

PART ONE

Consciousness on Trial

February 3

Dear Helen Keller:

Allow me to introduce myself. I am a writer and part-time English professor. I am American, married, middle-aged, middle class. Like you, I am blind, though not deaf. But the most important thing you need to know about me, and the reason for my letter, is that I grew up hating you. Sorry to be so blunt, especially on such short acquaintance, but one of the advantages of writing to a dead person is there's no need to stand on ceremony. And you should know the truth from the start. I hated you because you were always held up to me as a role model, and one who set such an impossibly high standard of cheerfulness in the face of adversity. "Why can't you be more like Helen Keller?" people always said to me. Or that's what it felt like whenever your name came up. "Count your blessings," they told me. "Yes, you're blind, but poor little Helen Keller was blind and deaf, and no one ever heard her complain."

I am not alone in this. Many disabled people think you did our cause a lot of harm. Your life story inscribes the idea that disability is a personal tragedy to be overcome through an individual's fortitude and pluck, rather than a set of cultural practices and assumptions, affecting many individuals that could be changed through collective action. Lately, for reasons I can't entirely explain, my feelings about you have mellowed. It occurred to me that I should not hold you responsible for the use others made of your life story. This led me to dip into your autobiographical writing for the first time. Even more surprising, it led me to take a road trip to visit your childhood home, Ivy Green, in Tusculum, Alabama. And I thought you'd like to know what I found there.

I went with my husband Nick, who is almost always up for a road trip. We took the house tour, which was standard fare for a local-hero museum.

The guide was a woman pushing sixty, probably a volunteer, apparently reciting a script. She rattled off a number of facts about the town, the region, and antebellum architecture—all the predictable stuff.

Then, in one of the downstairs rooms, she pointed out a carpet on the floor that had been woven especially for you by I forget whom. She explained all this, then said, “Isn’t it lovely?” We murmured agreement. Then she said, “Too bad Helen Keller never saw it.” Her voice had a throaty throb as she delivered the line. I realized that the statement was supposed to catch us up short, jar us out of our complacency, remind us that you were deaf and blind. We were supposed to feel grateful and lucky, and intone a private prayer of gratitude: “I wake each day and thank the Lord I was not born Helen Keller.”

I should have expected nothing less. Where better to deliver the “Why can’t you be more like Helen Keller” message than in your childhood home? I should have steeled myself against it, but the resentment I feel about the message is so old and deep, it’s like a knee-jerk reflex. And on this occasion, I turned my resentment on the woman pointing out the carpet that poor little you never saw. I said, “But she could touch it.”

“What?” the guide said. “She what?”

“She could touch it,” I said. “She had the sense of touch. One of the pleasures of a nice carpet is texture. She could feel it. She could walk on it barefoot. She had an imagination. Someone could describe it to her, and she could imagine it.”

I was talking like a crank. There’s a certain vibration that comes into a person’s voice when they’re going off the deep end, and I had it. I could feel the guide eyeing me askance. Was this how I was going to be? I was spoiling her spiel. I could feel the rest of the tour group—a van load of Baptists from Tennessee—looking away.

In any case, I quieted down and we moved on. I felt the guide was leery of me. As she pointed out the pump organ in the parlor, she paused briefly. I sensed she was supposed to say something about how you never heard its beautiful music, but since she had a crank in the crowd today, she dropped the line.

As we surveyed each room from the doorway, our guide was at pains to tell us which pieces of furniture actually belonged to your family, which were of the period, and which were merely reproductions. I’ve been on enough such house tours to know authenticity is always an issue. I wished

she would let me walk around the rooms and touch something. This was not the most blind-friendly museum I've ever visited. At Louis Braille's house in France, they let you put your hands on anything that's not in a case. But perhaps fewer blind people visit your house.

As if to confirm this, our guide spent a lot of time talking about the photographs on the walls of the central hallway. Although I have some residual vision, I don't see photographs well. Nick told me what I was looking at and read me the labels. There was one of you at about age seven, around the time Anne Sullivan, your teacher, came into your life. The guide said, "Wasn't she a lovely child?" Then she shook her head. To be accurate, I don't know if she shook her head or not. But her tone was that of someone shaking her head at the waste of it all. As if it would be less tragic if you had been homely.

