

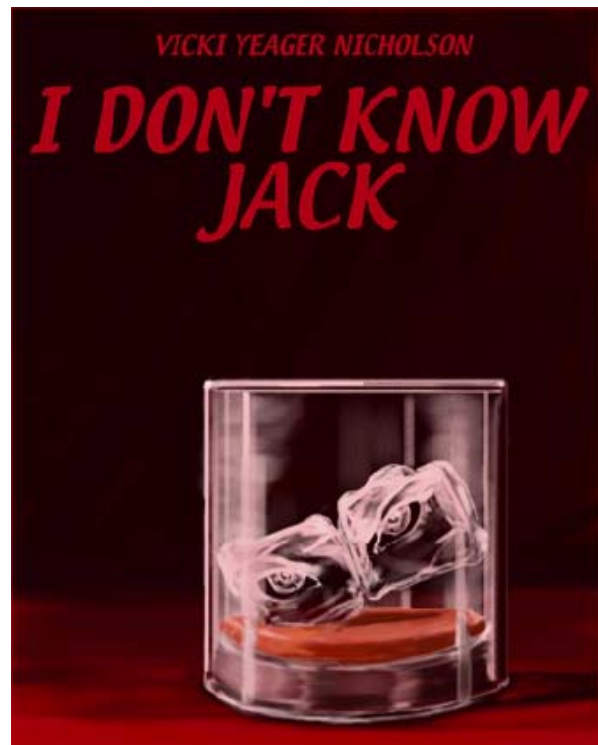
***I Don't Know Jack***

By

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Here you are again Jack,  
heading into work, and my stomach  
feels like there's a WWII dog fight  
going on inside. On the sidewalk,  
drawn in white chalk, is a goldfish  
jumping out of its bowl into a cup. It's  
signed in simple, block-print, De La  
Vega. Simone would gush and  
analyze, but I'm still too tight to care.  
My neck aches, yet again, from



nodding off on the loveseat, "The Sands of Iwo Jima," filtering into my dreams. I  
brace for my walk through the garbage alley to the employee entrance of Urban  
Fish, a corporate establishment, my hell away from home. The narrow alley  
stands in opposition to the arched entryway the moneyed patrons use. I swallow  
the phlegm leftover from last night's drinks, and the sour aftertaste sears the back  
of my throat. My head pounds with every step as the vibrations from the

sidewalk ricochet, like bullets, off my skull. Inside my black, wool, New York City, standard issue coat I'm dripping, which only adds to the belligerent January chill. I'm two minutes from turning into a walking Popsicle. The only thing that saves me is the simple scientific fact that alcohol doesn't freeze.

Unfortunately, neither has the pungent smell of fish entrails, nestled warmly in their boxes, snug at the bottom of the dumpster. They lie in wait to sabotage even the most disciplined of drinkers on his way in to work. I swallow hard as I dodge the dumpster. Not wanting to blow chunks in the alley, I hold my breath and pray that I can avoid the noxious crossfire. I just need to make it past the kitchen door.

It slams behind me and I exhale. Bent over in recovery with my hands on my knees, I let down my guard. I've reached a safety zone of sorts. I'm prepared to wait out the nausea here but the heat from the kitchen ignites my sweat glands. I rip off my coat. It's not enough. The rank lobster parts stuck in the corner infiltrate my olfactory glands. Bourbon reinvents itself from my pores. Random fish pieces squash under my boots. I cling to the railing as I work my way down stairs, resolved to my fate. Wondering why on earth I'm here. A dry heave away from freedom but I hold it back.

I could be home in my boxers, resting in front of the computer, coaxing my future Pulitzer Prize winning novel out of the deepest recesses of my brain. (A lie I've grown attached to. It helps justify the necessity of fish). Tonight, well actually in the last month, I've found that as bad as waiting tables with a

hangover can be, going home is worse. My writing is as rotten as a bad oyster.

It's turned putrid and all gone to shit since Jane left.

This is the first time in seven years I've questioned my decision to dodge the family business. My father's suffocating voice keeps replaying the same phrase, "You should have gone to law school when you had the chance," like the god damn ghost of Christmas past. Honestly, I am not the "lawyering" type. I've never donned a suit, and anything pre-teen doesn't count. What gets me about this whole break up is I've never had these kinds of doubts before. Sure, I've doubted the girls; they'd have to be crazy to dump me. Mind you, Jane was, and she had the lithium and Paxil to prove it.

I lived to balance her chaos. I had a gift for morphing into bipolar bubble wrap. Detecting the onset of an episode, I'd wrap myself around her sensitive psyche and protect her from any unwarranted jarring. During the lows I'd hold her in my arms for days and during the highs I was damage control. Now that she's gone, I feel deflated. One day it was, "I love you, Jack. You're brilliant."

