

The Boys Are Back

Jack stirred and saw Collins staring. Sam noticed nothing, his Lucky smoldering, his thoughts adrift with the smoke. Jack glared at Collins then shut his eyes again.

What a weirdo, he thought. What the hell's he looking at? Who cared if Collins liked him. He wasn't interested in playing varsity, just like he wasn't wowed by Collins like Jenkins and Connolly were.

Collins was a low-scoring, defensive-minded point guard whose game, Jack joked, resembled a corn-fed white guy's more than a Chicago-bred playgrounder. He did not fit the black or jock stereotype academically either. Majored in English literature, quoted poetry in practice, minored in religious studies. Always polite and cool, and dressed liked he stepped out of the pages of *Ebony*.

Jack had heard mixed reviews of Collins around St. Jude. "Tryin' to be white," the black kids at the Y said. "An educated, God-fearin' man," a weathered, white farmer said one day at the counter of B&W's Diner, where Sam and Jack ate breakfast on Saturday's. "You gotta respect that."

Maybe there was truth in both sentiments, but Jack's seventeen-year-old brain did not care if Collins was white, black, brown, or purple. He was still a point guard turned coach-slash-teacher-slash-preacher with a Napoleon complex and an over-developed vocabulary.

Reggie Collins, Mr. All-American-free-ride-jock-suck-up. A gentleman and a scholar? An Uncle Tom or the Jackie Robinson of St. Jude? Who gives a damn? What does this guy know about me or my situation?

Jack had his own problems. For one, expulsion, now glaring at him from a plastic chair in the form of one Dipshit Dunham. But, somehow, he felt fine. Maybe it was the pale lime color of the concrete block walls. Psychologists said lime was a calming color. The public schools concurred. Every principal's office Jack had visited, and there had been many, bore the same lime shade.

Jack chalked up his calmness to fatigue, namely the hangover he carried after partying with the Rams last night at Luke Davis's off-campus apartment. Even though in trouble for flipping off Dunham, Jack knew Sam would be preoccupied with finding Mary Lou and that Grandma Henderson would be watching the girls, same as she always did when Mom "went on a trip." Reaching home after the library incident, Jack had scarfed down a turkey sandwich, gulped two glasses of milk, run up to his room to get cash, and left a note in the kitchen that he was at Luke's. His cash he'd taken to keeping in a hiding place where Mary Lou would not find it. Once Sam had removed her name from the bank accounts and credit cards, she had begun stealing from the kids to finance her escapes.

Grandma Henderson and the girls were in bed when Jack stumbled home at ten, entering through the back door to hear Sam talking on the phone in the den. A half-hour later when Sam opened his bedroom door, Jack pretended to be asleep, and Sam acted as if he believed him.

Despite his father's smoldering quiet that morning outside Principal Locke's office, Jack smiled at the thought of Luke and the rest of the Rams. They'd all grown up in the same neighborhood, where they had played ball together since grade school. Why the group of them—Jack, Luke, P.K., Jeff Gudman, Eliseo "Cheyo" Jackson, and Jimmy "Kip" Keino—called themselves the Running Rams, none of them could remember. Something to do with basketball,

a beer bottle logo, and the hyped-up imagination and energy a close group of teenage boys generates.

Running Rams was a contradiction in terms. Rams do not run away from a fight. They dig into the dirt, jaws tucked into their chests, then charge and butt heads until the stronger ram prevails and the weaker turns tail. But Running Rams was their summer league team name. “Old Black Betty, Bam a Lam” by Ram Jam became their theme song. Barney Fife, Jethro Bodine, and the spaghetti western star Clint Eastwood were their patron saints. A general “Party on, but let’s not screw up our chances to get into a good college” was their motto.

Jack stole a glance at Collins. The combination of the *Jenkins looked strong* comment and Jack’s hangover reminded him of the night the Rams had gathered at Luke’s apartment a few months earlier to celebrate the victory over the varsity in the summer Y league.

