



# The Family Gangsta

by James Wilson

MY SON SAM AND I have reached a standoff of sorts, an uneasy accommodation. I understand him, more or less; and he understands me, more or less. We spend far too much time together, and because of that we sometimes get tired of each other. As often as I complain about the difficulty of being the primary companion of an autistic 26-year-old, he complains about the difficulty—and boredom—of having to put up with a 58-year-old assistant. “I’m tired of you,” he’ll say. “You’re too old for me.”

Call it a hard-fought truce.

Still, I’m a realist. I’ve spent too much time on the psych ward to fool myself into thinking that the bad old times won’t come again. Autism can’t be cured or outgrown. Just last year Sam could be quietly reading the phonebook one moment and then BAM, I look up and he’s banging his head against the wall. Sometimes not even listening to music or watching the weather channel would calm his turbulent mind. The forecast might remain unchanged from one 15-minute segment to the next, but not Sam. Some subtle, imperceptible change in intonation or camera angle would set off a chain reaction. Serotonin would surge, dopamine receptors would tweak, and suddenly all hell would break loose. Without warning, Sam would rush through the house smashing and head-banging everything in range, looking for...me? Yikes!

Let me be blunt. I've found that when all else fails and heads start banging, only dark humor can help me cope. I've earned my right to be sardonic. I've been punched, kicked, scratched, and bit. I've been pushed down stairs and shoved into walls. One day I suffered the indignity of being chased around my front yard by my broom-wielding son in full view of our neighbors. Hahaha, just Sam having a bad moment. Not to worry, really. He'll calm down in a second.

No question, Sam can be difficult. Yet, on other occasions he can be absolutely delightful, a pleasure to have as a life companion. At 5'8" he's a stocky 190 pounds with a more or less neatly trimmed beard and curly brown hair tucked under a baseball cap. In addition to autism, Sam has a mood disorder. When he's down, he'll sit slumped forward with his head listing to the right and his eyes half closed as though he were hibernating. But when he's wired, he paces around the house either humming or buzzing like a bee and tapping on walls and tables. For the past several years he's lived semi-independently in a fully equipped apartment in our basement dubbed the "Yellow Submarine" after its sunny yellow paint and a poster of the Beatles's movie of the same name hanging on the wall. His three other companions, all males, spend time in Sam's bachelor pad and take him out to movies and restaurants.

Unlike many people on the autism spectrum, Sam chatters nonstop about his favorite topics. His current obsessions are severe weather, especially tornadoes, and rap music, courtesy of his youngest companion, who introduced Sam to the likes of Jay-Z, Snoop Dogg, Busta Rhymes, Outkast, Dr. Dre, Ludacris, 50 Cent, Jurassic 5, and the ever-popular NWA. Sam and rap are a perfect fit. He loves the word play and the repetitive, pounding rhythms. Thanks to his friend, appropriately nicknamed Party Dawg, Sam has gone gangsta.

Now Sam comes hip-hopping down the hallway singing along with his headphones: "Drop it like it's hot! Drop it like it's hot!" Or "Bust a move! Bust a move!"

Sam walks the walk and talks therRap. "Wassup?" he'll ask, when he hasn't seen me for all of five minutes. Or he'll tell me he's feeling "all eaten up" when he's not quite himself. "Hook me up," he'll say, when he wants something, usually food. He introduces his

friends as his “homies.” Sometimes he’ll go back and forth between rap talk and weather talk, as though he’s engaging in parallel conversations. Just what the world needs: a playa with an obsessive-compulsive interest in meteorology.

Sam doesn’t work; he has never been able to hold down a job, partly because of the kinds of jobs people have offered him. Once in high school he was told by a job counselor to break down boxes since that was all someone with “reduced potential” could possibly do. Then after high school he was sent to a sheltered workshop and told to put screws in a box for 24 cents an hour. It would be hard to imagine a task less suited for a person who has problems with concentration, sensory overload, and fine motor coordination but who has above average intelligence. Not surprisingly, Sam refused to cooperate with his job counselors, acted up, and got sent to the showers.

So instead of working, Sam recreates. But enough telling, let me show you Sam in action. Recently, Sam’s social club, which caters to young adults with various disabilities, sponsored a special outing, a first ever Boy’s Night Out. Where does our fearless outing leader, Tim, decide to take us? To Hooters, of course. And not just any Hooters, but the fancy marina-style Hooters on the Ohio River in downtown Cincinnati.

Everyone arrives early, ready to party. Together, we’re a rainbow of ages, ethnicities, and disabilities. Sam and the other members of his club walk across the wooden ramp one at a time, accompanied by a couple of the fathers who serve as helpers, myself included. We don’t have to worry about fitting in at Hooters. We’re not the weirdest dudes here. None of the other customers even notices us. Not the group of Japanese businessmen, not the two grungers wearing heavy metal T-shirts, not the single guy pretending to be reading a newspaper, and certainly not the old geezers sitting at the bar nursing their beers. They’re much too busy ogling the Hooters girls to care about a few extraordinary young men limping and shuffling across the wooden floor. The server girls are wearing their standard-issue tight shorts and tighter orange tops. The classy look.

“Man—this beats last month’s outing,” says one of our troops when he spots his first Hooter’s babe.

