

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 began to differ, maybe mine changed more than his, so we knew to not come too close to topics that would ruffle each others feathers.

Jack was pretty strict about his religion and I suppose at one time I held some pretty firm beliefs too. But eventually I eased up a bit and my philosophies turned into loose ideas that turned into opinions I knew Jack wouldn't appreciate, so I began to steer clear of the topic.

Jack's observance of his religion was obsessive. He studied all of its beliefs and multitude of rules. He knew all the priests and bishops and cardinals and he seemed to treat the church as a second family.

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

Jack's story was about a well-dressed stranger. He related it as if it really happened, so said his cousin. Maybe it

did or maybe it was a very vivid and certainly memorable dream.

The story began in the winter of his 9th grade at school and at almost 16 years of age. Jack came to blows with his father and left their very 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 under the huge ornate baptismal font where he had been hiding and found the rack of perhaps one hundred small candles, only one now burning feebly.

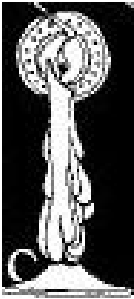
Thankful for at least a dribble of light, he sat down in the nearest pew where he could see the frail light play on the statues of Mary, St. John and someone with a hard face who looked a bit like an Indian he had seen in a magazine.

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. He had a kind face and after looking at Jack for a moment he 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 rose a little and then dropped. His face had a look of complete understanding. Either the man saw the lie or sensed the truth of Jack’s predicament, but the wonderful thing was he seemed to understand.

In a moment, the stranger opened his hands as if to signify the entire church and said, “Well, this is your family.” Then the man walked down the aisle and left the darkened church as Jack, still immobile, sat looking at Mary, St. John and the Indian.



Thus 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., subject to an alcoholic father and a sickly mother. There were 7 brothers and sisters who along with their parents slept in two bedrooms as well as the living room and even the kitchen on cold nights. Nothing in that family was ever solid or dependable. Everything changed hourly it seemed, 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 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, as well as the laws he learned and observed and

worried about, constantly it often seemed.

I had known very little of my father’s childhood and that story explained a lot of his life to me. Jack had grown up, of course, 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 some of the religious artifacts fell away, I noticed. The pictures of the Sacred Heart on the wall went first and the various Catholic magazines began to disappear from his apartment. I couldn’t tell if that was due to a loosening of his hard opinions or just aging. Either way, he seemed released..

When he lost track of the present and began to live in the past during his final year, he never mentioned religion or morals or rules. He seemed to have gone inside himself, found the worry switch, turned it off and come back at peace. He spoke mostly of my mother, who had been the balm of his sometimes troubled life.

In time his mind began to live elsewhere, but he appeared happy. Maybe he was sitting near the candles with the well dressed stranger in a church no longer filled with darkness, but with a light growing brighter and brighter as it welcomed him home.

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