

# The Alter Ego Handbook

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# **The Alter Ego Handbook**

Cover and interior photos: Phil Openshaw

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Everyone has a secret. Perhaps it involves hypothesizing about the turmoil strangers keep within. I'm certain mommy issues are rattling around in there, or the ache of an abusive father, or symptoms of a fractured marriage. Maybe a ribbon of uncertainty constricting faith. They might cope by binge drinking and drunk texting people who have forgotten they exist. Nobody's perfect, at least according to my alter ego. No one would suspect my life revolves around watching cult films and memorizing clichéd dialogue. All the while wondering why villains seem more compelling than heroes.

My alter ego begins with a circus of dreams and dies with a whisper of discontent. His bravado is buttressed by somber notions and sweet deception; it remains undaunted despite detractors and naysayers. On the inside, he's an outsider, with intentions lukewarm like red wine. I was doe-eyed, dumbstruck, and downhearted while surrounded by a ring of problems when he arrived, my confidence collapsing inward under the weight of its inherent emptiness. My alter ego is nothing if not crudely wrought. Nothing if not over the top. He pretends to be impressive but I know better. The conclusion is an optical illusion. Success moving faster towards me, but always farther away.

My alter ego uses Photoshop to conceal his flaws, posts photos on the internet that approximate perfection. My alter ego has a Facebook page and Twitter account, though I'm not really into social media. He claims there's too much identity in anonymity, too much authenticity. I tell him image isn't everything, but he continues blogging excerpts from his unfinished manifesto and obsessing about reputation. There are too many variables in obscurity; it's as futile as seeking privacy in a world full of windows. My alter ego incessantly tinkers with a smartphone, recites factoids during conversations to appear witty. He's a con artist imitating a renaissance man. He has every scenario scripted, knows when to gaze at the audience and recite the perfect line, exit stage left.

There's no evidence of my alter ego moving underneath my skin, no superfluous heartbeat knocking against the inner machinery of my body. But the halogens have been flickering for days, moisture lingering in the sockets. Rust blooming in all the spaces no one has bothered to repair. Even at night, my fingers grow slick with desire, my soul falling open like a suitcase atop a hotel bed. Lewdly placing my fingers wherever they don't belong. Optimism is a tangible thing, heavy, like a box I've tossed everything into that wasn't already on fire. Downstate, my alter ego keeps wearing clothes that don't match my personal style, suspicions eventually rising to the surface like a corpse tossed in the river. It was always like this, sunbaked hopes gone brown like a lawn in midsummer. The heat chafing my skin. A sloppy mess of biology and awkwardness. But my alter ego only listens when they mention the trauma of previous generations may exist within a person's genetic infrastructure. Drunk uncles and deadbeat ancestors. The twin I might or might not have eaten while in the womb, still haunting my thoughts from the other side of existence.



The phone rings at 2:12 AM, yet the caller sounds disappointed when I answer. Maybe people would rather talk to my alter ego than me. After all, his nights are filled with scandal and insinuation, populated by counterfeit sweethearts and transparent motives. Lately he's all about poor decisions. Great intentions, lousy execution. My alter ego is inconsolable when I say no. He has questionable habits, but I feign acceptance to keep the peace. A therapist might label me as an enabler, but I'm more like a silent partner. My alter ego does the deeds while I serve as an accomplice. The crimes we commit are deliberate, devious, destructive. Any attempt at repair leaving everything broken.

Shattered dishes, misplaced keys, snagged zippers. Evidence my alter ego is clumsier than I'd prefer to admit. He may be uncommonly smooth, but he still has my father's hands, and often they fumble over details, clutch onto the wrong things, or drop what they should cherish. Hand over hand, mind over matter. We take only what we need but eventually we need everything. At the end of the day, we have more hunger than my body can hold. My alter ego is insatiable, but you'd never know by looking at him. He knows desire is a roadmap that should never be torn or misplaced. He transforms into a willful machine as temptation pulls him apart like the sections of an orange.



My alter ego always says *hum*miliation like that, slowly and with emphasis on the wrong syllable. He's a bonafide showoff, a made-for-TV attention whore of the illest repute. Always overdressing and overspending while others blend into the background. All about flash, panache, the blatant art of making a splash. He claims to be so overt that it's covert, that standing out makes him outstanding. By now all my secrets are public domain. My insecurities are tethered to my exterior like enormous, shiny sequins. I fear leaving mostly because I fear I'll never return. I fear returning because it feels like leaving over and over again. My alter ego loves revision. The dubbed-over mixtape, the edited Bible verse, the subtle mutations of identity. My alter ego always says *hum*miliation like it's a threat.

