

# THE UNHEARD

A MEMOIR OF DEAFNESS AND AFRICA

JOSH SWILLER



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deafness and africa

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Before there can be a utopia in the world, there must be a utopia in  
every human heart.

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—ANANDA MOYI MA

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## Prologue

We were sitting on Jere's living room floor in the dark, clutching our handmade weapons—two-by-fours with five-inch nails driven all the way through them, so that the business end of the nails emerged like fangs from the mouth of a poisonous snake. Whenever I shifted my grip, splinters from the rough, unfinished surface of the wood jabbed into my palm. It was almost ten o'clock, late for Mununga—late for any village deep in the Zambian bush. By this time on any other night, the villagers would have been asleep for hours. But not tonight.

Jere and I sat beneath the window, our legs touching. A half-gallon plastic jug of banana wine rested between his knees when we weren't drinking from it. The floor was smooth cool cement, covered in the middle by a single bamboo mat. Ordinarily, a couch made of varnished lumber and cheap scratch foam surrounded the mat, but we'd stacked that up against the door, behind a tall dresser made from *mpanga* boards stained the color of dried blood.

"This way," said Jere, my friend, the best friend I'd ever had, "if they try to come in through the door, the furniture will stall them, and if they try to come in through the window, we'll hit them with these."

He rubbed his weapon against the floor as he spoke, trying to show confidence. But I could feel his fear. It had a smell to it, sour and rich. As for myself, I wondered what it would be like to hit someone with a club studded with nails. Would I hear his screams? Would the club get stuck if I swung too hard? I imagined wrestling the nails out of ragged, bloody flesh. I wondered how it would feel to be beaten to death, to grasp that things broken wouldn't be fixed. It seemed like it would hurt.

I was terrified; I was exhausted; but I had also reached a state where terror and exhaustion were subsumed by survival and life became the immediate moment and nothing else. Weapon. Wine. Door. The bruise on my face. My heartbeat—this was all my mind could focus on.

I had become way too familiar with this state.

Thing is: beyond the furniture, on the other side of that door, was a mob. The mob wanted to kill Jere and me. We knew this because they had said, "We're going to kill you."

This is what almost two years of Peace Corps service had come to.

Jere picked up his makeshift weapon, a rake for his maize fields in a previous incarnation, and swung it a few times.

"You were brave stepping in the middle of the argument," he said. "Boniface and his men were quite drunk. I've never seen him like that."

"I had my hearing aids off," I admitted. "Didn't hear him. Didn't hear anything."

"Ai, I always forget about those things."

Someone smashed loudly into the door, knocking the dresser back an inch. We jumped up.

"They're on now," I said. "I heard that."

Jere nervously eyed the door, then spoke. "I hate this place."

An hour earlier Jere had been in a shouting match, the culmination of six months of escalating enmity, with a village elder named Boniface. Shouting matches were rare in Mununga, where keeping one's face and allowing others to do the same was integral to the culture. A crowd flocked to the health clinic where we worked to observe the argument, the two men, one tall and well built, one short and pear-shaped, screaming and waving their hands at each other. When I tried to break it up, Boniface the tall man, stormed out. He returned ten minutes later with a group of drunk men, threw open the door to Jere's office, pointed at Jere, and yelled—and I couldn't understand him because of the

background noise and the language barrier, so I'm paraphrasing here—"I'm going to reach down your throat and rip out your fucking soul." Jere, the Mununga Rural Health Catchment Area's senior clinician officer and the bravest, wisest man I knew, cowered behind his desk. We had seen what drunken mobs could do in this town; it wasn't pretty. The last mob had left a half-mile-long bloodstain in the road.

I turned my hearing aids off, and stepped forward, smack between the two adversaries and tried to calm Boniface down. That's when I was hit in the face with a rock.

"Does your jaw hurt?" Jere asked.

"No," I said.

It hurt.

We pushed the door closed, jammed a half section of the couch underneath the doorknob, shoved the dresser behind that. Then we picked up our weapons again. I took a swallow from the jug of wine. There were more loud noises from outside.

"Is that them?" I asked Jere.

"That's the river."

"Are you sure? That sounded like shouts."

"It's the river," he repeated.

I wasn't convinced. I grabbed his forearm. "I'm not good with sounds from far away, Jere. I've explained this to you."

"Yes, I know."

I looked him in the eye. The loud noise outside continued. "Is that really the river?"

"No."

I'm deaf—that's why I couldn't make out the source of the noise. The hearing aids in my ears amplified sounds several thousand times but from behind a closed door it was still impossible to tell the difference between the rustle of a river and the shouts of a mob. If the fat lady was out there on the dirt lawn sharpening a machete and singing for the two of us, I couldn't tell. Deafness made our precarious situation more precarious. But deafness was the reason I was here in Mununga in the first place, and it was the reason I'd come to love this place and call it home.

Jere and I stood tensed by the door. I bent to look through the keyhole, then jerked back with the thought that someone could jam a stick through the hole into my eye. Ten minutes passed.

"It's late," said Jere. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead, which was plastered with sweat. "It's very late. We've been here hours. I think they must have gone."

"I don't think so," I replied.

"No, I think it was just a drunken boast. I don't think Boniface would really kill us."

"Well, this is Mununga. It is Boniface. You saw what they did on Christmas."

"That's true," Jere agreed. "But I really think they've gone."

"You sure? Listen closely."

"Yes, I'm sure," he said, and as he spoke a rock shattered through the window, showering us with glass. It clattered across the room, disappeared in a dark corner. The smells of wood smoke, perspiration, and alcohol poured through the broken window in a sudden rush that made it hard to breathe. The noise from outside, unobstructed, grew louder—at least now I could be sure it wasn't the river.

Pressing my back flat against the wall, I curled my hand tightly around my weapon. Another rock came through the window, flying neatly through the hole the first one had made, cracking against the far wall.

"They're throwing rocks!" Jere hissed.

"Really?"

We drew back, watched the door, and waited.

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## part one

*Akashi ushilala, bakakumbwa insonshi ne mitenge.*

The village in which you do not sleep is admired for its roofing.





