

## James Richard

He stood in front of the mirror that was plastered on the back of his bedroom door. He fluffed his brown hair a few times, his head cocked forward slightly. He stood up straight, clutched either side of his brown leather jacket, and forced it tightly forward. Now, taking his thumb and index finger, he tamed the coarse whiskers under his nose. His hands dropped into his pockets as he shifted his weight a few times, first left, then right, exploring the entirety of his image. He lifted his chin up, then down as he admired himself in front of the mirror plastered on the back of his bedroom door.

Behind him, gray floral bedsheets were reflected, tucked neatly around a queen-sized bed. This was pushed up against a dark, wood paneled wall. He stared through himself for a moment; if only that bed weren't there. He could imagine a closed room just like this: dim, yellow lighting, upholstered chairs clustered in social heaps around the room and, a smoky haze; it would drift, lazily, navigating the space between the other men, scaling broad shoulders, pausing for a moment to caress the muscled mounds, to curl around them, expand, stretch, massage, then, catching the scent of some other, bravely plunge over the chest, moving, like a powerful cataract, hugging tightly the protruding muscles as it surrenders to the cliff. He longed for this place. Minus the bed. If those bed sheets weren't tucked so neatly behind him, he'd be modeling his art in that hazy, wood-paneled room with those men. The canvas: himself.

The man in the mirror stared now timidly back at him: Blue suede shoes, tight blue jeans, a big-buckled belt, a patterned button-down, a brown leather jacket. Everything fit quite nicely, he thought, perfectly, in fact. He again shifted his gaze, fluffed his hair a few times, pulled on his leather jacket, and left the room.

He thought he'd better get out quickly. He clutched the pair of shoulders resting in the kitchen chair, laid a gentle kiss on the sweetly scented female head, murmured something about being home later, and made for the door. There might have been a response, a quiet protest, a quick question. He threw back a hurried affirmative with one foot out the door.

He drove a Ford pickup from 1973. A few years old by now, for sure, but it got him where he needed to go. He thumped the thin leather steering wheel as he sang along to "Margaritaville." He'd drive a little further tonight, he knew. Yes, he was driving South, to Denver. He was less likely to run into someone there. The West was like that. Folks like him got

stuck on this side of the Rocky Mountains, hundreds of miles away from Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York. In New York you could get lost in the sickening jumble of concrete and limbs, moving from one neighborhood to the next with ease, always finding something new. Denver wasn't anything like that. Here, a man could get stuck.

The mountains to the West were too daunting to climb. To the east, the barren plains too vast. In this little oasis of natural beauty, it was difficult to escape. And the people, well, they were mostly the same. He almost always ran into someone he knew, or at least someone who knew his family, or something. And they would gossip about him later, he knew; *Did he look any thinner? who was he with? You're kidding, I don't believe it. And the family, do they know? Well, he was always a little odd.* No, he didn't like that. So he'd drive the 20 miles South to Denver. And he'd enjoy it, he knew. He tapped the thin leather steering wheel as he sang along to "Margaritaville."

The city was still full of cowboys, he thought as he threw his car into park. Outside of the building that he approached, a few burley men smoked cigarettes, chewed tobacco, and spit on the ground. They were much larger than he was, but their button-downs were tucked in and their leather jackets pulled tight, just like his. Yes, men like him got stuck here, in this place which refused to shake its cowboy roots. In a place, he thought, obsessed with lawlessness and small bars like this where you could go, and avoid seeing anyone you knew. Above him a neon sign burned bright. "Bowling" it said, simply. He walked past the men and gave them a nod, their plump cheeks and brown whiskers lit up, menacingly red under the neon sign.

The place smelled like cigarettes, beer, and popcorn. The patterned carpet was navy blue, with swirls of red, yellow, orange bursting like fireworks, cutting through the haze that enveloped the space. He liked to see a little color in the dark. All around, the sounds of various arcade games and pinball machines, set on the lowest volume, coalesced, penetrating the thin fog: the symphony of the seventies. The best part, though, was the shrieking pins, crumbling as a heavy ball stuck their cords, scattering heavy noise everywhere.

"James!" someone yelled as he looked around. A man was waving to him from across the room. His face lit up as he moved his lips into a large, white smile. That was Bobby, one of his friends from the navy, from Vietnam. He'd met Bobby in San Francisco, where they'd been sent

before deployment. They'd had a few raucous nights in some of the dancing bars there, in the Tenderloin, as it was called.

