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## James: A Short Story

Jerald Walker

Bridgewater State College, [j2walker@bridgew.edu](mailto:j2walker@bridgew.edu)

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# James

A Short Story by Jerald Walker



Photograph by David Wilson

When James walked into the kitchen, his mother looked up from her newspaper and said, “Boy, you’re going to freeze before you get anywhere *near* school.” He was wearing his new imitation leather jacket that didn’t have a lining. The temperature was in the low forties, she told him, and it was supposed to rain. James took a biscuit from the table and bit off a small piece. “I’ll be warm enough,” he said, but a short while later, after walking only half a block, he was shivering and his school was a mile away. Luckily, he wasn’t going that far.

At the intersection he crossed the street and entered a three-flat with most of its windows boarded. He went to the third floor, stepping on cigarette butts and mouse droppings along the way. He knocked on apartment six. After a brief pause the door opened to a frail, middle-aged man everyone knew as “Uncle Joe.” James followed him into the living room and sat on a couch that smelled like sour milk. The walls were covered from floor to ceiling with glossy pictures, torn from the stacks of *Hustler* and *Playboy* that lined the room like sandbags against a rising tide. There was an actual tide a block away, which James could see through the window, a fairly scenic stretch of Lake Michigan known as Rainbow Beach. Only two years ago, when he was fourteen, he still swam in its blueish-green water, untroubled by its smell of raw sewage, or the shocked-looking trout whose dead bodies bobbed against the shore.

“So, how many you need?” Uncle Joe asked.

“Just one,” James said. He took a dollar from his jacket pocket and handed it to Uncle Joe. Uncle Joe disappeared into a back room and returned with a plastic sandwich bag full of thin, crumpled joints. He sat across from James on a wicker chair. There was a coffee table between them holding several crushed beer cans. A roach darted out of one of them, waving its antennae. “This shit’s strong,” Uncle Joe said. He’d fished out a joint and now tossed it to James. “It’ll warm you up a bit,” he added, “you look kind of cold.”

I’m all right,” James responded. He had his lighter out and was about to light the joint, then changed his mind

and put both in his pocket. Maybe he’d just go home and smoke it in his room. His mother should be gone by now. His father always left by six.

“That ain’t real leather, is it?” Uncle Joe asked.

“What?”

“Your jacket. That real leather?”

James shook his head.

“Didn’t think so. Had one like it once. Actually, had ‘bout forty of them. Ripped off a clothing store.” Uncle Joe grinned. A smile spread on James’s face. Uncle Joe left the room and returned with a half pint of Wild Irish Rose. For the next hour he shared his wine and stories until James, longing for a little adventure of his own, decided to leave, only there was nowhere to go, except to school, which he was just drunk enough to do. His drafting class was mildly interesting and started in thirty minutes; if he hurried he could get there before the second bell. He thought about going into the bathroom to splash cold water on his face, but from prior experience he knew that there were things in there he didn’t want to see or touch, so he settled for slapping his cheeks and, once outside, inhaling mouthfuls of brisk March air.

He missed the second bell. The halls were deserted except for a group of boys standing near the stairs, twenty feet away. One of the boys flashed him a gang sign as he approached—the middle and index finger curved toward the thumb—though James had already identified them as Disciples by some of their pierced right ears. James wasn’t a Disciple. He wasn’t anything. “Who you represent?” asked the boy who’d given the sign. He and others were moving forward now. James lowered his gaze. He resisted the urge to run. Let them do it right here, he thought. He braced himself as someone shoved him.

“Represent!” he was told. “I’m neutral,” James stammered. “I’m neutral.” An open palm slapped his face. But that was all. They let him pass after that. He headed for the stairs. He didn’t run.

When James opened his classroom door, Mr. Meredith cleared his throat loudly. He was seated at his desk. He had been grading papers but now watched James move

across the room. "Well, well, well," he said, "look who's here." Some of the twenty students did look but most remained huddled over their drafting tables. James glanced at a couple of their drawings as he passed, but he couldn't figure out what the assignment was; everyone seemed to be doing their own thing. He went to an empty table and decided to sketch a house. He had made good progress by the time Mr. Meredith appeared at his side. "Glad you could join us today," he said. James squinted at his roof line, pretending not to hear. "Any particular reason you're late?" This time James tapped his tongue twice with the point of his pencil. And then he belched, startling them both. "Come with me," Mr. Meredith said.

They went to the storage room, set off in the corner. Mr. Meredith's hands were on his hips. "You smell like liquor."

"That's not liquor."

"What is it then?"

"Cough medicine," James said, and coughed.

