

Holiday

She stuffed her guilt
into turkeys, and deep into the
branches of Christmas trees.

This was my mother,
frantic for the next holiday,
her entire life the preparation
for an occasion. Her fingers
were delicate in manipulation
of the crystal dove ornaments
that hung from silver

garlands on our doors and windows.

Her pies rose like angels
with trumpets; her tableware
and china were immaculate.
“See our home,” said her home.

Our living room was a cover
from *McCall's*, a defiant testament
of love for her family that radiated
like a flaming Yule log. Paying tribute
was a toast, the undoing of a fine
silk ribbon around a card.

*Blow out the candles, eat some
cake! This is my son, the poet-
philosopher! My son speaks “sign
language!” I’m trying to learn!* Her
smiles were frosted on like white
icing, her hands whirring noisemakers.

Our conversations were hidden in
containers of New Years sweet
potatoes and hot muffins, dependent
upon holiday formality that

our true feelings would not carry through
a silence broken only by the usual
obligational laughter, around
roasted ducks and polished bottles
of homemade Thanksgiving wine.
Her words were invitations within
gold envelopes, formally reminding
me of dates for dinners that I would not
attend. The writing sounded like an
“I do” at a wedding, which was nothing
more, really, than a cue to weep.

How to Become a Backstabber

1. Discover the Value of Your Own Deafness.

This is not as easy as it sounds. If you are deaf, many people—including some deaf people themselves—think that you shouldn't limit yourself by solely communicating through signs, and that if you have sufficient hearing, you should use speech whenever possible. This depends on your background, of course. You, for example, were born hearing, but you lost most of your hearing at the age of four due to rubella. You are the second daughter, and the only deaf person, in your family.

You have been told that sign language is bad, so you watched your hands carefully. Vigilance became one of your stalwart qualities as you sat and mostly daydreamed through mainstreamed classes, and spoke. You enjoyed speech lessons immensely because it meant getting attention. You didn't mind the repetitive drills of consonants and vowels, and the pronunciation of words you'd never heard before.

One day, though, your life was forever changed. You meet Billy, a *second* deaf student, who was actually hard-of-hearing but had spent most of his education in a deaf school recently closed by the state, and who uses sign language. You are fascinated in spite of your speech therapist's constant admonitions; you feel funny when she tries to force Billy's signing hands down on the table. You look at your own hands, wondering.

Those high school days were wonderful because of the clandestine language. You have mixed feelings when your hearing classmates come up to you and say, "Marlee Matlin's so amazing," or "Heather Whitestone's inspiring." You don't dare admit that you can't understand Matlin's signing at all, or that you feel funny about Whitestone's implied opinion of oralism being far superior to

sign language. You are constantly badgered by hearing classmates on whether you know the sign for this or that, and your opinions on this or that deaf person in the media, but you don't dare come out of the closet. You have nightmares in which your hands are chopped off and your tongue is anointed with holy speech.

Your speech therapist asks you daily whether you've learned any signs from Billy. You shake your head no. Everyone you know adores your speech, but Billy much prefers your hands. Everything is so easy, *easy* to say with hands, and *easy* to tell on your hands whether the signs are clearly enunciated—the inestimable beauty of hearing with one's eyes.

2. Spend a Great Deal of Time With Your Deaf Friends.

In a hearing college two hundred miles away from home, you hook up with some deaf students. You discover a world of language, culture, and friendship. High school is a dim memory, and you no longer remember why you'd once had such a huge crush on this or that hearing boy. Billy, your first deaf friend, is now at Gallaudet University. You can't imagine going away to a school hundreds and hundreds of miles away, and going there without even checking it out first. But that's what he did. He had been so unhappy with all those hearing classmates in high school, and he'd wanted to quit and find any old job anywhere. You are still relieved that he stuck it out, and that he actually sent you a postcard from Gallaudet, as promised. He wrote, NO MORE HEARIES. HAPPY HAPPY HAPPY!!!

In your dorm room you stare at the postcard for a long time and tack it on the bulletin board above your desk. Happy? Him happy? It is hard to imagine him that way, really. He was always so pissed off at the world, especially at the state legislators who decided his deaf school wasn't worth the expense and shut it down for good. The state's debts compounded by a limp economy, had grown too large to ignore. You vow to visit Gallaudet one day.

Your deaf friends at college tell you stories from their lives, and you begin to feel warmly whole. At home you still speak, and you don't tell your parents that you're using American Sign Language out in the open at school. You are eternally grateful that they're paying your tuition, but you know they'll never understand you as you are. The very idea of you using ASL would break their hearts. After all, they've donated a great deal of money to the Alexander Graham Bell Association over the years, and are often listed prominently in *The Volta Review*.

