

## **The Rebirth**

**by Dani Ringrose**

Bathroom tiles. With right-angle corners, neat fractals. Evenly distributed patterns; an eighth; a quarter; a half. A whole.

You would call the colour *aegean*. She would call it *aqua*. With the mirror frame lights on, it makes the bathroom glow like it's filled with seawater. You're both correct in your choice of words.

Both of you feel like you're drowning. Afraid to take a breath in case it's not air surrounding you.

She breathes first. She takes three shallow breaths for every one of your deep ones. Your ribcage expands and contracts, pushing against hers. Her ribcage expands, contracts, like the swelling of gentle waves. Pushing against yours.

The air smells briny to you. The layers of flaked skin from years of sharing the bathroom together. Fingerprints on the mirror leaving oily smudge marks. Spatter patterns of toothpaste still hold pale peppermint notes, a false freshness for such a confined, wet place.

These are last night's aromas, of course: you are both up early to celebrate a special day. It's the kind of day that neither of you needed to set an alarm for. A natural alarm buzzing through your nerves, blood cells swishing in veins, mirrored rhythms between you and her.

A birthday.

Nervous systems awaiting a gift.

An eighteenth birthday. Perhaps a gift of maturity, of independence.

As a gift, you will, one day, both lead separate and fully healthy lives.

She washes her face one-handed. Dawn's milky light bathes her gently, and you study her features as her hand rubs her skin. Fingers with bitten nails rub pillowy cheeks, pond-blue eyes protected by a sleepy sheen blink at their reflection. Her pink mouth stretches as it yawns. More blinks – a slow and deliberate firing of the senses.

You both never like talking much in the early mornings. What is there to say? *How did you sleep?* You occupy the same space at night, there is no need for empty pleasantries like these; your voices would only resonate impotently off the seafoam-coloured tiles. With two people occupying such an enclosed space, this bathroom never needs additional sensory elements, even voices in simple hushed tones. It does mean that you can hear her hair sweep against the cotton fabric of the t-shirt as she brushes it. It's a hushed swishing sound, a secret between you, and when she stops and passes the brush to you, you echo the sound.

Arms go up one by one, reaching towards the cloudy light fitting. Cat-like, two necks lift and vibrate slightly at the limit of their stretch. Shoulders are pushed back from their rounded sleeping positions; both you and her gain at least half an inch in height when you do this.

The stretch travels down your spine, one vertebra at a time. The cervical bones supporting your neck separate easily, releasing night-time tension into the wet air. Thoracic, one by one, loosening. T8, T9, T10 –

T11 –

The T12 vertebrae is not yours alone. It is yours to share, with her. It is where your bodies fuse, where you and she become a singularity from the waist down.

You look at her, you look at yourself in the mirror. You look at her in the mirror. Doubles, as if someone had fractured the mirror glass. Fragments of each other, two pieces, bonded and hitched at the hips. *Ischiopagus. Conjoined Twins*. Fixed, united, inseparable from the whole.

Double double toil and trouble. Two halves, a fraction, a whole.

double | double  
you're the toil | she's the trouble.  
inseparable  
in | separable

Eighteen years ago today, you were pulled from your mother's stomach, limbs rudely wriggling around, already an incorrect number before you both took your first breaths. Two heads, four arms, two torsos, two hearts, two spines, one tailbone, one pelvis, one anus, one womb, two legs.

Is she your extra limb – or are you hers?

The mirror is an echo chamber of beauty. The echo of yourself in the flesh in front of you, in the glass in front of you, a fractal abyss of self. You've been gazing at it since you were born. As you look now, you are struck by the symmetry contained within both your faces; having studied them for so long, the pair of you are the only ones who could spot the micro-discrepancies between them. Her left eyebrow is a fraction longer. Your lips are a tint darker. She gets more acne when you have your period.

If you separated, you and her would be the only ones who could tell you both apart.

So, have you decided yet? Is today the day? Has she decided yet?

It's why you're in this bathroom after all, on your birthday. It could become a new day of commemoration for you both: a new birth day.

The seed was planted on your birthday last year. A trip to Sephora, shouted by your Aunt Marieke.

'Pick three things each, and they're yours, girls,' she had promised.

But Aunt Marieke had not been shopping with you and her before. And did not understand that browsing for the pair of you didn't take double the time of one person – it took triple. Your shelves, her shelves – and the distance in between.

