Jack in the Box
November 27, 2001

Jack died the second time about 2:00 AM on November 21st, 2001. The nurse had finished cleaning him, changing the sheets, and adjusting his frail body to a more comfortable position. Fran and Wilma were left listening to the steady hiss of the oxygen and the murmur of his laboured breathing. Through the fog of her exhaustion, Fran felt a slight change in the rhythm of his gasps. By the time she reached his bedside they were shallow and irregular: finally disappearing beneath the white noise of the gas.

Wilma and Fran stood by his bed for a long time before calling a nurse, partly in grief, and partly in fear they would be compelled to leave. Their fear was unwarranted, since the nurse assured them that Jack could stay 'til about 7:00 am.

Shortly after 2:15 AM we received a call informing us that Jack had died. Dorothy and I drove to the hospital to join Fran and Wilma. Jim stayed behind and began the process of phoning family before making the trip to the hospital. John was the last to arrive so that by 7:00 in the morning all the family were assembled around his bed. Cheryl Black, the minister from West Point Grey United Church joined us and initiated the discussion about our next steps. She identified a number of options including some in which we might take control of part of the process. She recounted the experience of Art Griffin, one of her parishioners, who largely arranged his wife's cremation by himself. She warned us, however, that he experienced a number of difficulties along the way – mostly from officials and undertakers.

The suggestion that we might take control of the process came as good news to everyone in the room. Each time Cheryl tentatively suggested something we might do, someone in the family would eagerly approve it and often push it a bit further. As excitement over the prospects built, the nurse informed us that it was time to move Jack's body to the morgue. Once again Cheryl stepped in to ask for more time since we found so much comfort discussing our plans for Jack's cremation while he lay on the bed beside us.

We were able to extend the time only for an hour and we spent it well – spinning out our plans, occasionally moving to touch Jack's cooling body, and alternately weeping and comforting each other.

About eight o'clock, Cheryl suggested that we adjourn to the church to continue our discussion. We reluctantly left the room, but not before John inquired with a nursing staff whether he might accompany Jack's body to the morgue. There was some hesitancy on the part of the staff since they did not want him to be present when they washed and prepared Jack's body. In the end, John waited outside the room until they were finished, then walked with Jack as he was moved to the morgue.

Daegan, Fran, Thomas, and I stopped into the Safeway on our way to the church. We picked up bagels, cream cheese, fruit, and other necessities for a breakfast picnic. By the time we reached

the church everyone else was in the lounge. The table was set, the church kitchen had been raided, and the discussion continued.

As each new stage of the process was considered, and each new obstacle identified, Cheryl would head out to the office phone, make a few calls, and come back with the solution. When we worried about resistance to our plan at the crematorium, Cheryl came back with the news that 'Personal Alternative Funeral Services' in Aldergrove had been very accommodating to Art. When we worried about getting the transport permit from the bureaucrats at Vital Statistics, she returned with the news that Personal Alternatives would take care of this document. When we worried about finding a box to transport Jack's body, she informed us that Art had one we could use. He was saving it for another family member.

Everything seemed to fall into place. The one thing remaining was to get the doctor's certificate of death. Jack's doctor was currently giving a class and would not be free until 12:30. It was time to take a break. We cleaned up from our impromptu feast and headed back to the Shaver condo.

We were not all without obstacles, however. As we arrived at the Shaver condo, we discovered that in our rush, we had failed to bring a key. We had just about given up our search for an alternative way in to the apartment when I noticed that the door into the hallway was not fully closed. Thankfully, it opened as I gave it a pull.

Just after noon, Jim, Fran, and John set off to meet the doctor for the certificate. Wilma and I followed shortly to meet them at the morgue. By the time we arrived at the hospital, Fran was outside waiting. She suggested that we wait for Jim and John to find us, but I wanted to check the morgue myself. I knew where it was located so the three of us headed downstairs. By the time we got there, Jim's Volvo was backed up to the morgue doorway, Jack was lying comfortably in a cardboard box in the back of the station wagon, and John was deeply engrossed in a conversation with Bob, the morgue attendant.

This was about the third time I had heard John recount how angry he was when he discovered that they had resuscitated Jack on the floor of his bedroom. "Why did he have to die twice?", he asked. He went on to tell Bob how this anger dissipated as one after another family member arrived to a warm body rather than a corpse. In each case we were comforted by Jack's breathing even though he was unconscious of our presence. Bob appeared sincerely interested in the whole process we went through: our feelings while Jack was dying, our desire to participate in the handling of his body, and how this participation helped in the process of our mourning. I was touched by his confession that he had not thought of many of these things and of his intention to explore them in the future. What we thought was going to be a major barrier turned out to be one of the many blessings we experienced that day.

On his way to the car, Jim recounted his surprise when moving Jack from the morgue to his box. Instead of dealing with 'a stiff' he found the weight and flexibility of a sleeping body when they gently laid Jack to rest. We added one of his favorite blankets the box instead of leaving it bare.

