

Embodiment

by James Lynn Smith

I could have sworn I saw my father, Percy Weeks, glance at me. He was amidst a group of people near an airport snack bar. Strange, there was no recognition of me in his face, yet it had that familiar look of acceptance. One implying that, though no longer master of his fate, he'd found a deeper truth that made it mildly amusing. Body posture was the same, leaning on a cane because of an earlier stroke. But here's the part that floored me...my father died years earlier.

The implausibility stopped me cold. *A stranger's uncanny resemblance?* With growing trepidation, I looked back but he was no longer there.

I remembered comments by my psych therapist, Barbara, whom I had been seeing to curb alcohol addiction.

“Roger, dreams of seeing your deceased father may be a symbol,” she said. “What unresolved issues did you two have?”

“Nothing except my regrets that, when I became an adult, his health, speech, and mental acumen had decreased. Otherwise, we could have had interesting conversations across different generations.” I further said my father once had a sharp mind and took pride in my achievements.

An approaching figure broke my reverie. “Here you are,” my wife said, arms open. “How was the trip? My, you’re pale as a sheet.”

“It shows?” I muttered during a comforting hug.

“A bit, as if your plane hit an air pocket or maybe you’ve seen a ghost.”

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Driving home through the night’s rain, I told my wife, June, of my

experience. She remained quiet, probably thinking I was nuts or having a postponed mid-life crisis.

Later, she went to bed, and I remained at my desk finishing a trip report. Afterwards, I leaned back and put my feet on the desk edge, again thinking of my dad. *Why did I see him?* I'd had plenty dreams, but never hallucinations. No medication or food I had consumed would have that effect. *Life circumstances?* Both our kids, Marie and Jim, had finished college and were gainfully employed. We checked on them from time to time, but they reciprocated less often while grappling with their busy lives. June and I became more home-centric, focusing on events with friends while making efforts to build capital for our retirement.

I looked at the framed photo of my dad and mom across the room. His countenance was one of dignity, seldom displaying a cheesy smile. Maybe discussion with my therapist could get it off my mind. I checked, pleased that I had an appointment tomorrow after my workday.

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"Earlier you decided to forgo alcoholic drinks four days a week," Barbara said. "Does that still hold, Roger?"

"Yes, with some application of willpower," I said.

"You'll need to go cold turkey for complete control."

"I'm trying to avoid *becoming* an alcoholic, not quit being one."

"Don't you think that's a little self-deceiving?"

"Next, you'll encourage me to attend AA meetings again."

"Okay, Roger, we'll go to the other subject you raised. Being an engineer, you may see the world as a complex machine, logical if you knew all the initial conditions. Dealing with feelings directly might be uncomfortable because much is unsettled and has no definite rules. But the subconscious holds things that can rattle our emotions if we don't deal with them."

“So I need to dig stuff out of my subconscious?” I asked.

“Perhaps it’s coming out on its own. Might be projecting an illusion onto the real world, signaling a need to reflect on the past with your father. Something’s unfinished you need to face, even if it brings anger or tears.”

I sat like a lump, not knowing what to say.

“Now might be a good time to try hypnosis again. I’ll ask you to visualize your father and imagine an aura surrounding him. You can revisit this experience on your own. I’m turning this lamp down while you take a few deep breaths and relax...Let all anticipation evaporate and see yourself at the edge of a beautiful forest...”

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Driving home, I reflected on our session. I would normally doubt that a died-in-the-wool realist like me was becoming more sensitive and my subconscious was forcing its way into the external world. However, to claim every unproven idea was rubbish wasn’t logical either. There was a time when claiming the existence of radio waves would have been absurd.

I don’t exactly doubt claims about the collective unconscious, the existence of spirits, or even reincarnation. Yet neither do I get wrapped around the axle *believing* such things. I prefer life that’s understandable without evoking woo-woo isms. Maybe, aside from a multitude of phonies, some see ghosts. I’m just not one of them. It’ll be hard enough to imagine an aura about my father’s image when I try to induce self-hypnosis. Barbara probably mentioned an aura because it suggests spiritual significance, a way to imagine contact with the “other side.”

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Roger’s daughter, Marie Weeks, was a busy young woman. Her lifestyle in the renovated inner city area was exciting and sometimes tiresomely complex. Working as a paralegal in a law firm, she felt herself becoming an asset rather than

a trainee. Improved efficiency also allowed time for limited social activity. Normally reserved, she was coaxed into the nightlife scene by a more adventurous coworker, Jill.

Arriving at her apartment one evening, Marie had barely put her groceries away when her phone rang. She picked it up.

“Marie, it’s me, Jill.”

“Oh, hi, I just got in. What’s up?”

“You’ve gotta meet me at the Blue Frog tonight. It’s becoming the hottest spot in town. Lots of higher-class guys and gals. Drinks are half price, and free hors d’oeuvres. C’mom—please? I met some guys at an art gallery near our offices and they’ll be there.”

