

The Book of Jack

Maybe one in ten of my high school classmates can name the Vice President of the United States, but I doubt there's a kid in that learning factory who couldn't pick my father out of a crowd. Dad's a legend at my school.

Today is Thursday, so I'm staying late for tutoring. My friend Carl and I found a couple of seats in the back of the Learning Center and played *Battle Royale* on Carl's phone until the bell rang and they ran us out. I live across the street in a place my family rented a month into my freshman year, so I have a short walk home. Three years have passed since we moved in and I'll never forget my apprehension over starting at a new school mid-semester. I was afraid that I'd be invisible to other kids, but the *Let the Little Children Come to Me* bible camp t-shirt my mother made me wear that first day quelled that concern.

I approached our yard and spotted Dad at the property line in a discussion with our neighbor, Mr. Khan. I don't know who's more offensive to Dad, the Muslims or the gays, but he has it in his head that Khan is both, so I don't imagine the two of them are over there swapping recipes.

Mr. Khan has lived here for years and our landlady assured us when she handed over the keys that he was a prized neighbor. We met her at a church we used to attend, and she rents to us below market value because she wanted *to ease poor Eddie's burden*. I was curious right away when I overheard her say this because until that moment, I hadn't been aware that I had a burden.

Dad still maintains that he didn't mislead the landlady to convince her to drop her price. Yes, kids pushed me around on the bus at my old school and relocating to a house situated a mere two hundred yards from my classes did resolve my problems with bullies, but only those unfortunate enough to ride buses. Conversely, Dad's claim to her (and to the school administration, half of

the medical community in town, and the universe of Facebook) that I am autistic, well that was a stretch.

Dad and Mr. Khan turned to me in unison. I see exasperation in my father's bulging eyes, while the yard blower in my neighbor's grip suggests they've kicked off their autumn leaf skirmish early this year. We have no trees on our property, but a couple of Modesto ashes shade the house next door. My father insists that Mr. Khan bears responsibility for each leaf that falls from his trees to our yard, much like a dog owner is liable to clean up after a pet that's done its business on a neighbor's lawn.

Dad started to speak, no doubt to sandbag his feeble argument, and Mr. Khan triggered the blower. When Dad hushed, our neighbor let off the throttle. They cycled through three iterations of this before my father balled his fists like a toddler set to launch a tantrum. He's hypersensitive about people talking over him, and he'll never let a possibly homosexual Islamic leaf agitator get away with taunting him this way. He lunged for the blower, but Khan dodged, and Dad tangled in the electric cord, ending up on all fours in the grass. He scrambled to his feet as I reached him, and I signaled my neighbor to his garage while towing my father back to our place.

Dad has always been a crank, but I only recently came to see how far downstream his raft has drifted. Last month, a couple of my prescriptions ran out and, given how he grouses when I don't allow him enough lead time to refill them, I told him that I was still sitting on a week's supply. I went without meds eight days and my video game scores spiked. Since then I haven't taken a pill and I rule *Battle Royale*. Even my teachers are making sense lately. The only downside to this new clarity is the way Dad's rants now grate on my nerves.

I've been off the pills a month, but no one can know that because my parents feed on sympathy and having a sick kid draws plenty of it. The prescriptions somehow assure them that my being so screwed up isn't their doing. I was taking Ritalin for ADD, Prozac for depression, and something to keep psoriasis,

which I don't recall ever having, at bay. I took Isotretinoin for acne, which I have in florid abundance, and Enulose eased the epic constipation that the other drugs inspired. I'm doing fine without the pills, but now when I look at my parents, they just seem... Well, they're nuts.

I ushered Dad into our living room, where he complained about his wrenched back. I led him to the couch and said, "Stretch out here and you'll be fine." Fawning over each other's ailments is how we bond in our family, like baboons nitpicking, but I can't bring myself to do it right now.

Mom rushed in. "Jack? Are you hurt? What happened?"

"Get me your back brace, Eddie. The pain ... it's agonizing..."

