Twinsburg

by Margaret LaFleur

We knew this year would be different because we bought bikinis. We had never worn bikinis before. Our swimsuits had always been shiny one-pieces with stripes, or polka dots, or tiny yellow fish. Not this year.

It was a hot summer and the department store was overly air-conditioned, so when we stood in front of the dressing room mirrors tiny goose bumps appeared on our arms and legs. We looked good anyway. The bottoms were cut like little boy shorts. The tops tied at the back of our necks and were slightly thick, lending us a little shape in front where we were sorely lacking it. Our mother hovered behind us and bit her lip. We pretended not to notice so that when she said, “Are you sure, girls?” we could nod and grin and she had to sigh, had to agree. The suits were red, one tiny white flower blooming on the left hip. At the register the woman behind the counter held the swimsuits up and raised her eyebrows at us.

“You're really getting the same ones?” she asked. We said yes, of course, we have to match. We were going to Twinsburg.

Each year Twinsburg, Ohio plays host to the largest gathering of twins, triplets and multiples of every category in the United States. Matching in Twinsburg was like matching nowhere else. Two thousand sets of multiples passing by each other in and out of tents, crowded around stages and continuously snapping photos of various sets in intertwining arm locks. Matching in Twinsburg was what connected us, instead of what set us apart. We enjoyed being in a space suddenly free from the normal roster of questions. Oh, so you're identical? How do your parents tell you apart? Have you ever pretended to be the other? Or if those questions were asked, the tone was always mercifully light and mocking. But last year what we had really enjoyed were Josh and Jordan, from Virginia.

“Okay, sweeties, one more store?” Our mother consulted her watch.“We have the time.”

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We agreed. We took these outfits seriously. More seriously, even, than back-to-school shopping. The festival was more than a month away, but as our mother pointed out, why not take advantage of the Fourth of July sales?

“Girls!” she called, and held two carrot-colored blouses with square necks above her head. “Want to try these?” Without waiting for us to answer she draped them over one arm. “Yes, I think you will.” We rolled our eyes. We looked terrible in orange.

“These, though, I think you'll like.” She followed us into the dressing room and waved her latest discovery over the door. Determined to consider every sale option, our mother had brought back two matching brown dresses from the petite section. The dresses had matching lace along the bottom and top and a thick band around the middle that could be tied into a bow off to the side. When Mom held them up for us the soft skin on the underside of her arm swayed a little along with the fabric.

“Aren't they elegant?” she asked, pleased with herself. And we had to admit, there was something nice about them. They were the kind of dress that celebrities wore on the covers of magazines when they were kicking up their heels on a beach or in a lawn of perfectly green grass, hailing the arrival of summer. The dresses were also strapless. We stepped into them anyway and Mom zipped us up easily. We stood for a moment, considering the result.

“No, not quite right,” she said. “Do you think they have them one size down?” When she stepped out of the fitting room to investigate we immediately stepped close to each other and put our arms around each other's necks and smiled as though someone had commanded “Say Cheese!” The dresses slid down as we reached up, causing us to spring apart and yank them up again.

“We need boobs.”

“It's not fair.”

“Janice Akerman has more boob than she needs!”

“She could give us each some and still have more than anyone else!”

This made us laugh. Janice had developed boobs in the fifth grade, which was way before us. Once a boy in gym class ran up behind her and snapped her bra so hard that the smack of it against her skin reverberated through the entire gym and she actually fell to the floor. That had been in the sixth grade. At the time we felt sorry for her. That was until this year when she started getting rides home after school from Rick Lacey, who was seventeen and on the baseball team. Now, all of us soon to be ninth graders were jealous, slinking into our parents' cars (or worse, onto the school bus) as she and Rick drove a little too fast over the speed bump at the parking lot's exit.

