

Many of the Men

by Mary Clark, from *The New England Review*

Jackson's in stop-and-go traffic on Dorchester Avenue with Darius Green in the back. They're on their way to the chicken place, both of them regretting the lost opportunity to buy season tickets before Danny Ainge grabbed the last leg of The Big Three and all the good seats got taken.

"Yeah, my buddy had four spots in the second row behind the basket, just waiting for my go-ahead to click Purchase. Right there. Where the players fall into the cameras," Darius says.

"And over where the cheerleaders sit," Jackson adds.

"Indeed. Over where the cheerleaders sit."

They laugh and then they both ride quietly for a while. Jackson turns up the XM station he's floating through a weak frequency in the car radio, and sees his passenger in the rearview mirror, nodding out the beat pensively to Sir Mix-a-Lot.

"Now that the Celtics be winning, nobody's lettin' go of that gravy," Jackson muses.

"I'd rather watch games at home, you know, Jacks? I can do without all the distraction."

"Not me."

"The T-shirt cannon, the dance cam, the whole Jumbotron in general. You know what I'm sayin'?"

"The fanfare," Jackson sums up his customer's point.

"Yeah, the fanfare. The flashing lights, the kids everywhere, the leprechaun on the trampoline."

"Yeah, what's with the leprechaun? That's some racist shit."

“I know, huh? Lucky.”

“Riiiiiiight. Lucky the Leprechaun.”

“Crazy-ass white people.”

“Oh yeah!” Jackson says when the next song comes on the radio, and turns it up. Both men jump in from the beginning, phrasing fast and wordy, spreading out the cluttered parts to prove they know them, then trail off on the rest.

“I’m not gonna lie, I’d of snatched those up. Second row? Shhhh, either way, you’d been gold,” Jackson says into the rearview. He knows he’s not hearing the whole story. Jackson puts Darius at just under six feet, three hundred fifty pounds. He’s been driving Darius long enough to know he’s got going-out issues, and possibly seating issues. Darius is a light-skinned, bigheaded black man whose barber’s edged a clean line across his top that angles in above his temples.

“Lookin’ shaap,” Jackson says to his passenger in the mirror, then aims it to size up the usual crisp dress shirt tucked into dark blue jeans and belted. Darius wears his pants a shade above his waist, not too high. “Real shaap.”

They ride, both of them moving their heads to the beat, Darius with a smooth up-and-down yes, and Jackson with his slight back-and-forth no.

“Those seats are yours as long as you want them,” Darius says, and moves the subject to the advantages of being a season ticket holder, as far as they understand; neither man’s held seats at the Garden. Jackson’s gone to exactly three games in his lifetime, the first, as a kid, on a rare outing with his dad. Then in his twenties, when nearly the whole team went white, he saw Patrick Ewing play in his rookie season the day the Knicks came to town. Jackson knew Ewing growing up, and played as good or better than the pro that last year he stayed in high school. This past winter, when he saw a live game at the Garden, it was called the Fleet Center. Lucia took

him on a whim. The sales guys at her job threw her their extra tickets: tenth row center, with Jo White sitting right behind them.

“True. But you get first crack at playoff tickets. Maybe they’re a little more than the regular season, but not what they sell for,” Jackson says. “You buy ’em all at once, all the home games for the regular season, plus the playoffs, if they get in, which is gonna happen. You gotta pay for everything as if they go all the way. What’s that, like four rounds of seven at the most, divide that by half for reality sake, then add in, what? Five for the finals? Nineteen total. Let’s put that at two hundred apiece, is what—four grand? Times, let’s say, two seats. That’s serious capital.”

“Credit card that!” Darius adds.

“But you sell two, maybe four sets, and make back the price you put out.” Jackson lets out a long exhale considering the whole deal, and shakes his head. “And those were the cushion seats, not the bullshit seats.” He’s quiet for a while. “And if you had them by the aisle, over where the players come out... sheeezz!”

“They were like ten seats over from that side.”

“Still.”

“You know Jack, that shit piles up fast. Every time you turn around, you’re rushing home from work to change and get there. That’s a lot of having to go out, or feeling guilty for not going.”

“Shhhh, I’d go every time.”

“What about driving? Don’t you drive then?”

