

Shadows and Mirrors

My mother tells me that I never marveled at mirrors as an infant. The image in the mirror was nothing special; it was no different to me than what I saw each time I looked over and saw my twin sister, Erin, staring back. We were literally identical back then, so identical that our parents kept our hospital bracelets on us for several weeks, as not to mix up the two of us. When we outgrew our bracelets, our parents marked our names on the bottoms of our shoes and proceeded for the next couple of months to identify us by our constantly clad feet. Not even Erin and I can identify which one of us is which, when looking at any number of pictures of us taken during those first few months.

Being one of a multiple birth is an experience that is difficult to describe. There is something to be said for a relationship that begins as a single being and then suddenly becomes two (or more) people, not to mention the complex that can result very easily from growing up with an exact genetic duplicate at one's side. Unfortunately most people do not appreciate the damage that can arise from raising multiples without teaching and encouraging early on the value of independence and individuality.

Erin and I originally were to be named "Amanda" and "Melinda" - "Mindy and Mandy." Adorable. Abominable. My great-grandmother, who was also a twin, vehemently warned my mother against cursing me and my sister in such a way; she had suffered matching names with her sister (they were June and Jean), and she swore it had scarred the both of them for life. My parents reluctantly agreed upon two very different names and assumed the identity crisis had been thwarted.

Unfortunately even my great-grandmother, with whom we spent the bulk of our early childhood days, gave into the other horrific, yet difficult to resist, temptation that comes along with raising twins: she dressed us in identical clothing on a daily basis, without fail. If there was ever any difference

whatsoever in what we wore, we would wear the same cut of dress or outfit, but in different colors. Our parents were no better. They treated us not as individuals, but as a unit. At birthdays we always shared a cake and candles, and almost all gifts, we came to expect, were either shared or identical (or in different colors), no matter who they came from. What made the least of all sense, however, was the fact that Erin and I almost always got punished together, as well, even though Erin was usually the only one to misbehave.

We began life as "Twin A" and "Twin B" at the hospital. I was "Twin B." Erin asserted her dominance from day one, insisting on more of Mom's nutrients from within the womb, and then taking my natural right to be born first by blocking my path when I was ready to go. In a natural birth, the twin on the bottom comes out first, and in a Caesarean section the twin on top instead gets the honor. Of course, Erin's move made a Caesarean section necessary, effectively placing her first in our birth order. Dethroned from my rightful title as "Twin A" and over a pound lighter than my alpha counterpart, our positions in life had already been determined. As the years would progress I would grow to become little more than her shadow, and I would keep that designation for even more years to

come.

Being somewhat of an introverted child, I was more than happy to be Erin's shadow. I was perfectly content to have her as my only friend, too shy to make friends of my own at school. We developed our own language and became fluent in speaking it, which only helped me to seclude and segregate myself even further from my peers. No one saw what was happening, though. No one did anything to stop it, not when I still had a chance.

My world seemed to come to an end when third grade rolled around and I found myself, for the first time in my life, forced apart from my sister. Our classrooms were only across the hall from one another, and yet it felt like we were light-years away. I didn't know what to do with myself. I felt alone in the crowded classroom. I felt vulnerable. I thought I'd never get through that year . . . and then the next, when once again the school placed us in separate classrooms. I found myself simply unable to interact with my classmates, and it wasn't long before I was the regular target of bullies and pranksters. Erin usually only stuck up for me in secret, as difficult as that was for me to understand. As strange as it was, most of my bullies were actually kids who ran among Erin's circles of friends.

As we got older Erin's friends grew more tolerant of me,

although my social skills continued to remain seriously stunted. Erin didn't seem to mind. We both knew of no other life than one closely intertwined with the other, although I can see now how our level of co-dependence only worked to our detriment. I left all of my important life choices up to her: She took up smoking, so I took up smoking. She lost her virginity with an older guy, and then so did I. She dropped out of school and so, despite my honors classes and exceptional grades, I took my G.E.D. and left school, as well.

As we shifted into adulthood, it seemed only natural when we moved out together. I began to develop some social skills, even making a few friends of my own, but I continued to live as Erin's shadow. She kept charge of our household, taking care of bills, shopping, and other business. I let her, seeing nothing wrong in my aversion toward handling such matters. I became disabled with agoraphobia, the fear or loathing of going outside, and it got to the point where I would only leave the house if I could do so with Erin. We both went to college for a while, but that came to an abrupt stop after Erin wound up pregnant and giving birth to her daughter, Heather.

I ended up staying home with Heather while Erin worked. The arrangement seemed to work well enough, at least for a

while. Heather and I got along amazingly, Erin didn't mind working her various odd jobs, and we were able to make ends meet. Still, I began to long for more than what my life had become.

I took a chance on love, moving across the state to be with a friend I had made a few years previously. That relationship ended up not working out, but it paved the way for other new relationships and new revelations. Only by living hundreds of miles away from Erin, I realized, would I learn to establish an actual identity of my own.

It took the both of us far too long to shake the co-dependence our lives had, until then, groomed us to share. Even now, years after beginning my quest for independence, the impact of living for so long as Erin's shadow has left me with crippling social anxiety, intermittent agoraphobia, and a level of co-dependence with my husband that rivals that which I shared with Erin. I am an individual, but being "alone" - away from a "safe person" - sends me into a panic.

I know that my identity crisis will likely never be completely over. I will always respond just as equally to two names, Lisa and Erin, because people will for the rest of our lives get the two of us confused, no matter what physical

differences arise to distinguish each of us from one another. Moreover, I will forever be conditioned to respond to those two names. I know Erin and I will always have a unique and special connection, one that only other monozygotic multiples might understand. I am grateful to have that connection, although I do wish it could have come at a lesser price.

I have a few simple requests of parents out there who have been blessed with twins, triplets, or other multiples: Dress your children as the individuals they are. Give them their own birthday cakes, even if their birthdays fall on the same day. Separate them in school, starting from day one. Don't make them share everything. Teach them to be independent. Encourage them to teach you their secret language. Don't let the submissive twin become the dominant's shadow.

Let them marvel in the mirror with all of the other kids.