

BigEars Learns To Listen

By Thom Costello

BigEars missed the noise of his alarm clock the most, even more than music. He would lie awake in the morning watching it as it juddered and wriggled on his bedside table. He still set it every night, just in case. And yet, every morning, it became the first thing to remind him, in its silent fit, that he was deaf now and he couldn't hear a thing.

That particular morning BigEars had thrown it at his mum. She had breezed in all 'rise and shine' and 'wakey wakey' with her lips bouncing and her tongue flapping, just as she did every morning. He had wanted to scream. Why she insisted on still speaking escaped him, maybe she thought it would make everything seem normal for him; maybe it helped her fill the gaping silence between these walls; or maybe she was simply lonely now her one remaining family member had gone.

It was later that same day that BigEars found himself being dragged through the wood. The wood was really a sprawling mess of undergrowth and strange, crippled trees that squatted in the few acres behind the station. Instead of flowers, the plants blossomed lager cans, hypodermic needles and crisp packets. Today the vast twist of weeds was doused with bluebells. Spring was on its way.

Over the years BigEars had come here regularly with his friends. Initially to climb trees and scream from branch to branch, later to set off bangers that cracked the air in two and, recently, for his first few stumblings into the world of cannabis and the communal clawing cough that it induced. But now he was running, crashing silently through the undergrowth, his hand grasped by Melody, following a half-beaten path that broadened or squeezed with every turn.

Again his fingers touched the corners of the envelope in his pocket. It was a letter from Matt he'd got that morning, to confirm he was out of the band. Fair enough, he could hardly complain. Pity, though, that Matt said they couldn't attend the signing course BigEars had enrolled them on. The pressures of the band were big these days, but it would have been convenient for them to learn. Over his cereal he'd stared at the paper void that the blank, apologetic scrawl had attempted to fill. Recently, the memory of his friend's voices had shrivelled as the prospect of a dense future of silence had begun to wrap itself around him.

He wondered what they'd think if they could see him now with Melody. He had been careful not to mention that she was at the same unit as him but they had probably guessed. He didn't have much to worry about, the subject of the deafness and the meningitis had too much stigma attached to come up in their brief communication each week.

It was seven months ago, to the day, that the outbreak happened. Three students had died and he and Melody (she carried a toad in her lunchbox) had been left deaf from the disease. They were both quickly moved to the nearest Hearing Impaired Unit, thirteen train stops away. They were lucky enough to be survivors, not unlucky enough to be victims and, as the school grieved, they were all but forgotten.

But Melody, he had thought, why Melody? Why couldn't someone else have turned deaf, someone normal?

He hardly ever communicated with her. On the train he'd stare out the window and think about the sounds he missed. You have never experienced silence, he thought for the thousandth time, until you've been deaf. The all-consuming, ravenous silence left him nothing, not a squeak, a mumble or a bang. Not even the natural, gentle hum of the world, that most people will never even realise exists.

At the unit today, however, Melody had passed him a note and, in a desperate attempt to avoid his weeping mother (it was a Thursday, she tended to cry on Mondays and Thursdays), he had agreed to follow her after lessons, to the wood. She led him through the wood to a church, boarded-up and locked-down. The corner fragments of the old stained glass hung stubbornly in the window, and in the scrub surrounding the building, the pair crunched over a million beads of coloured glass. It was as if someone had smashed a rainbow. Melody smiled lopsidedly, took his hand and guided him into the building. The stone floor was covered with typical signs of neglect: amongst the debris of worship and subsequent dwellers BigEars sniffed hungrily.

Since becoming deaf, BigEars had become convinced that his sense of smell had heightened. And years of teenage bonfires, animal excrement and rotten leaves hadn't been able to smother the aroma of religion. It clung to the walls like a curse. As they picked their way through, his nose began to pick out the subtleties of the room's flavour and, below layers of incense, he found a smudge of something different: fear, the smell of his own fear.

God, if his friends knew that he was not only with Melody but afraid of her they'd freak. But the girl now leading him up the spiral staircase behind the altar was the same girl who had let a badger free in the school corridors last year. She was quite clearly insane.

Melody led him into darkness. His eyes momentarily hazed over. For a few seconds he was deaf and blind and he felt a pang of vulnerability. When his eyes regained focus he was confronted by chaos. They seemed to be in a loft room, the bell-tower perhaps, the walls sloped inwards, and against every surface and across the floor was stacked, piled, sprawled: a disabled piano, bongos, windchimes, bottles, jars, sticks, a megaphone, planks of wood, dustbin lids, more bottles, a cage, a recorder, more sticks and in the centre of the mess Melody stood grinning.

