

# Volume

*by tea kay*

Something reached into Avi and took his voice, turning his volume to zero. Avi might have said it was God in hindsight, but at the time he had no faith, so he didn't have any explanation. It happened on a Wednesday morning at the office, the mood that day was agitated. The mood came from the people - they were thankful for a few hours each weekday without nagging and the constant picking. *Did you expect that the lawn would mow itself? Do you remember that parent teacher conferences are next week? No, I will not agree to you having a beer with your old college friends after work today.*

\* \* \*

At this point in the story, the Best Man looks up from the pages in his hand to see if the wedding guests are paying close attention to his speech. Today is Avi's big day, he's getting married. The Best Man sees he should pick up the pace a little because he's losing people in the back. There's a table of bridesmaids in the far corner, not paying attention, and whispering with each other. He scans the rest of the room, and sees the DJ has appeared, and he's listening intently, while leaning against a door jamb in the back of the reception hall. At least *that* guy is listening. The Best Man looks back at the printed sheets in his hands, and decides to skip the funny bit about the guy who brings his dog to the office and the other guy with dog allergies, and instead jumps ahead to the events of the morning before the cherry blossoms.

\* \* \*

On this day, Avi was indifferently aware of the mood in the building as he walked down the office hallway, the overhead fluorescents pacing his progress. Perhaps there was slightly more tension this day, because it was springtime. The trees were showing leaves again, and the gray winter skies had been replaced with a soft blue. This always agitated the people in the office a little bit further than usual, after the strain of living through the long

stretch of no holidays and darkness between January and May. He is wearing a short sleeve shirt with a collar, it has a small alligator on the front - the office is casual.

Avi was working at his desk by 8:37; he spent that morning reading email and looking at his proposal first draft. Not editing, just *looking* at it. Reading bits and pieces over and over. It was almost 10:00 when he got up and walked down the hall to Wednesday morning doughnuts. In the conference room he tried to speak to someone for the first time all day. He had taken a bite of doughnut and turned to see Jason standing there. Jason, who worked in the same hallway, but on another team, was also a baseball fan. Jason had once confessed to Avi that he thought the receptionist was hotter than his wife, but wouldn't have sex with her unless his wife agreed and it was a three-some. Jason's extreme openness with personal information made Avi feel awkward. When Jason made eye contact with Avi, Avi intended to say "good morning". He made the movements of speaking, but no sound came out. He swallowed, and tried again. His lips moved, his vocal cords vibrated, but he made no sound.

"Are you alright Avi?" said Jason. Avi then fish-mouthed, as Jason turned back to the oval conference table and picked up *two* cinnamon cake doughnuts. Avi set his doughnut down and flapped his hands a bit, like he was imitating a bird, and shook his head.

"Dude, it's OK. One bite at a time." Jason said, and he smacked Avi on the shoulder and walked out of the room. Avi watched Jason's back as he left, and continued moving his mouth. His lips formed words, but no sound was made. Again he swallowed hard, like he did when his ears were plugged up after a long plane ride. Instinctively, he put his hands up to his throat and cradled the front of his neck. Jason was right, he thought, too big a bite. He tried to speak again, and again no sound came out.

He wasn't blocked by a lump in his throat, something had changed. He didn't know it yet, but Avi's ability to speak was gone for good.

\* \* \*

This time, the Best Man moved only his eyes. His face remained tilted down towards the pages in his hand, and he didn't make any other movements. He didn't want them to know he was checking on them again, to see if they were watching. This time, they were. The bridesmaids were looking straight at him, and the bartender was listening from behind the bar at the back of the room. The Best Man was satisfied with his scan of faces, full of eyes more intent now, and so he continued on.

\* \* \*

Avi abruptly walked from the conference room to the men's room. "Hi." said Javier, as he exited and Avi walked past him. Avi nodded, and smiled, desperate for Javier to move along. He walked into the men's room and saw someone's back at the closest urinal. He felt the hairs on his forearms go up, as panic made his heart beat faster and his breath come quicker. He wanted to be alone. Before the hesitation might seem noticeable to the unknown man in front of him, he took a few steps to the first stall and went in, shutting the door. He put down the seat and sat, with his head in his hands. He felt the stiffness of his dark hair in his fingers, the ethnicity that was mostly hidden by a generic haircut. He pulled his hands down and looked at his forearms. Light brown skin. Very hairy. Would his forearm hair get gray hairs mixed in too, like his dad? His father was darker than Avi, and his father's mother was an Ethiopian Jew. If your mother is Jewish, then you are Jewish. But if your dad's mom is an Ethiopian Jew, you just end up with a slight darkness to your skin that makes it harder for people to categorize you, and you are named Aviram. Avi didn't project any particular heritage, he blended. Thrown into the American melting pot, his dark skin mixed in. Yet somehow through a trick of lineage, he had still inherited a few things from his paternal grandmother. He wanted the feeling of blending in, of being just one of the moving parts. He didn't know it, but that came from her. She had traveled from Ethiopia to Israel for a better life, and been an outsider there for all of her days. Avi's dad had traveled from Israel to the United States for a better life *and* a

well paying job. Avi never traveled anywhere, but he had stiff black hair and a subconscious desire to fit in.

