

The Doppelgänger Girl

He wouldn't have ever noticed her if she weren't so tall; not in the office, nor here on the Metro train two rows back from him. Though Dale stood at just over six feet, she was probably an inch or two taller than him. She looked young; he figured she was a summer intern. Her brown hair was cut stylishly just above the shoulders, with heavy bangs that fell down to the eyebrows. He also noticed that she had the misfortune of a slight peach-fuzz mustache, though that didn't bother him. Those sorts of quirks made women more interesting. Perfect was boring.

Like other tall women, she tried not to stand out too much. Sitting diagonally to allow her long legs to extend into the aisle, he noted the flat-heeled shoes she wore to keep from appearing too tall. She was slender and no doubt played the usual tall-people sports like basketball and volleyball. Dale wondered about what it must have been like to always tower over the boys in her class. He decided he would just ask her which division she worked in, when he got a chance.

As the train approached the next station, she put away the magazine in preparation to exit. This was also his stop, yet another sign that he should say hello. He rose from his seat and followed her out the doors to the platform. He pulled alongside her and matched her stride.

"I think we work in the same building," he said, flashing a smile.

Her brow furrowed as she studied his face, trying to figure out if she recognized him.

"Down on F street, F and 8th?" he prompted.

"Oh, no I work at 17th and L," she said, smiling politely as she continued toward the escalator.

"Really? You don't work there?" he said, looking closer at her face as he tried to keep up.
"Could've sworn I've seen you walking around the offices."

"Nope. Sorry."

“Huh. Well, do you have a twin?” he asked, but again she shook her head. “Maybe a Doppelgänger then?”

She laughed. “No, but I’d be interested to know who this person is, if she looks so much like me.”

Now at something of a loss for words, he figured he might as well introduce himself. Her name was Megan, and she worked in a policy advocacy organization. As they continued up the escalator, Dale changed the subject to the Metro’s troubles, as good a small-talk topic for anyone as the weather. She smiled and chuckled and seemed to enjoy talking to him, even as much as he enjoyed talking to her. In another time, he might have asked to meet her for coffee, to get to know each other better. Dale and his girlfriend, Chelsea, had just celebrated the six-month mark with a nice dinner the other night, so he stifled his urge to ask Megan out as they approached the top of the escalators.

As they emerged onto the street he said, “I still can’t believe you’re not the same person as the girl in my office.”

Her broad smile added small dimples to the list of her cute quirks. “You’ll have to get a picture of this twin sister I never knew about,” she said.

Over the next week, the mistake nagged at him. Every detail of the girl on the metro train fit with so precisely with his memory of the girl from his office building. It didn’t seem possible for him to have been so wrong. Each day he hoped to see this Megan-like person at work, hoping for a chance encounter with the clone/twin/Doppelgänger in the halls or on the elevator.

One night at dinner with his girlfriend, Chelsea, he was so lost in thought that she had to call his name several times to get his attention. “Dale! I’m talking to you and you’re just staring off into space. Talk to me.”

Deciding it would make for a quirky bit of conversation, he told her the story of the tall girl at work and the encounter with an impossibly close match on the metro.

“I see,” Chelsea nodded. She furrowed her brow, and he knew instantly he’d made a mistake in saying anything at all. “So . . . you’ve been meeting girls on the metro?” she asked.

“No, nothing like that,” he said, waving off whatever assumptions she was making with a toss of his hand. He and Chelsea had been dating for nearly seven months, but she had begun to show a possessive streak that drowned out any humor in encounters with other females. Still, he tried to explain. “You’ve got to understand – she looked just like that intern or whatever she does. I had to ask her.”

Chelsea didn’t understand. He found himself trapped answering landmine questions about whether he found tall girls attractive, and if he would have introduced himself if the person were male. “Shouldn’t I try to meet colleagues outside the office to do some networking?” he asked. She remained unconvinced, so instead he told her to just drop it. He wiped his face with the napkin and dropped it on his empty plate. He was still hungry; all they ever did was go to the hot restaurants with great reviews online and eat small plates.

“Let’s go to another bar,” he said. “It’s not that late. How about that place we walked by on the way here? Lot of people there.”

Chelsea shook her head. “Maybe it’s not late for you; I need to start preparing for bed soon. You should have planned ahead if you wanted to go out later tonight.”

He sighed. They finished the meal in silence.

He probably would’ve forgotten all about Megan and Doppelgängers, if he hadn’t spotted Megan coming down the hallway towards him one afternoon as he was hurrying to the bathroom.

She met his eyes as they approached and gave him a polite smile as she continued on past; she all but said “hello” out loud. With all the coffee he’d consumed that morning he didn’t have time to chat, but since a sighting of her seemed to be as rare as that of an endangered butterfly in a forest he had to seize the moment.

