

JAM

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- Joystick Division



YAHTZEE
CROSHAW

DAY 1.1

I woke up one morning to find that the entire city had been covered in a three-foot layer of man-eating jam.

I didn't notice straightaway. Our apartment was on the third floor, so the day began as a fairly ordinary one. I got up at around eleven a.m. to go job hunting. I tried to take a shower, but the hot water was off. Then I tried to have some cereal, but the milk was off. The whole refrigerator was off. I fingered the light switch: nothing. The power was cut.

None of this was any cause for concern. I glanced over at the increasingly urgent utility bills pinned to the corkboard by the front door. It wasn't that we couldn't afford to pay them; it was just that none of us ever really got around to it.

At that point Frank emerged from his bathroom, wearing his gym clothes and with gooseflesh dotting his arms and shoulders. "Hot water's off," he said, through his teeth.

"Power's off," I replied.

"Oh, christ." He ripped the most recent payment demand from the board. "Was it off when Tim got back last night? Do you know?"

"No. He got back late. I was in bed."

"I'll give them a call when I get back," he said, waving the bill. "Don't worry about it."

"Thanks. You going to the gym?"

He pointed to the word *GYM*, emblazoned brightly on the front of his vest. "Yep."

"I'll come down with you."

He raised one of his thick eyebrows at me. "You gonna sign up?"

"No, no," I said, quickly. "Just get breakfast somewhere."

"When are you going to do it? I get a discount if I recommend someone."

He prodded my stomach in his good-natured but nonetheless painful way. "You should start working that off soon as you can. Your twenties only last so long."

"I know. I'll sign up," I protested. "At some point."

He raised a disbelieving eyebrow and I followed him out into the stairwell that led down to the courtyard. He immediately parked his thick buttocks on the handrail with a short whoop of glee and slid down the first flight of steps, swinging around and starting on the next without waiting for me. He was already at the bottom by the time I reached the top of the last flight.

So I was just in time to see him get eaten by the jam.

He was looking back at me to shout encouragement, so he didn't notice it until he was on top of it, flopping bodily onto the three feet of wobbling red that flooded the bottom of the stairwell. "Urrgh," I heard him say, in the disgusted tone of one falling victim to a messy practical joke. This quickly became "Arrgh" when he realized the jam wasn't letting him go, and that in turn became "AAAAARGH" when he saw his legs, immersed in the semitransparent goo, stripped of their flesh over the course of a second.

The rest of him summoned a burst of effort from somewhere and his torso strained at the ropy red strands that wrapped him like festive ribbons. He reached his last remaining arm out towards me, and his terrified eyes met mine. Then the jam shot out several more tentacles that fastened around his wrist, eyes, and mouth, and he was yanked back with a desperate gurgle.

His wristwatch, iPod, and fillings slowly floated to the surface, with a motion that seemed reminiscent of a satisfied belch.

I very, very slowly turned around and went back up the stairs.

I must have let myself back into the flat. The next thing I knew, I was sitting rather stiffly on the living room sofa with my fingers drumming on my knees, staring at the Master Chief figurine Frank kept on top of the TV. After a while, the finger drumming didn't feel right, so I clutched

my thighs instead. That didn't feel right either, so I gathered my hands over my crotch. That felt even less right. Nothing felt right.

Finally, I stood up slowly, holding my stomach in case it hurled itself up my throat and out my face, and opened the blinds that covered the balcony doors. The balcony looked out on the courtyard, but we generally kept the blinds closed because Frank (Frank, who was dead) would always complain about sunlight on the TV.

It was a pleasant, cloudless Brisbane day. The sun beamed cheerfully across the balconies of the vacant flats opposite. I slid the balcony doors aside, and felt a warm breeze play gently on my face. What a lovely day. By now Frank, Frank who was dead, would have reached the gym, probably flirting with the receptionist on his way to the locker room. If he hadn't been dead, that is.

I kept my gaze focused on the clear blue sky and stepped forward until I could clench my hands around the railing. I took a deep breath. Then I looked down.

The jam had filled the courtyard and foyer and pushed the water out of the swimming pool. Where it touched the walls, little tendrils snaked their way upwards like searching fingers. There was an overpowering stench of strawberries.

