

DOUBLE VISION

Something is wrong. Very wrong. One eye opens partway. An IV hangs overhead, machines stream graphs and numbers change—one up, one down. Annoying monotonous beeps tick-tock like a metronome. Needles prick both arms. The distant sound of my name echoes as if in a tunnel. Mr. Jones? Mr. Jones.

“Where the hell am I?” My tongue is thick, the words are sluggish. The pain in my head is like a vice crushing a coconut.

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

Two men hover over me. Neither are doctors. One has a fat pumpkin-like face. His breath stinks of stale cigarette smoke and his clothing reeks. Mother beat it into my head that smoking is a dirty habit. The other one has a long face and a large square chin. He wears a Bogart type fedora that gives him a dramatic look. They aren’t wearing uniforms, but I know they’re both cops. TV stereotypes.

“You were pretty bloodied... Mr. Jones,” the one wearing a hat stands near the bed. “We found you in a front yard up in Brookside. I’m Detective Stu Malcom, that’s Sargent Handley.” 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 I’m having a problem remembering anything. I’m drugged and partly in an alien universe. I put my hand over my eyes and a scene flickers, like a flash bulb pop in a dark room. Shadows and forms and screams and... oh god! It’s gotta be the meds....

“Mr. Jones, can you tell us what happened?” Fat face asks. His tone dry and clinical.

My mind tumbles 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. The sound clangs inside my head. She pushes a button. The sound stops. She eyes the two men who 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 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 pole. Thick pools of blood spurt from her neck forming a lava-like lake. A car is nearby. The back-passenger door is open. And... and there’s someone else. He seems familiar. He’s waving and he wants me to come with him.

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

“Yeah.” My headache screams and I push the button, wishing I had pushed it ten minutes ago. The nurse rushes in once again.

“Our patient needs some quiet time.” Her eyes are bright, but there’s a darkness in the room only I can see, a ghost-like presence.

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

I know it’ll be more than one. She puts a pill under my tongue. It’s bitter and melts quickly. Water to my lips washes it down.

“So, this Mr. Someone... who is he?”

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

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

Friend? I’m not sure I have a friend. I try to get ahold of the name, but it floats away. I can hardly keep my eyes open and I don’t want to. Something lurks 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,” Fat Face says. “Get well, Mr. Jones. We’ll be back.”

I 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 laughs while reading ‘Alice in Wonderland’ out loud. My eyes pop open. I have no idea how long I’ve been out. I hear voices, the cops are talking.

“You look beat, Stu. You’re spending too much time with those prostitutes.”

Hat Man smiles. “Not enough time, Handley.”

He spots my open eyes. “Mr. Jones, welcome back. 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. It’s cool and sweet. “Take it easy, Mr. Jones.”

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

Hat Man leans forward. His tone is friendly. “Tell us about this other person. Where are you?”

“I’m in a... a garage.” The two cops get closer.

“Speak up, Mr. Jones. We can hardly hear you.”

“There’s a single bulb swinging in the center of the ceiling that barely gives off any light. Moonbeams flood through the open garage door. I can see shadows.”

What I don’t say is that blood is everywhere, and... and a body crumpled up like a rag rug lies on the floor.

“We want your friend’s name, Mr. Jones.” Fat Face still stinks of cigarette smoke.

Why does he call 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... 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’s too unreal. My brain pounds, like someone sticking it with a knife.

“Yeah, she’s there.... on the cement floor.”

“What did you do with her head?” Fat man demands. He puts his face near mine.

“Your breath stinks,” I say. “You should listen to your mother about smoking.”

He 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.

“About my height.”

“Five eleven?”

“Yeah, or so.” Again, a jabbing pain shoots through my head. 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 within my skull. I’m 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 makes assumptions. His voice is irritating. I want to help, but his questions are like battering rams. I turn to Hat Man.

“You see something, don’t you, Mr. Jones?”

He’s right. “Yes. I see a workbench 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. I cover my eyes; the headache is from hell.

