researchers have determined that the fetus hears before it sees: the eyelids don’t open until about the seventh month, and at birth, the sense of hearing is better developed than that of vision. The newborn’s eyes are open, but when the baby responds to something by turning its head, it is actually searching for the source of sounds. Babies prefer voices over other noises, and women’s voices over men’s. Armed with that knowledge, it’s little wonder that some infant psychologists speculate that much of our personality may be determined in utero. In the course of my own idle speculation, I’ve wondered about the impact of extended periods of silence on my sisters and me, whether we could differentiate my parents’ muted voices from other voices as soon as we were born, whether we had some innate appreciation for what things would be like for us.

Dad passed out cigars to the men at work and cradled his arms to let them know his wife had had their baby. He pulled out the small white notepad he always carried and wrote: “girl.” Underneath, he wrote: “Lou Ann.”

My grandmother Wells had helped Mom and Dad choose that name. They’d needed words they could pronounce easily, a name with few syllables and one that didn’t have any t’s or r’s or p’s.

I’m told my mother just radiated happiness my entire infancy—except when the hint of red hair wore off and she had to tape a bow to the top of my head to clue people in on my gender. I’d ended up with my mother’s Irish coloring and my father’s features—a roundish face, turned-up nose, and dimpled chin—and everyone was happy about the compromise.

Before I was born, Mom and Dad paid sixty-five dollars, more than a week’s salary, for a baby cry box, specially designed to alert deaf parents when their children cried. They placed the dark-brown plastic box, shaped like a radio, next to
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my crib and wired it to a lamp by their bed. As I cried, the box transmitted an impulse to the bulb, which flashed on until I paused for breath. Every night Mom and Dad were privy to their own light show. The device was so sensitive to the noise that as I sputtered, the light sputtered. My mother hadn't read Dr. Spock, probably hadn't even heard of him, but her ability as a mother was instinctive, loving and patient, and she usually carried me from room to room as she cleaned house so she could keep an eye on me. If I was napping, she frequently came in to check. And those times at night when I cried for no good reason, when I'd been fed and diapered and comforted and there was nothing left to do but wait out my tears, the flashing light strobed through the darkened house. Mom and Dad had one advantage over most parents, however. They didn't have to listen to my wails. They could pull the plug if they wanted, although I doubt they ever did.

When I look at the old pictures of them, pushing me in a stroller, giving me a bath—the pictures all parents take of their children—the two of them look as if they're about to burst. Mom says she didn't even mind when I hit the "terrible twos." I swallowed a bobby pin and had to be rushed to the hospital for stomach X rays. (One aunt, inclined to be dramatic, insisted it was an open safety pin.) Another time, as Mom and I lay sleeping during our shared afternoon nap, I shredded her foam-rubber pillow and mine. "Our children never any trouble," my mother signs, dreamily. "I love taking care of my three babies."

There was one thing my parents did worry about: my learning to speak well. We lived near Grandma Nellie and H.T., and two sets of aunts and uncles, Bill and Margaret, and Ghee and Guy. I listened to their talk and I loved chattering to them. But more important, while I was still quite small, Mom and Dad bought one of the first television sets, a box that was mostly speaker and base, with a tiny six-inch screen.

Radio, of course, had meant nothing to my parents, but here was a device with small, moving pictures for them and voices for their daughter. A neighbor showed them how to adjust the volume knob, and each time they turned it on, they would feel for the delicate click, then turn to the precise volume for me. When I got a little older and they got a set with a bigger screen, they'd turn the dial, watching me. If I wanted the volume increased, I held my palm open and flipped my hand up. If they turned the knob too quickly, I'd clap my hands over my ears, prying one away to gesture "down."

And it was there, sitting in my small green rocking chair, that I would watch the screen for hours on end, developing what was for northern Indiana a strange, accentless "national-speak," occasionally rushing off to tell my parents about the Cold War or the baseball results. Though our neighbors talked with a hearty midwestern twang, substituting "warsh" and "git" for "wash" and "get," my words were precisely formed, even a little clipped. I spoke rapidly but my voice remained soft. In grade school, it was nearly inaudible.

