

Jacob Checks Out
By
Joseph Devon

We always used to say that Jacob was built backwards. I knew him from college on, so I sort of got to watch the tail end of things. There were friends of his from high-school and grade school there today. Each one of us caught a different fragment of years of Jacob's life. Each one of us was united in the urge to try and piece him together, to figure out what happened, to hope that by pooling our stories and year fragments maybe we could make sense out of the loss of our friend.

Jacob didn't have any brothers or sisters and his parents didn't identify with our need to reconstruct their son, so we had to start with Roger Federman who knew him in grade school. There isn't much there. It's infertile territory. Jacob stood out as much as anyone stands out in grade school, which is a whole lot and none at all. All we really get from Roger is a little more depth about Jacob's parents.

Jacob's father was an asshole. Mr. Dunn was the type of father that every group of friends has one of. Namely the father that everyone was terrified of even though you only saw him, at most, for five minutes every month. Outside of the lingering presence of fear there isn't much to say except the story about Jacob's lion and the busy street. And it's not much of a story.

Jacob was lost in thought when he was young, standing on the side of the main road that ran through his town. I'm not saying it was a major highway, but there was constant traffic, two lanes each way, and storefronts for three towns in either direction. Jacob was lost in thought; I like to think that he was on the verge of something big inside his head. Jacob always looked his stupidest when he was doing his best thinking. He'd look like the most bumpkin of rubes, eyes glazed over, somehow squinting into the distance while remaining completely blank, and you'd start to wonder about the guy. Next thing you'd now he'd blurt out some preposterous piece of knowledge. Sometimes he'd be working out a problem from a math class he was in four hours ago. More off-putting was when he'd piece together something more human. We'd be in our dorm room and a friend would stop by and say something, and then another friend, and then the girlfriend of the first friend, and they'd leave, and Jacob would look stupid for half an hour, then he'd suddenly tell you that the girlfriend was cheating on the first friend with the second friend. And you'd laugh. You always laughed. No matter how many times he was right. When he discussed science or math you kept your mouth shut, but when he discussed people you always laughed because that wasn't supposed to be his area. You'd laugh but you wouldn't forget. You'd try to forget but you never could and sure enough a week or a few months later it would come up that friend's girlfriend was cheating on him...and you'd never guess with who.

So, lost in thought is how I like to imagine Jacob in this story. Four or so years old, staring dumbly at the traffic lights or something while his head was piecing together god only knows what. And he's holding his favorite stuffed lion. It's hard not to overshoot with this image and picture him wearing suspenders and holding a giant lollipop as well, or those old timey pajamas with the flap on the rear, but as quaint as the image of Jacob carrying his favorite stuffed lion on the main street of his hometown is, that's how the story goes. And apparently his dad couldn't get him to pay attention to what he was saying. Jacob insisted on remaining lost in thought. Things are a little mixed here, but the overall consensus is that Mr. Dunn decided Jacob needed a lesson in being safe while crossing the street, so he ripped the

stuffed lion out of Jacob's hands and tossed it into traffic where it was run over by four or five cars in a matter of seconds.

Jacob's mother was a black hole of insecurity. Even though she was around a lot more than Mr. Dunn there aren't any stories about her. Every one of us can clearly see an image of her in her nylon jogging suit and fanny-pack slung backwards around her stomach, pulling Jacob aside and bending down to lean over him, not meet his eye level mind you, but to actually loom over him, and chastise him for being horribly wrong in everything he did. She was the type of person who was so insecure that the only way she felt she could discipline Jacob, or make her presence known in any way really, was to calmly take whatever action it was that had offended her and paint a very clear picture of how that action was going to destroy her life, his life, and possibly the world. Actually, it wasn't even always disciplining. David Ernest told me about one instance where she wanted to make sure that Jacob cleaned up the tray of snacks he had brought out for his friends. She stood on top of him for a solid ten minutes, right in front of everyone, outlining how she had to make sure he understood what he needed to do because they both knew how slow he was, how he needed to understand that if she didn't walk through every last step in cleaning up the snacks he would be sure to get it all wrong, how he always got everything wrong, how, when he managed to not clean up the tray and all possible crumbs correctly, this would inevitably mean mice and cockroaches and how he hated cockroaches, didn't he, because remember the time he had made a scene and embarrassed her at the insect room at the zoo when he had been too scared to look into the bug tank with the other children and she had been forced to pick him up and hold his face against the glass so he would look too, just like the other children, and how he had insisted on making a scene just to embarrass her.

