

SCOTT ZARCINAS

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RAIN

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RAIN

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For My Girls

*“Short stories are tiny windows into other worlds
and other minds and other dreams. They are
journeys you can make to the far side of the
universe and still be back in time for dinner.”*

— Neil Gaiman

JIMMY'S DEAD

THE RAIN, it never stops.

A thick black veil clouds the cityscape and the rain is coming down heavy, like a judge's gavel. I ride the Harley to work every morning now, rain or sunshine. It helps me to forget, but it rains more often than not since Jimmy died. It never stops.

I can see the faces of the world from my vantage point. Some are momentary, like Jimmy's, while others seem to last a little longer. Still, it's the same bored people driving the same bored cars, listening to the same bored shock-jocks on the radio. Donald Sutherland lived in a world like this in *The Body Snatchers*.

A tempting gap opens up between the cars that I might be able to squeeze through to the front of the line, but the Harley is too big to fit, and anyway, the nymphet in Volvo ahead is giving me come-on eyes from the backseat. They're bright as tail lights, and blue, like Jimmy's. I see no reason to hurry forward.

I'm amazed at the number of 15-year old girls who flash a smile and even a breast or two (usually the blondes) at me on the motorcycle when I'm next to them. If parents knew what went on in the back of the car they'd be aghast.

I don't know the statistics, but I've often wondered how many motorcyclists are killed because they are distracted by a nubile cleavage. *There are no old bold motorcyclists*, the bumper sticker says, but by heck we die with a smile on our face.

Over the car roofs up ahead I catch the lights changing, but it's at least thirty seconds before the car in front starts to move, and we barely go further than three car lengths when we do.

Rain

The lights turn back to red, so I lever the gears into neutral and wait. Apparently more people die of heart attacks waiting and doing nothing than at any other time. Dad was always fond of declaring this little piece of information whenever we were stuck in a traffic jam. It's the frustration of waiting, he says. Apparently it weakens the heart like a nagging wife weakens the wallet.

"Thanks dad," Jimmy would always say and roll his eyes or cross his arms, or both.

"We really *needed* to know that," I would add.

Though mum would always end it by saying, "Did you really have to tell us that Robert, did you *really* have to tell us that?" Dad would just smile.

It's almost Jimmy's 10-year anniversary. He died in a road accident back in 1999 riding a Kawasaki 900. That's 900 cc's of raw grunt, and it's quick, really quick. Unfortunately, it was quicker than his brain could handle after it ended up all over the intersection of William and Waverly Streets. Mr Fenman said he didn't see him. My guess is Jimmy didn't see Mr Fenman either.

"There were no skid marks at the scene," the police inspector told the court as he handed around evidence 3A to the jury. Jimmie's brains were photographed from many angles, and I haven't been able to eat mashed potato since seeing those pictures.

Jimmy had hit the side of the van at full speed. He didn't stand a chance. The forensic team estimated he was doing 80-90 clicks in a 50 zone, and how they arrived at that figure I don't know. I guess they calculated how far he flew through the air before smashing his skull into the gutter on the other side of the road, or something along those lines. Still, 80-90 seemed about right.

Jimmy only lived one speed. Fast.

THE MAD HATTER

I DON'T dream that much since Jimmy died, except for the one that keeps coming back.

In it it's raining, it's always raining. It's falling in a grey, velvet drape like a final curtain of a man's last act. I'm cruising along the city streets on the Harley, just as I normally do, but something doesn't feel quite right.

I look down. It's not my bike. It's Jimmy's green Kawasaki. *This is odd*, I think, *very odd*. Jimmy would never let anyone ride his bike, not even his older brother.

I don't need to look at the speedo. I know I'm doing 80-90 clicks just by the feel of the wind in my face. The road is empty. I hear a siren in the distance. Maybe it's the police, or an ambulance, or even a fire truck, I can't tell. The trees to the right and left of me are tall and straight like sentries lining a funeral route, and then it hits me – I'm Jimmy on my way to die.

I see the intersection of William and Waverly up ahead and I'm struck with dread. I know what's going to happen yet I'm powerless to stop it. I release the throttle and stomp my left foot down on the brake pedal, gripping the front brake with my right hand at the same time, but the bike doesn't stop.

"There were no skid marks at the scene," the police inspector's voice echoes in my head. "He must have been doing at least 80-90 clicks."

