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MY SISTER'S SHOES

My closet is filled with shoes, most of them a half size too big.

Black leather Mary Janes, barely worn but for a few minor scuffs across their rounded toes.

Brown, mid-calf dress boots—soft to the touch but tough on the arches. They made their debut at a meeting in cowboy country last week. I may never wear them again.

And next to those, mud-splattered garden rubbers, red as a brandywine tomato. When she first offered to let me have them, I thought they were too bright for my personality. Now I practically live in them come spring.

There are two empty shoeboxes in the closet as well. During a mid-winter cleaning frenzy, I packed the tan oxfords and another pair I can't even remember into a bag for Goodwill. I knew replacements would soon be on the way.

Circumstantial evidence aside, I'm no shoe fanatic. I rarely buy them, and when I do, they're usually from REI. Hiking boots, sport sandals, cross trainers—these are more my typical style. Most of my fancier footwear once belonged to my twin sister, Pam. Every time I visit her in Berkeley, it seems, I inherit a pair of Eccos or some other quality brand sold at Nordstrom.

"Do you like these?" Pam asks. There's a bit of hesitation in her voice, like she's sorry to see them go. Then comes the resolve, followed by her ultimate selling point. "They're practically new!"

Recently, Pam's tastes have gone from laced shoes and pull-ons to slightly bulkier models secured with Velcro. They're easier to slide over her swollen feet and to fasten with jerky hands. If a pair of shoes becomes uncomfortable—or Pam tires of looking at them, poised and motionless on the platform of her wheelchair—they're destined to become mine.

Pam and I started out as two eggs. She was sunny-side up; I was soft-boiled. In virtually every photograph from our childhood, Pam beams at the camera while I stand solemnly by her side, looking like someone just stole my Raggedy Ann.

Had we been identical twins, we would have shared one hundred percent of our genetic makeup—carbon copies, so to speak. But Pam and I are no more genetically similar than we are to our siblings. Which makes sense, given that she's the spitting image of one of our older sisters and I could reasonably be mistaken for the other.

All we knew was that we shared the same crib, the same stroller, the same haircut, the same blue eyes, the same birthday, the same birthday cake. Every morning, we awoke and took a bath together before my mother dressed us in the matching clothes she'd crafted on her Singer. We spent our days laughing and crying in sync, and went to bed listening to the same fairytales and the sound of each other's breathing as we drifted off to sleep. Identical or not, we were The Twins—a two-for-one deal. And that, we were told, made us special.

Was it nature or nurture that molded us into such distinct personalities? I was a restless infant, known for keeping my parents company while they watched *The Tonight Show* into the wee hours. Pam was more relaxed and outgoing, having earned her nickname, "Pam the Ham," almost as soon as she could talk. She was a pint-sized flirt with our oldest sister's boyfriend, asking him to marry her every time she sat playfully in his lap, and at six or seven, she pulled down her pants for one of the Flaherty boys next door in exchange for a bag of penny candy. I can just see her now, savoring a Tootsie Roll in our driveway, bragging that *she* had gotten the better end of *that* bargain! I gladly conceded the spotlight, observing the people around me from behind my shyness like it was a one-way window. We were perfect complements.

Our dualism was even more pronounced at school, where my efforts to disappear were paralleled by Pam's to flaunt her colors. In her fifth-grade performance as the Hunchback's court jester, she cartwheeled across the stage in her flamboyant, polka-dotted pajamas while belting out, "Who is the monster and who is the man?" to the enchanted audience. That same year, I pushed my limits as Abigail Adams, feeling more like Quasimodo than the First Lady of the United States when I had to kiss John—aka the studly Bruce Hardy—in front of my parents and peers.

Pam and I partitioned our intellectual resources to further minimize competition. I excelled at science and math, she struggled with algebra and had to endure excruciating tutoring sessions with my father, who hung a

blackboard in our kitchen and lectured her on the Pythagorean Theorem as if triangles really mattered. Meanwhile, in Social and Cultural History—the last class we ever took together—Pam blazed through blue notebooks during exams while I sat paralyzed at my desk, unable to focus on anything but the sound of her pen scrambling across the page.

