

Jeanette Weaskus

Never Dirty, Mostly Clean

I got the job my junior year in 1987 to earn free lunch. And what I would hand out the window would bring a treasure into the farthest reaches of my memory. It was a friendship uncomplicated by the adult toxins of expectation. For only a minimal time in this life can we have friends without burden. After the teenage years will come marriages and children. The new boundaries imposed on having friends of opposite sex are strict and unforgiving. And so I recall this time with Jerome.

“Yo’ snaps ain’t no good here,” I told him from the window of the high school snack bar.

“Word,” Jerome said and pocketed his lunch money.

There was a more sizeable pile of food before him than most others who came through my line, chicken sandwich, piroshki, burrito, bag of Doritos, Cherry Coke, and a Reeses Peanut Butter Cup. The typical female customer ordered a pop and a candy bar, while a male would get a piroshki and pop. My pile was the same size as Jerome’s. We were both big guys.

He realized that there was nothing free in the ghetto, that I wanted something from him. Maybe not right at the moment, but sometime later, I would come to collect on that free lunch by asking a favor. I imagined what he might spend his four dollars on after school. Would he walk two blocks to Round Table Pizza to get breadsticks and a Coke, or get a sub at the shop across from his building after the bus dropped him off.

I knew he lived in the Omega Court Projects over on A Street. When I was visiting my sister at her apartment, I saw him helping his mamma inside the door of #142 with bags of groceries. Purchased with food stamps, no doubt. Everybody who lived in those PJ's was on welfare.

I knew it was hard for his mamma to squeeze out four dollars a day for the snack bar, but what else could she do? Jerome was a talented defensive lineman and was already getting scouted out by USC. The Trojans came up to our high school every year to draft at least five boys for their basketball and football teams. Going to college on an athletic scholarship was like winning the lottery, a chance to escape the poverty of Sacramento's grimy north side. An opportunity to not become a drug peddler or maintenance man.

I waited for the day he would come back to my line. It was on Monday. I sent him away with a hoard of greasy white packets. He pocketed his money with a gap-toothed smile. After more than a month of freebies, he would catch up to me in the main hall. We were surrounded by oppressive floor-to-ceiling chain link fence which protected some of the lockers and the computer classroom. Computers were a new thing and had to be kept safe from the inevitable theft of valuables in the inner city. Jerome did not speak until we walked out of the hallway and into the sunshine.

“Why you give me free food, man?” he asked, “You like me o' somethin'?”

“I'm butterin' you up yo',” I said.

“Yeah? For What?” Jerome asked.

“Fo' yo' football workout, man,” I answered.

I would meet Jerome in the school weight room that Friday afternoon. He did not think it strange to shuffle through Coach Harris' black binder and unclip the page with his specialized exercises for a girl to copy. He thought it a tiny effort in exchange for so much free food. I copied his personalized work-out regimen in the dim, yellow light. Jerome Washington – Defensive Tackle 1987, I scribbled at the top of a page in my notebook.

“Why you work your traps so much?” I asked.

“Traps is what keeps your neck from getting' hurt,” he replied.

“What about all these squats?” I wondered.

“That's so you can really drive into your opponent,” Jerome clarified.

That weekend, I began Jerome's specialized program for the defensive tackle. My gym was just one block from Jerome's projects. I used my lunch money to pay the ten dollar per month dues. My mamma knew I worked in the snack bar and ate for free, but said it didn't sit right with her to send me to school with no lunch money. It was also good to have a few extra bucks for gas. Two dollars in my bug would get me downtown and back. I had worked at the Air Force Base all summer and bought that car for six hundred dollars, along with the most important addition, a cassette deck for twenty-five bucks.

On a rainy day Jerome missed the bus. He saw me coming out of Ms. Earl's office and asked why I got in trouble, then wanted a ride home. I always got in trouble for sitting by John Webb. He made me laugh. It is like twenty flocks of crows gagging at once, my laugh. And that John, he's a funny guy. Before we could go anywhere, I

opened the glove box and pondered over which tape to put in, Grandmaster Flash or Afrika Bambaataa?

“You like Da Baam?” Jerome asked.

“Yeah, you?” I asked.

“Man, my pops listen to Da Baam,” Jerome said with a laugh.

He dug through the tapes, reading the labels written in Old English style lettering by Dave Martinez, my buddy who taped all the latest jams for me.

“Now this is fresh,” Jerome said.

It was my new Run DMC “Raising Hell” tape.

