

## Jam To-Morrow, a bedtime story

Jim's usual walk home from work was currently being interrupted by an aggressive creature with a long, sharp nose. The creature's pointy ears wiggled as it guided him through an unfamiliar gate into an unfamiliar wooded park. As Jim passed through the gate and the creature --a troll probably-- released him, the troll lifted a large fist and thunked Jim in between his tense shoulders. The thunk on the back sent Jim into a headfirst tumble. Jim couldn't say if it was a thunk of encouragement of the positive sort or another variety of encouragement. As Jim lay on his stomach, he decided, due to the knot forming on his forehead, that the troll's motives had been of an unkind variety.

Jim was uncomfortably aware of the roots pressing into his stomach. Leaves had somehow found their way inside his only pair of decent work shoes and his pants were covered with dirt. When he rolled onto his back he checked his coat pocket, and sighed with relief upon finding the J.A.M. Jar where it should be, and intact. He scratched his nose and rocked himself into a sitting position. He looked to the left and right. He was in the woods, a proper set of woods that any child could read about in a book of tall-tales.

Jim expected these woods would be a bit dark, and full of many turns, unexpected roots that trip one up, and spiderwebs, which would range from annoying as they stuck to hair and shoulders to rather sinister. At least that was how the woods were in most fairy tales. Jim stood, but couldn't decide which way he should walk. Years of fallen leaves coated the ground and not even the suggestion of a path was evident.

"Well this will surely mess up my plans for this evening" Jim thought, annoyed by the inconvenience of being lost in these fantastical woods.

He had been expecting to return home to a dining room full of guests and friends and family. A celebration of sorts was to have taken place, for Jim was going to show off the J.A.M. Jar tonight.

"Now what am I to do?" he said out loud this time.

Perhaps a fairy godmother would come to assist him. Jim put his hands in his pockets and felt for the J.A.M. jar. The J.A.M. Jar had arrived in his mailbox today at work. Jim had pre-ordered his very own Jar months previously. Rick, the lead on the account Jim really wanted, had heard of the Jar from his University buddies. If only Jim hadn't had to stay late answering emails he wouldn't be in this unusual predicament. He could have been inside his home, touting the most spectacular device— the J.A.M. Jar. He would have been the center of attention as he twisted the pristinely fabricated tin lid off the handmade glass jar body. The penultimate act of his existence before being swallowed by the J.A.M. Jar, along with his home, the street, his office, the bad jokes his coworkers told, his future promotion, and the shocked gasps of his guests, would be the satisfying look of awe on those invited people as they witnessed him pop open the lid of the J.A.M. Jar. Although he certainly would have read aloud to the room the label of the J.A.M. Jar before opening it.

"Yes I would have most definitely read the label to my guests first," he said to himself, intending the utterance to be a reminder to do just that if he ever got out of the woods and to his guests in the parlor of his home.

Jim took the J.A.M. Jar out of his pocket. There was not a substantial amount of light in the woods. In fact, his digital watch was the only light source in this dense space of gnarly tree trunks. He

began to walk, intent on trying to find a spot where more of the sun's purple light entered beyond the layer of foliage.

After some time walking, and many encounters with cobwebs, Jim did not find a spot with significantly more light than any other.

"This park has been very poorly maintained," he commented to a nearby tree trunk that sported a fungus that acted as a platform for a small house of the most regular proportion and a thatched roof of moss.

"Depends on the standards of maintenance you use I'd say." said a child's voice from the gloom.

Jim started. He looked to the left and right, his feet tangling in roots, weeds, fallen leaves, and his own feet. He saw no one, but of course the wood had only grown darker the longer he walked looking for a spot where light made it beyond the foliage. Jim looked down at his digital wrist watch. The seconds were now ticking in reverse.

"I imagine I am going to be very late," Jim sighed.

"Is that so bad?" asked the voice.

Jim looked to the right and left. He could see no one. He sighed and massaged his temples.

"If only I knew how to get out of these woods," he said.

"You can try walking. That sometimes works for me," said the voice.

Jim closed his eyes. Hearing a voice was more annoying than the clinging of spiderwebs to his hair and shoulders.

Jim started to walk again. He immediately tripped on a large fungus that smelled of butterscotch. He fell onto his stomach and the J.A.M. Jar flew from his hand as he hit the ground.

"Oof!" he said.

Jim began to pick himself up. As he finished dusting off his knees, he looked up in time to see a child jump down from a tree limb. Her feet didn't touch the ground as she was held aloft by wings that shimmered and emitted a faint smell of rosemary. The fairy child's back was to Jim, and he could not see much of her head beyond the rapid fluttering of her wings. She alighted on a fern close to where the J.A.M. Jar had landed. She picked up the jar, and began to examine it. The child held up the J.A.M. Jar to the light of her fairy wings, and read aloud the label:

"The J.A.M. Jar (Jams in All Matter or not matter) is a most agreeable instrument, having been developed over many eons, for the singular purpose of holding all the universe within its body. Top scientists spent a great deal of time and other top people's money to manufacture the J.A.M. Jar. Without a doubt from any of the highest authorities of science, mathematics, money, jars, metal tin lids, and labels, the J.A.M. Jar guarantees the universe, the future, and all knowledge will fit inside."

The fairy child turned to face Jim. She had a round face, speckled like pyrite, the flashing gold caught the light of her fairy wings and was reflected into her small yellow eyes. Those small, fierce eyes were intent on Jim and he noticed she was frowning.

"Not who I'd consider an authority on such things." she remarked, and her eyes grew less fierce. Her frown was wiped away with a small whistle as she sang to the insects that buzzed by her ears.

