

## Hard of Hearing

I don't think I'll ever forget the day that my friend Rae, sitting across from me at our usual table in Panera Bread, confessed to me that she had once dated a guy who was sexually attracted to earwax. Hell, given how discreetly she'd admitted this, how she'd obscured the corner of her mouth with the top half of her Cinnamon Crunch bagel, I thought she was about to tell me she was molested as a child or something. It was partly because of this that I didn't know how to react at first—I peered down into my Bacon Mac & Cheese Bread Bowl, as if I would find an appropriate response hiding amongst the microwaved noodles. After a minute or so of this, I finally looked up from my overpriced hospital food and admitted, “I don't know what to say.”

She then went on to explain that before they began dating, he—Kev, though the way in which she said this suggested that she was uncertain if this was his name—demanded that she give him her old earbuds, but only if they had earwax on them. I started to open my mouth to ask why she didn't dump him then and there, then reconsidered. It's probably not wise to question someone who puts chive and onion cream cheese on a Cinnamon Crunch bagel.

According to Rae, foreplay with Kev consisted of him cleaning her ears with a Q-tip. She would then clean out his, which immediately made him hard.

“In many countries, ear cleaning is actually a very intimate practice.” She quoted, slathering her bagel with more chive and onion cream cheese.

She explained that while they were doing it, the first rule was that the used Q-tips would have to be visible somehow. This meant that if she was on top, she'd hold them between her teeth like ropes, and if she was on the bottom, they'd rest on her collarbone. The second rule stated that the Q-tips could not be sullied in any way, meaning no saliva, no semen, *nada*. His reasoning for this? *The wax was too pure to be tainted with sin, having come from the most innocent of the body's orifices, apart from maybe the nose.*

Eventually, like most couples at some point (I would assume), he longed to spice up their sex life, which led them to frequenting massage parlors that specialized in ear cleaning. He made sure to visit a different one each time, if only for the staff's reaction, which was practically the same every time:

*"You're here for the couple's massage, am I correct?"*

*"Not quite. We're here for the ear cleaning."*

*"But you want the massage included in that, am I right?"*

*"No, just the ear cleaning."*

*"Oh. Right this way, then."*

Every time, he'd request that they let him take home the used earpick, or curette, or whichever tool they'd cleaned his ears with, and every time, they refused. So he'd concoct some story about losing his grandpa or sometimes his cousin to ear cancer, and say that he wanted to bring the samples of his own earwax to a lab for testing. Stashing the ear cleaning instruments into a Ziploc bag, he promised that after analyzing the wax, he'd return them, cleaned and sanitized.

He never did.

Apparently, all the massage parlors in the area must've all been in cahoots with each other, because it wasn't long before he was banned from every massage parlor in the county, regardless of whether or not they offered ear cleaning. This didn't faze him in the slightest, as by then he had accumulated well over a dozen used curettes, ear picks, ladles, and even a few *mimikaki*, not to mention Rae's earbuds from a pre-iPhone era.

They started visiting massage parlors the next county over, usually making a day of it, but eventually, much like the intercourse, he grew tired of this as well. Rae mentioned ear

candling, a particularly controversial ear cleaning method, but instead of enticing him, this discouraged him.

*“I don’t know a place around here that offers it. Besides, I’ve heard it’s not really effective.”*

My friend managed to talk him into it, telling him that they’d do it on each other, like they had with the Q-tips all those months ago. To prepare, they’d watched ear candling videos on YouTube (this was how he got his rocks off when he was alone) and made detailed notes to ensure they wouldn’t accidentally singe each other’s ears during the process.

She said that the process itself was scary at first, but once she got used to the strange feeling, it was actually quite soothing, and rekindled their relationship in a way she didn’t know was possible. They’d unwrapped each of their charred cloths together, revealing wax from ear and candle alike, and there came a noise from his throat that resembled a growl.

Later that night, Rae got up to take a piss, only in her half-asleep, slightly drunk state, she wandered into his closet and stumbled over what felt like a giant jar, the kind they have at carnivals and are filled with uncooked beans or M&M’s.

Only there weren’t kidney beans or M&M’s in this jar, but wads upon wads of earwax, ranging from dry and flaky to moist and sticky, from caramel brown to piss yellow. The jar was three-quarters full, and at the top was her own earwax, which sounds ridiculous because there had to be earwax from hundreds, maybe thousands, of people within that jar, but hers looked fresher than the rest, and plus, earwax is like your first kiss, or if you hadn’t had it yet, your first pet: you never forget your own.

This seemed to finally convince her that he wasn't all there, because she started dressing herself in a way that was nineteen times quicker than that which they'd come off, and just as she was buttoning her American Eagle jeggings, he appeared behind her.

*"Where're you going at this hour?"*

Rae had always been an exceptional liar—a trait she'd picked up from a childhood spent in and out of foster homes—so he was none the wiser when she said, *"I totally forgot my brother was coming over for the weekend. He's probably worried sick right now."*

She made no effort to contact him after that, and he made no effort to contact her. She recalled hearing from a friend of a friend of a friend that he'd moved to Jamaica and was studying child psychology there, but she didn't quite care enough to confirm this with some Instagram stalking.

