

## Hearing Aid

I know the Makaton for fish. Dad taught it to me. He works with mongs in a big white house up the street, but further up the street than I'm allowed to go, and one of them can't speak — but he does spit. To say “fish” just turn your hand to the side and wiggle it like a salmon rushing upstream. That's *fish*. It didn't work with Kelly though; when I tried it on her she looked at me like my nose was slowly melting down my face. I was a little hurt. She says she's deaf, but I'm not convinced.

I asked my Dad if it was true and he nodded, said yes and then no. He was watching snooker, so he tried to explain it to me quickly using the television screen.

“See the triangle with all the balls in that the butler's putting on the table?”

“Yes.”

“Imagine that's total deafness. Nothing goes through.”

“Okay.”

“Now take away about four of them and that's Kelly.”

“Because she’s smaller than a butler?”

“Because she’s deaf.”

“But it leaves a hole ....”

“Yeah, sort of,” he agreed, and lifted his cup of coffee off his stomach.

Upstairs I asked my brother if an ear’s still good with a hole in it. He sucked on his cigarette, took a long time to think about it, and choked out:

“Lilli, any hole’s a good hole.”

He laughed, and his girlfriend laughed, and his friend with the green tracksuit laughed, so I laughed too — and we all stood there laughing at each other as he took my shoulder, walked me to the landing, and closed his bedroom door. Mum was just as useless; nudging me out into the garden with the head of the Hoover, telling me to *be nice*.

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Kelly moved into the house next door three weeks after we moved into ours. The council had to knock our old house down to build a new one, which wasn’t for us, so we moved around the

corner, which is better because now we have a giant field outside which our dog Tim does his business on.

I knew when she arrived that we were supposed to be best friends because she stuck her head over the garden fence and said:

“Wanna be my friend?”

And I did!

She doesn't talk much, but she'll listen to you with all of her concentration, squinting and watching your lips like any minute you're going to tell her where the gold is. I don't have any gold but I do have a trampoline, and it was up in the air where I discovered the names of her three older sisters: “Yakee” (Jacqui), “Shagun” (Sharon), and “Jwan” (Joanne).

Joanne's nearly the same age as my brother; she's in the year below him at school. Joanne looks like a boy, and dresses like a boy, and plays football better than a boy, but the other two have boobs and wear make-up and sleep on a sun-bed that makes the cracks of their bedroom door glow the brightest, most beautiful blue you've ever seen. Sometimes Kelly and I play *Angel, Oh Angel* outside of it, which is a game where we imagine there's an angel on the other side of the door — waiting, listening, breathing out all that stardust blue — and we kneel on the floor and put our hands together and ask in our heads (because a spoken prayer makes her ears bleed) for the heavenly angel to grant each of us our greatest, most heartfelt wish.

I want a rabbit.

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Kelly might not talk much, but her mum does. Lynne is the funniest woman I know. Lynne likes to dance in the kitchen to old club music and is always pulling loose cigarettes from the pockets of her silk nightgown, lighting up, and dropping ash on the floor. She says things like “Thin is in, girls,” and “You’ve gotta be in it to win it.” And I nod in agreement, to her and to Kelly, because Lynne seems so certain of this. She knocks at our house all the time to borrow things — usually my mum’s hairdryer or something from my dad’s toolshed — and every time she does she steps over the mat, glides past the radiator and says, “Isn’t this a gorgeous house!” like it’s the first time she’s visited. I usually tell her, as I tug at her nightgown, that if she thinks this is nice she could come see my room.

At first I thought Kelly was a bit of a slide-off, because sometimes when I knock for her Lynne tells me through the letterbox that she’s playing at Ashley Fazenfield’s house.

The reason I hate Ashley Fazenfield isn’t because she’s fat — which is why my brother hates her — it’s because she’s greedy. If you’ve got something nice you can be sure Ashley wants it, doesn’t want to share it, and will eventually stomp on it. She lures Kelly into her garden with packets of crisps — but it’s not what you think, her mum buys her a box of them *every week*, so she can afford to lose a few, she isn’t kind — and then sits Kelly down and says “this is what we’re going to do today.” You can see it all happening from my mum’s bedroom window. I’ve watched plenty of times. Ashley’s garden is bigger than mine, and the gates on her drive are taller and have painted metal roses on them that sparkle when the sun hits.