"That old brace is too small for you. Mom can massage your back, or something." I stepped away and made room for her. She relishes these opportunities to come to his aid.

I wore the back brace when I was eight years old and my parents were convinced that I had scoliosis. It's in my closet, where I keep a museum of medical torture devices. I have supports for weak joints caused by an autoimmune disorder, a shoe insert from a chiropractor who deemed my left leg to be half an inch shorter than my right, and a mouthpiece for TMJ. There's plenty more tucked away, but I never did get the one set of hardware that would benefit me, which is braces on my teeth. Apparently, we don't have money for such extravagance and, as Dad pointed out, who am I to try to improve on what my Lord and Savior gifted me at birth?

"Do you think we should call a minister?"

That is Mom's go-to solution in its perpetual search for a problem. I don't know what she thinks a minister might bring to our dance party, but Dad had it out with our last preacher three Sundays back and we departed that church under threat of police involvement.

“I should get a lawyer,” Dad declared. “Eddie, write up a statement while this is fresh in your mind.”

“I have math homework.” That line gets me out of just about any contact with my parents. I ended up in Special Ed when I transferred schools, though I’m not sure why because, despite Dad’s proclamations that I’m not the sharpest knife in the drawer, I’ve never failed a class. Sure, Math and I are not on friendly terms, but I get no help at home. Mom threw her hands up when I hit fractions in grade school and Dad’s patience died a harrowing death when we started rationalizing denominators in Algebra. His inability to teach me confirmed to him that I cannot be taught, so he trekked me to the Office of Special Needs.

His eyes challenged me and I smiled, another upshot of dropping my meds. Not honoring my father is wrong, but lately I slide into it like a hot bath. “Fine,” he said. “You can type up something later.” I turned to go and he called out, “Wait a minute. It’s Thursday.”

Damn. He posts Bible quotes on signs and plants them in our lawn to further whatever crackpot philosophy he’s fixating on that week. He changes out the signs Thursday nights and stands in our yard Friday afternoons shouting his take on the word of Jesus to kids heading home after classes. As I said, he’s a legend at my school. “I don’t have time.”

Mom muttered a *Lord Have Mercy* and Dad sat up. It seems that his back pain has dissipated. “If God had given me the money, you’d be in a proper Christian school. Instead, you walk among sinners in that godless institution across the street and it is my mission to save you and your friends there. It won’t hurt you to give five minutes in support.”

Friends? Every kid at school and half the teachers call him Mr. Dork. The German students call him Herr Dorkmeister and I’m Son of Dork or some variation to pretty much everyone down to the janitors and lunch ladies. He’s my father and I’ve ignored the harassment at school because his heart always

seemed to be in a good place, but I'm beginning to think he's just an angry bigot who uses religion to bully me and Mom as compensation for his being such a limp dick in every other corner of his life.

Dad works for the county nine hours a day, Monday through Thursday. On Fridays, he knocks off at noon and rushes home to one of Mom's soggy egg salad sandwiches and a bag of corn chips. After that, he's on lawn patrol, impressing my classmates.

Most kids pass our house mildly amused, but Dad's too irresistible to a certain subset of them. They launch his signs to our roof at night or draw anatomically optimistic penis images on them. Occasionally the posters find their way to the gym walls at school, but lately, and with disturbing numbers, kids have taken to festooning them with spent condoms.

He's my father and I pity him, so I gave in and gathered his signs. I'll do the printing work, too. I suspect that this week's message from the *Book of Jack* will be a dispatch on how man-loving leaf litterers will spend eternity gnashing their teeth in the blazing furnace.

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I ducked into the boys' room and had nearly finished my business there when a wrestling team member stepped in talking on his phone. His name is Hansen and I'm his favorite sport. He positioned himself at the adjacent urinal, despite there being three vacant slots to his right. His cologne battled for supremacy over the stink of piss and I found myself conflicted over which of them I hoped might prevail. He unzipped and let out a groan. "Oh, man..." he said into his phone. "I held that back *way* too long."