“N’s for never dirty, C’s for mostly clean,” he sang along with Joe and Darryl.

I was surprised to see Jerome in the spotter’s position above me as I bench pressed. We had been out of school for three weeks. He was walking to the 39 Cent Hamburger Stand, around the corner from King’s Gym where I spent my vacation so far. He saw me through the windows and came in to say hello.

“I wish I could work out over the summer,” Jerome remarked.

“Why can’t you?” I asked.

“King don’t take food stamps,” Jerome said.

We laughed at that universal ghetto joke. K-Mart and Burger King didn’t take food stamps either, but you could walk around the corner from the gym and trade two twenty-spot foodies for a vial of crack.

I imagined Dave King, sitting at his desk, counting out food stamps and trying to balance his books. When I first started lifting weights in 1985, Dave showed me the thick calluses on the palms of his hands. Yellowed and rough like tree bark from gripping metal bars for so many years. The boys won't want to hold your hand, he'd told me, if you lift heavy. I'll just have to risk it, Dave, I'd said.

"My brother got an old iron bench and weights," I said.

"Yeah?" Jerome said.

"You should come over and lift," I invited.

We could not bench press on my brother's bench or do squats because there were only sixty-five pounds of plates, but we were able to work everything else. It was best to work out in the morning. The back patio of my house was shady before noon and a breeze cooled us as we burned from the inside with pumped lactic and amino acids. During these mornings together, Jerome taught me to throw a football with force and accuracy. My arm was so accurate that it pissed me off. If I had been born a boy, I'd be heading to USC with Jerome. It is indeed frustrating to be born a huge, football-loving female. Powder Puff football games were only one night of every school year.

After we worked out at my house, he rode his bike home. I accompanied Jerome until he turned off at his building and I continued on for two more miles to the Laotian neighborhood to further develop my quadriceps. Later in the evenings I'd drive to the gym to powerlift. As I finished up a heavy session of clean and jerks, Dave told me some boys were gathered around my car. Jerome and the Johnson brothers, Andre and Dante, waited for me.

"Sup?" I greeted.

“What you doin’ tonight, Jay?” Jerome asked.

“I was just gonna watch wrestling, the British Bulldogs are on tonight,” I answered.

“Wanna go to the club?” Dante asked.

The club was way out in South Sac. Jerome rode shot-gun and the brothers were in back. He passed my Fat Boys tape around to be laughed at.

“So none of you saw *Disorderlies*?” I interrogated.

“Man, Dante saw it twice,” Andre tattled and we laughed about it.

Now Jerome was the one puzzling over which tape to put in, “King of Rock” or “RUN-D.M.C.” He rewound “It’s Tricky” and listened to it two more times before letting the tape finish itself.

Andre guided me through the streets of this strange hood. Crips walked in groups, staring at us as we passed. It must have looked strange to them, a girl of unknown brownish ethnicity driving three black boys. A girl driving through the hood is not threatening, so nobody showed us their Glocks. They looked into the Beetle’s windows for signs of gang affiliation, but found none. We were careful to wear all black and remain neutral on the Crip side. We were not Bloods or Crips, just football players from Del Norte out to the club on Friday.

The club was called “Coco Palms.” We paid two dollars for cover charge and huddled together for a moment before Andre grabbed my hand and wanted to dance. It was a fresh song, remixed live by the DJ. I like a lot of scratching and this guy tore it up.

I looked around the club at the people. Men wore tight black jeans, black t-shirts, and white Adidas shoes. Around their necks were huge gold chains with glinting medallions or crosses. The gangsters had blue bandannas tied around their heads or biceps. Some men wore baggy pants, loafers and silk shirts like MC Hammer. My favorite guys were the breakers in their Kangol sweatsuits.

The women flicked around their hair with acrylic nails and played with the colorful straws of mixed drinks. Most wore miniskirts, clingy tank tops, and pumps. They laughed with girlfriends, gold hoop earrings shining in the dappled light of an old disco ball. I wondered what it would be like to dance in pumps like these women, my archless feet hobbled in that strange footgear. My feet were mighty comfortable in white Converse All-Stars with fat, black laces, size ten in men's.

I was not the only brownie in the club. There were a few Mexicans speckled around. I liked how the men looked in their khakis cut to the knee, tube socks pulled up high, China flat shoes and a-shirts.

“Check dem brothuhs out,” Jerome said.

We looked at some guys our age that just came in. They were dressed, Run DMC style, like us, only they had chains with Mercedes hood ornaments.

“That’a fresh yo’,” Dante said.