Yet their love for you can't be mistaken for paternalism. They've genuinely tried to encourage you to participate in various extracurricular activities at school, and they do attend as your devoted cheerleaders. You love them because no one else cheered for you when you came in next-to-last in women's track, or when your science project won third place. You were never told that you couldn't achieve anything because you were deaf. But the unspoken corollary was that sign language would hinder you in insidious ways.

But those stories told by your deaf friends enrage you. They were unjustly punished merely for wanting to communicate, even if it meant through their hands. You vow never to let that happen again, and you take out your AGB membership card and light it with a friend's match. They clap with glee, and you know you've found a better home than your parents could possibly imagine for you.

3. Ignore the Little Insecurities That Nag at Your Deaf Pride.

After graduation, you move to Seattle. You find a job as a computer technician; you had been surprised by how much fun it was to fix those damn things in college, and now you can't believe that you actually get *paid* to do such things. Of course, the fact that you are both female and deaf seems to bother some of your clients, but they say nothing when they observe your troubleshooting speed. Boom-boom-*boom*. You're out the door, and your clients are already raving about you to their friends.

You still talk with your parents through e-mail.

In time, you meet a cute deaf man named George. You fall for him because of the way he signs, in a slowpoke kind of way. He is a computer programmer, but he is such a child at heart. He plays games all the time, he thinks nothing of wrestling with buddies in the living room, and he has a big heart. He comes from a deaf-strong family, and you are struck by how included you feel in his family. They welcome you with open arms, they are so relieved to see that you're indeed deaf. Just like them. They don't have to justify their ways to you. You and George become engaged.

When your parents meet George for the first time, they turn quiet with rage. They don't say anything about his gravelly voice or bad speech, but they are not forthcoming with hugs or attempts to be close, as they were with your hearing sister's boyfriend—now her husband. That day, out of eyeshot, George turns to you and says, "Hearing control wedding don't-want."

You compromise with two weddings, the first one taking place in a deaf church. On the day that you marry, your parents weep, unable to communicate with those who clearly care for you, as a deaf person who has embraced them; your sister keeps smiling as if nothing is wrong. You send interpreters their way, but they're too frightened to make conversation with anyone. They can't stop watching how George and his pals carry on as if they never left school; in fact, you envy their shared past and their tight-knittedness. Your parents cannot disguise their discomfort, even with your second wedding in their church where you always sat in the third row to be able to lipread the minister.

With your husband, you find yourself more and more drawn into the deaf community. He reminds you not to pay any attention to the gossip swirling around you: Dave makes nearly twice what you make, and he's only two years out of college! You *saw* his paycheck. Mina has married a hearing man who can't sign shit, and she comes from a deaf-strong family! Scott, a heavy-set oralist, brings his hearing thin lover to a particularly rowdy night at the

deaf bowling club! The guy has a tan so dark that his peroxidized hair looks white. You *saw* him carrying on like a sissy in front of all those beer-toting straight bowlers. And worse yet, that bitch who stole your best friend's husband now claims to have known your boss all her life! You *saw* him nodding and smiling anxiously around her.

George reminds you not to pay attention to all of this.

You repeat the grumbly things he has said about this or that pal of his.

He rolls his eyes, as if to say, "They're just *deaf*, okay?"

But it is not long before you serve gossip along with toast in the morning, constantly comparing yourselves with these people.

4. Spend So Much Time With Your Deaf Friends That You Practically *Have* to Start Talking About Each Other. (A corollary: The Smaller the Community, the Better.)

With the birth of your first baby, you suddenly feel the overwhelming presence of deaf in-laws peeking out of the shadows, wondering whether your Eileen is hearing or not. Six months later she is found to be deaf, and there is so much jubilation on George's face that he breaks into tears. You decide to stay home for a year or two, then longer when you learn of your second pregnancy. Your next baby, Robert, is hearing. You put your job on hold.

With both children you never use your voice. You simply sign, almost forcibly teaching your children *signs* instead of speech. Their eyes light up when they see you signing to them. They can't stop grasping for your fingers. You are so full of love, so full of hugs for them at every turn, that even George has to chuckle. You two no longer talk about other people, but about what's best for your beautiful, *beautiful* babies. At home, you feel at peace, more so when George in his boxer shorts twaddles around with the children trying to climb up the moving mountain of their father in the living room.

Sometimes some of your deaf friends who are also mothers visit with their kids, which is always great. Naturally, everyone

talks babies, but you suddenly feel a little out of it when they start discussing Al, one of your husband's best pals. Seems that he's been having an affair with a deaf high school senior girl, and his wife, Betty, hasn't talked to him ever since she found out.

You don't know Al very well, even though he's the one who's always there whenever George needs help with moving huge furniture around, or building the back porch, or painting all the walls upstairs in your new house. You've never sat down and talked with him as a person, not as someone who's known your husband all his life. You like him, though, because he is clearly a good man, a citadel of reliability, and someone *seeming* incapable of dishonesty. Before you'd heard all of this about Al, you wouldn't have used the word "seeming." Everyone, you thought, really liked him.