Mr. Meredith started to speak as there was a knock on the half-closed door. He and James turned to see a girl in a white blouse and a blue-jean skirt, bobby socks neatly folded on her greasy-looking shins. She held out two ragged dollar bills. "Can I get some M&Ms?" she asked. "With nuts?"

The storage room was full of them, crates upon crates. Somehow James hadn't noticed. But he wasn't surprised. Mr. Meredith coached the basketball team and was always trying to raise funds. He opened one of the crates and removed a box of candy, exchanging it for the girl's money. After the girl had gone, he looked at James and said with great pity, "You're a fool." He took James by the arm and led him from the room. Neither of them spoke during the long walk to the administrative offices. When they arrived, the secretary waved them into a back room where the principal sat at a square oak desk that was covered with stacks of paper and three-ring

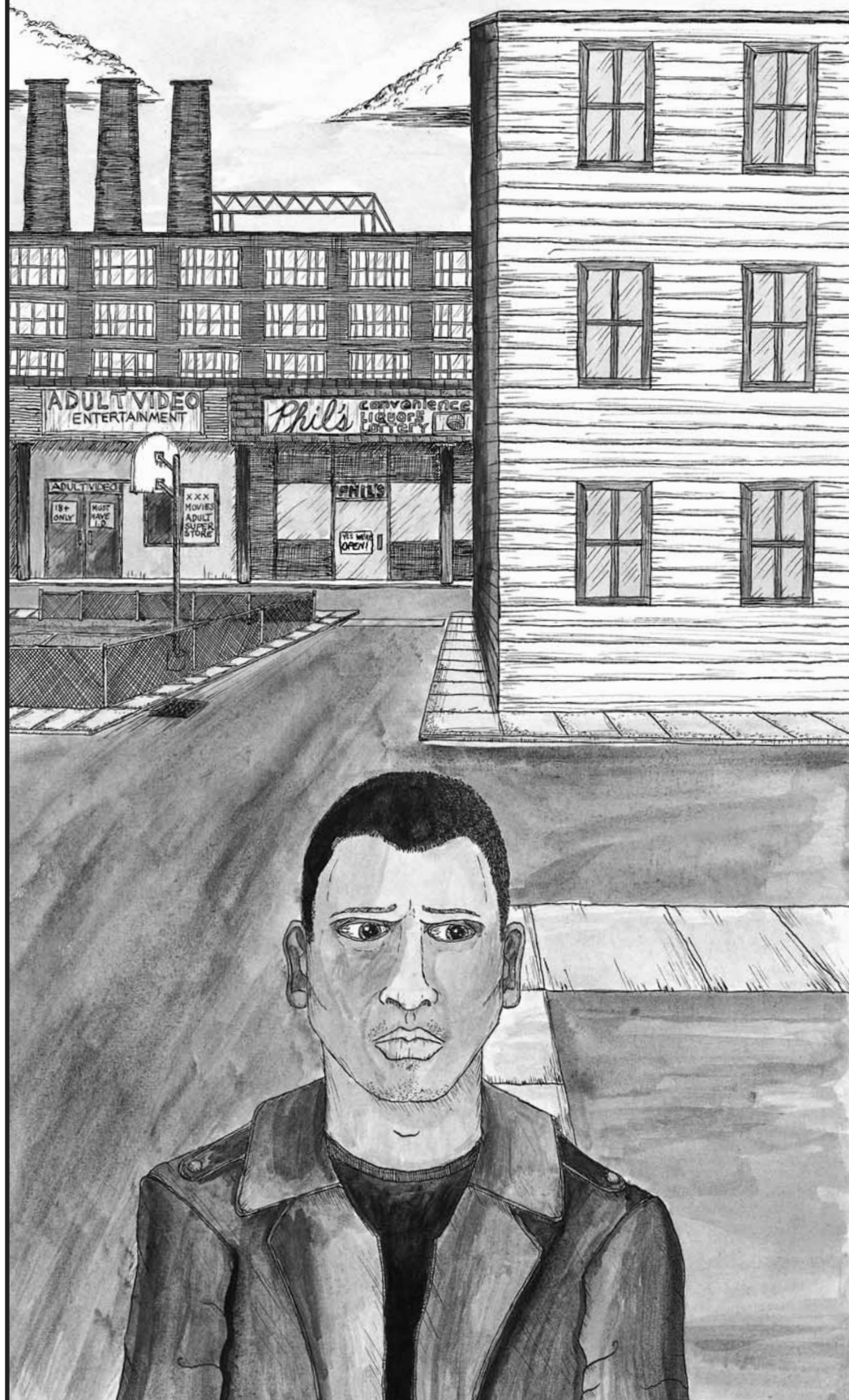
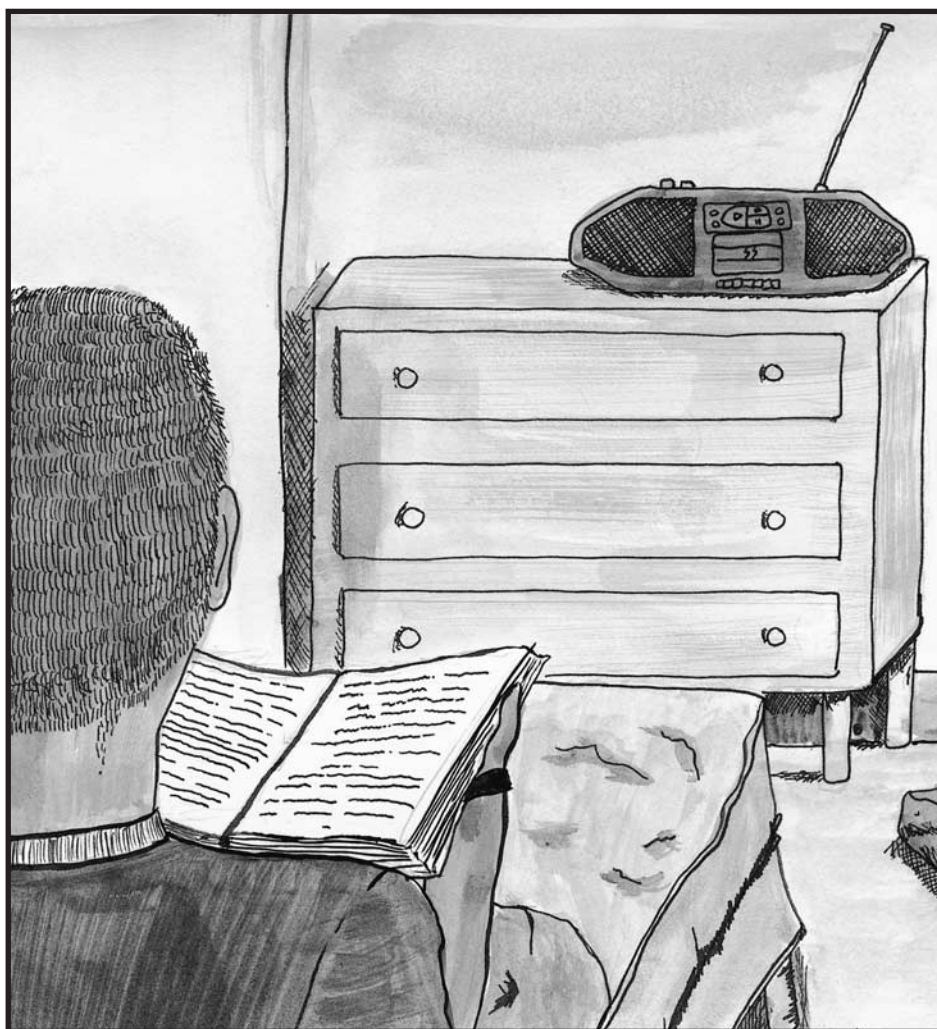


