

Hi My Name Is Jack

By Jack Watts

Sample Chapters

Chapter 1

"I'VE ONLY HAD THREE"

"Jack, I don't know how to say this gently; so here goes. If you want us to continue dating, you have to go to AA and stop drinking."

This ultimatum was delivered to me in the late spring of 1994 at a quaint Italian restaurant on Peachtree Street in downtown Atlanta, right above Underground Atlanta, by my long-standing girlfriend, Eleanor Benedict. We had been talking about Bill Clinton, who had taken office a little over a year before.

There had been no segue. She just blurted it out. When she did, I wasn't offended; I was surprised. I wasn't an alcoholic. "I've only had three beers," I said quickly and defensively.

"Tonight you've only had three beers, but your drinking has gotten out of hand. I can't go on like this. It has to stop, or we have to stop. The choice is yours. I'm serious about this," and I could tell that she was.

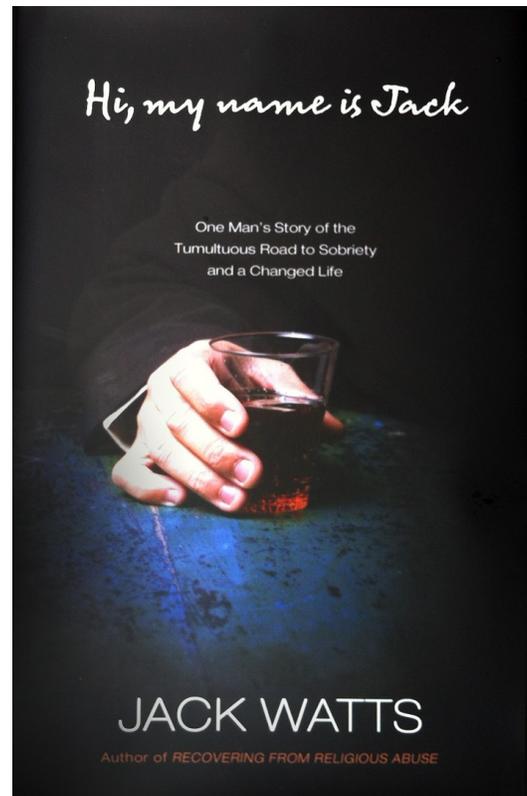
Now she had my attention. For me, three beers was nothing. I used to think of three beers as priming the pump before I started on Jack Daniel's. I would have anywhere from eight to ten of those and wind up the evening with one or two Grand Marniers. That was a normal evening routine for me.

Eleanor and I had been dating for three years—going on four—and Eleanor had been pressing me hard to marry her. Having been married twice, I was reluctant.

She was a medical doctor, finishing her residency at Emory and about to make substantial money as an internist. Eleanor was in her early thirties, redheaded, and had green, captivating eyes that were warm, alluring, and troubled. She was five three and always seemed to wear too much makeup. She wasn't beautiful—not in the traditional sense—but she was quite striking. She was also very exciting. There was never a dull moment with Eleanor.

At the time, I was doing quite well financially. I admit that I found the prospect of living a jet-setting, affluent life with a cute young doctor very attractive, but our relationship had its share of problems. One time, I was taking one of my daughters, Jordan, to the movies, and Eleanor came along to shop while we did. She and Jordan were fooling around in the car, and Eleanor bit Jordan. That's right. My girlfriend, the doctor, bit my daughter, who was only eight years old at the time. Jordan screamed because it was a hard bite, which both startled and hurt her. It was all I could do to keep the car on the road as Jordan reached over to cling to her daddy. Eleanor apologized, insisting that she was just being playful, but the scene was so bizarre that I began to rethink the possibility of a lifelong relationship with her.

This aberrant behavior was not an isolated incident. Another time, Eleanor and I planned to go to a bed-and-breakfast inn for a long weekend in Savannah. One of my older daughters, Brenn, who was twenty-two at the time, asked me if we could drive her there and back. Brenn planned to stay with a girlfriend of hers who just happened to be



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the hostess at the same B&B where Eleanor and I were registered. Naturally, I said yes. Frankly, I thought nothing of it and looked forward to the long drive down and back, with Brenn along for the ride. She was a lot of fun. For this trip, we drove in Eleanor's car instead of mine, which was in the shop.