I swallowed the urge to make this comment aloud. I am so used to this attitude, it hardly even registers anymore. "What a pretty girl," people say. "Too bad she's blind." Apparently, beauty is wasted on us because we can't see the reflection in the mirror, can't see men's heads turn when we enter a room. In this picture, you're wearing a dress with a lot of ruffles, and your hair is an elaborate arrangement of ringlets. Do you look pretty? Nick told me that there's a certain set to your lower lip, which makes it sound like your expression must be at odds with the prettiness of your dress and hair. He said you look posed and a bit uncertain about it. What could a photograph mean to you at that age? Later, you got the hang of it. In other photographs around the place, you're always wearing a big smile and have your eyes aimed directly at the lens.

Next to this photo, there was one of Anne Sullivan—"Teacher," as you always called her—taken at about the same time. The guide said, "Wasn't she pretty?" with that same "such a pity" tone. Only the pity in her case is not that she was blind or deaf or anything else. The pity in her case is that she sacrificed her life to be your companion and helpmate, when she was pretty enough to get herself a man and have a normal life. Again, I could have argued otherwise. But I didn't.

"Is she pretty?" I asked Nick. He told me she was intense looking, at once frail and fiery. I have no idea what that looks like, but the description fits what I know about her personality, so I took him at his word.

Up until this point, the house tour followed the predictable course. Yes, there was that crack about the carpet, but I admit most people

probably wouldn't have noticed it. But once we got to the dining room, things got strange. The guide called it the "famous dining room" where all your "famous battles took place." She called you "a regular little hellion," and narrated the struggle Teacher had getting you to eat with a fork and fold your napkin. As she was talking, I realized suddenly that she took *The Miracle Worker* as gospel. Outside the house, we found "the famous pump house," a sort of fenced-in gazebo around the famous pump that is the central prop in the climatic scene of that play. But the ultimate weirdness was farther back, behind some outbuildings, where there was a permanent stage set and bleachers. There, in the summer, they stage nightly performances of *The Miracle Worker*.

Here is where I began to articulate something, Helen. Mind if I call you Helen? My problem with all this, Helen, is not that the play is inaccurate. The playwright William Gibson drew those scenes from the letters and journals Teacher kept during her first few weeks at Ivy Green. In fact, as the play depicts, one day at the end of March 1887, Teacher pumped water over one of your hands while spelling the word *water* into your other, and you suddenly, miraculously, discovered language. You dropped the mug you'd been holding, said "wa-wa," a baby-talk word you'd retained from before the illness that left you deaf and blind. Then you went on to learn to communicate with the manual alphabet, to read, to write, to speak, and generally to triumph over adversity in all the laudable ways that made you famous.

Part of what disturbed me was not that this event was enshrined in your home, but that it is reenacted there. Where else in the world are events from a person's life ritualistically re-created in this way? Jerusalem springs to mind, The Way of the Cross. And while you may find the impulse to beatify, even deify you, flattering, it comes at such a high cost, Helen, particularly for the generations of disabled people who follow you.

But the main thing that disturbed me as I walked around the stage in your backyard was that *The Miracle Worker* is Teacher's story, not yours. She was the one who worked the miracle and triumphed over adversity. You were the adversity she overcame. You were the site of miracles. And while I admire Teacher's accomplishment, the play distorts things a little.

You were, in part, responsible for this. Throughout your life, you were always quick to give Teacher the lion's share of credit for your education.

And you narrated the same events—the dining room battles, the pump scene—in your own memoirs.

