

Excerpts from the young-adult novel *Hurt Go Happy*, by Ginny Rorby.

Joey is a young girl who lost 70% of her hearing at the age of 6 years old.

List Joey's mother Ruth's reasons for prioritizing lip reading and forbidding sign language, and evaluate them according to what you have learned in class.

List all of the different ways that Joey uses to understand and communicate with others. (writing, the FM thing, lip reading – later, sign too).

Joey had done well with her lessons when her mother taught her, but once in school, she had a terrible time. It was too easy for teachers and the other students to forget she was deaf, not to face her when they spoke to her, but even when they did, she found their lips difficult, often impossible, to read. When she tried to explain her poor grades to her mother, Ruth said she wasn't trying hard enough and called the school to make sure Joey was using their FM system.

Picking up the loaner FM system was Joey's first stop every morning. To hear her teachers, she had to carry a microphone from class to class for them to wear on a cord around their necks and two boxy little amplifiers that she wore strapped to her chest like little square breasts. Worse, the headphones were big and bulbous and her auburn hair flared up on either side of the wide headband. Someone said she looked like a praying mantis and the nickname "bug-head" caught on and stuck.

Roxy is her signing (but not deaf) friend.

Joey had never told Roxy that the reason she didn't sign was because her mother, Ruth, didn't want her to. She hadn't wanted to go into the reasons, all of which would have been offensive to someone who learned to sign before she learned to speak.

Ruth had convinced herself that sign language was shorthand for real language.

After Joey introduced them, the first thing out of Roxy's mouth, when she shook hands with Ruth, was, "I'm going to teach Joey to sign."

From the look on her mother's face, you'd have thought she'd said she was going to teach Joey to rob banks. "I don't want her signing," Ruth said.

"She thinks I'm better off reading lips," Joey said, trying to change the footing they were on, though she knew it was too late.

Roxy pulled herself up to her full height, looked Ruth right in the eye, and said, "Well, that's really stupid."

Ruth's eyes narrowed. "My daughter. My decision. I wish I could say it had been a pleasure to meet you."

Later

Roxy turned and for a moment Joey thought she was going to hit her. Her hands were balled into fists and her jaw was set. “Your mother’s an idiot,” she snapped.

Joey couldn’t bring herself to say *I know she is* and yet she was afraid to disagree with Roxy. She lowered her head and nodded.

“She is an idiot, but let’s not let that stand in our way. I am going to teach you to sign, in spite of her. How ‘bout it?”

The relief Joey felt was overwhelming. Her head bobbed. “Oh yes, please.”

Joey starts to teach some sign language to her little brother, and their mother Ruth catches them.

Joey’s mother marched out of the room and came back with a pen and notebook, something she did whenever she considered what she had to say too important for Joey to miss a word. She’d already written, **It’s okay to teach him some words for fun but I don’t want you two talking with your hands. It makes your handicap more obvious.**

Like an ember in a dead-looking fire, resentment flared. “More obvious than hearing aids?” Joey snapped.

Her mother wrote something and poked the pad for her to read on. **It could stunt...** she dashed a line through “stunt” and wrote, **slow down his learning to talk. He’s already mixing his English with Spanish.**

Ruth snatched back the pad and added, **And it will keep you from fitting in with people who can hear!**

“How am I gonna fit in with the hearing, with only you to talk to, Mom?”

“Practice your lip-reading,” Ruth said, emphasizing each word. “And stay away from that awful little girl,” she snapped. “She’s trash.”

Joey talks with Charlie, another signing friend, about her voice.

Joey said, “I must sound funny to people because sometimes they don’t understand all of what I say, and I get teased at school. They mimic me by talking through their noses. I can tell by the way their nostrils spread.”

Charlie wrote on his notebook: **Do you go to a speech therapist?**

Joey nodded. “On Wednesdays.”

Didn’t your therapist explain?

“Yeah, but not so I understood. She doesn’t like to write to me. She makes me practice reading lips and hers are hard to read.”

Charlie shook his head, then walked to Sukari’s log and sat down. **Why don’t you use hearing aids?**

“They’re pretty expensive, and since I haven’t quit growing yet, we’re waiting to get permanent ones. I have an FM system I use at school. That helps, except I hate wearing the earphones.”
You should wear them as often as you can. We learn words by imitating their sounds. To pronounce new words correctly, you need to hear them and have them spelled phonetically. That’s why people miss some of what you say. It’s easy to mispronounce new words. My mother never learned to speak. My father tried but no one could understand a thing he said but me. Thank heavens for sign language.

