



The Sound of Your Voice

David Sullivan

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By David Sullivan

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Dedications

To Lisa, for encouragement, support and a kick in the arse when I needed them most.

To Gary, for believing in me so that I might believe in myself. All I know about love I learned from you.

"Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."

--Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, 1958

"This is the Selma of the Deaf."

--Kathy Karcher, Gallaudet Graduate Student, speaking about the "Deaf President Now" protests of March, 1988

Prologue

We are at our favorite park—lying face down, arms draped casually over each other’s naked backs—my left hand lying palm up nestled into the small of Steve’s back. Steve’s arm is around my shoulders, his strong right hand cupping the curve of my shoulder as a pitcher holds the ball, tense-like, ready to uncork a fastball right over home plate.

Steve is turned away from me, probably lost in thoughts of Roman gladiators and chariot races—we saw Ben Hur, captioned of course, the night before for probably the hundredth time—it’s the only movie we actually own. Steve’s father sent it to him when he graduated from Gallaudet University, naively hoping the sight of Charlton Heston in a Roman toga would provide Steve the role model of masculinity that Mr. Dawson had failed to. “Why else would any son of mine ever appear on national TV, *prancin’* down Pennsylvania Avenue with those *queers* handing out *rubbers* for all the world to see?” he had said. Sheesh. One would think in a city like Washington, DC, they’d have at least one video store with a copy of the movie Airplane—remember the scene with Peter Graves in his pilot’s uniform asking the young boy who came up to the cockpit if he’d ever seen any gladiator movies? Then again, Mr. Dawson probably would think the pilot had the same motivation that he had—to “make a *man* outta him.”

I, on the other hand, am facing Steve, inhaling the strong tang of the tall grass mixed with the sweet smell of dandelions and clover. I compare the droplets of dew clinging tenuously to the blades of grass to the beads of sweat forming on the down on Steve’s neck, thinking of the William Blake quote, “to see a world in a grain of sand...” Even though this is a bead of sweat, you get the picture.

I’m almost afraid to tell you about our favorite park—the main reason it’s our favorite is that it’s practically undiscovered. It’s not one of those well-groomed landscapes you’d find behind an English manor house—you might not even know that it was there at all if you didn’t see the small sign by the dirt path leading into a thicket of mountain laurels, rhododendrons and briars. The name of the park (as you’d see on the sign if you could make it out after decades of weather and decay) is D.F. Buchmiller Park. Each time we enter we come up with different guesses at what the ‘D.F.’ stands for—Steve likes ‘dairy-free’ for our vegetarian friends; I like ‘donut farm,’ named for my

favorite food; but, together, we settle on ‘discrimination-free,’ as the park is a place where we feel free to be ourselves away from the judgment of the outside world.

Steve and I discovered this hidden oasis when we were looking at an ordinance map of the area from four years ago, dated 1990, trying to confirm that we did indeed live on the highest point of Lancaster County, as we certainly thought we deserved to. The map was spread out before us on our living room floor—the only flat surface in our house not covered by books, candles or a menagerie of stuffed animals. And, though disappointed with the discovery on the map of a hill a mere two meters higher than our own, we were happy to see that it lay within the boundary of a Pennsylvania State Park, where no house could be built. But, like modern day Sir Edmund Hillarys, we sought out this “peak” just to make sure. Upon discovering it the following weekend, by sheer luck and dint of Steve’s compass which he always carries with him, we knew from that moment on this would become our special place, a private refuge away from the storms that rage in our everyday world.

Once we had discovered the park, we wanted to make sure no one else ever did, so we would always choose a different way in so as not to wear an obvious trail that others might notice. This became a game for us as we tried to see how many different ways in we could find. I always chose the more circuitous routes that involved complex paths marked by certain trees and large stones that reminded me of different types of animals—a camel lying down or a box turtle tucked in its shell. Steve would choose to enter more directly by way of the thickets, gently holding them back for me so I wouldn’t scratch my bare legs on the briars.

Once inside, we come to this glorious field, lambent with sunbeams, dappled beneath a canopy of birch, oak and copper beech trees. I make out the song of water thrushes, wrens and warblers in the surrounding trees, and point out their general direction to Steve, who has a better chance of picking them out with his heightened sense of vision. The glen is filled with the flutter of small butterflies and moths, gracefully drifting from clover to clover, unhurried by thoughts that tomorrow or the tomorrow after that would be different or less perfect in any other way.

Just as we never choose the same way into this Eden, we also never pick the same spot to lie down and set up our portable world. It’s usually a very scientific matter of picking the exact spot that has the right mix of filtered sunlight, privacy, and scattered butterflies. Sometimes, though, we choose a spot right by the entrance if we have brought with us more than the usual number of “friends” to share in our revelry of the afternoon. Our “friends” are the menagerie of stuffed animals, accumulated over years of anniversaries, birthdays and Christmases, that await Steve and me as we enter every room of our house, silent sentinels, never failing to warmly greet us with a ready grin and

an outstretched paw or hoof. Steve, in particular, has a great affinity with these our mute companions, as they share his inability to hear or to speak.

We proceed to populate our newly-created world by setting out our friends around the edge of this grassy territory we have claimed. We place the animals in the particular direction from which we feel they belong—lions and tigers in the east, towards Africa and Asia; bears in the north; and horses in the west. Without fail, I get a lump in my throat as I watch Steve lay out his compass on one of the many books we have brought with us to read, and patiently wait for the needle to come to rest on Magnetic North. Then the animals are placed in their respective positions—always starting in the east, moving north and finally west. Steve and I, we live in the south of this New World, where it's warm. From this, our vantage point, we look out on the world we have created. It is good.

Then I reach for my guitar, which I have carried on my back in a padded bag with a strap on it that Steve gave me for my birthday three years ago. I've started to put stickers on the bag for all the places we have visited together—last year I added patches from Montana and Wyoming from our trips to Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks. Steve still has contacts in the National Park Service from when he used to work for them in DC, so we can always count on a nice campsite, set right by a lake, or high on a hill, far removed from any other campers. The two of us are alone, except for the wild animals lurking about us.

As I play my guitar, Steve looks on, enjoying it as if he could actually hear me play. He told me once, "just to watch your face transformed, as if you are in another world, gives me so much pleasure." Today, it's just as well he can't hear me as I stumble through a few chords, fingers grazing strings and frets that bring discordant sounds to the melodies I attempt.

Later, we pull out our books to read—Steve goes for the science fiction and is rereading one of his favorite Isaac Asimov novels, a cherished autographed copy of *I Robot*, while I have chosen something lighter for our outing today, Ann Rice's *Cry to Heaven*. After what seems only a few minutes, we begin to doze off in the lengthening rays of the afternoon sunlight and proceed to lie down next to each other. But instead of falling right to sleep, we drape our arms over each other and communicate by way of drawing letters on each other's back as we often do in bed when darkness inhibits sign language or the reading of lips.

Steve starts with "I L-O-V-E Y-O-U," to which I respond "M-E 2." Then Steve: "I-T I-S S-O B-E-A-U-T-I-F-U-L H-E-R-E" which he has to start over three separate times as I begin to lose track in my drowsiness. I respond by clenching my left hand into a fist and rub it up and down in the small of Steve's back—the ASL sign for "Yes." Steve has taught me many signs in our years together, but the only way I can remember them is to associate them with their origins. The sign for "Yes"

comes from the image of a head nodding up and down—so I picture two small eyes on my fist and an outrageous mouth of bright red lipstick drawn over my thumb and index finger like the hand puppets on TV.

I. The Protest

It's a gray Saturday almost six years earlier, on the cusp of spring, 1988. I'm between boyfriends now, just after being dumped by a guy more proficient in the kitchen than the bedroom—sumptuous dinners of braised lamb tips over squid ink risotto and pan-seared tuna with ginger-shiitake cream sauce left me wondering if I could marry someone just on the basis of his ability to cook. In the end, though, it was him that relieved me and my stomach from having to make that decision.

I'm heading over to a demonstration sponsored by the Whitman Walker clinic in Washington, DC, taking the Metro from my apartment in Eastern Market over to Woodley Park. At Metro Center, I run into my buddy Mack as I'm changing trains. At first glance, I think of Shaggy come-to-life out of a Scooby Doo cartoon: rust-colored bell-bottoms, a green V-neck sweater and canvas Keds sneakers riddled with holes—his long unkempt hair and pathetic attempt at a goatee complete the image.

“Helroh, Raggy...” I do in faint imitation of Scooby's lisp.

“Oh, hullo, John...off to save the world again?” replies Mack, noticing the large sign I am carrying, “FIGHT AIDS NOT PEOPLE.”

“Yes, well at least this part of the world. I'm heading over to a demonstration at the DC Department of Public Health...they're hosting a conference there today to discuss the proposed cuts in the District's AIDS budget. They need the money to build another bridge over the Potomac so that the CEOs who live in Georgetown don't have to sit in traffic in their Mercedes looking at the homeless on the sides of the street. Wanna come along?”

Mack seems to think about the prospect for a few seconds, more likely intrigued by finding a new boyfriend at the demonstration than saving the world, but in the end it's his stomach that calls the shots. “Sorry, bud. Gotta meet some mates over at Kramer's for some grub and then off to hear some Andrew Holler-something read from his new book over at Lambda Rising. You can always find a few single literary-types at a book reading,” he adds. “I'll ride with you on the train until I get to Dupont, though.”

We board the next Red Line train that appears and immediately notice a large group of students from Gallaudet signing vigorously to each other; often grunting or making other noises to get each other's attention. Mack leans over to me, nodding in their general direction, and whispers,

“Freaks, huh?” All I can think of is the irony of someone who chooses to dress and behave like a cartoon character calling other people freaks just because of a condition they inherited.

I don’t respond, though, lost as I am in thoughts of the upcoming demonstration and the hope that I’ll see Brian there again. We met the week before at a sit-in in front of the Supreme Court in support of a case concerning the Federal Hate Crimes statute. After chatting with Brian briefly beneath the reproachful and dour visage of the “Guardian of Authority and Law” statue that loomed above us, I was uncharacteristically inspired to say that I’d like to see him again. He suggested meeting up at the demonstration I’m currently on my way to, apparently more tapped into the protest “circuit” than I am.

Part of me thinks that my invitation to Mack to join me was somewhat half-hearted because I was afraid Brian might be just the “Mr. Right” Mack was looking for—good-looking in a college preppy kind of way, hair that just screamed out to be tousled, eyes a deep blue that most babies grow out of, and a clear face that spoke of the passion and enthusiasm he brought to his drive for social justice. But as I picture Brian in my mind’s eye, I fancy myself as the only man in the world who would appreciate him for who he truly is, finding comfort in his seeing through Mack’s transparent attempts at just another sexual conquest.

I wave my sign back and forth in parting to Mack as he sets out on his quest to bag his literary prey and I get off at the next stop. I’m joined on the platform by many others carrying signs heading to the same demonstration. I am moved by the obvious groundswell of support from all walks of life—there are lesbian couples, mothers with children in strollers and even guys in blue suits and ties. Log Cabin Republicans, I think to myself.

We become a loosely-formed parade of marchers as we carry our signs up Connecticut Avenue to the Department of Public Health at 25th. After making a brief scan of the crowd for Brian, I fall in with a couple of men, one very frail with visible lesions on his throat and face. The other supports him as they walk slowly toward what must be for them one of the last vestiges of hope for survival. The rain, which has held off for now, begins gradually, contributing to the somber scene. I introduce myself and offer to carry the stronger one’s sign which reads “KISSING DOESN’T KILL: GREED AND INDIFFERENCE DO.”

“Thanks, that would help a lot,” Roy responds after introducing himself and Greg, his partner of fifteen years. Over the course of our walk up to the Department, I learn that Greg used to get around pretty well until the District cut back on supplying him with the meds that were keeping him strong. “Now,” Roy continues, “we try to buy them as we can on our own, but I recently left my job to care for Greg full-time and the unemployment barely pays for the rent and our food.”

“I wish there was something I could do,” I say sympathetically.

“Just being here means a great deal to all of us.” Roy nods in the direction of others who also seem to be lagging behind, some using crutches or in wheelchairs, one actually being pulled in some type of wagon, the occupant beaming as if being carried on a royal litter. “I hope Reagan can see us from his window in the Oval Office—it wasn’t until last year that he even mentioned AIDS in a speech. By then, over 24,000 people had already died in this epidemic. He won’t say this in public, but I’ve heard that he thinks that we deserve this for being gay.” Roy pulls Greg to him and puts his arm around his slender waist.

We finally arrive in front of the department and I return Roy’s sign and bid them farewell. I continue to search for Brian when I come upon a cop with a bullhorn telling us to disperse.

“What about the Right of Free Assembly guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, bub?” a large woman next to me yells out, trying valiantly, but ultimately failing to match the decibel level of the bullhorn.

“He’d have to be able to read the Constitution to know about that,” another calls out. Someone next to me in the crowd shoves me into the cop whom I knock down in the impact. Next thing I know I’m in handcuffs and being led to a police wagon along with some of the other protesters.

Various emotions pass through me all at once—certainly anger at being treated in this brutal manner when I’ve done nothing wrong, but also some pride that I am so visibly taking one for the cause. I silently hope that Brian has seen me earn this Badge of Courage. On my way to the wagon, I begin to recall a time many years ago being forced to go to Boy Scouts when I would have rather been out in the woods playing with insects and building secret hideaways. The only way that my parents could convince me to go was to remind me that my best friend at the time, Harry Collins, whom I continually tried to impress, would be there.

Harry was appropriately named—he was the first among my peers to grow body hair on his chest—a thin, dark ribbon that ran from just below his chest to his belly button and then tantalizingly down to the nether regions below that. I would always look forward to the pool parties we had at a mutual friend’s home when I would gaze upon this harbinger of manhood the rest of us boys secretly envied.

In Boy Scouts, Harry always excelled at any activity our leader, Mr. Norris, would come up with—whether it was building birdhouses, shooting targets in his back yard (much to the dismay of Mrs. Norris) or orienteering in the woods of a nearby forest, using sun, stars and the growth of moss on the north side of trees as guides. Me, on the other hand? I couldn’t build anything, was afraid of

guns and would often get lost in the woods as I started to follow insects or other small creatures on their daily routes.

Mr. Norris announced at one meeting that there would be an awards ceremony the following week in the auditorium of a local church and urged us to convince our parents to attend. I knew that I had done nothing all winter to merit an award, so I began to feverishly look through the Boy Scout guide to come up with an activity in which I could earn a merit badge in just a week. I ended up choosing Archery, knowing that my father had an old bow and arrow at home and would join me in convincing Mr. Norris that I had satisfied the badge requirements to save our mutual embarrassment at the upcoming awards ceremony.

The night of the ceremony arrived. Attempts to feign sickness that worked when I was younger fell on deaf ears now as a teenager. I stared at myself in my bedroom mirror in my Scout uniform that hung loosely over my shoulders like sheets on a clothesline, and compared myself to how I pictured Harry in his uniform, clinging tightly to his developing arms and chest, resplendent with patches and pins received on nights just like this over the past two years.

After I reluctantly followed my father into the church and we took seats toward the rear of the auditorium, Mr. Norris made some initial remarks on how we were all so swiftly becoming young men and upstanding citizens and how proud our parents should be of us. My father glanced over at me, probably seeing nothing in my image that inspired his pride. Harry, the first of us to be called forward to receive his awards, was showered with a vast array of pins, patches and citations for all he had done over the past few months. I slunk down in my chair knowing my sole award in Archery would just confirm my father's doubt in me and also fail once again to impress Harry.

When my name was called to come forward, the last of my troop, Mr. Norris had a conspiratorial gleam in his eye and winked at me. He must be really looking forward to this public humiliation, I thought to myself. Ready to get my single merit badge, Mr. Norris instead listed even more awards than Harry had received—some, like Beekeeping and Disabilities Awareness, I had never even heard of before—and shook my hand enthusiastically. I was stunned, knowing I had done nothing to receive such praise. Both Harry and my dad were studies in surprise and then pride as they began to reevaluate their impressions of me.

I walked back to my seat amid the glow of the moment, opened the manila envelope Mr. Norris had handed me and saw just the lone Archery badge sitting within.

II. *The Priest*

I wait in the back of the police wagon while other protesters are loaded in, like some swordfish on ice in the hold of a fishing boat as nets are unloaded on deck. The pride I feel for my sacrifice soon gives way to self-pity as I have never been arrested before and have no idea what fate awaits me. I start to go through a mental checklist of family members I could call upon for help. My parents—they're down in Florida—snowbirds who extend their stay there each year until it seems that they're only back home in Maryland a few weeks in May before they begin to plan their trip back.

"You know, Agnes," my father would say wistfully to my mother, "there really is no one who knows a damn thing about canasta up here... hell, what I'd give to have the Kowalski's around here instead of back in Sun City."

My mother, wincing slightly each time my father swore, would then follow suit: "Yes, Harold. And I just know that Dotty Frances is just *destroying* the quilt my Bee was working on when we left—her cross-stitches are so big you could drive a truck right through them."

So out come the AAA Triptiks, routes are planned to see sights not seen in the last few years, and reservations are made at nearby Hampton Inns, the *only* hotel chain my father would stay at, as "they're the only ones that still put that sanitary band on the toilet seat. I wanna be damn sure I'm not sitting on someone else's damn pee when I'm taking my morning constitutional." I guess my father assumes that without the band, other hotels just leave the seat uncleaned, thinking no one would ever notice.

This left my brother, Joe, who lives in nearby Vienna, Virginia, and his wife Patricia. Not Pat, not Patty, *Patricia*, who never let any of us forget that she married beneath her station when she married into our family, and me, the gay brother-in-law, just one more shining example of our short-changed genetic heritage. Patricia seems to just barely tolerate me when we're out at restaurants with only adults present, but can be awfully jumpy when I'm around her two sons, Jacob and Liam. She stands guard over them, ready to thwart any attempt I might make to lead them into a similar life of depravity. It's as if she fears my appeal to their father's deficient Y chromosome, as yet untrained by her inviolate X, susceptible to moral turpitude.

There always seems to be some reason why I can't take them on a walk into the nearby woods or throw a baseball around with them in the field down the street. "Liam will get a rash if he even

gets near poison ivy,” or “Jacob might hurt his hand playing ball and he has that violin recital next Tuesday” are common rejoinders. So I decide calling them from a police station for help would only reinforce my *persona non grata* status.

No, I’d have to go this arrest thing on my own. Tears begin to well in my eyes, though I try to stifle them back as not to embarrass myself. A woman sitting across from me with a small silver cross around her neck looks into my eyes and conveys so much sympathy and understanding, I surprisingly feel a burst of inner strength and peace almost immediately.

“First time, love?” she asks. I nod slightly in response and she says, “It’s always hardest the first time, child—I can remember my first arrest years ago when a group of us novices walked into a closed-door session of Congress on scaling back federal welfare benefits. Now, we’ve all been taken in so many times, the order is considering opening a chapter house outside the police station in Alexandria where they’ll be taking us now.”

As I wonder to myself why we’re going to Virginia if we were arrested in DC, she introduces herself as Sister Bernadette Michael of the Daughters of Mercy, but I could call her Benny. “Jesus teaches us, ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.”

“Matthew chapter 5, verse 10” Benny adds after a pause. “His Father will never forget those like yourself dear, who fight for those less fortunate. Do you believe in God, child?”

I shake my head no, thinking back to the last time I went to Church over ten years ago, when I was around fifteen. My parents had encouraged me to become an altar boy at St. Brigid’s a year earlier, thinking the influence of the priests there would cure me of the “queer ways” I had developed—more interested in playing games with the girls in my neighborhood than in sports—in stark contrast to my brother Joe who seemed to find the ash of a baseball bat, the leather of his mitt, mere extensions of the same elements that he was made of.

My parents asked the younger of the two priests in the parish, Father Shanahan, to take me under his wing and prepare me to become an altar boy. Fr. Shanahan was nothing like any of the other priests we had had at St. Brigid’s—besides being much younger, in his early thirties, I would often see him jogging down our street early in the morning as Joe and I waited for our bus to take us to school. It was odd to see a priest in just shorts and a T-shirt (he seemed to favor a navy blue one with the arms cut off that said “Georgetown Hoyas” on the front)—I thought priests always had to wear a collar, a sign of their obedience to God, just as a dog’s collar symbolizes his obedience to his master. Although, if pressed, I imagined they wouldn’t have to sleep with it on.

Fr. Shanahan began to invite me to the movies and we'd go out to the nearby Friendly's afterwards for dinner. I'd always look forward to these evenings—feeling for once that I was being treated as an adult, not just some kid to be ignored or told what to do. Fr. Shanahan often let me pick the movie we would see, so I would spread out my dad's paper the evening before and look at the various advertisements, going for the action/adventures over the romances. I just couldn't figure out what all the fuss was about those love stories.

Another thing I appreciated about my time with Fr. Shanahan was that he never asked me about girls as everyone else seemed to be doing at that time—from my parents to my brother Joe, even my well-meaning history teacher, Mr. Schaeffer. Mr. Schaeffer, also the JV football coach, would pull me aside after class, arm around my shoulder, and worry aloud that girls are for dating, not hanging around with after school, jumping rope and making those star-shaped folded paper fortune tellers, filled with eight answers ranging from "Most Definitely!" to "Absolutely Not!" My father concurred—I could always count on him to suggest that I join the local Little League or Pop Warner League each week during the uncomfortable silence around the dinner table during our Wednesday night suppers—the only evening we were all supposed to be home to share a meal. But I continued to shun the company of boys my age, setting myself apart as I seemed to be made of different things than them—more "sugar and spice" than "snails and puppy dog's tails."

One afternoon I found myself in Fr. Shanahan's office in the rectory by St. Brigid's, waiting for him while he changed out of his clerics in his adjoining bedroom before our trip to the movies. I sat in a chair in front of his large desk, covered with books, notes and official-looking documents. A large cross, affixed with an extremely life-like and sorrowful Christ, hung on the wall behind the desk, reminding me that I was always watched and I had best behave.

Despite this feeling of dread, my eyes continued to roam over his desk and I noticed his mail in an 'IN' basket, located in the upper right-hand corner of his desk next to where I was sitting. Below some envelopes I saw a portion of a catalog with what appeared to be two men in bathing suits, their arms around each other on the cover. I leaned forward and read the upside-down catalog title, 'International Male.'

This feeling started to come over me—that feeling I had looking at Harry in his swimsuit. It was a slight tingle that started in my balls, ran up through my abdomen and branched out to my right hand, which reached out to the catalog to get a closer look. With shaking hands, dowsed in a thin veneer of sweat, I thumbed through the catalog, eyes darting from the men in underwear, to the closed bedroom door, to the ever-watchful Christ and back to the catalog. All of my senses were heightened, in particular my hearing, as I awaited any sound that would warn of Fr. Shanahan's

return. I heard him faintly humming as he changed, so I returned my concentration to the pages that now seemed to stick to my fingers, moist and prickly warm.

It's hard to explain my attraction to these images—they gave me a sense of pleasure and perfection—as if I were looking at a piece of classical art. I had no idea what I'd do with one of these Adonises if he had magically materialized in the room there with me, but as I continued to think about the prospect, Fr. Shanahan's bedroom door abruptly opened. I made a hurried attempt to return the catalog to the 'IN' basket, relieved that the priest seems to be distracted by the grandfather clock in the hallway which chimed five times just at that very minute. I made a simple prayer of thanksgiving to a God who had let me off the hook one more time.

Driving over to the movies in Fr. Shanahan's beige Celica, I started to get a sinking feeling that God may not have been so merciful after all. "So John," he began, "you've told me about all these girls you've been friendly with, but none of them sounds like they are particularly *special* to you."

"Ummm....No, Father." Words like wads of bubble gum caught in my throat.

"I was the same way at your age, John—it's nothing to be ashamed about. For me, it was just one of the many indications I had that I had a calling to the priesthood. Do you ever think that God may also be calling you to a life of service?"

"Ummm....No, Father." Again, the bubble gum.

"Well, John, you've still got a lot of exploring to do before you're ready to make that kind of decision. Pray for discernment each night before you go to bed—that God will lead you to your true vocation in life and I will pray for that as well."

I remained silent the rest of the way to the movies and even afterwards at Friendly's where I would usually play the movie critic, borrowing phrases I would have seen in my father's paper the night before in order to sound more like an adult. "Mesmerizing," I would opine. "Kept me on the edge of my seat the whole way through. The Academy will definitely remember this one when the Oscar nominations come out."

Father Shanahan noticed my uncharacteristic silence and asked me if he had disturbed me with our earlier talk on vocations. I responded, "No," between noisy slurps from my Strawberry Fribble.

"There is an Irish proverb that goes: 'It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.' Most people have just their family and friends as that shelter, those called to a life of ministry live in the shelter of God." The way he paused afterwards, I began to wonder if he was trying to convince himself of this more than me.

Soon after dinner, we left the restaurant and he drove me to my home. The sounds of passing cars and of barking dogs in the yards we passed only briefly interrupted our silence. We pulled in front of my home and as I turned to say good night, Fr. Shanahan put his right hand on my thigh and looked deeply into my eyes.

“John, I couldn’t help but notice that you were looking through that catalog back in my office. Can you tell me why it interested you?”

I tried to imagine that I had left my body and was hovering just above the car looking down on us, realizing that only fifty feet separated me from this man and the front door of my home and safety. I tried to listen in on the conversation between Fr. Shanahan and me, but it wasn’t really me—I was gone. I heard myself meekly answer, “For some reason I can’t explain, I like looking at those pictures...I know that it’s a sin, but I can’t help myself, Father.”

The real me, hovering, wanted to yell out: “It’s none of your damn business—what kind of priest are you jogging around without your collar on, going to movies with fifteen year-olds and touching them in your car?”

But the priest only heard my impostor, sitting in the seat beside him, now beginning to let out muffled sobs. He started to slowly rub his hand back and forth against the wale of my corduroy pants, creating a sheen that reflected off the street lamp up by where I was hovering. “John, desires in and of themselves are not sinful. It’s how we act upon them that determines if we have committed sin in God’s eyes. Let’s say the Lord’s Prayer together now that you are able to resist sinful temptation.”

I closed my eyes as the priest began to pray out loud and floated back to the car just as he was emphasizing:

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil.

I threw open my door without saying a word, ran up our walkway, burst in the front door and ran up the stairs to my room. I didn’t even acknowledge my parents who were watching TV in our parlor. As I slammed my bedroom door and fell to my bed crying, I heard the sound of gentle footsteps on the stairs.

“Johnny...Johnny, are you all right sweetheart?”

Of course, my mother. I managed to get out a “Yeah—I’m okay,” between sobs. She asked if she could come in, but I remained quiet. Eventually, I won the waiting game and was relieved to hear her turn and go back down the stairs.

After a few moments, I tiptoed out to the balcony and heard my father ask, “What’s wrong with that damn kid this time, Agnes?”

I then strained to hear my mother more softly respond, “I don’t know, Harold, he won’t talk to me.”

“Well, that’s the last damn time he’ll be going out with that priest—I never liked your cockamamie idea in the first place. John should be going to the movies with a girl his own age, not some thirty year-old guy who knows nothing about what would make my kid normal—he’s a regular freak himself.” At that moment, I couldn’t have agreed more.

III. A St. Christopher Medal

Benny sees me lost in thought as the wagon pulls into the Alexandria police station. She puts her hand on my thigh, eerily reminiscent of Father Shanahan in that beige Celica years ago. This time though, I sense her compassion and manage a wan smile in return.

After being led out of the back of the police wagon, one by one, we are brought into a large room that reminds me of a courtroom—lots of benches lined up facing a large, high desk centered against the front wall. A courtroom, except that this room has nothing to do with meting out justice, I fear. We are sometimes directed, other times shoved, to fill in the rows of benches and wait as people continue to be brought in. I recognize some from the protest, but then others appear to be prostitutes, homeless people and drunks. Benny, who is next to me, pressed closely against my body, whispers, “All God’s children.” I become aware of the smells that build in the room—wool that is wet, the sweat and grime of our bodies, urine mixed with the pungent cheap perfume of the prostitutes behind us.

In the far corner of the room, I pick out Brian being led in and start to get up to make my way over to him. Just as I stand, some goon looming against the wall yells out, “Take your seat, mister!” Given the way my day has been going so far, I quickly decide it’s best to obey.

After what seems like hours, we are brought into an adjoining room one row at a time. In here, a woman reads us our rights, tells us we’ll be spending the night here, and will be allowed one phone call, but not until the next morning. As she fills out the paperwork on me, I notice that I am being charged with “Disorderly Conduct”—the first time anyone has told me why I am being held.

I’m led to my accommodations for the night—a large cell with at least ten other guys already there and just one bunk bed with two sagging mattresses in the corner. One “guy” actually looks like a woman from a distance, and I wonder why she is not with the other women in a cell I passed on the way to this one. The stench from the cell is overwhelming—I trace the smell to a stainless steel basin on the floor, overflowing with toilet paper and feces. I wonder if my dad would ask one of these guys if he had already removed its sanitary band.

As my eyes become adjusted to the dim light, I can’t help but stare at the woman I noticed on the way in. She eventually notices my attention and walks slowly over to me. As she gets closer, I’m able to tell that she is a drag queen and belongs in here as much as any of us do.

“So what’s your name, handsome?” she asks out of the side of her mouth. Her makeup is smeared, revealing a black eye and a swollen lip. A false eyelash dangles precariously from one of her eyelids.

“I’m John. John Lathrop,” I respond hesitantly, trying to decide whether anonymity would be advisable in this situation. I inhale her strong perfume as an anodyne to the other smells around me.

“Enchanté, I’m sure,” struggling to stay within her persona. “I’m Ivana Mann. That’s Mann with two N’s, darling, and don’t you forget it,” she adds with bravado.

I start to turn away as I begin to feel rude staring at her as if she were a car accident on the side of the road. She must sense my discomfort and says, “Oh, if only they hadn’t taken away my purse with my compact in it. I must look a fright. What do you think, child?”

Given my day, I assume I probably look no better than she does, and tell her that.

“Oh, you’re so sweet to say that to a girl, even though I don’t believe a word you say.”

I leave Ivana and walk away to the far corner of the cell. To my surprise, I recognize Brian there, hunched down, his face full of anger.

“How could they do this to us?” he asks as I come closer, unsure if he recognizes me from last week’s protest. “I mean, we were just there, *peacefully* demonstrating and now look where we are. They’re the ones that should be in here—not us.” I’m not sure if he means the cops who took us in or the anonymous officials at the DPH who perpetrated the most heinous crime among all of us. In either case, I nod my head in agreement. I kneel down beside him, drawn in by the magnet created by a tightly-wound coil of wire wrapped around an iron rod shot through with electricity.

Brian asks, “Do I know you? Your voice sounds familiar to me, but it’s hard to see you in this light.” Another one who recognizes *the voice*.

Again, I nod, “Yes, we met last week in front of the Supreme Court. You told me about the protest today. *Thanks a lot!*” I add sarcastically.

“Yeah, sorry ‘bout that—not the romantic setting for our first date you were probably imagining, but memorable all the same.”

“Oh, I’ve had worst first dates.”

“Really? What happened, did he murder somebody while you were in the john?”

“No, nothing like that—you’re my first criminal, at least that I know of.”

We are both initially anxious to outdo each other recounting our dates from hell, but eventually the events of the day start to weigh upon us. The dire surroundings begin to fade and I reach out in the semi-darkness and stroke Brian’s face with the back of my hand, following the plane of his cheekbone with my bent knuckles. He turns to face me and kisses my middle finger just above

the joint, rubbing the finger back and forth against his slightly open mouth. His lips are moist and full of promise, morning dew gathered on the edge of a honeysuckle blossom.

But then I catch myself, caught between the pleasure of this intimate gesture and the strangeness of the surroundings. Brian must sense my discomfort and pulls my face to his. We kiss sweetly, and I enter a world in which all there is is him.

As we continue to kiss, my hands trace out the path of his muscles that run from his shoulders down the back of his arms to the sinews of his forearms. I finally reach his hands which I clasp and push back, arching his chest as it presses firmly against mine. He leans back and brings me down with him, resting his back on the hard, bare floor. I kiss his neck, the hollow where his ribs meet his shoulder, and lie beside him, eager to dream of a world where we could be like this, the warmth of the afternoon sun on our faces, a bed of soft grass beneath us.

The voice of another man in the cell brings us back to the cold, harsh reality. “So what you faggots doing over there? You trying to catch AIDS or sumthin?”

Ivana intercedes and comes to our defense. “I’ll keep the rest of these goons away from you two lovebirds. They may be stupid but they know better than to mess with a woman who hasn’t been allowed access to a decent bathroom for over an hour.”

We both smile at the appearance of this most unexpected guardian angel. I unbutton the first few buttons of my shirt and draw Brian’s head to my chest, where he lies nestled among the dark hairs sprouted there. I listen to the rhythm of his breathing as my heaving chest slowly raises and then lowers his head like a dory moored in safe harbor, its anchor reaching straight for my heart. His breathing diminishes over time and becomes barely noticeable, a slight smile on his face gives me hope that, in his dreams, he has reached a distant shore. In a world in which so much was wrong, here was something that felt so right.

* * *

I’m roused at some unknown hour—they’ve taken my watch at the front desk and the windowless cell is still the same dim shade of gray. Two guys in the cell are fighting over one of the bunk beds, though to me the relative cleanliness of the cement floor is more appealing. My neck and back ache from resting on the hard surface. I instinctively reach for Brian next to me, but he is no longer there. I struggle to stand up and look for him, asking others in the cell if they have seen him. One man tells me that he thinks he was taken away some time earlier, but to where he’s not sure.

My sense of loneliness and abandonment only deepens—I realize I don't have Brian's phone number and haven't even asked him for his last name. The brief pleasure I felt earlier seems like a lifetime ago. I return to where we spent the last few hours together and look for anything he may have left behind as a clue. But all I can find as I pass my hands over the cold floor that no longer holds any trace of his warmth is an old St. Christopher medal that I never noticed hanging around Brian's neck. Perhaps another inmate had taken it out to help him pray who knows how many seasons ago. I take up the medal, put it briefly to my lips, and drape the chain around my neck.

As if a sign from God, at that moment a guard comes to the cell and calls out my name. I approach the door and am led out back to the room where my information was taken. The guard hands me back my personal items taken the night before—my wallet, keys and watch along with my address book—a painful reminder that I have no way to get in touch with Brian, void as it is that he exists in this world. I start to ask the guard about him, where was he taken, has he been let go, but the guard seems only interested in having me sign for my things and move on to the next person. As I sign, the guard tells me to read all of the instructions, including where I am to report next week to begin my four weeks of Community Service.

“Can I appeal this?” I ask angrily.

“Sure, bud. Tell it to the judge.” And the guard lets out a small laugh.

I figure I've had enough of this place and will worry about the sentence after I get out of here. I walk outside, guessing from the position of the sun in the sky that it's midmorning—almost a full day since the protest began. A bus pulls up not long after I get to the street and I hop on, ready to go wherever it will take me as long as it's miles away.

