

## Why Jack Fairhaven Never Married

Although he had lived in Boston his whole life, in January 1997 my younger brother Jack bought a small house in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The house bordered a small beaver pond, behind a short stretch of woods. It was a barren, isolated place, with reeds at the shallower ends of the pond, and trees and logs rotting at the edges. Ducks swam in between the reeds in summer, though; and snows blew around the logs in winter. And Jack would sit out on the rocks at the north-easterly edge of the pond, watching the ducks, and the storm clouds gathering.

The storms, the ducks, the clouds, the snows might not be the *precise* reason why my brother never married.

But they had a lot to do with it.

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The house was eleven years old when Jack bought it. He said it was in good condition (as eleven-year-old houses go) and didn't notice anything wrong when he first took a look around the property. But snows had fallen on the roof of the house when the Inspector had come out a month before Jack's closing, and the exterior of the house was in need of a new coat of stain, as things were to turn out later, too.

But that didn't bother Jack any. The house was everything he'd wanted.

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Jack was thirty-seven when he purchased the home. At that age (Jack said to me over the phone one day), a man gets to thinking.

Apparently, what a man Jack's age gets to thinking is, how other men are fools. How most of us, as Jack put it, have no *understanding* — no actual, coherent *appreciation*, I guess he meant — for the world. And that, even if we did, we would probably be fools, and tear it all up, or pave it over, anyway. Three summers after he bought the house, before my trip out to New Hampshire to see it, Jack and his best friend, Luke, were hiking in the Tetons. “I mean — ” Jack said to me over the phone, “ — these are the Tetons, Phil. We're talking about Wyoming!” The leader of their club — in Jack's opinion, a gamin (“A pretender!” to use Jack's word) — apparently didn't have a kind word for the scenery: “Not *one* kind word!” Jack said.

Oh, somewhere inside him he's probably got a kind word, I finally got Jack to acknowledge — only he's too busy (apparently) digging in his pack looking for half-pint bottles of liquor to realize it, that's all. “We know there's a wife somewhere back in Boston,” Jack told me over the phone. “He told us about her the first day of the trip. But, Christ, Phil,” he said avidly. “Even if your wife's paralyzed back at home, how long does it take a man to put his two feet up at the End of the Day, take a look at the Scenery, and believe that there's a God?”

That's how Jack talks, see? “The End of the Day” and “Sceneries.” “Pretenders” and “Gods.”

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Jack's house sat a hundred feet back from the road. It had a large, two-car garage — which made the house look somewhat larger than it was — and, as I say, it was situated on a nice piece of land. I flew out from Seattle the weekend after Jack got back from Wyoming, and took a look around the property myself.

It was just woods, mostly.

Jack felt sorry for the previous owners of the house, because they had two young kids and were headed for divorce. Plus they had cut down most of the trees in front, since they were running out of money when they had started finishing the house, and needed to use the wood for heat. Jack took me down to the basement the first afternoon I got to his house, and showed me the old wood stove. She sat right there in the corner, alongside a couple dank, unburnished cords of wood. And although the owners had pulled the stove out and bought a proper, oil furnace a year or so before Jack bought the house, Jack still had them keep that old, black stove around for him in the basement.

“Can you imagine?” he said, as I stood beside him and he knelt quietly down to the small, metal door. “Heating this place in winter?”

Beside the stove, the land, the pond, the garage, the house had a small, covered front porch. And for the nearly four years that Jack owned the house, when he wasn't out at the pond, thinking — or up in the mountains, climbing — he was sitting out in the porch swing, watching the sunlight fade through the trees beyond the cordons of his front yard. That weekend after he got back from Wyoming, I sat out there and talked with him some, too, the porch lights on and the stars beginning to align, until ten or eleven o'clock. I knew Amanda didn't like me doing that — I talked to her every night on the phone — because bats would be flying around out there, and moths and other strange, nocturnal insects would be attracting themselves to the porch lights.

“Do whatever you want,” Amanda told me quietly. “But those things might have rabies, Phil!”

I told her maybe they did, maybe they didn't.

But it was all right sitting out there on Jack’s porch for a while. Every once in a while, too, while we were out there, something bigger — something, perhaps, rabbider — than a bat might rustle itself out by the edges of the woods.

Jack told me not to let that rustling bother me any, though.

“There are worse fools than bear and moose in the woods,” he said.

