Bottom Bunk

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I am not a typical twin. I came out two years later, by which time my brother was already walking. I am a different kind. A mirror-twin, child of the bottom bunk, the kind formed in another's reflection.

My first bedroom, or at least the first one I can remember, was on the second floor of our flat, at the end of the corridor at the top of a six storey block. In our building, my bedroom was as far up and as far left as you could go. I shared this room with my brother. I don't remember the colour of the walls, or the carpet – although my parents' bedroom next door had a carpet the colour of Irn Bru. But I do remember the atmosphere. Close, unformed, the air thick with slow tornadoes of skin dust. We played with our toys on the floor sometimes, my brother and I, smashing plastic wrestlers together to a soundtrack of frothing spit.

We slept on a bunk bed made of pine. Being younger, I duly took my place on the bottom bunk. I was used to taking the remainder, picking up the second part of a pair. Because my brother read the Beano, I read the Dandy. One rainy day during the summer holidays, we made cushions with the names of our favourite bands stitched on to them. I stitched Oasis in turquoise thread on to mine – it was made of purple fake fur – because he had already chosen Blur. One night in that bed staring up at the underside of my brother's bunk, I slipped the plaster cast off my fractured

arm because the skin underneath was itchy. It took ages, carefully loosing it over the knuckle of my wrist. I had climbed on a bin that looked like a giant hippo and fallen off its rump. Or I had dropped out of a tree. Or I had fallen in the school playground.

We didn't spend much time in our bedroom then. Our flat had a communal garden out the back, where we played football. Across the road beyond the school was an estate with an astro turf pitch, and we played there too. Sometimes two older boys called Mike and Jamie played with us in that way that older boys often do. Less play, more torture. On me nut but not too ard, Jamie would say, which meant one of us had to kick the ball in the air for him to header between the goalposts we had made from our jumpers, lofting it rather than punting it so it didn't hurt on contact. One day Mike threw a basketball in my face at close range so that my nose bled. I, aged seven, he fourteen. They must have been around – girls – but I can't recall, the entire time that we lived there, ever seeing one.

My brother was fast, and fairly strong, and whatever he lacked he made up for with an ability to talk: impossible, not to be his friend. I followed him everywhere, and I was good at following, if not exactly passive. Once in a fit of rage I chased him around the garden with a tennis racket, and hit him over the head with the frame. It would be five years later, in another room in another home, that I relinquished this mode of assertion – squashed against the sofa, his arm against my throat. Biology, that blunt force trauma.

One summer, we drove out of the city to visit an old friend of my dad's, who lived with his wife and two sons in a small town somewhere. Their house was spotless, their freezer was enormous, and they had a double-glazed porch. When the boys swore, or so my mum told me, their mum washed their mouths out with soap. I didn't like visiting. It was the sort of house where immediately I felt conscious of the dirt under my fingernails, where potatoes were boiled and served in dull gravy on frilly plates. The sort of house where hackneyed phrases could come to life and gag you with Imperial Leather.

It had been over a year since our last visit, and I looked different. My hair had always been long, and I had wanted it short like my mum had it, and, because it was the 90s, like women on TV. My mum had bought me a hairdressing magazine from the newsagent, which contained hundreds of photographs of women with cropped hair. I chose a picture of a wide-eyed elfin looking woman wearing an orange satin blouse, with black hair that came down in spikes before her ears, and showed it to the hairdresser. Afterwards I did not look elfin. At home the next day in my baggy tshirt, returned to my usual uncombed state, I looked like a little boy. I looked like my brother.

During the car journey there it was decided that it would be funny if, when we arrived, I pretended to be my brother, and see how long I could get away with it. I put on his jacket, and walked with my parents and my sister up the gravel drive. A hand on my shoulder, a clap on the back – easy as that. A few minutes later, tired of hiding on the back seats, my brother appeared. The trick was applauded and I went back to being me, only with the sensation that I had been outed: dweller on the bottom bunk, shadow-male, pretender.

