

# Life Lessons from Grandpa and His Chicken Coop

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A Playful Journey through Some Serious Sh\*t

Jacob Paul Patchen

This book is mostly the work of nonfiction, whereas some elements of the story have been slightly embellished or exaggerated for your reading pleasure. In other words, most of this crap is for real, but some of it is slightly blown out of proportion.

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For us,  
because we *need* this.



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## Chapter One Where I Come From

I'd rather not bore you right away with the simple geographies of where I sprouted from. Instead, I'd like to share with you a story that some old photograph recently reminded me of...

Just like you, I was a normal kid, with normal parents, and normal brothers (except for my younger one, he was a little weird). I had normal grandparents and aunts and uncles with mostly normal kids, which gave me, for the most part, normal cousins. And, I suppose, just like any other normal family, we would all get together at Grandma and Grandpa's house, bond, eat, laugh, and then us kids would go play army in the woods.

Now, for those who have never had the pleasure of playing army with me in the woods, let it be known that I am pretty much invincible. Matter of fact, I am invincible. I just have too many force fields, extra lives, and magic sticks. Yeah, I always had magic sticks.

But, there was one particularly special day that happened to be captured by my mother's Polaroid. A day where I decided that I needed more camouflage than just my usual Grandpa's hand-me-down fatigues, and whatever else we could pick up at the Army Navy store or Trader Days in Buffalo. On that particular day, I found myself sneaking into my mother's

room with slightly muddy boots, three toy guns, and two magic sticks tucked *not neatly* into my, probably new, braided leather dress belt. From her room, I peeked out of the upstairs sliding deck door, wait, no... no, I *scout sniper reconned* out of the deck door (probably on my belly, but I don't really remember), at my cousins taking their turn hiding in brush piles, ditches, and trees in the woods that is partly my grandpa's land and partly the land that he practically gave to my parents. I knew that if I was going to make it back to my one-man-team, this round, that I had to be fast and I had to be quiet.

I slid open the folding doors to my mother's bathroom. They creaked loudly, so I ninja tumbled my way past them and started opening drawers quickly, until I found the one with makeup in it, (okay, let's be honest, they ALL had some sort of makeup in them). I rummaged through the different reds and browns and skin colored compacts. None of these would do. I had to dig deeper. There had to be a shade of green *somewhere* in one of these drawers. And that's when my eyes caught it... a small tube with a green cap and dark green letters. *This has to be it*, I told myself. *This has to be Mom's camouflage makeup*.

I was fast about it, squeezing a large glob into my hands. It felt cold and pasty, and a little sticky, too. But, I didn't care. I *needed* it! I lathered up my cheeks. But that wasn't enough; I had to get more. I did my nose, my forehead, and my chin. Hell, I was as green as the summer lawn, and damn proud of it, too. I squirted whatever last bit was still left in the tube and covered the back of my hands, because listen... you can never be *too* camouflaged, you know.

I hid the tube in the bottom of the trash and even threw a few extra tissues on top of it, because when you steal make-up, you have to be smart about it. And, there was no way that

Mom was going to find out that I was there (well, except for maybe all of the smears and dots of green that I left on the sink). Then, in a *poof* of imaginary smoke, I was off, back down the steps, just as quiet as our cat while stalking birds. I made it across the living room, mostly ignoring the muddy footprints that led to mom's room; I'd be gone before anyone saw them, anyway. I threw open the sliding deck door, excited now that I was about to get back into the fight, into the fun.

And that's when I heard her... that wretched, daggered, sweet, sweet voice.

*"Jake?! Jake, what are you doing inside?!"*

*Crap!* I was busted. She was standing on the deck steps looking right at me. I froze. Closed my eyes, and for a second, thought that maybe she couldn't see me. But, when I opened them again, she was glaring right through all of my camouflage, right into my guilty soul. There was no way that I could hide what I had just done. So I lied.

I struck a pose, like I knew exactly what I was doing inside the house.

"I was just putting on some old camo paint from Halloween," I said, and then, tried to rush past her holding onto my armory of weapons tucked into my good belt.

She grabbed the back of my hair at the base of my neck (this means that I'm in trouble).

