I remember one Christmas Eve so clear, so breathtakingly pure. Soft snow began falling that morning, a crystal white blanket over the yard, covering the maple tree in front and its twin next door. It fell and fell, and a few minutes after the mailman had trudged through to deliver the last of the Christmas cards, his tracks had magically disappeared. Dad was at work. Each of us—Kay, Jan, Mom, and I—was in a different part of the house making surprises, each excited, dreaming of the reactions of the rest.

In the kitchen, my mother created endless confections, brownies and cookies covered with silver beads so shiny they looked like jewels, pecan pies, pumpkin pies, sculpted breads, even a fruitcake with succulent red cherries. Only the grown-ups would eat the rum cakes and cheese balls rolled in pecans. But she’d made a favorite for each of us. There was no more room in the refrigerator. She stacked confections on top of the icebox, on counters in the garage, and covered in cool back rooms.

On the floor of the living room, Jan sat, the dimples in her cheeks showing her effort, designing an ornament.

In her bedroom, Kay with the round cheeks and the pixie


cut that made her cheeks look even rounder, Kay who would soon start stretching to become the tallest of us, was wrapping gifts.

Each of us had a color, one that had been assigned to us as babies, one that we would keep through adulthood as ours. Kay’s was pale pink, delicate and shy, the color of a blush on the cheeks. Jan’s was red, bright and happy and alive. Mine was blue, to pick up the color of my eyes, my mother said.

That Christmas we each wore that color, that hue that brought out the colors of our skin, our eyes, our cheeks, that complemented our hair.

Jan was covered with more sequins than the bell she was making; the glue stuck to her fingers, dabs of it spotted her red shirt. Kay was calling for Jan to come hold her finger as an anchor to the ribbon bow she was making.

The windows clouded from the heat of the stove and the front-door window had smudges at each level where we’d rubbed away the fog from our own breathing to look at the yard.

It snowed all day and we created all day. We heard the soft whoosh of a car in the driveway at five and knew it was Dad. Mom felt the floor pound as the three of us rushed to the door, and she followed close behind.

Darkness came early and we were glad of it. We turned on the outside decorations, the lights Dad had strung in the evergreen bushes and around the edges of the roof. The icy tips of the maple branches glistened, reflecting the reds and greens and golds of our lamps.

And oh, the smells. Each dish, more tantalizing than the last, released sweet aromas through the whole house.

Finally, it was time for dinner. The lace tablecloth, the silver, the best dishes were laid. We’d even dressed up.

But first we went to the living room for one last look at the tree and the presents assembled underneath. Jan ran to turn off
the lamps. Kay gasped at the beauty of the tinsel and tiny lights glowing in the darkened room, her enormous eyes growing even wider.

And then we sat down to dinner. Jan sped through grace. She could usually get through her set four-line poem in three seconds. Mom peeked to see if it was done, and as we raised our heads, she grinned, signing an "m" that mounted to an arc and glided into a "c," her fingers rounded: "Merry Christmas," a sign that conjured up a holly wreath with red berries tied in a velvet bow in my mind.

The candlelight flickered as we talked, highlighting a smudge of butter on a fingertip.

It was Christmas, a celebration holy for the dump it put in our throats, for the exquisite perfection of our happiness. We were home. Together. Warm. Safe.

Mom came back from the grocery store sobbing. I’d known something was wrong almost as soon as she pulled into the driveway. Instead of coming through the front door to greet us, as she usually did, she went around back to find Dad, who was building a toolshed.

“What is it?” Dad signed from the length of the yard, seeing her waving her arms.

“Come into the house. I don’t want the neighbors to see me.”

As I approached the kitchen from the hallway, I could hear her choked sobs. She’d cashed Dad’s paycheck that afternoon and then gone to the supermarket. Someone had taken the wallet out of her purse when she’d turned to get a can from the shelf.