Before we had finished high school, Pam's enthusiasm for politics and a good argument had already positioned her for a future in law. My more eclectic background included forays into social work and environmental activism before I settled on wildlife conservation. Although our paths differed, I ultimately trailed her all over the country—from Vermont to D.C. to Colorado, and finally, to the West Coast, where we're currently separated by eight hundred miles of shoreline. Through the years, we've diverged and come together again like a braided river, with Pam consistently carving channels ahead of me like she did at our birth.

When I was a teenager, my friend Rachel's mother had multiple sclerosis. Mrs. Lieberman was an elegant woman, her disease barely made visible by her nodding head and a lack of balance when she rose from her chair. My mother was ill, too, with cancer, so Rachel and I were kindred spirits of sorts. The only thing all the *other* kids had to worry about was who was making out with whom and what kind of jeans they had on at the time.

Not that I didn't think about boys. In Boston, David Flaherty had wooed me from kindergarten straight through to the fourth grade—the year we moved to the suburbs. I recall the hot summer day my mother told me I had to start wearing a shirt when playing outside with David, those tiny pink nipples apparently no longer appropriate for public viewing. By the time I'd reached junior high and was ready for a training bra, my budding desires were well hidden beneath my family woes.

After school and on weekends, Rachel and I would perch on her bed commiserating like cellmates, taking life way too seriously given our innocence and youth. In addition to being lonely, we both had regular run-ins with our mothers, who had the strong wills necessary to manage their hectic households and failing bodies. But I always felt mine was the lousier hand. At least Mrs. Lieberman had two breasts and didn't have to wear a wig to the grocery store. I worshipped my mother behind closed doors but cringed when she put on pastel petticoats to go square dancing, or drove Pam and me to school in her yellow Chevy Nova—her tangerine White Stag jacket zipped up over a flannel nightgown. Rachel's mother seemed so

much more hip, with her thrift shops and bulk foods and artwork from faraway countries. And then there were our fathers.

Papa Lieberman, as I referred to him then, was a tall, doting professor who prepared exotic meals and insisted I join in. "You're not going to turn down Papa Lieberman's famous vegetarian casserole, are you?" he'd ask, taking mock offense if I said I had to get home. In contrast, my dad—a descendent of the warring MacKay clan and a number cruncher for the defense industry—often sent me running from our own meat-and-potatoes dinner in tears. His temper piled our plates high with tension, my older brother and me receiving the largest portions. Although I knew the Liebermans had their conflicts, too, I begrudged Rachel her close-knit family and found myself wishing the tables were turned.

Nearly two decades later, I stopped by to see Mr. and Mrs. Lieberman during a visit to Massachusetts. My mother was long gone, my father, remarried and estranged from my siblings and me. Parentless, I was eager to see the Liebermans again and to introduce them to Robert, the man who would soon become my second husband.

Mr. Lieberman answered the door. Warm and gracious as usual, he looked very tired—not the type of tired that comes from taking a long hike in the mountains, but that relentless, emotional exhaustion that knows no respite. We exchanged hugs and hellos, and he went to get his wife.

Some things hadn't changed. Books and magazines were scattered about, and I recognized Rachel and her siblings in the framed photos on the shelves. But the furniture was sparse, and Mrs. Lieberman's comfy chair—the one I used to see her reading in so often—was no longer there. Peeking around the corner, I saw medical equipment in the next room, its sterility penetrating me like a sharp needle. Once, this place had felt like home to me: the aroma of a hearty soup, Rachel's brothers racing up and down the stairs, the family's black Lab barking in anticipation. Now the house was quiet, and there was nothing cooking on the stove.

Mrs. Lieberman emerged in a power wheelchair, much like the one Pam relies on today. Her dark eyes bore their familiar spark. But her body belonged to the disease.