"Whoa, whoa, whoa... let me see," she insisted, stopping me in my tracks before I could dodge past her and fade back into the trees beside the deck.



Now, little did I know, but this green camo makeup of mom's had already started to dry and was turning to a pale, crispy, tight-feeling green. And she saw it clearly.

"What's on your face?" She questioned.

Not giving up completely, I looked down and mumbled, "Halloween paaaaint."

"That's not Halloween paint. Let me see it." She was stern and I knew that I was about to feel her wrath.

"Jake! Is that my cleansing mask you have on?!" She growled.

*Cleansing mask? What? No. No way! This is camo makeup! I thought to myself.*

"No, Mom, it's camo makeup. I swear." I said as she got closer for a better look.

"JACOB! That's my cleansing mask! Did you go up in my room and put that on?" She was glaring at me. I panicked. My brothers were in the woods; I couldn't blame it on them. So, I had to come clean.

"Yeah. But... but, I needed camo paint. So I went up in your room and put some of yours on. I'm sorry. I love you." (I always said I love you whenever I did something wrong, just in case they may have forgotten this in the heat of the moment).

She took it all in for a minute. Told me to wait right there and disappeared into the house for a minute.

I thought about jumping. It was only a few feet down. I could jump and disappear before she came back.

“JACOB! YOUR BOOTS!” She hollered.

*Oh crrraap!* I thought. It’s never just one thing at a time when I get in trouble. It seems that I’m always messing up in twos or threes.

But, when she came back out holding her Polaroid camera, it wasn’t anger that was on her face, it was a “get even” smirk.

I was confused. And, perhaps, more terrified of what that meant, than what a few spankings could have done.

“I’m going to take a picture of this and hang it on the fridge. This way, I’ll always have proof that you used to wear makeup, for whenever you bring your future girlfriends over.”

AND SO, JUST LIKE THAT ... now there’s a picture, tucked hauntingly away, in some old family picture book, of me, with my mother’s cleansing mask, *not-so-proudly-anymore*, all over my face... and well, *that’s* where I come from.

You see, we were each given a space in life. From the beginning, it has defined us and we have defined it. From our first cries heard by waiting ears, our first smile and laughter, our first wiggles, crawls, and falls into loving arms, to the very first steps we take... we broaden our space. And so it is, that the greater we become in life, the greater, too, does our space become.

My space began with turbulence. It was believed that I was supposed to be a triplet, though I was born alone, two weeks

late, and starving because the placenta had broken away from me. I weighed in at just 4lbs and 10oz. I was tiny, I was weak, but I was determined to widen my space.

From the moment I came into this world, I have been a handful. My mother's second child, kicking and screaming, I gave fussy a whole new meaning. From jumping up and down on the couch screaming "I don't care if I get another pankin'," to my mother setting the microwave timer at dinner because I refused to eat my vegetables... I was always getting another "pankin." To this day, I still can't figure out why she would ever want to have another child after what I put her through. But, two-and-a-half years later, she had my younger brother (and semi-honestly, I'm convinced that he was an accident). So, here I am, the ornery middle child of my mother's three boys.

The babysitters came and went like the flames on my burning G.I. Joes — they came in hot, determined, and left in a wisp of smoke. Although they were paid well, they refused to stick around for long. Looking back, I can't say that I blame them. I've been told that I was torture, that I was the very reason for so many childless women and for so many one-child mothers. You see, I was a toy and phone thrower, a ninja against my brothers; I was a hide and seek player when no one else was playing, and a disappearing act at bedtime. I was everything that my brothers were not, and every cause for the trouble they got into.

I was a tree climber. And, I don't mean that I would find the lowest easiest branch and just hang there, no, I mean that I would climb the tallest trees in our woods, all the way to the top, until they would bend, nearly break, and lower me down within jumping distance of the ground. I mean that I would climb trees, to climb onto roofs of two story houses, to hide from anyone who was looking for me. I discovered that it

was easier to hide from the babysitter if you were in a place that they would not go. So, at the top of trees and on top of roofs I'd sit — content in my orneriness, satisfied with my disobedience, and grinning from ear to ear when, and if, I was finally found. Indeed, I was a little shit.