“If you want something, sometimes you just have to go out and take it,” the man on the television told me. So I pulled my twin-sized Silver Cross pram out from my room and backwards down all of the stairs, and put Tiny Tim and Tiny Tears inside, and tied the real Tim to the handlebar with his leash and marched to Ashley Fazenfield’s house to take back what was mine.

They were on the grass playing what looked like school, and Ashley of course was the teacher, while Kelly sat with her back to me, looking up at Ashley’s big moon-face with the rest of her dead-headed dolls and I said:

“Kelly Fairclough this is ridiculous. You’re my friend and I have this Silver Cross pram that I’m going to let you push up and down the street. And Tiny Tim and Tiny Tears can cry and wet their nappies, so I’ll let you change them too. And Tiny Tim can even do a poo, so we can clean that up together if you like. And I have crisps in my house if you’re *that* hungry — and I won’t just give you the ready-salted ones ...”

But she didn’t look back so I yanked at Tim’s leash and said:

“And there’s Tim too, who you can pick up so long as you do it gently because he has sore legs and sometimes screams.”

And Ashley, who’d stopped the lesson, was standing there looking at me with her big fat chin lolled to one side, rocking her head and sticking her lips out to make every word seem important. “She can’t hear you,” she said. “She’s deaf!”

So I picked up a pebble from her gravelly drive and threw it at Kelly's head. It missed but caught her attention as it flew by her ear. She looked, and I couldn't remember everything I'd just said to be able to say it again — I'm not an actress — so I just opened my arms as big and as wide as I could to show her the amazingness of it all, and with that Tim had to go up on his hind legs to keep from choking, but it was actually good because it looked like I'd taught him to do the same thing as me. Like we were both saying "Look at it all, Kelly!" which she seemed to like and stood up.

We marched back to my house past those stupid metal roses; me ahead with the pram; her skipping behind with the dog.

As we practiced kissing the door I asked her why she sometimes went to Ashley's, and didn't she know that Ashley was mean and that I could out-skip her on the skipping rope by at least a hundred skips, and that that was a fact because she'd challenged me weeks ago and Little Paul from down the street was there and saw it all if she didn't believe me, and she told me:

"You're my fnend, but suntimes Ashley's my fnend."

Which I knew was a lie because Ashley is nobody's "*fnend*". More likely she promised her something, so I asked her:

"What did she promise you?"

Kelly stopped kissing the door and picked Tim up in the clumsy way she does. He yelped, but only a little as she stuck his head in the space between her shoulder and her chin, patted his bum like was a baby and said:

“A wedding.”

Which I thought was hilarious.

\*

When I told my mum that Lynne microwaves everything, even things that shouldn't be really be microwaved like frozen chicken and pizza, she told me I couldn't have dinner there any more.

“Life's too short for slow-cooked foods!”

“Who says that?”

“Lynne! Lynne lives life in the fast lane.”

Which isn't all that true because Lynne doesn't see to do anything fast. She takes a whole afternoon to paint her toenails in front of the TV. You have to pee in the downstairs sink if she's taking a bath. And you'll wait forever if you think she's going to clear the front room for you to

play *Twister* in. But I wasn't going to say that to either of them — I'm not stupid — I decided I'd have double-dinners and not tell anyone instead.

Eating on the floor is like having a picnic. That's how Lynne describes it, and that's how we eat in Kelly's room. She plays the TV louder than I'd ever be allowed to at home and sits so close to the screen that after a while my eyes start to hurt and I have to look away. That's how it happened. We were sitting on the floor eating microwaved chips, beans and a steak and kidney pie that I was pretty sure was still frozen in the middle, talking about whether Pocahontas really was a princess because she never had a crown and didn't actually marry a prince, only a sailor, when Kelly asked me:

“Wha' win you wear at your wedding?”

I hadn't given much thought to it, so I told her I supposed my dress would be big and white and stretch back for miles and miles and need a hundred children to carry it behind me, but that I also secretly liked blue dresses too, like Cinderella's dress, but wasn't sure if I'd be allowed to wear blue in Father Lee's church. She wasn't sure either, so I asked her the same.

“I won't get mannied,” she told me.

And I told her *everybody* gets married, that after you leave school there's nothing left to do but get married, but she shook her head at me — more violently than I'd ever seen her do about anything before — like the way my mum does it when she's made her mind up about bath-time on Sundays, there's no arguing with it, so I told her:



‘Love is stupid anyway.’

She nodded a gentler nod and pushed another bean-soaked chip into her mouth.

