

## ***Hearing Loss***

*Inspired by "It Will Come Back to You" by Sigrid Nunez*

Hearing loss is hereditary, the doctor said.

My face must have registered surprise, disbelief, curiosity.

You mean I can't blame it on the over-amped rock concerts I attended in my youth?

Have you fired guns?

I loved the shooting gallery at amusement parks when I was a kid and I've shot a pistol and rifle a few times. Knocked over a lot of cans.

The doctor nodded and I wondered if all ENTs asked this question or if it was because I live in Southeast Alaska, in a neighborhood visited by bears and moose.

My paternal grandmother wore a hearing aid but I don't remember at what age her hearing loss became noticeable and I don't know the extent of the loss. But when she wasn't wearing her hearing aid asking her a question could give us a good laugh. Grandma, what's for dinner? No. Then my grandfather would scold her for not wearing her hearing aid. Which caused more laughter.

When did you notice a change in your hearing?

It seemed to happen after I had COVID. All of a sudden I noticed I couldn't always understand what my friend's daughter was saying. And my tinnitus is more annoying.

Possible, the doctor said, we still know so little about the virus' epidemiology.

I feel like all my health concerns happened after having had COVID but maybe it's just my age. The last time I got on a plane I experienced nausea and

headaches for three days after landing. I usually don't feel good after a plane ride but not for that long. And then this last summer I went camping with friends, I was the back seat passenger. It was only three hours to the campsite but after we stopped it was like my brain kept sloshing around in my head. It persisted for the two days we camped and then five days after returning home. I felt horrible. I was afraid it wouldn't stop. I wondered if something was wrong with my inner ear.

It's called Mal de débarquement syndrome. It's related to your vestibular system, your inner ear, makes you feel like you're moving even when you're not. Tends to happen after traveling, especially by boat. Symptoms usually go away within 24 hours, but they can linger for months or even years. I had a professor who had it for months after a cruise. But to be sure we'd have to do further testing.

I nodded. Can you write that down?

Any other issues?

I was pretty sure she didn't want to talk about my menopausal complaints; she was seven months pregnant and in the beauty of youth.

Did you knit your hat and scarf? she asked.

Guilty.

Virginia Woolf said that knitting is the saving of life. I guess she must have stopped knitting. I think my grandmother never stopped knitting.

Knitting. Makes me think about Rachel.

Rachel was the most amazing knitter. I adored her. She was the town's knitting guru. She taught so many people of all ages how to knit. Did she stop knitting? Unlike Virginia she did not wade into the River Ouse with rocks in her pockets but she did abruptly end her life at age 55—when I was 65. I have never asked how and I have never heard why. She left Alaska for Wisconsin when she was

45. She once told me that her husband killed himself; he was 29. I never asked for details. It was just a fact she presented along side the fact of the damaging drug she took for her acne when she was young, a drug that has been linked to suicide, a drug that was pulled off the market, a drug that made her wary of the medical community, a drug that was probably responsible for her search for alternative forms of healing. She did opt for the iodine treatment during COVID.

Knitting is a passion, I responded as she stuck the otoscope in my ear.

My ears feel itchy a lot and it seems like they're full of wax.

I can see nothing unusual but some people use warmed olive oil to help with the dryness.

I have come to hate that word, dryness. I live in a rain forest but my body has become a desert. Menopause, dryness, itchy ears, a body I don't recognize. Rachel was of menopause age.

The hearing test is done using a laptop computer and a pair of headphones. I listen to different tones and different words and behold, the state of my hearing is revealed, which is delivered to me along with the bill. *Otoscopy found clear canals bilaterally with intact and healthy tympanic membranes. A mild to moderate sensorineural hearing loss in both ears with excellent word recognition ability. Normal middle ear function but absent acoustic reflexes for all conditions.*

As I leave she tells me it was nice to meet me.

And you, I say, and wonder if she did enjoy meeting me or if the exchange was only a social convention.

But I was warmed that she seemed to find our meeting—pleasant, pleasurable, affable, congenial, cordial, what is the best descriptor?

Fall days here can be bracingly beautiful when the sun is above the fjord, the mountains are dusted with snow, the sky is blue and the golden leaves of the

cottonwood trees tremble in the wind. Where did the tears come from? The decline of my hearing? The suicide of a friend? The beauty and courtesy of the doctor soon to give birth? The transience of this day, this moment, this observance? My soon-to-be afternoon with Dorothy?

