

THE COLOR OF SILENCE

The Southern California sun showered the expansive yard with a welcome, late autumn warmth, while a gentle breeze scarcely bothered the treetops. Uninterrupted blue sky and a well-manicured emerald lawn framed the picture perfect day.

A little girl with curly blonde hair and a smile as bright as the afternoon stretched out on a lavender blanket next to a floppy-eared cocker spaniel. The dog rested, its panting tongue a testament to its struggle to capture the slobbery ball that lay safely between its paws. The girl patted the dog's head and chose a new crayon to continue her drawing.

Several yards away, the girl's parents sat apart beneath the shade of a canvas patio umbrella. The mood of their conversation was less relaxed than the setting.

"She seems so happy, so content," said the girl's father, watching his daughter.

"She'll never be content—not like that," responded his wife. "She'll never be able to listen to a symphony or hear the words 'I love you'."

"Crystal knows we love her, and Ginger has already taught her how to sign the words."

"It's not the same. You know it's not. But it could be...if we try again."

He'd seen that hopeful look on his wife's face before, only to have it dashed with misery.

"It could also be like it was before. Do you want to put her through that again? The bleeding, the dizziness, the pain? You know what Dr. Stiller said about the first implant. Her body rejected it--wouldn't heal around it. He wasn't even sure why, except that maybe her system saw it as an intrusive foreign object. What makes you think it won't happen again?"

"He told me there was another option—a new kind of surgery."

He heard the hopefulness in her voice. Hope salted with desperation and a hint of guilt.

"And what if it *does* work? Are you ready for the years of rehabilitation? The time it'll take for her to learn to understand what she hears, to learn to speak?"

"Yes, yes." She was on the verge of tears. "That's why we need to do it now. She's almost four. The longer we wait, the harder it'll be."

Even had Crystal been able to hear her parents, she would have been too preoccupied. She was playing with Rupert. She didn't know his name was "Rupert," though she had learned the sign for *dog*. But she knew Rupert. She knew he liked to chase his ball, as he was doing now. However, each time he was about to grab the ball, a gust of wind blew it in another direction. First one way, then another. He could never quite catch it. Crystal laughed and clapped her hands in delight at his unshakable determination. She liked playing ball with him.

Her father stood and walked to the edge of the stone-lined patio. He looked out at Crystal. He didn't pay any attention to the dog's bizarre, futile chase, but he heard his daughter laugh and saw the joy on her face.

"I don't know, Coral. I just don't know," he said without looking back at his wife. "Maybe her body was trying to tell us something when it rejected the implant. Maybe...maybe sometimes nature composes its own symphony."

Crystal, tired of the "keep away" game, turned her attention back to her drawing, and let Rupert capture his ball. She found a new crayon and began adding another vivid arc to the rainbow she'd created. She was determined to use as many colors as she could.

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She knew this place. She knew it and didn't like it. It smelled. Everything was white and everyone had pretend smiles. When the door they were waiting outside opened, she tried to run away. Her father grabbed her and picked her up.

"I don't know what's wrong with her, Doctor," said her mother. "She's been fussing ever since we got to your office."

"She keeps signing *No*," added her father. "Nothing else, just *No*."

"Here you go, Crystal. How about some sugarless candy?" Dr. Stiller handed her an orange lollipop.

Crystal hesitated, then took the offered treat.

"How is her signing coming along?"

"She has regular lessons, and Ginger, her tutor, says she's doing well, even though she started late. But she doesn't seem to want to sign much," said her father. "At least not with us. We stopped the sessions after the surgery, and with all the recovery problems she had...well, I...I think it was hard for her to get started again."

"And what about you two? Are you learning to sign as well?"

"I sit in on her lessons whenever I can," said her mother. "Alan's been too busy."

"I see."

Her father shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "So Coral tells me she's talked with you about another new procedure that may work better for Crystal."

"Yes. It's still fairly new, but there's less chance of rejection. We could try another cochlear implant on the left ear, but..." The doctor held up his hands as if he wasn't very optimistic of a better outcome. "However, this new procedure completely bypasses the auditory nerve."

He held up a graphic illustration that was a cutaway of the auditory canal. Crystal saw it and didn't like it. She didn't like it at all.

She climbed down from her father's lap and went to the window. It was sunny outside, but not in her mind. Everything about this place, this man and his picture, poked at her, aggravated her. She didn't mean to get angry, but sometimes she couldn't help it...couldn't help what she did. She watched as a wall of clouds began rolling in. They were as dark as her mood.

"Even though the nerve on her right side was damaged when we removed the implant, we could use this technique on that side. We'll still use a tiny microphone behind the ear to pick up sounds, but we bypass the auditory nerve and transfer those sounds straight to the brainstem."

