

Soul Searching

Michael Weinberg

“Anyway, it’s basically like becoming the animal for a while,” Christian said, lying in bed and staring up at the dark ceiling in his dorm. This was his second semester away from home and his family. George, his roommate, best friend and somewhat of an adviser, was also in bed, not five feet away.

“Yeah, but what does it *feel* like?” George pressed. “You’ve never actually told me. I mean, I just don’t get it!”

Christian checked his phone on the nightstand. It was 2:41 a.m., and George had been interrogating him about soul-jumping for the past hour since they got in bed. He could feel his vision start to melt into the darkness of the room.

Within a yawn, Christian said, “It’s like VR, I guess. Like, super good, high-definition VR. But you feel everything. You almost forget you’ve jumped into the body of another animal.” He checked his phone one more time, then succumbed to his exhaustion. “Okay, dude, I’m going to sleep. I tell you more about it tomorrow if you want.” He rolled over in his sheets and didn’t wait for George to say good night before losing consciousness.

The next day, Christian’s schedule was fraught with classes, starting in the early morning and ending in the late afternoon. His reporting class was grueling. As a freshman studying journalism, he not only had to suffer through lectures given by snails and sloths, but he also had to write. A lot. It wasn’t so much the writing portion of the major that

Christian hated; it was the research. He would much rather have the ability to write freely than to confine the content of his sentences to information that already existed. That was why he was planning on soul-jumping.

On Mondays, between his American history class and upcoming reporting class, Christian met up with George on campus. They both had about an hour to have lunch, and being that neither of them were very extroverted, they ate together in familiarity. But today, Christian's hunger took a backseat. He sat down at a picnic table in a courtyard on campus and left his sandwich in his backpack. When George sat down with a smile and a grilled chicken salad he bought, Christian's words tumbled forth.

"I think I'm going to soul-jump again."

George raised his eyebrows in fake surprise as he chewed his chicken and mixed his salad. Christian could feel the lecture coming on, but he interjected before he swallowed.

"It's not because of reporting." The night before, Christian lamented to George about how tedious traveling and interviewing sources was going to be for his class. As an unconventional solution, Christian thought about soul-jumping into a literal fly on the wall of his sources. "Well, it is, sort of. But I've been really wanting to before that class anyway, and there are a lot of interesting animals around campus. I saw an armadillo the other day, dude! Imagine me as an armadillo, like rolling up and—"

"Do you think that's a good idea? That seems kinda icky, like cheating. How the hell would you even remember all the quotes you need to gather as a fly anyway, or any animal? And what if someone found out? And, jeez, what if you get killed? Flies aren't exactly immortal."

Christian sat still at the table with his hands clasped between his knees, mulling over the annoyingly reasonable arguments George had just made. Naturally, his mind started manufacturing counterarguments. He wouldn't get in people's way—he would just fly high and land on the wall. He could be a bird—he would attract attention in buildings, but at least nobody would murder him. And he had a pretty good memory!

"No, you're right. It's stupid," Christian decided.

"You're damn right it is." George said with his mouth full. "And I most certainly am not going to watch over your soulless body while you go play Nancy Drew Starring in the Fly or whatever you want to call it. Definitely not after last time."

"Last time" was when Christian and George were ten years old playing in an empty park. Christian soul-jumped for the first time in front of George into a squirrel and left the rigid husk of his human body lying face up in the grass. Christian's eyes and mouth stayed wide open while George started screaming and crying. In the squirrel's body, Christian tried to get close to George to signal it was okay, but his best friend in a rodent's body only made him scream louder.

"That was eight years ago, I think you can handle it now."

"That may be, but I'd rather *not* have to handle it." George organized his trash, got up to throw it out and slung his backpack over his shoulder. "I'm going to the library to study for my exam next week. Do you want to come before your reporting class?"

Christian looked at an ant crawling on the edge of the table.

"Nah, it's on the other side of campus. I'll see you back at the dorm. Good luck with your highly premature studying."

George chuckled and headed toward the library.

After one week, Christian's reporting class had transformed. He sat in the same seat as every other day, but about a third of the original students had dropped the class and were replaced by new victims. Even after a full semester at college, Christian still couldn't get used to new faces coming in and out of his classes during the first week. But today, there was one bright face he could get used to.

Her name was Alma. She walked into the classroom gingerly, almost like she felt cold, and took an empty seat toward the back of the room, behind me. Christian tried with difficulty not to stare at her ebullient curls and luscious brown eyes. He considered moving seats so he could look at her in a less obvious and creepy way. He turned his neck as casually as he could, and his eyes flitted into Alma's for one breathtakingly terrifying moment. Both of them quickly looked away uncomfortably, but Christian had the desire to look back. Heartrate rising, Christian's head snapped back to the front of the room when he heard his professor greet the class.

