

Second Place, 1990 Brookie & D. K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest

IN SEARCH OF SPILLED ROOT BEER

By Margaret Young

WHEN JAKE HAMPTON GOT HIS CALL TO Michigan Detroit, where he had lived until four years earlier, he shouted all the way to the Inkom Woolworth's, which his grandfather owned and operated. "Gramps, lookee there," he said, showing the call. "Goin' home, Gramps. God's called me home."

Across the back wall of the store were posters of basketball stars, a display Jake had designed. Two of the players were Motown boys, who Jake had never known. He had, though, known "The Ace" Carlton, who sure as fire would someday be part of that back wall display, dunking a ball, his face saying "Eeeassy." Jake had seen The Ace shoot perfect three-pointers, where the ball didn't even touch the rim, made no noise at all, save one sinful-quick SWOOSH as it poured through the net like orange water. The Ace was built for fame. Jake had a testimony of that.

And Jake was going to find him. God was sending him back for some big purpose like that.

When he went through the Idaho Falls Temple, made his pilgrimage from glory to glory, he thought of The Ace. Coming through the veil, he imagined The Celestial Ace, reaching up, fingering the lights on that brilliant crystal hoop.

It was a June afternoon when Elder Hampton boarded the plane for Michigan. His mother gave him a bouquet of day lilies she had picked that morning. She cried about how her brown-eyed little boy had grown so tall and now was going away and she wouldn't have him again, since when he returned he would be a man.

HERE was Detroit: muggy, grey, slow. On busses, everyone looking drugged, but flashing streetwise eyes at any sudden sound or movement.

Jake's first two areas were far from where he had once lived. He was in the rich zones—the George Romney suburbs. But at the start of his eighth month, he made senior and was transferred to a zone that included his old house. Ace Carlton's place was five minutes from the missionary apartment.

The day after he arrived in the old neighborhood, Jake took

his greenie, Elder Cline—a plump, apple-cheeked farmboy from Santaquin, Utah—on tour. "This is lower-middle-class Detroit, Elder Cline," Jake said. "Right over there is where I got my boots stuck in snow up to my hips. And there—that lightpost—that's where I saw a guy get mugged once. Now, mugging doesn't happen as often as you might think. It mostly happens if you look scared. Elder, you're looking scared. Don't look scared, Elder. Over there, right at the corner, there's this little old lady. I washed her windows with soap one November day after she didn't give us treats for Halloween. Over there, two houses down, that's where Ace Carlton lives, unless he's joined the pros by now." His voice grew soft, reverent. "I remember we had a party there once. They gave me root beer. I spilled it all over the front room floor. I was laughing so hard at this bad joke The Ace told that I spilled my root beer."

Cline kept looking over his shoulder.

"Elder buddy," said Jake. "Hey, cut it out, huh? You are going—I promise—to get us mugged. I swear you are."

THE sky was mother-of-pearl the day they tracted out The Ace's house. Tiny bits of snow floated down like powder from heaven, like the angels were dusting each other's wings, and vanished on yellow grass. It was the kind of snow you could see through, but your face got wet. Some of the trees wore clumps of white from yesterday's blizzard, but the snow on the ground was patchwork.

"Here it is," said Jake, looking up at the yellow gables. Two of the attic windows had jagged, black stars in their middles where baseballs or rocks had broken through. The other windows were thick with dust. Most had finger-writing on them, words like "No soliciting" and "Royben loves Tilda." The front room window had "Merry Christmas" written in its dust, and a thin, glittery, gold garland in place of curtains.

The Ace," said Jake, as though the name were part of a mantra.

"How tall'd you say he was?" asked Elder Cline.

"Maybe almost seven feet, I'd say."