He turned and called out, “Megan.”

She didn’t respond.

He called out “Megan!” again, louder this time, but still failed to grab her attention.

Though he was close to bursting, he hurried back to her before she could reach the elevators.

“Oh, were you speaking to me?” she said. “My name is Margaret.”

He stared at her. She seemed to tower over him, even there were only a few inches difference. Her brown hair was cropped at the shoulders and she was wearing a navy blue suit jacket and skirt. Her eyebrows matched the thickness of those of the girl on the metro but there seemed to be less peach fuzz on her upper lip. Perhaps she had waxed recently? There were small moles on her cheeks about the mouth, but he couldn’t whether whether those also matched the girl from the train. He took a gamble.

“Oh,” he said, with a friendly smile he mixed with a show of embarrassed confusion.

“You must not remember meeting on the metro one night a few weeks ago.”

She squinted, appearing to try remembering whether she may have met him, but then shook her head. “No. Sorry. I don’t think we’ve met.”

“I guess I confused you with someone else. I work on this floor, and I’ve seen you a few times.” He was doing his best to refrain from doing a potty dance.

“I work for accounting, down the hall.” She gestured at the door at the end of the corridor. She looked down and caught him wriggling his feet. “Um, I don’t want to hold you up,” she said. “I have to go to a meeting, anyways.”

“Yep, on my way to the bathroom. Look, I thought maybe you’re just the Doppelgänger of her or something,” he offered a strained laugh. She appeared puzzled, and he realized she had no idea what a Doppelgänger might be. “I’ll have to catch up with you again, Megan. Er, Margaret.” He turned and quickly shuffled his way back down the hallway. Behind him, she said something he couldn’t wait long enough to hear.

At the urinal he breathed a huge sigh of relief. As he stared at the tiled wall, he marveled at just how much Margaret looked like Megan, at how many similar features they shared. Was his memory playing tricks on him?

A thought struck him, making his jaw clench. This could all be a trick being played on him. Surely she glanced at him first as they approached each other in the hallway. Maybe they were twins, he thought, and Megan told this Margaret girl to pretend she didn’t know him. Twins did that sort of thing all the time, didn’t they? Trading places for a test the one didn’t study for, going on dates with each others’ boyfriends. Why not play tricks on that weird guy from the train – sounds like a lark!

And what was it she said after he ran to the bathroom? It sounded like his name. He’d never even introduced himself, since he was in such dire need of the bathroom that he’d forgotten. Only Megan knew his name, and he didn’t know anyone in accounting. So who else could have told her?

There was only one way to know: catch a glance at her ID. They worked in a building that required photo ID badges to be worn at all times. He remembered hers hung from her neck,

which would be easy enough to glimpse during another brief conversation. All he had to do was visit that hallway at the same time. *We're all creatures of habit*, he thought. There would be a chance he would find her there again.

Each day he visited the bathroom at precisely 2:36 p.m. in hopes of catching Margaret once more. He scheduled a reminder on his computer's calendar to avoid forgetting while engrossed in work. Yet, for two weeks he had no luck.

Chelsea was less than understanding of his annoyance with these twins playing some sort of stupid trick on him. "So you've got a twins fantasy?" she replied. "Hitting on girls on the metro and at work?" Without skipping a beat she dove into one of her ongoing complaints that he didn't email her enough from the office. Didn't he care enough to let her know how his day was going? Dale sighed and placated her with promises that he would email her more often.

Just when he was ready to forget all about Doppelgängers and twins, he spotted her in the hallway during one of his scheduled trips to the bathroom. "Margaret!" he said, laughing. "I managed to get it right this time." She replied with a tight polite smile. He went on to make small talk about the weather, then asked her how her work was going and isn't it just so busy these days?

"Oh, yeah, it always seems to be," relaxing into the small talk. "Seems work only piles up and this week we've got this project . . ."

While she talked he looked down at her badge. He was trying hard to read the name in fine print, his eyes narrowing. Her badge actually said Margaret M. Reynolds. The M. – what could that stand for? Then he looked up to find her glaring at him. He realized that he appeared to be staring at her breasts.

“Uh, sorry, I was, uh, looking at the picture on your badge. Not your boobs. Er, breasts, I mean. Can I ask what the M stands for?”

“Mind,” was her only response.

“Mine? That’s an odd n. . .”

“As in Mind Your Manners.”

He felt his face go flush. “No, no. Let me explain . . . See, I met this girl on the metro and she looks just like you and, you know, like *a lot* like you and . . . well, I sort of thought maybe you were either her and playing a trick on me or you two were twins and playing a trick on me, like twins do and all. Anyway, I just thought if I could catch a look at your name I could figure it out.” He offered a nervous laugh. “Kind of a funny story, right?”

