

Because There Are No Deaf Disney Princesses

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None of the prescriptions are for me. They're always for Ellie. Mam's been at the Superdrug counter for ages, waiting for them. Ellie is standing in front of the rack of hair clips and bobbles, picking up each one, peering at it, then putting it back. I go to stand in front of her and say, 'Mam said no more hair clips.'

'Mam said you should sign.'

'Tough.'

'I'm telling Mam.'

I sign, -Whatever, and slouch off to the brow bar. Signing is so embarrassing. The way you have to mouth things, exaggerate your face and move your arms. And anyway, she can lip-read so I don't see why I have to. Mam says I used to be so good at signing, but she also says my hair used to be nice and straight, and then it went frizzy. So, things change, don't they?

It's amazing what the brow woman can do with that piece of thread. The brow woman has thick, arched brows. Mine are virtually invisible, so threading won't help. But on the stand next to the aisle of Bourgeois and L'Oréal there is *NEW! Semi-Permanent Eye Brow Pen. For the brows of your dreams.* With a photo of a girl with perfect eyebrows, asleep, and in her dream, little brows fly away like wings.

I take a deep breath and step closer. £19.99! That's so much! There are three colours. Blonde, auburn and jet black. There's no testers, but someone has started to peel off the plastic around one of the pens. I pick it up, think about sliding it down my sleeve, but sweat pricks on my neck so, instead, I just peel off the plastic a bit more to remove the lid. See, it's a tester now. It's like a felt tip. I look at the girl in the advert and then go round the corner to peer in the small Bourgeois mirror. I carefully draw thick black lines over my pale, boring eyebrows. Then I pucker my lips to take a selfie.

From the corner of my eye, I see Ellie. Ellie in her Barbie pink coat, her blonde hair pulled up in a high pony, held in place with like over fifteen hair clips, all pink and purple, matching her two pink hearing aids. My sister is pure, sickening pinkness, and

with her pure, sickening pinkness, she picks up a pack of purple and blue hair clips and slips them into her pocket. Then she slips another in there too.

Holy shit.

'Are you going to buy that?'

I look up. A security man is glaring down at me. He's one of those gym types with a shaved head, and buffed up on weird drinks. What a bully, working in Superdrug so he can be mean to teenage girls trying to get their brows.

'Buy what?' I say.

'That,' he says, then he peers closer, as if he needs glasses. 'Semi-permanent eyebrow pen. £19.99.'

'I'm just looking.'

'You opened it.'

'It was already open.'

'It's on your face.'

'My eyebrows are naturally like this.'

'Josie? What are you doing?' Mam appears next to me, carrying a Superdrug bag bulging with the white bags of prescriptions.

'Mam,' I say. 'Have you seen what Ellie's...'

'What have you done to your face?'

'This,' the security man says, trying to hand her the semi-permanent eyebrow pen. But she pretends he hasn't spoken and isn't there.

'Mam!'

'You were supposed to keep an eye on her.' She turns and sees Ellie down at the hair section. 'Ellie!' She charges to the end of the aisle.

'You're going to have to pay for this,' the man calls after her.

Ellie is still in front of the hair clips, like they're a painting at Manchester Art Gallery. She doesn't react to Mam's call. Ellie has been moderately to severely deaf since she was two and got meningitis. She's always moderately deaf, but severely deaf depending on the situation, IMO. Mam grabs her arm and drags her past the permanent hair colours and root touch-ups. I sidle past the security man and follow them outside.

In the car, Mam starts on about how she can't turn her back for a minute. Did I know what a state I looked like. Brows like bloody beavers, she says as she reverses out of the space.

Ellie and I are in the back. I have to sit in the back so that Ellie isn't left out of conversations. We belt ourselves up and I look out the window at Eccles Precinct. God, it's a dive. Grey block buildings someone should just bulldoze down.

'Can you put the radio on?' I say.

'No!'

I don't know the sign for 'shoplifter', so I sign, -Bitch, instead. 'I know what you did,' I say into her face.

Ellie turns her face away so she can't lip-read me. I lean over, poke her in the face. 'I'll tell Mam.'

-Whatever, she signs, making a W with her hands.

'You're a dickhead,' I say, and sign, -Dickhead by making a massive dick come out of my head.

