

## GRADUATION SPEECH

The day before Jerric ruined his high school graduation, he went through a full rehearsal in his school's gym. Mr. Shaw, the principal, was not the type of man who left things to chance. Not content to simply tell people when to sit and when to stand, he had them do a dry-run of the whole ceremony, giving every speech in its entirety. They would be in a local convention center, so for rehearsal the administration had taped up the gym floor to match the layout of the actual venue. All the participants sat in folding chairs arranged on this imaginary stage.

Mr. Shaw started off with a welcome speech. A performance from the school's chorus followed, then an assistant principal named Mr. Casey stood and introduced the featured speaker, former NFL running back Randall Jarrett, a Central Cabarrus alum who had played in Super Bowl XXIX. Randall wore sweat pants and shuffled up to the podium, where he walked through a brief speech that extolled the virtues of hard work and made several obligatory parallels between academic and gridiron success.

After that Mr. Casey took the podium again.

"The next young man you'll hear from is the recipient of this year's Val Halla Scholarship, an annual award given by staff to the student who best exemplifies Central Cabarrus values. And this year's honoree has a special place in my heart. Mainly because he had a special place in my office throughout his freshmen year."

He paused for laughter, which was sparse. Since this was only rehearsal, most of the kids barely paid attention. They sat with eyes down, thumb-tapping on their phones.

"Now, if you have a close relationship with the AP, that's usually not a good thing. And this young man seemed to have a permanent seat with me all through 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Always getting sent out of class for some kind of mischief. Seems like at least once a week he'd come strolling through my door with yet another office referral in his hand.

"But something happened to him during 10<sup>th</sup> grade. I think it was several somethings, actually – adults who pushed him in the right direction, extra-curriculars here at school. He started doing his homework, listening to teachers, getting involved in clubs, running on the track team.

"I'll never forget the day I walked by a meeting of the Engineering Club and saw this young man – the former chief instigator of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade hall – building a huge, complex airplane out of Popsicle sticks. Looked like something out of a Wright Brothers picture. You coulda knocked me over with a feather.

"And now he's graduating and headed off to Appalachian State in the fall and I couldn't be prouder to see the Val Halla Scholarship go to a young man like this. A kid who was headed in the wrong direction and had the fortitude to turn it all around. So, please give it up for the winner of the Val Halla Scholarship – Jerric Forney!"

Jerric stood to polite applause. A couple of his friends hollered out his name and he gave them a mock salute. Mr. Casey squeezed his shoulder as they passed. Jerric took his place at the wooden podium and made eye contact with Miss Montgomery, who sat in the bleachers crocheting. Afterwards she would give him notes on his performance, which she'd heard at least a dozen times already, drilling Jerric until he knew it from memory.

Miss M was his foster mother, and chief of all the adults Mr. Casey alluded to who had put Jerric on the right track, a retired social worker who had taken in many kids like him over the years. When Jerric had first arrived under her care there was another boy his age already staying there, who warned him that she was a "hard ass old battle-axe."

This was true. There was no loud talking in her house, no tardiness, no baggy pants, no questioning of an adult's directions. She was not the first person who had tried to crack down on him, but she was the first he listened to. It helped that she was also black, and that her own early life

matched his in terms of deprivation and neglect. He had chafed under her rules at first, but slowly grew to thrive, discovering that the loss of all the petty liberties that got him in trouble led to an even greater freedom of choice, the kind of choice that had him looking at several college acceptance letters midway through his senior year.

“It’s a great honor to stand before you today as the recipient of the Val Halla Scholarship. Many people have won this award and gone on to success in life, contributing to society in countless ways. I’m proud to be a part of that tradition.”

He had notes in front of him, but didn’t need them. He moved easily from section to section, his voice echoing around the empty gym. He started by talking about the various definitions of success – financial, academic, romantic, athletic – and then noted that the threads tying them all together were hard work and self-sacrifice.

It was a decidedly impersonal speech. When soliciting advice on what he should say, he heard from several teachers that he should tell his story. He didn’t want to, though. It just wasn’t in his nature to think that an auditorium full of people would want to hear him talk about himself. Safer to stick to traditional graduation fare – positive vibes and abstract concepts.

The only time he got personal at all was in his conclusion:

“We know that, in the long run, we’re happier when we choose long-term success over short-term pleasure. And these choices aren’t behind us now that we’ve graduated. We’ll have to keep making them every day – at college, at work, in our family life. And it’s never too late to change. Anybody, no matter how much they’ve messed up, can wake up tomorrow and say, ‘Starting now, I’m going to make good choices.’ We all have that power. I’m living proof. Anybody that doubts it can look at all the office referrals in my file, right Mr. Casey?”