But I went to your house to find something else, another story. As we walked around the stage and back to the house, I scuffed the ground to raise a dust. I inhaled it. I guess I was hoping there might still be a few molecules of you left there, the you before language, the pre-Teacher you. I wanted to feel you there somewhere. I imagined you, age five or six, crouching in the shadows under the back steps. Your hair was a wad of tangles. Your face and hands were sticky with some sweet you filched from the pantry. Your pinafore was crumpled and stained. Your feet were shoeless, caked with mud. As I conjured your presence, I felt energy emanating from you, which was both curious and hostile. But not fearful, never fearful. I knew that if I bent down to touch you, you would catch hold of my hand. Your touch would not be gentle. You would smear your hand around my face to check if I was someone you knew. You would pat my pockets, looking for candy. Finding none, you might thrust my hand away, slapping at me, kicking at my legs with your calloused heels. Then you would scramble away from me, scoot backward into the darkness.

That was the child I went there to find, not the “lovely child” of the photographs, the paragon of cheerfulness and industry. In your adult writings when you attempted to re-create your pre-linguistic experiences, you called that child “Phantom.” I wish you’d found a different name. Phantom is too ghostly, too wispy, when my sense of that child is solidly corporeal, a dense tangle of physical needs and desires. And that child had a language of sorts. Before Teacher came, you were able to communicate with gestures and signs, some of them quite elaborate. You had signs for every member of your family, all the servants, and the regular visitors to your home. Your sign for your mother was to pat your cheek. Your sign for your favorite aunt was to tie imaginary bonnet strings under your chin. Your sign for your father was to put on imaginary eyeglasses and read an imaginary newspaper. And you had signs for things as well, typically food, since as for most young children, food loomed large in your concerns. If you wanted bread and butter, you would saw at the air with the edge of your hand then make deft, buttering motions with your finger. If you wanted ice cream, you would turn the crank of an imaginary freezer, then hug yourself and shiver. The people around you understood these signs and could generally give you

what you wanted. The problem was that your system was not particularly versatile or flexible. In effect, you could say, "I want . . .," but could not communicate anything more nuanced. And no one could use your signs to communicate back to you.

I may be wrong to call this gestural system of yours a language. It is perhaps no more a language than the way pets communicate with their people. For instance, one of my cats is currently sitting on the floor and meowing at me because she wants to be fed. When I don't respond, she will jump up on my desk and pace back and forth in front of my keyboard until I give in and go into the kitchen to fill her dish. Because I do this, she will repeat these actions anytime she wants to be fed. But this is not really language. I cannot use these same behaviors to communicate anything back to her. And besides, I know you never liked any comparison between your experiences and those of animals. And you were right. Such analogies coincide too neatly with ancient prejudices some seeing-hearing people still hold about us "sense cripples," as you called people like us. Our reliance on the less elite senses—smell, taste, and touch—seems to drop us a few rungs on the evolutionary ladder.

But my point is, you understood something about language even before Teacher came. You knew that other people communicated using their mouths. You were in the habit of touching people's faces to feel their expressions, and you observed how their mouths moved, how their lips puckered and stretched, and how they emitted small puffs of warm breath. You imitated this, walking around the house flapping your jaws at anyone you met, occasionally making noises.

What happened to that child? I wanted to know. In *The Miracle Worker*, the story you helped to inscribe on the American collective memory, Teacher came to tame that child and turn her into the "lovely child" with all the ruffles and ringlets. At the pump, she baptized you in the font of knowledge, washing away the sin of ignorance. I recognize that this formula makes for a dramatic scene, and fits already established narrative patterns, but it oversimplifies the facts. *Water* was not the first word you learned. You picked up on the fingerspelling trick almost from the first day. What happened at the pump was something more subtle. The pump incident served to clarify the confusion you were having about container and contents. You had been confusing *mug* with *milk*, and Teacher wanted to show you that a mug could contain other liquids—water (who knows what

she would have tried next) coffee, or chicken soup. The pump moment was less a miraculous revelation than a shifting of gears, allowing you to accelerate, but on the same path you'd already been traveling. This fingerspelling was not just a game or a gimmick, you discovered, but a more efficient and flexible system than the one you had previously used.

