

No Words

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After all these years, I'm still afraid of getting a brain aneurysm. Just a few weeks ago in church, my head started hurting, and I reached up and felt a vein throbbing on the side of my skull. I leaned over to my uncle sitting beside me and whispered, "What if it's a brain aneurysm?" He laughed and said it wasn't. "But how can you be sure?" I thought. Because I looked up brain aneurysms a long time ago and found out that they have no symptoms. No warnings before they hit you like an air bag. *Wham*. Suddenly, there's an artery bursting in your brain and you're bleeding to death inside your own mind.

I wasn't always afraid of getting a brain aneurysm. The fear came years ago when I was still taking classes at BYU-Idaho. I had written "learn sign language" on my bucket list, so for my last semester, I had signed up for the one and only ASL class they offered on campus.

We were assigned to groups of about five in the class. Twice a week, we were expected to meet up with our group and practice sign language. For our first meeting, my group chose a busier part of the library to meet in, hoping we wouldn't be noticed by the other students as we attempted to communicate with wild gestures and incomprehensible expressions.

I don't remember a whole lot from that first meeting. In fact, I remember only one moment. It's funny how some of life's scenes stick in your mind, playing like perfect moving pictures, while others seem to slowly dissolve until they've disappeared completely down the black canal of your mind. This one moment stuck with me. It tacked itself permanently on the bulletin board of my brain.

It's the memory of Tracie. Tracie was the only other girl in my group (that I can remember, at least). She was younger than me and was married to a guy in our group named . . . I actually can't remember. I know that it started with a *T* because I remember thinking that their names had alliteration. Well, anyway, she had been married to *T* for maybe a year, maybe less.

Our assignment that meeting was to introduce ourselves to our group. Signs only. No words. The problem was, we had learned only about two signs so far in class, so we would basically be pantomiming the entire time.

I don't know who went first, but Tracie had her turn at some point. I know because I remember how she sat there across the table from me, her eyes huge behind black, plastic glasses as she attempted to explain to us without words how she loved fireworks. First, she puffed out her cheeks as far as they would go. Then, in a sudden theatrical display, she leaned forward and threw her arms out wide, releasing the air from her cheeks in a silent explosion of unseen color and light. A firework.

The next day in class, we played the game Spoons. Our teacher silently explained to us that we would be playing it because it used the same body parts that sign language used: the hands, the eyes, and the brain.

We sat in a circle on the dirty gray carpet and passed out four cards to each person. I sat cross-legged and kept one eye on the spoons and one eye on my cards, passing them almost without looking. The way I saw it, you didn't need all the same cards to win—you just needed a spoon. Using this technique, I made it to the final round. All the other players had been eliminated except for me and Tracie.

We started the final game. Cards flew so fast you couldn't tell if they were clubs or diamonds. The neat piles turned into scattered numbers across the floor, the one remaining spoon sitting between us, waiting. Then, just when I had gotten my last card for the win, Tracie snatched up the spoon and pumped her fist into the air in unspoken victory. I looked at her cards and saw that she had used two jokers to win, which was not technically fair because I had not known we were using jokers as wild cards. I'll admit that I was a little bitter about it.

Two days later, I was glad she'd won.

It was already dark outside when I got to class that evening at 6:00 p.m. Tracie and *T* were not there, which bothered me because we had a group meeting scheduled right after class. Where were they? Had they dropped the class?

I decided I had better give them a call. As soon as class was over, I called Tracie. Her phone rang a few times, and then her recorded, electronic voice said, “Leave a message after the beep.” Instead of leaving a message, I hung up to try her husband. I waited impatiently for him to pick up. Finally, he did.

“Hello?”

“Hey, T,” I said. “Are you and Tracie still in the class? We had a meeting today.”

You would have thought there would be a dramatic pause—a hiatus that signified something important was about to be said. But there was no pause and no warning. I listened without any inkling that something life-altering had just occurred as T spoke his next words.

“No, my wife and I are not in the class anymore. She passed away.”

