

THE QUARRY

Hard of Hearing

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Aaron's parents were sitting on an uncomfortably small couch just behind their son, watching him with worry creeping onto their faces. Aaron's eyes were glazed over as he stared at the moving pictures on the TV screen. His head snapped away from the cartoon, towards the hall. Only eight years old, the young boy had a heavily cheerful demeanour.

'I'll get it!' he said, and swiftly stood up and headed for the front door.

His mother smiled half-heartedly, watching him go. 'That's the third time tonight.' she whispered to her husband. 'I haven't heard a single doorbell, have you?' she asked, rearranging herself on the lumpy lounge as anxiety edged into her tone.

'Nothing.' His Dad confirmed solemnly, rubbing his tired eyes.

'What exactly did the Doctor say again?'

'A form of tinnitus... they think.'

‘They think!? What do they mean they think, Andrew?!’

‘I don’t know.’

‘It doesn’t seem too bad now, maybe it’ll get better!?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Can’t they do anything? Aren’t there treatments for tinnitus, or whatever he has?’

‘I don’t know, Mandy.’ The strain in his voice communicated to his wife, he knew just as much as she did, which was just as much as the doctors did.

Mandy couldn’t keep quiet. ‘He said it was getting louder, the ringing I mean, does that mean it’s going to keep getting worse? What if he has this for the rest of his life?’

‘Breathe,’ Andrew interrupted.

‘When he was born he was perfectly healthy, and we’ve done everything right, how could this happen to us? I don’t...’

He clasped her hand with his own and together they breathed in deeply. A thousand dreams for a perfect child had begun to drift away as their nightmare drew closer.

‘Mum! Dad!’ Aaron burst back into the living room with a small, ragged ball of fur in his arms. ‘He’s so soft, can we keep him?’

The bundle of dirty fluff peeked out from Aaron’s arms, and the parents both jumped. A fake smile plastered the mothers face as she leaned in to whisper into her husbands’ ear ‘I think I’ve seen that cat hanging around recently.’

‘Those eyes,’ replied Andrew, ‘seems unnatural.’

‘What do we do?’ Although neither of the parents wanted this strange creature in their house, they could not deny the unbridled joy in their damaged son’s eyes.

Aaron couldn’t decide between fish & chips or a burger. He really loved fish & chips, but he’d had that for dinner just yesterday. Aaron’s diet had become poor since he’d moved

out of home, and as he stood in the local chicken shop's line his mouth began to water at the prospect of another greasy dinner. Staring down the menu, he noticed many of the customers were looking his way, embarrassment etched onto their faces. Turning slowly, Aaron was greeted by a rather angry looking man who seemed to be yelling at him.

'Oh, hello there,' greeted Aaron. 'Is there a problem?'

Taken aback, the angry customer lowered his voice a little. 'You cut the bloody line!'

Aaron could only just make out the man's words. 'Oh, really I didn't notice, so sorry.' He stepped to the side for the slightly overweight individual to take his rightful place. The man mumbled something about Aaron being deaf on his way past. He only caught a little of this, the buzzing in his ears muffling the insult. After waiting in line quietly he ordered fish & chips and once they were done Aaron walked back to his apartment, just down the road.

Opening the door, he was greeted by Softy who rubbed himself in-between Aaron's legs, looking up at him with his dark, red eyes. Aaron placed his take-away on the kitchen table, grabbing cutlery. Softy jumped up on the bench and sat patiently. He was surprisingly agile for a sixteen plus year old cat.

Aaron couldn't always hear Softy's meows. Sometimes they were blocked out by the sharp ringing. Therefore, Softy communicated through slight ear movements, blinking and licking his chops. It was a language Aaron knew well. Tonight, the message was simple. Aaron cut off some fish and placed it on the bench. He smiled, watching the cat play with his food, knocking it back and forth before claiming the trophy in his mouth.

Softy sat down after finishing his titbit and blinked.

Aaron much preferred cats to humans. At school there had been little sympathy for those with learning challenges. Often Aaron had found comfort in his hearing impairment blocking out teasing voices.