“I’d pick up whoever I was taking to the game that night. I’d take my kids. Sometimes I’d take my girl. She likes basketball. She likes being out with me is what she likes. I could take you. I’d park the cab over there, go to the game, leave five minutes ahead of everyone, and pick up

fares as they come out, stick mines in the front with me and passengers in the back. I swing by the Fleet Center after games anyway.”

A half mile up, Jackson grabs a space in front of a hydrant, cuts the engine, opens the door, steps out, and bends down to face his passenger, “What are we gettin’?”

“It's got the four-piece, fried. Yams, and mac and cheese.” Darius hands Jackson a twenty.

"Large Coke?"

“Exactamento.”

Jackson gets out, shuts the door, leaves the keys in the ignition, and goes into Mrs. Jones’s.

The place has the look of a clam shack up by Ipswich, bright and open. Menus chalked in exemplary handwriting, hang on big boards behind the counter. Everything comes in throwaway containers, even if you have a seat. Mrs. Jones belongs by the beach, or on a dirt road in the south, Jackson imagines—he’s never been south of New York—not here on a busy street in a city that gets mad snow shoveled away from the entrance in winter.

The woman at the register calls to him across the other customers, “Mr. Green, how are you this evening?” Donna. He slept with her a few years ago. It works out great that she’s got his passenger's name.

“How ya doin’?” Jackson asserts weakly from his place in line, looking at the face of his phone, arrowing down recent calls. He punches Lucia’s name.

“What’s up girrrrrll? How was yoga?”

“Mmmm, it’s you.”

“Did you get all sweaty?”

“Yes.”

“Drippy?”

“Yes,” Lucia’s voice is deep and sweet in his ear.

“I know you did. I’m with the guy, the Thursday night guy, what do you call him?”

“Moveable Feast?”

“Yeah, him.”

“How is he tonight?”

“He’s fine. Look, what would you think about me comin' over there to sleep?”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah, tonight, and you know, more than sleep.”

“Let me think about that... Hmm... I’d *love* it.”

“How are your tulips?”

“They’re still good. They’re on my desk at work. When I see them, I think of you.”

“No, your two *lips*?”

“Oh, they’re good too.”

“Get yourself tubbed up.”

“Do you need a ride? I can come get you.”

“I know you can. Maybe. I’ll call you. It’s gonna be early.”

“Early? Yum.”

“Look, I gotta get this grub for him.” Jackson moves to his turn at the register.

“You’re so nice. Bye, bye.”

“Rub a dub.”

“I will.”

Jackson grabs plastic forks and spoons, a stack of napkins and a straw. Donna hands him the bag, the drink, and his change, giving him her cute look. “I put a piece of cornbread in there just

for you.”

“Thanks,” he says, with a flash of eye contact, and opens the bag to check the order and put the utensils and napkins in. “Chow mein,” he says and raises his head goodbye.

Back at the car, he hands the bag to Darius, starts the engine, and pulls out. “Where to?” He dims the music.

“Let’s hit the Chinese place.” Darius gets out his phone and places an order for crispy vegetable rolls, spicy double-cooked pork, enchanted seafood, and fried rice.

“General chow mein!” Jackson says leaning toward the side-view mirror, watching for a break in traffic. He recommended Mary Chung’s after a few months of driving Darius. Before Chung’s was in play, they went to New York Pizza, but that made for an overlap between dinner one and dinner two. Chung’s is far enough away to give Darius time to eat, and gets more vegetables into his diet. The trek to Cambridge works for both of them. An idling cab is money, but a moving cab is better money. Plus, it puts Jackson near his daughters’ neighborhood, in case he needs to hunt them down. He bangs a U-turn shy of gunning it, attentive to the balancing in the back seat.

“Uh oh, what’s this I see?” Darius says, his voice upbeat as he takes the food out of the bag. “There’s cornbread in here.”

“I guess they’re addin’ that now. You should go in next time. There’s some girls in there that would loooovve you,” Jackson says and ups the music again.

They roll. The nodding resumes, with big bites and polite chewing added to the motion from the back, and in the front, thoughts spin. All Jackson has to do is pass that shit to Ratchet tomorrow, and it’s over. He’ll keep miles away from his apartment tonight and pick it up in the morning. In, out, and that’s it. Done.

