

The Man Who Pulled Himself Together

By David Henson

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We were blown away by this startlingly original story in which pulling oneself together is taken literally. The metaphor is played for all its physical and mental possibilities and we are completely drawn in to a convincing suspension of reality that is neither rationalized nor explained. The author tells us he reread Kafka's Metamorphosis while writing this story and while we see the influence—clear headed prose and 'familiar' voice that make the unreal all the more believable-- this one stands on its own. Brilliant imagery abounds.*

Quote: I feel as if a spider has been spinning its web in my brain.'

And

'I force down a palmful of calm and lie back till I feel as placid as a mud puddle.

(Font size is author's own. There's a few misspells, but ignore them. We did. In the interest of authenticity, we like it just as we see (or read) it.)

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I call my boss, whose texts I've been ignoring for days, and tell him I'm returning to work. He says not to bother. Serves me right. I've let everything go to hell since Arlene left. I vow to pull myself together. Tomorrow. I take a few diazepam and go to bed.

Next thing I know, it's morning, and I have a splitting headache. I try to turn away from the window but can't move. My left side tingles, and I can't feel my right. I take deep breaths to fight the panic starting to boil. After a few moments, I can rotate my left arm and leg. I expand and tighten my stomach a few times then sit up. Well, half of me does. My right half remains flat on its back.

I'm lying on my back, getting some feeling and movement in my right side, when my left half sits up. What a crazy dream.

I can't believe my eyes and try to pull away. But my arm and leg are floppy, and I tumble onto my supine half.

The monstrosity attacks me. I fight back, but can only flail and kick limply. How do I stop this nightmare? "Wake up. Wake up!"

I squirm to the far side of the bed. "Hey, you. This isn't a dream. Look at me!"

I need to stay calm and go with the flow. Lucid dreaming might be interesting. "What happened?"

"I ... you ... we split in half." I touch my fingers to my right side. It feels like a water balloon. I fumble for the diazepam on the bedstand but can't open the bottle with one hand.

My left side feels like gelatin. Go with the flow ... It's only a dream ... Going with the flow ... OK, better.

Choking on panic, I scoot closer to my other half, and hold out the pill bottle. "Quick. Can't breathe." It feels like pulsing blood is about to rupture my eardrum when he finally works off the cap. I force down a palmful of calm and lie back till I feel placid as a mud puddle. "Thanks, HalfMe. Or should I call you Walter Two?"

HalfMe? Walter Two? How boring. What's a dream without imagination? I suggest to him that we name ourselves after one of our favorite cartoon characters as a child.

His names are a bit whimsical for my tastes but bring back memories of smoother times — before cheating Arlene and a split body — so I agree.

I realize how hungry I am. "Onward to the kitchen, Huckle."

Berry excuses himself and drops off the bed. I feel as if a spider has been spinning its web in my brain. I need to be careful with those pills. "I admire your enthusiasm, Berry, but I need a nap."

Much as I want to sleep, I can't stop watching Berry wriggle around for what seems like forever and not even make it out of the room. I shake off the haze as best I can and tumble down to help him. We lie abreast on our backs, and I reach across my half-chest and grip his shoulder.

At Huckle's suggestion, we hold each other's shoulders and push across the floor with our feet.

We back-surf to the kitchen where we brace, lift, and hold each other to make cereal and toast, a feast compared to the potato chips and cookies I've been living on. We eat sitting on the floor, our shoulders propped together and half-backs against the cabinet.

Making breakfast isn't easy, but we manage. We even wash the dishes. I suggest that preparing meals and bathing become part of our daily routine.

The next morning I wake up with fire-crackering anxiety. As I reach for my diazepam, which I've spread out on the bedstand, Berry's hand grabs my wrist. He uncurls his index finger and wags it. Nice to know he's got my back. I still take a couple pills, but it's good to know he's got my back. Half of it anyway.