We were scared of his dad. Most of us have outgrown that and I've seen a number of Jacob's friends managing to put on fake smiles and shake his hand tonight and at least be pleasant to the guy for three seconds. His mom, though, we all hated. Still do.

You take a mom who tells you that the worst is always going to happen and a dad who actually makes it happen and you have to wonder how Jacob came out of that.

Anthony McCormick gets high school and, according to him, this was a high point for Jacob's sense of humor. I could try to impart some of Anthony's stories, but every Jacob story should be told by the person who witnessed it. That's my opinion.

You have to understand, for Jacob a sense of humor was a full contact concept. Most people can be funny around friends; to some degree I think a lot of people's friends are selected because of compatible senses of humor. And while Jacob occasionally joked around with his friends, he always felt there were higher tests of a sense of humor out there. For him it wasn't about making people laugh or breaking the tension, it was a test of his self composure. Nobody took humor as seriously as Jacob. He was a firm believer in the perfect joke, the ideal turn of phrase, the composed reply. For Jacob, being able to make a joke in the worst of circumstances was the real goal. I'm not saying he wandered around funerals with a joy buzzer and whoopee cushion or anything. It was more like he saw it as a test of his self composure in times of stress or chaos. If he was able to make a joke and deliver it well, then he was holding himself together and of a clear mind.

Like there was the time we were walking through mid-town and a delivery boy on a bike turned the corner. I'm not talking about one of the package delivery boys, those guys are just insane, I mean someone delivering Italian food. The food guys are slightly less crazy. Anyway, this guy tried to cut across the corner of the sidewalk while making a damned fast turn. Things got pretty messy. There was this woman walking a little dog and it went leaping out of the way and the delivery guy skidded pretty hard into a street sign and the basket of

his bike got all kinds of twisted up. Jacob wound up on his ass next to a dog that was covered in Italian food.

It was pretty scary. The bike was certainly bent out of shape, and I remember being rattled, my adrenaline going like crazy. You know how that gets? I mean my hands were actually shaking, the bike had come in really fast and something like that comes out of nowhere and almost cracks your knees in half you get rattled. And once you get that under control, and you realize that the biker is okay and the dog isn't injured, well then you're looking down at your friend sitting on the sidewalk with a dog next to him covered in noodles. And that's pretty funny, so maybe you start laughing at that if you've gotten over your adrenaline rush. And that's as far as you get, you know?

But not Jacob. Without a tremor in his voice and with perfect deadpan delivery he looked at the scene all around him and said, "Huh. My fortune cookie was right."

Little sentences like that. He could slip them in anywhere with complete mastery of the situation. I was in the dorm room once trying to watch TV and was actually having a hard time with it because the rain outside was so intense. Thunder and lightning and brownouts and the weather was putting on as good a performance as the daytime television I was watching. Then the door opened and Jacob came in, calm as you please, possibly twenty pounds heavier due to the amount of water his clothes had soaked up. He puts his bag on his desk and sits down to start untying his sneakers and looks up as he's taking one shoe off and, wiping a rivulet of water off of his nose, asks, "You know if it's supposed to rain today?"

The serious thinking started in college. Most people agree that the thinking was coupled with the worrying. Although I think it was more a function of life and age itself. I mean, anyone can bluster their way into their twenties fueled by nothing but cheeseburgers and sex drive. After twenty though, things get a little shakier, a little harder. You take a mind and personality like Jacob's and some sharp turns were almost inevitable. That's my theory anyway. What we do know is that he was pretty bright in high school, but in college all sorts of new switches starting turning on.

And it was maddening. He was able to do damned near anything without trying and without training and without realizing he was doing it. Since we were roommates all through college I'd often throw Jacob an essay or paper of mine to look over before I'd hand it in. He was a Physics major but he'd stare at it, flip through it, read it once, then pick up a pen and suddenly there'd be red lines cutting all through my prose. And at first I'd object and try to fight it, but eventually I'd put in some of his corrections, then more, then all of them, then print it out and sure enough my bloated lumbering paper would be turned into a sleek black panther. It was like he didn't even have to think about it. No. That's not quite it. It's that he didn't even have to try. I asked him once where he had learned how to edit English papers. He told me that he had no idea, but that it just sounded better the way he suggested I put it.

Everyone's got a few things that come naturally to them. A few things where conscious front-of-the-brain thought doesn't interfere. For Jacob that was everything. And if he was bad at it at first then he'd be good at it the second time around and practically an expert by the third time he tried it. It was like he had a second brain that he could keep at home in the fridge that he would just hand problems and tasks to and it would learn and digest them. Then Jacob would come back from Physics class or Statistics for Statisticians or whatever the hell else he was taking, pop his second brain back in, and presto, he'd know how to beat me at checkers.