Ratchet. Persistent motherfucker. Jackson breaks the rhythm of his head sway to shake his head, thinking of the straggly white guy at his day job on the crew for the union, switching out old pipes for new and upgrading the boiler room at the school. Jackson pegged Ratchet as a heroin addict from the start. Heroin and otherwise. Active. He has all the signs. He comes in late, selling convoluted excuses. His welds are messy and cuts are crooked. His look's as sloppy as his work, skinny as anything, with two modes: either crazy up or dragging. The other guys come in early wheeling coolers like luggage, but Ratchet eats from the truck—and owes the truck.

Jackson's overheard bits and pieces that come out in litanies on why he's late, or why he didn't show at all, or why he needs a ride, or why he's asking to borrow money, or why his joints leak, or why he has to duck out when the boss is off site. He knows Ratchet's license is suspended, that he lives sometimes with his mother, sometimes with his brother-in-law, even though that guy's not with the sister anymore. He knows Ratchet has a kid, a son, who lives with the mother in Florida. *Bad news*, Jackson thinks shaking his head. *I've done good. I can still do good.*

Ratchet pegged Jackson as a dealer, or someone with access to a dealer, and wouldn't let go of the idea. He got in Jackson's ear in line at Dunkin' Donuts. Jackson ignored him, but Ratchet kept needling. "Come on, I know you know someone. I'm paying eight hundred for a finger, and it's shit, twenty percent true, if that."

"Get *away* from me, Man," Jackson said. "Stop asking me."

The next day, Ratchet was back. "Look, alls I need is just a finger to get me through the drought. Come on. I know you're the man. Help a brotha' out, Jack."

"You think you're a brother? Shut up, will you? Hard headed." *Again with the finger*, Jackson thought to himself. *What the fuck is a finger of heroin?* He imagined the crooked finger

of a woman summoning him, beautiful Miss Smack whispering *come here* with two pumps of her index. A bag of heroin he knew; a balloon, an envelope, that's how it was given in his day. They were always coming up with new names for product. He was proud to not be up on the latest: evidence of how long it'd been.

“Come on, Jack. Tomorrow's payday. Hook me up with a deuce, will ya? Get your guy on the phone.”

“See ya! Vamanos! Move it along! Chow, chow!” Jackson said waving him away.

Sure, if someone had a gun to his head, or if he had to come up with a heroin ransom on his kids, Jackson knew who to call. He'd hunt down Freddie, and get his hands on something *real* nice within the hour to save the day. Freddie always had the best shit. He wasn't the boss, but he was somebody. Jackson remembered someone, some relation, a cousin, or maybe even a brother high up the chain in the local run. He wouldn't need the money upfront. Freddie'd know he was good for it. Even if he wasn't dealing anymore, Freddie'd point him to the new Freddie.

When Jackson saw Ratchet moving copper across the yard after lunch, he looked strong. “Gettin' it done,” he hollered over, but Ratchet kept working. He must have scored something, *some shitty grade of pinkie*, Jackson laughed to himself.

A Roots song makes it to the station, rousing Jackson to raise his hands into loose fists for his shadow box, a reserved pump in the air in front of the steering wheel.

“Uhh ohh,” Darius says from the back.

Jackson weaves his head from a punch, “How's the chicken?”

“Finger lickin', want some?”

“I'm good. You enjoying yourself?”

“Yes I am,” Darius says.

When the song cools, Jackson scrubs back his thoughts. Where was he? Riiiiight, Ratchet, the fiend, back at it the next day, coming up from behind at the cutting saw, with his same mumbled plea.

"Oh my goodness! I've got a blade here!" Jackson hollered above the noise, but kept his hands calm. "Leave me *alone*, Man."

"Sorry. Thought you might, in case you changed your mind," Ratchet said standing too close.

"What, you see a black man, and you think drug dealer? Ask another black man."

"Oh, okay, Who?" There was no other black man on that job.

Jackson sliced the air by his neck, keeping his watch on his work. When he looked up, he saw Ratchet slink toward the latrine.

For all of his incompetence in everything he did, his inability to comprehend the basics of cutting and fitting, and how to talk to people, how to get things done, how to live his life in general, Ratchet was adept at detecting the addict inside Jackson. Crushed long ago, deflated, barely alive, the faintest heartbeat of the fiend he was still pumps on the wavelength that only addicts hear, the high-pitched whistle that comes out silent to other humans.

