

# Spoiler: !!!!!



(or is it *so-o-o-o-o-o-o-p?*)

By

Darcy

-Heller

Sternberg

**WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...***Darcy H. Sternberg's, "Spoiler: Chicken Soup!", is as irreverent and surreal as it charming, humorous, and heartfelt. At the heart of our protagonist's, Jack, tale is choice and the choices we make that dictate our lives whether ill-informed or not – i.e., just how far does the impact of having your identity shattered alter the impact of your path in life? What happens if a butterfly sneezes? What I like about this story is the way it turns the old trope of man-finds-life's-meaning-looking-back-on-his-life on its head. Jack was told a lie very early in his life and adjusted accordingly throughout his life. Now, at the end of the road, he faces the truth of his own life - without the comfort of being able to create a new ripple in his timeline. Almost like a reverse Christmas Carol, Jack is a decent man whose life was handed to him, was not difficult, and was relatively enjoyable, but the truth of his circumstance does not allow him any chance to change. While his life may be spoiled, his spoiler is a revelation that rings true for many: How we define ourselves makes or breaks the stories of our lives. Good work*

### **QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language...)**

The Grandersons bought a really big house, so big in fact that the bathrooms echoed. Jack loved to stand on the toilet and yell, "Next!" He even considered a career in acting but preferred that Sheila serve him prunes and seaweed in the bathtub. Sheila's white and brown roses (reminiscent of the herds she so diligently tended) were world-renowned until one day Marta showed up with twins and spray painted them plaid. The day she left Jack Marta had had a color wheel epiphany.

Emily, a debutante, spoke upscale languages. But because of her addiction to anti-depressants Chinese came out as German and Arabic came out as Italian. This was a problem as a greeter to the United Nations where she told Herr Schnapps that his bratwurst looked like an eggroll and Sheikh Abdul that hydrogenated oil was killing the pizza business. The janitor said she had a bomb in her ear.

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Spoiler: Chicken Soup!

By

Darcy H. Sternberg

Once upon a time there was a man called Jack Grandinsky. Jack wanted to tell family and friends what he felt but couldn't articulate – that they used love, flattery and charm to bankroll their lives. But then he would have had to relinquish the one thing he unknowingly coveted – adoration. It was good to be rich and handsome.

Little Jack grew up riding around in a big black Bentley by a big Black Ben. Later in life he marveled at how a preposition changed the course of history. Whether a person was 'colored' or 'of color' black was black just as green was green and red was red.

When Jack was three years old a very bad thing happened. His brother told him that mommy and daddy weren't mommy and daddy.

“They got you from the zoo.”

This upset Jack so much that he disappeared into a glass bubble. He would occasionally stick his head out to size up the opposition but then quickly retreat. Kids would throw tomatoes; teachers would slip homework through secret cracks. Sometimes Jack would

grant interviews.

“No, you can’t buy this; it just happens.” People were in awe. His family rolled him around. A lot.

Jack graduated Magna Cum Laude but this came at a price. He was lost and scared. How could he protect himself?

This is a story of a man who found himself.

Jack’s first wife had big feet and made prize winning matzo ball soup. Marta was an artist who painted everything chartreuse including her neighbor’s Cadillac when he refused to move it from her spring bed of daffodils. One day Edgar, Jack’s father, entered her studio, dropped his pants and said,

“Paint this.”

That night she wept over burned brisket and tsimmes while Jack asked for seconds and fell asleep. Leaving nothing to chance Marta moved in with a band of gypsies and became an industrial sand blaster.

Shortly thereafter Edgar missed a putt, cursed God and got struck by lightning. The family celebrated because Edgar had coined the term ‘yummy’; every time someone said ‘yummy’ or other expressions such as ‘yummy in the tummy’ the bucks rolled in. In deference to all things good Jack prayed at the Wailing Wall. He clicked his red Guccis and repeated “I want to change my name” for six days. Deep down he cringed at Edgar’s ‘Oy veys’ and yellow pants. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day God said:

“You got it pal, but you owe me one.” Jack wasn’t sure what God meant by this but ‘Granderson’ it was.

Jack’s second wife was as clean and as fresh as the guernseys she milked.

Jack’s mother said, <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>”Over my dead body you’ll marry that shiksa.” The next day Sheila and Jack were married over Frieda’s dead body.

It was a fine wedding. So many cucumber sandwiches, so little food. And no chairs. Why sit when you can stand? Jack’s feet were so sore that he hailed a taxi shoeless. He even refused the cabbie’s sole pair of shiny oxfords. Sheila carried the newly minted groom through security then arm wrestled the flight attendant for a window seat. And thus began her long term pledge to please Jack, starting with the Dead Sea.

