Vanilla Fires

Nature attaches an overwhelming importance to hearing. As unborns we hear before we can see. Even in deep comas, people often hear what is going on around them. For most of us, when we die, the sense of hearing is the last to leave the body.

I went back to New York haunted by that Christmas scene. I felt hurt, then angry. There was so much I didn’t yet understand, so much I must have missed.

For years a friend had been urging me to write about what I knew—to write about deafness. After Christmas, when I saw I’d resolutely been avoiding thinking about what had been in front of me all those years, I decided the friend was right. Not long before, I’d begun hearing about a deaf street gang, the Nasty Homicides. Perhaps facing the issues I’d been shunning, perhaps setting them down on paper what I knew about deafness, would help me figure things out.

It was not an easy article to do. I hung out in squalid tenements in the South Bronx; I waited alone on street corners where there was nothing but rubble for blocks around; I watched angry young men practice self-defense with brass knuckles and baseball bats. It was probably insanity on my
part. I was defenseless in the most violent streets of the country. But the problems these deaf street kids faced reflected the problems of deaf people everywhere; focusing on these kids might do some good—for me, in particular.

I'd first heard about the gang through Pedro Acevedo, one of the leaders. Pedro fascinated me. He was deaf and his family came from Cuba. He spoke Spanish with his sisters and mother. His written English wasn't so hot, but his signing was extraordinarily clever. Pedro was a curiosity because he'd married a middle-class hearing woman who was a college professor. In his own way, he was probably the most effective deaf rights activist I'd ever met. At night he roamed the mean parts of Brooklyn and the Bronx with members of the gang. During the day he taught sign language, but he was always taking time out to get help for those he called his "brothers" in jail. Somehow he'd been able to lobby successfully for better treatment of deaf men in prison on Rikers Island. Pedro, small, squarish, bulldog-looking, convinced prison officials to put deaf men in cells together. In the past, guards preferred separating deaf inmates because they didn't know what the deaf men might be planning in their secret signing. Pedro argued that the deaf guys were already isolated enough.

When I first told Pedro I wanted to write about the gang, he was uncomfortable. He kept trying to examine my motives. "I don't want gang members hurt. Too much bad stuff," he told me. "Police know too much already. Other gangs beat us up. Dangerous business." I thought he was being a little melodramatic, but then I didn't know much about street gangs. After several phone conversations, Pedro agreed to talk with the other leaders of the gang about my writing an article. Each section of the city had its own chieftain. Even this part hadn't been easy. Pedro didn't want people he worked with to know about his heavy involvement with the gang. I could only telephone him at certain hours when an interpreter he trusted was present. (I didn't yet have a telephone-teletype—TTY—for calling deaf people.) I'd talk, the interpreter would sign, then Pedro would answer and the process be reversed. Since these were really interpreter trainees, there were times when my message was misinterpreted and Pedro got mad. Other times, it seemed to take hours to complete what should have been a short, simple call.

Three months passed. Pedro had been busy, one leader hadn't shown up, another didn't want any part of it. Finally, Pedro and I met and he told me that Big Willie—whose name sign was made with fingers cupped like a large ear at the side of his head—had agreed to check me out. Pedro told me to meet him at 9 p.m. on a corner in Greenwich Village. He said he'd drive me to Big Willie's in the South Bronx. I took off all my makeup and jewelry and put on the most nondescript clothing I could find. I wore a scruffy down jacket and pulled a hat down low over my ears and headed for the street corner. I stood in the dark for hours, chopping ice on the pavement with my heel.

Pedro never showed. I tried calling him that night, but it was several days before I finally got hold of him again. He chose another street corner and told me to meet him there the following week. He didn't come that time either, or the next. I began wondering whether he was deliberately trying to make me look like a fool or whether he was testing me.

The third time his excuse had been that he wasn't able to get word to the Brooklyn leaders to come. The problem with a deaf gang is that when the group wants to get together for a rumble or a meeting, things are not easy to organize. The members can't call each other up, so runners have to relay messages throughout the five boroughs. Advance planning is required, and these were not exactly the kind of guys who kept social calendars.

