

to the hard of hearing
YOU SHOUT

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Artist Statement

Introduction

“Deaf voices go missing like sound in space, and I have left earth to find them,” Raymond Antrobus wrote in his poem “Dear Hearing World.” These voices are quickly lost within the classrooms, dinner tables, workforces, and especially the stories and metaphors of the hearing world.

C.S. Lewis once said, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” Flannery O'Connor follows this metaphor as well. In her essay “The Fiction Writer and His Country,” she typed out what may be her most well-known quote: “When you have to assume that [your audience does not hold your beliefs], then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures” (805-806).

Both of these metaphors make sense to us. When someone can't hear well, it's instinctive to talk louder, even yell. Without asking the deaf or hard of hearing person what they actually need, the hearing world has prescribed the solution to the issue so readily that it has even become a metaphor. The only problem is that deaf or hard-of-hearing people would beg you not to shout at them. Shouting distorts the lips, making the words even more difficult to decipher. A megaphone covers the lips completely, making it impossible to comprehend what is being said. The deaf person does not have the option to explain what they need; the hearing person has already concluded that they know enough to cure that disability and make the deaf person as good as hearing.

One might make the argument that they are just creative metaphors that clearly show the author's point. But I would disagree. These thoughts are so prevalent in our society that when I state that I am hard-of-hearing, people's first instinct is to raise their voice and it is hard for me to convince them that shouting does not help me.

That is the heart of this project: to find the true voices of Deaf people and the Deaf culture, and to amplify them for the sake of those like me, struggling to find their identity, their worth, and God's masterful, loving touch in their deafness.

Why the project is important

As a fifteen-year-old struggling to comprehend a cranky audiologist's prediction that I might completely lose my hearing, I coped in the only way I knew how: I searched for stories. I wanted to know what was waiting for me in this possible future of deafness. I scoured my library but didn't turn up much except a copy of *Of Sound Mind* (published in 2004 with a basic plotline of *my deaf family can't survive without me so that means I need to say goodbye to my future*) and *Feathers* (published in 2010 with a sub-plotline of *I think my deaf brother is great but he is tired of it and wants to be hearing—oh wait, hearing people don't like him*).

It was d/Deaf people I met in the coming and going of my life, not the stories I read, who taught me that I didn't have to see my own hearing loss as a curse. Their opinions of themselves and their culture were drastically different from the books proudly adorned with painted sign language on their covers that I found in the library. From a friendly stranger with a red hearing aid, I learned to be proud of what I could do and okay with what I couldn't. From Gerry who taught sign language for free to further communication between the Deaf and hearing community, I learned about the vastness of the Deaf community and the depth of their culture.

From American Sign Language, I learned the pride of one's own language and the fight to make it acceptable.

It wasn't until years after I was officially diagnosed with hearing loss that I finally found a story portraying Deaf characters in a positive light: *Sue Thomas: F.B. Eye*, a TV show that followed the true story of the first Deaf FBI agent. I was instantly captivated by it, by the way it showed Sue Thomas' legitimate struggles, her crowning achievements, how she tore down stigmas, and most importantly, how her deafness gave her the ability to do things no one else could.

Why it is important to the larger community

I'm not the only example of why positive and truthful stories of Deaf characters are important. My story is not unique. According to the National Institute of Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, 90 percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents. At a critical period of their life when they are like me, delving into their identities, their ability to influence the world around them, their worth in the sight of other people and in God, they need stories that show them all that they can become. In times like these, these deaf children and teenagers and young adults need stories that uplift them and show the people around them how to uplift them. This is not the time to read about the deaf-mute who can never connect and commits suicide at the end of the book, or to read about the deaf boy always rejected by the hearing girls based on his deafness. It is time to read about the deaf detective who can solve crimes no one else can because of her deafness or about Cece who turns her deafness into a superpower, or to read the story of Sue Thomas, a real Deaf person who did amazing things in her lifetime.

If positive stories like what I heard directly from the Deaf community itself don't reach the mainstream American culture, people won't see deafness or the Deaf culture as something

positive just as I didn't when I was younger. They will instead see deafness in the way the Deaf community hates and is harmful to anyone with hearing loss: as something to be pitied, as something continually in need of fixing. This thought process continues the harmful mindset that has prevailed in our culture for so many generations already.

What attitudes have been ingrained in our society through this faulty mindset and storytelling? Many people misunderstand the diversity of sign language, thinking that it is a universal language used by all deaf people around the world and not realizing that there are differences between countries' languages such as Chinese Sign Language, British Sign Language, or American Sign Language and certainly not realizing that within ASL, there are regional accents as well as Black Sign Language. It doesn't help that until 1960, all sign languages were simply called *the* sign language (Baynton 108).

There are more issues than minor frustrations though. Oralism, which is the exclusive use of lip reading and teaching deaf children to speak while forbidding the use of sign language, has been the orthodox method for teaching deaf children up until the 1970s (Baynton 5). While people and educators are slowly seeing the downsides to it, such as children not being able to communicate until much later in their life or without extensive struggles on their side, oralism still heartily exists in mainstream America. Even among my family and friends, I encounter people who are confused by my desire to learn about the Deaf community. After all, won't it be much more in my favor if I'm as hearing as possible? These pervading thoughts travel deep. The Akron Deaf community still remembers when Deaf parents would receive visits from police officers and child protection agencies who thought that because the parents could not hear if their child cried, they would not be able to properly care for them.

If people have stories that uplift the Deaf culture and celebrate the people in it rather than bring them down or question their standard of life, the hearing community will be more willing to accept them. By seeing them as people with a rich culture and beautiful language, they will be willing to work with the Deaf community to make things more accessible and useful without blaming the d/Deaf for needing it.

What my project is

Clearly then, accurate stories featuring the Deaf community and Deaf characters are vital. This is what my thesis project tackles.

