

Now Hear This, by Beulah Gross

'Mom, why don't you listen?' My voice is shrill with frustration. She lowers her eyes and continues eating, faster than before. So do I. I'm ashamed and angry with myself. I have, yet again, allowed the endless cycle of repetitions and explanations get to me.

Mom and I resume chatting, pretending that I haven't snapped at her. Soon, too soon for her, I leave to go home even though Dad hasn't returned from his meeting. My throat hurts from the strain of speaking too loudly and at too high a pitch.

As I drive home, I wonder why Mom so seldom tells me that she hasn't heard me. After all, she often tells friends and strangers although I have noticed that she doesn't mention her deafness at meetings or parties. Then, she'll usually ask me what someone has said. Even if she doesn't I can usually tell because she just nods and smiles and her expression is bright - almost too bright. Whether she asks me or not, I feel compelled to help her regain understanding of what's being said and lead her back into the group. I touch her gently to attract her attention and ask her, in our own sign language, developed over many years, if she's having trouble hearing. Almost always she nods so, facing her so that she can read my lips, I quietly repeat what I think she's missed.

Ever since I can remember my mother has been deaf. She suffers from otosclerosis, a progressive, sometimes genetic disease which, simply put, causes the bones in the middle ear to calcify.

When I was a child, I accepted her deafness as the norm. It never consciously occurred to me that she was different but now, looking back, I realise that I, as did the whole family, discriminated against her. We tended to talk around her, only addressing her directly when we wanted her to do something - usually in the kitchen. I don't believe we meant to be thoughtless or cruel, and indeed, we would have been horrified if this concept had been suggested to us. Nevertheless, I know now that we all were.

Many years ago deaf people were looked upon as mentally defective if not downright imbecilic. They were seldom credited with having normal feelings and emotions. The

hearing aids they wore were large and cumbersome and attracted strange looks which must have caused untold embarrassment for the wearer.

Thinking about this I realise that little has changed. The hard of hearing are still treated with barely concealed impatience and irritation. Deafness, unlike blindness, lameness and so on, is basically invisible and hearing aids nowadays are unobtrusive. Therefore many people find it hard to deal with. After all, one can avoid most other afflictions by simply looking or walking away. This, for some reason, is not regarded as insensitive or rude - although staring is - but to walk away from a deaf person in mid-conversation because one is having communication problems is apparently OK.

By the time I get home, I've come to a momentous decision. I am going to move heaven and earth to persuade Mom to have her ears operated on. I anticipate a lot of opposition because I've tried before. My father, a domineering man, had previously refused to allow it. Mom, always meekly subservient, allowed him to make this decision for her as she had allowed all others. When I broached the subject this time, he was just as dogmatic.

'If we can't have a 100% guarantee that her hearing will improve, she can't have the operation,' he announced. This time, however, she astonished both of us.

'No, dear. I will have the operation,' she said firmly. 'After all, I've got nothing to lose.'

I turned to look at him. His mouth had fallen open and he stared at her in disbelief. Never before had she stood up to him.

'Wha? What did you say?' he blustered.

I turned back to her.

'I said that I've got nothing to lose,' she replied, speaking slowly and loudly, in much the same tone as we'd always used on her. 'If the operation is a success, then I've gained and if it fails, well, what will I have lost? I can't hear now anyway.'

'But what about the pain and suffering you'll...'

'It can't be worse than the pain and suffering I've endured from being deaf all my life. No, I'm having the operation and as soon as possible.' She looked at me. 'Please arrange it, dear.' Then she stood up. 'What about a nice cuppa now?' she asked and bustled off to the kitchen.

Shocked, Dad and I looked at each other. Mom had never before said anything about how she felt about being deaf. For first time I looked into the agony of her silent world; I did not enjoy what I saw. I was disgusted with myself for my lack of understanding through all the years and acknowledged my mother's silent courage. My thoughts were interrupted by the loud banging of cupboard doors and drawers and the crash of crockery being placed on a tray. I began to giggle.

'What are you laughing at?' Dad shouted, at last recovering his voice. 'It's not funny! At her age any operation is a risk?'

'Oh, Dad,' I gasped. 'Just think, if the operation is a success, we won't have to listen to all that crashing around because Mom can't hear what she's doing! And imagine how much money you'll save in replacing broken cups and saucers!'

By the time Mom came back with the tea things we were laughing hysterically and when we told her why she joined us.

It is now six months since Mom had both ears operated on. She wears two unobtrusive hearing aids and has joined several charity groups. She goes on outings and to meetings on her own and is altogether a different person. Instead of always finding her at home, I have to virtually make an appointment to see her.

The other day we took Mom to The Skillion in Terrigal where the ocean crashes wildly over the rocks. She stood there for a long moment then burst into tears.

'I haven't heard the sea since I was a child,' she sobbed, 'and I've always wondered what it was like. Isn't it wonderful?'

Tonight we're taking her to a symphony concert.

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