

**This American Life Transcript**

**Prologue**

**Broadcast June 25, 2010**

**Episode #411: First Contact**

**Ira Glass:** Is that Marc?

**Marc Holmes:** Yes, that's Marc speaking for Scott.

**Ira Glass:** So, Scott, you were born without hearing, right?

**Marc Holmes:** That's correct. Even though my parents didn't know that until I was 18 months old.

**Ira Glass:** This is a very strange interview because you can't hear, and because I have a terrible cold, I can't speak. [laughter]

**Marc Holmes:** Marc gets the burden here. [laughter]

[music]

**Ira Glass:** *I talked to Scott Krepel through his interpreter, Marc Holmes—they were in a studio in Washington, D.C.—about what happened when Scott was 11 or 12 the government approved the use of cochlear implants in children. So Scott got an implant. He was excited. He thought he'd fit in*

*better at school, have more friends and date girls. And of course, he tried to imagine what it would be like to hear.*

**Marc Holmes:** To be honest, I didn't know what to expect. The best analogy I can think of is maybe I was hoping that it would be like, that speech was like telepathy—instant thought transfer.

[music]

**Ira Glass:** *So he had the surgery and then he went to the audiologist to configure the device. And what they do is that they hook up the implant to a machine.*

**Marc Holmes:** To send different frequencies, pulses, to try and stimulate the different parts in my cochlea, trying to figure out which one worked.

**Ira Glass:** So the first sounds that you hear are those pulses?

**Marc Holmes:** Yes.

**Ira Glass:** And what do they sound like?

**Marc Holmes:** The first time I heard something, I can remember very vividly, because it wasn't really, it didn't feel like hearing; it felt more like a vibration in my whole body. I was sitting there and nothing was happening, except for like a little thing that was tingling throughout my body. But eventually, after a while, the vibrations localized to my ears.

**Ira Glass:** Oh, I see. The first vibrations, you couldn't even tell that they were coming in through your ears.

**Marc Holmes:** Right. I didn't really know that it was sound itself at first. And eventually I came to realize, "Wait a minute, this must be it!"

[electronic sounds, jagged speech]

The audiologist just sent me on my way with the cochlear implant on.

**Ira Glass:** *We can only make an educated guess what this really sounds like. As best as we understand it from people who could once hear and then later in life got the implants, there's a mechanical edge to the sound that you hear with these devices. Musical notes have to be nearly half an octave apart before you can tell the difference between the notes.*

*Voices, people say that they sound like a robot Daffy Duck. But for Scott, whose brain had never developed the neural pathways to process audio, there were two big questions that went beyond all of that.*

**Marc Holmes:** One was that I couldn't understand any of the sounds. It was just all noise. I did not have any ability to distinguish...

**Ira Glass:** Am I understanding you right?: If someone was looking right at you and you were seeing their mouth moving, talking directly to you, you actually couldn't tell which of the sounds was the sound of their voice coming out of their mouth?

**Marc Holmes:** It would depend on the environment, because if it was an environment where there was other noises, then I wouldn't really be able to pick out the person's voice from that background.

**Ira Glass:** *If a dog barked or a horn honked, he couldn't tell what the sounds were or what caused them. A doctor who does these implants told me about a very young patient of his, a child, who got the implant and then would just flush the toilet over and over, kind of amazed to connect the sound that it made with the action of the thing that they were seeing.*

*I was interested in Scott because, although I know lots of deaf people say they have no need to learn to hear and they're fine as they are, and they frown on this procedure, Scott is somebody who wanted this to work. He imagined what it was going to be like. And our show today, our radio show today is all stories where people are trying to make contact for the first time with something that they have never encountered or experienced.*

*And Scott's situation seemed like a particularly harsh example of that. The reality was so far from what he had*

*expected. His second big problem with the implants was he didn't have the ability to ignore any sounds.*

**Marc Holmes:** Well, if you're sitting in your office and you listen carefully, you might hear things like the computer fan running or your own movements, or many different things, and most people have trained themselves to ignore those noises. I had none of that ability.

So everything ended up overwhelming me, without me being able to stop it or ignore it.

**Ira Glass:** *For somebody like Scott, getting the implant at his age, his brain could never catch up and learn to process sound. After five years with the implant, it was still hard for him to focus if an air conditioner was on in the room. And as for recognizing words, if he was in a quiet room and his speech therapist would say a word to him, he could actually pick out the word from a list of words that were sitting in front of him, and that's about as good as it got.*

*So at the end of high school he stopped using the implant, and he doesn't miss it. The only time he really liked it, he says, was that very first day, when he had his first contact with sound.*

**Marc Holmes:** I think the first time I heard, that was cool. Things like, "Oh, I can clink the cookie jar," but it got old very fast.

[music]

**Ira Glass:**

*Today on our show, First Contact, we have three stories of people in that frightening, thrilling first moment of encounter, that leap into the unknown. Mike Birbiglia talks about an achievement that was literally years in the making for him. We have somebody also chatting his way into the lives of people very far away in the middle of a war.*

*We have scientists pondering exactly what we should say the very first time we find extraterrestrials to talk to, and what boneheaded things people want to say to them. From WBEZ Chicago, it's This American Life distributed by Public Radio International, I'm Ira Glass. Still with a little cold this week, but feeling just fine. Stay with us.*

[music]

**end of transcript.**