

It's Hard to Find a Good Dentist

That I need a new dentist is a tragedy. First of all, I grew up drinking well water; and my father had dentures by 28, so there's the bad genes thing.

I'm going to miss Jake. I suppose most people call their dentists Doctor or Doc; and I would too if I thought it mattered to Jake. When we first met, he introduced himself as Jake, not as Dr. Kranz. His only son, Aaron, and my middle son, Cody, participated in a program for people with autism. Program directors facilitate exercises designed to help kids and young adults develop social interaction skills through acting. Our families met while waiting for their first performance to begin. We chatted and got along well enough. Our wives hit it off immediately and enthusiastically plotted a future in which our boys – all of us – would become friends, adding to the alliance of support so vital to the other-abled and their families.

The dentist we went to before Jake was perfectly patient and pleasant (to me) – even invited me to go duck hunting with him and one his doctor friends. I declined not because of any irrational fear of cohabitating a duck blind with two dentists, but because I didn't think I could bring myself to shoot even in the general direction of a duck. My family – my wife, our three sons, and I – probably would have stayed with that dentist if he hadn't angered my wife – and, by extension, me. He told her that the gap between Cody's upper front teeth was not going to close without braces, then made the mistake of implying that braces for an autistic boy might be a waste of money. So now we go to Jake.

As a younger man, Jake's office would have appealed to me because it was filled with pretty women – pretty blondes, pretty brunettes, young and middle-aged, a larger staff than a one-doctor practice really needs, by my estimation. And Jake's consistently casual attire would've put a younger me at ease. I imagine his closet filled with Hawaiian shirts and elastic-waist khaki pants.

I've spent more hours writhing in dentist chairs than any person I know. My childhood dentist used to tell me, "You should have brushed your teeth more often, now you'll just have to be brave." He explained that it was to save my parents money, but I wonder now if he enjoyed applying his low-rpm drill to my offending teeth, without the mercy of anesthesia. Not knowing a trip to Dr. Koch could end any other way, I accepted agony as penitence for my lack of brushing tenacity, and clutched the armrests of his pea-green Naugahyde chair.

When in my twenties, one dentist charged the full extraction rate for removing three quarters of my bottom right wisdom tooth.

Another had a bass boat, and he liked to use it. He trolled a quiet lake nearly every night. And I was often his last patient of the day – the remaining obstacle between him and the serenity that the lake apparently provided him. After allowing what he reckoned was ample time for the injected anesthesia to take effect, the aspiring angler would audibly sigh when I reported I could still feel my bottom lip.

Still another dentist alternately left the surgery and returned to glower over me. With each return, his breath smelled increasingly like hand sanitizer. I suspected his peculiar habit was to an extent my fault. It was surely my low tolerance for pain, an embarrassing weakness in a man, which caused him to tittle on the job.

No dentist had ever been able to pump in enough Novocain to numb my bottom teeth – none until Jake.

Jake saw my mess of a mouth and objection to pain as a challenge. When he first encountered the mystery that was my bottom jaw, he struck a classic thinking man pose – furrowed brow and hand on chin – before a smile crept across his face. He claimed to have remembered a lesson from his first year anatomy class in dental school. Jake explained that in anatomically modern humans, bottom molars transmit pain to the brain via a nerve path in the jaw, but that I have a redundant, parallel circuit in my cheek – an uncommon vestige inherited from a Neanderthal forefather. Only recently have I come to suspect this Neanderthal explanation was nothing more than an improvised placebo. Anyway, thereafter, Jake blocked both real and

possibly imagined nerve pathways, and drilled without so much as a whimper from me.

I convinced myself that, in addition to our both having sons with autism, Jake and I had a lot in common. We're both scuba divers (whose wetsuits don't fit so well, anymore). We're both foodies and enjoy sharing recipes and outdoor grilling techniques. We enjoy the zen of gardening, and of creation. Jake obsessed over plum trees in his yard. He defended them from aerial attack with netting bought from a fishing supply shop. Merely draping the net over a tree kept birds out, but only intensified the determination of South Haven's black squirrels. To further deter them, he buried the bottom perimeters of the nets six inches deep. He also employed motion detecting sprinklers and a gadget that emits an ultrasonic shriek when bandits get too close. At the peak of ripeness, he harvests and ferments the plums in his basement. He doesn't drink, but enjoys sharing the wine with patients and other friends who do.

Jake prides himself on his prowess with pain management and amalgam expertise. He can slip a needle into my gum in a way that wouldn't wake me if I were asleep. But he's strictly a drill and fill guy. He'll joke, with a wink, that he doesn't have enough hand strength to pull a back molar, but he knows a guy who does. And *of course* he knows how to do a root canal, but Jake refers me to another doctor whom he describes as a nerve-removal artiste.