“Sorry, sweeties…” our mother said, coming up behind us. “They only had one.” She offered the single smaller dress and smiled regretfully at us in the glass. We shook our heads. Only one? What was the point? That, too, was the problem with Rick Lacey. Sure, he looked good striding toward the baseball diamond in his team uniform and all the girls wondered what it was like inside his car. But there was only one of him.

At home we hung up our outfits side by side on the shower pole, pushing the curtain to the far side. We had black skirts with plain blue tops for Friday, which we could pair with the large blue thong sandals and wear again on Saturday with jeans and the rhinestone top. On Sunday we had green t-shirts with looping print on the front reading Mindy Girls, with A stenciled on the back of one, B on the back of the other. Once the hangers were arranged we slid our backs against the wall and stretched our legs so that our feet rested on the edge of the bathtub. When we were younger and shared a bedroom we had done this sitting between our beds, our heels propped on pillows. We were used to seeing each other's faces and arms and matching bony elbows. Those were the parts that everyone else saw, too. It was our identical wide eyes and perfectly duplicated spatter of freckles on the bridge of the nose that people noticed on the street and squinted at as their eyes bounced from one of us to the other. But our replicated feet, with the fourth toe on the left foot longer than it should be, was something only we bothered to notice.

“When was the last time you talked to Josh?”

“I dunno, not for a while.”

“Jordan said he had a girlfriend. Once. Online.”

“Yeah, well, I didn't really like him, anyway.” We were silent for just a moment. “Wait, you still talk to Jordan?”

“Just sometimes…”

“They had weird hair.”

“It wasn't that weird.”

“We'll meet cuter guys, this time.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

We had spent most of the first night the year before at the hotel in the pool while our parents watched television in the room. Water had dripped off the tips of our hair and suits when we stepped into the elevator. Josh and Jordan rounded the corner and rushed in behind us, just as the doors started to close. They stood in front of the bank of small round buttons and surveyed us. It was cool in the elevator and our skin prickled beneath our thin hotel towels and the smell of chlorine filled the small space. We tried not to flash the braces we still had along our bottom teeth when we asked for the 9th floor. They replied that they'd only press the button if we agreed to go bowling with them the next day, which we took as a good sign. But after exchanging instant message names and e-mails the second night, they spent all of the final morning's pancake breakfast with a set of red-headed twins from North Carolina who were not quite in Janice Akerman's league, but were certainly above ours. There wasn't anything we could do about that. Our teeth were free and straight, now. We could definitely do better.

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Dad grinned at us and slapped his newspaper on the edge of the table. “Okay, darlings, I think we're almost ready. We'll fill ‘er up on the way out and then we'll be on our way. We should be in about 7, which will give plenty of time for my fishes to enjoy the pool.”

We had spent most of the night on the bathroom floor, painting a layer of glitter polish on our toenails and discussing whether or not to use the cell numbers that Josh and Jordan had e-mailed to us.

What we wanted were twin boyfriends. Someday twin husbands. Though Josh and Jordan were probably not going to be either of those things. They weren't the cutest either, and what if the redheads came back too? What if Josh and Jordan were just waiting to find them? We didn't want to waste our time. Besides, they lived in Virginia. Still, we programmed their numbers into both our phones and agreed to just see what happened. This morning we were both nervous, quiet as our parents looked over the event listings in the registration packets.

“Ok, girls. Let's hit the road.” Mom placed a hand on the back of our necks and fluffed the back of our hair. This was something we hoped she would not do once we were in Ohio.

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In the hotel room, after we hung our outfits in the small closet behind the door, we took our swimsuits into the bathroom. It was still Thursday evening, and the official Twins Days festivities didn't begin until Friday. We lingered in front of the mirror, adjusting the unfamiliar two-piece suits. We experimented with our hair, tying it back and braiding it, waiting for our eyes to adjust to our reflections, as if we were looking at ourselves in the dark. We were quick to wrap towels around our exposed and suddenly unappealingly white stomachs before we stepped into flip-flops and headed for the pool.

