

Jacob's Bell – A Christmas Story

By John Snyder

© 2018 by John Snyder

Chapter One

A deafening screech, then a loud thud jolted Jacob McCallum upright from his slumber as the freight train pulled into the Chicago yards on a chilly September morning in 1944. The boxcar, which carried him from the West, had a musty stench about it. Jacob's head throbbed. His breath reeked of whiskey and tobacco. An empty whiskey bottle lay next to his right leg—the remnants of a hard night's drinking. He lay his head back down on his knapsack and lit the stub of a cigarette as he watched the sunlight trickle through the cracks into the emptiness of the darkened wooden boxcar. Accustomed to traveling this way, he journeyed across the country looking for odd jobs and handouts to support himself.

As the train slowed, Jacob prepared to jump off. It wasn't wise to linger after the train pulled into the yard. Though hopping a freight wasn't a serious crime, they were cracking down. If caught, he could be arrested.

Jacob slid the door open and squinted hard as the bright morning sun reflected off his face. Instinctively, his right hand rose to his face, shielding his eyes while they adjusted to the light. The sun revealed the weathered skin of a sixty-three-year-old man who appeared much older, the cumulative result from many years of hard living on the streets. Jacob lived a callous life and carried the scars to prove it. Over the years, his face and head wore more stitches than a fine country quilt from countless fights, falls, and knocks to the skull.

The son of Irish immigrants, Jacob grew up on the south side of Chicago, a notoriously tough neighborhood. The skills he learned as a lad with his knuckles proved handy over the years, getting him out of plenty of tight spots, and into just as many. He spent most of his time riding the rails and hanging out on the streets with roughnecks and hooligans. His fighting skills were honed in prison, where he fought for recreation and for the amusement of the guards. Mostly, though, his fighting, just like his drinking, got him into trouble more than anything else.

Like the time when he was just thirteen and he came upon his older brother cornered by two adult thugs trying to strong-arm him for his billfold. His brother was sixteen at the time, but far more timid than Jacob. Backed against an alley wall, he pleaded with his robbers to let him go. Jacob snuck up from behind, introducing himself with a sucker punch out of left field, knocking one of the ruffians down. To even his chances, he snatched a heavy metal pipe from the ground and cracked it hard over the knee caps of the other before chasing both of them down the alley, wildly swinging the pipe over his head as he ran. As the trio rounded the corner, they rushed directly into a group of the muggers' friends, who promptly came to their aid, issuing Jacob a mighty beating. His brother, unaware, safely made his escape, only to witness Jacob's return home bloodied and bruised.

Jacob jumped from the boxcar as it slowly rolled into the yard. He executed a perfect landing. Standing there proudly, he puckered his lips and drew one last time on what was left of his cigarette, savoring the last of its nicotine. Tossing the smoldering butt onto the tracks, he rubbed his hand over his unshaven face, where a white stubble had emerged. I'm gettin' too old for this nonsense, he thought to himself as he walked across the train yard. Jumping freight trains, sleeping on the ground, and enduring the elements didn't come as easily as they used to.

He hadn't always lived this way. Jacob did have three grown children. Emma, his eldest, lived somewhere in Baltimore, Maryland. Frankie, the youngest, lived with his older brother, Tom, and his family in Chicago—the last Jacob had heard. Tom and Frankie were the motives for Jacob's visit to the city. He needed to put things right between himself and his two sons. Jacob had been riddled with guilt over the years for the tragedy he'd brought upon his older son, evidenced by a limp Tom would have the rest of his life.

A recent near-death experience out West spurred Jacob to take an accounting of his life. He came down with a bad bout of pneumonia and almost didn't make it. While lying in a hospital bed in Nevada, he came to the realization he needed to reconcile with his children before his time ran out.

Five years had passed since he had last seen his sons, even longer since he had seen Emma. He hadn't seen his granddaughter since she was a baby. Emma made sure of that. He had yet to meet Tom's young son, Michael, who was born three years earlier. Jacob's relationship with his children was chilly at best. And it took years just to reach that level of warmth. Tom's parting words from Jacob's last visit still echoed in his head. "Now get out of here and never come back again!" His encounters with Emma had a similar history. Jacob's family wanted little to do with him, and for good reason.

