

Jacob's Mirror

by Justin Piesco

After returning home from work just after noon, I walked into my living room to find myself pulled on all sides by an unseeable force. In an instantaneous feeling of being ripped apart by wind, the original me was removed from his feet and divided into twelve identical Jacobs throughout the room.

We stared at each other—eyes bouncing to the exact same freckled face, the exact same work-stained, white uniform, and the exact same confusion. It was impossible to tell who was the original—or even if there was an original. Where I had just been standing was empty, and now I—no, *we*—were all sitting around the room. Four of us were sitting on the sofa our mother had given us when we moved in with Sarah. Six of us were around the dining room table—our dining room was really just half of the living room—and the other two of us were sitting on chairs by the kitchen counter. We were all silent, yet the thumping in our chests was deafening proof we were *all* real.

Still, in the silence, we kept looking for some one of us to say something, anything, about who or what had caused this. But no mouth breathed a syllable. After a few moments, we began to recognize one another's expressions, and through them, one another's thoughts. Our eyes slipped nervously to the hardwood floor and, just as quickly, bounced up to look for our copies' mutual trepidation. Every glance, breath, and thought happened between us as if choreographed. We saw that any hope that we were the true Jacob would not be solved like this, and yet, none of us could come up with the proper action. We could curse, complain, fight, but these thoughts were identical on all of our faces. How would anything original come about? We could ask why this had happened; we could each demand that we were the solo among reflections, but none of us could come up with a uniqueness. We were all me.

Every thought that occurred was reflected on the surrounding faces. Fear tilted heads downward. *Is this a trick? Will it end?* Joking arrogance appeared in grins: *I always figured the world needed more of me.* We laughed simultaneously but returned almost immediately to fear because of the obvious implication: if all of us exist, if all of us are equal, who gets to live our life? Who gets to keep our family?

We kept staring at each other until we wordlessly came up with the idea that we should all leave for a few hours and come back before Sarah came home with our son, Sam. Our idea was to get some kind of differing perspectives so we might be dissimilar enough to not trip over ourselves when we deliberated the situation. We couldn't all live our life, but one of us had to. Sarah and Sam would need one of us, right?

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As I walked out the door after breaking into twelve, with all of the Jacobs behind me, I saw the picture of Sarah and me, and I couldn't help but slip it into the sleeve of my jacket. It was a terrible wedding picture—and probably my favorite—where I had blinked and Sarah was laughing. She hated her “crooked teeth,” and for the longest time wouldn't even let the picture near the apartment. This copy, though, was small enough that she eventually relented and let me put it with my keys by the front door. I knew the other Jacobs would understand that only one of us could take our car, so I took the car keys and in the same motion grabbed the picture. Without looking back, I got into our car and left to find myself.

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As we all walked out the door after breaking into twelve, with most of the Jacobs behind me, and the first Jacob taking the car, I decided to go to Abe's Park. The sun always felt hotter there, but the shade of the trees balanced it out perfectly. I sat underneath one of the younger oaks by the ocean inlet and tried to relax and think. How can you, at a moment's notice, give up your family to another person? Of course, how can you tell eleven people with whom you have such an intense intimacy that they will all have to abandon their family just so you can be happy? I looked out over the water and saw a boy, with nearly the same blonde hair as Sam, jumping up and down on the concrete pier. Though this child was fairer-skinned and shorter than my son, it was easy to picture them playing together. Would Sam grow up playing without me? Ask for advice about relationships from someone else? Be taught how to drive by another man—or worse, his mother? I laughed quietly and ran my hand over my head to rub the back of my neck.

The boy ran up to the edge of the pier, as if to jump in, then stretched both of his arms out to catch the railings on the sides, letting his legs swing out in front of him. I doubted I'd let one of my kids do that, but he seemed agile enough. After letting his legs dangle for a moment, the boy swung back onto the pier. He smiled and set out to jump again. As the boy ran toward the edge of the pier, one of his arms missed the right rail, and when he tried to balance with the arm that caught the left, he only managed to cause himself to spin into the water. I stood up, eyes wide, as no one appeared behind him. I was too far away to see his head hit the wooden pier, but the thud against the aluminum steps just under the water was unmistakable. The boy seemed to come up for air, briefly, but after a moment slipped back under the bouncing waves.

"Sam!" I shouted, running toward the pier. I dove in and found the boy only a few feet below the water. It didn't seem like he was breathing, but by the time I had lifted him back onto the pier, his mother was tearing him from my hands to give him CPR—apparently having finally noticed he was gone.

I watched, anger and fear mixed in my thoughts, until the boy coughed the water out of his lungs. The mother was too busy crying to even notice I was there, and I was already leaving when she turned around. I pushed the wet hair to the side of my forehead and realized that as horrible as my current predicament was, I could never stop watching out for my child.

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All of us came back to the house intermittently over the following hours before Sarah got home, some of us wet, some of us dusty, all of us looking more upset than when we'd left.

"On the plus side," said the Jacob in the kitchen, "I don't know what any of you are thinking." A few of us grunted acknowledgment; a few more rolled our eyes.

