

School Daze

By: Valerie Taylor

It was an unusually warm day for February. More Rutgers students crowded the sidewalks of George Street than normal for a Friday morning. Even Mr. Alvarez, the local florist, set up his mini stand outside of the store. Phillip Jackson, one of the neighborhood's oldest residents, made his way outside for the first time that morning with a newspaper in hand and the intent to look for work. He wore the same long, dark green trench coat that reeked of booze and old cigars that he wore everyday. It looked like it hadn't been cleaned in years. His black combat boots appeared worn with tattered laces and he never left the house without the fisherman hat he found in an alley one Christmas.

"Hey Mr. Jackson. How you doing this morning? Did you hear about the Campbell's?" asked Ms. Jones. She had been living in the neighborhood just as long as Mr. Jackson and knew everything about everybody.

"You out gossiping already? It's only ten in the morning woman. Damn!" replied Mr. Jackson. They both laughed as they took a seat on the front steps of the abandoned house that Mr. Jackson had been occupying ever since it caught fire in the early nineties. "Now you know I'm not one to be in other folks business."

"Yeah well now you didn't hear it from me, but I heard that little girl of theirs, Janice, she ain't so little no more", said Ms. Jones completely ignoring what Mr. Jackson had just said.

"What you talking about woman?" he replied, now halfway interested.

"I heard she went and got herself knocked up by the preacher's boy", she answered.

"And now who did you hear this from?"

“Patrice from down the street told me that her daughter told her that Frankie from around the corner overheard Mrs. Campbell’s sister talking about it at the hairdresser the other day. Mmmh.”

“Now Ms. Jones, you know damn well you can’t believe nothing that Frankie say. And besides, don’t you have nothing better to do with your morning than gossip about folk?” asked Mr. Jackson.

A bit upset about being called nosey, Ms. Jones retorts, “Well I see you ain’t doing nothing much better than me this morning. You sitting out here on this damn stoop like you do every day all day.”

“See now that’s where you’re wrong. I got me a newspaper today. I decided I’m going to do something better with my life and get me a job so I can I buy this place here and restore it to the way it used to be”, he claimed, looking at the burnt up dilapidated building behind him.

“Well how are you of all people going to get a job with no damn high school diploma?”

“Hey I went to high school”, he responded defensively while flipping through the job section of his newspaper. “I didn’t finish but I know shit enough to get a job.”

“Hahaha. You, work? I ain’t never seen you work a day in your life if it wasn’t hustling. You too funny Mr. Jackson. I’m going down to Willy’s to get a jack and a scratch off. You want something?” she asked still laughing.

“Huh? Oh. No I’m good”, he responded with his eyes glued to the newspaper.

“Suit yourself”, she screamed as she walked off so he could hear her.

“What the hell is she talking about? I can get a job if I want. I made it all the way up to the eleventh grade. I know some stuff”, said Mr. Jackson to himself. “My teachers was always saying how good I was with numbers and I damn sure know how to count some money. Maybe

I'll apply for this one." He reads, "Bank Teller Wanted. Wells Fargo George Street. Shoot I might as well go see about that now. It's Friday. Bank is open by now. Why not?"

Determined to prove Ms. Jones wrong, Mr. Jackson marched up the street to the bank. As soon as he entered all heads turned to look at him. Before he could even approach the teller window a man in a suit approached him.

"Good morning sir. Welcome to Wells Fargo. My name is Blake and I am the branch manager here. How might we help you today?"

Showing him the newspaper ad, Mr. Jackson replies, "Yes sir. I'm here to apply for the bank teller job."

A bit surprised that anyone would seek a job in attire as bizarre as Mr. Jackson's, Blake manages to ask him to follow him into his office.

"Please, have a seat Mr....?"

"Mr. Jackson."

"Mr. Jackson. Usually we refer people to our online application, but I can spare a bit of time to do a pre-screen", said Blake. He takes out a pad and pen to take down some background information. "Now tell me Mr. Jackson. Do you have any experience as a bank teller?"

"No sir."

"Ok. Can you tell me a little bit about any previous work experience?"

"I never had a job."

"Do you have a bachelors degree or a high school diploma at least?"

"I made it all the way up to the eleventh grade sir", replied Mr. Jackson.

Feeling as though he was wasting his time Blake hands him a sheet of paper and his business card and proceeds to stand up.

“Ok um just write your name and number down here and we will give you a call,” said Blake.

“Really? So I got the job?” asked Mr. Jackson extremely excited.

“Look, Mr. Jackson I don’t want to waste your time and I surely don’t want you to waste mine, but this position requires a degree or at least some work experience”, said Blake as he directed him out of his office.

Disappointed, Mr. Jackson left the bank and headed to a few more banks in the area. As each one tells him the same thing he gets more and more discouraged. At the last bank, the branch manager laughed in his face when he told her the reason for his visit. She thought it was a joke and asked if he even finished the tenth grade.

