

**The Thom(p)son Twins or Thomson and Thompson or Thompson and Thomson
by Lyle D Rosdahl**

Thomson and Thompson, Thompson said, are detectives with Scotland Yard. [To be precise, Thomson said, we're Scotland Yard defectives.] Be seated. The both of you. As you are virtually indistinguishable, the judge sighed, you will be asked to testify together. Though this is highly unorthodox, it will be the quickest way, given previous testimony to your inseparability and the preceding debacle. Please let the records show the judge's reluctant decision.

I never can understand how we look so much alike. It really is eerie, though I pretend it doesn't bother me. Pretend that I don't even notice really. It's me, in essence, next to me on the stand under oath. Twice. What else can I add to what he's already said? There is nothing left to say.

What happened the first day of the voyage? The judge asked. Thomson proceeded to stand up but the judge quickly asked him to be seated. Not before he wobbled, arms flailing, on the edge of the testimony box. I'll take a seat, he said, straightening his coat.

Sometimes I don't know if I'm wearing his hat. How do we know that I always leave mine on the right and he leaves his on the left? Perhaps they get mixed up... Perhaps I forget who I am. What's to stop one of us from waking up one morning and saying, I'm Thomson and you're Thompson? Or I'm Thompson and you're Thomson? What if I replaced one hat with the other? Do I still know that the one is mine and the other is his? What about one more switch? One more?

The first day of the voyage was a rough one. We were sea sick as dogs. [To be precise: we were sick as sea dogs.] One at a time please, the judge banged his gavel. So we were mostly confined to our room. We stuck our heads out the porthole every so often to vomit bile, or choke at the writhing sea below us. By the time we had gotten our sea legs we were twenty pounds lighter. [To be precise: our sea legs were twenty pounds.] The judge sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. And hungry. We were there to look after — Thomson choked up, pulling his handkerchief from his breast pocket and holding it up to his eyes. Precisely, he agreed, one at a time. We were there, Thompson put in, to look after someone. When we could finally stand up again we went to the dining room and had a meal of — what was it again? Halibut, Thomson said, stuffing his handkerchief back into his pocket abruptly. Curried halibut, to be exact. I don't remember it lasting long... We were back in our birdcage hanging out the porthole screeching at the sea. Luckily we had brought the elixir of life, eh? Thompson elbowed Thomson in the ribs. Thomson's chair teetered on the witness box and tipped, but not before he was able to reach out and hook his cane around Thompson's neck, bringing them both crashing through the flimsy wooden rail and onto the floor.

When we go to bed at night, we sleep. But sometimes I find myself awake in the middle of the night. The moonlight illuminates the room creating shadows. Sometimes they move about the room, crawling from corner to corner. But strangest of all is when I look over at the bed next to mine and see him, his head turned toward me, and I'm not sure if it is really him or if there's a mirror and I think that he's thinking the same thing, that his eyes are open and that he's thinking he's looking in a mirror and it's reflecting us infinitely. Never ending. Like the night in 1001

Nights when Scheherazade begins to tell the tale of herself telling tales, stopped just short of getting to the point when Scheherazade tells the tale of Scheherazade telling tales. I imagine the nightmare of that loop as I stare at him possibly staring at me. The shadows are nothing compared to that.

Please continue, the judge said after order had been minimally restored in the court (there was still the juggler in the back who would not leave). Well, Thomson said, we just weren't ourselves. We came out once or twice more to choke down some food. [To be precise: we choked once or twice more.] And then we docked at port, though we weren't sure where, you see, we had just hopped the steamer at the last minute. Thompson interrupted, We were keeping a low profile. He winked and dug an elbow into Thomson's ribs, resulting in a collective gasp from the courtroom. And succeeding, Thomson said, winking back. Is this pertinent? The judge asked leaning back in his chair. Is this going somewhere, do you mean? Thompson asked. Yes, this is going somewhere, Thomson answered. It went somewhere anyway. We didn't know then what we know now and so we're leading you through the events as they transpired. That is, Thompson said, as they happened. The judge pinched his nose between his forefinger and thumb again and said, Just stick to the important parts of what happened. Please. Thompson saluted, whipping his arm around and knocking Thomson's hat to the floor. They both spun around (Thomson counterclockwise and Thompson clockwise, losing his own hat in the act) to pick it up and their heads collided, rebounding off each other: the clunk of hollow coconuts. Stars.

