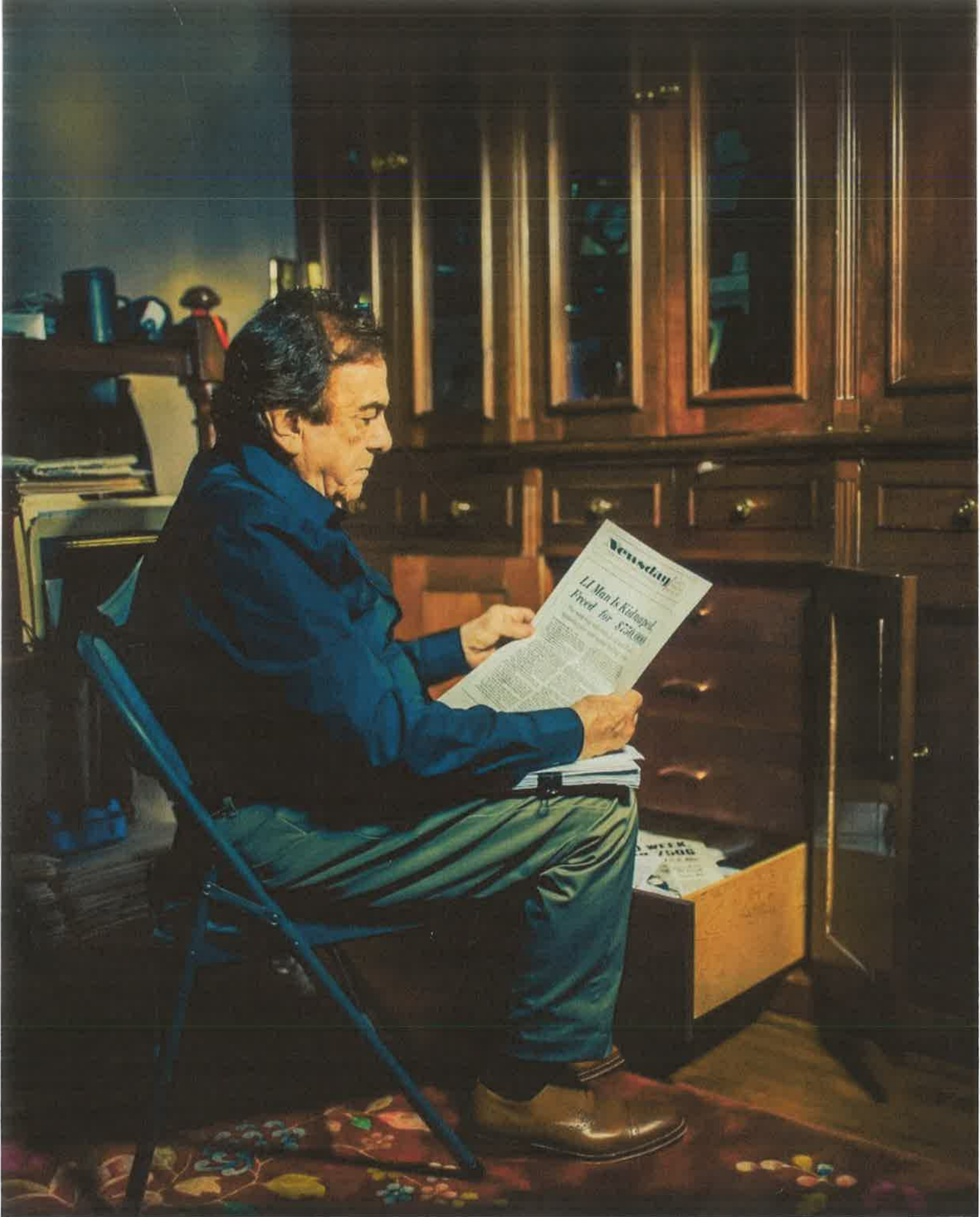


Jack Teich at his home in June. Dina Litovsky for The New York Times



Teich has file cabinets and drawers full of newspaper clippings and other materials about his ordeal. Dina

The Kidnapping I Can't Escape

Fifty years ago, my father's friend was taken at gunpoint on Long Island. Then he went on with his life — and that's the part that haunts me.



By Taffy Brodesser-Akner

Taffy Brodesser-Akner is a staff writer for the magazine. The kidnapping that begins her new novel, "Long Island Compromise," was inspired by the Jack Teich kidnapping in 1974.

July 7, 2024

On Nov. 12, 1974, my father's childhood friend Jack Teich was kidnapped out of his driveway in the nicest part of the nicest part of Long Island. He was arriving home from work at Acme Steel Partition and Door, the steel-fabrication company that his family owned in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. It was 6:40 p.m., and it was raining. He pulled up to the house and killed the engine of his Lincoln coupe but saw that the white exterior of the garage door still glowed even though he had turned his high beams off. He twisted around in the driver's seat and saw another car in the driveway, its headlights blinding him.

"Excuse me," a man called. He was now outside the car, but Jack could see him only in silhouette because of how bright the headlights were. "You know how to get to Northern Boulevard?"

Jack stepped out of his car. He was surprised. His street was so far off the commuter path that it would be hard to get lost and end up there looking for Northern Boulevard. In fact, when Jack saw headlights in his rearview mirror as he approached the house that night, he thought how strange and rare it was to be on that same road with anyone.

"Excuse me?" Jack asked.

But now the man was approaching. As he grew closer, Jack saw that he was wearing a ski mask and holding a long-barrel silver pistol. That's when he also saw a second man, taller, this one holding a shotgun and also wearing a ski mask.

"You're coming with us," the first man said. "Get over here or we're going to blow your head off!"

Jack froze for a moment. He considered running behind the house, into the thicket of trees there, but he thought about his wife, Janet, and his two small sons, 6-year-old Marc and 2-year-old Michael, who were in the house right then, how running might put them in danger.

But there was no time to think it through. The first man had already grabbed Jack and was hustling him into the car. One of the men pushed Jack into the back seat and forced him to lie down. They put handcuffs on his wrists and removed his glasses, mashing some kind of putty over his eyes, followed by a different pair of glasses. There was a can of gasoline on the floor of the back seat — the last thing he saw before they blocked out his vision — and when Jack was forced to lie down, its stench filled his nostrils. Someone put a large sheet of cardboard over his body and shut the door.

They asked him his name. He told them it was Jack. "Jack Teich, right?" one of them asked — the only one who would speak to him from then on. Then he said, "You're a Jew, right?" Jack replied that he was and grew even more scared because it was not good news then (or, really, any time in history) to be asked that question. Eventually the car stopped, and the men pulled him out and directed him down a path, then up a bunch of steps. He remembers a lock, then another lock, then the sound his dress shoes made on the floor. They searched his pockets and put him into what he thinks must have been a closet — his head hit what felt like a wire hanger. The men wrapped chains around his legs and neck and padlocked them to some sort of hook on the closet wall. One of them dug the putty out of Jack's eyes and then wrapped an adhesive bandage around his head.

