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Deaf

When I choose to turn my hearing aids off and so switch off the world of sounds, I experience delicious relief. It is as if a sigh is breathing into my ears. My shoulders relax from their “pinned to the ears” position of strain. My face relaxes. Everything in me relaxes. I don’t feel on alert to the world; I do not feel on guard. I am at home in my silence, free to fill it up with my own sounds—the sounds of memories, reveries, and hopes.

But I feel this only if the closure of sound is of my choosing: I panic if I am out and about and my hearing aids fail me in some way. I feel unsafe then, as if I have been blinded by a mudslide that I cannot find my way through. When I turn my hearing aids back on, the air momentarily becomes harsh and stinging. In that split second when sound crashes against silence, I must reengage with my world. I have to adapt each time, but once having adapted, I enjoy the return of the loud and the soft, the below and the whisper, the variety of sounds in all their musicality and clamor.

I was already feeling the strain of the appointment when the psychologist asked his question, in the form of a statement: “Your hearing loss must have had a big impact on you?”

I hesitated.

He turned it into a refrain. “Your deafness? It must have been difficult?”

Dust motes hung in the arrow of sunshine between us. He sat in a shadowy corner of the timber-paneled room, and I slouched in a low-slung chair beneath a cracked window. The distance between us was as vast as the Nullabor Plain, as arid as the Simpson Desert. The force of the psychologist’s words was muffled by his beard, fluffed up around his mouth and blurring the outlines of his words. Lipreading him from so far across the room was like trying to read fading print. I could make out the vowel sounds, but was that a “p” or a “b”? I stretched and flexed my fingers to release the tension in them, and closed my eyes for a few seconds. I struggled to sit up straight. The psychologist ran his right index finger around the inside of his shirt collar as if it was strangling him. His question hung in the air along with the dust motes. I used my arms to pull myself upright in the chair again and cast around for a way to deflect the psychologist’s question.

I was forty-five years old, but a childish refusal welled up in my chest. I did not want to answer this question. The bluntness of it offended me. It had lunged at me without warning, winding me. I had already answered many questions as precisely as I could about my work, for this was the reason I was there in his office. A social worker friend, Jennifer, had urged me to see him. We had worked together in disability policy on and off for fifteen years, and she had observed my mounting distress about the gap between my achievements in my public service career and my disappointments in romantic relationships.

I said to the psychologist, “Not really.”

Short silence. I tried again. “Perhaps?”

No response. Clearing of my throat. Stalling for more time. “What was the question again?”

“Your deafness. It must surely have had a profound impact on you as you were growing up.”

No rising inflection this time. A declamatory statement infused with a sort of restrained anger. I imagined the thought bubble floating above his head, “Must I repeat everything?” But I had no sympathy for him.

His question didn't just offend me. It irritated me, felt voyeuristic. I could not see its relevance to my work stress. It was a variation on a theme; I had been asked versions of this question all my life, usually followed by the crude and presumptuous statement that "being deaf must be terrible for you." Because I fell into that shadow-land category of "oral-deaf"—I could not hear without my hearing aids, but I did not communicate by signing with my hands; I could speak with my voice—I would also be asked, "What sort of deaf person are you?" After all these years and all these questions, I still found it difficult to summon up an off-the-cuff answer that would satisfy both me and the person doing the asking. If I went against my grain and said, "Yes, being deaf has had a big impact on my life," the questioner would quiz me with inquisitorial precision, heedless of my feelings about being the object of such scrutiny. If I said no, injecting a note of warning into my voice not to pursue the topic, the questioner would acquire an expression of hauteur and assume he (it was usually a "he") had the obligation to help me to "face facts" by reciting a list of "what if" scenarios.

I accepted that my life was different in some ways because of my deafness, but the differences did not seem to be particularly plentiful or exceptional. When I was three years old, I went to a school for deaf children, which I attended until I was eight years old; I was then transferred to a "normal" school. As I grew up, I had to make adjustments from time to time. I sat toward the front of classrooms at school and, later, at work conferences to make sure I could see to hear; and I disliked dimmed lighting, whether it was at a fireside campsite, in a restaurant, or on a friend's back deck because it put my companions' faces in shadow. I thought that was about it really. I was tongue-tied and reluctant to share any of this with the psychologist.