I have shaped my project based on this idea: stories are a conversation with each other, each story adding another voice and another viewpoint. For this reason, I spent part of my project in research, to fully understand how Deaf characters are presented in mainstream literature. (A bibliography of works I read can be found at the end of this document.) This research then informed how I created my story and specifically what topics I addressed: Deaf community, sign language, and Deafness in the church.

My research

In researching this topic, I read 20 books, articles, and poems to understand as much of the representation throughout literature as I could. I also worked with Gerry Green, a long-time translator and advocate to the Deaf community, to understand the themes in literature according to the Deaf community and culture.

The main themes I've found in the stories I read are what you would expect: loneliness and unbelonging, which is most often felt because there is only one deaf character in the story who is not able to communicate well with the other characters. One hypothesis I had was these

feelings came about because of the genre that I found the most d/Deaf fiction in—Middle Grade and Young Adult fiction. Because this fiction is geared towards children and teenagers who are also trying to discover who they are and where they fit in, loneliness is a major theme whether characters are hearing or deaf. However, this hypothesis was proven false. Even as I found more adult fiction with deaf characters, the feelings of isolation (although somewhat lessened) remained. A reasonable hypothesis would be that deaf characters (which then transfers to the Deaf community) are only seen as lonely and out of place, incapable of finding other deaf people to be with despite the fact that there are Deaf churches, Deaf restaurants, Deaf colleges, and a variety of other Deaf activities, places, and groups.

Deaf characters are also used as tropes for the hearing world. Flannery O'Connor uses this deafness trope with her character Rayber in her novel *The Violent Bear It Away*. Rayber is a scientific character and must wear a hearing aid. O'Connor uses this hearing aid to show his detachment from the world, that he is so scientifically minded that he can't even interact with the world without processing it through a machine. When his son is murdered, Rayber can hear his shout and struggle through the hearing aid and feels nothing. Carson McCullers also uses a trope like this with her novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. One of the main characters, Singer, is a deaf-mute. He has one friend that he can sign to, but that friend ends up needing to leave shortly after the story begins. After that, Singer is completely isolated. The other characters love Singer, however. He is very caring with his actions, will give them tea, let them stay in his apartment, will play games with them. Most importantly, they can talk to him. They can talk and talk and talk and tell him everything. They think he is their best friend, right up until the point that he commits suicide out of loneliness. All that time they thought he was listening to them, he was doing his best but drowning underneath their words. Lip-reading is hard. He couldn't keep up.

He didn't actually know any of them that well. McCullers uses Singer's inability to communicate as a metaphor for human connection, and then suggests it would be better to be dead than deaf and alone.

There were marked differences in the poetry and stories written by people who were familiar with Deaf culture or were themselves Deaf or Hard of Hearing versus authors who were not. Penny Warner, author of the Connor Westphal series and *Dead Body Language*, has worked with deaf children in a school before and wrote the only book I've read so far with a deaf main character whose deafness was not the main idea of the story. Connor Westphal's deafness, instead, was a part of her everyday life. Sometimes a hindrance, sometimes a help, but mostly just life. *The Silence Between Us*, written by Allison Gervais who is also hard of hearing, is the first story that I read which had a character involved in the Deaf culture, even though she had been forced to move away because of her mother's job and only kept in touch with her Deaf friends over video call. Raymond Antrobus and Meg Day, who are both Deaf, both write poetry that tries to show the hearing world what it is like to be deaf, but simultaneously asks the hearing world to *stop* trying to fix them. *El Deafo* by Cece Bell showed a hard of hearing girl struggling to figure out her hearing loss and who turns it into a superpower.

Authors without this experience with the Deaf world show something different. Jean Ferris, who wrote *Of Sound Mind*, and Jacqueline Woodson, author of *Feathers*, either show us the Deaf culture from the outside looking in as they puzzle together what it is, how it works, and what happens there or they don't show the culture at all, instead leaving the Deaf character to flounder by themselves as the hearing characters attempt to patch their own solutions on the issue.

This is where new stories need to come in, I believe. Even within the stories written by Deaf authors, there is not much that happens within the Deaf community. Instead, it is as if the Deaf authors feel like they must tell their stories in the hearing world if they want people to take their stories seriously. All of the stories I have found focus on one Deaf character who either has to leave the Deaf world to enter the hearing world or who doesn't know the Deaf community exists. I did not find one story that was grounded in the Deaf community. This trend needs to be reversed. My contribution to this conversation will be stories that highlight the Deaf community and the Deaf world.

This does not mean that Deaf people and therefore accurate Deaf literature ignores that there are struggles. The readings I have done are full of these paradoxes. There is a pride in the Deaf community, but there is sorrow and frustration over the communication struggle with hearing people. There is a community found in the Deaf world, but there is also the acute knowledge that even surrounded by hearing friends, the Deaf person will be alone.

How my story talks back

I wanted to write a story that captured the missing puzzle pieces of other literature, that showed the Deaf community's beauty and struggles, that uplifted and honored them. I wanted to write the story that I needed, back when I was fifteen and wondering what was in store for me. Out of this desire, "Yet One Body" was born and written.

Here are the specific ways in which "Yet One Body" enters the conversation and talks back to the literature and stories that I read:

- ★ Was reviewed by an ASL translator for sensitivity and accuracy of the Deaf community
- ★ Has two main characters to highlight the deaf community and combat the idea that deafness cuts a person off from all human interaction

- ★ Contains Deaf characters communicate almost solely in American Sign Language and are proud of their language
- ★ Is told from a Deaf point-of-view to show the culture from the inside out rather than trying to puzzle the culture together from a hearing standpoint outside of the Deaf culture`1
- ★ Brings deafness and the Deaf culture into the Church and looks at real challenges faced by Deaf people within Christianity
- ★ Presents Deaf characters as humans, and not as plot points to bring added drama or highlight a failed human condition
- ★ Bridges the gap between the hearing and Deaf community rather than polarizing the two people groups

Yet One Body

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

Romans 12:14-20 ESV

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.

