

Falling-down Jack, a Study

By Tom Sheehan

Early evening light, what was left of it, spilled near Jack Winters in his one lone room in the big house, a house once flaunting and imposing in its stance, now cluttered like an old shed forgotten in a back lot, debris its main décor. Despite his reputation as the town drunk, a ne'er-do-well from the first day, an inveterate crank, there had been an instant and subtle attraction between me and the old codger, an attraction without early explanation.

At the moment substantial shadows played around him, a host of them ready to take him in some rude and final manner; and no shadow around him ever bore much compassion, not to the alert of eye. It seemed, from my vantage at one of his windows, the north one, that light was seeking him out--and grasping, once it had him, something still warm in October's dying days. It was as if embers of anything were important: particles of light; pieces of moving air; slight jerking of his left knee as he knelt before the cotton-sheathed bed. In the middle of the bed catching parts of light, the latent day, was an empty bottle throwing back similar silver and gold on the loose, the way precious coins flatter themselves.

All of this came up to me in its quick shot as one supplicating god kneeling before another supplicating god, light-seeking, light-giving, emanations worthy of a thing grander than I could imagine, and at the same time powerfully sad, so sad it could choke you, a crushing taking place.

The crèche scene, an unknown metaphor to me then, was working its way in the back of my mind, drawing distal parts together, making alignments long before the legions of metaphors would put on their spurs and ride rampant on me.

On that October evening I was seven years old. Three of my years had been spent watching the old man in the old gray house on the next corner, from whatever vantage I could find. There had been, early in the scheme of things, the front porch or the front steps of our house. In turn there came the edge of the lawn, widening out to the roadside, which was early adventure's abrupt perimeter; then, a familiar trip to the corner in my fifth year where the dark green sentinel of the mail box was located; and finally the long, cold-hot, sometimes-green, sometimes-white path to school. All of this was my social laboratory, and Jack Winters a unique specimen or subject for that laboratory.

Falling-down Jack we called him, barnacled if I can say it, red-faced, slightly bearded, and all silence once the whiskey's stubborn and lengthy acquisition had passed its purchase. But he was somehow warm to me, pulling at me, a magnet I did not know was forever in place. This draw made me slink around in the near darkness on countless nights (alone and never with Richie or Wally or even my brother who might have been the only one to understand if I had been caught at the glass) to watch Falling-down Jack in the one room of his house that still had windows in it. Even then it was my young desire to see his clock works, his interminable ticking, what made a man like him go.

Oh, we had knocked out our share of the other window panes, six-over-six in that old Colonial pattern most of the other houses had, all of us from Central Street and the lane and the cul-de-sac. But the one room of his stupor and his sleep was off limits, though none of us ever said so. Even then I thought an element of fairness existed, a sense of fair play so honorable in its small passage and so acute it would never be trespassed upon. Drunks too had inviolable rights, prone or upright. My small world, our small world, could make its own share of profound statements.

The world is. I am here.

I'm past seventy now and some of his attributes, indeed some of his mean appearances and characteristics (remembered only by me, I swear) are mine. Now I am red faced, the wide and round face both heather and hawthorn have leaned on, the taste built into my throat as if a dry flume waits impatiently for its sides to be wetted, the small and constantly memorable bubble of joy at the roof of mouth when the first swallow rises over that tongued arch and flows coolness and heat and companionship down that tortured passage. Too, I have my silences. Some of them are like the long times he spent in that single room, a cell in sunlight or darkness, such as the hour just before dawn when a single bird's cry, the first one looping out of still darkness, finds you ready and waiting for what's on the line for the day.

I can tell you it's been near seventy years' contemplation of that Scotsman who came one day to his just-dead sister's house (Clarie was her name and all we knew of her, according to my mother). The two main doors he closed off with the permanent clutch of six-inch spikes driven with a vengeance I measured all the way from my front steps (the sun flashed off the peen as strong as semaphores). Then he drew down the curtains on all windows of the other seven rooms, as if shame were being hidden from view. That first evening he drank away, to its

oblivion, as much a signal to the neighborhood as one could imagine. On the following days and weeks and months he collected a fair menagerie of likewise friends. Eventually, as if clearing the stages of his life, he passed them off on the world and began occasional retreats into the small redan of his room.