The main kidnapper began interrogating him. He wanted the names, birthdays, addresses and phone numbers of his family members. He wanted to know how much money was in the family business. He asked how payroll worked. He asked about profits and unions and the company's real estate holdings.

He asked Jack what he owned: art, cars, buildings. He asked where he vacationed, if he had maids or a butler. He asked what kind of stocks he had, if he had a mortgage. He asked how much Jack donated to the Jewish Defense League. (The answer: nothing.) He berated Jack for hours about the plight of the Palestinians, ranting that the Jews were going to kill Yasir Arafat, the P.L.O. leader. He ranted further about "Jewish slumlords" but veered into non sequiturs: "Your money is going overseas to buy food for poor people!" He told Jack he had a Ph.D. He told him he had nine children. The man was organized and depraved. He was smart and completely nuts.

The kidnapper forced him to record an audio message, which began like this: "I'm in a place where there's no escape from. The group is serious, and they mean what they say. Janet, don't call the police."

On the second night Jack was gone, Janet received a call from someone demanding a ransom of \$750,000 and promising to call again with details. The next night, the caller told Janet to tell Jack's brother Buddy to go to the Exxon station near his house in Westchester and check the trash can there. There, in a vinyl bag, Buddy found a few of Jack's personal items, a tape of the recording he made and a letter of instruction that told them how to divide the money: old bills, not in sequence, unmarked and unrecorded.

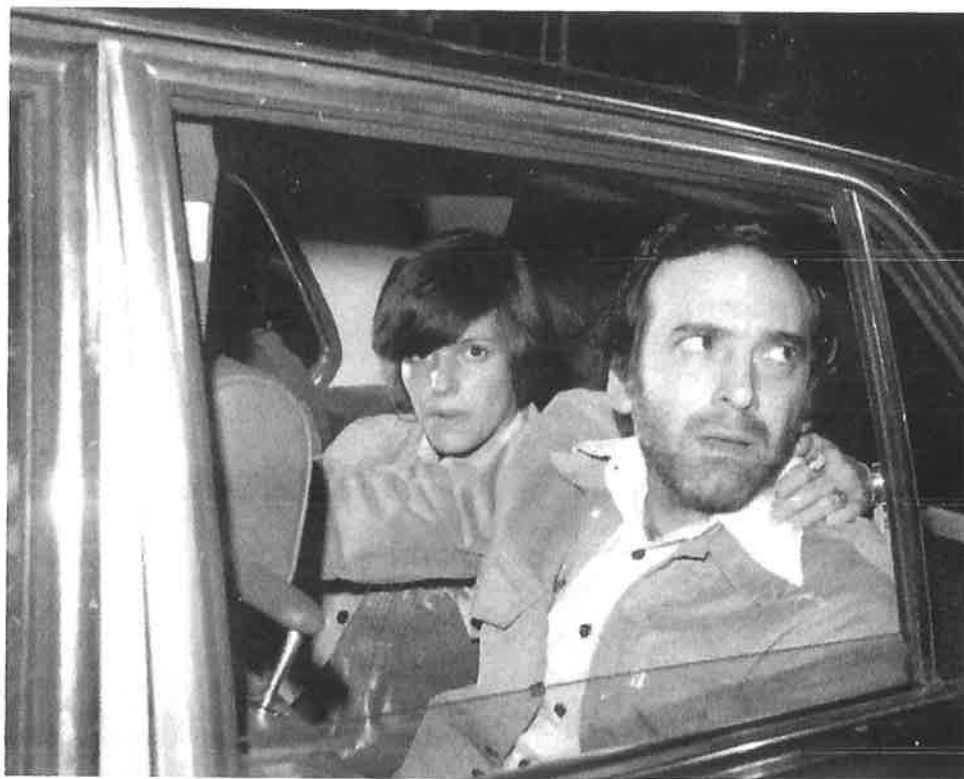
On Tuesday, Nov. 19, a week after Jack first disappeared, Janet and Buddy drove to the city with agents in cars behind them and a surveillance helicopter above them. They arrived at a telephone bank in Times Square at 6:30 p.m., as instructed. From there, a series of phone calls sent them scrambling to several different phone booths and eventually down into Penn Station and then toward a locker — Penn Station used to provide lockers — to drop the money there.

Here was the problem, other than the main problem, which was that two terrified, exhausted civilians from the suburbs were doing a ransom drop for a violent lunatic criminal: There were dozens of F.B.I. agents and police officers and detectives swirling around the drop. But underground at Penn Station, Janet and Buddy's two-way radios stopped working, and chaos ensued. Buddy accidentally put the bag

of money in the wrong locker. The man on the phone told Janet that Buddy couldn't be trusted. After another series of calls at different booths, Buddy and Janet corrected the mistake and finally got a call telling them they had done a good job and to go home. In the chaos, the bag man got away.

Some time later, Jack was yanked out of the closet. The main kidnapper told him that, though they had strongly considered killing him, they had decided it was better to send him home so that he could tell the world about the plight of poor people, as he'd been lectured about. He told Jack they would be watching him. They put wax in his ears and bandages over his eyes and black shoe polish on his face. Then they stuffed him back into a car and dumped him just off the Belt Parkway. Jack staggered to the Jade East Motel, right near John F. Kennedy airport, and he called home.

He was picked up a few minutes later and taken directly to the F.B.I.'s Manhattan headquarters on East 69th Street, where he remained through the night for debriefing. Janet eventually arrived, and by the time the Teiches left in the morning, the entirety of the New York press was outside, waiting for him. The pictures published in The Daily News and elsewhere the next day show him and Janet, shellshocked but intact. A miracle.



Jack Teich with his wife, Janet, leaving the New York headquarters of the F.B.I. on Nov. 20, 1974, after an overnight debriefing following his release. Charles Ruppmann/New York Daily News, via Getty Images

Jack was home safe. He had survived his kidnapping. But the actual kidnapping is not what this story is about, if you can believe it. It's about surviving what you survived, which is also known as the rest of your life.

After Jack's return, the Teiches moved on. They stayed in their home in Kings Point, determined not to further destabilize the children. Jack went back to work. The kids went back to school. They didn't talk about the kidnapping. It wasn't a factor in their lives. How much did the kidnapping not hover over them? Well, eventually, several years after the incident, Jack and Janet welcomed a third child: Jaime, a daughter. Jaime did not know her father was kidnapped until she was 13. She found out one day when she was sitting at the kitchen table, reading a young-adult novel called "The Face on the Milk Carton." It was a book I remember everyone our age range reading at the time, about a teenage girl who sees her own face on a milk carton, marked as a missing person, and begins to realize that she is not being raised by her biological parents. Jaime remarked to her mother how scary the premise was to her, and Janet looked up and said, "I have to tell you something." That's how little the kidnapping loomed.

