



*A Novel*

*The*  
**Girls**

Lori  
Lansens

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ALSO BY LORI LANSENS

*Rush Home Road*

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*For my mother and father*

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## *Ruby & Me*

I have never looked into my sister's eyes. I have never bathed alone. I have never stood in the grass at night and raised my arms to a beguiling moon. I've never used an airplane bathroom. Or worn a hat. Or been kissed like that. I've never driven a car. Or slept through the night. Never a private talk. Or a solo walk. I've never climbed a tree. Or faded into a crowd. So many things I've never done, but so many how I've been loved. And, if such things were to be, I'd live a thousand lives as me, to be loved so exponentially.

My sister, Ruby, and I, by mishap or miracle, having intended to divide from a single fertilized egg, remained joined instead, by a spot the size of a bread plate on the sides of our twin heads. We're known to the world medical community as the oldest surviving craniopagus twins (we are twenty-nine years old) and to millions around the globe, those whose interest in people like us is more than just passing, as conjoined craniopagus twins Rose and Ruby Darlen of Baldoon County. We've been called many things: freaks, horrors, monsters, devils, witches, retards, wonders, marvels. To most, we're a curiosity. In small-town Leaford, where we live and work, we're just "The Girls."

Raise your right hand. Press the base of your palm to the lobe of your right ear. Cover your ear and fan out your fingers—that's where my sister and I are affixed, our faces not quite side by side, our skulls fused together in a circular pattern running up the temple and curving around the frontal lobe. If you glance at us, you might think we're two women embracing, leaning against the other tête-à-tête the way sisters do.

Ruby and I are identical twins and would be identical looking, having high foreheads like our mother and wide, full mouths, except that Ruby's face is arranged quite nicely (in fact, Ruby is very beautiful), whereas my features are misshapen and frankly grotesque. My right eye slants steeply toward the place my right ear would have been if my sister's head had not grown there instead. My nose is longer than Ruby's, one nostril wider than the other, pulled to the right of my brown slanted eye. My lower jaw shifts to the left, slurring my speech and giving a husky quality to my voice. Patches of eczema rouge my cheeks, while Ruby's complexion is fair and flawless. Our scalps meet in the middle of our conjoined heads, but my frizzy hair has a glint of auburn, while my sister is a swingy brunette. Ruby has a deep cleft in her chin, which people find endearing.

I'm five feet five inches tall. When we were born, my limbs were symmetrical, in proportion to my body. Presently, my right leg is a full three inches shorter than my left, my spine compressed, my right hip cocked, and all because I have carried my sister like an infant since I was a baby myself. Ruby's tiny thighs astride my hip, my arm supporting her posterior, her arm forever around my neck. Ruby is my sister. And strangely, undeniably, my child.

There is some discomfort in our conjoinment. Ruby and I experience mild to severe neck, jaw, and shoulder pain, for which we take physiotherapy three times a week. The strain on my body is constant as I bear Ruby's weight, as I tote Ruby on my hip, as I struggle to turn Ruby over in our bed or perch on my stool beside the toilet for what seems like hours. (Ruby has a multitude of bowel and urinary tract problems.) We are challenged, certainly, and uncomfortable, sometimes, but neither Ruby nor I would describe our conjoinment as painful.

It's difficult to explain our locomotion as conjoined twins or how it developed from birth using grunts and gestures and what I suppose must be telepathy. There are days when, like a normal person, we're clumsy and uncoordinated. We have less natural symbiosis when one of us (usually Ruby) is sick, but mostly our dance is a smooth one. We hate doing things in unison, such as answering yes or no at the same time. We never finish each other's sentences. We can't shake our heads at once or nod (and wouldn't if we could—see above). We have an unspoken, even unconscious, system of checks and balances to determine who'll lead the way at any given moment. There is conflict. There is compromise.

Ruby and I share a common blood supply. My blood flows normally in the left side of my brain, but the blood in my right (the connected side) flows to my sister's left, and vice versa for her. It is estimated that we share a web of one hundred veins as well as our skull bones. Our cerebral tissue is fully enmeshed, our vascular systems snarled like briar bushes, but our brains themselves are separate and functioning. Our thoughts are distinctly our own. Our selves have struggled fiercely to be unique and in fact we're more different than most identical twins. I like sports, but I'm also bookish, while Ruby is girly and prefers television. When Ruby is tired, I'm hardly ever ready for bed. We're rarely hungry together and our tastes are poles apart: I prefer spicy fare, while my sister has a disturbing fondness for eggs.

Ruby believes in God and ghosts and reincarnation. (Ruby won't speculate on her next incarnation, though, as if imagining something different from what she is now would betray us both.) I believe the best the dead can hope for is to be conjured from time to time, through a note of haunting music or a passage in a book.

I've never set eyes on my sister, except in mirror images and photographs, but I know Ruby's gestures as my own, through the movement of her muscles and bone. I love my sister as I love myself. I hate her that way too.

This is the story of *my* life. I'm calling it *Autobiography of a Conjoined Twin*. But since my sister claims that it can't technically ("technically" is Ruby's current favorite word) be considered an *autobiography* and is opposed to my telling what she considers *our* story, I have agreed that she should write some chapters from her point of view. I will strive to tell my story honestly, allowing that my truth will be colored a shade different from my sister's and acknowledging that it's sometimes necessary for the writer to connect the dots.

What I know about writing I've learned mostly from reading books and from Aunt Lovey, who, along with Uncle Stash (born Stanislaus Darlensky in Grozovo, Slovakia, in 1924), raised Ruby and me from birth. I was accepted into the English program at a nearby university, but Ruby wouldn't agree to go. I knew she'd refuse, but I'd applied to the school anyway, so I could be aggrieved and excused. With Ruby sulking at my side, I'd handed the acceptance letter to Aunt Lovey. "How can I ever be a writer if I don't study writing? How can I be a writer if I don't even have a degree?" I cried.

Aunt Lovey hated self-pity. "Don't blame your sister if you don't become a writer. I don't know how pistons piss, but I can sure as hell drive a car." She gave me a look and strode away.

The next day Aunt Lovey presented me with a book called *Aspects of the Novel* by E. M. Forster.

She wrapped it in leftover Christmas paper and taped a daisy from the garden to the top, even though it was a library book, due back in two weeks. Then she drove me to the Kmart to purchase a ten-pack of pencils and a stack of yellow legal pads. Ruby threw up out the car window when we pulled into the parking lot, somewhat ruining the excursion. As Aunt Lovey cleaned the side of the Impala, I opened *Aspects of the Novel* to a random page and read aloud from a long, tedious paragraph on the subject of death and the treatment of death in the novel. Aunt Lovey beamed at me as though I'd written the passage myself. Ruby groaned, but I don't know if it was illness or envy.

From the very beginning, Ruby hated my writing. She didn't see the point of my character sketches and accused me of cheating when my poems didn't rhyme. One time, after reading one of my short stories, she asked me, "Who are you writing this for anyway, Rose?" I was stung. Because I didn't know. And thought I should. My love of reading has distanced my sister and me. Ruby has never enjoyed books, unless you count children's books and the Hollywood magazines she drools over in doctors' waiting rooms.

