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Megan Richardson

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Give Ev'ry Man Thy Ear

By Megan Richardson

In fifth grade, when most of my classmates were getting braces, I got plastic surgery. I got braces that year too, but the plastic surgery came first. Oh-toh-plasty. Reshaping my ears. Fixing them.

A boy in my class had one ear that didn't have a hole in it. It was as if someone had caulked it with melted wax. Peter was smart, ran fast during recess, had almost translucent skin and white-blonde hair; on sunny days, you had to squint to see him if he was in the sun. Everyone liked him.

"It's a family tradition," my mother said when telling me I would be getting surgery. She lifted my heavy hair in one hand to frown at my ears, where the fold of skin would normally be there to hold them flat against my head instead of cocked out at an angle. It was her faulty genes that doomed me to surgery. My mother, who got her sensibility from her German immigrant grandmother, her looks from her English ancestry, and her insanity from God, got her ears from who-knows-where. They must have been genetic, because she passed them on to both her children, but neither of her parents was visibly afflicted.

My father's ears were large for his head, almost comically so, but pinned perfectly against his head in a sensible fashion. My mother's ears were small and shell-like like mine, as flat as my father's but artificially so, brought into line at some point years before I was born. She had thick ropes of scar tissue from her operation inside, on the back of, and on the scalp behind her ears. I had never actually seen them. She wore her hair down, brushed into a voluminous shoulder-length mass, to hide the scars. Only large gold studs winked through, and only sometimes, when she dressed up for business dinners with my father.

The fourth member of our family, my brother Ryan, had also subjected himself to the surgery. He was eighteen then, and to me he seemed impossibly tall, like all adults. I didn't know it then, but he was short for his age, not filled out, still not shaving. Maybe it was because of this that he played

with me—indoor soccer, driveway hockey—longer than any teenager should have wanted to entertain his ten-year-old sibling. At least then he could be the unqualified best at something. Our mother had high expectations for her children, but we spectacularly botched every goal in a way that brought her new misery each time, as if we'd done it on purpose to shame her, each successive letdown failing to alert her of our inconvenient fallibility.

My surgery was only a year or so after his operation—his own attempt to minimize the kind of ear-based humiliation I had never experienced. The image of him sitting up in bed, vomiting into the waste basket between his legs, his head swaddled in bandages, was still fresh in my mind.

"Your brother has always had a hard time with this sort of thing," my mother said at some point. Perhaps in the car, driving me to the hospital for the consultation. "He was always sick as a child. But you'll be fine. You don't complain."

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I'm sitting on the crinkly paper covering the exam table, my bare feet dangling but far from brushing the floor. My mother is reading the paper, fanned out in front of her like the wings of a peacock, and there's a stilted silence occasionally broken by her turning the page or snapping its droopy edges upright. I sit perfectly still, not stirring the paper, breathing so quietly I can't hear myself. Then, the doctor: the door groaning open, his forceful nose-breathing, swinging a stool across the exam room with a practiced hand to sit down in front of me. He looks at me but speaks to my mother,

"How old is she?"

"She's ten."

"Going on eleven," I don't say.

"It's a good time for this," the doctor says. "Once they hit mid-teens, the cartilage gets tougher to work with."

He turns my head with four giant fingers, as if I'm one of the Barbie

dolls I play with in the attic. I bite the inside of my cheek, just a little; it's the most intimately anyone has touched me in months. He gently pulls my ear out, away from my head, moves it around in circles, probes where it meets my skull. I've never paid this much attention to my ears. They feel almost foreign to me now, like when your hand falls asleep and you touch it with your other hand. Finished with his examination, he wheels back again and speaks to my mother. I look down at my toes again, wriggling them, waving to myself.

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They scheduled it during spring break. The year before, we had gone to Hawaii. Most days I was dropped off at the glorified resort daycare to glue shells and sand to paper plates with other people's kids. But in the afternoons, my brother would come pick me up and we'd go to the video store at the resort and rent whatever movies we wanted. He picked most days. My favorite movie was "The Hunt for Red October." I was a bit young to understand the Cold War, but I liked the scene where the Russians all sang their anthem in proud tones that rang through the ocean and into the American submarine.

On one of my few days of family time, boogie boarding for the first time ever, I fell over backward into the seawater with my eyes open. I screamed, my eyes and throat filling with saltwater and sand, and my mother pulled me out by my upper arm, marching me—blind, snot and tears and saltwater coating my face in that putrescent way that only seems to happen to kids—back to our villa, gripping my upper arm. "I told you not to do that," she said, and she had. I could hear her taut expression, her rightness, even if I couldn't bear to open my eyes.

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"What do you want to do after your surgery?" my father said from the front seat. I wasn't sure why he was coming, absentee that he was even now that he lived at home. For the first six years of my life, he worked in California and flew up on the weekends on the earliest Saturday flight. Having two parents was still new to me.

"Jim, she won't be in any shape—" my mother chastised, but I was already speaking.

"I want to get a German pancake!" The insubstantial puff, half-eggs and half-pancake, dusted with powdered sugar and liberally coated in maple syrup (by me), was my elusive breakfast item, my white whale. Baked in the oven, it puffed up like a soufflé and collapsed if not eaten straightaway. We didn't often go out for breakfast, but I always ordered a German pancake, each time buoyed by the hope that it would still be puffy, even though it was always sadly deflated and wrinkled by the time it reached me.

"We'll see how you feel afterward," she said.

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They didn't put me under all the way. I was too young for that, so they gave me an IV—my mother squeezing my hand to distract from the pinch, her fingers cold and smooth—that made me half-asleep. I couldn't really move or feel anything, but I could hear the doctor and his assistants working around me. Halfway through, my legs started to ache from being so still, covered by what felt like lead blankets, so I flexed my ankles, but it didn't feel better at all, so I started to kick a little, and then more, throwing off the blankets with every strike, and felt good. But then they made me fall asleep, for real this time.

I open my eyes and the doctor is standing over me. He wants to show me what he did, offering it for approval, like when my parents order wine at a restaurant and they pour small glasses first to be sniffed and swirled. He's holding a mirror so I can see myself: I am small, too-pale. The ear he shows me is bone-white, surrounded by purple blotches like a gruesome bruise. Flat. I realize I never asked if I'd still be able to put my hair behind my ears. But I can't move my lips, still awake-asleep, and can't ask him to put things back the way they were.

"How do you like it? It went very well. It looks great," the doctor says. But he's not asking me, he's talking to himself, like at the dentist when the lady asks questions with her fingers in your mouth but she doesn't want you to answer. I fall asleep again.

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I wake up in a giant bed, perched in the middle like an egg in a nest. I can't hear; the bandages tight around my head muffle everything, like being in water and hearing the rhythm of someone speaking but not the sounds they're making.

The doctor and my mother are talking, but my father is reading the newspaper in a chair nearby so I say to him, "Can I still put my hair behind my ears?" He looks up and gets up to ask the doctor, nods. It's such a relief. That's all I wanted.

Later in the car, I ask, "Can we go to Elmer's?" I'm not sure if anyone heard me, so I say it again, louder. My mother looks at my father and my father looks at me in the rear view mirror, a framed pair of eyes.
"Jim," I see-don't-hear my mother say, and I can imagine her tone.

"I will have hot chocolate please and a German pancake," I tell the waiter when we sit down. It's 4 p.m. and the only other diners are old people. Some of them look over at me for too long to be polite. I stare back.
"You look like you had a lobotomy," I read my mother's lips, curled and half-scandalized, but I sit cocooned in my bandage turban, sipping hot chocolate and waiting for my pancake, certain it will arrive puffy and golden.