



The Weekly Man

Episode 71: Jackson

So many questions. Her whole life had been questions. Questions without answers. Questions to be shrugged off and ignored. Questions to be shoved to the back of her mind and forgotten.

Never question the questions.

Acceptance of things for what they are: events with no beginnings, reactions with no actions. Someone else's clothing. Waking up in the park without going into the park. A bump on the head with no accident.

And what does Mrs. Gilbert know that made her react that way? And why would she know anything? What could she possibly know? Why that look of shock?

She'd been out in the dark. Past the time. She'd never done that before.

And those faces? What were those faces? Me...but not me.

A chill crept up her legs and into her spine. She walked to the closet and pressed the code to open the secret door.

Why do I have a secret door? Why did I always have a secret door? What was it Mom said? It was so long ago. About protecting me from those who would treat me like a freak?

But I am a freak.

It was something she'd always known. She'd grown up suspecting it. She'd never been into the things that men were into and she'd never felt comfortable with her body.

But the acceptance of things over the years. Accepting and ignoring things.

She was suddenly awed by the power of her mother's suggestion and the continued power after her death. She felt that she'd been in a hypnotic spell all her life, conditioned to accept without question.

But I can't do that anymore. I need to know what's going on in my life. I need to find out who I am—or what—I am.

She grabbed her fall coat, closed the closet and went to the door.

Natalie

No...not now!

It felt like someone with an iron grip squeezing her heart as the numbness coursed up and down her arm. She gripped the shelves and knocked over a large planter with green leaves spilling over the sides. The planter hit the floor and cracked, spewing dark soil and green leaves as Mrs. Gilbert's eyes rolled. She watched in horror at the room spinning around her as she fell, knocking over the entire shelf with six more planters. She hit the floor hard.

Jackie and Natalie

Jackie heard the crashing from Mrs. Gilbert's flat as she opened the door leading to the front steps.

My god...what?

She rushed to Mrs. Gilbert's door and knocked.

"Mrs. Gilbert. Mrs. Gilbert. It's Jackie. Are you all right?"

She tried the door knob. It was locked. She knocked harder.

"Mrs. Gilbert! Mrs. Gilbert! Are you all right!"

She put her ear up against the door and listened. She thought she heard moaning.

"Mrs. Gilbert!"

She tried the knob again, turning it hard, but it wouldn't budge.

She yelled as loud as she could, "Mrs. Gilbert!" She put her ear up against the door again. She was certain that she heard moaning.

My god...she's had another heart attack. This fucking door. Well, Jackie...what about this fucking door?

Man's body or not, she wasn't big. She was slim but solid. She'd never been sure why that was because she never did much in the way of physical activity and certainly didn't follow an exercise routine. But she was solid and she kicked at the door with all the force she could muster. To her surprise, the door swung open. She rushed in and saw Mrs. Gilbert lying on her side surrounded by dirt and broken flower pots. She was convulsing. Jackie ran over to her and hoisted the woman's head onto her lap.

"Mrs. Gilbert!"

The older woman's breathing started to return to normal. She opened her eyes and looked into Jackie's eyes. The helplessness in those eyes frightened Jackie...this woman who was always so robust, so brimming with energy and positivity.

Her eyes. So helpless.

She reached into her back pocket for her phone. "Mrs. Gilbert, I'm going to call an ambulance for you. Hold on now. Help will be here soon." She couldn't help but think that there was something else besides helplessness in the old woman's eyes as she punched in the numbers and talked to a calm voice that requested information slowly and methodically.

What is that in her eyes? Like she's saying she's sorry. Why would she be sorry? What for?

She returned the phone to her pocket. "They're on their way now, Mrs. Gilbert. Just hold on. Everything's going to be OK." She sat on the floor with Mrs. Gilbert's head in her lap, looking

into her eyes. The older woman's lips moved as though she were trying to say something but she couldn't get the words to come. "It's OK, Mrs. Gilbert. It's OK. They'll be here soon. Just hang in there. You're going to be OK."

She looked around to see if there was a pillow nearby. There was something about the furniture in the room that seemed strange. The sandy brown recliner. It looked familiar. The dark brown chesterfield with the light brown tasseled throws. She couldn't put her finger on why it seemed so familiar. The paisley wing chair and ottoman. To her right, there was a fireplace that looked like it hadn't been used in years. On the mantle above the fireplace there were pictures. There was something about the pictures. She squinted her eyes.

