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

Photography by Steve Wewerka Text by Kenneth Miller Reporting by Jen M.R. Doman
A bigail 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 their 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. Stahike, “we can’t help it!” Says the teacher: “They tell it like it is.”
They've learned to deal with the **rude** and the **curious**.

“Why 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...
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 invalid," 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 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.

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

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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 semi-divided 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 environment. 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," signs 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."