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

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

I exhale a long breath. “I’m not a thief.”

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

Fat Face rolls his eyes. “We need a 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.”

“With purple stains?” He flips the shirt around.

The vice squeezing my head tightens. 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 bleeds. The ceiling sweats blood, walls are turning red. I want to scream. He hands me the call button and I push it as though my life depends on it. The nurse rushes in.

“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 a pill 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.

I can hear the cops talking.

“We should read him his Miranda’s.”

Fat Face laughs. “He’d think Miranda’s a woman. Let’s wrap this up and go home.”

“Home? I’m officially homeless.” Hat Man rises from the recliner. “You might say forcefully requested to leave my apartment.”

“Jesus, Stu, not again. What is it this time?” Fat Face knocks a butt out of the package and puts it between his lips.

“Putting up prostitutes.”

“For god’s sake, Stu, you can’t save the whole goddamn world.”

“Everyone’s got a story, Handley. Somewhere.”

I drift off on the word, somewhere. It’s where I’m living right now and where my dream starts, 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 she looks familiar. When I look over, her severed head is in her hands. Hypothetical is 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. My first thought is somewhere, but at the moment, I’m nowhere. 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 my 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 headless woman is lying in the back seat. Hypothetical is in 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 have to say anything, but I'm thinking I need answers as bad as the cops.

"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. The whole situation is fucked up. I'm not even sure this is a real hospital or these guys are real cops. It seems like they're two versions of the same person.

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 recliner, the kind that can throw you out on the touch of a button.

Fat Face gives up a long exhale. "In a trashcan, next to the garage... in a garbage bag."

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 not sure what that means. I go 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 breathe rapidly, the ink spot is spilling down the walls, the cops turn into paper dolls. The nurse has an evil smile on her face. Then darkness.

When I wake, it's night. No cops. A 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. 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 ache comes crashing down like someone hit me with a rock.... She touches a tube I didn't even know was there. It comes out the top of my head. "What the hell is this?"

"You have a fractured skull, 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 mother pouring a drink, one for her... one for me. I'm seven years old, 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 changes my blankets. There's a tube coming out of my penis and I'm wondering how it got there. The tube's connected to 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 he pounds 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 dredging 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.

Hat Man looks like he slept in his clothes. He pulls out a small notepad and writes something.

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

"Accomplice? No!" I'm hyperventilating. I turn to Hat Man. He'll understand. "He's not my friend and I'm not a murderer!"

"Calm down, Mr. Jones. He doesn'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 blood-soaked shirt you lent him, and there's a dead, mutilated body between you. Why are you protecting him? Is he a relative or a friend?"

His bright blue eyes are calming, but still, pain splits my head in half. 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?" It's Hat Man. He's holding out a cup of water.

The spider stops fucking the air. I take a sip. "Yes, I'm... I'm fine."

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

"It's all a blank."

“Let’s start with the last thing you remember.” Hat Man will 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 got jammed on the head of a pin.

“What about the cleaver?” Fat Face moves closer. I can’t stand his puffy lips.

“The meat cleaver?”

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

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

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

“He’s saying don’t rat me out.” I look up at the ceiling. Now there’s two spiders, the one with mother’s head is still there. 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 can smell Fat Face’s stinkin’ breath. He’s close, too close.

“She’s wearing my mother’s red skirt.” My eyelids are heavy, like someone put sandbags 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 and I don’t know what to do. She guides my fingers. I begin to shiver.

“What’s the woman doing?” Fat Face demands.

“She’s yelling at us.” She sounds like 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 like a little boy crying. Sammy said he's never coming back. But I'm wrong. Mama's searching for my hand.

When I open my eyes, 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. Hat Man looks tired, his eyes droop, he's wearing the same shirt and tie as yesterday.

"You look terrible, Stu." It's Fat Face talking.

"Yeah, not much sleep. Rescued two ladies off the streets last night, one of them was beat up pretty bad. They had plenty to talk about."