Then, a few years ago, Jack was at a dinner with some people from a professional association he belongs to when this question went around: If you were to write a book about your life, what would you call it? Jack knew the answer immediately: "I'd call it 'Operation Jacknap,'" he said. Jacknap was the name that the F.B.I. had given Jack's case.

The table greeted this with silence. Jack was almost 80 by then. He had rarely talked in public or even in private about his experience. Most of the people there had no idea he had even been kidnapped. Maybe some of them remembered the news story, but how do you bring that up? Also, how do you square a kidnapping with the prosperous, flourishing factory owner and proud family man that he so clearly was?

You see, Jack was *fine*. He was better than fine. He was successful — an emblem of a dream that his ancestors just two generations back couldn't have even known how to dream about. His business was thriving. He was healthy. His family traveled. They collected art. They educated their children.

Look at what a person can endure and end up totally great. The Teiches walked in lock step toward a bright future that was, and is, the Jewish dream of America. Can you imagine? Can you imagine that you could go through that and end up fine?

I've known the Teiches my whole life. My father grew up with Janet and her brother, Richard, in Great Neck, the township that Kings Point is part of. Jack was a few years older, but he, too, grew up in Great Neck, right across the street from Janet. As an adult, my father was at the forefront of the baffling new world of business computing in the 1980s, and Jack hired him as a consultant for Acme, where he automated and streamlined the company's manufacturing systems. I would go to Greenpoint to work with him sometimes, and Jack was always nice to me, giving me small tasks like shredding old documents that probably didn't need to be shredded. He wore suits and took charge and commanded respect and came to define "businessman" in my mind. Also, he looked to me like Neil Diamond. We had a Neil Diamond album at home, and I spent some time when I was 5 or 6 thinking that it was Jack on the cover of that album, that he had this whole other life.

I grew up, my father left Acme and I rarely saw the Teiches. Marc, the eldest son, and I found each other again as adults. He's a few years older than I am, and when I graduated from college and got my first job, he was already living in the city, married with a child. In 2001, I was let go from my job at a soap-opera magazine (yes), and the next day, he called up to my apartment and told me to come downstairs. He drove me to Stew Leonard's in his convertible and bought me a refrigerator full of groceries and gave me a summer job doing data entry at Acme for \$500 a week, which allowed me to start writing freelance articles, which allowed me to eventually end up here, doing this.

Marc and I stayed in warm touch. Then, several years ago, I texted him to ask if we could get together. Marc responded immediately and said that, actually, he had been about to reach out to *me*, and he and his father would love to meet up.

We met near Bryant Park for lunch. I told them I was about to start writing my second novel. It was about a wealthy family on Long Island who lose their money, the leakage of my frustrations at watching the middle class disappear and at the moneylessness of my own youth. (Let's all agree, for the sake of this story, that relative moneylessness isn't a dollar amount but a state of mind and stomach born of your own particular circumstance.) I was grappling with a question I had, which was this: Who was better off, people who were born with money and never had to worry about their survival, or people (like me) who didn't feel they had the financial stability and who had to learn to be survivors on their own? Did having money doom you in a way?

I wanted to see the Teiches because I was embarrassed to report that, though the fictional family in my unfinished novel bore only rudimentary biographical resemblance to them, a kidnapping kept finding its way into the plot. There was something I couldn't resist thematically about it, because it elucidated one of the many paradoxes of money: that money can put you in a kind of danger even as it brings you safety, too.

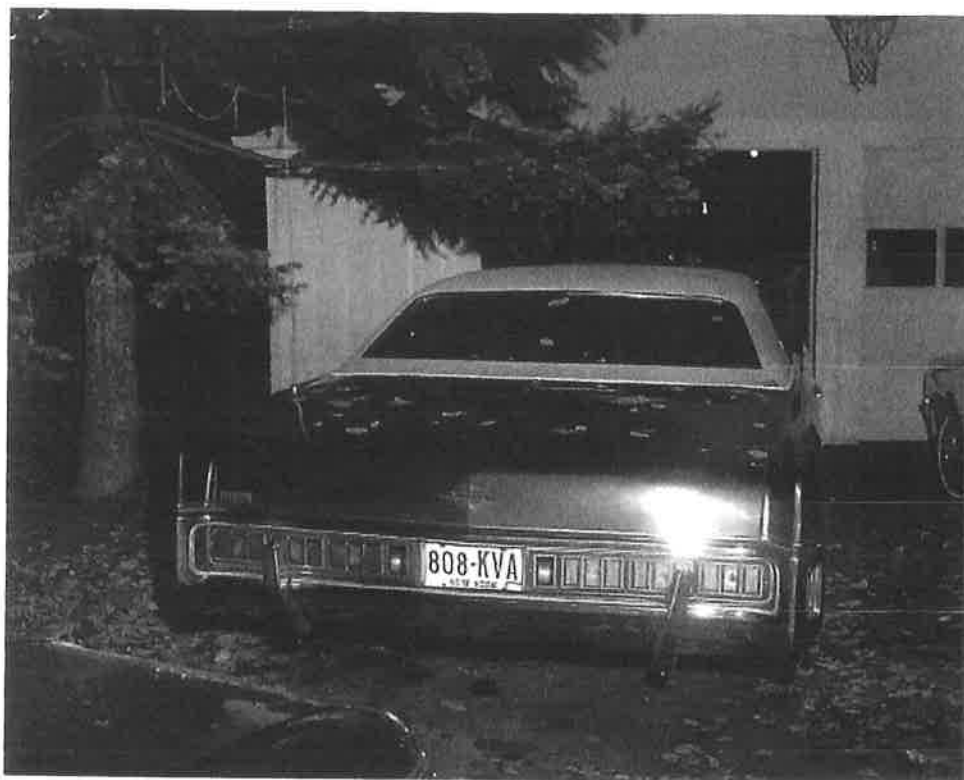
Jack gave me his blessing immediately. In fact, he said, it was funny that I was writing something like that, because he had been thinking about writing a book himself.

A few years earlier, he saw a write-up about the memoir of a guy he knew, a man who survived Auschwitz and went on to become a successful tailor. Jack realized he wanted to tell his story, too. He had suddenly found himself closer to the end of his life than the middle of it, and he decided that he wanted to write a book — that he wouldn't leave this world without a document that would exist to let his children and grandchildren know what had happened to him. That's why he wanted to talk to me, to get my advice on publishing.

I offered to give him whatever help I could. I introduced him to an entertainment lawyer, to help him negotiate with a ghostwriter, and every now and then I would get an update: that he really enjoyed working with the ghostwriter; that they hired someone to make a Wikipedia page about the kidnapping; that, finally, a small publisher was interested. In March 2020, I received the finished book in the mail: "Operation Jacknap: A True Story of Kidnapping, Extortion, Ransom and Rescue," by Jack Teich, his name done up like cutout letters from a ransom note.

I didn't read Jack's book for a while. I didn't want to confuse myself between the kidnapping I was writing and the one that actually happened, but on the day I sent in my final pass on "Long Island Compromise," which is what I called my novel, I finally opened it.

