

## Me Vs. The Mask

Published August 31st, 2020

Gael Hannan



As we crawl our way through this global pandemic, I understand the need for masks. But that doesn't mean I have to like them.

There's been a lot of coverage of how people with hearing loss have not been able to communicate effectively. Every person with hearing loss has received at least 50 emails from hearing friends sharing news of see-through masks. However, they have yet to take the world by storm; we know this, because we still don't see people wearing them.

So, my people are still trying to figure out what other masked people are saying. I know our frustrations pale in comparison to the devastation of COVID-19, but the first time I wore a mask in a store, it didn't go so well.

The Hearing Husband pulled into the grocery store parking lot and I put on my new and very bright green mask. Rather, I *tried* to put it on.

I hooked the elastic holders over my ears and discovered the mask wasn't *quite* wide enough. My pinnae were pulled forward over my ear-holes, causing the behind-the-ear hearing aid to pop out and dangle beside my head. I tried to stretch the mask a bit wider, but it jumped up over my eyes, momentarily blinding me.

Patience is not my best quality. I yanked out my hearing aid and shoved it in the glove compartment, hooked on the mask as best as I could and marched into the store, ears still folded in half. I was keenly aware of my odd appearance; the bright green mask coupled with my red Inuit-

design parka had turned me into a walking Christmas card, and breath-induced steam was escaping upwards and clouding my glasses.

Without the hearing aid, my cochlear implant was on its own. My brain is used to getting its information from my bimodal devices. Forced to fly solo, the CI could pick up the high-pitched music over the store's PA system, but it struggled with the overall noise (which also ignited some serious tinnitus). This was before stores had duct-taped the floors, telling us what direction to move in. Most shoppers appeared to be in pairs, and *all* were engaged in discussing their shopping lists. I couldn't help hearing two people interacting urgently, loudly, and with lots of arm waving.

Her: Do we need pasta!

Him: We have enough pasta!

Her: We don't have rotini!

Him: But we have penne!

Her: Right! Go get some coconut milk while I choose the cheese!

Him: No! YOU get the milk and I'LL stay with the cheese.

Her: OK, MILK it is!

I'm thinking, is all this yakking *absolutely necessary*? You're not wearing masks and your corona-droplets are hosing down the cheese! Cover your gobs or stop talking, preferably both! (Clearly, I was experiencing the early signs of pandemic-pettiness.)

The checkout clerk, who wasn't wearing a mask, didn't speak as loudly. I asked her to repeat herself, but I didn't use speech. Because of my need to lipread, I bizarrely assumed that people can't understand *me* from behind *my* mask. Instead, in the universal hard-of-hearing gesture, I raised my eyebrows and cocked my ear towards her.

This seemed to work. She repeated, but because of her amazing skill of talking *without moving her lips at all*, I understood nothing. I replied, using my own amazing skill of bluffing, I said *no* even though I had no idea what she'd said.

As I picked up my bags, I heard Ms. Softly-Voiced say something along the line of *have a nice day*. Then, for some insane reason, instead of saying *you too*, I bowed to her. Bowed! Had my neighbor sprinkled some dementia powder in my mask before packaging it? Or did I bow because nothing is normal now?

Back at the car, I was over my snit and by the next stop, I had the process nailed. I entered the butcher shop with my mask, hearing aid, CI sound processor and glasses all in place. I stood six feet from the counter. I used my voice. I did *not* bow.

As we all get used to masks, our communication is improving. I recommend using speech-to-text app when speechreading is impossible at checkout counter. Explain what it is, find a safe spot to hold the phone, and then read the cashier's words as she speaks. If that doesn't work, use this speech: "*Thank you, I'm not redeeming points today, I need bags, this is fennel and that's a lemon,*

*and have a nice day.”*

And hopefully, *she* will understand *you* from behind *your* mask.