
MICHAEL DOWNS

Jim at 2 AM: Something like Opera

AUBADE

The neighbor's baritone carries to their second-floor bedroom and through the open window, rouses wife, then husband.

"Hon," Sheri says. "Jim."

Arm searching for a bathrobe sleeve, fumbling with eyeglasses, Michael takes care not to step on the big white dog prone on the bedroom floor, the dog he'd carried upstairs earlier that night. One foreleg useless, the tumor having gnawed through the bone, only a few chips left behind. They feed her tramadol for the pain, and prednisone. Her dying is a distinct grief for them, childless, who raised her from a puppy. On her first night with them the dog cried, so he left bed then, too, to sleep with her on the cold kitchen floor saying, *Sshhh, sshhh*. Uneasy in the world ever since, unnerved by children and the UPS man; why they love her so.

"SAAAAAAAA-shaaaaaa!" bellows Jim, returned from another night at the bars in Mount Vernon, drunk and alone, wobbling azalea to azalea. "SAAAAAAAA-shaaaaaa!"

When Jim says no, he doesn't need help to find his cat, Michael asks whether Jim might not shout, then. Two in the morning, sleep and whatnot.

"Oh, fuck you," Jim spits. "Go back to your perfect wife and your perfect life."

In the bedroom, the big white dog raises her heavy head to watch him shut the window, then drops her ear back to the floor.

"SAAAAAAAA-shaaaaaa! SAAAAAAAA-shaaaaaa!"

"What can we do?" Sheri asks, voice weak with sleeplessness, desperation.

"I don't know," he says. At the window, he looks about Sefton Avenue, searches the city-lit clouds, as if there he'll see ways to perfect their lives: a poultice or a prayer to knit the dog's bones; and, perhaps to unmake the bones of others, a crowbar with its flattened hook, a shovel's cutting edge.

SYLVIA LOVES JIM, JIM LOVES SYLVIA

1.

JIM. Redneck bitch.**SYLVIA.** Faggot.

2.

SYLVIA. You keep spraying water all over my garage, you'll wreck the mortar.**JIM.** I'm watering my lawn.**SYLVIA.** You're wrecking my garage, asshole.**JIM.** Oh, go inside and complain to your redneck husband.**SYLVIA.** He's more man than you are. Hell, I'm more man than you are. Har. Har.**JIM.** Bitch.**SYLVIA.** You got me beat there.

3.

JIM (*on Halloween, to a princess and a ninja*). An evil witch lives in that house. An evil, evil witch named Sylvia. She'll poison you with her candy.

4.

JIM (*at 2 AM, his front lawn, moon-eyed toward Sylvia's second-floor bedroom*). Syl-vee-a! I love you, Syyyyl-vee-a! Syl-vee-a! I love you! Why can't we be friends?

5.

SYLVIA (*to police officer, at 2:20 AM*). He's not normal. He's one of those doesn't like women. You like women, right?

6.

JIM (*shirtless in the sun, garden hose between his legs, spurting, and him caressing its length*). Syl-veee-a! Syyyyl-veee-a, I love you! I love you, Syl-veee-aaaaa!**SYLVIA.** They should take you away.**JIM.** Oh, Syl-veee-a!

ROAD RAGE MAN

Because his sedan has stopped in a ditch. Because the scant interstate traffic whizzes by, uncaring. Because whiskey and wine soften the night's edges.

He's Laurel. Or is it Hardy? "Well," he says to hands that still grip the steering wheel. "Here's another nice fucking mess you've gotten me into."

He turns off the car's headlights. The ground underneath slopes, so the car tilts, and Jim leans. Through the windshield, the overpass ahead slants off-kilter. His exit? Jim turns his head, straightens the view.

If the police come, he knows what he'll tell them. "A road rage man," he'll say, "I was minding my own business, and an insane road rage man forced me off the interstate."

He sees the grotesque twist of the fellow's neck, the barking mouth. In a Mercedes. No, a pickup. What *do* road rage men drive? A hatchback? Yes. He drove an awful little hatchback. No hubcaps.

Tomorrow when Jim telephones the insurance company, he'll tell the person, "A deranged road rage man." And when his neighbors stare at him in that way they do and ask about the front bumper, about the mud and wet grass smeared across his sedan's passenger side: "I was minding my own business . . . a road rage man."

In class, just this week or maybe last, whenever, he told students: For stage roles, repeat the words until you believe them. That's how you convince people. True whether you sing Gilbert and Sullivan or "Amazing Grace" or Mendelssohn.

He tries the ignition key. The tires slip, catch, and then he's angling the sedan into traffic.

When he repeated the words to Nancy—*I love you, I love you, I love you*—she married him. Even now—after divorce and all his late-night despair over the ideal man—Nancy still claims to love him. (And was that his greatest performance—as her husband? Better even than as Elijah in the oratorio?)

As the prophet he sang, "Is not his word like a fire?" And knew it to be truth.

His hand gropes for a lighter. The road slips this way and that. Those rude beautiful boys in the bars, how they patronize him! As Elijah he encouraged the people to violence, and the people sang, "Bring all, and slay them," and meant it. He checks the rearview mirror for police, imagines his neighbors when they see his car.

