For a long time I was touchy as a sore tooth.
The next few months were awful. Consumed with fury, I
snapped at everyone. I slammed doors. I cursed. It was as if I
were going through adolescent rebellion.
I found I was sinking deeper and deeper into myself. I was
struggling with an anger that got uglier by the day. On the
outside I was trying to remain the "good" girl my aunts and
uncles had warned me to be. The difference between the fa-
cade and the interior kept growing.
I felt guilty. It's easy to feel guilt. It's hard to absolve your-
self. And never once had I ever been able to indulge myself in
feeling bad. "You shouldn't feel sorry for yourself. Think of
your mother and father. It wasn't their fault," I'd been told. In a
bizarre psychological turn of events, I couldn't even feel sorry
for myself without feeling the guilt. I had no right to feel bad,
to feel lonely or out of touch or anything else. I had been
boxed in on every side and that was what was struggling to get
out. Just the right to feel.
I had been dutiful, obedient, quiet, shy, all the time I was
growing up. And suddenly I was spewing forth. The venom
was whirling inside me. I hurled vases to the floor to smash
them. I slammed my fists into the walls. My fury came hurtling out at my boyfriend; the rage; the anger. I screamed at him and cursed at him. And when I'd poured it out over all those months, I was exhausted. I had screamed and spurted and spewed all the ugliness and filth festering inside me. Having like an animal after a bloody fight, I was finally, wearily, able to breathe. All those times when I'd carried the burden of deafness on my back. All those times when I'd been polite and said "Yes, sir" and "No, ma'am."

I got rid of my responsibilities.

I'd come close to suffocating under all those duties. I was nearly crushed by the unbearable weight, by the fact that if you have one responsibility, a hundred more come to rest on top of it; the responsibilities for my mother and my father and everyone else who had come along. I had stopped enjoying my life. I had become an automaton. And so I went to being a child for a while. I realized I'd have to reconstruct myself.

Sometimes when you hold yourself up to the light and scrutinize yourself mercilessly, there comes a release. I wish I could say mine was an overnight purge. But it couldn't have been. The wounds had festered too long. I had to learn I wasn't deaf. I had to start speaking out.

I'd known a few other sign language interpreters who had deaf parents. I ran into one woman at a meeting and found myself asking her about what it had been like in her household. I had cold chills running up my spine as I listened to her tell me stories that sounded exactly like mine. I told her about the time Mom had gone to pick up an ice cream cake she'd ordered for Jan's graduation party. The cake had the wrong wording on top. Mom was too embarrassed to have it changed. She didn't know quite how to explain it to the baker. Mom came home crying. Jan made a joke about the cake to the guests, trying to make Mom feel better.

The woman told me that her mother had once misunderstood the payment plan on a sofa. Seeing a sign in a furniture store window that said: $25 AND IT'S YOURS! she went in, paid the money, and had the sofa delivered. Then the mother started getting bills from the store. She hadn't known the twenty-five dollars was a down payment. The interest rates were prohibitive, and that was a time when twenty-five dollars was a fair amount of money. The mother fell behind on the payments. The store angrily reclaimed the couch. Her mother never again went to the street where the store was located. She still felt the shame of the repossession and the embarrassment of having misunderstood.

Hearing that daughter tell me of her own guilt and embarrassment and her intense identification with her mother gave me chills. It also gave me a peculiar relief. It was the first time another child of deaf parents had ever talked about the experience to me. I no longer felt so odd.

"Why didn't anyone ever talk to me about this before?" I asked the woman.

"You would have felt as if you were betraying your parents," she said.

It was too private. We didn't want to reveal the special, secret quality of our lives to anyone.

It was a long, slow spring. A spring against nature. I moped when I was alone and argued when I was with people. Although often shy, I was usually agreeable and wanting to please. But now I was on edge all the time. I quit my job in a huff. I had been pouring heart and soul into my work. It felt good to stop being responsible for all that stuff.

And so I was putting my life back in order. I stopped seeing people I didn't want to see. I stopped doing things I didn't want to do. I tried to say what I meant. And I stopped interpreting. I had to halt that crazy addiction. The interpreting hit all the
nerves of childhood. It was a daily replay of the hurts and the
shame and the embarrassment. Only it was worse because now
I had choices.

To earn my living, I was writing magazine articles and
teaching, and I signed a contract for a children’s book.

But there was still more to be reconciled. None of my rela-
tives had ever actually talked about deafness and how it af-
fected us—unless they mentioned the word and stiffened.
Tentatively, I decided to broach the subject with my sister
Kay.

Kay had recently been graduated from Northwestern
University in Chicago and was now working as a voca-
tional rehabilitation job coach, overseeing deaf clients who had
come to her social service agency, unable to find work by
themselves.

Carefully, I brought up the subject. “Do you think we’re any
different because of Mom and Dad’s deafness?” I asked her.
“What do you mean?” She was wary.

