

Wearing My Skin

by Nicola Griffith

Coel pulled out of the parking lot, enjoying the smooth roll of the wheel under her hands, the way the Jaguar's new tires gripped the road. Gold and red gleamed on each side of the road; the Indian summer was sighing to a close but the sky was a hard arcing blue and the sun made the inside of the car hot. She rolled down the window and put her foot down, leaving the ad agency behind. She loved Fridays.

A mile down the slow curve of Peachtree Industrial, she touched a button and the smooth voice of Ella Fitzgerald slid like cool cream under the leather seats:

...we're so close
you're wearing my skin,
it's my smile you're smiling



my bones within...

The phone sliced through the music. Coel eased off the gas, and the volume.

"This is Coel Roberts." She manoeuvred the car around a sharp bend. "Who? Doctor what?" Her foot eased off the gas even further. "Doctor Lisker?"

The voice on the other end spoke more and the Jaguar swerved and juddered to a halt. Ella sang on.

Coel switched off the music, then the engine, still listening to the voice on the other end of the phone.

"My what? I don't have a..." She listened. "Yes. Yes of course I'll come."

She dropped the phone back into its cradle and stared blankly through the windshield at the road curving out of sight into the trees. She was no longer alone in the world.

Dr. Nadine Lisker met her in the lobby of the Georgia State Facility for the Criminally Insane. In her early thirties, Coel judged, about four years older than herself. Her hair was very dark brown, almost black, held away from her face with a silver clip in the shape of a stylized butterfly. Not cheap.

"This way, Ms. Roberts." Her voice was pleasant, full. It echoed a little around the hard spaces of Reception.

"Coel," she corrected quietly, avoiding the echo. "I would like to see her."

"I'd rather you didn't meet her just yet. Though you can see her." They stepped through an ordinary looking white door.

It was a small room. The far wall was glass. Beyond the glass was another room, brightly lit and unfurnished. A woman sat cross-legged on the floor, reading a paperback.

"Your sister, Katherine Bernadette Macalley."

Coel knew Lisker was watching for her response; she said nothing.

"I'll leave you alone with her for a while."

The door closed. Coel walked up to the glass, her feet silent on the thick carpet. The woman on the other side continued to read; a two-way mirror, then. Coel laid a hand against the glass.

"Katherine." Her whisper was sucked away by the air conditioning.

The room smelled new, antiseptic. Against the wall opposite the door was a desk, complete with computer terminal and surveillance monitor; there was a phone, and two office chairs. Coel pulled one over to face the glass and sat down. Her legs still shook.

Katherine turned a page, chewed on her finger. Coel recognized the habit; it was her own. Katherine was wearing jeans and her hair was cut short, but in all other respects she was an identical copy of herself: wide mouth, slightly crooked; mid-brown hair with a tendency to part on the left; small hands; hazel eyes.

The glass was cool against her fingertips. She lifted her hand away and shook her head. Katherine. Something inside slotted into place for the first time in thirty years.

Katherine.

When the door opened, she turned reluctantly. Dr. Lisker put two plastic coffee cups and a manila folder on the desk.

"It's not very good coffee, but I thought you might want something anyway. Since you came straight from work."

Coel became conscious of her high heels and makeup,

the way the seam of her stockings ran up the back of her legs and disappeared underneath grey pinstripe. She touched her hair, realized that Dr. Lisker would recognize it as an automatic checking gesture, and was angry.

"If you feel you had the right to invade my privacy, and Katherine's, to the extent that you search out both her adoption records and mine, you could at least have informed me of the situation before now."

"Katherine was admitted in a disturbed state last night. I was called in only fourteen hours ago. At four this morning."

Now she could see the faint circles under Lisker's eyes, the way her shoulders drooped.

"When questioned about her next of kin, she could only say she had a twin. She had no evidence and, frankly, I was inclined to disbelieve her. But she became...insistent. Eventually, just to satisfy myself, I ran an initial search--for which she gave permission. I was surprised to find you did exist. We traced you as soon as we could. We haven't even had time to inform Katherine."

Coel watched the surface of her coffee tighten into wrinkles. "When will you?"

For the first time, Lisker hesitated. "I'm not sure. She's been quiet so far. I'd rather not disturb her again right now."

Coel turned to look at the woman behind the glass who was still reading. They had that in common too. Perhaps they read the same books.

"Tell me about her," she said. Lisker tilted her head to one side. "Anything. Who she was. Is. What she does for a living. How she came to be here."

Lisker reached for the manila folder. Coel laid her

hand on it.

"No. Just tell me. Please."