As he tuned out the professor playing a singular note on his vocal cords, Christian revisited Alma's face in his mind. He suddenly imagined kissing her and holding hands. He imagined smiling deeply into her smile, pressing his forehead against hers. An intrusive thought even had him soul-jumping into a dog to cuddle up next to her. All this, and he had just met her twenty minutes before. Actually, they hadn't really met at all. With the butterflies in his stomach begging to be let out now, Christian decided he would go up to her after class.

For two hours, Christian handwrote notes through a cramp in his hand and a spell in his heart. Infatuation like he'd never felt before seeped into the cracks of his brain like

syrup and made the lecture feel like an eternity. When the period finally ended, he carefully packed his notebook, laptop and pens to match the speed of Alma, so as not to miss her or stand around waiting for her. The butterflies felt like bats up against his ribcage.

When she got up from her seat, Christian mirrored her, letting her exit into the world before he made his move. He walked up next to her.

"Hey, you're new to Reporting, right?" Christian started smoothly. The bats in his stomach nearly came out of his mouth. "I didn't see you last week."

"Oh, hi. Yeah, new to the university, actually. I transferred here this semester." Her voice sounded comforting and mature. His nerves were on fire. He wanted to soul-jump into an eagle and soar into the sky.

"Oh! Well, welcome! Yeah, it's just my second semester here, so I'm still figuring everything out myself. Maybe we can figure it out together! I'm Christian, by the way."

"Alma." She smiled without teeth and looked around her, like she was searching for something. "Sorry, I have to go. I have class soon. It was nice meeting you, Christian!"

"You too, Alma!" And he watched her fade away into a crowd of people moving in opposite directions as they rushed to get to class, eat food or catch a bus home. No more bats in Christian's stomach.

Sitting at his desk in his dorm that evening, Christian kept replaying his conversation with Alma in his head. *It was nice meeting you, Christian!* His name sounded both exciting and foreign when she said it, as if she didn't say it in a personal sense. But the rich sound of his name in her voice echoed in his mind anyway. He began to think about soul-jumping some more.

When George came back from showering, Christian started organizing his thoughts. George was almost always right when it came to making risky decisions, so Christian made sure to approach his friend in a way that would receive as little backlash as possible.

Starting with seeing Alma for the first time, Christian made sure to highlight how incredible she was. He talked about the bats in his stomach, how he never felt like that before. He detailed their interaction, harping on how her voice meant she'd be the perfect girlfriend, maybe even a soulmate. He didn't stop there. The thoughts about soul-jumping tagged along, spilling out his mouth like an unwanted Cracker Jack prize.

"You what?" George said with a little scoff. He was drying his black hair with a towel, but he sat down on the edge of his bed for this part of the conversation. "I'm sorry, you want to soul-jump so you can spend time with her? Without her knowing? Do you realize how gross that sounds?" His face was contorted in judgment.

"It was just a passing thought, dude, relax." They were quiet for a moment. "I'm just saying, that's how attractive she was. I felt like my whole relationship with her already took shape."

George's face relaxed. "All of that is well and good, just don't soul-jump into a dog and... and cuddle with her." He laughed and went to his desk. Christian forced a chuckle and turned to his own desk.

That night, after reading an excessive amount of his American history textbook, Christian got ready for bed early, around 10:00 p.m. His mind felt like a popcorn bag in a microwave, his thoughts the kernels, but he needed to get some rest. George was at his

desk, his headphones blocking him from the rest of the world. So, Christian lay under his covers, thinking about Alma, reporting and soul-jumping.

Two hours passed. These two hours went by much quicker than his reporting lecture. Sitting up in bed, a thin layer of sweat kept Christian uncomfortable beneath his pajamas and sheets. He blinked until his eyes adjusted to the dark and saw that George was asleep. Without letting his inner voice speak up, he escaped from his damp sheets and put on his shoes without socks. He left their dorm, closing the door soundlessly. He would soul-jump, tonight, the first time in a couple of years.

Outside of the building, he looked around for any nocturnal animals lurking about. He saw moths crowding the lamps and a cockroach excitedly scurrying toward a storm drain. When he walked out toward the street, he saw something black move behind a parked car. Christian paused for a moment. When he saw a black cat emerge on the other side of the car, he headed back to his dorm, took off his shoes, lay in bed and covered his face with his sheets. The image of the cat formed fully in his mind, and suddenly, he was 8 inches tall, looking at a forest of enormous cars. He looked down and saw two tiny black paws, scrunched at the wrist, resting on the asphalt. Christian knew that he couldn't stay in an animal's body for too long—if he did, the conflict between two souls in one body would kill the animal after he returned to his body.

