

faded denim

one

MY BEST FRIEND IS SO SKINNY. I HATE HER. NO, NOT REALLY. I LOVE HER. NO, I hate her. The truth is, I think I hate myself. And I hate feeling like this—like I am fat and ugly and like I am a total Loser with a capital L. It makes me sick.

But here's what really gets me—the thing that makes me just scratch my head and go *huh?* When did all this happen? When did I fall asleep and get abducted by the body-switchers who did some mean sci-fi number on me and transformed me into this—this *repulsive blob girl?* I mean, I didn't *use* to be like this. Back in middle school, I was superthin. Okay, maybe I was just average thin, but my best friend, Leah, was . . . hmm . . . shall we say somewhat pudgy, slightly overweight, a bit obese, downright chubby.

This is the deal: When I was about thirteen, I had already reached my height, which is about five seven (that is, if I stand extremely straight and stretch my neck until I hear my spinal column popping). Meanwhile, Leah was about four inches shorter and twenty pounds heavier than me. She was a regular little roly-poly back then. But in the past couple of years she got really tall. And now she's like five ten or maybe taller, and she's as skinny as a stick. So sickeningly skinny that clothes look absolutely fantastic on her. And it just makes me wanna pull my hair out and scream! Or just disappear.

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Okay, to be fair (to me) I wouldn't feel so miserable about all this if Leah wasn't so obsessed with weight and diet and exercise and health that she's constantly throwing the whole thing in my face, saying stuff like, "Emily, are you sure you want to eat that Snickers bar since it has like five hundred calories that will probably end up sitting right on your thighs?" And when she says things like that it not only makes me want to pig out on the Snickers bar but to go grab a giant-sized bag of Cheetos as well. Like super-size me, please!

But that's not the only problem. I mean, since she got all tall and thin (and did I mention gorgeous?), she's become obsessed with fashion and beauty tricks and the latest styles. Leah studies all the fashion rags (which naturally feature these tall, bony, weird-looking models who really do look a bit like aliens if you ask me—probably a real product of the body-switchers), and she has recently decided that she actually wants to become one of them. At first I thought she was kidding.

"You seriously would want to put yourself in that position?" I asked her, incredulous. "I mean you want perfect strangers gaping at your body while you strut around in some weird and skimpy outfit, possibly with no underwear on?"

"I think it'd be cool." And the mind-boggling part is that she really believes she could make it as a fashion runway model—who, according to her, are the ones who make the megabucks. Although I've also heard that lots of them wind up strung out on drugs, burned out, and just generally messed up.

"That doesn't happen to everyone," she told me. "Those are just the girls who make the news and the tabloids, and then everyone assumes the whole fashion industry is at fault. And that's not fair."

Of course, it doesn't help matters that her aunt is a pretty well-known fashion photographer in New York City, or that she actually

thinks Leah may “have what it takes.” Although I’m sure aunts are a lot like moms, easily duped into thinking their kids “have what it takes” to do just about anything. Yeah, right.

“Okay, what *does* it take?” I asked Leah several weeks ago. (This was shortly after she convinced me to go on this stupid cabbage-soup diet that was guaranteed to “take off a few pounds” but in reality nearly ended up killing me. I ended up in the john for like an entire afternoon—what a fun diet!)

“What does it take to be a runway model?” She pressed her unfairly full lips together as she considered my question. “Well, it obviously takes some height and, of course, you have to be pretty thin . . . and you need good bone structure, even features . . . and then, of course, you need to have that special something.”

“Special something,” I said hopefully. Now, I may not look like a runway model, but I am good at making friends and making them laugh. Some people think that’s pretty special. Naturally, I don’t say this.

“Yeah, kind of like personality. Only more than that. It has to be something that cameras can catch, especially if you’re going the print route. Or you need that something extra that shows from the runway—an attitude, you know. You gotta be able to strut your stuff and make people want what you have.”

“Right.” I nodded as if I understood, but more and more it feels like Leah is speaking a foreign language and I am struggling just to keep up.

“I get to see my portfolio shots on Friday afternoon,” she told me a few days ago. “Want to go with me to pick them out?”

“Sure,” I offered, having absolutely no idea what I was getting myself into.

So here we are at this fancy-schmancy modeling agency where

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all the girls are tall, thin, and fabulous, and I feel like a creature from another planet—the planet where the body-switchers dwell. Uranus, perhaps.

“Ooh,” gushes Becca (a Scandinavian-looking blonde). She seems to know Leah and has just joined us to look at the photos. “That’s totally scrumptious, Leah.” Becca is pointing a perfectly sculpted nail to a shot of Leah, which in my opinion is exposing way too much cleavage, but naturally I don’t mention this. I just stand there where these glossy photos are spread all over a counter and try to keep up.