When Mom and Dad talked to each other, they used American Sign Language. With their hands, they were deaf and fast as lightning. Talking to me, they used their voices—throaty whispers—and signed simultaneously in straight English. They tended to finger-spell a separate sign for each letter of a word (a somewhat laborious process), rather than sign (where one symbol can have many meanings), reasoning that spelling was less confusing for a hearing child. As a direct result, my spelling was quite good. But when my parents got into a room with their deaf friends and the signing flashed furiously, it was as if I'd been taught nursery French and then been taken to La Comédie Française.
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Speech was always an effort for Mom and Dad, so unless they were talking directly to me, they didn't talk at all, except for those occasions when Mom was teaching me signs. She'd prop me up, point to herself and say "I," hug her two shoulders, "love," then point at me, "you." As it turns out, the first word I used was a sign—"apple"—a sort of inscribed dimple, the joint of the first finger twisting in my cheek. The spoken words followed soon after.

One of the few studies done on hearing children of deaf parents dwelt on one minor but fascinating point: By the age of two, hearing children perceived their parents' deafness well enough to know automatically that they must use gestures with their parents and other deaf people. If the children talked at all, their voices had an unusual quality and they exaggerated their mouth movements. These same children immediately shifted gears, speaking in "normal" voices, with hearing people.

Intuitively I knew not to talk to my mother and father. I gurgled to them to make my lips move the way theirs did. I'm told, but I never spoke distinct words unless I accompanied those words with a sign.

Even today when I sign to Mom and Dad, I make unusual distinctions. If I'm alone with them, I sign and don't use my voice at all. If a hearing stranger is with us and I'm translating, my English is clear. But if I'm with my sisters or an old friend, I use a strange hum-like voice as I sign and as I interpret what Mom and Dad are saying. The voice is almost an unconscious parody of a deaf voice. It seems I only use that voice, though, when I'm comfortable having my parents and certain hearing people in the same room. It's my way of including someone in the family.

The relatives all seemed to breathe a sigh of relief when I was born hearing. (While I was still in the cradle, several of them performed surreptitious hearing tests on me. Sneaking up to my bassinet, they'd carry out the same tests Dr. Douglas had in the delivery room.) Although my grandma Nellie had declared that the deafness in the Walker family was not inherited or inheritable, Uncle Gamel had never had children and thus the genetics of the situation hadn't actually been tested. After all, it was a quirkly coincidence, having two sons deaf from infancy in one family.

However, Mom and Dad certainly never thought of it as a genetics experiment: They were creating a family. This was the first opportunity they'd had in their lives to hold on to something that was their own and that was permanent. It was an affirmation of their capabilities as people. And the things they'd created—their marriage, their home, their baby—were whole and perfectly formed. They'd suddenly, magically, brought life to their own world. Their home was a haven. When they were there alone, it was exactly the way they'd dreamed it would be.

My parents bought a small white house with a yard and big trees. The house needed repairs and they enjoyed working together on it. They didn't have much furniture, but everything was clean and neat. And they got a dog. Poodie was a darling, honey-colored cocker spaniel. Not only was he good company, but he was helpful too. By looking at Poodie, my parents automatically knew when someone was coming to the door, and at night they depended on Poodie's bark to scare away burglars.

As my parents' child I was part of the deaf world with its culture, even though I could hear and was thus wired to normal society. My parents' friends felt I was "one of them," and years later, when deaf people asked me how I learned sign language, I could see them relax, I could see the relief on their faces, when I told them my parents were deaf.