My alter ego drinks too much, despite sober intentions. Never out of control, but always on the precipice. It may seem enigmatic, but the life of the party can be dead inside. He loves the gin but hates the messes that must be cleaned up by morning. My alter ego is insincere when he apologizes for bedding strange women and exploring the chaos theory between their thighs. He calls these our restless years, measured only by careless promises and closing time confessions. I awaken to find my soul emptied in motel rooms, searching for redemption in unlikely places. My alter ego tastes the caution in a woman's kiss but never considers reciprocating it.



My alter ego opens a can of beer. Opens his fist filled with dull quarters, his mouth filled with halfhearted apologies. Detonates a thousand different scenarios for carelessness dancing on top of an office desk. There are far too many excuses in his vocabulary and far too many hands reaching for his empty wallet. My alter ego opens his mind to doubt and doubt closes his mind accordingly. My alter ego knows how the fragile machine of confidence becomes waterlogged and wrecked, even when used with caution. With caution being the very thing that breaks it.

My alter ego likes it when buildings are on fire. Appreciates the scent of impending catastrophe, destruction spreading quickly as rumors through school hallways. The *click, click* of a lighter prior to ignition. Inside the abandoned factory, there are too many combustibles adjacent to his open flame. I have the strangest urges, scores of demons irking my conscience. I need a gas mask. I need to exhale. It is the worst sort of trespassing, but the best sort of torture porn. He uses rolled up newspapers as kindling and coughs into a sleeve. My alter ego likes it when my clothes smell like smoke. My alter ego likes it when I don't say *stop*.

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My alter ego is patient, but only if I stick to the itinerary and don't complain. He's a stickler for details, troubled by inconsistencies and flawed beliefs. Obsessed with double meanings, covert agendas. My alter ego keeps losing religion along the sides of the roads he travels. He talks about values and morals as if they matter, but he's actually just conforming to societal norms to gain popularity. A partial history of lost causes has fractured my alter ego's convictions, yet it's strictly by faith that we've made it this far. He's a little amazed when we walk into traffic. And more amazed when we emerge without a scratch.

When my alter ego was spawned, I was stuck in a staff meeting, lamenting my necktie-knotted throat and the methodical nature of the modern man's hustle. All suited up, all sold out. I carried around a list of authentic lies and voided aspirations in my pockets, my future monotonous and mundane. Grinding a pestle into my assigned mortar despite ambiguous dreams of doing something different. Ambition was a hand moving behind my ear, a magician filching the coin. My alter ego was beginning to show me the error of my ways when he placed a bullet on the table. Said *go for it*. My alter ego isn't frightened to be alive, but he's terrified of wasting away. Gradually vanishing under the low-watt gleam of tarnished confidence. He'll be half gone before you even know he's here.





My alter ego tapes newspaper articles and political propaganda to apartment walls. Is all anarchy and Armageddon during power outages and inclement weather. His conspiracy theories are sorted in alphabetical order, lined up perfectly like shoes next to the bed, toes pointed towards the doorway just in case. He was timid in the beginning, but for what he lacked in courage, he made up for in paranoia. My alter ego likes his hand on a gun sometimes, his patience eroded and worn thin as rice paper. My alter ego is nothing if not resourceful. He has a collection of convenient lies and acceptable excuses on tap for whenever he challenges authority. He goes off grid, off guard. There's nothing you can say to him that doesn't sound like deception.

My alter ego craves more. More white space, hush money, dirty habits, disasters overlooking other disasters. More neon signs blinking *live nude girls, live nude girls*. On the train, his mouth is filled with a litany of wicked things: sharpness, lies, veiled threats. I calm him by whispering the alphabet backwards over and over until he goes off script. Off topic. Off kilter. My alter ego is occasionally charming and occasionally alarming. Stasis is never an option; he wouldn't survive if he didn't change. It's all improvisation. He makes it up as he goes along, his heart capable of the most horrible beatings.