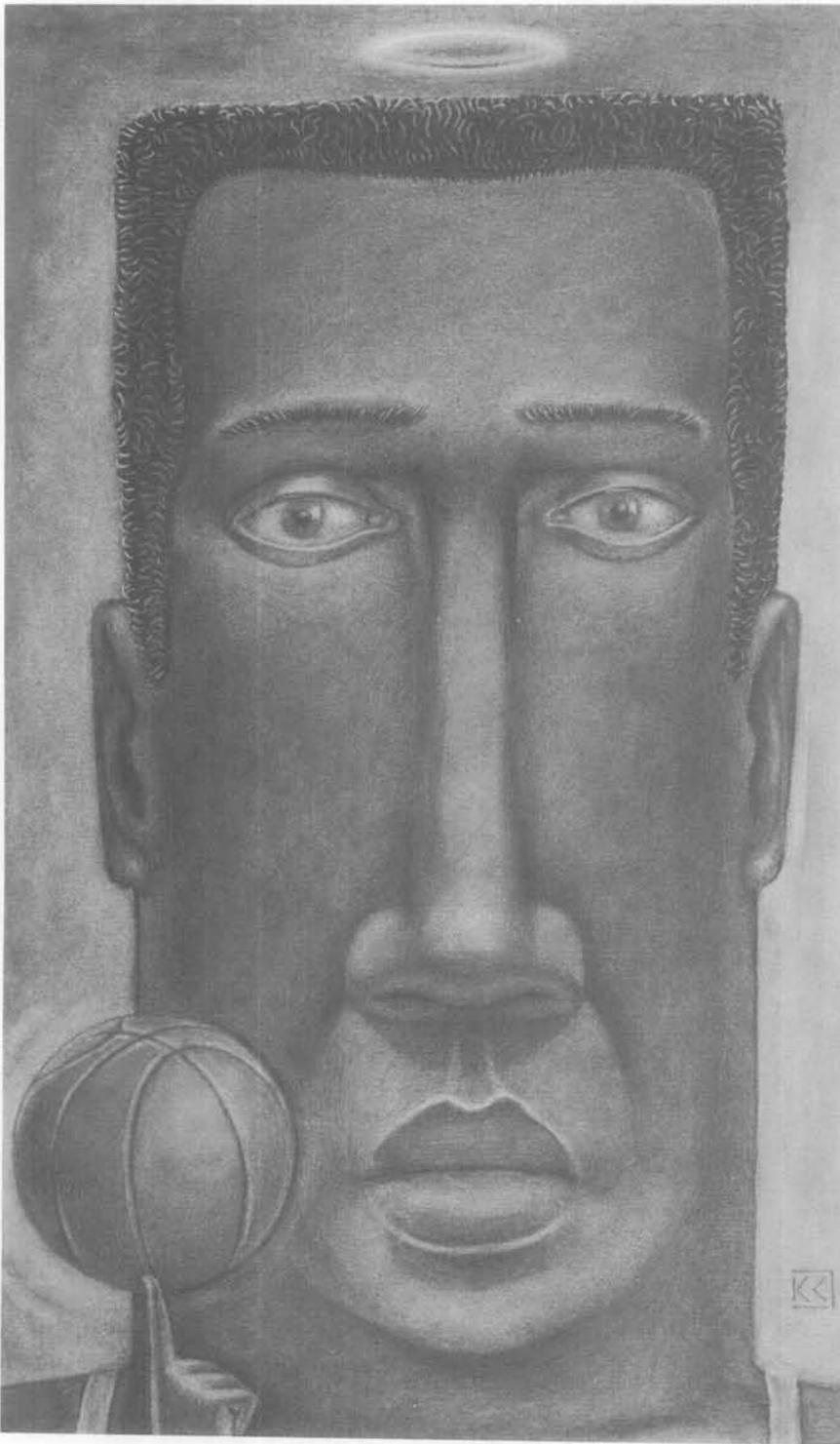
"You sure he won't be hostile?"

"The Ace? No. He's easy."

"Some of the coloreds don't like us much, I don't think. On account of the priesthood. From before the revelation."

Jake flashed his companion an accusing glare. "Don't think about that," he said. "The Ace will be—you watch. When he sees me, when he recognizes me—watch the grin. You'll think

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*"Ace," Jake said, "I thought you'd go pro, man."
Ace looked away. "So'd I," he said to the teddy bear.*

his teeth are filled with God, they'll shine so much. Gird up your loins, bud."

THE Ace's sidewalk was weather-cracked, lined with uneven, dirty snow. There was a film of ice on the cement, which the missionaries negotiated slowly. A faded Santa Claus

made of construction paper and cotton balls hung from the doorknob. "Carlton" was scrawled in red marker on the mailbox.

"I knew it," said Jake, closing his eyes. "The Ace. Thank you, God, for letting me come back. This one's for you." He rang the doorbell. When no one responded, he knocked. "Think I've changed too much for him to know me?" he said.

Elder Cline shrugged. "This neighborhood gives me the willies, Elder. I'm ready for some flippin' Watusi to come through that door. Gives me the willies."

There were sounds of movement inside. "Whozzeh?" came a woman's voice.

Jake covered his missionary tag with his overcoat. "One of Henry's friends," he called.

"Say what?"

"Jake Hampton. I used to know Henry."

