

## Dead Man's Roses

You're hungry. You're low in the trees that sough above the neighborhood. The moon catches your eye, bright against the black of you. Plumes from fire pits begging up at you, rooftops like gravestones, pubs dotting neon along Western Avenue, echoes erupt from beer gardens, gangways and alleys, then silence: the cemeteries. Green so rich it's as black as you. Dive at that glint of light you see. See it? Dive at it. You're ravenous. Feel the air rush around you, cradle you gently, then release, fire you at the mud. It wasn't worms. It was just the pale, dehydrated fingers of Boguslaw Wronski.

Bogie carefully collected a pair of white stargazer lilies from a grave marked by a solitary angel, wings and hands outstretched, her sweet blank face dappled by the streetlight through the trees. Enough shadows to trick you into thinking you saw life there. He felt a pang of shame light up his face. It wasn't guilt for stealing the flowers back. It was that kind of shame that makes your mouth taste like pennies and makes your shoulders rise towards your ears, because he knew he was jealous of the dead, jealous that their people came for them. Bogie knew his brothers would never come for him.

As a child, they had called him Bogus, Bogie, Double Bogie, Slow Bog, Sog Bog and Booger, among other things. That was when they talked to him. That was when they at least still laughed before mom got sick and the money disappeared. Bogie wanted to disappear with it. The humidity felt solid in his lungs. For a moment, he

felt as if he was buried beside the bodies, and had been slowly suffocating under the Southside ground for the last fifty years.

Bogie placed the two impeccable stems in the back of his van with the precision of a curator. Their verdant, almost poison perfume caught on the wind, reminding Bogie of the feeling of leaving his mother's hospital room. He closed his eyes and saw the lilies that crowned her bed. He breathed them in, the musk like old lemon mold and cat pee in the sterile air. He felt the shiver of moving from the cold cavity of Little Company of Mary Hospital, through the revolving doors, out into the sweet, cicada-hum of night on 95<sup>th</sup> and California. The van bed filled slowly. Lilies, roses, chrysanthemums, carnations, loads of carnations, pink, white, yellow, lit only by the temporary glow of the van's interior light.

Around the gravel bend, a phalaenopsis orchid caught his eye. The arched cascade of petals, twin falling curves, their absence of pigment in the darkness, the notches of pollen at their centers, the blooms just barely resembled the faintly iridescent, flawless palms of several unborn babies in a row, begging for Bogie's attention. Hands clasped behind his back, Bogie turned towards the orchid. The night sky began to bruise. Bogie knew it was time to go. He whistled at the orchid from a distance then closed the van doors softly, like a mother trying to not wake her children snoozing in the dawn. He climbed into the driver's seat, turned over the engine and crawled out the cemetery gates before sun up, as he did four times a week, every week since the winter of 1991.

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2512-2518 W. 111<sup>th</sup> Street. Basha Wronski bought this courtyard apartment building with Jewel bags of cash in installments from 1967-1971. Some of the money came from her flower shop, St. Phocus Flowers, over by the train tracks. The rest, she borrowed from her “cousin,” Leo, the “dentist” in Bridgeport. What else could she do with four boys and no husband? She started with one unit in the 2512 building, where she and the boys lived for more than thirty years. By summer 1971, she bought up half the block. They had a party in the alley to celebrate. Mom Wronski, as the neighbors called her, made enough apricot kolachkis for the whole neighborhood. Five feet tall if she was feeling big, Mom Wronski was small but never soft. She could beat those boys back to Poland with a hot spoon when she needed to. She was a dignified, benevolent ruler over her blond brick and concrete kingdom while it lasted. Last week, Mom Wronski was buried in St. Fiachra Cemetery. She was survived by her four boys, Ron Wronski, Jan Wronski, Bon Wronski and Boguslaw.

