

Reality

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 and Richard was happy to see the other guests 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 could not have afforded 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 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 and while effusively saying hello put her hands on his forearm before reaching out and giving him a chaste hug. She was the youngest woman at the party and ordinarily a chaste act was not in her repertoire. Richard should know, and he looked forward to seeing 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 a dark ebony finish.

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 named Franklin slowly gazed around the yard, not searching but gathering. His eyes stopped on Willomenia, lingered a moment, moved on to Jackie, 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 stepped aside while Jackie gave Richard a back slapping hug to the cheers of the crowd. With everyone's eyes on the guest of honor and the host, no one noticed Franklin nod his head to someone at the back of the crowd. And in a moment Franklin and Jackie were quickly inside the limo, the sound of locks popping like guns in the distance. The group 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 disappeared around 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 to where everyone stood. He hefted a leather brief case atop of the impromptu paymaster's desk, 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 name and handed out the checks from the Thespedia Agency.

Cabs arrived and the group began to leave. Willomenia slipped away, but Richard planned to meet her later at home. In less than an hour Richard found himself alone. He looked at his watch and wondered if he should wait for the home's owners to return. He decided it wasn't really necessary. The cleaners would be by in the morning and he

had already written a check to Bill and Fran, the agreeable owners.

He smiled when he thought of his wife complaining about the money he spent on this charade. No doubt she'd rather he it spent on her, Willomenia. Why were young women always so self-centered? He placed a call on his cell phone, waited five minutes and then stepped outside into the cool night air.

A light rain had begun to fall and the cozy neighborhood street lamps were reflected on the surface of the wet street. A pair of headlights made their way toward him and pulled to the curb, the passenger door directly in front of him. He reached down and pulled open the door of the executive grey limousine and got in.

"Did you get Franklin to the plane on time?" he said to Jackie, who sat behind the wheel.

"Yeah, she must be some hot property," Jackie mused. "I think he's taking a dame with him back to Frisco. He pulled out two boarding passes for the porter. Where to, Rich? Home?"

"Yes, Willomenia should be there. Want to come in for a drink?" said Richard.

"No, I'd rather be with my woman than looking at yours," Jackie replied with a smile

Richard hoped she would be at home, but he was used to his young wife running off at all hours to comfort a friend or join a protest on Wilshire Boulevard. She hadn't said goodbye before leaving today, as though she was in a hurry.

"We have to get the limo back, too," said Richard. "By tomorrow noon."

"Why do we do this every year, Rich," asked Jackie.

"Because they need the work," replied Richard.

"They're terrible actors," said Jackie. "Maybe that's why they need the work."

"They're old and no longer beautiful, that's why they need the work," said Richard. "Zach and Bert and the others were some of the first people to sign with my agency thirty years ago. I owe them my career and my success, frankly."

"Well, you're paying for it," said Jackie. "What's this cost you every year, fifty grand?"

"About thirty," said Richard, "mostly their pay. But there's food, rental of someone's house, touch up, staging, clean up ... it all adds up."

"Why not give them an annual stipend or something," said Jackie. "Why the fake party?"

"Jackie, you'll never understand show business," said Richard.

"I'm not in show business," said Jackie. "I'm your cousin, the plumber."

"They need a SHOW!" said Richard. "They need to feel valuable doing what they spent their lives perfecting. To play a part and feel good about themselves."

"I guess I can see that," said Jackie.

"I guess you certainly can," Richard replied as he stared out the window into the night. "You play John Randal Yorkton perfectly. The actors think you're a billionaire with permanent amnesia."

"I work at my acting," said Jackie. "I want them to think they're fooling me, that they're great actors."

Richard smiled to himself. In truth, his cousin was a pretty poor actor. But the overly sensitive man would have never been able to play his part if he realized everyone at the party understood he was a plumber, not an actor and certainly not a billionaire. That's why Jackie was never told everyone knew he was Richard's cousin. To the actors it didn't matter. Reality was hardly a fixed commodity in any of their lives and to them truth was just getting their lines right. They viewed the entire party as Richard's annual silliness, done to lessen his embarrassment at handing out a little charity to his old clients, and maybe to feel a little less guilty for the hefty fees he had charged them over the years. They didn't care how he gave them money. Most of them were in financial straits beyond pride. It's not easy to deceive an actor. The only person ordinarily fooled at Richard's annual party was Jackie. But this year there was an additional fool ... Richard. Franklin was by now in the air with Willomenia on their way to San Francisco.

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