When we first met at the agency, I couldn't look at him without getting chills. Goosebumps. I thought perhaps it was a joke. Who was this man? Why were they putting him with me? Just to see how we would react? It was a test, I concluded. And so I didn't say anything. That would have been the test. To see if I said anything. Complained. So I ignored it externally while internally I was ice. And he didn't say anything and so we proceeded.

Now where were we? Asked Thompson dusting his bowler off (or was it Thomson's? No time for that now). Ahh, yes, our disguises. Brilliant. [To be precise: consistent, Thomson said.] No one noticed that we were there, so well did we fit in to our habitat. Yes, Thomson interjected, we were like animals in a jungle: see-through. And when we docked, we — Where did you dock? the Judge interrupted. The twins looked at each other. Thompson scratched his head with his cane, knocking his hat askew. I thought I told you to take your hat off, the judge interrupted again. Did he? Thompson asked Thomson. I don't have mine on, do I? Thomson asked, his hands gingerly searching his head, eyes lifted up in an effort to *see*. Yours, my dear fellow, Thompson said, is in your lap. He tapped it with his cane. Ah, so it is. Thomson picked it up, cleaned it with his sleeve and donned it, proud as a father with a new son. You two will be held in contempt of court if your hats are not removed immediately. The court is content? Thompson asked. Quite, Thomson replied. The judge motioned for the bailiff to remove the hats, which he did by sneaking up behind the suspects. The twins patted their heads frantically before turning to see the bailiff, right eyebrow raised. How rude, Thomson said, crossing his arms haughtily. Quite, Thompson said, doing the same.

We don't even have the same mother, I thought, sitting across the breakfast table from him, who chewed loudly on a piece of toast, butterless. I looked down at my own piece of dry toast and said, Pass the butter, would you? He stopped chewing and looked up from the morning newspaper. Butter? he asked, crumbs spraying the newspaper, the white porcelain plates, the yellow formica-topped table, the linoleum floor. Never mind, I said. He went back to his paper and chewing. How could we not have the same mother? I wondered. And then, after he took another bite of toast, I asked, How's Mother? He stopped chewing and swallowed hard, the lump of semi-moist bread crept down his throat visibly. He gulped. Who? he asked. Nothing, nothing, I said. How'd the stock market do yesterday?

Now then, the judge continued. Where did the boat dock? It wasn't so much a boat as it was an ocean liner, Thompson corrected. [A massive boat, to be precise, Thomson added.] We docked somewhere in the Near East, Thomson said. [To be precise, Port Said, Egypt, Thompson said.] All we could see from the windows for hours before we arrived was sand and sand dunes and sun. We thought maybe we had run aground, but soon we started to hear movement on the deck and then saw the outskirts of Port Said. We started to pack up where there was some kind of brouhaha outside our door. Of course we waited for the commotion to die down and then opened the door. There was a sailor propped up against the iron wall next to our room. He was dead. Someone had harpooned him to the wall. Actually, interjected Thompson, he wasn't quite dead. He was struggling against the harpoon, but he had already lost a lot of blood. We tried to help him, but we slipped in his blood. When we got up, he was dead. Thomson looked at the judge

and said, It was horrifying. His feet were actually off the ground. No one deserves to go like that, Thompson said. [To be precise, Thomson added.]

