

Bourne
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For Now

by Gill Hilton

Words have always come to Helen like guests. If you engage with them they can tell you something about yourself, even familiar words, if you welcome them afresh. Since she has been living here she has breathed in the early morning words that drift under her door, as her family renew their sleepy love for each other. She has been lulled by the soft, low words that rise up through the floorboards as Lizzie and Pete clear away playdough and Peppa Pig.

Yet sometimes, for Helen, the house is silent now and she feels like a stranger here. And into this uncharted stillness there slips an unwelcome, reptilian word that has come to her attention of late: *presbycusis*. OED definition: *the gradual loss of acute hearing with advancing age*.

Now she stares at a tiny amplifier (with built-in microphone and receiver) and a set of differently-sized, tiny tubes and domes laid out on her table. It is as if she is doing this for someone who is not her. She reads the step-by-idiot-step instructions once again. They tell her precisely how to make a hearing aid appear from the contents of a small red bag, but they do not show her how to continue being herself from that moment onwards.

Helen is about to pick up the medium, female-sized tube and dome and put them together, when Alfie is suddenly there in the room, talking as he makes his entry. Helen covers the paraphernalia with her dressing gown sleeve. But she has no time to search out his mouth, to catch the words with her keen eyes. In a nanosecond, though, it seems obvious what he has said.

“Oh,” says Helen, “you made a train.”

“No, nana! Not a train!”

As Alfie draws breath to continue, a cloak of loss and separation and stupidity is lowered over Helen.

Alfie, however, is celebratory in having to say the words again:

“I made it *rain!*”

He holds up a plant mister, secreted somehow behind his small back until now, and squirts it over himself, then at her. His glee is unstoppable and throws her over. Shared laughter fixes their eyes and voices together and they are inseparable in that moment.

“You’re the Raining King!” Helen’s voice is lit up with joy.

“Rain King!” he declares.

Helen is not lost for words. She chants:

“Rain King, Rain King, you have made me wet. Soaking, soaking, wet as I could get!”

Alfie is delighted at having a song all to his mischievous self. They bathe in the silly words and the memory and promise that comes with them. Helen wraps herself around him, around his smell and his voice and his petal skin. She ties a bow of pure love around him. This is exactly the present she needs. Everything else is forgotten for now.