

Magic Ear

Fred unlocks his front door and tosses the keys into the little glass dish sitting on the entrance hall's table, just as he has done that a million times before. Instinctively, he anticipates his wife's response to the jumbled sound of metal on glass:

"Honey, is that you?"

But of course, that never happens. She is dead. The house is empty. Very empty, except for memories. It is even more empty now than it was when she was in the hospital. Everything is so final and permanent. It was never this empty before and Fred isn't sure how to handle it.

The staircase leading to their bedroom, is just ahead, but Fred pauses his ascent. He can't picture sleeping in that bed ever again, so heads back down to the living room and remains on the couch until dawn. He knows he can't stay on the couch forever, but also knows that at some point he must go upstairs. Life must go on, mustn't it? But, why?

It's been a week since his world crashed around him by Carol's doctor walking into the surgical waiting room and delivering the bad news. Fred has been having trouble "keeping it together" ever since. It barely helps that many friends stop by to see how he's doing. They bring meals, offer to do laundry, do his shopping, and some just come to reminisce with him about Carol. None of it seems real. He floats from day to day. Then one asks if he would like help clearing out Carol's things. He starts to assemble the automated response, "Sure, thank you", but within an instant everything stops. Or more exactly, his brain stops. It locks up his entire body, leaving him with only a blank stare, in response. Clearing the house of her possessions is something he never thought about. The idea of discarding her things, her private property, those extensions and adornments of herself drives home

the reality of her death more than anything anyone had said or done before. It means it is true, she is gone. She will never return. She will never use any of those things she once loved and cared for. It is over. Her closet full of clothes, her collection of shoes, her makeup, her jewelry, even the cherished childhood love letters he sent her, now belong to no one.

Only when his consciousness returns, can he answer:

"Thank you so much. Maybe next week we can talk about it, but not now. I'm just not ready."

Fred knows it must be done. Well maybe, it doesn't need to be done, but it should, or he'll never be able to move on with his life.

The entire week is spent combing through her things and figuring who should get what. Fred and Carol never had children, so there are no obvious recipients for many of her possessions, but Fred knows who may want what and separates everything into neat boxes for deliver. The rest is packed for the Salvation Army or the curb.

Preparing for bed and thinking he has finally completed this most difficult task, he notices one more thing he had overlooked. On her bedside table is a small brown box, which he assumes contains earrings or some other jewelry. His throat tightens with emotion when he discovers its content. An item that brings back memories of the fun they had teasing each other about how often they misunderstood what the other had said, especially because it often had nothing to do with what the other had actually said. The first memory that comes to Fred's mind is when Carol looked out the window and said, "I guess it's Windy." Fred distinctly remembers answering, "No, it's Thursday."

He had forgotten all about her hearing aid, but there it was. Probably the most personal item Fred had to dispose of so far. His first thought is: *I can't throw it away. She needs it. It was expensive. She'll be looking all over the house for it, if she can't find it. Stupid! She's dead! She'll never need it.*

Now with both in their 70's, each had hearing issues, but Fred never gave in. According to him, hearing aids are too expensive, and, according to him, he didn't really need one. Even though he hated to spend the money, he didn't discourage Carol when she wanted to buy one. As long as it wasn't too expensive. The one she ordered, on-line, is the type that goes behind the ear with a little clear tube that loops around into the ear canal. It wasn't very expensive, because it didn't require a doctor's prescription or any special device to control it, other than a blue-tooth cell phone app. It was easily mass-produced, and fit most everyone's ear and budget. Although Fred insisted he didn't need one, he was always curious about how well it worked. Of course he would never try it when Carol was around, for if she saw him, she'd never leave him alone until he got one too. Well, she's gone. She'll never know, so he sticks it in his ear, flops back on the bed to watch TV, and thinks, *Not bad.*

He sleeps all night with it in his ear. The next morning Fred is awakened to a faint voice saying, "Honey, get up, its 6:30, you're going to be late for work."

At first, it was the most wonderful and beautiful experience he had had in weeks, then it wasn't. Now fully awake, Fred realizes it was a dream. But, how wonderful a dream. It was exactly how Carol had awakened him many times before. He looks at the clock showing 6:31 and thinks, *Pretty clever dream, seeing it even got the time right.* Realizing the hearing aid is still in his ear, he pulls it out to get ready for work. It squeals with feedback during its removal, but intertwined within the squeals, he hears someone say, "Stop!". He does, for a moment and sits there puzzled, with his eyes darting around the room for its source. Eventually, and cautiously he says,

"Is someone there?"

