To Be Happy

by Riley H. Welcker

It is autumn. Jack is jogging up Bristlecone Pine Trail in Bryce Canyon National Park. He is holding his iPod. White strings dangle from his ears. The trail slithers off the Rainbow Point parking lot, climbing up and down, winding through the trees. A lone, cinnamon-metallic, Ford Edge SUV diminishes behind him. The scent of Douglas fir, juniper, and ponderosa pine is heavy and thick. The smell of rain hangs on the air. Gray clouds converge from the west. The muscles in Jack's legs flex and release. Flex and release.

The trail is easy. He comes here sometimes when he has something heavy on his mind. He knows every rock, every toppled timber, every glade. The familiarity is abounding, reassuring. He passes the heavy wood gazebo. The trail rises, dips, rises again. Near the top, he meets the sixteen-hundred-year-old bristlecone pine, its gnarly, white body twisting in every direction, like a man in agony. Dirt scratches at Jack's Nike running shoes. His chest rises and falls as he lunges upward, his nose forcing the sound of scraping air.

He is perspiring slightly as he reaches the top. The ground levels off. The hoodoos can be seen below the rim now—not some African tribe or Australian aborigine but a red canyon riddled with rock spires, a descending throng of spears.

Jack bends to tighten his laces. His gray sweats stretch from his wrists and ankles. He is in his late forties and considerably good looking. His posture is confident, strong, his muscles hard, well-formed. His eyes are green. Short creases mark either side of his cheeks, a tiny brown mole at the corner of his right. His brows are wiry and thick. A dimple divides his chin. His face is clean shaven. He runs a hand through his thick brown hair as he straightens and walks on, eyes angling across the scenic overlook.

Zion's National Park emerges in the distance, the oranges, reds, and yellows of its quaking aspens scattered among pointed, green pines. His shoes talk on the boardwalk leading to the overlook deck. He rests his elbows on the rail. A newer bristlecone is blocking his view. He glances around him. He is alone.

Gripping the rail with his right hand, he leaps over, briefly sinking into his palm, right hip skimming the wood, and lands nimbly on the slope below. Slowly, carefully, he picks his way over tufts of grass and fallen trunks. The view widens. He crouches, sitting on his heels, elbows wrapped around his knees.

Quiet.

* * *

The Friday before Labor Day, Jack bought a trampoline. His younger brother Dee was driving up from Las Vegas with his wife and three children for the weekend. Dee visited twice each year: Labor Day and Valentine's Day. While Maggie would sit at his oak, five-piece dining table comfortably tucked in the dining room nook and play crossword and jigsaw puzzles, the kids would tear the place apart. For them, it was Disneyland, Six Flags, a Carnival Cruise to Mexico —Jack's house was the place to be. And he took a measure of pride in that fact. He enjoyed the awe and wonder that filled his brother's kids' faces every time

they spilled out of their used Dodge Caravan and gaped at his house.

His little brother was a mechanic, hardworking; Jack was proud of him, truly; but Dee wasn't successful like Jack. Dee didn't have a four day work week, a sharp education, or ownership of a rock solid telemarketing firm. It was Jack's responsibility to be strong, confident, on top of his game. He had to be. He was the older brother. It was his responsibility to lead, to show no fear, to take on the world.

But things were different, now. Jack was different. The trampoline would get the kids off the foosball and air hockey tables in the basement, off the Xbox, off the living room couch, eyes pasted to his 47" Class Razor, Ultra slim HDTV mounted from his Summit Mountain TV stand or squabbling over his choice cast of DVDs: Castaway, Gladiator, Patriot, Saving Private Ryan, Schindler's List, Lord of the Rings—the extended version—Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl, and others he never watched: Bambi. For the kids, that was Jack's reason. He needed to get the kids out of the house. He needed to talk with his brother.

Jack might have had it all, but he wasn't happy. He remembered being a happy child, but he couldn't remember why that was. He remembered a kind and loving home life. Certainly, he couldn't remember any time his parents were cross or cruel. They were always firm, but always loving and kind. Still, he could not think where that peculiar sense of happiness came from. He searched his thoughts and memories. He remembered the faces of the boys from church, the same boys he went to scouts with. Most of them were gone now, and they had long since lost touch. But he remembered them. He remembered family vacations to Snow Canyon, family dinners, and family evenings dropping rocks in the river. He determined that his sensibleness was something he'd inherited from his parents. He was certain of it.

