

# Quack and Dwight – Anthony Nominated Story – Travis Richardson

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### Quack and Dwight by Travis Richardson

I considered not answering when I saw Shirley Chung's name on the caller ID. We'd been friends forever, going back to high school AP classes. She eventually went to law school while I got a PhD in psychology. Last time I took on a client for her, he was a six-foot plus brute named Aaron. His junkie mother had dumped him with her abusive, drug-dealing brother when he was five. Shirley, the LA county prosecutor in Palmdale, was hoping that the fourteen year old would testify against his uncle, considering the multiple bruises he had on his backside from disciplining. The boy, however, had developed a paper-thin temper that craved for any opportunity to explode. I discovered this when he lunged at me and broke my nose.

I answered the phone.

"I've got an emergency situation and need your help ASAP," Shirley said without a hello.

"When and what?" I asked, opening up my calendar.

"We're going to trial in two days and we need help with a child witness."

My week was already full with my regular patients. Moving them would be an aggravating hassle.

"That's too soon, Shirley. You should've called me a month ago."

"We had somebody else, but he dropped out," Shirley said in an apologetic voice.

"Why?" That was crazy to take a contract with the county and then drop out unless there is a family emergency. You'd be blackballed for any sort of expert witness testimony.

"Personal reasons, he says." Shirley's sarcastic tone let me know that she didn't believe him.

"Regardless, we need you bad, and I've been authorized to double your hourly rate for an entire week, whether you're needed or not."

That was a lot of money, and I could always reschedule my patients.

"Tell me about this kid. Is he going to try to kill me?"

“He’s eight. You can hold your own against that, right?”

“What’s the situation?”

“We busted a meth cook and his wife several months ago. They had a trailer next door where they baked the drugs for a prison biker gang. We’re coming down hard on the kingpin, a shitstain named Jack Taft. Neither the cook or his wife will testify against Taft, but the boy says he saw him there several times and witnessed Taft giving his father money.”

“Is he the only witness?”

“We’re working on the mother. She gave testimony and then recanted. Somebody got to her. I’ve told her she’ll never see her boy if she doesn’t open up. If we can get her and the son’s testimony, we can take the bastard down.”

I was intrigued. “So Taft is bad news.”

“The worst. He scares people shitless. We usually bust his crew, but never him. Nobody testifies against him. Ever.”

“Is the boy in danger?”

“He shouldn’t be. Gangs, as lawless as they are, usually don’t kill kids. It’s taboo. But....”

“But what?”

“It’s the kingpin, so the rules are more... flexible.”

A little voice inside of me screamed: *This isn’t your problem, Ben. The money isn’t worth it.* But another voice, the side of me that stood for law and order and craved to be a cape-wearing-crime-fighting crusader said yes... out loud.

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I called my part-time assistant telling her to clear out my calendar for the week while Shirley faxed over a contract with my rate doubled. The number looked nice. After I sent a signed copy back, she faxed over several dozen pages about the case. Shirley called before I could start reading.

“I need you to run up to Northridge and see Dwight. The address is in the packet that I’m sending you.”

“Who’s Dwight?”

“The witness.”

Dwight. That was a name I had never run into in person.

“Get a sense of him and what he can do on the stand,” Shirley continued. “Then bring him up to my office around noon. Got it?”

Shirley hung up before I could get another word in. She had the diplomacy of a bulldozer and attention span of a gnat. Driving up to the San Fernando Valley was never easy, but the Antelope Valley would be a serious hike. At least I'd be going against traffic since I'd be coming from Santa Monica.

Reading the file, I couldn't help but shout, “Are you freakin' kidding me?” This had to be a practical joke, right? Had Shirley installed hidden cameras to catch my reaction? Dwight Adolf Lange. Nobody names a kid Adolf by accident. And the further I read, I confirmed my suspicions that the boy's parents were a part of a white supremacist sect. At first I pondered God's twisted sense of humor, but then the more I thought about it, I felt like this was meant to happen. I was helping the universe by taking out the leader of this hatemongering organization. This was personal to me. My family lost several relatives to a paintbrush mustachioed jackass and his nation of goose-stepping followers. Anybody evil or stupid enough to salute a Nazi flag will always be an enemy of mine.

Opening up my desk drawer, I searched through notepads, pens and business cards until I found the small jewelry box in the back. I pulled out the solid gold Star of David medallion and studied it. It still felt as heavy as the day I received it from grandparents on the morning of my Bar Mitzvah. I clasped the chain around my neck. I wanted to see how little Adolf responded to that.

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The boy's social worker, Nancy Gonzalez, met me outside of the group home in Northridge where the boy was staying. It was a typical two-story house set in a suburban neighborhood. Typical except for the police officer posted outside the door.

“That isn't normal,” I said, nodding at the officer scanning the street from a chair on the porch.

“No,” she said brusquely. I had worked with Nancy before. She was sincere, somehow avoiding cynicism that her work often breeds. A wave of resentment radiated off of her. “Children aren't usually called on to testify against known murderers.”

“The DA is trying to take that murderer off the streets.”

“Do they really need a boy to do it?”

“None of the adults have stepped up.”

“So the DA's going to use this kid for their own means and then throw him back to us with even more damage. Not much different from his screwed-up home life.”

I didn't know what to say to temper her outrage. She couldn't change my mind since I knew I was doing

a greater good.

“This prosecution has cost Dwight,” Nancy said, glaring at me. “Two foster home families sent him back after receiving threats. That’s why he’s at a group home with police protection.”

“Surprised anybody wanted him considering his middle name.”

Nancy gave a half smirk. “Definitely makes a tougher sell. But Dwight is unique in spite of his biological parents.” She touched my medallion. “Is this your way of starting a confrontation?”

“I want to see where the boy stands. If I’m going to work with him through this trial, he needs to know who I am.”

Nancy shook her head. “You’ll be surprised. Come on.”

The officer nodded at me as we went inside the house. Apparently I didn’t look like a threatening biker.

