

The Sieve

I was lying on my side, half on and half off the bed, as despair choked my soul to the point of desperation. I squeezed my eyes shut, fantasizing about death and hopefully a numb, incorporeal afterlife. Unable to stop or even understand my viscous emotional swings between depression and panic attacks, I felt like a broken surfboard riding merciless waves. Up and down, dunking and flipping, all out of my control. I wondered at the cause and, still wondering, drifted off to a tormented sleep.

I opened my eyes to find I was no longer lying in a self-pitying heap, but was standing in the line of a grocery store. More than a little confused, I cast my eyes around and looked for the telltale signs that I was dreaming. I checked, and yes, I was wearing clothing. There weren't any familiar faces, and everything was viewed in crisp detail, unlike the fuzzy vision of a dream state. I noticed a sign above me for checkout line #4. Alarmed to realize that I could read (and in dreams you never can), I began to feel the familiar heart palpitations that signal an oncoming panic attack. I waited for it. Nothing happened beyond the slightly increased and a bit irregular heart rhythm. Perplexed, I noticed I was holding a gallon of milk and a pint of ice cream, which was significant because of my lactose intolerance. I hastily shoved these items onto the nearest shelf, uncaring that the food would spoil, and rushed off to the parking lot to see if my car had followed me to this unfamiliar plane. Feeling like a madman, I searched the lot in vain. How did I get here? I rummaged through my pockets and, finding a key fob, clicked the button and heard the beep of a car unlocking. In disbelief, I could only stare at the baby

Laura Austin

blue Corvette, now winking at me flirtatiously with her big beautiful headlights. Maybe this dream wasn't so bad after all.

Hours later, I finally decided that not knowing where I lived was not such a bad thing, not really; solid denial was *so* therapeutic. Gripping my steering wheel, I pulled over and took stock of things. Number one, I was in a completely unfamiliar town. Number two, I seemed to be the same man but had a very different life, which, considering the hurdles I had always faced, didn't put that detail on the con list. Number three... huh. I had an epiphany. If my car was different, and my town was different, maybe everything was. I pulled my wallet out of my back pocket and hooted in triumph! My address was on my driver's license, in Cold Spring, Minnesota. That was over eighteen hours away from my hometown in Marble Falls, Texas. Just as I pulled back into traffic, I caught a glimpse of a man, hurrying down the sidewalk, jostling his way toward me. I stomped the gas in a panic and careened down the street, narrowly avoiding a dented pick-up truck. The man rushing toward me had looked exactly like me. His clothing was even the same as what I wore now, down to the slightly scuffed shoes, and his face was the same face I had stared at in my mirror every morning. I didn't know what it meant, but instinct demanded that I stay as far from that man as I could.

I spent the next several miles in deep contemplation. Why was there a man living here, in this world, who was just like me? After the last few trying hours, I wanted to go to wherever "home" was now, and just relax. I never made it.

Snapping awake just as I fell off the bed, my head spun. No! I had NOT been asleep! Things had been too clear; I had *felt* the sun on my skin. Completely discombobulated, I got up off the floor, and tried to make sense of it all, but I couldn't. I

had been wide awake and in another life somehow. I had to get back there. Most people would have been terrified to the point of hysteria, but not me! My current lifestyle was that of a neurotic shut-in with more therapy hours under my belt than I could keep track of. I had been forced to go on disability because there were days, even weeks, that I could barely even leave my bedroom for more than a couple of hours. A new lease on life had been exactly what I'd needed! The hours spent in Cold Spring had been the most relaxed I'd had in years, and that was under the pressure of not knowing what was going on or what I was supposed to do! I'd had a calm mind for the first time in my adult life and it had been wonderful. I needed to go back.