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Sometimes just a glimpse of Berry or myself in the mirror is enough to trigger an explosion of panic. But that's happening less frequently as I acclimate to my condition. It helps that Berry, still thinking it's all a dream, is so calm. He also keeps us busy. We've started doing laundry and housework, though vacuuming is beyond us. We're cooking so much, the other day we had groceries delivered. We lay end to end and bucket-brigaded them into the house.

Huckle seems to be weening himself off the pills. No choice. He can't exactly hop down to the pharmacy for a refill. And I wouldn't even if I could. Tough love.

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We've finished brushing our teeth when Berry tells me about a "dream within a dream," as he calls it, in which we're sailing in the kitchen. His dream inspires me to rig bedsheets as slings on two chairs so we can sit at the kitchen table and eat. As a bonus, a pair of doves with squabs is in the tree near the window. Watching them helps keep my anxiety at bay now that I'm out of pills. The doves are the first thing I've enjoyed since Arlene left me.

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"I've been thinking about something," I tell Berry one morning after we've cleaned up. "I have the left side of our brain, which controls the right side of the body." I lift my arm. "But that's not what happens." I recount that first morning when we woke up halved, and neither of us could move. "Our brains rewired themselves to control the side of our body they were attached, too. That's the only logical explanation."

"I think there's a simpler reason: Anything's possible in a dream."

“If it’s a dream, it must be a long one since we’ve been at this for days.”

“Dreams are like a black hole, Huckle. They distort time. Onward to the doves.

We back-surf to the kitchen. Watching one the squabs fledge, I have a flash from another of my dreams within a dream. In it, we can walk.

Berry can’t remember the details of a dream about us walking, only that “the first step starts with pants.” The image gives me an idea. We’ve both been wearing pajamas all day because ...why not? “We have to get dressed, Berry.”

“OK, onward to the bedroom.”

When we get to the bedroom, I pull down a pair of jeans from a hanger. I slide my foot through the right leg and have Berry put on the left. We sharewear a shirt then cinch one belt around our waist and another under our armpits. The clothing and belts holding us together, we roll over and climb to our feet, tottering before steadying ourselves.

“Well done, Huckle. But we’re not done. Onward to the dresser.” I slide my right foot forward then Huckle steps with his left. We walk to the chest-of-drawers.

Looking in the mirror on the dresser, I see how our half-heads loll to the sides. Berry opens the top drawer and unrolls a necktie. We manage to Windsor it around our neck then fashion a headband from an old bandanna. A ballcap completes our ensemble. Our half-heads reunited, I nod at our reflection. “Not bad, is it, Berry? ... Berry? ... Are you here? ...” After a few Berry-less moments, I have a hunch and loosen the headband. “Berry?”

“I had the strangest dream.”

I re-tighten the headband, and Berry re-disappears. This’ll never do. I loosen the bandana again, but before I can remove it, Berry grips my wrist.

“Ever onward, Huckle.”

I start wearing my headband day and night. Sweet dreams, Berry.

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I've been getting out of the house. I shop, walk in the park, chat with neighbors. With my ballcap, headband, necktie and clothes holding me together, no one takes a second look ... well, not a third.

Tomorrow I start at the library. It doesn't pay as much as my previous job, but it'll be enough to get by. They don't mind my eccentric attire, and I'm looking forward to being a book keeper instead of a bookkeeper.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Before writing *The Man Who Pulled Himself Together*, I had the idea to experiment with a story written in two parallel points of view. Around that time, I had a random thought about someone needing to pull themselves together and imagined what that would be like if taken literally. The idea of a person in two halves was a natural way to try out the dual POVs I had in mind. The main theme of the piece is to portray a person whose life has come apart and their struggle to put the pieces back together. I reread parts of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* while working on this story.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: David Henson and his wife have lived in Belgium and Hong Kong over the years and now reside in Peoria, Illinois. His work has been nominated for Best Small Fictions and Best of the Net and has appeared in numerous print and online journals including Fleas On The Dog, Pithead Chapel, Moonpark Review, Fictive Dream, and Literally Stories. His website is <http://writings217.wordpress.com>. His Twitter is @annalou8. His story **Loud Socks** appeared in Issue 6.