Some people in the neighborhood thought him a balled fist waiting to be thrown, so few of them came into punching range. “He’d as soon as rap you as look at you,” I heard the mailman say to old Kosko one day.

It’s uncanny now, years later, how the light re-appears, the light that was in his room the night he knelt before his empty god, empty except for light answering some other light, though there was no coming from or going to. It was mythical then, is mythical now. The grasping and touching of light is one I’ve never been sure of, the meekest of light falling on the cotton-sheathed bed with the Xs of flour contents faded away thin and pale as two-cent postage stamps I once paid attention to. Prisms, wherever they end up, whatever their inversion, have a way of channeling light.

That fractured illumination fell about his head, pointed out each devilish scar’s waddle, cast shadow across skin more broken up than the lunar surface. If I tried to squander some of that light I’d not be able to put it aside, I’m sure. Now it is an aura in its entirety and must have been designed for such countenance in the very beginning, long before Falling-down Jack came our way, before imagination began its long walk with me, before three hard years of my young life were gathered, as it were, in one hand and dealt this great desire to study another person, to my parents’ utter consternation.

“You keep your fool self away from Jack Winters’ house or he’ll steal off with you some night.”

My mother had been the first to say anything, smiling at me a half tone, her head barely shaking in the lightest act of disgust she could muster. That moment passed, the threat passed from her mind, the occasion moving into the meager parcels of history she would only stir up at gala family events when telling all seemed to lighten family chains, when sharing was positive bonding. To her, as to many people of Saxon, Jack Winters was really no more than an oddity in our lives, in our neighborhood. Safety in her mind was the fact there were no rapes, no kidnappings, no child molesting, and no breaking and entering in the nighttime, at least not in our part of Saxon. We were back up from the river, the sea-borne river’s tide never touching us,

or the horrors of the world, where small gardens and lawns and grassy fields spelled silence and a quiet guardianship between houses. Our Saxon, to her, was inviolate; children, its chief commodities, never bothered.

My father had a different mindset, as you might guess. “What weighs on one end must be balanced on the other.” I can remember him saying that marriages, good ones, absorbed all of that demand, and he also said, “You can look all you want, young man. At the way he limps, at the ugly set of his mouth most days of the week, at the misery that flows about him sure as you’re breathing. But don’t ever step across the threshold of that house.” He didn’t wag his finger, but looked me straight in the eye. Commanding was that look.

As it was, his signal working, he had paused then, assuring me that an announcement was coming. I can remember it as clearly as if he’d just walked in from the other room. In the most serious voice I had ever heard, even in admonition, he said, “Somehow we both realize he looks like the grandfather you never saw past your first year, and I freely admit the mystery of that recollection. I think I know the great draw that’s been put on you and not on others,” those others he didn’t have to name. “If there’s a piece of that light left in your brain, a shadow of that old face, a grimace or a grin or one wild look from the monster John Barleycorn he carried as his own baggage, I can understand. If you’ve found something in the air that sets him apart from everybody else hereabouts, I can understand. He’s odd, we know. But he’s hurt no one, even in his bad dreams when he’s being chased or little folk sit in his shadows cool as embers left over from a bad night.”

In that serious vein he had blessed my small campaign. Later I suspected he had traveled somewhat the same road, seeking answers along the way, questioning as much as anybody else did his own recollection of occasional horrors.

How many times I have struggled to bring back the first sight of Jack Winters, coming toward me hidden in the bushes from my pals along the edge of the canal, I cannot tell you. But come he did, as loud and as vibrant as any man I’d seen on that rude path or anywhere else. His voice rang out as brilliantly pure as a tenor on stage, and just as unintelligible to me, words and rushes of sound whose meanings I could not begin to guess. He gave off long woeful cries that struck like nails in soft places (cries whose pain I can still bring back on my clearest days). Also, sudden beauties of notes any stage would shake with, soaring notes that followed those awful nails into my ears, high rising, majesties of another level, echoes as firm now as then in

their grip, then low guttural demands as if a beast of awed proportions shared his skin.

“DOMINAE!” he screamed or yelled or sang. An echo for all times. “DOMINAE!”