I was born to a carpenter, a handyman, a business man... a hardworking man. My father started up his own construction company. He built, with his own two hands, the house that I would romp around in, that I would grow up in, and the roof that I would call my "hiding spot." Dad had a sense of humor that was contagious and a hand that would help anyone in need. He was a known and respected name in a small town.

My mother, by his side during all those softball games of my youth, and even playing together at times, would be his strength until their divorce. Wise, kindhearted, and as stubborn as her middle child, she worked in his office until she aspired to be a beautician. Both of my parents knew the value of hard work; passed down from my grandparents, this was a lesson that was inherited.

And although, my parents divorced when I was just a pup, right around the ornery age of twelve, they did, eventually, remarry two of the most amazing stepparents any kid could ask for. The same stepparents that would befriend me, take me in as one of their own, and treat me just as family.

I come from the Eastern side of Ohio, outside of a very small but growing city (we have a Walmart), my home not much more than two hundred yards from my grandma and grandpa's house, nestled between villages and townships, among the oaks, cherry, and hickory trees that plot our hunting grounds. I was born into a space of traditions, from family birthdays, family holidays, to family cookouts, family sleepovers and family love. We were all taught to love.

My mother's mother, Barbara (Marty) Patchen (the self-appointed mayor of Trail Run), is the coolest grandmother any ornery child could ever ask for. When I would hide in my favorite trees, she would come to the rescue of, yet, another panicked babysitter. For her, it wasn't hard to find me. For her, I would, often, let out a low whistle as she would walk by and pretending not to know where I was, only to go settle and comfort whichever babysitter I upset this time. She would tell them that everything was fine, and that I was in "that tree right there, and would come down now that the fun was over." My grandmother was a savior. She was the host of so many parties and sleepovers that me and my friends would have. Her basement was the second home to many, and many of my friends still call her "grandma."

My grandfather on my mother's side, Charlie (Whitey, White Dog) Patchen, has Slovak blood. He is a stubborn man, a kind man. He is the father of four daughters who he loves dearly and would do anything for. He spent his younger days tinkering on cars and trucks, most of which were for family and friends. Grandpa wasn't afraid to have a beer every now and then (and then maybe have just one more, and depending on the taste, perhaps another one after that). I remember he once had a shirt that read "beer: not just a breakfast drink." He certainly wasn't shy when it came to humor, though most might not consider him a man of many words. But, there wasn't a toy, a fence, a car, or something in need of repair that he could not fix. In fact, he helped build the chicken coop that is represented in this book. Grandpa loved to teach through his actions, through example, through love. And, *Dear Lord*, did he love his chickens....

When I reflect on my childhood, I can't help but to see the significance of what that man, his chickens and his glorious chicken coop had on my life. When I add up the wisdom of

my youth, I am bound by honesty, to give the credit that is due to my grandfather and his chickens. Yes, *chickens!* And, I'm amazed... I'm in awe of the path that was set before me by my grandma and grandpa's good grace and caring hearts.

You see, no matter where we've started from, we all come from somewhere. We all have a past that has shaped us and formed us into what we are today. Maybe some of us don't look far enough behind to retrace the steps that have led us to the path that we are currently on? But, when I look back, I see a beaten path blazed by love, support, and guidance. I see a path of traditions, of values, of morals, and character. When I look back to where I came from, I see fortune. But, not of wages and monies and capital gains, no, I see prosperity and value in the moments spent running back and forth between my house and Grandpa's. I see wealth in the family get-togethers and meals, where laughter and smiles filled our hearts and souls full of all the riches that we would ever need. And where I came from, will always be where I'm heading to.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Help Somebody, When You Can**

For as far back as I can recall, my grandfather has always had chickens. Not the kind of chickens that would just sit in a hen house and nobody would even know that they are there, except for the smell and random squawking. No, these were yard chickens. These were driveway chickens, patio chickens, garage, and when no one was paying attention... deck chickens. They were the type of chickens that told other chickens what to do. Grandpa's chickens *owned* other

chickens. These were free-range chickens. At least for a little while, anyway.

But here's the thing, even street fighter chickens with the meanest roundhouse kick around, lose a battle to a coyote every now and then. Hell, even a lucky raccoon could sneak through the night and pick off one of the unlucky ones. But, don't get me wrong, Grandpa's chickens were not weak chickens, I mean, not when compared to the other sheltered and pampered chickens in the neighborhood, anyway. As strong as they were, at times, they were just unfortunate.

