

Lesson One in Fighting Fires

If you had ever seen Jack fight a fire, you would have known that he was not your average paramedic slash fireman. He once told me that the boys at the station used to terrorize him, "Jack, I swear you get hard every time we get a call in." "Jack, hurry and pull up your pants. The building is five stories and ain't carrin' ya up those stairs like last time." He liked to call it a date with the laws of nature, or a rendezvous with the ghost of the guy who'd fallen asleep holding a cigarette, or just another routine 911 call.

Now, if you had seen Jack start a fire, you would have never guessed that he was a fireman or a father or a husband, or a landowner of acreage in the middle of Iowa a far enough distance away from any sizable population so as not to draw attention to its vast and attractive marijuana crop.

Jack called himself a fireman, but oddly enough, he was the fire.

The truck rides to and from the fire site were not mirrorless. Jack saw himself in everything. The red light miraculously turning green. The other drivers yielding to the howls of the siren. The child sitting beneath a tree in their front yard, watching the white curtains framing their kitchen window flare up in metallic flames. The child wore the same ears Jack had stained with parental advice, "If there is ever a fire in this house, you run and wait beneath that tree, right there. Got it?" His eyes tracked and stung homes that held rusting frying pans, containers of condensed milk, chronicles of nothingness, and artwork that appeared to be irreplicable.

Faces. His job was full of fire and faces in photographs that were captured, framed, and displayed, and then harshly charred or swallowed completely in an instant of panic reactivity. He noticed that in our dramatic attempts to salvage order and perfection in a frame, we disown ourselves and end up sitting before the life we want to live rather than ever trying it on for size. Jack saw families hustle so hard to paint the picture, but watched as they rolled their loose bodies in the wet paint, abstracting the dream so much it became red, hot anger.

As a fireman, he learned that rooms alone could scratch the body and draw thick blood. The minute he walked through the threshold of a home or building, he could sense pain or pleasure, the percentage of laughter in contrast to the slow boil of resentment. His uniform gave his presence a distinct purpose and bestowed an air of dutiful respect wherever he traveled. He was the man who tamed the roar of that which was neglected or seen as a simple after thought: a backburner heating water, a deserted oven, an abandoned ashtray and so on.

The fire station was home. When the firefighters were not on a call, they were working out, eating, sleeping, or lounging. In the locker room, Jack would admire his strength in the mirror and linger at the entirety of his achievement. His body's perfection was a metaphor for the peak he had arrived to in life; he had accomplished everything he had desired. Jack had land, a family, a constant source of income, fitness, and sex. The justification for his vanity leaned on

his humanitarianism. The absence of self and the arrival of the self back into the body is a deranged, erotic joining. The two experiences abolish one another in the hunt for pure pleasure; the human is a slave to its kingdom. It will do anything to earn the crown. After a call, Jack would stand in the shower and allow the freezing water to beat onto his shoulders, and down onto the tile floor. Jack liked to span his arms out and watch the water trail off his fingertips, then plummet. He no longer liked to wear the disaster.

Most of the men at the station were married, but not Jack. He had been married, then divorced. The mother of his children remained the mother of his children. His children were still his children. Jack fought indignation for a living, so his family sat in his mind like a prize he accidentally won in a claw machine after demolishing his plate at a buffet restaurant. Family was a milestone that, once achieved, no longer felt necessary to address or pursue. To Jack, children and family were a means of survival, but quickly and quietly, a size two somewhere in the suburbs was organizing her shoes and would completely forget about the curling iron. She could not believe she just let it sit there, and right beside her linen nightgown too! What a ditz! "Well, as long as you are fine, Mrs..." "Oh, it's Sharon." See then, Jack saved the day, and our Jack-in-the-box came out to play. His divorced was finalized in 1988. When he wasn't working, he liked to crowd himself with attractive women and practice pivoting on the station's basketball court. He was on fire, and no one, not even he, knew the cause.

Jack served as a fireman for over thirty years, ducking in and out of smoke-filled rooms to salvage a family's beloved pet and scaling buildings to rescue men and women alike from dangerous situations. He revived a handful of people nearing death due to heart attack, drugs or alcohol and had performed CPR on several occasions, although most of the instances, he had performed it incorrectly.