“You know. You and Jan and I took on more responsibility
than other kids. Don’t you think that was hard on us?”

Neither of us had ever admitted it to another person, but it
was true.

“I used to get so embarrassed in restaurants,” Kay said.
“Everybody would stare at us like we were freaks.”

I told her that even now I had a hard time finishing a meal in
front of other people. Eating made me too self-conscious.

“Sometimes it’s so hard being different,” I told her, my
throat catching. “But I tried to act as if it didn’t bother me.”

“I felt so guilty, asking you for things, calling you up at col-
lege all the time,” Kay whispered.

“Oh, no, Kay. No. Don’t ever feel guilty. Please.” I could
hear the pleading in my voice. And that was when I realized
that the sin was not within us. The guilt was. But not the sin.

Both of us began to cry. She and I had been so close all the
time we were growing up. We’d talked about everything—ex-
cept this.

I was finally able to finish the gang story. It was an unusual
piece by People magazine standards. None of the characters
could be construed as a celebrity. And it was long. The editors
ran the article virtually intact—a rarity in a place where report-
ers report and staff members rewrite.

Taking Anne’s advice, I tried to explain deafness, the
frustrations, how difficult English was. The article was
well received, but as I’d feared, there was an unfortunate
consequence. Noel’s parents, ardent church-goers, read the ar-
ticle and immediately shipped him off to live with friends in
Puerto Rico. Both Ortiz and Miguel lost their jobs. Several of
the other gang members had been forbidden to see their
friends.

There was one thing that had always astounded me about
the Nasties. Despite their talk about rumbles and protection,
they didn’t seem able to sustain genuine anger. They were liv-
ing in squalid conditions with no hope for a stable future, and
yet they were optimistic. Big Willie had put the pictures of
himself in leather, spikes, and chains all over his wall. When I
went to visit him, he told me about what had happened to the
gang. He could see how upset the news made me.

“No, no, don’t worry,” Big Willie signed. “Those things
happen. We knew before starting article what might happen.
We enjoyed ourselves.”

In other words, Big Willie was telling me that he had taken
responsibility for himself. I hadexplained the consequences of
the article in advance and he felt it was a true portrayal. And
that was all he’d wanted.

I recognized that it would take a long while before I could
become whole again. Now, instead of being angry, I was sad,
sad about what was lost and couldn’t be regained. Sad about mistakes I’d made. There was a poignancy to everything. Each time someone asked me about my parents, tears came to my eyes. I had gotten a small TTY machine with a typewriter keyboard and coupler for telephoning them, yet even when I saw the electronic letters: HELLO GALE HERE GA (GA is typewritten shorthand for “go ahead”), I started to cry hard. I’d been sorting through memories and slights, crying and aching each time I put together a new realization. I’d lived my life with blinders on. I hadn’t wanted to see how easily family mistreats family. Or human beings mistreat other human beings. The letters weren’t enough. The electronic impulses for phone calls weren’t enough. I decided it was time to go home and see my parents again.

I tried to act cheerful. My mother and her razor-sharp perception knew something was terribly wrong. She asked me what it was. I said, “Nothing,” my fist starting at my chin, then thrown open. She didn’t press. She simply said if I wanted to tell her, she wanted to know.

I leafed through old photo albums and asked her about her own childhood, about going to the deaf school, about her friends. She told me about dropping chocolate pudding in her milk, about a green dress she’d pointed out to her father in a store window. He’d bought the dress as a surprise. But instead of being happy with it, she felt bad because it had cost so much. She talked about little signs and gestures that stood out as symbols in her recollection.

Over the next few days, I watched her. She must have felt as she had those times during childhood when I sat at her feet while she turned the pages of newspapers, me searching for spies. I was drawn into her day. Making a pie, she peeled an apple, the peel one long thin strip dangling off her knife. “Watch,” she signed, and she threw the peel over her left shoulder, then whirled around to see what letter it had formed. “My girlfronds used to do this and the letter would be the letter of the name of the boy who liked us,” she signed.

Another morning I started to peel a banana for breakfast. “Wait,” she signed. “Think of a question you want answered—yes or no.” I closed my eyes and thought. Then she took the banana and sliced the charcoal-black end off the bottom, and there was a fuzzy brown “Y.” “Yes,” she signed, smiling.

There is such optimism in my mother and father. I used to mistake their innocence for unsophistication. I used to be annoyed that they didn’t know about the world. More recently I’d been angry that they hadn’t fought back all those times they’d been mistreated. It was slowly dawning on me that innocence is a protection. They knew very well, better than I, how harsh the world is. And they realized early on they had one of two choices: to be bitter; or to enjoy what they had.

Dad and I were in a department store, walking past a display of electronic typewriters. Dad stopped at one. On the page above, people had picked out: “The quick brown fox...” Underneath, Dad typed: “I love my daughter Lou Ann.”

