New York City
September 1976

Within four months, I'd moved to New York, found an apartment, and gotten an editorial job at *New York* magazine. Before I left home, Mom had said the same things she had when I'd left for Cambridge: "Can't you find a nice job in Indiana? Don't you want to stay home?" "Home" is signed with the curled hand kissing the cheek twice.

Dad held up a silencing hand. He knew I had to get out on my own. "You know, she must do this," he signed to Mom. "Remember? We did same thing."

"Will you come home and visit often?"
"Mom! Of course I will."

*New York* magazine seemed a very glamorous place to work. I was wide-eyed at the number of famous people I saw coming and going. The first piece I edited was by Margaret Mead. Parties were lavish. The editor's office contained Chesterfield sofas and a massive silver service. But by mid-December
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something had gone wrong in the power structure and Clay Felker, editor in chief, was losing contractual control. The writers and editorial staff went out on strike in support of him and in protest to Rupert Murdoch’s attempt to buy the magazine.

I went home for Christmas and told Mom and Dad that I was crazy about New York and my work. I had no idea whether or not I’d have a job when I returned, but there was no sense worrying my parents.

Just before they took me to the airport, Dad handed me a twenty-dollar bill.
“Here. For your taxi and things you’ll need.”
“No, Dad, I don’t want it.”
“Here, take it.”
“No.” I held my hands up to stop him. I just couldn’t accept it. I knew Mom and Dad didn’t have very much, but also I wanted to prove my independence. I saw a terrible, hurt look pass across my father’s face.

Right after New Year’s, following intricate financial and legal machinations, Rupert Murdoch took control of the magazine. Felker walked away with a million dollars. A few days later, my boss, Byron Dobell, was named editor of Esquire magazine and he asked me to go there with him. I’d been fortunate. The swirl of events hadn’t left me stranded.

Although Esquire had been experiencing financial problems, Byron brought a new vitality to it and working there was genuinely fun. The only problem was that my tiny editorial salary didn’t go very far in New York. I quickly saw that I needed to supplement my income, so I began a double life—teaching sign language and interpreting weekends and evenings while working at the magazine during the day. I figured I’d stop once my salary improved and I was writing more articles. But I didn’t tell anyone at the office what I was doing. Once in a while an editor would ask me if I wanted tickets for a big movie screening and I’d have to turn him down in favor of

spending the evening in a jail cell or a welfare office in Harlem. How could I explain?

I taught my first sign language class at the New York Society for the Deaf on East Fourteenth Street. Day or night, Fourteenth was creepy. People loitered. Stores selling housewares and cheap T-shirts out of cardboard boxes hired armed security guards. The nearby park was the exclusive province of drug dealers. The Society’s building was not as bad as the rest of the neighborhood, but still shabby. It is a curious societal comment that the major agencies in New York serving the blind were on the genteel upper East Side or on tree-lined streets in Chelsea. The Society for the Deaf was in a place the police had forsaken.

As a child, one of the reasons I hated going to deaf social events was that they were held in seedy, decrepit buildings. The Indianapolis Deaf Club was above a porno peep show. The deaf community just didn’t have enough money to support anything else.

I was apprehensive about going down to the New York Society at night and I was uncomfortable teaching sign. But I decided my students, all of whom were hearing, were really going to learn something. My lesson plans were marvels. If students asked me questions after class, I stayed and answered them at length. I even gave private tutoring sessions.

We were midway through the first term. I believed in total immersion, which was hard on the students, but I felt it would ultimately make them better signers. From the first two-hour class on, I had not said a word. I wanted them to know a little bit of what it is like to be deaf: lost, confused, unable to communicate. In the beginning I had to pantomime much of what I wanted to get across. I’d pretend I was turning on a set of faucets, holding out one hand like a cup. I pointed into the glass, then took it to my lips. “Water,” I signed, the first three fingers of my hand pointing upright (a “w” shape), lightly touching
the edge of my lower lip twice. If the students didn’t understand the charade, I’d turn and write on the blackboard, but I tried to avoid even that. I didn’t want the students automatically translating everything from sign to English—that slowed the process.

