

Jack Came Back

I want to tell the story of Jack as I know it, not just to celebrate him now that he has passed: but because I learned so much from this story and it shaped who I am possibly more than any other.

Jack was raised in a small West Coast American town in the Post-War Years, with all the typical strict social conventions and economic plenty. When the Cold War grew hot in the jungles of Southeast Asia, he was off to the US Navy where he was fortunate and well connected enough to be sent to the Caribbean to perfect his skills at cards and catching a football on the beach. Afterwards, he came back itching to seek his fortune in the “big” city of Seattle, stubborn and unconcerned with starting a career as financial crisis loomed; oblivious to the country lurching towards cultural and civic revolution.

You see, apart from ambitions of money, respectability, and success Jack was tending to another project all along the way . . . one of destruction. Shades haunted his steps by day and lurked in his dreams by night. They made him fearful, selfish, temperamental, and quick to anger; and in a downward spiral of quiet madness he sought to annihilate any ability to feel, to erase his very self in excess. Moderation was a word that did not exist and nothing was worth doing if not to epic extremes. Drinking and later drugs, food and philandering, smoking and more drinking were the tools of this trade.

Somehow Jack’s charming façade was maintained, a family was started, and a new existential game began: living the American Dream, a big house in the suburbs, a perfectly manicured garden, a big car, a wife, 2.2 kids, and a dog. This is where my brother and I come into the story.

My father was not present much in my early childhood. He had to work doubly hard to maintain the illusion of normality as the business of self-destruction gained momentum and added new addictions. When he was at home I tended to keep to myself and often actively avoided him, exemplified in him arriving home and me promptly picking up my papers, pencils, and toys and setting off for another room or maybe the backyard. It was some sort of survival instinct because he was so unpredictable, when angry he could fill up a whole room – he was larger than life. I was shielded from most of the trouble in our home life by my mother who managed to create a bubble of creative activities to keep me occupied and spontaneous outings to zoos or shops when the more frightening mood swings began. When my baby brother came he operated only as an obstacle to be stepped over on the way to the liquor cabinet. On rare occasions, particularly after a long absence, Jack would snap me up and drive me out of the city to the middle of a field or the base of some wooded hills, to sit silently on the back of his truck eating sardines and cold beans out of the tin cans. A guilty and awkward attempt at father-son bonding that mostly perplexed me and where I developed a palate for mildly exotic foods.

This early stage in our relationship ended when my mother finally threw Jack out of the house, an act that in later years he told me was the best thing she ever did for him. Ironically this was how I started to get to know my father.

In that year he made a final sprint towards annihilation. A drunk, a junkie, barred from his own home and family, deep in debt, threatened with court dates and jail time for yet another DWI as they started to tighten such laws. He sat with a pistol in his mouth cursing himself as a coward for not being able to pull the trigger.

Amid this chaos he fought with my mom and convinced her to let me spend a weekend with him. I have more intense memories of that weekend than any other period in my childhood. A blur of strange anecdotes: he bought me a rubber bat, he burnt the hamburger dinner and set off the fire alarm, he took me to the movies set me up with soda and popcorn then slipped away for a fix on that eternal search for the perfect high. I spent hours battling shadows and imaginary monsters in a parking lot because Dad kept falling asleep on the couch and I could not figure out how to wake him up. In an instant, facing his prone and unresponsive form, I understood why my life did not match the picture of family taught in school and shown on the television. I lost my innocence at age six as I worked out just how sick my father was.

Jack finally found a splinter of hope in his mess of a life. The court offered him one condition to avoid jail, mandatory attendance to meetings of a not-so-secret society called Alcoholics Anonymous. At first it was just another trick and a lie to leverage his way back into his home and the life he led before everything started to fall apart. Then as time drew on something changed, something in this program began to stick. People challenged him to be a better man, they taught him how to start cleaning up his life piece by piece, they replaced his tools of destruction with love, support, and forgiveness; they called him friend and asked for nothing in return. He got a new lease on life, he got another chance, and he could try to be a whole human being again.

Those first years of sobriety were not easy. A lot of damage had been done, and some wounds were too deep to ever heal. I still saw little of my father and he remained a great enigma in my life. My parents eventually had to part ways, for both of them to heal. That was when something really perplexing happened. Jack did not go to Southern California, that fairy tale place where all deadbeat dads live. Stubborn as always he stayed, and before a judge fought for something that logic dictated he had no more right to: to spend time with his sons, to start trying to be an example, to step into that mysterious role of father to two boys aged seven and twelve that alternately feared and loathed him.

There we were in an awkward stance blinking at each other: in a line at a far flung amusement park, sitting at the dinner table, or driving to some sports practice. I hated Jack for our past, even more so because in character, manner, and sometimes action I was turning out just like him. But even in my adolescent brain I recognized that I needed this new example and with all his might he was at least trying now. As I grew bigger, stronger, and more independent we struggled, at times almost coming to blows, and something else changed, I was not scared of him when he filled up the room with his presence, when he puffed up larger than life, and thus he started to treat me like an adult. We parted ways as dysfunctional father and son, a project that always suited us poorly, and inched towards something like fast friends. We sat once in a parked car in a deep and spontaneous conversation, we re-hashed the past and told versions of our mutual journey, I told him of those myriad of ways that he had hurt me, memories long

suppressed or forgotten, and why I was so full of anger. I told him how much it meant that Jack had come back and that without knowing it before – all was forgiven, I could trust him again. A new relationship grew out of that heartfelt conversation. We were two men, like co-conspirators, with mutual respect and admiration, love and understanding, two sides of the same coin.

I charged headlong into the wide world to seek my own path and fortune. When we visited or telephoned we had many of those spontaneous sessions that always seemed so profound to me. When I was confused or frightened he held me up with his words and pushed me on. He always had some inspiration to support me for my baffling and odd choices on an irregular weaving road in life. He taught me how to ignore doubt, to be confident, to live life by my own rules, to beat back the shades that can haunt you in trying times. I am very grateful he had the strength to re-forge his life; that *we* got another chance. I owe so much of who I am today to that return journey. I cannot help but whisper, “Thank you for coming back.”

In his new life he found new purpose. He found a woman who could stand up to him, who called out any nonsense or half-truths that he was prone to, who he could truly understand; a partner that he could love without tearing down. Jack steered his career towards internal fulfillment and tranquility. And as his sobriety grew in years it became an achievement and an example. He showed that from the worst addictions and sickness, from the deepest despair a person can find inner solace, serenity, and strength to put his life back together as something positive and full of radiance.

I watched and listened to him over the years try and help people, to challenge forgotten junkies and lost drunks to be better people, and I was amazed at how Jack could be that rock of solidarity, the last person that people without hope would turn to. He helped set others on that difficult road to recovery and it helped him remember how far he had come. For him there was a quiet joy and pride in it. He liked being a teacher, it gave him meaning.

Instead of lamenting how young Jack was and how surprising his sudden passage was, I assert that long ago he was already dead. He took a faint glimmer of hope and made a whole new life out of nothing. For 25 years he healed himself and those around him. There is poetic irony that the last thing he did before he died was go to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. I hope he helped someone that evening with the curious and inspiring example of his life.

My father was not 63 and too young. He was 25, and that is a very long time considering the story of how Jack came back.

He could fill up a whole room with his presence; he was larger than life . . .

Jason Benedict

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