In the past couple of years I’d noticed subtle changes in Mom and Dad. Since all three of their daughters had left home, they seemed to go out and enjoy themselves more. And there was a fortuitous confluence of events. Society on the whole, it seemed, was becoming a little more accepting. Less and less we were freaks. More and more we were curiosities.

One day we went to a Mexican restaurant. We were drinking slushy margaritas and eating messy tacos. In the next booth a man watched us, incessantly, pryingly, annoyingly, for the whole meal. We could all feel his eyes boring into us and we tried to ignore him and just eat our dinner.

As we were leaving, passing his table, my mother turned and
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stared right back. I grabbed her arm, shocked. “Mom!” I fairly shouted in sign.

And then I started to laugh—at myself for my priggishness, and at Mom for her outlandishness, for her ability, finally, to stare back.

“I didn’t like him doing that. It wasn’t polite,” she signed. “And so I thought he wouldn’t like it either.”

I thought about it for a second. “Good for you,” I signed.

The next day Mom and I were on the patio getting ready for a picnic. I’d brought out a radio. She was shucking corn. An old Frank Sinatra song came on and I started humming along. I looked over at my mother and picked my hands up, signing: “Grab your coat and get your hat, leave your worries on the doorstep. Just direct your feet to the sunny side of the street”—“sunny” signed with the hand like a ball of fire throwing out its rays. “If I never had a cent, I’d be rich as Rockefeller. Gold dust at my feet . . .” Mom, hands full of corn, stopped, watching. Suddenly, feeling shy, I erased the air and started to pick up a platter.

“No. Do more,” she signed. “I enjoy.”

I started that song and then a bright, bright number came on. “New York, New York,” I signed, and my signs became more and more expansive, my hips swaying, my shoulders moving in time with the music. “These little-town blues are melting away. I’m gonna make a brand-new start of it. New York! New York!” Mom looked almost transfixed as she watched me, and as the horns came to the climax, I extended my arms, my hands beating the air in time to the music, going for the grand finale. Mom applauded madly, laughing. “Wonderful!” she signed.

A few hours later we were in the car for an evening drive. She turned around to me in the back seat. “I never told anyone this,” she began.

“When I was in school, in my room, when nobody else was around, I used to pretend I could sing.” She was singing as if

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she were playing a guitar, her head thrown back, serenading us. “I liked to think I could sing.” She laughed in that shy way of hers, chin tucked. “Nobody else knows that.”

I don’t think I had ever felt so close to her.

In June of 1983, Mom and Dad drove to New York City for a visit. This time I was really looking forward to spending the week with them.

The elevator in my loft building was broken and we had to climb the stairs. There was a terrible heat wave. The air conditioning in my apartment had broken too, so we ate out, trying to get comfortable. Only, in three different restaurants on three different days, the air conditioning was out of order.

We should have felt wretched, but we didn’t. We were having a good time.

One day a teenage girl started staring at us as she was walking with a group of older tourists in the street. I knew Mom had seen her. The tourists were walking away, the girl trailing; her jaw actually dropped open as Mom and I continued signing to each other. In the old days I would have winced. This time I could shrug it off.

And then the girl walked smack into a pillar. Mom caught my eye and we laughed.

That evening we took a cab to dinner. Mom and I rode in the back seat. Dad was sitting next to the driver in the front.

“Nice weather we been having, huh?”

Dad didn’t say anything—naturally. He was admiring the view out the passenger’s side.

“Been here long?” Dad still didn’t answer.

I was interpreting to Mom what the cabbie was saying but couldn’t sign to Dad because there was a bulletproof plastic partition between the front and back seats. Mom covered her mouth so the cabbie wouldn’t know she was giggling.

For years Mom and Dad had been comfortable enough with
their deafness to make light of it. I always cringed. Mom thought it was particularly funny one time when Dad was painting the picnic table and Harpo, the dog, got her tail stuck to a tacky-wet leg. Her howls, at the one ear-splitting pitch Dad could perceive, made him spin around.

"You can hear! It’s a miracle!" she teased him.

(Harpo was the same dog Mom had taught to sign. Upon signed command, Harpo could sit, stay, roll over, jump, and beg, among other dog tricks. The one thing Harpo rarely did was bark. She knew that with Mom and Dad around, it didn’t do her much good.)

The next day I took Mom and Dad to the beach. The sun was setting and the sky was fiery red-purple. Mom and I stood, arms linked, watching the waves.

"What does it sound like?" Mom signed.

I wrinkled my forehead and held out my hand, palm up, hand searching, to show I was thinking of an answer. Then I made a little gurgling sound with my lips. Mom looked at my lips thoughtfully, then turned back to watch the waves hitting the rocks and made her own lips gurgle.

