

*Author's note:

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I'm sitting in the waiting room of the House Ear Institute in downtown Los Angeles. I'm staring at 3, low backed, green chairs set up against the wall, to the right of the receptionist's desk, and the lone odd blue one just a few feet to one side underneath the television, which is currently off.

It's 7:45 in the morning. I've just come in from the clinic's underground parking lot after completing the 1 hour and 15 minute drive down from my apartment in Simi Valley.

Outside, the sun is a sick murky orange blur, hidden behind a slate gray cloud of morning haze, which I drove through with difficulty, as I rarely see the dawn..

I'm surprised to find I'm not the first person here, though I am here before most of the clinic staff, who are just now straggling in.

A lady in her mid 50's occupies the spot just two seats to my left. Though the remaining 25 odd seats behind us are empty, a lonely patchwork of hospital colors, disinfected blues and antibiotic greens and the occasional, out of place, rose or pink.

The entire back wall of the waiting room is lined with photos of either ancient or infant people, but none my age, smiling at clinicians, with the occasional lab shot of people in white smocks bustling around devices of stainless steel. The far back corner is hung with two large glass display cases that show, "The History of Hearing Aids." museum style.

I am here today to have my cochlear implant activated. Something I have been waiting for with impatience since the implantation surgery a month before that cost me the last of my natural hearing.

I'm staring at the three chairs in a continuing effort to keep my mind in another place. I'm finding patterns in things, the 3 green, the 1 blue, the way they're arranged. I have made this important, I know I will remember it later; it anchors me both in the moment and away from myself.

I've had some success in the art of non-thought. It is one of only a very small collection of personal defenses. But I do it well, so well in fact that, on the drive down, I nearly ran out of gas. I fill up on gas without fail before driving to L.A. because I don't know the area well and so don't want to wander it looking for a gas station. I failed to fill up the car this once, because I convinced myself there was no trip to L.A. today. I have managed forced forgetfulness.

But now I'm here, in the waiting room and it's more difficult to find alternatives to thought. I'm grateful to be exhausted, this helps, but isn't enough by itself.

So I focus on the floor, on the black television, on my hands, doodle a face on the whiteboard I've brought with me, and mentally record the arrival times of each new employee as they come through the door. One woman in particular, a mid height blonde with her white pressed lab coat suffocating inside its dry cleaning bag, slung over her shoulder.

A short round receptionist finally fills one window of the check in booth and I get up, walk over and check in.

"Hi, my name's John Goode, I've got an 8 o'clock appointment with Danielle." I say, while focusing on the feeling of this noise in my chest and throat. Being consciously careful of volume and pitch, making sure that this sound comes out in a way that matches my memory of how it should come out.

She reaches over and pulls out my chart and says silently, "Okay, have a seat." Her voice in my head is a tenor, with a low throatiness.

As I return to my seat I think of how I was wrong about this moment, I was wrong about the receptionist's speech, which I had decided would go, "Is this your address? Is your insurance still the same? Okay, thanks, take a seat over there, someone will call you."

A short oriental woman in a starched white lab coat, who I take to be about my age, with shoulder length hair, fine arched black brows, and deep oval eyes, keeps walking from the back into the reception area, peeking around the reception desk and then leaving again. She makes me curious.

I wait, unable to measure time, the battery in my watch has been dead for 4 months and I don't wear it anymore. So I gauge internally, with a loose carelessness, which I hope encourages it to pass quickly.

A tall older man arrives and sits down without checking in. Moments pass. The oriental lady comes and claims him, leaving me disappointed. I'll miss her visits.

Eventually, I see Danielle coming down the hallway towards me. She stops three feet away. I rise, focusing on her face and the fact that my head only comes up to her eyebrows.

I think she says, "Are you ready?" So I nod and smile and follow her back to the office where the two of us first met 3 months ago.

And on the way back, I think of how I was wrong about this too. How, in my mind, I was called by someone else, a short, fat, brown haired receptionist, with a particularly sour look on her face. I'm slightly surprised.

The office is a large rectangular room. Along the shorter wall nearest the door is a squat set of beige filing cabinets. Next to them across the far long wall are white cupboards, a utility sink, a stainless steel paper towel dispenser, and rows and rows of electrical equipment, stacked on a countertop that curves into the far short wall before terminating.

An oscilloscope, which I have come to associate with ITT commercials, rests on the stubby end of the far wall's counter. Above it to the right are three brown plastic bins hung on the wall, of the type that usually hold magazines, though not in this case, and further right, a bookcase stacked with three ring binders. The long wall, nearest the door, is filled with Danielle's desk and next to that, closest to the door, is a waiting room chair. I park myself there, laying my whiteboard aside the chair's left leg.

Danielle sits down right in front of me at her computer and turns her chair forward as she flips open my chart, and asks, "How have you been doing?"

I believe Danielle has a beautiful voice, a soprano, calm and smooth. She is imperturbable, serious, intelligent, and matter of fact. I have given her a slight easterner's accent.

"I've been doing fine thanks. How have you been?" I say back.

She nods, as if to say, "I'm doing well," nods in a way that dismisses the question, as if such a thing isn't important. It isn't, after all, what we're here for.

"Any qwhofoonisiness?" She asks.

"What?" I ask, fixing a tighter focus on her mouth.

"Any te-zi-des." She says again, more articulated.

"I'm sorry, I'm not getting ya." I say.

She spins her right hand in the air and I have an epiphany.

"Oh, any dizziness, no, not really." I say with haste.

She makes notes in the chart and then turns her attention to the computer for a moment before turning back to me to ask, "Is this it?"

"Hmmm? What?" I say quietly.