I read it in one sitting. I hadn't known much about the kidnapping in the first place, just that Jack had been taken from his own driveway and released a week later. Now I learned the details, not just of the abduction and confinement but of the harrowing rescue and its aftermath. About the two times that the kidnappers tried to ensnare his brother Buddy, instead of him. About the man who was eventually caught with \$38,300 of the ransom money and his association with another person of interest: a former Acme employee who had distributed antisemitic literature at work and who went on the run for four years after he was questioned by Nassau County detectives. An employee! Law enforcement suspected that three or four men had been involved, but only two were indicted — the Acme employee was one of them — and only one went to prison. The bulk of the ransom was never found.



Teich's Lincoln in the driveway from which he was kidnapped. Nassau County Police Department

The details of the kidnapping — way more involved than I was able to detail above — and subsequent investigation are riveting; you should read Jack's book. But as I was reading it, it wasn't those details that gripped me. No, it was how he told the story.

In "Operation Jacknap," he tells the story of his rescue as if it were a miracle. Each small vignette he tells is set up in a way that shows how a good resolution to the story seemed completely out of the question — until others devoted themselves to his rescue.

He writes about the irrepressible Dick McGuire, the detective sergeant with Nassau County who wouldn't stop digging even after all the trails went cold. He writes about kind Joe Polimine, the Nassau County police officer who lived with and guarded Jack's family for an eight-hour shift every day for almost a year after the kidnapping. He writes about Gene Batzer, the journalist from The Long Island Press who found out about the kidnapping but held the story when the police asked him to, for Jack's safety. Can you imagine that? A newspaper reporter would hold a story just for him? He's sure he would be dead if the story had run!

He writes about John Malone, who, even though he was an assistant director in charge of the F.B.I.'s New York field office, took Jack out night after night, checking to see if he could hear a match for any of the trains or church bells he remembered from his time in captivity. About how the tough, devoted F.B.I. agent Margot Dennedy, who lived with Janet during that terrible week, became a kind of sister to her for the rest of her life. About how Janet and Buddy were so courageous to do the ransom drop that day themselves and how Janet in particular rose to every challenge that was presented, that week and for the rest of her life.

All these people, the book underscores, worked tirelessly around the clock to make sure that Jack was released. He can't believe how smart everyone was, how professional, how dedicated.



The team of investigators working on the case came to include agents from the F.B.I. and Nassau County detectives. Nassau County Police Department

He thinks about when he was picked up from the Jade East in Jamaica, near the airport. How, when he arrived at the F.B.I. headquarters and was led in through a giant bullpen filled with hundreds of agents, the room went silent. Every single agent stood up as Jack walked through. It's that moment he thinks

about when he thinks about his kidnapping. It's the friendships, it's the way everyone came through for him — not the rest of it.

That detail about all the agents standing up isn't in the book. When Jack told it to me recently, I cried. But it's not Jack that I was crying for.

Tolstoy tells us that all happy families are alike and that each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. A few years ago, I wrote a different novel, my first novel, about divorce, which was inspired in part by the divorce stories of several people I know, and I came to the conclusion that, actually, all divorces are exactly alike. I tell you this because I've now come to understand the same thing about trauma: Happy, well-adjusted people are all different. The traumatized are exactly alike. I'm about to tell you a story that is nothing like a violent kidnapping — almost laughably so — but what I've learned over the years is that trauma is trauma. Something terrible happens, beyond what is in our own personal capacity to cope with, and the details don't matter as much as the state we're thrown into. Our bodies and brains have not evolved to reliably differentiate a rape at knife point from a job loss that threatens us with financial ruin or from the dismantling of our world by our parents' divorce. It's wrong, but explain that to your poor, battered autonomic nervous system.

Sixteen years ago, I was 39 weeks pregnant when my obstetrician sent me to the hospital to be induced. I didn't dilate easily, or at all, and the first night I was there I was advised not to get an epidural despite the pain of the contractions because it would slow dilation even further. That night, my husband went to sleep, and I was asked if I wanted pain medication so that I could sleep, too. I was offered Stadol. I told the nurse I had a history of anxiety: Would this be OK to take? She said yes, and within a minute of it entering my bloodstream, I began hallucinating. I was on a swing in my hallucination, the one in the backyard of my father's old house on Long Island. Every time I swung forward, I came so close to the house next door I almost crashed, and then I was yanked back. I was terrified, but I couldn't cry or call for help because I was sure my snoring husband (whom I love and don't fear when I'm not hallucinating) was a snarling monster whose wrath would be great if I disturbed him. Hours later, I whispered to the nurse that I had thought she was giving me something like Tylenol, not a narcotic. I told her I was hallucinating. She nodded and told me that sometimes that happens.

The next day, a different nurse told me that I still hadn't dilated, and my body showed no signs of being ready to give birth. I'd been in induced labor for 24 hours by then; I was exhausted. She told me my blood pressure was down, and not to tell the doctor that she was saying this, but that I should ask to give up on the induction. She told me to tell him I would stay on bed rest — in the hospital even — but that this baby didn't seem to want to come out yet.

When the doctor finally came, I told him just what the nurse said to say. He told me that he would examine me and that if I still wasn't dilated, we would talk about going home. But while he was examining me, I felt a searing kind of pain. I screamed. It went on. I screamed to my husband: "He's not examining me! He's doing something to me!" I screamed at the doctor to stop it, but he wouldn't. I screamed over and over for him to stop, and he still wouldn't. My husband stood frozen. The nurse avoided looking at me. Finally, I heard the doctor tell her — that same nurse, who now pretended we'd

never seen each other — to get the hook. I screamed at him that I knew what the hook was for and that he didn't have my permission to break my water. He told me that I wasn't going home, that he'd stripped my membrane, that there was nothing left to do but break my water and hope I dilated. Defeated, I lay back and let him do it.

As anyone could have predicted, 11 hours later, I was headed to the operating room for an emergency C-section. I lay splayed out on that table, paralyzed from the chest down. Eventually I heard my baby cry.

I refused pain medication after my C-section, afraid that whatever they gave me would make me hallucinate again. I cried day and night, asking the doctors and nurses if my behavior seemed normal, and they ignored me: What was all that talk about making sure to tell someone if you're worried that you're going to hurt yourself or your baby? I couldn't look down at my torn-up body. I refused to go to sleep, worried that I would do something to the baby while I was unconscious. I couldn't stop telling any visitor what had happened to me. At the end of my hospital stay, a nurse wheeled me out of the hospital, and while we were waiting for my husband to pull the car around, she said, "You just need some Jesus."

At home, I was afraid to be alone with the baby. I still couldn't stop telling everyone the story — just about everyone I encountered. To this day, I remember every single person who wouldn't let me finish telling it, who stopped me and wouldn't let me go on for whatever reason, and I hate them for it.

