

## Deaf & Mute

K was born a mute. At first his parents were glad to have a child who did not squeal, who did not beg, who did not cry in the night. But as months passed and K refused to utter an endearing 'Dada' or 'Mama', they soon became seriously worried.

The medical diagnosis was swift and severe. Something had gone wrong in the muscular structures in the back of the throat. Vocalisation was completely out of the question. The child would speak no language. "Just be grateful he can see and hear," the doctor warned K's parents. "Some kids can't even do those."

K's parents raised him as best they could, at first hopeful of his chances at a normal life but later fully aware they had a defective child. They took him to classes where he learned sign language, but they knew this would never truly fix him.

His silence led them to assume he was stupid. They would often forget he was in the room with them. Communicating with him was a chore, and they soon grew bored of it.

However, while they chose to neglect K, the child was always observing them. In this way, he learned a lot about his parents even though they knew nothing about him. People fascinated him and he soon developed keen perceptive abilities allowing him to notice tiny details that others easily missed. How do people tie their shoes? Who laughs at who's jokes? Why do some people talk a lot but others only a little?

At school K's unpopularity multiplied. He was the weird kid who couldn't speak. Sometimes he was bullied, but for the most part his fellow students left him alone. He simply wasn't of use to them. What is a person if they are of no use to others?

K's realisation: dead weight.

And that's how he spent many years of his life - as dead weight. An object seen and not heard. A consideration that every once in a while had to be dragged from here to there.

Then it all changed. He was so used to living his unnoticed life, of spending hours in the library by himself, of burying his attention in books and computer games and other things that didn't demand he have a voice, that when change finally came he didn't understand it. He never thought he would ever be listened to.

In the first year of high school, he met M. She had only recently moved to K's city. She kept to herself but was not shy. She was kind but not naive, intelligent but not arrogant. But none of the other students liked her. In fact they barely noticed her. This was because M was deaf.

K took to hanging out near the school cafeteria as an excuse to be near M. Before long, the two were friends, helping each other with homework, giving each other books to read. They made for a tight pair - K unable to talk, M unable to hear. Their communication began with a mix of sign language and small cards with passages of text written on them, but the two soon developed a language of their own. They invented new ways to convey points, using all parts of their bodies. In some respects, this new form of communication was far superior to the dry, limited vocabulary of human language. Theirs was a language of creativity and abstraction.

K's parents hated M. They thought she was the wrong sort for their child. "If only K had normal friends," they thought, "he might be able to pretend to be normal himself." But with M, and this new language the two shared, no pretending was possible - they were content to be seriously weird together.

The years went by and K eventually proposed to M. The two married at a much younger age than their peers, but they couldn't imagine anything better. Each was able to be their own, strange selves in the company of their partner.

The wedding was lonely. Only K's mother attended - the rest of the family refused to come. There were no friends to be invited. But neither K nor M cared, too engrossed in visions of their future. Even when M failed to hear the marriage celebrant ask her to say her vows and even when, upon hearing the vows, K was unable to repeat them, the two were unbelievably happy.

After the wedding, the years slogged by as years do - at a pace that never felt like anything was changing until one looked back and realised a decade had passed. They both worked jobs that required long hours from them, and they both grew tired and weary from the compounding of stress and worry and preoccupation that charts each lifetime. Their backs bent into hunches, their eyes burned red with bloodshot, and heavy lines started to cut deep into their skin. But they took all this in good stride, for they knew something special was held between them. Everyone gets old, but not everyone shares something as powerful as their kind of love - the proof of which was evident in that totally fabricated language they had created together, a connection unique to them and therefore held sacred above all else.

On the 30th anniversary of their wedding, K came up with a smart idea. Slaving away at work for many years, the two had built up a considerable amount of savings, and K decided it was time to spend some of it. One day after work he went shopping and found M an incredibly expensive present for the occasion. The present he chose bore a special significance to the both of them and he smiled all the way home, wondering why he had never thought of buying such an item before.

He laid the present, concealed in a gift-wrapped box, on the dining room table and waited for M to return from work. When she did, he led her to the present. Upon seeing it, she squealed in excitement and clapped her hands. It really was a special occasion.

K indicated for her to open the box.

With the packaging undone, M pulled out a small metallic object. She wasn't quite sure what to make for it until K pointed to her ear. "Aha," she thought.

It was a new type of hearing aid that was especially easy to install into the ear.

M had heard about it, as it was of a model allegedly perfect for fixing the unique medical condition that prevented her from hearing. She had always thought that specific range of hearing aid too expensive to ever consider buying herself.

Placing the small, spider-shaped aid into her ear, she was instantly impressed by the world of sound. Dawning on her was a new sensation she had never before encountered. It blew her away. She spent several minutes simply humming to herself, amazed at the quality of her voice.

But the surprise didn't end there. K took the gift box from her and reached further inside, withdrawing another metal object. This one was a circular shape with a black strap attached to it.

K fastened the object around his neck - it was an electrolarynx, a special type of computer that would allow him to speak. He turned it on and listened to the machine whirr. Then he started to talk, imitating all the people he had met, all the television shows he had watched. Human language was accessible to him! He was rightly amazed.

Enjoying these totally new sensations, K and M looked at each other. M said something, almost as if testing the water of conversation. K replied, able to finally put into words what was in his head. M listened to him speak - the first time she had heard anyone's voice.

They could listen and speak to one another, an ability they'd never experienced before; it was finally possible to talk about anything they fancied. But their first conversation only lasted about a minute before dying down. A sense of dread hit them both.

K had a voice, but didn't know what to say. M had ears, but didn't like what she heard. Each saw their partner in a new light. Their world of private communication was shattered. Worst of all, neither of them had much to say.