I'm not quite sure when I decided they were spies. At one point or another, most children think they're adopted. I never saw it that way. I was convinced Mom and Dad had been sent to check up on me. At about the age of eight I wasn't politically savvy enough to think about who might have dispatched them to me—or why. But there was one thing I was sure of: Mom and Dad weren't really deaf. They were pretending not to hear so that they would know everything I was saying and denounce me for it.

The tests I devised were simple and fairly ingenious. One of my ploys was to go into another room and scream, "Mom! Help!" Nothing. Then I'd drop a book on the floor and hold my breath. Still nothing. I'd throw myself with a thud onto the carpet. Nobody came to check.

Other times I'd sit on the floor in the living room and watch them while they read the paper. I wanted to see if they would make a mistake. (Maybe they weren't as well trained as I'd been led to believe.) I'd sit for long periods watching the back of my mother's newspaper. When she brought the two sides together to turn the page, she'd catch me staring at her.
“What’s the matter?” she signed, her forehead wrinkled.
“Nothing.”
“Why are you looking at me?”
(The one thing that completely unhinged her was someone staring at her—at home, in a restaurant, anywhere.)
“Oh, sorry, Mom. I was just thinking,” I signed, index finger circling my brow.
She’d go back to her newspaper and peer around the corner a couple of times, not able to figure out what I was up to.
While they were sitting in their easy chairs in the living room, I’d put my hand over my mouth, lower my voice, and announce, “Doris, your shoe’s untied.” Not a flinch.
“Gale, Soviet troops have just crossed the border. Red alert!”
When those tricks didn’t work, I decided to tail them. I’d walk up the stairs behind Dad when he was going to his bedroom. Then, as he headed to the right, I’d make a wide circle behind him, maybe even diving under the bed so I could watch his ankles. He usually went to his bureau to get a handkerchief, and I knew it was useless to search there. I’d watch my mother put clothes into the dresser drawers hundreds of times.
Mom was harder to follow. Even if I ducked into a room, she’d catch my reflection in a hall mirror. Her sixth sense was keenly developed and she knew when someone was standing behind her. Usually she was amused by my game. But if I kept it up too long, she’d become exasperated.
“What are you doing? Go play. Go outside.” And she’d gesture toward the front door.
One night before I went to bed, I fixed the phone cord just so. The next morning it was in exactly the place I’d left it. And the next. And the next.
Years later as an adult, during an afternoon of reminiscing, I embarrassedly confessed my delusions to Kay and Jan, only to find out that they, too, had both been convinced Mom and Dad were spies. Each of us, in our turn, had concocted nearly identical tests for our parents.

Although signing is not a pantomime of daily action, there are signs that are parodies of actual objects and that retain a cleverness even for deaf people. Indeed, these signs are to sight what onomatopoeia is to sound.
“Watermelon” is an example. You thump the back of one hand as if you’re testing the ripeness of a melon. For “banana,” you peel your index finger. “Monkey,” you hunch over while scratching your sides. For “ice cream,” you pretend to lick a cone. “Spaghetti,” your little fingers wind around each other, then you draw them apart, still circling, an imitation of the long, thin, slippery strands. In “elephant,” your flat hand starts at your nose and then snakcs out in the shape of the trunk. For “onion,” you put the knuckle of your index finger at the corner of your eye as if you were wiping away a tear. With “turtle,” one hand—the shell—covers the other, and the thumb peeks out and bobs up and down as if it were the turtle’s head.

One day Mom went up to Jan and signed without moving her lips: “Do you want some…” and then she did a little rumba step and shook an imaginary round object at each side of her head.
“What’s that?” Jan asked.
Mom did the rumba again.
“Coconut.”
“Why is that coconut?”
“Feeling the milk inside,” Mom said, but this time she signed “milk,” something we usually spelled out.
“What’s that?” Jan asked.
Mom repeated the sign for “milk,” a sign made as if she were actually pulling the teats of a cow, milking.
“Gross!” Jan said.
Listening

It was Mom’s turn. “G-r-o-s-s. What’s that?”
Jan made a face. “Yuck.”
Mom returned the face. “That’s nature.”

Kay and I had been sitting on the sofa watching this amusing exchange.

“You know,” Kay whispered to me, “Jan’s a great kid.”
“Yeah, I know what you mean,” I answered. “She’s really normal.”

Both of us were seriously engaged in a discussion of Jan’s attributes, of how well she got along with everyone. I’d once read that each child is born into a different family. Jan certainly was—one where there was more talking going on around her.

