

Corpus Peculiarus



By

Katie Jacobson

RIP
1985 - 2012

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In loving memory of Katie Jacobson, 1985 - 2012

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Disintegrating Christine

*Singing sweet savages lost in our world
This big-eyed girl sees her faces unfurl
Now she's in purple
Now she's the turtle
Disintegrating Christine
–Siouxsie and the Banshees, “Christine”*

Most people would know her as Eve, but that was never her name at all. She was called Eve, and Eve, and finally Jane, but her true name was Christine.

Eve was from the garden. Eve was the origin of sin and Christine¹ and Christine² and Christine³ would be forced to suffer for the sins of others, paradise gone to the snakes and the fallacy of phallocentricity and I believe any one of them would have chosen snakes over the sins they were dealt.

Christine¹ was first of the Christines but she is the only one still living. Her previous incarnations, Eve and Eve and Jane, are dead, and they were never really her to begin with. Christine¹ says that at one point in her life there were twenty of her. They came in groups of three like the Father the Son and the Holy Ghost and I do not know all their names, just Eve and Eve and Jane, and how does one keep track of so many people

¹ Christine Costner-Sizemore, 1927 – . Diagnosed with Multiple Personality Disorder in the 1950s. Subject of *The Three Faces of Eve*, written by her psychiatrists.

² Christine Chubbuck, 1944 – 1974. Television news anchor for “Suncoast Digest” from Sarasota, Florida. Committed suicide during a live broadcast via a gunshot to the head.

³ Christine Burns, 1954 – 2000. New Jersey schoolteacher raped and murdered in her suburban home.

inside oneself? It is possible they did not have names in the traditional sense of Christian names, but instead had descriptive appellations, and they all made a home together in the Appalachians.

Christine¹ was not always many. Once she was young; young, she was one. And the threes started. A witness to two deaths plus one accident equals three, all within three months and within Christine¹ the threes began. The trinity unholy. Knowledge thrust upon her before she was ready. Knowledge only of the evil, candid, no thought of saviors. She filled with shameful naked hers.

And it was years before Christine¹ ventured out again. Thorny plants may offer fruit. Knowledge of a world, of herself, for she contained an entire world. To be a self, rather than selves. The fruit equally forbidden: the headshrinker, that taboo, and she had truly thought that being a housewife was Eden. Housewives. The idea of it. Them. Her, all of the hers. The fact that she was many precluded the possibility of paradise, and she had first to remove the fig leaves that no one else realized were there. The mere suggestion of nakedness was unthinkable without even touching upon what brought it about, but declaring she had never been in Eden to begin with was the only way she could justify risking permanent banishment. Unfortunately, this admission only damned her further.

The sins of others. Born of ribs. Christine¹'s sin was to be too much like a man. Her selves were plucked from her naked and writhing and ashamed. Not babies, not natural, not woman's curse, and slowly her own self, Christine¹, not Eve, not Eve, not

Jane, not the strawberry girl or the banana split lady, but real true naked Christine¹, ribless Christine¹, picked dry Christine¹ began to be lost to herself as well.

She went from too many to too few. Three two one zero. She no longer owned her life. The headshrinker, that taboo, thought Christine was interesting. One of a kind, if one who is many can be one of anything. Thought Eve and Eve and Jane might make a nice story, might make a pretty penny, daddy needs a new pair of shoes. Snakeskin. His forked tongue. Christine¹ diverged from herself. Self, singular; that real hero ribless Christine¹. She'd been many and then one and finally none and she thought there was a reason they called them shrinks. He'd bought her life's rights, though from whom it's unclear. Naked Christine¹ was blindfolded and spun around and pushed down the path that led once again out of Eden.

But she turned around. Maybe it was a part of a ghost of one of her selves that called to her, that stayed only long enough to right her. And she was one. She had a life. Life, singular, and it was hers, and she was one. She had won. Her shame disappeared when she realized she wasn't the only one (much less ones) who was naked.

And naked she sought Christine².

Before Budd, before *Network*, there was Christine², the virgin, the dateless wonder. Taking matters into her own hands. Cocking the gun and the seed shot forth and the blood pooled on the white beneath her. Her fatal orgasm, permanent stain.

And Christine² was good, Christine² was clean, pure, virgin, lily lily fresh. She lived no illusion though of Barbiedoll parts, she knew of sin, she just hadn't partaken. And the seed which was original sin planted itself in her mind and that reptile part began

to swell until it became how she was defined. In her absence she became defined by her lack. Once she was gone, all anyone could talk about was what she'd never done.

Christine²'s sin was her shame at being sinless, her hatred of virginity. She was brash and cold and those who knew her described her as manly. The man she desired described her as manly when he wanted soft and pure and feminine and clean and good and she was. Her desire for sex was manly, but the emptiness in her life was bigger than the one between her legs. She could have had sex. She wanted accomplishment, she wanted love.

An obstinate girl from the Gulf Coast of Florida. A virgin but not virginal in the classic sense. Strong-jawed, dark-haired, thick-eyebrowed, hairier-than-average arms, deep-voiced. Determined and rude, she only avoided the title of bitch because she was too manly for that particular derision. Christine² viewed her virginity as a detriment, a blemish she wanted to rid herself of, but because she was not the delicate, white-gowned and sunbeam-haired she lacked the appeal of fresh fruit. Because she desired she was not desired.

If loss of virginity is for a woman a ritual bloodletting, then Christine² was the truest master of ceremonies. A loss of innocence – unmarried, there could be no doubt she would go straight to hell.

There was nothing gentle about it. Reviled and avoided but Christine² could not avoid herself. So she made a plan.

Sunny. Sunny Florida, sunny disposition. Gulf coast, sunny Gulf coast, Suncoast Digest, hard to digest. A manly woman living in a man's world, Christine could not win by her own volition.

That morning in Sarasota began like all of Christine²'s mornings. Early, dewy, defiant, broken. She smiled because she knew a secret driving in to work with the sunrise. Relegated to human-interest, stories of kittens, the fluff of ladies washing dishes or laundry, ineffectual and sudsy, Christine²'s position as an anchor for the Suncoast Digest could be viewed as yet another shortcoming. Beautiful news for beautiful ladies, but when the blood and guts came it was time for the real men to step in. Her airtime recently pre-empted by footage of a shooting, Christine² thought, *well*.

Bleeds it leads. Bleeds it pleads, pleas mislead to bloody deeds. Would not heed the pleas she bleeds. Bleeds and bleeds, her disease, can't appease.

That morning Christine² reclined before the whiteness of the set. It was her first time. With her right hand she raised the shaft and moved her fingers slowly back. Maybe she screamed. Some women do. What shot forth from the shaft held the power not of life, but of death. And like a bridal shroud, the blood pooled around her as she twitched and writhed, still clasping the shaft.

Live and in color, it was a first for everyone. It took a moment to realize Christine² had been serious, that she'd really done it. Eventually the blood stopped seeping from her hole. Christine²'s first time was also her last. They didn't turn off the cameras until her body began to twitch.

They would say she was such a pretty girl and how sad. How she was such a sad, pretty girl. How pretty it was that she'd been so sad.

When Christine² produced the gun from under her desk, they thought it was a joke. When she raised it to her head, when she pulled the trigger, when they heard the bang, when she fell forward, when the blood pooled around her. An elaborate joke.

Blood spatter is surprisingly far-reaching. As they cleaned up the studio they considered the fact that their initial reaction when they saw the gun had been anger. That Christine², what does she think she's doing?

She knew what she was doing. It wasn't what they thought. Ever the journalist, Christine² kept a set of notes in front of her, made sure to refer to this debut as an "attempted" suicide. Just in case.

A test pattern appeared and Christine² was scattered into the sea. People said a few words and her ashes rippled and sank with the waves. She was replaced with reruns of "Gentle Ben," which the citizens of Sarasota found much easier to digest than Christine²'s Suncoast and her tainted final signoff.

And across that sea, long before Christine² ever desired or lacked or blew out her brains, before her ashes had a chance to spread, before worries of sin and fruit and she was just a girl and she was good, there was born a red-haired baby. And she would be Christine³.

Born in Leeds, Christine³ came to the United States for a love that was destined to fail. On the night she was killed her daughters were staying with her ex-husband.

He came in, he had a knife. She must have come to the door, she must have heard a struggle or a sound. They say it happened in the front hall. There must have been a struggle, or a sound.

