

The Agent

Richard kept an eye on Jackie and on each party guest who spoke with the diminutive man. Jackie may have been short and rather ordinary looking, but he was the most important man at the party, the guest of honor. Richard was happy to see everyone act accordingly, treating the fellow not only with respect, but also with an easy friendliness that Jackie was thoroughly enjoying. When a small man in a professor's threadbare herringbone jacket spoke glowingly of Jackie's famous ability in college to write funny send-ups of the faculty, Richard congratulated himself on his inspiration to alert the guests to a few personal aspects of Jackie's history.

The afternoon was gorgeous, blue sky and temperature at 70 degrees. And the house, yard and deck where the party took place were exactly what Richard thought they should look like ... solid middle class, with shrubs set out and inexpensive flowers planted near the foundation. A Sears power lawn mower of recent vintage sat in the back corner of the yard. He'd always felt he'd like to live here in Monterey Hills if he couldn't afford better. Just another section of Los Angeles, a metropolis the writer Dorothy Parker had described as "72 suburbs in search of a city."

Richard turned back to the crowd and watched as a young pretty blonde woman came out of the house and crossed the deck to where Jackie stood talking with Bert Fuller, a man of fifty with blazing good looks who had some success on stage and screen. Willomenia, the blonde, walked up to Jackie, effusively said hello and put her hands on his forearm before reaching out and giving him a chaste hug. Perfect. She was the youngest woman at the party and Richard was sure a chaste act was rare in her repertoire. Richard hope he might see her afterward.

The crowd in the driveway began to separate as a large grey limousine slowly inched into the back yard and came to a stop just on the edge of the grass. The driver's door opened and out stepped a familiar

looking alumnus of the University of Chicago: 35 starts, 194 tackles, 13 sacks, six foot, three inches; 253 pounds and dark ebony skin. Wearing a meticulously groomed gun metal grey suit and wrap-around dark glasses, he moved slowly like the largest cat in the jungle. Indeed, he was the biggest creature in this jungle. The giant slowly gazed around the yard, not searching but gathering. His eyes stopped on Willomenia, moved on to Jackie, then resumed their survey and in a moment came back and locked on the guest of honor. When Jackie touched his nose, the black man stepped toward the rear of the limousine, ready to open the passenger door. Jackie began to walk toward the car while Richard moved in a line to intercept his route.

The crowd was now milling around the guest of honor, allowing him to pass slowly from their midst, shouting well wishes and reminding him to come back next year. Jackie seemingly tried to shake the hand of everyone in attendance. When he came to Richard, the short man reached out with two fists to grab the hand of the man who had organized the party.

"Terrific, as usual," said Jackie, and Richard smiled winningly.

As Jackie reached the car, the ex-football star pulled open the door and the two of them were quickly inside, the sound of locks popping like guns in the distance. Everyone was now waving to a man they couldn't see behind the darkened bullet proof glass, but that didn't seem to diminish their enthusiasm.

The limo backed out onto the tree lined street and swiftly glided away toward the expressway a mile distant.

The party had lasted exactly ninety minutes. As soon as the limousine rounded the corner at Blythewood and Gordon Streets, the cheering abruptly stopped and the raised hands dropped out of the air like fallen birds. The party-goers wordlessly looked at each other. A few smiles could be seen throughout the crowd, but most of the faces were sober and a few thoughtful. Richard rolled a large residential plastic trash can from behind the bushes into the center of the driveway and hefted a leather brief case atop the impromptu paymaster's desk. He opened the case and took out a small stack of envelopes, arranged in alphabetical order. The actors began to arrange themselves into a rough line as Richard called each of the 23 names and handed out checks from an agency none of them had ever heard of.

Later at the bar, Willomenia asked, “How much does he pay your agency for that show every year?”

“About thirty grand for salaries, the food, rental of someone’s house, touch up, staging, clean up it all adds up,” said Richard.

“And all because he has no real family?” she asked.

“What’s a real family?” said Richard. “When you go to their homes, they complain, ask for money, tell you you’re no good when you refuse their begging. Family isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.

“I like the pay,” said the woman. “But it’s all so hard to believe that a man would hire a talent agency to stage a party with a fake family.” She slowly swirled the liquor around the ice cubes at the bottom of her glass.”

“You really think so?” said Richard. “If you were worth a lot of money and for a mere thirty thousand dollars each year you could hire the family and neighbors you always wanted? Who act happy to see you? And ask your advice instead of complain about what you haven’t done for them? Who remember the little things you did in life as well as the big deals and laugh with you at what you think is funny or smart? It’s a wonder more billionaires don’t do it.”

“But the “family” he hires isn’t real,” she protested.

“No, you have it wrong,” Richard said. “It’s the so-called real family who isn’t real. They just want your money. THEY are the fakes. You and I are more real than they will ever be.”

“Well, OK, but”

“Believe me, I know,” said Richard, as he slammed his drink down on the mahogany bar. “I know what it’s like to have a family that just wants a piece of what you’ve spent your whole life building, who couldn’t give a damn about how you fought your way up in the world, the cousins who have no idea what it was like growing up with a drunken father, getting beat up all the time, sleeping on the porch some nights, never given a goddamn thing but a fistful of knuckles in your face ...”

“Richard, calm down!” said Willomenia, “You’re getting very upset ... and a little scary.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s just that ...”

A silence came between them while Richard took a breath, a swig of his drink and lit up another cigarette.

“I’m sorry,” said Willomenia, “I didn’t know about all of that.”

“I’m the one who should be sorry,” he said. “It’s not your worry.”

“I wouldn’t have brought it up,” she said, “but I wondered wherever anyone would get the idea for a fake reunion.”

“It’s my idea,” said Richard. “I staged my own fake family gathering for three years until I got tired of it. Then I moved on to my next fantasy.”

“Do I want to hear this?” asked Willomenia

“Let me tell you a little secret,” said Richard. “Jackie and his bodyguard are actors. I told all of you they were real to disguise who the show is really for.

“Richard, this is getting creepy.” said Willomenia.

“I’m wealthy enough to treat myself,” Richard said. “My fantasy is to be the head of a talent agency. To be with actors, meet pretty women like you and hopefully date them. The backyard party is a lot easier and cheaper to pull off than a short film.”

“You’re not a real talent agent?” she asked.

“Nope,” he replied “just a very successful patent attorney living out his fantasy.” Richard wondered why he had said “patent attorney.” Did they make that much money?

“Is anything real?” she asked.

“Not in this town,” he replied. “Would you like to go somewhere for dinner?”

copyright 2011 by David Griffin

**The Windswept Press
Murrells Inlet, SC**

www.windsweptpress.com