Jan’s was an ease both Kay and I longed for—especially Kay, who was so deeply cautious and whose shyness made her especially uncomfortable around outsiders. She was a middle child, and my role, as not only eldest but also interpreter and dealer with the rest of the world, made us very close. I was the one Kay asked questions of when we were growing up because I was the one who had the most contacts with the world. Kay and I played together most of the time, but in addition to being the explainer, I was also quite protective, and that must have been hard on Kay. I enjoyed playing teacher, helping her with her schoolwork, but then when Kay wanted to feel protective and grown up, she turned to Jan. And Jan was too independent for that. There’s still a dent in the closet door of the room they shared. “Stop being so bossy!” Jan had yelled as she hurled a shoe across the room at Kay, who ducked just in time.

Jan was not only the youngest but also quite petite, and Kay in particular was fond of a photo of Jan sitting on our front porch, wearing a red dress and plaid jumper. Jan has one finger at her chin, just under the dimple, smiling at the camera. Her straight-across, blunt-cut bangs are a little ruffled from sleeping on them funny.

Spies

As young as she was, Kay could recognize that Jan was right in her estimate that her two older sisters worried too much, that we were too serious, too wrapped up in grades. Periodically, we would have that same discussion over the years. “You know,” Kay said, “Jan’s got common sense. She’s cut out for the long run.”

My ritual every night as a girl was to stare up at the patterns the curtains made on the walls, the moonlight reflecting through the tiny holes in the eyelet lace. The yellow-gray figures danced on my walls as clouds passed over the face of the moon or as the breeze rustled the trees. As I lay in bed waiting for sleep to come, I’d listen to the noises outside. That was what pure hearing was: straining to detect a rustle, a distant motor, a siren. Back then I used to wonder if Mom and Dad had ever tried reaching out and grabbing noises that way. Or whether it was for them the same sensation I felt after the katydids stopped their scratching; absolute silence. And when the katydids remained quiet for too long, I’d move my head against the pillow or brush the sleeve of my pajamas along the sheet—just to hear something.

Once asleep I was as good as dead, except for those times a crash awakened me. I’d scramble to the sill and lift the shade to peek out. It was always the same source, the widow next door, Mrs. Haymaker, slamming her windows against the evening chill. I’d lie back in bed, tucking the sheets around me, folding my arms across my chest, determined to sleep. Only I was really listening and watching.

One night, though, the summer I was eight, I’d gone to sleep, been awakened by Mrs. Haymaker’s window slamming shut, and was just drifting off again when I heard scuffling noises next to my room. It sounded as if someone were knocking on the house, on the wall right next to my bed. I sat bolt upright and listened. I was sure I heard a man’s voice. He said a
couple of sentences, but I couldn’t make out the words. I waited a long time, poised in the dark. The noises didn’t go away, and I was too afraid to open the shade and look out. Every muscle in my neck was strained as I tried to hear what he was saying and what he was doing by my house. I lowered myself out of bed to the floor, careful not to let whoever it was see my shadow, then I crawled to the door and rushed upstairs to wake Dad.

Lightly I put my hand on his shoulder; I didn’t want to startle him. He didn’t move. I tapped him. He still didn’t budge. I tugged on his arm until he finally woke up. It was too dark for him to see what I was saying. He squinted at my hands, then touched my hip to move me over to the moonlight coming through his window.

“Man outside my room,” I signed. I pointed in the direction of my bedroom. “I heard a man.”

Dad threw on his robe, found his glasses, then grabbed the flashlight he kept in a drawer. I was following close behind as he lumbered down the hall, so sleepy he ran his hand along the wall to keep his balance. He went through the living room and peered out the front door. He flipped on the yellow porch light and walked out to the front yard as I stood behind the screen door. He looked eerie in the glow of that light, heading around the side of the house while I crept out to the edge of the front porch. As he walked along the corridor of grass between our house and Mrs. Haymaker’s, I ran to the corner and peered around. He’d been swallowed up by the dark. It was the middle of July. I was barefoot and shivering.

Eternity passes when you’re waiting in the dark, listening for violence. Dad must have gone through the entire backyard step by step.

When he came back, relief flooded through me. I’d felt so vulnerable, standing alone in the front yard, no cars passing, no lights on in the neighbors’ windows.

“Nothing. Sorry.” Only my father would apologize when someone roused him in the middle of the night for nothing. He patted my shoulder and we both went back to bed.