She turns back to her computer and opens up Microsoft Word, boosts the font size, hits the caps lock and types, "IS ANYONE ELSE COMING?"

"Nope, just me." I say. Wishing immediately that she had not hit caps lock.

“OKAY, WE’LL GET STARTED THEN.”

As she closes the Word window and opens up the program that will be used to program the CI, I find myself thinking about that fact, how there really isn’t anyone else coming. How I really am alone today. Wondering things, covering familiar ground.

I’m not alone because I have no other options. I can name a few people that would have accompanied me here today if I had asked them, all of them friends from the office though.

I’m alone because it’s not in my nature to ask for help if I feel I can manage by myself. And I’m alone because I didn’t want to think of anyone but me today. I didn’t want to be bothered with another person’s thoughts bearing down on me. And I didn’t want to worry about their feelings or expectations of what might lie ahead, my own are burden enough to bear.

Danielle finishes with her computer and takes a small black case from atop her desk and unzips it. She removes the CI components I will be receiving today, showing me first the half dollar sized transmitter that I will wear on my head, slightly above and behind my right ear.

The transmitter’s cover is a thin plastic disc, which Danielle now shows me how to remove, by inserting a small, flat ended, stick underneath and pressing forward.

With the cap off, I can see the recessed microphone beneath. Everything is gray, like the color of car primer.

She shows me the alternate caps, each a different color, I can choose from: blue, brown, gray, black, red, or the current one, which looks like the old, politically incorrect, Crayola color “flesh.”

“They ought to just leave it like that.” I say, indicating the exposed microphone.

“No, no.” Danielle says, or something like it.

“I don’t mean exposed like that, just the color, the gray is better than any of the caps.” I say, referring especially to the gray cap provided, which is not a nice matte dark gray, but a lighter, brighter gray that will most certainly stand out more than the bare transmitter.

“Which do you want?” She asks.

“That one is fine.” I say, referring to the “flesh” colored one, since the rest are snug in a plastic baggie and I don’t feel inclined to argue with her own choice.

“I’ll probably swap it off later, maybe go for matte black, a nice Secret Service agent look.” I say, an attempt at humor, as Danielle busies herself with a packet of wire.

“Black or brown?” she asks, referring to a thin wire strand encased in another plastic baggie.

“Black, thanks.” I say, thinking the brown is the same color as an old man’s hush puppies. Not liking the thought.

Danielle connects one end of the wire to the transmitter and the other end to a small device that looks like a tiny pocket radio. The device is metallic gray, with three small blue dials and two ½” jacks, one for an external mic and one for the transmitter wire that Danielle just connected. This is the *Platinum Processor* by *Clarion*, I’ve seen pictures of it on the Internet. I’ve done my homework.

Danielle connects the processor pack to her computer via a short I/O cable and then leans over me and places the disc portion on my head, I’m surprised to find that it stays there as she pulls her hand away.

“So how come the refrigerator magnets didn’t stick?” I say, measuring my tone, imagining it comes out quick witted and charming, as I mean it to be. Danielle smiles and I wish I could see a laugh there, but I don’t.

She does some things with the computer for a few moments and then pops another Word window, having killed the one she had been using. She bumps up the font size again, caps lock still down, and types, “OKAY, I’M GOING TO PLAY SOME TONES NOW, RAISE YOUR HAND WHEN YOU HEAR THE BEEPS.”

“Okay, will do.” I say, in a calm, flat voice, a dead voice. I’ve succeeded in staying detached, I’m nowhere near this event. I’m looking at it all from a distant place, viewing it third person, as if it were happening to another self.

“DO YOU HAVE TINNITUS?” Danielle asks in type.

“Yeah, really loud too.” I say.

“WELL THEN IT WILL BE HARD TO TELL YOUR BEEPS FROM MY BEEPS, BUT GIVE IT A SHOT.” She types.

The tinnitus, the windy, shrill, unpleasant whistling sensation, that whooshes and booms, rising and falling like a tide in my head, has been my only soundtrack for the last month, and my accompaniment for years. It is hard to hear anything at all through it. I expect it to be a problem.

Moments pass, my neck and shoulders are tight, I’m staring at the brown magazine bins, hung on the wall. Then I sense a tone. “eep eep eep” it says. I raise my hand.

Life changing moments pass too quickly, and they often, like today, run all together, so there is never time, to give them the attention they deserve.

This first impression of sound, needs to be examined, so I can explain later, to an audience, how it was, how it differed from “sound” and yet was the same.

There are things I want to say here, to myself, complicated endless rants on fear and mind and relief. But there is no time, another tone plays “oop oop oop” and I raise my hand again and another plays and another, and each new one pushes away the drama and wonder of that first most important of moments. So within a short space of time, it’s a cloudy memory, no longer clear or life shattering, just another event in life.

I am sitting stock-still, my body feels unbearably tight with concentration, I try to find a focal point to stare at, with the bottom left of my right eye, this usually lulls me, but I’m too tight, there is too much urgency tucked into my spine, which, although checked, cannot be ignored altogether.

I find it comforting to look at Danielle, so I do.

Danielle has a great face, soft serious eyes, she’s not wearing her glasses today, a fine nose, and even, upturned, lips.

Her hair is more red, than brown, and naturally curly, it falls forward over her slightly slumped shoulders. She wears it loose and makes no attempt to tuck it behind her ears or such nonsense.

She has on dark pants that flair at the bottom and a plain white blouse that I imagine she bought at Sak’s or Macy’s, its collar is slightly wide, the top button is undone and the shirt’s tails are untucked.