Jack had once been LDS. At nineteen, he went on a church mission to New Zealand and came home as they say, "on fire." He was ready to take on life, school, marriage. He went to Southern Utah University, a college just off the hill from where his house now stands, a college highly praised for its Shakespearean Festival. He studied Business Management there, graduated with honors, and got two minors: one in Drama and the other in English Literature.

It was his classes in English Literature that changed his course. He studied Locke, Rousseau, Existentialism. Eventually, he turned on his former faith in pursuit of a more liberating philosophy. He became an Existentialist. Owing to his heavy work load and newfound associations with the Extravagant-Hat-Wearing, Loose-Mannered theater companies, he just sort of lost track of dating.

He never married. Oh, there were many women who were taken with him. Jack had no problem catching their interest, but one by one they rolled away. Jack simply didn't have the time to pursue a relationship. His mind was on other things: education and money.

He eventually went on to get a mountain of business acumen from the University of Utah.

Then came Jack & Frias. Five years after starting the firm with a fellow M.B.A graduate, his partner pulled out; and Jack assumed full ownership. When that happened, he returned to his home town of Cedar City, Utah, taking his business

with him, and bought a house on Leigh Hill, a rocky knoll peppered with cedar trees on the west side of town. The neighborhood was populated with pompous houses, SUVs, and expensive views of the surrounding valley. The streets twisted through the cedars like strings of black pearls. If you lived on Leigh Hill, you were a cut above. If you lived on Leigh Hill, you had a home theater system in your basement.

But Jack wasn't happy, and he was embarrassed to admit it.

Dee was happy—there was no doubt of that—which was weird. How could a man with a wife and three chaotic children, a jumpy job that barely put beans in their bowls, a man who pulled and slaved every day for a scrap of meat like a husky in the Alaskan Range, a man who could barely afford their rundown minivan, a minivan that miraculously made it 172.3 miles—Jack MapQuested it—between his humble abode and Jack's mansion twice a year, be happy? Happy. Happy. Happy. How? To Jack, it seemed a far greater miracle, if he could believe in miracles.

The issue had been bothering him for some time. His brother was happy, and he was not; but it was his embarrassment of that fact that caused him not to ask his brother the last time he'd come what made him so happy.

And so he fretted about it, rummaged around his house for his racquetball bag, smashed a few humdingers at Gold's Gym, took an afternoon cruise through Dixie National Forest on his Yamaha Roadster, chopped steak with his favorite J.A. Henckels razor knife, snagged an Arrowhead from his chrome fridge; mawed a plate of charred steak, sautéed mushrooms, asparagus, and carrots; and twiddled a text from the remote of his king-sized Sleep Number mattress late into the night, his head buried between six plush pillows, his body rising and sinking, rising and sinking.

* * *

Jack stares at the rock formations rippling in the distance. The air is crisp and cool. It strikes his face. The wind ruffles his hair. A bird, too small to identify, cuts the expanse. Blue sky is engulfed by gray. Lightning slices the horizon.

He remains there for some time, nothing but trees and mountain climbs to accompany him.

* * *

It was ten o'clock, and Dee and his family would be there any minute. Jack stared in the mirror, his face streaked with shaving cream. Water poured down the drain. A Gillette Fusion, ProGlide Power Razor was pinned between his fist and the bathroom counter. A box of Clairol, Natural Instincts for Men, was open on the top of the mirror box; inside the open mirror box, a Crest Cross Action Pro-health toothbrush, a tube of Pro-health toothpaste, and a bottle of Pro-health wintergreen mouth wash.

He snagged the red towel hanging on the rack behind him, scrubbed his face, and put it neatly back. He slid the shower curtain shut, the silver hooks clanking across the top of the glass shower door as a print of Mount Timpanogos opened on the bathroom. It was a strange arrangement, but he had to cover the shower door in some way. What if one of the kids—or Maggie—should walk in on him when he was being blasted by his blessed chrome-handled, Echo-Performance

showerhead?