I inherited my love of books from Aunt Lovey, though I like to think my birth mother was bookish too. Aunt Lovey was seldom without a book in her hands or one splayed on the arm of her brown vinyl La-Z-Boy in the den. She made the sunporch beside the pantry at the back of the old farmhouse where we grew up into a storage room filled with books. We called the room "the library," though there wasn't a bookcase in sight—just stacks and stacks of paperbacks, 784 in all, keeping the cold in the plaster-and-lath walls. When Aunt Lovey died, we donated her books to the Leaford Library, which happens to be where we are currently employed. I sort and shelve, and Ruby reads to school groups though obviously not at the same time. (In case you're wondering, we are each paid a salary for our individual hours worked.) Aunt Lovey used to tell me that if I wanted to be a writer, I needed a writer's voice. "Read," she'd say, "and if you have a writer's voice, one day it will shout out, 'I can do that too!'"

My voice did shout out, but I'm not sure it said, "I can do that too." I don't ever recall being that confident. I think my voice said, "I *must* do that too." When I was in eighth grade, one of my poems called "Lawrence," was selected for the yearbook's Poetry Corner. I submitted the poem anonymously, pleased to know that when the yearbook staff chose it, it wasn't out of pity for one of The Girls. After "Lawrence" was published (even if I was just a kid, and it was only the yearbook), I announced (at fourteen years old) that my next work would be an autobiography. Aunt Lovey snapped her fingers and said, "Call it *Two for One*. Wouldn't that be cute? Or *Double Duty*."

I've sent sixty-seven short stories out for review (one has been published in *Prairie Fire*) and several hundred poems (eleven published in the *Leaford Mirror*, one in the *Wascana Review*, and the fifth of one—don't ask—in *Fiddlehead*). I've been composing this autobiography in my mind for fifteen years, but these are the first words I've put down. If someone asks how long it took to write, I won't know how to answer.

MY SISTER AND I knew from early on that we were rare and unusual, although I can't recall any single moment of clarity, as in "Ahh," she thought, "not all people are attached to their siblings." I can remember a struggle. We must have been around three years old—I've played it over and over in my head.

It goes like this. . . . There are the burnt-orange fibers of the shag carpet in the den at the old farmhouse. My small hand disappears completely in the thick deep pile. The room smells of Lysol and

Aunt Lovey's lavender powder. Aunt Lovey has placed Ruby and me in the middle of the room. I'm sitting on my bottom. Ruby is clinging to me, alternately balancing herself on her curious little legs and wrapping them around my waist as I shift to accommodate her weight. Ruby is forever beside me. I understand that I am *me*, but that I am also *we*.

Aunt Lovey wades through the carpet in her worn pink house slippers and places a Baby Tenderlove doll on the other side of the playroom in front of the silver radiator. Baby Tenderlove is mine. Aunt Lovey gave her to me in the morning when she gave Ruby her Kitty Talks a Little. She lets us play with the dolls for a few minutes, then took them away. Aunt Lovey was deaf to our sobbing. Here's the doll again. Only she's so far away. I lift my arms. And stretch. I know I can't reach the baby doll this way, but this is my language. It means "I want it." I kick my feet and cry. I see Aunt Lovey and Uncle Stash watching from the doorway. Aunt Lovey says, "Go on, Rosie. You go get your baby. You go get your baby doll." I look into Uncle Stash's eyes. *Please. Please, Uncle Stash. Please.* He's a pushover for Ruby and me. He starts forward to get my baby doll, but Aunt Lovey holds him back. I scream again. And kick the floor. Ruby whimpers, frustrated and annoyed and wondering what became of her doll. I kick the floor again, bumping myself up and down in protest, and suddenly without intending to, I move forward. I pause. I bump up and down again. Nothing. I kick and bump at the same time. I move forward. I stop crying and kick and bump again. I grip my sister around the waist and kick and bump, and bump and kick, and drag her along with me. We advance. Refining my alignment and the rhythm of my kick and bump, using my free hand to push, I go faster and faster across the fuzzy orange carpet. Ruby squeals in protest, her legs gripping my middle, her arm yanking my neck, tugging me back because she's not ready for this. But I'm ready. I reach the doll.

The next day, Aunt Lovey placed us in the middle of the floor again. This time she didn't put my Baby Tenderlove doll in front of the silver radiator but Ruby's Kitty Talks a Little. And it was Ruby's turn to learn how to get what she wanted. Ruby's challenge was greater than mine, though. According to Aunt Lovey, it took Ruby six months to coax me across the room. Some time after that, Aunt Lovey put my doll and Ruby's doll at separate ends of the room. A casual observer might have thought she was being cruel, but Aunt Lovey wanted more for us than just survival.

When Ruby and I were nine years old, Aunt Lovey drove us to the Leaford Library to look for books about our condition. (What books did she think we would find there? *Welcome to the Wonderful World of Craniopagy?*) Ruby had, and still has, severe motion sickness. She doesn't always tolerate antinausea medication, and more than half the time we travel, even short trips, she gets sick. Sometimes very sick. Ruby's motion sickness has further limited our already profoundly restricted lives. My travel bags, even for day trips, contain several changes of clothes for us both. Under most of my travel memories is the shaker-cheese smell of Ruby's breath.

On the way to the Leaford Library, Ruby threw up twice, and by the time we arrived I was wearing the last of my clean clothes. Even though it was normal for my sister to be carsick, I knew that it was more than Aunt Lovey's driving. (The next day Ruby was covered in chicken pox, which incidentally, did not get.)

Aunt Lovey had been disappointed to find that there were no books about cranial conjoinment, any kind of conjoinment, in the children's section upstairs. On our way to the elevator she stopped to tell the older woman at the desk that Leaford Library needed to look at its children's collection and include a book or two about *birth defects and whatnot*. "Especially," she'd added, "since you have a set of craniopagus twins living right here in your own community."

The old woman, whose name tag said ROZ and who was wearing a young woman's purple angora sweater, stared at me and my sister. Like most of Baldoon County, she'd only heard of the rare

conjoined twins. She seemed less astonished than most people on first meeting Ruby and me. Maybe that was because she knew someone not similarly, but equally, exceptional. She agreed that the children of Leaford needed to be enlightened, and then she escorted us to the elevator. I felt Ruby go limp on the quick ride down and I knew that she'd fallen asleep. I could feel the heat from her fever and considered informing Aunt Lovey that we should go home, but the old woman in the angora sweater had directed us to a book of photographs (from the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia) on one of the high shelves in the adult section. I could not leave without looking inside.

On the front of the huge book was a daguerreotype of Chang and Eng Bunker, twins from Siam, the original Siamese twins who were famous for doing circus acrobatics while being joined at the chest. After entertaining the courts of Europe, the brothers settled in North Carolina in the mid-1800s, married nontwin sisters, and fathered a total of twenty-one children! (This is absolutely true.) In the photograph the twins look distinguished, wearing identical dark suits tailored to cover the bare patches of flesh that bound them at the thorax. They lived to be sixty-three years old. Chang died in the night of a ruptured spleen. His brother's parting words are said to be, "I'll go now too."

