

SEEING DOUBLES



Throughout my college days, friends occasionally chastised me for being aloof. Why hadn't I waved back at them across the student union on Monday, returned their greeting in the library parking lot Wednesday, or managed even a nod of recognition when they shouted to me at the local pub the weekend before?

My only defense was that I had not visited the student union on Monday, or been near the library on Wednesday, and had not, in fact, darkened the door of any bar in weeks. They had obviously spotted a look-alike. In four years on campus, I never met my double, although the university was small. I naturally wondered if my elusive twin, like the *doppelgänger* of German folklore, was a spirit gifted at escaping my detection.

After graduating and moving to another city, I experienced yet another case of mistaken identity. As I leaned into the dairy case at my neighborhood grocery to fetch a gallon of milk, I felt a teasing slap on my rump. A beautiful woman behind me batted her eyelashes and asked how I had been since our student days

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at a nearby school. Her face went crimson when I told her that I hadn't attended her alma mater, and she quickly excused herself and retreated in embarrassment. I was not the old boyfriend she had thought I was.

Several years later, after I had moved to a new neighborhood, a customer approached me in the bread aisle and thanked me for getting her through surgery. We eventually determined that I resembled her gastroenterologist. Other mix-ups involving the good doctor ensued. Someone came up to me at a filling station to ask about polyps. Another earnest soul tapped my shoulder in a grocery line and told me that she had, as I had ordered, stocked up on bran.

I discovered the physician's name, so I was naturally excited when I learned through a mutual acquaintance that my carbon copy and I would soon be attending the same party.

Meeting the other me wasn't like looking in a mirror. We shared a slight resemblance and had a few physical gestures in common – the way we held our heads, for example, as we talked.

What I gathered from the experience is that people can be much more interchangeable in the eyes of others than we often assume. If each person, like each snowflake, is somehow distinct, then it's also true that snowflakes are more alike than different. Perhaps the idea of profound personal uniqueness, an underlying assumption of our modern view of identity, is overstated.

I didn't have to be an exact replica of a local medical specialist to be mistaken for him. In comparing various bits of evidence, I concluded that the doctor couldn't have been the person mistaken for me in my college days, nor could either of them be the same man who had inspired that long-ago comedy of errors at the dairy case.

I'm not just a nominal twin, as it turns out, but a quadruplet.

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