Her glare hadn’t wavered.

“Look, I don’t know if this works on other girls,” she said. “But I just don’t date anyone from the office.” She walked past him before he could say anything else.

They could still be twins, but her outrage was so genuine that it was hard to maintain the theory.

But if you stop think about it, Dale thought, a Doppelgänger is not such a far-fetched idea. Of all the people in the world, there is a possibility that some distant cousin directly related to your great grandfather, and carrying the same DNA that defines facial features, could end up living and working in the same city. All superstitious beliefs in Doppelgängers aside, it’s conceivable that a close copy of you could be walking around somewhere in the world, and closer than you might suspect. In Dale’s online research, he couldn’t find anyone who seriously attempted to calculate the odds of running into one’s own Doppelgänger, but it just had to be better than one in six billion.

The more he thought about it, the more he become convinced he had to pursue the possibility as a matter of science. There was a simple way to test the theory: take a picture of one girl to compare with the other.

He knew where to find Margaret at least. Winding his way through the halls of offices, he found his way to the accounting department. Looking like just another busybody office worker, he surreptitiously eyed each cubicle he passed, hoping to see the brown hair of a tall girl. More than a few people stopped him to ask if he needed help. Finally, someone directed him to a Margaret on the next floor. He wandered around that floor, but couldn't find any cubicles with a Margaret on the nameplate. After an hour he still hadn't spotted her, but needed to return to his desk. He found his way back to the elevators.

When the elevator doors opened, he found himself face to face with Margaret Mind. She didn't seem too pleased to see him and prepared to move past him quickly.

“Look, let me apologize,” he blurted, standing before her but trying not to block the door too obviously.

“Fine. I'm going back to work.” She brushed past Dale.

“Okay, just – “

She didn't stop to hear him out. As she receded further down the hall, he decided he had just one more chance to get what he needed to settle this. He bounded down the corridor, digging his cell phone out of his pocket on the way.

“Margaret!”

When she turned he seized the moment. The flash on his phone startled her. “What the fu...!” He hustled back down the hall before she could say anything more. After the elevator doors

closed he looked down at the picture on his phone: the expression was a mix of surprise and disgust, but it was a clear shot of her face.

The best chance of seeing Megan again would be where he knew she would exit from at the end of her workday, the station he first met her. Starting at 5 p.m., he posted himself at the top of the escalators, with a clear view of those exiting. He stood partially hidden by the corner of a brick wall and held newspaper open before him – just another commuter standing about and killing time. His cell phone buzzed in his pocket: Chelsea . . . again. He pressed Ignore; he didn't want to be distracted when Megan emerged. A text message from Chelsea popped on his screen: *Stop ignoring my calls!* He sighed and shoved his phone back in his pocket.

Finally, Megan appeared. He let her pass him as he pretended to be engrossed in an article about banking reform. Then he tailed her for a few minutes before hustling to catch up to her.

“Hey, Megan,” he said, grinning. “It's you again.”

She smiled. “So it is. Surprised you don't think it's my twin.”

“Wait, so you do have a twin?” He tried to contain his excitement.

“Ha, I had you going. I was just joking, from the last time we met,” she said. “How are you? It's Dale, right?”

“Oh, yeah, funny. But speaking of funny, I think I ran into your Doppelgänger. She does work in my building.”

“Oh really?” she said.

Dale thought she seemed genuinely interested. “Last time you said you would want to see a picture of this girl,” he said. She tilted her head slightly and scrunched up forehead, trying to remember whether she did say that.

“As a matter of fact, I have one right here . . .” He already had the photo pulled up on his phone’s screen. He held the phone up for her, and waited while she looked over the picture.

She burst out laughing. “That doesn’t even look like me!”

“What? Of course it does!”

“I look in the mirror every day. That’s not even close.” She smirked. “And that girl looks really pissed.”

Dale saw a look of pity cross over her face. “Hey, I’m flattered and all,” she said. “But I’m not looking to date anyone right now. Nice meeting you.” She walked away as he remained standing there.

He stared at the picture. She was right – the nose was longer and narrower, and the moles on the face didn’t match those of Megan. Actually, Megan didn’t even have moles on her face.

Dale hardly worked at all the next day. He sat staring at his screen, idly clicking through silly celebrity gossip articles on the Internet. He kept picturing Megan laughing at him. He briefly scanned through an email from Chelsea: a long essay about his failure to meet her needs, and informed him in no uncertain terms that she was breaking up with him.

At 2:30 p.m., his boss summoned him to a conference room. Joining them were a dour-faced woman from HR and a stiff-backed man from security.

“Sir,” the woman from HR said. “We need to ask you some questions regarding a sexual harassment complaint filed against you.” The man from security added, “And we also need to see your cell phone.”