A tiny window in the door opened. A brown eye squinted through it.

"You sellsmen?"

"No. Friends of The Ace," said Jake.

"Speak up?"

"Friends!" he shouted.

"Friends?"

"Yes!"

"Who friends?"

"Henry's."

"Not here."

"Where is he?"

The door opened three inches. The woman's face stared at them from above a chain bolt. "He's a come soon. He down at the Y."

"The YMCA?"

"That's what I say. The Y."

"Working out, is he?"

"Right. He workin'."

"Can we come back?"

"If your legs work, I reckon."

"Say in an hour?"

"Awright. He come by then."

"Tell him Jake Hampton came."

"Hampton? He know you?"

"Yeah. I was here once. Right here. I spilled root beer on your front room carpet. The carpet was blue, right? Your carpet blue?"

"Brown."

"You sure?"

"I sure. And don't try to take looks. I don't let no strangers inna my house."

Elder Cline tapped him on the shoulder, said let's go, with his eyes.

"You Henry's sister?" said Jake.

"Wife. I give him the message. You best leave for now."

"Come on," Elder Cline said. "She's right. Come on."

"His wife?" said Jake.

The door closed. Elder Cline took his arm and they negotiated the ice again.

"Married!" said Jake. "The Ace got married!"

The snowflakes were getting bigger. The sun was an apricot stuck on maple tree claws.

"Hey, Cline bud, what say I show you where I lived as a kid?" said Jake, and started walking ahead, walking fast, as though there were no ice. "These trees are the same, y' know? Nothing's changed. Married! Shee-oot!"

Elder Cline skidded behind him. "It's getting dark, Ham."

"Hang loose." He did not look back as he spoke, but moved faster. A winter fog was descending.

Elder Cline begged him to slow down. "Don't vanish on me!" But Jake was already into the mist. Cline heard him scream.

"Oh God!" said Elder Cline. A prayer.

"Elder!"

"God!" Cline whispered.

"It's my flippin' house!"

"What?"

"Come on, bud. Rush the buns. My house! My flippin' house!"

Cline moved gingerly forward. The fog was cold and moist. Jake was a phantom, his arm outstretched, indicating a hazy, dilapidated, white house. Cline jogged up to him, said, "You do that again, Ham, and I'm on a bus without you, understand that?"

"Do what? That's my house! See the trellis? Looks grey, don't it, but it's blue. My father put it up. Pretty lousy shape now, but back then—and my mother planted tulips. Should we see who lives there these days?" He started towards the walk.

"It's dark," Cline called.

"Come on, bud."

"I'm catching a bus, Ham. Seriously."

"Damn it, come on!"

Cline, glancing quickly over his shoulders, acquiesced. "Foul-mouthed bastard," he accused through clenched teeth when he caught up.

"My house," Jake repeated, and knocked.

"Foul-mouthed flippin' bastard."

"Shut up, Elder."

A hunched old man with steel wool hair answered the knock, cursed, and slammed the door.

"Let's go," said Elder Cline.

Jake knocked again. Again the door opened. Before the old man could speak, Jake said, "Please, sir, it's not what you think. I used to live here is all."

"Right," said the man.

"Yes sir, I did. My dad put up that blue trellis. My dad did that."

"Name?"

"Jacob Hampton."

"Ain't heard it. And m' rent's paid."

"I used to live here."

"Must be long time 'go."

"Five years is all."

"That long time."

"In that room there," Jake pointed, "my brother and me slept. We put notches in the door. For our growth, y' know? To measure it."

The man's stone face moved to a loose grin. He chuckled. "That you been wreck the door?"

"Yeah. Me and my brother."

Beyond the old man, Jake could see the front room—a ruin of his memory. Where his mother had had an autumny hide-a-bed and two burgundy arm chairs, the old man had a burlapish couch with sunken cushions. The only light was a dim lamp in the corner. The lampshade had children's pencil scrawls all over it. Above the couch was a velvet painting of a cocker spaniel pup with pathetic eyes.

"Same as y'members?" said the old man.

"Yeah," said Jake. "Same."

"Good then. You best be on your ways, I reckon. Night comin'." He smiled tiredly and closed the door.

"I'm catching a bus," said Elder Cline. "Swear I am."

"You're sticking with me, bud, or you're in for your first mugging. Your fear stinks, Cline. Streeters will smell you coming two miles away. And I'm senior anyways."

Cline sniffled and murmured under his breath, "Die and rot."

