

The Girls

Lori Lansens

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Extract

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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 solo walk. I've never climbed a tree. Or faded into a crowd. So many things I've never done, but oh, 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 marry 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 un-

comfortable, 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's 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 a 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 do 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 let us play with the dolls for a few minutes, then took them away. Aunt Lovey was deaf to our sobs. 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 I, incidentally, did not get.)

Aunt Lovey had been disappointed to find that there were no books about cranial conjoinment, or 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 it 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 old 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 band 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 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 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. I opened a small red book with no pictures and read a story that haunts me, like music. The story of Minnie and Marie. Minnie and Marie were born joined at the chest (that would be a thorapagus conjoinment) in Wales in 1959. The combined weight of the girls at birth was only seven pounds. By 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 they neared 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.