Every night was the same. I tried to lie down in the same body position, at the same time of evening, and even tried eating the same foods as I'd eaten on that fateful day, but I was still here. Here in this life of misery and hopelessness. What had been the trigger? How had I been transported to what I now thought of as another dimension? It was a puzzle, and I had always been far too nervous to enjoy puzzles. I paced and mumbled under my breath, trying to remember key details of the town, the streets, and the small store I'd entered. I missed my new car, the shiny little Corvette that I could never have hoped to own on a limited income of disability payments. I scoured the Internet, looking for any mention of other accounts from people with the same experience, but there was only fiction. Finally accepting defeat, I went on with my life.

A month later, I was curled up in bed, weeping quietly, not because anything was wrong, but because that was my curse. To be tormented by uncontrollable swings of emotion, and the best thing I could do was to ride them out. Utter grief filled my heart,

mind, and soul, with no obvious cause or explanation. My eyes began to drift closed, and I gave myself over to the exhaustion.

When I awoke, I literally leapt in the air, whooping and pumping my fist in joy. I was back in Cold Spring, or so I assumed. I looked around, and then corrected myself silently. This was a different place entirely. It was bigger, more populated. Cars packed the wide streets and people rushed down sidewalks in a hurry to be somewhere. It didn't matter. I was here, not in my own reality. Here I could be free of my demons. Whistling cheerfully, I began to walk among the hordes, unafraid and without a care in the world.

I entered stores, free to browse without the fear of having an episode in front of witnesses, knowing my fear of crowds had not followed me here. Walking for hours, I simply enjoyed life; not something I could normally do. I checked my pockets and found a little money, so I stopped for lunch at a small diner that advertised the best roast beef in town. As I paid for my meal and dropped a tip on the counter, I saw movement in the corner of my eye. The diner, for all it was as good as promised, hadn't been very busy, but expecting just another patron, I turned to nod a hello. I stared into my own wrathful eyes. Just like in the last "dimension" I'd visited, there was another Jefferson here.

"What do you think you're doing?" the irate man exclaimed. "You shouldn't *be* here!" In a panic, I backed up, turned, and ran out the door. I kept running even though I wasn't being chased. What was going on? I'd just been confronted by a man with my face *and* my voice! I ran until I finally gave out, stopping to catch my breath and wipe the sweat from my eyes. This was too much to take in. Heaving a sigh, I began walking again, not as confident, almost like I was morphing into my old self, here in this new world.

When I woke up this time, there was a sense of relief. I'd thought that these other planes of existence had held more appeal than my own, but now I was troubled. How could I find peace if these other worlds each had their own version of me already there? How could I perhaps supplant one was a better question. I began to scheme, thinking that I needed a plan to send the other Jeffersons here to live in this crumbled existence, leaving me to the opportunity to start over in theirs. I conceded it seemed a little cruel, or maybe a lot cruel, but I was desperate to better my own life, and felt I deserved a turn at happiness for a change. What was most disturbing was that the other Jefferson hadn't reacted to my presence as he should have. He'd been angry, not shocked, to see someone who was identical to him. It was almost as though he had known what I did not. He had seemed to know that there were other hims running around and that they could indeed, appear in his dimension. The fact that he would know there were other dimensions was astounding enough! I needed to speak to one of them; gain information so I could form a plan. I needed to go back, but how?

The harder I tried to switch planes, the more I thought I was missing something. The only thing I knew that the two prior incidents had in common was that I'd been feeling extreme emotion at the time I'd drifted off to sleep rather than the daily, almost routine level of depression. Unfortunately, not only could I not stop an attack, I also could not conjure one up when I wanted one, which I never had before anyway. I tried thinking the saddest thoughts, imaging the most dire situations, but I failed every single time. It was simply not going to happen this way. I rummaged through my cabinets and took out every prescription pill bottle I had and dumped them in the trash. There! Without my medications, I would soon be blubbing over nothing and I would be free to travel.

Three days later, it happened. I was a mess, but deep down inside, I still had a feeling of satisfaction. I was taking control of my life, even if it had to begin by letting go of what little control I'd always had. Shaking and crying, I lunged across my bed and buried my face into my pillow. I kept crying, until finally I simply blacked out.