As soon as I began to sign and talk, I became my parents' guide. They'd been depending upon me for clues even when I was tiny. If I cried though all my biological needs were met, they might realize it was thundering outside. Other times
they’d watch my face and eyes, notice that I’d responded to something, and then turn around to see someone walking into the room behind them. Mom and Dad never tried to put pressure on me to do things for them. That just came about naturally. If a phone call had to be made, I was the one to make it. And my being able to do so provided a tremendous convenience to my parents. Before, my father might have to drive hours to pick up a document that I could order over the phone in ten minutes. Yet Mom and Dad never took me for granted. “Please, would you mind to...?” and they'd make the request. They hated having to ask for so much to be done for them. But as practical people, they had no choice but to rely on me.

“You help us to know what happens;” Dad often signed of Kay, Jan, and me. “We find out what is interesting. We learn through you.”

My grandma Wells remembers me as a three- or four-year-old telling my parents about polio outbreaks and vaccinations. I have often wondered whether in some ways it might have been easier for them not to have had a hearing child. Certainly it was useful; we were a self-contained family unit. Yet the fact that I was hearing and they were deaf was held up to them every day of their lives. Here were people—their own relatives—coming into their house and acting delighted that the child was not like the parents. “Oh, what a relief you’re not deaf,” ladies gushed. Well, yes and no for Mom and Dad. Perhaps they would have had children they understood better if we had been more like them. Having hearing children meant they had to come into contact with hearing people even more frequently than they would have otherwise—hearing teachers and scout leaders wouldn't have been such a part of their lives.

“Do you think your parents are jealous you can hear?” a businessman once asked me. It seemed like one of the hundreds of inane questions I'd heard; his frame of reference was so different from ours. “No,” was all I could answer. There was just no point in explaining.

There were a few times when Kay or Jan was giving a speech in public, or when I was talking in front of a group, that I saw my mother sign, “I wish I could hear what my daughter is saying.” The sign for “wish” is a kind of hungry, longing sign, the hand open and sliding down the chest. But the intention had nothing to do with the differences between us; it had to do with a mother and her daughter.

Still, we encountered strange reversals. When I was in kindergarten, strangers would come up to my father, start to talk, and he'd point to his ear and shake his head “no.” He wanted to let them know he couldn’t hear, then he held up his hand to indicate “slow,” following that with a “come on” gesture, signaling them to talk. All the while he'd be staring at the person's lips. Immediately the stranger would bend over toward me and ask, “Does he lip-read?” as if Dad had suddenly become as inanimate as a cigar store Indian. And that was the turnabout. Usually people ignore children and talk to adults. In our case, I was the five-year-old head of household and they ignored my father. But those were minor irritations caused by strangers. There were other, worse slights.

I must have been about three at the time of one of the Walker family gatherings. I was the only child there. Mom and Dad kept an eye on me all afternoon, the way they always did. I sat in my lacy dress in the corner, cutting out paper dolls.

“Now, Lou Ann, don’t cut your pretty little dress with those scissors,” one aunt said.

“Be a nice girl and stop playing with those blocks.” It was Grandpa Walker.

“Come over here and sit with me,” an uncle said, patting his lap. “Be a good girl, now. You know you have to be especially good and watch over your mother and father.”

It was a phrase I would hear a thousand times as I was
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growing up. Be good. Be good. Be good. And even now I hear that phrase rasping through my head like a handsaw—pushing and pulling, shoving and twisting through a plank.

Mom and Dad watched me carefully and disciplined me when necessary. All the relatives believed I was well behaved, friendly and eager, although content to be off playing by myself. Yet this scenario took place every time we got together with the relatives.

"Everybody would try to interfere," my aunt Gathel once told me about that and many other afternoons of my childhood. "They'd tell you what to do as though your folks weren't even there. Your folks were watching. They could tell what was happening. It was up to them if anything needed to be said to you."

Even as a toddler I was learning that deafness didn't have, only to do with broken ears.

My father's first cousin Velma tells the story of when I'd been dropped off to play with her baby, Ann. I was about a year and a half old at the time, Ann a few months younger.

We'd been playing quietly and happily in Ann's crib, both of us scrubbed and neat. Velma, a superbly efficient mother, handed us stuffed animals she'd made and then turned around to fold laundry. Until I started wailing.

