

The Story of James Medeiros

CHASE BARNES

Only semisober, I was leaving a nightclub in Waikīkī one night when a haole marine walked up and pushed me. At first I didn't understand why he pushed me, but then he yelled that I was trying to talk to his girlfriend, and that she "doesn't like niggers." At that moment, a person I had befriended just a couple of hours earlier walked up and punched the guy in the face. The guy fell down the stairs and has been in a coma ever since. My new friend's name was James, but everyone called him "Baby James."

Baby James was an average-sized man, but he was much smaller than the people he hung around. Half Hawaiian, half Puerto Rican, and just a little crazy, he carried a distinct scar on the right side of his eye from one the many scraps he had been in. This man was the first person to befriend me here in Hawai'i and to teach me about some of the struggles "real locals" face in the islands.

CORRESPONDENCE MAY BE SENT TO:
Chase Barnes
Email: barnes6@hawaii.edu

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I had moved to Honolulu on August 16, 2012, on separation leave three months before my time in the military was officially over. Moving to Hawai'i was highly recommended by my military superiors, as well as other branches of the government, as a safety precaution and as a way to isolate myself from the people I worked with and against during my six years in the military. Although I had visited O'ahu a couple of times as a child and during deployments, I knew almost nothing about the culture, land, and struggle for independence. All I knew was that it is an extremely expensive place to live, and that there are a lot of beautiful women here.

After finding a place to live in Waikikī two weeks after moving to Hawai'i, I decided to visit a nightclub. The line at Zanzabar was really long, but I kept noticing locals walking to the front, cutting in line, and getting in for free. I walked down the block and saw a group of Polynesian guys making fun of dudes walking by them, sometimes flirting with their girlfriends. Most of the dudes were too scared to say anything back. When I walked past, the Polynesian guys immediately started making black jokes, so I started cracking fat jokes on them, purposely mistaking them for other races, like Puerto Rican, Micronesian, Japanese, etc. One of them told me I had some balls and said I should walk away before I get "falsed." I had no idea what that word meant, so I asked them. They just laughed as they walked to the front of the line of Zanzabar, telling me to follow them. The bouncer, Samson, stopped me at the door, and Baby James told him I was with them. Since I got in for free, I bought them all a shot as a token of my appreciation. I've been with that crew of nightclub bouncers ever since.

I didn't think much of that night. I didn't know that the marine who got punched was in a coma, or that Baby James got arrested. I didn't think much about it. All

I knew was that someone had called me a nigger, and that one of James's friends had told me that I should come to the Playbar the next day because drinks were one dollar. So the next night I got to the Playbar around 2:00 a.m., and everyone was pretty drunk already. One of the guys from the night before laughed and yelled out, "Hey! That's the guy who called me a fat Puerto Rican." He walked up to me and introduced himself, Willy Boy Tamasoa, but he said to just call him "B" or "Brandon," like everyone else does.

B told me James went to jail the night before, after punching the other guy out. All these stories about James and his family came pouring out:

"You know James works here and at Zanzabar, right?"

"News to me," I said, not really caring much.

"James's dad is one of the original beachboys," Brandon said.

"What's that?" I replied.

Everyone laughed.

Brandon referred to his friends as "sole," "aiga," and other terms I had never heard of. At the end of the night, they recommended that I come out to drink the next night, and I soon realized that they wanted me around only for free drinks.

Two months passed, and by that time, because I was hanging with James, I was getting into all the clubs for free and had his friends buying me drinks. James's guard card had been suspended because of the nightclub incident, so he could no longer work at Playbar, and since I was around so much, they had me replace him as security.

Baby James was still at the club every night, drinking and telling stories as if he were Joe Pesci from Goodfellas. His dad would always come in and get him from the club. Father James was always soft-spoken and polite, asking permission to go inside the club and get his son. Everyone gave him respect, but it was a different kind, as if they were scared of him. I guess father James had been some type of gangster in his heyday, but he just appeared as an old, fragile man to me.

During our drunken nights at the club, Baby James would always tell me, “You know, me and you are the same, and yet so different.” I never really knew what he was talking about.

One night outside the club, James’s dad collapsed and had to be rushed to the hospital. We didn’t see James too much for a while, because he was taking care of his dad. When his father got better, James returned, but he was much quieter, and he was no longer telling stories and trying to talk to girls who wanted nothing to do with him. Our friends and I started with the racist jokes again, and James stood up, yelling at us, telling us we shouldn’t criticize or make fun of each other’s culture. He said we’ve been unfairly comparing each other’s cultures with the culture of haole, or white culture, which steals from us and turns us against each other. He said making fun of another person’s culture because it’s different is like self-admission of how superior whites are to your own group. I thought to myself, “What a buzzkill.” But James was right.

