While other kids were going through adolescent rebellion, slamming doors, screaming at parents who didn't understand them, breaking all the rules, I was strangely silent.

In the late sixties and early seventies, the rest of the country was agitated. My neighborhood was as quiet and conservative as ever. The people who lived there had jobs at auto industry plants or at Western Electric. They worked hard. It was repetitive labor, but the hours were regular and their evenings were free for mowing the lawn and barbecuing hot dogs in the backyard, with the kids and dogs jumping around. The main excitement was "Hoosier Hysteria"—basketball—or preparations for the 500-Mile Race each May. That was it. People took a dim view if they thought you were unusual or you did unusual things. My meekness had one virtue: It kept me out of arguments.

I wanted to fit in. I was dying to fit in. I dressed carefully, I behaved carefully. And I wanted to do everything in my power to make Mom and Dad fit in too.

A banker whose children I baby-sat, a former neighbor of ours, was a member of the Masons. So were H.T. and Uncle Bill. When I asked the banker about the fraternal order, he told
me there were secret rituals, that members had sworn not to divulge what went on, but he assured me it was a worthy cause.

I didn’t understand what the Masons were, but I decided that if my relatives and this man were members, and they were all so successful and well liked, then my father should certainly join too. I don’t know what I expected from it all for Dad, but somehow, mysteriously, it would help.

“But I won’t be able to hear what’s going on,” Dad signed to me, truthfully. “I won’t know what they’re saying.”

“No, you’ll figure it out. They’ll tell you,” I urged.

“It’s expensive.” (Initiation fees and first-year membership were about five hundred dollars then.) “We need money for the family first,” he told me.

“It’s only that much in the beginning. Later on it’s cheaper.”

“You know I’m very busy already with meetings and other things.”

“Yes, but Dad, this is important.”

Dad got the application from the banker, and one day we drove to Montpelier to ask Uncle Bill for H.T.’s old lodge number and to get Bill to sign as a reference. When Dad handed him the form, Bill hesitated for a few seconds. I should have figured out what was wrong then, but I didn’t. I assumed he was troubled because teenage girls weren’t supposed to be involved in the application process, or something of that sort.

“Ah, well, yes, let’s get this filled out,” Bill said, frowning, searching through old files for the information.

Dad mailed the form. Several months went by without him mentioning a word about the application.

“Dad, what happened to the Masons? Haven’t you heard from them?”

“Turned down.” He used a “thumbs down” gesture.

I looked at him, stunned. “But why?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I’m deaf.”

He’d gotten the letter of refusal many weeks before, but had decided not to mention it.

My father’s submitting that application had been a completely unselfish act. He had no desire to join a secret society. He didn’t even know anyone who belonged to the local lodge. But Dad had always gone to tremendous lengths to please my sisters and me, the reasons for his selflessness bound up more in his gentle, courtly nature than in our complicated interdependence. True, I was willingly his interpreter, and he and Mom had to rely on me for so much. But they wanted to please us. We asked for very little. And they would do anything they could to give us the most normal childhoods possible. If it meant something as minor as joining a club, he would join.

As his thumb turned downward, I felt the blood rush to my face. I’d talked him into doing something he hadn’t really wanted to do, something that wouldn’t even have done him any good. He took the rejection well. That kind of thing had happened to him many times. But I’d never been the one responsible for hurting him.

It was all so complicated. We were father and daughter, yet often he’d had to defer to my judgment and let me be the one to control his transactions. I belonged to the hearing world, and in some ways that was the exclusive club he would never be good enough to join. I’d exposed him to this most recent taste of humiliation, and there was never the slightest rebuke from him. I felt as if I’d done my father a terrible wrong, exposing the differences between us that way. The episode brought me hard up against something I didn’t want in my head: We weren’t good enough.

The network of organizations Mom and Dad belonged to entailed every conceivable social, intellectual, and athletic function. Obviously, because the deaf population is limited, many of the clubs in Indianapolis had overlapping member-
ships, but still, the commitment of those members was amazing. Over the years, both Mom and Dad had served on dozens of committees. Mom was president of the women’s auxiliary of one club. Together they were members of the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf, the Indiana Association of the Deaf, the Indiana State School for the Deaf Alumni Association, the National Association of the Deaf, the Indianapolis Deaf Club, and many others. At one time or another, Dad was president of most of these organizations. The clubs held dances, basketball and softball leagues, dinners, endless parties and get-togethers. One or several of these groups sponsored nursing homes and children’s camps, provided scholarships, crowned a Miss Deaf Indiana, and much, much more. One of the main functions of the “Frat” was providing insurance policies for deaf people, who were often denied coverage otherwise, or who were charged higher premiums solely because of their deafness. (There was no actuarial reason to charge more; indeed, deaf drivers have fewer accidents than the general population.)

