



**RAD IUM GIRL**

*stories*

**SOFI PAPAMARKO**

**R A D  
I U M  
G I R L**  
*stories*

**SOFI PAPAMARKO**



A Buckrider Book

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, places and events portrayed are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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# Margie & Lu

*Lu*

We were born the day the *Challenger* space shuttle exploded. Things have only gone downhill from there.

I don't say *I* because we are unequivocally a *we*. We have always been a *we* and we always will be. My twin sister and I took our first breaths seconds apart. We've been told we'll die minutes apart. And we'll do absolutely everything together, all of that time in between.

My sister's name is Margaret. She also goes by Margie or Marg, if you want to save yourself a couple of syllables. We're very close, Margie and me. You might even say we're attached at the hip.

That's not technically true. We have two hips, just like you. Two hips, two legs, two feet, ten toes. It's above the waist where things get a little more complicated. Surgeons tell us we have four lungs – albeit one of mine is slightly underdeveloped and leaves me wheezy on hot, humid days. Two spines. Two hearts. One shared digestive tract, snaking its way through both of our torsos. We share most vital and reproductive organs, actually. So no, we're not attached at the hip, clever as that idiom may be in our case. We're attached at the chest cavity. *Dicephalic*

*parapagus* twins. We're conjoined twins, using the most basic terminology.

My name is Luna. Our mother says I was named after Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, where she went on a high school trip once, but I like to tell people I was named for the moon. It fits. If Margie is the sun, I am her pale reflection. Her shadow. People get pulled into Margie's glorious, gregarious orbit every single day. I am the only one who has no choice in the matter.

Our internal wiring is too intertwined for us to ever be separated; we will never lead separate lives. I've long given up hope that we ever will. But not a day goes by when I don't wish things were profoundly different. Margie, on the other hand, doesn't seem to mind our lot in life one bit. She actually enjoys all of the fuss and attention of being my very close neighbour. She knows it makes her extra special. She knows it makes her worthier of attention.

I don't go for attention. I'm not fond of fuss. All I want is a little peace and quiet. Is that too much to ask? All I want is a seat in a plush library with shelves upon shelves of leather-bound first editions that smell like paper and rot and the passage of time and the gift of perfect, expansive silence. Silence so vast and encompassing, it's practically a solid object.

Would you laugh at me if I told you that loneliness is a luxury?

## Margie

Some people spend their whole lives trying to get famous. My sister and I, we were *born* famous.

The Saint John *Telegraph-Journal* was the first coverage we got. “Rare Conjoined Twin Girls Born in Bathurst.” There’s a photo of us in an incubator, all veiny and purple, with the little yellow hats and booties Mum knitted for us while she was pregnant. We were front-page news and the talk of New Brunswick! We’d have been the biggest news story of the day, too, if that stupid space shuttle hadn’t exploded.

It only took a day or two before my sister and I became world-famous. The *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*. They all wrote about us. All of them! They still do, sometimes, on our birthday. Mum saves all of our newspaper and magazine clippings in a giant scrapbook. We still take it out and read the clips sometimes.

There was this piece that came out in the *Toronto Star* not long after our tenth birthday that I really like. It was a couple of years after Mum moved us to Toronto permanently to be closer to the very best doctors in the country, not to mention all of the university hospitals that wanted to study us. We ended up moving into an apartment on Bathurst Street in Toronto, which I think our mum did on purpose to help us feel less homesick. We would still be the Bathurst twins! Anyway, I like to read this one section of the article out loud over and over and over until Luna gets pissed off and tells me to give it a rest:



## R A D I U M   G I R L

The Bathurst Twins, despite sharing corporeal real estate, are two very distinct young ladies. Margie (Margaret) Provencher is an enchanting creature – lovely and wild, wilful and loud. This ebullient extrovert, head piled high with chestnut curls reminiscent of a young Mary Pickford, loves to sing, dance and mug for the camera. Her delicate upturned nose lends an air of aristocracy, despite the fact that the twins were born to a single mother in rural New Brunswick. Indeed, one can't help but think that bedimpled little Margie could have starred in commercials or even made it big in Hollywood had the circumstances of her birth and life been different. It's impossible not to be charmed by this pretty little dynamo.

