

## Jacob Morton Comes Back Alive

by Joshua Wheeler

A collective sigh of relief swept through the town of Mossyrock on the day Jacob Morton died. It wasn't that they desired his death or found satisfaction in physical harm befalling him. They just wanted him to go away and nobody was going to complain if that was achieved through his dying.

Jacob Morton had been a drunk; a festering, insensible shell of a man, carrying his morose, melancholic temperament with him wherever he went. He mostly kept to himself and rarely had words for anyone else. His excessive drinking didn't transform him into a raging, unpredictable demon as it would most alcoholics. The town simply shunned him for being there; for hovering like a dark blotch in direct contrast to the warm and happy environment they worked at lengths to create. Anywhere Jacob Morton happened to be, that warm and happy town could not be.

The body had been found by Doug Johnson in the back of Hal's Bar. He had tripped over it on his way to the dumpster. After kicking at him a few times to wake him up, Johnson felt for a pulse at Jacob Morton's neck. Nothing. The body was stiff and cold and reeking of beer. Dr. Fieldsplat was called over and confirmed the death. Mr. Allen was called next and with Johnson's assistance, loaded the body into his hearse to take back to the mortuary. While Mr. Allen was halfway through the process of embalming the body, Jacob Morton sat up and walked out of the funeral director's home.

Jacob Morton and his wife, Janaye, had settled into Mossyrock a few years after they were married. She worked as a book editor for Northwest Sierra Press and he had just signed a contract to produce five annual art exhibits back in Seattle with paintings that showcased life in a small town. They were excited to begin a life away from the city. After less than a year, they welcomed a baby girl into their world. They called her Elizabeth. His artwork was so far ahead of schedule that he decided to take a position at the local postal office to use the time to immerse himself even deeper into small town life. He was content with the home and family he had created in Mossyrock.

After finishing work one particular afternoon, Jacob Morton arrived home to find an out-of-town Lexus in their driveway. He parked behind it and walked into the house to meet their visitor. Elizabeth was sleeping quietly in her rocker alone in the living room. Sounds from the back bedroom made Jacob's heart slow. He walked down the hallway and opened the bedroom door to find Janaye in their bed with Don Parson, the editor-in-chief of Northwest Sierra Press. Jacob's body turned to stone.

He couldn't speak. He couldn't move.

Janaye ceased her rocking motions and turned around to regard her husband. Taking a few seconds to gather her breath, she said in a cold, detached voice, "We need to talk."

Don gently pushed Janaye off of him and fumbled around for his clothes on the ground. Janaye remained on the bed regarding Jacob without making any attempt to cover her nakedness. The only sounds were of Don yanking his pants up, latching his belt, and turning his shirt over and over again rapidly in his hands to figure out which hole his head was supposed to go through. It could become a tricky feat in these kinds of situations.

After correctly pulling his shirt back over his head, he rushed for the door, mumbling, "Sorry you had to find out this way."

Jacob was still locked into place, forcing Don to squeeze in between him and the door to get past. His footsteps faded from the room. The front door opened and then slammed shut.

Baby Elizabeth was awake and crying shortly thereafter.

Jacob found his voice, but sounded as if he was trying to relearn how to speak. "Janaye, what is this?"

His wife stood up with rage and said, "This is exactly what it looks like. It isn't an accident that you found us in here. I meant for you to see this."

"But...why? I don't understand..."

"I need to go to Lizzy."

Janaye stormed out of the room and Jacob followed, dragging each step as if he had doubled the weight of his body. Back in the living room, Janaye lifted Elizabeth out of the rocker and pulled her close against her bosom.

“I can’t do this anymore,” Janaye said, her face red with anger. “I don’t want this. I don’t want you.”

“But we love each other,” he said, hurt and confused.

“I don’t love you,” she shouted. “I know this sounds harsh and cruel, but I have to do it this way. It will be easier for you if you hate me. It’s not working anymore. I’m going back to the city, and I’m taking Elizabeth with me, and that is all there is to it.”

“Can we just...talk about this?”

Don Parson walked back in through the front door.

“Excuse me, Mr. Morton, but I’m going to need you to move your car. You’re blocking me in.”

Jacob Morton had never been an alcoholic before but he learned the ropes pretty quickly after Janaye left. When his art show contract was cancelled due to a minor clause about a certain percentage of sales not being met in each successive exhibit, he became a drinking expert. For the next ten years, he retained his position at the post office, but then was let go. Not because of misconduct or drinking during work hours, but because he just wasn’t pleasant to be around.

