

The Last Twist of the Knife

Jimmy wakes to the smell of roses. He sniffs the air - perfume. The cheap kind. His nose twitches and he opens his eyes.

The lights are low. His pupils are heavy. In the middle of the room, Jason lies sprawled on a table, snoring in a puddle of urine and beer, nostrils covered in powder. The others have long since left.

The blinds are closed, curtains curtained, yet the light still pierces his bleary eyes. What time is it? Noon? Midnight? His bladder suggests that the hour is late, but the wool in his mouth that it's early. He looks down and - oh.

Careful not to disturb the woman sleeping in his arms, Jimmy yawns and looks around the room. Plastic bags, soiled clothes, and stained violet pillows litter the apartment. He can't see much of the carpet beneath, but he bets that it'll need to be ripped out and replaced. No worries. Company time, company dollar. He smirks and fights to stay still as the woman on top of him shifts. No luck - her elbow jabs him in the ribs and he grunts.

"Jimmy?"

She's blinking up at him. As he watches, her eyes focus, and then she smiles, leans forward, whispers something in his ear, and he smiles back, showing teeth, gleaming, gleaming teeth, and she moves her hand lower and he groans and leans forward for a taste and then all of a sudden it hits him - the smell - rotten fish and spoiled meat - he gags, rears back, she's confused, she's getting up but he's choking now, he's smothered, he's burning, there's something rising in the back of his throat...

Jimmy opens his eyes. The sun slices into him.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he shifts against the wall and then, squinting, tries again. This time, there is no sun, only its afterimage, bleeding across his vision, painting the dark room in rainbow blots.

His eyes adjust. Weak morning rays seep from the blinds and pool onto the wall beside him. In the gloom, the room looks normal, broken furniture and all. It takes a second to place where he is, and when he does, he still doesn't know where he is - some living room in some house, most likely. Some house somewhere.

It's dark, his throat's dry, and his skin's burning up. His right foot still throbs. If he knew the layout of this place he might be able to crawl to the kitchen and slit his wrists. Instead, though, he straightens, coughs stickily, and looks down at himself.

The bandage on his leg has taken on an off-yellow hue, and a bit of the wound beneath it peeks through. He thought he'd be used to the smell by now, but having just woken up, it's stronger than ever. He groans and sits up.

That dream. It'd been so vivid, like he'd really been there... Was it a memory, then? A glimmer of the past? He recalls going to places like that, with women like that, but the bit by the end, the vomit and the rot... It could be blend of both, he supposes, the past in a dream and a dream from the past, a vision from the fever, fever dreams, hallucination - really, though, does it matter? It's all semantics. He'll be dead before dawn.

There's a chair in front of him. He'd rather go sitting than slouching, but as luck would have it, it's out of reach. If he moves his leg might start bleeding and again, and blood means pain - he thought he'd be all dried up by now, but apparently, his body has other plans.

He turns to his side and retches a few strands of bitter saliva. Sighing, he rests back against the wall and closes his eyes. Anywhere else but here.

Golden eyes. Liquid veins. River-rafting in champagne. The taxi stutters across the street like an epileptic roomba. Jimmy laughs until he chokes, then leans against the window. He's always loved roller-coasters.

Every drop hits the glass with the force of a thousand coins. It's almost like he can hear all of them, every single one, desperate and splattering. They want him - they all want him. It sounds like they're playing him a song, fast and jazz, without an end.

But the beat's fading. It's only rain, now. Rain and lightning - thunder courses through the frame of the car and into him. He wipes at his nose and inhales the residue - he will not go down. He won't... The powder works its magic. Something flashes in his brain. His heart picks up. He smiles.

He sighs. It comes out as a groan. He should've stayed at the club - he'd had more than enough in him to stay all night. Instead, now, the streets outside swirl in a haze of traffic lights and neon signs, TV screens and backlit billboards. Janet called him a cab but Janet was as blasted as he was. Where is she now? Lightning strikes in the east. From somewhere comes

the sound of a jackhammer. No - it's just his teeth. It's cold as shit. A stiff breeze freezes the sweat to his forehead.

"HEY," he yells out and slams his hand against the back of the driver's seat. "TURN OFF THE FUCKING -"

Thunder interrupts him. He tries again.

"HEY," he yells. "HEY HEY HEY -"

Another crack of thunder. When he blinks the electric lines out of his eyes the driver is shouting and pointing at the window. Jimmy turns to see. His condominium looms over him, a shadow in the lightshow.

"THANKS," he shouts, pawing at his pockets, pulling out a couple of bills and throwing them at the driver. The next moment, he's out on the street, out in the storm, sitting on the curb. He turns his face up and laughs at the rain. It splatters down, coating him in numbing warmth. Thunder rumbles in the distance. Cars come and go like violins. He's never felt more alive.

