

DOUBLE VISION

Even with my eyes closed I know something is wrong. My head pounds, arms sting with needle prick pain. Legs can move—thank god, and when my toes wiggle, I’m relieved. Annoying monotonous beeps tic-toc like a metronome. One eye opens, machines stream graphs and numbers change—one up, one down, one up, one down.

“Where the hell am I?” The sound of my voice echoes as if in a tunnel.

“You’re in Midway Hospital... Mr. Jones.”

Tubes and wires extend from my body. An IV hangs above my head. The lights are down but I can see two men hovering over me. Neither are doctors. One has a fat pumpkin-like face. His breath stinks of stale cigarette smoke. My nose is bad, but his clothing also reeks. I am grateful to my mother who pounded it into my head that smoking is a dirty habit. The other one is younger and wears a Bogart type fedora that gives him a dramatic look. He has high cheekbones, a long serious face and a big chin. They aren’t wearing uniforms, but I know they’re both cops. They’re TV stereotypes, and I hate those cop shows, but still, I’ve watched them.

“You were pretty bloodied... Mr. Jones,” the one wearing a hat stands near the bed. “We found you on the side of the road up in Brookside Neighborhood. I’m Sargent Handly, that’s Detective Stu Malcom.” He flashes an ID so fast it could have been a boy scout merit badge.

I stare at him like I don’t understand English. And right now, I’m having a problem understanding anything. I’m drugged and partly in an alien universe. At least that’s what it feels like. I don’t remember anything except... I put my hand over my eyes. Oh god... maybe it’s the meds or maybe it’s real... but what I see is horror.

“Can you tell us what happened?” Fat face asks the first question in a dry surgical tone.

My mind is tumbling backward like a boxer who just took a right hook to the jaw. I moan.

“There was a body.”

Wires and tubes keep me from turning, but I try anyway. A buzzer goes off and a nurse rushes in. She evil-eyes the two men. The sound rings like a bell inside my head. She pushes a button. The sound stops. The two cops stand there expressionless, almost lifeless.

“What body is that?” Hat Man says.

“The one with no head.” I can see it as if it’s in bed with me.

The two cops look at each other. Fat Face says, “Tell us about it.”

“I don’t know anything,” and that’s the truth. “Except, she’s female.”

“What makes you think female, Mr. Jones?”

“She’s wearing a skirt.”

“What color?”

“I don’t know, it was dark. Maybe red, or maybe that was blood.”

The two cops share another glance, I close my eyes. I’m standing over the headless body. It looks like a scarecrow that fell off its stick. A car is nearby. The back-passenger door is open. And... and there’s someone else. He seems familiar and he’s waving at me.

As if by telepathy Hat Man asks, “Is anyone with you?”

“Ya.” My head is screaming and I push the button for the nurse, wishing I had pushed it ten minutes ago. She rushes in once again.

“Our patient needs some quiet time,” she seems concerned.

“Sure sweetie,” Fat Face gives her a quick glance, “just one more question.”

I know it’ll be more than one. The nurse puts something under my tongue. It’s bitter and melts quickly. Water to my lips washes it down. The cop asks his question.

“So, this Mr. Someone... who is he?”

The pill is working. My head is fuzzing over, pain swimming out with the tide.

Hat Man steps closer, “Is he a friend or someone else?”

Friend? I'm not sure I have a friend, but I know him. I'm trying to get ahold of the name but it floats away. I can hardly keep my eyes open and I don't want to. Something is lurking in the closet, I'm sure it's a huge spider. My tongue is so thick it can't move. I can hear the cops talking.

"He's gone," the younger one says. "Get well, Mr. Jones. We'll be back."

I pass out and dream of my mother. I'm grasping a glass of water, my head in her lap. The edge of the glass is soft, the water is slimy, and she's laughing while reading 'Alice in Wonderland' out loud. My eyes pop open. I have no idea how long I've been out.