She motioned for him to sit down and he complied, squeezing himself a space on the floor. The fear had not gone away. Melody quickly produced a pad of Post-it

notes and a pen. She began to write. When she was done she peeled off the top note and stuck it to her top lip, so the writing hung down over her mouth and her smile poked maniacally from the sides of the yellow square. With every breath the paper fluttered and BigEars read:

- Did you know that Red Indians used to put their ears to the ground to hear approaching enemies?

Eagerly she stretched out her arm to offer him the notes. What could he do? He took them and, baffled, began to write. When he had finished he tried to pass Melody the note but she motioned for him to stick it to his lip like she had done. So BigEars did.

- I didn't know that. Why do you ask?

She scribbled.

- I was just trying to make conversation.

Again she offered him the pad.

- Oh, okay. The Wild West is very interesting isn't it?

- Don't you miss it?

- What? The Wild West, I wasn't there.

- No, I meant conversation.

BigEars hesitated.

- *Yeah, I do. I miss lots of things. I miss music. I miss my friends. What do you miss?*

- *There was this tribe in the Amazon who could hear approaching storms through the trunks of trees.*

- *Oh. Is that important?*

- *Yes. Very. Essential. That is if you want to learn to hear again.*

- *Jesus, no you've got it wrong. I'm permanent. I'm forever. I thought you were too?*

- *Haven't you been listening? It's irrelevant if your cochlea or whatever is damaged.*

- *That just stops you receiving sound the traditional way.*

He'd have to humour her.

- *Oh, and you've come up with a new way have you Melody? A new way of hearing?*

- *Back in Ancient China they used to believe it was possible to hear and breathe through your testicles.*

- *Really? Well, you've obviously researched this thoroughly, but I may have to pass. I'm sorry, I don't think I should have come, I'll be late for tea.*

BigEars thought about getting up and going but he found himself unable to, there was something too fascinating about Melody's proposal to let it go. The Post-it notes were gone so she wrote on her hand:

- No the testicles were just an example, please BigEars, you'll thank me. Watch!

Melody picked up one of the bottles next to her. It was green, and still contained the dreg of stale beer. BigEars watched as her eyes widened and focused, tinged with a sheen of obsession. She brought the bottle horizontally up to her face and her features became distorted through the glass. Everything swirled, colour choked from her cloudy blue eyes and they ran a dingy green. Her cheeks ached out their red and her hair, previously straight and blonde and stretched to her waist, tangled like seaweed.

Through this ugly veil she caressed the bottle, stroking it with her cheek, smelling it, watching it, tasting it.

On the glass, by her nostrils, two circles of condensation bloomed then faded, again and again. BigEars became entranced, watching this girl's face dance and morph. When she took the bottle away he realised with a stab that Melody was beautiful. Dreamlike the thought floated for seconds, unaware of its own existence, before he shook it away, banishing it from his mind.

Melody put her mouth to the neck of the bottle, blew across the top and a sudden thrill leapt across her face. Her manic smile returned. He was still reeling from her performance when she produced another pad of paper and began to write.

- I heard it BigEars. Did you see? I got to know the bottle, I watched it and felt it and tasted it and smelt it and then I listened to it. Did you see? Try? I know you can do it.

He'd been dragged into some sort of ritual. A ouija board with his friends was one thing, but this, this was different. If only he could be with them in their easy, sanitised company. No-one is scared of Melody, people laugh at Melody, people ignore Melody. And this was so different from any ouija board because, maybe out of desperation, he was beginning to believe everything she said.

He wrote:

- You don't understand. No-one does. It's not the same for you, you never had any friends. I've lost everyone. My mates never talk to me, my Mum's deluded, my Dad's on the other side of the world and when he does phone now, I can't even speak to him. I still can't even sign a conversation.

He was frenzied, and flicked pages quickly. Melody read as he wrote.

- It's not fair. My best choice now is between going home to watch Mum cry or come into the woods with some crazy girl who wants me to breathe through my testicles. They never even put a plaque up for me at school like they did for the

others. Do you realise that? We never even got a plaque. We only went deaf, we only lost our hearing. Well, I'd rather have died.

He could feel his body ache as he tried to press back tears. He threw the paper down and stood up. Blustering his way through the room's strange mess he made towards the little wooden door. It was only four or five steps but his legs were unreliable and wouldn't take orders. His hand reached out to take the handle but, suddenly, he spun round. BigEars couldn't have told you at that moment what made him turn back. His eyes were sore with tears and he wanted nothing more than to get out. What he saw explained it. Melody stood with arm outstretched and the bottle lay, in a thousand pieces, splintered on the floor.

She ran to him and her arms twisted around his neck. Over her shoulder BigEars was still mesmerised by the glass, by the fragments, by the smash.

He felt the delicious warmth of Melody's lips touch his ear. His ear, one of the pair that had given him his name, that had baptised him again in his first year at school. One of the pair made useless by a disease that should have killed him.

"You heard it." Melody said, "You heard."