-Dickhead.

-Dickhead.

-Dickhead.

We sign and shout it over and over, dickhead, dickhead, until Mam shrieks over her shoulder, 'You're both fucking dickheads!'

At home, Mam dumps the prescriptions on the table, puts the shopping bags away and starts packing her reduced veg in the freezer. All afternoon, we'd been dragged around Morrisons and Iceland and the sad indoor market, looking for reduced stuff. She'll probably make one of her healthy meals and show off about it on Facebook.

'I'm not eating kidney beans again,' I announce as I stomp upstairs.

'Come back here, Josie. I want to talk to you.'

But I slam my bedroom door behind me. It's not only Ellie who can pretend not to hear people. I check out my eyebrows and then snapchat them to Maria, adding whiskers and a cute nose. Then throw myself on the bed, kicking off my trainers.

An hour later, we have veggie chilli on the couch while watching Strictly. I miserably prod a kidney bean with my fork, then pick up individual pieces of grated cheddar and nibble them like a mouse. Ellie is sitting right up close to the telly, like she always does, her face near the screen. Even though Mam says it will hurt her eyes, she still lets her do it.

‘I can’t see!’

‘Leave it,’ Mam says. ‘When are you going to wash that stuff off your face? You look stupid.’

‘It’s semi-permanent. It doesn’t wash off.’

‘They’ll send you home from school.’

‘You can’t get sent home for eyebrows.’

Ellie glances around. ‘What you saying?’

‘Nothing!’

‘Tell me!’ she shrieks.

-Calm down, Mam signs.

But I can see it in Ellie’s screwed-up red face. One of her tantrums building ’cause she thinks she’s been left out again. So I face Mam and move my lips as if I’m saying something. Mam slams her plate on the coffee table and snarls, ‘Stop it, Josie.’ But Ellie is crying and saying, ‘I hate you!’ then running upstairs. A few moments later, we can hear the boom, boom, boom of Skanking Alone or Taiko or something being played from her pink CD player. She loves that dubstep shit and will have her head against the speakers to feel the vibrations.

Mam puts her face in her hands. ‘Why can’t you be nice to your sister, Josie?’

I’ve eaten all the cheese so I put my plate on the carpet. Mam glances at it and sighs.

‘You’re always having a go at me, but she’s the shoplifter. She nicked a load of hair stuff in Superdrug. Go and see.’

‘Don’t lie about your sister.’

‘I’m not lying! Go and ask her. She put hair clips in her pocket. I saw her!’

After tea, Mam and me go up to Ellie’s room. Ellie is lying on her bed. She turns to face the wall, staring at her deaf princess wallpaper. I hate princesses, but Ellie loves them. Even now she’s twelve, she still loves them.

There are no deaf Disney princesses, so a few years back, Mam got Ellie Disney princess wallpaper, then drew hearing aids on Ariel, Jasmine and Pocahontas with a black marker pen. Ellie and I coloured the hearing aids in pink and purple. Mam drew a couple of walking sticks for Ariel, gave Aurora a leg cast, and drew a guide dog for Cinderella.

Mam sits on Ellie's bed with her back to me, taps her to make her turn around and signs to her. I lean against the door.

'No!' Ellie screeches. She can't just say no. She has to break glass.

But I'm thinking that when she slipped the hair clips in her pocket, she did it like she'd done it loads of times. And I've never nicked anything! Not even testers or nail polishes or a Twix from Spar.

But Ellie is shaking her head, signing, -No. Never.

Mam turns to me and says, 'Can you leave us, Josie?'

All Sunday, nothing happens to Ellie. She must have hidden them. Mam is even nicer to her, spending time working on her homework with her. I have to do my homework on my own. I wish I was deaf so I could be let off things. The security man probably saw her and thought, ah, look at her poor pink hearing aids. She probably needs hair clips. Let her have them – and picked on me instead.

On Sunday night, Mam makes Ellie her favourite tea – fish fingers – and Ellie looks at me, like she knows how good she has it, and gives me her smug smile. I pick the crust off my fish fingers, eat it and leave the dry, crumbly fish. When Ellie goes upstairs to the loo, Mam turns to me and whispers, 'I think she's being bullied. But she won't say.'