Nancy introduced me to the home’s administrator, Jamal. Shaking the beefy, yet kind man’s hand, I couldn’t hold back a smile. The boy’s family would flip if they found out their son was being cared for by a black caretaker. He led us to a small room with a couch, a few chairs and bookshelf. Posters with positive words and images of men and women exerting themselves by climbing mountains or running marathons hung on the walls. Nancy went over a few details with Jamal about me taking Dwight out of the home for the next few days. I gave him my best estimate about what our schedule might look like.

“But nothing’s certain,” I added.

“We’re all on edge here with the cops hanging around our door, motorcycles rumbling past,” Jamal said. “Sooner this is over the better. Not just for Dwight, but all of us.”

Nancy excused herself, dashing off to another case. Jamal stepped out for a minute and brought a scrawny boy into the room. He had a natural blond mullet ending with a rattail curl. His oversized Harley Davidson T-shirt, faded to gray from years of use, hung loosely off his shoulders. No doubt a hand-me-down. His jean shorts looked filthy. A white-trash Aryan dream. Yet I couldn’t detect an ounce of hate in those blue eyes.

“Dwight, this is Dr. Steinberg and he’s going take you up to Palmdale for that case.”

“What happened to Sam?”

Jamal looked at me, and the boy followed his gaze.

“I’m taking Sam’s place,” I said, trying to convey confidence and authority. “He had to go out of town.”

Disappointment crossed the boy’s face as he looked down at his worn sneakers. Let down by an adult

again.

“Hey Dwight, after this trial is over, how about you and me go out for some ice cream?” Jamal said, bending down to the boy’s eye level. “What do you say?”

Dwight smiled, giving a nod. Jamal patted him on the back and left us alone.

“Take a seat, Dwight,” I said, motioning to a sofa across from me. I wanted to know him better before we got on the road. See what I was going to deal with for the next few days.

Sitting, I noticed his feet did not touch the ground. For an eight-year-old, he seemed small.

“Dwight, you can call me Ben.” I reached over and shook the boy’s reluctant hand. “So how are you doing?” I asked in a soft tone complimented with a smile and open body language.

He shrugged, looking at his feet. I let a moment pass, and just before I was going to ask him about his upcoming testimony, he knit his brows in perplexed expression.

“How come you aren’t wearing a white coat? Don’t most doctors do that?”

“I’m not that kind of doctor.”

“Do you have that metal thingy to listen to people’s hearts?”

“No, I don’t.”

He paused for a second. “What do you do then if you’re a doctor?”

“Normally I listen to what people say and then help them out in ways they need.”

“So you’re a duck doctor.”

“A what?”

“A duck doctor,” the boy said, twisting his face. “At least I think that’s what Daddy calls them.”

“Hmm.” I made mental note about the father’s influence. The apple falling next to the tree. Wonderful. Although it wasn’t too pertinent to the case (the father pled guilty to manufacturing meth and was sentenced to 16 years for cooking over 10 kilograms), I wanted to know more about the bastard’s influence. “Tell me about your daddy. Do you miss him?”

The boy shrugged. “A little, I guess.”

“You don’t always miss him?”

The boy shook his head, looking at his scabbed knees. There was something on his mind. It looked painful.

“Why is that, Dwight? Can you tell me?”

Dwight shrugged, letting out a sigh. “I dunno. Sometimes he was mean. Especially to Mommy. But not always.”

“Can you tell me what you mean when you say mean?”

Although the boy looked at a bookshelf full of Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein, his stare was a thousand miles deeper. “Sometimes, he’d yell at Mommy and throw things around the trailer. Especially if he’d been drinkin’ or testing product with his friends.”

Product was the word he’d heard for the crystal methadone cooking in the nearby laboratory according to the report. “Was that all he did, throw things?”

Dwight looked down at his hands, twisting them back and forth. “Slapped Mommy sometimes. And... hit her with his fists and then kicked her when she was on the floor. He usually cursed a lot too.”

“Did he ever do anything to you?”

The boy froze, his little shoulders sunk inside of his oversized shirt.

“Dwight, look at me please.” The boy turned his sapphire blue eyes my way. “Did your father ever hit you?”

“A little,” he said meekly. His pale face whitened further. “But he spanked me more.”

“How do you feel about that?”

The boy shrugged.

“Did your daddy say why he did it?”

He scrunched his face for a moment. “Sometimes it was because my room was a mess or I left a toy or something outside. I tried to clean up, but he’d always find something wrong I did. Said he didn’t wanna piss off JT.”

I hated seeing children growing up with domestic violence, not knowing that life didn’t have to be that way. Not knowing that it wasn’t their fault.

“You know, Dwight, you should never be beaten by an adult. Even by your daddy.”

The boy’s face brightened. Shocked, I believed for a second that my words got through to him. That

would be a first.

“Quack,” the boy said.

“Excuse me.”

“Quack. That’s what Daddy says you guys are.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah, like a duck.”

“Hmmm,” I said, scratching my chin and giving him my best comical, perplexed look. “Do you think I’m a duck? I don’t seem to have any wings.” I looked at both of my arms.

The boy laughed. “No, of course you’re not a duck. It’s just a sayin’.”

“Oh.”

“But it would be cool if you really were.”

“Really? Why’s that?” I loved children’s theories on the world.

Dwight’s eyebrows knitted again. “I wouldn’t mind being a duck ’cause I’d go swimming every day and if there’s any trouble, you know, I’d just flap my wings and fly away.”

I leaned back, stunned with a lump in my throat. Damn this kid. He was breaking my heart with this sincere simplicity. I’ve met hundreds of kids, but there was something special about Dwight. He had some unique quality that struck me hard. Expecting hateful confrontation, I encountered something totally different.

“You okay, Dr. Ben?” the boy asked.

“Sorry, just thinking. Continue what you were saying, Dwight.”

“I wasn’t saying anything. Just waiting for you.”

I pushed my glasses up to the bridge of my nose and smiled. I needed to get back on track and do what the county was paying me to do. “Let’s talk about a friend of your family, a guy named Jack Taft, okay?”

