

The Portrait

I was born almost completely deaf, and by the time I was seven I had already become a prisoner to my education. In the morning, I had speech therapy and tutoring with Mr. Bishop. We sat at my family's long dining room table, which was always covered in a tablecloth that no one ever saw beneath the mess of books and papers. My mother, who needed reasons to sneak out there and see how I was doing, was often pulling our blue china plates out of the hutch behind us, which is why, when tutoring was over, she and I ate tuna fish sandwiches on our good dishes.

I hated my lessons. Mr. Bishop's lips were fat and smooth like two long, pink party balloons that, it seemed, could be tied into dachshunds at any moment. People think reading lips is a precise skill that just takes practice, like learning Morse code, but it's more art, requiring intense concentration paired with context and guesswork. Still, it was nothing compared to the impossible task of learning to speak. I spent lessons resting my hand on the small, humming hill of Mr. Bishop's scratchy throat. My fingers would hover in front of his mouth, feeling for the hot, moist air of his words. I sent my tongue into somersaults, moved my lips in strange ways, pushing the vibrations out of me, adjusting and readjusting to the feedback I found in his face.

My younger brother Tim went to all-day kindergarten. He resented that I could wake up late and wear play clothes during the day and that I didn't have to listen to our parents yell. I resented that our mother didn't follow him around everywhere, that his sweaty fist wasn't always stuck in her hand like a bone in its joint. Most of all, I resented that my parents had bought him a new backpack for school. It was covered in geometric neon shapes over a black background and had electric blue zippers with little corded zipper pulls, plus front, side, and interior pockets, including special compartments for individual pens and other items. The most thrilling part was that it came with a matching lunchbox filled with samples of snacks, like Dunkaroos and Pop Tarts, items my parents wouldn't ordinarily buy. My mother said that when I was speaking and reading well enough, I would be able to go to school and I would get my own backpack and my own lunchbox with free snack samples inside.

The backpack was so alluring that I brought a new level of enthusiasm to my lessons, concentrating so hard that I was frequently stricken with headaches. I'd spend post-lesson afternoons lying on the blue corduroy couch in the den, a Ziploc bag full of ice wrapped in a tea towel on my forehead. I'd stare at the stucco ceiling, trying to find shapes and pictures there the way one might look for faces in the clouds.

I quickly realized that even if I didn't have a headache, pretending I did would get me out of my usual afternoon activities, like homework and helping Mom with chores. For a week, I went to the couch directly after lunch and lay there until Tim came home. Tim was towheaded and tiny and his backpack looked like a tortoise shell on him, like something he could have lived inside of. He'd fling the thing off next to the stairs, as if it were a burden he was happy to be free

of, and then crawl up on the couch and sit on my legs so I'd move them. He'd flip on the TV, Darkwing Duck or TailSpin. I couldn't read the lips of cartoon characters, of course, and the black strip of closed captioning zipped by so fast it might as well have been written in a foreign language. But I watched the pictures, which told most of the story anyway.

My mother didn't let this go on for too long. One day, as I was finishing my pickle spear, she told me we were going to a museum. I watched her say this, her lips like two pieces of ribbon. I shook my head no vigorously—we never went anywhere after tutoring, even when I didn't have a headache—but my mother would not relent.

Before leaving the house, my mother kneeled down in front of me on our colorful stone-tiled entryway and followed her usual routine. First, she dipped two fingers into my front right pocket, sober as a doctor taking a pulse, feeling for the laminated information card I carried there in case I got lost. Then, she checked my shoelaces, though I'd been tying them myself for a long time, pinching the double-knot between her thumb and forefinger. For good measure, she pulled the loops around and through one last time, her lips moving in an incantation I knew by heart: *Bunny ears, Bunny ears, jumped in the hole, Popped out the other side beautiful and bold*. She encouraged me to join her, and when I did her face lit up theatrically. She clapped, saying *Good job! Good job!*

In the cavernous station, we waited hand in hand for the train. The pear trees had just bloomed—they were beautiful but smelled like rotting fish—and little white petals dotted the gray platform like snow. I knew when the train was coming better than anyone. Even before the round lights on the floor blinked, I could feel the vibrations. I would close my eyes and wait for the cool whoosh of air that marked its arrival. On the train, I sat between the window and my mother, my hand finally free of hers. I loved the metro. As we jetted under the city, I imagined I was an astronaut cast out in the blissful, soundless dark, the silver window of my helmet just a reflection of emptiness and a pinpoint of blue earth below.

When the train slowed at stops, I pressed my hands to the window, waiting for the platform people to appear, some of them slumped down under the weight of luggage, others running frantically, blazers unbuttoned and fluttering behind them like wings. They were trapped out there. I pressed my face to the window and moved my mouth randomly, not forming any words, hoping that someone outside would try to decipher what I was saying.

The museum was a new and terrible torture. My mother read aloud the exhibit labels painstakingly slowly, one after the other, as if the lists of names and years and mediums were the art, her finger bouncing below each word as it passed through her lips, one, two, three times. I tried not to look at the people walking around us, who I thought might be staring, though my mother didn't seem to mind. She stood by the wall, presenting each label the way an elementary school teacher might read a book aloud to a class, except that I was the sole and lonely pupil. Her fingers were long and thin, finished with beautiful French manicured nails, egg-shaped, glossy,

and sharp—a fact I knew from the dark crescent grooves they left behind after a sudden grab as I tried to cross the street or run to a swing set.