Jimmy and Gudy rustled about in the kitchen, scrounging frozen pizzas to toss in the oven, while Jack, Cheyo, P.K., and Luke sprawled on the cheap, orange and black plaid cushions of Luke’s garage sale furniture. Posters plastered the walls: Jimi Hendrix, the Who, Charlie’s Angels, Charlie Daniels, and Jack’s personal favorite, Jim Morrison. A red, white, and blue neon Pabst Blue Ribbon sign flashed on and off in the kitchen, and the Doors “Roadhouse Blues” thumped from the stereo, as the boys sipped beers and settled in for a bullshit session.

Luke, stout and shirtless, ensconced in the brown, corduroy Lazy Boy recliner he retrieved from the curb on garbage pickup day a year earlier. One man’s trash another’s treasure, he had carried the chair four blocks and up two flights of stairs to its present location, where it had not budged since. Sporting a farmer’s tan from July corn detasseling—table leg arms tan up to the bicep, face burnt, beer keg of a chest and sturdy legs white—he laughed about a bone-crunching pick he’d applied to Jenkins in the first minute of the game. Smothering a long neck

bottle of Old Milwaukee with one meaty hand, he brushed his flattop haircut with the other and laughed as he recalled the look on a gasping Jenkins face. Luke wrestled light heavyweight in high school and college, and his hair, build, and never-say-die attitude earned him the nickname *Sarge*. But Jack called him Luke. They had known each other so long, it would have been like calling a brother by a nickname his friends had given him.

His younger brother, Paul Kennedy “P.K.” Davis, named after a pope and a president, resembled Luke around the eyes, dark brown and intense, but that was where the resemblance stopped. P.K. stood five feet eleven inches and carried one hundred fifty pounds on a distance runner’s frame, his dishwater blond hair flowing when he raced up and down the court. An excellent ball handler and passer who shared his wrestler-brother’s fearlessness, P.K. became the Ram’s point guard, penetrating the paint with controlled aggression. Able to dish off to a Ram for a basket while opposing teams smacked him to the floor, P.K. always bounced up, ready for more.

As for Luke and basketball, the pick on Jenkins summed up his contribution. Luke played the role of the enforcer/garbage man/sixth man who came into the game to give guys a break. He rebounded well, took up space on defense, shot the ball when wide open and under the hoop, and stayed out of the way. What Luke loved, what he lived for on the basketball court, was a collision: a charge, a pick, a takedown on a breakaway, not undercutting the guy, but tackling and wrapping him up, sending him to the free throw line to *earn* the two points. But the ultimate thrill for Luke was a good hard screen, the gasp slipping from opposing player’s lungs as they bounced off his rock-ribbed chest.

“Perfect pick,” he said, thinking of Jenkins.

“Sweet,” P.K. said.

“Pinche gringo,” the half-white, half-Mexican Cheyo said from his spot on the orange and black plaid couch. “Makes you wonder if Jenkins teammates hate his ass. Nobody called out the screen. Nobody.”

Cheyo, “as in ‘DAYO’” he told teachers calling roll at the beginning of each school year, slapped his chest with almond colored hands and laughed. Cheyo had the whitest teeth east of Hollywood, and when he smiled those teeth split the coal black whiskers encircling his mouth, giving his half-man, half-boy face the look of a crazed bandoleer from a spaghetti western. Cheyo’s dad, Robert, a tall, dark-haired Scot-Irish Catholic, was a soft-spoken Illinois grad who returned to St. Jude to practice law. He met Cheyo’s mom, Vita, a second-generation Mexican-American from the barrios of Chicago, in college.

Cheyo resembled Robert, but inherited his mother’s boisterous personality and energy. Although only six foot one—“Whaddaya mean *only*?” Cheyo would say, “That’s tall for a Mexican!”—he played forward for the Rams. An early bloomer who shaved at thirteen, he weighed one hundred seventy pounds and had finished growing at fifteen. By eighteen he was buying beer without an I.D. Like Luke, he enjoyed the rough and tumble play on the frontline. A scrappy guy on the court, who always guarded one of the opponent’s top scorers, Cheyo trash-talked a mix of English and Spanish—“Not today vato, no mas, no mas!”—pestering opponents into turnovers and fouls. Never interested in offense and an average ball handler, Cheyo got points off hustle, put-backs, and free throws.