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## First Day

A month after arriving in Zambia, about halfway through my Peace Corps training, I visited Munungwa for the first time. I traveled north for two days from the city of Kabwe, the training site, to where the pavement ended at a lake town called Kashikishi; there, I caught a pickup that made its way up a dirt road, wracked and cratered like it had been cleared by dinosaurs. Villages, forests, marshes, and more villages passed by, giving way to glimpses of Lake Mweru, a giant kidney bean of water stretching to the western horizon. After three hours of this, at the crest of a large hill, a thick log rested in the road—a military checkpoint. A couple of soldiers got up from beneath a mango tree, collected a toll from the driver, and kicked the log out of the way. The road descended into the broad Munungwa River valley, crossed a one-lane bridge, and suddenly we came upon the town. There was nothing to prepare you for it: after forty miles of scattered villages and blasted road, the valley was full of activity.

A market spread out in all directions from the bus stop. It thronged with merchants, fish sellers, dealers of various sundries and vegetables, and toutboys—rambunctious, rosy-muscle young toughs who bullied travelers on and off of vehicles for tips. People were everywhere, walking, running, laughing, flirting, staggering, hauling packages on their heads, toting fish, birds, children. Children played kung fu tag. Teenage cigarette vendors sat in the sun without a drop of shade and sold one cigarette and one match at a time. Goats scavenged as men drove them along with sticks. When I hopped off the truck, all the commotion instantly stopped. A thousand pairs of eyes simultaneously turned and stared.

“Remember,” Administration had said to us Peace Corps volunteers as we prepared for this inaugural visit to our villages, “most of these people, the vast majority, have never seen a non-Zambian before. Many have never even met someone from another tribe. You’re going to be the first to look they’ll have at an American. You’re going to be ambassadors. You’re going to influence how a lot of people see the United States and the world.”

Cool, an ambassador. On the trip north, I had daydreams of heroic rescues and grateful young maidens. Donning a black cowboy hat, I would oversee Great Works of Development while learning Great Lessons about Humanity. “We are all one people,” I would write back home, “black or white, hearing or deaf. One family.” But the looks on the faces in the vast market crowd read less like gratefulness and camaraderie and more like abject shock; it was like a pterodactyl had just landed in their midst and they were trying to decide whether to back away slowly or run like mad.

I stood in the road for fifteen minutes. Then I caught the next pickup out of town.

A MONTH AFTER THAT I CAME BACK TO MUNUNGA FOR GOOD. Administration dropped me off in front of a blue and yellow shack with my clothes, a new mattress, a two-year supply of hearing aid batteries, and a loaf of fresh bread. Instantly, like they had been waiting all week just for my arrival, dozens of children ran to watch me unload. It was a beautiful day, the sky a gauzy, cloudless blue.

“This is it,” Administration said to me, peering at the kids and shack from behind the steering wheel of his Land Cruiser. “Now, promise me you’ll watch out for river snails. They live in freshwater, even clean-looking water like this river. You can’t see their larvae and once they get in your skin, they burrow through your bladder and then you pee blood for the rest of your life.”

“Ok. I’ll look out for them,” I said.

“Schistosomiasis.”

“Shit so what?”

“Schistosomiasis. That’s what the snail is called. The one that messes up your bladder.”

“So don’t go in the river?”

“No, I’m not saying that,” Administration said, holding up his hands in a gesture of innocence. “I’m not allowed to tell you what to do. This is a free country. You might not get it.”

On an earlier expedition, Administration had chosen Mununga as a site for a volunteer sole because of the river—it was that beautiful. In retrospect, he probably could have done more research. He was from Cincinnati and didn’t know any of the history of the area, didn’t know about its reputation for violence, didn’t know that urban Zambians, even the ones embracing the global economy and technological age head-on, feared Mununga. “Oooh, Mr. Joshua,” the city folk had said when I had told them during training about my placement. “You are brave to go there.”

“Why is it brave?” I asked them, but they shook their heads in that floppy, figure-eight way that could mean anything, and wouldn’t say.

After Administration drove off I faced the village children. They stared at me from a safe distance. We watched each other like that for a good five minutes before I broke the ice by chucking pebbles at them. They laughed and threw them back. A long, tin-roofed building, easily the biggest building as far as I could see, was built into the hill behind them, so with nothing better to do, after making friends I put my bags away and headed over for a look around. The boys trailed along. The first room I looked into was a small office with a large desk in the middle. The walls were white, faded, with cobwebs shading the corners. A chubby round-faced man who looked to be in his early thirties sat in the shaft of sunlight, gazing at a chessboard on the desk. He held a beer in his right hand, a handkerchief in his left, wore a wrinkle-free T-shirt that read BOB’S STORES. With the handkerchief hand, he jabbed the air over the board, perhaps planning his next move.

He jumped up when I stuck my head in. “Hey! You are the white man who will dig us wells,” he exclaimed.

“Yes,” I said. “How’d you guess?”

He laughed, throwing back his head. Then just as suddenly he turned serious. “But you are alone. They only sent one?”

“Only one.”

“Why only one? Mununga needs more than one.”

I didn’t know how to answer that. I introduced myself. He told me his name, Augustine Jere and that he was the clinic officer, and shook my hand in both of his.

I motioned to the board. “Who are you playing?”

“I’m playing with myself,” Jere said. “Do you play?”

“No. But I could learn to.”

He nodded, wiped his face with his handkerchief. It was an open face with thoughtful eyes, a swollen nose, and a ready smile—a trustworthy face. “You could,” he said. “White men are very smart.”

“No more than anyone else.”

“But you invented penicillin. And automobiles. And airplanes.”

“Well, don’t forget nuclear weapons. And acid rain. And Pet Rocks.”

He gave a thumbs-up. “Yes. Those, too. Very impressive. Maybe that’s why they only send one. Yes, I think one is enough. Even for Mununga.”

Enough for what, I wondered, but before I could ask, Jere leaned over the side of the desk and took two beers out of a small cooler, handing me one, gesturing for me to sit down. The cooler was full

vaccinations, he said with a nod, but as they were out of those and had been out for a week, might well use it to keep the beer cold. It has always been my way to plunge into new situations headfirst and after a little more small talk, I started telling Jere about wells. As he had declared, wells were what I was there for, but, I explained, when they were dug, it wouldn't be by me—the villagers would do the digging and the villagers would be in charge of everything. That was the Peace Corps philosophy—they called it sustainable development.

