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## Representations of conjoined twins

Claire Marita Fletcher  
*University of Wollongong*

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**UNIVERSITY OF  
WOLLONGONG**



**Department of Law, Humanities and the Arts**

## **Representations of Conjoined Twins**

**Claire Marita Fletcher**  
**Supervisor: Professor Catherine Cole**

**"This thesis is presented as part of the requirements for the  
award of Master of Arts in Creative Writing,  
at the University of Wollongong"**

**March 2015**

# UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG



## **Declaration**

I, Claire Fletcher, declare that this thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the conferral of the Masters by Research, from the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

**Claire Fletcher**

March 1st, 2015

## Abstract

This masters thesis comprises two elements. The first section, the exegesis, examines what it means to be a conjoined twin. It explores the representation of conjoined twins from early historical narratives to the present day. Each chapter reflects the shifting passage of their representation. Chapter 1, *Freaks*, traces their exploitation in sideshows and performances. Chapter 2, *Separation* examines medical narratives about modern surgical separation interventions. Chapter 3, *Normal*, explores contemporary representations in film and fiction. I also examine conjoined twins who have chosen to remain as they are and to live their lives in a single, joined state. The final chapter, *Storytelling*, explores my novella which is based on the lives of two conjoined sisters and what creative issues I faced as I wrote it.

The second section of the thesis is my novella *Silvie and Van*, in which I create two conjoined sisters who undergo separation surgery. I trace their separated lives located in the contemporary world with its focus on beauty and so called normality. This novella attempts to creatively examine a number of the key questions I raise in my critical work, including: how conjoined twins are viewed by the external and single bodied world? What happens when these twins are separated? What is the potential emotional, physical and symbolic significance of separation on the human psyche?

Through these critical and creative explorations I hope to demonstrate how conjoined twins have been represented and misrepresented through the ages, and how they have managed to maintain their agency, despite the complexities of their birth.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank first and foremost my supervisor Professor Catherine Cole, who believed in the project from inception to completion. I am thankful for the support of my family, my parents and two brothers, who told me to keep writing when I desperately wanted to stop. For the support of my writers group, Catherine Fargher and Matthew Young, who looked at early drafts of creative work and shared ideas. To Matthew Young, Sandy Lange and Luke Fletcher for their diligent checking. Thank you fellow artists, Nellie Blundell, Armand De Saint-Salvy and Alejandra Canales for words of wisdom. The Goods Café, for caffeine and writing therapy. Finally to the inspirational examples provided by the twins themselves, without whom the idea would never have taken flight.

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## **SECTION ONE: EXEGESIS**

## Introduction

By their very nature, conjoined twins challenge almost every possible perception of the lived human experience. By presenting us with two distinct humans confined to one body, such twins rupture the boundaries of what it means to be human. Across the centuries conjoined twins have ranged from objects of worship, specimens of scientific interest, entertainment icons, and the subjects of horror films. Where does the truth lie between these representations? What is it like to be a conjoined twin? This thesis analyses real life biographies and fictional representations of conjoined twins throughout history, examining the gaps between their lived experience and their representation. The research informs the creative component of the thesis, a novella which follows two conjoined sisters who decide to undergo a surgical separation.

The lens through which I perform this examination is informed by theorists with subversive ideas about the body, including Mikhail Bakhtin, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler, who while not specifically referred to in depth led me to examine my ideas in a different way. However, my focus is largely informed by post 1983's 'International Year of Disabled People,' which emphasised disabled peoples' rights and their unique agency. Since then contemporary scholars such as Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, Lennard J. Davis and Alice Dreger, have become leaders in the field of disability, cultural studies, and 'freak' studies and I will refer to them throughout my analysis. In particular, I am interested in the lived experiences of conjoined

twins, the stories they have inspired, and how their conjoined lives have been shaped by cultural boundaries and expectations.



**Figure 1.** The Hensel sisters,  
from cover of *Life Magazine*. 1996.

For my purposes I will be using the word ‘singleton’, when referring to non-conjoined people. As I regularly compare the lives of conjoined twins with those who are not conjoined, such a term was deemed a necessary part of my narrative differentiations.

As I look at the images of conjoined twins I have included in this thesis, I ask myself again why I was so fascinated with them. This is a question that has underpinned all my research, but now as the research process concludes I realise just how much the twins have occupied my life. My best answer is that I find it fascinating that two people can share their lives so intimately. This seems particularly poignant at a time when, particularly in the West, we place so much emphasis on personal space and individual autonomy.

This thesis is structured in two parts: Section 1, the exegesis; and Section 2, the novella. The exegesis is divided into four thematic chapters: Freaks,

Separation, Normality, and finally, Storytelling, and I address each of these in greater detail below.

Chapter One, *Freaks*, explores the eighteenth century concept of the freak, in all its nuances. The term 'freak', which has become obsolete in contemporary usage, still holds within it the ethical and human rights concerns such a pejorative term sustains. This chapter closely examines the lives of Chang and Eng Bunker, and compares the real life twins to the fictional story, *The Personal Habits of Siamese Twins*, by Mark Twain. I draw on the life of the Bunkers because they represent the perfect vehicle through which to explore nineteenth century notions of 'the freak'. In examining the Bunkers' lives, I draw on the theories of Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, Cynthia Wu, Mikhail Bakhtin and Lennard J. Davis, whose examinations of freak show performances provide fertile ground for exploring the binary principals of normal versus abnormal modalities that dominated nineteenth century thinking.

Chapter one asks: What was the allure of the nineteenth century freak show and how was the image of the freak constructed? How did the original Siamese twins, Chang and Eng Bunker, disrupt binary notions of normality-bodily, racially and socially? How did scientific interest and sexual taboo collude within the freak show spectacle? Was Mark Twain successful at capturing the anomalies that the twins came to represent? What can his fiction tell us about social interpretations of conjoined characters and the social concerns of his times?

Chapter Two, *Separation*, explores three recent cases of separation surgery which have provoked challenging dilemmas. I will draw on Alice Dreger's theoretical research in analysing these case studies. Dreger's critical analysis of the surgical intervention of both conjoined twins and inter-sex individuals has been groundbreaking in relation to the medical protocols associated with conjoined twins. This chapter asks: is it ethical to separate conjoined twins in all cases, particularly when one twin must be sacrificed so that the other can live? Should the twins themselves offer consent or are their parents and guardians solely responsible? How much surgery is motivated by technological advancement and cultural assumptions about normality? How does the notion of the 'freak' play a part in the arguments and debates surrounding separation surgery? How does the personal experience of separation feature in contemporary fiction, and how is it absent from mainstream media accounts?

Chapter Three, *Normality*, focuses on recent documentary, film and literature which presents conjoined twin subjects as normal people and as post-modern signifiers of rebellion. Three texts will be examined: *Abby and Brittany*, a reality Television show by TLC, *The Girls*, a novel by Lori Lansens, and *Face to Face*, an avant-garde documentary about the Schappell sisters. While each text represents a different form or genre, all three share a similar theme. Each involves conjoined twin sisters as their protagonists, all of whom are living normal, contemporary lives. In all three cases the audience sees the world from the point of view of the conjoined protagonists. Lansens's novel is written from a first person perspective, while the hand of the director in both the reality programme and the documentary is deliberately hidden. All three

narratives attempt to portray the worldview through the voices of subjects who engage the reader and viewer directly. This analysis will draw on the work of theorists such as Lennard J. Davis, Linda Hutcheon and Ruth Enns, all of whom talk about modern representations of disabled characters in literature and film. In particular the chapter examines the thematic shifts away from the victimisation of the disabled body and toward a redefinition of the disabled person as both a survivor and an (ex)-centric.

Chapter Three asks: has there been a shift in how conjoined twins are portrayed in recent film and literary texts which invoke conjoined protagonists from a first person perspective? Does this have implications for current cultural interpretations of conjoined bodies? Does the resurgence of freakish characters in film and literature indicate a new mode of acceptance and understanding about the freak body?

Chapter Four, *Storytelling*, examines the way in which I approached my creative work and all the ethical dilemmas it involved. My novella, *Silvie and Van* explores the idea of separation: physical, psychological, spiritual and geographical. Silvie and Van are twenty-two years old conjoined twins who decide to separate. The novella explores what happens when we are separated from someone who has been part of us. How does a person grieve, transform, or re-invent themselves after separation? The novella also examines the tension between autonomy and personal relationships. After the surgery, Silvie flees from her sister and begins a new life in Argentina. Van, believing her sister to have died in the operation, is haunted by a sense of guilt and responsibility. I also examine themes of body normalisation,

drawing on my research about conjoined twin surgery. After the operation the girls struggle to adapt, both to their inner lives and to their physical embodiments.

In the process of creating my novella, I drew upon the relationships and tensions between non-fiction sources, fictional characters, memoir, and documentary texts, all concerning conjoined twins. Of particular influence was the work of Francesca Rendle-Short, who combines elements of both fiction and non-fiction in her storytelling. While her work does not focus specifically on conjoined twins, the themes she explores such as the body, censorship, memory and sexuality, all overlap with my key areas of interest.<sup>1</sup>

I conclude the thesis by re-examining the research, asking how I might combine this knowledge in my fictional writing to create complex plot lines and realistic representations of contemporary conjoined women who have been separated from one another.

## **Methodology**

During the past decade, a spate of novels appeared featuring conjoined twins. These included: the historical fiction *Chang and Eng* by Darin Strauss, *Ludmilla's Broken English* by D.B.C. Pierre, and *The Girls* by Lori Lansens. When I examined these texts, their themes, styles and perspectives seemed too polarised to support a coherent argument about conjoined representation in literature. Curiously, I could easily access biographical material about the lives of real conjoined twins. This included written autobiographies by the

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<sup>1</sup> F Rendle-Short, *Bite My Tongue*, reprint edn., Spinifex Press, Melbourne, 2012.

twins themselves, historical sources (from ancient and modern times), documentary films, reality television programs and newspaper articles. Clearly, texts regarding conjoined twins were not in short supply, but many of the most interesting stories were based on real people and often employed a highly visual medium like film and photography to explore the twins' lives. Nonfiction in this case, was certainly more potent than fiction.

Perhaps it is due to their extremely rare occurrence (conjoined twins represent one in 200,000 births)<sup>2</sup> or a fascination about how two people can share each other's lives so intimately, that real stories about conjoined twins have historically seeded far more public curiosity than have fictional ones. Even Darin Strauss's best-selling novel written about conjoined twins, *Chang and Eng*, is a historical novel based (however loosely) on real people.

As I began to examine the extraordinary lives of conjoined twins exhibited on the nineteenth century freak show circuit, the medical operations including sex changes and sacrifice surgeries, or how conjoined twins were institutionalised and experimented on, a complex web of stories began to emerge about the conflicts and challenges that conjoined twins have faced for centuries. Indeed, it could be said that in the case of conjoined twins - truth is often stranger than fiction. Furthermore, many of the conflicts and dilemmas of each case study pertain to the role of the body in a conjoined existence and cultural associations of monstrosity, arising from such unusual births. Even today the birth of two people who share a common body provides conceptual challenges to those who inhabit a single body.

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<sup>2</sup> L Spitz and EM Kiely, 'Experience in the management of conjoined twins', *British Journal of Surgery*, no. 89, 2002, p. 1188.

Presented with these dilemmas my investigation addressed some of the challenges that real conjoined twins have faced. I will compare these experiences with the way conjoined twins are portrayed in both cinema and fiction, comparing real-life biographical material with fictional narratives about the conjoined experience and drawing parallels between real stories and invented narratives. This comparison has become the key focus of my study and throughout it my aims were:

- To examine the politics of conjoined twins and their representation from different cultural and social perspectives. As my examples will show, social interpretations of the conjoined body have shifted dramatically throughout time. The progression of the conjoined figure from Godly, to monstrous then to ordinary, is an interesting one revealing different social trends about the human body and its conception. I will also examine how definitions of unusual bodies have both constricted and liberated those who possess them.
- To expose the gaps between fictional narratives and real ones. This formed a complex enquiry, for example, one could argue that a documentary text is just as fictional as a novel. There are, however, clear binaries between the fictional narratives that surround conjoined bodies and the lived experiences of conjoined subjects themselves. A reoccurring theme voiced by those inhabiting conjoined bodies is misrepresentation based on misunderstanding of the conjoined lived experience. This will

be a motif across all four chapters, as the tension between fiction, memoir and documentary storytelling, is examined.

- To examine in detail the concept of 'the freak' and how such a figure evolved from its negative, fearful, and monstrous associations of the nineteenth century, to an empowered, liberated cultural icon of contemporary times. I will argue that notions of the freak body are just as potent in an examination of Chang and Eng's life, as they are in the modern medical arguments that reflect an overwhelming anxiety about bodily abnormality. I will explore how the trope of the freak reoccurs in contemporary films and books involving conjoined twins to be reappropriated into a symbol of empowerment and liberation.
- To examine contemporary film, literature and fiction in order to analyse the trend to normalise the conjoined body and experience. I analyse how this trend parallels the philosophy of disability scholars such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Lennard J. Davis.
- I review and appropriate these concepts as a source of inspiration for my own fictional work. The plot of my novella follows two conjoined sisters who decide to undergo a medical separation and how they both struggle to live with the consequences of that decision. The themes of my novella include misplaced identity, grief, transformation, social misunderstandings, and the geo-social movement of body parts.

## Historical overview of conjoined twin representations

Scrupulously described, interpreted, and displayed, the bodies of the severely congenitally disabled have always functioned as icons upon which people discharge their anxieties, convictions, and fantasies.<sup>3</sup>

While my creative text is a fictional one, the examination of real life case studies of conjoined twins has played an important role in my research. This is largely due to the fact that there has been a temptation, for both ancient and contemporary texts, to treat conjoined twins symbolically. As Rosemarie Garland-Thompson asserts in the quote above, tales about unusual bodies often have come to represent various mythologies, far removed from the twins themselves. Conjoined twins have been emblematic figures from the earliest times, generating diverse responses which deemed them magical, divine, or grotesque.

Numerous reasons have been attributed to why conjoined births have held such strong mythical power. Clearly, it seems unfathomable for others to imagine an existence in which one person is permanently connected to another. Yet the symbolism of such a bond is highly potent in the human imagination. By their very nature, conjoined twins cross social and legal boundaries. In his book *Abnormal*, Michel Foucault argued that by transgressing nature's boundaries of one body and one mind, conjoined

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<sup>3</sup> R Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997, p. 56.

twins have a long-standing association with the monstrous.<sup>4</sup> Societies were unsure if the conjoined twin was one person or two, and as a result they came to represent two minds trapped in one body or two people sharing one soul.

This fascination with conjoined bodies stretches back to ancient cultures. Creation myths attest to this, as they often portray conjoined twins as something benevolent, wondrous, and containing life-giving powers. Examples of these include the Egyptian creation myth (where the God of Air Shu separates her two children, Geb and Nut, from their embrace), the Chinese story of P'an-Ku, (which describes the Ying and Yang principles), the Maori creation story (which divides Rangi and Pappa from their initial embrace).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the earliest representations of the conjoined figure found in archaeological sites in Mexico, Jordan and Turkey, support the thesis that conjoined births were venerated as something divine and holy.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 2.** Two Headed Boy of Bengal  
by E. Home, 1787.

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<sup>4</sup> M Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975*, trans. G. Burchell and ed. A.I. Davidson, New York, Picador, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> GA Barton, *The Religions of the World*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1919, pp. 1-16.

<sup>6</sup> G Bendersky, 'Tlatilco Sculptures, Diprosopus, and the Emergence of Medical Illustrations', *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2000, pp. 477-501.

In Reformation times, superstitions aligned conjoined births with the work of the devil. Daston and Park note that European songs and broadsheets dating from the fifteenth century, popularised the idea that such births were a bad omen sent from God.<sup>7</sup> The first recorded display of the conjoined-freakish body is in 1664, when still-born infants Martha and Mary, conjoined at the navel, were embalmed and sold for public display in a London market place.<sup>8</sup> By the mid seventeenth century *The London Monster Shows* became increasingly popular. These were penny shows which displayed dwarfs, sleepers, giants, strong men and hermaphrodites in sideshows and carnivals. The wealthy could obtain private audiences with these spectacular creatures in their own homes. Teratology, the official study of monstrous creatures, dates back to the 1500's, when such people were considered outside the realm of the human.

By the eighteenth century, the study of these unusual births was split by a debate about the role of science and nature versus that of God's intentions. A rising climate of scientific knowledge meant that conjoined twins were seen less and less as monstrous freaks and more as intriguing specimens for scientific study.<sup>9</sup> This culminated in the era of the freak show, where conjoined twins were the most prized specimens available for public display. By the mid nineteenth century twins such as Chang and Eng generated fame, popularity, wealth and legitimacy, largely because, unlike earlier generations of twins, they were able to assert their right to manage their own display.

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<sup>7</sup> K Park and L Daston, 'Unnatural Conceptions: The Study of Monsters in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century France and England', *Past and Present*, vol. 92, no. 1, 1981, pp. 20-54.

<sup>8</sup> P Semonin, 'Monsters in the Market Place: The Exhibition of Human Oddities in Early Modern England', in R Garland-Thomson (ed.), *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997, pp. 69-82.

<sup>9</sup> M Foucault, *Abnormal*, trans. G Burchell, AI Davidson (ed.), Picador, United Kingdom, 2004, pp. 55-78.

As many war veterans returned maimed and injured from the First World War there was a decline in the popularity of the freak show. Displaying the damaged body became both distasteful and a traumatic site for viewing the war's legacy. At this time, the disabled body was removed from the public gaze. The paternalistic era of institutionalisation was born. In America and Russia conjoined twins were experimented on, institutionalised and studied from the 1930's onwards, in the private space of the hospital ward.

Today, in the age of medical miracles, there remains a pressure to surgically normalise conjoined bodies. It could be argued that an emphasis on personal autonomy may well lead to the eradication of conjoined bodies in the near future. Surgical advancements have made many complex cases of conjoined twin separation possible, opening up opportunities for a separated life. No longer seen as belonging to the mystical realm, nor as viable showbiz curiosities, these births are now relegated to the world of medicine, where they can be biologically explained and then surgically *fixed*. Surgical separations, however, are not always simple. They often carry the risk of death for one or both twins. Navigating such dilemmas calls into play complex questions about abnormality, disability and the right to life of those who are conjoined.

This thesis examines and interrogates the way in which conjoined twins have appeared in popular narratives. It draws on biographical case studies identifying specific character traits, personalities, and anecdotes from real life experiences of conjoined twins and compares these stories to fictional narratives. Feature film, television programmes and documentary texts will

also be cited as narratives that have been constructed around the lives of conjoined twins.

In using materials in this way I have attempted to more fully present the historical, cultural and narrative representation of conjoined twins. By exploring these ideas more fully in my fictional work, I assert I have given new voice to the ways in which conjoined and separated twins live in the contemporary world.

## Chapter one: freaks

In this chapter, I examine biographical material about Chang and Eng Bunker and compare it to a short fictional piece which Mark Twain based on their lives. I chose to do a case study about the Bunker twins above other freak show acts for two reasons. Firstly, due to their fame and well-documented lives, the Bunker twins remain etched in history as iconic freak show characters. Secondly, the way in which their bodies functioned as both a site of exploitation and as a source of empowerment meant that Chang and Eng's legacy had important ramifications for the display of other conjoined bodies, and for wider notions of 'the freak show.'



**Figure 3.** Chang and Eng, 1811-1974.

In examining the lives of the Bunkers it is important to explore the social, theoretical, and psychological literature of the freak show itself. If it were not for the popularity of the nineteenth century freak show, the Bunkers may have lived an entirely different life. Lennard J. Davies, a prominent disability studies scholar, explained how the word 'normal' only entered the English

language in the 1840s.<sup>10</sup> The words norm, normality and normalcy all appear from 1849 onwards and Davis argues that the concept of human normality should be linked to this era and cultural philosophy. Previously, eighteenth century artists and philosophers, were concerned with concepts of 'divine beauty' and its opposite 'grotesque realism' as two polarities. In 'grotesque realism', Mikhail Bakhtin asserted that the disfigured body became a signifier of common life, rebellion, death and rebirth. Bakhtin linked the grotesque body with carnivalistic displays dating back to medieval times, where the aim was to undermine authority and power through the use of profanity and humour.<sup>11</sup>

As opposed to the romantic connotations of Bakhtin's 'grotesque realism', Davis argues that during the nineteenth century the conception of the 'norm' became the dominant cultural force against which such deviant bodies were measured. At this time the concept of the 'norm' was both articulated and valued. Normality, which relies on a flattening of plurality and difference, Davis argues, also has its limitations:

The very term that permeates our contemporary life – the normal – is a configuration that arises in a particular historical moment. It is part of a notion of progress, of industrialization, and of ideological consolidation of the power of the bourgeoisie. The implications of the hegemony of normalcy are

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<sup>10</sup> LJ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, Verso, London, 1995, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> S Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1997.

profound and extend into the very heart of cultural production.<sup>12</sup>

Davis argues that several nineteenth century philosophical influences shaped what constituted normality; statistics and eugenics in particular categorised human traits into groups such as norms, means, and averages. He notes that it was Darwinian ideas about evolution, from which the concept of defective traits was deduced. Marxist philosophy also relied heavily on the concept of the average worker, average wage and mean wealth distribution. These theories drew on statistics to reinforce the value of norms in society. Davis believes that the danger rests not in the definition of normality itself, but its application as a kind of ideal that all humanity should strive to reach:

The concept of the norm, unlike that of an ideal, implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm. The norm pins down that majority of the population that falls under the arch of the standard bell-shaped curve. This curve, the graph of an exponential function...became in its own way a symbol of the tyranny of the norm. Any bell curve will always have at its extremities, those characteristics that deviate from the norm. So

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 49.

with the concept of the norm comes the concept of deviations or extremes.<sup>13</sup>

Rosemarie Garland-Thompson's analysis of the nineteenth century freak show, also argues for concepts of enforced normalcy and truth. Garland-Thompson believes the freak show to have been a site where the abnormal body became an object of fetish, exoticism, and intrigue in order to sanctify the so called normality of those who viewed it. The mid nineteenth century was a time when medieval notions of monstrosity merged with modernist scientific advances to create a fascination with unfathomable physicality. Thus, disabled bodies became the subject of study and spectacle. These freak shows displayed giants, midgets, hemaphrodites, as well as Aborigines who were deemed fascinating due to their exotic origins. The extraordinary physicality and seemingly miraculous existence of conjoined twins meant they were amongst the most prized specimens offered for public viewing. Garland-Thompson asserts that audiences were drawn to such displays because, by psychologically identifying the freak body with abnormality, they felt reassured that their own bodies were stable, definable and certain:

Bodies whose forms appeared to transgress rigid social categories such as race, gender and personhood were particularly good grist for the freak mill. Albino Africans with dreadlocks, double-genitale hermaphrodites, bearded women, fat boys, half people, the legless and or armless, and conjoined

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 29.

twins violated the categorical boundaries that seem to order civilisation and inform individuality. Such hybridity, along with excess and absence, are the threatening organisational principles that constituted freakdom. At once dangerous and alluring, this cultural space of seemingly infinite license is what the freak shows both amplified and contained with their conventions of display.<sup>14</sup>

When Chang and Eng were born in 1811, the climate in Europe had shifted from one of inherent mistrust and fear of these monstrous bodies, to one of unrelenting fascination. By the time they were touring America in 1840's, the public thirst for the freak show was at its peak.<sup>15</sup> Industrialisation, civil uncertainty and the commodification of labour, had created an environment in which the unusual body became a highly intriguing object for display. Chang and Eng's body was laden with contradictions; it was both human and monstrous, individual and mutual, Oriental and Western.

In her book *Chang and Eng Reconnected*, Cynthia Wu identifies the troubled attempt to categorise the twins because their strange trajectory seems to defy typical accounts of Asian immigrants of the era:

The life of the Bunkers seems to defy legibility within  
Asian American studies because of the time and

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<sup>14</sup> R Garland-Thomson, 'Introduction: From Wonder to Error', in R Garland-Thomson (ed.), *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997. p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4.

circumstances of their migration to the United States, their economic success, their settlement in the American South, and other factors. . . . Far from being exceptions that prove the rule, these unusual historical figures beg a reconsideration of easy divisions between privilege and oppression that accompany the global circulation of Asian bodies.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, the lives of Chang and Eng seem at times to beggar belief. They lived at the height of the freak show era and were subject to some of the most exploitative displays in the history of theatre, but paradoxically, they managed to achieve economic, marital and social status, unparalleled by any pair of conjoined twins since.

In their Biography *The Two*, Irving and Amy Wallace outline some of the extraordinary details of the Bunkers lives. Born in 1811 to a poor family in a fishing village in what was then the Kingdom of Siam, the twins were raised by their mother, Nok, “who treated the two much as she did her other children.”<sup>17</sup> By age seven they were contributing to the family income by fishing and selling duck eggs at the local market. After their birth, a decree was issued by the King of Siam demanding their deaths, but the King never acted on his threat.<sup>18</sup> His successor, King Rama III, invited the twins to the

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<sup>16</sup> C Wu, *Chang and Eng Reconnected: The Original Siamese Twins in American Culture*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2012, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> I Wallace and A Wallace, *The Two, A Biography of Chang and Eng*. Bantam Books, New York, 1979, p.12.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p.7.

palace as royal visitors when they were fourteen years old, and later accompanied him on a diplomatic mission to China and Vietnam.<sup>19</sup>

The twins were 'discovered' by Scottish merchant Robert Hunter in the year 1824.<sup>20</sup> Hunter later united with shrewd businessman named Able Coffin, who recognised their potential appeal and was determined to take them to the United States.<sup>21</sup> When the twins were seventeen years old, Coffin and Hunter, appeared in the boys' small village and proposed to Nok, that they take the twins aboard his ship and display them on a world tour. Coffin promised to return the twins to the village at twenty-one years of age.<sup>22</sup> The brothers, having spent time with King Rama III and his royal entourage, were keen to continue their travels; Nok however, was hesitant in giving her permission. At seventeen, Chang and Eng were the family breadwinners (their father had died from Cholera years earlier) and she was dependent on their help. Nok was offered \$500 compensation (a handsome sum for the time), reluctantly she agreed.<sup>23</sup> Afterwards, Coffin gained permission from King Rama III, who had ultimate power over all his subjects. The deal was brokered and he set sail for Boston with the Bunkers. For the next three years Coffin took the twins on a circuit tour of Europe and the United States, where they attracted significant attention, performing back flips, playing draughts and other activities as part of an elaborate show.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 18 and p. 31.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 38.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 38.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 39.

When they were twenty-one the twins managed to break their contract with Coffin, who by all accounts had overworked and exploited them ruthlessly.<sup>24</sup> After this point they took ownership of their own affairs. They took control of their management, becoming even more successful. This is what set them apart from other freak acts of the time. They moved from being exploited citizens to actively self-managed, worldly, and exotic men.<sup>25</sup> After a brief involvement with the famous sideshow manager, Barnum, they went on to become his major competition and book-keeping records attest to the fact that it was not Barnum's efforts but the twins' own diligence and acute business skills, that accelerated their rise to fame.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout their lives, the brothers continued to tour and they alone reaped the profits from their shows.<sup>27</sup> Eventually they settled in North Carolina, and married the sisters Elizabeth and Adelaide Yates, daughters of a local pastor. The twins bought property, acquired slaves and ran a successful tobacco plantation. Eventually they fathered twenty-one children between them.<sup>28</sup> They made enough money to live a comfortable life by putting their bodies on display for a voyeuristic and fascinated public, which flocked to see them. By all accounts, the twins delivered the salacious information the public wanted in a dignified and non-salacious manner. Indeed, the twins' fame was so widespread they became household names in America. By the 1860's they were celebrities and upstanding gentlemen, and were seen mingling

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<sup>24</sup> I Wallace and A Wallace, *The Two, A Biography of Chang and Eng*. Bantam Books, New York, 1979, P. 139.

<sup>25</sup> C Wu, *Chang and Eng Reconnected*. p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> I Wallace and A Wallace, p. 142.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p. 203.

with other social and political figures in the finest parlours in the country. As Cynthia Wu notes:

Their unusual anatomy, one that today would be subjected to correction and or containment and would cause an abridgement of their civil rights, is what allowed them to become agents of capital in the historical moment they occupied. The affluence resulting from their celebrity allowed them to take part in the containment, enslavement and abridgement of freedom of others.... As they worked and participated in the spaces that opened up to them, Chang and Eng Bunker both transformed and replicated oppressive orders.<sup>29</sup>

Wu highlights the financial success of the twins which located them amongst America's burgeoning moneyed classes. Their ownership of slaves, she notes, allowed them to exploit their liberation while confining others. The twins' lives were remarkable, however, in more ways than just their freedom and money. They looked odd and their way of living offered all manner of conundrums. They were Chinese at a time when foreigners were feared and vilified. As Cynthia Wu notes, in the post Civil War period, 'the China Man' was a crucial figure in the America's racial landscape.<sup>30</sup> Immigration from China had surged with the gold rush of 1849 and reached a peak two decades later. By 1880 the image of 'the China Man', or 'Coolie' as they were known, had shifted from that of an exotic figure representing luxury and

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<sup>29</sup> C Wu, *Chang and Eng Reconnected*, p.11.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21.

wealth, to one which threatened to destabilise American identity by undercutting wages and transmitting impurity.<sup>31</sup>

Chang and Eng, however, not only managed to avoid the taint of 'the Chinese question,'<sup>32</sup> but they also maintained an outstanding reputation as married citizens. Nothing in the archival documentation of their lives explains how the Bunkers managed to circumvent both the 1790 Naturalisation Act which limited citizenship to free white persons, or Carolina's anti-miscegenation law which prevented inter-racial marriage.<sup>33</sup> It is well noted in biographical accounts as well as Bunker family narratives, however, that any local resistance to their marriage was primarily based on issues of race, rather than the twins conjoined condition.<sup>34</sup> Despite the obsession with racial differences at the time, the twins' celebrity, class and reputation as upstanding citizens saved them from restrictions experienced by their Chinese counterparts.

This view is supported by the fact that over time the pictorial representations of the twins show an increasing level of 'whiteness'. As notions of Asian-ness changed, the twins were no longer portrayed as two exotic natives but rather were fully amalgamated into the image of dashing, civilised young men. In boyhood portraits, they appear wearing traditional silk shirts and plaited hair; while in later depictions they sport American haircuts and Western tailored suits. Even their facial features appear less Asian, rounded eyes replace slanted ones and their skin looks visibly lighter. This pictorial shift

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<sup>31</sup> C Wu, *Chang and Eng Reconnected*, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> HL Hsu, 'Sitting in Darkness: Mark Twain and America's Asia', *American Literary History*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2013. p. 71

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 23.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p. 24.

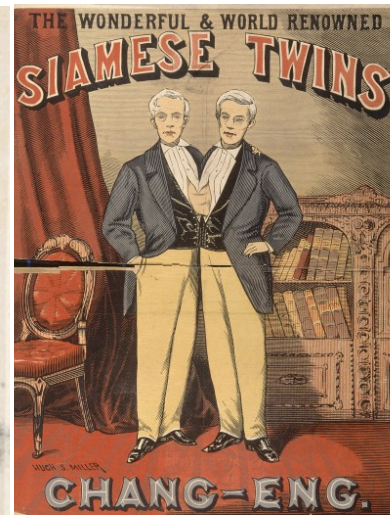
may indicate the way the twins viewed themselves: they never returned to their homeland, as promised by Coffin, and after marriage became increasingly involved in their new lives in America. It also represents the cultural distance that American society placed between the Bunkers and their Oriental origins. Images could be doctored to enhance American characteristics and the twins seem to have taken advantage of such cultural editing.



**Figure 4.** Chang and Eng, with artistic impression of Siam.



**Figure 5.** Chang and Eng the Siamese twins, Lithograph.



**Figure 6.** Chang and Eng, in evening dress.

### Science and the freak show

The interplay between science, the freak show and sexual taboo, played a crucial role in the rise of Chang and Eng Bunker. At first glance their shows seem pure spectacle, as the twins performed activities like back flips, board games, chess, eating and drinking. However, a crucial part of their publicity relied on the testimony of medical practitioners, whose authoritative voices provided them with respectability and endorsement. On their first tour of

Britain, for example, Chang and Eng were examined by some of London's most highly regarded medical experts, including Leigh Thomas, Astely Paston Cooper and George Buckley Bolton.<sup>35</sup> In Boston, a report by Dr John Collins Warren was circulated in the press in order to fuel publicity for the show.<sup>36</sup> The report attested to the authenticity of the brothers' connecting band.

In the nineteenth century, it was commonplace for doctors to be quoted in entertainment pamphlets and to be directly involved with freak show performances. British and American medical practitioners not only vouched that the brothers' condition was real (there were many fake freaks on the show circuit) but they regularly came on stage and discussed the medical issues at hand, such as the nature of the brothers' connecting band and the possibility of surgical separation. These medical figures provided both titillation and graphic information about the nature of the twins' condition normally only condoned in the context of a medical conversation. Indeed, Alice Dreger cites examples of other freak shows of the time whereby the line between medical report and pornographic description became a difficult one to draw. She cites conjoined sisters Millie-Christine (otherwise known as the two headed nightingale), who were born to an enslaved African American woman in 1851. Their life story includes disturbing accounts of being sold, bought, kidnapped and exhibited for medical teams to examine. On frequent occasions the testimony of doctors was used to enhance the twins' sexual allure. Dreger notes:

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<sup>35</sup> C Wu, *Chang and Eng Reconnected*, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39.

Because it was presented in the form of a straightforward quotation from two medical doctors, a report of Mille-Christines' sexual anatomy could be included in the pamphlet sold to the public. It was safe and acceptable for the lay public to read that Mille-Christine 'had separate bladders, but one common vagina, one uterus to be recognized and one perfect anus' as long as this information came from the lips of a medical doctor. Doctors thereby gentrified and legitimated a performance that might otherwise be simply distasteful.<sup>37</sup>

In a similar way to Mille Christine, the interaction between sexual allure and medical jargon was a key strategy in the Bunkers' success. Stulman Dennett notes that after the Civil War the Bunkers lost much of their wealth and by necessity were forced back on to the touring circuit.<sup>38</sup> This time, they toured with their wives and children, and a key element of their performance was the speculation in the minds of the audience as to the sexual practices of the twins:

Siamese twins posing with their normal spouses and offspring not only prompted questions about everyday privacy, but also raised issues of sexual privacy. Sex was a powerful component of the

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<sup>37</sup> AD Dreger, 'Jarring Bodies: Thoughts on the Display of Unusual Anatomies,' *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2000, p. 168.

<sup>38</sup> A Stulman Dennett, 'The Dime Museum Freak Show Reconfigured as Talk Show', in R Garland-Thomson (ed.), *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997, p. 322.

performance text of the freak show; spectators imagined sexual intercourse between incongruous partners... among couples like Chang and Eng and their wives. Such performances readily inspired images of transgressive sex, ambiguous sex, homosexuality, bisexuality and group sex.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, even after their deaths, the Bunker twins' body was a subject of sexualization, speculation and controversy, when it was publicly seized for purposes of an autopsy. Cynthia Wu comments that even in death the Bunkers had no respite from a career of exhibition, drawing a parallel between the anatomical theatre and the carnival stage.<sup>40</sup>

The Bunker twins died on January 17, 1874. They were sixty-three years old. Chang (who had been suffering bronchitis) was the first to die in the early hours of the morning.<sup>41</sup> Eng's son immediately sent for a doctor, however, Eng followed his brother into death within hours. After their deaths, Sarah and Adelaide stored the bodies in the cellar while funeral arrangements were being made. Within two weeks of their passing, Dr William Pancoast arrived from Philadelphia with an entourage of medical men. He began to negotiate with the widows about his intentions to perform an autopsy on the twins. In his report after the autopsy, Pancoast stated his reasons as follows:

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid* p. 322.

<sup>40</sup> C Wu, *Chang and Eng Reconnected*, p. 37

<sup>41</sup> I Wallace and A Wallace, p. 46.

It was held to be the duty of science and humanity that the family of the deceased, permit an autopsy... I became impressed with its importance and felt that it was the duty of the medical profession of this country to make an effort to elucidate the point at issue.<sup>42</sup>

The widows, however, did not give up their husbands' bodies hastily.<sup>43</sup> In the nineteenth century, autopsy was growing in popularity among medical practitioners as a scientific discipline, however it was not routinely performed. During the nineteenth century post-mortem dissection was associated with racial, class and social disadvantage.<sup>44</sup> This was an era in which the graves of African slaves were regularly robbed for use in medical schools. Post-mortem dissection was routinely performed on sideshow performers in order to substantiate or discredit the traits.<sup>45</sup> Hence, it is little wonder that the Bunker widows had their reservations about permitting the doctors access to their husbands' bodies.<sup>46</sup>

When an autopsy became inevitable, the sisters employed a lawyer to set out a contract, which included several conditions about the autopsy procedure.<sup>47</sup> Firstly, that the connecting band must not be severed, secondly if any incision was to be made it must be a small one at the back of the band, thirdly there were to be no incisions made into either of the brothers' heads,

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<sup>42</sup> WH Pancoast, 'Report on the Surgical Considerations in Regard to the Propriety of an Operation for the Separation of Eng and Chang Bunker', *Transactions of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia* 1, 1875, pp. 150-151, cited in C Wu, *Chang and Eng Reconnected: The Original Siamese Twins in American Culture*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2012, p. 42.

<sup>43</sup> C Wu, *Chang and Eng Reconnected*, p. 41.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 45.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p. 45.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p. 43.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 43.

and finally, that the bodies be returned to them after the autopsy. Presumably the condition about the connecting band would have irritated the doctors immensely, since Pancoast's report notes that the main prerogative of the autopsy was to 'unlock the mystery of their union,'<sup>48</sup> a subject which had been of great fascination to both doctors and the lay population ever since the twins were first publicly displayed. The widows' stipulation about the band, also draws attention to the symbolic and sacred value that it held for both the brothers and their families.

After their initial examinations, William Pancoast and his colleague, Harrison Allen, presented an exclusive demonstration about their autopsy findings to a select group of College of Physician Fellows in Philadelphia. Pancoast and Allen had already noted that parts of Eng's and Chang's livers extended into the connecting band along with the peritoneal cavities of each twin. The doctors realised that small veins ran from one twin to the other between both livers, and that the liver tissue was continuous between the two brothers, thus creating one conjoined organ.<sup>49</sup> When each doctor placed his hands inside the cavity of the connecting band (Allen on Chang's side and Pancoast on Eng's) they attempted to touch the other side and hence establish internally the nature of the brothers' connecting ligament. By examining the connection so thoroughly, Pancoast seems primarily concerned with the question of whether or not the brothers could have been successfully separated. Even after thorough examination, however, his answer to this question is inconclusive:

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<sup>48</sup> WH Pancoast, 'Report on the Surgical Considerations in Regard to the Propriety of an Operation for the Separation of Eng and Chang Bunker.'

<sup>49</sup> C Wu, *Chang and Eng Reconnected*, p. 49.

Should such a case occur again, I would recommend the operation, and be willing to perform it, even if....one of the children died, for then at least the survivor would be able to enjoy a natural life. Even if both perished, the risk might be justified; the moral sense of the community, at least in a Christian country, would then not be shocked by the unnatural complication which otherwise would arise, and did arise in the case of the Siamese twins, proving the case of so much criticism severe and unjust, when we consider the peculiar conditions under which the twins enjoyed their lives, the respectable families which they raised, and the good opinion in which both the Messrs and the Mistress Bunker were held in their neighbourhood.<sup>50</sup>

This quote from Pancoast, does not stray far from the sentiment of many contemporary surgeons, which I explore in the next chapter, who often advocated for dangerous surgery in infant twins even when death is a probable outcome. While Pancoast openly states his intention to abide by the moral codes of the time, modern doctors couch the same sentiment with words such as ‘functionality’ and ‘life quality’. Pancoast’s statement shows what is at the forefront of his imagination, namely, the unusual sexual

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<sup>50</sup> WH Pancoast, ‘Report on the Surgical Considerations,’ pp. 166-167.

practices of conjoined twins, rather than the vast array of experiences that make up a shared existence.

### **Mark Twain and 'The Personal Habits of Siamese Twins'**

Mark Twain's fascination with both conjoined twins and Asian-American stories is well documented. Twins are a reoccurring motif in some of Twain's most famous works including *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *Those Extraordinary Twins*, and *The Prince and the Pauper*. These works deal with confusion between identities, divided factions, and farcical courtroom dramas, which, when stripped away reveal vast divisions based on race, class and social status, a reoccurring theme in all Twain's work. In this section I examine Twain's satirical short story, 'The Personal Habits of Siamese Twins', printed in *Packard's Monthly* in 1869. The story appears to be a seed for many of Twain's later twin narratives and is based on the lives of the Bunker twins.

'The China Man' was a crucial racial and economic figure in the United States post Civil War period,<sup>51</sup> and it is necessary to examine this in order to put Twain's writings in its context. In 1849 a flux of Chinese immigrants had arrived in California, seeking their fortunes in the gold fields.<sup>52</sup> In the decades that followed, Asian immigration expanded along the eastern seaboard to Baltimore, Charlestown, and New Orleans. Due to their cheap labour rates, Chinese immigrants were deployed in iron factories in Louisville, Kentucky and other areas of the Southern states.<sup>53</sup> The white

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<sup>51</sup> HL Hsu, 'Sitting in Darkness: Mark Twain and America's Asia', *American Literary History*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2013, p.74.

<sup>52</sup> C Wu, *Chang and Eng Reconnected*, p 22.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* p 22.

working class resented the Chinese workers' ability to undercut wages.<sup>54</sup> There was also a fear that Chinese populations harboured diseases such as small pox, leprosy, bubonic plague and syphilis. San Francisco, where the original Chinese population settled, was under constant scrutiny by public health officials.<sup>55</sup> The prevailing anti-Asian sentiment was marked by a number of legislations: the Foreign Miners Tax of 1850,<sup>56</sup> targeting Chinese gold miners; the Sidewalk Ordinance Act of 1870, prohibiting transporting bundles of sticks on side walks; and the Cubic Air Ordinance Act of 1870,<sup>57</sup> assigning a cubic floor minimum per resident, responding to what was seen as overcrowded Chinese living quarters; and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882,<sup>58</sup> an outright ban on all Asian immigration. This culminating legislation can be seen as the government's attempt to control rising tensions over Asian-American race relations.<sup>59</sup>

Twain's views about Asian Americans have been a subject of much contention. Many critics point to his hardline newspaper articles written during his post at the *San Francisco Daily Morning Call*, as well as works such as *Ah Sin: The Heathen Chinese* (1871) a play which on first reading appears to be steeped in the racist stereotypes of the times.<sup>60</sup> Twain's position on Asian Americans is murky at best. It is purported that he left the *San Francisco Daily Morning Call*, precisely because he was not permitted to report the acts of violence committed against the Chinese population (often at the hands of

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

<sup>60</sup> HL Hsu, p.78.

officials and police), and that this later motivated him to write fiction where broader messages could be embedded in satirical plots.<sup>61</sup>

Additionally, while Chinese writers had no works published in nineteenth century America, Twain was a white male writer who continually presented works containing Asian American characters. Hsuan Hsu argues that these characters not only provided practice runs for Twain's later African American protagonists, but they also focussed Twain's work on crucial cultural transformations occurring in the post Civil War period.<sup>62</sup> Martin Zehr also draws a comparison between Twain's early Asian characters and his later African ones. In both instances, Zehr argues, 'Twain's transformation is a product of developing empathy that is, in turn, a product of his often-demonstrated ability to successfully adopt the perspective of the other in his writings.'<sup>63</sup>

Twain's focus on otherness is more than apparent in 'The Personal Habits of Siamese Twins', a satirical newspaper story published in 1869, three years after the Bunkers' death. Twain's discourse is one of playful speculation and a kind of comic affection. He writes:

I do not wish to write of the personal habits of these  
strange creatures solely, but also of certain curious  
details of various kinds concerning them, which,  
belonging only to their private life have never crept

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, p. 72.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p. 71.

<sup>63</sup> M Zehr, 'Mark Twain, "The Treaty with China," and the Chinese connection', *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2010, cited in 'Sitting in Darkness: Mark Twain and America's Asia', *American Literary History*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2013, p. 73.

into print. Knowing the twins intimately I feel that I am peculiarly well qualified for the task I have taken upon myself.<sup>64</sup>

From the opening lines of the piece Twain establishes the idea that the twins are at once monster and gentlemen, a dichotomy which received much attention throughout the Bunkers' career. After praising the brothers for being both accommodating and unified in their approach to life, Twain says:

And yet these creatures were ignorant and unlettered-barbarians themselves and the offspring of barbarians, who knew not the light of philosophy and science. What a withering rebuke is this to our boasted civilization, with its quarrellings, its wrangling, and its separation of brothers!<sup>65</sup>

Here the brothers are clearly presented as men from an uncivilised world who are inducted by their western superiors into the ways of art and culture, further reiterating their otherness by distancing them from their adopted community.

The text quickly plunges into satire when several hypothetical situations are described. Twain asserts that: Chang does the household work and Eng runs the errands, that Eng is a Baptist and Chang a Roman Catholic (he includes

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<sup>64</sup> M Twain, 'The Personal Habits of Siamese Twins', *Packard's Monthly*, August 1869, University of Virginia Library, <http://twain.lib.virginia.edu/wilson/siamese.html>, viewed 15 March 2012.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

an anecdote about Eng's baptism), and that Eng likes to drink while Chang is a teetotaler. He even speculates on their courting activities with the Yates sisters. Chang and Eng were recognised public figures, their fame so widespread that no explanation of their physical condition is needed by Twain. In fact, the facetious nature of the piece plays on the readers' assumed knowledge of their conjoined situation. On closer examination, the story sets out all the problematic scenarios arising from the ambiguous identity that Foucault would later make his focus: religion, marriage, punishment and law. Twain, like Foucault asks the question: which party holds agency over a unified body with two separate hearts and two minds? Hence, Twain's text focuses on the inseparability of self and other, raising questions about how such differences can be unified.

Deeper in his text Twain also extends his metaphor to the national by depicting the twins as fighting on opposite sides in the Civil War:

During the War they were strong partisans, and both fought gallantly all through the great struggle – Eng on the Union side and Chang on the Confederate. They took each other prisoner at Seven Oaks, but the proofs of capture were so evenly balanced in favour of each that a general army court had to be assembled to determine which one was properly the captor and which the captive. The jury was unable to agree for a long time; but the vexed question was finally decided

by agreeing to consider them both prisoners, and then exchanging them.<sup>66</sup>

In this excerpt, the Bunkers become a potent metaphor for the state of national affairs; the twins are pitched, brother against brother, but inextricably connected by flesh and blood as one whole and united nation. Twain highlights the twins' admirable life-long collaboration and success, despite the potential disunity of their situation. In so doing, Twain converts the Bunkers into a bodily metaphor for the state of a nation in the process of rebuilding itself after a long and bitter division between North and South. He inscribes national and civil conflict onto these conjoined bodies and in so doing, Cynthia Wu suggests<sup>67</sup>, his text shows the brothers as a symbol of national pride. Wu asserts that their racial differences are temporarily erased when placed into this symbolic role, illustrating how the twins are rendered visually white in this process:

This dynamic necessitates the erasure of the Bunkers racial difference. The twins in effect, engage in whiteface performance through the use of their body as literary and visual metaphor, even as these metaphors continue to rest on their palpable and visible distance from whiteness.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> M Twain, 'The Personal Habits of Siamese Twins', *Packard's Monthly*, August 1869.

<sup>67</sup> C Wu, *Chang and Eng Reconnected*, p. 82.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, p. 82.

Far from painting an accurate portrait of the Bunkers individual personalities and life situations, Twain's purpose is clearly symbolic. He converts them into emblematic figures racially, socially and nationally. In line with public attitudes of the time, the Bunkers are viewed as no more than objects of satire. Trapped by social interpretations about their bodies, they are again unable to transcend its symbolic significance.

In concluding this chapter I argue that the Bunkers remain significant figures etched into the cultural and sexual imaginations of the public. Their remarkable legacy is evidenced by their enduring name, 'Siamese Twins', which became synonymous with conjoined twins for more than a century after Chang's and Eng's deaths. While not entirely faithful to the reality of their lives, Twain's fictional text certainly shows how they were categorised as both abnormal and exotic subjects, their body clearly representing a polarity as to what at that time was considered 'normal'.