Well-respected among her colleagues, the other teachers said it was a tragedy. That was the word the girls heard, her students, early snowfall, the day Christine³ didn't show up, where's Mrs. Burns? So uncharacteristic. At the end of the day, first snowfall delicate outside, faculty filed antlike from the back offices, murmuring, and the students weren't told for three days. A tragedy, and how do you explain it to two-hundred teenage girls without once referencing Shakespeare? At once it was like she hadn't existed, not physically, and her things were removed immediately. The school was good at getting rid of messes. It was almost Christmas and there were plenty of crisp bows for the tying.

Upon the white tiled floor, the streaks of Christine³'s blood patterned in candy-cane stripes. Her rosy cheeks, her pale skin, her red hair and bright blue-green eyes. Staring up like ice. If it hadn't been real it would have seemed like an exaggeration.

Christine³ taught History and English and she had once told her class that they were all going to hell. Lessons in Christianity from the *World Religions* textbook. No one is sinless and God is a harsh judge. It was a class of twelve-year-olds and they believed her and in three years she would be dead.

Her sin, since she by her own admission had one, was to be a woman alone, and to be happy. To play pranks on her neighbors, ambushing their lawns with pink flamingoes; to slip tired students cans of V8 for fortification; to pass out M&Ms during tests and call them smart pills; to refer to an isolated group of girls as "Siberia;" to get

students aged thirteen to tell her friend, the math teacher, that her shirt looked like it had hair all over it; to teach them aged fourteen about the Defenestration of Prague; to have hair the color of the Devil and play Glinda the Good Witch in the school play, decked out in abundant pink taffeta, trilling. Now streaked upon tile, or sunk into carpet, or footprinted down the street as he left her. Follow the yellow brick road.

Invasion. Her home, her body, her body. The knife and his rape, repeatedly, repeat offender. The neighbors were sad, then scared, then angry.

The students were forced to sing songs. Mustn't disturb that prep-school brand of peppermint-scented cheer; just add a couple songs to the holiday concert. Somber but hopeful. Commemorate Christine³, her life; write messages on the wall and not necessarily attend class and stand in rows huddles and sell cupcakes and dress in bright colors and decorate the hallways with stars and snowflakes.

Christine³ remained an Englishwoman until the end. Proper and polite and carefully guarding the private. Whatever sin there may have been remained unknown, although attempts to exploit it were explored. If she'd met a man, mysterious, if he could've been the one to invade and bloody the red and white and turn Christine³ inside out. And when that avenue was abandoned it was three years before another turn was made.

Eviscerating Christine³ there was nothing he had against her specifically. What else to do on a Thursday in December, he must have thought. The thinnest dusting of snow melted before the crimson footprints could've shown up. Unlike Christine² it

wasn't his first time, nor was it his last. And he too knew what he was doing. She wasn't his first or his last.

That snake, that knowledge, thrust upon and into Christine³ as the last thing she would ever feel or learn. An apple forced down her throat, choke.

A sort of knowledge Christine³ had hoped never to impart, done her part, time to part, ripped apart. Christine³ was a teacher but this, her most memorable lesson, was one she'd never hoped to teach.

And bright lights in the students' faces as they sang Amazing Grace. Amazing the lack of grace with which that body destroyed that body. She fell from the sky. How sweet the sound. Did she consider herself among the hell-bound? She fell very far. They sang for her at church too, a churchgoer, and I wonder if they considered her among the hell-bound. And Kansas she says was the name of the star.

Maybe Christine³ saw Eve. Maybe that fatal shove into the garden of mostly evil allowed her to see a woman beckoning to her, singing sweetly that this was fruit not meant for anyone. And maybe it was Eve, or Eve, or Jane, and maybe the three were one, Christine¹, and Christine² followed close behind. Bound for heaven or hell or nowhere.

Virgins On The Dole

I am immune from sanity or insanity - I am an empty present box all unwrapped for somebody else's disposal. I am a throw away egg shell with no life inside me - For I am not touchable but a slave to nothingness.

-June/Jennifer Gibbons, September Poems.

Jennifer:

We were born in Wales. Poor. Born different, a different color. Mommy and
Daddy took us to school. They did, but we wouldn't listen.

Teacher told Mommy and Daddy we don't talk right, she looked at us like we don't look right and she talked about we don't talk right. We don't do right. We do what we do.

Mommy and Daddy took us to doctors. Our girls don't talk right, they said. Chirping like birds, not smooth, can't understand what our girls are saying. They said help us get our girls to talk, talk real, talk normal, our beautiful little twins, our Jennifer and our June. Our Junie and Jenny. And twins make up languages they sure do, the doctor said, and only they can understand it and it's normal. Twins do it, it's a twin thing.

And Mommy and Daddy protested and said they do not speak Normal they just speak Twin and the doctor said maybe we are shy. Maybe we are shy. Are we shy? Eventually they realized we were speaking Normal. English. Little staccato English, arrhythmic bursts unlike others' fluid tones, unrecognizably dissonant. Different.

We were two little girls. We were the same as each other. And we were going to stay that way.

June/Jennifer:

I am she. She is me. I am we. We are she.

We two are one. We two are one. We, too, are one. We are two who are one. We two who are we?

Together forever. Two heads, two bodies, one mind. One? We are the same. If we weren't the same as each other, who would we be?

Jennifer:

She steps when I step. She knows to step. Ducks walking down the hall, one after the other, synchronized. There is no more point in speaking. Don't go to school anymore. We file down the hall and into our room, and the door closes behind us. We write stories and play with paper dolls and send away for catalogues and magazines with our dole money, we pine for the glamour or America and boys and discos and real life. Our mother has started leaving our meals at our door. Said *girls, don't be weird at the*

dinner table when our forks lifted in sync, when we chewed, swallowed, and took sips of water like our bodies were one, too, and not just our minds. Our family is afraid of us, and now we never have to leave.

June:

We are not tall. We are thin, but not pretty. Scraggly hair, calf-length dresses. The same. I have never been to a disco and neither has she; she has never been to a disco and thus neither have I because we do everything together, the same. We walk in sync. What is my name? I know it begins with a J. I'm afraid. I'm afraid that she is controlling

me. And I'm afraid of what if she stops. And I'm afraid that I may be controlling her, even though I don't mean to be.

It is true, we two are one. We are two who are one. What if, in the womb, we split not into two complete people, but into two combinations of two halves each, so that we truly are the same person? And we can't live without each other because we quite literally are each other's other halves. I believe it. I am beginning to believe it. Because Jennifer is just like me. I have to be like her because she is me. If I wasn't like her, I wouldn't be like me, and then who would I be like?

If I didn't like her because she doesn't like me, then who would I like?

June/Jennifer:

What would she say if she saw I was writing this? I fear she doesn't have to see to know. I remember, and so does she. We own each other's memories. I am turning my head to the right and so is she. We know each other's eyes because they are our own. We

blink together. We confuse together; we are confused together. Confused with one another. I know that she must feel the same because I know everything about her. And she about me. She knows what I am thinking because she is thinking it too.

Look up. Cough. Blink twice.

June:

Now that we are teenagers it is time we started leaving the house. There is only so much one or two can do in a room alone with themselves. This time we will make sure that people see us.

There are some American boys that live nearby. And plenty of abandoned buildings. The lure of love and the lure of destruction. Either way there will be sparks.

Jennifer:

By definition identical twins are only half a person. We were not meant to be two. This is an accident. We are just making up for the failure of our egg to remain intact.

When you look at us it's blurry like no glasses. The lines aren't sharp. Who are we? Mirrorballs at the disco. How many girls are there? We look exactly alike. Spinning round and round, flashes of light in her eyes and flashes in mine. Are they of recognition or of fear? Are they the same thing? My fear is this recognition.

Disidentification. That we may be separated. That we may never be separated. That we are not the same person, or that we are.

June:

We are playing with fire. We have been our whole life. Matches in the bedroom. Small fires we put out on each other's legs. We have always been matched. But now the fires are expanding beyond this room. And we'd always wondered what it would be like out of these walls. Turns out oxygen feeds a flame.

Reckless and uncontrollable. I suppose that's accurate. How can I be expected to control me when half of me is her, and half of her is me? We can only be we. Set loose, we can only blaze incomprehensible to anyone who is not us. Incomprehensible even to ourselves. The fires have made the papers. Some brush, a barn. No one knows what we are saying when we speak.

I am tempted by suicide. I have scratches on my face from her nails. I want to kill her.

