

Jimmy

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A small blue car pulls into the parking lot, and everyone inside the bookstore groans. We love Jimmy, but he is a pain in the ass. Jimmy sits in his seat for a few moments before grabbing a stack of worn books from the passenger's seat and making his way inside the building. He swings open the glass door with a piercing ding of the automated "doorbell" security system. "Hey, Jimmy! What's up?" Sasa [pronounced "Sasha," if you want to call him by his full name, or "Sass" as we all affectionately call him] says from behind the counter.

Jimmy walks up to the counter and sets his stack of books on the ledge. His clear, light blue eyes twinkle in his worn and weathered, pink face. He stands at an average height, and he has a mop of white and grey hair that is twisted back into one ponytail. Unfortunately, that ponytail has existed for so long that it has morphed from free flowing hair into one large, ratty dreadlock at the back of Jimmy's head. He has a grizzled beard that matches his white and grey hair, and if it were fuller and crept up more on the sides of his face, I'd say it was Santa-like. He usually is dressed in a casual, button-down shirt and jeans, and today is no exception. As my coworker Chad has said to me, "the only fault Jimmy has is that he was born in the wrong time." It looks like the 1960s were good to Jimmy, and he probably would have benefitted if they had lasted much longer than a decade.

We're not just Lindenwood University's bookstore; we will buy back books year-round from other college students or anyone who happens to have textbooks. We have Jake, who commands the basement of the store and sells any books that Lindenwood is finished with, or books we purchase from anyone who wants to bring them in and get rid of them. Jimmy is one of a few individuals who finds college textbooks and the occasional novel and then brings them to sell to us. He's one of the "regulars."

Jimmy greets Sasa and begins to tell him one of his notoriously bad (and sometimes downright filthy) jokes. His voice is gravelly and filled with mischief.

While Sasa is scanning books into the computer to see if they're worth anything for us to purchase, Jimmy has wandered over to my side of the counter. "How's it going, Jimmy?" I ask. He grins and replies, "Good, good." He digs around in his pocket to produce his wallet. With that ever-present smile on his face, he produces what looks like a business card from the folds of his beaten-up wallet. "Did I show you this one?" he asks me. I've heard most of Jimmy's jokes and I've seen most of his "business cards," but I shake my head in negation and reach out for



the card he's holding. It's what looks like a normal business card, but is in fact one of those comic cards that has a fake name and occupation on it. This one says something about how the cardholder was abducted by aliens, and there's a little green face staring back at me from the glossy paper. I chuckle and hand the card back to Jimmy. He turns around to Kurt, another one of our employees, who has walked up to the front of the store, and shows him his abductee business card. Kurt laughs loudly and appreciatively, and starts chatting with Jimmy.

We usually see Jimmy in person, but on occasion we'll get a phone call from him. "BOOK-X-CHANGE, how can I help you?" I automatically answer. "Uhhhh, hi," a familiar voice greets me. "This is James Duncan," he says. "Oh hey, Jimmy! What can I do for you?" I respond cheerily. He then reads me the ISBN (the identifying number) of a book he wants me to look up. I look up the number like usual, give Jimmy our price for the book like usual, and then he sits quietly on the phone for a moment before he asks, "Is that all?" like usual. The first time I answered one of Jimmy's calls, I had no idea who it was. I had met Jimmy a few times before, but he was "Jimmy." Who the hell was "James Duncan"? Now I just laugh at his phoney formality.

Back at the front desk, Sasa finishes up pricing Jimmy's books, and he waves him back over to the counter to give him the rundown. He passes on a few of the older and/or cheaper books, but he buys the rest. Some books we can give some good, hard cash for. Other books we can only offer a dollar or two. It all just depends on how current they are, and much they're going for online. Jimmy listens intently to Sasa's pricing, and he nods along to most of the quotes, and says "Uhhh, yep," after each one he likes and "Uhhh, no. Pass," to each one he wants to hang onto. After Sasa gives Jimmy a total, Jimmy freezes and stares hard at Sasa. He requests a higher price, his mouth curling into a grin and his blue eyes twinkling. Sasa laughs; Jimmy does this all the time. "What about this one?" he asks, holding up a battered book. "Ehhhhhhh ..." Sasa thinks on it. "Okay, fine," he acquiesces. Jimmy chuckles a victory chuckle.

After Jimmy is given his pricing on his books, he always grabs his pencil from his pocket or from behind his ear. He opens the book's first page, and he carefully erases each notation from each book's interior. Until recently I had never asked him what his notes are. It's always just been one of those Jimmy-Quirks. I asked our store manager, Matt, what Jimmy's mysterious pencil markings are. He said that they're price quotes from all the other bookstores he sells books to. There are a few other establishments he sells books to, apparently, and he will call or search around before selecting the store with the best price. Matt told me, "He always tries to erase all the markings on the inside and I tell him all the time, 'Jimmy, you don't have to do that. I don't care.' And he always says, 'No, no, no, they're my scribbles', I'll erase 'em.'" Then I just shake my



head at him. I don't give a shit if there are pencil marks."