Her slim right wrist is banded in silver bangles of different designs, along with a lone copper one. On her left wrist is a watch, with a thin, segmented, silver strap and a dark face.

She wears a small silver ring with a large dark stone on the middle finger of her left hand, and another, more complicated ring, longer and intricately worked, also of silver, on the middle finger of her right. And over it all, her pressed white lab coat.

“Oop oop oop,” sounds the tone, and I raise my hand, and find myself relaxing a little bit. I’ve found a proper resting place for my head, one that eases my neck. I’m staring forward and slightly down, directly through the arms of Danielle’s chair, at her flat stomach, and the three small tufts her shirt makes, between the tiny ivory buttons, as she slouches forward into her keyboard.

The tones continue, the impression of them in my head is strange and full of ghostly echoes, but I have memories of hearing tests, that allow me to resolve the sensation into the “tones” from my childhood, stuffed in a soundproof booth.

Yet I acknowledge the difference and try and focus on it, keep it in my mind for later. The tones playing are more than sound, they have texture, they’re tangible as a sense of touch, as well as an impression of sound.

The challenge, it seems, is sorting out the sound from the touch, or at least, this is my first thought on the subject. I think for a moment on how to qualify the touch, how to describe it, it’s not soft or stroking, it’s harsher, more abrupt and definite, not painful or even prickly, just very matter of fact.

And then it occurs to me, that I’m hearing things that don’t exist, that this sound that I am sensing, does not exist as a waveform in the air. It’s created by a program on the computer 2 feet away from me and pumped directly into my processor and then sent to the transmitter and then into the electrodes in my inner ear.

The electrodes are stimulating my hearing nerve and I’m “hearing,” but preposterously, I’m hearing electricity, I’m hearing raw energy with no physical component. I tuck this thought away, I can’t examine it now and stay focused.

Danielle goes back to her Word window now, and turns the screen towards me as she types, “OKAY, NOW I’M GOING TO PLAY SOME TONES—“

Danielle is a touch typist and the text grows quickly on the screen, though there is a lot of backspacing and spelling problems along the way, which she types a hasty apology for. “FORGIVE MY TYPING...”

“Sheesh, you type great, don’t worry about it and don’t bother to backspace, I’m getting your gist.” I say. Indeed I’ve been finishing her sentences for her as she’s been typing, though that hasn’t stopped her from completing them. I find this revealing.

“--TELL ME HOW MANY YOU HEAR, 2, 3, 4, 5. OKAY? DON’T GUESS, IF YOU’RE NOT SURE.” She types, continuing to backspace over her mistakes.

“Okay, I got you.” I say.

Then more tones play, and I listen carefully and do my best to count them up.

I read quite a few accounts of other people’s personal experiences on CI activation day during the month before my own came. Those that dealt with activation in children said that it’s common for kids to “cheat” if they can see the computer screen. They see that the tone is in fact playing and so they claim to hear it, especially if their hearing parents are right beside them at the time. So I have specifically looked away from the computer, knowing myself well enough to know that I would do that too.

But I am cheating in another way. The beeps come at regular intervals, if I feel the first, I don't have to feel all the rest, just note when they stop, compute the time mentally and that gives me the number of beeps. I try and school myself not to do this, but it's happening almost reflexively.

"2. 4. 5. 3. 5. 4. 3. 4." I say, as the tones continue. This test is difficult, tones seem to linger in my head, fuzzy after images of sound, photographs exposed too soon to light, fading slowly away to white.

"OKAY GOOD, NOW I'M GOING TO PLAY SOME MORE TONES, YOU NEED TO TELL ME WHEN THEY'RE LOUD ENOUGH FOR YOU, WHEN THEY'RE COMFORTABLY LOUD. YOU'LL KNOW WHEN THEY'RE TOO LOUD." Danielle types.

"How? Will my face start to twitch or something?" I ask, not seriously, though it could be serious if I wanted it to be. I know that sometimes the patient's facial muscles are stimulated by the CI, that they do twitch. I'm just not worried about this happening to me for some reason. The same reason I don't fear death, both are things that happen to other people.

"LET'S HOPE NOT." Danielle says, with a rare smile.

"Okay." I say quietly, noting with surprise that my tinnitus seems less now, thinking this will help.

"Oop oop oop." plays a tone, and then again, "oop oop oop" and again and again each time more forcefully than the last.

"Forcefully," seems to be the correct term, the sound has more power, is stronger, more real each time. Because of Danielle's comments on "loudness" I associate the increase with volume, but it's different, it's that touch factor again, each sound "feels" greater than the last.

More tones play and Danielle looks at me questioningly and so I say, "I can handle it louder, I'm not sure how to pick, do you mean how loud can I stand it to be or how loud would I want it to be if I had to listen to it for a very long time."

"MOST COMFORTABLE FOR YOU, HOW LOUD YOU'D WANT IT TO BE NORMALLY, COMFORTABLE LISTENING LEVEL." Danielle types.

"Okay sorry, I screwed up, start over will you?" I ask.

"Oop oop oop," then louder two or three times before I say, "Okay that's fine, leave it here."

We set the other tones the same way, there are differences between them. They all touch me in different places, none of which are in my right ear, but lie deeper, in a hollowed space, a grotto in my mind.

None of the tones reach the sort of extremes in pitch I expected. The lowest tone is not all that low, the highest, not all that high.

“OKAY, NOW... I’M GOING TO PLAY TWO DIFFERENT TONES, TONE 1 AND TONE 2 AND YOU TELL ME IF THEY’RE AT ABOUT THE SAME LOUDNESS.” She types.

“Great.” I say.