A minute later, Dad came over. He’d been watching some fishermen.

"What does it sound like?" he signed, pointing to the waves.

Mom grinned and signed that she had just asked me the same question, then she made the little lip movement for him. The three of us stood and watched the waves and the sunset. I tried to imagine the scene without the sound, and suddenly, everything before my eyes turned black and white, like a silent movie.

I took them on the Staten Island ferry. As we watched the cars being loaded and the dockhands at work, Mom grabbed my arm excitedly.

"Music!" she signed, and she moved to the beat.

"No, Mom! It’s the engine," and I slapped a fist into my palm in time with the pistons.

"I think music," and she did a little dance.

I decided I’d drive back with Mom and Dad to Indiana to see my sisters. I had a few business errands to run, so the afternoon before we were to leave New York, I told them I had to go out and asked them what they wanted to do. Mom said she and Dad were tired and would stay in my apartment until I returned.

I was gone for several hours and Dad wasn’t there when I got back.

"He went to see New York Times," Mom signed to me.

"But he doesn’t know where it is. He doesn’t know how to get there," I signed to her.

"He’ll be fine," she assured me.

Dad came back half an hour later and told us about his day. Printers he worked with in Indianapolis had told him that the Times had a new laser process. Dad had wanted to see it firsthand, but we hadn’t time. After I’d left, Dad had looked up the address in the phone book, and gone out to the bus stop near my house. (I’d taken Mom and Dad on a couple of buses but never this particular line.) The bus let him off in the middle of Times Square—which I always found intimidating—and he somehow made it to the newspaper building.

No one gets into the Times without an employee card or a pass. There are two imposing guards at the front doors. Dad went up to one man and wrote a note saying he wanted a tour of the building. The guard wrote back that public tours were conducted on Fridays only. He’d have to come back.

Dad wrote that he was leaving New York the next day and that he worked at the Indianapolis Star-News and very much wanted to see the composing room. No. He’d have to come
back Friday. The guard busied himself with other people.

Signing the story to Mom and me, Dad stepped back and put his finger to his temple as if thinking, then he poked the air with it.

"I showed my union card," Dad signed, gesturing as if he were pulling out his wallet, "then I asked the guard if I could speak with the foreman of the local union. The guard telephoned him. The man came downstairs and took me all over and introduced me to other deaf boys. Very nice. Very interesting."

Dad then walked across town to Fifth Avenue, remembered that several years before I'd taken him on the number 5 bus, and came home.

The sixteen-hour drive back from New York to Indianapolis passed quickly. Mostly we talked. Every once in a while, when Dad noticed a peculiar town name on the interstate signs, I'd see him spelling the word in his hand, looking at his palm. Spelling "Wapakoneta" was his way of sounding out the pronunciation.

Two days after we got home, I asked Dad to take me to see the Indiana State School for the Deaf. He was surprised but pleased I'd asked him. Whenever Mom and Dad spoke of the school that had been their home for so many years, they talked of it fondly. Both of them were sad that the kids now were not as well behaved as they had been. But the place Mom and Dad talked about seemed to me to be in their dreams. The few times I'd been to the deaf school when I was growing up, it looked dreary and depressing.

Dad drove me over. He was president of the alumni association that year and he was going to see about arrangements for an upcoming picnic.

We went to the main office to get visitor passes. The secre-

tary didn't know how to sign and never bothered to get up from her desk so that she could write a note to Dad. She couldn't read Dad's slow, distinct finger spelling either. She mistook him for someone else and made the name tag with the wrong name. Usually Dad would have let the whole thing slide, but this time he was on his own turf. He wanted the visit to be perfect. He asked that the name tag be changed.

The large administration building, the one my aunt Cathel remembered as long and dark, with a dangerous oiled floor, had recently been renovated. Dad had helped raise funds for that and several other improvements. This was the first time I was seeing all the work he'd done, work he'd hardly ever mentioned at home. We ran into a few teachers who had been classmates of Dad's. They spoke fondly of the old days and told me again how much of a sport my dad was and how much they loved teasing him. Dad's high school math teacher, also a deaf man, saw us in the hall and motioned for Dad to come in and talk to the class about who he was and what he'd done.

Dad continued the tour. All over the campus, noble inscriptions had been carved over the portals: "Truth is Beauty." "Seek the truth and ye shall find it."

"This building will be torn down soon," Dad signed as we stood on the grass. It was the dormitory where he'd lived for nearly twelve years.

"That one too," he said, pointing to the building where Mom had lived.

It had been a bittersweet day for both of us, but I was pleased I'd come. For so long I'd been doing what I'd accused other people of doing—I was seeing the deafness, not the people.

Mark Twain once described growing up very succinctly: "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got
to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.” My father hadn’t started learning until I was twenty-one, and he didn’t learn much until I was thirty. I realized I was doing what every child must do. I was rediscovering my parents.