



The Weekly Man

Episode 44: Tuesday – Jackson

Jackson felt better about things today. He held firm to his conclusion that there was something wrong with him and not with Roy and Jody. He might question Jody's mental stability but Roy was solid as a rock and both of them being crazy was too far a stretch.

It was him, Jackson Gabriel. There was something wrong with him. His mother had drummed it into his head that he would have to shrug off things that he wouldn't be able to explain. He'd done that with the bump on his head. But this time, he didn't want to shrug it off. He wanted to know how the bump and the cut had gotten there. He wanted to know what had happened to him, when it had happened and how it had happened.

You don't just shrug something like that off and forget about it. No matter what your mother said.

And what was going on with the meeting? How could two of his clients accuse of him of missing a meeting that hadn't even happened and then not show up for the meeting when it was supposed to happen? Both men couldn't have been wrong.

He'd gone through his emails. Roy was still sympathetic and Jody was suddenly apologetic and practically begging for a meeting. He sent them both the same reply.

Gentlemen,

I apologize for any inconvenience I may have caused you in relation to the meeting. I've recently been diagnosed with a medical condition that, though it won't affect my work performance, it will impact other facets of my life. I'd rather not get into further details, but I assure both of you that there will be no impact on the work I do for you.

As for the meeting, I really should not have agreed to it. Both of you have contracted me to produce and market online learning for you. The terms of our business relationships were clearly laid out at the beginning, when we signed contracts and non-disclosures.

Given those terms, I should not have agreed to the meeting. In addition, differences between both of you are really issues that the two of you need to resolve on your own. I would feel very uncomfortable having to play the role of mediator. This is really not my role and I cannot see how it would help matters; in fact, I believe it might even be detrimental to our working relationships.

Therefore, I propose that we continue with our established guidelines and, if both of you wish to meet to discuss your mutual relationship, that this be done on your own.

I hope you can both understand my perspective on this and that we can continue business as usual.

Jackson

It took about five minutes for Jody to get back to him.

Mr. Gabriel

You are correct in re-establishing our understanding of the terms of business as per our original contract, which accurately defines hours and rules of engagement. I respect this, though it would have been courteous to have received a notice that the meeting was to have been cancelled. But that should be considered history now (sic) and we should move on.

You mention that you have a medical condition, but I accept your assurances that it will not interfere with our business relationship and hope for a speedy recovery.

I have some new ideas for courses I would like to pursue and will require a week or two to work out some details and course outlines to discuss with you. I will be in contact just as soon as those are ready and, possibly, your medical condition will have cleared up by that time.

Sincerely,

Jody Blake

It took a few minutes for the meaning underlying Jody's email to sink in, especially the delay in working on the "new ideas."

He thinks my medical condition might be contagious. He thinks he might catch it by doing business with me online.

For the first time in years, Jackson had a good laugh.

It was late morning before Roy replied to his email.

Jackson my man, good to hear from you! Sorry to hear about the medical condition, but in all the years we've been doing business, I don't recall you ever being sick once. Guess all that good luck on the health finally caught up. LOL.

As for the meeting, forget it. That was Jody's idea and to tell you the truth I wasn't all that comfortable with it from the start. As you pointed out in your email, meeting in person was never part of the deal and you acting as a referee between the two of us was REALLY never part of the deal. Still don't know what he wanted to talk about, bury the hatchet, whatever.

I don't know about you, but I think it's time for a break. We just finished a roll of courses and that was just for me. I know you have other clients besides me and whasisname and maybe that might

explain your medical problems. I think it might just be burn out and maybe it's time to take a vacation, which is what I'm planning on doing for the next month or so. You know, enjoy some of that money you've been making for me.

I suggest that you do the same.

Jackson, it's always been a pleasure working with you and I look forward to more of that pleasure in the future. All the best buddy.

Roy

PS...I really mean it about taking some time off and relaxing. What I'm going to do.