The class seemed to be catching on pretty well, except for one older man, who was having terrible trouble. His fingers were thick and slow-moving and he wasn’t able to remember signs from one minute to the next, let alone from class to class.

I’d had the students fill out cards with their names, phone numbers, occupations, and reasons for taking the course. When I read through them, I discovered that this man was a psychiatrist at a large deaf school in New York City.

Because this was an “oral” school, all signing was forbidden; however, the psychological unit of the school was relaxing its anti-sign policies because the professionals felt that students who were having emotional difficulties needed more ways to express themselves. (Many of the children came from poor families, had often been neglected, and had virtually no verbal language.) I was pleased that this man was making the effort to learn how to sign, although there was a vagueness to him and he seemed unwilling to look anyone in the eye. I wondered how he had been communicating with his patients.

At the end of the fifth or sixth class, he came up to me as I was putting on my coat.

“By the way, what made you learn sign language?” he asked.

“My parents are deaf.”

“Do you see them often?”

“No. They live in Indianapolis. I don’t get home much.”

As we were both passing through a narrow doorway, he said, not more than five inches from my face, “Children of defectives often feel guilty.”

These words seared into my brain. He’d said the sentence as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Here was the man entrusted with the psychological well-being of young deaf children every day and he considered them “defective.”

I hardly ever told my friends or the people with whom I worked about the interpreting I was doing. I didn’t think they’d understand or approve. Besides, the sign language interpreter Code of Ethics required strict confidentiality and I took the code very seriously. As an interpreter (I was registered with the National Registry of Interpreters), I was never supposed to divulge any names or information about what transpired while I was working. Mostly I interpreted in courtrooms, jail cells, hospital emergency rooms, welfare offices, mental institutions, and college classrooms, occasionally signing for press conferences and television programs.

Some of the interpreting assignments were quite boring—classroom economics lectures three nights a week could be tedious. Others were upsetting. I had to tell one man he was dying of cancer. There were mundane assignments, filling out insurance forms or interpreting speeches at a banquet. The court work meant I had to do a lot of sitting around in filthy hallways, breathing stale smoke, and while I sat, I fretted about the chances I’d be mugged when I walked out onto the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. Often I had to fend off passes a court officer made. I felt I couldn’t offend the officer (respect—or was it fear?—for authority was well ingrained), but also, I didn’t want the officer getting mad at the deaf person. Or me. If he did, he could make us wait all the longer. So mostly I sat and stewed, thinking about my retort if deaf people weren’t involved. Then I realized I wouldn’t even be there.

More often than not, the doctor or judge or welfare agent assumed I was the deaf person’s sister or neighbor or friend, even though I had carefully explained my role at the beginning of the meeting. According to the interpreter Code of Ethics, I was required to sign everything that was said, including a siren
on the street or a cough in the back of the room. If disparaging remarks were made about the deaf person, I was to sign them exactly as they were made. My interpretation had to be faithful. If the deaf person was angry, then I had to sound angry. If it was the hearing person who was angry, then my signs would be hard, slashing through the air.

This work was throwing me into the intimate functioning of people’s lives. From the vantage point of mediator between deaf and hearing people, I began to get an even clearer idea of what was separating the two worlds. Sometimes it was frightening to be in the middle of so many complicated transactions. Mostly it was frustrating. (I have, of course, changed all identifying details in describing the interpreting I did.)

The case of “El Mudo” troubled me for a long time. I just wasn’t sure justice had been served. El Mudo (Spanish for “the deaf one”) was a big, thick, affable boy from the South Bronx. It was his cheerful nature that had gotten him into trouble. He’d been driving the getaway car when three of his hearing friends—kids who were obviously using him as a lackey—had gone in to rob a dry cleaning store. The owner had balked, one kid shot him, and El Mudo had been apprehended as an accessory to murder. He was the first to go on trial. Two others had been arrested. The one who had pulled the trigger hadn’t yet been found.

