

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The term *doppelgänger* is widely, although not universally known.

So, to those of you who know the term, I apologise for what is an unnecessary explanation. Please feel free to skip this page and go straight to the story.

To those who do not know what *doppelgänger* means, let me explain.

Doppelgänger is a German word, consisting of two parts: *Doppel*, which means double and *Gänger*, which means walker or goer. The word refers to a look-alike or a double of a living person.

It is said that we all have a *doppelgänger*. Somewhere out there, there is a perfect duplicate of all of us. Well, I have never met my *doppelgänger*, nor has anyone I know. From time to time newspapers and magazines print photos of someone who closely resembles a well-known person, a sporting star, a politician or a movie star. It is done in jest and from what I've seen, the resemblance is illusory.

An internet search, however, does reveal dozens of photographs of so-called doppelgangers and I have to admit, in those photos the pairs do have an uncanny likeness, although none is a 'perfect duplicate'.

So, that's doppelganger. Now start reading.



PART ONE

What are the odds?

Chapter 1

‘Thank you for agreeing to come with me, Dr and Mrs Rosen.’

‘It’s Arnold and Ruth, Anton. No need to be so formal. But you do have us intrigued. What is so important that you’ve taken us away from our family?’

‘You will see in just a moment, Dr Rosen. I do apologise for intruding on your evening but I’m sure you will soon agree that it was appropriate.’

Arnold did not reply.

‘And allow me again to wish you a most happy birthday, Dr Rosen. I hope that the Symphony dining room met your expectations. It is a special birthday, I understand.’

‘Yes, Anton, the meal was magnificent. It actually exceeded our expectations. And yes, it is a special birthday, if you call turning seventy special. I call it old,’ he added.

‘Arnold, enough of that, I don’t think that Anton is interested in your self-pity.’

Anton appeared not to have heard that last remark.

‘And your family, were they happy with the meal too? I know that your daughter-in-law can be a bit fussy at times.’

‘You mean Helen,’ Arnold replied. ‘She is a lawyer. Very sharp and yes, Anton, she can be very particular. But she loved the lobster, so did our sons Paul and Michael.’

‘And the girls?’

‘They were fine too. It was very kind of you to bring them the chicken dish. I apologise for their reaction to the lobster. I don’t think they’ve ever seen a whole lobster close-up before. But in the end, they enjoyed their meals too.’

‘And the birthday cake?’ Anton asked.

This time it was Ruth who replied. ‘It was magnificent. Perfect. It must have used up nearly your whole supply of birthday candles.’

Anton did not respond. He smiled slightly.

‘It was a wonderful evening for all of us,’ Arnold said. ‘It has been a wonderful cruise. Are we almost there?’

The Symphony dining room was huge. After all, there were almost four thousand guests aboard the *Royal Princess*, who had to be fed. The Rosens had a window table on the port side of the dining room and Anton, who was the head waiter of the Symphony dining room, was leading them to a table on the other side of the dining room, also a window table, on the

starboard side.

It was a round table. Arnold counted eight people sitting around it, six adults and two teenagers. A large cake, virtually identical to his cake, was in front of one of the men. There were numerous candles on the cake, too many to count. All had smoke billowing from them, as if they had just been blown out. As Arnold and Ruth came closer, Arnold looked up from the cake at the man sitting behind it and stopped in his tracks. At that moment, he heard Ruth gasp, followed by the words, 'Oh my God.'

Arnold was looking at the face of a man who could have been his brother, his twin brother, his identical twin brother. The two men stared at each other in silence. The woman next to the man put her hand to her mouth and stared at Arnold too, a look of complete disbelief on her face.

Arnold Rosen was six foot two inches tall. He wasn't handsome, but his facial features were quite well put together. His hair, which was once a dark brown colour, was now a mixture of grey and white. He still had a full head of hair, well, almost. He kept it cut short, not too short and not particularly fashionable. He had dark brown eyes which were small but piercing. His lips were full and when he smiled, they revealed perfectly straight, white teeth, courtesy of a cosmetic dentist who he had gone to school with and who charged him mate's rates.

It's just like looking in a mirror, Arnold thought. The only difference in the man's appearance was the hair. The colour was the same mixture of grey and white but worn longer and slicked back, revealing a slight receding at the temples. No one had spoken yet.

Anton then cleared his throat. 'Arnold Rosen, may I introduce you to Gus Smith. I thought it would be interesting for the two of you to meet.'