Freak show performances, which reached their apogee in the Bunker's lifetime, faded with the coming of World War One, when an increasing population of disabled veterans made any display of abnormal bodies seem distasteful and disrespectful.<sup>69</sup> From 1940 onwards, freak show displays were seen as increasingly repugnant and anachronistic and the 'clinically disabled' population were excluded from economic opportunities and relegated to the medical domain.<sup>70</sup> The emblem of the freak, however, did not disappear completely. Today, underground movements have embraced the

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<sup>69</sup> R. Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997. p. 153.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p. 78.

freak as a cultural totem. Young people use tattoos, piercings and fashion, to align themselves with a rich history of transgressive bodies. These symbols offer a life of non-conformity and freedom, willingly lived outside the boundaries of the ordinary, a life that Chang and Eng demonstrated could be lived through exoticism, display *and* respectability.

## Chapter two: separation

The eyes of a curious world have been focused on us almost from the moment of our birth. You are undoubtedly wondering many things about our union as you read this – the story we never intended to tell. We have not told it before, so perhaps you, too have imagined that, joined together as we are, there could be no such thing for either of us as a private life. So much wonderment has centred around us, especially, how two human beings can endure constant, continuous living together harmoniously. Yet, we two, without parents, without one intimate friend until we were 24 years old, have found a fascination and interesting life... Yet- every breath every second of the day and night, we are never parted. We will never be – in life, although the scientists often tried to persuade us to allow them to experiment in cutting us apart.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> D Hilton and V Hilton, 'Intimate Loves and Lives of the Hilton Sisters', *American Weekly*, 1943, cited in L Frost (ed.), *Conjoined Twins in Black and White: The Lives of Millie-Christine McKoy and Daisy and Violet Hilton*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2009, p. 131.

**Figure 7** The Hilton sisters  
in the film *Freaks*, 1932



I open this chapter with the excerpt above, the opening lines from the autobiography of the world famous Hilton sisters, because it seems to express the often re-iterated opinion of many conjoined siblings; that the idea of separation is both distressing and abhorrent. In numerous documented cases, conjoined twins have chosen to remain

connected to their terminally ill sibling, even when it means they will die themselves, so strong is their unique bond.<sup>72</sup> Today however, we are witness to an era, where once impossible surgeries have become safer, more socially acceptable, medically recommended, and legally enforced. Modern surgical techniques are so advanced that highly complicated operations are possible, and access to these procedures is available to twins from all walks of life. These procedures appear to offer conjoined twins new choices but heated debate remains within medical, social, and religious circles about whether surgery is always the preferable course of action. In some cases it involves sacrifice surgery whereby one of the siblings is intentionally killed so that the other may survive. In other cases surviving siblings may face brain damage, impaired motor skills, or loss of reproductive capability. Nonetheless, as surgical techniques continue to advance, conjoined twins may be destined to

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<sup>72</sup> AD Dreger, *One of Us: Conjoined Twins and the Future of Normal*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p.46. (Note: Conjoined twins Mary and Margaret Gibb refused separation in 1967, even when one was dying of cancer.)

become a relic from a past era, mythological in what they represent. As Catherine Myser and David L. Clark have argued:

Although no longer exhibited in freak shows as such, extraordinary bodies continue to be objects of curiosity and public spectacle. This phenomenon is perhaps most obvious in the case of conjoined twins, whose birth and surgical separation regularly incite fervent media attention.<sup>73</sup>

While Chapter One explored the origins and psychology of the freak show itself and the 'Siamese Twins' Chang and Eng, this chapter examines how the freak show ethos still permeates the media spectacle of conjoined twin separations. I will do this by examining three cases, which received significant media attention because of the ethical dilemmas they raised: Jody and Mary, the Bijani sisters, and Lin and Win Htut from Burma. I am interested in exploring not only the ethical dilemmas of these three case studies, but also the storytelling framework which emerged in the mainstream media in each case study. In doing so, I probe the following questions:

- How often is separation surgery motivated by technological advancement and cultural assumptions about normality?
- Does the notion of the freak body still play a part in the arguments and debates around separation surgery?

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<sup>73</sup> C Myser and DL Clark, "'Fixing' Katie and Eilish: Medical Documentaries and the Subjection of Conjoined Twins', *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1998, p. 45.

- How are the cases influenced by cultural ideas that a conjoined body is abnormal, or that a conjoined life is a life half lived?

In examining these case studies my analysis will draw largely on the work of Michel Foucault, Alice Dreger, and Myser and Clarke to assert the view that body normalisation has been a key force, both in the surgeries themselves and the ways in which these surgeries have been presented to the public.

In his book, *Abnormal*, Foucault examines conjoined twins, drawing on examples of conjoinment from the Reformation until the Industrial Revolution, where such twins were portrayed as devilish creatures or signifiers of God's wrath. The eighteenth century, Foucault wrote, was a time when:

...the monster appears and functions precisely at the point where nature and law are joined. It brings with it natural transgression, the mixture of species, and the blurring of limits of characteristics. However, it is a monster only because it is also a legal labyrinth, a violation of and an obstacle to the law, both transgression and undesirability at the level of the law.<sup>74</sup>

Foucault argued that conjoined twins presented both ethical and religious dilemmas in the eyes of the law. If one is baptised is the other baptised too? If

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<sup>74</sup> M Foucault, *Abnormal*, p. 65.

one committed a crime should the other be punished? If one is allowed to marry is their spouse committing bigamy? He asserted that conjoined twins could not be contained by natural laws and therefore they rest outside conventional definitions of normality, hence they are viewed as monstrous. Foucault also applied his analysis to Reformation broadsheets, pictures, and poems. His ideas could just as easily be applied today to some of the medical rhetoric used to describe a conjoined existence: defective, abnormal, and dysfunctional. Consistently, the reasons that modern surgeons and medical professionals provide for operating on conjoined infants is that their future quality of life, autonomy and marriage prospects will be greatly enhanced, should they be allowed to function as two autonomous individuals rather than as two individuals 'trapped' by one body.<sup>75</sup> As G. Thomas Courser notes:

Even today the usual assumption about conjoined twins at birth is that their quality of life will be extremely low unless they can be separated... the conventional medical move is to determine the feasibility of separation, on the assumption that it is desirable to retrofit the twins to the norm of "one body one person" Indeed, the medical approach tends to prejudge the case, to assume that conjoined twins are 'really' two joined individuals rather than one complex and anomalous being. The medical response to conjoined

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<sup>75</sup> D Wasserman, 'Conjunction and Separation,' *Cutting to the core: Exploring the Ethics of Contested Surgeries*, Rowman and Littlefield, Oxford, 2006. p. 129.

twins, then, is to bestow individuality upon them by dividing them surgically, even at the cost of sacrificing one- treating one as a parasite or a growth (like a tumour, as one physician put it) rather than as a person.<sup>76</sup>

A large body of work from philosophers, medical ethicists and theorists such as Dreger, Myser and Clarke, or Nancy King, suggests that this medically persuasive approach is incorrect. It challenges numerous medically focussed documentaries that have been produced about separation surgeries during the past twenty years. These narratives present the surgery as a kind of miraculous intervention for conjoined twins who were otherwise doomed to live an unhappy life. These documentaries include: 'Katie and Eilish',<sup>77</sup> 'Siamese Twins',<sup>78</sup> and 'Trishna & Krishna: The Quest for Separated Lives'.<sup>79</sup> They assert that surgery provides positive outcomes for the surviving children (even when one twin dies). The twins' individual agency disappears within this saviour narrative. Scholars Myser and Clarke, who present a Lacanian interpretation of separation narratives are particularly critical of the ways in which such medical documentaries support these sacrificial approaches:

Our thesis is that the media accounts inherit and reiterate certain "regulatory ideals" in their narrative

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<sup>76</sup> GT Couser, *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2009, p. 52.

<sup>77</sup> 'Katie and Eilish', *First Tuesday*, television programme, ITV, UK, 4 August 1991.

<sup>78</sup> 'Siamese Twins', *Nova*, television programme, PBS, USA, 14 February 1995.

<sup>79</sup> 'Trishna & Krishna: the Quest for Separated Lives', Seven Network, Australia, 6 February 2010.

and imagery, and that such ideals act-in the hands of surgeons represented there- to determine and even (re)shape the “monstrous” difference of extraordinary corporeality with cutting sometimes killing force. We argue that medical documentaries are especially vivid instances of the correlation of power and knowledge.... they also function in prescriptive ways, reproducing normative assumptions about what it means to be properly embodied and thus operating as agents for the medical regime.<sup>80</sup>

In my examination of these case studies, I also explore the concerns raised by Myser and Clarke, asserting that it is not only medically produced documentaries that provide this bias but that numerous other forms of reportage assert the view that separation is always the preferable option. I posit that these media representations indicate a contemporary assumption that a conjoined life is monstrous, untenable and freakish.

Medical intervention is not a new approach to conjoined twins. Since earliest medical accounts, surgeons have been fascinated with techniques for surgical intervention on conjoined infants in order to create two separate beings. The first recorded non-lethal separation of conjoined twins occurred in 1690 when the German anatomist, Konig, divided infant girl twins who were connected at the abdomen.<sup>81</sup> There had been numerous attempts before this

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<sup>80</sup> C Myser and DL Clark, p. 46.

<sup>81</sup> JA O'Neill, Jr, GW Holcomb III, L Schnaufer, et al., 'Surgical Experience with Thirteen Conjoined Twins', *Journal of Pediatric Surgery*, vol. 208, no. 3, 1988, p. 299.

time to separate conjoined twins but none of them had been successful. The recorded number of separation attempts, worldwide to date, has been cited at two hundred and fifty.<sup>82</sup> Although, the actual figure may be higher, as the surgeon L Spitz notes in his paper about conjoined twin surgeries, 'These statistics must be viewed with circumspection as success is more likely to be reported than failure.'<sup>83</sup> With the advent of film technology in the early twentieth century, the privacy of these operations began to erode, and recording the complex surgeries became a regular occurrence. One such example is cited by G. Thomas Courser:

According to Jose van Dijck, in the early twentieth century, within years of the first public movie screenings, a prominent French surgeon, Eugene-Louis Doyen, had himself filmed separating a pair of twelve-year-old conjoined girls, Doodica and Radica Neik. Significantly, although the film was intended for a medical audience, pirated copies were soon shown to lay audiences. Indeed, van Dijck argues that the medical documentary has displaced the freak show as the arena for the display of conjoined twins as spectacles.<sup>84</sup>

As in the recording of the Neik operation, young twins have not given consent for these recordings and in many cases not for the surgery itself.

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<sup>82</sup> AD Dreger, *One of Us*, p. 51

<sup>83</sup> L Spitz and EM Kiely, 'Experience in the management of conjoined twins', *British Journal of Surgery*, no. 89, 2002, p.1188

<sup>84</sup> GT Couser, p. 53-54.

Indeed, before and during the eighteenth century, conjoined twins were still commonly referred to as monsters throughout European Medical Literature, and their consent to an operation was usually deemed unnecessary.<sup>85</sup> Until the early 1800s, smothering conjoined twins at birth was a common practice for midwives.<sup>86</sup> While this extreme euthanasia is now rare, the issue of consent remains problematic. One of the largest complications in modern day surgery is the tendency to separate such twins early in life (usually before they are able to talk) as the chances of their survival are much higher when babies. This means that in most cases the consent to separate infants often rests in the hands of their guardians.

In her book *One of Us, Conjoined twins and the future of Normal*, Alice Dreger has criticised the tendency for surgeons and the media to present separation as the only answer for conjoined twins.<sup>87</sup> While she does not rule out surgery, Dreger is highly critical of certain cases. She bases her arguments on years of fieldwork, talking with inter-sex individuals and conjoined twins. She notes that overwhelmingly the response from those who occupy anomalous bodies such as these, is that they would prefer not to have medical intervention to normalise their bodies. Dreger notes:

(Indeed) many conjoined twins often explicitly say they do not want ever to be separated, since this would result in a profound change of identity or the death of a twin's "other half"... One might assume that these sorts

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<sup>85</sup> P Fonetes de Costa, *The Singular and the Making of knowledge at the royal society of London in the Eighteenth century*. Cambridge scholars publishing, 2009, Newcastle, UK, p. 27

<sup>86</sup> GT Couser, p. 51.

<sup>87</sup> AD Dreger, *One of Us*.

of claims are simply psychological coping mechanisms that conjoined twins “decide” they do not wish to be separated because this way the necessary attachment seems like a choice. But then is it a mere coping mechanism when a woman says she’s comfortable being female, or when a Native American says he’s comfortable being Native? Historically, the medical profession has viewed as psychologically ill, those individuals – such as transsexuals and people seeking the amputation of healthy limbs – who have longed for bodies very different from the ones they were born with. Why not see conjoined twins who wish to remain together as well adjusted?<sup>88</sup>

Dreger argues that it is important to recognise key facts about conjoined births, which play a major role in debates pertaining to infant separations. Conjoined twins are extremely rare for a number of reasons. In the first instance the birth rate is estimated to be as low as 1 in 50,000 births.<sup>89</sup> When we consider that at least 40 per cent of conjoined twins are stillborn (due to the complicated strain that shared organs and body parts place on their bodies) and of those born alive 35 per cent die within a day, the survival rate drops to one in 200,000.<sup>90</sup> Many of the surgeries are conducted in emergency circumstances, with the intention of prolonging life for one or both twins. However, it is well known that such surgeries are often high risk. One

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<sup>88</sup> AD Dreger, *One of Us*. p. 43-44.

<sup>89</sup> L Spitz and EM Kiely, p.1188.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid* p.1188.

statistic from 1994 put the hospital discharge rate of separated twins as low as five per cent.<sup>91</sup> (It is important to note here that some of these cases were emergency surgeries, some were sacrifice surgeries and others were surgeries elected by their guardians.) While the survival chances of separation surgeries have improved since 1994, there are still many risks involved due to their complexity. The risks include: brain damage, permanent physical impairment, limited reproductive capability and death.

Conjoined twin births rarely occur in the first world, due to increased rates of medical scanning and access to abortion, so increasingly conjoined children are born un-expectantly, to poor families in developing countries.<sup>92</sup> David Wasserman, a bioethicist, comments below on the opportunities that these very rare cases provide for surgeons:

“The moral issues raised by contested separations are not limited to the assessment of the twins’ conflicting claims. Their separation involves extraordinary labour intensive surgery, utilizing some of the most expensive labour in the health care profession. This is likely to remain the case, for two reasons. First, innovation is far more likely to increase the odds of success than to reduce the cost of the attempt. Second, the idiosyncratic character of most conjunctions,

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<sup>91</sup> AE Winch and MT Gonyea ‘Separation of Conjoined twins: A Case Study in Critical care,’ *Critical care Nursing Clinics of North America*, 6 (1994), p. 808

<sup>92</sup> F Cuillier, KC Dillon, F Grochal, et al. ‘Conjoined twins: what ultrasound may add to management.’ *Journal of Prenatal Medicine*. 2012, 6(1). pp. 4-6.

even conjunctions of the same general type, is likely to require very costly improvisation.”<sup>93</sup>

Due to their scarcity and the particular challenging way in which many twins are conjoined, opportunities to operate on conjoined twins are very rare and extremely competitive among top performing surgeons worldwide. Often separation surgeries are performed gratis, and sometimes third world orphaned-twins are flown to first world countries, their guardianship transferred to first world parents, so that they have access to such medical intervention.<sup>94</sup> While this may seem extremely generous on behalf of the medical community, it also can provoke some concern. Increasingly, hospitals are spending a great deal of money on publicity campaigns to show off the skills and technologies employed in such rare cases. Whether or not the operations succeed or fail, it is inevitable that the profile of the hospital is raised by the attempt, as is their understanding of these never before tested surgical technologies.<sup>95</sup> As Wasserman clearly states above, each new surgery provides new innovation, new breakthroughs, and new opportunities that build up knowledge for the next attempt. Dreger warns us that these breakthrough attempts then prompt more interventions down the line, even when the statistical chances of survival may be very low. She terms this phenomenon, ‘Technological imperative,’ as explained below:

This is the situation in which increasingly fantastic and expensive surgeries are performed without much

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<sup>93</sup> D Wasserman, p. 134.

<sup>94</sup> AD Dreger, *One of us*, p. 24.

<sup>95</sup> AD Dreger, ‘The Limits of Individuality: Ritual and Sacrifice in the Lives and Medical Treatment of Conjoined Twins’, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1998, p. 24.

pause to consider their propriety in the interests of progress and discovery... They build up legitimacy and cease to be questioned.<sup>96</sup>

### **Lin and Win Htut**

The separation surgery performed on twin brothers Lin and Win Htut, is consistent with Dreger's concept of 'technological imperative'. Lin and Win were born in Myanmar (formerly Burma) in 1982. The twins were hospitalised from birth and had little contact with their parents from an early age. In 1983, Dr Alan Conn found the twins in a Burmese hospital while travelling to visit an anesthetist.<sup>97</sup> Negotiations began with the Burmese government in order to raise the funds to bring the twins to Canada for the operation.

The twins were joined at the pelvis and shared one set of male genitalia. When considering the twins' condition the doctors argued that it was too difficult to reconstruct a penis, so sexual reassignment for one of the twins was the only option, being easier to

create female reproductive organs than male ones. The Canadian paper, *The News and Courier*, reported that: 'Doctors separating 2 ½ year old Siamese

**Figure 8.** Lin and Win Htut , as babies



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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, p. 24.

<sup>97</sup> J Wong, 'Twin peaks', *The Globe and Mail*, 25 June 25 2005, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/twin-peaks/article20423419/?page=all>, accessed 13 February 2015.

twins chose the more active aggressive infant to leave as a boy and made the weaker child a girl.<sup>98</sup> This was not the only instance in which a sex change had been performed at the time of infant separation surgery. In two other documented cases a similar course of action was taken. One reported by O'Neill, 1988 in, *The Journal of Paediatric Surgery*,<sup>99</sup> the other reported by Spitz and Kiely, 2002 in, *The British Journal of Surgery*.<sup>100</sup> The Canadian medical team made these decisions based on the assumption that separation offered a better quality of life for the twins. They also made sweeping judgements about gender and character.

Lin and Win survived the operation well, with the media reporting it as a 'miracle surgery.'<sup>101</sup> In fact, the procedure caused something of a media frenzy, with the press painting the doctors as generous heroes of a groundbreaking operation. As this excerpt from the *Orlando Sentinel* notes: 'As Dr Alan Conn put it, Siamese twins Win and Lin Htut were trapped in the same body,'<sup>102</sup> and from the *The Globe and Mail*, 'If doctors at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children had been unable to separate the children they would have had a miserable, restricted life. They could never have stood up, let alone walk.'<sup>103</sup>

The surgery provided some benefits for the Htut twins – it meant that they were now mobile, autonomous individuals, their only visible disability the

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<sup>98</sup> 'Doctors Choose More Active of Twins to Become Boy', *The News and Courier*, 31 July 1984.

<sup>99</sup> JA O'Neill, et al., p. 303.

<sup>100</sup> L Spitz and EM Kiely, p. 1192.

<sup>101</sup> M Hanlon, 'Miracle Siamese Twins Enjoy Happiness and Love in Burma', *Toronto Star*, 23 December 1985.

<sup>102</sup> 'Happy Ending' *Orlando Sentinel*, Orlando, 18 October 1985.

<sup>103</sup> J Hollobon, 'Making Individuals of Siamese Twins 43 Doctors in Surgical Teams Used Care and Deductive Skills' *The Globe and Mail*, 6 August 1984.

artificial limbs they needed to move around. But the surgeons' claims that without the operation the twins were doomed to a miserable, trapped existence, were challenged by other hospital staff. Quite a different perspective was provided from the nurses within the hospital, who were caring for the boys on arrival: 'Once we overcame our initial reaction to their deformity we were struck by their normalcy. Although attached, they had and continue to have two completely different personalities.'<sup>104</sup> The responses of the post-operative nurses is even more striking: 'The healthy "whole" children whom we had adopted as our own were now, 17 hours later, separate but badly deformed. Now they seemed handicapped.'<sup>105</sup>

As is often the case, the conjoined condition is not viewed as a deformity in the mind of the twins themselves. Instead it presents a challenge to those who witness it. This dilemma is well documented in the case of the Schappell sisters who were institutionalised during their childhood and grouped with children who were mentally handicapped. When the sisters were IQ tested as adults, they both scored well above seventy points.<sup>106</sup> While life choices, employment and sexual activity are affected by a conjoined twin's circumstances it is not necessarily the conjoined condition itself which causes distress to the twins.

So great was the obsession with the Htut surgery that a full spread appeared in *Life Magazine* in October 1984, featuring preoperative, inter-operative and

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<sup>104</sup> T Sweeting and P Patterson, 'Lin and Win Htut the Conjoined Twins from Burma', *The Canadian Nurse*, no. 80, 1984, p. 18.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20.

<sup>106</sup> E Weissbrod, dir., *Face to Face: The Schappell Twins*, DVD, A&E Television Networks, USA, 2000.

post-operative photographs.<sup>107</sup> As the parents of the children were not in Canada during the operation, and the infants themselves were less than three years old, the question of who gave consent for publishing such an invasive and detailed photographic account of events remains unanswered. Equally worrying is the future impact that such an article might have. As Donna A. Caniano notes:

As these children mature one wonders about the future effects of this “full discloser” publicity. How will they react as teenagers to reading such stories about their surgery in which delicate, genital reconstruction was performed? Will they question the basis for phenotypic gender reassignment, a subject usually kept private between family and physician? What may seem to be an interesting, heart warming magazine story today, may be quite the contrary to the patient as a teenager or adult.<sup>108</sup>

After Lin and Win’s recovery, they returned to Burma. There were two follow up trips to Canada when the twins were aged four and ten years old, where the twins received new artificial limbs and basic medical checks.<sup>109</sup> However, as children in Burma, it seems that Win was not able to gain access to the hormone treatment that had been prescribed by Canadian Doctors.

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<sup>107</sup> 'Separating Siamese Twins, Lin and Win Htut.' *Life Magazine*, October 1, 1984, Life Magazine Inc. New York, 1984.

<sup>108</sup> DA Caniano, 'Pediatric Surgery and the Media', *Journal of Pediatric Surgery*, vol. 20, no. 6, 1985, p. 567.

<sup>109</sup> J Wong, 'Twin peaks,' *Saturday's Globe and Mail*, Jun. 25 2005.

**Figure 9.** Lin and Win Htut in hospital in Toronto, Photo credit: Stan Behal.



Subsequently when he was ten years old, Win told his mother that he was a boy and his parents complied with their son's wishes and chose to let him live as a male.<sup>110</sup> Both the physical and sexual identity of the twins remained

unmonitored throughout their teenage years. Notably, this lack of follow up and Win's ambivalence about his assigned gender, was hardly reported in the press. As is often the case, the success or failure of the separation surgery is where the media's narrative begins and ends. The publicity generated at the time of these surgeries is often fuelled by the hospitals themselves in the interest of raising their profiles, with little concern for the ongoing health of the patients or future complications.

### **Jody and Mary**

The case of conjoined twins Jody and Mary Attard from Malta also provoked public debate. The parents of Jodie and Mary arrived in England from the Maltese Island of Gozo in 2000, seeking medical assistance for the birth of

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

their twins.<sup>111</sup> The parents were aware that the girls in utero were conjoined, and being strict Catholics, they had refused an abortion on religious grounds in Malta.<sup>112</sup> They were seeking medical help to deliver their children. When the girls were born in Manchester, their parents were told that Mary's internal organs were joined to her sisters, her own being so defective that without Jodie she would likely die. Additionally, it seemed that Mary suffered from brain damage and a weak heart. If the twins remained joined, death for both was the probable outcome.<sup>113</sup>

The complex nature of the twins' conjoinment and their poor life expectancy, prompted the hospital staff to consider a unique type of surgery called *sacrifice surgery*. This term refers to cases of conjoined twin separation surgery where the death of one twin is inevitable, due to the twins sharing vital organs or brain tissue. Such surgeries are very different from emergency operations where a living twin is separated from their dying sibling. In sacrifice surgeries, one twin is intentionally killed so that their organs and tissues can be used to restore the body of the surviving twin.<sup>114</sup> The doctors urged the parents to go ahead with this surgery, thereby preserving Jodie's life at the cost of Mary's. The parents did not give their consent and the case was taken to the British court. The parents provided this statement during the case, cited by Dreger:

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<sup>111</sup> YM Barilan, 'Head-Counting Vs. Heart-Counting: An Examination of the Recent Case of the Conjoined Twins from Malta', *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2002, pp. 594.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* p. 595.

<sup>113</sup> AD Dreger, *One of Us*, p. 96.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

We cannot begin to accept or contemplate that one of our children should die to enable the other one to survive. That is not God's will. Everyone has the right to life, so why should we kill one of our daughters to enable the other one to survive? That is not what we want and that is what we have told the doctors.<sup>115</sup>

A legal battle ensued between the parents and the hospital as to the appropriate course of action. Eventually, Judge Johnson ruled that the operation should go ahead and he invoked a rare law in which the families of patients who are terminally ill and requiring life support are entitled to end life humanely.<sup>116</sup> By separating the twins it was clear Mary would die, but this was permissible given that her projected life quality seemed so low, the judge argued. The parents wanted the twins to face the natural consequences of the situation. After an appeal however, and a further hearing, they were forced to go ahead with the operation as decided by the court. As predicted, Jodie survived and Mary's life was lost.

There are many interesting points about this case. Firstly, conjoined twins continue to raise the same legal conundrums identified by Foucault, in *Abnormal*, by provoking public conflicts between parents, doctors and the state. Secondly, the case sparked heated debates about the role of churches, state, parents and disability groups about how and when we should protect human life or re-determine its natural consequences. The hospital argued for the surgery because they felt obliged to protect human life, however, there

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<sup>115</sup> AD Dreger, *One of Us*, p. 98.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, p. 99.

have been cases in which infant conjoined twins have survived well beyond the expectations of doctors. David Wasserman, A bioethicist and a psychologist, reinforces this argument:

The dire forecasts of surgeons eager to operate must be taken with a grain of salt. And in quite a few cases, the alternative to separation, with all its attendant risks, is seen as not death but bondage, the surgery not as life saving but merely as liberating.<sup>117</sup>

Indeed, many un-separated conjoined twins have outlasted the predictions of their doctors, including: the Hensel sisters,<sup>118</sup> Ruthie and Verena Cody,<sup>119</sup> and Yvonne and Yvette Macarthur.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, medical forecasts for a doomed conjoined life are often misguided. Modern medications, physiotherapy and rehabilitation have allowed disabled people to greatly improve both their mobility and their participation in society. In the case of Jody and Mary, the doctors' assumption about the twins' poor outlook may well have been too hasty. Thirdly, the courts went against the desires of the parents, placing legal and moral judgements above parental wishes. Perhaps an influencing factor in this case was Mary's limited mental capacity and the

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<sup>117</sup> Wasserman, p. 129

<sup>118</sup> 'School, Shopping, Sunbathing... Normal Activities in an Extraordinary World: Conjoined Twins Abigail and Brittany Hensel Offer a Glimpse in to Their Lives in New Reality TV Series', *Daily Mail*, 29 August 2012, available from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2195220/Conjoined-twins-Abigail-Brittany-Hensel-offer-glimpse-extraordinary-world.html>, viewed 26 January 2015.

<sup>119</sup> 'Girl Talks About Imminent Death After Her Siamese Twin Sister Dies', *New York Times*, 22 July 1991, available from <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/07/22/us/girl-talks-about-imminent-death-after-her-siamese-twin-sister-dies.html>, viewed 26 January 2015.

<sup>120</sup> B Stumbo, 'Two Lives Remembered: Eulogy: Family and Friends Recall the Conjoined Twins' Grace, Cheerfulness and Perseverance', *Los Angeles Times*, 17 January 1993, available from [http://articles.latimes.com/1993-01-17/local/me-2134\\_1\\_amazing-grace](http://articles.latimes.com/1993-01-17/local/me-2134_1_amazing-grace), viewed 26 January 2015.

incomprehensible notion to singletons that a conjoined life is worth living, however limited it may appear to be.

Certainly, one factor that escaped the attention of both the media and disability groups during the debate, was that part of the parents' objection to the surgery lay in their fears about returning to Malta with this severely disabled child, Jody. Disabled children in Malta are viewed suspiciously and their parents are often blamed for their condition.<sup>121</sup> In addition to this, the parents were fearful, especially after the court ordeal, that their daughter would be taken from them by the British government and either placed with foster parents or institutionalised.<sup>122</sup>

While it is shocking that the parents would go to such lengths to avoid raising a disabled child, it is not hard to imagine that for a parent, the prospect of choosing one child's life over the other was both morally perplexing and fraught. Medical ethicist George Annas asserted:

The case (seems) to have been decided not on the basis of the law (which most judges found of little help) but on an intuitive judgement that the state of being a conjoined twin is a disease and that separation is the indicated treatment, if such a treatment affords one of the twins a chance to live.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> AD Dreger, *One of Us*, p. 98

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, p. 98.

<sup>123</sup> G Annas, 'Conjoined Twins – The Limits Of Law At The Limits Of Life', *New England Journal Medicine*, vol. 344, no. 14, 2001, p. 1105.

Dreger makes two important points about the outcome. Firstly, when the judge specified that the decision be taken only in the case of conjoined twins facing this predicament, he marked conjoined twins as fundamentally different from non-conjoined people. Furthermore, the apparent success of the operation – Jody recovered relatively well and her prospects for life are looking positive – will have a disproportionate influence on decisions about other separation surgeries, particularly sacrifice surgeries in the future. Dreger remained concerned about the outcomes:

In the history of paediatric surgeries, the history of those who have been counted as successes has always weighed more heavily than the history of those who have been counted as failures, including those who have remained conjoined.<sup>124</sup>

A storm of media attention followed the Attards throughout the court case and operation. So great was the fascination with their children, their identities were protected and photos of the twins were prohibited under the rule of the courts. When the ordeal was finally over, and the operation completed, the Attards sold their story to the British papers complete with photographs. They used the media agent Max Clifford to secure £400,000 for the photos and an exclusive interviews with *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*. At the time this was the biggest cross-media deal ever brokered.<sup>125</sup> The Attards said that they intended to use the money as a trust fund for Jody and to pay ongoing medical expenses.

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<sup>124</sup> AD Dreger, *One of Us*, p. 112.

<sup>125</sup> M Clifford and A Levine, *Max Clifford, Read all about it*, Virgin Books, 2006. London. p. 235

### **The Bijani Sisters**

Throughout history, most adult twins consistently reiterate the Hilton's statement which opens this chapter, that the idea of separation is both untenable and abhorrent. In fact, Dreger points out, there has only been one recorded case of adult conjoined twins requesting surgical separation, the Bijani sisters from Iran. The Bijani sisters were craniopagus twins, and at twenty-nine they advocated in a court of law for their own separation. The sisters fought a long battle to permit the separation, which involved several hospitals and law courts. As they were joined in the brain many surgeons refused to operate, claiming the operation was too dangerous. The sisters finally convinced both the court and Dr Keith Goh to perform the surgery. The operation took place on July 8<sup>th</sup> 2003, in Singapore in 2003.<sup>126</sup> When Dr Koh and his team began the surgery, they found the joint brains much more difficult to separate than originally conceived. The sisters' brains not only shared a major vein but, having being joined for twenty nine years, much of the brain tissue had fused. The sisters died shortly after the operation from blood loss.<sup>127</sup>

Despite their deaths, the Bijani sisters were heralded as brave figures by the media, with rhetoric about their heroic attempts at a better life. In an outpouring of grief, the mainstream press issued grand statements such as this one from the *Deseret News*:

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<sup>126</sup> A Lustig, 'Separated After Birth', *Human Life Review*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2003, p. 99.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* p. 99.

The twins decision to undergo life-threatening surgery to look for a better life was a true act of courage... They were two bright, lively women willing to chance all for a dream.<sup>128</sup>

*The Spectator* claimed: 'In their separation, Ladan and Laleh had brought the world together.'<sup>129</sup>

Their father, Doctor Safaian, was not convinced, he publicly voiced his disappointment that the sisters were victims of a propaganda campaign in which they truly believed that the operation would bring them a better life.<sup>130</sup> Others within the medical community began to question whether the predictions about the operation were overly optimistic. Nancy Hastings asserts:

They wanted to be separated regardless of the consequences, even preferring death. I do not think the surgery should have been refused or prohibited. But I hope that they were privately told that the likelihood of either's survival was much lower than publicly discussed. I doubt they were.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> 'The Bijani Saga Will Live On', *Deseret Morning News*, 9 July 2003.

<sup>129</sup> E Niedowski, 'Sad Farewell for Bijani Sisters; Hundreds Offer Prayers, Cards, Letters, Bouquets', *The Spectator*, 10 July 2003.

<sup>130</sup> AD Dreger, *One of Us*, p. 43.

<sup>131</sup> NMP King, 'The Stories We Tell Ourselves', *The Hastings Centre Report*, vol. 33, no. 5, 2003. p. 1.

Publicly, the sisters' chances of survival were given at around fifty percent, however, surgeons who had examined the sisters previously put the figure much lower at between two and ten percent.<sup>132</sup> Would the sisters have gone ahead if the statistics for survival presented to them were less viable? As there are few records or direct interviews with the sisters themselves, it is impossible to know whether they were well informed about the level of risk the operation posed. Dreger believes that if Laleh and Ladan *were* fully aware of the true risks involved in the surgery, this makes them not only extremely brave, but also completely unique among conjoined twins, past or present:

Few singletons could imagine living a life conjoined, and most believed the sisters had made the right choice, risking their lives to try to achieve physical independence. But few recognized that this choice to risk their lives to achieve an embodiment radically different from the one they had been born with made Ladan and Laleh quite unusual, even for conjoined twins. This is because most such twins, like most of us singletons, grow up accepting the basic bodies they were born with as necessary to their selves. Most people who are conjoined, given the opportunity to do so, accept and embrace a life of two minds in one packaging of skin.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> YM Barilan, pp. 593-603.

<sup>133</sup> AD Dreger, *One of Us*, p. 43.

The sisters' desire to separate thus could be seen not as a heroic act, but one of suicidal inclination. As Courser argues:

Both women had law degrees, but, intent on pursuing different careers, they chose to risk an operation that had never been attempted on adults. This story suggests the powerful appeal of physical autonomy, the desire for which cost both these women their lives.<sup>134</sup>

**Figure 10.** Iranian sisters, Ladan and Laleh Bijani, 2003.



In conclusion, I have argued that very rarely does the mainstream press reveal a close personal perspective on the thoughts and lives of real conjoined twins who choose to undergo separation surgeries. I assert that this is not only because the patients are often young children, but also because the perspectives of surgeons, hospitals and government bodies are those which hold the most legitimacy in the minds of modern lay populations. Through these three case studies, I have shown that medical perspectives permeate the press releases, newspaper reports, and

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<sup>134</sup> GT Couser, p. 53.

documentaries about these surgeries. These perspectives are often based on the assumption that a conjoined existence is limiting, disabling and abnormal, without pause to consider that many twins who have remained conjoined, such as the Bunkers, the Hensels, or the Schappell twins, have gone on to experience fruitful and interesting lives. This constricting view thus justifies controversial surgeries which involve sex changes, sacrificing one twin's life, or suicidal risk. Such risky operations would be unthinkable for siblings who were not conjoined.

In his article, 'Conjunction and Separation,' David Wasserman concludes that 'The separation of conjoined twins should not be seen as their liberation, but as a course of action fraught with difficult trade-offs.'<sup>135</sup> I also support the idea that we should not discount the benefit of separation surgery in cases where it is safe for infants, or when it is performed on consenting adults, but clearly caution should be exercised when this is not the case. Twins who remain conjoined may lament their constricted existence, while separated twins may regret surgery or view it as the loss of an extraordinary bond. What is undeniable, however, is that the often repeated narrative of abnormality, dis-functionality and difference, should not be the deciding factor when weighing up the costs or benefits of such procedures.

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<sup>135</sup> D Wasserman, p. 137.

### Chapter three: normality

In his book *Enforcing Normality*, Leonard J. Davis examined the representations of people with disabilities, arguing that literature acts as a form of normality to restrict narrative:

If disability appears in a novel it is rarely centrally represented. It is unusual for a main character to be a person with disabilities, although minor characters, like Tiny Tim, can be deformed in ways that arouse pity. In the case of Esther Summerson who is scarred by smallpox, her scars are made virtually to disappear through the agency of love. On the other hand, as sufficient research has shown, more often than not villains tend to be physically abnormal: scarred, deformed, or mutilated. I am not saying simply that novels embody the prejudices of society toward people with disabilities. That is clearly a truism. Rather, I am asserting that the very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normativity encourages us to identify with him or her.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> LJ Davis, p. 41.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson also believes that ‘disabled’ literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters...main characters almost never have physical disabilities.<sup>137</sup> While this has traditionally been the case, in this chapter I assert that recent fictional and film texts subvert these historical representations by offering a significant cultural shift in the way in which disabilities and unusual anatomies are viewed in contemporary society. *The Girls* (a novel), *Abby and Brittany* (a reality TV programme), and *Face to Face* (a documentary) are narratives which focus on the lives of conjoined twins. All three texts locate their characters as protagonists, in the centre of their contemporary world, and all question out-dated notions of disability and abnormality.

**Figure 11.** The Hensel sisters.



In Chapter One, I explored the nature of freak show displays and in Chapter Two I examined dominant medical narratives about ‘fixing’ conjoined bodies. This chapter focuses on contemporary social narratives about the personal experiences of

conjoined twins themselves. As Courser has noted: ‘Even as disability memoir has taken graphic form, disability life writing is also found in

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<sup>137</sup> R Garland-Thomson, ‘Introduction’, *Freakery*, p. 8.

documentary film.<sup>138</sup> In the growing literature of the disability memoir, documentary films are undeniably forerunners in this assemblage of stories. By comparing examples of both fictional and documentary texts, I will examine the complex interaction between fiction and memoir in conjoined twin narratives. This chapter will also analyse the limitations of portraying conjoined twins as normal subjects across the three texts. I argue that while presenting conjoined twins as regular protagonists, these texts signal a wider social acceptance of conjoined twins, but they also provoke a number of dilemmas. What happens when conjoined characters are portrayed as 'normal' protagonists? What is beneficial about this approach and what is problematic about it?

A cultural shift has occurred in recent narratives about conjoined bodies. Until the 1980s and 1990s conjoined twins were still aligned with monstrosity and the abject in many books and films. Horror films such as: *Basket Case*,<sup>139</sup> *Dead Ringers*,<sup>140</sup> and *The Dark Half*,<sup>141</sup> equated conjoined twins with deformity, mental instability and mutation. Recent films about conjoined twins, however, have taken a different view, often using first person narratives rather than the objectifying gaze of the viewer. Films such as *Brothers of the Head*<sup>142</sup> (about fictional British conjoined rock stars), *Twin Falls Idaho*<sup>143</sup> (about conjoined Canadian twins), and the mainstream comedy *Stuck On You*<sup>144</sup> (starring Matt Damon) contain conjoined-twin protagonists. What is interesting about all of them is that conjoined twins are seen as ordinary

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<sup>138</sup> GT Couser, p. 49.

<sup>139</sup> F Henenlotter, dir, *Basket Case*, DVD, Basket Case Productions, USA, 1982.

<sup>140</sup> D Cronenberg, dir, *Dead Ringers*, DVD, Morgan Creek Productions, USA, 1988.

<sup>141</sup> GA Romero, dir, *The Dark Half*, DVD, Orion Pictures, USA, 1993.

<sup>142</sup> K Fulton and L Pepe, dir, *Brothers of the Head*, DVD, Potboiler Productions, UK, 2005.

<sup>143</sup> Polish, M, dir, *Twin Falls Idaho*, DVD, Free Range Films, USA, 1999.

<sup>144</sup> B Farrelly and P Farrelly, dir, *Stuck on You*, DVD, Twentieth Century Fox, USA, 2003.

people, living their lives within the boundaries that society has imposed on them, yet participating actively in cultural activities and relationships. *Stuck on You*, for example, offers the farcical situation of a pair of conjoined brothers as one brother tries to launch his acting career in Hollywood. Its scenes include one brother being painted out of a television show using blue screen technology and problematic scenarios when the brothers are dating. The film's comedy is derived from ordinary life situations rather than by objectifying or exploiting the twins. As the credits roll the song *Alone Again* is played by real life conjoined twins Reba and Lori Schappell. The film seems to simultaneously participate in and satirise contemporary obsessions with 'freakish' celebrities.

### **Abby and Brittany**

In contrast to Damon's comedic twin role, the TV show *Abby and Brittany* is based on real conjoined sisters from Minnesota, the Hensels. The programme promotes the Hensels as normal participants in modern society while at the same time offering certain voyeuristic elements. Abigail and Brittany Hensel are dicephalous conjoined twins. They have two spines, two hearts, two oesophagi, two stomachs, three kidneys, four lungs (two are joined), one ribcage, one circulatory system and a shared nervous system. From the waist down all organs are shared including intestine, bladder and reproductive organs. Dicephalous twins are extremely rare, in fact there have only been four recorded cases in the world. Their parents, strict Christians, never considered separation because the way in which the girls are conjoined made surgery impossible without a loss of life, or a severe loss of mobility for one or both girls.

*Abby and Brittany* screened on prime time TV in the United States to a mainstream audience. The program shows the daily activities of the girls as they experience various rites of passage including college graduation, a trip to Italy, and celebrating their twenty-second birthday. The underlying premise of the show is that the girls lead a normal life:

Abby and Brittany: We like to think the most amazing thing about us is we are just like everyone else. We really are normal, but I'm definitely more normal than Brit. Anyways. This is the story of our normal regular life, well our normal conjoined life. This is our life!<sup>145</sup>

The documentary is projected to the audience from the Hensels' subjective point of view. While this is in part untrue, producers, editors and writers have crafted the story elements to their liking, *Abby and Brittany* presents as if the girls are sharing their own lives directly with the viewer. There are no narrators, no hosts, no omniscient voices, no medical illustrations, and most importantly, no doctors. *Abby and Brittany* is not a documentary with experts examining the girls, or hypothesising about their psychology or medical possibilities, and as such it marks an important deviation from previous documentaries about the Hensels. The programme shows us a glimpse of the girls' strong personalities, their sense of humour and social interactions, through personal interviews and everyday observational moments.

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<sup>145</sup> '22nd Birthday Bash', *Abby and Brittany*, television programme, TLC, USA, 28 August 2012.



**Figure 12.** The Hensel sisters in *Life* magazine, 1996.

*Abby and Brittany* also offers a subjective point of view because the twins have invested a great deal in their own representation. They are advocates for the rights of conjoined twins and as such they assert their own right to normalcy. For years the Hensel family have deliberately sought positive and empowering representation for the sisters. The first article about them appeared in *Life* magazine (1996)<sup>146</sup> followed by an intimate interview on *Oprah* (1996). The Hensels' parents have continually made every effort to use reputable publications to tell their girls' story. Ellen Samuels notes that the 2003 documentary about the sisters, *Joined for Life*, '(Has) been described by the sisters and their parents as a calculated choice to create a media presence

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146 K Miller and JMR Doman, 'A Body, a Life, an Abiding Love', *Life Magazine*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1 April 1996.

for the twins which is neither freakish and through which they can exercise considerable control.<sup>147</sup>

Clearly, the girls and their parents are well versed in carefully constructed images and continue to perpetuate this message even within the world of mainstream reality television. Time and time again the normality of the girls' lives as they live in college, apply for jobs, participate in an active social life, play sports and travel, is reinforced throughout the programme.

When writing about the earlier documentary, *Joined for Life: Abby and Brittany turn 16*, Ellen Samuels wrote:

There are multiple axes of normalcy which intersect around the twins to enable their extraordinary body to be perceived as their only deviation from social expectations: They are American, Christian, white economically privileged, and beloved members of a family which includes a mother, father, siblings, and pets.<sup>148</sup>

Samuels' comments are just as pertinent to the follow-up documentary *Abby and Brittany*. In fact, in this programme, the idea that the twins are in any way abnormal has been completely abolished. It is interesting to note that while other conjoined twins have been institutionalised, sold for profit,

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<sup>147</sup> E Samuels, "'Don't Film Us, We'll Film You:' Agency and Self-Representation in the *Joined For Life* Television Documentaries', in ME Mogk (ed.), *Different Bodies: Essays in Disability on Film and in Television*, McFarland, Jefferson, 2013, p. 175.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.* p. 178.

displayed or abused due to their difference, the Hensels have been educated in a regular school, surrounded by siblings, parents and friends. They also attended college. Their relatively normal and affluent upbringing has allowed them to avoid the taint of 'freaks' and 'misfits.' They are not 'othered' in the way twins from developing countries or poorer American backgrounds have been. Unsurprisingly, the sisters view themselves fundamentally as normal individuals, entitled to the same rights and privileges as everyone around them. This is evident when the girls go for their first job interview as teachers at a primary school. When they return from the interview their response is not one of insecurity as one might expect, but rather they are overwhelming confident. Abby says:

Obviously we understand that we are only going to get one salary, as we are doing the job of one person. As experience comes in we'd like to maybe negotiate a little bit considering we have two degrees and also because we are able to give two different perspectives, or teach in two different ways.<sup>149</sup>

Thus she intimates that they would perform the job as well, if not better than a single person could.

Despite their ability to operate and achieve within mainstream society, the show also veers away from uncomfortable questions. There is little or no discussion about the girls' sexual or reproductive lives, and while the

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<sup>149</sup> '22nd Birthday Bash', *Abby and Brittany*, television programme, USA, TLC, 28 August 2012.

programme hints at their tendency to avoid crowds, it never fully examines their feelings about the constant public spectacle they arouse each time they roam in public. There is an obvious element missing here, a lack of acknowledgment of the fundamental life challenges these girls face. By avoiding some discussions, yet alluding to them visually, the viewer ponders: Are they sexually active? Will they ever marry? How severe are their medical complications? Will they be fully accepted by staff at their new jobs? Do they have limited mortality, and do they reflect on this? All these questions are swept under the carpet, the girls' opinions about them noticeably absent. This renders the text both inconsistent and superficial.

Importantly, these dilemmas and challenges do not go unnoticed in the realm of public discourse, in fact, they are its focus. For example, the text below was printed in *Esquire* magazine's sex column when the show first went to air:

"The twins that are on TV right now," says Christine Quigley, author of *Conjoined Twins: A Historical, Biological and Ethical Issues Encyclopedia*, in reference to Abby and Brittany Hensel, the stars of TLC's *Abby & Brittany*, "have a single lower body with only one set of sex organs," which I think we can all admit is thought-provoking. "The Hensels' have talked about their condition," says Quigley, "and I don't want to put words into their mouth[s], but they don't rule it out by

any means. And neither should you.”<sup>150</sup>

Such speculation about the girls is rife, and while they can control how their image is presented in the TV show they cannot control internet chat rooms, YouTube videos, or the tabloid press, which have followed them all their lives. While the show asserts that the girls enjoy a great quality of life, and thus supports Dreger’s argument that conjoined twins can be psychologically stable and well-adapted, perhaps it also stretches the imagination with its central theme that they are just as normal as everyone else. Furthermore, by adhering to the ideal of normalcy, an ideal which Leonard Davies and others expose as ill-founded, are the twins adopting a falsehood in their desire to conform to society’s expectations?

While the girls proclaim their normality, a large part of the appeal for the audience is the voyeurism of the programme. We see them dance, ride a bike, roller skate, jet ski, triumph in a volley ball game. Thus, the audience can view to full advantage their extraordinary bodies. In addition to the sports activities, there are overt sexual glimpses of the twins’ body. In one program they go sun bathing exposing their single chest in skimpy swim wear. In a shopping mall trying on new shoes they strut down the aisle shouting, ‘Look out boys!’ It’s hard not to acknowledge a voyeuristic fascination in such scenes. Courser cautions about this gaze:

Visual representation of visible disability offers new opportunities but also presents new risks and potential

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<sup>150</sup> S. Grenrock-Woods, ‘Sex’, *Esquire*, vol. 159, no. 1, 2013.

pitfalls, because the visual images may overpower verbal cues. But the danger of presenting visible impairments as a voyeuristic freak show is far greater in visual media like photography, especially in video and film.<sup>151</sup>

This view is supported in *Abby and Brittany*. Rather than the theatre stages of the freak show era, the twins' daily activities are neatly presented for public consumption in a TV format as a kind of freakish/normal binary. There is a certain irony in the fact that the twins assert that they don't want to be celebrities, yet the show relies on the audience witnessing every aspect of their conjoined lives, all of this amplified by upbeat music montages and flashy cinematography.

