

Jack's Family

Jack and I tended to avoid conversation about serious topics, maybe more so as we got older. During the time I knew him, our views on a variety of topics veered apart, sometimes differing markedly. Maybe my developing opinions changed more as I grew to adulthood. Respectful of each other, we knew not to brush against topics that would ruffle our feathers.

Jack was pretty strict about his religion, and I suppose at one time I had also held a number of firm beliefs. But my granite foundation eventually crumbled into loose ideas that turned into mere opinions ... opinions I knew Jack wouldn't appreciate. Better to steer clear of the religion topic, I thought. I would not have been a good advocate for my own opinions anyway, so without fervor did I hold them.

Jack's observance of his faith was obsessive. He studied all the beliefs and a multitude of church rules. He knew all the priests and bishops and cardinals, their positions on the issues of the day, and even a bit about their personal lives. In fact, he seemed to treat the church as a family.

When Jack died sooner than I expected, I sorely missed him. At the funeral, a cousin I seldom saw repeated a story Jack had told her that he had never mentioned to me.

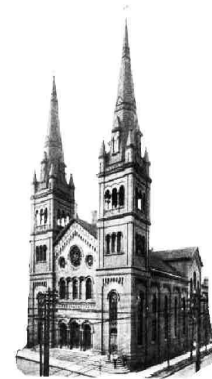
Jack's tale was about a well-dressed stranger he met one night. He related it as if it really happened, so said the cousin. I suppose it could have been real, or more likely a very vivid and certainly memorable dream.

The story began in the winter of his 9th grade at school, when he was almost 16 years of

age. Jack came to blows with his father and left their dysfunctional household for a few days. No relatives would welcome him, so he spent a night in St. John's Church, the large well-endowed Catholic edifice in downtown Utica. During the night Jack awoke as someone entered the almost completely dark building, made their way to the side altar, lit a votive candle and left. The supplicatory candle, lighted for whom Jack knew not, spit out a weak light across the church. Jack crawled out from his hiding place beneath the huge ornate baptismal font and found the rack of perhaps one hundred small candles, only one now burning feebly.

Thankful for at least a dribble of light, he sat down in the nearest pew where he could see the frail light play on the statues of Mary, St. John and someone with a hard face who looked a bit like an Indian he had seen in a school text.

When a deep voice behind him said, "Do you want a penny to light a candle?" Jack jumped nearly a foot off the bench. As the man walked up into the light, Jack could see by his clothing he was a man of means. The stranger had a kind face, and after looking fixedly at

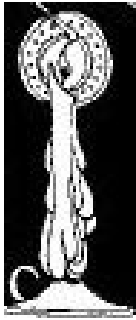


Jack for a moment, the visitor walked over to the candles, dropped a coin in the box and scraped a match into a flame. He moved the flame to one of the candles, paused and asked, "Will this one do?" Jack was paralyzed, but shook his head yes.

The man touched the flame to the wick, seemed satisfied and turned back to Jack and said, "Your family must be worried about you." Jack found his tongue, "I don't have a family." The man's eyebrows raised a little and then dropped. His face had a look of complete peace. Either the stranger saw the lie or sensed the truth of Jack's predicament, but to Jack it seemed wonderful to be looking

into the eyes of one who was understanding and gentle.

The visitor opened his hands as if to signify the entire church and said, "Well, this is your family." Then he turned and walked down the aisle, leaving the darkened church. Jack, still immobile, sat looking at Mary, St. John and the Indian.



In time Jack came to have a new family in addition to those who had bore him and with whom he had been raised. Jack's birth family was crowded into a teepee of a house, a ramshackle dump on lower Mohawk St. The entire tribe of nine was subject to an alcoholic father and the needs of a sickly

mother. Brothers and sisters and their parents slept in two bedrooms, as well as the living room, and even the kitchen on cold nights. Nothing in Jack's family could be considered solid or dependable. Everything changed hourly, ruled by emotions and fueled by drink.

Jack's new family was ancient and unchanging. Its adherents were admirable people and comprised the priests and successful parishioners of St. Johns Parish. As well, the family was universal and extended even to Italy and Rome. This new family had a daunting degree of tradition. The "family history" of Catholicism interested Jack greatly, and he constantly read about it. He consulted a host of laws by which he meant to live his life, and unsuccessfully recommended these same strictures to me, his son.

I had known very little of my father's childhood, and the story explained a lot to me. The troubled boy had grown to be a man, met and married my mother and raised three sons. But through much of that time he remained rigid and extremely loyal to his church. Toward the end of his life, some of the religious artifacts and observances fell away, I noticed. The pictures of the Sacred Heart on his apartment's wall disappeared

first and the various Catholic magazines strewn about went later. I couldn't tell if this was due to a loosening of his hard opinions or just an aspect of his aging. Either way, he seemed released, as though he had gone inside himself, found the worry switch and turned it off.

During his final year, my father lost his footing in the present and began to slide back into the past. Surprisingly, he no longer mentioned religion or morals or rules. Toward the end, he spoke mostly of my mother, the balm of his sometimes troubled life

In time, Jack's mind began to live elsewhere. He never told where he went, but he always came back happy. Eventually, he didn't return and I lost him, though I stood next to his bed, listening to him breathe. I was happy his mind was somewhere pleasant, but I missed him terribly. I just wanted to hear his voice once more. He could have quoted the canons of the Third Lateran Council, and it wouldn't have mattered to me.

I had always entertained the possibility of a heaven, until I lost my first hero. But my father's death, when it came, had such finality that I found it impossible to consider he might be alive elsewhere. However, as time went on, something inside me held out hope, and for a long time after the funeral, I would think of him each time the phone rang and smile at being touched that way.

And I hoped he was sitting with the well dressed stranger, among a thousand lit candles in a church no longer filled with darkness, but instead with a light growing brighter and brighter, as it welcomed him home to a family now perfected, to a family of peace and love.

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