NOTES FROM A SISSY

A Memoir of What He Broke and What She Built

AN OPENING · WAYMON HUDSON

Introduction

I’m Deaf. I wasn’t when anything in this book happened.

I lost my hearing as an adult, more than a decade ago, over about six months. Six months. I’ve had sinus infections that take longer to resolve. More proof that my body has never once done anything on a reasonable schedule.

It was a loss. It was hard. It’s also a different book.

So why tell you now? Because you’re about to spend a childhood with a boy who ran his entire life through sound. It told him where his father was in the house. It told him when it was safe to come out of a room. Music got him out of a pew and onto a stage and, eventually, out of a life that was trying to break him.

Sound was how he read the house and the world around him. Music was the escape route.

And then, twenty-some years later, my hearing goes.

The part nobody tells you about going deaf is that sound doesn’t leave. It relocates.

I listen with my feet now. Bare and flat on the floor, close enough to the speaker that the low end comes up through the boards and into my legs. A hand on the piano. Sometimes just my palm against a flat surface, the way you’d check a forehead for fever. Music moved out of my ears and into my hands and my chest and the floor under me. And it kept working, which is either a miracle or just anatomy. I’ve stopped needing to know which.

What I didn’t see coming was that my body had been keeping all of it. Not only the sounds. What they did to me. Where they landed.

My grandmother's laugh doesn't come back through my ears. It comes back in my chest, exactly where it landed the first time. Billie Holiday sits low under my ribs. A tap shoe on a wooden riser lives in the soles of my feet. My father coming down the hallway is in my stomach.

It always was.

My stubborn, difficult, extraordinary body had been filing all of this away for decades and never once thought to mention it.

To write what you're about to read, I had to reach in and get that archive.

I'm a better witness to that childhood now than I was when I could still hear it. Deafness forced me to look beyond the sounds themselves and find what my body had kept. Silence made me go looking for memories I hadn't known were stored there.

My deafness didn't make this book harder, sadder, or braver. It's the tool I wrote it with.

The boy you're about to meet can hear all of it.

Me? I can tell you where it lives.

Prologue

The phone rang sharp and loud and dragged me out of sleep. I grabbed it blind and saw the number. My grandparents' house.

"Hey, baby."

I nearly dropped the phone. It was her old voice. Not the sick one. The one with a smirk and a secret in it.

My grandmother, Mimmie, had been slowly dying of pancreatic cancer. But if anyone could go out on their own terms, it was Mimmie. She had a spine of steel and style to match. She could read you to pieces with a smile of her crimson lips and a sarcastic "bless your heart" that you knew meant the opposite. All in matching hat, bag, and shoes.

She had moved home from the hospital into hospice, and the strongest, funniest, wildest person I had ever known had faded into a small frail thing in a bed, lost in pain and pain meds.

She had not spoken in weeks.

I visited her anyway. I read to her, told her secrets I knew she would have laughed devilishly at, did her hair, and put lipstick on her because she loved being dressed up.

And now here she was in my ear. Clear as a bell.

I started crying and asked her how she was calling me.

“I need you to come see me. It’s today. I can’t go before I see you and talk to you, baby.”

I cried but nodded into the phone, as if she could see me. I said, “Of course,” and told her I would be there right away. I told her I loved her, more than anything, and threw on the first clothes I could find.

I didn’t want her to go, but I knew the pain she was in. I knew this was what she wanted. She always knew her own mind, even though she had been raised in a time when women weren’t supposed to have opinions or thoughts of their own. Much to my family’s and the church’s chagrin, and to my delight.

So I got in my car and drove. I don’t remember the drive, only crying the whole way and telling myself to get it together so I wouldn’t upset her when I saw her.

I ran into her house. My grandfather, Poppa, and my mother were there. The whole place was holding its breath. My grandmother sent them both out of the room when I came in, earning me the dirty looks I was long since used to, and called me over to the bed.

She looked so small and frail in bed, the sun coming in from the window and giving her a bit of her old color back. The room was stark in a way I hated. I brought her flowers and plants when I visited her so she could still feel nature around her, but my mother kept moving them out, saying they were in the way.

