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[Chapters 1-7]

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## CHAPTER 1

'There's no one like you.' 'I've never met anyone like you.' 'You're a one-off.' 'The only model.' 'They broke the mould when they made you.' 'Blah, blah, blah.'

Don't believe a word of it. It's typical of the flattery you'll hear a thousand times in your life. Your parents, your partner, your best friend, anyone who wants to sweet-talk you or lift your spirits, when you're having a bad day.

'No one like you... a one-off... The only model... They broke the mould...'

Take no notice: 'blah, blah, blah.'

There's no one like you? Of course, there is. Don't think you're so special. You're neither one-off nor the only model. If they've never found anyone like you, they need to keep looking. And they didn't break the mould when you were born, no way: they used it to make more like you. I'm not talking about similar; I mean identical. Like two eggs. Like two leaves from the same tree. Like two peas in a pod. Like two... whatever.

Sure, think about it. How many people live on planet Earth? Six thousand million?

*There are already about eight thousand million, know-it-all Valeria corrects me.*

Okay, eight thousand million. And does anyone think there are different faces for that many people? Of course not. Take the Chinese, for example. A thousand million Chinese.

*Just over one thousand four hundred million, according to Wikipedia.*

So, even more reason for me being right. Do all of you honestly think there can be a different face for each one? Of course not. That's why the Chinese all look alike.

*That's not true.*

Valeria, please. Will you let me get on with my story?

*It's MY story.*

And, according to you, the Chinese don't look so similar.

*If you look closely, they're all very different one from another. What happens is that we hardly know any Chinese, so we don't know how to tell them apart.*

What I'm trying to say, if Valeria allows me, is that with so many people on the planet, it's impossible for there to be a different mould for each one. Mathematically impossible. There aren't that many faces for that many people. There have to be repeats, out of necessity.

For example, those people who look like somebody famous. They even have competitions on TV – people identical to an actor, a singer or a football player. When people see them on the street, they are misled. They take pictures and ask for autographs.

*My father told me that some presidents, kings and dictators have a double for public appearances, in case someone wants to assassinate them.*

Good example, Valeria. But what's most important is what I was saying before: there aren't enough faces for so many people. If you collect all the nose types possible – large, small, fat, thin, straight, snub, blunt, bulbous... And the entire catalogue of eyes you can imagine – round, almond-shaped, slanted, tiny, owl-like... And include all the varieties of eye colour – not just black, brown, blue or green, but within black, for example, there are a huge number of variations: black as a black cat, or a lump of coal, or...

*Don't waffle; they've got it.*

Right. So, imagine that you put together all the varieties of noses, eyes, mouths, foreheads, chins and so on. And you start combining them, as if it were Mr Potato's face. How many different faces would you be able to make? Thousands. Or maybe millions. But there's no way you'll come up with eight thousand million completely different, unique faces. Oh, hold on: you also have to include all the people who lived before us. How many thousands of millions have inhabited the Earth from the troglodytes to now? Perhaps a million million?

*A hundred thousand million. I've just looked it up.*

So, no question that your face, the one you're seeing in the mirror and which seems to be so "you", unique, has already been worn by others before you. A Roman from antiquity or a mediaeval peasant, someone from the last century or from thousands of years ago.

*I remember a day when we went to the museum. Mamá stopped and stared at an old picture. It was the portrait of a Greek god. Mamá began to laugh and called us over: "Look, kids, it's Papá!" she said, pointing at the picture. And it was true: the person in the painting, the god, was my father – identical, the very same face, even the exact same laid-back expression. Mind you, it was Papá, but half-naked and with a warrior's helmet. Though he didn't think so and protested: "I'm not that ugly!"*

Well, there you have it, just what I've been telling you. I'm not saying that there was once a god identical to Valeria's father. But I am saying that the artist used as his model a friend or a servant who was identical to the father of our Valeria hundreds of years later. Not just similar: identical. I'm sure you've all had a double in the past, a copy of you. I'm sure you have one today as well, but you just haven't come across them yet. In Valeria's case, however, she has.

## CHAPTER 2

But Valeria didn't cross paths with her double in a museum, or during a competition on TV. It was at a bus stop, when she was leaving school one day. Imagine her surprise.

*More than surprise. A first-class fright.*

Can there be a more ordinary place for something so extraordinary to happen? If this were a novel, the encounter between Valeria and her double would have taken place in a cabin in the middle of the forest, on a deserted beach, during a horse ride, during a storm. And I'd tell you about it in the typically mysterious manner of that sort of situation: 'The door suddenly opened and...'. 'The stranger bore a weird resemblance, and as she got closer, to her horror, she discovered that...'. 'She noticed that someone was following her, and when she turned around suddenly...'.

