

Extract from *The Girls* by Lori Lansens

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

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

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

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

Ruby is my sister. And strangely, undeniably, my child.