"You've been asleep four hours." It's Hat Man reading my mind. "How do you feel?"

"Crummy." When I try to sit up, a hand pushes me down, which reminds me of mother, but it's the nurse. She feeds me ice cream, which feels cool and sweet going down the gullet. "Take it easy, Mr. Jones."

Jones? I'm not sure that's really my name, but it'll do for now.

Sargent Hat Man leans forward. His tone is friendly. "Tell us about this other person with you. Where are you?"

I can see him and the body. It's crumpled up like a rag rug thrown on the floor. I recognize where I am.

"I'm in a... a garage." Moonbeams flood through the open garage door. I can see shadows. Blood is everywhere, but I don't tell that to the cops. A single bulb swings in the center of the ceiling that hardly gives off any light.

"We want your friend's name, Mr. Jones?" Fat Face still stinks of cigarette smoke.

Why is he calling him my friend? My brain searches its filing cabinet of names but comes up empty. "I don't remember..." And that's the truth. Yet, there's something about him... I can't grasp but... I'm afraid of him. I'm as disappointed as the cops are.

"This man with you in the garage... is the woman's body there too?"

Hat Man is interested in the story. But it all seems made up, too unreal. My brain is pounding, like someone sticking it with a knife.

“Yes, she’s there.... her body is on the cement floor.”

“What did you do with her head?” Fat man demands. He puts his shoe on a stool by the bed. I can smell his socks. I used to be that way when I was a kid. Wear socks until they could stand up by themselves. My mother had a way of correcting bad habits. She should have been a boxer.

“Your feet stink,” I say. “You should listen to your mother.”

He puts his foot back on the floor, looks over at his buddy and raises his eyebrows.

“How tall is your friend?” Hat man has bright blue eyes, not probing or accusing like Fat Face.

“He’s my height.”

“Five eleven or so?”

“Yeah, or so.” My head is swimming in pain. I’m looking for the button to call the nurse. When I turn toward Fat Face, he’s holding it.

“Just a couple more questions, Mr. Jones.”

There is some kind of compression going on, like someone is squeezing my skull, as if someone is trying to hold everything in that wants to explode outward.

“My head hurts.”

“It should, Mr. Jones. You’ve got a nasty bump. The woman hit you, didn’t she?”

Fat Face is making assumptions that make my head spin. Of course I want to help but his questions, even his voice, are like battering rams. I turn to Hat Man.

“You’re seeing something, aren’t you, Mr. Jones?”

He’s right. “Yes. I see a work bench with tools on it. There’s a pipe wrench, screwdrivers, a hammer, pliers, a cleaver and other odd stuff. It’s a mess.”

“Is your friend with you?”

“Yes... yes, he’s there.”

“Why are you there?” Fat Face demands.

“I don’t know why.”

“That’s bullshit, Mr. Jones. Tell the truth.”

But it is true. The pressure is building in my brain, the headache is excruciating.

“You were there to steal something, weren’t you? Then something went wrong.”

Hat Man interrupts, putting his hand up. “You’re not a thief, are you Mr. Jones?”

I let out a long breath. He understands. “I’m not a thief.”

“I believe you. You don’t seem like that type,” he says.

Fat Face is annoyed. “Can you give us a better description of your accomplice?”

“An accomplice?” My god, he thinks I... my brain swirls as though a dust devil has entered it. The whole thing is unbelievable... to think I would kill... or even help someone... yet, when I close my eyes, he’s wearing a shirt that... that I lent him!

“What kind of shirt is he wearing?” Hat Man’s looking inside my head.

“A blue work shirt.”

I can see it. It fits him perfectly.

Fat Face walks over to the closet and pulls out a blue work shirt. “Like this?”

“Yeah, like that. Me and ten thousand others wear a shirt like that.”

The vice squeezing my head is tightening. I think my eyes are about to pop out. I go for the call button, but the cop’s got it. As he’s talking, the shirt begins to bleed. The ceiling sweats blood, the walls are turning red, my head is screaming. He hands me the call button and I push it as though my life depends on it. The nurse rushes in.

