

The Girl With One Ear

A Creative Writing Entry

The Happy Noisemaker Storytelling Contest, September, 2023

According to the books, they say that babies born on Saturdays had a stroke of bad luck, Neni's was a meter wide. She was born like many other babies in the year of the financial crisis, the second among the three children born to her mother. As a boisterous and curious child who usually found herself in precarious situations, Neni's mother and older brother usually warned her to be careful, but like many other carefree children, Neni paid them no heed. This eventually led to her taking what her grandmother called "*the inevitable step*".

Neni was seven years old when it happened, the event that changed her family forever. Neni and her siblings had over the years grown closer to the Johnsons family that lived down the street. They would occasionally go to play with the Johnsons' children and on one fateful day, it happened. The Johnsons owned what was a pet to the family but a danger to strangers; however, Neni and her siblings were no strangers to this family hence, they never expected that the day that started out so well would end at a hospital's emergency ward. The family's twin boys, Laith and Lennon, had always spoken highly of their rottweiler named "*Tonton*", but on this day Tonton did not behave like the dog they revered.

Neni and her siblings often played tag with the twin boys when they met to play at the Johnsons' compound, the dog was usually kept and locked in its cage while the children played. On this day, the children, thinking all was well, began playing a game of hide and seek. Neni ran to check out and hide near the dog's cage, where she got the bravery to do this, one wondered till this day. As Laith began the countdown, Neni noticed that everywhere seemed too quiet, she turned towards the dog's cage, it was empty! At that moment she felt something breathing down her neck. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead, she wanted to scream but her voice failed her, she slowly turned to face what was behind her and came face to face with the neighbor's dog Tonton the rottweiler, whose growls became louder.

Neni's screams had the other children running to see what was wrong with Neni. Tonton had descended upon her and refused to let go of her right ear. When the children came running and on seeing the horror before them, they scattered like marbles in search of any adults they could find to help Neni. Luckily, the twins' uncle was home and came to see what was going on. He immediately pounced on the dog but he was already too late, the dog had ripped off Neni's right ear and spat it on the ground after the twins' uncle had punched its snout. Neni was in so much pain and the last thing Neni remembered before she fainted was a loud ringing sound in her right ear.

Neni's mother, Lina, a tall heavysset woman was distraught and fearful for her daughter after she heard the terrible news of what had happened to Neni. She locked up her store and drove her five-year old Volkswagen Golf as fast as the small car could go. She dashed into the hospital frantically and yelled into her phone at Neni's father, Ojas, trying to decipher which ward her daughter was being operated on. When she finally found the ward, her husband and Neni's brothers, Nabil and Jasper, were sitting huddled at each side of their father crying. Once Neni's younger brother, Jasper, sighted his mother he ran to her crying louder, Lina picked up her young son and tried to calm him while fighting back tears of her own. Ojas and Nabil had stood up as well and though Ojas was not crying, the grim look on his face said it all, he was trying to keep his emotions in check though his eyes glistened with unshed tears.

Neni spent two weeks in a coma, she had lost a lot of blood and her ear could not be sutured back to her head. Lina's mother, Alda, had come visiting immediately after Lina broke the devastating news to her. Lina feared the worst, but she hoped that when Neni awoke, what had given her sleepless nights wouldn't come to pass. Alda kept vigil beside Neni making sure that she was beside Neni when she awoke and fortunately that happened on a day while Lina and Alda were quietly discussing the happenings of that day. Neni opened her eyes and tried calling for mother. Once her mother noticed her daughter had awoken, she ran to her daughter and began screaming for the nurses on duty. Neni was disoriented, it took a couple of hours after the doctor had checked on her vitals before Neni got comfortable enough to have a conversation with her family. She remained quiet most of the time, the doctor had advised Neni's family that Neni needed to be kept hydrated and left to rest to recover her energy.

