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I reading

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Opening extract from

One

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‘Are you *kidding* me?
Have you lost your *minds*?’ she shouts,
then argues with Mom and Dad for hours.

I listen
and nod
and bite at the skin around my fingernails
until they start to

bleed.

Finally Mom rubs her temples, sighs, and gives it to us straight.
‘Donations from well-wishers have dried up
and we simply can’t afford to homeschool you.
You know your dad hasn’t found a job yet
and Grammie’s pension
doesn’t even cover the cable bill.’

‘You girls aren’t cheap,’ Dad adds,
as though all the money spent on us
—the hospital bills and special clothes—
could be saved if we’d both
only
behave a little better.

You see,
Tippi and I are not what you'd call normal—
not what you see every day
or *any* day
for that matter.

Anyone with a jot of good manners
calls us 'conjoined',
though we've been dubbed other things, too:
freaks, fiends,
monsters, mutants,
and even a two-headed demon once,
which made me cry so hard
I had puffy eyes for a week.

But there's no denying our difference.

We are literally joined
        at the hip—
        united in blood and bone.

And
        this
is why
we never went to school.

For years we've been cooking up chemistry potions
on the kitchen table
and using our yard for P.E.

But now
there's no getting out of it;
we *are* going to school.

Not that we'll be in a state school
like our sister Dragon,
with kids who pull knives on teachers
and drink Tipp-Ex for breakfast.

No, no, no.

The city won't fund our homeschooling but
they'll pay
for a place
at a private school
—Hornbeacon High—
and Hornbeacon is willing to have that one place
count for the two of us.

I guess we're supposed to feel lucky.

But lucky isn't really how
I would
ever
describe us.

Everyone

Dragon stretches out on the end of the double bed
I share with Tippi,
her bruised feet pointed while she
paints her toenails a deep metallic blue.
'I don't know,
you might like it,' she tells us.
'Not *everyone* in the world is an asshole.'
Tippi takes the polish, starts on my right hand and
blows my fingernails
dry.
'No, you're right,
not everyone's an asshole,'
Tippi says.
'But around *us*,
        they all morph into them.'

A Freak Like Us

Dragon's real name is Nicola,
but Tippi and I changed it
when she was two,
when she was fierce and fire-breathing,
stomping around the apartment and
chomping on crayons and toy trains.

Now she's fourteen and a ballet dancer
she doesn't stomp anywhere—
she floats.

Lucky for her she's completely normal.

Although

I do wonder if being our sister
        sucks sometimes,

if being our sister
makes her a freak
too.

Ischiopagus Tripus

Although scientists have come up with ways to
categorise conjoined twins,
each and every pair that ever existed
is unique—
the details of all our bodies remain a secret
unless we want to tell.

And people *always* want to know.

They want to know exactly what we share
down there,
so sometimes we tell them.

Not because it's their business
but to stop them wondering—it's all the
wondering
about our bodies that bothers us.

So:
Tippi and I are of the ischiopagus tripus
variety.
We have
two heads,
two hearts,

two sets of lungs and kidneys.
We have four arms as well,
and a pair of fully functioning legs
now that the vestigial leg has been
docked
like a show dog's tail.

Our intestines begin
apart
then merge.

And below that we are
one.

It probably sounds like a prison sentence,
but we have it better than others
who live with fused heads or hearts,
or only two arms between them.

It really isn't so bad.

It's how it's always been.

It's all we know.

And actually,
we're usually
quite happy
together.