I once went on vacation. I don't recall where it was. Somewhere sandy. I drank rum out of a coconut shell. The drinks all had umbrellas in them. The umbrella shafts were long toothpicks. I would eat the fruit out of the rum drink with the umbrella, stabbing at the fleshy chunks. I was despondent. I sunburned my white flabby chest and legs. I got sand between my teeth and in my swimming trunks, which was then transferred into my room and then my bed. I was thinking of him. Nothing happened to me and I sat on the beach and drank rum drinks from coconut hulls and sunburned myself. I was lonely. If he had been there, something would have happened.

And how did this sailor fit into the overall picture, then? the judge asked. At this stage his wig was askew and a sword-swallower had joined the juggler at the back of the courtroom who was also joined by a man with a popcorn machine. The proceedings were getting fairly rowdy, but the judge and his bailiff were impotent against it (this always happens, the judge thought, when we get these types of trials — the mornings headline had read: TWINS SUSPECT IN BOY DETECTIVE'S MYSTERIOUS DEATH). At one point, Thompson stood up to decry the insolent nature of the crown only to slip and, while windmilling about the stand, kicked his chair into the bailiff remanded to standing behind them in order to prevent such occurrences. The crowd roared with delight and it took much gavel banging and truncheon slapping to get everyone calmed down again. It was during this uproar that the sword swallower and the popcorn vendor snuck in to join the juggler. The bailiff was unable to expel the slippery entrepreneurs,

not through lack of trying. The bailiff even ended up with a box of popcorn, which was knocked out of his hand as he went back to his post behind the witness stand. Once the popcorn had been swept up, the judge asked, And how did this sailor fit into the overall picture, then? It was at these moments that the courtroom grew silent, even the swishing of the juggler's balls stopping. Well, stammered Thompson. You see, Thomson continued. Yes? the judge encouraged. We don't know, Thomson finally admitted [To be precise, we know we don't know, Thomson added.] He was dead, you see, before we could ask him. But he must have been involved somehow. It couldn't possibly have been coincidence, could it have been? Thompson asked. The judge drew in a deep breath and held it. O.K., he exhaled. O.K. Then what? Well, Thompson continued, we checked him for ID, of which he had none. We asked around the ship, as there were people gathering by then, but we couldn't spend too much time as we might have lost track of our primary objective. Yes, Thomson stood up abruptly, right arm extended, index finger pointing into the air. We had to follow — he put his hand down, his chin sinking — Tintin! he sobbed. Thompson rose to embrace him.

I think we actually once brought home the same book to read. I think it was The Odyssey. They were different translations, but the same book! We had been together for years and years by that time. We had forgotten, so we thought, what it was like to not be together, what it had been like before we knew each other. And then the same book. We read it together and discussed the different translations, which ones we liked best, how, despite all the differences, they were still the same book.

And was Tintin not interested in this body? Why was he in Egypt? If it was connected, why didn't you warn him? What to answer first? Thompson asked. The last question first, Thomson said with some ire. We must vindicate ourselves, if not to these, these, simpletons, then to Tintin. Very well, Thompson said. We had strict orders not to let him see us or in any other way know that we were following him. [To be precise: the sickest orders, Thomson added.] We couldn't alert him about the body without also alerting him to our presence. We were concerned that by breaking our own rules, we would inevitably break Tintin's, therefore putting him in danger. Thomson added, he would, of course, have been interested, had he still been on the boat. It was after people started to gather that we saw him at the end of the gang plank with Snowy. He was too far away to notice the commotion (as quiet as it was). We don't know why, Thompson continued, he was in Egypt. We were there to follow him and report back. And after we saw him get off the boat we quickly got our things and did the same. We were in Port Sayid for two or three days while Tintin got rations and met with people he knew. He was obviously going somewhere inland, but we didn't know where. Isn't it possible, the judge asked, that Tintin himself killed the sailor? Thompson and Thomson gasped, but then stopped and rubbed their chins in unison, thoughtfully. I never thought of that, Thompson said. Neither did I, Thomson said. But surely not Tintin. Maybe that was why the man was banging on the side of the ship. It did make a tinny noise, Thompson conceded. But no, they said together, snapping out of it, not Tintin. Never Tintin. Or for that matter, the judge continued, why couldn't it have been either one or both of you that did it? This drew a gasp from the crowd, who had started to grow unruly again. Several people tutted loudly and a woman stood up and fainted causing the court to call a short recess at what time Thompson and Thomson were handcuffed together for safe keeping.