You had loved that. You'd both crafted a process to make both of you feel valued – a simple timer: equal time for separate pastimes. For despite being hinged in the same body, neither of you have much in common, interest-wise. Some psychologist could write a thesis on you, if either of you had ever seen one.

Your rueful acquiescence to her need to spend hours baking in the kitchen matched her seething at pricking her palm with pins while you cross-stitched. The sharing couldn't go on. And it was the cosmetics store where you both finally unravelled.

'I think we should check out the Clinique stand first,' she'd suggested. You'd tried directing both of you to the Too Faced display instead. But she couldn't bear it, she couldn't bear not having her choice first. In her head, it was her birthday – you were here for her. Your shopping trip could come second. But... she was with you to help *you* choose products to make you stand out. It was as if the bodily seam fusing you both together was forgotten the moment you stepped past these security barriers.

Her eyes shining as she drew lipstick testers across the back of your hand, she said, 'You know the Sephora in other countries has an even wider range than this. We should go to like, France next year, once we graduate. I imagine the one in Paris is epic.'

‘Paris? I’ve got no desire to visit that expensive cliché of a city. You’ll never get me there.’

‘I’m sure there are places you don’t want to go to either. It’s going to happen – we’re going to have to be each others’ travelling buddies.’

She didn’t realise it at the time, but you were terrified to leave home. Home for you meant the easy routine of medical check-ins, neighbours who knew who you both were. Not having to answer so many damn questions from strangers. And here she was, desperate to launch you both in front of the narrowed eyes and dropped jaws of foreigners.

A year later, you’re still frightened by the lure of *Overseas* – but anxious you might lose her.

She’d had picked Black Honey – everyone picks Black Honey for their first lipstick – and graciously had let you approach your chosen array of products.

‘Too Faced, huh? What about Two Bodies?’ she had laughed. You hadn’t thought it funny at the time.

‘Well, I’d like to test what shade I am in this foundation. Even my skin out a bit.’ You had turned your head to gaze at her skin tone. To look at her properly, you both needed to stand in front of a mirror. Your heads were not placed parallel on your torso; her head faintly askew, tilted left and down away from you, as if hiding a secret. You could see her in profile, but even if she craned her neck, you could never fully face each other.

‘I think I’m Pearl. Or Seashell. Can you choose for me?’ You had swiped stripes along your jawline, waited for them to melt in. She had picked one for you, then had continued to hoot at the ironic name of the foundation you’d chosen.

‘Are you kidding! *Born This Way!* You are having me on, right? Is this some kind of joke? Is this another one of your passive-aggressive comments?’

As you both pinballed each other around the fluorescent-lit and neon-saturated shop, taking turns to test products you each liked, it became a microcosm of how separate your lives were becoming. While she wanted to paste herself in glittering rainbows, you wanted to create the kind of luminous, flawless skin teenagers only dreamed about. While she chose to study Business at school, your eyes glazed at floating numbers sifted into spreadsheets. Her? Travel. You? Home.

By the time she had brought up the brutal proposition, you'd both moved around the store so much it had made you almost as dizzy as being whirled around a dancefloor with an eager partner.

'Look. I don't know what you think any more. I... don't want to be a part of you any more.'

She had paused, as though she had accidentally let her words escape. She had wondered whether she'd let out the unspeakable. You'd unknowingly positioned yourselves in front of a store mirror, in a pose much like what you're both in right now in the bathroom. You could see her words had wanted to tumble out. Her lips had clamped shut, as if pressing lipsticked lips together. To stop the truly unutterable from being uttered.

'You... don't want to be with me any more?' You had sounded like a dopey, naïve girlfriend on the precipice of a wholly-predictable breakup. 'What do you mean?' You had avoided direct eye contact – gazed at her copy instead in the mirror. She had looked away.

'Don't make me say it.'

Your jaw had trembled, swallowing the filthy thought down.

'I want to be cut apart from you.'

It had sat in the small gap between your torsos, a heady miasma of a proposition. She'd only said it aloud because she knew you wanted it too.

Seventeen years, and you couldn't bear to be in each other's lives for every hour of the day. You felt like failed twins. There was no *Psychic Connection*. No *Sixth Sense*. No *Divination*. No *Telepathy*. Not even the fun mythic talents: *Predict The Future*. *Blight Crops*. *Revive The Dead*. You share blood between yourselves, but by now, it seems like it's the only thing you still have in common. Half-lives, in half-bodies, yearning to be their own wholes.

