

Jack in the Box

by Dewi Faulkner

With the uncomfortable immediacy of a slap of icy water to the face, I am thrown back to my days in the neuropsychiatric ward.

“Would you sell your dog for five hundred dollars?”

“No, I love her too much.”

“One thousand?”

“No, can't say that I would.”

“Five thousand?”

This train of conversation continues, finally derailing at the one million dollar price tag, which, I gotta admit, was pretty hard to turn down. Upon doing so, I am told I have passed this gentleman's “test.”

I am standing outside the Jack in the Box on El Camino Real, it is pouring rain, and the man I am talking to is crazy.

I remember his name. I remember it perfectly. It was a memorable name. I won't speak it here, because I imagine him googling himself. I imagine him googling himself with the fake name I gave him and being led back to this story. I want no more connections with him than the several he already strenuously believes us to share.

I tell him my name is Louise.

We have bumped into each other twice. The first time was pure accident. The second time he was in his car, very close to my home, and, well, I'm not so sure. But I could simply be paranoid.

You see, I'm a bit crazy too.

In our first conversation this gentleman tells me, repeatedly, that he would never harm me. But his words somehow convey the opposite, like when someone says, “I'm starting my diet Monday,” or “This isn't a cult.”

Standing in the rain, my eggplant-colored slicker pulled tight around my face, I wonder why my dog is choosing this moment to be completely at ease and not at all suspicious of a stranger. She does stand protectively in front of me, providing a mostly symbolic barrier

between this gentleman and myself. But couldn't she work up a growl ... a snarl? He steps in closer, his knees nearly touching my dog's droplet-flecked coat. She simply yawns and pants. Nothing.

"Do you know what a psychonaut is?"

"I think so, yes."

"That's my profession. I'm exactly like an astronaut except I travel through my mind instead of space."

I was mistaken. I clearly was clueless as to the definition of "psychonaut."

When you are a bit crazy yourself, talking to seriously crazy people is a complicated thing. No matter the yawning chasm there may be that separates the severity of your own crazy and the crazy of the gentleman who has accosted you in front of the Jack in the Box on El Camino Real, you still don't feel right blowing him off. You still don't feel right just walking away while he is mid-sentence ... Telling him "I have to go, I'm leaving now" and not turning around as he shouts at the back of your head.

You're not him. You're nowhere near him. But you recognize his pain, his panic. That you share with him. In that small way, you and this gentleman are the same.

I wouldn't worry so much about the googling thing, but he did scrawl his email address for me on a withered greasy napkin. Mentions of the internet and internet searches are sprinkled liberally throughout his rambling emphatic monologue.

Crazy people have computers, too. They can also go to libraries.

The name of the university he claims to have founded actually exists online, so I won't speak it here. He has a PhD, of course. But all that stands for, he tells me conspiratorially, is "Piled High in Transcendentalism."

It is extremely important his son meet my dog. "I have been so unlucky in love," this gentleman explains.

Two days later I am once again walking my dog and this gentleman's car pulls up along side me and slows down. We exchange pleasantries, sort of, and I quicken my pace.

"This is fate," he says. "Have you ever seen *The Twilight Zone*?"

Do I imagine his speech slowing, his gaze narrowing as he says, “Be sure, this wasn't an accident”?

Probably.

Many people mistakenly use the term “rapid cycling” to describe the ranting frenetic speech of someone in the throes of a bipolar mania — think a Robin Williams stand-up routine (circa the cocaine years) or the intense, uncomfortable interaction described above.

In reality, rapid cycling simply refers to having more than four manic or depressive episodes in a single year.

