Mom

Indianapolis
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It will soon be fifty years since the September morning when my mother’s parents drove her to the Indiana State School for the Deaf. She had just turned six. Grandma and Grandpa Wells were a young couple from the country who had never even met a deaf person before their daughter was stricken. And here they were leaving their only child, a bright, inquisitive girl, at a place they’d never seen.

The day before the trip, my mother watched as her mother packed all the new little dresses she’d been making for her over the summer, a smocked rose-print frock and a corduroy jumper among others. Her mother folded the clothes neatly into a large leather suitcase—a small overcoat, hat, and mittens at the bottom, pajamas and petticoats on top, shoes, covered in tissue, stuffed in the sides. She rolled up her daughter’s dolls inside a favorite wool blanket, which she tucked into a paper bag, then put the suitcase and bag by the front door. The little girl was bewildered. She couldn’t understand why her mother wasn’t packing her own clothes. She sensed the sadness in the house, but her parents had no way of telling her she was going away to school. And no way of letting her know she’d be able to come home again. They pointed at her, they pointed at the distance, and then Grandma cried. So the little girl, looking up at her mother crying, began to cry too.

The three of them got up early the next morning to make the two-hour drive to the school. My mother was dressed in a brown-checked pinafore. When the three of them arrived in Indianapolis, they met the superintendent of the school, and after a brief walk around the grounds, and a look inside some of the yellow-brown brick buildings, Grandpa got the suitcase and bag out of the trunk of the car and brought them into Mom’s dormitory, laying them on a small black metal bed, one of a row of such beds. When he came back outside, my grandmother was tugging on the pinafore.

“Now, Doris Jean, you be a good girl,” she was saying; then she stood and turned, telling my grandfather that if they didn’t leave right away she would break down sobbing right then and there.

The superintendent, Dr. Raney, a large, kindly man, tried to distract the little girl, nudging her toward another girl so that my grandparents could slip out quietly. But Mom knew what was about to happen. As the car pulled away and the enormous iron gates shut behind, she threw herself at the black fence, shrieking, wondering why she’d been abandoned.

My mother had been thirteen and a half months old when she contracted spinal meningitis. It was mid-September 1931, and the Depression had just hit. She’d been sick a couple of days when a strange woman Grandma had never seen before came to the door of their house on Hannah Street. The small, dark woman asked for a glass of water and Grandma told her she mustn’t come in the house because the baby had meningitis, which was highly contagious. Grandma led her around to
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the side of the house to a spigot and the woman pointed at the delicate white flowers growing in a border. “She’s been eating those flowers, that ‘Snow on the Mountain,’” the woman said. My grandmother said no, but the woman insisted, “I know. I’m a nurse,” she said. Grandma, already fretful about her child, now grew angry. “No, it wasn’t those flowers at all,” she said. “If you’re a nurse, you should know it’s a sickness from a virus, not from any flower.” The woman drank some water from her cupped hands, eyed my grandmother, then slowly walked away. The strange visitor, and what happened later, the relapse, have always been mysteriously intertwined in Grandma’s head.

The doctor had sent all the way to Indianapolis to get medicine for Mom. When it arrived, my grandparents brought her in to the doctor’s office immediately. Sweating, Grandpa held the baby’s legs out, tight to the table, while the doctor injected the serum straight into her spine. They all knew that even a tiny jerk might leave her paralyzed or dead. Five times they went through that, the baby screaming from pain and fear. But a few days after the fifth shot, Mom was bright and alive and had started talking again. Grandma brought her in to the doctor’s office. He looked her over, seemed pleased with himself, then threw away the rest of the medicine. Grandma glanced at the serum wrapper lying in the wastebasket. It read: “Caution: Five to seven doses.” A week later the baby had a relapse.

Grandma can’t remember exactly when it was that she found out her daughter was deaf. From the moment she read the wrapper, she had the feeling something would go wrong. It took a while before she would know what it was. The doctor confirmed her suspicions.

Grandma Wells went out and bought a book about Helen Keller and tried to teach her daughter to talk the way Helen had learned, holding the little girl’s hand over her throat as she said words, then having the baby hold her small hand over her own throat.

“Oh, she was such a good girl,” my grandmother would say, clasping her hands together. “She had temper tantrums, all right. Just like the ones I read about Helen Keller having. She broke pencils. She threw herself down on the floor. And she sucked her thumb. We had a hard time getting her to stop, and they had a hard time at the school too. But she was just so sweet. She wouldn’t hurt a fly. And she was always so helpful. She’d see me sewing and she’d know whatever it was I needed and she’d run and get it.

“Why, one time when the old woman next door in Fillmore died—Doris Jean was about four; she didn’t know what it was all about—I was standing in the kitchen over the sink and when I looked out, I saw that she’d picked flowers from our garden and she was in line, following the mourners into the house, her hands full of orange and yellow flowers.”

