

ETHICATION

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CHAPTER 1

It is said that all roads lead to somewhere we hate, love or can't escape no matter how far off the beaten and familiar path we go. The Upstate city of Promethia, New York was such a place for Jack McMillian,

who was awarded three hard earned Ph.Ds in engineering on as many continents who applied the skills he learned to make earth a safer and more livable planet for more people than he knew, or was supposed to know about all over the world. While touching down to visit 'home' once every ten years or so, feeling to be more of a foreigner with each visit to family, friends and high school teachers who still called Ithaca home. Politely listening to conversations about their shared past which they remembered with more affinity than he did, taking an early exit out of the city each time using a plethora of faked stories about needing to be elsewhere 'yesterday'.

What brought Jack back to the town that called itself '16 square miles of enlightened pragmatism surrounded by reality' wasn't a sick parent in need of healing of body and soul from a self-sacrificing or unconditionally giving adult who once called said parent Mom, Dad or some variation of such. It wasn't the chance to teach engineering at Kornwellis University after he had built innumerable villages in countries whose names were known only by geography undergrads or history majors for refugees the oil companies he worked for made homeless. It wasn't even the chance to come back home to a location where, in the music world anyway, everyone is a king but no one wears a crown. No, it was something else. Dumb luck, or bad luck. As others could see the shit we are about to walk into better than ourselves, Jack didn't know which was the case. But, as a retired structural engineer he wanted to live the second half of his life less 'linearly' than the first half century of his shift on planet earth. And more effective. On his terms and as defined by the Eternities.

Spring came early in Greely, Colorado that year, the grass deciding it would proudly sprout its green tentacles upward, providing a thick layer of gustatory delights for cattle, horses and goats that had grown tired of dining on hay that had become moldy after late winter rains. Mounted on his mule, 'Festus', a six foot tall, moderately but not excessively muscular 65 year old man with grey hair that still covered his larger sized head and eyes as blue as the big sky above him, gazed at the lush pasture below his private observation post overlooking the river. The early snow melt on the mountains had turned that artery which carried the most essential element to the chronically thirsty land into a torrent of rapidly moving water that overshadowed any conversation between man and man, and man and beast, or beast and beast. "A welcomed sight," Jack said, while stroking Festus' neck, feeling the sun melting the crevices on his wrinkled face, the wind blowing his chin length white hair into an even more monstrously mess than it normally presented itself as when not required to be 'professionally presentable'.

"But as we know from the many years we've known each others' souls, too much of a good thing is a bad thing," he continued, stroking his overgrown Fu Manchu mustache recalling the flood four years ago that had turned the bone dry pasture into a muddy field. And the bigger one 10 months ago which had converted the normally dry grassland into a lake with more fish in it than fur bearing mammals. Such had the Bible Thumpers looking for a Noah or trying to be such, employing Jack to advise them as to the best way to build Arcs. Life rafts which would of course to carry only their own families to dry land somewhere else.

But echoing in Jack's head wasn't the bold expression of the river which had converted a winter desert into a lush Spring paradise. Or the snortling of delight Festus exuded when munching on his first meal of real grass after a long winter of hay. No, it was music playing between his ears. A pop tune that was played for him at his birthday party three painful days ago. The Beatles singing 'I heard it's your birthday...' etc. and as part of the real message of the song... 'take a look at yourself'. Which Jack did, thanking his stepdaughter and stepson for giving him a surprise party and NOT inviting his ex-wife, Nadia, to be in attendance. Behind forced smiles and faked laughter at the jokes delivered to him by local friendly acquaintances who still considered him (as he was in many ways) an 'outsider', Jack reflected on a life that was less than stellar according to his metric, made more painful by hearing music from 'the golden times' of his youth and that of his contemporaries, which were not so golden.

But there were some things Jack did that were...right, somehow. Most notably, exiting his comfortable job as an overpaid, overqualified and underworked Government Engineer. A gig he took on to try to change the system from within, in Chicago. Where approval of construction plans for wealthy contractors sailed through the red tape, the aspirations of 'less desirable' contractors, whose accents were not quite American enough, were denied the imprint of the rubber stamp that allowed them to proceed with bringing into the material world their blueprinted visions. A job he took on so he could give Nadia and his step children, who he first encountered as adolescents, a better life in a city where they could have more cultural and professional opportunities than in the (at that time anyway) 'hic backwater town' of Ithaca. Which wound up in divorce due to his being 'married to his work rather than his family', according to Nadia's divorce attorney, therapist and (as it was found out later) Nadia's first cousin, who was the judge. Particularly when Jack resumed his past activities working overseas for even higher pay for oil companies that (as he found out later) had created war zones wherever drilling was successful. And even more so when Jack signed on to work for the United Nations, building living quarters for refugees in need of food, shelter, water and protection from small time thugs who became powerful warlords because of 'unavoidable' wars the oil companies 'inadvertently' created.

