

Novel Excerpt - Full

Chapter of Jimmy!

by George LaCas

Jimmy Gollihue awoke to the howling of a bloodhound, a long voice from up the mountain, and the baying of the dog pulled a keening lament from his dream of the highway.

Waking was slow and it stretched out like a nighttime road, and he was Little Jimmy, not six years old. He sat in his grandmother's kitchen and watched the old woman. That there is a river banshee, said Granny Gollihue. When she starts her crying, you better get your affairs in order. It means your time has come.

Jimmy sat up in bed and rubbed his face, and he let up the blind. The August sun glared above the trees. He looked over at the clock. Ten-thirty. Pool hall opens in half an hour and I ain't even up yet, he thought.

He peered out the window at the trailer lot drive and watched for a minute, and he imagined the Visibar on top of the county sheriff's car, the green and white of the paint job, the gold star on the side.

Then he pulled on his jeans and put on his boots and got his pool cue.

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Bad omens are a funny thing. They'll repeat on you if you aren't careful. Several hours later, like a raven walking on Jimmy's grave, Henry Dixon shuffled into the pool room. Hat in hand, and his face a mask of horror, he announced:

"Old Cody got eaten by an alligator! Pulled him right off the river!"

Jimmy, who stood there alone at the table, remembered the hound dog howling, the banshee crying in his dream, and he shivered in the close heat.

One or two men murmured words of surprise, but most turned back to their games of eight ball and nine ball and one-pocket, shaking their heads in disappointment and disgust.

"False alarm," said one old boy.

"Damn gators'll eat anything," said another.

Dodgie came back over to the table.

"You hear that shit?" said Dodgie.

"Yeah, I heard it," said Jimmy.

"You believe that?"

"I believe it's your shot, Dodgie."

Jimmy hadn't known Old Cody, but he'd heard rumors. He pictured the scene: Old Cody floating along in his battered skiff, drunk as shit, dangling a line in the river that probably wasn't even baited, and all of the sudden a monster alligator explodes out of the water, all teeth and growling hunger, and drags the old bastard down. Jimmy wondered what that must have been like, and which was worse: dying by gator attack, or drinking yourself to death. He asked himself, briefly, what a gator was doing this far north.

But he became bored, and then absorbed in the game once more, as he watched Dodgie miss his shot on the six ball. Then he beat Dodgie three more games, a total loss that took a modest bite out of the boy's SSI check.

But not too much, thought Jimmy Gollihue. You got to keep them coming back.

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In a trailer camp on the edge of the forest, Iris lay in her bed and stared at the mildewed ceiling. I just seen the future and this is what I wake up to, she thought. What a weird dream.

Through it all it she was aware of being warm and naked in bed, yet she floated like a fairy spirit, diffuse and all-seeing, above a dark wooded scene, sure that something was about to happen, sure that she'd turned into air and cloud.

In her dream the road is a river, and the river's a road, a twisting turning green-scaled monster that follows a fool wherever he runs. First it's just a dirt track, and she hears a yelping and a baying and a great big gray hound dog comes running down it, his nose to the ground, and it is clear he's caught him a scent and he's hard upon it and not about to stop for nothing. The hound dog can't see it, but she can, as she watches from above: there's a terrible cloud on the road ahead, and the dog's about to run into it. She turns in her bed, and feels fear for the poor bloodhound.

Then the dream changes, as her dreams sometimes do, and the road is a river again, dark green and nasty and dangerous-feeling, and there's a dim shadow coming up from the bottom, rippling the dark water darker. The river changes to a road once more, and down it walks a young knight.

Iris begins to wake up but she doesn't want to, because now the dream is turning sexy, maybe the knight is on some errand in her name. She sees how handsome he is and her hand creeps like a spider down her tummy, and at the end of the dream she swoops down to the foolish knight, so close she can smell his skin, and she can almost tell his purpose, she can almost say his name.

She got out of bed and right away shivered in the shadow of the big stone house on the hill. The whole caravan camp sat squarely in the middle of its darkness. She looked out her window through a hole in the tinfoil, but all she could see was her own reflection in the dusty glass—a witchy green eye amid dead brown leaves.

Often, at dusk, Iris looked at the house's silhouette on the hill, like a black backdrop of her dreams to come, and she wondered what it was like to live there.

