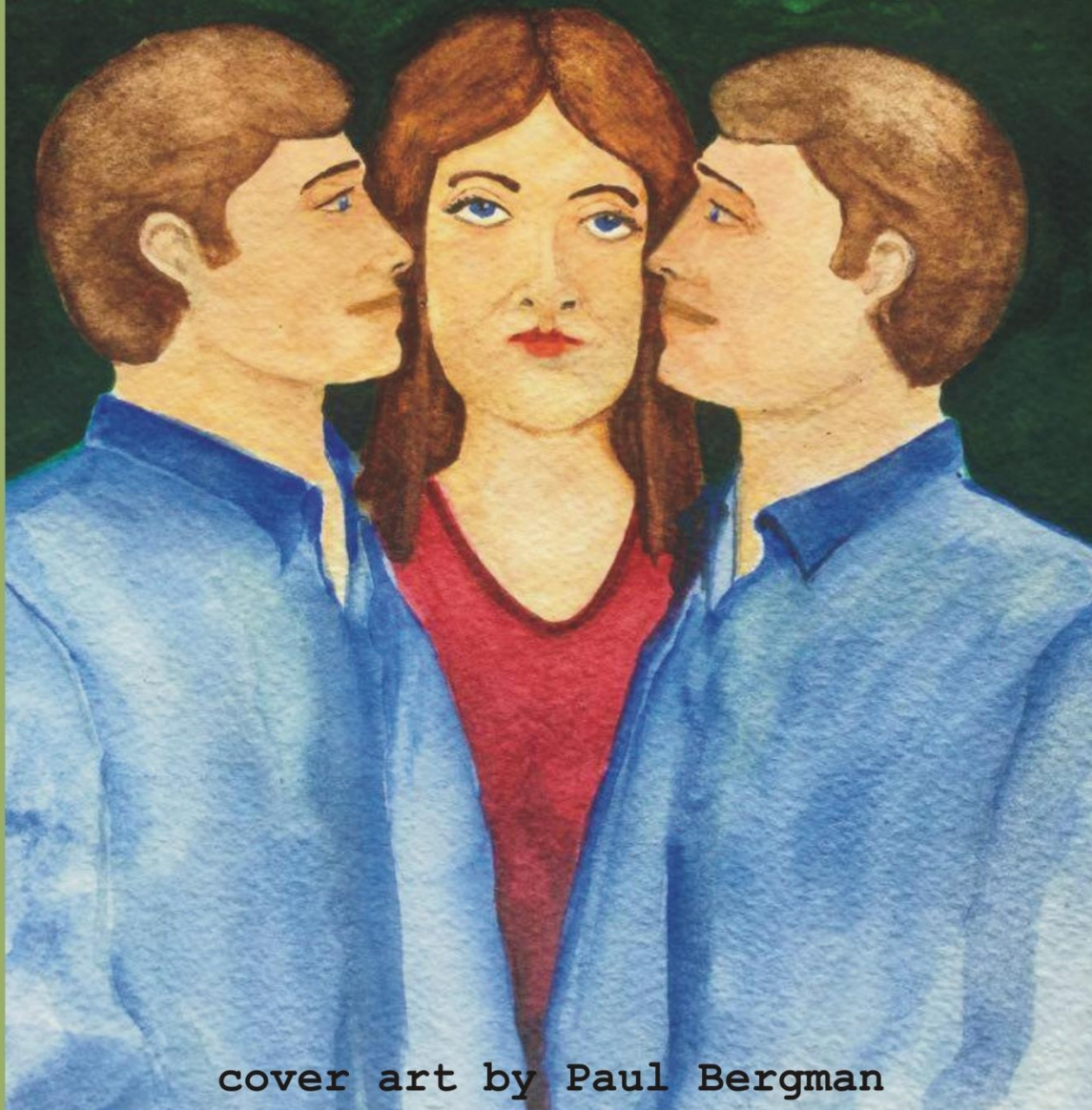


# Mervin and Marvin

a short story by

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## Mervin and Marvin

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Aren't they just the cutest little things!