His initial confrontation with alcohol was to achieve a widespread goal for many who undergo a deeply harrowing experience: he didn’t want to feel any emotion. He didn’t want the hurt of betrayal. He didn’t want the pain of losing his family. He was so determined to rid himself of these sensations that his over-drinking led to his dependency of it long after he had effectively purged himself of all feeling and emotion.

He frequented Hal’s Bar often, always taking the booth in the distant corner to avoid contact with others. Even had he been aware of how much his presence disturbed everyone else, it wouldn’t have bothered him. He made regular trips to the local liquor store and wandered the town with his tonic. Sometimes he went to the park and sometimes he just walked the streets, but to the great dissatisfaction of Mossyrock’s residents, he did not spend nearly enough time within the privacy of his own home.

When Jacob Morton walked out of Mr. Allen’s funeral home shortly after his death and began wandering the town, the people were greatly disappointed. While they had mostly ignored him for the near twenty years he had spent in the town alive, they now acted as if he was utterly invisible to them once he was dead. It was a credit to

their determination that they maintained this approach even as the decay and rot of Jacob Morton's corpse intensified. Strips of flesh peeled off and hung from his body, and a stench followed him wherever he went. Ironically, the more unbearable his presence became, the more effort the town put into disregarding him.

Jacob Morton was no longer a drunk. Since the organs and systems within his body no longer operated, he was unable to dispose of his fluids without it being a complicated process. Besides, he no longer possessed any physical sensations. He could not taste or smell or feel the touch of any objects. He had once stumbled over a barbed-wire fence, and when he pulled himself back up, jagged metal points raked across his left forearm. He had felt no pain, and would not have known it had happened if not for the evidence of long gouges in his skin.

Jacob Morton continued to sit in the corner booth at Hal's Bar. He continued to visit the park and walk up and down the streets of Mossyrock. He walked into the super market and wandered the aisles. He stopped by the library and always found a quiet table to sit at. No location was off limits to him when no one acknowledged he was there.

Jacob Morton was now sitting on a bench at the bus terminal. Mossyrock did not receive visitors too often, but when they came, Jacob would wait for them to notice him and stare for a few seconds with something close to disgust and alarm before quickly turning away. As he sat motionless on the bench, an out-of-town girl approached the terminal with a large pack hanging over one shoulder.

She unceremoniously dropped her pack onto the ground and took the bench next to Jacob Morton. After a few minutes, she turned her head to the side to look at him.

"A lot of people in the town told me to not get close to you and pretend like you don't exist," she said.

Jacob Morton turned his head to return her glance.

"But I don't really care what anyone in this stupid town tells me," she continued. "I've got a bus to catch and I'm not going to miss it 'cause some leper is hanging out around it. 'Sides, I thought you might like to converse for a little while since nobody else seems to talk to you."

She looked down and kicked her feet back and forth against the pavement.

"Unless you would prefer to be alone," she added.

Jacob followed suit and looked back away again. "I don't care," he replied.

"Well, good then. If you want my honest opinion though, you would probably be much better off out of this place. It seems like it could be a nice, pleasant little town away from civilization, but then you go and try talking to the locals and asking for help, and they're completely rude and worthless. So I am happy to say that I am now leaving it behind for good and won't waste another minute thinking about it. I'll start telling everyone that I was really born in Seattle and not this useless town."

She leaned back and stretched her arms above her head and her legs straight out in front of her.

"I actually came here to find my father. I've never met him and I wanted to see who he was, what he was like, to ask him why he didn't want me, why he didn't try to find me. I'm getting married in a couple of weeks and, I don't really know what I was thinking, but I just wanted to meet my dad first and...just see him."

Jacob Morton turned his head once again to look at the girl.

"But it doesn't really matter after all. He died a few months back. That's what they told me. They wouldn't tell me how or why, or even where his body is buried. These stupid people won't tell me a thing, and you'd think if an abandoned daughter came searching for her father that anyone would be happy to help her and tell her everything they could. But no, I get absolutely nothing. Just, 'your dad is dead' and 'stay away from the rotting man.'"

"Hey, maybe you can help me!" She said with sudden enthusiasm as she whipped her head back around to meet his glance. "Did you know Jacob Morton? Can you tell me anything about him?"

Jacob Morton focused on the detail in the girl's eyes. They were pools of green with hints of blue floating around the edges. The eyes were large and wide and hopeful.

"I didn't know him very well," he replied.

The girl's eyes looked downward as dejection replaced the hope inside them. "No, I suppose you wouldn't have if he avoided you like the rest of these people. Like I said, it doesn't really matter at all. He was probably just some bastard and wouldn't have wanted to see me anyway. I'm leaving this stupid town and won't waste another second thinking

about it. Eddie and I are getting married, and he will be an amazing husband and father and he's all I really need."