I heard the scuffing noise several more times that summer and the one after and the one after that. I’d wait for a long time, listening to the noise, trying to make sure that something was really there. A few times I didn’t make Dad get up. The other times, the scenario was always the same: Dad went out, me trailing behind, looking, listening, shaking. He’d search the whole yard, then walk to the end of the driveway, flashing the small beam up and down the street.

He never once refused to go out, nor did he ever tell me I was making it up, but after I’d awakened him several times that third summer, I decided it must all be in my head. I vowed not to bother him again.

It was the end of that summer and I was in bed having an open-eyed fantasy, watching a crack slither around on my ceiling, feeling all the different ways I could swallow, when I heard the scuffing again. I didn’t go get Dad. I heard the man’s voice quite distinctly that night, but I tried to convince myself I was imagining it. I couldn’t face the embarrassment of having Dad troop out and find nothing all over again, and I hated sending him out defenseless in the dark. I figured all I had to do was talk myself out of it. I waited awhile, tense, alert, even though I didn’t know what I would do if my imagination actually cut through my screen window and came into my bedroom. I waited awhile longer and the noise stopped.

And then I heard a shotgun blast.

I tore out of bed and ran upstairs, this time waking both Mom and Dad. The three of us rushed to the backyard and there was Mrs. Simon, our neighbor, holding a real, live smoking gun, shaking it in the direction of a mustard-yellow house down the street. In the commotion, the whole neighborhood rushed outside. At first I couldn’t figure out what
was going on. Finally, Mrs. Simon grabbed the cigarette from her lower lip, pushed the strands of coarse hair away from her bony cheeks. With the smoldering cigarette held between her fingers, she pointed at me.

“Next time I’m goin’ to shoot him. No warning. I’m goin’ to shoot him.”

I signed it all to Mom and Dad. We were perplexed.

“What is it?” Dad asked me.

“I don’t know. I can’t understand,” I signed back to him.

“Who are you going to shoot, Mrs. Simon?”

“He was pretending like he was walking that big dog of his, but I know what he was really doing. Snoopin’ around, nosin’ around other people’s property, looking in windows.”

“Who?” I practically begged her.

“Hessel, the one who lives over there in that house with the brown shutters, the one with the dog he calls Hessie.”

Mr. Hessel, who stood well over six feet tall and must have weighed at least 250 pounds, kept a beautifully groomed Saint Bernard. It was true that whenever he walked the dog, this enormous man acted as if the dog were walking him. Hessie was the perfect unwitting accomplice: He was so well behaved, he never barked when the two of them were walking among the houses.

I didn’t think Mrs. Simon was much saner than Mr. Hessel. It was unsettling knowing there were guns and Peeping Toms about, but still I was relieved. I no longer had to mistrust my hearing. If anything, it was too acute.

My father’s determination is a funny thing. He never announces resolutions or gets frustrated, the way most people do. There’s no bragadocio to him. Whenever I went to him with a broken toy, he would take it in his strong, handsome hands, the hands he washed so thoroughly each day to get off all the printer’s ink, then study the toy carefully before doing anything to it. He’d nod, carry the toy to his workbench, and no matter how long it took, he kept at it until he finished the job.

When I told him my desk chair was wobbly, he came into my room, looked it over, tipped it up, then stood back and rubbed his chin. As the solution came to him, he’d point in the air, and sign, “Yes, I can do,” and he’d get his tools. Sometimes I thought I had a better idea about something and I’d tap him impatiently on the shoulder. He’d turn to look at what I had to say and nod. If he could use the idea, he would. If his own method made more sense, he’d tell me to watch a little longer. If I interrupted him too often (or tapped his shoulder so hard it hurt), he’d say “Wait!” aloud. He was a master craftsman because he had spent so much time watching others, and because he was a patient worker. Occasionally I helped him as he repaired the car, listening for him until the motor hummed just right. But for the most part, he knew exactly what to do with an engine by using his eyes, his reason, and by being determined to complete the job. Yet no matter how determined he or my mother was, and despite the fact that they are terribly bright, there was one thing that eluded them: English. I was about eight the first time Mr. Hessel came to my window and it was the year I began feeling very adult. Mom and Dad started asking me to correct their letters.

Writing was hard for them, even harder than reading. In writing, you can’t gloss over things the way you can in reading. A conservative survey once showed that the average deaf high school graduate has a third-grade reading ability. Writing is more difficult to judge. I only know that each time Mom and Dad had to fill out forms, they read slowly and carefully so as not to make any embarrassing mistakes. If I was there, they’d tap me on the shoulder and ask what a word meant. My start-
ing school, of course, forced them to face dozens of forms and I could tell Mom despaired whenever she had to confront the papers with medical histories, family background, or "In Case of Emergency" written at the top. If a line said "previous domicile," Mom would turn to me and say, "What's that?"