Jack imagined the surprise that would certainly attack their faces. He imagined the surprise that would attack his own face. He could do without an incident like that. After all, Dee's family was LDS. It was probably against their religion or something.

He swiveled out of the bathroom and into his room, thrust his arm into a closet stuffed with suits and sport coats, power ties, starched collared shirts, and snazzy jeans. Rows of Nikes, Dockers, and polished boots lined the floor beneath him. He threw his clothes on the bed and rummaged around the drawers of his vanity, dug through unopened packages of socks, Dickie's sweats, and Calvin Klein underwear. When he found the socks he was looking for, he quickly fitted up, tore open the bag, and tossed the remaining socks on a mahogany dresser beside a collection of rocks and baseball cards.

The doorbell chimed. Jack popped down the stairs, wearing a navy blue sports jacket with a yellow, collared shirt, unbuttoned at the top, a brown belt, Lucky Brand jeans, and dark brown Dockers. A gold band glinted from his right ring finger. Old Spice aftershave trailed after him. He tapped his Verizon Revolution with his thumb, shoved it in his pocket, and threw open the door.

Dee stood in the frame, bags and all. He looked much like Jack, only an inch shorter; and his hair was gray.

"Come on in." Jack smiled. "Let me help you there." He hefted half of Dee's luggage over his shoulder and trudged down the entry. He swung his elbow, adjusting the bag's weight. The lower chandelier crystals jiggled above their heads. "You know you should really get some roller bags. Save you a lot of energy."

"Could, if we could afford it."

Jack turned around, his eyes on his brother. "Buy you some for Christmas, what do you say?"

"You don't have to go offering us presents. We'll do just fine. Come here and give me a hug."

"No, I mean it," Jack squeaked in his brother's arms.

"How have you been?" Dee asked.

"Good, good. How was the drive down?"

"Long."

Dee had hardly replied when an eleven-year-old boy raced by them, scraping his bag across the wall, followed closely by a nine-year-old boy and a six-year-old girl. They darted into the living room and snatched the DVDs, dotted the broad bay windows with finger and nose prints, touched every piece of furniture, and scrambled for the stairs.

"I get room on the left," the eleven-year-old said.

“No, I get it,” the nine-year-old replied. “You got it last time.”

“Ammon, Paul, get back here and give your uncle a hug. Say hello.”

Jack was beaming. “How ‘bout you both take the one on the left,” he said, grappling them both at the same time. “I put the weight set in the fourth room next to mine. That only leaves the room on the left unless you want to sleep in the basement.”

“Can we?” Paul asked.

“No, you cannot,” Dee said. (Paul frowned) “Where is your mother? Is she still out there?” he asked, stretching his neck in the direction of the open front door.

“It’s all right. She’ll be along,” Jack said.

“Haven’t you got anything else besides Bambi?” the six-year-old asked as the older two fought each other up the stairs. “Bambi’s a boy’s movie.”

Jack pointed at an office desk through the glass doors off the living room. A stack of movies littered a mountain of National Geographic magazines: Bratz, The Movie; Girls Just Want to Have Fun; Barbie: Princess Charm School; Disney Princess: Enchanted Journey.

“Ooh!”

“Gracie, come over here and give your uncle a hug.”

“It’s OK. Let ‘em have fun. They’ll settle down.”

Dee raised his eyebrows.

“You’re not watching anything older than rated G,” Maggie said, lumbering through the front door and lugging her bags down the hall. “You hear me? You’re too young. —Hi, Jack. How are you?” They touched cheeks at a stretch.

“Good. Dee said the drive was just great.”

Maggie rolled her eyes. “I’ll get lunch started.”

“I was thinking we might go to Chuck-a-Rama,” Jack said.

“Another forty minute drive? I don’t think so.” Maggie laughed and pointed in every direction of the house. “I’ll just pop down to Wal-Mart.”

“Cupboards are stuffed,” Jack said. “If you’re not up for going out, we’ll stay in. Fix whatever fits your fancy.”

Maggie disappeared into the kitchen.