He wrapped it up with acknowledgements, thanking his friends, his teachers, and Miss M, then went back to his seat. The rest of the rehearsal proceeded without incident and Jerric went home confident, feeling that as long as he avoided tripping over his gown, he wouldn’t make a fool of himself.

The ceremony started at 10:00 the following morning. The students who were participating showed up two hours earlier, where they gathered in a conference room and ate breakfast catered by the PTO. As Jerric ate, Mr. Shaw sat down next to him.

“Excellent speech yesterday.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Sounds polished. I bet you’ve been practicing in front of the mirror, huh?”

“Yessir. Miss M’s been my audience, too. I feel like I don’t even need notes at this point.”

“I’m the same way. You think it’d get easier since I speak at this thing every year, but I’m always nervous. So, I just practice and practice until it’s memorized.”

Jerric nodded and took a bite of scrambled eggs.

“So, who’s coming to see you? Got folks coming in from out of town?”

“No.”

“Just Miss M?”

“And Vincent.”

“Oh,” Mr. Shaw shifted positions, leaning forward and putting both elbows on the table.

Jerric knew what was coming next, and immediately regretted the answer he’d given.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for Vincent to join us today.”

“Why not?” Jerric knew the reason but wanted to hear how Mr. Shaw would phrase it.

“Really, this is my fault for not telling you sooner. I just didn’t think this would be an issue. I thought he was still unavailable.”

“He got out two months ago.”

“I see.”

“Why can’t he come?”

“I think you know the answer to that.”

“But that was a few years ago. He’s not a student anymore.”

“Jerric, this is nothing personal against your brother, but he dealt drugs in school. I just don’t want that kind of influence here today. Surely you understand my position?”

Mr. Shaw paused and looked Jerric in the eyes, willing the correct response from him.

“Yessir.”

“I didn’t even know you were still in touch. I thought he was far away.”

“Not too far. He was at Southern.”

Mr. Shaw grinned apologetically. “Not familiar with that one. I’m afraid I don’t know much about our state prisons.”

“It’s about an hour east of here.”

“Thanks for understanding.” Mr. Shaw slapped him on the arm. “You’re gonna do great today.”

Jerric turned back to his plate as Mr. Shaw walked away, one phrase from their conversation stuck in his head: *Nothing personal.*

He stabbed his plate, snapping the tines on his plastic fork. Mr. Shaw must have a low opinion of his intelligence to use a line like that. Vincent had been a terror in his time at Central, racking up suspensions, mouthing off to teachers, and – yes – selling pot, for which he’d been expelled. So, Mr. Shaw had not liked Vincent – and Jerric didn’t blame him – but to act like barring him from graduation was an instance of simply adhering to the rules was insulting. Especially considering that Vincent would not have been the only student drug dealer in attendance.

The Baker twins would also be there, shaggy-haired white boys on the soccer team. Their father was a pharmacist and in their junior year they’d been caught swiping pills from his work and selling them at school, for which they had been expelled. But both boys walked today – they had applied for readmittance and were graduating a year late – and both featured prominently in the dramatic, set-to-music montage of pictures that would play at the ceremony.

With time to kill, the students lounged in one of the convention center’s meeting rooms. Considering they were the kids involved in the graduation ceremony, either as speakers, presenters, or members of the chorus, they weren’t exactly a representative cross-section of the student body. Of the thirty or so, Jerric was one of only three black kids.

After his conversation with Mr. Shaw, Jerric returned to the snack table for seconds, then wandered around the room. For a while he lounged on bean bag chairs in front of a big screen TV, watching a cheery morning talk show. Then he played a game of pool with the salutatorian, a friendly, if uptight, girl named Hayley.

He was racking the balls for a second game when Miss M beckoned him to come see her. She had stuck around after dropping him off that morning, helping with set up and conversing with the teachers, many of whom she knew. She stood in a cluster of adults when Jerric walked over, and he waited beside her until she finished her conversation and turned to address him.

“You look great,” she said.

“Thanks.”

She straightened his tie. “I finally get you in slacks and a tie and you’re about to cover it up with a robe. I want pictures of you without the robe, too.”

“Sure thing.”

“And remember, you’re rushing a bit near the end. After the Mark Twain quote, you want to speed up.”

They had risen early that morning and Jerric ran through the speech twice more in the living room, without notes, using a bookshelf as a makeshift podium while she sipped tea on the couch.

“I know.”

“It’s probably because I’m looking for it,” she said. “I doubt anyone else will notice.”