Jere wasn't very impressed. "Can't you just drill a borehole?" he asked. "Those take two, three days. And they go very deep."

"We could," I said, "but no one learns anything when you dig a borehole. A truck comes, drill leaves. What is the community going to do if the borehole breaks? Or if they need another well? Wait around for another volunteer to show up? No, the goal is to teach the community how to take care of itself."

This all sounded good and was based on decades of trial and error, but I had little idea how to go about putting it into practice. I did get some well construction experience during training, but that was just a single day digging a hole in a dirt field and mixing cement in a wheelbarrow. Then, to learn the community organization skills we'd need, the other volunteers and I practiced splitting up hypothetical jobs while eating vanilla wafers. *You dig. I'll mix. He'll cook lunch.* What that had to do with organizing communities wasn't really clear to any of us. But I didn't know the depths of my ignorance yet, and could never have imagined the consequences of going in blind. Community empowerment, sustainability, and personal responsibility—that, I told Mr. Jere, was all we needed to dig the wells.

"Sounds good," he said with a smile, but I wasn't sure if he believed it. He seemed eager to get on to the subject.

We finished our beers, put back another round, then Jere called out and a skinny boy with a large overbite appeared, took some kwacha—the Zambian currency—and ran off to get more. We drank those as well. Evening came and filled the sky with such reds and oranges it was like the valley had been slipped inside a sliced papaya. The smells of the day—sweat, cocoa butter, kerosene, and fish lying in the sun—were swept away by the evening breeze. I was getting buzzed.

"Let me show you the clinic," Jere said. He stood up and whacked his kneecap on the desk. He groaned. "That hurt."

Jere's office, another office, three treatment rooms, and a storeroom opened off the clinic's long outdoor hallway. A couple of yards away were two ramshackle buildings: one was a ward for infectious diseases and one was for AIDS. A film of dust coated every floor of the facility despite the efforts of a cheerful elderly volunteer, bent over and sweeping with a handful of reeds. Jere introduced me to Mr. Mulwanda, the inpatient clinician, a bald and sleepy man in his forties who spoke very slowly. Whenever Mulwanda smiled, frowned, thought, or talked, his eyes crinkled up and disappeared.

There were four things I remember most clearly about that first tour of the clinic. First: the pregnant women who lay on the hallway floor waiting for their water to break. Clutching sleeping infants and beset by flies, they timidly shrank away as we approached. They were children, most of these mothers, much younger than I was (I was twenty-three), but they seemed already worn down by their lives.

The second thing: a poster on a door highlighting a newspaper article that claimed AIDS originated from top-secret malaria tests carried out by the United States in the early eighties in Haiti, East Africa, and North America's homosexual population.

"You don't really believe that, do you?" I asked Jere.

“Of course I do,” he responded. “Everyone knows about this.”

~~Third thing: the bats. They nested on the ceiling beams of every room, dark gray blobs like dead lanterns covered with hair.~~

“Should those be there?” I asked.

“Yes, they eat mosquitoes,” Jere said.

“But what about rabies?”

“Oh, that’s always fatal.”

The fourth thing: Jere and I exited the last treatment room to find a barrel-chested man in his mid-fifties standing in the hallway, his chin tilted so high in the air that at first I thought he was a patient with a sprained neck. This was Boniface.

“Ba Jere,” he said, in a remarkably loud and deep voice.

“Mr. Boniface,” Jere replied, eyes lowered, at once deferential. “This is our Peace Corps volunteer Mr. Josh. He has finally arrived.”

“Welcome,” Boniface said to me, in English.

“Pleased to meet you,” I said.

He stared at me from over his wide cheekbones. “You are from America. Come with me.” And before I knew what was happening, this Mr. Boniface was leading me by the hand down the stairs and down the hill toward the river, around huts and banana groves, past scores of startled villagers—quite a few of whom ran into their huts when they saw me—to a large hut distinguished by a rusty sheet metal roof; every other hut we passed had a thatch roof made of straw and mud.

Boniface opened the door, motioned for me to enter, sat me on a chair, and a young woman brought a glass of water that tasted like sand. It was dark; when my eyes adjusted, I saw that the room was large and well furnished—chairs, bamboo mats, a couch, a table, and three young faces peering at me from behind a doorway. Boniface took a seat, sped through—in English—a long list of greetings and salutations and blessings on our health and ancestors, and then told me, again in English, without prompting or pause, the story of his life.

He was born in Mununga way back before there was even a bridge over the river and you had to cross by canoe, or, in the dry season, by hopping from rock to rock. Then he had gone to school in Lusaka, learned English, served in the army, swung a pickax in a copper mine. Twenty years later he had returned to the village with only his clothes and his smarts and now he owned two shops at the market, both with tin roofs, and had three wives.

I missed a lot of what he said and was stunned by the speed of this introduction, but I grew excited as it dawned on me that I’d fulfilled one of the Peace Corps’ basic goals. “Find the village leaders they had instructed us in community development class—and here I’d found one, no looking.

“Congratulations on your successes, Mr. Boniface,” I said when he finished his story. He had talked for forty-five minutes straight, his chin pointed at the top of my head the entire time like the bow of an aircraft carrier.

“Thank you,” he replied. “Now tell me, you have come to my village to dig wells?”

“Yes, exactly. To dig wells.”

He nodded. “Mr. Joshua, there is no chief in our village. Our chief died and we are waiting for our next chief. With no chief the people look to me for leadership. I give them leadership. The people listen to me and do what I tell them. If I tell them to work, they work. If I tell them to dig, they dig. I tell them not to dig, they do not dig. So, what do you want me to tell them?”

Was this a trick question? “To dig?” I asked.

“No. It is not so simple. You will be digging very deep for water right? You won’t be working alone?”

“No,” I said.

“Yes.” He smiled as if he had just settled an obvious point.

“Yes?”

“No.”

“What?” I wasn’t fazed; I often had conversations like this. It was a common effect of trying to follow rapid speech with lipreading and hearing aids. Basically, with aids you’re constantly translating every line of language into itself—a concept that always makes me think of the interpreters in glass-walled and soundproofed rooms at the UN, the long rows of them with their dark suits and earpieces. What power these interpreters have! They could start a war with a few words here and there. But what if they miss a phrase? Maybe they just pretend they heard and make something up. That’s what I usually did.

