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DETACHABLE EARS (not as cool as it sounds)



Oh no. Here it comes. My best (technically, *only*) friend, Di, is beelining straight for me with that look she gets every time she has the “best idea ever,” which, I should mention, is *always* the worst idea ever. And today, I’m pretty sure it’s going to be the *worst*, worst idea ever.

See, this morning I woke up and my hair looked great—shining and bouncing perfectly against my shoulders. It was like I got ready for the most epic selfie before I went to bed and then slept on my face so I didn’t mess it up. I’ve tried that, so I’m speaking from experience. Spoiler alert: it doesn’t work.

But the thing is, on most days, the only great thing about my thick brown hair is that it covers my thick eyebrows. Sometimes, when they’re all messed up, it looks like a

squirrel died on my forehead. I *really* want to pluck them, but Gramma says thick eyebrows make me look like a supermodel, and if I pluck them, they won't grow back, which totally freaks me out. Because what if someday dead-squirrel eyebrows are suddenly in, and I miss out on my only chance to go viral?

My hair looking great doesn't make sense because girls like me don't have anything that's great. Which is how I *know* that something is wrong—Mercury is in retrograde, the gods took an extra-long weekend, the universe is getting a mani-pedi. Whatever it is, I'm in for it. I can feel it deep down, all the way to my unmanicured toes.

Di stops in front of me. Her hair is an extra-crazy mix of light and dark streaks today. She must have been YouTubing home hair dye jobs again. It actually looks pretty against her tan skin, but she's wearing those jeans I hate—the ones that are ripped up to her thighs—and it's kind of killing her whole vibe. I get the look she's going for with them, but for some reason, on her, it just looks like she got attacked by a dog on the way to school.

I close my eyes, bracing for whatever she's about to tell me.

She wiggles her nose, and it pushes her glasses higher onto her face, making her look even nerdier than usual. "Cash Funk died," she says.

"Who?"

"You know, that TikTok star? He sings 'Jazzy Face?'" She pulls out her phone and swipes until it explodes with a thumping beat, and a raspy, baritone voice raps, "*Sunflowers rise up to the sky. My pudding is chocolate and so are your eyes.*"

I curl my lip, recognizing those ridiculously stupid lyrics.

Pulling my books out of my locker, I stack them in my arms. “Oh. Him. Right. He’s a musical genius. I’m late for Spanish.”

While the news of someone dying is unquestionably catastrophic—especially for the person who died—for me, this is just more dumb famous people news that Di thinks I care about.

Her eyes lock with mine, and she inches in way too close. “Everyone is talking about it.” She says it slowly, like I don’t speak English, then steps back. “Do you know what this could mean for us?”

“That if we stand here talking about it any longer, we’ll be late for Spanish?”

She studies my head. “Wow, your hair looks great.”

“Don’t remind me.”

Her shoulders slump. “Come on, Liv. Aren’t you even a little bit curious about my amazing idea?”

I close my locker. “Nope.”

And I mean it. Di lets “amazing” ideas float out of her mouth like helium balloons, without even considering the family of sea turtles they’ll eventually suffocate. And, somehow, I am always one of those sea turtles.

I step toward Spanish class, trying to escape, but my foot catches something, and I plummet to the floor, sending my books flying from my arms. A familiar sucky, tearing noise ripples in my head. I hit the floor, and a crowd of giggling eighth graders gather around me.

Oh no.

This is it. *This* is the terrible thing I knew was coming today. I reach for the side of my face. My ear. It’s gone.

Snapping my head up, I watch it bounce through a

dozen Nikes like a pinball. It slows, then wobbles before landing gently against the glittering white platform sneaker that tripped me. I know that sneaker. It belongs to Kaitlyn Ashley—Glendale Middle School’s own social media star, with over one million combined followers across all platforms. She’ll tell you that herself.

She’s as freakishly beautiful as she is developed for her age. Di heard she already signed a modeling contract and wears a C-cup bra. At Glendale Middle School, boobs like Kaitlyn’s are like magical unicorns galloping through the hallways. Gramma tells me not to worry about it though. She says that “someday they’ll droop so low she’ll be dragging them behind her, like the rest of us.”

And, yes, my *ear* just flew off. My right ear, to be exact. And it’s not the first time it happened. A few days ago, Di convinced me to let her pierce my ears. She said because I wear my hair in a ponytail all the time, it would “add balance to my face.” That totally freaked me out because who wants an unbalanced face, whatever that means.

So, we spent three hours watching YouTube videos on how to pierce your ears with a stapler. It took Di about seventy-six staples (I counted) to get the hole in my right ear to line up with the one in my left. She says it’s because she’s right-handed, but that still makes no sense to me.

