Adapted from the short story, “Tone,” by YZ Chin:

I love it when my friends introduce me to new people, although I never let on. I love the proud and honorable expression they wear when they say "This is Sandy - she's deaf", as if I were evidence of their benevolence. I also love the split-second shocked expression on the new people, the hasty smiles and their best imitations of what they think of as their "normal faces". If they do the ritual well enough I turn my head ever so slightly and tuck my hair behind one of my ears, whichever one's closer to them. They never fail to say something nice about my pink hearing aids, while my regular friends beam on.

I'm thinking of starting a hearing aid collection, actually. They'd make better accessories than earrings. I once saw a catalog for clip-on hearing aids and hearing aid covers, and the products were most definitely fashion statements in various shapes and hues. It'd be like the exquisitely expensive handbag Esther's dad got her when we were in high school. The rest of us could only admire, but could not imitate. And now, only I can wear hearing aids. My friends can do nothing but gush.

To be honest, I quite like my deafness. It wasn't easy the first few years after the car accident, but now it's become something that makes me special among my friends. None of my close friends are hearing impaired. By the time I lost my hearing, I'd already accumulated a fixed circle of people.

You know how when you talk about your friends, you refer to them as Drew the Bartender, Carol the Feminist, Greg the Guy Who Can Knot a Cherry Stem with His Tongue and so on? I'm Sandy the Deaf Girl. I like it. I don't have any other particularly outstanding traits or skills. Never did. It's more than just standing out, too. I'm sure a lot of important events in my life wouldn't have happened or worked out quite the same way if I weren't wearing pink hearing aids. For example, the thing with Colin.

I first met Colin at an apartment party. When Carol the Feminist introduced us to each other, I tucked my hair behind both my ears and leaned closer, not because he did the ritual particularly well, but because he was cute. You should have seen his recovery smile after the inevitable surprise.

We went in search of something to drink after the handshakes, and somehow, we lost Carol.

"Do you usually read lips like this? Or do you sign too?" he asked after a while.

"I mostly just read lips because it was easier to pick up than signing," I told him.

We talked more, and then the host upped the music volume and dimmed the lights for the "dance floor", and I had to lean in much closer to be able to continue reading his lips in the semi-darkness.

We exchanged numbers, and a week later Colin did the unthinkable and called. We went out, satisfied ourselves that the other person still looked good in daylight. Within two months Colin and I were dating.

Colin was my first date after the accident, and now that I think about it, I wonder if my dismal post-accident romances had anything to do with feelings of self-consciousness. I don't know. I try not to think about the first few years when it was hard.

Our first birthday was his twenty-third. I got him a pair of tickets to the Rammstein concert; I knew he loved that band. When I flashed the tickets, he started exclaiming and laughing, but then abruptly stopped.
“Sandy, are you sure? I mean, can you...enjoy the concert?”

I tucked my hair behind my left ear and smiled at him.

“First of all, who said I want to enjoy the concert? I never did like those kinds of violent, headexploding noise you call music...”

“Hah!”

“...Second of all, I can hear most everything above a really loud shout, remember? So we're fine for the concert.”

His smile was beautiful. I tucked my hair behind my other ear.

It turned out to be quite a success, the Rammstein concert. I'd never seen him so full of enthusiasm, so propelled by energy before, nor did I ever see him like that again. We weren't even close enough to see much of the band, since I wasn't exactly raking in the money for front row seats. Colin was just driven purely by the music. I imagined his eardrums, the pair of them vibrating like mad inside his ears, unseen by the naked eye.

I felt a little jealous then and there, actually, something I thought I'd stopped doing for good when I'd quit asking "why me?"

I looked at Colin for most of the night, taking in his jumping up and down, his whoops, his huge grin, and the colored lights that traveled as if they were alive. I could hear the amplified electric guitar parts just fine, and I could feel the drum beats through the floor. But it wasn't the same.

A month and a half later, Colin presented a pair of tickets on my birthday. They were for a book signing and reading event featuring Emily Barnes, a writer I absolutely adored.

I was more than thrilled. The week leading up to the event, I re-read all of her books and agonized over which one of the four I should bring to have her sign, since we were only allowed one signature each. Colin laughed at me and said I was acting like a teenybopper when I made him promise to get in line as well, so that I could have two signed books instead of just one.

On the day of the event, we arrived at the bookstore early. They had cleared a section of the store by pushing bookshelves back, so that the whole place looked denser than I remembered, like a jungle that had turned magical and overgrown itself overnight. I certainly felt the magic, looking at the temporary stage and the half-full rows of chairs in worship before it.

Colin held me by my hand and led me to seats in the last row. When I protested, he smiled and pointed to the speakers mounted just behind us.

"But I can read her lips if we sit up front!"

"But that's not the point of readings, is it?"

"But-"

"Do you admire her words or her looks? Would you rather hear her own interpretation of her text or see her face?"

