

## OUR TWININDIVIDUALITY

*“An apple cleft in two is not more twin  
Than these two creatures.”*

– William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*

Probably the last word that people would use to describe the two of us is ‘normal’. Even *we* wouldn’t choose that word, and to be honest, we’re usually not bothered by the notion in the least.

‘Normal’ is such a subjective and arbitrary term, particularly when describing people or personality traits. Who decides what is and isn’t normal? Our ‘normal’ is nothing like the ‘normal’ defined by society, but rather, what the two of us have become accustomed to over the course of our lives. We most definitely do not conform to convention. Although we consider this to be a good thing, it can be frustrating as well.

We can’t even imagine what it would be like to live as a singleton. The idea of it is both frightening and appealing. People frequently say that we’re lucky to have each other so that we never have to feel alone, but as a twosome we experience our own feelings of loneliness. Although we have never been separated for an extended period of time, we *do* know how it feels to be *together* and alone. It can be a very isolating experience.

While there are many aspects of our lives that we wouldn’t change for anything in the world, we frequently yearn for the

‘normal’ life of an individual. Rightly or wrongly, the foreign concept of living as a singleton actually strikes us as a much simpler way of life.

We often try to imagine what life would be like if we were not twins, or if we were twins who were no closer than typical sisters. It’s not unrealistic to think that without each other we might already have careers and be married. The stability and normalcy of this scenario are in many ways achingly desirable.

With our more recent struggles in terms of career possibilities and relationships, we have conceded that if the choice were ours, we wouldn’t be twins. Instead we would choose to live as one person, without feeling that either of us is missing. We believe this would be more desirable than living as we believe we do now, as one soul divided between two bodies. When we try to imagine living as one person, we think of life with just the physical Allison or physical Lauren—it doesn’t matter which one—but having not lost the emotional and intellectual presence of the other. In other words, the existing sister wouldn’t feel as if she were missing the other because the other would become *part* of her—sort of like transposing one of us onto the other.

Just as it is probably mind-boggling for people to imagine what it would be like to live our lives, so, too, is it impossible for each of us to imagine living as an independent. What would it be like, for example, to wake up in the morning and spontaneously decide what to do in the day without a single thought of how this would affect your twin? How would it feel to compete in a sports event or write an exam with the only concern being *your* preparation and *your* results? And what would it feel like to have a boyfriend with whom you share so much and spend so much time?

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Neither of us feels complete without the other beside her. It is impossible to feel whole while apart from one another because, for each of us, an essential part of ‘self’ exists in another body—each other’s. In effect, each of us is only part of herself.

Nevertheless, neither of us views herself as having the value of only one-half of a human being. Neither of us would consider herself whole without the other, but each of us knows that she is ‘equal’ to any other person. Despite this understanding, we often

think and speak of ourselves as a unit, and even *feel* as though we are one presence.

When it's just the two of us, we consider ourselves to be alone, even though being 'alone together' is paradoxical. "You're lucky you never have to be alone" people will sometimes say to us, but the feeling of isolation persists, even when the two of us have some of the most engrossing conversations and experiences.

Rarely does either of us refer to 'my life' or 'my future'. We often refer to 'our life', 'our future', and 'our mind', rather than to 'our lives', 'our futures', and 'our minds'. It happens without us even being aware of it.

It is with this in mind that we provide the following anecdote. Several years ago, we were caught off-guard when a serious and inquisitive fellow university student asked us if we had been born as Siamese twins. While the answer is no, the notion of us as conjoined twins is not ridiculously off the mark.

We certainly don't mean to minimize the complications that result from twins born physically attached, as we are well aware that subsequent separation surgeries often end in lifelong challenges, if not fatalities, and that not all cases are even operable.

From an early age the two of us were exposed to tragic stories of conjoined twins whose lives were physically, emotionally, and psychologically challenging from their very day of birth. We remember watching a television documentary with our mom about young conjoined twins who underwent multiple operations so that they could have a chance to live healthy, 'normal' lives. Our mom felt particularly moved by the strength of the girls' parents when they made the difficult decision to operate despite knowing they risked losing one of their daughters. Their alternative was to watch both girls struggle every single day until they inevitably succumbed to early deaths. Thankfully the team of doctors conducting the girls' separation was successful, but we can only imagine the lingering effects on the twins and their loved ones.