The man known as Gus Smith stood up and with an accent which was obviously American but also tinged with something else, said, 'Pleased to meet you, Mr Rosen.'

'Pleased to meet you too, Mr Smith,' Arnold replied. 'I assume you are seeing what I'm seeing, Mr Smith.'

'I sure am, Mr Rosen. I sure am.'

'I will leave you gentlemen to it,' Anton interjected. He turned and walked off.

It is said that we all have a double somewhere on earth, someone who looks just like us. The term used is *doppelgänger*, a German word that means, 'an apparition or a double of a living person'. Arnold had always believed this to be a myth but now, right in front of him, was his doppelganger. What were the odds? Both of them on the same cruise ship at the same time.

Then he heard Ruth. She was speaking in a whisper. 'Arnold, there are seventy candles on that cake. I just counted them.'

The odds were getting longer and longer.

‘Mr Smith, do you mind if ...’

‘Gus, call me Gus. You’re Arnold, is that right?’

‘Yes, that’s right. Gus, would it be okay if my wife calls my family over? Just for a minute. This is so uncanny. I’m sure they wouldn’t believe it if I told them.’

‘Sure,’ Gus replied. ‘Look at my lot here. They can see you and they still can’t believe it. I’m not sure if I believe it myself.’

‘My name is Ruth. I am pleased to meet you but to be honest I’m a bit freaked out.’

‘This is Helena,’ Gus said, pointing to the woman on his left who was still staring at Arnold.

‘Hi, pleased to meet you.’ When Helena spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper.

‘Back in a sec,’ Ruth said and headed off in the direction they came from. She was back two minutes later with the family in tow. They clearly had no idea what to expect. Ruth had asked them to follow her but said nothing else.

‘Holy shit,’ Michael cried out. ‘Sorry, sorry for my language,’ he added. ‘I can’t believe this. Don’t tell me you have a twin brother that you’ve never told us about, Dad.’

Arnold laughed. ‘No, I don’t, Michael. Meet Gus, Gus Smith and next to him is his wife Helena. Believe me, son, I’m just as stunned as you are, as we all are.’

All at once, the eight people at the table stood up. Gus introduced them. There was his son Peter and his wife Gertie and daughter Lisa, another son, Raymond, his wife Mary and son Rolf. Arnold then introduced his family, his son Michael and his wife Helen and their daughters, Karen and Rachel and finally his son, Paul. There were a lot of ‘hello’s, ‘pleased to meet you’, and remarks like, ‘can you believe it’, ‘is this weird or what’ and several ‘cools’ from the younger members of both families.

‘I’ve heard about this phenomenon,’ Helen then said. ‘Doppelganger, that’s what it’s called, isn’t it. We are all supposed to have one somewhere, or so the story goes. There is someone somewhere who looks like us, or near enough. But this is something more. You two are absolutely identical.’

‘I agree with you, Helen,’ Gus said. ‘When I look at Arnold, it’s like looking in the mirror, but I don’t have a twin brother. I don’t have any siblings. I’m an only child. And in any case, I’m from the United States, Milwaukee. That’s in Wisconsin, if you didn’t know. And I guess from your accents that you’re Australian.’

‘From Melbourne,’ Arnold said.

‘So,’ Gus continued, ‘We might look identical, but we’re definitely not related. I bet if you look up the internet there will be other examples of such strong similarities. There have to be.’

‘I agree,’ Arnold said. ‘And I also don’t have a twin

brother. I have a sister and she looks nothing like me.'

The scene was drawing the attention of the other diners, as the sight of fifteen people milling around, chatting, is bound to do. A few waiters were looking in their direction, and not with looks of approval.

'I think we are making a bit of a scene,' Ruth said. 'Can I suggest that you two men, you doppelgangers, have a chat, somewhere quiet. That is if you want to. I'm tired, I'm going back to our cabin and I'm sure the others will have no trouble finding something to do.'

'Good idea,' Arnold said. 'How about it, Gus, you want to have a drink and a chat?'

'Sure, why not,' was Gus's reply, although he sounded less than enthusiastic.

After another five or six minutes of everyone milling around and half a dozen or so muted conversations, the group went their separate ways, leaving Arnold and Gus on their own. An awkward silence followed, which was broken by Arnold.

'Shall we go down to deck five. We can have a drink in the Piazza bar.'

'Fine,' Gus replied.

After a few minutes the elevator arrived and two minutes after that, they were seated at a corner table, a waiter hovering over them, ready to take their order.

