

SOUNDS LIKE HOME

Growing up Black and Deaf in the South

By Mary Herring Wright

CHAPTER 6—The Nightmare Begins

The happy years of my childhood and many of the pleasant sounds I took for granted were about to change. School had started again, as usual, in late summer. The teachers had arrived, and I'd helped Miss Staten unpack her trunks and bags, sniffing the lovely perfume (I can still smell it) and folding piles of dainty handkerchiefs edged with lace and flowers. She gave me some of her handkerchiefs and other trinkets for helping her.

One evening when I was about nine years old, as I was walking home from school, I felt something in one eye. It was bothersome. Upon arriving home I went to the crib to get Mama to get it out. She could find nothing. I still felt it and my eye was red by morning but no one could find anything at all. This lasted for several days and I started seeing little rainbows around lights at night. This was related to my hearing loss, only we didn't know it then. At school, sometimes I'd look up from reading a book or writing to find Miss Beaty standing right by my desk staring at me.

“Mary, didn't you hear me speaking to you?” she'd ask.

“No ma'am,” I'd say.

So she'd go over again whatever it was. Sometimes I'd miss out on something anyway and she would tell me to stop being hardheaded and to pay attention.

One evening while sitting around the crib trying to learn to tie dry tobacco I fell asleep. Then Mama was shaking me to wake me up because it was time to go in the house. She said she'd been calling me loudly, and didn't I hear her?

"No Ma'am." I said. "No ma'am."

The others hooted and said that they knew I couldn't help hearing her, as loud as she called, and that I should stop putting on. Finally, one morning after Eunice had returned to school, I woke up and someone was saying how loud the car was that had brought Eunice home that night.

"What car?" I asked.

"Didn't you hear all that noise? It was loud enough to wake the dead," I was told.

I hadn't heard a thing. Mama got kind of quiet and thoughtful. Frank didn't tease or pick at me anymore. In fact, he became sort of gentle and kind. One day, he came up behind me and started talking but I didn't know it until he put his mouth close to my ear and called me loudly. I jumped. Mama was also standing by, looking at me so sadly. Frank told her he believed I couldn't hear.

I screamed, "I can too hear!" and ran off.

I was terrified at the thought of being deaf. Not hear the birds singing in the woods or the music on the records? Not hear Mama singing, pans rattling in the kitchen, the wind whistling around the house on a cold winter night, so many other things? A silent world? I'd just as soon be dead. Then I got mad. I decided I was not going to be deaf and started trying to always face whoever was talking to make sure I saw their lips move. I tried to keep up with whatever was being said. When I would see the rest of the family laughing and talking about something, if I couldn't understand and join in, I'd go

out where the dogs were and talk to them. At least they were glad of my company. I felt they were my best friends.

School that I once loved so well was a nightmare. When the other children learned that I was losing my hearing, I was either shunned or pitied. When I didn't understand what was said, a few children would scream in my ear and ask why I didn't get a horn to hold to my ear and say "Eh? Eh?" They had seen pictures of old people with hearing problems holding a horn to their ear and thought I should use antlers from a mounted deer head.

I guess everyone also thought I was going blind. All I could see from my left eye was a blur of light. I had to wear shades from morning until night, when I wasn't sitting by the heater, wringing towels out of a pan of hot water to hold to my eye. Our family doctor didn't know what the problem was, so he sent me to a specialist in Wilmington, so Papa carried me to Wilmington every two weeks. Dr. Smith was nice and I wasn't afraid of him. Sometimes our neighbor, Mr. Luther Powers, would take us to Wilmington for my appointment. I'd sit in back with Miss Susie. She'd tuck a soft woolen lap robe around both of us. Usually, I'd end up asleep with my head in her lap.

We went by train at other times and Professor Rogers would meet us at the station. One day Professor Rogers decided to go meet my doctor. He wasn't satisfied with him and made an appointment for me to see his own eye, ear, nose and throat specialist, Dr. Sloan. He wasn't plump and jolly like Dr. Smith, and his office was on the tenth floor and much larger. He had so many nurses and shiny instruments that I was terrified. I cried and struggled so that Papa took me out in the hall to a broom closet until I quieted down. I continued to see Dr. Sloan every two weeks for several months.

I loved going to Professor Roger's house, which we did whenever we took the train. It was a tall white house with a porch. He'd put me in a chair by the fireplace in the library. I'd never seen so many books—shelves all around, floor to ceiling. His youngest daughter, Harriet, would bring me apples and things to nibble on until dinnertime. Once, Professor Rogers took Mama and me on a tour of Williston High School. It was the finest school I'd ever seen.

At home I'd sit by the heater from the time I got up until bedtime keeping hot towels to my eye. I had to have drops put in it three times a day. If I went anyplace, I had to wear dark glasses (or shades). They were grown people's shades and they usually slid down my nose. I never went for long without cracking or breaking one side of them. As long as the bad eye was covered, I had to keep that pair. How I hated those shades; I won't wear them today if I can help it. Finally, my left eye cleared up and I could see well from it again, but the right eye clouded, so I had to go through everything all over again. This lasted for a whole winter. Toward spring that eye also cleared up some, but not entirely, so I still wore shades.

When it was time for school to close, the teachers wanted me to have a part in something since I missed school so much. They gave me the part of Mother Hubbard with a few lines, but my hearing was nearly all gone by this time, so they had a girl lead me onstage and speak a few lines for me. It was humiliating to say the least. I'd always been so proud of learning my lines for a play or saying speeches. They thought I'd lost not only my hearing, but all my senses. I could still speak clearly and never understood why they wouldn't let me speak my lines for myself.

One Sunday afternoon while out on the highway with some of the kids, a boy named Hoover got into this argument with the girls and threw a bottle at one. It hit my eye, breaking the shades, so I stopped wearing them for awhile. I could see, but I was deaf, so no birdsong for me this spring. When we played the talking machine, I'd pick out a favorite record, then place my hand on top of the machine to feel the vibrations. I'd pretend I could still hear the music. At church, I'd keep my eyes glued to the choir members, trying to read someone's lips, pretending I could still hear the hymns I once loved to listen to. They would not give me any part in the Children's Day program that year. I stayed at Thelma's house while they had it. She had no part either, by choice. Thelma always flatly refused to be in any program and thought me foolish for caring enough to cry.

Mama prayed for me to hear again. She taught me to read different parts of the Bible on having faith. When I'd kneel beside her chair to say my prayers at night, her hand would rest on my head and I knew she was praying too. We'd talk about what we'd do when my hearing came back, but it never did. God must have had other plans for me.

NOTE:

Mary Herring Wright was right. God did have other plans for her. Read the rest of her powerful and inspiring story. This book along with her second book, "**FAR FROM HOME**," are both available for purchase at Amazon.com or HalfPriceBooks.com.