Although Eleanor readily agreed that it would be wonderful having Brenn, she was secretly seething. When we arrived at the B&B, Brenn's friend Jennifer, who was a very attractive young lady, gave me a hug, which was apparently a little too close and a little too long for Eleanor's comfort. Having known Jennifer since she was fourteen, I didn't think a thing about it—nor would anybody else in their right mind. Yet Eleanor, who had more and more frequently acted as if she had some kind of personality disorder, was not behaving like she was in her right mind—she was acting insecure and jealous. Although she didn't say anything then and there, her discomfort quickly turned to anger. When Brenn left to spend the weekend with Jennifer, Eleanor unleashed a tirade of obscenities that would have made a sailor blush. I was stunned, but there was no appeasing the doctor.

I retreated to the bathroom to take a shower and to avoid further battle. My fear was that every other guest would overhear her shouting, making it impossible to look others in the face at breakfast the following morning. While I was in the shower, Eleanor hurriedly gathered her things, threw them in her car, and left.

I will never forget how I felt when I realized what had happened—like an absolute fool. There I was, a forty-nine-year-old man with his twenty-two-year-old daughter, stranded in Savannah—250 miles from home. I not only felt like a fool, I also looked like one for being in a significant relationship with someone who was that volatile.

Within an hour, I rented a car for Brenn and me to drive back to Atlanta, cutting the trip short by two days. While on the road, I left a message for Eleanor, telling her it was over, which was the healthy, appropriate thing to do.

But I wasn't healthy. Although I did not realize it at the time, I was an alcoholic. Therefore I reconciled with her two weeks later when she came to see me—remorseful and in tears. That is what alcoholics do; it's who we are. Even when there is no alcohol in our system, we still think like alcoholics, and it costs us. I was a rescuer, and my alcoholism clouded my judgment regularly and repeatedly.

It's funny because Eleanor thought all of our "issues" were based on my drinking and not hers, but that wasn't true. I think she had problems with alcohol as well, and like nearly every problem drinker, she was in complete denial. During our last Thanksgiving together, my family came to eat at my house in the Buckhead section of Atlanta. Being the host for all four of my daughters and their families, I didn't have anything to drink. I was much too busy. By the way, this is also one reason I denied having a drinking problem for so long. I didn't have to drink on every social occasion. There were many times when I never touched it, but in truth, these times of abstinence were becoming less frequent.

Before the meal, everyone was talking and mixing very well when Eleanor, who was feeling no pain, spilled her red wine on my beautiful new white Burberry rug in front of everybody. I asked her to clean it up right away.

"Let the maid do it when she comes next week," she said with a dismissive, haughty laugh.

Immediately I got a sponge and started cleaning it myself. Victoria, my second daughter, who was twenty-four, marched up and said, "Dad, why are you cleaning that and not her?"

Eleanor heard this, and the battle was on. They went into another room and let it rip. It was awful, and it seemed to go on for hours. Every once in a while, Eleanor would come out and refill her glass to keep her throat moist for the next round. By the time the doctor left to go on duty, there was nothing left to be thankful for. The holiday was ruined.

She called in the early evening after everyone had left and said, "It wasn't that bad." She added, "The first two cases I saw today were Thanksgiving gunshot wounds."

"So I should be grateful that we didn't have gunplay?" I said, still infuriated that the holiday had been destroyed.

There were dozens of other examples I could describe, but everybody could see this relationship was unhealthy—that is, everyone but me. I met Eleanor at a Bible study, and we were attracted to each other at first sight. She was a petite beauty and obviously quite intelligent. I kept hoping things would turn around with her, but they never did.

So when she gave me the ultimatum to go to AA, I went. I found a noon meeting at the Triangle Club, which was right behind a huge liquor store that I frequented often. When I went to the first meeting, I was surprised to see so many sharp people and virtually no street people. At the end of the meeting, I went forward and picked up a white chip, which signaled my acknowledgment of being an alcoholic and my willingness to surrender my problem with alcohol to God.

My relief was instantaneous. I felt a burden lift from my back, and I was certain I was in the right place. Ever since I was in high school, when I first started drinking excessively, I knew I was different. I didn't fit in—not really. At AA I was finally with people who were like me—people who thought like me. It's definitely where I belonged.

