

## LOOKS

By

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Jagger despised the homeless people who panhandled in front of the courthouse. He had no less sympathy for them than the dotcom executives he'd just put out of business, and no more. But there was something disquieting about them, something less real and yet more substantial, as when you happened to look in a mirror that revealed an unsuspected wart on your backside.

Even at five o'clock it was stifling out on the street, well over a hundred degrees, and not well suited to his two thousand dollar Armani three-piece. The month-long trial had taken it out of him, and the elation of his victory had left him light-headed. The setting sun blinded him with its glare. He actually stopped on the sidewalk, momentarily disoriented, forcing passers-by into the street to avoid him. Christ, what a mistake, pausing here. The bums would be on him like flies-- As it was,

he'd be hit up five or six times just walking to the parking lot, making him feel like a fool if he gave to each of them, arbitrary if he gave to some and not others, and ungrateful for his own good fortune if he gave to none. What in God's name was he supposed to do? He tried not to look at them, tried to move his legs toward the underground parking. If

you looked and one of them was looking back, he had you. What the hell did that mean? The thought struck him as if it had come out of the ether rather than his own head. So it was only natural that he looked around.

The homeless man was sitting on a brick border of the elevated bushes that surrounded the courthouse. He swam into focus as Jagger's head finally cleared, and they were staring right at each other. The homeless man was filthy, bearded, layers of largely unidentifiable, wildly unmatched clothing ending in worn black army boots, a real trash heap harlequin. That he endured like that in this heat was a testament to misguided evolution, Jagger thought. Jagger thought about reaching into his pocket for change as a strategy to co-opt any request for dollar bills, but years of practice kept his hand from betraying the inclination. Jagger turned his head and started to move off down the sidewalk, but couldn't resist one reflexive look back. The look, so characteristically Jagger, denatured his curiosity with dismissiveness. It was a chilling, anaesthetizing look that said his best defense was this overwhelming offense. If Jagger's soul owned a vehicle, it was that look. And here was a bum, pulling him over for speeding through shit town. Because, when they locked eyes, Jagger found he couldn't pull away. Neither man spoke, yet, unmistakably, a transaction occurred.

When Jagger finally fell into the front seat of his Lexus, a few bucks lighter, he couldn't help stealing a glance at himself in the rear—view mirror. Whatever he had expected wasn't there. The engine roared to life at the twist of his key, and he realized he was surprised and relieved that it worked.

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As it turned out, the car was one of the few things that still did work. When Jagger turned up at eight sharp in his office the following morning, the cheers and hearty congratulations of his colleagues and staff turned to puzzled frowns. Their looks stuck to him like dirty soap film. He closed his office door and tried to busy himself, but Morgan showed up almost immediately. His partner froze his hand in mid—shake and stared at him. “Michael? What’s the matter?”

“What do you mean?”

“You look . . . strange. I mean,” he added, “you look, well, not fat or old or anything, but if I didn’t know it was you, I’d swear someone was wearing your skin for a Halloween costume.”

“Just tired. Trial is like running a marathon. Takes a few days to rehydrate.” In truth, Jagger didn’t feel tired at all. He just felt... wrong.

He realized, after screwing up pretty much every meeting he had that day, that he was, to say the least, distracted. Distracted: that was the word. And detached, as if he were outside of his life, as if the work he'd done for the past fifteen years had

nothing to do with him. And it went on like that for the next week, and the one after that.

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Jagger began to experiment with being someone... different. He tried picking up women in bars. He tried going to the opera, to movies, to the racetrack. All of it was outside of him, not his life. Only when he was wandering the streets, alone at any hour of the day, did he have some sense of rightness, but it wasn't a pleasure, wasn't even a long-term possibility. His intellect was too restless; his values too related to the person he knew he had been for his entire adult life. He was wasting his time, achieving nothing.

That is, nothing except a gradual sense of awareness about what was missing. It was his complicated arrogance, the I-could-own-you-but-I-don't-want—you-near-me quality of his personality. He stared across the grubby bar he was trying out, through the bartender and into the mirror behind him, with what should have been that patented Jagger look. A slack-faced potato-head stared back at him. But then he did see the homeless man from the courthouse enter the bar.

