

Stumble  
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## Stumble

In the wet, early October, when combines began to crawl the fields like prehistoric beasts, the universe stumbled, and while the Harvey Public Library took weeks to learn it suddenly owned two identical copies of Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, and Perry Nelson believed his larger-than-normal harvest a blessing from God, Hannah Dupont discovered the plurality of her husband fairly quickly when she awoke to both of them screeching at each other in the living room.

Stumbling from the bedroom with a deeply pregnant wobble, Mrs. Dupont rubbed her eyes as Sebastian, *her* Sebastian, messy and wrinkled from sleeping on the sofa, jabbed his finger and screamed incomprehensibly at yet another Sebastian, *her* Sebastian, prim and dressed from work, who shook his head and screamed similarly incomprehensibly. They both looked at her, eyes wide and feral, and she joined their screaming.

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The formal naming of the two Sebastians happened the following morning. One and Two seemed easy labels, but One always read as superior. The same consequence occurred for Alpha and Beta, Primary and Secondary. Eventually, they both quietly agreed to monochrome wardrobes, settling on Green and Blue.

Amelia Navarro, the evening desk manager at the Sleepyside Inn, was naturally not involved in these conversations, though she would have proposed simply naming them after their room numbers: 111 and 225. The twenty-six-year-old prided herself in her ability to scale down complexities, and it came as no surprise she quickly gained a handle on the two Sebastians.

When it became clear the pair were neither hoax nor crime, they were released from police custody and shuffled to the Sleepyside, because no one could quite determine if it was reasonable to send them home. Here, they maintained a suggested distance from each other, because no one could quite determine if it was safe for them to communicate.

No one could quite determine anything, except that the two thirty-one-year-olds were identical. *Straight down to their fingerprints!* reported The Evening Torch. Undoubtedly the same person, they carried a single divergence in memory. Blue Sebastian took the bus home from work, fought with his wife, and then conceded to sleeping on the couch. Green Sebastian left work, chose instead to walk home, detoured to Ollie's Place for a burger, and eventually returned

home to find himself already asleep on the sofa. Some time and some screaming later, their wife phoned the police.

Well, she couldn't technically be the wife to *both* of them, but she was clearly the wife of Sebastian Dupont. It was just now there were two Duponts, and no one really knew what to do about it.

At the Sleepyside, Amelia only encountered them in the singular, but they mirrored each other. Blue Sebastian came downstairs the first night to ask for additional pillows, all bright pink cheeks and repeated thanks, and left just as Green Sebastian phoned with the same request. On the second night, Green called to ask after a comb—"I'm so sorry, I didn't know what to do about personal items when I packed. I didn't want to be rude and take the only one."—and she ran one up to his room. Blue phoned an hour later—"I hate to bother you, but do you happen to have a spare comb? I didn't grab mine from home." Then, murmured, "I wasn't sure if it's mine."

When Green called on the third night to request additional toilet paper, Amelia grabbed four rolls, partly because she anticipated a second request and partly because she despised the door to the supply closet. Housed in the stall of the men's lobby bathroom, the closet handle stuck, and though she thought she'd learned its secret—knock twice just northwest of the handle and then quickly twist—sometimes it still managed to trick her. After delivering two rolls to 111, she hustled up to 225 where Blue smiled gratefully at her offer. "I was just about to call you."

Amelia did not worry about the time spent managing these echoing requests, because the two Duponts remained her only guests. Everyone else—reporters, gawkers, out-of-state lawyers attempting to parse how the law worked when one person suddenly became two—were forced to the Quality Inn, so she kept the lobby door locked and puzzled through Sudokus during shifts.

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Green Sebastian did not think of himself as Green Sebastian, because doing so implied an acceptance of this fragmented state. He didn't think of Blue Sebastian as Blue Sebastian either, he was just the Him who was not him but was in fact him. Green Sebastian found himself overwhelmed when trying to clarify pronouns, and often rested his cheek against the cold hotel window in the way he used to in the teenage months following his father's departure. The action brought a small comfort now, though only because the rain smeared the ever-present press in the parking lot.