“A trampoline!” Gracie screamed. Footsteps thundered down the stairs and slapped the stone-tiled entry. Ammon and Paul were a tangle of arms through the hallway, across the living room, and out the back door.

“Take a load off,” Jack said, dropping Dee’s bag in a corner.

Dee crossed the home dynamics area rug that was spread across the hardwood floor as if he was stepping through a thistle patch and trying to avoid every prick. “Butt hurts,” he said, his cheeks smashing his lids shut.

Jack laughed aloud and slapped him over the back of the shoulder. “Good to have you here.”

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At last, Jack rises and shakes out his legs. He lifts his foot and plucks at his sock, stumbles, throws out a hand, and steadies himself against a dead log that shoots from the slope at a sharp angle. He picks a rock from his shoe and tosses it aside and turns around, curling into the hill, heels stretched, clutching at the deadwood like a walking stick. He springs upward using the log’s certain strength to accelerate his forward movement.

The earth rips. Dirt ejects around his feet. His elbow slackens as the log slams against the slope. The sound punches his left ear and leaps away into the trees. The trees ascend above him. Jack is falling. He glances behind, throws out a hand, and skids down the hill on his back. Rocks grasp at his clothes. Dirt skitters between his skin and shirt. Grass switches his ear. His arm is dragged under his weight. The log is tumbling after him.

He grunts, his face tightening, and rolls sideways. This throws him into a spin. Earth and sky are swirling around him. He catches grass, and his feet jerk beneath him. He is falling feet first and fights off the log as they race downward.

The ground disappears. He grabs at thin air, wide-eyed, feet flailing. The ground reaches to catch him. His body bounces on the grade and plunges into a dirt pocket, a shallow bowl. As the log rolls over him, it snags the end of the dirt pocket, pinning his calf.

When Jack wakes, he is lying on his back, tucked under the log, his chin crammed against his collarbone. He prods and grips his body, his arm, his ribs, his legs. His sleeve is torn from shoulder to elbow. Red dirt streaks his tricep. His chest expands and contracts.

He lifts a piece of plastic. His iPod is smashed, its white grooves riddled with red dirt. One of the buds is still in his ear; the other, broken in half, its cord wrapped around his neck. Red and white dirt walls rise around him on either side. Small stones click, tumble, and clatter into his shoulder. The sky is blackening above him behind the log, which is gray, knotted, swirling, its brown roots a contorted tangle of claws hovering over his face. A red beetle crawls from a crack and zips past his nose.

He scratches his nose with the pit of his elbow, spreading dirt across his mouth like blood. He coughs. A dirt cloud settles on his cheek. Termites filter from the wood above his face. He places both palms on the log. The log is hard, unyielding. His arms shake. Veins bulge in his neck and forehead. The log doesn’t move. He exhales and pushes again, his face twisted, his teeth clenched.

Arms drop. He takes in the smell of rotting wood and dirt and rain and wishes this had never happened. How did this happen? How did he sink this low? He

regrets his life. He regrets his choices. He regrets not asking his brother the question when he had the chance.

* * *

On Sunday, Dee and his family were up and gone by eight-thirty and didn't come back until after twelve in the afternoon. When Jack finally got up, he sat on the couch in his pajamas, glanced around the empty house, and frowned—the clock ticking away the hours on the wall behind him. He couldn't think where it was they had gone. It couldn't be Church. Who could sit through a meeting that long? With those kids? They must have gone sightseeing. Maybe took a drive up the canyon. Jack thought they should've asked him along. He could have shown them the best places for shooting rifles, the best hikes, or the best scenic drives. When they got back, Jack asked them where they'd been.

Church.

He couldn't believe it, but there they were charging through the house in their white shirts and frilly-flowered dresses, clamoring up the stairs, ripping off their ties. The house was a zoo. Children ran backwards and forwards, left and right, between rooms: the upstairs bedrooms, the kitchen, the basement, the three-car garage, and out the back door. Jack stood and shut the door to the garage, quickly checking to see that none of them had meddled with his Roadster or his tools sprinkled across the back wall or his yellow Champion 4000-watt portable generator hunched like a boulder in the far corner. The children were springing and bounding on the tramp like a busy bunch of bouncing jellybeans.

"They've grown since last time."

