



The Weekly Man

Episode 51: Tuesday - Jackson

Jackson woke up to a rumbling stomach. He was starved to the point of nausea. He assumed that he must have had some abnormally calorie-burning dream. It seemed strange though—before going to bed, he'd eaten half a pound of chicken wings that he'd picked after his walk in the park.

The park. He played back his walk in the park like a movie unfolding in his mind.

It wasn't a big park, but once he was in the center, the trees blocked the view of buildings on all four sides. To Jackson, it was like being in the middle of nowhere, cut off from the outside world. There was a square at the center of the park with a fifteen foot high granite sculpture. It looked like a giant donut with spikes. He wondered about its significance. A warning against junk food? You can have your donut, but you can't eat it too? There was no plaque with an explanation or a name for the piece—just a fifteen foot high granite donut with spikes. He sat on one of the four benches lined up in front of it and stared through the hole in the sculpture at the trees with their faded leaves pasted against a metallic gray sky. He closed his eyes and listened to the sound of joggers and baby carriage wheels. Wind rustled the dry leaves on the grass and in the trees all around him. A man and woman talked quietly as they passed behind. He heard a group of children laughing on one of the paths leading into the square. Someone sat on one of the benches to his right, someone with plastic shopping bags, someone who breathed deep and desperately.

One too many cigarettes, I'm guessing.

Someone sat on a bench behind him. He heard the sound of texting and imagined a young man or woman with their head buried in their phone, oblivious of the park. The volume of footsteps and chatter grew slowly until the square resounded with human activity, bustling all around him, roaring with the presence of other people.

But he sat quietly, unperturbed, eyes closed, calm. He felt like he was a part of it all. He savored the aroma of perfumes and aftershaves, dying leaves and autumn flowers, unchanged diapers, food from the bistros and restaurants.

Popcorn. Someone's eating popcorn.

He'd stayed there till dark, reveling in the presence of people. He'd felt like a cork bouncing around in a sea of humanity, letting himself be carried along by the flesh and bone tide. On the way home, he'd stopped by a restaurant for wings. He'd picked them right down to the bone.

Why am I so hungry?

He decided to have something different for breakfast today, something big and filling—eggs and bacon, toast and coffee, home fried potatoes and baked beans. And he was going to eat it in one of the bistros, in clear view of everyone, as part of the crowd.

He was slightly disappointed that he'd been the only customer in the bistro. He'd wanted to be around people, eat breakfast with the buzz of conversations and the clinking and clacking of people eating, and they could have looked at him all they wanted. But the food had been great. He'd let the hugely overweight Lebanese man behind the counter talk him into the "big" breakfast: eggs, home fries, bacon, ham, sausages, toast and coffee. And beans.

For the first time in his life, Jackson was stuffed. He'd never eaten so much. He'd never imagined that he could eat so much...sticking always to balanced, sensible meals. Years before, he'd designed some courses for a retired nutritionist and his diet had propelled from healthy to obscenely healthy. He smiled as he sat down on the bench facing his flat. It felt good to be stuffed. Every time he burped, he tasted the totality of the flavors of his breakfast mingling in his stomach to create a beautiful culinary experience.

I've been missing this all these years? What have I been doing, wrapped up in work every day, living indoors, ordering things in, sending things out, hunched over a computer day after day? Afraid to go outside. Afraid to be seen. Afraid to interact with people in the flesh and blood of their real presence. Jackson Gabriel, it's time for a complete overhaul of your life. And that starts right now.

He sat down at this laptop. He had no new courses on the go. Mostly, he was evaluating course outlines, maintaining his e-commerce website and compiling reports. There was nothing he was doing that he couldn't put on the back burner for a few weeks. He had a new message to send to his clients, one that he liked much better than the first one.

Good morning to all,

I'm writing this to inform you that, after many years with no vacation, I've finally decided to take some time off to regenerate my batteries. At present, I have no urgent work for anyone, but if you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me.

I'll be out of office for approximately three weeks, possibly four, and I'll be in touch with everyone on my return. I appreciate your business and the friendships we've developed over the years and I look forward to working with you again with renewed energy when I return from vacation.

Jackson

Yes, much better. *More direct and conversational.*

He clicked Send and waited. Sure enough. He smiled as he opened the email from Jody.