No, nothing like that. Just a plain ordinary bus stop outside the school gates, one Monday in September at noon. Valeria looks up from her mobile phone and there she is, on the other side of the street, at the bus stop opposite hers: her double. A girl identical to her. As if Valeria were looking in a mirror.

*Yes, like a mirror. Because on top of everything else, she was also sitting at the bus stop, her backpack beside her, exactly like me. And looking at her phone, just like me.*

After a few seconds, Valeria realised that there was no mirror or window to reflect her. That's when she became really spooked. It was another girl. One that looked like her.

*How do you mean 'looked like her'?*

A girl who really looked like her.

*A lot?*

Totally. One who had an astonishing resemblance to her.

*Not again. No way. I already explained to you before we started writing. We didn't "look alike". We were identical.*

Okay. An identical girl. The same oval face, turned-up nose, slightly almond-shaped eyes, brown hair, the same slight body which always makes people think she's years younger.

What do you think, dear readers? Do you believe it? Can someone come face to face with their double like this, after leaving the school grounds, at the bus stop?

*Why that question? Why do you make them doubt it right at the beginning? Maybe you're the one who doesn't believe this... Some narrator I've found for myself!*

I'm trying. But this whole story strikes me as somewhat... odd.

*Odd! That's an understatement. It's incredible. But it happened. Let ME continue for a while.*

### CHAPTER 3

*There I was, at my bus stop. And there was the other girl, at her bus stop. My double. Face to face, separated by nothing more than the width of the street.*

*I studied her. I stared at her openly, dumbfounded, taking advantage of her being distracted. If she'd actually looked up, she'd have looked straight into my eyes; and maybe she too would have got a shock. She was like me. Identical.*

*And I insist again that when I say identical, I don't mean "similar", not even "amazingly similar". Not like those impersonators in TV competitions, not like presidents' and kings' doubles with their make-up and their wigs. No, no. This girl was identical to me.*

*I didn't know what to do. It didn't even occur to me to stand up and walk over to her. I was a bit frightened, and I started to worry that she'd see me. I secretly took a photo of her with my mobile. And I enlarged it on my screen so I could examine her more closely. There was no question: she was me.*

*As I was looking in astonishment at the photo, I heard a noise. I looked up. The bus. The one on the opposite side of the street, the one she was waiting for. I saw her get in, walk towards the back and sit down in a window seat. The bus moved away and I stayed where I was, paralysed. With that feeling of not knowing if something has really happened or you've just been dreaming. But the photo was right there on my phone.*

*When I got home, I showed it to my father:*

*"Look, Papá, what do you think of this photo?"*

*"You look really pretty," he said, without giving it much attention.*

*"Have another look, please. Tell me if you notice anything strange."*

*He had another look at the photo, and then again at me.*

*"Is something the matter, Valeria?"*

*"No, nothing. Just tell me if you see something strange about the photo."*

*He looked at it again, then at me, and then repeated the action several times: look at the photo, look at me, as if searching for something, like when they tell you to look for the seven differences between two pictures which look identical to you and you can't find them.*

*"I've got it!" he exclaimed finally, with a fake look of horror on his face.*

*"What?"*

*"The pimple. You've got a pimple on your chin, and it hadn't appeared yet when the photo was taken."*

*He pointed to a hideous pimple that had emerged that very morning. That was it. My father didn't see any other difference. Confirmed: she was identical to me. She was my double.*

*Right, now you continue, mister narrator.*

## CHAPTER 4

It was the last few days of September. Valeria hadn't even completed two weeks of classes and she still wasn't used to her new school. Or to the new apartment. Or to her new neighbourhood. She still woke up some mornings and, half-awake, thought she was in the bedroom she'd had all her life until, in the semi-darkness, she recognised that the furniture was arranged differently, and she could hear the neighbours already arguing in the courtyard, and the clatter of rubbish containers being moved as the day dawned. Then she would roll over to face the wall, as if it were all a bad dream, and changing her posture would be enough to wake up on the good side of life, in her former spacious, bright bedroom, her long-time house in her old neighbourhood, going to the school all her friends still attended.

That was how Valeria woke up those September mornings. She stayed in her bed, not wanting to get up, until her father came in honking his horn:

"Get up, penguin!" Honk, honk!