The magpies have returned. I do not have any problem hearing them. They are not shy about announcing their arrival or asking for more food when my bird feeders are empty.

What are we hearing, then, you and I? I think she hears me but I don't know if she understands me. She is now completely non-verbal. But she smiles. And when I play the CD of Doris Day singing songs from the songbook of Dorothy's youth, she sings every word. I sing every word with her as we drive along the road that parallels the fjord to the park where we can sit and watch the eagles, and if we're lucky, the bears.

At least there is sun today. Sometimes I talk on our drives about the color of the water, gray, jade green, different shades of blue, silver. When asked what one book he would take to the moon, he said, "I wouldn't take a book, I would take Monet because he understands light." I should have asked, Monet at what age? When she looks out the window I don't know what colors she is seeing. Age diminishes the amount of light our eyes take in.

She is 90 years old with a strong heart, and still, a hearty appetite. Her daughter does not allow her sugar so on our outings I treat her to a coffee and cookie at the cafe, which I can tell brings her joy. I rationalize that one cookie a week won't hurt. She does not have diabetes. Once her daughter came home from walking the dog around the block and found her mother with a package of Pepperidge Farm Mint Milano cookies, crumbs everywhere. So maybe Dorothy is figuring out how to have more than one cookie a week. Her daughter now hides the cookies.

One of my closest friends was thirty years older than me. We met in an American Literature class during my junior year in college. Her observations

were always the most insightful. She would be around Dorothy's age had she lived. She loved Doris Day too. She even saw her when she was living in Hollywood. Sometimes I wonder if she was telling the truth. She said in the 1950s you'd see movie stars all the time. She also told stories about drinking ouzo with Leonard Cohen on the Greek isle of Hydra and walking the beaches near Asilomar with Joseph Campbell before his "Power of Myth" fame. But I shouldn't obsess about whether or not her stories are true, "a story isn't great because it's true, it's great because it's a good story." I was with her the day Mel Gibson bumped into her on Union Square in San Francisco. Those blue eyes! So I do know that story is true.

At the end of our drives, when I take Dorothy back to the house, she always places her hand on the side of my face and smiles. Is she saying "thank you"? I tell my friend, you are so lucky your mom is kind and seems happy. My mother never got to the non-verbal stage; she could be quite mean and cruel. I'd also played Doris Day for her. She would sing along, she always liked to sing, and it appeared to me that it made her happy. At least it would stop her from saying horrible, spiteful, ugly things. There was nothing wrong with her hearing.

I want to show you something. Have you noticed that people with cell phones always want to show you something? It was a video of Dorothy singing "On a Slow Boat to China," the one song on my "Songs for Dorothy" CD that is not sung by Doris Day but by Bette Midler. She is singing and dancing with her very tall, very handsome teenage grandson. I am crying again.

I was 27 when I first noticed the ringing in my ears. I worked on the twenty-second floor of a high-rise building in San Francisco. I'd recently experienced "barotrauma" while scuba diving; I couldn't clear my ears but descended anyway. After a visit to the doctor and a week of drugs, all seemed well. The ringing didn't concern me at the time because it wasn't always present and I didn't know that it had a diagnosis. I just thought I was incredibly sensitive to all the white noise buzzing in an office space that relied on circulation systems, photocopy machines, florescent lights, IBM Selectric typewriters and Lisa

computers. I also thought it might be an alien life form trying to communicate with me. I'm sure there is a *Star Trek* episode that would confirm my suspicion.

I must have been in my 50s when I learned about tinnitus. One day my friend's teenage daughter started complaining about a buzzing in her ears. It's called tinnitus, my friend told me. She was advised not to eat salty foods. When my friend told me that I thought: that can't be helpful, I rarely add salt to my food. Of course, now I know that it isn't in your ears but in your brain, but only because I watched the TEDTalk on youtube. Barbra Streisand has experienced tinnitus since she was nine. Like me she never told anyone and didn't know that it had a name. And yes, I listened to all forty-eight hours of her memoir. It was the most amazing experience. I felt like Barbra stopped by for an afternoon cup of tea to tell me about her life while I listened and knitted, and knitted. Sting has tinnitus. And Sainorise Ronan and Bob Dylan. Why does it make us feel more comfortable when we know that someone famous is okay and experiences the same thing? The more important question is why didn't Barbra and I tell anyone. "The Soul of an Octopus" writer Sy Montgomery, who experienced a similar ear disaster to mine while diving in Cozumel to see octopi, does **not** have tinnitus. She can still experience silence. Her brain has not over-compensated for the injury.

