

## Jack Gantos Gets Kicked Out

The Bacon family didn't mind the misfit food, but soon they found out I was the greater misfit. It took them about six weeks to realize I was a live-in party crasher. After having my own hotel room in San Juan, I wasn't ready to live with other people. I'd go out drinking with my friend Will Doyle, and afterward I'd come home late and play my stereo at full volume, smell up the house with cigarette smoke, and make long distance phone calls on the Bacons' bill. I kept drinking more and more until I discovered I could drink lots of beer. Nearly a case of it in a sitting. Unfortunately, I was also in the process of discovering I had no tolerance for that much alcohol and I always became blind drunk and ferociously ill, spending almost every night loudly heaving my guts out in the toilet while begging God for mercy. I was a mess.

After one especially robust night of drinking with Will, I stumbled home, crawled up the sidewalk, stabbed my key in the front door, let myself in, and power barfed all over the living room. After I sloshed blindly through that mess on all fours, I splattered the bathroom, my bedroom, the bathroom again, my bedroom again, until I passed out in the bathroom with my arms draped around the toilet and my head on the cool rim of the bowl.

When I came to the next afternoon, after the carpet cleaners had finished their work, I was summoned into the kitchen, which had been closed off with plastic sheeting and heavily sprayed

with institutional-strength air freshener. I was promptly informed that I had to pack my bags and be out of their lives in an hour. Mr. Bacon tapped on the face of his watch— with his flexible prosthetic finger— to show that he meant business. I didn't debate their judgment of me as "an immature, spoiled brat who needed a major butt-kicking in order to straighten up." I didn't have time to defend myself. I suddenly felt sick all over again.

"Excuse me," I belched, and quickly covered my mouth with both hands, nodded my agreement to their assessment of my character, and ran down the hall to the bathroom.

Mrs. Bacon limped behind me yelling, "Don't you dare soil my carpet again!"

I didn't. But I threw up something so harshly acidic it left me with canker sores on the inside of my mouth.

As I stumbled out of the house, Mr. Bacon hollered out one final warning: "Keep this up and you'll fall flat on your ass." I spit up on the grass.

I spent the night in my car, parked next to the Dumpster behind the grocery store.

For a short while I felt sorry for myself, and then figured my drinking was a sign that I was living in the wrong place, with the wrong sort of people. There was no promise of anything in the Bacon family. The wife kept the kids in front of the TV all day while she vacantly dozed across the couch. If they acted up she'd swing at them with her cane. The husband was constantly

worried about money and kept reminding me not to use too much electricity. He was so cheap he turned the hot water heater down to tepid. Even I knew enough to understand what Buddha meant when he said, “Always walk the road of happiness to prosperity.” They seemed miserable and loveless. Nothing gave them pleasure because they were unable to receive it. And there I was, full of promise and hope and desire for real love and real events to shape and change my life. I knew I was free to change myself— free to feel the entire impact of what I was doing. And I wanted to feel it all. Being in that house was spoiling the hope of what life should offer. They were trapped and tapped out of ideas and cash and just waiting to collapse, and I was glad I wouldn’t be around to watch it all happen.

Still I knew something had to be wrong with me, too. You just didn’t end up homeless, hung over, sleeping in your car with all your worldly possessions because you had control of your life. I had lost control. Temporarily. But I’d get it back, I figured. I always did. My family had highs and lows, made money and lost what money can buy, had good days and days that were ground out like cigarette butts. So I was used to hitting the bottom. Now I was waiting for the bounce. By the time I fell asleep across my suitcases, I only felt sorry for the Bacon kids.

In the morning I woke up feeling pasty. My skin was like marzipan. I had slept with the windows rolled up and all that drinking had run me down. I bought a newspaper and coffee and looked through the Rooms to Rent section. I spotted a promising ad and drove over to an address on North Broward Boulevard. It was an old motel whose sun-faded sign barely read

# THE KING'S COURT

The sign was rimmed with broken bulbs that looked like rotten teeth. I rang the office buzzer, and an old woman with brown wrinkled skin like a well-used pirate map opened the door and flicked a cigarette butt over my head.