He wanted Hannah. Four days ago at the police station, she cradled her stomach, worried at her bottom lip, and whispered at him to *come clean, please, please Sebastian this isn't funny*.

"I don't know what's happening," he told her then, and it remained true, only she'd gone to her mother's and suggested he give her a few days to decompress. Decompression sounded lovely but unachievable here.

He missed his wife. He missed feeling his unborn daughter kick against his palms. He missed wandering into the kitchen at midnight to fill a glass of water and stare into their backyard wondering what it would look like with a swing set.

Was Hannah still his wife? And what of their daughter? Did the kitchen, the glassware, the backyard still belong to him?

When dread like this crept into his life pre-Blue-Sebastian, he would lie down on the floor of their living room and stare up at the rotating ceiling fan, counting his breaths in rotations. If he remained on the floor when Hannah came home, she slowly brought the house to life again with noises: water running to fill the kettle, the steady thud of knife on wood as she chopped vegetables for supper. With tea brewed, she brought the tray to the living room, made herself a cup, and sat as witness until he drew enough of himself back into his body to get up and drink with her.

Green Sebastian needed to lie down on the floor now, but refused to do that in the hotel where some previous guest's beard trimmings littered the vanity drawers. He walked the length of the room, listening to the rain as he clenched and opened his palms. The clamp around his throat remained.

He paced once more, then opened the door to the hall.

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Rain pattered against the windows of the Sleepyside while Amelia sat cross-legged on the floor, dark hair tucked behind her ears, and sorted puzzle pieces into *middles* and *edges*.

Footsteps on the stairs. 225.

"Evening," she greeted with a smile as Blue Sebastian stepped into the lobby, somehow askew without a single hair out of place. He cradled a mug in his hands.

"I hope I'm not bothering you," he said, looking down at her.

Amelia's cheeks reddened as she rose quickly. "No, not at all!" She brushed off her pants. "I'm sorry, just passing the time."

A gust of wind rattled one of the panes.

“No, you don’t have to apologize,” Blue said, looking down into his mug. “I just wondered if maybe you had a microwave? I wanted tea, maybe, but I didn’t want to use the kettle in the room and—”

He cut off, looking behind her to the hallway that led to the 100s.

Last February, Amelia slipped on ice outside the Sleepyside while walking to her car, ice she noted before stepping onto it regardless. The preexisting evaluation did not lessen the shock that tensed through her body when she lost traction. Turning around and seeing both Sebastians caused the same constriction in her chest. She knew there were two, *of course* she knew there were two, but that knowledge was held in a much different place than the visual of the same man writ twice.

“Oh,” both Sebastians and Amelia said.

They didn’t belong here. Amelia’s brain knew that fact, but did not clarify if *here* meant this lobby or the Sleepyside or this existence. The universe felt both much smaller and much, much larger to Amelia as she watched both Sebastians stare at each other.

“Can we—” one of the Sebastians started, and then they both moved in a way that appeared as dance. Two men who were technically one man but simultaneously, inarguably two men locked themselves in the lobby bathroom before Amelia could wonder if this was permitted.

The rain roared into a downpour.

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The lobby bathroom of the Sleepyside felt clean in only a technicality. Yes it smelled faintly of bleach, no not a single water droplet marred the mirror, but this small space with wood paneled walls, off-white urinals, and a singular unsteady stall felt perpetually dirty to both Sebastians. The sound of rain still reached this interior room, and both men listened to it while the gravity of being alone together for the first time pulled them securely to the floor.

“I think it would be easier if,” Blue Sebastian started, meeting Green’s eyes in the wall length mirror.

“Yes,” Green Sebastian agreed, nodding at Blue’s reflection, and both iterations of Sebastian Dupont first washed their hands, then faced the mirror.

Perceiving his duplicate through a mirror still felt like staring at the sun, but this buffer served as sunglasses. The extended exposure was still likely to cause lasting damage, but the

effects weren't immediate. He could pretend instead he was looking at himself.

"Hi," said Blue Sebastian.

"Hi," replied Green Sebastian.

The yellowed lights hummed in quiet soundtrack.

"You would think this celebrity would get us better accommodations," Green Sebastian said, folding his arms over his chest to keep his now-clean hands protected.