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Jack’s bedroom sat in the southeast corner of the house — the corner facing the front yard, the street, and the few left-over trees. It was a large, sunny chamber, with a clean, square bedroom and a square walk-in closet. Because of the minerals in the aquifer that fed the pond behind Jack’s house, though, the water in Jack’s bathroom — and the water in the guest bathroom down the hall as well — had stained the enamel a rich and flat, oily shade of aquamarine. The first morning I woke up — Saturday — after pulling back the curtains to have a look at the woods myself, I used soap and a scrub brush, to rinse out the tub, before I stepped into Jack’s shower.

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In the morning, Jack served coffee.

That weekend I was up, though, he never woke before nine.

So?

I fixed myself a cup, and took it out to the porch. . . .

The street in front of Jack’s house glowed palely in the morning light: it was a narrow and bumpy, short turnpike of road.

“Is every morning this quiet up here?” I asked, when Jack finally came outside.

“Wait until construction starts up,” Jack told me, lifting his own mug of coffee to his lips. “If you really want to hear something.”

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Neighbors lived just up the road from Jack; and neighbors lived just down the road from Jack, too. He liked his solitude, of course: more often than not, instead of sitting out on his porch — or watching the sunlight fade through the cordons of his front yard — he took me out back to his beaver pond. And although Jack had said winter was the best time to be out there because of the snows (the Quiet, was what I guessed he meant), the weekend I was out in August, the pond looked pretty peaceful, too.

A stand of birch trees stood quietly across the water.

Some of the trees were knocked down; but others appeared propped up, keeled over, caught on other trees. The ducks that swam in the pond came out from the other end, Jack said: the southeast corner, opposite where we sat Saturday morning, before the construction started up, talking on Jack’s rocks after sitting drinking our coffees on his porch. They never came near the beavers’ lodge, Jack said, talking about the ducks — and nodding to where some sticks had been piled up in the middle of the water. But while we were talking, a wood duck — this darling creature — came swimming up close to us. He sat there for a while, turning about in the water — but then must have seen us. Because just as we were sitting as absolutely, perfectly still as we could, the duck flinched — and flew absolutely, perfectly away.

“They’ll do that,” Jack explained, picking a reed by the rocks we were on. “They’re sensitive to the least little bit of noise.”

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Jack had warned me about the construction at the pond, of course; I knew what to expect. But there's still one thing I should tell you.

It's true Jack enjoyed his solitude. When he was out watching a family of ducks on his beaver pond or the storm clouds starkly gathering, what did the score of the Red Sox game down in Boston matter, or how many peaches a dollar bought him back at Kelly's? The spring before I came out, the first or second weekend in April, Luke drove up to see Jack, to start planning their trip to Wyoming. He can tell you about it himself, of course; but because the reason my brother never married is maybe also tied up with Luke's trip, Luke's story seems important here.

It goes something like this.

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The first night he was up at Jack's after he's seen the house and the two of them have gone out for dinner, Luke meets these two women outside a bar in town. And because Luke is Luke and the biggest fool I know outside of Jack, he had these two women come back to the house. Jack being Jack — and Luke being Luke — my brother's happy enough to let the women in, and give everyone a beer. Because apparently, if you listen to Luke, what had happened was, Jack had met one of these women before. At a town meeting or something, over the driveway going in behind the pond, two years after Jack bought the house.

Anyway, Luke's girl — the one he liked for himself, I mean — had brought her dog with her, apparently, in her pick-up, and she'd brought the pick-up, apparently, to the bar. Jack being Jack, he hadn't gone inside the bar himself, of course: he had just said good night to the two women outside the bar, and was waiting at the house for Luke to get a lift from the women and come back up from the bar.

So: the girl's dog sits on the rug on the floor between Jack and the girl he had met once before. "It may seem like we were getting cozy," Jack told me Saturday morning, after the construction trucks had started up around noontime at the pond. "But all we were really doing," he said, "was trying to start a conversation."

There was still a little bit of morning chill, blowing in from across the water. And although Jack and I were just out there by the pond together, what the two of *us* were really doing was nothing more than watching those construction trucks, crashing through the underbrush, and breaking down the trees.

"That must have been quite a chore," I said, returning to the conversation. "Given who one of the participants was."

"Well," Jack returned, "your brother can talk up quite a storm, if you get him started on the right subject. In any case," he went on, "all we were really doing, was just petting the dog."