El Mudo’s court-appointed lawyer spent no more than ten minutes with him in judge’s chambers before he began plea bargaining. El Mudo said he didn’t know the kid had a gun, or that they were going in to rob the store. He said the other boys had used rough gestures and told him to wait in the car. El Mudo had been pleased. They’d never let him drive before. He was only eighteen. He’d had very little education and his family was from Peru. His signing was virtually incomprehensible. “He’s playing dumb,” the lawyer muttered under his breath.

“He knew.” I wasn’t so sure. I tend to be overly trusting, but then El Mudo seemed pretty trusting too.

It was summer. No one wanted a prolonged trial, particularly not El Mudo’s lawyer, who kept saying he couldn’t stand having to face the kid every day. “It’ll drive me insane. This dummy will drive a jury crazy too.”

The lawyer went out in the hall to talk to the family—at least ten people shuffled out after him in a clump. They were dressed like peasants and their eyes were filled with terror. Only one of them spoke English and he translated for the rest, telling them the lawyer was going to “cop a plea” for El Mudo. (I wondered how that translated into Spanish; I had to be careful not to translate it literally or El Mudo would really have been confused.)

The other two boys who had been apprehended glared at El Mudo when he was brought into the courtroom.

The judge also wanted a short trial, but he was honestly concerned that the kid get a fair hearing. The judge questioned me closely about deafness and the interpreting process. He wanted to know how much El Mudo was understanding. I told him as much as I was allowed to tell, but the Code of Ethics forbids evaluating a person’s signing skills for hearing people, or making judgments about a deaf person’s intellect.

The case began. El Mudo contradicted himself. He didn’t understand the questions no matter how many times they were repeated. He kept changing the details. The lawyer took him aside to coach him, then approached the bench. “Look at how those two are menacing the dummy,” the lawyer complained to the judge. “He knows he’ll get his throat slit if he rats.” The other two in the murder case had made bail. El Mudo had not.

El Mudo was sentenced to seven years in prison. He tried not to cry when the judge pronounced the sentence. The judge asked him if he had any comments he wished to make. El
Mudo signed that all he wanted to do was go home to his mother and father. "I'm good boy. I won't do bad," he signed. The bailiff allowed him to hug his family goodbye. The judge and all the lawyers knew that in prison El Mudo would be sodomized, abused, and beaten. In all probability, there wasn't a soul in the jail who could sign, let alone anyone who would try to talk to him. The innocent look would be gone forever. I went home wondering if I'd done enough, if El Mudo really had understood what was going on.

Not long after John Hinckley, Jr., shot President Reagan, a twenty-three-year-old deaf man was picked up for harassing a young Broadway actress. There were striking similarities between the two cases. Hinckley had written a series of love letters to actress Jodie Foster. Thomas Hansen, who bore an uncanny resemblance to Hinckley, carried a gun in the trunk of his car, and wrote letters to one of the stars of the musical Annie, pleading with the girl to return his love, warning her to stop drinking (he'd seen a newspaper photo of her next to a bottle of champagne, celebrating her eighteenth birthday), and informing her that he would commit suicide if she didn't permit him to visit. Hansen had been tracking the girl for six years—since the time she was twelve—following her across the United States. In court it was obvious he was from a middle-class family and it was also clear that there was something terribly wrong with him. He repeatedly refused psychiatric treatment, even though the judge, quite a perceptive man, told Hansen he could go home to his mother if only he would promise to enroll in a program to get help for his emotional problems. Otherwise, he'd end up in jail.

Hansen's mother pleaded on his behalf. Clearly she'd been pleading on his behalf for years. I'd seen the same thing happen all too often. The mother was overly protective of the son and was willing to get him out of any scrape because she felt so guilty about his handicap. Hansen's parents had divorced long ago; the father came to court but never said a word to his son, nor did he make eye contact. It was the father's gun that Hansen kept in his car while stalking the actress.