Anyway, the next morning at breakfast, I was scrolling through my phone when I heard that same rippy, sucky sound. When I looked down, there it was—my ear—right in the middle of my plate.

Thankfully, my mom sewed it back on, and it was good as new. Even I could barely see the stitch line. But ever since, I’ve been super paranoid about it falling off again—

especially at school in front of everyone.

By now, you're probably wondering *why* my ear fell off. So here it is...I'm dead.

Yup. A corpse. A flesh-eater. A zombie. But *please* do not call me that. It makes me think of those gross horror movies with growling dead guys shoveling brains into their mouths. Ew. I do not eat brains. Weirdly, I'm too smart for that. But, I do eat meat. And, since you've probably seen a zombie movie or two in your life, I'm sure I don't need to mention what *kind* of meat. Gross, I know.

Oh, and yes, my name is Olivia, but I go by Liv. It just felt right. I mean, I am a dead girl who wishes she were alive. And, my last name is Creep. Like the universe couldn't kick me any harder.

Kaitlyn has no idea my detached ear is leaning against her shoe. And, scanning the rest of the faces staring down at me, no one else does either. I slowly reach out my arm, grazing my ear with my fingertips. I can almost grab it when someone else's hand swoops in and snatches it. I look up. Di! She quickly shoves it into her pocket. I nod a subtle thank you.

Di is the only human in the world who knows I'm dead. OK, yes. Before you say it, I know what you're thinking: Liv and Di? Really? Unfortunately, yes. And it would be super cool if we were super cool. But we're not. So, instead, it's just a really unfortunate pun for best friends with totally dead social lives.

Pushing myself to my feet, I touch the side of my head to make sure my hair is covering the hole where my ear should be. I'm eye-to-eye with Kaitlyn now, and somehow her boobs are staring at me harder than she is. I turn away

like I'm looking into the sun.

There are plenty of awful things about being dead. But the worst thing is that I'll never grow up. I'll never turn fourteen. And, I'll never have boobs. Ironically, the thought makes me want to die.

Di digs her hand into her pocket—I'm assuming to make sure my ear is still in there—and Kaitlyn catches a glimpse of it.

"Whatcha got there?" she asks, her lip gloss shimmering in the fluorescent lights.

Di plays dumb. "Where?"

"In your pocket," Chloe Johnson adds. She's behind Kaitlyn with her hand on her hip, taunting us.

Chloe Johnson is Kaitlyn's best friend. But she's not quite as pretty, not quite as popular, and definitely not quite as developed as Kaitlyn. It's like Kaitlyn made a really bad copy of herself. Which is why Di and I sometimes call her "Cloney."

"We saw you pick something up and shove it in your hoodie," Chloe says. "So, let's see."

A tense quiet sinks around us, and my armpits get sticky. Di shoots me a look. There's no getting out of this. She carefully takes her fist out of her pocket, her fingers slowly uncurling. I squeeze my eyes shut. I don't want to watch. I can't watch. But my eyelids spring open at the sound of a dozen horrified gasps.

"What is *that*?" Kaitlyn's face contorts into a horrified frown.

I look down at Di's palm, and the sick, panicked feeling fades. A lint-covered Cheeto?

"You picked that up off the floor?" Chloe asks. "Gross."

“It’s mine. She knows I love Cheetos,” I lie.

Kaitlyn examines me. “OK. So, eat it.”

I make a face. “Eat what?”

“That disgusting Cheeto. If you love them so much. Eat it.”

I rub my belly, smiling. “Nah, it’s cool. I had a big breakfast.”

“Eat it,” Chloe insists.

I look over at Di. Her eyes are telling me what I already know—just eat it so they leave. I breathe in deep, staring at it. I guess eating a dusty Cheeto that’s probably been in her pocket since September is still less disgusting than my usual diet of... meat.

I snatch it out of her palm and pop it into my mouth. I’ve tried human food a bunch of times since waking up dead. It doesn’t hurt or anything. It just tastes like dusty cardboard. This Cheeto is no different. Though I bet that’s what it would taste like even if I were human. I swallow it and smile.

There’s an awkward, grossed out beat before Kaitlyn finally says, “You two are weirder than I thought. Next time, watch where you’re going.”

Boobs bobbing, Kaitlyn disappears down the hallway with Chloe in tow, and the crowd of disgusted faces breaks up around us.

Di watches them go and then looks at me. “Your Gramma’s right. Someday those things *will* droop.” She knocks my arm with her elbow. “Come on. I’ll help you reattach your ear.”