But for now, she shook her head and put on Aunt Fiona's old robe and went down the hall for a wash. Ain't no time for dreams, girl, she told herself. Ain't no time for knights in shining armor.

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The baying banshee was just a dream, he decided, and the news about Old Cody was one of those country oddities you forget about as soon as you're done laughing. There was cold AC in here now since they'd gotten a new unit, and Jimmy was shooting better and better. Nothing else mattered, and if it did, it was easy to push it out of his mind.

That was before Iris walked in the place.

Jimmy looked up from a game of nine ball, and there she was, coming through the front door with the brilliance of midday streaming in behind her, like a miracle in a Bible movie. He stared at

her hard, because for a second the girl had wings behind her like an angel.

"That's the new waitress," said Dodgie, who stood there beside him.

Jimmy watched her come in, and as the door closed behind her and cut off the rays of the sun, she walked slowly and uncertainly around the side along the wall, as if to avoid the pool tables. He blinked, because a trail of shadows followed her as she went. Must be my eyes, he thought. The girl went to the back room, and while Dodgie lined up an impossible shot, Jimmy watched out of the corner of his eye as the owner handed the girl her work clothes and a piece of paper with her schedule on it. Then he looked away.

"Wonder what her name is," said Jimmy.

"You'll find out soon enough," said Dodgie. "They like to throw the new girls in on Friday."

But when he turned around to watch the girl leave, she was gone, as if she'd never really been there, like a ghost from a half-remembered dream. Or maybe she flew up through the roof on angel wings.

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The thought of the new waitress pulsed in his memory the way the sun does, when you look at it for a minute and then look away. She was pale and lithe, with short blond hair, and the more he thought of her, didn't she have scary green eyes, like they had secrets behind them, like they had knives?

Funny who you think about, he mused. He wondered if he was falling in love with her. He thought about his pool game for a few

minutes, he meditated on his stroke and the feel of the hit, but then he thought of the girl again, how ordinary she was, and yet how beautiful, like that purple flower down by the mailbox, the dusty one, the one you'd hardly notice, but that never seemed to die.

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A few days later the new girl started working in the pool room. Her name was Iris. Like a statue made flesh by the touch of a spark, Jimmy stared and stared at a world made new. All day long the balls rolled funny, like the whole world was tilted.

He noticed that some of the regular pool players, the older ones, eyed the new girl with suspicion as she struggled to balance their mugs of coffee and their plates of cheese fries on her hand tray. Jimmy thought they might give her a hard time about not knowing how to waitress, but when she finally arrived with their orders, spilling a good portion of it on the way, they averted their gaze. Jimmy stood there with his pool cue and watched this, how they deferred to her with a kind of fearful respect. And they didn't say anything to each other when she went away, either.

Old Sheldon wouldn't say anything about it, but one of the old-timers did over a friendly game of eight ball, a man so old he was past caring what anybody thought of anything.

"They say she's from the gypsies," said the old man, who tottered and leaned into his shot. And when the ball rolled into the pocket, the man stood and fixed Jimmy with a shrewd and wrinkled eye, and he made a motion in the air around his head, turning his hand and wagging his fingers to signify something crazy or evil, like sparkles floating there.

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Jimmy stood outside the trailer and watched the sunset, an aurora of rose and peach, hanging like a curtain beyond the long slope of the foothills.

He scraped the dust of the yard with his shoe, and brief ghosts arose on the breeze. He remembered the dream.

His name has been lost in a starless midnight, and he walks down a long road to find it again, a stick in his hand and a hound at his side. There's a light at the end of the road. Seems like it takes a long time to get there, but suddenly it blazes in his face—the miracle radiance of a new-minted name. He moves his lips as if to say it.

“Yes,” says a red-haired man, who stands before a pool table, his eyes like twin nightmares. “Yes, kid, tell me your name.”

Then the road he's on becomes a river of blood, and out of the light comes a grinning monster. It splashes through the blood tide to embrace him.

When Jimmy jolted awake in his bed, his arms wide for some dark savior, the river rushed within him, he ached for the highway, and his heart pounded with the muck-suck of monster feet.