Mr. Gabriel,

I've just received your message. I find this rather an inconvenience given that I informed you in my last communication that I had some new ideas I would like to discuss with you.

I believe I was very patient in giving you time for your medical condition to clear up, but I do believe that, given our long working relationship, you owe me some time to go over these ideas before you take time away from your responsibilities.

I await your reply.

Sincerely,

Jody Blake

Jackson smiled as he wrote back to Jody.

Hello Jody,

I assure you that I'm in excellent health. In fact, I ate a very hearty breakfast this morning and enjoyed a long healthful walk in the park last night.

The only thing I need at the moment is a break from work, so I've decided to take a much needed and much earned vacation and travel somewhere sunny and tropical.

I've also given some careful thought to my workload and decided that I need to cut back a bit. That said, I'm afraid I won't be at liberty to develop courses for you in the future. I can make some recommendations for other learning professionals with whom I'm certain you can establish profitable working relationships. When you've made your selection, I will, of course, transfer all your records and files over to your new learning agent.

Jackson

He read the message over several times, savoring every word, before he clicked Send, smiling wider by the minute.

Take that Jody Blake. Wish I'd done this years ago. Wish I'd taken vacation years ago. Wish I hadn't spent my whole working life cooped up in this flat. Wish I hadn't always been such a chicken shit when it came to people. Yeah, Jody Blake, take that.

He laughed out loud and his body shook as he laughed. It occurred to him that he couldn't remember laughing since he was a kid. This made him laugh even harder. He laughed until his cheeks were sore and his lips twitched. He wasn't sure how long he laughed but it felt good, like a dam of repression collapsing and flooding through the downstream of his life.

He felt light and free. He didn't have to deal with Jody anymore. Sure, there would be one last email from him and that email was likely to come soon. But he didn't have to answer it if he didn't feel like it. Jody was no longer one of his clients. He was someone else's problem Jackson was free.

He heard the ding and saw the message. It was from Jody. He opened it.

Mr. Gabriel,

I certainly didn't expect such an unprofessional response to my previous correspondence, especially after I was so genuinely sympathetic to your presumed medical condition. You need not bother to recommend better qualified personnel than yourself. I'm perfectly qualified to locate them myself.

I have one question to put to you, though: Is Roy Pickering still one of your clients?

Sincerely,

Jody Blake

Jackson laughed out loud again and decided not to respond to the message.

Time to drive him nuts with a little silence. I wonder if he'll get in touch with Roy to find out if I'm still working for him. Screw this, time for a walk in the park.

The morning light spread a warm buttery glow over the trees and buildings. It was an unusually warm autumn day and most people wore t-shirts and shorts, except the seniors, who hunkered down on benches in heavy fall jackets. Jackson noticed that, where there were two or more seniors on the same bench usually glorifying the past and condemning the present and wondering where it's all going, they were silent today and sat on their benches just staring at the unfolding of what was shaping up to be a beautiful day.

Jackson sensed an underlying optimistic energy and wondered if that might just be his own feelings overlaid on the park. He wouldn't have to deal with Jody Blake anymore. Not that Jody had been an unusually bothersome client but there had always been a stilted air in his messaging and it had always irritated some deep-seated part of Jackson's psyche to see the man dressed in a suit in his kitchen during Skype meetings. Their business relationship had never been friendly, more like detached and impersonal. The feud between Jody and Roy had for the most part been amusing even when it put some additional stress on him.

He could understand how Jody's wife would have left him for Roy. But it was a beautiful day and Jackson didn't have to deal with Jody Blake anymore.

He wondered if he would see the girl he'd talked to the last time he was here. That had been later in the day and she was probably in school now. He wondered where Roy was going to go on his vacation. Probably someplace warm with palm trees and green ocean water. He wondered about Mrs. Gilbert's apparent miraculous recovery from her heart attack. He wondered why he hadn't visited her in the hospital, why it hadn't even occurred to him. Visiting her would have been the right thing to do. She'd always been good to him. She was one of only a few people with whom he'd ever had regular in-person contact. Visiting her would have been the normal thing to do.

But he hadn't.

Why was that? Why didn't I visit her?