She looks at her machines, then turns to the cops. “It’s time for you gentlemen to leave. His blood pressure is in the danger zone, breathing erratic, oxygen below 80.”

Once again, she puts something under my tongue. “There, there, Mr. Jones, take it easy, I’ll look after you.” I drift off like Huck Finn floating down the Mississippi, the nurse and my mother are

with me on Huck's raft. The cops fade out like the end of a movie. But of course, it's not the end.

In my dream, I'm driving somewhere. My hypothetical friend is in the backseat. There's a woman next to me, pretty, mid-twenties or something. Her name is... I can't think of her name, but I know her. She's laughing at his jokes. When I look over, she's holding her severed head in her hands. He's still telling jokes, the head is laughing. I wake with a scream. I think it's morning, but it might be afternoon. The cops are there. Hat Man starts.

"Bad dream, Mr. Jones?" I hate that he can see into my head.

"The body," I take a deep breath, "she's a young woman."

"What makes you think young, Mr. Jones?"

"It's a dream. That's how dreams are."

Fat Face wants a smoke, I can tell. His right hand reaches for a pack in his shirt pocket then retreats to side. "Tell us about it."

I hate that, 'tell us about it,' tone. Fat Face doesn't give a fuck about the whole story, he wants something else, and he still stinks of cigarettes. When I close my eyes, the dream is as real as ever, but now the woman's body is lying in the back seat. Hypothetical is in the front next to me. His hands covered with blood and... and he's holding her head. I force my eyes open but say nothing to the cops.

"Was your friend in the dream?" Hat Man asks.

It's a good guess. "He's not my friend, but yes, he was there." I don't know why I tell them. I don't have to say anything but I'm thinking I need answers as bad as the cops do.

"What is he doing?" Hat Man asks.

"He's telling jokes." The headache is coming back.

"What kind of jokes?"

"I don't know, stupid racist jokes. I hate them." Just like my mother used to tell, but I don't say that.

“You’ve heard them before?” He’s looking into my head again. My headache is full of needles. When I move my arm, IV’s shift and send pain to my shoulder. The whole thing is fucked up. I’m not even sure this is a real hospital. I’m not even sure about the body or if these guys are real cops.

Fat Face gets a phone call. It’s short and when he hangs up, he gives one of those... ‘this is bad’ grimaces to Hat Man. “They found her head.”

“Where?” Hat Man flops into a cushioned chair, the kind that can throw you out on the touch of a button.

Fat Face gives up a long exhale. “In a trashcan, outside, next to the garage.”

On the ceiling, a dark spot is spreading, like someone spilling ink on cotton. Maybe it’s a black hole that’ll suck me out of here. I’m not sure. Hat Man leans forward.

“Go back to the garage, Mr. Jones. What were you doing there?”

I’m trying to remember where I was and where I am at the same time. My mind is spinning and I can’t answer.

Fat Face looks at me. “It will be easier on you if you tell us where your friend is.”

I’m back in the garage, he’s there, but something is not right. It’s his face, I can’t really see it in the shadows, and the tools... they’re not mine, and it’s not my garage... but I’ve been there before. I begin to breathe rapidly, the ink spot is spilling down the walls, the cops turn to paper dolls. The nurse has an evil smile on her face. Then darkness.

I’m not sure how long I’m out, but when I wake, it’s night. No cops. The nurse is standing there. She’s writing notes on a clipboard. Her lips are thick and red and pursed. They’re attractive, but she’s used lipstick to cover up small cracks. Maybe she felt me staring at her, I don’t know, but she looks over at me. Her smile is like my mother’s and she leans over the bed. She wants to kiss me; a big wet sloppy kiss.

Instead, she says, “What’s his name, Mr. Jones?”

“Sammy.” I blurt out.

“Sammy? Mr. Jones... who’s Sammy?”