No expression. No emotion. Just “She passed away.” Three words that didn’t make any sense with how he had said them. Had he been talking about his wife? About Tracie? Or had I momentarily zoned out, and it was his grandmother who had died?

I heard “brain aneurysm,” “hospital in Utah,” and something about time or relatives. But really I had no idea what he was saying because I couldn’t figure out who he was talking about. It sounded like he was speaking about his wife when he had first told me. About the girl who had explained to us that she loved fireworks. Who had beaten me with two jokers at Spoons. But he just sounded so natural, so calm. So didn’t that mean she couldn’t possibly be dead?

T stopped talking. I was supposed to say something then, something helpful, but there was nothing in my brain. No words to say. I was as silent as the sign language I’d been trying to learn for the past two weeks.

I think I ended up saying something stupid like, “I’m sorry.” As if “I’m sorry” could make up for anything that had just happened to him. I said goodbye numbly and pressed the “end call” button on my phone.

“What’s going on?” A kid in my group with blonde hair and braces had seen my face after the call.

I still wasn’t entirely sure, but I told him what I thought I had heard. “I think his wife just died. Tracie.”

“Think?”

“It was sort of hard to follow.”

I swallowed and looked away, but Braces Kid kept looking at me.

“How did it happen?”

I wished I could just leave. I breathed out and tried to remember.

"I think he said something like . . . brain aneurysm?"

I expected him to gasp or grimace or say how horrible that was, but Braces Kid just nodded his head knowingly. "Yep. Sometimes those just happen."

I blinked. *Sometimes those just happen?* It was as if he were talking about rainstorms. Or pancakes on weekends. Yep, sometimes those just happen.

I was still hoping that I had understood wrong and T was talking about his grandma the whole time. "Oh, you thought I was talking about Tracie? Ha! No way!" But something in the back corner of my mind knew it wasn't his grandma.

It was confirmed by a campuswide email a couple of days later that I was right. The email stated the name of a student who had died, and the name was Tracie's. It didn't say how she died, but I knew.

Brain aneurysm.

By then I had looked it up, but I had shut my computer right away after reading the definition. It made me think too much. It made me wonder if a brain aneurysm were creeping up on me that very moment, crawling into my head, embedding itself into an artery to suddenly and stealthily kill me with no warning.

It sounds like paranoia, but it's not. I'm afraid only when I think of it—*really* think of it. It's only when I remember a girl in my class who had no idea and no notice that something was wrong that I reach up and check the side of my head to feel if there's anything different.

But who knows when something is different? What does different feel like anyway? Do we get any kind of warning before we die? How do we know when we are suddenly going to be gone? People are not made with expiration dates. They are not milk cartons waiting on the shelf with numbers stamped on them, signifying the time when they are thought to spoil. We can spoil at any time.

These are some of the more unsettling ideas that bother me still years after the experience. But the thing that has always troubled me the most isn't the riddle of when someone is going to die or even the haunting feeling that an artery could burst in my head at any moment. No, the thing that has always bothered me the most concerns Tracie's husband. I've wondered for some time why he wasn't emotional on the phone. How could he tell me about his wife's death so naturally? How did the words come? How did he even know what to say after such a heart-bending blow? Maybe he didn't know. Maybe there were simply no words to speak, just like in sign language.

But you see, that's just it. Because even though you cannot hear the words out loud in sign language, they are still there. They exist. They are real without making a single sound to notify you of their presence. So couldn't it be possible to have *another* language where words exist without being heard? Could it be that there is a silent language all its own reserved for all of us when we are shattered, torn, and broken?

I believe it is possible. I believe there is an unspoken dialect hidden beneath the words "She passed away." It was there in that moment I was told Tracie had died, even though I could not hear it. And maybe those were T's real words. The silent ones buried deep underneath the spoken parts, too close to the heart to be spoken out loud.

This essay by Elizabeth Dodds received an honorable mention in the 2016 Richard H. Cracroft Personal Essay Contest.