

# JIMMIE

## MO FRANCISCO

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The coffee is percolating in the pot, the remaining gurgles dying into the morning's stillness. She always makes enough for two, though her husband had left her alone long ago.

She scrambles eggs for two, butters toast for two, fries sausages good for two. She sets down one plate for her and another across the table.

"Eat up," she says as she digs a fork into her own breakfast, "the service will be here any minute." Jimmie doesn't respond. He never speaks. Ever since her husband left, the house is always silent but she doesn't mind. That means that there is space to think, and to remember.

Across the street, the school service honks its horn. She peeks out the window and sees the Ramirez twins skipping out of their house, their *yayas* loading twin pink Barbie schoolbags onto the FX. She smiles at the girls' laughter, silent through the window; they are about the same age as Jimmie.

"Time to go," she stands up and starts clearing the table. His plate looks like it was barely touched. "You eat like a bird," she sighs.

Every morning, she drops by the office to oversee the operations of her small travel agency. Her agents are more than competent and paid well, so she never needs to stay long. When there are problems, which are rare, they can always call her at home. She really doesn't even have to go to the office. A call to her

manager is enough. There was a time, years ago, when she locked herself up at home for weeks on end. Her family banged on her door and called nonstop asking how she was. She was tired of being their 'poor dear'. So she went out, mainly for appearances.

She loves her home, though. She loves wiping the dustless tables and figurines of angels, ballerinas, swans, and random knickknacks. She loves cooking gourmet meals from TV recipes that she gets from Rachel Ray, *Giada De Laurentiis*, and Bobby Flay. From Martha Stewart she learned how to fold gartered bed sheets, make Christmas decorations out of gingerbread and Halloween costumes for Jimmie. And when she is done filling the small house with good smells and pretty linens, she pads barefoot into the bedroom, settles by the window overlooking the street, and waits for the school service to honk its arrival. She will not run down the stairs and fling the door open the moment the bus pulls into sight, no matter how much she wants to. She instead, will sit with practiced calm until she sees the Ramirez twins bound out of the bus, always the first to alight the FX.

Through this all, she always wears a summery dress, like the ones her husband loved, even when she is just at home. There will be a day, she knows, when he will come home. And she will be ready.

The water is running in the bath.

She dips her finger in the tub to check the temperature of the water, making sure that it is tepid, the way she had checked the milk in Jimmie's bottles less than five years ago.

She nods to herself and steps into the tub, Jimmie in her arms. She sets him down and methodically scrubs him with a washcloth.

She croons a lullaby to him, one she wrote herself. And between suds and song, she begins to answer questions about his father that Jimmie never asked.

He was tall, she begins. He was soft-spoken most of the time except, when I would nag him.

A smile flashes at the corners of her mouth, quick as a lightning bolt.

Oh, he was the most romantic man. He wrote me poems, you know. I think they were really good.

Where did we first meet?

She giggles like a schoolgirl and blushes deeply.

He sat behind me in class and I always heard his rock music blasting from his earphones. One day, I turned around and said to him ‘Your music’s too loud.’ He pulled off the earphones and said, ‘You want to go out?’ Then I said, ‘I *said*, your music’s too loud.’ And he said, ‘I know. You still didn’t answer my question.’ I knew it then, of course he didn’t, but I was certain that we were soul mates. Soul mates.

When he first held my hand, I remember mine was so sweaty. Or his was. Our first kiss tasted like salt and cotton candy.

Her voice drifts off and her hand drops from Jimmie and falls almost nonchalantly between her legs. She lets herself sink deep into the tub as she explores the depths of memories with her fingers.

She asked where they would go.

First dates should always be at carnivals, he said. So I can win you a stuffed toy after a display of machismo at the shooting range. Then you can drag the prize around proudly.

There wasn't a shooting game that night, so they settled for the knock-the-milk-bottles game. After a few failed attempts, she took the ball from him and smashed the cans from the stand. She smiled and handed him the big stuffed chick. It was custard yellow with ruffled fur and a small potbelly, like that chick from that cartoon *Garfield and Friends*.

We can pretend you won it for me, she said. He laughed and draped an arm around her shoulder.

Can we name it Jimmie? He asked.

She laughed and said no. You don't give names to inanimate objects.

Theirs was a whirlwind romance, as they say. They married, he bought a house, and she made it a home. They loved each other, everyone agreed. A handsome couple, others said. There was, she noticed early on, a tendency for his eyes to rove.

The first time was at a local fast food chain.

