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BUZZY JACKSON

SHAKING THE  
FAMILY TREE

Blue Bloods, Black Sheep,  
and Other Obsessions  
of an Accidental Genealogist

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## SHAKING THE FAMILY TREE

interviews, tours, driving, etc., and eventually he will get cranky and whiny, no matter how good-natured he is. Let's face it: it's hard to do anything productive when accompanied by a three-year-old. Genealogy included.

### The special space-time continuum of high school reunions

A few weeks after I returned from Michigan, I took a quick weekend trip, sans three-year-old, to Northern California to attend my twentieth high school reunion. Weddings and high school reunions go together: they're events that remind us of the connections we share with others. At a wedding, one looks around at one's new in-laws and thinks: *Okay, all these people with their plastic cups and soggy hors d'oeuvres plates—they are now my family. Somehow we've all been brought together, stuffed mushroom caps and all.*

It really hits home once you have children, because suddenly your own kid is sharing DNA with your mother-in-law. I say this as someone blessed with a wonderful set of in-laws, but it's still a little baffling. It's the most obvious thing in the world, and yet it can really blow your mind: my child has as much of *those* people's genetic material as he does of mine! In my experience, every single aspect of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth is a source of just such obvious yet awesome mysteries.

Here's another awesome mystery: the language of teenagers. On the airport shuttle I—no, the entire shuttle car—was exposed to the insanely raw, vulnerable dumbness of teenagers in love.

Boy: I love the way you sign your name.

Girl: Shut up!

Boy: I'm serious. It's so cool that you only use capital letters.

Girl: Shut up!

Boy: I love you.

I will spare you the rest of this “conversation,” though those of us on the airport shuttle are still suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Nevertheless, as I made my way toward a reunion with everyone who had known the sixteen-year-old Buzzy, I wondered: Is this what I sounded like in high school? I’m afraid so. I started thinking about my first boyfriend, R. I met him after one of the most significant events in my adolescent life, when, after eight years of wearing dorky glasses, I finally got contact lenses. Within two weeks I’d cut my hair into a stylish (I swear it was, at the time) Princess Diana bi-level, learned to apply mascara, began my freshman year of high school, and snagged a boyfriend. Contact lenses, apparently, will do that.

My conversations and love letters with R were just as inane as the dialogue reported above, though even as I write that I feel obliged to defend my first love. Our fluctuating emotional states may have been hormonally inflated, but it was also my first experience with the transcendence of romantic love—and lust. There is no lust like the lust of a teenage virgin.

Our relationship, if you can call an unending cycle of ecstasy, pain, breakup, and reunion a relationship, accomplished the same thing the shuttle-bus conversation did: it was a form of simultaneous action and rehearsal. The shuttle-bus kids talked for the sake of talking, which is another way of saying they were practicing conversation; in this case, the fine art of bullshit chitchat (bullshitchat?). For our part, R and I were practicing every aspect of the boy-girl relationship, from kissing to fighting to clever note writing. The novelty of love, along with the mind-blowing hormone overdose from which we were both suffering, compelled us to rehearse our parts over and over. And over and over again.

I thought of my mother—with pity for her suffering and gratitude for her patience. It can’t be easy to watch your formerly levelheaded fourteen-year-old daughter suddenly devolve into a



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swooning, mooning gossip machine who's decided to subsist on only three grapes and a Diet Coke for her daily caloric intake. (This is true. It wasn't an anorexia phase or even a conscious desire to be skinny; I simply could not bring myself to eat whilst in the throes of love. This pattern repeated itself in the early infatuation stages of all my later love affairs; I found that, unfortunately, it always wears off.)

All these memories were crowding back into my consciousness as I flew westward over the Rockies and toward California. Our incredibly dedicated senior-class president had exceeded her campaign promise to oversee our future reunions. The fact that this, our twentieth reunion, was the third reunion we'd had (tenth and fifteenth preceded it) was evidence of that. No elected official had ever been so true to her word. The organizational superiority of the class of 1988 began to attract interested members of our proximal classmates from years 1987 and '89. It was, therefore, entirely possible that R, who was two years ahead of me in school (it seemed like a huge deal at the time) could make an appearance. I considered this possibility for ten seconds: not good. Today's experience on the airport shuttle was as close as I need to get to my teenage self. Seeing my classmates, none of whom I ever dated (I seemed to have a thing for the classes of '86 and '87), would be much less fraught.

