

A rebellious teenager, Jake, escapes his tormentor by entering a Catholic seminary. His hilarious coming of age antics gives way to a profound awakening where he considers giving up his dream job for the priesthood. When a girl enters his life, he pleads with God for guidance, and...

Jake - The Prodigal Son

by Jake Winston

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JAKE THE PRODIGAL SON

PARSONS
11/18/2010

JAKE WINSTON

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This is based a true story. The names of the characters have been changed and any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author. The author has taken some liberties with the characters and events in sections one through five to enhance readability and flow. Section six, which deals with Miracles and Near-Miracles, depicts the actual events as they occurred.

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THE BELL TOWER

My favorite sport was handball. I was a pretty good player, and I could hold my own with the best of them, but I had to work at it. Finn, who was a natural athlete, was my regular opponent in singles, and my partner when we played doubles. He was good. I seldom beat him, but I kept him on his toes and learned a lot playing with him. After our last class on Monday, we had a couple of hours off until Vespers. I asked Finn, “Do you want a game of handball?”

“Heck, yes.”

We changed and ambled down the hill to the courts. We sat on a log and watched Scooter beat Chubs three straight sets while we waited for a court. It was like watching David beat up on Goliath. As they finished and left the court, we gave Scooter the thumbs-up sign. He just smiled. We ignored Chubs.

It was nearly three-thirty when we finally entered the court. I was determined to beat Finn, who had been kicking my butt for way too long. We did an easy five- minute warm up, and I said, “Okay little man. Are you ready to get your ass kicked?”

“I don’t see anybody around here that could do that. Do you?”

“Let’s get going. We’re running out of time.”

We played three brutal sets, with the lead see-sawing back and forth. There was never more than a point spread. Finn, who was close to the ground and very

quick, could return those tough low shots with little trouble. By comparison, I was a big guy, not as fast as Finn, and it was difficult for me to return some of the low ones. He knew that and played to my weakness. However, my greater height and strength, accompanied by a killer power shot, often gave me the advantage.

Finn won the first set by two points, and there was no way I was going to let him win the next one. I gave it all I had, and a couple of lucky power shots helped me win the second set. We were even in the third set, until the ball careened off the edge of Finn's glove, went high up the wall and took an easy slow bounce right in front of me. I stepped aside, like a bullfighter, and let it go out of bounds. The third game was mine.

When we took a minute to catch our breath, I noticed we had an audience. Four majors, who had just finished playing, were hanging around and seemed to be enjoying watching Finn and I slug it out. Being noticed by Major seminarians was a big deal since the Sulpician House rules dictated that we ignore each other.

When we re-entered the court, Finn's no-nonsense 'let's get this over with attitude' told me that he was embarrassed by not only losing two sets to me but doing so in front of an audience of Majors. As he stepped up to serve, he hesitated and announced in a voice loud enough for all to hear, "Zeke. Let's bet tonight's dessert on this series, okay?"

"Since I am going to whip your ass anyway, let's make it two night's desserts!"

"How about three, Sport?"

"Okay sucker, you're on; serve the damn ball!"

We were both on our game this afternoon, and now our reputations and three desserts were at stake. We were gladiators who had something to prove, and we would show no mercy in this three-wall court that was our coliseum.

We played several long rallies with incredible shots and unbelievable returns. Sweat was pouring off of me and running into my eyes, but I fought on. When the five o'clock bell rang for Vespers, our audience disappeared, but we kept playing. As the sun started to slip below the tree line, we played on. Although it was

becoming hard to see the ball, neither of us was willing to call the game and default on our bet.

By five-thirty, the score was twenty to twenty, and I was just about out of steam. I laid a fast, low shot an inch off the corner and the floor. I knew it was an impossible shot to return, and I had him. Somehow, Finn returned it with an equally difficult shot for me! That wiped the smile off my face; I reversed direction and lunged across the court on my belly and returned it. Despite my heroics, I knew the game was over. I was flat on my stomach as Finn spiked the winning shot at the wall and let out an ear-shattering victory shriek that could have been heard clear up to the bell tower.

We hurried up the hill and quickly changed into our day uniforms. I was nursing a pain in the part of my left hand between my thumb and wrist, which was my sweet spot for whacking that little black ball. After a few hundred returns the glove didn't help much.

When we reported late for Vespers, Scooter who was the monitor that evening noted our flushed and sweaty faces and gave us 'the look', but didn't say anything.

As I was leaving the refectory after dinner, Smokey beckoned me over to the store window, and asked, "Who won?"

"What do you mean, who won? Who won what?"

"Your handball game this afternoon, sport."

"Finn won, by a point. Why do you ask?"

Smokey motioned to a couple of Majors over by the steps, who were watching us. He said, "They have a bet on your game."