The drive to the deaf school was too far for Grandma and Grandpa to go to see Mom more than a couple of weekends a semester. In a way it was a relief to my grandmother not to visit more often, the leaving was so hard. Mom spent fourteen years at that school. Each time she went home for the summer, she and her family, even her sister, Peggy June, eight years younger, would have to get reacquainted.

It was several years before my mother understood why she was at the school. At first she wondered if she’d been exiled for misbehaving or if something terrible was about to happen to her own mother and father.

Most of the houseparents were kindly, gentle people. But when Mom was six, her supervisor was Miss Pitman, a gaunt woman with long, dark hair tumbling nearly to her knees when she took out the pins at night. During the day Miss Pit-
man wore narrow, pointy shoes, and every morning she used to love braiding and curling the little girls’ hair, especially Mom’s, which was straight and coppery. There was one girl who always seemed to be in trouble—and she was so scared of the housemother that she would wet her bed. Mornings, Miss Pitman combed and yanked on her hair so hard that she cried, her hands to her head, twisting, trying to catch Miss Pitman’s eye with a look that pleaded for release. When Mom recounts the story, her eyes fill with tears, her hands holding the sides of her head, reliving the pain. Once several of the girls told Dr. Raney how often Miss Pitman kicked them with those pointy shoes of hers. He didn’t believe them. Until one day he saw for himself. Miss Pitman was fired immediately. By that time, however, she had terrified my mother out of her thumb-sucking habit.

Like virtually all schools for the deaf at that time, the Indiana State School emphasized oral skills: speaking and lipreading. In classes the children spent much of their time learning spoken language and written grammar and matching people gesture and point. They’d hold their hands over their teachers’ throats, then over their own. And they wondered why the way they made their voice boxes bob was wrong and why the teachers’ ways, which felt the same to their fingertips, were right. The teachers never seemed satisfied. Mom blew feathers over and over to get her breathing right for f and p sounds. Every year it was the same old flash cards, children pushing out dull-toned “buh-buh-buh” whenever they saw a picture of a bumblebee, always the same drill, the same cards to learn the speech that came effortlessly to everyone else.

There is a controversy that rages in the deaf world and among educators for the deaf. It’s a battle that can provoke me to fury. For centuries there have been two distinct attitudes about how deaf people should be taught: The oralists believe in speaking and lipreading without ever signing; and the man-ualists are pro-signing in American Sign Language (ASL). Both sides have their points. And there is also a camp of compromise—those who favor “total communication,” or signing while speaking in full sentences. The oralists feel that unless deaf children master English skills, they will be outsiders all their lives. That point is valid, but to leave a child without language for a moment longer than is absolutely necessary seems cruel to me. There is also an underlying sense I get in the arguments of oralists that there is something terribly wrong with being deaf and wanting to hang around deaf people. The manu-ualists, on the other hand, sometimes seem to be living their lives in a vacuum. They occasionally act as if they don’t need contact with the hearing world./A few behave as if it doesn’t matter that their English grammar is faulty or that they can’t make themselves understood. And the problem with the middle-of-the-road approach is that combining the two extremes slows everything down. There have also been myriad systems for teaching language and phonetics to deaf children. None have been resounding successes. I objected to the rigidity of so many of these theorists and their systems.

At the Indiana State School for the Deaf, sign language was never a subject taught in class, and although it was used openly, it was considered something of a guilty secret, a crutch for those who couldn’t master speech. Children taught each other and what they learned was reinforced by those few teachers who were deaf. Mom considered herself lucky. There were many schools, particularly oral ones which forbade signing, that didn’t employ any deaf teachers. Some of those children grew up unaware of what happened to deaf people after high school. It seemed to them that all the other deaf kids disappeared forever at the age of eighteen.

There was no consistency among the educators. Many of the hearing teachers could barely finger-speech their names and they couldn’t read the children’s signs at all. It is easy to send out
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unintelligible pidgin signs and the children didn’t dare correct the adults. Yet among hearing people, these same teachers often claimed they were adept at signing. At the Indiana school, if a child did poorly with a teacher who was an oralist, he or she was not moved to another class. More likely than not, the child simply repeated the entire year of school and hoped that he would more easily understand the next teacher.

Mom took to signing “like a duck to water,” my grandmother said. Mom experienced moments every bit as thrilling as when Helen Keller spelled “w-a-t-e-r” under the pump. Where before the only way she’d been able to make contact with someone was to point or frown or smile, she suddenly found her world grew richer. She had people to talk to.

