

Ian Rankin Scholarship
Shannon Simpson Short Story

What Should Stay Dead

There are some faces you would recognise anywhere — even across a crowded room, even years after standing at their grave, trying to convince yourself it was the last time you'd ever see them. Some things bury themselves deep, but they never stay buried.

The place I'm standing in feels unreal. People move around me in every direction, voices rising and falling beneath music I can't place. The air is warm and close, like a room with no windows. I can't place where I am, or how I ended up here.

I can't remember arriving.

I can't remember why I came.

Then my eyes settle on a man a short distance away — and the room seems to narrow around him.

The moment I see his face I know exactly who it is. There is no mistaking him. I know that face, the way you know your own reflection — instantly, helplessly.

It's him. The man I buried. The man I loved. The father of my little girl.

A cold ache tightens in my chest — grief I thought I had buried, clawing its way back up. For a long moment, I just stare, my mind refusing to make sense of what I'm seeing.

Nothing about him fits.

He looks exactly as he did before death took him: same face, same posture, the same familiar way he stands. But the man I knew used to fill rooms without trying — loud, full of energy, impossible to ignore. This man looks folded in on himself. Quiet. Tense. Closed off.

Before I realise what I'm doing, I start moving towards him. My heart races, disbelief and anger twisting together as my mind struggles to grasp what I'm seeing.

When I reach him, he doesn't react.

His attention stays fixed on the people around him, as if I'm just another stranger passing by.

I wait for something — a look, a flicker of recognition, anything. Instead, he avoids me, shifting his focus elsewhere as if I'm not there at all.

Yet I know he's seen me. I know he knows exactly who I am.

I say his name, low, close enough that only he should hear it.

"Keiran."

He doesn't turn. Not even a twitch.

People laugh nearby. Someone brushes past my shoulder. The room keeps moving, like it hasn't noticed what's standing in the middle of it.

Anger and disbelief twist through me as I step closer, reaching for his arm — needing something real, proof that I'm not losing my mind.

My fingers close around him.

Warm skin. Solid muscle. His jacket smells faintly of cigarette smoke and rain — so familiar that for a second I forget he is dead.

And then he pulls away, quick and clean, slipping out of my grasp as if I'm nothing. As if I'm air.

The way he recoils feels sharper than the shock of seeing him alive. It feels personal — like being erased.

And suddenly, the longer I stand there, the more wrong the whole situation feels. Not just strange. Wrong. Because he's the one who shouldn't be here.

He shouldn't exist.

My throat tightens as I try to speak again, but my voice breaks. Tears blur my vision. My hands won't stop shaking. I don't know if I'm crying from fear or fury — only that something in me is splitting open.

For a moment, he finally looks at me.

Relief hits first — instinctive, stupid.

Then I see his face properly.

It isn't recognition. It's a warning. Fear — the kind that comes from being watched. That look hurts more than burying him ever did.

Then he looks away just as quickly, as if the moment never happened. A second later he turns and starts moving through the people around him, slipping between small groups as if trying to leave without being noticed. The crowd parts for him too easily, then closes behind him.

I push forward after him. My mind is racing. How can he be here? Is he alive? Did he fake everything? Where has he been all this time?

For a moment, I catch sight of him ahead of me, moving further away. I try to reach him again, but someone steps between us.

And when they move —

He's gone.

Completely. As if he had never been there at all. The space he stood feels like a doorway slammed shut — and I'm left gripping nothing.

I turn in every direction, scanning the faces around me, searching for him. But he's nowhere to be seen. It's as if he was never there.

The music dulls. The voices fade. The press of people drains away.

I wake with a sharp intake of breath, my heart hammering. For a moment I lie there in the dark, staring at the ceiling. It doesn't feel like a dream at all. His face is too clear.

My wrist stings. When I look down, there's a red mark across the skin, like I've been grabbed hard enough to bruise. It is already darkening.

After a while, I sit up. The house is silent.

I get out of bed and walk slowly along the corridor to check on my daughter.

She's asleep beneath her blankets, the soft glow of her nightlight illuminating the room. I stand there for a moment, watching her, trying to shake the feeling still clinging to me. Her face is peaceful. Too peaceful.

Just as I go to leave, she shifts slightly in her sleep.

"Daddy said you weren't supposed to see him."

I stop breathing.

She pauses, breathing softly.

"He said he didn't want to leave us."

Word Count: 925