



YOU DON'T KNOW JACK

**Presented to Toastmasters
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I want to tell you about my friend, Jack, and his great passion.

There were his wife and daughter, of course, whom he adored. His friends were also precious to him—and he delighted in their camaraderie, well into his 90s.

But this passion was different

This passion was HOT. It was steamy. It was sweet.

This passion spurted and sputtered out of a machine, up the street, on the corner of Washington and Whittier.

This passion? The 7-11 cappuccino.

Jack LOVED it.

I hesitate to call the concoction cappuccino, because I believe the stuff that comes out of that machine is some dubious blend of sugar and chemicals. But, I have to admit: that brew may be fake, it may clog the arteries, it may singlehandedly cause an onset of Type II diabetes ... but it is undeniably delicious.

Jack introduced me to the 7-11 cappuccino about 10 years ago, and I grew to love it. Or maybe it was the ritual I loved so much: I would call Jack to let him know I was dropping by ... if his busy schedule was clear, that is, because even as a 90-something, Jack was a very busy man, whose little black book was filled with lunches, board meetings, and awards dinners.

Jack was very thin; at 6'2", he probably tipped the scales at 120 pounds. So, in an ever-futile attempt to fatten him up, I'd whip up a batch of cookies or brownies, run to 7-11 to buy two cappuccinos—one for him, one for me—then sit in his living room and chat for a half hour or so.

But first, we'd toast.

We'd hold up our paper cups, and Jack would bellow, "HERE'S TO YOU!" Then I would roar back—because Jack was nearly deaf, and nothing less than a roar would reach his ears, "THANK YOU! IT'S GREAT TO SEE YOU AGAIN!" Then we'd clink glasses—or the cardboard equivalent of clinking—and holler stories and anecdotes at each other

There, in that living room, over many years and hundreds of 7-11 cappuccinos, I heard stories about his youth, I learned all about his favorite subject—America's founding fathers— and I gleaned some great advice on how to run a business.

I always knew when my visit was over, because Jack would boom something like, "WELL, IT'S BEEN GREAT TO SEE YOU; YOU HAVE MADE MY DAY!" That was my clue that he'd had enough and it was time to leave. Sometimes he'd don his hat and follow me out the door with his walker, lean against the side of the house, and wave goodbye as I pulled out of the driveway.

I always felt a little sad leaving him.

Since his wife, Virginia, had died, Jack lived alone in the house. However, he took very good care of himself and always looked dapper. If you were to drop by MY house on any given day, you'd find me in sweat pants and Little Kitty slippers. That's as good as it gets for a work-at-home writer.

Not Jack. He was always dressed to the nines, and he often donned a tie and jacket.

If you were to drop by *my* house on any given day in hopes of being fed, you would be sorely disappointed. As a vegan, I stock up on cans of pinto beans and tubs of hummus—hardly the makings of a decent snack.

Not Jack. That man maintained a well-stocked pantry. And he always prepared a spread for my visit: some admittedly peculiar but surprisingly delicious amalgam of ice cream, yogurt, fruit, cookies, nuts, and candy, all served in a dainty china dish with a sterling silver spoon. And you always got a linen napkin with your snack.

I'd known Jack since I was 8 years old. He and his family lived across the street from us on Dickinson Avenue. When I forgot my house key, I would run to their house and dig the spare out of a desk drawer on their breezeway.

When I was lonely or sad or needed to escape my three bratty siblings, I would head across the street for cheering up and Virginia's to-die-for chocolate chip cookies.

When I returned home from college as an out-of-work art history major, Jack drove me straight to Trenton and introduced me to the head of the New Jersey State Museum.

I ultimately moved to New York to pursue a writing career, but when I returned to Toms River about 10 years ago, trying to launch a freelance business, Jack was ready to help again. He immediately called his contacts and got me in to see every one of them. You only needed to say the magic words, "Jack sent me," and you were IN! He opened a lot of doors for me, and I will always be grateful to him. He was a man you could count on.

The last time I saw Jack was on a Thursday afternoon in October.

I stopped by with the usual—7-11 cappuccino and homemade chocolate chip cookies—and was thrilled to find him sitting on the breezeway. He'd been sick and confined to the living room for a few weeks, and he was enjoying the change of scenery. My mom joined me—she brought him a giant slice of chocolate cake—and he inhaled everything: the cappuccino, the cookies, and the cake. He was happy.

The sky was blue, the autumn air was crisp and fragrant, and the leaves were turning beautiful shades of yellow and orange. We knew when it was time to leave—as usual, he gave us the signal that he was ready for us to say goodbye.

We kissed him, and then we watched as his daughter and the nurse wheeled him back into the house.

The next day he died.

I don't do 7-11 cappuccinos any more. But I miss them. I miss the ritual. I miss Jack. I miss those lovely afternoons of conversation and friendship—two people, generations apart, bonding over a sugary 95-cent drink.

I wrote Jack's obituary. These two columns (SHOW OBIT) barely scratch the surface of everything he had accomplished in his life.

Many people knew Jack as a brilliant, charismatic, and successful man.

I knew him as a kind and helpful neighbor who loved simple things: good company and a steaming cup of 7-11 cappuccino.