I scratched my knee.

“My dog wouldn’t even eat your mum’s food,” I told her. And she laughed. She doesn’t often laugh, which isn’t to say she isn’t often happy. She’s one of the happiest people I know. But when she laughs it sounds like a car-horn going backwards and it makes me laugh too.

“Is your pie still frozen?” she smiled.

I nodded.

And she picked it up off my plate, like one of those metal claws you see at the seaside; the ones that snatch up goodies and drop them before you make it to the hole. Only she didn’t drop it, she just kept on going and pushed the pastry casing right into the television screen with a twist of her wrist. And the gravy oozed out like pus and poured down Homer Simpson’s face, and built up at the edge of the rim, and trickled down onto the floor, and I fell back onto the rug and held on to my stomach, as if any minute I might explode from laughing so hard. And the car-horn went backwards again as the light from the television screen bounced across the cracked, dirty ceiling above us, and somebody shouted “d’oh!”, and I wondered, struggling to catch my breath, if maybe this was better than a rabbit.

My mum says sometimes you can see a person's soul. Souls are tricky things, they're like deer; they only show themselves when they think nobody is watching, but if you're lucky enough to see one, in that moment you get to see everything. I didn't know I was going to see Kelly's soul as I pushed myself up with my elbows, but I guess that's the point. She was frozen in front of the TV screen which had changed channel at some point during my time on the floor. And she'd obviously forgotten I was there because she didn't even notice when I put my hand into her plate and knocked a swim-team of beans over the edge and onto the carpet. Her legs were tucked beneath her and her hands were busy playing with each other as she stared. Her mouth was open, her eyes were open, even the little holes in her nose seemed to be open, and as I leaned in to look I could see the little bubbles of spit on her bottom lip fizzing and popping as a bright blue light danced across her face. I turned to the television screen and it shouted to me:

*“You know, Hugh, it really is a royal wedding for our times. The odds seem to have been stacked against this couple from the very outset. Questions of will they? Won't they? Could it ever work? Seem to have dogged them from the moment their intentions were made public. But it appears today they're finally shrugging off both the hyperbole and the cynicism of the press and doing it their own way. It's been reported the prince and princess turned down a multi-million pound photo op from the ... oh, wait! Yes. Here she comes. Yes, she's arriving now. The crowd below getting very excited as you can see, Hugh as the car rolls into the grounds of the abbey. And we can expect to see her step out of that Rolls Royce at any moment now. Whoops of excitement there, Hugh, from a crowd that's been here since well before dawn to welcome the ... oh, here she comes. Out she comes! And I think it would be fair to say Hugh, from a female reporter's perspective, that that is a beautiful dress. Tailor-made, for the bride, in Paris, by Chanel ...”*

And it was just like we were playing *Angel, Oh Angel* again. The blue on her face. The hands placed together. And I did, I saw it all; the thing she'd never ask for but always want.

"You're right," Hugh told me. "*It is very beautiful.*"

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"The dolls don't like to face the sun," Ashley told me through the metal gate. "And the blanket has to be under all of them or they get dirty and have to be washed, which ruins the hair and makes the eyebrows fade away."

She lined them up like dominoes, each sitting in the space between the legs of the one before it, like a giant plastic train headed to 88 Boredom Street.

"The thing I like about dolls is they *listen*," she explained. "They don't answer back, they can't run away, and they look where you tell them to look — unless you lay them down of course."

"You promised her," I interrupted.

"I'm not finished!" Ashley hissed, lifting the tattiest doll at the back into her arms. She flattened its candy-floss hair and sighed. "But they all get dirty in the end. It doesn't matter how clean the towel is or how much you wash your hands. They all get dirty and they all turn ugly and they all have to go."

“You spoke best at the Harvest Festival,” I told her. “Remembered all of your lines.”

“And Father Lee gave me a chocolate frog afterward — only me,” she grinned. “He said it was our secret for a job well done.”

I told her how beautifully she’d spoken as I unfastened the canopy of my pram. That I wished I could remember all of those words and say them to a church full of mums and dads as I pulled the blanket back, but that my tongue gets jumbled and in the way whenever I try. I lifted Tiny Tears out of the basket, her eyes opening up as I scooped her into my arms.

“You’ve found her a husband?” Ashley asked.

“Little Paul from down the street. He’s her fiancé until it’s done,” I corrected her.

“Somebody to throw the rice?”