'Like – at a hospital? They would've done it when we were born if they thought it would work.'

She had shaken her head.

'I think they just wanted to study us. Have they really been checking our health all these years? The one thing they've never checked is our mental health. Are you okay? I'm really not okay any more.' As she had inhaled deeply, your chest rose too. 'We should do it ourselves.'

The thrill of possibility and the horror divided the hemispheres of your brain, and a cracked map of divergent destinations had prickled and mimicked your nerves. You would both ruminate the forbidden prospect over the next year, in ethereal and more practical terms.

But back then, you had one more product to pick. You had reached out to the shelves in front of you, selected the one red shade still in stock, and tossed it into the basket. You had painted it on your lips that night, the pair of you in the bathroom, playing with your new treats. The blood-red shade had matched your complexion perfectly. You had checked the bottom of the tube for its name as you'd placed it in the drawer. *Gash*.

Now, your actions mirror those of the previous birthday, this time with a nourishing tube of lip balm. You pass it to her after you swipe it on your lips, as is your usual morning routine. Instead of using it, she places it on the pale blue basin.

‘We’re doing this, right? Our birthday. The best gift we could give to each other, right?’  
Her hand slips into the pocket of your dressing gown, appearing to reach in for a gift. It is a gift, of sorts. A scalpel. Purloined from the school science labs, pinched by her while you peppered the teacher with questions.

Sunlight reflects off the metal as she twirled it in her hand. It shines with the gift of independence, own identities, your self. It promises you both separate and healthy lives.

She takes your hand, clasps it in hers, the scalpel’s handle between you. It isn’t quite a handshake sealing the promise, nor a goodbye. It is your final gestures of undivided love.

A whole. Two halves. Two lives.

Your bodies joined midway down your torso. Dressing gown removed, she slides her hand down the half-formed side of her chest. Scalpel in her possession, your future quite literally in her hand, she presses it gently against the fork where your bodies fuse together.

All your potential futures, every transgressive dream, every unfulfilled promise to yourselves, meld into this:

one moment in this

singular

present.

With only slight pressure, skin splits open like a ripe banana peel.

She continues the blade over the rise of You go to scream, but you’ve practiced this.

your seam. Muffle that noise.

Rivulets flow out of her handiwork. The shade of blood matches your lipstick.

Red from a gash.

She smiles, or grimaces.



The blade is pulled towards your front,

towards the mirror and basin. What was your role in this meant to be?

On the first cut, she doesn't outline your

join fully with the blade.

She repeats the cut, goes deeper on the second slice. Blood on her fingers this time. You hiss, a vampiric hiss, a moist sucking noise. Glare at her. Glare at your brief,

conflicted reflection in the blade.

Is she separating you both? Or cutting you off?

Nerves flickering, a fire spreading rhythmically between your torsos. Blood vessels pumping rhythmically and urgently.

She falls to her knees – You fall to your knees –  
pauses, tightens her grip on the handle, on the ground, a discarded cross-stitch  
knuckles affirming her purpose – blanket needle, from craft nights long gone

–  
as she moves to carve the next slice, your hand is in her way, and you  
plunge the needle into the flesh below the  
gash  
and ready yourself for the Sisyphean task of  
stitching you both back together.

You don't want her to go. Not like this. Not in pain.

She shifts her torso and your buried needle pulls back and forth  
in its puncture wound with the movement.

You push the needle up under the cut she  
has made, expecting the skin to pull and  
slide back together,  
but  
there is no thread attached.

She barely acknowledges your impotent penetrative efforts.  
She begins the slicing again, this time, Embrace your fate. You do not wish to be  
slashing movements, more urgent, with this monster any more.  
indiscriminate.

Your organs appear.

She pushes her hand further in, kidneys The tiles, slippery under knees. Your  
slipping out of the way of the blade. knee sliding like your organs against each  
other.

Blood. More blood.

Like a traumatic birth, the blood continues to flow. You both don't realise that you're  
taking shallower breaths. Your body/ies tip forward, liquids gushing out of the craterous cut.  
Two heads swim. One swims with the bounteous futures held in front of her; the other swims  
from a drop in blood pressure. Both your hands slap against the floor tiles, the two of you on  
all fours now.

Part of an intestine slithers out.

Is this the birth of two new lives, or a rebirth, or just afterbirth smeared on the sea of tiles?

Your mother knocks, enters the bathroom, to wish her daughters happy birthday.