I remember thinking I must be late for my funeral. To my horror, I see my hands have turned into paws and I realise I've turned into

Rain

the white rabbit from Wonderland. “I’m late, I’m late, I’m late, for a very important date!”

Mr Fenman pulls through the intersection without looking. *Mad Hatters VIP Lawn Mowing*, it says on the side of the van. *Mad Service At Mad Prices!*

Great, I think, I’ll ask how much he charges for front and back lawns. Maybe I’ll get a discount, you know, considering he fucking kills me.

Mr Fenman turns in surprise. He’s wearing a crooked hat and I clearly see his face before I smash into him. I try to veer to the right. No luck. I slam into the side, just where his telephone number is situated: 1800 048 048. One instant I am taking careful note of the number (you never know when they might come in handy), and the next I am flying through the air. I love flying, but I don’t enjoy this.

An instant later I’m lying in the gutter wondering how the hell I managed to fly like a bird when Mr Fenman walks over (waddles like a fat duck, actually) and asks if I’m okay. I remember thinking it kind of odd that the Mad Hatter was concerned about my state of health.

“You must have been doing 80-90 clicks,” he says. “I didn’t see ya comin’ son, I didn’t see ya comin’.”

I reach up and put my hand at the back of my head where my brains used to be. “Sure,” I say, “that’s all right. I’ll be okay. Would you like some tea?”

An ambulance pulls up with sirens blaring and lights flashing. So it *was* an ambulance, I think. Dressed in paramedic overalls, Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum step out and waddle over to my aid like the mad, fat Mr Fenman.

Tweedle Dee shakes his head and says, "It's too wate for de white wabbit, he's dead."

"No, he's not," says Tweedle Dum.

"Yes, he is."

"No, he's not."

"Yes, he is."

"No, he's not."

That's normally when I wake up. I know Mr Fenman was lying in court when he said he didn't see Jimmy coming. He saw him all right. He saw him collide with his door and fly like a modern day superhero, only without the cape and the indestructible wings of steel, and he saw him land head fist into the cement guttering 40 feet on the other side of the road.

Yes siree, he saw Jimmy all right.

He saw him *fly* like no man is supposed to fly.

JIMMY'S BORN

A CAR honks. I'm back on my Harley, in the rain (always rain), and the nymphet in the back of the Volvo is giving me another of *those* looks with her bright baby blues.

Jimmy's still dead though, and he won't be coming home, not tonight, not ever. Sometimes, when I see another green Kawasaki, I check to see if it's Jimmy, but it never is. I'm pretty much over the worst of it now, except for the nightmares. I'll take them to the grave, I guess, but it's mum I'm worried about.

Jimmy was her baby. When the obstetrician tells you that your uterus had to be removed when the baby was delivered because it was the only way to stop the bleeding, you either hate the kid or love it to pieces. Mum chose the latter.

The first time I heard how mum and Jimmy survived the near-death experience of his birth, dad was handing Jimmy a slice of cake. It was in the shape of a rocket and had *Happy 8th Birthday Jimmy* written in large looping letters and an astronaut made of strawberry icing.

Mum was two weeks overdue when she felt the first contraction, the only time Jimmy was late in his life. The obstetrician had threatened to induce her, although I don't know how you induce a kid that has no intention of coming out. Lure it with some candy perhaps?

Anyway, the doctor carried out his threat despite mum's protestations. Unsurprisingly, it didn't work. Jimmy didn't budge. Even in the womb he was a stubborn kid.

But it didn't end there, according to dad. I know he blames himself

for what happened next, but when your wife's brain is about to turn into pea soup because her head had begun to resemble a domestic pressure cooker, I guess you tend to agree with whatever the good doctor advises.

“Your mum's blood pressure was through the roof,” he said. “She was as red as beetroot and sweat'n like mad. Even I knew she had to deliver soon or she was gonna do the hippy-hippy shake all the way to the graveyard.”

Mum looked at him across the kitchen table and shook her head in mock disapproval. “Robert! You'll scare them senseless. Tell them something nice.”

Dad just smiled and handed me a slice of cake on a paper plate. It had the letters PY BIR on top and half an astronaut's head, just like Jimmy's 16 years later after he ran into a van doing 80-90 clicks on a green Kawasaki. *Mad Service At Mad Prices!*

“Anyway, your mum needed to have an operation so that Jimmy could be born quick.” He was on a roll. “We didn't know Jimmy was a boy then, of course, and I don't think she really knew how close she was to dying, but I always remember what she said before they took her in: ‘Do you think I need some lipstick?’”