“JT,” Dwight whispered, his eyes registering a hint of fear. Still he bravely nodded.

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When Jamal led us to the front door an hour later, I noticed Dwight’s face became rigid. He glared at the

police officer from the open door.

“Wait just a second,” the officer said, looking up the street through his mirrored sunglasses. He mumbled something into a microphone on his shoulder. In the distance, we heard the high pitch whine of a motorcycle engine. The officer motioned us to step back inside with his left hand as his right hovered near his holstered pistol.

Dwight shook his head in disgust. Thirty seconds later the officer, listening through his earpiece, told us it was safe to go to my car. I wondered if I should wear a bulletproof vest for the next few days. After we were strapped in and on the road, I asked Dwight more questions. It was going to take us almost an hour to get the Palmdale DA's office.

“You didn't like that police officer, did you?”

“Pigs are stupid.” He practically spat out the words.

I gripped the steering wheel, stunned at the hatred that he had not shown earlier. “Why do you say that?”

“That idiot can't tell the difference between a rice burner and a hog.”

“How could you tell? We didn't even see any motorcycles drive by.”

“Hogs engines rumble, rice burners whine,” he said with a confident grin.

Had he heard that from somebody or come up with this insight on his own?

“So you know motorcycles really well?”

Dwight shrugged. “I know a little.”

“What do you think about the police?”

Dwight shook his head and narrowed his eyes. “Hate 'em.”

“Why's that?”

Dwight gave out an exasperated sigh. “'Cause... they're not nice.”

For a kid who was abused by his father, neglected by his mother, and called “Little Shit” by Jack “JT” Taft, he was placing all of his anger on the one group who freed him from a downward life trajectory.

“Is this that because they arrested your daddy and mommy?”

He shrugged, signaling that was all I was going to get. I switched tactics, realizing he hadn't noticed my

medallion.

“Anybody else you hate?”

Another shrug from Dwight as he stared out the window.

“What about Jamal? He’s black.”

“I don’t care. He’s a good person.”

“Nancy? She’s Latina.”

He turned to me, his eyes furious. “What’s your problem? Don’t you know it doesn’t matter about a person’s skin color as long as they are decent?”

Dwight’s directness surprised me. I felt like an asshole, being called out for trying to elicit racism from a child. “Where did you hear that from? I know it wasn’t your daddy.”

“Daddy hates a bunch of people. Mommy does too. But Grandma told me not to judge people until you meet them.”

“Tell me about your grandmother.”

Dwight stared at the cars we cruised by in the carpool lane. I had read a little about her in the file.

“I understand she passed away last year,” I said in soft voice.

Dwight nodded, still looking away.

“I’m sorry.”

He nodded.

“My grandmother died three years ago.”

Dwight turned. “Sorry.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Know one of things I miss most? She used to make apple strudel for the holidays and pretty much anytime I’d come over.”

“What’s strudel?” Dwight asked.

“It’s a pastry. Flakey and sweet with sugar, cinnamon, fruit and jam. I’ve eaten other strudels, but nobody made them better than my grandmother.”

Dwight nodded, his eyes telling me he understood.

“Grandma made really good peanut butter cookies,” he volunteered.

“You miss her?”

“Yes.” His eyes glistened as he held back tears.

“Anything else you’d like to tell me about her? Sounds like she was a wonderful woman.”

“Yeah, she was.”

As Dwight talked about his grandmother, he filled in the blanks, helping me understand what made him tick. His father, Gerald, had only recently come back into Dwight’s life. He’d started a six-year sentence months after Dwight was born. His delinquent mother, Tracy, had dropped Dwight at her mother’s house for weeks at a time. From what I could gather, the grandmother was a warm and nurturing soul. It seemed like her kindness rubbed off on Dwight. Then two years ago, Gerald was released. He took Dwight and Tracy and stuck them in a trailer in the Palmdale desert.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, Dwight’s grandmother, his only known relative was killed in a traffic accident. She died coming up from the San Fernando Valley to visit her grandson. I sensed that Dwight felt responsible. The burden was too much for an eight year old to carry. The poor kid couldn’t catch a break.

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Shirley and her colleague, a young guy named Tom, sat across from Dwight at a conference room table. I sat behind them, watching. It was a risky strategy to put a child up on the stand, but after our brief conversations, I believed Dwight had the grit to pull through. He might hate cops, but he was honest. The prosecutors were going to test the boy. If it didn’t go well, then I would have to tell a jury reasons why Dwight could not stand as witness while also pushing for his statement from nine months ago to be included. Dwight’s identification of Taft from a six-pack of mug shots and his statement that the notorious kingpin had visited the meth lab several times led to Taft’s arrest.

Shirley started with questions about Taft being at the house and inside the lab. She provided photographs of the locations for Dwight to look at and confirm. He also reconfirmed he’d seen Taft paying his father and nicknamed Dwight “Little Shit.”

Tom followed with a vicious cross-examination.

“Are you certain it was Jack Taft, not another biker friend of your father’s?”

“It was JT.”

“Is there anybody else you know with the initials JT?”

Dwight thought about it. “No.”

“What about Justin Timberlake?”

“Come on Tom, objection,” Shirley said, looking like she wanted to throw a pen at him.

“You know they’re going to try to trip him up with those initials.”

Shirley scribbled out a note. “You’re right, I’ll have to define JT better on my end.”

They continued like this, Tom confounding Dwight with questions about his certainty of specific events. Dwight looked at me from time to time and I gave him a supportive “man” nod. Letting him know he needed to stay strong.

After Tom was finished, Shirley started over with her questions, trying to preemptively neuter Tom’s most potent inquiries. On his cross-examination, Tom came up with a new set of questions to boggle Dwight.

“How can you be sure you saw Mr. Taft give your father money in the middle of the night? Wasn’t it dark outside?”

I stopped Shirley before she started a third round.

“We need to get Dwight some food. He didn’t have lunch yet.”

