

One crumbles
crackers in her
soup, the other
says “Yecch!”
One wants to be a
pilot, the other
a dentist. But the
Hensel twins share
so much—a
body, a life, an
abiding love.

Together Forever

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For Patty and Mike, the initial shock was followed by **acceptance**—and then absolute **devotion**.

T FIRST IT SEEMS two girls are galloping across the snow-dusted schoolyard. Then it appears there is only one. Two pink ski caps bob along, and two pretty, mirror-image faces—one grinning giddily, the other dreamily frowning. But below the neck the numbers don't add up: a single torso in a purple parka; one pair of arms; one pair of rubber-booted legs. Abigail and Brittany hop into a waiting car. Inside, Mom gets two kisses and one hug. She drives her daughters home.

A double bed with a Lion King comforter dominates the sisters' bedroom. Their way of being, however, is as much about singularity as it is about doubleness. "This is me," says Brittany, pointing to a snapshot on the wall. Abigail runs a finger along an antique chest: "My dad gave this to me when I was little," she says. She winds up a musical figurine, and the girls pirouette to the tune, each with a graceful arm held high. In the kitchen, Britty sips milk. Abby, who despises milk, chugs orange juice. Still, through their mingled bloodstreams, Britty is supplying Abby with calcium and protein; Abby is sending Britty a dose of vitamin C.

The girls are asked to tell the world something about themselves.

"I'm *not* going to be separated," Britty declares.

"And I don't have two heads," says Abby. ➤➤



PATTY HENSEL

The twins were happy infants (left, at three months, before the removal of their vestigial arm). And they've grown to be rambunctious six-year-olds (right, with mom Patty and brother DaKota). Their health is generally good, although they have suffered two bouts of pneumonia and a kidney infection. Britty tends to get more colds than Abby; if Britty's throat is sore, Abby can take the medicine for her. Oddly, says Patty, "whoever has the fever will be ice-cold, while the other one is sweating buckets."



Abigail and Brittany Hensel are conjoined twins—products of a single egg that for some unknown reason failed to divide fully into identical twins. (Doctors and family members generally avoid the term Siamese twins, with its sideshow overtones.) Just one child in 50,000 is born connected by some body part to a womb mate; only about 500 such babies are known to have survived their first year, and fewer than a dozen—precise numbers are unavailable—are living in the United States today. Rarer still is Abby and Britty's particular condition, known as dicephalus: No more than four sets of surviving twins in recorded history have shared an undivided torso and two legs. Each of the Hensel twins has her own heart and stomach, but together they rely on three lungs. Their spines join at the pelvis, and below the waist they have the organs of a single person. Each controls the limbs and trunk, and feels sensations, on her own side exclusively: If you tickle the ribs on the right, only Abby giggles. Yet the girls manage—no one knows exactly how—to move as one being.

The paradoxes of the twins' lives are metaphysical as well as medical. They raise far-reaching questions about human nature: What is individuality? How sharp are the boundaries of the self? How essential is privacy to happiness? Is there such a thing as mental telepathy? Bound to each other but defiantly independent, these little girls are a living textbook on camaraderie and compromise, on dignity and flexibility, on the subtler varieties of freedom. And together with their courageous parents—two adults who are as extraordinary as these two children—they have volumes to teach us about love.

Saluting the flag, Abby places her hand on Britty's heart. "I don't know where my heart is," Abby says. (It's near her throat.) The girls are popular at school, where they frequently run into unique situations. For example, only two kids at a time are allowed at the Play-Doh table; when Abby and Britty are there with a classmate, that makes three. "Well," they explain to Mrs. Stahlke, "we can't help it!" Says the teacher: "They tell it like it is."

"They could give a speech on **cooperation,**" says their teacher.

In their basement rumpus room, the Hensels are having a rumpus. Patty, a brisk 37-year-old who could play the ex-cheerleader in a sitcom, tries to stop DaKota, three, from smashing his tiny car to bits against the wall. Little sister Morgan, 21 months, rides hard on an old-fashioned rocking horse. Abby and Britty have seized a plastic racket from a chest brimming with toys.

"Let's play golf!" Abby cries.

