

Fig Jam

by Michael Olsen

Characters: Jason Starbay, early 40s (M)
Natalia Potofsky, late teens (F)

Darkness. A spotlight comes up on JASON STARBAY performing onstage. He is in a skin-tight lycra bodysuit, and he is belting out a song into his microphone. He would look ridiculous only there's something quite commanding about him. We hear the song he's finishing singing, then a smattering of applause. A moment as Jason looks out expecting more. Then, rallying:

JASON: *(calling out)* Thank you, Prague!

Abruptly the sound cuts off, and Jason falls back onto his hotel bed. The spotlight fades, and morning light comes up on a small hotel room in Prague. There are clothes everywhere. Bits of food. Empty beer bottles. An ashtray stuffed full of butts. Bathroom is stage right, a window is stage left. There is a table and two chairs, with a phone on the table. It would be a quiet scene, only Jason Starbay lies sprawled out on the bed, snoring.

We hear a knock at the door. Jason doesn't stir. We hear another knock. Again, Jason doesn't stir. We hear a lock and key being fumbled with, and then the door opens. NATALIA POTOFSKY enters. She is 17. She wears jeans, sneakers and a T-shirt with the letters "PPU" on the front. She carries a tray with a pot of tea and some mugs on it. She carries a backpack on her back. She speaks with a thick Czech accent.

Natalia puts the tray down on the table, moving items of clothing and empty beer bottles out of the way. Finally, she straightens and inspects the room, checking out some of the items of clothing. She moves over to Jason, inspecting him closely. She pokes him. No response. She is about to turn away when Jason sits bolt upright. Natalia screams. Jason shouts as well and falls off the bed. He lies sprawled on the floor, then drags himself onto all fours, feeling a pounding head.

JASON: *(in a croak)* What the hell...??

NATALIA: Natalia. My name—Natalia.

JASON: Did I—did I order room service last night?

NATALIA: Yes, yes.

JASON: OK. OK. You got any cigarettes?

NATALIA: Ah, no, I don't smoke.

JASON: Who gives a shit? Go and get some.

NATALIA: *(blurting)* I am not room service.

JASON: Oh Christ. Did you spend the night—

NATALIA: No.

JASON: So we didn't—

NATALIA: No.

JASON: OK. *(Pause)* That's a shame.

NATALIA: I have brought you Bohemian tea.

JASON: Life's like that, isn't it? Complete strangers just bowl up, scare the shit out of you and offer you tea. *(Pause)* This is all Tony's idea, isn't it? He thinks I'm gonna sleep in and miss the plane.

NATALIA: Tony? Who is Tony?

JASON: My manager?

Natalia shrugs her shoulders.

JASON: Shit. Just get out, OK? Whoever the hell you are. Just leave.

NATALIA: Wait!

Natalia goes into the bathroom and returns a few moments later with a glass of water. She offers it to Jason.

JASON: What the hell are you doing?

NATALIA: You are dehydrated. You need water.

JASON: If I wanted some water I would have got some, wouldn't I? That's what's wrong with this country. You want to have a smoke, they bring you a goddamn glass of water. I don't need water I need a beer.

Jason looks around the room, then goes in search of a bottle of beer. Eventually he goes back onto all fours to search under the bed, the table.

NATALIA: You are Jason Starbartski?

JASON: Jason Starbay, darling. Who wants to know?

NATALIA: You look smaller close up.

JASON: You saw the show last night?

Natalia nods.

JASON: You're a bit young for the Roxy aren't you?

NATALIA: I think you a bit old for Roxy.

Jason drags himself back onto the bed.

JASON: Where's that damn water?

Natalia hands Jason the glass of water. Jason looks at the water as if he's never seen the stuff before, but then downs half of it.

JASON: Horrible stuff. *(Pause)* OK. What's the deal? Why are you here?

NATALIA: I am Natalia.

JASON: I heard you the first time. So what?

NATALIA: I am your daughter.

Jason crawls back under the covers.

JASON: Go away! Whoever the hell you are, just piss off. It's too early in the morning for this shit.

Natalia steps forward with a handful of photos.

NATALIA: You see my mother—

JASON: I don't care!

NATALIA: But she knew you! In 1987!

JASON: I told you I don't care! I'm—

NATALIA: See? This is her! You wrote a song about her!

JASON: Who cares?

NATALIA: But—

JASON: Get out! Just get out!

NATALIA: No!

Jason flings back the covers and hits the photos out of Natalia's hands. The photos go flying all over the place. Jason then half falls, half lumbers over to Natalia. For a moment Natalia is scared. Jason grabs her by the upper arm, intending to march her out the door. However, Natalia twists out of his grip and stamps on his foot. Natalia rushes across the room. Jason tries to pursue but his foot is throbbing. He winds up sitting at the table.