Fire is an undivided whole. There may be separate flames, but you cannot put out one without extinguishing the entire beast, or at least disabling it. It is why we haven't killed ourselves, why we haven't killed each other. It's the same thing. When I see her, I see fire. Years behind us burned and wasted, all rising up my throat and chest and I can't even scream if she doesn't, too. And when she did, each finger around my neck squeezed in sync with mine around hers, and we stopped at the same instant. When we set fires we each strike a match and throw it on, in perfect unison. We couldn't do it any other way. A passerby might see the silhouette of two girls dark in front of a single fire, but he would be wrong. We are only one.

Jennifer:

Sometimes I hate her. Usually I hate her. She is me. I hate me. I am her. She hates me. She hates she. We hate we.

I want to be without her but without her I wouldn't be. Where would my blood pump to if not her heart? Which of us is real, and which is the copy? Identity is cruel. We are doubles through and through. Our DNA is acidic, sadistic. And we need it to survive; it is the very essence of us. It is what is destroying us. We are the essence of each other.

And we know how to play it cool, virgins on the dole sipping beers with the American boys in our identical mini-dresses. Those boys made the mistake of seeing two of us, the same mistake everyone else makes. And as we drank and smoked I felt myself beginning to depart from reality, from my reality of us. I felt myself. While we were hallucinating, were two different people. And when he fucked me he fucked only me. One girl, two bodies. And he chose mine.

For the first time there is something that separates us. I love it and I am terrified. She hates us. She's always thought she was the one in charge. Neither of us is in charge.

June:

On the altar, Jennifer and Carl. Snuck into a church and they put on a show. High on pot and glue and brandy, it was like a ritual. Clothing removed sacredly.

He said a prayer and told us both to strip. Red roses and stained glass, a hollow haunt of organ music swelling Hallelujah. We lay in front of him like offerings and he pulled her close. He was struggling but she was still, and I was still. I was still alone and he could not squeeze himself inside of her. When he tossed her aside it was my turn but the same thing happened, I could not be penetrated. And I could not move to try, could not move to try to let him, the drugs and her eyes on me.

He tried her again and succeeded. Consecrated, consummated, desecrated. Body and blood. I lay naked and refused to shiver.

Jennifer:

Her name is June. My name is Jennifer. We are two girls but we are one. We do not know anyone else. We do not speak to anyone else. We set fires. We do drugs with American boys. We eat our meals in our bedroom. Every movement we make is synchronized. We are seventeen. We are writers. We are on the dole. We are twins. She is a virgin.

We both strike matches, but only one of us can pour on the gasoline. It is usually her. This time it was me. I do not know what will become of us if we are caught.

June:

A week after Jennifer's debut, Carl gave me another chance. And this time she watched from the pew.

June/Jennifer:

Both of us cannot be. One plus one cannot equal two. If we are to succeed, we must not be we. If we are to function, we cannot be we. One of us must go. One of us must go. June and Jennifer, Junie and Jenny, we must ignore the urge to fuse. For as long as we both shall live, we do. We can't. We must not both live. One of us must go. One equals one. That much is clear. Anything else is too confusing.

Our hands on each other's necks. Bony fingers: whose hands, whose neck? We are not sure. To choke out the life of your other half, to suck it into yourself and become whole, one, to no longer be a fraction, to be certain. This is all we want, for ourselves and for each other. We cannot be one as two. One of us must become one, and one of us must cease.

June:

From the courthouse to the holding cell, we walked in sync like always. They'd found out we were behind the fires and we did not defend ourselves. If they asked us to move, we would not; if they asked us to eat or speak, we would give no response. And soon we found out we would be going to Broadmoor. What notoriety! Here, the halls are narrow and the lights are dim. Lamps swing and flicker orangey yellow as guards and patients led by guards lumber to beds or tables or cells. Beds with straps, and chairs with the same. Thick brown leather, holes every centimeter, broad, tough, strong. Like belts, being whipped.

If not for the memory of the summer, it could have been almost exciting, as much as anything ever was. If not for the summer, the boys and the fires and the drugs, we wouldn't have ended up here. She wouldn't be staring daggers at me refusing to let us start making our beds.

But it is fitting that September take on this melancholy glow. The setting summer sun. Now all gray. If it hadn't been for the summer, nothing would have happened.

Jennifer:

Here in this cage they've put me in, I am only me. I do not know what to do without her, so I do nothing. I stare at walls without seeing them. I do not move or speak. How can I without knowing what she's doing at this exact moment? Without being sure that we are doing the exact same thing? I stare at walls. I do not eat. How can I when I do not know when she is biting, chewing, swallowing? They had to inject us to get us to separate. We were on each other's necks again. Sometimes we just reach a boiling point; it is always the same point. We are always the same. And so without her to be the same as, I am nothing. I must be nothing. When I woke up I was conscious of the fact that she wasn't here. I knew it before my eyes opened because I felt unwhole. I am. I am, and just I cannot exist because I am only a part of we. I am not me, she is not she, I and she are only we. And as long as we are we, existing, we will never be she and me. We can never. And so we has to end.

June:

They've separated us in here, but this is not the first time we've been pried apart.

Age fourteen: boarding schools, separate. Result: catatonia. Sent home in a matter of weeks. We were sure it would be the same thing here. I was sure, so I can be sure that she was sure.

Those words: criminally insane. Is that what we are? We set fires. That is criminal. We are one girl in two bodies. We cannot survive apart but to survive we must be parted. That is insane.

She wants us to be equal. There is a murderous gleam in her eye. Dear lord, I am scared of her. She is not normal ... someone is driving her insane. It is me.

I am just a girl. She is just a girl; we are just girls. We are just a girl. A girl.

June/Jennifer:

To become whole we must be halved. We have agreed. We cannot both be. And the one remaining must take the pieces and assemble them all within herself.

Assimilation, normality.

One of us needs to go, but how? Who? Suicide is not an option. For what would the survivor do? Sororicide, despite our mutual attempts, was also truthfully no good. It would have to be a question of will. But whose will will it be? What is the point of will in a place like this, where time is interminable?

June:

There was the day we were released. Broadmoor'd had enough of us. And how soon it would be, that we were both to be released. It was a matter of hours between the time we walked out of that gate and the moment her heart failed. She was physically quite healthy, only thirty years old. Doctors couldn't say why. But they never could.

I was surprised she agreed to be the one. We were surprised she agreed to be the one. But she had always wanted to be the one. To be in control. And in death she remains such, irrevocably. Only by her hand, or heart, am I left to be in control of myself, to graft together an identity, an entirety. Grappling and floundering. It was easier when we moved together, but we promised.

In the end she won. The sickest contest. In the end she won, she was the one, I was left as one, and I was left as no one. Normality.

Spoils

1.

My name is Baby H, and I was a surprise. The first words I ever heard were, “Oh! We’ve got another one!” said in a tone of panic. I guess when there’s 32 limbs floating around it’s pretty easy to lose count. And being buried underneath five brothers and two sisters, there wasn’t too much room for me to spread out. So it’s also possible it was partially my fault I was missed. I had to curl up just to fit.

Of course, my name isn't really Baby H. My brothers and sisters and I all have real names, but in order to protect our identities we'll be referring to ourselves by letter and/or age. Everyone knows our mom's name, though, and our grandma's and grandpa's. For a short time, our address was posted on Wikipedia along with a photo of our house. Still, if the news media wants to keep up this little charade and act like we have any privacy whatsoever, who am I to put it to an end? The eight of us are known as Babies A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H. We also have six older siblings: 2a and 2b (the twins), 3, 5, 6, and 7.

>>>NEWSFLASH:

Wikipedia has been updated. It seems we have names now. They are:

1. Noah Angel Solomon - male, 3 lbs 11 oz (Formerly Known As Baby A)
2. Maliah Angel Solomon - female, 2 lbs 12 oz (FKA Baby B)
3. Isaiah Angel Solomon - male, 3 lbs 4 oz (FKA Baby C)
4. Nariah Angel Solomon - female, 2 lbs 8 oz (FKA Baby D)
5. McCai Angel Solomon - male, 1 lb 8 oz (FKA Baby E)
6. Josiah Angel Solomon - male, 2 lbs 12 oz (FKA Baby F)
7. Jeremiah Angel Solomon - male, 1 lb 15 oz (FKA Baby G)
8. Jonah Angel Solomon - male, 2 lbs 11 oz (FKA Baby H) (me)

Our brothers and sisters are:

1. Elijah Makai Solomon - male, age 7 (FKA 7)
2. Amerah Yasmeeen Solomon - female, age 6 (FKA 6)
3. Joshua Jacob Solomon - male, age 5 (FKA 5)
4. Aidan Solomon - male, age 3 (FKA 3)
5. Calyssa Arielle Solomon - female, age 2 (FKA 2a)
6. Jasmiah Kai Solomon - male, age 2 (FKA 2b)

So forget the veil, I guess. All of this may or may not be less confusing than the letter/number monikers so briefly assigned to us. You can call me Jonah, if that makes you feel more comfortable. But let's be honest. We will never be individuals anyway.