Aunt Lovey carried that big picture book, and a few smaller books, to a large quiet table at the back of the reading area. Ruby's sleeping body was heavy. Hot. I settled down carefully on a narrow wooden bench and held my breath as Aunt Lovey's freckled hand (you would never have known by looking at her that my Aunt Lovey had Native Indian blood) opened the book. The first photograph, in black and white, was a graphic shot of a severely deformed human skeleton. Aunt Lovey read the small print out loud—"Skeleton of a seven-month-old fetus with spina bifida and anencephaly"—before she cleared her throat and turned the page. On the next page was a photograph of a nude woman, surprising not because of her white nakedness but because of a curvature of the spine that caused her to bend sharply at the middle, like a walking letter *r*. I asked Aunt Lovey to read the small print on that page, but she turned it instead. The next photograph was of a middle-aged man dressed in a starched white shirt and a cravat. An enormous plum-colored tumor appeared to have frightened the man's right eye into his forehead and chased the nose off the center of his face. I would have liked to linger on the photo, but Aunt Lovey turned the page. There, on the next page, against a velvet background, incredibly and spectacularly, were the pickled remains of infant craniopagus twins, joined not at the *side* of the head like Ruby and me, but at the *back* of the head, so that one looked forward and one behind. The babies were afloat in a massive glass jar, eyes wide, mouths open, a tooth bud visible in the larger one's lower gums. Back to back. Bum to bum. Flotsam in fluid. Tiny elements of metal visible here and there. The babies had been posed before being sunken in the jar. They were holding hands. A sob rushed out of Ruby's throat and startled me because I hadn't felt her wake. Aunt Lovey slammed the book shut. Her cheeks were scarlet. She rose to return the book to the shelf.

Ruby sniffed into the plaid handkerchief she kept, as old ladies do, tucked up in her sleeve. She opened a small red book with no pictures and read a story that haunts me, like music. The story is about Minnie and Marie. Minnie and Marie were born joined at the chest (that would be a thoropagus conjoinment) in Wales in 1959. The combined weight of the girls at birth was only seven pounds. Even at the time they were eighteen months old, they'd spent more time in the hospital than out. Minnie and Marie were physically beautiful babies with porcelain complexions and thick black curls, and they laughed more than they cried. The babies embraced and kissed each other often, but they also fought viciously and sometimes had to be restrained by the nurses. They were slow developing language skills but communicated easily with each other. For some reason, they each called the other "Marie," which they pronounced "Me." Their adoring nurses and doctors called both babies "Me" too. Minnie and Marie were normal in all aspects except that they shared one heart, which began to fail as the

near their second birthday.

Specialists were brought in on the case, thoracic and vascular and cardiac surgeons, all of whom proposed sacrificing the sicklier baby, Marie, and giving the shared heart to the stronger twin, Minnie. Their mother, panicked by the ticking clock and the doctors' insistence that both girls would die if something wasn't done, agreed to the surgery. She kissed baby Marie good-bye forever while she prayed that the shared heart would work in baby Minnie. The heart did work in Minnie, better than the doctors had dared hope. When little Minnie opened her eyes a few days following the surgery, the roomful of doctors and nurses erupted with applause. The baby clapped too, then reached out to embrace her sister, frightened and confused to find her twin gone. Minnie searched the room for the face of Marie. "Me?" she whispered. The doctors and nurses fell silent. The baby looked around again. "Me?" she begged. "Me?" Then she looked down and, suddenly, seemed to understand that her sister had been amputated from her chest. "Hurts," she whimpered, touching the white bandages. She found the eyes of her mother, who by this time was awash in tears. "Me," Minnie said once more, then closed her eyes and died too.

AUNT LOVEY TOLD me way back then to write my story fearlessly, a little how it is, a little how I wish it could be, not just as a conjoined twin but as a human being and a woman, and all these years later that's what I'm going to do. "Write," she said, "as if you'll never be read. That way you'll be sure to tell the truth." But I *do* want to be read. I want to share this true story of my life—with you.

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## *Mother's Nature*

A tornado touched down in Baldoon County on the day Ruby and I were born. According to eyewitness accounts, after hovering over twenty acres of seed corn near Jeanette's Creek, the funnel suddenly drove to the earth, plucked four-year-old Larry Merkel and his blue bike from his gravel driveway, and, cutting a swath through the seed corn and sugar beets, stole south toward the lake with its trophy. The tornado never reached the lake but veered sharply at Cadot's Corners as if just having remembered the way. There were sightings in three more townships, then nothing. The Merkel boy was lost, but his blue bike was found on the roof of a house three concessions over, more or less intact.

The little bike, with its slightly bent front frame, once sat behind a rope in the Leaford Museum, flanked to the left by a display of antique farming implements and to the right by a congregation of monarch butterflies straight-pinned to cork. The museum was across the road from our farmhouse on Rural Route One, so Ruby and I were frequent visitors. We knew the exhibits well, and Ruby eventually became a valuable contributor. In addition to the butterflies, there were cases of musket shot from the War of 1812, and a tobacco pouch said to have belonged to the great Chief Tecumseh. What began as a small display of Neutral Indian artifacts grew, as each year my sister searched for and found dozens more objects in the fields around our home. Across from the Indian exhibit in the Leaford Museum were two larger-than-life photographs of my sister and me, taken when we were three and a half years old.

I loved listening to our Aunt Lovey, or sometimes Uncle Stash, read the handwritten sign describing Leaford's riches and rarities. Beneath our picture the placard read: "Rose and Ruby Darlen Born joined at the head on the day of the tornado—July 30, 1974—at St. Jude's Hospital, Leaford. Rose and Ruby are one of the rarest forms of conjoined twins—craniopagus. They share an essential vein and can never be separated. In spite of their situation, the girls enjoy a normal and productive life here in Leaford. Picture taken by Stash Darlen, the girls' uncle." (Aunt Lovey told me they originally used the word "predicament" to describe our conjoinment. She'd made them change it to "situation.") Beneath Larry Merkel's bent blue bike the placard read: "Child's bike. Found on Doc Charboneau's roof after the tornado, July 30, 1974. The tornado devastated Baldoon and the surrounding counties, wounding dozens of people and killing two. Property damage was estimated at over \$300,000. Ninety-mile-an-hour winds carried this child's bike almost four miles." The dead boy (whose body was never found) was not named. And there was no mention of his poor grieving mother.

St. Jude's Hospital, the place where we were born, was not equipped for disaster, and the staff didn't know where to start after the tornado had come and gone and taken Larry Merkel with it. Most of the injured were seasonal workers from the Caribbean, and many of them had been stranded in the

field, unwisely seeking shelter in a derelict barn when the wind began to wail. There were eighteen rooms in the squat brown medical building, and by four-thirty in the afternoon, a half an hour after the tornado hit, all the rooms were occupied. Several dozen bruised and bleeding men were crammed in the musty waiting room, a few more spilling out onto the slippery floor in the hall. The less serious cases waited outside, smoking and joking in their island patois, glad for the excuse to be away from the farm. Pale and white-haired Cathy Merkel, mother of little lost Larry, walked among the wounded searching the halls for her swept-away son, standing shocked and still from time to time, like one of the lengths of birch scattered across the township.