Marie didn’t respond immediately. However, Jill was fun and made “off-the-cuff” seem simple, so she agreed and headed toward the bathroom. After a quick shower, she sat on a stool, brought the lighted magnifying mirror toward her and began her makeup art. Later, she chose a snug fitting, knee-length, blue dress, certain to go well with her complexion and auburn hair. The dressing mirror confirmed readiness for “party-time.”

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After arriving home, I helped June prepare supper by making a salad. After eating, we cleared dishes and I retired to my study while she parked in her favorite lounge chair for TV. She loved prime-time medical dramas, which gave me the heebie jeebies. When at my desk, I remembered neglecting email for three days. I keyed in my account and watched entries stack up. One was from Marie, two days ago.

Hi Dad and Mom,

Just touching base with you guys. Work’s not so stressful now, and I’m beginning to feel good about it. I’ve made more friends,

mostly coworkers. I'm buying a few things for my apartment so I won't be afraid to invite guests. By the way, Dad, something strange: When I was about to enter work today, I saw somebody who looked all the world like Grandpa. He had that limp, a cane, everything. Started to call you and ask what the dickens, but knew it *had* to be a look-alike. Right? Almost makes me a believer in avatars of those long passed away. All I can say is "strange!" -- Love you, Marie

I read the email again and started to call June, but stopped. What could she do? Next, I thought of my therapist and then Tom, a friend and our County Crime Reporter. He'd told me about some pretty weird things and might help my perspective. Surely he was part of a larger reporter's network. I dialed Tom's number, surprised that he answered right away.

"Who's this? Oh, Roger. If you'd called a minute earlier I wouldn't have answered. Just leaving a night shooting, and had my phone powered off. What's happening?"

I told Tom about seeing my deceased father at the airport and that my daughter confirmed a sighting.

"Probably not connected, but something similar went down in Chicago a few years back. Don't get alarmed, Roger, but there was a cluster of kidnappings and what they all had in common was sightings of deceased family members."

"How're these things related?" I asked.

"Not sure, but imagine the victim is a kid. A grandfather's face and hearing a fairy tale about coming down from Heaven to show the kid something cool might assist the abduction. If the abductee is older, that wouldn't work, but there's another theory: Certain underworld types need a new appearance so facial recognition software can't identify them. Someone in a crime organization may

pick out faces from obits. The hood's features could be modified to look like the deceased with very little plastic surgery and minor cosmetics.”

“How would faces from obituaries help?”

“Imagine a security camera picks up a strong suspect. If he looks only slightly unfamiliar, analysts may suspect he was somewhat modified and continue to probe for what the original appearance was. However, if the face correlates strongly with a deceased person, they throw up their hands, call foul on the software, and cease the analysis.”

“But how could crime analysts have visual identity databases on deceased people who were never arrested?”

Tom took a breath. “That’s why we think these people are quite advanced. They’re anticipating that, because of homeland security phobias, we’ll eventually expand the database.”

“Were kidnappings all for ransom?”

“Some were, others not. Maybe kidnapped for body organs or human trafficking. The only local police detective who knows about this is John Zane. Very sordid stuff, but you and your daughter may have just seen a rare look-alike of your dad.”

I let the conversation drop, hearing all the disturbing scenarios I could take for now.

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Marie found Jill at the Blue Frog among a mixed group that seemed attracted by her skimpy dress, outlandish purple hair, and devil-may-care personality. “Hi girl, looks like you’ve settled in here.”

“Marie, honey, I want you to meet these guys. They’ve all got art on the brain. That means they know how to mix it up without getting jealous about who’s getting it on.”

It was obvious to Marie that Jill was sloshed. *Maybe I shouldn't have come.* Amid loud music, Marie endured awkward introductions, hardly understanding any of the slurred names. Except for one young man, who appeared sober.

He leaned toward her ear. "I'm Michael," he said. "That dress is very becoming on you. You have good taste, probably quite selective. Would you care to dance?"

With nothing beyond his polite, sensible tone to go by, Marie nodded consent. *At least, he's not totally disgusting to spend a few minutes with before I leave.* Lights were flashing, the base sound was gut-shaking, and euphoric melody soared as she began gyrating on the floor. Her motions were an amalgam of disco, rave and contemporary dance. Michael seemed entranced and minimized his action for better observation.

When the first number ended, he said, "Your moves are quite artistic. Are you a performer?"

"I'm a paralegal," she said.

"Incredible. I mean that in a good way. I'd like to chat where we can hear each other. Would you like some outside air for a few minutes?"

They went out front, where people still queued for admission. "So what do you do?" Marie asked.

"I'm an art dealer, in training. I have a degree in business but minored in art. I work in my uncle's gallery. He has connections with European galleries and museums all over. Soon he'll probably retire and dump responsibility on someone. My dad encouraged me to step into that position."

