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Rearview Mirror

En Route to Cambridge, Massachusetts
September 1973

Mom and Dad drove me out to Harvard the fall I transferred. I'd never been east of Ohio. Looking back now, I know I was frightened. That day it came out as sullenness. I was scared of being a small fish in a big pond, terrified of being looked down on as the hayseed from Indiana. I was convinced that once the Harvard and Radcliffe administrations actually saw me, they would tell me to go home.

I was looking forward to getting away from home. Not from my parents. I was itching to break away from small-town thinking, from plainness, from flat land and houses that looked alike, from the constant interpreting, carrying out business transactions, acting as a go-between for my parents and a world that really didn't have much patience.

My head was filled with the aura, the stateliness of the Ivy League. Names resonated with impact: Currier, Lowell, Winthrop. I could smell and hear things I'd never encountered, but in my imagination I knew they existed, and I felt sure that upon my arrival—if I wasn't sent home—wonderful happen-
ings would occur. I wouldn’t be burdened by timidity. No one would know of my mistakes unless I repeated them.

I’d just spent two years at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, with some vague idea that I wanted to be a teacher of the deaf. When the program turned out to be less than I expected, and when I didn’t feel I was getting enough challenge in my other classes, I applied to four eastern colleges and was accepted. Harvard took very few transfers that year—the next year, none were admitted at all—and although the admission officers were very kind to me, all the literature they’d sent warned how difficult it was to switch colleges in midstream.

Now I looked up at the back of my parents’ heads and I sank down low in the car’s back seat. Filling out the application, I’d made prominent mention of the fact that they were deaf. The entrance essay, which was supposed to be about me, was actually about them. Many applicants use a father’s or grandfather’s degree to get them into the family alma mater, but neither of my parents had set foot in a college classroom. The irony that I was shamelessly using my deaf mother and my deaf father to get into Harvard was not lost on me. Neither was the fact that although I’d willingly and openly tell people they were deaf and I would briefly answer questions, I just wasn’t going to say anything else. It was all too complicated.

Most of the sixteen-hour trip to Cambridge I brooded over a freshman reading list, the kind given out to high school seniors that included all the books they should have read by the time they matriculate. I’d read very little of what was on that list. When I’d received it in the mail, I had gone to the library, taken out Ulysses, and despaired. I understood nothing.

I sat in the back seat for hundreds of miles, worrying that I’d have nothing to discuss at the dining table. And every once in a while I’d look up to watch my parents’ conversations.

When the highway was deserted, Dad could comfortably shift his eyes from the road to Mom’s hands. When traffic got heavy, he would have to watch the road and then his glances were shorter. If he wanted to pass a car, he’d hold up an index finger at Mom, signaling her to suspend the conversation for a moment. It was always easier for the driver to do the talking, although that meant his signs were shortened and somewhat less graceful. He would use the steering wheel as a base, the way he normally used his left hand; his right hand did all the moving.

Cuddled up in the seat, chin dug into my chest, I noticed there was a lull in the conversation. Dad was a confident driver, but Mom was smoking more than usual.

“Something happened? That gas station?” Mom signed to me.

“No, nothing,” I lied.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Everything is fine.” Dad and I had gone in to pay and get directions. The man behind the counter had looked up, seen me signing and grunted, “Huh, I didn’t think mutes were allowed to have driver’s licenses.” Long ago I’d gotten used to hearing those kinds of comments. But I never could get used to the way they made me churn inside.

Mom was studying me. Having relied on her visual powers all her life, she knew when I was hiding something. “Are you afraid of going so far away from home? Why don’t you stay in Indiana? This distance. Why wasn’t college in Indiana good enough?”

“Mom. Not! Cut it out.”

She turned and faced front again, then she tried to distract both of us by pointing out a hex symbol on a barn.

Dad hadn’t seen exactly what either of us said, but he’d caught the speed and force of my signs from the rearview mirror, and he could feel the tension coming from behind him. Mom had struck several nerves in me. Not only was I stepping into foreign territory—I hadn’t been able to afford to visit any
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of the schools to which I'd applied—but also, back home in Indiana, none of my relatives or high school friends had been enthusiastic about my going east. To Hoosiers, Harvard means highbrow and snotty, too good for everyone else. Before I had left, Grandma Wells, my mother's mother, had admonished me, not once but several times, "not to get too big for my britches."

I couldn't concentrate on my reading or the view. Passing the rectangular green sign with the pilgrim hat welcoming us to Massachusetts, I felt the knot in my stomach grow. I was anxious to get there but dreading the moment of arrival.

When she saw the first sign for Boston on the turnpike, Mom tapped Dad's arm rapidly. I nervously flipped through my magazine. Soon we were crossing a bridge over the Charles River. Another sign said "Cambridge."

You have to see a lot of things to enjoy resting your eyes. You have to hear a lot of noise to appreciate the quiet. And you have to journey away from home before you can figure it out. Dad pointed to the sign and turned to look at me. In the corner of his eye was the beginning of a tear.

"I never thought my daughter would go to Harvard," he signed. "I'm so proud." To sign proud, he started with his thumbs at waist level and drew them up his chest, sitting a little straighter as his chest swelled up. Dad would have been content no matter what college or job I chose, but this was a dream he never had, that a family with no money, no connections, no education, could send a daughter to Harvard.