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Jackson thought about that. Vacation. It was something he'd never thought about before. He'd never had a vacation. He just worked every day. He went right into it as soon as he finished his home schooling, as soon as he moved into the flat. Every day. For years. Day after day of work and never a break. He knew what a vacation was. He'd read about them online but he'd never actually applied the concept to himself. It was something other people did. Something that his differentness dismissed him from. A week in Varadero? A week in Macho Pico, taking in the magic of mystical mountains? A week river-boating down the Rhine, taking in the castles and bratwurst? A week at home, sleeping in every day. He wrote back to Roy:

Hey Roy,

Maybe you're right. Something to think about. Let me know when you're finished your vacation and we'll get back to work. In the meantime, I hope you have a relaxing and much deserved vacation.

Jackson

He wasn't sure if he could get his head around this idea of a week of vacation. It seemed like such a short time to take in so much. And the concept of going somewhere distant was far beyond his comprehension.

Why is that? Why can't I do that? Other people do.

He remembered his mother's lectures on the differences between himself and other people but that, he'd always thought, was more to do with the way he and others thought, about how they perceived the world around them and their place in it.

I should be able to take a week of vacation and go somewhere. Anywhere. For a week.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

He walked to the door and opened without hesitation, expecting to see his Uncle Manzer but he was surprised when he saw Mrs. Gilbert standing in the hall smiling. She looked like she always did, healthy, vibrant, lively eyes and a universe of wrinkles. She didn't look at all like she was recovering from a heart attack.

"Mrs. Gilbert, it's good to see you. I was going to come and visit you at the hospital but I wanted to wait until you were a bit recovered from your heart attack. But here you are, home already. I mean..."

She smiled through the wrinkles and folds, arms crossed over her chest, looking robust. "I never did like hospitals, Jackson. Place for sick people and people ready to die. And I'm not

ready to die. So, how have you been while I've been gone? Did your Uncle Manzer drop by to see you?"

"Uh...yes, he did. And everything's been fine. No emergencies or earth-shattering events. A couple of minor work-related incidents but everything seems to be working out well now. I can't believe you're here already, and looking so healthy."

"And I'm feeling just fine, Jackson. Won't be pushing things too hard for a while. Doctors say I still need lots of rest and I'll be making a few changes to my diet and taking some medication, but all-in-all, I'm feeling not so bad. Just wanted to stop by to let you know I'm back and see if there's anything you need."

"I appreciate that Mrs. Gilbert, even though I should be the one checking to see if there's anything you need. But now that you're here, maybe you can help me with something."

"And what might that be Jackson?"

"Well, it's occurred to me lately that I've never been on vacation. For as long as I've lived here, I've worked every day. Every single day. I've never gone anywhere, never traveled. I've been in two places all my life: the house I grew up in with my mother and this place. I've never been to the tropics, to Europe, South America, the Far East, anywhere. I've seen all these things on the internet but never even wondered about them, never really been interested. But just this morning one of my long-term clients said that he's going to take some time off, a vacation. He's going to relax for a while. I started to think about this and I think maybe it's time for me to have some relaxation. And maybe travel a bit. You know, a week on a tropical island with beaches and sun and swimming pools."

Natalie had read the email from Roy Pickering, which was why she decided to come over right away. It looked like he was serious about this vacation thing.

"Well, Jackson, I've never been on a vacation myself. Always thought they were overrated and heard from so many friends about stomach problems, missing luggage, stolen cameras and purses. No...I've always preferred to just take my vacation in the safety and comfort of my home. Put the chores aside for a while and just relax."

Jackson wasn't exactly encouraged by her response but the idea was taking root; he was beginning to feel excited about the idea of a week or so away from the flat if for no other reason than to just be somewhere else.

It would give him some time to think about some of the things that had been surfacing in his life lately, things that he'd put aside and ignored for his entire life.

Well, another fire to put out.

Natalie smiled to herself. This was something that she'd never anticipated during all the planning and all the possible scenarios that she and Manzer had envisioned and devised strategies for: vacation. The idea that any of them would take time off from the work had never crossed either of their minds, especially since Manzer had been retired for so many years and Natalie had always just existed, living on money from her parents and never having a job that would come with something as exotic as vacation. It was something that didn't fit into their lives or into the lives of the kids but it fit into the lives of others and they should have seen it coming.