"Jesus. You're gonna kill yourself doing that stuff. Let the socials take them." Fat Face looks showered and has a clean shirt on. Then he turns to me. He doesn't say hello, or ask about my head. He just comes at me with his hammer-like voice.

"You know 17 Riverside, bottom unit?"

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

"Been there lately?"

"Not since mother died."

Hat Man raises his eyebrows. "When did your mother die?"

The mention of mother fills me with a poisonous tension that shocks my body. It's a date a son should know, but I can't grasp it. When I furl my forehead, it hurts too damn much so I turn over toward the window. And there he is, standing with his arms crossed. I can hardly breathe. He's 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 seeing, 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. Spiders crawl over the ceiling. The walls look like graham crackers. Everything is there. The workbench, the tools, the car... but the cleaver is missing. I remember running out of the garage.

“It was Sammy... he came from behind and hit me.”

Sammy stands straight, he's waving his fist, but says nothing. Fat Face gets close.

“Why would Sammy hit you?”

“He thinks I hate mother.”

“Do you?”

The spider with mother's head is back and pumping like she's about to have an orgasm. 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 mother's red skirt. “She came out of nowhere, screaming at us.”

“Then what?”

“Sammy grabbed her and threw her to the floor. She... she struggled, but he swung that cleaver so fast her head just lopped off.” My throat is so tight I think I'm going to choke. “Her body jerked around, arms flailed, legs kicked, and... and then it all stopped. It slumped like a rag-doll. Sammy picked up the head... her eyes were still open, mouth in a weird partial scream.”

Sammy's standing with his fists tight, mouthing the words, ‘Fuck you. You know who did it. I love Mama.’

“Say you did, Sammy!” I scream. 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, Mr. Jones, on the cleaver and her blood on your shirt. 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. 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.

Fat Face blows out a long breath and says, "Forensics said he tripped as he ran out of the garage and smashed his head on a rock. There's blood all over it. The guy is guilty as sin."

Sammy is laughing at the cops.

"Maybe," Hat Man responds, "But there's no doubt Mr. Jones sees Sammy in that garage with him." Hat Man flips through his notes. "And I think his mother is in there somewhere too... maybe she got jealous. I don't think Mr. Jones did it."

"You gotta be kidding, Stu. It's so obvious. There is no Sammy."

Fat Face is so blind. Sammy's sitting right there, on the window sill, glaring at me. And I don't like that look on his face.

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It's late, how late makes no difference. Everything is clear in my head. No fog. Goodbye Jonesy. A nurse I've never seen before stands next to the bed. She's wheeled in a tray with bandages and surgical instruments. The lights are low, arranged so they're not in my eyes.

"You're doing better," she says.

I can't help but notice a scalpel on the tray. The implement has a sterile handle. It looks like jewelry, it's so shiny. It must be very sharp.

"We removed 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 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 her touch sets me on fire.

“What would you like me to call you?”

Her uniform smells like Mama—antiseptic clean. She has a red bandana on her head. Her hair tinted 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 wraps my head with a new bandage, so incredibly tender and careful, and her body is close and smells like perfumed soap. Her uniform presses up against the bed.

I want to laugh at those cops. My heart thumps 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. With one swift motion, I grab her blouse and pull her over me. The buttons pop. The nurse screams. A steel grip comes out of nowhere. Pain shooting to my elbow... bandages and implements flying across the bed. I’m hyperventilating. More pain, stabbing, twisting pain. Her blouse is torn open. My hand jerks backward, her bra snaps. I think my wrist is broken... and there’s another scream... from me.

“Mama... no! Mama... I’ll do anything, I promise!”

“Calm down, Sammy... your mother’s not here.” He releases my wrist.

The nurse runs out of the room holding her shirt closed. My heart thumps. I’m gulping breaths, like I’m drowning. The skin burns where he grabbed me.