He said that Luke and Sally — Luke's girl — were out back, kissing by the woods, for all he knew. . . . Jack's not much of a talker; he's said as much himself, of course — but neither was the other girl, apparently. So soon enough, it becomes apparent Jack and she wouldn't be doing anything anytime soon.

"In the way of kissing, I mean," Jack said. Then he nodded solemnly, and let a few low clouds pass by. But finally, he said, when they tired of dog-sitting, the two of them headed out back, to find Luke and Sally.

"Sure enough," Jack told me. "What are they doing? They're holding hands."

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Like I say, it was Saturday morning when Jack was telling me this.

They all just stood there listening to the dark for a while: Jack, Luke, Sally, and the other girl, I mean. And then someone looked at the sky — and then that same someone said:

“Pretty night.”

Jack looked at the sky then, too.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “I’ll turn off some of the lights.”

He went back into the house; and when he came back out again, the four of them just stood there, quietly watching the stars.

It’s a cool April night. There isn’t any moon. . . .

Finally, Luke says:

“There’s a darn lot of them.”

He whistles, softly, too.

“Or don’t you think so, Jack?”

Jack nods. . . . There’s Orion. There’s Ursa Major. There’s Pleiades. There’s Cassiopeia. . . . (It’s Christina — the other girl — who’s pointing out the constellations.)

“A darn lot,” Luke says again. He rubs Sally’s back, too, and says to Jack, mildly: “Let me tell you!”

Well, Jack won’t tell you so himself — and I’ve only met the man once myself, too. But my brother says that somewhere inside him, Luke Garrity’s got a kind word for the Scenery, and the possibility for a God.

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After the star-gazing, everybody heads back inside.

The next morning, after they meet up again, they all ride the gondola up the ski slopes together.



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Normally, there wouldn't be any reason to go on the gondola. The ski season is through — but — see? — the gondola is open for tourists. The air is fresh and the day is unspoiled; but all anybody wants is a view at the top of the mountains.

Most of the slopes are bare when Jack and the three others get up to the top. But there's more than a little snow, right at the very peak. From what I've already said Jack said, it had been a hard winter: there were places where the four of them couldn't even walk around very much. The sun was in their eyes, it's a clear, bright day, and they're all just standing there, holding hands.

“Even you?” I asked, Saturday morning, still out at the pond.

“Even Jack Fairhaven,” Jack said. “Your recalcitrant younger brother.”

He paused a moment, and then spat.

“Jack Fairhaven?” I said. “How'd he work up the nerve?”

Jack confided: he hadn't. “The girl took your younger brother's hand in her own,” he said.

The back hoes and construction trucks had broken through the trees, like I said. The duck had come and gone by then, too. But back on the mountain, the wind was blowing, gusting hard.

“She was coming in good,” Jack said now. “You know. From the North.”

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Well.

Just to get back to the house for a moment. . . .

She was built eleven years before Jack purchased her. Part of a larger subdivision, on a total of thirty-seven acres of woods — including Jack's beaver pond. At the time Jack bought the house, his nearest neighbor was six lots away — about a thousand feet, I guess. Two years after

Jack bought the house, a jumble of new construction started up. Someone put in that seven-hundred-foot driveway behind the beaver pond; somebody else cleared a lot on the corner. Some other developer clear-cut Timber Lane, and some other fool bought property from an old cousin of ours, down by one of the ski lodges.

After that last property sold — out went the trees, up went Fairhaven Estates.

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Fairhaven Estates might have had some fine views of the mountains; but it flushed out all the wildlife. Bears, Jack said, were crossing Black Hill Road every morning. One day, a moose comes trotting through. “Regular, old moose, I mean,” Jack said. “Jogging across my property like she’s running the Boston marathon.”

He’s a stubborn fool, my brother — and he’s got his own ideas about Right and Wrong, I guess. But whatever his own opinions, we see a lot more of him nowadays — seeing that he’s moved out west, finally, to Seattle. He likes the mountains and lakes well enough, I guess; but even when Amanda and I come over for dinner one night to celebrate his birthday, Jack seems to remember nothing fonder than that beaver pond of his — before the house and seven-hundred-foot driveway went in, I mean — and all those g-d damn stars.

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The house needed that new coat of stain. There was the general upkeep to take care of, too. So? After Luke’s weekend at Jack’s, Christina started to drop by. She was fond of getting things in order, and fixing things up for Jack.

By May, she’s got new curtains hanging. . . .

By June, she’s got the garden going. . . .