She turned back, to see me holding up an arm with teeth-marks in it. She was horrified.

"Bite her back, Lou Ann."

I kept on with my crying.

"She bit you, now you have to bite her back. Teach her a lesson."

Velma held Ann's arm up to my mouth. I demurred.

"Come on. Stand up for yourself." Whereupon Velma, the ideal mother, decided to teach both infants a lesson. She leaned over and bit her own baby on the arm.

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Untold Secrets

Ann screamed, even though it was hardly a bite. Apparently I just sat there and stared. To this day Velma is troubled by the fact that I refused to bite back.

It's hard to know where characteristics are ingrained in babies—in the genes, in the womb, in the cradle. To Velma, I think, this incident was early proof that although I could hear, my personality just wasn't tough enough. To me, the story indicated that, for better or worse, I'd absorbed my parents' habit of turning the other cheek. There would be repercussions.

Montpelier is about as American as you can get. People fly the red, white, and blue all year round, and the place hasn't changed much in the last fifty years. Plunked down in the middle of the cornfields, it has one stoplight, where the highway that whizzes through intersects Main Street. You can still park diagonally on Main.

For years the names on the stores were the same as the ones in the two cemeteries. There was Henderson's Hardware, Flanagan's Five and Dime, and Bontrager's Drug Store, where you could still get cherry Cokes and then reach under the table in the booth to feel decades of chewing gum wads stuck to the bottom. There was a movie theater when we lived there, the Palace, with its pink stucco facade. The movies it showed had been out in Indianapolis for a year already before they reached us. TV and the triple-X drive-in took all the business away, though. The Palace admitted defeat and closed soon after we moved away.

People here are real midwestern pioneer stock, mostly Irish, who had come over during the potato famine, and German. These were the ones who were adventurous and hardy enough to make it a third of the way across the country. When they saw the flat, fertile land, the settlers decided this part of the Louisiana Territory was good enough for them. They were
plain people. The only plainer ones were the Amish who settled thirty miles away from Montpelier, in Berne.

Hardly anyone moves to or from Montpelier. Everybody knows everybody else’s business—which can feel like strangulation sometimes, but it has its compensations. You never have to do any explaining. You never have to lock your doors. And a kid can have the run of the place. By the age of two, I was a freewheeling, independent spirit.

It was 1955 when Mom and Dad had saved enough to buy the old wooden house on Jefferson Street in Montpelier. Mom worked on fixing it up during the day, and Dad helped her in the evenings. Weekends—I was about two—I’d stay with either Grandma Walker or Grandma Wells while Mom and Dad did heavy repairs.

One weekend Dad was laying linoleum tiles in a closet when some of the boiling fixative ran down his leg, catching fire. He thought my mother was out on an errand and so he ran to his brother Bill’s house down the street for help. No one was home. He ran across the street to a neighbor, who figured out what was wrong and called the fire department. In the meantime, my mother, who had actually been in another part of the house, smelled smoke and rushed out. When Dad got back to the house, a policeman saw him limping, his leg charred. He rushed Dad to the doctor. Soon after, Bill came with an ambulance to rush him to the hospital. Dad spent months in the intensive care ward with third-degree burns over his legs. Mom and Dad’s house, along with most of their savings, went up in flames.

Dad underwent skin grafts—sheet grafts made with a tool like a cheese slicer—without anesthesia. Aunt Gathel told me years later. The doctors worried about the effects of anesthetics, fearing his lungs might have been burned as well.

Grandma Nellie sat in the waiting room with Doris Jean during the skin-grafting surgery. She heard a piercing scream and knew it was Puff. She said she didn’t see how he could keep from going crazy; the pain must have been terrible. But she was glad Doris couldn’t hear it and Nellie tried not to show how she was aching inside for her youngest son.

Dad has no memory of calling out during the operation.