The judge questioned Hansen about his intentions toward the actress. "I love her. I want her to follow the Lord's teachings more closely." Each of these words I was saying aloud as Hansen signed them. Suddenly, Hansen became agitated. He told the court he did not want a fair-haired woman interpreting for him. He became abusive. "There are devils in her!" he signed. (It was indeed as if I were possessed; I had to utter each of his signs to the court in exactly the manner he was saying them.) "I want a man!" he demanded.

The judge told him he'd have to make do and purge his soul later. The mother pretended to look the other way during the outburst. Even though she was pleading for mercy for this son, I noticed that she didn't try to talk to him once the entire day.

There seemed to be so much pathos in every setting I was in. There was the case of the two young men being brought to court again and again for an entire year. Their accuser never once showed up. "What's the matter," they asked me. "Hearing people don't like us?"

Another appointment filled me with sadness and longing. I was accompanying a woman to an eye examination. She was a gentle deaf and blind woman in her mid-forties, who I thought was making a remarkable adjustment to the loss of her two major senses. But she was still haunted by the words of her mother, spoken years ago, a mother who'd warned her she'd never amount to anything. As we were leaving, the eye doctor said her ability to perceive light would soon be gone as well.

And then there was the court case of the young black woman whose sister's boyfriend had repeatedly handcuffed her to a pipe, had beaten and pistol-whipped her. The night he came in drunk and ate her baby's food, she pushed him away. He pulled a gun. In self-defense she stabbed him with a
kitchen knife. In court she didn't know how a person was supposed to behave in front of a jury. She didn't know that society expected her to be hypocritically remorseful for the death of her tormentor. She didn't know that the jury would be appalled by the grunts she made trying to talk. She was found guilty. Just before sentencing, the woman's brother came up and asked me to interpret something to his sister. He told her that out of spite, the sister, who testified against her, had set fire to her baby's room and clothes.

In all these cases I was never allowed to interject a single solitary word. I was a robot. If I felt a psychiatrist was coming to the conclusion that the deaf person was a raving loon, when he or she just happened to be exhibiting a deaf mannerism that was completely normal, I could not say anything to explain deafness or its educational limits. I was powerless to straighten out the misunderstandings. And often the psychiatrist would be angry at me, feeling that perhaps I was misinterpreting what was being said. Often a doctor would order me not to sign something to the deaf patient. I had to reply that everything that was said I had to repeat in sign. This made doctors livid, even after I pointed out how unfair—and certainly rude—it is to tell secrets about people in front of them. It made me feel more and more helpless. The situation with Ray was an example.

I'd rarely had a client so overjoyed to see me as Ray was. He was sixteen, small for his age, part black, part Hispanic. He asked me—and everyone he saw, including the guards in jail—whether his mother was coming to get him. She'd been contacted and promptly moved away without leaving a forwarding address. Ray was charged with shooting a woman on the subway. I was to interpret his psychiatric evaluation.

Ray was filled with regret. A hundred times I must have interpreted his apologies to lawyers, psychologists, bailiffs, secretaries, everyone he passed. Ray had been riding the subway with a friend who had a gym bag. He and the friend had been chatting; the friend told him he had something special in the bag and Ray had playfully reached in and pulled out a cloth-covered object. The gun went off, Ray explained to the judge. Ray's lawyer had promised him she would get him out of jail, but there was a problem finding a home for young men that would accept him.

The first thing Ray said to the two prison psychiatrists was that he was cold. The two, looking and acting like Woody Allen parodies of Freidians, leaped on that remark, then began their Rorschach testing. One mumbled to the other: "There should be more sexual references. Don't you see anything sexual?"

Ray was befuddled by the tests on every level. He couldn't do simple addition and subtraction. One psychiatrist accused him of faking. The other asked Ray the date.

