

## **The Trouble with Jacobson**

*Eric Coleman*

The plaque that hangs on the wall of Longfellow's grocery store chain holds Jacobson's likeness. The elder Jacobson looks as if he's been caught a bit off-guard, as if his soul has been stolen, ripped from a seamless serenity and thrust into the spotlight. His face is like the before picture on some late night television infomercial: lumpy, sagging, and badly lit.

He stares at us from under a checkered wool cap. His eyes alone tell a story, a story of idyllic times that are so distant now they seem almost fictional, like tales from a brightly colored children's book.

In black lettering over a gold frame it reads: 'Our Favorite Customer.'

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The three dimensional representation of Jacobson is hunched over a display rack. His weathered face inches away from a plum. There's a head jerk and a kind of shiver and after a moment he's back to contemplating the riddle of the plum.

You see, Jacobson had just had a system reboot and they seemed to be happening with increasing frequency. To some, it appeared Jacobson was suffering from the early onset of Alzheimer's. The truth was far from it. Jacobson's memory was not in danger of slipping away into an irretrievable abyss but rather the vast weight of his innumerable experiences threatened to tax and twist his form until it was unrecognizable. In short, Jacobson was on the verge of another aberration, an episode so unprovoked, indiscriminate, random, and seething that to the unaccustomed observer it appeared to be anything other than what it was; part of Jacobson's normal daily routine.

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At register number three, Skid is the personification of punk rock. He's transmogrified the counter top into a drum kit. Turning ball point pens intended for customer credit card receipts, drop slips, and an array of other cashier related jobs, tasks, and responsibilities into beat sticks.

Sneering he hits the register's enter button like a high hat symbol. Ding. It opens and he slams it closed. Instantly bored he flips through a gossip rag and disinterested tosses it back upside down in the rack. His face pierced with a myriad of studs, loops, and bars lifts happy as a pre-occupied soccer mom enters into Skid's world, banging the cart.

She's a former beauty contest finalist in her AYSO sweater, having put on a few pounds since then. She's still a smoker.

"Hello Joshua," Mrs. Robertson says superseding Skid's sobriquet.

"Heeelllloo Mrs. Robertson, how are ya?" Skid asks becoming erect, standing up rigid that is.

Mrs. Robertson's response is tepid at best, "Fine, fine, I'm doing fine. Is that forty weight motor oil?" As she points with her cell phone at Skid's thirteen liberty spikes hair-doo.

“Egg-whites,” he corrects.

She starts, “Sharp. Well at least now I see your point...”

“It’s on my head,” he finishes with a smirk ‘n’ wobble.

“Yes, that’s great. You know I’m kind of in a hurry today Joshua so...”

“Please call me Skid.”

“No.” She replies.

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In a fluorescent grotto Jacobson growls holding the plum like a talisman. He’s sweating profusely.

His lips tremble. His speaks in a gruff raucous baritone voice reminiscent of God, “These used to be a pound for a nickel, a nickel!”

His face glowing like chaotic embers from a freshly stoked fire the old man squishes the ripe plum in a wet purple supernova. Bearing his dentures in utter disdain, the plums pulpy contents ooze between clenched fingers.

Speaking through grit teeth he gurgles, “What’s happened to the world?”

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Juan the bagboy, decisively distant, bags Mrs. Robertson’s products with care. Hands down he is a model of efficiency.

Skid, groping her goods asks, “What’s with all this low carb junk Mrs. Robertson? I was under the impression that one of the perks of livin’ in the po-mo age was a selection of designer foods engineered for maximum flava, rich in sodium, nitrates, corn syrup, lard extracts, trygliceratebenzotone, yellow dye number seven...” Skid rambles while beep, beep, booping items across the laser scanner in the counter.

Mrs. Robertson thumbs through the gossip rag and mumbles, “Yeah, well, you know.”

Sensing her absence from the conversation Skid keeps going with vigor, “I mean who’s eating this stuff. All the nutritional information is measured out in milligrams; it’s more like the grocery store’s in the pharmacy. Who’s buying this stuff, Mr. Robertson? He isn’t going soft on ya is he? Cause if he is going soft, there’s this pill he can take, it’s this blue sh...”

Digging in purse she looks up sternly.

“Sherbet, two for one, can’t go wrong with that buy.”

Beep.

“Hey gogurts, ten fer a buck, wow,” Skid continues.

Boop.

Mrs. Robertson exhales loud and steady. While diving back into her purse she does a double take noticing Skid’s sleeves are missing.

“Skid, where’s the rest of your shirt?”

“The manager told me I shouldn’t wear my identity on my sleeve.”

“So you got rid of your sleeves?”

“And my name tag.”

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Languishing in suspended animation suddenly Jacobson lets roar the cry of a grizzly bear with his chest puffed out and arms cocked back.

