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THE PROBLEM OF FURNITURE

Everyone in the room has mixed feelings. Jane and Marcie on the couch, David and Pablo at the door. The situation is a perfect introduction to the Problem of Furniture.

Some background first.

It's not entirely true that we are all multiple personalities. Oh, why beat around the bush with nuance? Actually, that is exactly the case. All of us house at least two and sometimes more than two people in our heads. We suppose it's possible there are people who only have one, rare cases, tragic cases, cases not covered in this report but only mentioned here to avoid confusion. Sometimes people do become aware of their neighbors, and this is thought to be a sad mental illness, but most people remain utterly unaware of their mental roommates. The sad cases can be tricky. If a person is suffering from a mental disorder, not all of the other people in the head are suffering from it, too. Generally speaking, a "person" in a given head is aware of only about 10 percent of what the brain is doing. Other people can be using some of the other parts, and there can be sharing. Being aware of a part of the brain does not mean being aware that someone else is also aware of that part.

Most often the people in a given head are very similar to one another, brothers and sisters, really. If you could meet the siblings in your head, you would probably not think they were much alike, because you would be noticing all the differences, but someone in an entirely different head would right away see how alike you all were. No two of us were raised by the same parents, however. Or at least, that is very rare. There is always room for strange occurrences like the unfortunate situation where a parent simply can't see the child or vice versa.

This similarity of personalities greatly simplifies the problem of stuff. It doesn't eliminate it altogether. If that were true, there would be no so-called "Problem of Furniture" and this report would be about something else.

The Problem of Furniture is simply this. One of you, Jane, for example, might love that oxblood leather couch, and Marcie might be thinking she wouldn't be caught dead

with such an ugly thing in her living room — it looks like a crouching masked wrestler or a bulldog, and it's made out of cows! So, the one who likes the couch buys it (with her totally separate checking account in a store that Marcie would never set foot in) and puts it right over there beneath the big windows, and Marcie forever after carefully steps around it and never notices it. She who loves it, dusts it and sweeps under it and lounges upon it, and even once got herself fed grapes while gazing into nearly violet eyes and will forever remember the image while the other one will be strangely puzzled and uneasy about why she never gets right up next to the big windows anymore even on the coldest days when she would like to put her nose against the glass and remember her childhood.

This explains why so many people have too much stuff.

But we should clear up the question, we know you're wondering, some of you will have guessed, of who "we" who are writing this report are. We are, of course, space aliens. (But to be fair and comprehensive, we are also you, since brain blending means things are not always so cut and dry.)

We are always looking out of the eyes and watching everything you do. Sometimes we interfere just because we can. Some of you think we are gods. Many of you think we are only one god, which is a laugh since we are so many. Those of you who become aware of us often give us names with no vowels, and you hear our names as the sound of breaking glass (David and Pablo) or the deep inside sound a cat makes when it's about to go from profoundly sad to irrationally happy (Marcie and Jane).

And how can it be that you are reading this report? Somehow one of you has invaded our invisible orbiting base, learned our language, stolen these pages, translated our words into one of your human languages, and now you are reading them! Maybe you wore a rubber suit with the extra limbs and things. It couldn't have been easy keeping the skin so moist and glistening. I bet you wore something provocative so we would only give you sidelong glances and only notice certain parts and not even see the other more difficult areas moving like monkeys, all elbows and knees, in a rubber sack.

What a blunder on our part! Isn't that just like us? This is the way the cat always gets out of the bag.

"That's ridiculous," Jane says.

Or maybe it was Marcie.

No, probably Jane, since she's sitting on the couch, and she looks so hard and hurt, you break my heart, but you can go to hell.

We could have told you the "We Are Really All Aliens" routine would not work in

this situation. If you are going to get out the door in one piece, you are simply going to have to make a break for it.

David is vaguely aware that the other guy in his head really does love the other woman in Jane's head. It's like she said the other day, someone in you is looking right past someone in me. Now he knows what she meant, sort of, but it's probably too late.

Come on, man, Pablo pleads with David, you can't do this to me!

Meanwhile Marcie is thinking hey! Hey! Where did this awful couch come from? And why am I lounging on it? And where is Pablo going looking so conflicted?

Sit up!

"Pablo?" Marcie holds out her hands. Come to me, please, come to me.

Pablo walks us across the room to the couch and sits us down beside her.

We are suddenly so shy with one another.

But all twenty of our fingers know what to do, and soon we are naked on the cool smooth leather and later we wonder if that was the storm and had it passed now? Was everything okay?

She's kneeling now on the couch. Come on, she says, and he gets up beside her.

Let's put our noses against the cold glass.

We do that.

Isn't this nice?

Her voice is so strange and pinched.

It really is nice, we say, echoing. Oh, look, your old pink bicycle.

Let's forever freeze just like this.

Whatever you do, dear Alien Overlords, don't beam us up now.