

Separating Siamese Twins

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We don't buy tickets to see monsters any more. When I was really little, I can remember, the allure of Side Show alley was precisely because we could, and it was forbidden. I didn't want to throw ping pong balls down clown's throats and found nothing glamorous about throwing up fairy floss on the roller coaster; but my brother and I hung around the tents with the human displays: the tired and battered boxers who would fight anyone for half a quid; 'exotic dancers,' a couple of decades older than their photographs and who seemed to use fans strategically, according to the blokes who came out disappointed. Even then, in the 50s, there were the freaks: the half man/half woman: the bearded lady: the mermaid: the three-legged man (before Rolf Harris), and the Siamese twins.

Of course there weren't any Siamese twins, then, nor any real 'freaks' to see, either. It wasn't acceptable by the '50s because though we all still wanted to gawp, being human and inquisitive and rather nasty, our moral leaders decided that we also shouldn't be seen to be callous. We put them in 'homes', these 'freaks,' and denied them the only opportunity they had to earn a living, by exploiting our darker side, in the interests of middle-class morality. And they weren't there, because the myth was not matched by present-day reality. Siamese twins died.

The only conjoined twins who made a living out of it had died decades before I was born. Then, the survivor died within an hour of his brother, 'for no apparent reason' the doctors thought at the time: but they were joined at the abdomen and now we realise that Cheng did not long survive Chang because they had shared a circulatory system. When his brother died, the other's lifeblood was simply pumped into a corpse and he expired, we are told, in speechless terror.

When Jodie and Mary were born in England to their Maltese parents in August this year, we had another sideshow. They would die at once if they were not separated, doctors swore. So in September English courts decided, twice, that these baby girls, with one torso between them and just one functioning heart and set of lungs, should be separated, though this would definitely kill the 'weaker' one – Mary – and leave the other – Jody – with just a 'chance' of a reasonable life.

The first judge decided that the Manchester hospital's application for permission to override the parents' objections (how could they make a Sophie's choice, and kill one of their only two daughters?) could be overridden on his assessment of Jodie's best interests. I had a rage attack when I realised he was prepared to make a decision on the basis of an unexaminable discretion. It is nobody's best interests to die, unless they are able to make a reasoned choice or they were in unrelievable pain and death was inevitable.

The second court decided that there was a duty to rescue, whatever the parents thought, one child at the expense of another who was doomed to die – but not, it seems, for months or even years. We are all doomed to die, and the law has always said, before, that 'Though shalt not kill/Yet need'st not strive/Officiously to keep alive.' The Court of Appeal gave the 'dying' child's lawyer leave to appeal: to his shame, the Official Solicitor decided not to exercise that right.

What will the outcome be? The last I heard, it was rumoured that the Manchester doctors were afraid to operate, because in spite of their opinions, and the second opinion provided by Great Ormond Street, they were by no means sure that they could save one twin by killing the other. Great Ormond Street had applied to the National Health Service to be nominated as the only hospital with the requisite expertise to carry out conjoined twin separation. It was also rumoured that Great Ormond Street had told the heroic Mancurians that if they did take on that responsibility, they would not operate at all, because the risks were too great, and the ethical conundrums too deep. I did wonder whether a surgeon may ethically perform an operation that he may

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legally do, but which his peers believe is risky, unwarranted and likely to end in pain and grotesque suffering, before ending fatally.

I tried to find someone else to exercise Mary's right of appeal. The parents had decided it was just too hard to continue to fight the legal and medical establishment. Nobody else was willing to argue that it was right to deny Jodie's right to a chance of life so that Mary might not die a violent death on an operating table. I am neither a Catholic nor a right-to-life advocate, but I am ashamed that the most helpless of all should have had no advocate for her right to death with dignity.