Jake is a voracious autodidact. He can and will hold court, peppering his orations with gruesome and arcane oddities gleaned from numerous fields of study. Jake remembers everything, including not only the names and birthdays of his patients, but also of their partners and children.

Jake kept his waiting room stocked with National Geographic and Smithsonian magazines – current issues. I'd settle into his antique settee, and open to a title that caught my eye, but seldom get more than two paragraphs into an article, regardless of how early I'd arrived. His clockwork staff took the X-rays, and did the cleaning

and initial examinations. With little to do but wait for them to call him back to an examination room, Jake would stride into the waiting room with a jovial “Hey, Boss, how’s life been treating you.” After enduring a vigorous, crushing handshake, I’d answer with “Not bad, thank you,” and dutifully return his rhetorical question, apprehensive about how it would be answered, and knowing it would be. Jake is always forthcoming with a cringe-inducing tale or two.

Jake’s narration of a recent event is often preceded with “Aw man, this sucks.” What most recently sucked was his explanation on why he and his wife, Laura, flaked on a dinner date at our house. He asked me if I’d heard about the pedestrian accident on I-94 West. The pedestrian was Laura’s mother. Jake said she’d “made a break” from the assisted living facility and somehow made it to the interstate. Jake, with all the sensitivity he could muster, pondered, “Imagine the look on that truck driver’s face when that old woman walked out in front of him, barefooted and night-gowned. Really, Laura lost her mother to Alzheimer’s a year ago, but now she truly has just me and Aaron. Ain’t that a kick in the crotch.”

Jake assured me that Laura was the hottest chick at Michigan State. Twenty-five or so years had passed since their college days, but few who met Laura would question that particular claim. Jake chuckled and said, “You’re probably wondering how an ugly sonofabitch like me could score such a fox.” Then he winked and paused for effect, or for me to admit I found him unattractive. When I only shrugged, he continued. “Well, Boss, I was always funny, and when you’re funny, ‘you can do anything. Grab ‘em by the pussy.’” He winked again and waited for me to betray whether or not I shared his disdain for the Republican nominee. Jackie, the amiable (and apparently tolerant) lady who ran the office, and could always tell me what our insurance would cover, rolled her eyes; one of the hygienists, waiting near the service counter, endured by pretending to be deaf. Jake alternately praised and lamented over Laura’s exclusive dedication to their son, and implied that Aaron’s needs controlled their lives – musing out loud what a life without autism might be like. Maybe they could travel. He’d saved enough money; they could drop out, live

on an island – fish and snorkel all day. Apropos of some neural pulse sparking in Jake’s brain, he blurted, “But if anything ever happened to Aaron, Laura would stick her pretty head into our oven. It’d be a long and painful way to off herself, though,” he said, with a wink and a slap to my knee. “We have an electric oven!” I don’t know if he talked like this to everyone or if he just thought of me as a coconspirator.

Laura Kranz is a soft-spoken, gracious hostess to my family when we visit their home; she’s an engaging guest when they visit ours; and she is indeed intensely devoted to Aaron – autism is her full-time job, and Jake thinks all the therapy and programs she insists upon are ineffective, a waste of time. “Our boys are always going to have autism, Boss. Best to just let ‘em be.”

In the Kranz’s backyard, I once looked on as Jake grilled a pork roast to perfection over chunks of mesquite, without using a meat thermometer, all while explaining complex investment strategies – quite a feat for those who know grilling. While prodding the meat with long-handled tongs, Jake said, “I know what you’re thinking, Boss. Pork ain’t kosher. I make exceptions. After all, I did marry a shiksa!”

After supper, Jake and Laura invited us to join them for their family’s summer evening ritual – a boat ride on the big lake. Jake slyly pointed astern to the name of their boat – *Shiksa*. The lake was expected to be calm, so Jake said we didn’t have to wear life jackets if we didn’t want to, the law just requires a vessel to have a personal flotation device for each person aboard. But Laura insists that her family don theirs before they reach the lake – their home is on South Black River, so Jake slowly navigates the boat through no-wake zones from their home dock to the lake. We all waved at returning boaters and neighbors. Once clear of South Pier Lighthouse, Jake punched the throttle. When the boat began to plane across small swells, Aaron leapt to his feet. Bracing himself, legs spread, hands gripping the back of the helmsman’s chair, he closed his eyes, and mimicked the rise and fall of the motor’s growl. For a few seconds, Laura smiled, closed her eyes, and tilted her face toward the sun.

