

A Policeman Comes A-Knockin'

"My father wants to know what is he going to jail for."

My father was the handsomest man I have ever known. He was deaf. My mother was the prettiest woman I have ever seen. She was deaf. Together they used American Sign Language. And that was the language of my youth.

If sign language could be heard, my mother's voice would be soft and gentle, with her hands making small circular motions connoting her shyness and reservation. Thomasina Brown Childress, born 1914 in Edgefield, South Carolina, was beautiful, with an oval face and large eyes, full lips, a pecan-brown complexion, shoulder-length hair straightened with a hot straightening comb, and a thin willowy figure. She was described as eloquent and poised in the way she walked, dressed, and talked.

My daddy, Herbert Andrew Childress, born 1913 in Nashville, Tennessee, could be described as the exact opposite of my mother. While he too was extremely good-looking, his outstanding features were his light mulatto complexion, his thin lips, his keen nose, and his soft straight hair. His physical stature was stocky, with broad shoulders and muscular arms and thighs. My father's hands were massive, and his signs were powerful, dominating, and forthright, conveying strength and authority.

One of Mama and Daddy's proudest moments was when the cinderblock bungalow at 5901 Clay Street was finally built in 1946, constructed primarily by my mother's daddy, Clarence Brown, a tall lanky dark-complexioned man, who had prided himself on being a master bricklayer. I called my grandfather Grindaddy because that's how Mama pronounced it, and he would lovingly hug me whenever I called out his name.

One spring day in 1945 when I was only two years old, Grindaddy took Herbert to see land blanketed with trees in north-east Washington, D.C., known as the "boondocks" because in those days, it was in the rural part of the District of Columbia.

Grindaddy drove up to the land in his old beat-up, rusty car; he took my father by the arm and waved his massive hand toward a large plot of land. Then, walking to the back of the trunk, Clarence pulled out a thick carpenter pencil and a small notepad, and scrawled in large letters, "You buy land. I build house." My father stared at the note. Clarence pointed to himself and then to Herbert, and mouthed the words "We build you a house." My father responded with a bobbing of his head, showing his ecstatic joy, and together they went to downtown Washington to purchase two lots of land on the corner of Fifty-Ninth and Clay at a price of three hundred dollars.

This was an area long recognized as a segregated area for "Negroes," located a distance from the nation's Capitol, where it was understood that "Negroes" could build homes to live, erect "colored" schools for their children, and buy food from the single-owner grocery stores interspersed throughout the area.

These were "colored" people dedicated to obtaining a better life by working hard, despite having little formal education. Many of them had migrated from the South during and after the Great Depression in search of work. They survived by filling many service jobs, from domestic work, to working



Herbert Childress and his father-in-law, Clarence Brown, before they built our house together. They were called the “D.C. Big Shots.”

as dishwashers and janitors in hotels and restaurants. They also found work in the privately owned homes of white people. Many “Negroes” found work in the construction business doing menial grunt work, lifting and toting heavy loads of brick and mortar in the hot, humid air that permeated D.C.

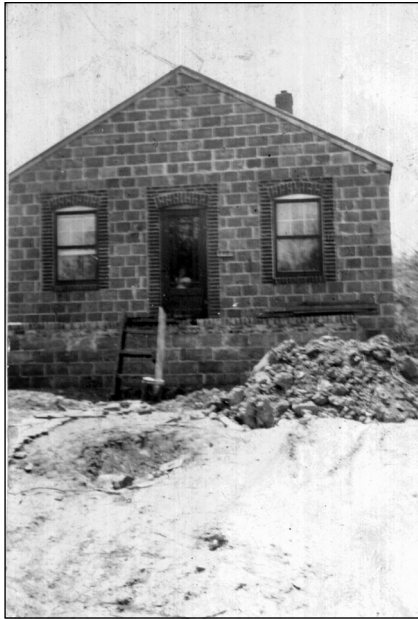
Such was the case with Grindaddy, who had migrated here from Concord, North Carolina. So it was natural for him to gravitate to this part of “Negro” town, D.C.

Building the house was a major task that consumed both my father and grandfather’s evenings and weekends for almost a year: clearing the land of the trees, carrying cinderblocks to the area marked off by string, and slathering cement between each piece of cinderblock.