I should stop here and make it clear that all I know of the details of the tornado, and of our birth, was told to me by Aunt Lovey, who was “Nurse Darlen” to her coworkers at St. Jude’s Hospital and everything to Ruby and me. Aunt Lovey was in attendance when we were born, benignly plump back then, her mop of curls more blond than gray, her freckled face hardly lined. You might have guessed she was forty. She was fifty-two.

My recollections of Aunt Lovey’s recollections of our birth will differ, of course, the story having been combed by my memory and set by imagination. And my sister’s recollections of Aunt Lovey’s recollections of our birth, or her own memories of any of the things that have happened in our lives are very different from mine.

Back to our story: Aunt Lovey said that on the day of the tornado, Dr. Richard Ruttle Jr., on seeing his hospital crowded with injured migrant workers, called his elderly doctor-father, Dr. Richard Ruttle Sr., out of retirement to help. Nurses from several neighboring communities appeared with boxes of supplies, and a few Catholic League ladies brought food: mushroom soup casserole, Kraft slices of white bread, chicken salad with celery chunks, and Cocoa Krispies from the fridge.

Aunt Lovey was paged on the intercom. There was a call from Uncle Stash, but she couldn’t take the phone. The message had been scribbled by a harried staffer in blotchy blue pen on the back of a Kentucky Fried Chicken napkin. It said simply, “You.” Uncle Stash was in Ohio visiting his elderly mother and had missed the bad weather altogether. He’d heard about the storm and called St. Jude’s relieved to learn that his wife was unharmed. “Please, just to tell my wife, ‘You,’” he’d said in his thick Slovak accent, then spelled it y-o-u, when the staffer thought she’d misheard. “You.” It’s what Uncle Stash and Aunt Lovey said to each other, perfect in its singularity, throughout their whole married life. It meant “I love you,” and other such powerful clichés. *You* are everything to me. I’ve been so worried about *you*. I’d die if anything happened to *you*. I’m sorry if I’ve hurt *you*. *You* have made my life. Uncle Stash also called Aunt Lovey “*moja mila*,” which means “my darling” in Slovak. Aunt Lovey would laugh and say, “I’m everyone’s darlin’, Darlen.” She said you had to have a sense of humor about names when you were born with the name “Lovonia Tremblay,” then married and became “Lovey Darlen.” Being a craniopagus twin, I understood what she meant about needing a sense of humor.

After tucking the napkin with its precious blue code into the cleavage of her damp brassiere, Aunt Lovey took a moment to wonder at the chaos around her. She’d scratched her blond head, feeling ridiculous for the gesture, thinking that Leaford hadn’t seen a tornado in more than forty years, and never one as vicious as this. When the public alarm siren behind the water tower in the park by the Thames River sounded off, Aunt Lovey just assumed (though she knew, of course, that our country was not at war) that Leaford was being bombed. She’d been shocked by news of the tornado and perversely disappointed not to have felt the lash of the killer storm more directly.

Aunt Lovey felt the napkin shift in her brassiere. Then a pregnant patient lurched through the Emergency Room doors. And the electricity went out.

The sun had yet to dip, so the degree of panic in the room did not increase noticeably. Everyone assumed the lights would be quickly restored, and for the moment they could see well enough. Aunt Lovey instructed a fellow nurse to bring water to an old man with a superficial scalp wound, then hurried to attend to the frightened pregnant woman contracting in the hall.

The woman, our mother, was eighteen years old, petite and pretty, with long wavy brown hair and a wide, full mouth. On her bottom, she wore a pair of men's boxer-style underwear swung low under the hill of her belly, and on top, a pink, not-quite-long-enough, smocked maternity dress with no bra. A purple Popsicle had melted down the front of her pink dress and stained her lips and tongue. Her hair was tangled from the wind. Her eyes, smudged with black mascara, were terrified. She was large as pregnancies go, one of the largest Aunt Lovey had ever seen.

"Twins?" Aunt Lovey guessed, smelling cigarettes on the young woman's heaving breath.

Our young mother suddenly noticed the wounded black men spilling out of the waiting room. A hollow, haunted, white-haired woman (Mrs. Merkel) watched her from the far end of the hall. Our mother bit her cheek, trying not to cry, but she was afraid, and she was in pain, and she was really just a kid herself. Aunt Lovey drew the pregnant girl from the twilight of the hallway into the large closet she used as an office. After fondling the light switch and hoping for a miracle, she asked, "Where you from, hon?"

Our mother couldn't answer. She tried to catch her breath as the pain from a contraction chugged up her spine.

Aunt Lovey already knew that our mother wasn't from Leaford or anywhere nearby. "I'd say you were from Windsor," Aunt Lovey said, sizing her up.

Our mother, having earned a reprieve from the contractions, tore the plastic off a fresh package of cigarettes she'd found in her dirty macramé bag. "I'm having a nic fit," she explained, then checked the darkening sky. "Aren't hospitals supposed to have generators?"

Aunt Lovey pointed to a NO SMOKING sign on the wall, bristling, "We have a generator. Of course we have a generator."

Our mother seemed reassured, if annoyed about the smoking. She chewed on a strand of damaged hair. "One doctor said twins early on, I guess, but I haven't really been to see him in a while, so . . . She descended into a yellow swivel chair. "I parked my car in Reserved. Are they gonna tow?"

The window was open full and the wind was still fierce, coaxing the papers on Aunt Lovey's bulletin board to flap out a beat. Our mother kept time with her jangling legs as Aunt Lovey looked into her eyes, thinking they seemed too large, like a borrowed boot or an older sister's sweat-soaked shirt. "What's your name?" Aunt Lovey asked, as she held our mother's wrist and counted the beats of her heart.

"Liiiiizzzz," she answered, so slow and uncertain it had to be a lie.

"Well then, Liiiiizzzz," Aunt Lovey said, reaching for the blood-pressure cuff, "I'm gonna take a wild one and say this is your first baby? Or likely babies."

Our mother nodded glumly.

Aunt Lovey checked the lights in the corridor. Still nothing. She looked at the sky. There'd be an hour's more light, at best. There must be a problem with the generator, she thought. We do *have* a generator.

"Do you know your due date, dear?" Aunt Lovey asked.

Our mother shrugged.

Aunt Lovey gave our mother a clipboard and pen, asking that she fill out her own admittance form, then the nurse wheeled a sleeping leg-wound patient back to triage, so the pregnant girl could labor.

privately in Room One. When Aunt Lovey later found the clipboard and read it in the light from a candle, she saw that, under "Name," our mother had written "Elizabeth Taylor." And under "Address" she'd put "Hollywood, California." The rest of the form was obliterated by spiral and box doodles.

Our mother was sweating severely, straddling a chair and smoking a cigarette out the window when Aunt Lovey and Dr. Ruttle Jr. entered her room. Aunt Lovey marched across the checkerboard floor, jerked the cigarette from her hand, and threw it out the window. (The room being on the first floor made the gesture somewhat less effective.) Our mother didn't, or couldn't, protest. She let Dr. Ruttle Jr. and Aunt Lovey lift her from the chair and heft her up to the hospital bed, where she lay frightened and craving nicotine.