IV. The Exchange

The following Thursday, I can hardly wait to pick up the new *Washington Blade* to see if Brian has left an ad for me in the ‘Glances’ section. As I scan through the postings, I begin to perceive the folly of my hope. What was I expecting?

You—fellow protester at Department of Public Health. We spent a night together on floor of jail cell. Didn’t want to wake you when I was released the next morning. Next time, let’s find a more comfortable place to spend the night, okay? Call Brian at (202) 397-4282.

But all I can see are listings that mention meeting places in all of the usual locations—Dupont Circle, the Metro, the Safeway on 14th, Annie’s Paramount Steak House. Nothing even approaching a jail cell in Alexandria, Virginia.

Disappointed, I thumb through the rest of the pages, pausing now and again on the ads of practically naked men, a phone cord dangling alluringly in front of them, eyes just yearning to receive a call from no one but me. I’ve come a long way from that International Male catalog years ago! But I don’t fall for this crude advertising and instead move on to the ‘Calendar’ section to see if there is any mention of upcoming protests, hoping to see Brian there. One catches my eye—a gathering on the Mall that Sunday afternoon by the Washington Monument, but I realize this is the time of my first session of Community Service. I’m also still a little apprehensive about attending a protest so soon after the experience of last weekend.

According to the paperwork I signed at the police station, my Community Service is appointed to take place at ‘The Telecommunications Exchange for the Deaf, Inc.’ I have no idea what would happen at a place named this and what service I could provide there. The address indicates that it’s located on the campus of Gallaudet University—a place I have never been to, even though it’s just a few blocks north of my home in Capitol Hill.

That Sunday afternoon, I drive to the campus and park in the Visitor’s parking lot. I’m impressed with the number of buildings that make up the campus; I had no idea the university was this large. I look for a map that would indicate where the Exchange is located, but I don’t see one nearby. I start to walk toward the center of campus and pass a student carrying a few books in a bag slung over his shoulder. I ask, “Do you know where the, umm...” and look at my form, “...Telecommunications Exchange for the Deaf is located?”

Silence. This guy's face doesn't even register that I have just spoken to him. And then I get it, he's deaf and can't hear me. So I reflexively say "I'm sorry," but realize that's not going to work either. He motions something with his hands to me, but it's as foreign to me as my words are to him. I begin to realize what it must be like for deaf people in the hearing world outside of this campus where sign language is the *lingua franca*.

I just wave good bye to the student and continue in search of someone I can ask for directions. I pass many other students, some in groups of two or three, and none of them are speaking with each other—they are all using just sign language to communicate. I'm amazed at the complexity of this new world I have discovered, practically in my back yard. I think back on the hours upon hours I could spend as a child just staring at the anthills in the woods behind our house—a whole other world with its own language and customs—completely foreign to mine.

I begin to feel a sense of comfort here, amidst those like myself who don't seem to fit a social "norm." Here's a place I could hide from the judgment and scrutiny of those who do not accept me because of my sexuality, a place where I can find some peace not having to work to gain other people's acceptance. A place where it's okay to be different without pressure to conform to a standard I am unable to achieve if I am to be true to myself.

At last, I see a tour being conducted ahead—I can hear a woman speaking to a group of adults, who look like parents of prospective students at the university. I join up with the tour and listen in for a bit, before I pull her aside as we walk to the next stop in the tour and ask for directions.

"You mean TEDI?" she asks.

"I'm sorry, did you just say 'teddy?'" afraid that even the hearing people here speak another language than I do.

"Yes, TEDI are the initials of the Telecommunications Exchange for the Deaf, Inc." she clarifies.

Relieved, I nod my head yes, letting her know that is what I am looking for. She points to a small building just across from where we are and I thank her for her assistance. I walk to its front door and ring the bell, noticing a picture of a teddy bear that adorns the sign for the Exchange. I'm glad that I had had the earlier conversation with the tour guide about the acronym or I might have been more apprehensive seeing the mascot of large, hairy gay men.

A large black woman, dressed in a strapless floral sundress with estimable décolletage, answers the door and I introduce myself. I speak perhaps a little too loudly, hoping that she can hear me. She nods and says, "Oh, you're the one from the Alexandria jail, aren't you?" Maybe it's not so good that she can hear me. I begin to try to explain how it had all happened, but she shrugs me off with a laugh.

“Honey, I seen all *kinds* of people through here—it don’t make no difference to me what you did as long as you got two hands that can type, you’re welcome here.”

A clue. Typing’s involved and sure enough, she leads me into a large room full of reading carrels, each with a small typewriter sitting on a desk and a notebook by its side. Two other people are already there—both are wearing headsets and alternately talking into the microphone and typing on the typewriter. The air inside feels close and oppressive; only a little natural light enters the room through a couple of small, sooty windows that seem fixed in place. A musty smell permeates the room and appears to emanate from an old threadbare carpet an ambiguous shade of green. A few faded posters, corners upturned, hang on the wall—smiling students, normal by all outward appearances, stand superimposed before the buildings of the Gallaudet campus.

The woman brings me into her office, which adjoins this large room, and shuts her door. Her office is terribly cluttered—books, newspapers, even old boxes of Chinese food are piled high on her small desk—the only clean surface holds a small figurine of a brass hand suspended on a pole imbedded in a black cube, shiny as onyx. At first I thought it was a joke—a hand with just the middle finger extended—but, as I step closer, I notice that three fingers are actually extended—the thumb, index and pinky.

“That’s the universal deaf greeting,” she explains, noticing my interest. “It’s a combination of the finger spelling of three letters—‘I,’ which is the pinky, ‘L,’ which is the thumb and index finger, and ‘Y,’ the thumb and the pinky.” She demonstrates these letters to me with her right hand as she describes them.

“I-L-Y?” I ask, a stranger in a strange land.

“I Love You. Though deaf people use it as commonly as we say ‘Hello.’”

She sits down behind the desk and motions for me to sit in the only other chair in the room. I start to sit down, but notice on the chair an open box of pizza with a couple of slices of pepperoni inside, the cheese congealed to a sheen of turpentine.

“Sorry, honey, just put that aside. I keep trying to diet, but with the hours I keep here, the only food I get to eat is what I can get delivered. Maybe with an extra pair of hands around, I might just be able to go out and get me a nice roast beef dinner sometime.” Not exactly the kind of meal to start a diet with, but I keep that thought to myself.

“So, honey, let me welcome you to TEDI. My name is Wendy—I’m the weekend supervisor and I’ll be showing you what you’ll be doing over the next...” She looks down at my paperwork “...four Sundays.” Wendy’s voice is low and gravelly, like pebbles scraped over a slab of granite. I look for the telltale ashtray filled with cigarette butts, but don’t let the fact that I don’t see one in the

disarray of her office dissuade me from my theory. I just hope that she puts them out thoroughly if they're now buried under one of the stacks of paper on her desk.

"Now we both know why you're here and it's not because you have a burning desire to be of service to the Deaf Community. My hope though, honey, is that over time you will learn a little bit about deaf culture and be glad about the service you provided while you were here."

I reserve judgment on this—I'm still upset that I have to give up four Sundays when I could be hunting down Brian at an area demonstration. I'm here only because I'm one of the disenfranchised of this world—a small voice in the darkness, silenced by those with power and money. But the ambiance of this campus is starting to have an affect on me and I think, At least I *have* a voice....

Wendy then describes how her operation works. "When a deaf person wishes to communicate over the phone, he'll use a teletype machine, commonly known as a TTY or TDD, the latter is the more recent term referring to a Telecommunications Device for the Deaf. It's basically a typewriter that emits a signal with each keystroke that another TTY can decode and display on some type of monitor.

"This system works great if both parties have a TTY, as almost all deaf people and their hearing relatives do. But if the person the deaf person wishes to call does not have a TTY, like the local Dominoes or a hearing friend, that's where we come in. Generally, the deaf person will call here first over a TTY. One of our operators will take the call and then call the hearing person using another phone hooked up to his headset. He'll announce the name of the deaf caller and begin to read what the deaf person types as it comes up on the display. I'll pair you up with one of our operators and you can just watch for a while before I put you on a call."

"So are all the operators here like me?" I ask. Wendy scrunches up her face in confusion and I wonder in my paranoia if she thinks I mean, Are they gay? "I mean, are they all in Community Service?"

"No," Wendy replies. "In fact, most of our operators are volunteers who are just looking for some way to spend a few hours a week, helping out as they can. Some have been with us for years now, and are often requested by name by some of our deaf callers as they do a good job keeping up with the conversation. Just try typing on a typewriter what someone is saying to you, honey, and keeping up with every word!

"Our operators do their best to convey what each party is saying—ordering a pizza is pretty straight-forward—but in some cases, say when a deaf person is calling a hearing lawyer about a job discrimination lawsuit, it's important to be as clear as possible and not miss any important point.

Deaf people can't hear the subtle intonations that we hearing people count on over the phone to detect emotions; our best operators include some of this 'non-verbal' language as they type. But be careful, honey, just call 'em as you hear 'em, I like to say—don't *ever* bring any of your personality or opinions into the conversation."

I'm a little overwhelmed by all of the information, but figure it'll make a little more sense when I watch someone in action. Wendy leads me back into the large room and waits for one of the two operators to finish with a call. This ends up being an older woman, probably in her early sixties, who reminds me of my grandmother—wispy gray hair gathered up into a bun and a face creased with lines, accustomed to smiling. The air about her holds a faint aroma of perfume, one that I imagine was more popular years ago and reminds me of lavender.

Wendy introduces us and tells me that Vivian will show me the ropes. "I hope she didn't scare you, sweetheart," Vivian says to me with an admonishing wink at Wendy. "If I can do this, anybody can." Wendy smiles and returns to her office as I pull up one of those old office swivel chairs from the neighboring carrel. A light flashes on the wall above Vivian's TTY just as I sit down. She tells me that's how deaf people know that someone is trying to call them. "So many things that we take for granted, the sound of a doorbell, the ring of a phone, an alarm clock going off, are missing in a deaf person's world. For deaf people, visual cues have to take their place."

I look at the monitor on Vivian's TTY, and see:

HELLO THIS IS DREW CLD U PLS CALL DOMINOES AT 202-549-1111 Q GA

Vivian dials the phone next to the TTY and speaks into the headset: "Hello, I am calling for Drew from the Telecommunications Exchange for the Deaf. He would like to place an order. Hold please."

Vivian types into the TTY:

DOMINOES ON THE LINE GA

As she waits for a response from Drew, she turns to me and says that at least half of their call volume is Gallaudet students ordering pizzas. Though so much of this world seems alien to me, I find something here that I can relate to from my own college days.

Drew finally responds:

I WANT LG MUSHRM N GRN PPR PIZZA DLVRD CLERC 307 GA

Vivian speaks into her headset: "Hi, Drew would like a large mushroom and green pepper pizza delivered to Clerc Hall at Gallaudet, room 307. Thank you." Then she types into her TTY:
20 MINS GA TO SK

Drew replies:

THX SK

And finally Vivian:

SK SK

She logs the call in the notebook and turns to me: “Now that wasn’t so difficult, was it?”

“I think I lost you right after the first line. I noticed that each line ended with ‘GA.’ What does that mean?”

Vivian explains, “‘GA’ is used to let the other person know it’s her turn to type. It stands for ‘Go Ahead.’ You probably also noticed everything is in capital letters—it makes things so much easier—and there’s no punctuation other than the letter ‘Q’ which we use as a question mark.”

I start to become intrigued in this yet another new language I’m learning today. “Wendy described to me the use of abbreviations—I suppose that helps reduce the amount of typing you have to do.”

“Yes, sweetheart, it does,” Vivian replies. “And just between you and me, many of the deaf people who call in here have atrocious English! The sign language that they use, ASL...oh, I’m sorry sweetheart, that means American Sign Language, reduces sentences to their basic elements, subject, verb, object and not necessarily in that order. Words like ‘a’ and ‘the’ are never used, and the tense of the verb is usually implied. These shortcuts tend to spill over into their writing.

“I have a deaf son myself about your age, that’s why I volunteer here. His writing is better than most, but it’s only because I still keep after him. It also helped that he was hearing growing up when he was learning how to write.”

“You mean some people just go deaf? I knew that could happen to older people,” immediately regretting this reference.

Vivian laughs it off, “You mean like at my age, sweetheart? Yes, that’s true, my hearing’s not what it once was. But no, my son lost his hearing as a result of a motorcycle accident when he was fifteen.”

An awkward silence is interrupted by the blinking light on the wall. Vivian returns to her work. This time, it’s from a woman who wants to place a call to her father who must not have a TTY. The area code that she types for her father isn’t familiar to me and I think to ask Vivian about that after the call is over: “Who pays for the long distance charges for a call like that?”

“Oh, that would be the university here. It’s a service they provide not only to their students but to any deaf person who lives in the Metro area.” Vivian pauses a moment and then a thought comes to her. “One last thing I think I need to explain before you take a call is how to end a conversation.

“When one of the parties on the phone is finished with the conversation, they will type ‘GA TO SK,’ which literally means, ‘Go Ahead to Stop Keying.’ It’s like saying ‘I’m finished now, are you?’ If the other person is also finished, he’ll respond with some parting remarks and ‘SK’—I’ll stop keying now too. Finally the first person will type ‘SK SK’ which ends the conversation. Generally, only the deaf person is aware of these conventions, so when the hearing person on the phone says that they need to go, instead of typing that, you use the deaf convention, ‘GA TO SK.’ But don’t worry too much about these, John. I’m sure you’ll pick them up in no time whatsoever.”

Vivian moves her chair back and motions to me to bring my chair in front of the TTY. She helps me on with the headset, positioning the mike right in front of my mouth. As she brings her hands up to my face, the scent of lavender I smelled earlier now reminds me of my grandmother’s ‘Ashes of Roses’ perfume my brother Joe and I accidentally knocked off her bedroom dresser on one of our scavenger hunts through her house, filling the room with the pungent smell.

The light above the TTY blinks and I start to break out in a slight sweat, nervous with my first call. Vivian must sense the tension—she grips my left shoulder firmly and tells me, “I’m right here, sweetheart. You’ll do great—I just know it.” Her son’s skill at written English must also come from such encouragement.

Green, glowing letters start to appear on the monitor, like the news headlines in Time Square. I read:

HI THIS IS JENNY CAN U CALL ROGER Q 202-703-1169 GA

Vivian lets out a small laugh and turns to the other operator next to us and says, “Josh, John got Jenny and Roger as his first call!” Josh laughs as well and I wonder what’s in store for me.

I dial the phone next to the TTY and hear the ringing in my headset. After a couple of rings, a man picks up and says hello. After a moment’s hesitation, I speak into the mike, “Hi, this is John with the Telecommunications Exchange for the....” He interrupts me just as I am about to announce the caller with “Hi Jenny. How are you?”

With the interruption, I guess Roger must not get calls from any other deaf person other than Jenny. I’m a little put off being called Jenny by a stranger, but quickly regain my footing. I type:

JOHN ON LINE HOW R U Q

Vivian nods her head as I type and whispers to me to be sure to type ‘GA’ so Jenny knows it’s her turn to type. After I type that, Jenny replies:

I M FINE I LUV U GA

I begin to speak into the phone to Roger, “She’s fine. She...” but Vivian tells me to read exactly what appears on the monitor, so I start again. “I am fine. I love you.”

Roger doesn't seem to notice my hesitation and responds, "I love you too, Jenny." After three or four rounds of this, Roger tells Jenny that he has to go on an errand. I couldn't be happier, uneasy as it is for me to tell a man I have never met that I love him over the phone over and over again.

After the requisite 'SKs' I turn back to Vivian who seems pleased with how I did. I give her back the headset and sit with her the rest of the afternoon. When she's not taking a call, she tells me more about her son, Steve. Apparently, he decided to stay in DC after graduating from Gallaudet with a degree in Sociology a few years ago. I'm curious about the kind of work deaf people can get and ask her what he does.

With obvious pride in her voice, Vivian tells me that Steve works for the National Park Service conducting tours for deaf visitors to the Lincoln Memorial and to the other monuments nearby. "Steve particularly enjoys bringing the tourists to the Viet Nam Memorial, where they can touch the names of those who died. That sense of touch means so much to them—Steve often tells me that so many are moved to tears by it, even if they don't know anyone who died in that war."

Wendy comes by with what looks like a small Chinese noodle dangling next to her mouth, and tells me I can go home if I want. I decide to stay another half hour with Vivian until it is her time to leave. I offer to walk her back to her car as she has parked in the same lot as I have. As we leave, she tells me she'd like for me to meet Steve some day—she thinks we'd have a lot in common. It's funny, but before today I couldn't imagine anything that I could have in common with someone who is deaf, but now I'm not so sure.

I tell Vivian, "I would like that," and we say goodbye.

V. Bad Connections

Another week passes with no sighting of Brian and I'm beginning to think I just dreamed up that entire night in jail—my way of dealing with the stress of the situation. I appear at the door of TEDI on Sunday at my appointed hour and Wendy ushers me inside.

I'm disappointed not to see Vivian in the room, but recognize Josh from last week and say hello. He nods as he is currently on a call and I sit down at the station next to him. Wendy asks if I think I can handle a few calls on my own and I tell her I think so. She says to just ask Josh for help if I get stuck with anything.

I place the headset on and wait for the light. After a few minutes, it starts to blink and I take the call—another pizza to be delivered from Dominos. Glad that my first call is an easy one, I build my confidence a call at a time, becoming more familiar with the various abbreviations and conventions as I go along. Then I receive a call much different from any other so far:

HELLO THIS IS STEVE CALLING IS MY MOTHER VIVIAN DAWSON THERE Q GA

I've never had a caller address me directly with a question. I lean back, about to ask Josh if the Vivian I met last week has the last name 'Dawson,' but he's on another call, so instead I type:

HOLD A MIN LET ME ASK SUPERVISOR GA

He responds

THNX SO MUCH WHAT IS YOUR NAME Q GA

I reply

MY NAME IS JOHN HOLD ON

I knock on the door to Wendy's office and hear a muffled "Come in" and enter. Wendy is smoking a cigarette (I knew it!), and an open box of Chinese food is in front of her, two chopsticks sticking out like TV antennae. I'm grateful that this time at least none of it is currently on her face.

She tells me that yes, Vivian's last name is Dawson, and I ask her if she knows when she'll be in. She tells me she expected her an hour ago. I tell her that her son is calling for her and go back to my station to give Steve the message.

Steve doesn't respond for a minute after I tell him, but then the letters start to appear:

OH OK I LL TRY HER AT HOME THNX JOHN MY MOTHER HAS TOLD ME ABOUT U GA

I wonder how perceptive Vivian really is and what she has shared with her son.

OK GOOD LUCK GA TO SK

THNX AGAIN!!!! SK

SK SK

My first exclamation point! I didn't even know one existed on a TTY but, studying the keyboard more closely, see it hidden to the far left of 'Z.'

The rest of the afternoon goes smoothly and is relatively quiet. I start to leave when my light blinks and I decide to take one last call.

HELLO THIS IS STEVE DAWSON HAS MY MOTHER ARRIVED YET Q GA

HI STEVE THIS IS JOHN AGAIN NO YOUR MOTHER NEVER SHOWED UP TODAY GA

OH I M BEGINNING TO WORRY!!!! I CALLED HER HOME AND THERE IS NO ANSWER GA

Vivian never mentioned her husband, so I'm not sure if she lives alone or not.

HAVE U STOPPED BY HER HOME Q GA

NO I M HERE AT WORK AND HAVE A TOUR GROUP ARRIVING IN A FEW MINS GA

Then, I remember Vivian told me last week that she lives in an apartment a few blocks away from campus.

WOULD U LIKE ME TO STOP BY HER PLACE ON MY WAY HOME Q SHE TOLD ME IT IS NEARBY GA

There is a long pause and then Steve begins typing.

THAT WOULD BE SO SWEET OF U!!! CLD U TELL HER TO LV A MSG FOR ME HERE AT THE PARK SVC IF SHE IS THERE Q GA

I get her address from Steve and sign off. A few minutes later, I wave good bye to Wendy, who is on the phone. I begin to see the usefulness of sign language even among hearing people—I could sign 'See you next week' through her open door without having to interrupt her phone conversation. But a wave will have to do for now.

I find Vivian's apartment building fairly easily among the letters and numbers of the grid of DC's street system. The building looks like it was built in the sixties, wide concrete steps lead up to double glass doors, protected by a wrought iron gate. Then I notice all of the windows on the first floor also have bars protecting them—a common sight in this area of DC. Units above the first floor have small patios that look out over the street—a few are lush with vines and flowering plants. I silently hope that Vivian's unit is one of these so that she might enjoy the pastel colors against an otherwise drab palette of urban grays and beiges.

I go to the rack of buzzers by the main door and see the name Dawson by the button for 3C. I press it and think of the visual cues that Vivian mentioned to me last week—how difficult would it be for Steve to live in a building like this and have to rewire the buzzer to set off a blinking light for him to know someone was at the door. And then I realize, he would just have to let them in without being able to talk to them over the intercom!

A crackling voice, definitely male, interrupts my thoughts. I am able to make out, “Yeah, who is it?” and begin to think I hit the wrong button.

“Hi, I’m looking for Vivian Dawson. Is this her apartment?”

The disembodied voice grows a bit louder: “Who wants to know?”

Still unsure I have the right apartment I answer, “My name is John—I work with Vivian at Gallaudet. Her son Steve is looking for her.”

“Well, she’s not here. She went shopping with some friends down...” and I miss the rest of what he says. This is not the place for a conversation like this, particularly with people coming and going through the glass doors. I’m tempted to follow one of these people into the building and just go to the apartment, but don’t want to just drop in on someone I’ve never met and who doesn’t sound too anxious to meet me.

“Oh, okay. Just tell her to call Steve when she gets back. He’s pretty worried about her.”

The static appears to diminish a bit. “That kid needs to grow up and stop worryin’ so much—he calls here all the time lookin’ for her. Whenever I hear that damn computer noise on the phone, I just hang up. I can’t use one of those stupid typewriters....” and then he fades out.

I take the opportunity to interrupt with a quick “Oh, Okay. Goodbye.” and head back to my car.

On my way home, I get more and more upset at how the man I spoke with treated Steve. When I get home, I decide to look up the National Park Service phone number and leave a message for Steve. I want him to know that his mother is fine and will be home later. The operator asks for my name and number after taking my message for him.

Satisfied that I have done what I could, hunger strikes, so I open the door to my refrigerator looking for something to eat. The intensity of the light that hits me indicates that there’s not much interfering its path to me—only a few Tupperware containers that belong to my old boyfriend, filled with leftovers from his culinary creations now long past edible, even by my lax standards.

As I go to the phone to order what must be my tenth pizza of the day, this one for me, it rings.

“Hello,” I answer.

“Hi, this is Josh from the Telecommunications Exchange for the Deaf. Is John there?”

“Hi, Josh. Yes, I’m John...I’m the guy who volunteered with you this afternoon,” stretching the truth about why I’ve been at TEDI the last two weeks.

“Oh hi, John. I thought this might be you. I have Steve Dawson on the line. Hold please.”

I find it very interesting to be on the receiving end of the service I provided earlier that day. Josh comes back on the line. “Hi, John. I just wanted to thank you for your message earlier.”

I first wonder what message I left with Josh, but then realize this is actually Steve talking to me through him. I respond, “Oh, no problem. Did you finally get in touch with your mother?” I’m tempted to add “Go Ahead” to signal I am finished to Josh, but I know he knows to do that anyway.

Steve responds, “Yes, I did. I forgot she had told me that she was going shopping with some friends this afternoon.”

“Okay, great. Let her know I look forward to seeing her next week if she’ll be at Gallaudet.”

Steve’s words in Josh’s voice: “I definitely will.”

Steve and I continue to converse as if I am speaking directly to him, over time I forget that Josh is even there. I make a mental note of his technique for my future afternoons at TEDI.

I think to ask Steve about the man whom I spoke to at the apartment building, hoping it wasn’t his father, but figure that conversation can wait until I see Vivian next week. I pause, wondering if Steve will say anything else. When I don’t hear anything, I ask Josh if there’s more. Josh says, Yes, Steve’s transmission is becoming garbled—this happened to me a few times earlier in the day when I’ve been on a bad line. Finally, Josh gets a clear signal.

“So, John, I was wondering if you’d like to get together next weekend? Every Saturday when the weather is good, some friends and I go to the grounds around the Washington Monument and fly kites. This may be the first weekend this year that the weather will be warm enough for us to go. We have a great time.”

I wonder how I’d communicate with Steve in person and also his other friends if they are deaf as well. But the idea of flying kites on the Mall appeals to me—it’s one of the few pleasures my father and I used to enjoy together, spending time on the beach as a child. He used to place his strong hands over mine, making sure I didn’t let the string out too quickly or let the kite get away. I used to love to see the brightly-colored kite soar high over the open water, dipping and bobbing as it got caught in the contrary currents of the shifting wind. Unfortunately, that all ended when I was about nine or ten when my father told me I was too old for childish games like that. We never flew kites on the beach again.

We agree to meet up at the Monument that Saturday and I suggest a backup plan of attending a foreign film festival in Dupont, if the weather's not good for kite-flying. I figure we'd both be on equal footing as far as the foreign language goes, relying instead on the captions to figure out what was going on. If this conversation was in person, I would look for a glimmer of recognition on Steve's face as I mention this gay neighborhood. But for now, that will remain a mystery.

I give Steve my basic stats so he might recognize me—5'11", jet black hair, and at my fighting weight of 185 pounds. I start to add what many people tell me is my most distinguishing feature—my voice. They tell me I'd be the next Michael McDonald if I could actually sing, but instead have been doing a lot of voice-over work for television commercials since my voice dropped to its resonant baritone after puberty. Advertisers tell me my voice has a midwestern purity even though I've never been west of Wheeling. They like a voice that can't be associated with any particular region of the country as their ads may play in any market.

My most recent commercial was for a new breath mint that was supposed to clean your teeth as it dissolved in your mouth. I've never actually seen the ad, but Mack told me that he recognized my voice on one of those rare occasions when he had the TV on, while painting his apartment a couple of weeks ago.

"Have you ever tried that shit?" he asked me when he called me at work the following week. "I'd usually never buy that stuff, but I had a date with Drew, the guy I met at that reading at Lambda Rising. I realized just as I was walking to his pad in Adams Morgan, I hadn't brushed my teeth all day, so I picked some up at the convenience store on the way. I'm tellin' you man, that stuff is *nasty*—like sucking on licorice covered in sandpaper."

Though there's the remote chance that Steve may have heard my voice on TV before his accident, like all sounds, it would be a distant memory and can't be tied to me. I wait for Steve to respond with a description of himself, but all he tells me is that his kite is in the shape of a dragon and that's how I'll know which one is him. Another mystery to be later revealed.

* * *

During the week, I keep an impatient eye on the upcoming forecast for the weekend. The prospects steadily improve throughout the week—by Friday, it calls for partly cloudy skies and a high of 68. Mack has invited me to an art gallery opening Friday night at the Hirshhorn—my suspicion is that his new-found interest in contemporary art means that he's showing off for his new friend Drew, or they have already broken up and is trying out a new venue to meet men.

After a brief stroll through the gallery, I meet Mack outside the Hirshhorn, hidden among the statues of the Sculpture Garden. He's sipping Chardonnay from a plastic cup, his eyes locked on a much shorter black man, sharply dressed with tortoise rim glasses, standing beside him. They're speaking in hushed tones as if the figures set in stone about them could overhear. A chill in the March air causes their breath to come out as a visible fine mist. Mack could easily pass for the artist responsible for the show—various hues of paint are splattered on his pants, colors only I would recognize from the freshly-painted walls of his apartment.

I don't want to assume this is Drew, so I wait for Mack to introduce me to his friend. "Oh, hullo, John. Glad to see it's you who found us out here—my ex is inside and he can be downright *unpleasant* when he sees me with another guy. We made a quick getaway out here before he saw us and are having a nice romantic stroll through the garden on this stellar evening." He takes his friend's hand into his and looks longingly into the shorter man's eyes. "This is Drew, the guy I told you about from the reading."

It'd be a rare gathering in DC where there wasn't at least one of Mack's ex's in attendance, an observation I'd share if I knew Drew better. Instead, I ask them what they thought about the paintings inside. Not surprisingly, Drew is the one with the informed impression: "I'm hardly an expert on this, but I find that his use of color and geometric shapes is reminiscent of an early Frank Stella, but the entire effect seems trite and less powerful." Mack just looks on, almost reverentially, lost in awe. I'd be impressed if I haven't seen him like this so many times before.

Drew excuses himself to find the restroom. "Dreamy, isn't he?" Mack asks me as his eyes make an obvious scan over Drew's backside as he walks away.

With Drew gone, I can speak freely. "I'm not sure I would've pegged him as your type, but, then again, he *does* have a penis now doesn't he, or he wouldn't be going to the bathroom?"

"Har, har, har, Mr. Comedian here. So what's your type, dude?" Mack asks me. "I thought once you found a man who would cook for you, you'd be set for life."

"No, Chris dumped me weeks ago, and then there was Brian I met at a protest and spent the night with on the floor of a jail cell but haven't heard from since."

Mack doesn't flinch with the mention of jail. Either he's not listening carefully to me or this has happened to him as well. He decides to offer me some advice. "Maybe if you hang out here, you can pounce on someone coming out of the exhibit. I'd stay away from my ex though—he was way too serious for me—we had had sex just a couple of times and the guy wanted to get married."

“Yeah, that means no more than a handshake to you, doesn’t it? Actually, I do have a date tomorrow, if you can call kite-flying here on the Mall with a man I have never met, am not sure is gay, and can’t communicate with a date.”

This peaks Mack’s interest. “Sounds intriguing. Tell me more.”

“Well, after my night accommodated at the expense of the generous taxpayers of Alexandria, I got sentenced to four weeks of Community Service at a telephone relay service for deaf people at Gallaudet University. I met a woman there whose son is deaf and who thought we’d have a lot in common.”

Mack mulls this over. “Hmmm...since he’s deaf and you’re not, that could only mean he’s light in the loafers, right?”

“I’m not so sure—maybe she just thought we could be good friends. Or that he might teach me something about deaf culture. Anyway, he called me at home the other night and we’re getting together tomorrow morning to fly kites with his friends.”

“There certainly have been plenty of times I wished the guy I had just had sex with couldn’t speak,” Mack confides in me. “Consider it a blessing. He can’t say anything to screw up the beauty of two men together under the sheets. No complaints about your choice in furniture, the clothes you wear, or the friends you choose to hang out with.”

I wonder if I’m one of those friends an ex-boyfriend of Mack’s has complained about, but dismiss the thought and file it under the rubric of Things I Don’t Really Care About. Instead, I decide to make a stand for romance. “How about getting to know someone before you have sex with them? Is that such a revolutionary idea to you?”

Unfortunately, Drew picks this moment to make his presence known behind me. “Yeah, Mack. I at least expect you to buy me dinner tonight before I jump into the sack with you,” Drew says mockingly as he takes Mack’s hand into his. Obviously, they have already had sex and this conversation is pointless. I bid the new lovers adieu and head off across the Mall, deciding to walk home on this “stellar” evening instead of taking the Metro. The sideways ‘W’ of the constellation Cassiopeia, the Queen, in the clear night sky above me guides my way home.

VI. *A Kite in the Shape of a Dragon*

Saturday dawns as predicted, hints of sun through scattered clouds, a promise of warmth in the humid air. I'm supposed to meet Steve at ten o'clock, but end up not leaving the house until then, having spent over an hour on the phone with my mother down in Sun City. Apparently she and Dotty Frances from her quilting bee are getting along quite swimmingly now—my mother regaled me about a local production of "South Pacific" they had taken in together earlier that week. It was "Ladies Night" as the men stayed home to play canasta without them.

"Those kids were so professional Johnny," my mother tells me, "you would've thought you were on Broadway. After the show, Dotty brought me to a new nightclub in town called 'Bananas' where all the waiters are men and none of them has a shirt on, just bow ties tied around their necks. Dotty kept tipping our waiter in his waistband each time she ordered a daiquiri. I was *so* embarrassed! Don't tell your father, sweetheart—he thinks we just went to get an ice cream sundae after the show."

"Your secret's safe with me, Mom," I reassure her. "Just be sure you're careful driving home if you've had too much to drink." Listen to me, admonishing my mother as if she was a teenager. Finally, I tell her I have to go to meet someone. "Oh, certainly sweetheart. Is it that man you've told us about who is such a good cook? What was his name...Craig?"

"No, Mom, I don't see much of *Chris* anymore. I'm just meeting a friend to go fly kites by the Washington Monument—you haven't met him yet." Neither have I, I think to myself.

"That sounds nice. Well, have fun and hope to talk to you later."

After sniffing it quickly to make sure it is clean, I put on a T-shirt that says "I CAN'T EVEN THINK STRAIGHT" and some cargo shorts a fatigue green. Running as late as I am, I decide to take the Metro to the Smithsonian station instead of walking down to the Mall. But before I leave, I pause to look at myself in the mirror in my bedroom, and am glad for the investment in time I have made at the gym, filling out my clothes nicely. A thought bubble appears above my reflection: "If Harry could see me now," recalling my shame in my appearance in my Boy Scout uniform before I hit puberty.

It's not long after I get out of the subway station that I see the brightly-colored kites flying to the left of the Monument. It's odd that I have never noticed them before as Steve has told me they do this every Saturday when the weather is good. They are so beautiful set against the patches of blue

sky beyond them—there must be at least ten of them caught up in a frenzied dance of ever-changing partners and gyrations. At this distance, I can't pick out one that looks like a dragon, so I continue to approach.

As I reach the top of the hill the Monument sits upon, I see the group of kite fliers right below me. I notice a woman in a white polo shirt and khakis among them without a kite, just staring up into the sky. All the others, modern-day Ben Franklins, hold a line tethered to a kite, reaching tautly into the sky. They do not appear to be communicating with each other; hands are put to use guiding the kites flying above them.

I follow their eyes skyward for the kite shaped like a dragon. I see it nestled amid others shaped like butterflies, stingrays, even a square-rigged pirate ship. The dragon kite trails a streamer that must span thirty feet, rippling in waves across the sky. I try to follow the line down to the person flying it, but can't follow the transparent fiber in the air. I'll have to wait until it descends to pick Steve out from the group.

As I stand gazing up, I fail to notice the woman without a kite approaching me. She surprises me and asks, "Excuse me. Your name isn't John by chance, is it?"

"Yes, it is," I tell her.

"That's great! Steve will be so happy to know you are here. My name is Christine," and she shakes my hand very firmly.

"Nice to meet you. You're not deaf?" I ask bluntly in my surprise. Christine tilts her head back and laughs loudly in an equine sort of way. "Hardly! Though I do have lots of deaf friends like Steve."

"Do you know sign language then?"

"Yes, I learned it many years ago. Both of my parents are deaf. But enough about me, let me introduce you to the others." She brings me down to the group, a few briefly turn my way and then return their concentration to controlling the reins of their flying steeds. Christine points out one of those who didn't look our way—the one flying the dragon kite, she tells me. This is Steve.