We've fallen down the stairs so many times that we began to talk about moving to a first floor apartment. We've had so many casts signed by police officers and Tintin (which signatures we had cut out and put in a cigar box: they filled at least two large size boxes), that the local clinic had to stock up on plaster just to keep up with demand. How many times had we been flailing down those carpeted stairs, arms entangled feet thumping anxiously against the wall, canes wedging unpleasantly into nooks and crannies? How many hats had we ruined? How I'll miss those times.

On the third day, Thompson continued the story, Captain Haddock met Tintin and they set out on camel across the desert. Dirty beasts, camels, Thomson interjected. Thoroughly, Thompson conceded. At the back of the courtroom the fire spitter shot out a burst of flame from his mouth, which, having gotten too close to a child's cotton candy, sent the thick smell of caramelized sugar through the room. So we, continued Thompson, rented a jeep. We had extra gas, supplies and our Jalabiyas. We were ready for anything. Except what happened next.

We both hate spiders. They scare us to death. But firing squads are worse. Much worse.

So what happened? the judge asked. He had moved up closer to the stand. The bailiff, by this point, had also lost that faraway look they get and had moved closer to the stand. The entire group of onlookers inched closer, pressing up against the bar (a sign on the judge's side read:

proceedings; a sign on the other side read: peanut gallery). A profound hush fell, filling the room with weighted anticipation. The juggler dropped a ball and the popcorn vendor turned off his machine. Well, began Thomson, sheepishly, we were captured. Captured? the judge asked. That's the short of it, Thomson said. We were following the trail that Tintin and Captain Haddock had left and so we didn't notice that they had doubled back in on themselves. Until we came to the end of the trail. [To be precise: the end of the line. Thomson added.] Yes, yes, the judge encouraged. Well, yes, Thomson said. We didn't have enough gas to make it all the way back. We were two days out, Thomson said. And we had thought that they had been going somewhere civilized. Where they would have gas. Like Cairo, Thomson said, brightening up. I've always wanted to go to Cairo. Really? asked Thomson. Filthy place. Polluted. Mosquitoes the size of cocktail waitresses. Air as damp as a wet wool blanket. Filthy. Ahhh, Thomson, my friend, you are wrong, but I am not disappointed by your dissent. Dissent? Thomson asked. And what are you? A dictator? An opinion other than your own is dissent, distraction from the la-dee-da of normal life? Pooh. How right you are, sir, Thomson said, standing up. I retrace my remark. Very good, sir, Thomson said, also standing. I remake my own. The crowd, still enraptured, slowly began to clap until there was thunderous applause throughout the room. The judge had to take another recess while he yelled, at the top of his lungs, ORDER, ORDER IN THIS COURT.

When we were being held there in that tent in the middle of the desert I thought about what I would do to get out of the situation. Would I have given them him for my own life? It was a question that I had asked myself before, but not under the actual circumstances that I had imagined. And there I was under those circumstances and worse asking that question that I had

considered a thousand times before. Not that I had been asked to answer it. Or even asked anything at all. The only outcome of this circumstance was death, I was sure and that's why I was worried about my asking the question I was. Before I died, would I grovel? Would I beg for mercy? Would I beg that they kill *him* instead of me? I was afraid that the answer was yes. I looked at him sitting next to me and wondered if he was thinking the same thing. And then I realized that it would be impossible for them to kill only one of us. Impossible.

