



Loretta Doesn't Know

From A Hyphenated Life: And Other Disjointed Things

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Jimmy is at Eckerd Drugstore just off Hulen Street on the Westside of Fort Worth. He is wearing a flannel robe, green t-shirt and, should a gust of wind blow through, it would reveal that was all he was wearing. Besides shoes, of course. Jimmy always remembered to put on shoes ever since the day he sliced his foot on broken glass at Minyard's Grocery, running from the bag boy chasing him for stealing a 12-pack of Miller Lite.

Jimmy is at the refrigerated case, again grabbing for a 12-pack of Miller Lite. He also has a bag of pretzels and a giant bag of Luden's Wild Cherry Throat Lozenges. Jimmy is prone to a tickly throat and he found Luden's work best. Pretzels, of course, because Jimmy always had pretzels when he drank beer. And Jimmy always drinks beer.

Jimmy is 47 years old but he could pass for 70 on a good day. His hair—what little of it he has left, anyway—is pure white, as is his beard, as is the ample hair on his arms. His white hair does him no favors against his face, flush red. His nose is bulbous with the telltale gin blossoms dotting its tip, though Jimmy would never call them gin blossoms since Jimmy only drinks beer. His hands, as they have done for several years, shake incessantly. He can no longer write checks, his preferred method of payment at Eckerd, so now he has his mother fill out the check before he leaves the house. She is senile but her hands don't shake and Jimmy can get her to write him checks whenever he needs them. And Jimmy always needs them for beer. He's long past the days of stealing beer, having been arrested three times, the last time the judge telling him he was going to jail for five to ten if he five fingered Miller Lite again.

Jimmy, to no one's surprise, lives with his mother, Loretta, who shuffles about the house with her oxygen tank all day, her destination known only to her. Jimmy has lived with Loretta since Loretta could no longer take care of herself. At least that's the story he likes to tell, the one in which he gets to play the hero returning home to take care of his dying mamma. The

truth, as Jimmy's truth often is, isn't quite so heroic.

Up until six months ago, Jimmy was living in the charred remains of an abandoned motel on the east side of town. The east side of Fort Worth is a glaring example of income disparity. Luxury homes and country clubs butt against impoverished neighborhoods suffering the rot of neglect. The motel, in one of these neglected neighborhoods, was gutted by a fire two years ago, thought to be set intentionally for insurance money, and has sat, untouched, since. Jimmy found a room that suffered the least damage and made himself a home. There was no roof or plumbing and the bed was basically a pile of soot, so Jimmy slept on the floor and when it started to rain, he'd simply sleep under the desk, the only piece of furniture in the room that the fire spared. Somehow, and this part is unclear, someone found Jimmy at the motel and told him about his sick mother. How sick is she, Jimmy asked. Sick enough to not remember much anymore, the stranger replied.

Jimmy packed up his things, nothing more than a broken hand radio and two cans of Play-Doh, the contents of which had long ago hardened. He walked all the way to his mother's house on the southwest corner of town and rang the doorbell. When his mom answered, he beamed "Mama, I'm here to take care of you. Your baby Jimmy is home."

His mother remembered her baby boy. Of course she did. Even with her dementia and creeping Alzheimer's, if ever a face were etched in her memory, it would be Jimmy's. What she did not remember was that, a year before, she kicked him out after he got drunk one night and, with a bat, broke nearly every breakable thing she owned. But the day Jimmy arrived back at her doorstep, Loretta only knew that her boy was home and he was home to take care of her. For what, she didn't know.

Now it's been a year since Jimmy moved back, ostensibly to take care of his mom. The reality is, Loretta's friends from church take turns taking her to doctor appointments and her weekly hair appointment and all her other appointments for that matter. Even if he wanted to, and he didn't, Jimmy couldn't take her on errands. He has no license and, even if he had, he has no business being behind the wheel of a car. The only thing Jimmy does for his mother is heat up food the church ladies bring by, but even then, he often forgets something is in the oven until it's too late. Loretta doesn't know her food is burned or that Jimmy often scrapes off the burnt parts and serves it to her. Loretta doesn't even know her son had a long history of drinking because Loretta no longer has a history beyond the past hour. Loretta doesn't know she doesn't know.

Jimmy will tell you, if you ask him, or even if you don't, that he's an alcoholic. He's known this for years, certainly long before anyone else suspected he had a problem. He'll tell you the hook was set pretty much from the beginning, and he's right. Jimmy's been drinking alcoholically since pretty much his first drink. What Jimmy won't tell you, however, is why the bottle had such an instant draw.