As the years at residential school passed, Mom enjoyed it more and more. There were only nineteen in her class—twelve boys and seven girls—and because the school rarely let children leave the grounds and parents didn’t come to get them very often in those days, they all grew up nearly as brother and sister. It was true that every week and every year had a sameness to it. Wednesdays they ate meat loaf. For fourteen years. Friday evenings meant fish and chocolate pudding, and Mom would scoop some of that pudding into her milk so she could have both chocolate milk and dessert.

Mom and her friends grew into typical teenage girls. They gossiped about which teachers they liked and didn’t like and who had gotten in trouble in what class. They had constant, all-consuming crushes on boys. In admitting a newly realized fancy for a boy, one girl would turn to another, her back blocking other people’s views of her hands—the deaf version of whispering—and confide in small signs.

Mom was a gifted mime who loved doing her imitation of the heavy-lidded, slow-walking teacher for her girlfriends. She could break them all up into giggles with just a hint of her impersonation of the school secretary chatting on the phone, ex-

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amining her nails, then looking bored and flouncing away when the boss came up to tell her to get back to work. Not being distracted by anything that was spoken made Mom’s physical observations especially acute. And the actual signing styles of people she knew were also ripe for mime. Just as there are accents in speech, there are regional accents in sign. People from the South sign slower than people in the North—even people from northern and southern Indiana have different styles.

In addition to language and grammar, the children in junior high school and high school were taught some basic living skills. The girls ironed the boys’ white shirts every week. The boys built wooden bookcases. The girls were also taught cooking and later on, in high school, many of them, including my mother, took a keypunch course to prepare them for outside jobs.

But during these years it was becoming increasingly hard for Doris Jean to come home for summers. She missed the small farm with her chickens and ducks and dogs and cats—and even a pet pig—that her family had when she was small. She has always had an implicit understanding of animals and they sense her gentleness. But her parents moved so often during her childhood that there weren't many children she knew in her neighborhood anymore. Very small children play side by side, so it doesn’t matter that one is silent. Slightly older children figure things out intuitively. But as children age, talking replaces playacting. In one sense, Mom had been left behind. But in another sense, she had advanced in a way her family couldn’t follow. In sign she could express complicated ideas and feelings, but none of that got across. She missed the company of the girls at school, the late-night secrets the girls signed in candlelight, even the classroom discussions, when all the students sat in a circle so they could see each other talk.

There is a story my Grandpa Wells used to tell about one of
Mom's vacations home. She was about fourteen the time she was helping him build a chicken coop.

"We were on the roof of that coop on the farm we had out-side Greencastle," he said. "She was hammering nails and hit her thumb and I could hear her as clear as day. She yelled, 'Shit!' Well, I just don't know where Doris Jean could have learned that word. But she sure knew it that day." My grandfa-ther laughed.

"I didn't say anything to her, you know," Grandpa said. "But I think she surprised herself."

Behind buildings in huddles and late at night, my mother and her friends had taught each other everything they could find out about the world, from romantic ideas about what happened on dates to even more romantic ideas about what life would be like after residential school. Curse words, though racy, were part of that magical outside world. Discreetly they practiced both signed and oral versions. The girls in Mom's class would remain friends for life.

In June of 1950 Mom was graduated from the Indiana State School for the Deaf. The class motto was "Rowing, not drifting." The class flower was the sweet pea. After a Chopin piano prelude was played for the parents in attendance, a teacher waved her hand, motioning for the class to march in. One of the students read a scripture from Matthew, then a poem was recited, "Step by Step," by a student with good speech. My mother signed the poem as it was read aloud and later signed the hymn "I Would Be True" in unison with the other girls in her senior class.

Suddenly, after years of regimented life, Doris Jean was completely on her own. Her parents wanted her to move back with them; she knew nothing about writing checks, looking for apartments, getting utilities hooked up, but there weren't any jobs for her in Fillmore, no deaf people, not much to do. She decided to strike out on her own. Soon she was living in an Indianapolis apartment with a deaf girlfriend who'd been a classmate. Mom was working as a keypunch operator for a company that made construction equipment. Both Mom and her roommate, Alice, were excited about the prospect of exploring the city. Even though they'd been in school all those years, they had rarely been allowed off the grounds.

They settled into their domestic routines quickly. After work they'd go together to do their grocery shopping. To find out how much she needed to pay, Mom would lean over and look at the total on the cash register. If the clerk said something to her and she didn't understand, Alice, an adept lip-reader, would sign it for Mom. They'd cook together, then head for a movie, one with lots of action so they'd understand the plot, or they'd take a walk, or perhaps just sit around and talk.

Their apartment didn't have a flashing-light doorbell and they didn't like leaving the door open because they couldn't hear someone entering. If one of them had a date for the evening, she had to get ready early in order to go downstairs and wait. If Alice was late in getting ready, she would ask Mom to go downstairs, let him in, and chat with the young man for a while. It was on one of those evenings that Alice's temporary stand-in struck the fancy of her date for the evening—my father.