I squint in the bright sunlight, my eyes blurry from so much time looking up into the sky. I see that Steve is wearing a plaid blue flannel shirt, arms cut off at the shoulder, revealing powerful arms, covered in freckles I can see from here, muscles now tense in their work of anchoring the kite to the ground beneath his feet. The kite fights his efforts to keep it tied to this earthly world, yearning to break free and soar ever higher, striving, like Icarus before it, to reach the heavens.

Steve's hair, a shock of red, hides the profile of his face now turned from me. I take the opportunity of not being noticed to walk closer to him and pick out other features. I first notice two

beige hearing aids which lay partially hidden behind each of his ears. My eyes then settle on his hands, large and strongly-veined, each finger seeming to work independently on the task at hand. They remind me of my father's hands as they would engulf mine, rough with the calluses from years of labor, helping me to cling tenuously to the string of my own kite, flying over the beach of my childhood.

I come no closer as Steve begins to reel in his dragon, streaming high in the sky, its wings protesting his pull to the ground where no wind will buffet it in its desire to soar. But the dragon is no match for this knight in blue flannel as it makes its reluctant descent in fits and starts, eventually reaching the ground about fifty feet from where we stand.

Steve goes to retrieve the kite and I follow him to it. He reaches it first, bends down to pick it up and makes sure it has not been damaged by the impact with the ground. I'm impressed with how seriously he examines the kite, running his hands gently down each strut as if his sense of touch might catch a flaw his eyes might miss. Satisfied this firebird will rise again, he turns to return to the group and notices me looking on. My broad smile at the sight of his handsome face, sprinkled with freckles, gives me away. "Yahhr Jahhn," I hear him say, words at once both foreign in their intonation but so familiar, as if the ancients from whom my genes are drawn communicated in this way.

I nod my head and we shake hands, his grip even more powerful than Christine's earlier. Christine greets us as we return to the group and signs something to Steve. Steve laughs and signs back. Christine turns to me and says, "Steve thinks you're cute!" A mystery no longer.

I ask Christine to thank Steve and tell him that I think he's cute, too. She says, "Tell him yourself—there are just two signs you'll need. The first is 'thank you,' which is signed by bringing your open hand, fingers together, to your lips and then motioning toward the person you're thanking with the back of your hand. The sign for 'cute' is similar, except that you place only your index and middle fingers against your lips and drag them down across your chin. Then, just point at Steve to indicate that he is the one you think is cute."

Christine takes my right hand into hers and helps me practice. After she tells me I'm ready, I turn to Steve and try out my first two signs. As his grin widens from ear to ear, I know I have succeeded in my first lesson.

Steve begins to speak aloud to me, but I am unable to make out his words as my ears are not yet attuned to his speech. After a few attempts, I turn to Christine for help. She and Steve sign for a minute and then tells me that Steve would like to know if I'd like to fly his dragon kite. "Yes, of course!" I tell her and I nod to Steve enthusiastically. Steve gives the kite to Christine and motions to her to walk the kite out away from us so he can let the string out and get a running start. When they

are both ready, Steve waves his right hand and begins to take off down the hill just as Christine lets go. The kite, which before seemed so anxious to rise into the sky, now seems content to stay grounded, perhaps not to be fooled again with the tantalizing prospect of freedom. But after a few more attempts, assisted by a sudden gust of wind, the kite complies and begins its inexorable ascent, yet again hopeful this will be the time it will be let free.

As the streamers of the dragon stretch into the sky above us, Steve motions to me to come take the string from him. As I come up next to him, he puts both of his arms around me and holds the string out in front of me for me to take. I grab both ends of the dowel on which the reel is placed. Steve places his hands over mine, signaling by touch alone when it is time to let out more string and when to pull some in. My skin tingles with his breath on my neck and I become hard in the excitement of the moment and the closeness of Steve's body pressed up against mine.

Then, as if I was being held up by the same wind that carried the kite aloft, it now goes slack and an emotional wave passes over me that brings salty tears to my eyes. I try to blink the stinging tears away, hoping they are from my looking into the sun now shining brightly over us, but know in my heart they can't be that easily dismissed.

Steve feels my body rack with spasms and hold me tighter. Even if I could speak to him, I could not find the words to express this feeling of pure joy intertwined with the bittersweet memory of my father holding my hands like this as a child. The language of my body, tense and now weeping, is the only way I have of expressing that which lies so deep in my heart.

We bring the kite back down to us and Steve turns me to face him, our bodies mere inches apart. He takes the back of his thumb, reaches up to my face, and wipes away the tears that stain my cheeks. Even more tears start to flow and I grab hold of him, seeking his comfort.

After a minute or so, I'm able to regain my composure. In my embarrassment, I start to pull away and Steve looks me directly in the eye to see if I'm okay. I nod slightly. We then go out to the kite to retrieve it. I want to apologize to him, try to give some explanation for my tears, but Steve seems content in the knowledge that we have just shared a moment that is beyond words, beyond signs, spoken in the language of the soul.

* * *

Vivian beams at me the following afternoon as I walk into the large room of TTY's at TEDI. As I sit down next to her, she reaches over and places her hand on my forearm, gripping it tightly, but can not speak as she is busy with a call. I place my hand over hers and squeeze back. She rolls her

eyes at me—I understand when I hear her say “I love you, Roger” into her mike—she has Jenny and Roger on the phone and won’t be free for a while. I get ready to take a call on my own.

For the next hour, I anxiously await a time when we are both free, but there’s a lot of traffic on the phones that afternoon—I handle many calls from students discussing the selection of the new president of the university, the only hearing candidate among the three finalists for the position. The callers felt that the choice of a deaf president would reinforce one of the basic principles of deaf culture, that a deaf person can do everything a hearing person can but hear.

I finally can wait no longer and stop taking calls until Vivian is free. When she finishes the call she is on, I ask her if she’d like to go outside for a few minutes to chat. “Wendy’ll have our heads, especially with all of the calls we’ve been getting today...but if we just take a few minutes, maybe she won’t notice.” I nod my head and my accomplice and I sneak quietly by Wendy’s closed door and walk to a bench across from the building in which TEDI is located.

The campus is so quiet—even though students pass us at regular intervals—the only sound I hear is from a lawn mower whirring in the distance. Vivian again puts her hand on my arm.

“John, I can’t tell you how happy I am that you were able to meet my son yesterday.”

“Oh, did you speak with him last night?”

“Of course, sweetheart. We talk on the phone almost every day.”

I notice we both say “speak” and “talk”—words like these have taken on new, more figurative meanings in the last few weeks.

Vivian continues, “Steve told me you had a wonderful day flying kites out on the Mall and he thought you were a very nice man.” I wonder if he also mentioned how I lost it there for a minute up by the Monument. I decide it’s time to clear the air with Vivian.

“Vivian, I have to tell you I’m not here because I just wanted to volunteer. I’m here because I was ordered to be here.”

“Ordered by whom, sweetheart?”

“By the Alexandria police—I was taken in after a protest and sentenced to Community Service here.”

“Oh honey, don’t worry about that—I figured as much. I’ve been here so many years now that I can pick out those who come here because they want to and those who are asked to be here.”

“But the funny thing is, I’m so glad this has happened—it has opened up a whole new world for me I never knew even existed.”

“I’m so glad you feel that way—maybe you’ll stay on and help us out after your sentence is over? I know that would mean a lot to Steve as well.”

We both agree it's time to return to our callers. On the way back I ask Vivian how she knew Steve and I would have so much in common. She stops for a moment, turns toward me and smiles wryly. "A mother knows these things..." she says.

The call volume subsides somewhat as the afternoon wears on and Vivian and I have a little more time to catch up. I think to ask her about the man who answered the intercom at her apartment building the other day. I don't want to hurt her feelings, so I don't tell Vivian how angry he made me until she tells me more about him.

"Did you come by my apartment?" Vivian asks me. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that my husband didn't give me the message."

"So that was your husband I spoke to, then? I wasn't sure...he didn't seem to take me too seriously when I told him that Steve was worried about you."

"No, ever since he saw Steve on television, handing out condoms during the annual Gay Pride parade here in DC, there was no chance that he could ever be proud of Steve again."

I wonder if I have one of those condoms back home! "I thought it had more to do with him being deaf...he mentioned that he didn't know how to use a TTY." As I say this, I realize that this is a just a cover, remembering how quickly I had caught on. And we both had Vivian's strong encouragement to help us learn how to use it.

"No, he knows how to use one, it's just that he chooses not to. It all began after Steve became deaf and we argued about the best way to educate him. My husband, Stephen, felt that Steve should only speak and lip-read as if he were still hearing, but I felt he should be allowed to sign since that seemed to come more naturally to him. Stephen sees the TTY as another painful reminder that his son is deaf, although how he expects Steve to call without one is beyond me.

"Later on, when he found out that Steve was gay, he tried to deny it for the longest time. Every time I tried to discuss it with him, he closed right up. As time went on, I understood that he took the news very personally—he thinks if he was a better role model for Steve growing up, this would never have happened. He even sent Steve a videotape of Ben Hur as a graduation present, thinking that would 'cure' him of being gay. He just doesn't understand it doesn't work that way."

Vivian's light blinks above her TTY and she takes her next call. A moment later, she leans back and motions for me to pull my chair up next to hers. She points to her monitor for me to read: **HI THIS IS STEVE DAWSON IS JOHN THERE Q GA**

"Well, it used to be I could count on Steve asking for me when he called here, but now I guess I've been replaced!" Vivian tells me in mock surprise. I ask her if she'd like to switch desks with me,

hoping she'll take the hint that I'd like a little privacy with her son. Again, as a "mother knows these things," she's already in the process of moving her things to my desk.

I reply:

HI STEVE THIS IS JOHN GA

OH GREAT HOW R U FEELING TODAY Q GA

I M GREAT THX! YOUR MOTHER N I R HAVING A BUSY DAY HERE THO GA

I'm really enjoying communicating with Steve like this, without anyone having to interpret what we're saying to each other.

REALLY Q HAVE U HEARD THE NEWS Q GA

DO U MEAN ABOUT THE NEW PRES OF GU Q GA

YES I CANT BELIEVE THEY DIDNT CHOOSE A DEAF PRES WHEN THERE WERE 2 WHO WERE EQUALLY QUALIFIED GA

YES I M SORRY WE HAVE BEEN GETTING A LOT OF CALLS ABOUT THAT TODAY MAYBE NEXT TIME GA

NO IT IS IMPORTANT WE MAKE A STAND NOW FOR WHAT IS RIGHT!!!! I HAVE INVITED SOME OTHER FRIENDS FROM GALLAUDET TO MY HOUSE TONITE TO TALK ABOUT WHAT WE WANT TO DO WOULD U LIKE TO JOIN US Q GA

As I read of Steve's passion for fighting for what is right, another item goes on the list of our similarities. Did Vivian perceive even this when she told me she thought we'd have a lot in common? This "mother" thing is starting to feel a lot like ESP!

I start to demur at Steve's invitation, thinking that this is their fight, not mine. But where would we be if the fight for AIDS funding was only waged by those who were afflicted by it? Steve senses my hesitation and assures me that Christine, whom I met yesterday flying kites, would be there to help me know what is going on at the meeting. So I agree.

THAT S WONDERFUL!! C U TONITE JOHN!! GA TO SK

YES C U LATER! SK

I lean back and tell Vivian she can have her station back, but she just motions to me to stay put. Later, as we walk back to our cars, I wait for her to ask me what Steve had said, but instead we both are distracted by a perceptible increase in activity around us—many students are now sitting outside on the grounds of the campus, in rapt attention to another student signing vigorously in front of them. We stop to look on and hear loud grunts of approval and see many students raise their hands high into the air and wave them back and forth. Vivian says to me: "I've never seen deaf people do that before, but it looks to me like some type of applause." As we continue on to the parking lot,

I see roughly-drawn fliers on bulletin boards announcing upcoming rallies to discuss the choice of president. The air is pregnant with a growing tension that makes me both uneasy and excited by the winds of change.

VII. The Cause

That evening, I find Steve's house in the humble neighborhood of Mount Pleasant. This area is made up of homes that seem out of context in both time and place—I imagine them on the grounds of a southern plantation, set deep in the shadow of a stately mansion, before distant hills covered in fields of cotton. Each home is almost identical to its neighbors—large, lazy wrap-around porches gird two-story clapboard homes of modest height and stature. Each is set back an identical distance from the street, just enough room to grow a few tomatoes, pole beans and succulent green peppers, tucked safely behind chain-link fences.

Steve has given me his address, but also described his house as 'colorful,' which in its understatement is more helpful than the address in finding it. Even in the falling dusk, lit only indirectly by a street lamp down the block and an ineffectual bulb struggling to shine through a greasy, bug-speckled globe over the front door, the house appears to have been painted following one of those "Paint By Numbers" kits my brother Joe and I had as kids. Various shades of reds, greens, browns and blues cover every visible surface—from the alternating colors of the front steps, to the mismatched shutters, the bright violet front door and finally to the clapboards themselves, each slightly different in color from any other.

Where other homes have vegetable gardens, Steve grows flowers, now in abundant bloom, a myriad of colors that seem to have bled from the surface of the house. The colors have seeped down through beds of petunias, impatiens and poppies—mere appetizers to the roses that lie behind them, set jauntily against the picket fence that separates Steve's yard from his neighbor's. Reluctant to go inside, I draw closer to the roses to inhale their sweet fragrance, and think to myself, "This is what pink must smell like, and this, this is what yellow must smell like," if indeed one could identify colors by the scent they give off alone.

As I look over the garden and the house, I'm moved that Steve seems to work so hard to stimulate his senses—the smell of these flowers and the sight of these colors and those of the kites flying against the sky yesterday. I think that without the ability to hear, Steve must cultivate his remaining senses to an extent others take for granted.

I'm startled by the sound of two men walking up to the house, one signing to the other who laughs hoarsely in response. As I join them on the path leading up to the front steps, one signs something to me—some type of greeting I assume. In my innocence and ignorance, I wave back to

them as a child would, curling the fingers of my right open hand. I immediately feel foolish in the attempt. The two look briefly at each other, a nod of understanding, and one reaches out his hand for me to shake and smiles.

We walk into the house together and I set out to find Steve as the other two join a larger group in the dining room to the right, greeted by warm hugs, smiles and signing. The rainbow-colored rooms I pass through, filled with the smell of what I guess to be peppermint wafting from burning incense sticks, echo the themes begun outside. When I finally reach the kitchen, I hear my first distinguishable words—Christine is speaking to a woman and also signing at the same time. A second woman, eyes closed and head tilted up toward the ceiling, has laid her hand on top of the one Christine uses to sign and is following the conversation by the sense of touch alone.

I overhear Christine urge both of them to contact their congressmen to put pressure on the Board of Trustees of Gallaudet to reconsider the election of Elisabeth Zinser. Ms. Zinser was the only hearing candidate among three finalists being considered for the position of president of the university. She tells them that the university is funded in large part by federal grants with several senators and congressmen on its Board. Both women nod their heads enthusiastically, the one looking at Christine says that she will call first thing tomorrow morning. I detect in her voice a tonality I hear in Steve's and guess that she is reading Christine's lips and can not hear her voice.

After a brief hug of welcome, Christine introduces me to her companions, first to Diane who shakes my hand and tells me it's nice to meet me. She then signs my name to the woman with her hand over hers who nods and signs back. Christine interprets, "This is Jill. She is pleased to meet you and is glad you are here." Then Jill reaches out into the space between us, eyes still closed, and I take up her hand into mine in greeting.

Christine asks me if I'd like something to drink before we go find Steve. After placing Jill's hand on Diane's, who takes over signing for her, she grabs two Rolling Rocks from the refrigerator and we go back into the other rooms in search of Steve. We finally find him in a large room I had missed earlier, one covered in a rich, textured wallpaper that I'm tempted to rub to feel the outline of the intricate pattern against my fingers. We make eye contact and he smiles broadly, walking quickly over to us. I get a big hug and a sweet kiss on the neck. In the process, I end up spilling a little of the just-opened beer on the floor, but Steve motions to me not to worry about it and we both laugh.

Christine and Steve sign for a minute and then she turns to me and tells me, with great pride, that Greg Hlibok, one of the four student leaders of the "Deaf President Now" movement will be there tonight to speak. He will describe the demands of the group and what we can do to help.

Then, as if by cue, Christine points at a young, thin man who has just entered the room, dressed in a maroon Gallaudet sweatshirt, and tells me this is him.

Though there wasn't much noise around me before Greg came in, an even quieter hush descends over the room, one obviously of deep respect. Guests from the other rooms seem to sense his presence and are drawn to the room, filing in as if in procession to a coronation. Most remain standing, but a few sit on the carpet in the center of the room—others move the few chairs in the room to the side to make room for more to sit on the floor.

Steve takes my hand into his and leads me to where Christine is now standing so she may interpret for me. I notice Diane has led Jill into the room, and then with the use of her cane, Jill discovers one of the empty chairs and sits down in it. Diane crouches next to her and reaches her hand out for Jill to hold—her interpreter as Christine is mine.

Over the course of the next twenty minutes, Christine roughly translates Greg's words for me, interrupted by whoops, cheers and the waving of hands from the group. I'm only able to make out a few of the words Greg speaks as he signs—his speech is much less clear than Steve's, so I assume he has been deaf since birth. He first thanks us for coming this evening and tells us that now is the time for the Deaf Community to “come of age” and “no longer accept any limits on what we can achieve.” He continues, “The problem is not that the students cannot hear, the problem is that the world will not listen,” inspiring words that bring the greatest response of the night.

The next part Greg signs in obvious disgust; Christine tells me that he is talking about Jane Spilman, the chair of the Board of Trustees. When asked why they had chosen the hearing candidate, Ms. Spilman—arguably one of the most important people in the administration of a university dedicated to the education of deaf and hard of hearing individuals—was reported to have responded, “Deaf people are not able to function in a hearing world.” Further, Ms. Spilman has never learned how to sign, because, in her words, “she never had the time.”

Greg tells us that, on the contrary, it is Spilman who “is not ready to function in the deaf world. It is now time to show the world that deaf people can indeed function in a hearing world. Join me in pledging to uphold the four objectives of the Deaf President Now movement.” Greg pauses to make sure he has everyone's attention at this critical juncture.

“First, that Elisabeth Zinser resign as president and a deaf president be selected by the Board in her place.”

The people around me reply, “I promise.” I quickly learn my third sign this weekend—an index finger at the lips, brought down as an open hand and slapped forcefully against the left closed fist.

“Second, that Jane Spilman resign from the Board.”

I add my voice to the others, “I promise.”

“Third, that the Board must be reconfigured so that a majority of its members are deaf.”

“I promise.”

“And, finally, no reprisals against anyone involved in the DPN movement.”

“I promise.”

Even without Christine to translate his words, I think I would have easily been caught up in the emotion and passion of this young man as he prepared his troops for battle. He has tapped into a rage, borne of over a century of oppression, and it is palpable in the room. We look at each other, ready to play our part in the drama which is about to unfold before an international audience.

Throughout Greg’s speech, Steve stands to my left, holding my hand and squeezing it tightly at particularly rousing moments, caught up in emotion. When others raise both hands in applause, Steve raises mine with his, as if he was announcing my victory by TKO in a prize fight. At times, I watch him during the speech, hoping to share a smile, but his eyes are fixed on Greg, unwilling to miss even one word of the cry for justice.

Soon after the speech is over, people start to disperse and Steve leaves me to thank Greg for coming and to see others to the door. I start to feel awkward standing against the wall as Christine has also left the room. I simply smile at those who remain. They ignore me, caught up in discussions with their friends, so I take the opportunity to walk through the house again and pick out details I had missed earlier.

I enter what seems to be a den, bookshelves full of mainly science fiction novels, lining one wall. Where I’d expect to see a TV, I instead find an aquarium filled with salt water fish, iridescent in colors and stripes. Steve has lined the bottom of the tank with many toys for them—a treasure chest that opens with a short burst of bubbles, a diver that slowly ascends and descends a pole and bright coral that looks to be real. As in his own world, Steve has given the fish many brilliant sights to make up for their inability to hear. The fish swim back and forth in this world that Steve has created for them, untroubled with the knowledge of this disability.

Another wall features a large fireplace with a long mantle above it filled with pictures. In many of them, I recognize a younger version of his mother, sometimes alone, and sometimes with a man in a military uniform. I assume this to be Steve’s father, a close likeness to Steve himself. Another picture reminds me of those old-fashioned photographs you can get at a carnival—Steve’s grandparents set formally in a room whose details have long faded to beige. Small stuffed animals are interspersed among the wooden frames, a teddy bear is positioned by one so that its arms seem to be

holding the picture upright. This frame holds a picture of Steve and another slightly younger man, both signing the “I-L-Y” deaf greeting to the camera. Both of them are smiling, wearing baggy bathing trunks, standing in front of a beach. There are palm trees and a salmon-colored house in the distance which remind me of the Florida beach communities my parents and I visited as they sought out a place to retire.

A couple of people come into the den to admire the fish, so I head back out to find Steve and say good night. I’m surprised to see so many still here, lingering long into the evening, perhaps reluctant to return to a hearing world in which they feel so isolated. After a few minutes, I find Steve on the landing just outside the front door under the dim light. He is signing with two other men, one much younger than Steve; I sense from the expression on their faces and the force of their signing that the conversation is tense. As I approach, they abruptly stop signing as if I might be able to tell what they were saying to each other. The older of the two men I have not met shoots me an accusatory glare, guilty of a crime I have no idea I’ve committed.

These men then walk down the front path to their car and Steve and I stand there awkwardly, Steve obviously upset by what has just transpired. I am merely confused. Steve motions to me to come back inside and I point to my watch to get him to understand it’s getting late and I should be going home. But Steve is insistent and I give into the gentle tug he gives to my upper arm.

I expect him to try to find Christine to help him explain to me what had just happened, but instead he leads me upstairs to his bedroom. I’m startled by the number of stuffed animals he has in here, piled high on his bed, dresser and even larger ones on the floor. I also notice his dragon kite leaning against the wall, its tail neatly furled behind it. We weave through this jungle to the far corner of the room where Steve pulls out a pen and a notebook, a clown holding a bunch of multi-colored balloons on its cover. I catch brief glimpses of the contents of the notebook as he flips to a blank page—sketches Steve has done, as well as seed pods and leaves taped to some of the other pages. As he begins to write, I notice that his strokes are swift, yet the penmanship is beautiful.

“I’m sorry about what happened down there. My friend Matt doesn’t like the fact that I invited a hearing person to this meeting.”

“What about Christine?” I scribble back, then scratch below Steve’s clear cursive.

“Christine is considered one of us—her parents are deaf and she knows ASL as well as any of us. They accept her into the community. Don’t take it personally.”

“How can I not take it personally? Isn’t this event about not being judged no matter what your abilities are?” Now I’m getting upset and my letters are getting larger. We move onto the next page in the notebook.

“Yes, of course. I understand that—it’s just that some in the Deaf Community feel we have been oppressed and discriminated against by the hearing world for so long, they can’t trust anyone who isn’t deaf. The recent events at Gallaudet just reinforce this feeling. Some in the community feel we have to fight this fight on our own.” The pen that Steve holds hovers a moment over the ruled page and then begins again. “It doesn’t help that I used to date Matt and I think he’s a little bit jealous of you.”

Now I know where I recognized him—from the photograph in the den with Steve in front of the beach that reminded me of Florida. I don’t know how to respond to Steve, ideas about a “Deaf Community” in capital letters and its unique set of values are new to me, so I just look at Steve in my frustration and hope my eyes will convey feelings I can express in no other way. Steve looks back into my eyes and puts his arms around me. He tries to whisper into my ear, but his words are too soft to make out. He pulls back and says more loudly and with greater emphasis, “Caan yooo staay?”

Though the idea is appealing to me, I wonder to myself if I would be no better than Mack if I sleep with Steve so soon after meeting him for the first time. Steve senses my reservation and rubs his hand in a circle over his heart. I think he says, “Pleese? Not for sex, only to hold.” I don’t trust myself and decide that things are going too well for us to screw things up by hitting the sack too early. I shake my head, No, hoping Steve understands my decision. Steve kisses me on the lips, just briefly, and seems to resign himself to my decision.

As I turn to leave, he leads me over to his dresser where many of his stuffed animals are corralled. Here he points to a music box that I hadn’t noticed before. It looks like an antique with red-lacquered wood, worn away in places, with intricate gilt scroll-work on its edges and lid. He lifts the box, winds the key a few times and brings the box to his bed where he sets it down on his blue paisley comforter. He moves some of his animals to the side so that he and I can sit cross-legged, facing each other, on either side of the box. He gently opens its lid. His eyes grow wide with anticipation as if this is the first time he has looked inside. He turns it towards me and a beautiful carousel appears, reflected in the mirror behind it, thin metal horses with saddles of different colors, slowly beginning their dance around the center pole.

Though it is entertaining to watch without hearing the accompanying lullaby, I imagine Steve has had this since a time before his accident when he could hear its simple tune. Seeing it may invoke the distant sounds of his childhood—the sweet sound of his mother singing him to sleep. Steve scoots over to where I am sitting and wraps his hand around my thigh and stares at the box in rapt attention. I softly sing the words that must now echo in Steve’s head, the words to the lullaby I recollect from my own childhood.

Sleep, baby, sleep.
Thy father guards the sheep;
Thy mother shakes the dreamland tree,
Down falls a little dream for thee:
Sleep, baby, sleep.

Sleep, baby, sleep.
The large stars are the sheep;
The little stars are the lambs, I guess,
And the gentle moon is the shepherdess:
Sleep, baby, sleep.

Sleep, baby, sleep,
Down where the woodbines creep;
Be always like the lamb so mild,
A kind, and sweet, and gentle child.
Sleep, baby, sleep.

Steve places his head on my shoulder, perhaps able to feel the vibrations of my singing. Lost in the moment, he suddenly covers his mouth as if he has forgotten something and points downstairs. I guess that he is remembering his responsibility as host to the guests that remain. He kisses me on the neck and I hear him scamper down the stairs in his socks. I feel my earlier resolve not to stay weakening with the sharing of this special moment, one among many in just one weekend with Steve, so I quickly pull on my shoes and head downstairs myself.

There are just a few remaining guests, all in the process of leaving through the front door, signing to Steve and hugging him as they depart. I follow them out and get another big hug from Steve as I leave. He brings his right hand to his mouth and ear—the universal sign for “call me later.” I nod and turn to walk down the front path to the street. Halfway down the path, I look back to sign the deaf “I-L-Y” greeting to Steve, who happily returns it and turns back into his house. My last image that weekend is of his bright violet front door closing behind him.

VIII. The March

“Hi, this is John. How may I be of service to you?” I answer in my quasi-professional voice, aware that my agent who gets me a lot of my voice-over work has recently given out my work number to hiring agencies. My boss stands over the opaque partition that separates our two cubicles, probably wondering how all of a sudden did I get so professional in answering questions about the tax-preparation software we support. I try to ignore her while I wait for the caller to respond—at first all I hear is what sounds to be someone eating potato chips.

“Oh, excuse me.” A swallow. “This is Wendy from the Telecommunications Exchange for the Deaf. I have Steve Dawson on the line. Hold please.”

I wonder why Wendy’s working on a weekday and more than that, why she’s actually working the phones as I’ve never seen her handle a call since I’ve been there. “Hi, John,” Wendy begins, reading Steve’s words, probably not even aware that she knows who I am. “How are you? Go ahead.”

“I’m fine. A little tired, but no worse for wear. It was nice to see you last night. Are you at work?”

“No, I took the day off—the students have closed down the university and I wanted to join them. They’ve formed a human chain in front of every entrance to the campus and deflated the tires of cars parked in front of the gates. They’re also stopping traffic on Florida Ave. in front of the school, holding signs to get people to honk their horns so that those who can hear will receive our message. Some local TV reporters have begun to arrive on campus to cover the story. Go ahead.”

Now a critic of this service, I think that Wendy could try to demonstrate a little more enthusiasm, expressing Steve’s obvious excitement. At least now I understand why she’s taking calls—with the entrances blocked, no one else could probably get on campus to give her a hand. I wonder if she’s spent the night there in her office. At least she wouldn’t starve with all the food in there!

“Wow, that’s really exciting! Do you think the Board will change their mind?”

“I certainly hope so. We are marching down to the Mayflower Hotel this afternoon to present our demands to the Board directly. Can you come? Go ahead.”

Though my boss is no longer hovering, I know she is still listening, so I tell Steve that I can’t get away, but will try to get down there after work.

“Okay, I understand. Look for the people with colored ribbons on their arms if you don’t see me when you get there. They’re hearing interpreters who will help reporters who want to interview any of the students. They can let you know what’s going on. Hope to see you later, handsome. Go ahead to stop keying.”

In my embarrassment at Steve’s nickname for me, I’m kind of glad that Wendy doesn’t recognize my voice. “Goodbye, Steve” I reply and hang up. I sit still and let the warm feeling I get after Steve called me “handsome” spread over my body. I imagine what I’d feel like if it wasn’t spoken in a woman’s voice! A few minutes later the phone rings again.

“Hi, this is John. How may I be of service to you?”

“John, is that really you?”

“Yes,” recognizing my brother’s voice, “Hi, Joe.”

“Jesus Christ, when did you start answering the phone like that?” There once was a time I was put off by my brother’s language, clearly inherited from our father, but now I just ignore it. I can’t answer his question with my “Dumbo-eared” boss right next door, so I drop it.

“So, what’s up? I’m awfully busy here today.” That’ll sound good over the wall.

“So some people really start their taxes a whole month before they’re due?” he asks, assuming everyone is like him and does them at the last minute. “Anyway, Liam’s playing the oboe tonight with his school band and I thought you might like to come. You could stop by here first for dinner.”

“Oboe? I thought he played the violin?”

“No, that’s Jacob. Liam’s our woodwind man.”

“Sounds like a veritable orchestra you’re raising there—any thoughts on having another who could play the French horn or something?”

“No, Patricia thinks two is enough, at least for now.” And we all know who makes the decisions in that household, I think to myself.

“Speaking of her,” I can’t even say her name, “does your lovely wife know that you’ve invited me tonight?”

“No, I wasn’t going to mention it to her until I was sure you could come. And I don’t give a fuck what she thinks about you coming by. You’re their uncle for God’s sake.”

“Well, that’s about the nicest invitation I’ve ever received. Hard as it is to resist, I must. I have plans tonight.”

“Oh, dinner with Clarence?”

Why can't anyone in my family get my boyfriend's name right? What if I started to call his wife Peggy? "No, I'm not seeing *Chris* any more. Actually, I'm going to a demonstration downtown to protest the selection of a hearing president of Gallaudet University."

"The selection of a what?"

Maybe my brother's selective hearing would've made him more qualified for the job of president of the university. "You know Gallaudet, right?"

"Isn't that the college for all those deaf people?"

"Right." That's about all I knew as well until just a few weeks ago. "Well, they needed a new president and the Board of Trustees narrowed the field down to three finalists—two who are deaf and one who is hearing. Tonight they're announcing the selection of the hearing candidate at a press conference at the Mayflower Hotel."

"So why protest? And what the fuck has this got to do with you anyway?"

I hear my boss start to stir next to me—time's up. "Just forget it. Thanks for the invitation. Tell Liam that his Uncle Johnny will be there in spirit, up in the rafters of the auditorium, clapping louder than anyone else there."

"I would, but any talk about spirits will just scare him. He's already afraid of the Bogeyman, after hearing it in a story one of his teachers read in school. We have to look under his bed each night and promise him that there's no one under it before he'll go to sleep. But I'll tell him you hope he plays real well."

This kid's going to be afraid of his own shadow when he grows up, but far be it for me to tell my brother how to raise his son. "Right, okay, bye then."

Despite my earlier claim to my brother, I'm not busy at all the rest of the day—just a few calls from a couple of people who are self-employed and have to file their estimated taxes quarterly. One was an actress from New York City who liked the sound of my voice so much she tried to convince me to move up there and audition for some parts in local theater productions. When we went over her income for the quarter, any thought I had of changing careers was quickly dispelled. The hands of the clock up on the wall opposite my cubicle creep along ever so slowly, but finally reach the five o'clock position. I lob a "Good evening" to my boss over the cubicle wall, but hear that she's on the phone with her ex-husband in an animated discussion about who will get the children that weekend.

I walk down toward the Mayflower Hotel from work, crossing through McPherson Square along the way. I take a lesson from Steve and make a point to notice the statue of Civil War Union General James "Birdseye" McPherson perched atop a proud, assuredly male, stallion, sitting amid a field of black-eyed Susans and purple coneflowers. The flowers are popular with a large group of bees

and butterflies, who follow a fickle trail from amber cone to black eye, allured by scent and by color. Cars speed around the circle and take no notice of me or the sights inside, focused only on what lies ahead.

As I approach the hotel, I notice a few patrol cars parked on the street and have a reflexive shot of apprehension, this scene so similar to the one I was arrested at a few weeks ago. I approach warily, hoping to appear as a bystander and not as a participant this time around. Support vehicles for local television crews also line the street—long poles wrapped in thick wire topped by satellite dishes stand ready to transmit the scene of the protest to area households as a side course to the evening meal.

In the distance, I see a woman dressed in an out-of-fashion blue serge suit on the steps of the hotel, speaking into a microphone set atop a podium, but I can't make out what she's saying. All eyes seem instead to be focused on a second much less formally dressed woman to her right who is interpreting her words. I try to get to some higher ground to be able to look over the crowd, and end up joining a few others standing on the hood of a blue Impala unfortunately parked in the middle of this maelstrom. I try to pick out Steve's red hair among the crowd which I estimate to be over five hundred people strong. I don't see him, but I do notice a young man with a red ribbon tied around his left arm below me. I leap down from the hood and push through the crowd toward him, assuming he's an interpreter who can tell me what's going on.

As I get next to him, I ask him what I've missed, hoping he can hear me. He turns to me and tells me that the woman at the podium is Jane Spilman, chair of the Board of Trustees. She is addressing questions from the reporters in front of her, defending the Board's choice of Ms. Zinser for president of the university. The woman next to her has been hired as her interpreter, and he adds that he sympathizes with her as she, like all interpreters, is bound by a code of ethics to faithfully translate Ms. Spilman's words even if she is in violent disagreement with them. Earlier that afternoon, four representatives of the students met with the Board inside the hotel to present their demands, but now, as Ms. Spilman dismissively responds to the reporters' questions, the crowd becomes increasingly convinced that their concerns were not heard.

Amid noises of protest and expressive signing from various hands raised above the crowd, people start to fall into a march that heads down Connecticut toward Pennsylvania Avenue and the White House. A man with a large drum beats out the rhythm to the march that must resonate even in deaf ears. After six blocks, we arrive in front of the White House and join up with others who did not go to the hotel at all and have been protesting there all day. I finally see Steve ahead of me in the crowd and run toward him, lifting him off the ground in my embrace, so happy am I to see him. He is

excited to see me as well and takes my hand, which he does not let go for the rest of the evening. There is no need for words between us, caught up as we are by the events and enthusiasm that surround us. We spend an hour or so in front of the White House, and then join the march to the Capitol building, on our way back to Gallaudet, arriving well after midnight.

