

# East Fork: A Journal of the Arts

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## Popped

By: Ian Byrne

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So, there I stood, the sun beating down on my head with Kim looking down at me with her mouth slit open slightly and a constriction around my heart that stung nearly as bad as the pavement digging into my right knee. Actually, it wasn't a constriction, it was a death grip. A death grip followed by a punch in the gut that came right after a kick to the head which was delivered by hearing the worst two words anyone could ever hear in this situation.

What the fuck?

Seriously, what in the actual fuck was happening right now? How did I get here, on one knee, in front Sleeping Beauty's castle with a crowd of, at least, thirty strangers and Cinderella staring at me and Kim, while she stared down in horror and- I hope to Christ- guilt.

All in God damn silence. What do you think the odds are that this will be a meme by tomorrow morning? I can picture the entire world laughing at this one moment, all of Facebook and Twitter getting a kick out of me and Kim until the next poor sap does something even worse.

And Kim... oh, Kimmy. Why did you do this to me? On today, our anniversary, of all days! Why? Haven't the last three months been fun? They have been for me...but apparently not for you.

I could feel just how red my face was, red like Kim's hair band. The one that keeps her golden locks back and out of the way so I could see just how bad a mistake I made.

There's a slight crackle from my now cramped up knee as I rise back on to both feet and slide the small felt box into the pocket of my cargo shorts. There's laughing in the background, and I want to scream, but losing my remaining calm would just make it worse.

So, I step to the side of Kim and I take her gently by the hand and right before I lead her out of the park I work up the nerve to tell her "We'll talk about this in the car."

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## Where's Mister Jim?

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by Jon Vreeland

The Blackwatch is a beer bar on the corner of Alabama street and Adams Avenue, in downtown Huntington Beach. An aging bar that only serves beer. No booze. The inside is purely wood, dark mahogany on the walls, floor, and bar. The beer is cheap and it doesn't cost anything to shoot pool. Next door is a pizza place and one block away in an anonymous house is Mister Jim, who often makes a brief appearance, then vanishes without a goodbye.

There are four full sized pool tables and an old juke-box sitting in the corner. Over every pool table hangs a lime green lamp that players are constantly hitting with their pool sticks—accidentally of course—getting Dan all fired up, a mean old fart who has inadvertently been working there since it opened forty years ago. He is tall, what little hair he has is gray, and his ear lobes flap a little when he moves. He spends almost every waking hour on either side of the bar, and when Johnny Cash croons from the most ancient juke-box Dan always turns it off.

"Fuckin' country nasal twang"

In a perfect world I live in a decent studio apartment. I have pictures hanging on my black painted walls—pictures by Warhol and artists I know nothing about. The carpet is charcoal grey. There is a window on the opposite wall of the front door that looks out at the light blue skies, until someone paints it black. I have nice furniture. A black leather couch, maple coffee and end tables—stained a dark warm brown—and there are two antique lamps made mostly of glass sitting on the tables, one red and one green. But most importantly, a perfect little Mason and Hamlin black, upright piano rests imposingly in the corner, and I sit in the apartment and write music and literature, prose, and poetry. And when I feel claustrophobic I walk down to the Blackwatch for a couple of beers, and I always say hello to Mister Jim.

But sadly, this is surely not the case.

I live in my black van. It is parked on Atlanta Avenue and it is raining. Large drops are splashing down my windshield, cleaning off a year's worth of dirt. I have been inside the van all day working on a story. Now I am walking to the bar to get a beer, while thinking about what I have written—two lovers who drown halfway to Catalina when their forty-five foot boat sinks—what does it all mean? I stop by the liquor store to get some smokes then walk across the street to have a seat at the bar and order a drink. I sit there for almost three hours.

In the interim I drink three beers.

Mister Jim usually shows every hour, but there is no sign of him today. Jim is a young white man who doesn't do drugs, just sells them. But I don't want to know Jim other than, "hey thanks for the heroin, see ya tomorrow Jimbo."

Another hour and no Jim, just a couple of dirty construction workers and a blond haired fat lady wearing a black dress, her neck draped with sham pearls. I finish my beer, I am starting to sweat. My eyes are drenching my face. I have to take a shit for the first time in almost a week—the bloody kind—so I walk quickly to the bathroom. I open the door and feel the wind sting my cold metal skin. I make it to the toilet and gallantly begin giving birth. It feels like a watermelon is being squeezed through my bathtub at full force. I am sure I am ripping and tearing. And I am certain I am going to die.

Just like Elvis.

On the crapper.

Writing.

Fighting.

Shitting for my life.

Oh! Don't be Cruel!! I am singing as low and loud as I can, trying to subside the pain, trying to push the watermelon out. I don't want no other lover. Ah Come On baby! Baby if I just you I'm thinking of, making sure that is all that is coming out. I keep singing. Don't be Cruel!! Laughing. Laughing if that's what you call having a baby, to a heart that's true, and when I am done going through the worst pain I have ever felt I grab my bottle of Xanax from the inside pocket of my leather jacket and take two milligrams, one full pill, two milligrams, then wash it down with a bottle of beer.