“Does the name Davy Crockett mean anything to you?” she asked.

“Yeah, he was king of the wild frontier,” I said, quoting the theme song from the TV show.

“Well he was the king of the frontier,” she said, then, pointing at her chest, added, “and I’m the queen of King’s Court. I’m Davy Crockett the fourth, his great-great-granddaughter.”

“Great,” I said, thinking she looked old enough to be his daughter, but I liked her right off because she was the opposite of what I had just left.

“Now, what can I do for you?” she asked.

“I need a room,” I said.

“Cash or welfare check?”

“Cash,” I replied. “Good, pay in advance and you’ll get a ten percent discount.”

I paid, and Davy's kin gave me the key to room number three.

"It's a lucky room," she informed me. "To my knowledge, no one has died in it."

"I'll try to keep it that way," I replied, and turned to go.

"One more thing," she growled. "Don't make any trouble or I'll have to kick your tail out of here with Davy's moccasins."

I stared at her feet. Her beaded buckskins looked real to me.

"And I got his gun," she informed me. "Ole Betsy."

"Not to worry," I said, smiling. "Honest. I'm a good kid."

I moved my car around to the parking space with the big **3** painted on it. I unlocked the shiny brown door and in a glance saw it all— a ragtag furnished room with a tiny bathroom and shallow closet. A low-slung unmade bed took the middle of the room. Musty-smelling sheets were folded over an exhausted pillow. It was hot, there was no air-conditioning. Against a filthy wall was a dresser with a cheap lamp on it, and a cheaper fan. I turned the fan on and unpacked my belongings. I hung my shirts and pants on hangers. I placed my toiletries on a glass shelf above the sink. I pushed back the yellow shower curtain. The stale air trapped there smelled like a mildewed lemon. I put my shampoo on the edge of the tub. The wall tiles were yellow. The floors were yellow. I looked in the mirror. I was yellow. It was a color that did not look good on me. I went back to the main room, pulled a chair over to the side of the bed, and stacked all

my books on it. Then I sat down on the other chair. I suddenly felt drained, utterly exhausted, and held my head in my hands. My spirit was as beat as my body was tired.

I had been reading Frank Conroy's *Stop-Time*. He had written about growing up in Florida. There was a passage about him dozing off and on all day in a backyard doghouse, like a panting animal in the heat. He was hiding from everyone, especially himself. I recognized the feeling. As much as I disliked the Bacons, I couldn't blame them for everything. There was absolutely nothing I could think to do that was good for me at that moment. I didn't have any plans. No big ideas. No hopes. No dreams. I was beat, inside and outside. I couldn't even make the bed or take a shower. Instead, I reached into my book bag, removed a pack of cigarettes, lit one, and exhaled. The fan bullied the smoke out the side window. I tried to fool myself into thinking that smoking was actually doing something, as if the smoke rising from my mouth was evidence of a churning industry that thrived inside me. But smoking wasn't doing any more than providing a physical activity that masked the emptiness behind it. I could blame the hollow feeling inside me on the hangover. But when the hangover passed, I knew I'd still sense that same barren internal landscape.

I needed to settle down and build a life for myself. For all I could tell, the King's Court was going to be where I planted my flag. Well, I thought, trying to lift my spirits, I'm not off to a good start but I should be merciful enough to give myself a second chance. After all, I figured I'd soon be saying the same thing to my parents. I looked at my watch. It was time to get

ready for work. Thank God for work, I thought. As I stood and headed for the shower, I felt a little bounce in my step. “I think I’m on an upswing,” I said out loud. And I was.

