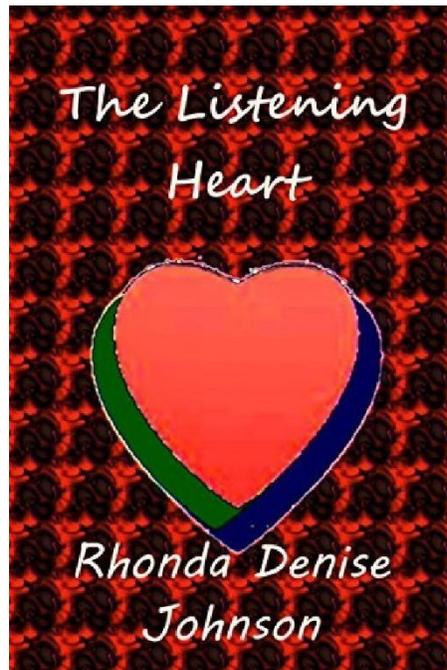


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The Listening Heart cover 1



The Listening Heart

A Short Story

Rhonda Denise Johnson

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The Listening Heart

I watch the people talking and am repelled, yet drawn by fleeting memories of this experience. I'd like to join them, but they do not know my language. Probably, they think I'm pretty stuck up. Some may even have tried to talk to me while my back was turned. I don't even know.

I turn to watch the traffic. The cars flash by silently. A bus swings around a distant corner, inching its way to our stop. I strain to see the route number above the windshield, but the glass is so scratched up and cloudy that I cannot tell what number bus it is. I let the others get on first, and then I ask the driver, hoping that his lips will be easy to read. I watch the white incisors press against a full and luscious lower lip. Then both lips move forward and back to form what looks like forty-something. What the something is, I cannot tell. It's like playing Wheel of Fortune. I buy a vowel and hope it is the right one.

"I can't hear you," I say.

He holds up his fingers—forty-six. I climb aboard. As the bus pulls away, strangers talk and laugh. The woman beside me responds to something she has caught in the air. Her lips move and there is laughter on every face. The driver, a well-set man of chocolate hue and southern eyes, trades lip motions with the man sitting by the front door. All heads turn to the back of the bus. Someone has said something back there. I look to see, but there is nothing to see. I try to look intelligent—sentient. I try not to slip into a dream world, but there is nothing here to hold my attention, and my mind must focus on something.

I decide to focus on something real and think of Barbara, one of my few deaf friends. Like me, she became deaf after many years of hearing. With horror we have watched the wild sign language of those born deaf. *Do that again. Wait a minute. Are you signifyin' on me?*

But while we shared the frustrations, we did not deal with them the same way.

"Let's go to the play," I'd say.

"No," she'd say. "I'm tired of smiling when I don't know what I'm smiling about, just because everyone else is smiling."

"So what do you want to do?" I'd ask, tired of her always being tired, but trying to understand. True, sometimes it feels like I am in a play, and everyone else has read the script except me. But I can't deal with it by hibernating. I can't let it deaden my personality or fill me with despair. Everything in me longs to reach out to other people and share life. My tears flow into a bottomless reservoir that never overflows. I put myself right in the middle of life, because I could not know the joy if I avoided the pain.

So here I am in the middle of all this secret laughter. The bus turns onto the freeway as I study the faces around me. I look up and see a man who must surely be the most gorgeous guy God's got. And so tall. To get from his feet to his head, I have to make a decision—A T&T or Sprint. He sees me looking and smiles. I smile. His lips move. I could watch those lips forever—don't care what he is saying. But his eyes tell me he is waiting for a response. I pull out a notepad and give it to him.

He hesitates, looking at the notepad as if unsure of what I want him to do with it. It's an odd thing to do—give a notepad to a stranger on the bus—and people who do odd things are very often well...odd. So he hesitates.

"I am deaf," I say. "Please write down what you are saying."

That initial look of confusion fades from his face as he leans against the back of the seat behind him and takes out a pen.

“You’re very pretty,” he writes. “Are you going to work?”

“No, I’m going to school. I go to Cal State.”

Interest widens his eyes, and his lips move. I cannot blame him for forgetting. Talking is so natural. It’s what I’m doing. Why shouldn’t he? Slapping his forehead, he grimaces and smiles at himself.

Flipping a page, he writes, “Really? What are you studying?”

“I’m working on my English masters.”

The bus stops and three women come aboard. One passes to the space on his left, and has to stop because there’s no more room to move. The other two stop right before him. They continue to throw their soundless altercation over his shoulder and all around him, interrupting the flow of my conversation with him. I am annoyed. They have not stopped talking for a second. How, I wonder, do people find so much to talk about without having to stop and think? I try to remember when I was a child and could hear. But then, words came as a response to what others were saying. I did not have to ransack my brain, trying to think of something to say. It just poured out, as if all prerecorded before birth.

Their faces give me some idea of what’s going on, though only enough to whet without satisfying curiosity. Two of them seem to be browbeating the third one, who is sucking her teeth and biting her lip at the same time. It’s a silent movie without subtitles. The emotions are so pure without language. But it’s another world. I only feel the frustration of not being a part of it.

