



The Weekly Man

Episode 43: Monday - Jack

He chuckled as he read her email.

Jack

So...now you know what it feels like, being stood up. I can't say that I'm angry at you for all the dates that ended up being very lonely for me because I can only imagine how lonely they must have been for you and the remorse you must have felt judging from the emails you sent when you got home.

And for your information, I didn't deliberately break our date, or more like my intrusion on your personal life. Something came up at the last minute and it was one of those things that changes everything. I still want to see you in person tonight and I'd like you to get back to me and tell me whether you want to meet at your place or somewhere else.

There are two caveats to this. First, you must keep your date if we meet somewhere else. You are not to break a leg, allow any of your relatives to get sick, die or disappear. You may not be run down by a bus, truck or flying saucer. You may not fall into an open sewer or fall off the edge of the world. You are allowed to do one thing and one thing only: show up. And since I've had to pay for so many coffees, beers and meals waiting for you in the past, whatever we have to eat or drink is on you.

Second, you must be home if I come to your place. If you're not, I will come back later and shoot you in your sleep.

Just joking. I will wait for you on the stairs and shoot you when you come home.

Just joking. I don't know what I'll do if you're not home, or if you don't show up if we agree to meet somewhere, but I guarantee you won't like it.

Fair enough?

Vine

BTW, I'm waiting for your reply.

Not long ago, he would have taken the threats seriously. Maybe not at first but he would have found a way to make them real in his mind. Not anymore. He knew that in all likelihood, she might actually be in love with him. And in all likelihood, he was in love with her. And yes, she was right about the loneliness after all the times he'd broken their dates and fled and then wrote to her with stupid excuses trying to justify unjustifiable behavior with lies that no one in their right mind would believe. The only irrational part of her was putting up with him for so long.

And just what could he say about the state of his own mind, writing those things and expecting any sane human being to believe them? What was his state of mind all this time? Certainly not rational. But then, hadn't that been the way he'd lived his life since childhood, having to give his credibility gap a huge amount of gap. All the things that he'd had to shove to the back of his mind and pretend they weren't important or never happened. Like the bump on his head. He touched it. It was almost gone. The cut was completely healed.

How could I have missed something like that? How can I not remember being hurt enough to have a bump the size of an egg on my head and not remember a damn thing?

Memory loss from the injury to the head?

He thought about that for a moment and had to admit that it was feasible. If he were hit on the head hard enough, it might lead to memory loss. He couldn't remember being unconscious.

But then, I wouldn't remember that, would I? I'd be unconscious.

He tried to remember back to the day when he first noticed the bump, where he'd waken up. He was sure it was in his bed and not on the floor. He was sure that he wasn't dressed when he woke up. He had a clear memory of sorting through his clothing and making sure everything was safe and free of bugs and other spying devices.

It felt like crashing into a cement wall. He knew something was wrong. He knew that he should remember and that it was time to stop forgetting. He'd been doing it all his life and he was going to put a stop to it.

He clicked Reply on her email and wrote for about an hour, telling her about everything and how he wanted to start remembering because the not remembering was ruining his life, making him paranoid about everyone and everything in the world around him. He wanted her to help him to remember.

He was almost in tears by the time he finished writing. As he clicked the Send button, he felt suffused with a sense of lightness that permeated every cell in his body. It was an almost dizzying feeling of release.

He'd told her that he wanted to meet her at the first place he hadn't shown up, so long ago.

Valerie tried her best not to stare at Mrs. Gilbert's wrinkles. She'd never seen anyone as wrinkled as the woman sitting across the room from her.

"Most of the way I look was done artificially," said Natalie.

"I beg your pardon?" said Valerie.

Natalie laughed. "The wrinkles and other physical changes. I had to do a complete makeover so that the kids wouldn't recognize me."

She calls them 'the kids.' But then, that's what they are to her.

“I apologize if I was staring,” said Valerie, “but I’m still getting my head around all of this. It’s so...”

“I know,” said Natalie, laughing. “I don’t think there’s ever been anything like this before. Split personalities, multiple personalities, things we read about and see movies about. But his is different. Jack is actually one of seven siblings sharing one body.”

Valerie thought about this a moment and it seemed to make sense. “When you put it that way, it makes sense. Like it’s not some kind of mental disorder. It’s actually a physical thing.”

Natalie smiled and sipped tea from an ornate cup. “It made giving birth to septuplets a lot easier but I think raising them in individual bodies would have been much easier. Except changing seven diapers every day!” Her body shook as she laughed and she spilled tea into her saucer as she replaced the cup. “And you’re right, it’s not a personality disorder at all. You might call it a physical defect, the egg developing seven separate brains, all within one brain. I’m not sure how it would all look under an X-ray or scan but it’s the way Manzer and I have always seen it.

“Then, why haven’t you told them about each other? It seems to me that it would make life a lot easier to you. And a lot easier for them.”