So, it was my job, no, it was my duty, as the best tree climber in the family, to venture out into the cool dusk air, with Grandpa at my side, and climb those tall bushy pines to snatch those free-range chickens from their roost and toss them into the safety of the coop, with them of course, in protest, kicking and screaming all the way.

It would go something like this....

I would leave the safe dwelling of my mom and dad's house and venture out alone, with flash light and pocket knife at the ready, up the grassy, shadowed, corridor, surrounded by wild woods — wide eyed and ready for fierce deer or wolves or gorillas or lions or whatever else might be lurking in those Eastern Ohio hills. My mother would be watching from the back screen door with the yard lights on (though it wasn't completely dark, yet) making sure that I wasn't eaten alive or kidnapped, or that I didn't get lost in the nearly two-hundred careful steps and twenty yards of sprinting that it took for me to reach Grandma's front porch. And Grandma, God bless her heart, already in her nightgown, standing on the wrap around deck of their two-story country house, would be waiting with the deck lights on and trying to talk to me the whole way,

*“Jake... Jaaaake, is that you? I think I see you. Can you hear me? Jake? JAKE?!”*

(Yes, Grandma, I could hear you, but what fun would it be to reply?).

Grandpa, already in the garage, would be waiting patiently with my favorite greasy, hand-me-down, way-too-big, work gloves. How he seemed to keep his composure at the sight of me in my brother’s extra-large sweats, way-to-tight long sleeved shirt, and blue snow boots, is beyond me. Come to think of it, how any mother would allow her child to dress in that ridiculous get-up is beyond me. I assume, that one woman could only take so many temper tantrums before she finally gives in and says, “Yeah... go ahead and dress like a heathen; I don’t care.”

Well, there I was, dressed like a heathen with a day’s full of dirt in my dirty-blonde hair; ready to tackle the task of de-roosting these curiously clucking hens. (Look, in my opinion, I feel like I was dressed for success, “*heathen*” was in style for chicken grabbers back then, alright? Don’t judge me.)

Now, it was imperative that we did an equipment check before we started: boots, *check*... gloves, *check*... flashlight, *check*... pocket knife, *phhff*... *uhh*, *yaaaahh*. We were ready. Like two professional chicken handlers, we were ready. Like two long time pals about to go on an adventure, we were ready. Like two soldiers gearing up for battle, we were ready.

Grandpa would go first, and I would hold the light. The clucking turned to squawking as soon as we stepped up to those pines beside the garage. But, we didn’t care; we knew what we had to do, and this wasn’t our first rodeo.



His instructions were simple. There was no need to elaborate. We had developed the sort of silent communication that long time special ops team members do. We practically had our own hand and arm signals.

“Light ‘em up,” he’d say as he started to climb.

I’d acknowledge with a salute and a head nod.

He’d start with the lowest birds first, grabbing at their feet, stepping down with one in each hand. They didn’t quite care for it, flapping and squirming, screaming bloody murder; they had no idea that it was for their own good (and some of Grandpa’s chickens were a bit dramatic). But we went through with it, anyway, as he shuttled them, upside-down and thrashing, towards the chicken coop.

Here, is where I became the door man. I’d run ahead, with purpose, around the corner of the shed behind the garage and down the hill to the chicken coop. What good was I if I didn’t make it there before he did? When I got there, I’d swing free the door and prop it open with the trash can. But, it wasn’t over, I still had to manipulate the latched door on the fenced in area, (okay... okay... now listen, the first run was the easiest, but from the second time on, I’d also have to *keep the chickens in* the fenced in area, while he threw the new birds inside). This required skill — a skill that only Grandpa and I had mastered. So, from the second round on, I’d lift the latch screaming some made up words to the hens that were already in there, and open the door while flailing my leg inside, just in time for Grandpa to throw the overly-dramatic hens safely through the threshold, as I’d slam the door shut with perfect timing. Then, we’d watch them run to the other side of their Marriott, ruffle their feathers, and forget everything that had just happened as they would take to their own roost within seconds. We were fluid, we were smooth... we were as cool

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