At first there is no reply, and then he hears, in that same familiar voice that just awakened him, "Honey, it's me."

Falling back onto the bed, Fred stares at the ceiling and slowly whispers, "Carol? ... Is that you?
... Where are you?"

"I'm right here."

"What do you mean; right here? You can't be here, you died."

"I didn't exactly die, I was killed. Killed by that incompetent jerk of a surgeon they gave me."

Fred springs off the bed, looks skyward and yells out to himself, "Wait, stop you idiot. This can't be happening. I can't be talking to her. It's got to be a psychological trick my mind is playing on me because I miss her so much and because I hate that damn surgeon so much for what he did to her. None of this can be true. It has to be a dream."

He sits back down on the bed with his eyes squeezed shut and his full concentration on the hearing aid, now pushed back in his ear. He hopes for her rebuttal insisting it is true, but it never comes. All he hears is a constant beeping in his ear, signaling low battery. The beeping stops and everything goes dead.

Oh my God, I know I'm going crazy.

Still astonished, he pulls himself together, knowing he'll be late for work if he doesn't leave now.

All day at work he can't get this morning's experience out of his mind. On his way home he wonders where to get new batteries for the hearing aid, or if he even should. He has nearly convinced himself that this morning's episode was obviously just the result of the mental exhaustion he's been experiencing since her death. So rather than taking a side trip for new batteries, he goes directly to the subway and heads home. During the ride, he notices an ad posted along the arch between the windows and ceiling of the car. In bold type, it says:

WRONGFUL DEATH? Call Hertzog and Smith at (555) 189-2353.

Like many, Fred's immediate reaction is; *Scum-Dogs! Doesn't the world have enough misery without lawyers adding to it. Their commercials, on TV, turn my stomach.*

The train rumbles along to the next station, all the while with his eyes glued to the ad and his brain developing the thought;

Those guys may be scum, but there is no better example of "Wrongful Death" than Carol's death; however I can't even imagine associating with that slime, Hertzog. This isn't about money, it's about getting to the truth and punishing those who failed her. Maybe I should.

Days go by and both the hearing aid and the Wrongful Death concepts gnaw away at him. Finally, he takes the hearing aid to a local jeweler to see if they have a watch battery that may fit. They do. That night, he installs the battery, puts the hearing aid in his ear, and crawls into bed, hoping to pick up with Carol where he left off. Nothing. When the eleven o'clock news is about to end and he can barely stay awake any longer, he hears a faint voice say, "Hi honey. It's me. I've been hoping we can do this again."

Cautiously he replies, "Are you really here?"

"Yes I am and I have been watching you. I saw you get new batteries and I couldn't wait until you put them in. I also saw you write down the lawyer's phone number on the subway. Are you going to call him?"

"Thank God, you're back. I thought I was imagining things the other morning. Do you think I should call him?"

"Yes, that damn doctor needs to be exposed so this never happens again, to anyone."

"Are you sure he actually caused your death?"

"Yes. Believe me. I could see and hear everything as my spirit hovered above my body. It is true what they say about out-of-body experiences. I had one. The doctor was panic stricken. I heard him say, *Shit, I told you to hold that fuck'n retractor out of the way. Now look at what you made me do. He threw his scalpel at the nurse and stepped back from the table yelling, 'Someone stop the goddamn bleeding. Someone do something!' Then I heard the anesthesiologist say, 'We're losing her.'*"

"Oh my God, that must have been terrifying."

"Yes, at first, then no. Actually, it became rather peaceful. I don't know why, but it was. I was upset about you; however, and hoped you'd be okay without me, but then I realized what had happened and how something must be done to stop this guy from ever doing this to anyone else, ever again."

"Don't worry about me. I can go on now that I know we are still together. What about the lawyer? If I contact him, how will I be able to prove anything to him?"

"I don't know. Take him my hearing aid and I'll try to get through to him, just as I do with you."

"But what if it doesn't work, he'll think I'm crazy, and to tell the truth, I'm not so sure I'm not."

"We won't know unless we try."

Fred does exactly what Carol suggests. He meets attorney Hertzog and explains his case. The lawyer tries to hide his glee about the potential multimillion dollar lawsuit, while also pretending to commiserating with Fred about the loss of his wife. The glee rapidly dissipates when Fred retrieves the hearing aid from his pocket and holds it out, saying,

"You're going to think I'm crazy, but if you have any questions you can simply ask my wife. Here, take this."