While we're at it, I might as well let you know where to find us. Or, well, where to find our older siblings, our mom, and our grandparents. None of us have been inside the house yet. We're too little. But if you're in the area, please drop by; I'm sure they'd love to see you. I'm sure they'd love to have their photos taken, or to give an interview. Just please don't threaten their lives; it does become tiresome. The address is 13604 Sunrise Drive in Whittier, California. Wikipedia describes it as a "well-kept cul-de-sac," which I think is pretty damn funny. Not, as I've said, like I've seen the place. I just can't imagine. Seventeen people living any one house won't remain well-kept for long. Although Grandpa is leaving soon, or so I've heard. Still. Sixteen.

Of course, that information isn't still in the article. I guess that charade – privacy – is still going on. But no worries, a thorough search through old versions of the article will indeed turn up the information. Don't you just love Wikipedia's thorough archival system?

People say our mom's crazy. Which, I mean, she must be a little bit to have fourteen kids. They're calling her "Octo-mom," which sounds like some hideous sea monster, like octopus, which I wish she was because then maybe she could actually deal with all of us better, all those arms. I haven't even left the hospital yet and already I feel neglected. In the ICU, the nurses set us up in birth order, so whenever Mom comes to visit I'm always the last one she holds. Sometimes it takes an hour before she reaches my incubator.

There weren't supposed to be this many of us. They said she only had six embryos implanted, two of which split into two sets of identical twins. There's no telling

which of us they are yet – because it hasn't come out in the media yet, but also because I honestly don't know. We all kind of look like wrinkled pieces of meat right now, which is a pretty apt comparison, considering the reason Mom implanted that many embryos at once was they were going to go bad, like a package of ground beef might.

Well, we didn't go bad. I mean, I guess. We're here at least. Certainly not rotted. We're the opposite, in fact – a little too fresh, a little too pungent. We are quite breakable.

2.

This is going to be a changing day in your life. Go ahead, let the booming drawl fill your head until you believe it. You will. But to be honest – I've been delivering that line on almost a daily basis for the last seven years and it's tough to believe people are

still buying it. I guess gullibility is to be expected when your target audience is overweight, borderline-retarded, middle-aged housewives.

I come on in the afternoon. After school, before dinner, when mom's picked up the kids but hasn't yet started the roast. I've been told I go well with the first drink of the evening, and I don't doubt it.

You're familiar with The Dr. Phil Show, I'm sure. You know I'm not even a real doctor? Well. Not anymore. But no need to bring up that ugliness. I can look sharp in a suit and I'm friends with Oprah. These days, that's enough.

Still, people come to me for advice, sure, and I am not afraid to give it to them. Thankfully verbal abuse has a certain comical allure. Just ask the Nielsons.

Pedophiles in the pillory, I do it every day. Here ye, here ye. It's good for these women to get a little self-righteousness alongside their double chocolate fudge diet cake. It's pretty clear they'll never lose those last ten pounds and they need some way to feel superior. Indignation builds an appetite and I've got to sell books somehow. The formerly obese are a wonderful draw, people who can fit into one leg of their old pants, that kind of thing. I guess superiority's a part of it too.

And then I heard about this Suleman woman, gave birth to eight babies. That's the same number my son's golden retriever had, and I thought, I gotta get her on the show. Octuplets. These women, the ones who watch, well, they usually have kids of their own. So they know what raising maybe one or two is like. I heard she already had six other kids at home, no husband. That's fourteen. This woman was going to be vilified,

and I was going to be the first one at the pyre. Jay's dog only had that one litter before we got her spayed. Here's a picture:



Of course, those aren't really his dogs. I found that picture on the internet. But you get the idea. They don't look like something you'd want to have much contact with.

3.

I thank God every day for my children; I really do. Watch my show if you don't believe me. Sure, they can be a handful, but Jon helps, and we have plenty of other helpers helping us with our eight little blessings. That's how we think of them – that's how we came up with the title of the book, actually. *Multiple Bles8ings*. Isn't that cute? The 8 is like an S. I always say, it's a good thing my name isn't Jen; we'd have to have two more kids! For some reason, Jon doesn't find that very funny.

The first thing I do every morning is make sure my face and hair are looking good. It isn't selfish, it's practical. I want to present a well-put-together image of motherhood, to be a person my kids and even other moms can look up to. If one mother out there, struggling with her young children, can think to herself *now how would Kate handle this?* and it actually helps her, I've done my job.

Now, this Suleman woman I've been hearing about – the Octomom? – I just think that's sick. Those poor kids, and she already had so many. What was she thinking, implanting that many embryos into her body? It's just selfish, and dangerous. I really do think she has some kind of mental illness. Truly unfortunate. Those kids won't even have a father.

Is Nadya Suleman a Christian? I'm not sure, but I kind of doubt it.

4.

You may not remember us. But think hard. Maybe we'd be a Jeopardy! question. Or answer, rather. *These Canadian sisters, the first quintuplets to survive infancy, became a major tourist industry and source of revenue for Ontario.* Who are the Dionne quintuplets! Or maybe they'd just rattle off all our names and you would never get it, scratching your head and thinking to yourself, who *are* Yvonne, Annette, Cécile, Émilie, and Marie? Bzzz. Time's up.

Yes, it's true we had the finest of everything. Our plexiglass playroom was everything a living spectacle of unwitting toddlers could have wanted. And, golly, we got to go to Hollywood, be in movies with famous stars.

Daddy never touched us. Yvonne and Emily and Marie are still alive, and we all live together quite happily. Our family valued us as individuals, and when we grew up, all the royalties from our charmed youth were ours to do with as we wished.

And that is why we are *so* happy to hear about these octuplets. What wonderful lives must be ahead of them.

5.

People are saying this Suleman woman looks just like me, that she got collagen lip injections to emulate my own lips, but I'm sorry, I just don't see the resemblance.

I can understand her desire to have a big family, to have lots of kids. I don't think anyone should be denied that privilege. With my own family, I don't know when I'll stop.

And I actually admire her decision to deliver all the babies herself. I suppose you could say that, in the past at least, my "thing" was adoption. But now that I've had my natural children, I understand the desire to go through that experience, and I think it was really brave of her to have, for all of her children, the embryos implanted in vitro because she couldn't conceive on her own. It's a type of commitment.

Everyone has been so quick to judge this woman, and I know what that's like. Being in the public eye isn't easy, and I can imagine it would be even harder if you weren't striving for it, you weren't in Hollywood or anything like that. I've been called weird, or a freak, hundreds of times and I've learned you just have to let it roll off your back, otherwise you'll go crazy. I hope Nadya realizes that.

6.

Did you know that when we were in the hospital, they fed us donated breast milk? Think about that. Donated breast milk. Just whose breast milk was it, anyway? Call me fussy, but I don't really like the idea of drinking liquid squeezed from a woman whose identity I don't even know.

My siblings, A-G? Because, let's face it – you don't remember their names and neither do I – don't really seem to mind it, they just suckle their little bottles with the extra-tiny nipples they keep around for preemies. They had to order extra for us.

I'd really like to go to this place, I think. Whatever factory farm they've got these women at, these faceless breast milk donors. Are there rows and rows of them, hooked up to milking machines like cattle? Rubber tubes running from cold metal suckers into a huge communal vat marked "Suleman"? Do they go home at the end of the day, breasts aching and sagging, and cook healthy dinners for their reasonably-sized families? Do their friends know? Are they proud?

7.

The babies are supposed to come home soon. At first I didn't know where they were going to go, but there's a whole room that's filled with cribs now. It used to be my room actually, but I had to move in with Josh. Which is stupid, because he's such a baby and sometimes he wets the bed. We don't have to sleep together but when it happens I get woken up anyway because he starts crying and then mommy has to come in and turn on the light and change his sheets.

I was too little to remember it when I was the only one. I was one year old when Mommy had Amerah. And all the babies just kept coming and coming. It's fun having people to play with, but the little ones can't do anything and they just cry, and we're running out of room. Now there's going to be eight more, and it will be really really crowded. Don't tell her I said this, but I hope they're going to be the last ones.