"Where you lived before," I'd sign.

"Should I put Montpelier?" she'd ask, her face turned up almost girlishly as I stood beside her at the table. She was so afraid of making a mistake.

"Yes, Mom."

She'd finish that one and turn to the blue paper. "What do you think I should write for 'Emergencies'?" We didn't have a phone then, and even if we had, she couldn't have answered it. Mom sent me over to Mrs. Miller's house across the street to ask if it was all right to put her phone as our school emergency number. From then on, I wrote the Millers' number and my uncle Bill's number in Montpelier, just in case, and it was Uncle Bill's number that I carried with me in my wallet, even though he lived a good two hours' drive away.

Letter-writing held the greatest challenge for Mom. I watched her struggle with that first letter she was going to ask me to correct. She approached it as if it were a formal composition, taking out a large, clean piece of paper and a blue-ink pen, and sitting down at the kitchen table. She smoothed the paper, twisted the pen in her fingers, and licked her lips, all in preparation. Finally, she wrote the date and the greeting, and as she continued with the letter, she'd occasionally stop, pen poised over the line, reading and rereading what she'd written. When she finished, she added her name to the rough draft. Then she handed it to me. "Will you fix it? Make it sound better," she signed. For "sound" she pointed to her ear.

There were a few cross-outs in the simple sentences she'd written. Over the years, I could visualize where she'd learned the constructions she used. Some were from her school-day grammar books. The books had always shown the infinitive form—"to play," "to work"—and when Mom used verbs in her letters, she often included the "to" when it wasn't necessary; for example, "We enjoyed to call her."

Other constructions came from sign language syntax. She would have an adjective following a noun rather than preceding it—"dress red" rather than "red dress." Much of my work was to make the letter conform to the receiver's expectations. I would add more formality to a business letter or untiffen a personal note.

After I made my copyediting marks and handed it back to her, she'd thank me, her open hand pressed to her mouth, then courteously she would arch the hand toward me.

"No problem," I told her. I'd watch her take the sheet and read it over, pinching her lower lip between her fingers in deep concentration. She didn't just want to copy it over; she wanted to learn from the exercise.

Dad and I went through the same routine. And later Kay and Jan began correcting letters as well. In fact, even if Mom and Dad were sending a letter to me they'd have one of my sisters correct it, and it became a game trying to figure out whether Kay or Jan had worked on a particular letter.

Mom and Dad's sentences sounded as if a foreigner had written them, as if English weren't their native tongue at all—and of course, it wasn't really. Still, I was to find out later that their writing was far superior to most done by deaf adults—even deaf college graduates.

Back then, a proud and self-conscious third grader correcting her parents' letters, I was filled with a mixture of pleasure and embarrassment—pleasure because I was useful to my parents, embarrassment because they couldn't do what I thought all other parents did with ease.

One morning that year, after I'd been sick, Mom tried to write an excuse note for me. She'd been rushing around the
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house, making the breakfast and beds, helping everyone get ready for the day, tending to Jan, who was a baby then. She sat down at the table but kept crossing out the words on her paper.

"Here, you think it up," she said in sign, and handed me the pen. I wrote it and she then copied what I had written. It was amusing in a way to think that I was writing my own excuse notes while other kids were forging theirs.

Every day after I left for school, Mom would lock the doors around the house—a wise procedure since she wouldn't hear if an intruder entered—and every day just before I came home from grade school at 3 p.m., she'd unlock the front door. Actually, I wasn't even aware that this was her habit until the one and only time she forgot. That day Id gotten off the bus at the corner and run home because I was desperate to go to the bathroom. The door was locked when I arrived. Standing on tiptoe on the front porch and leaning way over toward the window, I could see Mom's back as she mixed a cake in the kitchen. She was intent on the cookbook and the cake. I banged on the door, on the window, I waved my arms wildly, hoping to make a shadow. She didn't look up. I ran around to the backyard. The dog was barking like crazy as I pounded on the doors, looking for a window that might be open, but it was winter and everything was shut tight. I kept running around the house, trying to get in. After what seemed like an eternity, Mom glanced at the clock, started, and ran to the door to open it. I rushed past her. Immediately she knew what the matter was. She came running behind to help. It was too late. I was wearing French-blue tights, my very first pair. Standing outside in the cold, pounding on the door, I was angry at Mom for having forgotten me, furious that I could see her but couldn't get her attention. I was ready to complain bitterly. Then I looked up at her woebegone face. I saw that she felt worse than I did.