My friend Glen Martin’s dad was a sales rep for Van Heusen shirts. He sold them to stores throughout south Florida. His garage was filled with shelves stacked with samples, and after each new season Glen’s dad let him sell the samples to his friends. I was a good customer.

One afternoon I was in his garage sorting through new styles when he asked, “You ever smoke weed?”

“Ahh, no,” I replied, sounding very uncool to myself.

“Want to try some?” he asked.

“Not now,” I said. “I have to go to work.”

“Tonight?” he asked. “Come over to my new friend James’s apartment in the Lauderhill Lakes complex. Apartment 311. We’re having a weed party there.”

“Okay,” I said. “Yeah.” I was trying to sound enthusiastic, but it wasn’t working. I bought a shirt and left.

All through my shift at the grocery store I was absent minded. I had read lots of books where people smoked weed. Some seemed to really enjoy it and got happy and hungry and silly and had deep insights into themselves and the world. I had a sneaky suspicion I was going to be the other kind of smoker—the kind I had also read about who go off the deep end and let life drift way out of control, and become dependent on dope and other users to help them out, and are abused and broken down

and the only deep insight they gain from the experience is that they have totally ruined their lives— and I'd end up like that girl from *Go Ask Alice* who went nuts on LSD and was locked in a closet after she imagined a million bugs were on her skin and to kill them she clawed off all her flesh and nearly bled to death.

By the time I finished restocking the entire canned vegetable section at work I was convinced I would be a vegetable if I smoked. Yet I went to the apartment. Why? For the same deadhead reason people climb mountains— it was there and I wanted to try it. Plus, there was the slim possibility it would make me a better writer. I got that impression from reading William Burroughs.

I knocked on the door. James answered. He was at least ten years older than the rest of us.

“Come in,” he whispered, and as I entered the room I turned and saw him peek out the doorway as if I might have been followed by the police. He was so paranoid he scared me. Inside, the apartment was filled with smoke that smelled like an acrid palmetto brushfire. I coughed. On the living room floor Glen and four other guys were sitting cross-legged around a tall brass-and-glass hookah. Jefferson Airplane was on the stereo.

Glen grinned up at me. “We’re trying to get high but it’s not working,” he said, disappointed. “We’re just down to stems and seeds. Want a toke?” He gave me the spitty plastic end of the hookah hose. I drew in some smoke and instantly hacked it out of my lungs. “I know what you mean,” he remarked. “We

even filled the hookah with wine but it can't take the burn out of this stuff.”

I nodded my head in agreement as I gritted my teeth from trying to suppress more coughing. After it was determined the stems and seeds were a bust, I spent the rest of my time wondering just how long I had to hang around before politely leaving. I drank two beers, then said “so long” to Glen and James and the other guys I never met. They had stared at the floor the entire evening as if it were interesting. It just looked filthy to me.

All the way to my car I expected cops to grab me by the shoulder just as they had when I was exchanging the hot stereo. I didn't want to be busted and thrown in jail so that someday I could tell my sad tale to others, just as the prisoners had told their woeful tales to me. When I made it home I closed and double locked my door and pulled the curtains. “I don't have to do that again,” I said to myself. But I must not have been listening.

I lived in the King's Court for the whole school year. Davy baked and left cookies on my bed, and she always monitored my health and mothered me with homemade soup when I was sick. Her motel catered to a patchwork of local folks who were down on their luck. Florida was still pretty segregated, so the cultural mix was unique and mostly peaceful— blacks, whites, Hispanics, and some Seminoles. Every now and again the Seminoles would get drunk and claim that Florida was their territory and everyone else had better pack up and move out. Parents made sure the kids were inside and the doors locked

during these tirades. Davy let them shout and parade around in their native costume as they called on the spirit of Chief Osceola to help them regain their homeland. She only pulled out Ole Betsy and called them a bunch of “alligator wrestlers” when they walked onto Broward Boulevard to scare cars, or when they busted up furniture and threw bottles of Ripple and Boone’s Farm through the jalousie windows.

