

DOPPELGÄNGER

by LILY OLTHOFF

„You look just like her.”

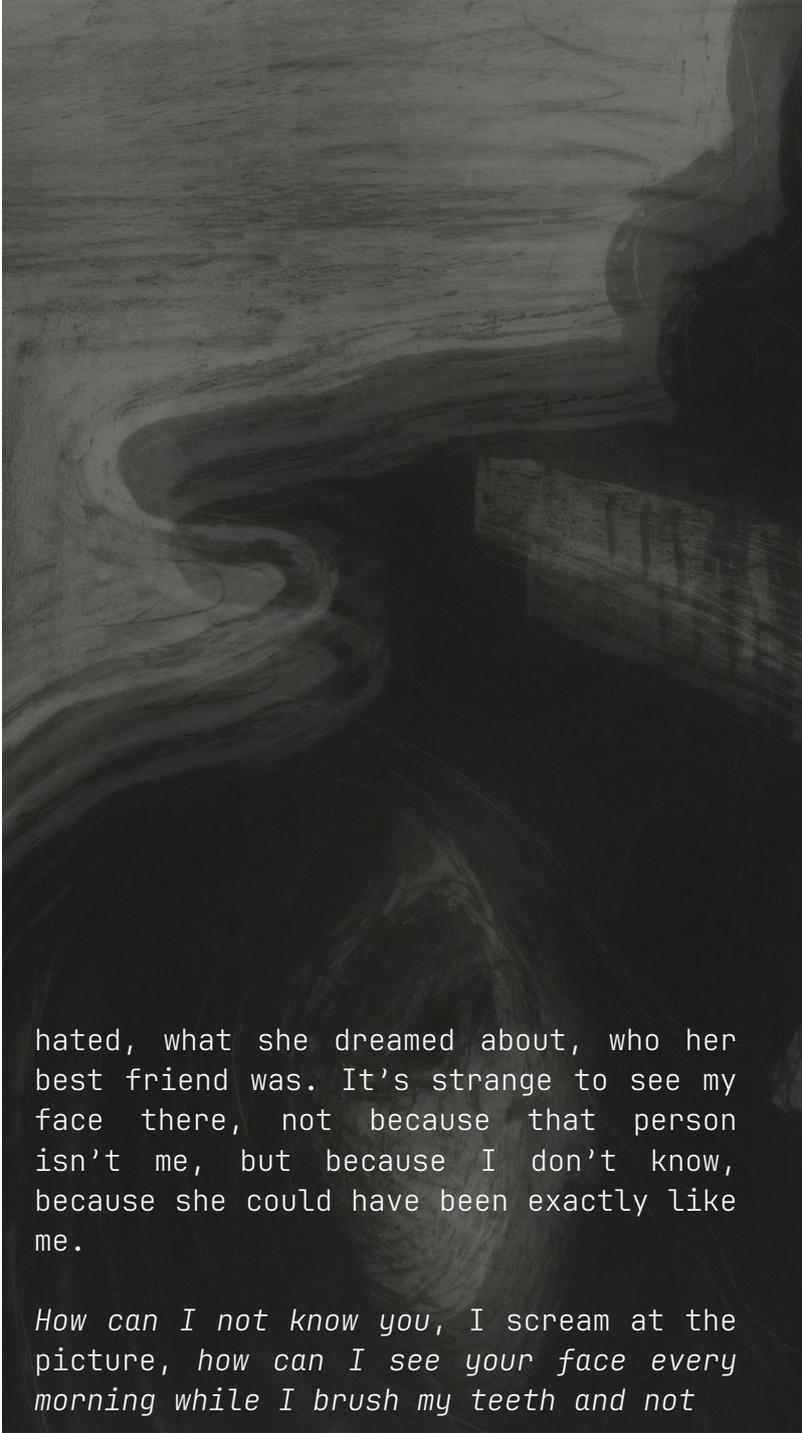
I have never met the woman coming up to me, but she knows me, because you hear about your coworker's daughters, and she recognized my face when I moved into the neighbourhood.

If you can call it my face.

“It's extraordinary, you are the spitting image of her”, she says, and I smile the smile that's not my smile, and ask about her new job, and she wishes me luck for my exams, and then I carry my grocery bags inside, and go on with my day all the while wondering why this is not making me cry.

You expect grief to be something insurmountable, a crushing weight that stops you from continuing your life, but its mundanity is the most terrifying part of all. At some point it stops being overpowering and becomes a small itch in the back of your head, a scab that won't go away. *It doesn't hurt, I think, why doesn't it hurt anymore?*

I can open decades-old photo albums of my grandparents' and see my face without recognising the person in the picture. I know nothing about her; what food she



hated, what she dreamed about, who her best friend was. It's strange to see my face there, not because that person isn't me, but because I don't know, because she could have been exactly like me.

How can I not know you, I scream at the picture, how can I see your face every morning while I brush my teeth and not

know you? It's a rhetorical question, of course. The answer is really simple, actually. The real question I'm asking used to be *how dare you be dead?* and is now *why did I never ask about your best friend when I still could?*

The worst part about photos is their silence. And how looking at them changes how you see the world. If all you have left of something is a photo, then you notice at some point it's the only image you have. It warps your perspective and eventually overtakes it.

Sometimes I'm scared I will open a photo album and only see me in her face.

I walk around with a dead woman's face. Which was already strange while we were both alive but now has made me into a monument for other people's grief. I like it for the most part. I don't like making people melancholic when they see my smile that isn't mine, but I like to pretend the determination showing on my face is hers, that her fierceness is carried around in the set of my jaws. I laugh often because I've forgotten her laughter, and I hope someone else can hear it in my voice. I hope sometimes to not be seen, for others to see her when they look at me, because then she would still be around.

It's a paradox: people tell me I walk around with someone else's face but to me it has always been mine, and I can't see anyone else but me in it. I've stood in front of a mirror so many times trying to make it out, but it's just me staring back. I carry an entire person around with me that is visible to everyone but myself, which is at once

too much responsibility and not crushing enough. I would like to feel the weight of her in the corners of my eyes and the fall of my hair, but she's just gone. I hate that she's gone. But more than that I hate that this is a constancy, that I am reminded of her absence every time I see my reflection in a shop window and can't see her, just me; not only occasionally when I visit her grave or don't have to buy a present for her birthday. Because she isn't there. Not in my contact list, not sitting in my kitchen when I bake her favourite cake, not even in the outline of my nose when I look at my reflection. She's nowhere left on earth, except in my head when I think of her every day, and she never answers, because I can't come up with what she would say.

I don't ask for hauntings; but if I appear haunted to everybody else, is it too much to ask that I can see it, too?