In calling yourself Phantom, you distanced yourself from that child and dismissed your system of signs as primitive. In later life, you took a cue from Alexander Graham Bell and criticized the use of sign language by deaf people, advocating that they learn to speak and lipread instead. The manual alphabet you used was a transcription system, not at all the same as a sign language. A lot of people in the Deaf community today (I use the capital D indicating Deafness as a linguistic minority rather than a disability) would take exception. But I assume you've received many letters on this subject already.

For my part, I do not believe that the child you called Phantom ceased to exist that day at the pump, and I think you were too quick to deny and denounce her. Because that child already understood about language; she caught on fast. She absorbed words like a sponge. She couldn't get enough of them. She acquired language at such a startling rate of speed that she made herself sick. By June, you had worked yourself into such a state of nervous exhaustion that the doctor had to be summoned. He prescribed rest. But even as you lay in bed, your fingers were in motion, spelling words into your own hand, the sheer pleasure of the words making you shudder.

More than pleasure, it was such a relief finally to be able to make yourself clear to the people around you. One day, you found a hole in your boot and wanted your father to send your half-brother Simpson to buy you a new one. You told your father: "new boot Simpson buggy store man." You had a flair for the telegraphic and an intuition about how to arrange words to represent a sequence of events, causes, and effects.

You loved the idea of language. Later, when you learned that there were other languages, you couldn't get enough of them. "*Chien* means dog in French," you'd say to anyone who'd pay attention. "*Hund* means dog in German. *Canis* means dog in Latin." You understood language as layers coating every object. There was the object and then there were the many words which stood for the object, piled one on top of another, stacked up like checkers, towers of words reaching to the ceiling. Towers of Babel, you'd think and giggle to yourself with glee.

But I digress. The point is that you were in love with the very idea of language. You were not merely hardwired for language, but seemed to have had an innate love for it. No teacher can teach that, not even one as obviously gifted as Anne Sullivan. While most people can take language for granted as a convenience, a nicety of human existence, you reveled in it. You had an affinity for it.

But the event I would like to see reenacted there at Ivy Green would be how you learned to write. Teacher started early to teach you to read and write, to make the conceptual leap from language spelled into your hand to language written on paper. She would hand you an object—a doll, say—and you would spell the word to her. Then she'd give you a card with the word written in raised type or Braille, and move your hand from the card to the doll, spelling the word into your free hand. You caught onto this surprisingly fast. Soon you were constructing sentences. You would put the doll on the bed, then find the cards with *doll*, *bed*, *on*, and *is* and arrange them in the right order. "The doll is on the bed." This game delighted you. You'd tug on her arm and point, first at the objects you'd arranged, then at the sentence, the sequence of cards lined up in a row. You'd drag in others to look at it, your parents, the servants, the dog. You'd jump up and down with pleasure over this, grunting and patting your chest with pride.

Teacher was surprised by how you took to it. Of course, you'd always had an inkling about written language. People around you read. Your mother was an avid reader. And as your sign for him indicates, your father was always behind a newspaper. You knew they never welcomed your interruptions when they were engaged in this activity. And when you managed to wrestle the book or paper out of their hands, you could not for the life of you fathom what they found so enthralling there. Books smelled good, you discovered, and sometimes letter paper was scented. Occasionally you could feel some texture in the paper, but you suspected there must be more to it than that, and the frustration you felt usually led you to shred pages and strew them around the room. So when Teacher gave you those Braille cards to play with, that infuriating mystery was solved. You recognized immediately that this was the very thing you'd always needed. You'd run around the house collecting objects, then shuffle through the stack of cards for the words. "Baby sits in the chair," you'd write. "Dog lies on the ground."

One day, Teacher came into your room and you were not there. She found a row of Braille cards on the floor outside the wardrobe, saying, "The

girl is in the wardrobe." She opened it and found you inside, the words *the girl* carefully pinned to your dress.

That was when she told you your name. "Helen," she told you. "The girl," she touched you, then spelled, "is Helen."

You were motionless for a moment, in that way you had when something was sinking in. You fingered the cards pinned to your dress. "The girl?" you spelled to her. "The girl is the girl."