"It doesn't matter," said the Jacob sitting on the couch. "It would ruin Sarah and Sam's lives if more than one of us stayed here. We should just go." He was sitting low enough in the cushions that it looked like he was starting to melt into the fabric.

"You can, but one of us has to stay," said the Jacob at the table. "I can't tell if it's selfishness or selflessness that I care about how any of you feel, but I know how I would feel without Sarah and Sam. I guess I can't find the spark to force any of you into the situation." Several of us nodded. The Jacob on the couch ran his hand over his head and rubbed the back of his neck.

"How many other people can say they suffer from too much empathy?" another of us asked.

"Charity workers, jackass," Kitchen Jacob said, wincing as he realized he was in a strange way insulting himself.

“Speaking of,” he continued, rubbing his forehead, “I came across a lady collecting to raise awareness for the ‘dangers of vaccinations.’”

Most of the rest of us looked around the room. One of us was going to make a bad joke—one of us *had* to—but no one opened his mouth, until finally, the Jacob lying by the corner said, “Fine, I’ll do it.” He cleared his throat and in a higher-pitched voice said, “Didn’t she know that only religious leaders and English professors are good at selling bullshit?” Terrible joke. Most of us shook our heads, but there was a grin or two as well.

“Sarah wouldn’t like hearing you generalize like that,” Couch Jacob said, clenching his jaw. Sarah had just gotten her doctorate in English, but for us that made it funnier—she was brilliant at making things up on the spot. Still, his not laughing meant something had changed him. We asked what was wrong, but he ignored us and stared at the wall. We continued telling of our days.

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As we all walked out the door after breaking into twelve, with most of the Jacobs behind me, I decided to go to this New York-style diner I often visited on my lunch breaks. I left the cab I’d picked up outside the apartment and saw Katie waving to me from inside the diner. She was a younger brunette girl who was always incredibly nice to me.

“Hey, Jacob!” Katie said, hurriedly smoothing down her apron with both hands. “Can I get you anything sweet today, or will you have the usual?”

“I’d just like a cup of coffee please, Katie.” Katie wore an immaculately clean apron, wrapped tightly around her waist, but she seemed to be adjusting the buttons on her shirt whenever I came in. I sat down and was looking out the window onto the road when she walked over with a coffee pot and mug. The smell of her vanilla perfume seemed to add flavor as she poured. She touched my arm as she normally does, and for the first time, I realized that she was purposefully leaning too far over to pour the hot coffee into my cup.

“Can I get you anything else, handsome?” she whispered to me, her unbuttoned shirt—and all that it didn’t cover— inches from my face.

I tried to say no but could only manage to politely shake my head while my eyes lingered on her a while longer. Odds were, I only had a one-in-twelve chance of being able to stay with Sarah and Sam; why shouldn’t I stare at what could be future happiness for me? Some of us will have to tough out a life without our family because the twelve of us obviously can’t share—that would be too much of a burden for Sarah and too hard of a situation for Sam. There was an avenue for my, and their, long-term happiness, being revealed in front of me.

“Let me know,” Katie said, winking at me, “if you change your mind.”

I watched the slow, measured movement of her legs as she carried the coffee pot to another table. Katie then put her arm around the man at that table and said to him, “Can I bring you anything sweet, handsome?” The man grinned. I pushed my coffee away, and stood up to leave. Katie was just being a friendly waitress, and I was arrogantly living in my head. I laid down a few dollars for the coffee and tip, wondering what I’d do if I ever had to see the woman I actually loved put her arm around someone else.

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As each of us relayed our experiences, we knew we were running out of time before Sarah got home. The strangeness of the situation only grew. When someone tells a story, most people imagine what they would do in the speaker’s position, but upon hearing one another’s stories, even if we thought about handling them differently, it was impossible to think that we actually would have. Every tree, street sign, mom-and-pop music shop, camo-jacket-wearing

homeless man, waitress, and child would have been noticed or ignored in exactly the same way by all of us. We went out looking for differences and returned finding our similarities.

“We aren’t the same,” said Couch Jacob, who had somehow managed to sink lower into the sofa.

“I suppose not,” one of us replied. “Not anymore, anyway, but it does put our lives into a weird perspective. I feel pretty heroic knowing I saved a kid from drowning.”

“I thought I was saving Sam,” Wet Jacob said, dryly. “But it might have taught his mother to watch her other kids more carefully if I hadn’t done anything.”

“That’s not funny,” growled Couch Jacob.

“I saved him, didn’t I? I think that entitles me to some spurts of bitterness.”

“Seriously, Couch Jake, what is wrong with you?” we asked.

He finally told us.

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As we all walked out the door after breaking into twelve, with some of the Jacobs in front of me likely going to the park and others on various cab rides, hoping to God no one noticed there were so many of us, I decided to get on the public bus. It was just a whim; I hate buses. Obviously it wasn’t the most logical decision, going straight to a place I hated, but I figured if anyone in the world was in as bad a situation as I was, they probably rode a public bus.

I took a seat in the middle of the rust-riddled public-transport vehicle and sat through a few stops, staring out the window, when a black man sat next to me. His eyes were drooping and he clearly needed to shave, but he had one of the nicest tailored suits I had ever seen.

