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I had chosen a college geographically—and psychologically—between Indianapolis and Montpelier. The school, named after the canning-jar family, had the only program in the state for training teachers of the deaf, and although I had not actively thought about it, that seemed like as good a career as any.

The summer before college began, I'd done my first sign language interpreting for strangers; I signed a computer course for a young man who was learning Fortran. I didn't have a clue as to what was going on, but I took my pay and the money relatives had given me as high school graduation gifts and purchased a typewriter, a dictionary, and a thesaurus. I glowed with purpose and intellectual fervor.

I'd chosen to take a double English and French major along with deaf education courses. Classwork was no problem. Other things were.

"Well, *nice* Lou Ann, here is your mail." The girl behind the dorm desk shoved a stained white envelope at me. I could tell
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from the loopy handwriting that it was from my aunt Imogene. She'd addressed the envelope "To my Nice" (she meant niece), followed by my name. Imogene was married to Dad's eldest brother, Garnel. As with him, no one had ever diagnosed the cause of her deafness, although she, too, had been deaf from a very young age.

I waited until I got back to my room to open the letter:

Dear Nice Lou Ann,

Thanksgiving Day was over. We wanted to thank you send us a Thanksgiving Day card, very happy to get your letter. I was thinking about going to write a letter and your birthday card this week. Garnel is a bowler every Friday. Just only for retirement. Yes he enjoyed to meet many friends there let him have a good time—what about me. Ha. Ha. I stayed at home and work some and read the Indianapolis Star every morning. The weather is nice and chilly. We will go to Ft. Wayne. Ind tomorrow (Sat) has a meeting Frat and small thing Christmas Exchange... Have you a nice visit your family for Thanksgiving Day? Most time we stay at home sometimes go to the Senior Citizen groups at Indpolis. Garnel has been running his nose and blow out—about a month. Well. Say Good bye—Hope hear from you.

Your Love—
Uncle Garnel & Aunt Imogene

always glad and enjoy to read your letter

The door flew open and my roommate, Cindy, strode in. Hurriedly, I hid Imogene's letter under some papers on my desk. I was too embarrassed to let her see it.

The truth was that Garnel and Imogene drove me crazy. Garnel made grunting noises when he signed—not at all uncommon among deaf people who can't hear themselves. Whenever he saw me, he'd pucker up his lips and grab my face to plant a wet, slobbery kiss right on my mouth. Imogene was always asking me to teach her to crochet. Patiently I'd go through all the steps, and then the next time I saw her, she'd ask me to teach her again. Over five years, she accomplished about four rows.

4. When we were out for dinner, Garnel pretended to look the other way when the bill came. At holidays my mother would search long and hard for the perfect presents for Garnel and Imogene, but my uncle refused to thank her for them, insisting that it was his brother who had given him the present. And my father didn't even get thanked if the present didn't thrill Garnel. On the other hand, Garnel was not exactly extravagant when he handed out gifts. Once he gave me a three-year-old fishing magazine.

I was self-conscious enough, but it was mortifying to be around them. My parents weren't at all like Garnel and Imogene. And I hated it when deaf people got lumped together, which is something even Dad's and Garnel's other siblings were occasionally guilty of doing.

One time Garnel and Imogene dropped in on me for a surprise visit at Ball State. I took them out for a snack, then a short walk around campus, ending at my dorm. I said goodbye to them at the fifth-floor lobby (the elevator stopped only on one and five), waving as the doors closed, then I rushed upstairs to finish a paper due the next morning. Entering my room, I heard an alarm ringing, but assumed it was a prank. (The university carefully segregated its male and female populations, and the fire door on the stairway between male and female floors was attached to a fire bell.)

As Garnel and Imogene were to tell it later, the elevator doors had opened, but they didn't think they were in the right place, so they rode back up to five, got out, and decided to walk downstairs. They couldn't understand why boys came pouring out of their rooms on every floor to look at them as they went down the staircase.

"Elevator—wait, wait, wait," Imogene signed later. "We
hurry home. Walk down stairs. Boys, boys everywhere, every floor staring at us. Why? We walk loud?” The alarm had indeed been loud enough to wake the dead. They hadn’t paid any attention to the EMERGENCY ONLY sign on the door. Guiltily, I hoped nobody would trace them back to me.

There were several reasons why I had never told my father about the obscene phone calls back in the fourth grade. The first was for the same reason that so many child-molesting cases are never reported. It was my guilty secret. Like most children, I felt it was too bad even to admit. The second was probably, in my case, the more important. I knew there was nothing my father could do about it. If we reported the event to the police, I was the one who would have had to call them, or if we’d gone in person, I was the one who would have had to explain what had happened. I couldn’t bring myself to do that. There was no way my father could innocently ask his hearing co-workers who it might have been. And it was impossible for me to describe what a voice sounded like to a father who had never heard one. It was a lesson in powerlessness. But somehow I had been able to shield my father from that reminder, and that was what made a difference to me. Years later when the same sort of vague feeling that something terribly wrong was happening—and again there was nothing my father could do about it—the grim lesson was held up for him and for me. I was embarrassed. But worse, I ache for him.