### **The Girls**

A novel has narrative advantages over documentary film when attempting to portray conjoined twins. By its very nature, a reader is allowed an insight into a character's thoughts and perceptions in a novel, rather than constantly being distracted by their striking appearance. Additionally, fiction allows writers to carry their characters into the terrain of the imaginary, without fear of law suits or accusations about misrepresentation. In her book, *The Girls*, Lori Lansens harnesses this narrative power to create a vivid portrait of the thoughts and experiences of fictional conjoined sisters, Rose and Ruby Darlen. The critic Ali Riley applauds Lansens' narrative choice, asserting

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<sup>151</sup> GT Couser, p. 49.

that: '*The Girls* is anything but facile voyeurism. It is a tender captivating glimpse into those who are other.'<sup>152</sup>

The twins of *The Girls*, Ruby and Rose, are inseparable sisters, both literally and metaphysically. They are Crapagnious twins (joined at the head). Through chapters alternating between the first person diary entries of each sister, the reader is offered a window into the sisters' world, as they grow up in the secluded area of Ontario, Canada. The book is a tribute to sisters who are both special and ordinary:

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 the 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.<sup>153</sup>

In her book, *A Voice Unheard*, Ruth Enn suggests that the difference between survivors and victims in contemporary Canadian literature is that the

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<sup>152</sup> A Riley, 'Inseparable Twins: Lori Lansens' Girls Live Life Joined at the Head', *Calgary Herald*, 24 September 2005, p.3.

<sup>153</sup> L Lansens, *The Girls*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2005, p. 1.

survivors are those who negotiate the social obstacles around them and the victims are those who are subsumed by them:

They (persons with disabilities) prefer “survivor” to “victim” because the latter plays to the stereotypes of disability being a perpetual tragedy. The former has positive connotations of living through a struggle, perhaps being permanently marked by it, but nevertheless going on to lead a satisfying life.<sup>154</sup>

By framing Ruby and Rose as survivors rather than victims, Lansens resists previous literary tropes about conjoined twins. She emphasises the normal human struggles they share with the reader, rather than the differences that set them apart as they weather rites of passage from birth to death. From the beginning of the book, the reader gets to know the sisters like two intimate friends. Rose is bookish, thoughtful, a writer but also an extrovert. Ruby is more tranquil, prettier, down to earth, and less prone to whimsical philosophy. Lansens delves into the characters’ lives, surrounding them with a cast of equally likable characters: Aunt Lovely and Uncle Stash, their adoptive parents; Nick, a distant relative; and Whiffer, their co-worker.

Unlike *Abby and Brittany*, Lansens is not afraid to explore the territory of sexual experimentation for the Darlen sisters. In one scene, when they are just sixteen they have their first sexual encounter with the local bad boy, Frankie Foyle. The girls are trapped in his basement waiting for their parents

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<sup>154</sup> R Enns, *A Voice Unheard: The Latimer Case and People with Disabilities*, Fernwood Publishing Co., Black Point, 2000, pp. 90-1.

to show up. Frankie concedes to Ruby's request for a kiss. Rose, records the memory in her diary years later:

I wondered if Uncle Stash or Aunt Lovey had realized their mistake by now. I hoped they hadn't. I wanted Frankie Foyle to kiss me too and didn't want to miss my turn. But Frankie didn't kiss me. My turn never came. Frankie kept kissing Ruby. Even when his fingers crept spider like onto my shoulder and dropped down inside my blouse to find the nipple of my right breast. And even when his hand slid lower, traversing my flat stomach and thighs. And even when he shifted me, because he wasn't quite comfortable, and even when he parted my long legs, Frankie kept kissing my sister.

And even when...

Even then.

I didn't protest. Neither did my sister. I believe we were struck by the strangeness of the moment. We've never discussed it directly, but the kissing must have been amazing for Ruby to have endured my part in the affair.<sup>155</sup>

This excerpt offers three theoretical concepts of the bodily discourse between the three characters: boundaries, attraction and agency. In her article, 'Jarring Bodies', Dreger argues about what 'different' bodies mean to society:

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<sup>155</sup> L Lansens, p. 117.

...these people messed up in the anatomy/identity rules and dichotomies and hierarchies I enjoyed keeping stable...I came to understand the intense and almost universal attraction to these anatomies, these bodies that loosened all the boundaries and set us all in motion...I understood finally how that attraction to their gravity has led to so many power struggles over them.<sup>156</sup>

Earlier in the book Rose writes in her diary, 'we've been called many things, freaks, horrors, monsters, wonders,'<sup>157</sup> yet it is this monstrosity that most attracts Frankie. A body that is at once singular and plural, unified and divided, without boundaries, without regulations. This physicality excites and propels his sexual desire. As Dreger argues, the fact that conjoined bodies have crossed various taboos about the human experience, often diminishes the boundaries of experimentation. This may involve medical experimentation, freak show experimentation, or sexual experimentation to which the reader becomes privy through Ruby's retelling. While the experience of being a conjoined twin may be difficult for a singleton to grasp, everyone can relate to unwanted sexual advances or the pangs of sexual rivalry between siblings. Ruby's account of the situation provides this recognition, and offers a humanising effect to the strange tableau her recollections present to the reader.

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<sup>156</sup> AD Dreger, 'Jarring Bodies', p. 171.

<sup>157</sup> L Lansens, *The Girls*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2005, p. 1.

The scene may be about Frankie's attraction, but it is also about his prejudices. Earlier in the scene, he mocks the sisters, referring to them as 'mutts' or 'ugly.' Ruby is silenced while Frankie has intercourse with her and she is shamed in this process. In her silence Ruby allows Frankie to further refute her right to humanity.

In his book, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Erving Goffman writes:

The attitudes we normals have towards a person with stigma, and the actions we take in regard to him, are well known, since these responses are what.... social action is designed to ameliorate. By definition of course, we believe the person with stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances.<sup>158</sup>

Frankie's denigrating behaviour towards the sisters exposes his true thoughts. After all, the girls are abnormal freaks well below his social status. He justifies his actions by shaming them because to his eyes they are unworthy of respect.

The narrative of conjoinment also poses questions about agency. In his text *The Personal Habits of Siamese Twins*, Mark Twain satirised the problems of

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<sup>158</sup> E Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Touchstone, New York, 1986, p. 5.

agency for the Bunker twins. He joked that Chang drinks while Eng abstains, Chang fights for the South, Eng for the North. In Larsen's text, Ruby kisses with longing while Rose is sexually penetrated. Interestingly, it is Ruby who is the active participant in the seduction and her sexual desire allows her briefly to escape from her conjoined body to experience the singular agency of the freely sexual woman:

"Kiss me," Ruby said.

I had never met this bold sister, this brave Ruby, this sister who desired a kiss so badly she risked the cruellest of rejections.

"Fuck that," Frankie laughed . . .

There was a pause in which Ruby must have convinced Frankie with her eyes, or with her lips, or in some other mysterious way that women convince men to do surprising things because, in a moment I heard a wet sound and knew that Frankie Foyle was kissing my twin sister.<sup>159</sup>

It is Ruby who seduces Frankie, but it is Rose who is impregnated by him and eventually carries his child to term. Taylor is a child conceived by Ruby's desire, but grown in Rose's womb, yet both sisters participate in the discovery of the pregnancy:

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<sup>159</sup> L. Larsen, p. 116.

Ruby glimpsed my body in one of the mirrors in the bathroom and laughing said, "I told you you're getting fat, Rose. God, you look pregnant!"

Ruby could not see my face in the mirror. There was a long pause.

I hid my face from the mirrors angle, knowing in that moment as my sister made it real, that I would not, and could not, keep my baby.

I held Ruby's body tightly as she let go her grip on my neck. Slowly leaning one leg on the edge of the vanity, she reached down to touch the well of my womb. We found the other's reflection broken by the foggy mirror.

Where once we were two.

Now three.<sup>160</sup>

Rose decides to give up the child, in part due to shame, in part due to the sisters' doubts about being able to bring it up. This decision continues to haunt both Ruby and Rose long after Taylor is born. Again the question of agency leads the sisters to a sense of connection and loss. Having shared the physical experience of carrying the child, and intimately witnessing her birth, Ruby feels the loss of Taylor as acutely as her sister. Throughout the book both sisters continue to refer to Taylor as 'our daughter,' emphasising the ambiguity around her conception and their shared motherhood.

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<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.* p. 150.

Lansens makes the Darlen sisters survivors. Their dilemmas and struggles are things that everyone can relate to: pregnancy, adoption, the death of a parent, falling in love. The book, however, is not without its faults. Its main weakness lies not so much in the believability of the characters, but their lack of drama. As Lord Darlington states in Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windemere's Fan*, 'It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious,'<sup>161</sup> and Ruby and Rose, are just too overwhelmingly good.

Thus, Larsens' novel becomes a tract about tranquillity, wisdom, and sisterly love. Ruby and Rose's equanimity, intentionally designed by Lansens to woo her reader, becomes that which pushes them away. The engine that drives narrative tension, rattles softly in the background of the novel, like a car in neutral. It stutters through their medical appointments, romantic encounters, the deaths of their loved ones and as their own deaths draw close. Like the lives of the girls themselves, the narrative remains a little too tranquil.

### **Face to Face**

The third text I examine is *Face to Face*, a documentary about the Schapell sisters from the United States. This film supports similar themes to the other two texts with one important difference: the Schapelle sisters fight for their status and rights as normal citizens, but both of them are rebels and anti-conformists who insist on living life on their own terms. The film tracks the ways in which the sisters regain control of their 'freakish' traits, exploiting them, exposing them and embracing them. They challenge any prejudices about their bodies and challenge prejudices in the process. They are true

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<sup>161</sup> O Wilde, *Lady Windemere's Fan*, FQ Classics, Victoria, 2004, p. 13.

post-modern '(ex)-centric' characters, a term coined by the literary theorist Linda Hutcheon. Adam Pottle explains, Hutcheon's use of the term (ex)-centric:

Her phrasing of (ex)-centric suggests an existence on the outside (ex), while the word as a whole suggests idiosyncrasy, defiance and deviance. Hutcheon's (ex)-centric idea provides a twist on disabled characters: persons with disabilities can be considered 'eccentrics' who defy and deviate from what is normal.<sup>162</sup>

The film's title, *Face to Face* offers a double-entendre. The girls are joined face to face so that their foreheads lean together. They are fused at opposite eye sockets. Joined at their skull and leaning toward each other, their visual appearance is highly unusual. What would have been considered grotesque less than a century ago, is also a configuration that is uniquely poetic. Due to their head placement, the twins are constantly looking in opposite directions. They do not see the same world, therefore they are constantly explaining to each other what they individually see, and who is before them, even turning in circles to introduce each other. In one comical scene the girls argue over which direction to turn on a street corner since they permanently face each other their left and rights are reversed. They use touch as their key mode of relating to each other, and each sister strokes the other when they want to sense their emotion. In addition, Reba has spina bifida, which means she cannot walk, and requires a specially designed stool for mobility.

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<sup>162</sup> A Pottle, 'Towards Their Own Identity: Persons with Disabilities in English Canadian Fiction', Master of Arts in English thesis, University of Northern British Columbia, 2006, p. 6.

**Figure 13.** The Schapell sisters,  
From the film *Face to Face*.



The title, *Face to Face*, also addresses the constant theme of gaze. The stare of the viewer is ever present in the film, as Garland-Thompson argues:

The film emphatically focuses upon the starers' rather than the object of their stares. The film's project is to make the viewers visually comfortable with the Schappell twins and to humanize them, presenting Lori and Reba more often in the context of the staring relationship where we see the entire staring dynamic played out in the film frame.<sup>163</sup>

*Face to Face*, thereby mitigates the usual objectifying tendency of freak show narratives about conjoined twins, turning its focus back on the audience, in a similar way to which Rosemarie Garland-Thompson turns her academic focus on the spectator rather than the freak show performer. For the

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<sup>163</sup> R Garland-Thomson, 'Ways of Staring', *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2006, p. 173.

Schappell sisters, their visual impact on the world represents the biggest boundary to normality that the girls face. By constantly inter-cutting *vox pops* from the general public into the story, the film frames their abnormality within the assumptions and misunderstandings of their audience.

The film opens with a close up of the wheels of Reba's special chair rattling along the street, and this is inter-cut with a series of onlookers' shocked reactions to a small video screen that displays the twins in real life (we cannot see the video image. We only hear the onlookers voices and witness their reactions) 'Oh Jesus,' and 'That must be so hard,' and 'Oh my God look at that!'<sup>164</sup> Immediately the filmmaker has placed the viewer in the skin of the Schappell twins. We hear what they hear and we see what they see. Soon the audience feels an empathy with them. After hearing all these sound bites, we see the sisters weaving through the crowd, then Reba forcefully asserts:

We are not going to sit at home just for you guys to go out and do your stuff...to make you happy...we are going to go out and live our lives, we are going to go out and if you don't like us that's your problem.<sup>165</sup>

This sequence sets the tone of the documentary perfectly. It is a film about the Schappell sisters 'coming out', their debut into public life, as they meet face to face with their audience, the public.

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<sup>164</sup> E Weissbrod, dir., *Face to Face: The Schappell Twins*, DVD, A&E Television Networks, USA, 2000.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

An important distinction from the previous two texts I examined, is the film's ability to avoid any suggestion of triumph over adversity, a common theme in disability memoir. If Abby and Brittany are praised as regular cotton candy girls, and Ruby and Rose are crafted as resilient and poetic survivors, then Lori and Reba are outspoken, rude and rebellious. They will not be told what they can and cannot achieve. They will not conform to audience expectations. They refuse any pity offered by their onlookers. Lori says:

We don't want shielding. We are not these vulnerable little things that are going break in half if something looks at us the wrong way. I'm not gonna cry or crumble.<sup>166</sup>

The sisters are not interested in being praised nor patronized. They only want to be accepted for who they are. An example of this is seen when they visit New York and a bellboy at their hotel comments to the sisters that he also has a twin brother. Although the brothers live in different cities they still fight constantly. The bell boy admires the sisters' ability to co-operate and compromise about decisions. To this Lori replies cynically, 'Well, if you were locked in a room together with your brother, then you would probably find a way to get along.'<sup>167</sup> This reaffirms the sisters' unique perspective. In their eyes there is nothing extraordinary about their situation. To Lori, it is singleton presumptions and prejudices which are at fault. Lori and Reba are

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<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

true '(ex)-centrics,' as defined by Hutcheon,<sup>168</sup> and like all interesting and complex characters they display numerous foibles and contradictions. The film offers characters who counter-balance the blandness we feel while watching *Abby and Brittany* or reading *The Girls*, which both feel one dimensional in comparison to this multi dimensional documentary text.

A key element in the complexity of the film, is achieved by a thorough examination of the twins' distinctive personalities. Each displays different interests and temperaments. They do not talk over each other or wear identical clothes. Their skulls may be merged, but their hairstyles differ. Reba is strong-willed, loves to read, to sing and is more outspoken; Lori is physically stronger, she identifies as tomboyish, even a little shy. Due to the clever way of shooting the interview, (two cameras are set on each side of the girls in close up, so that we can focus on them as individuals as they speak) the film cuts between the two personalities, giving a clear idea of separate voices and separate identities.

This is not so in *Abby and Brittany*, where the twins' identities are presented as more merged. During their interview, the Hensel sisters always appear in a two shot. They are dressed in the same shirt, with an extra large collar to accommodate their neckline. In the interview the girls explain that Abby controls the left side, Brittany the right. They clasp hands as a loving husband and wife might, but these hands are identical and belong to the same body. They talk in sync with a sort of psychic prediction and finish

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<sup>168</sup> L Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989.

each other's sentences. We are told that they disagree and bicker, although not one fight is ever shown during the interview.

In *The Girls*, if not for the different fonts used for each diary entry, the reader might struggle to tell the two voices apart. While their writing styles differ slightly (Ruby is more flamboyant, Rose is direct) the emotional tone of both women is markedly similar. The Schappells offer none of this. They often argue or interject, they give two sides to each story, they never speak in unison. Their thoughts and perspectives seem a lot less fused than do those of the Hensels or the Darlens.

Undoubtedly, the Schappells' history played a part in their determination to be accepted as separate personalities. As children they were named Lori and Dori, until Dori changed her name to Reba, which she admits was an attempt to forge a separate identity from her sister. In addition to this they were raised in the Hamburg Institute, a home for mentally handicapped children, where they remained for their entire childhood. In order to leave Hamburg, the sisters had to prove that they had an IQ over seventy points and that they were able to live independently. This forged them into fiercely determined women, willing to survive alone. Perhaps the Schappells have had to struggle more than the Hensels to be accepted as smart, capable, independent women, hence their distinguishing features have become more important to them. A testament to the complexities of human psychology is the fact that the Hensels' merely share a body, while the Schappell sisters share a brain. Even so, the former couple appear more closely linked in personality than the later.

Another intriguing part of the documentary is what Courser terms 'performing twin-ship'. Toward the end of the film, we view the sisters' eagerness to enter the public eye more assertively, not just as individuals, but as minor celebrities. Courser sees this as a way of gaining agency:

Certainly the Schappell sisters have been performing conjoinment – in different senses, in different venues and media, and before different audience – all their lives... Since they began living independently in their twenties – living more public (but also more private) lives – they have been performing in new ways and in new arenas.<sup>169</sup>

Lori and Reba maintain a strong power relationship throughout their performance. They do not allow their bodies to be seen as spectacle. Instead they forcefully insist on being treated with respect. They understand that they will never walk unnoticed, but they draw the line at uncalled for attention. On their tour of New York City, the girls carry a video camera with them. Every time a member of the public steps up to them and asks them for a photograph, the twins turn on their onlookers and start to film with their own camera, a less than a subtle reminder that permission to photograph, film, or stare is required. When a dentist starts to take photographs of them, Reba asks what he is doing. He responds: 'Because its unusual, I'm a dentist from Germany and I don't see these things very often.' Reba shouts back,

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<sup>169</sup> GT Couser, p. 56.

‘What has that got to do with dentistry? What have we got to do with dentistry?’<sup>170</sup>

When a teenage girl is staring at them and considering a photo, Lori gently reminds her, ‘You cannot take pictures of me, but you can take pictures of her, because she is a celebrity and I am not.’<sup>171</sup> The sisters will not allow unregulated collection of their image. They alone will decide when their audience is acting inappropriately and they will call them on it. When we see the girls attend a professional photo shoot, appear on Jerry Springer or record a film clip to launch Reba’s singing career, we realise that Lori and Reba are proud of what they have achieved and are unashamed to show their bodies to the world. What once may have been seen as exploitation and voyeurism is reframed in the film as empowerment and liberation. They control their body and how it is gazed upon. Dreger, who appears in the film, explains how the sisters are actively seizing the opportunities presented by their analogous body:

It’s not that they desperately seek out being some kind of enormous celebrity, but basically what they want to do is use the kind of restriction that are imposed on them to retain some privilege for themselves, and to speak in a privileged position, and perhaps even to exhibit themselves in the way that nineteenth century people did for their own profit.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> E Weissbrod. *Face to Face: The Schappell Twins*.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

By the end of the film it is clear that Lori and Reba have managed to invert almost every assumption raised by their onlookers. Firstly, they have asserted that they are two people and not one. Secondly, they are capable, independent, intelligent women. Lastly, they have demonstrated how capable they are of capitalising on their differences rather than being framed or victimised by them. As Rosemarie Garland-Thompson notes:

The film's conceit is that we singleton viewers have gotten accustomed to and quite charmed by Reba and Lori so that, when the many interviewed starers reveal their own prejudices and lack of imagination in their comments about the twins, we initiated find ourselves smirking at their naiveté and bias. Like the twins long term friends, we have come to find them unexceptional and indeed lovable.<sup>173</sup>

Rather than abide by the social restrictions that have limited so many other conjoined twins, Lori and Reba defy them. In this sense they move well beyond the realm of normal protagonists and fit perfectly into Hutcheons '(ex)-centric' archetypes. These girls are not ordinary, quiet, retiring, nor self-pitying.

In this chapter I have examined three narratives, and identified different conjoined-twin archetypes in each. Abby and Brittany represent pristine,

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<sup>173</sup> R Garland-Thomson, 'Ways of Staring', p. 189.

middle class normality; the Darlen sisters are fallible, tangible, young women; while the Schapells are rebels who relish their differences rather than regret them. Taken collectively, these texts symbolise a shift in understanding the conjoined experience that goes deeper than 'object', 'monster' or 'freak'. Taken separately, they display characters ranging from ordinary to defiant. Like their predecessors, Chang and Eng, they demonstrate how awareness about those who possess unusual bodies can reinstate their agency and control.

Garland-Thompson and Davis have criticised academics and writers of the past, for either shutting out conjoined twins, or relegating them to the fringes. Perhaps this trio of texts indicates that society is finally ready to reassess its relationship with the conjoined. As Pottle argues:

By advocating disability as a cultural entity rather than a negative condition, the term "disability" will acquire more positive connotations. If persons with disability – both literal and real – can survive and even thrive with their respective conditions, and have resounding impacts on their respective communities, then their stigmatisation in both fiction and reality should be lessened.<sup>174</sup>

I assert that these texts symbolise not only a wider acceptance of anomalous bodies, but also support an active culture in which both abled and disabled

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<sup>174</sup> A Pottle, p. 10.

bodies can participate. These experiential representations of conjoined bodies may even affect social change. As the intersections between disability theory and literary narratives grows and diversifies, such representations also allow space for the creation of broader and more socially inclusive exchanges.

## **Chapter four: story telling**

How might a writer such as myself construct a fictional narrative about conjoined twins? Would I make much of their differences or maintain the view asserted by social theorists that it is in fact society which creates these differences? What dilemmas might I face ethically, creatively and representationally in regards to the manner in which I create two different yet connected sibling? These questions certainly presented keen dilemmas for me when constructing my novella, *Silvie and Van*. This chapter attempts to answer these questions by exploring the ways in which various literary and social theories from my critical research have found their way into my fictional narrative.

### **Fictional themes**

As the previous chapters have shown, the bond between conjoined twins is one of the most intimate and misunderstood of human experiences. Unlike the bond between non-conjoined siblings, parent-child or spouse-spouse, conjoined twins share their intimate experiences from birth until death. They witness every part of each other's lives, at the same time often maintaining fierce differences in personality. The separation of conjoined twins is medically dangerous but also psychically fraught. The central theme of my novella is anchored to this idea of separation.

Given the fact that my research from previous chapters has shown that historically it is very rare for adult conjoined twins to advocate for their separation, one might ask: why make separation focal point of my novella.? The reasons are threefold. Firstly, my research has shown that in the present

climate, separation surgeries are increasingly advocated by hospitals, surgeons, law courts world wide. In addition, they are often attempted very early in the twins' lives. Given these medical trends, soon conjoined twins may fade into oblivion. Even in the case of adult conjoined twins, the cultural stigma is currently so great that modern, liberated, educated woman, such as the Bijani sisters, actively advocated for their own 'semi- suicidal' operation, rather than remaining conjoined.

Secondly, my own personal experience of separation from a loved one and my subsequent trauma, prompted me to use conjoined twins as a symbolic vehicle to explore the emotional landscape of separation. In essence, the book explores the idea of a very close bond being severed and how the two parties might react, transform and adapt to their new lives.

Thirdly, I wanted to use conjoined twins as a metaphor for a current obsession with individualism and personal autonomy. In the contemporary western world, the concept of the individual is highly valued- at what lengths would one go to obtain this Autonomy? The Bunkers, trapped as they were by the Victorian repression of the time, still managed to earn a good living, marry respectably, have children, buy property and eventually live a secluded life in the country. While many conjoined twins following them (such as the Hilton sisters) were denied permission to obtain marriage licences. Perhaps it was easier for previous generations to accept such communal living, in an era where compromise and collectively were part of everyday life.

The novella itself is divided into two parts. 'Part one: Silvie,' and 'Part two: Van.' The two parts are written in distinct voices of each sister- and trace their lives' after separation. The physical book itself represents the dual body, which is literally split into two parts, but still joined by the same spine. A more detailed explanation of these structural choices is explained later in this chapter.

My narrative opens six years after Silvie and Van have been surgically separated. As such, it varies from news stories which focus on medical separation. Silvie and Van were born in the NSW rural town of Orange, out of wedlock, to single teen-mother Rosa. They are thoraco-omphalopagus twins, joined at the chest, sharing a heart and kidney. Their mother, having missed her pregnancy scans - was surprised by their conjoinment on arrival. She refused to separate them at birth due to the high risk of surgery. When the twins are 22 years old, Rosa dies and the twins decide to proceed with their separation in an Amsterdam clinic. After the separation surgery they travel to separate corners of the globe, Silvie to Buenos Aires, Van to Sydney. The sisters' feelings about their previous conjoinment percolate through each of their stories. In Sydney, Van's memories of her sister and the trauma of the separation constantly resurface. Meanwhile, Silvie runs away to Buenos Aires and is highly secretive about her past. Her feelings of loss and betrayal are expressed in series of emails to her sister, written but never sent.

My key aim is to explore the grief and transformation of separation throughout the narrative. I attempt to portray the internal struggle each sister is facing through their individual crises and their subsequent

transformations. In writing it was crucial that the obstacles the sisters faced were not only based on their unusual appearance as conjoined twins, but rather were aligned with their adaptation to their new embodiment post separation. By probing this emotional territory I wanted to create a narrative which resonated with the universal experiences of reinvention and transformation.

In creating the plot for the sisters' separation surgery, I drew heavily on the real life story of the Bijani sisters. Most adult conjoined twins decide against separation, but the Bijani sisters were unique because they vehemently fought for their own right to be separate adults. This provided me with a real life example of modern twins who chose autonomy over a life together. Furthermore, the media storm that followed the Bijani surgery and their subsequent deaths, were also influential to my plot. In particular, the way that the operation was managed from a public relations perspective informed the narrative. The limited media access to the Bijani sisters themselves, the publicity generated by the hospital before surgery, and finally the twins' absolute belief in the possibility of a separated life, were key factors woven into Silvie's and Van's narratives about surgical separation.

### **Finding my characters**

When creating my characters Silvie and Van, I asked myself the following questions: how might I create believable conjoined twins, avoiding the trap of 'othering' them or developing a narrative imbued with a kind of awful voyeurism? How would I draw on earlier examples set by writers and documentary makers?

Creating believable conjoined twins was one of the biggest challenges I faced when writing my novella. In his book, *Enforcing Normalcy*, Leonard Davies asserts that traditionally, disabled characters in literature have been stereotyped as either villains or angels.<sup>175</sup> In my previous chapter I explored texts such as, *The Girls* or *Abby and Brittany*, texts that have diverged from this trend, portraying conjoined twins as ‘normal’ protagonists. In *Silvie and Van*, I didn’t want to create conjoined twins who were freaks, heroes, survivors or ‘normal.’ I wanted to avoid the narrative of ‘triumph over adversary,’ which has coloured many recent disability memoirs. I also wanted to assert what authors of past fiction overlooked: that disabled characters are prone to the same flaws and foibles as the rest of us. Disability is only one aspect of their personality. Disabled people can be just as damaged, controlling, impertinent or vain as the rest of humanity. Rather than beginning with my characters’ strengths, I began by considering their weaknesses, as I believed this was the best way to construct complex personalities.

Van’s weakness is her vanity and hubris. This seemed an appropriate metaphor in a contemporary age of narcissistic self-obsession. Silvie’s weakness is her self-destructive sexual addiction. Both sisters’ post separation lives spiral into a downward trajectory. Through their separation, each sister gains autonomy, but they also suffer a palpable loss. The intensity of their grief gave me licence to draw each sister into extreme behaviours.

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<sup>175</sup> LJ Davis, p. 41.

My attempt to avoid voyeurism was aided by the fact that I was writing fiction rather than creating a visual work of film or photography. By its very nature, fiction allows a glimpse into the internal workings of its characters and by choosing a dual narrative, told in first person by each twin, I felt that the audience would closely identify with the sisters as thinkers rather than bodies. In my novella, I wanted the reader to be privy to the sisters' philosophy, psychology, hopes and dreams. These decisions aimed to draw my readers into a close psychological identification with each sister.

When considering the influence of other texts about conjoined twins, the most influential by far was Ellen Weissbrod's, *Face to Face*. I wanted to harness the spirit of the Schapell sisters, as seen in Weissbrod's film. Their rebellious behaviour, their independent personalities and their media manipulation, were all key factors in my creation of Silvie and Van. I also modelled my characters using Hutcheons' concept of the (ex)centric,<sup>176</sup> that is, someone who stands outside the norm due to their disability, rather than fighting to remain within it. Like the Schapell twins, Silvie and Van are independent, rebellious, outspoken and strange, not just as conjoined sisters, but also as single women. By their very nature, conjoined twins represent an inherent oddness which is difficult for the human imagination to grasp. I wanted to push this difference further, showing it pre and post separation, rather than pretend it did not exist.

### **Using symbolism and creating a world**

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<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

Symbolism became an integral part of my storytelling when creating the dual worlds of Silvie and Van. While Mark Twain's writing is imbued with the cultural prejudices of its times about race, gender, and 'freaks', there are certain parallels between his symbolic devices and mine. Twain's work harnesses the symbolic power of Chang and Eng's body in order to examine the tensions of America re-unification in a post civil-war environment. As such it is just as much a story about shifting North-American identity as it is about the Bunker twins. Following Twain's example, my twins are signifiers of rich and poor nations - living separately but connected by the international context of the world organ trade.

The stories about the separation operations I explore in Chapter Two, often entail twins who share organs, donate organs, or sacrifice organs, sometimes at the expense of their lives. This material inspired me to find out more about the global world organ trade and its operation, which I then used as a subplot in the novel. Due to a shortage of organ donors in the first world, a black market has evolved where organs are bought, traded or stolen from poorer nations. As well as exploring the personal stories of conjoined twinship, I wanted to use the sisters as metaphors to also explore the twin sides of the medico-beauty industry, and how it operates on a global level.

Silvie and Van are symbols of the cultural context that surrounds each of them. It was helpful here to draw upon the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. In his book, *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin outlines his theories of both Carnival and Grotesque Realism and how they operate in literature. Bakhtin splits the body in two symbolic realms of story telling: The 'upper stratum' and the

'lower stratum'. The 'upper stratum body' is legitimate and pure and is represented by the church, legitimacy and power while 'the lower stratum body' brings all sensations to a base level, and attempts to destabilise the upper stratum through rebellion and parody.

In my novella, I harness the Bakhtian notions of upper and lower stratum, through the worlds of Silvie and Van. Van is a Sydney socialite and celebrity. Her world is one of high fashion, privilege and narcissism - she occupies the 'upper stratum' body. By contrast Silvie is ensconced in an underworld of South American crime, drugs and organ traders in Buenos Aires. Her community comprises people with no legitimate status or nationality, where the threat of violence is ever present. Symbolically Buenos Aires has 'lower stratum' permutations. The sisters each symbolically inhabit very different places and it is the interaction of these two worlds, and their co-dependency on them, which joins the sisters' personal narratives and reinforces their connection.

My reasons for choosing Buenos Aires, as a symbol of this 'lower stratum' world are outlined below. Buenos Aires is a city that I know personally, having spent several months living there. Hence, I could draw from both my own experiences and cultural knowledge as a foreigner inhabiting that space. Having also spent several years living in Spain, I understood the 'fish out of water' cultural experiences that Silvie endures. Buenos Aires is a sprawling metropolis which holds within itself huge economic and cultural divisions. This is partly due to the quantity of unregulated migration from poorer Latin-American countries. Villa 31, as described in the novella, is based on a

true shanty town of the same name near Retiro station, where illegal migrants live in ramshackle huts. The phenomenon of missing persons, especially children, is one that resonates loudly within the Argentine consciousness, especially after years of military dictatorship. There have been numerous documented cases of child kidnappings in the last decade, and these have been linked to an active organ trade in Buenos Aires. The research conducted by Nancy Scheper-Hughes in 2010,<sup>177</sup> exposed *La Colonia Montes de Oca*, a mental Asylum in Argentina, where organs were harvested for the international market. This research inspired the character of Angelica, a friend of Silvie's trapped in a mental institution who becomes a victim of the organ mafia. Scheper-Hughes also talks about real life 'organ hunters' from Manila in her research, a term I appropriated in my novella. Buenos Aires, once a rich and decadent city, is going through an interesting transformation itself due to its recent years of economic instability. I felt it would be an appropriate space where Silvie, a runaway and rebel, could collide with these underworld elements.

Bakhtin's notions of Carnival are relevant to the world that Silvie inhabits. Bakhtin argued that carnival shatters oppressive limitations to allow for true emancipation.<sup>178</sup> As explained by Sue Vice:

Carnival profanation consists of 'a whole system of carnivalistic debasings and bringings down to earth', to the level of the body particularly in the case of parodies

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<sup>177</sup> N Scheper-Hughes, 'Parts unknown: Undercover ethnography of the organs-trafficking underworld.' *Ethnography* 2004 vol5 no. 29 pp. 30-73

<sup>178</sup> S Vice.

of sacred texts. Death and renewal are central to carnival, represented most often by the carnival act of 'the mock and crowning and subsequent de-crowning of the carnival king.'<sup>179</sup>

One could argue that Silvie is living a truly carnivalesque life. Not only through the company she keeps (circus performers, drug addicts, prostitutes, and misfits) but also through her choice to remain an illegitimate person and by challenging the authoritative structures that control and regulate her. Buenos Aires, the world capital of carnival in the context of the novella, also offers her a symbolic home for her quest. Thus Silvie is anything but 'normal'. She is a rebel, a misfit and a carnival voice.

While Silvie exists in this underworld on the social fringes, the metropolis of Buenos Aires is itself painted as a body of decay. In the novella various locations in the city are compared to body parts. Retiro station is described as 'a giant iron lung,' La Boca, is referred to as 'a giant mouth' ('the mouth' being its literal translation), and the slum town of Villa 31 as, 'the cities bowels,' with rabid dogs, dirt roads, putrid smells and thugs.

If Buenos Aires represents an underbelly of fear and terror, Sydney is painted as an 'upper stratum' world of wealth, privilege and spectacle. As a celebrity, Van sits on her throne at the centre of this world. She is an actress, model, disability activist and television presenter, at the pinnacle of her success. After the surgery Van becomes addicted to plastic surgery, and with

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<sup>179</sup> S Vice, p. 152.

the help of her media savvy manager, Rex, she re-invents herself, using a triumphant narrative of survival to propel her success. As a public figure and mainstream celebrity, she displays her unique body and ever-changing collection of fashionable prosthetic limbs to the public. When her story begins, she has finally chosen to ‘go permanent with a new prosthetic arm.’

In the novel Sydney represents a clean and sanitised city where the ‘body beautiful’ mentality reigns on high. In Van’s social circles beauty, legitimacy and fashion are the dominant cultural forces and her quest to achieve them is what drives her. Creating this world was a deliberate attempt to poke fun at the spectacle of western celebrity culture and the farcical nature of a celebrity-obsessed society, fuelled by social media and digital identities. While the freak show carnival tent no longer exists, the ‘freak show’ still abounds in popular culture. One might argue that the voyeuristic spectacle is more prominent now than ever in an age of the internet, global news, and reality television; all of them elements that appear in the glitzy, yet superficial ‘upper stratum’ of Sydney society.

### **Exploring ideas about individual agency for each sister**

In both women I wanted to assert a right to sexual freedom regardless of disability or disfigurement. The sexualisation of disabled bodies can be traced back centuries. As I outlined in Chapter One, a key element of the appeal of the nineteenth century freak show was that the bodies of ‘freaks’ aroused the possibility of crossing boundaries of personhood, race, class and gender. Unlike the clandestine fantasies of the Victorian era, Silvie is a woman of the twenty-first century, an explicitly sexual character. Exploring

her freedom post-separation means experimenting in the sexual landscape of Buenos Aires. Unfortunately, she has no idea how to navigate the desires of men. Her grief for her sister and thirst for intimacy results in Silvie's sexual addiction landing her in hot water. Despite this, Silvie is not exploited by the sexual desires of the men around her, but rather she consciously makes decisions regarding her own sexuality. An unspoken part of her sexual appeal is her physical appearance as an armless woman.

In a similar way to which Silvie is an independent sexual agent, Van empowers herself through her celebrity status. In creating Van I wanted to expose the contradiction of a character who wasn't defined by her anatomy, but rather who was narcissistic and savvy enough to use her anatomical differences to her own advantage. As I researched the lives of the Hensel sisters or the Bunker brothers, I realised that this is exactly what these conjoined twins did to become successful celebrities. By maintaining control of their public image, they generated respect and wealth. Indeed, when we examine the contemporary popular cultural landscape and shows such as *Britain's Missing Top Model*, (a reality television program about British disabled models) or *Abby and Brittany*, it is evident that conjoined twins and other disabled people are gaining celebrity status. Rather than their difference, which was previously the basis for their appeal, their success is now based on their normality and their triumphs. The rise of the popular UK celebrity Katie Piper who suffered severe facial disfigurement due to acid burns inflicted by her ex-boyfriend, was influential when I was developing Van's character. After her plastic surgery, Katie Piper became a documentary subject, memoir writer, social advocate, charity CEO and television

presenter. Indeed, her disfigurement and her heroic coping mechanisms were largely the reasons for her mainstream success.<sup>180</sup>

### Structural choices

Structure is also significant in the development of the story. Initially I wanted to convey the physical connection between the two sisters by creating a shared middle chapter where the two sisters collide. The diagram below explains the book's structure:



When deciding on this structure I avoided alternating chapters from each of the twins' perspectives as is the case with *The Girls*. Instead, I structured the stories as separate tales. Both are told in the first person voice of each sister. I wanted to emphasise the surgical separation as well as the unique world views of each sister so having individual, contained stories seemed the best way to achieve this.

Due to the unique format of the two stories, I wanted the reader to be able to choose where they started the tale. If the book is read as I intended in the diagram above, they can pick up it up and begin reading 'Silvie' or flip over the book, invert it and begin reading 'Van'. Either tale can be read first, depending on the reader's preference. The middle chapter is written in a

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<sup>180</sup> K Piper, *Beautiful Ever After*, Quercus, London, 2014.

neutral third person voice and reveals the moment of the sister's reconciliation. I made this decision because I wanted to tell the two distinct stories, from two unique perspectives. This structure allowed me to emphasise the autonomous nature of the two sisters' lives after separation and to contrast this with their various embodiments. In this way the novella reflects the physical nature of the sisters' original body. Like their joining tissue, this middle section speaks of the sisters' ambiguous overlap and deals with the moment of their reconnection. For ease of narrative this approach has been modified in this thesis but would be used should I send the novella for publication.

In conclusion, I wanted to evolve my creative work by drawing on the rich, multi-dimensional material of theorists, critics and cultural historians such as Garland-Thompson, Dreger and Bakhtin, which I explored in the first three chapters of this thesis. In doing so I have attempted to create characters who are authentic, and whose conjoined/separate lives add additional dimensions to what it means to be a twin in every sense of the word.

## Conclusion

In writing this exegesis I wanted to explore how conjoined twins have been represented in narratives across different epochs and cultures. How have these representations shifted? How are they pertinent to creating my own fictional characters? From live performances, to literary texts, art works, documentaries and reality programmes, stories about conjoined twins have always provoked strong reactions. By analysing the differences between the symbolism of these narratives and the lived experiences of the twins themselves, I was inspired to create my own fictional narrative.

The human body is an odd site for all kinds of artistic imaginings, especially when that body takes a shape that seems more mythological than real. Its so called grotesquery opens new ways of seeing. From the most ancient Mexican tribes<sup>181</sup> to Russian cultural theorist Bakhtin, to Hollywood comic film-makers, the conjoined body has inspired ideas and creative narratives. This thesis has examined these narratives in three thematic chapters. Chapter one explored the narrative of the nineteenth century freak show and its role in defining so called 'cultural norms.' Chapter two explored the modern phenomenon of separating conjoined twins. Chapter three explored normalised conjoined twins, who appear in contemporary cinema and fiction.

Chang and Eng Bunker were the most famous conjoined twins of the past 200 years. Their legacy is still present in the name they left behind, Siamese

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<sup>181</sup> G Bendersky, 'Tlatilco Sculptures, Diprosopus, and the Emergence of Medical Illustrations', *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2000, pp. 477-501.

twins, as well as the many films, performances and books that they continue to inspire. The Bunkers' fame was founded on an obsession with binary notions of normal and abnormal bodies. The lives of the twins provided useful background material to explore the origins of the freak show. The freak show's fascination with subjects who deviated from social norms and its overlap with the rational views of nineteenth century modernism, merged to form a cultural obsession with anyone outside the rigid constraints of the times.

In the twenty-first century a more open interpretation of normality offers a broader definition of race, gender and body than it did in the Bunkers' lifetime. The term 'freak' has also evolved beyond its derogatory connotations. Today it means a free spirited, unusual, gifted or creative person as opposed to someone monstrous, grotesque or exotic. Recently there has been a resurgence of freakish characters in film and fiction. Books such as *Geek Love* or the short stories of Nora Jablonski all feature sideshow performers, disabled characters or vaudevillian scenarios, in a positive, empowered, even comical way. In this exegesis I have argued that 'the freak' has not disappeared from contemporary conjoined twin narratives. It has instead been re-interpreted and re-invented.

While the concept of the freak may have shifted over the centuries, notions of medical normalisation are perhaps more relevant now to those with anomalous bodies, than they were in Chang and Eng's lifetime. With advances in surgical techniques a whole world of options has opened to those possessing conjoined bodies. The question that most conjoined twins

and their guardians face is no longer: Will we separate? But, *when* will we separate? This question, however, also brings with it new dilemmas. Chapter two outlined problematic scenarios with surgical separation including the issue of consent when operating on infants, sacrifice surgeries, or cases where twins have been shifted from their home countries or endured sex changes in experimental surgeries. Given the life and death conundrums involved in many of these cases, there are no simplistic answers in regards to separation. Each case must be assessed on its own unique criteria. I argued however, that the social pressure to possess a normalised body has now moved away from the freak show stage and into the spectacle of the operating theatre. This is particularly true in an era where surgeries are being performed earlier and earlier and based on surgeons predictions about future life choices.

Chapter Three explored recent films and fiction that focused on conjoined twin protagonists, in particular *The Girls*, *Face to Face*, and *Abby and Brittany*. The unifying theme in all these texts is that of conjoined twins as regular protagonists. Each uses a different medium to achieve these ends. I have argued that collectively these three texts represent a cultural shift in the way that conjoined bodies are viewed in contemporary society. Indeed, these works represent an amalgamation of ideas from disability studies which have seeped into both films and literature. By exploring their characters as personal, complex, fallible human beings and by shifting them to centre stage, the audience is allowed to engage completely with conjoined twins as fellow human beings. The characters in these texts are presented as neither victims nor monsters. All three texts open up a fresh look at conjoined twin

psychology, thus avoiding the disabled clichés of literary works from previous generations.

By far the most influential text when creating my own work was the documentary *Face to Face*. The film allowed me a glimpse into the lives of the Schappell sisters who are fierce, rebellious, 'Bakhtian' in presenting their body as a site of subversion which challenges the limited visions of society. The film-maker's focus on social perceptions and the twins' control over their representation was also helpful when constructing my own plot.

In Chapter Four, I examined what lead me to write my own conjoined story, which contained a mix of satirical and political philosophy. I wanted this novella to make people laugh but also I was acutely aware of the dangers such a subject matter presents.

In creating my own fictional work, I set out to make my characters as realistic as possible. I felt that by researching biographical material my fictional material would feel more authentic. I realised after my initial drafts that avoiding both symbolism and comedy was a near impossible task. One of the limitations of 'political correctness' is that it can be stifling for creating interesting work. As I read more about the troubling limitations of normality and how it restricts bodies, consciousness and personhood by its very nature, I was troubled by possibility of creating 'normal' characters. Instead, I decided instead to use Linda Hutcheon's framework of the (ex)-centric disabled character to inspire my characters. This formed a large part of the theoretical and political philosophy underpinning *Silvie and Van*.

The concept of twins as inherently symbolic characters has been a recurring motif across literature. Famous examples of the doppelgänger such as Robert Louis Stevenson's, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* or Edgar Allan Poe's, *William Williamson*, linger in the western imagination. Jung notes in his theory of the universal subconscious, that symbolic notions of duality such as light and dark, male and female and good and evil can be traced through twin narratives all the way back to ancient cultures.<sup>182</sup> The concept of twins who also share a body take this symbolic literary trope one step further. Creating sisters who share a body in the context of an individualistic, autonomy-driven world was a task fraught with difficulties, but it also provided an opportunity to explore these contradictions and what they represent.

During the process of drafting my creative piece the dilemma that I faced shifted from how to avoid centuries of mythology and misrepresentation, to how to represent the sisters in a way that is true to the cultural environment in which I placed them. I consciously decided to make my twin sisters free-thinking, independent, feminist agents of their own destiny rather than victims, monsters or outcasts. I wanted them to possess the positive attributes of the 'freak' in a contemporary context, rather than out-dated models from centuries past. In doing so I wanted the fictional work to push my characters into unexplored terrain.

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<sup>182</sup> CG Jung, 'The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious', *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 9 (Part 1), 2nd edn., trans. RFC Hull, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1968, p. 54-72.

A key part of this process was allowing Silvie and Van to be responsible for their own media representation. As active agents who make their own decisions and choices in regards to their bodies and their life decisions, I consciously gave them control over their image. Van, in particular, constructs an image of herself that is far from the truth. She manipulates her media representation in the way we all do in the digital age. By allowing Silvie and Van to face the same life dilemmas and problems that singletons face, the sisters became more real. I wanted to place both sisters into regular life situations involving decisions about love, career or power. That way the reader would feel a certain affinity with them. At the same time I wanted to employ a quirky and unique voice for my characters, so that my twins were adventurous and humorous rather than dull and pious.

Scholars have written about conjoined twins through a diverse range of disciplines from psychology to medicine, ethics, religion, history, fiction, and psychoanalysis. My focus has been to draw from interpretations from cultural and disability studies, as well as literature and film. This lens provided me with a cultural context in which to conceive my own narrative about conjoined twins. A particular concern for all conjoined twins has been a constant misinterpretation about the nature of their existence, and disrespect for their independent life choices. While perceptions about conjoined bodies have shifted from wondrous, to monstrous, to human, to fixable, one constant remains. Conjoined twins are undeniably fascinating and extraordinary. The symbolic treatment of the conjoined twin, which I initially wanted to avoid in my own fictional piece, became an inspiration which propelled my own creative process.

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## **SECTION TWO: THE NOVELLA: SILVIE AND VAN**

## **Part one, Silvie**

## CHAPTER ONE

If Buenos Aires had a heart it would be San Telmo. Tonight its streets are thick with mist. Hipsters, punks and pijos pump down its narrow streets. Graffiti bleeds from its crumbling apartments. Florists, antique dealers and prostitutes hang around corners. It palpitates like a *corazon*. Even the stray dogs and drug dealers have sentimental faces.

I clasp one arm around Pablo's chest, tight enough not to fall off, but not so tight as to give him the wrong impression. The motorbike weaves through the back streets of San Telmo. Dives and ducks around its atriums and ventricles. Past Malfalda's chair, under tipuana trees, down Defensa, over Dorrengo's cobble-stones. My hair stretches wild like a flame. The wind cuts my face, teases the edge of my skirt. The Harley thunders to a halt outside la Tavern Roja. Lights pulse and voices beckon.

I gently lift myself off the leather saddle. It is precisely at that moment that I remember that I'm not wearing any undies. I couldn't find them when leaving the flat. They're scrunched up somewhere in Pablo's room, probably under his futon, his two kittens pulling at the elastic.

"Thanks for the ride," I say and peck his cheek.

"Hey chica," he runs a long finger down the scar on my neck. His silver rings feel cold on my skin. "I see you later on tonight. No?"

