Commencement

Arriving at Harvard
September 1973

Everything in Boston was new to me. I'd never eaten yogurt or granola or tasted any kind of cheese but sliced processed. I was at once at home and uncomfortable in these surroundings. I dressed up nearly every day for classes. The uniform was blue jeans, but I didn't own a pair.

During that first month at school, there was a party at Adams House, the quintessence of Harvardiana, where I'd been told the undergrads had lockjaw accents and blue-blood New England family names. (I didn't know the Sedgwicks from the Saltonstalls.)

The party was noisy and packed when I arrived. Strolling over to the drinks table, I picked up a glass of orange juice. Right away, a tall, slightly scruffy blond fellow came over to me. I was flattered.

"What does your father do?" I nearly choked on my juice.
"He's a linotype operator at the Indianapolis Star-News."
He turned on his heel and walked away. I stared at his back
as he made his way through the crowd. I should have given him some sort of withering, Jennifer Cavilleri-type response. It didn’t matter that he might have done the same to anyone. He’d struck a nerve. I fled.

What overwhelmed me at Harvard was that everyone I met was articulate. Even the shy, studious science majors had a strong command of the language. In my classes, students seemed able to extemporize on topics that hadn’t even been assigned. I could see how different my preparation had been from theirs. In school I’d memorized facts and formulae and could answer true/false and multiple-choice tests with ease, whereas these people had been taught to use the facts for the purpose of reasoning. They’d taken the numbers and dates and gone many steps further. In classes I watched as the others seemed to perform little dances at every meeting, pirouetting while I sat, a wallflower. It took a long time for me to figure out that many of the words I was hearing were decorations, extra flutes and hand motions to trick the ear into thinking there was more substance to answers than there actually was.

I decided I’d practice talking at mealtime, when everyone seemed intent on conversation. These were real discussions. But I was so worried that my vocabulary was wrong or that there wasn’t enough importance in what I was saying that I went over every word in my head before uttering it. By the end of my real narration, though, I’d added so many details and gotten so sidetracked by trying for perfection that my story lost its punch. I’d start out animatedly. “Listen to this!” I’d describe how a woman tried to stop me from getting on my bike by asking the time. “She’d been imported by some religious cult from Europe to be an undercover recruiter. And ...” I went on with the story, then panicked. I didn’t have an ending line. I looked at the faces around the table. They were expecting something from me. I caught my breath. “Well, that’s all ...” I murmured.

In sign, you more often than not start a story with the punch line. It’s the telling that is important. You establish the basic facts of the story: “I saw two trucks collide today.” But the trucks would be drawn in space and your two fists would collide violently. Then the story would head backward, explaining how you were driving down the road, looking at a lake, when suddenly one truck came rushing past you ... The fluidity of the sign is what the person enjoys watching, the actual telling of the anecdote, not the point it makes, not the final note. In sign you get excited about telling fairly mundane stories because the vigor of your presentation is part of the language. You’re watching and feeling someone communicate. The language is so physical that signers are far more engaged with each other during a conversation than are most people who talk. You move and the other person moves with you. It’s eyes and faces and hands and legs and torsos. Not disembodied words.

After the first few times people heard my descriptive vignettes and waited for the slam-bang end that wasn’t there, I retrenched, not quite able to figure out why my stories were falling flat. I began to wonder whether it was because I was too easily impressed. These people knew so much more than I did. I went back to weighing my words carefully.

Thanksgiving came and another transfer student, Pat Ryan, invited me for dinner with her family, who lived nearby. That morning, before leaving, I made my first phone call home. Kay interpreted what I said to Mom and Dad as I talked, and she told me what they were signing. Occasionally she’d tell me to slow down, that I was talking too fast. At one point there was a pause and I heard some shuffling. I thought Jan was about to get on the line.

“Looahn.” It was Mom’s breathy voice. Kay had put the receiver to her mouth. Then I heard more shuffling. Mom had
backed away as if scared, then looked questioningly at Kay. "Can she hear me?" Mom signed to Kay.
"Yes," Kay urged her. "Go on."
"Looahy," Mom said again. "I lahv you." She paused to breathe. "I mees you."