The man sits in the recliner and places his hat on his knee. He's quiet and pulls out a small notepad and flips it open. His bright blue eyes are calm. He waits. Finally, he speaks.

"I've been wanting to meet you... Sammy. Can we talk?" He says it like we're friends, but we're not. I know what he wants.

"Jonesy hated Mama."

"Why's that?"

"Mama always had to slap him around before I'd take over." My lips stretch into a nasty little boy smile. "He hated Mama. Mama and I got along."

"Where is Jonesy now?"

"Mama made him go away."

The cop writes something on his notepad, then looks up. "You love your Mama, don't you?"

"I love my Mama." I'm surprised he can't see her. She's leaning against the window sill, wearing a red dress. She adores me.

"And Jonesy, did he kill the woman?"

"The woman was pretty, like Mama. She had salt water blue eyes, and she wore Mama's red skirt. Mama didn't like that."

"Oh?"

"Mama was furious and told me to get it off her. I grabbed the skirt and tore it down to her knees. The woman screamed and put up a fight. I kept tearing. She fell to the floor. Mama handed me the clever. I always obey Mama. Thwack! It was over just like that. Jonesy picked up the head and started yelling. I told him to shut up, but he ran out of the garage; said he was going call the police."

"And Mama didn't like that, did she?"

"Mama told me to chase him."

"She's here, isn't she?"

“Mama’s never far away.”

The cop stops writing and looks around the room. “Can I talk with Mama?”

“She doesn’t want to talk right now.”

Mama would never talk to him. I can see her now, smiling, mouthing words—you’re such a good boy, Sammy.

A pie shaped beam of light fills the room as the door opens. Another cop comes clapping in. There’s a smokey stench on his clothes and an unlit cigarette dangles from his lips. He shouldn’t smoke. Mama says so.

“I knew I’d find you here, Stu. I’ve got a warrant for Mr. Jones.”

“Yeah? Well, Mr. Jones isn’t here.”

“Get over it, Stu. This isn’t some whore you’re trying to protect.”

“It’s complicated, Handley.”

“Yeah, sure. They’re all complicated. You spend too much time on these things.”

“Think about it, Handley. Think about the last six murders. All women. Red skirt, red shoes, red pants, red sweater, one had a red bra, one with apple red hair. We got him, Handley. We got him. And this person, who doesn’t exist, has a name..., Sammy. And Sammy has an accomplice...his mother.”

“For god’s sake, Stu, they’re not gonna buy this downtown. The guy’s a puss and a murderer. Keep it simple. Let me handle this...”

I hear the detective push out of the recliner. “We’ll talk in the morning, Handley. I gotta get some sleep.”

“Yeah. Go home, Stu. And stay away from the whores, tonight! They can take care of themselves. I got this.” The fat one plops in the chair.

Mama’s smiling. Sammy, do you have it?

I do, Mama. It's tucked in my sleeve, so very sharp and shiny, like jewelry. No one saw me grab it.

Wait till the Fat Man checks on you, Sammy. Then make your move and make it deep. His neck is thick.

OK, Mama, I'll cut deep.

They'll never catch us. Never. When it's over, I'll get Jonesy. I love you, Sammy.

I love you too, Mama.

"Officer. Would you bring me a cup of water?"

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The tick-tock of a metronome is back. A blistering pain runs from my wrist to my elbow, my nose crushed. My other arm can't move and neither can my legs. I'm in a different room, no windows, the bed is hard as rock. My body aches as though a truck hit me, or maybe I fell out the window. I'm not sure I'm even in the same hospital. Hat Man stands bedside and leans over me.

"What's going on?" I ask. His eyes are deep set and worried.

"Hello Mr. Jones. Do you remember anything?"

His voice is fraught with sadness. It's something I know about people. They try to hide it, but I can hear it anyway. "I went to sleep and woke up. Just like any night."

"Why do think you have a cast on your arm, Mr. Jones. And your nose is broken."