“Oop, eep. Oop, eep.” The first one, the lowest of all the tones I’ve felt, is sad, it vibrates too much, like a throaty sob, I bailed out of the “most comfortable listening level” test earliest with this one. My low tones were the first to go when I lost my hearing so it’s not surprising that their restoration should be the most alien to me.

“Oop, eep. Oop, eep.” The tones continue, over and over again, while I sit in pensive silence. Danielle has let her arm dangle off the arm rest of her chair and is flicking her hand back and forth in time with the tones, holding first one finger out and then two, to indicate to me, “Tone 1, tone 2, tone 1, tone 2.”

“I can’t tell. The way the pitch changes, it’s just... I mean they’re so different, that first low one sounds so overwhelming and then the second one just seems...not as forceful, but I sense them both.” I say.

“I KNOW IT’S HARD.” She types back.

So I continue to listen and finally have her raise the volume on tone 2 a few times until the two of them feel a little bit similar somehow, in a way that I hope is volume.

Then we move on to the next one, what was “tone 2,” is now the first tone played and I must compare it to the next.

Of everything I’ve done so far, this action is the most difficult. Since the tones reach me in different places, and touch different areas, it’s hard to equate them.

“About the same. About the same. About the same.” I say, repeatedly, referring to the volume difference, or lack thereof, feeling as though I’m flunking this test outright.

“OKAY NOW I’M GOING TO PLAY ALL EIGHT OF THEM, TELL ME WHETHER THEY’RE ALL AT ABOUT THE SAME LEVEL OR NOT.” Danielle types.

Then the sounds play slowly back-to-back and I do sense some differences. The first, two are out of whack with the rest of them, so I have Danielle raise those up, though I can't stand having the first one, the lowest one, raised much, as it's too overwhelming.

"Yeah they sound about right now, all pretty much the same." I say at last.

Danielle makes a few final motions with her mouse before pulling Word back up again to type, "OKAY, WE'RE ALL SET, THIS IS IT, I'M GOING TO TURN IT ON NOW, ARE YOU READY?"

"Yeah, guess so." I say, without a shred of excitement. I'm safe behind walls of my own design, aware of events happening around me, but feeling immune to them.

I have felt for a long time as if I were drowning in intangibles, in a sea of void, of absences, things that I sense as missing, drowning in their lack.

My defense, rather than learning to swim, as I should, has been to go numb and stiff, so rather than dog paddling through everything, I've learned to back float on top instead. This is what I'm doing now.

"I wonder what my first words should be." I mutter quietly, as Danielle works with the computer. "I am Locutus of Borg." I say with dramatic humor, loud enough, I think, for Danielle to hear, though I see no response from her at all. So I dismiss the phrase, which I had stored in my head as a fun joke, but now falls flat on us both.

Danielle finishes what she was doing, and turns to me. The index finger of her left hand is poised over the up arrow on the keyboard, ready to adjust the volume, and as she taps it, I begin to become aware of something.

"swhonDAAAY, twoesDAAAY, wheshDAAAY." The force of the sounds is slowly increasing all the while. "thurshDAAAY, friDAAAY, Shaturdaay, SHUnDaay."

"Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday." I say back, matching her pacing, and the way she elongates the, "DAAAY" leaving it dangling at the end.

"Can you hear me?" Danielle asks.

"I can hear you." I say, with a quiet smile.

"How does my voice sound to you right now?" She asks.

"High and pinched." I say, focusing on the sense of things in my head.

"Like a cartoon character?" She asks.

“No, not really.” I say. Though indeed, searching my memory of things, I can see that she does in a way sound like a cartoon character. She sounds like Daffy Duck in his role as the sheriff of a small western town, shortly after he downs a special bar drink and starts saying, “Maww had a wittle wamb...” in a high squeaky alto.

“All the personal experiences I read said cartoon characters too, or ducks. But you sound more like an old time telephone operator.” I say, thinking of a cassette tape I used to listen to as a young boy of, “The Jack Benny Program.” and the skit where two telephone operators, both high pitched women, natter at each other about Jack’s choice of cars.

So now I do the voice for one of the characters, “Hey Mabel.” I say, high and pinched, seeing the operator’s pin curls and bulky black headset.

“Yeah it’s normal for it to sound a little high, but you understand what I’m saying? Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday.” She says.

And while she talks, my mind does things, I have a shambling avalanche of thought.

I think first about the fact that she’s started her “Days of the week refrain.” with Monday, which is wrong, since Sunday is actually the first day of the week. I find noting this at this instant hilarious, the part of me, safe behind the walls, laughs helplessly at the way my mind works.

I am working to correct these impressions of sound I’m receiving. To make them into what, I believe, they really should be.

In the distant void, I see myself, a small stone man, dressed in charcoal clothes, wandering out from behind castle walls, into mist on the moors beyond and meeting strange men, in electric blue suits, that float above the ground.

I touch each of them in turn, shaping them like balloon animals, twisting and turning to make Danielle sound, less like Daffy, and more like, the mid, Ivy League, soprano I believe her to be.

“Yep, reading you fine.” I say. The phrase seems appropriate, as though I am acknowledging a transmission. It reminds me of Sundays spent watching, “Black Sheep Squadron.” with my Father.

“How’s your own voice? How do you sound to yourself?” Danielle asks.

“I sound pretty weird to me, we both do, but even while we’re just talking now I can see it changing and getting a little better.” I say.

“That’s good, let’s try MPS now.” She says as she switches the program from her computer. There is a disconcerting moment of absolute silence in between and then a low mechanical hum as MPS rises in.

“How does my voice sound to you now then? January, February, March, April, May.” She recites.

