

SUNDAY MORNING

by
H. David Whalen

Jim limped up the heat-cracked cement driveway on crutches. He juggled a thin brown paper bag. Spying his old friend in the garage.

“Hey Jay, what’s up?” the arrival asks.

Jay struggled with a large cardboard box in his hands. “Jimmy? What are you doing here?” Shocked to see the man.

“Just came back to see the old place. Didn’t expect to find you here.”

“Been here a couple of weeks. Just cleaning up the place. Heading back to LA this afternoon.”

Jay’s father had passed the year before, and he was back in his hometown of Bakersfield. His mother needed placement in a rest home. Medicare had seized the property to pay for her care. Jay spent his vacation having yard sales and giving unwanted stuff to the Goodwill and Salvation Army. He was just finishing packing up the remains of the old family home and loading a rented U-Haul to take anything of value to his newly leased storage unit.

“Have a seat, Jimmy.” Jay shoved two large boxes across from each other. He sat on one and Jim took the other. “Did you hurt your leg, Jimmy?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know!”

“I’ve been out of touch with the old gang. Sorry I haven’t heard.”

“Haven’t heard! That’s rich, buddy.”

“What are you talking about? How could I hear?”

“You were there, buddy!”

“Jim, have you been drinking?”

“Just a little breakfast nip. For the pain, you know.” Jim took a large swallow from a fifth of Jack hidden in the paper sack.

Jay wondered what is going on.

Maybe he thinks Marlene called me.

“How’s Marlene and the boy?” Not remembering the name of Jimmy’s son.

“Hell, they left me, as soon as I got fired.”

“Really sorry to hear that. I always thought you guys were a good match.”

“Yeah, until you came along, buddy. I’m still baffled why you got loaded and tried to drive in the snow and ice? Nobody’s that stupid!” He took a long pull from the bottle. “I tried to take the keys from you, remember?”

“Jim, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t play dumb with me! I relive that night every single day. For the past two years, I haven’t slept and hardly eaten. You screwed up my life, buddy!” He took another chug.

“Maybe you should take it a little easy, there?”

He laughed. “You’re preaching to me, buddy!”

“Just saying,” Jay responded.

“Yeah, you’re just saying. Like you’re all innocent!” He pulled a crumpled pack of Marlboro Light 100’s from his shirt pocket. Jim wrested to stand and balance on the good leg. He shoved his hand into a jean pocket and came up with a red Bic lighter. Jim flicked it half a dozen times.

After it would not light, he pounded the lighter head hard into his left hand, before trying to light it again. Still no flame. "Shit!" He threw it out the large opened garage door onto the dead grass.

"You got a light, buddy?"

"Sorry, Jim, I quit years ago! Right after high school."

"Bull crap! You were smoking that night coming down the Grapevine."

Jay stood. "Listen, Jim, I have to finish loading the truck. It's going to be late before I hit the road and traffic will be a nightmare. Debbie is sure to get worried."

"She should damn well worry, the way you drive!" Jim took another large swig, before he pulled up his left pant leg, exposing the nub. The appendage, from just above the knee down, is gone.

"My God, Jim, what happened?"

"Back to that bullshit again, buddy?"

It was evident that they were getting nowhere.

"Jim, I really need to get going." Jay stood and picked up a box and headed to the truck."

Jimmy and Jay were inseparable growing up. Everyone called them the JJ twins. After high school, Jay went to Cal State in Los Angeles. Jim was number eight in the lottery, but rather than drafted and sent to the frontline in Vietnam, he enlisted in the army. It was not a hard decision. His dad had been career Navy, and he planned on joining.

Jim sent to Nam anyway. He got into the Military Police and spent his entire deployment patrolling the streets of Saigon. Every steamy night, he broke up fights and hauled drunk servicemen to the brig. The war zone was dangerous everywhere in Vietnam. You could not tell the enemy from the friendly. A couple of times, Jim was shot at and returned fire once killing an innocent kid by mistake.

The army rewarded Jimmy with a dishonorable discharged and shipped him home. Jay was on summer break from school and returned at the same time. The two spent the summer partying and taking road trips to LA and Las Vegas.