I sought treatment, all kinds. I had my first visit with a psychiatrist within a week, and she told me I had postpartum depression. I went to postpartum-depression support groups, where I scream-cried so loudly that other people had to stop talking and wait for me to quiet down. I returned to the psychiatrists to tell them that I didn't *feel* depressed or otherwise identify with those faded women in those groups. I felt *insane*. I was scared all the time. I couldn't stop reliving what had happened to me. I couldn't lie on my back because it reminded me of the C-section.

I asked everyone who would listen what I should do for this unbearable psychic pain. I sat up every night watching TV, wondering about the impact on a baby from a mother who cried all the time. I went to see doctors constantly. I thought I had a blood clot. I thought I had a brain tumor. I thought I was bleeding too much. I didn't understand why I stopped bleeding so abruptly. I sat in front of a seasonal-affective-disorder lamp. I did something called body work. I did postpartum therapy. I did talk therapy. I did a progenitor of what would become E.M.D.R. I went to my rabbi. I went to someone else's priest. Lord help me, I consulted the internet.

I couldn't smell rubbing alcohol because it reminded me of the birthing room. I bought a liquid soap that I kept in my bag (it was Method brand, the Sweet Water scent) and smelled that if I got a whiff of hand sanitizer or rubbing alcohol, which was often, because I was constantly going to hospitals and doctor's offices to check out my imagined ailments. At the hospital, I passed a sign for a rape support group. I didn't dare go in, but I stared at it for a long time, suspecting that the people in there would understand me better than anyone outside did.

I prayed. How I prayed. I screamed at the sky. I begged God to help me, to save me from whatever it was that had taken me away from my life, that made it so that I now could see the world in the uncanny, photonegative way that it wasn't meant to be seen, but that was the truth — a truth I can't shake even to this day.

And then a few months passed, and my husband found a different psychiatrist for me to talk to, someone who did not specialize in postpartum issues. He diagnosed me with post-traumatic stress syndrome and gave me some Zoloft, then some BuSpar to help it along. I began to get better. I could sleep again. I wasn't quite as scared anymore. I would like to say that I became myself again.

But I never did. I never got over it. I never stopped being bitter about that time, about how lonely and scared I was. I never stopped worrying about the impact it had on my (wonderful) child. I never got over the fear on my husband's face as I screamed for help. I truly never got over how apparently fragile I am, how *unresilient* I proved to be. That was one of the worst parts for me, that I knew something about myself now, which was that I was delicate. I had been rocked into a full nervous breakdown, and I had no idea what aspect of the birth did it. All I knew was that, should something go wrong — a car accident, maybe, or a mugging — I would be prone to falling apart.

It was that fragility that I just couldn't get over. I had thought I was such a tough guy, but that doctor took one look at me, and he knew what I would literally lie back and accept his treatment of me. You'll say I'm being unnecessarily hard on myself, but months later, I saw the doctor, and instead of confronting him, or spitting in his face, I hid behind a tree. A few years later, I was contacted by someone who had used that same obstetrician and had heard that I had, too. She called me up and told me that she had filed a complaint about him with the local police, and it would really help if I told them my story too. I told her I absolutely would and then I never did and never took a call from that number again. The pandemic came, and the smell of all that hand sanitizer nearly drove me off a cliff. Worse, my husband brought home a pallet of Method Sweet Water-scented soap, remembering how much I liked the smell of it. Only now it reminded me of the darkest time in my life.

And I never stopped needing to tell the story. A couple of years after it happened, I began writing about it, first for an online magazine, then a women's print one. Eventually it somehow helped me parlay this into a real career, and it would have been totally reasonable for me to move on and never write about it again. Except that I still was. In my first novel, I found myself giving the story of my son's birth to the book's most neglected and misunderstood character. There was never a time I reread that passage — not in edits, not in copy edits, not in the first or second pass — that I didn't sob. I helped make the TV-show version of my book, and I watched the birth scenes play out, angle after angle. I sobbed at my monitor at every single take while everyone around me pretended that my behavior was totally normal. In the editing room, I sobbed every one of the 50 times I watched each of those takes, the editor and producers kindly waiting a moment until I could speak again. At one point, it occurred to me that, all these years later, I had not gotten over anything so much as I had built a city out of my suffering, a

monument to my trauma. I had done hours of exposure therapy by then, and my last word on exposure therapy is that if it worked, then hiring a world-class actress to play out the worst day of my life over and over would have made it so that I am not sobbing even right now as I type this.

So what does this have to do with Jack Teich? I'll tell you: As I sat and read his book, I couldn't completely dismiss the idea that if I had just figured out a way to find some gratitude that I had survived that day, I could have borne the whole thing more gracefully. I left that hospital — my need for Jesus notwithstanding — physically healthy and alive. My baby was healthy and even the kind of even-tempered, good-napping child that would take a mother's nervous breakdown in stride. What I'm saying is that I read Jack's book and wondered why *I* couldn't be like that. I didn't know why I couldn't get over it. I don't know why I can't get over it now.

Yes, if only I could be more like Jack, I thought, at every stop on this story. But that's because I didn't see what was going on yet.

A few weeks ago, I went to visit Jack at his home in Westchester, where he and his family relocated in 1986. After years of discussion over whether they should move, what eventually got the Teiches out of Kings Point was a summer house they purchased in the Berkshires and how much longer it took to get there from Long Island. Jack unlocked the door and let me in, then locked the door behind me, ushering me into his office. He was on hold with American Express, he explained, coordinating a driver to pick him up from the airport on a trip he was planning to Greece.

At that point, I thought I was going to focus this article on the ransom money, which was never found: \$750,000 would be more than \$4.5 million in today's dollars, and its mystery vexes Jack to this day. He keeps a website with information about the case and lists a post-office box for tips and clues, so that anyone reading his book, or now this article, who knows something might come forward. He even offers a reward.

I asked him why he wanted the money back. It wasn't all that much, compared with his fortune today. But he wouldn't take a penny of it, he told me. He would donate it to the Federal Law Enforcement Foundation, which provides federal and local law enforcement with financial assistance.

"Justice," he told me — that was why he was interested in recovering the money.

Someone at American Express was talking to him now, and so I stood up and began to wander around his office while he made his arrangements. In one corner is a set of glass shelves with family photos: Jaime with her husband and children; Marc's high school graduation portrait; Michael and his wife; Janet and Jack with a group of friends. On the top shelf is a photo that is as large as any of them. It's a portrait of Jack pointing, and it's a familiar one to me. In 1994, the one convicted kidnapper, a man named Richard Warren Williams, who had been in prison for 17 years, appealed the verdict by citing a 1986 Supreme Court ruling that held jurors could not be dismissed on the basis of race. The jury for Williams's case had been all white. Of the 40 total potential jurors that had been dismissed, six were

Black; records for the case were destroyed in a fire, and the prosecution was not able to remember the reasons for three of the six dismissals and was therefore unable to prove they were not racially motivated. Williams won his appeal, and a new trial was ordered.