#

The Jaguar whipped through the night, through a sheath of soft black velvet sequined with lights. Orff soared in endless latin cycles from the speakers, shaving slivers of whispery phrase from her memory, dropping them into her mouth until she thought she would choke:

"Then she called over the woman from the next apartment..."

"...with an electric carving knife..."

"...four dead..."

"...is, or was, a freelance illustrator..."

Then all the whispers shriveled, leaving one hard, lucid sentence:

"She's been quiet, behaving well within all the normal parameters ever since admission, except she insists that her twin will understand why she did it, that her twin will forgive her."

But she didn't understand. She slammed the Jag into fifth and hunched back over the wheel. How could Katherine have been so certain she existed? Lisker told her that she and Katherine had been abandoned on the steps of a public library in Columbus, Ohio, but had been separated for adoption. The women who had taken them in, whom they came to call Mother, had no way of knowing that either of them had a twin. How could Katherine have known? There was no way Katherine, as a member of the public, could have used the kind of records Lisker had recourse to. How had she known?

...you're wearing my skin

it's my smile you're smiling...

In the morning she woke to find that autumn had breathed glitter on her window and the trees outside stood silent and vivid as abstract art. She shivered, remembering a dream of Nadine Lisker, and pulled her robe tight.

In the kitchen, the refrigerator rattled ice into the tray. The Saturday quiet made her nervous as she sat at the kitchen table to eat her toast and drink tea. She carried breakfast into the living room, walking through slats of sunlight that slanted past the blinds.

The card lay where she had left it last night, leaning on the sill of the drafting table by the window, obscuring the corner of her unfinished charcoal sketch:

Nadine Lisker, PhD, Asst. Director,
Institute of Twin Studies
2013 Peachtree Road NE
Atlanta, GA 30103

It was plain and white, not embossed. Practical. Call me if you need me, she had said. Coel picked it up, intending to tear it in two, then changed her mind; it would do well enough as a bookmark. She tucked it in her pocket and cradled her tea.

The phone rang.

At the Institute of Twin Studies, an annex of the Psychology Department, Nadine Lisker served her real coffee, in a lumpy handmade mug.

"Thank you for coming in."

Coel just waited.

"You're a rare commodity, Coel, a twin raised separately from her identical sibling. You represent an opportunity that may not come my way again for a long time."

Lisker seemed comfortable in the silence that

followed. Coel broke it.

"You want to do some tests on me?"

"Ask you questions, compare your personality profile with Katherine's. This may involve filling out a few simple questionnaires."

She was not in the mood to make things easy for Nadine Lisker. "What do I get out of it?"

Lisker laughed, a light, strong laugh that surprised Coel and drew some of the tension from her shoulders. "I'll rephrase: I want your help and, in the process, I think you might learn some things that could be useful to you. Let me expand on that." She settled more comfortably in her chair. "Personality is largely genetically determined. Just how largely is debatable."

"Biology is destiny?" Coel could not keep the distaste from her voice.

"Some studies have suggested that at least fifty percent of measurable personality diversity is due to genetic diversity."

"You said 'measurable.'"

"We can accurately measure factors as diverse as attitude, alienation from society, aggression, traditionalism, aptitudes, sexuality, musical taste and self-esteem. From there we can categorize into personality types."

In the quiet Coel realized she was tapping her ring against her empty coffee cup. She put the cup down.

"What are you saying?"

"That I'd like the opportunity to conduct tests; that both of us stand to gain a little knowledge if you agree."

Coel thought of Katherine quietly reading behind the two-way mirror, constantly observed, and was afraid.

"How long will it take?"

"I'll need you for two or three hours today, then

another twenty hours or so which we can schedule at your convenience."

"I'd like to see Katherine. Meet her, I mean."

"I would rather you didn't, at least for a while."

"Why?" Her voice was hard, challenging.

"I'm not being unnecessarily cruel." Lisker steepled her fingers. "Katherine is convinced that she has a twin, and clings to that belief despite the fact that she hasn't a shred of evidence. It may well be that her adoptive mother read or heard a news report on another baby, you, being abandoned, and made the connection. Katherine may unconsciously remember her mother telling her something. I need to find out."

"Why does it matter so much to you?"

Lisker looked away for a moment. "I have funding for this personality study, but I have other interests in twins that this may...pertain to."

Something in the way Lisker avoided her eyes puzzled Coel, made her think. Then she understood. "You want to study psychic bonds. Telepathy, empathy, that stuff."

Lisker looked uncomfortable. "I'd rather think of it as an unexplained method, or methods, of communication of strong emotional or physical sensations between twins."

Coel considered that. "Is it causing her distress, my not being there?"

"You saw her. She's very calm. I told her I was investigating, but that it was likely to take a few days. I thought it would."