On campus, we are drawn to the campfires set up on the lawn of the president's house where some tents have also been set up. Steve leaves to sign with a few of the others, excited and energized by the events of the day. In my exhaustion, I lie down on the grassy slope not far from one of these fires and stare up at the sky above me, stars in motion against a canopy of deepest ebony. I hear the reassuring crackle of smoldering timbers and am showered with their occasional sparks, which turn to ashes above me and drift slowly away. Eventually, Steve joins me and I gaze at his face now in profile, partially lit by the distant flames burning behind us. We hold each other and kiss, two men among many that evening, perched on the cusp of a brave new world.

* * *

Throughout the rest of the week, I watch in pride and amazement as the Deaf President Now movement gathers more and more momentum, attracting media attention on an international scale. Greg Hlibok, who spoke at Steve's house, appears on Nightline with Ted Koppel, demanding Ms. Zinser's resignation. Rallies are held all over campus—the largest ones take place in front of the statue of Edward Miner Gallaudet, the university's first president, with students perched on limbs of the surrounding trees when there's no room left to stand on the ground below. At first they are attended only by students from the university and the "model" elementary and secondary schools on campus—but soon grow to include members of the Deaf Community from all over the world who see this as a defining moment in the history of their culture.

Visitors spend the night in makeshift shelters as a shantytown takes form on the lawn in front of the president's house where Steve and I spent that first night together. Skits are held around campfires lampooning Ms. Zinser and the Board of Trustees, who are held up in effigy as objects of revulsion. Statements of support from people as diverse as Mitch Snyder, director of the Community for Creative Non-Violence, to Marlee Matlin, the Academy Award-winning deaf actress, along with monetary contributions from Gallaudet alumni and the American Postal Workers Union demonstrate the broadening base of appeal the movement is taking on. Dr. I. King Jordan, dean of Gallaudet's College of Arts and Sciences, and one of the two deaf finalists for the position of president, first

announces his support of the board's selection and then retracts it the following day as he joins the students in demanding a president who is deaf.

I have tried to call Steve at home throughout the week, but I don't reach him and am frustrated that he has no answering machine that could tell him that I called. I imagine that he must be deeply involved in the events of the week and rarely at home. I am anxious to share with him the excitement as the movement builds momentum, portrayed each day with increasing media coverage of the protests and rallies. After just one week of sustained pressure, a week in which it seems like the entire world sat still to listen to what these people without a voice had to say, the board announces that Ms. Zinser has resigned. I'm moved by a quote I read in the paper from one of the deaf students, "It took seven days to create the world, it took us seven days to change it." I hope to see Steve at a march that will be held that afternoon in celebration of the resignation.

Instead of joining the march at its start at Gallaudet, I decide to watch it from Constitution Avenue, among those like me who have closely followed the week's events as well as others who just like to see a parade. I can hear the marchers before they actually appear, a community that has found its voice in its celebration of victory. I proudly return the "I-L-Y" greeting to the marchers as they start to come by where I'm standing; an attractive man next to me asks me what it means. I smile and tell him "I Love You," and take his hand to show him how the individual letters make up the entire sign. Another student carries a large sign, "DEAF PREZ NOW" on one side, "DEAF PREZ WOW!" on the reverse and I think about the signs I have carried in support of other causes in the past. Someone from the march comes over and hugs me and then gives me a button that says "3-1/2" on it; I later learn this symbolizes the fact that with Ms. Zinser's resignation, only one half of the first of the original four DPN demands have been met, three and one-half remain.

Finally, after I have given up hope of seeing Steve, my eyes catch sight of him, helping to carry a large banner that reads "WE STILL HAVE A DREAM," reminiscent of the Civil Rights marches led by Martin Luther King, Jr. that passed by this very spot over two decades ago. As I wade through the crowd to get into the street to Steve, I try to get his attention by waving, but he takes no notice of me. Instead, he takes his free hand, the one not helping to hold the banner, and puts it around the man to his left, who I recognize as Matt as I get closer. I flash back to the week before at Steve's house—the picture of the two of them at the beach on the mantle and then at the door when they stopped signing as I approached.

I stop in my tracks, frozen by indecision. As a person who can hear, I begin to have doubts about my place within the Deaf Community in general and with Steve in particular. If they want a

deaf president, why wouldn't Steve want to date a deaf man? I turn back, fading back into the crowd, again a bystander looking on at the celebration of a victory that is no longer mine.

Steve passes by me, his face full of joy, a joy I was beginning to think only I could bring him. But now I wonder, as with Brian on the floor of that cell, if I have just dreamt of our time together, the beauty of the bond we have shared. In that moment of self-doubt and loss of faith, Steve is gone.

I leave the parade and walk home alone, the route the one taken just a week ago late at night, when I was one of thousands united in a common cause. Now, it is just me entering my house, a house so unlike the one that Steve will return to tonight—there are no flowers in front, no brightly colored walls, no chairs still pushed aside to make room for a group that has pledged to fight for respect and common decency.

I distractedly thumb through the mail that has accumulated on the floor below the mail slot in the front door. A few bills and catalogs, a postcard from my parents of a group of bright pink flamingos wading in an artificial pool, each a figure "4" reflected in the too blue water below. I don't even bother to open the refrigerator door knowing I've not been to the store in weeks. The light on my answering machine is blinking—I can't recall when I've last checked for messages.

The indicator on the machine reads two—I begin to hope one message is from Steve, perhaps from this morning inviting me to the parade. But the first is from my mother, worried that she hasn't heard from me and asking how my day of kite flying went. I swallow at the memory, that day I was eight years old all over again, my father holding me from behind, our kite soaring high above us.

The other message is from my friends Anthony and Chuck, inviting me to join them at the movies that evening. I haven't seen them in ages and decide the distraction will do me good. A few hours later, I meet them, along with their friend Lisa, in front of the Arlington Cinema 'N' Draft House. This is my favorite place to see movies in the area—where else can you sit at a table, enjoy a pitcher of beer and watch decent, if not too recent, movies for only three dollars? Well, the beer's extra, as are the curly cheese fries, which I enjoy with sloppy delight each time I come here.

I notice on the marquee as I enter that they're showing 'Children of a Lesser God,' nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture two years ago, starring William Hurt and Marlee Matlin, the deaf actress who recently publicly supported the DPN movement. I don't know whether to attribute the movie to sheer coincidence or to shrewd marketing on the part of the theater; if the latter I hope they've ordered a captioned version of the film for the large numbers of deaf people who have descended on the area over the past week.

We take a table toward the front and Chuck asks me where I've been for the last couple of weeks while Lisa goes back for the pitcher of Bud and my fries. I tell them my story starting with the

protest in front of the Department of Public Health, the night in the Alexandria jail cell and finally meeting Steve and my involvement with the events of the week surrounding Gallaudet University. I watch their eyes grow wide in amazement; they seem to have found new respect for the old saw “truth really is much stranger than fiction.”

As I get to the part about seeing Steve with his old boyfriend at the parade, Anthony seems to agree that it’s best that I didn’t interfere. “There was this couple we knew, one was Christian and the other a Jew, and it was always difficult for them around the holidays figuring out if they were going to celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah or both. David’s family was very Orthodox—they had separate silverware and dishes for meat and another set for dairy—and were fine with him being gay, they just didn’t want their son dating one of the *goyim*. In the end, they made David feel so guilty, he dropped Carlos and started dating an oncologist out of Bethesda Naval, who his parents adore.”

Chuck nods his head as Anthony tells his story. Lisa returns with the beer and fries, and pours each of us a foamy quaff. Chuck asks Lisa what she thinks of me dating a deaf man, and she asks me how would we communicate? I think back to the times Steve and I have been together, flying kites, at his house and during the march in front of the White House. It just never seemed to be a problem, either someone was there to translate for us, we had a notebook to write in, or we were just able to share in the joy of each other’s company without exchanging words. But I find myself at a loss for words to explain this to her and just shrug my shoulders. She tells me that there’s enough cute guys in the world who can hear for me to date—in fact, she has a whole list of them in her address book, her misfortune in life is to be attracted to men who turn out to be gay. Why add one more complication to a potential relationship that has the life expectancy of a mayfly anyway? Present company excluded, of course, as she looks over to Anthony and Chuck.

As the movie begins, I think of what they have said and how happy Steve and Matt looked carrying that banner earlier in the day. But, despite these distractions, I start to get into the movie after a few minutes. William Hurt plays a hearing teacher at a school for the deaf in a remote fishing village that reminds me of Maine. I am drawn in first by his good looks, his high forehead and Roman nose, but later, by his sense of play as he relates to the students in his class. I even find myself admiring his ability to sign so well.

Hurt quickly comes into conflict with the principal of the school, who tells him during his interview, “We are not trying to change the world around here, just trying to make a few deaf kids get along a little better.”

Hurt seeks out more than just this as he teaches his students to live successfully in a hearing world. He teaches them to read lips and speak out loud, but it's his playing of really loud music that reaches those who have been the most withdrawn.

These techniques, while effective with the students, do nothing to get through to the attractive deaf custodian, played by Matlin. She resists his attempts to get her to speak or read lips, and chooses to remain in her world of isolation. She had been a promising student at the school herself, but after graduating, took the demeaning work of a custodian so that she could stay in a place she felt safe.

It is finally when Hurt finds Matlin swimming naked in the school pool late at night, that he tells her that he is falling in love with her. Hurt joins her in the pool, and, in that moment, enters her world while underwater, a world without sound.

Over time, Matlin leaves her job and moves in with Hurt. She tells him that "he is the nicest person she has ever met."

Hurt replies, "I will take care of you."

And it is in that that their relationship begins to unravel. Hurt continues to attempt to get her to speak, and when she does not, he speaks for her, turning her into a puppet, a circus sideshow. A person with no identity other than the one he gives her. When she finally does speak, a high screeching noise like the sound of fingernails being drawn across a chalkboard, she leaves him to rediscover who she is without his help.

At the end of the movie, they reunite at the summer farewell party for the students at the school. Hurt tells her, "Do you think we could find a place where we could meet—not in silence, not in sound." Then they both sign "I love you" to each other—the first time in the movie Hurt has signed but not spoken the words out loud. I begin to cry and wonder if Steve and I can connect with each other at such a place.

Long after my friends have left their seats and the credits have completed rolling on screen, I remain quiet and alone in the theater. I slowly become attuned to the voice of my heart, and resolve to shut out the dissonance of my family, friends and fears.

* * *

Though they signed short comments to each other during the celebration parade, stuff like "Isn't this great?" or "Look at that guy over there—he's hot!" Steve and Matt didn't have a chance to really talk until after the parade had reached the Capitol. They stood with the other marchers

watching speeches from the leaders of the DPN movement and other supporters, including Congressman Steve Gunderson of Wisconsin.

“So where’s your new boyfriend?” Matt asks.

“I don’t know. I kept expecting to see John along the route. We probably passed right by him without seeing each other.”

“So what does this day mean to you?”

“What kind of question is that? We’ve won!” Steve signs enthusiastically, his right hand finishing high in the air.

“Yes, now Gallaudet can have a deaf president, but this is just the beginning. It’s important now more than ever to stick together to maintain this momentum.”

“Don’t you think I know that? That’s why we’re all here.”

“We’re here, but where is your ‘hearie’?” Matt signs with a sneer.

“I told you. I’m sure John’s around here somewhere, we just didn’t see him. And I don’t like your implication that because I’m dating a hearing man, I’m abandoning the Deaf Community. John was at my party and came to the march after Spilman’s news conference. I think you’re just jealous.”

“Like I said at your party, you can’t trust hearing people at all. Sure, they say they want to help us, but all they want to do is keep us from realizing our full potential. Like we’re all just children.”

They spot Christine who squeezes through the crowd over to them, apparently having watched their conversation from a distance. “Speaking of children, Matt, where’s *your* new boyfriend?”

“He’s not my boyfriend, just someone I’m seeing,” Matt protests.

“I think you should focus on your own behavior before you start judging others,” Christine signs. “Just my opinion, of course.”

“Yeah,” Steve adds. “John is funny, sweet, and handsome. If you got to know him better, you’d see that for yourself.”

“I promise you that that’s never going to happen,” Matt tells them and leaves.

“We told him, didn’t we?” Christine signs to Steve.

Steve gives her a high-five and they return their attention to the stage and the celebration of their success.

IX. A Toy Horse with a Note

“So it’s going to be a great time, I hope you can make it.” Mack is on the phone with me at work, inviting me to a party at his place. My boss is out today, something about meeting with her lawyer to go over the alimony payments she has been receiving from her ex-husband.

“What’s the grand occasion? Let’s see, you’ve been with Drew, what two weeks now...time for an anniversary party?”

“No, if you have to know, Drew and I split up a couple of days ago. The sex was great—I just felt he was always talking down to me, like I was some kind of kid or something.”

You are a kid, Mack. “Are you dating anyone new, then?”

“There’s this guy named Saheed I’m interested in who works down at the convenience store on the corner of my block. He’s working nights to help pay for his classes in astronomy at George Washington University...wants to work for NASA some day. I think he’s getting suspicious since I’m in there at least twice every evening buying some other item I pretend I’ve forgotten the last time I was in there. Now I have enough Cheetos, Fritos, potato chips, and Ben and Jerry’s ice cream to last a lifetime. So I thought, why not have a party and put the stuff to good use? Gives me an opportunity to show off the new paint job in my apartment and invite Saheed over at the same time. He might be able to show *me* a heavenly body or two.”

My guess is that Mack’s pretense of forgetfulness and his craving for junk food are not the way to make a favorable impression on an aspiring astronaut. “Will it just be the three of us then?”

“No, there’ll be others and I was also hoping that date you had out on the Mall went well and you’d be bringing someone yourself.”

“It did go well, but I’m not sure where we stand. All this protest stuff has really made things complicated between us.”

“Protest stuff?”

“Even you must have seen the news about the protests at Gallaudet University over the selection of a hearing president.”

“Nope, can’t say that I have.”

It's amazing to me that Mack is oblivious to something I thought the whole world knew, especially as it's been happening right under his nose. "Anyway, Steve used to date a deaf guy and I think the events of the week have brought them back together."

"You should give him a call just to make sure. Invite him to my party. You can call him, right?"

"Yes, I can use the exchange where I'm doing my Community Service. I was thinking about calling him anyway."

"That's the spirit. See you Friday."

"Okay, bye."

Back at home later that evening, both the local and national news run feature stories on the progress of the DPN demands at Gallaudet. Students who would normally have been home during Spring Break week remained on campus to fight until all of their demands were met. Board of Trustees members who had gone home after the announcement of Zinser's selection as president the weekend before, returned to Washington for an emergency meeting to discuss what to do next.

By the eleven o'clock news, the networks report that in addition to Zinser's resignation two days ago, Jane Spilman has stepped down from the Board of Trustees. Further, a taskforce would be set up to determine the best way to achieve a deaf majority on the Board; there would be no reprisals against anyone involved in the protests; and, most significantly, Dr. I. King Jordan was named the eighth—and first deaf—president of Gallaudet University. All four DPN demands had now been met, a mere eight days after the protests had begun.

I am so excited I can't help but try to call Steve at home, hoping to share the news with him. I try the relay service, but get a recording that their hours are only from seven in the morning until eleven in the evening and I would have to try back tomorrow. Before I'm aware of what I'm doing, I'm in my car speeding to Mount Pleasant and Steve's brightly-colored home, my heart, not my head, at the wheel. Somewhere around Howard University, I see the flashing lights of a police cruiser close in behind me, and look down at my speedometer for the first time since I left my house. The needle is hugging sixty. I can only guess how many lights I've run through on my way here.

"License and registration," the cop asks me after I pull over and he saunters to my window. I can only make out the rough outline of his hulking frame as he points his bright flashlight right into my face. It'd be nice to have a pregnant woman sitting next to me as an excuse for my speeding that late at night, but there's not much chance of that ever happening to me.

"Okay, officer, here they are. What seems to be the trouble?" I ask innocently, a cover for my rapidly beating heart. The officer doesn't respond and walks slowly back to his vehicle, the

flashlight now shining on my license which he reads on his way. After what seems to be an interminable amount of time, he strolls back and hands me back my documents. He also hands me a ticket which I can't read with the flashlight in my eyes. "I've cited you for speeding, twenty-three miles over the posted limit. I didn't cite you for the light you just went through, but if I catch you again, I'll add that to the list."

"Thank you, sir. I'll drive more carefully from now on." I wonder if my night in jail came up on my record when he called in my license number back in the cruiser. At least he didn't mention it. He walks back to his car and I let him pull away first before I follow, a safe distance behind. By the time I reach Steve's house, it's just after midnight. Though he may be asleep, I figured I've come this far and want something to show for the fine I received on the way over here.

I walk up the front path, happy in the memory of the last time I came through Steve's garden and stood before this violet door. All the lights in the house are off, but the light above the door is on. Steve's bedroom faces the back of the house, so it's possible that he's still awake upstairs. I start to knock on the door, but catch myself in the futility of that sound attracting Steve's attention. I look for a doorbell and find one, wondering what will happen when I push the button. Nothing seems to, no lights blink on and off, at least that I can see, so I turn and head back to the car. Halfway down the path, I hear the front door open and turn to see Steve standing in its frame, wearing only a pair of baggy gray gym shorts. He rubs his eyes as if he has just woken up and tries to make out who is out in his yard. As I come closer, his smile lets me know that he finally recognizes who I am.

"Jahhn," he calls out to me. I sign the "I-L-Y" greeting in return, each of us communicating in the other's first language. I hold him close to me, rubbing my eager hands up and down his back, his hands tight around my waist. He takes me inside and brings me up to his bedroom, leading me by the hand, unaccustomed as I am to navigating through the rooms of his house in the dark. He goes over to the table on which the notebook with the clown on the cover lies, brings it to his bed and begins to write. I take off my shoes and sit down on the edge of his bed, shoulder-to-shoulder between him and a large teddy bear with a red ribbon tied in a bow around its neck.

"It's so good to see you," Steve writes, "I looked for you Saturday at the celebration march, but never saw you."

I think it best not to name my fears. "I saw you pass by with a banner in your hand and you were already too far down the street before I could get out to see you. Did you hear the news this evening? I was so excited to see you after I heard, I had to come over right away."

“Yes, all of our demands have been met. I just got off the phone with Matt a little while ago. Dr. I. King Jordan will be accepting the position of president tomorrow afternoon at a press conference at the university. Hopefully I can get away from work again to see it.”

Uh oh, Matt again. “Steve, I think the real reason I’m here is to ask if we’re going out or not. At first I thought we might be, but I’m wondering if you have changed your mind and would prefer to date a deaf man instead.”

Steve takes the notebook from my hands and sets it aside. He motions for me to lie on his bed, face down. With some apprehension, I comply. He turns off the light by the bed, shrouding the room in darkness and then lights a candle next to the lamp which sputters and flickers to life. He untucks the tail of my shirt, pulls it up to my shoulders and puts his warm hand reassuringly on my naked back. I feel him start to draw with one finger across my back, one line down my spine and then one across my shoulder blades and another across my lower back, a capital letter ‘I.’ I hold up my right hand with the symbol for the letter ‘I’ that Wendy taught me when she taught me the “I-L-Y” greeting to let Steve know I understand. I hear Steve, now straddled over me, say “Yahhs.”

Other letters quickly follow: W-A-N-T, a pause and then the letter ‘U’ on its own. I turn over and see Steve mouth the words he has just written on my back. He is still sitting on top of me, the growing dick in my pants pressing against the folds of his gym shorts, which hang loosely about his thighs.

Steve frees me from my shirt, now tangled around my neck, lifting it up gently over my head. He places his hands on my chest, and looks expectantly to the left and to the right, as if waiting for some conductor to give him the signal to play on my pecs like bongo drums. He bangs on them individually and then in unison, following the rhythm to a song only he can hear.

I take one of his hands by the wrist, bring it slowly to my lips, and kiss the back of it. He smiles and holds out the other for me to kiss—I wish to cause no jealousy between them. I place my hands on his chest and pull at the wiry hairs that sprout around each nipple. I lean forward and lick these amber moons and feel the nipples harden beneath my tongue as I lap up their salty tang.

Steve then begins to sniff me, a bloodhound following a scent, starting with my armpits, raising each arm in turn. I try not to show my embarrassment at the piquant odor that must now greet his nose. Satisfied that my scent is now imprinted on his memory, he kisses me there, tickling me with his darting tongue. He draws his tongue down across my chest to my bellybutton, which again he sniffs before exploring its concavity with the edge of his tongue.

I place my hands along the elastic waistband of his shorts and gently tug at them to release the stiffening member inside straining against the thin gray cloth. I look into his eyes and get a small nod,

permission to complete this moment of intimacy, to place him at his most vulnerable, fully exposed to me. I draw his shorts down over his knees and beyond his ankles and hear them softly hit the floor as I drop them over the side of the bed. I pull my own pants and shorts down together with his help, the pair of socks on my feet the only article of clothing left between either of us.

Steve lies down on top of me, the full force of his naked body pressed firmly against mine, and we kiss. I pray the kiss will never end, our lips parting ever wider to take in the mouth of the other. Our tongues meet inside this cavern we have created between us, exploring far-flung crevasses in search of vast chambers coated in gold and in silver.

I turn Steve over, face down, and straddle him above the ridge where the cheeks of his muscled buttocks meet his lower back. My penis rests hard against the curve of his lower spine, a bead of moisture forming on its tip shimmering softly in the candlelight. I take my turn drawing on Steve's back, but instead of letters, I draw a smiley face, and I hear him giggle with delight. The sound of his laughter encourages me to tickle him along the sides of his chest. He turns back to face me and we wrestle, sending stuffed animals careening this way and that to the floor below, innocent spectators to our match.

As each of us struggles for the upper hand, our bodies begin to glow, covered in a sheen of glistening sweat. Steve is now on his hands and knees and I am positioned to his side, my arms around his neck in a playful headlock. I move behind him and reach around his waist to grab his dick and start to pump it, using the sweat of my hand to lubricate the motion. I lick the balls hanging before me and hear Steve moan with delight, his head arched back and body taut. I think to ask him, by writing on his back, if he has one of the condoms from the Gay Pride parade left that his mother told me about, but feel spasms rock his body, warning signs that he is about to come. I grab my own dick with my free hand and pump it in unison with Steve's, quickly catching up to the crest of orgasm and actually getting there before Steve, spraying my sticky come across his comforter and along his left thigh.

Steve then turns around and gets up on his knees, putting his dick into my mouth, moving it back and forth with rapid thrusts. I start to taste his salty sweat and then the hint of something sweet but also unpleasant. I have never taken someone like this before and wonder if I can quickly acquire a taste for it. Just as I start to pull away, Steve reaches climax, shooting his sperm into my mouth and across my face, groaning with the release.

I can't bear to swallow the foul liquid and point at my mouth, hoping Steve will understand my need to quickly get to a bathroom. He laughs at me; I think of the comical picture I must present. He leads me down the hall to his bathroom where I spit into the sink and take a big draught

of water cupped into my hands. Steve takes a face cloth, runs it under warm water and washes off my face and hands. I wash him in turn, rubbing the cloth along his thigh and down his left calf.

We dry each other off with a green terry cloth towel hanging behind the bathroom door and return to his bedroom, arms wrapped loosely around each other's waists.

* * *

I wake the next morning, startled by the unfamiliar surroundings. Then a smile starts to form on my face, last night was not a dream after all. I turn to put my arm around Steve, but all I find on his side of the bed is a toy stuffed horse, a note with my name folded in its mouth. As I open the note, written in Steve's beautiful hand, I know this is something I will cherish for a lifetime, a constant reminder of the night we have just shared.

Dear John,

Thanks for a beautiful night together—I stayed awake all night, gazing on your face, asleep in peaceful serenity. Sorry I couldn't be here with you when you awoke this morning, there's a group of deaf people from Seattle who will be at the Jefferson Memorial for a sunrise service and I need to help them set up. I left you breakfast and a hot pot of coffee downstairs in the kitchen. Stay as long as you want—consider this your home. I'd love to hear from you later today, so call me when you can.

XXOO

Steve

I get up out of bed and look around the floor for my clothes and finally see them neatly folded on the table next to Steve's notebook. I must've slept pretty soundly for all this activity to occur in the room without waking up! I notice the speeding citation I received the night before on the table next to my pants; it must have fallen out of my pocket when I was taking them off last night.

I pull on my briefs and head downstairs, oddly hungry given that I rarely eat breakfast at home. I wonder if it has to do with the strange surroundings or the activity of the night before. As I enter Steve's kitchen, I'm overwhelmed by the amount of food set out on his kitchen table—all different boxes of cereals and granola, muffins, honey and jams, and a tall glass of orange juice. In the center of the table, he has placed a large cobalt blue vase filled with roses freshly cut from his garden—yellow, pink, red and white—which fill the room with their sweet aroma.

I hunt through the various cupboards in search of a coffee mug and finally find one, "I'M NOT DEAF, I'M IGNORING YOU" printed on its face. I fill it with coffee from the pot on the counter and

grab some milk from the refrigerator for my cereal. Steve's also left a copy of the *Washington Post* for me—its headline reads “Gallaudet Consents to All Student Demands” with a picture from the march below it. I begin to read the story, but stop before I get too caught up in it as I have to leave for work.

Before I go, I want to leave something for Steve as a reminder of me and to let him know how much last night meant to me. I go back upstairs, pull a piece of paper out of his notebook and roughly sketch a picture of the toy horse on the bed. I sign the drawing and leave it in the horse's mouth, just as my note was placed a few hours ago. I change back into my clothes from yesterday, but on a whim exchange a pair of Steve's socks for mine—just to have something of his next to my body for the rest of the day.

X. *The Party*

Steve and I have a long conversation on the phone that evening. I feel sorry for the operator who handles our call at TEDI, but I just love speaking with him even in another person's voice. There is so much to say—Steve was able to take the afternoon off from work (it helped that his workday started at sunrise!) and attend Dr. I. King Jordan's acceptance speech. He tells me how moving it was for him and how proud he is that a deaf person has been given so much responsibility.

"And thank you for your drawing," Steve tells me. "How did you know I love horses so much?"

"Just a guess. But I should be thanking you for your lovely note and the wonderful breakfast that was waiting for me when I got up this morning."

Steve goes on to tease me about my speeding citation, confirming his belief that deaf drivers are safer than hearing ones. I wonder how this could be so, not being able to hear the honk of a horn or the siren of an ambulance or police car. Steve tells me that deaf drivers are very careful and rely on their acute visual sense to foresee anything that might lead to an accident. "And we *never* speed," he adds teasingly.

I tell him that I have thought about him all day at work and confess to wearing a pair of his socks today just so I would have something to remind me of him all day long. He tells me to keep them—he saw how big my feet were last night and knows his socks would be stretched out of all proportion if he were to wear them again.

I finally get around to inviting him to Mack's party later in the week. Steve asks me if there will be any other deaf people there. I tell him that I don't think Mack knows anyone who is deaf.

"Then how would I communicate with anyone there?" Steve asks me.

"It hasn't been a problem before," I answer. "We seem to be able to understand each other just fine." Though I do remember having difficulty understanding Steve when I first met him flying kites, it didn't take me long to become attuned to the sound of his voice.

"That's you and me—how will anyone else there understand me?"

"Don't worry, it'll be fine," I reassure him, thinking if I can attend a party at his house among deaf people, he should be able to come to one with hearing. Doesn't he go to the bank, the supermarket, a restaurant and manage without other deaf people around?

“Okay, handsome, if you say so.” If I could hear him speak, would I detect some apprehension in his voice?

Later in the week, the night of Mack’s party, I arrive home to a beautiful bouquet of flowers sitting on my doorstep—colors that remind me of the flowers in the garden in Steve’s front yard. I bring them inside and find a note, “Looking forward to seeing you tonight, XXOO Steve.” I search through my kitchen cabinets for something to put them in and finally settle on a pitcher I used just once to make iced tea for a picnic with Chris.

Steve had offered to pick me up that evening—maybe he doesn’t trust my driving now?—but since he lives closer to Mack, I tell him I’ll pick him up. I don’t tell him that I’m also embarrassed to have him see my home, so different from the warmth of his. I change into my favorite clothes—a lucky shirt of faded blue denim that I wore the day I got my biggest voice-over contract promoting a new men’s cologne called ‘Intrigue’—and a pair of black jeans that have an attentive lover’s knowledge of the curves of my butt, thighs and calves.

On my way out the door, I grab a yellow carnation from the bouquet to give to Steve, a corsage for my date to the prom. I arrive at Steve’s a little late; he’s already out by the street waiting for me. I can’t believe how handsome he looks—his shirt sports a blue tropical background set behind orange Bird of Paradise blossoms that pick up the red of his hair. Luckily, I learned the sign for “beautiful” just for this occasion from a sign language book I bought at Kramer’s earlier in the week. I get out of the car, and encircle my face counterclockwise with my right hand, my hand open at first and then closing it as I saw in the diagram. I then point at him—he smiles and signs the same to me in return.

Steve holds a bag with balloons on it that contains a bottle of wine or champagne. I point at the bag and then at myself, assuming this is for me. Steve lets out a loud, “Noooo,” and I am touched by his thoughtfulness in bringing something to Mack for his party. Just then I realize there’s a lot I can learn from this kind man.

I open the passenger door of the car for him, make sure he’s tucked safely inside and get in on the driver’s side. I kiss him briefly on the cheek and hand him the carnation from his bouquet, which he sniffs deeply and puts behind his ear. Steve straps on his seatbelt as I start to pull away from the curb. He motions for me to stop and reaches across my body. He wants to hug me right now? I wonder, but he instead pulls out my seatbelt and draws it across my waist. He sits back and grins, smug that he has performed his good deed for the day. I bristle at the constraint, but give in to Steve’s good intentions.

I find myself driving more carefully on our way to Mack's, traveling at a reasonable speed and actually stopping for yellow lights. Maybe deaf people *do* make better drivers, if Steve is representative of the norm. As we approach Adams Morgan, I dread trying to find a parking space there. But the parking gods seem to be smiling on us this evening, and I see one in front of a restaurant right across from the building in which Mack lives. I start to pull in and a shabbily dressed man steps down from the curb and stands in the middle of the spot, blocking my way.

I roll down my window and call out to him to see if he is holding this space for anyone. He comes over to my door, leans on the window frame and I wonder if I could get drunk inhaling the alcohol-laden fumes of his breath. He looks at both of us with glazed eyes and then says with a slur, "That'll be five dollars, mister, if you want me to watch your car."

"You want to wash my car?" Five dollars isn't a lot of this but he's the one that could stand a wash.

"No, I said *watch* your car, faggot." His words become more clear as he builds momentum.

"And what if I don't pay you?" I ask him defiantly.

"Well, then, I can't guarantee that sumthin' won't happen to it," he replies ominously.

Figuring he would be the perpetrator of any possible damage to my car, I decide five dollars is a small price to pay for parking in this area at this time in the evening. As I dig into my wallet for the money, Steve puts his hand on my wrist and looks confused. I start to mime the reason why I'm giving this strange man money, but do not have the patience to get my point across. As there are cars behind me, I just hold out my hands in surrender and give the man the money. He shuffles away as another car starts to pull out of an adjacent spot, ever vigilant on his safety patrol.

I motion to Steve to stay in the car as I get out on my side, run around the front and open Steve's door with a great flourish. Steve seems impressed by my chivalry—I bow slightly in acknowledgement. I take his hand and start to lead him across the busy street to Mack's apartment, but he holds me back before we cross and carefully looks both ways before he concedes to the tug of my hand.

We climb the front steps of Mack's building and as I look for the buzzer, I'm reminded of the entrance to Steve's parents' building, this one smaller but of the same era. I hear the loud buzzer signal that the door is now unlocked and wait for Steve, standing before it, to push it open. He just stands there staring through the glass, perhaps expecting Mack to come down to get us. I try to catch the door in time, pushing Steve out of the way in my haste, and get a 'Hey!' out of him, affronted by my shove.

I miss the door and buzz Mack again, this time keeping one hand on the handle of the door which I catch in time on this second attempt. I walk over to the elevator and hit the 'Up' button; Steve holds up his hand to stop me and starts counting off numbers with his fingers: one, two, three, four, and points upstairs. I guess that he's asking me what floor Mack lives on and I hold up three fingers. He shakes his head in disappointment and leads me to the staircase we passed on the way in and we climb the two flights instead.

As we reach the third floor, I don't have to tell Steve which apartment down the hallway belongs to Mack—though he can't hear the loud music coming from 312, he can see the cluster of balloons tethered to the doorknob. I knock on the door, and wait about thirty seconds before I realize that no one inside can hear me over the music, so we just walk in. There are about ten people in the living room—none I recognize—so I lead Steve back to the kitchen in search of our host. I smell the stench of dirty laundry as we pass by the open door of Mack's bedroom—bed unmade—along the way. I can only imagine what kind of impression this is making on Steve.

We find Mack in the kitchen with another man, crushing ice in the sink with a long butcher's knife, shards of sharp crystals spraying out in all directions. Though some of the other rooms have been recently painted, the kitchen looks like it hasn't been touched since it was built back in the '20's—original appliances and a linoleum floor with many of the tiles worn away in places or missing completely. I'm grateful that Mack puts down the carving knife as he comes over to greet us.

"Hullo, boys," Mack says heartily, giving me a hug and Steve a handshake with both hands. Steve nods warily and manages a small smile. He hands Mack the bottle of wine that he brought. Mack asks me if I can thank him, but I show him how to do it instead—one of the first signs I learned the day I met Steve.

"This here is Saheed, the one that's going to be an astronaut some day," Mack says with an air of pride in ownership.

Saheed looks at Mack reprovably. "Not an astronaut, an astrophysicist. One who studies the stars, not visits them." He reaches out to shake both of our hands. Mack asks me to translate, but I tell him that I only know a few signs so far. I turn to Steve and point at the ceiling and then at Saheed, but stop when I figure this can be taken as anything from Saheed is a pilot to he lives upstairs.

Mack brings us out to the living room to meet the other guests. Steve hangs back and starts to wander over to the bookshelf, looking intently at Mack's collection. Mack introduces me to a man and a woman, Bud and Maggie, who Mack met during a 'Parade Your Pet' event at a nearby park a couple of weeks ago. Bud and Maggie's pet Weimaraner, Sam, won the 'Best Display of National Heritage' award, dressed in a Bavarian vest and lederhosen. Maggie asks Mack where his

dog, Petey, is—she just *loves* Jack Russell Terriers and thought he was the cutest one she had ever seen with that black patch around his eye. Mack fumbles for a second and then tells her that Petey is with a neighbor and gets easily excited with a lot of people around. I make a mental note to ask Mack about Petey, knowing that if he owned a dog, I'd certainly know about it by now. My hypothesis is that he borrowed it in order to meet some man at the event.

