

Almost Normal, But Not Quite

Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.
(Matthew 13:9)

Tires screeching, fireworks exploding, people screaming, dogs barking, rocks careening down, waterfalls crashing, guns firing, fire alarm wailing, televisions droning, glass shattering—and then, with a simple flick on my head to remove my cochlear implant, a silence follows.

Silence so sweet.
Perennial silence.
Silence unbroken like melted diamonds.
Lips moving all around like ventriloquists.
My closest friend.
My worst enemy.

The silence I love because I understand.
Because I don't understand, I hate the silence.
The silence I've learned to embrace like a dear friend.
Like an embarrassingly disabled sibling, I chose to reject the silence.

This is my penetralia.
That's how I feel when I visit my silent friend.

Then, like that moment when your bungee cord becomes taut after experiencing an exhilarating fall, the silence was violently yanked away by my cochlear implant. When a power drill bore into my skull to insert the inner part of the cochlear implant into my cochlea and a magnet placed behind my ear, the sounds followed after years of training.

Sounds engulfed in emotions.
Cacophonous sounds in the air.
I see sounds suspended in purgatory like a rainbow I never can quite reach.
Sounds were like someone whom I've always wanted to be friends with.

The sounds I love because I understand.
Because I don't understand, I hate the sounds.
The sounds I've come to embrace like a precious youngest sibling.
Like a very annoying friend, I chose to shun the sounds.

This is my penetralia.
That's how I felt when I was first introduced to my sound-loving friend.

But silence always follows when the sound-providing cochlear implant turns off, repeating that vicious cycle of unsatisfied longing for perfection—the constant struggle for peace between the silent and the sound-loving lives.

I remember Mom smiling at me bravely, her eyes full of hope and unspoken prayer, like any good mother. My mind was almost disconnected from my body, and I felt like I was looking at my body from the distance. My body was lying on the gurney. My face was white like an albino deer in headlights. I was terrified of the surgery that was about to happen. I remember my eyes beginning to glaze, and I looked beyond my mom. My dad paced next to my mom, like a condor hovering over the Grand Canyon, with concern on his face. My mom smiled and signed to my distant mind, “You’re doing the right thing. Just be brave.” I remember thinking, “Am I really doing the right thing?” Following my doubting thoughts, a female nurse with blue scrubs walked in. She had that smile on her face that seemed to be a mask. The mask was the mask of encouragement, courage, and happiness. But I noticed that behind that mask the nurse wore, a quiet doubt creeping like a moon eclipsing the bloody sun. She silently asked me to be strong. In retrospect, I understand that the masquerade was bravery covering up fear. I realized that the mask of false strength became a crucial limb on my body to help me function well in life.

I wish I knew about that mask before they put my implant in.

The nurse gently injected the IV into my arm and let the sedative flow into my bloodstream. I have no idea how I managed to let her put that needle in my arm, because I passionately hate needles. She grabbed the railing of my gurney and rolled me away from my family. I watched my former silent life sitting in the corner, left behind by my choosing.

Quietly sitting.

Betrayed.

I’m the traitor.

The implant was the instrument of my betrayal.

My silent friend, don’t judge me.

I chose to leave you.

I chose a life with sounds.

I left my world of silence for hopes of a better world.

My silent life was filled with precious deaf friends who opposed the concept of cochlear implants because being deaf isn’t a disability. The cochlear implant was designed to be the cure. Being deaf is just like being in a different culture—my culture. If I got a cochlear implant, I was risking rejection from the Deaf community because I would basically be telling everyone that I had been disabled, and I wanted to be “fixed.” My silent life was full of childhood memories that threatened to dissolve if I put on that machine. But I was never a part of the Deaf community. In the Deaf community, I was the spectator. The observer. The watcher. I didn’t belong because I was born with a hearing mind. I was born deaf, which is true. But I was raised with hearing people, so I thought like a hearing person. So I wanted to have a new future—a future where I could understand the majority, the hearing people. A future where I could belong. And that future was waiting in that white room with knives, needles, and the machine.

The door soon blocked the view of my dad, my mom, and my silent life. As I passed by, the lights on the ceiling flickered like truth barely shining through the web of lies. The sedative kicked in. The lights soon faded. My mind became numb. I underwent surgery. I woke up. My head was wrapped in white gauze. White gauze wrapped around my head. My hair was half-gone. My skull was throbbing with pain. Throbbing pain in my skull. I drifted back to sleep. Drifting endlessly. Drifting into a drug-drenched dream.

Did it work?

After the surgery, I had to wear a hat to my junior high school for two months because my head was half-shaved. I looked like a fool. An epic fool. It was a terrible time to wear a hat everyday for so long, because I was in that awkward stage of finding my identity. It was during eighth grade. One girl even had a nightmare about lice, which I possibly had in my hat, and one teacher ranted at me for wearing my hat at school; she ignored the hat card that the principal had given me. I had to take off my hat to show her my half-shaved, stitched-up head. It was the awkward stage when I didn't have my cochlear implant, so I was still deaf. I had to wait until I got the exterior part of the cochlear implant, which will come when my head has been fully healed. I managed to pull through that rough time with the support of my family, friends, and just pure grit.