AN hour had passed when they returned to the home of The Ace. Jake knocked. The woman called again, "Whoozeh?" "Jake Hampton."

The door opened two inches. A dark face appeared again in the rectangle. A man's voice called, "You know me?"

"Ace? Ace, is that you?"

Heavy steps. The door closed, then opened wide. Ace Carlton stood in the frame, two inches taller than Jake.

"Ace?"

In The Ace's arms was a skinny child, a boy about three years old, wearing faded Winnie the Pooh pajamas.

"Ace? It's Jake Hampton. We used to play basketball together. Remember me, doncha?"

"Nope."

"Jake Hampton? Lived on Adams Street? Moved to Idaho when I was fifteen?"

"Idaho?"

"Yeah. I kept thinking I'd see you on some basketball poster in Idaho." He grinned stupidly.

"Jake Hampton?" The Ace shook his head and rubbed the child's back. "It don't come to me."

Jake gazed at the dark, suspicious face. The Ace had grown fleshy around his jaws. "No reason you should remember me. Not really," said Jake. "I was just some dumb honky. Couldn't play basketball to save my—" He glanced at Elder Cline. "To save my nose."

"Yo' nose?" The Ace broke into a grin. Two of his teeth were missing. "Damn, man!" he said.

"We had a party here," said Jake. "I came, and I spilled root beer on your rug. Used to be a blue rug, didn't it? Blue?"

"Brown. Always be brown."

"Maybe I just think blue because—I don't know. The sky."

"You sellsmen?"

"Missionaries." Jake's voice was soft.

"Damn, man. Shee-it. Why you come here for?"

"Just to see you, man," said Jake. "Don't worry. You don't need to hear no missionary talk from us. Just come to see you, man."

"Jake Hampton. You wear glasses?"

"I did. Have contacts now."

"Li'l black kiss-ass, Poindexter glasses, din'cha."

"Yeah, Ace. That's me."

"I 'member. Spilt root beer all over my rug. My mama like t' kill me. Shoulda make you pay for that." He grinned big.

"Can we come in, Ace?"

"Chassay forrard!" Ace stood back and let the missionaries pass.

THE house smelled of cigars. The front room was lacerated. In one corner was a tinsel tree, rattling like paper—shivering, it seemed, with the coldness Jake and Elder Cline had let in. In the opposite corner was a teddy bear. It sat grinning, spilling its white guts. There were four Santa Claus cards hanging on nails above the couch. Each Santa had a blue-grey beard and a sugary blue-grey tassel; each wore a fuzzy suit. The couch was mock leather and looked knifed. Black tape covered the biggest splits in its upholstery; none covered the smaller ones; stuffing poured out of them.

When they sat, Jake could feel the couch's coils. Looking at the yellow light bulb swinging from the ceiling like a metronome, Jake had a fleeting thought of an electric chair.

"Right there," said The Ace, pointing to the corner where the teddy bear sat. "That's where you spilt it."

Jake nodded.

"Probably there still."

Jake chuckled.

"Damn man," said The Ace. "I 'member you for sure. I thought I forget off'n the mind, but I 'member. But what's this get-up? You get 'ligion? You some moonie or somethin'?"

"Mormon, man. I told you. Mormon."

The Ace laughed hard and didn't stop for a long time. He tried to speak twice, but couldn't get the words past his laughs. "Scuse me," he said at last. "Sorry for the gigglement, but you know how funny 'tis seein' some dressed-up MORmon dude, sassy as'a jay bird, y'know, in his shiny blues, sittin' like nothin's unusual—sittin' right here in my room?" He finished laughing with a ghostly moan. "Damn, man," he said, wiping his eyes.

"Ace, hey—" said Jake, and The Ace started laughing again.

"It's getting late," whispered Cline.

"So Ace," Jake said, "you got married."

"Yeah."

"She's pretty."

Ace wiped his eyes. "Oh yeah. My woman. Love her like the mischief, you know. Now you all—you all have them big weddin's, right? Like thousand brides and thousand grooms all

marry t'once?"

"Nah, man. That's them moonies."

"Oh yeah. Yeah."

Elder Cline whispered, "We don't want to miss the bus."

"So how's the basketball?" said Jake.

The Ace shrugged. "Last I look, basketball fine."

"Come on, Ace. You're the best basketball player I ever seen," said Jake, looking him square in the eyes. The Ace shrugged again.

"You was workin' out when we come first time. Basketball, right?"

"When?"

"Before. Your wife said you was at the Y."

"My job. I sweeps up."

"You sweep?"

Another shrug.