We lived from week to week. A month that had five Wednesdays in it was a godsend because, the way Mom and Dad calculated it, that meant there was an “extra” paycheck. They called it “money good.” They figured the monthly bills—mortgage and car loan payments, electric and gas bills, and Dad’s union dues—on a regular four-paycheck month. The little bonus helped us pay off a bank loan quicker, or allowed us to splurge on something new—say a couple of lawn chairs, or a winter coat. Mom is a careful spender; Dad is frugal. But there were plenty of weeks when we gritted our teeth until the following Wednesday. Mom might sheepishly come into our rooms on Saturday afternoon to ask if she could borrow enough for bread and milk from our piggy banks. When the next payday arrived, the first thing she and Dad did was return the money borrowed from us. More than once, such as the week the water heater and the refrigerator blew up, I thought we were in terrible trouble.

But on this quiet, sunny afternoon, Mom was beside herself. I knew how judiciously she shopped and how sharply aware she was of strangers. Standing in the kitchen, it was hard for me to watch her recount how it had been in the checkout lane. Her hands trembled as she signed and she had to keep stopping her words to brush the tears off her face.

The cashier had rung up almost everything—Mom watching the register closely to make sure the amounts punched in were the prices on the packages. And then she reached into her purse and didn’t find her wallet. She rummaged through the bag. She looked on the floor, in the cart, among the groceries—the whole week’s worth of food. She had to fight back the tears as she held out her handbag to show the cashier what had happened. She wasn’t sure if the woman understood her. The people behind her in line grew impatient. The cashier didn’t know what to do. Mom made a gesture as if patting the tops of the groceries—a head of lettuce, cans of peas, milk, carrots, hot dogs, a chicken—indicating to the woman to bag them and leave them there at the end of the counter. She pointed to herself, to the distance, to her wedding ring, and then the floor in front of her, indicating that she had to go get
her husband. She raced back among the rows of the supermarket, hoping perhaps the wallet had dropped on the floor. It hadn't. Then she had come home to tell the story to Daddy.

“Are you angry?” She looked up at him.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he told her.

She was upset that the theft had happened in her own grocery. She worried about how tight money would be. An entire week’s paycheck was gone. But far worse was the fact that she’d been publicly embarrassed. She’d inadvertently created a scene. And there is nothing in the world she hated more. She felt the eyes of the other shoppers on her, just as she’d felt people staring at her—the sign for “staring” is the fingertips of both hands almost poking into one’s own face—in so many restaurants, so many streets, so many thousands of times during her life. That intense self-consciousness, that feeling that she’d done something ugly and wrong—when she’d only just been going about the normal course of affairs.

Before taking Mom back to the grocery, Dad washed and changed clothes. Neither of them could ever feel comfortable going out in public unless they were clean and neatly dressed. Mom fretted the ice cream would melt by the time they got back to the market.

“Please, don’t worry about that,” Dad said, taking her arm and guiding her out the door. “It will be all right.”

That day our lives seemed extraordinarily fragile.

In fifth grade I won the school spelling bee and the next step was getting ready for regionals. I’d never asked Mom and Dad for help with my homework, but now that the words were longer, preparing became difficult. The teacher urged me to have my parents quiz me on the lists in the official book. I didn’t think she comprehended the complicated logistics involved.

Mom was eager to help—until she realized that she couldn’t pronounce any of the words. Few of the arcane terms on that list had exact sign language equivalents. I sat on the ottoman across from her chair and watched her trying to sound out the words to quiz me. With the first one I could puzzle together what she meant. The second one I couldn’t figure out.

“Mom, that’s not a word.”

She looked into the book and tried to say something.

“Zhooodikeyous,” she repeated.

I came around and looked at the finger she had holding her place.

“No, ‘joo-dish-as,’” I mouthed to her.

We went through the same exercise for a few more words. She was getting annoyed. She wanted to help me out, not get a lesson in pronunciation. “Oh, I don’t know these big words! I’m stupid!”

And then she made a sign that sent a chill up my spine. It was a slang sign meaning “I’m deaf,” but it’s crudely done, made by putting the thumb in the ear and turning the rest of the hand downward—almost as if the hand is a donkey’s ears.

“Mom! Stop it! Try something else. I have to practice.”