I'm swimming up a raging river. It's a name I should never have spoken. I'm ashamed. My gut churns and my head aches like someone hit me with a rock... No! Not a rock—a piece of steel.

She touches a tube I didn't even know was there. It comes out the top of my head. "Your skull is fractured, Mr. Jones. The tube relieves pressure on your cranial cavity."

If that's true, it's not working. She turns up a dial and a warm feeling spreads over my body. "Are you hungry?" she asks. Her tongue looks like a serpent coming out of her mouth.

I can't even feel my body much less hunger. "No. But I could use a drink."

She laughs. It sounds like my mother's laugh and I close my eyes. I can see my mother pouring a drink, one for her... one for me. I'm a kid. I'm trying to push her and the drink away. The dream comes back. Sammy's in the garage with me. There's a mirror, a five-foot cheap mirror you can get at any big box store in a plastic frame. We're standing together, but I only see his reflection and that of the car behind me. It's not my car. The headlights are glaring. He has a meat cleaver in his hand. Everything disappears.

When I wake, I have a bandage on my groin and I'm fuzzier than ever.

"Good morning, Mr. Jones." It's the nurse. "You had a procedure during the night. You could've died. They inserted a filter into your femoral artery to keep blood clots from moving to your brain."

Part of me says fine. She could've stabbed me and I wouldn't have cared.

She is changing my blankets. There's a tube coming out of my penis and I'm wondering how it got there. I've been peeing into a bag hooked on the side of the bed. When I turn my head, I see it's half full. The cops are standing there.

Fat Face never asks how are ya doing or does it hurt. I'm shitting in a pan, peeing in a bag, my head is about to fall off and two fucking cops are pumping me with questions. I'm feeling fuck, that's how I'm feeling. But he doesn't ask.

He starts with, "Who's Sammy?"

The question slams me. I look at the nurse who turns away. Dragging up that name is like drudging the Chicago river. It's like a flashlight in the eyes. My mother would scream Sammy when having sex in the bedroom next to mine. That was thirty years ago. I don't tell the cops. I lie.

"My stepfather was named Samuel, but good luck with that." Fat Face is after his cigarettes again, and there's a giant spider on the ceiling. I know it's the meds, but it looks real anyway.

"Ya, why's that?"

"He's dead." Hat Man is writing all this down on a small note pad.

"We think Sammy is your accomplice," Fat Face says.

"Accomplice? No!" I'm hyperventilating. I turn to Hat Man. He understands. "He's not my friend and not an accomplice!"

"Calm down, Mr. Jones. We don't mean that kind of accomplice. But even you must be curious who Sammy is? I mean he's with you in the garage, wearing a shirt you lent him, and there's a dead, mutilated body between you. Are you protecting him? Is he a relative or a friend?"

The pain splits my head in half. I know I'm puffing. There's a dam within me holding back something terrible. The spider on the ceiling moves. It's gargantuan. I know it isn't real, but it... it has my mother's head on it. Its body undulates and pulses like its having sex. I want to scream.

"Are you alright?" Hat Man must've seen the expression on my face or heard me hyperventilating.

The spider disappears. "Yes, I'm fine."

"Do you remember where we found you?" Fat Face asks.

"It's all a blank."

"What's the last thing you remember?" Hat Man is willing to listen.

"I'm in the garage. It's night." But after that it's a tornado of memories about as real as that spider. It feels like my entire life is jammed on the head of a pin.

“What about the cleaver?” Fat Face moves closer.

“The meat cleaver?”

“Yes. We think it’s the murder weapon.”

I close my eyes. “Sammy’s got the cleaver in his hand.”

Fat Face puts his shoe on the stool by the bed. “Are you sure?”

“He’s saying don’t rat me out.” I look up at the ceiling. Now there’s two spiders, one with my mother’s head, and I’m shaking. I can’t tell if it’s an earthquake or just my body. “There’s someone else in the garage,” I whisper.