Then Dad. I could hear his preparatory swallow.
"My sweet daughter. I lahv you. Your Daddee," he said.
Kay came back on the line, but I was too choked up to talk to her or Jan. That was the first time Mom or Dad had ever talked to me on the phone. Their voices had the same distant quality of ships' horns on foggy nights.

Through Kay, Mom had asked again if I was coming home for Christmas. "Yes, of course I am. Tell her that, Kay."

For my senior honors thesis I chose a topic that had rarely been treated in literary essays: the confessional novel. At the time I didn't think the topic was at all autobiographical, but it's a little chilling to think how closely the themes of that thesis would parallel the themes of life during my twenties.

The thesis explored the reasons why protagonists of such novels as André Gide's *The Counterfeiters* and Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* had felt compelled to bare their souls. The subject was not so much confession as it was guilt and culpability, shame and repentance. The confessions themselves were so self-conscious that every word had to be examined and reexamined, and even then, one could never be sure that the final conclusion was correct. Everything could be twisted around to mean something different. In some of the accounts, the confession was a difficult, painful learning process. In others, the confession was an easy construct for absolving oneself of all guilt. The motive for some confessions was murder or cowardice. In others, it was an unspeakable evil of the mind, worse than any crime ever committed. There was no bottom, no end to the confession, just the knowledge that the chasm was ever deeper. These souls were contorted, but they realized that guilt was a black, bottomless pit and they could fall through it forever.

One evening when I was in the middle of doing the thesis, I was out with a new boyfriend. We'd been talking about those themes. Somehow the subject got round to my parents. Just as I felt I'd used my parents on my admission forms for college, it seemed to me I occasionally used their deafness as a kind of talisman. If someone asked me about myself, I invariably brought up deafness. I felt I was somehow lying if I didn't mention it; I would be distorting the truth by omission. After all, it was the thing that had affected every corner of my being.

But there was another reason I did it, a darker, far more complicated one. By giving someone the thirty-second prepared spiel, I could keep them at bay. It was like confessors in the novels for my thesis: if they admitted and were punished for a lesser crime, they were off the hook—in the public's eye—for any other wrongdoings. Their real punishment came with their inner torment, the agony they carried inside them.

For the first time I began telling someone about what I'd seen and heard, growing up. John, my boyfriend, was a sympathetic, reactive listener. It was the first time I'd ever trusted someone enough to admit that anything was less than perfect in my household. Tentatively I told him about being uninvited by our own relatives, about the golting pro and the obscene phone calls, about children making pretend gestures and adults staring. With each story I cried. The litany "Be Good, Be Good, Be Good" was so loud in my ears, I'd never let myself cry before. But thinking back on all those times, I had this odd, inescapable feeling that society thought it was some kind of sin to be deaf. After all, something was making me feel terribly guilty. I had the urge to confess. But I didn't know what I'd done wrong. I knew that my parents hadn't done anything wrong.
Learning

My senior-thesis adviser, Joel Porte, was a kindly, professorial type, who couldn't understand my fascination with the convolutions of confession. Nor could he figure out why, halfway through, I suddenly became so uncomfortable with the subject. Every day, as I set to work analyzing those confessions, those crimes of the heart, the faces of my parents would flash into my head; my mother's delicate hands, my father's broad, handsome ones, moved silently through my mind. And my eyes would sting and my throat constrict. Frightened to go on, I was like a horse being led to the edge of a cliff. I was shying away. The topic had got too close. I didn't know what it was I had to confess. But on the other side of confession, I was certain, was the abyss.

I was in the cab on the way to the airport after commencement exercises. It should have been a day of celebration. Next to me was John, his hand over mine. Across my lap was a red rose he'd given me. I stared out the window on my side. The taxi driver kept looking in the mirror, waiting for the tears to come. I couldn't really speak. I was feeling too sorry for myself. I was about to fly back to Indiana.

The lofty words of the speaker were ringing in my ears, all those meant-to-be-inspiring words about how much awaited us in the world and how much we'd already accomplished. I was aching, thinking how much I would miss John. I was in love and convinced I'd never see him again.

The years had passed so quickly. I had studied and worked hard, made friends for life. I was learning to reason. And yet as I watched Boston go by for the last time, I realized that there was a great deal more I was supposed to have learned. I wasn't sure what it was, only that it was somewhere inside of me. But I knew I hadn't learned it. And going back to the middle of things I didn't understand meant I'd never figure them out.