Who hasn't spoken those exact words, catching sight of identical twin babies in a double stroller, beautifully dressed in their matching outfits and little knit hats, smiling sweetly at passers-by? It's a rare and joyful sight, guaranteed to put a big smile on our faces, as the proud, devoted mom wheels away the gorgeous little creatures.

For Mervin Morrow and Marvin Morrow, both six feet tall, fair-haired with blue eyes and chiselled features, those magical, starry days in the stroller were long gone. Now 26 years of age - Mervin being the elder by 11 minutes - the two were getting on with their lives as identical twin adults. Looking at them today, one could only vaguely imagine their rural upbringing in Swan River, Manitoba. All those long, demanding days and trying nights, as their parents, Matthew and Marlene Morrow, kept their noses to the grindstone. Day after day on the family farm, it must have required a bottomless well of patience and dedication, making sure that the twins were treated exactly the same, in all ways. Even the most obvious details would have required constant care and attention, like maintaining all clothes and toys in duplicate, and meticulously sharing playtimes and bath-times. Doling out praise and affection, and admonishment, in exactly equal measures. Without fail. As the twins got a little older, birthday presents and Christmas presents would have become increasingly sensitive undertakings. They *did* have to be treated as two individuals, didn't they? But to what extent and how often? At first, there would be the occasional experimental variation; maybe a blue shirt for Mervin and a green one for Marvin, just to see if peace and harmony could be preserved. And then plainly assessing the effect for next time. Meanwhile, enough time and energy had to be paid to the two other children.

The twins' names had been purposefully chosen by their father. First of all, there was an established family tradition to follow. Like their two older brothers, Milton and Morris, as well as both parents, the twins' names had to begin with the letter M. But in their case, the choices were much more strategic. The names Mervin and Marvin sounded very much alike when spoken, and so reached out to either and both of the boys at the same time. Ultimately, this was a brilliant decision, because it usually wasn't clear who was who anyway. Especially not to people outside the immediate family. Either name could be used at any time, correctly or incorrectly, and it really wouldn't matter.

From the day of the twins' birth, their parents steadfastly employed a series of creative methods to tell them apart. Marlene fastened name bracelets around their pudgy little ankles when they were babies and then around their little wrists when they got a bit older. She gave them slightly different haircuts when they reached their teenage years. But by the time they'd arrived at high school, it was a losing battle. By then, the boys were clever enough to sabotage any scheme to properly identify them. There was no choice but to resign oneself to the matter, to the inescapable confusion and ambiguity. Fortunately, for most people in the twins' lives, this presented no problem whatsoever. After all, what difference did it really make, whose name was what?

Like their two older brothers, the twins helped out on the farm from a very young age. And like their older brothers, they loved sports and athletics, combining as forwards on their youth hockey teams and guards on their high school basketball team. But their academic performance set them

apart from the older brothers. Morris and Milton had always struggled in school. Neither made it beyond Grade 11, both marrying local girls and farming like their father. Mervin and Marvin, on the other hand, were top students, pushing each other to school scholarships in Grade 12. The twins had other ideas for their future. They wanted to move to the city and see the sights; do something else with their lives. After graduating from high school, they left their hometown behind, setting off for university in Winnipeg.

Both began BA degrees in Business at the University of Winnipeg. Sharing a room in the men's residence, the twins embraced an active urban lifestyle, walking and cycling until the middle of November, and getting around by transit otherwise. With so much to do and so many new people crossing their path, it was an exciting new world, though they definitely missed their mom's cooking.

The two did spend periods of time on their own. For instance, you might have encountered one of them in the library working on his own, or with friends in the cafeteria, or out shopping around the city. More significantly, both had a healthy sexual interest in women and they tried to follow their instincts as individuals. Of course, for them, navigating the enticing, complex world of dating and girlfriends always involved an extra degree of complication. They were attractive and intelligent young men, but it was difficult for either to be taken seriously by prospective girlfriends. Any new female friend, once aware of the other twin, would immediately and unavoidably become suspicious. Among other things, this mostly ruled out fellow students as potential girlfriends. Any woman at university who was acquainted with one of them was bound to have seen the two together. Consequently, with few exceptions, their romantic endeavours originated on dating sites. Second dates were infrequent and even if they occurred, the situation would be marked by uncertainty and confusion. While periodically providing its comic moments, this reality was highly frustrating for the twins. Dates and friendships invariably tended to be superficial and disappointing, not to mention short-lived.