It is half an hour later and I am feeling a little better. I repeat this ritual every hour on the hour until the sun goes down—three pills, six milligrams, five beers, but still no Mister Jim.

Another two hours drag on and I drink three more beers.

The Xanax and beer have cured me temporarily, but the sickness is about to land hard. If I don't find Jim within the hour I will most likely be coughing and spitting up bile, working hard to keep the runny shit inside my bony ass. And not down my scrawny legs. Two more milligrams.

I reach the van and try writing a story about a hooker and her vicious slayings across New York. A brutal tale with a brutal ending. But I am too busy to write the idea down instead. I am too sick to do anything, but the idea had been born which holds its significance too. Not as significant as the writing, but it's something.

I return to the bar. Dan is gone. He is "sick" and has called in the night girl, Milly, who came in a few hours early, who is now standing behind the bar putting pretzels into little brown bowls. She is young. She is beautiful. She has long black hair like Peaches. Her eyes are verdant green, shadowed by eyelashes just as prevailing just as hypnotic. I try hiding my sweaty forehead under my stringy black hair and ask if she knows where Mister Jim is. She says no.

I keep hiding.

Behind my black shades.

My eyes dripping.

Down my cheeks.

Onto my lips.

Two more milligrams.

I wash down with a bottled Bud and a bowl of stale pretzels. It is now a half an hour later and my condition has vastly improved. The ten milligrams of Xanax have finally kicked in, plus the four that ensued. I am starting to feel okay. Two more milligrams.

Through the good times and bad.

Milly and I talk while we share a pitcher of beer. She is telling me about her grandpa, how he arbitrarily died in his sleep in his black canopy bed the nose sticking in, hoisting the street when tomlorwome Milly was born in. She spoke and only of her grandpa, how sweet he was, how he raised her since she was a little girl. Milly's mother didn't want the hospital to take Milly away from her because she was on heroin when Milly was born and had to give birth to Milly on her living room floor. Milly's grandpa delivered her. Milly's mom died two days after giving birth to Milly in that same townhome from a heroin overdose.

Milly's Dad was some John Doe she met at a Camps show in 1951.

He wasn't there.

For the birth or the funeral.

Milly's grandpa always wore this hitchin' black hat, played a green violin, and didn't know any music other than classical artists like Mozart, Beethoven Brahms etc. But never told me to turn down my records. And it was always the Ramones Johnny boy."

I sit at the bar talking to Milly for hours.

Two more milligrams. The rain is letting up but still soaking the inaudible Tuesday streets. Milly and I are getting a little drunk, laughing, carrying on about Dan the bartender who has been working here forever, and his stubborn old man ways. The bar remains empty through the late afternoon and into the evening. We finish our third pitcher of beer then I walk her home in the rain to her little cottage. I reach into my pocket—two milligrams—and let the rain hit my face, washing the color onto my face as I walk with my head tilted back. When we reach her pad I give her a kiss on the cheek and say goodbye before she has the chance to invite me in. The rain continues as I head back to the van, keeping an eye out for Mister Jim, going one block out of my way to peak in the Blackwatch one last time. The place is dead. Just a couple of locals I know well, but not by name, sitting at the bar with dead eyes.

"Where's Mister Jim?" they shout my way.

"I wish I knew. I really do."

Four more milligrams.

Then two tears: one on the left and one on the right.

Racing.

Landing in the corners of my dried up neck.

...

A week goes by.

Still no sign of Mister Jim.

I spend all week with no sleep, popping Xanax like M&M's. The hardest part of my kick is over. By now we assume Mister Jim is in the county jail—swearing orange, eating soy, listening to inmates lie about their street hustles and how many women they fuck. The Blackwatch, strangely, is filled with laughter and a plethora of yellow teeth. The jukebox is playing whatever it comes. And it sounds good. The pool tables are running smoothly. Nobody has whacked the green lamps that usually swing over the tables from being inadvertently struck by a drunken pool stick. Milly and I are flirting and shooting pool when our friend Marty comes in with an unusual look painted on his green face.

Mister Jim's truck has been discovered.

Resting on the bottom of Lake Elsinore.

With the fish and the garbage and green stuff we call moss. The FBI apparently has gone through Jim's room. Opened his safe. Twenty thousand dollars and over five hundred hits of ecstasy was discovered. So Jim didn't take off for good, they concluded, because he obviously would have taken those items with him. Conclusion? They think he was murdered in a drug deal because, according to his brother, Mister Jim drove his truck to Murrieta to make a rather large deal. (That is also what he told his roommate before he left, plus, the cell phone calls and texts were relevant.) Somebody jacked him for the pound of meth he bought. Killed him. Then dumped his truck at the bottom of Lake Elsinore, thinking nobody would ever find it, perhaps.