So we tried having Mom sign the parts of words she knew and my relying on memory, having studied the pages so often, to know what the various endings were. That didn’t work at all. Then Mom tried finger-spelling the words quickly—so quickly she hoped it would be a challenge when I spelled exactly the same thing back to her. (In theory, it might have worked. Just as we do not see each letter when we read words, a proficient signer sees the shape of the word rather than each letter when reading finger spelling. Otherwise, finger spelling could never be read so quickly.) But in this case, it was ludicrous. We stopped. She felt bad for letting me down. I just wished I hadn’t put her through all that.

At any rate, for several successive Saturday mornings, Mom drove me to the competitions. I got all the way to the state finals, and each time I got a word right, I gave Mom, sitting in
the darkened auditorium, a big smile so that she would know everything was all right. She knew, too, when at almost the very end of the contest, I messed up. There are two n's in "mayonnaise."

"Don't worry. I'm proud of you." She knew how rotten I felt. Hugging me, patting my cheek, she said, "Next year you'll do better. Maybe I can help you study more. Do you want to go for ice cream?"

Of course I did. Mom was a great believer in food as a healing balm to the spirits.

Every summer in those days I spent at least two weeks in Montpelier, visiting Dad's brother Bill and his wife, Margaret. I relished those weeks; they were my vacation, my only regression into childhood. My room, at the head of the stairs, had carpeting and a thick, quilted bedspread. In the headboard of the bed, Aunt Margaret had installed books she thought I'd enjoy, one of them Uncle Bill's primer. Essays he'd written in grade school, tucked between the pages, would float onto the coverlet and I'd read of the time his mother had punished him by putting his blocks in the oven. Inside another was a picture of my uncle taken on board a ship in the South Pacific during his World War II navy days. A door next to the bed opened onto the attic, which contained trunks full of old clothes and tools and family documents.

We didn't have those kinds of mementos at my house. Grandma and Grandpa Wells hated clutter and got rid of anything that had lost its usefulness, and somehow my father's brothers and sisters were the recipients of most of the treasures on his side. The kinds of things I enjoyed looking at and handling in the storeroom were the artifacts my mother loved. She would look longingly at an antique mixing bowl and remember watching her own grandmother blending pie dough. She didn't recall any singing, or the click of a spoon against the pottery, or the muffled thump of the roller hitting the counter. But in her face I could see the intensity of the memories flooding back to her when I'd go home and describe what I'd looked at and handled in the attic.

Dinner every evening with Margaret and Bill was served on glass plates with real cloth napkins, and after dinner, Uncle Bill would take me for a chocolate-dipped ice cream cone at the Dari Delite, then we'd go back home, where Uncle Bill indulged in a few drinks and told me about the future. He promised me a bright-red convertible of my very own when I was in high school. He also promised me the moon and the stars.

Certainly I didn't feel the pinch of money worries when I stayed with them. Uncle Bill was always handing me twenty-dollar bills so I could treat myself at the five-and-dime.

Aunt Margaret, a wiry, pragmatic type, took me on all her errands, and I loved watching how she handled the banker and the man at the post office. There was never any uneasiness in the way these relatives conducted their affairs. Uncle Bill left me alone for hours in his office, me playing with the electric typewriter, picking out the words for a letter home on the crisp, engraved stationery. Best of all, there was serious work for me to do there. I helped move flowers and chairs, held doors, and fetched whatever was required. How ironic it was that I felt such pride doing this busy work. The importance of the actual adult transactions I handled for my parents paled in comparison.

Evenings, after the Dari Delite and the spinning out of Uncle Bill's promises, I'd sit in the living room at Aunt Margaret's feet, clean from my bath—she always let me dust myself with her Chanel No. 5 talc—while she slowly combed my hair.

"You know, all my life I've wanted long red hair. I think it's so special," she said quietly. Her dark-brown hair was unvaryingly cut short, with marcel waves.
"You know, we're so proud of you, Uncle Bill and I," she said, leaning close.

"Why?" I asked.

"Oh, don't you know? You work so hard. You make good grades. We just couldn't be prouder."