"How successful has this operation been?" asked her father.

"It's only recently advanced from the testing phase, but the results have been excellent, even though the procedure itself is more technically demanding. Of course, I have to tell you, like with the cochlear implant, there's always a chance Crystal may not respond well."

"You mean her body could reject this one too?" Before the doctor could reply, her father continued. "We don't want her to have to go through all that again. It was too much."

"I'm not pushing this on you, Alan. It's a decision you're both going to have to make. But I think the odds of a favorable outcome are good, and certainly outweigh the risks."

Crystal continued to stare out the window. The sun was gone now, blotted out by a menacing troop of steel gray clouds. It had even begun to rain. She wanted to go home, where she was happy, where it was sunny, where she could play with Rupert.

"I'll give you some more information to read. Go home and take some time to think about it. We don't want to wait too long, but we don't have to decide this today."

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"Are you drawing another picture?" Her mother placed a hand on her shoulder to get her attention. She signed the words, adding, "Can I see?"

Crystal handed her mother the drawing.

"Is that you?" she asked, pointing at the stick figure with long blonde hair. She asked again, pointing at the figure, then at her daughter. "Is this you?" Crystal didn't respond. "Is this Rupert? It looks like a dog. Here's a tree, and the sun, and a rainbow. You like rainbows don't you? There are so many colors in your rainbow. Let me see what colors you have here." She picked up some

of the crayons and began reading their names. "You've got *Sugar Plum, Yellow Sunshine, Magic Mint, Sky Blue*, and even *Atomic Tangerine*."

As she sometimes did, lost in the moment, Coral forgot her daughter couldn't understand a word she was saying. She quickly tried to sign something about the names of the colors, but couldn't remember how to do them all. Frustrated, she gave up.

"I wish you could understand me better, Crystal. If only we could talk together like..."

Crystal looked up and saw tears blooming from under her mother's eyes. She held out a finger and caught one. She held it close to her own face, examining it, then stuck her finger in her mouth to taste it.

Still crying, her mother pulled her close and hugged her. Crystal hugged her back and smiled.

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Crystal threw the ball and it rolled until it hit the wood stacked inside the red brick fireplace. Rupert chased it down, paused to sniff the wood, then grabbed the ball and ran back to her. She yanked the ball away from him and threw it again. She laughed as he chased it.

"Are you playing with Rupert?" asked her mother, walking into the room. She knew Crystal couldn't hear her, but she couldn't get out of the habit of trying to talk to her. But soon, soon she'd be able to hear everything.

After much talking and arguing, and many tears, she and Alan had decided to try the new operation. She'd had to convince him, but in the end he agreed. Dr. Stiller was right. It was worth the risk. She knew that--in her mind she was certain. But her heart was burdened with self-reproach and doubt.

Crystal signed something. Her mother tried to remember. Crystal signed again.

"Cold? Are you cold? Alright, I'll go get you a sweater, and then maybe we'll start a nice fire," she said, pointing at the fireplace.

On her way, the doorbell rang. She'd forgotten it was time for Crystal's lessons.

Like Crystal, Ginger had been deaf since birth. But her implant had been successful, and except for an occasional odd inflection in her speech, her impairment wasn't noticeable. That's what Coral wanted for her daughter. She just wanted her to have a normal life.

"She's very talented," said Ginger, looking at one of Crystal's drawings displayed on the fridge. "I've worked with many children, and this is more like the art of a seven or eight-year-old. Her use of color is very original. She definitely has an artistic side."

"Yes, she loves her box of crayons. But we've got big news, Ginger. Crystal's going in for a new kind of surgery that will help her hear. Isn't that great?"

Ginger looked thoughtful, but didn't say anything.

"What's wrong? I would think you, of all people, would be happy for her."

"I am happy for her. I hope with all my heart the operation's a success." Ginger hesitated, then asked, "What does Crystal think about it?"

"Oh she's too young to understand," said Coral with a dismissive wave.

"There are those within the deaf community who think any child, no matter what age, has the right to choose whether or not to have such surgery," said Ginger. "To them it's not so much an accident of birth as a variation of life. They believe being deaf is just a different human experience, not a disability."

"That's silly. Of course it's a disability. I'm surprised you'd say such a thing. You had the surgery. Didn't you want it? Aren't you glad you had it?"

"Yes, yes, I'd do it again. I was older than Crystal, but I did want it. I'm not saying it's wrong, but even with the surgery I'm still a deaf person. I'm still dependent upon a device to hear, and I don't hear everything the same way you do. I'm still different. I don't really fit comfortably into

either the deaf community or the hearing one. In a way, my implant makes me *more* of an outsider."