The next she and her pharmacy had vanished from my apartment. It's not like I need closure, but some kind of explanation would have been nice after two years of running interference. I ask you, what good is bubble wrap when all the bubbles have been popped?

The prep kitchen's air wafts raw fish. It forces me to hurry into the cramped locker room, which could be confused with the boiler room it's so hot.

The ancient lockers are shoved into a tiny alcove. One might think you're

entering a scene from Caligula as bodies twist in stages of undress, but after a day or two, there's nothing appealing about this situation. Scott, aka Weeds, an ex chemical engineer, pulls on black pants over his Simpson boxers. Christy glances at his choice of underwear as she tries to shove her dance bag, the size of an army duffel, into a foot cubed locker. "What? I need to do laundry!" he defends.

Simone tucks into a corner trying to put on a bra without being seen. Long, dark hair encircles her as she creates her own cocoon. We're squished like anchovies packed tight in this tin, but I feel better surrounded by voices. It's easier than listening to the chatter within my own head.

"Spare us Jose. Come on, invest in some underwear!" yells Tanya, shirtless herself and quite comfortable in her signature red bra. He laughs. That's it. In Ecuador this is probably normal. I squeeze in between Tanya, who's now dusting herself with glitter, and Christy's bag. I quickly tug my shirt out of my locker and shake it hard to avoid a run in with a roach. In the beginning, I thought it would be hot to change with girls, but now it's just stifling. Tanya flops against me as Weeds pushes his way out, "Keep those girls in check," I say. After all, I'm grieving not dead.

"You don't really mean that Jack, now that you're available."

"Relax Tanya," says Simone from her corner. Her eyes wide with concern as she turns around to flash a warning.

"Whatever," I shrug. I stay focused on ridding my shoes of any visitors. If I can just keep my stomach steady for the next five minutes, I can make it

through the shift. I glance down to slip on my shoes. My body isn't perfect. My newly thirty physique could use some sit-ups. I know my hair is thinning, but that's not why Jane left. It was something else, something beyond the physical. She had wanted. . . what? Some kind of intangible bullshit that women always want. Why don't they get it? Love isn't really like the fairy tales. It's grounded in the every day. But that was too real for her, too simple, not like the movies at all. I let her know how I felt, which was a mistake. She was not prepared for something as natural as love. Neither was I, in the beginning. How could I compete with a madwoman's ideals? Yet, I had trusted her. Believed what she said about me being her strength. How could I have been so stupid? No one could compete with a fantasy. I had given in to her, indulged her whims, when I should have insisted on therapy. Now she was out there, in the city, alone...crazed.

"Fuck her, Jack!" the opinionated air of Charlie sweeps through the befouled room. He has a way of changing the energy when he makes an entrance. I'm sure it has to do with his constant search for a stage.

I focus on tying my shoes rather than give into the black hole that is Charlie. "You have that lost look again. FUCK HER!" he growls, "Believe me you're much better off without the fern fairy."

"What's wrong with being environmentally friendly?" says Christy, leaning her full 95 pounds against her locker, wrestling with her lock.

“This is man talk, hippie,” Charlie winks at her, reaches over and presses shut the locker. She’s about to protest but he flips a bit of his longish, brown hair out of his eyes and flashes his ‘commercial’ headshot smile. At that moment her lock snaps shut. She shakes her head begrudgingly, and walks out around the corner.

“You’re a prick, Charlie,” says Tanya, rushing to the female defense. She’ll admit to 37 but the lines under her eyes say older. She’s tough, has been singing in bars for years waiting for her big break. A moment, I fear, which may have already passed.

“And you’re a slut. Wanna work it out?” teases Charlie.

“Not if you were the last man-,”

“At the bar?”

She shakes herself into her shirt. “You’ll never have these.”

“Those are some tired titties, Tanya. Stop offering”.

“Fuck you Charlie,” she says. She slams her locker shut, and struts past Charlie. He slaps her on the ass.

“Can’t keep your hands off the goods, huh?” and is gone before Charlie can retort.

The locker room is empty except me, Charlie and Simone, who has remained quiet in the corner. She’s watched the whole thing, reserving judgment. Her eyes say it all. Dark, almond shaped, almost mystical. Ave Maria. Her stare makes Charlie lower his head for absolution.



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“What?” he says, peering up out of the corner of his eye. He pretends to be busy with his fly.

“Nothing,” she says.

“I know you want to say something Simone. So go ahead and say it.”

“I stand by what I said last night.”