She watched her husband flirt with the girl at the counter. Her nametag said, *Hi! My Name is Trixie!*

Trixie greeted him in a singsong voice as he stepped up to the counter. Trixie batted her eyelashes at him. He laughed at something she said. There was definitely something suggestive in the way that Trixie said cheeseburger *with* fries.

"Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes," his wife had cut in. "That will be all."

After that episode, she made home-cooked meals for his lunch and dinner. She called him at lunch, asking how the food was.

Is it still fresh?

Did the butter make the vegetables soggy?

How's the sirloin? Is it tender enough?

Did you see the cake I baked for you?

I love you.

Yes. No. Delicious, dear. Yes. Yes, thank you. I love you too.

There was an incident where he had to go out for a lunch meeting. She went to his office insisting to be let into the meeting. He was presenting to the board of chairmen, one of whom was a very pretty chairwoman named Jessica.

When he came home that night, he told his wife of an unfortunate incident that happened to one of the board members. When Jessica came out of the bathroom, some miscreant sprayed pepper spray directly in her eyes. They had to rush her to the hospital. She was retching and gasping for breath the whole way.

How terrible, she said slipping into the circle of his arms. Your office isn't safe anymore. Maybe you should work from home.

Don't be silly, honey. That was a fluke incident. He kissed the top of her head and drew back slightly. A sharp spicy smell hit his nostrils. He blinked away his sudden tears. He looked at his wife. She gazed up at him with love.

What's her name? she asked.

What are you talking about?

The girl in your office.

There are a lot of girls –

Amanda? Is her name Amanda? Or Paola? How about Marianne? She was wringing her hands, tearing her hair, punching his shoulder.

He sighed and sat down. Janine is my secretary and she's a grandmother of three. She goes home earlier than I do. What's this all about?

Fire her, she said. I'll be your secretary.

He sighed. You know I can't do that.

She opens her eyes. She is shivering. The water in the tub turned ice cold. Jimmie lay limply in her lap. She wraps him in a towel, dries him off, and tucks him in bed beside her. In her bed, dreams became memories, memories became dreams.

You can't go, she said. I-I'm pregnant.

He stopped. She smiled, stood up straighter. They said it's a boy. He turned around. How far along are you?

She was silent.

There is no baby, is there? His voice was soft. There was a honk outside the house. His brother John gave an impatient wave from the driver's side. He turned slightly toward the door.

There is, she stammered, he even has a name! His suitcase dangled uncertainly between them. She relaxed her grip, slightly. His name's Jimmie.

Really now? He looked down at her. She dropped her eyes. Really now? He repeated, lightly slipping from her grip. She was silent. He left quietly, the click of the door echoed loudly to her.

Silence blossomed in her womb.

He came home the next morning.

She is sitting by the window, watching the school service pull away. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees a man walk up the sidewalk. She knew that stride anywhere. She knew it from her dreams of carnivals.

She counts to ten, stands up, and smoothens out her dress. She sits down at her vanity table and applies a layer of lipstick, then smudges it off. She doesn't want him to think she is expecting him. She splashes on baby cologne and walks slowly down the stairs. Her knuckles are white on the banister.

The doorbell rings.

She skips silently on bare feet toward the door.

The doorbell rings again.

She stands behind the door. She closes her eyes, counts her breaths. She tiptoes and peers out at him through the peep hole. His fish-eyed image pushes the doorbell once more. She stares at his distorted face, the nostrils exaggerated; his head is concaved and appears larger than his body. He glances at his watch and turns to walk away.

She goes to the closet and slips on low-heeled sandals so that they can be heard against the wooden floor—as if she had just descended the stairs. She goes back to the front door and calmly opens it.

“Hello?” she calls at the retreating figure. He turns around and smiles. “Oh, it’s you. Hello.”

He walks up to her, bends down and embraces her. She laughs nervously. “I wasn’t expecting you. I’m such a mess.”

“You’re lovely still,” he says.

She reaches out and he takes her hand.

“Come in.”

Inside, she is a flurry of activity.

“Coffee? Tea?” she offers him aloud. And to herself with a half smile, she offers, Me?

“Coffee, please.”

She smiles. Of course, of course. How could she even ask? He never takes tea unless his stomach is acting up, and that’s only when he eats greasy *adobo* peanuts or *kare kare*. She brings out the sugar and cream. Half and half. Just the way he likes it, she sings to herself. Aloud, she begins to hum a tune she made up.

“Oh dear, I take mine black now.” He smiles. “Like you.”

She smiles outside. She frowns inside. “How funny,” she says. After a pause, “I take mine half and half now.”

She sets down one black and one half and half on the table. She chuckles as she catches herself putting the half and half in front of him. She sets down the batch of cookies she baked for Jimmie. They are warm still. The chocolate is melted perfectly, the batter moist.



