

The First Cousin of Introspection

Sometimes there are strange things that go down here on this green earth that seem logical at the moment but really aren't later on. Take the day I found myself. I have a friend named Ezra and a cousin named Sandra. They helped me that day. Mostly Sandra. Actually almost entirely Sandra. Truth be told, Ezra was mostly a useless element of this part of the story. There we were that day—the three of us—just standing on the lawn outside my landlord's house. Sandra had been "fixin'" to leave for the past half hour. We three stood there talking about everything and nothing.

"I don't really get the whole second cousins and first cousins once removed thing," I was saying.

"Okay, it's like this, we—you and I—we're first cousins, right?" said Sandra. "Now say you get married and have a daughter. I and that daughter will be first cousins once removed. Then when I get married and have a daughter—"

"What's the deal with you all only having only daughters?" asked Ezra. "I object to this rabid sexism."

"Just an example. Give him a boy, I don't care. Anyway, if I have a daughter—or son—my kid and your kid will be second cousins."

"What if you and I got married and had a girl?" I asked. "Would that make her my first daughter once removed?"

"No, that would make her your abomination once removed. Hey, look at that lady up there."

My landlord's neighbor stood on her upstairs balcony railing staring down at the ground as if there were no more tomorrow.

Then she took a dive. She hit the pavement on her walk pretty hard and blood and brains splattered everywhere. There was little doubt that she was dead, dead as the proverbial doornail. The three of us gawked for what seemed an eternity. No one moved or spoke.

When the police arrived all three of us were still standing on the lawn looking like dazed idiots. I don't know that by personal eyewitness experience. Sandra later told me that by the time the police arrived, she and Ezra had come back to reality and that in the fullness of time, the police briefly questioned all three of us. Sandra was just fine everything considering and answered the questions like a normal innocent bystander. Ezra threw up and then answered the questions between spitting out the bitter aftertaste. I on the other hand wasn't talking. The investigating police guys thought that made me seem guilty of something so they hauled me into the police station. In the police interrogation room Sergeant McKenzie looked into my eyes. "Shock, that's what it is, shock. Seeing a person kill themselves like that is pretty traumatic if you ain't used to it." So he took me to the hospital. A still shaken up Sandra and Ezra came with us.

At the hospital Dr. Bob studied me. "Hmmm, he appears to be in shock."

"That's what I was thinking," said McKenzie.

"I just said he appears to be in shock. He's not really in shock, I don't think. He's almost in a deep state of introspection like he's thinking so intensely about something that...Has his family been notified and consulted?"

"He doesn't have much of any living family. Only his cousin. She's out in the waiting room. She and a friend were with him when the incident happened. There both pretty shook up to, but pretty much okay. I asked her if he had any preexisting conditions."

"Did he?"

"She said she's known him his whole life and he's never had much besides a cold now and then."

"M,kay. He seems fine. I think that case you were talking about just triggered something. Sometimes that all it takes to set something off. He'll be fine, though. I imagine the best we can do is just let him sleep it off." The two left.

My brain squiggled and churned. As I thought my thoughts, there were thoughts in thoughts and more thoughts creating periphery thoughts, and they chiseled out nooks of thoughts. I opened my eyes and there was my girlfriend, Peg. I frowned.

"What's wrong?" Peg asked. "Just rest for a bit. I think they want you to stay in bed for a while." She pressed the Nurse Call button. Momentarily a nurse came into the room.

"He's awake."

The nurse put her arm on my shoulders and gently forced me to sit on the bed. She held up three fingers. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three."

"What's your name?"

I told her.

"What's your occupation?"

"Zoologist."

"Zoologist? One of those people that works at the zoo?" said Peg.

"Well...there's more to it than that, but sure. I'm a Zoologist. At least I want to work with animals. It's always been kind of a dream of mine. Anyway, I think it's time to do it."

"You talking about what you wanted to do when you were a kid?"

I thought you were way past that phase.” asked Sandra.

“It just come to me all of a sudden that I need a big change, you know, for me.”

That is when I walked in the door. This other man, I instinctively knew he was me and that this other me was a zoologist. He swerved, dipped and zoomed across the room. Then he turned back and charged straight for us. Sandra and Ezra recoiled in disgust. This man who was me stopped and glared at the nurse who screamed and fled the room. You would think that someone would have come to see what all the hubbub was about, but no one did. I, the other man who I decided to call Bill, suddenly smiled and stuck out my hand. “Howdy, I’m a zookeeper.” I smiled back and shook his hand because I figured that was good enough.

“Why are you here?” said Sandra.

“Just accept it,” said Ezra. “We both of us are waiters, just waiters.

“I think not. My brain waves declare it!” I, Bill, said.