"You can't play golf with that," says Mike, 40, a burly man with an open, friendly face. "That's for tennis."

"Doesn't matter," says Abby. Her father shrugs and rolls a ball toward the twins, who putt it back. Three antlered heads—two deer and an elk, bagged by the hunting Hensels—gaze down indifferently on the fun.

An unmistakable air of well-being suffuses this household. The house itself is a fine one: a solid two-story colonial, perched on 20 acres of midwestern flatland. Four hounds



They've learned to deal with the **rude** and the **curious**.

and a horse have the run of the property. With Patty's income as an emergency-room nurse and Mike's as a carpenter and landscape worker, the couple are among the more prosperous in their village of 300 people. (To keep the girls from being deluged with attention, LIFE is concealing the town's identity.)

Abby and Britty are lucky to live in such a setting, and they're lucky to have a set of parents intrepid enough to help them navigate a difficult path. If the Hensel adults ever feel

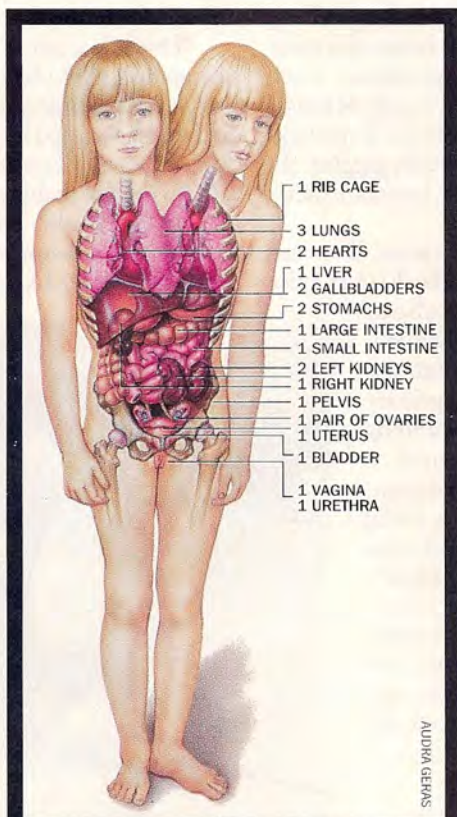
overwhelmed, they don't show it. "I don't think we've ever said, 'Why us?'" says Mike. Instead, they seem to relish the challenges posed by their two eldest daughters. They have taught Abby and Britty to swim, to ride a bike and to explain that they came from a single egg—and are therefore special—when other kids ask questions. They buy the twins snazzy outfits, then have a seamstress modify the upper portions. "It's important to create two separate necklines," says Patty. "Otherwise it would make them look like they're one person." They encourage the girls to express their individual tastes in everything from leggings (Abby likes blue; Britty prefers pink) to hobbies (Britty is into animals; Abby loves to draw). While the Hensels are not particularly religious—

"We go to church, but we don't sit in the front pew," says Mike—they draw on reserves of strength that can only be called spiritual. They also draw on a circle of helpers: Patty's sister, Mike's parents, the family doctor, the day-care provider who helped the twins learn to walk.

Patty and Mike confess to just one brush with despair—at the beginning. Although Mike thought he had heard two heartbeats during Patty's pregnancy, tests detected the presence of one fetus. (Sonograms sometimes miss even unconjoined twins when one blocks the other from view.) Born on March 7, 1990, under the double-fish sign of Pisces, Abby and Britty were delivered by a team of eight stunned doctors and nurses. "They had a pretty

crude way of telling us," says Mike. "They said, 'They've got one body and two heads.'" Patty, still woozy, didn't understand at first: She heard the word *Siamese* and thought, "I had cats?" When the news sank in, Mike admits, "We were pretty depressed for a while."

For more than a week the girls were kept under observation while Patty, bedridden with high blood pressure, lay fretting about the future. "How are we going to take care of them?" she wondered. "Are they



"They're two people above the waistline, one below," says the twins' pediatrician, Dr. Joy Westerdahl. Food is digested in two separate stomachs but excreted through shared intestines; nutrients nourish them both. If they were separated, their formerly joined sides could not support functioning prosthetic limbs. Should they stay joined, the twins could have a baby someday. Their life expectancy is normal, but if one were to fall seriously ill, the other would be in jeopardy.