Luna is the shy one. Quiet and introspective, her forte is language. Both girls are fluently bilingual, but Lu has already taught herself Latin and is presently dabbling in Italian, Spanish and Mandarin. I ask her to conjugate Latin verbs for me. She does so effortlessly and in a tone that announces her utter boredom. Lu is moon-faced and her skull is slightly misshapen. Looking at her is like looking at the lovely Margie's reflection in a funhouse mirror. She probably has much to say, but allows her sister to do most of the talking.

*Lu*

I hate that article. Hated that interview, too. That reporter was about a hundred years old, kept touching us on the arms and thighs and leaned in to kiss us at the end – like holy shit! Landed square on Margie’s lips, the sad old pervert. I turned my head away, but I knew it wasn’t my lips he wanted. His beard was yellow and his nails were too and he smelled like he’d been marinating in Scotch and old cigarette butts for decades.

*Margie*

There’s a photo of us, too. We’re blowing out the candles on our birthday cake (Black Forest cake from Safeway, my favourite, I really do remember it). My eyes are wide and dark. Luna’s cheeks are all puffed out and her eyes are scrunched shut. We’re both wearing polka-dotted paper party hats with those pinching elastic strings around our chins. There are a few headless people in the background wearing hospital scrubs. Mum’s on the far left, saying something frozen in time.

I remember exactly what I wished for. Every year, when I blow out the candles on our birthday cake, I wish for the exact same thing. I want a boyfriend. I’ve wanted a boyfriend since I was like six and I wish for one every year. I wonder how many birthdays it will take? How many candles? How many flames do I have to extinguish before I finally get to fall in love? I’ve never even kissed a boy before and I’m already so old.

Below the photo, in italics: “*Margaret and Luna Provencher celebrate their tenth birthday at Sick Kids Hospital, surrounded by their medical team.*”

I don’t know what Luna wished for on that birthday or any birthday. We never tell each other what we wish for. If we did, our wishes might never come true.

*Lu*

I’ve read everything I can get my hands on about our – look, I really hesitate to call it a condition. Our *situation*, let’s say. *Condition* makes it sound like we’re old and frail and piss ourselves every hour. It’s nothing like that. We’re young and strong and healthy. We’re capable and mostly independent. We’re only seventeen.

Two years before we were born, an article about conjoined twins was published in a medical journal. I found a microfiche in the Toronto Reference Library when I was supposed to be doing another research project. One line from that article has stuck with me ever since: “Two people never being able to obtain privacy – to bathe, excrete, copulate, or eat – defies imagination.”

I found the sentiment . . . odd. Margie and I are different people, sure, but we share this body. Why should we be shy about bathing or taking a shit? It’s *our* body! Are you embarrassed taking a bath alone with your own body? Do you feel strange peeing while you’re in the same room as your body? No? Well, same.

Eating, too, is a breeze. We take turns these days for the sake of efficiency and also, in the words of Margie, to watch our waistline. Margie lets me have breakfast, because I love oatmeal with fruit and I can enjoy a leisurely cup of coffee while I read the *Globe and Mail*. Margie takes lunch, which is fine by me – I read philosophy tomes while she mows down on a sandwich and apple and chats with her friends in the cafeteria. At dinnertime, we alternate and negotiate, depending on what Mum has prepared. Margie takes one for the team whenever pork is involved. Brussels sprouts and peas are all mine. Lasagna night? We take turns. For both ethical and environmental reasons, I have seriously been considering veganism. Margie rolls her eyes and says, “That’ll sure be fun!”

*Copulate.*

Margie is convinced she’s going to meet someone. She’s dreamt up a magical, understanding prince of a man who will fall in love with both of us at the same time. One wedding, two sets of vows. “That would be awfully convenient,” I say. “He’d be living the dream! Threesomes every night!”

Margie tells me to shut my idiot mouth. She doesn’t see me pull a face because we aren’t able to directly look at each other, except when we’re looking into a mirror. I try to avoid my own reflection but steal glances at Margie in the mirror whenever I can, if I’m being perfectly honest.

My sister is very beautiful. It’s the second thing people notice about her.

*Margie*

Can I tell you about a dream I had last night?