Jim and John pulled out of the morgue service entrance while Fran, Wilma, and I returned to the Multi. We followed the Volvo across town and out Highway No. 1 on our way to the crematorium in Aldergrove.

By the time we arrived, Jim and John had already unloaded Jack's box. It was lying on a gurney next to the retort that was to be the next stage in his journey. Cremation is only permitted after a 48- hour waiting period, so we moved to a small room in the crematorium to discuss the details for the cremation itself. Cheryl had already warned us that if we wished to be present at the cremation it would have to be at 9 o'clock in the morning. Apparently cremation is not an exact science. Each body has a different size and moisture content, therefore it is very difficult to anticipate just how long the process will take. Thus, the only cremation of the day that can be planned precisely, is the first.

Once again, what we thought was going to be a major obstacle turned into a comforting event. Tony Nash of Personal Alternative Funeral Services was able and willing to accommodate our every desire. When we asked if we might be present as Jack was lifted into the retort, he took us to the room and showed us what would happen, how many people might be present, and what they were likely to see. When we asked if there was place for a small gathering while the cremation was taking place, he showed us the room specifically designed for such purpose. We would be able to use this room for the two hours that the cremation would take. As we signed the papers and worked out the details we could hardly believe our good fortune.

One final item of business was to retrieve the rope that Jim had used to secure Jack's box. Mr Nash was clearly pleased with the idea (although he was quick to inform us that he did not call it a 'box', but the more dignified 'body transfer case'), for he returned with the rope neatly rolled as a memento of our make-do approach.

Since it was now well after lunchtime we began to search for a place to eat. Across from the crematorium was a small nondescript shopping mall so we drove over to see what we might find. Three restaurants were available and we chose the one that looked warmest since it was a bitter, rainy day and we were feeling very vulnerable. It turned out to be a small Chinese food restaurant with a menu that can be found in most of the Chinese eating places in small-town Canada. We were very surprised and pleased to find that the food was excellent. As we discussed our plans for the cremation day it became clear that this restaurant should be a part of them.

We returned to the Shaver's condo tired but excited about our day's activities. The deep sadness of the early morning had been thoroughly kneaded by the many apprehensions and blessings of the day's events. As Fran so aptly put it, we were like a flock of geese migrating across the sky. Each time a leader would lose the ability to continue, by exhaustion or faltering of courage, another person would take his or her place, leading us in directions that we never felt were possible. In each case, each shift in direction, each burst of energy, was heartily endorsed by the whole flock.

That evening the photo albums came out. By the time we were heading off to our various beds,

couches, sleeping bags, and cribs, we were aching from the laughter, pain, and intensity of the whole experience.

Thursday was a day of recuperation. The storytelling continued, more photo albums appeared, and we began the process of getting the word out, comforting others, and planning for Friday. Each of us took on a part of the burden. By the time the day was done we had put together just the right number of people, the right things to say, and the right things to do.

Friday morning began early. We were on our way out Highway No 1 just after seven o'clock. We arrived at the crematorium just after they opened. Jack had been prepared for a partial viewing in anticipation that some of the new arrivals would appreciate this type of access. In the room next door many hands were busy arranging chairs, setting up audio equipment, preparing video cameras, and arranging flowers. Len began quietly playing music on the organ and people took their turns in the anti-room and gradually gathered in the meeting room.

About 9 o'clock the family members closed Jack in his box and moved his body to a position in front of the retort. We crowded into the workspace of the crematorium away from the quiet rugs of the meeting rooms and into the concrete floor and industrial ambiance of the furnace room. We could already hear the roar of the burners.

Cheryl led us in prayer before Jack's body was finally committed to the flames.

We moved to the circle of chairs in the meeting room while the cremation proceeded. It was our first semi-public event for sharing our stories and feelings about Jack's life. Cheryl set the scene when she recounted Wednesday's events as a testament to Jack's spirit. Fran led us with her own perspective followed by moving words from John and a short reading by myself of Jack's prayer at the funeral of Craig Miller. Jim introduced two songs by Leonard Cohen as reflections of his own feelings and those of his father's, and we sat in silence as they were playing.

Finally Gordon Laird got out his clarinet and with Len at the organ they played a moving rendition of Just a Closer Walk With Thee and Rock of Ages. After a brief benediction, we adjourned to the Chinese restaurant we had discovered on Wednesday.

Although we had arrived a few minutes before opening time they easily accommodated us and set us up around 3 large tables. The rest of the morning was spent eating, talking, and laughing – just the type of event that Jack would have enjoyed.

Before we left the restaurant, we were greeted by a staff member from the crematorium with a warm box containing Jack's ashes (or as John more properly reminds us – 'bone meal'). When Fran, Daegan, Thomas, and I arrived back at the Shaver condo, Jack's remains were already settled in their cardboard box on the mantelpiece and Jim was in the hall with a mop wiping up the water from the washing machine (since a pipe had burst). It reminded me how much Jack appreciated 'busy work', simple pleasures, family, and friends when confronted by a broken world.