



*That's me and my mom somewhere outside of Boston,  
when I was wee. And blond.*

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## TWINS

  
Daniel Torday

The embryo was almost halfway through its first trimester when the planes flew into the buildings and it split in two. That morning Jonah was listening to Tom Waits's *Bone Machine* as loud as the stereo would go, so he didn't know anything had happened until after everyone in the neighborhood was already in Manhattan for work. Annabel turned on the TV and told Jonah to turn the music down and he ignored her but then he saw that her nostrils were flaring like when she really wanted something—the thin volutes of her freckled nose pushing out as the skin near the bridge of her nose pushed down.

They watched it all happen on TV from their bed. Annabel got up and walked over to the window, where by now the plume of smoke was already wafting across the river, over the DeKalb N/R/Q station.

"You can see it," Annabel said. "All you have to do is look out the window."

Jonah got up and went to look, but you could see more on the television so he got back into bed. He watched as the towers went down. It would have been hard for him to explain, but their going down seemed like an inevitable causal reaction from what he'd already seen. He'd woken up; he'd turned off "I Don't Wanna Grow Up"; he'd seen smoke; now there was much more smoke, smoke and rubble enough to cover what looked like all of downtown Manhattan, everything below Union Square.

Annabel stayed by the window. Then she came back to bed. First she lay on her side of the bed; then she moved to the crook of Jonah's arm. They watched the TV and the smoke and the replays now of people running from the buildings. She said, "We should go see."

Jonah dressed and Annabel grabbed her bag, which a friend had made—it was made of maybe a thousand woven and laminated Doublemint wrappers. At Fort Greene Park fifty people were standing in couples at the top of the hill by the oxidized Prison Ship Martyrs Monument on top of its Doric column. The towers themselves had always been framed perfectly by the clearing through the buildings that led to the view of the river. Jonah heard someone say, "It'll all change now." He didn't know what they meant, but it sounded true. Jonah and Annabel stood looking at the smoldering cloud across the river. It rose from the ground as if something were being built there by some schizophrenic charlatan, as if the smoke were the product of some mad project someone had cooked up to bring together all the love and fear in the city in a single afternoon.

Annabel and Jonah stayed there all day. They talked about China—everyone had been so afraid of China but that had all changed now—and about what they knew of what was happening in the Middle East and what they knew of Pearl Harbor. Sometimes other couples overheard them and talked for a while, then left. The light was glowing thin, like the sun had become just a sodium bulb. Some strange feeling awoke in Jonah's gut, and just as it did, as he was thinking to turn to his wife and tell her, Annabel said:

"Ooh."

"What is it?" Jonah said.

"Something moving around," Annabel said. "Probably it's gas."

Jonah looked at her pallid face, at the strange water filling her eyes, and led Annabel down to one of the benches in front of the tennis courts on the southeast side of the park. There were some trees to keep them sheltered from the people. No one would be looking anywhere but at the smoldering towers for months anyway. Annabel pulled up her shirt, and Jonah almost thought he could see something, a kind of shimmering movement in Annabel's belly. Her eyes were

squinted very tight. There were squiggled white marks along the flesh she revealed. They sat together, Annabel's hand in Jonah's, for an hour. When finally the color came back to Annabel's face, the sky had grown so dark Jonah could barely tell.

"Should we go see Dr. Frankheimer?" he said. "Or the doula? Should we go to the city and see the doula?"

"I think I'm okay," she said. "I'm okay."

Back behind them the plume of smoke wasn't quite so big now, but more couples were crowded up at the top of the hill. Those couples would be back every day for months. Annabel and Jonah, too.

It wasn't until January that Jonah and Annabel found out they'd be having twins. For weeks and then months after the towers came down, all Jonah could do was watch the crawl on the bottom of CNN and go teach his classes. Annabel went to work at her studio. Neither of them took the train into the city. They both worked in Brooklyn, and they only went into the city when they had to. Jonah sat in his office watching the crawl, waiting for students to come in to discuss their papers. So when the technician spread goop across Annabel's belly on her twentieth week of pregnancy, at the appointment when they were to find out the sex of their baby, and said, "Oh, look, look at the two little heartbeats!" Jonah didn't know how to take it. This wasn't information about the possibility of further attacks on the city. It wasn't the news of Al Qaeda operations or a clip of the Secretary of Defense bloviating. It wasn't the CNN crawl.

It was twins.

