Double Trouble

Will Dart

Editor's note: Names, besides Will's, have been changed.

We're the same person. Five foot ten and 145 pounds, with darkish hair, blue eyes, a straight nose, full lips, high cheek bones and a weak, asymmetrical jaw, the sides of which are marked by weird scars from random accidents, occasional acne, and a few pretty serious ass-kickings.

I first heard about my double a few years ago from a girl in the neighboring dorm, who'd said she'd seen me at a party the night before. I told her that this was impossible; that I'd spent that night—as I spent every Saturday—in my room, alternately reading Green Arrow #15 and listening to Bon Iver's first album while staring soulfully into the flame of a scented candle. But her roommate corroborated the story: they'd been at Psi U last night. And so had I.

It's possible that I'd developed multiple personality disorder. That I had a twin brother who also scored well on his ACTs. That I'd been cloned by a secret government subcommittee in the early '90s. That both of these women were insane. It was also possible that there was a kid at this school who—when viewed under the influence of strobe lights and alcohol—looked like me. There are only a certain number of phenotypes in the world; maybe this was inevitable. But, as an avid consumer of Lovecraft, pulp fiction, and late '70s speculative horror, I came to another, more logical conclusion: that I'd finally encountered my double. And his motivations were...sinister.
I should say that the double—as a concept—has long been of great interest to me, beginning in about the second grade, when my buddy’s grandpa told us a weird and probably bullshit story about running into himself while lost in the woods near Devil’s Elbow.

“He tried to bum a smoke off of me,” he’d said. “But I turned tail and ran for the hills!” And the nonchalant way that he told us this tale prevented me from sleeping for a long time afterward.

Granted, this was a man who’d introduced himself by grabbing me by the shoulders and shouting, “HAVE YOU EVER SEEN ERASERHEAD?!” (I had not). But meetings like this are still a well-documented phenomenon, even among persons with no history of heavy drug use. Percy Shelley famously saw himself on his terrace before drowning in the Bay of Spezia. The eighteenth century German statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe apparently came upon what appeared to be an older version of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe while travelling through a dark wood—only to pass by that same spot eight years later and wearing the same clothes as the double. Even Honest Abe Lincoln claimed to have had a run-in with a spectral twin shortly before his death. Clearly there’s something going on here.

There’s different names for these ghoulies in different mythologies; the German doppelgänger is the most famous, but there’s also the Irish fetch and the Norwegian vordoger. Sometimes the double likes to walk in front of you, going in and out of rooms, completing tasks, and meeting people right before you get to them, thereby sowing confusion and chaos in your household (such is the case for the aptly named Finnish etiäinen, or “forthcomer”). Usually these creatures are ill omens,
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forecasting the impending death of those they imitate. Often they cast no shadow. It’s unwise to speak to them, or lend them cigarettes, and their advice should never be taken, lest they lead you into peril.

Where do they come from? That’s tricky. The Ancients thought they were demons-fiends in disguise, I guess. Some scientists think that they’re electrical glitches in the brain, or some alternate version of you that slipped through a rift in our dimension. A lady at an herbal medicine store once told me that the doppelgänger is the product of your own energy, reflected back at you in permanent replay. Creepy, mildly annoying, but harmless. Like looking in a mirror.

Anyway I thought that these were old-world phantoms, the kind of spooks you only ran into on moonless nights in the weird woods of Bavaria and Northern Michigan. Only mine followed me here. Or, rather, I followed him. From what I heard, Other Will was a second-year. He was taking STAT 200 and was doing okay on the quizzes. I was told that he was in a fraternity, which made sense, given that he was mostly spotted at parties. Another person said that he was on the football team, which was unlikely given that we have the physique of a Lusty Cabin Boy in a musical revue.

He was evidently popular and charismatic, running in numerous and diverse circles on campus, a fact which I was able to triangulate after noticing the kinds of people—big dudes in bro tanks, cute girls in yoga pants, bomber-jacketed hipsters—who had started to smile and wink at me, before noticing that I was the Real Will, and not the Imposter they’d befriended.

Complete strangers had started to imagine that they knew me from somewhere; that they’d seen me DJ at Delta Upsilon, or taken shots with me at an apartment. I’d be standing in line for a flu shot at Student Health when the dude in front of me would turn around, look at me very closely, and then smile with recognition.

“New Jersey!” he said, pointing at me.

“Sorry?” I’d already sensed his mistake.
“You’re from New Jersey, right?” he asked, with less confidence. “We played beer pong last night!”

“I don’t think so,” I said. He yielded there, though from the way he continued to smile and look back over his shoulder every so often, I could tell that he didn’t quite believe it. Me and him had played beer pong, and that was that.

