

JAMEY GENNA

## Always Say Sorry

We were standing outside in the hot hot sun. I wasn't sweating and that worried me. The field was on a hillside of green pasture grass. The grass had started to turn yellow. I knew some things about grasses and that is if you don't cut them early enough in the season they lose value and become a form of straw that doesn't go far in feeding a cow, or especially a steer. It's not good to harvest late.

I was feeling grouchy and I knew why. I wanted Drew to marry me and it was making me mad that he hadn't asked me yet—even though I heard him tell his friend Steve a week ago, before we started to dig this grave, that he was, “Probably going to get married.”

Steve's funeral was on the reservation of the Blackfeet tribe and it was, by far, the best and sweetest funeral I had ever been to. I'd only been to two or three—one for my youngest brother who died of crib death, one for my grandpa, and one for the first high school classmate to go. The Indian traditions were new to me. The men were scooping handfuls of smoke over their shoulders from a burning plait of yellow sweetgrass, and even though I was seven months pregnant I liked the smell of that smoke. I had always liked the smell of something burning: burnt toast, t-bone under the broiler tarred til the smoke rolled out of the oven.

“Burn it,” my dad always said, afraid of trichinosis. I remembered the way a burning ditch smelled, too, the time the train came through at night, lighting the ditches on fire on both sides of the rail, the dry grass burnt to a dead coarse flat landscape from the sparks of the wheel against the rail.

Steve was killed by the railroad, too. He'd got caught on a piece of equipment, and the train came through, and now I could finally meet his pale face hidden under a black veil, his long rope of braided red hair laid across his chest, and his chest held up, like it was full of baling wire and paper. He was dressed in his Guatamalen coat and had a blue pulsetta on his wrist, his hands crossed over each other delicately in the casket. These were the artifacts Drew had discovered down in Mexico and Guatamala that he had shared with me. He went down there with Steve last winter, sent me bracelets in the mail made out of thick threads of purples and reds and blue and brought me a purse woven with those colors, too. I had wanted to go to Guatemala and be with him, but my teaching schedule in California prevented it, so I never got myself down there and now Drew was all the time romanticizing everything he'd seen there. But he did come out to California to visit me after his trip.

At the funeral they all got up to speak and said truths about Steve, the stuff that counts when you are alive, how he had changed, how he'd once been a city boy and a hippie, and how he'd grown older and started showing an interest in his teenage daughter. The tribal leader was a tall strong man with a barrel chest and slim hips, and he spoke in that low clipped way Indians have of saying their words in short bursts and accents. He said how he remembered seeing Steve cross the ground at the pow-wow and how his red hair stood out in the afternoon sun. How Steve adopted the tribal ways, meditation and the belief in the sky and the sun. The chief was talking of Steve in the way memory and grief teaches you to notice someone's color and movement across a field, under a tent, some moment of love that didn't get noticed in life.

“This is Steve,” Drew said at the casket and he held my curled-up fist in his hands and his throat was thick with sadness, the way it is when someone dies, but I felt left out because I didn’t know Steve. I was supposed to have met him, but then this happened.

“I was going to ask him to be my best man,” Drew whispered to me. I knew it, I can’t pretend. But I wanted to be mad at Drew for not asking me out loud before he’d gotten me pregnant. I’d said wait, I need the birth control, but it was too late. I knew he loved me. He’d said it many times since hearing the news. I can’t pretend that wasn’t true.

The men were lucky because they were able to sweat out their grief while they dug Steve’s grave. But I had to go sit in an air-conditioned car and watch in wonder as they put their friend to rest.

There is another way to tell this and it goes like this. Drew and I met up in Montana, then I moved to California and we wrote to each other, then we were lovers for one moment out in California, and this was the product. But we were both in love with the baby the minute she was more than an idea in our letters. That’s why I went up there to Sheridan, Wyoming, to live for the summer. I was too big and too heavy for my size, five foot two and a hundred and forty-seven pounds already. People asked me if I was going to have twins.

