

Coming into the Language



That our family's home was a school for the deaf did not seem in any way extraordinary to Reba, Andy, and me. Lexington School for the Deaf was simply where we came from. Our apartment was on the third floor of the southern wing of the building, above the nursery school and adjacent to the boys' dormitory. The walls and doors, incidental separations between our living space and the rest of the building, were routinely disregarded. Our father might be called away from the table in the middle of dinner; we children often played down the hall with kids from the dorm. It wasn't until Reba, my older sister, proved at age six to be a sleepwalker — discovered one night riding the elevator in her pajamas — that our parents even thought to install a proper lock on the front door.

We lived at the school, in Queens, New York, because our parents worked there. Our mother taught nursery school; our father was the director of child care. But their involvement extended far beyond their jobs. They put out *The After-schooler*, a newsletter about residential life. They hosted holi-

day parties, cranking our stereo so that vibrations thrummed through everyone's rib cage. They built a snack bar in the basement for the high school kids, using giant electrical spools for tables. They invited people from all parts of the Lexington community to have dinner at our apartment, from student teachers to administrators, from alumni to people on the maintenance staff.

They seemed intimate with the very marrow of the school, and tended it with infinite care. Our mother painted giant murals that hung on the first floor: reproductions of famous children's book characters, altered slightly so that a hearing aid nestled in each one's ear. And our father extinguished a fire in the basement one night, pulling on jeans in response to the alarms that simultaneously clanged and sent pulsing red beams along the corridors.

Our parents knew every inch of Lexington, every passageway. In his rear pocket, our father carried a dense batch of keys. Yellow and snaggle-toothed in their neat leather holder, they pivoted forth to open any door. When he was summoned away from us — to hold a child who was out of control, or to interpret *Miranda* rights for police who were arresting a student, or to transport a blender from the kitchen so that the dorm kids could complete a cooking project — our mother would guide us on small adventures. She would take us to the pool for evening swims, afterward changing us into our sleepers in the locker room. She took us to the auditorium for movies, special screenings of subtitled prints that were shown in the days before closed captioning. She took us to watch the Lexington Blue Jays play softball out on the field, and when we got bored she taught us to weave crowns from the white clover that dotted the sidelines. On hot days she equipped us with paintbrushes and saucers of water so that we could "paint" the patio that led to the playground. Once, on the Fourth of July, she led us up to the roof, where we ate green ice cream and watched fireworks flash around the dark grid of the neighborhood.

Lexington was our red-brick castle, our seven-acre kingdom. My sister and brother and I pedaled our tricycles up and down the hallways, over the tan-and-cream bands of buffed linoleum. Later, on summer evenings, we learned to ride two-wheelers in the narrow strip of parking lot. Our books were stamped out from the school library; we picked up the mail from our slot amid the faculty boxes in the general office. Once we helped plant corn and tomatoes beyond the northern wall of the auditorium. We even ran the proverbial lemonade stand out in front of the school one hot July afternoon. We frequently ate dinner in the cafeteria: fruit cocktail, meat loaf, and peas; plastic trays; milk from a machine; and all around us the murmur and motions of our elders, the Lexington community.

Everyone knew us. They knew us in our diapers and they knew us in our pajamas. They knew us running around the basketball court at halftime during the big deaf-school tournaments. They knew us making candles out of melted crayons with the dormitory students, or chewing Mary Janes and Bazookas while reading the comics in the lobby with the weekend watchman. Lexington held our extended family; it was a large, interconnected neighborhood full of surrogate uncles and aunts.

During the seven years our family lived at the school, it had an annual enrollment of about four hundred students, from the infant center straight through high school. One hundred and fifty resided in the dorm. In the building's northern wing, the centers for hearing and speech, mental health, and research served thousands more deaf people from the greater New York area every year. Deaf people from all five boroughs, New Jersey, Westchester, and Long Island converged on Lexington for special events — athletic tournaments, plays, homecomings, lectures, and talent shows, all held in the gym or the auditorium. My sister and brother and I were at home among them. From the time we could walk, we were navigating forests of grown-up legs,

ducking in order not to obstruct signed conversation and pausing to endure having our cheeks pinched, our height exclaimed over.