Once the court returned from the recess and the room was again ordered, the judge asked, and how did all of the previous lead you to be caught? Thompson and Thomson looked at each other. Do tell, please, Thompson said. It had nothing to do with me, Thomson responded crossing his arms over his chest and looking blankly out into the audience. Oh, is that right? Nothing whatsoever? It wasn't you who swore that if we continued on the line we had been following that we would find them eventually? That or end up somewhere with a filling station? Cairo? Thompson was pointing his index finger now. Thomson harrumphed once and said, do go on with your story. Yes, please, the judge said. Do go on. Fine, Thompson said, crossing his own arms over his chest. The judge, suddenly not knowing who was sitting on which side, banged his gavel once. The crack ran around the room. Fine, Thompson said again, not moving. We did continue. For another day until we ran out of gasoline at which time we tied our shirts onto our heads and began walking. Nearing the end of our ropes [To be precise: being roped in, Thomson added, indignantly], we were beset upon by arabs in Keffiyeh on horses. They were certainly unfriendly and had us hogtied in minutes. They took us to their encampment, a semi-permanent

collection of tents. Our jeep was there, too, Thomson exclaimed. Yes, Thompson said, and our jeep.

We had at one time talked about getting wives. This was inconceivable because of the difficulties. Would they look the same? They would have to. This, then, became an extension of the hat problem. How would we know who was who? How would they know? Mrs. Thomson and Mrs. Thompson. How would we ever find two women who looked the same? How would we convince them that a) we were different people (I still was not sold on this point) and b) it doesn't matter which one you end up with because you won't be able to tell the difference anyway? In other words, how were we to convince them to love both of us equally? These types of situations are fraught with jealousy and competitiveness. What if Mrs. Thomson fell for Thompson? But Thompson loved Mrs. Thompson who loved him back? There was always that possibility. Or if Mrs. Thomson and Thomson began to fight and she left him leaving Mrs. Thompson and Thompson and Thomson? Would this not become problematic? At the very least, the strain between me and him must be taken into account when considering the equation. Or equations. What if we decided that we didn't want wives after all? That all along he and I were perfect for each other? Then what? we asked. And so our discussion ended. It came up a few more times, but always ended the same way. What if we were meant for each other? After all, what's in a "p"?

We were dumped into a tent, still hogtied. Thomson continued the story. I don't know how long we were there. It seemed like weeks. Thompson added, it stunk of fear as if there had been others held there before us, but we were exhausted and dehydrated and slept for some time. Thomson said, when we were awoken, it must have been night because it was cool. We heard whispering near the corner of the tent. We managed to roll in that direction. When we were close enough, we recognized the voice. Tintin! Thompson shouted, standing up. The crowd gasped. Precisely, Thomson said, at which point a guard rushed into the tent, another rushing around the side. In minutes, Tintin was bound and gagged and taken to another tent somewhere in the encampment. We had failed, Thomson sank into his chair. Failed, echoed Thomson. Such are the charges brought against you, the judge said. Brought against you by your very employer. Brought against you by Tintin's employer. Do you realize, the judge asked, that major crime syndicates have robbed banks, assassinated heads of state, stolen jewels and mummies and generally raped and pillaged since news of Tintin's dematerialization leaked? It is a catastrophe for governments everywhere. And you may be the only witnesses to his disappearance. Tintin, Thomson sobbed. Please continue your story, the judge softened his tone. Thompson patted Thomson on the back and said, there, there. The long and the short of it, he said looking from Thomson to the judge, but had to stop as he choked up. Thomson, regaining his composure, said, the news is grim. The evidence grimmer. They both pointed to the bag sitting next to their table. The judge asked the bailiff to bring it to him. The bailiff set the bag up on the bench. As the judge reached for it, Thompson said, wait! You have to understand that they told us they would kill us. They said that we were witnesses. The judge said, I'll keep it in mind. Then he reached for the bag and unzipped it. He turned green as he peered into the dark interior. Oh, god, he said. After a minute,