Mostly I wish that I could blend in with the aluminum-looking wallpapered walls, which in reality must make me stand out even more in my “fat” jeans (okay, I was bloated today). I also have on this old hoody sweatshirt that is baggy enough to cover a multitude of sins, although I’m sure it simply makes me look like a cow. I try to shrink away from these two girls, seriously wishing I could just vanish.

“Is there, uh, a restroom around?” I ask meekly.

“Yeah,” Leah jerks her thumb to the left. “Down that hallway, on the right.”

And then I slink away, feeling dumpy and dowdy and just plain pathetic. I consider leaving this plastic place and going home, except that Leah is the one who drove us here and I can’t exactly steal her car, although I do know where her spare key is hidden in its little magnetic box under the right fender. But instead of committing grand larceny, I just go into the bathroom and spend enough time there to make someone think I have a serious bowel disorder. I sit in a stall and read a fashion magazine that someone left on the counter. Okay, call me a glutton for punishment.

When I finally glance at my watch, I see it’s nearly five o’clock.

I'm hopeful that this place may be closing soon so I can get out of this stupid bathroom and we can go home and I can forget about all this. I emerge from the john and take an inordinate amount of time washing my hands, the whole while staring at my pitifully disappointing reflection.

These are what I would call very unforgiving lights—a garishly bright strip right above the enormous mirror. I'm sure it's been put there so that models can come in here and carefully examine themselves to detect every miniscule flaw (like they have any), and then I'm sure they do their best to address these minor blips before their next big photo shoot. But as I stand here gaping at my lackluster reflection, my dull brown hair (which needs washing), and my boring brown eyes, I suddenly notice a new zit about to erupt on my chin. I want to cry.

“God, why am I so ugly?” I actually mutter out loud, quickly glancing over my shoulder toward the three stalls to see if any feet (which would be shod in the coolest footwear, I'm certain) are present. Thank goodness there are not.

I silently continue my line of questioning. I really was addressing God, not taking his name in vain. I ask my maker what he could've been thinking when he made a loser like me.

Why do I look like this? Why is my nose too long? Why am I short and fat? Why is my hair plain and brown—maybe I should consider highlighting it like Leah suggested. Why am I so boring and blah and mousy looking? Why? Why? Why?

“Hey, Emily,” says Leah as she comes in with a big, black folder, which I assume is her portfolio. “I've been looking for you. Are you okay?”

I blink back what threaten to become real tears and force a smile. “Yeah, I'm fine. What's up?”

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She looks more closely at me now. “Seriously, are you okay?”

I stand up straighter. “I’m fine.”

She nods but still looks concerned. “Becca helped me to pick out the photos, but you were in here so long that I got worried you might be sick or something—”

“Like when you tried to poison me with your cabbage soup?” I try to sound light.

She frowns. “I told you I was sorry, Emily. I never meant for you to get sick. You’re the one who said you wanted to take off a few pounds. I think you look fine.”

Fine compared to what, I wonder, *a water buffalo*? But instead of saying this, I point to her portfolio. “So, are they really great? Going to launch your big career in New York?”

She laughs. “Not quite. But it’s a start. LaMar says that he might have a job for me next weekend.” She kind of smirks. “Okay, it’s only a Mother’s Day fashion show, but hey, it’s better than nothing, right?”

I nod. “Yeah. That’s great, Leah. Congratulations!”

She drives me home, gushing about how cool the agency is, and then she changes gears and starts telling me about this new cream that Becca was just telling her about that’s supposed to make your thighs thinner.

“Hey, maybe you should try it!” she says, turning and looking at me as if I might be some kind of science experiment for her and her new model pals.

“Try what?” I say, pretending that I wasn’t really listening. I had been partially daydreaming—or maybe I just want to appear slightly brain dead when it comes to all her mind-numbing beauty talk.

“That thigh cream.” Then she goes on to tell me what it’s called and how you have to get it online and on and on and on.

I am so thankful when she gets to my house. “Thanks,” I tell her, wondering what exactly I’m thanking her for. The ride or the torture?

“Oh, wait,” she says suddenly. “I almost forgot to tell you something.” Now she has this mysterious expression on her face, like she’s got some big secret. Despite my wanting to escape her, I am pulled in.

“What?”

“In all the excitement of getting my photos this afternoon, I almost forgot to tell you about Brett McEwen.”

“What about Brett McEwen?”

“He asked me to prom!” She shrieks loudly enough that everyone in my neighborhood has probably heard her.

