Bonsai Jack

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Jack Mellenkamp sat in a wicker rocker on the porch of the house that stood at the end of Peach Street. That litany comforted him, like the sing-song of a children's rhyme, like the creaking rhythm of his rocker, like the pendulum of the mantle clock: all of them synchronous, all of it forming his raspy reed-grass mantra. But, unlike the rhyme, Jack had not built the house at the end of Peach Street. Jack's father built the house, and that had been a long time ago.

When Jack and the house were new, they both stood more in the perpendicular. Now they slouched, their supports having gone somewhat out of square. Nothing opened or closed without becoming stuck in mid-stroke. And, to be honest, both Jack and the house could have used a coat or two of good paint. Their warped and weathered exteriors awaited this nourishment in gray silence, like parched grass crouched for the settling of the dew.

The sun came up at the far end of Peach Street, and Jack rocked it up over the steep hill of the horizon a notch at a time. That was how he got things done. And when the light reached Jack's porch, the rocker seemed to recharge, swinging in ever wider arcs until it forced Jack to his feet. It went on rocking away without him for a while, nudging him forward.

"All right, all right," Jack scolded the rocker. "Don't get pushy. I'm going."

Jack took up the pole that had been leaning against the porch rail. He eased himself down the stairs like a child uncertain yet of his balance, each foot joining its mate on the step before proceeding to the next. At the stone stoop Jack rested, relying upon the pole as if it were a biblical

staff. He looked out over the subdivision in the manner of a patriarch surveying the Promised Land. And, also like Moses of old, he could behold all in his field of view but dared not set foot in it. The neighbors didn't like him hanging around.

At the top of the pole Jack had wired a little basket which he lined with a piece of an old towel. He extended the pole up into the boughs of the last peach tree on the street which bore its name. Peach Street had once been part of the Mellenkamp's fruit orchard, as had Apple Lane, Plum Grove, Cherry Avenue, and all the other east-west streets of the Olde Towne development. Now, only the peach tree remained and Jack made the most of it.

Finally, after seven or eight tries, by which time Jack's arms ached, the little basket found a ripened peach and dislodged it. Jack had learned how to deal with his trembling limbs, compensating for even the random twitch, so that he managed to lower the pole and retrieve the peach without mishap. He found that he had worked up an appetite for the soft, slightly bruised fruit.

He replaced his fruit-picking pole against the railing where it would be close at hand for the next morning's forage. From the stake that supported one of the raspberry bushes in the front yard, Jack took down his cereal bowl, rinsed by a brief evening shower and the morning's dew. He gathered the darkest berries until he had accumulated about an inch of them at the bottom of the bowl. Then he went back up to the porch and into the house, where he fetched the rest of the fixings for his breakfast. Since it was a mild morning, he returned to his rocker on the porch.

Over the berries in the bowl he poured an inch-and-a-half of Wheaties and floated them all in milk until it reached the top of his index finger. He knew his capacity and had it all down to a minor science. With the bowl nestled in his lap, Jack reached over the back of the rocker and got his cane. He pulled at the crook, revealing a set of utensils inside the handle. With the stubby knife he

sliced the peach into the bowl, sucked on the stone, and then dropped it over the railing. The former flower bed had begun to resemble a miniature forest, and this newcomer would have to fight its established compatriots for the light and water. Jack replaced the knife in the handle and pulled out a short spoon. The cane had been his own invention, the desire for convenience and an economy of steps guiding its design. The size of the spoon did not permit him to take larger mouthfuls than his ill-fitting dentures would oblige, and when his arm grew tired of holding up the bowl — especially at the beginning, when it was nearly full — he rested it in his lap again. This allowed him to savor his meals and to enjoy the humble act of eating in a measure which the relative haste of his younger days would not countenance. All food tasted better to him now in his age, a revelation Jack could still scarcely believe.

His breakfast finished, Jack wiped the spoon on his shirt cuff and replaced it inside the handle of his cane. He reached over the railing and set the cereal bowl atop its perch overlooking the very raspberries it would snare the next day. Jack pretended that this made several of the berries nervous, and that he would find them next day on the ground, trying to roll away from him. It was this story, repeated by a neighbor boy to his parents, that made them inclined to regard Jack with nervous suspicion. The past spring, they put up a fence.