He laughed himself silly every time he told that story, and for years later we would all laugh with him no matter how many times we'd heard it before.

At the time the drama was actually unfolding, though, it was anything but funny. They wheeled mum to the adjacent ward for one of those operations Caesar's mother had 2000 years ago, but when she eventually woke up from the ordeal Jimmy was three days old. She died twice on the operating table, apparently, and lost so much blood her whole body had to be replaced with someone else's.

Rain

A machine had to keep her breathing during that time and the only sustenance she got was dripped into her veins. I was barely 2 when all this was going on and only understood the gravity of it years later when I saw Jimmy hooked up to life support the day of the accident.

Tubes were coming in and out of his body like Frankenstein's monster, but it was the exasperations of the breathing machine that really freaked me out. Every time it pushed in a lungful of air it sounded like an irritated woman at the opera – *Sbbb!* – and every time it sucked air out it hissed like a slashed tyre. It was relentless:

*Sbbbb! – pause – Hiss! – pause – Sbbbb! – pause –
Hiss! – pause – Sbbb...*

Like Jimmy after her, mum was fed a cocktail of medicines. Medicine to keep her heart beating, medicine to paralyse her muscles, medicine to make her piss, medicine to prevent infections, and medicine to keep the pain away.

There was no medicine, however, that would ever allow her to have another child. When she was eventually allowed to go home she took some of the pills with her. She especially liked the little blue ones that can make you forget you're no longer a woman.

I see she's been taking them again, ever since dad told the doctor to switch off Jimmy's breathing machine.

Sbbb! – pause – Hiss! – pause...

JIMMY'S POTENTIAL

The throb of the Harley's engine is sweet. Even the rain can't detract from the pure joy of riding it. It's pure fantasy.

Directly ahead of me now is a rusty Volkswagen Beetle that had squeezed its way into the lane. It's at least as old as its musical counterparts, but more decrepit. It rattles and splutters, and blue smoke pours out of the exhaust in choking spasms. The rings must be going, I think (the car's equivalent to catching pneumonia), and I hope it doesn't decide to pack up and blow oil and phlegm all over me. I look further ahead.

The Volvo with the backseat nymphet has crawled two car lengths further on to the foot of the traffic lights. We've been funnelled into a single lane. That's the reason for the hold up, and in the middle of the intersection a stationary ambulance is flashing. No sirens though. Just flashing.

It looks just like the ambulance in my dreams, and I hear a voice over the Harley's purr: *It's too wate for de white wabbit, he's dead!*

I think of Jimmy again, I can't help it. Everything I see brings him back to me.

At school he was always getting into trouble, and that meant getting his parents into trouble. For dad, the annual parent-teacher evening was the equivalent to a parole board, where he was the prisoner appealing for early release.

He always knew what they were going to say. "Mr McCormack, your son is, how should we say, a bit of a problem."

Mum would sit still (something Jimmy obviously couldn't do), clasp her hands and stare at the wall behind Mr Bainbridge. Mr Bainbridge, I discovered many years later, was always asked to sit in whenever Jimmy McCormack was being discussed. That was Jimmy's claim to fame: he was the only child for whom the headmaster had to speak to the parents about.

Dad never took it seriously. As far as he and mum were concerned Jimmy was an angel, he could do no wrong. The teachers were obviously mistaken. Hadn't they heard the story how he and Mrs McCormack nearly died when he was born?

But to the teachers Jimmy was one of *those* kids, the ones who were destined never to be anything except shower-buddies for the lonely men doing time up in Victor's Ridge. They were wrong, though. Jimmy was just too smart for his class. And too smart meant too bored, but the teachers never saw it.

Dad would clear his throat before he spoke. "Uh, what sort of problem?"

Mr Bainbridge would take a deep breath, purse his lips, lean forward in his chair, as if he was about to say something, and then sit back, passing the buck to Jimmy's teacher.

"I'll let Miss Schmidt fill you in on all the details."

Miss Schmidt was one of those teachers every schoolboy and their father wanted to be filled in with all her details. A Twiggy look-a-like, she turned more heads than a carnival sideshow, especially when she wore a miniskirt and white knee high boots, which was nearly every day. This was the 70s, of course. She taught Grade Five and when she bent over it was like a glorious sunset on the horizon. I was in her class two years before Jimmy and I saw the sun set on many glorious occasions.

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