Mack introduces me as “one of those annoying operators who try to sell you something over the phone,” but I tell them that people call me for help with software that my company sells. Mack ignores the interruption and goes on to say that I'm the voice behind many of the commercials on TV, “just don't buy anything he's trying to sell. It's all just a load of bourgeois crap in my humble opinion.” Well, there's a glowing commendation of the work I do.

Mack heads off to freshen drinks for the other guests and implores us to eat the junk food spread out on the coffee table so that he can get rid of it. I reach over for a tortilla chip and dip it in what I hope is salsa in a bowl next to the chips. As I tentatively bite down on the chip, Bud asks me where my friend is who came in with me. I point out Steve over by the bookshelf, still poring through Mack's collection of books.

“Quiet one, isn't he?” Bud observes. I'm inclined to explain that he is deaf, but decide to let them figure that out on their own. “Yes, he is. He's quite the reader.”

Bud and I talk politics for the next ten minutes or so—a topic that always gets me excited. Even though we live in the nation's capital, local politics are always more intriguing. Marion Barry, mayor of the city known as the ‘Murder Capital of the World,’ had recently responded to his critics with the rejoinder: “If you take out the killings, Washington actually has a very very low crime rate.” Both of us are amazed that this man continues to be elected by an enlightened constituency who should know better.

After some time, I realize that I've left Steve alone and turn to see him still in front of the bookshelf, but now Mack is beside him. Each of them is holding a book, Steve brings his up to his heart and closes his eyes in contentment. Mack holds out his book in front of him, points to it and then holds up his index finger—his choice for number one. I come over and Mack tells me that they are arguing about which is the best Science Fiction book ever written. Steve is holding J.R.R. Tolkien's “The Hobbit,” but Mack tells me that, though it's an excellent book, it's really fantasy and not true Science Fiction. He holds “Foundation” by Isaac Asimov and believes that it is truly the best scifi book ever written. It's funny to see Mack “argue” with Steve and I'm glad to see the two of them have made a connection.

Mack leads us back to the center of the living room and announces that he has just had “this radical idea”—we should all play charades. I wonder if this is mainly for Steve's benefit—if so, this is a beautiful gesture on his part. We all sit in a circle around Mack who begins to act out the name of a recent movie. Steve quickly gets the hang of what's going on and motions for a pad and pen so he can write out his guesses which I read out loud.

After a few others get up and act out names of books they have recently read, Steve raises his hand to take his turn. We all remain quiet and wait for him to begin. He suddenly drops on all fours and paws at the carpet with his right hand, his face transformed into a snarl. He turns to face me directly and stares at me so intently, I'm actually frightened that he will attack me. Then he does the most amazing thing—he opens up his mouth as wide as he can and lets out a roar so loud I think the whole apartment building can hear it. I take his pen and paper and write “LION” on it in big letters and hold it up to him. He smiles and raises his hands waving them from side to side, deaf applause. I reach out to this wild beast and tame him in my embrace.

* * *

As he looks out of the passenger window of John's car on the way home, Steve compares the game of charades to the games he plays with his friends from Gallaudet. His favorite is an ASL game in which everyone stands in a circle. The first person signs a word that is made using the ‘A’ hand sign—a closed fist. The next person signs a word that uses the ‘B’ sign and so on. Signs like “sorry,” “brown,” and “search,” follow each other in rapid succession around the circle until someone can't come up with a sign and has to sit down. It takes all of Steve's concentration to keep up with the dizzying pace, trying to figure out ahead of time what letter will come to him next and which sign he will choose.

Steve finds it hard to believe that he ever enjoyed a game as simple as charades when he was young. Not one person at the party used his face to help express himself—even as he intently watched John's handsome face, Steve could get no clue to the words John was acting out. The game was a reminder of how far Steve has traveled away from a world in which speech and some simple gestures were enough to get a point across. Now Steve feels his entire body has become a chalkboard on which to write his thoughts and feelings.

Although there were moments in the evening that Steve enjoyed himself—sharing his interest in books with Mack for instance—most of the evening he felt awkward and alone. Other than Mack, none of the guests tried to approach him and he felt uncomfortable introducing himself. Steve also

noticed the smells in the apartment, of soiled clothing, stale food and carpeting that needed to be cleaned. Before his party when Greg Hlibok spoke, Steve spent an entire day scrubbing the floors and vacuuming the rugs. In the car, he asks John if the smells had also bothered him, but John seemed not to notice.

Steve thinks back to the warning Matt had given him at his party and once again at the celebration parade. Matt had told Steve that if he dates a hearing man, he will begin to lose touch with the Deaf Community, so soon after their greatest victory. Steve tried to dismiss these fears, telling Matt that he was jealous and that he did not know how wonderful John was. But tonight's party has made Steve wonder how difficult it would be to integrate back into the hearing world, a world that now seems incomplete and inadequate. He could never leave his Deaf world behind.

XI. Waffles, Not Pancakes

CLD U PLS CALL 911 Q GA

I'm at TEDI, many weeks now past my mandated sentence—Wendy convinced me to stay on after she told me about the university's policy of paying the tuition of any classes taken by volunteers on campus. I enrolled in ASL I, taught by a deaf woman, who is extraordinarily patient with me as I fumble through fingerspelling my name and signing the days of the week. Not much to go on for a conversation with Steve, but I pick up a lot of non-verbal cues by watching my teacher describe new signs to us. It all comes down to making yourself understood, however that can be done. A raised eyebrow, eyes open wide in surprise, a mouth in the shape of an 'O,' all are forms of communication, often more rich than simple signs or words.

"Hello, this is the Capitol Hill Police Department. How can I help you?"

"Hello, this is John from the Telecommunications Exchange at Gallaudet. I have someone on the line who needs assistance. Hold please."

POLICE ON LINE GA

I log the call in my notebook as the caller begins typing.

YES THIS IS SHEILA WILLIAMS OF 1351 C ST NE I WANT TO RPT MY HUSBAND WHO HAS LOCKED ME IN THE BASEMENT AND TURNED OFF THE LIGHTS GA

"Is your husband home right now, Ms. Williams?" the dispatcher asks.

NO HES LEFT FOR WORK I MANAGED TO GET OUT BY CRAWLING OUT A SMALL WINDOW TO THE BACK YARD GA

"Are you in the house now?"

NO I M AT MY SISTERS GA

"Have you been abused in any way?"

YES I TOLD U HE LOCKED ME IN THE BASEMENT N TURNED OFF THE LIGHTS WITHOUT LIGHT I CAN NOT SEE HE ALSO HAS HELD MY HANDS SO I CAN NOT SPEAK GA

"Okay, let me transfer you to the duty officer." An involuntary wave of apprehension passes over me, fear that the officer will recognize my voice, but that was in Virginia and now months ago.

“Lieutenant Grayson here. How can I help you?” The man sounds tired and irritated, causing me to wonder how sympathetic he will be. After I type his words into the TTY, Sheila replies:

DO I NEED TO REPEAT MYSELF Q GA

I’m not sure if Sheila is directing this to me or to the officer, so I ask the officer if he has been told what Sheila said to the dispatcher.

“I don’t know the first thing about it,” he replies. I ask Sheila to repeat her report from the beginning.

The lieutenant listens with a disinterest I can sense over the phone, something I’m glad that Sheila will not be aware of. He asks no questions and just says that he will file her report and someone should get back to her sometime tomorrow. Like powder to a machine gun, this sparks a barrage of questions from Sheila that I can barely keep up with.

**HOW WILL THEY GET IN TOUCH WITH ME Q WILL THEY CALL ME AT HOME Q
WILL THEY USE A TTY Q IF THEY COME BY WILL THEY BRING AN INTERPRETER Q
WHAT IF MY HUSBAND IS AT HOME Q GA**

I can sense her panic and sympathize with her, but unfortunately the lieutenant is uninterested and has heard it all before. “Please just wait until tomorrow,” is the best he can offer and hangs up.

I know that I’m supposed to just “call ‘em as I hear ‘em,” as Wendy told me on my first day at TEDI, but I can’t help but get involved.

THE OFFICER HAS HUNG UP IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE I CAN DO TO HELP Q GA

She replies,

CLD U CALL HIM BACK PLS Q GA

If it were me, I would back off from this type of confrontation, but I admire Sheila’s resolve to be heard and call back the station. This time the dispatcher won’t even forward my call to the lieutenant and suggests that Sheila go back home and wait until tomorrow.

“But call us back if he actually abuses you,” she adds, clearly misunderstanding the gravity of a deaf person being locked in the dark, deprived of her sense of vision.

My last call of the day is one I initiate to Steve to invite him to Sunday brunch tomorrow. I catch him at home, just on his way out to the dance club, Tracks, with some friends. He tells me that there will be a lot of students from Gallaudet there, drawn by a deaf DJ who recognizes songs solely by their bass line. I think this to be quite a feat, as it was my impression that most dance music had the same beat. Steve asks me to join them, but I leave them to enjoy a loud place where their

ability to sign gives them an advantage over hearing people who can't hear each other speak. A long 'Awwwwww' comes across the TTY, but he says he understands and will be by tomorrow around noon to bring me to brunch.

* * *

Early the next afternoon, we pull into the lot for the restaurant. As Steve comes over and opens my door, the smell of sizzling bacon surrounds me like a lasso and draws me in. We join the line snaking out the front door of Julio's, and I hear a couple behind us refer to the name of the place with an aspirated 'H,' smug in their political correctness. However, the correct pronunciation is with the 'J' sound, something that distinguishes the denizens of DC from the tourists who visit us. It's the verbal equivalent of the sight of a camera around the neck, a fanny pack around the waist, or comfortable shoes, suitable for walking long distances.

Ignoring the tourists, I strike up a conversation with the two men in front of us instead—Darryl who is a lobbyist for Trade Associations and Tyrone who is visiting DC from rural Alabama for the first time, wide-eyed and enthusiastic about the sights and sounds around him. I recognize myself when I first moved to DC and saw the city as a vast playground, the Mall as my sandbox, the Tidal Basin my wading pool. It's almost like a Disneyland theme park, and we its inhabitants, characters in an intricately scripted play that changes each day.

Steve stands next to me while we speak, transfixed by the sight of a golden retriever tied to the railing that leads up to the front door. Steve's face mimics the slobbering grin of the dog. Ty and Darryl glance over at Steve periodically as we speak, expecting to be introduced. But I still feel awkward introducing Steve to strangers who would naturally want to include him in a conversation. If I were more adept at signing, I might be inclined to interpret for him. But, for now, we remain in our separate worlds.

Steve and I are eventually seated and a waitress brings over two menus and a pot of coffee. We both nod our heads as she reaches out to pour some into our mugs. Steve looks on the table for some cream, and seeing none, says "Cream," but it comes out like "Green," and the waitress is confused.

"Could you please bring us some cream?" I ask her.

"Oh, certainly honey. Do you know what you'd like?"

"I'll have three eggs, scrambled; bacon, crisp and wheat toast with grape jelly. I look over to Steve, who points to what I think are pancakes on the menu, not willing to try to speak again and be

misunderstood. I relay his order to the waitress. I think how easy it is for me to ask for exactly what I want and wonder if Steve ordered the pancakes just because it was easy.

I take out a pen and draw a grid on the back of my napkin and place a 'J' in its center. I hand the pen to Steve, who draws an ornate 'S' in the upper right-hand corner, our opening salvos in Steve's version of tic-tac-toe. Steve taught me to substitute our initials for the X's and O's, "that way we always know which ones are ours," he wrote next to the first grid we played on. I couldn't disagree with his logic.

After a couple of rounds, I start to lose interest and lose the following game on purpose, but Steve seems no less happy in his victory. Our food arrives shortly thereafter, and Steve looks at the waitress and then me in surprise as she sets a plate of pancakes in front of him. "Nooo!" he says, loud enough to interrupt the quiet conversation of the diners around us. I shake my head and sign "I don't understand." He takes the pen and writes "WAFFLES" on the napkin and underlines it many times.

"Is there a problem here?" the waitress asks.

"No, everything's fine," I assure her and she walks away.

Steve turns to me and says "Whaat?" and points to the napkin he just wrote on. He folds his arms, a child who won't eat until he's satisfied.

I think, tell her yourself, and ignore him as I start to eat my eggs before they get cold, hoping he'll just start in on the pancakes. But he remains set in his resolve and continues to just sit there. After a few minutes, I lose my patience and call the waitress over to tell her that there was a mistake with our order. She takes the pancakes away and I continue to eat while Steve waits for his waffles.

It's very quiet in the car on the way home. This is certainly not unusual, particularly with Steve at the wheel—I, on the other hand, can be very verbal about my opinions of the driving of others—but this time the silence takes on another, more ominous, meaning. As we arrive at my house, I look over to Steve to get some sense of how upset he still is, and, with his forward gaze, I get my answer. I turn and get out of the car, shutting the door loudly enough that I hope Steve feels its vibrations. Steve pulls away and I'm left feeling angry at both of us for our childish behavior.

When I get inside, I notice that someone called while I was at brunch. Wendy left a message to tell me that the police were at TEDI looking for me. She mentioned their request for the call logs from yesterday, so she told me not to be worried as it probably had nothing to do with "that business" that brought me to TEDI in the first place. She gave them my address, so I should expect them later today. As I pull the blinds back from the front window, I see a cruiser parked on the street and wonder if it has been there all along and I just didn't notice it in my distraction with Steve. A

woman in uniform approaches the front door. I quickly close the blinds and briefly consider running out the back door, but tell myself I have nothing to be afraid of.

The officer rings the doorbell and my heart races as I reach for the door.

“Hello, I’m Sergeant Lappen from Capitol Hill homicide, are you John Lathrop?”

My heart begins to slow down; I certainly have not been involved in any murder. “Yes, I am. How can I help you?”

“May I come in?”

“Sure.” I lead her into the dining room and clear off the place settings from a dinner I cooked for Steve earlier in the week. Nothing like Chris would’ve cooked for me, but Steve seem pleased with the green bean casserole that I made from a recipe I got from my mother long ago.

The sergeant takes out a notepad and reviews a few of her notes before speaking. “You work at the Telecommunications for the Deaf at Gallaudet University, is that correct?”

“Well, I’m not an employee, if that’s what you mean. I’m just a volunteer there.” I wonder if the sergeant is testing me and expects me to say how I got started there in the first place, but she seems uninterested in my history.

“Do you remember taking a call from a Sheila Williams at about fifteen hundred, oh, I’m sorry, 3 PM yesterday?”

“Yes, I do. In fact I was very worried for her as she called to report that her husband had locked her in the basement and had escaped to her sister’s house to call for help. Did something happen to her?”

“Sheila was found dead in her home just a few hours ago. A neighbor called to report the sound of a high-pitched scream coming from their house and a cruiser went by to investigate. They found her in the living room, apparently dead from blunt force trauma to the head, although forensics will have to confirm that.”

I must not be a suspect if I am told this level of detail from the scene of the crime. “Was her husband there?” I ask.

“No, we can’t seem to locate him, and that’s why we’re here. Did she give you any idea where he might be?”

“All I can remember is that she told the officer yesterday that her husband was at work when she called from her sister’s house.”

“Did she say where he worked?”

“No, she didn’t. She did seem very ill at ease with the idea that he might be there if the police came by.”

“Well, someone from the department *was* by her house first thing this morning, but couldn’t take her statement as it wasn’t noted on her report that she was deaf and would need an interpreter. The call from the neighbor came in just a few minutes after the officer left. We went back and traced the number that she used to contact the department yesterday and came up with the Exchange you work at. We spoke with your supervisor today who looked through the logs and found that you had taken Sheila’s call.”

My initial nervousness becomes anger as this was just the fear Sheila had expressed after the lieutenant had hung up on her. I can’t hold back any longer. “This is exactly what she was afraid of when I took her call. If that officer had just taken her seriously, she might be alive right now.”

“I assure you, the lieutenant’s actions are under investigation. With all the crime in this city, we have to triage our callers in order of perceived priority. A domestic argument, particularly when there has been no report of injury, does not merit immediate attention.”

Argument? A deaf woman was deprived of the only means of communication she has, the ability to see and be seen. Her husband must know how traumatic that would be for her.

“If there is anything else you can think of, please call me. Here is my direct line,” she says as she hands me her card. “Thank you for your time.”

As she leaves, I realize that I must call Steve and tell him about this incident. He would know what to do.

XII. A Man not a Child

Not long after the officer leaves, I try to call Steve at home, but get no answer. Restless, I feel the need to get out and go for a walk to clear my head of the events of the day. I change into an athletic T-shirt and shorts and head outside.

I stick to the shaded side of the street—even late in the afternoon, the heat and humidity are oppressive as I feel sweat start to form under my arms and on my upper lip. I walk east, ostensibly heading toward Lincoln Park, where many of my neighbors bring their dogs, and shade is to be found under the spreading maples and oaks that extend their leafy arms over benches with missing slats. But, arriving at the park, I decide to walk past it, heading down C Street, and realize that subconsciously I am heading toward the home of the late Sheila Williams.

I warily approach the house from the opposite side of the street, cautious that the home may be under surveillance and at a loss to explain why I have felt the desire to come here if asked. I realize that I expect the house to be painted in all different colors, like Steve's, a sign from the street that a deaf person lives here. But as I get closer to the house numbered 1351, I see that it is simply painted a pale blue, the color of the baby jumper I bought for my brother and sister-in-law not long after my nephew Liam was born.

I stop across the street from the house and listen to the familiar neighborhood sounds, present in all but the most desperate of areas of DC—small children on tricycles and skateboards, the calls of birds comfortable in urban trees, whoops from a distant pickup basketball game, the whirl and rattle of engines in cars that pass slowly by. The house itself is quiet amid this background, *deadly* quiet, as goose bumps rise on my thighs and upper arms. I stand in wait, perhaps expecting Sheila's husband to appear, anxious to get my own take on whether this was a man capable of murder. But as a few pedestrians walk by, the house brings no more attention to itself than all the similar townhouses that stand in slumber on either side of it.

As I turn to head home, a young girl on a tricycle with a woven basket in front and bright red streamers off the handlebars, rides up to me.

"Hey, mistah. You lookin' for Mistah Williams?" She squints up at me in the sun, its rays catch the small transparent beads braided into her hair.

“No. I don’t know who you’re talking about.” Could the police be so strapped for resources that they have resorted to hiring children to help them out?

“Oh, sumthin’ real terrible happened there today. My mama told me to stay away from here, but she at church right now and won’t be back ‘til late.”

“So no one’s looking after you while your mother’s away?”

“Well, there’s my older sister Latrell, but she out driving around with some of her friends.”

“Do you know what happened then?” I think it best to continue to play dumb, just in case.

“No, not really. All I know is that the police were by the house today and askin’ my mama lots of questions about Mistah Williams. I don’t see him around here much, but Miz Williams, she lets me come into her house and gives me sugar cookies with lemon frosting on them that she done baked herself.” Her face becomes one big toothy grin as she thinks about those cookies. “And some sweet tea. I was afraid of her at first ‘cuz she can’t talk, you know, but now I ain’t afraid and get a big hug from her every time I come by.”

“Maybe it’s best you listen to your mother and head back home.”

“Okay, mistah.” She turns the front wheel of her bike back down the sidewalk in the direction from which she came, looks back one more time as if to check on me, and pedals away.

* * *

As I try Steve again at home, I imagine the bright light that blinks in many of his rooms with each ring of the phone. When I first saw it, I thought it was a fire alarm and started to head for the front door. Steve chuckled and pointed at the phone, which he picked up and placed in the cradle of the TTY in his bedroom and began to type.

The operator from TEDI, a man’s voice I don’t recognize, tells me that Steve is on the line and to “go ahead.”

“Hi, Steve. How are you?” Although I’m anxious to get to my news of the day, we have some lost ground to regain first.

“Still pissed from before. Why do you always have to treat me like a...” and the operator adds tentatively, “...chime? But that doesn’t make sense, does it?”

“Please ask him to retype what he said.”

“Oh, okay. I’m kind of new at this.”

“You’re doing fine, just take your time and be sure of what Steve is trying to say.” Maybe I could take on Wendy’s job some day, although I wonder if the tendency to smoke and overeat comes from the sheer boredom of the work.

“Oh, he said, ‘child’... Why do you always have to treat me like a *child*. That makes more sense, doesn’t it?” the operator asks tentatively.

“Yes, that makes sense.” Or does it? “You were the child, just sitting there not eating the food placed in front of you that I know you pointed to on the menu. Why don’t you just order for yourself next time?”

“Do you want me to type all that?” the operator asks me and I realize that when I started speaking, I was addressing him and then switched to Steve midstream, expecting him to follow. I tell him, “No, it’s just as well you missed that. Please tell Steve that I’m sorry he feels that way.”

“Will do,” the operator complies. It’s not that often we can take back words spoken in anger as if they were never said—the course of history changed by a novice operator.

The operator then puts Steve’s words to voice: “Just because I can’t hear doesn’t mean I need you to take care of me. I was quite able to do that on my own before I met you, you know. So many people focus on deaf representing something we cannot do instead of the things we can. I thought you would be different.” As he goes on, I picture him, eyes firmly focused on the keyboard, the act of typing replaced by pure emotion.

I consider this and think about the recent times I’ve been with Steve, comfortable in a world in which I hear all its sounds and only occasionally passing them on to Steve, depending upon my mood or my patience in trying to get him to understand. But maybe I’m being too hard on myself—has Steve asked me to be his interpreter at all times or have I just taken that on myself? Is it possible I have fallen in love with Steve because I think he needs me?

Steve must sense my silence as the operator tells me Steve is asking if I’m still there.

“Yes, Steve. I am here.”

“John, I understand you’re just trying to help me. It is easier for you to order for both of us when we’re out, but that doesn’t mean you always have to—you’d be surprised at what I can do.”

“I think I would be surprised.” I get that warm feeling thinking of those things I’ve already seen and felt Steve do. And then I remember why I called him in the first place. “Hey, I almost forgot to tell you the police were here today.”

“Really, what did they want?”

I’ve never told Steve about my night in jail so he doesn’t share my suspicions of their visit. “A deaf woman was murdered this morning and I took a call from her yesterday afternoon when I was

working at TEDI. She was calling the police to report her husband who had locked her in their basement in the dark.”

The operator says, “Oh, do you work here too?” and I tell him, “Yes, but please keep to the conversation for now.”

“That’s awful,” Steve answers. “Was her husband hearing?”

“I have no idea.” I guess I just assumed he was deaf as well.

“I bet he was hearing. A deaf person would never do that to another deaf person.”

He would if he were capable of murder.

* * *

I think about my conversation with Steve well into the following week and realize I have a lot to learn about what it would be like to be deaf. Despite all the challenges, I really want this relationship to work out, or at least know that I’ve done all I could. I remember that Christine gave me her number back at Steve’s party before the protests began and think of her as someone I can talk to about how things are going.

Christine answers the phone after just one ring as if she has been waiting all this time for my call. I wonder at first if she’ll even remember me, but I have no need to worry as she almost sounds hurt when she asks me why I waited so long to call.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” quickly recovering, “Things have been pretty busy lately.”

“Yeah, Steve told me about that murder you were involved with. It sounds like you were one of the last people that woman spoke with.”

“I just told Steve that a few days ago...you’ve spoken to him since then?”

“Steve and I talk almost every day. I really think I’m missing something out of my day if I don’t hear from him.”

“Does he ever say anything about me?” I ask almost reflexively.

“Of course. We talk about everything that’s going on in each other’s lives. No topic is off limits with us. I can tell him anything—I often tell him about the guys I’m dating and he gives me advice.”

“Well, I wonder if I might take advantage of some of that advice and take you out to dinner some time.”

“I’d love that. How about tonight?”

Christine is nothing if not forceful and to the point. I hesitate at first, afraid of what being free at such short notice might say about my social life, but the same could be said of her. “Sure, how about the AmCaf here on Capitol Hill around eight?”

“See ya there, handsome,” and I begin to realize how frequently she and Steve must talk as I hear her use the nickname Steve calls me.

* * *

The American Café on Massachusetts Avenue is much like any of the others scattered across DC—as predictable as the Friendly’s in my area growing up. I like this one best, though, because I know one of the waiters here. Rob is an ex-marine, originally from West Virginia, who stills keeps his hair in a crew cut from his military days. I developed a crush on him not long after I moved into the neighborhood and started to come here for take out dinners. I got to know Rob’s schedule pretty well, only showing up on those nights he’d be on and late enough in the evening that he would be free to chat for a bit. I gave him my number once but never heard from him, so our relationship remains within the confines of the soft lighting and hushed tones of the restaurant.

I know before I arrive that Rob won’t be there tonight—on Fridays, he tends bar at Remington’s down on Pennsylvania. I’m a little late as usual and find Christine already at a table when I come in, having given my name at the door. She stands as I come over to her and gives me a firm hug as I recall the firm handshake she gave me when we first met. She’s drinking a glass of white wine from a bottle chilling by the table, so I immediately realize we’re going to be here a while.

“Thank God you’ve arrived,” Christine tells me theatrically. “That man over in the corner just keeps staring at me—I was so afraid he’d come over here and assume I was alone.” Christine speaks loudly, perhaps with her long exposure to the hard of hearing, and attracts the attention of nearby patrons.

I lean over to catch a glimpse of her stalker, but only see happy couples in that direction, engaged in the business of eating or chatting. I nod my head though, in understanding. She removes the centerpiece that sits in the middle of the table with a flourish and sets in on the floor under the table. “A habit,” she tells me, “so that we can see each other without obstruction.”

She pours me a glass of wine from the bottle by her side and motions for the waiter to come take our order. I guess she must realize I know the menu about as well as my own name and have already decided what I want. I do listen to the specials, though, out of deference to the waiter, an

attractive Latino I've never seen here before. I make a mental note to ask Rob about him next time I'm in.

"Cute, isn't he?" Christine remarks, causing me to flush in embarrassment, more obvious in my attention than I was aware. "Don't worry, I won't tell Steve. I'm just more attuned to people's facial expressions than most, having been brought up in a deaf home."

"Thanks for the warning. I'll know to be more careful next time."

"I told you, you don't have to worry about me. Whatever we say stays right here. Steve is such a big part of my life, I hope we can be good friends."

"Me too. So how did you and Steve meet?"

"We met in a Deaf History class at Gallaudet. I was working on my Master's degree in Deaf Studies. We had to choose someone in the class to do a project with and I chose Steve, because I thought he was the cutest guy in the class. It didn't take long before I figured out he was gay, but that hasn't stopped us from becoming best friends ever since."

"I didn't know hearing people took classes at GU, other than the ASL classes like the one I'm taking."

"There weren't a lot of us back when I was there, but there are more and more each year. Not only deaf people are interested in Deaf Studies, you know."

Well, no, I didn't know. Christine has a way of almost talking down to me that makes me wonder in my insecurity if she thinks Steve could do better. Maybe if I express my interest in learning more about Deaf Culture, she will see that I'm trying.

"So I guess Steve told you about our scene at the restaurant last week?"

"Yes, he did. He was pretty upset that day, but I think he's cooled off a bit. He knows in your heart that you are just trying to help."

"Yes, I was. I just thought it was easier to order for both of us in that situation."

"Certainly, that makes sense. I always order for my parents when the three of us go out to dinner. It helps that I can easily communicate with them in ASL so I know exactly what they want. Maybe next time you shouldn't just assume Steve needs your help and let him ask you for it first. It's simply a matter of respect—something deaf people have been denied throughout their history. I hope the recent events at Gallaudet signal the beginning of respect from hearing people for what deaf people are capable of and the idea that they don't need to rely on others to get by."

I notice her wine glass is empty, so I refill it for her.

"Thanks, John." She hesitates a minute, considering if she should continue, and then does.

"You know that this relationship is as hard for Steve as it is for you. A lot of Steve's deaf friends think

that he's 'selling out' dating a hearing man when there are a lot of deaf men out there he could have chosen from."

"Like Matt?" I ask boldly.

"They're just friends now. It took a long time for Steve to get over being hurt when Matt left him many years ago for someone that he had met out at a bar."

"Did you know him then? Maybe if I knew why they broke up, it might help me understand him better."

"No, I met him a year after he broke up with Matt. But Steve told me all about it. How much has he told you about his time at Gallaudet?"

"I know that he graduated from there a few years ago with a degree in Sociology, but, other than that, nothing."

"Sounds like you've got a lot to learn about Steve. If you want the whole story, I think we'll have to order another bottle of wine." She doesn't wait for a response from me before she catches our waiter's eye and points to the bottle by our table and signs 'again.' Though the waiter probably knows no ASL, her intention is clear enough.

Christine begins. "When Steve was a sophomore at Gallaudet, he used to give tours to the freshmen there, so that they'd become familiar with the campus and the facilities. He told me that he loved to see the awe so clearly written on their faces. I think it reminded him of how he felt when he started there, among so many who were deaf like him for the first time. He met Matt, who is a year younger than him, on one of those tours."

I think of my first year in college and how overwhelmed I felt, so I can understand deaf students entering this world in which they find themselves in the majority feeling this to an even greater degree.

"Matt had waited too long to apply for on-campus housing and asked Steve after the tour if he knew of any place he could live off-campus. Steve had just moved into an apartment on Florida Avenue which he had expected to live in by himself. But Matt had caught him at a good time, because Steve had only a few pieces of furniture from his mother and felt lonely in the virtually empty rooms. He realized he could also use the extra money a roommate would bring.

"Matt arrived the next morning, at the wheel of a U-Haul full of an assortment of used furniture and clothing. He and Steve spent the whole day unloading the van and deciding where all the furniture should go. And, you know how boys are," as she gives me a salacious wink, "they became less shy about looking at each other's bodies, covered more in sweat and less in clothing as the day went on."

“Wait a minute,” I interrupt, “Steve told you that?” I can’t imagine sharing such intimate details with anyone. In my embarrassment, I look at the people around us to see if anyone is eavesdropping. But no one seems to notice.

“Yes, I told you we share everything. Do you want me to continue?”

“Yes, I guess so, if you don’t think Steve would mind that I know.”

“No, he’d tell you about it himself if you asked him.”

“Okay,” I agree. “If you could just keep your voice down.”

She looks at me as if I have offended her, but then speaks a little softer. “That evening they slept together in Steve’s bed, both eagerly agreeing it was too late to set up Matt’s bed. And yes, they had sex that first night, which, for Steve, was the first time he’d ever been with another man. Matt apparently didn’t believe that he was a virgin, since the sex seemed to come so naturally to Steve. Steve told him that he had dreamed about that night and, from that recurring dream, knew exactly what to do.”

I squirm in my seat, wondering if I made the right decision encouraging her to continue with this story. But my prurience gets the better of me and I remain quiet.

“That first month was wonderful for both of them. Steve truly believed he had found the man of his dreams. They went shopping together, finding out they both enjoyed the same kind of foods. They even wore each other’s clothes. Steve helped Matt with his first-year classes, in particular, English and History, which were Steve’s favorite subjects. Steve would also explain new signs to him that he had not been taught at the California School for the Deaf Matt had attended before Gallaudet. In return, I remember Steve telling me that Matt left intricate origami swans, folded from red construction paper, on Steve’s pillow that he would discover just as they were going to bed.

“After that first month, though, Steve noticed that things seemed to change, imperceptibly at first, but it was more noticeable as time went on. Matt started to hang out with other students at Gallaudet whom he had gone to school with in Fremont, sharing stories and a common history that made Steve feel left out. Even the way Matt and his friends communicated with each other, using secret signs that they had invented while they were in high school together, alienated Steve. Then Matt seemed anxious to explore the night life in DC—bars Steve had heard about but never felt comfortable visiting, since they were located in some of the most dangerous areas of the city.”

I feel it’s finally my turn to expound on my area of expertise. “They still are. DC is no different from any other city as far as this goes. I think the bars were hidden at first because they didn’t want to attract any trouble, but now, I think it just adds to the sense of risk and adventure

when you go there. I guess Steve feels differently about that now, since he invited me to Tracks just the other night.”

“Well, we all change over time, don’t we?”

“Yes,” I say, strangely reminded of my father. I wonder if he’ll ever change.

Christine must sense my distraction and takes the opportunity to take a long sip from her wine.

“Later that semester, Steve suggested that they splurge on a trip to Florida over the winter break. Matt told him that he couldn’t afford it. Steve was so anxious to go, he offered to pay for both of them, even though he didn’t have much money either. Steve made reservations at a gay bed and breakfast in South Beach that he saw on a brochure at a travel agency in Dupont Circle. He was so excited that he went out and bought matching swim trunks for both of them.”

I think of the picture of Matt and Steve wearing those suits on Steve’s mantel I saw when I was at his house for the rally.

“The trip, though, was a disaster. The distance that had developed between them before the trip only became worse while they were away. One night after dinner, Matt wanted to go out, but Steve wanted to head back to the room and read. At three in the morning, Matt came back to the room, drunk and belligerent. Steve tried to ignore him, but Matt turned on the lights and wanted to talk. He told Steve that he was seeing someone else in DC, a man he had met at the Lost and Found bar, and he couldn’t keep it a secret any longer. Matt had hoped that this trip might bring them back together, but it just made him realize how different they really were.

“Matt left the room and Steve cried all night. He didn’t see Matt again until their flight home, when they changed their seats so they wouldn’t have to sit next to each other. Matt spent that night on his mattress on the floor, his bed still not set up from when he had first moved in. He moved out the next day as a truck driven by his new boyfriend appeared out on the street in front of their house. Steve came back that evening to a house empty of Matt’s things. When he went to his bedroom, he saw on his pillow an origami swan, this one formed from a hundred dollar bill. I think he still has it.”

I’m still amazed that Steve has shared this level of detail with another person, especially information so graphic. I wonder if all deaf people, and those who know them well, are this observant of the details around them and remember them so clearly.

“That’s awful. How could Matt have been such a jerk? And Steve’s still friends with him?”

“Maybe to call them ‘friends’ is an overstatement. Let’s just say they’ve learned to tolerate each other. I think they both realized they had a lot to learn back then. And it’s hard to be deaf in this city and avoid another deaf person for any length of time, the community is so close.”

“So close that they frown on those who date people who can hear?”

“Remember that Steve was hearing until he was fifteen, so he’s not as closely aligned to the Deaf Community as those who have been deaf all their lives. In fact, I think I’m more ‘Deaf’ than Steve, knowing no other than deaf parents all my life. So no, it’s just important to him, and to me, that he finds someone that he loves and who loves him in return.”

Our meal arrives and we’re quiet while we eat. Christine looks furtively from time to time back in the direction of the man she pointed out earlier, but makes no more mention of it. As she pours the rest of the wine from the bottle into my glass, she says, “You know, John, you can learn a lot about a culture by their jokes. If you were to ask a deaf person if he had five senses, he’d say, ‘Yes,’ and count them out: sight, smell, taste, touch and a sense of humor.