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Spites

* * *

If Kay or Jan or I had been willer, we could have presided over anarchic terror. But it wasn't that way at all. There was an orderliness, a gentleness to our lives. Mom and Dad maintained the internal rhythms they had developed at school. We ate meals at a fixed time—dinner was at five-thirty, except when Dad was working the night shift, and then, even though it was four o'clock, we all ate together. Friday nights we ate out. Saturday morning was for laundry. Once a month, on a Sunday, we drove to visit my grandparents in Greencastle.

Although my sisters and I still had our suspicions about our parents and their abilities as secret agents (we hadn't yet caught them red-handed), Mom and Dad's parental control was simple and direct. Mom says we required very little discipline, and there were never any double messages from our parents. If Mom discovered one of us marking in a book or coming home late from school, she'd say, "I don't like that. Nice girls don't act that way." If Dad was really provoked, he'd give a swift flick with his thumb and middle finger to the side of our heads. "Not nice," he'd say. And we were chastened. Above all, we wanted to be nice. That's what the aunts and uncles and grandparents and school teachers told us to be. Kay and Jan and I tried to call as little attention to ourselves as possible. We wriggled when we were under the spotlight. Public attention seemed a terrible thing. It was like being stared at in a restaurant.

There is a subtle tyranny in being nice, in worrying about what other people think, in being concerned about how everything you do is perceived, in feeling that you're constantly scrutinized. That tyranny is what makes schoolboys have bloody fights in their Sunday best. It's what makes little girls into tattletales.

Mom and Dad were instinctive parents, parents who imparted a strong sense of right and wrong. They were easy to
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live with and we wanted to be nice with them. But the outside world was confusing. We wanted to be nice and not attract attention, but we were also desperate to make Mom and Dad proud of us and we needed to be proud of ourselves. Kay, Jan, and I worked hard on Science Fair and art class projects. We won essay contests and spelling bees and music awards.

It was fourth grade with its flickerings of puberty that proved to be troublesome—because of and despite the fact that I was such a good girl. People expect us to act in certain ways and it’s the surprise that disturbs them. When the class bully behaves for an afternoon, the teacher is suspicious. When a docile child acts up, the teacher overresponds. I used to sit at my school desk, back straight, hands folded, paying strict attention to whatever it was the teacher wanted. I tried to keep all the teacher’s admonishments in mind: I didn’t talk; I kept my hands to myself; I did what I was told. I used to sit next to the class clown. One day I failed a pop quiz. Stung with humiliation, which was bad enough, but then the boy teased me about it. At first I ignored him. But he kept it up until finally I couldn’t stand it anymore. I pinched him. He howled and told the teacher what I’d done.

“What’s the matter with you?” she barked. “You can behave better than that! Now stop it and be a nice girl.”

Mrs. Wamsley was the most hated and feared teacher in all Moorhead Elementary School. Her left leg was nearly a foot shorter than the right and she had a large, squarish body which she dragged slowly through the halls. Keeping up with thirty wriggling ten-year-olds every day must have been painful for her. She always seemed physically relieved whenever we were all quiet in our seats and she could get a few seconds’ rest. She’d stand at one side of her desk, hand holding the edge, as her left leg and black platform shoe dangled in the air.

She made lots of rules. If you ate a school lunch, she wouldn’t allow you to turn in your tray until you’d taken three large bites, even of the soggiest green beans. If she was mad at one kid, she might keep the entire class in from recess, heads on our desks, as punishment—though school rules expressly forbade that. Oddly enough, I always felt sorry for her, but I was mortified when one of the other kids accused me of being Mrs. Wamsley’s “pet.”

Mrs. Wamsley’s most oppressive rule banned talking except when we were reciting. To circumvent the rule, we tried note passing—entire notebook pages, covered with writing, were specially folded into two-inch squares, with a triangle folded over the top.

In the row next to mine sat an enterprising girl, Vicki Terrell. When she discovered I knew signing, she thought she had a perfect way to get around the no-talking rule.

“TEACH ME THE ALPHABET IN DEAF-MUTE LANGUAGE,” Vicki wrote me.

I read the note, glanced up to see if Mrs. Wamsley was watching, then shook my head “no” at Vicki.

“Come on,” she hissed. “It will be fun.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Don’t be a baby. Teach me at recess. What could it hurt?”

I couldn’t articulate it then, but I would realize later that what she hurt was my sense of privacy. Never once have I failed to feel a pang when asked to show some signs. It seems like too public a display. Somehow it trivialized us, me and my family, making the way we talked into a party game.