*Genuine honks with a huge horn from a vintage car. My father was a clown.*

Yes, indeed. Valeria's father was a clown.

*A genuine clown, the kind with a red nose and huge shoes. But a clown with no flair.*

After losing his job, her father tried everything, and when he got tired of sending out his CV, he ended up establishing a small company with another unemployed former colleague, providing entertainment at birthday celebrations and children's parties. And that's what he was now: a clown. But a poor clown.

*Hey, I don't have anything against clowns. It's just that he wasn't funny. And that's the worst possible thing for a clown. And something else, even worse: sometimes, he'd walk along the street in costum, to advertise himself. Wearing green trousers, a multi-coloured shirt several sizes too big, huge red shoes, white gloves, a pink wig, a big nose and make-up.*

And a horn.

*Right, the horn. He'd go down the street honking the horn as he handed out leaflets, especially in parks and at school gates, so they'd hire him for their birthday parties. When you're little, having a dad who's a clown might be the best thing in the world, and make you the envy of your friends. My brother Teo loved it. But I wasn't a little girl anymore. No-one at your secondary school is going to congratulate you because your dad wears a red nose.*

That's why, from the first day of classes, Valeria insisted on going to, and coming home from school alone, with nobody picking her up.

"I'll pick up Teo at school and then we'll come by for you," her father insisted, but Valeria wasn't going to risk having a clown honking a horn at the entrance to her new school. That was all she needed.



## CHAPTER 5

But let's get back to the bus stop the day Valeria swears she discovered her double and her life changed. There was our heroine, just out of school, waiting for the Number 9 bus and deep in thought. Thinking about her exam the next day, the first one. About where to go during recess: because staying in the classroom or the library was a bad idea, they'd take her for a nerd; though walking round the playground or sitting by herself in a corner wasn't the best solution either. Wondering why her former classmates – including Laura, who she thought was her best friend – hadn't been in touch the previous Saturday about going to the basketball courts. Thinking about an explosive pimple that had emerged on her chin, which she couldn't hide with make-up, and thanks to which she'd spent the whole morning with her hand on her chin as if she were on the verge of saying something really important. Oh, and also thinking about that boy from the classroom opposite who'd been looking at her in the corridor since the beginning of the school year.

*Do you have to tell this bit?*

It happened every day, in the few minutes between classes. The boy glanced at her and she glanced at him. Then he would pretend he wasn't looking, and she would too, until she glanced at him again and he glanced back at her. They'd do this the whole time. Nothing more and nothing less. The same thing every morning: the bell would ring and they'd go out into the corridor until the next teacher arrived. The boy would stand beside the door of his classroom, Valeria beside hers, and they'd look, and then pretend they weren't looking, and then look at each other again, and they'd feel embarrassed and act as if they were looking at the noticeboard or the window, until they'd look for each other out of the corner of their eyes. Nothing more and nothing less.

So, there was Valeria, at the bus stop, one Monday in September, at noon, thinking her own thoughts. And keeping an eye on her phone, waiting for Laura to answer her last message, suspecting that her former classmates had set up another chat group without her. And then she looked up. And saw HER. At the bus stop opposite, on the other side of the street. The other girl. Her double.

## CHAPTER 6

On Tuesday, the day after that first sighting at the bus stop, her impatience made the morning seem incredibly long. Endless. She couldn't concentrate in class. At recess, she faked she was watching the football game while, out of the corner of her eye, she watched the girls in her class who knew each other from the previous year and had formed a clique. Distracted, she got hit by a ball, and had to pretend her ear wasn't stinging so they wouldn't laugh at her. She even forgot about the game-of-exchanged-looks between classes with the boy across the corridor; in fact, that morning she didn't even go out into the corridor. Until the bell announcing the end of classes finally rang.

She hurried out to the bus stop, in case the other girl had got there first and boarded her bus without giving Valeria time to see her. But there she was again: sitting down like she had been the day before, on the opposite side of the street. She was coming from school as well, backpack on her shoulder and holding a folder. But she couldn't be at the same school as Valeria, they would have seen each other before. She had to be in a different one that Valeria knew was nearby, a state school with whose students Valeria's classmates were always squabbling. They'd challenge them to football matches and sometimes they had to be separated because they almost came to blows.

Valeria thought she and her double must have been catching the bus like this since the school year began. How had she not noticed her before? She was always distracted, looking at her phone, doing her homework at the bus stop, reading.