When my sister was born my brother moved to the bedroom next door, which had previously been a cupboard. It was big enough – just – for a single bed. In the great re-organisation we had both been promoted, he to independence, me to the top bunk. With my sister came an influx of dolls and dresses and plastic picnics laid out neatly on the floor. No spittle, no thrashing wrestlers, no rackets over the head. I kept my toys with me on

the top bunk then, so that I slept in a deep pile of synthetic fur and yellow plastic eyes. I confuse this bed with the bed of my first girlfriend, who, aged fifteen, still slept among a mound of soft toys, on a raised bed which had no bottom bunk (an only child, she was automatically promoted to the top), and whose bedroom walls were orange. In the corner of her room was a great volcano of clothes, spewed out from her wardrobe. Every day she would spend hours sifting through the mound of viscose and nylon, her fine hair standing on end from the static, eventually choosing two or three things to wear and often deciding to wear them simultaneously. Vest on top of t-shirt, skirt on top of jeans. And I confuse her bedroom with the bedroom of my best friend, who lived around the corner in a similar house, who also had a bunk without a bottom, and whose walls were the same shade of orange.

Orange. I have never been able to choose colours. Every wall I have ever painted has been white. Because of this, I have always been attracted to the sort of people who can. The sort of people not stunted by self-conscious analytics – what red means, what green means, what orange means; what kind of person chooses red, chooses green, chooses orange – but active people, people sure of their desires. The sort of people who could say, with full confidence and without complication or hesitation, I want orange walls. To me orange meant sunshine, nostalgia. It meant surfboards and retro t-shirts, guitars and plastic fruits. It meant blue, too, its complimentary colour, and so it also meant sea and sky. Having orange walls, then, would mean committing for at least five years – the time it would take before I could confidently broach the subject of redecoration again with my parents – to a world of boys in bermuda shorts kissing girls in crocheted bikinis in the cabins of VW camper vans. As much as I could appreciate the appeal of such a landscape, I was pretty sure that it wasn't mine.

My family moved from the flat to a house in a different area the year before I started secondary school, a house with rooms enough for all of us. The previous owner of our new house had not been afraid of colour. The kitchen was lime green, the living room a mixture of deep reds, purples and emerald greens. My new room was the colour of a dead dolphin. Dirty, decaying blue. I painted it white. To avoid having to buy new beds, my dad cut the bunk bed in half. Because my brother was already in possession of his own single bed, one half of the bunk bed went to me, and the other half to my sister. The posts at the end of my half still had holes from where the doweling had joined top to bottom. I could see these holes at the four corners of my bed, and so I knew that the bottom bunk, once again, was mine. Within a few years, they became useful holders for incense sticks, which I burned to cover, or at least confuse, the smell of cigarette smoke. Later, when I stopped caring so much, I stubbed cigarettes out in them. These holes were apparently endless, any number of cigarettes or joints or lumps of chewing gum could be fingered into their recesses.

With its blank walls, and its newly single bunk, this room was just like me: a portrait in search of its subject. One day at the dentist while I was waiting to have a filling, I shoved a limited edition of Rolling Stone magazine into my rucksack. It contained posters of the '100 best album covers' – I hadn't heard of most of the bands, but I stuck them in a line around my room anyway. Later I stuck up pictures of women too. Angelina Jolie in a white vest, Angelina Jolie having her breast tattooed in Fox Fire (a scene I would later copy out on to my own body), Jessica Alba in Dark Angel, squatting down by a chain-mail fence dressed head to toe in leather.

Other rooms and other images offered sustenance to my portrait, images of people I could desire or become. Downstairs in the living room, on the bottom shelf of the Ikea unit beneath my parents' records, was a book of photographs of drag queens. In that book I saw a convoluted possibility.

If I could become a man, I thought, I could be a drag queen – I could be a woman. It made sense then, as it does now, that logic. That way, I might enjoy wearing a blouse, a dress even, instead of being an unhappy hostage.

