

**Robert Jackson**

Where: Milton Methodist Church

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

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Robert Jackson, a native of Milton, West Virginia, was a childhood friend of writer Breece D’J Pancake's and the inspiration for Pancake’s character "Chester" in his story "Salvation of Me." In this interview, Jackson shares his memories of Pancake, from childhood to the last time he saw him at the Milton Methodist Church, shortly before his death.

This interview is part of a series of material related to Rick Wilson’s Breece D’J Pancake tour of Pancake and Wilson’s hometown of Milton, West Virginia.

RJ: Robert Jackson  
EH: Emily Hilliard  
RW: Rick Wilson

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Talking does not begin until 8:29

RJ: (laughs)

EH: Could you talk about the last time you saw him [Breece D'J Pancake]

RJ: Oh, well we're here in the church that we grew up in and it was a particular Sunday and I was in the choir loft and he was seated in one of the old oak pews, this church was built in 1912. And he was under the huge stained glass window that lends a golden light to this sanctuary and he was partic...he was always robust. And he wasn't heavy, but he was full, you know, he had a full face and you know, he wasn't muscled or defined, but he wasn't pudgy, but he was, you know, just normal looking. And I was struck by, not having seen him in 10 years, how emaciated and how gaunt his face had become. And of course, he was losing his hair and it was his hair--it was very golden still, and particularly in this golden light and his beard--you know, he was in his late 20s at that point. Maybe 27? And I remember looking at him, and just thinking he looked almost... I can't think of the word--ethereal? Uh, he didn't--you know how when you're in a light streaming in, and the person sorta becomes diffused in the light, and I was struck by how much he had changed since the robust young boy I knew who was 17 years old. And here he was 10 years older and he did not look healthy, and he did not look happy. He looked haunted. And I didn't know why, but I could recognize the difference, yes.

10:38

EH: Was that '79?

RJ: Well, let's see, I came back in '79 so yes it was. It was, it was right--it...I know Helen came into the bank on a Monday and she said, "I talked to Breece last night." And I said, "Oh!" And I came back to work at the bank April 1, 1979. Because it was April Fool's Day--you remember that. And so I--Breece was already gone on April 1st, wasn't he?

RW: Ninth.

RJ: Ninth? I think that's right! That's right! So this--anyway, Helen said to me, "I talked to Breece last night." It was a Sunday night, I think that she'd talked with him, "And I told him Robert has come home, why don't you come home, Breece?" And yes, within a week, he had killed himself.

EH: Wow.

RJ: Right.

EH: Yeah.

RJ: And I always had to wonder you know, I know anyone who does that is depressed. But did I add to that because you know, I'm "Chester the Shithouse Mouse" (quoting one of Breece's stories) and I was able to get outta town and come back. And I've always wondered--Breece didn't feel comfortable coming back to this environment. Because he was different and I could come back and go to work at the bank and enjoy the folks here and be a part of this community. And I don't think he thought that he could. And I don't know. It's gone on... Huh?

RW: It was April 8th.

RJ: April 8th that he took his life. And was it Palm Sunday evening? Yes, yes, Palm Sunday evening. So you know, that's just always been in my thinking that--Helen thought he would--she wanted him to come back and write in the house where he grew up, with his old typewriter bangin' around, writing his stories. And it was just a pipe dream. That was nothing that he could come back to.

EH: He was still in school, right?

RJ: I think he was teaching.

EH: He was teaching.

RJ: He was teaching, yes, at a military school.

EH: Okay.

RJ: Right, right. He had a teaching. And it's been said, Helen told me that it was over some girl that he was--had a crush on, maybe thought he was interested in her and that he was over in her house that Sunday evening and she came in, and she was scared because she thought she had an intruder. And then whatever transpired between them and I'm purely assuming all of this--she may have said what are you doing in here, you scared me to death, how dare you come in to...whatever she said and obviously he had been drinking.

14:06

And whatever she said, I think crushed him. And she was not returning his affections. And he went out to the tree. And I was always, I may not get it exactly right. But, "Don't ask why, just feel what I felt." Is that close? "Don't ask why, I killed myself, just feel what I felt."

EH: Was that on his note?

RJ: Nnnn...

EH: No.

RJ: How did we know that?

RW: We just did. There was no note.

RJ: No, there was no note. Yeah. Maybe the fella wrote it? In the afterword? Maybe--I don't know, it came from something. Right.

RW: From my dreams.

RJ: Is that it? Okay. And Helen, his mother always said that he would have this dream where he was shooting the rabbits and then they'd just pop right back up. That's on the DVD that I gave ya, and she thought that he thought that he'd just pop right back up.

EH: Yeah, yeah.

RJ: You know. Helen could never accept the fact that it was a suicide. And because most of my communication was with her, I didn't know until the book came out and I read the foreword and the afterword that it truly was a suicide. You know, we had a funeral and a Roman Catholic was in charge of the service, and I didn't know that he'd killed himself. Right, yeah. For years until the book was published. How long did it take for her to do that?