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The men of the O'Faolain clan, and not a few of the women, went after the alligator like vengeful warriors after the monster that slew their king, though when Old Cody had been alive his clan didn't give two shits about him, and left him very much alone in his trailer on the edge of the woods. Old Cody's killing, which struck them as comeuppance from some medieval past, summoned an insane and disorganized rage from members of the O'Faolain clan. Those who weren't so scared they stayed at home and stared out their peepholes loaded onto their pickups the largest steel traps they

could lay their hands on—traps that had been moldering away for decades in mountain cabins, known only to a few. They took the traps and laid them out along the quarter-mile stretch of the river where it ran through the woods (which included the spot where Cody's boat and left arm had been found), and baited the traps with chicken halves and soup bones and pieces of half-rotten beef, swearing to themselves and each other that they would capture the alligator and slice open its belly to retrieve whatever legacy was inside it. Then they'd load its body into Cody's old skiff, douse it in gasoline, and send it flaming down the river as a warning to other gators that might develop a taste for O'Faolain flesh. The would-be avengers waited along the stretch of river, armed with shotguns and lined like sentinels against the blood-red backdrop of sunset, and after a time did manage to kill two or three small gators, but mostly wasted a lot of ammunition and good meat. Eventually all of them slunk away from the river banks to go home, and drink and fight and fuck and watch TV.

But soon the trap bait began to spoil, and for nearly a mile along the river, the horrid memory of Old Cody hung in the form of a deathly stench. So many dogs and cats were beheaded or chopped clean in half by the untended traps that someone put in a call to the state game and wildlife authority, and the agents came out and told the O'Faolain clan they'd have to take up their traps and put away their weapons unless they were hunting in season. You won't never catch a gator of that size, the agents told them. Then the game agents announced to the frustrated clan members that an alligator the size of the one they were hunting had been found in the next county over, dead by the side of a pond as if by a judgment from God.

Which none of the O'Faolain clan believed for a second, not even the stupider ones. All the clan—every peasant, craftsman, liar and thief—knew that something would have to be done, but there was not a knight among them.

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She told him she got a break at two, told him twice while he was playing, and when it was two o'clock he propped his stick against a chair and said something to Ben and Dodgie about making a phone call.

He waited for her up by the bar, and soon she came smiling out of the tiny kitchen.

"Hey," he said.

"Let's go smoke," she said.

They went outside in front of the pool room. A fog had come in after the rain earlier, and Jimmy and Iris stood on the walk and smoked. They faced the foothills, the vague line of them in the mist. The long low curve of the valley was engulfed in clouds.

"So what's your story," she said, just when he thought he wouldn't have to talk too much. She blew a cloud of smoke into the still humid air, like she'd been out here all day just blowing smoke and she'd filled the world with it.

"Me? Oh, not much. Not much." He didn't know what else to say. He cleared his throat.

"Well," she said, and looked at him sidelong, "you need to come up with something better than that."

"How long a break do you get?"

"How long you been comin in here?" she said. "Ten, fifteen minutes, I reckon, then they hire the next hot slut that wanders in."

He laughed, and flicked his cigarette into the parking lot.

"I don't think you're a hot slut," he said.

"I ain't a slut at all, hot or not," she said. "So what's your story, Jimmy? Your name's Jimmy, ain't it?"

"Yeah, it is. What's yours?"

"You know my name."

"How do you know?"

"Tick tock, Jimmy, tell me something I can think about while I sling chicken wings and beer."

"All right, Iris—"

"So you do know my name."

"Yes, I do, somebody told me, and my story is, I play pool all day, and maybe a year from now I'll take my game on the road, see if I can't make some money."

He waited for her to say something, waited for her to smile and turn around and go back inside. He wanted to say, please stay out here with me, but how could he?

Iris took out her cigarettes.

"You got a light?" she said.

"For you I do," he said, and he flicked a flame as fast as a switchblade.

"Thanks," she said, and blew some more smoke against the foothills.

"So that's me, just another man playing pool—"

"Without a job."

"—without a job, but I make my way, you know? I ain't about impressing nobody, my story is what it is."

"Well don't worry," said Iris.

"About what," said Jimmy.

"About impressing me," she said, "cause I ain't."

Then she tossed her cigarette into the lot, gave him a wicked smile, and went back inside.