Aunt Lovey pulled the curtains back as far as they would go. There was just enough light to see. In twenty minutes they'd need candles and flashlights. "I couldn't find your admittance form," Aunt Lovey said, clucking her tongue. "You'll have to fill out another."

Our mother nodded, watching the undulations of her babies beneath her blue hospital gown. Dr. Ruttle Jr. bent to pull the gown up, but it was stuck under her sweaty bottom, and there were some embarrassing maneuvers before Liz Taylor's stretched-raw skin was finally exposed.

"What's your name?" Dr. Ruttle Jr. asked. "Where's her chart?"

"Chart's in the hall," Aunt Lovey answered. "Her name is . . ." She waited to see if our mother would introduce herself, but she just stared off, stroking the *linea negra* on her swollen stomach. "Her name is Elizabeth. Elizabeth Taylor, just like the old movie star. Isn't that cute, Dr. Ruttle?"

"Yes, Nurse Darlen. That's cute." Then, for the first time, the doctor looked directly into his patient's eyes. He smiled kindly. "Who brought you in, Miz Taylor?"

Our mother began to cry.

"The father couldn't get here because of the tornado," Aunt Lovey lied.

"It's just stupid that you won't let me smoke," our mother sobbed.

Dr. Ruttle Jr. laid his small palms on the huge lump and submitted us to some forceful palpitations. "Twins. They're both engaged."

"Engaged?" Our mother sniffed and blinked.

"The babies' heads are down," Aunt Lovey explained. "It's good."

The doctor snapped on a latex glove, pried apart our mother's knees, and stabbed between her gooseflesh legs. After a moment he extricated himself and, letting the strain of the day creep onto his face, pinched the bridge of his nose with his lubricated fingers. Quickly realizing his mistake, he reached for a tissue. "Four," he said.

"Four?" Our mother looked horrified. "Twins are two."

"Centimeters. You're four centimeters dilated, dear." Aunt Lovey patted our mother's shoulder. "First delivery. Twins. It'll be a while yet."

I like to think our mother knew what "dilated" meant. I like to think she was not terrorized by the invasion of Dr. Ruttle's fingers. I like to think that, before he breezed out of the room, he assured her that he'd delivered hundreds of babies and dozens of twins and all would go well. It's more likely that our mysterious mother just lay there contracting in the darkness, dying for a smoke.

The electricity was not restored. The generator, if there was one, did not kick in. The streetlights did not come on, nor any other light in the whole town of Leaford. Our mother, young and afraid and sweating beneath her blue gown, labored alone. She asked for some movie magazines but couldn't read them with only two candles to light the room. Aunt Lovey, or one of the other nurses, stopped by each quarter hour with a sip of some swampy-tasting water, apologizing that there were no ice chips to suck on, assuring her that when it was time to deliver, the nurses would bring in kerosene lamps.

By ten o'clock that night most of the migrant workers had been treated and sent back to the farm to slumber in their makeshift barracks. A few of the men had been rushed to Chatham by ambulance. Three near-drowning victims, teenage boys whose stolen fishing boat had capsized on the choppy lake had been collected by their fathers and brought home for a thrashing. And the talk of the hospital (before we arrived anyway) was that Dr. Ruttle Sr., in a feat some called heroic, had removed the shard of wood from a split-rail fence that had impaled a young autoworker with four children. Assisting as his father removed the giant splinter from the poor man's chest, Dr. Ruttle Jr. would recall a day when he was six years old, double-riding a bike down Rondeau Road, clinging to his father's back and thinking the man a giant.

White-haired Mrs. Merkel sat alone on an orange vinyl chair where she could watch people coming and going from both the front doors and the Emergency entrance. She was clutching Larry's picture (shorn white hair, slit gray eyes, fretful brows), dreaming of his little blue bike spinning without a rider in the vortex of the storm. In the dark, there were soft steps and whispers. Down the hall, dancing circles from a flashlight.

At 11:33 p.m. the Stones, a family of Mennonites from the Eleventh Concession, staggered through the Emergency doors into the dark hospital. Fifteen of them, with injuries from mild to severe, had spent hours digging out from the rubble of their collapsed cellar. Their horses were lost, so they'd stumbled the five muddy miles from farm to hospital. Two of the men, though bleeding and limping badly, carried a third, who appeared to be dead. Six small children, bits of wood clinging to their hot wool caps, floated behind the others. Aunt Lovey was relieved to see that the children seemed mostly unharmed, until the little girl in the center fell to the ground and stopped breathing. Dr. Ruttle Sr. dropped to his knees to begin cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

Most of the volunteers had already been sent home, and with them had gone the extra lanterns and flashlights. In the dark there were cries for light, and water, and light, and bandages, and light, and saline, and light and light and light. The man who'd been carried in dead had been revived by the commotion and, on seeing the fallen child, began to wail. There was so much noise in the Emergency Room, with trying to revive the little girl and administering care to the rest of the family, that no one could hear our mother moaning, or maybe yowling, some sort of deep, throaty, animal sound. No one except Mrs. Merkel, who, steeped as she was in worry, prepared as she was to grieve, followed the river of cries from Room One, groping through the blackness until she found our mother, on her knees leaning over a chair with her forehead flat on the windowsill. (Aunt Lovey thinks she was trying to climb out the window to retrieve her cigarette.) The candles that had been in the room were dead on the ground outside. (Presumably she was trying to cast light on the grass to see if she could find the smoke.) Whatever brought our mother to the window, she'd been overcome by searing pain from her longest, strongest contraction yet, and before she could right herself, let alone make it back to the bed, another wave of pain had come, and then another and another.

Even in the pitch black it was obvious to Mrs. Merkel, who unintentionally set her hands on the woman's pulsing stomach, that this was the pregnant woman she'd seen before. "Help me," our mother begged. "Please, God, help me."

Mrs. Merkel shouted down the hall, "Nurse! Doctor! There's a woman having a baby! It's coming! The baby's coming! Please! *Please!*"

But no one came. Mrs. Merkel (who only had the one child) knew nothing of midwifery but had the presence of mind to offer some comforting words, find the sink in the dark, and soap up fast. There was a sound from our mother, a spine-chilling scream, as if she'd just had her arms amputated in a horrible sneak attack. And then another scream, the legs gone now too. Mrs. Merkel started out of the

room, but circled and returned.

With her sleeves pulled up to her elbows, Mrs. Merkel reached down to feel the slick hair moose that was my (our) head between our mother's legs. "Good Lord," Mrs. Merkel whispered. "Good Lord in heaven." Of course, being conjoined, our head was nearly twice the size of a normal baby's head. Our mother grunted and pushed.

From anus. To clitoris. Her tissue tore.

One would assume that the birthing mother would be screaming, but she was not. "Oh my God," Mrs. Merkel whispered. "The head's out." She could hear the faucet dripping in the corner. Her hands on our bloody scalps, unable to see the two-faced twin that we were, Mrs. Merkel drew a deep, thrilled breath.

Suddenly Aunt Lovey was in the doorway with a kerosene lamp. The flickering lamp lit the scene at the window just enough for the nurse to see that an enormous head had emerged from your Elizabeth Taylor and that it had two distinct faces. Pinched faces not quite side by side, sharing a crown of thick dark hair. Aunt Lovey cocked her head and drew closer, not shocked or repulsed but utterly entranced.