The four of us gathered in the living room, Robert and I talking about how we'd met in graduate school and recently moved to Vermont. Mr. and Mrs. Lieberman, their faces shining, caught me up on Rachel and their

grandchildren. We touched upon the past, too, although this seemed like sacred ground.

Then one of them asked, "How's Pam?" There was an awkward silence. I'd intended to tell them, perhaps even come in part to solicit their empathy. Now I felt guilty. Mrs. Lieberman embodied my deepest fears about the future, and I'm sure it showed on my face. I often wondered what it was like for my mother to see her illness through our frightened eyes, and how she reconciled this perspective with her fervor to protect her two baby girls. Many mornings, I'd find her propped up with pillows in her home hospital bed, staring at her hairless head in the mirror across the room. I wanted to move that damn mirror, replace it with a pretty painting.

"Actually, she was diagnosed with MS about a year ago," I said, unable to lie to my old friend's parents. My voice wavered as I started to convey the details.

Mr. Lieberman got up and left the room. Maybe it was more than he could bear, hearing about a woman Rachel's age just beginning her journey with a disease he knew all too well. Or maybe he just wanted to give us a private moment with Mrs. Lieberman, who spoke slowly and with sheer determination.

"Please don't worry that Pam will end up like me," she said. "Not everyone ends up like me."

Summer, 1997. Robert and I had traveled to Quebec to go canoeing at La Mauricie National Park. On the rainy afternoon of our arrival, we checked into a spa for a pre-camping splurge. I decided to call Pam from a payphone after my massage, just to touch base before we paddled off into the wilderness.

"Hi, Paula," answered a voice as familiar to me as my own. Her heavy tone made me anxious, despite the scent of lavender oil wafting from my skin.

"What's wrong, Pam?"

"I got some bad news today. The doctors think I have multiple sclerosis."

Although Pam sounded shaky, she didn't break down. I held myself together, too, as I didn't want to be the one to set us off. Ever since we were kids, neither of us could stand to see the other get into trouble; if one of us got slapped, we both began to cry. Our emotional dynamic became even more complex when we were teens. I started dating before Pam, and I

often stayed out late with my boyfriend to avoid coming home. There was hell to pay if I missed my curfew, which happened more frequently than I care to remember. After being confronted by my father in the stairwell, I'd find Pam sniffling in the bed next to mine. "Why do you have to piss him off like that?" she'd whisper into the darkness, misdirecting her anger toward me. Over time, we'd learned to beef up the membrane between us so that we could endure one another's heartaches—the loss of our mother, my short-lived first marriage, Pam's imminent divorce from her college sweetheart, Sam. But it didn't take much to open up old wounds, or to create new ones from raw material.

Bracing myself against the wall, the phone's cord stretched taut, I listened to Pam describe how they'd ruled out lupus and Lyme disease—two of the usual suspects. She was being treated for carpal tunnel syndrome, but that didn't explain her fuzzy vision. With more tests, they'd finally found the culprit. Her MRI showed lesions in her brain, linked to the neurological attacks she'd been experiencing for years.

Did she say *years*?

Gradually, the memories fell into place. Pam's clumsiness during our day hikes in the Rockies, where she'd tire out quickly and complain that her legs were on fire. "You should drink more," I'd say, urging her to go farther. And that backpacking trip into the Maroon Bells, where Sam and I hopped effortlessly across a stream, only to see Pam stumble like a drunk into the water behind us. And then there was the ski hut expedition near Aspen, which concluded with Sam sporting two loaded packs—one on his back, the other dangling from his chest—so Pam could snowplow down the trail unencumbered. She was deathly afraid of falling.

Still, I couldn't fully absorb the impact of what I was hearing. I'd spent most of my life terrified of cancer, dreading it would someday come back for Pam or me. Cancer had consumed our childhood, beginning with our mother's left breast and not satiated until it had picked away at her bones. But MS? How could that be? We were only thirty-three years old.