On the outside—the side I allowed people to see—I looked fine. In fact, I looked better than fine. I looked good. On the inside, however, I was a mess, and I knew it. In the second step of AA's 12-Step program, it says that God can restore an alcoholic to sanity. At first this seemed a little extreme, but I soon realized how crazy I had become. Take my anger, for example. I would sit in a meeting and, if a guy looked at me in a way I didn't like, I would say to myself, I can take him. If he even looks at me again, I'll beat the crap out of him.

I always thought like this and was surprised to find that most people don't. Even people who have a problem with anger aren't that angry. My anger seemed normal to me, which is a pretty good definition of insanity. By the way, if a girl looked at me, I thought, She wants me. Sadly, I still think that way, which is pretty typical for a guy—even an older one.

In those first few months, AA was my life. People seemed genuine and more willing to be transparent than any people I had ever seen before. At Triangle, there was a guy who led quite a few meetings. He was kind, accepting, insightful, and had an obvious desire to help others. He seemed genuinely humble, which came from deep within him. He was also gay and had AIDS. It was clear to me that he had a better relationship with God than I had. Before I went to AA, I'm sad to admit that I thought AIDS was God's punishment for being gay, but not after I saw God's love come from this man—unconditional love. He spent his final days of life in service to others, constantly giving and never bemoaning his fate.

He died soon after I met him. I can't even remember his name, but I'll never forget the character qualities he possessed—qualities I coveted. As a result of being in meetings he led, I started to realize that God's love was greater than the box to which I had confined Him. I knew I didn't love people the way the gay guy did—not even close. I needed help with more than my drinking. I needed character transformation as well. I wanted this kind of love to come from me, not the anger I had always harbored.

I also started to realize just how destructive my life with Eleanor had become. As I became more involved with AA, I began to see that I wasn't responsible for fixing her. I had enough problems of my own. One evening, six weeks into the program, I broke up with her and never looked back. I had been sober for only a short time, but I knew I wouldn't maintain my resolve while still dating her. I'll always be grateful that she initiated my visit to AA, but marrying her was certainly not the way to express that gratitude. I needed a fresh start.

As part of my AA program, I began to take a complete—painstakingly honest—inventory of my life. In so doing, I asked myself exactly when I became an alcoholic. I decided that it was in 1933—eleven years before I was born.

I WAS WANTED

Los Angeles may be the city of charm and opportunity today, but in the 1930s the place to be was Chicago. My mother, Mary Catherine Reagan, knew this, and being the youngest of six children from a dairy farm in Maxwell, Illinois, Mary anxiously headed to the city as soon as she graduated from high school. Her shorthand was good and her typing skills a little better, but Mary's greatest asset was her charm—pure Irish.

Prohibition had just ended; the Depression was in full swing; Hitler was coming to power in Germany; but regardless of what was happening in the world, you could always find a party in the Windy City. And that's exactly what Mary did every Friday and Saturday night. One evening, when Mary had had a little too much to drink, she carelessly locked herself in a bathroom and couldn't get out.

A handsome young man from St. Louis, Missouri, was there and quickly came to her rescue. He climbed outside a living-room window, walked carefully along a ledge six stories up, and entered the bathroom through the small window above the commode. In his hand was a key to open the door, and thus he saved the damsel in distress. His name was William Houston Watts, my father.

Some say it was the last truly athletic thing Bill Watts ever did. Nevertheless, he and Mary started dating and quickly became a couple. The story they told us was that they married in 1934 and my older brother, Danny, was born in 1935. This story was unquestioned for nearly seventy years until my dad's younger sister, whom we called Sweetie Pie, inadvertently revealed that they were actually married in the spring of 1935—just a few months before Danny was born.

At first you might think this little revelation to be insignificant, but in the dynamics of our family, it has proven to be of monumental importance. Like a clue to a Sherlock Holmes mystery, it helped unlock my understanding to nearly everything that has transpired since.

You see, my dad was a very bright and talented man, a man of great promise. He was a freshman in college, a young man who had just taken a trip to Chicago to have a little fun. He had no plans to marry anybody, but when Mary turned up pregnant, he did what was right. He married her—just like nearly any other guy from his generation would have done. His sister finished college and eventually received her PhD. Six years younger than Dad, Sweetie Pie became a renowned artist and college professor, accomplishments her older brother envied but never equaled.

