

Oasis - A MFT fundraising story

Paul Carlson
1997



Ahead, the two-lane road stretched almost to the horizon. James and Ted sped along, confident that the nearest Nevada Highway Patrol officer was many miles away. It was a cool November day; cooler than people who'd never spent a lot of time in the desert could even imagine it being.

The sky was pale blue, and everything below seemed one shade of brown or another. In every direction, rugged, treeless mountains marked the middle and far distances.

James sighed happily. "I love heading out to these small towns," he said. "I get so tired of those uptight city people slamming the door in my face all the time."

"You got that right, bro," Ted affirmed.

"Last year I was in this place in Utah, way out on a dead end highway that went to some canyon. It was so isolated that the people I met just stared at me. Like they'd never seen a stranger before."

"But did they buy anything?"

"One of the best days I've ever had," James said. "Not a record, but almost everybody I met gave something." He tapped the dashboard. "Have you been watching the gas gauge? It's getting really low."

"Those last two towns didn't even have gas stations. That old mining town back there didn't even have a grocery store."

"Beautiful place, though. Practically a ghost town. We're what, a hundred fifty miles from Reno? We'll never make it on a quarter of a tank."

James unfolded their state road map, and battled with it for a minute. He hated stuffy places, and had refused to roll the car window all the way up. Unfurled, the map took up considerably more than his half of the subcompact rental car, and the wind kept snapping it like a paper flag.

"I just finished this book called Basin and Range," James said. "Really neat stories about this desert out here, and the geology and stuff. You ought to check it out sometime."

"Just hurry up with that map before I drive off the road." Ted swatted at its intruding edge. "I think there's some kind of military base out this way."

"Here is it," James responded, squinting at the tiny print. "Margrave Test Range. It's only about ten miles from here. I bet they have a gas station. We'll have to turn left in, let's see, about five miles."

The Test Range's guard shack looked ridiculously lonely, standing watch over a narrow ribbon of blacktop while open desert extended for miles on either side. The little beige car rolled to a stop, and Ted leaned his head out the driver's side window.

"Is there a gas station?" he asked the lone MP.

"Sure," the MP said, as he waved them through. "It's up ahead, five miles."

Ted drove on. "That's strange," he mused aloud. "I thought they had better security in these places. I guess it's 'cause we're a black guy and a white guy with short haircuts. That guard must have thought we were military."

Relieved that they'd located a gas station, James began singing a tune, cheerfully though rather off-key. It was a silly parody of an old Christian hymn. "Bringing in the cash, bringing in the cash, we will come rejoicing, bringing in the cash."

Beyond spending enough to maintain a Spartan existence, the money that James and his partner for the day 'gathered in' was not for themselves. James firmly believed in his cause, and that everyone out there would do well to pitch in, even if it was just a 'widow's mite.' At the least, everyone had to be given the opportunity. Including people who lived way the heck out in the Nevada desert.

At first there was no sign of a gas station, nor of anything else manmade. Just more desert scrub. Then a patch of green appeared ahead, and widened into a stand of trees. An assortment of small buildings was scattered beneath them.

Gasoline purchased, the two men walked out into the empty street, curious about where they'd found themselves. A sign read: Little Burbank.

"Glad we made it," James said. "You know, come to think of it, I read somewhere that they test secret weapons out here. I wonder where they keep 'em?" He raised his hand to shade his eyes, and looked around.

At first glance the area looked like an ordinary small town. There were only a few shops on the block-long main drag, and to the north was a single street lined with squat, reddish cinder-block houses. Gigantic cottonwood trees grew everywhere. The sun shone brilliantly in the cloudless November sky. Nothing looked blatantly military, much less threatening.

"Jesus, this place is beautiful," Ted exclaimed. "Where I come from, back in Baltimore, all the trees died."

"Really?"

"Guys carved the bark too deep. Finally killed 'em."

"Ouch."

"My man, you are so sensitive."

There was a hint of mockery in Ted's voice. James felt a twinge of unease.

Just the day before, Ted had been bragging again about his violent past, and dramatic conversion. "I hurt somebody," he'd said, as casually as if he were discussing the weekend's big football game. "I was robbing him, and the stupid guy fought back, but I had the drop on him. Thank God I met the Lord after that, and got myself cleaned up. Cops never knew who did it, but those number runners back in Baltimore, they might know."

The men didn't work together like this every day, but they'd both jumped at the chance to visit some friendly desert towns. Towns quite unlike inner-city Baltimore.

"I'm hungry," Ted announced. "Let's get us some lunch."

Next to the gas station was a bowling alley. Inside it was quiet. To the left of the entrance were its five lanes; no one was bowling at the moment. To the right was a small lunch counter. The waitress, if she was military, would have fooled anyone. It could have been a cafe in any small town.

James and Ted were the only ones seated. No one struck up a conversation with the two outsiders. They both ordered a burger, fries and a chocolate shake.

"Hey, I remember where I heard about this place," Ted commented. "Last year there were demonstrations; a bunch of peaceniks were camped out there by that guard shack. They was protesting the nerve gas they keep out here. A bunch of 'em got arrested, even a couple 'a movie stars."