Jack measured success numerically: the amount of time it took him to accomplish a task, the revenue he accumulated in a specific time frame, the number of companies he founded, acquired, and sold. Value was inherently numerical.

After retirement, he found a new friend called loneliness and was inspired to download some dating app. The station's basketball court was now occupied by younger fireman and mostly likely, a reformed value system, where bombshell blonds did not run after the basketball, then press it to their chest and wait for strong-armed fireman to pry it from their grasp. Giggles no longer tickled Jack's ears as he did that sneaky maneuver where you just apply pressure from above to remove the ball from the arms of its captor. There was no alarm that rang at random intervals of the day to snap him back into reality, into wakefulness, and responsibility.

There was no sound that came to remind him: "Life is so fragile. It could be gone any second, any second now."

Time had pushed all the doomed damsels out of their distress and into dry cleaners, dog groomers, daycares, and diners in the daylight all while Jack's fire waged on. It was the only

factor that remained vibrant and true once the treaties were settled, and parties separated, and terms agreed upon. He paid his outstanding balances, redeemed a sense of purpose, and felt fine. Jack matched with a kind-spirited lady while filtering through biographies and portraits online. He fell in love with this woman's soul, apparently. He described their connection as something so deep, profound and unmoving; however, this woman weighed almost five hundred pounds. He did not know this until they met in person. When he told me this and I gasped, and he asked, "have you ever seen *Shallow Hal*?" Prior to this relationship, Jack had participated in a fitness challenge where he lost forty pounds in two months. His profession had fine-tuned his body awareness, and so during his relationship, he helped his over-sized lover achieve extreme weight-loss. He said sex was literally impossible. It only lasted a few years. Not the sex. The relationship. On long car rides, she would pull into Sonic for a snack and Jack would sneer, "I cannot eat anything here." This was a fire Jack could not extinguish, and a person he could not save from the floorboards that caved underfoot; he hated living in a world where some people are destined to fall through.

When she finally left and regained all the weight Jack had helped her lose, he converted the spare bedroom in a grow room. He enrolled in a few horticulture classes at the community college and fell in love with growing things: plants, flowers, herbs, and most of all, weed. This man loved to smoke. In fact, the first time, I went over to his house, he handed me a fresh-baked cosmic brownie and warned me, "Don't eat the whole thing! You'll end up in the ER!"

Fresh, honey crisp apples fell from the tree in his orchard out back. I would stoop down to pick one up from the cold ground on my fall walks through the neighborhood. Grape vines wove their roots in and around everything in reach. Jack let his body soften like the soil he broke into, turned, and tilled. Jack was a child of the sixties; his love for marijuana spouted early, and its five points grew exact and identifiably strong. His entire home was full of bud bits and the stench of something dank, but I never did mind the realness of his need to fall back into his submarine and strum along to old Beatle's tunes for the day. I once asked him which he enjoyed more: rescuing people or fighting fires. He spoke so securely, I adored it: "Aren't they the same thing?" Jack had steel pins, plates, and bones all up his spine, and his hips were completely replaced; his medical card allowed him to cut his opioid use in half.

Just yesterday, we were sitting on his sofa watching football and passing a jar of Jack's lemonade from lip to lip. He added a splash of vodka that touched me like a tidal wave. He is one of the few elderly folks that does not entertain themselves by listening to a police scanner and I appreciate that about him. His home is not obsessively stocked with aluminum cans or nonperishable brown boxes. I have never seen a kernel of corn in his home. In fact, he offered me a cookie and crème milkshake once which I turned down for some obscure reason.

We play a round of pool and he whoops my ass; keeps going on and on about me "having a lot of balls left on the table." He tells me if trouble ever comes my way, he's got a gun and knows how to shoot a man without taking their life. The logic behind his ability is that he was a

fireman once, and therefore, is an expert in removing a man's genitals by bullet. Jack took my solitude and folded it into a machete, then returned it to my hands and said,

"Walk like no one else knows what they are doing,
and you are the only one who knows the way."

"Why would I do that?" I asked.

"You have no reason not to."