He looked different too. He would have had to, to even get into this place without causing bouncers to heave to their size thirteen feet. He was a bit cleaner, sure, but he had a confidence, a sense of control that he hadn't had that afternoon a few weeks earlier. He didn't sit down, but not because he seemed uncomfortable. It seemed more

as if he disdained the company. Well, what's wrong with that? Jagger thought. I disdain them too. Only I'm sitting here with them for some reason, while you're buying a bottle of Jim Beam to take back to the park, or the sewer, or whatever penthouse you apply your makeup in.

Jagger paid and followed the man out. From behind him, it was easy to observe the unselfconscious swagger, the way other people just as unselfconsciously moved around him, gave him a foot more on either side than they gave the other pedestrians on the sidewalk. Homeless people, thought Jagger, aren't just me without a home, Without money. They're aware of living always in enemy territory, remaining hidden except to forage among those who fear and despise them. They live without possessions, while civilized people define themselves by their possessions, are defined by their possessions. He wondered if those homeless he saw still carrying their meager, filthy things around in plastic garbage bags were carrying vestigial organs, or trying for turtle-hood by carrying their homes on their back, or were like the dead waiting by the river for a boat to cross over into their new, true world. Their filth, he thought also, had to bother even them, so that they wound up retreating even from their own skins, further into themselves, trying to find a protected internal cave or space, peering out like turtles at the world hurtling past. They were alone, without family or lovers, without hope of love, or at best some kind of turtle-love, briefly banging the hardened shells of their outer-beings into each other.

The harlequin man entered a small ungated park near the courthouse, and walked up to the bandstand, drinking thoughtfully from the bottle, looking somehow

like a politician about to take his place on stage.

“Hey! I want it back!” Jagger surprised himself with the outburst, an old pitcher finding he had one more good inning in him.

The bum spun around, raising his bottle like Diogenes’s lantern. Just when Jagger thought he’d been insane for shouting, the man gave him one of Jagger’s own quintessential looks.

“You son of a bitch,” Jagger gasped. “You did steal my look. How the hell...”

“Fuck off.” The bum mounted the stage and headed for the back of the bandstand, but Jagger followed him.

“I’m serious. I don’t know how you did it,” Jagger protested, hopping up on stage himself, “but I want it back. I’ll pay you. Look.” He pulled a wad of money out of his pocket.

The bum, glancing arrogantly back over his shoulder, paused and turned around. He eyed the wad suspiciously, though not without a calculating interest. “You make a lot of money, huh? I could tell by your suit.”

“Yeah. So what?”

“So, you think you need whatever I’ve got to keep making a lot of money, huh?” Jagger started, fumbled for a response, and the man laughed. “If I gave a shit about a lot of money, why would I sell off the... thing that makes it?”

Jagger stared at him. The man laughed again, then held out the fifth of Jim Beam, offering Jagger a drink. He was offering Jagger charity, but it was only going to be loose change.

Jagger took a swig from the bottle, and then suddenly swung it with all his might at the man's head, connecting in an explosion of prismatic refractions and crystal sound. Then Jagger knelt on his chest and began to strangle the man, repeating only, "I want it back. I want it back."

Finally, a look of resignation seeped into the other man's eyes, an acceptance that he was going to die anyway. Jagger kept squeezing, and kept staring. "Give it back!" Just as the man's eyes rolled up and a noise that wasn't a gasp escaped his lips, Jagger felt it, felt something, experienced a momentary blinding that did not come from light. He rolled on his back in exhaustion, eyes shut tight, as if to capture the thing fluttering around inside his eyes until it calmed enough to stay put. He lay next to the bum, a fallen brother or sleeping comrade, finally opening his eyes to the starry night.

Jagger found he wanted to keep lying there. But as the moon rose over the bandstand, he forced himself to his feet. There was his career to think of, a career he could finally get back to, now that... he was himself again. He didn't bother to look around the park for possible witnesses. That was a good sign, he thought, threading his way through the nodding and stooping bodies, restless on the lower benches and grassy knolls of the park. As long as you don't meet their eyes, they'll never really look at you, never be able to identify you, to get you. Yet something tugged at him as he was regaining the sidewalk, and he cast a look back, seeing... something. Ghosts? Victims? People who should have been invisible to him, who would be again, soon.

He found his car in the underground parking, fished the key into the ignition

while the automatic interior light was still on, but then couldn't stop himself from looking up into the rearview mirror. What stared back at him was a face furtive and confused with guilt, anxiety, a nameless fear, the face of a haunted turtle. As the interior light suddenly blinked out, he realized he'd stolen the wrong look.

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