“Maybe if I tell you a deaf joke, a favorite of my father’s that he told me when I was old enough to understand, you might begin to see the world from a deaf perspective.” I watch her face transform in preparation for the story, accustomed to communication with just expressions and signs. “A deaf couple arrives at a motel for their honeymoon. After unpacking, the nervous husband goes out to get a drink. When he returns to the motel, he realizes that he has forgotten the room number. It is dark outside and all the rooms look identical. He walks to his car, and leans on the horn. He then waits for the lights to come on in the rooms of all the waking angry hearing guests. All the rooms are lit up, except the one where his Deaf wife waits for him!”

Though funny, I’m not sure how this applies to Steve and me. But I keep that thought to myself and laugh politely. The check comes and as I reach for it, Christine pulls it out from under my hand and quickly covers it with her credit card. I protest, but she tells me I can pick up the bill next time which she hopes will be very soon. She returns the centerpiece to the table and we walk out together into the warm May evening.

XIII. Parents

“Hi Johnny,” my mother’s voice sounds on my answering machine, “sorry we missed you. We just wanted to let you know we’ll be back home in two weeks and would love to see you when we get in. Your brother Joseph tells us you’re dating someone who is trying to become the president of a university? That sounds nice, so please bring him by when you come over. Good-bye, sweetheart.”

With that message, I give up any vestige of hope that my family will ever retain any information whatsoever about the men in my life. I don’t have the time to dwell on this now—Steve has invited me to dinner at his parents’ home this evening. But before we go, he has told me that I need a haircut first, something he wants to give me himself.

When I arrive at Steve’s front door, he opens it before I even have a chance to ring the bell and ushers me inside. After a “Hi, Jahhn” and a big hug, he leads me directly upstairs to his bedroom where he starts to take off my clothes. I point to his bed and sign “Now?” and he hits me on the stomach lightly with the back of his hand and signs, “No” and then “shower.”

We then make a game of this, who can take off all of the other person’s clothes first? Steve wins, mainly due to my decision earlier in the day not to wear any underwear. After all of our clothes surround us on the floor, I hoist the winner onto my back and carry him piggyback, pretending to stagger under the weight. As we head to the bathroom, Steve ducks his head to fit under the doorway to his bedroom and so as not to hit the light in the hallway. Once there, he dismounts onto the toilet seat next to the tub.

Steve draws back the shower curtain, a field of stars, planets and moons set against a royal blue sky, and leans over to turn on the faucets. A loud “whoosh” accompanies the water as it begins running into the tub. I stand back to admire the perfectly oval crescents of Steve’s ass and can’t help but reach out to caress their tender smoothness. Steve turns back with a playful, “Heyy!” and splashes water from the tap out in my direction. After making sure the water is warm enough for us he diverts it to the shower head and a gentle rain begins to fall in front of us, beckoning us to stand beneath its liquid benediction.

Steve places his left foot on the rim of the tub before stepping in all the way. As he enters, I notice the peach-colored hairs sprouting from each of his toes, barely noticeable except against the white of the tiles. I follow the path of the water as it runs over his head down his face into the hollow

right below his Adam's apple before spreading out across his chest. He tilts his head back as if to laugh and lets the water fill his open mouth to the brim, and then over and down each cheek.

He looks over to me and I step in behind him. I wrap my arms around his waist and pull him back toward me. My cock stiffens in contact with the crevasse of his butt. I lift my dick up and rub its tender underside against the small of his back, moist with his sweat and the stream of water beginning to run down along his spine.

Steve reaches for a bar of lavender soap and sniffs it before he hands it back to me. I draw it across his chest and down his left side before I nestle Steve's dick with it in my hand, the friction and its lather causing his dick to lengthen inside my palm until it stretches out between my index and middle fingers.

Steve turns to face me and takes the soap from my hand. He scrubs my chest so hard I feel like he's taking off a layer of skin, so I gently draw his hands down to my thighs which can better withstand this coarse treatment. He brings the soap down between my legs and washes that area of my body he seems to be most fond of—that stretch of skin that reaches from beneath my balls behind me.

He then kneels in front of me. The water from the shower hits me face on and streams over the top of his head now bobbing slowly back and forth, his lips rubbing against the coarsely veined skin of my cock which stretches and bunches up with their contact. He firmly grips the back of my thighs with his strong hands and pulls me toward him, holding me tightly, as if there could ever be a world in which I might want to break free from him.

My hands rest on the back of his head, fingers intertwined among the strands of his red hair, now brown, slick with water. Steve begins to cough slightly and I draw him up, placing my hands beneath each of his arms, before he begins to choke. I then kneel on the hard porcelain floor of the tub and take him into my mouth, but instead of sucking, I blow as if I were inflating him like a balloon, eliciting a giggle I hear over the running water.

We then get down to the more serious business of cleaning each other, head to toe, the ritual preening of our animal forebears. Steve cleans out each of my ears with a soapy face cloth, as my mother used to do when she washed me in our tub growing up. Satisfied that he is done, we exchange places and he rinses me off under the shower head.

I step out first and reach for the green towel, which reminds me of the one that we used to dry each other the first time I spent the night here. Since I don't see another towel hanging on the rack, I hold it open to embrace Steve as he turns off the water and steps out toward me. After I have dried him, he signs for me to wait while he scurries out of the room. He returns with another towel, still

warm from the dryer, and wraps this around me, drying me quickly with its warmth and the friction of his rubbing it against my skin.

I wrap the towel around my waist and Steve, wearing nothing, leads me back into his bedroom. He pulls out an old sheet and spreads it across his floor as if we are to have a picnic right here among the stuffed animals that populate this forest. He motions for me to sit down in the middle of the sheet. I remove the towel, playfully toss it over his head and sit cross-legged on the sheet facing him.

He walks over to the desk in his room, pulls out the top drawer and reaches in for a comb and a pair of shears. I had almost forgotten why we were in the shower in the first place and I become tense, uncertain of Steve's skill as a barber. He must sense this as he hands me a mirror so that I can watch him in action and stop him if he cuts my hair too short.

As he combs out my hair and begins to cut its ends, I hold the mirror out in front of me so that I can see his face instead of my hair. He grimaces at me as I break his concentration. Strands of my moist hair start to fall around me, across my chest and down my back, tickling me as they tumble. I grin with pleasure at the prospect of another shower to wash these off my skin.

Every so often, Steve bends down and tenderly kisses the top of my head as if afraid that he has nicked my scalp with his shears. He comes around in front of me and I luxuriate in the long opportunity to study his naked body in front of me, the barely perceptible hairs around his belly button, the darker pubic hairs below them, the gentle curve of his thighs as they extend below his waist. I reach out and caress his thighs, but he brings the shears down and hits me on the wrist, not wanting to be distracted from the task at hand.

At last, he hands me the mirror again and I admire his handiwork. Steve has cut my hair a little shorter than is my wont, but it will grow back quickly and I know I'll think of him each time I look into the mirror until it does. I nod my head in approval and Steve grins in appreciation of my appraisal. I carefully stand and brush the hairs I can see off my chest to the sheet below. Steve signs for me to stay there, which I do as he leaves the room. He comes back pulling a vacuum cleaner behind him and I wonder why he would choose this moment to clean the sheet instead of just carrying it outside and spreading my hair out over his garden. Steve attaches the upholstery brush to the end of the tube and surprises me by drawing it across my back as the bristles tickle my skin.

I get his attention by waving at him and sign to him, "You think I'm a sofa?" He responds by bringing the brush across my face and we both laugh.

Steve points at the clock by his bed and gives me the "hurry up" sign. Steve never likes to be late for anything—something that rubbed my more laid-back nature the wrong way at first, but I'm

slowly adjusting. I like to think we're finding some common ground on this—we're no longer the first to arrive at events, but also not the last as I tended to be before I met Steve.

As we start to sort out the clothes on the floor and dress for dinner, Steve walks over to his chest of drawers and pulls out a fresh pair of white Calvin Klein briefs and tosses them over to me. I pull them over my head and position the openings for the legs over my eyes as if it were a mask. Steve begins to tire of my antics and signs "For my parents," and I understand he's interested in my modesty, remembering that I had no underwear on earlier.

We finish dressing and I ask Steve to turn around so that I might admire this man I adore. He is perfect, save one too many buttons fastened on his collared shirt, so I step up to him and open the top button to reveal more of his neck above a white V-neck T-shirt. He looks in the mirror and appears to agree with my decision. We head out the front door, but Steve remembers that he left something inside so I wait on the front porch for him. He returns with a bottle of sparkling cider from his refrigerator and I recall that he has told me that his parents do not drink.

I open the passenger door of my car for Steve and he notices a big bouquet of flowers on the seat. He says, "For meee?" and I sign, "No, for your parents," which brings a warm smile to his face as he nods his head. He puts them in his lap and along with his cider, we are ready for our visit. As we drive over, I find that I am looking forward to see Vivian again as my hours at TEDI have changed so that our schedules no longer coincide. I'm very concerned about meeting Steve's father in person, apprehensive from what I have heard about him from both Steve and Vivian and from our brief conversation over the intercom where they live. Steve has assured me that they'll both love me just as much as he does.

In front of the doors to the building that Steve's parents live in, I reflexively reach in front of Steve to the rack of buzzers to his left. But I catch myself in my new resolve to only help Steve when asked. This turns out to be the right decision as Steve pulls out his key chain, a large set that includes many keys to rooms hidden in the bowels of the city's National Monuments, and quickly distinguishes the one that fits into the door in front of us.

I follow Steve up two flights of stairs, rarely used by the building occupants, given the dust and trash that has accumulated on the various landings and steps. I first thought that Steve opted for stairs over elevators in the interest of keeping fit, but he later admitted to me that he fears elevators, unable as he is to use their intercom system if something was to go wrong. I told him that just hitting the buzzer should be enough, but old habits die hard and I'm beginning to enjoy our scavenger hunts in search of stairways in buildings we have never been in before. One time, we found a stairway only used by maintenance people in the old building in which the Department of Motor Vehicles is

located, when Steve went to renew his license. Our search was rewarded with a remote stairway made of marble and bronze—we pretended this was our home and we were ascending the stairs to our palatial bedroom with a canopy bed.

We find the door to 3C is already open a crack—I can see the stubby rectangle of light from inside the apartment cast onto the sisal welcome mat as we approach. Steve looks at me in the dim hallway light and takes my hand reassuringly as he must see my nervousness in my face. I haven't told Steve but this is the first time I've had dinner with the parents of a guy I'm going out with and I want to make sure I make a good impression. Remembering that I have already met his mother and knowing that Steve wouldn't have invited me unless he thought it would go well, I start to calm my fears. I take a deep breath and follow Steve inside, my offering of flowers shaking slightly in my hand.

My first impressions are of smells—Vivian's perfume that I recall from my time with her at TEDI, mixed with the warm aroma of poultry cooking in the oven. In their familiarity, these smells also help me feel at ease. Like eager bloodhounds, we follow the scents to the kitchen, where we find Steve's mother dressed in an apron, tossing a large salad. She reaches out and pulls Steve to her, the wooden runcible spoons clacking as she embraces him with them still in hand. Steve signs to her without voice and I pick up "How are you?" to which she replies with the sign for "Fine," but speaks it out loud for my benefit.

Steve then presents me to her, as if we had never met—at first, I wonder how he could have forgotten but then he signs "tease," with crooked index fingers. Vivian and I play along, fingerspelling our names to each other. Steve looks at me and shakes his head as if I have misspelled a letter in my name. He takes his pinky and forms it into the letter 'J' and draws it around his face and then signs "nice"—this would be the sign for "handsome" if he had used his index finger instead of his pinky, so I wonder if this is just a sign I haven't learned yet. Vivian chimes in, "Steve has just given you a sign-name, John. Everyone in the Deaf Community gets one at some point growing up—it's usually a play on a personality trait that the deaf person giving the name thinks distinguishes that person. Steve gave me one a long time ago—it's the letter 'V' used with the sign for "queen"—I guess he thinks I'm royalty!"

I know that Steve has chosen just this moment to make me feel more at home among his family and I hug him tightly with this symbolic membership into the Deaf Community. I hand Vivian the flowers I brought which she immediately puts in a large vase filled with water.

It's time to meet Steve's father, so Steve leads me back out into the hallway and down to the room at the end, which is dark, except for gray shifting lights that must come from a TV in the room. We step inside and as my eyes become adjusted to the light, I see that the similarity between Steve

and his father that I noticed in the picture of him in Steve's den is even more striking in person. The red hair, the freckles scattered about his face, the cast of his nose set against the plane of his cheek, all make me smile thinking now there are two men in the world whose features I am in love with. The similarity ends at the face, though, as Mr. Dawson wields a large, low riding belly—a combination of Vivian's cooking and a sedentary lifestyle no doubt.

Steve turns on the lamp by his father's recliner in order to see him better. Steve speaks "Hi, Dad," and I guess that his father has not taken the trouble to learn sign or, like the TTY, chooses not to use it if he has. Mr. Dawson stands with some effort, and shakes his son's hand firmly. He turns to me and reaches out his hand and says, "You must be John. Please call me Stephen, everyone does."

Like Vivian in the kitchen earlier, I respond with voice and with sign, "It is nice to meet you," and fingerspell "Stephen" to let Steve know that his father has granted me the liberty to call him by his first name. I assume the formality of "Stephen" is to distinguish him from his son and wonder if my Steve is a "junior" to his father as "senior."

"So what are Gallaudet's prospects for the fall?" Stephen asks of Steve, enunciating each word carefully to assist Steve in the task of reading his lips. I'm tempted to interpret to make it easier for Steve to understand, but know this is not my place.

I would have trouble interpreting anyway, as I don't follow the question. Steve seems to, though, and replies slowly in his voice devoid of modulation, "Pretty good. We have some large linebackers returning for their senior year." As Steve and his father talk, I look behind Mr. Dawson and see a large glass display case full of medals and stripes that must date back to his military service. Steve never told me that his father was in the military and I guess that from his age, these awards must be from the Korean War. When they are finished speaking, I point to the case and ask Stephen about them.

His face lights up, as I see it reflected in the glass of his case of medals. As Stephen reminisces about the skirmishes fought and battles won, I wonder if he has ever shared these stories with Steve and wish that even now Steve could hear them instead of standing passively behind us. I begin to feel awkward isolating Steve in this way, even if Mr. Dawson does not, so I break away and sign "toilet" to Steve who leads me out of the room and back down the hallway.

After Steve points to the door to the small bathroom, I tug at him to join me inside. We crowd together in the narrow space, barely enough room to sign between us. Steve asks me if I need to pee, but I sign, "No, I just wanted to talk to you in here." I would add "in private," but don't know that sign. Still, Steve nods in understanding.

"Why?" Steve signs back.

“Why does your father not sign?”

Steve thinks for a minute and signs slowly using simple words so that I might understand. “I think he likes to believe that I am not deaf, just like I am not gay. He avoids anything that reminds him of that. He also thinks that I would be more successful in the hearing world if I could speak and read lips better, so that's how he communicates with me.”

I suppose my presence here for dinner is also an unpleasant reminder to Stephen that his only son is in love with another man. Just when I was starting to feel comfortable here, I'm back on edge. I sign back to Steve, “I think you are successful. You have a wonderful job and a wonderful boyfriend. What more do you need?”

Steve signs back “Nothing” and then signs my sign-name again, my initial ‘J’ with the sign for “handsome.” I ask him if he has a sign-name and he replies, “Of course,” and signs the initial ‘S’ multiple times over his right cheek, and I guess that a deaf friend has picked out his freckles as his distinguishing trait. Steve begins to worry his parents will notice us in here together and excuses himself. A minute later, I flush the empty toilet in case his parents are listening and follow him out.

I find Steve back in the kitchen, helping his mother carry dinner to the table. There is a roast chicken on a large platter, garnished with roasted root vegetables and sprigs of thyme. The wonderful aroma reminds me of dinners with Chris, and I become nostalgic about our meals together, lit by flickering candlelight. But I break out of my reverie as Vivian hands me the large bowl of salad to carry out to the table.

As I take in the table set for four, I'm disappointed not to see my flowers displayed in the center, but then remember Christine's removal of the centerpiece at the restaurant so that we could see each other clearly. The chicken instead is placed in the middle of the table and we take our seats on either side of it. As Stephen reaches toward it, I expect him to carve, but he reaches past it and takes my left hand into his right. We all join hands and Stephen closes his eyes and begins to pray. Steve stares at him, intent to pick up the words of his prayer. I'm again made uncomfortable by this lack of regard for Steve's impairment. But Steve must know this prayer from heart and nods as if to also give thanks to a generous and gracious God.

Then Stephen does begin to carve the chicken and offers me the first choice of white or dark meat. I opt for the breast and hold out my plate for a hearty portion. The rest is tacitly understood—Vivian gets a leg and thigh and Steve gets white meat like me. I help myself to the salad and vegetables and begin eating this delicious meal. After a few bites, I find I'm aware of the quiet around me and pause to watch the others eat to see if anyone will break the silence.

Vivian looks up from her plate to me and says, “Looks like you’ve gotten a haircut since I’ve last seen you, John. It becomes you.” She does not sign as she speaks and I follow what must be Stephen’s rule at the table.

“Thank you. Steve cut it just before we got here. It’s a little shorter than I usually have it cut, but the price was right.” With Steve to my right, I imagine he understood none of this, so I sign ‘I-L-Y’ with my right hand under the table just for him. He puts his hand on my thigh, squeezing it tightly.

Stephen looks at my hair as if he is just seeing it for the first time. He then turns to Steve and asks him how his job is going. “I heard that there were goin’ to be some layoffs at the Park Service and I was concerned whether your job was secure,” he says.

Steve surprises us all by responding, “Yes. I was just told this morning that my position will be eliminated in two weeks and that there is no other opening for me there.” I can’t believe we spent so much time together getting ready for tonight and he said nothing about this.

Vivian seems to hope she has misunderstood what Steve says and signs “Again,” despite Stephen’s unspoken prohibition of signing at the table.

Steve then signs very rapidly, so quickly that I pick up none of what he says. Mr. Dawson brings his fork and knife firmly down against the table and says that if Steve has something to say, he can speak it out loud so that all of us can understand him. Vivian glares at him, but says nothing—a futile fight she has no doubt given up hope of winning long ago. Steve gets up from the table, his anger barely contained in his measured motions, and gives his father a glassy stare. Stephen calls out to his son, “So let’s see what other jobs that fancy education has prepared you for,” but Steve’s back is turned to him and in the reality which is Steve’s world, these words have not been spoken. Steve leaves the room, leaving me with his parents who go back to their meals as if nothing extraordinary has happened. I have no idea where Steve has gone, so I remain and join them finishing this silent meal.

Mr. Dawson leaves the table after he finishes and says nothing as he retreats to his den. The drone from the TV announces his return to a world that he can control and feels more comfortable within. Vivian and I clear the table and she tells me in a low voice that Steve is in his bedroom and directs me to it. I take her hand and ask her if I can stay and help her clean up, but she pulls away and tells me that Steve needs me more than she does right now.

Lying face down on his bed, Steve sobs into his pillow. He feels stupid that he thought that this evening with his father would be different from any other. He turns his head slightly, perhaps to find comfort in the familiar surroundings of his childhood. His eyes settle on his train set—he remembers how he and his dad set it up one Christmas morning, sprinkling snow on the make-believe town to make up for the unseasonably warm weather outside.

Steve loved to watch the train go over bridges and slip into tunnels, completely under his control. He would turn the dial as far as he could, in love with sheer speed. He imagined himself as the conductor of the train, watching the town and then its rural suburbs pass by in a blinding blur. He'd hit the red button on the controls, which would release a puff of smoke through the engine's smokestack along with a high-pitched whistle to warn townspeople and animals alike of his approach.

When he was older, Steve left the train set behind, but never lost his love for going fast. At fifteen, an older boy at his high school, Billy Preston, asked him if he'd like to skip school later in the week and head out to a nearby amusement park. Billy had just received his license and a used motorcycle for his birthday. All the students would admire the bike as they passed by it in the parking lot near where the buses left them off in the morning.

Billy was by his bike that morning when Steve got off the bus. Steve walked over to him and got up on the bike behind him, putting his arms around his waist and his thighs against the steel of the bike, still warm from Billy riding it to school. Billy put on a helmet, strapping it beneath his chin. Steve asked Billy for one for him to wear. Billy told him he only had the one helmet and he needed to wear it.

"What, are you afraid?" Billy asked Steve.

"No, I'm not afraid," Steve responded, trying to hide the fear in his voice.

At the park, they rode only one ride all day, the largest and fastest roller coaster there. As soon as they got out of the first car at the end of one ride, they would race each other to the end of the line to wait to get on it again. Steve's heart pumped so fast and hard as they held their arms up over their heads going down that first deep descent, he thought his heart had moved all the way up into his throat.

Late in the afternoon, they decided they should leave so as not to make their parents suspicious of their whereabouts. Billy drove faster than he should, still intoxicated by the speed of the roller coaster. Steve was the first to notice shards of broken glass in their lane of the highway ahead, and tapped Billy on the shoulder to get his attention to point them out. Billy finally saw them as well and swerved to their right to avoid them, into the lane of a car attempting to pass them. Billy's scream

along with the screeching breaks of the car that hit them were the last sounds that he would ever hear.

* * *

When I get to Steve's bedroom, the door is closed. Before I catch myself, I have knocked on the door to get his attention. Then I just open it slightly and stick in only my arm, signing 'I-L-Y.' I hear Steve come to the door and take my hand into his. He brings my hand up to his mouth, and I feel the sweet warmth and moisture of his lips on the back of my hand. I cannot imagine a clearer sign of welcome and I enter his room. Steve's room is almost a carbon copy of the one in Mount Pleasant, with the notable exception of his menagerie of stuffed animals. In their place is a train set sitting on a large table to the left, complete with bridges and buildings covered in a light dusting of confectioners' snow. Small figurines inhabit this miniature town, women in shawls and men in caps gaze into windows tinged with gold—a promise of warmth waits inside. Various train cars are coupled together and sit waiting for a conductor to bring them to life. I have a feeling they will have a long time to wait.

Steve's eyes are red and swollen. He signs "I'm sorry" to me, but I shake my head and take his hands lest he continue such nonsense. I run my hand through his hair and grab him by his shoulders, trying to knead away his cares. He leans forward and kisses me on the forehead.

"My dad is such an asshole," Steve signs to me, shaking his head. I actually learned the sign for "asshole," an index finger rotated around the inside of a hand formed like the letter 'O,' not from Steve, but from watching one of the students sign it in *Children of a Lesser God*. It's not hard to figure out how the sign was chosen.

"Remember when you told me that you thought I was successful? A wonderful job and a wonderful boyfriend? What do you think of me now?" Steve continues.

"Well, one out of two's not bad," I reply, trying to get him to smile, at least just a little. Steve will have none of it, though, so I take a more serious tack.

"My father doesn't accept me either, Steve. I know how hard it is."

"How did you come out to him?" Steve asks.

I start to tell the story, signing that it started when I was twelve years old, but get confused with the signs. Steve tries to follow, but I can tell he does not understand. In my frustration, I just throw up my hands.

Steve gets an idea and walks over to his train set. He lifts three figurines from the small town—a man, a woman and a young boy. He sets them down in the middle of the oval braided rug by his bed and motions for me to join him on the floor.

He picks up the woman and signs “mother.” The man is “father” and for the young boy, he points at me and signs “cute.” Then I understand that he is asking me to portray my coming out with these characters.

I pick out another boy from the train set—I sign “friend” and fingerspell “M-A-R-K.” Then I pick up a tree and a cow, signing “my brother” for the cow. Steve asks me what the tree represents. “Just a tree,” I respond.

I simulate throwing a baseball between Mark and me. We are very happy. We go behind the tree and kiss. I move the cow around the side of the tree to represent my brother, who sees us kissing. We don’t see him and continue to kiss. Joe runs home to tell my parents the news.

I come home later in the afternoon. My parents stand side by side as I come into the house. I sign the exact words my father spoke, words forever etched in my memory.

“John, are you a homosexual?”

“What?”

“Your brother told us that he saw you kissing another boy in the schoolyard. Is that true?”

I glare at Joe, who I’ve positioned between my parents but behind them a few steps.

My father repeats his question. “Son, did you hear me? I asked you if what Joe has told us is true. I want an answer and I want it now.”

I know there is no use in lying. “Yes, Dad. I did kiss Mark.”

I turn my mother to face my father. “Harold, they’re just kids. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Agnes, leave this to me. John, I’m just going to say this one time, so listen carefully. I’m not going to have some faggot for a son. We are going to call this boy’s parents and I want you to promise that you will never see him again.”

I trace small tears coming from the eyes on the face of the young boy. I wish I could wipe the silly grin off the figure’s face.

“Harold, you’re scaring him,” my mother says.

My father remains firm. “Do you promise?”

I let out a muffled, “Yes.”

“What was that?”

“Yes,” a little louder. “Yes, sir.”

“Alright son, now go upstairs. There’ll be no dinner for you tonight—gives you plenty of time to think about what you have done.”

I move the figurines of my parents away, leaving the cow, who laughs at the sight of me.

I sign “finish” to Steve, hoping he understood at least the highlights of my story. From the fresh tears on his face, I know that he has. He holds me tightly and we are quiet, imagining a world in which fathers accept their sons no matter what the cost.

He leads me out of his room back to the kitchen where his mother is putting up the leftovers from dinner. Vivian hugs her son—Steve signs “We must leave.” She nods her head in understanding and then hugs me and thanks me for coming and for the beautiful flowers. As we leave, I am the only one who turns back down the hallway to see the flickering gray light in Stephen's den.

XIV. The Barbecue

Washington has settled into its season of stifling heat and humidity like an old Victorian matron lowering herself into a commodious chair, the layers of fabric in folds billowing in her lap, the creases of her face mapped onto pancake makeup that buckles above her perspiration.

My parents have been back from Florida almost a month now, long enough for them to begin plans for their return. I'm beginning to wonder why they come back at all—certainly it can be no warmer there than here right now—but I think my father looks forward to the sense of accomplishment he gets as he addresses the list of exigencies their summer house annually presents him. Storm windows are replaced with screens, fans are brought out of storage to be strategically placed throughout the house, and the old wooden dinghy is exhumed from the basement, “just in case” Joe or I come up and want to catch some stone crabs from the bay whose waters lap the shore two blocks from the house.

My mother has her own set routine when she returns—which is to reestablish contact with her network of friends and reenter the stream of news that flows through the neighborhood. These items range from the personal (“Did you know that June saw Dr. Shapiro with his receptionist at the bar at The Imperial Palace?”) to the political (“*Finally*, the town meeting passed a law so that owners will have to clean up after their dogs on the sidewalks.”) My father long ago learned how to tune out Agnes as she passed on these tidbits in the evening, after he had settled down to watch the Orioles on TV and she had pulled out the most recent sweater she was knitting for one of her grandchildren. But I imagine there's some comfort to the sound of her voice as it washes over him, knowing it holds no more substance than the store-bought lemon meringue pie she serves after dinner.

After my father is content that he has prepared the house for summer occupancy, it is time for the family barbecue. This is the occasion for all of the Lathrops to gather and officially welcome my parents home. In prior years, these have been dreadful affairs, attended by distant cousins, aunts and uncles I see only this one time all year, and who to a person wonder when such a nice guy like me will ever get married. There's only one uncle on my father's side, my flamboyant Uncle Charlie, who himself has never married, that seems to be a kindred spirit, though neither of us has ever dared to speak of it. Instead, we parry and feint about the topic like boxers in the ring, taunting the other to

strike first with the frank admission. Last year, Uncle Charlie told me about a recent trip he took to Key West. I asked him where he had stayed, thinking if I could find the name of his hotel in my Damron guide, I would have him on the ropes. But when he told me he stayed at the Hampton Inn just outside of town on my father's recommendation, I knew our match would continue for at least another year.

My mother called to invite me to the barbecue not long after they got back, picking a date far enough in the future to give Harold the time he would need to prepare. She tentatively prodded me about whether I might finally be bringing someone this year, hopeful that I was still dating the man she thought would become a president of a university.

"Yes, I'll be bringing Steve along. Thank you for inviting him."

"Oh, certainly sweetheart. We can't wait to meet him. Did he get that job he was looking for?"

"Umm, no, Mom, he didn't. He's still looking." Steve *has* been looking for work ever since he was let go from the Park Service, but, as a deaf man, his options are unfortunately limited.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Maybe Harold knows someone from the University of Maryland who could get him into administration." Though my father was a student at the university, he did not graduate when his basketball scholarship was revoked after a freak accident on the court. He still walks with a slight limp and hasn't played the game since. "I know it's nothing like being the president, but who knows what may open up for him after a couple of years there."

I start to feel guilty leading my mother on like this, but I don't want to give my family the time to prepare to be disappointed yet again in the way I have lived my life. I want them to meet Steve on his terms, without fear or preconceptions, and give him the chance to win them over as he did me.

* * *

At 11:30, I hear a horn honk outside my house and am surprised to see Steve's car in front. Though this is exactly when he said he would arrive, I think this is the first time Steve has ever tried the horn of his car and may just want to see if it works if I come out. As I open the front door, Steve steps out of his car and looks me over like a ravenous lion ready to devour his prey. His lips purse into a whistle, and although no sound comes out of his mouth, I am flattered all the same. He meets me on the sidewalk and rubs my shoulders, revealed beneath a black muscle shirt I bought last week just for this occasion. Steve is dressed more conservatively—a short sleeve madras shirt that hangs

out over his shorts, woven with threads of many different colors, and a blue baseball cap with the letter 'G' emblazoned on it. We kiss briefly, and my lips pick up something my eyes did not—a noticeable blonde stubble above his upper lip. I point to the incipient mustache and make the sign for “milk” as a question. He smiles, says “Nooo” and opens the passenger door for me.

As Steve starts to pull away from the curb, I hook my left hand around his thigh out of habit. This is more difficult to do in his car than mine, given that Steve drives a standard and has to move my hand away each time before he shifts. He is also wary of anything that would take his attention away from the road. But I persevere and my hand is finally allowed to stay in place. We pass fields of corn, ears soon ready for harvest, and vegetable stands filled with brightly-colored carrots, peppers and tomatoes. We stop at one of these and buy some summer squash and zucchini in the hopes my father might have something to grill other than just red meat.

As we pull into my parents' driveway, their Irish Setter, Rex, bounds out to greet us from behind the holly bushes. He zeroes in on Steve who is hunched down with his arms open wide. Rex almost knocks him down in the impact and, as his face is lapped, I realize that Steve has made his first friend of the afternoon. I hope he's as successful with the rest of my family, but know they will be a much harder sell.

Instead of going directly into the house, we follow the scent of the grill to the backyard, where we find my father tending to the coals. My father is a tall man, “tall as a drink of water,” my grandmother would say, and thick-wristed from his many years working at a shipyard as I was growing up. But the accumulation of years has taken their toll on him, more noticeable to me as I only see him now during the summers. His hair, once black like mine, now is an ashy gray, cut short against his scalp, and missing completely from a wide swath running along the top of his head. Broad shoulders once held back adding to the perception of his height, are now hunched forward, forcing him into a slight stoop that accentuates his limp from his college days. He wears a red Terrapin T-shirt that once hung loosely but now fits snugly around his waist, the effect of his weakness for Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, a can of which he balances in one hand while poking at the coals with the other. One thing he has not lost, though, is his strong voice, which booms out toward Steve and me as we approach.

“Hi, son. Damn good to see you,” placing the beer down as he reaches out to shake my hand. “I didn't expect you so early—you're the first to arrive.” My punctuality is just one of a number of things that have changed about me since we last saw one another.

“Hi, Dad. This is my friend, Steve.” Steve steps forward and gives my father a firm handshake and looks directly into his eyes.

“Pleased to meet you,” my father replies. “Oh, and I see you’ve met Rex Hiberniae,” as the dog sidles up to Steve and pokes his muzzle into Steve’s open hand. I had long forgotten Rex’s formal name, one my father got from watching a dog show on TV and was the name of the winning Irish Setter. I quickly fingerspell “REX” to Steve with my left hand down at my waist so my Dad won’t notice.

Steve reaches down to the dog and says, “Hi Rex. Hi boy,” in a voice that causes my father to glance quizzically at him but not to say anything.

Instead he tells me, “Your mother is inside, John. Why don’t you go in and see if she needs a hand while your friend and I get to know each other a little better.”

I wonder if my mother has primed him to help Steve with a job at his alma mater, and if he wishes to discuss this with Steve, I’m touched. But Steve would wonder why I was just leaving him here if I went inside alone and he would also have a difficult time communicating with my father. I decide this is as good a time as any to break the news. “That’s fine, Dad, but you need to know that Steve is deaf. He can read lips some of the time and can speak okay, but it might be best for me to stay to make sure you both understand each other.” I sign the same to Steve as my father’s jaw goes slack and he just stares at me as if I’d told him that Steve was an alien from another planet.

“What do you mean, he is deaf? And when did you learn how to damn sign? How could he ever expect to be the damn president of any fucking university like that?”

It’s the last question that really gets to me, talking about Steve as if he is not even there, so I respond to that first. “I never told Mom that Steve was trying to get that kind of job—Joe told her that after I told him I was meeting Steve at a demonstration to protest the selection of a hearing person as president of Gallaudet University.”

Steve looks at us, concerned that my father and I appear to be upset. He must’ve been able to pick up a few of my father’s words as he signs to me, “You told him I was deaf, right?”

As I shake my head no, I want to explain to Steve why I felt it was important that my parents not know he was deaf until they met him. My father jumps in, “Is this some type of damn joke you’re playing on us, John? This is just like you to want to embarrass us in front of all of your relatives.”

I’m about to respond, but we are joined by two cousins of mine, teenaged twins named Jessica and Jeannie, and I can never tell them apart. They are used to this though and greet us by telling us their names. Jeannie asks Steve what his name is, but I answer for him and introduce Steve as a friend of mine. After an awkward silence, I tell them that we were just about to head inside to see if my mother needed help. I take Steve’s hand and start to lead him away under the cold glare of my father.

Steve is not willing to give up so easily and asks me to translate for my father. As he begins to sign, the twins look on in amazement and one whispers to the other, “I think they’re communicating in sign language,” as if none of us can hear them. I nod my head, yes, and return my attention to my father to tell him that Steve would like to say something to him.

“Mr. Lathrop,” Steve begins slowly to give me a chance to keep up with him, “you may never have met a deaf person before, but I can assure you that I can do anything you can do but hear. You wondered if I could be president of a university, and though I am not qualified to do that myself, it is not because I am deaf. In fact, a deaf man, Dr. I. King Jordan, was just selected as president of Gallaudet. Your son means a lot to me and has been a good friend since we have met. I would appreciate your respect for me and for our relationship.”

As I say these words to my father, words that I would never have been bold enough to speak to him on my own, I wonder if I should’ve confronted Steve’s father in a similar manner. I certainly had the opportunity to do so when Steve left the dinner table at his parents’ house, and I had the additional advantage of being able to speak out loud. I take pride in Steve’s courage and love him more now than I ever had.

My father is caught not knowing what to say—I have never seen him at odds like this before. The twins look on intently, caught up in the drama of the moment though they can hardly understand the context.