“The kid is a champ,” Shirley whispered to me. “What did you do?”

“Nothing. We just talked.” I glanced to make sure Dwight wasn’t behind me. “We bonded over our grandmothers.”

Shirley and Tom conferred over notes, while somebody in the office made a run for IN-N-OUT burgers and shakes. Dwight came over and sat next me.

“You’re doing a great job, Dwight.”

“Thanks.”

He stared at point below my eyes.

“What’s that?” he asked, touching the Star of David around my neck. “I was going to ask you earlier, but I forgot.”

I too forgot about the medallion hanging in front of my open collar. A feeling of panic hit me. I looked over at Shirley and Tom, fine tuning their notes. If I told him I was Jewish, would Dwight flip out on me?

Would he feel betrayed and then scuttle the prosecution's star witness? I had planned to tell the Neo-Nazi spawn about my background, but I got distracted with his duck theory and all around personality. Sure Dwight believed you shouldn't judge somebody by their skin color, but he had blanket hate for cops. Would he feel the same way about Jews? A community of people with separate beliefs than his own.

"It's nothing... just something I wear," I said, stuffing the medallion under my collar. I felt an overwhelming sense of shame and cowardice.

He wanted to ask more questions, but probably sensed my discomfort. The food came in moments later and we ate non-Kosher deliciousness.

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We didn't leave until after 8 pm, when Shirley declared they were "bulletproof." I hadn't paid too much attention as I had spent hours chastising myself instead of watching the testimony. I was determined to tell Dwight who I was when we got into the car.

As we were making my way out the door, Shirley mentioned that the mother, Tracy, might be willing to testify.

Dwight's exhausted demeanor flipped into excitement. "Does that mean I'm going to see her?"

"I'm not sure, Dwight. I'm going over to Chino tomorrow to see if she wants to help us out. I hope so," she said, mussing his hair.

Driving from highway 14 to the I-5 we were mostly silent.

"Do you think my mom will testify?"

"I hope so," I said truthfully. It would take pressure off of Dwight, and I could wipe my hands clean of this case. I remembered the promise I made to myself. I had to do it, this case be damned.

"Got a question for you, Dwight."

"Okay."

"What do you think about Jews?" I tried to keep my voice nonchalant, but I'm sure it had some residual emotion in it.

"Why?"

I'm sure the last thing Dwight wanted to do was to answer another series of questions.

"I'm curious."

"You're talking about those people who own all the banks and movies?"

I was breathless. Dwight's racist father had already indoctrinated him in spite of his grandmother's best countermeasures. I felt the urge to pull over and lecture him about stereotypes. But I needed to explore further. Was there hate? "What else do you know about them?"

Dwight leaned back, thinking. "Well, Daddy says they're the people who killed Jesus and control the world. That's why he hates them."

"Do you know any Jews?"

"I don't think so."

"Do you hate Jews?"

"I don't know." Dwight looked perplexed. "I'd need to meet one to make up my mind."

I couldn't help the huge laugh that escaped my lips.

"What's so funny?" Dwight asked hurt.

"Nothing, I'm sorry," I said wiping tears from my eyes. Though I lost it, I managed to keep the car on the road. "Got a trivia question for you. Did you know that Jesus was a Jew?"

Dwight blinked twice as his mouth opened. His mind was blown. "Are you fooling me, Dr. Ben?"

"Not at all. Mary was his mother and you can trace her ancestry all the way through Moses."

"Wait, you're saying Moses was a Jew too?"

"He most certainly was."

Dwight rubbed the back of his head, flipping his rattail up and down. He was thinking hard.

"Can I tell you something else, Dwight?"

"If you want."

I lifted the medallion from my collar. "This is the Star of David." I pulled chain over my head and handed it to him. He held it up in his hand, trying to look at it in the passing streetlights. I turned on the overhead light so he could see it better.

"Looks cool. Is it real gold?"

“It is. It’s also a symbol of Jewish identity.”

Dwight did a double take as his eyes almost bugged out of his head. Then he narrowed them, examining me. “Does that mean....”

“It means I’m a Jew.”

“But... but you don’t look like one.”

“What does a Jew look like?”

Dwight took a few seconds, trying to recall the racist propaganda he’d encountered. “Aren’t you supposed to have a big nose?”

I smirked. “It isn’t small.”

“What about a big hat and long beard and stuff like that?”

“That’s a more strict, orthodox sect of Judaism. Most of us don’t do that.”

Dwight nodded, but it was obvious he didn’t comprehend what I was saying. Regardless, he didn’t hate me. He kept looking at the star, trying to comprehend it. I wondered why I cared about an eight-year-old’s opinion of me.

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Pulling into the Dwight’s neighborhood, the road was blocked by police cruisers. Firemen, glowing in the red flashing lights of their fire trucks, sprayed water on the smoldering group home.

“What happened?” Dwight asked.

“I don’t know.” I pulled out my cell phone, remembering that I had turned it off inside the conference room since there was no reception. Pressing the “on” button, I waited for the software to boot up.

Somebody knocked on Dwight’s window. We both screamed like we were in a haunted house. It was Nancy. I rolled down the window.

“What happened?”

“The home got firebombed. I’ve been trying to call you.” She motioned with her eyes for me to get out of the car.

My phone finally engaged. There were seven messages on it. Dwight looked unnerved, twisting the star in his fingers.

“I’ll be right back.” Dwight’s eyes widened. I pointed to his hands. “Hold on to that for good luck.”

He hinted a smile. I got out of the car.

“How did it happen?” I asked in a whisper. “Where were the police?”

“They were here, but that gang sent a decoy, popping off shots and getting the officers to pursue him. Another a-hole came through seconds later and threw the firebomb.”

“Is everybody okay?”

“They are. Jamal got the kids out in time.”

I looked over at my BMW. Dwight clutched the star, his eyes locked on mine.

“What’s going to happen to Dwight?”

“I’ve been working on it, but it’s late and he’s a high risk. Most families won’t take him. He needs a witness protection program or—”

My phone rang and I answered.