The documentary we watched covered the girls' immediate reactions to no longer having someone physically attached at their side, as well as their gradual rehabilitation. Their parents noted on film that their one daughter could often be found in bed, her head turned to where her sister used to lie beside her. Her sister's absence had yet to register.

With true stories like this in mind, we feel incredibly blessed to have been born with no such complications. Even in cases where conjoined twins are successfully operated upon and show promise of living long and healthy lives, this does not erase all of the strain, anxiety, and fear endured by their loved ones in the early going.

This is precisely the reason why we carefully describe ourselves as Siamese-like. What we mean by this is that the two of us feel bound to each other in a physical way, even though we have never been physically attached. We sometimes wish that we *were* conjoined twins, for then we wouldn't have to justify doing everything together. While we know it wouldn't be easy to function while attached to another human being, if we *were* conjoined twins then no one would object to us applying jointly for jobs or taking on the same projects.

Above all, each of us just wants to pursue her dreams in the way she feels will be the most productive and enjoyable for herself—with the other right there beside her pursuing the same dreams. Her dreams too, after all.

We also feel some commonality with conjoined twins because each of us has a comfortable side in relation to each other, with Lauren feeling best to Allison's left, and Allison feeling best to Lauren's right. When we were young and sitting around the dinner table with our brother and parents, Allison's seat was always to Lauren's right. For most of our lives we've shared a bed, and Allison has always slept to Lauren's right. In both our elementary and high school bands, we were flutists and shared a music stand. Allison always sat to Lauren's right. Whenever teachers and professors allowed us to choose our own seats, we were quick to position ourselves with Lauren on the left and Allison on the right.

This pattern probably helped our teachers distinguish one of us from the other, although, at least before we started to use laptops for note-taking in university classes, the fact that Allison is left-handed and Lauren is right-handed probably served as a key indicator on its own.

To cite a few other examples where our preferred positioning comes into play, Lauren typically walks with Allison to her right, and even when the two of us used to jump rope, Allison was always to Lauren's right for events that required us to position ourselves side by side, such as for pairs speed and pairs power. To look at photographs

of the two of us, this pattern again largely holds true. In instances where we were able to pose as we pleased rather than at the whim of the photographer, Allison is most often to Lauren's right.

How we stand or sit in relation to one another is a detail that we consider on a daily basis. We try to do what we can to feel most at ease, but inevitably there are situations that require us to cast this preference aside. Driving a car is one such situation. We have always alternated driving duties, meaning that any time Lauren is the passenger and Allison is the driver, we feel slightly off balance.

Again, we have no definitive answer as to why we each have a comfortable side in relation to each other, but in talking with another set of mirror-imaged twins who have become friends of ours, we've learned that they, too, have comfortable sides when together. The thought has crossed our minds that perhaps in the latter stages of our mom's pregnancy, when there was no longer ample space in the womb, the two of us were positioned snugly in what would become our preferred positioning in life.

Interestingly, we find ourselves quite coordinated when we *do* try to function as one person. Two examples come to mind. First, three-legged races are hardly a test of our coordination. It's not as if running while attached at the ankles is something we practise, but on the few occasions when we've participated in such a race, mostly in elementary school but once in university, the two of us could easily *run* as a unit. Perhaps because we are of similar height and build, there is no need to concentrate on coordinating our movements. Our synchronization simply comes naturally to us.

Second, back when we were in university we came up with the solution to 'team type' when we found ourselves trying to construct an e-mail over lunch one day. Seated side by side at the computer with Allison to Lauren's right, Lauren used her left hand to key in any letters or punctuation usually controlled by a typist's left hand, and Allison used her right hand to key in any letters or punctuation usually controlled by a typist's right hand. This way the two of us could type *and* continue to eat with our free hands! Remarkably, we found our experimental style of typing almost second nature to us. As long as we communicated ahead of time the words that we would write, we found it no challenge whatsoever to type at a reasonable pace. In fact, we found the process so effective that we resorted to team typing on several occasions thereafter when the need

arose.

### *Allison*

We don't like to use the term 'special' when describing our bond. Instead, we think of our relationship as unique, just as everyone has his or her own unique relationships.

