



## AUDIO VISUAL

*Ears are cute, until they're not. LYNN CROSBIE goes under the knife to make hers lovable again.*

they

are shoulder-grazing, often two- or three-tiered and jewelled. They demand that you pin your hair up and dress in Madame X's diamond-strapped gown. They are, of course, the statement earrings that are raging in fashion right now. But they may be dangerous....

First, a little back-story. It is February. I am lying on a hospital stretcher between two candy-corn-yellow walls draped with black curtains. This is the sound that I hear: *scrrrrccchhh*. It is the sound of my earlobe being cut off with what might be a pair of dull scissors. No, it is a scalpel. I am horrified to be appearing, so suddenly, in *Reservoir Dogs*, or in the role of a heartsick Vincent van Gogh: How did I get here?

I am being cut by Dr. Richard Rival, a

board-certified facial surgeon with two practices who also works in St. Michael's Hospital's Otolaryngology Clinic. As I stare at a disquieting valve in the ceiling marked VACUUM, he threads a needle and tells me he is quite handy at stitching up his daughter's favourite blanket. "I love my work," he says, and I wonder why, as he meticulously sews my lobes together—now smaller, shod of their "redundant" flesh and, for the time being, deformed—pausing to discard a series of blood-soaked gauze pads.

I would come to ask him why, but to explain what led me to this surgery, I need to tell you another horror story.

About a year ago, I ran into a former boss, a fetching woman in her late 50s. As we caught up, she flipped her hair back, and I saw—to my shock and,

frankly, excitement—that her ears were huge. They looked like alien spaceships engaged in a reconnaissance mission on her head, or like bakery-fresh palmiers, or abandoned tortoise bodies.

It was, of course, vulgar to take such avid note. But older women are both inspirations and cautionary lessons: Please ask any of my students how moved they have been to condition and treat their hair, having seen the ruins of my once-pretty locks.

Do ears just keep growing and growing? I asked myself, horrified. That's the million-dollar question, as it turns out. According to Rival, the medical, and in particular the ENT (ear, nose and throat), community is somewhat divided on this issue. Many believe that our noses and ears never stop growing, a »

disturbing thought that makes one want to take to one's bed with a stiff drink. Others maintain that our faces shrink, causing our noses and ears to appear larger as we age. That's still bad news, but somehow less nauseating in contrast to the other theory's Pinocchio roots.

Here's some more news, in case you are thinking that all this happens on that galaxy far away called Old Age (and let's leave aside the noses from now on): Our ears start enlarging in our 30s or so. Additionally, those of you in your 20s are at imminent risk of having both big ears—which may start at birth—and fat lobes, though as Rival notes, men have far worse mondo-lobes than women, and big-eared people live longer lives.

Large pie-ears usually do occur in our later years, and may be treated surgically in a procedure called an otoplasty. This can involve a complete reconstruction

an age-appropriate fortysomething woman. When his vexed brother asked why, he cited the ears of older women, describing them with extreme distaste. "Why do you think old ladies wear big earrings?" he asked, not incorrectly.

I stared at my ears. Definitely larger—Rival tells me that they grow, according to one study, at the rate of .22 millimetres a year—and, worse, listless and perceptively heftier. I think despairingly of my 20s, of the punk/grunge earrings I made out of hardware, cool key chains and rear-view-mirror accessories. My heaviest were a pair of angered, burly apes, and Greek religious icons with three devotional levels.

Yes, this is what did it, Rival agrees. Many a wearer of heavy earrings, having strained the ear's natural elasticity, has split the actual piercing, another problem that a quick procedure can rectify.

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wherein a doctor builds up—using what is called microtia repair—barely existent or mutilated ears, or reshapes and minimizes large ones. Otoplasties are performed most commonly on people whose ears stick out, or on so-called "pixie ears," which may be the result of a not-so-good facelift. They can cost as much as \$5,000, and involve general or local anaesthetic and two weeks of recuperation. A lobe-plasty (what Rival calls a "lobe job") is a far less serious matter, involving only freezing, incisions and sutures, and the vigilant application of Polysporin for two weeks. Cost? Between \$500 and \$800.

Those of you intent on wearing drop or chandelier earrings may want to think about your ear lobes: consider those little chunks of flesh and cartilage, their purpose (there is none, actually) and appearance. In your 20s, they are likely sweet little things. My ears were so cute, my best friend shrieked when she saw them. Speaking of a hulking male we both loved, she said, "Don't let him see them! He'll fall in love with you!" They remained cubby and cute until 40 descended like a guillotine.

On an episode of *Two and a Half Men* (Charlie Sheen can hurt women through waves of light!), Charlie refused to date

He tells me too that he sees a lot of people who have gauged their ears—that is, inserted expanding circlets in their lobes—and who are now frantic to repair the damaged cartilage.

Rival advises me not to undergo the procedure. Wait, he tells me. "Get more bang for your buck." More endearingly, he suggests I could ear-model, which is the nicest and saddest compliment of my life. But he agrees that they could be trimmed a bit, that they are a bit larger than they ideally should be, so here I am.

The procedure is painless, but it hurts a lot for days afterwards—some ice helps with the irritation. The swelling is grotesque the first night, and it takes a while for the ears to return to normal. The stitches are dissolvable and it is too soon to say if there will be scarring behind my lobes. I am looking into a pair of earrings shaped like actual chandeliers, with miniature candles aflame.

When it comes to my ears, I have only ever felt vanity. My first hairdresser told me, at 14, of the ears I thought stuck out: "Honey. Nobody notices such things!" I email Rival 10 times during the first 24 hours after the procedure. Will they be gloriously cute again? I ask. "Cuter," he writes back. □



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