

Hum

By Mary Warner

It had taken her whole life, an accumulation of fifty-three plus years, to figure it out. Mostly because it had taken her ears the entire time to succumb to the accumulation. It was as though her ears were stuffed with cotton and she'd only just noticed. It manifested in the continual way she had to ask her husband to repeat himself. He was mumbling under water, there was no other way to describe it, and he kept getting irritated at her constantly asking, "What?" Only, he wasn't under water, because they lived on dry land in a dry house miles away from any major water source except the indoor plumbing and besides, they couldn't breathe if they were living under water.

She wasn't very good at metaphorical thought. She was literal and it confused her. The reference to cotton plugging her up was as close as she could get without knitting herself into knots and leaving the subject at hand. She wasn't old enough for deafness. Hadn't ever listened to loud music because she was a good girl when she was younger and she had heeded her mother's warnings about excessive decibels. She didn't need to be told twice. One time sufficed and stuck with her forever and ever to the end of her days, which were a long way off, she noted. She was certain of that.

What she wasn't certain of was why she wasn't hearing what she wanted to hear. She'd had her ears checked a month prior, but the doctor told her, "Everything's fine." Only it wasn't fine. She just knew it, the way you know these things that doctors who barely see you for five minutes per visit don't know these things.

"What? What? What! Can you please speak up!" she'd demand in frustration.

"I am, fool woman! Why don't you listen louder?" her husband would reply. And he'd sit down to munch on a piece of crunchy toast, which she could see entering his mouth, but not quite hear as his teeth scratched the surface. The day she had her hand on the refrigerator handle while he was working his way through his third piece was the day she made the connection. The fridge had been humming along and then, suddenly, it wasn't. And a bit of the crunchy action made its way to her ears. Comprehension knocked her on the noggin. The refrigerator hummed and its racket interfered with her conversations. How rude!

As she wandered about the house that day, she noticed that most of her appliances were similarly impolite. The washing machine and its slurshing as it agitated and its hard whirr, whirr, whirr as it spun. The bathroom fan sounding like it was about to take off as it sucked water and odiferous vapors into an exterior netherworld. The dishwasher as it churned and whooshed. The freezer as it whined on the back porch. The television as it prattled nonsensically. The computer as it whizzed through its ones and zeroes. Add to that the neighbor's growling lawnmower and it was endless, the hum, hum, humming. This was what stuck in her ears, the background buzz of the mechanisms of convenience.

Once she had noticed, she couldn't not notice. It about drove her batty, until she decided to conduct an experiment. No more humming allowed. She enlisted her husband, who thought she was already batty by the mere suggestion, and she switched things off one-by-one, or unplugged them if there was no switch – including that pesky refrigerator, even if it had been the light bulb in her dark belfry. One evening of quiet during dinner, that's all she wanted. She had to see if the soft shooshing was a permanent resident of her ear canals, or if she was doomed to a life of hum-induced "whats."

As they settled onto the couch with their white bread, salami, and mustard sandwiches, she sighed at the silence. Relief, momentarily. And then, she heard it. With a beautiful clarity that should be reserved for the evening song of birds or the resonance of morning church bells, a loose wetness reached her ears. It moved through a constriction, like a shoe yanked from deep, moist clay. She swallowed in response, picked up the remote and allowed the television to resume its chatter.

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