I raise my new eyebrows at her.

'It's just a few things she said about her friends, but when I asked she clamped up.'

'So? Why are you telling me?'

'Can you just keep an eye on her? You know what you went through.'

I sigh and look tired.

'Please. Just keep an eye out for her. Let me know what's going on.'

'O...K...' I say, like it's the biggest thing anyone can ask me, ever.

I usually try to ignore Ellie at school and pretend we are not related. This isn't hard since I tend to hang out the back where the boys play football. In Year Eight and Nine, I played football with them a lot, but then the PE teacher wanted me to join some girls' team, and I just wanted the occasional heady at lunchtime. The reason I like football and only have one female friend is that all my old friends turned bitchy in Year Eight. They're OK now, but after all that, they are dead to me. So now I hang around the edge of the pitch snapchatting with Marie. Ellie doesn't go round there. She's always with her few nerdy friends, who do things like maths club at lunchtimes or stand under a tree in the front yard. Mam has been trying to get Ellie into a special school for years, but it's really far away. So she has a teacher of the deaf once every couple of weeks, an assistant, and her other teachers wear speakers around their necks.

This lunchtime, I go round to the front yard where she sometimes stands under the blossom tree in the far corner. Ellie and her nerdy friends are trying to reach for the pink blossom and then tuck the already wilting poor flowers into their hair clips.

I play on my phone, sending snapchats of my eyebrows to Maria, who is watching the football. I don't like standing alone in the yard. The time my old mates turned bitchy, I had to walk round and round on my own, pretending I was going somewhere. But now, I keep watching Ellie. One of her friends is taller and grabs the blossom out of Ellie's hair, pulling some strands with it. Ellie's mouth goes, 'ouch,' and her friend holds it high above her head. I stand there, surly. Staring. Ellie spots me but then looks away. Am I supposed to intervene or what? There's nothing you can do when girls decide to be twats. Then Ellie gets the hair clips she stole out of her pocket and gives them to her friend. The girl – I don't know her name – takes the hair clips. What is this? Illicit hair clip dealing? And then she puts them in her pocket. Then the bell goes. My phone beeps. It's Mam on her break at work, asking for updates. I text her she's right. Ellie is being bullied. Mam texts, I knew it. Then she texts thanks and an x.

After school, I wait for Ellie so we can walk home together. We walk on our own like we usually do, a few feet apart, not talking, both on our phones.

We stop outside Spar. I ask, 'Are they bullying you?'

She shrugs. 'They're just,' and she makes the dickhead sign.

'But they're making you steal things.'

'No, they're not. I just like stealing.' Then she looks up at me. 'You should try it.'

'What?'

'Yeah. I'll show you.'

I follow Ellie into the shop, and look at the magazines, but don't touch them 'cause small, shitty shops hate you reading them from the stand. While the cashier is talking to an old woman, Ellie walks down the chocolate and biscuit aisle, glances around her and slips two Twix bars into her pocket. I look the other way, my heart beating fast. Then she comes over, smiling at me and we walk out. The cashier glares at us, but says nothing.

'What about the CCTV?'

'They don't check that until later. I always do it in different places.'

We walk around the corner to the park, where there is a play area with swings and a roundabout. We climb on the roundabout and I push us round with my foot. Ellie opens her pocket and reaches inside. She smiles and as we spin round and round, she hands me a Twix. I keep watching her because I'm thinking of how she looked in the shop when she glanced around and slipped the chocolate into her pocket. She'd had this adult look to her. No, it was more a look of the adult Ellie emerging from her Year Eight face, an Ellie who'd always be watching, looking, on guard, never sure of things, as she slipped the Twix into her grubby, pink pocket. But then she'd smiled at me as we went out and I thought she'll do things anyway despite all that, like stealing.

I keep spinning us with my foot, but not too fast because she's unwrapping the Twix. And I think, what about me? Am I adult already? Was this me forever, angry and jealous all the time? Will I always be like this?

I don't know.

Then Ellie takes a bite and says, 'Oh my God, look.' She holds out the Twix. It doesn't have a centre or biscuit or caramel. It's just a stick of pure chocolate, and we laugh like we've won the lottery. 'Try it,' she says. So, I reach over and have a bite.