“Sandra, Ezra, dudes, you’re embarrassing me. It’s not polite to embarrass a body in their own story.”

“Let’s just get you home—just you, just regular you,” said Sandra.

“Sorry, Bill.”

I, Bill, placed a “business” card on the bed. It was an index card with nothing on it but a penciled-in phone number. Mostly I, Bill, just got a kick out of it because it made me feel professional. “Call me.”

After everyone had gone, I got dressed. When we left the room the hysterical nurse was nowhere in sight and business was going on as usual. Bill was gone as well. In the car I brought up Bill and neither of them knew who I was talking about. For

the next couple of days, the restaurant managerial staff where I worked let me recuperate because they thought I needed it. Little did they know that this would provide my story with yet another convenient plot device.

Ezra didn't cotton to my being off since he was the head waiter and therefore my boss—plus he knew I was just fine. And he was also jealous because he and Sandra had also been traumatized but didn't get any "recuperation" time off. He had mumbled that life was so bloody unfair and that a body that vomits needs to have some getting better time. Anyway, it was a relaxing two days. On the first day, I called myself, the zoologist who worked at the zoo. There was a momentary fumbling sound then my whispering voice on the other end: "This is Bill...Dr. Bill."

"I can barely hear you. Are you sick?"

"I'm hiding," I told myself.

"From who?"

"Sandra. She scares me."

I blew a raspberry. "I just called to set up a time to come have a talky talk with the other protagonist of this story. At least I think you are. Sandra would say you're the villain or at best a rough-edged antihero. Sandra, sorry, but she will probably be there too."

I, Bill, screamed.

"Bill?" I said.

There was only ranting, raving, and carrying on. "I think you fail to grasp the situation."

"What do you mean."

"Sandra. She made her position quite clear, you know, by her tone and stuff. Well, okay, you know where the zoo is?"

I said I did.

“You all can meet me at the possum exhibit.”

“The what?”

“O-P-O-S-S-U-M. Don’t forget that O. This is the American one. When you write it in your story, it will be acceptable just to say possum since many readers aren’t familiar with the O thing.”

“I am. I remember reading about those O’s a time or two.”

“They have a few at the zoo. Meet me there at, say, 10:00 in the morning on Friday. That’s the day after tomorrow.”

“It’s a good thing you told me that because I never learned the days of the week...Bill?” Too late, a dial tone. I was sorry he hadn’t heard my sarcasm. I sat in a lot of empty space which typically isn’t good idea to have for a long time for a good short story. That’s what happened though. I can’t deny that. For the rest of that first day and all of the second day, I watched a whole passel of nature shows. Bright and early on the third day, Ezra personally drove me to work.

I scoffed. “Well this isn’t gonna work.” He looked at me and smiled but didn’t say anything. Five minutes later we were standing in the grille area. I was not happy. I was so upset that some might have a bunch of curse words here, but I don’t curse at all so I’ll just do a string of exclamation points:!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Ezra balanced a tray on two fingers and spun it around like a basketball. “This is a tray. You put food on it.”

“I know how it works, but thanks.”

Sandra—the night manager—came in and asked us if we were getting to work or just planning to sit on semi-colons, and also to say she was about to be sign out since the day manager

was in. Ezra just looked at Sandra and smiled.

“Fine. Later suckaaaaas,” Sandra said. I don’t know why she said that since typically I don’t make characters say uncharacteristic things for them and that is uncharacteristic for her. Anyway, at that moment, Shawn, the day manager came in.

“Hey!” Shawn said loudly. He was short and talked really loud to make himself look taller and meaner. “There are more tables out there! Go!” I couldn’t help but notice he was also using exclamation points proving that we really did have something in common after all.

“Sorry dudes—and dudette—can’t do this anymore. Now, if you’ll excuse me I gotta meet someone in a couple of hours.” I rudely brushed past Shawn. Sandra and Ezra followed. We exited as three busloads of hyper kids on a fieldtrip entered the lot.

“So you’re quitting just like that?” Sandra asked. She tried to snap her finger but it just thudded. “When you write your story I better be really snapping, you here?”

“Just like that, I’m quitting just like that.” I snapped in her face. “I’ve found myself, Sandra, Ezra. It’s the new me.”

Sandra jerked her head. “You were saying you had to meet someone. Who?”

“The new me. You remember that guy who you didn’t like? In the rough draft he was in a helicopter but I changed that because it was so stupid and it never happened that way.”

“Dr. Bob?”

“It wasn’t a medical doctor. You know, that zoo guy?”

“Ugh, still?”

“Thought we’d seen the last of him,” said Ezra. “Course

villains usually don't go away unless you kill them. There are exceptions, though."