“Shirley, did you hear?”

“Yes. I’ve talked to Nancy.”

Nancy raised her eyebrows at me as if saying there was one more thing.

“I need a huge, crazy favor from you,” Shirley continued.

“What’s that?” I asked, realizing our friendship had been a one-way street for a long time. But it was that way with most people. A constant pleaser. A man who will make others happy, even at the loss of my own personal identity. I’m not sure if it came from anticipating my mother’s mood swings or from fitting in with the public school cool kids or combinations of that and more. I’d spent years of my life analyzing this fault, contenting myself with the argument that I could have much worse flaws like egomania or substance abuse. Shirley’s firm, yet cautious voice brought me back to the present.

“I need you to take Dwight home to your place. Just for tonight. I’ll get a couple of officers posted there so it’ll be safe.”

“I can’t put Rachel in danger.”

“Nobody knows about you yet. Please Ben, Dwight has bonded with you. Over grandmothers, remember?”

Although Shirley's manipulation was obvious, as I looked into Dwight's frightened, trusting eyes, I knew I had to say yes.

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When I called my wife, Rachel, and told her about the situation, she was less than thrilled. Yet she didn't put up as much resistance as I had expected.

"One more thing, Rach. Can you check the freezer and see if we've got in any strudel in there?"

"Why?"

"I'll tell you when you meet Dwight."

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I spotted an unmarked police car when I pulled into my driveway. Stepping inside the house, my beautiful wife was waiting for us in the kitchen.

"Dwight, I want you to meet my wife, Rachel."

I saw strudel sitting on the table, but she didn't mention it. Her mouth was open, as she scanned the boy from his blond mullet to his stained T-shirt and scabby knees. Dwight wasn't the boy she had in mind.

He held out his hand to her. "Nice to meet you, Dr. Rachel."

"Oh no, I'm not a doctor. Just a lawyer," she said, coming back to her senses.

Breathless for moment, I feared Jewish lawyer stereotypes escaping Dwight's mouth.

"But don't lawyers have something special about them?" he asked.

Rachel gave a wide-eye grin. "I have a juris doctor, but—"

"See you're a doctor, just a funny sounding one."

Rachel let out a snort. "I guess you could say so, Dwight. Come have some strudel," she said, pointing at the table.

"Like Dr. Ben's grandma used to make?"

"Well, it's not as good hers," Rachel said with a little reluctance.

"Nobody's as good as Grandma Steinberg," I said, taking a dish and cutting a piece for Dwight. "But this isn't bad."

“Of course it’s not,” Rachel said, giving me her “watch it” look.

“This tastes awesome,” Dwight said, after taking a bite.

In spite of the mullet, he had won Rachel over.

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After we put Dwight to sleep in the guest bedroom with the smallest T-shirt I could find, Rachel and I talked in bed. I told her more details about the meth lab and white supremacist background.

“I still don’t understand how he turned out the way he did,” Rachel said. “I didn’t detect an ounce of hate.”

“He had a special loving and nurturing grandmother who raised him during a crucial development period.”

“He knows we’re Jewish, right?”

“Yeah. We’re the first Jews he’s aware of meeting. I think we’re making a good impression for the tribe so far. We need to keep it up.”

She pulled my face close kissed me hard. Her eyes had a spark I hadn’t seen in years. She locked our bedroom door and dropped her pajamas on floor. Even though we had a guest in the room next door, we made quiet, vigorous love.

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Two days later I sat with Dwight outside the courtroom waiting for him to be called. Dwight wore a dark blue pinstripe suit that Rachel had bought from Macy’s along with a new wardrobe. She had taken the previous day off work and went on a shopping spree. She also convinced him to get a haircut. A maternal side had emerged that I hadn’t seen since we learned we couldn’t have children.

Nervous, Dwight played with the star medallion, flipping it back and forth in his hands. My grandparents had given it to me at my Bar Mitzvah. I thought it was too gaudy at the time, but I cherished it now even if I didn’t wear it often.

Towards the end of opening arguments, a sheriff’s deputy escorted a scraggly woman in an orange prison jumpsuit across the lobby.

“Mom!” Dwight shouted. He leaped from the bench, running over to her. The escorting deputy tensed, but then relaxed. Dwight’s mother, Tracy, bent down and opened her arms as far as her shackles would allow.

“Oh baby darling, I’m here. I’m here.”

They hugged. She pulled back her long unkempt hair and wiped tears off of Dwight’s face and her own.

“Look at you, honey darling. In a suit. You look so much like a man.” She gave him another hug. Her emaciated arms trembled. “Listen here. After I do this... thing in there.” Her eyes went over to the courtroom door. “They’re suppose to cut me some slack. I’ll get out in a few months and after I jump through some hoops for them, I’ll come and get you, all right? We’ll be a family again.”

Dwight nodded. Tracy embraced her son again, and I read fear across her face. Like she knew she made a promise she couldn’t keep.

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We waited for an hour. Dwight was anxious and so was I. He swung his feet back and forth while playing with the medallion.

“You doing okay?” I asked.

He nodded. “You think Mommy’s going to be okay in there?”

“I think she can handle herself.” I imagined she’d be an emotional wreck when the defense lined up all her prior drug possession charges and questioned her reliability. I patted him on the back. “Don’t worry either. You’re going to kick butt in there.”

He nodded and handed the medallion back. “This is yours.”

“Why don’t you hold on to it for good luck?”

“Really?”

“You bet.”

Dwight stuffed it into his pants pocket with reverence.

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When Dwight was called to the stand, he kicked butt, pointing out JT, even with his hair cut and beard shaved off. When the defense tried to impeach his testimony, Dwight didn’t waver, saying unequivocally that he saw what he saw.

Shirley was delighted, giving me the thumbs up more than once. At the end of Dwight’s testimony, the defense asked the judge if they could meet in her chambers. They were looking for a plea bargain.

We celebrated with milkshakes and burgers at Crazy Otto’s in Lancaster. Nancy called my phone.