If not inspired by some recent catastrophe, Jake renders a verisimilar portrait of his past. To spare my wife from his routinely hair-raising subject matter and winking delivery (maybe, in part, to spare Jake from her response), I took all three of our sons in for their check-ups and routine cleanings. And so, Jake's tales twisted together in the course of so many waiting room hours, over four years.

Turns out Jake is not Jewish, as his assumed name and veneration of Jewish holidays would suggest. Jake Kranz is not really Jake Kranz.

Jake was raised, as it were, by his mother, Doris, and two elder sisters. The sisters were two physical renderings of Doris, but, not for a lack of trying, they never quite got the hang of her meanness. "All three of them, absolute knockouts, Boss, even Doris, pushing 50." I initially found it disconcerting that Jake called his mother by her first name – turns out, that would be the least of it.

Even though she'd be about 80 by now, Jake's dread of Doris is palpable. "I tell you, Boss, you ain't seen vindictive till you've seen Doris." Jake felt it necessary to assure me he and Laura would never let Aaron be touched by his grandmother.

Jake's father died young, after a mysterious, protracted illness. One of his two stepfathers shared the same fate. With each illness and death, Doris reveled in her fellow parishioners' sympathetic attentions. Jake saved husband number three.

When eleven-year-old Jake's most recent stepfather, Hugh, got a cold look at the cards he'd dealt himself, he folded his hand: One Sunday, not even an hour after sneaking a slice of blueberry pie, Jake felt the blueberries threatening a quick exit from his small body. One of his sisters was fussing with her hair in their only bathroom. She refused to cede any territory, and Jake, duck-walking toward the back door, made it as far as the kitchen before soiling himself. Doris was stirring a foul-smelling pottage, simmering on the stove. Enraged by the dark stain spreading in the fabric of his trousers, or maybe because the odor of shit was competing with her stew, she whipped out the still-steaming wooden spoon to beat Jake. When her first weapon of opportunity splintered across his head, she cursed and continued the

assault with her shoe – a rare stroke of luck for young Jake was that she was wearing flats at the time. Though there had been no precedent of paternal intercession, he looked up at Hugh. Hugh responded to his tacit plea with, “You’re on your own, boy,” before stepping outside. Turns out he didn’t mean just for that moment. “By the next morning, ol’ Huey was gone. And that’s the story of why I can’t eat blueberries,” Jake finished with a laugh, punctuating his wit with a slap to my knee.

Disapproving females were in no shortage during Jake’s boyhood. But for a while he found shelter in the company of two same-aged neighborhood boys: Hyman – *Hyman* with an A not *Hymen* an E. Still, Hyman begged everyone to just call him Hy – and Stan, whose given name Jake couldn’t pronounce. Stan’s family had emigrated from Indonesia. On the hottest day of that summer, the boys were spinning on the tire swing, staggering and giggling like drunks after each turn. As they had each day of summer break, when Jake figured Doris was by then safely passed out, instead of drinking from the hose, they went to the tap at the kitchen sink, where the water was cooler and didn’t leave a taste of rubber in their mouths. Their eyes not yet adjusted to the dimness of the house, Stan and Hy almost crashed into the waiting Doris. They froze, mere inches from her, unable to look away. She smirked and made no move to cover herself. Doris was naked from the waist up. Stan mumbled an excuse to run home. He never came back.

When confessing, Jake leans forward – his huge hairy forearms resting on his khakis – leading one to believe that what’s coming next is especially sensitive, for his nearest audience only, but he routinely fails to diminish his volume. It was in that conspiratorial pose he told me how Hyman stood his ground. “Now Hy,” Jake began, “after witnessing the horrible splendor of my mother, you couldn’t get rid of that little perv. Never seen a boy so thirsty. Got to where I’d have to tell him, ‘Don’t go in the house, Hyman.’ God, he hated it when I called him that. ‘Get some water from the hose, you little freak.’ Little *Jew* freak was Doris’s pet name for Hy, especially to his face.”

Out of so much necessity, Jake started going over to Hy's house, even though Hy didn't have a tire swing or anything else that was fun for a boy like Jake."

Hyman Jacob Kranz was an only child. His father wasn't around much, and when he was, they only knew it when they heard him banging on his typewriter in the closet he called his study. Mr. Kranz was a pharmacist and unrequited poet. He put in eighty-plus hours a week at the pharmacy. "You know how us Jews are about the almighty dollar," Jake interjected – maybe forgetting he'd already shared, a few checkups ago, the chapter on his personal exodus and appropriation of Jewishness.

Hy's mother was what Doris was not. Mrs. Kranz had kind brown eyes, a soft, round face, and a hint of a mustache. People said Doris looked like Joan Crawford.