I decided to agree with him. "Oh yes, a big impact." I could not think of anything else to say that he might like to hear and that I was prepared to reveal, but it was the right tack to take, because he dropped the subject. We spent the last ten minutes of the appointment tossing around ideas for managing my work stress. He told me that I needed to meditate every now

and then throughout the day, and that it would be good if I could go for a walk each morning to clear my head. I smiled at him.

I walked down the hill from Wickham Terrace, through the city, back to my office on Mary Street, shaken by the certainty in the psychologist's voice. I was not obtuse. Of course I understood that I was different from others simply by dint of being deaf, but it was not something that I gave much thought to. I had other things on my mind. The psychologist had asked me an earlier question. "Have you had any trauma in your life?"

"Trauma?"

"Yes," his voice filled with insinuation. "Any significant harm?"

"No."

I did not tell him about my son, Jack. I did not have a track along which to lay down my words safely. Instead, I bent my head and saw that the flesh across my knuckles had started to loosen with age. I thought of the creamy touch of Jack's baby hands.

I could have recited the facts. Jack was twenty-two and a half weeks old when he died suddenly thirteen years earlier. He had been my solemn-faced baby boy; my chest ached each rare time he smiled at me. At the back of his head, a tuft of hair stuck up which I slicked with a lick to make it stick up even more. He liked to lean forward so that he could see his world open up before him; he would never sit back. I was thirty-two years old at the time, but still unprepared for the flurry and spin of my days and nights as my life expanded with the fullness of this baby of mine. And then grief came through my door, became my twin; my son hummed his last breath into the cold sky above his cot, and ghosted into my shadow child. I was unprepared, then, for the stillness, the silence without echoes, and the airlessness that seeped into my bones, into my heart.

But these facts would not have told the whole story. I could not have explained to the psychologist how my sorrow felt like a heavy weight, but that I was reluctant to relieve myself of this pain. To do so seemed like an act of disloyalty to my son, and I preferred, instead, to adjust to its bulk somehow. I lived my life cautiously, as if that might make a difference. I

worked hard, kept up my friendships, and was moderate in my diet, drink, and fitness schedules. Jack's father was long gone. After we buried our son at the Pinaroo Lawn Cemetery, we were unable to console each other. Instead, I fought him, not in blame but in an unceasing and desperate urge to kick my pain away, to give it another reason. Our struggle was terrible. He left me, unwilling to bear the gap in my arms, the tearing away of the flesh and blood that formed our son. I loved him and hoped his flight was temporary, but his absence stretched into years. He made a new life for himself, remarried, and had a new child. A daughter this time. My love for him drained away until there was nothing left at all.

I was afraid this made me a shallow woman, and I fretted about my apparent inability to keep love alive. Other men passed in and out of my life, but I could not muster the wherewithal to keep them close to me. I didn't like this. Despite my desire to be in a lifelong relationship, fear was my steady companion. This was no great surprise. Once bitten, twice shy; and I'd already been bitten more than once, having also survived the collapse of a brief marriage to a man of considerable charm but equivocal love long ago. My friends chivvied me along and tried to encourage me to enjoy all that was good in my life. When I revealed to one of them that I believed being in a relationship would provide me with a sense of history, an enduring constancy, he chided me, saying, "That has to come from within you. No one else can give you that."

I didn't go back to that psychologist. Instead, I dealt with my stress by getting involved in a new work project while knowing that I wanted to do something more dramatic. Something fresh. Perhaps freeing. Fabulous, even. I was single, lonely, and tired from the joyless diligence of my days. My torpor was crushing me, and so when someone I knew in England suggested that I apply for a job over there, I sent off my application as if it was a telegram of hope.

The odd thing was, I could not forget the certainty in the psychologist's voice. It haunted me. He had repeated his question about my deafness once more, rephrasing it for emphasis: "It must surely have had a profound

impact on you as you were growing up.” I felt unsettled by his words. I was assailed by doubt and wondered why I felt so jarred by a question that I had, for most of my life, shrugged off.

I mulled over the basic facts of my biography. I was the sole deaf child in a family of five muddling along during the 1950s and 1960s in a weatherboard war commission house at The Grange, a Brisbane suburb. It had closely mowed lawns, a creek at the bottom of a hill, a lolly shop crammed with God-knows-what other crazy trinkets, a bakery with faded awnings that sold white sponge cakes with pink icing, and a butcher shop with sawdust on the floor and slabs of beef with purple stamps on the skin strung up on long, grey steel hooks. The local milk-bar gave off a hopeful air of danger: young men in tight jeans—hair slicked back into a quiff with Brylcreem, and Craven A cigarette packs tucked up their T-shirt sleeves—hung out there; their ponytailed girlfriends were draped around them.