But despite it all, Mimmie also looked beautiful, like her old self somehow. Her eyes were no longer dull and listless but full of that endless mischief again.

I ran to her and buried my face in her neck, crying, as she stroked my hair and told me it was all going to be okay. She smelled the same, not of sickness or medicine, but like the air after rain. Light. Clean. The storm already gone.

She lifted my chin up to look at her and told me she needed to say some things to me and to ask some things of me. I nodded and told her anything. And meant it. I would have moved the moon for her if she had asked.

That’s when she told me, in the voice that lived on the edge of a laugh, that she had always known I was different.

My tears stopped as I looked into her eyes that were the same as mine, hazel with a golden ring around the iris, at a loss for words.

“That’s why I chose you, baby. To be myself around. To finally just be me and not what everyone wanted me to be. I knew as soon as I held you when you were born that you were a kindred spirit. You were mine just as sure as I birthed you myself.”

She put her hand on my cheek, her skin soft and warm and smelling of the lotion she always used.

“I have never fit in, not as a child, not as a woman, and not as a mother. I ended up choosing to live the life expected of me. But baby, I found happiness, I had moments of joy, I had secret moments that had belonged only to me… and then belonged to you too, baby. That was the gift you gave me. I was no longer alone in my life. I had you. And you saw the real me.”

Her eyes got stern in that way that brooked no argument.

“But I don’t want that for you.”

She looked me in the face. Really looked deep into my eyes and said in a soft but firm voice:

“Baby, I know you’re gay. I’ve always known. And I’ve always loved you even more for it. It’s what makes you who you are. It’s what makes you special. And stronger. Stronger than this family. Stronger than this town. Stronger than that damn church. Stronger than I ever was.”

I nodded, crying. Nobody had ever said any of that to me. Nobody had ever said it about me.

“Now you listen to me, baby. You get out of this town. Get out of this life. You go find your people. Go find your joy.”

She kissed my forehead. Then a cough, small and dry, and something in her let go.

“Now, baby. I need you to do something for me. I need you to sing to me. Just to me. I want to leave this world doing what I love most, hearing you sing your heart out.”

I nodded and kissed her cheek, telling her how much I loved her and how thankful I was that she was in my life. Then I held her hand as she rested her head back, the spark in her eyes already weakening again with pain and tiredness. Her hand felt small in mine. Just bones. Not the hands that had spun me around as we laughed, or clapped in time while she taught me some old dance she knew.

But then I sang. I sang all her favorites, the songs we shared in secret, songs she loved most in the world. I sang with every part of me, not caring what my family on the other side of the door might think, not caring if my voice cracked as I cried, just doing it because she asked it of me. I sang her favorite standards like “God Bless the Child,” “I’ll Be Seeing You,” and “Summertime.”

Then I sang Nina Simone’s “Feeling Good,” earning a weak smile from her drifting face. She loved Nina most of all. Mimmie always said she was a woman with fire in her soul and poetry on her lips.

I crawled into bed with her. I slid my arm around her waist and rested my head on her shoulder and sang “Wild Is the Wind.”

Mimmie took her last breath. A soft sigh. Her little smirk still on her face.

I kissed her cheek, then her forehead. I did her hair one last time, humming. Then I put on her crimson lipstick, because she loved being dressed up.

Then I just sat with her, holding her small hand while I called my grandfather and mother in. I don’t remember what they said or did. I remember the crimson smirk still on her face, even after she was gone, and her words going off in my head like an alarm.

Get out of this life.

I squeezed her hand. I was the only one with her when she died. Just like she wanted it.

CHAPTER ONE

Growing Up in the Big Potato

Make no mistake, Central Florida is the Deep South. Not the quaint, antebellum, sweet-tea-on-the-porch kind, either. Think of it as the frayed hem of the Bible Belt: slightly moldy, always damp. Where the humidity clings to your skin and the past clings to your soul.

Right in the middle of the state, close enough to Disney World to smell the magic but far enough to never touch it, lies the small town of Apopka. Calling it a “suburb of Orlando” would be giving it way too much credit… and frankly, way too much glamour.

Apopka is a small, working-class town stuck somewhere between a John Deere catalog and an episode of *Cops*.