"I'm in the same boat you are," Jack told the raspberries. "A certain doom hangs over all of us."

He laughed at himself and settled back in his rocker to wait for the mailman. Jack judged the arrival of this visitor less by the chiming of the mantle-clock than by the thermometer nailed to a column of the porch. Above seventy-five degrees, Mr. Swage wouldn't come till after lunch.

Everything moved slower in the heat except molasses. But Jack was confident that Mr. Swage would be coming early, for the September mornings had grown cool.

An hour passed in silence. The rocker slowed to an imperceptible swaying as Jack fell asleep. Not even a breeze stirred the lofty white oak at the back of the house and, thus, no acorns crashed onto the tin roof, ringing out like gunshots over the meandering stream of Jack's sighing, floating dreams. But the creaking of a porch step intruded and Jack climbed up out of his nap, as slowly and deliberately as he ascended the porch stairs.

"Sorry to wake you up, Jack," Mr. Swage said.

"Oh, I wasn't sleeping," Jack told him. "Just kind of checking for leaks, you know. These eyelids done a lot of scraping up and down, and I think they're getting pretty thin in spots."

The mailman knew when Jack was joking — which was very nearly all the time — and he smiled, quickly, just to let the old man know he got the point. But his mouth snapped into its former drooping shape, like the fat rubber bands he twanged off a bundle of letters. He held up a single envelope to the light.

"Looks like another one from those Beautification Committee folks," the mailman said.

"You can read it to me, Oscar. I got no secrets. Besides, I left my cheaters in my other sweater. And that letter ain't bound to be worth any more steps than you spent already in bringing it here."

The mailman set down his leather pouch and tore open the envelope. He read slowly, his head pivoting back and forth.

"Says here that — 'in the interests of neighborliness and good will' is how they put it — they're giving you a one-month extension to get your place fixed up before they take their complaints to the county zoning people. Well, ain't that right friendly of them?"

"Just simmer down, Oscar," Jack told him. "It ain't your fight. Anyhow, I got nothing against them people except that maybe their noses are getting a little too long to mind their own business. I would've fixed things up before they got this bad, but me and ladders ain't quite in step no more."

"What about your kids?" Oscar asked.

"They're no saplings neither. They act older than me sometimes," Jack laughed. "They're still mad at me for not selling out when the price was good. Oh, it'll work out. I could get somebody to help with the sweating, but I got no money for paint, that's for sure. Time was, I could've gave somebody a couple of bushels from the orchard, or stuff out of the gardens, or maybe promise them a really fine Christmas tree when the time rolled around for it, and get me all the paint I needed. That's how we used to conduct business around here. But these folks only got money for what they call their 'medium of exchange'. I wouldn't even give it a 'medium'. Seems pretty 'poor' to only about 'fair' to me."

"Well, I think they're out of line here — just a bunch of people with too much time on their hands — if you ask me. You let me know when it comes up before the Zoning Department. I'll be there, Jack. You can count on it. Where do they get off anyway? You and your family was here before anybody else, and there wouldn't be nothing here except for the Mellenkamps."

"You're right, Oscar. I remember — though I was just a seedling at the time — when my family came floating up the Wisconsin River here on that fine old ship of theirs — the Mayflower,

I think they called it. And the Indians said, 'Well, we were expecting you folks. Just make yourselves right at home.'"

"Don't you ever get serious about nothing, Jack?"

"I try not to," Jack said. "It just makes things bigger than they really are, and then you can't get a handle on them no more."

"Well, I think this one is bigger than you think, my friend. And there's only one of you now."

"That's how I always been, Oscar. I ain't never been in the plural case."

Oscar Swage retrieved his mail pouch, determined to say nothing more, now that Jack had got into one of his contrary moods. He went back down Peach Street, wagging his head. "No use talking to you. But you'll find out," is what the gesture said.

Jack paid it no heed, but only settled back in his rocker to check for further leaks.