“That’s odd. It’s all chopped up, it’s so weird, it’s like you’re coming through in slices and I’m putting them all together further in, towards the center of my brain. I can feel it traveling, feel it being resolved.” I say. The sound really is sliced up, like a picket fence, and in my mind I’m pushing the fence together, removing the empty places.

“Wow, that’s interesting, let’s set the other program now and then we’ll go over all the stuff.” She says, indicating with a nod the large box between us marked *Clarion*.

So we go through the same routine once more, only this time the tones seem strangely different, less pure, more a blend of two tones together. I have all the same problems on this go around, especially the tone volume comparison, where I feel once again as though I’m flunking out.

“January, February, March, April, May...” Danielle says after completing the second round of tests. This second round is necessary for the other speech strategy that I’ll be field-testing in the coming days.

We did CIS and MPS settings to start with and this second pass took the readings needed for the SAS strategy. I’m using SAS now, and the sound is more complicated, not necessarily in a good way.

“January, February, March...” I say back to her, again trying to mimic her cadence.

“How’s this sound to you?” She asks.

“Different, stranger, more complicated, you’re a little harder to understand but at the same time you don’t sound quite so squeaky, maybe because of the program or maybe because I’m getting used to it now, hard to say.” I say, always one for a full explanation.

“Wow, that’s interesting. You’re doing really well.” She says. “Let’s go over a few things about your processor. First of all, the batteries...”

And she shows me the batteries and then how to keep the connection cord that runs from the processor to the headpiece from getting tangled or broken.

I pick out a carrying case, choosing the black one over the fatigue green one.

She explains the dials on the processor, the first one changes the program, MPS to CIS to SAS. The second controls volume, the third controls the sensitivity of the headpiece’s microphone, setting this dial higher brings more detail, every tiny whisper of noise in the room.

She issues a few warnings, “There’s a few things you need to be careful of now. If you go through a security checkpoint at the airport, you’ll probably scramble the programs on your processor, so either have them wand you or take off your processor and put it in the bowl they pass you for keys and stuff. Most people ask them to do the wand thing.”

“That seems odd, I’d definitely think to go with the bowl instead.” I say.

“You’ve only had your processor on for 10 minutes.” Danielle reminds me, her voice full of a strange reproach.

“Yeah I guess.” I say, wondering if I’m reading her tone correctly, wondering about the reproach I hear there, knowing it’s too soon to trust this “sense of hearing” for anything.

“Also,” she continues, “those theft scanners in stores, they won’t hurt your processor but you may sense a beep or something as you pass through them, just be aware, don’t worry about it.”

“You’ll need to be really careful about static electricity and keeping that cord, “ here she refers to the cord running from processor to headpiece, “away from static. Like if you’re walking past the TV and it should get sucked onto the screen, you’ll hear a really loud unpleasant something and you’ll rip that thing right off and never make the same mistake again.”

“Oh great.” I say dully, but attempting to be upbeat I continue, “Now I’m all intrigued, that’s the first thing I need to try...there’s a TV in the lobby y’know...” I say with a weak mischievous smile, trying to keep things light.

“Trust me, don’t test it out.” She says flatly.

“You’ll need to be careful of microwaves too, you can use a microwave of course, it’s not a big deal, just don’t let that wire touch it while it’s going or you won’t like the result.” She says.

“Wonderful.” I say quietly.

What I’m feeling now, is very similar to what I felt when I thought about the brown cord being the same color as an old man’s hush puppies. I feel suddenly very old and frail, impossibly so in my huge beefy 29 year old body with my surfer style blonde hair falling in front of my eyes.

I do not, at this point in time, wish to be reminded of things I “cannot” do, it sucks away at the recent gains, leaving me feeling justified in my deadpan demeanor.

“Here are the phone adapters.” Danielle says, referring to one already plugged into the phone on her desk and another smaller one still in its plastic baggie.

“This one,” she says, referring to the one in the baggie, “is for hotel rooms or pay phones, anywhere that you can’t use the other one. You put this cup over the phone’s ear piece and plug this end right into your processor.”

“And this one,” referring now to the one plugged into the phone on her desk, “you can see how it’s connected, just plug this end in here and this in the handset and then you can plug this right into your processor directly. Let’s try it out okay?”

“Alrighty.” I say, finding that I don’t like these toys, I don’t like the “junk” factor they introduce. Thoughts are teeming up in me, of all the extra steps that are now required for me to do anything.

“Who are you calling?” I ask, as she plugs the jack into my processor and begins dialing.

“Voice mail.” She says.

Then I hear the greeting of her voice mail pumping into me, and it sounds like a recording, not like her “live” voice does.

I’m so interested in this fact, the difference between the two Danielle’s that I completely blank out the words. They pass over me, I handle each one of them, attempt to bring them down, lower their pitch, to match my beliefs, but don’t make any attempt to hang onto them, to remember them.

So when it’s over, and Danielle asks me what her greeting says, I find I can’t remember it exactly, “Hi this is Danielle--How do you say your last name?” I ask.

“Zoobak.” She says.

“Hi this is Danielle “zoobak”, I’m away from my desk, leave a message after the beep.” I say, though I know this isn’t quite right.

“Let’s try again.” She says.

This time I just try to hold onto the words as they pass through, granting them free reign to be high and tight.

“High this is Danielle Dzubak at the House Ear Clinic, I’m away from my desk right now or with a patient. Please leave a message and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.” I rattle off, doing my own imitation of Danielle in the process.

“That’s incredible, word for word.” Danielle says, shaking her head in mock dismay, “I mean, you have nothing to compare this to, but you should know that you’re doing just phenomenal. Maybe 3 to 5% of patients can hear on the phone on their first day. You’re just really doing well.”