Jake blinked and pushed at the glasses he no longer wore. He could feel himself starting to sweat. His lungs stung. "Ace," he said. "I thought you'd go pro, man."

Ace looked away. "So'd I," he said to the teddy bear.

"So yeah. So—what happened?"

"Nothin'," he said, still to the toy. "Weren't nothin to count on gettin'. I never was good enough." He turned his eyes back to Jake. "Got busted up. An' I don't wanna wrassle with my shadow, understand me?"

"But you're the best, Ace!" said Jake, his voice nearly squeaking with adolescent conviction. "The best!"

The Ace's eyes were as pathetic and big as the cocker spaniel's in Jake's ex-house. They circled Jake's face. His voice, when he spoke, was a soft, low monotone. "I don't have nothin' to brag on." He paused, looked from one missionary to the other, eyes moving back and forth between them, then up and down. "Mormons," he said. "Mormons. Isn't they the church don't let no black man inside?"

"That's changed, Ace," Jake said fast.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, Ace. Changed way back."

"The way used to be all blocked up. I don't reckon you'd know what that's like, wouldn't you. Havin' the way blocked up. You wouldn't know, bein' from Idaho."

"I do know, Ace."

"Nah. You wouldn't."

"Ace—"

"Most my friends, they call me Hank now."

"Ace, you should practice or something. You're too good to sweep up other guys' sweat. You should be up on the posters, you know? Shootin' baskets. Ace, you got to gird up your loins!"

The man leaned forward, stunned. "I got to WHUT?"

Jake glanced at Elder Cline, who gave him a defiant look of abandonment. "Gird up your loins," Jake whispered.

Ace grinned, and started laughing again. "Git up my WHUT?"

"It's a song. A Mormon song. Says 'Take fresh courage. Gird up your loins.'"

"Sound like some faggot song ta me," he laughed.

"Nah, it's just—"

"Jacob," he said, his face suddenly hard. "Jacob, you know how many high school kids's wantin' to be pros in basketball?"

Jake shook his head.

"No idea? I tell you, then. More 'n all the MORmons in the world. More 'n all the MORmons in the whole damn world."

"Ace—"

"You bes' be gettin' on your way now, missionaries."

Elder Cline sat up straight. "He's right," he said. "The man's right. We don't want to miss our bus."

The Ace shook his head. "Lookin' so shiny and so sassy. Kickin' up shines and shuttin' all the doors and the windahs. You best go. You wanna give me money for the spilt root beer, that's awright."

"Ace, that's not why I come. I—"

"Maybe ten dollar."

Jake felt around in his pockets. "I just come to say 'Hi.' That's all."

The Ace held out his palm. Jake fed it a ten.

"Come on," Cline said.

Jake held out his hand for The Ace to shake. The Ace backed away.

"Good to see you," Jake said. "Really."

Grinning, The Ace slapped the missionary's palm. "Other side, man," said The Ace, and, by reflex, Jake turned his hand over. The Ace slapped it again, hard, and Jake felt himself being gently shoved toward the door.

THE construction paper Santa Claus swayed back and forth when the door closed behind them. It was fully dark now.

"Cold," Cline said, his breath white.

Snowflakes were big and thick. Clumps of snow fell from the Carlton roof like rags. It was a black and white, frozen world. Pines towered above them, seeming to Jake like huge black bears, the snow on their limbs white stuffing, coming all undone as they stood there waiting to get slapped, stood there saying with the wind, "Gimme fa-a-av, m-a-a-an. Utteh s-s-side, ma-a-a-n." Jake slapped one branch, then turned his hand over and caught the snow as it fell. He made it into ice in his fist.

Elder Cline was two steps ahead.

"Elder!" said Jake.

"Die and rot!" yelled his companion.

To Jake. To the world.



ANOTHER COUNTRY TO CAT CASTEEL

Easy to come for the weekend
and stay until Tuesday, in your country.
Now I try to remember everything
how the boys practiced their swimming in the bathtub
and said their rhymes in the language of your country.

Next time I'll come sooner and stay later.
To see the Palominos stamping in your stable,
to ride out through the wind,
to feel the sand sucking at our toes at the shore,
Your country, like beryl in a sapphire sea.

Someday I will live there.
We'll eat apricots in the gloaming,
the bowl heavy between us,
the skins peeled back to get at the sweetness,
the apricots so perfect in your country.

And we'll eat them off the ground,
in your orchard in the morning,
walking beneath the trees in the morning,
in your country, in death, your perfect country

—KATHLEEN WEBER