

Jacob Monash

Clerk

“It’s been months!” Jim half mumbled as he emptied the last dregs of whiskey out of his bottle into his morning cup of coffee.

He only faintly remembered his last creative thought. It had been spiteful, critical, and, most importantly, fruitless. The rest of the details were lost to the Jameson.

Jim fancied himself a writer, but he could hardly put pen to paper. He could write, that much he knew. None of his own ideas struck him as brilliant, though.

His writing genius had flourished in college. There his rote and proficient handle with the written word allowed him to succeed. When forced to report research and record raw fact, Jim’s mind raced for ways to eloquently relay what he’d found - what was irrefutable. His grades mirrored his skill and from his ego stemmed his steadfast, almost pathetic, immersion into the craft of language. Though his talent was refined and irrefutable, Jim truly fancied fiction and secretly dreamed of writing for television, but found himself creatively dry. The few workshops he’d taken in college left him fearful of the future. He’d fared well, but felt personally unaffected by his creations. What use was his excellent handle on the English language outside of the world of grades and positive reinforcement? His syntax, his grammar, his mechanics, his diction – the whole shebang - was all useless to a brain as bland as his morning toast.

Good writing not just inspired him – it also nourished a steady drip of envy. Jim was enticed to the bone with the very idea of fiction. His TV was his infallible companion, whisking him out of his drab little flat and off to mysterious islands, the Wild West, lands populated by the dead, where ever. The set to him was a window, radiant and

rife with drama. It far outmatched the only other window his flat had to offer him, from which he could only gaze out at a flat black lot. What struck him most, he'd think of those fascinating lab rats behind the thin sheet of glass, was how they all managed to exude an unmistakable air of the important. Often times they were miserable, sure, but they were important. If they weren't alone, they were in charge; if they weren't geniuses, they were charmingly and profoundly dumb; if they weren't loved, they were feared. Jim closely inspected what made his heroes so damned important. Whatever their case, he envied their lives. Comedies, however, fell flat on him. All he saw when he'd watch one was a sense of mocking the flawed. He skipped over those, as there was always something better on. Comedies took the unimportant and made us laugh at them. *Opiates*, he'd think. *One big placebo to make this rather shitty pill a tad easier to swallow.* The jig was up for Jim, though. Laughter from fiction seemed dry and couldn't trick him into joy.

He hadn't had much luck finding a real job since college. Writing professionally hadn't worked out for him as well as he'd hoped. It lacked emotion and passion. It felt vacant. No position lasted long. With nothing to put his heart towards, he'd dug himself a hole slinging burgers to afford the coffee, bread, whiskey, and cup ramen that fueled his fruitless days typing away at his laptop. He'd begin each day with two slices of toast, no butter, a cup of coffee, and whatever was left of the bottle, usually about half, that he'd left unfinished before he passed out the night before.

He ate his breakfast over at his writing station. At least, that's what he liked to call it. It sounded professional. *Writing Station.* "I bet Vonnegut had a writing station. Probably churned out *Slaughterhouse* with his back hunched over his typewriter and his ass planted firmly before the table." Jim sat here for a couple of hours, idly sipping down

his half bottle of whiskey while staring at the blank white screen. He'd grasp at fragments of stories as they floated by in his head. Most of the time the best day's work he could manage was a weak attempt at a character. The page would be occupied by some arbitrary name and a couple of mildly interesting facts about them thrown below it. Nothing much else. Every character that saw the page would garner Jim's hate and be quickly scrapped. He just couldn't make them important enough. They usually began to resemble him, and quickly became inconsequential. The flaws he'd imagine for his characters often, upon closer inspection, made them neither important nor interesting, much like himself. For months he'd been stuck like this, finishing off his bottle with the bitter warmth of stalemate and booze numbing his fingertips. Once finished with his bottle, he'd either watch TV before he needed to go flip burgers or he'd stumble to the liquor store a block down the road from his apartment complex to stock up on his whiskey for the night.