I was captured! At first by the sound, then by brazen details rushing into my eyes, details that fixed themselves into permanent niches of my mind. thick gray hair he had the smallest wind talked into, a face nearly purple and crazed with lumps and scars, eyes red as a cardinal bird I’d seen that very morning. His small chin-point beard was as dirty as the town dump. His khaki shirt was tight at the collar (character-building the way only a mannequin would be grasped). A striped suit coat comfortable as bedclothes sat on his shoulders, the kind Rip Van Winkle slept in. I swore his boots had climbed distant mountains or other azure. At his sides his hands, huge hands, powerful hands, worked at squeezing the sense out of air. One thumb, the left one, lay splayed twice as wide as it ought to be (a blacksmith must have tended it with a hot hammer). And that fateful aroma coming at me, on a sheet of air at first, and then purely by its voluptuousness, its triggered volume, ripe fruit at the core, sweet and pear-like and syrupy. Bright crimson cherries carried in the mix, nectarines or limes like beggars hiding just around the corner, green and yellow melons tossed in at random, and finally, as if to top it all off, an edge of peach cutting through all the mix to throw its signature out front.

Immediately I thought of the contrast---he should smell as foul as he looked. I should be sucking my gut back down my throat through which it ought to be passing at any moment in abrupt stages. But the air about him was fruit-sweet, perhaps too thick and too syrupy, but fruit-sweet, and then my mind, triggered again by a message on the air, plunged for recognition. To this moment of this clear day I am aware of how minor mechanics within me were appointed and discharged in a quick plunge into my short history, scratching for identity, scratching for recall, scratching for a face or a body or a name. It was one I didn’t know at first but would know for the striking, left back in the entrails of thought, perhaps an identity squandered in a dim corridor. I could have screamed, because I knew it was there, behind a corner, just inside some thin cover of gray matter’s secrets, my mind holding back from me, teasing me, trying me out.

“DOMINAE!” he screamed or sang again just as he passed by my cover of brush hide-and-seeking me from my brother and friends, just as the fruit came stronger that it would ever again in any encounter. And almost unholy was that cry, but dared not to be. It might have been an imploration, an expulsion, a plea and a curse in one breath, able to rough itself into leaf and limb all around us, an act in itself.

“DOMINAE!” At least, that’s what I thought he yelled, though I’ve surely put some effort over the years into the spelling of that cry. I’ve never known what it was, what passed from his lips, his mouth, his throat, and most certainly, from his soul. Probably it was the most honest sound I have ever heard in all my life. I never heard it again, though, no matter how many times I crouched by his window or heard him coming down the canal path from town or wherever he had been. There had been but that unearthly cry up into leaves and limbs and the far-off blue or darkening sky, a soul rising. “DOMINAE!”

Even within the fruited air at full tilt, and the dense brush at my eyes, my heart shaking its hammer inside my flattened chest, I could not help but pull more parts of him together, as if he were a time puzzle and I had but minutes to gather the millennium. Rough as junk was he, drum-like and thick, pushing exorbitantly at the one button of his jacket. I thought of barrel staves girding just under cover, stout oak, holding in, stiff, rigid, volume-grasping, formed not by the outer but by the inner.

Instinctively, within the fruited atmosphere and the body electric and the royalty of his voice, came something I already knew---though under cover, or disguised, or coming at me from an odd tangent. That knowledge spilled itself at my feet, pooled, then flowed up into me, warm, slow-rising, taking care not to frighten me, as if reins tethered its climb; it was temptation and reach, it was touch and acceptance. I held my breath, and the millennium passed. While that breath was held, while it coiled its harsh wonder in my chest and allowed itself to be separated for recognition some near seventy years later, as if it were now just doing its final dance, strong urges and requirements had fallen into place. Days later, still spelled and caught up in the newness and its necessities, I began to take notes on the Scotsman, The Town Drunk, The Dread Baritone---sheaves of information scratched and scrawled at any moment of sight, drawers of notes the years gave growth to. I knew when Jack Winters left the house, every time out. How long he’d be gone. What he wore in all weather. Could predict the reappearance of a khaki shirt or a purple wool sweater that must have had a thousand lives (and cranked up admiration for the sheep from which it had been scored). And pegged to the hour Friday night’s return down the canal path.

In one quick decision, and much concentration, I had become expert at something. The relationship was intractable.