She never called the cops on anyone. Her frontier policy was to work it out among ourselves. Besides, she felt for the Seminoles. “They got every right to be pissed,” she said. “It wasn’t so long ago the government paid two hundred dollars bounty for every Indian killed by settlers.”

When I told my school friends where I lived they thought I was joking. For most of them I might as well have been living in the Black Hole of Calcutta. When my drinking buddy, Will, came to visit, he was always nervous his new Camaro would get broken into or stolen. And when any of the motel kids knocked on my door for a treat (I always kept bags of candy from the store in my room), my friends reeled back in horror as if the kids had lice, ringworm, or rabies. But after meeting my neighbors they’d relax and realize that people on the other side of the tracks were warm-blooded, could tell good stories, and were as curious about white high school kids as we were about them. I named my room the “Bad Attitude Clearing House.”

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Things were not going well for my dad's business. The family had moved from Puerto Rico to St. Croix in the Virgin Islands with the hope that my dad could start a small construction company and make big money. He started the company, but there was not much money and my mom was worried. I had stopped asking for a monthly allowance. I just wanted to be one less thing to fret about. That was my goal. My letters home were lame, but they did not add to the general gloom and doom around the house. Even when I changed my mind and decided not to go to college, it didn't bother them.

At first I was going to go. I had taken all the tests that counted—the SAT and the Florida Placement Exam in order to determine state college eligibility. There was only one kid out of our 700-student graduating class who was going to Harvard, and that was not me. After I was accepted to the University of Florida in Gainesville, the only school I applied to, I was required to attend an interview with the admissions office. Before I went up to Gainesville I looked over the course offerings. The school was strong in literature but just seemed so-so in creative writing. That bothered me, but not too much because I was accustomed to not getting everything I wanted.

On a Wednesday I took off work time, packed a bag, and drove up the turnpike to I-75. I had changed the oil in my car, and had the brake pads replaced and the engine tuned. The car drove beautifully. I loved my car. I felt even more comfortable in it than I did in my room. They were about the same size and had about the same amount of furniture and closet space.

I arrived on campus early. I drove around the dorms, the library, the classroom buildings, and the administration offices. It was 1971 and the campus was dozing. Across the country students were rioting over civil rights, Vietnam, social justice, and government cover-ups involving tapping phones and secret wars. While in high school I accepted that I was living in a void, but now that I was heading for college I needed some fresh air and fresh thinking. Granted, my mind was pretty blank to begin with, and I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted or what I needed, but I was totally certain what I didn't want. And I didn't want the University of Florida. It looked just like a big, sprawling high school. It was everything I feared, and it gave me the creeps. As I drove around I came to the conclusion that I wasn't going to go. I wasn't going to just bump along to grade thirteen and not go to a real school where I'd be roughed up and challenged.

By the time I parked my car and entered the admissions officer's cubby, I was determined. The lady who met with me was very nice. She shook my hand and welcomed me to the college. She gave me a little booster bag full of university items: a mini orange football with a Gator logo, a Gator car decal, a Gator hat, a Gator hand towel, a Gator mug, and a rubber Gator for the top of my car antenna. I thanked her for the items and set them down by my feet. I was trying to come up with a way to tell her why I decided against attending the school. I suddenly wanted to blame it all on the Gator mascot, but knew I needed more than that, and more than just a gut feeling that the place was all wrong for me. Then she sealed the deal while pointing

out a few freshman rules. “ ... and you have to dorm on campus for the first two years, and during that time you cannot have a car.” I stared at her. I debated silently if I should tell her I loved my car— needed my car— and that I had been living on my own long enough to never want a roommate. But I kept my thoughts to myself. I smiled. We chitchatted a bit and I left, and on the way home I felt a huge weight lift from my shoulders. All the way down to my toes I knew I had made the right decision. But I didn’t know entirely why. I guessed I would find out later. It was a good guess.