"I don't know," I say, a bit too quickly.

Pablo looks down, fidgeting with his wrist as if checking the time on an invisible watch. I don't buy it. I know he's always late for the restaurant.

"I don't say nothing." He flicks his fingers in the air, already insulted. Violently he flips down his helmet visor and kick starts the engine. The action is restless and angry like a child. The bike roars into the distance. I can't be bothered with his tantrum right now, I have bigger things on my mind.

I swing open the doors of the small tavern and make my way through a sea of tight leather jackets and mullets. This place gets pretty crowded on a Saturday, locals mostly, sipping copas, playing tunes on the jukebox. I wriggle my way through the swarm of bodies and make it to the bar. There stands Jose pouring a scotch with one hand, a beer with the other, an oak bar slab in front of him and a tower of spirits behind him, lit up like a temple.

"Hey Silvie, how goes it?" he says, ignoring the other customers squashed against the counter.

Roxanna comes out from behind the bar and sniffs my crotch. Roxanna always does this sniffing routine. She doesn't like me. Jose and I have successfully avoided that conversation. Roxanna is a crossbreed, part greyhound, part Rottweiler.

"Shhh girl," he pulls her back behind the bar, "You're going to get me in trouble, little mutt." He pats her ears, his eyes two wet saucers of love.

He pours two tequila shots and shoves one into my hand. This is our tradition. He strokes his half mask beard, salts his wrist, we clink glasses.

"Salut," we say, eyes locked.

I lick the bottom of his wrist and he licks the top. It's easier this way for someone missing an arm. We figured this out over various sessions. I bite down hard on the lemon chunk, my teeth grating against the rind, which I spit towards Jose. He holds up the rubbish bin and catches it in flight.

"I need your couch tonight," I say.

"Trouble in paradise?"

I lean over the bar and pour myself a *Quilmes* from the tap.

"Sort of."

"No can do Silvie, not tonight."

The cigarette smoke in the bar just hangs there, like a cloud waiting to explode with rain. I sip the beer.

"Why do you need my couch anyway?" He lifts a tray of steaming clean glasses from the dishwasher. "It's Pablo isn't it? You're un-fucking-believable Silvie. Couldn't you have spared your own flatmate?" He starts to laugh.

"Get me another drink, cabrón." I hold out the glass.

He slaps the bar with his tea towel and lets out a victory yell. He has enough ammunition on me for weeks now. I grind down the ice cubes between my molars.

Jose has been there since the beginning. In my first week in Buenos Aires I woke up beside him – not naked, still wearing my sticky nylon dress. I had bandages down one side, itchy, covering my wound. Roxanna was there too. She was licking my toes and prowling around me like a shark. When she saw my face she looked disappointed. Roxanna was Maria's dog. Maria was Jose's girlfriend, an airhostess. That day one of her uniforms was hanging on the chair in Jose's room, pressed and

dry cleaned, covered in thin plastic. There were postcards from different places stuck around the walls: white cottages in Santorini, the Colosseum, Machu Picchu, the Eiffel tower. There was even one from back home: Sydney Opera House, all lit up at night. There were no photos of Maria, just her stiff, empty dress. Sometimes I still think about Maria like that: like a thin clean crisp ghost made from cardboard, slipping into a flat pressed uniform.

I wonder sometimes how men find me attractive. The truth is, I've been re-incarnated. What I thought initially to be the tragedy of my life, has converted itself into triumph. Although I don't like to admit it (in fact, I rarely speak her name) I only have one person to thank for that. My sister, Vanessa. So I do. Every night on various pillowcases scattered around the city; smelling of rosewood-incense, *dulce de leche* or Chanel *pour Monsieur*, every night before sleeping I curl myself into a little ball, and say my sister's name. A whisper of gratitude, so small it's barely audible before closing my eyes to sleep. But this week I've trumped myself. Pablo is a friend. I don't normally do friends. I've been crashing at his one bedroom studio in Abasto, downtown because I'm broke.

*"Hola Lindissima, can I buy you a drink?"*

A man twice my age with a pepper-grey beard and tobacco breath whispers in my ear. I place a palm flat up against his face and using his head like a pylon push my stool a metre away from him.

*"You obviously don't know her," Jose says dryly.*

*"God this place is a jungle. I don't know why I came here," I say.*

“Where else would you be?” says Jose.

I gulp back the whiskey and push my ragged hair out of my eyes. I cross my legs and begin rolling a smoke between two fingers. On the other side of the bar, I spot the pepper-grey beard man, trying it on with a blonde girl. Next to them a good-looking girl in a lace dress is bending her prosthetic arm across the counter so that the barman can light her smoke. The arm is stainless steel, shiny like a sculpture. Dexterous metal fingers hold the smoke carefully between her lips as he flicks on the flame. Judging from the way that she is showing off, I guess the arm is new. She is probably from the States and has travelled here for the operation. The city is renowned for having some of the best-designed limbs, faces, buttocks and breasts in the business. The surgery is cheaper than up north. Jose is staring too.

“Dude, you should totally get one like that,” he says tilting his head.

I roll my eyes. “Some people prefer to remember a limb rather than replace it,” I say. “Besides, I can’t afford it.”

“Well, you’re the only one armed girl in town who rolls her own smokes,” Jose smiles, grabbing the smoke from my fingers to fix it, “and fails every time.” He seals it tight and passes it back.

I light up and blow a stream of smoke in his face.

The bar is filling with the usual rabble. Punks caress their pool cues and short Latino guys with too much aftershave. They shoot heavy looks across the room, while chicks in sixties’ dresses and arm tats sip mojitos and dance. The roof is draped with red taffeta. Chandeliers cast a scarlet glow across the room.

*La taverna Roja* is a dump, but I love it. It's one of the few places in the city left where you can drink without fear if you don't have a micro. Most of the crowd here are *sin papeless* like me. There hasn't been a raid here for almost twelve months; rumour has it that they're focussing on the uptown bars these days. Over on the other side of the room I see Martha. She trips over one of her long sequined tentacles. She is dressed like an octopus. I lower myself off the stool and make my way over to her, my boots sticky against the stained floor.

Martha has coined the term "orphans" for us. One night, drunk, she blurted out, "This is the city that attracts the washed up muck that can't find anywhere else to go. They get dumped on the dirty shores of La Boca and never find their way home." Martha is from Connecticut. She got a divorce and in a symbolic fuck you to her X, she removed her micro. She'd come here to start a new life. Two years later, she was stuck. No micro, no way back.

"Darling," Martha embraces me warmly.

"How are you?" I say.

"I'm engaged!" she spills champagne down my back. "He's half Canadian, half Porteño. Name is Roger. A puppeteer."

This city is something of a Mecca for puppeteers. They gather from the corners of the globe and spin around Buenos Aires, colliding like meteors in their own private galaxy.

"Did you see my ruby?" She twists the ring on her finger.

"It's gorgeous. You can frame it and put it on the wall with the others."

I've known Martha for two years and in that time she's been engaged four times. For the first wedding, (a British Computer Engineer called Theo), we were all dumb enough to show up at the *Ayuntamiento*. After thirty minutes of waiting, Jose tapped Theo on the back and said, "Crazy North American chicks," which did nothing to change Theo's forlorn expression. His yellow carnation was drooping from his pocket. He looked down at his black patent shoes. The problem with Martha is that she's stepped right out of a Jane Austen novel and never figured out how to step back in. A tall dark man (not her fiancée) takes Martha's hand and starts to spin her clockwise on the dance floor. When the tune stops she grabs my elbow and pushes me towards the bar, sliding a tequila into my good hand.

"By the way," she says, "Little P was here earlier, said he wants a word with you."

I swallow the tequila. "Why?"

"Beats me."

The tune changes to a Samba. The guy grabs Martha's hips and cha cha's her enthusiastically across the room. A blur of taffeta, sequins and florescent tentacles whoosh through the hungry crowd.

\* \* \*

It's past two a.m. and I'm still at the bar. People's faces are starting to blur into demon shapes. The floorboards are rocking back and forth like a ship. I'm on the floor, whispering secrets into Roxanna's ear. She isn't paying me much attention. Her face is buried in the water bowl near the bar. People have dropped all sorts of

things inside it – popcorn, peanut shells, cigarette butts. Roxanna slurps loudly from it and some debris sticks to her nose. I am in the angry phase of drunkenness. Jose told me once that at a certain point in the night, I turn and daggers come out of my eyes. Then I start to rant. Once I start to rant it's game over.

"I'm late – almost two weeks, Roxanna."

She whimpers.

"You're the first one I've told," I pull her towards my face, she doesn't protest. Her face nuzzles mine. Her eyes looked sympathetic. We are coming to a kind of understanding, I think.

Jose squats beside me. "Go home, Silvie. Roxanna doesn't want to hear your bullshit tonight."

"I can't. I have no home. This is my home." My eyes close as Jose pulls the joint from my lips.

The thing about Jose is his hands. They are large and rough and warm. He grabs me by my wrist and yanks me along.

"Where are we going?"

"The cool room. I need to get a fresh keg and you need to cool off."

He pushes the plastic sheets to the side and we slide inside. The cool room is ten metres deep. Two sets of iron shelves sit parallel, a small corridor runs between them. The shelves are crammed with cans, beer bottles, cheese, bottled water. The condensation wraps around me, I feel the hairs on my arm prick up.

"There's nowhere to sit," I say as Jose pulls out a tray of coca cola cans.

He takes three tubs of olives off the shelf, sets them on the floor to create a little gap at waist height. He places his hands on my hips and hoists me onto the shelf. I wedge my arse inbetween beer bottles and pickle jars. My boots dangle, weight shifting to my wrist. He leans forward and brushes a stray hair from my face.

"So," he says.

"Here we are," I say. "Are you going get that keg out or what?"

Now he has that hungry look in his eye.

His palms brush against my breasts, they settle on my nipples.

I should push him away, but I don't. I lean back and allow him to kiss the nape of my neck. He is a silhouette, a nose, two hands, a mouth, a shadow. I can feel the cold metal shelves pressing hard on the back of my thighs.

His hands begin to traverse my body. They journey over breasts, belly and hips. My body is a landscape he is mapping; mountains, valleys, lakes, deserts. Those fingers. They seem to know what direction to go in. They know where things start and where they stop. They have their own instinct, pulse, rhythm. Now he shifts his weight forward, pressing down against my thighs. He pulls up my cotton shirt and his lips rim the deep wound running down my side. The scar tingles and pops. He loves this part of me best, the part that is missing. My body is ice, except from where his mouth presses against my skin. His tongue dips inside my belly button, probes the depths of its infinitesimal cavities.

I should tell him to stop, but I don't. Instead I start moaning. My skull falls back against the metal shelf. Now his head is between my thighs. I don't even remember when or how he pulled off my stockings. The generator throbs in my ears. My ankles clank on the shelves. His rough beard is against my thighs. Eyes closed tight.

"Jose. We're three rows deep here, where the hell are you?" It's Juan-Carlos, the other bartender.

I don't care who is calling or why. For all I care it could be the second coming. I'm gasping, breathless, drooling. I'm butter melting inside a pan. I'm floating, weightlessly in white light. I'm gone. Then suddenly he is next to me. He chews my earlobe, his forehead against my cheek. I grab his shirt, like a kitten drowning in a bucket, desperately pawing at the nearest solid object, fighting to make its way out.

"Let's go to your place," I whisper.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Have to go to the airport," he kisses my cheek and pulls away.

Of course I knew this was coming. Maria.

This is how he plays me. Like a fucking violin. This is how they all play me, because they know that my melting point is so low. Jose straightens his shirt. Wipes his hands against his legs. Those large, talented hands, those perfect

knuckles. My black stockings are crumpled in a heap on the floor. I can't reach them from up here. In fact, I can barely get down. Jose is at the door.

"Hey," I scream, "pass me my fucking stockings!"

Jose turns back and swipes the stockings from the floor, placing the soggy heap in my hand. They smell like cerveza. Then the trembling begins, like my body just realised that this place is 20 below zero.

A row of bottles collapses above me. The whole room vibrates. Lights blow out. Windows smash.

"Fuck. It's a raid," Jose helps me off the shelf then rushes out front. I remain hidden behind the thin plastic strips at the cool room door.

Metal boots, lights pierce the blackness. A digital voice says, "All illigits surrender themselves willingly."

I see shadows of policemen. Round rubber masks, *Protection Civil* in yellow writing on their backs. The red dress girl is pinned to the floor. They scan her wrist. No chip. In seconds they have her in cuffs. Push her chin against the wall. Some Asian guys run toward the exit. The guards pounce. A scrum of batons, limbs, fists in a tangled mess. An ocean of body parts, throbbing in half-light.

My breath goes shallow. I cross one arm against my chest.

Jose stands at the bar, a statue made of shock. An officer pulls the steel-armed girl by the belt on her dress.

"Get out of here, sister," whispers Jose.

He signals toward the rubbish chute. A square the size of a cat door. He can't be serious. I see the pepper-haired man hiding behind a velvet curtain. Would he give me up? You can save your own skin, if you assist the police. The hairs on my neck prick up.

I move toward the chute. Jam both legs inside it. My good arm grips a shelf. Bottles clink. My hips are too wide.

"Anybody else, camerero?" an officer says to Jose. He grabs him by the scruff of his neck. Shakes a baton at his chest.

I hold my breath. Squeeze my buttocks together. I still can't fit. I hear the slam of Jose's head on wood. Glasses shatter on the floor. I jam my legs down the chute. My torso follows like a worm wriggling down a hole. The aluminium pipes scrape my hips. I sink into a pile of bottles, ashtrays, dog food, chorizo. I clamp my nostrils shut. There's a small window in the corner. I wade through the rubbish to it. Wrap my hand in newspaper. Puncture the glass. Clear the shards from the edge. I wiggle through the window. Push onto the cobbled street, slick with rain.

Across the street I squat on a corner, my body wrapped by the mist. Che Guevara's Graffiti-face, a headlight traces the edge of his beret. Sirens whir, police cars recede. They will be crammed with illegals by now. I brush away a cigarette butt embedded in my elbow. I try to recall Martha's face in the chaos. A gaggle of drag queens comes out of the doorway of a nearby terrace house. The lamp-lit shadow of an old man walking his dog bends itself around a corner. God knows why people walk their dogs this late. They're always walking dogs in this city. A black

Fiat, with tinted windows, pulls up next to me. My heart slams against my chest. Have the police got unmarked vehicles on patrol? A thin nose silhouette behind the glass. He rolls down the window.

"Are you coming?" It's Lennie.

"Where you going?"

"Everyone is going back to Little P's house. Jump in."

"Will there be whiskey?"

"And acrobats, like always," he says, as if it were obvious.

I look at my watch. It's 3.30 a.m. If I can just make it through the next five hours without passing out, throwing up, getting arrested or kissing anyone, then the night might turn out OK. I get in the front seat and slam the door.

"It's been a while babes." Lennie's hand drifts closer to my knee. Here we go. Here we fucking go. I wish I'd remembered the undies. The road rushes towards me, but not fast enough. It's never fast enough.

## CHAPTER TWO

“Let’s shoot around the back way, shall we?” Lennie still has his east London lilt despite the five years he’s spent here. He rockets up Calle Peru. My shoulder slams against the window as he swerves. We fly down alleys, balconies crumbling like cake above us. I have to use my teeth to grab the belt. I tug the strap taunt, but the spring is busted. When I release it, the metal fitting snaps across my face. The engine rattles and spits.

“You look hot tonight.” Lennie tries to brush the ash from my cheek.

“I’m celibate now,” I pull away.

“Why’s that?”

“It’s the new big thing, darling.” The new big thing was a running joke we had about all the passing trends in the city.

Lennie and I met in my first month here. I was sleeping in an abandoned cheese factory back then and I used to wake every morning smelling like gruyere. I saw him one morning, graffiti-spraying over an incredible Muriel of the Amazon with his ugly alien heads. I told him, “Your art is crap.” He laughed. I wasn’t joking. Then we became friends. No one has figured out exactly why he left London, what exactly he was running from: a criminal record, botched finances, fraud? For him to choose this place over London, it must have been something bad.

A warm hand squeezes my shoulder.

"I'm Paulina by the way," says a girl. "I'm Tanya," says another. I shoot around to see two young women, chewing gum on the back seat.

"Jesus, Len – You could have told me you had company!"

The girls are both dressed in leather jackets. They have fake multi-coloured dreadlocks sprouting from high pony tails, matching smiles, Latino accents. They are either sisters or friends unable to dress independently.

"Girls, this is Silvie. She takes the most fantastical photos, don't you babe?"

"Not really," I say, "I'm a translator."

"Artisté," he says.

"Translator."

"She's the new big thing, darling," Lennie mocks.

We cruise along Avenida 9 de Julio. Lennie weaves in and out of the four lanes of traffic. Skyscrapers tower on either side of us. Blood red neon pulses from the rooftops. We pass Obelisk, pointing its long needle to the stars. Floodlights buzz around it like mosquitos. In the distance the ships of Puerto Madero shimmer against Río de la Plata.

"How did you girls get mixed up with this one?" I say.

"We just met him at the Taverna," says Tanya, or perhaps it was Paulina.

"We're art students," the other one says.

Now we pass the giant sandstone façade of Estacion Retiro, where the railways of Tigre, Mitre, Jose L. Suarez, all converge. Lennie cruises toward Villa 31, a shantytown, wedged between Retiro and Recoleta, encircled by zooming

highways and aluminium fences. The fences are there for a reason. Not even the cops are game enough to enter. Lennie approaches the locked gates and revs the engine.

"Feel like giving us the scenic tour do you?" I say.

"Never picked you as the timid type." He grips the wheel tighter.

"Are you fucking suicidal? How we getting through that?"

"Watch me," he pushes down on the pedal and the metal gates crash on either side of the car. Lennie does this sort of thing for thrills. He has a death wish sometimes.

If San Telmo is the heart of Buenos Aires, Villa 31 is its bowels. A putrid mix of sewage, burning rubber and rotten fruit fills my lungs. I roll up my window. Outside whole families gather around fires in steel garbage bins, little kids with charcoal cheeks, search for food in piles of garbage. We drive past piles of junk, tyres, dirt roads. Clusters of self-made huts reach skyward. They're constructed from corrugated iron, mortar, bricks. Splashed with red, orange, blue. Sewage bubbles from broken pipes. Roads are lined with dead rats. Teenagers hang around the dusty football fields. Over a million people live in Villa 31, mostly illegal immigrants from Bolivia, Paraguay, Peru. People say in the slums six-year-olds carry guns. People say never go inside, especially at night.

A stray dog runs beside the car. It's missing tufts of ginger hair, its flesh is tender and exposed. Lennie drives faster. He doesn't stop. Behind the car shadows are gathering. Large guys with sticks are chasing us and banging on the back windscreen. The two girls in the back seat begin to scream. "Shit, Lennie, drive

faster!" I yell. He accelerates and we slam through the exit. The angry mob stays inside the gates. We are ejected onto one of the large Boulevards of Recoleta, where fancy hotels line the street.

"That was stupid, I can't believe you did that!" I scream at him, watching the slums disappear.

"It's good to remember you are alive sometimes," Lennie laughs.

We are passing alongside the graveyard of Recoleta, where famous people are buried.

I take a few deep breaths. "Did anyone see what happened to Jose?" I ask, "They had him in a headlock last time I looked."

"He sent a message," Lennie says. "He's doing OK, just a little shaken up. Don't worry, he's a local. They won't touch him."

I rest my head back on the seat. "Were you inside when it happened?"

"I was taking a stroll with the girls when we saw the vans. You?"

"Had to push out through the garbage shoot."

"Seriously?"

"You think I intentionally dress like this?"

We've reached Palermo, a middle class barrio in the North. A mob on motorbikes swerves around us. Shops have their shutters down. People spill out of small bars. Lennie slows down. "Aqui estamos," he says. "Let's not keep Little P waiting."

\* \* \*

Little P is short for the Little Prince. God knows what his real name is. I'd known about Little P for years. There was a point when everyone was talking about him and I thought that it was a big practical joke, like they had invented the guy. I would arrive at Pedro's, Jose's, *La Taverna* and someone would say, "Little Prince was here man, you just missed him."

Little P is Jose's dealer, and Pablo's, and Lennie's. He always has the best gear. Pablo and him were tight once. Apparently, he did back flips on asphalt, was a chess master, had a glass eye. People told lots of stories about the eye. That it was a disguise, it was payback, that the cartels had gouged it out with a spoon. The women talked about him, the women swooned over him. Those black rubber wristbands people wore for charity, the bronze statue of José De San Martín, painted pink on Election Day, the App that hacked into the police database, all his ideas, apparently. But then, people talk a lot of shit, don't they?

The door of Little Prince's apartment is thick Spanish oak. It has two serpents intertwined, their profiles locked together in a figure eight. The doors are tall enough for horses to enter (they probably did once). Lennie presses the buzzer to a Hendrix riff and the door clicks open. We walk into the foyer. A high ceiling edged with tiny plaster roses, a wrought iron balustrade, a marble staircase. We cram into the elevator. Lennie slides the metal grid shut, pushes level six.

A guy dressed as Napoleon opens the door, the fiesta thumping behind him.

“Venga!” and we trundle in. A ska band is jamming out the back. People are pushed against the walls, smoking, laughing, arguing, kissing. Stilettos are strewn across the couches. Acrobats on the balcony toss silver batons into a star-spotted sky. The apartment looks like it might have been upmarket once. But now, plaster crumbles off the ceilings, old light fittings crackle, water leaks down the crown moulding like the walls are crying. Martini glasses are discarded on the floor. I hop over a little pathway of toothpicks speared with olives. People are dressed as police, vampires, sea urchins, exotic dancers. Lennie and I push our way through the crowd. We squat on a little patch of tiles, like soldiers in a trench digging in for the night. He passes me his cigarettes, tapping the packet on the back so that one pokes out like a finger.

“Seen Little P?” Lennie asks a passing Samurai.

“He’s around somewhere.” Her sword brushes my shoulder.

Lennie takes a swig from his beer. He is wearing cut off military pants, stained with paint, knee high in the middle of winter. He told me once that it was part of his uniform. Part of being an *artiste*. I thought it was a wank. Salvador Dali passes by, kicks Lennie’s backpack, rattling the spraycans inside. “Hey watch it,” says Lennie, giving him a dirty look.

Lennie is passionate about street art and he never goes anywhere without his cans. He told me he worked on a wall with twenty other artists once. By eleven the next morning it was gone. “The beautiful things in life never last,” he sighs. I was never really sure if he was telling the truth.

Across the room the two gnome-girls are texting and tweeting, intermittent Spanish conversation punctuates their button-pushing. Occasionally they look up and try not stare at my missing arm.

"Your friends are super boring," I tell Lennie.

"That's cos they're robots."

A wave of female acrobats push past us. They wear stripy halter necks and carry gold batons. Lennie looks down the pretty one's cleavage, then winks at me. Lennie can be a misogynist prick, but at least he's funny. He follows the trail of smiling acrobats. I feel a warm hand on the base of my spine and turn around. It's Martha.

"Thank God you're ok." I pull her towards me.

"What?"

"They raided the Taverna again. I didn't know if you were still inside."

"Shit. Is Jose OK?"

"Yep. Just a bit shaken up."

Judging from the mascara running down her face, Martha has been here a while. Her costume has disintegrated into a sort of parody of itself. I wonder briefly if I look as trashed as she does.

"How's life with you anyway?"

"Pretty average," I say.

"You need a husband."

"I don't do husbands."

"You should try them, they really take the edge off."

"I prefer Valium. You got any?"

"I do," says a man no taller than myself, with coffee coloured skin. One eye is brown the other is blue and made of glass like a small glittering marble. He releases the pills into my palm.

"You must be Little P," I say.

"You must be Silvie." His accent is thick. Half Porteño, half something I can't place.

He is younger than I'd imagined, shorter and much cuter. His arms have two serpent tattoos, sketched over Arabic backgrounds. His neckline is strong and he has a collarbone that begs you to touch it.

"I like your arms." God I am drunk.

"I like yours too." He stares at my stump and I realise he is joking. He is missing a tooth and it gives his grin an extra charm.

"Want another drink?" says Martha.

"Sure."

We walk over to the bar. Martha grabs the bottle of whiskey and starts pouring. I snatch the bottle from her and take a swig.

"Don't go there," she says.

"What?" Little P is across the room, now mingling with some Italian mermaids.

"He has a reputation."

"Come on, he's like 12," I say. "Let's sit down."

We slump on a couch with a leopard skin cover. The DJ has changed the music to suave electronic Tango. This is the cue for the acrobats to begin their act on the balcony. A small girl is sitting on a guy's shoulders and the two of them juggle interchanging fiery batons. They synchronise seamlessly with the beat. The fire crackles and lights up an ocean of mesmerised faces. Lennie is in the front row, nestled between the dreadlock-girls, a hand on each one's hip.

"What the fuck is wrong with Lennie these days?" I ask Martha.

"You didn't hear?"

"What?"

"Remember that girl he was sleeping with? Angelica?"

I recall her face. Gaunt cheekbones, slender hips, lips like a cherub. A crazy karaoke bar flashes through my mind. Was she Russian? She had an Eastern accent. She sang with a husky voice six songs straight. Refused to hand over the microphone. Kicked in the machine when it didn't play her tune.

"She went missing a week ago."

"What happened?"

"She was chain smoking weed like you wouldn't believe. She was always pretty loco."

"He tried calling?"

"Number was blocked." She shakes her head. "Checked her apartment. Everything gone."

"Not good."

"There are rumours that the organ hunters are in full flight again."

"Jesus," I sigh.

We don't want to discuss the possibilities. When people go missing here, it's never good news. The organ hunters prey on girls like Angelica. Bodies are untraceable without a chip.

"Since she disappeared, he kind of lost the plot." Martha looks over at Lennie, who's whispering in the girl's ear.

Behind a clump of fire breathers, I see a guy who looks like Pablo. I recognise his red rimmed bike jacket. He starts peeling off his gloves. I clutch the whiskey bottle close to my chest, sink in to the couch, start looking for an escape route.

I get up slowly, make my way down a narrow corridor. I find a handle to what seems like the bathroom and twist it. I slide down inside the door, feel the cool tiles against my legs. A chipped mosaic-star touches my boot-tip. When I look up, two men are near the toilet kissing roughly. I watch them listlessly for a while. Hands gripping buttocks, thighs, shoulders, slippery tongues furious and hungry. I wonder how it would feel to be a gay man. I'm sure I'm trapped in the wrong sex, the wrong time period, the wrong body.

The whiskey bottle, now balanced between my knees, topples to the floor. Its contents spill onto the star. The larger guy stops kissing and looks up, huge biceps, his face throbbing with anger. He walks over, stands inches from my face.

"Jesus, ever heard of knocking," I'm showered with his spit.

"Sorry, I didn't..." but he is already raising his fist as I retreat against the wall. The other guy scuttles over. It takes me a moment to register the missing tooth.

"Don't. She's cool man," says Little P.

He lowers the man's arm, peels open his clenched fist like a paper wrapped stone.

The big guy bumps my shoulder roughly and slams the door.

"Never mind him," Little P says. "He's a drama queen." My hand is nestled between his. His glass eye stares, crystal-clear-blue.

He pulls me up gently, like a lady stepping off a carousel. Hand in hand we walk back to the party unperturbed by the strangeness of it, as though the bathroom belongs to some strange rip in the space-time continuum. We blend back into the soup of acrobats, Gypsies, vagabonds, as if we'd never left.

### CHAPTER THREE

I wake up in someone else's bed wearing a snappy T-shirt I don't recognise. There's a lump next to me. Sometimes memory loss can be good thing and sometimes it's bad. This morning when I wake up it's a strange combination of both. I'm afraid to look at the body beside me, afraid of what I might have done. Faces from the party flash through my head: the guy with blotchy skin dressed like Sergeant Pepper, a flame thrower with terrible breath, an old fat French guy. All of them ugly. I peel back the cover-slowly, gingerly, trying not to wake him. It's the French guy. I have no idea what's happened. I leave him snoring and crawl from the covers. My eyeballs pump in their sockets like hand grenades. From bed to door feels like a thousand miles. Por la camino, I find a trail of things, my skirt, tobacco, stockings and bra.

In the corridor, the stench of last night still lingers, tobacco, kerosene, whiskey and sex. People have ashed on the floor, in wine glasses, in half-eaten takeout containers. A few bodies lay on the couch. I recognise a gnome girl, her plaits sprouting like an unwieldy plant. Martha is nowhere, nor is Lennie. My friends make a habit of deserting me when I'm drunk. Behind the door I spot an old vacuum cleaner. I flick it on, slump over it and begin down the hall. I'm not sure why I am doing this. Perhaps to vacuum the mess from last night, perhaps hoping to suck up my memories with it.

When I get to the end of the corridor, I feel a tap on my shoulder. It's Little P. He's freshly shaven with a clean white shirt, sipping maté through a silver straw.

"Nice T-shirt," he says. "You look like shit." He passes me the maté. "Drink this, you'll feel better."

I release my grip on the vacuum cleaner and it clatters to the floor. My brain doesn't seem to be working. I sip the bitter mixture. I've always hated this stuff, but I force a smile. It was probably Little P's room that I slept in. I regret every drop of whiskey, every stupid conversation, my head beats like a timpani. I pass him back the cup.

"About last night," I begin.

"Better for us not to go there."

"I'm sorry, was that your room I slept in?"

"Don't worry, nothing weird happened," he says.

I pause for a minute contemplating what a one-eyed drug dealer might consider weird.

"I'd better get home." I walk toward the door.

My phone begins to buzz. There have been seven missed calls from Pablo, now a text:

Mi amore, where have you been?

I cooked us breakfast.

I've never understood how I graduate from "Silvie" to "Mi amore" so quickly with these guys.

"You don't have to go," says Little P, "I'm cooking tortilla for breakfast, the zombies will wake soon." He gestures to the sleeping bodies.

"Thanks, but I should make a move." I learnt long ago, that quick exits make things easier.

When I open the door I hear the whirring sirens start up. I step back inside and shut the door behind me, pushing my spine against it like a vertical mattress.

"On second thoughts, perhaps I will stay."

"Cool," Prince grins, flashing his missing tooth.

\* \* \*

Prince told me that I could crash a few days. It's been three weeks and I'm still here. Right now, I'm lying in his hot tub, heels resting on its ridges. Bubbles spill onto the mosaic floor. Nina Simone is pouring out his stereo. I slip my head under the water, tap my fingernails on the bottom of the tub in time to *He's My Baby*. My skin is like shrunken leather. I fold and unfold a small bulge in my belly, letting water swell into the cracks. I sit up, wipe the water from my face, dry my hands. A paper and pen are balanced on a wooden beam across the bath. My laptop is still at Pablo's place, so I'm writing this email by hand.

**Dear Sis,**

You're probably wondering why I'm writing this. After all, it has been six years. Truth is, I've been writing and re-writing this email since Amsterdam. The last time I counted I had twenty-six versions. I write it for me more than you these days. A record of my memories, filed away but never sent.

People always think that twins are the same, but we couldn't have been more different. Could we?

Remember as kids the way people always used to point out how beautiful you were? I had crooked eye brows, blotchy skin, a skinny neck. But your face was something special, milky skin and emerald eyes. You could always pull a crowd. I'd stand alongside you and feel like shrinking. Silvie the bookworm, the introvert, the nerd.

Yet without you I had nothing to measure myself against. I constructed an image of myself, based as much on our points of difference as our points of overlap. Like a lunar eclipse, it only made sense when you blocked out the light.

I'm not saying that I was jealous, although at times I was. Part of me was also really proud. I guess all sisters have their ups and downs. I'm not writing to dig up old wounds. I'm writing cause I still don't understand where we went so horribly wrong.

I never thought of you as a burden. Despite everything, I accepted the way we were born. I supposed that's why it was such a shock, such a kick in the face, when you pulled what you pulled in Amsterdam.

After it was done, I walked outside. It was snowing and everything looked beautiful. I'd never seen snow like that. It settled on the rooftops like icing sugar, black chimneys pushed through it like charcoal sprouts. It tickled my cheeks, crunched underfoot, turned my thick breath into steam. In the taxi I watched out the back window as the road disappeared. The hospital became a tiny dot on the mountain, a spider in a sea of white. The flakes tumbled against the glass. At the

airport I dialled your number, then clicked the receiver against my forehead, listened to the dial tone.

If you're expecting an apology you shouldn't. I think you know my reasons for leaving.

On the plane the bandages spilt down my side. My hair was like a hurricane. I stared at the mist outside the window, wondered if there were parts of me still left inside you. Cells and muscles and strips of flesh. Would my genetic material remain imprinted on your soul? The hostess came over with a steaming pot of tea. She looked me up and down, her mouth gaped, then she poured tea onto my leg.

The first months here were hard. I had no chip, no money, no Spanish. I drifted around from place to place. When I asked directions I felt like a ventriloquist's doll, all gnashing teeth and frozen arms. The Jotas and Zetas felt itchy between my lips, deciphering, mimicking like a child. An elaborate game of charades would unfold between me, the tobacconist, bus driver, the Fruitaría.

For months I couldn't sleep. I woke up whispering to your face. Sometimes I felt you kissing my forehead, touching my cheek, breathing down my neck. Sometimes I heard you singing an old jazz song that Mum used to sing.

I saw you everywhere I went, every corner, every supermarket, every club. When I thought about you, my anger was inflamed, so I tried to stop remembering. Now you exist only here, between these sheets of paper, underneath these smudges of ink.

I place my good arm on the edge of the tub and lever my body upwards. I grab a towel and pat my torso dry, I wrap Prince's Japanese silk robe over my shoulders. It falls a little bit short. In the past three weeks, Prince and I have come to a sort of agreement about how things should go in the house. I can use everything: his Japanese robe, Star Wars thermos, maté cup, boxer shorts. I play his records, *West Side Story*, *Mary Poppins*, *Phantom of the Opera*. Prince has a thing for musical theatre. There are only a few of things out of bounds – his glass eye and his mahogany case, locked with a key. In exchange he gets my undivided attention each night and my inspired company, and I clean. I clean cause I like it and cause Prince doesn't know how. I haven't made it out to fetch any of my stuff. In fact, I haven't made it out of the house at all.

Prince's apartment is on the sixth floor. The living room is decorated with animal skin couches, shaggy rugs and tiled floors. A bookshelf sits in the corner tilting to one side. Along it are books about Picasso, anthologies by Borges, novels by Marquez, some street mags. On the wall are a couple of self-portraits of Frida Kahlo and Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. I used to adore Van Gogh, but that was a long time ago. On the opposite wall is a frame containing moths on little pins. One has lime green stripes, the second is translucent blue, another with velvet wings. When I asked Little P about them, he said they belonged to his sister.

From the living room, French doors open onto a petite balcony. It has two wooden stools, terracotta tiles, wrought iron rails. On the edges are lines of small cacti in colourful pots. His cousin Tito brought them back from a trip to Jujuy. At night we

sit out on the balcony. I roll tobacco while Prince sips his maté, and we talk. People buzz around in the little hive of shops below: a Fruitaria, a Panadaria, a bar. From the balcony you can see the jagged city skyline. Rooftops broken up by aerials, satellite dishes, and LCDs stretch all the way to the port. Purple clouds, swirling with pollution, stain the sky. The sound of whirring sirens wafts upwards like music.

The raids haven't stopped for three weeks. There seems to be some new crackdown underway. When there is a lull in the patrols we watch the dog-walkers and the prostitutes emerge. They are barking out various mating calls to the traffic. They look like little sea urchins crawling out from beneath rocks at low tide. At night, Prince and I talk about our misdemeanours, hum *West Side Story*, discuss favourite aspects of the male body. Shoulder spans, neck sizes, hips. I watch my ash falling like grey dandruff on pedestrians below. Prince goes to the kitchen, refills his maté cup and we keep talking. Prince told me he had this theory about "people like us." He said that we had chequered pasts and chip-less futures. We arrived from different planets and fast tracked ourselves to the sun. 'The Icarus effect,' he called it. Price said it only happened to people that had lost something big. This unquenchable desire to repeat the past, to relive it – to go back to the site of pain and examine it with a spectacle. "And you, what have you lost?" I asked one day. He just looked down and smiled.

Most days Prince comes home pretty late, wearing the white robes of his hospital job. One time I saw droplets of blood on his uniform, like miniature roses on the

rims of his pants. I've never asked exactly what he does, but from our conversations I'm starting to glean certain facts. Turns out, most things I've been told about him are untrue:

1. He is not a dealer.
2. He can be unbearably shy.
3. He is a vegetarian.
4. He is chip-less, like me.
5. He knew everyone that I had slept with, usually more intimately than I did.

Prince tells me he grew up in Villa 31. He pronounces Villa "Vi-ccccha", the Argentine way, extending the *ll* long and soft between his teeth. But his accent is all muddled up. His parents were immigrants, from Bolivia, they were illegals, he said. He never got registered with a chip. The kids from the villa were from Bolivia, Venezuela, Peru. They spilled out and built their own little shacks, like ancient tribes in an urban jungle. The villa had no running water, no sewage, no light. "Still, it wasn't as bad as people say," says Prince. "We had our own radio station. Our own football field, we ran amok, doing pretty much as we pleased."

Prince tells me about "the ghost train," a white government train, rattling like a skeleton – no aircon, no heating, no seats. It had windows grilled with steel. The ghost train arrived into Retiro at midnight and departed just before dawn. It wasn't on the official schedule because officially it didn't exist. The ghost train was

reserved for *Cartoneros*, the trash pickers who come from the outer slums, earning meagre wages by scouring the city's waste. Prince would watch the *Cartoneros* rattle onto the platform at midnight pushing empty trolleys which would be filled by dawn with their booty. The poorest citizens could only travel at night, invisible while the city slept.

Prince's father talked by the fireside at night. "We are like Gypsies," he said. "We live between light and dark, between death and life, between nations, between valleys, between wars." On the wall hung a photo of his great grandfather, Jorge from Bolivia. He wore a black hat and played a miniature guitar. He told Prince they were a forgotten people. They had to fight to survive, to live in the shadows and cracks.

I hear his key in the door and the sound of his bag thumping on the coffee table. He taps at the bathroom door.

"You in there Silvie? I need to get something."

"Just a sec!" I yell back.

I unlatch the door. He slips inside, his white robes swishing. It's steamy and hot and there isn't much space in here. A lone nipple pokes itself out the black silk robe I'm wearing. His eyes make its acquaintance, before I tuck the nipple swiftly into place. A little alternate reality sails past us waving a flag, lives we could have chosen but didn't, then his gaze darts up to my eyes.

"Do you need help?" He glances at the overflowing ashtray, the bubbles foam, my letter on its tray.

"I'll fix it later," I say.

He has never seen me with this much flesh showing. The incompleteness of my body, in its full glory.

"Long shift?" I prop my hips on the vanity.

"I need to get some painkillers. I have a splitting headache." He reaches behind me to open the cabinet door. I slide to one side but clash with his elbow. This is uncomfortable. It's clear what's going on – the time has come for the unsayable to be talked about. I can't stay here forever.

He retrieves a box of pain killers from the cabinet. He stands in front of me. His eyes avoid mine. Lines of water drip through my hair, red Japanese print clings to my back. He stands close to my face, the bathroom thick with steam.

"I wasn't always like this." The words fall out of my mouth. It's too late to send them back. His eyes hover over the purple star tiles.

"How did it happen?" he says.

But I keep quiet.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have asked." His cheeks flush.

I've never told people the truth about my arm. I told Pablo that it was a motorbike accident. Jose thought it was bone cancer. Lennie never asked.

Prince leaves the room. I hear the whistling of the kettle, the scent of *lleba*, the sound of clattering cups. He walks to the stereo and puts on *Maria*, from *West Side Story*, his favourite song. I slip on a cotton T-shirt and some fisherman pants. When I walk into the living room, I notice a tiny postcard propped up on the coffee table.

I pick it up. It's Angelica's face in black, framed by a red border. I flip it over, it's a pamphlet, some sort of fund raiser that Lennie is doing to raise awareness about the disappeared.

Prince is lying on his back. His palms dangle off the sides of the couch. His cat, Juliet scratches her ginger neck on the bottom of the sofa. She rubs against his fingertips.

"You hear about her?" I ask him holding up the card.

"Yeah," he says casually.

"You knew her?"

He nods.

Of course he does. There isn't anyone in town that he doesn't know.

"Lennie still thinks he can find her."

Prince raises an eyebrow.

"None of my friends ever showed up."

The disappearances are getting more regular. There's always someone's cousin's friend's sister going missing. They go for a walk one day and don't come back. But Angelica is the only one that I had ever actually met, so it feels more real this time. The worst thing about the missing is what they do with the bodies. My stomach turns inside out at the thought of it.

I walk over to the French doors. Blue paint is chipping off them. I pull them back and lean my forehead against the glass. Below the traffic is banked up. On the

corner police are questioning a young man with dreadlocks, pulling his wrist and shouting. They push him against a wall, kink his elbow behind his back. I have spent three weeks behind this thick glass panel, watching these dramas unfold daily. Last week I saw a woman and a child pushed into a black car on the street. The infant dropped her heart-shaped toffee on the pavement. In the afternoons the shadows of the police officers grow longer. They stop pedestrians, picking targets from the metro during rush hour. I water the cacti. Not because they need it. It gives me something to do, a small sense of purpose. Afterwards, I smoke another cigarette, pace around in circles, return to bed. I haven't shown up to my translating job in three weeks. I need to call Martha, to ask her for more work. I'll do it tomorrow.

"Sometimes I feel like this city is killing me slowly," I say, searching in my pocket for a Rizler.

"We all feel that." He puts a hand on my shoulder. "It'll die down soon, they can't keep up this pressure forever."

He's right, these crackdowns come in waves. Still, I wouldn't mind getting out of the house. Prince is more fearless than me, he keeps showing up for work.

"You know anyone with a *Paloma Blanca*?" I say with a laugh.

I am joking of course. *Paloma Blancas* are the fake chips, allegedly distributed for high prices on the black market. They are named after white pigeons that migrate effortlessly over state borders every day. Breeze beneath their wings, no immigration police, no scans. Most of us think that they are mythological.

Prince smiles as though he is about to say something, then changes his mind.

There is a line of pigeons on the wrought iron of the balcony. One of them is shitting on a policeman's cap. The policeman looks up. I grin. My phone starts to ring, Prince grabs it from the sofa.

"It's Pablo," he says.

"He might be coming later, to drop over my stuff," I explain.

"You want to answer it for once?"

I stare at the phone.

Pablo and I have been planning when and how to collect my things. I need my laptop with its twenty-seven unsent emails. Besides, I don't know how much longer I can crash at Little P's. At the same time, I'm dreading going back there. I sort of know once I see Pablo, it will be easy to fall back into old habits.

The phone stops ringing for a moment, then the buzzing starts up again.

"Persistent isn't he?" says Prince.

"I don't want to talk to him."

"Honestly, I don't know why you bother having one. You never pick up. All these guys. What do they really do for you?"

I don't have an answer. I wedge the glass doors open, watch the cigarette smoke escape through a small crack.

"I reckon they're all distractions," says Prince.

"Distractions from what?"

"From everything." He throws his hands wide, "You don't even want to talk to them."

"What you are trying to say," I take a drag, "is that I have to stop randomly fucking people."

"Yes," says Prince. "That's pretty much what I'm saying."

I remember once I was out with Martha when we ran into a suit from her work. I can't even remember his name. The guy had money, something about him smelt like a new car. After doing a few rounds of tequila shots I ended up fucking him in the toilet. Then he told me he had to go. His wife was driving over to pick him up. When Martha and I walked down Corrientes, Martha told me that she thought I had a sex addiction. I told her she had a love addiction and in my book that was much worse. She slapped me hard across my cheek. We didn't speak about it afterwards.

"What are you getting from all this?" asks Prince.

My eyes are fixed on the blur of a tail light. When it happens, I'm like an animal on heat. It's a cortex that runs from part of my head directly to my clit. It's triggered by touch, by someone's hand against mine, or a gaze across a bar. I don't even realise it's happening. I'm overtaken by it, like a virus. It's power for five seconds. It's fear, exhilaration, control between my legs. Freedom from white noise inside my brain. Having sex is my one small freedom, in a world without choices.

"It's good exercise," I say.

"Good exercise?"

"Yeah. You burn a lot of kilojoules having sex. It keeps me slim."

Prince laughs. "You know what I think don't you? You are confusing intimacy with love, and love with intimacy." He moves his hands from side to side with each word, as if he is sorting garments into clean and dirty wash-baskets. I am not really sure which is the dirty one, intimacy or love.

"You need to disconnect for a while," he says.

I struggle with the flint of my lighter.

"Disconnect," I mumble, "I don't know how to do that."

My phone starts ringing again. Pablo.

"It's really not that hard." He grabs the phone from my pocket and switches it off. Then he flips off the back, takes out the SIM and walks out the balcony door. He crushes the card under a brick, brushes the pieces off the terracotta tiles with his foot.

Tiny shards of plastic dance through the air like confetti. They drift past washing lines, old ladies sipping coffee, pigeons. They settle on the asphalt.

"So where am I supposed to stay now?" My eyebrow is raised.

Prince grins, tucks Juliet under his elbow.

"As long as you like, you are staying here with me."

Prince pulls out two little stools and gestures for me to join him.

Outside the sky has darkened. The moon is bright and we watch it rising. Skin-coloured rooftops stretch all the way to the port, in patches of tan and brown and pink. A shirtless guy is playing a violin on the terrace opposite. Little lights flicker in the windows- a family eating their dinner, a dancer stretching his hamstrings.

Life goes on, despite the upheavals. The police cars below are thinning out. Maybe Little P is right, the raids are getting shorter, perhaps soon I can wander outside.

"Do you think you could make it a whole month without sex?" he asks.

"Probably."

"Can you promise?"

"OK," I say, although I've never been big on promises.

"It's a full moon," he looks up. "The perfect night to turn over a new leaf."

## CHAPTER FOUR

Angelica stares back at me from behind thick glass. Two wide brown saucers, shocked, like a rabbit caught in a flashlight. Her hips are kinked to one side. Lips turned upwards, a hand resting on one hip. Gaunt cheekbones, slender hips, lips of a cherub.

The print is huge and glossy, a life size portrait. Those brown eyes could be addressing me directly, through sepia acetate. They lure me in. A loose white T-shirt droops at her thighs, its edges frayed, a coffee blotch near the sleeve. There's a smattering of crumbs on her chin. Even in two dimensions and trapped inside a dull gold frame there's something unusually beautiful about her.

The sound of the crowd in the background swells up like a radio. The basement smells like pheromones and citrus wine. A warm arm grasps my waist. Lennie.

"Beautiful eyes aren't they?" He passes me a cup of sangria, apples bobbing like miniature buoys.

"Did you take it yourself?"

"That weekend we lived on *dulce de leche*, cigarettes, and Janis Joplin records," he says. "I don't think I wore anything much except pyjamas for three days. That lump in the corner there." He points to a bulge. "That's Mildred, my ferret."

"So it is." I recognise his yellow sheets. His smile has faded. She's been gone more than a month now, his hopes must be waning.

The longer Angelica is missing, the more her legend grows. Stories about her seep out like moisture from a soil filled box. The time she cooked hash cookies for the boys and they took a short stroll and returned six hours later. How she tried drinking her own urine for a week to cleanse her liver. She did Martha's chart once and predicted that she would marry. Naturally, she did. She wore a Mumu around Lennie's flat, so that her Aura could breathe. I only met her a few times, so I remember her in flashes. Polaroid moments. Her long legs crossed on Lennie's couch. A cigarette holder pursed against her lips, Audrey Hepburn style, arguing violently with anyone who would listen. Over the next few weeks I noticed she was always chewing on a random object – a popsicle stick, a straw, a man's ear. Then she was mumbling about the spirits, insisting they were real. She started talking with them, sleeping with them, giving them names like Cedric or Lawrence, fashioning pillows on the floor for their weary heads. "Not there silly, that's Cedric's bed," she said to Lennie once. That's when we figured the psychosis was kicking in. When the line between fiction and reality got a little bit blurred. Those days it was always difficult to know. People would say, "That's just typical Angelica." It seemed to arrive easily to her, this craziness. It fitted her snugly, like a tailor-made suit, or a noose. What scared me the most though, were her similarities with me. She was a drifter. No home, no chip, no past. Like me she was a whore, but she was smarter than me. Sometimes she got paid. Then one day she vanished. It could have happened to any of us.