8.

He's gone. Really gone. Everywhere I turn I see our faces on the tabloids, our children's faces. Jon is really making this harder than it has to be.

And yes, I'm sad. For the loss, and for what this has to be doing to our kids. Do you know I couldn't even get pregnant? For both the twins and the sextuplets, we had to use fertility treatments. We were supposed to be a family, together.

But no, I don't believe we should stop doing the show. It'll just be different. The truth is I don't need him; he was never much help anyway. I think "strong single mother" is a role I could really get into – in life and on screen. They really are the same thing, anyway. My kids have everything they could ever want. I have to make sure I continue to set a positive example.

I'm sorry...Nadya who?

9.

We know all too well what can happen. Does the word “Quintland” ring a bell?

No, Annette. People don't remember that anymore.

They should. It's dangerous.

It's dangerous to us. It is our secret to protect.

It's not a secret, Cécile. We have a certain responsibility.

No. We are not beholden to anybody. Our sisters are dead. We are old. We will probably die soon, too. Just let it die. Let it die with us, and be forgotten.

Don't you see? If we allow it to be forgotten, it will happen again.

It's not our responsibility. If they're worried there are the books. There are the movies. There are the dolls, the pictures, an entire goddamn museum. Let them remember if they really want to; I've had enough.

But no one knows what it was really like. No one but us.

I just want to live the end of my life peacefully. Quietly.

They'll be treated just like we were.

We've done enough. We've gone through enough.

So did Émilie. And Yvonne, and Marie.

Sweet Sixteen

In different bodies, they might have been friends.

Instead, Abby and Brittany were Brooke's babysitters, wheeling her through the mall in a stroller as they searched for prom dresses to fit their personal styles, keeping in mind that they didn't want them to clash too badly when they were eventually sewn together.

Abby was on the right and Brittany was on the left. That was how it had always been, how it always would be. Each girl controlled her half of the body, which performed with astonishing precision. At seven, the girls had learned to ride a bicycle, and they had continued to be athletic throughout their youth. Gripping handlebars, swinging bats, and kicking balls, the girls would coordinate their arms and legs fluidly, balancing.

They resented it when people referred to them as a two-headed girl. They were two separate people, with two separate consciousnesses. A fine path down their back marked where one ended and the other began, until eventually their spines met and their organs ceased to appear in duplicate.

Bright colors flew by. In her pale yellow onesie, Brooke sat in her baby carriage and looked out at another stroller-bound child, fifteen years her junior. They waved at each other, flashing gummed, drooly smiles.

Brooke had not grown an inch, nor gained a pound, since she was six years old. She stood (with the help of a Disney Princess baby walker) at exactly 27 inches tall, and weighed precisely 13 pounds. Her parents outfitted her in pastel onesies, and she lived in a perpetual nursery wallpapered with tiny pink chicks. Sometimes her younger sister, aged twelve, would babysit for her. When Carly was not available, her mom called the Hensels.

Brittany was forced to walk with her head constantly tilted outward at an angle, there not being enough room on her and Abby's shoulders for two upright heads. Abby often took advantage of Brittany's physiological deficit to subtly exert control over her twin: the extra inch it gave her, the extra toss to her hair, and the lack of neck cramps made Abby walk with an extra spring in her step, which Brittany was forced to imitate,

lest they appear asymmetrical. Additionally, being the right-twin gave her the power advantage when she and Brittany were driving, since she got to control the pedals. Granted, half of Brittany's face appeared on her license picture, and half of hers was on Brittany's, but if there was ever somewhere Abby didn't want to go, she could just slam on the brakes.

Although she could not walk or talk, and possessed only the most limited logical reasoning, Brooke's emotions were that of any other sixteen year old. When she was about thirteen, she began to notice strange feelings emanating from her head to her heart and down to her no-no about her older sister Caitlin's friend, Rachel. This must be a crush, she had realized, those things her sisters constantly laughed and doodled in their notebooks about. But Rachel and Caitlin had laughed and whispered only about boys; the names they had religiously bubble-lettered and heart-surrounded were always Daniel, Joe, Michael, Peter. But the feelings she was experiencing were undoubtedly the same as the ones the girls described to her while inadvertently high on pink Sharpie fumes. Could you have a crush on a girl, too?

"I know I can trust *you*, Brooke," Rachel would say to her, leaning in close. "I know you won't tell a soul that I'm totally in love with Scott Marshall!" And Brooke never did say a word. If she started to cry soon after these confessions, Caitlin and Rachel would just assume she was being fussy, and one of them would rock her. They never even imagined that Brooke's crying was due to an overwhelming sense of

hopelessness that she would ever be the one Rachel would proclaim her love for. She learned to only stop crying if Rachel was the one to pick her up, having to settle for the feeling of falling asleep in her arms, head rested wistfully on her breasts.

Everyone in town knew Abby and Brittany, and was accepting, in their way. “God’s children” was a phrase commonly bandied around their Midwestern, Lutheran community, and “Love thy neighbor.” People often told the girls they were special, would say “God bless you” in earnest tones, while bending down slightly to their height and making sure to make eye contact with both Abby and Brittany.

These same attitudes carried over to their school, where Abby and Brittany were well-liked and well-treated. The town was small, and they had grown up with most of the kids in their classes, whose parents’ attitudes of behind-closed-doors pity dressed up as benevolence was passed on to their offspring. No one would dare look twice at the girls who by definition looked twice wherever they went.

There was one other set of twins in the eleventh grade, Jeff and James Robertson. They were identical, though not conjoined, of course, and were six-foot tall basketball stars with shaggy brown hair and smiling hazel eyes. Abby and Brittany were thrilled when the brothers asked them to prom. Brittany had been eyeing Jeff for quite some time, and Abby, James. They were pretty sure this was the order in which the boys had asked them.

In the end, Abby ended up choosing a simple, navy blue dress with a V-neck and tiny cap sleeves, while Brittany picked a more ostentatious bright pink number with spaghetti straps, a lacy bodice, and pouffy tulle skirt. Both girls wore delicate faux-diamond jewelry and tall, elaborate hairdos festooned with corkscrew curls and glittery barrettes. The dresses did not match, per se, but in the end the girls decided they didn't mind. Each was thoroughly in love with the dress she'd chosen, and dead set on it. They hoped their dates would agree.

Jeff and James showed up at the Hensels' house precisely at 7:00. The limo they'd rented with all their friends wouldn't arrive until eight, but Abby and Brittany's parents had wanted to meet the boys before they took out their daughters.

So it was that over loin of pork and roast potatoes that the Hensels got to know Jeff and James. They talked about the boys' hopes to be scouted by one of the big state universities, and about what subjects they enjoyed in school. Jeff's favorite was Geometry, while James preferred Spanish.

Brooke's mom arrived at the Hensels' doorstep, harried, just moments after the kids' limo had pulled away. Mrs. Hensel had just stepped in herself, having been outside in the yard taking pictures of her daughters, their friends, and their dates. It was simply adorable, the way Jeff had put his arm around Abby's shoulder in the exact same manner James put his around Brittany's.

“Melanie, what a surprise!” Mrs. Hensel shifted her attention to the bundle in Mrs. Greenberg’s arms. “Hi, Brookie! Hello!”

“Patty, thank God!”

“What’s the matter?”

Mrs. Greenberg quickly explained that her younger daughter, Carly, had injured herself at soccer practice, and she was wondering if Abby and Brittany could look after Brooke while she went to the hospital.

“Oh gosh, I’m sure they would have, but you just missed them,” Mrs. Hensel said sympathetically. “Gone off to the prom, not five minutes ago. I wouldn’t mind looking after Brooke, though.”

“Patty you are a lifesaver.”

“Not another word!” Mrs. Hensel took Brooke into her arms. “Now go! And give Carly my best.”

Brooke struggled not to cry as Mrs. Hensel carried her into the house.

“Oh, don’t worry, Brookie. Carly will be just fine, yes she will.” Mrs. Hensel cooed.

But that wasn’t what Brooke was upset about. She was currently holding in her tears because not since four years prior, when she’d learned what a firsthand crush was from her sister’s friend Rachel, had Brooke felt such fondness for another person that she felt for Abby and Brittany. The fact that they were at their prom – which Brooke knew was yet another normal teenage activity that she was missing out on – meant not only that

Brooke would most likely not get to see them that night, but that they, too, undoubtedly loved someone other than her.

