

identity

for Ron Woodall

Twins do not always look alike, but these identical twins were identical. Were, because they are dead now. Or perhaps just one is, I really don't know. Both were about 5 foot 11, with greyish blond hair and tidy moustaches. Their unusual feature, though, was their eyes: oval eyelids around yellowish eyes with a dark spot just below the pupil. This made the pupil look just slightly oval too, along a vertical axis. The two of them would sit side by side at the bar of Zanuzzi's, at the end where the mirror behind the bar turns and follows the wall before the bar joins it. Strangers entering the place were confused: was there one person there or two, or four? And were those really eyes that glowed at them, or reflections of the bright liqueur bottles on glass shelves before the mirror?

They didn't bring their cats to the bar. The cats were identical too, large male Siamese, with startling blue eyes. And, like many Siamese, rather round pupils. I saw the two cats at their apartment, once, to confirm that they were indeed two. I asked if they were twins as well, but only got a joking answer "of course, they're Siamese twins, like us, inseparable".

I said the twins were identical, as with the cats. I should have said they were identical to look at. They were very different people. One twin was very friendly and easy-going, and the other was brittle and difficult. One cat was purr-friendly, too, and one would scratch your

eyes out. Whether the friendly cat belonged to the friendly guy I never understood. The difficult twin talked and the friendly one was silent. But there was a problem: you couldn't believe anything the talkative one said, and while the friendly one would never tell you a lie he would never tell you very much, and what he would tell you was all about directions, how to get to places. In fact, he preferred not even to tell you this, but to pull out a notebook and draw you a map. He would rarely name anyone or even describe a place, either. He would draw the person's face or the building's façade. And he was good, you knew who or what he meant. Or thought you did. I asked him once to explain the difference between him and his brother, and between their cats. He just sighed, shrugged his shoulders, and drew two pictures, of two identical people with two identical cats. "Obvious". And then he moved the pictures in a very strange way. He drew a map of the city, and then took scissors and separated the cats and the guys, and moved them around the map in a confusing and complicated pattern. As far as I could see, the two guys traced the same route but in opposite directions and the two cats traveled the same routes but each together with the opposite guy, but I was far from sure I had understood. I did note that the route out and the route back met at the Strathcona underpass.

You've noticed that I haven't named them. I wanted to, but either they never told me or I didn't remember. I have never been good at names. The only real conversations I had with them were in that bar, sitting by those mirrors. I listened to enough stories from the untrustworthy one to understand that he never used names either. Or rarely: looking back now I feel confused. I once asked him to say who he was talking about and he just turned to his brother and said "draw her". The brother

pulled out a sharpie and looked at the ceiling for twenty seconds, then put a flurry of marks on a napkin. I looked at them: I saw immediately an impressionistic but uncanny portrait of my good friend Amy. "Well, Amy, who would have known?" "Look again" he said, and when I blinked there was a sharp likeness of another friend, Zena. I learned later that he earned his living doing uncaptioned political cartoons, in which prominent politician would find themselves libelled but could never sue because the judge would be just as sure it was someone else. And his brother would edit editorials and news stories so that it was not as clear as one thought at first who was being fingered.

This was before the accident. I had gone to Zanuzzi's hoping to meet them, trying to get to the bottom of a feeling that if I understood about them something fundamental would snap into place. They were not there at their usual time so I waited, sipping a beer and letting the television abduct my attention. There was a story on the local news about a mysterious explosion at the Strathcona underpass. Witnesses described two black Mercedes - there were witnesses who said they were white, too - disappearing simultaneously into the underpass, followed by a massive explosion, a flash of lightning, and dark black smoke. Then nothing. No wreckage, no cars, no debris. I looked at the barman: we were both thinking the same.

The apartment was on my way home, so I stopped to see what I could learn. When I got out of the elevator the door was open and so with some hesitation I went in. No one was there, except the cats. Feeling like an intruder, but also feeling I had to learn more I waited. The cats waited too, sitting on an eye-level shelf at the meeting of two corner mirrors. There was the noise of a car door closing outside and they

turned their heads as if they were linked, one towards the window and one towards a framed picture facing it. I stared at the picture: it was a detailed portrait of that I assumed was the untrustworthy twin. The cat who had looked at the picture turned to look at me and blinked slowly. That's a friendly gesture for cats so I gave him a slow blink in return. I felt a blink responding to mine, but not from the cat. I raised my eyes and in the mirror above him I saw the reflection of the brother. The eyes seemed to move. No doubt I was projecting my own glance, but I took it to be a message from the other one, the friendly picturing one. That made me wonder if they didn't look different after all, and I stood up to stare at the portrait. For a moment six eyes seemed to become two, and then two more joined them, my own reflection. Confused, I turned to the portrait. It no longer looked like either brother but like me, as if I was looking into a mirror.

I left and took the elevator down. It was a modern building and the elevator was elegant, with indirect lighting and mirrored sides. I stared at the infinite series of lights, each illuminating a reflected wall with an image of itself or the other. There we were, many faces of me, each with a pair of eyes engaging others engaging others engaging themselves.