This time, Williams pleaded guilty. At the sentencing hearing, Jack spoke in court about what Williams did to him. That's where the picture is from: He is pointing at his kidnapper. The judge sentenced Williams to time served, and he was freed. After that, Jack got himself a permit for a pistol.



Teich pointing at Richard Warren Williams, the only person convicted in the case, on June 24, 1997, at Nassau County Court in Mineola, N.Y., at a sentencing hearing. Dick Yarwood/Associated Press

“These are vindictive people,” he remembers saying at his permit hearing. “They’re crazy. Not stupid, but crazy.”

Jack got off the phone, apologizing, telling me he just needed to make sure that someone would be there to pick him up when he landed in Greece. I asked a version of a question I often have about my own trauma, which is that the trauma ended up giving so much to me — my journalism career, for one thing, plus my first novel and the TV show, for another, but, even better, a deeper understanding of how the traumatized world lives — that I sometimes wonder if I could go back in time and make it never happen, if I even would.

But he misinterpreted my question. He looked off and nodded and then returned to me with this: “The recurring theme is: Should I have taken off? Now, you have to understand, it was raining. It was dark.” He went on: “Behind my house was a big woods, a woodsy area, and I was this close to taking off, and that is a recurring theme.”

I was surprised to hear that he still thought about what he could have done differently — that he had regrets and dwelled on them. It didn't match with the idea I had about Jack, the mythology of him as having put it all behind him. I asked him if he visits that moment in his mind very often. He leaned back and looked far away for a minute.

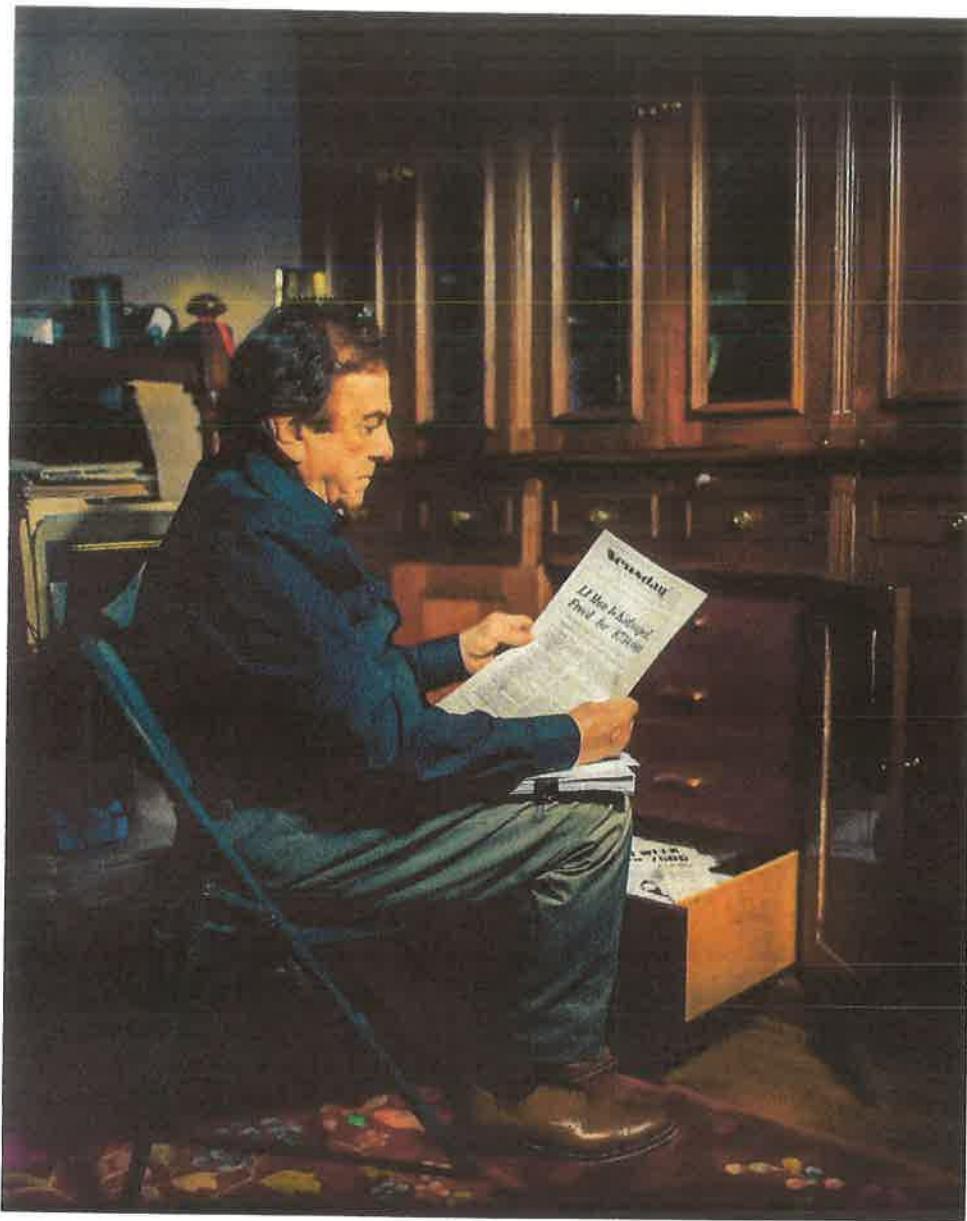
"I'll tell you what I do," he said. "Once in a while, I pick up the book, and I keep it right by my bed. Once in a while, I'll actually read a chapter of the book." He nodded and closed his eyes, but he kept a faint smile on his face. "Then I'll get upset, and I'll put it down." He opened his eyes and laughed at himself a little.

I had noticed that, just a few feet away from the shelves of family pictures, there were four black file cabinets. Two of the cabinets bore labels like AUTO, BANK, MORTGAGE, INSURANCE, etc., but the other two cabinets weren't marked at all, and I asked what was in them. He opened them and showed me. Inside were the meticulously kept files of what happened to him. Folders labeled: ACME \$750K RANSOM MEETING, JACK TEICH 1997 COURT SPEECH, VARIOUS 1974 PICTURES, SPECIAL AGENT FRED BEHREND'S MEMO, LETTERS TO JOE TEICH — AFTER KIDNAPPING. There's even a folder that says TAFFY AKNER, containing our printed-out email correspondence about the lawyer I introduced him to.

He has piles of news clippings and court transcripts. He has photos and printed-out ransom-call transcripts, as well as cassettes and CDs of the ransom calls. I asked if he had a mechanism with which to play them, and he said that he also had the audio on his phone. Did I want to hear them?

Of course I did. So we listened together. In the calls, Janet sounds alert and determined; Buddy is high-pitched and terrified. They are as painful as any recording I've ever heard, these moments of true panic and purpose, in which people who had already imagined the worst were now responsible for trying to produce the best possible ending to a terrible story.