"Whoaboy," Annabel said. "That's more than one baby." She grabbed Jonah's hand and squeezed. "When I came in before you said it was just one."

"Well, we thought it was," the technician said. They all just looked at each other. "I'll go grab the doctor."

The doctor told them the same thing: sometimes this happened. They missed it on the first ultrasound, and here it was. Twins. With a pen he took from the pocket of his white coat, the OB showed them the four little hands, the four little feet. With his other hand he rolled

the thing in goop over Annabel's stomach. Sometimes he would stop long enough to look at one hand, and you could see the little folds at the bend of each segment of each finger. Then it would slip out of view like a ship passing over the edge of the horizon. The OB talked to them about the kinds of issues they would face having twins, and told them to set up an appointment for the next week. Annabel had another doula appointment and she had to run, but she told Jonah she loved him, and, well: Twins!

On the walk home from the hospital, Jonah looked down at the sidewalk. There was a pair of earthworms frozen to the ground. On 7th Avenue in Park Slope, he had a hard time even walking on the sidewalk for the Bob Revolution twin jogging strollers coming down the street. Airplanes screamed as they took off from LaGuardia—Jonah looked up and watched two planes flying side by side. Trees along the avenue grew up next to each other. He passed two bodegas side by side and walked by shoe stores selling pairs of Nikes buy-one-get-the-next-half-off and walked down to 5th Avenue where a couple came out each holding a cup of Gorilla Coffee in each hand and there were dozens of tattooed couples walking their young twins along the street and he heard sirens and watched as two NYPD cruisers flew along the avenue after a pair of fire trucks and all at once he made his way fast across Atlantic Avenue but then he had to cross Flatbush and two birds brushed by in a flutter and two homeless men asked him for change and Jonah looked to where they had twin homeless babies cradled in their two pairs of homeless arms and in a laboratory somewhere at Long Island University two scientists looked through a pair of microscopes to watch where at the most minute microscopic level a cell divided and became two as it always had and always would and Jonah always got his bearings from the Williamsburgh Savings Bank Tower but now there were two of them, side by side, two Williamsburgh Savings Bank Towers and in Fort Greene Park there were two white columns with identical oxidized monuments at the top. It was all a little much to take in, so Jonah went back to the apartment and watched the crawl. For a second, just for that brief moment, it made him entirely alone in the world.

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Saturday night Jonah and Annabel had all their friends over for dinner. They figured it was the perfect time to announce they'd be having twins. Annabel sautéed tilapia in butter and rosemary and garlic, and Jonah made a big salad with goat cheese and dried cranberries and avocados. Jonah sliced open the avocado and called Annabel over to see what he'd found: there were two perfectly shaped pits inside.

"Have you ever seen anything like it?" Jonah asked. The two pits were entirely unconnected; the lissome flesh of the fruit detached from the brown pits with ease. Jonah felt his palms sweating. Annabel yelled in from the other room that, yeah, it was surprising, she guessed. She was lying on the couch reading *Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child*. "I keep getting this weird pain in the side of my stomach," she said. "You think it's a Braxton-Hicks?"

"There are two pits in this avocado," Jonah said. "You need to come look at it."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Annabel said. "I think I'm having Braxton Hicks. Get over here." Jonah came over and felt her stomach. They decided it was nothing. Annabel reminded him their guests would be there soon. Nothing fit her anymore, she said. Jonah put the two avocado pits in a plastic bag and stuck them in the fridge. He thought maybe he would bring them up again when Annabel wasn't distracted.

Their friends arrived for dinner. They all tried to talk about whatever they could. There were nine friends that night, and one of them was a reporter for the newspaper. He was the only one not in a couple, and he just kept talking about the day the towers fell. The reporter didn't make eye contact as he spoke. Jonah didn't know what to say to him.

"It seems like you're taking this all very personally," Annabel said.

"I've been talking to these people every day for months," the reporter said. His name was Bunting. "Do you know what this one doctor who set up the first triage said the injuries looked like?"

Annabel said she didn't. She meant that she didn't want to know. She walked away.

"He said that they looked like the kind of injuries you'd see after a fall trauma," Bunting said to Jonah. He had red hair and a complexion

so fair he looked albino, and when he was intent on a point—not just agitated—the very tops of his cheeks, under his eyes, flushed. “The first people he saw were people who’d been in elevators. The planes severed elevator wires. Compound fractures in legs, spines compressed. Femurs driven up into abdomens.”