The Nasty Homicides was actually an outgrowth of the
Crazy Homicides, a hearing gang that had alarmingly grown 25,000 strong in New York City during the seventies. Many of
the deaf kids had been introduced to the gang through older
brothers. By the eighties, the ranks of the Crazies had dwindled
to almost nothing. However, a statistical bulge nearly
twenty years before made the Nasties more viable than ever.

From 1963 through 1965, a nationwide epidemic of rubella—German measles—caused thousands of women to deliver babies who were handicapped in some way: deaf, blind, or retarded. Some had heart conditions or withered limbs. Many had more than one problem. Some eight thousand babies were born deaf, more than doubling the population of children their age in special school programs for handicapped people. Poor people living in the Northeast were particularly hard hit.

After months of waiting, Pedro was finally taking me to
meet the gang. We were in the car, driving through areas more bombed out than Dresden after the war.

"You write good things," Pedro warned, sticking a finger in
my face. "Gang must be strong. Not weak." Then he looked
over at some guys hanging out on a sidewalk when we were
stopped for a light. "Lock your door. Bad neighborhood." Pedro
reached under the car seat and drew out a very long, thick knife.

The first meeting was in front of a grimy bodega. Someone had propped up seats pulled out of a car as a bench. There
were five Nasties waiting for us there. They didn't look much
different from the guys I'd interpreted for in the courts and
jails. With my pale skin and hair, I felt conspicuous. I was on
their turf. The Nasties I was to follow were predominantly His-
panic; the black deaf youths had a separate group.

None of the guys at the bodega that night had worn "colors"—the special gang uniforms. The Nasties had a skull

and crossbones sewn on the back of their black jackets and
they wore metal spikes on leather bands around their wrists
and necks. They were checking me out more than I was investi-
gating them.

"How you know sign language?"
"My parents are deaf," The Nasties seemed surprised.
"Why you want to write story?"
"I want to tell people about deafness. And I want to under-
stand it myself."
"You'll tell the police bad things. You'll get us in trouble,"
Big Willie said.

"No, honest I won't. I'll tell the truth. I'll tell what I see."
Big Willie didn't exactly live up to his name. He was average
height, thin but wiry. In part as a warning, Big Willie began
telling me how hard it was to be a Nasty. "Never know when
someone sneaks up on you," he said. "Deaf must have eyes in
back of head."

Over the next few months a pattern developed. During the
day I went to my white-collar job. (I hadn't really told anyone
at work what I was doing.) On prearranged evenings, Pedro
would pick me up and I'd hang out with the Nasties.

One day I happened to be talking to an editor at People maga-
azine, Lanny Jones, and for some reason mentioned the gang.
He immediately wanted the story and assigned a photo-
graper. I told the gang about the picture taking. We went back to
the testing. This time at least I had someone to wait with, Mi-
chael Abramson, the photographer. Luckily, I'd had the fore-
sight to stipulate that we meet in bars, so we wouldn't freeze if
we were stood up. Finally, Michael and Pedro met, though
Michael wasn't allowed to take pictures for a while.

The Nasty Homicides ranged in age from about thirteen to
thirty-five. They liked to boast that there were a thousand to
fifteen hundred of them scattered around the city. I imagine it
was closer to a hundred, although I never met more than twenty-five and usually hung out with about ten regulars. There were two reasons they exaggerated their claims. One was that they fancied themselves big shots. The other was that they wanted to appear strong and scare off the bullies in other gangs.

The Nasties had banded together for self-protection. Because they were deaf, kids had been picking on them all their lives. They liked to see themselves as vigilantes for deaf people. Their favorite sign was “Deaf Power,” a fist over the heart and a fist in the air. These were kids who didn’t fit in anywhere else. They never knew what the police and social workers were going to do. In fact, they’d developed a kind of paranoia, always having to look over their shoulders. Often they thought people were talking about them because things just happened to them, and it often seemed they didn’t have any control over their lives. Someone was always losing a job or getting thrown out of an apartment.