Twelve and a half years clean, when Jackson's addict bangs in the basement of his thoughts, he leaves it alone. He doesn't open the bulkhead and go down. He hasn't sniffed heroin or freebased since before his daughters were born. His kids never knew him like that. He hoped their mother never told them. Cindy. He can imagine his personal history flying out of her mouth at the lethal mix of having it up to here with his kids, and him not picking up his phone. This far into his recovery, Jackson describes himself as a father first, then a community member, then **the man** he is with Lucia, and lastly, as a grateful recovering addict.

In his first years out and clean, his recovery was front and center. If he ran into somebody on

the street, or passed by some triggering corner, or had a go-round with Cindy, or spent too much time helping his mother, and the itch banged on his thoughts, he calculated the wait for a meeting. He knew the schedule for all the NA meetings in Cambridge and Boston. He could hold it down for hours waiting for a meeting. *Three hours till a meeting, till I can take my medicine* he told himself. *An hour till a meeting*, he told himself when the itch bore down on his chest. It wasn't only when things were too heavy that he wanted to use, it was also when things were too light. After a great day out with his kids, everybody happy, his need rose up. He got in his car and drove, his breathing labored, *twenty minutes till a meeting*.

Just walking in the door to NA rinsed him with relief. Even when he didn't share, to hear his shame let loose in someone else's words—so easy to forgive when he heard it that way—freed him. Listening to an addict was listening to a sermon. Lessons on triumph, on overcoming, on failure, or on nothing he could name, it didn't matter, they gave rise to absolution. Addicts were the wisest people he knew, maybe not experts on how to live the life they dreamed, but they understood the intricacies of the will, the play of desire, the power of tangents, and the humors of temperament. Those up in years of recovery holding the twenty and twenty-five-year medallions, and even some of the fresh one-year-olds, were masters on the twists and turns of impulse, the impotence of intention, and the sprawl of consequence.

Preachers, many of them, they spoke on the juncture between confidence and pride, preparation and control, pleasure and thrill, sadness and sorrow and misery. There was Raymond who never got acknowledgement for a job well done from his boss, on a mission to see his paycheck as acknowledgement. There was Gail, always struggling with her kids, working the ins and outs of patience while deciphering her healthy influence of her mothering from her guilt influence and all her other influences. There was Michael trying out the idea of waiting until his

wife got to the end of a sentence to disagree, because maybe she wasn't getting to what it seemed like she was getting to, and even if she did get to that, not taking it personally, seeing her fear as a natural reaction to his fuck ups, and acknowledging it, letting it sit there, or whatever it did that day.

The sermons weren't always serious. The speakers poked fun at the convoluted bullshit they did when they were using, and their addict ways still. They ribbed themselves and invited others to tell on their own massive efforts at nonsense, everyone ridiculing, without pointing fingers. The basement of the church, with the cold metal chairs and coffee, the annex at the hospital, the room off the gym at the Y, those places were meccas on life. Life on life's terms. He would go in hurting, and come out like a newborn baby who never touched anything but pure mother's milk.

Now he has a day job and a night job. He doesn't have time for an hour-long meeting—sometimes an hour and a half—plus another half hour for travel, plus time for finding a spot in Cambridge, even with his permit. His children are his medicine. He puts that time into them, and into earning money for them. He stopped celebrating his clean birthday, his rebirth-day, at meetings after he earned his ten-year medallion. He acknowledges it privately, something bright at the dreary time when winter revs up for round two. February the fifth, the day of his last sentencing, recovery imposed by bars, but valid.

Jackson still practices his religion without going to church. He works his creed: *Thou shalt not be around drugs or people who use drugs. Thou shalt not lie to others or to oneself.* Neither is easy, and the first's near impossible. Drugs and people doing drugs are everywhere. Walking down the street if he gets a whiff, he thinks *ummm*, and then tells himself, *keep it moving*. The world's an obstacle course. Crack houses, base houses, and shooting galleries rise up every fourth block of Cambridge and Somerville, hopping crazy on Friday nights and weekends, but

small sad parties go on in there all day, controlled substances served up between juice for breakfast, McDonalds for lunch, and cheese curls for dinner. Jackson bolts the bulkhead and drives by. Even in his home, safe and sound, he'll be watching TV and *Bam!*, someone's shooting or cooking in high definition.