"You should write about this." She told me when she was done, with her tale anyway; the heel of her Cinnamon Crunch bagel was lying naked on her plate, looking sad. "It would make a good story, I'd think."

"Me? Write?" The only writing I did lately was grocery lists and emails: 7 cans of tuna, Reddi-whip, bok choy. Sorry Alana, but due to the fact that I'd rather be doing literally anything else, I will be unable to attend Friday's meeting. *Sent from my iPhone.* "What makes you think I'd be any good at writing?"

"Your name." She said, as if it was obvious. "You have that Writer Name. Like Stephen King. You don't have to be *good*, you just have to slap your name on a book and you'll be a New York Times Bestseller in no time."

Before I had the chance to say that I quite liked Stephen King and would enjoy his writing just as much if he had seven different last names, and also that even I knew that being a

NY Times Bestseller was the Bachelor's degree equivalent of being a writer, meaning it ultimately amounted to nothing, she was gone. The only evidence she'd ever been there at all was her half-eaten bagel, looking even sadder now.

I hadn't seen her since.

In a selfish way, I was slightly grateful that she had vanished inexplicably from my life. Being the asexual friend, and her only asexual friend, I was forced to listen to her recount her sexual escapades, Kev being her latest (and possibly last). She told me all these tales because she knew I wouldn't judge her, wouldn't pass on the stories to my other friends like pink eye. Not because I didn't understand the mechanics of it. On the contrary, I was uncomfortably familiar with the birds and the bees, bumping uglies, doing the devil's tango, etc., having reluctantly partaken in it several times myself in college. Granted, this was long before I knew that there was a term for what I was, let alone that there were millions of others like me.

It was the appeal of it I didn't understand, that primordial hunger that really only existed for reproduction. And even that probably won't be necessary a hundred years or so from now, because who knows, maybe by then babies will be conceived by swallowing a watermelon seed or something.

Anyway, a month or two after Rae's disappearance, I was sitting alone in the same Panera, at our same table, writing. I wasn't very good, but no one else was going to see it, and besides, it was the last thing she told me to do before vanishing, so it was like I was honoring her, in a way.

He sat across from me, folding one hand over the other. She'd never shown me a picture of him, but I knew it was him anyway. I assumed she'd never shown me him because he was ugly, but in reality, he was rather plain-looking. Not network-television attractive, but not

casually-racist-pickup-driver ugly either. Then again, I'm not exactly the best judge when it comes to these sorts of things.

I asked him if he'd seen Rae, and he said he hadn't, sorry. He then requested that I give him a pair of used earbuds, the oldest ones I could find, please. I went home that day and, after ransacking my bedroom for the better part of the afternoon, returned to Panera the next morning with a pair that'd been tucked away in the bowels of my dresser for four presidential elections, one impeachment, one pandemic, and twice as many Halloweens and Christmases. I offered the buds to him, which were so thoroughly clogged with earwax they resembled a honeycomb. He brought them to his mouth and licked them. When he'd left, I rushed to the bathroom and vomited.

Those next few months were some of the worst of my life. Countless times I considered slicing off every square millimeter of skin his greasy fingers had slithered across. I felt like a firefighter who'd failed to save a family from a house fire. I felt like a devout Catholic who'd killed a man, then raped his wife. I'd broken a pact that could never be mended.

Since identifying as asexual, I hadn't had sexual encounters of any kind, despite several dates bringing it up. "*I'm waiting until marriage,*" I'd say every time. I had no desire to marry, either.

I even contemplated reaching out to a Facebook asexual group I was a part of, but every time I typed something that sounded semi-coherent, I deleted the text before I could hit "Post." I wasn't afraid of the possibility that the moderators would remove me from the group. What terrified me was the possibility that I'd be exiled from the entire asexual community, and if I wasn't asexual, then what was I?

I kept telling myself that I was doing it for Rae, and that it's not like I had any feelings for Kev, sexual or otherwise, but it was as though my ears were clogged with all the earwax from the jar Rae had found, the jar that was somehow behind her disappearance. Then it hit me that if I wanted to find out what happened to Rae, first I had to find the jar, which made me feel even worse because technically I never had to sleep with Kev, just break into his house during the middle of the night and steal the jar.

Initially, I was going to wait until the night of the ear candling to search for the jar. This would also be the first and last time I'd spend the night, if only partially; every time he asked me to stay, I'd cough up some excuse, being careful to never use the same one twice, and Rae's lying skills must've rubbed off on me, because he never once questioned me. Really, I wanted to avoid the possibility of even more sex with him, and also, the urge to investigate the jar was as overpowering as a fart in a single-seat car. Whenever we watched Jeff Goldblum movies, or ate walnut shrimp or burritos at the kitchen table, I could feel the jar's presence upstairs, beckoning me like a lover. I imagined this was how people who experienced sexual attraction felt on a daily basis, and I realized that I pitied them.