But don't be fooled: Apopka has its claims to fame.

For one, it's proudly known (as declared by dozens of sun-faded signs) as the "Indoor Foliage Capital of the World." That's right. Our great civic pride? Potted plants. There are hundreds of nurseries and greenhouses, which means the whole town perpetually smells like fertilizer and regret.

It's all glamour and class in Apopka.

And in a poetic flourish only Florida could pull off, the town's name comes from a Native American word that, no joke, translates to "Big Potato." Move over New York… our tuber-themed metropolis is coming for your title. Why, we had a Dairy Queen and at least three stoplights. What more could you want?

It was on a seven-acre patch of green on the outskirts of this starchy paradise that I grew up. Down a dirt road flanked by rusted mailboxes and clay-coated weeds sat our little farm. Cows, pigs, and chickens roamed freely, though never with much dignity. We grew every Southern vegetable you could imagine: okra, collards, squash, green beans. It was rural as hell.

Now, before you let your imagination run wild and start picturing a charming, white-fenced farmhouse with lace curtains and a wraparound porch, let me stop you right there. Our house started as a mobile home. Not a fancy double-wide. Not even a "modular unit." No, this was an aluminum-sided rectangle on concrete blocks. Basically, a sardine can with windows.

At some point, in what can only be described as a burst of architectural optimism, my parents decided to "build onto it." Instead of just constructing a new house, they built *around* the trailer. They poured a foundation, added cinder-block walls, and eventually absorbed the trailer like some kind of mobile home Matryoshka doll.

It was a Franken-house: part trailer, part house, all confusion. But it was ours.

Directly across the road from us sat the local fairgrounds, home to Apopka's only real cultural event: the Zellwood Sweet Corn Festival. Picture it: carnival rides, crafts, country music, and corn cooked every way imaginable. We'd climb onto our roof during the concerts to listen to cover bands wail about heartbreak and tractors while the smell of grilled corn wafted through the air like Southern perfume. It was magical. Sticky. Swarming with gnats. But magical.

Just down the road from our house was a massive clay pit, mined by heavy trucks that raced back and forth all day long, kicking up so much orange dust that everything… our furniture, our clothes, our actual skin… developed a permanent terracotta hue. When the clay ran out, they turned the pit into a landfill. So, we went from terracotta skin to eau de garbage.

Welcome to Apopka: come for the corn, stay for the toxic dust.

But to me, this wasn't strange.

This was just life.

The only one I knew.

Apopka had a way of pulling you in like kudzu… quiet, relentless, and impossible to kill. Generations of families stayed put, working the same jobs, passing down the same weathered houses, and recycling the same tired stories about the "good ol' days." Men were tough and sunburned, working farms or factories. Women stayed home, raised kids, and kept casseroles warm. Boys played football, girls took Home Ec.

And then… there was me.

I could hold my own on the farm. I carried feed sacks, pulled weeds, dodged chicken pecks, even herded a pig or two. But more often than not, you'd find me perched on the kitchen counter watching my mom cook or curled up at my grandmother's feet as she snapped beans and told me stories in her soft drawl.

I was stocky (okay, fat… let's be honest), which led every man in my life to dream I'd be some kind of football prodigy. Maybe even get a scholarship, win a championship, and open a used car lot like every washed-up athlete in town. Those dreams were quickly dashed when it became clear I had zero coordination, a strong aversion to sweating, and asthma that flared up anytime I looked at a patch of grass.

So instead of the gridiron, I gravitated toward my sisters' dolls, homemade fashion shows, and reading books under the table during dinner. I wore my mom's apron more than she did. I made lasso props out of yarn and tried to get the dog to play Superman in our backyard "Super Friends" reboot. I gave monologues to the cows.

It didn't take long for everyone to realize the horrible truth:

I was different.

I wasn't just quirky.

Or sensitive.

I was a full-blown glitter-powered sissy: bookish, artsy, always humming show tunes under my breath and staging impromptu dance numbers in the living room.

I wasn’t made for farm life. I was made for spotlights.

I didn’t have the words for it yet, but I knew that somewhere out there was a world that made sense. A world where I wasn’t too much, or not enough. A world where being a sissy wasn’t something to fear… but something to celebrate.