You bring up the story with George later that night.

"What tell you before?" He explodes. "Not true! Not true!"

Nevertheless, you vow to keep an eye peeled for any telling detail.

5. Pretend to be Concerned in Front of the People Involved.

At a social party held for local alumni from the National Technical Institute of the Deaf—your husband George had earned his bachelor's in Computer Science there through the Rochester Institute of Technology—you run into Al's wife. You are pleasantly surprised to find that she doesn't seem embittered at all. Betty comes up to you and asks how you are doing.

You share the latest on your babies. Eileen is now walking and climbing like crazy, and has to be fenced in no matter what. Robert is obsessed with eating asparagus, dipped in mayonnaise. Betty laughs at the image of your boy dipping and flipping the mayo all over the kitchen floor before eating the stalk.

Finally, you broach the subject. "How you?"

She doesn't let on whether she knows that you probably know. "Fine A-L work tonight." Of course. He works the graveyard shift at a Microsoft factory, keeping an eye on its security. It's a tough job because so many packages slip out in the back and end up getting sold on the streets of New York and elsewhere way below wholesale, and the guards often get the heat for it. You remember how Al had explained all of this to you one night, when you were all a great crowd who always got together every weekend to party. That was a long time before any babies were born.

She smiles and says nothing more.

You glance around the room, full of people whose faces you know, and most of whom you've gotten acquainted with here and there through various deaf social functions over the years. You turn to Betty. "Me sorry."

Her face turns a little hard. "Gossip stupid."

"Betty. Stories true?"

"Play dumb you? Good."

"Me-not-say-that."

A mutual friend enters the room with her husband, and Betty is gone, waving hello. You turn and catch Michelle's knowing glance; she's married to one of George's pals. Seems you weren't the first to ask Betty tonight.

6. Instead of Feeling Hurt, Wear Your Feelings On The Outside.

For days afterwards you can't stop wondering whether your trustworthiness has become devalued among your friends, and whether they've been talking badly about you. You've been in the deaf community long enough to see how some deafies can easily spread inaccurate and hurtful stories, if only to destroy the ones they don't like. Often, when you and George talk about throwing a party at your house, you two have to write down the list of all the

guests and see if you know of any bad blood among any of them. Sometimes it gets too complicated, and the party almost always never happens any more.

One day, some friends come over for coffee and bring their kids. Once they're satisfied that their kids are indeed safe in your child-proofed backyard, they share the latest soap opera installments on this or that deaf person you all know either by sight or by acquaintance. Somehow, without thinking, you pry loose some deep-down opinions. George's always warned you of sharing your innermost thoughts with people you think are friends, but these days he seems constantly weary; at his company, the project of migrating from Windows 95 to a whole new—and invariably better—operating system has become much bigger than anticipated, what with bugs in the hardware and politics within George's department. Completely attentive, the friends are suddenly yours. Their appetite for what you think of others seems insatiable. They nod agreement, and when it's time for them to leave, you know you've hit on something. You're not sure what it is, but you like the sensation of feeling this intense kinship with them.

7. Warning: Someone Will Backstab You Sooner or Later. (Usually Sooner.)

You are buckling the kids into their special seats in the back of the car when you catch George giving a slight wave to a beautiful blonde strutting by to the supermarket behind you. You know he didn't think you'd catch that, but you have sharp eyes. Ever since these friends keep coming back for your thoughts, you've become much more aware of how men behave among themselves and among women not their wives.

You sit down in the car. "Saw you."

"Me do-do?"

"Girl over-there you wave."

“Looked-at-me smile.”

“Smile finish wrong?”

He turns the ignition key and says nothing.

When you are all home, and the food has been put away, he turns to you. “Heard many-many stories about you. Friends some-them don’t-want visit come over any more. Sick-you gossip.”

Usually the loquacious one, you feel unable to say anything.

8. Above all, deny that you’ve ever said a bad word or spread rumors about anyone.

That night you snuggle up to George’s back. You lick his sweet back slowly, in the way he’d said turned him on, but tonight he doesn’t respond. You know you’ve lost something, something that these friends of yours wouldn’t understand. You sigh, thinking instead about your kids, and how much they need a father in today’s darkening world.

In time, he will probably have affairs with other women, who usually outnumber deaf men by a wide margin; no wonder that deaf wives can be extremely jealous of single deaf women. In time, George will extend more of his love on your kids; of course, he still loves you and talks with you and all that, but it’s not the same. And in time, some of his pals will return to watch sports on his huge TV, if only because they missed his company. But you’ll always be remembered as someone who’d neglected the vigilance of watching her own hands.