Thoughtfully stroking my hair, she'd lean forward, her mouth just behind my ear, and whisper to me, confide all sorts of things to me.

"You know, your uncle Bill and I, we tried and tried and tried for years to have a little girl just like you," she said so only I could hear.

At first, her words soothed me, but soon I felt my insides turning to jelly. There was something so seductive for a ten-year-old in what she was saying. I longed for their position, their lives, their ability to talk about anything and everything. I was shy but tried to appear forthright when I dealt with clerks and bankers and car salesmen on behalf of my parents. In their household, Uncle Bill, with his own haggling over price. Aunt Margaret returned the milk herself when it was sour. I was so self-conscious about everything that concerned my family. Nothing was good enough, we weren't good enough; our clothes, our food, our silverware—none of it. What an ache, what a longing, what a maze! At that very same moment I was deeply ashamed of myself. I loved my parents fiercely. I would jump to their defense at any time. And yet I had these horrible, treacherous desires.

And after the two weeks, when I got back home, I was terrified Mom and Dad would figure out the secret.

Human beings are dismal failures when it comes to communicating. We've had it bred out of us, just as the Russian wolfhound has had its fine pointed nose and sleek, shiny coat developed from years of breeding and cross-breeding. The animal is swift but just a showpiece. I remember being so dazzled by the adults I met, by the sophistication they had, the witty conversation and the facile remarks. But so often the pith was missing, or hidden deep inside.

On the other hand, Mom and Dad had startling, almost telepathic abilities. They could piece together what was happening at an event, even when no one clued them in. They seemed to catch every nuance of movement, every blink. They noticed when a man and woman were not getting along, when no signs were evident to other people. Mom and Dad were actively participating without talking. They didn't have to contend with words as smoke screens. And there were times when I felt they were reading my soul. It was equally disquieting one day to discover that their empathy was a trait my sisters and I had either inherited or acquired.

One Sunday evening after we'd gone to visit Grandma and Grandpa Wells, Kay, Jan, Mom, Dad, and I were sitting at the kitchen table having a light supper, just toasted cheese sandwiches.

"Grandma's face," I signed, holding my hands to my cheeks, then pulling my hands gently downward. Perhaps she had a virus, maybe she was worried about something, but on that visit she looked ten years older than she had the month before.

I couldn't sign anymore. Suddenly, tears sprang to my eyes, then to Mom's, Kay's, and Jan's. My father looked pensively. Grandma might not have looked different to anyone else; as it turns out, she did come down with the flu. And even though it was unsettling to be in tears over the prospect of aging and mortality, there was something both mysterious and reassuring about the communion among the five of us.

My Grandma Wells's meal repertoire wasn't large, but it was time tested and reliable. Talk over dinner was always the same: So-and-so is going to have a baby; Marlene and Jerry are moving; Connie bought a new car. Emphasis on factual reporting of the goings-on. Little analysis. The accounts were so similar.
they seemed timeless. After a spurt of talk, there'd be silence, only the sound of forks scraping plates and an occasional “Pass the butter, please.” Then we'd plunge into how “Johnny couldn't get a license plate for his truck because the office closed early.” I was sitting, poised on the edge of my chair, alert, waiting for something to happen, listening so hard my skin would prickle.

Sometimes Grandma would take my mother off to a corner to tell her a secret. Grandma used a whole variety of communication modes. She'd start a sentence by finger-spelling and mouthing a word, then she'd draw some letters on the palm of her hands, act out a little bit of what she wanted, maybe finger-spell another word, and then mouth another. The whole time, she had her head pulled back, peering up at my mother's face through the lower half of her bifocals.

At one of our Sunday dinners, when I was alone with my grandmother in the kitchen, she bent over to take the rolls, hot and glistening, out of the oven.

"I read about a cure for deafness," she said, measuring her words, her eyes still on the rolls.