Returning to the car, they prepared their fundraising product for the next small town on their itinerary. This process involved filling their carrying boxes with an assortment of candy from the supplies in the back of the car. This was a Mormon part of Nevada, and the Mormons, in denying themselves the usual adult diversions, had become the nation's largest consumers of candy.

The peanut brittle and assorted candies they brought door to door was locally made, and available in most grocery stores. Nevertheless, the candy had been selling like hotcakes. It was only two in the afternoon, and they were nearly out of supplies.

Ted appraised the row of houses with a practiced eye. "Want to?"

"Hit everything that moves, and sell it if it doesn't, isn't that what Director Smithey said last Sunday?" James said with a chuckle. "These folks need a chance to offer too. No telling how often they get into the city."

"Then let's do it." With a single motion of his arm and a quick word or two, Ted divided up the area. They began knocking on doors.

The Military Police arrived within ten minutes-though not before the men had sold most of their remaining candy. James was guided, gently but firmly, to the patrol car, where Ted was already standing. The two MPs said little as they bundled their captives into the vehicle. They had the back seat to themselves, perhaps the first people to be locked in there since the peace demonstrations the year before.

"Some lady over there was pretty hostile," Ted whispered, bobbing his head towards 'his' side of the street. "She must've called 'em."

James knew from experience that the Military Police were far more efficient than their civilian counterparts. He'd been stopped on three or four military bases that year, as far away as Texas. Once called, the MPs reacted fast, and they were damnednably hard to avoid. Each time, he'd been reprimanded and escorted off base. But those bases hadn't been out in the middle of nowhere-much less, loaded with secret weapons.

James glanced at Ted-and flinched. Growing up in the slums had hardened the man. In Ted's section of Baltimore, the police themselves were regarded as the enemy. It must have been utterly different from the lily-white suburbs of his own childhood. Ted's gaze burned into the head of the MP in front of him.

James has noticed something about the guard. A handgun, black and sleek, was strapped to his waist. He thought of Ted's fierce look, and imagined his friend wrenching the gun away, and using on his captors.

The drive to the police station was short, only two blocks. The station was constructed of the same cinder blocks as the houses, though it had been painted bright white. The effect was not cheerful.

The station was quietly efficient. An MP read them their Miranda rights, and then the cuffs went on. James had to use the bathroom, and was annoyed to discover that "regulations required that he be observed"-at all times. He was used to crowded missionary quarters. Still, it was difficult to pee with the cuffs on.

"Let's see your IDs," the Officer in Charge began, a picture of professionalism.

"I don't drive," James said quietly. "I never learned to. I just have my volunteer card." He showed the OIC his laminated fundraiser's card. It had a nice, little color photo.

The OIC frowned. "And you?" he asked Ted.

"I don't have my driver's license with me," Ted replied sullenly. "I'm sorry, sir. I must have forgotten to bring it with me today." He too produced a volunteer card.

The OIC's frown deepened. He jotted some brief descriptions in his notebook:

Suspect: Ted Martin. Black male. Twenty two, five foot eight inches, one hundred eighty pounds. Prominent scar on left forearm.

Suspect: James Broomfield. Caucasian male. Twenty, five foot six inches, one hundred forty pounds. Blonde.

Neither subject carrying valid ID. Both have home-made appearing religious membership cards.

Trespassing, unauthorized purchases, unapproved commercial activity. Have Private Wilson run their fingerprints thru NCIC as soon as they are booked.

Vehicle: Beige 1977 Ford Pinto hatchback, Colorado license plate ARG 237. Owner, Ace Rental Cars, Salt Lake City, airport branch. Vehicle in good condition, has several dozen boxes of candy in back. No contraband found.

An MP lead the two prisoners from the front office to a conference room next door. Or was it an interrogation chamber?

The prisoners sat glumly at the long table; the MP remained standing. Ted seemed to have calmed down.

In the other room, one of the MPs was fiddling with a machine. "Darn teletype was working this morning. How can we run their fingerprints if we can't even contact the FBI?"

Shortly thereafter, a new face appeared. "I'm Deputy Sheriff Park," the young officer told the prisoners. "Since you two are civilians, I've been called in to handle your case."

Just then, a second MP entered the room. "We ran the plates. That car has been reported stolen."

James blanched. "But it can't be. It was rented by our regional director, Aaron Smithey. He had to fly back to Phoenix this morning, so he said we could drive it today."

The MP silently held up the printout, as if it was a sentence of doom.

"I can call him for you," James said, trying to keep his voice from quaking. "I'm sure Mr. Smithey can explain everything."

Deputy Park took down the Phoenix telephone number. He dialed it himself, and moments later, his young features hardened. "That number has been disconnected," he announced.

"But-" Ted sputtered. "That's impossible! I just called 'em last night. I was talking to Yoko, our secretary."

In response, Deputy Park dialed the number again, sounding out each letter as he did. "Six-Oh-Two, Five-Five-Five, Seven-Nine-Two-Four." Then he held the phone up to Ted's ear. In the stillness of the room, James could hear the recorded voice too.