Natalie drew out a long sigh before answering. “I guess, because I don’t know for sure how it works, how they’re separate but one. I don’t know what effect it will have, them knowing about each other. Would they see themselves as freaks? Would all the personalities join together as one new person? I don’t think they would but I’ve never been willing to take that chance.” She looked wistfully towards the window. It was slightly open, filtering the sound of passing cars and children in the park. “And then there’s the matter of how the rest of the world would treat them. Hate to use the word again but...freaks? Or just one freak. A hoax? I can’t see the rest of the world ever accepting them as seven different people. They’ll say it’s one person with seven personalities. Sometimes, I have a hard time making the distinction myself and I love each of them individually. I’ve never doubted for a second that I had septuplets.”

Valerie sipped her coffee and nodded. “I just can’t even begin to imagine how you held all of this together for so long, even with Mr Doyle’s help.”

Natalie laughed. “It hasn’t been easy.” She sipped some more tea, thought a moment. “I won’t bore you with a lot of details. I’m sure Manzer explained all of that. But...” She looked out the window again, the wistful look giving in to something else.

She’s afraid, thought Valerie.

Natalie’s lips moved under the wrinkles as though she were going to say something but changed her mind and changed her mind again until finally her shoulders slumped and her eyes and body seemed to slouch into a deep sadness. “It’s all starting to fall apart. The outside world is coming in and they’re beginning to feel the draw of the world outside the lives I’ve built to protect them. Well...” She gestured with one hand toward Valerie. “You’re here. You found Jack. And Jack has found you. I think he’s finally gotten to the point where he can’t stop himself from meeting you. And I don’t think it was all his paranoia about THEM that stopped him from meeting you in the past. And by the way, you’ll have to admit, some of the excuses were entertaining.”

Valerie laughed. “Yes. Yes, they were. It was sometimes worth being stood up just to read the excuse for it.”

“But it wasn’t just paranoia about you being an unknown factor. He’s always been like that about everything in his life that wasn’t in his flat or childhood home. When he was a child, he

checked his clothing carefully before putting it on. I think he was checking for listening or tracking devices.”

Valerie nodded and smiled. “I’m guessing he checks his clothing even more closely now.”

They both laughed.

“I think,” said Natalie, “that something deeper was going on though. I think that his fear of meeting you was an unconscious knowledge of his condition, that he was too different to have a relationship with a woman. I doubt that he would have been able to explain it. It was just something he was aware of at a level that he would never be able to see. And, unfortunately...” She sipped some more tea and stared out the window for several minutes.

Valerie sipped her coffee patiently and didn’t interrupt Natalie’s train of thought, thinking it better to just let her talk about it in her own time.

Natalie suddenly shook her head and breathed in deeply and quickly, as though she’d just been pulled from a dream. She looked into the other woman’s eyes and Valerie saw the fear back, a deep sad fear.

“I think they’ve all responded the same way,” said Natalie. “At some level they were always aware of the others and, if not, then aware of not being around all the time. I think, as much as I tried to get them to rationalize another way of perceiving time, they knew that their experience of time would never let them be fully a part of the outside world.”

“I can see that,” said Valerie. “It would always be there.”

“And the awareness of it has been growing. And now, I have a feeling they’re all going to start asking questions that can’t be answered without them knowing the truth, and they’re going to start doing things they will soon find out are impossible and they’re going to want to know why they’re impossible. Jackson wants to go on vacation for a week. Jackie wants to get a sex change.” All her weight sunk into her chair with a heave like a slow sigh of the body.

“So,” said Valerie, “it’s time for them to find out?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t. I don’t know what that will do to them. I don’t know if they’ll be able to live with the knowledge or if it will drive them mad. It could affect each of them differently. I just don’t know.”

“Well,” said Valerie, “we’ll just have to work something out. In the meantime, I have a date with your son and I don’t want to be late.”

The Girl in the Blue Sweater. Weird name for a bar but it seemed to do the trick. The place was packed with an upscale crowd of mostly hipsters and hippie wannabes, as in hippies with brand new Nikes and Tommy Hilfiger jeans with an appropriate and politically correct amount of worn and torn knees. But they wore peace beads and hair band and they were doing a wonderful job of looking like they took the world seriously.

The crowd had changed but the place itself hadn’t changed a bit since the last time Jack was supposed to meet Valerie for their first date. The walls were plastered with black and white photographs of demonstrations, peace marches and outdoor rock concerts. Jack wondered if, somewhere in the building, there was a picture of a girl in a blue sweater.

There she was. Sitting on a stool at the bar with a martini in front of her, hands cupped around it, leaning slightly forward, looking into it.

She’s so beautiful.

She wore a low cut light yellow dress that made her blonde hair look even more blonde. The light behind her silhouetted the side of her face. She wore matching high heels, currently resting on the foot rest at the base of the bar where they highlighted her long slender legs.

And I've been running away from this woman for how long?

His stomach was one very large, very tight knot. He felt as though he were walking through a cloud, as though he were detached from the reality of his life and wandering in a place that threatened to swallow him. But it felt good. He liked the tightness in his stomach, the feeling of just throwing himself off whatever cliff the cloud was leading him to.