That statement of hers filled me with skepticism and dread. From early on, I'd read about plenty of "miracle" treatments. But these "cures" were for less severe forms of deafness, mostly "conductive losses" that occurred later in life—deafness caused when one of the tiny bones in the ears is missing or damaged by disease, thus creating a break in the mechanical chain that brings sound to the auditory nerves. My parents' "sensory-neural loss" is far more complicated. The microscopic nerves and their attachment between the inner ear and the brain were destroyed. Medical science hasn't advanced as far as nerve reparation in the brain. Unfortunately, the articles never distinguished between types of deafness.

But my grandmother would get her hopes up. And I would panic. What if some extraordinary transplant were invented?

I began losing my own hearing when I was thirteen. I didn't tell a soul about it. I was too terrified.

First my sisters' voices and the television volume became ever so slightly fuzzy. Then I was feeling the vibrations on my violin more than I was hearing the notes. From fuzzy I went to indistinct, from indistinct to thinking a glass bowl was over my head. I was sure the whole thing was a temporary aberration, perhaps psychosomatic, perhaps a hysterical reaction—one aunt was always warning me that reading too much would take its toll. Within a week the problem was affecting my schoolwork. After a few more days, when it was obvious I was getting worse, not better, I told Mom and Dad. They looked at me strangely. Mom took me to the doctor the next day.

In the waiting room, the receptionist took my name and told us to sit down. We'd been there many times before, but still the woman behind the desk stole glances at us. I signed low and small to Mom. In public we tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. Sitting in the waiting room, we tried to ignore the open looks of one man; we set up a wall around ourselves and carried on a conversation, or sometimes, if we were feeling too
cowed, we didn’t talk at all. We just laid our hands in our laps. This day we went on signing; only the nurse’s call intruded on our private circle.

Inside his office, Dr. Marsh, a vague, disheveled man, looked in my ears, then got up and left the room. My worst fears were suddenly confirmed. At least I already knew sign language, I comforted myself. But I was already so protective of my sisters and my parents, so charged with the weight of grown-up responsibilities that I was fretting over just how the family would get along if I went completely deaf.

Dr. Marsh came back with a pan full of soapy water and a giant syringe.

“What are you going to do to me?”

“Ear wax,” he grunted.

“What?”

He said it louder. I signed it to Mom. She’d been acting as if she weren’t all that concerned about my hearing problem, but now she leaned forward, a worried look in her eyes, concentrating heavily on my hands, one eyebrow raised. With the diagnosis, she leaned back, obviously relieved and a little amused.

After a few soapy squirts—it sounded like Niagara Falls inside my head—my hearing was miraculously restored.

“Use Q-Tips with baby oil,” Dr. Marsh said.

I’d watched Mom and Dad inserting cotton swabs into their ears, but I’d read so much about puncturing the tympanic membrane that I was scared to put anything in there. It was all right for Mom and Dad, I thought; they didn’t have anything to lose. After my bout of deafness, I swabbed regularly.

On the outside, whoever it was doing the talking had a power over us. Our signs were small and timid, and our faces were almost immobile. But when we were home alone, the five of us were transformed and the signing was large and generous. We made faces. We teased each other.

When Dad came home from work, my sisters and I would run to meet him at the door and give him a kiss. (We couldn’t have just shouted “Hi, Dad” from our bedrooms.) Often as not, Dad was in a playful mood. He’d throw his hat on one of our heads. He’d start to hand one of us the newspaper, then hide it behind his back and toss it up over his shoulder, grabbing it backhanded just as we were about to catch it. He’d point to a spot on the floor, and when Kay looked, he’d catch her nose. It was never prolonged teasing, and after he was done, he’d hand the paper to us and pat each of us on top of the head.

Mom, much shyer in public, was even more playful in private. If Dad fell asleep in his easy chair before dinner, she’d come in to impersonate his spasmodic snoring. She’d lampoon herself too, showing how she’d gotten up groggy that morning and tried to brush her teeth with Dad’s shaving cream, her mouth puckered up from the taste.

