

## **George, Who Heard Everything**

Karolina Filova

28<sup>th</sup> October

Dear Customer,

Congratulations on your purchase of the Aerosonde-12, the hearing aid that will make you hear everything, and welcome to the exciting world of auditory perception! Whatever the source your aural impediment, thanks to the Aerosonde-12 you will once again hear all the sounds you have missed, and many more beyond that.

You are now but a few simple steps away from complete hearing, but before you start, please check the contents of your package. Your package should contain two (2) Aerosonde-12 hearing aids, one (1) charging platform, one (1) safety case, three (3) Aerosonde-12 stickers, and one (1) User Guide. If any of these components are missing from your package, please contact us by the details listed below.

If your package is complete, you are ready to begin using the Aerosonde-12! All you need to do is follow the simple steps in the User Guide, complete with labelled diagrams, to unpack your hearing aids and turn them on. No complicated calibration is required from your side; as soon as you place the Aerosonde-12 securely into your ears, it will automatically adjust its settings to your requirements. Your auditory perception will improve immediately and then sharpen and expand with every day of use!

Please read through the User Guide carefully before handling the Aerosonde-12 and familiarise yourself with the instructions for use, terms and conditions, and possible side effects. If you find any fault with the Aerosonde-12, please do not hesitate to contact Customer Services. Please also note that we reserve the right to refuse refund for any damage that may come to the Aerosonde-12 as a result of uninformed handling.

On behalf of Aerosonde Ltd, I wish you the most pleasant of experiences with the Aerosonde-12, the hearing aid that will make you hear everything!

Yours faithfully,

S. Calleigh

*Attachment. This package was ordered for you as part of our 'Send as a Gift' programme. The following message was added to your delivery:*

*"Dear dad happy 77<sup>th</sup> hope you have a great day this is the hearing aid I was talking about hope it helps with your bad ears sorry we couldn't stop by kids football match super busy love you Kat"*

5th November

Dearest Katherine,

I'm writing to thank you for my birthday present and the kind words you sent to me. Don't worry, I understand just how busy you must be nowadays—I remember my own first promotion, all that zeal and overtime and gracious initiative—though I must say it would still make me incredibly happy if you could visit me sometime. Birthday cake doesn't taste the same alone, and I'm sure little Tom and Arthur must have grown a good twenty centimetres since I last saw them! Or maybe I could come and watch one of their football matches sometime? I can't believe they're already playing matches.

I hope you forgive me for taking so long to reply. The truth is, I've just been too busy with the hearing aids you so considerately sent my way. The guide didn't lie—I managed to get them going almost immediately, and you know how I am with technology! When I first stuck them into my ears (pardon the detail, but you have to twist them in like the helices in a corkscrew, deeper into your ears than you'd ever think possible), they immediately started piercing the inside of my skull like they were hungry for my blood, tiny little jabs that reminded me of wasp stings. Luckily, they didn't last long, but when they'd finally gotten a taste of my blood, they started sending tiny shocks into my brain. It felt like all of my grey matter was buzzing and expanding and threatening to burst out right through my eyes, but again, it lasted only a few seconds. After that, I'm delighted to tell you, the hearing began!

As you probably know, there isn't much to hear in my apartment, so at first (and forgive my doubt!) it crossed my mind that perhaps the hearing aid, like all the other ones before, just didn't work. I was sat at the kitchen table, running my hands along the tablecloth, a cup of coffee waiting for me next to a slice of Pavlova. I was wondering what I'm going to do with the rest of the cake; perhaps I could bring some to Ms. Bradbury next door, but she rarely answers the door for me nowadays... Anyway, that's what I was thinking about when it came. It started like a gentle humming of distant ocean waves, but then it grew closer and louder until eventually I recognised the awfully annoying sound of our air vent! I'd completely forgotten we had one! Mary—sorry, your mother—always used to despise that sound, bless her!

I miss your mother, Katherine. Of course, I've missed her ever since she left us, as I'm sure you have as well—but as they say, memories tend to fade and wounds heal and even our loved ones surrender their features to the soothing stream of time... Well, everything, I tell you everything, came right back to me with the roar of that air vent; all the tiny details that I had long since forgotten, suddenly fresh in my mind. I miss her more than ever now, since I've started recalling more precisely the sound of her laugh, the gentle clicking of her typewriter as she stayed up late translating Kafka and Goethe for me, and how it was only under her touch that the piano would play clearly. These sounds resonate so lucidly in my mind that I'm not sure if I'm recalling or actually hearing them; it's almost as if they'd never left me.