That day in the Y game, Cheyo guarded Connolly, The varsity player’s frustration was palpable as Cheyo held him well below his scoring average. Carrying four fouls into the fourth quarter, Connolly fouled out after Cheyo stole the ball and streaked down the court for a

breakaway layup. Pissed, Connolly had clipped him at the knees and flipped Cheyo onto the hardwood, preventing the basket and clearing the benches.

“Temper, temper, amigo,” Cheyo said with a smile to the cursing Connolly.

After the refs restored order, Cheyo made two free throws and the teams shot technical fouls, Jack sinking one for the Rams, Jenkins missing for the varsity, giving the Rams a two-point lead.

“Yeah, well,” Luke said, referring to the pick on Jenkins, “you paid for it later. Connolly cheap-shotted you but good, man.”

“Forget about it, mano. We won. That’s all that matters,” Cheyo said, then pointed at the muted TV. “Hey, turn it up. *Jeopardy*’s on, and they got a category on Elvis.”

Luke raised the volume over the stereo.

“What is ‘Jail House Rock’?” Luke and Cheyo shouted at the TV.

“What is ‘Jail House Rock’?” a black-tied guy with granny glasses responded. “Elvis for 400, Art.”

“Song from Elvis first movie,” said Art Fleming the host of “Jeopardy.”

“What is ‘Love Me Tender’?” said Luke.

“What is ‘Are You Lonesome Tonight’?” said the TV.

“Wrong, you lame ass, Coke-bottle-glasses nerd!” Luke yelled at the screen. “Sorry,” Art said. “What is ‘Love Me Tender’.”

“Man,” said Luke. “How can you grow up in America, go to college, and not know crap about the King. Unbelievable.”

Luke and Cheyo, like the rest of the Rams, were Elvis fans. The Rams dug the Stones, Led Zeppelin, Cheap Trick, Jimi, the Doors, Pink Floyd, AC/DC, all that stuff, but they knew

that in his day Elvis was the baddest rock 'n roller of all. The Rams were not build-a-shrine-in-your-house, Elvis-in-black-velvet type fans, but admirers of the Elvis of the 1950s to the 1968 comeback TV special, before fried peanut butter and banana sandwiches and a handful of pills became his diet, and he bloated up like a Thanksgiving Day parade float. Bouncing around the stage, Kung Fu fighting, a parody of himself, the King had died long before they found him crumpled on the bathroom floor, pants around his ankles, bottles of uppers and downers on the shelf.

Being surrounded by sycophants was what killed Elvis, the Rams agreed. Past a certain point, nobody told him *no*, and everybody needs somebody not afraid to say no. The Rams had their folks and each other. They drank, and when they drank too much it bit them in the ass, but no pills, no hard drugs. Listening to Jimmy Morrison howl and smoking the occasional Marlboro while swigging an Old Milwaukee long neck was about as crazy as it got. No harm, no foul.

“Can you believe that geek?” Luke said. “‘Are You Lonesome Tonight’? You got to be kidding me. You can’t understand this country if you don’t know your Elvis. Don’t have to like him, mind you... although if you don’t that makes you suspect in my book. But if you don’t know Elvis, you don’t know America. I don’t give a damn how many freakin’ PhDs you get. It’s impossible. Your education is incomplete. Remember...”

“*Before anyone did anything, Elvis did everything!*” Cheyo, Luke, Jack, and P.K. shouted in unison, slapping hands and giggling.

“Ah, man,” Jimmy Keino said as he walked in from the kitchen with Gudy, a fresh brew in his hand. “Drinkin’ beer and talkin’ trivia about Elvis. Won’t be too long before Luke starts wavin’ the Confederate flag.”

“Now, you know, Jimmy,” Luke said. “The Civil War wasn’t about slavery. It was about individual state rights. And what the hell do you care, anyway? You weren’t even born here.”

“I knew it, I knew it,” Jimmy said laughing as he sat down on a chair next to Luke. “Elvis always gets you goin’.”