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The next sound to alert Jack to an alien presence on the front porch was a polite, feminine throat-clearing. He cautiously peered out through a half-opened lid, so that he would be able to retreat, if need be, without arousing suspicion. Before him stood a slight, but therefore more compactly beautiful young woman with long black hair and large dark eyes. She clutched a large book. That was not a good sign. But Jack's curiosity had been stirred up — along with a few other dormant juices — and he found himself clambering up out of his drowse heedless of his footing. He opened his eyes wide, already breathless from the exertion.

"Is Mr. Jack Mellenkamp at home this afternoon?" the young woman asked.

"Depends on who's calling," Jack said.

"I'm Charmaine Yokomura, with the University Extension Office," she said. "Mr. Mellenkamp has signed up for a course as part of our home extension for senior citizens."

Jack began patting his chest as if he were searching for something in the pockets of his sweater-vest. "Yep. I'm home," he announced meekly. "At my age, you can never be sure. To see you standing there, for instance, I might think I was called up to paradise — though it was probably a mistake."

Charmaine Yokomura smiled bashfully and averted her eyes. Jack thought he could detect a faint blush even in her predominantly oriental complexion. He was reminded of the deep almond-colored cambium beneath the bark of a bruised sapling. But there was no analogue to account for the pinkish tinge on her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I wasn't expecting someone."

"Quite so old, is that it?" Jack interrupted.

"Well, sort of," Charmaine Yokomura admitted.

Her blush returned, and Jack was growing furious with himself. In his clumsiness he continued to bruise her feelings, though that remained very far from his intentions.

"Don't mind me," Jack said. "We old ones get kind of a crusty bark on us that makes us look pretty rough. And we don't bend so good in the direction of graceful manners any more. But it's all on the outside, you see. Kind of like protection."

"Yes, I see, Mr. Mellenkamp," Charmaine smiled, now without embarrassment. "It's just that — well, in case you're not really familiar with it — a bonsai takes a great deal of care and time. Many years, in fact, to get them into true shape."

"And you're wondering if I'm gonna live that long, is that it, Missy?" Jack asked. "There I go again," he said, slapping his knee. "Please, young lady, forgive my manners. I'm not always this hard to get along with — sometimes I'm worse. Go on. Sit down in that other rocker. I want to tell you something first." Charmaine settled herself, awkwardly and uncomfortably at first, in the wicker rocker that had formerly been the companion piece belonging to Jack's wife. But Dora Mellenkamp had been a more furious and nervous sort of rocker than Jack. She had worn out the curved runners many years before her death. Now it was just an old weather-gray chair with a damp and musty cushion. The flowers of the pattern were now in the brown of their autumn.

Charmaine set the book across her lap, pulling at the hem of her short cream-colored skirt.

"Well, I know you're going to ask some day, or wonder forever, just how old I am, Missy . . . Yokomura, is it?"

"Yes, but I prefer 'Charmaine'."

"Fine, Missy. Well, I'm ninety-four," Jack announced. He waited for her to digest that before going on. "About thirty years ago, when the last of this old homestead was sold to the developers, I all of a sudden had some extra time on my hands. There was this or that I thought I'd finally have some time for. But my kids thought it was ridiculous for me to be starting new things and taking up hobbies at my age. I thought maybe they were right, so I just kept puttering around the house and taking care of what was left of the Missus' garden. Well, now that I look back on it, that's a lot of years wasted waiting to die. So, who knows? Maybe I'll be around to see all those little trees grow into a little forest. But I ain't gonna waste any more time."

"Good for you, Mr. Mellenkamp. As you'll see, bonsai is truly a hobby for all ages."

"You sound like an ad, Missy," Jack said. "But it's okay. I've already made up my mind to do it, so you won't have to do the hard-sell on me."

Charmaine smiled, and Jack thought it was like the sun rising again.

"Did your family really own all of this?" Charmaine asked, her arm sweeping in a wide gesture. The book nearly slipped from her lap.