Three small boys in indistinguishable orange swim trunks jumped into the water one after the other as we walked into the pool room. We looked around and surveyed the groups that were lounging on plastic chairs. It was mostly families, and two women in matching flower patterned suits sitting in the hot tub, the ruffles along their straps bubbling around them in the jet streams. The year before we had made a beeline for the pool, racing from one end to the other in laps of the same race we had been swimming our whole lives. We were past those kinds of childish competitions now and we walked toward the hot tub. The women both had wrinkles around their eyes and short hair that looked permed and dyed to a rich brown. We

perched on the opposite end of the whirlpool and tentatively touched the water with our sparkling toes.

“Hi, ladies,” one of the women said, wiggling her fingers in our direction.

“Is this your first year? Or all you old pros?” the other asked.

“It's our tenth year,” the first one offered before we could answer her sister.

“God, it must be fun to be here so young.”

“How old are you girls?”

“We're fifteen.” It was one of the answers we always stumbled into simultaneously. Often, when speaking to strangers this would make us blush. But the women just nodded, no doubt familiar with a lifetime of two inflections in every routine reply. We dangled our legs farther into the water.

“You two must drive the boys wild.”

“Really, look at the legs on them,” the second woman said, more to her sister than to us. We tried not to look too pleased.

“Remember when we were young and pretty?” They both hooted softly with laughter.

“Speak for yourself! I'm still pretty!”

The women stayed in the hot tub a few minutes longer, until their cheeks were tinged with pink, at which point one stood to climb out, water cascading from her soft and sagging suit.

“My time's up.” she said, waving slightly towards us and using her twin's shoulder for balance. “I'm going to call Charles. We'll grab a bite in half an hour?” The remaining woman nodded and slid deeper into the pool, closing her eyes as her sister made her way across the slippery tile.

“That's the problem with husbands. Always need to check in.”

This comment surprised us. “You don't have a husband?”

“No, no, no.”

“Why not?”

“I guess I never found anyone.”

Neither of us said anything more, thinking of what it might be like to watch the other in the front seat of Rick Lacey's car, as stranded

on the school steps as the woman bobbing lazily across from us. Out of habit and for reassurance we let our floating feet bump together in the jets of hot water.

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“You have only been separated, once,” our mother says. “I read in a book that it was important for twins to have time alone, so when you girls were two, I picked you up” (here she reaches out and touches only one cheek,) “and off I went.” She had been intending to spend the long weekend at her own sister's place, leaving the other with our father back at home. Our parents do not relish this story quite the way we do. They smile in a tired sort of way when we insist they tell it and our mother cocks her head to the side as she tells us, studying us for our reaction, or as if she remains puzzled. But she continues. “It was the longest day of my life,” she says, “trying to get you to stop crying. Finally, near my wit's end, I called your father. I could hear the TV in the background and you,” (here she touches a different cheek,) “I could hear laughing. I was so stunned I began to cry and your father told me to take a deep breath and go to the nearest mirror. I did. I plopped you down in front of the hall closet, right on top of a pile of dirty shoes.” She stops here, because we know what happened next. She waited and listened to her husband laugh on the other end of the line. A hundred miles away from each other for the first (and only) time in our lives we grinned and laughed and slapped our chubby baby hands together. In the glass we saw our sister do the same. “I got right back in the car,” our mother finishes, “and drove home that night, exhausted.” And, we say after she tells this story, we've been together ever since.

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We discussed whether or not to text Josh and Jordan. We didn't know whether they would be in this hotel, first of all. We also didn't know whether Josh still had a girlfriend. Perhaps, more importantly for this weekend, we didn't know whether they were still in contact with the red-headed twins from North Carolina. When we said “North Carolina” we drew out the words as if we had a Southern drawl. We lingered in the hot tub, dipping ourselves in and out. The

pool area was filled with pairs of matching children and we laughed at the idea of someone visiting the city who didn't know about the festival. How confusing it would be. The city was called Twinsburg. Could it be that more twins lived here than anywhere else? We laughed at this in a way we hoped was alluring and looked around to see if anyone was watching. We secretly hoped that when we got into the elevator Josh and Jordan would be there. It would be an undeniably romantic coincidence. We did not admit, out loud, that we were disappointed to find ourselves alone.

