

## King of the Road

by  
**Lolita Chakrabarti**

Jackson Bloom had been knocked down by life more times than he cared to remember. He'd arrived in England in 1954, one of the Windrush generation, and although it seemed such a cliché now, he had had high hopes for the future. He had a degree in English and loved literature of all kinds but trying to get a job teaching proved too difficult. No one took him seriously and so after a good few months of trying he got what work he could. He must have done everything from working on the buses to washing dishes to sweeping streets to cooking in a greasy spoon. None of it required much brain-power but Jackson did it because it earned him a necessary crust.

During his fifty years in this contradictory land he had married twice, produced seven children who adored him and managed to collect two more degrees in philosophy and psychology. All to no avail of course. He had tried to rise through the ladders of power but he always got just so far and would never be promoted to managerial status. Inevitably he became disillusioned and stopped trying. All the learning he did was for himself. He learned because knowledge is power and those who knew him knew he was a very powerful man. That was why his two marriages failed. Esther, his first wife, didn't understand why he wasted so much time writing essays when she was working her fingers raw with chores. Marleen, his second wife, had had little formal education. Jackson had been angry at the world and taken it out on her, making her feel more stupid than she was. Of course he'd known it was unkind but he couldn't stop himself. All through that time, Jackson had persisted with learning because he knew it fed his soul and kept him dignified.

With two marriages behind him and all his kids gainfully employed Jackson's career was over but he was bored. So at the ripe old age of sixty-eight he had applied for a job on the railway. He loved travelling and he loved the sense that he was covering so many miles a day but still slept in his own bed. It was the perfect job. He was part of the catering staff, which basically meant that he microwaved food and took small change all day, but he enjoyed the simplicity of it and the fact that it got him out of the house.

People liked Jackson but thought he was a bit of an eccentric. So much education and yet nothing to show for it they thought, but Jackson knew better. He was known as the Singing Professor and often while people bought their fast food and canned drinks they would stop to hear Jackson sing a tune.

**'Trailer for rent or sale  
Rooms to let fifty cents  
No phone, no pool, no pets,  
I ain't got no cigarettes,**

**Ah but, two hours of pushin' broom  
Buys an eight by twelve four bit room,  
I'm a man of means by no means king of the road.'**

It so happened on a journey from London to Birmingham that a young woman with a baseball cap and dark glasses came to buy a coke. She looked very busy and very impatient as if her life was one fast lane and she wanted to get off. Jackson liked her though, something about her reminded him of himself.

‘Busy day?’ he asked her.

‘What?’ she asked distracted. ‘Yeah I guess.’

‘What is it my daughter calls it?’ mused Jackson, ‘you looked ‘stressed’ she always says to me.’

‘Yeah,’ the woman laughed, ‘I guess you could call it that.’

‘You know,’ mused Jackson, ‘you get to my age and you get to thinking that nothing was worth all that worry really. The important things make themselves known to you at my age, it’s a pity they take so many years to clarify cos I tell you I wasted a lot of time on a lot of nothing.’

‘Yeah?’ she asked interested despite herself.

‘I’m an educated man and yet I’ve done jobs like this all my life. I spent a long time bitter and resentful about it. But you know the sweetest payoff?’

‘What?’ she asked.

‘I’ve got seven kids.’

‘Seven?!’ she winced at the idea of so much breeding.

‘Seven. Two of them teachers, one a lawyer, one a doctor, two in the police force and a full time mum. Not bad eh?’ he beamed. ‘I get less and less ‘stressed’ each day.’

She laughed. ‘I’m waiting to see if I get a contract today. I’m.. self employed I guess.’

‘Ah,’ he said. ‘It’ll come to you I’m sure. You look smart. 52 pence please,’ he said as he gave her the coke.

As she walked away Jackson began to sing,

**‘Third boxcar midnight train  
Destination Bangor, Maine  
Old worn out suit and shoes  
I don’t pay no Union dues,  
I smoke old stogies I have found  
Short, but not too big around,  
I’m a man of means by no means king of the road.’**

Unknown to Jackson the young woman had stopped to hear him sing and then slowly walked back to her seat deep in thought.

The next day Jackson was on the train coming back from Birmingham. The rush for lunch had finished, most of the food had gone and Jackson was feeling quite tired. The one thing about age is that you don’t have the endless supply of energy that you take for granted when you’re younger he thought. Jackson sat down for a minute behind the counter. Almost immediately a voice roused him from his quiet moment. ‘Hello?’

Jackson stood up and saw the young woman from the day before standing before him. ‘Hello again,’ she said, ‘d’you remember me?’

‘I do,’ said Jackson wryly, ‘how’s the stress?’

She laughed. ‘I’m feeling much better now thank you. You really helped me yesterday, you sound like a really interesting man.’

'I'm afraid I might be a bit old for a young thing like you,' he quipped. She chuckled. 'Actually the reason I came to find you is...,' she looked around to check that no one was in ear shot, '...I'm a musician. My contract yesterday was a signing with a really big record label.'

'Congratulations,' said Jackson, 'tough business.~

'Well I heard you singing yesterday and it gave me a great idea for a track. A song I mean and I wondered if you would consider singing on it with me.'

'Catering to pop star and it only took me fifty years,' said Jackson. 'I don't think I'm what you want really but it's very sweet that you asked.'

'No really,' said the woman, 'I know this might be a bit weird but I'm legit, I've done other stuff, I'll get you some CDs. This number - King of the Road, it's a kind of fusion of the classic number with Asian break beats and hip-hop.'

Jackson looked impressed. She gave him her card, took down his details and said she'd be in touch.

What an odd life he thought. All my expectations were wrong and yet what I have now is an amazingly diverse existence. Jackson Bloom, teacher, philosopher and muse of artists. He chuckled to himself as he started to clear up. His kids would love this. Maybe they would have heard of this woman, Janica Louden. They would be arriving at Euston soon. He was tired and glad to be on his way home. To pass the time he sang quietly to himself,

**“Trailer for rent or sale  
Rooms to let fifty cents  
No phone, no pool, no pets,  
I ain't got no cigarettes,  
Ah but, two hours of pushin' broom  
Buys an eight by twelve four bit room,  
I'm a man of means by no means king of the road.’**