Coel looked at the fingernails of one hand, then the other. "If it won't do her any harm, then I guess I can wait another day or two."

"That should be long enough."

"Meanwhile, I'd like to see her again." Then she

surprised herself. "Every day, if that's possible."

"How about helping me with a questionnaire, then I'll take you to see her. While we're there, I'll arrange for you to visit and observe without me, at anytime." And she smiled a slow smile.

The drive from the Institute to the State Facility took less than fifteen minutes. Coel followed Lisker's Toyota nose to tail.

Inside, Lisker stopped by the door to the viewing room. "You go on in. I'll take care of your visitor's permit."

Katherine was wearing green; it picked up green tints from the hazel of her eyes and emphasized the fresh pink of her cheeks. Coel wondered how they would feel against her fingertips. The skin looked so soft. She was reading again, this time a fat hardback without a dust jacket. Coel wished she could see the title, wondered if it was something she had read herself.

As Coel stepped nearer to the glass, Katherine raised her head and looked up, directly into her eyes. Coel smiled automatically, then her heart slammed under her ribs. Katherine could not see her. Katherine could not know she was there. Then her twin sister spoke. Coel could not hear her through the glass, but the words formed by her lips were clear: *Hello. I know you're there. I knew you'd come.*

And she smiled like a satisfied six year-old receiving her birthday present, and bent her head back to the book.

Coel did not dare move, afraid that the floor might creak, or that some minute flaw in the two-way mirror might allow through a flash of movement. Afraid that Katherine might know she was there, might see her in some way she did not understand. Afraid.

She sucked air deep into her lungs, released it gently; sucked, released until her heart slowed a little. The muscles in her shoulders burned. Why was she so scared? Lisker must have told her, that was all. Lisker. Nothing unusual in that. Or maybe someone else had told her. Somebody had to have said something. Or perhaps Katherine was so crazy that she repeated that sentence randomly every hour or so. The sheer faith implicit in that assumption rocked her.

...we're so close...

you're wearing my skin...

She moved closer to the glass, until the cold unyielding surface pressed against her abdomen. The part in Katherine's hair was very slightly crooked. Gently she pushed closer: her breasts, her thighs, her right cheek; her arms, the palms of her hands. Her breath fogged the glass. Katherine. She wanted to spread herself against the slick, vitreous surface, ease herself all the way through, cell by cell, sigh up against her sister, touch cheek to cheek, thigh to thigh, mouth to mouth.

The glass was cold against her lips. She blinked. The air conditioning made her throat dry and ticklish and she coughed, reached a hand to her mouth, banged an elbow against the glass. She stepped back. The fog of her breath faded.

The wall clock told her she had stood there for over fifteen minutes.

The door opened. Lisker came in slowly, looking wary. "What happened? What did you do?"

Coel struggled between the need to push herself up against the glass, be with Katherine, and the need to pull back inside herself, neat and compact, face the enemy. She blinked. Enemy?

Lisker put a hand on her shoulder and peered at her.

"What is it? What did you do?"

"Nothing." Like a guilty schoolgirl. "Were you watching me?"

"You? No." She looked at her more closely, then steered her to a seat. "Sit down," she said in a softer voice. She took the chair next to her. "Katherine is under video surveillance around the clock. When I was talking to the security officer about your permit, I watched the monitor in her office. I saw and heard Katherine greet you."

Coel tried to sort out the emotions that twisted in her gut: relief, that Lisker had not seen her pressing against the glass like...like a cat in heat; fear, that there was no way Katherine could have known.

"A security leak?" she managed.

Lisker shook her head positively. "She's been monitored every second she's been here. If someone told her, we'd know about it."

Monitored because she was crazy. A killer. Maybe she was going crazy too.

Nonsense. She straightened, forced a smile.

"Evidence of telepathy?"

"I'll make a note of it, but we could do that over lunch. You look very pale. Food might help."

They walked six blocks to a sidewalk cafe and took a seat outside in the sun where traffic-fumed breezes gusted warmly over their skin while they looked at the menu.

Lisker ordered wine for them both.

"Tell me what happened."

"Somehow she knew I was there." She sipped at her wine, wishing the glass were bigger.

"Why were you so frightened?"

"It was a shock. To think she could see me."

Her fingers tightened around the glass. The wine was very cold. "Tell me more about Katherine. Does she have a good lawyer?"

"She has a public defender, but she's refused to talk to him. She doesn't care what happens to her, she says. She's admitted the murders but won't tell us why she did it. Only that you, her twin, will understand." She paused. "Do you?"

"No. And I wish I had never heard of Katherine."

"Do you?" Lisker asked again.

