In order to protect the privacy of people who were part of my life, the names and certain individual traits of people in this book have been changed, with the exception of my family members and some prominent figures.

I must have been about four the time Grandma Wells and I were cooed up spoonwise in her bed. Grandma had her arms around me and the new ballerina doll I'd just received for Christmas. Grandma started humming, her voice, quiet and low, cracked. She breathed between words. Then her humming floated into a lullaby: “Sleep, my child, and peace attend thee, all through the night. Guardian angels . . . . Soft the waking hours are creeping, hill and dale in slumber steeping . . . .”

Mom and Dad picked me up from Grandma’s the next day. That night as Mom tucked me into bed, I asked her to sing me a lullaby, even though I knew she couldn’t.

My parents are deaf. I can hear. And the fact of their deafness has made all the difference. It has altered the course of their lives, of my life, of their families’ lives.

In a way we were outsiders, immigrants in a strange world. With my two younger sisters and parents, it was as if we were clinging together for safety. There were unbreakable bonds between us. Yet there was also an unbridgeable chasm, for despite my parents’ spirit and their ability to get along, their world is the deaf, their deaf culture, their deaf friends, and
their sign language—it is something separate, something I can never really know, but that I am intimate with.

The best that can be said for deafness is that it's an invisible handicap. The worst, that it puts adults at the mercy of their hearing children, at the mercy of parents, at almost anyone's mercy. It is one of the cruelest and most deceptive of afflictions. It canemasculate men and devastate women. It is an impairment of communication. But it's not just the disfigurement of words and it's not just broken ears. It's most often a barrier between person and person.

I acted as interpreter and guide for my parents the entire time I was growing up. I was an adult before I was a child. I was quiet and obedient around people because I didn't know what was expected of me. Outside our house speaking and hearing seemed to be valued more than anything. And that's what we had nothing of at home.

I was the child who did all my parents' business transactions, nearly from the time I was a toddler. I spoke for my parents; I heard for my parents. I was painfully shy for myself, squirming away when the attention was focused on me, but when I was acting for my parents I was forthright. I made their doctors' appointments. I interpreted in sign language for my mother when she went to the doctor and told him where it hurt and when he told her what medicine to take. I told the shoe repairman what was wrong with a shoe. I told the store clerk when we needed a different size. It was me the garage mechanic would hang up on when I called about a transmission for my father. I was usually the one to relay to Mom and Dad that a friend had died when we received a call. I was the one who had to call up other friends or relatives to give them bad news.

A child doesn't know that his childhood is sad: it's just his life. I didn't realize that everyone didn't feel content at home and embarrassed and confused away from there. And it took me most of the first three decades of my life to figure out what those differences were between the deaf and hearing worlds.

When I showed my parents the first draft of this book, I was nervous. "Rough," I signed, one hand, clawlike, scraping the back of the other. It was a crude, ragged manuscript and I'd asked them to tell me exactly what they thought of it. It took them a couple of months to read it. Then they mailed me a letter and five notebook pages filled with single-spaced corrections, altering the sequence of events and reinstating the veracity to family legends other relatives had told.

They made only one substantive comment in the letter: "We hope no feelings hurt." They had just read four hundred pages in which their eldest daughter had ripped open their lives and held them up to scrutiny, in which I'd written every bit of the harshest truths about our relationships. I dredged up things I would never have mentioned in the ugliest of arguments. And their main concern was for other people.

At first my father was tentative about my writing this book. My mother was dead set against it. They are extremely private people. All the stares they get in public when they talk in sign has made them so. All their lives they've hidden away the insults and hurts other people caused them, and hidden the insults from themselves as well. They did not want to have their one bit of privacy made glaringly public. I did not blame them and I did not want to pressure them into allowing me to do this. Thinking it over, however, they changed their minds. "It may do some good for others...."

This is a subjective work. In some places, having bottled up so much for so many years, I have vented my spleen. Writing it, I sat at my desk, endlessly typing the same pages over and over. It was as if, in the writing, the words had to come through my fingers for me to understand them, just as the meaning had to come through my fingers in signing. There were hours I cried, realizing how difficult the day must have been when my
mother was taken away to school for the first time. I was crying from discovery—never once had my mother or father mentioned such things to me. Other times I was touched by the sweetness of a memory.

I discovered a great deal researching and thinking about this book: Nothing is as difficult as writing about your family, nothing can tear your soul apart quicker, nothing can make you cry and ache and wish you’d never begun. Nothing is as dismal as the feeling that you may be deceiving them, or even that you may be overpraising them and thus leaving them without the dignity they had before. Sometimes the people you've ignored growing up turn out to be more decent and solid than you could have realized. Often your childhood heroes melt away.

In some ways my parents' lives were exceedingly ordinary: plain stock from the Midwest, working-class people, ranch house, one dog, one cat, three children. And out of that comes the extraordinary.

Two ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances.

I can only hope that I've imparted something of what it is to be them.

I started out writing about my parents. I learned a tremendous amount about life. And I ended up finding out about myself.