

PAULA MACKAY

MY SISTER'S SHOES

My closet is filled with shoes, most of them a half size too big.

Black leather Mary Janes, barely worn but for a few minor scuffs across their rounded toes.

Brown, mid-calf dress boots—soft to the touch but tough on the arches. They made their debut at a meeting in cowboy country last week. I may never wear them again.

And next to those, mud-splattered garden rubbers, red as a Brandywine tomato. When she first offered to let me have them, I thought they were too bright for my personality. Now I practically live in them come spring.

There are two empty shoeboxes in the closet as well. During a mid-winter cleaning frenzy, I packed the tan oxfords and another pair I can't even remember into a bag for Goodwill. I knew replacements would soon be on the way.

Circumstantial evidence aside, I'm no shoe fanatic. I rarely buy them, and when I do, they're usually from REI. Hiking boots, sport sandals, cross trainers—these are more my typical style. Most of my fancier footwear once belonged to my twin sister, Pam. Every time I visit her in Berkeley, it seems, I inherit a pair of Eccos or some other quality brand sold at Nordstrom.

"Do you like these?" Pam asks. There's a bit of hesitation in her voice, like she's sorry to see them go. Then comes the resolve, followed by her ultimate selling point. "They're practically new!"

Recently, Pam's tastes have gone from laced shoes and pull-ons to slightly bulkier models secured with Velcro. They're easier to slide over her swollen feet and to fasten with jerky hands. If a pair of shoes becomes uncomfortable—or Pam tires of looking at them, poised and motionless on the platform of her wheelchair—they're destined to become mine.



Pam and I started out as two eggs. She was sunny-side up; I was soft-boiled. In virtually every photograph from our childhood, Pam beams at the camera while I stand solemnly by her side, looking like someone just stole my Raggedy Ann.

Had we been identical twins, we would have shared one hundred percent of our genetic makeup—carbon copies, so to speak. But Pam and I are no more genetically similar than we are to our siblings. Which makes sense, given that she's the spitting image of one of our older sisters and I could reasonably be mistaken for the other.

All we knew was that we shared the same crib, the same stroller, the same haircut, the same blue eyes, the same birthday, the same birthday cake. Every morning, we awoke and took a bath together before my mother dressed us in the matching clothes she'd crafted on her Singer. We spent our days laughing and crying in sync, and went to bed listening to the same fairytales and the sound of each other's breathing as we drifted off to sleep. Identical or not, we were The Twins—a two-for-one deal. And that, we were told, made us special.

Was it nature or nurture that molded us into such distinct personalities? I was a restless infant, known for keeping my parents company while they watched *The Tonight Show* into the wee hours. Pam was more relaxed and outgoing, having earned her nickname, "Pam the Ham," almost as soon as she could talk. She was a pint-sized flirt with our oldest sister's boyfriend, asking him to marry her every time she sat playfully in his lap, and at six or seven, she pulled down her pants for one of the Flaherty boys next door in exchange for a bag of penny candy. I can just see her now, savoring a Tootsie Roll in our driveway, bragging that *she* had gotten the better end of *that* bargain! I gladly conceded the spotlight, observing the people around me from behind my shyness like it was a one-way window. We were perfect complements.

Our dualism was even more pronounced at school, where my efforts to disappear were paralleled by Pam's to flaunt her colors. In her fifth-grade performance as the Hunchback's court jester, she cartwheeled across the stage in her flamboyant, polka-dotted pajamas while belting out, "Who is the monster and who is the man?" to the enchanted audience. That same year, I pushed my limits as Abigail Adams, feeling more like Quasimodo than the First Lady of the United States when I had to kiss John—aka the studly Bruce Hardy—in front of my parents and peers.

Pam and I partitioned our intellectual resources to further minimize competition. I excelled at science and math, she struggled with algebra and had