

BLUE GENES

“I’ll bring her on in!” I yell to Dad, who is loping away through shreds of rotting snow towards Jenny at the far side of the grassland pasture. I want to be alone anyway, and making sure one cow gets back to the corrals is an easy enough job.

The cold wind plucks at the smell of frothy horse sweat in my nostrils. It’s Saturday—the first day of spring break--and Dad, my identical twin sister Jenny, and I have been roaming the hills since dawn, rounding up cows and cutting out problem calvers from the herd. The cattle need protection from the coyotes. I’ve seen those mangy dogs crouching at the heels of a birthing heifer, eager to devour the tender new life.

This cow is balky, her eyes a little wild as she looks for a chance to bolt. She turns, and I grip the saddle with my knees as my mare lurches to cut her off. Head to head, the two animals check each other, my horse’s strong neck swaying in fluid tempo to the thrusting of the cow’s horns. Their rhythmic movements bring to my mind Thursday’s tennis match at the college, when Jenny and I took the finals in women’s doubles.

Our timing is synchronized, my sister’s and mine. It’s like we think from the same brain, usually. My left handedness complements Jenny’s right, and during that tournament we anticipated our opponents’ moves like my horse blocks the cow.

“Got this game beat, Gwynne,” Jenny predicted as she stepped up to serve that last ball. I glanced sideways through the fringe of my copper bangs, seeing my own profile—straight nose, full lips. Even the map of our freckles matches. I knew that none of the students in the bleachers could distinguish between the two of us on looks alone. The coach

can't tell us apart. It will take them all longer than a couple of semesters to know one of us from the other.

I remember the cheers as we finished the other team off with a lob to center court. Jenny and I clasped raised hands in a triumphal salute, a pair of paper cut-out dolls attached at the palms.

“Only one more day of classes,” I'd reminded Jenny as we walked back to our dorm to shower. Dad had called to let us know that calving season had just begun, and he needed our help as soon as we could make the five-hour trip up home to the ranch. I knew Jenny would rather have taken her break in Daytona Beach, along with half of the freshmen class. For my part, I was looking forward to the riding in store for us, the hours on horseback in my sister's company. The anticipation, for that moment at least, subdued any anxiety I've been feeling lately about my sister.

Jenny's personality's been changing, no doubt about it. It's hard for me to admit that my twin isn't the same and, to be honest, I suspected even then—even as early as Thursday—that I bore some of the responsibility for the recent strain in our relationship.

Mom has always told us that, from the earliest ultrasound taken when the doctor detected two of us, we've been holding hands. Holding hands *in utero*! We touched each other's skin before we even touched Mom's.

Since my earliest memories, Jenny and I have possessed each other. We shared a crib. As toddlers, we could find each other's voice from opposite ends of a crowded stockyard arena at cattle sales, calling out from the arms of separate parents over the auctioneer's ringing chant. By grade school, the teacher had arranged for speech therapy because no one could understand our private language. In high school, when Mom

discouraged identical wardrobes, we poetically protested, “We’re Siamese twins of the soul,” and graduated in duplicate gowns.

Now, our first year in college, we still find each other’s hands beneath the quilt as we settle on the residence lounge sofa—especially if the movie is scary. We like the excuse.

We *used to* like the excuse, I mean. We haven’t watched a movie in months. Jenny’s found outside interests—partying, that is.

“What happened to our vow?” I demanded to know when she came back to the dorm room after curfew last weekend, reeking of beer. Our index fingers still bear faint scars from our pre-teen covenant of loyalty, when we mingled blood. As if there’s any difference in our types. As if it was an exchange instead of an extension. Our childish pledge has kept us faithful in our exclusion of others.

Until now.

“Yeah, what *about* our vow?” Jenny had bitten back. “It was fine like it was. Why’d you have to change the rules?”

“I’m not the one that’s out till three in the morning,” I said.

“Well, you’ve got your nose stuck in that Bible all night. Why should I hang around?” Jenny had slammed the bathroom door behind her.

And we haven’t bumped shoulders in passing for a week, haven’t brushed each other’s hair or shared lip gloss. Our conversation has been minimal. The first real bridging of that empty space between us was this Thursday’s tennis match and our instinctive clutching of hands in victory.

I thought, at the game, that maybe it signaled a return to the way it was. I wonder if that’s what I really want. We’ve spent eighteen years, after all, wearing the shade of green

Jenny likes best, reading books Jenny chooses, engaging in sports Jenny excels at. I've given in easily, content to do what pleases her.

But lately, I've begun to think for myself.