The fruit sit mocking him from a different era in a foreign tongue that only scallywags can decipher. And Jacobson was most definitely not a scallywag. He lashes out pummeling the peaches, pomegranates, and pears. The cardboard dam gives way and the pile of produce goes spilling causing Jacobson to go slip, slip, sliding stumbling bumbling, tip top tumbling down to the cold pulpy juice drenched concrete, like a poorly executed Russian folk dance. He lands with a great grunt.

“Mahhhhh,” echoes through Longfellow’s grocery store.

“What was that,” Mrs. Robertson exclaims.

Beep. Beep. Boop.

“What was what,” asks Skid.

Boop. Boop. Beep. Beep.

“That screaming?”

“Oh I thought that was in my head, four hours of this a day can really get to ya. It was probably something to do with the air conditioner.”

“Maaahhhhhh,” Jacobson lets out another howl.

“There it is again!” says Mrs. Robertson.

Beep. Boop. Beep.

“There was what?”

Boop.

Just then, Jacobson covered in a purple film goes barreling by knocking over a ketchup pyramid.

Skid gestures with his thumb, “Oh him, don’t mind him, that’s only Jacobson.”

“Who’s Jacobson?!”

“He’s our most valued customer. Which means he throws alotta dough around the place.” With his head bent down, eyes looking up, and talking out of one side of his mouth like Dick Cheney he continues, “And I’m not talking about the stuff on aisle seven.”

Mrs. Robertson is startled by a loud crash!

Skid gets on the intercom, “Clean up on aisle seven.”

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At night Jacobson would dream of infancy, of light particles performing a delicate dance in the brilliant shaft on sunlight emanating from a window plane. He dreams in grainy color of great big slobbering golden retrievers and birds that would sing from the telephone wires, and a warm teat to hide in.

“Beans can’t lactate,” the old man shouts.

Making an awful mess in the dairy section, Jacobson stomps on cartons of an alien and disturbing substance to him: soymilk. The show he puts on for the surrounding shoppers is so far off-Broadway it’s Topeka Kansas but, to his credit, it does have urban appeal.

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Wincing Mrs. Robertson glares in Jacobson's direction and is genuinely concerned, that she won't make it to her nail appointment that is.

"Is he okay?" She asks.

Beep. Skid nods. Boop.

"He doesn't look okay."

Boop. Beep.

He's actually better than okay, he's brand new. He's like a jaguar," Skid exclaims.

As Mrs. Robertson slowly pushes in her cell phone antenna with her chin she comments, "Or a lion."

"I actually meant the luxury automobile which breaks down just as often. See ol' Jacobson," Skid thumbs at him, "He's got a team of specialists that work on em'; making upgrades, installing new parts, adjusting the timing, suspension, belts, cylinders, gaskets, brakes, steering, exhaust..."

Mrs. Robertson's pizza flavored chips swing back and forth like a pendulum or a race car staging the light, never quite reaching the laser scanner. Mrs. Robertson motions for him to close the gap and accomplish the boop but Skid is miles away babbling about car parts. Juan's taken advantage of the line slow down to double bag her groceries. Finally Mrs. Robertson takes Skid's hand and leads him through the red beam on the counter.

Boop.

Skid scans and prattles on, "Guy's on his eighth liver. Beep. And probably his tenth heart. Boop. He's like a hundred and seven years old, but you'd have to carbon date em' to be sure. Ol' man Jacobson's a stem cell poster boy."

Boop. Beep. Boop. Beep. Beep.

"Isn't implanting stem cells still illegal?" Mrs. Robertson inquires.

"The law doesn't mean nuthin' when ya got Jacobson bucks," Skid says, "The third world invites him with open arms."

"And open wallets," Mrs. Robertson quips.

"He's been coming here since this place was a strawberry stand." Skid explains, "He always pays fer anythang he breaks and with all the stuff he's broken he practically owns the place."

"That's great," Mrs. Robertson says sarcastically. "Can you move any faster Joshua, I really got to go."

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Rapping her fingers together and humming to the flaccid soft rock overhead Jane, the regional rep of Longfellow's busies herself preparing today's free samples: coconut shrimp with kiwi salsa, back for a limited time only pending FDA review. She waits on the microwave to complete its rapid vibration of molecules.

Bing.

She removes the breaded low-cost delicacies with a certain Victorian elegance, spinning around to address the curious crowd.

“Okay, who wants to be the first to try?”

As the crowd draws closer drooling with anticipation in a response that would make Pavlov proud, a shrill prehistoric bone-chilling cry rings out.

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In the grocery store’s bubble Dave, the security guard, slumbers in a wooden chair propped up against the wall. On a closed circuit TV different angles of Longfellow’s flicker in black and white. The ear piercing audible onslaught sends Dave ricocheting rumbling rocketing to the monitor where Jacobson is seen clawing his way to the front of the pack. Recognizing the familiar old man Dave sighs, tilts his chair, and slinks back into it.