“Well, I never...” my Dad says under his breath in words even I can barely hear. Then he seems to reconsider and says more loudly, looking directly at Steve, “Yes. I read about the protest at Gallaudet in the papers down in Florida. You students achieved something remarkable then and I should learn from your example.”

Now *my* jaw goes slack—Steve looks to me though in confusion, not following what my father just said. But it’s my Dad who prompts me, “Sign for him, John,” and I do a rough translation ending with “He is very proud of you,” words my father has never directed to me, though I have yearned for them so. Steve and my Dad shake hands again and the twins coo in delight. A glance toward Steve, and he and I decide to head inside, riding this wave of good feeling. My dad nods to me as we leave.

Unlike the apartment that Steve grew up in, this house holds no childhood memories for me, no room kept up as my bedroom as if I still lived here as a child. My parents sold my childhood home to help pay for the condo down in Sun City. This home by the bay, this belonged to my Aunt Anita, a spinster who willed it to her sole remaining relative, my mother, when she died. I only remember being here a few times while my aunt was alive. I found it to be a sterile place, couches and chairs

covered with protective doilies, and delicate glass figurines on end tables not to be touched by stubby fingers, clumsy and likely to leave smudges.

The house still has an unlived-in air about it, shuttered as it is now for nine months out of the year. I recognize magazines on the coffee table from last year, though the covers advertise stories that are timeless in their appeal. “Take this TEN MINUTE sex quiz,” “If you’re not satisfying YOUR MAN, someone else IS,” and “How to bring those OLD FASHIONS up-to-date,” adorn the covers of old copies of *Cosmo*, *Women’s Day* and *Marie Claire* magazines, favorites of my mother. Beneath the table, dust has long accumulated and I think that there wouldn’t be much interest in something like “Clean YOUR HOUSE from top to bottom,” to the readers of these magazines.

As we head from the living room into the kitchen, we’re intercepted by my nephews, Jacob and Liam, as they run by us with whoops and shouts. They’re dressed as Indians, complete with war paint and feathered head-bands. Steve turns to try to catch one of them, putting his hand into the shape of a gun, and follows them out the back door. I was hoping to take this opportunity to introduce him to my mother, but it might be best for me to see her on my own first and let Steve meet her later.

In the kitchen, I find my mother in front of the sink with my sister-in-law Patricia, each wielding a partially-peeled vegetable to emphasize a point they are making. I overhear my mother say, “The boys are growing up so quickly!” waving a carrot.

Patricia motions a cucumber up and down as she replies, “I know. Just as soon as I buy them clothes, they outgrow them.”

My mother sees me first, and spreads her arms open wide and says, “Johnny!” as she hugs me tightly. Patricia is less cordial and just says, “Hello, John,” as she returns to the task of peeling the cucumber over the sink.

“Let me get a good look at you,” my mother says and holds me out to arm’s length. “You look like you’re eating well,” she says with a wry smile and I slightly blush with the attention. “So how are you? Did you bring your friend with you?”

“I’m fine, Mom. Yes, Steve was just here. I think he’s out back playing with the boys.” Patricia’s ears perk up in alert with the notion of a man I am dating spending time with her children. She quickly wipes her hands dry on a dish towel and excuses herself to go find them on the pretense that one of them needs to take some medication. I continue peeling the cucumber she left behind and my mother returns to the carrots at my side.

“So what’re we making here, Mom?”

“A big salad. Your dad’s cholesterol is pretty high and his doctor told him he has to eat more vegetables.”

I remember the squash I left in the car, but my mother tells me I can get it later. “I’ll just cut them into slices and sprinkle some olive oil and salt on them for Harold to grill,” she tells me.

“Mom, I have some news.”

“Oh really, Johnny? What’s that? It’s not your job is it?”

“No, it’s about Steve. He really isn’t trying to become the president of a university.”

“Oh, did I misunderstand you, sweetheart?”

“I never said that he was. You heard that from Joe. I told him I was going to a protest and would meet Steve there, but that’s what the protest was about.”

My mother looks a little bewildered and I can tell she doesn’t really understand. “So what does Steve do, then?”

“Actually, he *is* looking for work. He used to work for the Park Service conducting tours, but was let go a couple of months ago, when they had to cut their budget. He’s been having a hard time finding work because he’s deaf, even though he has a college degree.”

“He’s what?” She stops peeling the carrot and looks at me in the hope she might understand me better.

“Steve is deaf, Mom. He lost his hearing in an accident when he was fifteen.”

“Really? Can you talk to him?”

“At first, Steve had a friend who helped us communicate. We also wrote down things we wanted to say to each other.” I recall fondly the notebook in Steve’s bedroom with the clown and balloons on the cover and leaves taped to the pages within. “Since then, he’s taught me some sign language. I’m also taking a class at Gallaudet to learn more.”

My mother, bless her heart, tries to take in all of this information, but finds it overwhelming. “And he’s out playing with the boys now?” is all she can ask.

“I think so. Maybe I should go find him.”

“Yes, dear, go ahead,” and I leave my Mom to her salad and the solitude of her thoughts.

I head out the front door of the house, thinking I will get the squash from the car first. Rex greets me again and follows eagerly along. As I get to Steve’s car, I notice that the trunk is popped open. I look in the trunk and see lots of sports equipment inside—a soccer ball, a baseball bat and hockey skates lying on top—and I close the trunk thinking it came open by accident. I grab the paper bag of vegetables from the front seat and bring it back inside to the kitchen. My Mom is talking to my Uncle Charlie, this year dressed in a loud Hawaiian print shirt. He shoots me a sly

wink as I lay the squash on the counter. This may be the year we come out to each other, but not right now as I continue out the back door of the house.

The backyard is now full of my relations, many sitting at a bench beneath a tarp my father has stretched between two trees for shade. I look for Steve among these familiar faces, but don't see him. I do see one of the twins nearby, but have forgotten who this one is wearing the red and white checkerboard blouse.

"Oh, hi," I say to Jessica or Jeannie.

"Hi, John. Pretty hot out here, huh?"

"Yes, it is. You haven't seen my friend Steve around here lately, have you?"

She thinks for a moment and then says, "I think I saw him with your nephews and they seemed to be heading toward the water."

I can just imagine what Patricia would think if she found the three of them by the shore. I thank Jeannie or Jessica and sprint the two blocks to the end of the street. Before I see the water, I notice the same dragon kite in the air that Steve flew by the Washington Monument the day we met. I think this can't be a coincidence and as I rise over the sandy knoll that leads down to the shore, I see Liam holding the string to the kite with Steve helping him to guide it, standing behind him. Jacob is running beneath the kite along the shore, stopping and starting, arms in the air, as if to catch it if it were to fall from the sky. When he sees me, Jacob calls out, "Can I try now, Uncle Johnny?" I tell him okay, and lead him to Steve, who helps Liam transfer the reins to his brother.

I sign to Steve, "I want my turn next," and we both laugh. As the kite flies back toward the street away from the shore, I'm surprised to see my father standing on the knoll, staring up into the sky. He then looks down at me and I wonder if he is remembering how we used to do this so many years ago. I touch Steve on the shoulder and point out my father to him. Steve nods in understanding. I walk up to my Dad and silently lead him down to where Steve and Jacob are. Steve reaches over and takes the string from Jacob's hands and gives it to my Dad. He fumbles with the string at first, but soon regains his feel for the kite and holds the string out high above his head. The kite responds to his command and soars mightily skyward. Over time, my Dad's shoulders square out—he seems to have proudly regained the height once lost. I put my arms around his waist and do not want to let go.

As my father brings my nephews back to the house, Steve and I sit down on the shore, take off our shoes and dig into the coarse sand with our toes. The rays of the setting sun dance off the light chop of the bay. I hear the ‘caw’ of a distant gull and wonder what it would be like to not have sounds like this in my life. I reach over to pull Steve toward me, but he seems distracted in thought and continues to stare out across the open water.

“What’s up?” I ask him.

“I wish you had told your parents that I was deaf before we came.”

“I did that for you. I didn’t want them to get all these fears in their head about what you’d be like or how they would communicate with you.”

“Don’t you think I know how to handle that by now? Is it really about me or is it about your fear of what they’d think of you?”

“No,” I start and then hesitate. “I suppose I was afraid that they would be disappointed in whom I chose to go out with.”

“Are you ashamed of me?”

“No, of course not. Ever since I was young, I felt my parents, particularly my father, judged me because of who I was—something I had no control over.”

“It’s time to grow up, John.” I notice this time he fingerspells my name instead of using my sign-name. “Live the life you wish to, date the man you wish to date, and stop looking to your family for affirmation for the choices that you make. Life is full of risks. You can’t live your life in fear of how people will judge you for following your dreams.”

Who would’ve believed a man who could speak no words could speak so clearly to my heart? “One thing I know is that I love being with you and I’m glad you’re here with me today.”

“I am too, John,” now using my sign-name. “Let’s go meet your mother. And I hear at these barbecues there tends to be some food around. I’m famished!”

The sign for “famished” is a lot like the sign for “horny” and I decide I could take it either way.

Steve and I return to my parent’s backyard. My dad has lit tiki torches and some citronella candles to ward off the mosquitoes. We both load up our plates with cheeseburgers, ribs, salad and corn on the cob. I don’t see our squash—either it’s still in the kitchen or my relatives finished it off earlier.

I look for my mother to introduce her to Steve but don’t see her outside in the growing dusk. We head back inside to the kitchen, balancing our plates in one hand and one of my father’s PBR beers in the other. She’s exactly where we left her hours ago, this time cleaning dishes over the sink.

The kitchen buzzes with activity around her—my father and Uncle Charlie are playing cards against their sister, Aunt Mildred, and her husband Phillip.

“You can’t meld with only 160 points when you’re over 5,000,” my father tells my aunt.

“Oh, Harry. You’re always such a stickler for the rules,” she teases him. My Aunt Mildred, a forceful woman, is the only person my father begrudgingly allows to call him by this name.

“Either you play the damn game correctly or you don’t play it at all,” words I’ve heard many times growing up.

Steve and I set our plates down on the counter and I bring him over to my mother.

“Mom, this is Steve.” I turn to Steve and sign, “Steve, this is my mother, Agnes.”

My mother tentatively reaches out her hand and Steve takes it, saying “Very nice to meet you,” in a clear voice.

My mother turns to me, “I thought you said he was deaf?”

“I did, Mom. Steve was hearing into his teens and does a good job of reading lips and speaking.”

“Oh, I see,” she says, but I’m not completely sure that she does. “Did you boys get enough to eat?”

Steve rubs his stomach and points to the plates we left on the counter.

“So where’s Patricia?” I ask her.

“She had to leave. One of the boys got a mosquito bite and she wanted to get him home to put something on it. We had some antiseptic here, but she wanted something stronger.”

Typical, I think. Steve and I return to our plates and carry them over to the card game to look on. My father looks up and motions for me to come over to him. He whispers to me not to let Steve give any secret signs of the cards he’s holding to my aunt and uncle. I look over to Steve who has a rib in one hand and his plate in the other and think that highly unlikely.

After a few minutes, Steve fingerspells ‘canasta’ to me and I’m surprised that he recognizes the game. My Uncle Charlie intently watches our interchange, so much so my father has to get his attention when it’s his turn to draw a card.

At the end of the hand, Uncle Charlie stands and says, “Harold, you deserve a better partner than me. Lady Luck just ain’t on my side tonight.”

“Stay, Charlie,” my father exhorts him. “It’s just a matter of time before you get a decent hand.”

“No, I’ve had enough. You’ve got to find yourself another partner.”

“Who the hell else around here knows how to play?”

Steve looks over to me and I believe he was able to pick up some of what my uncle was saying. I nod my head to him. He looks at my father and points to himself and then the empty chair. My father reaches out his hand and sweeps it toward the open chair in welcome. As Steve goes to sit down, my uncle stands next to me and whispers, "Your mother told me Steve was deaf. But she didn't tell me he was so *cute*. I heartily approve."

I smile and am glad that we have finally reached an understanding.

The four of them play long into the evening. Instead of watching the game, I focus on Steve's face, intent on each card that is played. Steve and my father exchange cards on each other's melds, each seeming to find the one card the other was looking for to complete their canastas. Eventually, I lose interest and stroll away from the table to visit with my mother who is now out in the screened-in porch, sipping a glass of white wine with one of her neighbors. I begin to tell them more about Steve and our times together, but they seem anxious to return to their neighborhood gossip. I return to the kitchen ready to leave and point to my watch when Steve looks up between hands.

My father notices me as well and decides it's time to tally up the score. "Let's see 2,000 for four natural canastas, 900 for three mixed canastas, 800 for all the red threes...I think that puts us over the top, my friend," my dad beams as he shows Steve the final result.

"That's quite a ringer you found there, Harold," my Uncle Phillip says and then smiles at Steve. Steve seems very content and collects all of the cards and puts them into the color-coded boxes. He excuses himself, signing 'toilet' to me, a 'T' shaken quickly from side to side.

My dad puts his arm around my shoulders as Steve leaves the room. "John, you are just full of surprises aren't you? I hope you can bring Steve back later in the summer. I fixed up the dinghy and I bet you boys would just love to go out and fish for some crabs."

Even though I've never been one for fishing, I think I would look forward to that too.

XV. *The Hearing*

Washington's seasons are of disproportionate length—spring and fall are maddeningly fleeting, while summer and winter seem interminably long. This summer began with the advent of the cherry blossoms the last week of March and now ends abruptly in mid-October with the first killing frost. The short cold spell sends shoppers scurrying to Woodie's for hats and gloves and squirrels in search of acorns to last through the winter.

Though Steve seems to like all sports, with fall's arrival, it is clear that his favorite is football. He's particularly proud of a deaf player by the name of Kenny Walker, an All-American for the University of Nebraska. I tease him about his interest in these muscular men in tight pants as we watch the professional games on TV at my house one Sunday afternoon. But he demurs and tells me that he admires the players because "they are modern-day gladiators who personify the human ideal."

"Yes, I know," I sign with a leer in my eye, but Steve turns back to the TV, and I know this is one of those times he wishes that I could be more serious. I attribute his comment about gladiators to the movie 'Ben Hur' he brought over for us to watch together last night.

Steve can hardly fault me for teasing him, though, as I have endured my share of football this weekend. Yesterday, Steve took me to Gallaudet's home opener against their conference rival, Catholic U., whose ornate buildings lie just a few blocks north of here. Before the game began, we all stood for the National Anthem, signed by three cheerleaders standing in the center of the field. I found the utter silence of the players and the spectators, along with the expressiveness of the cheerleaders' signing, more inspirational than at any time I've heard the song sung out loud.

When the Bisons, Gallaudet's *nom de guerre*, went into their first huddle, Steve waved a hand at me and proudly told me that the football huddle originated here at Gallaudet back in 1894. The quarterback at the time wanted to make sure the signs his players passed to each other could not be seen by the other team, so the players formed a circle and signed within it. I also found it interesting that each play began when someone on the sideline hit a big bass drum—from its vibrations, the deaf players knew when to cross the line of scrimmage. GU lost 44-7, a typical result, but this did not dampen the festive spirit of those of us rooting for the home team.

The Sunday afternoon wears on into evening and I order a pizza for us, mushrooms and green peppers, with extra-crispy crust, from the Mom and Pop operation down the street, run by a pair of immigrant Haitians whom I adore.

“Ah, c’est vous, Monsieur Lathrop?” the wife says, recognizing either my voice or our regular order.

“Oui, c’est moi, Hélène,” I reply, making some use of the French I learned in high school.

“Quinze minutes, d’accord?”

“Mais oui, merci beaucoup.”

After dinner, Steve is anxious to turn in early, as he has an appointment tomorrow with a career counselor at Gallaudet to help him find work. Though he daily scours the want ads in many local newspapers, no job seems to be appropriate for a deaf man with a B.A. in Sociology. He’s hoping the university itself is hiring instructors, but is concerned about layoffs there he heard about when talking to some of his old teachers he ran into at the football game.

I also have an important appointment the next morning. I received a summons to appear at a pre-trial hearing for Mr. Clarence T. Williams, accused of murdering his wife, Ms. Sheila Williams. The summons has been sitting on my coffee table since the day I received it, taunting me as the day of the hearing approaches. Though I welcome the opportunity to miss a day of work, I can hardly say I relish the idea of stepping into another courtroom.

Turning in for the night, I’m happy to see that over time, my bedroom is beginning to resemble Steve’s. Each time he stays over, he brings something else for my room, once so spartan. Tonight he has brought one of his favorite blankets for us to sleep under, a rich Donegal tweed that has been in his family for many generations. It’s a pale blue, the color of a robin’s egg, with green and pink stripes running through it, slightly faded from years of use.

The blanket joins three teddy bears that have already taken up residence here—Steve left them on the condition I would solemnly swear to hug each one every night before I go to bed. We both take turns doing this tonight—Steve signs each one’s name before taking it up into his arms—Patch, Rainbow and Mr. Wiggles—and sets them at the foot of my bed to watch over us as we sleep.

I wake in the middle of the night to a strong clap of thunder right outside the window—even Steve is jolted awake with the crash. I get up to close the window and feel the cool pelting rain hit my naked chest as I lower the sash. Steve reaches out to me as I return to bed and rubs his warm hand over the moist hair on my chest. I pull his arm tighter around me and we both fall back to sleep, each other’s protection from the storm that continues to rage outside.

By the time I stumble down to the kitchen the next morning, Steve has already fixed himself a hearty breakfast of warm oatmeal, mixed with raisins, bananas and chopped hazelnuts—items I now keep stocked for his visits. I opt for a slice of cold pizza from last night as I stand in front of the open refrigerator door. Steve has already showered and looks quite the young executive in his neatly pressed navy blue oxford shirt with a yellow tie with blue flecks in it. I know I'd hire him if it were up to me.

My hearing isn't until eleven, so I see Steve to the door and, dressed only in my briefs, kiss him warmly goodbye. I then head back upstairs and watch some morning TV. Nothing on seems to sustain my interest and I quickly tire of the drone. I turn it off and, in the quiet of the room, notice that I am jumpy about the hearing. There's really not much I can say—it was just a telephone call after all—but I sense inside myself a curiosity about the murder that drew me to their house when I met that little girl on her bike. I wish I could fathom the reason behind my morbid fascination.

I decide to take my shower, and spend a long time just letting the warm water run down over my head and spread out over my body. I take my dick into my hand and stroke it firmly, quickly reaching orgasm as some comfort to my growing anxiety.

Falling back into old bad habits, I arrive late at the room in the courthouse and find the hearing has already begun. An officer catches my eye as I enter and motions for me to come over to him. As I squeeze behind the last row of chairs to get to the other side of the room, I see a man who must be Mr. Williams, sitting next to his lawyer, nodding at something the lawyer is whispering into his ear. So Steve was right after all, he is hearing. The judge is speaking with another officer behind the bench. None of them seem to take notice of me.

The officer asks my name and checks it off on a list he has on a clipboard in front of him. He quietly tells me to take a seat and wait to be called forward. I notice the wooden seats have taken on a mottled patina, their stain rubbed away by others waiting here before me. I glance around the room, full of light from large windows that look out over the tops of trees shedding leaves that line Constitution Avenue. I study the large portrait above the judge of a man with a colonial powdered wig who looks stern and uncomfortable. Two large flags straddle the judge's bench, American and the District's, everything oversized to contribute to an air of intimidation that permeates the room.

Before long, a woman is called forward, who is introduced as the Williams' neighbor. She is dressed in clothes that seem a size too small for her, the buttons of her corduroy vest strain to contain her broad chest. Her hair is neatly coifed and seems to defy gravity as it is piled high above her head. I'm glad to see someone else go before me so I can see how things work. Apparently she was the person to hear Sheila scream and called the police to report the noise. The woman seems anxious to

complete her testimony—when asked more general questions about how the Williams behaved as neighbors, she added very little other than they were “nice enough.” She said that Mr. Williams seemed to be away a lot and since Mrs. Williams was deaf, there was no way she could communicate with her.

The judge doesn’t seem to listen to her testimony, spending most of her time leafing through papers and speaking again with another officer. Since I assume she will be the one to decide whether Mr. Williams will have to stand trial, I would expect her to pay closer attention. The next person called forward is a doctor from forensics who reports on the cause of Sheila’s death. As he starts to use medical terms that mean nothing to me, my thoughts start to wander. I stare at Mr. Williams in profile and wonder what would make someone so angry that he could murder another person, particularly his spouse. What originally attracted him to someone who was deaf? Did he learn any sign language to communicate with her? What did their families think of their relationship? I can only hope that Steve and I have laid a stronger foundation for our future together.

In that moment, I realize this is the first time I have actually allowed myself to think of Steve and me as a couple, not just two men going out seeing where things would lead us. I now understand that I need Steve in my life and cannot imagine being without him. Did Steve’s mother perceive even this so many months ago when she thought we would have a lot in common? Early on, the fact that Steve was deaf seemed to dominate my thoughts, but now I rarely think about it. It’s just another aspect of who he is, like the color of his hair, the smell of his breath when he wakes next to me in the morning, the smoothness of his skin as I stroke his cheek with the back of my hand.

I’m roused from my thoughts as I hear my name loudly repeated by the officer who spoke to me when I came in. I make my way forward to the chair by the judge and can sense the palpable glare of Mr. Williams like a hot branding iron, searing the letter ‘W’ into my back. As I turn to face him, taking my seat, my initial nervousness gives way to resolve. I make a silent pledge that this woman who had no voice while she lived will have one now. I’m not given an opportunity to speak freely, though, as the lawyer for the District asks me only for Sheila’s responses on the TTY as best as I can remember them. I start to elaborate on how I thought Sheila was very upset about being locked in the dark and what would happen to her if her husband found out she was calling the police, but Mr. Williams’ lawyer stands up repeatedly and calls my statements “mere conjecture.” The judge instructs me to report only what she said and a sense of defeat comes over me. The powerlessness I felt when I was arrested at the protest returns as I am effectively silenced from speaking out in a cause I believe in. I find it subtly humorous that the Deaf Community has had more success in having their causes heard than me.

I'm quickly excused and I leave the room in frustration and anger. As I step outside the courthouse, a gust of wind blows some brittle leaves across the sidewalk at my feet. I find I could stand the walk home to collect my thoughts. I pass row houses in a neighborhood I have never been in before and stop to watch three young children staring into a large cardboard box set out in a small front yard. A young boy calls out to me, "Hey, Mistah. Wanna puppy?"

As I come closer, I look down inside the box and see a litter of puppies crawling over each other on a torn flannel blanket. I can't tell what kind of dogs they are—they are all different colors, from all black to one that is light brown with white patches on its forehead and belly.

"Where's their mother?" I ask.

The girl responds, "We don't know. We found them under the porch this morning making a lot of noise."

The other boy adds, "My father said I can't have a dog, but I'm thinking I'll keep one of these hidden outside and he'll never know."

This sounds like a plan I had as a kid with a bird I found in our back yard that had broken its wing. This boy's plan probably has no better chance of success than mine had back then. Parents *always* find out these things. For me, it was my sudden interest in sunflower seeds, empty wrappers of which my mother found in my bedroom wastebasket, that gave me away. She told me to leave the poor thing alone, "you might catch something from it." I continued to feed the bird anyway until one morning it was gone from the box filled with straw I had set out for it in our shed. A couple of feathers by a small hole in the back wall of the shed and a return visit from a neighbor's cat through that hole while I was there turned my hope in its flying away to despair.

The puppies continue to play inside the box and I notice one that seems disturbed by the antics of the others, curling into a ball and trying to go to sleep. My heart goes out to him or her and I point that one out to the children. The girl lifts it up out of the box and over her head, pronounces it a boy from looking at it from below and hands him to me. He nestles into my open leather jacket and starts to paw at my chest. I reach into my wallet and hand each of them a ten dollar bill. Their eyes grow wide with thoughts of how much candy this will buy.

"Thanks, Mistah," each of them says in turn. I zip up my jacket and continue to walk home, a frail soul tucked delicately inside.

Steve's not home when I arrive. I try to pull the puppy out from under my jacket but his claws are inextricably caught in my sweater. I continue to hold him against me as I bring him into the kitchen. I look in the refrigerator for something for him to eat and wonder what would be appropriate for a dog this young. Something liquid or solid? I settle on both as I pour some milk over a couple of slices of deli turkey in a cereal bowl. I set the bowl on the floor on top of a place mat and expect him to ravenously attack the meal, but he still clings to me, starting to shiver as if he is still outside in the cold. I leave the food on the floor and bring him upstairs with me into bed and pull the covers up tightly around us.

I awake with a start when I hear the front door close and am startled by something furry and moving on my chest. As I reach down, I remember the puppy, who has left a small wet spot right in the middle of my sweater. I start to scold him, but can not bring myself to speak harshly to those baleful eyes. I carefully get out of bed with him still clasped to me and bring him downstairs to introduce him to Steve. Steve is in the kitchen looking down at the bowl on the floor, trying to figure out why it is there, and does not notice me come in behind him. I tap him on the shoulder—he turns and his eyes grow large in surprise when he sees the puppy.

Steve reaches out to hold him, and is finally able to pull him away from me as he pulls each claw out from under my sweater. The dog then latches onto Steve who strokes the back of his head and kisses him gently on his moist black nose. As Steve holds him, I realize that his fur is a just a little darker than the color of Steve's hair, more like rust, except for a large black patch over his right eye.

"What is his name?" Steve signs to me.

"I don't know. I picked him up from some children on my way home from the courthouse."

"We need to name him, then," Steve decides and I think back to the time Steve gave me my sign-name in his parents' kitchen when we went there for dinner. Steve thinks for a minute and finally fingerspells "Caesar" to me and I nod enthusiastically, recognizing the reference to 'Ben Hur.' I bow before him and sign "Hail, mighty Caesar!" and Steve holds out one of his paws in acknowledgement.

We bring Caesar with us into the living room and set him between us on the sofa. As Caesar starts to explore this new world around him, stepping gingerly over the cushions and our laps, I finally remember to ask Steve about his meeting with the career counselor. Steve tells me that there is nothing available at the university itself, but he did hear about an immediate opportunity to teach at a residential school for deaf children, where a teacher has just left.

"That sounds wonderful. You'd be great with those kids."

"Yes, I think so. The only problem is that the school is not near here," Steve tells me.

“Oh, really?” I ask apprehensively, wondering how far away it would be.

“It’s in Southern Pennsylvania, Lancaster County,” he fingerspells slowly for me.

Wow. I don’t know how to respond to this. Though I certainly would want Steve to be able to take advantage of this offer, I’m afraid of what the distance would do to our relationship, just as I’m beginning to think of us as a couple.

Steve seems to be reading my mind as Caesar settles down into his lap. “I’d like to go see it, anyway. It can’t hurt to look.”

“Yes, you should,” I tell him, not sure if I really believe this to be true.

“No, *we* should,” he signs, broadly signing the word “we,” encompassing me, Caesar and himself in one sweeping motion of his hand.

XVI. Signs

Steve drives north on I-95 toward Baltimore, careful not to let the car exceed 65. He wonders why, if he is obeying the legal limit, there are so many cars that pass him. He is forced to stay in the far right-hand lane, to avoid the glare and probable honking of drivers traveling too closely behind him. This doesn't really bother Steve, though—he enjoys driving slowly, anxious to take in the sights along the road, even if it's a route he's been on many times before. There is always something new to see, cows grazing in fields, a tractor left to rot, a new restaurant whose sign rises so high in the air you'd think a plane might hit it.

Almost every sign Steve sees along the way seems familiar to him—the reassurances of towns and routes he recognizes from the maps he studied the night before, planning out this trip. It's one of his habits, to be well prepared. It helps him to avoid the difficulty of asking questions of people he can't easily communicate with. Steve has exact change for the two tolls he will have to pay, carefully placed into marked envelopes, one for the bridge that crosses over the Potomac and another for when he first enters Pennsylvania.

Steve has his sun visor down as the rays from the sun, low in the autumn sky, glint brightly off the metallic hood of his car. He is anxious, though, about how this limits his view of the road ahead and he raises it at the first opportunity when the road heads more westwardly, away from the morning sun. Steve left his house at six, just as the sky was turning a delicate shade of pink, like folds in a baby's flesh. He packed his car the day before, laying his suit from the cleaners over the back seat and stowing his duffel bag in the trunk after removing a basketball and his dragon kite to make room for it. He made sure he had a full tank of gas, and checked the oil, wiping the dipstick on an old T-shirt from the trunk.

Steve sips from a thermos full of hot coffee and nibbles on some trail mix as the rural highway exits draw further apart, heading away from DC. He pictures John sitting in the passenger seat next to him, to share in his appreciation of the bucolic scenery, and also to help build his confidence in his upcoming interview. But he understood when John told him that he couldn't take time away from work on such short notice. John had said that he would come back with him next time if things went

well, although it wasn't clear if that meant just to get him settled in or to stay. Neither of them was ready to discuss that until they had to.

Steve likes to imagine the lives of other people in cars as they pass by him. A man and woman with two kids in the back, all dressed in formal clothes, are heading to church. When they get back home, they'll have a big Sunday dinner of ham, green beans and mashed potatoes. After dinner, the kids will do the dishes in the kitchen so that their dad can watch TV in the parlor and their mother can work on the crossword puzzle in the Sunday Post. A bearded man with a tattoo in a large delivery truck will pull off at the next exit. He'll have sex in the woods behind a diner with another trucker who flashes his brake lights as he pulls into the parking lot. They will not exchange names; in fact, they will speak no words at all. A young woman, her car full of clothes stuffed haphazardly around her, has just left her husband and is moving back in with her parents where she'll become reacquainted with a childhood sweetheart, also recently divorced.

Steve is not so naïve as to think the story of his life with John will be so easily told. When he was with Matt in his first relationship, he thought his life was a story which had just reached the part “and they lived happily ever after.” Even after Matt told him he had started to see someone else, Steve thought this was just a side plot to the main story of their life together. Matt would come home one night with his tail between his legs, and Steve would reluctantly but magnanimously forgive him and the real story would continue. But their story did not turn out this way.

Though he hopes John will move up here with him if he does get the job, Steve knows in his heart that if he has to choose, he will come here alone. Even more important than his love for John is the conviction that he can make it on his own in the world. Like a penny worn along its edges, Steve holds onto the belief that he doesn't need the help of others, of Matt, of John, of Christine, of his father. In the quiet that is Steve's world, at its core, it is really a world that only he inhabits. Others come and go along its periphery.

As Steve pulls off the highway, he glances over at the directions he neatly wrote out and follows them to the school. It's set back from the road, hidden from view by two large copper beech trees that still cling tenaciously to their purple-brown leaves. A gravel driveway leads up to the front door, where a sign hangs, “Willow Street Residential School for the Deaf.” The building is a large, old Victorian home, all white except for black shutters and a bright red door. A round turret flanks the house to its left—Steve can see window seats set in the bays beneath its pointed dome.

A bell by the door sets off a light that Steve can see in the hallway through antique panes of glass set into the door. A man quickly arrives and ushers Steve inside, followed by a brief gust of wind. The man is wearing a blue cardigan sweater, buttoned only at the waist, over a pressed white

shirt, open at its frayed collar. He looks to be about fifty years old—there is a weariness to his eyes behind an old pair of glasses.

“Can I help you?” the man’s lips move simultaneously with his hands in sign.

Steve responds only in sign, “Yes, I’m Steve Dawson. I am here for an interview for a teaching position.” The man pulls out a pocket watch from his sweater, and Steve adds, “I know I’m a little early.”

“Oh, no trouble at all. I’m Dr. Perkins and am the administrator of this school. We’re all very excited that you could make it. Let me bring you upstairs to where you’ll be staying.”

The room that Dr. Perkins shows him to is meant for a child—the bed runs half the length of his bed at home and he’d be afraid to break the small chair by the desk if he managed to fit into it. It’s like he took the pill that made him larger from *Alice in the Looking Glass*. The administrator apologizes for the accommodations and points to a folded cot rolled into a corner behind the door. Despite the inappropriate scale, Steve loves the little room with its crayon drawings on the wall, bright in primary colors, left behind by a former student. A large teddy bear sits on a small stool in a corner, its arms sagging by its side and its head tilted sideways as if in mourning for being left behind.

The administrator leaves Steve to settle into the room, encouraging him to walk around the grounds of the school to get familiar with it. Steve hangs his suit up in the small closet, the plastic from the cleaners brushes against its floor. He puts the duffel bag on the small bed and starts to set up the cot. He carries the teddy bear over to the cot and leans it up against his pillows. With its head straightened up, Steve decides that it already looks more cheerful. Steve sits down on the cot next to it and asks it its name, but a wry smile, made of two short pieces of black yarn, is the only response Steve receives. Steve signs his name to the bear and then adds, “If you won’t tell me your name, I’ll give you one, at least for now.” Steve chooses “William.” He could swear that its black button eyes grow more lively as he fingerspells the name for him.

Steve puts his toiletries in the bathroom, noticing the showerhead, which is only high enough for someone half his height to fit under. He makes a point to get up early tomorrow so that he can draw a bath instead. He leaves his room and sets out to explore the house. Students who live at the school only come during the week, so Steve has this wing all to himself. He walks down a corridor and looks at the drawings and names of the other students on the doors as he passes—Corey, Margaret and one named Steve like him. He sympathizes with these kids who are sent to live away from home, but thinks they might prefer to be at a place like this growing up among others like themselves.

* * *

The night before Steve left for Pennsylvania is not a good one for me. It starts off well enough—we splurge on a romantic meal at our favorite restaurant, tucked behind the Capitol down an alley not found on any tourist’s map. We order an expensive bottle of wine, which Steve barely touches and I feel obliged to finish. By the time the check comes, I am starting to feel rather giddy. Steve walks me home, thinking the fresh air would do me good, but it just leaves me cold and dizzy by the time we reach my front door.

I ask Steve in, but he tells me that he needs to get home so he can leave early the next morning. As I fumble for the key, he takes it from me and lets us both inside, his arm around my waist to help support me. Caesar greets us at the door. Steve sweeps him up in his free hand and, still carrying him, leads me up the stairs to my bedroom. There, Steve helps me out of my clothes and puts me into bed, tucking the covers in around me. I plead with him to stay, but he insists that he go, telling me that he’ll catch a cab out in front of Union Station. As a poor substitute, he places one of his bears by me on the bed for company.

Perhaps as punishment for getting drunk, I toss and turn most of the night, wracked by visions of cataclysms—Steve in a car crash, followed by Mack and I lost in a deep wood. Covered in a cold sweat, I go downstairs to get a cool glass of water from the tap. Caesar thinks I’m up to feed him and leaps up about my shins. I kick him angrily away, but he playfully returns, unable to comprehend that I could bear him any ill will.

I finally find some solace in a fitful sleep. I remember no more dreams when I awake. The sun shines brightly on my bed, a ray catches the eye of Steve’s bear—Rainbow, I think—and it seems to wink at me as an accomplice to some crime we committed while I slept. Though awake, I lie in bed for a while, staring at the ceiling, until I am finally roused by the telephone.

“Hello,” I answer groggily.