The pregnancy meant he had to quit college, go to work, and raise a family. He did what was expected of him, but his heart bore deep resentment toward Mary for getting pregnant. But his resentment didn't stop there. He reserved a special place of hatred in his heart for his newborn son, Danny. He blamed Danny for the lot in life he was forced to endure. Danny could do no right in his father's eyes, no matter how hard he tried. My dad would use the least provocation to scream obscenities at him, undermine his self-worth, and make him the brunt of his cruel and sarcastic humor. This abuse not only undermined Danny's character and confidence, but it also twisted him at the core of his being in dark ways that would come to light decades later. You might say that even in his youth, Danny had a black spot on his soul.

Danny grew up despising our father, and the two of them became enemies for life. To this day, more than three decades after Dad's death, any conversation with my brother Danny invariably turns into a diatribe about our father's real or perceived faults. Now, in his late seventies, Danny is still rebelling against paternal authority. It's probably at the root of Danny's lifelong problem with alcohol and cocaine. As you can imagine, this bitter enmity and rivalry caused significant problems, some of which will never be resolved.

Mom, like all good Irish Catholic girls—and in spite of the constant warfare between Dad and Danny—wanted more children. A second pregnancy, however, eluded her until a year after her mother, Bridget, died in 1943.

Mom's nickname was Murph—a tribute to her Irish charm. This sobriquet was not derisive but endearing—so endearing, in fact, that her children called her Murph. We even pinched her fanny when she walked by, just like her husband often did. Even in the midst of this highly conflicted family, Murph was a lot of fun. Just a little over five feet, Murph was formidable, with a fierce Irish temper.

She was fond of telling me, "When my mother died, she went to heaven and asked Mary to ask Jesus if I could have another child. And, Jacky, God sent us you. We wanted you so much." My mom had that kind of simplicity, purity, and superstition that is uniquely Irish. As you can imagine, we teased her unmercifully about such statements.

As cute as this was, it also was important. When I came into the world, I was wanted, which didn't go unnoticed by Danny, who was nine at the time. He was keenly aware of the difference between the two of us. I was wanted; he was not. Shortly thereafter, my mom became pregnant again, and my brother Dick arrived on VJ Day (victory over Japan in World War II). I was fourteen months old. Dick was very sickly, receiving extreme unction (now known as anointing of the sick) and a hurried Catholic baptism because he wasn't expected to live. My mother poured herself into his care. Dick not only survived, he also thrived.

Because she nearly lost him, the bond between my mom and Dick was so strong that they became extremely close for the rest of her life. Once she gave Dick a T-shirt that said, "Mom Loves Me Best." No kidding, she really did this—and she was surprised that the rest of her children were openly incredulous and inwardly resentful! That was Murph—you had to love her.

My parents used to say that my dad liked me the best, but I never believed that was true. When I was only three, however, he did take me to a bar with him on Saturday afternoons to drink with his friends, and I felt special then. He would sit me right up on the bar, like I was one of the boys—along with the beer, whiskey, smoke, hacking coughs, uproarious laughter, and lewd stories. They would give me the last sip of beer and think it was hysterical to see such a cute little boy drain the last drops from a bottle. It was my introduction to alcohol—at three. Looking back, it's hard to imagine such irresponsibility, but at the time they didn't think a thing about it.

Because Dad's company transferred him often, Danny and I were born in Iowa, then Dick in St. Louis. In 1949 we moved to Newton, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston, where we bought a small three-bedroom, one-and-a-half-bathroom house. The conflicts between Danny and Dad intensified. Because Danny was now a teenager, he was able to hold his own in verbal combat. He started lifting weights in the basement and went from a scrawny kid to a full-fledged bully in just a few months.

His bullying was no novelty to either Dick or me because Danny used every opportunity he could find to inflict minor physical pain or major emotional cruelty. In spite of this, we loved him dearly. He was our big brother, our hero, our champion in standing up to Dad. He couldn't see the intensity of our loyalty because he was a bully, and since bullies are obtuse by nature, they often can't see or understand what's going on around them. They're too busy with the corporal dimension of pain to comprehend the emotional side of life.

Dick and I, on the other hand, were happy, carefree, and as mischievous as Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. We were into everything. Dad was hard on us—make no mistake about it—but we had each other. When he would send us to our room, which we shared, we didn't sulk and brood like Danny did, because we had each other to play with. So our punishments were just opportunities for some new adventure.