One fist grips the steering wheel so his fingers pale. Cigarette smoke curls like spite around his head. His breath burns. Tomorrow, they'll ask: the neighbors, the

insurance company. “A road rage man,” he’ll insist again and again, the words cast forth like fire and belief.

WHERE THERE’S FIRE

Late night has become early morning, a long trip to another city near its end. For the last few miles Michael drove windows down, winter air slapping him out of sleep. When he’s almost home, that air picks up a thick odor: smoke and char. He smells it even before he sees a red midnight sun rising over Sefton Avenue.

Not *his* house; someone would have called his cell. Instead, he thinks: Jim. Then: Sylvia. Like mean and scabby cats, those two, especially these past weeks. Drunken shouts and staring contests, slammed doors and bored police officers saying, “Play nice.” Whoever’s house burns, Jim would be the spark. He’s crazy, operatic.

The car bumps over fire hoses, and no—not a Sefton house, after all. Instead, the lights of public tragedy illuminate neighboring Fleetwood Avenue. Jim isn’t even home, his absent car suggesting another night at the bars. Michael parks in his own driveway, sets the hand brake, embarrassed that he imagined a stranger’s misfortune as the end of Jim and Sylvia’s noisy feud. Firefighters roll up their hoses, and Michael watches with that glancing sadness that comes with bad news that is neither close nor far, knowable but without demands. Cold air sneaks under his coat, goose bumps rise on his skin. He needs to piss.

Inside, he pets the crippled dog, kisses his wife. “I thought it was Jim or Sylvia,” he tells Sheri. He doesn’t say how, for a moment, the thought thrilled.

Days later he’ll learn that the burned-out house belonged to a hoarder, who escaped. She’ll leave the neighborhood and not return. Then the house will be demolished, a new one built on the lot. A family will move in.

And one night after 2 AM, Jim will drive past that new house where children now sleep, his car’s front bumper scraping the asphalt, because that’s what happens when you drunkenly steer your car into a tree.

But that’s not how it ends, either.

THE CRITIC

Is it too grand to call this a final performance?

After all, it will end before morning, with Jim’s body sprawled belly-down on the dining room floor, pants around his knees. Police officers will work around

the piano, touch fingers to his dead neck, note the sweat dried on his skin. Heart attack, they'll say.

Nothing so grand in that.

Nor in the earlier scenes. Another night with wine and nicotine, a few pills. Another man, polished as the bar counter, who sparkles and flirts but leaves with some young stud. Another crashing of the car, driven despite his revoked license. Another taxi ride home.

The drink and anger make noise and a white glare, louder and more blinding than his loneliness. It's so loud it outshouts his thoughts, so bright it burns all shadows. Deaf and blind, he lumbers up the porch stairs and into the house, and there is for him no awareness of dew on the grass, of the spotlight that falls from a buzzing streetlamp. He can't notice the stringed bulbs he threaded so carefully through the bushes, like stage lights. Potted chrysanthemums bloom into bouquets, but he's oblivious. He ignores the cat, with its front-row view, tail twitching, bored.

WRONG NUMBER

That cozy September evening, neighbors gathered on the sidewalk as Baltimore police and paramedics labored inside and outside Jim's house, around and with his body. Procedures and paper work.

"Anyone know next of kin?" an officer asked.

A brother somewhere in the South. A sister. No one knew contact info, not even the neighbor who'd once had keys to his house. He'd been married once. No, no kids. Not that anyone knew of.

"Friends?"

Once some neighbors might have been counted as such. No longer. Not after the "Fuck you!" and late-night bellowing, and those spontaneous growls and snarls and death eyes. Kenny did the funniest imitation: *Rrrrraaaaarrrrr*. But laughter never lasted as long as the dread that neighbors felt each time Jim stepped outside for a smoke. Only Cathy, the pet sitter, talked to him anymore, drove him to the dollar store when his car was wrecked, porch-sat with him for a glass of chilled and cheap sweet wine. Having charmed hissing cats and bellicose dogs, she knew that all God's creatures soften before patience and good cheer, high-pitched coos and baby talk. The more vicious, the more they want for love.

"We've got his phone," the police officer said. "We'll find someone."

Neighbors lingered as if lingering were ritual, spoke of inevitability and sadness. Of relief. The neighborhood felt new: diminished, but safer. They had survived something. Outlasted a plague. Floodwaters now receded. Paramedics lifted a stretcher up the front stairs. Michael and Sheri, who once wrote for newspapers, wanted to see his body brought out; others preferred not.

Cathy's phone rang in her purse. Neighbors turned when they heard her tell the caller: "Why, yes, I know Jim. I'm standing in front of his house right now."

Nearby, a police officer leaned against the front end of a cruiser. He mumbled into a phone, and Cathy turned to him. The officer raised a few fingers, shrugged. Cathy's laugh sounded of wind chimes, her wave back as if for a toddler, elaborate and assuring.