Fuck you Crosby.

He was suddenly standing right behind her, a little to one side, staring at her, wondering what to do next. Without taking her eyes off her drink she said, "Have a seat, Jack. Your drink is on the way."

He was dumbfounded. She'd just spoken to him. There was no running or turning back now. He was uncovered, in the open, caught, cornered, trapped. Finally free. He sat down on the stool beside her. She turned her head to face him. Her eyes were blue. Her lips were red. Her hair was blonde. She was smiling, looking right into his eyes.

Jack passed out.

He had no idea how long he'd been unconscious. Apparently he hadn't fallen on the floor, just full face onto the counter top, arms dangling down both sides. It was her laughter that woke him. He felt her hands on his head and neck, massaging him as she laughed quietly and said, "I've never had that effect on a man before. Now I'm beginning to understand why you've been standing me up all this time."

Slowly, dizzily, he straightened up. He felt the flushing in his face. His head was spinning and he couldn't think of anything to say.

"It's OK, Jack." She kissed him on the cheek. "I know you're not exactly the social type. And I know how much courage it took you just to come here...and to just sit beside me. And I'm happy that we finally get to meet each other in person."

She still wants to be with me? I just passed out. She still wants to be with me?

"I...uh...yeah." He looked up into her eyes. She was an inch or two taller than him. "Yeah, I guess you're right, not much in the way of social skills." There was a martini glass on the bar in front of him. He picked it up and almost emptied it. He wasn't much of a drinker so the alcohol hit him almost instantly. A sense of euphoria settled over his head and body. His thinking seemed fuzzy.

Valerie giggled and put a hand on his arm. "Feeling better now?"

He looked at her and smiled. "Yeah. Much better." He lifted the drink to his lips and sipped, lightly this time. "I just want to apologize for all those times I didn't show up. Guess I deserved you doing the same thing to me."

She smiled. "Didn't like having the tables turned on you, did you?"

"No. But at least I wouldn't have passed out in a public place."

They both laughed. "I'm sorry about that," she said. "Something came up at the last minute, something really important. I really did want to see you though." She placed two hands on his forearm and squeezed with both. "But here we are now, together. I was almost beginning to think

that this would never happen.” She giggled loudly. “Here we are. Would you like another martini?”

He nodded yes. Valerie signaled to the bartender, a short woman with long black hair and a slim body splashed with tattoos. Valerie turned to Jack, eyes wide with what seemed to Jack, excitement. “I love your comic strip, Jack. It’s so dark and well rendered. The characters are so real and the sense of mood and danger you create is so intense. And the way you talk about it in your emails...” She squeezed his arm with both hands. “I mean, the passion you put into your work. It’s so amazing. But, Jack, I think...well...I don’t want to talk about your work for a while.”

What?

“There’s something else I want to talk to you about.”

“Sure. Anything you want to talk about. That’s OK with me. And I’ve always loved reading your emails. I feel like I’ve known you for a long time and...well...”

She smiled widely and kissed him on the cheek again. “Well, Jack, it’s about my job. You remember the man who called to me the other night? Well, he’s my boss.”

“So...?”

Jack’s mind was still reeling. He’d finally kept a date with her. He hadn’t run. Sure, he’d passed out. But he hadn’t run. He didn’t Crosby on her. He was happy with himself. He’d just had the most interesting evening of his life and he couldn’t remember being so relaxed. He couldn’t remember ever being so happy.

And all this time, she’d been working for them. He’d been both right and wrong to run from her.

Well, mostly wrong.

He knew that, even though she worked for a covert agency, she was never going to harm him.

She said that she couldn’t tell him much about her work or employer, only that her job was to check out anomalies in data to determine if an investigation might be necessary. She also told him that contacting Jack on such a personal level could land her in a “shit load of trouble.”

She told him that she felt a strong attraction towards him but had no idea why because, she assured him, he wasn’t in any way the kind of man she would normally be attracted to.

He told her that he appreciated her candid, in fact, brutally candid honesty and asked why the hell she wanted to meet with him then?

“A feeling,” she said. “Just a feeling.”

Jack decided that he could live with that.

He asked her about the anomaly that put him on a list. She told him it was just some little thing about his birth date not matching between organizations and left it at that. The rest of the evening they talked mostly about all the dates that had never happened and Jack’s sometimes hilarious excuses. They laughed till both their faces began to twitch. She touched his arm repeatedly and kissed him on the cheek. In the car, after driving him home, she kissed him on the lips, not deep and long with a little bit of tongue-play, but enough to give him hope that something romantic might be brewing. And they were going to meet again—next time, at the second place they were supposed to meet.

He wondered about the birthdate discrepancy. Had he felt a brief sense of fear? Angst? He wasn’t sure but something about it hit a nerve.

He decided to just let it slide and get on with things but it was the last thing he thought of before sleep enveloped him.