In our world, people were either deaf or hearing. We registered both with equal lack of concern: the designation was relevant but unremarkable. We were already accustomed to cultural differences, even within our own family — our father was Jewish, our mother Protestant; our paternal grandparents were deaf, the rest of us hearing; Andy (who was adopted) was black, the rest of us white. We didn't actively learn so much as acquire the special behaviors and customs of communicating with deaf people.

We knew always to look at someone deaf when we spoke. We knew not to exaggerate the movements of our mouths but to make sure we did speak clearly. We knew that we should use our voices, because a lot of people picked up some sound with their hearing aids and that helped them read lips. Our father got annoyed if we only mouthed the words. If we wanted someone's attention, we knew that we should tap the person's arm or stamp our foot to send vibrations, never poke or snap. If we didn't understand someone's speech, we knew that we should listen for our father's voice, which would come from behind and above in easy translation, and without ever breaking eye contact we would respond, our lips automatically precise, our voices pitched at normal volume.

If our father wasn't there to translate, I would wrinkle the top of my nose in between my eyes, and then the person would automatically repeat what she was saying. If I still didn't understand, and I was feeling very tired and was waiting to be taken upstairs and put to bed, I might smile and nod, guiltily faking it. When I got older and knew enough sign language, I might use some of that, and then the person would beam, bestowing on me such a look of cherishing gladness that I would feel my cheeks and neck go hot.

Many nights I found myself, at the end of some late event, weaving groggily about the auditorium or gym, waiting for

the crowd to disperse so that my father could lock the doors and take me upstairs to bed. Someone would flick the lights on and off, signaling, "Go home, please go home." No one ever paid much attention. Finally the lights would go off altogether, making signed communication impossible, and people would genially drift out as far as the still-lighted lobby — only to resume conversation there. When at last everyone had been shooed from the building, there were always some who remained out in front, halfway down the steps, under the dim globe of a streetlight, anywhere that enough light remained to converse.

I imagined friends lingering out there long after I had been tucked under the covers, vivid silhouettes communicating deep into the night. That the task of clearing the building after community events was so challenging never struck me as odd. Long goodbyes and deafness intertwine in my mind as far back as I can remember.

My connection to Lexington extends even further back than my memories. It begins long before my birth.

Around the turn of the century, my father's father, Sam Cohen, arrived in this country from Russia. Because he was still a child, his parents were able to hide his deafness from authorities at Ellis Island, who could have sent him back across the ocean with a single chalk mark on his coat if they had detected any impairment. Sam went on to become a student at Lexington, then located in Manhattan, on the avenue for which it is named.

My grandmother, Fannie, attended P.S. 47, the city school for the deaf downtown, on Twenty-third Street. She and Sam met after graduation, on a boardwalk near Ocean Parkway where groups of young deaf people gathered during the summers. Fannie, too, was part of a wave of Eastern European immigrants, but when she and Sam married, the culture that infused their home was not so much Russian or Romanian as it was deaf.

After a social evening — a dinner party or a few hands of

cassino with another couple — they would stand at the door of their basement apartment in the Bronx for over an hour, saying goodbye. The other couple might live only blocks away. They might be going to see each other the very next day. It didn't matter. Always they would linger.

This reluctance to part, to sever the connection and enter the vacant night — this is an integral part of deaf culture. After a day spent surrounded by the hearing, at work, on the subway, at the market, those evening hours with other deaf people were never enough. The last prolonged moments by the door grew out of a hunger for connection. Sam and Fannie, in their lifetime, had few alternatives to satisfy that hunger.

The teletypewriter (TTY), which enables deaf people to communicate through phone lines, did not become widely used until the late 1960s. A large clattery machine indigenous to newsrooms, it transmits typed messages instantaneously to someone who is also operating a TTY. Originally, the number of households that owned TTYS was quite modest, and virtually no public agencies — schools, hospitals, libraries, police stations — owned one. Certain localities offered a service called Deaf Contact for use in emergencies. A deaf person would call on a TTY; a Deaf Contact operator, acting as intermediary, would then telephone the hearing party and deliver the message by voice. Both its hours of operation and the purposes for which Deaf Contact could be used were limited. Very often, deaf people resorted to beseeching their hearing neighbors to place calls for them, or they simply ventured out on foot.