Sometimes a fine line separates our friends from our foes. Take gray squirrels, for instance. When they cache nuts in the soil, they provide an important ecological service by helping to regenerate the trees that dropped them. But if they decide to move indoors, squirrels can chew through the plastic coating surrounding your electrical wires, potentially causing a short in the system. Worst-case scenario: your entire house burns down.

The same principle applies to your immune cells. They defend your body from foreign invaders, but become downright dangerous if they turn their forces against the cells insulating your central nervous system. When they attack this insulation, called the myelin sheath, the nerve fibers that send signals to and from the brain, spinal cord, and optic nerve don't function properly. The damaged myelin forms scar tissue (sclerosis) in multiple places. Multiple sclerosis.

Although MS is typically a progressive disease, its course varies widely from person to person. Many people experience remissions between attacks, while others decline more steadily. Women are diagnosed with MS two to three times more often than men, most between the ages of twenty and fifty. Symptoms run the gamut as well, from blurred vision and poor coordination to blindness and paralysis. Some have cognitive issues, some don't. Some can walk, some can't. An estimated two million people live with MS worldwide. None of them, including Pam, knows the story of how their disease began or where it will lead them as it unfolds.

I love to walk. In the forest. In meadows. Along rivers. Even in the city. Each passing step brings calmness, relief. I move forward. I breathe. Walking feels like survival. Walking allows me to leave my demons behind.

Sitting does the opposite. My back hurts, my butt goes numb, and finally, so does my mind. Thoughts no longer flow. I'm like a clogged artery, a heart attack waiting to happen. I need to get up. Get out. Get going.

"When you have worn out your shoes," writes Emerson, "the strength of the sole leather has passed into the fibre of your body." I burn through a pair of hiking boots in a single summer, maybe two. But what about Pam's shoes, with their intact soles and unmarred leather? Does it count if I wear them out for her? Or will their strength remain locked inside forever, a lasting testament to her immobility?

For the most part, Pam takes it all in her stride. On weekdays, she braves San Francisco's public transportation system to get into work, her office located so many floors up in a skyscraper I become lightheaded just thinking about it. Weekends bring downtime with her husband, Norris, and September kicks off the sacred football season—which means don't even bother trying to reach her on Sundays. Norris grew up in Seattle, making Pam a diehard Seahawks fan. I have a statue of the Buddha in my garden. Pam's is graced with green and blue Seahawks gnomes.

But living with MS has changed Pam—how could it not? Her contagious laughter is harder to come by these days, and she's often preoccupied with getting from Point A to Point B. There are the barriers most of us don't ever have to worry about—the bathroom without a grab bar, a broken elevator to the train—and the myriad inconveniences we all have to face. Yet the last thing she wants is for people to feel sorry for her, as though she's any less a person because her immune cells don't know how to behave themselves. I've seen the way some strangers look at her—or don't—and it makes me want to scream, "Hey, that's my twin sister, and she'll kick your ass at Scrabble!"

The truth is I'm the one who can't embrace Pam's disease. Not an hour goes by when I don't yearn to rewrite the script, or at least hit rewind. If I could, I'd strap her leg to mine and enter a three-legged race like we used to do at camp. If I could, I'd help her scramble up those peaks again and wait for her at stream crossings. If I could, I'd carry her to the other side.

Singer k.d. lang's voice filters through the hospital speakers, her liquid melody pierced by the industrial noises of the MRI scanner. With my head immobilized in a padded vice and my body enveloped in metal, the unsettling sounds help distract me from the claustrophobia I acquired from my mother. Pam has described this strange, pseudo-musical experience to me in the past, how she can hear familiar tunes in the thrums, pings, and pounding jackhammers permeating her skull. Maybe it's the anti-anxiety drug at work, but I can see what she means. Within minutes, lang is accompanied by the rhythm of "I want my, I want my, I want my MTV."