Now, the two men hugged as they eventually met. James could smell the musky cologne that saturated Bobby's neck, as his strong arms squeezed tight. James nestled his head on one of Bobby's broad shoulders, and felt his brown mustache graze Bobby's ear. The men ended their embrace and James looked into his friend's green eyes, gently nestled under jet black hair.

A collection of men had gathered in front of their bowling lane. Some sat in the chairs behind an oblong table. Others, stood to shake James's hand. He had met most of them before; they were regulars. Most Saturday nights they could be found here, bowling, laughing, smoking and drinking beer, happy to be in a place where no one recognized them, not even themselves.

This night was no different. Together they laughed, they drank and they smoked, escaping life for a few hours. One by one, bowling balls rolled down the paved runway to their destination. The balls modeled their colors, their designs. Blues, pinks, yellows, oranges, neon statements of freedom and fun flashed down the aisles until they crashed into their targets with a distinct resounding and wild cry. They went on like this, laughing, drinking, admiring the strong, unapologetic speed of the bowling balls as they careened down the runway, modeling their uniqueness.

"You son of a bitch," laughed Bobby as their first game finished. "Would you look at that, I mean, goddamn James. How'd you get so good?" His flattery was betrayed by the wry smile he shot in James' direction. James looked up at the television screen above him. The scores were recorded here. 10 columns following each of their names. James had played a nearly perfect game. His name was followed by an impressive series of X's, and one or two /'s. He met Bobby's eyes and returned his mischievous smile, but James addressed the crowd when he spoke.

"It's all in the approach I told you. If your hitting too far to the left, move right, too far to the right, move left," he said as he motioned to the series of dots on the ground, marking where to place your feet. "Then just four even steps, you know. And, bingo." For added effect, he flicked his wrist, clicked his tongue, clashed his teeth and winked at Bobby. "Strike," he said finally.

All around him laughed and shook their heads. They were now sunk into the chairs around the table. Almost through two pitchers of beer by now.

“Round two,” someone in the group suggested. They all nodded the affirmative. It was early, only 10 o’clock.

“10 minute break,” said James, “I need some fresh air. Anyone want a smoke?” He pulled a pack of Marlboro’s out of his jacket and flashed them to the crowd.

“You know those things will kill you,” said Bobby with a smile. James raised his eyebrows but ignored him, scanning the crowd for any takers.

“Suit yourselves,” he said, finally, “I’ll be back soon.”

He left the haze behind and stood where he had seen the burly men spitting when he arrived.

It might be unseasonably warm, he thought as he lit his cigarette under the neon sign. His hands were not chilled by the late February air, perhaps unseasonably warm. He took a slow, deep drag. The smoke burned the bottom of his lungs as he inhaled, struck the back of his throat. He held it in place for a few moments and then let out a deep sigh, pushing the smoke out of his lungs into a billowing white cloud, that, this time of year, should’ve mixed with his hot breath in the cool air. Unseasonably warm.

He carried on like this for a while, silent, steady, until the door opened and a stranger joined him. He studied the man, a short, pale blonde fellow wearing brown corduroys, and a teal button down with white buttons. His brown leather jacket was the same shade of tan as James’s, and he admired the stranger’s style; it was bright, hip, fresh. The man’s face was clean shaven, and his hair was long, gently smoothed back and fluffed up by some sticky pomade. James wasn’t sure, but he thought he could smell the man’s cologne: the usual musk with a hint of something sweeter, new, different, unique. They locked eyes for a moment, and, nervous that the newcomer might have noticed James’s curious gaze, his eyes darted quickly to the floor and he shuffled side to side a bit. Out of the corner of his eyes, James saw the man take out a pack of cigarettes, and gently place one in between his pink lips. He returned the pack to his pocket and searched for a lighter, patting his chest, hips, and butt for the familiar pocket protrusion.

“Got a light,” the man asked, clearly unsuccessful.

James reached into his pocket, and extended his arm. The stranger didn’t accept, but stepped a few inches closer to James instead. The lighter clicked into life as James held it to the man’s face, carefully lighting the temporary appendage for him. Now, in this new proximal

space, James knew that he could definitely smell this guy's cologne. It burst out from underneath his shirt, coaxing James's eyes to the top button which had been undone, revealing the top of his bare chest. James let his eyes wander, exploring the smooth expansion of the collarbones, unconsciously searching for the smell. The scent relaxed after its initial burst of bright citrus and heat, and cooled as it slowly made its arc, settling into a mix of cool blues and lush, earthy greens until finally it rested deep within the nostrils, fading into a musty purple, distinguished, regal. Eventually, James looked up at the man's face. His eyes were bent towards the tip of his cigarette, so that the smooth white eyelids were lit up by the flame. His face was saturated by the red of the neon sign above, smoothing out his pale skin, erasing any inconsistency by chasing away the shadows, leveling the peaks and valleys of a face. Finally, James released his thumb, and the flame died. The man moved only his eyes, so that their striking blue flashed forward. James reeled in response, but his gaze remained steady. Blue eyes must always have this dual effect; their startling clarity belies their depth, and captures the curious observer, effortlessly.