Despite my lame arguments, Vicki shamed me into teaching her. (That was one of the things about deafness. It made us compliant, unable to resist authority.) Vicki had broad, flat fingers that gave her trouble, but by that afternoon every girl in the classroom knew the alphabet forward and backward. Secrets got passed for an entire week. I’d occasionally correct a girl if she couldn’t remember how to make an x, but I rarely signed myself. Mostly I’d nod if someone signed to me. By

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Monday some of the boys had caught on. Security became lax.

"Pam! What are you doing?"

"Stop that this instant! What was that?"

There were some embarrassed coughs in the room as Pam straightened up in her seat and tucked her delicate white hands under the metal desk.

I could only be grateful that I hadn't been singled out, but I felt bad for Pam. Somehow it was my fault she'd got in trouble.

That year Moorhead School was making a big parent-relations push.

"The teacher says you can come visit my class," I told my mother one night. I handed her a mimeographed form. In a way I didn't want to ask Mom. It seemed too public, too uncomfortable, but the teacher had made such a big deal about the whole thing that I thought I had to.

"You mean spend the day at school?" she asked.

"Yes. Don't you want to?"

"Well, I don't know what I'd do. I can't hear ... ."

"That's okay. Don't you just want to come and watch?"

Against her better judgment, Mom was talked into it. She found a baby-sitter for Jan and came for a morning. She looked so pretty, dressed up in a light-green suit and high heels. And as soon as she arrived, I knew it had been a mistake. She was the only parent who came. The teacher seemed to act as if it were an imposition having Mom there. She did little to welcome her except shove a chair at her and point toward a spot.

Mom sat and watched kids writing on work sheets and raising their hands to ask questions. I could hardly look at her. I didn't interpret for her at all. Every once in a while a kid would turn around and stare at her, then at me.

Lunch was worse. Mom stood in line with me—she wasn't even accorded the privilege of most guests, going first and sit-

ting at the head of the table with the teacher. By the time we got to the twelve-foot-long tables and benches, the only two spaces left were smack in the center. It was fine for little girls in loose dresses to hoist a leg over the bench. It was completely impossible for Mom, wearing a straight skirt and heels. I watched her place her tray down and totter, trying to climb over.

"Should I ask someone on the end to move?" I signed in the middle of her maneuver. All eyes were on us.

"No, it's fine," she signed, taking a steadying hand away from the table. "Don't worry."

She left after lunch. Mrs. Wamsley walked with Mom and me to the door and into the hall.

"I wanted to tell you what a fine young lady Lou Ann is," she said to Mom. I was completely taken aback by her compliment, and writhing because I had to sign that kind of thing.

"I'm pleased to have her in my class."

"Thank you," Mom managed aloud, then she gestured toward me, nodded, and flashed her most beaming smile, conveying to Mrs. Wamsley that she was proud of me.

By example Mom was trying to show me that it didn't matter that she was stuck in the back of the room. That the family was what was important. But to me, it mattered.

The big excitement of the year was getting a telephone. It was an ivory-colored wall model, hung up in the hall next to the kitchen. I was thrilled. I felt about it the way the other girls in my class felt when they got their first pair of stockings. To me, having a telephone in our house meant real sophistication. Installation and monthly bills were expenses Mom and Dad wanted to avoid, but it had become too inconvenient to drive all the way to the dentist's or the doctor's office just to make an appointment. I was delighted every time I got to make one of
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those calls, and relieved when I no longer had to explain to
teachers and other kids why it was we didn’t have a phone.

I knew immediately when the caller was a telephone sales-
person. If anyone asked to speak to “Mr. or Mrs. Walker” or
“your mom and dad,” that person didn’t know my family.

One summer morning when I answered the phone a voice
said: “Is this Gale’s daughter? Is this Lou Ann?” I couldn’t rec-
ognize the man’s voice. He was speaking in a hoarse whisper.
There was the sound of heavy machinery in the background.
The man began using words I’d never heard before, and the
first few sentences caught me off guard. How it is we know
sexual words we’ve never heard before is a mystery. The man
on the phone was explicit and vulgar. I held the receiver tight.
I didn’t quite know what to do. And then I hung up and walked
slowly back outside. Daddy was on the front lawn watering
some plants.

“Telephone?” He signed with his thumb and little finger
held to his ear and mouth as if his hand were a receiver.

“Yes.”

“Who was it?”

“Wrong number.”

