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What's Wrong with You

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“What’s wrong wit’ you?” asked the shopkeeper.

“Ain’t nothin’ wrong with me,” scowled Mr. Jackson as a flap of skin unfolded across his chest. Hinged at the side like an armoire door to Mr. Jackson’s body, the flap opened at the breastbone, curling outward towards his left arm. It pushed part way into his sleeve, filled out the space under his armpit, and then unrolled down to his hip. Cramped by the shirt, it bunched into lumps along his side and pulled the material just enough to draw open gentle slits between the front buttons. From a distance or a certain angle, someone might just see him as fat, but the shopkeeper was standing close and looking straight on.

“Yeh there is. I can see half yo ribs and yo stomach muscles, yo *real* stomach muscles. And yo ain’t even been embalmed yet.”

“What you talkin’ about!” trembled Mr. Jackson, furious, his right hand pulling back as soon as he got his change. He hadn’t looked down yet to see, and staring straight ahead, he dropped the sixteen cents into his left shirt pocket. The tips

of his fingers felt an unusual hardness through his shirt and a surprising wetness.

“I must be sweatin’,” he grumbled, still not looking down.

Mr. Jackson cast a quick glare at the shopkeeper, headed straight for the bright sun gleaming through the store’s glass front doors, and stepped out into the neighbourhood street. Johnson’s Liquors skulked to the left, and just beyond, a grated metal shutter in front of a long-closed fast food chicken joint. He kicked some crumpled beer cans and an empty liquor bottle out of his path and walked past. His arms swayed a little more slowly now as a new flap had opened up on the other side and made his shirt even tighter. The breeze cut through to his chest, now fully exposed.

Still determined not to look down, he glanced across the street to two teenage girls slouching on the steps of a three flat. He had known them since they were babies and had a memorable go with one of their mothers back when she was beautiful, he handsome, and they both thought maybe.

“Hey Mr. Jackson,” one called, waving and smiling, a little uncharacteristic of her usual teenage glumness.

“We got something for you,” the other followed, teasing and inviting, but Mr. Jackson suddenly got colder and started breathing heavier. They held up the front half of a rib cage and pushed it forward.

“No you ain’t!” he said, almost shouting. “Yo crazy! Where you get something like that!” He walked right over to the girls, the front of his shirt

now fully drenched and softly yielding as he felt with both his hands. "I must be sweatin' something! What'd I eat this morning?" He racked his mind to recall.

His wife had passed not three years ago and he had pretty well settled in and made sure to keep his refrigerator full. He had learned to take care of himself, which really meant deciding to take care of himself while feeling lonely. The biggest thing since then had been his knee surgery, but he was walking fine now. After thirty years together, it had been hard not to have her there for that, but enough friends had visited the public hospital, and a good one had given him a ride home. He was managing.

The muscle and lining of Mr. Jackson's abdomen were now open.

"We got something else for you!" The girls leaned forward, arms outstretched, almost seductive. Their t-shirts were high-necked so he couldn't see their breasts as they angled towards him, but despite his rage, he imagined what he might have seen. They held up palmfuls of clear, straw-yellow fluid.

"We got yo lung fluid!" They were laughing – but it wasn't mean laughter, or even unkind. It could never be.

Just as they had become part of his life, he had become a part of theirs. They had grown up knowing Mr. Jackson from the neighborhood and had occasionally come to his house where his wife had made them dinner on days when they found their own front door locked, their mother stuck at work doing a double. One of the girls' fathers was dead

and the other girl's had just never been part of the picture. Mr. Jackson, like a few other men in the area, was neighbourhood family, especially when Mrs. Jackson was alive, although now they saw him less and the front steps more.

“You got nuthin’!” He rarely yelled at these girls, but he was still furious at the shopkeeper and just didn't see how else to respond.

“Don't forget yo intestine!” they called out after him brightly, the sunshine bouncing their words forward to Mr. Jackson's hurrying back. His intestine had fallen onto the sidewalk — just the small intestine (the large was still in place) its inner edge fanning out from a central sheet of fat, the worm-like coils ringing round and around in sagging, veined loops. It had come out in one unbroken piece and there was no leak or stain on the sidewalk. It just sat there.

Mr. Jackson arrived home practically livid, threw himself on his old crimson vinyl armchair and scowled. He pulled a footstool up, heaved both feet on top and hiked up his long pants. The scar from his right knee surgery showed over the middle of his exposed lower leg. It always intrigued him. He hiked that pant leg up some more, bunching it at the thigh to get the bottom edge above the knee. The scar crossed the knee and Mr. Jackson knew it continued up even further. He couldn't lift the pant leg any higher so felt along his thigh for the scar. He was somehow still mesmerized even after so much time had passed.

Mr. Jackson rubbed the scar on his thigh, then his knee, then his lower leg.

“Hmnh!” he grunted and walked to a full-length mirror in his bedroom.

By this time, his voice box was coming down with his esophagus, and his heart and lungs were dangling over his abdomen. His eyes widened as one elbow pulled back tight and then shot forward, crashing his fist into the mirror and splintering his image into a radiating halo of glass and metal sliver shards. Shattered glinting fragments of him fell to the floor in a delicate crackling shower.

“Oh, Hell!” he raged, helplessly. He turned and ran to the front door, but as he opened it his prostate, bladder, and lower colon started to come out. His organs trailing behind him, Mr. Jackson plunged back into the bright street and stopped. Looking up and down the street, he searched for something, not an ambulance, not a friend, but for something else to come to his rescue.

“Margaret,” he whispered.

He decided to run back to the store having left his organs beside his house and he burst through the glass doors just as his scalp was peeling open.

“Brains in aisle four,” said the shopkeeper, not looking up. “Brains in aisle four.”

Mr. Jackson sighed, grabbed a cart, and walked over.

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