

The Fake Tales of Jack Melancholy

It was raining when she had bumped into Jack in the hotel lobby. The drops tapped against the windows and revolving doors like finger tips on a piano, providing a rhythmic miasma about the vestibule as people talked of plans for the night and organized their room keys with the person at the front desk. The lights looked particularly luminous, showing a warm glow, comfy. Jack rubbed the sides of his sweater and tugged at the necktie that choked his throat as he waited for his business partner to come down from their room, although he himself could not remember exactly what his quarters or the partner looked like.

It was then that something collided into his back, knocking him off his feet and onto the carpeted ground. It smelled like bleach when his nose pressed close against it and several fibers went up his nose. People were staring, but their presence was blurred, as if he was viewing them in his peripheries.

“Goodness!” She said, reaching down to offer a gloved hand that was glistening with the absorbed rain drops. Her voice sounded like a harp. “I am so sorry, sir! I did not see you there.”

Jack found his hat and reclaimed his umbrella that had tumbled several feet from him. He situated it upon his head, and lifting the lip of the garment from his brows he felt as if he was gazing upon the sun, although the only thing that hurt was his heart.

She was gorgeous, radiant. How her hair fell in wavy strands of black, soggy from the rain, that made her look gilded by some silver mist. How her running make up, black curtains cascading down her face that followed to those full, pink lips made her even more pretty. And her smile. Meek, shy, embarrassed, but her cheeks were flushed with red, more welcoming than the plastic ambience of the hotel lobby.

“It’s okay,” Jack said, holding out a hand, “My name is-”

He awoke with his blankets tangled upon the foot of his bed and a pillow cradled in his grasp like a giant egg. The alarm at his bed stand was functioned to begin screaming in ten minutes. Jack sighed and deactivated the alarm, feeling the empty space across the sheets. It made him wonder if that man and that women ever shared a bed for one night or many. Perhaps they had gotten married. Perhaps not. Jack had wished that he could know.

The crust in the corners of Jack's eyes was thick and it stabbed into his flesh when he excavated them with pale, sharp knuckles. He rubbed his face with calloused fingers, feeling the little specks of patchy gristle upon his chin. He lit the half burned cigarette near his bed stand and took several long drags before closing the window, shielding his bedroom from the brisk autumn air.

Food had long since lost its taste to Jack Melancholy. No matter how green the garnish, he saw it a tint too grey, regardless of the rich taste of a steak, it oozed juices of warm water. Drinks were no different. All Jack ever drank these days was water and whisky. Water because that was all he ever tasted anyway and whisky because it was the only thing that gave him feeling enough to forget that he had none. Yet his tastes did not stop him from getting a bagel down the street as he waited for his taxi. It tastes like bland bread, and the sound of the city with its persistent horns, cursing, and clusters sounded like a mere whisper to him. He wondered if people were as sad as he was. He wondered if that passing, smiling woman wears those perfect teeth to hide a tongue that whispers cruel words.

Jack collected himself as the taxi arrived. The doors opened and a man whose accent he did not understand ushered him in. Jack nodded and wondered if this man liked his job. He pictured him returning to some apartment in Harlem with several children that he did not love and only worked for them out of obligation. The taxi began to mobilize and weave through the streets.

“Nice day, right?” The driver said.

“Yeah,” Jack Melancholy replied, although he did not understand where the driver's optimism was coming from. It was too cold to wear something light and too hot to don the pea coat that his dead grandfather had given him, yet he had done so anyway.

And that was the end of that conversation. Jack reasoned that the driver only opened with that statement as a formality, and that he was only another customer. He knew that there was approximately seven billion people on the Earth, and he had been wise to discard the audacity that he mattered long ago. Instead, Jack closed his eyes and let the honking of horns, the smell of grime, and the rest of the city fade out from his morning commute.