This was an exceptional interaction. More often than not, I’d end up playing along with the charade, finding it easier to impersonate my lookalike than to convince his buddies that they’d confused me with someone else. It’s probably unsettling to find out that someone you think you know can be so easily replaced by a geeky first-year with a passing resemblance to him. So, imagining that it was for their benefit, and not because my identity was being slowly subsumed by that of a fraternity brother I’d never met, I’d nod and smile, faking my way through vital biographical details which I knew nothing about, confirming that, yes, I still lived in Regents, no, I was no longer seeing that blonde girl, and yes, I’d love to smoke with you this weekend, hit me up. This kind of thing happened multiple times, and I got used to playing the role.


Ryan, the Double. Ryan, the Walking Shadow. Ryan, Specter of my Ego, following me around campus like a curse. I’m not saying that I devoted myself to tracking him down and destroying him before he had the chance to infiltrate my life, insinuate himself among my family, and befriend my dog before finally killing me in a dramatic rooftop confrontation, ready to commence his life as the Real Will. None of that happened. But I did think about him a lot.

I was worried that he was somehow the better copy—Will 2.0 or something—living the consummate college lifestyle: bedding hot women, hobnobbing among cool...

"Massive babies springing up with fungus-like rapidity."
dudes, and snorting very good cocaine for breakfast, while I listened to my neighbors fuck through the thin plaster of a dorm room wall. I was worried that Ryan was the man I should have been. I was not worried that he would replace me. Because I’d long since realized who the real Imposter was in this thriller. I was the one assuming his name, after all; I was the one pretending to be Ryan while chatting with a stranger on the bus; I was the one fantasizing about living his fantastic life. I was Ryan’s Evil Twin.

Or was I?

Sometimes I’d run into people who’d had less than genial experiences with Ryan. Numerous individuals seemed to hate this guy’s guts—I could tell by the way they’d give me a wide berth on the quad or throw me the stink eye when I walked into a classroom. I’d heard stories about certain slackerish tendencies in my double, a kind of bro-ishness, leaning towards misogyny and douchebaggery, and a general disregard for the feelings of others. I sat beside a girl in a remedial math class who, whenever possible, would look at me as
though I’d killed her father in a duel. This went on for two months before the mix-up was clarified; Ryan—that rascal—had jilted a close friend of hers. I’d had no part in this. Clearly, I was a good person. But why did I still feel like I had to apologize?

That’s the other thing about finding your double: you’re looking for the wrinkle—some feature or flaw that delineates you from Bizarro-You, something that makes him the Good Twin or the Evil Twin, the Original or the Copy. That’s the fetch or the vordoger again: evil imitations, not the real thing. But deep down, you also fear that you and he might be exactly alike. I think about the lady in the herbal medicine shop, how some of my energy—my deepest fears and insecurities, my faults and failures—might’ve taken on a life of its own somehow, floating off into the universe and bouncing off Neptune and coming back in the form of a frat boy to haunt me forever.

When people mistook me for Ryan, were they confusing my eyes, my nose, my mouth or hair for his? Or is there something else about me that struck them as familiar? Hearing stories about Ryan, I started to worry that I might be similarly vapid, duplicitous, cowardly, and cruel. And I started to worry that these people could see it.

I met the Real Ryan in my second year. We had Spanish 101 together. And it sounds weird—but I didn’t see it. In fact, I didn’t even realize that Ryan was my Ryan until I checked his biography against the one I’d recently been in the habit of impersonating. We had similar features, true; the same tired eyes, the same nasally voice, a certain shared countenance of disinterest. From some angles, we might’ve been first cousins. But identical? No. Not physically, anyway.

As the quarter progressed I did not find Ryan to be the Ultimate Evil, or even the Darkness Lurking at the Edges of my Mind. I did find him to be generally annoying, and kind of a dick. He was already quite proficient in Spanish, and was taking the class for an easy A. He sat in the back of class and chatted incessantly, and was often openly insubordinate to our very nice professor. The narcissist in me
wanted to like him. But I did not want to be Ryan.

It’s been suggested to me that maybe I should call Ryan now and ask him what he thinks of this whole saga. Was he ever mistaken for me? Did he pretend to be Will? And does he stay up nights, wondering if Will Dart is the better Ryan, and if he’s a coked-up loser who should’ve socialized less and spent more nights alone in his room? Is he, in fact, human, or is he actually something sinister that crept through an interdimensional portal in the basement of Psi U?

I now try to live under the assumption that the doppelganger—or the double or the fetch or the vorbinger or whatever—is not real. I assume that Ryan is Ryan, that I am Will Dart, and that a passing resemblance was all it took for the two of us to get a little confused for a year or so. There is no evil entity that wears my face and follows me around and waits for the opportunity. I mostly sleep okay.