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The Significance of Jim

Two summers ago I met a man named Jim. Jim is in his late fifties; he's mostly bald, except for a few tufts of graying hair that are mowed quickly every few weeks by a pair of clippers from Wal-Mart. He likes wearing old polo shirts, drinking instant decaf coffee, and playing scratch-and-win bingo. Jim has a big nose and a sideways, open-mouthed grin that make him look like he's always just about to ask you a question. And he lives at a group home for men with developmental disabilities where I work.

I started working at Jim's group home out of a misplaced search for significance. A sort of Mother Theresa among the mentally ill—that's what I had in mind—except, of course, that my piety was to be rewarded each month by a government-funded paycheck. When asked about my plans for the upcoming summer, I replied gravely that I was working with "people with developmental disabilities." This, I had learned, was the terminology currently correct. Perhaps using the politically nice phrase gave off the rather vague impression that I was going to serve as a saint to the insane. And perhaps I enjoyed that reputation.

I remember my first day of work; with no one to meet me at the front gate, I found the key and let myself in. I tried not to look nervous as I made a casual march along the walkway and up the steps to the house. I recalled that this group home, simply called House Eight, was a "behavioral house"—that is, not only did its residents face mental challenges, but they could be extremely violent as well.

Jim was sitting in his white plastic chair by the door, having a cigarette. I didn't really know what to say at first, so I got his name and gave him mine, and we shook hands. Jim took

another drag on his Marlboro; I watched for a minute as he sucked down the fire and blew out the smoke, then I turned and went inside.

As a support staff member at the group home, it was my job to help Jim and his housemates with everyday life. I soon found myself running errands, administering medication, cooking meals, and lighting cigarettes. Though smoking was not encouraged, Jim, like everyone else, has a right to smoke. His doctors had settled on a compromise: one cigarette every hour on the hour. The arrival of each new hour was a much-anticipated moment, ushered in by Jim with all the eagerness of a Times Square crowd waiting for the New Year's Eve Ball to drop.

"It's almost smoke time," Jim would say, looking up from his wristwatch minutes before the magical moment.

"You know the doctor says: smoking's real bad for you, eh Jim?" I'd offer.

"Yeah." He looked down again, distracted.

"You wanna quit then, buddy?"

Jim grinned and shook his head. Then, looking again at his watch, "Is it smoke time yet?"

Over the days and weeks that followed, Jim and I got to know each other. We'd play cards, either "Crazy Eights" or "Rummy," a game neither of us fully understood. We also worked on checkers; Jim would look up from beneath his concentrating eyebrows and grin at me before smacking his piece down on the far side of the board. "King Me!" he'd proclaim. We read together too. I would bring books from home, while Jim seemed to have an endless stash of paperback westerns. The pictures on the covers of the novels he read usually featured a bare-chested cowboy and some busty harlequin heroine tangled together underneath the novel's brazen title, usually something like *Chase McFerrin and the Outlaw from Bullet Ridge*. Jim

enjoyed working the sentences through, passing his index finger over each line and whispering the words softly to himself.

One afternoon I was sitting out on a covered swing on the lawn with Jim, watching the afternoon go by. The wind was breathing down our necks and pasting the summer's humidity to our sticky skin. Jim had long since finished scratching his instant-win bingo tickets (an \$8 take from two \$3 tickets), and was staring off into the August sky. Sometimes he liked to count all the white vans that drove by the house, keeping his eye also on the large trucks that passed, coughing up exhaust as they smoked their diesel cigarettes on down the road. But that particular day, Jim seemed content with the empty blueness of the languid afternoon. I myself was splitting the binding of a J.D. Salinger book, pulling its pages back and trying desperately to keep up with the dialogue. Frustrated, I set the book, with its pages open and face down, upon my knee. One of the characters had just made an off-handed, dismissive remark about Freud. I looked over at Jim.

“Jim,” I said, interrupting the sky, “Have you ever heard of Sigmund Freud?”

Jim scratched his nose and looked at me. “No,” he said.

“What about Mother Theresa?”

“No,” he said after a pause.

Perhaps that wasn't the right question. I tried again, “What about Hitler? You ever heard of Hitler?”

Jim nodded eagerly, tilting his nose up slightly and shaking his chin up and down. Yes, he'd heard of Hitler.

“Jim,” I said, settling back in the chair, “do you ever think you'll be famous?”

It was a strange question. Jim was already famous, at least locally; he just didn't know it. The staff knew all about Jim and the rumors of his shadowy past. Brain damage had left his judgment impaired; he couldn't keep himself from constantly worrying or from becoming incredibly angry. As he sensed his own rage beginning to build, a look of sad panic would come into his eyes. "I think I'm gonna explode," he'd say. And then, snap—different Jim. Yelling and throwing chairs. Cursing and threatening to kill everyone he could name. In his younger days, so the rumor went, it took five orderlies at the mental hospital just to hold him down. He had been in and out of high-security institutions his whole life. Every imaginable form of abuse had been committed against him, and as a result, a few of his personal habits defied polite description. His physical and psychological scars were still raw. Most of the time he was lovably pleasant—but he was famous for his incredible rages and awful moments, famous for the dark distress that pressed upon his soul.

"Do you ever think you'll be famous, Jim?" I had asked.

I saw him mumble something.

"What'd you say, Jimbo?"

He smiled like he thought he had said something silly. Then he looked down and mumbled again.

"One more time, Jim. I didn't hear. "

And then Jim leaned towards me and spoke in voice just loud enough to hear. "In the Promise Land," he said. "I'll be famous in the Promise Land."

I looked at him, caught the watery blue of his aging eyes and watched, enraptured, as his lips trembled slightly and began to form hesitant words.

"When... when he meets me at the Gate," he said.

I blinked hard. “D’you mean Jesus?” I asked.

“Yeah, yeah!” he nodded again. “When Jesus meets me at the Gate.” He rubbed his nose again, and then slowly turned and looked back towards the sky.

I remember thinking that this was a moment I must never forget. Jim’s answer—that he would be famous in the Promise Land—had ambushed the subtle assumptions of my soul. My question for Jim had really been a question for myself. I was the one asking, in the deep-down smallness of my own heart, if all of the unimportant glories of my life would ever add up to something.

Jim’s answer changed the way I see significance. I had assumed a person’s importance is measured solely by the recognition he receives, by beauty and intelligence, by the fame of this world. I overlooked the fact that Jim, for all of the setbacks that relegate him to a rather obscure infamy, is well known to Jesus. One day Christ will meet him at the Gate, after Jim crosses from Jordan’s stormy banks into that better country. All the turmoil of his mind and body will wash away in the water of that heavenly river, and he will stand clean on its farthest shore. I won’t be surprised to find that Jim, with his simple faith, is famous in the Promise Land, for I imagine that the last really will be first. Heaven may choose to honor all of this world’s invisible saints, and softly remind many others that they have already received their reward in full. There is a higher applause one must listen for, for it is of greater worth than all the accolades of men. It is the only significance which truly counts. Like Jim, I want to fix my gaze on the glory of the skies and live to be famous in the Promise Land.