He remembered a time when he was a boy at a farm. He enjoyed the simple times of that life. How open the fields were, and probably still were-Jack did not have the courage to ask for more of that memory. The rolling hills of some country or another had a carpet of grass that swayed in the gentle summer wind, like the fur of some green beast tanning in the sun. This memory of watching the mountains in the distance that were crested with clouds once used to brighten Jack's day until he used the memory too much and it became stale. He got them when he was a janitor at a hospital during his undergraduate years. It was then that he met the boy who was chained to his bed with wires and needles that pumped life into his veins so he can sleep another day with only an hour or two of consciousness. He had wished that the dying boy he had taken the memory from was able to give more moments of bliss, but cancer put a stop to that.

Jack fixed his tie and waited for the elevator. His body was aching for a cigarette, and the morning's bristles upon his face has grown into a patchy shadow that already began to contrast the paleness of his skin so early in the morning. A cluster of people with their suits and their briefcases stood outside of the lifts, checking watches, making phone calls, texting their loved ones. That was what bothered Jack the most. He had no one to talk to, no one to tell all his problems and share what little smiles that he used to have. He once had a therapist that he had accidentally mistaken for a friend, but when Jack offered to buy her a drink she declined and reminded him that their relationship was at the cost of seventy five dollars an hour. Jack never saw her again, his pride wounded from being called a transaction.

"The world is your oyster, Jack," The therapist said at their last meeting.

"I don't like seafood," was his reply before he shut the door and never looked back.

Jack once found solace in the small hope that he would find comradeship in others like him. Not those who were depressed as his ex-therapist, dying mother, and mail man all suggested, but those who had The Gift. Jack called it The Gift to make him feel better about it, and it did for a while until he was beaten up in the school yard when he was a boy for boasting of his abilities and proving it. Still, the name was resilient and it stuck.

On the school yard Jack had wobbly knees and a problem where his lips overly salivated. Through a heavy lisp that he would later force himself out of to avoid further jesting from his classmates, Jack had claimed that he could extract memories by physical contact. He saw them

as a timeline, a progression of events in everyone's history, a catalogue that he could see all at once and take without asking. It took Jack several years to figure this out, and even more to have the courage to say it. When he did, on that cold day while a crowd gathered atop the school yard asphalt, he received a punch in the face and a shirt stained with his own blood. He was called a freak and a lunatic. Yet Jack was victorious. After the teachers intervened on the conflict, the bully had no recollection of punching Jack in the face and Jack had both his own memory of pain and the other memory of punching *himself* in the face with thick pudgy hands that were not quite his own while the gremlin of a child vomited after rubbing his head from the stress of having his mind rattled. It was an odd success, and it was more so a learning experience because Jack knew better than to speak of The Gift to anyone else.

After that day Jack tried once again years later. His courage equally encouraged and destroyed by hormones to impress a girl. He called himself "special", but teenage boys and girls are mean. In addition to laughing at his long face and gaunt complexion, they had coupled his social inadequacy with his own self labeling of "special". He had not known at the time that it meant something else, so really it was his fault for suggesting otherwise.

Jack had never sat with anyone at lunch. People claimed that he talked to himself and fell asleep midsentence but Jack knew they were rumors. Well, the first one was. Or perhaps the second. He did not remember. Either way he grew out of both of them. But he did know that before he was aware of his Gift he would often dream vivid dreams of people he never met and places he never went. It took until adulthood one day at a café as he waited for a date to stand him up that those dreams were memories of people he had brushed by and unconsciously collected.

He had learned to hone his skill when he accidentally retrieved the memory of a miscarriage that his cafeteria lunch lady had experienced when her hair was long and her face was beautiful and she wore a wedding ring. He saw the blood as he stood up from the toilet, and he felt his heart drop. The memory is linked to when Jack looked through her eyes and in the surgery room, where a doctor with grey hair and crow's feet told her that the baby had died in the womb. He looked at the soft hands and travelled down body and over her full breasts that were clad in an unflattering hospital gown where her husband sat looking out the window. From then on whenever Jack received a tray from her sagging hands his eyes wandered to her bare left ring

finger, naked and cold without the golden ring that once accompanied it. The sadness in her eyes was less so that day, and the day after, and Jack felt that maybe the poor woman understood. But she only told him to *move along* just like everyone else.

