

Honorable Mention, Non-Fiction

Meeting Screamer

by Jasmine Kent

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All of a sudden I must throw my cell phone against the wall. I have just written my husband a nasty note. I am furious but I'm not sure why. It's been a good day. My chores got done. We just celebrated my daughters 24th birthday with a homemade three layer banana cake that leaned and had one candle. We had Chinese for supper then had a friend over in the evening. I felt strangely uncomfortable and out of place so I went to the study where my sudden fit of agitation and anger came out of the blue.

Soon I am so enraged I grab my keys and bolt through the front door to the car. I am in my pajamas. Screeching out of the neighborhood, I head onto a freeway, ignoring my husband's calls on the cell. I don't know how fast I am going, but I'm weaving and the other cars are zooming away behind me leaving me plenty of space. I don't know where I am or where I'm headed. I call Dr. Gary on his emergency line, but he doesn't connect with me instantly, as I demand. Miles later, scared, I call a friend who at least will pray. Finally I get off the freeway in a dark and dangerous looking part of town.

Just as I recognize a street, Dr. Gary finally calls and talks me into pulling into an empty parking lot. He spends 25 minutes trying to reason with me but I only want to hurt myself; kill myself if necessary. Wisely he figures out that "myself" isn't my real self. It is a newly discovered alternate persona, commonly called an alter ego personality. "She" wants me dead even if it means she goes with me. She plans to run the car into a wall.

Determined to stay in the parking lot as directed, but unable to resist the intense urge to hurt myself, I beat my fists against the window and almost break the glass. Finally, Dr. Gary suggests I call the police. They can decide whether to take me to the psyche ward or drive me home. I dial 911 and drive in circles for half an hour in that little lot trying not to go somewhere else. My friend calls back and asks if it is OK to call my husband. Fortunately he arrives just as the police do. Their bright lights blind my eyes as they demand my name and license and boggle me with questions. They discuss my case and agree to send me home with Greg. I ask him to buy me some wine and then take six tranquilizers with it and go to bed. Tired of my antics, Greg ignores me and pretends not to notice.

Three hours later I am wired again, so the next morning Greg takes me to see Dr. Gary, who after an hour of probing questions, announces "she" refuses to be helped and is hell bent

on killing “us”. My only option is to go to the severe trauma hospital directly from his office without packing anything.

Alter egos are created by trauma. My childhood was rough but seemed pretty normal to me. Only years of therapy could convince me it was not normal. I have many alter egos to handle various situations that occurred. In the hospital I am to learn of yet another aspect of the trauma that I had endured; my mother’s perpetual screaming.

My mother had a tendency to scream almost hysterically over every little mistake that occurred. A spilled glass, a letter mistakenly opened, an accident on the rug made by the cat. “Sick, Sick, Sick” She would yell and pace followed by “Darn” “Darn” ...“Darn.” Cussing was against her religion, but I am certain she would have been good at it if it wasn’t. Just recently my Dad was grilling salmon on the front porch and he poured off the juice. “Oh nooo!” she screamed. “I was planning to make salmon gravy! What am I going to do? Darn....Darn...”

Growing up, these severe overreactions sometimes took place several times a day. A few even involved declaring that someone was going to be condemned forever for something. They were always serious. Apparently as a small child I was unable to handle such tirades. Consequently my brain walled them off in a separate section of my mind. I experienced this as learning to ignore them but in fact, doctors say I was dissociating, creating another part of me. Years later I would startle or scream suddenly for no reason, especially at night; suddenly remembering some stupid thing I had done that day. Perhaps I forgot to change the dog’s water, or said something inappropriate to some person at church. I thought these reactions might be seizures and nick-named them my “Screamer”. Now she is out.

Hospitals are interesting places. I change beds four times in the first three days because they can’t decide where to put me. They lose my mandatory urine sample. I refuse to give another one. There are interesting patients and long boring hours. I smoke to calm my nerves though I am not a smoker. But at least it is a safe place. I can’t hurt myself.

Amazingly I get to see Dr. Gary or another therapist, plus a psychiatrist, every day. The psychiatrist finds yet another drug I can take in a crisis. Dr. Gary and I work hard.

To talk to Screamer instead of me, Dr. Gary calls her name softly in different tones. My job is to relax and fade away. I squirm at first with the awkwardness of the process, but soon it is easy to see myself, Jasmine, in third person and be Screamer instead. I now remember things that happened to Screamer rather than Jasmine. Clearly I AM Screamer just as much as I was usually Jasmine. Soon I can switch to either one.

Dr. Gary spends our first session in the hospital trying to establish a rapport with Screamer, who doesn’t trust anyone, and has never heard of love or care, only hysteria. She was separated or blocked out from nurture whenever the rest of me got it. He tries to orient

her to the here and now. We are all grown up. Mom isn't around anymore. He hints that Mom was wrong, but she isn't ready for that. She is, after all, created to be loyal to Mom. That mistakes are okay, is another new concept. When she is calm enough, he instructs me to write back and forth to her in my journal. The following conversation flows onto the paper. As I write, my two sides or alters each have their own handwriting.