If Mom and Dad had nothing else to do on a Saturday night, they might go to the deaf club to play cards or Ping-Pong, have a few drinks, then sit around chatting with their friends in sign.

Of course there were the usual number of arguments and upheavals. A man absconded with a club’s treasury once. The political infighting was intense, and sometimes the elections seemed a little too heavily weighted in one person’s favor. “That’s the way things are everywhere,” Dad once told me, shaking his head.

A few times Mom and Dad went to national conventions to represent Indiana organizations. Once they went to the Sherman House in Chicago. It was an old hotel with an antiquated fire alarm system. The management was concerned about having an entire contingent of deaf people. Upon registering, each conventioneer was given a whistle and instructed to pick up the phone and blow the whistle into it if there was an emergency. Dad became annoyed with one man, who, every time he wanted room service, whistled into the receiver. The third time the worried hotel manager, expecting a fire or a heart attack, raced up to the room, only to be asked for a whiskey and soda, he confiscated the man’s whistle.

“Stupid,” Dad signed to me, a fist knocking against his forehead. “Now what will that hotel think of deaf people?” That was what mattered to Dad. For him the conventions, where deaf people from all over the country gathered, were an important show of strength. But he was also concerned that outsiders not lump all deaf people together.

It was not long after the Masons episode. Dad and I were underneath the hood, bent over the car’s engine. I was trying to listen to find out when he got an adjustment right—even though I wasn’t quite sure what I was listening for. Uncle Garnel and Aunt Imogene had come to visit earlier that day.

“How come Garnel and Imogene never had kids?” I asked. I’d heard a whispered rumor from one of my cousins and I was checking it with Dad.

Dad looked at me pensively.

“Is it true that Grandpa Walker wouldn’t let them?”

“Yes, that’s what Garnel told me,” Dad said.

“Why? I don’t understand.”

“I don’t know,” Dad signed. “It bothers me. I don’t know if it’s because he’s deaf or what. But I think Garnel and Imogene should have had children. They would be more in the world. They would understand more things.”

I asked Dad about H.T.’s imperious decree, but he was as mystified by it as I was. It didn’t make any sense. Why didn’t Garnel and Imogene just go ahead and have children anyway? And if it was the deafness, why had H.T. never ordered my father to do the same? I wondered if H.T. knew Dad wouldn’t
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I wondered if there wasn’t something deeper, more mysterious. Someday I would find out.

In sign language, conversations like these are unbelievably hard. You must look directly at the person as you talk to him, and as he talks to you. You can’t avert your eyes to relieve the tension. The contact is intimate and immediate at all times. And as you’re expressing yourself, the ideas don’t just go from your brain out your mouth. The emotion, the feelings circulate through your body, through the way you hold your shoulders, through your hips and legs and neck and cheeks and brows. The thoughts go through your head and arms and hands and fingers to someone’s eyes. And although signs aren’t a dramatization, there is such a close relationship between certain signs and what they represent that it can feel as if you’re acting out much of what you say. You can’t escape the emotion of a story. It reverberates through you. I flinched asking my father about the decree. My father flinched as he watched me ask, and as we talked, we could both see the ache. We were speaking in feelings. Words were not enough.

I had very few dates until junior year, when I met Dave Gregson, who was clean and neat—he washed his car before every date—and punctual, if not early. A few times as I madly pulled the hot rollers out of my hair, getting them all the more tangled, I could hear the strained conversation between my father and Dave as they struggled to pass the minutes. I knew what was going on, even though I could hear only a few grunts—Dave’s—and my father’s scratchy speech.

“Coke?” Dad said.

“Huh?”

“Drink Coke?” I’m sure Dad leaned his head back in imitation of someone drinking a soda.

Dave would shake his head no, waving my father off with both hands. (That was another thing hearing people did—

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made too-large movements. It was tantamount to shouting.)

Then Dad might pull the notepad and pen from his pocket and make an effort to discuss the weather or tell Dave what a nice car he had. Dave’s responses were never longer than a word.

When I’d finally yanked all the curlers out and rushed to the living room, the air was thick. “Sorry,” I said to Dave, signing at the same time to Dad.