"Would be nice," Blue Sebastian replied, sticking his hands into his jeans pockets.

They met eyes and neither admitted they were paying for two people on a single salaried bank account. Green thought about how every penny spent on Blue was a penny his daughter would never see. Blue thought about how every dollar spent on Green was a dollar away from Hannah. Then both men reversed thoughts and both men sighed and both men looked at their own reflection and then at the reflection that matched their own but wasn't.

"We don't—" Green Sebastian started, but they both finished the sentiment together.

"Work."

Blue made a soft sound and shuffled his feet. The first rumble of thunder breached the atmosphere and echoed in his chest.

"What did you say to her?" Green asked quietly, looking to Blue, to the floor, to Blue. He hadn't been there, of course. He returned home later, after wandering and eating and more wandering, but they were the same, and, in the moments after Blue arrived home to Hannah, their divergence was minimal. Green knew what he could have said.

Blue tucked his chin, looked at the sink faucet upon which a single bead of water formed slowly. It would drop soon.

"I wasn't going to say anything," Blue said, "but she'd started painting the nursery. I didn't know we'd decided on a color."

"We didn't," Green Sebastian murmured, having seen the half-painted nursery when returning home to pack a bag. At that time, it stirred a great sense of despair: loss of this choice that should have been made together, a fear he would be unable to make choices again.

"Right," Blue affirmed. "But Hannah decided to do this herself and I was so tired from work and it looked like she didn't even need me." Rain on the building almost drowned his words. "Like, what was I doing here because I don't know how to be a dad and maybe she's right to do all this without me because maybe I'll just mess it up. Maybe it's in my genes to

mess this up.”

Another roll of thunder.

“You’re not Dad,” Green Sebastian said.

Blue Sebastian looked at him.

“We’re not Dad.”

The water droplet pearling on the faucet dropped.

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Amelia stood in the monochrome lobby of the Sleepyside and stared at the bathroom door. She prided herself in her ability to scale down complexities, and while the issue here seemed to be the existence of two Sebastians, she realized upon seeing them the issue lay in their simultaneous existence, which sounded like the same thing, but fundamentally was not.

Thunder rumbled and she stepped over her forgotten puzzle to the door.

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They looked at each other in the mirror.

“I’m scared,” one Sebastian whispered.

“Me too,” replied the other.

A knock on the door.

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Twenty minutes later, the door to the lobby bathroom of the Sleepyside opened. Only a singular Sebastian stood inside, stripped down to plain black boxers, identical to a pair on the floor beside him.

Thirty-five minutes later, Sebastian stood beneath the awning of the Sleepyside, rain now sprinkling, and rewarded the night owl journalists with news that the mystery had concluded. He claimed when he and the other Sebastian hugged, they merged and became one. When asked which Sebastian he was, he said he held both their memories.

An hour later, Amelia and her boss explained the bathroom had no alternative exit, not unless a Sebastian shrunk to squeeze through the vent or drain.

Four hours later, uninterrupted video footage of two Sebastians entering the bathroom and one Sebastian leaving the bathroom aired on the local station, soon to be picked up by the national news. In the footage, Amelia stood outside the bathroom door, seeming to offer compassion, though no audio could be heard around the thunder.

One day later, Sebastian returned home, apologized to his wife, and spent the next ten hours in near-silence with her.

Three days later, they painted the nursery together.

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Amelia Navarro no longer had trouble with the supply closet in the men's lobby bathroom. It opened easily for her, though it appeared no one else on staff quite had her luck.

Sebastian visited Amelia at the Sleepyside often. He always used the bathroom before he left, and emerged stretching, rolling his shoulders, thanking Amelia.

Amelia once overheard a pair of teenage boys whispering and jostling each other about a ghost they'd heard while using the lobby toilet. A shuffling sound, a bit of wood creaking, a sound like breathing from the closet. She assured them old buildings were prone to pests.

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The Harvey Public Library eventually attributed their duplicated copy of *House of Leaves* as a catalog error. A new barcode permitted both copies to enter circulation without issue.

Some things are much less complicated than humans.