Over the following three years, Jake became a fixture at the Kranz's – adored and trusted such that Mrs. Kranz showed him where they hid the spare key so that he could let himself in if she were on an errand, and maybe it was raining. Jake thrived in their home which lacked the pregnant dread of violence or injurious scorn to which he was accustomed at Doris's house. He even took to calling Mrs. Kranz, Mom. She liked it, and Hy didn't mind. There was enough love in her for everybody.

Jake joined Hy in Torah study, and learned Yiddish and some Hebrew from Mother Kranz. He took a hard slap from Doris when he called her Momzer." Momzer is Yiddish for a devious person. Jake risked it, thinking she'd just think Momzer was a riff on Mom, but maybe Doris had been called that before. Or maybe she just preferred Doris over Mom, with or without the zer part.

By thirteen, Jake had come to understand and anxiously await Jewish holidays. The year of his fourteenth birthday, he joined his adopted family in their Yom Kippur fast, and looked forward to a tranquil Rosh Hashanah at the Kranz home. But when he arrived, Mother Kranz would not allow him to enter. Hy had a fever and sore throat, and she would not risk exposing Jake.

“Can you believe my luck, Boss. According to official records, only four people in the whole United States died of fucking measles in 1985 – none of them in Michigan. Don’t think you can sell that to anybody named Kranz.”

After Hy died, Jake stopped going to the Kranz house – not because he didn’t want to be with them or they with him, but because Mother Kranz would break down, inconsolable when she saw him.

Mr. Kranz quit the pharmacy. Jake couldn’t say if he stopped writing poems.

On January 11, 1986, Chaim and Esther Kranz went to synagogue, then nobody ever saw them again. Their car was found in a parking lot near the shore of Lake Michigan. Jake believes they walked out onto the lake, kept walking until the ice was thin enough to buckle under their combined weight.

In warmer waters, because of gases associated with decomposition, bodies float; but in colder waters, they do not rapidly decompose, so they sink. The Great Lake would never give them back.

With a screwdriver, Jake levered and upended the frozen disc in the birdbath, and pried the spare key from the ice. They wouldn’t have minded. Once inside, he first thought to save Mr. Kranz’s poems, but he found no trace of them. He did, however, find Hy’s birth certificate and social security card. The Kranz family had given him a new life, again. Doris would never tolerate his leaving. Not because of anything resembling love, mind you. Her son must disappear, name and all.

The same day I received an email reminding me of my next dental appointment – I came across a piece in *The Tribune*. A ball of ice grew in my stomach as I read the short article. The Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA) had received a tip from a woman who identified herself as Doris Crawford. According to Ms. Crawford, a local man fraudulently obtained a license to practice dentistry; allegedly, the accused attended but never graduated from an accredited dental school. A representative for LARA described the investigation as ongoing. I called Jake’s office. A cheerful Jackie thanked me for confirming my appointment, and said a bottle of Jake’s famous fermented plum concoction awaited me there.

The following Monday, a windblown, *Channel 3* journalist squinted out from our television screen. With a professionally mournful expression, she reported from the shore of Lake Michigan. A 16 foot Grady-White, named *Shiksa*, was found capsized on Lake Michigan. Due to dangerous waves, authorities had temporarily halted the search for the vessel's occupants, who were last seen by neighbors as they left their dock, Sunday afternoon at approximately three pm. They almost certainly have succumbed to hypothermia after so many hours submerged in 52 degree water. They are presumed dead. When the weather clears, Coast Guard and volunteer divers will resume the search, but experts tell us that if flotation devices were not in use, there is little hope the bodies will soon be found. *Channel 3* will not release the victims' names, pending notification of next of kin.

I wasn't surprised to learn that Jake named his office manager as the executor of his will. As well as being efficient and unflappable, Jackie was a matriarchal figure to Jake and the rest of her coworkers. The will stipulated how, in the unlikely event Jake and Laura should perish together, their estate would be divided between Jake's office family – past and present. Jackie would gain guardianship of Aaron. "But Aaron is gone, too," she added, uncharacteristically pointing out the obvious.

Jackie told me that Jake had left a small package for me; and that he winked and said that I would understand what it meant. I brought home the re-taped Amazon box and a bottle of Jake's plum wine, and opened both. The box contained three open, half-empty packets of seeds.

The last time I saw Jake, despite the eight inches of snow on the ground, he was already revved up about planting his garden. He'd recently discovered and made himself an expert on the Native American Three Sisters technique. Three seeds are planted closely together: Corn, the eldest, provides support to the climbing bean plants; this second sister gives nitrogen back to the soil; and the youngest, squash, spreads out with her prickly vines and large leaves discouraging pests and weed growth around her sisters. He'd order the seeds and share them with me.