\* \* \*

With the power of a million stampeding wildebeests Jacobson flips up Jane’s tray of free samples summoning righteous indignation not seen since Jesus in the temple of the moneychangers. Coconut shrimp projectiles fly everywhere. Jane becomes unhinged and tries catching the tasty in-between meal snacks in mid-air. Unfortunately, Jane trips and lands face first in the kiwi salsa. Unfortunate for the worker’s comp. claim adjuster that is.

\* \* \*

With Dean Martin cool Skid scans the last of Mrs. Robertson’s purchases.

Boop. Boop. Boop.

“How do ya wanna pay fer dat, Mrs. R?”

“Check,” she says.

“Then I’m gonna have to see some ID.”

Squinting and pursing her mouth, she folded her arms in protest, stonewalling Skid.

Skid continues, “oh now ya wanna be friends huh?”

Amused Skid glances over his shoulder and shudders.

“Incoming!” He yells and ducks.

Mrs. Robertson remains unimpressed and rolls her eyes. Then seeing what Skid saw she hits the deck. An egg arches past hitting the divider wall with a splat!

“Wow,” Skid rises cautiously one eye above the counter.

Blink.

\* \* \*

At times Jacobson’s existence seemed unbearable. Memories haunted him. One day blurred into the next. The prices changed but Jacobson did not. Just like tuna can logos that would change from a big lipped Caribbean fisherman, to a happy upright dolphin, and eventually settling on a serrated golden crest; in the same way Jacobson was a test of what the public would accept. The old man himself probably would have put an

end to the stem cell implants a long time ago if it were not for his wife signing the medical forms like checks from a joint bank account.

“This false idol must come down,” Jacobson rages while rocking an aisle.

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Mrs. Robertson scribbles out the check while shaking her head.

“This is really out of hand,” she unnecessarily editorializes, “Someone should really stop him!”

“Usually Mrs. Jacobson is here to pick ol’ Jacobson up about this time. That is if she’s not busy snoggin’ the gardener.”

Bang. Crash. Bang

Skid leans into the crane necked microphone and presses the button, “Clean up on aisle twelve.”

Two of Longfellow’s employees dart by, one with a mop other with bucket.

Jacobson succeeds in toppling the aisle. A wind escapes him preceding a bombshell.

Calmly Skid’s back on the PA, “Clean up on aisle thirteen. Attention customers: aisle twelve is now aisle thirteen. Please make note of the merger. Thank you and have a pleasant shopping experience.”

Click.

Backtracking, the cleaning crew dashes down an aisle, dripping, listening for the next shatter.

A lady behind Mrs. Robertson comes forward and pipes up, “What’s going on here, should I call the police?”

The mustached manager pops in with a clipboard and speaks authoritatively, “No ma’am don’t mind him that’s only Jacobson.”

Mrs. Robertson hands Skid the check remarking, “That’s beginning to be a theme around here.”

A jarring thud turns everyone’s head in Jacobson’s general direction.

With the stamina and endurance of an inflatable clown Jacobson bounces up, delivering a powerful, “mah,” before taking a second charge at the cigarette case.

Juan has temporarily moved to another register and is doing the work of ten men while the rest watch the unfolding spectacle.

Jacobson butts the cigarette case like a mountain goat. It falls backwards hitting the wall. The impact vibrates Jacobson’s plaque from its perch.

Ka-chee!

“Thank you,” Mrs. Robertson says while hoisting herself up on the counter in a huff, tearing off her receipt.

“Have a nice day,” Skid says with a distant expression and monotone voice. The others stare dumbfounded at Jacobson crumpled up on the floor like a discarded piece of trash.

“I’ve cheated the clock. I want out of it. Out of here. Where’s Jacobson?” The old man speaks while lazily lifting a pricing gun to his forehead as Mrs. Robertson locomotions out the sliding door.

He pulls the trigger. Clack.

In the plaque's broken glass reflection Jacobson can now see he's worth 99 cents, with inflation of course. He cries a little.

The security guard, having witnessed the incident rushes to the front of the store where the rest of the employees and shoppers have gathered, arranging themselves in a half-circle. In walks Mr. Jacobson's trophy wife and a distinguished looking gentleman in a chauffeur's uniform.

"Pookey what's happened?" she says. "Who's responsible for this?"

Clearing his throat the manager takes two steps forward and replies, "Um, yes, well you see Mr. Jacobson had a lil'..."

"Mr. Jacobson?!" She screams, "My husband's name isn't Jacobson, his name is Jacobson," as she points to the chauffeur.

Juan pauses his work and looks up.

"My husband's name is Longfellow," Mrs. Longfellow states lucidly.

Everyone's jaws drop, Skid smirks and exclaims, "Hey for minimum wage this is almost worth it."

Boop.