Indianapolis, 1950

Mom was nineteen, nearly twenty, when she finished high school. Dad had been working as a printer at the Bluffton News-Banner for three years when he went to pick up Alice for their date in her apartment off Central Avenue in Indianapolis. It was the fall of 1950 and Alice made the mistake of leaving Doris Jean and Puff alone. As my mother signs, blushing, “It was love at first sight,” the first two fingers on each hand facing each other, a little surprised, at “sight.” Every weekend Dad made the two-and-a-half-hour drive from Montpelier to Indianapolis in his green ’47 Studebaker. All that winter they went out for dinner dates, and in May of 1951, Dad asked Mom to go on a picnic to Qualifications Day at the Indianapolis 500-Mile Race. Dad knew it was going to be a special day. He brought along his camera and asked several people to take pictures of them. Mom wore a crisp white blouse with tiny capped sleeves at her shoulders and a long, dark, flowing skirt. Dad rolled up the sleeves on his white shirt. He had on good pleated trousers.

In the middle of the infield, they spread a blanket and set
down a red metal picnic hamper, Mom happily pulling out sandwiches and salads she and Alice had made. A few feet away, cars were roaring by, grinding gears, smashing into cement walls. Dad gently touched Doris Jean’s arm while she was looking for the mayonnaise. Dad asked Mom to marry him. Actually what he signed was: “Can we marry soon?” The sign for “marry” is two hands circling then firmly clasping each other.

The crowds were all around them, people playing catch, shouting to each other above the din of the track. Yet it was an intimate conversation because no one around them could understand what they were saying to each other. Mom shook her closed hand up and down—“Yes.”

The next weekend the two of them drove to see her parents. Doris Jean went up to her mother, pointed at her boyfriend, pointed at herself, and, using the manual alphabet, slowly finger-spelled “m-a-r-r-y.” Grandma Wells clapped her hands and broke into a grin.

“Chet,” she yelled at my grandfather, “they’re getting married!” Immediately he went over to my father and pumped his hand. Pursing his lips, he said “Good” and nodded his head. My father, describing the meeting later, would say: “They were appreciated we asked them for the marriage.”

Doris Jean and Puff set the date for a respectable but not overly long four months thence. The wedding was to be held in Fillmore; just a bulge on the highway, where Grandma and Grandpa Wells were living. H.T. was to officiate. Because they couldn’t use the phone, Mom and Dad made several trips to Fillmore and Montpelier to check on flowers, invitations, and details for the reception.

The week before the wedding, H.T. typed up their vows so Mom and Dad would know exactly what to expect. It was a traditional text. H.T. began by asking: “If anyone has any objection, let him or her speak now or forever hold their peace...” The ceremony ended with the Lord’s Prayer. When Dad showed the vows to a friend, he excitedly wrote across the bottom of the single-spaced page: “Is this good sound? I think it is. Oh Boy! We’ll be husband & wife.”

They were married in the tiny white frame Methodist church on Main Street. My mother wore a virginal white lace gown with pearl buttons. She was a shy bride. Dad wore a gray suit and wide tie. Grandpa Wells gave the bride away. It was “simple and nice,” my Grandma Wells once told me. “Real pretty. Nothing fancy.” She and Grandma Nellie both cried.

The attendants, both deaf, were two of Mom’s and Dad’s best friends. There was also an interpreter, Miss Christian, an older woman who wore gloves and a big hat festooned with birds that bounced as she signed.

H.T. could starve you to death while he was saying the blessing before a meal, and I imagine that at the wedding of his youngest son, he got pretty wound up. But Mom and Dad were so excited, they could hardly focus their eyes on the interpreter’s hands. Like every young bride and groom, they barely knew what the preacher had said.

Prompted at the right moment by Miss Christian, they each signed and uttered a muted “I do.” After the ceremony, everyone, friends and relatives, went back to the Wells house to eat a ham and potato salad lunch, followed by cake and punch and mints that had been made by my grandmother. She’d also had to clear most of the furniture out of one bedroom to hold all the presents that had been brought. Mom and Dad fed each other bites of wedding cake. The pictures show Dad cupping his hand to his chin as Mom coyly overstuffed his mouth.

Mom changed into a gray suit she’d bought for her trousers and then the two of them got into Dad’s almost-new black ’50 Chevy. As Dad turned on the ignition, there was an explosion under the hood. Mom, easily frightened, jumped out and clear of the car. Dad laughed. He knew someone had hit a pop-
ping device. He coaxed her back into the car and they took off, waving. But as they did, everyone at the reception began laughing. One of my father’s brothers had put rocks in the hubcaps. Only the plan had been foiled: Mom and Dad didn’t feel the rocks banging—and they certainly didn’t hear them.