"I don't know."

In fact, Ray didn't know whether it was Thursday or Sunday. He couldn't identify the season as being winter, spring, summer, or fall. But finally the explanation for Ray's coldness came out. He'd been arrested in summer and it was now almost winter. All he had to wear was a thin shirt and pants.

In stating his home address, he gave a vague approximation of the spelling of the street, but he didn't have a clue as to what the number was. As the psychiatrist continued questioning him, Ray held his head and said he couldn't think. The session turned into a Gestapo interrogation. "Who was your father?" Ray, small-boned and smooth-skinned, shrunk in his chair. "I don't know." Apparently his mother had had a series of boyfriends, but Ray didn't know any of their names. Ray wasn't able to tell where he went to school, just that he had attended schools somewhere. The more questions the doctors asked, the more Ray's head hurt. He was terrified of them. He simply didn't know anything.

Ray was taken away and as I was getting ready to leave, one
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psychiatrist said to the other: "Amazing. Definitely in the concrete stage. But how could he possibly have gone through school and not know the seasons of the year? Preposterous."

Ray's was an extreme case, but it wasn't preposterous and I felt incredibly frustrated with the two psychiatrists. They'd never dealt with a deaf person before in their lives, had no idea of what a toll deafness could take, particularly on a kid who had been ignored or mistreated his entire life. I cringed to think of what their report would say.

One of the criticisms leveled at deaf people is that they're rigid thinkers. For Ray everything was right/wrong, yes/no, good/bad. There is no room for gray areas in Ray's life. The reason why makes perfect sense.

When deaf children are small, everything is yes or no with their parents. It's easy to shake a head up and down or sideways. There are probably more nos, with slaps and shaking fingers, than there are yeses. If the parents and the children aren't talking, the children aren't picking up the filler between the black and the white.

When deaf children get to school, the struggle is always to get them to read and write English. They aren't encouraged to write fanciful stories, only "experience" stories—"Our Visit to the Factory," "The Rain," "What the Guinea Pig Did Today." The stories they read are Dick-and-Jane simple, and they read that sort of thing all the way through high school. In fact, an alarming percentage of deaf children graduate high school with a third-grade reading ability. Hansen's might have been that. Ray's certainly wasn't. But in all the drudgery of learning noun-verb agreement, gerunds, and participles, there's one thing that's never nurtured: fantasy. They don't get fairy tales because the teachers feel they're too hard to understand and impossible to explain. The teachers feel frantic—or disgusted—when there's so much to teach their deaf students.

It's little wonder that so many deaf people are at the concrete-thinking stage. Their entire lives are concrete, didactic efforts to do a-b-c-d. There are no intuitive leaps, no fairy tales, no dream analyses. Day after day in school, they get grammar pounded into them, and they learn to make "puh" sounds, and they try to make their Adam's apples bob with their g's.

The most frustrating conversations I've had with deaf people have been about the gray areas. They get angry when there isn't a right answer to a question. Once I watched a boy in a vocational program put a motor together. The instructor was in a playful mood and began asking the eighteen-year-old, "What if I put this kind of pipe here?" The boy looked up and shrugged his shoulders. "What if this hose were connected a different way?" The boy just sat looking bewildered. With the third question, the boy got so mad he threw a hammer across the room.

And then these deaf kids get out into the world. They can perform the tasks they were taught, but any initiative was driven out of them long ago. The teachers wanted orderliness. There were few kids in a class, so they were watched carefully. The system works. The kids end up being exactly what the teachers wanted them to be: docile. They weren't training inventors or leaders or supervisors. They were training drones. Only some drones, hemmed in at every turn, end up throwing hammers.