At the office everyone for some reason liked to drink coffee black, so Jack did the same. It tasted like water and it always failed to give him that burst of adrenaline. He found himself in the break room. It was eleven in the morning and amidst the aged and expert accountants who no longer had to prove themselves to each other, the young workers who were actually only a bit younger than him spoke with the same enthusiasm as they did every day.

“So I’m at this bar last night, right? And I meet this awesome bitch,” Conner began to rub empty air pockets above his chest, “And she’s this gorgeous blonde with great tits. I mean, like Kardashian style. Mark, you gotta tell the rest.”

Conner began to snigger and Mark placed his mug on the counter because Jack noticed that he liked to talk with his hands. He liked Mark more than Conner because Mark was less cocky, only slightly but that made all the difference. Also because one day Jack shook his hand and accidentally captured a memory of Mark and his father underneath the Toy Story sheets in his bedroom. His dad possessed cold hands and Jack felt his genitalia clench under his grip. The memory troubled Jack for weeks after that, so much that he could not even masturbate himself to sleep. Yet after that day there was certain glimmer in Mark’s eyes that was not there previously that suggested he could take on the world. Jack envied him for that.

Mark continued, “Okay, so anyway, Conner just walks up to this girl and says, literally, ‘hey, so are we going to fuck, or no?’ So I left the bar and all this son-of-a-bitch texts me this morning is ‘yes!’”

Everyone laughs, and Jack could almost hear a drum roll in the distance, although that could be because a music studio was across the street. Even some of the grandfathered accountants looked up from their papers and nodded at Conner’s victory with unsmiling faces but hungry eyes and a soul that reveled in their youth.

“What about you, Jack?” Conner said when he noticed him, “when was the last time you got laid?”

Jack shrugged and tried to recall a time when he was at Palm Beach for spring break at a university that he never went to. Those memories were particularly faded but what little slivers he was able to retrieve would be those he would take to his grave. He remained silent and made some excuse that he had to return to work. Conner laughed and those who were his friends did too. Mark did not partake, and for that, Jack Melancholy was appreciative.

On his way out Jack brushed his hand against Conner's. His flesh was cold and the room became almost frigid. Jack blinked and he was in what he called "The Warehouse". It used to frighten him at first but now it was the only place where he felt he harbored some control of anything. He had never reasoned why but he thought it was because he could gaze upon secrets without remorse and everything was free.

The Warehouse was simple. A mass collective of tables and counters that formed right angles to create a pattern of aisles that was almost maze-like. Above the Warehouse was black and infinite, yet the floor that Jack navigated on was faintly lit from some unknown source of light. Television screens of different eras guided Jack through Conner's particular Warehouse, for each individual possesses a different configuration of aisles, twists, and turns. However, Jack knew the pattern, as it was always the same. The oldest looking televisions were ones from an individual's youth. Memories that are fading play with various degrees of static. Memories of sadness and pain are shown on dented and progressively malfunctioning screens. Jack was always drawn to certain kinds of memories, the crisp ones of hatred and love that are shown in high definition on a plasma screen. Some of them were even three dimensional and came with their own set of glasses. The happiest memories were the ones that Jack always found himself gravitating towards as he stepped through the lonely aisles. The only sounds were his own footsteps, the distant clinking of that invisible hanging lamp, and the portions of memories that played, played, played constantly in Jack's ear like a television display in an appliance store.

Jack found himself traversing through Conner's memories, from birth until now. He had never observed Conner's memories before, and Jack was not that interested, truth be told. Most people have normal lives with normal memories. An awkward interaction in middle school that is always as crisp as can be. The first break up. Death of a loved one and the first kiss. Broken bones, stage fright before a play. It was the emotion that was associated with them that provided

any real significance, Jack knew. Without that memories are only hollow images. The significance comes from the emotions associated.

But here Jack came with a mission. He walked along the aisles of Conner's life. He passed videos of his mother, snapshots of his first girlfriend, lying in bed with a muscular man that Jack was sure to keep a secret. He walked past Conner's victories and defeats, triumphs and trials. He watched the life of Conner's dog escape through its eyes when he was a boy. It was a golden retriever and it was old. Finally, Jack stopped himself at the most recent memories, and found himself at that very same bar wearing Conner's flesh and speaking with Conner's voice.