My father, Jimmy Mac, once a “Ledger Keeper” for the Mobil Vacuum Oil Company, had served as a corporal in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) during World War II in Ceylon and New Guinea. He had also served as a boxing official at the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games, having earlier won fame and been written up in the Brisbane *Courier Mail* as a “bright little bantamweight” and “one of the best lightweight boxers in North Queensland” with a “dandy left, and a good right [who] steps into his punches pivoting on them well.” My memories of him stemmed from his days as a tally clerk on the wharves during the week and a bookie on Saturdays. Everywhere he went, he wore his felt hat with the little feather in the band. He would have worn it to shield his Irish complexion from the burn of the Queensland sun, but he probably also fancied it for its flair. He had a gift for telling stories that made people laugh. He even made himself laugh.

My mother, baptized Eloise but known to all as Jackie, was a curvily petite woman with a broad smile and green eyes that hinted at secrets she might share—if pressed—in exchange for a chat and a cigarette. She spent her childhood on a cherry orchard in Young before leaving at the age of fifteen to work as a nurse in wartime Sydney. Black-and-white prints snapped by roving photographers in the city streets at that time show her in the

company of friends, all laughing as if life's comedy was theirs to enjoy forever. She met my father in North Queensland in one of those postwar romances when time was still an enemy of promise, and love had to be grasped in a quick foxtrot around the floor to the sound of a saxophone, lest it be swallowed up by yet another war, another Depression, another something terrible. Jimmy Mac sent Jackie a gilt-edged postcard—pink-golden sun setting on a palm-tree fringed beach—embossed with the words “Memories of Magnetic Island.” On the back, he had written in his convent-bred penmanship, “Mine are happy. Are yours?”

After their wedding, they set up their home in Townsville and then moved to Brisbane two years later. My older sister, Cecily, wore her dark hair in thick Annie Oakley-style plaits and burnished her fair-skinned complexion with Coppertone lotion. My older brother, Michael, all sun-bleached hair and sturdy brown limbs, went on hikes along the Kedron Brook on summer days. My parents did not know of any deaf relatives in their families. There was just me, the little deaf girl, but I was not a child given to the moody contemplation of my deaf life. The fact that I wore a hearing aid and that my sister and brother did not was not remarkable to me. That was just the way things were.

Coincidentally, during this time of introspection, I was invited by an editor to write a piece for a literary journal, and so, with the psychologist's question still on my mind, I made it the trigger for an article. Still feeling defensive about his question, I wrote mockingly about the psychologist and presented my deaf childhood and adult life as a series of happy vignettes with only the occasional disruption to my sanguine self. I conceded, in this article, that I had missed my deaf childhood friends when I left them behind, that I had once experienced discrimination at university, and I wondered about the impact of my deafness on my sister and brother, as well as on my parents, but dealt with this in an “All's well that ends well” tone of dismissal. I wrote it more as a writing exercise than as an exhumation of the psychologist's question. The editor would not publish my article. He felt that I had gilded the lily, downplayed the significance of certain events, and avoided other questions altogether. He encouraged

me to explore the topic more intently. While I wondered why this editor was so reluctant to accept my cheery version of events—must misery lurk in every story?—I accepted his challenge.

This was more difficult than I had expected. I do not go about the daily business of my life measuring how much I hear or do not hear, feeling barbs of revelation about my deaf self, and I wondered why it should be of such interest to anyone else. My being deaf is not usually the subject of self-absorption. I do not need to hear in order to think, and my private musings wander along the same topics as anyone else: work, relationships with friends and family, hopes and dreams about love. I can tune into my thoughts as soundless as they are. I like the muffled air of silence, and, in fact, I am writing all this with my hearing aids turned off; I enjoy the sense of being set apart from real life. But when I made myself consider the audiological facts of my deafness for this chapter, I was surprised by what I discovered.