These trips out of the flat to the liquor store, he hoped, would one day inspire his breakthrough. They were his closest brushes with the important. The only people he ever saw at his work were nothings. Side characters in the larger story. They were either brainless mouths attached to grotesque bodies or they barked orders out the ass like the fear they struck in their own employees was all they could care about anymore.

On the way to the liquor store, however, he would dissect lives like frogs pinned to a board. Walking in, he could sometimes see a kid left in the car while their dad would grab his night's booze. Either the dad has a goal in mind and the kid's used to these quick and frequent waits or the dad's indecisive and that kid's stuck breathing the same stale air for twenty, forty minutes at a time. Jim selfishly hoped the kid was in for a wait. It wasn't

that bad. He, after all, had used the wait his father used to put him through as time to wallow and grow thicker skin. *The little shit'll be fine.* By the door three kids pool their money getting ready to ask whatever sucker they believe would throw a six pack of some shitty beer into their checkout. Alcohol was new to these kids. A newfound stupor they couldn't down quickly enough. Jim drank only rarely in high school. *Smart kids*, he'd think, watching them get an early start with a smirk. College boys, freshly twenty-one, would always be scrambling together crumpled ones and fives they gathered from their unfortunately young friends as he walk past checkout, buying the cheap shit. Bulk, not quality. It all gets the job done just the same. He knew their motives well.

Jim was used to this. These sights, their smells and sounds. The smooth sterility of booze and the clank of bottles being picked up and inspected. His feet led him to the usual isle – number seven, all the way at the very end. His drink was Jameson Irish whiskey. The taste was alright, but he truly admired the man behind the drink. He'd watch John Jameson be the hero during the commercial breaks of his shows.

While visiting home in his last semester of college, Jim and his father were watching TV, as that was their sole shared interest. There was little ill will between the two; they just both sat locked in chronic silence. They kicked back and drowned the stipulation of conversation out with mind numbing adventure. John Jameson came onto the screen during a commercial break. He struck Jim immediately as important. Everyone enjoyed his drink. He was devoted. If a barrel dropped into the sea, he selflessly swam through the storm to pursue it. With his wit and bravery he rescued his stolen barrel from the fearsome Hawk of Achill. He got the girl and was warmly celebrated. He was the center of attention – was loved, revered, brave, exceptional. The commercial's narrator

smoothly sang the drinks graces. Jim's dad broke the silence just once, raising his class own glass of Jameson, "Aye, cheers." The visit home hardly struck Jim as anything noteworthy, and he felt little need to return home or call since college had ended. He did, however, pick up one last trait from his father: his appreciation for Jameson. The drink tasted like adventure. Well, at first it had. It was now familiar for Jim, lacking its original charm, but it still put a glow in his stomach and made his writing seem a bit less boring.

Not two minutes after walking in the front door, Jim made his way to the checkout. Still buzzed, the roughly forty-five second wait Jim needed to endure before it was his turn at the register passed by like a dull razor on dry skin. *Soon*, he thought, *soon I'll be back to the flat to crack this bottle open and see what's on*. He waited in a painful daze to hand the clerk his card and be on his way.

"I'm gonna need to see some ID, friend."

*Huh?* Jim was a regular here and was never asked to show proof anymore.

He looked up. This man didn't belong working here. "There," Jim muttered after fumbling through the expired fast food coupons and receipts growing wild in his wallet to find his license. *I'm a damn thirty year old man*. Jim was more flustered than angered.

"I have to ask everyone for their ID, ya know? Even if I have the slightest doubt about your age. Everything here looks good to me though, bud." The clerk must have noticed Jim looking thrown off. "You have a good night." His words were cordial and nonthreatening. *Strange*. The man held out Jim's card to him.

This guy was unlike the other liquor store clerks that he was used to. He spoke confidently and didn't seem in any sort of hurry to take things quicker than they needed to go. A pencil was tucked behind his ear and held in place by well-trimmed blonde hair.

His usual clerks were flippant and irritable, obviously looking towards their shift's end. This man held his head high and respected every sad face that walked through his lane. He wasn't miserable.

He was important.