Despite the tension in her shoulders, despite the fear that flexed in the pit of her stomach, there was also comfort, almost exhilaration, in the knowledge that she had a blood relative, a twin, someone who was hers, someone that nobody could take away. Family.

"Will she go to jail?"

"I doubt it. She'll be judged incompetent and assigned to a state facility for custody and treatment."

"For how long?"

"That depends," Lisker said gently. "We can't begin treatment until she decides to cooperate. Right now she's refusing to talk to any body." For a moment her frustration showed.

"She'd talk to me." The words were steady with absolute conviction.

"I can't take the risk."

"What risk? She's my twin."

"She has killed four people."

"Then tell her that you found me at least."

"You think it would make any difference?"

"I know it would."

A waitress took their orders. There was a lull in the

traffic. Coel thought about what she had said. She knew it was true, but didn't know how she knew. Their fettucini came. They ate in silence.

"I'll tell her this afternoon," Lisker said suddenly. "If she reacts well I'll arrange a supervised meeting."

"Thank you." She put her fork down. "Nadine, these other studies you mentioned, did the twins talk about physical stuff, a compulsion to be close?"

"Sometimes." Nadine hesitated. "A small percentage of subjects displayed the need to remain in close proximity to their siblings. Among these particular subjects, the correlation of both positive and negative personality traits with genetic similarity was unusually high. The incidence of unexplained communication was also much higher than average."

"So it's a bad sign, isn't it? I might go crazy, too. In fact I might already be crazy, who knows?"

"If you are crazy, it'll show up in the tests," Lisker said calmly. "If you're not, and I believe you're not, then there's no reason to suppose that you'll remain anything but a woman with extremely well-adjusted emotional and mental processes."

Coel was grateful for Lisker's blunt words; she wanted to believe every single one of them, but she wondered how it felt to be crazy, and if Katherine even knew she was insane.

When the phone rang she was curled up on the couch watching a movie she had rented on her way home from the cafe. Dark had crept into the apartment while she watched the screen; she had to fumble for the light switch behind her before she reached for the phone.

"Coel? It's Nadine, Nadine Lisker."

Coel turned off the movie. "You told her. When do I get to see her?"

"You don't. She doesn't want to see you. Coel? Are you there?"

"Are you sure?"

"When I asked her how she felt about seeing you tomorrow, she said, 'Tell Coel she'll be hearing from me when the time is right. The time isn't right yet.'"

Blood thumped in her throat. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know. But she definitely doesn't want to see you. I suggest we leave it awhile. She might change her mind."

She wouldn't. "Will you be in tomorrow?"

"I could arrange to be."

"In the afternoon? Two?"

"I'll be there. Meanwhile, try not to take her decision too personally. She's not really responsible for what she says."

Coel made a noncommittal noise and hung up.

Certainty fluttered over her skin like cold kisses: Katherine knew exactly what she was saying.

Coel refused a chair; she stood by the glass and watched Katherine. "What's she doing?"

"Tai chi."

"It's beautiful." Her voice was wistful.

"She is beautiful."

Coel turned. They held one another's gaze briefly, then Coel dropped her eyes. "Have you asked her again? About seeing me."

"Not yet. Are you sure you want me to?"

Coel did not try to explain the fierce urge she had to see her twin, to touch her, to feel her breath against her

cheek. "Yes."

"Then I'll talk to her." She paused half way through the door. "I could arrange for our conversation to be run through to here, if you like."

"Thank you."

Lisker nodded and left. Coel took a seat by the desk terminal and examined it. The agency could use a new computer, one with more advanced graphics programs. Perhaps Lisker could give her some advice.

Something made her look up. Katherine was standing up against the glass, looking at her. She tried to stay calm. There was no way her twin could really see her, or know she was there. She stared back, tried to laugh at herself. Katherine could not see her. Defiantly, she waved.

Katherine smiled. Her teeth were very even.

She felt sick, the kind of gut-squeezing sick that hits before a college exam, or an interview. The air she breathed was slick and heavy; it slid down her throat as if it were muscular, alive. She would not panic.

"What do you want?"

Katherine just smiled and turned away, back into a tai chi stance.

Coel struggled to breathe, wondered if she was going to vomit. She needed a drink of water.

Her legs were rubbery with adrenalin; the tiled corridor seemed to undulate under her and her footsteps sounded hard, alien. The water fountain was outside the women's bathroom. The sound of her gulping echoed off the walls. In the restroom, she looked at herself in the mirror. She was pale and sweating, shivering. Perhaps she was in shock. Food.

Out on the street, she found a vending machine and dropped in two quarters. The fig bar was sticky and stale,

but she managed to get down a few bites. She leaned against a wall and tilted her face to the sunshine; she did not want to go back in there.