“But hardly any hearing people know sign language, so even if I learned, who would I talk to?”

Charlie grinned and scribbled, **Well, me, for one.**

“That’s true. I’m sorry.”

He took the pad back and wrote, **How do you do in school?**

“Okay, I guess.” Joey shrugged. “I mostly try to get by with lip-reading ‘cause I get called bug-head when I wear the headphones.”

We all get teased about something. They called me Twig when I was in school. Hard to believe now. He patted his stomach and smiled. **How well do you communicate with your stepfather and brother?**

Joey shook her head. “Not at all with Ray. He has a long mustache. I brought a sign language book from the library this week, to teach my brother so we could talk, but Mom really wants me to lip-read.”

For an instant the expression on Charlie’s face reminded her of the fury he’d been in when they first met. “Can you read Luke’s lips?” he snapped.

“Well, no, not yet, but then he—”

So you’re just supposed to wait until he can speak his words clearly or learns to write? he slashed across the pad.

Joey flinched. She hadn’t meant to make him mad. When she took a step back, his expression changed. He shook his head. SORRY, he signed, but he was still mad enough to break the point off his pencil and have to fish for another one before he finished the next note.

If you went to a school for the deaf, you’d get a wonderful education and could go on to college and do just about anything you wanted. Without an education, you will be cut off from making a good life for yourself.

“My friend Roxy is teaching me to sign,” she said hopefully.

“Ump. That won’t last.”

Though Joey knew he was right, still she asked, “How do you know?” Her tone was a little defensive.

“She’s thirteen, right?”

“Fourteen.”

“She’ll get bored.”

Joey bit her lip. “I know she will. Her mother’s deaf and she’s mad at her all the time.”

Charlie wrote, **Your mother wants you to fit into the hearing world, but like most hearing people, she doesn’t understand the isolation you feel.**

Charlie tells more about his family background

Hearing you speak of your friend Roxy reminded me how angry I used to get at my parents, and the burden I thought they were because they didn’t talk or read lips. I, like Roxy, was their bridge. That’s a huge responsibility for a kid.

My mother was born deaf and never heard a single word, she never spoke, though oddly she had a wonderful laugh that I still miss. When she was young, the traditional thinking was to make the deaf learn to speak, but luckily, her parents quickly gave up that notion. They wanted to be able to communicate with her themselves so they sent her to a school that taught American Sign Language and they learned it, too.

My father was a baby, just learning to talk, when he lost his hearing. His parents were caught up in the same debate, but they chose the other path. It was a terrible handicap. Because it took so long to teach him to approximate the sound of each word, the rest of his education had to wait. What little speech he learned, no one could understand. The frustration finally drove him to quit school in the eighth grade and take the only job he could find—a janitor. The good news is that the job was at a school for the deaf. That’s where he met my mother and where he learned to sign. Eventually, he found his life’s work as a printing press operator (the perfect fit for him; presses make a “deafening” racket). He made a good living and they were happy. We were happy.

Don’t get me wrong. Both arguments have valid points. But if I had to decide for a child of mine, I would choose sign language. If we hadn’t all signed, I would not have been able to talk to my own parents.

Kenny, another friend, asks Joey about being deaf.

Do you and your parents talk in sign language?

“That’s what my mother was mad about.” Joey hesitated. She wanted to tell him everything, especially about Sukari.

What do you mean?

“My mother doesn’t want me to learn sign language.”

“How come?”

Her mother's face popped into her mind. "Dumb reasons," Joey said, deciding it was better not to go where the details would lead. "Have you ever heard about Washoe, the chimpanzee who uses sign language? I read all about her in a National Geographic."

"I thought..." he said, then wrote it instead: **I thought it was a gorilla.**

"Koko is the gorilla who signs, but Washoe was the first and she's a chimpanzee. She's still alive, I think. Someplace."

What about her?

"I know a chimpanzee that signs. My neighbor owns her and I bet he'd let you meet her if you wanted to."

Kenny's head bobbed. "Rad."

"What?"

Radical. Cool.

More with Joey's mother

Ruth glanced at her then deliberately—so that Joey could see every word—and said, "You want her to use a language a monkey can learn. Sign language." She snorted. "It's a contradiction in terms." She shook a finger at Joey. "No signing. I won't allow it."