But then you got it. "The girl is Helen," you repeated. You waved your hand at her, saying, "Card, card, Helen, card." If you'd known how, you would have snapped your fingers with impatience. She quickly made you a card with your name on it. You unpinned the cards from your dress, found the *is* on the floor, and composed the sentence: "The girl is Helen." Then you arranged yourself above this sentence, as if it were a caption to a photograph, and patted your chest with delight.

OK. OK. So this last bit is not entirely accurate. I'm conflating several separate events, and inventing a few actions you may not have actually performed. It's what writers do, Helen.

Anyway, once Teacher got you hooked on writing, she then showed you how to make a narrative. Someone had caught a mouse in the kitchen and put it in a box. Teacher wrote sentences: "The cat sits on the box. The mouse is in the box. The cat wants to eat the mouse. Give the cat some milk. Give the mouse some cake." You had not learned all these words yet, but you picked up on it right away. You fell all over yourself running to get the milk, the cake. You made new sentences with the cards: "Helen did give the cat some milk," making yourself a character in your own story.

For a long time, *Helen* was your only word for yourself. It seemed to take a long time for you to adopt the personal pronoun, even though *I* requires a lot less effort to write, Braille, or fingerspell. But you insisted on the proper name. Helen Keller. Helen Adams Keller. Helen A. Keller. Apparently, *I* was too thin and flimsy to bear the weight of all you wanted to say.

For you, writing was the missing link that allowed you to connect yourself, the phantom inside your body, with the outside world. Writing allowed you to make an impression of your inner self—on paper, or in a row of cards on a table. You could leave the cards there and come back later and read the record of an earlier state of mind. Or you could arrange sentences on a page, seal them in an envelope, and send them off into the outside world, beyond the confines of your own body, beyond the confines of

your home, farther than you could walk or ride. Later, a letter would come back to you, and you could touch the impressions made by another hand, another self. Written language allowed you to transcend space and time. It allowed your mind to expand outward and encircle the universe. It allowed you to reach into the past and touch the imagination of someone long dead. It allowed you to reach into the future perhaps to imagine me writing this letter to you, dead for more than thirty years.

In your house, I scuffed the floor to raise a dust. But I think there's nothing of Phantom left there. I think they've swept and scoured and vacuumed away every trace.

I should not be critical that when you finally got the means to put yourself on paper, you chose the "lovely child" of good table manners, cheerful industry, and saintly overtones rather than the curious, willful, resourceful child hungry for words. You were only seven years old and lacked the sophistication to represent your self in all its true complexity. And in 1887, little girls weren't supposed to have that much depth or drive. Or maybe you recognized that the pretty, docile child would be a better medium for your message. Who am I to judge? The version of my self that I use to write this letter is no more authentic or accurate than the self you constructed in your writing.

Since I found no trace of Phantom there at Ivy Green, I bought souvenirs instead. It surprised me they don't sell bottled water drawn from the famous pump. "Helen Keller's Miraculous Well Spring Wa-wa," they could call it. Think of the claims they could make: "Put those pesky communication problems behind you. Foster docility and good grooming, cheerfulness and pep. Turn your little hellion into a poster child for special education."

I buy a coffee mug with a picture of Ivy Green on it. I also buy a replica of the pump. It's made of cast iron and stands about five inches high. I have it on my desk now—as what? A source of inspiration? A reminder to love the language more? I haven't decided yet. I pick it up and make a fist around it. The waterspout protrudes between my two middle fingers. It's a weighty item. It would make a good weapon. I think I should get the flat, circular base inscribed with something, a word or sign of some kind, perhaps my initials, and use it to seal my letters. My letters to you, Helen.

Because I guess the point is that I feel a need to write to you about these things. Now that I've scanned your writing, visited your childhood home,

and more importantly released some of my hostility toward you, I begin to sense that there's more to your story than the official version. So if you don't mind, I'd like to ponder one or two incidents from your life and find out where it takes me.

Until then,

GK