Abby and Brittany had two mouths between them, but only one liver. So while each girl pounded Boone's Farm behind the school, one might conjecture that they got twice as drunk as they might have, had they been disconnected girls with their very own livers. Their combined weight was also far less than the sum of two separate girls' bodies would be, and the shared blood that circulated through their system was truthfully closer to one girl's allotment than two. They were so drunk, in fact, that they barely even noticed when Jeff started passing the joint around. But Abby and Brittany always insisted upon their individuality. One might also conjecture that Jeff and James knew these things, or at least had an inkling, as they enthusiastically passed the bottles, followed by the joint, to their dates. They were both in A.P. Bio.

And so when James, his arm sloppily caressing the back of Abby's neck, slurred into her ear, "Hey, you girls want to come to our place?" Brittany (for he had spoken loudly enough for everyone to hear) answered back, "Come to ours. We have a basement. Practically soundproof."

The girls didn't know much about sex. That is, they knew the facts, had gone to health class and had had the talks with their mother, but they had very little experience. It was awkward to share an intimate kiss with your twin sister just inches from your face. The one time they tried masturbating, it had felt a bit too close to incest for either twin's

comfort, and the session had been quite short. However, with their inhibitions freshly lowered, they were eager to finally experience what everyone else was always talking about.

Brittany, especially, was curious. She tore through Harlequin paperbacks almost weekly, which she bought in secret at a used bookstore near their school. But even as the piles built up under the girls' bed, Abby, sworn to secrecy, would turn her head and otherwise occupy herself while her twin voraciously finished volume after volume of what she considered trash.

Stumbling into their house just before midnight, it was the first time to Abby or Brittany's recollection that it took real effort to coordinate their walking. They had eaten a handful each of Altoids and doused themselves in Gap Dream to cover up the scents of their evening's earlier activities. The girls didn't doubt that their parents would be waiting up for them; they did not expect their mom to be sitting at the kitchen table holding Brooke Greenberg.

Abby spoke first. "Hi Mom. Brooke?"

"Hi girls, did you have fun?"

"Oh yes, we had a great time," said Brittany.

"What's Brooke doing here?"

"Oh, well Carly got hurt – " began Mrs. Hensel.

"Is she okay?"

“She should be fine, but they’re keeping her at the hospital overnight just to make sure. Mrs. Greenberg decided to stay with her, so it looks like we’ve got ourselves a little houseguest! Yes we do! Yes we do!” Mrs. Hensel explained, directing the last part of her proclamation at Brooke. “Actually, would you girls mind taking over? I forgot how tiring it is to have a baby in the house! Although I guess Brooke isn’t technically a baby, but you know...”

The twins glanced at each other. “Um, sure, Mom,” Abby began hesitantly.

Mrs. Hensel smiled. “She just woke up a little while ago. I have her down in the basement. It looks like she’s getting sleepy again though, so your job shouldn’t be too hard.”

“No problem,” said Brittany, struggling not to lose her balance as she and Abby leaned over to take Brooke from their mother. “We can bring her down there now.”

“Thanks so much, girls. Listen, you’re gonna have to tell me all about your prom tomorrow, but right now I just need some sleep.”

“Okay. Goodnight, mom!” chorused the twins.

“Goodnight, girls.”

Abby and Brittany made their way carefully down the white-carpeted stairs to the Hensels’ recently finished basement. They found it exceedingly difficult to navigate the banister, Brooke, and their intoxication with only two arms.

They deposited Brooke in the makeshift crib their mother had set up in the corner of the room, and hurried to the window where the boys were already waiting.

“What the hell took you chicks so long?” James demanded, after he crawled in.

“What’s up with the baby?”

But Abby and Brittany were in no position to answer. They had collapsed, heads drooping to either side, onto the white leather couch that sat plumply in the center of the room, pointed toward the large, flat screen TV.

Jeff and James, upon noticing their dates’ unresponsiveness, swooped like eagles to either side of the girls. Their heads fell gratefully to the boys’ shoulders. Glancing quickly at each other over the girls’ heads, Jeff gave James a quick nod before they, in unison, caressed their twin’s face and began softly kissing her.

Abby and Brittany, meanwhile, were fading in and out of consciousness. One or the other would awaken periodically to feel James’s or Jeff’s (neither was sure which twin they’d ended up with) lips pressed against her own, working in a persistent pattern, tongue sliding in and out as her own flopped like a dying fish.

“Hey, what --” Abby protested weakly when she felt Jeff’s (or James’s?) hand snaking up and down her dress. But she was soon silenced by his mouth once again covering hers, and she was too tired to push him off.

Brittany stirred beside her twin. The thin, pink strap of her half of the dress had come off her shoulder, and one of the Robertsons was suckling at her shoulder blade, his hand moving closer and closer to her breast. “Hey, there, baby...” she began, but it was all she could say before she felt her head getting heavy and she succumbed once again to sleep.

Suddenly, both girls were awakened by a sharp tug of fabric over their heads. Their arms were forced into their bodies, elbows jabbing each other in the face.

Brittany's arm was pulled into the tight space between her and Abby's heads, their necks twisting and wrenching, banging heads. The sound of seams tearing. This is what Brittany had dreamed about, her crooked head on the pillow next to Abby's at night. Her thoughts and desires her own, the only thing she could really keep separate from her sister. Brittany pictured herself as the busty heroine one the cover of one of her paperbacks, beautiful and lust-filled, and of course with only one head. Hers.

And just as suddenly the fabric sheath loosened as the skirt of their dresses was yanked over their heads and tossed carelessly into the corner near where Brooke lay, eyes wide open.

Brooke knew this was wrong. She knew this was very, very wrong. She knew this was sex. She knew this had to be sex.

Brooke had been in the room for two of her three sisters' sex talks. She knew what sex was, and that sex was something between two people who love each other very very much, and that there were two sets of two and that this was what sex was. And so if Abby and Brittany were having sex with Jeff and James then they were in love with them and not with Brooke. And also it was wrong because sex was something for people who were married and Abby was not married to James and Brittany was not married to Jeff. If two people love each other very very much then they should get married and then and only then can they have sex, because sex makes babies. And only married people should have babies and they were not married and so it was wrong.

Their bra was pushed roughly downward to their waist; their underwear pulled harshly off, forced from Abby's kicking leg with the help of Brittany's, and tossed aside like garbage. Pink cotton limp, hanging off the edge of white leather.

In Abby's mind, dully: a girl with one arm and one leg could not compete against two boys with four arms and four legs, could not compete when the other half of her body, Brittany, was working against her for the first time she could remember.

One hand massaging their breasts. Grabbing. Pulling. One hand covering Abby's mouth, and its mouth on Brittany's. Brittany kissing back, not knowing who, not caring. One hand fumbling with its pants. One hand prying open their legs. Two legs holding them down.

Fumbling with pants. Belt buckles. Being sat on, breath heavy, breasts mashed. Abby's leg being pried away from Brittany's, weighted down, as Brittany spread hers further. Being turned over. Four arms grabbing roughly one body, one arm flopping uselessly from drunkenness and confusion and shock and exhaustion, occasionally delivering useless punches to one of the boys' backs. Two arms grasping one body from the front, lowering it; two from behind, holding it up. Brittany's mouth, alternately caressing Jeff and James. Abby's mouth, covered by Brittany's hand. Brittany's moans and Abby's screams, both stifled. Boys, thrusting.

Something inside, slipping moist against Abby's will. And again Brittany gasped.

Two somethings, deeper than Brittany thought they could and pleasure mingled with pain and she felt something give. They were feeling the same thing but it did not feel the same. Blood, red on white leather. Punctuated by a final muffled scream from Abby. Sweaty bodies, four people, three bodies, panting. Tears in the eyes of one; in the others', ecstasy.

And finally Brooke began to cry.

Of The Lamp

She barely had a name and knew only darkness. When she escaped it was like a genie, and although that isn't her real name, that is how she has been and will be referred to.

This is how it started: A woman and her daughter were seen walking down the street. The woman, suspected to be blind or visually impaired, was wearing dark glasses and moved cautiously, her arms out in front of her. The daughter, who appeared to be approximately six years old, clung tightly to her mother's side and walked with a curious, stilted, bunny-like gait. They stumbled into what the mother had thought was the Social Services office, to start receiving benefits for the mother's disability. This building was actually the Child Welfare office, and, upon noticing the girl's unusual way of walking, the people inside took immediate notice. She appeared small and quite thin, and when they learned she was in fact thirteen years old, she was immediately taken into custody at the Children's Hospital under suspicion of child abuse.