"It was good of you to call," she sang in that pet-sitter voice of hers, with its promise of belly rubs and companionship, a soft hand and squeak toys. A voice which comes from a place gentler than this.

CATS

In the days after Jim died, no kin or coworkers came by. No newspaper obituary summed up his life.

But one afternoon, a few neighbors gathered in front of his locked-up house. Bert pointed to the second story—a serious, bone-breaking height—where two kitty faces peered from behind a window screen. "See, it's open a crack," he explained. "Someone with an extension ladder," Joyce suggested, knowing Michael's would reach. "Three days without fresh food or water," said Bert, a sadness in the slow shake of his head.

Joyce and Bert held the ladder's base while Michael pried the screen with a screwdriver, then let the screen spin and turn through air to the bushes below. When his foot slipped off the shingled overhang, his stomach pitched, and he grabbed that ladder so tight tendons popped out on the backs of his hands. Then, with a shift of weight, he lunged through the window and into Jim's house.

The cats had fled, but cat hair lay on the room's rugs, its chairs' upholstery, its lampshades and occasional pillows, dulling colors. Plants wanted dusting. Just inside the window sat a side table—and on it an unfinished glass of white wine, fingerprints oily on the bowl. The open bottle lay on its side. The cats' clumsiness, maybe, or Jim's.

(A voice—Bert’s—faraway and muffled by the house, its silence: *You made it!*)

Michael stood still awhile, not wanting to touch anything. But the house touched him, cold and too close. He tried not to look, not to spy into rooms, but the house made madness visible. He didn’t want to listen, but the house gossiped, betrayed the life it had sheltered. In this house, it felt as if Jim were not dead—as if he had not died—but were still here and dying.

Joyce and Bert met him as he opened the front door. Michael took his ladder home; Joyce and Bert stepped inside. Eventually, they counted four cats, including two who had never lived outside Jim’s basement. They found that basement flooded, turds and litter floating in three feet of water, starving cats huddled atop the washer and dryer. They discovered that Jim had thrown away clothes rather than hazard his basement bayou to wash them. They learned he bought briefs in bulk, that he died with dozens of unopened packages in his bedroom.

Michael had glimpsed those, too, and the smeared dishes stacked a foot high in the kitchen. He’d breathed Jim’s air, maybe with Jim’s breath still in it. The air had a taste Michael couldn’t describe. Back home, he brushed his teeth.

In the days after Jim died, the mail carrier stuffed the box with Valpak coupons and circulars from Bi-Rite. No one mowed the lawn. What the city did with Jim’s sad flesh, no neighbor on Sefton Avenue cared enough to learn.

But those cats all found homes.

PIANO, COUCH

Neighbors called it “Jim’s House” for years after he died. No tenant stayed long enough to erase his ghost—and why would they? The house remained fully his. Tenants rented it furnished, could play his grand piano, nap on his couch, drink from wineglasses his lips had touched. Whatever the designs of the new owner, or how she’d known Jim, no one could say. She materialized and vanished with the efficiency of the druggies who sometimes parked across the street and, after an exchange with a passing sedan, sped off.

Then, one raw February morning, a white truck pulled up to the curb and from it waddled three thickset men in sweat shirts and work gloves. They slapped a metal ramp over Jim’s porch stairs, and after a while indoors returned first with piano legs, then with the body draped in blankets and strapped to a wheeled bed.

Later, the tenant of the moment, a young photographer with a beard, told Michael

that he was moving out, too. Then he lowered his voice. “I found *Penthouse* calendars in the piano bench,” he said. “Wasn’t Jim gay?”

A few days later, Jim’s sofa appeared on the sidewalk. Cream-colored, its upholstery also displayed faded pink roses and blue peonies. The young photographer had already cleared out. So now Jim’s house stood empty of piano, couch, and life. This was on Valentine’s Day, a gray one, and cold.

Next door, Bert, the widower, still believed enough in romance to hang a glittery paperboard heart on his porch. A few fence hops away, Megan and Sara mixed a bowl of vodka punch and set their table for a party to celebrate love, all neighbors welcome. Michael and Sheri tugged on wool hats and mittens—the weather reports predicted snow—and walked.

Seven years ago, when they bought on Sefton Avenue, each neighboring house had been someone’s home, Jim’s the most spectacular with profuse blooms and string-light galaxies sparkling through the bushes. But: bailouts and foreclosures, layoffs and food stamps. Now Michael and Sheri strolled past one empty house, then another, the last with legal declarations on yellow paper pasted to the front door. Black hole after black hole. A neighborhood buckling under the gravity of its losses.

Darkness fell fast. Snow blew in and settled thickly on leafless branches, across roads, over sidewalks. At Megan and Sara’s, neighbors toasted love with punch. Sheri resisted the chocolates. Kristen and James came late with the kids, who shook snow off their hats. Sharon shooed Megan and Sara’s dogs off the couch. John kept Joyce company when she went to the porch to smoke, though he’d quit months earlier.

The snow shrouded Jim’s old couch, too, its faded flowers.

On the walk home, Michael noticed a stray cat creep under the couch’s skirt, sheltering among coils and stuffing.