“I’ll mostly be glad to get it behind me.”

“It’ll be over before you know it,” she said. “And then lunch afterwards. But only if you want to. Don’t let me get in the way of you going out with friends.”

“Come on, Miss M,” he said, throwing an arm around her. “You’re the best friend I got.”

“And I suppose Vincent will be joining us?”

“Maybe. I told him the time and place, but you can never tell with him.”

He left it at that, deciding not to mention his conversation with Mr. Shaw, knowing that Miss M would side with the school on this one, both because of her reflexive “the teacher is always right” mindset and because she wasn’t a fan of Vincent, either.

An hour later they still lounged in the waiting room. Miss M had long left to find her seat. Jerric sat on a recliner with his legs dangling over the side, Tupac in his headphones. His eyes were closed, the music alleviating his nerves, when a hand on his arm jolted him. It was Mr. Casey, the assistant principal.

“Almost time to go, big guy.”

Jerric hopped up from seat, grabbed his gown, and pulled it over his head.

“Nervous?” Mr. Casey asked.

“Not much. Maybe a little.”

“You’ll be great. You sounded like a pro in the rehearsal.”

“Thanks.”

“Ever spoke in front of an audience like this before?”

“Nope. Biggest public speech I ever gave was in class – maybe 25 people.”

“Well, it’s a piece of cake. Once you get rolling, you forget the crowd.”

“I hope.”

Jerric’s headphones dangled from his hand, music still audible. He pressed pause.

“I just saw your brother outside.”

“Oh.” Jerric pretended to only be half interested.

“Mr. Shaw said he spoke with you earlier.”

Jerric nodded.

“So, you understand why I had to turn him away.”

“Yessir.”

There it was again, same as his reaction to Mr. Shaw. It was an impulse he’d developed in the last few years, ever since he started going to class and making good grades. The kneejerk “yessir” in the presence of an authority figure, the desire to please, immediately followed by an ill-defined sense of embarrassment at having had this desire, so counter to the defiant kid he’d been for years.

“You know what he said when I told him he couldn’t come in?”

“No.”

“Sure you do. Think about it.”

Jerric considered this for a moment.

“Oh.” He knew exactly what his brother had said.

*Fuck that shit.*

That was Vincent’s signature phrase – what he said in response to any frustrating situation. Teachers, police officers, and an endless parade of foster parents had all been on the receiving end of it. Jerric had heard the words so much from his brother that he’d started saying them himself. It

was indeed a useful phrase – patently absurd yet undeniably right in certain situations, a tidy complete sentence.

But his romance with this phrase came to an abrupt end in Miss M's house. He tried this line his second day with her in response to a complaint about baggy pants. Her eyes went wide and she marched into the kitchen with a bar of soap, with which she proceeded to wash out his mouth. Jerric had heard of this punishment before, but never actually seen it. He was too shocked to resist as a 60-year-old woman half his size lathered up his tongue.

"I'm gonna tell the county," he said when she was done.

"Run along and tell DSS, you want to. They'll probably get you a new foster home. But you will *not* bring that language into *this* house."

He never told the county though, never came close, knowing intrinsically – even as a wild 14-year-old – that she was exactly what he needed. And four years later, he knew without question that he wouldn't be graduating, much less speaking at graduation, if not for her.

"Yeah, he was all dressed up, looking nice," Mr. Casey said. "Thug came out when he saw me, though. Like he was back in my office with his pants hanging off his rear. Pavlovian response, huh?"

Jerric hated when teachers ragged on his brother in front of him. Mr. Casey wasn't the first to do it. Turning in homework reminded teachers of how Vincent had *never* done homework. A good grade on a test would elicit memories of how Vincent used to sleep through tests. It was like, since he was a scholarship kid now, they assumed that he'd come over to their side, that he viewed Vincent the same way they did.

"He's actually been doing well since he got out," Jerric said. "Got a job and everything."

"Oh, ok. Well, good for him. Maybe you've been rubbing off. Look, I've gotta run, but I just wanted to say good luck. We're all real proud of you."

"Thank you, sir."

As Mr. Casey walked away, Jerric reflected on what he'd left unsaid about Vincent's current situation – that he'd only been out two months and was already hustling again. He did have a job, but only part-time at a grocery store, the bulk of his energies devoted to re-establishing himself in old circles and deceiving his parole officer. All this Jerric knew through a few phone calls. He rarely saw Vincent, who wasn't allowed at Miss M's house. Jerric missed his brother, but also felt that their distance was for the best. Still, it stung that Vincent wouldn't see him speak.