I was wrong, Katherine, about there not being much to hear in my apartment. It started with the air vent, yes, but soon enough the rest of the kitchen came back to life, and it did so with the ferocity of a jungle. Relentlessly, more and more sounds started layering upon each other: the fridge buzzing its low, mighty growl; the kettle hissing ever so ominously; the gentle cracking of the impatient whipped cream in my Pavlova; water being gulped down the sink's drain and churned through its intestine... soon, even the silence hidden in the cupboards started creeping out to fight for its aria. I bathed in these rich sounds for they were the first drops of monsoon pouring down after what has been an endless drought. And after the kitchen followed the rest of my apartment—the alarm ticking in my bedroom, the moths eating through my winter coat, water slowly evaporating from my drying rack. It turns out there's a universe of sounds in my apartment.

That's why I only got round to sending my thanks now; ever since my 77<sup>th</sup> birthday, I've been sitting at the kitchen table, gradually making my way through the Pavlova, revelling in the sounds. I know, as you always remind me, that I shouldn't leave my apartment—but now I don't even mind it anymore. With every passing minute, I notice new sounds soaring through the rooms, sounds that never before crossed my mind. Just yesterday, all of a sudden, an odd bubbling reached my ears that I somehow knew must have been Octavia. I didn't even have to walk over to the aquarium to be sure of that. All day and all night, I've been able to make out all the strokes of her fins as she swims around in her circles. And you know what the strangest part is? Even now, with the scraping of pen against paper pounding against my earlobes, I feel like I can almost discern her thoughts among the bubbles...

Anyway, I've finished my cake now, which means I can go on hearing undisturbed. I might even go to the bedroom, just to have a closer hear of Octavia. My dear Katherine, I cannot thank you enough; you've filled my world with sound again. I would be blessed to see you sometime.

All the best,

Dad

11<sup>th</sup> November

To whom it may concern,

I am writing this in the hope that the address printed on the bottom of your sardine cans is the correct one for contacting somebody in a position of authority in Blue Ocean Sardines. I would like to place an order for sardine cans and believe this matter is so pressing that it ought to be addressed by none less than the leadership of Blue Ocean Sardines itself.

In the first place, please let me explain the reasons behind my purchase request, in order that you do not dismiss it immediately as lunacy. In the very simplest of terms, the issue is that I can hear the screaming of your sardines from my apartment and, frankly, it is keeping me awake at night. The situation of your sardines has become a matter of great concern to me, especially so considering the notable distance between your warehouse and my apartment. I cannot begin to imagine the force of their screaming from closer up.

The heart-wrenching sound first came to me two days ago and has not stopped since. The mere shrieking is enough to perceive your sardines are immensely distressed, but one can even discern the specific objects of their worries: the extremely crowded conditions they are placed in, the lack of seawater, and oh, the claustrophobia! Octavia told me that fish suffer greatly when they cannot swim around (at least in circles, like she does), and clearly this is not an option for sardines in your warehouse. Plus, it is clear from their yelps, they are terrified of the dark. I cannot bear to hear any more of their lamentation; somehow, they almost manage to drown out almost all the other sounds in the world.

I believe you are just as concerned with the well-being of your sardines as I am, which is why my proposal should be highly satisfying from your perspective as well as mine. I am asking to purchase as many cans of sardines as I can with the deployment of my savings, releasing them into the freedom of my well-equipped home aquarium. Not to worry, my aquarium is large enough to fit even high quantities of sardines and, just in case, I have temporarily fixed my bathtub into an emergency aquarium extension. With these measures, I can provide a much more pleasant environment for your sardines and, in that way, ensure their peaceful silence.

It is for these moral and practical reasons that I would prefer this order to be processed by somebody of high position in Blue Ocean Sardines. Please answer promptly to my suggestion so that we can discuss financial matters as soon as possible. Perhaps even, under these considerations, you could propose a quantity discount to allow me to save as many sardines as possible under my financial conditions.

