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Familiar Stranger

Lisa Stillman
Denison University

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Familiar Stranger

A heavy smog swallowed the air and sucked up against the window pane outside her Third Street apartment. Inside, the air stood stale and thick with the haze of cigarette smoke. A cigarette hung smoldering between her stained fingers that morning as she lay disheveled on the single bed, clad only in a pair of colored cotton briefs. Her tired gaze penetrated the smoke stream and happened on the window, where the sky hunkered down like unpolished steel.

She'd been awakened by the muffled yells of the fourth floor neighbor. She could hear the slur of his voice, as she had to hear it every morning. He probably just got in from the night before. In her mind, Jackie could almost smell the whiskey on his breath, like the men she served late nights. They drank past their limits, and she'd keep bringing them more. The more they'd drink, the more hands found their ways clumsily past the hem of Jackie's shorts. But she'd still keep bringing the drinks, and smiling. Anything for that tip.

Jackie cringed at the man's tirade; he sounded too much like her father. Arching her back, she reached a long arm beneath her and slid the tattered quilt to one side. Settling against the cool sheet and drawing the blanket over her, she wished she could lie there, covered, hidden, and never have to go to work again. Snuffing out the cigarette, Jackie rolled over, and the world grew dark as the drunken man's voice faded.

She woke to the steady patter of ice against the window, where the steel sky had grown darker. Reaching to the plastic milk crate beside the bed, Jackie grabbed, by touch, a cigarette and lighter. She held one strong drag, as if that might somehow give her the courage to make it through the night. When her head began to feel the tingle, she released the smoke in a forceful pout and threw back the quilt. Sitting, her feet rested on the cold hardwood floor. The wind-up clock next to the bed ticked out six o'clock p.m.; the alarm wouldn't have rung for another half hour. She turned it off and grabbed a short terrycloth robe from the foot of the bed.

The contents of the mini-fridge did nothing to excite her digestive juices. She grabbed a Coors, and a poptart from the refrigerator top. 'Great breakfast, dinner, whatever you'd call it,' she thought to herself.

She wondered what all those men she'd be serving later would be doing right now. Pulling a little overtime on the job maybe. Some were probably catching a quick meal that somebody else, a cafeteria cook or a dutiful wife, cooked for them. She'd bet that a good deal of those at home for dinner were gearing up to hit their wives, like the neighbor upstairs who can't control his volume, or his temper. Jackie knew that a lot of the guys she served came to the bar with a woman's blood on their hands. And the rush of the act made them damn thirsty.

Jackie swigged the last of her beer, and dumped the can in the paper bag by the fridge. The course booklet under the poptart box caught her attention. She pulled it up and flipped through. The community college offered night courses for continuing education, and Jackie had marked the courses she thought looked most interesting. "Who am I kidding?" she spoke aloud to the smoke filled room. She had to work nights, and she couldn't manage day classes, because that was her time to sleep.

In the bathroom, she turned on the shower and let the water generate from cold

to luke warm as she stripped off her robe and briefs. She stepped into the tub, drawing the curtain behind her, and lingered as the warm massaging rhythm graced her shoulders. She wished she could get back under the covers again, and sleep until morning.

In the main room, away from the warm steam of the shower, the air felt frigid, and Jackie's damp feet stuck to the slick floor. On the couch lay her work outfit. The halter shirt was a little wrinkled from the night before, but it would do. She shook it out and laid it beside the shorts. She took a couple minutes to apply Apple Blossom lotion to every part of her body, helping the skin look healthy and feel silky to the touch.

From the little blue chipped dresser, she pulled a satiny pair of underwear, and slid them on under the robe; then the bright orange shorts that were a little shorter than the length of her buttocks. She dropped the robe onto the couch and struggled, towel still wrapped on her head, into the white half-tee shirt with the loud logo "JUGS" in bright orange across the front.

Back in the bathroom, Jackie used the blow dryer and a lot of hairspray to create height in the bangs. Then she teased it to perfection, giving it that shaggy look that the men seemed to like so much; she always made just marginally more in tips when she did her hair this way. She brushed her teeth, then set to work on her makeup.

Taking special care to create an even application of foundation, she made sure to cover the eclipsed half-moons under her eyes, and to blend in well below the chin, so that no line would be visible. Then she stroked on blush, bright on the cheekbones, and powder to soften the look and give that glow to the face. Then the eyes: she applied three shades of shadow, blending expertly with a special brush, penciled on brown eyeliner above and below, and swept on a brown-black mascara whose tube promised that her eyelashes would go on forever. Lastly she drew on a dark lipliner, tracing for the most part her natural line, fudging a little here and there to create extra fullness. Then she filled in the stencil tracing with a dark wine lipstick, heavy and full.