“Long night?” I asked, hoping he was another melancholic bus-goer.

“A *great* long night,” he said quietly. “I got pinned doing back-to-back spinal surgeries.” He looked at me. “Are you a doctor?”

“I’m a butcher at Costco,” I said, cheeks reddening.

“Well, today is my daughter’s birthday,” he said, pulling a porcelain elephant from his pocket. “My car is in the shop, and to add to the perfect storm, I had to oversee two ten-plus-hour procedures, all while having to get to the store to buy this ridiculous elephant my daughter wants *so badly*.”

“No kidding?” I was stunned to learn that the scraggy beard in front of me was apparently a veil for a real-life Superman.

“Yeah, elephants are the worst. So both surgeries went without complication, but the only time I had to get this damn figure was today, and the store is on some kind of religious holiday. Still, I called the store owner a few days ago, and she told me they would stay open all day for me if the surgeries went well.” His eyes were half-closed, but he nodded in tired bliss. “I closed up the second guy about an hour ago, got dressed at the hospital, ran to the store, and now I’ll get home just in time for my little girl’s party to give her this ugly, perfect elephant.”

He looked on the verge of collapse, but the clear contentment about him rubbed off on me. “Your daughter’s a lucky girl.”

He bobbed his head affirmatively. “She’s worth it.” He turned just slightly enough to be able to see me with one eye. “Do you have any kids?”

“Yeah, a son. I...” Did I still have a son? Was he still mine, really? I turned my head away.

“Well, this is my stop, buddy,” the surgeon said, patting me on the back. I blinked my eyes back to awareness and

decided to get off the bus too. This trip was too much. Instead of hearing a sob story, I'd come across a great one. One I'd likely never experience.

I walked a few steps off the bus, following the lines in the sidewalk as I went. A large man bumped me hard in the shoulder and huffed, "Excuse me, sir."

"It's fine," I muttered turning to see a police officer run past me as the bus drove away.

The officer that had jostled me—who I now saw had a huge mustache and freckles—yanked the surgeon-in-the-suit and said angrily, "Wait a moment, *sir*." He, alongside his shorter partner, whom I'd missed, squared his shoulders and left little doubt how determined he was to do—something. "Sir, I'm going to need you to turn out your pockets, please."

"I'm sorry, what is the problem?" the surgeon asked, eyes red and widening.

The other cop—blonde, with glasses and a mild sunburn—rubbed the sweat off his forehead with his wrist and said, "We got a call about a man matching your description robbing multiple houses of money, jewelry, electronics and various family heirlooms."

"What?" the surgeon asked, holding out his hands. "Where am I supposed to be holding all of this?"

"Sir, calm down and turn out your pockets."

He pulled out the tiny elephant and the blonde cop snatched it from him. "Bill, this looks like an heirloom to me."

"It still has the tag on it!" The surgeon insisted. "Look!"

"Sir, I'm going to ask you again: calm down!" The surgeon tried to take a breath, but he was clearly exhausted. He was beginning to breathe heavier and heavier, and water was forming in his eyes, but neither cop seemed to notice. "Now, sir. Do you have a receipt for this?"

The surgeon let out a sigh of relief, "Yes, I do. Thank you." He reached behind him for his wallet and the mustached cop shouted, "Gun!"

The blonde cop immediately dropped the elephant, leaving it to shatter on the sidewalk, and whipped his own gun into the surgeon's face. The mustached cop smiled and drove the surgeon to the ground. The cop shoved a fist clenched into the surgeon's pocket and pulled out a small bag that I couldn't quite see. "Sir, you are under arrest for threatening a police officer and for possession of narcotics. You, like all the rest of your kind, have the right to remain silent."

The blonde cop turned to me and asked if I had something to say. I just watched, horrified, unable to move. He pointed his gun at me and shouted that I should leave, but I was already trying to get away.

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"What the hell is the matter with you?" we shouted as the Jacob—who was clearly not us—finished his story. How could he not say something in defense of the surgeon? He turned his eyes towards us, glaring, and not bothering to move any other part of his body. His stare lingered a moment then shifted back towards the wall in front of him as he sank deeper. He shrugged. We could tell he wasn't about to say much else. Even if he wasn't one of us, we could tell.

"At least that is one of us that we don't have to worry about," one of the clearly real Jacobs said. "Although we still have to figure out which of the rest of us gets to stay."

"Wait," Wet Jacob said. "Are there only eleven of us here?"

The man on the couch laughed. "I noticed that a while ago," he said. "You were all so self-absorbed, you didn't notice the car was still gone. It doesn't matter." He rolled to his side and held his knees to his chest. "I don't deserve his

happiness anyway.”

“What are you talking about, coward?” we asked. “Where is the other Jacob?”

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Once I pulled the car into a parking spot, I walked up to the school and went straight toward Sarah’s office. I pulled our wedding picture out of my pocket. It was warm. At first I wasn’t sure I was doing the right thing, but seeing her smile in my hand made me need to see her in person.

As I knocked on her door I thought about the eleven other Jacobs, but when Sarah answered and hit me in the shoulder for surprising her, I laughed and forgot all about them.