Greely, Colorado was as far from Promethia, New York, the oil-rich middle East and Chicago for Jake as the ability of Bob Dylan to sing Verdi operas at the Met. But they all came together when Jake upped the ring tone on his cell phone, finally able to hear a call coming in over the raging river below. And the thunderous voices between his ears of his past life accomplishments and miscalculations, sometimes both of them being the same thing.

"Ok, OK already!" Jack yelled to the screaming mini-cyber demon inside his right front jeans pocket. Being slow on the draw, and knowing that his phone often did not record who had called him, he yelled into the device just as the ten second segment from William Tell Overture was about to hit the last note. "Hello...Don't hang up....Who is this?" he frantically screamed onto the phone which no matter how much he reset it, shut itself off to the caller's voice and identity after 10 seconds.

"Are you John MacMillian?" a more male than female voice at the other end of somewhere inquired in a monotone, serious tone.

"Someone has to be, I suppose," Jack mused, conferring humor to the caller who seemed to be more in need of such than the bone dry valley was in need of water.

"So, you are John MacMillian?" the caller continued, dead serious about something.

"Yes, I am," Jack replied, not recognizing the number. He braced himself for less than optimal news from the caller, taking in a deep breath into his chest that he would hold onto once delivered into the base of his lungs. He didn't know if the caller was a friend, foe or, worse, an official who didn't care anything about who or how Jack was. He scanned the possibilities as to what that news was, and considered the various possibilities regarding the caller's identity. From a 'beautification officer' informing him that the grass on his front lawn in front of his overloaded and uninspected home workshop was overgrown. To someone from Air West saying that his name was entered by his ex-wife into a contest in which he won an all expense paid Hawaiian vacation which the workaholic masochist would be forced to 'enjoy'. To the IRS wanting more details about expenses he claimed on the acreage where he raised cattle and his workshop at home that did work for others in need on the basis of barter rather than traceable cash or bank transfers. The answer to those speculations was worse than any of the above. "I'll hand you over to the Head Nurse now," the caller said.

"Jack," the second caller said, her gender assessed to be female, and caring. "It's your sister, Ann. She was found dead by the lake here in Ithaca with a note that said to contact you first. It was in her pocket. Saying, and I quote, 'if anything happens to me, my brother Jack is the first to be notified. For reasons only he knows, God Bless and Help Him.' She put your phone number on it, and on the collar of her dog, Sidney."

Jack's mental reflexes kicked in, overshadowing the wave of shock penetrating through his chest at hearing the news about his only sibling. Such left him as the only member of his over caring but minimally understanding family left on this side of the dirt. He was about to allow the pain developing in his chest drain the 'thinking juices' in his brain, leading to him losing control of everything. But after a defiant clenching of his teeth and fist, he seized back the steering wheel before sliding into the ditch of helplessness, answering. "Sidney's name is Sidhartha! Not Sidney!"

"Yes, I know," the voice which Jack still could not identify said.

Jack took in a deep breath, attempting to pull in all of the diffusing thoughts and feelings running through and dominating every portion of the cranial vault between his aching ears, and his shivering arms and legs. "Sidhartha, is he ok?" Jack self observed himself asking regarding the only family in his home town he understood, and who he thought understood him.

“He’s ok,” the caller assured Jack, whose identity he still could not identify, this time due to the static on the phone as well as the loud ringing of brain fog between his ears

“And my nephew, Tom?” Jack inquired as his thoughts shuffled at warp speed between agendas of the present and memories of the past, his face breaking out in a cold sweat. “He and his mother were...”

“---Not on the best of terms,” the caller related. Apparently, because the note, written in elegantly written and easily deciphered cursive, she left on Sidney...”

“Siddhartha!” Jack blasted into the phone, pushing the knot of grief in his chest into a fire breathing blast from his mouth rather than a ram rod opening up the tear ducts in his bloodshot eyes.

“Yes,” the caller said after taking in a deep breath reeking of emotional exhaustion. “The note Anney tied to Siddhartha’s collar, and the emergency contact card in her pocket listed only you as her contact .”

“Her name is, or was anyway, ANN! Without an E or a fucking!” Jack blasted at the caller whose attempts to keep forms of address personal made him feel less willing to bond with her. “Who has a husband.”

“An ex-husband,,” the caller informed Jack. “Who is deceased. Two months ago.”

“And a son,” Jack informed the Nurse, wondering how she knew more about his deadbeat, asshole and (because of such) EX-brother in law than he did. “Thomas Smith.”

“Thomas Defoe now,” Jack heard under the static and patchy audio. “Who hung up on us when we tried to contact him, five times. Whose relationship with his mother is apparently...”

“In more need of repair than I thought it was” Jack surmised and stated, gaining control of his logical mind rather than being a prisoner to his limbic lobe. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Sooner than as soon as you can would be better, Mister MacMillian,” she said. “Please, Jack!” she continued, her voice sounding painfully familiar, after which she hung up. Indeed it was Carla Ellison. Someone who Jack had had ‘history’ with. Along with many others in Ithaca he had history, and unfinished business with. The list too large and painful to recall with regard to specifics.