I kept my head down.

"Yeah, so what?" he continued. "I held it for like an hour, Julia. Give me a break." I let a smile escape and he elbowed me to the wall. "Didn't Daddy teach

you it's rude to listen to other people's conversations? Thou shalt not eavesdrop, Dork Boy."

"What choice did you give me?"

I regretted that straightaway. Hansen turned, hands on hips, and autographed my leg with his impressive stream. "Praise God, brother."

I jumped clear and he turned back, telling the girl on the phone that he'd catch up with her in Biology. My pants were soaked, so I hurried to a stall and dabbed at them with a wad of toilet paper. Hansen finished at the urinal and primped in front of the mirror a few minutes. When he finally left, I slipped out and spied his backpack on a wall hook.

What would Jesus do? My father drops that on me when I ask for advice, which is why I stopped doing it. Jesus would turn the other cheek or render unto Caesar or something, but I gravitate toward an Old Testament eye-for-an-eye response: piss on it. That would be elegant, but my tank is drained. I considered my own backpack and the one-gallon Ziploc bag inside it, where I've stashed a dozen pills a day for the past month. I pulled the bag from my backpack and shoved it into Hansen's, then slipped out of the restroom.

The corridor was empty, meaning I was late to class. I hadn't yet figured out how my brilliant move with the pills was going to balance out the humiliation of cruising these hallways in urine-soaked jeans, and I was working through that when a voice broke my concentration.

"Don't you have a class you should be sleeping in?"

It was Señor Clancy, my sophomore year Spanish teacher. Nice that he remembers me. "Yes, sir. I'm going." Then it hit me. "Hey, some kid left a bag of pills in the bathroom. Short, stocky guy in a wrestling team jacket."

Clancy widened his eyes and I turned, smiling too soon. Hansen was coming my way, apparently to retrieve his backpack. Mr. Clancy asked, "This guy?"

Hansen paced a wide arc around us, glaring at me like he knew I was up to something, but not yet certain what. “Maybe,” I said. “I’m not sure.” I rushed to U.S. History.

My father is critical of the school curriculum. He denies evolution and climate change, even launched a Biology textbook across a classroom at a parent-teacher meeting. With similar ardor, he tore out four chapters of my history text when he learned that it gave his War of Northern Aggression the propagandized title of the American Civil War. We’re covering that conflict in class and since I’m unable to read about it, I’ll have to pay attention to the lecture if I’m going to survive the upcoming unit test. I made my way to my seat and kids moaned at the trailing stench as I passed.

My teacher, Mrs. Torres, was involved with her lecture when the wall phone behind her rang. She lifted the receiver and nodded as she said, “Yes,” then, “Right. Eddie,” and, “He’s on his way.” She hung up and pointed to the door. “Vice Principal Amador is waiting for you in his office.”

I trudged across campus and entered the waiting pen as Hansen stepped out of Amador’s office. We passed within inches of each other and I didn’t make eye contact, but I felt the rage boiling off him. Mr. Amador waved me in. His job forces him to mingle with barbarians all day, and his mussed hair and crooked tie hint that he’s reached his limit with us today. I noted the mound of pills on his desk.

The good news is that he won’t call my home. The counselors tried multiple times last year to bring Mom in to talk about nutrition and my sleep regime because I had been dozing off in classes. She no-showed to each appointment, citing sciatica pain, and they gave up trying. Since then, I eat both breakfast and lunch at taxpayer expense and I’ve put on like twenty pounds.

“You smell like a toilet,” Mr. Amador said, “and Hansen claims you set him up. Explain yourself.”

At times like this, I wonder not what Jesus would do, but what Dad would do. He can draw pity out of others like an old pervert pulling a quarter from a kid's ear in the park. In this case, he'd judge that the truth was pathetic enough to speak for itself, so I told my story.

He rubbed his jaw a moment, studying me, then offered to call Hansen back in, but I protested. "It's your decision," he said.