As he made his way through the streets of Chicago, he noticed there were not many young men about, and the ones that were wore uniforms. World War II was in full fury. Most of the young men of Chicago, like young men in every other city and town in America, were being consumed by the Great War. He wondered about Frankie—was he, too, wearing a uniform?

Jacob often pondered about his youngest child. He knew Tom and Emma were fine. They were strong, sometimes even stubborn, much like him. But Frankie was different, more like his mother, sensitive and overly generous, far less independent than his siblings. The turmoil Jacob had brought upon his family seemed to have a more profound effect on Frankie, but in a quiet sort of way. He never lost his temper or showed anger toward Jacob as did Tom and Emma. Frankie always seemed less emotional, more withdrawn. But Jacob knew that what he had done had deeply scarred his youngest child. Through it all, though, Frankie seemed to show Jacob more love and respect than his siblings.

Jacob projected a tough exterior, walking with a cocky gait, but on the inside he was hurting. Haunted by memories of the past, filled with regrets and what-ifs, he longed for love and companionship, which had evaded him for so many years. For most of the last two decades, Jacob existed in an alcohol-induced fog, a time of denial and self-pity mixed with intermittent periods of remorse, sobriety, and attempts at reconciliation.

Jacob stopped, slung his coat over his shoulder, and inserted a crumpled cigarette into the corner of his mouth.

“Got a light?” he asked a passerby.

“Sure, pal.”

Jacob leaned his head into the palms of the stranger’s hands as they cupped the matchstick. Drawing the flame onto the end of his cigarette, he stood upright and inhaled deeply.

While exhaling, he asked, “Know a place where a fella can get a drink this early?”

“Down the street, turn the corner, and at the end of the block is a joint called Kelly’s.”

“Thanks.”

Jacob headed to Kelly’s for a morning fix of liquid courage before he would begin his quest to find his sons and attempt to extinguish the burning in his heart. As he strolled through the warehouse district of the city, his memory took him back to a distant time, some thirty years before. Dressed in an expensive suit partially hidden by a fashionable woolen topcoat, he wore freshly shined shoes made of expensive Italian leather, and his hair was full and slicked back in a way that accentuated his chiseled features and a strong jawline, features that attracted the attention of the ladies when he walked by. Surrounded by associates, he was greeted warmly by passersby, who regarded him with much respect. After all, he was among the richest and most powerful men in Chicago.

“Hey, old man, watch where you’re going!”

Startled back into the present when he bumped shoulders with a man on the sidewalk, Jacob passively let the encounter go without incident. In his younger day, the guy’s rude remark most likely would have put him on the receiving end of one of Jacob’s well-established right hooks. But ol’ Jacob was tired, tired of fighting, tired of running—just plain ol’ tired. He offered a muted apology: “Sorry. I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Well, why don’t you watch where you’re going?”

“I said I was sorry.”

The confrontation caused Jacob to drop his coat onto the ground. He stared down at the pathetic piece of cloth, riddled with holes, the pockets ripped at the sides. Honestly, it wasn’t worth the effort to bend over and pick it up, but it was all Jacob had, a far cry from the fine woolen topcoat he once wore.

Spotting the sign over the front door, he stopped in front of Kelly’s. Flicking his spent cigarette out into the street, he opened the door and walked inside. The place was practically empty. The barkeep, chewing on a half-smoked cigar, was sweeping the floor. Five shabbily dressed patrons were seated at a table playing poker, and in the corner a guy slept soundly in a booth, his head resting on the table in front of him. The place smelled of stale beer and cigarette smoke. The glow of the morning sun, which snuck through the pub’s smoggy windows, provided the only

light in the dim establishment. It flowed into the smoke-filled room, its beams of light spilling onto the dirty wooden floor.

Jacob pulled out a stool and bellied up to the bar. The bartender disregarded him and just kept sweeping. He sat patiently for a few moments before becoming irritated at being ignored.

“Hey, buddy!” Jacob called out.

Still, the bartender kept sweeping.

“Hey, buddy. I’m talking to you.”

The bartender looked up and said, “I’m not your buddy.”

“Well, I’d like a drink. You are the bartender, aren’t you?”