"You know what? Forget it, go," Sandra said.

"I'd go with you but I'm keeping my job," added Ezra. "You can take my car. Just pick me up at four," added Ezra.

"Roger."

"And another roger"

"What?"

"Two rogers. Roger, roger."

"Roger, roger."

"Anyway, I hope you find whatever it is your looking for."

"It's probably best you don't come, Ez. At the beginning I said you were mostly a useless element of the story, anyway."

"Wow, thanks. Who needs enemies when you got friends, know what I'm saying?" After a miffed Ezra had gone, Sandra sighed. "Get in. I'm coming with you."

"You're a champ. Told Bill you'd probably be there, anyway."

For the next couple of hours, we hung out at a restaurant across the street from the zoo. Twenty minutes or so in the three busloads of kids pulled into the zoo parking lot.

"I am so glad we're not there yet," said Sandra.

At 10:00ish I was looking for the possums with an O. They were inside the marsupial house, which was empty and pretty dark and crammed full of mysterious question marks. The horde of kids hadn't come yet or had already left. I spotted myself standing beside a window looking at the ugly little guys—the possums, not the kids. I walked behind myself, reading the information sign aloud: "Opossum. A nocturnal marsupial found in certain parts of South, Central, and North America."

"Masterpiece of a description, don't you think," I, Bill said.

"I wrote it myself. Not really, but I plan to. I do plan to. If I weren't a fictional character. That's where you come in, Mr. non-fictional character." The both of me stood watching the small beasts for a few minutes.

"I half expected to find a screaming horde of school kids in here," non-fiction me said.

I, Bill, finally sighed. "I need to tell you the rest of the story."

"The rest of the story? What story? You haven't told me anything." I scoffed, smiled and looked at Sandra for approval of my contempt. She was ignoring us and just watched the possums with a scowl.

"I'll tell it now."

"Go to it, Paul Harvey."

"It all started just this morning. That's when I became a fictional character" I started. "And that's when I saw a lady kill herself. It's not like she was my best friend or anything. We had talked though, definitely talked and flirted and all that. She made me brownies now and then. We would sit on her steps and talk about Lost and Seinfeld. Never really got around to all the romantic stuff, though. Anyway when I saw her all dead and head all bashed in, it really did something. I had always banked on there being more time and I didn't expect there to be no more time, ever, you know. I didn't expect there to be a time when I didn't have a choice in the matter."

"So now what happens?"

"Now that you found me, we walk away as one and you are me. The ending of a book and beginning of a new chapter."

I thought about this. "Is this a joke?"

"I'd say so," said Sandra. "Your making your readers think there is someone else there when really it's just you."

"But I've always said he's just me."

"Listen, this other guy—"

"Bill."

"Bill. He's not you. You are you. Maybe God wants you to be a zoologist, I don't know. I just think you're trying to force yourself into something else and you need to stop and think about it and you need to mull it over and most importantly practice some wise and godly discernment."

"Wow. That was a long and awkward sentence. Probably a run-on and needs to be separated into at least two sentences, maybe three or four."

I, Bill, stared at the possums with an o. "So how about it?"

"I don't know. Sandra makes some good points."

"Look," said Bill. "I know you're feeling scared and a little unsure that you're doing the right thing. This is what's right. Right for you."

"That last sentence was a fragment, but sometimes fragments are good and effective writing devices so I'll allow it." I watched myself. Sandra looked at me partly as if I'd gone mad, mostly with pity and love. "You know life is more important than knee-jerk reactions, right."

"Did I say otherwise?" I said.

"No, you felt it, though, gotta agree with Sandy there" I, Bill, said. "And that's just fine, just thinking about your situation and how you might improve it. That's what I got to do, myself, change right stinkin' now and I'm not even gonna put a period after this because I'm such a rebel"

Sandra grabbed my head and turned it towards herself. "Right now, I know that you may not know what to think and you may not know what's real. You're my cousin, Dennis, my one and only living relative and I would never lie to you. You have to think of more than yourself. Changing right now just won't work. And if you don't believe in me or anyone else, believe that God will help you to think it out."

The both of me were uneasy. I looked at the ground, closed my eyes tight, then I looked at Bill. He was gone with every noun, verb, and adjective that constituted his existence. Sandra and I and the possums with an O were alone. We weren't yet out of the marsupial house when Sandra said, "I'm glad that's all done."

"You have no idea. The plot almost got sidetracked. Back when we were at the hospital, I imagined myself a girlfriend named Peg for a little bit."

In later years I became a writer/teacher and married a girl who wasn't named Peg. And Ezra did achieve meaning to this story by marrying Sandra and making me lots of first cousins once removeds who grew up with my kids, their second cousins, and joined forces to save the world.