John 17:11b ESV

I.

The pastor was tired. I could see it in the rumpled clothes, the wrinkles across his forehead, the circles under his eyes. There was an algebra book flipped open behind him that we'd interrupted him studying, no doubt his son's. Unsigned greeting cards scattered beside the math book and the "new messages" light was flashing on his machine.

And here we were, come to put more work on his plate. He was delighted.

I would like permission to start a translated service, Meredith told the pastor, signing as she spoke so Jamie, my friend and roommate, and I could follow along with the conversation. *There is no Deaf church or translated service anywhere in our town, despite the growing Deaf community we have here. I've been praying about it, and God is opening doors for a ministry.*

"Do you mean like a Deaf church within our church?" The pastor spoke, and Meredith translated for us. "Like they'd use one of our rooms to have their services?"

I shook my head. *No,* I signed and Meredith translated my American Sign Language into English for the pastor. *We want to be part of your church, not create our own church.*

I'm a translator, Meredith added. *I've done translating for events and can apply the same principles here. All I would need is a small corner of your screen on the projector and a video camera that can stream the video so that Kara and Jamie can see my translations.*

The pastor rubbed his face. "You want to do your sign language on the main screen at church during the service? Won't that be distracting? There's no other way to do it?"

Meredith leaned forward. *There are conferences I've translated for that use this for even one Deaf person coming to the event. What are we saying if we, as believers in Christ, aren't willing to do it for two people desiring to know Christ better?* She paused. *Plus, it's not just for Kara and Jamie. There is an entire community out there that no one is reaching out to, but that God is giving us the opportunity to. Who are we to say no?*

He laughed and shook his head. "Meredith O'Conner, you know how to say what you mean, don't you? But, it's not up to me. To start a new ministry, you'll need to talk to the elders. There's a meeting coming up at the end of this week that I can get you into, and you can present your case to them."

I waved my hand to grab his attention before I started to sign out of habit, even though I knew he didn't need to see my hands to hear Meredith's translation. *Are you on our side? Do you agree with us?*

He shrugged. "I'm with God, and if God paves the way, then I follow it."

Meredith looked pleased by his answer, but I felt cheated. Surely he knew how to stand and fight for people God cared about. Surely he knew God often asked people to walk a narrow, canyon-rimmed trail rather than cruising down a beautifully paved highway in a Corvette.

Thank you, Pastor. Meredith stood up and shook his hand. *You won't regret it.*

Jamie and I did likewise, except by touching the tips of our fingers to our chins and then extending our hands. The pastor smiled and nodded before turning back to the algebra textbook.

Well ladies, Meredith signed. *It looks like we got our work cut out for us.*

The idea for this ministry was sparked over hot chocolate on a video call. Jamie and I had sat on our dorm floor in our sweatshirts and PJs, pressed up against the edge of my bed, while Meredith sat in an office chair on the other side of the screen having just returned from an

interpreting job. She still had her curly hair styled and wore her nice black shirt so her hands would be easily visible as she translated. We'd all gone to college together at Gallaudet University, though Meredith graduated two years before Jamie and I.

Jamie and I called Meredith to share the good news: we'd applied for mathematical positions at Parnox Labs and were both hired, *and* the job was in the same town where Meredith was currently working.

It was a great entry-level job with positions for both of us and we knew there was a Deaf community in the town. We'd visited Meredith once after she graduated, and had gone with her to the monthly Deaf game night. But, on the video call with Meredith to share the good news, we asked about a Deaf church in town that we'd be able to go to.

Meredith's hands paused and she shook her head, curls flying. *We don't have a Deaf church in town.*

Beside me, Jamie threw her hands in the air. *What are we supposed to do, preach to ourselves?* She turned to me. *We'll have to take turns who's the pastor each week.*

Over the screen, Meredith's mouth opened with laughter. I just rolled my eyes at Jamie's drama. *No, no, we can go to a hearing church and have an interpreter. I mean, unless you really want to hear my preaching.*

Jamie crinkled her nose. *A hearing church? That seems like a disaster waiting to happen.*

I grew up in a hearing church and it was great, I retorted. *Some of them tried to learn sign language, they paid for a translator every time I came, and they raised money to help Mom buy my hearing aids.*

Friendly faces, but not a community. Hearing people don't understand like Deaf people do, Jamie shot back. You didn't know another deaf soul until you went to high school, and then you never went back to the hearing world, did you?

Meredith waved her hands at the camera, dragging us back to the conversation. *No, no, this is a great idea. I've been praying about how to start a Deaf ministry here, and this could be the perfect way to do it.*

And so here we were, three weeks out of college, starting a new ministry and a new job in a new town. The only thing that had stayed the same was that Jamie and I were still roommates, this time in an apartment instead of a dorm room. It was terrifying to step into the apartment the first time, but also exhilarating. We could choose to do whatever we wanted here. We could mold it into anything we wanted. We had power now.

We'd only been in town just long enough to visit Goodwill and buy a TV stand and armchair. We pressed the TV stand up against the far wall and tucked the armchair in the corner. Then both our families surprised us with a graduation gift: a brand-new round table and a high-quality couch. The colors on the couch and armchair didn't match at all, but they were both comfortable and better than sitting on the floor. We'd stacked some still unpacked boxes in front of the couch to make a coffee table.

Before we'd even set foot in the town, Meredith had set up the meeting with the pastor, and she whisked us off shortly after our families left to drive home after helping us settle in. It wasn't hard to see that Meredith's excitement level was much higher than Jamie's and even higher than my own. I think she'd been dreaming of doing something like this since she graduated. All she needed was the right catalyst to get things moving. We were dear friends, of course, but we were also the exact catalysts she was looking for.