Cathy Merkel screamed.

Within seconds, Doctors Jr. and Sr., followed by a passel of female nurses, appeared, all clutching some source of emergency light—a candle, a kerosene lamp, a flashlight, shining their lights upon the thing, the thing that was *us*.

It was a full minute before someone thought to remove the screaming Mrs. Merkel from the room.

The Doctors Ruttle quickly agreed not to try to move the patient from her all fours, acknowledging that hands and knees was, in fact, a fine posture to birth what appeared to be the first case of conjoined twins in Leaford and, possibly, the whole country. Dr. Ruttle Sr. at her left flank, Dr. Ruttle Jr. at her right, using two pairs of obstetric forceps, wrenched us from our mother's body, our internment with her ended, ours with each other about to begin.

Our entry into the world was greeted not with gasps but with the quiet reverence of professional people. Someone scooped us up and carried us, uncovered, to the examination table. We were slippery with creamy vernix, blotchy, purple, trembling. The doctors and nurses moved as one to watch us wriggle on the crinkling paper blanket. How long must they have stared before someone spoke?

Our combined weight at birth was ten pounds seven ounces. I was the longer one, my legs perfectly formed, my torso somewhat shorter than normal, making my arms appear somewhat longer. My sister's legs hung limply from her hips, two clubfeet annexed by her shortened femur bones. Ruby's upper body was normal, but very petite. I can imagine what the silent staff at St. Jude's Hospital saw as they looked down upon us: our heads welded together, my crooked face looking that way, and Ruby's pretty one looking that.

I've heard a number of versions of what happened next, but I'm sticking with Aunt Lovey's. There was a hushed round of "Oh my Gods" and "Lord in heavens" and "Holy mackerels." Then Aunt Lovey whispered, "The little one looks like the big one's doll." Dr. Ruttle Jr., never taking his eyes from us, called for a camera, then told Aunt Lovey to get on the phone with the Children's Hospital in Toronto. Before Aunt Lovey could turn to go, an instrument cart crashed near the door. People did not instantly spin to look, as they would in normal circumstances. And when they did turn, one by one, with the lamps and candles and flashlights, they were not shocked (after what they'd just seen, nothing would ever seem shocking again) to see Dr. Ruttle Sr. sprawled on the linoleum, a scalpel resting comically on his forehead, dead of a heart attack at age seventy-eight.

I abruptly stopped crying and led the room in a moment of silence. Heads twisted and swiveled

wondering at the extraordinary birth, conceding the timely death. Dr. Ruttle Jr. moved to his father's side. He did not attempt resuscitation. His father was already gone. He returned a rogue white hair to its dignified place on the old doctor's head, then set the instrument cart back on its feet. Quietly and calmly, he retrieved the bag of saline, the forceps, the clamps, and the other things strewn about the floor, straightening and revising the exact position of the scalpels twice while he considered that his beloved father had died on what had likely been the best day of his life. My newborn cries recommenced.

Finally, Dr. Ruttle Jr. turned his attention back to the craniopagus twins as Aunt Lovey and the other two men in the room (the custodian and one of the Mennonite men who'd been drawn by all the commotion) hoisted the elderly doctor's body onto a gurney and ferried him away.

Our mother, exhausted by her labor and likely reassured by the sound of my mewling (Ruby was still mute), did not make inquiries. She did not confirm, "Twins?" She did not question, "Boys or girls?" She did not even ask for a smoke. She allowed the attending nurses to roll her toward the bed where Aunt Lovey helped to deliver the afterbirth. But there was a hemorrhage with this second delivery and enough blood to severely deplete the poor young girl, if not quite enough to require transfusion.

Within two hours of our arrival, Ruby and I were on our way to the Children's Hospital in Toronto in the back of an ambulance with head nurse Lovey Darlen. Our mother, Elizabeth Taylor, lay silent and staring but conscious for a full week following our birth. She would not divulge her real name (Mary-Ann Taylor) or eat, but she did manage to obtain some cigarettes. Aunt Lovey was in Toronto with us, and the rest of the staff, feeling sorry for the wretched new mother, didn't have the heart to enforce Aunt Lovey's no-smoking rule. On the morning of the tenth day, our mother accidentally or intentionally started a fire in Room One. Before the smoke was cleared, someone reported having seen her wobble toward the beat-up yellow Mustang parked in the tow zone. She was not seen again.

It is my opinion that our mother lost her mind when she delivered us. I think any normal woman would come unhinged giving birth to conjoined babies, and our mother was still just a girl, and an unmarried girl, in 1974, in southern Ontario. Ruby thinks it wasn't giving birth to us that drove our mother away but having her twin girls taken from her with so little regard. Ruby has deified our mother somewhat. I don't have the same illusions.

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## *Nature's Mother*

Larry Merkel was the first casualty of the tornado. Missing, presumed dead. Leaford also blamed D. Ruttle Sr.'s death on the storm. It was said that stress from the tornado caused his massive heart attack. The third death, the one that is not counted in any official records, might be blamed on the tornado a little too. Perhaps if our mother hadn't been caught in the storm, maybe if she'd delivered in another town, her married lover waiting anxiously in the hall, the event would have materialized for her in a different way. Maybe she would have kept us. At least it's possible.

Contrary to some Web site information, our mother did not jump out the window when she saw that Ruby and I were joined at the head. (The room *was* on the first floor, after all.) She died alone in Toronto, in her dusty fourth-floor walk-up, of sepsis, eight weeks postpartum. Aunt Lovey said our mother must have been mentally deficient to have suffered the infection without seeking treatment. Uncle Stash said you didn't have to be crazy to do something stupid, just young.

We spoke of our dead mother often when we were children, less as we grew older. Aunt Lovey tolerated our adulation for the woman who'd abandoned us, but only because she was dead. She encouraged Ruby to draw pictures of her (Ruby is quite the talented artist) with diamond tiaras and angel wings, wearing white robes and riding on clouds. I wrote poems and short stories about our mother, keeping the unflattering portraits to myself. When we grew bored with drawing and writing, one of us (usually Ruby) would say, "Let's play that game," and the other knew it meant the game where we called our mother *Liz* and intentionally mixed her up with the real Elizabeth Taylor. It was the game where Ruby pretended we lived in Hollywood and people found us more interesting than freakish.

When we were twelve years old and pestering Aunt Lovey with questions about our birth mother, Uncle Stash had the idea to hire a private investigator. It was an incredibly exciting week for Ruby and me as, each day, Uncle Stash brought another tidbit of information home to the orange brick farmhouse on Rural Route One. Our mother's name, as I said, was Mary-Ann, not Elizabeth. She lived in Toronto but had friends in Windsor. She'd once had a part-time job in a secondhand bookstore where she was well liked by the staff. A coworker told the investigator that she was a voracious reader and was saving money to go to college (I loved knowing that). She had been very interested in all things Native (Ruby loved knowing that), and she had belonged to a church youth group (which my sister and I could never picture).