“Jesus, why can’t you be ready on time so I don’t have to sit there like that? I hate it,” he said, leading me to the car. He opened my door to make a good appearance for my parents.

“Sorry,” I repeated.

One December afternoon—we’d been dating about six months—we were in the midst of a terrible argument. Dave was bulldozing me. I lashed out: “Why can’t you be polite to my parents?” I was thinking of my mother’s eager face when I left on a date, and of Dave’s grunts. “You could at least try to make conversation.”

“Jesus! What do you want me to do?” Dave yelled. “They can’t talk, for God’s sake. They don’t have anything to goddamn say!”

And suddenly I realized that Dave, who was so concerned about new clothes and a clean car, would never want to be seen in public with people like my parents. Looking at us from his point of view, I saw how unusual my family was, how difficult we were to break into. I stewed about Dave and his reaction for quite a while. But what had happened to my aunt thirty years before had been far worse.

Gathel had not dated much until nurse’s training, when she met Herb Engel, a medical student with blond hair and blue eyes, from a poor southern Indiana family. Herb’s uncle, a doctor in Louisville, Kentucky, was sending him through medical school. During the time they dated, Herb had asked her
lots of questions about her family, about her deaf brothers, and he'd spoken of marriage. At the beginning of February, during a long walk, Herb was talking about what a great team a doctor and a nurse would make, and then he told Gathel that when they got married she could never mention her two deaf brothers. She could not visit them and they would never be welcome at his house. There was to be no contact whatsoever. They had a terrible argument. Aunt Gathel told Herb she loved her brothers.

On Valentine's Day, when she got off the hospital's evening shift, she got a package from Herb. It was the hand-painted photograph of herself that Gathel had given him for Christmas. No note. And she never heard from him again.

That summer after graduation, my cousin Peggy, Aunt Gathel’s daughter, was coming from Georgia for a visit. Peggy was beautiful, tall and leggy. She was my opposite: Where I was fair, she was tan. I had red hair and blue eyes; she had deep-brown eyes and hair, and a magnificent smile. And when she spoke, that soft southern accent was honey, the words easing slowly and gracefully from her mouth.

For years Dad's side of the family had been so embroiled in a feud, most probably spurred on by H.T.’s skullduggery, that hardly any of us saw the others. Only the coming of cousin Peggy could have brought so many Walkers together for a reunion. We decided on the fanciest restaurant in Indianapolis.

The day before the dinner Uncle Bill called, saying that one of my aunts had been speaking to him about the dinner. Dad was standing next to me. Receiver wedged between my chin and shoulder, I signed what Bill was saying.

"We can't wait to see you," Uncle Bill said. "But I just got this call from your aunt Diana and she thinks it would be better to go to another restaurant. She says the waiters won't be very nice to your mom and dad or to your aunt Imogene and uncle Garnel." I'd stopped interpreting for Dad at the beginning of that last sentence. I tried not to let my face change expression, and I jiggled the receiver as if my neck had a cramp and I couldn't sign. Dad's head was cocked and his forehead wrinkled as he tried to imagine what I was hearing. He reached out to help me ease the phone receiver, but I waved him away, then turned my back to him.

"Diana says she knows they wouldn't enjoy the restaurant all that much." Uncle Bill told me about alternate plans—dinner at the Holiday Inn on the outskirts of town. When I hung up the phone and Dad asked me what happened, I just couldn't tell him. "Uncle Bill says we have to switch dinner to another restaurant. I don't know why."

The idea that this aunt didn't want a maître d' in a restaurant seeing her with us gnawed at me. I was so proud and sensitive. I hoped Dad wouldn't guess the reason for the change.

The next evening we all gathered and had a fine time. We laughed and joked and reminisced for hours. Aunt Diana and her husband never showed up. Nor did they ever phone.

At school I spent hours working on the newspaper and yearbook staffs, and I would spend hours during and after school talking with the journalism adviser. Spring of senior year, we had an all-school Easter convocation. The speaker was a local minister, and his talk was actually a sermon about the Resurrection and the unbelievers he called "heathens." At this point I was going to church every Sunday morning, attending youth fellowship meetings Sunday evenings, and volunteering for all kinds of church missionary work in between. Yet I objected to having been forced to attend a religious Easter convocation at a public school. It seemed to be an infringement of constitutional rights. I did exactly what I felt a good journal-
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I wrote an editorial citing the Supreme Court ruling on prayer in the schools. No fireworks. And I turned it in.

