It was 1927. Everywhere else people called it the Roaring Twenties. In Montpelier, Indiana, which had once boasted a fancy gilded opera hall, the Depression had hit two decades before, when all the oil wells dried up. The town itself, thanks in part to my grandmother Nellie’s WCTU efforts, was also dry. In addition to his circuit ministry, Grandpa Walker was trying to make a go of the mortuary business he’d started fifteen years before, which had never once gotten out of the red. He also latched onto frame-making and farming, and just about any money-making scheme he could think of to feed the six children and the new baby.

Grandma Nellie was short and round and lively. Her trademark was to burst into a house calling: “Yoo hoo!” She was the backbone of the family, bustling about, raising the seven children, tending her garden, helping out with the business in every way she could. More often than not, that meant laundering bloodied linens for the Walker ambulance service.

Grandpa Walker, on the other hand, was tall, with a long, stern face. In his later years when he was stooped and his white hair thin, I’d see H.T. pinch my sister Kay’s shoulder blades—she was only four then—and, with his tongue caught between his front teeth, squeeze until she shrieked with pain. “Oh, that couldn’t have hurt at all,” he’d mutter, letting her go so he could fuss with his pipe. H.T. was a believer in education and hard work, although as my aunt Gathel would put it delicately, “He was a great one for saying one thing and doing whatever he pleased.” Nevertheless, H.T. was proud and he instilled in each of his children the idea that it was an honor to be a Walker.

Whether it was pride or peculiarity, however, that spurred him on when he gave them their Christian names, no one will ever know. His firstborn he named Garnt Boyd, and in quick succession came Ghlee Delight, Garl Dwight, and Golden William. With his fifth, Nellie insisted on having some part in the process. He let her have the middle names: Gathel May, Gene Iris, and my father, Gale Freeman, Freeman being Nellie’s maiden name.

The first four, in addition to their distinctive names, also had unusual name signs, the special gestures used to abbreviate a person’s name when signing. Garnt, my father’s eldest brother, by bizarre coincidence, was also deaf. Garnt’s name sign was two fingers tapping the side of the forehead. Ghlee’s was a “g” handshape—the gesture people use to indicate “a little bit”—held at the chin because hers was pronounced. Garl’s sign was a hand held sideways at the middle of the forehead, a sign denoting “great intelligence.” Golden, who was always called Bill, was referred to with another “g” handshape, this time turning up the end of the nose. The sign was both a pun on his nickname, and a reference to the actual shape of his nose, the most upturned of the characteristic Walker ski slope, which my father also had until a too-vigorous high school football tackle.

* * *
Watching

There's a tremendous amount of folklore surrounding deafness. From ancient times through the early part of this century, the mysteriousness of the condition made the public view deaf people as either prophets or devils. James Joyce once said, while passing in front of a skeleton, that he was superstitious about only one thing—"deaf mutes."

Often as not, the actual cause of deafness is presumed rather than pinpointed. Over the centuries people have blamed everything from eating a green chestnut to being cursed by a gypsy. Others have cited being frightened by a burglar, consuming improper combinations of food, and thinking and speaking impure thoughts as direct causes of deafness. My grandmother believed that the source of Garnel's deafness was the few seconds at his birth in 1908 when the oxygen supply to his brain was cut off. There's no way of verifying that. My father, she insisted, was not born deaf. "Insisted" because there was an even greater stigma attached to genetic deafness (and the family) than there was to acquired deafness. As far as she and my grandfather could remember, there had never been any deafness in either of their families.

Garnel was about two years old when Nellie realized he was deaf. She was distraught until one day, she said, the Lord spoke to her. He told her that if she did not accept Garnel as he was, and do for him and make the best of it, He would take the baby away from her.