The strain was suddenly washed away. I smiled and leaned over the seat to kiss his cheek. Mom patted my hand and then my face. She was unaware of the long low hum of affection coming from her throat.

In Cambridge we were completely lost. I had a housing office address for my new dorm and an indecipherable map of the narrow, twisting one-way streets. Where I came from,

things were laid out in a simple grid, and no one was ever on the sidewalks.

It turned out I was stuck in a left-over room in Jordan Co-op, and when we got there I didn't even want to look up at my mother's face. The place was pathetic, an unlived-in cinder-block dorm room with upended tables and chairs. There was litter in the hallway, the bathrooms were filthy, and the kitchen had an unidentifiable smell. My dreams of wood-paneled, leather-chair splendor were not coming true.

"Your room at Ball State was cleaner," Mom said, the sign for "clean" being one palm drawn neatly over the other.

I glared at her.

Only the overstudies "nerds"—whom Harvard half-affectionately termed "wonks"—had arrived this early. All the glamour that might still be attached to Harvardness disappeared when a peculiar-looking character with mechanical pencils in his pocket, frizzy hair, and enormous, twitchy eyes came into my room. He almost jumped as I began translating what he was saying into sign for Mom. I felt several worlds collide.

For both my parents, appearances are crucial. Most of the time the only impression they get is visual. They couldn't hear the accent in this fellow's voice. None of us had ever encountered anyone quite like him.

As soon as the last box and lamp were moved into the room, I told Mom and Dad they could go to their hotel. I told them I needed to plunge into Harvard life as soon as possible. But if I'd been honest with myself, I would have known that I was just as embarrassed having them meet the wonk as I was having the wonk and the rest of Harvard meet my deaf parents.

A couple of hours later we had an early dinner together and said our goodbyes. They were leaving very early the next morning for the drive back to Indianapolis. Standing on the
sidewalk outside the restaurant, I was in a hurry to get on with things. We hugged and kissed, and Mom hugged and kissed me some more. She reached over to smooth the hair from my face.

"Promise you'll write often," she signed.

"I always do, Mom."

"You're coming home for Christmas, aren't you?"

"No."

"What?" Mom looked upset.

"I'm just kidding. Of course I am. How could I not come home and see you?"

Back in the dorm, I set about unpacking. I rearranged the daisies my sister Kay had gotten up at 3 A.M. that day to give me. As I set papers and supplies on my desk, a blue notepad fell open and for a second I was annoyed that my sisters had been doodling on the new pad a friend had given me as a going-away present. Then I read it. On the top sheet was scrawled: "Dear Sister, I'll miss you. Love, Jan."

My roommate had already arrived. Laura was the first person I'd ever met from California. A junior with long, wavy dark hair, she was beautiful. Her body was long and sinewy. She didn't look at all like my image of the studious 'Cliffie We talked for a couple of minutes, and except for throwing a sheet over the top of her bed, she didn't bother to arrange any of her things. Instead, she went off to talk to the guy with the mechanical pencils for a while.

Laura came back to the room.

"Howard told me your parents are deaf and dumb. He said he saw you using sign language. That's pretty neat."

I cringed. I didn't want to sound priggish, correcting her for saying "dumb." "Um, well, I don't know if I'd exactly call it that...."

At nine-fifteen, Laura announced she was going to bed and took off all her clothes. Throwing them across the room onto a dusty chair she'd carried up from the basement, she dived under the sheet to rest on top of the bare mattress.

I'd never seen anyone sleep nude in my life. There was something in the nimbleness of her movement after she'd taken her clothes off that told me there were a number of things I was going to learn at Harvard that I hadn't foreseen. But mainly I was thinking about how prudish and midwestern it was of me to be so shocked at her unshaved armpits.

I put on my nightgown, dressing with my back to Laura, carefully pulling the gown to my ankles before reaching under to remove my skirt. I crawled into my crisp bed—made by my mother—and we talked for a few minutes more. Suddenly Laura kicked her foot up out of bed and hit the light switch.

In the dark I felt more forlorn than ever. I waited until I thought she was asleep, got up, put my clothes back on, and walked outside. I didn't know where I was going. I headed toward what looked to be the busiest street and discovered Massachusetts Avenue. Mom and Dad had told me that was where the Holiday Inn was located. I wandered up and down the sidewalk and found myself in front of their hotel.

I made my way to their room on the third floor and as I raised my knuckles, it dawned on me that knocking would do no good. I knew they were awake; I could hear the television. I took a notebook paper out of my purse and bent down to shove it underneath the door, working it in and out. There was no response. I tried crumpling up a small piece to throw into the room but I couldn't get it between the jamb and the door. I pounded on the gray metal, thinking they might feel the vibration. I must have stood there for twenty minutes, hoping Dad might come out to get ice from down the hall or perhaps go to the car to retrieve a bag. But he didn't. There was no way that night to get the attention of my deaf parents.

I walked back to my dorm.
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Years later I would find out why the television was on that night in Cambridge. My father wanted to hide the noise of my mother’s sobs from strangers. My mother cried for hours, my father trying in vain to comfort her. For both of them, this drive to a faraway school had awakened memories of their own trips to schools as children, memories they’d tried to keep hidden from themselves. Dad said the drive home was very long.