Well, Nat, don't beat yourself up over it. You and Manzer had an impossible task and you missed a few other things that took you by surprise but you always managed to work your way through it. You always find a way.

She stretched her thick legs out as she sat in the big easy chair. She yawned. She was tired. She'd been up most of the night catching up with the emails from her kids, seeing what they were getting into, wondering how she was going to work her way through all the fires.

After driving her home from the hospital, and after him trying desperately to talk her out of leaving so early, Manzer had stayed with her a while, filling her in on what the kids were up to. He seemed sad, and there was a look in his eyes that she didn't understand but, for some reason, it worried her. "What's on your mind, Manzer?"

He smiled. It was a warm smile. He smiled to make her know that he would do anything for her and would always be there for her no matter what. But the eyes above the smile told her that something else was up. "You've been doing this for over thirty years, Nat, holding everything together, keeping track and heading off disaster after disaster. I can't even begin to imagine how you manage to do it, the energy and dedication you've put into keeping their lives separate but allowing them to interact with the world around them."

She smiled but she had a good idea what was coming and she was braced for it.

Manzer sighed and leaned forward in his chair, resting his chin on his folded hands. "It's starting to come undone, Nat. They're starting to want normal lives, to be able to do the same things that others do, have the same kind of lives. The outside world is starting to knock at their doors."

Tears started to well up in Natalie's eyes. She had no idea where they came from. She wasn't sad or heart-broken or angry or lost or anything she could really put her finger on and say, "This...this is where the tears are coming from." Maybe they were coming from the inevitable finally arriving, the day when all her work for so many years was coming to some sort of existential intersection where the improbable was about to become still more improbable. Natalie's life for so many years had been guided by known factors, factors that she created and controlled to prevent the unknowns from creeping in. But now the unknowns were, as Manzer put it, knocking—and knocking hard. The outside world was coming for her kids and it was becoming obvious that there was little or nothing that she could do about it.

Manzer had told a woman about the kids' secret. He had told her because he had no other choice. She worked for an organization that could take control of everything she and the kids had. But the woman didn't want to harm them. She would help them keep the secret. She was in love with one of them, the most unlikely one of them. And now, another woman knew. And she was also in love with one of them. Love, something she'd never counted on. She'd isolated them from it, not let it invade their lives with all the questions and improbabilities it would bring. Love, a force stronger than all her planning and manipulating. She was no longer the only woman in their lives. There were now two other women in their lives and they weren't going away.

And Jackie was planning on getting a sex change. Natalie couldn't blame her. She'd never been right with the world or herself. It was something that had haunted every moment of her life and Natalie had to admit to herself that she was surprised that she'd borne that anguish for so long.

And now a new thought was beginning to occur to her...just as Manzer voiced it.

"Doesn't it seem strange to you, Natalie...that so many things are suddenly happening that seem to be bringing it all to some kind of...I don't know...a culmination? An explosion of events that will radically change things? And it's not just from the outside world suddenly seeping in...it seems to be coming from them...like suddenly they want to be part of the world. They're all changing...at the same time...having thoughts and asking questions that have never

crossed their minds before and, if they did, they just shoved it all to the back of their heads and continued past it. They're not doing that now. They're wondering about things, questioning things, not letting go and not working past the things they don't understand."

Natalie knew he was right. "But..."

Manzer leaned forward, so huge and, Natalie thought, so beautiful and compassionate. "I could see it in each of them when I talked to them about your heart attack, the way they kept putting their hands on their heads, feeling the bump. I've seen their reactions to things like that in the past. They just ignored those things as though nothing had happened, as though a bandage on an arm had always been there and so what? They'd always been able to push reality out of their minds and replace it with something they could live with."

It came to Natalie in a deluge of memories, questions and the thousands of looks in their eyes as they tried throughout their lives to fight as desperately as she did to keep them separate, to save their own lives against something they neither understood nor knew about. And this, she knew was where the tears were coming from. She looked at Manzer, "What have I done?"

He read the email back for the third time.

(Insert Name)

I just wanted to drop you a note to let you know that it has been a great pleasure working with you for the last (Insert Years) and I value the relationship we've built over the course of those years.

