

JAMES'S ARRIVAL

The word of James's upcoming arrival spread throughout the town of Clayton like a banquet buffet at our church's Saturday night social. I'd first heard about it from Susie Portman while walking to the comic book store one afternoon. I smiled my "knowing" smile at her, because I remembered how I almost got to first base with her back in '02. She told me that James would be arriving at the Lake County airport tomorrow. She'd heard from Mrs. Dansey, who wears pigtails and works at the Dairy Queen on Sundays. I sometimes think about getting to first base with her, and even second and third when I'm really thinking hard, but all she ever does when serving me a Blizzard is smile and ask me how my mom is. Mrs. Dansey heard about James from Officer Glueck, and I think he heard the news from Frank at the auto shop. Frank knows everything. He's like God or something.

James arrived on a little puddle jumper piloted by none other than Bob Marley. I kid you not. His name is Bob Marley, but I don't know how he'd look in dreadlocks because he's bald, and it's hard to imagine hair on a bald man, just like it's hard to imagine a clean-shaven face on someone who's always had a beard. I mean, Osama Bin Laden himself could probably walk up to me and share his beef jerky or something, and I wouldn't have a clue who he was if he'd shaved that morning. Whenever I run into Bob Marley at the diner I say something in my best Jamaican accent like, "Yah mahn. Let's get together and feel alright." I'm laughing just thinking about it. Bob doesn't usually laugh though, but instead hits me on the shoulder with the force of a jackhammer and swears a string of profanities that would have Pastor Schmidt spinning in his grave if he were dead. He's funny, that Bob.

Turns out just about the whole town of Clayton showed up for James's homecoming. There were balloons and streamers, a fun-sized version of the high school band, a large banner that read "Welcome Home James—Thank You For Your Service," photographers, and a microphone so that James could answer questions for the local newspaper. James stood in front of the audience like a petrified tree, hands in pockets, a stone-cold expression on his face, and responded in short, curt, sentences. Afterwards, he did his best Elvis Presley impression and said to the crowd, "Thank you, thank you very much," except he'd substituted the "F" word for "thank," which made his impression of The King come off a bit harsher than most I'd seen. Some of the people seemed taken aback, but I frankly was surprised it had taken him *that* long. Good old James. He's always been a master at using the "F" word in innovative ways.

The Sunday after his return home, I knocked on his door. His house was sort of hidden by a forest that led to a nearby lake. I waited for a while, and Mr. Roberts finally came and told me to please go away because James was officially grounded for the stunt he'd pulled at the city's welcome celebration.

"But isn't James like twenty or something? Hasn't he been serving our country in a desert?"

"Jerry, that don't mean shit in my house. He's grounded. Come back next week."

Well, there wasn't much else to do. I was so looking forward to James coming back that it was practically all I'd thought about for the last couple of years. His arrival was supposed to build up to something, but it hadn't really built up to anything at all. I mean, his Elvis impression was *okay*, I guess, but still. So in between *The Price is Right* in the morning and *Three's Company* reruns in the afternoon, I started shooting hoops at home. I used to go to the park where the guys play pickup basketball, but they never let me play. It was their loss, really,

because I was making some serious shots on my driveway. After mastering my left handed hook, I tried doing little tricks like scoring from behind the basket and facing my back to the hoop and lobbing the ball over my head backwards.

I went to the Dairy Queen again one afternoon, hoping to see Mrs. Dansey, but she wasn't there. I did see Susie, however, eating a banana split with someone I didn't know, and I sat down across from her and said hi.

"Jerry, what do you want?"

"I want to know who your friend is."

"She's not interested. Go away."

"Not interested in what? I just want to know who she is."

"I'm Pam."

"Hi Pam"

"Jerry, you try groping her like you tried with me that one time, and you'll be wearing my banana split."