That afternoon, the journalism adviser told me the principal wanted me in his office. In thirteen years of schooling I’d never been to the principal’s office, never been sent out to the hall, never had more than a one-sentence tongue-lashing from a teacher (from which I suffered greatly).

The principal’s name was Obert Piety. He looked like Harry Truman, but without a bit of good-naturedness. He was spare, strict, and greatly feared. There were two assistant principals at Warren Central High School to see students who had committed infractions, the worst of which was usually letting a pig run down the halls during senior week. The most common problem was empty milk cartons flying across the lunchroom. Only high-level offenders were summoned to Mr. Piety’s office.

“What is the meaning of this?” He shook my typewritten pages at me.

“That’s my editorial. I don’t believe students should be forced to attend a religious convocation. It has to do with the Bill of Rights. That was a sermon, not a public school meeting.”

I was strong-willed for as much of the meeting as I could be. Mr. Piety told me that under no circumstances would a publication at his school print such heretical material.

“But it’s an editorial. That means it’s an opinion. What about the law? What about the Supreme Court?”

“There were no laws broken here. You should be ashamed of yourself, a nice girl like you.”

That stung. He tore up my pages and insisted that I go back to the journalism teacher and apologize.

My voice quavered but I wouldn’t let him see me cry.

“I didn’t do anything wrong.” And I didn’t apologize.

The secretaries in the outer office stared as I walked out.

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Most kids would have turned around and screamed. I couldn’t. I could write an editorial about objective rights. I could argue for an abstract point. But when it came to defending myself, I couldn’t. I felt foolish and nothing squashes resolution faster. Perhaps the principal was right. Perhaps I didn’t have a legitimate complaint. Certainly the journalism adviser, who had lectured to us about the First Amendment, would not have gone to such lengths if I hadn’t done a terrible thing. I stuffed every trace of rebellion back inside and tried to act as if nothing had happened.

I just kept wondering why my adviser had not come to me first with her objections to my editorial. Me, who had worshiped her. Me, who had only wanted to do what was right, what she had taught me. I felt betrayed. And later, puzzled. On Senior Honors Day, she gave me the award for best journalism student.

One evening not long after, I was out with my regular gang of girlfriends. I’d driven them to the Steak’n’Shake for burgers and fries, and as we pulled out, I squealed the tires. “That was an accident,” I told my suddenly quieted passengers. “Honestly.”

“Know what my dad said today?” I went on. “He said he was going to take me to the doctor to have the lead removed from my foot. Pretty funny, huh?”

I don’t know what came over me. Dad had said nothing of the kind. I’d made it up. It wasn’t even that funny. This wasn’t my way. I’m not a prevaricator. If anything, I usually down-played stories rather than embellished them. It was just that I wanted to show my friends how witty my father was. The problem was that the funny things he really did say weren’t all that translatable; they were mostly visual jokes, or Dad’s teasing. But I’d felt compelled to make this comment up. When I quoted him to my friends I’d begun making him sound funnier.
and more intellectual than he really was. They couldn’t possibly know that in his lexicon, my father really was funny and smart. I was just trying to show them that my dad was like any other dad.

We lived at the edge of suburbia—what seemed like the edge of civilization when I was in high school. And that night after I dropped off my friends, a curious ritual began. Five minutes from our house was flat farmland, stretching out to eternity. I’d head out a different road each evening after I’d dropped the others off. I wanted to see how many turns I could make, how far I could go without map or compass or any way of knowing where I was. I drove and drove and only allowed instinct to take me back home after twisting myself around on roads with numbers for names—700 W and 300 S. My sense of direction is terrible. I’ve never known west from south. I didn’t dare look at the time or the odometer to see how far I’d gone. The few farmhouses I passed were darkened. The stories my high school friends had told me whirled through my head. Cowed by mothers who that morning had read about a man who stopped to help fix a flat and then killed or raped the woman driver, my friends would laugh nervously. Then they’d launch into a story about a hitchhiker who robbed someone and stole his car, or about a man who waited in back seats and underneath cars in parking lots. My head would be spinning with the sum of all those fears and as I drove faster and faster, the accelerator down to the floor, windows down, the breeze whipping my hair, the radio turned as loud as it would go, I felt free. The challenge was to see how far and how lost I could get, then wind my way out of the maze, trying not to backtrack. Some nights the tilled earth and the sky seemed one black splotch, a giant hungry hole all around me. Other nights I’d see menacing shadows in the six-foot-tall cornstalks.

There was a pounding inside me as I drove those roads, looking for something, wanting desperately to feel something.