"Yes, they have," Dee said. "Honey, won't you join us?"

"I'm doing fine in here," Maggie said, waving her hand in the kitchen entry.

"Puzzles." Dee shook his head and sipped his soda, ice clinking in his glass, and sank into the cushions of Jack's Callidora dark brown leather sofa.

Jack settled into his favorite corner. "Least she's found something she likes to do. Would you want to be forced in on woman-talk?"

"I get it all the time," Dee replied in the middle of a swallow and brushed off the shiny droplets on his shirt. "Mother-in-law."

"Wouldn't know. Never had one. Is it bad?"

"You have no idea," Dee mouthed.

"How are Mom and Dad?"

"Thought you'd know better than I would."

"I don't get down to St. George much."

"They've got new callings."

Jack nodded, not understanding.

“They serve in the nursery on Sunday.”

Jack’s brows arched.

“They’re enjoying it.”

“And you? What are you up to these days?”

“Nothing new.”

Jack noticed his brother’s hands. His fingernails were black with grease. Grease blotted his knuckles and penned the cracks in his palms—wiped grease, permanent grease, as if he had just gotten out of the shop. They weren’t much to look at, but they were strong hands. They were happy hands.

“How about those Democrats?”

“Huh?” Jack asked.

“Making a real mess of the country, that Nancy Reed and Harry Pelosi.”

Jack laughed in spite of himself. That was always Dee’s way. He always made a splendid mess of names. He probably didn’t even know he’d said it that way.

“Thought we were making history when we elected that Obama character. We made history all right, history of economic disaster.”

“I’m just sorry that I voted for him.”

“You should be.”

“Ah, well, we all make mistakes. But how about those Republicans, now? They aren’t much better.”

“You’re right. Oh, they never do anything. Democrats actively make a mess of this country, and Republicans just stand back and watch. Things are real bad in Vegas. House prices have dropped over thirty-five percent.”

“That much?”

“Everybody’s hurting. Everybody’s hurting real bad.”

“How are you holding up?”

“We’re hanging in there, like always.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

Sorry that you’re poor and I’m rich. Jack wanted to say it, but he couldn’t get it passed his lips. And if he had been able to say it, he would have added: sorry that you’re happy and I’m not. But he couldn’t bring himself to say that either. He

couldn't bring himself to say anything. So he just sat there, glanced out the window, avoiding his brother's eyes. Here he was driving a Ford Edge SUV and Dee's wife was buying her pants at Goodwill.

But they looked happy. It was a puzzle of greater perplexity than the 5,000-pieces stack he'd left on the table for Maggie. And there sat Dee on his couch with little jewels in his glass, a dribble stain on his Hawaiian-flowered shirt, looking as pathetic as any grown man could, but his face was glowing. Light radiated from his eyes. It was as if Dee was light. Light was Dee. He couldn't tell. It was all the same. It was the look of happiness.

Jack stood abruptly. He paced the living room floor.

"Is something wrong?" Dee asked.

Jack ran his hand through his hair. He wanted to hit Dee. Beat the happiness out of him. Squeeze it from his face. How could he dare admit that he wasn't happy? How could he? Admitting he wasn't happy to Dee's face would be to admit that every choice in his life had been the wrong one, that every choice in Dee's life had been the right one. It was humiliating and not all the HDTVs and posh couches could change that. Jack smacked the wall. He gripped the corner.

All he had to do was ask. Just ask Dee what it was—what made him so happy. But he couldn't do it, not for all the pro-gyms and scenic drives and razorback trails that Southern Utah could offer.

A door opened and slammed. Happy children burst upon the living room and danced around the couch and piled on their happy father. Their mother was happy at her puzzles; and in a few moments, she'd bring dinner in for all of them, smiling brightly, light rings swirling around her face. Happy.

Jack turned away.

"Can we watch a movie, Dad? Can we? Can we?"

"Shhh. Your uncle Jack and I were talking."

"No, it's all right," Jack said, shaking his head. He straightened. "Why don't we take this outside?"

"Sure, Jack." Dee set his glass aside on the coffee table and followed him out of the living room. Ammon was already inserting Gladiator.