Meredith drove us to the church for the meeting with the pastor, and now she dropped us off at our apartment. *Do come in, Mere.* Jamie offered from the passenger seat. *You can be our first visitor.*

For sure! I added from the backseat. *We can grab a pizza and talk game plans. You gotta tell us about this board of elders.*

Her smile opened into a laugh and she agreed. Unlocking the door and opening it for Meredith felt like a shock. Opening *my* door to *my* apartment felt like a dream, but it also gave a sense of finality to what we were about to do. This was *my* town now, and this church and ministry would be *mine* just the same. There was no backing down now.

During the first meal at the new table residing in my very own apartment, the three of us laid out our game plan.

What questions will they ask? Jamie asked.

Goals. Plans. Where we see ourselves in five years. I winked at her. *All the interview questions we've been answering for the past three months.*

Yes, Meredith agreed. *But also, they'll want to know why you want to be part of the hearing church, and not just create your own church.*

A church of two. I shook my head and leaned back in the chair. *Now that would be interesting.*

Jamie raised her eyebrows. *It's a valid question. It'd be so much easier if it was just us.*

Easier for us, or for them?

Jamie shrugged. *Both.*

I paused a moment, regarding her carefully. *You don't think this is going to work, do you?*

Jamie looked from me to Meredith and back to me. *We have a completely different culture than the other people in that church, Kara. So no. Not really. What more would a hearing church want with us than a hearing world? They love our language, but hate our deafness.*

Jamie was a rarity among Deaf people. She was born to Deaf parents, had Deaf siblings, went to Deaf schools since she was a baby, and thrived in the Deaf culture long before she ever realized there was a hearing world out there.

I was different. I was born to two fully hearing parents. Doctors didn't know why I was born deaf, just called it a "genetic mishap." After all, "those things do happen." Shortly after, my dad was killed in action overseas and my now-single mother had to figure it all out on her own. In a situation like that, I very quickly learned what it was like to always be behind, in conversations, in comprehension, in friendships. The only place I felt accepted was at church, where they made it their mission to include me as much as possible.

Look, Jamie signed. I want a church, too. And I'm willing to do my best to make this ministry work. I just think it's going to be an exercise in disappointment. How long until we end up back here on our couch preaching at each other every Sunday?

Meredith nodded. *Fair enough.*

Fair enough, I echoed, but I wished she was walking into this with the same excitement I was.

Back on topic, Jamie signed. *Why do we want to be part of this church? Elder-worthy answers only!*

On the day of the meeting, Jamie and I stood at the end of a long, cherry oak table with the elders dotting the seats. Meredith stood off to the side enough that she could translate for us but close enough the elders would see that she was part of the conversation too. An empty cross rested on the back wall, directly opposite me. The only smile I recognized around the table was the easy, still-wrinkled grin of the pastor.

The elders listened carefully as Jamie and I explained our need for a church family, and Meredith described how she would be able to make it happen: All she needed was a spot to translate from, a video camera, and a small corner of the large screens in the sanctuary. As a visual representation of what we'd like to do, she showed a video from one of her translation gigs. The elders watched, smiled, nodded, and took notes. And then they asked questions—about us, about our plans and goals, about our experiences.

“Why the screen?” One of them asked. “Why don't you just have a Deaf section of the church? You can stand or sit where everyone can see you in person, and there would be no issues of technology or video cameras and streaming your image on the screen.”

Meredith nodded resolutely. *That's a great question, but I think the answer is simple. I want my Deaf friends to feel welcome and comfortable in the church, free to mingle with their fellow Christians, and certainly free to sit wherever they want. I don't think that you want anyone to feel like they are only welcome if they sit in a certain spot, or only talk to certain people. The only way we can be a ministry that is one body, one church, is if we don't regulate people to certain places.*

“Are you concerned about the different cultures? The different languages?” Another elder asked us. “Why do you want to start a deaf ministry here?”

Jamie shot me an *I-told-you-so* glance.

But we had already discussed the answer. I stepped forward slightly. *The fact is, there is no Deaf church here or Deaf ministry anywhere in this town, and you already have a translator here—I motioned to Meredith—who has been praying for an opportunity to minister to the Deaf community. The Deaf community is the world's largest unreached people group because of language barriers, and there are probably very few other Deaf Christians in town. We're not asking to take over your church. We're just asking that you let us come alongside you, be equal to you, begin reaching out to the Deaf in this community, and see where God takes it from there.*

Meredith nodded as I finished before adding her own answer, speaking while signing. *There will be cultural differences, but I remember reading pleas for unity and harmony in the Bible, not for division among people types. We are one body in Christ, each for a different purpose, to walk together and help each other.*

I met eyes with Jamie and she nodded slightly. We'd given our best and truest answer.

The elders dismissed us, telling us they'd let us know as soon as they'd made their decision.

We ended up at Steak and Shake, sitting around the table and dipping overly long spoons into milkshakes. No one said much. The nervousness of the meeting had drained the words out of our fingers. The elders didn't tell us how long we would have to wait for them to make their decision, just that they would let us know. Would it be days? Weeks?

The drive from Stake and Shake was also still, without anyone making a sign. We'd carpooled again while Jamie and I learned the layout of the town, and Meredith drove back to our apartment through the park. *It's relaxing*, she said turning in her seat at a stoplight so I could see her signs. *No better way to kick back than shakes and trees.*

Just as we pulled into our apartment building's parking lot, Meredith's phone vibrated. She picked it up, then spun to face Jamie and me. *It's the pastor!*

She moved the call to the speaker so she could have both her hands to translate the call for us. "The elders decided to grant your request," he said. "Congratulations. You'll have to work with the building coordinator and the creative team to find a place for you to translate and integrate your video with the regular display."

Meredith, signing to translate herself, thanked him.

"Also," the pastor continued. "The elders are a little bit concerned about your experience. None of you ever worked in ministry before. So, we'll be appointing a mentor to work with you and make sure you get off to a good start." He didn't know who it would be yet, but he promised to let us know as soon as he found out. Meredith wished him well, thanked him again, and said goodbye before hanging up.