I sat down, clutching two of Emily Barnes' books, convinced of the evening, and also of Emily Barnes, of Colin, of us.
It would have been perfect. Sometimes I still think about it.

The store manager walked up the temporary stage promptly at 6 PM. Her turquoise green heels were precarious, and I imagined the clicking that came with each step.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen," she said.

The P.A. system was not of very high quality, and the bookstore really wasn't set up for that kind of thing, but I could make out every word of the store manager's introduction of Emily Barnes if I focused. Colin squeezed my hand and raised his eyebrows at me. I gave him my sweetest smile and nodded.

Then Emily Barnes herself stepped onto the temporary stage. Hands clapped in every row ahead of us, all the way up to the stage. Emily Barnes bowed a little, and smiled, then accepted the microphone from the manager's outstretched arm.

"Hello." She said from behind me, from the speakers. After a pause she smiled apologetically and said, "I never really liked these things."

And then she put the microphone down on the floor of the stage. She straightened up, and her lips started moving. I didn't notice this at first, or if I did, my brain didn't process the first few seconds of it. I was caught by surprise.

A second later, when it occurred to me to start reading Emily Barnes' lips, I felt Colin's eyes on me. I looked up and caught his eye, and he started to raise his arm.

"No!" I hissed and grabbed the arm.

Colin gestured towards Emily Barnes angrily. Seeing his forehead in creases, his eyebrows in frowns, I suddenly had a very clear mental video of him at the Rammstein concert. How excited he was. His jumping up and down, his whoops, his huge grin, and the colored lights that traveled as if they were alive.

"No." I told him. Sitting in my plastic chair with the video of his birthday running in my head, I suddenly had the most ferocious desire to be happy, to be excited, to jump up and down and whoop and grin. I was determined to be happy, here and now, with my birthday present.

"Why not?" Colin asked.

"I can read the tone of expression from her lips," I told him.

"What?"

"Shhh."

I stood up, inched my way past knees and walked until I took up a spot near the stage where I could stand without occluding anyone's view. Colin remained in his plastic chair for a while, but he eventually came up from behind and slipped his arms around me. I twisted around to smile up at him, a smile as bright as I felt inside.

For the record, Emily Barnes' reading was exceptional. She breathed life into her own words. Made them alive in ways I had not been able to imagine. Her lips moved, parted, close, moved, and I heard the subtle sadness, the cautious joy, the gentle regret - all of it contained in her prose all along, never fully discovered until then.
"So how exactly do you determine tone of expression from reading lips?" Colin asked on the way out.

I smiled down at my autographed books.

"That's a silly question. It's like asking blind people what they dream of when they sleep."

I walked faster. Colin kept up. We didn't talk on the drive back to my apartment.

If a tree falls in a forest, and no one hears it, does it make a sound? If two people argue, and one of them doesn't hear the argument, can the damage be undone?

A few weeks after the book reading, Colin and I fought for the first time. He wanted to cancel a dinner we'd planned long ago. The reason was the premiere of his indie filmmaker friend's first movie.

"Premiere? What premiere? It's going to be in his basement!"

"It doesn't matter, okay, his specialty is low-budget films, and besides, he spent one whole year on the movie, all right? You just can't appreciate movies, that's all!"

"Don't you use that kind of tone with me!"

It took me a moment to comprehend his silence.

"Right," he eventually said. "right. You can read my tone of expression from my lips. That's it, right?"

And he left. For the premiere.

It went downhill from then on, and I suppose we both knew it. The last argument we had, he yelled at me so loud I thought I'd regained my hearing.

"I'm breaking up with you!"

I didn't say anything for a while, and when I did, it was nothing but a "Are you serious?"

"Why?" He sneered. "Can't you tell whether or not I'm serious from my lips?"

And that was it. Colin and I broke up.

I have a few nice memories of the last months of the relationship. The most vivid one of them is of Colin fussing with my bangs and tucking my hair behind my ears.

"You look pretty like that. How come you never do it anymore?" he'd said.

I never told Colin that he sometimes shouted so loudly at me that I didn't need to read his lips to know his tone of voice. Colin was never very good at determining at what level I could start hearing clearly. I also never told him what it felt like to realize that he didn't sound like what I'd imagined, because, of course, I had never heard his voice until he started shouting at me.

I've had a haircut since. I wear my hair really short these days. Shows off my new fluorescent green hearing aids better. I still love it when my friends introduce me to new people. Sometimes I forget, and lift my hand to tuck my hair behind my ears, but the reaction is never the same.
anymore, now that my hearing aids are unconcealed. They see it coming.

My girlfriends asked, of course. I told them that it was human nature. That people just can't accept other people who see or hear or feel or know things they aren't supposed to. If you see UFOs, you're crazy. If you see spirits, you're a fraud. If you can read the tone of his voice just from the way he moves his lips, you're a bad girlfriend. And deaf, of course.