For the rest, the whole thing works fine. I watched people my father's age, men and women who had pretty good jobs and relatives who lived nearby. They set up apartments when they got out of high school and they readily fell into a pattern. They worked year after year—never being promoted—but working steadily, rarely missing days. Then suddenly newspapers stopped using linotype machines or a factory closed and the person was out of a job. If the worker couldn't find another one, he or she ended up in a social worker's or a vocational re-
habilitation counselor's office. I've heard plenty of job counselors mutter about how childish these deaf people were, how they didn't have any initiative. Yet no one had ever let them think that initiative was acceptable behavior.

Indeed, only a few research studies have been conducted on how deaf people think, and their findings are scanty. For the most part, they're related to the age at which the deaf person lost his or her hearing. What's interesting about the studies is that prelingually deaf people (people such as my parents, who were born deaf or who lost their hearing early on) have no interior monologue. In most of us there is a tiny voice we consult as part of our thought processes. Deaf people literally don't hear themselves thinking. Scientists speculate that we begin recording this inner voice from the second of our births, if not before. This is the voice that dictates all of our writing. A good writer, they presume, has a particularly well-developed voice. Many deaf people who have no voice sometimes have to finger-spell or sign to themselves to make sure of the spelling of a word or the phrasing of a sentence.

Research into the dreams of deaf people is also just beginning, but it has fascinating implications. Some researchers theorize that deaf people think the way others dream. That is, the deaf people's thought processes, because they are so pictographic, are really more like dreams. Interestingly, very few deaf people actually use sign language in their dreams.

It never occurred to me as a child that my parents' thought processes or dreams were any different from my own. They were my parents. I learned most of my behavior from them. How could they possibly think in a different way from me? And how did their lives and how did my life fit in with the chaos I saw around me?

I did go home for Christmas that year and it was as happy as any we'd had. Early that morning, my mother, my father, and Kay, Jan, and I excitedly exchanged gifts, then we made the hour-long trip to Greencastle and my grandparents' house. Mom's younger sister, Peggy, and her family were already milling about the kitchen when we got there. Everybody was in good spirits. The only disappointment was that Grandma and Grandpa Wells had not put up a Christmas tree. Their trees were always scruffy—never taller than a couple of feet—but they were strung with wonderful lights, orange globes containing a magical, gurgling liquid. The absence of a tree was part of Grandma's effort to do away with the gift exchange. The one thing she didn't like was fuss—which was precisely what my mother adored, the excitement of celebration.

Grandma's one excess was home-cooked dinners. As we gathered around an overloaded table, she kept apologizing, saying, "Now, don't be too disappointed. Remember it's nothing special." Everything from the dumplings to the pies was good and hearty.

Aunt Peggy started up the conversation and as it flew around the table, Kay, Jan, and I took turns interpreting, one of us putting down a fork to translate, fingers and hands gliding through the air as my grandfather told a story. Mom and Dad, so hungry to know what was going on, hardly stole their eyes away as they reached for rolls or brought their own forks to their mouths. Mom started telling a joke, signing to me so that I would speak aloud—until she suddenly stopped and shook her hands as if erasing the air: She'd accidentally told the punch line.

After dinner we did the dishes and opened our packages, sneaking off to nibble pieces of fudge and red-sugar cookies. Midafternoon, feeling bloated and sluggish, Mom, Grandpa, my sister Kay, and I decided we needed to go for a drive.

We bundled up and went out to Grandpa's gray Chevrolet. Kay, now a college sophomore, her long hair tucked under a cap my grandmother had crocheted for her, took the wheel.
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My grandfather sat next to her in the front seat as Mom and I climbed in the back. As we pulled out of the drive, Grandpa scooted around in his seat to face Mom and me.

"Tell Doris Jean I figure it's about time I learned that sign language," he told me. As he spoke, Mom watched my hands. Grandpa had never made a sign in his life.

"Never too old to learn," he said.

Gently we coached him. "Right"—first two fingers on the right hand cross, then the hand arcs to the right; "left"—thumb and forefinger spread in an "l" shape as the hand arcs to the left.