Well, that sounded like a win-win to me. I reached over and grabbed Pam's left breast, and sure enough, Susie slammed her banana split in my face. I was able to lift up my shirt and catch most of it, though, and after I found an unused plastic spoon on an empty table, I downed the ice cream without much trouble. All in all, it was a pretty good afternoon. And I finally got to second base! I'd have to write that down in my spiral notebook of accomplishments, right after my entry of making a left-handed lay-up. *Blindfolded.*

I finally saw James a day later when I was riding my skateboard downtown. He was wearing army fatigues, a black t-shirt and these big leather boots that seemed more suited for hiking in the Alps than for walking down Main Street in July.

“James! They finally let you out.”

“Go hump yourself, Jerry. I’m busy.”

“How do you like being back?” He didn’t answer, so I asked, “What are you going to do now?”

“I think I’ll start beating you silly, fat-ass.” James liked to say things like that, but it never really came down to nothing. Except for when he shoved me off my bicycle one time and I went to the hospital with a concussion. That was a good one.

“James, I want to talk to you about the war and all. You got some good stories?”

“Stories you wouldn’t believe. Not in a million years.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. Did you see any action?”

He rubbed his hands through his buzz-cut. “Tons of it.”

“Wow! Did it make the guys there pissed? I heard they’re pretty protective of their women.”

James gaped at me and sort of winced. I thought maybe he was having a flashback or something. “I saw *action*, dumbass! Guns. Bombs. Killing. I wasn’t fucking around with their women, jerkoff.”

“Oh. I thought that on leave they might have some honey’s waiting for you, ready and willing.”

“You are a complete moron. Go away.”

“I’ll try to stop by tomorrow, and you can tell me some of your war stories. I’ll bring along some chips or something.”

“I’m busy tomorrow.”

“Okay. I’ll try stopping by anyhow. You know. Probably not more than a couple of times.”

James rolled his eyes and walked down the street like he was looking to score, kind of strutting and holding out his chest. I had figured he’d gotten laid all the time in Iraq, but now I wondered if he was ornery because it had been such a long time. Maybe I could introduce him to Pam, and I could give him a first-hand account of how nice her breasts are. Well, her *left* breast, anyhow.

When I stopped by his house for the third time the next day, I’d already finished most of the bag of Doritos I’d purchased at the Qwik-Mart. I rang the doorbell with my “cool ranch” seasoned fingers, and James came to the screen door.

“What do you want? Can’t you see I’ve been home all day but not answering the door?”

“Yeah. You know, sometimes when the phone rings, I don’t even get up. I just let it keep ringing until the machine gets it.”

James didn’t say anything. I could smell his body odor from where I was standing. He must have gotten used to not showering in the desert, what with it being a desert and all.

“I got some Doritos. Something to munch on while you tell me war stories.”

“I’m not going to tell you war stories.”

“Don’t want to talk about it, huh? Yeah, I remember my granddad was in the Korean War, and he didn’t talk about it either for a long time. I think until after he died, actually, because of all the bad stuff he saw. War really changes you, I guess.”

“It didn’t change me.”

“I don’t know, James. You got that faraway look in your eyes, like you’re thinking about hurting someone, you know?”

James walked out onto the narrow wooden porch and let the screen door slam behind him. He was still wearing his big boots. “Jerry, do you remember what I was like before I left for the army?”

“Sure I do. You and I did all sorts of stuff together.”

“Mm hmm. Do you recall who duct-taped your butt cheeks together?”

Well, of course I did. You don’t forget a thing like that.

“And who pushed you off the bleachers during the football game?”

“Uh...yeah.” I’d forgotten about that one.

“And who took pot-shots at you with a paint gun while you mowed your lawn?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well. What do you think about someone who did all those things? I mean, what would you call him?”

I could see where he was going with this. I didn’t expect him to get all emotional and all, but I guess war puts things into perspective sometimes. It must have been really tough for him. “I’m still your friend, James. I was your friend then. And I’m your friend now. And I don’t care how many Arabs you shot or how many times you were scared and all. Nothing’s going to change that.”