But what was there to be scared of? It was coincidence, that was all. And even supposing, for the sake of argument, Katherine had seen her, somehow, why should that scare her so much? She was in no danger. She pushed herself away from the wall and straightened up.

She opened the door to the sound of voices. They were tinny, coming from the ceiling. Katherine and Lisker moved their lips to the sound. It was like watching a movie in a theater where the volume was turned up too loud.

"...waiting to see you," Lisker was saying.

"I haven't changed my mind, Nadine."

"But why? After insisting that I track her down?"

"I'm very grateful, Nadine, as I've already said. But I no longer find it necessary or desirable to see Coel."

The sound of her own name from those lips thrilled up her spine. She missed part of the next sentence.

"...what she looks like, I know how she will smell. I know what she thinks, I even know how she feels right this minute." Katherine looked straight through the glass at Coel. "I will come to her in my own time."

The words were gentle but Coel felt as though Katherine had reached into her stomach and was squeezing it gently. The edges of her vision went a hollow dark red.

Katherine turned back to Lisker. "You'd better go to her. She doesn't feel well."

Lisker looked uncertainly at the glass, her gaze missed Coel by several feet. Katherine laughed. Like her voice,

her laugh was very gentle. She gestured toward the door.
"I think you'll have another patient before long, Doctor.
But by the time that happens, you won't have to worry
about me."

Lisker handed Coel the glass of water, let her take another
sip. "Better?"

Coel nodded. "Thank you." She drank some more.
"I don't know what's the matter with me. I just...felt
dizzy."

"Let me drive you home."

"My car..."

"I'll drive your car, take a cab back."

Coel found it strange to sit in the passenger
seat. She was closer to the trees, to the curb. There were
all kinds of different grasses growing by the road; the sun
streamed through the clouds and caught the fur of a
squirrel as it ran along a branch.

Nadine drove carefully, always checking the mirror,
never taking the Jag more than five miles over the speed
limit; Coel wondered if was because of the car. After a
Toyota it would feel big, a wild carnivore after a tabby cat.

Nadine's hands moved competently enough over the
wheel; the gear changes were smooth. Coel realized that it
wasn't the car that Nadine was taking care of, but her. She
couldn't decide if she was glad or annoyed.

"I'm feeling much better now."

Nadine did not take her eyes off the road but their
speed increased imperceptibly. "Good. How about a little
music?" She glanced at the cassette player, pushed in the
tape that was already there.

...you're wearing my skin
it's my smile you're smiling...

"Not that." Coel punched it out. "Sorry, I've just heard that one once too often."

She found a Nina Simone tape, pushed it in without checking to see which one it was.

...I want you right now
I don't care if you're not ready
and, oh, I don't care how...

The white line hissed beneath their wheels. Coel opened herself to the heat of the clarinet and the slow beat of the drums.

"Right or left at this intersection?"

"Oh. Right."

Nadine pulled smoothly into the lot and cut the engine. The engine ticked in the silence.

"Thank you." Then, impulsively: "I like the way you drive."

Nadine grinned. Coel smiled back, found that once she started, she couldn't stop.

The cab would be half an hour. They took coffee into the living room where they sat facing each other on the couch. A shoal of early afternoon sunlight swam across Nadine's thigh as she leaned forward.

"How are you feeling now?"

"Better. But puzzled. What did she mean, 'I'll come to you in my own time?'"

"I don't know, but she won't be going anywhere for a long time. It what she said later that disturbs me. 'By that time, you won't need to worry about me,'" she repeated slowly. "I wonder if she might try to harm herself." She frowned. "I don't know. And I should know. It's my job to know. Katherine just won't let me in."

"Could she? Harm herself, I mean."

"There's nothing she could use, no belt or tie, no

sharp edges, the light bulb is recessed. And she's under constant observation."

"But?"

"I don't know." Nadine ran her fingers through her hair and sighed. "I'll check on her before I leave there this afternoon, and leave a message that the night staff should be especially watchful. There's not much else I can do."

"Do you always work Sundays?"

"When I need to. More often than I'd like. You?"

"Strictly Monday to Friday at the advertising agency. I treasure my weekends."

"You never bring work home with you?" She nodded over at the drafting table by the window.

"My hobby." She felt shy. "Would you like a look?"

In the last ten years no one but her mother had seen her work. She hovered by Nadine's shoulder when she stood to look at the unfinished sketch. It was a woman sitting on a bed in a robe, leaning forward and clipping her toenails. The expression on her face was serious, intent. An utterly private moment.

"It's good."

Coel felt pleased and embarrassed. "Well..."