Joey's hands began to tremble. She put the plates on the table before she dropped them. I knew this would happen. Ray looked at her and shook his head, warning her off going further with this, but she couldn't let that be the last word. "Stop calling her a monkey," she shouted. "She's a chimpanzee. And signing lets us know how she feels, what she's thinking, and what she wants. That's more than I can tell about my own brother." She ran to her room, slammed and locked her door.

Joey gets an invitation from Charlie

"It's bad enough you are learning that ... that language against my will. Don't use it in this house," she snapped.

Joey flinched. "I forgot."

"Damn that old man."

"It's not his fault."

"Whose fault is it then that you're going against my wishes and learning to talk with your hands like a mute?"

The madder her mother got, the faster she talked, the harder it was to read her lips. Joey missed some of what she'd said. "I want to..." she said, then lost her nerve.

"You want to what?"

Her insides trembled. She wanted to shout, I'm sick of only having you to talk to. I hate my nasal-sounding voice. Charlie says I have pretty hands to speak with. Poetry in motion, he said.

But she hooked her bottom lip with her teeth and clenched and unclenched her fists. “Nothing,” she said.

Ruth stared at her for a moment, eyes narrowed, then she nodded and turned to go back to the bathroom, fluffing her wet hair with the towel.

Joey almost let it end there. Almost. “People make faces when I talk,” she said so softly that she didn’t think she’d spoken out loud.

But her mother turned. “We’ll get you more therapy.”

“If I can’t read somebody’s lips, they don’t bother trying to talk to me.”

“You think talking with your hands will change that? You should practice reading lips instead.”

“I do, but why can’t I do both?”

“Well you are, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, but in secret, like it was against the law or something. Why can’t I teach it to Luke and to Ray so I could talk to them?”

“I don’t understand this, Joey. You can talk to them now.”

“But, Mom, they can’t talk to me. I can’t read their lips or very many other people’s. I don’t hold conversations with anyone but you, and Charlie because he writes his half.”

“Well, practice more. If you get better at reading lips you can talk to everybody in the world and nobody has to learn that stunted language.”

“You think because I can read your lips I should be able to read anybody’s. Watch TV without the sound on, Mom. See how hard it is and how different people talk. Some lips are impossible, like Ray’s because of his mustache and other people who hardly move their mouths when they talk. It’s not that easy. You try it.” Joey realized she was shouting and looked down.

“I don’t want to argue this with you again. Sign language is not the answer. Use it to talk to that chimp if you want to, but don’t use it in public. People will feel sorry for you. You don’t want to encourage pity, do you?”

“Charlie says...” came out of her mouth before she could stop herself, so she plunged ahead, “it’s more pitiful to be left out of everything.”

Her mother had been softening but her expression changed swiftly at the mention of Charlie’s name. “Well, I’ll tell you what,” she snapped. “You want to learn sign language so bad, you can stay home today and practice.” Her mother turned away.

Ruth and Charlie meet

Ruth said, “She is my daughter, and I don’t want her signing. I’m sure it’s fun to learn a few words to use with you and the chimp, but...”

“What?” Joey said, having missed some of her mother’s response.

Ruth didn’t repeat it, so Joey moved so she could see all their mouths.

“Fun,” Charlie snapped. “Sign for fun.” He heaved himself up and put his hand against the wall for support. “She’s deaf, Mrs. Willis. She needs to learn to sign to survive.”

Lynn tried to get him to sit down again, but Charlie jerked his arm away from her.

“People will stare. They’ll pity her. Now at least she looks normal,” her mother said, but her face showed no anger. Joey thought that was strange until she realized her mother must also be worried about the way Charlie looked.

“My parents were normal,” he said. “And staring is just unfamiliarity with the language, like listening closely to someone speak French. It’s not pity. It’s curiosity.”

Too late, her mother’s hand flew to cover her mouth. She’d forgotten Charlie’s parents had been deaf. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean normal in that sense of the word,” she said. “I just want her to function in the hearing world. Hearing people don’t sign.”

“I’m hearing,” Charlie said. “What’s the real reason you don’t want her to sign?”

Lynn clamped a hand over his. “This has gone far enough.”

“Not yet, it hasn’t,” Charlie said.

Ruth stiffened. “I just told you the real reason.”