"No rated-R movies," Maggie said, poking her head through the kitchen entry. Jack opened the front door. Dee passed him through the frame. Jack glanced back at the children happily bouncing from the couch cushions. The door snapped shut behind him.

From the outside, his house had a sharp-slanted, gable roof at three different angles, the main roof pierced by two dormers. A strong covered front deck filled the breadth of the front of the house. The walls were patterned with brick and stucco. It was a beautiful house. His mail box at the end of the driveway read: Strong—in bold black letters.

More than anything, Jack wanted to ask his brother what made him so happy. But he couldn't look weak, not in front of Dee. Instead, he simply asked, "Will you

help me plant some seeds?”

“Where?”

“The rock bed. I’ve been meaning to change the scenery. Just haven’t found the courage to do it yet.”

“Where are you going to put the rocks?”

“I’ll find a place. We’ll just move them to the side for now. What do you say?”

“What are you planting?”

“Daisies. Got a bag in the garage.” Jack slipped between his SUV and his brother’s minivan. His fist bulged in his pocket like a stone. His SUV chirped. He opened the door and clicked a white button strapped to the driver-side visor. The garage door opened.

When Jack returned, Dee was already on his knees, shifting the stones away with ease. Jack knelt beside him with the bag of seed in his hand. The seeds shook like pieces in a puzzle box as the bag plopped on the stones.

“You sure you want to get your hands dirty?” Dee nodded.

Jack noticed his own hands. They were clean, no blisters, no scars, his nails immaculate; but somehow, they looked old, worn out. He turned them over and squeezed his fingers rapidly. “No,” he said. “But if I don’t do it now, I don’t know if I’ll ever do it.”

Perhaps it was because they had been there so long or that he was so used to the way the bed looked or that it was upsetting the balance of the yard he knew so well and had become so comfortable with that it took him such a concentrated amount of effort, strength, and stamina to pluck those smooth river rocks from their places; for it seemed to Jack that each gray rock he grasped felt as heavy as a boulder in his hand.

He seized one, then another. Within a few minutes, he was sweating. He wiped his forehead. Stones piled beside his knee. Eventually, a heavy, thick layer of black paper was torn and peeled away. Jack stared. He was kneeling in the soil —deep, rich, black soil. He remembered it well. It was the dirt he put there in the beginning intending to plant garden shrubs and daisies but had ultimately convinced himself that it was probably better that he didn’t have garden plants, that maybe they would be too difficult to maintain. Rock beds took less work, and they were always in style. But now he stared at that deep, rich, black earth. He sank his hands into it, rummaged around in it like a child, squeezed it, and exhaled.

When he snagged the bag of sparkling seeds, he noticed soil like black rivers in the lines of his palms, soil crammed under his fingernails. They looked like his brother’s. He drew a handful of seeds and pressed them into the earth one by one, enjoying the feel of soft soil billowing between his fingers, working into his cuticles and the wrinkles in his knuckles.

It felt good.

* * *

Jack is lying in his dirt pit. He is contemplating death. His worst fear: to lose a limb and live. The air sucks and gushes through his nose. It is the only sound. Termites squirm and swell across the smooth surface of the wood beside his face. He turns his nose against the dirt. His muscles flex. His chest convulses. His lids squeeze shut.

A drop strikes his cheek. He tilts his head back, hair scraping the dirt, eyes darting to the sky; and another flicks his cornea. He blinks and squints back the drops that bounce on his face. The woods above him pop and crackle. Tiny mushroom clouds multiply around his head.

Rain dribbles from the sky. It gets into his ears. It runs in rills down the back of his neck. He listens to the rain, his chin twitching. Before long, the ground slithers and bleeds with mud. It writhes around him. It strokes his elbows.

Gray sheets shatter the ground. Mud swells and oozes.

The log's unbroken limbs all point to the sky. Jack thrusts his palms against the log, smashing termites, and bows his head, lips moving. His hair quivers, teeth clench, veins bulge, muscles shake—his face a mixture of contorted force, his body bent to task. The log budges, unpinning his leg.

Jack collapses on his back, his chest rising and falling. He looks up. The clouds begin to break. They are rimmed with light. Droplets glitter like a handful of diamonds hurled from the sky.

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