She puts her mug to her lips and gags at the first sip. She hates cream. "Oh, it's too hot," she says, pushing her mug away.

She looks at him and smiles, she hopes, coyly. It has been awhile since she's played this game. "So, what brings you here?"

"I was just going to ask you something." He is suddenly fascinated with his hands. "But I can ask later. Tell me first what you've been up to."

"Just the same old." She lightly squeezes his hand briefly before self-consciously letting her hand fall away, a finger's length away from his. "You tell me."

"Well, I was living with John for awhile."

"Oh, how is John? Does he still play golf? I remember he was so obsessed with that game." She chuckles at the memory. "Janice and I always used to laugh that he'd get so *nognog* under the sun. What a couple, they were like coffee and milk together." She stirs her coffee absent-mindedly, the metal edges of the spoon hits the porcelain rim of her mug softly. A light tinkling sound fills the space between them.

He leans forward and for a moment she thinks he will take her hands in his. Instead, he cups his mug in front of him. His long fingers overlap around the circumference of the mug, trying to enclose the emanating warmth.

"Yeah, you remember Janice huh?" He brings the mug to his lips. His hesitant sip burns his tongue. "Well, her sister needed a roommate. So I moved in with Therese. She's a nice girl." He glances up. "And I want to marry her."

The cream of her half and half hits the back of her throat. Her right eye twitches. "Oh." She reaches for a cookie and stuffs it in her mouth. She swallows and gets another.

He reaches into his bag and pulls out an envelope thick to bursting with documents. “I was hoping I could get you to sign these.”

Null and void. With her signature, they will be null and void. The carnival will be merely a fantasy of a school girl. Their kiss a storybook tale. Their memories together will change, even vanish. As if they never happened. But did it matter now? He’s drinking different coffee now. He’s wearing a shirt that she didn’t buy—one that that Therese girl probably bought. That must have been why it’s so hideous. She can’t love him anymore anyway, she thinks. I can’t love a man with a receding hairline.

“I can’t afford to pay three hundred thousand pesos. I can’t afford even half,” she says. “I told you that before.”

“I paid it already.” He slides the papers to her. Then, gently, “Please.”

“Do you remember our first date?”

“Of course. I brought you to that carnival and I won you that stuffed bear.” He smiles at her. “You even gave it a name, I forget what it was.”

“His name was Jimmie,” she says.

She signs her name.

She is quiet during dinner. Usually, she entertains Jimmie with stories of what she did that day, or if nothing eventful happened to her that day, she would tell him what happened to the sitcom families. She used to laugh while telling the stories of *Everybody loves Raymond* or *Malcolm in the Middle*.

Oh, they’re so crazy! she would laugh. You should have seen what Ray was up to today!

But tonight she is quiet. The only sound is the occasional unbearable scrape of a wayward utensil on the fine china they always used. It's her mother's wedding gift, a family heirloom.

Jimmie's food is untouched as usual. She scolds him for wasting good food, for being an ingrate. She puts his leftovers in a Tupperware and throws it in the ref. She's muttering to herself as she washes the dishes one by one.

"Why does he need to remarry anyway? Who is this bimbo?" She whirls around, soapy water flies across the room.

"Well? Answer me!" Her hands are on her waist and she looks accusingly at Jimmie. He is, as usual, silent.

"You're just like your father, he never cared. After all I've done for him." Her bitterness is a cloud that infects the air. She scrubs furiously at the scorched bottom of a pot. She imagines boring a hole in it with her sponge.

"Why? I made a home for him. I ironed his clothes. I'm a great cook. I'm great in bed. He told me, I asked him. I made him little notes, folded them into hearts and slipped them in his lunch. I called him every hour. Told him I loved him. Wore these stupid dresses every single day. Isn't that love? Am I not a good wife?" She bangs the china plate on the soapy, marble counter. It breaks into two jagged pieces in her hands, porcelain pieces bury themselves in her palm. Pinpricks of blood dot her palm and grow into thin red rivulets. "Goddamit!" she picks up another clean plate and flings it at the wall behind Jimmie. It hits the corner of the doorframe and shatters.

"Jimmie, forgive me," she whispers, gathering him up in her arms. She sinks to the floor, rocking him slowly. "Haven't I been a good mommy to you? Haven't I taken care of you?" She croons, then, "answer me, Jimmie." She shakes him hard, her voice growing shrill. "I said, answer me!"

But Jimmie simply stares back at her with the patient eyes of a stuffed toy chick won years ago when memory was not yet tainted by time. Blood slowly stains his balding yellow fur, and he keeps his silence.

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