



The Weekly Man

Episode 63: Sunday - Jackie

"Hello!"

The voice was close, right next to her ear.

"Hello! Are you awake?"

A woman's voice. Close.

"Hello. You fell asleep on the bench."

Faces. Her face. But faces plural. Her face...but different. And thoughts. Or memories? Her in a red dress chewing on a cigar. Her riding a bicycle and taking pictures. Her hiding in bushes and spying on a coffee shop. But not her. Not Jackie. Someone else. But her face.

A hand on her shoulder. A face taking shape. A young woman with black hair in a ponytail wearing a jogging outfit under a light black jacket. She sat down beside Jackie. "Are you alright?"

Jackie shook her head and looked at the woman. "Yes, I'm fine. I guess I fell asleep. Thanks for waking me."

"No problem," said the woman, smiling widely. "It's generally safe here at night, but it's getting cold and I was concerned that you might get hypothermia." With that, she stood up, wished Jackie a good night and continued running.

Jackie's mind reeled.

What the hell am I doing in the park? At night? How did I get here?

She clearly remembered going to bed.

Sleepwalking? I got dressed and sleepwalked into the park and slept on a bench?

She looked around, looked down, saw her clothing.

Who's clothes am I wearing? These aren't my clothes. Why am I wearing someone else's clothes?

What were all those faces? Those were me?

She stood up quickly, too quickly, the blood-rush to her head made her dizzy and she sat back down.

What the fuck is going on? Who's clothes am I wearing and what am I doing here? And what was that all about with the faces? Am I going fucking crazy?

She stood up, slower this time, and looked around, getting her bearings. She saw the orange light glowing through her two living room windows through the spindly branches of the trees to her right and walked slowly in the direction toward home.

She shook her head as she stood in front of the mirror.

How did I get into these clothes? Where did I get these clothes? Why am I wearing these clothes? And how did I get to the park? And why am I awake now? It's still dark. It's still night. I should be asleep.

Her thoughts went back to one of the conversations she'd had with her mother when she was a child, one of the many conversations they'd had on her condition.

"You're not like other people. You're very special. But you have to take certain precautions. These things are necessary."

They were in the kitchen. It was evening. Crickets chirped outside the windows.

"I know it's hard for you to understand these things at your age. I know that you'll have questions as you grow. But sometimes you have to accept things without fully understanding them."

The message had been so thoroughly drummed in night-after-night that she'd just accepted it, never questioned it. It was in the woodgrain of her life.

But this was beyond accepting. She looked at the cuffs of her plaid shirt. They were worn. These were not new clothes that she'd bought somewhere. These were used clothes. Someone else's clothes.

Where did these come from? And what was it with all those faces? So different. But me.

She heard a familiar knock on her door.

What does she want at this time of night? Why am I even awake at this time of night?

The concern in Mrs. Gilbert's face was unmistakable, even through the wrinkles.

"I heard you come in and I thought, my, that's unusual for Jackie. I was wondering if there's anything wrong."

"No, Mrs. Gilbert, there's no need to worry. I fell asleep on a park bench. But a woman out for a run woke me. I'm alright. I think."

Mrs. Gilbert laughed. "Oh, I'm afraid I'm guilty on that count as well. Fell asleep in the park one night shortly after I bought this place. It's so comfortable in the park." She studied Jackie carefully for a moment. "But you seem somewhat distraught. Are you sure that you're OK?"

Jackie thought about this for a moment. "Mrs. Gilbert, I have a question."

"Yes, dear."

She opened the door completely. "Have you ever seen me in these clothes before?"

The look in Mrs. Gilbert's eyes was unmistakable: shock.

Why would she react with shock? What does she know?

"Mrs. Gilbert? What is it? Have you seen me in these clothes before?"

It took several seconds before she replied, as though she were gathering her wits or trying to figure something out. "Honestly, Jackie, I wouldn't be able to say for sure. The shirt looks nice on you though. Why do you ask such a strange question?"

And why did you have such a strange reaction?

She shook her head. "I...I don't know. It's just that..."

What does she know?

"Yes, dear?"

"Well, this is going to sound strange...but I seem to have forgotten that I even had these clothes. Isn't that weird?"

Jackie imagined that she could hear gears of thought grinding away inside the older woman's mind. The look in her eyes had been real. Shock.

Why shock?

Mrs. Gilbert's expression changed from bemusement to mirth and she laughed. "Oh...I wish I had a wardrobe so large that I would forget some of the clothing I had."

"But these clothes aren't mine, Mrs. Gilbert. I don't have a big wardrobe and I've never seen these clothes before." She looked down at the shirt. "And I hate plaid. I would never wear it."

Something was going on in Mrs. Gilbert's eyes but Jackie couldn't tell what it was. It looked like a mixture of things, so fleeting they left no impression before the next one flashed into her irises. "I really don't know what to say, dear." She shook her head and crossed her arms over her massive chest. "Have you been getting enough sleep? I was reading that lack of sleep can sometimes lead to unexplainable things happening in your life..."