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Friday was when we met the most people, so we took our time applying light blue eye shadow and wisps of blush to our cheeks. We ignored our father's insistent knocking, ignored when he groaned and suggested that next year they'd have to get us our own room just so he could get in and use the toilet once in a while. We ignored him, too, when we emerged and he grinned at us, calling us pretty girls. It was already past nine and we wanted to get down to the breakfast. Our parents agreed to meet us and we left before they had the chance to change their minds.

In line for the breakfast buffet we had our first chance to look over the other festival participants. Some people would still be trickling in throughout the weekend, but almost anyone who had to come with parents was there by Friday morning and we looked around, searching for familiar faces or just cute ones. The excitement in the room was contagious and we helped ourselves to more food than we could possibly eat, just to have something to do with our hands and as a reason to remain at breakfast as long as we wanted. We chose a table with a pair of twins dressed in matching college t-shirts. They introduced themselves as Jessica and Jennifer. They could be us in a few years. As we crunched overcooked bacon we imagined college parties and our dorm room, a replica of the tiny room we had shared before we moved to the bigger house we lived in now. After we ate we lined up for a photo and when we flipped through the display we were pleased to see how smooth our black

skirts and blue tops looked. We looked trim and neat. The morning was going well, and it was almost time for the parade.

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We saw them at nearly the same second, though they were not who we had been looking for. Walking half a block in front of us they wore jerseys, with Adam and Alex stitched in arcs over the numbers one and two. We butted each other with our shoulders and sped up a few steps. The back of their necks and arms were tan and they had closely cropped dark hair. The parade was mostly an informal thing. People wandered down the route, waving and calling to each other. Everyone could participate, or not. We kept a bit of space between ourselves and the boys, settling into a space in the crowd just ahead of them and off to one side. We waited for them to notice us. We flipped our hair once, twice. We smiled, once, twice. Our smiles were large and aimed in their direction. Still, we were surprised when they saw us and smiled back.

“I'm Adam.”

“I'm Alex.”

We introduced ourselves. It was exciting, but we tried not to show it. We looked down at our twenty matching toes. The boys were from Ohio, not too far from Twinsburg.

“We know the area,” Alex boasted.

“Yeah, so you should stick with us,” Adam added. This sounded like a good plan. We were approaching the final turn of the parade. Pretty soon we would reach the end of the route and the rows of tents where people sold jewelry and t-shirts, all advertising two-for-one deals. We asked Adam and Alex what their favorite part of Twinsburg was, if they liked to participate in the games or just hang out.

“We like the people,” Adam said.

“We like the girls,” Alex said.

We tried not to blush. We held up our camera. When the boys slipped their arms around our waists we leaned into them, all of us standing in a neat line, rib to rib. The boys smelled like sun block

and light cologne. For a delicious moment we felt as if we had plunged, head first, into a hot spring.

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We agreed that we'd meet our parents by lunchtime, so we exchanged cell phone numbers with Adam and Alex. They now appeared at the top of our contacts list, which seemed appropriate. We did not scroll down to find Josh and Jordan. It was, we almost agreed, a little pointless. For now.

“If Jordan doesn't have a girlfriend, we might want to see them.”

“We might, yeah.”

Our parents waved at us from a shady picnic table. They already had food spread out in front of them.

“Having fun?” our mother asked when we sat down. We shrugged. We knew they wouldn't understand. They looked out of place in Twinsburg, wandering around with each other, barely a pair. We unwrapped the sandwiches they had bought us. One turkey, one chicken. The park was a popular place for families to meet and have lunch. It was a warm afternoon, but we were glowing from a different kind of warmth. We were feeling generous, so when our father asked if we wouldn't mind hanging out with them for a few hours, we agreed. We sent text messages to Adam and Alex. They would meet us later at the hotel. We hoped our bikinis had not shrunk since the night before, or become stiff after drying. It mattered, tonight.

