

Eliza

Jack searches for deeper meaning and starts down the long road to redemption.

ESSAY BY ERIC GRANT

Jack was a man with restless feet, who left all that he had known for a six-pack of beer and a quest for deeper meaning.

His folks owned a big ranch near the town of Mack, where he came into manhood beneath the thumb of a strict, authoritarian father. His mother was dotting, attentive and ever-mindful of what the neighbors thought.

By the time Jack reached 30, he'd grown to resent ranch life but to love the bars and the good times on Saturday nights. His drinking and carousing were an embarrassment to the family, a drain on their money and a scourge on their good name.

When a fight broke out between Jack and his dad, he got the excuse he needed. They'd had enough of him. He'd had enough of them. And it was time for him to move on.

"At least I'm alive," he often muttered to himself, thinking of his staid days on the ranch. "At least I'm alive."

The words became his credo. Though he had no money, no prospects, nothing but a pack of cigarettes in his coat pocket, he wandered the West's back roads for 15 years.

He let his hair grow long and left his beard untamed. He wore a handmade leather hat that he'd won from an old Navajo in a game of blackjack. He donned a bead necklace and tucked a Bowie knife in his boot — an insurance policy "just in case." His loyal companion was a dingo named Old Blue.

Jack eventually gravitated toward Burford, a small town near the big bend of the Purgatory River. The community became, as he called it, his "spiritual center." In other words, it was full of people just like him.

He worked intermittently at the mighty DX, where he hauled hay in winter and fixed fence in summer. He rented a dilapidated trailer house on a hill. He paid

rent by "sharking" tourists of their money at billiards, drawing them in for the kill by playing the dumb drunk for the first and second games, then upping the ante and running the table in the third.

His life changed, at least in some ways, on a cool spring morning in 1978. Restless and suffering a hangover, Jack drove into the country to consult the higher power. He rested in the shade of a pinyon tree, stroked Old Blue's hair and searched the desert landscape for the meaning of it all.

Somewhere in the distance he heard the song of a meadowlark. It was the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard, a sign of rebirth, he thought, a harbinger of good things to come. He rose from his rest and headed for town. His life was about to change — and for the better.

It didn't hurt that he'd fallen in love, either. Her name was

Eliza, and her thirst for booze and craving for cigarettes nearly matched his own. Ten years his junior, she'd come from the red-dirt country of Oklahoma. More accustomed to bare feet than high heels, she was rough-hewn, rawboned and black-haired.

They'd met at the D Bar W, a local hangout that reeked of smoke, old beer and bad memories. Frequented by cowpokes, coal miners and shepherders, it also was a "finishing school," the townsfolk joked, for the half-dozen women who spent more time there than they did at home.

Jack invited Eliza to a picnic, where they sat alone on a granite boulder on the banks of the Purgatory. They dangled their feet in the cold water, and threw sticks to Old Blue, which he fetched in the river's whirling eddies.

The afternoon marked a moment of happiness that neither of them ever had known. He was overcome with it all and proposed to her right then. Cool in her response, she smoked her way through a pack of Marlboros, eyed Jack up and down several times, then finally said yes.

Two weeks later, the blissful couple exchanged vows at the Burford Methodist Church. A mob of disbelieving onlookers gathered in their Sunday best to see Jack actually tie the knot and to witness Eliza marry whom many considered the least reliable man they'd ever known.

A stuffy, fat-faced pastor presided over the ceremony. In a low, steady voice, he read from 1 Corinthians 13:4: "Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not jealous or boastful. It is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends . . ."

For Jack, the words rolled like raindrops off the back of a pigeon. He leaned back from the altar and winked at his best man,

Charlie, an impish, toothless bar crawler who winked right back at him.

It was almost beer time.

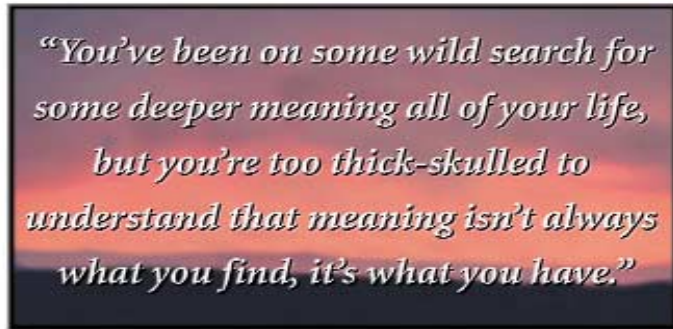
When the couple kissed, the entire congregation burst into cheers. It was simply too much for them to take: Jack in a sky-blue tuxedo; Eliza in a snow-white dress. Overcome with glee, two drunks stood on the pews and shouted at the tops of their lungs. Old Charlie tugged loose his fuzzy bow tie and threw it into the crowd. Five women dove across the floor to catch it. One of them came up with a bloody nose.

The happy newlyweds turned to the congregation and bounced down the aisle, down the sidewalk and piled into Jack's pickup. The crowd hurled rice, birdseed and whatever else they could find, including a hymnal through a stained-glass window.