"Bleep-bleep-bleeep," said the phone. "We're sorry, but that number has been disconnected and is no longer in service."

"You could call the main office," James said hopefully, "in New York."

Deputy Park's expression indicated that he wasn't about to waste the taxpayer's money on any such wild goose chase.

"A new number today," the second MP said dryly, "and another one next week." He shook his head in disgust and walked out of the room.

The two prisoners sat silent and miserable. A third MP now stood by the door, watching his charges alertly. James kept glancing up at a small, frosted-glass window. Along the top, a slice of blue sky was just visible where it was partially open.

Get a good look now, James told himself. You may not see daylight again for a very long time.

The situation seemed too bizarre to be real. He prayed that it would all work out, somehow. He didn't feel as afraid as he ought to be, and that seemed strange, even to himself. Hey, he thought. At least there aren't any hungry lions waiting out there. Maybe things ain't all that bad.

Still, they were both good and stuck. James was glad that, as far as he could see, Ted's conversion had been real enough. He trusted the Lord, and wasn't going to try anything stupid. But the Lord doesn't operate the Department of Motor Vehicles, and the guy had no ID, with his real name on it or otherwise.

They could hear Deputy Park in the next room, talking on the phone.

"That's right, Sheriff," Park was saying. "We've got us a couple of religious fanatics here. Real, live ones. On a restricted military base, no less. They have no ID on them, and they're driving a stolen car." There was a pause.

"Okay, I'll wait." Park hung up the phone.

"Lord's gonna save us," Ted muttered to himself. "Got too. I done my mission, now He's gotta do His part. I know He will."

James heard him. "Right on, man. He got Saint Paul out of jail before."

Fifteen very long minutes later, the phone conversation resumed.

"But-" Park said. "I know they're missionaries. What do you mean, what would the papers say?"

The deputy listened silently for a minute. "Oh? His best customers, he says? Well I'll be. If you say so, Sheriff."

The bored MPs straightened as Park entered the conference room.

"Looks like you boys can go," the deputy told the prisoners. "Sheriff Brown called the rental company, talked to their president personally. The guy claims you people are just about his best customers. Says that stolen-car report must have been a paperwork mix-up."

Park wagged a finger at Ted. "You should be more careful. You can't drive without a license on your person at all times, and anyway, the rental contract on that car has expired. We'll have to impound it."

He removed the handcuffs. "Sheriff says we can't be hassling missionaries. We know you boys are a long ways from home. Anyway, Sergeant Hart will give you a ride out to the gate." He nodded to one of the MPs. "You'll have to hitch a ride into town from there."

The OIC came in with two cases in his arms, the remainder of the fundraising candy. Then he brought a third cardboard box.

"Sorry about the trouble, guys," he said. "These are some preserves and relish that my wife made." He set the smaller box atop the other two.

James' eyes widened. Was the man for real? He fancied himself a pickle gourmet, and this looked like some of the best around. He picked up one of the brim-full Mason jars, and thanked the officer sincerely.

There was a different MP at the Test Range's lonely guard shack this time. Deputy Park stood with his former prisoners, leaning against his patrol car and gazing appreciatively at the vast landscape. Manifestly, to his experienced eyes, the view was a rich one.

James felt content; he was no longer curious about where any of the base's mysterious weaponry might be stored. Ahead was the road into town, and to home. Home for a month or two, anyway. Next month he'd pay a visit to his own home town, and spend a week with his father. But it always felt like home when he was with his spiritual brothers and sisters, however far he went, even overseas.

An old but immaculate car pulled slowly up to the gate, a gray-haired man at the wheel. Deputy Park addressed the driver. "Would you mind giving these two boys a ride into town?"

"Sure," the man replied.

It turned out that the man was the official spokesman for the Margrave Test Range. A civilian, it was his job to deal with the press and various officials that visited. There were more and more of these lately, he explained, because the base stored chemical weapons. These aging weapons had been the subject of a recent Congressional hearing, and were now a matter of public controversy. Reduction treaties were being negotiated.

On the way into town, the man regaled his two young passengers with stories about the famous -and sometimes quirky- TV network news anchormen that had broadcast from his base that year.

Next, he asked what had happened to Ted and James that day. After he listened to the entire story, he offered them a five dollar bill. "Here's for your trouble, boys." He let them out of the car at a grocery store near the house where they were staying.

"Thank you Lord," Ted exclaimed, as the spokesman drove away. "Free at last! I knew you'd pull it off."

James looked closely at his friend, at the light in his eyes. A weight seemed to lift from his chest. "You got that right, bro."

James set down his boxes, then strode to a nearby phone booth and called Phoenix. Yoko answered after two rings. First of all, he asked why the phone had been out.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" she said, embarrassed. "The repairman was here, putting in a new line. It was only going to be off for two hours."

This story is dedicated to Don Marshall, the real life Ted. Don passed away in March 2003, just after completing a missionary visit to Asia. We'd met while there, for the first time in twenty-five years, and shared memories of our adventure that day.