H.T. had started a funeral business and ambulance service back in 1912. It had gone through tough times over the years. Montpelier, though a tiny town, had several competing funeral homes and H.T. was not a particularly competent businessman. He overstocked expensive caskets, and he seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time on outside projects. During World War II, Uncle Carl would finally help get the business into the black, then he would leave to run another establishment and Uncle Bill would come back from the war in the South Pacific and stay on.

The funeral business sounds more gruesome than it is. It’s actually a lot of waiting around—except when there’s a funeral, and then everyone is scurrying, putting out folding chairs, carrying baskets of flowers, picking up dresses or suits, chauffeuring family members, delivering death notices and boxes of sympathy cards. People don’t die on schedule. Sometimes there are several funerals in a week. Some months there aren’t any.

Whenever Puff was home, he helped by rushing to accidents with the ambulance, picking up bodies from other states, and driving the flower car in funeral processions, doing much of the heavy work required. He was also called on to transport sick people between hospitals and drive chairs out to reunions whenever a family wanted to borrow them. My aunts and uncles were impressed with his industry. Over the years he put in thousands of hours.

In the middle of one night, early in Mom and Dad’s marriage, the two of them were asleep, with their window shade
slightly open. There had been a bad car wreck, and Bill came around to their window, took out a cigarette lighter, and flicked it on and off until Dad finally woke. Dad spent most of the night ferrying bloody bodies from the scene to the hospital, then headed directly to work early the next morning.

Just before the fire, Dad had been offered a newspaper job in Fort Wayne, a town that was then about an hour-and-a-half drive from Montpelier. It was a better-paying job in a larger shop. Dad went in and told him of his plans, writing on a piece of paper when he was going and where. H.T. put the paper down, closed his eyes, and gave Dad an elaborate shake of the head “no.” Dad was crestfallen. He looked into his father’s eyes. “Why?” he said in his quiet voice. He held out his notepad and pen to his father for an answer.

H.T. wouldn’t take the paper. “Too far,” he said aloud. “Stay here at home.” Then he pointed at Dad and pointed straight down at the ground. “Right here.”

When H.T. didn’t get his way, he could make life very unpleasant. Reluctantly, Dad stayed. Both he and Mom knew how hard it would be to move to a new town with a new baby and without any parental support. Looking for a place to live at a time when landlords wouldn’t rent to deaf people and setting up bank accounts when banks often required deaf people to get co-signees just for checking accounts wasn’t going to be easy.

Then there was the fire. Most of their money had gone to buying and fixing up the house, and with the medical bills and Dad not working all those months, they needed a bigger paycheck. Another offer came, this time from a deaf high school classmate living in Dallas, Texas. The friend had written saying there was an opening at his newspaper, that there was a nice deaf community in Dallas, and the pay was higher. To my father, it seemed like a dream opportunity. In Montpelier they didn’t have any deaf friends. Garnel and his wife, Imogene, fed up with their farm, had moved to Anderson, Indiana. Mom and Dad were feeling isolated.

Again Dad went in to announce his intentions to H.T., who told him he absolutely could not leave. H.T. informed Dad that he had obligations to the family business, that the family had helped him out when he was sick and he couldn’t go off with a bunch of strangers to Texas. And then he invoked the big guns: “You’ll break your mother’s heart.”

Dad complied. For a while.

Later that year, we all went off to the Montpelier Parade.

There’s a black-and-white photo of Dad standing next to his decorated bicycle, looking straight into the camera, beaming with that gap-toothed smile of his. He’d just won first place for best decorations and there were yards and yards of colored crepe paper woven through the spokes in his bike. A banner that says “Welcome Montpelier Day. Parade” is stretched between poles attached to the front and back of the bike. He’s wearing a felt hat, cut from an old fedora, pulled straight down on his head.