"Thanks," the man said finally, taking a step back. James nodded, and continued to smoke, returning the lighter to his pocket and tearing his gaze away, casually forcing it back down to the ground. He heard the fresh embers crackle and click as the man took a deep inhale. Then silence settled broken only by the man's gentle sigh. The smell of the man's own brand of cigarette easily traversed the rift between them, reminding them both of the silence, and their closeness. Another inhale, a pause, and an exhale. The smell of cigarettes and cologne, of sex and tobacco.

"What's your name," the stranger asked. James looked up to meet his eyes.

"James. Yourself?"

"Jackson Hayes. James..." Jackson let his voice trail away. It was obvious what he wanted.

"Richard," James said, "James Richard." He paused, and then deciding finally added, "The first."

Jackson smiled, his teeth flashed red under the light. His quick reply suggested humor, threatened a laugh. "The first? How many are there? Can't be too many of you, by the looks of you. What are you, maybe thirty?" He let his eyes wander the length of James's figure clearly guessing, suggestively speculating.

“Twenty-nine,” James answered, letting his gaze drop again. Both men took a drag, paused, and sighed, testing the again uncomfortable silence that threatened to consumed them.

“So, you’ve got a son?”

“Yes. A seven-year-old. And a four-year-old daughter.”

“James Richard the second,” Jackson chuckled, “And a daughter, too. Well that’s a perfect American family, isn’t it? You’re blessed James Richard, aren’t you?” Jackson raised his eyebrows at this last question, his eyes searching for a response.

“Yes,” James looked down again for a moment, just long enough to let a friendly puff of air escape his nostrils. *Blessed*. Did he feel that way, he wondered, as the air burst sarcastically and involuntarily from his nose? “I suppose I must be.” He reached for his back pocket and pulled out his black leather wallet. “Here. Take a look.”

Jackson happily surveyed the small photos that fell like an accordion out from between the smooth leather flaps. He chuckled softly, here and there, as his face lit up, looking genuine under the neon light.

“Beautiful. I especially like this one,” Jackson said finally, indicating a picture near the bottom of the accordion fold. It was one of James and his son, both smiling, holding up red Christmas stockings, with their identical names spelled out in green glitter goop, etched neatly into the white fluff which bordered the top. James laughed freely, now.

“Thanks. You got a family?”

“Sure,” Jackson said, shrugging, but not losing his smile, “A mom and a dad. A sister, too. They all live near Laramie. My parents have some land. And my sister has some kids. Two little boys.”

“None for you?” James asked teasingly, eyebrows raised, flashing a mischievous smile.

Jackson laughed softly, and let his eyes fall to the ground. His shoulders dropped too as his shuffled his feet. “No,” he said, “none for me.”

James looked down, knowingly. The two men again took two long, mirrored drags from their cigarettes, sighed, and looked up at each other. The silence had transformed. It was no longer an oppressive, awkward presence, but a bridge of understanding between these two men, smoking, standing under a neon bowling sign. James let out a smoky sigh.

“Why’d you come to Denver?” he asked.

“To get away,” said Jackson, “Laramie is too small for people like me.”

“Yeah, I understand” James said. Then laughing, “Denver is pretty small, too.”

“Bigger than Laramie. Plus nobody knows me down here.”

“Fair enough. Ever thought about going out to San Francisco, LA?”

“Sure,” laughed Jackson, blowing smoke out his nose, “But if Laramie’s too small, then those places are too big. Too big for a cowboy like me, anyway. I need some space. I need the mountains and the sky. I always imagine life is harder on the coast. Here you can get away, just by looking up at the sky, or seeing those Rocky Mountains. Everywhere you look there’s room to move, room to grow, you know?”

“Sure enough,” James said, “You can settle your roots and watch ‘em grow.”

“Exactly. Be whoever you wanna be ‘cuase there’s not so many people here all tryna be the same damn thing.”

James didn’t think that was quite right. He’d been here his whole life, the sky, the mountains, the West, he knew it all quite well. Sure, there was plenty of space. And, it was easy to blow through this place, letting the wind take you where it will, from Laramie to Denver, for example. James knew, however, that no matter how hard that wind blew, the mountains never bowed, the grass, the corn, it couldn’t be uprooted. In its own ways, the west would always be fixed. It might be easy to move around here, but it sure as hell was hard to get out.

