

Leah Browning

Two Good Ears

We went to visit Wendy in the hospital. She had a big white bandage covering her ear. The dog had bitten off the bottom part of her earlobe. Her mother made a fuss over the flowers we brought and served us vanilla ice cream in little dishes. When we got back to the neighborhood, when we were alone again, it was all we could talk about.

A day or two later, Wendy came home. Our houses were newer builds, all unfenced, and she had been running down the long stretch of our shared backyard, her blond hair like long streamers behind her. She was the fastest runner in the entire fourth grade. The dog had leapt on her back and knocked her to the ground. We had all seen it.

The doctor stitched her up as best he could, but Wendy was still self-conscious about her ears. She stopped wearing ponytails and let the hole in her other ear close up. Sometimes, if one of us had something she wanted, she'd open her jewelry box and offer earrings in trade.

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When we were thirteen, for Samantha's birthday, her parents let her throw a slumber party in their basement. Her birthday was right before Halloween, so we painted each other's nails black and watched scary movies. Most of the food was regular, but her mother had helped her fix Vienna sausages and catsup to look like severed fingers, and there was a huge bowl of fruit punch with plastic spiders frozen into the ice cubes.

At one o'clock in the morning, her dad came down and told us to switch off the lights and go to sleep. Then he went upstairs and left us alone again.

Someone suggested telling ghost stories, and someone else said that ghost stories were boring. We decided to play Truth or Dare.

The first few rounds were uninspired. Lick the floor, Who do you like?—that sort of thing. Then it was Samantha's turn. She chose Dare. We got the idea of piercing her ears.

There was a girl whose older sister had told her that you could do it with ice, a sewing needle, and a potato. Samantha licked her lips and looked from one face to another. She said that she didn't think there were any potatoes in the house. That was all right, we decided. We didn't need one.

We marked a black dot on each earlobe, and when her first ear seemed good and numb, the girl with the older sister tried to stick in the needle. At the last second, Samantha lost her nerve and jerked her head away. The needle punctured her earlobe, but nowhere near the black dot, and we had to wait for Samantha to stop thrashing before we could pull it out again.

Do you want me to do the other side? the girl with the sister asked. She held up the needle. A drop of blood fell on the carpet.

Are you crazy, Samantha said. She was trying not to let us see that she was crying.

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We went to visit Samantha when she got home from the doctor. She'd been in bed with a fever for two days before she took off her hat and showed her mother the swollen, oozing ear.

She was sitting on a chair at the kitchen table. Her ear was loosely bandaged, and she looked terrible, flushed and misshapen. Her hair was stringy and flat in back from lying down for so long. We weren't sure what was going on under the gauze. Her ear could have turned black and fallen off, for all we knew. We were afraid to ask. So we each drank a glass of apple juice and chewed our nails.

On the way home, a woman jogged by with a dog on a leash, and Wendy ducked behind us. She was still afraid of dogs, even small ones.

When we were nine and that dog had leapt on Wendy's back and knocked her down, her mother had come flying out the back door of their house with a kitchen broom in her hand.

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We turned seventeen, eighteen. That summer, for the last time, we worked at the ice cream parlor and pizzeria in our little town and then drove around until it was far too late, talking. At home we were tired, insolent. Our mothers stood with their hands on their hips and told us to clean our rooms and take out the trash. God gave you two good ears, they said. Why don't you ever use them?

But it was no use. We had floated so far away from them at that point that we couldn't hear a thing.

Leah Browning is the author of three nonfiction books for teens and pre-teens. Her third chapbook, *In the Chair Museum*, was published by Dancing Girl Press in 2013, and her fourth is forthcoming. Browning's fiction and poetry have recently appeared in *Chagrin River Review*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Mud Season Review*, *Toad*, *Bluestem Magazine*, *Cape Fear Review*, *LitroNY*, *300 Days of Sun*, *Storyscape Journal*, *The Big Jewel*, *The Blue Hour Magazine*, and *Glassworks Magazine*, among other publications, and with audio and video recordings in The Poetry Storehouse. In addition to writing, Browning serves as editor of the *Apple Valley Review*.