“She was a good woman,” Jack conceded, out by the pond. “If ever I was going to marry anyone, I was going to marry Chrissie.”

“That’s a word I don’t think I’ve ever heard you use before, Jack,” I said, after a moment. “‘Marriage,’ I mean.” I tugged up a weed between us, and watched the back hoes thrash more trees. “I’ve never known you to be in love before, Jack. Or am I not hearing you correctly?”

Jack considered the word.

“‘Love’?” he said, carefully. . . .

He looked out at the pond for a while — as though deciding for himself whether Love did or did not have anything to do with it — then turned his gaze downward, and listened to the back hoes, dragging away those trees.

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“Well,” I said, after Jack hadn’t answered. “Whatever you want to call it, Jack. I just hope you told Christina, that’s all.”

After a pause, Jack said:

“I tried to, anyway.”

“‘Tried’?” I said. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shook his head, and sighed weakly.

The story, he said, goes something like this.

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A few weeks before Jack flew off with Luke to Wyoming, Christina and Jack were lying in Jack’s bedroom. This happened near dawn. Christina was rubbing Jack’s chest quietly, and Jack was lying with one arm behind his head and fixing his eyes up to the ceiling. The windows in Jack’s room had those curtains on it Christina had already hung — and the gardens outside

had those plants in it Christina had already planted, too. And the patient, grey morning light was beginning to filter quietly through the windows. . . .

“I’ve planted your plants for you,” Christina said softly, rubbing Jack’s chest. “And I haven’t done too badly by your windows, if you ask me, either. Tell me what else does a girl have to do to get you to marry her, Jack?”

“You’ve been out to the woods yourself, Chrissie,” Jack said, after a while. “Tell me that beaver pond doesn’t mean the world to you?”

“That old mud puddle?” Christina said, rubbing her hand fondly along Jack’s chest. “That’s nothing but a bunch of sticks and weeds. . . .”

“I know,” Jack said. “And I love you too, Chrissie. . . .” He stared at the ceiling, and thought about Love for a while. “If ever I was going to marry anyone, I’d marry you.”

“Jack Fairhaven?” Christina replied, shortly. “Don’t make me laugh!” She turned away, and stared off into the morning light. “Half the county knows you’ll never marry!”

The next moment, however, Christina did — she laughed! Then she slipped out of bed, and picked up her bathrobe, which had been lying all the while on the floor.

“Jack, Jack, Jack,” she said warily. She shook her head, and tied the bathrobe quietly. “That beaver pond always will be there — you marry me or no. It’s Christina Brooks when she’s gone I’m wondering if there’ll be any regrets for?”

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That was three weeks before Christina Brooks left.

When I made it out to the house, there was no sign of Miss Brooks — only her gardens quietly dying, and the curtains, straining pale morning light weakly through the windows. . . .

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Although Luke had found her at the bar, Christina had sense and sensibility about her, too. She had spent time thinking out by the pond, hadn't she? One day, Jack found her sitting out there, on the rocks.

“What are you thinking about?” he said, dropping quietly down beside her.

“I see what you see here,” Christina told him, after a moment. “But you can't have it both ways, Jack.” She shook her head, and appreciated the complications. “The beauty, I mean,” she said, “and asking me not to matter.”

“You matter, Christina,” Jack said. He put his hand on Chrissie's shoulder, and pulled her gently toward him. “You matter to me a lot.”

“Just not more than the pond to you right now,” Christina replied. “Is that it, Jack?”

When Jack hadn't answered, Christina Brooks went on: “Well?” she said. “What kind of position do you think that places me in, Jack?”

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One thousand dollars was the cost of the stain Jack needed to put on the house; the workers came out in June. Jack said he thanked the contractor when he finished — but Burt hadn't been able to match the tones exactly.

Later, when Burt came back, he put the new roof on, which cost Jack a few thousand dollars more — but looked as good as the old roof.

“It's a better product,” Jack told me the last morning, before we picked up groceries and headed for the plane. “It'll last me twenty-five years.”

“Twenty-five years?” I said. “What's a bachelor Jack Fairhaven's age need a roof to last him twenty-five years?”

Jack just looked at me, and laughed.

“That’s exactly what I told Burt,” he said. . . .

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So?

Jack had that property of his out in the woods. He hired a man to plow the driveway in winter, and a neighbor to come over and mow the grass in summer. But there’s still one last thing I should tell you about the house. Even though most people have stopped putting houses up on Black Hill Road these days, by the time I made it out to Jack’s place, most people had moved into the places they’d already put up while Jack was living there, too.

