

Soliloquy for one dead

By James Phelan

That they were both named Nigel is a distant memory, flotsam fading away. For now, it's the smells of barbecues and cut grass that blow their way, the adventure that lies ahead. These two friends, Jim and Joe, leave their homes and chores behind to ride through evening streets. The sun, still strong, heats their backs as they joke and laugh and weave. Kids are ganging, playing cricket and hopscotch down lanes and dodging cars. Teenagers fix Fords and Holdens kerb-side, INXS's new anthem blazing.

Down Church Street the pair meet up with the Yarra, the wind up their tail as a group launches stones at them. They whoop and fang along the riverbank, taking their worn track in the couch grass as if they were late for the time of their lives. Matching haircuts flow blond, skin tanned from the long summer, smiles flash white.

Shorts and t-shirts on the ground, Joe unties a book from his bike and shows his friend.

Treasure Island, Joe says. You read it?

Not like that, just one with pictures. Dad read it to me, couple of years ago, Jim says.

Take it in turns to read the chapters? Joe flicks through the old hard cover as he speaks, appraising the time ahead.

Sure. Jim pats his mate on the arm and walks nearer the edge. He's prone, ready to pounce. But first, we fly!

Joe hides the book amongst their clothes and pushes the bikes into a tangle of banksia.

Ready, Joe?

Joe stands to, crouches like a sprinter.

Ready, Jim.

They run full pelt and leap into the sky, leaving the Earth for a while.

Splash! They drop like cannonballs, entering the water from the heavens.

Jim paddles to the black wattle root he always uses to haul himself out,

not at home in the liquid like his mate. He looks up the sheer face of Notts

Point, beaming at his – their – courage. Another few jumps and they'll have

to find a higher place to fly from. He straightens his jocks and turns around.

Scoops up clay to throw at Joe.

Jim scans, eyes darting, up and down, left to right. Eyes widen. Smiles.

Joe swims underwater, bobbing up where Jim least expects it. Almost on the other side once, where the sad peppercorn dips into the water.

Several heartbeats pass. Jim's hand is still raised, ready to piff the clay.

He's wishing he had his shanghai, but glad he didn't bring it down – he'd

lost his change on their first jump, a couple of weeks ago, having stuffed

it down his jocks. The week's paper round money, gone. The river was

like that, taking things, never to return from that muck that went forever

down.

His arm shakes, tired, raised above his head, slung back and ready to fire.

The smile remains. Movement – he launches. Fish. Should bring their rods next time; no one fishes here, the fish'd be real dumb.

He stands, unarmed, and feels suddenly alone.

Joe? Joe!

He squints to see through the peppercorn's curtain, squats to peep under.

Come on, dickhead! he says, kicking his foot through the water. The ripples eddy out, expanding fast, breaking at a snag in its curve.

Joe?

Jim slips into the warm brown water that envelops his body, a womb.

There's no riverbed here, at least not one a ten-year-old can reach, and he wades to the snag that continues to break the ripples of his entry. His breath holds, he looks, taking it in. Pale. Soft. Skin. A finger, just breaching the surface. Jim sputters. In five years all he'd known was laughs with Joe. A heat rushes up his neck and flares in his jocks.

Jim pulls at his mate's hand. Tugs. Thrashes about with the effort.

C'mon! He moves closer, can feel his submerged friend against his body, still. His feet find ground and he stands on something hard, smooth, metallic.

Foreign. He tugs at an arm, puts his head under and gets some leverage.

He sees Joe in a car – almost sitting in the back seat. Bent through the shattered window. It's dark down there but the image of the familiar illuminates.

Forever.

Jim goes to high school, the year glides into winter, and then time stands still. Days drag and weeks sigh to a close, leaving emptiness all round the twelve-year-old. The walks home are long despite the distance, and he's sodden by the time he comes through the door. His mother can't believe he could lose three umbrellas in as many weeks, not realising the barbarism of teenage boys. Bruises go unnoticed.

Home becomes quiet, his parents no longer fighting into the night. His father not home before dark, drinking beer in the garage if he is. Jim sits at his homework with headphones blaring Nirvana, defeating the silence. Little gets done.

Before the winter breaks, his mother packs the Volvo and takes him and the cat down the coast.

We're staying with Nan for a while, she tells him. Thank God they didn't have more kids, Jim thinks, feeling able to brave whatever happened next. He's grown used to being alone, and is sure his mum will too. He feels stronger, like he has something to give. Dry again, lighter.