The marriage remained on solid ground for about 12 hours. Jack and Eliza spent their honeymoon at the No-Tell Hotel in Muddy Pass. The room came complete with a swag lamp, a broken-down whirlpool bath and a velvet painting of a Spanish conquistador behind the bed. Jack bought a bottle of Cold Duck and a microwavable pizza. He toasted his new bride, they snarfed up the pepperoni and their happiness flowed like champagne.

About a month later, Jack's "wandering ways" got the best of him. When Eliza found him at the D Bar W, his arm draped around a 50-something redhead, she struck a match and set aflame the load of hay he had stacked in the back of his pickup, which was parked right there in front of the bar.

The blaze burned so brightly and with such intensity that townfolks didn't have time to call their neighbors. They just poured onto their porches and sidewalks and stood with their mouths agape as the spectacle unfolded. No one could make out Eliza's screaming, but everyone knew her meaning. Jack was in deep trouble, and now he didn't even have a pickup to use to run off and hide.



Eliza left town sometime that evening for Oklahoma. She was going home, away from her public shame, away from the biggest mistake she'd ever made.

Bloodshot eyes and all, Jack walked home. He found his trailer empty of everything except a beanbag chair that slouched in the corner of the living room. On the bathroom mirror, Eliza left this note: "Jack — I have left you for Mama's. I can't take this any more. Old Blue is with me. He didn't want to stick around, either. — Eliza. P.S. I'm pregnant."

Pregnant? The word landed like a stack of ton bales on his chest. Pregnant? How could that be?

"How do ya s'pose she's pregnant?" Jack asked Charlie the next day.

"Well, Jack, I think it's really pretty simple ..."

"I know *how* it happened, Charlie. I just don't know *why* it happened."

"Oh, heck, Jack. You've been on some wild search for some deeper meaning all of your life, but you're too thick-skulled to understand that meaning isn't always what you *find*, it's what you *have*."

Jack washed dishes for two weeks at the Burford Diner, and finally he got enough cash pulled together to buy a Trailways bus ticket to Oklahoma. He sat next to a retired electrician who'd just signed on with Amway. His name was Ned, and he was a believer — big time.

All Jack wanted was Eliza — living in his trailer house on the hill. He told Ned that despite his interest in Amway, right now wasn't the best time to take on such a "lucrative business endeavor."

"Can I call you in the future?" Ned inquired.

"Sure. Here's my number." He gave him Charlie's.

The real sales job, however, was just about to take place. When he arrived on his mother-in-law's doorstep, his brother-in-law Bob was there to meet him. "You ain't comin' in," Bob said, arms folded and jaw clinched. "Ya best be gettin' along."

"Look, Bob. This ain't got nothin' to do with you. I ain't here to fight. I'm here to patch things up with my lawfully wedded wife. Eliza?" Jack shouted. "You in the house? I wanna talk."

There was no response.

Bob stepped closer, pressing his chest against Jack's. "If you're lookin' for trouble, I can give ya trouble," he threatened.

Jack got mad and tried to push him aside. Bob's big body didn't budge, and he responded with a fist that struck Jack's lower lip. Jack hit the ground like a flounder.

"I told ya, buddy, ya best be movin' on," Bob said. "There ain't nothing for ya here no more. Eliza's come home. She ain't goin' back."

Just then, she appeared at the door. Jack, pinned to the ground by Bob's foot, strained to see her, his lip split wide open and bleeding. "Eliza, I love you. I'm sorry about all this. I want to be a daddy."

"You're already the daddy," she said. "You just ain't a father."

"I've changed my ways. I promise. Just come back. I'm a different man."

"You give up drinkin'?"

"Yes."

"You give up that woman at the bar?"

"Yes. She was nothin'."

"You still got a steady job?"

"No. I got fired after you burnt up my truck."

"Then you ain't changed your ways, have you?"

"No. I will. I have. I promise. I got leads."

Eliza said nothing. It seemed like an eternity for Jack, who spat grass and dirt from his mouth. Eliza considered his words and actions. She knew that somewhere, beneath all the booze-induced troubles, there was a good man in there. Question was, did she have the patience as he worked his way toward redemption?

"Get off 'im, Bob," she said.

Jack stood up, brushed the dust from his pants and wiped the blood from his lip. She stepped forward and embraced him.

"You better be serious about this," Bob threatened. "Because if you ain't, I'm gonna put the hurt on you next time."

Six months later, Eliza came into labor. Jack rushed her to the hospital in their brand-new, previously owned '69 Ford pickup, which he purchased with money from his new job at the Y-ME Ranch.

She gave birth to a 5-pound, 6-ounce boy, bringing unexpected joy to Jack, who broke into tears and kissed his wife on the forehead. They named him Jasper, after Jack's hard-nosed, deceased dad.

Jack coddled his son for hours, as gently as if he were holding a dove. Later that night, as Eliza rested, Jack and Jasper slipped down the hallway, through the labor ward's sliding glass doors, and out to an empty field adjacent the hospital.

Daylight's purple hues were just beginning to break across the horizon, and somewhere, as if on cue, the solitary song of a meadowlark pierced the dark's waning moment. Jack pulled the blanket from Jasper's face, so he, too, could look into the heavens and hear the wondrous song.

"At least we're alive, my boy. At least we are alive," Jack whispered into Jasper's ear. "There is no deeper meaning than this."

