

AUDIOLOGY

Pops had worked on a Ford assembly line most of his life so it was no wonder he was going deaf. He didn't seem to care much about losing his hearing, but I noticed how more and more he sat off to the side at gatherings, not participating. Most of the family gave up trying to call him. We could tolerate him shutting down; it was his choice. But when the bathroom overflowed because he couldn't hear the water running, and he didn't go to the shelter because he didn't hear the tornado sirens, something had to be done.

I was the one who pushed most, the oldest of the siblings and the one who lived closest so I got the job. His condition bothered me more than the others, I think. He was dying a slow death. He used to be a man who flourished as the center of attention, a flirt and a showman, always at the head of the table. He loved telling ancient jokes, as embarrassing as they were hilarious.

"A little boy wrote Santa Claus," he said to the grandkids. "'Santa Claus, give me a sister.' And Santa Claus wrote back, 'Okay, send me your mother'." I'm not sure my kids understood the joke, but they howled. "Look how red your grandmother's face is," he said to them.

“What do you suppose that means? Santa Claus might be your grandpa.” And the kids shrieked more.

After Mom died, the stream of jokes dried up as if they were all told to make her laugh. The one thing he kept at was his woodworking, turning out useless objects (wooden candle holders, cracked soup bowls), pawning them off on whoever faked admiration. Maybe he had an addiction to noisy machines.

He was in his workshop, his arms covered with sawdust when I came over to take him to his audiology appointment. He acted like it was a surprise, and I was afraid that he had forgotten, but beneath his coveralls he was wearing his good slacks.

On the way to the clinic he didn’t say a word. I couldn’t tell if he was resentful or passive. I felt obligated to review the forms he filled out in the reception area to see if he’d been truthful about his hearing loss. When Pops’ name was called, he told me to stay put, he’d be okay going it alone.

The appointment took a long time. I read a whole copy of Vanity Fair about celebrities I was unfamiliar with. I heard Pop’s raucous laughter before I saw him, a sound unheard for a long time.

“Is this your son?” the audiologist who was escorting him down the hallway asked.

“That’s him. The one who keeps bugging me,” Pops said.

A lemony smell, faint but acute, preceded her. She introduced herself, taking my hand. Doctor Rivera with her shiny brown hair and her almond skin was a knockout.

“I’m going to take your father outdoors to test some hearing aids with background noise,” she said. “It shouldn’t take too long.”

I watched the silent show through the lobby windows. Doctor Rivera helped Pops situate the devices first in one

ear and then the other. She had a ring on every finger of her left hand except her thumb. Once the hearing aid was in place, she and Pops waited until a big truck drove by and when it did, she kept talking. Though I could barely hear the rumble of the truck, I imagined I could hear her voice, not the words but the tone, smooth as caramel.

Pops kept sidling up to her, not in any way that would seem outrageous or blatant to an observer. When he put his hand on her waist she redirected it to his ear, showing him how to put in and remove the hearing aid.

Back inside, Doctor Rivera told Pops to make another appointment for a fitting. On the way home Pops was more talkative than he had been in months. I asked him if the aids had worked, whether he was going to buy a pair.

"Hell, no. Too expensive," he said.

"Then why did you make another appointment?"

"Are you blind? Did you get a look at that flight deck?"

Doctor Rivera's "flight deck," featured an oval neckline dipping down to a peep of cleavage.

"I told her the one about the deaf guy and the prostitute. Right up her alley." The old Pops. Careful what you wish for, I reminded myself.

A week later he was still adamant: he wasn't going to spend that kind of money. I knew he had the money. I said I wasn't going to take him back since there was no reason to keep the appointment.

"Fine. I'll get there on my own."

He was waiting on the porch when I arrived. He had on a tie and was carrying a narrow package.

"What do you have there?" I asked.

"I made something for Doctor Rivera."

As we drove across town my curiosity mounted. "What did you make her?" He took it out of the box and undid the tissue. I gasped. It looked like a dildo. "What is it?"

"Are you blind? It's a porpoise. Doctor Rivera loves porpoises."

This appointment seemed to last longer than the first. Again I heard Pops cackle before he emerged. Doctor Rivera was wearing a lilac colored blouse. A strand of amethysts embellished the "flight deck." She barely acknowledged me. She kissed Pops' cheek when she said goodbye. It did not seem very professional.

"Listen to that," Pops said as we were walking to the car.

"To what?"

"Are you deaf? That bird." It was a mockingbird, high on a wooden light pole over Anza Street. Pops was wearing hearing aids.

"I can turn them back in within twenty-eight days," he said. "That's what I'm going to do."

"How did the audiologist like your gift?"

"She loved it. Said she was going to add it to her collection. You don't need to shout."