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Heat came at him from all directions as Bogie walked down 111<sup>th</sup> Street towards the shop. The traffic, the blacktop, the air — hot. Still, beneath his suit and tie, Bogie was cool. He had read that, by rubbing eucalyptus on his neck and wrists, he could be a man in this world wholly free from the burdens of sweat. This technique proved to be helpful in the business of death, a particularly sweaty line of work.

As he pushed open the door to the shop, bells chimed. The cool air caressed him. From a cell phone speaker in the greenhouse out back, Bogie could hear the Dead Man’s Roses

undeniable, wild yelps from Judie's R&B Hits YouTube playlist. Splash sounds, dramatic pauses, moans. "Mmmmmm." She always said the flowers liked to feel. "Mmmmmm." No amount of neck eucalyptus could keep Bogie from sweating when grieving customers walked in on Judie, eyes closed, shaking her bony hips slowly to the rhythms of this playlist.

The neighborhood kids called her Sister Juicy. No one knew why she had left the convent but there were plenty of ideas. It was just the music, though. From her rapport with the children in her classes at St. Dismas to her therapeutic loafers, everything about Judie still seemed like a nun. Besides that, she was nearly 80 and had been a good friend to Mom Wronski, so Bogie never said anything about the R&B, though it hardly seemed like the right music for a flower shop named for a saint who was so chaste that he dug his own grave for his executioners.

Judie and his mother had liked to drink vodka and smoke Virginia Slims together out back in lawn chairs. In the summer, the vodka was iced with limes. In the winter, it was "winter vodkas," which just meant vodkas. The Virginia Slims were always the same.

Bogie pulled a billowy Annabelle hydrangea arborescens and examined its blooms, gently scrunching them like a daughter's curls. The bells on the shop door chimed. Waiting for Judie to tend to the customer, Bogie didn't look up. After a few seconds, he realized she couldn't hear the bells over the R&B waterfall in the back, so he turned to greet his patron.

Before Bogie could set his facial expression to the position most proven to communicate empathy, the customer screeched. Bogie saw a dark flash. The

panicked creature whammed repeatedly into the windows around the perimeter of the shop. *Thwack. Thwack. Thwackthwackthwack.* The customer also panicked.

“Please, please remain calm. It’s just a…” Bogie wasn’t sure what it was. “It’s just a creature. I’ll take care of it. Please, ma’am.” He touched her arm near the elbow and tried to make eye contact, the way he did when talking to a grieving widow, but her eyes followed the creature in terror. He placed the hydrangea on the table beside her and turned to find an implement with which to usher the creature out of the shop. It swooped down at them, tangling in the woman’s blonde mane. Her screams were animalistic; the creature’s screeches sounded like a hungry baby. Reaching for the nearest weapon, the woman snatched the hydrangea from the table and began to beat the creature with it, swinging the stem like a medieval morning star, making it snow soft white petals in the chaos. Before the moment could congeal, Judie opened the front door, allowing the creature to escape into the heat.

The customer was shaking. Tears streaked her made-up face. She turned to Bogie with fever in her eyes.

“I should sue. What if that thing gave me rabies? You! You are!” her ranting grew unintelligible through her sobs. Judie walked over, put her arms around the woman and cradled her. Over the woman’s shoulder, Judie winked at Bogie. Luther Vandross soothed the flowers back in the greenhouse.

Bogie receded into the back. He paused Judie’s playlist and breathed in the flowers and the quiet, picturing the Japanese island of Okunoshima. His aim was simple: maximize the shop’s profits by recycling flowers, then leave the Southside

forever to go live among the bunnies and beautiful women on *Usagi Jima*. With what he knew he could sell the properties for – he had helped mother leave the apartment buildings and the shop in his name when she was sick - he had nearly reached his goal of \$2 million in savings. He just needed one more big job to lock it in.

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Dolores Murphy sounds like an old woman but she's ten years old. Her parents weren't the most reliable lot so her grandparents took her in when she was born and her Grandma named her "sadness" because she's dramatic. The cherubic child quickly became known as Dolly, for her fair complexion, big blue eyes, butterball build and the fact that no other girl had been named Dolores since her Grandma was a girl playing with literal dolls.

