

A Translation for Laughter

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The faint, upbeat stream of music trickled through the waiting room, bubbling around the harried nurses that raced through from time to time and the receptionists that sat typing at their desk. Heidi sat in one of the chairs arranged by the window, her toes hanging a couple of inches above the ground. She kicked her feet impatiently back and forth; it seemed like she had been waiting a million years for the doctor to come. The wait had been all right when she had been talking with the receptionists, but her mother had lifted her from her perch on the marble desk and reminded her that they need to work and had asked her to sit in one of the waiting chairs. Laura, Emily, and Max, the three receptionists who were always there on Tuesdays, had seemed sad to see her go—no doubt they weren't excited to get back to whatever boring tasks they had to do—but Heidi had ended up stuck sitting in the waiting chair nonetheless.

The sound of the door opening distracted the girl from her boredom, and she turned eagerly to see who it was. A man and woman entered, passing Heidi to check in at the front desk. The woman talked briefly with Emily, and then the two settled down in a waiting chair opposite to Heidi.

The man cast a glance around the room, and his eyes settled on Heidi. His hair was brown and his eyes seemed a little off, though she couldn't quite place why. It took her a moment to realize he was squinting at her face, and her shoulders tensed in irritation.

I hate it when people stare at me! She was already beginning to feel the chafe of her wounded feelings. What makes them think their face is better than mine? My face is fine. I like my face. Can't he see it hurts my feelings when he stares at it?

"Excuse me," she said aloud. "Will you please stop staring at me? I don't like it."

The man leaned forward slightly, his head tilted to the side. The woman sitting next to him tapped him on the shoulder, and as he turned to her, she began to wave her hands. Heidi watched in awe, forgetting her wounded pride for a moment, at what appeared to be a conversation with no words. From the expressions on their faces, she had a distinct feeling that they were talking, but they didn't speak a single word.

After a moment, the woman turned back to Heidi. "I'm sorry," she said. "I was trying to see who else was here, and it's hard for me to see well without squinting. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

Heidi was befuddled. "Why are you apologizing for him?"

The woman looked surprised for a moment, then smiled. "I am his interpreter," she explained, continuing the hand motions as she spoke. "This is Danny. He can't hear sounds, and his eyes are very bad, so he speaks with sign language, and I translate." The man—Danny—made a motion with his hands, and she added, "What is your name?"

"I'm Heidi," she said, already forgetting her hurt feelings in the face of this new and interesting person. Her mind was bursting with questions. "You said he can't hear sounds?"

He motioned again, and the woman said, "I cannot."

"But then how do you listen to music?" One of Heidi's favorite things to do was to listen to music. She liked all kinds, but her favorite by far was classical. Recently, she and her mother had gone to a musical, and ever since then, she had been begging her mother for piano lessons. The thought of not being able to experience music was almost incomprehensible. She couldn't imagine it.

The woman relayed the message to Danny and watched him respond before translating, but Heidi had already begun to think of this conversation as talking to Danny himself. It had not been a hard leap to make; his expressions were already giving some hint to the tone of his response.

"I can't listen to music, but it doesn't bother me. I've never been able to hear, and I can't really miss something I've never had." There was a tone of amusement in his face.

Heidi still couldn't fathom his nonchalance about not being able to hear music. What would life be like without music? It would be bad, I bet. But he doesn't seem that bothered. She shook her head, perplexed, but she had too many questions to worry about one for too long. "What are you here for?" she asked, rapidly switching gears. "Are the doctors going to fix

your ears so you can hear?" Maybe that's why he's here. So he can hear voices and music and everything. Oh, I hope so!

Danny laughed when the words had been relayed to him, startling Heidi. She had not heard him make a sound until now, and though she was already growing used to his silent communication, she couldn't understand it. Here was something she could understand. She didn't need a translation for laughter.

"No, I'm here to get my eyes checked again. Why are you here?"

"My heart," Heidi said, tapping her chest. "They check my heart to make sure it's still working right."

"Do you have a bad heart?" There was a shadow of concern on Danny's face.

"Not really. The doctors say it might be a problem one day, but nothing's happened yet." I wonder if there really is something wrong with my heart? I've heard them say there's something wrong with my brain, when they thought I wasn't listening, but there's nothing wrong with it. And there's nothing wrong with my face. Are they wrong about my heart too, I wonder?

A nurse came out of the side hall. "Heidi!" she called.

Heidi sprang to her feet and waved at the nurse. "Hi, Aly!" she called. But Aly's so smart... and she says there's something wrong with my heart too. How could Aly be wrong?

Heidi turned and waved at Danny. "Bye, Danny!" she said. Danny waved back at her. Heidi was surprised; the woman hadn't needed to translate. But I suppose you don't need to translate a wave goodbye, or a wave hello. Just like you don't need to translate a laugh.

She was right. Heidi had a unique ability to connect with the people around her, and despite his lack of hearing, Danny could understand her. He had learned to use information besides sound to read the world. Despite their illnesses and the obstacles they provided for them, despite the differences in the ways they thought and spoke, they could understand each other.

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