James Jones, "They Shall Inherit the Laughter," in JJ Reader

[372]

I. Johnny's Speech to the Draftees[[1]](#footnote-1)

AFTER A MOMENT, Bill Jacobs walked around the room over to the other side where the long table was. He sat down at his place near the head of the table. Johnny saw him leaning over and talking to various people who were seated at the table. He noticed that the men who had been at the bar were sitting at several different tables. Apparently they were spreading the news. One of the men was sitting at a table near Johnny with two heavily older women; Johnny recognized one of them as a school teacher who had taught him in grade school. The man leaned over toward Johnny and said, "You tell them, son." Johnny grinned at him with bright-eyed intensity and nodded. All right, they would be told. All part of the game, the big game that was Endymion first, the rest of the United States second, and the rest of the world last; never the reverse. He was suddenly tremendously angry at their stupidity. Not only did they insist on deluding themselves with their game, but they insisted on dragging him, a bystander, into the farce. If they wanted a show, by god, that was what they would get.

He inspected the large group of men at the long table. They were of varying ages, but there was a common look of innocent cynicism on their faces. None of them looked very enthusiastic.

He sat at his table and ate apple pie with ice cream on it for dessert, but it did not taste as good as the rest of the meal had because his single-minded forgetfulness had been destroyed by Bill Jacobs and his gang, who not only fought the war from the draft board office but wanted the right to say what the war was being fought for. After the pie, he mixed himself another drink and sat [373] watching the group of men in civilian clothes who sat around the long table.

Bill Jacobs made the introductory talk and call for attention. He introduced the Reverend Doctor Bryson. Reverend Bryson made a short talk to the effect that the young men at the table were going away to fight a war against oppression and greed for power and that God was behind them and championing their cause and that the fate of the church and the world was in their hands.

Tom Prentiss spoke, giving them the goodwill of the Rotary Club and voiced the hope that they would fight hard and well to preserve the American way of life, which was the best life yet devised on earth, and concluded with the thought that if the rest of the world had been taught more of the American way of life sooner there would have been no war.

After that Bill Jacobs made his speech, pointing out that this war was only a continuation of the last and that this time America was going to do the job right and finish it, instead of leaving it half-done like they did last time.

"And now," Bill said with an air of expectancy, "you fellows have a special treat tonight. We've got with us a boy;" Bill laughed; "a *man*, I should say, but I never can remember how fast you fellows grow up;" a few of the men at the long table laughed with him; "we've got with us a man who has been through Guadalcanal and who has played his part in this adventure, as the ribbons on his shirt will say more eloquently than I ever could. He's reluctant to talk about himself, but I finally persuaded him to say a few words to you fellows. He's done and seen all the things you are about to do and see, so listen to him closely and maybe you can learn something from what he says. Johnny, come on up here and say hello."

Johnny stood up and walked up into the raised organ stand where Bill Jacobs stood before the microphone. As he stood up, he felt his individuality slip curiously away from him. Bill Jacobs put his arm around Johnny and grinned at the long table. "Most of you fellows probably have known Johnny Carter all of your lives, so he won't need any further introduction. I'll sit down and let him talk." Bill stepped down off the platform, sat down in his chair and looked expectantly up at Johnny. The draftees at the long table watched him with bored attention. Johnny stood in front of the mike, and there was a bright spotlight on the side of the stand that illumined him. He stood with his legs widespread, his arms [374] hanging down along his thighs, his fists closed. In his tailored uniform he made a fine picture and the ribbons on his shirt glittered colorfully in the light. He stood quite still for several seconds after Bill Jacobs sat down. he looked down at the long table with no nervousness, not speaking.

When he spoke, his voice was coldly quiet and completely without emotion.

"I'm not reluctant to talk," he began, "but there is very little I can tell you guys. As Mr. Jacobs said, most of you probably have known me all my life. I'm not talking to you as Johnny Carter whom you know. I'm talking as a soldier whom you don't know.

"These gentlemen have told you a number of things about this war. You have been told you are fighting for a number of things: democracy, freedom, to end oppression, and so on. There is one thing that you are fighting for that has not been mentioned. To me it is the most important. You are fighting for your life. These other statements may be true or not. There is a possibility they are not. True or not, they are general ideas, and the army is a particular life. When you are in the army, you will find it very hard to reconcile these general statements with the particulars of the life you'll live."

Johnny paused for a moment and looked around the room. Every face was turned toward him, and he could see the startled looks on a number of them. Bill Jacobs' mouth was hanging open, and the attention of the draftees was not bored. Johnny's eyes glittered savagely as he looked down at the long table.

"One other thing. Some of you may go overseas, and some of you may never get over. If you ever do, remember this. You must learn to hate. Brotherly love and mercy are all very fine back here. There they are worth nothing. You cannot afford to think of mercy or sportsmanship or fair play. You will have to forget the code you've been taught. You are fighting to keep from being killed, and a dirty fighter kills a man just as dead and with less effort than a clean one. You can take no chances. When you are in combat, you are not fighting for freedom or anything else. You are fighting only to save your life. If you remember that, you will have every chance to get out alive that you can have. You may need them. Sometimes these chances are not very many. You have to learn to hate, because in hating without mercy you can kill better. And that is what you are for, if you're a soldier."

Johnny stopped talking abruptly and stepped off the stand. As [375] he stepped to his booth he saw the face of the grade school teacher, contorted with a look of revulsion. She turned her face away and would not meet his eyes. He sat down in his booth and began to mix himself another drink.

There was a stillness in the Grille for several moments, and then people began to talk and move about, as if trying to refute the fact that there had been a lull. Johnny grinned to himself and sipped his drink. They wanted their war, but they wanted to select their own spices to kill its taste so it would fit into the game they played. They didn't want to know the true taste. The men in Europe had learned what was the game of war and what was the truth. The French and the Poles and the Greeks and the Russians had tasted it as it was. Their lives had been stripped of subterfuge and nonessential ideas. You couldn't select your own spices when you were starving. He looked over at the long table. Several of the draftees were looking at Bill Jacobs with derisive grins. Bill's face was expressionless, but tinged with red.

The draftees were herded out to catch their train, for them the first of a long line of herdings. The Grille settled back down to its former relaxation and enjoyment. The draftees were gone, like so many other groups of draftees; they were torn out of Endymion by the roots to be shuffled about and replanted all over the world, but their absence made no appreciable difference in the quiet laughter, fine drinks, good food, and people whose moods and memories hung outside beside their caps, except that now there was an invisible curtain of reproof drawn between Johnny Carter and the rest of the Grille.

People wandered over to his booth from time to time and were friendly and talked to him, but the invisible curtain was always present. Johnny grinned wryly to himself and did not try to penetrate it. Bill Jacobs came over for a moment and thanked him perfunctorily for talking to the selectees, but Bill looked at him coldly and did not offer to claim his drink. Johnny felt Bill had not liked what he said. (from Chapter 10)

1. editors indicate that this is an early version of "Landers' speech about 'the soldier's responsibilities' to his Indiana hometown Elks Club in Whistle" and that "Jones gave a similar speech in Robinson, Illinois, in 1944." (366) I've seen a reference to this incident--"James Jones: Another Eternity?" (Newsweek, 11/23/53) but was described in this article more like Jones getting drunk and breaking some things, not a speech. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)