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Ms. Gillanders

English III

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“The Jack Effect”

I always find meeting someone's family for the first time interesting. I can instantly see which family member they got certain personality traits and quirks from. However, I only looked at myself and my family in the same way once my junior-year English teacher had me generate a list of quirks about myself. That process made it abundantly clear that my half-brother Jack had an undeniable influence on me.

I have two half-brothers and one half-sister. The youngest, Jack, was six years older than me. Jack and my other half-siblings spent about half their time at their mom's house and the other half with us. Despite the limited time, Jack made sure to hang out with me.

When I was old enough to play video games, I always wanted to challenge Jack to games of FIFA or NHL. Every time he would happily agree before swiftly beating me by at least ten goals. Jack may have never gone easy on me, despite the age difference, but he still made it fun. I mean, there was a reason I continued to challenge him, knowing I would lose. Over the years, I slowly improved, eventually beating Jack for the first time. He didn't take it great, especially because after three straight years of losing, I had a lot of gloating to catch up on. Although he was upset at that moment, he continued playing with me and beating me (that one game was kind of a fluke).

Jack did more than develop my competitive side, though. As a little kid, a big brother is always a role model. I remember always seeing Jack as confident and secure in himself. I'm not sure how much of that was true or just the product of childhood idealization, but whether I meant to or not, I found myself replicating Jack. During car rides, if Jack didn't like a song, I wouldn't either. If Jack thought a movie was funny, so would I. These imitations were somewhat deliberate, I knew I was copying him, but I didn't understand why at the time. However, some things I picked up from Jack were much more subtle but more indicative of his influence on me.

One night, when I was fifteen, we were having a family dinner. I brought up how this girl in my grade kept making a fuss whenever I said, "Uh huh." I didn't even notice it till she pointed it out, and then, I couldn't help but see it myself. Jack was the first to speak up after I was done talking. He shared how his coworkers did the same thing to him. He said, "It's my way of responding to someone without actually engaging in conversation." And that's when it clicked. That's precisely why I was using it too. It was not like I was intentionally being dismissive or trying to avoid them; it just kinda happened. I didn't pick up "uh huh" from Jack, but the attitude that led to it was all Jack.

One of the shows I started watching because of Jack was "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia." He introduced it to me when I was eleven-ish, and I have been watching it on and off since then. It's a great show, but there was something I didn't notice until Jack mentioned it a while back. The characters in the show say "Heyo" quite a bit. Jack has been saying it forever, and I picked it up from him. I never connected it to the show because I was so used to us saying it.

I remember once during sophomore year, I was driving with a friend, and he said "Heyo" in response to something. He picked it up from me but used it all wrong. He asked me to explain it, which made me realize that I didn't have a concrete understanding of when to use it either. The best I could explain was it's something I say when I want to acknowledge something someone said or agree with them. Like, if someone makes a clever joke that's not exactly a belly laugh but still deserves a nod, I'll drop a "Heyo."

Looking back, even though I didn't spend a lot of time with Jack as a kid, there's no doubt in my mind that I'd be a different person today without him. Although I see Jack even less frequently now, every time I call out "heyo" or sidestep boring conversations with an "uh huh," I know at least part of me is a direct echo of him.

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“In Pursuit of Authenticity”

For my whole life, I've struggled with the idea of authenticity. Being genuinely authentic was never something I could picture myself being. The idea of not holding any part of myself back and letting other people see me for all the things I didn't like about myself was so out of the question and scary that it never even occurred to me. However, I didn't always have this problem.

When I was a young kid, I just existed. I did the things I loved, said whatever came to mind, all without caring at all about what others thought. Trying new sports, messing up, it didn't matter to me. But growing up changed something. Maybe it was the internet, or perhaps just understanding more about people and the world. Suddenly, I felt others' eyes on me in a way I'd never experienced. I overthought each conversation, worrying if I'd said the right thing, if I was odd, or worse, if I'd made someone uncomfortable. This fear of making others uncomfortable even stopped me from talking at all sometimes. I yearned for the confident, happy kid I used to be, but didn't know how to overcome these deep insecurities. It wasn't until the summer before freshman year, while I was backpacking in Alaska that things began to shift.

Over most of middle school and high school, I have been privileged enough to go on backpacking trips in the summer with a company called Wilderness Adventures.I have gone on a few of these trips; however, when I went on a backpacking trip in Alaska before freshman year, something clicked in my head. All my trips have been two weeks long and usually only consisted of three to four days of actual backcountry backpacking; however, this Alaska trip had six days of backpacking in which we would cover sixty-five miles. Part of me was nervous about the increased challenge, but I knew I was physically capable.

The trip started with the required superficial introductions and icebreakers, but to me the trip truly starts on the first day of backpacking. The first day on the trail is always tough; your feet and shoes aren't entirely broken in, and you are still used to the luxury of bathrooms. To make matters worse, it started to rain about a mile from our camp. Everyone ran -- or as close to running as you can get with 40 pounds on your back -- to the site.

Usually, when you finally make it to the campsite each day, you fall back onto your pack, unbuckle all your straps, and lie there for a minute. You let yourself decompress and then take off your shoes, switch into your comfy camp shoes, and then after plenty of relaxing, you set up your tent with your tent mates. However, because the rain was coming down so hard and the temperature was starting to drop, we didn't have any time to relax. My tentmate and I scrambled to get our tent pieces out of our packs and assembled the thing while trying to keep it somewhat dry. At last, I had a moment to return to my pack and dig out my warmest clothes and a rain jacket and pants. At that point, everything I was wearing was soaked, and my only option was to just be cold and wet while everything dried under my rain layers.

After everyone sat in their tents for a while to dry off, the cooking crew for that day had to go back outside and brave the rain to make dinner. Everyone else went out to keep them company, despite it still being fifteen degrees and raining. Luckily, the camp stove we had was able to work in the rain. Despite its purpose being mainly for cooking, it also emitted just enough heat to make us a little warmer. So, there we all were, nine teenagers and two adults, all wrapped up in warm clothes crouching and huddling around a pot of cooking beans, talking about how miserable and cold we were.

I had only known these people for less than three days, and we had already gone through a lot. It was these moments of genuine human connection that felt so pure and new to me. It was these moments that changed my way of thinking.

I've always loved how being in the backcountry strips away the superficial layers people wear, especially myself. It's hard to not be vulnerable and authentic with people when you are hiking ten miles a day and sleeping in the same small tent with them all while not showering. I love the person I become out there. I love how I never look in a mirror because there simply isn't a mirror to look at. I love how I wear the same outfit for five days straight because who will judge me. I love how I freely talk about anything on my mind because when you are out hiking for nine hours a day, what else are you going to do? I love how I get out of the tent early in the morning to watch the sunrise. I love how despite my aches, pains, and blisters, I still muster up the strength to keep going. I love how I stay up late around a campfire and talk about things I would never even imagine discussing anywhere else. I had felt all of this before, but never as intensely as I did there, huddled around the stove, and that's when it really clicked for me.

After that trip ended and I went back home, I knew I was no longer that person in the backcountry I loved so much, but I knew he was inside me. I at least knew I was capable of that type of authenticity I didn't even know was possible before. That has allowed me to start working towards achieving that authenticity even outside the context of backpacking.