It has recently occurred to me that I've been working full out for the last ten or so years without vacation. I think it's time that I take some vacation and do some traveling for a week or two. I'm not sure when I'll be away, but as soon as I have the dates nailed, I'll be in touch.

I'm letting you know this now so that, if you have any work coming up that might be impacted by my decision, then we can discuss and work out a solution.

Have a great day and please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Jackson

That should do it. Brief and to the point and no commitment yet on the date.

He decided to hold on to it for a while—he wasn't sure yet when he would be leaving, how long he would be gone or even where he would be going.

And that was something he would have to start working on. Right away.

He opened his browser, clicked in the search field and held his fingers over the key board.

What to enter? Vacation? But that's likely to bring up all kinds of vacation themes including blogs about people's worst vacations and stupid definitions of vacations. Vacation destinations? Vacation destinations. That's it.

He entered vacation destinations. Only one hundred and thirty-seven million results. The first was Expedia. Unfortunately, it looked like they wanted him to already know where he was going and when. He returned to the results page and scrolled till he saw \

Just what he needed. Ideas. And it looked like he had choices for the kind of trip he wanted. He wasn't really the adventurous sort and casinos didn't interest him at all. Family fun was out. He didn't know how to ski and he wasn't interested in shopping. Romance. He wouldn't even know where to start. The only wellness he needed was, apparently, a vacation. Beaches and sun he could handle. He'd seen pictures of pristine beaches in tropical paradises and he could see himself strolling down a beach under a magnificent blue sky with waves washing around his feet. He clicked Beaches & Sun.

He wanted something close to home for some strange reason. Mexico, Central and South America looked good. They all had tropical beaches, sun and blue skies. He spent a few hours checking out the possibilities and finally decided on the Dominican Republic with its "glowing white sand and gorgeous blue water."

He was jubilant. He'd found a place for his vacation. He studied the images of palm trees, beaches that spread into distant horizons and vast clouds soaring into infinite blue sky. But then as he went from picture to picture, a feeling of foreboding began to cloud his vacation joy. At first the pictures showed the land and the ocean. Now, they were beginning to head into the hotels and other places where he was beginning to see things that unsettled him.

People.

Smiling faces everywhere. Singles, couples and groups of people. People sitting in thatched bars. People lying on the beaches under umbrellas as they sipped pina colodas. People running half naked into the ocean surf. People smiling and talking in lobbies. People.

He felt a sudden sense of foreboding. People. His stomach tightened. His chest tightened. His heart raced. People. The Dominican was full of people. They were everywhere. And there would be no way to avoid them.

He needed to find a new destination. A place to vacation by himself. A place with no people. A place where he could be alone to experience the...

What will I experience alone? Not bars. Not beaches. Not hotels.

He tried a new search term: Places to vacation alone away from people.

He found 9 Introvert-Friendly Travel Destinations - Quiet Revolution. That didn't last long. It looked like some kind of workshop or cult thing to him. The other results were all for getaway-from-it-all, budget and vacations for seniors. The whole vacation concept was suddenly not the great idea he thought it would be.

He walked to the windows and looked out at the park. It was late afternoon and the park was crowded with people and pigeons. He felt like all the energy in his body had been sapped out of him. He'd been so excited about vacationing just minutes ago and now the excitement had turned into some inexplicable sense of angst. Why was he so afraid of people? This was something he'd never been able to figure out.

But then, have I ever tried to figure it out? Have I ever asked why I'm so uncomfortable around people? Has there ever been any reason for me to fear people?

He couldn't remember any traumatic events in his early life other than his mother dying that would lead him to fear interacting with other people. He'd never had friends when he was a child but he was already uncomfortable about people then. It was something he was born with, something that went back as far as his first memories. It was something he'd never tried to deal with.

Why is that? Why have I never asked what's wrong with me or even tried to deal with it? I know I'm different than other people. Mom drummed that into me thoroughly enough, but why

would it make me afraid of other people? No one has ever tried to hurt me. No one has ever actually threatened me.

As he stared at the people in the park, he had an idea.

Maybe it's time to go for a walk in the park.