At the beginning of this semester, a girl from my philosophy class asked me to a Christian discussion group. It piqued my interest, and I cracked open the Bible I got years ago, back in the days when Jenny and I sat bored in Sunday school. The story about the first pair of siblings caught my attention. The older brother, Cain, was a farmer and a murderer—in that order. God demanded an animal sacrifice, but Cain thought his harvest offering was good enough. So in envy he slaughtered Abel, whose sacrifice of faith had pleased God and whose blood cried out from the ground for vengeance. Cain was cursed to wander the earth restlessly, far from God's presence. I didn't stop reading the Bible there, either. I got so interested that I just kept on, right through till I got to the part about Jesus, and how He fits into the whole picture.

And that's when the relationship with Jenny *really* began to change, I admit now as I slack up a bit on my horse's reins. Still, I wasn't prepared for Friday—yesterday—our last day at college before the break.

Some of the senior guys run a bikini contest every spring, and publish a desktop edition of their underground newspaper. By midmorning yesterday I was noticing the strange looks from fellow students, and by early afternoon I understood them. It was just after my last exam, and a couple of us went for a pop to celebrate. A copy of the paper was spread open, abandoned on the cafeteria table, and a photo of Jenny stripped to bare essentials winked up at us beneath the headline: "Hot Frosh 2003!" It may as well have been

me. I slept in a friend's room that night, and sat alone at the back of the Greyhound, far from Jenny's seat, all the way home yesterday.

This morning at daybreak, before my alarm went off, I saddled up and cantered on ahead, letting Jenny and Dad eat their breakfast without me. I've been staying as far from my sister as the pasture fence will allow, but now Dad's sending her over to help me. Without words, we bully the stubborn cow onto the sandy path towards home. We trail the animal in silence but for the wind, and the creaking of our saddles, and the occasional mournful lowing of the cow. A swelling bulges beneath her tail; the calf inside is just too big to birth without help.

I glimpse my sister from the corner of my eye. Jenny's shoulders roll to the rhythm of her horse's easy gait but her fist, like my own, is clenched upon her thigh in a tight knot. I avert my gaze, not caring to be reminded of her whole body.

"Go ahead, Gwynne. Say it," Jenny challenges.

I pretend not to hear.

Jenny sidles closer and yells into the wind, "Say it!"

"How could you do that to me?"

"I suppose you want me to suck up to you. You think you're so innocent—a victim?"

Aghast, I say, "You're blaming me? That was a *disgusting* thing you did."

"You just can't help sticking your morals into my face, can you?" Jenny digs her spurs into the horse's flanks and gallops on ahead, spooking the cow into a poplar bluff and leaving me the task of chasing her out alone.

When I plod up to the corrals, Jenny has the cattle squeeze open and the calf pullers ready. I dismount while she shuts the gate up snug against the cow, holding her in place.

Waiting for Dad gives me the chance to talk this out, and I continue the argument.

“You made me look cheap, Jenny,” I start in. “My identity is tied to yours. You have a responsibility to me.”

“It’s my body,” she shoots back.

“It sure looks like mine. You exposed *me*,” I say.

“Well, you’ve exposed me to some stuff I don’t care for, either. Leaving those religious pamphlets around the dorm room, pushing your misfit friends onto me.”

“That’s hardly equivalent to posing half-nude for the school paper!” I counter.

“You’ve got a hang-up about your body, Gwynne. Doesn’t God see you naked?”

”But it’s my *soul* He sees naked,” I defend myself in a rush. “You’re still trying to cover that up, Jenny. Sure, you party with the guys, but you’re embarrassed to be really known. You’ve got it backwards.” My knuckles are white as I clamp the splintery corral rail. “There was Someone who touched us, Jenny, even before we touched each other.”

“I don’t know what it is about you and this God thing,” Jenny spits. “You expect me to apologize, to feel sorry for something that’s none of your business. And I don’t hear you asking forgiveness for abandoning me! You’ve ditched the real world for religion, Gwynne. Anyway, that picture? It was just a little skin.”

“But it’s *our* skin,” I insist as Jenny struts off, riding boots kicking up dust. I lean against the wooden gate pole in frustration. She just doesn’t get the difference between religion and relationship. I have always been the first to break the tension with a quick “I’m

sorry”—the first to open my hand for her clasp, to beg forgiveness, to accept absolution. I am tempted to call out to Jenny now.

But the newspaper photo is unforgivable. It’s character assassination—a kind of death. I feel betrayed by the unsisterly action of my twin. I’ve always been loyal, always sacrificed myself. It feels so unfair. This time Jenny should have to pay.

We can’t wait any longer for Dad. The cow’s water bag has broken, and the calf’s front feet are now protruding. Jenny and I labor by each other’s side and are smeared with amniotic fluid and manure by the time the calf flops onto the dirt to be tended by its mama. Weary, we trudge towards the house and the basin of warm water Mom has set out for washing up.

I slump against the siding of the house. It startles me a little to think that, during the last two hours spent mucking around the corral, neither Jenny nor I have hedged at touching the other. We’ve worked as in a duet, shoulder to shoulder in the mess together—reaching, massaging, pulling—a communion of four soiled hands straining to get the job done. To heal where hurt has caused the cow to cry in hollow, sad tones. To bring life where death threatens.