The Grandersons bought a really big house, so big in fact that the bathrooms echoed. Jack loved to stand on the toilet and yell, “Next!” He even considered a career in acting but preferred that Sheila serve him prunes and seaweed in the bathtub. Sheila’s white and brown roses (reminiscent of the herds she so diligently tended) were world-renowned until one day Marta showed up with twins and spray painted them plaid. The day she left Jack Marta had had a color wheel epiphany.

‘This should be mine. All I got was a floor plan.’ “Yes, but I got Jack,” Sheila winked. <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

And so they embraced and became life long soul sisters. What a team. Sheila taught Marta how to stomp in manure. <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

“As an artist you never know when this might come in handy.” Sheila had read a lot of

art books.<sup>[SEP]</sup>”Teach me how to paint,” she begged.<sup>[SEP]</sup>

And walls they graced. But Sheila could never make a decision. For years they’d change from persimmon to apple, from fern to granite to bright pink. Marta attributed this to mad cow disease and quit while Jack got so frustrated he swam 100 laps in five minutes (to his credit modesty prevailed). Eventually the Grandersons became colorblind. Much to their surprise blue OJ turned out to be a great holiday mixer.

Sheila also loved to move furniture. Her strength as a farm gal knew no bounds. One day the living room was in the kitchen and the den was in the bathroom On a hunch (creative types work like this) she rearranged her doctor’s office only to find on her next visit everything restored to its original position. She would never go back to him even if he did cure her of cancer.

The Grandersons had five children; each more gifted than the next.<sup>[SEP]</sup>A romantic by nature Margaret sculpted animal organs: lungs, livers, intestines, stomachs, gallbladders. Dinner guests were thrilled to find an array of soap penises in the powder rooms. You can view her work somewhere.

Emily, a debutante, spoke upscale languages. But because of her addiction to anti-depressants Chinese came out as German and Arabic came out as Italian. This was a problem as a greeter to the United Nations where she told Herr Schnapps that his bratwurst looked like an eggroll and Sheikh Abdul that hydrogenated oil was killing the pizza business. The janitor said she had a bomb in her ear.

Jack Jr. was an undercover Rabbi who sold used SUVs. He would bless the car, then

circumcise the muffler to promote disease free emissions. This feature attracted mostly priests and nuns. Jack Sr. did not approve of his son's occupation as it reminded him of Aunt Shelley fainting at his bris.

William travelled the world singing songs about whales to poor people.

And finally there was Charlotte who smoked weed and drank Grey Goose. No one liked Charlotte. She would ruin all the happy family pictures especially those with Santa's hand up her dress. They tried to photo shop her picture out but she always popped back: on soup cans, cereal boxes, billboards. Even on Meet the Press.

At the dentist she would say, "Cut my teeth." At the salon she would say, "Floss my hair."

Jack loved his children but he couldn't tell them. Love. That's the one thing that everyone wanted from Jack. Even the plumber.

Sometimes Jack went to the zoo where he would point to the polar bears and say, "That's Mom and Dad."

The tourists would laugh. Everyone knew that animals don't give birth to humans but Jack knew better. If he found out who he was maybe he could love but this was not to be so he either pontificated about grapes in Tuscany or said nothing. He did though give to charity, including his children.

So Jack remained a beat behind the world. When he called there was always a long pause and then just as you thought it was a pervert he'd announce "It's Jack!" When someone

told a joke he sat puzzled. Three days later he'd say: "I still don't get it." You could never give him a funny birthday card. This from a man who had graduated top of his class.

And yet, despite his shortcomings, Jack had a dream. He wanted to save the world. In the mornings he'd wear a sandwich board that read 'Caution: Mind Working', then disappear into his ten-car garage and order in. On Monday, Wednesday and Fridays the staff served bagels and lox, on Tuesday and Thursdays German potato salad. On the weekends he drank. You see Jack Granderson was a complex man. Some days he felt like singing in Yiddish, on others chasing hot fräuleins in dirndls.

After watching PBS nonstop he decided to create a country where you could eat or believe anything without guilt. If Catholics wanted to eat a Big Mac on Fridays or Jews pork rinds let them. There were so many considerations: location, size, climate, vegetation, government, language, economy.

Jack hired Bessie, a childhood nanny, as his secretary. This caused quite a stir when a neighbor mistook her for Aunt Jemima. But Bessie was no pancake dummy; she knew a good thing and insisted on a 50% partnership.