Boniface leaned forward, gazing intensely in my eyes. “Mr. Joshua, you need workers, good workers. I have them. I think you and I are vital to each other. So if I organize your workers, what will you do for me? How will we work together?” He sat back, letting his words sink in. When I didn’t say anything he added, “Everyone knows white men have money and my roof is old, my wife is sick, and my children are hungry. We can work together.”

I realized then what he wanted, and felt foolish for not catching on earlier. Boniface just gave off that vibe like he had an agenda and he’d already figured out your place in it.

“Mr. Boniface, I can’t do anything for you except bring you clean water,” I said. “That’s how community development works. There’s no money involved. But clean water’s important. It will save many lives. People will work for free.”

“Are you sure?”

“No. Yes. What are you asking me for?”

“An agreement.”

“An agreement?” I repeated, and then I went further—too far. I often did; I couldn’t help myself—especially when dealing with someone who had, knowingly or not, taken advantage of my inability to hear. “You mean like a bribe? You want a bribe. I can’t believe it.”

“No, I do not.”

He looked uncomfortable. I couldn’t stop myself.

“Yes, you do. Unbelievable. I just got here.”

Boniface stood up from his chair and walked toward the door. “It was nice to meet you, Mr. Joshua,” he said. “I think you should leave.” JERE HAD INVITED ME OVER FOR DINNER THAT EVENING, FOR WHICH I was deeply grateful because I had no idea where to eat and I was drained from an entire day of being a space alien, all the villagers staring and pointing, freezing to the spot or scrambling off the path when I passed. Jere never did that. He treated me warmly from the first moment and made no assumptions.

Now it was night and we were sitting in his *insaka*, a kind of thatch gazebo. The only light came from a kerosene lantern and the distant stars. While his wife cleared up the bowls from the meal Jere produced a bottle of banana wine, and I peppered him with questions.

“Who is Boniface?” I asked.

“He’s a very powerful man,” Jere said.

“Like a chief?” I offered. “He kept saying that.”

“Not exactly.” He swallowed a glass of wine. “When you were at his house you didn’t say anything that might upset him, did you?” he asked.

“No,” I lied. “Of course not.”

“Good.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“Good.”

“But supposing I did, why would it matter?”

Jere looked around to make sure we were alone. He was, I learned later, from a different tribe, the Nyanja, who lived mainly in southeastern Zambia. Mununga, up near Zaire, was Bemba tribe. Because this wasn't Jere's home area, he had to be careful with what he said.

Then he told me a story that chilled my bones, one that in my nineteen months in the village was never far from my mind. The most powerful *ndoshi*—witch doctors—in the entire country lived in Mununga, he said. Shopkeepers traveled here from as far away as Zimbabwe, a three-day bus journey each way, to obtain an infallible talisman for the success of their stores. They came because—and here Jere chuckled uncomfortably—the talisman they needed was the dried heart of a teenage boy.

“A dried heart?” I interrupted. “No way.”

It was true, Jere insisted. Mununga *ndoshi* had the ability to reach right into a chest and pull out the heart of a business success, still beating. The heart-deprived teenagers were buried or abandoned out in the bush. The *ndoshi* dried the hearts in the sun with special herbs found in the forests and the businessmen took them back to the cities and placed them in altars above the front entrances to their stores, where, supposedly, they attracted customers like tropical ulcers attract flies.

It was a striking story and yet I couldn't tell if I was supposed to believe it or not. It sounded to me much like Indiana Jones.

“Things like that, Ba Josh,” Jere continued, “is why they call this place Gomorrah. That's why you have to be careful with what you say.”

I didn't hear him right. “This place is going to rah?”

“It's Gomorrah.”

“Gomorrah?”

“You don't like Gomorrah? Fine, it's Sodom.”

I felt like I was still missing something. “So wait, you're saying Boniface is *ndoshi*? He's going to freeze-dry my heart if I hurt his feelings?”

Jere shook his head. “I'm pretty sure witchcraft doesn't work on white people. I just want you to be aware.”

“Of what? Aware of what? He seemed kind of like a jerk, to be honest.”

“He can make things difficult. He can stop people from helping you.”

I thought about this. Those early days in the village I wanted to get as much done as possible, save as many lives as I could and make a difference and heal the world and so on, so I mostly had wells of help in my mind; and also, beyond bringing help to others, I was focused on a personal quest to find some help of my own. So I didn't really consider that Jere meant my own life could be in danger. But maybe he didn't either.

“So how do I get people to dig?” I asked.

Jere closed his eyes for a minute, rubbed his stomach.

“Carefully,” he said.

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## Deaf Not Deaf

I'd come to the village to find a place past deafness. I know that seems strange to say, I mean, do you eat burritos to find out what chocolate tastes like? Maybe you do if you've reached the end of your options, and I'd already looked everywhere else.

That first day in Mununga, Jere was the only person to ask me about my hearing aids and when I told him what they were, he responded with total disbelief. No one else in the village had noticed them or, if they had, they hadn't said anything. Maybe they thought the aids were large earrings all which the guys wore.

"Are those radios?" Jere had asked, pointing.

"Not radios. I'm deaf," I answered.

He laughed. "You're deaf? Come on, you're not deaf."

I could see how he might think that. We'd talked for hours, in quiet surroundings with little background noise and I'd been able to catch almost all of what he said and guess the rest. Jere spoke in a loud and clear voice and that was the key. In the States, I had pursued relationships with women for their speaking voices alone. Clear speech beat a pretty face any day in my book. In quiet places, with a loud talker and my aids, I could actually hear close to 80 percent—well enough that people didn't believe I was deaf.

"Check this out," I said to Jere and took off an aid, wiped it with a shirttail, and put it in his ear. When I turned it on, his eyes shot open and he jerked his head away. The aid fell on his desk and bounced. They were pretty hardy. Jere looked at me, rubbed the side of his face, looked at the hearing aid now beeping like mad. Smiling back at his stunned expression, I waited for his questions, mentally preparing the speech I had written for just such an occasion: *These are hearing aids. They take all the sounds of the world and turn them up louder. I can't hear without them, not a thing. You will need to talk loudly and face me when you talk, and I'll still miss some things, but I'll make up for it.*

Instead Jere said, "You ever read *The Odessa File*?"