Illustration by Daniel J. Bythewood



Illustration by Michael Graham



binders. Mr. Meredith nudged James forward. “*Drunk,*” he announced before leaving.

“*Drunk?*” repeated the principal, an elderly man with a wandering right eye that made him seem aloof. He was new to the school and not yet familiar with the students, and so, after writing James’s social security number on a small note pad, he left the room to get James’s file. He was gone for a long time. James decided to amuse himself by searching the desk drawers. The top one contained six pencils—sharpened severely, as if for hunting purposes—and a dozen sticks of chewing gum. The other three were stuffed with important-looking papers that he rearranged. He was returning to his seat when he stopped to look in the closet. It was empty, except for a ring of keys hanging on a hook. He slipped it into his pocket.

A moment later the principal returned. He was reading James’s file, denying the contents with slow shakes of his head. He licked an index finger and turned a page. “I don’t understand you,” he said, easing into his chair. “You came here as a freshman reading at the college level, and now you’re flunking out. What gives?”

those kids made him nervous, the thought of being among them in basically foreign land. He did not want to go to college.

“*Of course* I want to go to college,” he said.

“Good, but first we have to address your drinking problem.”

“I don’t have a drinking problem.”

“Then why are you drunk?”

“Because drinking makes me that way.”

The principal smiled and calmly said, “Surely college material can come up with a better response than that.”

James took a moment to gather his thoughts. “The thing is, my mother recently died. I guess I’m having a hard time dealing with it. It’s not easy, I mean...sometimes... well...okay... *all* the time, it hurts.”