“I have to ask a question,” Jonah said. Bunting’s eyes met his for the first time that night. His whole face flushed. “Since the towers came down, have you heard anything weird about twinnings?”

“Twinings,” Bunting said. His eyes were down, his hands turned up so he could see only his palms—both palms, searching them. Bunting had put his wine glass down. Jonah recognized a certain look of confusion, from the faces of students who came to his office, in Bunting’s eyes. Dithering conversation went on in the room behind them.

“Like so many people having twins,” Jonah said. “It seems like everyone’s having twins all of a sudden.”

“A preponderance of twins,” Bunting said. “I think there might have been something in the *Atlantic* about it? I don’t know.”

“I just found two pits in one avocado,” Jonah said. “I’ve got them in the refrigerator. I could take you and show you them right now.”

Bunting was looking at his palms again. “Avocados. Dunno. The craziest thing, that doctor—I learned all this from the guy in the couple days after,” Bunting said. “Wednesday, Thursday of that week, we talked on the phone.” Bunting was still looking at his palms. “I didn’t call the guy again until the next week, until Monday. When I did, he said he couldn’t remember. I would read quotes back to him; he would just say, ‘Yes, yes, I’m sure that was what it was like.’ But did you say it, I would ask. He didn’t remember. Couldn’t remember any of the details of what he’d said, let alone what he’d seen. He had no more details. He couldn’t even confirm what he’d told me. It was like his mind had cancelled the whole thing out. Like there had been no event at all.”

“Or what if there were two events?” Jonah said. “What if there were twice as many events, instead of none?”

“I have no idea what you’re saying,” Bunting said. “Do you?”

Conversation had died down in the room. Everyone was looking

over at Jonah and Bunting. There was no way Jonah would get him to the fridge now to see the avocado stones. Annabel called Jonah to her, gathered everyone around them like a sports team, and said she and Jonah had an announcement: They were pregnant with twins. Their doctor had given a due date: April 23. People ran up and hugged them, and Jonah felt wholly overwhelmed by a love he would soon feel every time he looked at those little munchkins: his arms and neck felt warm like he was in a very hot shower.

Bunting just gave Jonah a look like he’d almost let it slip but he hadn’t. Jonah worried this might have made him think the twinnings question was a joke, which it wasn’t.

“We didn’t even know you were having twins!” one friend said. “Two little objects of love. It’s like you’ve made twice as much love.”

“It seems like everyone is having twins these days,” their friend Michelle said.

“There are just so many twins because of IVF,” a tall bearded man said. He was named Morrison, and he taught in the Public Health program up at Columbia, so people listened when he talked. Only his wife, Michelle, ever challenged him on anything, really.

“But still,” Michelle said. “It’s uncanny. It’s inexplicable.”

“I read in the paper that there have been more than ten times as many twins born this year,” another friend said. There was a tangible spark in the air. Twins! Twins! they were thinking. Something unnatural was happening with twins!

Bunting looked at Jonah.

“So, show us your pits,” Bunting said. He was flushed at the tips of his cheeks.

Jonah went to the fridge and brought back his Ziploc baggie.

“I found these when I was making the salad for tonight,” Jonah said.

All nine of Jonah and Annabel’s friends leaned in to look at the baggie Jonah had put down at the center of the table. There they were—two avocado pits. A thin sheen of white film had developed on their surface after only a couple hours in the fridge. They reflected the soft light of the dining-room candles.

“It’s two avocado pits,” Morrison said.

“They were in the same avocado,” Jonah said. No one said anything, but Michelle and another friend leaned back. Looked away. “And I’ve seen lots of pairs of worms on the ground lately.” He looked over at Bunting, who was again just looking down at his palms. “And I saw two Williamsburgh Bank Towers the other day.”

Now everyone was looking down at their palms, or away. Everyone except for Annabel, who was just staring at him with a look he’d never before seen on her face.

“Can I get anyone some more wine?” Annabel said. “I’ll bet we’ve got *two* bottles of pinot noir.” Everyone burst out laughing. The good cheer of talking about twins again filled the room.

Before they knew it, there was a hoary rime of snow on the junipers outside their brownstone. Annabel and Jonah could see the trees in Fort Greene Park from their window. The trees were all conifers lining the way, so the park was white and green. Two birds nested on their windowsill where once, just days after the towers fell, a ledger sheet from Cantor Fitzgerald had blown in from the wreckage of the towers. There was an important craft show coming up in Baltimore, and Annabel would go there with not one but two babies in her. When Jonah went to MapQuest directions for Annabel, who had to rent a car to put all her pieces in, there were two New Yorks on the map. Next to each other. Two Brooklyns, two Queenses. Two Goethals Bridges. He looked up at Annabel, who was looking down at her stomach. He printed the maps out and handed them to her without noting the double boroughs.