I don't handle praise well, for the simple reason that personal pride rankles with me in other people, so I make every attempt to stay humble myself. Unfortunately this means I find it hard to take a compliment. I do my best though, and say a polite, "Thank you." But this is the limit of what I can muster on the subject.

"And you thought something would go horribly wrong remember?" Danielle says teasingly.

And with that statement, I travel back to the conversation we had together 3 months ago in this same room after I passed the test that qualified me for CI surgery, under FDA guidelines. And by "passing the test" that is to say I did horribly, I heard or understood nearly nothing. Though I must confess I tempered my own efforts, I didn't fail deliberately, but I didn't apply myself either, I didn't guess to the extent I am capable of guessing.

It was my second attempt at qualification you see. On the first one, I discovered that I needed to understand only one word in the "test sentence," to decipher the entire sentence. And I was capable of understanding that one word, read as it was, in a strong articulated voice in a soundproof booth.

So I disqualified myself and then went back to work and the normal day to day of life, finding that I could not understand one word from anyone under "real life" conditions. And so I decided in my mind that I wouldn't guess on the second go round, that I'd just say what I heard, in spite of everyone's encouragement to "guess it."

Life, for me, must be lived on my terms, or not at all. I had reached the end of my happiness, all my joys and loves tied up in the nuances of sound, the voices of memory, of people and places beloved to me.

I never acquired a "deaf identity," or thought of myself as being deaf. I had tried a few times to migrate slowly into a deaf community and each time I failed for various reasons, which I took to be fate, because I wished it to be fate.

Danielle, on that day 3 months ago, had suggested I get the implant in my right ear, not my left, which is the one I was considering. I still heard somewhat out of my right and was loathe to give the last of what I valued up, on a wager.

Finally she made the straightforward comment, "I hate to be the one to break this to you John, but you're deaf. You just haven't caught on to that yet, since you're somehow managing to get by anyway and you lip read well."

Then she listed all the good reasons why I should choose my right ear, the list interspersed with statements like: "We'll implant whichever one you want." "There is no pressure." "It's entirely your decision, I'm just giving you my opinion on why I think, based on my experience, your right would do better."

I found her candor touching, she actually seemed to care about me.

I told her, at this time, about how medical procedures always went wrong for me. She listened, reserving judgment, apparently for today. Her teasing makes me feel warm, like pancake butterflies.

“Well I like to be realistic, lady.” I say back, smiling.

And I’m thinking about the email I wrote to her a few weeks following surgery, about how I was looking forward to activation and “breaking a few speed records.” I haven’t been realistic at all, I’ve always believed I would do amazingly well, yet denied this to myself.

Danielle goes over to the filing cabinets by the door and pulls out some laminated papers and then crosses back and sits down with them.

“Alright.” She says, with a happy energy in her voice, looking at me. “Normally we do this stuff on your second day, but you’re doing so well, I just can’t resist.”

“What do I win?” I ask, smiling. “Is there like a House Ear Institute trophy I can walk out with if I beat the record?” And I feel bad suddenly for saying this, the flippancy of it, recalling the reproach in her voice from earlier, thinking about the other 95-97% of people who did not, or will not, do as well as I have already done.

She hands me two pieces of laminated paper, joined together by a thin metal ring. There is text on both sides of each sheet.

The first sheet, the one she indicates we will be working with, is broken into three columns, each row is numbered and I notice that the columns are broken up by syllables. The first column is a word with one syllable, the second, two syllables, the third three syllables.

“Tell me which one of the three words I’m saying.” She says.

“White. Mellow. Tangerine.” She says, with her own copy of the paper over her mouth, so I can’t lip-read her. And then she pauses and says a single word, “Mellow.”

“Mellow.” I say.

We move to the second row.

“Mice. Bramble. Regular.” A pause, then, “Mice.”

“Mice.” I say.

“Do you want me to read the words first or shall we just go for it?” She asks.

“Let’s go for it.” I say.

The sense of things in my head has changed very little. Her voice is still far too high and too squeaky. Yet I find already that I can sense the warmth of it. I can feel things rolling off of her when she speaks, trusting nuances that I can’t possibly be receiving yet.

I could listen to her forever, her voice rolling and curling away, mechanical and tight and false, yet wonderful at this moment. Awash in the new sound, something is moving in me, from a spot between my heart and stomach, something that has lain dormant for a long time.

And I think suddenly of the conversation I had over the Internet, with a young deaf lady from back east. We were having a good chat and I was heartily enjoying the exchange, feeling as though perhaps she could help me build up another head of steam to carry me into the deaf community, when we finally, for reasons I can’t recall, touched on the subject of CI’s.

I told her I was considering one and she immediately became cold and standoffish, saying at last, “I could never be friends with someone who would do that to themselves.” and then left.

And I’m thinking about my little sister, living two states away, a special education major in college, who has told me repeatedly of her “good deaf friend” that received a CI but doesn’t wear it anymore. Choosing instead to, “embrace his deafness.” She’s fond of telling me what I need to do, now that I’m deaf, fond of telling me who I am, now that I’m deaf.

I wish I could please everyone, but short of that, I’ll please myself, and hope one day they come to understand. I’m not an advocate or lobbyist, or a special interest group. I made choices for myself alone and would never presume to tell anyone else what theirs should be.

“Summer.” Danielle says, returning me to the moment.

“Summer.” I say back.

We complete the list, and I don’t miss any. We move on to another page, this one is much the same, only instead of picking single words from a known list, I’m picking sentences from a known list, which is considerably easier anyway.

“The grass is green. There are four grapes. She runs quickly.” Pause. “She runs quickly.”

