



The Weekly Man

Episode 50: Monday – Jack

Jack woke up feeling good. He remembered his date with Valerie. A coffee shop. The Tinker. The second time he'd stood her up. He tried to remember what had happened to spook him that time but the memory was long gone.

Traumatic enough to have caused amnesia? But what about the cuts, bruises, scrapes? A lifetime of trauma? I don't think so.

His thoughts turned back to Valerie and he smiled to himself.

I'm going to be with her again. I'm going to spend time with her in real life. I'm not running anymore.

He'd broken down a barrier. He wasn't sure exactly what that barrier was but he understood now that he'd always been looking for an excuse to run—searching the location, the people, anything that would trigger the alarm and send him into the street in panic.

He wondered about that. He wondered why it was that he'd always felt threatened. Why he was so sure that some agency or organization was out to get him. He'd never done anything to warrant being seen as an enemy of the state, or an enemy to anything or anyone. The evil organization in his comic strip was fictitious, something straight out of his imagination. The chances of his having hit on something that actually existed in the real world were non-existent. And if he had, he very likely would have been “eliminated” years ago.

What happened to make me so damned paranoid?

He couldn't think of anything. Probably something that had happened in his early childhood and he'd long since forgotten about it. Like he'd forgotten so many things in his life.

Why do I forget?

He thought it might be related to something his mother had said to him. She'd said so many things about accepting things, about moving past “details you can never understand.”

What details? What can't I understand? Why can't I understand them?

The bump.

Why can I never understand that? I know it was there. Why can't I remember? Why can't I understand? What's going to happen if I start understanding these things?

Jack's entire body froze. He felt a cold slice of energy slashing down through his spine and into the backs of his legs.

What's going to happen? What's going to happen if I remember?

He knew this was the key. If he started to remember things, something was going to happen. He knew it. He wasn't sure if it would be good or bad but he tended more toward something bad because he'd tried so hard all his life to not allow it to happen.

But the feeling that there were others close by and unseen was something that had always been there. Sometimes it had been strong, sometimes weak. Lately, it had been a bit stronger than usual but it hadn't affected him as much as it normally would because, suddenly, there was something new in his life: Valerie Vine. For the first time, there was a woman in his life.

A woman. This was something he'd never thought would happen. He'd never invited it, never gone to bars or events to meet women. He couldn't even remember being in a situation where he would meet women. It just didn't occur to him. It was like the instinct to mate had always been somehow subdued. His mother had never said anything about it. It just wasn't there. Until Valerie Vine had come into his life and even then he'd put off anything from happening for so long. But not anymore. He'd finally broken through the paranoia and stayed for the date. And tonight, he had another date with her. Time now, though, to put everything else on hold and get to work on his strip.

It was strange. He hadn't worked on the strip for a while. He wasn't sure how long—it had been longer than any other time he could remember but it didn't take much to get back into it. It was like the script had been writing itself in the back of his head.

Bobcat's eyes were wide and fearful as she said, "The Fourth Prerogative!" The lettering spilled into the next panel where she thrust her cell phone in front of her as text appeared showing the rest of the group repeating her words and thrusting their cell phones so that they all touched in a circle as they repeated, "THE FOURTH PREROGATIVE!" In the next panel, a dazzling light emerged from the connected cell phones. Cougar and Bobcat's faces appeared almost maniacal as they stared at the light. The next panel showed the outside of the tree house with light spilling through the windows and through cracks in wood slats of the walls and roof. A beam of blue light smashed through the roof of the tree house, shattering bits of wood and metal, and the beam blazed into the night sky in a panel showing the massive tree and the house, and miles to the right of the tree, the Tryanny motorcade, its lights shining ominously along the road.

The beam struck the bottom of a cloud with a splash of iridescent blue light that rained down on the Tyranny motorcade. As their dark cars were soaked by the rain they transformed into a dull pulsing blue and the SUVs began to beat like blue hearts faster and faster and the dull blue turned bright blue, brighter and brighter. The motorcade ground to a halt in the middle of the road and the car doors flew open. Men in dark clothing staggered out and fell to the road, gyrating and screaming. After a few minutes, they went still and then stood up shakily and stared at the scenery around them. They looked at each other with confusion, as though they were strangers. Some walked uncertainly from the road and into the wheat fields on the other side of the ditches, snagging their clothing on fencing, too disoriented to cry out in pain, just moving

into the fields and disappearing. Others followed the road like newborn zombies. Two of them just fell to the pavement and sobbed.

And that was what the Fourth Prerogative did.

Bobcat's eyes filled the frame, the scene on the road reflected in them, with the caption:

It makes them forget!

Jack's hand froze over the paper the second he finished the exclamation mark.

It makes them forget!

I need to talk to Valerie.

Time had been a kick in the ass for the Tinker Coffee Shop and Bistro. The walls were cracked and yellowed, the tables and chairs covered with peeling veneer, and whenever he or Valerie put their hands on the table it sloped enough to spill coffee from the coarse grey mugs.

But he was with Valerie in the second place he'd run away from her and this time he hadn't run. He'd told her about the ending for his latest Unseen episode, which he hadn't published yet. He wasn't sure how to broach the history of forgetfulness in his life. He was sure she would think he was crazy. She told him she loved the ending.