"What?" I replied, startled.

"I have it at home. It's a great book. About the CIA. I will get it for you."

He left the room. I put the aid back on and considered that this might be the place I'd been looking for.

I got my first hearing aids when I was four years old. To that point, I was slow to pick up language, slow to show an interest in the world at large. I wasn't very social or curious. I mostly sat under the table in the front room of my family's big apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side and stared at the corner.

"That boy is slow," my grandfather decided.

Underneath the table were shadows and dead spiders, the ridges where baseboards fit together, the pattern of the wood floor, cities of floating dust. It had not yet occurred to me that the silence of things was an absence. Then my mother figured out I couldn't hear. There was no exact moment of recognition—it was more of a slow dawning. She took me to pediatrician after pediatrician, all of whom told her she was being neurotic and that I was just a delayed learner. Finally, one tested my hearing, and said, "Well, what do you know." We went downtown to the League of Hard of Hearing and I got fitted with hearing aids and was born for a second time, into a noisy new world that expected

things from me.

“I knew it the whole time,” my grandfather said when we got home.

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What the world now expected of me was no small thing. With hearing aids, I was supposed to hear. Briefly, my parents considered forgoing aids and sending me to a school for the deaf, but back in the mid-seventies, schools for the deaf were notoriously poor at teaching their students the English they needed to live independently in the hearing world. Rejecting that route, my mother instead found an audiologist on the Upper East Side, Adele Markwitz, who immediately set out a regimen to maximize my hearing. Adele had developed an intense and unconventional program for training hearing-impaired children. She did not believe in limits, excuses, or self-pity. I would wear hearing aids every waking moment, she decreed, attend regular schools, and three or four afternoons a week I would come to her office to learn how to lip-read and to speak.

At home, my mother supplemented Adele’s lessons with constant practice while my dad, a psychiatrist, was away at the hospital. Ma was a gifted painter who had dreams of pursuing her art, but with the birth of four sons in six years, two of them deaf, she gave up those dreams so we could pursue ours. Later, my youngest brother, Sam, who was born with less hearing than me (but I lost the rest of mine by the time I was four or five so we were pretty much even), would work with Adele as well. Sign language wasn’t part of our educational program, nor was learning about the deaf community. Sam, born four years after me, and my cousin Ben, born four years after him, were the only deaf people I knew until after I finished college.

Learning to function in the hearing world was hard work. Lipreading was the key to understanding the speech of others; after much practice I learned to recognize the difference in the shape of a mouth saying “please” and “thank you”; saying “peas” as opposed to “cheese.” I became quite good at it and could lipread from all sorts of angles: “The peas please, please pass the peas”—sure, no problem. Learning language this way made for an eclectic vocabulary—while only 20 percent of English syllables are recognizable on the lips, nearly 100 percent of all televised basketball coach profanities are. I learned many interesting words from Bobby Knight.

Lipreading was the warm-up; the real focus of my sessions with Adele was on improving my speech. Day after day, week after week, year after year, Sam and I labored to enunciate everyday words by reading from Babar, the Berenstain Bears, and Dr. Seuss. S’s were particularly difficult for me to say correctly—“The Grinch sssstole Christmasss”—I whistled them, hissing like a snake. S is the highest-pitched sound in English and even with my hearing aids turned up full blast, I couldn’t hear it, and it is difficult to say a sound you can’t hear.

Which points to one of the intractable problems I faced: hearing aids helped a great deal—the aids were invaluable actually—but they were as sensitive as two microphones shoved into my ears.

Flesh-colored, comma-shaped, aids wrap around the back of the ear then connect via a little plastic tube to a mold that fits snugly in the ear canal. Sound enters the aids, is amplified and sent into the tube, through the mold, and into the ear past the eardrum. A little way past the eardrum are cochlear, seashell-shaped tubes the circumference of quarters, in which fifteen thousand tiny hair cells wave and shudder with the incoming sound. These waving motions are conveyed via the hearing nerve to the brain, which then interprets them as downshifting trucks or growling dogs, clattering dishes or beeping timers, or often, if the sound came through hearing aids, just loud white noise. Hearing aids amplify every single sound they encounter, including the ones you’d rather they didn’t—your own voice, the vacuum cleaner, the bus brakes and baby cries, your mother calling you to do chores. And that noise is difficult to decipher, so hearing is not quite the right word for what hearing aids bring forth. Amplified 90 decibels, voices aren’t saying words so much as the idea of words. With



lipreading and guesswork, your brain has to turn the ideas into words—and while I did fine in quiet places, in noisy surroundings I was lucky to get a tenth of what was said.

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We worked hard at hearing. My mother spent hours every day laboriously repeating words and phrases that gave Sam and me difficulty. It's not that easy to say "the snakes slid through the sand," a hundred times before dinner, but she never once complained or gave up. On weekends, my father read entire novels to us. I was extremely grateful to my parents for their dedication though I have to point out one confusing aspect of their approach: despite all their work, they never wanted to talk about deafness. I don't think they were ashamed of it so much as they worried that mentioning it too often would damage my self-confidence, but I wasn't able to grasp that distinction at a young age. I was certain something was so wrong with me that it couldn't even be mentioned. If everyone avoids something, does that mean it has to be a bad thing, no?

It's actually not so hard to pretend deafness isn't there. It doesn't announce itself when it enters a room like a spastic limb or a Seeing Eye dog does. Looking at a picture, you can't pick out a deaf person unless you search for the hearing aids, and these can always be hidden under long hair or slipped into a pocket before the photographer says cheese. Then, if you believe that the quality of a person's image in the picture, his attractiveness and wrinklelessness and so forth, has a direct correlation on the quality of his life, you can easily convince yourself that the un-disabled, untroubled-seeming person in the photograph really is those things. *He's no different from us, he just says "what?" a lot.*

This is obviously mistaken. Imagining your underwear is gold doesn't make it so. But here's the rub: Adele's lessons worked so well that they reinforced the seeming legitimacy of downplaying my disability. Many people never realized that I was deaf. I could speak almost perfectly. You only picked up the faintest deaf accent if you were really listening for it, if I was tired, or if you were a highway patrolman and I was exaggeratingly slurring my words in a play for sympathy to get out of a speeding ticket. Like the high school sophomore at the college bar with a great fake ID, I could fool everyone into believing I was who I pretended to be—which enabled me to go places (Mununga, for one) I wouldn't have otherwise.