'You're welcome.' Replied Aaron, a smile began to spread across his face, but faltered as Softy maintained eye contact. Softy blinked again, slower this time, his eyes almost humanlike as they conveyed their thankfulness. Aaron was a little unnerved, unsure what the feline was trying to tell him, but responded with a blink of his own.

Later that night, Aaron tucked himself into bed, Softy hopped up, and instead of settling at the end, he snuggled next to his owner. Aaron 's brow furrowed, but he didn't think much of it, due to how cold it was tonight.

When Aaron awoke, glancing at the clock, it was only 3AM. Softy wasn't on his bed. He must have gone for a drink. Closing his eyes once more, the sound in his ears was now a loud chirp, as if a smoke alarm had been set off in his brain, to warn him.

Aaron dragged himself up, his feet flinching at the cold bedroom floor. Wandering out to the living room, there was no sign of Softy. Aaron called out to no avail. As he moved through the room, the chirping sound seemed to be getting slightly louder. Making his way into the kitchen, he noticed the window was ajar. He didn't remember leaving it open. He left a small saucer of ice-cream under the window, then went back to bed, the alarm receding into a low hum.

Sitting in front of a computer screen for eight hours, looking at mortgages, was usually rather easy for Aaron, as his condition blocked out many different office sounds. Today however, the hum between his ears was a low rumble like distant thunder. The rustle of the air conditioning, buzzing of computer monitors and casual conversations snuck past the rumble. He hadn't known that the photocopier could make such an annoying beeping sound, or the door hinges to squeak so violently, so often. Through all this sound, thoughts of Softy hadn't stopped plaguing his mind since he'd found the untouched puddle of ice-cream this morning. Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, Aaron noticed a loud tapping sound had entered his mind, joining the other office sounds to create the beginning of a painful headache.

After a few moments, he realised the tapping was his own fingers rattling on the desk, continuously drumming an anxious tune. There was no point for him to be here if he couldn't

focus on his computer screen. Slowly, Aaron got up, walking past the other cubicles, his fists clenched. It was only mid-afternoon, but the only thing he could think about was Softy.

On the train home, the sound in his ears changed. Now it was like radio static. The train rattle echoed through his thoughts as Aaron flinched a little. It was unusual for any sound to be this loud for him. He got off at the next station, deciding to walk home. It was a longer walk than he'd expected, and sweat drenched Aaron's, now creased shirt, when he found himself home much later than usual.

He hoped that Softy would be waiting for him when he opened the door, rubbing in-between his legs to greet him. Aaron opened the door slowly, no one to greet him. Dragging his feet into the apartment, he realised he hadn't picked up anything for dinner. Looking in the freezer there was a packet of oven chicken nuggets. 'They'll do.'

As the nuggets were cooking, Aaron wondered what the best course of action was, in finding Softy. Should he put up a poster? Or ring the vet? Maybe one of the neighbours had seen him. A buzzing filled his head as he attempted intelligent thought. For once the buzzing seemed to be outside his head. The noise drew his attention to the overhanging light in the kitchen. Aaron wondered if it had always made that sound. He imagined there was some sort of bug trapped inside the light, flapping frantically to escape. A thought popped into his head. What if Softy was trapped somewhere dark and alone, unable to come back to him? He wished his condition would take over, bringing his mind back into the solace of a familiar ringtone. The light didn't heed his wish, instead prying open his ear drums to crawl inside his brain. Softy missing, his tinnitus failing him, this stupid buzzing light, Aaron couldn't take the pressure, he lashed out at the overhanging light, knocking it so hard that half of it fell, with the last remaining wire still connecting it to the roof. The light immediately went out. Aaron breathed, as he shook his throbbing hand.

Grabbing his phone, he found his mother's number and texted his situation. It was unlikely she'd reply for a while, but she'd know what to do.

The chicken nuggets were slightly burnt as he cut through them in the dark, separating a little for Softy. Aaron stared at the lonely crumbed piece of chicken, his expression forlorn. Checking his phone, there was no reply for his mother's imperfect son, and no cat to keep his feet warm tonight. For as long as Aaron could remember, it was the longest time he and Softy had ever spent apart.

A couple days later, the sharp ting of a message woke Aaron on Saturday morning. His mother had finally replied.

