Epilogue

September 1983

The funeral was Monday; Jan’s wedding was Saturday.

It was hard to ignore our sadness. We threw ourselves into
the preparations and tried not to think about what had gone on
before. Jan and her fiancé, Brian, were superbly organized, but
there were still plenty of errands to do that week. Mom and I
made rice packets out of white net and pink crinkle ribbon.
Dad picked up the champagne fountain and took it to the re-
ception hall. We had last-minute fittings for the bridesmaids’
dresses, which Jan had sewn. The four of us looked like
English milkmaids with our white eyelet frocks, pink sashes,
and white stockings.

There was a rehearsal and a dinner Friday night. We’d hired
an interpreter to stand at the altar for Friday and the Saturday
ceremony, since both Kay and I were going to be bridesmaids.
The minister began the rehearsal but had to stop in order to
find a box for the interpreter to stand on; she was too short to
be seen over the podium.

By rights the rehearsal dinner is an uproarious occasion.
This one was subdued and dignified. Brian’s father and the
best man made solemn toasts. Dad began his with a small,
simple joke. I voiced what he said.

“I must admit that when Brian first wanted to marry Jan,” he
signed, “I was suspicious. I thought perhaps he just wanted to
borrow my luggage.” (Brian had used my parents’ suitcases,
the chestnut-brown ones they’d bought for their honeymoon,
on many occasions.)

Dad put down his champagne glass so that he could sign
more eloquently, using both hands.

“I am kidding you. I am proud to have Brian join our family.
I know I am not losing my daughter. I love her too much. Brian
will be a good part of our family. I know Jan will be happy in
her marriage and that Brian will be happy in his marriage. To a
long, wonderful life.”

We raised our glasses and drank.

My interpretation was inadequate. My father’s signing was
graceful and expansive. It had the beauty of a conductor lead-
ing a symphony orchestra. There was nothing clichéd in what
he signed. No translation could have been as expressive or as
moving as the way he drew his hands through the air. They
were gestures made in public, but the meaning was private and
loving.

The morning of the wedding was exactly as the morning of
any wedding must be: a flurry of preparations. Mom had laid
out her clothes and Dad’s. She wanted to press my dress, but I
wouldn’t let her. Dad couldn’t find his studs. I went wildly
searching for them. His shirt needed ironing and the sleeves
were too long.

We got to the church in plenty of time. Hiding in the choir
loft, Jan, Kay, and I watched the ushers seating people. We ex-
changed sisterly whispers, the three of us surprised at some
who showed up.

Jan wore a delicate turn-of-the-century wedding dress of
silk and inset lace, with a high Victorian collar. Dad walked
her down the aisle as if she really were the china doll Grandma Wells always said she was. Standing before the minister, Dad watched the interpreter intently and when the minister asked: “Who gives this woman to be wed?” Dad answered aloud, quietly, slowly, but clearly, signing as he spoke: “Her mother and I do.”

The reception was held in a large, greenery-filled clubhouse, and the party quickly spread to several rooms. Every once in a while I’d look over, to see my grandmother alone, fighting back her tears. She didn’t want to grieve during her granddaughter’s wedding.

A natural division occurred at the party. The deaf people sat in one room, catching up on the gossip, enjoying themselves, while the hearing people stayed in the room with the buffet and the band.

Dad and Mom were perfect hosts, never hovering, but congenial. I adored it when Mom was all dressed up and excited. There was an aura about her, a beauty that transcended her features. I thought back to the letter she’d written me after Brian formally, in sign, had asked my father for Jan’s hand in marriage. “We are pink tickled,” she wrote. “Brian is so fine young man.” And here today Mom looked lovely in her flowing cream-colored dress, her once red hair now a lustrous gold. Dad still had his boyish cowlick. A grin emphasized the cleft in his chin. Somehow it didn’t matter that his rented tux didn’t quite fit.

Every once in a while Mom or Dad would walk into the main reception room to see how the party was going. Mom danced with Dad and then she danced with Brian and Brian’s father, feeling the heavy bass beat through the floorboards. Dad danced with Jan, then Kay, then me, and was happy to let us lead.

My parents shuttled back and forth between the two parties. The interpreter had left quite a while ago, but in situations like these, interpreters really aren’t needed. There was something in my parents’ smiles, in the way they were holding themselves, that made everything seem fine. Dad was proud of his family, proud of the fine wedding and reception, delighted that so many of his relatives and friends had come. The communication was basic. People walked up to Mom and Dad, beam- ing, pumping their hands, pointing to Jan and Brian and holding up a rounded thumb and forefinger—a universal “OK” sign.

Dad came in and danced a couple of big-band tunes with me. I introduced him to twirls and swoops and he was enjoying himself immensely. “I follow you,” he signed. I asked him if he knew how to dip.

“What’s that?”

Signing and doing a slight gesture, I explained that at the end of the song he would tilt me backward.

“I follow you,” he signed again in his most courtly manner, a curled right hand acting as if it were following a curled left. It turned out to be a very successful dip.

“I was afraid I’d drop you,” he said, kissing me on the cheek.

After our dance I made the rounds in both rooms, chatting in sign with friends of Mom’s and Dad’s I’d known since childhood. Back in the main room near the band, I looked up to see Mom and Dad standing at the door, surveying the scene. He had his arm around her. She was leaning against him. I thought about that shy young couple in the Great Smoky Mountains thirty years earlier. And all the disappointments and frustrations they’d had before and after. Yet as I’d watched other marriages crumble or freeze into icy acquaintanceships, theirs was different. They were very much together.

In New York I’d just met a wonderful man and I was falling in love. Helplessly, happily. This was different from my other loves. It was uncomplicated and sweet. And I could only hope that it would have a future as long and that the relationship...
would be as strong as my parents'. I'd started this one clean and fresh. I'd told him about my parents, not in that gasping, embittered confessional tone but through stories, the stories of my growing up and Mom's and Dad's growing up. For me, the past had finally emerged from being a horrible, dark secret to being an unusual family's history. I was altering my perception to make life happier and easier to live, and that change was working well. I was even looking forward to bringing my beau back home for Christmas.

It was a fine celebration.

Dad led Mom to the dance floor. They stole a couple of glances at the dancers around them to make sure the beat hadn't changed—or the music stopped. After a few cautious steps they danced to whatever beat they felt like, wrapped in each other's arms. Dad twirled Mom around and held her as they dipped.

And then he looked up at me and winked.