Sitting on stage in front of hundreds of people wasn't as unnerving as Jerric had anticipated. The lighting helped. Several spotlights glared right at the stage, blinding him to large swaths of the arena. At one point he started to panic when he thought of the attendance Mr. Shaw had predicted earlier that morning – at least 1,500 – but he calmed himself by recalling his own level of attention at such ceremonies. At least half the people would be zoned out or texting while he spoke, so he was really speaking to an audience of less than a thousand.

He sat on stage between his salutatorian pool-partner, Hayley, and a geriatric history teacher named Mr. Williamson who was being honored for his longevity. Jerric's speech was in the middle of the ceremony, between Randall's remarks and the valedictory address. As he waited, as the graduates filed in and as various principals made introductions and gave instructions about parking validation, his mind wandered. He let it, wanting a distraction from his nerves.

He thought about lunch that afternoon, wondering which restaurant Miss M would like. He thought about the hardware store where he'd applied for summer work. He hadn't heard from them for a week and wondered if he should stop by to inquire about his application. And he also thought about Vincent and what he'd said to Mr. Casey earlier. He wondered if Mr. Casey had given him an explanation when denying him entrance, or was it more understated? Maybe just an extended arm

and a shake of the head, with the implicit understanding that no thugs were allowed, no matter how proud they might be of their little brothers.

Jerric looked at the program. Randall was halfway done, which meant that he was next. He fingered his speech, folded neatly in his hands, nice to have as a safety net, though he doubted he'd need it. His first line started echoing in his head.

*It's a great honor to stand before you today as the recipient of the Val Halla Scholarship.*

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He knew this had to end, that overthinking would surely make him trip over his words. He focused on Randall, whose baritone filled the room.

"Then we had a tough spot my senior year. Second to last game of the year and we lost to Clemson 40 to 7. Nobody gave us much hope for a bowl after that."

Jerric settled in to Randall's story of how he went on to win the Peach Bowl, then to his later professional success. His nerves calmed, and before long Mr. Casey was standing at the podium, introducing the staff's pick for this year's Val Halla Scholarship. Jerric unfolded his speech and looked blankly, not reading a word. He flipped a few pages, then heard clapping and realized that Mr. Casey had finished his introduction. He gave Jerric's shoulder another squeeze as they passed, like he'd done at rehearsal. At the podium Jerric flattened his notes in front of him and took a deep breath, not looking out at the audience until he started speaking.

"It's a great honor to stand before you today as the recipient of the Val Halla Scholarship."

First line out with no stuttering or voice cracking. He felt more confident.

"Many people have won this award and gone on to success in life, contributing to society in many ways. I'm proud to be a part of that tradition."

Sentence followed sentence, and paragraph followed paragraph. His self-awareness ebbed, the words coming more and more effortlessly.

"We've made lots of memories over the past four years – some good, some painful – but the painful ones we learn from."

Once settled into a groove, he found himself so comfortable that he was actually able to practice the public speaking skills Miss M had drilled into him. He was conscious of his pace and diction. He made sure his eyes swept the whole room – left, then center, then right, then back to center – easy to do since he wasn't reading anything. In fact, halfway through he looked down at his notes and saw they were still on page one.

As he continued, the words coming out semi-consciously, his thoughts returned to Vincent. He had an image of his brother leaving after his confrontation with Mr. Casey. Driving back home in his run-down truck, tattoo poking out over his collar. He wondered what Vincent was doing at that moment, having gotten all dressed up for nothing. Probably sleeping.

And then for some reason, these thoughts dovetailed into another, older memory. Jerric was nine years old, getting nabbed by the police for swiping cigarettes from a convenience store, and Vincent took the rap, telling the cops that he put his little brother up to it. This memory came and went in an instant. Jerric didn't recall the entire scene, just a single image – his brother with his back against a squad car, the cop and convenience store owner in his face.

A moment of meta-awareness followed this flashback, how odd it was to think of such things while giving a speech to an arena of people. But he didn't need to focus, because the lines kept coming, smooth and confident.

"As Mark Twain said, 'I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.' No offense to our fine teachers, but I think that's a sentiment we can all agree with."

Laughter at the light-hearted jab. It was at this point that the idea came to him. He'd later be accused of pre-meditation, but it was that word "fine" that triggered him, the taste when it left his

tongue, similar to his feeling earlier when “yessiring” Mr. Shaw and Mr. Casey. He was down to the last minute of his speech, the conclusion in which made a few grand pronouncements about the future and the need to always be ready for change, when he went off script.

“So now that we’ve graduated, things are up in the air, right? For the first time in our lives, we have a decision that’s totally ours. We’re eighteen years old – legal adults. We’re free to do as we please. How we gonna use that freedom?”

