



The Weekly Man

Episode 64: Monday - Jack

The pencil wouldn't move. Images of people he didn't know and yet seemed familiar bulged out of the peripheries of his awareness. His hand was stuck over the panel. He pushed the images out of his mind until it was blank.

Where do go now? He couldn't visualize their faces: The Unseen. He chuckled to himself.

Guess they are unseen. Panther? Bobcat? All of you. Where are you? What are you thinking? What's the Tyranny up to now?

Nothing came. No images. No faces. No tree house. Nothing. He tried doodling...just letting the pencil glide across the paper. This had worked in the past, engaging the right side of his brain in some kind of relaxing activity, nothing planned, just the creation of shapes without direction or meaning. It eased his mind and put him into an open state of thought where anything and everything could happen.

He doodled for an hour. Nothing. He was empty.

Maybe I just need a break.

He thought about this for a moment. He'd been working on his strip every day for years. He'd been hiding from the world for years, fearing the world. For how many years? But now he had a woman in his life.

I have a woman in my life.

He gave up on the doodling and ate a sandwich as he looked out the window at the park.

Maybe a long walk in the park to clear my head and figure out what's going on.

Scattered clouds enclosed the park in shadows and then opened into full sunlight and back to shadows. A cool breeze brushed against his face and disappeared when the clouds moved unwrapped the sun.

He walked through the park and around the park without clearly seeing anything or anyone. Everything around him hazed behind his curtain of thought. He wasn't sure how long he'd walked but his stomach started clamoring and it occurred to him that there would be an email from Valerie waiting for him at home.

His heart raced as he read.

Jack

Do you remember The Constant Apple? It's a quaint little coffee shop on Fourth Ave right across from the stone federal building. You know where it is. You stood me up there. But you're not going to stand me up tonight, are you Jack?

Good.

Did you ever see that oriental grocery beside the fed building? It was torn down to make way for the three tier parking lot that...

She went on for several more pages, just like she used to before they actually started seeing each other. It wasn't until he started reading that he realized that he missed her long rambling emails and he missed writing back to her with memories, theories, feelings, hopes and dreams and things he just made up, things that popped into his head that he wanted to say to her because he didn't want the email to end. It was like he was connected to her through it.

He spent the next hour writing back to her before getting ready to meet her at the Constant Apple.

The coffee shop was exactly as he remembered it: cozy, dim lighting, curtained windows, intimate seating for about twenty. He saw her immediately, sitting at a candlelit table near the back of the room, the same place she'd been sitting when he stood her up. He couldn't remember what it was that had spooked him that night but he felt a slash of regret. She looked so beautiful and graceful, sitting erect, posture perfect, hair tumbling over her shoulders.

How could I have been such an idiot?

"Well," he said as he pulled back a chair to sit down, "I didn't chicken out."

She looked up at him and smiled. "Good thing," she said. "I'd hate having to hunt you down to shoot you."

"You need a gun on your job?" He wavered slightly before sitting all the way down, as though he were about to change his mind and leave.

She laughed. "Not really. I don't do field work, just boring old desk stuff, checking out information and anomalies. Really boring stuff."

He looked around the room. "I remember coming here."

"Our fourth date. Pardon me...the fourth time you stood me up."

He reached over the table and touched her hand. "I was an idiot. I'm going to blame it all on Crosby."

"Who?"

He glanced around the room again. "This place hasn't changed a bit. I mean, we could be sitting here that night. Everything's the same."

"Except we're sitting here together this time."

They laughed. They ordered coffee and cheesecake.

He looked at her wistfully. "I really liked reading your email and I like writing back. It's almost like you're there." He looked, reflectively, at the table and then back to her eyes. "I've been having all these weird thoughts."

"Like what, Jack?"

"I'm not really sure. I had a big bump and a cut on my head. Haven't got a clue how they got there." He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and opened his eyes again. "Things like this have been happening all my life and I just shrug them off." He leaned forward. "There's something intrinsically wrong with me and I don't have a clue what...only that it's kept me from being a part of the rest of the world all my life."

The worry in Valerie's eyes was unmistakable. She started to say something but stopped. She stared into his eyes, reached her hands across the table and held his hands. Jack had a sense that she wanted to say something but she held back. "What...what do you think?"

The waitress arrived with their coffee and cheese cake. They were quiet, smiling tensely, as she placed the contents of the tray on their table. When she left, Valerie said, "I'm not sure. I know you were into this whole conspiracy theory thing for so long and..."

"But this isn't conspiracy stuff. It's me. It's things about myself that I don't understand, things that I've spent an entire lifetime shrugging off, ignoring. But I can't do it anymore." He leaned forward. "Do you want to hear something really weird?"

He saw something in her eyes, just a brief instant and then it was gone.

Was that fear? Did I just see fear in her eyes? Why fear?

"I've always had this feeling that I'm not alone." He let his words sink in before continuing. "I've never been able to figure out who or what the others are, only I feel their presence sometimes. So strongly. It's as though there's periods of time when I'm somebody else. When I'm other people. And things happen to those other people...like the bump on my head...and when I'm back to myself, I've forgotten what happened because the memory isn't mine...it's somebody else's." He stopped for a moment, staring intently into her eyes. "Does that make any sense?"

She was quiet for a moment. He had a sense that her eyes were searching his eyes for something. As though she were weighing the possible ways to answer his question.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's just that..." She shook her head slowly. "You've cut yourself off from the rest of the world for so long. It's bound to have an effect on you. The characters in your strip are probably more real to you than anyone else you know and..."

"And that's another thing. The characters in my comic...they all look alike and they all look like me. Why is that?"

Valerie smiled nervously, "Well, don't writers write about what they know best. Maybe each of those characters represents a facet of your own personality."

Jack thought about his a moment. "You know, Valerie...there's something about what you just said that has a ring of truth to it. I'm not sure exactly what it is, but..."

"Maybe it's because you have so few interactions with other people...that you interact with yourself as other people in your comic."

After a moment, he said, "I don't know. What you said at first, seemed...familiar, like it was close to something I knew. But I don't think, no...interact with myself as though I'm other people? Why does that seem to make so much sense?"

"It makes the characters in your comics seem more real...like real people."

"No. It's more than that. It's so much more than that." He looked off somewhere into the room, deep in thought.

Valerie frowned.

She thought carefully about the things Jack had said and the things she'd said. She knew that she had to be careful. Something was happening with Jack that hadn't happened before...if she understood what Natalie had told her correctly.

Jack was questioning things. He was no longer accepting them and shrugging them off to some anomaly he'd always accepted. And he was starting to question the things that had nothing to do with the rest of the world, the things that were personal to him, like the bump on his head, a cut on his lip—all the things he couldn't remember happening but had happened to him.

Natalie's grand scheme to keep the identities of her children secret from each of them was starting to unravel and Valerie was beginning to share her concerns about the consequences. What would happen to Jack when he found out that he was one of seven people sharing the same body? How would he react to his entire life being something completely different than he thought it was?

But he's seen into it in a way. The seven characters in his strip. And he has so many questions and suspicions. Maybe the truth would give him some kind of closure on a lifetime of doubts that he's been conditioned to ignore.

She decided to drop by to see Natalie on the weekend.

We need to come up with a plan before all hell breaks loose. And maybe it's already too late.