Today the old machine has been streamlined into the compact, portable telecommunication device for the deaf, which, in addition to being cheaper and more convenient, increases deaf people's autonomy. Today Deaf Contact has evolved into twenty-four-hour, toll-free relay services across the nation that facilitate simultaneous voice-TTY conversations. Today we have closed-captioned television, on-line computer

information programs, and legislation mandating increased interpreter services. But even all of these modern developments have done little to quench deaf people's thirst for time spent physically together. When so much of the world is indecipherable, so much information inaccessible, the act of congregating with other deaf people and exchanging information in a shared language takes on a kind of vital warmth.

My first home was steeped in this warmth. I took it for granted, responded to it unconsciously, just as I took for granted that Lexington was in some way special, set apart from what lay beyond. Something survived intact within these walls, something perfectly removed yet vibrant in itself.

It seems to me that during my childhood, the fact that I was hearing was kindly overlooked. This may have been due to my lineage; people's feelings for my grandparents may have prompted a special graciousness toward me. It may have been simply my age; children are usually granted surrogate membership in the larger community in which they are raised. But I staked a further claim, one purely my own: after I was born, I was taken straight from the hospital to Lexington School for the Deaf. As far as I was concerned, in that motion alone my birthright was sealed.

What interests me now is not whether this fantasy was legitimate but why it mattered at all — why I longed so deeply for a place among deaf people. For if by blood I am bound to Lexington, by involuntary desire I am bound to the deaf community.

For the first century of its existence, Lexington was housed in a great gabled building across the East River, on Lexington Avenue and Sixty-eighth Street in Manhattan. It moved into its new lodgings in Jackson Heights in 1968, three months after I was born. I remember learning this fact when I was very small, and it struck me as further evidence of a special tie. With this information, I fully anthropomorphized the

school; we were nearly twins. She was larger than I, but we were the same age. We turned five together, and six; I remember patting her walls in recognition of these shared anniversaries.

Just before Astoria Boulevard and the Grand Central Parkway mark the end of Jackson Heights, Lexington claims one full block in the midst of the neighborhood's varied ethnic landscape. Up by the Roosevelt Avenue subway, where the elevated Number Seven rattles overhead, women in jeans and sneakers shop for Asian herbs, videos from Bombay, tropical fruit in terraced displays. Within a block, business gives way to residences — grand old Tudor houses and garden apartments whose Anglophilic names seem incongruous with their current occupants, who have settled here from Korea, Colombia, Russia, Argentina, Venezuela, and Uruguay. The immigrants' voices rise from stoops and drift through open windows, punctuated by bursts of flat American slang from their children, playing stickball in the streets.

On the other side of Northern Boulevard, the ethnic mixture changes sharply. Old Italian, Irish, and German families live here, in brick rowhouses that squat for blocks like fat red hens, each indistinguishable from the others except for an occasional pink metal awning hung over a front door, a cement lawn cherub tucked in a nave of sculpted hedges in a yard, or worn AstroTurf lining an exposed porch floor. Always a woman in a housedress is pruning a rosebush, a man in an undershirt is hosing down his drive. From every tidy plot of land radiates a dual sense of patriotism and homogeneity.

At the northernmost edge of this neighborhood stands Lexington, a cultural community in its own right and a visible presence in the area. Storekeepers recognize Lexington students by the hearing aids behind their ears; residents can pick them out a block away as they sign to each other while they walk. In spite of their quarter-century in Jackson Heights, the deaf remain as culturally distinct as any newly arrived immigrant population.

During the late 1960s, Lexington was in the early stages of changing its stance on sign language. American Sign Language (ASL) dates back to 1817, when Thomas Gallaudet, a hearing preacher from the United States, asked Laurent Clerc, a deaf teacher from France, to help him start the first public school for the deaf in this country, the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. Clerc introduced manual education to this country, teaching the students his native French Sign Language, which became the ancestor of contemporary ASL.

Despite the achievements of Clerc and Gallaudet, most hearing people considered sign language to be primitive, an indication of deficient intelligence. This attitude prevailed for more than a hundred years. Not until the 1950s did research begin to show that ASL is a legitimate language rather than a sloppy English-substitute for deaf people who functioned too poorly to learn to talk. But even though Lexington no longer regarded sign language as an abomination, it still prohibited its use in the classroom and treated the whole subject with moody ambivalence.