More than once in those tender years, in that blood-seeking quest, that absolute need

for patriarchal warmth and acceptance, I stood between Jack Winters and his mortality. All four or so feet of me did it; calling my father on a very sharp November evening, night coming heartily on from Montreal and the Maritimes, when I ventured up the path that Jack was late coming down. I found him cold and fetal and near bare of breath (though the sweet-fruitiness still had a clutching but cumbersome hand on him), under a bush whose blanket he must have sought. My father called three neighbors, burly ones at that, and they carried him to his room, wrapped him, dropped him on his bed, cranked on the man-killer kerosene stove sitting in the middle of the room like an Easter Island stone infant.

On my first visit, of course, I reacted to the room. He had no books but a Bible shimmed under a lamp on a small table. A dozen empty bottles (green and brown and crystal) were scattered like candlepins and blazoned with rainbows of wax. A blue insignia metal can without a cover that crackers belonged in sat in a corner. There was an icebox with its oaken door hanging by little more than one untidy hinge so you could see the gray rind on its oxidized corrugated inner surface. A whole wall surface showed where pain and loneliness wore themselves into its pale yellow expanse camouflaged with black and OD green, like Army canvas hiding targets. Beneath my shoes the floor felt more of yard and less of house, with sounds in mutual support of that argument. But there was no stench, not a whiff of it, and one look said we ought to be assailed at any moment by such threat. Our trespass did not seem approved despite the mission done. We had infiltrated another man's domain. The exit was quick.

I dwelt a long time on the room that came away with me, and made its way into my notes, before the sun had risen over Saxon. . Sketches of its boundaries and its contents rose on paper tucked in the back side of my notebook, the then current one, Number Three of my travels with Jack Winters. None of the burly lifters saw the godhead abed, only the faded legend on the surface, veneer of another use, another occupation, when they placed Jack Winters down on it. More than once I've already told you I'd seen an empty bottle embedded there, crèche of all the crèches, a passion play acted out and I was the known audience, the lone pursuer.

Frankly, I don't think any of the men, including my father, saw much in or of the room, visible parts that tell so little, invisible parts that tell so much. Such information could practically spill all over you like unwanted company. But it had escaped all of them, my father too, who kept

his eyes on my alertness. There was exhibited a need to be out of there, to not be contaminated by whatever had held this place together as long as it had. Strengths are not easily recognized.

The second time I stepped out in front for his mortality was the Halloween Night, cold as a drawn dagger, star-lit, an evening star almost shouting it hung so low on the horizon. Airy signs coming with the messages of our mouths, when the gathered clan of us neighborhood toughs (as we sometimes liked to think of ourselves, though we'd not readily admit as much) dared speak of burning down Jack Winters' house. My brother was all for it, seeing an end perhaps of the attention paid to my attention, my mission. His voice did not quiver once, cool as judge without a trial, but his feet moved, little shifts on the coarse gravel, not a dance, mind you, but talking, a penchant I'd noticed too many times to ignore. "They'd hum about it all winter," he said, "everyone would. It's a dump anyway. We all know that. Know about him all the way over to Randsville, they do, our most famous citizen." He snickered to mark his stance and shifted his feet a little more, more punctuation. "He'd only have to go someplace else. Over there, or maybe the place he came from. Right now he won't be back for more than hour and it'd be a glorious bonfire by then."

That was a pointed revelation, to say the least.

He came off as spokesman, and looked at me sort of indirectly, matching his feet in a way. Even under the cover of the cold night and the shivering shadows and the silence mostly about our strategy encampment, we both knew that he had looked at my notes had come away with some knowledge. I loved him and hated him at the known declaration, and was determined, though the youngest of the lot, that they'd burn his house down over my dead body. Light of the evening star fell through the leaves at our heads, fell on countenances, shone from the eyes of all of them looking hard at me, first and only obstacle to young pyromania.

"He's just a drunk, and you know it!" Wally advanced with a sudden burst of courage. I saw the star leap again in his eyes, heard the plea specializing itself in his voice. "It'd be the best fire ever. Everybody would be glad the house is gone. My mother talks about it all the time, how it must stink like socks or old drawers, how it'll catch fire some night from his own hand, falling down drunk and smoking and the man-killer sucking up the air all night long and the stupid candles dancing in the dark. Says he's always light as a clerk's lunch hour."

He'd never said so much at one time in all the time I'd known him, in all the time he'd been the closest friend of my brother's, but as tricky sometimes as the bakery driver swapping

day-olds. I caught a bit of pride in his voice, some dare. He'd toss the match for sure. I sensed also the recording of his words, which he must have dragged right out of his mother's kitchen and played it for us in our thin cover, under air sheer at the touch, under a star's reaching.