We complete the whole page and as I finish the last one, Danielle says, nearly laughing, “Purple and orange elephants are mesmerizing the monkey magicians.”

And I laugh too, a short quick laugh, because I didn't understand it all, it caught me by surprise and I repeat back "Purple and orange elephants WHAT??"

Danielle is grinning, "You just have no idea how well you're doing." She says.

"Let's get an audiogram!" She says expansively. "You want to go out front for a few minutes while I check and see if there is a free booth?"

"Yeah, thanks." I say.

I set the processor back to the SAS strategy as I leave the office, having switched to MPS for the quizzes earlier. I have it in my mind that I'll "do best" with SAS, because I know already, through research, that it's the fiercest of all the choices. It delivers the most sound, stimulates the ear the most at any rate, and I've read that most people find the sound it provides to be of "better quality."

Already I can easily sense the differences between the programs. CIS sounds highest and most ducky and tinny, yet oddly, the easiest right now to understand. MPS sounds fairly full bodied, but unpleasant in a way I can't put my finger on yet. SAS, because I believe in it, sounds best, though it's the most complicated of them all and very difficult to get a grip on, it echoes more than the other two.

As I wander back out front, I meet a solid wall of impressions, all gummed together, like a jigsaw puzzle coated in Elmer's glue.

I pass the restrooms and suddenly there is a sound, like kettledrums in a blender, which I know is the flush of a toilet, though I have to consciously make it that.

It's like those exams, questions on one side and answers on the other and you draw lines between them to match them up. For every questioning voice in my head, I have a thousand prepared answers, memories of things I have refused to let go of in the intervening years of silence. This I think, is why I'm "doing well." I clung to memory.

I pass the television set and the sound from it has a metallic twang, harsh and brooding. I can't make out the voices coming from the speakers, just as I can't make out any of the voices of anyone around me,

I'm aware of their voices, yet they arrive in broken twinkles, like shattered glass, indecipherable, as each one is a voice I've never heard before and so I have no prepared answer ready for the question of it.

Danielle arrives, "Where were you? I was looking for you?" She asks, and I realize, long moments have passed, and I can't fully retrace my steps.

"Sorry lady." I say.

I follow her, two steps behind, as she leads me back into the area full of soundproof booths.

“Alright, just raise your hand when you hear the tone.” She says, as I plop myself down into the lone brown chair inside and stare at the old fashioned looking, felt covered, speakers and the bare wires running to the small glass window that looks out to where she will sit.

Tones play and I feel that familiar ball of strain rolling to a spot at the base of my neck. In the silence of the booth, with no input at all to focus on, I’ve already, in a matter of moments, found my tinnitus, which had been consigned to a low, barely perceptible hum, roaring back to greet me again. I want to do well, I want to do better than anyone ever has before.

I keep turning my head to the right, as if to hear a sound coming from behind me, which makes me feel incredibly foolish, because I know the sounds are all in my head and turning won’t help anything.

But still, there are times when I have a vague impression I’m hearing something but can’t quite make it out and so turn to try to face it, believing perhaps that it will rise up, pale and gaunt, over my right shoulder and introduce itself to me. I feel frustrated.

“Okay we’re all done.” Danielle says, and I wish I could hear nuance there, hear some low rumble of pleasure or pride, but it sounds tinny and flat to me now.

We meet right outside the booth where she explains my results to me.

“30 decibels nearly all across.” She says. “You’re just barely hard of hearing by clinical standards. And you heard my voice, at 15 decibels, which is wonderful.”

“Can I see my old scores?” I ask.

“Yeah, they’re in here.” She says, flipping a few pages back and pulling up a much different looking audiogram.

“See here, your best result, on just this one high pitch, since that’s all you really had left, is now your overall worst result with the CI. You’re nearly straight across at 30 decibels and this old best was 45 decibels.” She says.

“Gee, that’s pretty neat.” I say.

“So you think you made the right decision?” She asks.

“Yeah, guess so.” I say.

“Are you all right?” She asks. “You’ve been wearing a poker face all day. I mean c’mon, what does it take to make you happy?”

That’s a damn good question. My Mother always asked me the same thing when I was growing up. I was always disappointed with things, especially my birthday parties or Christmas. I built the events up too much in my mind, lived them completely long before they actually happened, enjoyed them prematurely and so felt let down by their eventual, usually far less eventful, reality.

Mom was always sad I never burst into bright smiles when I tore open the brightly wrapped boxes, she never understood that I’d already opened them, hundreds of times and nothing they contained could ever surprise me.

I have lived this activation day many times before now. It’s gone several different ways and none of them match this one, though bits and pieces fit in place.

During those imagined experiences, which I lived quietly while working, or driving, or lying in bed staring at the ceiling, I have laughed aloud, and cried in turn, and felt such flows of joy and loss as I can’t recite. So that now, I feel very little, like an old hand at this whole thing.

“Oh I’m happy.” I say. “I’m sorry, I’m just... I forced myself not to have any expectations, I’ve sort of kept my distance from everything.” This too is true, and a simpler answer. Nobody has time for complicated truths anyway.

We go back into the lab and I get plugged back into the computer again to set some final volume levels. Danielle turns the Platinum Processor’s dials to, what she calls, “11 o’clock,” and then uses the computer to actually set the volume, asking me to sound off when it’s comfortable, which I find easy to do this time.

Then we go over some more *Clarion* toys. Danielle tells me about the external microphone that I can use if I want, and the FM system, for use with the CI, that I can buy for “150 dollars.” She encourages me to wait a bit though, saying, “You’re doing so well, you might not need any of them.”