“No way!” The truth is, this really is shocking news. I mean, Brett McEwen is a pretty cool guy. And not only is he cool, he’s fairly nice too. But he’s never really given Leah (or me) a real second look before. Sure, he says hey to us and even chats with us now and then (which I assume he feels compelled to do since we all go to the same youth group), but asking Leah to prom? Well, this is mind-blowing.

She nods, grinning and exposing her perfectly straight teeth, which she got whitened right after the braces came off last fall.

“Way!”

“Wow.” I just shake my head in amazement.

“I am so totally jazzed. I can hardly believe it!”

“Yeah, I can imagine.” And the sad thing is that I *can* imagine. I mean, I’ve imagined myself going out with Brett McEwen, not to prom, since that’s too much even for my imagination, but just some-place ordinary. He’s been my secret (like really, really secret—even-Leah-doesn’t-know-it secret) crush since freshman year. He leads

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worship in our youth group and I'm sure, being totally honest here, he's one of the reasons I keep going back. Maybe even one of the reasons that I got into playing guitar.

"At first I actually thought he was teasing me," she's telling me now. "I said, 'Okay, Brett, don't be stringing me along here. I know that you can't be serious.'"

"But he was?"

"Yes! He said that he'd been thinking about asking me out for a few months now, but that he couldn't get up the nerve." She shrieks again. "*The nerve!* Can you believe that? Like he was intimidated by me?"

"Well, you are trying to become a supermodel, Leah. Maybe the word's getting around that you're hot."

She laughs so loudly that her classic snort comes out. "Yeah, right. Last year's nerd girl finally thinks she's got it together."

"You weren't exactly last year's nerd girl," I protest.

"No, just brace-faced, kinky-haired, gangly, big-footed Leah Clark. Not exactly Jessica Simpson if you know what I mean."

"Well, the ugly ducking has turned into a swan," I say, trying to sound more positive than I feel.

Her smile grows even bigger. "Sometimes I can't even believe it myself, Emily. It's like I look in the mirror and I have to pinch myself."

"I'll bet."

"Not that I'm perfect." I lean half in and half out of her Honda, and my back is starting to ache from this frozen position. "I mean, especially after looking at some of those photos today." She makes a face. "Some of them were really awful. But like Becca said, it's a good way to see the things that need to be addressed."

"Addressed?"

“Yeah.” She nods with enthusiasm. “You know, like with the right makeup or airbrushing and maybe even a little surgery, little nip and tuck, you know.”

“Like I’m sure, Leah. Why on earth would *you* ever consider surgery?”

“Hey, I’m thinking about it. But I have to talk to Aunt Cassie first.”

“What could you possibly need surgery for?” I ask.

“A breast reduction. Duh.”

I blink and then look at her chest. “But why?”

“Because they’re too big, silly.”

“They’re not *that* big, Leah. What are you? Like a B cup?”

She laughs. “I wish. No, I’m actually a C. Can you believe it? I mean like last year I could barely fill a double A. And it’s not like I’ve put on any weight either. In fact I weigh less now than I did as a sophomore. Grandma Morris says it’s genetics, from her side of the family. I guess my mom had a set of big girls too. Not that I can remember that . . .” Leah sighs.

Her mom died when she was six. I can barely remember her myself. But I can’t help but wonder what her mother would think of her daughter wanting to get breast-reduction surgery when she’s only seventeen. I know my mom would totally freak. But then she didn’t even want me to get my ears pierced. Fortunately, I talked her into it, but not until I turned sixteen. Talk about old-fashioned!

“Well, let me know what your aunt says,” I say, standing up now. “And if you want my opinion, I say don’t do it.”

She laughs. “Yeah, big surprise there, Em.”

“Seriously,” I tell her. “I’ve seen models who’ve gotten implants just so that they can be as big as you. Why would you want to go the other direction? I mean, you look great, Leah.” Then I laugh.

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“If you don’t believe me, maybe you should ask Brett. I’m sure he’d have an opinion.”

Now she gets a serious look. “Do *not* tell anyone about this conversation,” she warns me. “Besides, if I do it, it won’t be until summer. And I don’t want anyone to know. Okay?”

I dramatically press a forefinger to my lips. “Mum’s the word.”

“Thanks.”

“But just for the record, Leah, I think your boobs are perfectly fine!” Then I slam the door and head up to my house. *Breast-reduction surgery!* Get real.

Okay, as I open the front door I am starting to feel angry. Really, really angry. I’m not sure whether I’m angry at Leah for being so skinny and gorgeous and having a prom date with Brett, or just angry at myself for not. Or maybe I’m angry at God for making me like this in the first place. But as I stomp up the stairs to my room I seriously feel like breaking something!