I watched Jack's face as he listened. He was nodding, watching me, both of us living inside this terrifying moment. I'm not sure what to call the look I saw on his face right then. *Engagement* would imply he isn't engaged at other times. *Alive*? He is nothing if not alive. I'm going to use the word *relaxed*, no matter how strange that might sound. But yes, he was more relaxed than I'd ever seen him.



Teich has file cabinets and drawers full of newspaper clippings and other materials about his ordeal. Dina Litovsky for The New York Times

It was right then — just as Buddy shrieked from Jack’s cellphone, and Jack looked at me nodding with that small smile, and I looked down to find I was holding two reams of reproduced transcript printouts — that I understood all of it at once. The ransom calls on his phone, available to listen to at any minute. The large photo of him pointing out his kidnapper, taking pride of place among his treasured family pictures. The pristinely kept, unmarked filing cabinets filled with all the details. The endless search for the money and the reward, which he says is because there are still people out there who caused him harm and they’ve never been apprehended, even though every suspect in the case is now dead.

After his call, he washed two apples for me — he was worried we had spent so much time talking that I must be hungry. I took the apples but couldn’t eat them. *He keeps his ransom calls on his phone.* He has a panic button at every outside door. There are lights everywhere. The place is never dark. The house alarm is never off. The doors are never not locked. “I never shut it off,” he said. “Once you start shutting it off, you forget it.”

Later, at home, I scoured my transcript for what I'd missed.

No. I sleep with the shades wide open. ... I like to wake up to the light, not to a dark room.

No, I have a four-door car, midsize, with a nondescript license plate. I don't have my initials or anything. Because you're a target to get followed.

I try not to leave in the dark.

When I come home, when I make a turn, I look through the rearview mirror to see. ... I mean it's instinct now.

About the immediate aftermath of his homecoming: *I didn't focus for a year. I mean minimum. You know, could've even been longer, but from what I remember, I didn't go to work for two, three weeks. Then when I started to go back to work, I just went and just sat there. I mean, I made believe I was working. I got up, shaved, showered, drove to the office, or I was driven, depending, and I just sat there all day and then came home at the end of the day. I didn't accomplish anything.*

I went back and reread the book, and this time I didn't cry. This time I kicked myself. Amid, yes, all the grateful notes and the storytelling that frames every move as miraculous, here it was, staring me in the face the whole time. "Around Thanksgiving, when our children and grandkids gather at our home, a pang of panic for their safety jangles my subconscious, sending my heart hammering," he writes in one passage. In another: "I hear a metal chain clink or rattle, and my mind zooms me back to the closet."

He was not untraumatized by what happened. Nor was he pretending he wasn't or trying to hide anything from me. He hasn't moved on any more than I have. It was only willful blindness on my part that insisted on the juvenile fantasy that Jack was fine. I couldn't believe I missed it. Of course he wasn't fine. How could you be fine after something like that?

I met with Marc a few days later and told him all this. I told him I had totally missed what happened to his father and probably what it meant for Marc's life, too. I told him I felt like an idiot and that I was sorry for the ways I was blind to what he went through.

Marc laughed a little. Had I not been paying attention all these years? Did I not remember that his father had a heart attack shortly after the trial ended, at 38 years old? Did I not notice that his father's house in Westchester is four houses down from the local Police Department? I hadn't. I looked at a map. Jack lives 1,183 feet from the police station.

He went on: Did I realize that in one of the other cottages on the property was an ostensible handyman who also served as a driver and bodyguard? Did he never tell me that his parents slept in a queen-size bed his whole life, him holding tight to her, arms and legs intertwined, as if they knew the perils of laying down their vigilance into unconsciousness — as if they knew that you could just disappear at any single moment?

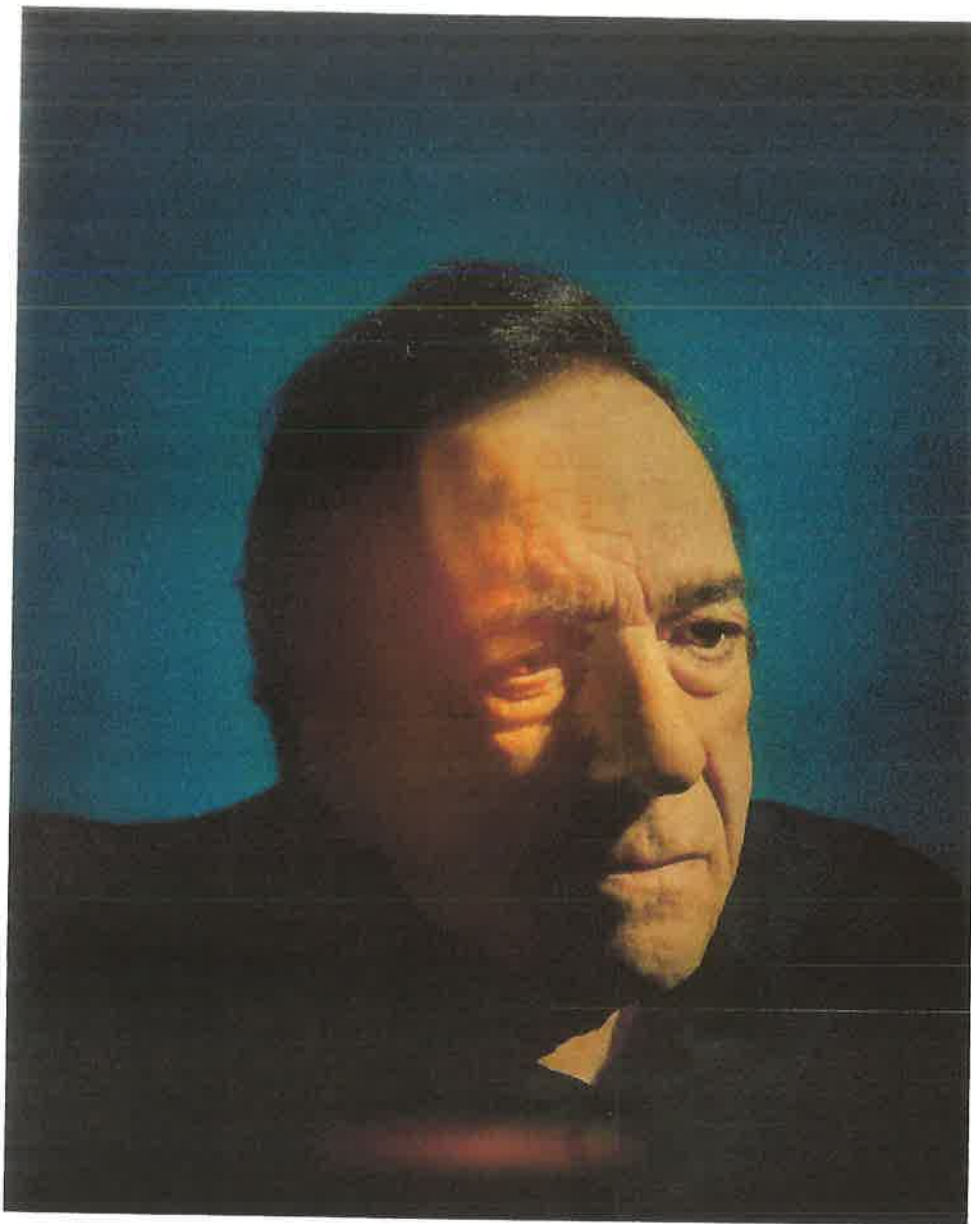
His own daughter didn't know he'd been kidnapped!