"It's good," Nadine repeated firmly. "I can't paint or draw myself, but I know good work when I see it. Do you work in any other medium?"

"Acrylic, inks, monoprints."

A car honked. The taxi.

"I'd like to look at them sometime." Nadine put her coffee cup on the table. At the door she touched Coel's arm. "Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"Yes." She did feel better.

She stayed by the door and watched Nadine walk across the parking lot to the taxi. A breeze caught a strand

of her hair and tugged it over the butterfly clasp; Coel wanted to call out, say something more. She rested her forehead against the door frame and watched Nadine climb into the car and drive away.

Inside, she went back to the drawing board. It was good. She picked up her charcoal.

Two hours later she straightened. The light was beginning to fade. She wiped her hands down her jeans. Her stomach grumbled. She pulled the blinds closed and padded over to the kitchen. Five-thirty.

The refrigerator light made her blink. Nothing inside really appealed. She hefted out the wine and drew the cork. She'd eat later.

There was nothing much on TV. She watched a program about the devastation of the equatorial rain forests until it began to depress her. She pointed the remote, stood up restlessly. What was Katherine doing right now? She imagined her twin smiling at her gently, and mouthing *You'll know soon enough*. She shook her head. Maybe another glass of wine would help.

Halfway to the refrigerator, the phone rang.

"Coel? It's Nadine. Just thought I'd call and see how you were."

"Fine. Fine." She laughed self-consciously. "Bored, actually."

"Sundays can be like that. I've nothing planned myself." A pause. "How about dinner?"

The restaurant was one Nadine had suggested, one that served wholefoods as well as the usual steak-chicken-fish selection. Nadine was waiting. There were fresh cut flowers in a vase in the center of the white tablecloth. Coel ordered a glass of house white with her salad.

Nadine had some kind of beer. She noticed Coel looking at it.

"It's Dutch. This is the only place I know of that serves it."

They ate their salad and bread, ordered tuna steaks to follow, and talked of politics, the weather, work.

"There are all kinds of theories about twins. Some people even go so far as to suggest that what happens to one twin is likely to happen to another."

"Surely you don't believe in predetermination."

"Not as such. But I've been going through the case histories. It's fascinating." Nadine leaned forward. Her hair was swept to one side; the light softened it to chocolate and caramel. "Things do seem to happen more often than coincidence might account for. One gets appendicitis, so does the other, one gets crippled in a hit and run, so does the other, one gets fired from his job, so does the other."

"Are you serious?"

"It happens over and over but, no," she grinned, "I don't really believe it, not seriously."

"So how come you got interested in twins in the first place?" Coel asked between mouthfuls.

Nadine's eyes were bright. "I used to be a twin myself. Ruth died when we were in college."

"Jesus." Coel reached for her glass and drained it.

"I'm sorry. Jesus." She had only known of Katherine's existence for two days and already there was some kind of bond. It might not be a comfortable one, but it was there. She could not imagine what it would like to lose a twin after eighteen or nineteen years together.

"How old were you? Were you at the same college? I'm sorry, that's a dumb question to ask. I just don't really

know what to say."

Nadine tried to smile. Coel reached out for her hand.

"I really am sorry."

"We were...close." They were quiet for a while.

Nadine finished her beer, looked at Coel's empty glass. "A refill?"

By the time their drinks arrived, she seemed to have recovered her composure. "So, how did you get into the advertising business? What tempted you from a career as an artist?"

"Money," Coel said calmly. "We didn't have much when I was growing up. I don't like being poor. And there's no way you can make a living in fine art. Not creating it anyway. There's just no money unless you become fashionable."

"Do you ever regret the decision?"

Coel considered that. "No, not really. This way I get to make money and paint when I feel like it. Though," she continued slowly, "I seem to spend less and less time on my own work every year." To Nadine she had articulated something she had not realized before, and it bothered her.

The conversation moved on to other things. They did not mention Katherine once.

They split the check; Coel insisted on paying the tip.

Outside, the night was cool and soft. They walked to the parking lot together. The stars were bright.

Coel stood by the door of her car. "That was a lovely evening. Thank you." She hesitated. "I have a big day at work tomorrow, or I'd invite you for coffee."

"Next time, then."

They said good-bye without touching. On the drive home, Coel played more Nina Simone.

Coel did not get time to think of Nadine, or Katherine, until late Monday afternoon when the meetings were over and she was at her desk drawing a storyboard to tempt the director of their latest cosmetics account. She had no particular ideas, and let her pen follow its own path; often, her best ideas came in these moods.

She looked at what she had so far: a woman bending over a sleeping form, her face satisfied, but anticipatory. It could work. Manufacturers always liked cosmetics linked with seduction. She looked more closely at her sketch.