So, as far as Jack’s house goes? I never could understand why Jack couldn’t have that beaver pond of his, and marry Christina, too.

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Things got going quickly after Christina and Jack had that first heart-to-heart. Before Jack knew, Christina knew: Peace? Quiet? Nowhere to be found by that beaver pond!

“Take a look around you; much of the best land is already gone, Jack,” Christina said one day, shaking her head — and packing her suitcase. “I might be able to help you eventually. But who am I to prevent you from learning what it is you’re actually looking for, Jack?”

She zipped her suitcase quietly, and stood it on the floor.

But when she saw how much she’d hurt Jack, she came over to him, and kissed him on the brow.

“You’re married to the land,” she said, tenderly. “Don’t be afraid of that, Jack!” She kissed him — tenderly again — then looked plaintively out the windows. “But, Jack?” she said, forbearantly. “Just be sure that that’s what you actually want!”

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One day after my visit — not long after Jack decided to go — my brother was walking up his road. A car's parked in a turnout there: ugly green station wagon. There's a path through the woods, fifteen feet wide. Trees and saplings, knocked down all the way. A man Jack's age comes walking out to the road. He's wearing a green, flannel shirt and overalls, and carrying some tools. He puts the tools in the back of his station wagon; rubs his hands on his pants; and then sees Jack looking at him.

“Cold for this early in the year,” he says. “Isn't she?”

“She'll get colder,” Jack says — coolly.

But then he thinks better of it, and introduces himself.

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The new man's name is Tomlinson.

Once upon a time, Tomlinson had Grand Plans. Because of the markets, though, Tomlinson's plans have grown smaller. “She's down to seventeen hundred square feet, now,” Tomlinson tells Jack one day, nodding to where his house will be. “If the markets keep going lower, I'll have to hold her back a year.”

The markets?

They go lower.

Tomlinson's still out there every weekend, though, riding his back hoe through the trees. The weather's starting to get colder now, too; Jack sees his neighbor driving down the road every morning, knocking down those trees. “It's his trees, Jack,” I tell him over the phone. “All right,” Jack says. “But does he have to keep knocking them down?”

Jack's already got his house on the market by then, though. Prices it right to sell. Even while the house in back of the pond is finishing up, Jack's house gets an offer. The closing goes

off without a hitch; in the lawyer's office, Jack passes the owners the keys. "Skiers from Rhode Island," he tells me over the phone. "Three kids and a dog!" I'd arranged for an apartment here, near Seattle, while Jack's looking for a house. The apartment's nice, when Amanda and I drive out to it — Jack's started unpacking his things. It takes a few days though, just to get adjusted. He's up in the hills, a fair way out of town; but there's restaurants. Parks. Cafés. Something's still not right, though. "Everything's cold," Jack says. "Congested." At night, he calls my wife, not sleeping so well. "Things are empty, Amanda," he says. "Void." My wife stares at the ceiling, trying to envision Peace and snow. Quiet. And, that beaver pond. . . .

"All right, Jack," she finally says, "I think I can see it now."

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So? Maybe he should have.

Maybe he should have married.

"Remember that duck flying off by himself?" Jack says to me, the night my wife and I are over at his place, celebrating his birthday. "Can you believe it? Something like that? So skittish? And, what?" he says. "All because of nothing?"

"Jack," I say, pouring my wife and Jack more wine, "let it go."

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So? Even selling his house? Even that might have been a mistake!

Because whether or not there's something more each of us might be looking for, Christina was probably right: Jack was just afraid of knowing it.

"Everything a man's looking for changes," Jack tells me later, washing dishes in the kitchen.

"So?" I say. "That pond will go on without you, Jack."



Jack nods quietly to that, rinsing; I think he understands Christina better now, though: he wanders over to our neighborhood — more often than not, without a good reason. He lets himself through the door, then sits by himself on the couch, watching network news — or football. Working in our garden these days, Amanda clips her hedges, then turns to me and stares.

“Imagine what it’s like for him?” she says, after a steady pause. “Nothing but that apartment? And that paltry view of the stars?”

I try to imagine it — but I can’t. But Amanda? She smiles at me warmly, and returns to clipping her hedges. But then? She senses my unease.

In the rolling afternoon sunlight, she comes quietly over to me, and slips the gloves she uses for gardening off, and — tugging my shirt lightly — pulls her small, soiled warmth against mine.