In late August, Jay returned for his senior year. Jim bummed around and ended up in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. He acquired a job as a patrolman for the local police department. A year later, Jimmy met Marlene and they married. Not long after, the pair had Jimmy, Junior.

After graduation, Jay stayed in Los Angeles and went to work for the city planning department. He had met Deb in college, and they made a life together and had three children.

The JJ twins lost touch and only saw each other once. It was their twentieth high school reunion. Both couples spent the long weekend together. The twins reacquainted and the wives bonding.

The old friends and wives traveled together back to Jay's Los Angeles home for another week of partying before Jimmy and Marlene scheduled to return to Idaho. They promised to keep in touch but never had.

"This just in. There are reports of gunshots in Widel Orchard subdivision. Stayed tuned, Bakersfield's Chopper 9 is en route. We will bring you an update as soon as available."

Minutes later. "Sharon, are you there?"

"Yes, Adrienne. This is Sharon Bilwick reporting from the sky above the Widel Orchard scene. As you can see, there are police vehicles everywhere, and the streets cordoned off. Nobody is allowed in the area. There appears to be a body covered, next to a U-Haul truck in the driveway." Bilwick kept broadcasting everything she observed. "It looks like someone was in the process of moving. It does not appear that the police have anyone in custody at this time. That's all we can see for now. Back to you Adrienne."

“Thank you, Sharon. We are going live with Carlos Rivera on the ground. Carlos are you there?”

Pictures broadcast the hectic scene. “I’m here, Adrienne. We are talking with Mr. Bongder, He is the neighbor who heard the shots and called 911.” The camera pulled out showing both men. “Mr. Bongder, can you tell us what you know?”

The elderly man biting at the bit to be on TV. “I heard two shots and ran over to Mrs. Johnston’s. She has been out of the home for a couple of weeks, and her son Jay is staying there cleaning up. I’ve known the family for years. Nice people, great neighbors.”

The reported interrupts, “Sir, can you tell what you saw this morning?”

“I’m getting to that, son.” Looking back at the camera. “Anyway, Jay was laying in the driveway, behind the truck. There is a box beside him, and it looks like he was loading it. Blood flowed down the driveway. Another man lay in the garage. I couldn’t tell, but it sure looks like Jimmy Harden. He used to live across the street, there.” The man points. “The Hardens were nice folks. They moved away... oh, twenty years ago, now. That’s when I ran home and called the police.”

“So there are two men dead, and you are familiar with both of them?”

“I guess they’re dead. The police covered them up.”

“Excuse me, officer!” The reporter called out. “Thank you, Mr. Bongder.”

Carlos ran up to the policeman. “Carlos Rivera, Channel 9. Can you confirm the identities of the victims?”

“Not at this time.” He started to walk off.

“Is there any more bodies than what we see?”

Turning back, the officer states, “Only the two.”

“Can you tell the viewers what happened here?”

“Not sure. It appears to be a murder-suicide.”

Television screens across Southern California interrupted with KJLA Breaking news.

“This just in, Los Angeles mayor-elect, James L. Johnson was murdered earlier today in Bakersfield by long-time friend James Micheal Harden. Johnson was in Bakersfield closing down his mother’s home and preparing to come back to Los Angeles when confronted by Harden and shot in the head. He died instantly. Johnson is survived by his wife of eight years, Debra Johnson and three sons. We now go to Stephanie Harwell for a background report on shooter Harden.”

Harwell’s face appears. “Thank you, Terrie. Here’s what we know about James Micheal Harden. After returning from Viet Nam in nineteen-sixty-eight, Mr. Harden worked as a patrol officer in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho. One snowy night four years ago Officer Harden was involved in a one-car accident while on patrol. An empty bottle of Jack Daniel’s whiskey was found at the scene, and Harden’s blood alcohol level at 2.8. He lost his right leg in the mishap. Homeless James Harden was picked up by Fresno police two years later and has been in Central Psychiatric Institute ever since. Last night Harden escaped the facility and showed up at the Johnson family home in Bakersfield today, where he shot and killed James Johnson before turning the gun on himself.”