I liked it in Sheridan. There was a nice library and a public pool to bob around in and a great view on the walk I took every day—the mountains and the town down below and a creek to walk alongside of. When Drew got off work at the railroad, we’d go over to the park, and on Thursday nights we’d have an ice cream cone, and some nights we went downtown and ate at this café that had a different menu every week, Wyoming rosemary chicken with a rice pilaf. They had lots of nice places there. There were two or three antique stores, so I bought some Amish rugs and a rocking chair to rock the baby and Drew got me an old washstand and a pitcher and a bowl. The apartment we had was up a high set of stairs and had no air conditioning, even though I’d told Drew in my letter, pretty clearly, that I couldn’t be pregnant without air conditioning. But he said that’s all he could come up with on short notice. There was a small room off the front with French doors, so at night, I opened the windows wide and read a book in the rocking chair and listened to crickets or music, or else we’d make love in the big square bed or I’d take a cool bath in the tub. Drew had said not to bring my TV, but I still had an addiction to soaps, so I watched those in the daytime, and one day I went and bought an All-American picture cookbook and I made spaghetti old-school style for him, with tomatoes and wine and spices. That’s the last time I remember having to cook because Drew said he wanted to quit the railroad and stay home with the baby when it came and I could go back to work in California as a teacher. I let him start learning right away what it meant to feed me because I didn’t want to cook and I didn’t want to stay home. It sounded like cooking and cleaning and mouths to feed. I didn’t know that staying at home with a baby of your own isn’t work.

We decided to drive up to Billings where we’d met the summer before and say hi to old friends, and I thought that’s when Drew would say his piece about marriage and I’d say mine.

We listened to tunes in his pickup truck on the way, all the cd’s he had, like Robert Cray and J.J. Cale, blue love songs I’d never heard, and I brought the subject up.

“So do you think we should get married before we go back to California? Or do you think we should wait? Or do you want to get married at all?”

His answer—I don’t know that he even did. He could’ve said, “I don’t know.” He was purposely vague. I didn’t know him well enough yet to know that he was a person who could only answer one

question at a time, which doesn't mean he wasn't smart. He was. I just think he gets lost in his head sometimes with all the thoughts that are up there.

I brought it up at dinner again. And I can't remember his exact words, but I remember his expression, how he pulled back into himself or looked smart the way he did when I told him a joke. Like he wanted to laugh but wasn't going to, just to make me squirm, only this kind of holding back was mean. I was seven months pregnant and a teacher and I wanted to know one way or another. I was down there in California teaching seventh graders in the barrio to write essays, and the principal had given me grief over being pregnant and not wearing a ring, but that didn't have anything to do with my wanting a decision. It wasn't that I didn't believe in his love—we had plenty of items and images of love between us as proof. I just wanted everything ironed out and plain. I didn't think it bothered me so much to be pregnant and unwed. I was a modern woman, raised on Cosmo and the feminist movement. I could be a mom without his name or without a ring. But if we were going to be together, well, I wanted the baby to know that Drew was in it with me for the long haul.

The conversation ended up in an agreement on a date, but he had never asked me and I felt like I'd put his head in a vise, even though he said, no, no, let's do it now.

A week before the wedding, I got a migraine. I thought it was a sinus infection, and the doctor in Sheridan said I had to go get x-rays. They covered me with lead shields, so the baby wouldn't be burned, but when they looked at my facial cavities they were empty. My forehead throbbed so badly every night, the pain moved around my face like a mean fire. The heat in the apartment was oppressive and still and dull and everything made me nauseous. At the top of the stairs leading into the apartment was a huge fan meant for clearing the air and it whoosed with an unbearable sound, but the fan didn't make a dent in the heat.

One of those days that week, just before going into the store to get groceries, I put my head against the dash of the car and I said, "I can't make it," so Drew took me right back home.

In the daytime I couldn't stand looking at light or hearing the chimes Drew had bought for me that hung outside our window.

Finally I took something the doctor gave me. He told me, "It won't hurt the baby. Probably the pain you're in is worse for the child than this." It worked at once and I liked it more than I should have.

The doctor had said, "Maybe you're under stress."

But I said, "No, I'm getting married next week. And I'm happy."

My mother sent the flowers with a note and put my dad's name on it and named all the kids still living at home. Then she called me the day of, I know she would've come if I had asked her. Drew's parents were opposed and didn't hide the fact, which was just too bad for them because I was twenty-eight and he was thirty-five, a grown man and woman who could make decisions.

We got the legal papers from the court and went to a local church to say our vows. The minister who married us told us that we'd be good parents if we could just remember to always say sorry when we were wrong.

This is another thing. At Steve's funeral, at the graveside, the tribal chief was singing a tuneless song. The words, he told us ahead of time, had to do with how the Indians had burned the bottoms of their moccasins on the prairie fires, and how his song would help Steve find his way to running now, with his other Blackfeet brothers, across the plain. I thought how this was a nice dream to help contain his brief life. Then I saw Steve's daughter. She was only seventeen and dressed in a loose

gauzy black dress that was already pulled tight across her belly because she was several months pregnant like me, her boyfriend by her side. Her hair was a honey-red copper and she had a rounded, freckled face. Dark earrings dotted her ears like tics. The men were inside the grave, digging. Through the dust thrown up to the sun's light, she was like a round mirage. Her face looked confused and lost and tired.

So I went over to her before I could pass out, and I told her, "I'm sorry."