The trouble started with a persistent twitch in my right eyelid. I found it annoying at first but became more concerned when muscles in my back, arms, and legs began to twitch, too. I also had some inflammation in my feet, and my balance seemed way out of whack. Although I suspected these symptoms were somehow tied to hormonal changes—isn't everything for a middle-aged woman?—I decided to pay a visit to my physician.

"With today's medications, people do really, really well with MS." The doctor was perusing my medical chart, focused heavily on my family history. After we reviewed my symptoms further, he suggested I see a neurologist to make sure Pam and I hadn't inherited the same fate. "Even if you do have MS," he said, "I'm sure you'll be just fine. I know women who keep running marathons." *Yeah*, I thought. *And I know a woman who would*

pass up front-row tickets to the Super Bowl to be able to walk from her bedroom to the toilet.

According to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, the average person in the United States has a 1 in 750 chance of developing MS. The risk increases to 1 in 40 when a close relative, including a fraternal twin, has the disease, and to 1 in 4 if that relative is an identical twin. In other words, if Pam and I had started as one egg, I would have a twenty-five percent chance of having MS. Because this figure isn't one hundred percent, genetics alone can't explain who gets MS and who doesn't. Some researchers suspect that an infectious agent—the Epstein-Barr virus, for example—might trigger the disease process in genetically pre-disposed people. A lack of sunlight and the Vitamin D it produces could be another factor; MS is less common closer to the equator. Theories abound, but there are still more questions than answers.

By remarkable coincidence, I was referred to the same MS specialist Pam saw in San Francisco when she was first diagnosed. Dr. K now works in Seattle, a leader in her field. The day before Thanksgiving, she listened carefully to my complaints and performed a basic neurological exam. She didn't find anything particularly alarming but wanted me to have an MRI so we could rule out MS. Within a couple of hours, I was being slid into the tube with the k.d. lang/Dire Straits duo.

Dr. K texted me to say my MRI looked good before I even left the hospital. Relieved, I decided to put the whole thing to rest for a while—until I received a copy of the MRI report in the mail a week or so later. Some of the details surprised me.

T2/FLAIR SIGNAL ABNORMALITY IS PRESENT ADJACENT TO THE OCCIPITAL REGION OF THE RIGHT LATERAL VENTRICLE MEASURING APPROXIMATELY 11 X 6 MM.

MINIMAL WHITE MATTER SIGNAL ABNORMALITY IS INDETERMINANT. IN THE PROPER CLINICAL SETTING THIS MAY REPRESENT DEMYELINATING DISEASE, HOWEVER APPEARANCE WOULD NOT BE CLASSIC.

Although I was no medical expert, I understood the terms *abnormality* and *demyelinating disease* and didn't want to see either of them associated with my MRI. I emailed Dr. K and we connected by phone on a snowy day in

mid-December. I ducked into the doorway of a local bank when I received her call, my cell phone pressed hard against my ear.

"Can we can talk about my results now that I've seen the report?" I asked, clenching my jaw so she wouldn't hear my teeth chatter. She pulled up my records and read the findings aloud. I probed her on the meaning of abnormality and how it applied to my right lateral ventricle.

"You might want to come back for another MRI in a year. Just to be safe."

Pam and I were eight years old, still living in Boston. It would be another year before our parents relocated to the suburbs to evade forced busing, the court's controversial attempt to desegregate the public schools. Another year before my mother found a tumor in her breast, causing my intrinsic worry to metastasize into full-blown anxiety. Another year before I had to wear those ugly green glasses, before I walked into Bridge Elementary knowing nobody and wary of everybody. For the moment, there was only Kilroy to contend with. And that was bad enough.

When I try to imagine Kilroy today, I can't distinguish him from the quintessential neighborhood bully. Scrappy. Mean smirk. Dirty blonde bangs draped over his eyes. The first time Kilroy cornered Pam and me, we were hanging out with David Flaherty—who ran home to get his older brother. Now it was just the two of us on our little red bikes, rainbow streamers hanging from our handlebars, spokes decorated with neon plastic covers that went click-click-click as we rode.