I hook Lennie's elbow in mine.

"Lets take a look at the others." I pull him over to the next print.

This one is a similar size. An Asian teenager in a school uniform at a bus stop. The traffic rushes past his face in blurred shapes, giving the impression that he is standing in the centre of a cyclone. Underneath the print is a little card.

Martias Lee.

Last seen 6 months ago.

Estación Plaza Constitución

"It was a good idea. Pulling this exhibition together," I smile and Lennie smiles back.

*Wish Them Back Again*, he's called it. He'd found six artists to make portraits of the missing. Each of them were photographic portraits of a similar shape and dimension, mounted around the white walls. Lennie found the abandoned basement below a shoe shop in Palermo. A quiet side alley, so it wouldn't draw too much attention. Jose borrowed some flood lights from a friend. Pablo drew together the crowd, sending emails, putting out the word through the usual channels. Lennie even put a guard on the door to make sure we would know if there was any unexpected company.

"Where's Martha?" I say.

"Away for the weekend with her beloved. The boys are here somewhere."

The crowd is getting denser. I look through the mis-en-scène of pork pie hats and girls in long silk dresses. A whole family of Vietnamese kids play hide and seek in the corner.

"There's Amelia," says Lennie, dashing off to talk to her. She is making wild gestures in front of her photo to a captivated audience.

A tingling sensation begins to crawl up into my shoulder and down the arm that doesn't exist. It always begins like this. Like a thousand tiny thistles rubbing against skin and flesh that isn't there. I haven't felt it for months; "phantom arm" the doctors call it. They warned me before the operation, although in my case it's more than my arm. My phantom is much bigger than just a limb. The malaise soon converts to short sharp jabs. Pins and needles run up and down the space where the flesh used to be. A high pitched screeching fills my eardrums. I can feel the tendons seize up. The pain shoots through the side of my stomach, my sternum, my lower back, trickles down my legs. I grab my shoulder stump, squeeze it until my knuckles are white. I try to compress it into a small, containable lump. I head toward the bathroom. My steps are quick.

Inside the bathroom, I stand with my head pressed against the mirror. I fumble through my handbag. No pain killers. Stupid. I bend down splashing water on my forehead, cupping it to my lips. This doesn't stop the swell of nausea. I dry retch in the sink, knocking over my sangria cup. The red liquid runs over the porcelain, a waterfall of wine trickles to the floor. I press my skull hard against the mirror, close my eyes. I hear voices.

"She's not coming back- someone needs to break that to him," says a man in Spanish.

"You don't know that for sure," says another.

"Hombre. One whole month? You seen anyone come back after one whole month?"

I open my eyes. The last voice is familiar, husky. I look behind me, realise they are coming from inside the cubicle.

I clamber onto my knees and peer under the crack of the toilet door. I see a pair of Doc Martins, shiny patents, trainers with yellow threads. I know who it is.

"Open up guys," I say, the half moon of my face brushing the floor.

The door opens, Jose (the Doc Martins), Pablo (the trainers), and a stranger (patent black) sit cross legged around the toilet bowl.

Pablo is cutting up two thick lines of white powder on the toilet lid. Jose has a rolled note propped behind his ear. The patent black guy has glasses, a suit, a bald head, a harmless smile. They look like a group of boys sprung in a cubby house.

"You'd better close that," Jose signals to the door.

"Since when do you guys do this in the Ladies?"

"Well, we can't really hang about in the men's ones can we? No doors on the cubicles," says Pablo.

"We were just talking about you," Jose shoots a look to Pablo.

"Comparing notes."

My face turns hot at the thought of it. The reason why I have a rule not to fuck my friends, is that later you have to put up with jabs like that. I was excellent at making rules, but I wasn't so good at sticking to them.

"Why are you clutching your shoulder?" Jose asks.

"I'm not." I drop my hand.

I stare at patent leather. He reminds me of Noddy. Large ears, red nose, awkward smile.

"Oh, this is Theodore- our new friend," smiles Jose, tapping the note on the toilet lid.

We shake hands uncomfortably. Pablo and Jose could never afford this gear on their own. They always manage to sniff out a benefactor if there's one at hand.

"I would kiss you, but there is so little room in here," I say to Theodore, cramming myself inside.

"I'm sure you could make it happen if you really wanted too," says Pablo.

"Oh shut up." I jab him with my elbow.

"You going to partake?" says Jose.

"I can't," I say, "I've got a job interview at 9am tomorrow."

"Never stopped you before," Jose says with a smirk.

"Really. I can't."

Little P's words float around my head, straight and narrow, new leaf, clarity, purpose.

"Suit yourself," Jose places the note against his nostril and begins the ceremony.

The trouble with only having one arm is that sometimes people assist you when you really wish they wouldn't. Jose sits there holding my hair out of my face as I snort. I tell myself that I needed it. I tell myself that it will help forget the pulsing through my arm. I tell myself a lot of lies, when it's convenient. The powder burns right through to the back of my nose and shoots through to my brain like a hothead on a highway. I scrape the remnants on my gums. My eyes are bullets. My back goes straight. I'm there.

\* \* \*

A few hours later, I'm examining the sad looking sangria bowl. Soggy pieces of orange and apple are discarded at the bottom. The children have cleared out. A skinny DJ's on the decks. The flood lights have been swapped for a disco ball. Pablo's sucking on an orange wedge. His muscles ripple through the fabric of his white shirt. His skin smells like chocolate milk. The nape of his neck looks inviting. "You've been working out," I say in his ear. "Never," he smiles.

The whites of Pablo's eyes pulse like beacons in the dark. He reaches out to touch my cheek. He is about to speak, when I feel Jose's hand pulling me to the dance floor. Pablo stands in front of me, Jose is behind. His hips rock mine like a cradle. Theodore has vanished. I loose myself in the music. I rest my head on Jose's shoulder. Breath in his sweaty neck line. Pablo's rough hands pull me towards him.

That's when I see him, smoking in the corner. A pool of light spills from above, illuminating the sharp lines of his hat against the wall. A mirage of bodies sweeps between us. I refocus. I untangle my legs from Pablo's and walk over to the corner. Prince is there, grinning like a cat.

"You're late. We gave up on waiting." I lift my boots onto the table, like a cowboy.

"I see your new leaf is really going smashingly," he says.

"I'm not very good at sticking to rules." I grab the flask from his hand.

"You want to stay here?"

On the dance floor the boys step apart. They dance awkwardly, taking extra care not to brush each others' hips, hands, face, or buttocks.

"Actually, I'm bored off my tits," I say. "I really want to go home, but I have to tell you something."

Prince raises an eyebrow.

"You may need to carry me."

**Dear Sis,**

Last night I dreamt about you again. About your lips, your silky hair and emerald eyes. I remember waking every morning in your embrace, being pushed and shoved in my sleep. I remember strawberry flavoured milk. Your voice slightly higher than mine and your fingers clasping me tight.

In my dream we are three years old. We are lying snug in the bed, wrapped up like silk worms. Your chest is rising and falling like an undulating tide. Fruit bats hang in the figs, with folded wings and beady eyes. You're sleeping deeply. I pull the quilt over our heads, creating a cocoon to protect us from the screams.

Aunt Lucy and Mum are fighting again. The wall is cardboard-thin and shaking. Ripples are breaking against the glass of water beside our bed. I watch them swell and explode at the rim.

Aunt Lucy begins with threats. She is going to call our grandparents. She is going to report Mum to the authorities. I envisage her skirt ballooning around her as glass shatters on the oak floor.

"I don't want anyone touching them," Mum screams, "Not my girls, I won't have them touched."

I stumble out of bed and wrap you in a blanket, we shuffle together but you're still half asleep. The first thing I see is Mum's back. A black slip clinging to her hourglass. I clutch Nexus, our well loved teddy, tighter. You are waking up.

Mum's face is a highway of confusion, her hair coiled like telephone wire. She is a high-class actress in a low-class melodrama. She sits down the broken bottle on the table.

"Go back to bed girls," she says.

Later that night we are tucked under the covers as if nothing is wrong. I pretend to sleep but I can feel Aunt Lucy beside me. She is calmer, more level headed than Mum. I always felt that I knew her better.

"Beautiful girls," Lucy strokes our hair. "You are beautiful, special girls." She grazes our foreheads with a kiss.

I open my eyes. "Don't worry, Aunt Lucy," I say, "everything will work out fine." My fingers make imprints on her cheek. "Don't cry." I watch a tear run down her nose.

"I know," she says, like someone who wants to believe in God, but can't.

She pulls me tight against her chest, her vest itchy against my face.

Is it a dream or something that really happened? I know that those arguments were real, although it took me years to realise why Aunt Lucy was crying, why she was afraid. I was confused about the smashing of bottles and the storming of feet. To everyone else there were problems, but to us things felt fine.

Do you dream about these things too? Do they seep into your brain, the way they seep into mine? Sometimes dreams cross into memories, but I feel like I only know half the story. Fragments are missing, moments I don't recall. There's an ellipsis, two pylons with a negative space, where I reach out my hand and feel the cool thin air.

If you were here, would you complete the puzzle? Would you fill in the blanks?

## CHAPTER FIVE

I stand in the kitchen, Juliet curls around my legs. I warm one palm around my coffee cup and watch the morning rays melt over the crooked city skyline. Little P is cooking an omelette, smashing eggs against the old wooden bench, dropping the yolks into a deep glass bowl. The possibility of attending my job interview is long gone.

“You ever known anyone else who disappeared?” I say.

Prince smashes an egg. “Yeah.” Egg drips down his fingers. “My sister disappeared when I was eleven.”

My grin slides across the chequered tiles. “What happened?”

“Organ hunters. They were targeting little kids back then.”

He begins to whisk the eggs furiously. The rhythm of his beating takes hold. His wrist seems powerful and fluid. I’m not sure what to say. Then he starts talking, breathless, without pause.

“You remind me a bit of her. She had long black hair, a real mane, and fierce green eyes. No one knew where they came from – those eyes. Papa’s skin was dark as charcoal, he said that there were light eyes on our mother’s side, but she was long gone and Papa had a tendency to tell lies.”

The eggs blended, he taps the fork against the bowl to a soft beat. He flicks on the gas.

“Abby was the kind of girl that everyone knew not to mess with. Even in the Villa. She practised karate kicks against the pillows in our room. Once she dislocated a boy’s jaw. He was three years older than her. She gave me a good wack in the rib cage once or twice. I learnt not to tease her after that.”

“But she could be real quiet too. Loved to collect things with wings. Had a collection of hawk moths, diurnals, sapphire butterflies laid out next to her thin mattress. Used to call them her guardian angels. Said that they were protecting us.” He cleans the knife with his finger. “But she was wrong.”

“What happened?” I say.

He slides onion, capsicum, mushroom from chopping board to pan. The sweet aroma meets my face as I watch ingredients sizzle.

Prince tells me that as an eleven year old kid, he’d scamper over the aluminium fence to Retiro each day with Abby close behind him. He says *Estacion Retiro* felt like a giant, rusted lung. Two parallel half domes constructed in Victorian Grandeur. The old rattlers breathed in and out of the station like corridors of wind. Inhaling and exhaling passengers to Mitre, Tigre, Rosario and Patagonia in clear whistling gusts. It felt like a giant respiratory system, controlled by the guards’ whistles, signals, lights. On any weekday over a hundred thousand people bustled under its boleteria and its stained-glass cupola. Prince wove in and out of the throng shaking a small tin, with Abby at his side. He grew up hopping on and off the rattlers, dirt on his face, chewing bits of old candy he found under train seats.

Jumping from train to train, shaking a tin in the face of the gringos, a firm hand between his sister's shoulder blades.

Every night Prince and Abby returned to Villa 31. He tipped the coins from the tin. He counted out the change. If there wasn't enough for his father's rum, Prince would endure a beating until his buttocks were tender. His father sipped the bottle until he passed out. Prince would shift him into bed, an old mattress stuffed with hay. His father's body was warm and flabby like an old horse. Prince would smell his dark skin. It smelt like dead things from a place that existed only in his father's imagination. He threw food scraps in the fire, smouldering woodchips, broken plates, chicken bones. He listened to the sound of his father's teeth gnashing like boulders at night. Prince sometimes felt that burning was the only thing that his father knew how to do.

Abby and Prince roamed the trains together, but one day she refused to go with him.

"Give me the tin!" she said, her arms crossed tight.

"You are too small and you don't know the grid."

She kicked him in the shins and stole the can. Got on the Mitre line, the carriage door slamming behind her. "I'm sick of you bossing me around," she shouted.

Prince clung on to the carriage as it slid away.

"OK, Butterfly. Let's see what you can do. Meet me at 7pm under the golden clock."

He watched the train pull out of the station's concave shell.

Prince was under the clock at seven. He was under the clock at eight. He was still there at 8.30. He watched the hands point at the Roman numerals and the sky melt from pale pink to violet. The Venus star appeared. At first he thought this was one of Abby's little jokes. By 9pm panic throbbed in his chest. He knew for sure, that she wasn't coming back.

"Those two hours were the longest in my life. Every minute on that clock seemed like hours. In the distance I'd catch a swish of black hair, a white skirt. I'd rush over hoping it was her, but it wasn't. Abby never came back."

The omelette sizzles. "Sometimes, I hear the story from a stranger, or from Tio Rahul with a pipe between his lips, or my cousin Tito slamming a soccer ball against the wall. Sometimes, I'm watching my father rage around at night screaming her name, drunk and hysterical. It's all mixed up now – it's blended with other people's versions, with dreams, with imaginary history. I can't remember which one is true and which one is fiction. I only remember waiting under that metal clock, feeling like it was all my fault. I was stupid to let her get that train."

Prince has his back against the wall as he speaks. He has forgotten about the omelette although it is almost cooked. I take the pan off the stove. I look him square in the eye. I think about telling him the truth about my sister, but my throat goes dry. I can't speak.

“Her body never showed up. We found out that the organ hunters were praying on little kids. Unaccompanied kids. I stuck her pictures all around Retiro. No one ever called. At midnight the ghost train would arrive. I’d watch the *Cartoneros* unloading, then go back to the golden clock and wait. I had this crazy idea that she might appear. I’d sit on the bench, looking at the closed *kisko* shutters, rub my heels under the seat, watch the pigeons settle in. One night as the clock struck midnight, I noticed a girl. She sat on the opposite side, dangled her legs over the tracks. She stared at her ankles, eyes painted black, ears plugged with headphones. She was wearing a white sleeveless dress like one that Abby used to wear. At first I thought I was going loco, till I realised who it was. Nikkita was Abby’s best friend. They used to play hopscotch, hide and seek, truth and dare. I used to chase them around the dusty soccer field. I had known Nikkita since before she could walk. I ran to the other side of the track. I grabbed her long black ponytail in my fist and tugged it toward the concrete. ‘What you doing here, muchacha?’ I said. ‘This ain’t no place for you to be.’

She said, ‘Get lost. This is a public platform. You don’t own it!’ She kicked a silver trash can on its hinges. It spun 360, then spilled out newspapers, beer bottles, patatas fritas. She screamed so loud the steel beams seemed to vibrate. I’ve never seen a girl with that look in her eyes, like she had a demon in her belly. She dug her nails into my chest and burst into tears. They cut a path down her cheeks, like cracks in a cave wall.

“Nikkita was persistent. She just kept showing up, and she kept getting taller, which annoyed me. ‘What are you eating for breakfast – steroids?’ I’d say watching her legs dangle down like two string beans. ‘I don’t even eat much,’ she’d suck her cheeks inwards. We talked about Abby. Shared a beer, sometimes a spliff. Sometimes just sat there the two of us, in silence. I got used to our midnight chats, the station all quiet, no trains breathing in or out. Just scampering rat’s feet and howling dogs. People thought we were having a rendezvous, but it wasn’t like that. We just talked. Every night she came. Black pony tail swishing behind her, painted eyes and skinny legs. Then she started sprouting little titas. I could see nipples poking through her cotton shirt. It annoyed me, ‘cause in my mind, Abby is frozen. She’s permanently nine years old, wearing plastic hair bobbles, counting her moths on the floor. I wanted time to stand still. I didn’t want Nikkita to grow up. Getting older didn’t make things easier. Just seemed that shit got more complicated, the more you understood.

One night, I laid along a bench and stared at the ceiling. The clock chimed. I was looking at the giant ribs of steel that stretched above my head. Light leaked through their cracks, spilt shadows across the concrete. I listened to the rain pelt against the metallic roof, watched the pigeons flutter. Water dripped on my foot, a puncture in the giant lung. I looked at the marble arches, half expecting Nikkita to rush onto the platform yelling, ‘Che, I missed the bus! Got stuck with abuelo.’ Her hair would be drenched. But she didn’t say anything. She never showed up. I felt the first rays of morning sunlight unsticking my eyelids. Maybe she had a boyfriend. Maybe she’d already started using. Maybe she just got bored. Weeks

later Tito said he'd run into her and she looked skinnier than before. Said she was hanging with an older guy he didn't know. I tried to sound like I didn't care. Like it was no big deal. But that night I realised I wasn't waiting for Abby no more. I was waiting for Nikkita."

We are sitting at the table now. I'm shovelling the omelette on my bread with a folk. Prince isn't hungry. He just stares at the food.

"I've never told anyone that story," he says.

"I had a sister once too," I say, "but we don't speak these days."

Prince waits patiently, but I don't know how to start. The story is so impossible, so ridiculous, so painful. The thought of talking about it makes me heave. For a moment I look into his glassy eye and imagine what it must be like to be the one who's left behind. The one picking up the pieces and trying to make sense of them. Prince plays with the omelette on his folk.

"How's the celibacy going?" he says with a smile.

"It's OK."

"I've got an idea. Lets get married."

"Why would I do that?"

"Cause we make a good team. Besides, if we get married you can kiss your visa problems goodbye."

"I thought that you were illegal."

"I was," he says and flicks over his wrist to reveal a fresh deep fresh scar. "But not anymore."

\* \* \*

"Me and Little P are thinking about getting married," I say.

"I thought you said marriage wasn't your thing?" Martha crunches a pipa shell between her teeth. "Are you in love?"

"Are you kidding?" I snort.

We are walking down the aisle of the Grande Teatro, trying to find our seats in the crowd. Martha checks the ticket number and guides me into the correct row. It's opening night for Roger's first puppet show and the room is alive with the anticipation of a restless crowd. Pushing along the aisle, we find our seats wedged between a group of old ladies and three teenaged boys. Most people are already seated.

"He wants to help me out. Says he can sort out my visa problems. He reckons marriage makes things easier."

"Are you sure about him?" says Martha. "I mean I have heard some pretty crazy shit that he has been messed up with. You know he grew up in the Villa, right?"

This coming from a woman who has married four men in the past two years and subsequently divorced all of them. How dare she lecture me on the perils of marriage.

"He's cool. He's gay anyway, I think. He's helping me not to sleep with people."

"Right," Martha raises an eyebrow.

"He will make a good husband."

The lights begin to dim. A well dressed young woman from the row in front turns around to hiss at us. Her hair is pulled back tight. Martha leans close to my ear and whispers.

“So you’re getting married to a *gay* man, *who won’t allow you to sleep with other people?*”

“Yeah.”

“Sounds like a picnic.”

The music strikes, the curtains spring open to reveal a sweeping array of forest creatures. Puppet shaped eagles, monkeys and ferrets forage around the stage. The background is decorated with papier mache trees, hills, mountains, and lakes.

“What’s this called again?” I ask.

“The Organ Hunters,” Martha whispers.

I look at her profile under the dimming lights. She didn’t understand. Relationships are binary for Martha. Straight/Gay. Sex/No sex. Man/Woman. For me the lines are a lot more blurred. All I know is that I feel safe at Prince’s place, with Juliet, the smell of llerba and *West Side Story* humming away in the background. I don’t want to move around anymore. I want to stay still, to stay celibate, to stay focussed.

The premise of the show is this. There are “good forest creatures” and evil “organ hunters,” whose puppets resemble humans, gigantic, stilted, figures with long legs and pointed fingers. The parallels to the city are obvious. The organ hunters catch the wild forest creatures and steal their insides, using biotechnology to convert the

animal organs into human ones. The whole ecosystem is under threat. Then the animals unite against the evil hunters. The puppeteers even give the creatures accents to indicate various nationalities. There is a herd of Mexican flamingos, a group of Columbian monkeys, the llamas are from Peru.

I've spent six years in this city, but still I haven't adapted to the Argentine obsession with the puppet show. For Porteños it seems perfectly logical to play out highly politicised narratives using felt animals and high pitched voices. The puppet masters dance around the stage, wearing black skivvies and long black pants. They are not hidden by lights or curtains, instead they remain highly visible. Roger plays two characters. One evil "human heart hunter" and also a messenger dove. When he first appears on stage, Martha points excitedly at him, "That's my man!" she whispers a bit too loudly. The tight haired woman in front of us turns around again like she's about to kill us. Obviously, a puppet show purist. Roger utilises a classic Mid-Western American accent for the evil character, and a soft Argentinian one for the dove. He is pretty good. I drift off during the show – which is performed in Spanish. I find it hard to follow every nuance and I'm confused by the flurry of puppeteers around the stage.

After the show we wait for Roger at the stage exit.

"Want a drink?" Martha asks.

"*No tengo plata.*" I empty my pockets, counting the loose *monedas*.

"Did you go for that job interview? The one I set up for you?" Martha says.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Long story."

Martha rolls her eyes. "Babe you really need to get your shit together, I mean, how long can you keep moping around like this?"

"I'm not moping."

Martha is always trying to sort out my life. Sometimes I resent her mothering instinct.

She sighs at me like she is repeating a conversation we have had before.

"Do you realise that I've been calling you for weeks and you never pick up?"

"My phone got smashed up."

"How?"

"Prince did it. He said I function better without it."

"Exactly how are you planning to get a job with no phone?"

"Don't know. A homing pigeon, perhaps. Maybe Roger can help me," I make a little gesture with one hand to imitate the movement of his messenger dove.

"That's not really funny," she says.

"I wish you wouldn't worry about me. I'm living rent free and Prince says I can stay awhile. I'll get a new phone soon. I've got time to get another job."

The colour drains from Martha's cheeks. She grabs the sleeve of my jacket and pulls me out of the crowd over to a quiet corner near the theatre's leather couches.

"Look babe," she says. "You can stay at my place, if things with Prince are getting... stressful in any way."

Before I can answer, Roger appears behind her. He swoops her up between his two strong arms. Martha seems uncomfortable with this show of public affection. She kisses his cheek and squirms.

Roger has wide eyes and square cheeks like a football player, a wholesome face that belongs on a margarine commercial. This is the type of guy Martha always gets. It seems incongruous that he was the guy messing about on stage with those puppets, Spanish rolling effortlessly off his tongue.

“Darling. Come and meet Silvie.” She points toward me.

“Congratulations on the show!” I say.

“You liked it?” he has a polite Canadian tone.

“Yes, it was really great. Actually, I loved it. The plot was sort of complicated wasn’t it? I mean it had layers of meaning and subplots.”

I’m a terrible liar. I hated it.

Roger pauses. “Awesome. Glad you liked it.”

One of Roger’s puppet *companeros*, Carlos, appears at his side. Roger introduces us, then turns to Carlos and speaks in Spanish. They are hugging, re-living various moments of the performance. Watching this, Roger feels suddenly less squeaky-clean Canadian and more like a typical Argentine man. His Portañeo accent is perfect, he rolls his R’s on his tongue and softens his C’s. He bridges the languages seamlessly, as if he had lived his whole life here. Totally bilingual. I hate him suddenly for the ease with which he can do it. My foreign accent always feels clumsy.

“You ladies like a drink?” Roger switches back to his Canadian persona again.

"Sure," Martha smiles. "I'll have wine. Silvie likes whiskey."

"Thanks," I say.

We watch the two men elbow their way through the mass of people, chatting enthusiastically.

"He's lovely," I say. "Excellent Spanish."

"He's wonderful really. I mean he is just so kind, steady, reliable. You can see how creative he is too. I mean this guy has like zero faults." She bites her bottom lip.

"You're breaking up aren't you?"

"Yeah, we are," she says. "Jesus, Silvie. Why do I always wind up in this same place?"

She has that look in her eyes when the fantasy is melting into something tangible, something you no longer want.

"His mother is flying over next month. I have to tell him Silvie. I mean, I wake up every morning, I have a shower, we sit down to breakfast. I say today is the day. I'll say something, but I can't. The days keep passing."

"You have to tell him."

"I know," she says.

Roger is at the bar demonstrating the intricacies of his messenger pigeon to a group of enthralled young women.

"Looks like I'm gaining a husband, while you're losing one."

"The world is upside down," says Martha.

Pablo appears beside me, a beer in his hand.

"You made it!" says Martha.

"Here I am, I've been calling you and you never pick up the phone," he says with confusion more than anger.

"My phone's busted."

"Her husband smashed it," says Martha.

"Husband?"

"Yeah, Prince. He likes smashing things," says Martha.

"Where is he anyway, 'dis husband?" he spits out the words like a life-threatening bacteria.

"Working the night shift," I say.

The three of us stand uncomfortably. Roger returns with our drinks.

"Great show man!" Pablo slaps Roger's arm.

"Thanks."

Jose weaves in and out of the crowd urgently, dragging Roxanna beside him.

"We didn't realise you were coming," Martha says. "What you think of the show?"

"I wasn't inside. Actually, I've been trying to call Silvie for the past two hours, it keeps saying no signal."

"My phone is busted."

"Well, this is sort of important," Jose says, "Lennie thinks he might have found Angelica."

"Where?" says Martha.

"San Martins."

Roger drops his dove. Its feathers glide to the ground.

## CHAPTER SIX

I saunter into Little P's bedroom, drop my backpack on the floor. He sits at his desk. His mahogany box is open with photos fanning out. He sifts through them, chewing an empanada, his maté close at hand. "Look at this," he passes some prints, a strip of photos. It's faded and shaped like a bookmark. Looks as if it comes from an old passport booth.

In the first square is a girl with black hair, she is no more than eight years old. It's Abby. She blows a large bubble of gum. In the second square is a ten-year-old Prince, his skinny arm around her shoulder. In the third square Prince and Abby are cheek to cheek, his tongue splayed, her nose scrunched up. In the last one Abby's bubble's burst and Prince's lips form an O, a tiny gasp captured on acetate. "Wow. She was really beautiful," I say. "Eyes like a doll."

I flop on his bed, kicking my sneakers onto the floor. He passes over the maté, it makes a strange sound as I slurp. I've finally been converted to the drink. Months of living with Little P has done it. I've also begun sleeping in his bed, clothes on, no funny business. It's more comfortable than the couch.

Prince takes the stack of photos in his hand and reverently places them back in the box. He walks over, flops his skinny body alongside mine. He lies on his back, stares at the paint peeling from the ceiling. The maté cup rises and falls on his belly.

“Things changed after she died. I wasn’t cute enough to beg anymore, so I had to start stealing. Mobile phones, tablets, wallets, anything I could lay my hands on.”

I examine his profile, his delicate concave nose. I imagine a teenaged Prince, with grubby cheeks and an overgrown fringe, dipping his fingers into suit pockets, handbags, knapsacks on the train.

“We used to do it together, me and Tito. We had this great technique. Tito would distract them with a performance, a folk song, a tap dance, a poem. He’d poke out his hat for change. Meanwhile I’d shoot through the train dipping fingers into pockets and unzipping bags. Tito’s performances got more elaborate with time, Samba dances, poetry recitals from Borges. He tried to finger pick flamenco style. This little skinny kid with a raspy voice always prompted an avalanche of tears. I shot through the carriage. They used to call me the bullet.”

He bends his knuckles back in his fingerless gloves, like claws. “I had a whole room piled high with watches, phones, laptops. More stuff than I could manage. I started to tinker with it. Unblock phones, decode laptops, restripe hard drives. Pretty soon, I started to get a bit of a reputation on the block. Had my own regular shop.”

“So one day this guy arrives. He wasn’t from The Villa. He’s all dressed in an expensive suit- everyone called him *El Jefe*. No one seems to know his real name. He brings his own car. He has a driver, a bag carrier, an entourage of guys with thick necks. We called them piranhas cause of the way they circle him. He carries

an old fashioned pocket watch on a string, a notepad and a silver pen. A pink scar like a rats tail cuts his cheek. 'Come with me boy,' he says. 'We got business to discuss.' Of course I didn't want to go. I mean, this guy could be some sort of pervert right? I was pretty good looking back then, before I lost this." He smacks open his gums, grabs the empty space where his tooth once sat.

"El Jefe plonks a pile of cash on the table before Papa. I was sixteen years old. I didn't know money like that existed. 'Go with him hijo,' says Papa, pushing me out the door. I knew better than to fight. Before I know it I'm in the limo with this guy, breathing in the fresh leather seats, stuck between his two piranhas. He taps a cigar out the window. We cruise past the Obelisk, its giant slender tower all glittering with hazy flood lights. The traffic is dizzy around us. We arrive at a restaurant in San Telmo, tucked behind Independencia. The waitresses have names like Catalina and Gina. They have low cut dresses busting with cleavage. I get the feeling that its not only pasta that gets served out back. *El Jefe* takes out a wad of cash and shoves it in my pocket, even though I haven't started working yet. Even though I don't know why I'm there.

"We drive past Puerto Madero, past vacant lots, crumbling buildings, towers pumping out smog. We arrive at a warehouse. The place is lined with people in beds. At first I think it's some sort of underground hospital, for abortions, for childbirth. They are mostly women patients. There is straw on the floor, and bags of blood and respirators. Pretty soon I work out what is going on. This guy is an organ hunter.

"El Jefe doesn't want my organs, he tells me he needs my help. He says that a smart kid like me can be useful. I'm connected in the Barrio, I know everyone's nicknames. He wants me to find him young men, healthy adults, who want to make a contribution. '\$15,000 in cash,' he says, 'for good Samaritans willing to donate a kidney, or a slice of liver. When I walk past the rusted bed frames, all I can think about is Abby. Her slender frame, her tiny organs, how we never saw her again. 'If I do this, what's in it for me?' I ask. 'A *paloma blanka*.' He grins, so that the scar makes an upwards tick on his cheek. He says he has a metal box full of them out back."

"They really exist?" I say.

Prince nods.

"So what happened?"

"I stayed there a few days, he wanted to show me the ropes, to talk me through the procedures. He had bull terriers guarding the doors, I was too afraid to leave." He swallows deeply and his Adam's apple gives a little hop. "He used to kidnap street girls. Kids generated too much publicity, but people didn't miss girls from the street. They would arrive all drugged up, eyes rolling in their sockets, half collapsed. In the morning after the operation, he'd just toss them out back on some esquina. One day he drags in this girl, who's totally out. Eyes barely open. She's wearing high boots, tight jeans, about fourteen years old, a black top clings to her spine. I see her face. Nikkita.

"Jefe kisses her on the forehead. 'Prince,' he says with a smile. 'This one's for you.'  
He lays her body on the table.

"El Jefe has an initiation procedure for newcomers like me. I'm supposed to inject the anaesthetic. Then the doctors can begin their work. She blinks at me, semi conscious. I glance down to her legs. I remember those legs dangling over the train platform. Kicking over the trash can. Rushing down the platform stairs. I take her hand, stretch out her forearm. Her skin is pearl coloured, a feather bed of flesh, a tiny row of track marks crawling up her veins. Jefe passes me the needle.

"I choke. I drop the needle to the floor. I cover my ears with my palms, crouch down in the saw dust, scrunch myself into a ball. He pats my shoulder. 'This isn't for you hijo,' he whispers."

Prince's hands are trembling now, as he sets down the maté cup. It surprises me. I've never seen him this nervous, never seen him miss a beat.

"So he let you go. Just like that?"

"Not without a price, he decided not to use the anaesthetic when he did this," he cups his glass eye, "Wanted me to remember the pain."

Prince never went back to the Villa after that. He cleared out, started fresh. But when he left the factory, he took a little souvenir with him, a small white card with silver wings, plucked by his nimble fingers from the box.

"So, you're just like everybody else," I say, "a runaway."

"In this city, doesn't matter what or who you leave behind. It only matters that you don't get dead. We have to run quick, like scampering rats."

I suddenly think of Angelica, a slow moving rat. I shudder and pull the blankets down tight. Tomorrow I must call Lennie, check he's doing OK.

"Don't you get sick of this though? Knowing at any moment you could disappear. They could find you."

Prince presses his palm gently over my face.

"Close your eyes," he says.

"I don't want to."

"Don't you trust me?"

"Course I do."

"So close your eyes."

I obey.

He strokes my hair.

"We ain't like normal people, honey," he whispers. "We ain't built to be normal people. Just look at us."

He tells me to breathe deep below my rib cage. I push out the air out like a rising tide. He lifts his palm from my face; a stream of light trickles into my retina. I curl into a little ball on the bed. Our clothes are still on. Our bodies almost touch. I can smell the maté on his breath. I can feel his body next to mine.

He falls asleep hissing like a lizard through his front teeth. The rhythm of his heart is constant and reassuring against my spine. When the moon has climbed a little higher and my breath synchronises with his, I begin to relax. Perhaps this is what

it's like, knowing someone inside out – from the crown of their head, to the tip of their toes. From their thick chocolate skin, to the rumblings of their mind. Intimacy without touch. Trust without fear. Love without sex. I take his skinny arms and wrap them over me. Trace the curve of his tattoo. I tickle my toes against the sole of his foot. I breathe in pollens mingled with soot. The winter is almost over, the night is not so cool. I blow out a tiny candle, dripping stalactites beside the bed. Outside I hear cars backfire, planes soar, police boots stomp. But inside all is quiet and warm. Inside, it feels like home.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

I'm in La Boca standing on an esquina. La Boca means the mouth. The port is a hungry semicircle, where ships are swallowed into Río de la Plata. They say tango was born here, when prostitutes, musicians and gangsters collided in smokey bars. Nowadays, you're more likely to find discarded needles on the floor rather than cigars. Illegals and Gypsies - spill from its ramshackle apartments and camp under its bridges. I uncrumple the piece of paper, not sure if I have the right address. Before me stands a skinny building. A metallic staircase zigzags down its side. Some of the windows are shattered. There are bullet holes in the front. Graffiti angels and demons are sprayed on its side.

Lennie said this was a hospital. It can't be a hospital.

I touch the intercom. "I'm here to see my friend," I say, "Lenard Coburg. Is he inside?"

"We don't use names here," says a female voice.

Above me two cameras are mounted on the tin roof. Their electric arms turn towards me, so the lenses point at either side of my face.

"You can come in."

The buzzer sounds and I push open the door.

The foyer looks like a dilapidated hotel. Flakes of linoleum peel from the floor. People wait on faded leather couches. A heavily pregnant woman slumps on a pillow, a man clutches his shoulder with a rag, a child clings to his mother's hip, an

old man walks in the corridor, shoeless and dribbling. I head toward the concierge desk. A grey-haired woman in a white coat stands there. A small bell sits before her.

This is the place that you go when you have no choice. They find a vacated building and set up shop. For residents they do illegal procedures, for illegals they do residential treatments. Everything from births to bullet wounds. The location shifts when the cops get close. Martha had to come to a place like this for an abortion once.

The tall woman at the desk sorts through a bag of syringes, gauze fabric, tubes.

"Arnold, I have a woman in stage-two labour here," she says into a walkie talkie.

She shoves the medical supplies into the lattice of squares, that once held keys. The squares are too small, the supplies keep popping out.

I tap the bell.

"Excuse me," I say. "Can you tell me where Lennie Coburn is?"

She drops the walkie talkie and stares.

"We don't take visitors."

"I know. But this is urgent."

"We don't take visitors."

"Clear out those guys from 113. This baby is not going to wait, Arnold."

The pregnant woman screams.

"Look. I'm not leaving."

The woman's eyebrows furrow, "Fine. Natasha will show you where he is. You have 15 minutes."

Natasha is dressed in jeans but she has plastic coverings on her sneakers and a shower cap pulled over her ears, as if any second she will be called into an emergency room. The elevator doesn't work, so I follow her up three flights of stairs.

Natasha guides me through a labyrinth of passageways, spider webs garnishing the eaves. Hotel bedrooms have been converted to patients' quarters. I catch glimpses of bodies propped in beds, lamp lit tables, bags of blood. Women in white coats push past us. They enter a room with a body laid out on an operating table. The walls hung with sheets.

A generator is throbbing below. The building seems to shake slightly, as if the weight of sick people is too much for the foundations to bear.

"Here we are." Natasha unclicks the door.

When I walk in, Lennie sits upright in his bed.

"Hey you," he says.

A lump like a bruised peach sticks out of his forehead, his right arm swings in a white cast. A screen flickers in the background. *Dr Who*, in a multi-coloured scarf and talking to the Daleks in Spanish.

"Hey," I dump a packet of Camels on his bed. "Thought you could use these."

"Thanks." He puts one to his lips.

"You do realise that we are in a hospital?" says Natasha.

"Of sorts," he says. "Got a light?"

She pulls the fag from his mouth, then her belt buzzer beeps and she is out the door. We sit there listening to pulsing machines and the phlegmy coughs of distant patients.

"Nice looking bump you got there. It kinda suits you."

"They had me on morphine yesterday, that was pretty sweet. Had a little red button which gave me a dose whenever I pressed it. But they took the machine away."

"Bastards aren't they?"

Lennie smiles.

"So, what happened?" I say.

"I went to find Angelica," he says. "Found out she was inside *San Martins*. That place doesn't have the greatest reputation."

*San Martins* is a mental hospital connected to the ring of organ hunters.

Lennie takes a sip of water, it gets caught in his throat and he gives a short cough.

"They kept me waiting in the reception area for two hours. This tall brunette bitch on the desk, tells me only family members can visit. Tries to send me away."

"What did you do?"

"Told her that I'm her brother," he smiles. "Her English step-brother."

"And she bought it?"

"No. She looked on her computer, said there is no one by the name of Angelica. That my information must be wrong. You know what this girl does? She calls the security guard. Huge, dressed in black, silver necklace, shaved head. Five seconds later I'm on the floor, head exploding like World War Three. The smell of concrete against my face. I wake up a few hours later to a team of doctors. They tell me

someone actually picked me up on the street and brought me here. One of the doctors. Can you believe that? I have three broken teeth, a splintered shoulder, a punctured lung."

"So you shaped up pretty well then?"

"Tip top." He taps the cast.

Natasha enters the room. She checks Lennie's drip and his blood pressure.

"You can't stay," she says fumbling with a plastic chord.

"Just give me five," I say.

She flushes his drip and then leaves.

"You really think she's inside?" I say.

"I know she is," says Lennie.

We both go quiet. We don't want to talk about the possibilities. Chip-less inside a place like that, your body is no longer yours.

"I'm going back there," says Lennie.

"You got to recover first." I plump up his pillow and shove it behind his back until he is comfortable.

"Get rested here first. We'll go together when you're well."

I peck his cheek with a goodbye kiss. His face feels stone cold.

Outside Lennie's room Natasha is gone. I walk around the corridor trying to retrace our footsteps. My nostrils are filled with disinfectant, moth balls, body fluids. The smells remind me of my operation. After some wandering, I start to feel lost. Then I catch a glimpse of a tiny figure. Something about the way he is walking reminds me of Little P. White robes, hair bundled in a tight knot, "Hey!" I call, but

he disappears. I run down the passageway trying to catch him. The ceiling is cracked overhead, a maze of lipstick red pipes twist along corridors.

At the end of the next hallway I see his silhouette, his small nose against a shaft of light, that unmistakable profile, but when I approach he has slipped through the door. I twist the handle but it's locked. I jam my shoulder against the door. It's no good. On the other side I hear his footsteps rattling down a staircase. There's a door a little further down. I push through it and into a bedroom. Inside is an unmade bed, clean syringes spill from the dresser. I climb out the window onto the balcony. There's a fire escape hanging off it. I descend two flights of stairs, then climb inside another window, into a small dark room. On the floor is a little glass patch, a skylight. I get on my knees and look through the fogged up glass. It's Prince beyond a doubt. I tap on the glass and call out – but he doesn't look up.

He's standing in the basement, a place you might expect to find cleaning supplies, paints, toilet paper. There is a huge metal fridge in the corner. I squint through the glass. Prince scrubs his nails in a deep aluminium sink. The walls of the basement are covered in grime.

A man in a red suit enters with a trolley, a body covered with a sheet. The man whispers something in Prince's ear. Prince wheels the trolley into the centre of the room, flicks on an overhead lamp. The red suited man slips out.

Prince stands over the body. He peels back the sheet, beginning at the feet, and moving up the body. It's a young woman wearing stilettos and a silver dress. He moves up her thighs, belly, and breasts. Her skin is a rich chocolate colour. At her neck he doubles the sheet over her face. Her small breasts look like ice capped hills through the sheer dress.

Prince begins whistling "America" from *West Side Story*. He snaps on a pair of rubber gloves. He bends his fingers back and forth inside them, like a conductor warming up. All these actions seem part of a well practiced ritual. There is a familiar rhythm to his movements. In this room, he does things methodically. Prince walks over to the fridge and pulls out three small Styrofoam boxes. Each has tiny black writing on its lid.

I glance to the back table where a silver case is open on the desk. Inside it are scalpels, a suction device, surgical tape and scissors. The hairs on the back of my neck prick up.

Prince manoeuvres the girl a little bit to the right. He takes a pair of scissors and slices through her dress. Very delicately he starts to take out her belly-button ring, as if she were his lover and this was her first time.

What began as a feeling of horror is converting to a lurid fascination. He is removing her stiletto, delicately working the leather off her heel. As he works he sings softly:

I like to be in America  
Okay by me in America  
Everything free in America  
For a small fee in America

I notice a small black tarantula tattoo on the girl's hip. Six black legs splayed outwards, the centre piece of an intricate web. Prince holds the scalpel in a tight grip. He is making a deep incision between her breasts, down her abdomen, below her belly. The blood seems fresh, it oozes out like black slugs. Slow, thick, red-wine coloured. His lips buzz:

Skyscrapers bloom in America  
Cadillacs zoom in America  
Industry boom in America  
Twelve in a room in America

His hands work her flesh. I cover my mouth with one hand. Even through the thick skylight, the putrid smell leaks out. Prince is probing somewhere behind her intestines, as if he were searching for something. His neck is crooked, his eyes attentive, like a cat. His gloved fingers produce something from her inside. A mushroom shaped thing, covered with a thin film of liquid. A kidney. "Perfecto," he lays it on the table, as if he has delivered a new born infant.

I watch him extract pieces of her body. He works the scalpel carefully, precisely, bending with the curve of her body, plunging his fingertips inside her with ease. He reaches for instruments as he needs them – scissors, a clamp, a blade. He wipes his forehead with his elbow, wrinkles his nose with concentration.

As each item is placed on the bench I can't help but examine it, identify it.

Big mushrooms covered in slime, the kidneys.

Red bat wings splayed out flat, the lungs.

Two pink cheeks topped with white valves, like trumpet keys, the heart.

*Generous isn't she?* I think, looking at the neat Styrofoam boxes as he puts each item inside, and clicks their lids shut.

Everywhere grime in America

Organized crime in America

Terrible time in America

You forget I'm in America

That's exactly where they are going. Prince strips off his gloves at the basin. The man in the red suit enters the room again. He collects the boxes, placing them neatly on the trolley. He shakes Prince's hand and smiles. He slips out the door like a ghost. Prince goes to the basin, lathers his hands in thick white soap. When he has finished, he returns to the corpse. He pulls the white sheet off her face. Thick lips of a cherub, gaunt cheekbones, slender hips. Angelica.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

When I'm confused, I walk down Avenida Corrientes. Corrientes is the main artery that cuts through the city from Obelisko to Villa Crespo. My body is a cell floating among thousands. I am pulled and pushed and swallowed and sucked. Shoe shiners, swaddled babies, dog walkers, milonga dancers, suits brush my legs, bump my shoulders. They flow toward Río de la Plata, spilling through the capillaries of town. Traffic lights, telephone wires, and metro lines send pulses, signals, synapses along their tracks. All the cells of the city seem to know where they are going, but I do not. I just walk aimlessly.

I need to call Lennie. I can't call Lennie, but I need to tell him.

Wind stings my cheeks. There's a dog paw on my knee, then another, then a hairy dog face. It's Roxanna. She jumps right up, her tongue on my face. Jose is at the other end of the lead, as if Roxanna's taking him for a walk.

"Hey," I peck his cheek.

"So you made it back from the dead," he smiles gently.

"Huh?"

"Haven't seen you for a while."

Below Roxanna has got involved with a passing sausage dog. They are sniffing each other's behinds and pacing in circles like bulls in a ring. Jose tries to pull her back, the owner of the sausage dog tries to do the same. Various expletives are muttered by both parties toward their respective canines.

Jose tugs the lead firmly. "We should get going," he says. "You can let go of my shoulder now."

I realise that all this time my nails have been digging into his jacket. I don't want him to leave.

"Got time for a coffee?" I say. "Quick one before you go?"

Roxanna starts to whine.

The coffee is hot and black and served in two small white cups with golden leaves engraved on their rims. I curl my fingers around the cup. Outside the window Roxanna is tied up to a tree and stares at us with her saucer eyes. Her body is trembling, she digs at the ground like an abandoned child.

Jose folds a napkin to form a perfect triangle.

"You gonna drink that? Or just stare at it?" I look at his coffee.

"Maria's not coming back," he says.

"What?"

"She met some saxophone player in London. She called yesterday. It's been happening for months. I'm the last to know, seems like."

"A saxophonist?" I stir my sugar. "That's . . . different." I am struggling to find the appropriate word.

He sits with that strange lost boy look on his face as though he's trying to piece together the puzzle. He changes the subject.

"Where you been these days, anyway? I haven't seen you around."

"Been crashing at Little P's. Trying to lay low, after that raid."

I suddenly feel sick, right down to my bones. The images return.

Two pink cheeks with valves on top like keys of a trumpet.

Big mushrooms covered in slime.

Red bat wings splayed out flat on the table.

My leg is shaking underneath the bar. The coffee cups begin to rattle, the saucers jump on the table. Two teenage girls at the table behind us are staring. Jose grabs my knee in his hand.

"What's up?"

"I don't want to go back to Little P's place just now."

"So then," he waves for the bill, "come to mine."

\* \* \*

I wake up to Roxanna's nose sniffing my feet and the familiar smell of Jose's weed-infused apartment. It's as if someone has rewound my life six months. My head is a washing machine. Last night there was whiskey, more whiskey, more whiskey. Jose rolls over and kisses my neck. Roxanna walks over.

"You're in her spot," explains Jose.

"No, I think she just really hates me," I say.

I offer my hand in a friendly gesture, but Roxanna rejects it. She buries her face under Jose's armpit instead.

"Roxy will never leave me."

He places a treat between her jaws, then heads for the kitchen.

I reach for my jeans and wriggle into them. Even after five years with one arm, I still struggle with certain actions. Clicking on a bra and getting into jeans are among them. But there is no way I'm asking for Jose's help, not today. This sort of sex is always the same. You think it will bring you something, at the very least some temporary amnesia from all the shit going on in your brain. So you hop on the boat, you are rocked by its gentle waves. At the climax, you throw your head back in relief. You smell his naked flesh against yours. But you wake up the following day still on the island. You realise what looked like a yacht was actually just a dinghy.

Here you are, shipwrecked on a mattress that smells of dog.

I'm still struggling with the jeans when Jose returns, a fresh coffee in his hand. He sits on the edge of the bed.

"Where's my coffee?" I say.

"Oh, you wanted one?" He seems puzzled.

"Forget it."

Little P was right about everything. I miss him the way you miss a sharp arrow in your side. It still feels like Maria lives here. There's a clothes rack with her mini skirts, a heart shaped jewellery box, a desk covered in ear rings, tampons, receipts. Save for the guitar in the corner of the room, everything else belongs to her.

"You haven't even packed up her stuff." I point around. "It's like living in a fucking museum."

"I can't bear to touch it." He buries his face in his hands.

The therapy session begins. Everything he had sacrificed for her. All those years of commitment. He doesn't know now how to approach life, where to begin. Even the arguments they used to have, he craves them with *ganas*. What he resents most is that he can't just phone her up for one of those little jesting matches he used to throw himself at so gleefully.

"How are things going with Little P?"

