

## Odd Jobs

# All the Right Moves

Written by  
**Linda Barnard**

**JEROME LeBLANC'S BRACES CAME OFF, ET VOILA! TOM CRUISE.**

Not Tom Cruise, exactly. But an uncannily realistic Cruise imitator: a persona carefully nurtured by the 31-year-old French-Canadian actor to be a Tom Cat copycat.

Dressed in a c.1986 *Top Gun*-style flight suit, or wearing a tight white T-shirt and leather jacket with colorful aviator patches, dark hair shiny with pomade and jaw like a chunk of granite, people can't seem to resist LeBlanc's Pete "Maverick" Mitchell.

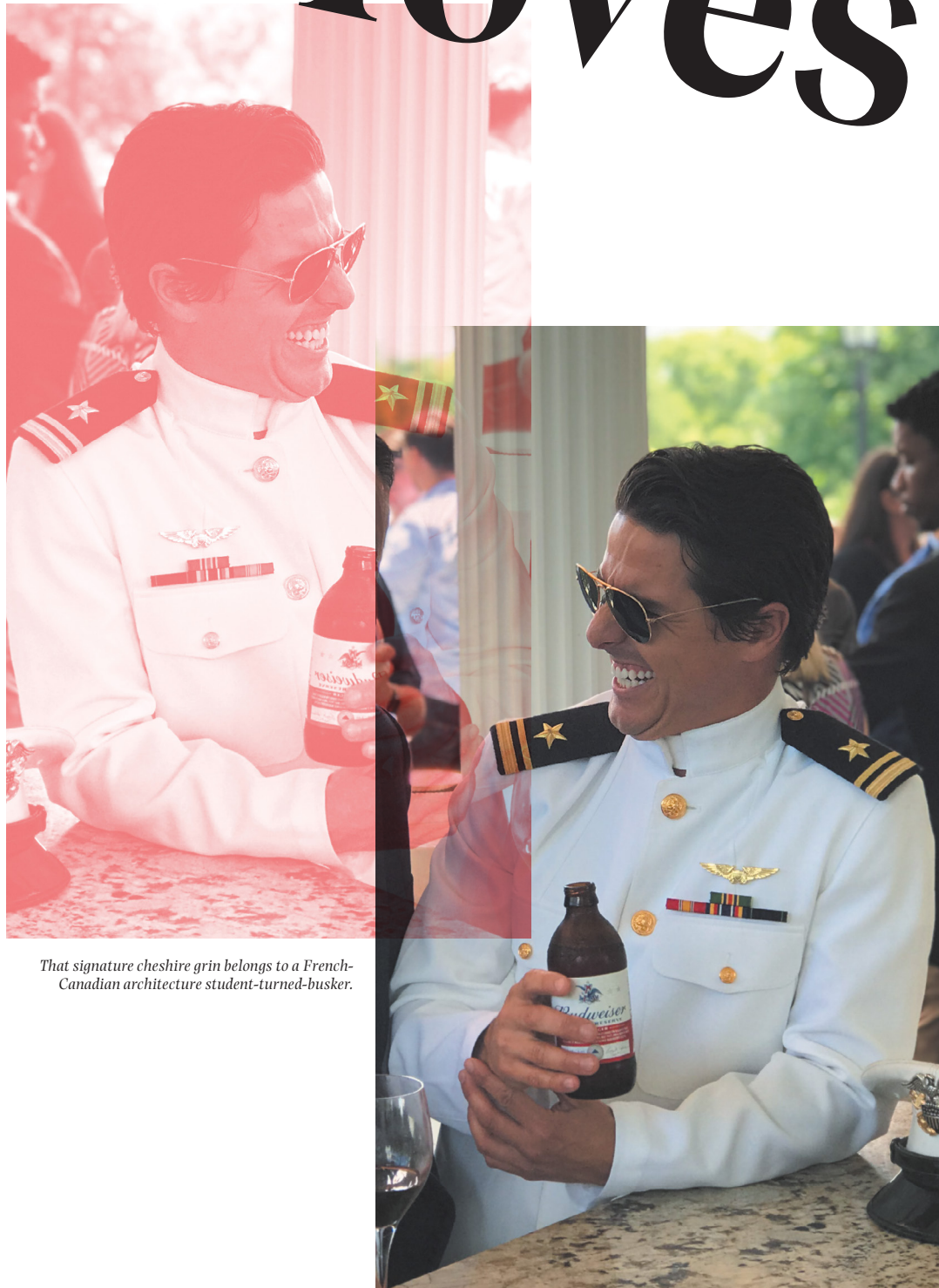
"It's like being an illusionist, and it's mixed with nostalgia, which is a very powerful feeling," the San Diego resident says. "I bring back the feeling of such an impactful movie in the '80s. *Top Gun* was a huge hit and [he] was a huge crush for many women. So, I use that to bring back that lovin' feeling."