Just before our fourteenth birthday, Uncle Stash took a day off from his job as butcher at Vanderhagen's Meat (where the other men called him Stan) so he and Aunt Lovey could drive us to Toronto for a doctor's appointment for Ruby's gastrointestinal problems—and to learn a little more

about our birth mother. In Toronto we parked the old red Duster in front of the apartment building where our mother had lived on Sherbourne Street, across from a park and near a hospital. We sat in front of the unremarkable brick building (Uncle Stash bought a fat Saturday newspaper to read) for a full hour before Ruby finally said we could go. Where I'd found my attention drifting toward the beautiful, dangerous young people in the park, my sister had never taken her eyes from the red-brick building, imagining that each stranger going in or out had been our mother's trusted confidant and had some important story to tell. Ruby had sulked when Uncle Stash said we could not approach the strangers for questioning, and then she refused to eat the picnic lunch (honey ham sandwiches and danish squares) that Aunt Lovey had packed that morning. "Don't be cute, Ruby. You are going to eat," Aunt Lovey had promised.

After lunch in the hot car (because Aunt Lovey would not expose my sister and me to those beautiful, dangerous young people in the park), we drove to Mount Pleasant Cemetery to put pink carnations (Ruby's favorite) on our mother's grave. The gravestone, which we'd found on the map given to Uncle Stash by the private investigator, was pink granite with specks of scarlet and amber. The stone read: MARY-ANN TAYLOR. BELOVED DAUGHTER. BORN, JANUARY 10, 1956. DIED, SEPTEMBER 2, 1974. My sister and I found comfort in seeing the grave, just as Aunt Lovey had told Uncle Stash we would when I overheard them arguing about it one night.

While standing in front of the pink granite gravestone, I sensed Ruby mouthing our mother's name, *Mary-Ann Mary-Ann Mary-Ann*. I felt sorry for my sister, at the same time curious as to why she was mouthing *Mary-Ann Mary-Ann* and not *Mother Mother*. Ruby urged me to kneel so we could be closer to the grave. I consented, though it was incredibly uncomfortable squatting on the grass that covered the dirt that covered the coffin that covered the body of Mary-Ann Taylor, and I was embarrassed. There were only a few people nearby in the cemetery (none of them squatting on the loved ones' plots), and they were all staring at us. Of course, they were staring because we were conjoined, but they were also staring because we were a spectacle.

After five or ten minutes of Ruby moaning *Mary-Ann Mary-Ann*, I began to feel really irritated. I didn't have the same longing for our mother that my sister did, and I felt guilty and confused by my lack of emotion. I asked Ruby if we could go and waited patiently each time she said, "A few more minutes." Soon Ruby began to weep with abandon, *Mary-Ann, Mary-Ann, oh Mary-Ann*. A family from several rows over drew closer.

I can count the number of times I've physically dominated my sister—the number of times that I have carried her away against her will—but at this point, with the gawking family closing in and my sister bellowing *Mary-Ann*, it was all I could think to do. I stood, gathering my sister in my right arm, feeling Ruby shake with shock and protest, and marched us back to the family car. After a moment Uncle Stash appeared with the keys. His hands were trembling and he wouldn't look at me. I knew that whatever Uncle Stash was thinking, it went triple for Aunt Lovey.

On the way to dinner no one spoke, except Ruby, to declare that she would not be eating. My sister hadn't eaten lunch (in spite of Aunt Lovey's promise that she would), and she'd be sick if she skipped dinner too. This made me anxious (when Ruby gets sick my life is severely restricted), and I could see it worried Aunt Lovey too. She shared a look with Uncle Stash, after which he suddenly pulled out his notes from the private investigator and announced that we'd be having dinner at Lindy's Steak House on Yonge Street, "where your mother worked as a waitress!" Ruby clapped her hands—like a three-year-old. Gullible. Vulnerable. I loved her beyond comprehension in that moment, though we were not yet back on speaking terms.

Aunt Lovey and Uncle Stash had a chef's salad and a T-bone steak. I had a banquet burger, and

Ruby had the fish. (She had a psychic feeling that fish had been our mother's favorite. Groan.) (Of course there was staring. Whenever we go out in public there is staring, even in Leaford, where we grew up, and went to school, and hold jobs, and where we've been described in the local paper (Ruby and I *hate* this) as the town's mascot. (Being called a mascot is bad enough, but to singularize us—that's the worst.) We've been stared at so much in our lives we find it normal, and only really notice when we *haven't* been noticed. (I've wondered if beautiful women process staring the same way that Ruby and I do. Oh yes, they're *looking*. Of course, they're looking. Why *aren't* they looking?)

My sister remembers little about that pilgrimage to our mother's grave. She doesn't remember the dinner at Lindy's or the cemetery, or that we stayed in a cramped Lakeshore hotel and saw our first and only cockroach.

Back to the day of our birth. Since it was not possible for our mother to travel with us to the hospital in Toronto, Aunt Lovey volunteered, or rather begged, to go. With the Emergency Room still attending to the injured Mennonites, St. Jude's could not spare more than two of its staff, the driver and Aunt Lovey. As the ambulance hit the on-ramp to Highway 401, my sister began to cry, then so did I. Aunt Lovey scooped us out of the incubator and juggled us until she found a comfortable hold. She rocked us until we stopped crying and fell asleep. The weight of wonder, she thought, and the weight of worry.

Alone with my sister and me in the back of the ambulance for the full four-hour drive, Aunt Lovey determined that we were alert, responsive, and, surprisingly, more different than the same. ("From the moment you were born you had such opposite demeanors," she'd once said, and I later wondered if she'd read that term in a poem and forgotten she'd read it, then claimed it as her own.)

That was all it took—four hours—for Aunt Lovey to fall in love, the way you do with babies deeply and without effort. She fed us infant formula and sang a song she made up about two chicks and sisters. (When I was sixteen, on the eve of a violent acne eruption, I broke Aunt Lovey's heart by asking that she never, ever, sing that stupid song again.) Ruby does pretty fair vocal impressions. She sings the song with a little tremolo, just like Aunt Lovey used to. It makes me sad, but I never ask her to stop. (What is it about sadness that can be so fulfilling?) "Two little chicks just sleeping in the sun. First chick peeped and woke the other one. 'Who are you?' said the one to the two. 'Who am I? I'm your sis-ter!'"

Aunt Lovey named my sister "Ruby" because she shone like a gem. And she named me "Rose" to carry on the tradition of her eccentric mother, Verbeena (and hers before her), who named their girls after places or plants. As rain pelted the ambulance roof, Aunt Lovey found herself thinking of Verbeena and of her own childhood in the old orange farmhouse. She thought of Stash and her upbringing in distant Slovakia (once known as Czechoslovakia: the Slovaks separated from the Czechs in 1993). She also thought of the conjoined South Asian twins she'd read about who'd been raised in the basement of an institution for the criminally insane but were found to have genius IQs. What would life be like for Rose and Ruby if Elizabeth Taylor wanted to raise us? I think Aunt Lovey knew, though, even before our mother ran away, that Elizabeth Taylor could not, would not, raise us. (I'm not bitter. I don't blame her.) Aunt Lovey believed that God had sent my sister and me to her, in answer to a prayer.

