

# My Drifter Doppelganger

by Con Chapman

It was Thursday night, but looming ahead was Saturday and another polite suburban party at which, after a couple of pops and convivial conversation with the husbands, I'd say something that embarrasses my wife in front of her girlfriends. Or so she claims.

"Like the time Lisa wore those shoes with the fruit on them and you asked her if somebody dropped an *hors d'oeuvre* on her foot," she said, giving me a for-instance.

"You can't be serious," I objected, channeling the youthful John McEnroe. "She got upset over an innocent little crack like that?"



"Oh, come on!"

"She wouldn't speak to me for weeks. She had two sets of Christmas cards made up, one with an expensive family photo on the front, one with just 'Best Wishes for the Holidays.' We got the cheap one."

Okay, so maybe I get a little too--"flip" sometimes. "What am I supposed to do with all the pent-up frivolity I accumulate over a stressful week of work?" I asked her.

"I don't know. Sometimes I wish you had a doppelganger."



"Isn't that . . ." I began.

"A ghostly double of a living person," she continued matter-of-factly. "Lots of famous people have had them. Lincoln, John Donne, Shelley, Goethe."

"But I thought doppelgangers were an omen of death," I said, reciting the party line among non-bilocating beings like myself.

"Which is worse?" she asked rhetorically. "You getting snookered and I die of mortification, or you have a doppelganger and drown in the Bay of Spezia with Shelley?"



*Percy Bysshe Shelley clambake*

I had to think about that for a minute. "I suppose if my doppelganger could just be like Bizarro Superman, who used his super-powers for evil rather than good, that might work."



"Or like that stupid Hank Williams CD you bought last weekend," she added helpfully.

"The one with the bitter, cynical 'Luke the Drifter' recitations on it?"

"Right. Get a doppelganger who will utter the sarcastic remarks that go running through your mind with their muddy boots on, so I won't be blamed for my poor choice of mate," she said, then turned on Grey's Anatomy.



*"We need a doppelganger transplant, STAT!"*

It was a ninety-minute double episode, so I had to get to her before she entered full body-heaving sob mode. "Where in the hell am I going to find a non-fatal doppelganger in forty-eight hours?"

"Call the rental place down in Newton Lower Falls--they have everything."



"Hmm--you're probably right."

"I'm *always* right. Now go away so I don't have to listen to you rolling your eyelids during my show."

I started to correct her, but somebody was already dying on TV, so I went into the den to look up the number. I called it and a guy at the other end picked up.

"Tyler Rental, Mike speaking."

"Hi, uh, do you have any doppelgangers available for this weekend?"

"Black or white?"



*Josh White*

"Uh, what's the difference?"

"We got a black Josh White model. His good side is 'The Singing Christian,' his bad side sings the blues and lyrics like 'If you can't send me a woman, send me a sissy man.'"

I wasn't quite ready for the 'down-low' lifestyle, so I said "What do you have in white?"

"We've got a drifter doppelganger," he says. "It's a Chinese knock-off of the popular Hank Williams style--'Bob the Drifter.'"

"Why 'The Drifter'?"



"He comes into your town, looks around, makes some piercing comments that cut through the thin veneer of civility with which our baser animals natures are shellacked, then moves on. You get to enjoy the spectacle, while taking none of the blame!"

"That's what I want," I said. "Can I reserve it?"

"I'll need a major credit card number."

"You got it," I said, and I had my wallet out of my pocket before you could say "Percy Bysshe Shelley." If you could say it, that is. A lot of people don't know how to pronounce the middle name.



### *Happy-go-lucky Hank*

Saturday afternoon found me pulling into the parking lot, eager to meet my new wingman. "Are you Mike?" I asked the guy behind the counter.

"In living color," he said.

"I'm the guy who called about the doppelganger."

"Okay, let me check in the back."



He disappeared into the storage room and emerged with a remarkably life-like male figure, average height like me, receding hairline, horn-rimmed bifocals--the works.

"This is Bob," he said. "Two hundred dollars for two nights."

"But I only need him for one."

"That's the minimum."

"What's the matter--ashamed to have me stick around for a Sunday barbecue?" the doppelganger asked. Apparently it's a self-starting model.

"No, it's just that I'm getting you for a party. I don't need somebody to deflect attention from me when I'm home."



"That's not what your wife says," he replied, somewhat too sharply for my tastes.

"All right--two nights it is," I said to Mike.

"I hope you're not cooking fish on the grill Sunday," the doppelganger said, then headed out to my car.