“Hullo, John.” It’s Mack. “Sounds like you’re just waking up. Rough night?”

“Actually, yes. It’s funny you called. I had this dream with you in it.”

“Oh, was it one of *those* kind of dreams? I didn’t think I was your type.”

“I can assure you, you’re not. No, we were lost in the woods....” I trail off trying to recall the substance of the dream, but it passes through my fingers like water.

“Are you still there, John?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. So what’s up?”

“I wanted to see if you and your boyfriend wanted to join me at a protest later this afternoon.”

“Since when did you become a political activist?” And then I recall how I became involved, trying to track down Brian.

“Well, this cause hits pretty close to home—a new restaurant is trying to buy out this great little bookstore here in Adams Morgan that’s been here forever. We’ve got too many restaurants already—it’s impossible to park around here with all the tourists looking for a trendy meal.”

I remember the scene Steve and I had with the homeless man trying to park the night of Mack’s party. “I’d love to join you. I didn’t know what I’d be doing today anyway—Steve is up in Pennsylvania for a job interview.”

“I didn’t even know he was looking for a job. Gees, Pennsylvania sounds pretty far away. You thinking about having one of those long distance affairs?”

“I don’t know. I guess we’ll just see how the interview goes and cross that bridge when we get to it. And we’re in a *relationship*, Mack, not having an affair as you like to put it.”

“Whatever. Far be it for me to give *relationship* advice, but those long distance things never work out—too many distractions closer to home if you know what I mean.”

I grow quiet again thinking about Steve’s and my future. Mack lets me know where to meet him later in the day and hangs up.

* * *

Low, menacing clouds build throughout the day. By the time I get to Adams Morgan, this time walking from the Metro at Dupont Circle, the small group of protesters are being anointed by sprinkles, a precursor to the downpour to follow. Mack is easy to pick out, he stands head and shoulders above the rest and is the only one carrying a sign. It reads, “SAVE OUR NEIGHBORHOOD” on one side and “WORDS NOURISH THE SOUL” on the other, a swipe at the restaurant that wants to move in here. The blue letters on his sign start to run in the showers and soon become quite impossible to read. The sparse crowd that has assembled dwindles to just three or four as people seek shelter from the rain. Under an umbrella, Mack introduces me to the Indian couple who own the bookstore. They explain they are being forced out by their landlord who has recently increased their rent.

The couple invite us inside their little store and the wife pulls out a hot plate to warm up some water for tea. My wool sweater begins to give off steam like the teapot as it dries out in the

warmth of the store. As Mack talks to the husband in significant hushed tones about “next steps,” I retreat to the back of the store and roam through the shelves of used books in search of hidden treasure. The light in the store is dim—motes of dust, flakes of parchment and leather from the decomposing books, float in the shafts of light that illuminate the narrow aisles. I inhale the substantive air and think “WORDS NOURISH THE BODY” as well as the soul. I find it hard to make out the titles of books from their spines and pull out a few by their heft and color alone. I bring them back to the front to look at them more closely in the light by the window. Mack peers over at my selections.

“Hey, what’s that?” he asks.

“I’m not sure,” and hold one of the books up for him to see.

He takes the book from me. “Wow! This is a first edition of Asimov’s *I Robot*,” Mack exclaims. “It’s even signed by the author,” as he opens the cover. “I bet your boyfriend would love this,” and I remember their debate in front of Mack’s bookcase about science fiction novels.

I bring the book up to the register as the wife pours some aromatic tea into a fragile china cup for me. As I bring the fragrant tea to my lips, I hear someone come into the store. At first, I think the dim lighting is playing a trick on my eyes, but, as he stares at me in recognition, I realize this is Brian. I almost break the teacup as I place it down on the counter and go over and embrace him. He kisses me on the side of my neck as we hug. He looks curiously at my neck where he just kissed me, but says nothing about it.

“It is so good to see you!” Brian tells me. “I’ve been wondering if I would run into you at another protest or something and here you are.”

“Yes, what happened to you after you left...” I was about to add, “the holding cell,” but with the Indian couple and Mack looking on, I choose to be discreet. “I had no way to get in touch with you after you left.”

“You had finally fallen asleep, so I didn’t want to wake you when they called for me.”

Mack, who has looked on like a voracious wolf since Brian walked in, can wait no longer for me to introduce him.

“Hi, my name is Ronald MacDonald, but for obvious reasons, my friends call me Mack. What brings you to this bookstore?”

“Oh, hi. I’m Brian. I live over by the Zoo and heard that there would be a demonstration here today to support the owners. No one was outside so I came in. It’s funny I’ve never been inside here, it seems very cozy.”

“Yes, we don’t want to lose this great resource to the neighborhood. You should come by more often.” Mack, who was a safe distance from both of us when we began this conversation, now is standing directly in front of me. Brian looks like he’d like to brush the water off his hooded sweatshirt, but is afraid to get any of the books on the tables around him wet. Mack asks him if he’d like to warm up at his place across the street. I tap Mack on the shoulder and he says, “Of course, you’re welcome too, John.”

“Well, thank you. Don’t mind if I do.” I pay for the book and wish the owners well. They tell us all to come back soon—hopefully they will still be there. The three of us walk across the street to Mack’s building. Mack has his arm around Brian’s shoulders, leading him to his front door. I hang back and am again amazed with the ease Mack brings new men into his life.

We take the elevator to Mack’s apartment on the third floor. Mack practically closes the door in my face after he and Brian enter, seeming to forget I was behind them. I catch it before it closes completely and watch Mack help Brian out of his sweatshirt. I notice the pink flesh of Brian’s flat stomach, revealed as his shirt is pulled up along with the sweatshirt. He tucks his shirt back in and grins as he catches me looking at him.

“So why don’t you two catch up in the living room while I fix something to warm us all up?” Mack offers graciously.

Brian and I sit down on the sofa, moving to the side some clothes Mack was folding into a pile on the coffee table. I take advantage of the opportunity to get a better look at him and find, though he still has the college boy good looks I admired in the Spring, he seems a little haggard now, a determination set into his face that makes him look much older. We talk of protests since the one in which we were taken in—he’s proud of my participation in the Gallaudet marches. He wishes he could’ve been there for them, but he was out of town at the time.

Mack comes into the living room with three glasses filled with ice and a decanter full of a yellow-brown liquid that is definitely not iced tea. “This should take the edge off the chill,” and he pours us both a glass. He sits down right between us, and I have to get up to move his clothes off the sofa completely. Mack doesn’t seem to notice and turns to Brian.

“So is John telling you about his boyfriend that he met at a march?” Mack wants to make sure Brian knows which of the two of us is the available one.

“No,” Brian says with a cough after taking a sip from his drink. “What is this stuff? Turpentine?”

“It’s something my mother taught me to make. It’s made of equal parts of bourbon, brandy and Benedictine. She called it a ‘restorative beverage,’ and told me it would cure anything that ailed

me. Too bad it didn't help her with her cancer," Mack says with uncharacteristic candor. He's never told me this and I begin to wonder if it's even true or if he is just trying to play on Brian's sympathies.

The alcohol and Mack's stories begin to have the desired effect, and soon Mack has his hand on Brian's thigh, rubbing it back and forth as he sits in rapt attention. Brian tells us about his father who is battling lung cancer, but has yet to give up smoking completely. I find it ironic that after so much time looking for Brian, now it is Mack, not me, who is making the moves on him.

Feeling the proverbial third wheel, I stand to go. Mack makes haste to retrieve my coat as Brian walks me to the door.

"So I never heard anything about your boyfriend," Brian says.

"No, neither of you seemed very interested in that," hearing a twinge of self-pity in my voice.

"What's his name? What is he like?"

It's funny, the first thing I think to tell Brian is how tenderly Steve tucked me into bed last night before leaving for home. Brian nods his head, and I continue to describe Steve's love for his teddy bears and his beautiful garden, and my pride in him as he stood up to my father at the family barbecue. Lost in my reverie, I fail to notice that Brian is not even looking at me as Mack comes back into the room with my coat.

Brian seems to have no intention to follow me out, so I tell him that Mack has my phone number if he'd like to get together again. Brian says, "Sure," and hugs me as I leave. He looks again at my neck and says, "That chain you're wearing. It looks familiar to me. Where did you get it?"

Having worn it for so long, I forget that I'm wearing the St. Christopher medal that I found on the floor of the jail cell the night I spent with him. I pull it out from under my sweater and show it to him. He says, "Hey, that's mine! I've been looking all over for that. Where did you find it?"

After I tell him, he says it must've fallen off while he slept. I hand it back to him. I realize that I don't need it any more.

XVII. The House on a Hill

Steve sits in a chair, as big for him as the one in his room is small, facing a table at which four people sit. He thinks the oversized chair, the long table, and the fact that he is so outnumbered, are all meant to subtly intimidate him and he doesn't like it. But he is as much to blame for feeling ill at ease—he arrived late for the interview, something so out of character for him, but these people don't know that.

Late last night, after giving William a big hug, he reached over to set the alarm clock on the desk. But he was surprised to see that it did not have a setting to blink when it went off, like the one by his bed at home. No wonder the deaf student who lived here before left this behind, he thought. He got up out of the cot and went over to his duffel bag, in search of the vibrating alarm clock he travels with. When he didn't find it, he remembered that he left it under his pillow at home as a backup alarm so that he would be sure to get an early start yesterday.

It was too late to find Dr. Perkins to ask for another clock, so he rolled the cot over to the window so that he would wake with the sun. Unfortunately, a cold front moved in during the night, bringing dark clouds and rain. A dim, gray sunrise through the north-facing window did not rouse Steve from his slumber, and he overslept.

When he finally awoke, he first saw William, who, Steve imagined, was trying to tell him something. "What is it, my friend?" Steve signed to him and then looked at the clock, which read 8:45—fifteen minutes after the time the interview was to begin. He couldn't believe his eyes, and continued to stare at the clock, hoping this was a dream. When the time changed to 8:46, he realized this was no dream, and hurried into his suit, without bathing or brushing his teeth. A quick hand through his hair as he bent in front of the mirror on the wall, and then he ran out into the hallway.

Luckily last night before he went to bed, Dr. Perkins had pointed out where the interview was to take place—a small classroom on the right at the far end of the hall. He ran to it, swerving around children who were arriving for the week, their eyes wide with curiosity. The door to the classroom was open. As he entered, Dr. Perkins motioned for him to sit in a large chair at the center of a circle, partially circumscribed by the crescent-shaped table.

Before Steve sat down, he signed that he was very sorry for being late. Dr. Perkins brusquely dismissed his comment and repeated his request that he sit. The other three seated at the table were introduced, starting with the two women to his right who were teachers at the school. Both were hearing like Dr. Perkins himself. The only deaf person in the room other than Steve was a man to Dr. Perkins' left, a parent of one of the children attending the school.

Dr. Perkins begins. "We each have a copy of your résumé in front of us. Do you wish to elaborate on your education and work experience?"

"Certainly. Thank you." Steve takes a deep breath. "I graduated from Gallaudet University with a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology in 1985. I had many jobs on campus—I worked at the bookstore and also at the cafeteria. I gave tours to new students to help them become acquainted with the campus and its facilities. I also tutored students in English and History. After I graduated, I got a job with the National Park Service conducting tours of the National Monuments around DC. I really enjoyed that work but I was let go a couple of months ago due to budget cuts."

As he signs, Steve is distracted by the woman directly to Mr. Perkins' right who is whispering to the other woman at the end of the table. Is it possible that a teacher here does not know ASL, Steve wonders?

The woman who was whispering asks him where he went to school before Gallaudet. Was it a residential school like this?

"No," Steve responds. "I became deaf as a result of a motorcycle accident when I was fifteen. I was able to graduate from the public high school I attended before the accident."

"Oh, that's interesting," the woman continues. She has an assertive style that Steve admires and thinks would be very effective with children. "Did they give you any assistance in your classes?"

"Yes, I was lucky to have a transcriber with me in each of my classes. I started to learn how to read lips when she wasn't around—after school at football practice, for example. My mother and I learned sign language together, but my father never did."

The woman at the end of the table waves at him to get his attention. As he turns to her, she slowly mouths some words to Steve as some sort of test. Steve reluctantly plays along with the parlor game and clearly speaks, "I understand" when she's finished. Then he signs what she has just said, "Oralism is very important at this school." Steve is prepared for this—very few deaf children are taught to sign. Instead the focus is on training children to adapt to a hearing world by reading lips and speaking out loud. Steve and his deaf friends see this as a not-so-subtle attempt to turn them into hearing people, a parody of their real identity.

After taking some notes, Dr. Perkins interrupts, “But we are hoping to hire a deaf teacher who can teach the children ASL so they will have that skill as well.” The man at his left nods his head in vigorous agreement. He asks Steve if he has had any teaching experience.

“No, none other than the tutoring I did in college.”

“What makes you interested in working with these children, then?”

“First, I love being with children. They have an innocence about them that is lost when they become adults. It’s at that age that someone can really make a difference in their lives—to teach them that being deaf is not a handicap, but just another aspect of who they are, like the color of their skin.” Steve directs this last part to the parent who is African-American. “I marched with thousands of others in DC this spring for just that reason, to show the world that deaf people can accomplish anything they set their minds to. They only have to dream and it can happen.”

Dr. Perkins looks at his pocket watch and says that they are out of time—a class will be using this room in just a few minutes. He asks the others seated around the table if they have any other questions. They all shake their heads no. He invites Steve to stay in the room to observe Mrs. Hamilton, the teacher at his right, who will be teaching Civics.

Steve says that he would like to stay and thanks them for their time. He adds that he hopes to hear from them shortly. The other three leave the room, each shaking Steve’s hand as they depart.

Mrs. Hamilton also shakes his hand, and asks him to help her arrange the room for her class, moving the long table against the wall and laying out mats on the floor for the children to sit on. Children begin to arrive as Steve lays out the last mat on the floor. A little girl signs “Thank you” to Steve. He squats down in front of her and signs “You’re welcome. What’s your name?”

“I’m April,” the girl fingerspells and then uses her sign-name, the letter ‘A’ drawn in a circle over her heart. Steve shows her his sign-name and tells her he got it because of all of the freckles on his face. The girl laughs a bit and then runs over to Mrs. Hamilton and gives her a big hug.

Five other children come in, ranging in age, Steve guesses, from seven to twelve. One girl carries a doll wrapped in a blanket. Steve goes over to her and asks the doll’s name. The girl tells Steve that her doll is deaf like she is and can’t tell her what her name is. Steve asks the girl if he can hold the doll, which she lets him do, showing him how to hold her tightly and to keep her head upright. Steve rocks the doll from side to side and holds her face up against his chest. He hands the doll back to the girl and says that she told him that her name was Denise.

“How do you know?” the girl asks.

“Since we can’t hear with our ears, we learn to listen with our hearts,” Steve tells her. The girl looks up at Steve in awe and then begins to practice fingerspelling the doll’s name. She brings Denise over to the mat, spreading out the blanket and laying her down beside her.

Steve sits cross-legged on the mat to the side of Mrs. Hamilton so he can watch all of the students. Mrs. Hamilton begins by welcoming all of them back and asks if they did anything “very special” over the weekend. All six raise their hand in unison—she calls on an older boy named Jimmy who starts to sign. Mrs. Hamilton interrupts him and reminds him he must speak as he signs in her classroom. Steve watches him mouth the words “I’m sorry,” and then he tells her about a hike he took with his father in a grove near their house. His father is helping him to identify different trees by the shape of their leaves, the texture of their bark, and how their limbs grow out from the trunk. This time they discovered a hickory, a chestnut and a birch tree to add to his list.

Mrs. Hamilton tells Jimmy that is wonderful. Five other hands immediately shoot up, but the teacher says that they must begin their work. She first introduces a “special guest,” and tells them that Mr. Dawson came all the way from the District of Columbia to visit their school. “Who can find DC on this map of the United States?” she asks the class. Jimmy is the only one who raises his hand. He goes up to the map tacked to the wall and points to the large star that represents the nation’s capitol.

“That’s right, Jimmy. Very good. Now what were we talking about last week?”

A young boy raises his hand and signs “state capitals,” fingerspelling each word very slowly. Steve realizes that there are all different skill levels in this class—something for him to think about if he is to teach here.

“Thank you, Thomas. Now who knows the capital of the state of Pennsylvania?” All six hands go up and Mrs. Hamilton chooses Jennifer, the young girl with the doll. Jennifer holds the doll up against her chest and then fingerspells, “Harisburg,” leaving out the extra ‘r.’

Mrs. Hamilton asks her why she held the doll up before she answered. Jennifer tells her, “Denise told me what the answer was.” Mrs. Hamilton replies that dolls can not talk, and even if they could, deaf children could not hear them. The girl points to Steve and signs, “You heard my doll, didn’t you?”

Mrs. Hamilton says, “That is nonsense. Mr. Dawson is deaf like you, and can not hear a doll speak.”

Steve says nothing and the class continues. Other capitals are spelled out on the board and the children sound them out—only Mrs. Hamilton can tell how well they are doing. Steve decides

that if he is to teach there, that there will be no speaking in his class—only sign. Leave oralism to the teachers that can hear.

After the students leave the room, Mrs. Hamilton asks Steve if he told Jennifer that her doll could speak.

“Yes, I did. She said that her doll couldn’t tell her her name, so I asked the doll and she told me ‘Denise.’”

“What do you mean?”

“Ever since I became deaf, I imagined that my stuffed animals could communicate with me, in their own language of course, and it has helped me not to feel so alone. As someone who is hearing, you may not understand this, but I can assure you Jennifer does.”

Mrs. Hamilton thinks about this a bit. “I guess there is no harm in her thinking she can communicate with her doll. But, as an adult, you should know better.”

“Sometimes it’s better to hold onto your dreams,” Steve replies.

* * *

Steve returns to his room and is finally able to draw a bath. He takes off his suit and tie, hanging them back in the small closet and covering them with the plastic from the dry cleaners. He places his shiny black shoes into separate cloth bags with drawstrings and puts them into his duffel bag along with the underwear he has worn since yesterday. He carries William into the bathroom with him and sets him on the toilet seat so he will have some company while he bathes.

Steve can barely stretch out his legs in the short tub, so keeps them bent so that his knees poke through the surface of the water, like twin mountainous islands in a sea of foam. He leans back against the tile wall and lets the warmth of the water seep into the pores of his skin.

Steve lets his mind wander over the events of the day. He decides that he belongs here, among these children, and hopes that he will be offered the position. He is afraid that his lack of teaching experience, his inability to hear the students practice speaking, and his disagreement with Mrs. Hamilton about the doll, will all work against him. But Dr. Perkins did say they were looking for a deaf person to teach here and Steve believes fate has brought him here to fill that role.

After his bath, Steve changes into a pair of jeans and a Gallaudet sweatshirt. He packs up the rest of his things and returns William to the chair in the corner of the room. William’s head droops to the side as it was when Steve first saw him. “Someone else will move in here with you, William,”

Steve signs. “And, if not, I will rescue you when I return.” William looks as forlorn as ever—apparently, he has been told this before, only to be disappointed.

Steve loads his luggage into the car and returns to the school to say goodbye to Dr. Perkins. Steve knocks on his office door, but cannot tell if he is inside as no one opens it. He heads up the large staircase and walks down the hallway toward the classroom he was in. All of the doors are shut and there is no glass in them for him to look inside.

He goes back to his car and writes a short note to Dr. Perkins on the back of his directions to the school.

Dr. Perkins,

Thank you for the opportunity to meet you and the other teachers during my interview. I believe I could make a big difference here. But even if I am not selected, I strongly urge you to hire someone who is deaf who will be able to relate to the way your students think and feel.

Sincerely,

Steve Dawson

Steve folds the note and slides it under the door to Dr. Perkins’ office.

Before Steve heads home, he decides to explore the area. He drives by rolling hills, covered in rich farmland, and passes through covered bridges over picturesque streams. Every now and then he passes horse-drawn carriages, full of men in wide-brimmed hats and women in white bonnets. These must be the Amish Steve read about who have eschewed modern conveniences for their simple lifestyle. Steve slows down as he passes them and they wave a hearty welcome.

He stops at a farmer’s market in search of gifts to bring back home. He ventures inside the small shed, passing through aisles of colorful produce, the bounty of the fertile soil around them. Toward the back, he finds colorful circular signs that have adorned some of the barns he has passed in the area. They are tagged “Hex Signs”—he assumes to ward off evil spirits—and chooses three for their brilliant designs. For his mother, he picks out one that says “Wilkum” beneath two doves, hoping she will put this on their door at home. Christine will get one that offers “Good Luck” and for John, Steve selects one with six flower petals surrounded by red, blue and yellow hearts that symbolizes Love and Romance.

He brings the signs to the counter to pay for them. A sign reads 'Ring Bell for Assistance' next to a large hand bell. Steve has never rung one of these before and is not sure how loud a sound it makes as he swings the bell up and down in broad strokes. From the vibrations of the bell he can feel through its handle, he guesses it makes a loud noise. Sure enough, Steve sees an older man approach the shed from a house across the way. He is dressed in a flannel shirt and blue overalls. Steve notices that he favors his right side as he walks, perhaps the result of years of labor in these prosperous fields.

The man enters the shed and says something to Steve that he does not catch. Steve just smiles at him and holds out the three hex signs he has selected. The farmer takes a pencil from a drawer behind the counter and writes down some figures on the back of a brown paper bag used for the produce. Steve has done the math in his head and hands the man a twenty-dollar bill, enough to cover his purchase. The farmer counts out his change and speaks again. Steve believes that he said, "Are you from around here?" so he shakes his head no, and says out loud that he is deaf, pointing to his ear.

"Now I understand," the farmer says. He reaches for the pencil again and writes on the bag, below his sums, "Where are you from?" and hands the bag and pencil to Steve.

Steve writes 'DC' in large capital letters and then writes below that, "But I may be moving here soon."

"Do you have a place to stay?" the farmer writes back. Steve shakes his head, no. That seems to give the farmer an idea and he motions for Steve to follow him outside the shed. Together, they walk up the path to the farmer's house and then behind it to another path that leads up a steep hill. Steve looks up as they climb the hill to see what might be up there, but cannot see from this direction in the low blinding sun.

When they reach the top of the hill, Steve is finally able to make out the house, which, with its front steps and wrap-around porch is eerily similar to his home in DC. This house, though, is only painted one shade, an egg yolk yellow, its clapboards peeling in places. Steve is already thinking about how he might paint it differently if it were his. He still is not sure why the farmer is showing him the house, until they go inside and see that it is virtually empty, save a few folding chairs scattered in a couple of the larger rooms. One room has a large fireplace, made of stone, which looks big enough for Steve to crawl into and explore. Many of the windows are boarded up and there is some broken glass on the floor that they are careful to walk around.

They go back outside the house and Steve looks out over the front yard, full of wildflowers gone to seed and imagines all the different varieties of roses that would thrive here. They walk to the back and Steve pictures Caesar bounding through the open field that stretches out as far as the eye

can see. He then looks out at the commanding view of the rolling countryside. He can see no other structure as high as the house on this hill in any direction he turns.

Steve can hardly wait to get home to tell John about this house. The farmer hands him a slip of paper with the address, his phone number and the monthly rental fee. Steve is amazed to see that it is less than he pays for his home in Mt. Pleasant. He shakes the farmer's hand firmly and thanks him. He drives toward home, full of hope in the direction his life is heading.

XVIII. The Decision

It's another slow day at work. I hear rumors about layoffs and know I'd be one of the first to be let go, having been hired just last year. My boss does little to disabuse me of my fears—I haven't been sent to training in over a year and I know that the support we provide to our larger clients is being shifted to another group overseas. I picture foreign men and women, their clothing in tatters, their backs raw from flogging, trying to sound cheerful over the phone explaining why someone can't claim their guest room as a tax deduction just because there is a computer in it.

The free time gives me a chance to think about Steve and his interview. I have no doubt that he will be offered the position. I wonder if our relationship is strong enough to withstand the stress of moving to a new area. I've lived in the city for so long now, I'd miss being able to walk down to the Mall, take in the sights of Dupont Circle, be able to grab a pizza from the Haitian couple right down the block.

Then I wonder what kind of work I could get up there. Maybe if I found a better agent, I might be able to do voice-over work full time. I would be that much closer to New York City, where I might be able to get some work as an actor, as that woman on the phone told me. I picture myself in some Shakespearean revival, squatting with some other actors in a small Manhattan studio, and returning to Pennsylvania on the weekends.

As I think about it, all of my reservations are really just a matter of logistics, the least of my fears is what life with Steve would be like. I trust and admire Steve as I have no other man in my life and know that, with him, everything else will fall into place. I just worry that it still may be too soon for us to take this next big step.

I leave work early, knowing Steve will be arriving home tonight. I decide to walk through Dupont to pick up some flowers, and I get an idea as I pass the display window for "Lulu's Costumes and Design."

"Can I help you?" a surprisingly butch man calls out as I enter the store, surrounded as he is by feather boas, wigs and cases of costume jewelry. He's dressed entirely in leather, from the top of his studded cap, to the pointed tips of his black leather boots. I almost don't think of this as a

costume any more, as common as it is to see at all times of day and in all types of weather up and down the streets of this neighborhood.

I first think to ask him if he is “Lulu,” but when I see his riding crop lying on the counter next to the register, I reconsider. “Yes, I think that you can help me. My boyfriend comes home today from a trip up north and I wanted to surprise him with something special.”

“Oh, you mean something sexy? What’s he into? We have some sports uniforms over there, complete down to the color-coded matching jock strap. Then we have an entire S + M line in the back if that’s more his style. And over here we have various military uniforms—our sailor suits are *very* popular. Or, if he’s into drag, I could show you a few frocks that are just to die for.”

I quickly reassess that butch first impression as he swoons over the sequined evening gowns on the rack. “I was more thinking of an animal suit. I saw a gorilla costume in the window. Do you have any others like that?”

“No I think that’s it. I had a rabbit costume in here once, but someone rented it around Easter this year, and that’s the last I’ve seen of it.”

I walk to the front of the store and look at the gorilla costume in the window and see that it would be much too small for me to fit into. I continue to stroll through the store like an anthropologist cataloging the various fantasies of the homosexual male. I finally reach the S + M section in the back. I’m morbidly fascinated by the implements of inflicting punishment in the display cases, when I see a large mannequin dressed in a teddy bear suit, complete with shirt collar and tie around his neck.

I go back to the front of the store and ask about the suit.

“Oh, we just put that there to attract the ‘bears’ to that section of the store. We’ve never rented it out.”

Even better—I’ve always been squeamish about putting on a costume some other depraved soul has worn before me. “Could I just have it for tonight? I promise I’ll return it first thing tomorrow.”

“Sure, bud. Why don’t you go try it on first in the back and see how it fits?”

I head back into the dressing room, after taking the suit off the mannequin. I look around at the various costumes draped over chairs and on the floor, and I think, Man, if these walls could talk! I step into the suit, pulling it up to my chest and realize I will need some help with the zipper in the back. I walk back into the store with the suit around my naked waist and receive a brief round of applause from a couple who have just come into the store. I take a brief bow and ask if one of them could zip me up the back. One of the men reaches over and says, “Let me help you, honey. I’m a pro

at this with Miss Thing over there,” motioning to his friend who is deep into the rack of designer gowns that have just arrived.

I walk back to the dressing room and put on the head, positioning its eyes so that I can see through the black mesh. I stand on a short platform in front of three angled mirrors and think all that I’m missing is a “pic-a-nic” basket to be a dead ringer for Yogi Bear. I practice “Hey, Boo Boo!” and start to giggle with the absurdity of this.

I decide to take the suit and pay for it up front, carrying the head and my street clothes in one of my paws. The man asks me if I’ll be wearing it out. As I wonder who else would be able to zip me up in the back, I decide this costume is a lot tamer than many I have seen out in the Circle. I tell him that I’ll leave it on. He gives me a bag for my clothes and I walk out, receiving only the occasional glance. I walk into a card store, and ask for three helium-filled balloons of different colors, and get ones that are red, yellow and blue. I ask the clerk to tape them to my paw so that they do not fly away.

I try to hail a taxi outside the store. One starts to pull over toward the curb and then thinks better of it and continues down the street. The next one stops long enough that I can open the door and hop in the back.

The driver turns her head back toward me and says, “The Zoo, I presume?”

“No, they let me out for the day and I’m making the most of it.” I give her Steve’s address and she calls in the fare. “Car 1410. Got a bear going up to Mount Pleasant. Over.”

I catch her looking at me in her rear-view mirror. “So are you heading to a costume party, Yogi?”

“No, I just want to surprise my boyfriend.”

“Well, that oughta do it.”

Soon enough, we pull in front of Steve’s home and I am spared any further embarrassment. “That’ll be seven jelly sandwiches, uh, I mean dollars,” she tells me. I instinctively reach into my pocket, but come up with only lint from the costume. I realize I left my wallet in my pants pocket and look for the bag with my clothes in it. I have trouble keeping the balloons from getting in the way as I search the floor of the cab.

I finally discover the bag on the seat next me and try to pull the wallet out of my pants pocket with my free paw. After a couple of tries, I just hand my pants to the driver and ask if she wouldn’t mind grabbing the money out of my wallet herself. “Sure, I do this all the time with my husband’s pants,” she replies. She draws out a ten, shows it to me, and I tell her that will be fine.

She puts the pants back into the bag and hands it back to me. I reach inside the bag for the head to the costume, put it on and step out of the car, carrying the bag in one paw and holding the balloons aloft with the other. I'm glad to see Steve's car parked out front and another next to it that I recognize, but can't recall its owner. I'd hate to have gone through all of this trouble and find he still wasn't home yet.

I ring the bell, pushing it in with my thumb, my only free finger in my mitten-like paw. As the door starts to open, I yell out "Surprise!" but I am the one surprised to see Christine at the door.

"John, is that you?"

"How did you know?"

"I recognized your voice. Did you expect Steve to hear you say 'Surprise'?"

She's right of course. "Is he here?"

"Yes, he's in the kitchen."

Christine takes my bag of clothes and sets them aside. She leads me through the rooms to the kitchen, making sure I don't trip on anything or knock something over.

"Look who I found at the door," Christine signs to Steve as she pulls me into the kitchen behind her. Not being able to sign, I hold up my empty paw and wave hello to Steve. His face becomes one huge grin as he takes in the sight of me.

"What's your name?" Steve signs to me. Christine fingerspells John for me and Steve corrects her using the sign-name he has given me. He gives me a big bear hug.

I hold out my paw with the balloons and offer them to him. He thanks me and pulls off the piece of tape holding them in place. As he looks at the colors of the balloons, he remembers something and leaves the room. He returns with a present for me—the hex sign representing Love and Romance, set in these same three colors. We hug again and begin a slow dance across the kitchen floor, swaying to the same silent tune. Still unaccustomed to my oversized feet, I step on Steve's toes and he lets out a loud "Owww!" that both Christine and I can hear.

Finally, I remove my head and we kiss, the sweat on my lips from the warm costume forming a precious seal with his. Christine says "Excuse me," and I pull back and point to her. Steve laughs and pulls my face to his for one more kiss.

I ask Steve if I can change back into my clothes and he points up to his bedroom for me to change there. When I come back down, Christine and Steve are talking about the school and how the interview went. I build up my courage and ask if he got the job.

"I don't know yet. I really hope so."

Christine and Steve continue to talk about the school. She tells Steve that if he does get the job, he should insist that only ASL be used in his classroom. Steve agrees. I find that I am of so many mixed emotions, I don't know what to say.

Christine senses my quiet and looks at her watch. "I've really go to go. Thank you for the hex sign—I'm going to put it on my bedroom door and hope it brings me good luck in there!"

I walk her to the door while Steve cleans up in the kitchen. "So what will you do, John, if Steve gets that job?"

I look out into the garden stretching before me outside the open door and decide. "I will go."

"I'm glad to hear that. That will make Steve very happy."

She turns to go and halfway down the path she turns and signs "I-L-Y" as I did to Steve the first night I was here. Instead of returning the sign, though, I blow her a big kiss, stretching my hand out as far as it will go. She reaches up to catch it and plants it on her cheek.

I return to the kitchen and help Steve with the dishes. When we are finished, we walk through all of the rooms of his house, turning off the lights. In each room, I take a moment to take in as many details as I can, as if I will never see them like this again. I follow him up the stairs to his bedroom and we both undress. Seeing the bear suit on the floor by his bed where I left it, Steve asks me if I would put it on one more time. I sign "Of course," and become a bear again.

Steve lies down on his bed and I lie next to him, seeing him only in outline through the cheesecloth eyes. He kisses me on my bear lips and holds me close to him, rubbing his naked skin against my fur. I begin to feel uncomfortably warm in the suit, so I gently pull his arms from around me and get up out of bed to take it off again.

I come around to his side of the bed and tuck him in, kissing him in the center of his back, curled away from me. I climb over him and get under the covers, drawing his arms around me, marveling yet again how well my back fits into the breadth of his chest, his right hand gripping my shoulder, tense-like, like the pitcher holds the ball.

I wake early the next morning to a light blinking in the room. I think it's Steve's alarm, but the light is coming from his desk. Steve gets up and places the receiver from the phone into the cradle of his TTY. I look over his shoulder as the green letters start to scroll across the display.

HI THIS IS DR PERKINS IS STEVE DAWSON THERE Q GA

YES THIS IS STEVE GA

**I HAVE GOOD NEWS FOR U WE WLD LIKE TO OFFER U A POSITION TEACHING
HERE AT WILLOW STREET GA**

Steve turns to me and smiles. He returns to the TTY.

THANK U VERY MUCH I WLD LOVE TO WORK THERE BUT THERE R A FEW
THINGS I WLD LIKE TO DISCUSS WITH U GA

I M SURE WE CAN WORK THINGS OUT WHEN CAN U START Q GA

HOW DOES NEXT WK SOUND Q GA

THAT WOULD BE FINE DO U NEED HELP FINDING A PLACE TO STAY Q GA

I place my hands on Steve's shoulders. I know he is thinking about the house on the hill that he told me about last night—a home where he, Caesar and I can live as a family. I squeeze his shoulders tightly and slowly nod my head.

NO I ALREADY KNOW THE PERFECT PLACE FOR US SK SK

Epilogue

We're back at our favorite park. A bracing October chill in the air reminds us this may be our last visit here this year. The change in season—visible in the riot of multi-colored leaves on the sugar maples and the disappearance of our butterflies and moths—puts me in a reflective mood. Steve begins the meticulous process of setting out our stuffed animals and I think to ask him a question I've been meaning to ask for a very long time. I sign to him: "Of all the sounds in the world, which do you think you miss the most?"

Steve pauses just a second as I expect him to respond with the songs of the birds around us, the crash of waves on a sandy beach or the rush of wind bristling through the trees pulling the leaves down to their wintry bed. Instead, he begins with two signs: "sound" and "your" and then he ever so gently takes my right hand into his, kisses it, and then forms my index and middle fingers into the shape of the letter 'V' and places this 'V' over my Adam's apple, moving my hand up towards my chin along my neck: "voice."