I'm in the middle of a huge athletic arena. The seats are all empty, but the lights are on. Including a heavy-duty spotlight pointed right at me. I'm wearing a silver sequined leotard and am powdering my hands with chalk dust. I'm practising a gymnastics routine and it's a big deal. Like, *a very big deal*. And I am under a *lot* of pressure. It's not like any routine you've ever seen on TV for the Olympics. It's a lot longer and more complicated than that.

The arena is quiet because it's completely empty. I'm the only one there.

I start out on the uneven bars and flip myself around like it's nothing. Like I'm in an antigravity chamber or something. I am practically weightless, and pin-straight. I fly off the bars to land effortlessly on the balance beam. I backflip my way across it, nailing the landings every single time. From there, I leap directly to the rings and hold my body parallel to the floor for what seems like eons. I'm not even shaking – that's how strong and solid I am. Finally, I dismount and twist and cartwheel across the floor, leaving a trail of flames behind me. I do a little curtsy to the empty stands but an audience has appeared. It's a full house. Everyone erupts into cheers and I get a standing ovation. I see my mum in the front row. She's crying. Dozens of heavy-duty television cameras are pointed right at me. I can see my image projected on huge video screens around the arena. I wave and smile and my teeth are gleaming white like I'm a woman from

a toothpaste ad. It's only when Lu runs over from the sidelines with an armful of red roses that I realize my sister hasn't been by my side the whole time. I had done something all by myself.

*Lu*

Mum demanded we start applying for summer jobs after we got our university acceptances, even though we both got full-ride scholarships at the University of Toronto to do a double major in Theatre (Margie's choice) and English Literature (mine). Mum really pushes for normalcy at every turn, which I can usually appreciate, but this time I was irritated with her. A full-time summer job left little time for pleasure reading and I had just discovered Nabokov.

After a resumé blitz in our neighbourhood, we were hired on as stock girls at Honest Ed's, which is this massive chintzy discount department store just a few blocks from our apartment. Honest Ed's is a living monument to tackiness: a Vegas-style marquee of a store taking up an entire square city block, plastered with slogans and cheeseball puns that I suppose might have been amusing in another era.

*HONEST ED AIN'T UPPER CRUST! BUT HIS BARGAIN*

*PRICES SAVE YOU DOUGH!!*

*HONEST ED'S A FREAK! HE HAS BARGAINS COMING*

*OUT OF HIS EARS!!*

*ONLY THE FLOORS ARE CROOKED!!!*

*COME IN AND GET LOST!*

We started off unpacking boxes from the loading dock, taking note of inventory and replenishing the shelves with canned goods and electric tape, jars of instant coffee and brightly coloured rubber balls that were Made in China. Our co-workers – all much older than us – marvelled at how seamlessly my sister and I worked together, like synchronized swimmers on dry land, pricing tinned tomatoes and marking down tubes of discontinued toothpaste.

It paid minimum wage and I found it boring as hell. Margie was thrilled, though. She couldn't stop gabbing about our new job to her friends over the phone, like going to work in that cheesy hellhole was some kind of glamorous accomplishment. As much as she revelled in being special, I knew there were times when she yearned to be just like everybody else.

### *Margie*

When the store opened at 10:00 a.m., every single morning without fail, we played the Honest Ed's theme song over the intercom. It was this really goofy jingle written about a hundred years ago. The guy who sings it sounds like he's putting on a fake Jamaican accent. Luna says it's sexist and kind of racist because it was probably sung by a white guy and if that's the case, it's sort of making fun of the way Black people talk? I don't know. The words are a little bit ridiculous and the whole thing makes, like, zero sense, but I kind of like it. It's pretty funny. Sometimes I sing it in the shower really early, before our shift. One time, I got Lu to join in:

*He sells pins and needles shoes and tacks  
Shirts and ties and household wax  
H-O-N-E-S-T E-D  
Honest Ed's  
Crazy Honest Ed's  
How can he be honest when his prices are so low?  
This guy chases a bargain like a woman would chase his  
dough  
Now he's got a brand-new service  
He'll sell you a wife tailor-made  
And if you have a row with your mother-in-law  
He'll take her back on a trade.*

That weirdo song might be my second favourite thing about the store. My first favourite thing about Honest Ed's is how it's built like a kind of labyrinth. There are all sorts of weird storage rooms behind closed doors that are for staff use only. And since we're staff, we can explore and excavate them on our breaks. One of the secret rooms almost gave me a heart attack.