“I don’t think you have. People would watch her express herself with her beautiful hands and the whole world would know that your child is deaf. I don’t know why that scares you so. You are cutting her off from the rest of the world.”

Ruth’s head jerked as if she’d been slapped. “That’s not true. I just want her life to be as normal as possible. I don’t want people to feel sorry for her, to treat her differently.”

“Deafness is different, dammit. And for Joey it is normal not to hear. But she’s missing so much more because you’re trying to pound her deaf ears into hearing holes. She is what she is. Let her be deaf.”

Joey joins a sign language class

On the second day, Ms. Alexander asked the other students to explain why they were taking the class. As they answered, she showed them the signs, then numbered and wrote each reason on the board:

1. New friend deaf.
2. Uncle deaf.
3. Father is losing his hearing.
4. Thinks it’s cool to talk with my hands.

So it went around the room. Mostly they each had someone with whom they wished to talk. But when it was the turn of the young woman sitting directly across the room from Joey, she didn’t answer. Instead she looked at Joey and tried to smile, then suddenly signed, SORRY, brought her hands to her eyes, and began to cry.

The woman in the desk next to her reached and squeezed the younger woman's shoulder. Ms. Alexander put her hand up for everyone to wait. After a minute the woman wiped her eyes on the tissue someone handed her. She must have given her reason for being there when the tissue obscured her mouth, because Ms. Alexander began to show her the signs she needed.

The young woman nodded, looked at Joey, and signed, MY BABY BORN DEAF.

Out of the corner of her eye, Joey saw Ms. Alexander add it to the growing list on the board: 9. **Baby born deaf.**

All eyes turned to Joey as if they expected her to say something, but Ms. Alexander just pointed to the next person, who said she needed a second language to graduate.

All eyes turned to Joey as if they expected her to say something, but Ms. Alexander just pointed to the next person, who said she needed a second language to graduate. She blushed, then glanced first at the young woman with the deaf baby, then at Joey, before going on. "I thought ASL looked easier than French or Spanish because I already know how to speak English."

Ms. Alexander broke her own rule. "It's not easier," she said. "It will be just as difficult as any other language you study." **10. Need a second language.**

When it was Joey's turn, she realized she'd broken into a sweat. Her palms and her underarms were wet, but she swallowed and instead of answering, I'm here because I'm deaf, she looked across at the young woman. "I wasn't born deaf," she said, "so sometimes I imagine I still hear the sounds I remember, but I have a friend whose mother was born deaf and his father lost his hearing when he was two. His mother's family all learned to sign, and eventually his father learned it, too. I know Charlie would say you are doing the right thing for your baby."

Joey made no attempt to stop the tears that slid down her cheeks when Ms. Alexander wrote, **14. So I can talk to the people I love.**

ending

Joey goes to the state school for the deaf

Both Bridgetta and Tanya signed too quickly for her to understand more than a word here and there, and Tanya barely moved her lips when she spoke. Everything Bridgetta signed, Tanya interpreted for Ruth, then her mother had to repeat it for Joey. Here she was, where Charlie said she should be, at a school for deaf people, and she was beginning to think she'd be more isolated and alone than ever.

After their tour, she went to have her signing skills, which she considered pathetic, tested. Her worst fears were confirmed when she was assigned to an intensive signing class. She pictured herself crammed into a tiny first-grader's desk, practicing the alphabet. Suddenly, Joey, who'd been so excited to be where she'd always believed she belonged, began to dread her mother's departure. When Ruth drove away, she would be totally cut off from the hearing and the deaf.

For lunch, she and her mother went to a small restaurant in town, one recommended by the counselor. It was full of returning CSD students. Joey and her mother sat in a booth by the window and watched friends, separated for the summer, jam in together at tables, hands flashing, laughing, and hugging one another. A person from each table, obviously the one with the best oral skills, was sent up to order the sandwiches and act as interpreter for the cashier and the woman behind the counter who took their orders. Joey tried to imagine herself crammed in a booth with a half-dozen friends. How many months, or years, of intensive signing would it take before she would be accepted into a circle of friends?

"Can you tell what they're saying?" her mother asked.

Joey shook her head. "Only a word or two. They're talking too fast."

"For a room full of deaf people, there sure is a lot of noise in here. Why are they pounding on the tables?"

Joey smiled. She could feel the vibrations. "To get each other's attention, Mom."

Ruth shook her head. "I guess I've never really gotten it, have I? You can't hear."