Trying to equate our inseparability to the strong relationship between a husband and wife, for example, is an inadequate comparison. One major difference is that for this husband and wife there is a definitive mark separating life before marriage and life after marriage.

For twins, there is no such life-before-meeting period. I cannot remember life without Lauren because I have never lived without her. I can only *imagine* life without her in a vague, uncomfortable, and frightening way.

The two of us have never spent an entire day or night apart. We've never even spent more than a few hours apart at any one time. At twenty-eight years of age, this is quite remarkable... and probably disturbing for some. Inevitably we've had to spend some time apart over the years, but the occasions are few and far between.

One of the first memories I have of being separated from Lauren is of us in kindergarten when she fell on the playground equipment and hit her head. Lauren was taken to see the doctor, and I ended up being babysat at our grandparents' house until she returned to me with one of our parents and what the doctor had 'diagnosed' as a 'rainbow bump', which to Lauren was adequate consolation for her pain.

Many years later when we were in grade ten, Lauren and I shared only one of four classes in our first semester, and we touch on one particularly miserable experience in the next chapter. Other than that, we've spent time apart while having driving lessons, and also when writing in isolation for some of our university exams.

### *Lauren*

We fear for each other's well-being when we're apart. This isn't to say that we can always protect each other when we're together—for example, Allison couldn't break my fall when I tumbled on the school playground in kindergarten—and yet there is a far greater peace of mind for both of us when we're in each other's

presence. Though it would be silly to pinpoint a single incident as the reason for our resistance to spending time apart, one contributing factor is the frightening episode that took place on a skating rink more than two decades ago.

Despite being avid hockey fans, Allison and I have never been fond of skating ourselves. When we were much younger, on the occasional Sunday afternoon our family would go to the local ice rink for an open skate. Our brother, who played organized hockey, liked to zip around the ice while our dad patiently held our mittened hands and guided us along the end of the rink.

For a while there, Allison and I were actually managing to propel ourselves forward without our dad's help. Sure, we were far from graceful or agile, preferring a more staggered, stiff-legged, arms-thrusting-out-with-each-movement technique, but the important thing was that we were making strides. Hand in hand, the two of us would circle the rink, not caring that we were getting lapped and double lapped by young and old alike.

I recall parting with Allison on only one occasion. It was the day of 'the accident'. Skating on my own, I had just rounded the bend so that the full length of the ice was ahead of me. Allison was either half a lap ahead or behind, but in any case, she wasn't there by my side. It was only me.

All of a sudden, and much to my horror, a young boy appeared directly in my path. While he wasn't an imposing figure, the wooden chair he was pushing as a sort of walker to steady himself made him seem much larger. We stared at each other with eyes as round as hockey pucks, each of us hoping for the other to veer out of harm's way, but seeing all too clearly that neither of us had mastered the necessary skills.

It was inevitable: there would be a head-on collision. My two front teeth *thwacked* against the chair on my plunge to the ice, and the next thing I knew, a crowd had gathered around my sprawled figure and my mouth tasted salty with blood. Somehow I was escorted off the ice and into the arms of our dad.

When Allison arrived in a panic she witnessed him inspecting my bloody, swollen gums and two loose front teeth. (Later that night, our dad would pull out these two baby teeth of mine.) Needless to say, the news of my fall had given Allison a scare, and seeing me in tears afterwards probably didn't help!

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Ironically, the fact that we're always together makes it weird to think of each other as a sibling. Each of us knows, for example, that she has two siblings: a twin sister and an older brother Andrew. But we perceive ourselves as a unit.

Frequently someone will inquire, "Let me guess—twins, right?" and, after our confirmation, follow up with, "Do you have any siblings?" The two of us have become so accustomed to answering "Yes, an older brother," that to say that either of us has an older brother *and* a sister seems strange.

The only circumstance that comes to mind when we explicitly acknowledge each other as a sister is while filling out surveys or forms. We have caught ourselves on more than one occasion musing aloud how we wish we had a sister. Lauren *does* have a sister, of course, and so does Allison, but what we mean is that we wish we had a sister to whom we could turn for sisterly advice. As much as we mean the world to each other, neither of us really considers the other to be a source of advice, if for no other reason than neither of us has anything particularly 'new' to offer the other. For the most part, what Allison knows Lauren knows, and what Allison doesn't know Lauren doesn't know either.