At Ball State we were required to take various physical education courses; I signed up for golf. Dad had played some tournaments at his newspaper a couple of times, and one weekend when I was home from summer school we went to a nearby driving range so I could practice. I was concentrating on all I’d been taught, trying out different grips. Dad answered questions if I asked, but otherwise didn’t say much. He believed in letting me discover how to do things on my own.

At the same time we’d driven up to the range, I’d noticed a man in a yellow boat of a Cadillac pull into the parking lot. He was a heavyset man, flashy dressed, black hair slicked back. I was just hitting my third ball when the man came over and introduced himself so quickly I couldn’t even make out his name. He said he was a golfing pro.

“You should be holding that club like this, see?”

“I’m fine, really. Thank you.”

“No. Look here. You do it that way, you’ll never get anywhere. Put your hands like this.”

“I’m doing it the way I was taught at school. Thanks just the same.”

He kept up a patter as rapid as a carny man’s. “I don’t like to see anybody doin’ it wrong. Then you don’t enjoy the game, you know? Here, sweetheart, let me show you how it should feel.”

Dad had been standing down the row a way, practicing. Just then he looked up and saw the man talking to me. Dad walked over.

“He told me I swing wrong,” I signed to Dad. “He says he’s a golf pro—” The man’s hand swept over mine just as I was about to finger-spell “o.” Standing behind me, arms over my arms, hands squeezing mine, he forced me through a swing. This wasn’t the friendly romantic gesture it was in the movies.

“Like this. It should feel like this.”

He was pressing hard up against me from behind. I felt hot and uncomfortable. I smelled the thick oil of his skin. I must surely be mistaken about his intentions, I thought, trying to squirm away without seeming impolite. I just couldn’t believe he would really be doing anything wrong—not so close to my home, not in public, certainly not in front of my father.

I finally got out from under him and swung once—a really rotten shot.
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“No, now that’s not what I showed you,” and he tried to get behind me again.

“No. Leave me alone!” and I jerked away. Dad stepped forward, holding up his hand the way a policeman stops traffic.

“Let’s go home,” I signed.

We’d both been helpless in the face of this aggressor. As we drove home, Dad said very little. I think he was frustrated, even a little humiliated that he hadn’t been able to shield his daughter from the unpleasantness. We never said another word about it.

I had never consciously intended to become a teacher of the deaf. My memories of the deaf school in Indianapolis were vague. I’d only been there a few times, when Mom and Dad went back for a basketball game or an alumni association meeting. It seemed a dark, forbidding place. I had the feeling that once someone got into teaching, there was nowhere to go. You stuck around until you retired. Yet part of me felt a sense of duty and obligation. No one was forcing me to take deaf education courses—unless it was those voices from childhood urging me to “do right” by my parents.

During my first course in the deaf ed department, the professor gushed over me. I was the only student she’d taught who’d actually known any deaf people. Most of the students in my courses were there because they’d seen a movie or read a Helen Keller book. For them there was something romantic and noble about the field. They were sure that with every child they encountered, they’d have a miraculous, spine-tingling breakthrough “w-a-t-e-r,” just like little Helen’s.

But I preferred their idealism to the worn-out, unimaginative nature of the professors. A couple of the teachers in the department would have nothing to do with me; they were wary of the fact that my parents were deaf. It took a number of years

for me to figure out that I actually posed some sort of threat to them. At first I thought it was because the program at Ball State was “oral” (speaking and lip-reading to the exclusion of signing) and that my family used “total communication,” that is, speaking in conjunction with signing. But that wasn’t it. It had much more to do with an ideological need. None of these teachers had had any real success with children they’d taught. And one who had gone into deafness because her daughter was born deaf was heart broken over the fact that her daughter had rebelled, learned sign, then refused to have anything to do with her mother. What annoyed these professors was the persistent, nagging fact that none of their students had turned out more successful or happier than my parents, who’d been taught with “backward” methods. I was tangible proof of that.