“This whole town thinks I’m some kind of war hero.”

“Well you are, ain’t you, James?”

He stood up abruptly and pushed me back off the porch. I remember my feet sort of flying through the air and me seeing the sky for a moment. The tree branches looked like little fingers, and I must have blacked out then, because I came to in the hospital just as a real sweetie of a nurse was walking in.

“How are you feeling, honey?”

“My head kind of hurts.”

“Well, it should. You landed hard on a rock.”

I remembered falling and wished that James had pushed me toward the petunia garden instead. “Where’s James?”

“James Roberts? The one who pushed you?”

“Uh-huh.”

The nurse nodded. “Don’t you worry about James. Officer Glueck’s got him in jail for the night. Probably post bail tomorrow, but you’ll be alright.”

“In jail! What in God’s name for?”

“Well honey,” she sat on my bed, and I peeked down her nurse’s uniform. Her breasts were a little on the small side, but real nice just the same. “Because he tried to kill you.”

“Ma’am, I don’t know what you’re talking about. James pushed me off the porch...”

“...and then went into his house and got a knife. His father arrived home just as James was about to stab you.”

I must have looked confused, because she put her hand through my hair, careful to avoid the bandages, and then walked away. My head hurt real bad. I tried picturing it: James in his t-shirt, bending over my unconscious body with a knife! I wondered how long James would be in jail for this. It would probably be a while. And I thought about how I could visit him at the jail cell and listen to his war stories. And I could bring a care package if the warden let me, and we’d munch on some chips and talk about Iraq. Or I might even help him plan his escape. I’d get him a poster of Rita Hayworth like in that movie, only maybe the warden would have already seen that movie so we’d have to come up with a different plan.

Well, I could hardly stand the weeks that followed. It was just like before James's arrival, only now there was nothing to look forward to except seeing Mrs. Dansey at the Dairy Queen. I was really feeling down. I didn't even say anything to Bob Marley when I saw him at the drugstore. I think he was looking for me to ask him if he shot the sheriff or something, but I just didn't feel up to it.

A few weeks after I got back home from the hospital, Mr. Roberts stopped by my home while I was shooting hoops (even that had gotten old, so I'd started taking shots while riding my skateboard). I sort of froze when I spotted him on the driveway. I thought maybe he was going to shout at me or something.

"Hello, Jerry."

"Hi, Mr. Roberts."

"You still practicing your shot, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I don't suppose there are too many teams with a skateboarding guard." I think he was trying to be funny, because he knew that I only played forward. So I laughed.

"You know, Jerry, I'm real sorry about what happened. I can't explain what went on in James's head."

"Oh, that's alright. He didn't mean nothing by it." I went on to tell him my plan to keep James company in jail, but I left out the part about me helping him escape. The fewer people who knew about that, the better.

Mr. Roberts put his hands in his pockets and looked down for a moment. "Jerry, I don't think they'll allow visitors where James is going. He's going to spend some time in a mental

hospital. The government has a program to help, and it's going to be a long while until you see him again."

Well, if that didn't make me feel even worse! I rubbed my nose because it itched, but then all the sudden I felt kind of teary eyed, and I started crying. Right there in front of Mr. Roberts. For a minute there, I thought he was going to hug me, but he didn't.

When I settled down he asked, "Jerry, you like *American Idol*?"

I said I didn't, but that I liked watching reruns of old shows on *Nickelodeon*.

"Well, come on over to the house sometime and we can watch some TV together."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'd like that."

"Okay. I can bring along some chips or something to munch on. Andy Griffith is on in the evenings. That's a good one."

Mr. Roberts just smiled and turned to walk away.

"Hey Mr. Roberts."

He stopped and looked back at me.

"You don't suppose James will mind if you and I hang out, do you?"

"No. I don't think so," he said, and I watched him walk away.

I felt good about his answer, because I didn't want James mad at me when he came back.