Of course, this is not really how it started.

It started in a small, dark room with one window and a locked door. The carpet was thin and dusty, and the furnishings were sparse. The furnishings were cruel. The furnishings were a large crib in one corner, outfitted with wire mesh across the top that locked into place with straps, changing its function from cradle to cage. A potty chair, also with straps, was the only other fixture in the room.

She was the forbidden experiment. Theories of language acquisition and Chomsky and the critical period. Genie was just about the right age – had never been spoken to, just handed the occasional spool of thread or empty cottage cheese container

or growled and barked at by her father like a rabid dog from the other side of her door. The only words she knew were *no* and *stop*.

It was 1970. In the shadow of the mountains, Arcadia, California nestled snugly between two types of raceways, the Santa Anita horse track and the 210 Freeway. Largely residential, it is a city overrun with feral peacocks, a result of its founder importing the luxurious birds from India in the early 20th century. This is the environment from which Genie was plucked. Left to breed, the birds run wild, picking through trash and landing on people's roofs. The local arboretum cannot house them all, so the city distributes brochures to its residents about how best to deal with the peacock population. There are lists of plants the birds like and dislike, tips and tricks for how people can coexist with them harmoniously. But the lists do not stop the peacocks from running through the streets or from shrieking like children.

Like children, but not like Genie. And there are fines levied for feeding the peacocks. When she emerged that day, from her gray-shadowed room into the waning remnants of 60s psychedelia, the lustrous birds might have been the first thing she saw. Such a bold array.

At Children's, Genie arrived pink and freshly hatched, devoid of plumage. She was something that hadn't grown. Unused to noises and color and light, she was petrified. Faces near hers, patting, petting.

And people! Genie had never known there were so many people. What was this world beyond her walls, her chair, her crib? Shocked into a silence completely separate from her language-deprived mind.

They started out hopeful. Surely it could not get worse.

Genie couldn't speak but constantly clawed and spat, like an animal caged. She growled, at times, rabidly, bubbles foaming at the corners of her mouth, bony and ragged and mangy. Growls that echoed her father, the passing of language. They called her feral.

She was tiny and fragile and no one knew what to do. There were deep sores on the backs of her thighs. It was a golden opportunity. Genie's father had already demonstrated the lack of morals required to produce a subject for such an experiment, and it would be a tragedy to pass this up. For science. And for Genie, too.

The hope was she'd lead a normal life. She'd grow and learn and talk and play and have a new mommy and daddy and a puppy and they would all love her. They took out the set of blocks, the letter-shaped pieces of brightly-colored foam, and let her play with the toddlers. Pat the bunny, see Spot run, as Genie sat and drooled. The cycle of light and dark, night and day, was fully new to her. Regular meals, working her jaw and learning to chew. Some things she could swallow, and others nobody could.

Her real dad's brains had been splattered on the wall by his own hand shortly after Genie's escape. And she was terrified of dogs. Barking and growling and scratching at

her door back when her father still had his brains in his head because that was the kind of thing that was inside of them when Genie was inside of that room.

But she couldn't stay at Children's forever. When the scientist working with Genie told everyone she'd exposed her to German Measles, Genie was put into quarantine at the scientist's house.

Her quarantine there was, of course, wholly different from that she experienced at her father's hands. No straps this time, people knew about her. People talked to her, played with her, told her not to play with herself while she and other people were talking. *No. Stop.* The words she remembered. But there were new ones too, *yes, please, more, love, Genie.*

Also unlike her other quarantine, this time people were trying to take her out. The doctors, the scientists, they wanted her for themselves. Their very own Genie, emerged from her lamp, running awkward, waiting to see if she would develop the magical power of speech, of grammar. They enjoyed observing her, bated breath, Genie bunny-walking around next to them, uneven, hands twisted in front of her chest as though palsied. Her eyes, finally through blinking, seeing everything new.

When Genie would walk outside, strangers would give her presents. A fake-pearl necklace from a woman in a car, a large pink ball, a fire truck from a little boy. She didn't say a word, her haunted smile gratitude enough for these generous passersby.

But even at home, her new home, with the doctors, her speech remained stunted. This is what she did say: *Father hit big stick. Father is angry. Father hit Genie big stick. Father take piece of wood hit. Cry.* As she took in the care that now surrounded her, a portion of her mind was still stuck, lashed to that chair, deep sores unhealed.

With her stunted speech, Genie was a disappointment to those hoping to disprove the critical period theory. The doctors' hope for Genie deflated like the giant red balloon they'd bought her on a trip to the zoo. *You take me store now.* She could not separate herself from the things around her; she had no concept of pronouns. No sense of self. Time, money, patience were running out, and the doctors who had cared for her and even taken her in as their own child had to give up. The research was deemed unprofessional; not enough data was being generated. Genie was not generating enough data; her relationship with the scientists was too familiar, not clinical enough. Funds for the study, for Genie, dried up. With the funds went the interest. And with the interest went Genie. She was no longer of any use to the medical community.

In her first civilian foster home, the abuse was mild compared to what she'd endured from her father. The welts were not as deep this time, and appeared on her body in other places than just her legs. Feeling sick one day, Genie had vomited, and the beating that ensued instilled in her the fear to open her mouth. If she didn't open her mouth, nothing could come out. If she didn't open her mouth, she could go back in. And Genie was still tiny and easy to juggle.

Her father had believed she was retarded. He was keeping her locked away for her own protection. He would be her guard dog.

Alone back in that small dark room, Genie sometimes listened to soft piano music as it wafted from the neighbors' house. Hearing such music would calm her down later in her life, when she was frightened by a cat. Her life had been fully non-experiential, and everything unfamiliar was a monster to her. And everything was unfamiliar to her.

When Genie first emerged from her lamp-room after thousands of thirteen years, it took her years to learn to smile. The day Genie and her mother appeared at the Child Welfare office, they took one look at her and said something is not right. When the woman asked her age, Genie didn't answer because she did not yet know how. When Genie's mother said she was thirteen, and not six or seven or possibly a small eight, they looked at her again. And they said we have to make a phone call.

The mother said I cannot see and I didn't mean to be here and please, what are you going to do with my daughter? And the woman said shh and please sit down, and Genie's mom cried it's not my fault, she cried it's her dad, it's my husband. It's my husband and I'm scared too.

And she was back now, mommy, saying it wasn't my fault and I just want my Genie, my girl, I want her for my own. And poof, wish granted, Genie was hers. But when the cloud of smoke vanished and Genie was a real girl, not just a figment strapped to a chair, mom's breath grew labored. At age sixteen, Genie still acted six and her mom was not able. Nobody was able. Genie was made once again to disappear, like she'd never been there and a story no one would ever believe, back into her lamp, protected by the state, hidden from sight like a legend not to be spoken of.

The King Of Germs

"Whatever I do depends on what somebody else decides I do. Why school? Why did you make me learn to read? What good will it do? I won't ever be able to do anything anyway. So why? You tell me why."

--David Phillip Vetter

He never had the chance to breathe air. Locked into tubes that he'd die if he was removed from. His world was inflatable, his context nonexistent. He was incapable of touch, of being touched. Constantly at a remove.

They called it his bubble but it was not light like soap, not sweet like bubblegum. It consumed him completely, and he could never float away.

David was given less than ten seconds between his mother's soft, cushiony womb and the clear plastic shell in which he was to spend his entire life. Ten seconds of air, of temperature, of touch. Ten seconds, because more might have killed him.

His conception was little more than a science experiment. In the best of hearts it might be viewed as optimism, but David's bubble was not rose-colored.

Dr. Wilson:

It was a tragedy, what happened to the first Vetter boy. Death of an infant is a terrible, terrible thing. A family never fully heals from something like that. So I understood the Vettters' desire to have another child.

I explained to them the risks as well as I could. We didn't have the same technology back then; you have to understand this is the early 70s we're talking about. Either a mutant gene caused the defect, or it was carried on one of Carol Ann's X chromosomes. If it was genetic, there was a 1 in 10,000 chance that if the Vettters had another child it would have SCIDS. However, if the problem was chromosomal, and if they had another boy, there was a 50% chance he'd be affected.

I'm just the doctor. Ultimately, they made the decision. And faced with that decision, I did what I had to do.