Great, yes, but it gnawed on me that this way of navigating the world was based on a fundamental, untenable position, a two-sided lie. To others: I can hear you; to myself: it doesn't matter how much I miss or how alone I feel so long as others think I can hear.

It drove me crazy. I kept doing it, it was all I knew. It drove me to Africa.

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# Varieties of the Deaf Experience, Part I

Growing up, the best release valve I had for frustration, deafness-related or otherwise, was fighting with my brother Zev. I have three brothers. Ari, the oldest, was always tall and well spoken, cut a good figure in adult company, kept his bed neat, and did his homework without being told. I was the second born, Sam was last. Zev, the third, nineteen months younger than I, was the only one of the four of us who didn't grow over six feet, but he offset any disadvantages his size caused with a gift for battle. On demand, he could tap into that pure energy mothers use to flip cars off their trapped children.

The two of us together were like gas and fire. Upset about a world that was always just this side of incomprehensible, I would push his buttons until a fight started. Usually we'd just brawl to a standstill and inside an hour we'd be calmed down and in front of the TV, chugging sodas and watching sitcoms. Picking fights was probably an unfair way for me to blow off steam, and to his credit, Zev always got his revenge, either physically or in more subtle ways, by twisting my perceptions of the things I couldn't quite hear.

"Why can't they just set a bonfire and attract planes?" I asked him of *Gilligan's Island*, having missed all the dialogue between Skipper and Gilligan and the rest—TV back before closed captions, being less a boob tube and more a string of inexplicable mysteries.

"Because they live in the future," Zev replied.

"They live in the future?"

"Yes, everyone in the world is dead."

"Everyone in the world is dead?"

"Yes. Are you going to keep repeating everything I say?"

"But I thought this was supposed to be a funny show."

Zev shook his head. "No. Everybody dies."

Take that and put it under your eight-year-old's pillow at night.

"I'm not going to school," I told Ma when she woke me the morning after Zev had explained the *Gilligan's Island* apocalypse. "Everybody's dead."

"Don't do this to me," she said.

"I'm not doing it to you."

But pretty quickly I got bored of lying in bed so I got up and watched her try to wake up Zev. Every morning, he clung to sleep with the tenacity of a pit bull in a death match. Ma'd strip the bed of blankets, sheets, and pillows, strip his body of all its clothes, and still he'd cling to the fringe of the mattress in a convincing paroxysm of a boy in deep sleep.

When she gave up, I ran to the kitchen, got a glass of water, and threw it in his face.

"I'll kill you!" He jumped up screaming. "I swear to God! You're dead!"

"You both missed the school bus." Ma popped her head in the room. "You'll have to take the crosstown." She gave us each two quarters.

On the way to the bus stop, Zev ducked in a bodega and bought two Twix bars with his money, then he boarded the bus without paying a penny. Who was going to stop him? He was six and looked about three and a half: short and thin, with small features and big round eyes. He gave me one of the candy bars and we ate together as we rode through the park.

So Zev and I battled. We broke knuckles; we chucked rocks through windows, Atari consoles through drywall; we swore to never forgive, forgave, fought again. Ari and Sam joined in on occasion, and

every three days the four of us ate through eight bags of groceries, every month two or more of us would have concerned teachers requesting a parent-teacher conference. When I was eight, Mom ran the New York City marathon, twenty-six miles through five boroughs, and when she got home, silver body-temperature cape still wrapped around her, she had to cook us dinner—Dad simply saying to her when she walked in the door, “It’s your turn,” and locking himself in the bathroom with the *Sunday Times*. Babysitting trumped marathon running—Mom didn’t argue.

Maybe this was why my parents largely ignored my deafness. Not because they were scared of damaging my self-esteem but because the collective energy of the four of us banging off the walls drowned out a quiet thing like the inability to hear. And maybe that’s not so bad. I learned to adjust, to think on my feet, forget what I couldn’t do, and focus on what I could. As a kid learns to swim by being thrown into the deep end of the pool, so I learned to get by in the hearing world. In a way, as much as it frustrated me, I learned to love being in the midst of incomprehensible chaos. I could pretend to listen as well as any politician could, which turned out to be an invaluable skill in Mununga. What was I but a politician those first few months?

Of course, there were plenty of moments when the devices and stratagems all failed, such as in sixth grade when I gave a long report in social studies class on a mythological hero named Herakools. I had spent a week researching the report, writing it in cursive letters, drawing illustrations of half-clothed Greek immortals for the cover, and tying the whole thing together with a spine of red yarn. Then I stood before the class and read the report with the solemnity of the bearded men I had seen davening over their books in temple. Herakools—it was a word I’d read plenty of times, but never heard. No one understood what the heck I was talking about. The last five minutes of class were reserved for my report, but so sure was I in my research that I went on long past the bell—which I didn’t hear anyway. Herakools went to Hates, after all. He was the son of Zoos. He wrestled with Care-boos. The teacher, a kindly man named Mr. Johnson, didn’t know what to say and let me talk into the lunch hour.

I was in tears after I found out why everyone in the class looked so confused. When Ma picked up Zev, Sam, and me from elementary school I was still in tears.

“What’s the matter?” said Ma.

I told her.

“Get over it,” she said. She wasn’t big on emotional displays.

“Herakools! Herakools! Oh that’s funny!” said Zev, sparking another brawl.

Pretty early on I developed a strategy of not trusting others with my feelings and trying to figure things out on my own. I read books voraciously, TV and radio being pretty much out of the question, but nothing I read had the answers I was seeking. *Portnoy’s Complaint* when I was nine, a series of biographies of Lou Gehrig (the greatest, no question) when I was ten, and *On the Road* when I was eleven: sex, cruel death, and drugs—an early introduction, but they didn’t seem applicable to my particular situation. People complained, died pitifully, and ended up in New Jersey; I knew that already. That’s where my mother’s parents were buried. But where was the wisdom on being deaf?