I took a closer look, and I recognized them as part of our audience that afternoon. I smiled, and they gave me back a friendly, conspiratorial smile. I told Smokey, "See yah later, Man." I headed for the stairs, and as I passed the two Majors, I said to nobody in particular, "Finn beat me by one point," and I walked out into the Quad to catch up with Brody.

That night about midnight, my mind was racing wildly, and I couldn't sleep. I got up, grabbed a pack of smokes, a can of Millers and made my way up to the bell tower. I needed to make some sense out of my life, understand who I was, and where my life's journey was headed. I would soon be leaving my comfort zone here at St. Edward's and facing the summer of '56 with all the distractions the outside world had to offer a fifteen-year-old adventurous kid.

I had a pretty good idea about whom I was, although I wasn't at all that sure about where my life was going. I was a smart, fun-loving, mischievous kid determined to be the best that I could be at whatever was important to me. I was an achiever, not an over-achiever. I wanted what I wanted, and I was going to get it. I was at St. Edward's hiding out from my abusive father and getting a proper education the only way I knew how. I wasn't proud of this. It was actually pathetic, but that was who I was.

To be honest, I had no idea what my ultimate career choice would be. As long as I could remember, I had wanted to be a world-class builder, and I thought that I still did. However, after two years of living within the cloistered walls of St. Edward Seminary, I was becoming attracted to the religious life. I thought, *I guess I need to keep an open mind and see where this goes.*

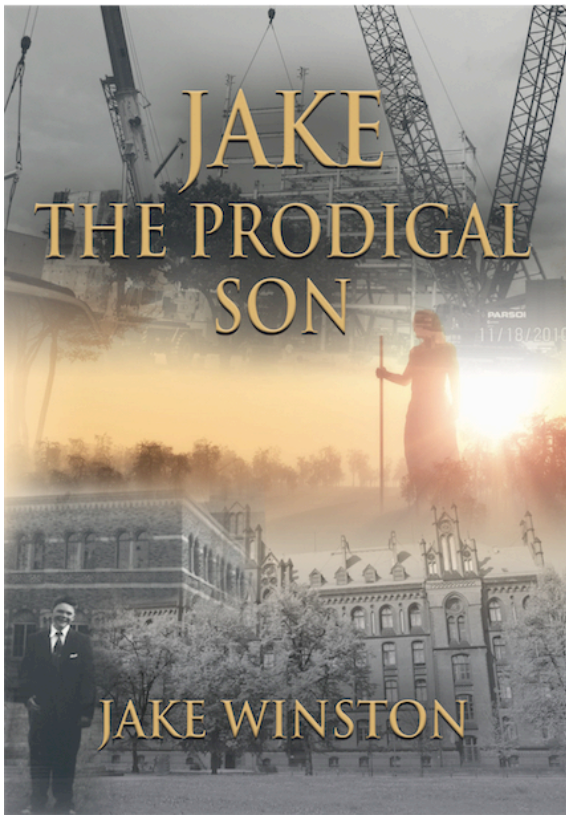
Smokey sent out the word that the last of The Gatherings, this year would be on Sunday. We were to bring all the goodies we had left. It was going to be a blowout. Even though I was an eager participant in many of the early events, my confrontation with Chubs pretty much put an end to my participation in The Gatherings, and it had been a while since I had attended one. I decided I would show up for the last one of the year and have a farewell drink with my fellow rebels.

After lunch, I left the building and headed for the Gym. If Chubs or Ichabod were watching me, they would assume I was there for a game. I entered the

building, and immediately exited through the side door and slipped into the woods and disappeared. Fifteen minutes later, as I neared The Gathering Place, I came across Billy Wilson. He waved as I passed him and whispered something into a cheap walkie-talkie. I guessed that Smokey had him standing guard, and that was not a good omen.

When I entered the shack, I counted eight seminarians perched on the bench puffing on cigarettes. Smokey was standing at the table loaded down with all kinds of stuff, from canned peaches and cookies to a couple of half-empty whiskey bottles. He was pontificating about how unfair it was that we, the church's future priests, had to hide in the woods like fugitives to speak our minds, enjoy a drink and a smoke with friends. He lamented that our teenage counterparts in the outside world did so routinely without recrimination.

I helped myself to a smoke and a shot of whiskey and listened to Smokey's rant. I had outgrown this crap, and the reward was no longer worth the risk. I interrupted Smokey's rant, and said, "I have something to say." I freshened everybody's drink, raised my paper cup and said, "I propose a toast to the noble concepts of questioning authority, embracing the real world that we live in, and to friendship. I have mastered that doctrine, and I'm moving on. It's been a hoot, thanks for the memories, farewell my good friends, and God bless." I swallowed my shot, turned on my heels, and walked out the door for the last time.



A rebellious teenager, Jake, escapes his tormentor by entering a Catholic seminary. His hilarious coming of age antics gives way to a profound awakening where he considers giving up his dream job for the priesthood. When a girl enters his life, he pleads with God for guidance, and...

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