The July sky offered a cleansing rain for most of the journey down the flat, gray Highway 401. Aunt Lovey fretted that the ambulance would spin out on the slick black roads. When finally we approached the Emergency bay at the Toronto hospital, she saw that there were dozens of doctors and nurses waiting on the dock and imagined there must have been a terrible accident and a load of injuries on the way.

“Pull up!” she’d called to the Leaford ambulance driver. “Pull up, for Pete’s sake! They’ve got accident victims coming in.”

The driver pulled the vehicle forward, and the doctors and nurses, led by a small, rather attractive middle-aged Asian man, followed. They had not been waiting for accident victims. They’d been waiting for *us*.

Aunt Lovey was not prepared for the hungry way Dr. Mau (the eminent craniofacial surgeon) and the others set upon her babies, or the way they seemed not to notice or care when they yanked us from her and we began to wail. One of them called us “it.” One of them let out a whoop, like he was at a *bucketing rodeo roundup* (Aunt Lovey’s words, not mine). Aunt Lovey said Dr. Mau reminded her of a large black spider descending upon two little fruit flies.

The press came; television reporters, newspapermen, and, of course, the sleazy tabloid guys. Aunt Lovey, as our self-appointed guardian, kept them all away. She’d been horrified to turn on the news that first night and see the Polaroid snapshot that was taken of Ruby and me shortly after our birth and she’d been furious with Dr. Ruttle Jr. for releasing the photo to the media. (Newborn babies seem more alien than human to begin with, so you can only imagine what Ruby and I looked like through that awful Polaroid lens. Our Nonna calls newborns “*creatura*.”) Aunt Lovey was determined that no unauthorized photos would ever find their way to the media again.

Fearing for our emotional development, Aunt Lovey made sure it was she, and not one of the other nurses, who fed us our bottles, gave us our bath, and sang the chicken sister song as she rocked us to sleep each night. Ruby preferred a cuddle against the chest, while I liked to be held higher up on the shoulder. “You had to be *Give* when you were *Take*,” she told Ruby. “And visie versie for you, Rosie.”

Doctors from all over the world came to Toronto to confer with Dr. Mau and to examine the rare craniopagus twins. Newspapers around the globe carried the story (accompanied by that awful Polaroid photo) of our miraculous birth and its concurrence with the freak tornado in Baldoon County. For a short time, anyway, we put Leaford on the map. Channel Seven featured daily progress reports on the six and eleven o’clock news. Viewers were rapt, especially because there was fear early on that Ruby was too feeble to survive. A team of twenty surgeons was standing by, prepared to assist Dr. Mau in slicing my sister and me apart in the event she perished, so I might be saved. People prayed for Ruby’s death, thinking it would have been kinder to both of us.

Wearing a crisp white nurse’s uniform even though she was not officially on duty, Aunt Lovey sat next to our hospital crib, reading books or calmly looping wool from the pink yarn in the basket at her side. Doctors came and went with foreign germs and disregard. Aunt Lovey read, and looped, and prayed to God that Elizabeth Taylor would not return to claim us. When the children’s welfare people had given her temporary guardianship of Ruby and me, Aunt Lovey hated the way they thanked her for taking on such a “tragic case.” She held us when she could and promised us the moon. “I’m your Aunt Lovey,” she whispered, nuzzling our soft cheeks, “and you are my family.”

Aunt Lovey and Uncle Stash had never been separated for longer than a few days before, and the separations, when Uncle Stash went to see his elderly mother in Ohio, were rare—not even years (only when Mother Darlensky called to say she was dying, then didn’t). As much as Uncle Stash missed Aunt Lovey, he was delighting in his solitude. The World Series was on Channel Two. His beloved Tigers (if you lived in Leaford you were a Detroit Tigers fan) hadn’t made the play-offs, but the Los Angeles Dodgers were playing the Oakland A’s (the A’s were Uncle Stash’s second-favorite team) in Game Five in Oakland. (The Athletics were not a team in the seventies; they were a dynasty winning three consecutive World Series!) Not only could Uncle Stash watch his baseball in peace but he could smoke his forbidden pipe in the house and eat supper in his underwear in front of the TV.

(An aside: In some strange way I can celebrate the unlikelihood of Ruby and me through the game of baseball. Maybe that's why I love it. The controlled chaos. The trillions of possibilities. And millions of improbabilities. The home run. The pop fly. The double play. The shocking outcomes. Not to mention the simple thrill of watching a mere mortal launch that little white ball into the stands. Uncle Stash would clap his hands, shouting, "Vack dat ball, Kirk Gibson! Vack dat ball, Gibby!")

(Another aside: I didn't know that Uncle Stash had a thick Slovak accent until Ruby and I were in fourth grade attending a parent-teacher meeting about Ruby's inability to focus. Mrs. Hern, whom Ruby disliked but I adored, seemed not to understand a single word Uncle Stash was saying. Aunt Lovey said Uncle Stash's ear didn't hear his own accent. At his workplace, except for the sound of the saws, there was quiet. The other butchers didn't have much to say—which is just as well with all their bad tempers and sharp knives. We lived in the country, where the nearest neighbors were across the field and over the creek. Before that, Aunt Lovey and Uncle Stash had lived in a little bungalow beside Nonna, an old woman whose Italian accent was as thick as Uncle Stash's Slovak one. Uncle Stash didn't hear his accent, so he assumed people who couldn't understand him were either stupid or deliberately trying to irritate him. "*Picovina*," he would mutter under his breath—the Slovak word for "Bullshit.")

(Ruby hated—still hates—baseball. Ruby hates all sports, preferring just about any mindless garbage on the television: *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie* reruns from the 1960s or one of her endless movies taped from TV, neatly labeled and stacked in a room, like Aunt Lovey with her books. Our conflicting taste in entertainment causes conflict between us during the hockey play-offs, and the basketball play-offs, and the Olympics, and especially the World Series.)

All that to say that Uncle Stash was enjoying being alone, smoking his pipe in the living room watching Game Five in his underwear, and he had not been paying enough attention to Aunt Lovey's voice on the phone or her face when he was visiting the hospital on the weekends. He didn't suspect that his wife was falling in love with the conjoined twin girls. Her phone call about guardianship came from the proverbial left field.

"I have to *tink* about it, Lovey."

"What do you have to *think* about?"

"Lovey . . ." His tone was a warning. She was already being unreasonable. He watched the tobacco smolder in his pipe.

"Have you got the baseball on, Stash?"

"It's Game Five."

"Well, for the love of Pete, turn it down."

"Rollie Fingers is at pitching."

"You say, *on the mound*, or *is the pitcher*, or just *is pitching*, Stash—you know that." Aunt Lovey had been correcting her husband's English for nearly thirty years, but he never seemed to mind. "Please turn it down, Stash. This is important."

Uncle Stash left the phone to lower the volume. Steve Garvey singled to first.

"What if they are not finding the mother?" he asked when he picked up the receiver.

Aunt Lovey had one of her feelings (Aunt Lovey's big on premonitions) that our mother would never reappear, but didn't share it with Uncle Stash. "She'll turn up, but if she doesn't, I s'ppose we could try to make it permanent."

"We're old, Lovonia," Uncle Stash said, sounding old. He was fifty, exactly two years younger than his wife.

"Speak for yourself."

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