Dolly spent most of her time in her imagination and there, she was a star. After school when Grandma was napping and Grandpa was also napping, Dolly would walk through St. Fiachra's on her way home. In her second-hand plaid jumper, always with shorts underneath, she would bump and grind all up on the headstones. Dolly's big dream: DANCING WITH THE STARS. She was certain she was destined for hip hop background dancing greatness and she knew her first stop was to win the St. Dismas school talent show. It wasn't actually a competition but Dolly, again, knew victory was on the horizon.

Since it was summer and she didn't have school to walk home from, Dolly danced around the cemetery with her headphones in all day, imagining all the dead and all the flowers were there for her. She liked to pause and curtsy before several of the biggest angels, knowing that they were the judgiest of the audience. Today,

she sported her best one-piece swim suit, the neon cheetah print one with the fringe strap, because she felt like a pro in it. And she would probably do a cannon ball at Kennedy Park to cool off before heading home for dinner.

The cemetery groundskeepers all knew Dolly by sight and, all of them fathers and brothers, knew a lonely girl when they saw one. So they stayed out of her way and referred to her as *solitaria poco Beyonce*, gesturing in a dramatic head-hip-wrist flip motion when they noticed her. She saw them mid-performance and waved, thinking they were for sure imitating her best “Single Ladies” move because it was so super awesome.

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Listening to Judie wrap up the deal with the woman, Bogie felt his cell phone vibrant on his hip.

*“St. Phocus Flowers, you are our focus. Boguslaw speaking, how may I help you?”*

It was Kitty Ryan at St. Dismas. She would be planning a funeral for two young men from the neighborhood who had been killed in battle while serving in the USMC. The mass and burial would be in three days. Bogie chastised himself for his initial joy at the news. Of course this was tragic. He had even sort of dated the mother of one of the boys briefly after her husband had died a few years earlier. He chastised himself for that, too. What she must be feeling was too massive to imagine. Instead, Bogie thought of Japan. This would be the job he needed. He went to the back of the greenhouse and noticed a depleted supply.

He returned to the front of the shop. Judie was recording her sale in the book.

“Judie, what happened to the shipment from Colombia?”

“Bogie babe, don’t you have Facebook? Huge storm in the Caribbean. Gonna be a day or two before they get any planes up this way.”

The tiny, freshly-buzzed hairs on the back of Bogie’s neck stood up. The eucalyptus was fading but he felt a chill when he realized how he would prepare for this job. “I’ll take care of it,” he said, with uncharacteristic speed.

Jude furrowed her brow and tilted her head. Bogie felt embarrassed by his thrill, as if she could see it on his plan on his face.

“Did you turn off my playlist?” she said. Bogie realized he had been holding his breath. He exhaled.

“You got me.”

Judie smiled and hummed Boyz II Men, rolling her hips as she walked back into the greenhouse to restart her music. “Mmmm.” She shouted back to Bogie, “You know the flowers need to feel loved, Boguslaw. Don’t we all?”

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The word TALENT floated in the air above the stage in the gym at St. Dismas. The cardboard letters were covered in gold glitter, twinkling in the hot stage lights, so bright against the faded green velvet curtain. The teacher-judges sat in folding chairs on the gym floor and, to Dolly, this was everything.

From the back of the gym, she watched student after student audition their talents while she stretched and listened to her performance track on her headphones, practicing the deep breathing technique she saw on YouTube. Dolly caught her reflection in the windows that divided the gym from the vestibule. She



looked like a million bucks in her teal and purple windbreaker jump suit. The sound of the fabric swishing as she went through a practice run made her feel like the Michael Jordan of hip-hop back-up dancers. The lightning bolt she stayed up all night to bedazzle on the back of the jacket would look beyond awesome on stage. Worth it.