It took over two months after Neni had been discharged from the hospital before she could have a full conversation with her family, she was still coming to terms with the fact that she no longer had two ears and how she had to live the rest of her life having only one ear. While all this happened, her grandmother continued to dote on her, hardly ever leaving her side. It felt like the entire family was walking on eggshells around her. The twin boys, Laith and Lennon, and their parents had come visiting again after they had visited Neni at the hospital, the twins' mother, Caroline, had spent most of the visit crying her eyes out barely able to get any words out, while the twin's father tried to comfort his wife, he assured Neni's family that Tonton had been put down, he apologized profusely while offering to help the family anyway they could.

Lina's fears were confirmed the night Neni woke up screaming, the entire house was thrown into a commotion, Neni wouldn't stop screaming until her grandmother came and calmed her down. Speaking softly to her, Alda held her terrified granddaughter as Neni kept muttering. "It's still standing there", over and over again. Alda spoke in hushed tones to her granddaughter until she stopped muttering, Alda then turned to Lina and told her to get her bag, a jug of warm water, a spoon and a cup. When Lina returned with the things Alda had requested for, Alda open up her worn woven bag and brought out a transparent container which contained a blue powder, she open the container and using the spoon, she took a spoonful of the blue powder, poured it into the cup, poured in some water and stirred the mixture for two minutes. Alda turned to Lina and said to her, "it's time". Lina could not not stop the groan that escaped from her lips as she hugged herself while she shook her head in disbelief. Alda took the spoon from the cup and as she brought the cup closer to Neni, she urged Neni to sit up and drink the mixture in the cup, "you'll stop seeing the man standing there if you drink this", Alda told Neni softly. "You can see him too!" Neni whispered loudly to Alda, staring at Alda in shock. "Yes, I can", Alda reassured Neni. Neni grabbed the cup and almost choked while downing the mixture in a haste; with this, Lina fell to the ground and began bawling her eyes out. Alda went ahead and put on a stick of incense to smoke out in Neni's room and the rest of the house. Soon after, the man disappeared.

Few days later while Lina and Alda were seated in the living room, Lina asked her mother if Neni was going to have to drink the *nep* drink for the rest of her life and her mother reassured her that it was only until she was able to control her *steps* and when necessary. Alda then went ahead to tell her daughter that it wasn't an accident that had taken her leg and ability to ever walk again as well. Alda was wheelchair bound and she thought it was the right time to tell her daughter what had led to the events that changed her life and left her wheelchair bound. Alda had four children, but the birth of her last child didn't go as well as her other three children's. Her last pregnancy had gone well but nothing prepared her for the aftermath of her last pregnancy. One minute she could feel her legs and by the next three hours after her last child's delivery, she couldn't feel any sensations from her waist down. During the rush of activities that ensued during the hours that followed, all that Alda could remember was the feeling of a deep sense of foreboding and her sister crying as the doctor spoke to her about Alda needing an amputation. "I later learned that what had happened to me was called Puerperal Sepsis, I was lucky to have made it out alive", Alda said to her daughter, Lina. "I came into that hospital to have your brother and I left that hospital to never walk again but that was the least of my worries, my nightmare was just beginning", Alda said.

"It began 6 months after your brother was born", Alda continued. Alda was sitting in the balcony of their home rocking her last child to sleep when she saw two children jump down from the tree near their home and run through the closed gate. At first, she thought she was dreaming and rubbed her eyes but then she saw another child jump down from the same tree and run through the closed gate, immediately she carried her child and rolled her wheelchair into the house screaming for her sister. After her sister successfully calmed her, Alda narrated what she had seen but it sounded so ridiculous her sister found it hard to believe but the occurrences didn't stop, the next occurrence more bizarre than the last. The occurrence that broke the camel's back and sent Alda spiraling was when Alda found a strange woman with no eyes reaching for her last child while he lay sleeping in his cot. When the woman noticed that Alda could see her, her expression transformed to one of delight, she grinned, her mouth revealing rows filled with tiny razor-sharp teeth. The woman stepped away from the cot laughing and began running straight for Alda her footsteps sounding like that of a herd of elephants and on hearing Alda's ear-piercing scream she vanished. Alda wouldn't stop screaming, not even her sister or husband could comfort her. Lina had been at home that day. She remembered the house being thrown into a frenzy, her baby brother crying, her mother's wails of agony. Alda's sister, Ida, knew that it was time to visit Mami.