Over time my alter ego loses his tonsils. His mind. His appendix. A handful of baby teeth nostalgically kept in a jar on a dresser. My alter ego loses himself gradually, piece by piece, then faster. The sight in his eyes, the hearing in his ears, the feeling in his fingers. My alter ego was destined to fall apart, inevitably, like an old truck or overripe fruit. Limbs loosen from their sockets; even follicles fall from his crown. My alter ego collects all his broken parts nightly and tosses them in a pile on the bed. Rises again each morning, piecemeal yet whole.

My alter ego believes t-shirts are wearable bumper stickers fuzzy with the social commentary of a McDonaldized society. He sports one that says Che Guevara is his homeboy, pimping El Che's likeness as if riots are brewing in cul-de-sacs. Maybe anti-establishment's where it's at, fighting on only to keep on fighting. Revolution wouldn't come to mind if you saw my alter ego's meticulously coiffed patch of rebellious facial hair. He's at the edge of edginess. He's a poseur where poseurs shouldn't go, counting sins to convict a devil who isn't aware of his existence. Magniloquence shifts inside his mouth, tiny accidents colliding with consonants, devalued words that claim to take on the world and its underhanded promises, but don't.



My alter ego understands the difference between sex and love, though their definitions often slur into each other sloppily like the words of drunken co-eds. The difference between the flesh and spirit, the pure and sullied, the body's accurate memoir versus mind's personal myth. The dark intentions loitering behind bright shining eyes. My alter ego knows these things the way he understands gravity without falling down. The temperature at which blood boils inside his smoking ember heart. Knows them in the way dogs instinctually recognize danger and react without releasing a single bark.

Sometimes, if my alter ego flushes down enough Xanax with merlot, my body will drift off to sleep as a thousand questions chorus through my brain. It doesn't matter how high he gets, as long as I'm with him for the eventual fall. Sometimes my alter ego dreams about wandering down empty hallways, trying every locked door, unsure of what might be behind them. Every once in a while, the spirit leaves the body for something else, moves through my alter ego like wind fluttering the pages of a book. Sometimes my alter ego roams without me, through strip malls and parking lots, the mystery of identity loitering within the chaos he leaves behind.

Before long, my alter ego is powerful enough to assemble faux empires out of half-truths and student loan money. Though often silent, I am still present. Still playing straight man to his comedic antics. Still practicing kindness and predicting doom and preoccupied with the fistfuls of cash we make while overstretching my rubber band soul. When he's missing, there's an obvious hole, and that hole is nothing but what remains around it. Fortune hangs out in the trees and my alter ego returns blinded by hindsight, surviving on scotch and soda and last night's leftovers. At work, I've taught him to sit quietly under my chair until it's time to go home. Taught him to shake the table legs at appropriate moments and throw his voice. In life, sometimes we sing along even if we hate the lyrics. Sometimes the word *hope* gets lodged like a fishbone in our throats.



All in all, my alter ego attracts disaster. Locusts and frogs plummeting from the heavens. Rivers spilling over with blood. Together we sing somber hymns to a vengeful god, wave flags and false intentions while misreading prophecies in the stars. Make vain attempts to arrange mayhem. I masquerade in a mask slipped over other masks I had on already. Outlines of foreign faces in place of the face inherited from my parents. My alter ego has no teeth, but what he lacks in bite he makes up for with reckless explanations and fabricated statements. Call it fragmented. Call it flawed. We're all trying to find ourselves beneath the wreckage of what we once thought we were.







**Adrian S. Potter** writes poetry and prose in Minnesota. He is the author of the poetry collection *[Everything Wrong Feels Right](#)* and the short fiction chapbook, *[Survival Notes](#)*. Some publication credits include *North American Review*, *Obsidian*, *Jet Fuel Review*, and *Kansas City Voices*. Website: <http://adrianspotter.com>

Adrian S. Potter's *The Alter Ego Handbook* is full of wonderfully wrought contradictions and conflicts, a prose feast of a dialectic in an attempt to answer why "villains seem more compelling than heroes." And it is in this imperfect union (never becoming a true balance) that we come to appreciate caution, rationality, and even denial, as well as the "poor decisions...the fumbling over details, the clutching onto wrong things." Phil Openshaw's photos of double images perfectly complement this stunning collection of the self and its love-hate relationship, with its sometimes destructive shadow side.

— Kyle Hemmings, Writer and Photographer