Maybe I’m reacting to nothing—a kaleidoscope of unreality. I turn my head and see the guy, but I feel the atmosphere in his mind change as he looks at the three women. His eyes are now reacting to their lips. No, to what I know from memory is coming out of their lips. I look at them and wonder.

Consternation and astonishment knit his brows. I read his face like a slow, eloquent lip. But I cannot respond to the circumstances that are changing him. I’d know what to do in this situation—I’d know what to say, if I knew what the situation is.

I look at him. Would he tell me? I want to ask, but my mouth will not open. He looks at me. He looks right through me. He knows I do not know, and seems pleased. He smiles and pats me on the cheek. As his hand withdraws, everything seems to be going in slow motion, but that is just the bus slowing. He looks up, suddenly interested in the world outside the bus.

He starts to hand me the notepad, then remembering, scribbles, “Goodbye. This is my stop.” And gets off the bus. With him goes my ability to scream, but not my will.

Got to find some reality somewhere, somehow. I take my EBENCE magazine from my bag. I’ve read most of it except the music section. I usually skip that part, but today I need some reality. These pictures on the page with their written words are more real to me than the ghost that just got off the bus or the chatter boxes who turned him into a cheek patting wraith.

A full page has been blessed with the image of Luther Vandross. I read the accompanying article, trying to capture his sound from this description of it. I reach back in my memory for a masculine voice that fits his majestic face. I find Sam Cooke. Yes, Luther sends me. Jerry Butler.

Understand, the man is mellow as a cello. Larry Graham. One in a million chance that the voices I remember belong to the man that I see.

There is also an article about sisterhood. Reach out to the sisterhood, it says. It is vital, dynamic. No woman should isolate herself from it. I look at the three women—the sisters. They are still talking. They must be using Duracell batteries. Let me experience sisterhood with you, I want to say. Would they slow down their manic chatter? Would they put their words on paper or learn to sign and share their souls with me? Or would they say, “Girl, I don’t have time.”

I look at them. I want to hate them for what they can do, but I cannot. They are the ones I have loved and identified with in books. All the writing sisters I’ve ever read taught me to laugh with them, yell at them, and slap high five over something we knew was true. To any of the characters in those fictional worlds I might say, “Yeah Girl, I know what you mean.” Or, “Girl, you’re crazy. Don’t do that.”

It’s all very well to find reality in a picture in a magazine or words in a book. But ain’t nothing like the real thing. Now is the test. There must be something that I can do to reach them. Many people hear without listening. It must be conversely possible to listen without hearing. What do the ears have to do with listening anyway? Listening is done with the heart and the mind. I will listen to my sisters—listen to their faces. I will listen at the windows of their souls.

The bus sputters to an unscheduled stop by the side of the freeway. The driver stands to face us and his lips move. He takes some orange traffic cones from a box under his seat and goes outside. With no wind coming through the windows, the heat of fifty living bodies in close quarters suddenly asserts itself. I look at the faces around me. These are the expressions of sardines in a pressure cooker—annoyed, flustered, phobic, got to pee.

The two talking sisters are too caught up in the general annoyance to continue jumping on the third one, and she has withdrawn to a place where one must write poetry or go insane. I am listening as her eyes reach to some distant pain outside the bus—beyond the heat. No freeway can take me to that place. I must listen, but now my courage is wavering. She has not looked at me, and I do not know her. I want to know her. I want to know and feel this sister of mine. Courage? Presumption? Can I do and say the perfectly right thing to make it all better? Kiss it and make it better? Presumption? Presumptuous courage. Courageous presumption. Dumb to sit here hemming and hawing like Hamlet when to be is the only answer, because I am. But “I am” is no good without “I do.”

I reach out and touch her. Courage or no courage, I touch her.

“Smile,” I say. I listen to her startled uncertainty. “Are you okay?” I ask.

She smiles weakly. Her lips move to say “Yeah, I’m fine.” And heads back to that distant place. Should I let her go? Doesn’t she have a right to go? Maybe she will find healing there. Maybe I can’t help her anyway. Maybe...too many maybe’s. Love is a verb. Maybe is an antiverb.

“I just noticed you seem like something is bothering you.”

This time the motion of her lips don’t translate into anything I can understand. I take out the notepad. My portable telecommunications modem. “I am deaf. Please write what you are saying.”

My eyes are listening. They do not blink. She takes out her own pen and, leaning against a seat, writes carefully, talking to the paper, which does not threaten to dismiss her pain with

comforting words. I am not there, but I'm listening. I read what she has written. Now I know I was presumptuous. I have no cure-all answers. My silent, paper heart says nothing.

We are torn away from this wordless touch by the practical business of moving to the new bus that has just pulled up. I listen. Does she feel—relief? Or like someone dragging her fingers at last on the lip of a deep hole only to be flushed back down by an avalanche of pitiless necessities. I am listening, but life is loud. Too loud to hear a woman on a table, a mother on the phone, a baby not ready to be born.

I get on the other bus. Wind blows through the window, but I have no answers. She gives me another sheet of paper. It says, "Thanks for listening."

Think of that. She hadn't wanted an answer. She wanted a listening heart. Fifty living bodies just want a listening heart. The wind blows. I do not blink.

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The end.

I hope you enjoyed The Listening Heart