Jim stared at the fairy child, mouth slightly agape. She did not look at Jim, but instead continued to examine the J.A.M. Jar.

“Of course the toppest authorities of science, mathematics, money, jars, metal tin lids, and labels would know such things. The toppest authorities know more than anyone else in their fields,” Jim explained.

“Well I guess I am the toppest authority on walking in these woods, because you scraped your knees just now.”

Jim frowned.

“It doesn’t work like that.”

The fairy child was no longer paying attention to Jim. With the J.A.M. Jar still in her small hands, she was floating away. Jim continued to frown. He looked down at his torn pant legs. Jim stepped forward, carefully choosing his footing, for the deep blue of night had settled in the woods. He made slow progress walking behind the fairy child.

“Excuse me? May I have my J.A.M. Jar back?” he said.

“You are excused,” said the child.

Jim stopped, rather affronted. He cleared his throat and opened his mouth to say something rude. He could feel his temper coming out his ears. The fairy child tapped his shoulder before he had had the chance to find his voice. She handed him a pebble.

“Throw this.” She said and drifted away.

Jim took the pebble, and by the light of the fairy child’s wings he read the words ‘angear wax’. Understanding clicked in Jim’s tired, sore, and irritated mind and he quickly threw the pebble sized lump of his own ear wax as far into the woods as earwax shaped into a pebble can possibly be thrown.

The fairy child was moving away, gliding between trees and over the nefarious vegetation. Jim stamped his foot, crushing iridescent flowers and causing a swell of pollen to whoosh up his nose. Jim’s great sneeze nearly caused him to fall over. Recovering, Jim sighed and, without any other option to choose from, followed the fairy child.

After stubbing his toes, walking into many more cobwebs, and being pricked by what seemed to Jim to be the tiny swords of territorial gnomes for what felt like hours, Jim had had enough.

“I have had enough!” he said exasperated.

“I’m glad to hear that.” the fairy child said, turning to look back at Jim and winking.

Jim growled and breathed hard through his nostrils. He watched the back of the fairy child as she glided easily on. Jim closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. When he opened his eyes again and did not see the shimmer of the fairy child’s wings in front of him, his breath caught in his chest.

Jim dashed forward to the last place he had seen her. He broke a branch and fell face forward into a clearing.

“Oof!”

Jim expected to hear the fairy child’s voice, but didn’t. He got up quickly and looked around him, left and right. The clearing was well lit by starlight and the waxing moon. Jim could not see the fairy child. He walked into the center of the clearing and looked up at the stars.

This was certainly not how he thought his evening was going to have progressed. The stars were unsympathetic. “As usual,” Jim thought.

“Aren’t the stars lovely?” said the child’s voice.

Jim started and looked down at the fairy child.

“I ‘suppose so,” Jim said.

“You aren’t an authority on stars then either?” the child asked.

Jim rolled his eyes and turned to the fairy child. It was time to take advantage of their considerable height difference and to impress upon the small figure his much more adult authority.

“May I please have my J.A.M. Jar back?” Jim asked.

She looked up at Jim, nonplussed by his display of adulthood.

“This?” she said and held up the most marvelous device.

“Yes, that,” Jim said.

“Is it really able to jam all matter inside of itself?”

“Yes, of course. It was designed by all the top authorities of science, mathematics, money, jars, and metal tin lids. And the label says there is a 100% guarantee.”

The fairy child frowned and looked down at the J.A.M. Jar.

“Can we open it and find out if it works?” she asked.

Jim frowned and looked down at the fairy child holding the J.A.M. Jar.

“The label clearly states the J.A.M. Jar can hold the universe, the future, and all knowledge. It wouldn't say that if it couldn't,” he said.

“So can we open it?” she asked.

“Not right now.”

She began to turn the pristinely manufactured tin lid from the handmade glass jar body. As the seal broke there was a small pop from the tin lid. Jim was frozen, expecting this instant to be his second to last instant before being whooshed into the J.A.M. Jar. Jim's mouth was hanging open. His tongue grew dry and he tried to swallow. His mind processed the fact that all matter, all knowledge, the future, himself, the insufferable fairy child, none of it was inside the Jar.

The fairy child looked inside the J.A.M. Jar. Jim looked inside the J.A.M. Jar. She turned the jar upside down, to see if anything would fall out.

Jim frowned and waited while the fairy child replaced the no longer pristine tin lid on the jar and tightened it. Jim held out his hand for the J.A.M. Jar, but the child did not return it to him. Instead she looked up at the night sky.

Jim looked up, too, his outstretched hand falling back to his side.

They watched the sky together for what felt like many minutes to Jim. Just as Jim was about to ask for the J.A.M. Jar once again, he gasped.

He had seen a shooting star! He smiled, recalling himself as a child. He used to sit in his backyard in the evening, staying out later than the fireflies stayed awake, all so he might have a chance to see a shooting star and make a wish.

Still smiling, Jim looked down at the fairy child. She had her eyes closed, her uneven lengths of hair curling at her cinnamon-colored cheeks. She was wordlessly speaking, her blue lips close to the J.A.M. Jar, her hands holding the jar tight.

Jim waited for her to finish her wish. When she opened her eyes again, Jim smiled. The fairy child smiled back and handed Jim the J.A.M. Jar.

“What did you wish for?” Jim asked.

The fairy child took Jim's hand and started to lead him back into the woods.

“I wished for the universe to fit inside a jam jar,” she said.

Jim frowned, getting the joke being played at his expense.