"Hey, so are we going to fuck, or no?" Jack said. The bar was musty and his peripherals were blurred. Jack found himself troubled to speak the words and the taste of whisky was thick in his mouth. He felt as if he were underwater.

The woman was indeed gorgeous, and the curvature of her body was actually as true as Conner had made it sound. She looked like an hourglass draped in scarlet and topped with gold. He wanted to see the sand get to the bottom so he could turn her over time and time again. Jack felt dirty thinking Conner's thoughts. Her smile was white and her lips full and red. She looked like a woman that Jack had slept with when he went to Canada on winter vacation with his father. That was when he was a younger man.

The woman's bottom lip receded into her mouth, and for a brief second she looked alarmingly seductive before her expression twisted into a scowl.

"Fuck off!" She said, throwing the martini in Jack's face.

Knowing the truth of Conner's lie would have made Jack happy, but as he looked outside the windows of the glass panels that lined the office, he saw only grey clouds looming above. It had begun to rain, and his mind drifted to a time when he was in France with a group of travel companions. Water began to collect within the crevices of the cobblestone streets, making organized puddles of crude geometric angles. He wore rain boots, and his stomach felt as if knives were scraping against his insides like nails on a chalkboard and stakes were being driven into his abdomen. Thunder struck and he pushed his hair back behind his ear. The echo of the crash sent a vibration up his spine and caused his stomach abdomen to ring with fear. Jack had remembered why he tried to discard this memory, for experiencing menstrual cramps was

horrifying painful. He did not understand how the female body could experience such pain and still carry on a normal conversation like the one he was having underneath a collection of umbrellas. His group was making their way back to their hostel to escape the rain, and his blue painted nails were intertwined with the calloused digits of the girl's guitar playing lover.

"We are almost there," he said. Jack Melancholy was not attracted to men, but he could recognize the fellows beautiful blue eyes because the girl did.

And suddenly Jack detached from her lover's grasp and stepped out onto the raining street where water pellets crashed heavy upon her head. The other members of their party stopped and tried to usher her back into the dry safety of the umbrellas awning.

"We have all our lives to be dry!" Jack said in a voice so high pitched and so sweet. He wondered if the girl was a singer.

The woman's boyfriend protested but Jack persisted, "No, come on now!"

And one by one each umbrella retracted like a metal skeleton's fingers closing into a fist. A red headed boy stepped onto the street first followed by a girl with an afro and a bright pink scarf. They began to dance but her boyfriend stayed under his umbrella with both feet planted firmly on the ground. The lights in the houses lining the streets looked like paint brushes of yellow, and people began to look out upon their closed windows as Jack and his companions paraded in the watery straight. They beckoned for the girl's lover, and with a huff and puff he submitted, dropping his umbrella and joining him and his friends as they danced to their own music. That day was perfect, that day Jack Melancholy felt alive.

His mind recaptured his attention to his cubicle. A calculator lay within arms grasp, the keyboard to send e-mails to his clients at his fingertips. He rubbed his eyes and massaged his temples, breathing in the musty air of the office. It was cold today, even colder because of the droplets that had evolved into a storm. It was two in the afternoon and already the artificial lights of the office block were up and running on high. Jack wondered if his clients were people with lives as dull as his. He wondered if Mr. Hugo Montgomery ever cheated on Mrs. Montgomery. Underneath their files was Suzanne Delphi, and Jack was curious if she actually loved her three kids that were listed in her demographic information for their census. Not love by obligation, but *actually* love, like a passion to see them succeed and grow up to become good Human beings

with the false sense that they matter. Underneath their file was the restaurant owner of Gonzo's Pizzeria, and Jack was inquisitive as to how many times Anthony Gonzo felt like a pizza cutter.