When I stood off the log, as much dais as any I'd known, I thought they would rise and mass against me, and the only thing I was sure about was they'd leap at any viable alternative. I was ready to tell the whole world if they proceeded, that much I knew, and if it came down to the last minute of saving the house, I'd run inside it. That would panic my brother no end, them too, so I threw another bone for their gnawing: "I know where there's fifty feet of chain. We could wrap it around a couple of his fence poles, such as they were, and the gate and then hook it on the bumper of the 8:20 bus when it leaves for the Center." I mimicked the jerking motion of the old Hart-Line Bus as it would pull away from the corner, mulish, Mack-ish, the clutch in spasms, gears scratching for holds, windows shaking light of every surface, the muffler an abomination of the transport industry. I mimicked well, and tossed in sound effects for their ears, for my argument.

The picture played too much for them, the noise and commotion promising heady delight to cap off Halloween. They could talk about it in secret for months to come; for years to come, as it proved to be.

I did not know until after the bus left, the chain taut behind it, the links sure on post and beam and stave, the rending and riotous clatter like empty drums in the wind as the bus bounced up the street, that Jack Winters lay sick in the cold house. He had left earlier, but had returned, and we had not seen him. I had not seen him. The calamity brought him weakly to his door, coughing and gagging on his own self, wrapping stout arms about his gut as if holding some treasure within. His collapse, the sudden silence, the fear quickly riding on the dagger air, brought the burly neighbors again. They lifted him, bedded him, lit the man-killer again, but we stayed our distance. The wrenching echoes of wood and steel were sharp yet in our hearing, pointing fingers at us, making claims against us, we noble toughs, the promise of the neighborhood kicking a man when he was down, a man I thought was warm as an old acquaintance generating trust, a soft leather wallet you've pawed for years.

Jack came back from both those bouts, bounced like the ball in the singalongs at the theater (Camptown Races, Doo Dah Doo), came healthy and kicking out of those depths as I thought few men could. There was no pity about him, that was evident; no wallowing in his own

mire (though some would pick at me on that point), no asking for help, no hand out for any spillage, just a gunny sack full of mash and potatoes and some raw ingredients it took me a long time to put names on. He was a tough man born to a tough path and damned sure he was staying on it.

Oh, there were other episodes that pulled us together, though I never once spoke with him, and baseball came and football and a girl just up the street one day who sat on the same dais log with her skirt riding who knows where, and Notebook No. 10 and Notebook No. 11, and a drifting of my years.

Then, as sudden as not, I was in high school and the house on the corner stood yet in its blocky and stubborn way, and Jack Winters went back and forth, shrunk a little, drank a lot, saying not two words to anybody. And one day, as I left my house to go to the game of the year, October clear as a rung bell around me, I saw him walking toward the canal path, the half-graced limp still in place, the arms out of step down his thighs as if he were hearing another music. I looked away for a moment when I heard the band music at the stadium, and when I looked back, he was gone. I think my ears heard another ringing. My chest pawed for breath. Something was happening in the crisp October air. I could feel it.

I never saw Jack Winters again. Nobody did. Gone, like a quick cloud. Gone, as if he'd never been. Gone, only to exist in my notebooks. Three of the books turned up a while back. My brother found them in his garage, tucked in an old bureau my parents had given him. Sixty some years and he read them for the first time just before returning them.

"I never knew he was like Grandfather to you," he said. "I'd never have thought that in a hundred years, but you and dad did, right from the start, the way he smelled and the way he walked with that little limp, and the stubborn ring he carried in his mind. Never came on me once." He was, I knew, scratching for differences, the founding of relationships, the minor reasons for found differences.

I didn't tell him I still think of Jack Winters practically all year long. Often it's for hours at a stretch, or days: where he went when he went off, what took him off, what kept him, especially when October's little knife begins its twist, when the evening star comes out to speak on the low horizon, and when I say to myself that if I hadn't kept him he would not be, that if I let him go he would not have been, that if he had not been there there would have been no pain kneeling before his small godhead in that cell of a room, the man-killer sucking up air, the camouflage

hiding him at times from his own self, a minor light source pulling rainbows out of waxed bottles, and a small god looking in a window at his own nativity.

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