My escape was sudden and inspired. My mother and I were in the museum bathroom. She liked to use the handicapped stall, because we could both fit in it at once, but it was out of order. She read the piece of paper taped to the door as if it were another exhibit label. *Out*, she said. *Out. Out.* Her finger tapped the word three times, then curved under the space, then tapped the next word. *Of. of. of.* And the next. *Order. Order. Order.* She leaned down in front of me, so I could see her lips.

Do you need to use the bathroom? She asked. I shook my head no.

Say it, don't shake it, she said. And I flung my tongue to the roof of my mouth and down again, sending a small *no* up my throat and into the changing O of my lips.

Wonderful! She said, clapping her palms together again. She placed my hand on the rounded edge of the sink. *Wait right here. Right here. Understand?*

Just as my mother walked into one stall, a woman walked out of another stall down the line. She washed her hands, glancing at me with pity, like I was some pet tied to a stop sign in front of a store. I watched my mother's feet splayed in a V under the stall, one of them gently tapping. I figured there was music playing. I lifted my hand from the sink edge, letting it hover just a half-inch in the air, a thrilling little retaliation. I put it down, then lifted it instantly again. My hand was still lifted when the woman left the bathroom. Without thought, I darted out behind her.

It was that easy. My heart hammered in my chest, less from nerves than from excitement. The lobby was white and glossy like some great castle hall. It seemed much larger than it had when we'd gone into the bathroom not moments before. I fast-walked to the marble staircase, ascending like a mermaid rising from the depths of the ocean to the sunny surface above.

I felt dreamy and unfurled. The museum was a maze of long legs and clean rooms. A boy in a stroller stuck his tongue out as he passed. His lips moved, and I did not try to read them. I just offered back a blank, fierce stare. Thick gilded frames hung like windows into other worlds: stark women sat in silky gowns, stern men stood in suits, and in a stairwell, a dozen Native Americans hung in rows, with fringed robes and feathers splayed above their heads. The people on the walls had gleaming, oily skin and white, human flecks in their eyes. But they were not humans at all, and I was grateful, because they couldn't open their mouths.

I wandered through a stately room with marble floors and thick stone columns, recognizing presidents as I passed, but I only stopped at FDR. I knew him because Mr. Bishop said I should be inspired by his story. His portrait wasn't like the other presidents I'd passed. It looked unfinished, abandoned halfway like most of the pages in my coloring books. There were a bunch of hands lying around at the bottom of the painting, looking severed but animated, speaking without mouths or bodies. Most of the hands seemed nervous, curled in fists or

fidgiting with pens, but one in the corner looked friendly, poised in an easy, wrist-flicked way that seemed full of latent energy, as if it were about to spring into action.

I was staring at this hand when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I flipped around to see a stranger bending toward me, asking me a question, her lipsticked lips changing urgently from red to crimson and back as they creviced and flattened, her tongue darting from the dark cave of her mouth like a snake, the white curb of her teeth glistening under the angled museum lights. Again and again and eventually I understood: She wanted to know if I was lost.

This hadn't occurred to me, but of course, I was lost—I didn't know where my mother was, or, really, where I was, or how to get home. Automatically, I put my hand in my pocket to feel for the smooth plastic information card. But I didn't pull it out. An image of my brother's backpack flashed before my eyes, and then Mr. Bishop's smile, and my mother's clapping hands, and my own body lying on the couch, stricken down by the intensity of my own efforts.

I would tell her the information myself.

I opened and closed my mouth, at first soundlessly, like testing a hinge, or like a fish caught breathlessly on land.

Then, I spoke.

I hadn't even finished a sentence before the woman's face went pale. The skin between her eyebrows furrowed, her nostrils flared, and her top lip, just slightly, curled. Her eyes were wide, her pupils humongous. At first, I thought something hideous had materialized behind me, but, no, that wasn't it. It was my voice.

The expression only lasted a few seconds before the woman realized herself.

Oh, she said, her mouth round as the hole in a tube.

I felt heat rise up through my body, into my cheeks and out to my ears which felt sunburned. I wanted to crawl away from the heat of myself. The whole room must have heard me, every ear, the ears of the woman and the security guard and the tourist-couple in the corner and even the ears of the portraits themselves.

I thought of the hours of lessons, I thought of words and all that were part of them: the shape of the lips, the twist of the tongue, the pattern of breath, the pulses, the quivers, the throbs, and finally, after everything: the meaning, which, even if it was pronounced and produced correctly, might be, in the end, a lie or misunderstood. My mother had lied, Mr. Bishop had lied, the backpack was a lie, each piece of encouragement was a bread crumb thrown out on a path leading me here, to this lonely place, a mansion of cold marble where I was not welcome and didn't belong.

The woman looked embarrassed now too. She was talking, but I couldn't see what she was saying. Her head was turned slightly, as if she were conferring with one of the portraits. She was over-enunciating, her lips stretching into incomprehensible shapes.

I put my hands on this woman's stupid cheeks, twisting her face towards mine, so that we were eye to eye, so that maybe I could see what she was saying. But she jerked her head from my hands, then looked back at me with an expression of disgust that, this time, she didn't try to hide. As if it were my own fault that twice now I hadn't been the girl she'd expected. As if I were an alien or a savage instead.

The card in my pocket felt stiff against my thigh. I closed my eyes, but the world did not disappear—I could still feel my own heat and the heat of the woman, the smell of her sweat mixed with perfume, something floral and too sweet, but more than that I could still see her face, hanging before me in the darkness, framed in gold and finished with horrified, white-flecked eyes.