“Who?” Both men move closer.

“A woman.”

“What about her?”

“I know her, she looks familiar.”

I can smell Fat Face’s stinkin’ breath. He’s close, too close.

“She’s wearing my mother’s red dress.” My eyelids are heavy, like someone put anvils on them. A pain shoots from between my eyes straight through to the back of my head. I’m pressing the call button, but it’s not the call button. It’s my mother’s hand. She’s pulling my fingers down between her legs. It’s wet and hairy and I don’t know what to do. She guides my fingers. I begin to shiver.

“So, in the garage, what’s this woman doing?”

“She’s yelling at us.” She sounds like my mother screaming Sammy.

Ink blotches on the ceiling reappear and they’re spreading down the walls. The room tilts and I’m out, maybe passed out or maybe I’m dead. It’s nighttime when I wake, and the room is empty. Machines are beeping. There are murmurs in the hallway, someone is talking softly outside my room. My mother is a shadow sitting bedside. She’s saying, where’s my Sammy? Sammy’s gone, Mama. I’m crying. Sammy said he’s never coming back. But I’m wrong. Mama’s searching for my hand.

When I open my eyes, the two detectives are there. It's morning, or I think it's morning, I'm not sure. Hat Man still has his hat on, Fat Face looks wired. He's probably smoked a half-pack of camels and had four cups of coffee. There's no welcome or how are you. He starts.

"You know 17 Riverside, bottom unit?"

"Ya... It's where I grew up."

"Been there lately?"

"Haven't been there since my mother died." The mention of mother fills me with a poisonous tension that shocks my body.

And then I see him. He's in the room, standing with his back to the window. I can hardly breathe. Sammy's leaning against the sill with his arms crossed, wearing my work shirt. Very clever... I'm sure Fat Face brought him in. I don't think he realizes how dangerous Sammy is. He's not even cuffed.

Hat Man looks out the window, past Sammy. "What are you thinking, Mr. Jones?"

Before I can answer Fat Face breaks in. "Do you know how your head got cracked open?"

Sammy puts a finger to his lips, shh. His eyes are pleading. The memory is flooding back to me. Spiders are crawling over the ceiling. The walls look like graham crackers. Everything is there. The work bench, the tools, the car... but the cleaver is missing. I remember running out of the garage. Sammy is chasing me. He's swinging the cleaver. By the time I reach the end of the drive, my head is in pieces.

"It was Sammy... he came from behind and hit me."

Sammy stands straight, his fists are tight, but says nothing. Fat Face gets close.

"Why would Sammy hit you?"

"He thinks I hate my mother."

"Do you?"

The spider with mother's head is back. I can hardly breathe. It's terrifying.

“She’s not here, Mr. Jones.” Hat Man’s looking into my head as if he can see it too. The spider backs off. “Tell us about the woman in the garage.”

I can see her in my mother’s dress. “She came out of nowhere. She’s screaming at us.”

“Then what?”

“Sammy swung the cleaver so fast her head just lopped off.” My throat is so tight I think I’m going to choke. “The body stood there for a moment then dropped to the floor like a rag-doll. He picked up her head by the hair. The eyes were still open, her mouth in a partial scream.”

Sammy’s standing by the window, mouthing the words, ‘Fuck you. You know who did it, not me.’

“Say you did, Sammy!” I scream. “We dragged the body into the back seat of the car. There was blood everywhere. I ran. Sammy chased me. He hit my head with the backside of the cleaver. Everything went dark. Next thing I know, I’m here.” My eyes are bobbing back and forth between the cops. “It was Sammy, I swear.” I point at the window.

There’s a brief silence. Fat Face takes out a smoke and knocks it against the cigarette box and looks up at me.

“It’s your prints on the cleaver, Mr. Jones. How do you figure that?”

The ink is back on the ceiling. It’s pouring down the walls like a black waterfall. Spiders come out of the closet. They all have mother’s head. My body is vibrating as if hit by a lightning bolt. Mother is a master at creating fear. Hat Man leans over the bed and presses the button for me.