Without answering, the man walked behind the bar, stopped across from Jacob, leaned in, and said, “What’ll ya have?”

“A tall glass of whiskey.”

The bartender poured whiskey into a dirty glass and put it on the bar in front of Jacob. As Jacob reached for it, the man pulled it back.

“You pay first, then you drink.”

Jacob rummaged through his pockets for the price of the booze. Finding it, he slapped it down on the bar. The bartender released his grip on the glass, grabbed the money, and slid the drink toward Jacob. Friendly place, Jacob thought.

As he straddled the bar stool sipping his whiskey, Jacob eavesdropped on the men playing cards as they cursed loudly and laughed at the punch lines of off-color jokes. He grabbed a box of matches sitting on the bar and fumbled through his pockets for a smoke. Searching frantically, he checked his pants, his shirt, his sweater, and his coat—nothing. He was out. He could bum a smoke from one of the guys playing cards. But that could lead to trouble.

He craned his neck in the bartender’s direction, who was busily wiping off some tables behind him. Out of the question. Then, he glanced at the man sleeping in the corner booth. Sitting on the table by his elbow sat half a pack of Lucky Strikes, Jacob’s preferred brand, but these days he wasn’t too particular. I could sneak over and snag the pack. The dope probably wouldn’t even notice. A smoke sure would go good with this whiskey.

Jacob redirected his roving eyes down to his feet. This must be my lucky day, he laughed inwardly. There, just below the bar, lay a long cigarette butt. Someone had discarded it after taking just a few drags, prematurely snuffing it out on the floor. Fortunately for Jacob, the bartender wasn’t that conscientious about his cleaning. He bent over and lifted the castoff to his lips. Lighting it, he smiled, then turned his attention to the drink he had been neglecting.

His thoughts returned to his past, to happier times, like the day more than thirty years before, when he and Nick, his best friend and business partner, made that big deal. Wow...we sure were

flying high that day. We really hit the jackpot. A slight smile crept onto his face, then quickly disappeared. Yeah...and where did all that get me in the end? Where I am today...in a run-down bar sniping cigarette butts off the floor.

Whatever became of Nick? he wondered. He's got to be doing better than me. He dreamed of the beautiful home he once owned. Some called it a mansion. He drove fancy cars and wore imported suits with silk shirts and ties.

Looking down at his clothes, he frowned at seeing how they were all tattered and torn, pants with patches. His shoes were customized with stuffed cardboard inserts to cover the holes in their soles. He laughed out loud, then joked to himself, I've got holes in my soles and a hole in my soul. All of a sudden, it wasn't funny anymore. He did have a hole in his soul, and it ached.

How could my life have turned like this? I had it all—everything. Now I have nothing...no money, no home, no fancy cars, and most importantly, no family. Nothing!

Of all the things he missed, he longed for his family the most. But he knew that part of his life he could never recapture. Jacob took another swig of whiskey and swallowed hard. He puffed on his cigarette and blew out a ring of smoke, watching it glide toward the ceiling, where it disappeared in the slow whirling blades of the ceiling fan. As he gazed upward, his thoughts again drifted back to his past.

He and Nick went way back—all the way back to their childhood. Nick introduced Jacob to his wife, Amanda, a moment which Jacob would always remember. She was stunningly beautiful with her pale blond hair and blue eyes. They fell deeply in love...a love that still caused Jacob deep anguish.

I should have listened to Nick. My life would be far different today if I had.

“Ouch, dang it!” Jacob’s cigarette burned down to his fingers. His yell caused the men playing cards to turn and stare. The bartender dropped the glass he was washing, and the gentleman sleeping in the corner began to stir. Jacob kept his head down, avoiding eye contact, acting as if his indiscretion had never happened. After stubbing out the cigarette, he tilted his head back and poured the remaining whiskey down his throat before confidently slamming the glass back on the bar, picking up his coat, and walking out the door.

The light of the outdoors glared in his eyes. He staggered slightly for a brief moment, partially because of the gleaming sun, but mostly because of the whiskey he’d consumed. He plopped down on a bench in front of the building. A few minutes later, the front door of Kelly’s swung open and the man who had been sleeping in the corner emerged.