"I take care of my guys," says Tim, our fearless leader, a stocky young man with shoulder-length brown hair. Tim plays in a rock band and appears absolutely unflappable. Nothing ruffles Tim's feathers as he supervises his group: John jumping up and down at the table, Eric scribbling in his notebook left to right, then top to bottom, and Sam asking repeatedly about tornadoes. Just another night for City Club, a social club for young people with disabilities sponsored by the United Way. Our version of "normal." Whatever normal means.

Unable to attain Tim's Zen-like state of unflappability, I keep worrying that one of our charges will reach out and grab a handful of Hooters flesh. My bad. Ironically, our guys are less distracted by Hooters babes than the other customers are. Mostly, we want spicy chicken wings, platters of fries, and a round of drinks, thank you very much. Sure, we enjoy the sexy costumes, but the girls represent only one item on our party platter and definitely not the main course. We're here to party, not to ogle. We don't get out all that much. As you can probably guess, our social calendars aren't very full. But when we do go out on the town, watch out. Let the good times roll!

And for not ogling, the Hooters girls love us. Sure, we're a little strange, but at least we're not sexist pigs. No boorish behavior coming from our table. Just John, the youngest of our group, who is largely nonverbal, bouncing in his seat saying "Hi!" over and over again. So the girls hover around us two and three at a time, like a burst of orange butterflies fluttering around our flowers. They can't resist our charm. And who can blame them? How often does a group of young, distinctive, well-behaved gentlemen appear among Hooters's usual clientele?

We're about to order when Eric, a young man about Sam's age, turns to his server and asks, "Do you have a death ray in your mind?"

Hahaha, everyone laughs. Good one, Eric. Our server, a blonde bombshell, blushes ever so slightly. She's been asked worse, no doubt. "No, I don't," she says playfully. "But I can take your order if you're ready."

Eric likes that. You bet. Everyone tries to order at the same time until our server has to raise her hand high, like an umpire calling time out. "One at a time, boys."

When it's Sam's turn, he asks, "Which do you like better, rap or hip hop?"

"Oh," she says. "I'm not sure I know the difference?"

Sam's already on to the next topic. "Have you ever seen a tornado? Do you remember the Blue Ash tornado on April 9, 1999? Have the sirens ever gone off here?"

"Whoa," our server says. "You must like weather."

"And fire alarms," Sam adds. He reaches out and touches her bare arm lightly, then thinks twice about it and snaps his hand back. "Sorry," he says, and means it.

Sam turns to me. "Was I appropriate?" He tends to worry about his behavior—after the fact.

"Well...you shouldn't touch, but . . ." I don't know how to finish my sentence.

"It's okay," our server says, all smiles.

When Sam orders, he always begins with the same question: "Which do you have, Coke or Pepsi?" Not that it matters, since whichever they have is what he orders. But Sam has to follow his ritual. His next question is: "Do you have pizza or chicken tenders?" Pizza and chicken tenders represent the staff of life for Sam. Only on rare occasions will he break his routine and order a cheeseburger, as long as the server understands that no lettuce, tomato, onion, or pickle should touch his cheeseburger. If vegetable touches burger, we're in for a bumpy ride.

"We have chicken tenders, served with lots of French fries," our server responds.

"Yeah, baby. Pile it on!"

Everybody agrees. Pile it on!

When the food comes, we pounce. We might not be pretty to watch, with stacks of extra napkins and wet wipes all around, but no one could ever accuse us of not enjoying our food.

Later, when we've pretty much finished eating, most of us bearing the telltale signs of catsup and barbecue sauce, the servers take turns coming over to visit. We've won them over with our good looks, charming behavior, and healthy appetites.

Then Andrew, our oldest, jumps up and heads for the gift counter. Someone jokes that he wants to buy a Hooters outfit for his mom.

Yeah, right, wouldn't she love that? But when he returns, it's with a Hooters T-shirt for himself. We all agree that Andrew will be one handsome dude in his new Hooters T-shirt. Always a ham, Andrew pulls the T-shirt over his head, eyeglasses and all, just so we can see how good he looks. He straightens his glasses and mugs for us and the ladies. Joking, one of the servers asks if he wants to work at Hooters.

Meanwhile, Sam has cornered another server. "What about the Xenia tornado of 1974? That's famous, you know. The biggest outbreak of tornadoes in recorded history."

"Really..."

"Yeah, I have a book on that one. Do you like fire alarms?"

"No, I don't like alarms. They're too loud."

"Me neither. Except for Simplex. Do you have any Simplex fire alarms here?" When she doesn't answer, Sam says, "That's okay, not everybody has a Simplex."

When we leave, it's with a sense of satisfaction, with the knowledge that we made new friends and interacted with everyone, including the Hooters girls, and that we partied to the max and left quite an impression. We have the T-shirts and catsup stains to prove it. Someone wants to know when and where Tim's rock band will be playing, so that we can continue the party, whenever. Let's do Hooters again. Why not? Hooters rules!

Sam and I are the last to leave. He's made it this far without a serious gaffe. But suddenly he reaches out and takes our server's hand and looks deeply into her eyes. "If you were president, you'd be Babe-raham Lincoln," he says, repeating a line from the movie *Wayne's World*.

She laughs. "Thank you—I think!"

I breathe a sigh of relief. He could have repeated his favorite line from *Austin Powers: Goldmember*. The one about shagging!

"Did I blow my cover?" he asks on the way out the door, a big grin on his face.

I have to laugh. "No, we did well."

At that Sam says, "Bust a move!" and does a hip-hop dance shuffle on the deck. Then he heads for the ramp that will take him to shore, with me following along behind.