The lawyer takes a step back and keeps his hands to his sides, so as not to acknowledge Fred's offer. After the initial shock, Hertzog slowly moves forward and accepts the device. He knows that even if his client is crazy, he's not. It's better to play along with him than to take the chance of Fred walking out, so he humors him and holds the hearing aid next to his ear. Fred and he both try to coax a response from the inanimate object, with no success. The lawyer tells Fred, in a voice typically used to humor injured children,

"Don't worry Fred, everything will be okay. I'm sure we can get everything we need from the hospital."

Fred senses another of his devastating headaches coming on, undoubtedly from both the embarrassment and frustration he experienced at the lawyer's office today. He takes a couple of aspirins, goes upstairs, lies down, and tries to contact Carol again through the hearing aid.

"Carol, are you there?"

At first nothing. Then more rapidly than before, "Yes I am, and I'm so sorry that damn lawyer couldn't hear me. I tried, but nothing happened. I have no idea why."

"So you heard and saw everything?"

"Yes."

"What do you think? Will the lawyer get anywhere, even if he can't hear you?"

"Maybe, but who knows what information was put in my medical record. The staff was extremely intimidated by Dr. Schmitt. It also looked as if he may not have been the only one responsible for the screw-up. I bet they all covered for each other and never said a word about it to anyone."

"So now what?"

"I don't know, honey. Let's wait until we hear back from the lawyer before we try anything else. All I know is; I really miss you, and at least now we know that death is not as final as we thought. I love you."

"I love you too. My head is splitting and I need to get some sleep. I'll wear the hearing aid from now on, so if you need to talk, at any point, you can. I'll always be here for you. Good night sweetheart."

"Good night."

Weeks go by. Fred and Carol have numerous conversations with each other, even in public. Fred is beyond trying to hide his discussions with Carol and just doesn't care who hears. So what if people avoid him just because he appears to be out of his mind? It doesn't bother him. Even his lawyer is growing weary of him, especially when he discovers there is nothing in Carol's medical record implicating the surgical team. He knows the suit will go nowhere and tells Fred he's dropping the case.

Fred spends more and more time talking to Carol every day until, eventually, his unusual behavior causes him to lose his job. The HR department says it is because of his frequent absenteeism. They chose that excuse, rather than admitting other employees were afraid of him and had complained to HR about his obvious mental instability. Fred doesn't seem to care why he was fired or if they thought he was crazy, or much of anything. When he is escorted out of the building he is heard to say, "Don't worry honey, I'll fix this and then we can be together again."

Because of his conversations with Carol, Fred knows the truth about death. It is not the finality everyone thinks it is, so he fears nothing. He also knows no one is going to help him bring justice to that butcher, Dr. Schmitt, so he decides to take things into his own hands. That night he and Carol

have a long talk about his plan to do exactly that. She tries to talk him out of it, but he insists it must be done, if for no other reason than to honor her and save others.

Today is the day, but Fred can't go anywhere. He is confined to bed once again. Another one of those damn headaches. So, he spends most of the day just laying in bed, reminiscing with Carol about the wonderful life they had together. Carol agrees, but spends most of her time trying to talk him out of doing anything stupid.

The next morning arrives and Fred feels strong enough to carry out his mission. He pens a letter to the hometown newspaper telling them all Carol had told him about her botched surgery. On his way out of the house, he retrieves a butcher knife from the kitchen drawer and hides it in his overcoat. He drops the letter in his mail box, and starts to lock the front door, but stops. *Why bother?* he thinks so he simply continues on to his car.

Upon his arrival at the hospital, he heads directly to the cafeteria where he buys a cup of coffee and takes it to a table near the entrance to the physician's lounge. There he sits, arguing with Carol and waiting for the right moment to arrive. It does when he spots his target exit the cashier stand and head for the lounge entrance. Fred leaps to his feet, pulls the knife and starts flailing it in the air, all the while shouting,

"This is for Carol, you murderous bastard!"

The shocked doctor drops his tray, screams for help and runs for his life. Fred gains on him, raises the knife ready to plunge it into his back just as two shots ring out. Immediately, Fred's body crumples to the ground.