As practically minded as they were hard-working, the twins began a certification program in Accounting immediately following their degrees. Eighteen months later, both received their CPA designations with distinction. Back home in Swan River, their parents and their brothers couldn't have been prouder. Of course their pride was tinged with sadness. The six-hour Greyhound trips home were becoming less and less frequent.

Marvin and Mervin sent their virtually identical resumés to the same potential employers in the city. While they might have preferred to join the same firm, there was no company or institution in the city that offered positions to both. So, in the fall of 2014, Mervin joined a small local firm, Solomon and Faulkner, while Marvin accepted a position in the Comptroller's Office at the downtown Canada Post. With secure, good-paying jobs, the two wasted little time in moving into better digs, finding a comfortable two-bedroom with a view, at River and Osborne. With popular bars and restaurants minutes away, and a supermarket right across the street, they were set.

Despite the twins' admirable success in establishing professional careers, their fundamental need for love and romance remained a dominant source of dissatisfaction. Being in different workplaces at least had the potential to improve the situation. Many attractive women crossed their paths, clients, co-workers and others, each encountering the twins on their own, seeing each as an individual.

Still, the essential, underlying problem persisted. Any prospective girlfriend would eventually meet the other twin. And who could shake off the creepy feeling, after seeing the two together, wondering if and when they would be up to some kind of trick, one of them substituting for the

other, the two having a big laugh about it at home after? How could she get involved, never knowing if it was the same person two times in a row? Even if a woman had enough trust to get past this weird predicament, something equally troubling was inescapable and crystal clear. The twins were so intimately bound to one another, their lives and souls so totally entwined, that each was certain to share with the other everything that happened to him. Whether they admitted it or not. When one of them was dating a woman, that would include absolutely everything that passed between him and the woman; the details of everything they shared, of every conversation they had, of any kind of sexual interaction and any kind of emotional intimacy. Everything. It was just too weird. Too difficult to overcome. No point even trying.

The twins persisted nonetheless. Their different workplaces meant more natural ways of meeting women, but their basic strategy remained the same: to delay telling the woman about the other twin, as long as possible, hoping to establish some kind of connection with her in the meantime. Hopefully to get laid. Hopefully several times. And then, once she knew... well, let the chips fall where they may.

It wasn't a particularly brilliant strategy, but it was the only strategy they had. And it had a reasonable success rate. Over the years, the twins continually surpassed one another in executing this strategy; delaying the moment of revelation and either inventing excuses why the woman couldn't be invited back to their place, or making sure that the other was out if she was. There was always the risk of being called out as dishonest. A place where two people lived, even if they were identical twins, might not seem quite like a place where one person lived. Why were there so many pairs of shoes, so many duplicates of so many things? What was the second bedroom used for? It hardly looked like an inactive, occasional spare room. And what possible explanation could be feasibly offered? That there was a roommate, but he simply wasn't in, carefully omitting the fact that he was an identical twin? How long would this unlikely fiction stand up?

Despite the debilitating circumstances, the twins had managed a bit of fun and romance. In their university years, both had a girlfriend lasting more than a month. Both had had a number of second dates. And both had gotten laid, several times.

As to the inevitable suspicion a woman would have, about one twin substituting for the other, that the two would collaborate, that she could potentially be tricked and manipulated, just for the fun of it, that she might never even know... well, had they or hadn't they?

If a man was to find himself in friendly conversation with one of the twins, on his own, and if he was to ask the question, playfully and non-accusingly, the answer he would almost certainly get would be *no*. Of course they hadn't. Sure, they had secretly conspired in all kinds of ways, like writing one another's exams and providing alibis for one another. But they would never, with the woman not knowing, physically substitute for each other in a romantic situation. That was the answer they gave. But if a man got to know the twins a little better, and if the same subject came up again, the twins might well admit to having carried out that exact deed. They both had, and more than once. In high school and in university. Ha ha ha. Fun and games. Well of course you did, the listener would think.

Separate workplaces or not, the twins' success rate with women remained stubbornly unchanged in their first year and a half as accountants. Until Mervin met Patti Broderick.