So I waited. I watched. I built a world inside myself, made of glitter and courage and jokes sharp enough to deflect shame.

I didn’t know it yet, but one day, that world would save me.

But first… I had to survive the Big Potato.

FRAGMENT

Footsteps

It always started the same way.

The footsteps.

I think I was around five the first time I remember the footsteps.

Maybe younger.

Old enough to know fear,

too young to name it.

Heavy. Slow.

Deliberate in a way that said: they weren’t walking.

They were *coming*.

Down the long, dark hallway of our mismatched house, through the linoleum kitchen and across the groaning wood floor of the living room, each step got louder.

No. Not louder.

Just heavier.

Each step carried… intent.

They always stopped outside my door.

I never locked it. Maybe I already knew it wouldn’t matter.

Locks were only for people who believed they had a right to say no.

I clenched every muscle like a trap waiting to spring.

Even my eyelashes felt tense, as if the slightest flutter might give me away.

I trained my breath to be slow, even, shallow. Practiced.

Like I was already in a coffin.

The light from the hallway would slip under the door… a thin, jagged line cutting across the carpet. I’d watch that light go dark as two feet stopped directly in front of it.

Work boots, I think.

Or maybe just heavy shoes.

I never looked long enough to know for sure.

Then came the sound that still tightens my stomach when I hear it today: the click of the door handle.

It wasn’t loud.

Just a soft, metallic *snick*.

But some sounds don’t need to be loud to be terrifying.

They just need to mean something.

And that sound meant one thing: whatever safety the outside world pretended to offer was gone.

The door creaked open.

A pause.

Then the shape in the doorway… big, broad, blocking the light like a dark curtain pulled across a stage. One hand resting on the frame, the other braced like it was holding back something worse. I always wondered if he paused to make sure I was asleep, or if he just liked that moment of power. The breathless hush before the lights went out for good.

He never said a word.

Just stepped inside and shut the door behind him.

And I became smaller than my own breath.

WHAT SHE LEFT ME

The Open Door

Some kids ran away from home.

I ran toward hers.

The route was three miles of back dirt road

I knew by heart

long before I understood

why I kept walking it.

I spent after school with her every day.

But these trips were different.

These were after my parents had already picked me up.

After supper. After bedtime.

These trips were in the dark.

Often in pajamas with sneakers thrown on hastily,

a flashlight in hand

and a little backpack packed for school the next day.

She never asked why I showed up.

Not once.

Not even when I showed up often enough

that it should have been a question.

Her door was always unlocked.

That sounds like a small thing.

It was not a small thing.

A door that stays open

is a decision someone makes

every single day.

She made it.

Every day.

The house smelled like her.

Warm and familiar,

the way only one person’s house ever smells.

Something always on the stove.

Something sweet underneath that.

The scent of her lotion, her hairspray, her powders.

The comfort of a home

that had been loved for a very long time.

I’d come through that door and she’d look up.

Not startled.

Not questioning.

Just… looking.

Reading my face

the way she read everything.

All the way to the core.

Then she'd say something like

"Supper's almost ready"

or

"Come sit with me"

or sometimes just "Hey, baby"

in that voice of hers

that always seemed to have

the warmth of a hug in it

when directed at me.

And that would be enough.

No why are you here.

No does your mama know you've come.

No what happened to you.

No are you staying the night.

Just room.

She made room.

Every time.

I’d find my spot at her kitchen table

or curl up at her feet in the living room

and feel something

I didn’t have a word for then.

But I have a word for it now.

Safe.

Not the kind that means nothing bad has happened.

The kind that means even if it has,

in here, right now,

you are not carrying it alone.

I didn’t know then

that she knew I was carrying something.

But I know now.

A child who comes to your house

every chance he gets,

who takes the long walk alone in the dark just to get there,

who walks through your door and exhales

like he’s been holding his breath for days…

that child is telling you something.

She heard it.

She never said so out loud.

She didn’t have to.

She just kept the door unlocked

and supper warm

and a spot at her table

and a place at her side

that was always, without question,

mine.

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The story continues. Read more at waymonhudson.com