'What's your poison?' Arnold asked.

'Bourbon, straight,' Gus replied.

'I am a Scotch man,' Arnold said. 'Single malt

preferably.’

‘Jim Beam, rocks,’ Gus said, looking up at the waiter.

‘A Talisker for me, neat. This one’s on me,’ Arnold said. He pulled the cabin card out of his pocket and handed it to the waiter.

Another silence, again broken by Arnold.

‘So, Gus, what do you do? Are you retired or still working?’

‘Still working,’ Gus replied. Then, after a hesitation. ‘I’m a doctor. A cardiologist. I work at the Aurora St Luke Medical Centre in Milwaukee. It’s quite well known,’ he added. ‘We are one of the top centres in robotic assisted heart surgery. That’s not what I do. I leave that to the younger guys.’

Arnold just stared at him and kept staring. Finally, Gus asked, ‘Is everything okay? Is there a problem?’

‘Not exactly a problem,’ Arnold finally said. ‘This goes well beyond coincidence. I am a cardiologist too. I worked in a hospital for years, I’m now in private practice.’

It was Gus’s turn to stare. He then laughed. ‘This is like an episode of reality TV. I’m expecting a guy with a camera to appear at any moment.’

Arnold laughed too. ‘Pity the others have gone. They would not believe this. Not for a minute.’

There was another awkward pause and then Gus asked, ‘Rosen, is that a Jewish name?’

Arnold was taken aback by the question.

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘I’m Jewish. Is that a problem for you?’

Gus hesitated. ‘No, not really. It’s just that, well, I haven’t mixed much with Jews before. Which is strange, considering I’m a doctor and the profession is full of them. But maybe not where I come from, Milwaukee.’

‘Well, now you’ve met one, Gus,’ Arnold said, his tone distinctly cool. He then added, ‘As you can see, I haven’t got horns growing out of my head and I’m not about to eat your children. I’m a normal person, at least I’d like to think I am.’

‘Take it easy. I didn’t mean to offend you. I’m a bit embarrassed saying this, especially as we’ve just met and what I said wasn’t meant to be personal, but I was brought up with a lot of negative views about Jewish people.’

‘What does that even mean?’ Arnold asked. He could feel himself becoming agitated and it showed.

‘How much do you know about Milwaukee?’

‘Not much. I’ve heard about it and I think it’s got something to do with beer. That’s all I know.’

‘You’re right about the beer, but that’s not what I’m getting at. Forty per cent of Milwaukee’s population have German ancestry. I am among that forty per cent. You have to understand my background. Gus Smith was born Gustav Schmidt. My parents were German. My father fought for Germany in World War Two. I

was brought up with stories about Germany after the First World War, a war Germany lost because of the Jews, or so my father used to tell me. The Jews were to blame for everything that was wrong in Germany. I was young then, impressionable, and I worshipped my father. It was decades later, long after he was gone, that I finally realised how distorted his version of the truth was. But I guess, deep down, some of what he told me stuck. Please accept my apology. I know I have a tendency to shoot my mouth off. Please forget about it.'

'It's a bit difficult to do that. We have just met and sure, we do have an uncanny resemblance to each other, but we're total strangers. You've just told me some pretty personal stuff. A bit odd, don't you think? Not to mention, offensive.'

Gus did not reply.

'Okay, Gus, if you want to get personal, then let's get personal.'

Arnold realised he was speaking a little too loudly but he didn't care. He was annoyed by Gus. Arnold usually avoided confrontation but Gus had it coming.

'I have a confession to make too. I was brought up to hate the Germans for what they did to us Jews during the war. How does hearing that make you feel? It was drummed into me from a very early age. My parents were Polish. They were Holocaust survivors, so I could understand how they felt. I suppose I could understand why they wanted me to feel that way too.'

And as a result, I have no love for Germans, none at all, although I have to admit I don't really know any.'

Gus didn't say anything for a moment. He was looking at Arnold. He appeared to be weighing up whether to say something else. Finally he did.

'I was born in Germany, Arnold. I guess that makes me German.'

'Can I ask where?'

'You wouldn't have heard of the place. It's a small town near Stuttgart, called Waiblingen.'

Arnold was holding a glass of whiskey in his right hand, about to take a sip. His hand started trembling. He put the glass down. He looked at Gus and, in a voice that was barely audible, he said, 'So was I, Gus. Waiblingen, that's where I was born.'