"Pretty weird," I say, then instantly regret it. I'm sure his mind is imagining all sorts of strange sexual positions. "I mean, he has an interesting life, sort of."

"How so?"

"Hard to explain."

This is how mythology is created.

I walk to the kitchen, pour some coffee. The wall is alive with a patchwork of Maria's postcards. I pick at one of them, Santorini's volcanic rock towering over white houses. My fingernail works along the edge of it. I'm struck by the realisation that I can't ever go home, not home to Australia, not home to Prince's flat either.

"I gotta get out of this town man," I rest my forehead on the wall.

"It's not so hard for you to leave is it?" he says.

He had a chip. He had a life. He had no idea.

"Don't you have a sister back there?" he says. "Can't she help?"

Over the course of various crazy nights, I was prone to let slip some little confessions while Jose poured my drinks and lit my smokes. He knew I had an *accident*, and that I had a sister.

"Hey, I need a favour." I rip Santorini off the wall.

"Sure," but his tone is uncertain, he's worried now we've had sex that I'm going to request something beyond his regular boundaries.

"I need you to call Lennie. I need you to tell him Angelica is dead."

**Dear Sis,**

When I came here six years ago I did so out of desperation. I wasn't thinking clearly. I wanted to disappear, to escape, to start again. But now I've become a shadow, a no one, a negative space. I'm scared, that's why I'm writing.

When you told me the news, it felt as if you were putting my mind in one room and my body in another. I buried my head on your shoulder, let your long hair enclose me. My tears formed a patch on your sweater.

"It's better this way," you fumbled with the ashtray, "We can live like normal sisters, now that Mum isn't around," You looked out at Amsterdam's canals.

"But I don't want to be normal," I said, "I only want to be your twin."

I still don't remember why I signed the consent forms. Looking back I guess I was confused. In shock. I guess I agreed because you wanted it. Somehow I'd decided that there was no other way. How could I stay there when you wanted so desperately to escape? There was no point in fighting it.

An army of surgeons escorted you through the hospital. Showed you shiny equipment. Showed you computer generated models of how your body would look afterwards. Discussed post operative surgeries for additional limbs. Tummy tucks. Skin pigmentations. They agreed to do the whole thing gratis. Girls like us were rare. Girls like us were sent from God.

There were speeches and congratulations in the hospital.

Everyone seemed so happy that you had come to this decision.

Everyone except me.

I was never good at knowing what I wanted. I had problems understanding boundaries. I constantly confused my desire with yours. The body that we grew up with didn't help. It made it difficult to understand that my needs were different from yours. That they had their own colour, forms, dimensions.

While the medical team drafted papers, pointed excitedly at diagrams, pricked us for blood tests and collected urine in paper cups, an uncomfortable lump was growing larger in my throat each day. It felt fat and furry like a mouse with sharp claws. I couldn't eat a thing, I hardly spoke. I watched the white robed people float around like ballet dancers. I didn't know how to synchronise. I smiled and nodded. I was a shadow, a hostage, a ghost. I tossed around at night in sticky sheets of sweat. I vomited every morning.

You were caught up in the storm of celebration. You talked to the doctors. You pointed at the electronic scans. You talked about outcomes, therapies, ground breaking medical advances, about what our future would look like. "We'll have a flat with two separate entrances, two en-suites, a connecting door in the middle," you said. "We'll have separate lovers. Separate degrees." You slept beside me on the pillow each night. You hardly noticed I was there.

Now, here I am in Buenos Aires, still making the same mistakes.

Like my life is on a permanent loop...I still have the same problems with boundaries, I still cross lines that I shouldn't. Take risks that other people find strange.

It's becoming clear to me that it wasn't all your fault. It was my fault too. For not seeing clearly the picture that you were trying to paint. Not reading the signs that you were sending loud and clear.

And still I write these emails that I refuse to send.

Still the thought of calling you is just out of my reach.

## CHAPTER NINE

I stand outside Little P's door. The intertwined serpents flick their tails with spite. They are overreacting, I think. He probably won't even be home. Yesterday, Jose and Martha staged an intervention. They pinned me to the couch, screamed, chain smoked, ranted. Told me that I was crazy if I thought it was OK to see Prince again. Accused me of stupid things. Love, intimacy, trust, things we all knew were fictitious. Roxanna was barking, excited by the cacophony. Hopes of our reconciliation dimmed. Lennie was in the background, phone in hand, pacing, crying, popping valium, his cast still fresh. "I never liked that little shit!" he screamed, "I never trusted that little shit." Martha told me I was psycho, if I considered, even momentarily, returning to his flat. Said we would never speak again. Besides I'd be dead and she didn't do relationships with corpses.

I take a deep breath as my key slides in the lock. I push open the door and walk across the marble floor. Best to avoid the lift. The staircase will be quieter. Climbing the stairs, I make a mental inventory of my room and the things I need to collect: the pile of notes under the mattress, my passport, underwear, wallet, but most importantly my laptop. I'll probably never send those emails, but I'm not prepared to lose them either.

I knock on the apartment door – there is no answer. A good sign I tell myself. I turn the key as quietly as I can and slip inside. Inside the doorway, Juliet sits there

half expecting me. "What you doing here?" she seems to say, with her "feed me" eyes.

"Did you miss me?" I say.

"I miss you the way a cat misses you."

"How's that?"

"Inconsequentially."

I give Juliet a gentle stroke, between the ears. Behind her the bedroom door is ajar. Her ginger tail brushes me. I slip past her deftly. I jam my hand under the mattress and locate the money, shove my laptop, clothes, wallet in the knapsack. While sifting through the clothes, I stumble over the snoopy T-shirt. I scrunch it in my fist. My eyes start to well. This is ridiculous, getting sentimental over something so stupid. I drop the shirt onto the floor; slide the passport in my back pocket, push open the bedroom door. I walk briskly past the bookshelf, the leopard skin couch, the butterfly wings, past Van Gogh's *Starry night*.

I'm almost at the door before I see a shadow against the balcony glass. A skinny silhouette, holding a maté cup.

"Silvie. I've been waiting here all morning for you." He walks toward me and my heart quickens.

"Sit down babe." He taps the couch. "Lets have a little chat."

He sips the maté slowly, a beam of light catching his marble eye. I wonder who he is, this boy-man I once called my husband. He seems like a stranger. He straightens his back, sinks his hips into the couch.

"Did you hear about Angelica?" says Prince. "They found her body at the hospital."

"They?"

"It's sad really. They found leather marks around her neck. Suicide it seems"

"How do you know this?"

"Lennie called this morning."

"Lennie called you?"

"Yeah," he says, "I thought you should hear it from me. The rumours will start soon. You know how people are."

"People?"

"Well, people talk crap really."

"Yeah. People do talk crap."

My eyes are wells of fire.

Prince places the cup on the coffee table between us. Waits for me to grab it.

"You off somewhere?" He looks at my bag.

"I'm staying with Jose a few days," I say.

"Is that safe?"

I zip my bag tight.

"I can take you on my bike if you want, make sure you arrive OK."

"I'm fine," I say.

Little P leans toward me on the couch. I pull away swiftly, losing my balance.

"You look stressed. Is something wrong?"

"I'm in a rush," I stand up to leave.

"Wait," he follows me. "I need to give you something."

"I don't need anything from you, anything at all. You've done more than enough."

My voice is trembling. The brass knob is sweaty in my palm. He is right at my heels. I turn the handle. Feel his breath on my neck.

"Wait."

I push open the door.

Cold marble stairs slip under my feet. My grip slides on the balustrade.

"Where are you going?" he shouts from the stair case.

The street is thick with mist. Condensation forms on my jacket, leaving the leather slick. I look left, I look right. I don't know which way to go. Any direction could be the wrong one. I begin to sprint. I get to the corner fast, my feet pumping on the pavement, my vision blurry. I rush onto the road against ongoing traffic. Like I'm drunk. Not thinking. I can't even see my hand through the sheets of mist. I hear the sound of scampering feet, he isn't far behind. I rush around the corner, smell patatas-fritas and beer. Push open the swinging bar door. Run to the toilet. Push my shoulders inside a cubicle. Slam the door. Seal the lock. My back against the thin wood door. Hold my breath.

"Silvie. Why are you freaking out? I just want to give you something."

I hop on top of the toilet, knees pushed against my chest. I'm getting flashes of Angelica's cheekbones. His hands inside her, as if she were a puppet.

His mouth is against the thin wooden door.

"Come on, lets talk. I know you're inside."

I trusted him with everything. I want to howl and scream. Instead I bite down on my knees.

His palms are against the door, his coffee skin visible through the gap. His voice is soft and calm.

"Look, I don't want you to be afraid. I just came to give you one thing. Please."

He drops something small dropping on the tiles, a red box.

"You don't even need to come out. Just promise me you'll take it."

He slides the box under the doorway with his boot. I watch him step away.

I bend down and pick it up. Inside there's a small folded tissue. I unravel it with one hand and something spills into my palm. A white plastic card, with tiny silver wings, a *Paloma blanka*. I unlatch the bathroom door slowly. The door creaks open. Prince stands there, his back against the mirror, smiling.

"On Corrientes, 295, you'll find a surgery. Go there tomorrow, 3pm. The doctor will wait. The operation takes about an hour. Within two days you will be healed and ready to jump on a plane. Any plane you want."

Those faultless eyes, that charming smile.

My body shakes as I stare at the card. I examine it closely. Now I have my ticket out of here and suddenly, I don't want it. I have an urge to flush the card down the toilet. To crush it under my foot. Perhaps, I'm afraid of leaving this place, of boarding the plane, of starting again. Home. But when I look up, I'm even more terrified about what Prince might do if I reject it.

"What in God's name did you have to do to get this?" I say.

"You don't want to know."

I want to ask him so many things. What happened to Angelica? Is he still working for El Jefe? But the words are stuck in my throat.

“Put it somewhere safe. Don’t tell anyone it came from me, OK?” he says.

I slip the box in my back pocket.

My hand reaches for the tap and I bend down to drink some water.

“You deserve it more than me. At least one of us can get out this way,” he says.

He is standing right next to me. His hand wraps around my right hip. Something about his reflection reminds me of my sister. I get a flash of her face. I see it clearly now, her green eyes and her curly hair, staring back at me through the dirty mirror. This is the way we would stand every morning, preparing for school. She was always there at my side, supporting my weight like a pillar. Her arm wrapped around my hips in the exact same way. These people we choose to love. No matter how far we run or where we hide, they stay with us. I realise she’s been there all along, looking over my shoulder, whispering in my ear.

I’m mixed with longing and repulsion. I could have chosen anyone and I chose him. I thought I was being careful, thought that my boundary was firm... I wasn’t supposed to let anyone in. I was sure this time, my shutters were closed. Somehow he slipped straight into the cavity of my chest.

“What about you?” I say.

“I can’t stay here, I’m going to take a trip. Jujuy, Patagonia, I’m not sure. I’ll jump on a train, meet Tito down there.” He opens the door. “When you arrive home, send me a postcard, OK?”

I push my forehead against the glass and close my eyes. I hear the whirring fan, smell cerveza mingled with urine. The door is swinging on its hinge. And just like that, he is gone.

## **Part two, Van**

## CHAPTER ONE

The sky stretches cloudless before me as my driver speeds over the Anzac Bridge, its beams gigantic guitar strings. Silver gulls duck and whirl. Beyond the bridge's concrete pillars, crystal office towers loom. Sydney is the cleanest city in the world. It glitters around me as the black limousine weaves over Darling Harbour. I stretch out my new arm along the leather seat. It was fitted less than a month ago but lately I'm having some teething problems with it. Aches and pains arrest me at all hours of the night, nausea, headaches, difficulties controlling my fingertips. Then there are the blockages in the neuro-pathways that cause it to do uncanny things. Last week I accidentally smacked a passing child across the cheek, finger tapped to an Irish jig and gave the finger to a passing truckie. I trace the floral tattoos above my knuckles, feeling the texture of the three diamonds that form a triangle along the radius of my wrist. This morning, thank God, it is behaving. Today I can't afford one single fuck up.

I hold up my hand mirror, checking my reflection. This morning Carla paced around my bedroom, placing clothes flat on the bed. "Today, my dear, we are channelling Brigitte Bardot in *La Parisienne*." She pointed to the options; an orange sixties dress and a matching hair tie, or a black mini with a blouse. "Sexy, confident, allure," said Carla, tying my hair back in a loose ponytail. She clipped two large silver hoops in my ears. I chose the orange dress. My makeup was carefully constructed to match the sixties theme – cat eyes that flicked upwards

with fake lashes. "A face is like a canvas, it's hard to tell when it's finished," she said, glossing my lips.

I take my iPad from my monogrammed satchel and flip it open. I've read Charlie's email three times, but it's still not reading any better.

"Should I take the tunnel?" says the driver.

"No. Cut through the city. I want to stay above ground."

"We'll be late."

"Let's make those journalists sweat a little. Besides, when you're Vanessa Johnson you can be as late as you like." I stare at the scenery out the window and pull my shades down. These days it's difficult even for me to grasp the enormity of my power. We glide up Goulburn Street and start climbing toward Oxford. We pass hanging ducks, glass towers and sandstone pubs. It's a Wednesday morning and George Street is filling up with office workers, students and tourists.

The driver is African. He has a long graceful neck and white gloves. He's a replacement, my regular guy is on holiday. He has effortless good looks. I find that highly irritating. My face has taken twenty-seven surgeries, but I'm still not happy with it.

My phone buzzes.

"It's happening," says Rex.

"What?" In the background I can hear his Chihuahua barking or is it his second wife? I often confuse one for the other.

"Your book launch. It's locked in. Opera House in two weeks."

"That's fucking fantastic Rex," I say, but my stomach is beginning to rumble. I have that nervous feeling, like cockroaches crawling beneath my skin. I've worked so hard for this, I'm convinced it might spontaneously combust.

"You're not at the Hilton yet?" I say.

"Don't worry, I'm about to grab a taxi. You feeling OK about it?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I've taken my anti-anxiety pills, don't worry."

Public speaking can sometimes put me in a spin. Thankfully, I haven't vomited yet.

"By the way, you haven't tweeted today."

"I just put it up," I say, "you probably haven't checked it."

I started tweeting at fourteen. Last year, when my fan base passed 10,000 Rex insisted I step up my tweeting to hourly intervals. If I don't do it Rex develops a nervous tic, like the one I know he has now.

"What does it say?" Rex asks.

I read the text out loud:

*#VanAtTheHilton*

*OMG! Going 2 my v. own p. conference peps.*

*OTT with anticipation.*



"My darling, you are a poet," he says warmly.

I pull out a packet of immuno-suppressants, holding it against the window. Hyde Park whizzes past. The lush green shimmers through the pills' clear cellophane packaging.

"By the way, you didn't tell me that you were sacking Charlie. I just got a vile email about it," I say.

There is a pause on the line, I can pin-point the sound of Rex's mind breaking.

"Well, we haven't exactly been getting many results from Charlie, have we?" he says.

"That's beside the point. You know I like keeping Charlie on the books."

Charlie has been my private eye for the last six years. My twin sister died six years ago in Amsterdam. Charlie was investigating the circumstances around her death. I've never been satisfied with the way that the hospital handled things. Sure, Charlie hadn't turned up what I'd expected, but someone so meticulous, who I trusted so completely, was hard to find. After all, this was a delicate matter.

"You're two weeks from the launch of your memoir. Isn't this the worst possible time to dredge all that up?"

"Come on Rex, this is important. If you don't apologize and call, I'll do it myself."

Rex sighs. "OK your majesty, just promise me you'll go easy on the immuno-suppressants."

"OK," I say, crunching the bitter tablets between my back molars.

Rex is my agent. We have a strange relationship that swings between father-daughter-jilted-lover. During my recovery, when I had more than a year of surgeries, Rex was my main support. Each morning he'd appear at my bedside with a fresh bunch of lilies. "Just brightening things up," he'd say refilling the vase. He'd bring me bowls of chicken soup, medications, movies. He'd coax me

out of the room with little walks to brighten my day. My post-traumatic stress was acute and Rex did everything he could to help. Since then, he has been like a family.

The good-looking driver stares at me in the rear-view mirror. Hazelnut eyes like a hypnotist.

“Everything OK, Madame?” he asks.

“Just drive.” I try not to look at him.

I count the weeks it’s been since I had a man. I go through all ten fingertips. I reach inside my satchel and realise that my vibrator’s still there. Carla burst into my place early this morning and she’d almost caught me in the act. I’d shoved it quickly into my handbag. Sometimes I regret giving Carla my house keys.

A green bicycle whooshes past my window, bumping the side mirror. The rider flashes past my vision, I notice a tweed jacket and scruffy hair. Hey, was that Josh? The bike disappears in a maze of cars up ahead, so I don’t get a look at his face. Josh is an old friend, but we’ve drifted apart and haven’t spoken for years. These days I have visions of him everywhere; in supermarkets, during speeches, opening school fetes or art exhibitions. I’m told he lives in Orange. The cyclist probably isn’t him.

On the new Coke billboard in Taylor Square the model wears a tight lace dress, silver painted eyes, soft hair to her shoulders. She clasps a coke bottle dripping with condensation. She’s a typical brunette beauty. I’d missed that gig by a

whisker. When Rex and I walked into the boardroom, six executives reached inside their pants and plonked their metaphorical penises on the table. I was the only woman in the room. They scrutinised every detail of my body. Their eyes perused my face, my arm, my neck. I was used to that. It's something I've experienced since birth. They called Rex the next day and told him that I'd missed out. "Don't worry darling," Rex said, "you're too good for them anyway. Besides, your personality is associated with quirky brands like Libra or Dolly, you're way too hip for Coca Cola." Rex has big plans for us. Next year when my charity goes global and my memoir hits the shelves, he thinks we should relocate to LA and crack the international market. Given my current circumstances, I'm not sure it is a wise idea.

When we arrive at the Hilton, a bunch of photographers is milling in around the marble entrance. I stay inside the limousine and watch. "Look, here she is, stand back, let me through." They elbow their way to the side of the car. "What is she wearing? Is she coming out yet?" I watch them from behind the tinted windows. The driver turns around. "Would you like an escort, Madame? It seems a little crazy out there."

"No, I'll be fine." I draw a breath, my fingers poised on the door handle. When I emerge I will not stop. I will not pose for photos, nor answer questions. I'll walk straight ahead exuding entitlement. "Float past them with a God-like aura," as Rex would say.

This is what I live for. This is why I love being late. To think there was a time, when they used to turn their heads in disgust.

\* \* \*

I pause. I take a deep breath. A bouquet of microphones is shoved before my face. The lights burn my skin. Cameras are lined up along the back wall like machine guns. I was told once by a rap artist, that the secret to freestyling is pauses. "Ramble ramble ramble, PAUSE. Ramble ramble ramble, PAUSE." The gaps, apparently, allow you time to think. Right now I seem unable to find any thoughts in those gaps.

"Could you repeat the question?" I ask the reporter, a white-haired man in the second row.

"How does it feel, knowing that you are a role model to so many young women out there?"

"It feels great, I guess."

Perspiration is forming in my armpits. The room is ten deep with journalists. A thin aisle runs down the centre. Streams of light pour through the high windows along the wall. Even after hundreds of interviews, my stomach still turns somersaults, my voice still trembles.

"Can you expand on that?" asks the reporter.

"I believe it's time for people with unusual bodies to come forward, to step into the light. That's what my charity is all about. It's about providing public, highly-visible opportunities for people with unconventional looks. Bodies that lie outside

‘normal’ beauty. It aims to strike a balance between restoring aesthetics and recognising inner value. That’s what I’ve dedicated the last four years to.”

I roll back my shoulder, unclick the joint and straighten my spine. The words seem to gain their own momentum once I start talking.

“I think all women, abled and disabled, can relate to my struggle. In this era of the body beautiful, face lifts, Photoshop, Botox, we can’t help being image conscious. But what is beauty? In the end aren’t we all unique? Aren’t we all different?”

Six rows of faces, mostly women, nod back.

“Tell us about losing your sister, about writing your new memoir, *My Other Half*,” says a mousy woman in the front row. I hate this question, but after six years I’m used to it. Nowadays, I try to answer without too much emotional investment, like an actress reciting a script.

“Well, all we wanted was to have some sort of individuality – some autonomy in life. Silvie always wanted to study law and I wanted to study fashion design.” My voice begins to crack. “So, after Mum died it seemed logical that we went our separate ways. We wanted independent lives. We always knew there was a risk, after all we shared a heart and a kidney. Conjoined twins like us had never survived this operation before.” I swallow the tears. “But her death was a shock. I felt like I was trapped at the bottom of a well. I had to find the courage to keep going. Besides, I knew that it was important for the world to hear my story. For others to gain strength from my example.”

Rex is standing at the back of the room, nodding silently.

“What was it like, having all those surgical reconstructions?” asks another female journalist.

I stand up and hold my palms to the side. “Three years, one hundred and five operations and voilà, here I am.” I touch my fingers above my head and describe a small pirouette ending in a bow. Applause. “If it wasn’t for Dr Morijoto, I wouldn’t have all this.” I bend my elbows and tilt my head to the side. Now I’m channelling Botticelli’s Venus, floating on her clam, her golden locks drifting in the breeze.

“The separation-surgery fixed my insides. But afterwards, my outsides were still a mess. Dr Morijoto performed stem cell transplants, inserted a metallic breast plate, skin grafts, a spinal reconstruction, and reconstructed my face. He transformed me.” I sit back in the chair and replace the microphone on the stand carefully. “Of course it wasn’t just the surgery. I had to learn how to walk, to breathe, to stand, to talk. My sister and I used each other for balance. It took months of physio, rehabilitation, speech therapy. Not to mention the psychological scars.”

During my recovery, Rex co-funded a BBC documentary called *Rebuilding My Body*. The film was very successful. It documented my surgical transformation over a whole year, using a highbrow narrative style. The film won international acclaim. Afterwards I was catapulted to the top of the social pyramid. That was quite a shock after spending years at the bottom. Shortly after the documentary, I scored a role on *Neighbours*. I was cast as Suzie, that girl with the prosthetic arm. No one on *Neighbours* ever spoke of the arm. It was never mentioned in either dialogue or plot, making my casting all the more ironic, like the token black kid who never

mentions his race. After *Neighbours*, the papers said I was “a disabled role model”, “a trail blazer”, and a “pioneer.” I didn’t feel like a pioneer. I just felt like a one-armed girl, performing a badly written script.

From *Neighbours* I transitioned easily into modelling and acting work. My look was out there, but new younger brands were thriving off my celebrity appeal. Now at 29, the modelling gigs were drying up. I was an ambassador for several charities. I had done several gigs as a TV host; *The MTV Awards* and *Big Brother*. Last week I rated number three in *Vibe* magazine’s, ‘Cool Local Talent’ index. Rex said this indicated a new peak in my popularity.

“How is it going with the new arm? And what prompted your decision to go permanent?” asks a young man from *The Australian*.

“The dexterity is amazing,” I stand up again and wiggle my fingers. Over the years, I’d learnt to cherish my fake arm, to embrace its vaudevillian potential.

“Watch this, it even has a robotic mode.”

I signal to Terry, my technician, at the back. He produces a large remote control. When he pushes various levers, the arm moves forward releasing the microphone and gripping a glass of water. A slight panic creeps over me – what happens if he loses control? The glass might tip? The water might splash? I raise the glass to my lips, I begin to shake, then I sip. The crowd gasps. I replace the cup delicately on the desk. The crowd applauds.

“Don’t you miss your prosthetic limbs?” asks a tall woman with short hair.

"Yes, I miss them." I let out a sigh, recalling how my limbs were once my trademark. "I loved mixing them up: fluoro pink for the cover of *Dolly*, steam punk copper for a *Sony* TVC, flesh colour for *G-Star* jeans. One day I picked up the TV guide and it said, 'Guess what arm the one-armed girl will wear next time?' I was tired of being trapped by that label, so I decided to go permanent."

"Is there anyone special on the scene?" asks a young journalist from *Cleo*.

I take another sip of water. Early on when my scars were fresh, men were repulsed. When they were healed and my fame expanded, they became intimidated.

"No one special." I breathe in the pungent smell of their disappointment.

"Excuse me, Vanessa, I have a question."

I can't see the speaker, but I recognise her sombre tone instantly. I look past the ocean of suits and see one tiny green dot. Leticia Leone. She's a blogger and activist. She's also a pain in the arse. I hate everything about this bitch. Her thick rimmed glasses, her messy dreadlocks, her Greenpeace T-shirt.

Last year I released a line of eye glitter called *Diamonds in the Rough*. Leticia wrote a blog exposing how the products were assembled by underpaid workers and tested on animals. After she broke the story it was picked up by the mainstream media. The timing was abominable. My charity had just been nominated for a *Spirit of Australia Award*. Leticia turned my reputation to mud and any chance of the award went with it.

"Your sister died six years ago, right?" She slides her glasses down her nose. "So why has it taken you so long to release this book?"

"If you recall Leticia, this is actually my third book." I punctuate my words with a cough. "The first, *Tomorrow's Promise*, was a book of self-help affirmations about loss. The second, *Legless*, was a photographic collection of maimed soldiers from Afghanistan, featuring their personal anecdotes.

"But this one isn't for coffee tables," she says. "It's the one everyone has waited for, an in-depth personal account about losing your sister. Right?"

"Leticia," I pause. "Have you ever lost a sibling? A child? A partner?"

"No," she says.

"If you had, I guess you'd understand that writing about such a thing isn't easy."

The crowd gives a collective sigh of empathy. A gentle smile glows within me. Put that in your pipe and smoke it.

But Leticia looks far from perturbed. She places one black army boot in front of the other, leaning forward like a fulcrum.

"I wonder if your fans realise that your arm was made by a biotech company with dubious links to China's killing fields?"

I clasp the shoulder joint tight. I always try not to think about where the arm came from. Sometimes I've dreamed about a freckled redhead boy who comes pounding on my door to reclaim it. But China? The forced killing of political prisoners? I've never heard anything like that. Dr Morijoto was personally recommended by many trusted sources.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I say.

I raise my eyebrow at Rex. He waves toward the security guards.

"That's not the least of it." Leticia flips open her iPad to reveal a photo.

"According to my sources, your sister Silvie Johnson is alive and well and currently living in Buenos Aires."

The room gasps at the image.

Silvie is walking down a crowded pavement, her eyes squinting fiercely. Leticia traces the screen's edge like a blade. Before she can say any more, two security guards pounce on her. They drag her from the room while she wrestles and screams. Rex leaps on to the stage, grabbing the microphone from my hand. "That's all we have time for today guys." Before I know it I'm scuttled away, cameras trailing, reporters following, bulbs flashing. Under Rex's protective grip, I'm swiftly backstage, the door closed, the conference shut down.

## CHAPTER TWO

I lie on the sofa in the Hilton penthouse. An icepack-pillow balances precariously on my forehead. Rex opens the curtains, letting sunlight fill the room. The penthouse has arched windows and a view over Kings Cross – all the way to the harbour. Rex walks over to the sideboard and switches off the boiling jug. He plops two peppermint bags into the teapot. Rex knows that I like it strong, the way my mum used to make it. He arranges the cups carefully on a tray.

“That was a fucking disaster,” I say.

“It was fine.” He walks towards me and sets down the tray.

“No,” I open one eye. “It was a fucking disaster.”

“Listen. We need to talk about your financial situation.”

“I don’t want to talk about my financial situation.”

“I know. But we need to talk about it.”

“What we really need to talk about right now is this.”

The iPad sits on my knees. I tilt the screen towards Rex, exposing Leticia’s image. Already, it has gone viral and rumours are spinning all over cyberspace.

The girl, who looks remarkably like Silvie, has features slightly darker than mine. Her hazel eyes are set closer together. The wind tussles her hair, spreading its long black threads sideways. Her cheeks are slim, her skin a floury white. She looks like an actress from Japanese Noh theatre. She wears a tight leather jacket with one arm sewn up at the side. There’s a green metro sign behind her and people hurrying past. She seems powered by determination.

"It's a fake, right?"

Rex grabs the iPad from my grip. "Of course. It's been Photoshopped. Look at that background, even I can see the pixilation." He stares at the image through his thick glasses, holding the screen so close it brushes his nose. "Come on Van. Don't let it worry you."

"But it looks so much like her."

"It's impossible, remember?"

Carla rushes through the door. She wears denim overalls and a sort of tool belt with her brushes poking out at all angles. One thick plait swinging down her back. She embraces me on the sofa firmly. "Oh my God, I can't believe that woman. She's a total bitch." She pats my arm.

Carla is my personal stylist, she is also my closest friend. I found her tucked away in a Paddington salon when I was having a hair cut meltdown. Some hipster in Newtown had tried to style me into a punk. She cut my hair horribly short and spiked up greasy strands at the front. Carla had done a great job repairing the cut. A stylish array of African plaits, woven feathers and a chestnut dye, was all it took to regain my femininity. Carla has exquisite taste and inspired ideas about fashion. She also possesses the annoying habit of agreeing with practically everything I say.

She takes the icepack from my forehead. "You're ruining all my beautiful work. Those eyes took four hours."

"I don't care." I plonk it back.

Carla turns back to Rex. "Can't you do something about that bitch?"

"No one is taking her seriously. I think we should ignore it," he says.

"Shouldn't we be talking about damage control?" I say.

"If we take her seriously, then she becomes a threat," says Rex.

Carla sits on the armrest. She's given up on saving my face and now concentrates her energy on my feet, slowly easing my heel from my shoe, then massaging each toe with individual care. Rex pours a fresh peppermint tea and sets it in my hands.

"So what's the plan?" I say.

"Tonight you have that charity thing for orphans in Kenya, right?"

"Sierra Leone."

"Kenya. Sierra Leone. Whatever," he coughs. "So you show up at the Wentworth and put on your best face."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"If you don't show, people will talk Vanessa. Best thing to do is not let her get to you. Just roll on, as if nothing happened."

I clasp my forehead tightly, trying to ignore the sledgehammer inside it. "I don't know, Rex, seems like a risk," I say.

"Listen, no one takes that greenie seriously. Besides, we all know it's a fabrication."

"He has a point," says Carla.

Rex shoots Carla a thank you look.

"Sometimes we think these things are bad news, when actually they work in our favour." Rex is sitting at the end of the sofa, iPad in hand, flicking through

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. These days, I can't help feeling his attention is divided. Half monitoring the real me, half monitoring the virtual one.

"I'm not comfortable with the idea of going out tonight, Rex."

He tucks the iPad under his arm. He looks me sincerely in the face. "What about the African kids? You owe it to them, don't you?"

The charity for Sierra Leone is closely aligned with my own. The country has one of the highest rates of maimed people in the world. I think of their malnourished faces, skinny chests and mud huts. Then my mind switches back to Leticia.

"I'm sorry Rex, but I feel so fragile. I don't want to show my face anywhere."

"Yes love, I understand." He places one hand on my shoulder. "Carla, would you take her home and run her a bath. Make sure she gets some sleep. But first, could you be a dear and have the chauffeur pull up outside. I won't have my most precious cargo kept waiting."

"Sure," Carla slips out the door.

I sink back into the soft feather cushions and exhale.

"You need some rest dear," says Rex, assuming Carla's position as chief masseuse.

"Rex. Do you think it's possible that..."

"Darling. What would your dead sister be doing in Buenos Aires?" He strokes my face like a kitten.

"You're right, it's ridiculous." The warm peppermint tea hits the back of my throat. What unsettles me most is that Buenos Aires is the exact place that Silvie *would* go. She always had this strange fascination with it. How did Leticia find out something so personal? Was she really so determined to fuck with my head? I replace the cup on the silver tray with a clink.

"Rex, the China thing worries me. Maybe we could get Charlie to investigate that?"

"I'll get straight onto it." Rex is typing into his iPad.

Carla swings into the room. She clasps both my hands in hers, levering me off the couch like a seesaw.

"Let's go," she says.

"Oh, I almost forgot, these came for you." Rex walks over to the wardrobe and pulls down two boxes from the top. He opens the lids, producing two of the most stunning ball gowns I have ever seen. The first one is lime green, a translucent fabric lining the chest. The front is intricately woven with beads and diamantes. It tapers to a pencil-thin skirt. The second one is bright red. It has a corset sucking in at the waist and a full skirt. It's love at first sight. I walk over to the table and run my fingers over the smooth satin folds. The hard part is choosing which one to try first.

"The red one is Gucci. The green one is from Valor," says Rex. "Now you're the hot new thing, everyone wants you wearing their labels."

I pick up the red one, pressing it to my chest so that the skirt swirls around my knees. I walk to the wall mirror and check my reflection. Carla stands behind me manoeuvring the corset against my breasts. I swoop my hair up, allowing a few strands to drop at the my neck. "It's gorgeous," says Carla, resting her chin on my shoulder. Already I'm channelling Scarlet O'Hara from *Gone with the Wind*,

emulating her pouting face and her sweet southern smile. I picture black gemstone earrings, or perhaps pearls would have more class.

"I had it tailored exactly to your measurements," says Rex.

"It's a good colour on me, isn't it?" I say.

"Well, I guess it's not too late for me to send them back," says Rex. He tugs the dress from my fingertips and begins walking back to the coffee table.

"Send them back?"

"Yeah, they're for tonight. A photo op on the red carpet, naturally."

"Right. So I'd borrow them?" I clasp my hand over my chest, feeling suddenly naked without the dress.

"Of course not. You'd pick one and keep it." He begins folding the dress carefully, "but I guess since you're not going." He replaces the lid with a neat little click and ties the ribbon firmly.

\* \* \*

When I get to the Wentworth, things are pretty much as I expect. The usual limousines crawl along Elizabeth Street. The usual expensive dresses waltz up the red carpet: Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Prada; the usual crowd: models, movie stars, tycoons; the usual bling: diamonds, chunky gold chains and rubys. What I don't expect is the metal detector. Apparently someone smuggled a gun into the venue last week. At the end of the red carpet sits a huge metal box. A flock of security guards are huddled around it.

Two ushers in cream suits escort me from my car. Their bulging forearms protect me from the crowd. I walk up the carpet, my new arm floating beside me, my red skirt swishing. When I reach the machine, I place my clutch onto the conveyor belt. Just as the handbag is disappearing into the plastic flaps, I remember that my vibrator is still inside it. The belt is stopped. I notice a pair of female security guards pointing at the florescent-blue banana shape on screen. They whisper to each other, as if the device is of national importance. The short one reaches for the bag. My face goes hot. A male journalist is creeping behind me. He can smell my discomfort.

"Excuse me," I say to the security girl, "do you mind if I just..." I reach over, but before I get anywhere a squat male security guard with a body like a pumpkin, waves me through the metal detector. I walk through the rectangular frame. Naturally, the alarm begins to wail.

"This way please ma'am," he pulls me by my shoulder. Behind him the female guard is rifling through my bag. The male guard picks up a device and waves it over my body, scanning me from head to toe. When it reaches my shoulder socket, my hips, my knee caps, the beeping begins. The breast plate has set off the alarm.

"On the inside I'm made of iron," I say. "Here, take a look," I offer him my identity card. He scans into the computer a 3D image of my body highlighting my various artificial parts: *Arm reconstruction, shoulder reconstruction, plasticine elbow, face lift, silicon breasts.*

"I'm not flammable officer," I flash him a flirtatious smile. "Do we have to do this now? I'm supposed to be inside."

"Just doing my job, Madame." He waves a pair of men in tails through the door.  
"I'll need to rescan you."

Of course, he could have picked any of my body parts to scan: shoulder, elbow, knee cap, but he settles the device an inch from my nipples. Pert breasts point upwards from my corset, like two ripe pears on offer. The computer beeps.

*"Matching profile,"* flashes on the screen.

The guard looks disappointed with the machine, as if it hasn't given him the answer he desired.

"OK, go ahead."

I walk toward the gold-plated doors of the hotel.

"Excuse me, Madam," says the female security girl, "you can't take batteries in there," she has my bag in hand, a knowing smile on her face.

"Sure. I'll get rid of them." I reach for the purse.

"I'll do it." She retracts the bag quickly.

I lunge forward and rip it from her grip. The strap breaks. The contents almost spill out, but I shove it under my arm and regain control. Pushing through the doors I feel the tsunami of camera flashes against my back. I imagine the potential Twitter feeds with a cringe.

*"#OneArmGirl lashes out with one arm!"*

*"Van clutches for her clutch!"*

*"Totally psycho about a tote."*

Once inside I survey the crowd and take a deep breath. My heart beats violently against my chest. Relax Van, I tell myself. It could have been worse.

\* \* \*

The Wentworth's foyer has been decorated with a nautical theme; fishing nets, bamboo thatching, frangipani chains and golden anchors. The waitresses are dressed as pirates. Fishnet stockings, stripped shirts and hoop earrings. Two lines of them cut a V shape from the entrance, wearing identical costumes like a hall of mirrors. I grab an oyster from the canapé and sip my champagne. I wonder how long I have to bear this conversation.

"I just loved your first book. Really, I loved it," says Eliza. She has a face like a horse. "Guilherme, did you read *Tommorrow's Promise*?"

"I didn't actually," he forces a smile.

"I said to Guilherme, that we really should have thought of that idea ourselves! Self-help and beauty – the perfect combination." She prods his ribs. "It was brilliant really... and it sold so well. I just hope this one makes the same big splash."

Eliza and I attended model-training together. Back then she flirted outrageously with any man who looked at me. Here she stands, batting her eyelids, latching onto my currency. Guilherme is one of the most powerful modelling agents in

Sydney. He refused to sign me years ago because of my arm. I hate them both with equal passion.

"How are things with you, my dear? You still have that contract with Esprit?"

"I'm releasing my own line of lingerie next week."

"That's great," I say, but honestly, I can't think of anything more droll.

Rex always says, "Van the brand" exists in three dimensions: a charity, a philosophy, a lifestyle. Eliza only has two: body and face, both deteriorating rapidly as she approaches thirty.

"That Leticia Leone, she's a right *biatch*, isn't she?" says Eliza, tasting the word on her lips like a paw-paw.

I sip my champagne.

"It just must be so difficult, having people dig up shit like that. It must happen all the time, when you reach the point you're at. They prey on you. I don't know how you maintain your cool."

"Well, I'm really just here for the kids." I point to the video feed of armless infants.

This is the third time tonight I've had this conversation about Leticia. Every time a sick feeling pushes through my intestines. Rex always says, "People are sadistic. They love seeing the pain of others play out on stage. The pagans saw their Gods slaughtering on battlefields, committing adultery, getting devoured by demons. They relived these dramas in theatres or frescos. Nowadays, we have the gossip magazines for all that." Rex would smile. Tonight it feels like I'm witnessing this

sadism up close. Every remark about Silvie, reopens my wound with excruciating pain. Anxiety bubbles inside me each time those piercing syllables hit my ears. Le-ti-ci-a.

A waitress arrives with a tray of champagne.

"Do you have any mineral water?" I say.

She looks at me as if I'm asking for liquid cocaine.

"Try the bar," she says.

The room is crammed. The idea of walking across the crowded dance floor terrifies me. Since losing my sister I'm prone to attacks of claustrophobia. Packed spaces are the worst. Where's Rex? Why hasn't he arrived? He was supposed to fetch my drinks, steer the conversation, protect me. I give in and grab another champagne.

Emilio pushes through the crowd. He looks as scrumptious as ever with his smooth Maltese skin, ice blue eyes. He's a 22-year-old model and a friend. Young guys are my kryptonite.

"Hey there gorgeous." He pecks my cheek. "I didn't see you at the Arias. Where you been hiding?"

"I've been concentrating on the book."

He puts his hand on the small of my back, where the dress line dips. I remove it gently.

Emilio and I had a thing once. We managed to keep it discreet. He has a charming smile, incredible abs, and a good heart (not yet tainted). But Emilio also has a brain

the size of a peanut. He reminds me of a Labrador- kind, harmless, cute. The problem is that he also acts like a Labrador puppy dog in bed. Clawing with too much enthusiasm, licking in all the wrong places. No patience, no build, no rhythm.

Light bounces off his white vest, which cuts a perfect curve against his shoulders.

"Say cheese!"

A photographer flashes her lens. With Emilio's smile, it's sure to end up in the social pages.

"Hey. Just want to say, I saw what happened on YouTube," he says. "That girl, Leticia, she's a real bitch."

"Yeah. She's a bitch." My back stiffens.

"And someone should tell her to shave those armpits."

The champagne is still on frequent rotation. I grab another one and quaff it back, although really, I shouldn't be drinking.

"You look divine sweetheart," he leans in. "What are you doing later?"

The scenario with Emilio usually goes like this. We go back to his place. He offers me a massage. I undress slowly (this time I'll be sure to use every flourish on my Gucci dress). I stretch out on his bed. He proceeds smoothing almond oil into my shoulder joint. Then he goes a little further. Perhaps touching my neck. Perhaps unclipping my bra. We kiss, until he is aroused. Then I make an excuse to leave. He begs me to stay. I refuse. Penetration isn't my thing. I don't like to lose control.

Besides, Rex has warned me about the media attention that casual sex might bring. I'm not going to take any risks two weeks before the book launch.

"Not tonight sweetie, I've just got too much on my mind. I really should get going, gotta work the crowd, you know how it is."

"Yes, of course." He kisses my cheek.

Emilio is sucked into the mass and the room is filling rapidly. A surge of panic hits my chest. My corset feels unbearably tight. I can't breathe. The crowd, Leticia, Silvie. Random images pulse through my mind. I notice a glass door leading to a garden out the back. I push past a Channel Nine presenter, a jewellery designer, a mining magnate. His smile is weird and David Lynch like.... I need air. I'm buffeted between an ice-sculpture, a seashell tower, a tray of peach martinis. The crowd is a quagmire. A dancer slams against my chest. I push through the glass doors.

Outside, under the palm tree by the pool, I can breathe. I take my anti-anxiety pills from my bag. The cool air hits my face. There's a lounge tune playing, a waterfall, bonsai plants. A girl in a golden bikini frolics at the bar. On a luxurious sofa opposite, a media mogul spreads his legs. People are pretending to laugh at his jokes. I drop a few anti-anxiety pills onto my tongue and swallow. Then I see him in the corner, wearing a dirt coloured suit, his back pushed against the glass. It's Josh. A young girl jives towards him, stretching out a hand to dance. Naturally, Josh refuses. It's amazing how he's so awkward with his body, when I'm so comfortable with mine. All things considered, one might expect the opposite.

“Josh. What you doing here?” I stride toward him.

“I’m here on behalf of the Doctors Federation.” He flaps his name tag. “The Federation runs a program sending doctors to Africa. I’m the official rep these days.”

“Well, it’s great to see you.”

“What’s been happening?”

“You know the usual.” We both look down at our drinks. Whose fault is it for falling out of touch? There were no bad vibes between us, just an extremely long time since either of us had bothered picking up a phone. I examine his outfit. His brown suit is badly fitted, his beard untrimmed (not even slightly hipster), his shoes scratched, his afro unkempt. I guess fashion has never been Josh’s strong point.

“You look great, Van,” he says.

“You like?” I give a twirl. “You’re here alone?”

“Nathan the other officer was supposed to come, but he got sick.”

“I thought doctors never got sick.”

“We’re human too, you know.”

I knew Josh well before I had this arm, or my breast implants, or my eye surgery. In Orange he was our closest friend. But there comes a time when every boy who befriends a set of twins must choose. Josh chose Silvie. I never really forgave him.

Josh scrunches his nose as he sips his peach martini. He’s probably missing his lager as much as I’m missing my mineral water.

“That Leticia, she’s unbelievable.” He says. Here we go again.

"I'm fine, really. I don't want to talk about it."

"But I feel really bad." He fumbles with his straw. "She called me, you know."

"What?"

"We were friends back at uni, remember?" I'd forgotten that Leticia and Josh once ran the Sydney University paper together. Josh was politically active back in those days.

"She asked about you. She asked about Silvie, totally grilled me. I swear I had no idea she was going to pull that stunt."

"What'd you tell her?"

"Barely anything. Just childhood stories. If I went to Silvie's funeral, if I knew much about how she died."

"Right." Blood rushes to my cheeks. This is a sore point. Josh wanted me to scatter Silvie's ashes at home, but that never happened. I knew he was angry that I never held a proper ceremony.

"Leticia's just ruthless sometimes," he says. "Remember that time she made me rewrite an entire article for the university paper about old growth forests in Tasmania? I stayed up till 5am, slaving over every detail. Then she takes the piece, sensationalises my argument, modifies the facts and keeps my name on it. I could have killed her."

"Josh," I pause. "There isn't any truth to what she says about the China thing, is there? Dr Morijoto's company, they wouldn't be involved with...?"

"They're reputable as far as I know. Leticia does have the tendency to draw a pretty long bow. I wouldn't worry."

I knew I could trust Josh's opinion. He's always worked within the strictest ethical codes. I glance at my watch. Rex has invented a formula, which dictates how much time to spend with each person at events like these:

$$X + Y + Z + P$$

$$\text{-----} = \text{Total score.}$$

S

X = Company profile

Y = Title

Z = Level of visual appeal

P = Street cred

S = Number of recent scandals

Josh's S-value would be nil, giving him a natural advantage. Still  $X+Y+Z+P =$  a total score of zero, so technically I should be moving along.

I watch the lighting change behind the glass. Inside the texture of ripples washes over the bodies on the dance floor. They look like a bowl of tropical fish. I watch weightless dresses and sequins floating behind the glass. Could I count any of these people as friends? No, I couldn't.

Josh looks me up and down again. "You really scrub up well, Van. You seem to get better with age, like a fine red wine." He gives me a brotherly stroke on the arm. "Thanks," I say with a smile.

It never ceases to amaze me how easily people are fooled by appearances. Even Josh, who once knew me as a mud-covered child, doesn't see the vulnerable girl on the verge of a breakdown, struggling inside her corset. For years people have been clicking their tongues at me saying, "you're doing so well," when the truth is, I'm not doing well in the slightest.

"Anyway, it's nice to see you. I think I'll be off." He drains his martini.

"Already? They haven't even done the speeches."

"Got to drive back to Orange early, don't want a late night."

I look back inside the fish bowl and notice Rex enter the room. If the ballroom dancers are fish Rex is like a shark, with a sleek silver suit, pointed teeth and greedy eyes. He is perusing the room for opportunities. The thought of gliding alongside him, makes my stomach turn. "Can you give me a lift to Surry Hills?" I say to Josh.

When we arrive at the back alley, an acute sense of relief strikes me. I realise Rex is always convincing me to do things that I don't want to do. He has a way of twisting things around, making them sound exactly like my ideas, when they are really his.

\* \* \*

### CHAPTER THREE

I'm lying in the backseat of Josh's old Volvo, feeling uncomfortable. These days I travel only in Porsches, Audis, BMWs. I'm shocked that vehicles like Josh's still exist. My head is throbbing.

"I can't believe you still drive this car. It smells like mandarin peel," I say.

"Old girl still runs like a dream."

"How long have you had it? Fifteen years?"

"Longer," he smiles.

Josh, the quintessential nerd, has never been able to move with the times like the rest of us.

"It never lets me down," he says, "in fact, I remember doing donuts with you and Silvie in the backseat on those dirt roads back in Orange."

Josh rattles off some story about the good old days in Orange, but I'm not listening. I stare at Orion, blinking at me from the clear night sky. The middle star on his belt sits between my fake thumb and index finger. Orion always reminds me of Aunt Lucy. She loved to point out the constellations to Silvie and me when we were kids. She would tell us about Shu, the Egyptian god of air, who separated his children Geb and Nut and in doing so he created the sky and earth. She'd talk about Ranginui and Papatuanuku, from Maori folklore, locked together in a tight embrace, smothering their children in the darkness. When their son Ta'ne used his legs to pry them apart, the world was born. Being a librarian, Aunt Lucy loved to share stories like these. At night her old house moaned like a ship in the wind.

Fruit bats hung from the trees and chewed on the figs. Lucy would stand against the veranda railing and point to the black sky as we imagined the universe being reborn time and time again.

She even had a story about Orange, about the volcanic peak of Mount Canobolas. The Wiradyuri translation for Mount Canobolas was a “two headed creature,” named by the local people because the mountain had two peaks, “old man” and “young man”. It seemed everywhere we looked, the world was full of tales, songs, magical possibilities, all connected to twins like us. For a brief moment in my childhood, I felt primordially important.