One of my first courses was a practicum in teaching at the model preschool hearing-impaired program. Monday through Thursday, three- and four-year-old deaf children came to the morning classes. The children were loaded down with amplification, big boxes strapped to their small chests and giant headphones clamped over their ears. They looked like miniature spacemen. The teacher wore a microphone. It was the task of college interns like me to lead “positive reinforcement” experiments. Again and again the children learned to pronounce letters. The teacher held up a deflated red rubber ball. “This is a ball. Ball. Melissa, say ‘ball.’” Puffing her cheeks out, the teacher led Melissa through “buh-buh-buh-buh—ball.” There would be an M & M candy in it for the child who attempted the word (even if it sounded like “bog”). Early on the kids had grown savvy. They knew their lives would be markedly easier if they pretended ignorance for a while, and then suddenly learned “ball.” They strung the teachers along at a prodigious rate for three- and four-year-olds. And they made a killing in M & M’s. The teacher of that class was perfectly groomed,
never a hair loose from her chignon, and when she talked, it was more like singing. She could smile even as the kids poured paint over her lap. But when she learned that my mother and father signed, the threatening tone in her voice was hardly veiled: “We don’t sign here, of course. We want to prepare these children to enter the normal world.” She believed that. And if she thought no one was looking, she would smack a child’s hand if he so much as pointed at the “ball” without vocalizing.

I feel sure I would have fallen into Ball State’s “oral” camp had it not been for Marion, the one deaf graduate student who started in the master’s program that fall. Up until then, my knowledge about deafness was purely emotional, garnered from observing my parents and their friends. I knew nothing about statistics and philosophies of education. The program’s teachings made good logical sense—it seemed right that people would learn better English grammar if they spoke it. It seemed true that in order for deaf people to become successful, they needed better verbal skills. After all, I wolfed down novels and I knew that my parents and their friends had a terrible, embarrassing time with even the simplest of sentence constructions. The deaf education professors’ didactic views didn’t disillusion me, nor was I analytical enough to figure out that their concepts failed to take into account the varying levels of innate ability within deaf children and the different times of onset of deafness. No, they confused me on a gut level: They treated that one deaf adult, a fellow professional, condescendingly—almost inhumanly. The professors rarely talked to Marion, even though she had had years of experience teaching the deaf—and being deaf. It was like the old joke: the operation was a success but the patient died. Theories and goals of education don’t matter a whit if you don’t consider your students to be human beings.

* * *

Sometimes the momentous decisions in our lives are ones we hardly make; they’re so inevitable we simply tumble into them. I had not known anyone who had gone east to college. I was about to give up my home and a family that depended on me to go someplace far away. I was in my second year at Ball State, but I had nearly enough credits to graduate. Whatever it was that was pushing me on during those late-night drives that I still took through the darkened countryside, whatever it was that made me discontent, was sending me out to look for something. Yet I hardly knew I was serious.

“Where were you thinking of going?” my English professor, Dr. Rippy, asked me when I approached her. I told her.

“I never would have suggested that to you, but I think it’s the natural thing for you to do. It’s an excellent idea.” She wrote gracious letters of recommendation for me.

I’d applied to four colleges for transfer: Smith, Mount Holyoke, Yale, and Harvard/Radcliffe. With trepidation, I chose the last.

The reaction of some of my old friends surprised me: “What’s the matter? Indiana isn’t good enough for you? You have to go off to Hah-va?!”

That summer I worked as a reporter at the Indianapolis News, often writing obits or the readers’ hot-line column, “Herman Hoglebogle.” (I’d solve readers’ sewer and weed crises and then write about the problem in the paper.) I had to be at the News at 6 A.M. every morning, and then five evenings a week, I’d drive sixty miles to Muncie to act as arts editor for the Ball State Daily News. Luckily, the job paid more than the gas cost. Besides, I liked the excitement of putting out a paper. That was where I met Steve Praeger, the sports editor.

In the basement of the old creaky house where the newspaper was housed, Steve and I worked side by side, pasting up our pages, waxing and then rolling on bits of paper, hoping that an ε we’d inserted at the last minute would stick all the
way to the printer. Steve, who had just finished college, was hanging around Muncie finishing a graduate course and figuring out where he was going next. He was affable, smart, and not at all like most of the fellows at Ball State. I thought his laid-back style was charismatic. His principal worry seemed to be whether he’d go bald by age twenty-three. We saw each other a lot that summer.

My only reservation about heading east to college was leaving him. We talked often over the phone and once I told my parents I was going to visit a friend and then I sneaked off to Steve’s place in Champaign, Illinois.

There is one terrific advantage in having parents who can’t answer the phone. They can’t receive a call from the person I’m supposed to be visiting. I just hoped my sisters didn’t piece things together if a slipup occurred.

That time with Steve was exciting. Even though they were fairly innocuous meetings—I was still a “good” girl, after all—I came back refreshed and happy. I was hopelessly in love by then and realized, driving back to Indianapolis, that I might betray myself by seeming too vibrant. My parents were quick to pick up on my moods.

However, I had underestimated my father in another way. He had been keeping a record of gas consumption on the Mustang. A few hours after I arrived home, he said, with some amusement, that we must have done an awful lot of driving at my friend’s house. “No, we didn’t, Dad. Why?”

“Well, it’s not a great distance, but the meter shows over three hundred miles.”

“I guess we did drive some.” I cleared my throat. I was convinced he’d be furious. He wasn’t at all. Whether he guessed the truth, I’ve never known.