he reached in and pulled Tintin's desiccated head from the bag, holding it up for the gallery to see. Across his forehead had been inscribed with a knife Brotherhood for the Extermination of Tintin, which the judge read to the courtroom. There was a gasp from the audience and then shouting and crying as the judge replaced the head. The sword swallower began to choke on his sword nearly lacerating his throat as he pulled the blade from his mouth. Thompson and Thomson sat clutching each other and shaking, whether from fear or sadness, they didn't know. People began to point at the twins who had different parents. They began to accuse. They condemned. They stood and yelled obscenities at the two men who had traveled home with a head in a bag: an inherent castigation of their culture. An affront to their very intelligence and goodwill as a nation, indeed as a world. A vilification of a set of morals that is unquestionable for the foundation of a society or moral people. This was an outrage. A disgrace. A scandal. An atrocity paralleled only by the continued criminal acts being sown across the world. These people are trying to slay God, they cried (it is not clear if they were referring to the twins or to the criminals, though they are not mutually exclusive). The judge watched all of this and then banged his gavel. There was instant silence because this meant that the judge had come to judgment and punishment.

We argued and cried frequently on our return. I consoled him when he cried and he consoled me when I cried and sometimes we consoled each other as we both cried. All along knowing that poor Tintin was dead. That his desecrated head was in our bag under the bed. The smell was becoming unbearable, but we could not leave our quarters because of the fear we were being watched. And because of our guilt. We knew we were guilty and so we argued with each other

and cried. We contemplated throwing the bag overboard. But what if we were being watched? he would ask. What then? They'll kill you? he asked. And then where will I be? I don't want to volunteer myself, because then where would you be? They would never kill us both, he continued because there must be someone to tell the tale. We are, after all, witnesses. We must tell the people about Tintin. We must hold his head up high with pride and tell tales of his death fighting. Don't be a fool, I told him. Tintin is dead and that's all. But it wasn't all, of course. It would never be all. And then we were captured at port, someone having reported the smell of decay.

I have come to a verdict, the judge said loudly. The organ grinder pulled his monkey up onto the organ and fell silent with the crowd. I have come to a verdict, the judge repeated, his voice echoing through the domed ceiling and descending on the audience with fervor. My verdict is, as a ruling of the people, that the suspects, one Thompson and Thomson, are guilty of scuttling their assignment, which was simply to keep track of one operative Tintin, due to ineptitude. There interjected a smattering of applause. Also, I find them guilty of transporting an illegal substance, namely the head of the previously named operative, Tintin. Louder applause, with a few "here-heres" thrown in. Finally, I find them guilty of treason, for bringing the message of the savages who so brutally, and without forethought for our own culture, murdered the previously named operative, Tintin. The courtroom rumbled with applause. Thompson and Thomson were unable to move, the weight of the judgment heavy upon their shoulders. The judge found it necessary to pound his gavel repeatedly in order that his punishment be heard by all. As punishment, he screamed into the uproar. As punishment, he repeated as silence descended, I sentence Thompson

and Thomson to be executed by firing squad. Again the court erupted in applause and screams. A spectacle. Thompson and Thomson opened and closed their mouths like guppies out of their tank, drowning in the air. The crowd rushed across the bar, breaking it down, and hoisted the twins upon their mass like soccer players who had just won the world cup. They were rushed out of the courtroom and into the courtyard where the two firing squad poles stood cemented into the ground. The concrete was stained with blood and the poles pock-marked with bullet holes. The crowd quickly fastened the pair to the poles and stood back, waiting for the commander of the firing squad (already there) to arrive and give the order to fire. He arrived shortly. Ready... Any last words? Thompson (or is it Thomson? No one knew) asked. Aim... Kiss me, he said. Will that do? Fire.

Kiss me, he said. I had heard him correctly. The bullets entered our bodies and we slumped against the ropes, our hats falling off simultaneously and spinning together in our gore. Kiss me. Our lives spilled before our eyes, as far back as the day that we met. There was nothing before that. We watched it unfold, the physical gap between us having been breached. It might have been only six seconds before the oxygen to our brain was cut off completely, but it felt like eternity.