In a house where they could make all the noise they wanted, Mom and Dad were especially quiet, partly because they don’t know how much noise certain activities make. They don’t want to disturb anyone. When Mom is in the kitchen with pots and pans and she’s banged them together, she starts. The vibration of the bang gives a little shock to her fingers, so she tries to handle them gently. And of course she doesn’t want to dent her pans. I never heard my parents smack their lips or sigh. Both of them pick up their dining chairs to replace them under the table rather than slide them across the floor, and to cut down on vibrations, Kay, Jan, and I were required to do the same.

Mom is so conscious of making noise that every once in a while, out of the clear blue sky, she apologizes when she hasn’t made a sound.

“Oh, excuse me.”

“What did you do?”
"Thiccupsed," she signed, her right hand making a brief jump up her chest. She covered her mouth.

"I didn’t hear anything."

"Oh."

One night after we’d all gone to bed, Jan and I ran into each other in the hallway while getting drinks of water.

"Shhh! Listen!" Jan said, grabbing my arm. "Do you hear it?"

From the back of the house came a low, soft hum and a few little smacks.

"They’re Mom’s love pats," Jan said. "I love it when she does that."

I knew those little smacks. They were the ones she might give us clear out of the blue when we were reaching for milk in the refrigerator. She’d come up behind me, put an arm around my shoulder, hug me tight to her, and smack my hip, all the while the motor in her throat issuing a gentle, cooing hum. It was the same feeling I had when I held our puppy or somebody’s baby, a surge through my arms just wanting to hold and squeeze the thing I had so much affection for. Jan and I giggled, thinking of Mom, nestled in her warm bed, and her little taps.

"Do you think they sign into each other’s hands when the lights go out?" Jan asked.

It seemed like such a lovely, intimate gesture. I wondered.

We all took after Dad, playing small tricks on each other. Quiet, doe-eyed Kay, for example, developed an echolalia designed to drive me crazy. Even when I shouted, "Kay! Stop!" she repeated the words in exactly the same tone of voice.

My revenge was to get her laughing with her mouth full at mealtime and see if I could get her in trouble with Mom. My plan usually backfired; it didn’t take my parents long to figure out who the troublemaker was. Sometimes Kay started giggling spontaneously, and I would get in trouble for that too.

My favorite trick, though, was one I played on Mom and Dad. I would tap my toe under the table. I started with an adagio rhythm. If no one noticed that, I’d switch to andante. And if I was really feeling my oats, I’d try for syncopation. Dad would turn to me and sign "please," his flat hand rubbing his chest in a circular motion.

I knew I’d gone far enough when my father spoke out loud along with his signs for me to stop.

Humor at the dinner table was another thing. Dad loved telling what can only be classified as "deaf" jokes. There is really no adequate way to translate them. If we were with close family members, interpreting as Dad talked, the jokes he told got big laughs. But when it came to friends or relatives who didn’t understand sign language, they usually looked as if they were waiting for the other shoe to drop.

One story was about a deaf man who was driving in the country, when safety bars were lowered across the road at a railroad crossing. The train passed, but the bars weren’t raised. Finally, the man went to the stationmaster and wrote him a note: "Please but." That’s the punch line. The joke is that the sign for "but" is the index fingers crossed and then opening up, just the way the bars protecting train tracks do.

In another story, a deaf man went to a bar and sat on a stool next to a hearing man he knew. The hearing man and the deaf man wrote notes back and forth to each other. When another man came into the bar and sat down at the counter, he joined in the conversation. Soon the first man had to leave. The other two continued their note writing. Another deaf man walked into the bar and thought it very funny that two hearing guys were sitting writing notes to each other as if they were deaf.

A third story has a macabre twist. A deaf man lived next
Listening

doors to a known robber and one day decided to help himself to the spoils of the latest bank job. The robber, suspecting the deaf man, got an interpreter and went to the deaf man's house to confront him.

"I don't know anything about it," the deaf man told the interpreter, who relayed that to the robber.

The robber brandished a gun in the deaf man's face. "Okay, okay, I'll tell. Don't shoot me," the deaf man signed to the interpreter. "The money is stashed in the oak tree in the backyard!"

The interpreter turned to the robber and said aloud: "He signs he'll never tell. He says he'd rather be shot."

