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Jacob

...the swindler who wrestles with God

based on Genesis 32:24-32

by Ralph Milton

from [Is This Your Idea of a Good Time, God?](#)

Jacob knew it would be a restless night. He was given to dreams, to nights of tossing and turning, and waking in the morning not knowing whether it was a dream or a vision or a nightmare or hallucination or simply too much spice on the meat and a bit too much wine to drink.

Jacob knew that God would speak to him through dreams or visions or whatever it was that happened during those long and restless nights. Especially when things were falling apart in his life. Especially when he was afraid.

And Jacob was afraid. Afraid for his life.

It was getting dark and tomorrow would be a hard day and somehow he just had to get some rest. There was Esau, his angry brother, to face tomorrow.

Jacob was on his way back home because, well, God had told him in one of those dreams, or visions, or whatever – told him to go home.

Home. Where is home? He had left his mother's house fifteen years before, running for his life. Jacob had cheated his brother out of the family inheritance. When Esau threatened to kill him, Jacob ran before he could collect that inheritance.

Off to some distant relatives in a country called Haran. There he managed, through hard work and a fair bit of cheating, to acquire two wives, a bunch of kids, a bundle of servants, and who knows how many sheep and goats and camels.

Jacob had come to Haran with nothing but the shirt on his back. Now he was a wealthy man, but he couldn't go back to Haran either because he had also swindled his Uncle Laban.

"Where can I go, God?" Jacob demanded. "My brother Esau and my Uncle Laban are both angry enough to kill me."

"Go home," said God.

Jacob's stomach was churning. His head was aching. "I've got to get some rest," he muttered to himself, as he lay a blanket down over the sharp rocks and prickly bushes of the unrelenting desert.

The last rays of sun faded from the cloudless sky as Jacob dozed a little. Fitfully. Then fell into a troubled sleep.

Into his sleep or vision came a stranger, a man, a someone. And Jacob wrestled with the man, wrestled and struggled, hour after hour, straining for every small advantage, every muscle, every sinew stressed. And then the stranger reached and pressed a nerve, and Jacob screamed as waves of pain shot from his hip throughout his body.

But Jacob held on. Held on with every fiber, held on though his limbs screamed rebellion – held on, knowing somehow beyond the knowing that this was a struggle for life itself, knowing that this wrestling was a battle for his very soul.

"Let me go!" said the stranger. "It will soon be dawn. I have to go."

"Bless me!" Jacob screamed. "Bless me!"

Something changed just then. Jacob sensed that now the stranger's death grip changed to an embrace.

"What is your name?" The voice was gentle.

"My name is Jacob."

"What does your name mean?"

"It means...it means I am a cheater. I take what isn't mine."

"Now, Jacob. Now you are a new person and you have a new name. Your name is Israel – Israel, the one who struggles with God – the one who knows God in the stress of life. And not your name only, but the name of all your children, all God's children through the ages shall be known as Israel, the people who struggle with God."

Jacob stood to meet the dawn and screamed in pain. His hip was out of joint, and Jacob knew that whether it was dream or vision, he had indeed struggled with God, struggled with himself, and from the struggle, God was calling him toward a way of being he could hardly understand much less explain.

Jacob faced the rising sun, and faced the pain that throbbed his new name "Israel" hard into his mind. Israel, the wounded people who struggle with their God.

Then Jacob, Israel, walked limping to the future.

**Ralph Milton has written a number of books,
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