She stared at the girl, even more astonished than on the previous day. It was as if they resembled each other more now. Not her double, not someone who was the same, but Valeria herself.

*More me than me. I don't know if I'm explaining myself. As if I was now the double and she was the original.*

Suddenly, the other girl looked up in the direction of Valeria, who got such a fright that she hid her face, turned around and started to study the timetables at the bus stop. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the other girl go back to what she'd been doing; it didn't look as if she'd even seen Valeria.

When Valeria got home, she said she had lots of homework, shut herself in her room and didn't come out until dinner time. She spent the whole time lying on her bed looking at the ceiling, and occasionally inspecting the photo on her phone, trying to understand the whole thing, only to be interrupted by that pain, Teo, who came into her room without knocking and, when he saw her like

that, on her bed staring at the ceiling, asked her if she had fallen in love, which was what he always said to stir her up.

“Go to hell, shrimp,” Valeria snarled at him quietly so her mother wouldn’t hear her. She shut the door, threw herself on her bed again, and looked at the photo one more time. There had to be some explanation, and she was going to find it.

## CHAPTER 7

Three more days went by in this way. Valeria went to school but couldn't concentrate in class, and spent her recesses either in the bathroom or walking round and round the playground. She continued the exchange-of-looks game in the corridor with the boy, but in as distracted a manner as she was when the teacher asked her something, and she'd blush while her classmates laughed at her absent-mindedness. She was just waiting for the bell to ring to rush to the bus stop, find the other girl, and look at her less furtively each day, defiantly, as if hoping the girl would realise, that she would raise her eyes and catch Valeria looking; waiting to see what the other girl would do, hoping that she'd take the initiative and come over, since Valeria hadn't dared to do so as yet.

But the other girl was always looking at her phone, and would end up boarding her bus without noticing Valeria.

The weekend was unbearable. Two days without seeing her. She started to have doubts: did the girl really exist or was she some sort of mirage, a sly trick of the imagination? Was she going mad? She would look at the image on her phone again and it was of no use in dispelling her doubts. Wasn't she herself the subject of the photo given that, no matter how often she looked at it, enlarged it, and enlarged it again, she could see no difference? But her impatience also made the weekend unbearable: she wanted it to be Monday as soon as possible. Because she was determined to take the initiative, to find out the truth. She convinced herself that on Monday, she would approach the mysterious girl and talk to her. She had to do it.

On this same weekend, she finally caught up with Laura, her best friend, or rather, the girl she thought was her best friend until the summer just gone when, thanks to her family's move, they started to grow apart. Now, it was Valeria who called Laura, and they arranged to meet at the housing estate's basketball court along with some other mutual friends.

On the way there, Valeria walked past her old street and stopped in front of the house where she'd lived until just two months earlier. She leant over the fence, saw the small garden full of toys, and the puny apple tree that she and Teo had hoped would grow enough to hold a tree house up top one day. She looked towards her window, which no longer had her paper stars on it. She felt more weird than sad, as if another Valeria might lean out at any moment, a Valeria who would go on living there and carry on with her life from the point where she had left it when they moved.

Laura and the others were waiting for her at the basketball court. They exchanged hugs and kisses, and caught up on their news.

“How’s your new school?” asked Laura.

“Oh, great,” Valeria replied with her best smile. “I’ve been lucky; I’ve already got some friends who’ve made it much easier for me.”

Valeria spoke most enthusiastically about her new home (*‘It’s lovely, you have to come over one afternoon.’*), the neighbourhood (*‘It’s not as boring as here, the streets are buzzing with life’*), and she told an amusing story about her school which was in fact something that had happened to another girl but which she presented as if it had happened to her.

Laura and the other girls told her about their school, the one that had also been Valeria’s until the end of the previous school year: new teachers to whom they’d already given nicknames, former classmates, and other people Valeria didn’t know, handsome boys and ugly boys. But they spoke among themselves more and more, shared jokes that Valeria didn’t understand, referred to people she didn’t know, and so she gradually fell silent, like you do when you arrive late at a party and everyone’s laughing and dancing, but you don’t manage to become part of it, and you feel as if you’re looking at them from the other side of a window as you gradually fade away.

As they said their goodbyes that afternoon on the basketball court, Laura said she’d get in touch about another get together, and spoke to her in the way she always had, her words suggesting nothing unusual. Nevertheless, Valeria sensed that there was something different, a distance between them she didn’t know how to explain, but which hurt. On the way back to her house, she thought she would have liked to share with Laura the discovery of her double. If not Laura, then who else was she going to tell?