

The Bob Delusion

by Stephen Stark

It couldn't be a worse time for failed novelist Robert Grayson. He's 40 and falling apart. He's balding and accumulating a gut. His job writing technical manuals for software looks like it might get cut. Then his wife does the unthinkable and files for divorce.

On that very day, he literally runs into himself, which is, of course, impossible. Certain that he's lost his mind, he does the only sensible thing—run away. Except the other him, Bob, is in way better shape and catches him easily.

Robert begins to warm to the idea when Bob runs into Ann, Robert's soon-to-be ex-wife and two of her closest friends. Bob happens to be with Mia, the lasciviously luscious Bombshell. To Ann—who on that fateful day was actually having second thoughts—and her friends, it seems as though Robert is taking the news of their impending divorce way better than Ann herself is. He's suddenly trimmer, better dressed, and has a way better haircut. And he and the Bombshell look like they know each other pretty well.

This, Robert thinks, might get interesting.

In fact, it gets way more interesting—and way weirder—than Robert could possibly anticipate. Especially when they switch places. Especially when Robert's Narrative Consultant, Charlie Burns, LCSW, finds out that Bob may not be just a literary invention that enables Robert to objectify himself. Burns, who may be the only person on earth who lovingly remembers Robert's first novel, *The _____*, sees the opportunity to make history as a narrative therapist by doing the unthinkable and inserting himself into Robert's narrative.

Maybe it is an adhesion in the multiverse, as Robert's best friend Leo says. Whatever it is, Robert has to deal not just with Bob, but two Anns, two of his son, Robbie, and two Mias. Things are fun when he and Bob trade places, but things get very scary when he and Bob decide to introduce the two Robbies to each other and they, unbeknownst to their fathers, trade places.

By turns a metafictional farce and a coming-of-middle-age story, *The Bob Delusion* is a novel about the stories we tell ourselves that make us who we are. And it answers the fundamental question that humans have grappled with for the ages: If I'd done things different, would I be different? The answer: Not so much.

Chapters posted so far:

1 And then she was gone

- in which failed novelist Robert Grayson, who is under the wild misapprehension that the most successful part of his life is his relationship with his wife, Ann, gets the news that she is divorcing him.

2 The several stages of grief

- in which Robert faces down his denial with disbelief and does the only sensible thing, flees. Except in fleeing he runs into, literally, his doppelganger, Bob.

3 Let the shitbirds fly

- in which Robert's wife Ann, who is holed up in her parents' comfy cozy condo in West Virginia, decides to come back to Virginia to talk it out and hug it out with best friends Claire and Bonnie, whom she did not tell about her plot to divorce Robert because her lawyer had urged secrecy.

4 Unprecedented weirdness

- in which Robert--certain that he's lost his mind--tries to flee Bob, but finally comes to the conclusion that Bob is an

improved version of himself and perhaps this could get interesting. Robert's best friend Leo also sees Bob, and confirms that he actually does exist. And begins to posit theories as to how this whole doppelganger thing could have happened.

5 Arlene

- in which Robert goes by to see his widowed mother to tell her about Ann filing for divorce. And Arlene letting him know that she's not at all surprised.

6 Ann, meet Bob

- in which Ann flees her parents' comfy W. Va. condo to talk it out with Claire and Bonnie and after getting way hammered on fishbowl margaritas, turns around and there is her husband—or so she thinks—looking way better than he has in ages, and with a voluptuous young woman on his arm. Which kind of changes her whole outlook. He's suddenly gone from miserable to macher in no time flat.

7 Robert hires a lawyer

- in which Robert hires the looming supermodel-looking Texan, Susan Blythe, Esq. to represent him in his divorce. She has, he discovers, a mild case of Tourette's, although she isn't an obscenity streamer. She sounds a bit like she's got a five-year-old, or perhaps two, inside her that now and again comes out. Bob calls to mention that he ran into Robert's Ann while she was busy getting wasted.

8 Hammered, then hungover

- in which Ann goes back to Claire's and wakes up with a pyrotechnic hangover and totally pissed that Robert is out screwing around and they've hardly been separated for a week. She's really tempted to call Robert and ask him what the fuck is going on, but Claire urges her not to. It's a temptation that proves hard to resist.

9 How dare you?

- in which Ann calls up Robert and discovers that it wasn't all that great of an idea.
- 10 The Ann chapter
- in which Ann intrudes upon Robert's narrative and tells her side of the story.
- 11 Let's do something with this
- in which Robert and his doppelgänger Bob get together and decide that life isn't complex enough already, let's fuck it up some more by messing around with identity
- 12 The agreement
- in which Robert and Ann sign their separation papers