RW: '83 it came out.

RJ: I was thinking it was--yes, so 4 years? Yeah.

EH: Could you talk about reading the book and especially, what is it? "Salvation of Me"?

RJ: Mmhm. Right.

EH: Yeah.

RJ: Well it was January and it was a bleak midwinter and I, Helen gave me a copy of the book and so I persevered. I, it was very, very depressing. And because I knew those people that he wrote of, those people who had no hope of ever having anything better than what he described. And I couldn't think of anything that would help them. Anyway, it was hard to get through, but I made my... so then you know, about 2/3rds of the way through the book is this story called, "The Salvation of Me." And it starts out, I can't really talk about it in the church, but "Chester wasn't any ordinary [shithouse] mouse, he got out while the gettin' was good," and it talks about somewhere in the story about, he

could sing and dance and had gone I think to "Chicago that toddlin' town." And it was obviously me! (laughs) And anyway, as I read on, you know, Chester isn't a very nice person. And I thought, Oh! So when I saw Helen at some point in the bank, I said, "Helen, am I Chester?" and she said, "Yes." And I said did Breece really hate me? "Oh no, Robert, Breece loved you. That was the fiction." And I always thought Breece, maybe he didn't resent me, but he didn't have, I don't think he had a great deal of respect for the person that I was. I was as I said, more social, I enjoyed being with people, I also enjoyed being by myself. But you know, I could rally with the troops and, and I don't think he could. And that that might have been sometimes hard on him, since we had been so much of the same ilk as children, then to see me be able to do some things socially that he did not want to do. He didn't want to participate in MYF [Methodist Youth Fellowship] and he didn't want to do... and I guess we can talk about it here. In later years, we've come to know that his father was an alcoholic. And my father was an alcoholic. And there are times in those types of households, when things happen that you know, we weren't aware of at the time. I didn't know what he might have been, what type of abuse he might have had at the hands of an alcoholic father. You know? I was fortunate with my dad. He always got up and went to work and he came home in the evening and after dinner he went to the barn. And when he came back from the barn, he pretty much laid on the couch with US News and World Report and went to bed. But as the disease progressed, he did, but I was out of the household, when my father's downward spiral got out of control. And I'm afraid that Breece was a victim of things that were probably not very pleasant and I'm sure shaped him and you know, let's face it, it's genetic--that addictive personality. And Breece evidentially became quite a drinker as, in his 20s. And I don't really know the extent of it, but he did not look healthy, at you know, at 27 and that does something to your mind too, after a fashion.

20:06

If you're not getting proper nutrition and all you're doing is drinking your calories, it's not going to lead to a healthy thinking process, is it? Well obviously, he decided he'd rather be dead. Mmm!

EH: I was having some mic difficulties--could you talk about the childhood a little bit more, you don't have to tell that story, but (laughs) but I would like to--I don't think I got the story with the seeing him emerge on the hill with the headband.

RJ: Oh okay, yes. I can remember once we were in high school on a Sunday afternoon, I was in my bedroom looking out the window at the hills. And at this point the interstate had been cut through the middle of our hills. And I could see Breece on the other side of the interstate climbing the hill to the woods. And he had a walking stick and cut from, you know, just wood. Not anything that had been fashioned into a walking stick. It was a tree branch. And a red bandana tied around his head, his forehead, and sort of like a sweat band, and just an army fatigue jacket of some sort and you know, back in that day, we wanted to have a cool looking coat on, or jacket. We weren't--that's before it was cool to be walking around in army fatigues and camouflage, and I just looked at him up there and I thought, you are definitely marching to a different drummer. Because nobody was climbing the hillsides period, in their teen spells, and much less with a walking stick and a red bandana looking like something you know, out of a history book from the 1800s. But this was the world he was living in and that's where he enjoyed seeing himself as he crossed the great frontier. (laughs)

22:19

EH: Right, right.

RJ: Meanwhile I was just hanging out in my bedroom, probably talking to some other teenager on the phone, you know, about what had been going on that week. And it was just a different approach to life than what most of us were doing in the 60s.

EH: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

RJ: I can't think of anything. You, what do you do with this, just sorta...

EH: Well it'll go into our archive and then that goes to WVU and I have a release form you can review, if you agree. (laughs)

RJ: Okay.

EH: But why don't I have you introduce yourself again so we have it. Tell me who you are, where you're from, when you were born.

RJ: Okay, again, I'm Robert Jackson and I was born May 1, 1951 in Milton, West Virginia. And lived all of my growing up years in this small town of 2,500, where Breece Pancake and I went to the same United Methodist Church and participated in those type of activities as young children. And graduated from high school in 1969 and Breece was the next year in 1970. So that was the years I was really involved in Breece's life. Right.

EH: Thanks so much.

RJ: Well, that's not something we do every day, is it?

EH: Right!

23:44

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END OF INTERVIEW