My parents, seeking to get my mind off my mind, encouraged me to find regular hobbies. I learned to ski, went to basketball camps, played on every Little League team, tied half-hitch knots out in the woods with the Boy Scouts. That still left some free time, so to give me something else to do besides harass Zev, my parents even had me take piano lessons. The teacher secured for this purpose came with impeccable credentials. She played in a professional orchestra and taught Bach to legions of children on the Upper West Side. Every week, she arrived at our apartment exactly on time and sat on the piano bench in the living room with perfect posture, in a white blouse and black heels, looking like she had just walked off the Lincoln Center stage.

“My students win awards,” she liked to say.

After four years of weekly lessons all I’d learned was how to smash my brother’s fingers in the keyboard guard and to play a passable “Heart and Soul”—a major feat in retrospect, as it never sounded like anything but rhythmic door slamming to me. In time, I did grow to appreciate music, slow jazz and Van Morrison in particular, but not in time for my piano teacher.

“I don’t think piano is Josh’s instrument,” she told my folks.

When we moved to the suburbs, the junior high school required all students without exception to take choir or band so my parents bought me a saxophone. For three years, into freshman year of high school, I sat in the orchestra pit through practices and concerts and pretended to blow my horn while the conductor, a preoccupied man with bad skin and a beard, did those conductor things with his stick. No one knew what to do with the deaf saxophonist—there’d never been one in the band before—but I talked clearly enough and did well in classes, so why, everyone figured, couldn’t I play a little Beethoven? He had been deaf after all. But in the cacophony of a full orchestra rehearsal, I couldn’t tell the difference between a good note and a bad one, a long one and a fat one, a short or a tall one, might as well have been sitting in a washing machine.

So twice a week, I slumped in my seat, the sax in my lap, and daydreamed of being anyplace else, a forest somewhere, in a battle, a desert, a tank, on a spaceship in a galaxy far away. The school finally released me from its musical requirements when I repeatedly (and not unintentionally) interrupted the spring concert my freshman year with wayward notes. It boggles my mind now that they had even insisted I sit in a room with a hundred instruments, every last one blaring. I mean, how was I graded on it?

When I was older and finally did begin to come across people who seemed genuinely concerned for me, who wanted to know what deafness was like, I didn’t know what to do with their sympathy. They were mostly female. They had soft hands, serious faces, and steady eye contact. “How much can you hear with your hearing aids?” these sensitive women asked.

I spread my hands about two feet apart. “That much,” I said.

“Really?”

“Well, maybe this much,” I said and closed my hands until they nearly touched.

“Oh. I’m sorry. That must be hard.”

When I kissed them, they smelled of baby powder. But it was best not to abuse such kindness. It felt like a sellout as well: trading the great and relentless mentor I’d been given in deafness for cheap pity. And afterward, the sensitive women never called, as I had explained to them I couldn’t talk on the phone.

In the end, after all the piano lessons and episodes of *Gilligan’s Island* and great works of literature, the only coping strategies that really took when I was young were starting fights and daydreaming. Causing trouble was the one guaranteed way to catapult myself through a world that didn’t really seem to care if I drifted off or not.

In my defense, I may have picked up this particular coping strategy of channeling instead of deflecting aggression from watching my father. “I can’t understand anything,” I would say to him, and we sat on his bed with Zev watching *Cheers*. “Why? What is the point of that? Why can Zev hear?” Dad would shake his head and pat my leg through the commercial break. As soon as the show was over he’d bark at Ma.

One time he shut off the television set and turned to me. “It’s just a television show,” he said. “You’re not missing much. We all have our burdens. Everyone does.”

“Really?” I responded. “What’s your burden? What’s Zev’s burden?”

Dad didn’t answer, though he’d seen and been through plenty in his life. Zev just rolled his eyes and

pointed at me.

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I think back to being ten years old. My parents threw a lot of dinner parties, noisy affairs with many courses and loud adults talking over each other and eating with gusto, and I knew that if I was lost in the din and couldn't follow what was being said, neither could Sam. I would turn off my hearing aid, look to him, and lipread hourlong conversations in complete silence. Having a brother to share this huge and unspoken experience with was invaluable, but after a while we'd get bored.

"This is dull," I'd mouth to him.

"It sucks hairy balls of shit," he mouthed back. He was six—Ari, Zev, and I had taught him much of his vocabulary by sitting on him and saying curse words until he repeated them back to us. "What the fuck are we going to do?" he asked.

"We could gross out Grandpa," I suggested. My father's father, the retired cardiologist with strong opinions, was moody and tight with a buck, a much better talker than listener, and liked wordplay, dirty limericks, and long jokes in which he could talk in a cockney accent or an Irish brogue. He was also an easy mark—grossing him out was a snatch, and furthermore, it threw him off for the rest of the evening—he'd become too upset to talk and just stare at his plate, seething at the decline of civilization. Sam went to the kitchen and got a handful of grapes, passed some to me, and we shoved as many as we could up our mouths and noses. Zev, also bored by now of the adult conversation, caught on and grabbed a few grapes from my hand.

"You ask," I mouthed to Sam.

He nodded, his head just above the table, grape-stuffed nostrils straining like the cocoons of giant insects.

He tapped Grandpa's arm. "Grandpa, tell me a story," he asked.

"Certainly." Barely looking at Sam, Grandpa took a prescription pad out of the breast pocket of his jacket and read something he'd written: "There once was a man named Begin and a man named Sadat. They sat down for dinner and the man named Begin said, 'Let's begin' but the man named Sadat said 'Who sadat?' 'I sadat,' said Begin. 'No, I Sadat,' said Sadat."

Grandpa cracked himself up and took off his glasses to rub the tears from his eyes.

"Wahh-choo!" I blew a grape across the table into Sam's lap.

"Wahh-choo!" Sam blew two grapes right into his water glass.

"That is disgusting." Grandpa thrust his pad back in his jacket. "You children. What terrible manners. Disgusting."

"WAHH-CHOO!" This was Zev. He held his face in horror. "Mom! Call Dr. Liebowitz! A grape flew out of my brain!"

"Enough!" growled my father.

We quieted down for a few minutes. But as the adult conversation continued, a steady unintelligible garble, and, as none of the adults relayed what was being said to Sam and me, it wasn't long until we caused trouble again. I couldn't help myself. I needed the charge. And on those rare nights when I didn't start up something, it was only because I'd sunk into daydreams of the things I'd do when I grew older, of the people I'd meet, and of a world where deafness didn't make a difference.