I watch Jenny now kneeling by the bench and plunging her hands into the battered metal basin—the one we’ve used since childhood to mix our mud pies, to water the flowerbed, to wash each other’s feet. Jenny, elbow-deep in water, is rubbing her skin, scrubbing it hard and harder, compulsively now scraping off the filth. She is crying, finally. I can’t see the tears beneath the curtain of hair falling from her bowed head, but I feel them as though they are my own, and hear the sobs. My sister is suffering, and so alone.

Jenny deserves to pay, as Cain had to pay for his sin of murder. Blood dripped from Cain's guilty hand, but I think about the blood that also dripped from Christ. The final sacrifice has been made. The Innocent already died for the blameworthy, and vengeance isn't mine.

I see the bar of soap, nestled in the grass and hidden from Jenny's sight. I uncurl my folded frame, unclench my fists, and stretch to pick up the soap with bloodied, muddied hands. My sister's skin is soiled and needs cleansing, but the mire caked on my own body is beginning to itch. I join Jenny at the washbasin, lathering up my hands and arms and rubbing the suds on Jenny's, too.

THE END

AUTHORIAL REFLECTION ON THE WRITING OF "BLUE GENES"

I wrote this short story with older Christian teens in mind, to convey my theological research on the biblical theme of forgiveness and reconciliation. In the story Gwynne, a formerly compliant girl, overlooks the offences of her identical twin sister, Jenny, until a violating personal act demands her attention. Gwynne finds that forgiving is not as simple a subject as it appears on the surface but that it affects her very identity, which has recently been undergoing change. The forgiveness and reconciliation of Christ involves both truth and love. Recognizing and defining the offence, and acknowledging its validity, must precede the gracious offer of forgiveness—which may or may not be appropriated. In other words, a quick "I'm sorry" and a glib "It's okay" may have nothing to do with forgiveness at all. Forgiveness is a transaction affecting and including both parties, causing each to adjust in accommodation of the other.

In this story, the twins are a unit symbolizing shared humanity and even the “wheat and tares” of the Church. The pair begins embraced in some type of peaceful cohesion, as did Cain and Abel in “together” working the soil and keeping the flocks (Gen. 4:2). Gwynne’s identity reformulation in Christ (upon her conversion) causes schism within the pair. She overlooks some of Jenny’s shortcomings in an effort to “keep the peace” (Eph. 4:2-3), but other shortcomings she unwisely forgets, for old habits compel her to rush into a forgive-and-forget, “I’m sorry” routine. Gwynne is learning to wait in patience for her sister to respond, as Christ waits for us, but her rebuke is unheard by Jenny, who careens onward in her destructive patterns.

When Jenny’s offence becomes undeniable, causing Gwynne to lose trust completely, the fellowship is broken. A type of excommunication ensues, and confession on Jenny’s part seems unlikely. Gwynne struggles to maintain the balance of her own new identity in Christ, as her twin’s actions have a formative effect on her self-definition. Gwynne becomes angry and is in danger of committing the sin of Cain (at least figuratively, for hateful rejection is akin to murder, as Christ pointed out). The indication that Jenny is beginning to repent coincides with Gwynne’s own willingness to at least offer forgiveness, which she now realizes she has the ability to withhold. Gwynne’s basis of mercy is not the twins’ genetic birth similarities or the familial obligation of one sibling towards another, but the efficacious blood of Christ. Her now-open hands extend the gospel by delivering the forgiveness of Christ (whose open hands held nail prints). Unilateral forgiveness is no longer an option for Gwynne, who has done with pseudo-confession, with pseudo-repentance. The end of the story foreshadows full restoration.

In writing “Blue Genes” I tried to approach the use of symbolism on several levels. For example, I intended the title to infer sadness. Then, I chose the twins’ names from a common root—the Celtic “Guinevere,” meaning “the white one,” which can biblically imply purity or disease (or, in this case, both). On another level, I dropped into the text biblical innuendo with phrases such as the “bitter root” of Hebrews 12:15 (which grows up to cause trouble for those not making every attempt to live in peace and holiness) that Gwynne chews on as she contemplates the anger she’s feeling. I had the coyotes crouching at the heels of a birthing cow, as sin crouched at Cain’s door desiring to have him (Gen. 4:7). Perhaps a more obvious level is the outright references to Cain (who offered the works of his hands instead of faith as the basis of acceptance by God) and Abel (who submitted in obedience to the authority Cain rejected), which I tried to parallel to the twins’ experiences, and which I hope will turn the reader in curiosity to the Bible. Then, of course, this fictional story is, on the surface, about adolescent change in search for personal identity and, symbolically, about spiritual change caused by new identity formation in Christ.