Despite the fact that several of the guys had records, I felt there was something curiously naïve and beguiling about the Nasties. They were street kids who’d had tough lives, but they didn’t seem to understand how to operate the way other street kids did. One day they wanted to go on a rumble. They’d planned it for a long time, but there was only one car. They decided to take the subway. They knew if they were caught with weapons on public transportation, they’d go to jail, so they talked Michael into putting their baseball bats and non-chukas (two sticks connected by a chain) in his car.

When they got to the rumble spot, Mendoza’s Pool Parlor, there were only two guys there from the other deaf gang. Something had gone wrong with the rendezvous. The Nasties, decked out in their war costumes, paced up and down the street. I could see the outlines of people in tenement windows, looking out in terror as the gang marched in front of their building. Big Willie had shaved his head to appear more menacing. When he got worked up, his signs were very fast and he slammed his knees together nervously. Finally, it was clear that no one was going to show. Big Willie ordered his troops home.

I should have been able to see the humor in that situation, but I didn’t. I was not at all afraid of Big Willie and his men, but it was the way the hearing kids in Mendoza’s had eyed them, the way Mendoza himself had gruffly thrown Big Willie out when he’d gone in to ask someone a question, that troubled me. Despite their bravado, there was something so powerless about the Nasties.

Their ineffectuality increased my fascination. I was the one who had chosen to be there. I was the one most out of place. I was convinced that in the squalor of New York there were valuable lessons I wouldn’t get anywhere else. As a journalist, I was there to observe and record. It was the first time in my life I didn’t have to feel responsible for all the deaf people present. I was throwing myself on the streets to discover whatever it was I’d been sheltering myself from.

It was a strange kind of double life I was leading. At my office, things were going very well. I'd left Esquire, worked a stint at Cosmopolitan, and then gone to Diversion, a travel, arts, and leisure magazine for doctors. I had tremendous amounts of responsibility and the magazine had already sent me on trips to the South Pacific and North Africa. My office was demanding more and more of my attention, and I hadn’t yet been able to make myself work on the article about the Nasties.

Still, I spent as much time with them as I could. Things weren’t going well for them. One night, Juan came home from his after-school job as a janitor, to find his father blocking the
doorway. In crude gestures, the father told him he'd sent all Juan's clothes to Puerto Rico. The father shoved his seventeen-year-old away and told him never to come back.

Miguel's parents had simply left for Puerto Rico. They didn't bother to write a note telling him where they'd gone—Miguel said they probably figured he couldn't read it. He and Juan were sleeping in abandoned buildings.

To me these were tragedies. The gang was fatalistic. So much so that hanging around with them, even in the midst of all this, took on a paralyzing sameness.

Afternoons the gang members filed through a graffiti-lined hallway to Big Willie's apartment. Big Willie's three small children, all hearing, wandered through the scene. Big Willie, José, and the others would pass joints and drink beer. Miguel would do push-ups, hoisting himself on just his thumbs. Noe kept talking about how he loved Arnold Schwarzenegger. José practiced Bruce Lee-type nunchaku techniques, expertly wrapping the two chain-connected wooden cylinders around his neck, his chest, his shoulders, and his waist. Big Willie's two-year-old son, Willie Junior, was watching. José bent over to wrap the weapon around the child, trying to teach him the routine. But José was so gentle with the weapon that Willie Junior looked up and smiled.

In the background a couple of stereo and a radio played rock and salsa full blast. A few of the Nasties had some hearing at certain frequencies. One wore a penny in his left ear to block out painful vibrations. They had mock fights, Noe especially. "Anybody say bad things"—he'd point to his nose—"I punch in the face. They bad to me..." Noe slowly drew his finger across his neck, indicating a slit throat.

One day we all went on a "peacekeeping" mission. By now I knew them so well I almost felt I was one of them. Certainly the fact that I spoke their language blurred the distinctions be-

...
came back with a vanilla milk shake and French fries. His conversation with Pedro had been brutal—hands smacking hands, chests, foreheads. Still, his illiteracy had been serendipitously poetic.

When they weren't looking, I slipped the napkin into my pocket. The Nasty Homicides and I couldn't have been more different. But "vanilla fires" was an exact description of what was happening within me.