When Dad was a kid, the parade had marked his favorite day of the year. Beauty queens—actually bashful local girls in prom dresses—rode in the backs of convertibles, waving, throwing pencils and small toys and trinkets to the crowds. The convertibles were decorated with pink and white tissue flowers, many of which Dad had made himself. Uncle Bill got out his collection of antique cars, and when Dad was a few years older, he’d get to drive one himself. Every year they had a big raffle. The year I was three, the grand prize was a bike. I won. It was a full-size, two-speed, fat-tired, fiery red Columbia, my pride for my entire childhood. I didn’t even know I’d entered the contest. Mom and Dad hadn’t said anything to me about it.

As it turns out, I hadn’t entered. H.T. had rigged the contest.
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First, he stuffed the box with raffle tickets that had my name on them. He was the master of ceremonies that day, as well as the person who drew the winners’ names out of the raffle box. Apparently, he hid behind the curtain of the gymnasium stage, throwing away every name he picked out of the box until he finally came to mine, and proclaimed me grand prize winner. H.T. had wanted to please his granddaughter and his son. When Dad heard the story several months later, he made no response. His face went very white; his mouth was set. It was a turning point. He resolved he would not subject his family to domineering any more.

My sister Kay was born a year and a half after that. It had been astonishing to watch my slim mother inflate like a beach ball all those months. One day, several weeks after my fourth birthday, she brought home a chubby new baby.

There was no question of sibling rivalry. Kay was mine. I helped diaper her. If she cried during the day, I rushed to get Mom. I watched her and held her as often as I could. When she was awake, I’d go in to her room and talk to her, leaning my forehead on the bars of her white crib. She was a colicky baby who often cried, and that was the only thing that displeased me—having the accustomed quiet of the house disturbed. I’d walk into her room and whisper to her, trying to calm her, trying to jolly her up, my small hands clumsily patting the top of her head, cooing to her, the way I imagined mothers did for their babies. I was tall and skinny for four and I loved being allowed to push Kay’s stroller. Kay was an extraordinarily shy baby who hid behind my mother’s legs, clinging to her skirts.

“Now you look after her,” a cousin would tell me. “You talk to her a lot because your mother and daddy can’t.” Soberly, I heeded these instructions. As we got older, Kay and I almost always played together. If we were outside in the sandbox—a tractor wheel turned on its side and painted white—Mom would sometimes go inside and do her housework. She’d glance out at us as we filled pails with sand. If the sand was wet from the rain, we’d build castles. Rather, I built the castles and Kay smashed them down.

Our temperaments were as different as our coloring. She had pale-blond, almost whitish hair, and although she was fair, she would later tan. Her chin was nicely rounded like Mom’s; the towheadedness came from Dad. I don’t know what she was thinking about it all, but I was flourishing, playing teacher, encouraging her to speak, instructing her in the arts of sandcastle building, singing, and everything else I could think of. It couldn’t have been that easy for her—power is a heady thing for a four-year-old—but to everyone who saw us, we seemed as close and happy, as two sisters could be.

I’d just turned six when Dad drove down to Indianapolis to the Star and News, two sister newspapers, and handed his union card to the foreman of the linotype room. He was hired on the spot. He drove back to Montpelier, told everyone he’d taken a new job, that there was no turning back. He gave his boss notice and in February of that year he moved to a rented room in downtown Indianapolis. After work he went house hunting, driving all over town to find a neighborhood he liked, one that was clean and good enough for his family. In the spring he found a half-built frame house in the suburbs to the east of Indianapolis.

H.T. complained to his other children that he couldn’t understand why Puff would up and move away from his family like that. Gathel suggested to him that Puff was thinking of his future. “Why don’t you try offering him a part of the business?” H.T. said that he had and that Puff had turned down the offer. That was not true. No one had ever asked Dad to be a partner in the funeral home. Nor had they offered him the as-
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sistant’s job they gave to outsiders. No one had even offered to compensate him for all those back-breaking hours he’d spent carrying caskets.

I was excited about going to a new place, but the move would prove to be momentous and difficult for all of us. We were leaving safety, the place we knew and where we were understood, for a big city full of strangers. At first we felt all alone. We had no relatives living there. Slowly Mom and Dad began reestablishing contact with the friends who’d gone to high school with them. Dad’s job was much better and my school was excellent.