Jackie threw her hair back from her shoulders, and took in the full view of herself. "Ah, transformed!" she said aloud. At the dresser, she took out of a cloth-covered box a gold chain necklace with a rhinestone heart pendant dangling from it. She fastened the chain behind her neck, the heart landing on her bare skin, just above the beginning dent of her cleavage.

She pulled on white fold down socks and small white tennis shoes. Over her 'uniform', Jackie dressed in jeans and an old sweatshirt. She took few minutes for a last cigarette, then threw on her jacket and gloves. Laving the apartment, she secured both outside locks behind her. At the first floor, she skated across the parking lot to the bus stop.

After only a few moments in the cold, the shiny metal bus came lumbering down Third, its headlights framing Jackie. She boarded, dropping a pocket full of change into the box. As the bus rumbled toward her destination, Jackie noticed a neighboring passenger who seemed to be staring. Out of the corner of her eye sat a man whose gaze seemed directed at Jackie. She avoided eye contact with him by shifting slightly in her seat, facing more forward. She'd lived in this city a long time, but the familiar gaze of a stranger was something that always made her nervous.

Finally, at Thayer and Central, the bus came to a stop, and Jackie exited, conscious of the man's penetrating stare. She did not look back as the bus pulled away. Instead, as she went inside, she looked up at the neon sign over the building: "JUGS". Inside, Cara was seated at one of the high chrome-legged bar stools, and Roger stood behind the long wood-top counter, preparing for the night ahead.

"Why don't you give me one before I have to give em to everybody else?" Cara taunted the bartender. "Shot of Jack Black would do me just fine."

"I ain't giving you one tonight just like I never give you one before you star" Roger replied. "I don't like the way you get out there when you've been drinking. You get too... oozy." Cara gave him a questioning look, and he answered, "You know exactly what I mean. No booze."

Cara looked over her halter-clad shoulder at the approaching Jackie. Clouded in a haze of cigarette smoke came the words, "Jackie, Rog won't give me something to help me through this dreaded night." Cara's melodrama grew more overdone, "I don't think I'll make it. What if I end up flipping out and killing one of those jerks when he plows his hand up my shorts?" Her tone shifted to dead seriousness, "I swear one of these days I'm gonna plow right into one of those fuckers."

Cara dragged hard on her cigarette, and Jackie responded, "I know exactly how you feel."

"Really Jackie, don't you just want to slam those beer bags a rough one in the face every damn time they do that?" Drives me fucking crazy. I don't know how you handle it so well. You just smile and walk away, gritting your teeth the whole time, but they'd never know it. Isn't that right? I see it. You put on a great show. I don't know how you do it. Boy, I'll tell you, I've spilled my share of beer in boys' laps over the years. I just lose it sometimes."

Roger answered for Jackie, "Jackie's more accommodating than you are, Cara. She knows how to pull in the bucks. In more ways than one," he laughed at his own play on words. Neither woman cracked a smile.

In the back room, Jackie took off her jacket and gloves, and laid them on a vacant chair. It was cold in the little room, but Roger would be opening the doors in five minutes, so she went ahead and stepped out of her jeans, and slid the sweatshirt off over her head. The cold air assaulted her lightly clad body, and she shivered. "Damn," she complained to herself, as she searched the room for an order pad. Finding one, and a pen, she hurried out of the little room and back into the bar, where the heat was just beginning to circulate. "Damn," this time she addressed the bartender, "you think you could keep it any colder back there, Rog?"

Roger apparently took it as a rhetorical question, not bothering to answer. "He just likes to get a look at our chests when we come out from back there," Cara said. "Isn't that right, Roger?" He made himself look busy by wiping out beer mugs with a rag, but a slight grin perked the edge of his mouth.

Jackie had thought of this before, and knew Cara was exactly right. "Screw you, Roger," she said; the comment was tempered with just enough sarcasm to keep her on the job.

By 10:30, the place was full, mostly with regulars. There were also out-of-towners, some of the guys who stayed at the George Washington Motel across the highway. They were always the worst; they could be rude to anyone, and get away with almost anything, because tomorrow they'd be gone forever.

Tohight there was a crude one at booth six, and Jackie was doing everything she could to put up with his comments and drunken fumbblings. While picking up the tenth beer for this man, Jackie leaned over the bar. "Another Golden for the foreigner. Hey Roger, this tom at six is a real jackass."

Roger bent to grab the beer from beneath the bar. "All right, Jackie, what do you want me to do, kick him out? He's the best customer in here tonight."

Taking the beer, Jackie shot a glance over to the front door where the bouncer was standing watch. Charlie's six foot, four inch frame with three hundred pounds of surrounding tissue was overbearing, and Jackie had witnessed his persuasion in getting people to leave the bar. He was firm, but didn't get into the rough stuff unless he had to.