Yes, just like Maverick in *Top Gun*, LeBlanc serenades his fans with the Righteous Brothers hit. Indeed, playing Cruise is LeBlanc's full-time job, one that grew from street busking as the movie star's twin while he was studying architecture at UCLA. While his work has taken him as far as Australia, he concentrates on southern California, at promotional events, conventions and in advertising. He has also teamed to do promotional work with San Diego Sky Tours. With the blessing of the retired naval aviator docents on the decommissioned aircraft carrier USS Midway in San Diego, LeBlanc plays the newly minted Midway Maverick at the USS Midway Museum, where he poses outside for photo ops. USS Midway Museum travel industry sales manager Joseph Wagstaff says LeBlanc approaches his duties with respect for military personnel, making him a good fit for the job.

Life is sure to get even better for LeBlanc with the June 2020 opening of *Top Gun: Maverick*, starring Cruise, Miles Teller and Val Kilmer. Much of it was filmed in San Diego.

I've met Cruise on more than one occasion. I first sat down with him for an interview in a Toronto hotel, 2008. I also watched LeBlanc work a crowd at a recent event in Anaheim. Excited women rushed toward him. Men crowded in to pose for thumbs-up selfies. Hand on heart, LeBlanc could be his *Top Gun* twin, right down to the slightly manic laugh, bursts of enthusiasm and wide, perfect smile. Like Cruise, he's slightly built. When LeBlanc takes off his ever-present aviator shades, he's less of a ringer. The illusion goes a bit askew when we chatted. The soft-spoken LeBlanc still has a noticeable Quebecois accent, although he has worked hard on his American-Cruise voice. He has been coached by his wife, Nicole — yes, that's her name — a Jersey native he met while mimicking Cruise five years ago on Hollywood Boulevard. She handed him her phone number. Today, the couple has a newborn daughter.

The language difference did help him play a better Cruise. "French being my first language, it was hard for me to understand Americans, so I became very focused on listening, and how is Tom Cruise?



*That signature cheshire grin belongs to a French-Canadian architecture student-turned-busker.*

## The (unrisky) business of a celebrity doppelgänger

Very focused." Nicole and her Brooklynite dad gave him better voice lessons than his 18 months of dialect coaching.

Born in Quebec City, LeBlanc was studying architecture in Montreal when he decided to transfer to UCLA. "I was a very shy person. I had gaps between my teeth. It was hard to be confident. The [new] smile helped and brought a different personality to me," he says.

The braces came off, he got to UCLA and, "I would hear it every single day: 'You look like Tom Cruise in *Risky Business*,'" LeBlanc adds. "I never heard it in Canada because I had braces. I wasn't smiling." He pauses for a shout-out to his Montreal-area orthodontist Dr. Yuray Benko, for kick-starting his Cruise career.

Unable to work because he was in the U.S. on a student visa, LeBlanc decided to play the Cruise card, posing for photos as Maverick on tourist-clogged streets. "I'd say, 'I pose for donations. Is that OK with you?' Being very polite, it worked very well," says LeBlanc, who worked every Thursday to Sunday, pocketing \$200-\$400 a day. Soon enough, architecture took a backseat. He switched to acting classes, completing a certificate in TV and film acting, then taking classes at The Lee Strasberg Theatre & Film Institute, The Groundlings Theatre & School and the Beverly Hills Playhouse.

LeBlanc says it was "a blessing and a curse" to be a Cruise look-alike when he was trying to get work as an actor. Weekly, he'd drive to L.A. for auditions, but he couldn't get callbacks for anything other than Cruise-related jobs.

Once he committed to being a Cruise impersonator, however, things changed. Although he watched all of Cruise's films to help nail the actor's mannerisms, his street audiences were his biggest teachers. Comments about what clicked and what didn't taught LeBlanc how to smile, react, and do that signature Cruise chuckle.

LeBlanc says people usually ask how he got started as an impersonator and how he makes a living playing Cruise. When they touch on controversial topics, he keeps it light. "I joke around with them. I try to keep Scientology out of it," he says.

Although he still has a passion for architecture and shares photos on his phone of a small, stylish cabin he has built, Cruise is his living for now. "I think we all have a niche. To know our talents is something to discover over the years and to go full speed in that direction," LeBlanc says. "Anybody can succeed in that way."

He's heading back to Australia in October as part of a promotion for a *Days of Thunder*-themed charity race. And he's always looking for new clients, especially in Germany, France and Italy where people are "*Top Gun* fanatics."

Still, he has never come face-to-face with his doppelgänger. If he did, he'd have just one thing to say to the actor: "Thank you." •

@barnardfilm (Linda Barnard) is a British Columbia-based freelance travel, food and film writer, previously of the Toronto Star.