The subject of art struck a resonant chord with Marie. "Last week I saw a painting in an art book. Something by the landscape artist Lorraine. His use of light made the environment seem both spiritual and elemental."

"You have sensibilities few possess. And a paralegal, for Pete's sake."

“You think logic and art can’t mix?”

He slapped his forehead. “That reminds me. My uncle has a special media show at the gallery tonight on that very subject. My bad that I forgot. I wasn’t required to be there, but it’s supposed to be great. Would you come with me to see it?”

Marie hesitated. *Jill says I’m too conservative, and need to loosen up.* “Well, I should talk to Jill, first. We were supposed to party together.”

“You think she would care with the attention she’s getting? Okay, tell her and I’ll get a ride for us.”

When Marie returned outside, assured by Jill that Michael was okay, she expected to see a cab. But the back door of a black sedan opened and Michael waved.

He held the door. “Over here.”

Feeling something slightly amiss, she overruled herself as unnecessarily paranoid and got in. “You have a car and driver? That’s quite uptown.”

“Perks of the job. Customers want to feel they’re dealing with expertise and class. All part of the profession. Just relax and we’ll be there in no time.”

Marie was familiar with the art district and knew most galleries by name. But the car was heading in the opposite direction. *Maybe the driver’s avoiding traffic and will loop around.* Time passed and the driver did not turn. “Where are we headed, Michael? Where is your uncle’s gallery and what’s it called?”

“It’s in the art district, Zeno’s Omnibus. But this special showing required a different venue. It’s quite experimental. You’re one of the lucky ones to experience an early show.”

She had not heard of Zeno’s Omnibus and resisted saying she was wary of the environment they were driving into for fear of insulting him. Finally, they slowed and drove into an alley beside a large brick building, appearing to be an old

warehouse. Upon stopping, Michael came around and opened her door. She twisted and touched her feet on the ground but didn't get out.

"We're here," he said. He took her by the arm, tugging gently. "I know this looks weird, but in a few minutes all sorts of traffic will arrive with prominent people eager to enter. The show needed lots of space, and this is an excellent place to start so bugs can be worked out before going to a more refined establishment. We can't start off without trial runs."

He yanked her up hard and she stumbled against him as his other arm tightened around her. Too tight. The car drove away.

"Michael, what the hell are you doing? I don't want to go in there," she said.

He said nothing, but moved her toward a metal door, gripping her tightly.

"Quit," she yelled. "Let go."

"Shut up bitch, or I'll cut your liver out right here. Feel that sharp point in your side? He pushed it harder when she started to struggle.

In the dim light, Marie could make out a figure near the metal door.

"Push the door back, Cal," Michael ordered.

Closer up, she saw a man who looked like her grandpa slide the door into a side pocket.

"Come in behind me, Cal," Michael barked, "and get the lights on."

The man nodded and stepped aside as Michael forced Marie inside. Then he entered and flipped a light switch. "There's a chair and duct tape straight ahead. The table has the syringe and drugs you asked for."

Whump! Marie heard it, but didn't understand. Then she felt Michael pull away, collapsing on the concrete floor. She turned and faced the man who hit him.

"A heavy handle on a cane has good uses," the man said. "This scoundrel will have a supreme headache later."

"Grandpa—Percy Weeks?"

“Let’s not get technical about identity right now.”

“But I thought you were, like, I mean...”

“Suffice it to say they sometimes allow an embodiment to return briefly.

Here’s what’s important. Take this thumb drive and go out the metal door. Turn left and go two blocks to a bus stop. Take the bus and deliver the object I gave you to the police. Tell them it’s for Detective John Zane. Hurry.”

Marie took the drive and hastened to the door. Exiting, she looked back, and the man who Michael called Cal was gone.

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The next few days for me were a whirlwind of nail-chewing concern, unanswered phone calls, and emails. Marie finally called June and me, telling us what had happened and that she was okay. She agreed to come home on the weekend so we could sort it all out.

My last talk with Tom indicated he was keeping up on the developments. The delivered thumb drive contained crucial, mob, organizational data and contacts. Police were arresting members of what turned out to be a kidnapping network, even connecting cases of abductions thought to be unrelated.

That night, I went to my desk and called Tom. After connecting, I got to the point. “You’re confirming that imposters of the deceased family members were part of the network? Then why did one looking like my dad aid my daughter and furnish evidence that brought them down?”

“Can’t answer that,” Tom said.

“Did they capture him too?”

“His body was found in an alley near that warehouse. Coroner thinks he died of electric shock or heart attack. No autopsy yet.”

“This is getting stranger by the minute.”

“Here’s something even stranger, Roger. Coroner said his time of death was

earlier than your daughter's abduction."

I straightened in my desk chair. "Then who was the man that—"

The words Marie quoted as her grandpa's when she called popped into my mind: "...allow an embodiment to return briefly." I looked across the room at my dad's photograph. This time he seemed to have a subtle, secretive smile, and, for a moment, I could have sworn an aura surrounded him.

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