When they returned from the pool one day, their dad joked, "Who dove in first?" "I did," said Abby. They're good swimmers, and they were walking at 15 months. Says day-care provider Nancy Oltrogge, "They were a little wobbly because they were top-heavy. But once they got it, they just took off."





When Patty and Mike ask about **separation**, the twins say, **No way.**

going to be sick all the time?" But when she and Mike first got to bathe the girls a few days after their birth, something clicked. "We knew it would be fine," remembers Patty. "It got to be O.K., just like that." And it has been: Since their fourth month, when a vestigial arm was removed from their shared shoulder, the girls have required no extraordinary medical attention.

Early on, different experts had different opinions as to whether Abby and Britty could be separated, but for their parents, the decision was clear. As demonstrated by two recent, highly publicized cases in New York City and San Diego, one twin often dies in such an operation. "How could you pick between the two?" asks Mike. "And if they both lived, what kind of life would they have? They'd be in surgery for years, suffering all the time, and then they'd have half a body each." The twins, so far, agree. Should they ever change their minds, it may be too late. No conjoined twins have been successfully separated after early childhood. Dr. Benjamin S. Carson, director of pediatric neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins Children's Center in Baltimore, adds that neither Hensel girl would come away from surgery with sufficient body mass to support prosthetics. "It would make them invalids," says Carson. "And there would be major emotional and psychological trauma. They've grown together. That's their way of life."

Like most kids their age, Abby and Britty love a family outing. On this day, they and their parents are visiting the gigantic Mall of America in Bloomington, Minn.—a combination amusement park and retail mecca that draws pilgrims from across the nation. As the girls roam the mall, most people politely look away after a double take. But

there are exceptions. The face-painting lady exclaims, a tad too heartily, "I remember you!" ("Why wouldn't she?" Patty whispers wryly, but the twins are flattered.) A teenage attendant at the ringtoss stand gawks for a long moment, then apologizes: "Sorry, I just spazzed out." The real test comes at a nature exhibit. A boy shouts, "Oh! Look at them!"

The twins proceed as if he isn't there.

When Abby and Britty go among strangers, the stir is not entirely the product of ignorance or insensitivity. As Freud noted, any event evoking ancient images of the supernatural makes us shiver—and gods and sorcerers have long been adept at generating doubles of themselves. Twins have symbolized good or evil in many cultures. The Yoruba worshiped them; the Algonquin killed them at birth. No wonder conjoined twins, who throw our definitions of doubleness and singleness into disarray, elicit such awe.

One uncanny phenomenon regularly associated with identical twins, conjoined or not, is paranormal communication: the man who dreams of a plane crash just as his twin's F-14 is going down in flames; the woman who dreams of a litter of puppies the moment her twin, thousands of miles away, gives birth. Scientists have failed to find a higher incidence of telepathy between twins, but as Eileen Pearlman, a Los Angeles psychotherapist specializing in twins, puts it, "Is that because it doesn't exist or because there isn't a way to test it? The jury is still out."

It is certainly tempting to chalk up some of Abby and Britty's behavior to mind-reading. Like many twins, they often speak and act in

Learning to ride a bike, the twins say, was "very hard"—but only the balancing part. Pedaling together came naturally. Although the girls have separate spinal cords, there may be connections between their nervous systems that help them coordinate movements.



As six-year-olds,
the twins are a
great team,
unworried about
what tomorrow
will bring.

unison. Playing cards with their day-care pals, they shuffle the deck without even looking down. When Britty coughs, Abby's hand—the right—shoots up reflexively to cover her sister's mouth. "The other day," says Mike, "they were sitting watching TV. Abby says to Britty, 'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?' Britty says, 'Yup.' And without another word, off they went to the bedroom. They both wanted to read the same book!"