"Well, this isn't so hard," he said. Grandpa signed "right" and Kay turned the car. Then he made a "left" at the next corner and we went in the other direction. He led us into the old section of town, with its blind alleys and dead-end streets. Greencastle doesn't even have ten thousand people and Grandpa had lived there all his life. He couldn't help but know his way around. Still, he was concentrating so hard on his "left" and "right" signs that he had us turning into driveways of houses where heads would suddenly pop up in the front picture window, people wondering who was coming to call.

"I didn't mean that," Grandpa chuckled after the third driveway.

His signs looked like such gibberish that Mom started to laugh, then she leaned over the car seat to mold his fingers back into a "right."

"This vocabulary is none too easy," he muttered, staring at his hand. "My old fingers are so stiff and sore."

"This is the sign for 'car,'" and I started to show him what it was: two hands guiding a steering wheel.

"No, no," he said, brushing my imaginary wheel aside. "I'll just get confused. I want to get these down first."

We'd all been disappointed there wasn't any snow that

Metaphor

Christmas morning. Yet despite the day's bleakness, there was a nostalgic air in our car. Mom squeezed my arm when we came to the elm where her friend had had a treehouse and where they used to hold tea parties for their dolls when they were little. Mom made a gesture with her left hand as if she were balancing a tiny saucer near her chin, her right fingers pretending to hold a china teacup to her lips. The elm, black and naked, showed no traces of the little girls who had played there. When we passed the white clapboard house in which Mom had been born, she tapped Grandpa on the shoulder excitedly, motioning toward it. He couldn't quite figure out what she wanted.

"Mom says that's the house where she was born."

By the time we got back to his house, Grandpa couldn't reproduce the two signs he'd learned, but he hurried inside to describe to my grandmother how he'd tried.

The snow had suddenly begun falling fast and now Mom was in a hurry to head home to Indianapolis. Jan, still in high school, helped Dad load the car trunk with shopping bags full of presents. Grandma handed us desserts wrapped in aluminum foil to take with us, then hugged each of us, cake and foil getting smashed out of affection. As Mom began stepping out the door, Grandpa put his hand around her arm and pulled her back inside.

"Come here." He led her over to a corner by the kitchen cabinets.

"I want to tell you something." He stooped over toward her, his lips pursed out, the way he always talks to Mom, an exaggerated stage whisper.

"I can't remember if I ever told you I loved you," he said, deliberately pointing his finger at Mom with the beat of each syllable. She was staring intently at his mouth, her forehead wrinkled. "You're so special to me. I think about you an awful
lot and I'm proud of my wonderful daughter.” He took a
breath, then squeezed her hands between his and brought
them up to his chest. “I love you very much.”

Grandpa straightened up. Slightly embarrassed, he tugged at
Mom's winter coat, pulling it tight around her neck.

She was smiling at him, her red-gold hair like a halo around
her creamy cheeks. My grandfather was normally a plainspo-
ken man. I felt I was eavesdropping.

Grandpa ushered us both out into the snowy night.

By the time Mom and I got into the car, Kay and Jan were
settled in the back seat. My father had gone out earlier to
warm up the car, but the weather was raw and we were still
shivering, rubbing our hands together as we slammed the
doors. Then we rolled down the fogged-over windows, fool-
ishly letting all the heat escape so we could shove our arms out
to wave goodbye. Grandma and Grandpa stood coatless on the
front porch, blowing kisses.

We were rolling up the windows, still smiling, the yells
dying out, when halfway up the street, Mom turned to me,
puzzled. In sign language, she asked, “What was Grandpa say-
ing in the kitchen?”

My heart froze.

In the dim light of streetlamps, I signed to her what I’d over-
heard. “Mom, he said he loves you.”

In the country, leaving the lamps behind, it was too dark to
see any more hand signs. Mom turned back around, clasping
her hands in her lap. She sat with her head bent, contemplating
something in those hands. I turned my face to the window,
hoping she wouldn’t turn around again and catch the glimmer
of tears welling up in my eyes.

So much had been lost.