Midnight sessions ensued. Emily spouted algorithms in French and Margaret sculpted dolphin brains for support. Jack Jr. said Kaddish, William sent postcards and Charlotte tweeted that Jack was losing his mind. Sheila was just plain jealous. She trashed Jack's favorite toilet, divorced him and had Manhattans with Marta at the Plaza. Jack lost the house but kept the garage.

One evening as Jack and Bessie were eating fried chicken and blintzes the lights went on.



Let's go global. They fought over top billing but then amicably concluded that Jack was the lamp and Bessie the light.

Each country would have a specialty. France: hot pants, Bolivia: hats, China: short haircuts, North America: green bean casseroles, Iceland: ice. If you longed to see a ballet or know the president in 2024 head over to Russia.

Jack and Bessie decided to dub their country 'No Name' because once you name names people make assumptions and write things they know bupkis about. There would be no flag as citizens burn them.

Jack decided that NN would be the go-to country for free sex and food, where unfettered ideas could thrive. Bessie was not thrilled. Wasn't that how Rome fell? On the contrary. There would be no more lies, private investigations, jealousies, hangings or starving children. Bessie shook her head while Jack sang 'Don't Rain On My Parade'.

The next day Jack got a text from the United Nations.<sup>[1]</sup>

"You cannot make unilateral decisions without consulting us; besides, Mexico wants to be the hat guy and the USA is suing NN for patent infringement. We're the freedom dudes."

Indeed. Jack had read 'We Don't Do Bagels' at a local eatery where customers used guns as utensils and waitresses served horsemeat when he had specifically asked for gefilte fish. He was beaten up for reading the Bible in a pink dress.<sup>[1]</sup> "Freedom. Ha!"

Bessie said the first step in global management was to negotiate but Jack could not see

beyond his rhinoplasty and fired her. Bessie took her 50% along with a lifetime membership to Costco but kept the door open by becoming an arbitration lawyer.

Jack's children insisted he let it go and do something productive like grow radish but he refused to listen. He walked all the way to the Supreme Court where if it weren't for a group of cheering hippies from Vancouver he would have given up. After months of backyard dealings and barbeques the judges gave him an atlas and wished him well. And so Jack spent his days wandering into brick walls and nights in the ER. <sup>[[[]]]</sup><sub>SEP</sub>

"I'll show them", he muttered between surgeries.

Jack's third wife-to-be couldn't decide whether he was a misunderstood genius or a fool. After getting the straight dope from Marta and Sheila she dropped dead at the altar.

When all hope was lost Jack met Lucy a local surgeon.

When a fight broke out over who should cut the first slice of nuptial cake Jack made a wish then smoked the living hell out of the six-foot confection. The sheer force of his intentions sent shrapnel sized pieces of lit candles, raspberry cake and whipped cream into the faces and laps of the bewildered.

It was a conflagration of sorts but the most honest moment of Jack Grandinsky's 70 years. His children wept and licked his face.

That night God came to Jack.

"Pack your bags. We had a deal. I gave you looks, money, opportunity, women, children, a new name and what did you accomplish?"

“I never shook your hands.”

“I don’t have hands.”

“I’m finally beginning to see....I want to love! I need more time!”

“I have a confession”, God said. “One night your parents ate spoiled chicken soup, made passionate love and gave birth to you. They put you in a soup pot and threw you into the Grandinsky’s pool hoping that fancy people could at least shop with the hoity-toity. Jacob’s a butcher and Ethel’s a maid. Decent people, tough decisions.”

“If I had known I would have lived differently! Not fair! I thought I came from the zoo! Where’s your responsibility?!”

“Yeh, well, whatever.”

And so Jack braced himself, strode through the pearly gates, embraced his parents, ate hotdogs, cleaned toilets and lived one step closer to his true self.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *I’ll be blunt. Inspiration came from my family: a merry-go-round of husbands, wives, step and half siblings and a father who moved one step behind the rest of the world. Hence the only way I could express myself was through a heightened sense of absurdity. I stand in awe of Sam Shepard and Edward Albee. One of my favorite novelists is Ann Tyler who is about the furthest one can get from the Theatre of the Absurd. Life is a series of contradictions.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** This is my first foray into fiction. My background is as a playwright and a first person essayist. My essays have appeared in The New York Times, The Plain Dealer Magazine, The Litchfield County Times, Caregiver.com, Hektoen International (A Journal of Medical Humanities), Read650 and CafeLitMagazine.

Hearts Afire, based on my students at CUNY’s Borough of Manhattan Community College, premiered at the New York International Fringe Festival. Other venues include

Theatre for the New City, Jewish Women's Theatre and the Virtual Bad Theatre Festival. Currently my one act 'Turkey Perky Hotline' is slated to appear at the Queens Short Play Festival February-March 2023.