



Earmuffs

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FLYMF December 2006, The Peace Among Men Issue, Volume 3 Issue 12

Let me start out by saying that I do not come from hearty pioneer or peasant stock. As near as I can tell, my ancestors spent their time fleeing from various parts of Russia and Europe in order to settle in the Promised Land—Southern California—where the weather is almost always warm.

I, showing that the family get-up-and-go has not completely gotten up and left, moved my family to Phoenix some years ago because I realized that, for me, Los Angeles was just too cold.

So it should come as no great surprise that, even in Hell's Orientation and Holding Area, I am frequently chilly.

I am also susceptible to ear, nose, and throat infections. I can get one of those like most women seem to get headaches. I don't get headaches, other than migraines, and they are rare; my husband almost never has anything to do with them. We won't go into it here, seeing as this is about earmuffs and all, but let's just say that there is a reason that my husband is happy. Tired, but happy.

At any rate, I can get ill very easily. It took me years to figure this out. Not the getting ill part, but that a vast majority of my illnesses started with my ear canals feeling cold. It's a long story, but it ends up this way—I have to wear earmuffs. Almost all the time.

Now in the dead of winter—and for those of you about to scoff, trust me when I tell you that we do get winter out here. It's not like winter to many of you, but for us, we're freezing. So, when it's wintertime, people don't seem all that bemused when they see me walking down the street with ear coverings on. They seem to be able to take the obvious leap that, since it's winter, I must be cold.

Sadly, I have to wear my earmuffs if my ear canals are cold, and nothing makes them colder than air blowing. Any kind of air.

I don't know if you've ever visited Phoenix in the summertime, but there's a reason all Phoenicians are nocturnal for half the year. We peep out in the early morning, and then we don't leave our caves or burrows until the sun is at least thinking about setting. During the middle of the day from March through September—about 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.—it's the kind of hot you can't believe until you experience it...and then you won't believe it, either.

If we have to go outside for any reason we all, to a person, follow this procedure. We race out of our air-conditioned homes to our air-conditioned cars. We run the air conditioning on high in our cars, because it takes quite a while for our little ovens-on-wheels to cool down to anything less than “broil.” Then we drive our air-conditioned cars to our air-conditioned offices, jobs, restaurants, supermarkets, and malls. We repeat the process to go home or to the next air-conditioned stop along the way.

Air conditioning creates a breeze. Air conditioning in any Phoenix office building or shopping mall creates a hurricane. Sometimes smaller folk are blown back out of the buildings when they attempt to enter, looking like extras in an old Harold Lloyd movie. Many times the office building doors can't close because of the huge, non-stop gust of wind coming from the air conditioning units and blowing right at them in order to keep the heat out of the building or at least away from the higher offices where the executives are.

So naturally the moment I go inside anywhere, I have to put on my earmuffs. Sometimes I don't bother to take them off between the car and my destination, figuring that being slightly hotter for a few seconds is less hassle. Yes, I wear them in the car. If there is a breeze, including someone sneezing nearby, I wear them. I am that much of a wimp.

Needless to say, wearing earmuffs in the middle of summer in Phoenix garners you some looks. What fascinates me, though, is that for some men—and I must stress that they seem to be fairly normal, since I don't tend to cruise the mental health wards—if they see a woman wearing earmuffs, they use it as...an opportunity to pass a pickup line.

I've lost count of the number of times some man has sidled up to me—sitting there in my earmuffs when it's 115 degrees Fahrenheit out, like Dork Chick from Planet Odd—and said, in a seductive tone, “Now, why are you wearing those earmuffs, honey? Are you cold?” Then he grins like a maniac, clearly impressed with his Smooth Operator line that I could never possibly have heard before in my lifetime, at least not in the recent fifteen seconds since the last guy went past.

The temptation to come back with a smart reply is, for me, almost overwhelming. However, common sense tells me that being snippy when you look like an idiot is not normally your best bet. So, I usually end up explaining my little sensitive ears problem while said smooth-talker's wife or girlfriend stands somewhere nearby and steams.

Ladies, ladies, ladies. If your man is that attracted to a gal in earmuffs, then it's a simple trip to the ski shop for you. No embarrassing, incognito trips to the “marital relationship helper” stores are necessary. You can walk into Al's Sea and Ski, get a pair of earmuffs, and head home secure in the knowledge that I can no longer steal your man with my seductive, fashion-forward wiles.

Frankly, I don't get it myself. I, personally, don't think I look all that appealing with a couple of fuzzy balls over my ears and a plastic “headband” screwing up my hairstyle. But, apparently, earmuffs do it for some men. You know who you are.

Of course, I have more than one pair of earmuffs. Like shoes, they need to coordinate with my various ensembles. As one friend put it, if you have to wear them every day and everywhere, you might as well make them a fashion accessory.

I have over a dozen different kinds, including rabbit-fur muffs, bought when my original pair of ancient, gray muffs broke right before a trip to the East Coast in the dead of winter there. My husband got off easy on those—the rabbit fur ones were far cheaper than the raccoon or the mink. Yes, I passed up getting mink earmuffs. I consider that more of a sacrifice than if I'd given all my blood to the Red Cross.

One of my girlfriends is from the South, and she found it rather embarrassing to be seen with me in full earmuff regalia when it was over 80 degrees. So because she is a true friend as well as a true Southern lady, she searched for a decent alternative. And she found one.