Christian felt revitalized and lithe. He took off down the road, past his dorm building. He ignored students walking by who jolted at the sight of a racing black cat. The wind circulating through the cat's fur was delicious, and Christian wished he had soul-jumped earlier. The cat's claws and teeth felt like weapons in a holster, like he could go anywhere and do anything. He scampered atop parked cars, enjoying the silent cushion of

his padded feet. An hour passed exploring campus as a feline. He knew he should probably return to his body, but he stopped for a moment near the journalism building, where he had introduced himself to Alma outside of class. A surge of desire rippled through the cat's body. He wished he knew where Alma lived.

As he positioned his body to jump onto a bus stop bench, he was inexplicably pulled back to his human body. He gasped for air and thrashed under his sheets. Everything was blurry for a few seconds, until he focused on an angry George looming over him.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he fumed. “You soul-jumped?”

“Yes, I did, but it’s not what you think. I don’t even know where Alma lives. And how the hell did I come back to—”

“I woke up to use the bathroom and noticed you looked too stiff, so I shook you until you woke up.” George’s face softened, but he folded his arms across the Nirvana t-shirt that he slept in. “You freaked me out when I took the sheet off and saw your eyes open. You better not have been at this girl’s place.”

Countless questions tackled the already countless thoughts in his head. He didn’t think it was possible to return to his body from an external force.

“I swear, I only jumped into a cat. I’m sorry I freaked you out. I just wanted to do it again.” He looked up at George’s face, which seemed more understanding, and ventured to tell him about it. “It was really cool, dude. I wish you could try it. It feels like being reborn, but with all your memories and knowledge intact.”

When he went to reporting class the next day, this time in a morning period, Christian’s heart beat faster as soon as the thought of Alma surfaced. He watched the door as every student made their way into the classroom, each just a disappointing

version of Alma. Finally, he glimpsed her curly hair through the window in the door, along with someone else's brown hair. His heart burst and deflated.

As she opened the door, Christian saw her smile with beautiful teeth for the first time, only it wasn't a smile for him as he imagined. She kissed the tall, muscular guy with long brown hair and skull tattoos and headed into class. Christian's eyes sank to his desk, where he fiddled with his pen. Alma walked by him, a waft of her fruity hairspray invading his nostrils. He wanted to cry, but they were writing mock interview questions today, and tears didn't do well on paper.

Curtis. That was the name of Alma's boyfriend. She had transferred to their university to be with him after a year at her community college. Christian learned all this from the conversation Alma had with a new friend of hers that she met in reporting, also behind his desk. Curtis. The name sounded like a knife cutting through skin and bone. He had never wanted to leave reporting class more.

The professor dismissed the class, and Christian packed up his belongings without even looking in Alma's direction. He rushed out of the classroom before anyone else and headed for his dorm. George would still be in class for the next few hours. He didn't want his advice this time anyway.

Almost at his dorm area, Christian noticed a black lump underneath a sedan in the parking lot of an on-campus convenience store, shrouded in the car's shadow. He stopped on the sidewalk and unsurely walked up to the lump, fearing for what it could be. As the motionless whiskers and ears came into focus, Christian's heart stopped. He had stayed inside the cat's body for too long.

Students started pouring in from every corner of campus, ready to move on with their day between periods. Christian averted his eyes from the lifeless cat, trying not to think about its innocence and how he had commandeered its body. He made his way to his dorm, locked the door and sobbed into his pillow.

He thought about all the times he would cry growing up. He would lock his bedroom door at home, dwell on what felt like the world caving in and then soul-jump into the last animal he saw. He would inhabit birds and fly all over his neighborhood, shedding unnatural bird tears and flying to forget his sadness.

Peeling his wet face from his pillow, Christian tried to soul-jump into animals he remembered as a child, but each time he was met with nothing. They had probably all died with such short lives over many years. He tried all the squirrels, all the blue jays, all the turtles. But they were all dark dead ends when he closed his eyes. He remembered each one, an experience that would last a lifetime to the average person.

Alma and her big eyes dropped into his mind suddenly like the backdrop in a theater. His heart was being drawn and quartered by grief and desire. He had tried so hard growing up to make sure every creature survived his visit into their body. Now, blinded by lust, he mourned his past judgement, his first college host and a shot at love. His tears turned into burning drops of acid rain. He didn't care about love. He cared about being with Alma, no matter what that meant.

Imagining her soft hands and bright smile, Christian stood up from his bed and started to pace around the room feverishly. He pulled on his fingers and squeezed his palms open and shut, going over the plan he was developing in his head, one that George would never approve of.

“This is insane,” he muttered to himself as he left the dorm unlocked. George’s voice rebounded in his head: *You better not have been at this girl’s place...* but so did Alma’s: *It was nice meeting you, Christian.*

Putting his phone, wallet and keys on the desk, he took a deep breath. He lay on his bed, the butterflies in his stomach more like pterodactyls clawing at his innards. His last soul-jump. He closed his eyes, and visualized Curtis.