Jimmy's father, James Sr., didn't have much use for Jimmy. James Sr.—Senior to those that knew him well—was already damaged, psychologically more than physically, when he returned from the second World War. It only got worse when, for extra scratch, he started making lead fishing sinkers in his garage. The sustained lead exposure, combined with the PTSD and his drinking, made for a volatile mixture.

By the time Jimmy came along, Senior was clinically insane, though no one formally diagnosed him as such. Loretta did her best to shield little Jimmy from his father's insanity, but eventually Senior became impossible to contain. Jimmy would bear the weight of Senior's resentments.

By the time Jimmy was 6 years old he had suffered eight broken ribs and a broken arm, all at the hands of his father. At 7, his father took a hot iron and held it to Jimmy's leg until Jimmy quit crying. When it became evident he couldn't quit crying, Senior clocked his son across the head, knocking him out and leaving him for dead. By the time Jimmy was 10, he was nothing but a rag doll, a punching bag on which his father would pound away his frustrations and regret.

Regina was born sometime between broken rib one and two, a year or two after Jimmy. Regina was born two months early, and she was born in the bathtub, as Senior was too drunk to take Loretta to the hospital so Loretta never went. What Jimmy was to his father's fists, Regina was to his perversions. When she was 16, Regina became pregnant. When Senior realized his daughter was carrying his baby, he beat her in the stomach to kill his shame. It worked. Senior effectively aborted his second son, his daughter's child. It would be three years before Regina would speak again.

Jimmy and Regina were each other's only friend, only refuge. They learned quickly that their father would never abuse them if they were together, so they tried, as much as possible, to never be apart. It was only in isolation that Senior would exact his terror. And Senior did everything he could to separate them. Jimmy knew, though Regina never spoke of it, what Senior used Regina for. He knew why her clothes were ripped, her sheets stained with blood, and the reason the screams in her sleep pierced the darkness of the night.

Jimmy and Regina never had a childhood, nor did they ever grow up. They never played outdoors, never received presents on their birthdays or Christmas, never had friends over and were never allowed over to anyone's home to play. Loretta never made their favorite dish or even knew what their favorite dish was, and they only went out to eat as a family once and only once because Senior became so angry over the cost that when they got home, Jimmy paid the price.

A year after Regina's forced abortion, Senior died. The official story was that Senior drowned while fishing. The reality was he committed suicide by lining all his pockets in his pants and jacket with hundreds of his homemade lead sinkers, rowing to the deepest part of the lake, and jumping in. The only note he left behind was for Jimmy. It read, *I hope you know you're worthless and what I am about to do is because of you.*

Jimmy didn't need the note to tell him he was worthless. He already knew. Jimmy knew his worth the day his dad, after beating him almost to unconsciousness, urinated on his son and told him he was worth less than a toilet. That's the day the hook was set, the day Jimmy realized that the very thing that fueled his father could act as the salve that Jimmy had been so desperately searching for. At 8 years old, Jimmy learned how to steal beers, and more importantly, he learned that beers made all his problems disappear.

Loretta knew the day Jimmy picked up. She was there when Senior pissed on his son, and she saw the last of his innocence slip from her son's eyes. She witnessed the day her husband succeeded in breaking the spirit of childhood. And she witnessed the first beer her son consumed. She didn't try to stop him. There would have been no use even if she had. She knew, at that moment, he needed it. But she also knew how the story was going to end.

Loretta doesn't know it anymore. She doesn't remember that day anymore. She doesn't remember that, at one time, she knew how this story was going to end. The only thing she remembers is she must, always, have her oxygen tank by her side, that she has a son named Jimmy, and that on Sundays she goes to church, though she doesn't know, exactly, what church is.

Jimmy, with his lozenges and pretzels and beer, makes his way to the cashiers. They all know him, they know he has a check, they know it will be made out for the exact amount, and they know he didn't write it. They each, in their own way, pity Jimmy. Stacy makes a point of always asking how Loretta is doing. Tammy—Tams, as her nametag reads—always makes sure to slip a weekly circular in Jimmy's bag, on which she's circled deals she thinks Loretta and Jimmy might be interested in. Frank helps Jimmy carry his beer at least to the end of parking

lot. Frank never forgets to tell Jimmy to have a nice day. Jimmy never forgets to respond that he will.

Jimmy always walks home from Eckerd on the grassy shoulder, a good three or four feet from traffic. Except today, the rains from the previous three days saturated the soil and the grassy shoulder is nothing but a murky soup, inches deep. For some reason, the water and the rain and the beer remind Jimmy of the day he read the note his dad left for him. Worthless Jimmy stands there, on the side of the road, as the cars zoom precariously close, just inches to his left. Worthless Jimmy waits. And, at just the right time, right when a bus is ten feet away, barreling at 50MPH, worthless Jimmy steps just inches to his left.

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