I was raped.

His mother decides to break the silence after the Tracy Chapman tape ends by articulating what she'd always wanted to say. Jim feels the heat rise up his neck again, his throat closing, the weight of it all.

Why are you telling me that?

I thought you should know. A few years after you were born. While your father and I were apart for a while. I had a really hard time when you were

young.

Jim stares at a chip in the windscreen the rest of the car trip, all silent tears and clenched fists.

Three years pass to become an endless summer.

Jim finds friends, discovers laughs and smiles again, gets some colour back. He still thinks of Joe, how they used to share and talk about books, reading their favourite bits aloud. His new friends play football and surf, shoot things and ride motorbikes. He misses not knowing someone who reads, but he can look back differently now. He's finding himself.

At night, Jim lays on the concrete water tank, watching the Milky Way shift in the pitch blackness that surrounds their home. On a far-off horizon is the haze of Melbourne, an eerie glow as if the place is on fire or a nuclear bomb has gone off. He's glad he's out of there, sure it's safer from the end of the world where he is.

Tony becomes his new best friend – an Italian kid who lives on a farm. Jim respects the confines of Tony's limitations, and anything outside that takes him by surprise. At home, Jim still listens to Nirvana through headphones, reads books on the bus as it snakes the dirt roads, adapts his life for this new companionship. Sport takes hold, Aussie Rules and cycling, shooting and camping. His mate talks of tractors and farm yields, peas and cows. Jim declines swimming in dams, even when it's thirty-plus. Tony chides him for it. Jim watches the clouds until he hears his mate is out.

You need to eat more! the Italian mother tells Jim.

I eat, Jim says. We're pretty poor though, he thinks rather than adds.

Not that there isn't food on the table ... just not the snacks that his mate has a constant supply of. That morning bucket of cow's milk from the dairy next door. The grocery budget.

You're so skinny, Mrs Italy is relentless. Jim studies his empty plate and wonders what else he could have done, and his friend excuses them from the table so they can shoot foxes at dusk.

Jim laughs when his mother recites Mrs Italy's two phrases uttered her way so far: Show me your kitchen ... oh. So why'd you leave his father?

His mum voices these and laughs, but Jim feels the pain of it for them both.

Jim is asked by no fewer than eight girls to the debutante ball. It's the girl's right to ask the boy, and he figures he must have some kind of city kid novelty factor working his way. He grows tired of saying no, loses track of who's asked him, and when Tony says he's got a date organised, Jim relents.

She's tall like him, blonde and thoughtful. Not in the surfer crowd, or the rich list, the geeks or the alternative lot. They're so similar it's destined to turn into something, and without knowing it Jim is going out with her and at risk of losing another good friend.

Jim kisses her after school one day. It's his first, all clumsy and feverish.

She says it's her first too, and that seems important to him. He thinks she flinches on contact.

They sit together in class and hold hands after school. Jim trades off the

stigma of being the only male on checkout so he can work alongside her.

Other guys from school are using machetes in the produce section or driving tractors for their dads.

She is waiting for marriage, which is good for them both, she assures him.

Jim's hormones are wild, evident as much in the stubble and muscles as the pimples and moods. They steal time on weekends and sit in the bush, kissing and hugging, his fingers probing and rubbing until she sighs and shakes.

Sometimes she flinches, and he wishes she'd tell him, though he knows he doesn't want to hear it.

The night of the deb ball her father shakes Jim's hand.

I'm very proud tonight, thank you.

Jim thinks it strange, fighting between face value and scripted cynicism.

Jim receives a watch in the post from his father to celebrate the night. He realises how much the old man doesn't understand.

Jim lies on the water tank, wrapped tight against the wind that cleared his eyes.

He's broken it off with the girl, after two years' torment.

He was intuitive to abuse, especially the family kind – his mum worked with enough of those kids born into hell for him to diagnose that look. The way his girlfriend's body stiffened and became taut when her older brother was present was enough to draw a conclusion. She'd told just one friend before him, a girl who a week later died in a car wreck. A tree at school grew for her. The pain. That pain Jim could understand, and for a while it was

enough. But the injustice of it all made him run, as he wasn't a fighter yet. This, his last year of high school, sees the cycling dropped, the job end, and the football peter out with his knees. School remains and Tony is there, still loyal and still economical in expectations.