Half expecting it not to work, Christian’s soul awoke in a new human body. He was in an apartment, sitting on a sofa. Nobody else seemed to be home. He flexed Curtis’s hands and arms. This was unlike any soul-jumping he had ever done. It felt eerily natural, like a stronger, more massive version of himself. He searched for a bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. His contorted his face—Curtis’s face—trying to get himself used to another person’s features moving on his command. Christian laughed, and a deeper, heartier laugh came out.

“I’ve never spoken while soul-jumping before,” he said aloud, and a deep voice vibrated his torso. There was a digital clock on the oven in the kitchen just outside the bathroom. He checked the time: just after noon. If he wanted to spend time with Alma before it was too late for Curtis, he had to hurry.

Just then, a phone on the kitchen counter buzzed. A text from “Almita,” with a pink heart emoji. Christian rolled his eyes but opened the text using Curtis’s fingerprint.

It read, *“by the fountain on campus near the biology building.”* Christian scrolled up and saw that this was where Curtis was to meet Alma after he second class. He quickly figured out that he was just across the street from campus, not too far from his dorm. He

texted back Alma that he would be there in about half an hour, making sure to give himself enough time.

In Curtis's body, Christian could run twice as fast, even in jeans. He raced across the street to the campus, weaving through students with enormous backpacks and iced coffees. He heard someone call out, "Hey, Curtis!" as he whisked past a throng of people near the student union, but he didn't stop. Strong legs finally coming to halt outside the dorm building, Christian navigated to his dorm room, opened the unlocked door, and shoved his phone, wallet and keys into Curtis's jeans. When he looked to his left, he nearly had a heart attack when he saw himself on the bed.

He looked like a wax figure frozen in a state of fear, with a gaping mouth and eyes so wide his eyelids seemed to have disappeared. He tucked himself in, making sure to cover his face so that George wouldn't see him if he came back early. Then he ducked out to meet Alma by the fountain.

Checking his phone, Christian saw that it was 12:33 p.m. He needed to have at least some time with Alma. He didn't even want to think about what would happen if he spent a minute too long in Curtis's body.

There she was, as beautiful as she was in Christian's mind, her skin glistening against the reflection of the fountain's water. Her face lit up when she saw him. Finally, a smile just for him. She greeted him with a, "hey, cutie," and kissed him. Christian's mind exploded with joy.

"You are so gorgeous, you know that?" he said to Alma. He grabbed her hands in his.

Alma smiled in a funny way and laughed. "Well, that was random and sweet."

"I mean it! I can't stop looking at you. Your eyes, your nose, your lips."

The smile faltered on Alma's face. "Curtis, are you alright? Did something happen at the gym?"

Christian's mind spluttered. He had forgotten that Curtis would know things that he did not and that he did not know how Curtis spoke.

"No, I just, I'm really glad to be your boyfriend, Almita." He tensed up after he said her name, hoping she didn't investigate further. She did not, and Christian relaxed.

"Okay," she said, with a cute chuckle. "I'm hungry. I know you said you only want to eat chicken, but maybe we could try out that burger place on Ninth Street we saw? They probably have chicken sandwiches."

"I'm good with anything, my love," and she blushed when he said it. They walked hand in hand toward Ninth Street, and Christian felt like anything was possible.

They sat in the quick-serve restaurant, eating burgers, laughing and holding hands. Christian strayed away from personal topics, and instead asked her how her first semester at the university was going. He did not check his phone.

He had drunk three full glasses of water since they got there, and he had to use the bathroom. As he walked toward the men's room, his vision went black for a moment, and he was suddenly in his dorm room again. George was above him again, peering into his eyes with concern.

"Holy shit," was all Christian could say. He reached for his phone, but it was in Curtis's jeans. "Oh my God. What time is it?"

"Dude, what the hell just happened?" George's voice was desperate. "What did you soul-jump into this time? Can you answer me?"

“I, uh...” Christian’s hands trembled as he tried to get out of bed. He felt sickly after being in a body that was stronger than his own. The body he was born with quaked with fear. Numerous tiny dots threatened to block his vision. He made his way over to his desk and looked to his laptop. The time was 2:57 p.m. He had stayed in the cat’s body for an hour, Curtis’s for nearly three.

“No, no, no, no, no,” he murmured under his breath. “He’s gone, I didn’t mean to stay...”

George started yelling out to Christian, but his vision and hearing faded away slowly. He could hardly feel George’s hands on his arms, struggling to keep him from falling.

When he awoke a few moments later at the foot of his bed, George was coming into the dorm with water. He was asking questions, but Christian couldn’t decipher them. His mind was both racing and defunct. The water slid down his throat like air; he couldn’t even feel it. George sat across from him on his own bed, interrogating him once more, worry and disgust plastered all over his face. Why hadn’t he listened to him? All those years, hopping from soul to soul, but there would never be enough souls to erase what he did.