“Still, I’d like to visit again someday,” said James, suddenly thinking of his children. He hoped that they might be able to make it out there, to the sea, to real freedom.

“Visit where, exactly? San Francisco? You been?” Jackson asked, smiling again, then knowingly, in a coy, suggestive tone, “A military man. The Tenderloin?”

James nodded and stamped out his cigarette. He pulled his jacket tightly against his shoulders again, and smiled at Jackson as he flicked the flaming stump away from him, too. The silence descended again, this time begging answers as it threatened finality. The two men locked eyes. James smiled shyly and then cast his eyes down. Jackson gently laughed.

“Well, it’s not much of a journey,” said Jackson finally, “But I’ve got a place you could visit if you’re interested.” James looked up and saw the flirt in this stranger’s blue eyes. He rubbed the back of his neck slowly, his chin pointing downwards as he eyed Jackson.

“I’ve got to be home,” he said eventually.

“A quick adventure,” said Jackson, “A little taste of freedom.”

Beneath the red neon light, some of the cigarette smoke still lingered. James's eyes fixated on it, as it caressed the stranger's tan boots in front of him; it crept into laces, caressing their smooth pinkish tips, sucking every detail from between their braids. Curious eyes slowly ascended, following the smoke that floated lazily over small mounds of flesh beneath brown corduroys, after pooling briefly just below the brown belt buckle, swirling in one unified, tantalizing eddy. White buttons on a teal shirt threatened to stem the flow every so often, but the wandering smoke was like a winding river, weaving its way into the spaces between the buttons, kissing and sculpting the hidden foundation. James's gaze continued to rise, slowly, until he saw the smoke melt over the exposed collar bones and ravenously plunge into the smooth space where the shirt had been left open. Finally, cologne impregnated the haze as it grazed the bare white neck briefly before the scent's force fired piercing arrows of hot sensation: powerful at first with an initial blast of orange and blue, then a gentler mint, until finally, purple filled the nostrils, making James stop and revel in the after taste, thinking about where they were and what they were doing; mountain's majesty.

"Well," James began, finally meeting the stranger's eyes. Those eyes were piercing, set in that smooth, blonde face, shining out like two small moons, the smoke creating halos around them.

"I've seen tumbleweed move quicker than you."

"Let's go inside. I'll say goodbye to my friends."

The two left the now comfortable space, lit by the red neon bowling sign, and walked back inside. James hurried over to the table where his friends sat, talking, laughing.

"There you are, James. Finally ready for round two?" Someone had asked that question, but James did not know who; he hadn't made eye contact with any of them.

"Not tonight fellas," said James, quickly pulling off his bowling shoes and replacing them with his boots. "I've got to be getting home." He met a few protests, but didn't acknowledge any of them.

Out of the corner of his eye, James could see Bobby watching him intently. The gaze Bobby had fixed was concerned, but also prying. James could feel the hot, accusational stare



burning the side of his face and knew that his body must have been dripping with anxiety, desperation, shame and anticipation. When he stood up to leave, Bobby followed.

“You alright?”

“Fine. Look, Bobby, I’ve got to go,” said James. Here, his gaze had betrayed him. The nervousness in his voice, his primal, agitated demeanor finally made sense as Bobby followed his gaze to the front door where a short attractive blond man stood, waiting, shuffling from left to right. Bobby’s eyes met James’ in a moment of empathy of understanding.

Bobby sighed and looked down at the ground for a moment. When he turned his gaze back up he noticed James had done the same. Here, in the middle of this hazy hub of entertainment, the two men stood face to face, immersed in their shared, unrecognizably obvious shame.

“James,” said Bobby calling the other man’s gaze back up, “Be careful.” He clasped James on the shoulder and the two men nodded at one another. James turned, stopped to say a few words to the blonde waiting at the door, and left the building.

Bobby waited a few moments, then he walked outside to stand in the red neon light. He lit a cigarette and took a slow, deep inhale. He could hear “Margaritaville” on the sound system inside and the shrieking of pins as a man opened the door, stepped outside, and asked him for a light.

She felt the weight on her lap become heavier, noticed it expand and contract in a deep, steady rhythm. Sleep. She flicked off the T.V. that was glowing blue in front of them. She shifted again, this time the weight oppressive. The child, whose head rested on her stomach, was now too big for her to carry. Had been for a while, actually. She’d have to wake him up to get him to bed. But she hesitated. She sat in the dark staring at a blank T.V., the yellow of the street light outside illuminating the orange curtains, creating a sleepy hue that lit the homey living room. Finally, she sighed, and repeated his name a few times as she rocked him gently.