By 1953, we were well settled in Massachusetts. Danny was nearing the end of his high school education—not because of graduation but because he was nearing his eighteenth birthday. He received one D in his junior year, his only passing grade, and that was in PE. He got into fights constantly and was finally arrested for one particularly nasty incident where several kids were hospitalized with broken bones. The judge said he could either go to jail or go into the service. So the day Danny turned eighteen, he joined the Marine Corps and was quickly shipped off to Parris Island, South Carolina, for basic training.

At about the same time, Mom became pregnant with her fourth child—my sister, Terry Jean. I came up with the name because I loved the comic strip Terry and the Pirates, but she was always called Jean. Because there were eighteen years between her oldest and youngest, Mom was fond of saying, "I've been stuck at home with you kids all my life." This reproachful statement might have destroyed the psyche of most, but Dick and I laughed and wore it proudly as a badge of honor.

To most families, education or athletics is the most important role for children. For us, it was earning money. From the time I was old enough to carry a bag, I caddied for Dad when he played golf every Saturday and Sunday. On Sunday mornings, we would be at Mass, and just as soon as the priest washed his hands, Dad rushed me out of church so we wouldn't miss our tee time. This cut church short by about twenty minutes, but he got no argument from me.

I liked caddying for my dad because he was with his friends, and he would never embarrass himself by yelling at me in front of them. I also loved talking to these men—all of whom were World War II veterans with incredible tales from Europe and the South Pacific. One of my favorites was Bill Sullivan, the original owner of the New England Patriots. I caddied for him a hundred times.

I remember asking my dad what he did in the war, and he said, "I did your mother." He was the only nonveteran in the crowd.

Once, when I was fourteen, we were on the eleventh tee when the entire foursome started talking about my future—where I would go to college, what I would be, and what kind of girl I would marry. One of the golfers—a man with a distinct southern accent—commented, "Jack should go to the University of Georgia. I like that. It has a nice sound to it." No one paid any attention to it but me. It did have a nice sound to it, so I made up my mind right then and there to go to UGA. It was a decision that would have lifelong implications, and I made it capriciously—with no more thought than it had a nice sound to it.

I also worked at a gas station for a short time on Sundays when I was sixteen. Once, when locking up, I left the windshield display out all night, and it was stolen. The owner noticed it was missing right away and came by our house early on Monday morning. He wanted to make me pay for the display, wipers, and several other things. Dad did a little investigating and discovered that the display unit was provided by the wiper company and would be replaced without cost. So the guy was trying to use this opportunity to make a cash bonus for himself because of my mistake.

Upon learning this, I wanted to confront him immediately; but my dad wanted us to pay for it and then threaten to go to the senior management of the gas company. Reasoning that we could make the guy pay us to keep our mouths shut, we would turn the table on him. "It's not blackmail, Jacky," Dad explained. "It's just a little free gas, a tune-up, or something like that." I was appalled, but that was my old man—always looking for an angle and proud of it. He thought this was a laudable quality rather than a character flaw, and he was contemptuous of me for not seeing it his way.

In fact, he was so proud of his penchant for looking for an angle that I always found it ironic that he put up this plaque right over the dirty-clothes hamper for all of us to see every day:

The Darkest Hour in Any Man's Life

Is When He Sits Down

To Plan How to Get Money

Without Earning It.

—Horace Greeley

My dad was always trying to get money without earning it, so the plaque was like spouting the virtues of abstinence while being a closet drinker. By the way, I never paid for the windshield wipers or anything else in the matter, because we never could get any straight answers out of the gas station manager.

It's funny, but if you look back, you can nearly always discern patterns of thought and behavior that have had a profoundly negative impact on your life. You think, I should have said no right then and there, or How could I have let him do that to me? That's how I have always felt about my dad's sneaky little deals and attempts to get something for nothing.

Inside, I knew his plan was wrong. Something was desperately wrong in our family. The leader, my dad, was not honorable. We were being trained to connive, to look for angles, to exploit and manipulate rather than to do what was right. More than anything, I wanted to do what was right. I felt like Oliver Twist being led about by the artful but malevolent Fagin and his henchman, the Dodger. I tried to watch out for Dick—to protect him from all the dysfunction surrounding us; that's all I could do.

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