

Without Sound

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Tiny babies dressed in pastel pink and baby-blue onesies scream out of frustration and hunger. A red helium balloon pops when it gets too close to a spinning fan. The overweight kitchen manager yells out “order-up” in a deep voice filled with anger and stress. Pint glasses clank as they brush up against one another as bussers quickly clear each table. So many unique, yet everyday sounds.

I had never taken the time to stop and listen to the ordinary sounds around me until one quiet Saturday afternoon. The restaurant was unusually slow, primarily due to Sea Fair events downtown. Three senior citizens were being seated in my section. *More senior citizens? I'm really not going to make any money today.* Senior citizens coming to Red Robin are known for the notorious one-dollar tip. I smile and approach the table with red, orange, and yellow Red Robin coasters in hand. I lay one in front of each person and begin my server script, known as the Red Robin “AEA” (Acknowledge, Educate and Accelerate). I am given thirty seconds to greet and thank the guest for coming in, introduce myself, and give a brief overview of a feature item.

“Hi there. Thank you for coming into Red Robin, my name is Kellie, and I’ll be taking care of you today. Can I get you guys started with some cheese-sticks or maybe a Freckled Lemonade?” I say, in my perkier voice. They are sitting in the red booth positioned nearest the entrance of the restaurant, one usually reserved for senior citizens, or for people who can’t walk very far.

The two women, probably in their mid-sixties, dressed in white and pastel pant and blouse outfits, give me blank stares as though I am speaking a foreign language. The gentleman at the table, probably a little older, maybe close to seventy, looks up at me with a huge grin and mutters something in a very faint voice that sounds like “We’re all deaf.”

Thinking he meant they just couldn’t hear very well from old age, since my seventy-five year old grandmother refers to herself as deaf—but she really just needs for us to shout --I raise my voice and say: “Can I start you off with some iced tea or maybe some lemonade?”

As they begin to communicate with each using their hands, it doesn’t take

me long to realize they are signing to one another. *Oh, wow. They really are deaf. What do I do? I don't know any sign language. I took Spanish in high school, but I never thought I'd need to know sign language. Are they signing about what an idiot I must look like for yelling when they can't hear me anyway?* In hopes that they might be able to read lips I ask, "Okay. Well, do you need a few more minutes to look over the menu? Do you need more time?" As I was standing there trying to figure out what I would say or do next, the gentleman, dressed in light gray slacks, and a button-down, short sleeved, blue shirt, holds up five fingers and signals they need some more time. I ask if I can bring water, talking at a slow pace hoping he'll understand me. He does, nodding and smiling.

I step over to the condiment and beverage station around the corner, grab three pint size glasses, scoop up some cubed ice, fill them with cold water, put a lemon slice on the rims, and take them back to the table. I wait on my other tables, but keep an eye on my table of seniors, who are now waving their hands and signing at one another. I pause for a second to see if I can recognize any of the signs they are making, but of course I can't. *That must be so hard, living a life without sound. Were they born deaf? Or were they in a terrible accident that caused permanent hearing loss?* Since I don't know any sign language, I can't sign to them to find out.

After five minutes, I notice the plastic menus are laying in front of them, so I quickly approach the table. I look to my left and see the manager standing with his stopwatch making sure servers are conforming to the proper Red Robin time standards. *There is no way I will have this order taken down and entered into the computer within one minute.* My heart begins to beat faster until I realize the manager is watching the server in the section next to me. I look up and smile at the threesome sitting at the table. I pull out my white notepad and blue ballpoint pen hoping that maybe they will signal for the paper and write down their orders for me. They didn't. I was in luck though, because the gentleman, who was obviously the best at reading lips, was their "speaker" and ordered for each of them, pointing out items on the menu.

"Would she like the cup or bowl of chowder with that?" I ask, referring to the woman in white, who has white hair with a stripe of silver, almost like a highlight, down each side. I cup my hands to symbolize a cup, and then put them out further to indicate the distinction between a bowl and cup size. He signs quickly to the woman, who smiles and puts out her hands to show me she wants a large portion. "A bowl it is then," I say, smiling and wrapping up the rest of the order.

The gentleman, whose name I never learn, gives me a thumbs up. After I enter their orders into the computer system, I can't help but watch them again. *They seem so happy; but how can someone be happy without sound, without ever being able to ever hear the words "I love you."*

Their food comes out in eight minutes, a perfect "gift of time" according to Red Robin standards, which aims to get the guest in and out at their convenience. That includes having drinks for them within two minutes of being seated, ten minutes for the appetizers, and eight minutes for their main dish. Our script and detailed schedule of checkpoints makes it crucial that everything turns out tasting great and served hot the first time.

Again, I get smiles and thumbs up when I ask how their food tastes. *Do they really understand what I am saying after all? Or are they just humoring me?* Either way, they seem happy about the food. I drop off the checks as the gentleman gets down to his last spoon of creamy, white clam chowder. They quickly hand me money-exact change for the woman with the silver streaks in her hair, and twenty dollars for the \$18.98 bill for the other two. The gentleman smiled as he handed me the money, and I say, "I'll be back with your change."

He must have read my lips when I said the word "change" because he smiled and mouthed "It's all for you." Another one-dollar tip, but this time I wasn't disappointed. This time it was different. Maybe it was because I felt sorry for them, or maybe it was just because I had had so much fun watching them interact with one another that the minor detail of a tip didn't bother me. This unique group of people made me realize there is so much to be thankful for in this world. They wave goodbye as they exit the restaurant through the heavy glass doors.

I close my eyes to try to concentrate on all the sounds around me that I take for granted; sounds that those three kind individuals will never get to experience. Tiny babies dressed in onesies screaming out of frustration and hunger. A red helium balloon popping when it gets too close to a spinning fan. The overweight kitchen manager yelling out "order-up" in a deep voice filled with anger and stress. The clanking of pint glasses brushing up against one another as bussers quickly clear each table.

These are all insignificant sounds; sounds so common and frequent that it's hard to hear them unless you devote all your attention to focusing on them. These slightly disturbing sounds will be sounds I will never take for granted again, because I am fortunate to be able to hear them.