Grandma Nellie never mentioned whether God spoke to her again, not even when my father's deafness was discovered. Although by that time the family had had nearly twenty years to adjust to deafness, in some ways my father's must have been the harder to accept. First, Nellie must have shouldered some of the blame for having taken that tiny baby out in the bitter cold, and then watching him sicken. What was more difficult, though, was that the family knew what to expect: trouble. Garnel was a difficult child. He threw violent temper tantrums that continued well into adulthood. In short, Garnel was exasperating. And the Walker family was slightly nervous about the likelihood of having to contend with another trying member. It's difficult to know where personality leaves off and circumstance begins, but the brothers and sisters still marvel at how different Garnel and my father turned out.

When Dad was born, he was a fat baby. At first the family called him Butterball, soon altered it to Puffball—a variety of local mushroom—and then shortened that to Puff. Even Nellie, who objected to nicknames, seemed to like this one. There was something right about it.

It took them a while to discover Dad's deafness. The signals were confusing. His cries sounded like any baby's. Crying is a reflex all babies have, even if they can't hear. Speech came to Dad slowly, but he did make some noises, and a deaf baby's voice isn't all that different from that of a hearing baby. If someone walked into the room behind him, he usually didn't respond. But of course he did if he saw the person. He was alert and active. He'd already begun compensating for his deafness.

Eventually the realization that something was wrong was unavoidable, and his parents took him to a doctor, and then another and another. The answer was always the same: The auditory nerves were destroyed. There was no cure. They'd have to live with it.

In some ways Puff had a typical Indiana boyhood. On the family farm, he was a hard and willing worker. He helped milk the cows, put up the hay in the barn, pump the water for the animals and for washing clothes outside. He'd go with his sisters Gene and Gathel to collect the eggs and feed the chickens, hogs, and other animals. If he was home when the weather was cold, he'd help with the butchering and soapmaking.

Puff, lanky, towheaded, and athletic, was often content to
play by himself, but the difference between him and other little boys was that he had to pay far more attention to whatever it was he was doing. He was always watching to see what was happening so he could join in. And he learned to be vigilant because he couldn’t hear warnings.

Once, when he was eleven, he dashed off the porch at home in Montpelier as a car came careening around the corner. His mother stood screaming but helpless. Puff was fortunate; he bounced off the side of the car. If he’d run out a second sooner or if the car hadn’t swerved, he would probably have been dead. It was a valuable lesson. He willed himself to be even more alert and agile from then on.

Puff was about five when Nellie insisted they take him to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. He was having slight breathing problems and the family wanted his hearing checked again. H.T., Nellie May, and Puff were gone for five days. A battery of tall men in white coats spent hours poking and prodding Dad’s ears, throat, and chest. Nellie had left full of hope, and when she returned she was despondent. Dad remembers her trying not to show her disappointment.

When Garnel was at the state school for the deaf, H.T. had a falling-out with the superintendent, and so after returning from Mayo, H.T. announced he would not allow Puff to attend. H.T.’s grudge would have cruel implications for my father. Dad’s days at Huntington Street public school in Montpelier were a complete blur. He sat in class trying hard to pay attention and figure out what was going on. The teacher faced the blackboard so often when she talked that he couldn’t lip-read her. Because his last name started with a W, he was in the last seat in the last row, so he could hardly see her anyway. His grades were uninspiring C’s. Second grade was worse. His brothers and sisters pitted him for getting stuck with the sour-faced Miss Trent.

Luckily, by the time Dad was ready for the third grade, a new general superintendent of the deaf school was appointed, the same Dr. Raney who a couple of years later would be showing my mother’s parents through the imposing brick buildings. Whereas my mother was terrified of the place, Dad, with his mischievous, gap-toothed grin, felt tremendously relieved the moment he was enrolled. The time at Huntington Street proved to have been a waste. Dad had to begin all over, a tall eight-year-old among the first-graders. He’d had the advantage of having a brother who was deaf, which meant some of the people in the family had been able to communicate with him when he was quite young. After his first year, he was promoted quickly. The school wasn’t at all rigorous, but the children were well disciplined and worked hard.