On that water tank, Jim is both alone and sitting in a chamber of like minds. He hears Kurt Cobain sing and Joe read books. Even when life seemed shit the stars were limitless in the black of living by the sea, two hours drive from a city. He lay with his hands behind his head, the sound of distant surf the only stimulus but those stars. They were brilliant in every sense, wondrous and comforting for always being there.

Nigel? Only his mother calls him that, and it is thankfully less frequent.

It's Jim, Mum. J-I-M. Jim.

Okay, Jim, she says, climbing up the ladder. Thought you might want some chocolate.

Oh, yeah, Jim sits up and scoots his blanket across for his mum.

You know, I named you Nigel for a reason. She sits next to him, handing over an open block of Dairy Milk.

Yeah, I know. Jim looks out at the twinkling town, a crust along coast that stretches out below their hill.

You think of him much? His mum put a hand on his knee, lighting up a joint with one hand.

Joe? Jim was never sure if it was from the quack's direction or his parent's long-winded separation, but his mother had never broached the

subject.

Yeah, Joe. Nigel Two. Jim's mum takes a drag and holds the joint out to share.

For the first time, Jim takes the offering.

Ha, well, look at you, seventeen and all grown up. I'm proud of you.

Jim draws a toke as his mum hugs him, coughing from the combination.

He takes in the moonlight on the sea, the green neon cross of the town's church.

I think of him all the time, you know, Jim says. He wipes a tear to sleeve and blows a jet of smoke into the sky.

Anyway, if we hadn't of had the same names and picked new ones we would have got the shit kicked out of us – Nigel's a pretty gay name, Mum.

Yeah, sorry Jim. For everything.

His mum cries as they sit and watch the water and the stars, smoking until the cold bites.

Jim leaves home later that year and lives in the mountains. He studies and works and shares a room with a friend from his city days.

The world is different up there, the same clarity and stars, but it's the smells and the sounds that change. No she-oaks and surf, all gums and silence. It's summer again, bright but cold, movements laboured in the deserted snowfield. The couple of people in the course who own cars become friends to everyone, as once a week they pack like sardines to get off

the mountain for supplies and sanity.

At a party, Jim watches a guy fall from a second-storey window, only to return to the room moments later as if he meant it. He falls two more times that night, quite the joker. Jim wonders why a guy like that is allowed to go on. Girls strive for attention and Jim finds easier, less taxing company. Beds are seldom cold but the novelty remains, and somehow he and his friend survive the frigid summer and leave the barren mountain where it is and how it should be – uninhabited but for those seeking adventure. Theirs is all full up from that place.

Back in Melbourne, Jim works in hotels to use his diploma, and searches for what's next. Before he knows it, years pass, courses and jobs blend, and he becomes a wanderer, a drifter of intellect and ambition. He tries architecture – Joe wanted to do that – but it doesn't stick: too rigid and uncompromising. He misses the sound of the sea, forgets he likes to read.

Jim sits at the keyboard and stares at the blank screen. The cursor blinking while a Nirvana CD plays for the first time in ten years. He needs that mood.

He is planning a speech for the next day, an anniversary for Joe. He's ready for something like that. Needs to take those final steps. Jim sits and stares, the stereo reciting words he'd never forgotten and his girlfriend's singing obliviously leaking from the other room. Grunge rock versus soprano opera. Joe would like it, a mix of air guitar and high art. Jim pictures

a ten-year-old blond boy having guitar lessons from George Harrison, Maria Callas teaching him to sing in tune.

Jim knows enough prose and poetry to recite. But it is the whole of it he wants to say. The missed time as well as the memories, the loss as well as the benefit of not being there in the flesh. Jim still lives in the city, the stars all packed up, the ocean poured away. The smells and sounds industrial, the days and weeks relentless. He's gone full circle and worked a few things out, found that it all makes sense when you're having fun with someone you love. Going for a ride. Sharing some laughs. Reading a book aloud.

Jim smiles. Types.

The joy of it all, Joe. That's what you missed – that's what we had – but all that you missed ... I'll tell you, Joe, I'll tell you all about it, what you had and what you left with, all that you went without: Ah, no, Joe, you never knew the whole of it ...

Note – the title and final line are from a Bruce Dawe poem of the same name, from: "Sometimes Gladness: Collected Poems, 1954-1987" (Longman, 1997).

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