I already knew that my deafness was unrelated to the rubella epidemic that had occurred during my mother's pregnancy, but I now learned that the opaque medical words used to define the absence or subduing of sound within me—"moderate-severe, sloping to profound, unknown etiology"—do not reveal what I can hear or cannot hear. For several days I experimented with sounds by tapping, clapping, and dropping things; by standing still on a busy footpath listening out for bird calls, people chatter, and car horns; and by turning my hearing aids on and off in different situations. I made notes about what I could or could not hear. I worked out that without my hearing aids, if I am concentrating, and if the sounds are made loudly, I am aware of those sounds at the lower end of the scale.

Sometimes, it is not so much that I can actually hear sounds; it's more that I know that those sounds are happening. My aural memory of the deep-register sounds helps me to "hear" them, much like the recollection of a tune replaying itself in my imagination. I discovered this effect during one of my sound experiments. I swim with friends regularly and had assumed that I could faintly hear the vowel sounds of their voices without my hearing aids. But one day, while I was talking with one of my swimming com-

panions, I realized that I could not hear him at all. Nothing. Zilch. I had tricked even myself because I am so proficient at lipreading, and because I know what his voice sounds like when I wear my hearing aids. What I was actually doing was “dubbing” my friend’s apparently soundless words with my recollection of his voice from our conversations when I wear my hearing aids.

With or without my hearing aids, if I am not watching the source of those sounds—for example, if the sounds are taking place in another room or even just behind me—I am not immediately able to distinguish whether the sounds are conversational or musical or happy or angry. I can only discriminate them once I have established the rhythm of the sounds; if the rhythm is at a tearing, jagged pace with an exaggerated rise and fall in the volume, I might reasonably assume that angry words are being had. I cannot hear high-pitched sounds at all, with or without my hearing aids: I cannot hear sibilants, the “cees” and “esses” and “zees.” I cannot hear those sounds that bounce or puff off from your lips, such as the letters “b” and “p”; I cannot hear that sound that trampolines from the press of your tongue against the back of your front teeth, the letter “t.” With hearing aids, I *can* hear and discriminate among the braying, hee-hawing, lilted, oohing, and twanging sounds of the vowels . . . but only if I am concentrating, and only if I am watching the source of the sounds. Without my hearing aids, I might also hear sharp and sudden sounds like the clap of hands or crash of plates, depending on the volume of the noise. But I cannot hear the ring of the telephone, or the chime of the doorbell, or the urgent siren of an ambulance speeding down the street.

My hearing aids help me to hear these sounds, but again, not all the time. I drift away from the pull of sound, and need others to tug me back. Many examples spring to mind, but one, from many years ago, will do for now. I have a nephew, Alexander who, as a six-year-old, was a serious-minded boy and not easily moved to laughter. He would reflect on the mysteries of arithmetic, posing such wonders as “Did you know that when you add up two odd numbers, the answers are always even?” One day, when I was driving him home from a children’s theater, I glanced across at

him in the passenger seat and saw he was grinning. He looked up at me, flushed with his smiles. I turned my attention back to the road, pleased by his enjoyment. A heartbeat later, Alexander called out in that over loud, barrel-chested voice of little boys. "Do you know that a police car is chasing us?" And that was how I caught the siren's heart-stopping, needy, wait-for-me cry.

I was curious about what it would mean for me if I reopened the psychologist's question for my private exploration. What *was* the impact of my deafness on my life? What threat would be posed to me if I tackled this question head-on? In the months following my visit to the psychologist, my reflections took on a more urgent, even querulous, tone. Having let the first questions to take hold in my imagination, new ones tumbled in. Where were my childhood deaf friends? What would my life have been like if I had stayed at the deaf school? How were my relationships affected by my deafness: not just my friendships but also my romantic relationships too? Eventually, I found myself confronted with the ultimate question: what was holding me back from finding, and then telling, my own story of deafness?

In making the decision to understand the impact of my deafness on my life and to answer those questions that were unsettling me, I was unsure whether to undertake my journey solo, as it were, without any guiding tools other than my memory and imagination. I wondered if it would be cheating to combine my recollections with research on deafness by experts, because although I'm deaf, I did not consider myself to be an expert. In fact, I didn't know all that much about deafness or deaf culture. I had not made it my business to make a study of it. If anything, I had made a virtue of avoiding such introspection, led by my mother's aspirations that I would live wholly as a hearing person separate from the deaf community. I did not even know many deaf people anymore. I was worried, too, that my memories would be contaminated by the influences of those other expert voices. I decided to begin my investigation at the beginning: I would return to my childhood.