"Once upon a time," Jack said. "But when folks started buying their produce from stores and then supermarkets, well, we couldn't hardly give the stuff away. After the war, none of my brothers — my sister either — wanted nothing to do with the old place no more. That was too much for just me and the Missus to handle — my kids wanted to get away, too — so my family and me sold part of it to this developer who was planning to build some houses for all the folks with families just starting up. So, we sign the papers, but my brother Charlie ain't quite ready to let go. He wants all the new streets named after the ships lost in Pearl Harbor: you know, Arizona Avenue, Oklahoma Street, Nevada Lane, et cetera. No need to blush, Missy. It wasn't my war, and it sure wasn't yours. But the bank had the last word, and they liked the sound of trees, their names anyway. So they cut down most of our orchards and named the streets after them."

"But what about the rest of it, Mr. Mellenkamp?" Charmaine asked.

"Just call me Jack, Missy. Somebody calls me'Mister', they always want something. Anyhow, once they had all them houses up, the taxes went right on up through the roof right along with them. Bit by bit we had to sell off the rest of the orchards, then the nursery and the gardens. All I got left is the house and my back yard. But I ain't complaining. It's all I can do to take care of that."

"It must be hard for you — Jack — to look out on all this and remember what it was once."

"Not so much," Jack said, resuming his rocking at a steady pace. "I had to come down some in what I can do, Missy. It ain't caught up with you yet, and I hope it never does. But when I first took over this place when my Daddy died — that was 1920 then — I went around with my shovel and my axe like there weren't no tomorrow, planting trees and clearing trails. Most of them now are streets. The Missus kept a garden big as ten back yards. Well, when all these Wisconsin winters caught up with me, I took to keeping a tree nursery close by the old barn. And then it was just the garden, which kept getting smaller like the ground was being swallowed into some hole. A few years ago, after the Missus died, I gave up the garden and took to them window boxes all around the house. They're a little weedy now, though. And that's why I want to take up that miniature tree business, Missy. It's more my speed. And, besides, it'll give me something to do over the winters. Them window boxes just sit there catching snow all winter long. Gets kind of boring, if you know what I mean, Missy. But you probably don't."

"Yes, I think I do, Mister . . . Jack," Charmaine said, a tinge of challenge in her voice. "My family is from Minneapolis. We had winters there, too."

"I think I read about that someplace," Jack said. "'Course they got nothing better to do up there all winter except concoct exaggerations and eat pickled fish."

"Raw fish," Charmaine said. "We call it sushi. I'll bring you some next time."

"I like you, Missy. You don't take no guff — even from an old man."

Charmaine Yokomura smiled at him. She saw a flash of Jack's youth in the glint of his eye, which was absorbing the slanting afternoon sunlight and shooting it back.

"Well, are we ready to get started on our first exercise?" she asked.

"I already did. But you go right ahead," Jack said.

"I mean the bonsai lesson, Mister Jack. I always begin with a history of the art of bonsai."

"Fine. I'm all ears, Missy. Just keep it interesting so I don't fall asleep on you."

"All right. I'll try." She cleared her throat and opened her book to the marked pages. "Bonsai means 'tray trees'. The practice of collecting trees that had been dwarfed by their harsh natural environment began many centuries ago in Japan, itself a tiny country in which all things had to compete for the small amount of available land that could be allotted to each living thing . . . "

Jack found Charmaine Yokomura's voice to be not merely pleasant, but actually soothing. His eyes slipped shut. He pictured his mother reading to him, her long skirts trailing beneath the porch swing. Charmaine's words flowed from his mother's lips and he saw, depicted on the inside of his eyelids with the bold strokes of a sumi brush painting, the very things of which Charmaine spoke. She was drawing a spell.

" . . . led quite naturally from collecting to cultivating . . . "

Jack held the tiny seedlings and placed them gently into the holes made by the tip of his stick. He felt its smooth gnarls.

" . . . from seed, from cuttings, and from graftings . . . "

He saw each of these things in turn, for he had done each of them in his time.

" . . . firethorn, juniper, wisteria . . . "

These brought their remembered smells to his nostrils along with their prickly needles and waxy leaves.

" . . . so that a mere handful of moss can become a green meadow, a small rock a mountainside, and a cluster of seedlings an entire forest."

Jack knew that she spoke of an art, for he could see and smell and feel these pictures she was drawing beneath his fluttering eyelids. That took quite a steady hand, he thought.