In Baltimore Annabel sold more of her pieces than she’d ever sold before.

Many of Jonah and Annabel’s single friends had decided that it was time to leave the city after the towers fell. It wasn’t safe anymore, Morrison said, and he and Michelle could come down the days he was lecturing. By March, Hiram had moved to New Haven, Rebecca to Philadelphia. Wiley took off for the Pacific Northwest, and even Bunting had moved up to Woodstock. He still commuted in by Metro-North on weekdays, but no one saw much of him anymore. Only their

couple friends, people with children and people with each other, stuck around. The only things that were left of the fear he’d once felt were pairs of camouflaged soldiers with machine guns who stood talking to each other at the top of the platform at the DeKalb subway stop.

The air didn’t smell anymore of smoke. Annabel and Jonah walked up to the top of Fort Greene Park every Saturday morning to look across the granite steps below the Doric column to Manhattan. There were no towers to look at, and there was no more smoke. People still talked about it like it was their first child. Many of the same couples from that morning would go there anyway to look at the chasm between buildings.

Now instead of just twins, Jonah started noticing pregnant people everywhere. It was as if the whole world were populated by babies and women about to have babies, along with duplicates of just about everything. They pushed around Bugaboo strollers and strapped babies to their chests and backs with ERGO baby carriers. Jonah and Annabel never went anywhere anymore—Annabel was pregnant, and there was work to do, after all, and no one really wanted to leave the city for fear they’d miss something awful to come next. A plane had gone down in Queens in late fall just to prove it, and for a morning everyone assumed it was terrorism, though quickly it turned out to be just an accident. When Jonah and Annabel got back from those Saturday park excursions, they would lie together in bed. Jonah would put his ear to Annabel’s stomach, and he was elated each time a little elbow came up and kicked him in the head, and each time he imagined a baby. Which baby—Isaac or Lilith—he didn’t know.

Jonah and Annabel went to a dinner party in Park Slope, and of the seven couples there, all seven were pregnant. Four of them were having twins. All of their due dates were April, May, and June. One was early July. Women stood with an arm across their bellies and another hand propped against their lower backs. They talked about breast pumps. They shared with each other tips from *The Happiest Baby on the Block* and *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* and the Bradley classes they were taking.

“There are just so many twins because of IVF,” Morrison had said at dinner. Jonah was sure he’d heard him say this before in nearly the same conversation. People were so busy around that time they often recycled stories, recycled comments.

“We talked about this that night at my house,” Jonah said. Everyone was just looking at him. “That night we announced the twins. We talked about the IVF and the preponderance of twins.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Morrison said. Annabel looked at him like he’d just tried to embarrass their Ivy League professor friend. Which in essence he had. Plus Jonah realized they hadn’t invited the Rosenfelds or the Blocks to their announcement dinner, and there was tension over it, even though it was only because they’d already planned the dinner, not because they didn’t want to include them in life-changing announcements. Annabel had been eating crow for it ever since.

“But still,” Michelle, Morrison’s wife, said. “It’s uncanny. It’s inexplicable.”

“I read in the paper that there have been more than ten times as many twins born this year,” another guy said. It was beginning to feel as if the whole conversation had happened before. Jonah thought better than to speak again. They all sat and ate the shrimp the hosts had grilled. When he got home that night Jonah said, “I can’t believe we sat there and listened to the exact same conversation again tonight.”

“What exact same conversation?” Annabel said. “What were you thinking, bringing up the announcement dinner?” Jonah just looked at her. She looked sincerely angry. “Maybe rather than getting all uptight about people talking about their babies—I mean, people like to talk about their babies—you should spend a little more time thinking about *your* babies who are on their way. Two babies, Jonah. They’re going to need twice your love.”

Jonah sat up until three in the morning reading *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*. He looked in the paper every morning for a story about the recent preponderance of twins. He even tried LexisNexis, but he couldn’t remember how to refine his searches anymore.