I signed the paperwork and we drove home where my wife was in the front yard, killing the annual flowers she bought the week before by overwatering.

"Honey, I'd like you to meet Bob," I said.



"Nice to meet you," he said in a voice that recalled the smarmy tone of Eddie Haskell complimenting June Cleaver on her fetching outfit. "Your husband couldn't stop talking about you on the way over."

"He has a remarkable capacity for invention," she said defensively. "I can assure you I did not eat our young, they're in college."

"Ha ha ha," Bob laughed politely in a well-modulated tone. He had his patter down pat.

"I have to go get ready," she said to me. "Can you wear something besides that god-awful Brooks Brothers pullover sweater-shirt with the cat hair all over it?"

We were off to a flying start.

\* \* \*

As we made our way up the walkway to the Wiltons, Will and Stephanie, I couldn't help but feel a sense of foreboding. "You'll go easy on people, right?" I asked Bob.

"Nice time for you to start developing scruples," he said out of the side of his mouth.

"It's just that . . . well, there are some people here who are a little more vulnerable than others."

"Like who?"



"Well, the Shimers. They've been telling everybody their daughter's a prodigy since she made *fettucini al Play-Doh* at the age of two."

"And now?"

"She got her SAT scores last week. Looks like Wellesley's out of the question."

"Okay--just point them out to me. Anybody else?"

"Jane and Andy Scaife are going through a rough patch."

"How'd that get started?"

"He had to borrow money from one of her friends to keep their home equity line current."



"Ouch. High-end foreclosure--I *hate* when that happens!"

"Easy for you to laugh--you occupy a crepuscular nether world where home prices never fall."

"You said that about the western suburbs of Boston just a few years ago, didn't you?" he says snidely. Got me there.

Our hostess opened the door and the wife and I entered to air-kisses from our hostess. "Stephanie, this is our friend Bob the Drifter," I said. "He's staying with us for the weekend,"

"Nice to meet you, Bob," Stephanie says pleasantly. "You didn't bring your better half?"

"Actually, at this time of the year it's more like my better three-fifths," Bob said. "My wife tends to put on weight over the winter."

Cutting, unkind, and totally uncalled-for. This guy was *good*, I said to myself. Stephanie's face clouded over for a moment, then she recovered like the true social counter-puncher that she is. "Let me take your coats," she said as she pointed us towards the kitchen.

We entered the kitchen, recently re-done at a cost in the high five-figures, where everyone congregates at these suburban shin-digs much to the dismay of the hostess. I spotted Todd Smirsky, an



equity trader with a seven-figure income, leaning against the sink, regaling lesser mortals with tales of his conspicuous consumption.



"See that guy in the Gucci loafers," I said to The Drifter.

"He set off my twerp detector the moment I walked in the room."

"Time for you to earn your keep," I said.

"Let's roll," the Drifter replied, and I could tell he meant business.

We each grabbed a drink and headed over to the WASPy *minyan*, ready to do some damage.



"So I said to the guy at the Hummer dealer--'I don't want a black one, I want a real kiss-my-ass color like orange, so the hybrid crowd will remember me when I cut them off!'" Smirsky said, touching off a series of explosive guffaws from the hale-fellows-well-met who surrounded him.

"Awesome," said one.

"Fantastic," said a second.

"Awesome," said a third, causing the first to give him a dirty look.

"Sorry to use your word, Mike. Uh--how about 'Super!'"

"That's better," said the first, mollified--although he didn't know what that meant.

"Hummer--isn't that a Chinese car now?" the Drifter asked with a subtle note of disapproval in his voice.

"Well, uh, I guess," Smirsky said.

"Actually, it's not," I interjected. "The Chinese Ministry of Commerce *rejected* the deal."

I detected a murmur of disdain coming from the assembled multitude of Todd's admirers.

*murmur-murmur-murmur--disdain-disdain-disdain*

*"Is that true?"*

"Yeah--that's right," the Drifter added. "I've heard GM's going to just retire the brand, and the Chinese may pick it up for a song."

"Good luck getting any warranty work done," I said knowingly, and a few heads on the necks of Todd's admirers nodded.

Suddenly, Todd's \$65,000 impulse buy doesn't look so smart. "Well," I said in my best we've-got-to-blow-this-pop-stand tone of dismissal, "nice to see you guys."

The Drifter and I turn and can barely suppress the laughs we feel bubbling up from our guts. Once we're out of earshot, I give The Drifter his first performance review. "Nice one."

"No problem. Going after a human dust bunny like him makes my job fun."

