

‘WHAT’VE I GOTTA DO TO GET THROUGH TO THAT NUT IN YOUR SKULL?’ Jackie asked as he paced along the street with his friend a few paces behind.

Beneath the dim orange glow of streetlights, they both carried stained, tattered blankets around their shoulders that unintentionally cleaned the grime off the backs of their necks. Their dragging feet wore down the already-dying soles of their shoes, and their collective ungodly pungency trailed behind them like bewildered stray dogs.

‘You ain’t gotta talk to me like that—’

‘No, I *really* do—’ he started, before getting distracted. ‘Spare any change, please?’ he asked a smoking bystander. After getting a half-smoked cigarette flicked at him as a response, Jackie picked it up and snuffed it with his sleeve as he continued on his stride and his sentence, ‘Because you never listen! I tell you, “fifty-thirty-twenty.” Fifty per cent goes towards necessities like bills and rent; thirty per cent is for your own financial goals. And what’s the twenty per cent for?’

A spindly red fox stood in the middle of the road unaware of their encroachment. Its attention was keenly focused on the tower block ahead of them.

‘Can I ask you a question?’ his friend said.

‘Sure—’

‘What’s twenty per cent of *nothing!*?’ he shouted, snapping the fox out of its trance. Jackie watched it scurry away beneath a parked white van.

‘This is why you are where you are!’ Jackie replied.

‘If you’re so smart, why you got shit on your pants, same as me?’ his friend said.

‘You seem to think I was born homeless—’

‘Oh, *no*, Jackie. You’ve made it clear enough.’

Jackie stopped at the base of the tower block the fox was transfixed by.

‘We’re here,’ he sighed.

His friend looked up as high as he could.

‘You ain’t real, man,’ he said, exasperated.

‘What you talking about?’ Jackie responded, snatching the blanket off

his shoulders. He tossed it to his friend.

‘Nah, I mean you ain’t *nothin’* like me.’

‘You’re damn right,’ he replied, pulling together the zipper of his dank parka. ‘Why would I wanna be like you?’

‘That’s not what I’m saying. You’re lucky to have family, man.’

‘You don’t know my life!’ Jackie said, sharp as a razor. ‘And you don’t know what shit I’m gonna have to deal with to get enough for even the tiniest bump.’

Jackie greased his hair back with his grubby palms, and then turned and smiled for the tiny camera at the door. His teeth looked like rusted screws and his cracked lips nearly bled as they stretched over his darkened gums.

‘Man, Jackie, I can taste it already—’

‘Move,’ Jackie said, as he pushed his friend out of camera view and then pressed the call button. As he waited, his cheeks began to twitch as the smile drew to its natural expiration. He tried again.

‘Nobody home?’ his friend asked.

‘It’s late.’ Jackie said. ‘He’s always home on our birthday; he has no life—’

‘It’s your birthday? Shit. Happy birthday, man!’

Jackie buzzed again when, through the glass, across the lobby, the lift door slid open. Two identical teenage girls stepped out and walked in unison towards him with matching one-inch scars over dark brown eyes, and one penny-sized birthmark to the left of each of their chins. They were an exact double.

Jackie stood back from the door as the girls exited the building, looking no higher than their own five-foot-one eyeline as they passed by the two vagabonds. Jackie caught the glass door on its close and slipped in.

‘Wait here,’ he said.

‘If you see anything valuable—’

‘What the fuck?’ Jackie interjected, with disgust dripping off the end of his nose. ‘You think I ain’t done this before?’

His friend backed off and the heavy door closed and locked

automatically.

Jackie rushed towards the lift but the smooth steel door closed before him and no amount of erratic button smashing would open it again. He leaned against the glossy forest-green tiles opposite and watched the number above the lift gradually climb to ten and then stop. The itch of addiction crawled up his neck for attention as he watched the number flash and then climb to fourteen. Fuck this, he thought. He ripped open the door to the stairwell and began his ascent.

Floor after floor, his kneecaps ground like pumice stones, and his ankles rattled within his dull, laceless brogues. By the tenth floor, Jackie's lungs felt like plastic bags salvaged from the rain, but he still had three more floors to go. Halfway up the next flight, a shiny pound coin on a step caught his eye and halted his stride. His heart and shins thanked him as he granted himself a break to sit by the coin for a moment. A pound could hardly buy you a damn thing in this city anymore, but it's never worth walking over. He tried to pick it up but, as if it weighed a ton, it didn't move. Upon further inspection, Jackie noticed the coin had been glued to the step. A sick joke for someone to pull especially knowing they wouldn't be around to enjoy it. Jackie clawed at it longer than most would, but he couldn't let it go. He pulled out his penknife from his parka pocket and began chipping away at the concrete immediately surrounding the coin. Suddenly, the coin popped up and rattled between the iron balusters, but before Jackie could scramble to catch it, it had begun its descent down the stairwell.

Now irked, Jackie started up again and hoisted himself up each flight with the aid of the handrail. But soon enough, dripping with sweat and partially wheezing, he'd arrived at the thirteenth floor.

Upon leaving the stairwell, a distraught child rushed into Jackie.

'Hey, little man—' Jackie started.

'Elliot!' a woman shouted. She pounced on the child and quickly snatched him back. 'Stop crying. He is your brother!' she said to him in a hushed tone, 'You must treat him well.'

The mother noticed Jackie and looked up at him as if she'd seen him

before, but she needed no confirmation and hurried back inside. Her slammed door echoed, and when the resonance concluded, the child's screaming continued.

He rang the doorbell to number fifty-two and listened in. Several locks were unlatched until eventually, the door opened an inch. A cold blue eye spied on Jackie and scanned him from top to bottom.

'Happy birthday . . . ?' Jackie said, with a desperate smile.

He heard the sigh that was blocked by the door, and then it slammed shut on him. The final chain rattled off its latch and the door crept open. Jackie gently pushed it and entered.

'Please take off your shoes,' a firm voice called from another room. And then, almost begrudgingly, it added, 'Happy birthday to you, too.'

Holy hell, Jackie thought, as his calloused soles sunk into the luxurious carpet. It was a level of comfort the man had forgotten existed.

As he walked down the hallway, he heard the shower running in the bathroom, but he was more taken by how bare the home was.

'Where's all your stuff?' Jackie asked.

Each room he passed was empty. All that remained was carpet and light bulbs and the white paint on the walls. So much for lifting anything, he thought.

He stopped at the master bedroom where his brother was laying out a pair of trousers on the bed. They were pressed to perfection and were the same chestnut brown his brother was currently wearing. Jackie watched him turn back to the closet and pull another matching crisp white shirt off the hanger to also place on the bed. His skin was taut, like a supermodel, just on the cusp of appearing gaunt, and his head was completely shaven and smooth.

*Thanks for reading.*

*The entire short story is available upon request or online at leading eBook stores...*

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