"Well I think that's nonsense. Who wouldn't want to hear if they could? And Crystal's too young to understand what it will mean for her life. She can't make that decision for herself, even if we were able to explain it to her."

"I guess that's true," said Ginger, though she didn't sound convinced.

"I was just going to get Crystal a sweater. She's in the den if you want to go in. After I get the sweater I'm going to get a fire going to warm up the house."

Ginger found Crystal curled up next to her dog. They were both lying by the fireplace. Crystal had her head propped on the dog's tummy, and was staring into the crackling fire.

Ginger was surprised by the fire. Coral had just said she was going to start one. Maybe she'd misheard her. She bent down where Crystal could see her and signed as she spoke. "There's nothing like a good fire on a chilly day, is there?"

Crystal signed *Yes*, then looked back into the fire. She was trying to pick out all the different colors she recognized within the flames. She had her own name for each and every one.

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She didn't know why her parents were so serious, so glum. It was a bright sunny day, and she was happy in the backseat, looking out the rear window. She saw one lonely little cloud in the sky. It almost looked like a dog. She thought of Rupert and subconsciously snapped her fingers—the sign she'd learned for *dog*. She thought about that cloud as the wind played with it, moving it and molding it until she was certain it looked exactly like Rupert.

When the car came to a stop she looked around. She wasn't happy any more. She didn't like this place. She hated it. She was so angry she didn't notice when the wind reshaped her cloud into something unrecognizable--something ugly.

She kept signing *No, No, No*, but her parents only kept moving their lips like they always did. She struggled as her father pulled her out of the car and held her against his shoulder.

"She remembers the hospital," said Alan. "She doesn't want to go inside. I don't know if I can do this, Coral."

"What do you mean? We have to do this."

"She's having a fit. I don't want to force her."

"It's for her own good." Her mother stroked her hair and tried to calm her with both signs and speech. "It's okay, darling. It's going to be alright this time."

Crystal was still crying and struggling as they walked through the enormous glass entryway. The further they went, the more she struggled. She was so upset her body began to tremble. Tears dampened her father's eyes as he held her in his arms. He wanted to sit and quiet her before they went any farther, but before he reached the waiting area, the ground beneath him began to move. He could barely keep his balance.

"Earthquake!" someone yelled.

Before anyone could react, the tremor ceased.

Still shaken, Alan put Crystal down in a chair and sat next to her. Everyone in the room was buzzing about the quake, some trying to guess its size, as Californians are wont to do.

"My God, that's the last thing we needed." Coral looked to her daughter and signed *It's okay*. Crystal stopped crying, but her look of dread didn't fade. "She looks so scared," she told her husband.

"We can't blame her. She associates this place with the surgery and all the pain she had afterwards. It's only natural she's scared to be here. Let's give her a few minutes."

"Okay, I'll go check in," said Coral.

"It's going to be alright. No one's going to hurt you." Alan knew she couldn't understand, couldn't hear him, but he felt like he had to say something. He hoped his contrived smile would calm her.

When her mother returned, Crystal had settled into her chair and stopped crying.

"They're ready for her." Coral bent down in front of her daughter and signed as she said, "Alright, Crystal, we're going to get up now."

Her father stood and took her hand, but as soon as they began walking towards the front desk, Crystal began crying again.

The brilliant sunlight filtering through the tinted glass of the entryway faded so abruptly that Alan looked up. A billowing storm cloud swept over them, shuttering the sun and darkening the sky before his eyes.

The downpour that followed was instantaneous and emphatic, stridently pelting the glass. Those who'd been watching the little girl's tantrum glanced up at the sound as a bolt of lightning streaked overhead. Everyone who'd been looking up at the unexpected onslaught was blinded by the flash. Belatedly they covered their eyes as thunder exploded in their ears.

Free of her father's grip, Crystal turned and ran toward the exit.

"Crystal!" he yelled, but could barely hear himself. It was only seconds before he could see again, but when he looked around he realized she was gone.

His ears still muffled by the thunder, Alan grabbed Coral's arm and motioned for her to follow him. They ran for the exit, pausing only for the automatic doors. Once outside, their initial panic gave way to wonderment. They stopped in their tracks, rigid with disbelief.

Crystal had run only a short distance away. She was swirling about, almost dancing, looking as if not a single drop of rain had fallen on her. Several yards on either side of her the rain continued, though diminished, but directly above her the clouds had parted and yellow sunshine was cascading

through. Crystal twirled around and around, laughing and looking up, her arms outstretched toward the heavens and all the colors of the rainbow shimmering there against a backdrop of sky blue.