What the hell was I thinking? This is such a bad idea.

A large man wearing orange skin tight jogging pants and matching top smiled at Jackson as he approached him, panting and moving sluggishly. Jackson stared at him with wide open eyes. He was sure he heard the man chuckle as he jogged past him, puffing and wheezing.

What am I doing?

Staring at the joggers back, he backed up quickly...right into a woman pushing a triple baby carriage.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going!” He could barely make out her face buried under layers of synthetic fur around the border of her parka’s hood. She pushed by him, muttering something. This seemed strange to Jackson. He’d watched this woman push her carriage with the triplets every day for over a month. He watched as she stopped the carriage and picked up one crying baby after another and patted them on the back until they stopped crying. She’d seemed so patient and composed, like nothing in the world could bother her. But *he* had. There was nothing good about him in the things she muttered.

He stood to the side of the sidewalk, out of everyone’s way. He stared at the joggers and walkers, the carriage pushers and the hand-holding lovers. He closed his eyes and listened to them passing. He felt their presence so clearly he could have counted the number of them in a group. He stood like that for nearly an hour until he heard a voice. It was a child’s voice. He opened his eyes and saw a young girl in a plaid fall jacket looking up at him.

“Are you alright, mister?” Her eyes registered real concern.

It took him a few seconds to put her into some kind of context that he could understand enough to react to it. “Yes,” he said. “I’m fine. Thank you for asking.”

The girl smiled. “I think you were having a panic attack. My brother has them all the time and he does the same kind of thing.”

Jackson looked into the girl’s eyes and smiled. Suddenly, the fear seemed to melt away, not completely, but he didn’t feel nearly as terrified as he had.

“He takes three deep breaths and tries to think about something that makes him happy,” said the girl. “Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t.”

Jackson reached his hand out and put it on the girl’s head. “Thank you. That’s what I’ll do next time.”

“Next time?” said the girl. “Does that mean that you’re OK now?”

Jackson thought a moment and smiled again. “Yes, I think I’m OK this time. And I’ll remember your advice if it happens again.”

“Janie.” A woman’s voice—the girl’s mother, in a matching plaid jacket—called to her. She didn’t look upset as she walked over to where he and the girl stood. “Please don’t mind my daughter. She’s been told not to bother strangers but it’s like telling water not to flow.” She looked at her daughter and said, “Say goodbye now. We have to get to the hairdresser, maybe on time for a change.”

The girl looked up at Jackson. “I hope you don’t need to do the breathing again, mister. Nobody wants to hurt you here.”

Jackson smiled again. “I’m sure you’re right. Thank you for the advice, Janie.”

He watched as the girl and her mother walked away. He’d never talked to strangers like that before. Even the occasions he’d met face-to-face with clients online had been carefully scripted with checklists and action items. There’d never been much time for niceties—just business.

The girl had been so open and sincere, and she’d noticed him standing there with his eyes closed, which made Jackson wonder how many others had seen him there and wondered what was wrong with him: was he some kind of weirdo? A pervert? An escapee from a mental ward? Or just someone who didn’t know how to handle people face-to-face?

And now a new feeling took hold of him: he was calm, even with all the people around him jogging and running and pushing and holding hands. He wasn’t afraid of them. The nervousness was gone. His breathing was normal. The knots in his stomach had unwound and he felt a lightness that he’d never felt before.

He looked around at the people in the park. These were people he’d watched from his window for years, people he almost knew from seeing how they acted, the times they’d run for cover when it rained, the arguments over how much space one was allowed to use for sitting and for storing parcels when there was nowhere else to sit, the meetings of strangers, the meetings of old friends, the comforting of children hurt from falls or other accidents. It occurred to Jackson that he knew these people, that he’d known them for years and that he had nothing to fear from them.

In all these years, he’d never seen one of them strike or hurt another. Argue, yes. The older ones argued over the benches. But these were good people who treated each other with respect.

And now, as Jackson strolled down the sidewalk deep into the park, he was one of them.

That night, before it was time, he bookmarked a few travel sites. He wasn’t going to rush it, but he *was* going to go on vacation.