Lucy also loved to tell us the stories Mum didn’t want us to know. The more personal the stories, the more we enjoyed them. “Tell us more, Aunt Lucy! Tell us more,” we would beg, dancing around, pulling at her skirt. We liked to hear most of all about the day our mother, Rosa, arrived in Orange. When Mum stepped off the bus she was only 17 years old. She wore a yellow cotton dress stretched tight across her chest and her stomach. Lucy noticed the placement of the hand. The subtle bulge. “Shit,” said Lucy, “Lets talk in the car.”

But Mum didn’t want to talk. She sat silently in the ute, heat burning through the windscreen. How could she explain that this lump had been caused by a man she knew all too well? The Deputy Mayor of the local council, with a tennis court in his yard, a wedding band on his finger and two boys of his own. A handsome man with sparkling emerald eyes. Mum watched the wheat fields fly past her. She

smelled the apple orchards, the grape vines, the plums. She closed her eyes and tried not to think. She knew for sure that she couldn't return to her parents' house and her mother's shame.

Lucy broke the silence. "Rosa, have you had the blood tests? Have you done all the scans?"

Rosa shook her head. Truth was, she'd been in denial. For days her stomach stretched and buckled and bent, like a horse was kicking inside it. That's why she'd come to visit Lucy. Her cousin, five years older, always knew what to do.

The day we were born, sixteen inches of rain fell on Orange. "We were in the middle of a dry spell," said Lucy, "nothing like that much rain had fallen for months." The dry grass drank up the rain. Drops exploded on the steaming asphalt. Apple farmers were dancing in the fields when the storm hit. The dairy farmers were lassoing cattle stranded on tiny islands of grass. Lizards scuttled under balconies into holes. Kelpies shook their coats and whimpered. Children grabbed hens from barnyards and took them to safety. Meanwhile, Lucy, Mum and the local midwife were inside the house as the rain pummelled the tin roof. Rosa was bent over the cracked leather couch, howling louder than the dogs.

"Rosa wasn't expecting twins until you came, crying, crimson coloured, into the world," Lucy used to tell us. The midwife washed off the blood and dried us with a clean towel. We were all tangled up, a wriggling ball of limbs and belly buttons. She thought we were just regular twins, until she tried to pry us apart. She laid us flat on the bed. One arm outstretched on either side, each with five perfectly

formed fingers. A third protruded from the middle, a useless, half formed flap. Later they realised we shared a heart, kidneys, a stomach and much more. "I think you should see this for yourself." The midwife handed us back to Mum. Even then, each of our hands was searching for the other, as if it was our own. When finally our hands came together, the crying stopped.

Mum hugged us tight to her chest. She examined our wriggling toes, two heads and three arms. She began to weep. They were not tears of sorrow or pain. They were tears of remembrance. We had our father's eyes. He was the non-existent man, the ghost-father who'd appear in strange places. Our father who did not exist, our father who Mum was not allowed to love, and by extension neither were we, but here he was staring at her, emerald eyes, lit up like cool green fire.

Mum never left Orange after that. The house that moaned like a ship in the wind became our home. Lucy never had children of her own, so Mum and Silvie and me became part of her brood. One tin roof sheltering four girls. We screamed, fought, argued and loved. Two of us held together by biology, the other two by circumstance.

I close my fingers on the glass, so that the middle stud of Orion's belt disappears. A tingling sensation shoots down my elbow. I've had the arm a month, but it still doesn't feel like it belongs. Before the operation the surgeon said that my body would "grow into it." The phrase made me feel like a kid getting braces. Still the arm stayed foreign and strange, like a tail or a third breast.

The car stops at a red light. I reach into my handbag and pour out some tablets.

"What are those?" says Josh.

"Immuno-suppressants," I say, washing them down. "They stop the antibodies from attacking my arm. My body's natural inclination is to reject it."

"You really shouldn't be taking so many. Especially when you're drinking."

I still find it strange when Josh gives me medical advice. I didn't know many doctors as a kid. Mum generally avoided hospitals and treated all western doctors with suspicion. So my childhood is tainted by memories of bitter Chinese herbs, acupuncture pins and Reiki sessions. As an adult I've embraced antibiotics, antidepressants and cosmetic surgery like a new religion. But Josh and medicine somehow jar in my mind.

"How's your wife?" I say, "How's Sohailia?"

"Her name is Sanura." He emphasises the "n" when he says it.

"Yeah, so how is *Sannnnnura*?"

"Fine."

Josh had fallen in love with a Kenyan nurse he met during his prac. She fell pregnant quickly and they got married soon after. Josh is one of those men who actually keeps his promises.

"How's Cynthia?"

"They're both fine."

"How old is she, four?"

"Six."

"God, six already. She's so cute Josh. You're really lucky to have her."

The last time I saw Cynthia was her second birthday party. How many invitations had I received since and thrown in the bin? Had it really been that long? Josh is obviously angry about my absence from his life. His tone is gruff and his answers are curt.

"Does she like school?"

"Yes," he says, "we're here." He pulls up abruptly outside my place on Crown Street.

"Well, goodnight," I say.

"Van, I'm not letting you walk up that staircase alone."

"I'll be fine," I say, swinging open the car door and falling flat on the cement.

When I open my eyes, Josh towers over me, his messy hair eclipsing the florescent lamp. He helps me to my feet, throws my arm over his shoulder. We bumble to the door. "You really don't have to do this, Josh," I'm saying, but he just smiles and helps me climb the stairs. Sometimes I feel like Josh's kindness is a kind of virus, a sickness with no cure.

## CHAPTER FOUR

I live in a one-bedroom studio, located above a boutique dress shop in Surry Hills. Josh and I walk up the two flights of stairs, my body still slumped against his. I extract my keys from my purse and hand them to Josh. The sight of him jiggling them at my door is strange. I have a rule never to bring boys to my place, for three main reasons:

1. My bed is my temple. I reserve its crisp white sheets for myself.
2. I'm embarrassed about the state of my flat.
3. Rex has prohibited it.

Men expect a palace: antiques, a full liquor cabinet, retro furniture. The reality is quite the contrary: a pokey space, out-dated kitchen, a bucket in the bedroom catching a leak. Rex has promised to fix all these things, but there is one small problem; cash flow. Everything has to wait till after the book's release. Of course I can bend these rules for Josh.

Josh strolls into the small bedroom and hangs both our coats on the door. I collapse onto the bed. On the east side of my bedroom is a balcony overlooking Crown Street. At this late hour there's not much noise outside, the pubs close at midnight. On the opposite wall is my walk-in wardrobe. The door is ajar and I can see my prosthetic arms, hanging like glossy carcasses in an abattoir: sleek-white-aluminium, medieval-embossed silver, cyber-punk-copper, flesh-coloured-

polyurethane. I used to love their detachability and my ability to chop and change with the seasons, fashion shoots, moods. I miss them sometimes.

On the wall opposite my bed are three small prints by Van Gogh, *Starry Night Over the Rhone*, *Workers Asleep*, and *Sunflowers*. Josh drifts toward them tracing the frames with his index finger.

"I can't believe these are hanging in your room," he says.

"They grow on you," I smile.

Van Gogh was Silvie's favourite, but I hated him pathologically. As a child I could never understand how she could idolise him. Hacking off his own ear was bad enough, but dying before he was famous was unforgivable. But then again, Silvie was always the tortured artist type. I found the prints a month ago, covered in dust at the back of my wardrobe. I had them framed and mounted.

Josh looks at my teak shelf with its oblong compartments. It's a little shrine to some of my favourite objects. A fish necklace I used to wear as a kid (Silvie wore the matching other half), some crystals given to me by a psychic after Silvie's death, three bottles of perfume. The three perfume bottles were very expensive. Neither Josh, nor anyone else, realised they were stolen. In Amsterdam, while I recovered, I often had to walk around with bandages covering my face like a mummy. I got tired of the looks of horror and pity, so I started stealing. I wasn't poor. I didn't really need a thing. I'd slip a lipstick, sunglasses or a bracelet in my bag. Once inside my bag I felt like the item had always belonged to me. As if the world owed it to me. No security guard would dare stop and question an invalid

like me. Soon, I became more ambitious- stuffing feather boas, glass statues and dresses into my duffle bag. There was a little part of me that wanted to get caught. I longed for someone to shake and question me – to wake me from my strange new world.

The dripping bucket punctuates the silence between us. Josh sits down beside me on the bed. I can feel his warm leg against mine. I'm suddenly transported back to when, as kids, he used to alternate between Silvie's side and mine. We'd take turns sharing him democratically. After *it* happened, he switched permanently to her side. That's when Silvie and he started obsessing about their comic book. Josh created the pictures and Silvie the words. I'd sit next to them on my iPad, Googling a poison that would kill them both in their sleep. But finding a potion to knock out Silvie and ensure my survival, proved difficult.

Josh reaches over to my dresser and picks up a bottle of meds. He rolls the bottle along the dresser so that it rattles like a rainmaker. I sink back into the pillows and stretch my arms wide.

"You're drunk," he says.

"No. I'm just tired."

"We don't need to talk now," he says. "I mean it's late and you're exhausted. I'll grab a blanket for the sofa. We'll talk tomorrow. We have time." He grabs a pillow from the bed.

"Actually, we don't. Time is not something I actually have."

Josh studies the bottle of immuno-suppressants.

"Who prescribed these?" he says.

"They're for my arm."

"But are you on the right dose?" He squints at the label. "These are very strong."

My stomach contracts into a tight ball. I can't keep it inside anymore. The pain is starting again. My doctor called to tell me the news about four weeks ago. At the time I was at Fox Studios – a photo shoot for the book cover. My face was plastered with foundation. Carla was brushing my cheeks with concealer. I was wearing a loose white dress made from Japanese silk. I hung up the call and placed the phone on the vanity, next to Carla's palette. I walked out of the room, then I just kept walking. Past the tall glass cinema doors, the café benches, the Telstra booth, the khaki fence, into the football stadium next door.

I lay down in the middle of the football field, limbs sprawled out like a starfish. The grass felt wet against my neck. I stretched out my freshly blow-dried hair. I looked up at the sky framed on all sides by the pavilion. The sky was the shape of a perfect blue egg. It was a Tuesday. The stadium was empty. Just me lying there with the wind echoing inside my eardrums. I let out an almighty scream that resembled the primal sound that a woman makes when giving birth. I heard my voice bounce against the concrete walls. I felt absolutely nothing. Just a sort of numbness, from my toes to my cranium. Like a large glass casket was encasing my body. I thought about the children I didn't have. The book I hadn't yet released. The friends who had floated in and out of my life, like ships bobbing in and out of the harbour.

For months now I had felt that deep guttural pain. Burning, stabbing, pulling my insides. I felt dizzy and weak during speeches. My stomach twisted with nausea, my head pounded with blinding white light. I did what I've always done. I ignored it. I kept working through the pain. The way I did when Silvie disappeared. The way I did when Lucy went mad. I buried myself in emails, decisions, photo shoots, press releases. Work was the only thing left to do. Work made me forget.

In the stadium, a million empty seats stared back at me. It was getting cold, and the dampness was seeping through my silk dress. The sun was shifting over the hole in the sky, flickering its rays over the white cusp of the pavilion. I thought about her. I wished I could phone her. I wondered if I could hear her voice, what would it sound like? What would she say? Tears dripped down my cheeks. A desert dried the back of my throat. They would be searching for me at the shoot. I didn't care. I sprawled out watching the inverted egg of sky turn from blue to purple. I let my thoughts wash around me. I was trapped inside a time-lapse scene. Maybe minutes passed, maybe hours. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

After a while, I brushed myself off and returned to the shoot. Carla stood there, her mouth wide open, staring.

"Fix my face," I jumped back in the chair. "And for God's sake change this lipstick. The colour is horrible."

I was back under the hot lights, a new dress freshly pressed, my hair redone, in twenty minutes. No one questioned me. Even now it feels like a dream. The doctor's call, the stadium, everything.

Josh places his hands on my shoulders. "It's your kidney, isn't it?" he says. "Vanessa, you have to slow down."

"Too late to slow down," I say.

Since the operation, everyone has always assumed my heart will be the first to go. During the surgery, Silvie received the heart we shared. Mine was a transplant. Heart transplant patients have mixed success. I was checked constantly. It was a shock to find out that my kidney was the problem. In the operation Silvie took one kidney and I took the other, but the immuno-suppressants, anti-depressants, painkillers and post-operative medications were taking their toll. My kidney is under immense pressure. One organ doing the work of two. Being a medico, Josh has put it all together.

"They want to put me on dialysis. They want to start after the launch."

"Can't they do anything?" says Josh.

"I'm on the waiting list for a transplant," I say. "But my blood type is very rare."

My body forms a crescent shape around a pillow. I push it hard against my chest.

"The launch is going to be my last public appearance," I squeeze tighter, "I'm dying, Josh."

I haven't admitted this stuff to anyone. Not Carla, Lucy, or Rex. Why am I telling a man I've hardly spoken to in years? There is only one logical explanation. Josh is right. I must be drunk.

## CHAPTER FIVE

My sister and I were seven years old when we met Josh. We were sitting on a rocky crag of Mount Lindsay, overlooking Orange. In the distance Mount Conobolas lay like a sleeping dog above the town. Back then Silvie and I were inseparable. This was not only due to the fact that we were physically connected. The simple truth of the matter was we had no other friends. Silvie sat with her head turned away while I plaited her hair. I gave a fistful of strands a deliberate pull. She straightened her back and produced the elastic band, trying to ignore my tugs. Like most siblings our fighting was constant. I remember vividly that day that we were trapped together in a blanket of silence, waiting for the tension to dissipate.

When Silvie's hair was done I collected fallen gumnuts from the eucalyptus hanging over our heads. I scooped up the pellets and counted them into our laps. I heard a rustling from the haze above. A boy appeared in front of us, his knees hooked around a branch. Clumps of dark curly hair hung from his inverted skull. He wore a khaki jumper one size too big for him. A plastic sword dangled from a silver-foil belt. He jumped from the tree and stumbled to his feet.

"I'm pirate Joshua Long-beard!" he said, "what be your names?" He brandished the sword in our faces.

I began to laugh. "I'm Van and she's Silvie." I pointed to my sister.

Josh stepped back, tucked his sword behind his back. His eyes widened against his tanned brown skin. We were wearing a cotton dress. Silvie's side was grey, my

side was black. Aunt Lucy had sewn it together in the middle with a thick red zig zag.

“Wow!” he reached towards us. We pulled back swiftly. Our cheeks grew scarlet at any attention our body attracted.

A week before we had been held hostage by a boy called Damien Black for two hours under the football stadium. He tied a skipping rope around our middle and squeezed it tight, in an attempt to split us apart. The rope burned our skin. We felt the thumping of boots above us, heard the kids stamp and scream. To this day the shrill sound of an umpire’s whistle still gives me a start. The skipping rope didn’t break our flesh, but it did cut off our circulation. The teachers found us collapsed at half time. Damien was put on detention. After that happened, skipping school became a regular event.

Josh paced around in a circle, dry leaves crunching under his feet.

“You realise, this is actually my ship you’re sitting in?”

We both looked around and saw the evidence. Logs arranged in a diamond shape, mud carved seats, and a skull and crossbones that flew from a makeshift hull. Josh plonked himself on a log, chin in his palms, body turned away. He was sulking.

“It’s not a bad boat,” Silvie tapped his shoulder gently.

“Hey, want to play a pirate game?” Josh turned. “It’s much better with real people, cause the possums sometimes scratch.” He lifted up his trousers leg to reveal evidence of previous pirate battles.

“Don’t you have any friends?” I said.

"Not really," said Josh. "I don't really go to school."

"Yeah, neither do we." Silvie's grin grew wider.

I felt something shift in my tiny seven-year-old heart. A string plucked tight, like a miniature harp. It seemed this boy was just like us, friendless, inept, a loner.

For the next few weeks we met Josh on the hill top every day. We played games inside the pirate ship and explored some of the bush tracks. One day we went inside his caravan. Its appearance was rather mystical to our seven-year-old eyes. One side was painted with bright yellow sunflowers. Colourful batik tablecloths flapped from its windows like wings. We discovered his dad's shisha pipes, his big thick books with Arabic text scrawled like ripples across the pages, and his golden compass that always pointed 277.683187 degrees north. His fridge was full of flat bread, spicy chutney and stews.

"Dad's from Afghanistan and mum's from Bowral," Josh explained.

I liked the word Afghanistan. The way its multiple syllables rolled off my tongue. It conjured images of camels and tents. Later as adolescents, we realized that there was much more to it than that. Josh was a blend of light and dark. That's where he got his caramel skin and his light brown eyes. He spoke two languages. He spanned cultural differences without even realizing it. It wasn't easy for his mum to bring her husband into the family fold, so Josh straddled family tensions as well. His mum was a contracting nurse and his dad did construction projects. His parents moved around a lot trying to find a place to settle. At seven he'd already

tried four different schools. Josh knew what it was like not to fit in. Perhaps that's why he understood us so well.

As the days passed, our innocent games became a little less innocent. We started with pirates and treasure hunts. One day we progressed to doctors and nurses. I'm not sure who's idea it was to strip down into our undies and singlets, but I remember that it was thrilling. Not the idea that we were semi-naked, but the idea that we were visiting a doctor. Josh stood in front of us wearing a plastic stethoscope around his neck. He fumbled with the cool metal disk in his hand.

"What are you going to do with that?" Silvie asked.

"Find your heartbeat, of course," he replied, slipping it under our singlet.

Just muttering the word "hospital" in our house was a sin. While other children got regular check ups, antibiotics, needles, X-rays, the whole thing remained a mystery to us. It was something regular kids did, but not us. Mum dealt directly with the pharmacists or with herbal practitioners. She avoided medicines and never had us immunised. There were a few emergencies, a broken finger, a case of the mumps where medical assistance was needed, but for regular flu or stomach bugs we usually avoided check ups. Of course Mum had her reasons. But it gave doctors a sort of mysterious allure. We didn't have much idea what went on inside those white rooms with those strange instruments. We imagined it must be something quite peculiar.

In the caravan we proceeded to take off our singlets. We let Josh measure the dimensions of our chest, stomach and neck. He did it carefully and with scientific precision, perhaps a sign of things to come. The feeling of his hands on our flesh was unforgettable. This was the first time a boy had ever spoken to us in a regular voice, let alone indulged in such an intimate game. I still remember the sensation of his fingertip running down my spine, Silvie's eyes flickering on the bookshelf ahead of her as she felt the smooth line.

That afternoon we climbed down the hills. A troublesome trio, skipping over the dirt track. Silvie and I volleyed Josh back and forth between us, playing for his attention. We hardly noticed that the moon had risen and the mosquitoes were biting. We stumbled past apple orchards, cows and sheep.

Mum was waiting on the wooden balcony when we got home. She paced the creaky boards.

"Where have you been?" Her arms crossed against her chest. "Do you have any idea of the time?"

"Your teacher says you weren't at school today," said Aunt Lucy, a cigarette in hand.

"And why have you brought him here?" Mum pointed at Josh. "This mud covered boy!"

"His name is Joshua Long-beard," I shouted back, "he's our new friend!"

Mum was not used to us having other children to play. Lucy and Rosa dragged Josh to the bathroom. They peeled off his clothes, ran the bath to the brim.

"Well, I guess you can stay for dinner," sighed Rosa, rubbing his afro with foam.

"You have parents somewhere in town?"

"Yeah," Josh said.

"Where?"

Josh paused, busy enjoying the sensation of warm water against skin. The hot tap hadn't worked at the caravan for weeks. As always his parents didn't know their plans, whether they were passing through or staying here.

"At a caravan at the top of the hill."

Lucy roasted chicken that night, with side dishes of pumpkin, potato, string beans and gravy. Josh politely took a slither of breast. Lucy took the drumstick. Silvie and I shared the wing. When we snapped the wishbone in two, I got the bigger half.

"What do you wish for, love?" Mum said with a smile.

She was expecting the usual response: a new dress, a bracelet, a hair clip. But I said nothing, just pushed my carrots with my fork and looked across the table at Josh, his freshly washed skin and his eyes flickering behind the candle. I wished secretly that Josh would never leave. That he'd stay our friend forever.

## CHAPTER SIX

I wake up to my buzzing mobile and roll over. The Gucci dress is still stuck to my skin. 'REX' flashes on screen. I click on the hands free.

"I know, I haven't tweeted yet," I say, one hand blocking out the morning rays.

"That's not why I'm calling."

"It's not?"

"Van, we have a problem."

My back shoots upright, my hangover dissipates instantly.

"It's the Leticia thing, it's getting out of hand."

"I told you this would happen!" I thump a pillow with my fist, visualising Rex's head.

"Relax my dear. Uncle Rex has a plan."

"Go on then."

"First things first. You do an exclusive with *Sunrise*. I've called them and lined it up. You'll pre-record this afternoon. Broadcast tomorrow. That way you'll look fresher. You'll exude that morning glow. I've got some pretty good dirt on Leticia that I can leak. After that you go up to Orange, lay low for a while."

"Orange. No fucking way."

"You need to go there anyway."

"Why?"

"You need to sell the house."

Orange. I curse its wide streets, its quaint foliage, its bric-a-brac, its country charm. The place tormented me with childhood memories. Rex had been urging me to sort out the house for years, and I'd managed to avoid it with layer upon layer of excuses.

"Van, I told you, we're in the red right now."

"It's not that bad, is it?"

Rex draws a long thin breath, exhaling the air slowly through his front teeth, "\$500,000 bad."

Despite my apparent "success" my money problems are constant. The expenses roll in: the flat repayments, the book publicity costs, Lucy's nursing home bill, two lawsuits last year, paying twenty-seven staff from my charity, all my medical costs. While Dr Morijito's surgery was gratis, I still have ongoing bills for physio, medications, and rehabilitation.

"It's simple," he says. "Just sell the house and we'll be back in the black."

"But I don't want to go to Orange right now."

"You have to."

"Isn't there another way?"

"No. There isn't."

The tendons in my arm begin to ache.

Rex has kept me in the dark lately. Six months ago, he advised a small float, saying that the book was "a guaranteed windfall." But \$500,000 in debt was another story.

"Fine. I'll go. Did you call Charlie yet? I really want more info on the China thing."

"But..."

"Rex. We need him right now. Promise me you'll do it."

"OK."

As much as I value Rex, sometimes his fuck ups are completely unforgivable. I get out of bed, pour a water, swallow some pain killers. The phone rings. Rex again.

"Van, there's one more thing. Did Josh sleep there last night?"

"Of course not."

"Well, in the unlikely event that he did, tell him to use the back exit."

I peer outside the curtains and notice two overweight paparazzi at the coffee shop, long lenses around their necks. I let out a small groan.

"And another thing. Don't read the newspaper today."

"Which one?"

"Any of them, or magazines, or blogs." He takes a breath. "Come to think of it, avoid the internet in general."

Like that's possible, I'm about to say. But I just get dial tone. Rex is gone.

I walk into the living room, expecting to see Josh, but instead there's a neatly folded blanket on the couch and a note.

Had to leave early to pick up Cynthia and get back home.

Nice catching up. Talk soon. : )

I stroll back to the bedroom, slip off my Gucci dress, hang it carefully on the rack. I begin flicking through the rack trying to pick out my costume for the day. I need

something that says “in control, successful, chic, yet vulnerable.” Hip-tight leggings – too Lopez... a translucent gold top – too Britney... a busty dress – too Kim. Nothing seems right, I want something undoubtedly Van, but what is that? Channelling others might be simple, but when it comes to channelling myself I have no idea. I walk deeper into the wardrobe. Perhaps if I start with the shoes, I can construct my outfit backwards. I pick up a canary yellow heel and consider it.

The first time I went on *Sunrise*, I was nine years old. Jimmy Valentine was the host. Ironically, it was Mum who had set up the interview. I remember watching her prepare our clothes. Two white dresses, sewn carefully at the seam, matching canary clips to tie back our hair. I stood there, watching Mum ironing the dresses, questions tumbling out of my mouth. How many people will be there? How long is the drive to Sydney? Will it go to air live? Who will watch it? What should we say? I was speaking so fast that I wasn't even listening to Mum's answers, my stomach was abuzz with anticipation. But Silvie was in one of her moods. She sat there, flicking through her bubble gum cards, sulking in silence. Mum and I knew how much she detested public appearances.

Silvie and I kept a pretty low profile as kids. That's the way Mum liked it. Part of her reason for staying in Orange was the seclusion that it provided. In an urban centre, we would be constant objects of attention. She thought Orange was the perfect size, bigger than a village, smaller than a city. One of our favourite hangouts was Orange's swimming pool. A tall iron fence and a concrete slab, a neat line of native shrubs along the edge. Floating gave us a kind of celestial relief.

Our one little heart worked so hard pumping blood all day, in the water our breathing slowed and our muscles relaxed. We could drift peacefully on the surface and watch the clouds.

One day, sitting at the pool's edge we felt the cool water between our toes, smelled the chlorine in our nostrils. I looked down at our reflection, two red Speedos crossed at our chest. As nine-year-olds we could no longer be considered "cute". Our body was thinning and stretching into something gawky and strange. We noticed the looks from old women, the pointed fingers of infants, the questions, the smirks... Most of the residents knew us by our names by then, but words like *different, strange, ugly, unusual* were still muttered as we passed. I couldn't accuse them of being cruel – at least not the adults. We were part of the scenery, so they never took pictures or made a big fuss. But Silvie and I still felt the temperature drop every time we entered a room. Our presence prompted hushed voices and covert stares.

Mum left us at the water's edge. "Just going to the toilet," she said. A greyhound bus pulled up. Inside it were tourists visiting the local wineries and a large group of young people, recent school leavers on a trip, most of them just shy of twenty. It wasn't normal for them to stop at the pool, but it was a scorching day, so the driver had made a detour.

Some of the boys started jumping into the pool. Huge bombs, spreading their ripples to the edge. Their mouths were stained with Shiraz. "Hey, look at the

freaks!” screamed a bleached blonde guy slurring his words. “Oh my God, I’m seeing double!” said a plump girl. “Hey girls – look this way!” said another boy splashing us. Soon they were swarming. They poked their cameras in our faces, taunted, clicked and laughed. I looked for our bag and realised Mum had taken it. We didn’t even have a towel to cover up. Our red bathers clung against our flat chests. We crossed our arms diagonally, like a shield. Silvie started to quiver. The adrenaline from her bloodstream, surged through my veins, erupted at my throat. “Get lost, loud mouth!” I screamed at the fat girl. “You’ve never seen a pair of conjoined twins before? What’s your problem? You spineless little shits!” I pushed a guy into the pool fully clothed. My natural reaction was fight, but Silvie’s was fright. She covered her face, cowering from the attackers. The worst part was that she wouldn’t budge. I still remember the sound of her wheezing with fear as I pulled her up, a soggy weight.

Finally we made it to the kiosk. Mrs Whitters locked the door and let us sit in the back. “Don’t pay them any mind,” she said. “They’re silly boys, that’s all.” She handed us each a raspberry icy pole. I licked mine gleefully. A free icy pole was a thing of beauty. Silvie wasn’t even touching hers and I felt melting liquid hit my leg. Pretty soon, my diaphragm was overtaken. Silvie couldn’t stop sobbing.

Ironically, Mum’s response to this was not to shut us away. In fact, she did the opposite. She realised that people’s curiosity wasn’t going to disappear, so she chose a forum for us to talk about it. “If you girls can have an open dialogue it will help deal with subsequent attacks,” she said. I had no idea what “open dialogue”

meant. I was just stoked that we were going to be on TV. To be honest, I have no idea why she chose that programme. Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, even Double Dare would have made more sense to my nine year old brain. Of course, a kids' programme like that would never let girls like us appear, but I didn't understand those things back then. I think Mum chose it because she had a secret crush on Jimmy Valentine. I'd catch her some mornings before school, curled up on the couch, watching him. Mum loved peppermint tea, jazz, contemporary art, but she still had her moments of pop culture binging.

I remember the metallic poles of the Harbour Bridge zooming past the car window on the way to the studio. The sails of the Opera House up close. The giraffes at the zoo, poking their necks over the dark blue harbour. Silvie and me sitting at Martin Place station and staring. We'd never seen so many people emerge from a hole in the ground before.

Backstage at the studio, I couldn't wait to get out front. Silvie, on the other hand, was almost wetting her pants.

"Van, I don't want to go on."

"Don't be such a baby." I grabbed her pinkie with a squeeze, a little gesture of reassurance we'd adopted over the years. "Just take deep breaths, answer the questions, you'll be fine."

We walked out hand-in-hand. I looked around the audience, drinking in the crowd. They were applauding vehemently, goose bumps rose along my neck, they liked us.

Jimmy's gigantic grin spread from ear to ear. He wore a bow tie.

"Welcome Silvia and Vanessa. It's so great to have you girls here." He shook both our hands. "They tell me that you are extremely rare."

"Yes, we are one in a billion," I beamed proudly, "technically we shouldn't even exist." This was a little fact that I loved to share.

"But here you are," said Jimmy.

"Yes, here we are," I said, drumming my fingers on the seat, waiting out the awkward silence.

"And they tell me that you are excellent dancers."

"Yes we are," I said.

As kids there was a complicity between Silvie and me. An instinctive childhood understanding of how to speak, walk, dance, fight. We could sense each other's rhythms. It surprised people, this complex ability that we had to synchronise. We'd swoop, spin and dive, exchange roles effortlessly in a waltz or a rumba. As infants we performed for family and neighbours from the safety of our lounge room, but around age seven Silvie grew a little shy. The performances stopped.

"Are you going to do a little demonstration later?" asked Jimmy.

"Yes, if Silvie wants to." I nudged my sister. Her body was stiff, her mouth shut tight.

"And they tell me you are very different."

"I guess. Silvie likes reading. I'm more the athletic type."

Jimmy turned to Silvie. "You're very quiet Silvie."

"She's a little shy," I said.

"What books do you like?" Jimmy leaned closer.

Silvie opened her mouth then closed it quickly.

"Don't be shy."

"Well," said Silvie, stopping abruptly.

"Go on Silvie, tell us about something about the books you like," Jimmy said.

Silvie took a deep breath. I felt a rising tension in my chest. I heard the sound of our chair creaking. Jimmy leaned forward, his grin grew wider. Silvie took the microphone from him. The camera zoomed tight to her face. Then she puked.

A commercial break was quickly called, and we were whisked backstage. I couldn't help feeling a little jilted by the unfairness of it. After all, I did my part, answered with a smile, nodded, carried the team. I watched the studio disappear as our car zoomed away. I vowed I would go back there someday. Next time it would be my own programme. No one would usher me away from those bright lights. No one would tell me what to say or what to do.

It's strange but I never suffered stage fright as a child. I was the confident one. Silvie had constant nausea, vomiting, a fear of crowds. Now here I am years later, with intense social anxiety that cripples me before every performance. It's like a little seed of her still exists deep inside me. I often wonder, had I lost something in the exchange or had I gained something? It depends on how you look at things, I guess.

The sun pelts through the windscreen, my fake arm jams the horn in one high-pitched note. Sydney traffic is shit. I hadn't anticipated this. The Channel Nine studio is all the way out in North Ryde and Epping Road is crammed. I'm satisfied with my outfit. I chose the canary shoes and a white cotton dress, displaying just the right amount of arm.

The road is still gridlocked, so I glance at my watch. I'm behind schedule. It's partly due to the traffic, partly because I ignored Rex's advice. I flicked through every single online report. Their horrible words spun a big black hole in my mind. This interview is going to be crucial. It's up to me to set the record straight and put Leticia in her place. The phone rings. I'm convinced it will be Rex waiting for me at the studio, but when I pick up it's a female voice.

"Ms Thomson, this is Sally from the nursing home," she says.

"What happened?"

"It's about your Aunt Lucy. She's had a fall."

I pull over and dial the number for the studio. Rex is going to lose the plot.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

When I go to see Aunt Lucy she always says the same thing.

"Where's the other one?" She looks at me with her beady blue eyes. "Where's your sister?"

She is confused. She sits in the chair near the window.

"She's not here, Aunt Lucy," I say. "She's doesn't live here anymore... remember." I go through this every time.

The scent of potpourri does little to mask pungent odours of urine and mothballs in this place. Outside, a garden is splashed with jacarandas, jasmine, azaleas. In the distance, the sea crashes against the jagged sandstone cliffs of Dover Heights. The sky cuts a hard blue line against them. Under her chair, Lucy rubs her slippers against each other. A metal tray displays her afternoon snack- two teacups and a portion of apple cake.

"She's had a fainting spell," said the nurse. "She seems a little more confused than normal."

Lucy's hair falls over her shoulders in thick silver clumps. It looks like it hasn't been washed for days. There's a trail of crumbs on the lapel of her dressing gown. Why am I paying these people? I brush away the crumbs with a napkin. "I brought this for you, Aunt Lucy." I place a preview copy of my book on the metal table in front of her.

"What is it?"

"My book."

"Book?" Her head is half nodding and half shaking, unsure which direction to choose.

Her expression suggests that she may have forgotten what books are. Yet there was a time, when she would read to us for hours.

The hospital seems quiet today. I am the only visitor. Above my head the television crackles with news stories. I turn to look at Aunt Lucy. She has not even reached sixty, but examining the lines under her eyes, she seems much older.

"They said you had a fall this morning. Are you feeling alright?"

"Who said?" she asks suspiciously.

"The nurses told me." I stare at the doorway, where candy striped uniforms pass like shadows. "How are they treating you here?"

"It's fine here," she says, looking glum.

Lucy is reaching forward toward the trolley. Her hand is trembling and she knocks over the saucer. I intervene, placing the cup back on the metal tray. I insert a straw and hold up the tumbler, so she can sip it easily. On the television is a story about a new load of boats arriving. There has been a naval intervention, some passengers have drowned. Aunt Lucy is momentarily distracted by the flash of colour and audio. Her eyes are trying to weave the images and noises into a narrative.

"Hello. You are a lovely lady." Lucy looks at me as if I'm a stranger.

"What's your name again?"

"Van."

"Would you like a game of backgammon, Nurse Van?"

I take her hand in mine and squeeze it.

"It's me, Aunt Lucy. It's Vanessa. You know me."

"I'm tired." She flops backwards. One slipper dangles from her toes.

"Get me the other nurse. The one who brings me the lemon jelly," she says.

Behind Lucy's head is a corkboard, a patchwork of press clippings, photos, get well cards. I brought them in over the years, on the doctor's advice to try to jog her memories. My hand moves over the inky newspaper printouts. Most of them are articles about me from the last few years. Alongside them sit three glossy childhood photos. Silvie and me aged five at the pool, Silvie and me dressed as Halloween witches, Silvie and me blowing out candles on our tenth birthday cake. We had an ice cream cake that year. That was the year that Mum gave us the fish pendants. Two matching silver charms, one hangs on Silvie's neck, the other on mine. I remember the look of Silvie's face when we unwrapped them, her fascination with the tiny sterling silver pieces. Hours were spent pushing the two fish together, apart, then together again. The two tails interlocked with a small magnetic chink. We were fascinated by their detachability. We could choose to have them joined at the tail, or floating side by side, loose at the chest.

"Do you remember that day?" I indicate the photo to her.

"Oh yes. Of course I do." She pulls the photo close. "Where is she now? That girl with the plaits?"

"Her?" I point to Silvie.

"Yes, that one. Why isn't she here with you? The one with the black hair...?"

"Well she's..." I try to find the right words. "She's passed away, Aunt Lucy. That's why I'm here. To let you know."

We've had this conversation numerous times before, but today it feels extra heavy. "Dead?" says Lucy, as if they changed the evening meal from beef to chicken, without informing her. "Can't be dead! She was here last week. She brought me that box of roses there." She nods to the wilting roses on her bedside table.

"No," I say quietly. "That was me."

"It was the other girl. Whats-her-name." She points to Silvie's picture, with a shaking finger.

"You should call her. Are you fighting again?" She smiles, exposing a set of inflamed gums. "You were always fighting when you were little. I had to take you out the back and whack you. Of course your mother didn't like that. She was too soft your mother. Always left the hard work to me."

She pulls her grey hair back from her face. "Because they put you in that glass box, the day you were born. Your mum hated that. She never forgave them." She takes a sip of tea. "She hated doctors, your mum."

Lucy has told me this story hundreds of times. After we were born we stopped breathing and had to be rushed to the hospital. They limited mum's visits to three hours a day. Her gloved hands would poke through the glass openings to touch our skin. The doctors mumbled that we weren't going to survive. The problem was our organs, of course. No twins sharing a heart had ever survived. They provided a grief counsellor, just in case. They told her it was time to "make arrangements." Weeks later, when we'd both gained strength, they said an operation to save one of

us would be best for everyone. "They'll never be normal," the doctors tapped their clipboards. "They'll never live a normal life." Rosa was horrified. How could she choose just one of us, over the other? The doctors gave us a six per cent chance.

The funny thing was, we kept breathing, surviving, proving them wrong. Mum would sit there watching the plastic valve rise and fall beside the crib. Then one morning, we opened our eyes. Mum plucked us from the glass box. She did two full laps around the ward. She paraded us with a giddy smile, like she'd known all along. She signed papers and slipped out of the door, head high in the bright sun. She was a determined woman, Rosa.

Rosa never wanted us to split. I remember lying in her lap as a five year old, smelling her Juniper berry perfume. "I love you the way you were born," she would whisper, "and everyone should love you that way too." We were curling her red plaits around our fingertips, staring at her pale skin. The problem was that Mum never really considered what *we* might want. She never really considered one day we might grow up, might have our own opinions, might live our own lives.

I look at Lucy's vacant face. The doctors say this is normal for dementia patients. Memories from long ago stay vivid and crisp while the last six years remain a mess inside the recesses of the mind. The point at which Silvie disappeared was the same point at which Aunt Lucy's mind began to fragment. This coincidence has not escaped my attention. When I returned from Amsterdam my mind was worn

thin. I couldn't face Orange, so I rented a flat in Surry Hills. Sydney seemed to provide a fresh start. I had just moved when I got a call from Josh's mum. "Better drive out to the house," she said, "your aunt is totally freaking out."

When I arrived in Orange, Lucy was watering her plants with boiling water. The refrigerator wasn't working. The putrid smell of rotten meat permeated the house. She had forgotten how to drive, she couldn't unlock her ute. She kept wandering around the house saying, "I need new reading glasses, I can't find the prescription," as though the new glasses would clarify all the things she was confusing: her left and her right, her sugar and her tea, her laundry soap and her fertiliser.

The next month she did the tests at the hospital. When she filled out the medical forms, she said that she was twenty-one years old, the year was 1963, and Silvie was still alive. Lucy was living in another dimension. I found a place for her at Saint Mary's as quickly as I could, but her decline was rapid. These days it's getting harder to tug her back to the present.

Lucy's gaze is now fixed back on a tooth-paste commercial.

"Better get going," I say.

"Sure," she says, without looking up.

"Bye Aunt Lucy." I kiss her, but she doesn't move.

At the threshold, I turn back to look. Her hunched figure casts a long shadow across the room. It seems absurd. Lucy's the only person left who's known Silvie

since her birth, and her memory is as fickle as the wind. As I walk towards the exit, I look at the crumpled photo in my hand. In the end our life boils down to a selection of stories. But stories mean nothing, when they can't be shared, when they cannot be spoken.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

My red Mini has its top peeled back and I'm winding through the hills. The radio is tuned to a crackly news story. I switch it to some mindless pop. The crisp wind blows through my hair. I smell pungent manure, fresh daffodils, and smooth cool lakes. Next to me is a brown package tied with string. It's for Cynthia. I decided I may as well swing by Josh's place while in Orange. It's been a while since I've seen his daughter. She's probably forgotten what I look like. The unsettling feeling that Josh knows my deep personal secret, has nothing to do with it. That's what I'm telling myself, although I still haven't phoned him.

I whizz through pastures, past sheep, tiny shacks, stone houses. The road loops and twists. In the distance, I notice a tiny yellow speck. As I approach I realise that the speck isn't yellow. It's mustard. Josh is slumped over the front of his broken-down Volvo. Looks like I won't need to call him after all.

On the side of the road sits Cynthia, face resting between her palms, a buttercup necklace hanging from her neck.

I pull over. "Fancy seeing you out here. What happened to your car?"

Josh bangs his head on the bonnet as he straightens up.

"We were planning a bushwalk today, then she overheated." He returns to his tinkering.

"Daddy, how much longer?" whines Cynthia. "You said we wouldn't stop here long. I'm starving."

"It's almost fixed."

"Want a lift?" I smile.

Josh looks up from the bonnet.

"It's really not that complicated. If I can just get the coolant to flow." He wipes his forehead with his elbow, leaving a smear of grease across it. "I think she'll start up fine."

"Josh truly." I look at Cynthia, "Let me give you guys a lift to town, it's fifteen minutes from here. You can bring one of the boys over to take a look at it."

Josh rubs his hands with the cloth.

"Come on, Dad." Cynthia grabs the door handle.

I pop the boot of my Mini. Josh transfers a hiking knapsack, an oily rag and his rain coat into the trunk. He jiggles his pocket to check for the keys. Cynthia insists on riding in the front seat. Josh allows her to, although his face wears an expression suggesting this is a bad idea.

"What you doing down here anyway?"

"Just here for the weekend. I'm packing up the old house. I'm putting it on the market."

Cynthia kicks her sandals back and forth against the leather seat. Her cotton frock has tiny blue beetles stitched into its shoulder straps. Her fuzzy black hair is tamed by two wiry black plaits that drop to her neckline. They are tied with red elastic bands. Her skin is coffee coloured. She has thin lips like her father, but her eyes are definitely her mother's. Big brown moons that examine every inch of you.

"What a pretty outfit," I say.

Cynthia rolls her eyes as if beauty is a given at six and a half.

"I brought you a gift, wanna see it?"

She stares silently.

"Of course she would!" says Josh, poking her through the seat.

I've always been good at charming children, but Cynthia is a tough nut to crack.

"Here" I say, passing her the package.

Cynthia rips the brown paper open. Inside is a box containing a thin plastic doll. She wears a peach miniskirt, has sparkling green eyes, flowing golden hair, and only one arm. Next to her, embedded in the plastic, are an array of detachable arms. Snow white metal, engraved copper and zebra stripes. They pop out of individual bubbles, the idea being that you snap them on and off her shoulder as you please.

"She looks like you!" says Cynthia joyfully.

"She is me, honey. They modelled her on me. It's part of the franchising for my book. They are releasing her for little girls just like you."

"I'm not little," she says.

"OK. Big girls like you."

Cynthia widens her eyes. The idea that dolls could actually be based on people that she knows in real life is a new concept for her. Now she looks at me in a new way. The hills shimmer behind her face.

"When I grow up, my doll will have long black plaits like this," she says, winding her plaits around her fingertips, so that they spring upwards into neat coils.

"Your doll will be beautiful sweetie!" I say.

We drive into town, past the Royal Hotel with its lattice balconies, the post office, the butcher shop, the swimming pool. I shudder as we pass the stadium and remember the tormenting kids. God, I hate this town. Every landmark, every building, holds some harrowing incident that I prefer not to recall.

"Should I drop you at your mum's place or yours?" I ask, turning a corner.

"Mine."

I glance back. "I guess Sanura is waiting there?"

Josh stares out the window. "Nope," he says.

"Is she in Sydney then?"

Josh clears his throat. "No."

"Mum went back to Africa," says Cynthia, as if this is something perfectly logical for a mother to do. Her fingers are still pulling at the doll's packaging.

"Daddy, I can't open this," she says.

"You'll need scissors."

"Do you have scissors?" she asks.

"No."

"Can we get scissors?"

'No!' His eyes seem weary. Two dark circles sit below them. Cynthia breaks through the plastic with her teeth and is taking out each bubble-wrapped arm.

"She is visiting her family, I guess," I say to Josh in the rear-view.

"We are her family," says Cynthia.

"Yes, of course sweetheart," I say. "Of course you are."

Josh concentrates on cleaning the grease from his hands. "You just drove past."

I look out the window. I'm used to dropping him at his mum's at the top of the hill.

I reverse until I reach the gate.

"Thanks for the ride," says Josh, scooping Cynthia into his arms and pulling her along. Cynthia bounces around like a hyperactive midget. The backpack is flung over his shoulder and he walks up the concrete path toward the door.

\* \* \*

The wooden house still creaks like a ship. Apart from the bougainvillea, which crawls along the balcony rail, across the window and onto the roof, the place remains unchanged. A rusty tin roof, a wraparound balcony, a chimney, vertical planks weathered by time. The house is on the outskirts of Orange, amidst waving yellow grass and open skies. Lucy told us her great-great-grandfather, a sheep farmer, built the house with his own hands. Over the years it has been repaired numerous times.

Some parakeets have made their nest in an overhanging gum branch. One of them squawks at me as I open the door. Inside I find the same table, fireplace, and bookshelves. Lucy's Moroccan carpets are rolled out on the floorboards. A chipped table surrounded by uneven stools is in the centre, set with place mats, cutlery, frosted cups, a pot with dried jasmine. It even has our custom-made chair still at its end, as though we are all about to sit down to tea.

The room is covered with a thin film of dust, like grey snow has been falling here for six years. Cobwebs spread between the ceiling beams. Behind the dining room is the kitchen, its cast iron stove with cracked orange tiling. I walk towards the pantry and open the door. It reeks of cardamom seeds, rosemary, stale tea. One of the pantry knobs slides off into my palm. I examine its gnawed edges. Woodworms. There are holes in the cabinets below the sink and above the stove.

Beyond the musty couch lie our three bedrooms, the first Lucy's, the second Rosa's, the third (with an extra-wide door) is ours. The initials "S&V" are still glued to the door. Teddy bears swing from the carved wooden letters. Someone has scribbled "Please knock" with orange crayon below them. I run my finger along the height chart on the wall, and read the scratched in marks:

Silvie and Van aged 6.

Silvie and Van aged 8.

Silvie and Van aged 11.

I hear a rustling under the floorboards and suspect it could be mice. The thought of it sends shivers down my spine. Rex was right, I should have sold the place years ago. When Lucy got sick everything felt so uncertain. I moved to Sydney, my career took off, and selling the house just became another thing to do.

On the balcony I collect a pile of folded cardboard boxes, an apron, and a bucket of cleaning products. I tie the apron at my back, fit a rubber glove onto my new

fingertips. My reflection looks back at me from the side panel mirror. I can't help but chuckle at how ridiculous I look. Today you are channelling Samantha from *Bewitched*, I say to myself, fastening the cheese-cloth around my head like a scarf. If only it were as easy as wiggling my nose to sort out the cupboards, wardrobes, chests. "Bedroom first," I say out loud, but as I walk past Rosa's bedroom I stop dead. The smell assaults me immediately. Juniper berry perfume mingled with peppermint tea. I haven't smelled the combination for years. Her bed is still made up with the same faded floral sheets and next to it sits a medical bag on a hook, a kidney dish, some bandages, a bible. Toward the end, she even began to pray.

Rosa was diagnosed with bone cancer two days before our twenty-second birthday. It took eight months for her body to change from a flabby round pillow to an emaciated scarecrow. Cheeks falling inwards, her eyes dull and wide. We kept her home on a morphine drip, bathed her, fed her orange jelly. At the end, Silvie and I sat by her for three weeks. We hardly left the house or her room, both of us petrified that if we slipped out for five minutes we would return to a stiff body. We watched her slowly slip from day into night, as her pulse grew softer. One day she stopped talking. Her breath became wheezy. Then one morning, her chest stopped rising.

We buried her at the graveyard on Mount Canobolas, near the wild bush track that we used to climb as kids. Her grave was marked with a humble piece of sandstone. The autumn sky bled orange and vast above us. Silvie threw a pile of red dirt on the coffin. It thumped and slid down the sides. She didn't cry and neither

did I. We lowered the coffin together, slipping the rope easily through opposite palms. It was strange, imagining Rosa's body inside that box. After it was over, I clasped Silvie's pinkie tighter than usual. Aunt Lucy was there, staring over the abyss towards the rolling mist. The clouds might have swallowed her up, if she'd let them.

After the funeral Lucy didn't talk for three days. Then she packed up a swag, billy, gas stove and threw it in her ute. "I'm going bush," she said. She didn't call us for three weeks. It didn't matter. We were independent by then. Besides, we had our own personal crisis to deal with.