He sat there, in the bathroom, and tried to make a low hum for about fifteen minutes. Just a simple, low hum, from the top part of the throat. He tried to make the sound soft too, in case he actually made a noise, because he didn't want anyone to hear and wonder. At twenty minutes he experienced a new level of obsession, as his mind tumbled over futures and causes and solutions and rationalizations for his missing voice. It wasn't like a sore throat, it wasn't like *anything*. He could still feel the vibrations of his vocal cords, there was just no sound. It was like... like he had been muted.

\* \* \*

At this point he knew he had them. He didn't look up. The Best Man half smiled out of the left side of his mouth. Everyone in the room knew Avi, except for a small handful on the bride's side, the guests that met him for the first time tonight. But even those few had already learned that Avi couldn't talk. It was easy to see, he used sign language, and he read lips. No one ever questions how a person gets to be like that. It's assumed there must be some clear and reasonable explanation, typically the general toxicity of life, resulting in cancers, birth defects, and diseases that claim who they can, when they can.

This was also the only point in the Best Man's story where no one doubted him, no one believed he made the whole thing up. That would all come later, when the guests had thinned a bit, and had had more wine. Later on, as the DJ played, you might have overheard: "That toast was a good one, the magical cherry tree story. He must've just written that last night, it was so wild.". Or maybe: "The best man gets some points for being different with that speech, but I heard that Avi was born that way, *just like everyone always thought*".

He continued.

\* \* \*

Avi camped in the men's room for about half an hour. Then he controlled the panic by going back to familiar routine. He

walked back to his office, sat down at his desk, and worked. In his head, he repeated: "I'll be fine in the afternoon" over and over. He focused on work more intently than he had in months, maybe years. He finished the proposal that he didn't expect to complete until the following week. He hid his lack of voice artfully, making an excuse for the one meeting, and then skillfully maneuvering the hallways throughout the rest of the day. He succeeded in becoming *so* focused on his work that there were stretches of time where he forgot about his problem.

But, when late afternoon arrived, it was again the only thing in his mind. It encompassed every bit of his being. He had to leave, go home, get away. He walked down the hall, out of the building, and towards the parking lot. He stepped off the curb and suddenly stopped short, sucking in a small breath. The tiny things in front of him that pulled Avi out of his head were pink cherry blossoms covering a tree on the edge of the parking lot, near his car. He stopped for a moment. He had just caught that springtime late-afternoon light, so similar to winter light, except it touches things like cherry blossoms and newly leafed trees instead of bony branches and frozen puddles. The blossoms were moving; they looked like snowflakes, but also they looked alive, like sea creatures. The tree was shedding too. The petals rained down and were starting to make a pink snow cover on the ground around the tree, and on the side of his car. There was an energy, he could feel it. He started to smile.

And then, in another tick, he was back inside his head, and back to the problem in his body. Having now wasted seconds, minutes, perhaps even more, on beauty, he double stepped to his car door and got in. He was driving home in a daze.

He was shaken out of his inward state, for the second time, by sudden brake lights on the freeway and the simultaneous screech of twisting metal, as the car in front of him swerved, colliding with a station wagon. The two cars skidded and twisted. Glass sprayed and popped like fireworks. Avi slammed his foot down on the brake pedal, skidding his own car to barely avoid joining the crash. As he

reeled to a stop he saw blood splattered across his windshield. What he saw next was not meant to be seen. Not meant to be smelled. Not meant to be told in a story.

In that hour of an instant, Avi all at once knew he would never go to the doctor, he would never seek help for his voice, because he would never be able to speak again. Minutes later, as he turned his car into his driveway, the left side of his mouth curled into a half smile. Before he stepped out of the car and as the engine hummed, he was looking forward to growing old. He was looking forward to watching the light of the day pass over the garden, looking forward to watching his one true love stir a cup of tea.

\* \* \*

Now, the room was silent. The DJ hadn't moved from his spot in the door jam, and the bartender was opening his eyes wide, to hide emotion from the coming onslaught of bridesmaids with drink orders. Soon the crowd would be ready for some bad dancing to even worse music, but now, they were silent. The Best Man put his left hand, holding still bubbling champagne, in the air with a swift motion. The champagne splashed up and then downwards, down his arm and onto his white dress shirt. A shirt already marred with stains of sweat in the armpits, and already unbuttoned, at both the collar and the cuffs. He looked like the perfect wedding guest, and like the others he was ready for some exaggerated hip movements on the dance floor. He made an effort to project as he said: *"In this, my best man's toast, I raise my glass to Avi. The luckiest man I know. That is to say, he would be the luckiest man... if... I believed in luck."*

The End