No wonder I can't move my arm. The cast feels like a lead weight. But my other hand... it's tied down. Pain washes through my head. "I think I fell out of bed." It's the only explanation I can think of.

Hat Man purses his lips. "Sammy attacked my partner last night."

My head spins. An ache rises from the center of my brain. I want to smash something, but I can't move. Even my legs are strapped down. Anguished faces of dead people strobe in front of me. I'm falling into a pit and Sammy's looking down into it. And then I see it.

"There was blood. A lot of blood. Sammy slashed him." A terrible sadness wells. I want to wipe tears away but I can't move.

"Have you ever talked to Sammy, Mr. Jones?"

"We yell at each other. He always wins."

"What about Mama?"

I don't want to say anything bad. "She's listening."

"What did she do to you?"

"She would burn me with her cigarettes if I didn't do what she said. I'm always trying to keep her away."

"But she's dead, Mr. Jones."

Worlds collide within me. A sound comes from my mouth. A sound I release only when I am alone, but I cannot stop it. It's the monster within me, screaming. Two nurses rush into the room. It only takes a moment and I'm floating in space somewhere, and the scream floats away, or maybe I'm floating away from the scream.

When I wake, Hat Man is there looking down at me. I remember that I am alive. And I hate it. Alive or dead, I have to ask. "Did Sammy kill your partner?"

"Handley will be fine. A few stitches. He got cut up... but he broke Sammy's arm."

I look down at my arm. It's in a cast. "Are you going to... arrest Sammy?"

"If I could, I would. But I think we're going to do something better. We're going to get rid of Sammy." Hat Man leans over the bed. "We'll rescue that little boy, Mr. Jones. It wasn't his fault. It's gonna take time, but we'll find him."

My body tenses. Muscles pull against the restraints. Mama's holding that little boy down and he's crying. A glowing cigarette is inches from his eye. I'm a grown man crying for a boy I couldn't save.

Hat Man pulls a vibrating cell from his pocket and answers. "Ya? Your friend's in trouble? What's her name? Lucy. What... her pimp beat her up? How bad is she hurt...?" He lets out a long sigh. "How old is she? Jesus! No. Don't take her there. Tell Lucy she can stay at my place. A few women are staying there who'll take care her. You know where I live? Oh ya, now I remember you... we laughed about the black eye... Ya, sure. Your welcome." He hangs up the phone and for a moment he's still.

"You're a busy man."

"Yeah, you might say that."

"I call you Hat man."

His eyes are sad, but he smiles. "Figures."

"Why are you helping me?"

"Because we're all damaged. All of us. Even me. So, I do what I can. You know?"

He takes off his hat and wipes his forehead with the back of his hand. He's tired. The door cracks open. It's Fat Face. He's got a bandage on his arm. If I were him, I'd kill me. There's a part of me that wants him to do exactly that.

"You Ok, Handley?" Hat Man asks.

"Ya. It's nothin'." Fat Face looks over at his partner. "What a crazy SOB, but I feel for him. Cried for his Mama after I punched him." He pulls out a cigarette and lets it dangle in his mouth, unlit.

"What's up, Handley. Why are you down here?"

"I need you Stu. It's my daughter. She's missing.

"What's her name?"

"Lucille, but everyone calls her Lucy. She's sixteen, Stu. There's trouble. I know it."

Hat Man leans over the bed. “I gotta go, Mr. Jones, but we’ll meet again. Soon. I promise.”

He put his hand on the big man’s shoulder. “Come on, Handley. Let’s find your daughter.”

“Stu,” Fat Man’s voice choked up, “Lucy’s my only kid. I... I’m afraid for her...”

“We’ll find her, Handley. I know, it’s tough, something happens, and that’s where the story starts, right there.”

The door closes behind them and the room goes dark. I close my eyes. I’ve never told my story to anyone until Hat Man listened. He’ll help me find that little boy, and when I do, no jail can confine me, because... I’ll be free.

The darkness in the room has lifted, and I have this feeling... that tonight will be the best sleep of my life.