You would think it might take just a few moments to scrub a pencil eraser across a few markings. With anyone else, that might be the case. With Jimmy, it can take up to half-an-hour. He gets so excited to talk to the employees as they come upstairs or come in to work or come back from lunch. He greets each person enthusiastically and shares some new (or old but still good) story with him. After each employee shuffles back to work, Jimmy goes back to his erasing, only to be interrupted when a new customer comes in, or he thinks of a new joke, or one of us cracks one that reminds him of another story. It sometimes takes him five to ten minutes to even get out of the store after he's finished. Jimmy always pauses at the door, turns around, and asks, "Did I tell you the one about...?" He especially enjoys jokes involving the clergy.

It's through these little chats each time Jimmy swings by that we find out a little bit more about Jimmy and his past. We really have no idea where he came from; the current employees of the store weren't employed here when he originally started to come by BOOK-X-CHANGE to sell books. We just sort of inherited him and his quirks.

The first time I met Jimmy, the usual experience went down. He came in, joked around, pocketed his cash, erased his scribbles, grabbed a soda from the vending machine, and left. "So ... was that our resident nutcase?" I asked everyone. They all laughed and filled me in on what they knew about Jimmy. It wasn't much.

Melissa, who had been at the store for years before me, said she thought that Jimmy had a gambling problem. He had a lot of stories about the casino, and he knew a good deal about blackjack. Melissa and the store manager at the time, Jeff, said that there was a period of time where Jimmy just disappeared. He wasn't one of the regulars for several months to a year. They had no idea where he had been, and they hadn't wanted to ask. Jimmy didn't supply an explanation, either. Of course there were several wildly colorful stories the bookstore employees created to explain the disappearance of Jimmy. I don't remember most of them now, but there were some involving jail, fugitive status, winning the lottery, and other various extreme scenarios.

We do know that Jimmy has a sister, and we're fairly certain he lives with her. He mentions her sometimes, but not often. We rarely hear about anything that gives us a glimpse into Jimmy's life, let alone his family. One day, Jimmy pulled up into our parking lot in his shiny, royal blue car. This time, there was a passenger. We couldn't see very well through the car windows, but we could see that the passenger was a woman, and she was very old. Jimmy is definitely old, but we're not sure exactly how old he is. Perhaps 70? It's a guessing game. This woman in the passenger seat of Jimmy's car had to be close to 80. She didn't get out of the car with Jimmy. Jimmy came in, sold us some books, and went



about his usual routine while the woman waited in the car. One of my coworkers finally asked Jimmy about it, and he said something along the lines of, “Oh, that’s my sister. She’s fine.” That was it. Jimmy finished up with us, and went back outside to carry on with his day.

One day when we were chatting about Jimmy, Matt told me, “You know he was a college professor or something? He has a shit-ton of degrees! He’s insanely well-educated.” I told him about the day Kurt and I found out about Jimmy’s past academic life.

Jimmy was at the store, commanding everyone’s attention, when he told us about how many classes he used to take. He has multiple degrees—“all of which are useless!” Jimmy happily told Kurt and me as we were taking a look at the books he was selling at the front desk.

“Really?!” Kurt asked, pausing his book buying.

“Oh yeah,” Jimmy said, still grinning, but with the tiniest flicker of sadness and reminiscence. He then told Kurt and me about how he had earned several degrees from several universities around the nation. I don’t remember most of the degrees he had earned. I think one was in communication, and I think he said he worked on a radio station for a while. Jimmy also had studied several languages. The one that struck me was that Jimmy had studied some ancient, dead language from the country of India that was written in some sort of hieroglyphics. Given Jimmy’s joking nature, Kurt and I thought he was kidding at first. We demanded he tell the truth, and he just shook his head and insisted it was true. He said he was one of only a handful of students who took the class. The story gets better, and he knew it. He had us holding on to every word of this new tale. “The professor was blind,” Jimmy told us.

“Nuh-uh!” Kurt insisted. “How could a blind professor teach a course on hieroglyphic language?”

“I don’t know!” Jimmy told us gleefully. “But he did it! He had an assistant, so that helped.” Jimmy laughed and walked away to grab his customary couple of sodas while Kurt and I exchanged a dumbfounded look.

It just doesn’t seem like something our Jimmy would do—take a course on Indian hieroglyphics. It strikes me as the sort of behavior of an insanely pretentious person, someone addicted to academics and that scholarly world filled with dissertations, conferences, putting new spins on old ideas and publishing them. It doesn’t sound like our Jimmy - the one who always looks a little disheveled, the one who is super friendly but slightly creepy. But then again, beneath the cheerfulness and the quirks, there’s a hint of world-weariness behind his twinkling blue eyes and laugh lines.