The body, not so strangely, had not been recovered.

Wet or dry.

Dead or alive.

Just the moss covered truck, completely dead inside, and a couple of curious fish, looking through the hollow wreckage. Milly and I sit there and pretend to listen to Marty, who is now being a little dramatic with the tear build up. And I think about it all. Real hard. While Marty carries on...

...a man who walks through life making money off mentally sick, tortured souls. Who takes our money so the pain stops—physically and emotionally—the same pain that he provides us with whenever we have the cash, cash that should have paid for my girls' new pair of shoes or a trip to the batting cages but I needed my medicine so I could breathe, see, walk, talk, live. So the feeling of wrapping a nose around my trachea up neck and swinging from the Huntington Beach Pier might fade, just a little, while he consciously takes people's money, my money, her money, watching our lives' parish into a solitary hell, while professing our friendship with a bag of dope, for the 'bro' price."

But I know deep down this isn't the reason I hate Mister Jim more and more each day. I am, without a doubt, insanely jealous of Jim's sobriety. I wish for just one day I can sleep normal, wake up normal, shit without injury, not have to stab myself every couple hours with a needle I have been using all week, just so I can remain, or get, well. He is physically healthy and I feel like an old man. Even though I am far from it. "Sorry to hear that Marty, I lie. No attempt to sugar coat my obvious lack of compassion for Mister Jim as I instantly think of his demise. (A proper little musing. I am sure there will be many more). Marty says goodbye. Milly and I follow him out the door and watched him and his old blue hatchback purr away in the rain, then Milly invites me over to her house for more drinks. And I accept.

We arrive to Milly's.

We are soaked in rain.

Milly goes into the bedroom and changes into dry sweats and brings me black pajama pants and a green jersey with the number 69 on it, grabs a couple of beers, and sits next to me on the yellow couch. I gaze upon the room, looking at pictures of her and her grandpa. Admiring her cozy pad. Next to the bottom of the stairs is an old white player piano sitting alone in the dark. Above the black fireplace mantle hangs her grandpa's green violin, with all of its strings, and not a scratch on it. The fire in the fireplace dances amiably below as we finish our drinks then food around a little, but don't have sex. We fall asleep on the yellow couch. The rain is forming a sporadic pulse and the drops slide down the wet, gable roof.

It is hours later.

I open my eyes.

I can't quite remember where I am, and I am alone, which is normal for me, but don't recognize the fireplace or the black mantle. After thirty seconds of looking around I remember I am at Milly's so I peek over the couch, and see the white player piano sitting in its desolate world. I get up to take a look at the green violin, but it is gone.

"Maybe I dreamed that? Maybe it was never there?" Moments after, I hear what sounds like the strings of the violin being utterly mangled, coming from upstairs, making its way downstairs, into my ears until I can't bear anymore. I make my way upstairs, past dozens of pictures in the stairwell of Milly and grandpa, past the piles of dirty clothes, following the cacophony that still pushes through the spectral air of Milly's home. When I get upstairs I approach the only door and it is closed.

The red one.

I put my hand on the knob and give it a turn, the door opens quickly, a fuzzy smell crawls up my nose, and they stands Milly. Naked. A little out of breath but not much. She slides through the not even half way open door and shuts it quickly behind her. Without a word she takes my hand and we walk downstairs.

To the yellow couch.

We lie down, again.

And it is just past three in the morning.

Milly passes out, while I write in a sultry sleep. She is snoring a little. I think about walking home—to the van—but the rain is coming down harder than before. I reach a deep falling moment, and fall back asleep. In my most vivid reverie, I wander through the house—which looks like an elder person's home, someone who was born tens of thousands of moons ago, who doesn't know a thing about social media or The Ramones—climb the stairs to the second floor, again, smelling a bird stench the higher I climb, the same smell from earlier. I can only dream of rotting cadavers in the walls or the attic of what a person might call this morally deprived home. I walk down the hallway and stand by the red door, reach for the handle, and I enter the dark room where the horrible screeching took place. And Milly is standing in the middle of the room, with one single candle held close to her heart, allowing the flame to reach a cryptic shadow on her doll-like face. She takes hold of my left hand, and leads me to the corner of the average sized bedroom.

And there sits Mister Jim.

Inertly in an old rocking chair.

His feet and hands are tied behind his back and to the chair, and he is peering at the curdled cheese on the ceiling, a green violin shooting from his lipsless mouth, expelling from his nose inside out throat. Milly is standing beside him and the flame of the candle is lighting up the room, just enough to see this grisly picture—a ruthless murder scene I inadvertently painted in my sleep, while dreaming on a yellow couch, draped with a woman's flesh.

A brutal tale with a brutal ending.

The story of my life.

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