"You haven't heard a word of what I've been saying, have you, Mister Jack?" Charmaine asked. "You disappoint me."

"No need to get all school-teachery on me, Missy. I heard you all right. Sometimes it's just easier for me to see things with my eyes closed, that's all. Go ahead. Test me, if you want."

Charmaine smiled. "This is supposed to be a course for adults, Mister Jack. You're here because you want to be."

"Sometimes I am," Jack said. "Well, are we gonna get our hands dirty with anything besides book ink, Missy?"

Charmaine fought to keep from laughing.

"Hand me that other cane there," Jack said. "Please."

Charmaine noted with amusement that this second cane had been fitted with a small spade at the tip and that it could be unscrewed and replaced with other implements. In the crook was a sort of lobbing shear. Jack rose from his rocker and took the cane from her. She waited at the foot of the stairs for him.

"We're going out back, Missy. Why don't you come again tomorrow, 'round about now, and we'll get there at the same time."

"I'm in no hurry, Mister Jack. That is the first lesson of bonsai."

"I like how everything fits together with you, Missy. Now, how about taking my other arm. That's it. Give an old man a thrill. The worst it'll do is make me die with a smile on my lips."

Charmaine became uneasy watching Jack descend the steps, feeling almost ashamed of her youth. But on the level ground the old man held his own. His paths around the house could be read in the trampled grass.

"How'll these do, Missy?" Jack asked, indicating several rows of pine seedlings in a former flower-bed near the house. "These'd sprout up in the lawn every now and then — I suppose the squirrels buried them there — and I'd dig them out before the boy came to mow the grass. Sometimes he wasn't too careful about where he was mowing, so they'd get clipped every so often. And they been moved — transplanted, you'd say — about a dozen times already. I got little maples and some oaks over on the other side."

"They're wonderful, Mister Jack," Charmaine said, stooping to finger the small trees. "These make an excellent point at which to begin to cultivate a bonsai."

"Some of them are a lot older than they look, too, Missy. Like me," Jack said, grinning like the canary who swallowed a cat. "I guess it's because I like trees — all kinds — and I couldn't see them getting mowed down just to keep the lawn tidy and the neighbors quiet. I got some little fruit trees going by the front porch — my pits and stones, you see — and I think some of them are getting tired of fighting the weeds."

"This is wonderful, Mister Jack. It's as though you had been running a bonsai nursery here. Any of these should do very nicely. I wonder," Charmaine said, hesitating. "Well, I wonder if you'd consider . . . "

"Spit it out, Missy. Manners are for the supper table."

"Well, I'm not too pleased with what the nurseryman in town has to offer us this year . . . "

"I ain't surprised."

"There are nine other students enrolled in the bonsai class, and while I wanted stock that was a little dwarfed and abused, I think the nurseryman is trying to unload every sickly, root-bound specimen that he's got — on us."

"I ain't surprised."

"What you have here is at least healthy," Charmaine said. "It's disheartening to the new student when his first attempts at bonsai turn brown and wither up. I wonder whether you'd consider selling some of your seedlings to the rest of us, Mister Jack. We'd need quite a few. I conduct the class three times a year, and I like each student to start off with at least four seedlings. Well, Mister Jack?"

"I ain't thought of selling them, Missy. But I'm sure you teach them pupils of yours how to take care of them. That ain't the problem. I don't exactly need the money, that's all. How about paying me in paint?"

"Did I miss something, Mister Jack?"

"No," Jack said. "You're too sharp for that to happen. I just ain't explained it, that's all."

They began walking back toward the front of the house, Charmaine guiding his other elbow this trip, for he had switched the cane to his left hand. Jack pointed out the peach, cherry, apple, and apricot seedlings among the raspberry bushes and weeds crowding the flower-bed along the front porch. There were no plums, for he didn't like plums. "Prunes-in-waiting", he called them.

"Are you going to explain it to me, Mister Jack?"