The cab's the worst. Any pickup in any neighborhood, on any run, can put him shuttling fares to buy drugs, to drop off drugs, to pick up drugs to sell, facilitating deals while feigning business as usual, passengers telling him their address when they get in, when to go straight, when to turn, pointing out the place and where to pull up, like any ride to the airport, or a grocery store, or a club. *This is good. This is me. Right here, what do I owe you?* or sometimes *I'll be right back. Be back in five..*

On runs like those, he waits for his passenger to return from the mini-party to try the goods, making easy money, watching the meter flip. He calls Lucia. He gets on his kids to do their homework. The wait pays better than searching for a new customer if he plays it right. Addicts, with their bend to prioritize random bullshit blown their way, threaten his fare. If he gets an extra rich fuck-up vibe off a passenger, he takes off after a couple short toots of the horn. If the meter's substantial, he gets out, double-bolts his will, and goes after the guy. Without the cab he's more man than driver. He's agile, he can talk full-frontal, his height intimidates, but he feels the lack of armor and engine. At the door where his fare disappeared, he starts out with the respect he gives any customer, and tries to do his business from the porch. He reads the kind of high he's dealing with, and can usually coax out his money with simple repetition. He presses angry dudes to a point, but stays short of stupid.

Once for a forty-dollar fare, he went into a second floor apartment and waited for his passenger to come out from somewhere in the back. Just the room alone—the windows curtained

in with blankets, the standard crap couch before a glass-top coffee table from the fifties, the familiar mismatched seating of brightly painted wooden chairs dispersed among gray metal folding chairs and a woven lawn chair—rang in his throat. He stood quietly breathing, a representative from the world of the living. Finally his guy emerged, “Hey man. Sorry about that. Let’s go.”

Now Jackson aces pop-tests that come up for the union a couple times a year. Those victories make him feel invincible, human invincible, not the bullshit superhero invincible of being high, like back when he’d make deals happen with the rented car of the day, or on foot, carrying himself through the hills of Mattapan in the snow to a drop, ringing every bell of a multifamily base house, calling his name into the intercom before all doors buzzed open. He still practices his faith, and fills the prescriptions for his chronic illness: *Thou shalt not lie to oneself or others; Thou shalt not be around drugs or people who use drugs.* As recently as a year ago, at what he thought was an innocent party, he was offered a sniff. The chemical-earthly richness when the bump came near, probably just a memory, flooded his brain heavy, wet his mouth, and loosened his guts. *Thou shalt not be around*—only for devotion to creed did he summon his legs to stand and walk out.

“Who does it like you?” Darius says to Jackson pushing through Mass Ave. into the heart of Cambridge, banging lane changes and squeezing into openings that might not be lanes. On the way over Jackson’s phone buzzed against his leg, five calls, one after the other: Cindy the task master. *She can wait.*

Thou shalt not lie to oneself or others. It’s a good one because lies take headspace. Jackson started out honest. He tried to get Ratchet off his back. He didn’t say he knew somebody and he didn’t say he didn’t know somebody. He supplied no information, but eventually a lie leaked out.

“I told you go ask someone else. I don’t know anybody.” It was nothing really, a white lie, whiter than white, but there it was. He tried to flush it with the truth, “I told you, go ask someone else. What’s wrong with you? I don’t do that shit,” but it didn’t help. He could feel the second story sprouting, and from then on he had to keep Freddie in his head as someone he didn’t know.

So two days ago, after all the prodding from Ratchet, and after all of Jackson’s not mentioning Freddie, who would have been the ace answer if Jackson cared to impress Ratchet, crossing Prospect, who comes out of Whole Foods but Freddie himself.

“Hooooo,” Jackson said, out of a feeling of familiarity.

“Jackie Jack!” Freddie called back.

“It’s Jackson.” Jackie Jack was Jackson’s street name. He insisted on his real name since he got out. It wasn’t just Freddie who didn’t get the memo.

“Okay, Jackson,” Freddie acknowledged. “Looking good, my friend.”

“How long’s it been?”

“Years and years.”

“Feels like yesterday,” Jackson said.

“I saw you over at A.J. Spears. When was that? '98?”

“Roary’s service. That’s right. I was still living with my kids then, so it must have been ’98, ’99.” Freddie wore his Bluetooth plugged into one ear like a half-man half-machine. “What, you on the phone?”

“Oh this?” He pointed to his ear. “No, man, I’m all yours. You still in the East?”

“No, I’m in The Port. By your old digs.”

“Old digs? I’m still there.”