Then it was the end of February and it snowed a lot twice and then

it was March and then it was the third week in April and Annabel actually did have Braxton Hicks contractions this time, and then in her thirty-seventh week she went into Manhattan to see their doula and the next day she had real contractions, and she went into labor and they had the babies. They were a boy and a girl, Isaac and Lilith. Each baby came out headfirst, and Jonah watched each little squiggle of black hair on each pale head push its way out. They had the doula with them, and Jonah and the doula worked together with Annabel. Annabel held the babies after Jonah had cut their cords, her legs shaking like some 1950s dance craze, long after the twins were out and after she’d stopped bleeding.

On the walk home from the hospital Jonah looked down at his feet. There was a pair of earthworms burned to the ground. Airplanes screamed as they took off from LaGuardia. Trees along the avenue grew up in pairs. He passed two coffee shops side by side. On 5th Avenue a couple came out each holding a cup of Gorilla Coffee. He heard sirens and watched as two NYPD cruisers flew along the avenue. Two birds brushed by. Two homeless men had twin homeless babies cradled in their homeless arms. Jonah walked up DeKalb Avenue and then he was home.

He never told anyone about any of it. At a different time in his life, he would almost certainly have thought to call Bunting, to get his experience verified. But now he just wanted to get some sleep so he could get back and see those squirming pink bunnies, who were in the well-baby nursery for the night, being tested to make sure they were healthy.

When Annabel came home, Jonah set up the babies in a cradle in a corner of the apartment, where he had painted both walls pink and blue. At the corners it made a pale shade of purple. They’d been given a co-sleeper to attach to their bed, and both of the little patchkins fit in it. There was a view outside their window onto Fort Greene Park. The babies would have a view of the clear sky when their heads stopped rolling freely on their shoulders, and their eyes stopped crossing, and they could finally fix on something. Jonah and Annabel couldn’t go



out to the park on Saturdays in the beginning—they were too tired, all four of them, and Jonah and Annabel just wanted to be home with Isaac and Lilith. They lay in their bed and looked out on Fort Greene Park, saw it was finally spring. The park was lush. They were okay just to look.

Whenever Jonah went out with the babies, he would long for them to be able to talk to him, but it was years before this would happen. When it did, Jonah found he always listened as closely as he could to Isaac, who looked exactly like him, and to Lilith, who looked just like Annabel. When the twins were three, and the wind whipped up Atlantic Avenue so hard it turned them around, they said, “Windy, Daddy, windy!” and he’d never been so happy to observe something that would have meant nothing to him. Now it meant the world, and he understood that cliché differently for the first time, so that it wasn’t a cliché anymore: “It meant the world” meant it allowed him again to see the world, closely, in its parts. Things happened in the world as the twins grew up—a tragic tsunami in Thailand, a devastating earthquake in China—but none of it mattered like the wind on Atlantic Avenue, observed by his children.

One day when the twins were five, Isaac was out walking alone with his father on the Upper West Side—they’d gone to see a movie at the Sony Theater at 68th Street—and Isaac said, “Daddy, how come all the mummies have Chinese babies?” Jonah was mortified, looked around, red-faced, to make sure no one had heard his son and thought him an Orientalist toddler, corrupted by a racist father.

But then he saw that Isaac was right. Many of the women did have Chinese babies—a thing Jonah wouldn’t normally have noticed—and not just Asian babies, but infants who were identifiably Chinese. When they got home Jonah watched the crawl on CNN, as he did when the towers had gone down. It declared World Series wins, covert operations in Kandahar province, but nothing about Chinese babies born to white women. The closest he saw was a report about foreign aid to a province in China, where tens of thousands had died in an earthquake. Perhaps there was a connection; Jonah thought he might tell someone. But then he remembered those twin avocado pits, and

Annabel’s response when he’d brought them to the dinner table, and he thought better of it.

One day the next week, Jonah saw a tabloid paper at a newsstand in Midtown with the headline, “Caucasian Manhattan Woman Gives Birth to Chinese Baby.” He paid for the tabloid for the first time in his life. He read the story. There would be an interview with the woman one afternoon later that week, on a disreputable talk show Jonah had never watched. Jonah watched the interview. It showed a clip of the woman claiming her husband was divorcing her, thinking he’d been cuckolded. The woman said five of her friends had been through exactly the same thing: white or black mother, Chinese baby, white or black husband: divorce. The interviewer looked skeptical. The crowd yelled derisively at the woman.

Jonah turned the television off.

He had kids now, twins, and no time for such bunkum. The twins had been born in April 2002. Now they were children, and Jonah and Annabel were raising them as best they could. They had two kids. Twins. Just like everyone else. 