

Situs Inversus

My sister and I took the bus to Camden. She wanted to go to the market and finger through the merchandise, but I wouldn't let her. She'd have ended up slipping a necklace or a phone case into our pocket. We haven't been caught yet, but it's only a matter of time. She's desperate to get into trouble; all I want is a quiet life. I love her, but she's a burden. She says the same about me.

Before we left, I let her choose our clothes and makeup, just to see what would happen. She's never satisfied with what I want to wear. She calls me *mainstream* and *conformist*. Such a bitch. I call her a goth slut. We can be pretty harsh with each other; it's just that we're so different. Anyway, I let her choose. She went straight for the box under the bed, of course. I keep the key on the charm bracelet I got for my thirteenth birthday, just in case. If Mum ever saw what was in that box, we'd both be in for it. It wouldn't matter that most of it was Gilda's. Mum sees us as pretty much the same person.

Gilda is my sister's name. And it's the name of an old black and white movie we once watched about a showgirl. The showgirl threw her head back and her hair tumbled over her shoulders. 'Are you decent?' 'Me?' Gilda fell in love.

I bit my lip as Gilda pulled out black eyeliner, raisin-coloured lipstick, and foundation so pale it made our skin glow.

'Just relax,' she said. 'We're going to have some fun for once. And no one will even look at us if we go out dressed like a frigid librarian.'

She's so mean. Just because she likes to put everything on display doesn't mean that I have to as well.

She tied on a ribbon choker decorated with blood-red rhinestones, then pulled that dress out from behind the radiator where I'd hidden it. It was the dress she'd made us wear the night of Andrew Brown. The tight, velvet fabric hugged our skin; it still smelt of him and what we'd done.

Mum took one look at us and her mouth went hard. 'You're mad if you think you're leaving the house in that outfit.' She marched up and grabbed our shoulder. Gilda jeered, spinning away and sticking up two fingers. I shrunk into myself as they argued, like I usually do.

Poor Mum. She only wants what's best for us.

We took the bus to Camden. As we'd had to sneak out our bedroom window, I was aching and clammy by the time we arrived. Puffy little clouds dappled the grey sky in circular patterns that made me shiver.

As soon as our feet hit the pavement, Gilda spotted a dress she liked in a shop window: black, of course, in a stretchy fabric made up of interlocking spider webs. She insisted that we try it on.

'Go on, you pussy,' said Gilda. 'It's just a shop, what do you think's going to happen?'

I let her push me inside and then stood frozen, wanting to run back out. It wasn't a normal shop. I could taste the dust on my tongue. Stacks of clothing lined the walls, making it a dark, unwelcoming labyrinth. The shopkeeper, a stout, dark-haired man, approached and stood far too close.

I pointed toward the dress Gilda liked, and he snatched it up, saying, "Twenty-five pound."

I nodded and tried to shy away. Gilda held her ground, and as the shopkeeper stood firm, blocking our path to the exit, I gave in. He handed me the dress and a sour-faced young woman ushered us to a curtained-off corner in the back.

I stripped off in front of a mirror propped against the wall. Our skin shone pale in the dim light, our reflection speckled with water spots streaked across the mirror's surface. There was Gilda, just beneath my ribs. My abdomen bulged and receded. Her elbow? A knee? I pressed my hand to my stomach to keep her still and she blossomed with heat.

Gilda had a right to a life of her own, so her anger doesn't surprise me. I'm not proud of what I did, but I couldn't help it—I wasn't even born. She was there in the first scan, Mum said; there'd been two tiny heartbeats. By the next one my twin had vanished. I'd eaten her.

The ironic thing is if Gilda had survived, she'd have been the normal one, because I'm all wrong inside. My heart, liver, veins, all the blood and guts are on the opposite side of where they're meant to be. And Gilda would have been my mirror, everything perfect, all the puzzle pieces in place. The right side of my Rorschach test.

Mum says my twin is gone for good, but I know she's wrong. Gilda is there, rippling beneath my skin. She sees what I see, breathes when I breathe. And she's stronger than I am.

The dress glazed our skin like scales. I could see our pants and nipples through the fabric, but Gilda didn't care. She likes to shock. We decided to wear it out and I stuffed the old dress into the plastic bag the shopkeeper gave me. Finally, he moved out of the way and let us leave.

The sun had come out. It licked at our skin and I ignored the way people stared as we walked down the street toward the Market. Gilda swivelled inside me,

and there he was, leaning against a wall next to his mates: Andrew Brown, all long, skinny legs and hair in his face. He spotted us and sauntered over. "Hey, girl."

His eyes locked on our chest and I cringed, wanting to cover up. As she does whenever I freeze, Gilda took over. She's much better at talking to boys.

"Hi, Andrew." She speaks as if she's singing; her voice rises and falls like a bird on the wind. She gave him a seductive smile and lowered her eyelashes. I have no idea where she learned how to do these things, but they work.

Andrew shoved his hands in his pockets and grinned. I wondered if he wanted to do it again. I know Gilda did. I... Well, she generally gets what she wants, so it doesn't matter what I wanted. I would have been happy staying a virgin, but Gilda wouldn't shut up about it, how we were sixteen and it was time and did I want to stay a child forever? So, we did it. It was fine.

Mum would piss her knickers if she knew. And she'd lose her rag entirely if she knew about the baby.

Andrew is eighteen, he's left school, and shares a flat with a few other blokes. He sleeps in the box room on an ancient smelling futon. The window was open and he lit some incense. Gauzy orange curtains fluttered in the breeze as he peeled off our new dress. I didn't recognise the music—some rock band with heavy guitars—but Gilda did. Andrew whispered in our ear along with the lyrics. His skinny chest heaved. His hands shook as he touched us.

Given the noises she made, Gilda enjoyed it, but I just lay there, waiting for him to finish.

Afterward, he played more music and gave us a glass of Southern Comfort. I curled up with my head in his lap. He laughed and stroked my hair. He's all right, Andrew Brown.

We did it a couple more times and then he had to go and meet his mates. Gilda and I took the bus back home. We snuck in through the window. I hid the dresses in the box under the bed and scrubbed off all the makeup. I had a shower. Then I remembered that you aren't supposed to drink when you're pregnant and I made myself be sick.

Mum was going to be so cross. She was only sixteen herself when Gilda and I were born. It was hard for her. She's told us a million times.

"Let me handle it," said Gilda. "I know how to talk to her. You'll just go catatonic and let her push you around. Let me have control."

Like I told you, she's stronger than I am. So I did what she said. I was scared, but it was for the best.

Our baby is just about as big as an eye, and now that I'm here, inside, I can see that it's not one baby, but two. Just like Gilda and me. I love them, the tiny little things. They're sweet blobs, separating and expanding. And I wonder... I've done it before.

Gilda has taken out the box beneath our bed and arranged the contents across the duvet: the dresses, the jewellery, the makeup. I hiss at her, tell her to put that shit away before Mum sees it, but she ignores me. And then I realise: she's not going to let me out again.

I scream and curse, but Gilda just laughs. It's what she's wanted all along and I fell right into her trap. She's the one who wanted to have sex. She picked out Andrew. Now I'm stuck inside with the babies.

I feel bad for Mum. Gilda won't be gentle with her. She opens our bedroom door and marches out. Mum is in the kitchen, making dinner. I don't want to watch. I don't want to listen.

The babies, tiny mirror images of each other, float silently inside our womb. They look so calm, so peaceful. So innocent—although I know better. I choose the smaller one and it doesn't take much effort for me to slip inside.