"I hate to do this to you, but can you hang on to Dwight for one more day? I'll have him in a home or a foster family by tomorrow, I swear."

"That depends on what Dwight says."

Dwight looked up from the food he was stuffing in his face, a question on his face.

"Would you want to stay another night with us, Dwight?"

Dwight grinned with a mouthful of fries and nodded.

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When I told Rachel, she was delighted and proposed we give him a home cooked meal, considering he might not get one for a while.

"We ought to make it traditional too," she added. "He'll probably never get a Jewish meal again in his life."

Rachel gave me a shopping list and later that night, all three of us crowded into the kitchen. Rachel put together her family's famous raisin-and-carrot tsimmes while Dwight and I peeled and shredded potatoes for latkes. Rachel joked about "making a big tsimmes over Dwight," but it went over his head. We were also going to have brisket and matzo ball soup. I thought it was cheesy, but Rachel insisted on playing *The Fiddler on the Roof* soundtrack.

"These recipes have been with our families for hundreds of years, Dwight."

"That's cool," he said, shredding the potatoes. "At home, we usually have microwave dinners. Sometimes."

Nancy had told me that *sometimes* meant he didn't get any food at all. The way he scarfed down burgers, it was like he might never get another meal in his life. While I fried the latkes, Dwight asked if he could help out.

"Do you want to set the table?"

"Sure."

Rachel handed him a stack of plates. He took them to the dining room, a place we rarely used. Usually we spent dinner zombied out in front of the TV. Hearing a crash, I turned to see Dwight wide-eyed with broken shards at his feet. His lower lip trembled as his body drew into itself.

I stepped away from the oven. "Dwight, it's..."

Dwight shot out of the room. I looked at Rachel. She was perplexed too.

“Dwight,” I shouted, running after him. “It’s okay.”

He ran into the guest bathroom, locking himself inside.

“Dwight,” I said in a kind voice, knocking on the door. “It’s okay. We’re not angry.”

“I-I’m sorry,” Dwight said through the closed door. “I didn’t mean it. They slipped.”

“They’re just dishes,” Rachel said. “I’ll buy more tomorrow.”

It took several more minutes to coax him out with us swearing not to beat him over some lousy broken dishes. When he finally opened the door, the smoke detector wailed. All three of us jumped at the eardrum-piercing shriek. A latke was burning in the pan. Once the smoke cleared, we sat at the table and had a terrific meal.

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“So Dwight goes back into foster care tomorrow?” Rachel asked in bed.

I nodded. “Nancy’s supposed to pick him up before nine tomorrow.”

Rachel took a deep breath and squeezed my hand. “I don’t want him to go.” Her eyes were big and imploring.

“I don’t think we’re ready for fostering yet.”

“But if we don’t step up, what will happen to him?”

“He’ll go to a foster family or a group home.”

“And if he breaks another plate with somebody else, what will happen to him? Will he get smacked around?”

“I don’t know, Rachel,” I said with a lump in my throat. “This is a big decision.”

“Remember Bubbe Previn’s story? How her Polish neighbors took her in as one of their own while the Nazis carted away the rest of her family... my family.”

I gave a supportive nod, but her logic was apples versus oranges. “This isn’t the Holocaust though.”

“No, but it’s karma asking me to return the favor. That’s why I was okay with Dwight staying the first night.” She stroked my face. “Who knows, maybe this is the reason we couldn’t have children in the first place.”

My mind did backflips. We weren't atheists, but we didn't believe in an active hand of God either. Rachel's eyes had an intense determination rooted behind her unasked request. I've had my share of marital mistakes, but I am no fool.

We woke Dwight. Even though he was sleep drunk, he came alive when Rachel asked if he would like us to be his foster parents.

"Yes, please," he said with enthusiast nods.

We did a group hug. Tears streaked down Rachel's face while Dwight and I did our best to keep our manly emotions inside. We were starting a family.

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The following eight months after taking custody of Dwight was the biggest upheaval in my life. I've had some of the most spectacular life-fulfilling moments. Early on there were bumps as Dwight tested boundaries, subconsciously sabotaging our relationship in order to test the elasticity of love. When we talked to him about stealing money or intentionally not coming home from school one day, he admitted to not knowing why he was acting out. He was just doing it. Slowly we built the bonds of trust.

Both of our parents, at first reluctant to accept a kid with a hateful lineage, were won over by Dwight, accepting him as a grandson. Rachel pushed us to become more active with the local synagogue. Rabbi Levy and the congregation took Dwight in as one of their own. We celebrated Hanukkah with a Christmas tree and Dwight ended up with nine days of presents.

All the while, Dwight's mother, Tracy, was released, sobered up, joined NA, and took parenting classes. We never followed her progress because nobody thought she could make it through. Then a week before we were going to apply to have Dwight adopted, she moved to reclaim her son with the help of a lawyer. We were about to head out to a baseball game when Nancy called me with the news.

"After all we've been through, Nance, you can't let this happen," I said, keeping my voice down to a violent whisper as I walked into my office. Dwight and his new friend Alec were waiting for me in the living room, decked out in Dodger blue.

"I'm following the rules, Ben," she said flatly over the phone. She was too chickenshit to tell me in person. "I'm sorry."

"But who do the rules benefit? It's supposed to be the child, right? But there is no way that's going to happen if he goes back to her."

"Reunification between child and their biological parent is—"

"Nancy, stop. I know what the rules are and the motivations behind it, but tell me, truly, what are her

chances of keeping Dwight?”

She sighed. That was not a good sign. “We’re going to monitor her with weekly visits. And she has to pee in a cup every time. One violation and it’s over for her. But she really has shown progress and a will to turn her life around—”

I hung up, not wanting to hear anymore. I kicked a trashcan and let out a primal shout. While Dwight was ambivalent about his father, I knew he missed his mother. I remembered her strung out look in prison orange. She was no suitable mother.

“What’s going on?” Rachel asked, walking into the office. She still had on an apron from making a waffle brunch.

I shut the door. “We need to talk.”