He emerges reluctant, unwilling, yearning to go back. It's all so clear - so so clear! - but every moment spent awake makes everything go darker. The dream fades. The spark unravels. He takes a deep breath and something tickles at his nose.

He sneezes. The force of it sends pain arcing up his chest. Dust has settled in his throat; he fights the urge to sneeze again and wins, choking it down instead.

The blinds are full of dim orange light. It must be late. He doubts it is the same day - somehow, it feels like weeks have passed since he stumbled into this house. The dream has given him insight, though; only now does he notice how disappointing the décor is. It's like he's twenty one again. The plainness gives him shivers, that, and the broken furniture... and is that blood on the ceiling?

No, no. He's looking down, not up. That's not a dead body; that's himself, his body, his soon-to-be corpse. He smiles. He's starting to feel better. His feet have numbed and he might have pissed himself - he can feel something wet against his thigh - but his nose is numb as well. Good.

Something pulses in his head, enveloping him in ice. He lets it carry him away.

It started as it ended: quickly.

At the front of the line, Jimmy stands with his eyes on his phone, fingers tap-tapping on the counter, as the storekeeper searches for a pack of Brites.

He hopes he's acting impatient enough. He doesn't have all damn day. He growls a complaint and glares at the other man. The storekeeper stammers an apology, bangs his head against the counter, and comes up a moment later, rubbing his temple, a nervous smile on his lips, a battered pack of smokes in his hand.

Jimmy eyes them disdainfully, then plucks them out of the old man's fingers and taps his phone on the payment display. Nothing happens. Sighing, he reaches into his pocket, takes out his wallet, brings out his credit card, and swipes. The machine dings.

The storekeeper wishes him a good day, but Jimmy's already gone. The street is cold, slurry and bright. Other people pass him without a single stare.

His phone buzzes - he raises it to his ear. A woman's voice, bright and chirpy, reminds him about an appointment he's already late to. Jimmy cuts in halfway.

"Jean," he says through gritted teeth. "My company card, at the restaurant last night - it didn't go through, one of the clients had to foot the bill - do you know what kind of stain that puts on me, my reputation, I had to make excuses and jokes until - I expect an explanation..."

And on he goes, on and on, demanding, commanding, reprimanding, until he realizes that she's gone, that his earpiece is silent, that he's staring at a blank screen.

He looks up. The traffic lights have gone dark.

A doorbell brings him back. Madness - who could it be? He hasn't seen anybody in months. A friendly ghost? A ghostly friend? The sound rings in his ears and reverberates until its echo is gone and all that's left is silence.

He wants it back. He wants it all back. He'd rather be there, back there, those final days - the chaos and the crime and the drug-fuelled bucket lists - oh, anything is better than this, these shuddering limbs and shriveled eyes and lungs so heavy they seem apt to split. Everything below his waist has long since frozen. His fingers are starting to burn - he's surprised they haven't fallen off yet. He's cold, he's tired, he's shaking and confused. He'd rather be anywhere, anywhere, anywhere else...

But is he? Could he be? Maybe, just maybe, he is. These past few years could be a dream. He could wake up in a puddle of vomit and shattered glass, the chime of his ringtone, the lilt of his fiancée. He can almost hear them; the chorus, the crinkling, and the voice. He struggles to focus on the words, but when he does, the syllables go fuzzy and turn into a buzz...

Flies. He blinks. Flies, all around him. His brain's disconnected from the rest of the body, dazed and confused, rotting in cranial goop, surrounded by little flitting wings. Where did they come from? When did they get here? Who sent them? No idea, no clue, nobody.

The years have worn on. The world has died. There's nothing left but rot and rust, and now all he wants is for it to be quick, for it to be over, to meet the end, and as for these glimpses, these dreams, is it hope or is desperation that makes him crave the past? He wants one more look, one more memory, something, *anything*, to come rushing up and fill these last few moments before the void rears up and claims him. Childhood - adolescence - desperate youth. He wants his mother. He wants his dog. He wants one last taste of days gone by. Around him, the world shudders and shifts into -

The beach is empty. White sands cling to each other as the tide threatens to tear them apart. Out in the water, the sky meets the sea in a thin green line; the edge of the world. Land ho.

Jimmy stretches in his lawn chair and looks out into the blue. Perhaps, on the other side, someone is staring back and wondering just as he is. He yawns. Does it matter? Not especially. All that matters is that he's managed to scrounge up a crate of beers. They're warm to the touch, but hey, these days, so is everything else.

He pops one open and takes a swig. The fizz trickles down his throat and works its magic. The view is great - he's never seen anything so serene. The world's given him a lucky break. He smiles, takes another sip, closes his eyes, and basks in the warmth of the setting sun.