A Death in the Family

I was sitting in class one day when I got a call from a friend, telling me that Brandon had passed away. I was

shocked, and James took it really hard. Brandon was one of James’s closest friends, and I could hear the pain in James’s voice when he described how Brandon would not wake up when his mother was calling his name. To make matters worse, James was planning to throw a party for Brandon the very next day at our club. Brandon’s birthday was a couple of days later, and we were supposed to be celebrating.

No one ever talked about what caused Brandon’s sudden death, as most of us didn’t want to know and refused to gossip, out of respect. At the same time, James’s father had gotten much worse. He was staying in the hospital, and James began selling drugs to make extra money. I don’t think he was very good at it, because other Waikīkī drug dealers would complain about him to me but never to him, out of respect for his dad. James said he would sell only to white people, as if that made things better.

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Within a couple of months, his dad died in the hospital, and James slipped into a depression. To cope with his depression, he began using the drugs he was supposed to sell. It took almost no time for him to drop weight and to age in appearance. Cops often mistook him for a homeless person. He came into the club on Labor Day, and we all just watched him. It was a sad sight to see. My boss said, “We have to do something.” So we got him into rehab, and they back-paid his rent, and I agreed to pay two months of rent after rehab.

James was forgiven of all his drug debts, and after rehab he came back strong. But there was just one problem: He could not get a job. And without his dad’s check coming



in, James couldn't afford to pay his rent. Because of this, we were worried that he would go back to selling drugs, then slip into using them again. His sister was trying to convince him to move to Vegas and live with her. When I suggested that he should take up her offer, he looked at me as if I had stabbed him in the back.

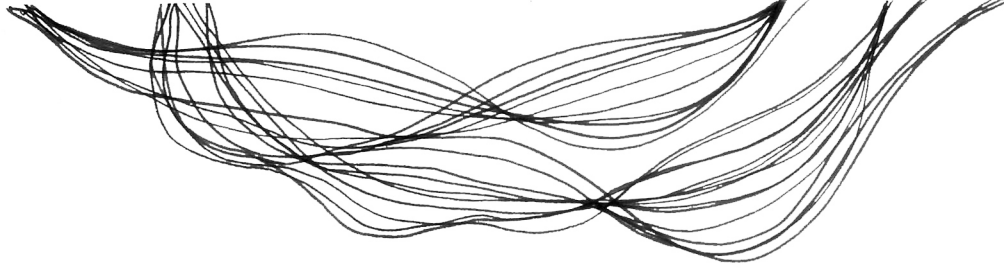
He said, "Chase! Brah! I can't do that! Leave my fuckin home?! All these years of you living here, and you don't see that's what they want us to do?! We Hawaiians leave. There's no land for us to claim, you know? Big Sis is selfish, only thinking of herself and not the community, leaving for da ninth island. Dat ain't me, brah! That's the difference between me and you, us over here and y'all over there. We fight for independence; y'all fight for equality, and during that fight for equality, y'all end up anywhere you believe will give you a fair chance at life. You traded one inequality for another. We all poor here, and we'll just keep getting poorer as the cost of rent goes up. But hey, look, there's a pretty beach we can go to, until they say we can't; there's a restaurant we love to eat at, until it's bought out and turned into a shitty four-star that none of us can afford. I'm grateful, but you shouldn't have paid my rent. There is more to life than material things. This land is my home, and I'm not going nowhere."

A New Life

In his proud stubbornness, Baby James ended up moving to Wai'anae Boat Harbor. I didn't know what that was until I had to do a group presentation for a political science class on homelessness in Hawai'i. I learned a lot about the homelessness epidemic here, and when I saw James shooting pool in the back of a bar in Waikīkī, I asked him about life at Wai'anae Boat Harbor.

He told me there are many families there, and lots of kids. He told me that everyone helps out. "We self-govern, to the point where people can get kicked out of the community. We do not consider ourselves homeless. We don't beg for money, and we don't do drugs." I thought to myself, "Yeah, right." But James did look like he had gained weight. He started showing up more and hanging out with me and the boys, but when we offered him a drink, he would politely refuse. James had quietly quit drinking. He just showed up to see his friends and occasionally talk to girls who wanted nothing to do with him.

It wasn't until my political science class, and a seven-hour plane ride to Osaka, that I realized what Baby James had indirectly taught me about personal struggles, inner demons, family, social status, and the discrimination that Hawaiian people and other people of color face in Hawai'i. And for that, I will always be grateful to him.



“You traded one inequality for another.”