The dead, decomposing body of Jacob Morton, devoid of all feelings and all sensations, watched this girl and could not stop watching her.

"Are you in love with Eddie?" he asked her.

The transformation in her eyes was even more pronounced as the pools of green lit up with excitement and joy. "I love him more than anything in the world."

"What does it feel like?"

She laughed in amusement. "What does it feel like?" she repeated. "Haven't you ever been in love?"

He looked to her as if he was pondering her question with much consideration.

"Yes, I have," was his answer. "But...I don't remember what it feels like."

She laughed again, and said, "Well then, I'll tell you. It is like your heart is burning, like you are sizzling and boiling over with so much emotion. It's like you're on fire. Love is like a big, burning flame of fire."

Jacob Morton nodded his head to show that he understood her. "Like fire," he agreed.

Twenty feet away, an empty bus suddenly roared to life, kicking a cloud of smoke out of its exhaust pipe.

The girl stood up and lifted her pack to hang over her shoulder again. "That's my ride," she said. "Thanks for letting me talk to you. Hope you find love again."

She then jogged over to the bus and climbed aboard.

"Goodbye, Lizzy," Jacob Morton said.

He remained at the bus terminal for two more days before he finally stood up and walked away. Three hours later he entered Hal's Bar and sat on a stool at the front instead of going to his normal corner booth. Johnson was standing a few feet away by the bar, chatting with Hank Batterson. Jacob Morton watched him, waiting for him to make eye contact, but Johnson put all his effort into looking the other way.

"Johnson!" Jacob called out.

Johnson flinched, but would not budge from his stance. He continued to speak with Hank, but Hank stood and quickly left the bar. Johnson started shaking.

“Johnson, I need some alcohol,” Morton said.

Johnson ducked underneath the bar and reappeared with a bottle of beer in his shaky hand, carefully sliding it toward Morton.

“I need a lot more than that, Johnson.”

By now, everyone else had fled from the bar. “Take whatever you want,” Johnson murmured, and jumped over the bar to make his own speedy exit, bumping into chairs and tables on his way out.

Jacob Morton guzzled the bottle of beer in front of him in one gulp and grunted. He too got up and walked out of the bar. Ten minutes later he arrived at the town’s only gas station. He went straight to the garage, and lifted the silver handle to open the door. It creaked and rumbled as it slid upward. Without bothering to turn on the light, he walked to the back of the garage and came back out with a large gas can in each hand.

The front door of the house attached to the garage burst open and Dave Planter stomped out wearing his night robe and was armed with a pistol.

“What do you think--?”

Dave cut himself off in midsentence and stared at Jacob Morton.

Morton had removed the lids off of both cans. He was now standing with one of them gripped between his hands. He lifted it above his head and poured the gasoline out, completely drenching his body.

Dave’s mouth dropped open as he stared in dumb amazement.

Morton picked up the second can, repeating the process of dumping all the gas onto his body.

He then focused his attention on Dave Planter.

“Shoot me,” he told him.

Dave made no move to shoot, but continued to stare as if Morton were speaking a foreign language.

Jacob Morton began taking steps toward Dave. “Shoot me,” he repeated.

Fear jumped onto Dave’s face when he realized who was coming directly for him. He pointed the pistol at Morton and pulled the trigger. Jacob Morton’s body flew backward as he erupted into a ball of flame. He stood up again and walked away from the gas station, engulfed in fire that was melting the flesh from his body.

The town came awake. Feet came running from every direction to investigate the noise of an explosion and the black smoke billowing into the air. The column of smoke was not stationary, but appeared to slowly be moving toward the edge of the town. Jacob Morton's body was like a bright beacon, signaling to all of Mossyrock's residents where to find him.

Jacob Morton walked purposefully, pushing upward to reach the hill overlooking the town. As the flames continued to devour his body, what might have been a smile stretched across his face. He reached the top and turned around to look below him.

Everyone in the town had come out of their homes and had followed the light to witness Jacob Morton's fate. All eyes were on him, the fire so hot and bright that tears poured out from many of the faces. From behind his shield of flames, Morton watched the people watching him, though his eyes had melted from his sockets long before, and felt touched that they chose to be here for his rebirth. He threw the two burning brands of his arms up into the air and laughed with joy.

The crowd of people had formed into a half circle below as they arrived at the base of the hill. For three hours, the town remained frozen and watched the burning form of Jacob Morton until there was no more Jacob Morton to watch.