“Hey, mate,” the disheveled gentleman said with a prominent British accent. “Mind if I sit here a spell?” He lit one of his Lucky Strikes. “Care for a smoke?”

Ah...that was music to Jacob’s ears.

“Sure. Don’t mind if I do.”

“I haven’t seen you around here before. You from Chicago?”

“Originally. But I’ve been gone for a while,” Jacob said. “Just passing through. I’m here to see my sons. How about you?”

“I rent a room down the street. It isn’t much, but it’s a warm place to bunk. Would you care for a nip?” the British gent said as he pulled a bottle of scotch from inside his coat.

“No. I’ve got to be going. Gotta get to my sons’ place.”

“Oh, come on, mate. A few nips on the bottle will warm you up inside.”

Jacob thought for a moment. He wanted to find Tom and Frankie to straighten things out...to say the things he came there to say. But his fear of Tom’s rejection gave Jacob a reason to kill some time with his new friend. After all, Jacob had robbed his children of their mother’s life, and he knew this would always be a barrier to a meaningful relationship with them. Painfully, he realized that Tom’s feelings of disdain toward him were justified.

“Maybe just a few nips, then I have to go.”

Actually, the gentleman’s offer enticed Jacob to put off his plans...more appealing than sure rejection. A kind stranger willing to share a bottle of scotch and his Lucky Strikes offered the perfect reason to put off his meeting with Tom and Frankie. He spent several hours with his newfound friend, long enough to help find the bottom of the bottle of scotch and to empty that pack of Lucky Strikes. After bidding the man good-bye, Jacob staggered down the street and into another bar, where he stayed much too long.

Chapter Two

As Tom walked up the street, images of his father came into his mind with every step he took, his limp a poignant keepsake of his father’s recklessness. His recollection of the man oozed like an open wound. All his life, Tom had struggled with the scars left behind by his father. He tried hard to remember the good times he’d experienced as a child, the times he’d gone fishing and attended ball games with his dad, but these memories were overshadowed by his father’s drinking, carousing, and bad judgment.

Tom and his siblings had been raised by his mother’s brother, Uncle Phil, and his wife, Aunt Mildred, while Jacob remained incarcerated. Growing up with relatives, Tom could never remember anything good ever being said about his father. He often made a conscious effort to block even the good memories of him. Missing his mother, though, he yearned for just a whiff of her sweet perfume or the gentle touch of her soft hands. What a wonderful woman. He could only imagine what it would be like to have her in his life.

Though taller than his father, Tom favored him remarkably, especially in his younger years, handsome and muscular. He married his childhood sweetheart, Betty Matthews, and they were the proud parents of a small child, Michael, age three. A devoted family man, Tom loved fatherhood and made a concerted effort to spend as much time with Michael as possible.

He shared a good relationship with his siblings, especially with Frankie. In many ways, Tom shouldered more of a father's role with Frankie than that of a brother. Before entering the Army and being shipped out to Europe for the war, Frankie had lived with Tom and Betty. Never really living on his own, he relied on Tom for guidance and support.

Tom arrived at work a few minutes late, something he pawned off on his lame leg, another thing for which he could blame his father. He worked in a machine shop as a skilled machinist. His impressive work ethic made him the perfect employee and well liked, but the lack of opportunity for advancement in the small shop frustrated him. Being short on seniority further inhibited his prospects. He yearned to own a business, but lacked the self-confidence, not to mention the financial resources, for such a venture. So he settled for being a dedicated underling.

At lunchtime, Tom walked outside and ate at the picnic table behind the shop. The afternoon sun warmed the chill in the air. He preferred the solitude of eating his lunch alone. It afforded him the opportunity to think about his life. Before lifting his sandwich to his mouth, he bowed his head for a short prayer. While chewing his first bite, he began thinking about his son. Last weekend they'd gone to the park and done a little fishing. The fish weren't biting so he and Michael walked around the lake, enjoying their time together.

This prompted a memory of one particular Saturday afternoon when he was a young boy. His father took him fishing. Tom caught all of the fish and his father didn't catch any. He thought that was great—out-fishing the old man. He later learned that his father was fishing without bait, letting Tom win the bragging rights for the day. That's the kind of dad Jacob was in the earlier years, unselfish and tremendously thoughtful. It brought a slight smile to Tom's face.