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## Phone Call

I had never heard of Zambia before I got the phone call from the National Peace Corps headquarters in D.C. telling me I would be living there for two years. In fact, I couldn't make out the name of the country that the woman on the other end of the line was saying so I had to grab the nearest person to relay the call for me. I was in southern Georgia at the time, where a girl I was dating was building houses with Jimmy Carter and the nearest person turned out to be a young man with a beard and a deep southern accent.

"Zambeeyah?" he said. I could barely understand him.

"Could you spell that for me?"

"Z. A. M. B. I. A. Y'all gon Africa?" He was from Columbus, Georgia. We'd been tacking up roof shingles together for a couple of days, but we hadn't spoken much because it was too hard for me to read lips, hold a conversation, and keep my balance while standing on a roof.

"Yeah," I said. "I guess."

"They speak African there?"

"I don't know. Probably."

He looked me up and down and shook his head. "How you gon heah that, if you ca heah t' phone?" He pointed at my ears.

"What?" I said.

"I said, 'How you gon heah that, if you ca heah t' phone?'"

"What?" I repeated.

"Zackly."

I researched the country in the local library. Zambia was good-sized, a little bigger than Texas, and landlocked in the middle of the cone of Africa. It rested high on the Central African plateau, much more than a mile above sea level. To the south was Victoria Falls. To the north, the tail of Zaire (the once and future Congo) tried to cut the country in two. Zambia was shaped like a fetus, with Lake Mweru (where Mununga is) nestled into the soft part of the head, and the land between the head and the curled-up body, Zaire. The country's borders, drawn up in a meeting of colonial powers in Germany in the 1950s, paid no regard whatsoever to tribal boundaries. Seventy-two different tribes were shoehorned inside and told to get along.

For a long time, because of its location, Zambia—or, more accurately, the tribes that lived where it came to be—avoided the worst of European colonialism. Slave traders found it easier to pillage Africa's coastal areas than the sparsely populated central plateau, and Portuguese missionaries visited only every once in a long while. Then in the 1870s, the famous and somewhat befuddled explorer David Livingstone crossed through the area looking for the source of the Nile. He was nearly a thousand miles off course, but nevertheless searched the Zambian river basins for years. Cecil Rhodes, a diamond miner and white supremacist (and originator of the famous scholarships bearing his name) became the territory's de facto dictator in 1888, when he obtained the mining rights. He mostly used the territory as a source of cheap (i.e., slave) labor for his mining operations in South Africa and ruled until his sudden death in 1902. The British government took over from the mining interests in 1902 and the territory was named Northern Rhodesia. In 1964, it became the independent nation of Zambia and Kenneth Kaunda was elected president.

On taking office, Kaunda declared himself an African humanist. Kaunda wrote two books describing his humanist philosophy and preached nonviolence at home while sending troops abroad to help support violent independence movements in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia, and other places. An emotional man, he was prone to weeping in public and carried a white hankie everywhere to wipe away his tears. In portrait photos, he gazes forlornly at the camera like he has just lost a child. He spoke often and eloquently of the patience, humility, friendliness, forgiveness, and all-around easygoingness of his people, but nevertheless was not against detaining them without trial.

In 1972 Kaunda declared a state of emergency, outlawing opposition parties. Over the course of the remaining nineteen years of his twenty-seven-year regime, he drove the national economy, once one of Africa's finest, right into the ground. After he left office, miles of secret tunnels were found, along with massive underground bunkers, one of which descended six elevator flights beneath a hidden entrance in a shantytown in Lusaka, the nation's capital. Yugoslavian engineers had built the bunker in the seventies and it was full of secret passageways, bookshelves that swung open when a hidden switch was touched, huge conference rooms walled in foot-thick steel. Kaunda claimed they were for security; his opponents claimed they were for torture.

Zambia was the third-largest producer of copper in the world after the United States and the Soviet Union, and when the market was strong, it kept Kaunda's state running smoothly. But when the world copper market collapsed in 1975 the country entered a long decline, culminating in a series of violent riots in 1991. These led to the first-ever free election, which Kaunda lost by a three-to-one margin to a five-foot-tall, bespectacled former trade unionist with a humongous forehead named Frederick Chiluba.

Kaunda accepted his defeat with grace, stepping down from power without a fuss, without the expected declaration of martial law. He gave Chiluba a tour of the imperial palace and then, weeping forcefully into his white hankie, climbed into his limo, and was driven away to a creative post-presidency career that included, among other things, a reputed coup attempt, a spell as a visiting professor at Boston University, and a televised appearance in the audience of *Dancing with the Stars*.

Chiluba had won 76 percent of the vote despite the fact that Kaunda had refused to update voter registration lists and had the army keep people away from the polls. That Chiluba and his party had won despite these and other shenanigans was a remarkable achievement, almost as remarkable was the fact that Kaunda had accepted the results. It should have been a time of hope, a brand-new leader after years and years of state corruption, but Zambia was in a bad way. In his first presidential address, November 1991, Chiluba told his countrymen:

When our first president stood up to address you twenty-seven years ago, he was addressing a country full of hope and glory. A country fresh with the power of youth, and a full and rich dowry. Now the coffers are empty. The people are poor. The misery endless.

Chiluba visited Washington, D.C., two months after his election. There, as a gesture of American approval of Zambia's movement toward democracy, he was offered the service of the United States Peace Corps. He accepted. He shook Bush Sr.'s hand and smiled for the cameras, a photo op that was replayed nightly on Zambia's only TV station. The country was thrilled. Kaunda had pursued friendships with leaders like chairman Mao and Saddam Hussein, and that hadn't worked out well.

Now, America, Big and Tall, winners of wars hot and cold, would help bring progress to Zambia for sure.

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Flashbulbs popped. Plans were made for a first group of twelve volunteers. My application was pulled off a pile, and a call went out to southern Georgia. It was relayed through a roofer who sounded to me as though his tongue was shot through with Novocain.

“Zambeeyah,” he said.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“Well, mebbe tha don ha phon dere,” he said.

“What?” I said.

“I said: ‘Mebbe tha don ha phon dere.’ Sheesh.”

I took a guess. “Maybe.”

“Zackly. Man, why you goin’ dere?”

I didn’t answer that, not because I couldn’t hear, but because it was a little too complicated to get into.



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