But I was too quiet. He knew something else was wrong. I
kept thinking it had to have been a man who worked with Dad
and who knew him; the machinery sounded like the presses at
the Star-News. I was scared the man would come get me and do
what he’d said on the phone. A couple more times that day
Dad questioned me about the phone call.

“No. It was a wrong number.”

At first I felt guilty for keeping the secret from my father.
Later I came to resent the man who had known for sure that
the only one in our house who could answer the phone was a
ten-year-old girl.

I got one more obscene call from him—or at least the begin-
ing of one. Someone must have walked in on him, because he

hung up in the middle of the first sentence, just after he’d
asked for me by name.

At school kids used to grumble about having to practice the
piano. It was something they all seemed to have in common. I
longed to be like the rest, complaining about études and scales.

“Mom, every kid has to learn to play the piano. Your sister
Peggy plays. So does Grandma.” I told her we needed music;
we didn’t have a radio or stereo.

My logic was irrefutable. A couple of months later, after
great trouble and expense, a piano was delivered. It was a
plain, refinished upright. The problem was, it was painted
brown, not stained. The moment I saw it, I knew I’d never
learn to play. I’d been envisioning a black baby grand.

The deliverymen put the upright in place and I sat down and
began picking out a couple of tunes. Someone had given me a
Teach-yourself piano book and a few basic learner’s guides and
I hit the keys for “Merrily We Roll Along.” Mom stood next to
the piano, delighted. She kept moving her hand along the
back, the front, the sides, everywhere she could, trying to find
the best spot for feeling the vibrations during my one-note-at-
a-time masterworks.

Ironically, after the expense of the piano, we couldn’t afford
lessons. For months I struggled, trying to teach myself a few
songs. But I had so little natural ability that I never got very far.

And so the piano just sat there. Once in a while I would hear
someone play a glissando passage, going through the whole set
of keys. I’d rush to the living room, wondering who was there,
only to find it had been Mom, dusting.

After several years I came home one day to find the furni-
ture had been rearranged in the living room.

“Mom, what happened to the piano?”

“Sold it to some people. We put an ad in the newspaper.
They had a daughter who wanted to learn how to play.”
"But you didn’t even tell me you were going to do that." I slapped the index-finger sign for “tell” from my mouth to my chest. I had no right to be so angry, but I was.

"No one plays it." There was no reprimand in her signing—she was just stating the facts.

Later, I took up the violin. I showed a little promise the first year, although the school orchestra leader became increasingly doubtful that the reason for my shortcomings as a stringed-instrument player was my inability to see the music stand. The stand came ever closer to the end of the violin—to the chagrin of my stand partner—until I was fitted with white, harlequin glasses. My playing, curiously enough, did not improve. I was reduced to years of violin mediocrity. The only good thing about it was that my parents never knew how bad I was.

Once a year the school orchestra held a concert. For weeks in advance, the teachers exhorted all the students to bring their parents and friends. At first I didn’t want to ask Mom and Dad, but after the orchestra leader put on more pressure, I told them about the concert.

Dad fell asleep during the first selection. I could see him out of the corner of my eye. Not only was I mortified because his head was drooping to his chest, but I was scared to death he’d start snoring and Mom wouldn’t know to stop him. Mom elbowed him awake twice and then gave up until the end of the first selection. A split second after she saw everyone else applauding, Mom hurriedly tapped Dad’s arm so he could clap too.

At the end of the concert, Mom and Dad told me what a good job I’d done.

"I liked watching all the bows go back and forth together," Mom signed, mimicking a violinist drawing a bow. (Fortunately, even when I couldn’t figure out which notes to play or where we were in the score, I was certain to keep my bow going in unison with everyone else’s.)
awesome adult roles. Instead of running away, we hid. (I have heard that a number of children who have deaf parents do precisely the same thing.)

Jan did it the most. Once, when she was about six, Mom, Kay, and I had searched the entire house, calling her name, looking in every closet and under every bed. She was nowhere to be found.

"Zhanli!" I whirled around. It was Kay doing a perfect imitation of my mother's voice. She was trying to trick Jan Lee. We looked at each other, both amazed at the reproduction of that eerie sound.

Mom panicked. But then she checked the closet and saw that Jan's coat was there. Jan had too much common sense to leave without it. Kay finally found Jan curled up beneath the headboard of my parents' bed, tucked so carefully that we hadn't seen her the first several times we'd searched there. Jan thought it was great sport.

Although I never realized it was happening, Mom and Dad made periodic rounds to be certain we were all right. They needed the reassurance because they couldn't hear what it was we were up to, and we couldn't call out if we were hurt.