In some ways, Tom was conflicted about his feelings for his father because he had some great memories. But then Jacob changed. He became selfish and hard, spending less and less time with the family and more time carousing and drinking with his no-good friends.

I wish things had turned out different, he thought. I would love to have a relationship with Dad. And Michael would have love having a grandfather...if only he hadn't changed so.

Tom occasionally wondered if his father could ever revert back to the man he used to be. After these many years, he doubted it. But to be honest, he never really gave Jacob a chance, too afraid to open his heart, only to have it smashed once again.

About five years earlier, Jacob had actually showed up and asked for a fresh start with him and Frankie—fat chance, as far as Tom was concerned. He told him he'd missed his chance and slammed the door in his face. His father had fooled him before with promises that he'd changed, only to go back to being an irresponsible drunk. Never again would Tom fall for that line. Part of him knew this was wrong. As a Christian man, he realized the importance of forgiveness in his faith. When he sought the advice of his pastor and friends, they told him he should, at least, give his father an opportunity to apologize and see where it went from there. But like his father, Tom had a stubborn streak.

Five o'clock came fast. As Tom packed up his things to go home, Randy Fleming, his best friend and co-worker, approached him.

“Me and some of the boys are stopping off at Mattie’s Pub for a beer or two on the way home. Want to join us?”

“I don’t know,” Tom said. “Betty’s expecting me.”

“Oh, come on, Tom. We won’t be late. Have a beer and a few laughs with us.”

Tom thought for a moment, then agreed to go. Once there his somber mood lifted as he joked with his friends. They began throwing darts, a game at which Tom excelled. After beating his friend, he and Randy returned to their table and let some other guys have their turn.

“How’s Virginia and little Billy?” Tom asked.

“Oh, they’re doing fine. Billy’s really a pistol, though. He’s so excited about the prospect of having a little brother or sister.”

“Well, at least he doesn’t have long to wait. Virginia’s due anytime now, isn’t she?”

Randy nodded and took a drink of beer. “It’s about time for you and Betty to start thinking about a little playmate for Michael, ain’t it?”

“Not on my wages. It’s all I can do to put bread on the table as things are now.”

Suddenly, Tom’s attention focused on a drunkard at the corner table fumbling for a cigarette, swaying unsteadily in his seat. People were laughing at the man as he tried to light his smoke. Randy noticed Tom staring at the man, watching his expression change from one of happiness to pain. He knew what he was thinking. He let Tom sit silently for a moment before saying, “Thinking about your father, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. That’s what he’s probably doing right now, wherever he is—dead drunk and making a fool of himself.”

“What if he’s changed?”

“Oh, not to worry—he hasn’t.”

“You don’t know that, Tom. He’s getting up in years. He may have changed his ways. It’s been a while since you’ve seen him. I know you think about him.”

“I try not to.”

“Come on, Tom. He’s your father.”

“He’s a disgrace.”

“What if he showed up one day and told you he’s changed?”

“I’d probably pitch him out like I’ve done before.”

“You wouldn’t give him a chance?”

“No! Can we change the subject?” Tom said, raising his voice. “Whose side are you on anyway?”

Randy let it drop.

“Let me get us another round,” Randy offered.

Tom’s eyes turned back to the drunk. “No, this is it for me.”

Tom had a healthy respect for alcohol. He usually stopped at one or two drinks, swearing he would never be an alcoholic like his father.

He stayed another five minutes, took the last swig of his beer, then grabbed his coat and headed out the front door of the bar. On the way home he couldn’t stop thinking about the drunk in the corner. It made him wonder about his father and what he might be doing.

Upon arriving home, Michael, his toddler son, ran up to greet him. Tom stooped to pick him up, then kissed Betty. She was beautiful...small boned, sharing many of the same qualities as Tom’s mother: kind, warm, and pleasant to be around.

“How was your day, dear?”

“It was good. I stopped by Mattie’s with Randy and some of the guys after work for a beer.”

“I wondered what was taking you so long to get home.”

“You’re not angry, are you?”