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The pool area was crowded. More twins had arrived during the day and it seemed every set in the hotel had decided to take a swim. The hot tub was full of half a dozen adults holding sweating bottles of beer over their heads. Adam and Alex hadn't arrived and for a minute we hung back, unsure. We settled our towels carefully on a single free chair. Kids were splashing in the pool but we perched near the deep end. The water was cold and after a few minutes we pulled up our feet and sat cross-legged, leaning back on our hands. We watched people pass the glass doors. We thought Adam and Alex

would be here by now. Our parents had insisted we leave our cell phones safe and dry in the room.

“Should we go up and send them a message?”

“Well, if we do that we might as well send one to Jordan, too.”

“Jordan and Josh?”

It was at that moment, as if we had conjured them from thin air, when they strode into the pool area from the hallway.

They were taller than they had been a year before. They wore blue swim trunks and had let their hair grow out so it hung across their foreheads. We looked away, out across the pool towards a group of kids tossing a ball back and forth in the far end of the pool.

“Oh my god.”

“What about Adam and Alex?” We had to speak under our breath. We didn't need to look at them to know they were moving towards us, their bare feet slapping against the tile.

“Hey, look who it is,” Jordan said, falling into a heap next to us. We looked up, casually surprised. We said hey, once, twice. Josh slapped his brother on the back and threw himself into the pool. Drops of water splashed up and over us. Josh yelled to his brother and Jordan grinned at us.

“You feel like getting in?” he asked, making a move as if to collect us into his arms and toss us towards Josh. We squealed and stood. No, we said, and laughed into the palms of our hands.

“I'm gonna need some help!” Jordan said, also getting to his feet. He waved his arms towards us. Behind him Josh climbed over the edge, shaking his head like a wet dog. We laughed and clung to each other, shook our heads.

Hands touched shoulders. Once, twice. Adam and Alex were suddenly behind us, still dressed in the t-shirts from earlier, each with a towel over one arm. We grinned, not because we thought this would make us pretty, but because we were full of nervous laughter. The boys looked each other over as we stood between them, waiting. They traded names as they bumped their knuckles together. Once, twice. Adam and Alex pulled their shirts over their heads and then we were all limbs. Between the four of them we were carried like

half empty bags of groceries pitched unceremoniously into the backseat of a car. The water rushed over our heads and we could feel the boys as they followed us in, hitting the water with shouts and skin smacking. We came up for air, brushing the hair from our eyes and checking the outlines of our suits, tugging our straps back into place. We smiled, but the moment was quickly drowned beneath another wave spraying above our heads. We turned to splash back. The whole room echoed with shouts and the sound of water and it took a few minutes of elbows knocking and dipping underwater before we both kicked over to the edge of the pool, grasping the edge and clambering up the tiny pool ladder.

We picked up our towels and stood back from the pool, pretending to wipe our faces dry.

“Can you believe Josh and Jordan are here?”

“No. That's weird.” We whispered and bit our lips and shivered.

“I think they look better. Jordan is funny.”

“But, it was sweet of Adam and Alex to come.”

“He hasn't said anything about a girlfriend.”

“That doesn't mean he doesn't have one.”

“Yeah, I guess, but…”

“But what?” We looked at each other and then back towards where the boys continued to splash and call. For a moment we thought we could drop our towels and go back. It would be easy enough to jump, to fall, and to let the pool be the answer. Dusk was setting in outside and we could see our reflections in the glass of the windows, each tucked into a solitary plane. We dropped the towels and linked our arms. There was only a small slice of space in the hot tub but we lowered ourselves in, our backs toward Josh and Jordan, Adam and Alex. We looked at our bodies beneath the surface. Our skin was translucent, our swimsuits like four red petals dropped into the water.