The room seems foggy, voices mumble, but I’m listening and words seem far away.

“Do you think he knows who the dead woman was?”

“I’m not sure he knows... or ever will, that the dead woman was his mother. And I’m still not sure who Sammy is.”

My eyes slit open. Fat Face has his jacket on and he’s shaking his head. “There is no Sammy.”

They must be blind. Sammy’s sitting right there, on the window sill, staring at me. And I don’t like that look on his face.

•

It's late. Not sure how late, it makes no difference. Finally, the cops are gone. Everything is clear in my head. No fog. Goodbye Jonesy. There's a nurse standing next to the bed. I've never seen her before. She's wheeled in a tray piled with gauze pads and bandages. The lights are low, arranged so they're not in my eyes.

"You're doing better."

I can't help but notice a scissor and a small scalpel on the tray. The instrument has a sterile handle. It looks like jewelry, it's so shiny.

"We were able to remove the tube from your head."

"Tube? What the hell are you talking about?"

"You had a relief tube coming out the top of your skull."

I reach up and touch the top of my head. No tube, but it's sore.

"This won't take long, Mr. Jones." She's busy unraveling the dressing around my head.

"What's with the Mr. Jones?"

"It's your name...." She smiles. It's a cute nurse-type smile.

"I'm not Mr. Jones."

She turns my wrist and looks at the band. "It says, Jones..., Mr. Jones." Her fingers are soft and the touch sets me on fire.

"What would you like to be called?"

Her uniform smells like Mama—antiseptic clean. Her hair is the same color and her lips... those frothy red lips.

"Sammy. My name is Sammy." Oh, my heart is beating fast.

"Sammy." The nurse exhales my name in a breathy way, just like Mama.

She's wrapping my head with a new bandage, so incredibly tender and careful, and her body is close and smells like perfumed soap. Her uniform is pressed up against the bed.

I want to laugh at those stupid cops. My heart's thumping so loud I'm sure she can hear it.

"I'm finished... Sammy." She says it using the same words Mama used to.

She rolls the tray back and leans over the bed. Her eyes are bright, Mama's eyes, she wants to kiss me. My arm moves like lightning, I grab her blouse. The buttons pop, but a steel grip traps my wrist. Pain shooting to my elbow... bandages and implements flying. I'm hyperventilating. The nurse screaming. More pain, stabbing twisting pain. Her blouse is torn and open. I think my wrist is broken... and there's another scream...

"Mama... no! Mama, I'll... I'll do anything, I promise!" It's my voice...

For a moment I'm floating in space, or maybe I'm in Mama's womb.

"Calm down, Sammy..." the voice is composed, even. "Your mother's not here."

The nurse runs out of the room. My heart is thumping, I'm gulping breaths, floating in an underwater bubble. My wrist burns where he grabbed me.

"I've been wanting to meet you." His tone is reassuring. I look straight into his bright blue eyes.

He sits in the recliner, takes off his hat and sets it on his knee. He's quiet. I'm calming down. He waits. I know what he wants.

"Can we talk?" he says it like we're friends.

"He hated Mama."

"Really?"

A nasty little boy smile crosses my lips. "That's why Jonesy killed her."

"I'm looking for Jonesy. Where is he?"

"Mama took care of him."

"What do mean, took care of him?"

"Mama put him in a cage. I don't think he'll be around for a while."

He takes out a notepad and writes something, then looks up.

“Did you bash in Jonesy’s head?”

“Mama told me to shut him up.”

“And where’s Mama now?”

“Right there.” I point. She’s leaning against the window sill. I’m surprised he can’t see her.

He glances at the window. “Will she talk to me?”

“I don’t think she wants to talk right now.” Mama’s mouthing words, Sammy’s been a bad boy. She’s naked, holding a bloody cleaver, and I don’t like the look on her face.