But it wasn't just classes or books that Jacob worked well with. That wasn't why we all expected so much out of him. It was...how do I put this...he was good at visualizing things. He was good at visualizing things and he was good at doing it differently than most people would.

Take jigsaw puzzles. He had the ability to conceptualize the entire picture and then he would pick up a piece and stare at it, hard, for like a minute. And whatever was on the piece, a little bit of a twig from a tree or one of a hundred goose heads or whatever it was, after staring at it for a minute he'd swivel on his seat and, like one of those games you play where the crane tries to grab the stuffed animal, he'd be purely mechanical as he moved and he'd set the piece down on the table. The first time I watched him do this I thought he was taking an incredibly long time sorting out the edges and picking out the various parts of the picture. I mean, I do that to on the rare occasion when I do a jigsaw puzzle. You put the balloons in one pile and the crowd or whatever in another pile. But then more and more pieces starting being put down by the crane and then more and then more and then they started to match up. And every piece he had come in contact with was almost perfectly in place already. Even if it was in the dead center of the puzzle, slowly, piece by piece, they would start to fill in and when that piece in the center finally connected with the border it probably hadn't moved more than a few centimeters from the spot he had originally put it down in.

Or there was time. He had a way of grasping of time that eluded most people. Those are my words. And they don't make much sense. I'm not saying he was amazingly punctual or anything like that. I mean he seemed to understand the passage of time better than others. That doesn't make much sense either. It still sounds like I'm talking about punctuality. Maybe I should skip this detail.

It's just that it was such a large part of his outlook on life. He understood on some fundamental level the passage of time. Most people look around and have a hard time separating out the new from the old. It just seems to them like what's around is what has always been around...at least until they get to be eighty years old when they finally notice that the world has changed and they start complaining about the price of dinner.

Jacob's been acting like an eighty year old for as long as we've known him. Maybe that's it. He didn't understand time, he understood change. It's always happening, bit by bit. Maybe he was never surprised at the big things because he kept perfect pace by being amazed by all the little things. One night, out at a bar, I think it was a year or so after we had graduated, Jacob asked me for a piece of gum. I handed him my sheet of gum and he smiled and laughed. "I remember when gum came in sticks," he said, a little sadly. I remember thinking, "Oh, here we go again with Jacob. What's he talking about? Of course gum comes in sticks." Until I looked down and saw that my gum actually came in pellet form, walled in by metal foil into a rack of plastic. You popped the gum out of the foil and popped it into your mouth. We took a survey, made everyone with gum put it out on the table. There were packets and more plastic racks and things that were almost sticks but they were too squat and short to really be called that. But no actual sticks. Not a one. And there wasn't a person there who referred to gum as anything but sticks. But gum isn't sticks anymore. This is a difficult aspect to capture, but you have to understand the wonder Jacob felt at the tiny little innovations that most of us are too busy, dense or looking at the big picture to notice. It wasn't always innovations. I don't know. He'd get rolling and he'd start laughing and smiling as he talked and he'd rack up entire lists of things that had changed that you hardly noticed. "I remember when toothbrushes actually fit into the toothbrush holders in the bathroom. I remember when Pluto was a planet. I remember when there was only one type of aspirin."

I know. It seems a bit silly to point these out. The tendency is to say, “So what?” To think maybe he’s a little simple for even noticing such small things. After awhile, though, the thinking starts to turn more towards, “Well what does it say about me that I *never* noticed these things?” I mean, Pluto I noticed, but the other ones kind of snuck up on me.

Somewhere mixed in here is Margo, of course. I think they started junior year and ended senior. Margo was when he got it into his head that he wasn’t normal. And that was when the unhappiness started to overwhelm. Margo never understood that she wasn’t dating Jacob; she was dating some strange variant of Jacob that only she brought out of him. She thought the Jacob she dated was the real Jacob and the obsessive thinking and the detaching for days at a time Jacob was something different that was caused by her. She had it backwards.