“Oh, no. You deserve time with your friends. How’s Randy doing? Any news about the baby?”

“He’s doing great. Said the baby’s due anytime now.”

“That’s wonderful. Now little Billy will have a playmate.”

“Yeah, if it’s another son...that will be twice the trouble.” He laughed. “I’m starved; what’s for supper?”

“I fixed a meatloaf. Let me put Michael to bed and then we’ll eat.”

Tom took a seat at the table and began thumbing through the newspaper while Betty attended to Michael. The alluring smell of the meatloaf stole his attention. He walked over to the stove, opened the oven door, and inhaled deeply, taking in an unfiltered scent of the dish. Snatching a fork, he bent over the meatloaf, carefully guiding the utensil toward its target.

“Ah-hum,” Betty interrupted.

“Oh...I was just checking it.”

“Sure you were.” She laughed.

“All right...You caught me red-handed.”

“Sit down and I’ll get you a slice in a minute. Do you want mashed potatoes to go with it?”

“What do you think?”

“I thought you would.”

Betty cut off a generous slab of meatloaf and spooned up an extra helping of mashed potatoes, Tom’s favorite. She set the plate in front of him, then fixed a plate for herself before taking her place at the table. They graciously bowed their heads as Tom said the blessing.

“Tom, I was thinking today...Do you ever wish your relationship with your father was better?”

“What made you ask that question?”

“Oh, I don’t know, I just think it would be nice for Michael to have his grandfather in his life, especially since my daddy’s gone.”

“What’s with everybody today...all worried about me and my relationship with my father?”

“What do you mean, Tom?”

“Randy got on me about the same thing at the pub.”

“About your father?”

“Oh, never mind! Let’s just drop it!”

“I’m sorry, dear. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She placed her hands on his to comfort him.

“Look, it just isn’t within me to forgive him. Not right now anyway.”

“It is within your power to forgive. I know he has his faults, but don’t you think it would be good for Michael to know his grandfather?”

“Are you kidding me? I don’t want my son anywhere near that man. He’s a terrible influence.”

“What if he’s changed?”

“You’re talking about the impossible.”

“Miracles happen, you know.”

“Now that would be a miracle.”

“It’s certainly a dream of mine.”

“You know the havoc he’s brought upon me and my family. I would prefer to keep Michael out of my father’s wake of destruction. Let’s talk about something more pleasant.”

“Such as?”

“Such as how beautiful you are.”

Betty smiled.

“Especially when you smile.”

“It’s been a while since you spoke with Emma.”

“I received a letter from her a few days ago.”

“What did she have to say?”

“Everything’s fine in Baltimore. She said she got a letter from Frankie.”

“We got one today, too. I forgot to tell you.”

“Where is it?”

“Here, I’ll get it for you.”

Betty jumped up from the table and retrieved the letter. Setting it down by Tom’s plate, she said, “Read it out loud, will you, please?”

Tom put down his fork. Using his knife, he opened the letter.

Dear Tom and Betty,

I thought I’d write to let you know I’m okay. It is cold over here. Snowed today a little bit. I know I’ve been out of touch for a while, but the Germans keep us pretty busy. Yesterday we kicked their butts in a battle. Two of my buddies were wounded...not badly, but they’ll be out of commission for a while. I’m trying to keep my head down. Maybe this thing will be over soon, but there doesn’t seem like there’s an end in sight. How’s my little Michael? I’ll bet he is growing up fast. I’d love to give him a big hug right now. You know, Tom...I would love for Dad to see me in my uniform. I think he’d be proud of me. I know how you feel about him, but my time over here has made me do a lot of thinking. I’d really like to see him. When I get back, do you think we could work on that? Think about it, will you? I’ll write again as soon as possible. We have a mission tomorrow, and then I’ll be off for a few days. I’ll write then. I love you both.

—Frankie

As he gently placed the letter down on the table, an empty stare occupied Tom’s face. Betty put her hands on his again. A tear rolled down his cheek.

“Maybe God is trying to tell me something...about Dad, I mean.”

“Maybe. Do you think he’s all right?”

“I have no idea.”

“I’m worried about him, Tom.”

“Don’t waste your time worrying about him.”

“Tom!”