No. This can't be. How can this be?

They were pictures of Jackie when she was a child. Seven pictures of her when her mother was still alive.

It was a few seconds before Jackie could tear her gaze away from the pictures to look at the woman who had just walked through the door and past the dark oak storage bench with scarves and coats hanging from brass hooks. She remembered the bench from her childhood when it had been beside the door leading into the backyard from the kitchen.

Long blonde hair flowed over the woman's navy blue fall coat. She had a long hawk-like nose but she was beautiful. The motion of her steps was sure and concise. She moved quickly and was beside Jackie in a matter of seconds. She looked first at Mrs. Gilbert and then at Jackie. "Did you call an ambulance?"

Jackie nodded yes and looked back at the pictures on the mantle. She looked back into Mrs. Gilbert's helpless apologetic eyes and it started to sink in.

All this time. All these years.

"Mom? Is that you Mom?"

The faintest of smiles curled at the edges of Natalie's mouth.

Valerie watched as Jackie's eyes turned to the pictures on the mantle and back to the old woman, back to the pictures and back to the woman. The confusion. The realization. And even more confusion.

Well, I guess the secret is out now.

The look in Mrs. Gilbert's eyes didn't show a trace of fear. Valerie would much rather have seen that than the look of infinite helplessness. The movement of her lips, but unable to speak. Knowing that her years of keeping the secret, all her strategies, the planning, the quick responses to emergencies, the mental programming, the faked death...the lies: It was all coming undone. There was no strategy for this. One of them had seen the photos.

And why did she keep the pictures here in the same building?

One of them had looked into her eyes and seen the truth. There would be no amount of conditioning that would make Jackie just shrug off and forget that the mother she'd thought was dead since she was a child was still alive and had been living in the same building with her for years.

Some things can't be shrugged off no matter how much conditioning.

She looked down at Natalie and shook her head, her face showing her disappointment. Tears streamed out of Natalie's eyes. She'd stopped trying to talk. She just lay on the floor looking up into Jackie's eyes.

Jackie was still dumbfounded. She stared deep into Natalie's eyes. Every few minutes, she said, "Mom? Is that you?"

In the distance, a siren grew closer and closer. Natalie stared into Jackie's eyes and now both were streaming tears.

Things were about to change and Valerie hoped those changes would be for the best.

It was a couple of hours before the time as Jackie sat on the chesterfield with the tasseled throw staring across the room at the woman named Valerie, sitting in the brown recliner. They were in Mrs. Gilbert's apartment, except that it wasn't Mrs. Gilbert's apartment because Mrs. Gilbert didn't exist. It was her mother's apartment. Natalie Carson. Her long dead mother, Natalie Carson, living downstairs all these years.

She'd been allowed to visit her briefly after the surgery. Until then, she'd sat with Valerie Vine in the waiting room, neither of them saying a word, Jackie still in shock. Everything in her life was beginning to fly apart like a bursting piñata. The visit had been short. Valerie had told her that it was essential that she be home before midnight. Her mother's lips moved furiously under the folds of flesh. Jackie barely managed to hear her words, "Go now. Explain later. Listen Valerie. Please. Go now."

Neither woman had spoken during the ride home as Jackie stared straight ahead, feeling the buildings and sidewalks, the traffic and intersections, a whole world passing by on the other side of the window. Every thought that could have bred a question dissolved before she had a chance to clearly define what she was thinking. Everything tangible was suddenly illusory. Even her presence in the car felt dreamlike, a product of her imagination. She clenched her fists tightly to assure herself that she could feel something in the physical world—that she was real.

And now they were facing each other surrounded by things that Jackie had let go of years ago, those things that wouldn't fit into the flat. But she wasn't looking at the furniture. She was looking at the pictures on the mantle. They were the faces of herself that she'd seen in her dream. They were her but not her, except for one at the far end of the shelf. For some reason, she was sure that was her. She turned her head to Valerie.

"OK...so I'm pretty damn sure the one at the end is me," she said, pointing. "But I have a feeling that the others are someone, or something, else. Can you explain?"

Valerie closed her eyes as she looked up at the ceiling and breathed deeply. She was motionless for a few minutes while Jackie stared patiently."

Valerie opened her eyes and looked at Jackie. "Let's go over to the mantle and I'll introduce you to some people you've been sharing your body with since birth...your brothers."