Yours faithfully,

George Sanders

15<sup>th</sup> November

Case number: 0011578

Reporting officer: Steven Rogers

Incident type: Theft

Address of Occurrence: Maple Gardens

Events. On November 15<sup>th</sup>, at approximately 7:23, an anonymous passer-by reported an absence of fish in the central pond of Maple Gardens. Officer Steven Rogers arrived at the scene of the crime at 7:58 and confirmed the absence of fish at 8:04. The anonymous passer-by stated that fish had still been present in the pond on November 14<sup>th</sup>, at approximately 20:34, and this fact was confirmed by a number of other passer-by witnesses. From this the conclusion was drawn at 8:17 that the fish must have disappeared during the night.

Evidence. No distinguishing evidence was found at the scene of the crime. Some footprints around the pond were deemed slightly suspicious (viz. attached photographs), but all of them different sizes and shapes, and therefore inconclusive. A grass patch near the side of the pond was flattened (viz. attached photograph), suggesting that a person kneeling to extract the fish, but offering no clues as to which person that could be. Officer Steven Rogers nevertheless decided to classify the case as theft, although allowing that alternative occurrences such as Extra-terrestrial Presence or Divine Intervention cannot as of yet be ruled out.

Future action. Due to the crucial role that fish have always played in the central pond of Maple Gardens, investigations into this case continue at high priority. Action includes searching for further witnesses, gathering more possible evidence from the crime scene, and visiting registered fish-keepers. The Maple Gardens have issued financial rewards for information and/or returning any or all of the missing 12 koi carps, 7 goldfish, 15 fathead minnows, and 3 shubunkins. The police force is collaborating with the Maple Gardens to distribute ‘Missing Fish’ posters in the park’s vicinity and even in surrounding neighbourhoods.

27<sup>th</sup> November

Dear Miss Katherine,

I know we've never properly met, but I thought I'd better contact you anyway. My name's Viola and I live next door to your dad, who gave me your address when I moved in a few years ago—you know, just in case. Don't worry, nothing happened to your dad, or at least nothing acute. But I wanted to let you know that things aren't the best either.

I'm starting to get worried about your dad. He's been acting a bit strange lately. Surely you know how he's been these past few years, but it's been different now. He always used to knock on my door a lot, just to tell me stories or ask about my day, but now he does it even more. But mostly he just knocks on the wall instead. He asks me if I could please be quieter, and then he talks about everything he can hear from my apartment, like turning the tap on or even opening my cupboard. He reminds me to feed my goldfish. I know I forget, but how would he know that? It's a little scary. And getting worse every day.

He says I'm distracting him—but all I ever do is sit in my armchair and knit or solve crosswords! Oh, and he hates it when I turn on the radio, even if it's at the lowest volume possible! I have to bring my chair all the way across the room and sit with my ear right next to the speaker, otherwise he won't let me listen at all. He's very polite about it, never forgetting his pleases and thank-yous, but the thing is he's just never been like that. On the contrary, he sometimes seemed not to catch much of what was being said. And now he keeps talking and talking and he sounds offended when I roll my eyes a tiny bit, even though there's no way he could see it through the wall.

Anyway, I think it's because he's been lonely. He doesn't have any friends, you know, and so he just sits in his room all day. I meet with my knitting club sometimes at the park and we feed the pigeons and the fish and talk about knitting. It might not be much, but it's something. Your dad doesn't have that, you see, and that's why I think he's making up all that about things happening in other apartments and across town and everywhere else in the world. Maybe give him a visit sometime soon?

I thought you should know.

Kind wishes,

Viola Bradbury

31<sup>st</sup> November

To Mr. George Sanders,

This is in reply to your query, dated 25<sup>th</sup> November, regarding your Aeorosonde-12 hearing aid. On behalf of Aerosonde Ltd, I regret to inform you that we can neither accept your complaints nor complete the refunded return you requested. This is because you do not fulfil the requirements stated in our Terms and Conditions, as included in the User Guide.

In the first place, a large portion of the complaints you have listed are included in the ‘Possible Side Effects’ section of the User Guide, and so you have been warned about them prior to using your Aerosonde-12. To quote your own words, *‘hearing everything is painful, horrible, and terrifying,’* these sentiments are addressed in the relevant section, albeit in slightly less derogatory vocabulary. To remind you, the side effects listed include ‘feelings of being overwhelmed,’ ‘physical symptoms,’ ‘learning uncomfortable truths,’ and even ‘slightly negative sentiments.’