He stopped suddenly. He'd been thinking so hard and for so long that he hadn't even noticed where he was going. And now he faced something he'd never seen before: the other side of the

park. He'd walked right through the entire park. He looked at a row of buildings similar to the ones on his own street, most of them three story brown and red brick buildings but most of these buildings were both commercial and residential with galleries, coffee shops and craft stores at street level and rentals above.

He made his way slowly to a crosswalk, continuously looking from the sidewalk to the buildings and to the sidewalk and to the buildings. He felt a deep excitement, a thrill of discovery and a sense of freedom. He wasn't bothered by the people he passed, even the ones who looked straight into his eyes, their faces expressionless or amused. He knew that he wasn't acting normal, that his excitement was showing but he didn't care. He was beyond that now. That was a habit he'd outgrown. He was the new Jackson Gabriel, fearless stroller of sidewalks and insatiable bistro customer. As he crossed the street, sensing the cars stopping on either side, he felt a sense of power he'd never felt before. He was in charge here and his legs were guided by his mind to glide him over the crosswalk and onto the sidewalk on the other side of the street. As he stepped from the pavement to the concrete, he felt a sense of elation and empowerment. How many times had he looked out his window at the park and seen the tops of the buildings that towered over him at this moment? How many times had he seen the tops of these buildings and never consciously wondered about them? For years, these buildings had been right in his face but if someone had asked him a few hours ago what was on the other side of the park he probably would have said, "Sky."

He went into a coffee shop and ordered an espresso and a ham and cheese bagel. He sat by the window so that he could watch people walking by. He was amazed at the people. He'd never really looked at people before and never really thought about them. But not anymore. He stared right into the eyes of pedestrians and he was sure that he made more than one of them feel uncomfortable.

Back on the sidewalk, he decided to take the long way home. Instead of going through the park, he would take the sidewalk. He'd always seen the park as a busy place throughout the day and into the evening but he'd never noticed the human traffic on the sidewalks on the other side of the street from the park. He would have had to look straight down from his window to see that...and the movement of people around the benches, bushes and trees in the park had always been a magnet for his eyes.

It was early afternoon and the sun was high in the sky. People were taking off their jackets and slinging them over their shoulders. Those who were fresh outside wore shorts and t-shirts. Street traffic, as usual, was light with more motorcycles and bicycles than cars and trucks. The only vehicles that appeared with frequency were buses that were almost always practically empty. He noticed pigeons perched on eaves and ledges. They seemed to melt into the architecture and give it sound with their soft cooing. There was a sense of life and vitality all around him, a closeness of humanity that was assuring and comfortable. He didn't know any of these people but he felt an affinity to them. He wondered why he'd never felt this before, why he'd always felt like an outsider.

But then, wasn't that what his mother had taught him? Wasn't that what he'd felt so many times when things had happened that he couldn't explain, most recently, the bump on his head. How did that happen? It should drive him nuts, not knowing. But it didn't. It never had. He'd always just shrugged it off and gotten on with things. His mother's words: "Let it go and just get on with things. There are things that don't need explanation in the life of someone as special as you, Jackson. You're different and your experience of the world will always be different than the people around you."

And maybe that's why he always felt so nervous around other people. They were different. And he was different.

But not today. Today, he was right here in the midst of them, sharing their sidewalk, their park, their air. Nobody was looking at him as though he were weird. Nobody stared. Mostly, when they met his eyes, they smiled. He felt like he belonged here on the sidewalk with them. A middle aged woman in a blue sundress smiled at him as their eyes met and he said, "Beautiful day today."

"It certainly is," she said as she walked past him, still smiling.

If Jackson had had wings at that moment, he would have spent the rest of the afternoon soaring in the sky over the park.

After supper, he stood in the window looking down at the park. He saw everything differently now. He felt like he was looking at something that was a part of himself, something familiar but at the same time surrounded by an aura of newness and adventure. He decided he was going to start questioning things more often. It was too late to do anything about the bump. He wouldn't even know where to start. But there was a difference with the bump. Before now, he would have forgotten about it. But not this time. This time he was going to write these things down, keep a log and maybe over time figure out what was happening when bumps mysteriously appeared on his head.

And he decided to put the travel plans on hold for a while. He had a whole new world to explore right here in the neighborhood that had been virtually a mystery to him for over a decade.

For the first time in ages, Jackson was excited to the core.