

## **DOPPELGANGERS**

By Michael Ventura

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Doppelganger is a German word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*; it means “an apparition or double of a living person.” The literal German is more interesting: “double-goer.”

I never thought much about doppelgangers until they started showing up.

**Exhibit A:** On the walls of my apartment are hundreds of photos that have accrued for years until my entire dwelling has become one large collage. Most of these photos are of people I’ve known. Others illustrate my writing projects -- present, past, and intended -- faces evocative of characters in my books. There are photos of places I’ve lived. On seven doors and one stretch of wall are pastiches from newspapers and magazines. Plus many photos of all sorts of dancers. There’s a world map in my short, narrow hallway and a U.S. map in the spare bedroom; artwork by people I know; a framed facsimile of the Declaration of Independence; and a framed sheet of original *Austin Sun* stationary. My psyche, on display upon my walls.

On one of Spider’s visits, a sepia photo caught his eye: “Where’d you get that picture of Heather?” (Heather is not her real name.)

Heather herself visited another time – walked in, noticed that photo first thing, and said, “What am I doing on that wall?”

The photo is from a *National Geographic* of September 1923, decades before Heather’s birth. It was taken on the Mediterranean island of Corsica. The woman is identified only as “Constance.” Constance was not an uncommon name a century ago in Britain and America. Heather’s people have been here since before the Civil War, but it’s conceivable that genetic links connect Heather to Constance. Even so, such a distant duplication of faces is, to say the least, rare. Still, their similarity may be explained in a poem by Thomas Hardy: “I am the family face. / Flesh perishes; I live on.”

**Exhibit B:** On one of my walls is a photo of Ninotchka (not her real name). Beneath it is a photo from *Century*, a photographic record of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The caption reads: “Anton Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters* is produced in 1903 by the Moscow Art Theatre.” The face of the actress on stage is half the size of a dime, but it’s Ninotchka’s face. (She hotly denies this. “It’s too small to tell.” But when Butch visited, I asked him to judge – he has the best eye I know. He and Ninotchka have never met. Butch said firmly, “Same person.” Same face, anyway.)

Ninotchka was born 80 years after the photo in *Century*. Her parents’ origins are Mediterranean. They gave their kids Russian names for no conscious reason but that they liked Russian names.

Again we may postulate a chance genetic link, but even so: For ricochet genes to cast nearly identical forms on faces so many years and miles apart speaks of possibilities that are, at the very least, unexpected.

But, after all, these are only photographs. We know nothing of how Heather’s and Ninotchka’s doppelgangers moved; maybe in life their resemblances would not be as striking.

Here’s where it gets spooky.

**Exhibit C:** Some time ago in a West Los Angeles nightclub, I saw Maryanne (not her real name). But it wasn't Maryanne. This woman was a decade younger at least, and her facial resemblance to Maryanne looked familial but not identical. Yet her gestures, her expressions, the lines and colors of what she wore, her air of authority, and her powerful, I-dare-you-to-dare-me beauty – she was a Maryanne.

Feeling something like a spy, I nursed a drink and kept track of that woman by watching the mirror behind the bar. There's no one like Maryanne, believe me. And yet, here was a version of her. Not a double. Not quite. A version.

In this case, the literal German makes sense: doppelgänger as double-goer.

How on Earth had that happened?

**Exhibit D:** Dave and I met when we were 10. We've known each other well and consistently through every stage of life since. No one else has so thorough a knowledge of me.

On July 9, 2009, he called and spoke in a voice unusual for Dave, breathless and shocked.

"Where are you?"

"My apartment in Lubbock. Where are you?"

"Emoryville, California. I just saw you. It was *you*. I can't believe it."

**Exhibit E:** In early May, 1981, I saw a me in a Burger King on a two-lane between Austin and Houston. I wrote the scene as it happened for the penultimate passage of my first novel, *Night Time Losing Time*.

"I didn't realize, at first, why he startled me. But I couldn't take my eyes off him. He caused this strange hollowness inside, like there was an enormous space in my chest. Then it hit: He looked just like me. More like me than [a son] ever would. I mean: exactly. Like a twin, but younger. That's why I hadn't realized, consciously, at first, though my chest had known – I hadn't seen him in the mirror since I was a kid. He was about sixteen. Even give or take two years, he would have been born sometime during that period when Nadine and I were inseparable, so I knew he wasn't mine. ... I sat there, forgetting to breathe, trying sort of to stare at him out of the corner of my eye and figure all the possibilities, and there weren't any. The spooky thing was, he didn't only *look* precisely like me, he wore the same cut of shirt and wore it like I wear mine, open down the front, a T-shirt underneath. And the way he used his hands – how he put his fingers to his lips or his forehead. I didn't even know I did that stuff till I watched him do it and realized I was looking in a mirror. His hands, his walk, the way he slouched in the booth – he was me. All that was different was that his eyebrows were thicker.

"I was strangely frightened; I wished Katherine were with me, not only so I wouldn't think I was imagining this, but because with her I could have gone up to him, learned his name, told him if he wanted to know what he'd look like in thirty years, he just had to look at me.

"I was sure he knew I was staring at him, but he was cool about it. If I went up to him alone, God knows what he'd think. Better this way, just to watch, not spoil it."

Then the novel reverses what happened. In the novel, the kid goes into the parking lot and turns around suddenly and looks intently at me. Actually, I walked into the parking lot, felt eyes on me, turned, and he was in his booth staring at me. "His look wavered, seemed confused, his eyes questioned. He turned uncertainly... out of my line of vision. I

wondered if he would remember me. ... Maybe, just maybe, in thirty years he'd look in a mirror and all of a sudden *really* remember.”

Often I've wanted to write something thoughtful about these double-goers but haven't known how because I don't know what to think. So, finally, I've simply presented the experiences. Raw data. Anecdotal, for sure, but true: double-goers, people of different generations and different geographies, who have the similarities of twins in their styles as well as their looks.

In *Night Time Losing Time*, my alter ego drives on through a rain shower, thinking of his double.

“Seeing him had seemed a kind of proof. Of something more intricate, immense, and unnamable than I would ever understand. ... As I drove on, I felt a great tenderness. For that boy. For my own son. For the very rain.”

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