Jimmy “Kip” Keino was an honest-to-God-African-American-via-Kenya who was so black he looked blue, whose real name was not Jimmy, and whose Kenyan name was not Kip. Kip was the name of a miler who’d won an Olympic gold medal in 1968, but even his folks called him Jimmy or Kip.

At six foot three, Jimmy played forward, joining Cheyo and Jeff Gudman on the front line. Like Jack he could create his own shot, using a fast first step to get to the hole and jumping-jack leaping ability to finish. Unlike Jack he lacked a good jump shot and so, even though the shorter of the two, Jimmy played forward.

“Jimmy, you’re always stirrin’ shit up, lookin’ to argue,” Luke said and laughed, slapping Jimmy on the knee. “Doesn’t matter whether you’re speaking English or that Kenyan tribal rap with your parents when you don’t want us white folk knowin’ what’s up.”

“Guilty as charged,” Jimmy said, who scored a thirty-two on his ACT and hoped to use that and a high grade-point-average to gain acceptance into the prelaw curriculum at Georgetown. “Comes from being the product of two parents with PhD’s,” Jimmy continued, “who don’t let me talk enough around the house because they’re busy impressing each other with their big brains. And reminding me they are descended from royalty and to act accordingly.”

“Yeah,” said Luke. “We know all about your royal lineage. All you guys from Africa are descended from royalty. Not a peasant in the bunch. Your parents remind me of these reincarnation believers. None of those bastards say, ‘I was a shitkicking shepherd.’ No, every last

one of 'em was a Roman Emperor or a member of a royal court. Not a shitkicker or a whore in the bunch. Maybe that's Africa's problem, got so much royalty ain't nobody left to work."

"Excuse me?" said Jimmy. "You gonna start with your lazy-nigger-societal-theory-from-the-perspective-of-an-Elvis-lover rap?"

"Hey man, I didn't say that," Luke said, face red. "Why is it you and Richard Pryor can rip honkies, but we make one joke and y'all get on your high horse and start screamin' racism?"

"We're all prejudiced," Jimmy said. "It's just a question of degree and whether we choose to admit it, try to rise above it."

"Ah, Jesus H. Christ, Jimmy," Luke said. "Now you gonna get all philosophical on us. I was just havin' fun with you. Sometimes, man, I feel like..."

"Like what? Kickin' my uppity ass?" Jimmy said rising.

"Well, now that you mention it," Luke responded leaning forward.

"Hey, fellas," Gudman said with a laugh as he plopped onto the couch and pulled Jimmy down with him. "What is this, an after-school special on race in America? We kicked some major varsity ass, and you guys are startin' in on that crap? Give it a rest, man. Give it a rest."

Jimmy waved his hand and sank into his chair. Luke, jaw grinding, muted the TV. Jack, P.K, and Cheyo stopped talking and took swigs from their beers.

Gudman was the one guy beside their dads or Jack who could shut up Jimmy and Luke. All the boys looked up to Gudy, a walking, talking blond-haired, blue-eyed billboard for the All-American boy. Straight-A student, star pitcher on the baseball team, class president, dated all the best looking girls, never made fun of kids but liked to drink beer and hang with the guys as much as anybody. The most popular kid in school, hands down. Everyone loved Gudy, the Golden Boy

they called him, and not behind his back with a smirk and a wink but with admiration. As Jack's little sister Becky once said with a sigh and a roll of her eyes, "He's so cool."

But on the court, the easy going Gudy became a fierce competitor. When Connolly took Cheyo down, Gudy, taking a breather on the bench, leapt into the middle of the fray, and came face to face with Timmy Brewster, the black, six foot eight, two-hundred-twenty-pound starting center for the varsity, who'd knocked Jack away from Connolly with one swipe. Even at six foot four, one ninety, Gudy looked small next to Brewster. But Gudy did not give an inch and shoved Brewster like he was firing a cross-court chest pass. The big man tumbled to the floor, the ref and Y staff stepping in before Brewster retaliated.

When the game resumed Gudy checked in for Luke and called for the ball in the post. Back to the basket and Brewster, who banged him with a forearm to the spine, Gudy took the inbound pass with his right hand and pivoted the same direction, giving a quick head and shoulder fake. Brewster, amped from the shoving, took the bait and leapt. Gudy reversed direction, ducked around the big man's body, took two hard dribbles and soared to the hoop, jamming the ball with his right hand as Brewster fell away to the left.