Pam was ahead of me when Kilroy stepped in front of her, causing her to backpedal hard on her coaster brake. I came to an abrupt stop, too, like I'd hit an invisible wall. *We should have taken a different street!* I thought, wishing we were closer to David's house. Kilroy straddled Pam's front tire, spewed some tough words in her face. But it wasn't until he gave her shoulder a shove that I broke myself free.

"You leave my sister alone," I yelled, jumping off my bicycle and running full speed toward Kilroy's chest. The next thing I knew, I was somersaulting backwards along the sidewalk, pavement scraping the skin off my elbows. Lying there dazed and looking up at the sky, I heard the comforting sound of a neighbor's voice. She emerged from her doorway waving her arms, hollering at Kilroy that he should be ashamed of himself for picking on girls. *Is Pam okay?* The memory goes black.

Sclerosis has another definition: an inability or reluctance to adapt or compromise; excessive resistance to change.

On the eve of our fiftieth birthday, Pam and I had a huge fight. I'd felt it brewing over the phone for months—probably much longer—but it didn't surface until we were strolling along the shore of Puget Sound. She and Norris had just arrived in Seattle for our traditional birthday rendezvous. We were discussing plans for the celebration when Pam suddenly proposed we each go our own way the next day and meet up for dinner late in the afternoon. I stopped walking, unable to speak. We'd been talking about this birthday since before we'd turned forty-nine.

"I don't identify with being a twin like you do," she said in her lawyerly voice, like she was describing one of her cases about software mergers. "We're basically just siblings born at the same time."

Robert and Norris glanced at each other nervously.

"What can you possibly mean by that?" I asked, peering down at her through my sunglasses. I hoped she couldn't see the water in my eyes.

"All I'm saying is that spending our actual birthday together isn't a big deal to me. I could just as happily watch the Seahawks game with Norris and celebrate with you later."

The Seahawks? Are you fucking kidding me? I felt myself start to panic. Not only had I gone to a lot of effort exploring options for our fiftieth—which had now been usurped by football—but Pam was dismissing our twinhood as a fluke of nature and nothing more. In her mind, we weren't special after all. We were run-of-the-mill sisters.

The conversation quickly escalated. Selfish. Ungrateful. Pam and I pummeled each other with words while Robert threw a Hail Mary, trying in vain to remind us of how much we loved each other. I finally muttered something that got under her skin and she zipped away, sobbing, in her electric wheelchair. As I watched her go, I thought about how profoundly unlike we were—our temperaments and interests; her passion for sports, mine for the outdoors. In many ways she was right—we really *were* just sisters. If we weren't, would we even be friends?

I knew Pam could be stubborn—she got that from my father. I suppose I did, too. But was she really willing to sacrifice our birthday plans just to bring home her point? What I didn't know was that she'd been wrestling for weeks with how to tell me she wanted more than anything to see the Seahawks play on her birthday. I didn't know that the following year, I'd go bear-watching with Robert on our fifty-first, having decided that

Pam *was* right about one thing: we both had to do what made us happiest, even if that meant letting go. Most of all—and this had taken me half a century to understand—I didn't know what it was like to be Pam.

It's easy for me to box Pam into being a victim—a grown woman rendered powerless by disease. In my low moments, I can see myself that way, too: first, a mother with cancer, then a twin with MS, and now even a small chance that I have it as well. Instinctively, I try to take control; Pam pushes back, then vice versa. Each of us wanting more—and at the same time, less—from the other. Both of us trying to be whole in a life that has always been divided by two.

Pam and I are at "The Walk Shop" in Berkeley. We come here every Christmas to check out the latest shoe styles. Pam eyes a funky new boot sitting high on the rack. I'm dubious—it looks narrow for her foot—but I get it for her anyway. "This is so cute," she says, coveting the boot with her hands. "What do you think?" I glance down at my feet, unsure how to answer.