"Sure," Jack said. "I just get so carried away with walking sometimes that I forget what I was doing. My neighbors hereabouts say they don't like looking at my old house. They want me to spruce the place up. Painting is at the top of their list, I guess. Now you could pay me, and I could

pay the man at the hardware store for his paint, but that's a lot of extra work and money changing hands. It ain't altogether necessary as I see it. Why not you and your pupils just go and buy the paint — say one quart per seedling — and save all that wear on leather: on shoes and wallets both?"

"I suppose there's a certain logic in it," Charmaine admitted. "But . . . "

"That comes to a gallon for each pupil," Jack said. "Better get porch enamel — the smelly stuff. I don't want to have to be painting this place again in a couple of years."

Charmaine realized she had been snared somehow. "What color did you want?" she asked. "Shall I bring you a chart of colors?"

"I ain't fussy," Jack said. "Go ask the neighbors. They're the ones gonna have to look at it. But I don't like purple."

"You want me to just go up to them and ask them what color you should paint your house?" Charmaine asked.

"No," Jack laughed. "They'd think you had a screw loose or something. Leave that part to me. I'll get Mr. Swage — that's our mailman here — to go and ask them on his rounds. Put it to a vote. Let them think this here's a democracy like they're used to. We'll get pale blue. The Missus always said the next color of the house should be pale blue. They'll think they picked it."

"You're really too much, Mister Jack. Did you have all this figured out already when you signed up for my class at the Extension Office?"

"Nope," he said. "I'm used to thinking on my feet. Other places, too."

Charmaine smiled. "Well, now that we have that settled, I suppose we should get to the first lesson. You're a little ahead of my other students, but I'm going to leave you these hand-outs for you to read before we meet again next Friday."

"Okay, Missy. I'll do my homework. You can count on it. It's been a pleasure meeting you," Jack said, extending his hand to her before easing himself down into his wicker rocker again.

Charmaine held his hand for some time, examining every gnarl and knuckle as she did so, quite forgetting her own manners. Jack rocked her back to her car and helped her up over the hill toward where the sun would rise again up over Peach Street.

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On the third weekend of painting Jack's house, Charmaine, her fiance, and their two friends realized that they would not have enough paint to finish up the back side of the house.

"Don't worry," Jack said. "If the neighbors notice that, then they're really nosing around for trouble. It'll last another winter without paint. Now that's enough for one morning. You two come on down off the ladders. Charmaine's made some iced tea and sandwiches."

After their small lunch, the two young men went back up their ladders to paint the missed spots Jack had noticed beneath the gable and below one of the abandoned window boxes. Donna, Charmaine's friend, finally at ease with the old man, began pestering Jack with numerous questions. She wanted to know, especially, how it felt to have gone from being a hearty woodsman to a cultivator of bonsai. Charmaine cringed at her friend's lack of tact.

"Well, but I always been working with trees somehow, ain't I. It's pretty lucky to be always doing what you want. Anyway, size ain't so important. It's how you use what you got that counts. The Missus was always telling me that."

Hiroshi and Paul, overhearing how effectively the old man had put Donna in her place, began laughing so hard that they had to set their brushes down in the paint buckets and hang onto the rungs. Jack called up to them to stop horsing around.

"You do your laughing on the ground," he reprimanded. "It ain't safe to find anything amusing at that height. If you fall down and sue me, all you're gonna get for your trouble is this house and a lot of work. Nosy neighbors come with the package, I'll warn you. Now, either finish up, or get back down here."

The volunteers went back to their painting. Donna packed up their picnic basket and brought it back to the car.

"Funny, but I ain't ever thought of living someplace else but here," Jack said to Charmaine. "But I suppose they'd let me keep a couple of bonsai at the old people's place, don't you think? They don't take up no room to speak of."

"I don't see why not, Mister Jack. But I wouldn't talk like that. You'll be fine. And even after the class is over, I'll be stopping by to see you. And you're coming to the wedding in the spring, right?"

"Yeah, Missy, but things happen. Suppose I got so far gone that I couldn't even take care of my bonsai. You'd watch after them for me, wouldn't you, Missy?"

"Of course, Mister Jack."

"Good, then I'll put it in my will," he said, the cloud passing away from his face. "You're just the kind of sunshine they need. I wouldn't trust my kids with a plastic palm tree."

Charmaine smiled, and patted the old man's barky hands.