Girls, we are a go! Meredith's beam could outshine the sun, but already I felt the first breezes of a coming storm in my stomach. The pressure was on. Now we would see if we actually had what it would take and if we could keep our boat afloat. Maybe we would drown, maybe we'd swim, but the eyes of the church would now be upon us.

II.

I was up early the morning before the first service. I tried to eat a bowl of cereal, but eventually abandoned it on the counter beside the sink. For the past two weeks, we'd been working with the mentor the elders appointed to us and as well as with the Sunday morning team to carve out space for Meredith to translate from, and to ensure all the technology was working correctly. So far, in all of our tests, it seemed to be. To prepare the congregation for our changes, the pastor had also announced at the service last week that we would be beginning translations of the services.

Yet here I found myself, pacing the living room and offering up nervous prayers for a smooth integration into the service.

I wanted more than just a smooth integration, though.

It wasn't until I felt the words slipping through my fingers that I understood my other prayer, the one I had been too nervous to process: the prayer for a friend. A friend who would come and stand alongside us, who would welcome us to the church and be excited about the translations streaming on the screen; a friend who would show Jamie that it was possible to bridge the gap between our two cultures.

Outside the living room window and across the street, the sun began to rise, my first hint to stop pacing and start getting ready for the big day.

When we arrived, the church was still waking up. The worship band on stage, practicing the songs for the day. Meredith stood on stage in her "translating booth"—a white sheet tall

enough for her to stand in front so we could clearly see her signs—and practiced translating them. The booth was on the left side of the stage and Meredith was signing to the camera in front of her. The technical team gathered in the sound booth at the back of the sanctuary doing their checks of the day.

From where I stood, the sanctuary looked like a jungle of chairs. The thought that strangers would be filling them in just a few hours, strangers whose routine was about to be disrupted partially because of me, was overwhelming. If Jamie hadn't been with me, I might have thrown in the towel right then and there and marched all the way back to the safety and familiarity of Gallaudet. Luckily enough, I wasn't alone. It makes a big difference to know that you have someone with you who you can communicate with fully.

The rhythmic vibrations slowed, then stopped. On stage, the worship team broke apart. One of the singers talked with Meredith as they trotted down the steps to the stage together. Meredith caught sight of us and smiled, lifting her hand over her head in greeting. She headed our way, the singer in tow.

Welcome, welcome! Meredith signed. She gestured toward the woman beside her. *This is Lilyanna.* She turned to Lilyanna and introduced both of us.

Lilyanna beamed, a wide smile that showed each of her teeth and caught us up in an embrace without saying a word.

“So good to meet you!” Lilyanna said and Meredith translated for us. Lilyanna reached out and shook each of our hands. “I’m so excited to see what you are doing here. It’s important to outreach to everyone, not just the people you immediately think of when you think of ministry.” She watched Meredith’s translation with fascination. “Also, your language is just so cool. It’s amazing how the human spirit will always find a way to communicate.”

It's a beautiful language, I agreed.

I have permission to begin teaching a sign language class at the church, Meredith added. If you're ever interested in learning or know someone who might be, point them my direction.

Lilyanna clapped her hands. "That sounds absolutely delightful. Please let me know when that starts."

A few families began streaming in as we got closer to the time when services officially started. Lilyanna waved to someone she knew who appeared behind us, then brought her attention back to our small group.

"Girls," Lilyanna said. "I know what it's like to uproot your life and move somewhere entirely new. My husband and I are free next week after church. Why don't you come home with us then and we can have lunch together?"

I pointed to Meredith. *Meredith as well, to translate for us?*

Lilyanna's smile grew. "Of course." She looked over to Meredith. "Of course you're welcome, Meredith."

We would be delighted then, Lilyanna. Thank you for the invitation.

Lilyanna chatted with us for several more minutes before being called off. I watched her disappear with almost giddy delight. Just hours earlier, I'd been praying for a friend. Could God be answering my prayers this quickly?

Jamie nudged my side and pointed out some seats we could grab for the service.

The service went flawlessly. There were no issues with the technology, and we both understood every word the pastor said. Meredith looked great on screen.

No one else talked to us like Lilyanna had. Several people had smiled as they passed by. One person looked about ready to come chat until she saw Jamie's hands move in response to

mine, and then he backed away. I watched the people throughout the service to see if anyone seemed annoyed or unnerved by Meredith's translation on the screen. It was new for them, and would probably be distracting until they got slightly more used to it, but no one seemed upset. One child, having come into the sanctuary mid-service clutching his mother's hand as she gave him the universal *start-behaving-or-so-help-me* glare, stared at Meredith in fascination. He stopped wiggling in his seat and instead played with his hands, shaping them and forming them like Meredith did. His mother looked grateful.

Jamie and I left shortly after the service ended; we still had a lot of boxes to unpack. We checked in with Meredith, who agreed it had all gone very well. I felt the relief and joy in equal measure: this was shaping up to be every bit the new beginning I'd hoped it would be.

The next week found us walking up the walkway to Lilyanna's house for lunch after another successful service. Lilyanna opened the door seconds after Meredith rang the bell, a smile on Lilyanna's face. "Come in, come in!"

She waved her hand at me. "I think this is the proper way to get your attention, right? I tried to read up about how to best interact with Deaf people online and a lot of it was confusing so I hope I get it right! Let me know if I do anything wrong."

Meredith quickly slipped to her side and began translating for me. I smiled and nodded. *That's perfect. Thank you, Lilyanna. We appreciate it.*

I didn't think it was possible but her smile grew even bigger. I could see how the church could get swallowed up in it; if you had Lilyanna's smile, the others would follow it. "I have things set up," she said through Meredith's hands, "so that you and Jamie are opposite of Meredith. That way you can see her when she translates."

Perfect, I signed.

She turned her back to us to lead us toward the dining room, and I turned to wink at Jamie. She was trying, harder than Jamie thought any hearing person would, to bridge the gaps between us. Jamie shook her head at me, smirking. She was not convinced.