Both of the principal’s eyes located James for an instant, then went their separate ways. His shoulders slackened. He leaned back in his chair and spoke, for a very long time, about his parents, both of whom were deceased, and then about dead black people in general and James’s responsibility to them. He arranged for James to see a counselor, recited a touching verse from Psalms, and

James hunched his shoulders.

“Don’t you want to go to college?”

It was a question James had never been asked. His parents hadn’t gone to college and, judging from their silence on the subject, they didn’t expect him to either. But maybe he *should* go. As he considered the possibility, an assortment of kids strolling past gothic buildings flashed in his mind. This was pretty much his only notion of college, courtesy of the faded brochure that was taped on the cafeteria’s bulletin board near where they posted the daily menu. He had never given the brochure any real consideration, and now doing so made him nervous. All

then sent him away with a three day “personal leave” slip and a stick of chewing gum.

James heard music and cheering coming from outside the building as he approached one of the exits. He opened the door and saw a large gathering of students watching cheerleaders and pompon girls dance. A stupid pep rally, he thought. He headed in the opposite direction, pausing to unzip his jacket. It was much warmer outside now, maybe somewhere in the fifties; the sun had emerged and felt good on his skin. He slipped his hand into his front pocket and fingered the ring of keys, wondering what they opened.

The clock on the stove read 11:32. James’s mother wouldn’t be home from work for another six hours, his father not for another nine. He made a turkey and spicy mustard sandwich before going to his room. For the rest of the day he did what he did pretty much everyday, lie on his bed reading his favorite writers, lately Hemingway and Cheever, now and then closing his eyes to imagine himself in a scene.

It wasn’t until almost midnight that he remembered the keys. He had an instant impulse to ignore them. He continued reading for several more minutes before he snapped his book closed and called Uncle Joe. Fifteen minutes later James snuck out of the house and waited around the corner. Uncle Joe picked him up there in a rusty station wagon with a missing headlight. Motown played softly on the radio. James’s heart raced as they headed toward school.

They parked in back of the main building near a dumpster overflowing with garbage bags. Across the street, an army of bungalows squatted silently in the darkness. James opened his door. Uncle Joe didn’t open his. He lit a cigarette, exhaling in James’s direction as he talked about his parole, sore left knee and suspicions of car thieves in the area.

“Maybe you should wait here,” James suggested.

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

“Got a flashlight?”

“It just so happens.”

There were four keys. The third one James tried unlocked a service entrance not far from where the car was parked. He went straight to the home economics room on the second floor. The same key fit. There were maybe forty typewriters, Smith Coronas with long black electrical cords nearly as thick as sailors’ rope. James spent the next half-hour carrying ten of them to the car. When he brought out the last one, his arms were rubber. Sweat ran down his face and neck. By the yellow glow of a street light, he could see that his shirt

was streaked with dirt and oil and spicy mustard. Uncle Joe started the engine and put the car in drive. As they pulled away from the building, James told him to stop.

“What for?”

“M&Ms.”

“M&Ms?”

“M&Ms,” James repeated. “With nuts.”

There were a few dozen crates. James figured there must be a safe. He didn’t mention the safe to Uncle Joe, only the candy, for which Uncle Joe said he had no use. They agreed to meet in the morning.

As soon as James reentered the building he realized that the flashlight was still in the car. He had his lighter, though, and used it to guide himself to the drafting room on the third floor. The door was locked but the master key worked. He stepped inside and maneuvered past the tables and stools, a streetlight near one of the windows illuminating the room just enough for him to see.

The storage room door was locked. This time the master key didn’t work. None of the other keys worked either. But there was a transom and James reached it easily after mounting a table. The transom squeaked open without resistance. James stuck his head through. He couldn’t see a thing. He extended his lighter into the darkness and swore as it slipped from his hand, making a faint thump on something below. He leaned back and examined the opening. It was small. He would have to enter head first.

A moment later, lying on his backside, surrounded by a half dozen toppled crates, James remained perfectly still, as if waiting for someone to tell him he was okay. He *was* okay, though his left shoulder hurt a little when he finally moved. He struggled to his feet and rubbed his hands along the wall until he found and turned on the light switch. There were about fifty crates of M&Ms. There wasn’t a safe, but there was a shoe box resting on a file cabinet, stuffed with money. His hands trembled as he scooped up the bills.

The first thing he did when he returned to his bedroom was to count the money. It was three hundred and fifty-three dollars, all singles and five’s. Tomorrow he would buy a couple of books, and maybe some Reeboks, though he didn’t need any new shoes. He put the money under his mattress. He shook his head as he undressed, marveling at what he had done. He wished he had someone to tell.

—Jerald Walker is Assistant Professor of English and a graduate of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. “James” is from a short story collection in progress.