

Futures

Bringing back the stars

A little bit of movie magic. By Redfern Jon Barrett



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

I had the original Jack Stanley chin. That's what they called it. My chin, with my name. The chin was everything – in the gossip magazines, on television; slap the thing on a movie poster to make a hundred million gross.

Of course, it wasn't just the chin. It was everything else: the jaw, the look, the idea. You take care of your expression, pull in the cheekbones – not too much, not like a duck – and the work'll roll on in. Well, it did. Way back in the way-back-when.

My agent gazes at me, his eyes like yellow curdled milk. He's even older than I am, and when I look at his deflated-scrutum face I see nothing but lost time. 'Cause the Jack Stanley chin is gone-long-gone, along with the cheekbones and jaw, all buried beneath fat and sagging skin.

Students still hang my vintage posters on their walls, for movies like *Slap!* and *The World Won't End Tomorrow*; good movies. But I don't get invited on the talk shows, not any more.

They don't wanna see the lines and wrinkles. If Jack Stanley can get old, then so can they.

"If you'll just consider an infomercial –" Hugh the ancient agent says, his jowls quivering as he talks.

I put up my hand. I put a stop to it.

"Hugh, you're fired," I say, finally cutting him loose. Because, to be frank, I have a better idea.

The new agent's name is Ida. She's young and professional and she looks good. She waits with me at the clinic. It's nice – classy furniture, classy music – and it should be, seeing as the treatment, well, it's not cheap. Among the other patients I think I spy a Kennedy.

Now, I've had surgery before – just small things; a tuck by the ears, a jab of botox. But nothing like this. This is all new.

It turns out the fountain of youth is real, they just need to rejig my cells.

"You'll get me work, after this?" I ask Ida.

"With *the Jack Stanley* in his prime?" she asks, glancing up from her phone. "You won't

just be an actor. You'll be a living icon, brought right back from the past."

She didn't answer my question, but they're already calling out my name.

Jack Stanley. Jack Stanley.

"We *strongly* recommend you undergo psychiatric therapy first," the doctor declares. He's just another saggy old face.

"Time is of the essence here," says Ida, who's worth every penny.

"It's a novel treatment, but it doesn't fix all problems," the doc replies. "You should know that not everyone gets what they want from it."

I laugh, right at him, to show I'm serious.

"I'll be 20 years old again!" I cry. "What more could I *possibly* want?"

When I wake up everything's crisper and more colourful – it's like my senses have gone from fuzzy cathode-ray to dazzling high-def. Was this really what it was like, to be young?

"Welcome back," Ida beams from my bedside. Her perfume's too strong. Her pores are huge.

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“Show me,” I say. She hands me a plastic mirror.

And there it is: the Jack Stanley chin. The jaw. The cheekbones. He’s a little pale, but hell, he just travelled 50 years.

They offer me a wheelchair-to-go, but I don’t know why ‘cause I can walk better than ever. In fact, I’m ready to *run* past all the paparazzi vultures – but when we get outside there’s nothing but an empty parking lot.

“They just don’t know yet,” Ida explains, choking me with tacky perfume as she leads me to her car. “The clinic’s protecting your privacy.”

All the same, I’m kinda disappointed. It’s like I’ve died and nobody’s noticed.

“What we need is an event,” Ida says. “Something to announce you to the world.”

The event is called ‘Jack Stanley Returns’, but so far I’ve been stuck behind a godawful curtain, all bright red and gold stars like a cheap magic show. Ida insists it’s the same one used

by Mimi Eve at her reveal event, but Jack Stanley is his own damn brand, he should have his own damn curtain.

I hear the party on the other side, clean and clear, laughing and chatting like they’re excited to see me. Then come the thunder-boom speakers.

“... STAR OF *THE WORLD WON’T END TOMORROW* AND *SLAP!* – IT’S THE LEGENDARY JACK STANLEY.”

And just like that, the curtain’s gone. The whole room’s full of people – young, pretty-looking people – and I’m ready for the shock, for the applause.

But it’s like someone’s let all the air out of me, ‘cause nobody’s shocked. Nobody’s amazed by the Jack Stanley chin. They look bored, and as I gaze over the crowd of beautiful, unimpressed faces, I can see what’s wrong.

I know them.

There’s Lawrence Furley, over by the punch. Clara Baybourne’s near the doors. Somewhere in the middle there’s Susan Fara. Michael

Thames. Mimi goddamn Eve. They’re all here, they’re all young, they’ve all come right back from the past.

There is no press. I’m too late to the party.

The director calls. The camera rolls. I give them that classic Jack Stanley smile.

I’m ready.

“But this isn’t just any old juicer. With the Pulp 900 you get high-quality, fresh-squeezed juice every single time – no clean-up required!”

And if I glance to my left, I can see Ida. She smiles and gives a thumbs-up, because Jack Stanley is finally back on screen. Right where he belongs.

Redfern Jon Barrett is the nonbinary author of the upcoming *Proud Pink Sky* (Amble Press, 2022). Their short stories have appeared in publications including *Booth*, *Passages North* and *The Sun Magazine*. Read more at redjon.com.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Redfern Jon Barrett reveals the inspiration behind *Bringing back the stars*.

In 2020 my stepfather died after a protracted struggle with dementia. A few months later he was followed by a close friend and role model of mine, the writer Richard Murray Vaughan. In 2021, my partner Darren lost his father, and two more family members of mine passed – my uncle and then my aunt. As we now live in Berlin, we had to watch their funerals on a screen from a thousand miles away. Seated in our living room, dressed entirely in black.

Obviously we are not alone: this is a time of death for the whole world.

This may seem like a dark accompaniment to a relatively light-hearted story, but I’ve become fixated on recent attempts by the extremely wealthy to live forever, and experimentation with cell rejuvenation in particular. Many of us wish for more life, but were we to actually restore human bodies to youth, it’s a miracle that would be experienced only by a select few. The personal, political and social consequences of such a leap are impossible to overstate.

Yet this seemed like an interesting challenge, and I’ve been considering the potential effects of this existential desire from many angles across a variety of social strata. Here I explore its impact on the highest financial and cultural rung of our society: the movie star.

After the traditional oligarchs, celebrities would (or will) be among the first recipients of such technology, yet cultural icons are not people; they are perfected, idealized images, frozen in time and space. *Bringing back the stars* follows the elderly Jack Stanley as he attempts to resurrect his own famous visage for a new age. But there are many kinds of death, and, as Stanley comes to learn, not all of them are strictly physical.

Sometimes we die regardless.