Mami was an old woman with pale leathery skin, she had a loud laugh, her complete set of white teeth stood out to people who met her for the first time when she laughed. As Ida ushered a sullen Alda into Mami's barely lit room, Mami smiled, her white teeth distinctive in the barely lit room and said, "Alda, you have finally come". Ida was taken aback, neither Alda nor she had ever met Mami in person as adults and Alda had never seen Mami before in person. The only time Ida had ever met Mami was when she and Alda's mother had taken Ida along with her on one of her numerous visits to see Mami. "Good morning Mami. You know who we are?" Ida said to Mami. "Of course, are you not here because Alda keeps seeing them?" Mami replied. Ida was in utter shock. "Your mother saw them too", Mami said, "Ida, why do you think your mother kept coming to visit me?" Mami continued. "Settle in Powei's daughters", Mami said. Once Mami arranged her deep blue kaftan all around her, Ida began recounting all that had happened to Alda in the past two months and how Alda was quickly becoming a shadow of herself. "When the body is no longer whole, you will see them", Mami said to Ida. "Who are they?" Ida and Alda asked together. Ida turned to Alda, shocked to have heard her sister speak, Alda hadn't said a word since the bizarre incident that occurred two days ago. "Some people call them the dead while others call them ghosts but they're those who share this world with us, many might not see them but that doesn't mean that they do not exist", Mami said to the sisters. "The best way for Alda to deal with this is for her to dampen her senses, your mother could see them after she lost her

hand to the ghastly accident that almost took her life”, Mami continued. “Not losing a part of your body is the only way to be exempted from this and don’t ask me why it happens this way, it’s still a mystery to us. The blue *nep* leaves’ powder will help with dampening Alda’s senses, Alda must mix the blue *nep* leaves’ powder with warm water and drink it everyday until she can handle seeing them although many never reach that point”, Mami concluded.

“Mami never collected money the first time she gave us the blue *nep* leaves’ powder and when I drank the *nep* leaves powder mixed with warm water, from that day on, I hardly ever saw them again so yes, Neni will have to drink it for as long as necessary”, Alda said concluding the story she was telling her daughter, Lina. Lina let out a deep sigh hoping the road awaiting Neni ahead was one she could bear to walk through.

It took Neni two years before she was able to get back to being somewhat like her former self, she struggled with accepting what the mangled right side of her head had healed into. To her mother’s relief, Neni was not bullied at school, and she was grateful for the way Neni’s teacher, friends and classmates welcomed Neni back to school. Neni’s insecurity about how others perceived her appearance was one of Neni’s many problems, Neni usually forgot to drink the *nep* mixture and it led to her encountering them when she least expected. One of such encounters shook her so much that she had to form the habit of never forgetting to drink the *nep* mixture.

The encounter at the aftermath of an accident when Neni was thirteen years old changed how dedicated she was to drink the *nep* mixture and had her seeking answers from her grandmother. While on her way back from school, there had been an accident, a coaster bus had collided with a trailer truck on the route she normally took back home, Neni pushed her way through the crowd that had gathered and the scene she saw before her was revolting to say the least. During the commotion of ambulances blaring, paramedics assisted the injured people and took away the bodies of those who unfortunately didn’t make it out alive, Neni felt very cold suddenly then she felt a heavy tap on her right shoulder and heard a woman beside her say, “hello, please have you seen my arm?” Neni felt the hairs on her body stand on end as she turned and saw the same woman who not only had she unfortunately lost her arm, but two paramedics had just put in a body bag standing next to Neni staring at her expectantly awaiting her reply.

Neni screamed and ran from the accident scene as if she was being chased by hellhounds, she had forgotten to drink the *nep* mixture because all that had been on her mind that morning was how she wanted to show her new sweater to her crush at

school. When Neni got home, she ran to the kitchen, made and drank the *nep* mixture and ran to the living room where her grandmother was quietly reading a book. "Hello grandma, good afternoon, I'm so tired of seeing them", Neni said sitting on the floor next to her grandmother's wheelchair. "Oh, my dear grandchild, you saw them again, I too wish we didn't take the inevitable step", Alda said, caressing the face of her distraught granddaughter.