Our fighting escalated. It was small insignificant things at first, like what to do with all Rosa's clothes, her long cotton dresses, her jazz records, her sketch books. How and when to write cards to friends and family. Which ones to phone back. Which ones to ignore. Then it expanded into larger terrain. Having cared for Mum for the past six months, our lives were put on hold. We had to make a decision about what to do next. I wanted to pursue fashion design, Silvie wanted to study law. Our choices were worlds apart. We had endless discussions late at night on the balcony. We couldn't settle anything, so our lives stood still. Without Rosa or Lucy, there was no voice of reason, no mediator to intervene. Josh had to stop by constantly to stop us from clawing at each other.

"I give up," he said one night. "You guys should just kill each other."

Four weeks later the cheque arrived. Rosa's insurance money was split equally between us. We didn't know what to make of that, all that money, how to hold it, count it, justify it. We stored the notes in her old leather suitcase. We counted the money out on the old musty couch, where Rosa used to snooze in front of her daytime television shows.

"Let's book a flight," I said, casting a magazine on the floor. Silvie looked out the window. We had spent our whole life hemmed in by those hills, perhaps it was time to step out of their shadow. Rosa didn't approve of travel for girls like us. "I need to protect you from the world," she used to whisper, holding us tight. On school holidays we saw the Opera House of Sydney, the wildflowers of Canberra, the beaches of Perth. But Rome, Paris and Milan only existed in magazines.

I hear a squawk outside and walk to Rosa's window. When I draw the curtains I see a sheep dog chasing some robins around the meadow. He is jumping and swiping at them with his paws. I am mesmerised, watching this interplay unfold against the waving grass and the silver lake. The sheep dog is blinded by the sun. He misses his chance and the birds scramble. I trace my fingers around the edge of the S&V lettering and push open the door. It's the same room we shared for years. We divided the walls between us. Silvie took the east-facing and I took the north. Her wall is a collage of art and literature. Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* sit alongside Manga's *Cyborg Chicks*. Picasso's *Guernica* next to quotes from Keroac and Plath. My side is a tapestry of dress sketches, lipstick shades, and movie stars. Audrey Hepburn, Doris Day, Bridget Bardot. Even as a teenager I was besotted with their

gowns. I emulated the styles of Channel, Calvin Klein, Dolce and Gabbana in charcoal sketches and water colour paints. Our bed sits in the centre of the room. As girls we were able to lie down with our heads turned away from one another, staring at our respective walls. We would disappear into our own fantasy worlds, each dreaming that we were lying there alone.

I lie on the single mattress. Years ago when we shared it, the bed felt tiny. Now it feels immense. I get up and open the sliding glass door of the built in wardrobe. A Monopoly board, a chess set, some magazines, a makeup box, tumble to the floor. I look at the crammed shelves inside. What I really want to find is Silvie's fish shaped necklace. But Its silver tail and tiny chain could be anywhere amongst this stuff.

I decide to sort the mess into three boxes. One is for throwing out, one is for keeping, and one is for Rex (he has specifically asked for photographs and memorabilia for the launch). I stand each box upright on the floor, return to the cupboard with refreshed determination and begin to sift through each object. A skateboard designed for two (throw), some maths text books (throw), three photo albums (keep). I find a familiar looking paper, rolled up with red string. It's a world map with tiny holes strewn across the Atlantic.

Silvie unfurled that map, her legs tapping with excitement under the oakwood table, while I held it steady.

"First Singapore – we can stop over. Amsterdam next, four weeks," she said, plotting our journey with red head pins.

"How about a week in New York on the way home?" I said.

"How about Buenos Aires?" said Silvie.

"New York," I insisted.

"OK fine. New York," she agreed.

Silvie always had an uncanny fascination with Buenos Aires, but I preferred the States. Being the more passive sister, I knew that she would follow. Besides, she was getting Amsterdam, where she could see all the Van Gogh she desired. The plan was to stay at Georgina's, an old friend of Lucy's who lived in a flat near the Rijksmuseum.

A sadness came with Rosa's death, but also a freedom. We could roam unshackled and wild. It un-nerved and excited me. A trip would distract us. It might even stop us from fighting. I looked through the open window, the breeze tickled my nostrils. But lots of planning had to be done. Two seats in the plane, liftable arm rests, a catheter. We only had one passport, but we had to buy two separate tickets.

"Does it have tiles? Linoleum? Carpet? Bath or shower?" Silvie asked the hotel over the phone. "No stairs, we can't handle stairs," she said. "Only elevators," I shouted. Try explaining to a concierge in Singapore why you and your twin sister need to sleep in a double bed, and how it's essential that you have a plastic, slip-proof chair in your shower. When he asks, "Why?" tell him that you are a

conjoined twin and listen to the dial tone hum. Rex arranged an interview for us in Singapore with a local girls' magazine. Conjoined twins were quite the rage in Singapore it seemed. A reporter would be sent to our hotel room. Silvie protested, but I told her it would help us cover all the extra costs. When the trip began, the fighting escalated. It was constant, relentless, exhausting. High-pitched screams coloured the soundtrack of every flight, bus tour, train ride. But the real problems started two days after arriving in Amsterdam.

I hear a thumping sound, a tapping on the front door. Who could it be? A passing bible basher or a sales person most likely... but why have they come all the way out here?

Josh. The sun backlights him with a golden rim. Cynthia hides behind his corduroy pants. She is stroking the doll's hair with a plastic brush.

"I came to say thank you about the car."

I glance down and remember that I am wearing an apron and rubber gloves. I must look ridiculous.

"I couldn't leave you stranded there, could I?"

"I brought this," he extends a quiche Lorraine.

Cynthia pops out from his leg, "And I brought wine!" she says.

"Thanks sweetheart." I usher them both inside.

## CHAPTER NINE

Cynthia is on the swing outside, her legs stretching to the sky like a stick insect. Behind her a pair of red-caped robins swoop playfully around the scrub, the shadow of the mountains fast swallowing them up. "Look Daddy," she screams, "I'm touching the sky with my ankles!" Her undone plaits fly behind her.

"That's great sweetheart, fly higher!" he shouts from the balcony. The swing was specially designed with a wide girth for Silvie and me. As kids we passed countless afternoons airborne. Josh was usually the one pushing.

This garden was our whole universe. I glance around its various landmarks: a fire-pit that we once failed to convert into a swimming pool; the thick ghost gum near the fence, pirate headquarters, rehearsal stage, look out point; a mud pit turned bakery where we created sludge tarts and banksia topped pastries. Silvie and I would take turns being the head-chef. Josh was always the assistant.

"What happened?" I lean over to Josh on the couch. "It used to be us – the ones getting dirty out there, remember?"

"I guess we grew up," he says.

"I guess so," I smile.

I take the wine glasses and splash them with the last of the red. We deserve it after packing up all those boxes. We've done a pretty good job, but I haven't found the one thing I really want, the silver fish necklace. It must have been lost somewhere between Amsterdam and Sydney. Josh's Volvo has been repaired and sits on the

dirt driveway, its boot weighed down by the boxes. Josh has offered to drive some of my stuff back to Sydney.

All that remains of the quiche is a plate of crumbs. The flies buzz around. Cynthia squeals with delight on the swing. "She's a great kid, Josh."

"Yeah. When she behaves, she's a sweetheart."

I notice that weary look again. Sunken eyes and pale skin.

"I wanted to tell you about Sanura earlier," he says.

"You mean about going to Africa?"

"We're splitting up." He looks at Cynthia. "I'm still figuring out the right way to tell her."

"Oh Josh. I'm so sorry."

"Life is full of surprises, isn't it?" Josh stares out at the vineyards.

"You want to talk about it?"

"Not really," he says.

That is the difference between Josh and me. I always felt the need to share my pain with others. To purge it, viscerally, communally, publicly. Josh bottled his inside. I feared one day his inner turmoil might someday get unleashed. A giant outpouring of grief, drenching anyone who stood close.

Grapevines and apple orchards. The scents of my childhood. In the distance two robins tussle. One of them has a grape in its beak which the other tries to snatch. I grab Josh by his shoulder.

"Remember when we were teenagers and we all ate those hash cookies together? It hit Silvie extra hard and she sort of lost the plot."

"That was classic," Josh smiles.

"We were lying in the middle of the grapevines, Silvie's feet in the air, peddling an invisible bike. Remember?"

"The universe is collapsing! The universe is collapsing!" says Josh, in mock-Silvie voice. "Her *Stary Night* moment!"

We both begin to giggle.

"Remember her face the next day – all swollen up from mosquito bites?"

"God. She was hysterical when she got angry."

"Wouldn't talk to me for three days. Not even 'pass the toothpaste.' "

"Yeah. She really knew how to hold a grudge."

"We used to have fun, the three of us, didn't we?"

The next part I don't mention. How a month after that incident, something happened between Josh and Silvie. I remember waking up in the early morning to find them locked together in a tight embrace. The smell of toast crumbs and body fluids hung about in the twisted bed sheets. Her hair was tucked under his armpit. Both of them pretended nothing had happened, that they innocently fell asleep. It destroyed me. I've never mentioned this to Josh. I'm not about to go there now.

"There was one thing that I never understood," Josh says. "Why did you guys go ahead with the operation? I mean, I always thought you were happy, living like that. When I found out you had returned alone from Amsterdam, I was so

shocked. I couldn't imagine that you would ever want separate bodies, yet alone separate lives."

I pull my shawl closer. The last rays of sun dip behind the mountains. The first stars are appearing.

Josh always thought we were cool because, like him, we were outcasts. The truth was I never wanted to be an outcast. He didn't understand how horrible it was to be pointed at every time you left the house. How people never heard a word you said, because they were too busy staring at your breasts, your legs, your fork-shaped neck. How complete strangers asked about your bowel movements, your hiccups, your sex life. The worst were those people who turned away, when you knew they desperately wanted to stare. Those were the people you hated the most.

Josh romanticised our strengths, he romanticised our battles, the way everyone romanticises the things they can't comprehend. Suddenly I get it. He's like Aunt Lucy. When he sees me, he only sees half a person. He sees Silvie's absence. He misses her acutely, the way I miss her. It's these two poles of grief that have repelled us for so long.

"The thing is Josh, I never imagined it to be this way. I wanted us to keep going through life together. I thought we'd release an album together, perform together, have apartments with interconnecting doors. I thought we'd babysit each other's children. I wanted to stay out there in the world together – separate, but together. I thought we'd be happier with new bodies and separate lives.

"So are you happier, like this?" He crinkles up his nose and looks me up and down.

"After the operation, my life got taken over. Rex, Carla, the photo shoots, the acting gigs, the book. The machine of Van." I take a breath. "My company has twenty seven employees. I'm like a whole industry now. A locomotive that can't stop." I shake my hair out, "Most days, I don't even know why I'm doing this. I don't even know if I want this book launch, this face," I poke my fingers into my chin. "I came into work the other day to 200 emails. A Scandinavian boy with a brain tumour, an anorexic girl from Japan, a girl whose twin just died. I mean, what am I supposed to tell these people? It gets better? Life goes on? It doesn't."

"Come on Van. You always wanted this."

"I never asked for it, not really."

"Remember dancing for the neighbours as a kid? Remember the Jimmy Valentine interview? Auditioning for the school play when Silvie protested? You always loved performing. You loved the attention. That was pretty obvious."

"OK. So maybe I did want it," I smile. "But it just feels totally out of control sometimes. I don't have anyone to share it with. I always thought it would be Silvie and Van. Not just Van and Van. I feel so unbalanced sometimes."

Josh walks over and joins me at the railing. He stands so close I can feel his breathe on my skin.

He looks out at the distant fields, their colour drained by the low light.

"I never understood why you didn't bury her here."

"They burned her."

"What?"

"In Amsterdam. They burned her body."

"You never told me what happened, exactly."

Amsterdam. The word sends a cold shot down my spine. I woke up in intensive care and Silvie's body was gone. The doctors told me that I'd been in a coma for eight full days. No one expected that I was going to wake up at all. The hospital couldn't keep her corpse.

During the surgery there was confusion about which pieces of flesh belonged to me and which belonged to Silvie. Our middles were enmeshed, the blood vessels joined, our lungs connected, our muscles intertwined. One heart beating for two. When they started to lose her, they used her tissue to restore my body. I never gave them permission for that, but surgeons will do what surgeons do, in the desperation of a moment, trying to save a life.

Apparently, when people don't view the bodies of their deceased loved ones, the grief stays with them for life. Sometimes the bereaved are convinced that the person never died. There are documented cases where missing look-alikes have been kidnapped or where graves have been dug up. Viewing the body is an essential part of letting go. That's why we have rituals for our dead. The Vikings float them to Valhalla. The Hindus burn them on the Ghanga. Some Christians bathe the body, dress it in white and place it in the ground. I can't explain why I never scattered her ashes. Amsterdam was a strange combination of grief, confusion, shock. I remember walking along the canals in a daze, roasted chestnuts

melting in my mouth, the snow crunching underfoot. A biting cold wind stung my cheeks and burnt my fingers. I watched the sun sink as this uneasy feeling churned inside me. As if I'd woken up in someone else's skin, in someone else's story.

"We could have scattered her ashes here." He rests his hand on my shoulder. "We could have made our own ceremony."

"Yeah. I know." I step away. "It was hard, Josh. And you weren't exactly around."

"Well, that was the year Cynthia was born, I was kind of busy..."

When Josh married Sanura, we weren't invited to the wedding. Obviously, it would have crushed Silvie to see it, but no-one ever considered my part in the equation. I often resented the fact that the end of their intimacy meant the end of ours. When Silvie and Josh fell out, our little triangle was broken.

"It's all in the past. I mean, there's just no point rehashing this stuff..." I'm stumbling over my words. I don't want to go back to those horrible memories of the operation. I walk to the top of the stairs. Orion is glowing on the horizon, his centre buckle the brightest. I see her hand pointing towards it. I hear her voice whispering a tale, one that Lucy used to tell. Then my face hits the staircase. All I see is black.

\* \* \*

When I wake up I'm lying on the couch. A hot water bottle rests against my belly; a row of tea-lights sit on the edge of the coffee table. The old wiring cuts out from time to time. Candles flickering against the wood. The room is like a church. Josh is there.

"How long was I out?" I ask him.

"A little while," he says.

"Where's Cynthia?"

"Asleep in Lucy's bedroom."

"Van. I should take you to the hospital. If it's your kidney, you need specialist care."

"No. Don't Josh. Really, I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"It's just the wine and my low blood pressure. I'm OK now." I sit up. "After the book is released I'm going to be in hospital for months. I'll be hooked to machines, shut away from everyone, unable to even take a piss by myself. I don't know how long I'll be admitted, or even if I'll get out."

"Calm down," he says.

I didn't realise I was shouting.

Josh places his body next to mine on the couch. His toes wriggle in his socks. He traces the edge of my skin, from my face down to my hips. It feels like everything in the background is fuzzy, out of focus. His face is the only thing I see. Josh interlaces my fake fingers with his real ones. He takes the water bottle from my belly. Then I see it, suddenly. I see what Silvie saw, all those years ago.

## CHAPTER TEN

I open the bedroom door, light on my feet, my hair wrapped in a towel. Josh's T-shirt slips off my shoulders, nothing but my undies underneath it. Sex always makes my skin shine. Today I'm channelling Béatrice Dalle - *Betty Blue*, 1986, her swaggering hips, un-brushed hair and loose fitting clothes. She seems to exist in a permanent post-coital glow. In the living room, I hardly notice Cynthia's nymph-like frame, crouched over a Japanese bowl.

"Oh, hello." I say. She looks like a tropical fish, a splash of moving colour, there to decorate the room. Cynthia places one dry cornflake in her mouth and crunches it slowly.

"What have you got there? Can I try some?" I say.

Cynthia stares at me with the expression of a six year old child who is being addressed as if she is three.

"Well, guess I'll help myself." I pour my own bowl.

Clearly Cynthia has decided somewhere along the line that she doesn't like me- the real flesh and blood Van who takes her father to bed and wears his T-shirt. She prefers the commercial version, the one moulded from plastic, with multi-coloured hair and dismountable limbs.

A stream of milk drips from Cynthia's lips. "Why did we sleep here last night?" she says.

"Well, sweetheart," I clasp her hand, "your dad and I are very old friends. Sometimes adults like to have slumber parties too." I place a neat pile of flakes on my spoon and swallow.

Cynthia raises an eyebrow, indicating that the adult concept of fun is a strange, misguided thing. A sudden flash of panic seizes my chest. Did she hear our screams of passion through the wall last night? I dig out a packet of Uno cards from the box and begin to shuffle them. "Would you like to play a game?"

"No."

"Perhaps we could draw something? Your dad says you're an excellent artist."

"I hate art." She bites down on her spoon. "Look. I think it's better if you just leave." She sounds like a bouncer reasoning with an intoxicated patron.

"If anyone is going to leave, sweetie, it will be you," I say softly.

At that moment Josh appears. "What a delightful sight. My two favourite ladies, eating their breakfast together." He taps each of our foreheads with a kiss. He pours himself a bowl of cornflakes and begins crunching away happily, oblivious to our conflict.

"Daddy."

"Yes, sweetheart."

"What are we doing here?"

"Now darling, that's no way to speak in front of Van."

"It was just a question, she won't explain it to me." She speaks in the matter of fact way that children have of making adults look like perfect idiots. "Is she your girlfriend now?"

Josh flushes. "I thought we could hang out together today, maybe we can catch a movie."

Cynthia's lip began to tremble. The shaking spreads to her cheeks, then hijacks her entire face. Tears spring from her eyes. She stands up. "She is not coming with us!" Cynthia slams down her fist. Kicks over her chair. The cornflakes spill long fingers of milk. "She is spoiling everything!" She runs out to the balcony. She slams the front door.

There it is. Evidence that the sophisticated six-year-old act is just that: an act. Josh sits among the wreckage of split milk and upturned chairs, unsure which piece of debris to pick up first. I place my hands on his shoulders, one of them real, one of them fake. I note the difference in size, shape, pressure, as the memories from last night seep through me. The long-awaited sex had been surprisingly good. I was shocked that under his moth-eaten shirt lay firm abs and taut shoulder blades. My salty tongue locked in his, my arm clicked in and out to the rhythm of my rocking thighs. Things were going well, the bed was pulsing gently, I was about to climax, when Silvie's radio switched on.

The tune was Don McLean's "Starry Night." My orgasm stopped dead. The singer's gentle voice and acoustic chords vibrated through our naked bodies. I unwrapped my legs and curled up beside Josh. We both listened to the entire six-minute extended version. Neither of us wanted to discuss the significance of its lyrics, its annoying Van Gogh's references, or the possibility of Silvie's spirit still lurking somewhere behind the old walls.

"I'm sorry," Josh looks at me helplessly from the kitchen table.

"It's OK. I should be heading back soon anyway. Lots to do in Sydney this week."

"I want to stay," Josh bites his lip. "It's just a bad time right now, with her mum leaving and all. She's a little bit, unbalanced."

"Maybe it's best if you just leave. You have to deal with that." I look toward the balcony. Josh has a look of exasperation that I've seen many times before. Here he is again, being pulled between two women.

He gathers his things and kisses me on the cheek, the way good friends do. We walk to the door. Outside, Cynthia is sitting on the bamboo couch, her arms crossed tightly. A row of dismembered doll parts sit on the balcony ledge, like a medieval warning. The grapes shimmer behind them. A miniature head, leg, four multi-coloured arms, a torso (sad looking and limbless), all lined up in perfect row. Cynthia diverts her gaze to the burning sun.

"Time to go," says Josh.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I'm at centre stage, about to go on," Rex says through the Walkie Talkie. "Fifteen minutes until your call... We did it baby. Can you believe that we fucking did it?"

"I know." I say.

"Break a leg."

"Thanks."

I'm sitting backstage at the Opera House, as Carla adds the final touches to my look. Today we are channelling 1920's glam. Zelda Fitzgerald meets Coco Chanel. I wear a sleeveless beaded dress – aquamarine. A loose chain of pearls swings to my waist. A peacock feather pokes from my hair. My skin is porcelain white my eyes are lined with charcoal.

The events of the week flash through my mind. The dress rehearsal went without a hitch. Rex arranged extra coverage at the last minute. A television station from Tokyo and a radio station from London are both streaming live. Dr Morijoto has flown in and fixed the few kinks in my arm. Rex has quashed the Leticia problem. A few phone calls to *Sixty Minutes* and a news story linking her blog to a series of terrorist units, was all that was needed. The media has lost interest in her now. A little glimmer of sunshine hits my chest when I remember her humiliated face online. A flurry of interviews for radio, TV, print. At last it seems everything is going to plan. Even without the *Sunrise* interview, we've defeated her. We have won.

"How's the stomach?" asks Carla.

"Not good," I say.

"Don't you dare vomit, that's four hours work." She describes small circles around my face with her brush. I take a sip of my drink.

"Are you sure you should be drinking whisky with your stomach like that?"

"I always drink whisky before a show."

Whisky was Silvie's drink, I'm certain it brings me good luck.

Charlie has made some progress in the investigations. I had nothing to worry about on the China front. He's sent a FedEx package to my place but I haven't been home to collect it. The last week has been so hectic that I slept three whole nights at the office. One of the advantages of living above the dress shop is that they always sign for my stuff. Things are feeling under control. I examine my reflection with a smile.

Josh's fuzzy afro appears around the dressing room corner.

"Josh. What are you doing here?"

"Aren't you happy to see me?"

"I'm just surprised. Why are you here?"

Josh never comes to my events.

"I've been calling all week." A clenched fist taps lightly at his side.

I shift uncomfortably in my seat. The truth is that I haven't spared a thought about what happened between us. I've simply been too busy. On my desk there is a security monitor. I watch the crowd sink into their seats. I imagine their smelly

breath, their attentive eyes, their pudgy faces in neat rows before me. This might be my last public appearance, but I'm not planning on going quietly. I'm going to make it spectacular.

"You have two minutes, Van. Final checks for makeup," the stage manager says through my Walkie Talkie. The cue sends Carla into a flurry of brushing and fluffing. She tilts my chin back for the final strokes.

"Josh, do we really have to do this now?"

"God forbid, I interrupt you." He looks annoyed. Why on earth is he so upset?

"Can you just once in your life acknowledge that this is a big deal for me?" I squint as Carla sets my hair with the spray.

"We need to talk privately."

"Now's not a great time, Josh."

Michaela, the short-haired stage assistant, appears at the door. "Van, we are on." She gestures briskly.

"Right, lets go." I do a final check, caressing the plume of my feather in a neat upwards stroke. Then I walk out the door.

Michaela's long strides down the corridor set a furious pace.

"Hey. This is important." Josh trails behind us.

"This guy bothering you?" Michaela doubles as a black belt. She wouldn't hesitate to eliminate any obstacle.

"Pass me the bowl," I say. I slump over it, dry retching. Nothing comes up.

Michaela grabs my wrist. She guides me along the twisting bowels of the Opera House. They reek of sweat and artificial smoke. I can hear Rex's introduction speech booming, the crowd jeering him on. Michaela's legs keep up the tempo allegro.

"Look Josh. I don't want to get into this," I say. "We're friends, aren't we? And we value each other's friendship? So what is the point of analysing this?" We arrive at the wings. I peek through the curtains, its packed to the rafters. Michaela presses her earpiece against her skull and waits.

"Can't we just pretend that it never happened and go back to that platonic thing we had?"

"Shhh" says Michaela.

"Oh God. You are so self-centred." His voice is a whisper. "I'm not even here about that. I wasn't even calling about that."

"You're not?"

"No. I'm here about something else entirely."

"Excuse me, Van," the sound guy, Paul, appears beside me. "I need to attach your microphone now." He spins me around and splays my arms wide, plugging a battery pack in the back of my belt.

"So what's this all about then?" I turn back to Josh, my arms raised like an aeroplane.

Josh produces a box from his bag. A yellow FedEx package, opened at the side. He pours the contents into his hand. Three photos of Silvie and a USB stick. The postmark, naturally, is Buenos Aires. The handwriting on the FedEx packet is

Charlie's. I pull Josh toward me. We find a nook away from the velvet curtains, at the very back where no one can hear us.

"You make a habit of opening other people's mail?"

"I was dropping off the boxes at your place when this FedEx guy arrives. I signed them and..." Josh shakes his head. "Please tell me that it's not true? That it's a set up. A sick joke from Leticia? Van?"

"It's complicated."

"It's not complicated. How long have you known about this?"

I can't speak. I stare blankly at him waiting for words to arrive in my mouth.

"Christ." He pushes his closed fist against his forehead. "When you said you were dying, was that a lie too?"

Michaela has found us. She tugs me back to the entry point. "Three, two, one," she counts down with her fingers, then she flings me onto stage.

I stumble out squinting. The hot lights hit my face. I walk very slowly to the pool of light in the centre. The applause fades. My heels clink like ice picks. I look out to the ocean of faces. I open my book. When I find my voice, it's trembling:

"We were born together and we'd die together.

That's what we'd always told each other."

Rex signals to me from the side, drawing a cutthroat sign across his neck. I look back to the book:

"After she died, I felt weightless, like a spirit or a ghost.

I was waiting for God to call me to him. But God never called.

I was stuck here, on the ground.

I had to accept it was Silvie who had flown."

The lights switch off. Then on. Then off. Like an epileptic fit. I tap my lapel mic. Nothing. The emergency lights are flashing. People are flooding the aisles and pushing out the exits.

"Wait! Please don't leave," I say. "It's just a technical hitch." I'm looking past the stalls, all the way to the mezzanine. My eyes are pleading. I don't understand. My chest is tight. My chin hits the stage with a thump. My legs curl to my stomach. I close my eyes and listen to the scampering of feet.

After a few minutes the auditorium is quiet. Rex peels me from the floor. He flings my arm over his shoulder and tugs me beside him. "Next time your dear friend Josh decides to grace us with his presence, it might be wise to turn your radio mic off," he says through gritted teeth.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

In Amsterdam we kept the separation surgery under wraps. Silvie insisted. We didn't tell a soul, not even Aunt Lucy. Silvie didn't want the pressure of press or family, on top of everything else. So we hired Rex, Britain's most gifted media broker. He advised us on PR matters previously. Silvie and I weren't big league celebrities back then, but the press was something we'd learnt to manage. Rex was suave and experienced. He did an excellent job. The hospital agreed to a complete media blackout, on the proviso that once fully recovered we'd go public. It was a win-win situation. Rex would negotiate an exclusive media deal for us, while the hospital would benefit from positive exposure. But things didn't turn out as everyone had expected.

Three days after the operation, Silvie ran away.

I saw her figure on the hospital's crackly CCTV footage. She slipped deftly out the hospital door while I was still sleeping. She had an odd expression, like she might have been smuggling a gun under her coat. Her face had changed. There was a hardness to it, a cynicism that I'd never seen before. Was that my sister? The same submissive Silvie who always saved the bigger piece of tiramisu for me? Who never raised her voice? Who was this new Silvie? Why did she want so desperately to escape?

In the first months I was convinced that Silvie would return. "We'll find her ourselves," I told Rex. We hired a whole team of private eyes. I put Charlie in charge. I was determined not to involve the police because I didn't want to draw too much attention to the surgery. I thought we could handle it. But mostly, I thought she'd come back.

After a few weeks I rented a small apartment in a seventeenth century building that overlooked *Singel Canal*. It had a gabled façade and three large windows and a view. The windows were south facing, so the apartment felt spacious. The trees along the canal were covered in a thick white snow. Flakes drifted onto the cobblestones.

She didn't call. She didn't email. The private eyes found not a single lead. I waited for months. I was losing hope. "We contacted every hospital in Europe," said Dr Morijito. "No sign." He shook his head. "Without medical assistance, I don't see how she could have survived."

"Could she have boarded a plane?" I asked.

"Unlikely." He sat at his desk, puzzled how someone in her condition had summoned the energy to escape. "Total shock syndrome," he called it.

I waited through the festivities of spring. Watched the tulip sellers, the market stalls, the sunsets. Saw the heady days of summer pass. The streets throbbed with tourists, buskers, midnight crowds. Autumn slowed the city down, turned it shades of yellow, brown and red.

Dr Morijito was from Japan but he worked out of Amsterdam. He had a low dipping bow and a tender smile. He wore tailored silk-lined suits. I trusted him right from the moment we met. His gentle voice, his round rimmed glasses. He was the sort of person who spoke so softly you barely noticed when he was in the room. "Vanessa-San," he would whisper, "we'll fix you up my little fighter..." His fingers were tiny and agile. As he spoke he would always be using them somehow – mending a transistor, sewing on a button, organising his papers, as if they had a mind of their own. The year I stayed in Amsterdam, Dr Morijito supervised my recovery. He arranged a team of specialists to perform additional cosmetic procedures. These surgeries had to be done little by little, with rest periods in between. Rex would come and visit me on a regular basis. Back then he was based in London, he was going through a divorce. I think he cherished the escapes from his ex-wife. His weekend jaunts allowed him visits to Amsterdam's brown cafes, beer halls, and dubious back alleys, where more illicit things were bought and sold. There was a spare room in my flat where he stayed. I didn't mind, as long as he came back from the alleyways alone.

I became obsessed with my reconstructive surgeries. Rex would flick through the magazines with me choosing new skin grafts, hip constructions, breast sizes. Rebuilding my body gave me a task to focus on. It distracted me from this huge sense of loss. Silvie was gone. Dr Morijito had been kind enough to offer me the reconstructive surgeries gratis. He wanted to re-create my body – to the best of his ability. To be honest, I think the hospital still felt a deep regret about what had

happened. The reconstructive surgery didn't figure in the original contract. Then again, bodies as uniquely disfigured as mine were rare. Each of Dr Morijito's surgeries was entering new medical terrain.

I retraced the conversations I had with Silvie before the operation. In every joint decision there is always one sibling who wants it more than the other. The separation was my idea, but Silvie agreed. It took me three weeks to convince her. We argued on train rides, in museums, on bus trips. Then she cracked. After we made the decision, she seemed relieved. She signed the papers. She talked with the doctors. We speculated about our new lives, even made jokes about it, but inside she must have been fuming. Her desertion was my punishment.

I sat on the bed and imagined our reunion many times. She'd waltz in saying, "Hey sis, I missed you." She'd grip my waist tight with a dog tired look on her face. I wouldn't ask for an explanation. I wouldn't scold or blame her. I'd simply tuck her into the white sheets. Smell her armpit, stroke her unwashed hair, cook her favourite chicken curry and smile.

But Silvie didn't come back. The reunion remained a figment of my imagination.

\* \* \*

The day it happened was a Wednesday, about a year after the separation and still no sign of Silvie. I was sitting upright in the bed, a cotton bathrobe snug around

my shoulders. Under the robe my body was wrapped in bandages. It was one of my last surgeries, liposuction I think, but then again all my surgeries started bleeding together at the end. My left hand clasped a black coffee, an empty sleeve fell in my lap. My iPad was on my knees. I read the article from the *London Star* three times over. Anxiety bubbled in my stomach as I read it a fourth.

Rex swung into the room, carrying a bag of painkillers and some fresh lilies.

"Good morning Buttercup," he said.

"Have you seen this?" I held up the tablet.

"Hello to you too," he said dryly.

I passed him the iPad. He began to read the headline:

"Conjoined twin dies in secret Amsterdam surgery."

I wanted to kill the journalist. Not only had he cracked our cover, he'd been lazy when checking his facts.

Rex jiggled his glasses out of his waistcoat pocket and scanned the article.

"We need to do something about this," I said. "We need to go public. We should release a statement denying this bullshit."

Rex chewed his lip.

"Well, darling," he said with a sigh, "now that it's out, they'll keep writing this crap until they get the official version from your mouth. You're right, we need to act fast on this one, but we should tread carefully."

"Does that documentary crew have something to do with this?"

"No. Sonya wouldn't do that. I've known her for years." Rex made a tut-tut noise with his tongue. He leaned in towards me, a worry line on his forehead, his moustache thin and prickly. His face was a landscape morphing with my emotional tides. My months of anger had softened into a helpless interdependence. I was hypnotised by his accent, his dashing around responding to all my little requests: pharmaceutical supplies, black coffee, *stroopwafels* and *appeltaart*. All year, he'd been my only connection to civilisation. A consultant on everything, from breast size to painkillers.

Rex walked slowly to the window. He peered out at the bridges, at the long sleek canals.

"You know," he said, "we do have another choice."

"What choice?" I said.

He shifted his weight, "we could let it ride..."

"I don't understand."

"How many people are aware of the CCTV footage?"

"Just you, me, and Dr Morijito."

"So perhaps she died under the knife. And you, my dear, are the survivor of this tragedy."

"But Dr Morijito, the hospital, they'll never go along with that."

"The hospital will do exactly as I tell them. This is my area of speciality, remember."

I tightened my robe.

"No way. Absolutely not. I cannot kill my own sister."

Rex sat down behind me on the bed. He ran his fingertips down my back all the way to my hips. "You're still hoping that she'll come back, aren't you?" he whispered in my ear.

A tear trickled down my nose.

"Until I see her body I can't accept she's gone."

"Remember what Doctor Morijito said. If she survived even a few weeks without medical treatment, it would have been a miracle."

I shifted my weight on the bed. I still wasn't used to feeling my new heart beating inside my chest, the sound I made when I breathed, or how food gurgled in my intestines. In the middle of the night I would call out, "I need the bathroom," as if Silvie was right there beside me. A lifetime of habits is difficult to break.

"Twenty-three years together and she didn't even leave a note." I looked for some answer in Rex's eyes, but he just sat there and stared into space.

"The older I get, the more I realise, how little we know about the ones we love the most," he said.

Rex walked back to the window, fumbled with the venetians, catching the last rays of fading light. "Did you realise that our documentary might be screening at the BAFTAs?"

"The BAFTAs?"

"Sonya is stirring up a real interest in the film. A few charities have already approached me. There's a skin cream company that wants to use you for their campaign."

I was taken by surprise. "I'm not a model Rex. I want to design clothes, not parade them."

"That's true. But you are a *role model*. Sonya says you have a natural affinity with the camera. A real presence when you speak. She says that women will relate to your raw emotional honesty. This documentary could be a great launching pad for you."

"Launching pad?"

"Restart your career, Van."

I joined him by the window. Some of the canal boats were bobbing up and down outside. They had timber panels and fogged up windows.

"Haven't you thought about any of this?" Rex said. "There is life after losing your sister. There's a whole world waiting for you." He picked up the paper, "Conjoined twin, tragic death. It's not a bad angle."

On the bridge an old lady was roasting chestnuts. She stoked the coals, hunched over a grill, a long scarf down her back. The sky was closing in. The days were getting shorter. The snow would soon arrive. I thought of slippery pavements, frosted lakes and Christmas lights. How long could I stay in this in-between place? How long could I wait for my life to start again...? Maybe Rex had a point. Maybe it was time to go home.

It's amazing how when you tell a lie, there's this tiny part of you that believes it's true. The words begin to shift. They take on colours, textures, shapes. After I gave the interview with that documentary crew, I couldn't go back. In my mind, Silvie died that day. Then she kept dying, time and time again. When the newspapers picked up the story, when the documentary won first prize at Sundance, when I returned home. I remember gripping Lucy's hand to steady her, breaking the news on the bamboo couch. I repeated the story three times before her mind could grasp it. The modelling gigs started rolling in. I was doing interviews for blogs, television and print. When my charity started, Silve's name was engraved on a golden plaque. We christened it with the smash of champagne.

Rex started referring to Silvie as "the deceased" in private conversations with me. Implanting her death in our minds. If you repeat a story enough, if you blow gently under its wings, it might just take flight. You might even convince yourself that it's real.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It's 7am. I'm sitting at the top of the concrete staircase outside Carla's Marrickville house. It's a red brick semi with a tiled roof and a thin concrete drive. The sun's in my eyes. Alongside me sit a neat row of terracotta pots filled with parsley. I hear the sound of trains rattling in the distance, dogs barking, lawnmowers. My feet rest against my large white suitcase because today I'm taking a trip. I feel the crisp ticket between my fingertips. A thin line of sweat forms on my palms, I still haven't summoned the courage to knock on Carla's the door.

The door clicks open. Carla almost trips over me as she bends down to collect the newspaper on her doormat. She sits next to me on the porch, pushing her fringe from her eyes.

"Vanessa," she says quietly. "Why are you here?"

"Actually, I came to see Josh." I tuck the ticket in my bag.

"I'm not sure he really wants to talk to you, Van."

Two weeks have passed since the launch. During that time I stayed couped up in my apartment, counting my losses on my mechanical fingertips: career, reputation, money, credibility. I'd shut the bedroom blinds tight - lived on packet soup, frozen pizza and peppermint tea, watching constant re-runs of *Friends* on the TV. I haven't paused a second, to consider that Carla, along with 27 other staff members have been left jobless. Now I see anger burning holes in her cheeks. Although it's not the unemployment that cuts her the deepest, it's my deception.

"Look, I know he's staying here with you. It'll only take five minutes."

"I'll see if he's awake." She tucks the paper under her arm and walks inside.

The screen door slams, then I hear footsteps. "You don't have to see her," Carla whispers from inside. "Really, you don't owe her a thing."

I stand up and roll the suitcase to the door. It's an unusually hot day for Sydney in August. Spring is arriving early. The sun pelts down on my long white dress. Josh slowly opens the door. He's wearing boxer shorts and slippers.

"I'm probably the last person that you expected to show up," I say.

"Yeah. Especially at 7am."

"It's just, I'm leaving for a while. I wanted to give you something, before I go."

"I'm kind of busy." He fumbles with his boxers.

Now our roles are reversed. It's me begging for a moment of his time. Josh is refusing.

"Please Josh. This will only take ten minutes."

"Ok. Come in," he says and ushers me through the door.

Carla is standing in the shadows against the banister.

In the living room we settle on the green couch. Directly opposite us is a huge fish tank, full of colourful corals and swishing tails.

"I brought you this," I take out a small red box, place it on the coffee table.

He looks at the box if it were a hand grenade.

"Go ahead, open it," I say.

Slowly Josh eases off the lid. He pulls out the fishbone necklace.

"I found it under my dresser in the end. Just like she said. You always find stuff when you stop looking."

Josh holds the chain in front of his face. Lets the silver fish tail tickle his nose.

"I can't take this Van." He drops it gently on the coffee table. The chain curls neatly into a figure eight.

"I want you to have it."

"Are you sure?"

"Keep it."

"Fine." His eyes are cold. He places the necklace back inside the box, with a soft clink.

My body is trembling, I'm not sure why I feel so upset. I didn't come here for his sympathy. I want to leave on a good note. The main thing is to say goodbye, because now I'm certain that I'm not coming back.

"Where are you going exactly?" he says.

"It's just a short trip." I stare at the floor. I have my reasons for not telling him my destination. The last thing I need is Josh following me.

"Look. I have to book a cab pretty soon."

"I'll do it." Carla tilts a silver watering can, under the pretence of watering her Peace Lilly, but it's obvious that she's eavesdropping and eager to get rid of me.

She dials the number from the kitchen. "First available please," she says. I have five minutes. I hate hurried conversations. I squeeze my thumb against my hand until my palm turns red.

"Josh. I'm sorry about all the shit I put you through."

He looks away.

"I was confused. I was sort of in shock, I think, when it happened. I know that's not really a proper excuse." I release the pressure.

"Look Van," he places the box on the coffee table gently, "it's better we don't talk about this."

In the aquarium a dark blue fish shoots out from the coral. An eel pokes his head cautiously from the rock. I wish for a moment that I was inside the tank with them, sipping air through my gills, brushing my tail against the glass. I wish I was anywhere but here, trapped in this body, in this room, between my two friends who hate me.

"What about your kidney? Should you even be travelling?" says Josh.

"I got checked up last week. The hospital gave me another month before starting dialysis."

Josh stands up. He places the box on the mantle. I stare at his back, a lump forming in my throat.

A horn is honking outside. We walk along the corridor. Josh taps my cheek with a kiss. I grab his shirt and pull him tight against me. My nails dig at his back. His breath accelerates. I squeeze tight, then release him. Don't cry. Don't let yourself cry. My feet are crunching the small pebbles of the driveway. I open the taxi door.

Josh helps the driver pack my case in the boot.

“Josh, there’s one more thing.” I roll down the window, “If I don’t call, would you do me a favour?” I pull out a card. “Would you call Charlie and check up on me?” Josh looks confused, “But you’ll call me when you’re back, won’t you?” “I’ll try, but you know me. Sometimes I have a tendency to be a bit self-centred.” When the cab rolls away, Josh’s figure disappears against the sand coloured driveway.

We cruise past red brick houses, gardens, a round-about, a school.

“Where to?” asks the cabbie.

“Just do some loops around the block,” I say, “I’m not in a rush.” I want to soak up the streets of Sydney for a while, let the colours wash over me. I watch houses, apartment blocks, train tracks outside my window. We pass a Macedonian Deli, an African cafe, an old Greek Church.

They say when death is close you can feel it coming from inside you. Today I feel it twisting in my arteries, jabbing in my chest, pumping along the veins of my artificial arm. There’s this uneasiness under my skin. How much time do I have left? Days? Weeks? Hours? Some animals wander away from their clan to die. Cats, elephants, dogs. They find some shady tree, a tranquil waterfall, a riverbed. They rest alone until death takes them. But humans are different. We wish to be surrounded by the ones we love the most. For us there’s nothing so terrifying as the thought of leaving this world alone.

Maybe Mum was right all along. There's a point at which no doctor can help you. Dr Morijito has been calling me daily from Japan. Offering miracle transplants, private dialysis teams, life prolonging treatments, but there are no guarantees. Even if they replace my kidney it would only be a matter of months before my heart began to fail. I don't want to spend my last days hooked to machines, smelling bleach and disinfectant in some cold hospital ward. Josh and Carla haven't forgiven me. But there is one person who would certainly forgive me, no matter what I do or how badly I fuck up. Because sisters always forgive.

Finally, after six years of searching, Charlie found her address. Leticia was right, she had been living in Buenos Aires all along. Silvie moved constantly in underground circles, she had no official identification, which had made her difficult to trace. The address Charlie found was in the suburb of Palermo. "The name on the lease is Little P," said Charlie. "Strange name for an official document, don't you think?" Charlie wasn't completely sure if Silvie lived there permanently, but she had observed her coming and going for weeks. It was a door I could knock on. It was an address. It was a start.

"So where are we going exactly?" the cabbie says.

"The airport," I say. "I have a flight to catch."

### **Part three, the collision**

At the airport, Silvie feels lighter now that she has checked her bag. Six years here and all she has to show for it is a 10kg green sports bag. Her laptop swings in a satchel bag at her hip. It is easy to travel light when you have been on the move so long. Throwing away things has become a habit, scampering from house to house, bar to bar, bedroom to bedroom. She thinks about the little pieces of her scattered all over Buenos Aires: panties, cigarette papers, scribbled phone numbers, photographs, shoes. No time to think about that stuff now. All she has time to worry about is getting out. She holds the ticket in her hand "Florida," it says. The name sounds crisp and full of possibilities. It also sounds daunting.

When Silvie arrives in Florida, Martha's cousin will be waiting for her. She will spend a few weeks at her place until she settles in. "A new life. A new start. One of us deserves it," Prince said before swinging his tiny frame out the bathroom door. Silvie is glad to be getting out, away from the confusion and the constant fear of the last months. But something inside her is strangely sentimental. She hardly had a chance to say goodbye, and now she's about to board a plane. She knows it's time to leave, but she also knows she's not ready to go home. Not today. Perhaps not any day. She will think about it from Florida. She might actually send one of those emails to her sister. Then again, maybe not.

Some immigration police push past Silvie. They have crisp black uniforms and batons swing at their sides. She feels a rush of cold air as they pass. She

rubs her wrist against her hip gently, wondering if the doctor implanted the *Paloma Blanca* with enough precision. When she checked her bag, Silvie had been nervous, but the girl hadn't even requested an ID check. Instead she looked up with her heavily painted eyelids and a sigh. "Your flight's been delayed for two hours."

"What am I supposed to do for two hours in this dingy place?" Silvie blurted, as her nerves turned to anger.

"Not my problem," the girl said, raising her eyebrow.

Silvie feels strange. She's had three days of emotional goodbyes, doctor appointments, packing, and drinking sessions. Now she stands here, calmly, with two whole hours of emptiness to fill. Two luxurious hours of nothing. She doesn't even have a book. She should have smoked the last of her *gunja*. She regrets shoving it into Jose's warm palm last night. She looks around the foyer and notes the lack of padded seating. They intentionally design airports to be the coldest, most sterile, uncomfortable places in the world. Then she sees a sign indicating a café on the top floor – away from the hustle and bustle of the duty free and the departures lounge. She pulls out some coins from her pocket, just enough to afford a black coffee and a *factura*. She imagines one filled with *dulce de leche*, a sweet adios to Buenos Aires.

When Silvie steps onto the escalator, she notices a girl on the top of the parallel staircase. Her green eyes lock with Silvie's. Her figure drifts weightlessly down. *I must be hallucinating*, thinks Silvie. The girl wears a white dress, the sheer fabric drifts behind her, flaring softly like mist. Golden locks fall down her back, like an angel. Her tattooed arm rests lightly on the

rail. Three diamonds on her wrist catch the light. Her suitcase is large and white. Her cheekbones seem higher, her breasts smaller, the palatte of her skin slightly more pale. Only her striking emerald eyes remain the same. Gliding closer, like a cool green fire. At the midpoint of the escalator their two bodies meet. Their shoulders brush against each other lightly. Silvie catches her sister's strawberry scent. Then she's sure.

\* \* \*

When Van's shoulder rubs against the girl, she sees a vision... two five-year-olds swinging over grapevines – legs stretched out to the sky. Their nostrils filled with crisp cold air. Van looks back. The girl is pushed upwards – Van is pulled down. Van watches the figure get smaller and smaller. She's a tiny black dot at the top of the staircase. Van steps off the bottom feeling dizzy and sick. Their eyes are still locked. Van watches the girl dragging one hand along the rail. They both stop.

The girl fixes her gaze on Van. She is wearing the same leather jacket as the photo, one arm sewn up at the side. A tattered patchwork skirt falls about her knees. She has a black satchel slung at her side. Dark strands of hair spill down her left cheek. She leans over the edge and stares. She's changed. A little braver, a little more fragile. Like a domesticated cat, who one day went wild. There are bruises along her wrist. She's lost weight. Van raises her hand in an unsteady wave. The girl returns the gesture, equally unsure. Van smiles.

They stand there for a moment, each uncertain about what should happen next. Should I run upwards? Should I run down? Should we collide in the middle? There's a giant pocket of air between them. All this time and they're unsure how to close it.

Suddenly Silvie sprints to the glass elevator on the right, but Van is rushing left to the stairs. They're waving and pointing in a muddle of confusion. Silvie steps inside the elevator. Van hops back down three stairs. She scurries toward the lift. The glass bubble descends in slow motion. Van is breathless. Silvie is inside.

The elevator lands with a bump, but the door is jammed. Jesus Christ. The two girls are frantic. Slamming fists and pushing buttons. It won't budge. Van pushes her forehead against the glass, "Should I call security? Should I sound the alarm?" she mouths to Silvie on the other side. The situation is absurd. Six years of waiting and now her sister is trapped behind a thin sheath of glass. Silvie throws her head back, a wild glint in her eyes.

Van lifts her fist off the glass. Takes two steps backwards. A bell chimes three times. The door slides open effortlessly. The sisters embrace.

It's not the reunion either Silvie or Van imagined. There are no gushing tears, no screams of joy, no collapsing bodies. They uncurl from each other's grip and stand there like two perfectly ordinary women. They look quite different from each other now. They could be friends, lovers, or strangers that pass

each other in a crowd. But they are not. They are twins. Van wants to pluck out her sister's hair, to pinch her, to check that she's real.

Silvie is jumpy, frenetic. She fidgets with her Jacket.

"My bags are going to Florida," says Silvie.

"What?" Van says.

"I just checked in my bags for Florida. Shit."

"I only just arrived and you're leaving Buenos Aires?"

"Yeah. It's a long story," Silvie bites her lip, "Wanna hear it?"

"Sure."

"How much time you got?"

"A little. I have a little time." Van swallows a lump in her throat.

\* \* \*

We walk along the concourse only inches apart. There's an awkwardness. Six years and our muscles have forgotten how to co-exist. But after a few moments shock subsides to familiarity. Nothing has changed, we can go on like this, we are found.