Likewise, your point about removing the Aerosonde-12 from your ears can be found clearly stated in the User Guide. Difficulty detaching the Aerosonde-12 has been confirmed to increase with time, but fortunately enough you can purchase our specially designed Aerosonde-Remover to ease the process. Please delegate this issue to our order office.

I am aware that some of your complaints are not recounted as precisely on the list of ‘Possible Side Effects.’ The sensations you describe as *‘losing all sense of left and right, of good and bad, of life and death’* due to the fact that *‘the universe is collapsing upon [you]’* are truly disconcerting and we will exert all possible efforts to prevent other users from experiencing them. To address your further worry, please rest assured, it is not the case that everyone else can hear you as well. You are as alone as you always thought you were. Other clients of ours may possess the Aerosonde-12 as well as you, but this fact need not be concerning to you because you are undoubtedly of little interest to them.

Unfortunately, we cannot provide you with a refunded return as your Aerosonde-12 has, anyway, surpassed its warranty as of 8<sup>th</sup> November. For that reason, I would like to thank you for bringing these considerations to our attention; we will include them (as ‘existential dread,’ ‘paranoia’) in the list of ‘Possible Side Effects’ so as to avoid similar misunderstandings in the future.

Thank you for your feedback.

Yours faithfully,

P. Walker

Customer Services

Aerosonde Ltd

1<sup>st</sup> December

To Katherine, or Ms. Bradbury, or whoever finds these words.

This is to say goodbye. I cannot tell you where I am going, only that it's so far away that you will never see me again. It's where the only sound I won't hear will be the humming of ocean waves. I must ask you don't attempt to find me, although I realise it's quite outrageous to suppose such a thought would cross your mind. I know that no similar one ever has.

I've heard enough. No, I've heard more than enough, I've heard more than anybody else ever should hear. It was a gift at first, a miracle, but then the blessings flooded me until I could barely keep my face above the water and became more exhausted with every kick meant to keep me afloat. But I could still breathe then; it was all bearable as long as all I heard was that outside of me. Sounds past, sounds present, sounds near and distant and soft and sharp and lovely and heart-breaking; I could manage all of those. But not the ones from inside of me.

I never thought I was a man of bad conscience, of suppressed emotions, of secrets and ignorance—but what when all of your voices start speaking to you? Not like internal monologues of indecision or mild guilt; I mean everybody I ever was, everybody I ever could have been, everybody I would've never guessed I could be, all crouched around me in my apartment, all shouting over each other and attacking me and reminding me of my mistakes and ill-behaviours and refusing to calm down and let me breathe, if only for a second. And then, a lack of sound in a place where the sweetest of melodies should play. Why could I not hear anything about Mary? I could hear Mary, but not her love, not my love. I couldn't hear anything about you, Katherine. Only the echoes of my apartment.

As for the hearing aids, there is no point trying to return them. My misfortune cannot bring any monetary profit no matter the effort put into it, that much I am certain of. Definitely not now—who would refund a drowned pair of hearing aids? Who would believe that your deaf old father or neighbour was ludicrous enough to throw his auditory perception into an aquarium? Well, they might believe it, for they know too well what it means to hear everything. But there is no way they will return the money.

The only favour I ask of anybody reading this is that you take care of my fish. I've taped the instructions to the aquarium and another copy next to the bathtub. They really shouldn't be too difficult to follow, if done conscientiously, and only require one to come here once or twice a week. Please keep in mind that I faultlessly tailored the instructions to them based on their own requests, and so if the fish appear hungry or overfed or overcrowded, it is just that—appearance. They do need their care, though, and so please follow all of the instructions. Ideally, please rearrange their aquarium equipment (point 5) either on Wednesdays or Thursdays, referee their water-football matches (point 11) on Sunday afternoons, and play the radio (point 7) between 7:00 and 8:00 in the morning, so they can hear the news update. Otherwise they might feel neglected.

Yes, I've heard more than enough, but I wish I could say I'd started listening sooner. Sounds bounce back and forth through the world, like subtle everlasting echoes. All the sounds ever

produced are whirling around you in this very moment; all you need to do is pick out a thread and listen in. The fish were more than willing to explain everything. And so was everybody else, but I fear by then it was too late for me.

George