“Joanne. I’ve told her my brother likes her and that I’ll be her spy. It’s a lie.”

“Bridesmaids? Rings? A dress?”

“It’s all taken care of,” I assured her. “We just need you to read. Read and then leave.”

Ashley got down on her big fat knees and jiggled the pin of the gate open. The metal roses flashed as they swung away from me. She stepped forward and watched as I placed my baby in her big clammy hands. She waddled back up the drive, reaching the bin as the gate clanged shut again.

“I think you’re stupid you know. I always have, ” she told me as lifted the lid. She dropped the old doll inside like it was a piece of rubbish. It made a hollow clunk as it hit the bottom.

“Tomorrow,” I told her.

She pressed Tiny Tears to her chest — too hard — then lifted her up into the air to get a better look at her. My little girl joined Ashley’s train of orphans with wetted cheeks, her head turned away from me. “Tomorrow,” Ashley agreed, shooing me away with her fingers.

As we walked home I told Tiny Tim that it was ridiculous for him to cry. That now was *not* the time for crying, and that he shouldn’t dare think I gave his sister away because I loved him more; that I only did it because I knew she was stronger than he was. She’s always been with strangers. And besides, the last thing we needed was him crapping all over one of Ashley’s blankets — because then where would we be?

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She hummed when I told her; like someone had placed a battery inside of her chest, like the one in my toothbrush, and switched her on. I told her *everybody* gets married, including her, and

that even though she was against the idea and thought love was stupid, this was just the way it was supposed to be. That this was what the angel behind the door wanted, and that people can never question what an angel says — not even Mary and Joseph — so we'd just have to get on with it.

“Bun’ I don’t have a dress ...” she started.

“She brought it all,” I stopped her. “It’s all in my house and tomorrow you’re going to have a beautiful dress and a gold ring and the right words and a handsome husband.”

Kelly’s hands found each other as she listened to me.

“Kelly, the angel told me what to do.”

And the corners of her eyes loosened as her concentration left my lips. They settled somewhere on an orange cloud filled with late evening sunshine that was rolling our way. I looked too, and Tiny Tim tried but fell asleep as he tilted his head back. Then she said to me in the clearest words I’ve ever heard her use:

“She heard me!”

I put my arm over her shoulder. She hummed all the way through my body.

\*

“You need sweaty feet for height,” I told Joanne as she peeled her socks off and placed them inside of her trainers. I gripped the lamp-post. “They’re sticky you see, and if they’re sticky it makes getting up high and staying high up a whole lot easier.”

Ashley pulled the almost-full wheelie-bin down the steps of Kelly’s path, the dog jumping and barking at her with each clunky drop. “We couldn’t have done this tomorrow after the bin-men have been?” she complained, pushing Paul out of her way. He shuffled to the other side the garden and leaned on the fence, his hands fidgeting in his trouser pockets.

“Can’t I go play with Mark on the field until you’re ready?” he whined, his fingers dancing frantically under the fabric.

“Itchy, shush!” I told him, handing the bag of rice to Joanne. “I gave you the red Jeep. We made a deal. You’re ours until it’s done.”

He pursed his lips and yanked the head off a stray dandelion poking through a slat. “I don’t like you calling me Itchy,” he said. “You’re always calling me Itchy. I want you and your dad to stop calling me Itchy.”

Ashley threw her pretty pink blanket over the top of the bin and began smoothing it out. Joanne examined the bag of rice, then the lamp-post, then the bag again.

“Then stop *itching* yourself!” I told him.

“I don’t like it,” he muttered, sweeping away a candlestick of snot between his nostril and his top lip. He sat down on the ground, examining the back of his hand. “And why does the dog have a tie around his neck?”

“He’s the best man. The best man wears a tie,” I explained, filling Joannes pockets with rice.

“But he’s not a man,” Paul said, clicking his tongue for the dog to come over.

“He is too a man!” I defended as Tim trotted toward him. “He has one of *those* the same as you, although he doesn’t play with it half as much as you do — which is saying something for a dog. He’s a traveling man. My Tim’s seen the world on his walks. And he even got Mrs. Howard’s poodle pregnant last summer, so he’s a dad too. Remember the Bitzah’s?”

“I do,” Paul laughed, playing with Tim’s furry ears. ‘Bits’a this and bits’a that. He’s funny your dad.’”