There's a white swinging door in the children's toy department with a painted sign on it that says **AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY**. Behind it, there's a series of ramps and hallways and conveyor belts that end up in the creepiest fucking room you've ever seen. We both screamed our heads off when we first went in there.



*Lu*

I thought we had innocently stumbled upon a mass murder scene, or maybe an open grave of people who had died from SARS. There were armless bodies and legless bodies, free-standing torsos and what looked like boxes of severed heads. Some of the mannequins were standing and some were lying down and some were sitting with their long legs crossed. They're all bald as chemo patients and garishly made-up – lipstick and eyeshadow like something out of an '80s music video. The mannequins are old – definitely way older than we are – so they're thick with dust and a lot of the flesh-coloured paint has been chipped away revealing putty grey underneath. Their eyes are unblinking and vacant and blue. There are mannequin arms grotesquely bent at the elbows and mannequin hands with nails the same colour as their flesh and dusty mannequin legs attached to beige stiletto heels. Many of the disembodied legs are all clustered together in one or two boxes. The toes point upwards, like alleyway flowers straining to seek out sunlight.

It's strange to me that mannequins are supposed to represent the ideal of womanhood when all mannequins look the same. Mannequins are never fat. Mannequins are usually white. Mannequins never ever have more than one head on their body. Mannequins never say a word.

Margie and I gravitate toward the mannequin room before and after our shifts to blow off some steam and be ridiculous.

"Alas, Poor Yorick!" Margie would say in her best overwrought actor voice, holding up a mannequin's torso holding

its own head in its hand. “I knew him, Horatio. A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy . . .”

“Hey there, gorgeous. Would you like to dance?”

“I would, but I seriously have two left feet.”

“That you do! Don’t worry – I’ll give you a . . . *hand!*”

By the end of our little plays, we would be in hysterics. We couldn’t tear ourselves away from that place. But if I’m being honest with you, the mannequins – and that dark, hidden room – gave me a serious case of the creeps.

### *Margie*

The store hired a couple of other new people halfway through the summer to help take on some shifts while the veteran workers took their vacations.

One of them is this girl Tracey who’s around our age. Tracey’s cool as hell. She always wears these long floral vintage dresses under her Honest Ed’s shirts but never gets in trouble for violating the dress code because she’s the manager’s nephew’s girlfriend. She’s really pretty and has this super rad free-flowing bohemian style but she told us it’s out of necessity because she’s a fat girl and has trouble finding anything cute that fits. Tell me about it. Mum has to tailor most of our clothes.

The other new hire is this guy Alex Addorisio. We know him, of course. Or at least, we know of him. He was in our grade. We’d just never really talked to him or gotten to know him at school at all. We were never in any of the same classes. Alex was on the rugby team last year. He’s Irish-Italian and he likes

to joke that his favourite food is spaghetti with Lucky Charms sprinkled on top. That made me laugh. He's a little on the short side but pretty handsome, really. All the girls at school super thought so, too.

*Lu*

Alex is a genuine turd and dumber than any mannequin. He repeats that Lucky Charms joke literally every day. He uses words like *Paki* and *retard* and *gypped* on a daily basis and addresses everyone as “Hey, guy!” instead of bothering to learn their actual names. Otherwise, he mostly expresses himself in grunts, monosyllables and jokes about blondes and Newfies. Naturally, Margie hasn't stopped talking about him.

*Margie*

Tracey throws a party every Labour Day weekend. She hand-delivered our invitations at work. She said her parents would be at her grandparents' cottage in Haliburton this year, so we'd have the entire house to ourselves.

“No parents, no rules, no bullshit,” she said. “My boyfriend and his college friends will buy enough booze to go around, but make sure you bring ten bucks to contribute to the cause.”

On the back of the invitation, it said, “Destroy with fire after memorizing address.” This party was a secret. This party was all ours.