The crowd roared and the Rams exchanged high-fives as they raced back to play defense, never to surrender the lead.

But, now, a few hours removed from the win, they sat in silence.

"Gudy's right," P.K. said, ever the point guard, directing traffic, kicking butt when needed, praising when deserved. P.K. raised his beer. "A toast to the Rams."

"To the Rams," Jack and Cheyo said, bumping bottles with P.K.

"What is this half-ass shit?" P.K. said and stood up, lifting his Old Mil high. "Running Rams! Running Rams! Running RAMS! RUNNING RAMS!"

All the boys stood and chanted, Jimmy and Luke cracking grins as they jumped up and down, anger fading as fast as it emerged.

Like a family around the kitchen table telling stories from back in the day, the boys lingered at Luke's and talked about the game:

There'd been the varsity boys bickering after Cheyo's breakaway and Gudy's dunk, as they sensed the game slipping away, their first string about to get beat by a beer-drinking, college-prep, mish-mash of neighborhood kids. The crowd was one of the biggest for the tournament, with high school and younger kids ringing the court, a few parents, coaches, and college scouts in the stands, as well as the team from Blooming Grove who the Rams would meet the next day in the finals, led by All-State player Hassan "Go-Go" Jones, a jet-black, six foot six superman, who seemed to never tire or slow down during a game, his engine running on ten cylinders to everybody else's eight. There'd been the deer-in-the-headlights look on Jenkins's face when Jack slammed the ball. Jack going airborne eight feet from the hoop, the crowd rising with him, even Go-Go Jones, gazing as Jack's right arm extended high, the brown leather ball suction-cupped to his hand as Jack froze in midair for a split second, bent knees even with Jenkins eyes, before descending and driving the ball through the rim so hard it smacked the hardwood and ricocheted off Jenkins's left cheek. The gym exploded, kids ringing the court hooting and hollering, Jones and his all-black team laughing, exchanging high-fives, coaches and scouts, hands on hips or arms folded across chests, nodding, grinning, exchanging knowing glances. Then, after the game, the junior college scout who approached Jack and asked for his phone number.

"That's gotta feel good," Gudy said, tipping his Old Mil Jack's way.

"Ah, to hell with that. I ain't goin' to a JC to play ball."

“Bull, Jack,” Cheyo said. “I saw you give him your phone number.”

“No, you didn’t” Jack said, laughing. “You saw me give him the number to the sheriff’s office. I got it memorized from the list of emergency numbers posted by our kitchen phone. First number we call when Mom’s on the run. Guy’s gonna be talkin’ to the police dispatcher.”

The boys laughed and exchanged high fives.

Empty brown Old Milwaukee bottles lined and then fell from the plywood-and-concrete-block “coffee table,” clinking on the floor when the boys kicked them out of the way as they rose for another round from the fridge or to take a leak, the curling smoke of Marlboros overhead as Jimmy and the Doors roared. Bullshit thickened the air, choking the boys with laughter, cheeks stinging from constant smiling, not wanting to go, but curfew creeping close, beer yawns spreading, finally heading for home, leaving Luke stretched out on his recliner, clicking the remote control.

Jack and P.K. were the last to leave. As they stumbled toward the door they listened to Luke mumbling at a flickering image of a singing Andy Gibb, the latest in a long line of wavy-haired, teen heartthrobs.

“Pathetic wannabe,” Luke grumbled, “not even good enough to be an honest-to-God Bee Gee, whatever the hell that is. There’s one King, goddammit, and his name is Elvis. That’s the TRUE gospel according to Luke.... ‘Amen,’ said the choir.”

As Andy Gibb disco danced across the shimmering screen, Luke went dark, sound asleep. Jack and P.K. giggled as they shut the door behind them.

The next day, hungover and outmanned, the Rams were blown out by Hassan Jones and his team as the St. Jude varsity players sprawled around the court, cheering for Blooming Grove and jeering the Rams.