They are called Ear Pops. They're made of felt, basically, and they "pop" onto your ears via a simple spring-like mechanism so you don't need a plastic headpiece. They come in seven designer colors—I have them all as well as extras of my preferred shades, just in case I lose them or kill them from overuse—and are sold by a fine company from whom I receive no endorsements, but should. I should because I now wear these things 24/7, and I am a walking advertisement for them. Sort of.

I say sort of because I've discovered an interesting fact. Without that dorky, hair-do wrecking, plastic headpiece...most people don't realize that the ear pops are, in fact, earmuffs. This has led to loads of fun for me.

To me, you see, they look like earmuffs without a plastic headpiece. But to those not in the know, they apparently look like something, anything, else.

I've gotten the standard questions—are those headphones, are those a new form of cell phone, are you talking to outer space—but most people don't ask. Because, it turns out, most people think that they are some form of bandage and that, therefore, I either have no ears or the ears I have must be horrible to look at.

I first realized this in the Miami International Airport a while ago. I was coming back from a business trip and it was, as Miami tends to be, warm. However, it was, as Miami also tends to be, breezy outside and air conditioned on the Phoenix scale inside the airport.

At first, I didn't notice anything. Then I realized as I was walking along that people were looking at me and then very quickly looking away. You have that happen once, no big deal. When it happens with each and every person you pass—elderly retirees, brisk businesspeople, couples on vacations, family groups, religious zealots—you start to figure something's wrong.

I surreptitiously checked in passing reflective surfaces, but, nope, I looked normal. But it was still going on, so I went into a bathroom and checked in a mirror to be sure. But, no, I looked fine. Perhaps a bit tired and harried, but my hair was reasonably in place, my face was not warped in any way, my clothes were right-side out and on properly, my fly was not open, and my luggage was both mine and not open and trailing dismembered limbs behind it.

So, what was the problem?

I left the bathroom, and it continued. I headed to the phone bank to call my husband and share that not only was I at the airport safely but that the people here were bizarre. Just as I took off one ear pop, for comfort more than anything else, I caught a nicely dressed man's eye. I could see him start to look horrified when I was removing the ear pop and then, as he saw my normal, unscathed ear appear, his whole expression went to relief.

I realized that everyone was thinking that I had no ears or something. I ended up taking my ear pops off and putting them back on as I walked through the airport. It got to be a game—catch someone's eye, see the horror, SMILE, so they HAD to do something, and then take off the ear pop, just to see their expressions.

I had the most fun when I bought dinner. The girl behind the counter had, I believe, come to our great country from Cuba, and she didn't speak much English. Cuba, being a warm country, apparently has no earmuffs on its shores, because she was looking at me with such stark horror and terror in her expression that she literally couldn't ring up my order. The retired couple in line behind me were also eyeing me nervously.

I could tell I was about to become "an incident," and I don't know about you, but becoming an incident in an airport these days is not your best choice for fun and frolic.

So I said, "They're earmuffs. I'm cold. See? I have ears." And then I took off the ear pop.

It was instructive, I'll say that.

The girl, who as my hand had reached for my ear had looked like she was going to scream as loudly as she possibly could, or faint, or both, clearly didn't understand a word I'd said. But, hey, I had real ears. She practically sobbed with relief.

The elderly couple also looked like they'd been close to fainting but were recovering, now that, yes, I had ears. "How can you be cold?" the old lady managed, trying to pretend that she hadn't been ready to shriek with horror.

I just looked at her, gave her a tight smile, and stalked off to eat my Cuban Chicken Surprise with as much dignity as I had left, which

wasn't all that much.

This happens all the time now, and I've just learned to recognize the look of terror or the quick looking away that indicates said looker thinks I'm deformed in some way. I take the ear pops off a lot in those situations, and the reaction is always the same—the panicked looker appears ready to faint with relief when my ear appears.

I realize this is how it must be for our nation's handicapped people. We're taught not to stare, so we don't, but we want to, so we look away, partially wanting to really take a gander and partially not wanting to know. Obviously I can't speak for anyone who is handicapped, but if I use my experiences as a guide, I'm hugely in favor of those folks who just come up and ask me, "What are those things on your ears?"

By the way, if, after all of this, you feel that you might want to obtain a pair of these babies for yourself, go to SolutionsCatalog.com. While the "Catalog" component of the URL is now unnecessary—Solutions.com will take you to the same website—once upon a time it was crucial.

When I'd first gotten the ear pops, I was speaking with an older co-worker, a woman in her late fifties, if not well-preserved early sixties. She thought they were a fabulous idea, and that they'd be great for her to use when she was gardening in the colder months.

So, I told her to go to Solutions.com.

She sent me a note a few days later mentioning that, while it was possible, she didn't think I'd actually gotten my earmuffs there.

I went to check it out and, lo and behold, one word makes a huge difference.

Put it this way—if any of the ladies attached to those earmuff men out there want some extra help above and beyond earmuffs, well, Solutions.com was your website, baby. But even though it's been taken down, I'm sure it wasn't taken out, if you catch my drift.

But if you do pass on your own set of earmuffs, just don't complain to me when your man still sidles up and asks me if I'm cold and need to be warmed up.