"Scarecrow, why don't you come out?" Jasmine writes, trying to start a conversation by giving Screamer a different name that she thinks might be less embarrassing.

"You can't even say my name right," Screamer replies. "It's Screamer! Screamer."

"What do you do?" Jasmine asks.

"I scream when you do something bad or make a mistake."

"Why? Why not just leave it?" writes Jasmine.

"--Because Mom always screamed over every mistake. Her screaming didn't hurt me. It was an example to me."

"Wow. Why didn't it hurt?" asks Jasmine.

"I was created to take her yelling at an early age, so you wouldn't hurt."

"Okay. But I really don't hurt any more. I can handle it when something goes wrong now."

"But you shouldn't take it. You should scream. Mom would have."

"You know what makes me scream? --You keeping me in this damn hospital! That's what. I am so frightened of losing my teaching job because of you," responds Jasmine angrily.

"But if I don't scream, you will screw up again and then you WILL lose your teaching job."

"Can't you do something besides scream when we screw up?"

"What? And who is 'we'?" Screamer asks suddenly realizing Jasmine is referring to us as the same person.

"You are part of us." Jasmine replies.

"NO! I am not!"

"Yes you are! We have one body!"

“Okay. Okay. I know from Dr. Gary that if I hurt or kill you it will happen to me too, but I don’t care. I don’t care what happens to me. I am in torment anyway already.”

“I am sorry.”

“Sorry?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I’ll try not to hurt you but I don’t want you in that teaching job. It’s too precarious there! You are way up and could fall hard with embarrassment or worse. I will still try to stop you from teaching.”

“Please don’t try to stop me. I love my job,” pleads Jasmine.

“But you are going to screw up.”

“So what if I screw up. Everybody does.”

“There are a thousand ways you’ve hurt others or embarrassed yourself. Someone may even go to hell because you say the wrong things. I think it’s time you got hurt for those you’ve offended and hurt.”

“But God forgives me and so do I, so you don’t have to punish me, Screamer. You don’t have to stop me from making mistakes at my job. Maybe you just need to come out and stay out all the time...warning me but not hurting me. I will love you and care for you.”

“I don’t know what love and care means.”

“Just try it.”

At this point I begin to feel her becoming me. In my mind I can see her disturbed brown eyes fading into mine and my thoughts become a jumbled mix of hers and mine.

Dialogues are a useful healing tool. In this one dialogue, she has gone from defending her screams to recognizing that Mom’s example was inappropriate; from dealing in judgment and black and white religious thinking to wanting to know what love and care is like; from wanting to kill me to wanting to join me.

Janie, another therapist, on Dr. Gary’s day off; suggests that Screamer might be able to take on a new role, helping me recognize mistakes before they happen instead of screaming at me in bed later. Maybe she could even use her capacity to find mistakes by learning to proofread.

In our next session with Dr. Gary, he spends time helping Screamer to see that Mom's behavior was inappropriate and even harmful for a child. At one point he pretends to impersonate Jesus, only he gets hysterical like my Mom used to. That brings the point home. Screamer is determined to keep me in the hospital, but Dr. Gary surprises me by letting me out on Monday in spite of her so I don't miss class.

All evening in class, I am made aware of every little "mistake" I make. Did I just say too much to this person? Should I have not read my essay? Was it stupid? Was my writing bad? The next day I realized this is evidence that she is working in and through me, but we still need to smooth things out.

I have another session with Dr. Gary. He gets her out easily even though it feels as if she is already lost inside me. We have another long talk about the inappropriateness of Mom's screaming over little things and what problems that could cause. Screamer also goes over years of my mistakes, which she has kept track of, especially about how I raised my kids. I never wanted to act like Mom but didn't know how to be reassuring and nurturing, so I had neglected the kids a lot. It is a very healing session. I feel good afterward.

All of this happens in six days. I write it up because it is such a clear example of what Dissociative Identity Disorder (formerly called Multiple Personality Disorder) is about and how a good therapist and a determined patient can work to heal some alters.

Since this event, I have felt more confident about who I am and less afraid of making mistakes. I no longer wake up screaming in the night about things I did during the day. It took more than eight years for me to make contact with all or most of my "personalities." One at a time I met them, learned of the trauma that split them off, and gradually made them a part of me again; just like Screamer.

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Many people find Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), previously called Multiple Personalities; baffling. Having had many such alter egos, I am very confident in my understanding of the disorder. This true story written under the pseudonym of [name deleted] is a good example of how I met and resolved each one, usually one at a time. It was a process that took years. This example is based on pages of my journal during that time. The good news is DID is curable with a good knowledgeable therapist. I no longer experience this type of scenario. In some ways I miss the adventure of it, but it was agonizing at the time. Be assured, I never made it up!