At the booth, Jackie stood away from the table, at the greatest distance possible, and leaned in to place the beer in front of the man. Despite her distance, he reached out with two thick, hairy arms, grabbed Jackie around the hips, and pulled her with great force, into the booth. Out of beath, Jackie struggled against the man, but he was large, and held her tight on his lap. She let out a yelp, but in the quick seconds before anyone could react, it happened. As she fought against him with all her strength, the man slid his hand inside her shorts, beneath her underwear. She screamed as she felt the jamming penetration of his fat, cold fingers.

Suddenly Charlie was over them, and Roger just behind his shoulder. Charlie grabbed the man's head from behind and slammed it full force into the thick wooden back of the booth. Jackie felt the man's hand release and leave her, and her body shivered; she felt burning, and numb. Charlie was grabbing the man's torso from behind, wrenching him half out of the booth. Jackie pulled her legs in close, cowering in the corner. The man's eyes glared hard, condemning, at Jackie as he was pulled out of the booth. He was roughly escorted from the building by Charlie, Roger, and several of the bar regulars. He would never be allowed in the door again, but Jackie was sure that didn't matter to the man. He'd be gone forever as soon as tomorrow.

Cara was at the booth, holding Jackie, comforting her. "My god, baby, what did he do to you? We'll get you to a doctor just as soon as..."

"No," Jackie snapped, her father's hands filling her mind. "No, I'll be fine. Just a little rough stuff. I can handle it." She was trembling, and could feel the cold of the sweat beginning to dry on her skin. "I'm okay, Cara. I just need a minute."

"Honey, I'll take you home, okay? You just hold on a minute until the boys get settled down. Let's get you into the back room."

Cara helped Jackie up from the booth, and Jackie leaned on Cara's arm to help support her weak body. Jackie suddenly felt naked. She wasn't wearing enough clothes. She was cold, and she felt on display in front of the world, as she had in her wet swimsuit at her thirteenth birthday party. In the back room, she got dressed as quickly as possible. She didn't want to feel so naked anymore. She needed some covering, but the burning between her thighs made putting on her jeans difficult and slow-going.

Out in the bar, things had died down considerably. Charlie stood at his post by the front door, guarding. Roger was waiting just outside the door to the back room. When the women emerged, he-started, "Jackie, are you hurt? Jesus, I can't believe that fucker. Are you okay? Did he hurt you?" Roger was out of breath.

"She's okay," Cara said, holding Jackie around the shoulders. "I'm taking her home."

"Fine. Good. You get some rest, Jackie. Give me a call tomorrow, okay?"

Jackie couldn't seem to speak. Instead, she nodded her head in agreement. She couldn't imagine coming back to work tomorrow night, wearing that skimpy costume. How could she ever let a man fumble at her shorts hem again? At the door, Jackie's throat freed up, and she managed a small "Thank you" to Charlie.

The ride in Cara's car was silent, but Cara's fingers gripped the steering wheel in tight fists. She huffed sighs under her breath, as if to precede statements, but the statements never came. Jackie rode slumped against the seat, eyes staring ahead.

At Jackie's apartment, Cara walked her in, then left her alone; asking her to call if she needed anything. Jackie went immediately to the bathroom and turned the shower on hot. She peeled off the layers of clothing, wadding up the "JUGS" shirt and pants and throwing them in the bathroom corner. Her underwear, speckled red in the crotch, went in the waste basket.

The water felt almost too hot on her still trembling skin, but she needed it that way. Water didn't cleanse unless it was extremely hot. She soaped down her whole body, wiping away the dried sweat. The soap burned like salt, but she knew it was necessary for the cleansing. All she could think of was that man's fingers, fat and cold. Thick and familiar. She wanted to hide.

She turned off the shower, dried off well, and pulled her sweatshirt back over her head. She ran the blow dryer through her hair, so her scalp wouldn't freeze in the cold air outside the bathroom. She found a pair of comfortable cotton underwear and pulled them on gingerly, then a pair of sweatpants and thick cotton socks.

Easing into bed, she pulled the cover up to her neck, realizing that she was still shaking. She lay there a long time listening to the night, trying to forget.

She woke to the persistent patter of rain on the window. Outside, the sky was a sheet metal gray, cold, numb. She turned on her side and felt the dull throbbing between her legs. Lighting a cigarette from the bedside milk crate, she let one arm be exposed to a chilling draft in the room. She lay a long time, staring at the dark sky, holding in nicotine drags. When the wind-up clock ticked out six-thirty p.m., Jackie got out of bed. She found her uniform crumpled in a wad in one corner of the bathroom floor. The shirt was a little wrinkled, so she shook it out, and laid it on the bathroom sink with the little orange shorts. They'd be ready when she got out of the shower.

— Lisa Stillman '95