In the art rooms at secondary school, our teacher had a cupboard of books we could borrow, and among his collection was Nan Goldin's 'I'll Be Your Mirror.' No more drawing cabbages, or practicing the ellipses on teacups. These were magical photographs, documents of another way of being. Photographs of drag queens preparing their make-up, women having sex, friends smiling in the bath, friends crying, drinking, smoking, dying. Friends badly bruised. The dirty beds and amber light of the rooms in which Goldin moved showed a type of art not limited to the study of a vegetable for an hour in the afternoon, but art that enabled an entire life. And there was fiction in her photographs too, but a type of fiction I hadn't seen before. Fiction which didn't make you a faker. In all those moments of intimacy, Goldin and her camera were present, watching her subjects, framing them, directing them, making them. But this made them more real somehow, as if they belonged to a place where fiction was an aid and not a hindrance. Being shadow-male, pretender, child of the bottom bunk, suddenly didn't seem so bad.

I photographed my friends in my bedroom, and in my brother's room downstairs, which he had painted lime green. His room was usually filled with boys, the air ripe with skunk and teenage body odour, two smells that combined to such effect that to this day I cannot tell them apart. And at my request, my friends photographed me too. I still have these photographs. Me topless in ripped jeans, chains hanging from my belt loops, with a pierced love-heart drawn on my chest in lipstick, drinking Budweiser from the bottle. A photograph of my girlfriend lying in my unmade bottom bunk smoking Marlboro Lights. Her with a sulky face blowing bubbles in her underwear. Me slumped against the wall in a leather jacket. A photograph of another friend, pretending to have passed out shirtless among a string of fairy lights and bottles of Jack Daniels, with plasters on his hands like stigmata, a fake tattoo drawn across his back and kohl smudged around his eyes. A photograph of my brother, one half of his face in make-up, his long hair hanging in dirty tussles. I developed these pictures in the school darkroom in black and white, like so many ready-made classics. Framed by the lens, fixed on the paper, my clutter and my friends and my body took on definite edges. We looked like something, something recognisable.

These photographs were a way of falsifying the evidence, of making my life appear the way I wanted it to be. I could show them to people in twenty years time I thought, and this is what my childhood would look like. A few weeks ago I emailed one of these photographs to a friend. *You really lived it*, he replied appreciatively. The myth has taken hold.

My brother and I, no longer stacked one on top of the other, had become a different kind of pair. We got stoned after school in his room, peeling ourselves off the wall when my mum came home, trying not to look so far gone. But by degrees I had begun to build a separate sphere, a fragile and nascent place of my own, and one which was at last populated by women. If I was a shadow, I had become dislodged, had begun to morph, drifting from the object that cast me.

My friend Beatrice and I scrawled all over my walls in multi-colour crayon, writing the names of things we thought were cool. PVC, dayglo, songs with guitars, MDMA, Kate Moss. One morning I woke to find her cutting off her long, curly hair in front of my bedroom mirror. We had watched Empire Records the night before, and liked the damaged girl the best. She had bandaged wrists, she held a funeral for herself when she was still alive and invited all her friends, she had a shaved head. She had big-screen problems, the perfect kind of imperfections. I wanted my hair – which was

long again by then – cut too, and so she cut half of it off, on one side only. At moments like these, the portrait I had made in my bedroom, the world in the photographs, the world scribbled and tacked on to my walls, felt in touching distance of reality. At other times it drifted away. Sometimes no black and white picture will do, no beer in the belly or smoke in the lungs, no words scribbled on the wall, no image or script or doctored reflection can stave off the blank sore of loneliness.

I moved out of my room by degrees. First during my foundation year at art school, because my new friend rented a place of her own, and because my girlfriend was at university. Having only a bedroom was no longer cool. People I knew had living rooms now, and kitchens, in which their portrait could bleed out into sofa throws and posters in toilets and ashtrays on coffee tables and cups in kitchen cupboards. Inviting people back to my bedroom began to mean something different: an exercise in nostalgia, or else a proposition.

The following year I moved out entirely, leaving it behind for new rooms in a new city. When I returned for a brief spell after university, the room had changed into a guest room. The posters had gone and so had the writing, the walls returned again to white. Both bunks are gone now, slung into skips, replaced by beds for full size bodies. I still have those holes where the dowel once was.

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