August 1983

Jan telephoned. I was sure she was calling to find out when I was arriving home in Indiana for her wedding the following week. I wish she had been.

A few days before, she'd called to say that Grandpa Wells was in the hospital with a spot on his lung. Grandpa had always been so healthy and uncomplaining that I was certain it was a doctor's scare to make him give up smoking. It was not. He had inoperable lung cancer.

I told Jan I would get home as quickly as possible.

I never saw my grandfather alive again. He died the night I flew to Indianapolis, never awakening from the coma he'd slipped into. It all happened so quickly. The next morning we drove to Greencastle and went straight to my grandmother's house. Except for a couple of stints in the hospital, my grandparents had never been apart in the fifty-six years they'd been married. They admitted to having fought plenty and they'd both learned over the years to contain impatient natures, but by the time I knew them, they'd either worn or smoothed each
other out. They took such pleasure in going out for breakfast each morning at The Point, a Greencastle diner where there was a crew of breakfast regulars. If they didn't go to The Point, they went fishing or mushroom hunting in the woods. They planned the rest of their lives around seeing the family. Their first great-grandchild was just three months old. "Oh, we're pretty happy," I'd hear my grandmother sigh from time to time. "We just take things as they come."

When I walked through her door that day, my grandmother burst into tears.

"He wanted it this way," she said. She was dressed in a simple navy suit she had made herself. Grandpa had helped her pick out the fabric.

"He wanted it quick." She'd been up most of the night, had bathed and dressed herself at 5 A.M. While we were waiting for the rest of the family to gather, she sat in Grandpa's favorite chair; I sat in hers. She picked at her handkerchief.

That day was filled with details: phone calls to friends and relatives who lived far away, arrangements for pallbearers, flowers, a minister. Mom and Dad were alert, watching everything. Jan and I took turns interpreting whatever it was an aunt or a cousin said. Grandma was too distraught even to attempt her semi-signing that day. Kay, who had recently married and moved to Lexington, Kentucky, was to arrive the following day. If Jan or I was called aside to do an errand, I'd see Mom out of the corner of my eye, looking around, wanting to give comfort and be comforted. She would go over and hold her mother's hand, gently patting her cheek. But then she sat down again, lost. My father put his arm around her.

That night I stayed after the others left. Later in the evening we sat in the spare living room, the curtains drawn, the air conditioner running full blast. I was chilled, but Grandma suffered terribly from the August heat.

She laid her head back on the rocker, her eyes closed. We sat listening to the air blowing. Then she leaned forward and pulled a dog-eared sign language book from the drawer in a table between the two easy chairs. It was hidden underneath the photo albums.

"I've always been disappointed that I didn't learn the sign language more," she said. "I tried, but it just didn't come naturally... See? I can do them to myself," and she proceeded to sign "apple," "cake," "rum," and other words from diagrams, paging through the book, finding signs she liked, trapping the page with her elbow while she did the gesture, her palms toward her face as if she were signing only to herself.

"How come you don't do this when Mom and Dad are here?" I asked.

"Oh, when I get around the kids, I just can't seem to remember. Your mother and dad go so fast. They wouldn't want to wait for me."

It was dizzying, entering that room at the funeral home, with green and white mausoleums on the wallpaper, rosy swirls in the carpet, and gold brocade on the chairs. I walked to the front, where Grandpa's polished oak casket was nestled in a profusion of yellow spider mums and orange gladiolus. My grandfather had loved fishing. Most of the baskets were adorned with miniature rods and reels. Mom stood next to me, her arms on mine. I could hardly look into the open casket.

Suddenly, my mother burst into sobs, soul-wrenching, piercing cries such as I'd never heard before in my life. She doubled over, her body trembling.

"Should we get a doctor? A sedative?" Grandma asked, scared, blinking. "What should we do?"

The funeral director rushed in. He was a thin man with an oversized black mustache. "Would she like some water? Some coffee?"
Jan and I led Mom to a chair. Her face was buried in her hands and she was shaking her head back and forth. “Can’t we do something?” Grandma asked.

“It’s all right,” I told her. “She’s okay.”

Grandma, hands clenched, not quite sure what to do, walked back over to my grandfather. Jan looked up at me. We both had our hands on Mom’s heaving back, trying to soothe her. “Grandma doesn’t know that Mom just can’t hear herself,” Jan whispered. “She hasn’t lived with her in a long time. Mom doesn’t know how loud she is.”

My mother had just lost her father. No relationship between parent and child is simple. And no matter how eloquent we are, grief cannot be translated into words. In her mind, the images of their lives were replaying, speeded up and slowed down. Every moment of their lives. The characteristic gestures and expressions. The things she’d depended upon seeing. She was in agony.

Later on that afternoon, Mom said she was worried about Grandma. “I wish we lived closer so I could see her more,” Mom signed. “I don’t want her to be lonely.”

Then Mom asked if she’d been too noisy, a sign made with the hand shaking at the ear.