Now determined to prove Ms. Jones and every bank teller that turned him down wrong, Mr. Jackson headed toward the neighborhood high school. The school had undergone many changes, including all new faculty members, since he had been a student there. Amazed at how different the school now looked, he wandered around in search of the principal’s office and bumped into Mrs. Anderson, a plump, middle-aged history teacher.

“Can I help you sir?”

“Yes ma’am. You sure can”, he responded a bit taken back by her beauty. “I don’t remember teachers being as fine as you when I was here or else I would have stayed”, said Mr. Jackson as he tried to kiss her hand.

“I beg your pardon”, she exclaimed snatching her hand back. “Look I don’t know who you are or why you are here, but I’m going to call security.”

“Oh no. Please don’t do that ma’am. I’m sorry to have offended you. I’m only looking for the principal’s office.”

“In regards to?”

“Well, I would like to get my diploma.”

“Yes, I see”, she said a bit unsure about his answer. “The principal’s office is right this way.”

As Mrs. Anderson led Mr. Jackson to the principal’s office she noticed him admiring the portraits of past graduating classes and trophy cases that lined the hallway.

“Were you an athlete during your time here Mr....?”

“Jackson. Mr. Jackson and ah yeah, but I’m sure that was way before your time”, he responded.

Mrs. Anderson began to blush.

“Well here you are. Go right through this door and the receptionist can help you.”

“Why thank you Mrs....?”

“Mrs. Anderson”, she replies as she heads back down the hallway.

As Mr. Jackson entered the office he immediately received awkward stares from two students waiting to be seen by the principal. Not even noticing him or his outrageous attire, the busy receptionist motions for him to hold on while she finished a phone call. Mr. Jackson takes a seat in between two students, Alfred and Mike. Alfred, an honor roll student dressed in suspenders and a bow tie, who could not bear the stench of the smoke on Mr. Jackson’s coat, quickly whipped out his inhaler and began to wheeze. Now a bit uncomfortable, Mr. Jackson gives him a head nod and turns to face Mike, a thin boy that looked as though he spent all his time getting into trouble.

“How you doing today?” Mr. Jackson asked Mike.

Mike gives him a blank stare for a moment and then exclaims, “Dude you smell!”

Feeling quite offended and extremely insecure Mr. Jackson stands up and walks back over to the receptionist who is still on the phone.

“Excuse me miss?”

“Hold on for one second”, the receptionist says to the person on the phone. “May I help you?” she says to Mr. Jackson extremely annoyed that he interrupted her phone call.

“I need to see the principal.”

“Principal Anthony is in with someone right now. You will have to take a seat and wait”, she replies.

Just as the receptionist is shooing him away Principal Anthony’s door swings open, the principal walks out behind a student, and Mr. Jackson abruptly approaches the principal and reaches for his hand.

“How you doing today sir. My name is Mr. Jackson. I live in this neighborhood. I used to go this school and I just need my diploma so I can apply for this job”, said Mr. Jackson speaking extremely fast and stumbling over every word.

“Ok slow down there buddy. Why don’t you take a seat in my office and I’ll be right there.” The principal turns to Alfred and hands him a signed recommendation letter and Mike a detention slip before walking back in to his office. “So now what is it that I can do for you Mr. Jackson?”

“Well you see sir, I need to get a job, but everyone is telling me I need either a degree or some work experience, but I can’t get no job with no high school diploma. I left this school after the eleventh grade and never went back. Do you think I could start taking some classes so I can get my diploma?”

“Um Mr. Jackson I’m afraid that’s not possible”, answered Principal Anthony.

“I swear I’ll work really hard and I won’t quit this time. Just please you got to let me back in school.”

“Mr. Jackson how old are you?”

“I’ll be 48 in August.”

“You see you are bit too old to attend this school. Have you thought about getting a GED instead?”

“No sir. I’m not even too sure what that is”, he responded.

After hearing about the GED and receiving information on it Mr. Jackson headed back to his abandoned building. On the way he stopped at a pay phone and began making a few calls to the GED locations the principal had given him with some change he found on the way. Things had been beginning to look up until he found out the amount of the registration fee. Knowing that he had no means of income and no sufficient education to even get a means of income he felt completely discouraged. Extremely depressed he went into his room, or what used to be a den in his abandoned house, grabbed a shoebox from under his beat raggedy blankets in the corner and put its contents into his coat pocket.

It was around four o’ clock and Mr. Jackson had just come from the alley where he usually scores. On the walk back home, strung out, he accidentally bumped into a manager from one of the banks that had laughed at him. She looked at him with pure disgust.

“I’m sorry”, he says a bit slurred. When he looked up he saw the Wells Fargo where Blake had first shot him down. He decided to go inside. Mr. Jackson reached into his coat pocket and screamed, “Everybody get the fuck down!” Before getting on the floor Blake hit the emergency button. In less than five minutes the place was swarming with police. As Mr. Jackson

was escorted out in handcuffs he looked to Blake still high and uttered, “They wouldn’t give me my diploma.”