Silence. Sometimes in the early morning just before sunrise I sit on my porch. I know it is quiet. No car sounds. No airplane sounds. No getting ready for work sounds. Just . . . quiet. But my head is filled with buzzing and ringing and recently it almost sounds like screaming.

When was the moment when I no longer experienced silence? Once when I was taking a walk on a zero degree day, a day so cold my snot froze and my eyes teared, the ringing and buzzing and screaming stopped. Or did I only imagine it stopped because it was so cold and my brain was probably freezing. In Barbra's memoir, she longs for silence. Me, too.

My initial thought when I heard the gunshot was that I hoped it isn't another suicide. I hoped it was someone warning off a bear. Should I go back to my

car or continue on my walk? I had left a man standing next to a dark blue SUV in the parking lot. Was he waiting for someone? But something about the way the two cars were parked struck me as odd, which was why I had parked as far away as possible. I also wasn't sure where the shot came from. And then the second shot rang out and the police car, sirens blazing, lights flashing, raced by me. I kept walking, away from the direction of the police car. And then came the ambulance and more vehicles. At the harbor a woman was sitting in her truck watching the scene with binoculars, something most people who live here are never without. You never know when you will see a whale or a bear or a moose or a blue heron standing on the shoreline or a porcupine waddling across the road. Binoculars were one of my first bit of kit I purchased when I came here for a summer job.

I knocked on her window and asked if she could see what was going on. I think someone got shot. The ambulance just took someone away. I told her that that's my car now blocked by a police car. She asked if she could give me a ride. No, I said, I want to finish my walk. Maybe everyone will be gone by the time I get there.

By the time I got to my car the police were taping off the crime scene.

I knew something was off when I pulled into the parking lot. It was the odd way the cars were parked, and something about the man signaled that I'd interrupted something.

As soon as the officer saw me going to my car he hurried over to ask me what I had seen, if I'd heard any yelling, where I was when I heard the gunshots. He must have asked me five times to describe the man. All I could say was that his head was higher than the roof of the SUV, he was white, and had dirty blonde hair. All I could think about is that I'd missed witnessing the shooting by a mere five minutes. Was anyone hurt? I asked. Yes.

Suicide? Attempted murder? A drug thing gone bad? My brain, my heart, my stomach was spinning out, I felt wobbly. Hadn't I just read that there are more

guns in America than people? Hadn't I just read that there had been a meth bust the week before?

I do not have a cell phone and also do not do social media but still the stories spreading through town reached me—by landline. Someone said a police officer was shot in the arm. Then someone said it was some kind of domestic altercation and that the man I'd probably seen got shot in the arm. Someone had heard a restraining order had been violated. Another person said the person who got shot was a really, really bad guy, as if maybe he deserved to get shot?

What happened in the five minutes between locking my car door and leaving the parking lot to the moment of the shooting? Stories, spinning, spinning, spinning. Me, on edge, not sleeping, my tinnitus somehow seeming louder, more prominent.

Should I be surprised that there are many articles and websites that address tinnitus and trauma? It was discussed in the TEDTalk. According to AI, it is estimated 53% of people with traumatic brain injuries also develop tinnitus. Researchers are even investigating whether it plays a role in suicide and dementia. Did Rachel have tinnitus? She did have a traumatic brain injury. Did Dorothy have tinnitus? She did have dementia. It is also estimated that 90% of people experiencing tinnitus also have some form of hearing loss. Barbra Streisand has perfect pitch and distinguishes chord nuances that even sound engineers don't always hear.

Dorothy had perfect pitch. Her daughter told me that her mother taught herself to play the piano as a little girl; she played everything by ear, never learned to read music. Rachel was the same, guitar, mandolin, ukulele. All self taught. What were they hearing that I do not hear?

Is hearing hereditary?

So much is unknown.



It has been years since I met with the lovely doctor. I heard she had a girl and is pregnant again. I did not go for further testing and I do not think my hearing has diminished.

My mother died the day before my birthday just before lockdown. We'd spoken on the phone the day before. I don't know what she heard but she did say good-bye. Dorothy died not long after the end of the pandemic in an assisted living facility. She was singing to the end.

I want to show you something. It was a video of her mother and me singing "My Buddy."

*My Buddy, Your buddy misses you.*

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