High school reunions are fun, which is why I keep going. My experience at the ten-year one was positively life affirming. I walked into the banquet room and was confronted by a sight I'd never dared to imagine: X, one of the quietest, nerdiest girls in our class chatting comfortably with Z, a scrumptious stud who probably lost his virginity (happily) at age nine to some high school girl and continued getting effortlessly laid for the rest of his life. Yet there they were, the ugly duckling and Prince Charming, catching up on old times as if they were social equals. Which they now were.

People tell you lots of things when you're in high school: these are the best days of your life (False); and someday all this social warfare will be revealed as the petty bullshit you deep-down know it to



be—a statement I'd always wanted to believe and one which, standing there in the foyer of a rented ski lodge, I suddenly knew to be true. That's why I keep coming back. Reunions are the big do-over we always hoped for.

I didn't feel that I had much to do over or live down (maybe that's why I have such a positive attitude toward these things), but that wasn't the case with my friend P, who had finally consented to attend after a mere twenty years of cajoling by yours truly. P had been a quiet but well-liked guy—an athlete and star academic—but in his own mind high school had been just one miserable moment after another and he could barely wait to leave it behind. I'd always felt that a trip back to one of our reunions would finally exorcise those teenage demons—especially because he'd be returning as a handsome, successful grown-up man married to a gorgeous woman. Right? It seemed obvious to me. I guess I'd worn him down enough, and finally something snapped, and here he was—here we were! We took a quick disco nap, slugged a gin and tonic for courage, and off we went.

There is a special quadrant of the time-space continuum reserved for weddings and high school reunions. I don't think Einstein went into detail about it and I can't provide a mathematical equation to explain it, but in layman's terms what happens is this: One enters the wedding/reunion space and suddenly hundreds of recognizable faces, each one sparking a different memory stream, begin to whirl through one's consciousness. The nearly mechanical consumption of a sequence of alcoholic beverages serves to speed up this swirling reality, until somehow eight hours have passed by in what seems to be twelve minutes. Now, if one were to be sucked into a black hole, one's entire self would be compressed, flattened, and stretched into a filament so infinitesimally incomprehensible that existence as we know it would be nullified. That's my understanding, anyway. The difference here is that when one enters—and eventually emerges from—a high school reunion, the only organ to suffer such a fate is the liver and possibly the higher-functioning lobes of the brain. That

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was my experience, at least, and I once again stress that you'll have to ask a physicist if you want a full scientific explanation.

I did survive with a few memories intact. I remember standing at the door of the restaurant, waiting to claim my name tag. I remember ordering a margarita. I remember embracing Mehmet, a Turkish exchange student who'd made the trip back. He'd been my senior-prom date and I'm proud to report that he is now quite possibly the handsomest man on the Anatolian Peninsula.

Most importantly, I remember several of our class's cutest girls walking up to P and exclaiming: "You're hot!" Victory was mine. I replayed the moment in slow-mo over and over again in the days that followed. Needless to say, P had fun, too.

The twentieth reunion went down just like the tenth and fifteenth: hot, boozy, and loud. Former geeks mingled with former studs. Hair was a theme. For some reason, 95 percent of the guys had goatees and receding hairlines. Almost every girl's hair had gotten blonder. Boobs were much in evidence and they were still just as popular as they'd been in high school. Some of the heavier kids were now skinny and vice versa. A few of our teachers showed up, looking exactly the same (this was a little unnerving). We were still a little embarrassed to be seen drinking around them, but our level of inebriation was such that we managed to get over our mortification. Fast. Many photos of adorable children were passed around. Many business cards were exchanged. I was harangued by at least a dozen people about the fact that I had not yet joined Facebook. When I told people I was working on a genealogy project, most of my classmates said something along the lines of: "My mom/aunt/uncle is totally obsessed with that stuff!" If my eighty-five classmates were any indication, Generation X had not yet reached its genealogical maturity. I'd expected that.

We danced sweatily to the tunes of our adolescence. For the class of '88, this meant a lot of New Order, Guns N' Roses, and Prince. I realized that I'd spent my music-geek teenage years convinced that



the music I loved (the Smiths, Duran Duran, the English Beat) would not stand the test of time, as the music of an older generation (Led Zeppelin, the Rolling Stones, Carole King) had. I was wrong. For a New Wave music dork like myself, this was a gratifying revelation.