Pearlman, who says she often senses when her own twin is about to call, believes identical twins may simply know each other so well, and have sufficiently similar brain wiring, that they can anticipate each other's actions. Dr. Carson of Johns Hopkins speculates that something else may be at work with Abby and Britty: "Given the fact that they have shared organs, it's almost impossible for there not to be some overlapping in their autonomic nervous systems." Whatever the case, at the mall any uncanny moments are outnumbered by ordinary ones. In the Stampede Steakhouse, the twins share a bowl of black bean soup. When Abby begins sprinkling in oyster crackers, Britty snaps, "You know I hate crackers in my soup. Put them on your side!" Abby complies, and the girls dig in.

In the brightly colored classroom of their tiny Lutheran school—67 students in grades K through 8—Abby and Britty are coaching a classmate who is having trouble opening her milk carton. "You can do it, Amanda," the twins assure her. "You can do it."

The Hensel girls are stars here. Today the kindergarten teacher, Connie Stahlke, is having her 11 charges cut out paper snowmen. As always, she gives the twins an option: Create two separate projects or team up. Although they often work independently and never copy each other's answers on tests, they decide to collaborate this time. Since it is impossible to use scissors without a spare hand to hold the paper, it would take them twice as long to finish if each made her own cutout. In the end, the twins' snowman is the most elaborate of all.

Teamwork is a concept Abby and Britty have grasped more quickly than their peers. Once, after several students got into an argument, the twins led a class discussion on how to get along. "They've definitely had to do *that* their entire lives," says Stahlke.

It can't have been easy. Their different temperaments have been apparent since infancy. Abby has a voracious appetite; Britty finds food boring. Abby tends to be the leader ("She wants more things and is more diplomatic in getting them," says Mike's mother, Dorothy); Britty is more reflective and academically quicker. Sometimes they argue. Once, Britty hit Abby in the head with a rock. But they have obvious incentives to arrive at a consensus. When they can't agree on where to go—a rare occurrence—they literally cannot move. When one misbehaves, both are sent to their room. "They watch out for

each other like you wouldn't believe," says their father. To J. David Smith, a professor at the University of South Carolina who has written on conjoined-twin psychology, the individualism of siblings born of a semidivided egg sheds light on the nature-nurture debate—the question of whether we are shaped mainly by heredity or environment. If conjoined twins have identical genes (nature) and grow up only inches apart (nurture), what can explain their dissimilarities? Some scientists theorize that the position of each fetus in the womb affects development. Some suspect one twin is dominated by the right brain hemisphere, the other by the left. Smith's answer is less mechanistic: "It isn't just genes *or* the environ-

ment. People are actively involved in creating their personalities. They make different choices, choose different directions." The development of conjoined twins, he says, "is a compelling study in human freedom."

For Abby and Britty, freedom will always come with severe restrictions. The constraint that may count most is hinted at in a plea from Britty. When our photographer snaps her picture, she peers up at him and says, "I'm on the phone. Can I have some privacy, please?"

"They'll never have much of that," sighs Patty. For now, the issue is not terribly troublesome—small children have a more fluid notion of personal space than do their elders. But as the twins approach adulthood, the lack of any chance to be alone may prove increasingly frustrating. Mike looks toward the twins' teenage years with concern. "They won't have the same chances as other girls," he says. "They're good-looking, and it will be tough on them."

He might take heart from the stories of some of Abby and Britty's predecessors. In the 19th century those celebrated twins from Siam, Chang and Eng, quit the sideshow circuit and became wealthy farmers; they built two

houses, married a pair of respectable sisters and fathered 21 children between them. In the late 1920s, the Filipino twins Simplicio and Lucio Godino both found spouses, as did Pittsburgh hotel owners Daisy and Violet Hilton a decade later.

Mike quickly recovers his usual optimism. "Who knows? They have a sense of humor, they're witty..." Brightening, he launches into a proud-dad discourse on his daughters' career ambitions—Britty wants to be a pilot, Abby a dentist. "It'll be hard in the cockpit, when one's flying and the other's working on someone's teeth," he says with a laugh. "But then, they can do just about anything."

In the hallway, the girls are putting on their sneakers. Abby consults her sister: "I think I should make a double knot, don't you?" Britty nods and lends a hand. Patty, watching from the kitchen, gives one of her enormous smiles. "If they had to be put together," she says, "I think they were put together perfectly." □



People say, 'We pray for you and the girls,'" says Patty. "But we don't need anyone to feel sorry for us."