Of course, though. *Of course*. How did I miss that? How had I been so determined to think of Jack as healed, as unscathed, maybe so that I could aspire to it myself — to hold it in the future as something that might happen?

Now I thought about my new book, which revolves around the Fletcher family — the one whose father, Carl, is kidnapped. Yes, they're rich, they lose some of their money, they try to get it back. But mostly they are stunted by the kidnapping and Carl's refusal to engage with it. The oldest son is obsessed with safety, amassing insurances and crash-test ratings. The middle son goes to hotel rooms to act out kidnappings with sex workers who think he's into S.&M. but don't know that his fetishes are far more baroque than that. And the daughter, born a few months after the kidnapping, works so hard to run from the family trauma-ethos that she comes to define it. By the time I was done with it, it was clear to at least the people who wrote the marketing copy for it, but somehow not to me, that it was a book about a different kind of inheritance — the legacy of trauma.

Maybe I was never writing a book about money. Maybe I had to think I was writing about money in order to find myself examining trauma again, because nothing had truly changed in all this time except the swell of my shame that I was still in this state — not trauma, but post-trauma, its own discrete nightmare where self-awareness doesn't ever seem to ameliorate its symptoms. Maybe I always was headed right here, to this moment, where I could finally revisit my own trauma, to make snow angels in it — the only place where I'm truly comfortable. I wonder if you looked at my face on the set of the TV show I helped make, as I watched the worst day of my life play out, over and over, if, behind the tears, I looked the way Jack did when he was listening to his ransom calls. Upset, sure. But maybe a little relaxed, too. As if, for a moment, I could stop using all my energy to pretend that my own life wasn't kidnapped from me that day.

And maybe if you could have seen my own expression while I was working on this article — not anguished, but relaxed, like Jack's when he was listening to those tapes, you would understand why it was worth the crime I myself was committing, which was forcing a man I care about, a man who has already been through quite enough, to revisit the worst week of his life in the twilight of his years so that I could better understand what happened to me.



Jack Teich at his home in June. Dina Litovsky for The New York Times

That's how the traumatized life goes, I guess. You work your whole life to overcome the terrible thing that happened to you, only to get to the end of it and find that the overcoming it *was* your life. You find the other people who share the unfixable tear in their perception of themselves and their circumstances, of how safe they are in the world, of the precariousness of knowing that it could happen again at any time, and you feel a little better. And then, at the end, the vine you rest beneath is that you get to stop working so hard to pretend you might put it behind you. I'm glad I learned that now. Because I'm telling you, the sheer amount of energy it takes to pretend that I'm over anything is killing me.

The night I left Jack with the apples, and he unlocked the door to let me out and then locked it again after I left, he texted me.

"Wow that meeting today stirred up a lot of memories," he wrote. "I hope I can sleep."

A couple of years after the trial ended, Jack began gathering the crew of people who had been involved in the kidnapping investigation once a year at Peter Luger in Brooklyn, near Acme. Over time, they started to get together more often. Margot Dennedy, the F.B.I. agent who lived with the family during Jack's abduction, became Janet's best friend; she told me that Janet was her "north star." Jack and Joe Polimine, the retired police officer who lived with them after the kidnapping, would sometimes go out fishing with their children. Dennedy started coming to Passover seders. In 2019, Buddy died at 91. Jack lost Janet to cancer in 2022 at the age of 78. The whole group was at her funeral — my father and I were, too — and a few months later, Dennedy hosted a Catholic Mass in honor of Janet.

Recently, the gang got together for lunch at the Peter Luger in Great Neck, on Northern Boulevard, 3.4 miles from the house where Jack Teich was taken on a November evening and his life as he knew it was never returned. It was a rainy day, and we were joined by Polimine; the Nassau County investigator, Dick McGuire; and the prosecutor Ed McCarty, who is now a retired judge.

McGuire told me how he had come to suspect that a corrupt police officer might have orchestrated the whole thing. McCarty talked about how the children of the kidnapers must still have the money. I asked what was different about this case — why they all still got together, and McCarty answered by saying: "The courage of the victim. Just to go through what he went through and how he held together and started his life right after the kidnapping. I mean they helped us right away. Usually the victim is so traumatized they can't even talk."

I asked if they got together with other victims they helped over the years. They told me no — that Jack was special, and unspoken in that was the fact that not all the victims make it home. Jack's case, while somewhat unsolved, had a happy ending. Look around: Here it was.

I turned off my tape recorder, and we finished lunch. Jack ordered dessert, and soon they were all making jokes about high cholesterol and tartar sauce. Polimine asked McCarty what he thought about the Trump trial. McGuire poked some fun at Jack for looking like Neil Diamond. Jack reported that recently, while he was visiting France, someone told him he looked like John Cane. Nobody knew who John Cane was, and eventually we realized, through a variety of clues — "You know! From 'The Godfather'!" — that he meant James Caan. Everyone laughed.

I thought about the question I asked Jack earlier, about whether he would change what happened to him if he could. He hadn't misinterpreted it. He had known something I didn't, which is that it's a bad question — that the thing not happening to you is never one of the options. It happened. It will never not have happened.

Maybe, actually, there was something I could learn from Jack. That after all your attempts at healing — when you finally realize that you are forever changed — you can allow yourself to embrace your trauma. You survive what happened to you, then you survive your survival, and then the gift you're given is that you fall in love with your whole life, inextricable from the bad thing that happened to you.

"This is my world," Jack said. There was no mistaking his expression this time. He was happy.

Before I end this, I want to say one more thing: The second time I gave birth, I was at a different hospital, at Cedars-Sinai, and I had a mercifully good experience. As I was writing this article, I used the bathroom at a restaurant, and the soap in the restroom there was the same brand that Cedars-Sinai used. I don't know its name, but I can identify it by scent. I've encountered it a few times since I had my second son. When I smell the soap, my system floods with the neural surprise that I felt on that day: whatever it is that's the opposite of trauma, that not everything is a *fait accompli*, that there are new experiences out there for me to have, that one day I could smell this smell enough times so that it would replace that other smell and the terrible things that happened to me that terrible day would recede, eclipsed by the wonderful and regular things that have happened to me since then — that that day would restore itself to its size, just another 24 hours, like all the other days, some of them good and some of them bad. I wanted to tell you that I still have some hope that it could happen.

Read by Gabra Zackman Narration produced by Emma Kehlbeck and Krish Seenivasan Engineered by Ted Blalsdell

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