So my sister and brother and I did not grow up bilingual. Our lack of fluency in the language did not prevent us from using it among ourselves, however. Just as we scribble-scrabbled with crayons on newsprint when we were preliterate, we played at signing to one another in elaborate gibberish. The signs themselves were nonsense, of course, but other features of the language we reproduced with native perfection: pacing, eye contact, various placements of the hands on the body, facial movements, even the incidental click of lips and teeth. I liked those sounds that deaf people made — unchecked, intimate, like tiny, natural lullabies.

For the longest time I never fully believed that I wouldn't eventually become deaf. All around me, children were deaf. I observed the older ones: the wonderful way they chewed their gum and wore their hair and cavorted in the snack bar, and most especially the way they talked, with such enviable panache, such thick rapport. At that time Lexington still ad-

hered to oralism, the educational philosophy and practice that focuses on teaching deaf children to speak and read lips, but outside the classroom the older children signed to each other and no one much bothered them about it. I loved the rapid rhythms of their conversation, the effortless weave of eyebrows and fingers and shoulders and lips, so full of care-less grace and yet freighted with meaning.

Reba and Andy and I could fingerspell the alphabet, sign the numbers up to ten, say *I love you* and *More milk, please*. I knew the signs for colors and members of the family, knew *apple* and *ice cream* and *good* and *home*. But that was about the extent of my signing abilities.

I played at signing the way other children play dress-up; part of trying on possibilities, practicing for the future, it was laden with excitement and anticipation, even aspiration. I wanted to grow up and be deaf, be a Lexington student, with all the accouterments: hearing aids, speech lessons, fast and clever hands.

When I was four and five years old, I was one of a few hearing children who attended Lexington's preschool as part of an experiment with integration. In many ways I seemed no different from any of my classmates, making doll cakes in the sandbox, playing chase outside on the patio, eating just the middles of my bread-and-butter snack, as was our fashion. But I was not the same.

One afternoon, while playing with my classmates outside, I sought to remedy my most blatant difference. I selected two pebbles — urban pebbles, rough bits of dark gravel — from the ground and set them in the shallow cups of cartilage above my earlobes. When the teacher spied my improvised hearing aids, I was thoroughly scolded. "Never put *anything* smaller than your elbow in your ear!" was her mystifying admonishment. Puzzling over this helped deflect some of my embarrassment and hurt, but it did nothing to help me fit in with the others.

I sorely envied my classmates their speech lessons. Whenever I had occasion to peek into one of the closet-size speech rooms along the hall, I drank in the scenery, the exotic paraphernalia — mirrors and flash cards, balloons and balls, feathers and tongue depressors — with a lustful, wondering eye. I didn't know then that many deaf children loathe speech lessons, experience them as something designed for humiliation and failure. (Once, when I was six and attending public school, I faked a lisp for the speech therapist who visited our class so that I could finally discover what really went on during speech lessons. They turned out to be crushingly dull; the therapist — a beige, squarish woman — presented me with an entire box of plastic drinking straws and directed me to practice saying my *s*'s around them at home.)

But the time I remember being most alienated as a student at Lexington was during story hour. The other children and I would pull our little wooden chairs up to the table, and each of them would plug a special hearing aid into the metal box that sat on top, an FM unit that amplified the teacher's voice as she read the story into a wireless microphone. With their regular hearing aid receivers strapped around their chests on white harnesses and their heads crowned with large blue earphones, the other children leaned together, tightly connected, all joined to the same circuit.

I never felt so apart. The privilege of being able to hear paled in comparison to the privilege of being close, of sharing that common experience with the other children. The ability to hear, this extra sense through which I received so many signals and that allowed me to process information and make connections on another level, seemed to me at age five a mean gift.

It was not actually my ability to hear that set me most apart, though. At any rate, it was not my hearing per se, although it could be considered a symptom of my ability to hear: it was the fact that I spoke the teacher's language. This was my most important feature as a student. This, be-

fore anything else about me — personality, cognitive ability, learning style — was what shaped my experience in the classroom: I knew the same language as the teacher and the world at large.