We were dressed in black again, but we weren't going to Coco Palms. Andre and Dante were the ones with a dad, so they raided the toolbox. All we needed were wire cutters. We drove to Fair Oaks Boulevard where my mamma cleaned houses. She

worked for doctors, lawyers, and a corporate president. I helped her clean their houses all summer and knew my way around the rich neighborhoods. In this neighborhood lived

Billy Mills, the Lakota Olympic gold medalist. And I hoped we did not clip his hood ornament by mistake.

“Stop at the store first, Jay,” Jerome said.

“Don’t you wanna wait, them eggs’ll be sittin’, they might go bad, man,” I advised.

“We ain’t gonna be in no shape to buy eggs after we be stealin’, man,” Jerome reasoned.

“All right, then,” I agreed.

Jerome’s mamma had given him a booklet of food stamps and asked him to bring home eggs. She gave him a five so he could buy us all a pop. I stopped at Pak N’ Save in Citrus Heights. It was almost to the rich neighborhood. The people who lived in this area were the kind who bought their kids a new car when they turned sixteen. Jerome nestled the egg carton beside his feet. We cracked open our root beers and toasted Ethel Washington.

Dante wanted to see what San Juan High looked like. It was just down Greenback Lane in Citrus Heights, so we cruised by. It did not look special in the dark. I was still driving slow as we passed the nearby bus stop. A fat woman with stringy yellow hair yelled into the window at me.

“You fucking nigger loving bitch,” she screamed.



I looked at Jerome's face. He was shocked and hurt. I waited for anger, but there was only silence. Though it would have felt good to pelt her gut with blows, violence could not answer the hurt felt by my friends at that moment. Instead, I used Jerome's gift to me, traded for with dozens of chicken sandwiches and Cherry Cokes. I flipped a u-turn and cruised back by the bus stop. I wondered if the Johnson brothers looked at the woman or did not.

"Are you going to kick my ass now, bitch?" the woman yelled.

I bent down and fished out one of Ethel's eggs. I threw it with my deadly Dan Marino arm. It hit her huge left tit. The yolk splattered up her wide bosom to leave a cold, slimy sunflower pattern on the wide expanse of the purple t-shirt. Her face contorted with pain and she let out a screech. She clutched at the yolk on her chest.

"That look like it hurt, Jay," Jerome said with a curious, flat note in his voice.

We did not go to the rich neighborhood that night to clip Mercedes hood ornaments, but back to the projects. As we pulled into the parking lot and I smelled the grilling chicken of a late night bar-b-que, I felt the tension of that racist confrontation diminish. The boys were also glad to be home and asked me to kick it in the courtyard. The ever present shattered glass crackled under our soles, a song of welcome on the way to the picnic tables.

The velvety sound of African voices further put us at ease. The talk swirled above our heads from the open apartment windows. Jerome took his mother's eggs inside while the Johnson brothers sat on the farthest side from the bar-b-que. A

helicopter with a glaring spotlight buzzed in circles, looking for some breaker of the law. Jerome's large shadow was caught in its light as he returned.

We talked in smatter at first, about who the five-0 is chasing tonight, and how that chicken smelled so good. The chicken led straight to the egg and the guys began to chuckle about it, until soon the vision left in their heads was so funny, they were having trouble breathing as they laughed about it. I felt good that we were left with a memory to laugh at in the face of racism.

Just before the summer ended, we rode the train downtown. The K Street Mall had a four story parking garage, full of Jaguars, Mercedes, Audi, Volvo, Porsche. Jerome tried to boost the first hood ornament by ripping it off. It was secured by two metal cables. Dante bent it back, Andre clipped the cable. We could only wear our ghetto medallions for a couple weeks before the school district banned them.

Jerome was busy when football practice and school started. I missed hanging out, but wanted him shipped out to USC. I was there at the home games, watching him hold the defensive line. We'd kept faithful to the trapesius workouts all summer and now Jerome was a real bull. Besides throwing, he also taught me some of the running and driving drills from his after school practice.

I thought back to my original plan of bribing Jerome Washington with free snack bar food so I could copy down his football season workout. And considered how much more I got besides that entry in my notebook. When it came my time to play football, Jerome insisted I wear his uniform. The day of my first game, I pulled his battered

shoulder pads over my head and laced them up. Put on the bright red #98 jersey with HIGHLANDS across my chest and WASHINGTON from shoulder to shoulder. When I tied the fly of those skin tight pants and buckled the chin strap of Jerome's helmet, I had already won the game.