JASON: You little bitch! You busted my foot!

NATALIA: I don't care.

Jason picks up the phone.

NATALIA: I will make scene. I will say you kidnap me. I will tell them in Czech language, too. In detail.

Jason slams the phone down. Almost at once the phone rings. Jason answers it.

JASON: *(barking)* Yes? Tony! Did you send up a little groupie this morning to— No I am not on the piss. Did you? Shit. No no I've gotten rid of her. Little tart. Yes I know we're leaving today. Yes, mum, I'm all packed. Yes. OK. See you then.

Jason hangs up.

JASON: I don't need this shit. Either you're a whacko, you want money, or you want fame.

NATALIA: What is "whacko?"

JASON: Nutcase. Loony.

NATALIA: Ah.

JASON: So which is it?

NATALIA: *(gesturing to the room)* You think I am after money?

JASON: You don't look like you're swimming in the lap of luxury.

NATALIA: Neither are you! Look at this place! Is what you call "shitbox."

JASON: Well it's not the bloody Hilton if that's what you mean.

NATALIA: And I don't want fame.

JASON: Why not? Everyone wants their 15 minutes.

NATALIA: How long did you have?

JASON: So you're a smartarse whacko.

NATALIA: I am no whacko! No whacko! I am—

JASON: Alright you're not a whacko. You're not a whacko. OK. I'm not arguing. It's too early in the day to argue. Go, stay, I don't care.

Jason crawls back into bed.

NATALIA: Do you want breakfast?

JASON: No!

NATALIA: I could phone. I saw hotel breakfast they make.

JASON: I don't think—

NATALIA: Sausage with sauerkraut, and pressed ham, and mustard, and scrambled eggs with—

But Jason is out of the bed and hobbling quickly for the bathroom, where we hear the unmistakable sound of someone being sick. We then hear a toilet flush, followed by a tap running, and Jason gargling.

NATALIA: *(calling out)* Is what you say better out than in.

JASON: *(off)* No more descriptions of anything, alright?

NATALIA: *(calling out)* I know what you need to feel better.

Jason enters and collapses in a chair. Natalia pulls a couple of tablets out of her backpack and hands them to Jason.

NATALIA: I am boy scout. I am prepared.

JASON: What the hell are these?

NATALIA: Something to settle stomach.

Jason swallows them. He closes his eyes a moment, then begins:

JASON: There's no way you're leaving without some messy scene, right?

NATALIA: Right.

JASON: I hate mess. Strange as it might sound. *(waving a hand around the room. Pause)* I already know what you're gonna say, Natalia.

NATALIA: You do?

JASON: About me and the Stunned Mullets touring Czechoslovakia in 1987 and I slept with some girl and got her pregnant and she had a baby and that turned out to be you. And you've got proof, haven't you?

NATALIA: Yes. Here—

Natalia starts picking up the photos.

JASON: OK. Well. How's this? I don't care if I am your father. OK? I simply don't care.

NATALIA: Even if the facts—

JASON: The facts? The facts are I never heard from any of the girls I slept with in '87. So one of them got pregnant. Big deal. Because I never heard from them again, I presume whoever-she-was didn't want to contact me. She must have wanted to have a child and bring it up on her own. Now that child—you—thinks I owe them something.

NATALIA: No! No! I—

JASON: Natalia—go home. You'll get yourself all worked up and you'll get nothing from me so just save yourself the bother and go home.

NATALIA: There is no home.

JASON: What are you talking about? Everyone's got a home.
Jason starts collecting the photos that have fallen on the floor.

NATALIA: My grandmother she died last year. She had big debts. Gambling. To pay they sold the house and I go to live with cousin in Bratislava.

JASON: OK. So that's your home.

NATALIA: My home is—
Jason is stuffing photos into Natalia's backpack when he stops.

JASON: Who's this?

NATALIA: That is my mother.

JASON: What's her name?

NATALIA: You know her?

JASON: What's her name?

NATALIA: Katerina.

JASON: Jesus.

NATALIA: You know her?

JASON: Where the hell are you from, Natalia?

NATALIA: We live in—we used to live—in small town called Stary Smokovec, near the Tatra Mountains. It is what you say tourist town.

JASON: Shit.

NATALIA: It is you, isn't it?

JASON: Where's your mother now?

NATALIA: She is dead.

JASON: Dead?

NATALIA: Yes.

JASON: When did she die?

NATALIA: Last year. Stupid! Stupid!

JASON: What's stupid? What?