Throughout the afternoon, Lilyanna was gracious with us and quick to make sure that we were comfortable and could understand what was happening. It was refreshing, and even Jamie warmed up, cracking jokes and sharing stories.

The food was delicious. It was the first homemade meal I'd eaten since moving. Half of our dishes were still tucked away in boxes... somewhere. My aunt gave me a cookbook and Jamie found an eight-dollar crockpot at a yard sale on her way home from work, but we hadn't actually taken the time to make a meal yet.

Lilyanna's husband joined us for dinner. He was an introvert, she said brightly smiling, but not to worry about that because she had plenty of words for both of them. He smiled and raised his glass to her, a toast to his appreciation of not having to speak.

How did we like the town? she asked, and what did we do for jobs? She asked us about our first day of work, and how that went.

It went well, we said. We had cubicles right next to each other. We could pop our head over the divider and sign to each other.

Then, Lilyanna blurt it out, as if she'd been holding the words back but they'd exploded through her lips before she could control them: "Do you ever wish you could be hearing?"

Never, Jamie signed, a harsh slash through the air, as I shook my head and signed, *no*.

Lilyanna frowned. "Never?"

Jamie again shook her head.

I shrugged. *When I was younger and didn't know anyone else like me, yes. But now I have Deaf friends, a Deaf school, and this amazing language joining us all together. So no.*

“But have you ever *heard* anything?” She pressed.

We simultaneously shook our heads.

“So don't you ever wonder what you're missing?”

Meredith's signs were getting tighter. I could tell she was getting a little bit nervous about the conversation.

Probably about the same amount of wondering you do, Jamie said. Her signs were also getting choppy.

Lilyanna's eyebrows crinkled together in confusion.

Don't you ever wonder what you're missing by not being Deaf?

“Not really. Well, not until I met you.”

Jamie shrugged. *There you have it.*

Lilyanna nodded softly, like maybe she was understanding it. I prayed she was understanding it and we could move on.

Lilyanna's husband knocked on the table, catching all of our attention. “How's it going at the church?”

Meredith beamed. *Wonderful so far.* The tension I felt rising up dissipated like fog in an early morning's sunlight.

We'd just gotten back home. I thought it had been a fairly nice evening, even with Lilyanna's question. Jamie flicked the light on in the living room so that we could see each other's words.

She's never going to understand, Jamie snapped, annoyance showing through her signs.

Not if you keep up an attitude like that, I retorted, instantly annoyed back at her. All you gave her was sass!

I shouldn't need to explain myself to her.

You can't expect her to fully understand our culture if you don't give her the chance to.

I'm not here to broaden her horizons, or to be a project, or to be some diversity for her friend portfolio. I'm here to work my job, go to a church that uses my language, and live my life for myself.

Perhaps my facial expression showed my thoughts better than any words of mine would have. Jamie held up her hands in surrender. *We already have a Deaf community. And we have translated services so we don't have to preach to each other. We don't need a hearing community too.* She slipped out of the room.

Yet one body, Paul wrote in a verse I had taped up on my bathroom mirror. I wondered if he realized how much the different parts of the body repelled each other. Wouldn't it be great if we were all eyes, and could all see the same thing.

There was a calm after that dinner that stretched for weeks, like each side was worried of rocking the boat too much. Services went well. Lilyanna made sure to talk to us each week, her smile often the first sight I had of her as she led other people in the church over to meet me. These other people were nice as well. I tried to teach them how to best communicate with us: looking at us when they were talking to us, not at Meredith; speaking clearly and not shouting; always letting us see their lips.

Jamie came every Sunday, stayed for the service, and then left. We started driving separately to church. I left the apartment earlier than her, saved her a seat, and then after the service, stayed later, chatting with Lilyanna and others.

If I was friendly enough, I figured, I could make it happen. I could create a place with arms outstretched toward Jamie; I could create a place where we were both accepted and welcomed and that paved the way for others to follow us. I told Lilyanna about my first church, about the one old lady who's favorite signed word was "hurricane," so much that she'd use it anywhere she could, and her husband who just shook his head and gave me tootsie rolls. In my heart, I wanted Lilyanna to become that person to others like me who might come in the future. Honestly, a part of me wished she would become that person for me now.

Lilyanna showed up at the door one Thursday shortly after we got home from work. I was surprised to see her since she'd never come to our apartment before. Jamie was the closest one to the door when the lights flashed, and so opened it up. She smiled and showed Lilyanna the way in.

Lilyanna smiled back. In her hand was an envelope. "I'm sorry — drop — without calling —."

Lip-reading is hard. Many words look exactly the same as others on the lips. So many sounds are made in the back of the throat, away from my vision. Lip-reading means that I need to take into account the context of the sentence, the shape of the speaker's lips, the other words in the sentence, and mix it together with a little bit of luck in hopes of understanding what someone is saying.

"It's fine," I told her.

And yes, I can speak. I went through hundreds of miserable hours of speech therapy to ensure that I could. I can't speak perfectly. I avoid it as much as I can. My mom says that I slur some letters together and that my voice is always one notch too loud. But, I can speak well enough that people can understand me.

Lilyanna glanced down at the envelope in her hand, nodded decisively to herself, and then handed it to me. "I found something — help you."

I opened the envelope and found two pamphlets. I took one pamphlet and passed the other to Jamie. My heart dropped into my stomach. It was an informational guide on cochlear implants. *'Oh Lord, no,'* I wanted to cry, *'this will destroy everything.'*

Sure enough, Jamie's glare was melting the side of my face before I even looked over to her. *I told you, Kara.*

Lilyanna didn't stop talking. "I don't know — hospitals near you — this, but I — fill out financial aid — whatever you need for it. You need an exam to — if you're eligible for — surgery that — maybe hear! Wouldn't that be exciting?"

No, we simultaneously signed. "Thank you," I said, handing it back. "We don't need it."