Rachel did not take it well. She said something I never thought I would hear her say in a million years.

“I’ll kill that bitch if she takes Dwight away from me. I’ll do it, Ben.”

Her cheeks flushed, and her hands trembled. The savage look in her eyes said that she would rip the mother’s heart out of her chest with her bare hands if she walked through the door. She had bonded to Dwight like a sealed envelope. To separate them would cause irreversible damage. Rachel read to him every night as he fell asleep. The attentiveness that she gave Dwight, as he explained the minutiae of his day at school was nothing like I had ever seen from her before. At times I vacillated between parental love and petty jealousy.

“She has a history of drug use and neglect, Rachel.” I used my words very judiciously. “We should be able to win in family court, but it’s not guaranteed. A sympathetic judge—”

“I’m going to call Sarah Levine,” Rachel said, picking up her iPhone and scrolling through the directory. She was the attorney we were going to use for the adoption.

While Rachel talked to her I came up with an idea. A horrible, awful idea, but it could save our family. Save Dwight from a life of destitution. A life of neglect.

When Rachel got off the phone, her eyes were moist. “Sarah’s on it. But she says it could go either way.” She bit her lip to hold back a torrent of tears.

“Rachel, I have a plan.” Then I told her.

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Walking through the steel door, Aaron saw me through the glass at the juvenile delinquent center and stopped for a moment, squinting. Then he recognized me as an angry, surly mask morphed across his

face. It was the same face he had when he attacked me ten months earlier. That case for Shirley which only netted me a broken nose.

“What do you want, asshole?” he said after picking up the phone.

“Why do you say that, Aaron?” I couldn’t help falling into therapist mode.

“Cause of you I was put in isolation for three months. Cause of you, I ain’t ever gonna see daylight until I’m eighteen.”

“You attacked me, Aaron. There are consequences to your actions.” He was already on his way to juvie hall, when I had been hired to see if I could pump some information out of him for the county.

“You were talkin’ about my mama. That was none of your business to be askin’ about her.”

“I was just asking if...” Aaron’s eyes widen, anticipating an insult so he could go berserk. That wouldn’t help me at all. “Let me ask you something else. Do you like being in juvie?”

His eyes narrowed. He was ready to play ball. I was going to make a promise I couldn’t keep.

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I waited at a Denny’s in Palmdale. Sitting in a booth facing the parking lot, I had arrived thirty minutes early and watched the cars roll in. I was looking for a 1993 blue Pontiac Bonneville, that’s what Shirley told me Tracy drove. That was the only thing I could get out of her about Dwight’s mom, besides apologies. I got that information by saying that we wanted to make sure she wasn’t driving by to kidnap Dwight.

“She testified, so we made good on our promise to cut her loose on probation,” she had said. “Most of the time they get nailed for a violation within their first few weeks out.”

That did not make me feel any better. Ten minutes after our appointed time, the filthy junker pulled into the parking lot. I called Rachel.

“She’s here.”

“Where... Oh, I see her... are you sure that’s her?”

I squinted out the window. The woman that I had seen in the courthouse had been bone thin with stringy blond hair. If it weren’t for the county-issued orange, I imagined she would have worn a Jack Daniels T-Shirt with ripped up jeans. This woman looked like her healthy, professional sister. She had her hair cut short and bobbed. She wore a cheap powder blue dress with modest heels. She could have been a small-time real estate agent in a rural town.

Tracy walked inside, scanning the tables for me. I waved and she looked at me as a cloud of confusion crossed her face. She hustled across the diner, dodging customers and waitresses. Her eyes looked from me and then to the empty booth seat.

“Is Dwight here?”

“He’s not—”

She bit her lip and shook her head. I could tell she saw me as yet another obstacle in a string of disappointing life events.

“You said Dwight would be here, Mr. Steinberg. That’s why I came here. I want to see my baby boy. Where is he?”

The lie was the only way I could arrange a meeting with her. She looked like she was ready to leave.

“Take a seat and let’s talk about—”

“No, I’m jetting if he’s not here. My attorney told me to not to come here without him.”

“He’s with my wife,” I lied. “I wanted to talk to you first and make sure everything is all right before you met with Dwight. If your attorney were here it would be all legal mumbo-jumbo. I have to say, I’m impressed. You seem to have made positive life changes. Please sit.”

I waved my hand to the open chair. She hesitated, as an internal debate, no doubt, raged in her head. She had smiled briefly when I mentioned the positive change. I believe that is what got her to sit.

A young waitress came up with an air of unfiltered affability. “Hello, my name is Mindy, would you like something to drink before I take your order?”

“Diet Coke, please,” Tracy said in a low, apologetic voice.

“Can we get an order of mozzarella sticks, too?” I asked. The coffee I had been nursing was burning a hole in my stomach.

“Sure thing.” Mindy scribbled the order and left.

“I don’t have much money—”

“Don’t worry, this is on me,” I said. “Order whatever you’d like.”

Tracy picked up the menu with hungry eyes, not much different from Dwight when I first took him out to eat. This would be a treat for her. She suddenly paused and closed the menu. “No thank you, I’ve already eaten.”

An obvious lie. I wanted to insist, but there was no need to offend her... yet.

I saw Rachel get out of our car and start to cross the parking lot. Tension racked my bones.

"So tell me about your progress." I also wanted to know how she could afford a lawyer too, but wasn't sure how to bring it up.

"Gradual. One step at a time. But I'm turning my life around now. And I mean it."

"Are you working anywhere?"

"At a beauty parlor, and I'm getting my GED. I used to have a beautician's license."

"That's great," I glanced out the window again, noticing Rachel approach Tracy's car with unnecessary caution.

Tracy's Diet Coke arrived. "The mozzarella sticks are on their way. Anything else I can get you?" the waitress asked.

"We're good for now," I said.

After the waitress left, Tracy leaned forward. "Tell me how Dwight's doing? He's been okay under your care?"

"Things have been great. We lov... care about Dwight a lot."

"Do you have pictures of him?"