Jack most certainly felt like he was a calculator. He had never had the pleasure of having his identity and career melded into one. He had always tried, but Jack never was able to find who he was first. He liked chemistry, but the reality of ionic bonds and atoms made him sad. Plus, the inevitability of Earth being destroyed by an exploding sun always caused him to shiver. He liked literature, but *The Diary of Anne Frank* made him reconsider. History was a cyclical negative rotation, and the only instrument that Jack had ever learned to play was the violin, but that had stopped when his mother died, as she put him up to it. On the occasion that he would find himself weeping in the courtyard of his apartment with a cigarette and emptied bottle of whisky in hand, he would recall the brief moments where his playing would make her smile, and then he would travel to other memories of his life when he had learned the piano for a moments ecstasy and played in a bar and was very successful, or when he strummed along to a guitar in a park and sang with a spritely voice that seemed to encourage dollar bills to find their way into his open case.

But that would only lead to further depression the following morning, for at times Jack felt guilty for his Gift. The memories in their life that he takes are permanently within his possession, it is a one way road. Jack once stole a memory of a dying man's wedding by the mentality that he would not need it in death and by the suggestion of his then therapist to try dating. He had failed at the dating but succeeded in smelling the daisies that spiraled around the alter and how his bride smelled of strawberries. Yes, it was a great memory, but the man lived long enough to acknowledge that he did not remember his wife in her flowing dress with the sun in her eyes. The gentleman died crying.

Jack found himself in a similar situation after work that day. He bought a carton of eggs, a box of tissues, Nyquil, and a kitty cat calendar from the inconvenience store a block from his building. It had stopped raining, but the streets glistened with the rain's residue and everyone looked particularly forlorn that the weather could not make up its mind. The rain had cleaned the streets but that only allowed for the new smells to enter and fester back onto the Earth, causing Jack to wrinkling his nose. Whenever he sniffed a foul stench Jack would refer to that memory of

spring break when he did cocaine off of a topless brunette. He hoped that she had a nice personality and that her father never knew about this event.

Jack appreciated television because it was an escape from his life. He appreciated alcohol even more for the very same reason. After eating one of those television microwavable dinners that taste like anything else, he sat upon the couch with a glass of whisky in hand and a flickering cigarette in the other. He looked at the cushion next to him and imagined a person being there. A friend, a lover. Anyone, really. It was not that Jack Melancholy did not have friends, it's just that he had trouble keeping them. When he had first started his work at the office he was invited for drinks but after a couple beers he heard his coworkers whisper to one another from the cubicle the next day that Jack had grown too sullen and began to complain of how his mother is dying and how she is actually really dead and how he never had a mother in the first place.

“Which one is it?” Someone asked.

“I dunno. No one knows.”

And that was the end of any friendships that Jack could have made, for any other attempt was squandered by himself because he knew that his little insignificant life was only a fraction of how interesting everyone else's was.

Something trickled in his eye and Jack brushed soft fingers to his pale face. A certain dampness coated his index finger, and he realized that he was crying. And then it started, as it did every night once that full glass of whisky was half empty. Tears fell from his face like the rain drops of the afternoon's storm. It dropped in heavy streams that made his cheeks look like they were blanketed with diamonds. His eyes turned swollen and pink, his irises red and sparkling. His lower lip quivered and his hands began to shake, forcing his bony fingers to tap upon his knees like a piano. It made his fingers hurt and wiping his tears with the sleeve of his pajama bathrobe only succeeded in making the cotton wet. Jack got up to clean himself and the whisky had captured hold of his legs and twisted his ankle as he rose, forcing him to stumble.

Jack felt as if he was underwater in a pool of alcohol, and he had no reason to gasp for air, no want to try to claw his way to the sun that always failed to show and to greet the people that he knew felt apathy towards him. For that was the worst. It was better to be liked than hated, and better to be hated than unnoticed. To everyone Jack was just a figure in an office, in a taxi, in

a store. He was of zero value, not adding anything to his environment but not taking away either. Because of this the alcohol now lost its taste as the last drops slithered down his throat and into his stomach.

Jack found himself remembering a birthday party that he had when he was a child. His mother set the candles aflame as he was surrounded by friends he never knew. They sung him happy birthday and called him Joey. He felt himself gushing from being the center of attention, but he was glad all the same to have people celebrate his existence. He received a toy car and a Gameboy Advance, although when woke up they were gone and so was the house and everything with it.