"But — want to hear?"

We both firmly shook our heads no. I tried to explain: "We're *Deaf*. We don't need to hear, nor want to. We want to stay Deaf. Why would we want to change? Who would we be if not Deaf?"

The confusion on Lilyanna's face only increased. "—worried about — money? I — help. — fundraiser, financial aid, scholarships — you — worry about that."

"No, no! It's not the money. It's just— this is who we are! We're Deaf. We don't want to be anyone else."

We're happy, Jamie signed. *We don't want to be anyone else.*

"I — leave — here for you. Think about it?" Lilyanna stepped up from the couch to place the pamphlets on our counter. Jamie jumped up to stop her.

"I — not leaving with them," Lilyanna warned. "They're staying —"

"We really don't want them," I tried to keep my voice even, tried to sound friendly and peaceful, not attacked and defensive. It's a challenge when you don't know how you sound.

"We're not going to read it, and we aren't going to consider it. We don't want to change who we are, or how God created us."

"Not even — hear? Not — to fit — not have — struggle anymore?"

No. If even she didn't know the sign for 'no,' the expression on Jamie's face and the intensity of her sign told it all.

The corners of Lilyanna's mouth turned down and her fingers crumbled the pamphlets in her fist. "I'm trying — help."

"Thank you," I said.

We don't need it, Jamie signed.

Lilyanna turned and stalked through the door. I couldn't hear it but I felt the vibrations throbbing underneath my feet.

Jamie spun to face me. *She will never understand because she can't understand. Every time she looks at us, she sees something to fix. Nothing will change that, Kara, no matter how nice you are.*

I just wanted— I dropped my hands and shook my head.

Jamie's expression softened. She stepped over and wrapped me in a hug. Then she stepped back to speak again. *It was a kind thought by a kind person, but some things are beyond*

anyone's reach. She patted me on the shoulder before heading to her room to grab her purse. It was Deaf game night at the community center. I knew after what just happened, Jamie wanted other Deaf people who would understand her frustrated rant against the hearing world.

You coming?

No. I didn't think I could handle any more people for the day. I didn't make friends as easily as Jamie, try though I did, and the only thing I wanted right now was a fluffy blanket to curl into and an episode of Star Trek.

I waited till she was out the door before I let the exasperated words slip from my hands:
On the last night of Your life, Lord, You prayed for unity among the believers. Couldn't you have prayed for anything easier?

Of course not. What sort of people would we be if we were not constantly striving for something just beyond our reach?—something that means so much to the One we would die for yet something so far beyond our human capabilities.

Lord, help us all.

III.

The peace and harmony I had so carefully cultivated at church were shattered, a glass vase picked up and hurled at the ground. To my great surprise, Jamie showed up at church again the next week. (*What? I still need my weekly dose of preaching*, she scolded my visible surprise.) She did not talk to Lilyanna, though. Lilyanna avoided eye contact with Jamie. Lilyanna smiled thinly at me as I walked in, a smile that did not light up the room, and did not bring people following after her. She didn't stop after service to chat with me and Jamie stalked out the doors as soon as the pastor stepped down from the stage.

There was a palpable crack in the room, and if I stepped too close, it felt like I might actually fall in. Straddling that crack, and in the midst of debating whether duct tape, prayers, or running for my life would solve it, I met Verna.

I was discussing the Lilyanna issue with Meredith when Verna timidly but firmly reached out and tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to see an older lady with her white hair nicely pulled up on her head, clutching her purse a little nervously.

I smiled and signed hello.

Meredith translated the word for her, helpfully, but Verna was completely focused on me, giving me a smile with a nod, and then started right into it: "I--well, I just--It's really cool what you're doing with the sign language and interpretation and everything, but do you really need it?" Meredith's hands froze in surprise. It took her a second to finish what Verna had just asked: "Dear, have you prayed for healing?"

I stared at her. *My healing?*

“Yes! Of course,” Verna said. “Haven't you prayed for healing? After all, we serve the Ultimate Healer. All we have to do is ask and receive.”

The words all left my brain as I struggled to find the appropriate response.

Yes, I finally signed. *I have.*

"Did you do so with *full* faith that He could heal you? You must have complete and total faith. Child-like faith."

Now she was doubting my faith too? *Yes, I had total faith.*

I wasn't just saying that either. When I was in elementary school, my best friend had cancer. We prayed and prayed and prayed. We prayed as a church. We prayed as a family. We prayed with her family. I prayed with her. I prayed on my own. The doctors gave her a nineteen percent chance of survival. She wasn't supposed to make it.

But she did. The treatments began to work. Her cancer started to disappear. The doctors and nurses called it a miracle. So did we.

When she came home from the hospital and we could hang out again, she had an idea. *I think, she signed, we need to pray that you are healed too.*

But I'm deaf! It's not cancer. Can He actually heal me?

If you look at the Bible, He healed all kinds of things that weren't sickness, like lameness and dead people. He can heal you too. Wouldn't it be great? I could share my songs with you and you could hear all the sounds instead of just feeling it. You could hear the birds. You could hear my voice! You could come to school with me too!

Everyone's dream is to go to school with their best friend. So we agreed to pray about it. We prayed and prayed and prayed, just as fervently as we did when she was dying. She started

talking to me when she signed so that if God decided to give me hearing right then and there, her voice would be the first thing I heard. I'd call her every morning to see if it came in the night. It did not. It never did.

We had total faith that it would and it did not.

What did happen was my church family came around me. There was an old lady who tried to learn sign language to talk to me without an interpreter. When she learned what I was praying about, she offered to pray with me. But she also told me that if God didn't heal me, it wasn't because He didn't love me, but because He made me special like this. If I was hearing, I might not be able to experience the life He had in mind for me. I didn't know the future, she said, and neither did she, but God did and He made me like this knowing everything. It didn't matter whether I was hearing or not, He made me wonderfully and beautifully just the way I was.