My aunt and uncle and a couple of their friends, thinking the rocks might dent the hubcaps, hopped into a car to stop Mom and Dad. Dad drove faster. He was sure they were about to pull another trick. The race continued through the backcountry roads, Dad having no intention of letting them smear him or his car with shaving cream or whatever. Finally, my aunt pulled up alongside the Chevy, pointed toward the hubcaps, frowning and frantically shaking her head “no.” Dad pulled over. Sheepishly, the fellows in my aunt’s car removed the hubcaps, derocked the car, and Mom and Dad took off, headed south for the Great Smoky Mountains.

Dad loves driving, especially through winding roads and mountain passes. The scenery was beautiful. In the trunk were the heavy brown leather suitcases they’d bought together. Mom had made a neat list of each item she’d purchased: stockings, hat, girdle, gloves, and next to the items were the prices she’d paid from her salary. Everything for their life was to be shiny and new, down to their underwear.

The two of them were delighted to be free, away from the regimentation of school and their parents’ watchful eyes. Except for a few trips to the hospital, for the next thirty-odd years, they were rarely apart overnight.

On the second day of their honeymoon, they stopped at a mountaintop gift shop, looked around, but didn’t buy anything. As they were leaving, though, the owner rushed up and grabbed my mother, startling her. My mother looked down. The shopkeeper was pressing something into her hands, a pair of tiny moccasins to fit a baby. My mother looked up at her questioningly. The woman started speaking, but Mom smiled,

shook her head, and pointed at her ear. The woman picked up my mother’s left hand and tapped her shiny rings, pointed at my father, and then shook their hands. It was a wedding present.

For the first time in their lives, Doris Jean and Puff had someone to talk to twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year. They no longer had to worry about teachers slapping their hands for using them to talk. The curtain that language had drawn between Mom and her family, and Dad and his, was no longer there. The inability to hear is a nuisance; the inability to communicate is the tragedy.

American Sign Language—ASL—is a language unto itself, with its own syntax and grammar. Adjectives follow nouns, as in Romance languages. In sign, one says “house blue,” establishing a picture of what is being described and then embellishing on that. Many sign language “sentences” begin with a time element and then proceed with what happened, thereby conjugating the verbs. The movement of the shoulders, the speed of the hands, the facial expression, the number of repetitions of a sign, combine with the actual signs to give meaning to the language. Signing is precise. The casual gestures hearing people make when talking have no meaning in sign language. Hearing people who do learn sign usually practice “signed English,” a word-for-word coding of English into signs, but that translation sorely limits the language. In some hands, signing is an art equal to an actor’s rendering of Shakespeare. It is not just swoops and swirls but an enormous variety of expression, just as a great actor’s delivery is completely different from some ham’s idea of haughty speeches.

The creativity can be remarkable. A person can sculpt exactly what he’s saying. To sign “flower growing,” you delicately place the fingertips at each side of the nose as if sniffing the flower, then you push the fingertips of one hand up
Watching

through the thumb-and-first finger of the other. The flower can bloom fast and fade, or, with several quick bursts, it can be a whole field of daffodils. In spoken English, most people would seem silly if they talked as poetically as some supposedly illiterate deaf people sign. With one handshake—the thumb and little finger stretched out, the first finger pointing forward—you can make a plane take off, encounter engine trouble and turbulence, circle an airport, then come in for a bumpy landing. That entire signed sentence takes a fraction of the time that saying it out loud would.

The face and body convey nearly as much as the actual signs. A raised eyebrow can completely alter the meaning of a sentence. Recounting a conversation, the signer shifts his upper torso just slightly, thereby doing away with the need for unwieldy “he said . . . then she said” constructions. People stutter in sign. There are even sign language equivalents for spoken sentence fillers, such as the irritating “you know,” “well,” and “I mean.” Instead of using those phrases, the signer repeats a particular gesture, such as the hand flipping over, palm up. And just as surely as the British can pinpoint a person’s station in life and place of birth upon hearing a couple of sentences, a signer can do the same upon seeing a couple of phrases. Signing can be small and intimate or big and brassy. It can convey every nuance imaginable. The rules for inventing new signs are strict. Mom and Dad, of course, had signs they invented for special things—the name of their street, for example. And they made up private names for each other.

Mom and Dad moved into a rented house in Montpelier and began saving for their own home. They busied themselves setting up housekeeping, and within six months of their marriage Mom became pregnant. She was nearly eight months pregnant when one night my father had a sudden attack. Mom ran to get help—of course they didn’t have a phone. It was appendicitis.

Good Sound

Dad was rushed to the hospital for an appendectomy, which went well. Mom had been so frantic she’d left her keys inside the house. (Dad, as always, had so much presence of mind he’d locked the door even when he was doubled over with pain.) She had no way of getting inside, and her car keys were on the same ring. My mother never wanted to cause any trouble and wouldn’t dream of bothering anyone. She didn’t want people to think she was less capable or more dependent because of her deafness. So she broke the window and crawled in, delicately maneuvering her girth over the jagged shards of glass.