Unseen within the cafeteria were two police officers having lunch, after delivering a prisoner to the ER. When they first sat down, both had noticed Fred talking to himself. It raised their concern

about his mental state and possible instability. When Fred jumped up, waving the knife, and screaming nonsense, they both instinctively leaped into action too, each with guns drawn. The officer closest to Fred had the safest shot trajectory, so he took it, twice.

One officer kicks the knife away, while a couple of nearby doctors, including Fred's intended target, attend to Fred. One doctor starts CPR, and Dr. Schmitt starts mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Dr. Schmitt's head is so close to Fred's, he isn't sure if what he hears is the wheeze of a sucking chest wound or what sounds more like the high pitch wail of a woman's voice somewhere near him. Upon closer examination, he notices a hearing aid dangling from Fred's ear and soon realizes, it is the source of the sound. A familiar sound to him. A sound he has heard many times before, when delivering the bad news of a patient's death to some poor woman following one of his failed surgeries.

With all hope lost for Fred's survival, his lifeless body is lifted onto a gurney and removed from the cafeteria. His hearing aid remains on the floor mixed in the heap of bloody napkins used in an attempt to stop the bleeding. Dr. Schmitt notices it before anyone else and remembers the ghostly sounds it made. He sticks it in his pocket for later examination and heads to the restroom to wash up and go home.

Within a few hours, Dr. Schmitt returns to the hospital. Not the way he left, but by ambulance. The ER docs do everything they can, but their patient is so badly injured none of them even recognizable who he is. As desperately as they try, nothing can be done to save him. After calling his time of death, one asks an EMT, "What happened?" The EMT says it is hard to say, but the tractor-trailer driver, that crushed Dr. Schmitt's car, explained it to him this way:

"It was the strangest thing. It was terrible. I was flowing with the expressway traffic when this guy shot down and cut ahead of me at the bottom of the entrance ramp. He must have been doing more than 70, yet left little room between us, so I let him in. He was so close, I couldn't even see his

tail lights over my hood. Then all of a sudden he slammed on his breaks. I rolled right over the top of him. It all happened so fast and unexpectedly. There was no way I could have stopped. I've been driving over 40 years and have never had an accident. This is terrible. There was nothing I could have done. That idiot! It's all his fault. Now he has ruined both of our lives."

It takes about a week for the autopsies and police reports to be compiled and released to the press.

One of the nurses, who was in the OR on the day of Carol's death, notices the headline above an article on a waiting room newspaper. It mentions the hospital, so she stops to read it. It tells about the hospital cafeteria incident and ironically the related, same day car accident of Dr. Schmitt. It's a three part article including a copy of Fred's letter, Fred's autopsy, and an attempt to explain Dr. Schmitt's accident.

It starts with Fred's letter to the paper which explains how he and his wife blame the hospital and their incompetent surgeon named Peter Schmitt for her death. It goes on to describe everything that happened in the OR that day and skeptically quotes Fred as saying everything is absolutely true, because he and his deceased wife talked about it through a channel they had developed through her hearing aid. The nurse certainly doesn't believe the hearing aid story, and knows the average reader will think Fred is nuts, but she does know, what he described is absolutely true. No one could know what he described unless they were there. She continues by reading the autopsy section. It defines a single gunshot to the head as the primary cause of death and a shot to the chest as an secondary cause. While describing the head wound, there is mention of another item: a tumor on the left side of Fred's brain in the area used to understand speech. The article suggests this Wernicke's Area abnormality may have been the reason Fred thought he was hearing his wife's voice. However, the

nurse is still amazed with the accuracy of his story and finds it easier to believe he actually talked to someone than it was to believe his diseased brain made it all up.

The article continues by linking the irony of Dr. Schmitt's accident to Fred's assassination attempt. It provides the fairly obvious cause of death as multiple organ failure based upon how devastated the body was. However, the root cause was not so obvious. After reviewing the car's internal computer system, it was discovered the automatic breaking sensor had detected an imminent collision which forced it to slam on its breaks. However, according to the truck driver and other eye witnesses, there wasn't anything ahead of his car, when the incident occurred. Further investigation revealed the collision avoidance system, had received numerous external blue-tooth signals which modified its software just before the collision. Investigation of the crash site revealed only two blue-tooth enabled devices, the doctor's cell phone and a single, blood-soaked, hearing aid. The article concluded with:

“Seeing neither are a very likely source, further investigation is needed to understand how or why the car's software was modified.”

Only Fred and Carol know the answer to that.