The woman was Katherine.

It could just be herself... No, it was Katherine. That smile.

She pushed the paper away. Tiny dust motes danced in the sunlight. She picked up the phone and dialed.

"Dr. Nadine Lisker, please. Yes, I'll hold." She pulled the sketch toward her again and wondered who the figure in the bed represented. "Hello? She's not? Then I'd like to leave a message. Tell her I called and...no, just tell her I called."

The office seemed too small and hot. It was almost five. She could always come in early tomorrow.

She walked briskly through the corridors and instead of using the elevator took the stairs two at a time. It felt good to move quickly, to do something with all that tension that hummed through her body. She hated meetings.

It was not until she reached the parking lot that she realized the sketch was still in her hand. She folded it and stuffed it in her pocket. She had forgotten her jacket. She slung her purse into the back of the car and shrugged. It could wait until tomorrow.

The Nina Simone tape was still in the deck. Coel turned it up loud and concentrated on taking every curve tight and making every gear change at high revs. The Jaguar roared and bellied down, sinking its claws into the road. Coel laughed and let out the leash a little further.

A long straight stretch. The Jaguar's roar tightened to a scream; Coel took the volume control gently between finger and thumb, turned it all the way up, and let the hot animal she rode have its head. In the driving mirror her eyes shone as though backlit, the way she knew Katherine's would.

A memory of Nadine's hands cradling the wheel so carefully made her glance at the speedometer. She was doing 105. Sweat burst from her skin and wormed down her back. She eased her foot onto the brake. The Jag growled as she downshifted and took the curve.

She turned the tape off, and all the rest of the way home she kept to the speed limit.

In the apartment she prowled like a nervous cat. She took the sketch from her pocket and stared at it. It was definitely Katherine, Katherine looking smug: the seduction, the suasion, was complete. But of whom? Who was the figure in the bed?

She threw the paper on the floor in frustration. Why could she not get Katherine out of her head? She glared at the sketch, then smiled. She would draw a full length sketch of Katherine. By the time she finished that, her twin would be the last thing she wanted to think about. It was the same principle she used to loosen tight muscles: tense them as much as she could, then relax, tense then relax.

She worked rapidly with a wide graphite stick. Katherine took shape. She sketched her as she had last

seen her, as she wanted to remember her: graceful and strong in a tai chi posture that resembled some long-legged bird settled and serene after a long flight.

After a few minutes, she took her wine from the refrigerator and filled a glass at the table. She sipped as she worked, filling her glass more than once.

At eleven she had to stop. She blinked, trying to ease her sore eyes. The bottle was empty. Fatigue hit her in a soft wobbly wave. Bed. After she turned the lights out, the last she remembered was Katherine smiling at her and mouthing words without sound: *It's time, Coel. I'm coming for you.*

Coel had no idea how long the phone had been ringing. It was still dark and there was a foul taste in her mouth. Her head felt hot and heavy. The green glow of her clock told her it was four in the morning.

"Hello?"

"Coel, it's Nadine."

Coel's knuckles whitened in the sickly glow of the clock. Katherine. "Tell me."

"She's dead. She killed herself." Coel thought of all the close observation, the precautions. "She bit... She deliberately through her tongue and choked on it."

Fear breathed, hot and fetid, in her face. Katherine was free now, free to come for her. She remembered the sketch, Katherine leaning over a figure in bed. She dropped the phone and hit the light switch. There was no one there; everything was normal. A thin, tinny sound came from the receiver on the bed. Coel picked it up.

"...okay? Coel? Coel!"

"I'm here, I'm fine." She spoke through a long roaring tunnel; dark waited for her at the other end.

"Thank you for letting me know. I'll call you in the morning."

She put the phone down, engaged the answering machine and turned off the light. The glow from the clock irritated her; she unplugged it. Soft, warm dark nuzzled her skin. Katherine was coming.

She woke two hours later. The sun was already up; she felt strange, heavy-limbed and light-headed. The apartment looked subtly different, as if the walls were smaller and the windows bigger, the colors brighter than they had been. She swung her legs out of bed and stood. The rug felt coarse and scratchy.

In the living room, she pulled open the blinds. The empty wine bottle still sat next to her sketch. It was finished. But the subject, the woman poised and graceful in her tai chi stance, was not Katherine. It was herself: the hair was longer; she wore the side-fastening shirt that hung in her own closet.

In an effort to shake off her lethargy, she took a shower. Her hair was tangled; more than once while she combed it, she caught a knot. Perhaps she should get it cut.