“What! How is it that we haven’t run in?”

“Separate worlds. Never the twain shall meet.”

“Crazy,” Jackson said. Freddie looked a little thicker and older, with a wisp of gray in the temples. He didn’t use every day, but he was as taken as anybody by the trade. He was well put together, wearing stove-pipe denim above fawn Timberlands topped by an orange Hoops for Health T-shirt, crisp like some woman starched and ironed it, and a clean-edged shadow a shade closer than his hair. “I step out of my crib and go the other way. We're redoing the school in the old neighborhood.”

“Putnam Gaaadens! My sister project!” Freddie boomed.

“What? You weren’t from there?”

“No sir. We hail from the towers.”

“The towers? No sir! I always thought you were in the low rises with us.”

“Nope. Got that wrong, Bro. I was only there a lot. My peoples were there. I remember you. Scrappy Jackie, always on your bike, travelin’.”

“I had my rounds. Boston, Somerville, Watertown. Huntin’ my dad.”

“So wasn’t I. I remember you, mad traveler. And after that it was girls, girls, girls.”

“Hey, gotta live.”

“And always with the Pop-Tarts.”

“Riiiiight. Pop-Tarts.”

“Yeah, they don’t sell them here.” Freddie thumbs over to the Whole Foods behind him.

“How far we’ve come!” It felt good to reminisce. Many of the men Jackson knew from childhood were dead. “I cannot believe I ran into you. I was thinking about you.”

“See that? Called me up!”

“Yeah, this guy at work was asking me for a finger of boy. Been out of the rigamarole so

long, I didn't even know what it was."

"A finger? A finger's ten grams pressed into a cylinder. Like this," Freddie shifted his grocery bag to his left hand and held up his index finger.

"Of course it is," Jackson said.

"Goes for six."

"Six hundred?" Jackson looked at Freddie.

Freddie looked back and nodded.

"Pssh. I know this loser who's paying eight."

"Let me know," Freddie switched his bag back to his carrying hand and took a step his way.

"I've got to bounce in here myself, get some coffee for my girl. She likes it fresh roasted," Jackson said, stepping toward the store.

"I know she do," Freddie said, not as if he knows Lucia, but as if he knows what it's like to run errands for a woman.

"Chow mein," Jackson said, reaching out his fist.

"Good to see you, My Man," Freddie said.

Jackson walked into the grocery store and stopped to look absently at the fresh flowers. *Of course Ratchet's getting ripped off. A thousand ways pathetic*, he thought picking up a bunch of red roses, smelling them, nothing but the moldy florist smell they always have, putting them back and exchanging them for pale pink tulips before heading over to the coffee bins.

Jackson double parks in an illegal spot at the corner by Mary Chung's, and leaves the car running. "I'll take that," he tells his passenger, reaching for the trash bag Darius has neatly compiled, and goes to fetch dinner number two.

Inside the restaurant, Jackson calls Cindy while checking the order. "Yes?"

“I can’t find them anywhere. They’re not answering their phones.”

“I’m working.” He pushes the phone against his head with his shoulder and lifts a folded white box and three aluminum pans from the bags, half-listening to Cindy’s account of the fight she had with their kids before they ran out of the apartment and down the street.

“Anika’s mother said they stopped there. Can you check over that way?”

“Maybe.” He tightens the edges of the pans bent around the plastic lids.

“Thanks a lot.”

Jackson tries both of his daughters’ phones. He stuffs a bag with plastic forks and napkins. He hangs up at voicemail. He doesn’t need to hear his ten and eleven year old telling him that they’re busy, and they’ll call him back, the one saying she’ll call back if she feels like it.

In the cab, he passes the bags to Darius who sets them beside him, unpacks and tosses one of the fortune cookies to his driver. Jackson opens the plastic with his teeth.

“‘Man who blows in wind is a wise coward.’ What the fuck does that mean? Who writes these things?”

“That’s not even a sentence.”

“No doubt a Confucius thing.” Jackson throws all the pieces in his mouth. “Whatchu get?”

“Pride is a bamboo rat in dry grasses.”

“Couldn’t of said it better myself!”

“Got that right!” Darius passes up his slip of paper, and Jackson adds it to the collection of fortunes clipped under the passenger side visor.

“Look, can we do a loop through East Cambridge, off the meter?” Jackson asks into the mirror, putting the cab in reverse.