Our next Christmas witnessed a strange confluence of events. By then I was in junior high school. Mom had spent a long morning at the shopping mall, Dad obligingly tagging along, carrying bags until they were so full he couldn't manage. He sat down on a bench, boxes piled alongside him, patiently waiting until Mom finished. Mom came home tired, but hurriedly put everything away, immediately wrapping the presents she thought would be hardest to hide. The doorbell rang. (Actually, it flashed and brayed, being the doorbell it was.) Mom went to answer it. A man handed her a card that read: I AM A DEAF MUTE. HERE IS A CARD WITH THE MANUAL ALPHABET. I WOULD APPRECIATE CONTRIBUTIONS.

Mom looked at the card and then signed: "You're deaf?" her fingers shaped in a letter "d," lightly touching her ear, then her cheek near the mouth. The man looked at her, then fled.

"I don't like that. It's not nice for deaf people to beg," she said to me in obvious disgust, "but people who pretend to be deaf—that's worse!"

Whether he was faking or whether he'd run away because he was embarrassed about begging from another deaf person, we never knew. There's a strain of Calvinism in my mother

that's strong. Indeed, it runs in most deaf people I've met. Both Mom and Dad were appalled to learn that the double income tax exemption blind people receive might be extended to the deaf.

"I don't want that," Dad said. He felt it was some kind of handout. "We don't need it."

When it was finally time for gift-giving, Kay, Jan, and I ran around the Christmas tree, reading name tags and piling gifts in front of each recipient. Kay brought in the dog and we helped her open her package; Jan brought in Sylvester, our black cat, and vainly tried to get him to claw the paper off his catnip. They were rituals that had gotten a little corny over the years, but they helped prolong the excitement. Each person took a turn opening a present.

After the gifts were all opened and we tried on clothes and picked up the heaps of ribbons and papers, my sisters and I each hung up a wool knee sock on the door of the front-hall closet.

This year Kay and Jan were too sleepy to come with me to the midnight candle-lighting service at church. A friend's family picked me up in the middle of a nasty sleet storm. We arrived at the church at eleven. Only a few electric lights were on. The church was packed. I always thought the Christmas Eve service was the best of the year, probably because it was mostly Christmas carols—"It Came Upon a Midnight Clear," "We Three Kings of Orient," "Joy to the World!"

The minister began his sermon:

"While you are warm and snug in your houses, while the visions of sugarplums are dancing in your heads, in the heads of your children, you must remember the less fortunate. Remember Mary and Joseph, wandering without a home. But as we remember those less blessed than we are"—his voice dropped to a near whisper—"sometimes we forget those we
should try hardest to remember." Suddenly the voice rose: "The lame and the halt." It thundered: "The blind and the deaf!" I looked up from my hymnal. He went on about the "unfortunate blind, the silent deaf, the halt who would walk," intermingling all that with curses and miracles and stars in the east.

At the stroke of midnight, Christmas, he stopped.

The church went dark, only one altar candle flickered. The minister lit his candle from the flame, then the altar boys, robed in red and white, lit the wicks of long brass rods from his candle. And so the light was passed slowly throughout the church, each person lighting the candle held by the one next to him. The burning flames grew brighter, we stood, holding our candles aloft, softly singing "Silent Night, Holy Night." My eyes stung, from the beauty of the light, from the purity of the song, and from the hurt of the minister's words.

I stood wondering what my friend and her family were thinking. Had they picked me up because I was the unfortunate daughter of the unfortunate deaf? Had I been a Christian duty? At home we'd just had a wonderful, storybook Christmas: presents, laughter, kisses, hugs.

What was "wrong" with us? I sat in the pew thinking about what might be "wrong" with other people—the man with the bad knees who couldn't play softball, another man who spoke through a hole in his throat because of surgery, the old woman with the withered hand, the young woman whom multiple sclerosis had confined to a wheelchair. To most of them we seemed worse off. But we didn't feel that way.

I hid all those feelings away, though. I would never have admitted the embarrassment I felt or the fears or anything else to the family who drove me home on Christmas Eve. I hid all that away from them and from myself, and not even a spy could have divined what was there.