Seeing as how the ear candling had occurred months into their relationship, and that we were barely a month into ours and I was barely surviving as was, I decided to take a different approach. Fortunately, I would have some help.

One night, we had just finished watching *The Fly* (the '86 one) and eating steak burritos when I heard my name being called from upstairs: "Meeeeelllllllllllll."

"Shhhhh." I interrupted Kev, who was halfway through a rant on why modern movies didn't have the same charm as older ones, or something; I wasn't listening, anyway. "You hear that?"



“No.” He said.

“Meeeeeeeeeeeeelllll.” The voice called, louder this time.

I lurched forward and kissed Kev.

“Mmm—Mel, what’s gotten into you?” Kev asked.

I scooped him up and carried him bridal-style to the bedroom as if he didn’t weigh 185 pounds, most of that muscle. I felt like a puppet: my words and actions weren’t my own, but whoever—*whatever*—had called me wanted me to find it tonight.

Later, as soon as he was asleep, I snuck into his closet, hoping to find the tub of earwax right in front of me, conveniently illuminated like a key item in a video game. Using my phone’s flashlight, I groped in the dark for the jar--I didn’t want to trip over it like Rae had and risk waking him. But still all I found were crumpled henleys, frayed Under Armour sneakers, and distressed Levis. I slumped to the floor in defeat, my phone sliding off my thigh and the flashlight illuminating my face as though I was about to tell a scary story at a sleepover. *It was a dark and stormy night...*

I felt a warm, slimy hand on my shoulder. I turned around to find a woman made of earwax towering over me, hefty wads of the stuff dripping onto my shoulder, which, much like the rest of my upper body, was draped in Kev’s faded Wu-Tang Clan T-shirt. She swallowed me whole before I could even think to scream, and I floated in her belly like an unwanted fetus.

Kev was awake. I knew this because I could see—albeit with muddy vision—him sitting upright in his bed. Also, he was hurling a pillow at us. He threw several other things at us: a used condom, a tin of eucalyptus-scented hand cream, a heavily annotated copy of *Animal Farm*. The woman took the brunt of it; each item that was chucked at us sent more and more globs of

earwax splattering everywhere. After a good minute of this, she picked up the bedside lamp with an outstretched arm and beat him over the head with it, making scrambled eggs out of his brain.

It wasn't until we were outside that she expelled me, and I was hurled onto the sidewalk like a net of freshly caught salmon. I stumbled to my feet with a squelch; earwax must've seeped into my shoes while I was inside her.

Finally, in the streetlight and LED sign illuminated night, I could properly admire the woman. She was grotesquely beautiful, her "skin" various shades of amber and caramel, her "hair" almond-colored. "Hello?" I ventured, wondering whether she could speak.

"Hello." She echoed. Her voice wasn't a singular one but a multitude of them, female voices of varying frequencies and cadences. I thought back to the time Rae and I went to a Childish Gambino concert three years ago. During the beat drop in "Heartbeat," the crowd went unreasonably apeshit, and we got separated. Having heard her rap/sing the song numerous times before, I tried pinpointing her voice among the dozens of others. This was easier than I thought, mostly because she was the only white concert goer within a 20-foot radius that wasn't saying the n-word.

I squeezed some earwax out of my hair; it oozed onto the sidewalk. "Say puppy." Rae's n-word substitute.

"Puppy." They echoed. Some sounded confused ("Puppy...?"), some sounded bored ("Puppy..."), but one voice in particular I'd know even if it was coming from underwater.

"Mel, is that you?" Rae cried.

"Yes!" I exclaimed. "It's me!"

"He killed me."

"I know."

“Me too!” Now a bunch of other voices were clamoring to be heard.

I said to all of them, “I know.” I’d assumed as much, but somehow this confirmation comforted me. Assured me that I wasn’t, to quote Donald Glover himself, losing my mental.

“Rae,” I said, “I feel terrible. I feel dirty. I feel—”

“I know.” A different voice said. It was deep, and had a slight Southern twang. “I felt the same way, too.”

“Me too” said dozens of different voices, in just as many languages. Somehow, I knew they were all asexual, knew that some of them didn’t know there was a word for what they were. I was suddenly overwhelmed with sadness. Some of these women had died before they knew who they were. Some had died before their friends and family could accept them, before they could learn to accept themselves.

I wanted to go back in time to five minutes ago so I could kill Kev myself.

The woman embraced me; I barely felt the earwax seeping into my clothes. “You are very brave, Mel.” Rae said.

I hadn’t realized I was crying. “Am I still me, though?”

“Oh, Mel,” all the voices collectively said, “you’re more you than you’ve ever been.” The woman then slipped into a nearby manhole, leaving several booger-sized dollops along the rim.

I stood there in the street for a while before it hit me: my ears had never felt cleaner.