As predicted, many interlopers from other classes showed up at our reunion. I danced for about twenty minutes with a guy who *really* loved AC/DC before it occurred to me that the reason I didn't recognize him was that he was a graduate of the class of 1978. With his shaved head and goatee, he looked just like every other guy I'd graduated with. Rock on. All interlopers were welcomed.

In some weird way, it felt as if all those mindless high school pep rallies had a purpose after all. Every class had chanted its superiority, trying to outshout the others. "We are rad! [It was the eighties, people.] We are great! We're the class of eighty-eight!" Why did we do this? I didn't know at the time and I don't know now. But it turned out that possibly we were better than the classes of '87 and '89, after all, because we were the only ones able to pull off a slammin' reunion every five years. The fact that our former upper and lower classmates were attending was the proof.

Seeing my old classmates was like reuniting with long-lost brothers and sisters. There were only eighty-five kids in my graduating class, so we really were a kind of family. We shared the same teachers at the same schools. We lost the same friends in car accidents over the years. We grew up together in the same small town and we watched that town get bigger and less affordable over time. We watched each other metamorphose from grubby little kids to preening teens to slightly wiser adults. And when we get together every ten years, we are thrilled to remember those former selves.

Looking around at my classmates in various states of embrace and exhaustion, I remembered one of the genealogical factoids I'd picked up recently: if we were able to play out every individual's family tree with enough detail, we'd find that each one of us has approximately four trillion twentieth cousins. These are crazy numbers: not only are

ey too big to comprehend, they also describe a population greater than the number of people who ever lived on earth (that's math for you). Nevertheless, the lesson I drew from it was the one I kept drawing on this journey: We're all family. Every one of those drunken sots at the reunion was a cousin—literally. During gatherings like weddings and family reunions, we enter a collective subconscious agreement to emphasize and cultivate those subtle relationships, which makes us feel even closer.<sup>1</sup>


The next day I tried to recount the happenings to my mom, who'd suffered through it all the first time with me in high school. She's attended her reunions at Cass Technical High School in Detroit, so she could relate to the strange mixture of delirium and emotion that overtakes these events. "I can't believe it's been twenty years . . ." I said. My mom shrugged. She believed it. At age thirty-eight I was finally starting to understand another important aspect of time: the way it moves faster, the older you get.

So much changes in one's first twenty or thirty years of life. And sometimes, it seems, relatively little changes after that. These new conceptions of time and aging were surely a part of why I'd gotten interested in genealogy in the first place. I was starting to experience the slightly desperate feeling of watching time slip away. I thought of the thousands of images and emotions I'd felt at the reunion the previous night. Very little of it could be captured in a photograph or even by writing about it. Genealogy, I thought, was the attempt to capture as many impossible details as we can. We focus on the big, boring details: birth certificates, marriage licenses, then allow our imaginations to fill in the rest.

### The importance of backups: Not just for IT professionals

I came away from the reunion and the trip to Michigan with a new metaphor. Our family and our old friends are like external hard





drives: they're independent memory banks reminding us of who we used to be. Sweet, caring, warm little hard drives. As we all know, however, no hard drive is foolproof. We need backups. And the backups exist in the old family Bibles, the stories of our great-aunts, and the moldering archives of millions of county courthouses, church records, and federal assessments around the world. Backing up is a life's work.

Almost exactly a month after we visited her, my great-aunt Selma died.

On a metalevel, I could barely believe it. This is *exactly* what genealogists are always saying will happen: there are so many stories of oral histories recorded just days before the subject dies. It almost seems as if interviews themselves might be some kind of a curse. But they're not. As a genealogist, you just have to be grateful you took the opportunity when it came.

That visit to Detroit turned out to be the only visit my son will ever have with that generation of his ancestors—the generation born in Europe. Shalameth “Selma” Yaffe Kratchman (1911–2008) was the only one left and now they're all gone. I took out one of her beautiful dresses and put it on, remembering her. And, I'll admit: the dress *was* a little tight. That made me laugh. I took a photo of Selma with my son, Jackson, on that day when we visited her in October. It's now part of the cosmic backup. But I should have taken more.

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