One of my Lexington classmates had also started school knowing a language system. Like me, he had not been taught his first language; he had acquired it the way we all do naturally, through exposure, by seeing it used by parents, an older sibling, adult friends. However, his parents were deaf; his language was ASL. Unlike me, he knew a language that was not used, nor even condoned, by the teacher, who could not therefore know him or communicate with him in the same way that she could with me. The primary focus of this boy's education was learning English; everything else came second to that.

As for me, I was a language-smitten child, thrilled by the patterns and shapes of words. In my mind each letter of the alphabet had a particular color and personality. Every inanimate object — the wooden door wedge, the saltshaker, the windowsill — hummed with stories on its own special frequency. I related these stories all the time, told them to my brother and my sister, to my socks and my shoes. I dictated the stories to my parents and teachers, who transcribed them in English. Engaging with adults in this way, I could feel that I was the recipient of their delighted attention. I didn't know how lucky I was to have a vehicle for telling these stories, how lucky I was that my parents and teachers understood and encouraged me.

The messages my classmates received from hearing adults were altogether different. They did not qualify for most adult praise until they could use English. Most of them were not fluent in any language. They knew bits of English and were just learning to recognize words visually, although those words appeared slightly different in the mouths of their teachers, their mothers, their fathers. They were learning to connect the lip shapes with the concepts. They were being

taught to locate their own vocal cords and position their throats and tongues and teeth and manipulate all the muscles just so, and when the teacher told them they had reproduced the sounds correctly, they were praised.

The process was arduous, and there was so much they continued to miss. They could not *overhear*. While lining up at the low sink to wash my hands for lunch or gathering my mat for naptime, I was constantly absorbing the banter between teacher and assistant, picking up new vocabulary, cadences, and constructions; the others were not. They were forced to devote a significant portion of their school hours to speech and auditory training, learning to use their residual hearing and read lips. Every bit of time they spent at speech lessons, I spent learning content.

Because most of my classmates had no contact with older deaf people, they had no opportunity to learn sign language. In the sixties, ASL was still considered anathema. Many hearing parents, typically besieged by grief and guilt over having a deaf child, perceived in oralism an alluring promise. Deaf children who could use their voices and understand English speech seemed less alien, more intelligent. In other words, more hearing. Normal.

For more than a century, doctors and educators had typically advised parents not to allow their deaf children to learn sign language and not to learn it themselves — it would impede progress toward mastering English. As long as parents didn't fall prey, the experts warned, to the manualists — those who believed that sign language was a more appropriate method for instructing deaf students — their children would become fluent in English and be eligible to reap the rewards of the hearing world. The parents, generally new to deafness and eager to salvage whatever relationship with their deaf child was possible, clung to this advice, which offered the hope of communicating on their terms.

In spite of their good intentions, they ended up withholding from their children the one language that could be ac-

quired visually. And because deaf children do not acquire an aural, spoken language naturally — they must be taught every minute element that hearing children absorb effortlessly — they were sent to school with no language system at all. A bit of English and a few crude homemade signs were the only tools that most of my classmates possessed for making sense of the world.

Oralists are not willful oppressors. When Lexington, the oldest oral school for the deaf in the United States, began in 1864, it heralded a new option for deaf people. Until then, all schools for the deaf in this country used a manual system of communication. Lexington's founders were offering a hitherto unavailable choice, one that they believed was better, would grant deaf people more opportunities. But after more than a century (during which oralists had only qualified success in proving the merits of their method), research began to show that ASL is not an inferior language and that restricting its use constitutes a disservice and an injustice to deaf people — educationally, psychologically, and culturally.

During my lifetime, a civil rights movement has developed among deaf people. Spearheaded mostly by highly educated deaf professionals, its ranks are filled with people from the grassroots deaf community. With the issue of language at its core, the movement has grown influential at all levels, from local school boards to Congress. Political ramifications now apply to everything from personal style of communication to the portrayal of deaf people on television.

At Lexington, the movement has manifested itself in disputes over the use of sign language in the classroom and over the hiring of more deaf employees. During the past several years Lexington has gone through great changes, and it continues to change, in response to several forces: activism in the deaf community, a steady increase in the number of students of color and immigrant students, a national trend toward mainstreaming disabled children in public schools, and controversial medical technology that is almost certain

to reduce the number of culturally deaf people (members of the signing deaf community).