"No, Mrs. Gilbert. It's not lack of sleep. I don't know where these clothes came from." She gestured toward her body with both hands. "They're just...on me."

The two stood, facing each other for what seemed like hours before Mrs. Gilbert said, "Well, dear, the shirt does look good on you...even though you don't like it. But I suppose I should stop bothering you now. Perhaps, you should try to get some..." She stopped dead and Jackie was certain that what she saw flashing in the woman's eyes was panic. "Or, maybe you should change clothing and make some coffee." Jackie's eyes followed hers to the big windows where the first light of day was beginning to erase the night. "It looks like it's almost time to rise." She smiled, but there was something other than smiling in her eyes.

What is that? Helplessness?

"Well...I have some things to attend to. If you need to talk some more, just let me know." She hurried toward the stairs.

What does she know?

Natalie

Natalie's hands shook. Sitting in her armchair with her hands resting on her legs, back straight and eyes looking forward but seeing nothing, she breathed deeply, slowly. She felt her heart flutter. That was the last thing she needed.

What have I done?

It was all catching up to her, all the years of hiding the truth from her children.

But what was I supposed to do? Anything could have happened if they'd found out. And what would the rest of the world have done to them?

Manzer had told her that it might be best for them to know so that they could work together to adapt.

But they might have merged into one personality. They might have all gone crazy. They might have lived their lives being studied, under the microscope.

I love them all. I have seven children.

That, she knew, was the main reason for not telling them: she wanted to keep all seven of them. It was the same as if some other mother had given birth to seven babies with seven different personalities, except her babies were all in the same body.

What have I done? God, please don't let her go to sleep now.

She had no idea what would happen if Jackie went to sleep this early. Nothing like this had happened before. She might wake up as Jackson. She might wake up as herself but with her biorhythms skewed so that she might not sleep that night. Natalie had worked hard to ensure that all seven of them adhered to a strict schedule, something that was so much a part of them that it defined who they were. For their entire lives, they'd all been in bed by midnight. For their entire lives, they'd waked up at six in the morning. For their entire lives, they'd always been home to make that deadline. None of them had ever been to a sleepover or stayed overnight in a hotel or anywhere else other than home. All the strategies and planning she'd worked out with Manzer...all of it seemed to be unraveling now.

They're all going out on their own now. I need to talk to Manzer.

What could she possibly know that she would hold back from me? Jackie, you must be going crazy. It's Mrs. Gilbert. Sweet wrinkled old Mrs. Gilbert. She has nothing to hide from you. You're being paranoid. But why did she look that way? She seemed almost shocked. And why did she seem to panic after telling me I should get some sleep? And then change suddenly to drinking coffee?

She went to the bedroom and opened the hidden door to her closet.

Why do I keep my clothes and other things stored in a secret closet?

She thought back to her childhood, the secret closet in the house she grew up in. This had been one of the rituals of her life. It was something she just did because she wasn't like other people.

And why am I not like other people?

She undressed and threw the strange clothing on the floor of the closet.

God, even the underwear isn't mine.

She picked a pair of jeans and t-shirt and put them on.

This is crazy. Something's seriously wrong. Either I'm going crazy or someone's playing some kind of really bizarre joke on me.

She went to the living room, sat down at her desk and turned on her computer. Light burst through the windows as the early morning sun broke through a thin layer of cloud. Jackie stared at dust motes in the air as her mind wandered. She thought about the hundreds, no, thousands of little things she'd forced herself to ignore through her life, so many things and so many times that it became second nature and she never questioned it. The only thing she'd ever questioned was her body. It didn't feel right. It wasn't the body she was supposed to have. She was a woman. She'd always been a woman. The man who lost his glasses knew that without even seeing her clearly. She'd always thought like a woman, felt like a woman, wanted the things that women wanted. She'd had to accept never really being herself.

And those faces. Me.

She thought about how she'd felt when she'd seen them. Puzzlement. But familiarity beyond the faces being hers.

And not me.

She noticed that her computer was on. She was certain that she'd turned it off. She was always careful about that. She pressed Control Alt Delete and entered her password. Her desktop appeared. She stared at it, not knowing what to do next. The research on sex change suddenly didn't seem so urgent. She had no idea where she was going to go with her next play. She wasn't even certain that she wanted to write another play.

Maybe it's time to try something else. A novel? Short stories?

The scripts for all seventeen of her plays were lined up across the top of her monitor. She stared at them.

Seventeen plays. Seventeen.

It occurred to her that she didn't care about those plays. Suddenly, they were just words that she'd mostly forgotten. What she wondered about was the theme that ran through every one of them: Humans transforming from primordial beasts into so called civilized people, but deadlier and more violent than ever.

What's that all about? Do I really believe that? Where did that come from?

She felt all the inconsistencies and unexplained events of her life building like a wave that threatened to swamp her sanity. The more she thought about it, the more she was awed by the power of it.

But not anymore.

She decided to put everything in her life on hold while she faced whatever it was she hadn't faced since as long as she could remember.

I need to find out who I am before I become who I will be.