NATALIA: It was car accident. She was driving to Bratislava. She was speeding. She was too fast going around a bend, she lost control, hit a tree.

JASON: Jesus Christ.

NATALIA: *(sarcastic)* He was great help.

Jason sits on the end of the bed, not believing what he's heard. Finally, he stares at Natalia, then at the photo, then back at Natalia.

JASON: You look like her.

NATALIA: I do not look like you?

JASON: That's a blessing not a curse.

Jason returns to the photo, then stands, then sits again, looking around, not sure what to do. Pause. Natalia bobs down, looks him in the eye.

NATALIA: Change clothes.

JASON: Right. Good idea.

Jason grabs some clothes and goes into the bathroom. Natalia collects the remaining photos. Finally Natalia goes to the bathroom door.

NATALIA: You are OK? *(Pause)* Jason Starbartski you are OK?

JASON: *(off)* I'm fine.

NATALIA: OK.

Natalia looks around the room again and begins tidying up. Jason emerges in jeans, a T-shirt and runners. He notices that they're both wearing the same sort of clothes. He tosses his stage costume onto the bed.

JASON: Why do you always call me "Starbartski?"

NATALIA: That is your name. "Starbay" is stage name.

JASON: Not at all. My grandfather shortened it at the Immigration Office when he and my grandmother arrived in Melbourne in '47.

NATALIA: From Poland.

JASON: Yes.

NATALIA: My name is Natalia Eva Potofsky.

JASON: Your mother never married then?

NATALIA: No.

JASON: So what do you want?

NATALIA: What?

JASON: What do you want from me? Is it money? What?

NATALIA: You are making big mistake.

- JASON:** Oh yeah?
- NATALIA:** I don't care if you are my father. I go I leave I never see you again—I will be happy.
- JASON:** OK. Great.
- NATALIA:** All I want to know is this.
From her backpack Natalia removes an object wrapped in newspaper and puts it on the table.
- JASON:** That's all?
- NATALIA:** Yes.
- JASON:** And then you'll piss off and leave me in peace?
- NATALIA:** Yes.
Jason picks up the object, unwraps it to reveal a jar full of jam that is capped with a wax plug. He pulls out the plug of wax, sniffs, dips a finger, tastes.
- JASON:** It's fig jam.
- NATALIA:** I know. But why was mother crazy about it?
- JASON:** How the hell should I know?
- NATALIA:** Grandmother said you were the only one who knew.
- JASON:** Really? Your gran took an instant dislike to me. After one week she hadn't changed her mind. Thought nothing even remotely good could come from me being with your mother.
- NATALIA:** Nothing did.
- JASON:** You came out of it.
Pause
- NATALIA:** What does it mean?
- JASON:** Why do you want to know? What did Katerina do with this stuff?
- NATALIA:** Every summer grandmother make fig jam. Every summer mother would take one jar and walk up into the mountains and bury it.
- JASON:** How do you know? Did you follow her?
- NATALIA:** Of course. When parent tells you not to follow—you follow.
- JASON:** And when exactly did she do this? What date?
- NATALIA:** Every August 1.

- JASON:** Shit.
- NATALIA:** Please. What does it mean this fig jam?
- JASON:** I can tell you everything I know about Katerina—your mother—except this.
- NATALIA:** What do you mean “everything?”
- JASON:** Ask me.
- NATALIA:** So you slept together. Big whoop. All I want to know is what fig jam means.
- JASON:** August 1 was the day I left Katerina. You happy? You can go now.
- NATALIA:** The day after you "made love."
- JASON:** Well yes, but it was a week after we first met. You can go now. I've told you what the connection is.
- Pause*
- NATALIA:** You will have to tell me everything. Everything!
- JASON:** The point is there are some things that are private between people, between parents especially.
- NATALIA:** You have never been parent! You are more like, what do you say? Sperm donor?
- JASON:** In that case you can really piss off.
- NATALIA:** You know but you will not tell me! Then I not tell you what my mother wrote you!
- From her backpack Natalia pulls out a bundle of letters and starts reading one of them.*
- NATALIA:** *(reading)* “Dear Jason. The sky above the mountains is like the sky the day we met.” “Dear Jason. Another month pass and I do not—”
- Jason puts his hand out for the letters, but Natalia stuffs them back in her back pack and scrambles over the bed to get to the door. Jason races over and grabs the backpack, and pulls Natalia back into the room. He dives a hand into the backpack and pulls out a handful of letters, scanning them. Natalia screams.*
- NATALIA:** They are not yours!
- JASON:** They're addressed to me! All of them! *(Jason goes through them, checking the date)* Why didn't she send them?