“Rutt roo,” Darius says. “No problem, Bro.”

Jackson pauses the meter and the radio, and jogs out of the space. Darius takes a crispy roll and offers the tray to Jackson over the seat.

“No thanks. That’s all you.”

Jackson drives eastward, scanning the side streets and alleys where he’s found his girls in the past, hanging on the corner, or on a porch with some boys, tweens in the posture of adults. They could be anywhere. Last week on a tip from the security guard he knew working the theater, he found them on the top floor of the Kendall garage smoking cigarettes. When he sees them where they shouldn’t be, he swings his cab up close and dramatic, gets out, leaving the driver’s door wide, and points at each kid, one by one, starting with the ones that aren’t his. “Go home. Go home. Go home. Go home,” and to his own, “Get in the cab, the both of yas.” The other kids grumble but move; his girls complain walking to the cab, then argue over who gets to ride in the front.

Jackson finds his daughters outside of the convenience store on Cambridge Street with Deirdra, an older girl he told them to stay away from. They see him see them, and walk away from her like they only happened to pass by. He pulls up on an angle, noses half into a gap between spaces, gets out and strides their way, “Phones.”

They protest, claiming innocence, all the while working their telephones out of their tight shorts and handing them over so easily it seems to Jackson that a part of them likes getting punished. “You’re not going to answer when me or your mother calls, you don’t need no phones. In the front. In the back,” he says pointing to the oldest and then the youngest.

He opens the front passenger door for Jacqueline, and Jane opens the back door on Darius’s side. “Go around,” Jackson chides Jane, and closes Darius’s door.

“Say hello to Mr. Darius.”

“Hi, Mr. Darius,” they sing.

“Hello, ladies,” Darius says low. He has packed up his food and stopped eating.

“You interrupted his evening with your mess.”

“Sorry.”

“Sorry.”

Jackson puts the car in reverse and looks behind him.

Darius offers crispy rolls to the girls.

“You can have one. Just one,” Jackson tells them.

His children thank Darius and consider the selections from the tray.

“Oh my goodness! Take the first one you see,” Jackson says.

Everyone but Jackson eats quietly during the short trip to his children’s place. When they arrive, he puts the car in park and looks at his daughters. “Listen, you gotta stay away from that girl. I know it’s hard, but you gotta.”

“We weren’t—” Jane begins.

“Shhh. Don’t lie. Say goodbye to Mr. Darius,” he tells them and they do.

Jackson gets out of the cab to walk them as far as the door of their building. He doesn’t need to see Cindy in her ancient silk robe smoking cigarettes on her couch surrounded by piles of papers.

“Do your homework.” He kisses them goodbye and returns to his passenger.

He puts the cab in drive and lets out an exhale. “Back to your neck of the jungle?”

“Pretty little things,” Darius says. “And they’ve got—”

“It’s not them.”

“—good manners.”

“Their mother let's them do what they want. Did you see those shorts? She lets them leave the house in their underwear.”

“It’s good they have you on their case.”

Jackson turns on the music. Savory spice overwhelms the dusty carburetor smell. “You know what’s in R-rated movies?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Do you think a ten- and eleven-year-old should be seeing those?”

“No, I do not.”

“They should be watching cartoons with princesses and talking animals, shit like that.”

Crossing Storrow Drive into Boston, Jackson looks for the ramp to 93. “You never know what the fuck’s up over here. I don’t trust it.” The traffic pattern at that intersection changed daily during the last phase of the Big Dig. “I can take their phones, and I can cancel stuff we planned. That’s all I can do. They don’t live with me. I don’t want to be mad at them the whole time for the little bit of time I got with them.”

“Sound’s rough, Bro.”

The cab slips into the shiny, new tunnel under the city, as bright and clean as a hospital operating room, and loses the radio frequency to static. The tires on the smooth road shush. The cab breathes calmly, free from the bumping music and squeaking shocks on the patched roads all over Boston and Cambridge. “Sorry to bother you with all that.” The silence makes Jackson’s apology ring louder and bigger than its meaning.

“No problem,” Darius rings back.

Jackson resumes the meter. “Too much worry bring fungus to rose garden,” he quotes a fortune from the early days.

“True that,” Darius says.

“Are we makin’ any more stops?”

“Let’s hit the Burger King drive-thru and that’ll be it for the night.”

“You got it.”