“They were lovely,” Ashley beamed, re-reading the vows at the pulpit. The crowd of plastic faces she’d brought with her sat huddled along the rim of the gate in bonnets and berets, watching silently like a jury. She pulled her dad’s heavy black bathrobe over her shoulders, lifted the papers, turned to us and said in that reading voice of hers:

“I am ready.”

Joanne snaked her arm around the lamp-post, pressing a toe against the dull grey metal. “How long will this take?” she asked.



“We’ll be quick. Super-quick!” I promised as she climbed up the lamp-post like like a sticky-toed lizard. “You can see my brother’s room from up there!” I shouted. “He’s probably watching you right now!”

“Mark said this isn’t going to work,” Paul confessed as he stood up and took his position.

“Mark’s a moron,” I assured him, wiping his face with a wet thumb.

“He says you can’t even get married unless you’re ...”

“Listen!” I stopped him, shoving a bouquet of near-dead sunflowers into his arms. “Do you know what these are?”

He tilted them back a little, like it was a trick question.

“Flowers?”

“No,” I told him. “They’re not flowers, they’re sunflowers. They’re the sunflowers I begged my dad to buy me right at the beginning of summer when they were still seeds in a packet. And do you know what he said to me?”

Paul shook his head timidly.

“He said they wouldn’t work. He said they wouldn’t work because the mud in our garden is bad mud and they’d only grow in good mud and that I’d be better off just eating them instead. But do you know what I did Itchy?”

He shook his head again.

“I planted them anyway. I took that bad mud and watered that bad mud and I super-duper-pooper-scooped Tim’s business and any other business I could find into that mud and I mixed it all up, then I put my seeds inside and can you guess what happened?”

“You got good mud?”

“No, Itchy. I got sunflowers! Nine of them! And they grew. Grew until they were taller than me and were covered in bees that didn’t know or care about the bad mud beneath. Then my dad cut them down and gave them to my mum as a present, and she didn’t think or care about the bad mud either.”

“I don’t get it,” Paul confessed, his cheeks reddening.

“You don’t have to!” I shouted, pushing a hooped earring into his pocket. “Just ... be a bee!”

“What kind of bee?”

I grabbed his shoulders. “A handsome one!”

Then I ran to the doorstep and shook the bell as hard and as long as I could until the ringing seemed to be everywhere and then only in my ears, and I finally felt the *thunk* and the *click* of the door as it unlocked itself from the inside.

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Her dress moves with a swing and a swoosh, rocking lazily like a Sunday bell as she makes her way slowly down the aisle. Paul's back straightens and so do the flowers. He looks at her hair, high and full, held back with a white headband that she touches as she accepts his gift with a painted-lipped smile.

The best man sits.

They turn to the words and the words unfold. We don't understand them all but it doesn't matter; it's music and Ashley is singing.

"Does she promise?"

She promises.

"Does he promise?"

He promises too, slips his hand inside his pocket and pulls out a ring.

She hums as he slides it onto her finger and fastens the clasp.

Ashley nods — the signal — and we clap as Kelly turns around, lifts her arm and spreads her hand out to meet that other gold ring in the sky. I expect to see rice falling, but instead it's Joanne, tumbling down to earth between Kelly's fingers.

Paul is over the gate first. He's halfway across the field before I even notice he's gone. Ashley isn't far behind, knocking her dolls off the blanket and onto the concrete as she forces her way out. Those fat, whole legs of hers seem to shudder and shake as she pushes herself into a slow sprint home.

Tim is barking, keeping his distance from the wobbly, clanging lamp-post.

I look up again because I'm still not certain it happened. A seagull floats above us, its wings spread wide, in no rush to leave — but that is all.

It's Joanne who brings me back to earth as she brushes past my leg, a stream of rice trailing behind her as she crawls toward the door. A window shuffles open. My brother, forcing his head out to see who is screaming. I step back and look for Kelly — but it's too late, she's already left us — balancing on her tiptoes as she slowly spins around and around, lost in the magic of her own happy moment. All she sees is a spirally blur of sandy-colored houses, far-off tree tops and perfect blue sky. Streaks and stripes of color that wrap around her — and nothing touches.

That's when I know what I'll say when they come. When the doors open and the shouting begins, with all the *who's* and the *how's* and the *what were you thinkings?* — like they've never once heard an Angel before.

I catch up to Joanne, take what's left of the rice from her pockets and throw it high into the air.

“She's my friend,” I begin, pushing all of the doubt to the side of my mouth.

She's *my* friend.

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