



A Tale of Two Adam Rosens: The U-M alumnus, with glasses, struck up an online friendship with a similarly named stranger who had received his emails by mistake. When they finally met face to face, he realized he'd hit the online alter ego jackpot.

My Online Doppelganger

SINCE 2006, A GUY WHO LIVES IN VIRGINIA has been reading my email. It's not his fault; we have the same name — Adam Rosen — and nearly identical email addresses. So for the past decade, a stream of emails intended for me has been flowing into his inbox. These have included party invitations, doctor appointment reminders, article forwards, job applications, job rejections, marriage congratulations, and other sorts of mundane but personal exchanges.

At first he was irritated. "You have the wrong email address, as so many of his friends, family, and colleagues do," he responded to one of my friends in 2006. The message was signed "Adam 'Annoyed With All These Emails' Rosen."

I became less uncomfortable with my own part in disrupting his life and began asking him how things were going.

His resistance was futile. All that separates our addresses is a single "m" — my middle initial — scarcely enough to stem the flow of determined but erroneous holiday well-wishers and car repair follow-up survey administrators. The onslaught continued.

Resigned to his fate, he softened. (At least, this is my theory.) A physical therapy appointment confirmation in 2010 was prefaced with "feel better dude"; more inspiring news, like a successfully landed interview, came with a "congrats!" above the email body text.

Over time, our dynamic of forwarder and forwardee slowly began to equalize as random excerpts from the lives of the Earth's apparently many, many other Adam Rosens arrived in his email. These entertaining and often bizarre intrusions out of thin air lightened the mood. I became less uncomfortable with my own part in disrupting his life and began asking him how things were going. Up and down, as it turned out. There was a divorce and a move between different states. He had a daughter and really liked deer hunting. Our exchanges grew less superficial. It was only a matter of time until we were ready to take the next step: becoming Facebook buddies. After a few years of wall postings, it was clear that an offline interaction was in order.

In fall 2014, we made plans to meet. I was driving to see family in Baltimore from my home in North Carolina, and the route took me right past his city, a small town in the Shenandoah Valley. He proposed lunch, but — having long ago internalized first-date escape planning — I said I could probably only get a coffee. I figured that if the rendezvous seemed to be going well, I'd magically find the time for lunch.

I wasn't nervous as I pulled up to his house. I already knew plenty about this other Adam Rosen. We'd had 10 years to bond, a period that shakes out to be almost one-third of my entire life, a tremendous span by the standards of Internet stalking. If anything, I worried about being disappointed. Most of us don't spend too much time thinking about it, but given a choice we'd probably want our alter egos to be cool – or, at least, not well-known misanthropes. Pity those named Bob Mugabe.

Before I even got out of the car, he was outside, waving. Much to my delight, he looked exactly like his Facebook photos and didn't seem especially inclined to hold me for ransom. He had a graying beard and was wearing a T-shirt with a dinosaur image. It wasn't hard to imagine him as the source of the friendly, sarcastic voice rising from my Gmail every month or so.

Inside, a small crew of curious spectators had assembled: his daughter, his daughter's friend, and his mother. I shook hands with the latter, identifying myself as "Adam Rosen," just as protocol required. His daughter, who seemed to be about 7 or 8, looked at her friend, then back at me: "Hi, other Adam Rosen!"

The introductions finished and everyone sufficiently amused, Adam and I got into his car and took off for a bakery a few miles away. We sat down and talked about a lot of things: life in New York City versus the South, relationships, different places we'd lived, bands we liked, and so on. It was kind of like reconnecting with an old high school acquaintance.

We wrapped up and headed back to his house, but not before he bought me a box of cookies to take to my family. (Again, I declare: I really hit the online alter ego jackpot.) Outside my car, we agreed that he and his girlfriend should come visit me in North Carolina sometime the following spring. A macho-yet-heartfelt handshake-hug sanctified our unique bond, and I headed on my way.

He hasn't visited yet, but he's still forwarding. A few of the messages he sends are actually meant for me. (Speaking of which, my car dealer really needs to get with the program.) But most of them clearly aren't; he knows enough about my life and career to deduce that I'm probably not heading to sales training in Illinois or renewing my motorcycle insurance. A few of the messages, like the cryptic congratulations from a guy named Larry, could maybe go either way, but I don't think he keeps forwarding stuff just to make sure I don't miss a price drop on tickets to "A Behanding in Spokane." Sending me real estate counteroffers for a house in Long Island is his way of keeping in touch. At this point, I'm proud to call Adam a friend first and a technologically mediated interpersonal connection second.



Adam Rosen, '05, works in academic publishing in Asheville, North Carolina. He's also one of a few Adam Rosens to earn a U-M degree.