Katherine Vetter:

David must be the devil because they had to sterilize the holy water before they could put it on him. Sterilize means make it clean. That's what mommy told me. Not the part about the devil, but the part about the cleaning the holy water. But I said how do you make the holy water cleaner cause doesn't it have God in it? And mommy got real sad and she didn't answer. My mommy and daddy say I'm really smart. I'm four years old almost and I can count to 100.

Well, we go to church every Sunday and I know all about holy water. They put it on the babies to make sure Jesus loves them and it's very very special because the priests bless it with God's love. Mommy said that if they didn't clean the holy water, and they put it on David, it could make him very very sick or maybe even die. Well I know that the Devil can't touch holy water but I thought he was the only one. I don't know what they did to clean it. God is perfect so how can you make something better than God? But they must have taken all the God out of it because they put it on David and he was fine.

David Joseph Vetter III:

I'm glad I died when I did. I know that sounds terrible, but this solitude is preferable to the life my never-brother had. At least after the funeral everyone forgot about me; put me underground and I was gone. Sure, I had a short life, and maybe that's a tragedy in its own right. But maybe it wasn't so bad. Here's the thing, though: had I lived, he never would have been born. The truth is, my death should have been a deterrent, not an opportunity to try again.

I was six months old. Just weeks later, mom got pregnant again. My body had barely even begun to decay. Nine months after that, they had David. David Phillip. At least they had the decency to give him a different middle name.

poke.
poke.
Little tiny holes.
No no.
Don't let the germs in. Be a good boy.
You are a very special little boy. Now be good.
No more poking holes.
Don't want those germs to get in.

Carol Ann Vetter:

David was my son. Of course I loved him, and wanted the best for him. When David Joseph died, I was devastated. I was not trying to replace him, no; do you really think I'm that callous? It's just that I was so heartbroken – I wanted another child so badly, you see, a little brother or sister for Katherine. That's all.

I knew the risks. How could I not? How do you think David Joseph died in the first place? But they told me advances were being made. They told me things could be done, that if my new baby was sick too, they could do things to make him better.

Transplants, that kind of thing.

They mentioned the bubble. They did. A “sterile environment,” they called it. They said it would be temporary, and I believed them. They were doctors; why shouldn't I have believed them? They said advances were being made, that a cure was coming. I believed them. And then David came, my second little David. And they put him in.

Mary Murphy:

David was three years old when I met him. I hadn't wanted to at first, hadn't wanted to be a part of that whole thing. Don't get involved.

Of course I'd heard about him. I don't think there was anyone who hadn't. He'd been all over the news since he was put into that damn contraption; the whole country knew about Bubble Boy.

The day I met him, he'd just gone home for the first time. They had a bubble set up there, but he could never stay there for too long. There was always some test or another they had to perform, and it was always a big process getting David from the hospital to his house, and back and forth. It was always back and forth. And always sterile. It had to be completely sterile. It would come to the point where he feared germs, where he'd have nightmares about it. This little boy, and his biggest fear isn't a monster under the bed, it's germs. And they really could kill him.

Anyway, I remember we started out by introducing ourselves, and the noise coming from the bubble's motor – the thing that kept it inflated – was so loud I could barely hear him. I started out by asking him to tell me what a tree was, and you know what he said? He said a tree is a brown rectangle with a green oval on top. The kid didn't know what a tree was. He'd never seen the outside. When I told him about leaves he didn't believe me. So I went outside – it was real rainy out – and snapped a little branch off one of the trees, and brought it in so he could look at it. You could tell he was absolutely in shock. He'd never seen a tree before. And he couldn't even touch it.

HE IS COMING FOR ME
THE KING OF GERMS IS GOING TO
GET ME HIM AND HIS WIVES
THEY ARE GOING TO KILL ME

Katherine Vetter:

Yes, of course we fought. We were brother and sister; it's not like just because he was in a bubble we didn't have the same interactions as other siblings, that we didn't get on each other's nerves and tease each other and argue.

I remember this one time. David had these kind of...spacesuit arms on the bubble, so he could reach out and pick stuff up, or high five people. It was the only way mom and dad could give him a hug. We started arguing about something. I don't even remember what it was, undoubtedly something really stupid and trivial. So I was standing right there, right up next to his bubble, and the little fucker reaches into the plastic arms and punches me in the face.

I was stunned. I mean, really? The kid's in a bubble, he's completely helpless, but he had a good right hook.

Well, when I recovered from just the shock of it, I remembered. He couldn't get out of that bubble. He couldn't really defend himself. I just unplugged the thing. He begged me to plug it back in, but I just laughed. I loved to torment him. I have no idea where our parents were, because they would've killed me if they saw what was going on.

Look, he wasn't actually in danger. There was another area he could go into that was there for just this type of thing. Well. I mean, it was there in case something went wrong and his main bubble deflated.

It's kind of funny, thinking back on it now. The way we terrorized each other. It's almost...it's kind of funny.

Dr. Wilson:

It was a mistake. Looking back now, I can see...we never should have done that whole thing with David Vetter. The advances we've made since then make that clear. But you know what they say about hindsight.

All I can say is that at the time, we really did think there was hope for him. We thought we were at the point where we could make a lot of progress on how to treat SCIDS, and that David would be the first case to test the new methods. I wouldn't say guinea pig, no. His parents were aware of all of this.

I'm sorry, that's all I have to say on the matter.

Carol Ann Vetter:

When David told me about his nightmares, yes of course it was disturbing. There was this villain he'd created, the King of Germs.

Actually, I heard it from Mary. She asked me if I was aware of the nightmares, how David was having trouble sleeping. I'd had no idea. So that hurt a bit, that he'd tell her before he told me.

Well, when I asked him, he said that the King of Germs was the main character, he was out to get him. And he had all these wives helping him, helping him infect. And

it was all of these germs against David. He could kill the wives, he said, sometimes even kill a lot of them, but he could never kill the king. And as long as the king was alive, David was in trouble.

I mean, what do you say to that? It's not like the bogeyman or something.... I mean, of course there's no King of Germs, and no wives and what have you, they're not *characters*, but it's not like I can tell him there's no danger. The proof of danger is all around him.

Mary Murphy:

David was a very troubled boy, as you might imagine. That movie they made, the pictures in the media of him smiling...it was all fake, all an act. The movie was Hollywood bullshit, and David knew it more than anyone else. They set up a screening so he could watch it – the liberties they took, they made it look like he was a normal, happy child who just happened to live in a bubble. Like it was a big, clear bounce house he got to stay in forever. David had had this NASA spacesuit made for him – he hated the

thing, only wore it a couple times, and then it was for the media – that was supposed to give him extra mobility outside the bubble. Well, the John Travolta character, the one who was supposed to be David? He had a spacesuit too, and he just wore it right into the bubble. Didn't even have to sterilize it first. David thought this was hilarious.

But yes, like I said, his mental state was...not healthy. How could it be? People are not meant to be caged up like that. He would be extremely polite to his family and to any outsiders, obsequious even, but inside he had so much rage. He was a very, very angry child. He would wet his pants, draw these disturbing pictures.... The worst was the time he smeared his own feces all over the bubble in a fit of anger. He could have killed himself doing that, which I don't think he really realized. He was just so, so angry.

neat little matches all lined up smooth
strikesparkstrikesparkstrikesparkstrikespark
plasticmeltharden
houseburnfire
BURN BURN BURN
NO MORE BUBBLE
NO MORE GERMS

Carol Ann Vetter:

David was twelve when he got the transplant. Katherine's marrow wasn't a match, but the doctors said it would be okay. Advances had been made. They said he might finally get to leave his bubble. We were overjoyed.

Corpus peculiaris

So he had the operation, and everything seemed to be going well. We were all optimistic. And then, he started to get sick. And that was never supposed to happen; he'd never been sick before, he lived in a completely sterile environment.

Well. It turned out that Katherine's marrow contained traces of Epstein-Barr, which they didn't know before. It had never affected her health, but it just wreaked total havoc on David. They had to take him out of the bubble for treatment. Kind of ironic. He died two weeks later.

The whole time he was out, he kept asking for a Coke. He'd heard so much about it, seen the commercials, seen us and Katherine and his friends all drinking it, and he was curious. He'd never had it before because all food and drink had to be sterilized before it was given to him, and that spoiled the taste. The doctors said he couldn't have it. Just a bottle of Coke for a dying little boy. A sip. Out of everything he never got to experience – a NASA spacesuit made just for him, a state-of-the-art fucking hamster cage – that was what he asked for, and they said no.

David Joseph Vetter III:

I told you so.