After my head was fully healed, I went back to the hospital. The audiologist ran some tests and gave me the cochlear implant. That strange object was supposed to change my life. I held that sandy-colored, scythe-shaped object connected to the hanging disc in my hands. I carefully put it on my head and waited for the miracle to happen. Waited for the lottery that I'd been trying to get for so long. The audiologist pushed the button. Like a bomb in a greenhouse destroying all the delicate plants inside, the cochlear implant broke the silence in my head.

Excruciating pain.

White noise everywhere.

Sounds like fingernails scratching an electrocuted black board lined with crackling aluminum foil.

Like a truck full of air horns rolling down a long hill.

Like a fat lady screeching through the broken glass lining inside her throat.

Loud, indiscernible, and unintelligible noise.

Overload.

My head was like a computer with all gigabytes and terabytes filled, unable to save more information.

Like a cartoon box stuffed with too much stuff, about to explode.

Like a blind man seeing for the first time, the flare of the blinding light burning his eyes.

I couldn't understand anything.

I felt paralyzed.

Was this what my life would be like?

I miss it.
My silent friend.
I miss how it could smell the rapids of the river.
I miss how it could see the mountains singing.
I miss how it could feel the hearts of my dear ones.
I miss how it could taste the sunrise.

Primal instincts nearly took over, almost forcing me to rip the pain-inducing machine off my head. I held strong. I left the implant on my head. I had invested too much in this new future. I felt like I had to be strong. I had trusted this small machine to grant me a better quality of life. I had given up my dear silent friend for a new world; but now, the prospect of a new world wasn't looking so great.

What had I done?

I held on bravely like that little Dutch boy who kept his finger in a leak in the dike all night long. I had to fight for a long time. For a year, I struggled to overcome the agony of constant headaches so I could hear the sounds all around me. My mom hired a speech therapist to help me learn how to hear. Hour after hour, my speech therapist toiled with me. She did everything she could to help me listen.

Feathers were used to practice my plosives.
Pah, pah, bah, bah, tah, tah, dah, dah.
My fingers on her throat to feel the guttural sounds.
Aaaaaa, eeeee, iiiiiii, oooooo, uuuuu.
Mouth opened to show where the tongue should be for each sound.
Nnnnnnnnnnn, dad, dad, dad, llllllllllll, tttttttttt.

Soon, pitches formed.
New sounds registered in my brain.
Frequencies took shape.
My ears filled with the music all around me.
Low-pitched and high-pitched sounds rang in my head.
I heard abrupt sounds and long-lasting sounds.
The intensity of each sound became clear to me.
Noise became discernable.

I felt like a fish being introduced to the Great Barrier Reef for the first time after living in a small reef for its whole life.

I felt like a viewer at a movie theatre that had finally allowed closed captions in their movies after I had spent years trying to read the characters' lips.

I felt like an audience member at a concert hearing life-changing music for the first time.

The more sounds I heard, the more I loved my new life filled with sounds. I loved

hearing the refrigerator run, hearing the birds chirping, and hearing people's chatter in the background. The more I listened, the more I couldn't imagine life without sound. Sound became a dear friend of mine. It changed from a stranger whom I've always superficially known, to a dear friend whom I cherish. And that change was wrought by taking the time to get to know that friend. I loved it. But I often paid an old, silent friend a visit with just a short, fluid motion of my finger flicking my implant off my head. I almost felt perfectly normal.

Was the cost of trying to be perfect like everyone else too high? And why did I think being able to hear was the only way to be perfect?

One thing was missing. I soon came to realize that my implant failed to provide that perfection that I was hoping for. I was hoping for a perfect life where I could connect with anyone with sounds and signs. But it wasn't meant to be. I was doomed to a fate of a never-ending search for a perfect world of understanding. I couldn't follow everything that was spoken to me. I could only understand an empty shell of a conversation. I hoped that I would be able to grasp the full breadth of the conversation that was spoken everywhere. I hoped that I would be able to contribute to the conversation. Yet it didn't happen. Instead, I was doomed to miss almost the entire conversation, miss the chance to share my thoughts, and consistently hear the words:

"It's not important."

"Never mind."

"I'll tell you later."

So, more than often, I had to wear that mask that my nurse wore many years ago on the day of my surgery. I had to look happy, bright, and brave so that everyone could have a good time. But in reality, I was masking my disappointment. So every time I hang out or socialize with people, I had to sacrifice my noisy and my silent friends to help provide and promote the short and fleeting pleasures people have in their conversations. Hopefully, those short conversations people have with each other will become a lasting memory for them. I didn't want to show anyone around me the fact that the so-called miracle called cochlear implant was actually a failure riddled with disappointments. No matter how many visits I pay to my silent friend and my friend full of sounds, an unsatisfied longing for a sense of belonging lingers.