‘Have you tried the animal shelter?’

He almost kicked himself. The animal shelter made a lot of sense. Google told him there was one a short walk from his apartment. Aaron didn’t want to waste any more time. With Softy on his mind, he threw on some clothes and run out the door.

Walking briskly down the busy street, a few faint yells splashed against his ringing as he pushed past the crowds. Crossing the road, Aaron was so focused on the path ahead that he was oblivious to the red pedestrian light, screaming at him to stop. Unharmed, he continued past a group of young buskers, strumming quiet chords, and onto the animal shelter.

Swinging open the door, he was greeted by an elderly woman at the front desk. He was able to make out what the woman said, without too much trouble. ‘Hello, there sir, looking for a pet to brighten up your day? Or maybe you’ve...’

‘My cat is missing!’ Aaron blurted out.

The woman’s brow furrowed. ‘Have you tried calling your cat? You know cats have pretty good hearing, usually with high pitches, I’ve heard even better than dogs, how high is your voice? I imagine probably not too high, being male. Though I have met some males with beautifully high-pitched voices and they...’

‘Can I just see what cats you have,’ Aaron brashly interrupted. The lady was almost as infuriating as his mother.

The lady led him to the back room with an array of cages full of mostly cats or dogs, along with the occasional ferret. The animal’s scratching and screeching were dulled by his tinnitus pumping through his head. Aaron searched a row of cages at a time. There were ginger cats, tortoise shells, tabby cat’s, but no Softy.

‘Where is he?!’ Aaron desperately checked each cage again. ‘He has to be here, he has to...’

The woman sighed quietly 'It doesn't look like he's been handed in.'

'Do you have any other pets here?'

She could see the anguish in Aaron's eyes, 'I'm sorry, I really am. I'm sure when you get back home, he'll be waiting for you.'

'No, he won't,' tears burned in his eyes. Aaron ran out of the shelter and onto the street. Thousands of voices surrounded him as he looked around urgently. He swam through the sea of sound. The ringing in his head was a small droning reverberation, unable to prevent the cacophony of the city. He forged onwards.

Passing the buskers once more, the twang of their guitar strings overpowered his croaking voice as he cried out for Softy. Once more, he ignored the stop light and crossed the road without looking, focused on finding his friend. Car horns blared around him in an inhuman frequency, but he paid them no mind

Aaron trudged through the damply lit streets as the sun set. His legs aching and voice breaking, there wasn't a cat in sight. The number of people on the streets had diminished. It was quiet now, apart from the low ringing always weighing on his mind. He found a small alleyway where he collapsed against the wall. Aaron cried out for Softy one more time as he sobbed into the bricks. He hadn't realised how much that little ball of fur had meant to him until now. Sliding his back against the cool brick wall, Aaron brought his knees in close as protection against the cold evening. A few stars had begun to shine through the night sky, protruding through the darkness.

Aaron remembered looking up at the stars as a child, around the time he'd been diagnosed. He had thought the stars were singing to him. Softy had sat next to him that night, looking up as if he could hear them too. Now, it was as if the stars remembered. His tinnitus began a tune in his head. A soft shimmer of sound that cascaded down the waterfall of his memories.

A familiar presence hobbled up next to him. A singular meow broke away anxieties' grip over Aaron's heart. 'Softy!' sitting next to him was a small ball of fur, red eyes blinking. The feline's front-left paw was held up and looked to be broken. 'What's happened to you?' the injured cat tilted his head as to offer an explanation. Stroking Softy's back, his fur was knotted and dirty, but the cat purred, delighted to have found his owner.

Slowly Softy limped into Aaron's lap and settled down with the hurt paw spread outwards. Aaron let out a sigh. He finally relaxed as the stars continued their song, now full of joy. He thought to himself how glad he was that Softy and himself had found each-other. Both unwanted, except by the other.

The song turned back to tinnitus as reality set in once more. 'It's time to go home now.' Aaron whispered to his companion who nuzzled into Aaron's knee. 'Alright, we can stay a little longer.'

Once more Softy gazed up at his owner and blinked slowly.

Aaron blinked back.