She stood in her closet and stared at her work clothes. The thought of being trapped in that office all day closed her throat with fear. No, she would not go to work. She would stay home, have a drink, maybe two, until this terrible blankness went away, until she could weep.

At the store she bought six bottles of Beringer and two bags of corn chips. They did not have any Dutch beer, so she bought German. She supposed they were similar.

Back at the apartment, she put on the Ella Fitzgerald tape, opened the chips and pulled the cork from the first

bottle.

you're wearing my skin
it's my smile you're smiling,
my bones within...

The Beringer was cold and delicate on her tongue. She let it roll around her mouth, wetting every pink surface, before she swallowed. The chip was crisp and salty. Ella sang on. She drank deliberately, filling each glass to precisely same level as the last.

By early afternoon she was halfway down the third bottle; she had turned the Ella Fitzgerald tape eight times. She was well aware she was drunk, or should be, but she walked steadily from sound system to refrigerator to kitchen counter for the chips. Her world had shrunk and curved into a perfect sphere that encompassed the living room and the kitchen, a bubble where everything was bright and shiny and meaningless, where feelings bobbed out of sight like high-altitude balloons.

The air in her bubble shuddered. Someone was knocking on the door. They would go away.

They did not. She stood up and went to the door. The handle fitted her palm beautifully: like the head of a cat wanting to be stroked. She twisted it.

"I knew you'd come," she said to Nadine. She smiled. "I bought you some beer."

"I called several times, but your machine was on."

"Oh. Yes."

"So then I called the ad agency. They said you hadn't been in, or left a message. I got worried."

"I'm fine. Drunk maybe, but fine." She wandered into the kitchen. "Perhaps you'd like to join me. A beer?"

"Coel, will you sit down?"

"In a minute. Do you want a beer?"

"Yes, I'll have a beer. No, don't bother with a glass."

Coel followed her to the couch. Nadine looked at the empty bottles without comment before sitting down next to her. She put her arm around Coel's shoulders.

"Coel, honey, how are you really?"

"I feel fine." She blinked at the concern in Nadine's eyes. "No, actually, I don't feel anything. Except numb. Numb and cold." Nadine's arm tightened around her shoulders and she rested her head against Nadine's breast.

"That feels good. You take some of the coldness away." She lifted her head. "Is this how you felt, when Ruth died?"

Nadine was silent. Coel felt the muscles in the arm around her tense as Nadine withdrew inside herself; then, abruptly, the arm relaxed. "When Ruth died I felt as though someone had taken the world and twisted it through ninety degrees until there was no longer any way I could touch it. I felt like someone had their hands over my eyes, over my ears, that there were gloves on my fingers. Everything was dulled. After a while, it felt like this same person took me and twisted me to fit back into the world. It felt like every bone was popped from its socket and my skin had been ripped off. Everything got through. Anything--someone smiling, a dog whining--made me weep. I couldn't shut anything out." Coel listened, trying to understand. "After a while I developed this obsession that I should have been killed instead of Ruth. It took me a long time to get over that. A vital part of me was gone. Ruth was gone."

Coel absorbed that. Unlike Nadine, the emotion she was avoiding was not grief, but fear. "How was she killed?"

"She was murdered. Stabbed to death in her own

home."

The fear that had floated over her head all day bumped gently against her bubble. "Did they catch whoever did it?"

"Her lover did it."

Fear split her bubble, spiking her skull down her throat red and sharp to her stomach. Vomit humped up into her mouth and she ran for the bathroom.

Over the toilet she heaved and heaved until her back and stomach and ribs ached.

"This might make you feel better." Nadine held out a glass of water that was already frosting and beading. She slid her arm under Coel's and helped her to a sitting position. She held the glass while Coel sipped. "Can you hold it?" She found some tissue and wiped Coel's face. "Feeling better?" She flushed the toilet. "Best place for all that alcohol."

Coel looked at herself in the mirror, seeing Katherine eat up her bones, Katherine smile back at her from within.

"You have to drink at a wake," she said.

"An Irish wake? A wake for Katherine?"

A fat tear rolled down Coel's cheek and burst plumply on the back of her hand. "A wake for me," she whispered. "Don't you see, a wake for me. And then for you."

Because finally she understood. Katherine had come, and Nadine had come, and what happened to one twin often happened to another. Here. Soon.

Story Notes

This and "We Have Met the Alien" are the closest I've come to writing horror. There are good moments in this story but a bad ending is inevitable, no matter how Coel and Nadine struggle. For that reason I've always felt ambivalent about this piece. I prefer to end fiction on an up note, or at the last an ambivalent one.

Where did this come from? I really don't know. Perhaps the fact that I'd just left all my family in England and, apart from Kelley, felt utterly alone on the North American continent.

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