Our constant togetherness also means that we haven't experienced some of the simple interactions that most twins and other siblings experience. For example, the fact that we're almost always together means that we've rarely had reason to hug or kiss each other goodbye. Doing either isn't something that comes naturally to us.

People may also find it surprising that we've never spoken to each other on the phone. There's never been a need to call each other since we're always together. We *have* posed as one another on the phone when one of us gets tired of engaging in a particularly tedious conversation and needs a reprieve, or can't be bothered to call the other to the phone.

We also find it interesting to see the correspondence our twin friends have with one another on Facebook. The two of us have always shared everything, including a bank account, e-mail address (outside of the ones we were assigned as university students), Blackberry, website, and Facebook account. When we see one of our twin friends writing to his or her twin via Facebook about looking forward to seeing him or her the following weekend, or asking what's



new in the other's life, we see how different the dynamics of our own twinship are in comparison to other twin relationships.

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There are many obstacles we've faced due to the nature of our twinship, but it's important to us that we express some of the blessings too. First and foremost, it is a wonderful comfort to know that we can always share our thoughts with each other. The two of us can express inane thoughts to each other that we would feel too embarrassed bringing up around anyone else. No matter how stupid one of us feels voicing something, she knows that the other completely understands her perspective because, rest assured, her sister's perspective is the same.

By no means do we need to communicate verbally to appreciate one another's company. As artists we sometimes spend hours at a time working side by side without speaking. In these instances our silence doesn't reflect anger, annoyance, or indifference, nor does it mean that we've run out of things to say to each other. We're not sure we've *ever* been in a situation where we have nothing to discuss!

Sometimes when we take our dog Lily for her daily walk we muse aloud together, but there are some walks when we don't exchange a single word. There is no one else we feel we can do this with without feeling awkward.

When and if we do speak on our walks, the two of us usually confirm the expected: that in our silence we were internalizing the same quandary or thought process. Allison might turn to Lauren and say, "This is going to seem so out of the blue, but I can't stop thinking about—" only for Lauren to interject, "I know. Me too!"

We frequently find ourselves jumping in when the other is in mid-sentence because we were just thinking the very same thing at that very same moment. Especially in instances where our reactions to something or someone are unusual or perhaps even unreasonable, it's satisfying to know that both of us feel the same way.

Our perceptions of people and the associations we make are eerily spot on with each other, even if the perceptions are subtle ones. When we meet someone new who reminds us of someone else, and when we bring it to each other's attention afterwards, more often than not we find that we've drawn the same connections.

Randomly Lauren might say, “You’re going to think I’m crazy, but didn’t that cashier remind you of—” and Allison will finish, “the TA we had in first-year history?” “Exactly!” Lauren will exclaim. And then we’ll say in sync, “Isn’t that weird?” Only, it won’t be that weird for the two of us because throughout our lives, and more so as we grow older, we have had these types of revelations.

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Because we’re always around one another, there is little need to transmit unspoken messages. Perhaps telepathy is innate rather than a developed skill, but in any case we are not programmed or trained to communicate in this way.

When we hear stories of other sets of twins having telepathic twin moments, such as one twin experiencing morning sickness during the first trimester of the other’s pregnancy, or one twin feeling a sudden sense of doom only later to find out that the other was involved in a car accident around the same time that the sensation occurred, we can’t help but wonder whether we would react similarly if we were in those situations.

We may never learn if we have the special twin powers that others have. Regardless, we find telepathy particularly compelling when it involves twins who don’t share the same physical closeness that we do.

In a sense, though, we *can* read each other’s mind basically all of the time. Because we have the same stimuli in our lives, whether sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or feelings, it only makes sense for similar thoughts to swirl around in our heads. Furthermore, we stress over the same things because we have the same fixations and preoccupations. Allison can take some solace knowing that what is bothering her at any given time is also bothering Lauren. We don’t have to vocalize our thoughts to know that we are affected equally.

We even find similarities between our dreams. For whatever reason, our dreams play out not so much like stories or episodes as they do snippets and flashes of nonsense, but it’s true that on the rare occasion when we *can* describe our dreams to each other, we find some mind-boggling commonalities. It even freaks *us* out when we discover that the most random people appear in both of our dreams on the same night—people whom we haven’t thought about in years!

We sometimes think that even if we were unable to use any