I woke up in a new place altogether, which was good because I didn't want the other Jefferson to suspect anything. A return visit would seem suspicious, as it couldn't be handled with false surprise. I was again on foot, and I casually meandered around the peaceful countryside where I'd found myself upon waking, enjoying the sound of birds singing and the smell of the clean country air. A few old trucks passed me by before someone finally stopped to see if I needed help. Country folk were helpful this way, I supposed.

"Hey there, boy," grinned a weathered looking farmer, head poking out the window of the latest truck. "You looking for a ride into town? You can hop in the back." He gestured to the rickety looking truck bed. "We're only about 5 miles out; I'll gitchu there in no time."

Grateful for the lift, I hopped in the back, hoping it wasn't illegal here like it was back home. "Thanks!" I called out, loud enough for the old man to hear over the rumbling growl of the powerful engine.

Five dusty miles later, the truck eased to a stop and I hopped out. "Thanks for the lift," I said, feeling very relaxed. This was my chance. I had to find the other me and find out what he knew about jumping from one reality to the next, and whether or not it could be a permanent situation. Of course, this needed to be done delicately. If the other Jefferson knew I was planning to switch places with him and send the unsuspecting dupe

Laura Austin

to a word of pills, therapists, and mental breakdowns, he wouldn't go down easily! I swung my head from side to side as I walked, looking for, as crazy as it sounded even in my own mind, myself.

After about thirty minutes, I was approached, not by Other Jefferson, but by a slim young woman in a halter-top that I suddenly wished I could trade places with instead.

"Hey, Jefferson!" she trilled. "I thought you said you had to work today!" She didn't look accusing, I decided, more like pleasantly surprised.

"Oh, uh, I left early. I, uh," I stammered. What should I say? It didn't matter as it turned out, she just kept talking.

"I'm sooo glad I bumped into you because I need to tell you I can't make it tomorrow night." My heart sank at whatever tomorrow was supposed to have held but now wouldn't.

"Buuut," she smiled slyly, "I *am* free tonight! You wanna get together around 8?" She bounced a little when she talked. I loved it.

"Of course, uh, babe." I had no idea what her name was, but I seriously wanted to find out and spend more time with her. The other me had it way too good. Time to share a little. She kissed my mouth and even though she left after that, I continued to float around on the sidewalk, unable to get my bearings or believe my luck. Reality soon came crashing in when I saw my other self heading my way, and he didn't look happy. How did he know to actually leave work early and find me here? How had any of them known where to find me? This was getting more than a little creepy. Feeling like I had a stalker, even though, technically the stalker was me, I shied away at first, until I remembered

with a sudden clarity that I had wanted this. I needed to talk to him, and now I'd get my answers. A little acting was going to be necessary.

“Oh m-my g-g-gosh!” I fake stammered, “who are you and why do you look like me?” Okay, so maybe I'm no actor. He wasn't buying my pitiful attempt, and I ducked a swiftly thrown punch.

“What the hell do you think you're doing here! Go back to your own dimension, you loser!” Stunned by the venom in his voice, it took me just a second longer to respond than it should have and he got me with a second swing. Reeling, I fell back, noticing that he was a bit more physically fit than I am.

“Wait!” I held my finger up, silently begging for a minute. “I don't know what's happening to me. It isn't on purpose. I go to sleep, wake up here, and then at some point in the day I wake up back at home. Like a dream, but not.”

He listened to me with thinly veiled impatience.

“Tell me what's going on. Please.” I tried to make it a demand, to sound tough, but he'd busted my mouth up and I was whining a bit. He looked disgusted, which shamed me into getting to my feet.

“Fine. You don't know what's going on? I'll tell you. Come on.” He spun away and stalked down the sidewalk, looking much more menacing than I ever could. It goes to show that confidence and attitude are everything. We walked for a couple of blocks, and then veered off in to a parking lot of an apartment complex. He led me to a door and took out a key. He glared at me, “This is *my* place, not yours, no matter how much we are alike. You do not come here. Ever.” Picking up on the fact that he meant both his apartment and his dimension, I nodded meekly. Other Jefferson was rude.