“Jimmy,” she said, “Jimmy. Get up sweetie I’ll take you to bed.”

The child stirred and, without saying a word, caressed his groggy eyes. His brown wavy hair was cow-licked in certain places, towards the back, and his body was warm as he slumped off the couch. Practically blind, the boy stumbled down the hallway that led to his bedroom. He

forced down one of the corners of his blue sheets and crawled into bed. His mother, Susan, followed closely.

“Goodnight, Jimmy,” she said as she tucked him in, and planted a gentle kiss on his smooth forehead.

“Mommy,” said Jimmy, sleepily, “Tell daddy to come kiss me goodnight when he gets home, OK?”

Susan sighed. The boy looked so much like his father, James. The brown hair, the face, the skin tone, everything. Well, almost everything. The eyes were different. Susan’s little boy had her eyes, bright pools of clear blue, like crystalline tunnels leading underground. She smiled at him gently.

“I will. I’ll tell him. Go to sleep now, babe.” She kissed him again and gently closed the door, leaving it open just a crack, the way he liked it.

Susan walked to the end of the hall, past the room where her four-year-old daughter was sleeping and peaked inside. She saw the little pink mass moving up and down steadily, so she moved along, down to the end of the hall where she quietly slipped into her own bedroom. Here, she prepared for bed slowly, hoping she would catch her husband coming in the door. Every Saturday night was like this: James would leave, hastily, around eight o’clock; Susan would put her daughter to bed around nine; she’d watch T.V. with Jimmy, until he fell asleep; and then she’d go to bed, alone. Susan glanced at a clock on her bedside table. “12:30,” it read. James would not be home for another thirty minutes, at least, maybe more. Sometimes, he didn’t come home until two or three in the morning. So, she prepared for bed in this way. Slowly, hoping that this night maybe he’d come home early, and she could ask him where he’d been.

But truly, she knew where he had been. She’d checked the miles on his car a few weeks back. James was driving around thirty miles every Saturday night. Probably down to Denver, she thought. That was the only place he could go where nobody knew him, where he could get what he wanted.

On her way to bed, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. The silk nightgown stopped just above her knees, revealing her smooth, white legs. Despite her two children, her form was not entirely round, and even the loose clothing couldn’t hide her generous curves. She was sexy, she thought, standing in the mirror that was hung on the back of her bedroom door.

But, she didn't feel that way. She peeled back the floral sheets tucked tightly around her queen-sized bed and settled in.

Sleep always came slowly for Susan; she'd lie awake and wait, listen. And when it finally did come, it was shallow, restless. Like this she drifted in and out until she finally heard the front door open. She glanced at the clock: "2:13." A long night.

Susan could hear James making his way down the hallway. She shut her eyes, so he wouldn't know that she was awake. He entered the bedroom quietly, slipped of his clothes and climbed into bed. Every Saturday night was the same. Susan knew that he had gone to Denver to escape the suburbs for a night. But try as he might, she knew he'd never escape the West. He'd met some cowboy, maybe some other man enjoying the city. She knew this because, every Saturday, James would climb into bed, smelling like cigarettes and sex. The faint stench of some cologne she didn't know traveled easily in the darkness, inside of this still room. Tonight, Susan smelled bright citrus, then powerful blue like the roaring Colorado river. Green came next, as gentle as the hue on the summer conifers, the trees which masked the subtle western purple where they took root. These nights, James slept as far away from Susan as possible.

Just as things settled, James stirred and left the bed. A warm hazy spot haunted the space next to Susan where his body had been. He quietly left the room. Susan could hear the far door open in the hallway. James was going to kiss his son, his namesake, goodnight. Jimmy would ask his father in the morning if he'd come in to say goodnight, so James never forgot. When James returned the smoke and the sex came back. But, as the scent faded, the rift between husband and wife grew. It was as if the queen bed they slept in expanded outwards, a continent carrying them both in separate directions. He was a good father, and a good man, Susan thought. He had a wife, two kids, a loving family, and a job. But still, he'd go down to Denver every Saturday night, in search of something that they could never give him.

The faintest purple crossed the chasm between James and Susan, until it reached her nose. It soothed her, knowing he was still there, even if the marker of his existence was the scent of another. A small tear leaked out of one of her crystal blue eyes. Before it hit the pillow, the purple found it, kissed it, filled it with smoke. The milky tear left a wet trail which slowly dried as Susan faded into a gentle, hazy sleep.