I nodded. "Can I go?"

"Counseling tells me you're not working with your tutors. They say you do nothing but play games and stare out windows." I objected as a matter of decorum and he raised his palm. "Yet your classroom work has never been better. What changed?"

What changed is the volume of pharmaceuticals I wash down my gullet every morning. I glanced to the pile of pills on his desk and back at him. "I can't think of anything."

"How's life at home?"

I get that question a lot. "Same ol'."

"So, what's behind the improved grades?"

I shrugged. I thought he might send me on my merry way, but he switched tracks on me. "I understand you take a lot of grief over your father."

The shrug again. I can do this all day.

"Did he tell you that we spoke?" I pulled out of my slouch; Dad hadn't said anything to me. "I told him that his signs have become a distraction to our students, and he told me that if I'm not for him, I'm against him."

"One of his favorites, but a distant second to *Honor thy father.*"

Amador smiled but he looked like he had a stellar case of heartburn. “Your father quotes Matthew, which is interesting. Luke and Mark said something like, ‘Whoever is not against you is for you,’ which is less divisive.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

He pushed away from his desk and motioned to the door. “What I’m telling you is that you’re going to be fine if you decide that’s what you want to be. And find a better place to dump your garbage than Hansen’s backpack.” I agreed that I would and turned to leave, but Amador wasn’t done with me. “You’re lazy, Eddie, and your compass is too close to a very strong magnet. Otherwise, there’s nothing wrong with you.”

Pushing up a smile, I said, “I have to play the cards I was dealt.”

“No, Eddie. You don’t. A kid like you shouldn’t play cards at all.”

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I crossed the street on my way home and noted a kid coming my way. He asked for the time and as I consulted my watch, someone threw a coat over my head from behind and bear hugged me. The jacket reeked of the cologne I had experienced earlier in the restroom, so I had an idea of what was coming.

They frog-walked me to the parking lot of the minimarket at the intersection and pushed me against a car. I’m familiar with this drill, so I dropped and curled to protect my vitals and my head, and they kicked me until I wore them out. “Stand him up,” a familiar voice said. They hauled me to my feet but the pain in my ribs kept me from reaching full height. Sunlight assaulted my eyes when they pulled the jacket away, and that’s when Hansen introduced his fist to my nose.

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I opened my eyes to the sight of a morbidly overweight woman with spectacular fingernails on the hand she was reaching out to me. She’s the clerk from the

store. “What’s wrong with you? You’ll get run over laying on the asphalt like that.” She got me to my feet and offered a couple of cotton balls for my bleeding nose, which I shoved up my nostrils. The pain made my head swim.

I thanked her and walked home, where I saw Dad out on the lawn, staring at Khan’s house. He stood there as I passed, his back to me and his precious signs, kneading his fists. Inside, I found my mother crying in the kitchen.

“What’s happening, Mom?” She looked at me and chills traced my skin.

“He’s going to do something we can’t fix.” She drew a sharp breath when she noted my face. “What happened to you, Eddie?”

“Nothing. What set him off this time?”

“Mr. Khan brought a man into his house.” She framed my face with her hands.

“Let’s get you cleaned up before your father comes in.”

“What’s he doing over there, Mom?”

She shook her head. “He’s going to take it too far this time. You know how angry he gets when it comes to the...,” she whispered, “gays.” He said he’s going to settle this today. And he’s going to need your help with something.”

A classic Dad move—set off a shitstorm and expect me to be there to hand out umbrellas. I leaned to the window and saw Mr. Khan walking to the street with a man dressed in a suit and carrying a briefcase, and who looked more like an insurance salesman than a fornicator. Dad approached them and said something, prompting the briefcase guy to step back, his jaw slung. Khan hopped between them, fury registering on his face. I believe my father has finally pushed him too far. I turned to Mom, who was aging before my eyes.

“He’ll be fine.”

“Do you think so, Eddie?”

I shrugged. People tend to find their own answers when I do that. “Why don’t I fix us some tea?”