"And it fits so well with their philosophy of not actually harming anyone," she said. "The bad guys just forget who and what they are. They can start new lives. Maybe good, maybe bad. They still have free choice. Brilliant, Jack, brilliant!" She pushed her coffee mug across the table top closer to his. "But you don't seem too happy about it. You seem tense. You don't still think that I'm with them, even though I am, but that I'm going to shoot you or anything, do you?"

It took a few seconds for her words to sink in before they both laughed.

"No, I don't think you're going to shoot me. If you were, you would have done it long ago, probably for standing you up so many times."

Her smile widened as she pushed her mug closer.

"There's something about the ending that kind of relates to my own life." He took a deep breath. "And I'm not sure how to explain it. I'm not even sure if you'll think I'm sane after I try to explain it." He squeezed his hands around his coffee mug. The tips of his fingers turned white.

"Jack, you're an illustration artist who thinks a secret organization has been watching you all your life and wants to eliminate you for some unknown reason and this has caused you to stand me up on date after date until now." She leaned in closer over the table. "Jack, I already know that you're insane." She smiled. "Now, tell me what's going on in your head, crazy guy."

He smiled as blood ran to his head and he felt it flushing his cheeks and forehead. "All my life, I've been forgetting things."

"We all do that, Jack."

"No. I mean seriously forgetting things, things that I shouldn't forget. I had a bump almost the size of an egg recently, and a cut that must've bled a lot. It's almost healed now, but I don't remember how I got it. I mean, there's no way I could've forgotten something that must have been excruciatingly painful and bloody. I should have a clear memory of the incident. It should be painfully etched in my memory. It should be something I'd love to forget, but can't."

Valerie stared into his eyes. She didn't say anything and her expression was completely non-committal. He wondered if he'd said too much...if she was sure now that he was, in fact, insane.

He felt insane. After a few minutes of silence that seemed to emanate throughout the room, she spoke.

“It was your head, Jack. Maybe the jolt to your head caused a sort of amnesia and you forgot the accident. That wouldn’t be unusual and it wouldn’t make you crazy.”

“But it’s been all my life. Ever since I was a child things have happened that anyone else would remember. Valerie, I don’t remember losing any of my baby teeth. Not one. I’ve had cuts and scratches, bruises and pulled muscles that were just there and I couldn’t remember what happened to me to get them. I’ve waked up sick as hell with the flu or a cold without any of the symptoms first, just full-blown into it. But I’ve always just shrugged it off. My mother taught me to do that, said I was different and that I’d just have to accept certain things and forget them but I’m not sure if I can do it anymore. You say I might have some kind of amnesia from the bump on my head but it’s just happened too often. It’s something else, and I have no idea what that can possibly be.”

Valerie slid her hands over the tabletop and cupped them around Jack’s hands. “I’m sure there’s some rational explanation for this. In what way did your mother say you were different?”

Jack thought for a moment. “She said that I would perceive things differently than other people, that I had a brain condition that made my brain function differently than others but that it wasn’t dangerous or debilitating or anything...it just meant that things would happen that seemed to have no explanation or didn’t jibe with the experiences of other people and all I had to do was just accept it and get on with things. But...” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “...it’s getting harder and harder to do that. I want to know what’s wrong with me. I want to know if there’s a cure or some kind of therapy or program I can get into. I want to know what caused the bump on my head. I want to remember that.” He pulled his hands away from Valerie’s grip on them, put his elbows on the table and propped his chin on his fists. “You said there was some kind of discrepancy about my birthday and that’s why I was flagged for investigation. What was the discrepancy?”

Valerie’s eyes squinted slightly as her posture stiffened. She knew that she had to be careful. Whatever was going on in Jack’s mind could jeopardize him and the six other personalities. She needed to talk to Natalie soon. It looked to her like things were heading toward some kind of flash point with Jack and she wondered if the other personalities were experiencing the same thing. “It was nothing really. Just different birth dates from the hospital. We see that all the time. It’s just some administrative foul-up. The hospital records are messed up and sometimes different dates get sent out to different government departments. Like I said, it’s pretty common and I can’t see how it can have anything to do with you forgetting things.”

“I need to know what’s going on, Valerie. I can’t keep ignoring it. I need to know.”

Valerie motioned with her finger for Jack to come closer. They leaned toward each other and she kissed him lightly on the lips. Jack’s eyebrows rose.

Valerie smiled and ran her right hand over the side of his face. “I’ll check at work tomorrow and see if we have anything unusual on file but I doubt there will be anything.”

Jack barely heard a word she said. It was the first time a woman, other than his mother, had kissed him.

It was almost the time and for the first time ever Jack didn’t feel the least bit tired. He could still feel Valerie’s lips, the closeness of her face and her hand passing over his cheek. It was something he hadn’t expected and something he’d never given thought to. He’d lived his life in

fear of something that didn't exist, an unnamed threat that, after all these years, he realized never existed. All these years, the real threat had been himself, his unreasonable fear. No one was after him. No one was trying to trap him. No one was watching him through nanobots in his socks. No one was tailing him on those rare occasions when he ventured outside, like to run away from a date with Valerie.

It was all just in his mind and he had to do something about that.

At exactly midnight he fell asleep still feeling the kiss on his lips, her hand on his face.

Her face glowed red from the stop light hanging in the center of the intersection, highlighting the light wrinkling of her forehead, the heaviness of her eyes.

Something's happening to him. Natalie's training isn't working. He's starting to think for himself, to question things. Need to talk to her...soon.