Dad flourished at school. The mahogany bookshelf he made there with its intricate cutouts still stands in our house. His class was small—only nine people—so the students had plenty of individual attention. Sometimes too much. It was a cloistered life. To leave the grounds, children had to be accompanied by a relative because officials worried about what might happen to them out on their own.

One weekday in the middle of the term, H.T. showed up at the deaf school and had Dad pulled from his class. Walking down the long, dark hall, Dad looked past his father through the doorway to see his aunt Emma sitting in the car, her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking. There was a man he didn’t know sitting in the back seat. H.T. pointed to the place next to the man, then he got behind the steering wheel. They drove for hours. Dad recognized the road. They were on the way to Emma’s farm near Amboy, Indiana, way in the northern part of the state. Puff still didn’t know what was wrong. Emma just cried and twisted her handkerchief, and when she talked, her
mouth was contorted by the sobs. The strange man seated next to the boy just stared out the window.

Arriving at Emma’s farm, Dad figured it out. Some men had removed the picture window from Emma’s house and now they were trying to fit through a giant coffin. A neighbor took Dad out to the field next to the ten-foot-tall corn picker. In pantomime he showed how Uncle Hen—Henry, really—an enormous man who used to keep skinny little dogs, had been standing atop the picker as it moved down the cornfield. A sharpened metal tooth caught the edge of Hen’s coat and yanked him into the machine’s jaws.

By high school, Dad had obtained permission to take the interurban tram by himself to go home for special visits. Once in a while his brother Bill would stop by to see him if he was in town, but it was Gathel, in nurse’s training at Methodist Hospital, who came most often, and who took Dad out for ice cream sodas.

Senior year of training, Aunt Gathel was in surgery, working with Dr. Sage, one of the best ear, nose, and throat men in the state of Indiana. She had talked to him at length about Puff’s deafness and asked if he would take a look at him. Gathel asked Nellie May and H.T. to make the appointment and come down from Montpelier to take Puff to the doctor. The memory of the trip to Mayo still seemed fresh and they didn’t want to go through it all over again. Gathel pestered them until they relented.

Later, Gathel found out that Dr. Sage said there was no help for Puff’s deafness. “I felt so bad,” she admitted years after. “I felt that I had built up Puff and the folks—especially Mother—for another letdown. I felt very guilty and very sad about that.”

Oddly enough, Dad didn’t feel at all sad. He had never let himself get his hopes up, and so he wasn’t at all disappointed then or any other time. He only felt bad because Gathel felt so guilty.

Dad hardly gave the doctor’s appointment a second thought. He was too excited about graduating from high school. He’d learned a trade to prepare himself for going out into the world. He was taught how to operate a linotype machine, an enormous contraption that converted molten lead into type slugs. The slugs were then used in the newspaper printing process. The job was considered ideal for deaf people because they were careful, patient workers who wouldn’t make too many typos, and presumably they weren’t disturbed by the noise of the heavy machinery. Dad was looking forward to being out on his own, away from school, earning a salary.

There would, however, be one more incident with doctors, soon after. Dad found this one particularly amusing.

At the very end of the war, Dad was called before the Blackford County Selective Service Board. Most of the men had known the Walker family all their lives, but the board was desperate for recruits. At one point Dad was writing a note to an officer when someone behind him slapped a hand down on the table. My father started and whirled around. Like most deaf people, Dad is sensitive to vibrations, not because his ability to feel them is heightened but because he pays more attention to the sensations he receives. Also, although he describes himself as “stone deaf,” there is virtually no one who has an absolutely flat audiogram. Somewhere there is some tiny perception of something akin to noise in everyone. For Dad, it happens to be a very loud bang, just like the one on the draft board’s table. When another officer banged, Dad jumped again. The board required medical reports no matter how well its members knew the young man, but because their suspicions were
aroused about the severity of Dad’s deafness, they forced him to see several doctors. Finally—according to family legend—it was not deafness but his very flat feet that kept Puff from being drafted.