The elevator to the roof opened with a beep. The alarm sounded like a gunshot and he felt the world tremble as he stumbled out of the lift. He thought of a homeless man that he encountered outside of the UPS store a couple blocks from his apartment. His hands fell to his knees and his fingers bled as they scratched the concrete landing. He was back in some jungle or another in Vietnam, and the suddenly his fingers were not his own, but were digging into the hot dirt as mortar and bullets rain down around him. He dug his hands into the ground as if some leverage could be found there. Around him someone cried in pain. Jack did not know this man with the name “Johnny D” inscribed upon his jacket but he knew that he was friend. Jack stretched out a hand to save him but his world slowly dissolved into darkness...

Jack held his head and screamed. He could not get the thoughts from his head. He could not purge the memories. Jack Melancholy had lived many lives, but none of them were real. He knew this but never chose to accept it until now. He had smiled with so many people, but they did not know his name. He had encountered many lovers, but their touch upon his flesh was not his own. Jack was nothing, and he contributed nothing. All he did was steal and possess. Jack Melancholy felt fake and artificial. Plastic. A phony.

The updraft that flew up the building’s wall cradled his face. Jack felt safe and secure as he looked at the streets below. The flashing lights of the city beckoned him, telling him that his pain would be over if he only embraced the concrete thirty stories down. Up here on the balcony’s awning, the world was his oyster. All he had to do was jump and his sadness would end his artificial life and all those fake memories and everything would cease and it would be over.

“Stop!” A man called out, his body was half hidden in the threshold of the staircase at the other end of the rooftop.

Jack turned his head and the man spliced into the two images until it focused in the center of his vision. It was one of the janitors that Jack had forgotten the name to. He was panting. Big and burly, Jack figured amidst his alcoholic haze that he was in no shape to run up the steps without collapsing a lung.

“Who are you?” Jack yelled over the winds.

“I’m George. My name is George,” the man said, closing the door behind him, “I heard you crying and shouting as you got on the elevator. I tried to stop you from whatever you were doing but the doors closed. So I ran. You don’t need to do this.” He had an honest face. Jack did not know what that meant, but he knew that it was *honest*.

“Leave me alone,” Jack said.

“I think that’s exactly what you don’t need,” George said, wiping a thick matt of black hair from his sweaty forehead.

“It is. I’m nothing. Nothing! No one would miss me if I jumped.” Jack turned away and inhaled the cold, crisp air of the night.

George stepped forward tentatively as if a sudden gust of wind would knock Jack over the lip of the building, “I would.”

“You don’t even know me. Say my name.”

George shook his head, “You’re right. I don’t know you, but I know that everyone is important. Everyone has family that they care for and lost, friends they love and sometimes even love more than that. Everyone has small things that really make their life worth it. I know. I’ve seen it. Life is special, and so is yours.”

Jack tried to assess this man’s words and realized that the only people he loved were dead or not aware of his own existence and he had no friends and small pleasures.

“Everyone has something to die for. I understand. Trust me I do, I’ve been there. Lonely, scared. But it gets better. Just get down from there.” George held out his hand.

“I’ve seen many lives,” Jack yelled as a horn blared below, “And I’ve hated all of them.” Tears were flowing free from his face.

George’s lips trembled, “Don’t do this.”

Fat as he was, George moved like a python as he jumped forward once Jack began to step over the balcony. He felt the man’s grip dig into his wrist and his arm felt as if it was being ripped from his socket. He was being reeled in like a fish and George his fisherman...until he stopped. Suddenly all was black and Jack entered into his Warehouse, although it was small and every memory was blanketed by thick static.

George’s eyes grew wide and tears began to surface. His face grew taut and Jack was unsure if he was witnessing sadness or fear. His tongue lapped silently and dryly around his mouth, and he stammered, “You...you can do it too.”

“What?” Jack said.

“I thought I was the only one,” George gasped and his grip began to loosen. He fell to his knees, “The only one...”

“You are,” Jack whispered, more to himself than to the janitor. The winds sang and cradled him as he jumped from the building, creating a memory that was his to own and his to keep.