From my vantage point I could see into some of the ground-floor apartments. All of them were half-filled with jam, the top halves of TVs and stereos poking up like electronic islets. The occupants were nowhere to be seen.

I went to the far end of the balcony and craned to look through the main entrance doors at the street outside. I couldn't see much, but it looked like there was jam there, too. It was only then that I remembered that a main road was barely fifty yards from the complex, and yet I couldn't hear any traffic noise.

Please stop noticing things, went my brain. I'm having trouble finding room for it all.

I rapped my knuckles against the other set of balcony doors behind me, the ones that led into Tim's bedroom. I had been knocking continuously for close to five minutes before they finally slid aside.

"WHAT?!" yelled Tim. He was naked save for a pair of cargo shorts he was still zipping up, and his blond hair was unshowered and still chaotic from sleep.

"Juh," I said.

“What?”

“Jam.”

“Jam?”

“Jam.”

His baggy, sleep-deprived eyes glanced left and right, confused. “Are you saying there’s a jam?”

“There is jam, yes.” I pointed. “Down there.”

He stepped out of his room dubiously and leaned over the balustrade. His eyes bulged, and his mouth spread gradually into a grin. “Holy shit. That is so awesome.” He bent his entire top half over the rail, trying to look out into the street. “It is jam, isn’t it?”

I took up position next to him, supporting my face in my hands. “ ’S got seeds.”

“Yeah. Whiffs a bit, doesn’t it. Has Frank seen?”

“Frank’s dead.”

Another long silence passed, during which neither of us moved.

“When did that happen?”

“ ’Bout ten minutes ago.”

Tim stood upright and coughed. “So, of the two important things that happened this morning,” he said, enunciating slowly and carefully. “One being jam, the other being Frank dying, you felt jam was the one worth mentioning.”

“The jam killed him,” I said, finally getting the words out. “He was eaten. By the jam.”

“Ah. Right.” A pause. “Actually, no, not right. Back up. What happened?”

I gave an account of the morning’s events. Tim slowly nodded in bafflement after each significant word, drinking them all in one by one but not quite connecting them in his head.

Eventually, he ducked back inside his room and picked his dressing gown up off the floor. “I think you’re going to have to show me,” he said.

I led him in silence down the stairwell, stopping at the same place I’d stopped before, at the top of the last flight. The jam was where I’d left it, flooding the ground floor, pulsating slightly and slopping goopily below the fourth step.

“Is he in there?” asked Tim, squinting.

“It dissolved him.” I waved a hand uncertainly at the heaving mass. “He’s dead.”

Tim peered forward, examining the small collection of objects that were still bobbing on the surface at the foot of the stairs: a few coins, a key ring, and Frank's phone with the Mr. T plastic casing. "Hmm," said Tim thoughtfully, before pulling off his left thong and hurling it in.

The jam extended a couple of elongated peaks of itself to welcome it. The sole rapidly shriveled away to nothing in the grip of the corrosive red ooze, while the plastic toe strap popped free and drifted over to join Frank's pocket change.

"Likes rubber but not plastic," Tim said to himself. "Okay. What else do we know about it?"

"It liked Frank."

"Likes human bodies. We should be taking notes."

"Tim?"

"Yes?"

"Frank's dead."

"Yes, I gathered that." Tim looked at me. "Are you all right?"

"I . . . don't know. I feel a bit numb."

He pulled off his dressing gown and wrapped it tightly around his hand until there was a foot-wide cloth fist on the end of his arm. Then he made his way carefully down the stairs, one at a time, stretching his covered hand towards the jam. He stopped a few steps before the surface. I noticed the jam had gone rather still and quiet, as if anticipating something.

"Er," I said, twiddling my fingers. "What are you doing?"

"Give me a hand."

He wrapped his arm around my right wrist as I clung to the banister with my left. He leaned even closer to the jam and began dabbing at it with the dressing gown. I felt myself inhale sharply.

"It's all spongy," he reported.

As he examined the jam's texture, he failed to notice a large section of jam in front of him start to rise from the surface like a tombstone being pushed out from under the earth. After a few false starts I found my voice. "Er, Tim . . ."

"Sort of feels nice, actually."

It stopped growing when it was about six feet tall, then stood quivering back and forth uncertainly. "Tim, there's . . ."

"Reminds me of that fat girl I—"