My father, Oscar, has led Lexington through many of these changes, as its superintendent for the past eight years and its principal for eight years before that. Hearing people, especially those affiliated with oral education and the medical profession, are seen by some deaf militants as members of the establishment that has long oppressed deaf culture and tried to make deaf people assimilate into the hearing world. As a hearing person, then, and as the director of a famous old oral school, Oscar is one of the enemies. But as the son of deaf parents and as a person who grew up signing and has spent his life living and working with deaf people, he is trusted and respected. He is framed by these dual images, regarded suspiciously by some, welcomed warmly by others.

As I grew up, I was slow to realize that the deaf community I had idealized was fraught with political tensions. I was even slower to understand that my status as a hearing person would forever restrict my membership in that community. For most of my childhood, I continued to nurture a secret belief that I belonged to this special world, and it to me.

I was seven years old, halfway through the second grade, when we moved to Nyack, a village on the Hudson River about thirty miles north of the city. Our mother no longer worked at Lexington, but our father had become the principal and commuted to Jackson Heights each day. After the compact railroad apartment we had inhabited at the school, our new house seemed vast, echoey. Beyond its cool stucco exterior stood a row of dark, towering fir trees, a perpetually shady back lawn, dense hydrangea bushes — nothing familiar, no one we knew. It was here that I began to use sign language to remove myself, to retreat into a comforting, secluded place.

Our parents had chosen Nyack partly because of its repu-

tation as a well-integrated community, but we soon discovered that almost all of the other children on our bus route were white. There was always a group of big boys, fourth-graders, who would menace us. "Oreo. Zebra," they would say, seeing Reba and Andy and me together. They would lurch down the aisle of the moving bus and stand over our seat. "You fuck your sisters, don't you?" they would say to Andy. Andy was six.

Furious, frightened, I would channel my response into my hands, discreetly spelling passionate words into my lap. Our parents told us that if we ignored the boys, they would stop. They advised Reba and me to sit on either side of Andy, hemming him in for his protection; if he lost his temper and entered into combat, he would surely be beaten. So I sat on the aisle, pressed tightly against my brother, willing us all to remain mute, composed, while in my lap I unleashed silent furies. Fingerspelling, I imagined I was working spells, weaving cryptic incantations around my brother and sister and me. This private language was a kind of power I retained over the awful boys, an invisible shield beyond which they could not go.

When the taunting eventually subsided, as our parents had predicted it would, I did not stop signing. The habit became ingrained; whenever I was bored or angry or hurt or threatened, my fingers would start to spell. I found in this language a way to absent myself, to grow remote and slip into private, imagined conversation. It was like a tangible cord that stretched from my fingers all the way back to the world I had left behind at Lexington. It was my flying carpet, my trap door. If being able to hear had set me apart when I was a student at Lexington, I used sign language to maintain this sense of separation when I was among hearing people.

I was not fluent then, but pestered my father endlessly for new vocabulary: "What's the sign for tuna fish? How would you say umbrella?" Every June, when he brought home a fresh copy of the Lexington yearbook, I would pore over the

pages, longing to become deaf and go to Lexington. What I missed most was the closeness of the school, the physical intimacy wrought by sign language.

Deafness is classified as a low-incidence disability. About two million Americans are classified as hearing-impaired; only around two hundred thousand of those are culturally deaf. For seven years I had lived among members of this minority group, witnessing bonds that transcended language. I longed for the warmth of words left unspoken and nevertheless understood.

But as I got older I had to reconcile this desire with the fact that I was not deaf. I had become a full-grown hearing person. Although I could (and did) choose to socialize and work with deaf people, I could never be a member of the deaf community. Cultural identity is fixed. No amount of tricycling up and down Lexington's halls could ever change that.

And yet, certain details persist. Those were the halls of my childhood. I am Sam's granddaughter and Oscar's daughter. I once put pebbles in my ears, once wished I were deaf. These are bits of evidence, facts I can tick off on my fingers, count and possess like objects. Even today, when people ask me where I am from, the answer that comes first to mind is always Lexington.