We continued to pray, but after a year, I was still deaf. "It's okay," the woman told me, half-signing, half-speaking. "This is the way you were meant to be. God has amazing plans for you this way, plans that you would not see any other way."

"Dear," Verna said, reaching out to clasp my hands in hers. I pulled my hands back. "I'm willing to pray for you right now."

You think that you have more faith than me?

Now it was her turn to stare. "God healed me..."

And I've seen Him heal too! Verna. It doesn't have a thing to do with my faith. It has to do with God. If you have a problem with me, take it up with Him.

"But," Verna sputtered. "Your hearing loss is a result of the Fall." This obviously wasn't the way she imagined the conversation going.

Agreed. But when I arrive in Heaven I'm going to march up to Him and say thank you.

She gawked.

What would I be without this? Who would I be? What would my relationship with Him be? I paused, grasping for the right words. All that I am, all that I know, all that I love: it all came from this so-called 'loss.' So don't talk to me about faith, or about lack of faith. Don't talk to me of it until you are standing at the foot of the cross asking why and He says because you are better this way.

I was angry. I so easily forgot this was what the hearing world thought of me and Jamie. I forget that we were only things to be fixed for them. They saw us and knew intrinsically in their soul that we were wrong, and took it upon themselves to fix what they only saw as broken. I could dismiss Lilyanna's attempt at fixing, but Verna's was different, sinister almost. In her loving attempt to challenge my faith, she was driving a wedge between me and God.

If God is as powerful as I believe He is, He can redeem every part of my life, even the parts that are broken according to other people's standards. And if He loves me the way I see over and over in the scriptures, and in my life, then He loves me as He created me, and not as others would want me to be.

"But, dear," Verna tried again.

I turned on my heel. First Lilyanna, now Verna. I couldn't put up with this any longer.

Jamie found me at home, sprawled facedown on the couch as I tried to shut off my emotions from the morning. She bumped the couch with her foot to let me know she was there. I rolled over just enough to see her.

She stood there with two bowls in her hands and held one out to me. I pushed myself up far enough to look inside and see vanilla ice cream, topped with cherries. I sat up fully, and she claimed the couch cushion beside me.

We sat there without speaking until we'd scraped the last of the ice cream off our bowls and licked the spoons dry. Jamie took my bowl into the kitchen for me and came back with a pair of scissors.

C'mon, she said, kneeling in front of the still-packed boxes serving as our coffee table. *We gotta get these out of the way if we ever want to put a real table here.*

She sliced the tape and unfolded the box, opening it up to bubble wrap and a picture frame. The picture was us, dressed in our black graduation gown, and hands raised and waving in celebration. She found the hook under that, stepped over to the wall, and held it up over the center of the couch for my review. *Good?*

I eyed it critically. *Up slightly. Little more, little more... there!*

She pressed the sticky-tack hook against the wall and then hung the picture up. She stepped back with me and admired it. *It's not a home without a picture.* She motioned to it. *We must really be home then.*

We must be, I agreed. Chaos and all, this was home now.

IV.

I skipped a service, the first service I'd skipped since we moved here. I didn't want to run into Verna or Lilyanna again. I didn't want to run into anyone else like them. I told Jamie I was too tired and spent the morning on the couch in my PJs sipping hot chocolate and reading.

I had no excuse to miss the next service, though. I couldn't mope forever. There wasn't enough ice cream for that, and my mission hadn't changed. It just got shook up a little.

During the service, I noticed a woman with a younger boy, pointing him towards Meredith on the screen. She was trying to help him shape his hands the same way Meredith did, even though Meredith's hands moved at the speed of fluency.

Jamie nudged me. *Wait, what verse are we in?*

I pointed it out to her in her open Bible.

Thanks, she signed, eyes roving over the page now to catch the context of the verse.

I glanced back at the mother and her boy, and found her instead looking at me. *Sign?* She asked, in actual sign language.

I don't know if I kept the shock off my face before I nodded and signed *yes* back to her.

She smiled, but at that moment, her son grabbed her hand and pulled her attention back to him. She helped him shape more words with his hands, and our eyes didn't meet again for the rest of the service.

After the sermon, Jamie, Meredith, and I stood in a circle near the back of the sanctuary. It had been hectic for Meredith's work lately and we hadn't been able to talk outside of business

for the church in a while. Meredith suddenly looked past us and waved to a woman tumbling our way.

It was the woman I saw earlier, signing with her son. She was holding her son's hand in one of her own, and her other arm balanced a baby on her hip.

"Hi! I'm Candace, and this is baby Amelia and this little rascal"—she held up the toddler's hand—"is Percy." Meredith translated for her and then translated us introducing ourselves back. There was a pause as Candace shifted. Hopped the baby up higher on her hip. Bit her lip. Then finally she blurted out, "Amelia's deaf."

"I've been researching everything I can." She paused, reeling in the mental threads of information she'd gathered. "There are so many things that people say to do. Make sure your child learns how to lip read. Send them to a regular school so they can interact with a hearing world. No, actually, send them to a Deaf school so they can be with people like them. Make sure they sign. Don't let them sign. Get a cochlear implant ASAP. Actually, no don't. But wait...do. It's confusing."

Candace looked from Amelia to Jamie and me. "You both are Deaf and proud of who you are. That's what I want Amelia to be. How do I do that?"

Jamie beamed and held her hands out for Amelia. Candace handed her over. "You both are a godsend, really. God knew what we needed before we needed it, and He provided."

Jamie bounced Amelia, her smile growing in sync with the baby's. It didn't look like she was going to give her up any time soon. Meredith was crouched to talk to Percy. I spoke with Candace, sharing things my mom did that helped me a lot.

This must be what one body looks like: each of us different, but each of us together pouring into one another, not for ourselves or for our high-minded ideas, but out of our love for

the fellow humans God has placed us with. One body together, marching toward tomorrow, ever following where He leads. One body building each other up.

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