My favorite escape hideaway was the back of our faded red Volkswagen Beetle. I would curl up fetus-like, devouring a book. I went through all of Sherlock Holmes in that tiny compartment. Cramped up there on a hot, sticky August day, I'd be transported to cool, foggy London.

I was in the middle of The Hound of the Baskervilles when I heard heavy footsteps walking past. (Many deaf people have a heavy tread because they can't hear the loudness of their walk. Some, like Mom, also have balance problems.) This time it was Dad. He called for me a couple of times; perversely, I decided not to reveal myself. I listened to him walk down to the end of the driveway and I knew he was searching up and down the street for me. As he came back up the drive, I scrunched down so that I wouldn't be seen. He walked around to the backyard, again calling for me. Dad didn't like to do much yelling; he worried about disturbing the neighbors and, because it didn't get much practice, his voice didn't hold out for long. By this point the crook of my knees was sweaty and my right arm had gone to sleep; I wasn't reading anymore.

He came back, walked into the house and in a few minutes came back out, walked down the drive, and this time when he called, there was anger in his voice. Finally, tiring of the game, I climbed over the back seat and out of the car. Dad was still looking up and down the street when I came up behind him and touched his shoulder. He wheeled around, pointed at me, an angry look on his face, and signed "Where?" both his hands out, palms up, moving slightly from side to side. I took him over and showed him the little space in the car where I'd crouched. The anger melted into amusement over my choice of location, but he added, "Next time don't make me look so long."

Just as the three of us had our physical spaces to escape to, so did Mom and Dad. I used to think of it as summer nights & never-never land.

On hot, sticky nights, after dinner, Mom and Dad would go back to the patio. Mom would light a couple of short candles scented to keep the mosquitoes away. As a kid I never had the patience to go out with them. There didn't seem to be anything happening. They'd sit in lawn chairs in the dark, one on each side of a small patio table, the orange candle burning in between but barely giving off light. When I went out to look at them, all I'd see was the glow of Mom's cigarette. If I stood there awhile, I'd be able to make out their forms, Mom with her legs curled up on the chair, Dad leaning back, hands folded in his lap. They'd each be staring out into space. All day long
they strained their eyes, using them for watching signs, staying alert to everything, and at night they needed to rest them. This was their idea of peace: the quiet in front of their eyes.

Though it was dark, I knew what Mom's face looked like. Saturday afternoons, having done all her chores, she'd sit at the dining table, and there I could see her staring off into space. The only way to reach her was to tap on her shoulder. Sometimes I'd have to tap two or three times before she'd shake her head and return to me. If Kay or Jan or I told her something during one of those trances, she'd nod her head, but we knew we weren't getting through to her. Her mind was somewhere else.

Before retiring to the back porch, Mom and Dad might take a walk around the neighborhood. Once in a while they'd go for a bike ride before dusk. Mom's sense of balance had been slightly impaired by the meningitis, so she'd take my fat-tired Columbia. She didn't feel at ease on a bike, and although Dad put a rearview mirror on it for her, she worried about not hearing cars coming up behind her. Evening rides in the car, though, were something she looked forward to with girlish delight.

I remember being bored by drives, but Mom found them exciting. There was so much to see, she'd tell me. I preferred being home with a book. Her enthusiasm at Christmas was overwhelming. She wanted to look at the decorations on every house in every neighborhood in Indianapolis, and she never tired of driving to Monument Circle to see what the city billed as "the world's largest Christmas tree"—never mind that it was a cement spindle with lights attached from base to top.

At other times of the year, Mom would look at houses along the way to get ideas of how to improve her own home, what flowers to plant, where to put an awning or shutters. Even though we couldn't afford most of the home improvements, she loved looking and planning and dreaming. She took everything in. She could spot minor changes in a split second, and she often, excitedly, turned to me in the back seat, pointing something out so that I would be sure and see it.

On summer nights after the drive, when Mom and Dad were seated on the patio, I'd go out to ask them something. I'd stand in front of Mom and start signing. She'd take my wrists between her hands and move them into the candlelight. I remember the orange glow on her cheeks as she cocked her head, trying to see what I was saying. I'd run through it once and she'd squeeze up her face and shake her head "no," and move my hands closer to the flame. I'd try again. If she still couldn't see, she would move her hand as if flicking a light switch—the sign telling me to go turn on the back-porch light. I'd run in and flick on the yellow lamp, yellow so as not to attract moths. It cast an eerie pall over everything, so I'd hurriedly tell Mom whatever it was I had to say, then rush to turn the light off again and run back inside, leaving them to their dreams.