*Lu*

I didn't really want to go to the party, but I genuinely liked Tracey and didn't want to be seen as completely anti-social. Plus, I wouldn't want to take the experience away from Margie. Sometimes I have to take one for the team. I wasn't going to have fun but, I mean, it would be fine. *Carpe diem* and all of that.

The thing was, we were scheduled to work an opening shift at the store early the next morning. Margie promised we wouldn't stay at the party too late.

*Margie*

Tracey lives in this old Victorian row house not far from our place. It's like something out of a movie, I swear! Stained glass, pine floors, an ancient brick fireplace, the works. We told Mum Tracey's parents would be chaperoning. Plus, we had our new flip phones and would text if we needed to get in touch with her.

At Lu's insistence, we leave right at 8:00 p.m. We are the very first guests to arrive, which is slightly humiliating, but Tracey seems genuinely happy to see us. She gives us a tour that ends in the kitchen, where there's a row of unopened booze lining the counter – brown and green and crystal clear bottles.

Aside from having a few sips of wine at a family friend's wedding last year, Luna and I have never actually had any alcohol before. But I'm not about to tell that to anyone. Least of all Tracey, who is beyond cool.

“I was hoping they were going to get more hard stuff than that,” Tracey sighs. “Don’t worry – the kegs are being delivered in like half an hour.”

We meet Tracey’s boyfriend, Tim. He is really nice, just like Tracey. But then his buddies start showing up. They all go to the same suburban college and walk around in clouds of cheap cologne. Every single one of them seems to own a Honda Civic. They’re parked up and down the street. One of them is blasting a remix of 50 Cent’s “In Da Club” from his car stereo and it’s battling with the house party music, which right now is shuffling between a Wilco CD and Sleater-Kinney.

*Lu*

“Well, I’ll be good goddamned!” says one of Tracey’s boyfriend’s friends, grinning menacingly at us. “A bitch with two heads!”

A flash of red. I’m stunned. Enraged. Gut-churningly humiliated. We forget sometimes. We’re so used to our school friends and our colleagues treating us with dignity and respect and like human beings that we forget we’re different. Different enough that certain people think we should be treated as less than human. They see us as circus freaks, sideshow fodder, *monsters*.

“My name is Margaret, how very lovely to make your acquaintance,” says Margie, poised and charming. She reaches out her pale slender hand, gingerly latching onto his red meaty one. “This is my twin sister, Luna. We’re going to the University of Toronto in the fall on a full scholarship. How

about yourself?” The friend, suddenly sheepish, mutters, “Nice meeting you,” and retreats to the backyard.

Game, set, match.

“Let’s get ourselves a fucking drink,” says my sister.

## *Margie*

*That prick that prick that fucking prick fuck that fucking prick fuck that prick fuck him*

I’m yelling. I might be crying. We’re in the basement. Alex is holding my face and telling me to calm down. I tell him what happened and he’s telling me that it’s okay, it’s okay. That Tracey’s boyfriend’s friends are just a bunch of frat boy douches. He tells me that I’m beautiful.

“You do know that, don’t you, Margie? You’re gorgeous. Seriously hot, okay?” He looks me in the eye for a few seconds. And then he goes outside for a smoke.

When he comes back, he unzips his backpack and waves a silver bottle in the air.

“I stole the good tequila,” Alex says. “Let’s do shots, ladies!”

## *Lu*

We’re pretty drunk, Margie. I think you need to take it easy now. We’re not used to this.

## *Margie*

Whatever, *Mom*.

RADIUM GIRL

*Lu*

I don't know what time it is. The party is winding down. Soon it will be time to leave. Thank god. Thank god. My head hurts. Alex is whispering things into Margie's ear. Margie is laughing this insanely high-pitched laugh. She sounds like a hyena after huffing from a helium balloon. I've never, ever heard her laugh like that.

There are only six or seven of us left here. The college bros are long gone. Tracey reamed them out when she caught three of them smoking weed in one of the bedrooms.

"No smoking inside, dumbasses!" Tracey shrieked. "You want me to catch serious shit from my folks?"

"This party sucks," said one of the bros as he left. "High school girls are so uptight."

I want to go now.

I want to go.

Can we *please* go now?

*Margie*

Fine. We can go. Let's go!

*Lu*

Relief washes over me . . . until I realize Alex is coming with us. And where we're going is not home.