Dolly slipped on her headphones, lay flat on her back, and zoned out the competition.

Someone was shaking her shoulder. Dolly opened her eyes. It was Sister Juicy. Dolly whipped her headphones off and hopped up, her light-up sneakers flickering with her bounce.

“I am so ready.”

Judie said nothing. She kept her hands on Dolly’s shoulders. Dolly looked over her teacher, rubbed her eyes and scanned the gym. The lights were all off. A car drove by out front and the headlights washed across the stage, illuminating the glittering TALENT that Dolly would never get her chance to shine under. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart. I didn’t see you over here. I thought you were just a pile of jackets.”

Dolly nodded fiercely, choking back her tears. She breathed in through her nose, exhaled out her mouth, the way the videos said to.

“Do you want to show me your routine now?”

“Thank you,” she said, causing Judie to smile and relax. Judie started to walk towards the light switch but Dolly stopped her. “It just wouldn’t be the same.”

Judie turned back to the little girl, “Can I give you a ride home?”

“My grandpa’s waiting for me, so I better go.”

Judie helped Dolly gather her things and walked her to the door. As Judie locked up, she watched Dolly walk straight past the empty parking lot and keep going, her dazzling lightning bolt growing smaller as she walked further from the school.

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Bogie arrived at St. Fiachra’s precisely five hours earlier than usual. A calculated risk. He stood over a grave covered in pink carnations and white roses. Whose *loving mother* was she? Did she care if he borrowed her roses for a soldier? He stopped that thought, trying to identify a strange sound. He peeked over the headstone and saw a little girl laying on the ground, arms and legs spread out like a lily. She swayed her head back and forth, bopped her knees and pumped her plump little fists. Bogie realized she had headphones in. He didn’t want to scare her, or catch her attention at all, so he gathered up the roses in a hurry. He left the carnations. As he hustled back to the van, he could hear the girl begin to sing, gasping between notes as if she might be trying not to cry.

“Hey!”

Bogie froze. He turned back towards the sound.

“Hey!”

The second shout somehow spooked him more and he dropped a few roses. They nearly glowed in the dark, muddy grass of the cemetery at dusk. Bogie's gaze lifted from the roses to the whites of the eyes of the little girl he had seen splayed before a grave.

"Omigod are you a ghost?" Dolly hissed at Bogie in a whisper, half like she had realized a plot twist on a soap opera, half like she faced the sacred or evil.

Bogie couldn't find any words in his mouth. He stared at the child. She stepped around and over gravestones and roses. The streetlight caught her jumpsuit and made her radiant. She climbed up on the headstone nearest Bogie, grunting from exertion because it was a pretty high headstone. The angel at the top stared down at them. Dolly reached up and touched Bogie's face with her pink, swollen fingers. They felt so warm and safe on his face. He wanted to know why she had been crying, why she had been alone in the cemetery, why he couldn't help her.

Laughter echoed from out in the trees. A yelp. A howl. Cellphone flashlights caught Bogie and Dolly, blacking out their sight lines, her hands still on face, white roses still in his hands.

*"What the fuck!"*

*"Let her go!"*

*"What are you doing to that fat little girl you sick motherfucker?"*

The cries continued. Beer cans crashed against grave markers and so did Bogie's head. Dolly snatched her iPod and ran, dropping behind her only a worn photo of a young girl in a toga, her mother, who she pretended she could visit at the

cemetery but really she didn't know where she was. Dolly ran home, her glittering lightning bolt holy in the darkness.

Bogie woke up in the purpling dawn at St. Fiachra's, his head throbbing. It was a familiar hour in a familiar place, but everything felt wrong. Blood filled his left eye. He tried to swallow and tried to sit up but both felt impossible. He blinked and the softening light through the trees cast shadows he thought he remembered from somewhere. A safe feeling warmed his cold torso. He touched his face and thought he heard music.