"Sure..." I said, fumbling for my phone. I swiped through several pictures, skipping snapshots of him wearing a yarmulke at the synagogue or wrapped in a tallit with my parents at Passover. I settled on pictures at Disneyland.

"My boy," she said taking the phone from me. A sob escaped her throat. "He's growing so fast." She scrolled through a few photos when the phone buzzed. I snatched it back, giving a curt sorry.

It was a text message from Rachel. I was hoping it read *mission aborted*. But instead it one word glowed on the screen. "Done." My breath caught, the machine we designed was operational.

"Mr. Steinberg...." I didn't want to correct her with my PhD title. Her eyes were glassy with tears. "It looks like you've done a wonderful job with Dwight. Thank you. But I want...." Her chin trembled for a second. "I need my boy back. He's the reason I'm sober. The reason I'm turning my screwed up life around. I need him if I'm going to survive."

She wiped away tears. Mindy showed up with the mozzarella sticks.

“And here are—” she saw Tracy and went silent. She gave me a sympathetic nod, and scurried away.

“How soon are you thinking of taking Dwight back? Do have a place to live yet?”

“Soon, I hope. I’m in a halfway house now. I had to sell the trailer to get a lawyer, but me and a friend are looking for an apartment.”

I saw in Tracy’s eyes desperate hope backed by petrified fear. Part of me, an emotional side, wanted to help her. But the other half, the rational, educated side that knew self-delusion and self-destruction were frequent roommates. Nothing good would come from handing Dwight over to Tracy.

“You know that my wife and I were thinking of adopting Dwight before we heard—”

“Thank you again for taking such good care of him. Once I get Dwight settled with me maybe you two can come visit him.” She grabbed her purse ready to leave.

“Wait, I want to ask you something that been bothering me about Dwight.”

Tracy glanced at the door, ready to bolt. “What?” she asked in a tired voice.

“His middle name, Adolf. Why did you name him that?” I held back from calling it the mark of Cain.

She sighed, leaning back against the booth. Her cheeks flushed while she stared at her hands. I noticed that she wasn’t wearing a wedding band. “I was about ready to deliver when Gerald, Dwight’s father, got arrested on his second robbery offense. He told me to name the boy Adolf because he knew he was going up to San Quentin and he wanted to get in with Aryans up there for protection.” She shook her head. “Selfish bastard from day one.”

“But why did you do it? He was in jail anyway.”

“He told me I’d better ‘cause somebody’d come and check.” She looked at me with tears streaking down her cheeks. “Sure enough, a big biker came out to see the birth certificate about two months after Dwight was born.”

She clutched her arms and shivered. Although she didn’t say anything else, I could tell the biker got more than a look at the birth certificate. I didn’t know what to say. I was speechless trying to comprehend what she had told me.

“Good night Mr. Steinberg, and thank you again for looking after my boy.”

I nodded. “Good night.”

She rose and walked to the door. I called Rachel.

“Has she left yet?” my wife answered.

“We need to call this off.”

“There she is.”

“Rachel, wait.”

She hung up on me. I threw a twenty next to the untouched sticks and rushed for the door. I saw Rachel’s clunker make a right turn out onto the street. I ran to our BMW at the end of the parking lot. Rachel sat in the passenger seat, the blue glow of a cell phone silhouetting her face. When I jerked the door open, I heard her say, “Please hurry.” She collapsed the disposable cell phone and glared at me with intense eyes daring me to defy her.

“Everything is in motion.”

I sank into the driver’s seat feeling like I had inhabited somebody else’s body. A dark, sinister man. A conspirator. A life-wrecker. I couldn’t believe what we had just done.

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We drove down the road in silence. Rachel had her chin jutting out in self-righteousness. I gripped the steering wheel, keeping my eyes focused on the road.

“Over there,” she pointed to the blue and red flashing lights more than two blocks away. “I think that’s her.”

I slowed down to fifteen miles an hour. Tracy’s car was pulled over, and she sat on the sidewalk shouting something to an officer who shined a bright ghostly light in her face. A K-9 police cruiser was also there, as an officer led an eager German shepherd into the back of the Pontiac. Rachel squeezed my arm.

“It’s happening,” she said in a voice mixed with fear and hope, looking through the side-view mirror.

I did a U-turn a block away. Coming back we saw Tracy, cuffed and screaming a fury of words at two officers as they pushed her into the back of a squad car. The K-9 officer held a bag in his gloved hand as the other gripped the dog’s leash.

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We were on the highway heading home, when Rachel let out a sigh, slinking into her seat. I tried to smile. As we got closer to civilization – Santa Monica, a place far away from meth dealers, filthy air, and tumbleweeds – an ill feeling crept upon me. We did the right thing, I told myself. We rescued Dwight from a fate of poverty and crime. A woman who had messed up her life. A woman who, even with the best intentions to turn her life around would probably not pull it off. And what would happen? Dwight

would suffer irreparable damages. Dwight, he was our boy now. I swallowed dryly and repeated to myself, *We did the right thing, we did the right thing.*

In the trunk lay a pile of Goodwill clothes I'd bought trying to blend in with the Palmdale culture, although it had not worked at all. Aaron's Uncle Lewis laughed at me. Lewis had said he would have thought it was a drug bust, but "the cops wouldn't send no candy-ass like you in here. It's too obvious. What's your angle, man?"

I had said I needed it for personal reasons.

"Personal enough you gonna pay out the nose for it, candy-ass."

Three hundred dollars for a little plastic baggie of clear crystal rocks. Three hundred to ruin one life. Three hundred to give a better life to another.

"Hey, Ben," Rachel said, touching my arm.

I glanced over at my wife. By the concerned line on her forehead, she had something heavy on her mind. Was she finally feeling guilt too?

"Yeah?"

"I was thinking, once we get Dwight fully adopted, maybe we can look at fostering a little girl. What do you say?"

THE END

"Quack and Dwight" was originally published in JEWISH NOIR. Edited by Kenneth Wishnia.

*Sharing is caring!*

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