Jim felt suddenly compelled to try his hand at writing once more for the day. TV would need to wait. He staggered down the block, bottle resting in a paper bag he cradled in his palms. Soon enough he arrived at his door and it opened no problem. He hardly ever cared to lock it. *I have nothing to steal*, he'd think. Jim grabbed a glass from the counter and gave it a quick swirl of water to rinse. He set the glass down, dropped two ice cubes into it, and placed it next to his laptop. His writing station was ready.

*What now.*

Jim fell to habit and began the typical character outline he normally produced when writing. First thing he tried to think of was a name for his story's focus. He hadn't caught the clerk's name. *What could his damn name be?* Jim looked around. He realized his whiskey was still in its bag. The paper crinkled as he ripped the bottle out to uncork it. He poured himself a glass and he settled on a working name.

*John.*

"What's up with John? Why's this stiff so important?" Jim thought aloud, wracking his brain for interesting facts to throw under the name on the page before him. He recalled the pencil tucked behind John's ear.

*He's a student. John wouldn't squander his intelligence. The liquor store doesn't pay too extraordinarily well, but John's sensible and it's gotten him by well enough during his studies to become a doctor. Doctor's save people. They have direction. Make*

*choices. Who could be more important? John was qualified to feel stress, but kept a steady smile and an inviting attitude with the drinks he supplied. Quaint.*

Jim couldn't save squat. Not a dime, certainly not a life. His first glass was already mostly empty, only a few drops clung to its sides. The ice cubes were thinner now, and would dilute his next glass even less. He filled the drink again, absentmindedly. "Now, where's he live?"

*Nowhere too extravagant. John's a modest man and can't afford everything he wants, but he didn't belong in squalor. It was probably a small flat, a little bit bigger than my own. What else could he afford with his job? Not a house, that's for sure, but he wouldn't need that right now, and he's well aware. He knows this apartment will get him through med school. He doesn't mind. He keeps it real neat, like he's proud of it or something. I bet you could eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner right off the floor. But he doesn't eat off the floor, he was well above that,.*

Jim stretched, imagining his character and knocked his drained second glass to the floor, causing it to shatter. "Dammit!" Little shards flew from the crash and sliced little cuts into his left shin. It stung for hardly half a second until he reached for the bottle to take a swig. It was unusually empty for this early on in the night. He hardly noticed, however, took another quick sip straight from the bottle, and forgot about the glass shards scattered about on the floor.

*I bet John's got a dog. It used to be a stray. John's so nice I wanna puke. Dog's named Gus and it's fat and happy. John's not the type to force his friend to eat dry kibble. No, Gus gets the good stuff, canned and wet with gravy. Shit's not cheap and John's no millionaire, but he loves his dog.*

“What a damn hero,” Jim grumbled. Somewhere in the background, Jim barely registered the sound of his cell phone ringing from his bedroom where it sat charging. He wasn’t usually the type to answer his phone.

He hardly even tasted the whiskey by this point. No hints of peat moss and certainly no adventure. It was just there. “He’s got more love in him than he spends on that pup. Probably share’s it with somebody else in his flat.”

*Oh yeah, of course. It’s obvious. There’s no way in hell John’s single. Too damn perfect. Too damn important. Important people don’t go through winters cold. No, they’re warmed with devotion. I bet they were high school sweethearts.*

Jim never had a sweetheart; that is unless you count Jameson. He’s kept Jim warm for years. No questions asked. Jim was angry now. The bottle was clinging onto its last third while Jim steadily nursed it like it was his child. His grip was hardly worth writing home about by this time. The bottle slipped from his fingers. Jim could never handle a child. The smooth, caramel colored liquid snaked between the keys of his laptop. Jim dully heard the crackle of his computer as it sputtered and quit. His laptop’s screen flashed white once and went black, killing John with it. Jim was too drunk – too angry – to care for his laptop. His eyes welled up with tears and he let out an exasperated chuckle.

Jim slouched in his chair. Joy welled up in him at the thought of being rid of John. Too important for someone like Jim. He slid from his chair, vision black and blurry, cradling the broken glass and the cracked fifth on his floor. The sun set across the flat black lot and, through Jim’s pathetic little window, pulled the dark cover of night over his writing station.