This was all improv, but he hoped it came out smoothly. The shift in tone, from formal to vernacular, was intentional.

“That’s the funny thing about freedom. Too much of it starts to feel like a prison. Like you start wanting more than your mind can handle. But that’s what it means to grow up, right? You figure that out for yourself, learn what freedoms you can handle and what you can’t. A lot of times you figure it out through experience, the hard way.

“And that’s the thing about being an adult. You’re in charge now. No matter what the people in your life say, remember that. You’re free to make any choice you want – go to college, go to work, go to California to be a movie star, stay here in town and be a garbage man. Whatever you wanna do, it’s yours. People gonna have they opinions, but really – “

The slightest pause before crossing the Rubicon.

“– fuck that shit. Y’all just do what you wanna do.”

With that he grabbed his notes, turned, and walked to his seat. There was a moment of absolute silence, then the student section on the convention center floor erupted into cheers, some of the more boisterous among them standing and yelling, dancing spontaneously. Jerric sat back down beside Hayley, who angled her body away from him, trying to get as much distance as she could from his suddenly radioactive presence.

Mr. Shaw bolted to the microphone.

“Take your seats! Take your seats!”

He repeated this for at least a minute, thumping his hand on the podium. Jerric’s speech seemed to have stoked his fellow graduates’ rebellious nature, and they took their time sitting down, relishing their final opportunity to defy a principal’s orders.

“On behalf of the administration, I would like to apologize for what you just heard,” Mr. Shaw said, when order was sufficiently restored. “I assure you this was *not* the speech we approved.”

He returned to his seat with a baleful stare in Jerric’s direction. For a moment, Jerric wondered if he would be escorted off the stage, made an example of right then and there. This didn’t happen though, and the ceremony continued as planned.

The next item in the program was a recognition of 40 years of service from Mr. Williamson, the teacher sitting to Jerric’s left. This was followed by the shy Asian valedictorian delivering a short, barely audible, and easily forgettable speech. Then it was time for diplomas.

Unlike the majority of graduates, who lined up offstage to wait for their turn to walk, the students who were on stage as part of the ceremony merely waited for their name, took a few steps to Mr. Shaw to shake hands and get their diploma, then sat back down. Jerric’s last name was “Parkins,” so he had a little time to wait. As his classmates proceeded in front of him, he wondered if Mr. Shaw would say anything to him, something about how disappointed he was, or maybe deliver some kind of veiled threat. Jerric was determined to give no response, just a firm handshake and a look square in the eyes.

Jerric followed the list of graduates in the program, and when “Abigail Anne Norris” boomed through the arena, the name in front of his, he prepared to stand. At the next sound of the speaker’s voice, he was halfway on his feet before realizing it wasn’t his name.

“Nathan Lee Perry”

They'd skipped him. He wasn't going to walk. He sat back down. An insolent half-smile stole across his face, an old expression he hadn't had the occasion to use in a while.

After the ceremony, the administrators pulled him into the rec room. Mr. Shaw and Mr. Casey were there, as were Mrs. Flowers and Mrs. Humphries, the two teachers in charge of the Val Halla Scholarship. Jerric was instructed to sit on the couch, the adults lined up in front of him.

There was finger pointing, breathless lecturing, threats of withholding his diploma and the scholarship. Jerric endured with calm assent, not talking back or defending himself, well aware their threats were empty but without the desire to let them know he knew. Whether or not he had the physical piece of paper, he would still have a high school diploma. And Appalachian State had already deposited the scholarship money, so that wasn't going anywhere, either. Having been in trouble so many times before, bluster did not scare him.

He didn't disclose the reason behind his actions, knowing it wouldn't matter and preferring to let them agonize over the "why," the heart-wrenching question of how the child they had cleaned up so well could just turn on them. When they exhausted their indignation, there was a pause. Jerric could tell they had nothing left to say, but that they didn't want to let him go yet, either. He imagined they were mentally reloading, about to rehash some of their earlier points.

While this conversation troubled him not at all, he was a little worried about seeing Miss M. She would demand an explanation, too, and he would give one to her. He knew it would make no difference, but he wanted to at least try to make her understand. He imagined getting the soap treatment again, and he almost smiled at this image. She'd be mad, sure, but it would pass.

As the adults droned on, Jerric looked around the room, noticing that the food from earlier was still on the table. He planned to get another plate on his way out. He reclined on the couch, crossing one leg over the other, at ease. He'd be out the door soon, into the summer air.

And then come fall, he'd be in school.