Before leaving Montpelier I’d been serious and self-conscious enough, but this new place, as placid and ordinary as it seemed, was overwhelming. If a neighbor came by, I would make the introductions and explain where we’d come from. But mostly people seemed to circle our house, eyeing us. I could see the window shades lifted and the dark shapes of heads in the windows whenever we walked into our front yard. In Montpelier, people hadn’t been that way at all. Gradually, through the neighborhood kids’ responses to my parents—the ones who weren’t shy about staring open-mouthed at Mom and Dad—I figured it out. These people had never met a deaf person before. We were a curiosity. For the first time, it hit me that my mother and father were deaf.

It was a gray afternoon in early spring. The yards were too muddy to walk in. I saw some kids playing in the driveway across the street from ours and suddenly I decided I should go meet them. I figured the easiest way would be to bring over some kind of present. I went in and asked Mom for some cookies to serve.

“I want them on this plate,” I told her, climbing up on the counter to retrieve one from the cabinet. The dish had a delicate blue and yellow floral pattern on it. Mom had splurged on

a set of dishes to go with our new house. They were called Melmac, a tempered plastic, guaranteed not to break. The guarantee was what intrigued me.

I took out the Oreos. The kids just looked at me. Finally, they took the cookies and as they stood holding the dark wafers in each hand and licking out the cream centers, I announced that the fragile-looking plate was unbreakable. Naturally, one of the kids was skeptical. I let him smack the plate on the asphalt street. The first several bangs didn’t do it.

“So what,” one boy said.

“It won’t break no matter what,” I told him. “You should hit it harder,” and I took it over to the large rock at the edge of the drive, held the plate up over my head, and brought it down with a smack that left a chip as jagged as a broken tooth.

None of the kids said anything. I felt more like an outsider than ever. I walked back into the house, scared Mom would be mad. She was so proud of her brand-new dishes.

“I broke your new plate,” I confessed, “broke” signed by putting my two fists together and twisting them apart.

“I know. I saw from the window,” she said. “It’s all right.”

Instinctively, despairingly, she knew what the real problem was that day of the Oreos, and it was one she couldn’t solve. She got down on her knees and put her arms around me, then she held me away. “You take things too hard,” she signed.

I never had the feeling I was being watched, but from one window or another, over the years, Mom would see me fall off lawn chairs and bicycles, drive the car into ditches, and neck in the driveway. She watched and knew I had to get into and out of my own scrapes. She knew I was too independent to allow for any interference. She also knew there wasn’t much she could do.

On a sunny morning that same summer, a neighbor, the mother of someone I was going to play with, came out of her
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house. She was a pleasant-looking woman, wearing a dress and an apron.

"Are you the one with the mother and father who are deaf?"
"Yes."

"Oh, you poor little thing. It must be terrible. Them both being mute that way."
She was nice but she was feeling too sorry for me.

"No, it's okay." I wanted her daughter to hurry up so we could go play.

"Can't they talk?"
"Yes, they can, but their voices are sort of hard to understand. I interpret for them. We're fine. Really."

Later on that day, one of the kids I was playing with said, "It must be great, your mom and dad can't hear. You must get away with murder. You can yell all you want and they never scream at you or nothin'."

"Well, it's not so great. It's hard for them to be deaf. And I don't scream much and they can yell at me if they want."

I writhed under the scrutiny of outsiders. I didn't think they ever got it right, how it was in my family. They thought it was either better or worse than it was. I never wanted to go on explaining too long. There was too much of it to do.

I hardly ever brought kids home with me. Mom asked me not to, saying the house wasn't straightened up enough—in fact, it was always neat and clean. The real reason was that in this new place among strangers, her house was a refuge. It was easier having her daughter run small errands, talk to door-to-door salesmen, and act as her buffer to the outside world.