I would like to clarify here one of the greater misconceptions about their relationship. Jacob broke up with Margo, not the other way around. And it’s true, maybe he put the puzzle together and broke up with her before she could break up with him, but maybe not. I think it’s quite possible that Margo was as in love with him as those of us closest to Jacob are, and I’m not sure she was ever going to break up with him. So he did it to her. And I know this, despite what some of the other theories floating around say, and I can remember walking into our room and seeing Jacob with his thinking face on and I remember that I didn’t even try to say hi to him, you learned to never bother intruding when he was thinking. I walked across the room to hang up my coat and he said from behind me, “I broke up with Margo,” and it was like he was telling me to hang up my coat on a different hook there was so little emotion in his voice. I turned and maybe said something or maybe just looked at him and he said the only other sentence I ever heard him utter on the subject, “If I stay with her, I’ll never figure it out.”

What “it” was is irrelevant. It was everything. It was life. I don’t know if you’ve ever met anyone that you really felt was destined for greatness, if you have then you’ll know what I mean. “It” doesn’t matter, you can just tell that whatever it is, it’s going to crack one day and it’s going to crack big. Those of us who knew Jacob would compare him to the great minds of history. Actually, that’s not true, what the hell did we know about the great minds of history? What we would do, though, is wonder out loud if Aristotle had been good at jigsaw puzzles, or if Einstein clocked time differently than everyone else. Jacob was so singularly unique that it was impossible not to start imagining him doing something great. Solving some age old riddle. He was thinking for all of us. And I think he felt it too. By the time he was in college I think he knew that he was going to figure it all out. And by the time he broke things off with Margo, or maybe right after he did so, his thinking became less playful and more brooding. More determined. More desperate. He was going to figure life out.

These are the years where I take over. Others knew him in college. I knew him after college. After Margo. Into the fighting years.

There are those that fight battles their entire life, and you don’t quite understand what it is that they’re fighting, but you come to know the battle and you come to know the fight. And after awhile, after you’ve gotten to know them and seen them go up against it again and again and again, well after a long enough time you can’t do anything but root for them in their fight. And it becomes a part of you on some fundamental and wonderful level. You have a bad day or you get fired or you’re sitting in your living room and your cable shuts off because you forgot to pay your bill like an idiot and you hate yourself for a few seconds, or you get angry, or sad, or whatever, normal reactions. And then an hour or a few days later you remember your friend who’s still fighting, and you smile.

Because it doesn't matter what he's fighting against, it just matters that he hasn't given up yet. You draw on that. And you start to believe that he'll always fight.

Maybe it's my mistake for seeing Jacob as a fighter instead of a human, but that's what he became in those later years. A fighter. It never crossed my mind that the fight was hard, I just got it into my head that he fights because it's what he does. Until one day he quits. And you're left cheering on a hole in the universe that no longer makes sense. I never thought Jacob would quit.

I never thought Jacob *could* quit.

But there it is.

He looks happy, don't get me wrong. I just saw him on my way to the bathroom and he gave me one of those dopey Jacob smiles and told me again how much it meant to him that I could be here. But it's got us all on edge.

None of us want to be selfish, but we all feel the same way. This isn't so much a wedding as it is a Jacobectomy. I mean, I saw him the day before he contacted Margo again, which most of us agree is the day he decided to switch off as we all call it now, and he looked happy then too. But he wasn't Jacob. Jacob is gone. We sat that day and had a cup of coffee and he told me he had been thinking. That was the first sign and it might as well be the only sign. Jacob never talked like that. He was never colloquial. And he never pointed out that he had been thinking. He never *had* to point it out. He might as well have pointed out that he'd been breathing. But that's what he said, that he'd been thinking. And we actually sat and talked over coffee. Jacob never sat and talked over coffee. And he seemed so, I hate to say it, but he seemed so *normal*. But he was gone. I mean, is someone still alive if everything that made them special to you is no longer a part of them? This was the guy that was going to revolutionize the world. He was going to figure life out. But not any more. I swear it's like he shut his brain off. It's like he shut his brain off for good.

The scary thing is, if there was anyone on the planet that'd be capable of doing something like that, of purposefully thinking himself into not thinking, it would be Jacob. That's why all of us are so much on edge. It's like he destroyed himself just for the chance of being happy. And that's not Jacob at all. He was supposed to be fighting for all of us. He was supposed to figure life out.

On the other hand, I saw Jacob the day after Margo agreed to go on a date with him again, I saw Jacob the night he proposed and I saw him smile into her eyes when they shared their first dance.

Jacob was going to think until he figured life out. Maybe that's exactly what Jacob did.

About the Author:

Joseph Devon was born in New Jersey. He grew up and began to write books. For a longer version of this story be sure and visit him online. You can always find news about his latest books, recent short fiction and all things Joseph Devon at www.JosephDevon.com. You can also buy a hard copy of what you just read. Drop by, you'll be glad you did.

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