“No, don’t worry about it,” Jan signed to her. “Please don’t. It was normal.”

Callers began arriving at the funeral home even before the appointed two o’clock visiting hour, and it was a very long six hours until the last of them left. Despite the fact that I had spent all those summers with Uncle Bill hanging around the funeral home, I’d never had to stand watch before. Jan and I took turns interpreting for Mom and Dad. Every once in a while we’d walk downstairs to a private lounge, to sit and rest our eyes and arms. Grandma never left the room the entire day, and sat down only once, for a few seconds in the chair next to Grandpa’s casket.

Mom knew most of the people from when she was a little girl growing up in Greencastle and Fillmore. One woman reminded Mom of how she used to play with her daughter, how she’d pull her little red wagon in front of their house every afternoon. Mom and Dad lip-read the people and looked over at Jan or me when there was something they missed in a sentence. Mom’s memory was extraordinary. Watching all those mouths was exhausting because some of the people talked nonstop, but she could honestly recall every name and incident.

At one point an obviously demented woman got hold of my mother, grabbing her hands, thrusting her face into Mom’s, talking a blue streak. Mom shot me a look that asked what the woman was saying. I interpreted, but Mom looked confused.

“She’s not making any sense,” I said. “Crazy,” I signed, my hand twisting an imaginary bolt back and forth at the side of my head as if a screw were loose.

Friends of Mom’s and Dad’s arrived in the early evening. “That was nice of their deaf friends to come,” Grandma said. “I’m glad they had someone to talk to.”

The next morning at the funeral, it was decided I would interpret. It seemed fair. I got home the least frequently and Jan and Kay had recently signed other difficult situations. Before the sermon began, I tried positioning myself so that my mother and father could see the preacher and the casket as well as look at me.

“She shouldn’t stand up,” my mother said to my father. “Everyone will stare.”

“But all these people know we’re deaf,” he signed patiently. “It’s the way it must be done. We need to be able to see.”
My mother calmed down. As I signed the service, I tried not
to think of the words on my hands. I didn't want to get emotional as I conveyed my grandfather's funeral sermon to my
mother and father.

Standing there, taking the invisible words from the air and
placing them for my mother and father to see, I searched my
mother's face for echoes of the face of the man lying in the box
a few feet behind me.

"Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. We come here to bury Che-
ster Cooper Wells." I signed "bury" with two open hands
lowering him straight down into the earth—but gently, gingen-
ly. I didn't want to hurt my mother any more than I had to.

I did the mental counting up all people must do at funerals. I
thought about my relatives who had died: H.T., Nellie May,
Aunt Margaret. I thought about the ones who were alive: my
parents, sisters, aunts and uncles, my grandmother, friends. I
could hear my Grandpa Wells's voice and his self-doubts. "I
don't know if I done right. I don't know if I done all I should,"
he'd say, sitting on the back step, resting his elbows on his
knees. He'd been cutting up an apple. I was little; I wasn't quite
sure I knew what he was talking about. Then he'd try to dis-
miss the heavy mood, offering me an apple section on the tip
of a pocketknife. What do you do about the past? He'd missed
so much of my mother's growing up, of her conversation, of
her. But he'd also cared for her and he'd tried to tell her that
once. Even though life got in the way.

I wanted him alive. For my mother. For my grandmother. I
wanted to get to know him better as an adult, even though if he
hadn't been my grandfather I doubt we would ever have been
friends. I doubt our lives would have crossed. Strangely, I was
most grateful for the past few years, the ones after the
Christmas of the missed connections. And most of those years
I'd spent angry at him and hurt by him—for his trying to tell
his daughter he loved her. And failing. I was relieved that

when he died I was no longer angry or hurt, that he'd lived
long enough for me to realize that people are not bad or good,
but that all things and all people are complicated layers of
good and bad and confused. I'd wanted to explain to him all I'd
learned about what deafness was and what it did. But as the
minister's words tried to establish a peace for my grandfather,
I made my own peace.

There was no use brooding about it any longer. I'd seen
plenty of families where there was more communication and
less love.

After the trip to the cemetery, we headed back to my grand-
mother's house. Neighbors kept stopping by with casseroles
and cakes.

"It was as if Grandpa planned it this way. He wouldn't want
to get in the way of Jan's wedding," Grandma said. "He
wouldn't want to upset anyone else's plans. No, he never
would."

Grandma was sitting in the backyard, holding the baby, her
great-grandchild. She looked down at him. "I've had some real
shocks in my life. Doris's being deaf. Grandpa's dying so
quick. My brother Lee, sister Pauline, brother Tim, dying so
young. All of them. Yes, I've really had some terrible shocks."

I was signing this to my mother. She didn't say anything. I
wished Grandma hadn't made Mom the first of the list.

"But I lived through them," she said, "and I'll live through
this, I suppose."

As we drove away, Grandma stood alone on the porch, wav-
ing.