When we went in, I noticed he had good taste- really good. The carpets and paintings on the wall coordinated, and the furniture was high end. My place looked like an indoor rummage sale, with multiple families participating. Nothing matched. He gestured toward the sofa, “Want a beer?”

“Absolutely,” I said with relief. Maybe he wasn’t so bad, after all. I changed my mind yet again when he tossed the bottle at my face. I caught, barely.

“Okay, so here’s the deal,” he started. “You live where you live and have your life. I live here and have mine. Others like us live where they live, and so on. You don’t come here, we don’t go there. That’s how it is, especially for you.” Bristling at the implied insult, I began to speak but he cut me off. “Shut it and listen. You are not like us, and although there are six dimensions and six of us, you are the least of us all. You’re the sieve.”

Confused, I stuttered, “The sieve? What’s a, I mean, I know what a *sieve* is, but how am *I* a sieve?”

“Cause stuff goes through you.” He looked at me like he had explained something, but I was still lost. Not easy on the ego. He sighed, maybe a little dramatically. “What we go through, our emotions, well, our negative emotions, go through you and then out into nothingness. When we are afraid, enraged, heartbroken, all those feelings have to go somewhere so we can be happy. They go through a sieve, which is you. You aren’t a filter, you don’t absorb it or stop it, you just redirect it.’

“Redirect it?” I parroted.

“Yeah. In every universe, or dimension, or whatever you want to call it, there

has to be a sieve. It balances the rest of us. Keeps us from being driven insane by what life throws at us. Everyone has one, in one world or another. If you are a sieve, that's just your lot in life. The role you play in the greater scheme of things. You probably think you're crazy half the time, but every time you feel something intense, it's our emotions passing through you. We feel better for it, and it does pass for you, eventually."

"So for every human being, there is one out there who gets dumped on emotionally?" My voice had gone quiet,

"Uh, yeah," he confirmed, looking less sure of himself now. "I told you. There has to be."

"So what makes me the one? Who decides who gets to be normal and who gets a ride on the insanity train?"

"I don't know, man. Really! The only other thing I can tell you is that there are way more sieves on your plane of existence than on any other one. Way more. So many that your dimension is kept ignorant of all the rest. We know of one another and can handle it. You and yours, well, can't," he fumbled.

"Maybe we can't because if we did, we'd do something about it!" I roared. I was ready to do this, to get him out of the way and take his place. No way would I continue to be the landfill for all the other Jeffersons' pain and fear. I crept toward him, feeling murderous. He backed away a few steps, but then reached around him, pulling out a gun.

"You think I didn't expect this kind of reaction from one so pitiful, so *primitive*, as you? You've spent your life careening around in your head, focusing on your feelings, without self-control, self-discipline!" he thundered.

“And I’m to blame for that?” I demanded. “I never asked for this! I’m the victim here!”

He scoffed, “Victim or not, you’re done here. Get out of my home and out of my world, or I kill you. Right here, Right now.”

I called his bluff. “And destroy your sieve? Your way of coping with your *feelings*,” I mocked scathingly. “You can’t handle life without me, none of the Jeffersons can. I’m not leaving. Ever.”

“You have no choice,” he replied, almost gently. “Did you ever try to return home before?” Blood drained from my head and I felt faint. He was right. No matter what I did, I was going home at some point. There was nothing I could do to free myself of this enslavement. I was a sieve for five other versions of myself. I would never experience happiness or peace. I would always be batted around, like a helpless ball of yarn at the mercy of a heartless kitten. Like the kitten, the other Jeffersons meant no harm, couldn’t even prevent it, but it was there nonetheless.

Dazed I headed for the door, and just as I turned the knob, I woke up.

I sat up in bed, rubbing my face. I took my phone off the nightstand and called my doctor. I told Dr. Jennings everything. “Please help me,” I pleaded forlornly. “This is real, too real. I’m trapped. Please...” I dropped the phone and flopped back down. I needed stronger medication; something that could literally numb the pain and fear of six men. The only good news? I had discovered the source and cause of mental illness. Being believed was another matter.