“That external mic will really be a hit on dates.” I say. Thinking about this fact, thinking how I must look to other people, the effect this prosthetic is likely to have on women. “Dating’s sure going to be interesting.”

“Yeah it will be interesting.” Danielle says. She stresses the word “will” in a peculiar way, it’s hard to discern her meaning, if she’s being positive or agreeing with my feelings of fear, it can go either way.

She has me fill out some more forms and says, “Pretty posh address you’ve got there.”

“Oh yeah.” I say, “Country Club Drive, sucks doesn’t it?” And I do think it sucks, I think it sounds terribly snobby and unfriendly and I want her to know that’s not a reflection of who I am. “You’re not from California are you?” I ask offhandedly.

“Nope.” She says.

“Where are you from?” I ask.

“New York originally.” She says. So I was right about the easterner’s accent I had given her, even though I haven’t noticed it since activation.

“That’s cool.” I say. There is more I want to say. I’m wondering many things about her, but I don’t know how to ask. I just wish we could talk for a while.

She gives me a little packet of special forms to take home, saying, “I’m going to give these to you and then we’ll never speak of them again. This is a temporal bone donation form. They just take out a tiny portion of the bone behind your ear. It’s used for research. Right now, you know, we’re just scratching the surface.”

It amuses me that she just described “organ donation” forms, for after I die, without ever once saying anything about death.

Then we talk about the BTE (Behind the Ear) processor, that I’ll be given at my one-month follow-up appointment.

“I see why you make us all wait.” I say. “It seems easier to fiddle with the settings on the body worn processor than it would on the BTE.”

“Exactly, you got it. And you’ll want to play with everything, change all the settings, and go back and forth between all the programs. Be sure and use all the programs regularly.” She says this last part, doubly stressed, in a way that makes me believe she’s onto me, and my SAS hang-up.

“Okay, you’re all set. Oh! That reminds me, you’re supposed to meet with Dr. Friedman at 1:30 tomorrow, but maybe we can get a hold of someone now. That way you can just leave after your 8 o’clock with me, instead of waiting around for 4 hours.” She says.

“Sounds good to me, but if you can’t find anyone, don’t worry about it. I’ve scheduled the time, it’s not that big of a deal.” I say back. Thinking that I really do want to see Dr. Freidman, the young, enthusiastic, kind looking, person that performed the CI surgery for me and who praised me to the point of blushing when he found out how well I could discern test sentences with only 3% of my hearing remaining. This was before implantation.

I admire the man, for his personality, and I'm impressed by the fact that he holds both a PhD and an M.D. I want him to be aware of, "How well I'm doing." I want him to feel good about his work, what he does, who he is. I really like the guy.

Danielle leaves and I begin to drum loudly on my shins and shoes, while sitting in the chair waiting.

Then I get up and walk over to the countertop and pull open a drawer, with a shiny metal handle shaped like a U, just to hear the drawer slide out. The right side of the handle comes loose from where it was attached to the drawer. It feels like an omen, like some sort of dread warning from parties unknown.

I laugh, more honestly than I have all day. It feels so good, looking at the ridiculous half broken handle, just to laugh openly at it. I've got glitter in my belly. I ignore the drawer, and leave it with its handle dangling.

I walk over to the paper towel dispenser, pull out a towel, listen to the scrape of the paper. I'd like to pull all the towels out, one by one, just to hear them.

I can see myself doing this, joyfully, like a little kid, and Danielle coming back to find the room coated in white paper, like a new snow, and me smiling, sitting on the floor packing the towels into balls and tossing them at the wall.

But instead I throw the towel away and sit back down again and school myself to sobriety.

Danielle returns with a short blonde doctor, who takes a cursory glance at the incision from my CI surgery last month and says, "It looks great, you're good to go. Danielle tells me you're doing really well, I'm very happy for you."

"Thanks." I say.

Then the doctor leaves and Danielle helps me gather up all the "toys" we've been going over and put them all in the big *Clarion* box. Then it's time to go and I have something I feel I should say.

"Danielle, I just want you to know how much I appreciate you and how happy I am. I know, that uh, I've... I've been pretty deadpan all day, pretty poker faced. It's because I distanced myself so much from everything. Y'know? I was so afraid if I didn't I'd fall to pieces, depending on how...things went. I just...want you to understand how much this means to me, and how much I appreciate you personally for being so encouraging and helping me make the right choice. Thank you." I say all this, with the realization that people don't talk this way. Moments of heartfelt appreciation among relative strangers, defy all social conventions.

And Danielle reaches out and wraps her arms around me and I squeeze her back. I hear and feel her spine, at a spot up between her shoulder blades, pop twice, under the pressure of my arms, and I smile. I'm known for bear hugs.

As I leave, I notice that I elicit a few stares in the lobby, on my way to the parking garage. I realize, that the receiver on my head, only partly covered by my hair, is a spectacle.

I have a sudden urge to burst forth with a loud cry of, "I'm a man, not an animal! A man!" I chuckle grimly at it. And I think of Robert Frost, and the line, "I took the road less traveled by."

And I think of how, earlier, I was jacked into a computer, hearing electricity, sensing energy that nobody else could sense. I suspect that nobody will ever understand my world, and nobody will ever share it. It is, I fear, too alien and thus too fearful for anyone to even make the attempt.

"What does it take to make you happy John?" The question is running through my head as I wander downstairs to my car and back into life.

Company, love, words, shared moments.

My god, I love people and their voices. I love the way they speak, how they all wear their souls in their throats. I wish they weren't so often afraid of me.

Let me be wrong, let there be one other in this world like me, who understands, who will love me. That would be enough to make me happy.