The cherished outcome from their arduous sweaty hard work was a shotgun bungalow with a kitchen, a living room, one bathroom, and two bedrooms. (A shotgun house is one where a shooter could shoot a shotgun at the front door of a



Herbert (left) and Clarence Brown, a bricklayer, began building a home at 5901 Clay St., N.E., in Washington, D.C., in 1947. Herbert was the first Black deaf person to build his own home in D.C.



The partially built house, which when completed was painted white with red trim.

bungalow and the bullet would sail straight through the house and out the back door.) The tiny house was bordered on the south and east sides by a variety of lush green trees: oak, elm, and willow; on the north side of the house, cutting through those trees, was a dirt road leading to a creek some five hundred feet away. Small boulders and darting tadpoles peppered the creek, with slimy goo at its bottom that when disturbed swirled into dark pools of muddy water.

As a kid, I would often step on the boulders, crossing the creek to the other side to climb a steep bank, which led me to acres of flat land covered with vinca vine growing everywhere. I loved to wander through the fields and look among the flowers, especially for four-leaf clovers to bring home for good luck.

When I climbed back down to the creek, I occasionally threw a pebble in the water and watched the tadpoles dart here and there. As I left the creek and skipped down the narrow dirt road, I reached our large backyard, which was strewn with wild Concord grapes hanging from makeshift trellises that seemed to have been there for ages, and as I finally entered the backdoor, deposited the flowers on the kitchen table, and ran straight through the house to climb a wild cherry tree growing right in our front yard. The front of our house faced Clay Street and was met by two other shotgun houses sixty feet apart: a burgundy red house owned by the Fultons and a brick house where the Millses lived. Neither the Fultons nor the Millses had any children, making Clay Street quiet and secluded.

On Fifty-Ninth Street there were two houses on the south side and two houses facing them across the street. We knew only one family, the Ricks family, who moved from Rocky Mount, North Carolina, to settle at 311 Fifty-Ninth Street. In the early days, their house had an outhouse attached to it in the backyard, and only when the city inspectors demanded it, did they build a bathroom inside their home. There were Mr. and Mrs. Ricks and their three children (the two oldest, Slim and Evelyn, were adults, and the youngest, Carol, was three years older than I).

The Rickses were probably the first residents to build in that area, and they were the family who welcomed my mother and father to the neighborhood. Having no telephone in our house, Mama or Daddy would send me to their home to use their telephone. On any given day, I would open the gate of their white picket fence, knock on the door, and usually be greeted by Mrs. Ricks.

I politely asked, "Can I use the telephone please? My mother wants me to call her sister."

“Why you sure ’nuff can, just come on in,” said Mrs. Ricks, greeting me with a kindly southern smile and pointing to the black telephone situated on a nearby table in the living room. While going to make the phone call, I basked in the cooking smells floating through the house, savoring the aroma of freshly baked biscuits or pound cake.

“We gonna have dinner. Have some?” asked Mrs. Ricks.

“No. Thank you,” I replied, drooling for just one bite, but following Mama’s strict instructions to never accept food from anyone.

GROWING up in our community, I saw only Black people. In fact, I thought the entire world consisted mostly of Black people with different shades of beige, brown, and black skins, from the very light, nearly white, complexion to the darkest of the dark.

Rarely did white people ever come to our house. If truth be told, I seldom saw white people in Washington, D.C., proper, unless I went downtown with Mama. Certainly not in our immediate neighborhood in northeast Washington, just six blocks from the Maryland state line separating Seat Pleasant, Maryland, from Washington, D.C. Our neighbors and friends were Black. The postman was Black. My teachers were Black. All the kids I knew were Black. Every once in a while, I would see a white person such as Mr. Don, who owned the grocery store some five blocks away, on the corner of Sixty-First and Dix Streets, where Mama and Daddy bought food on credit. Daddy’s boss, Sam the Italian, was white.

Mama and Daddy had a few deaf white friends. My father had a deaf white friend with a crew cut who worked at Fanny Farmer candies, and occasionally they went fishing together. Mama did cleaning in deaf white people’s houses in Maryland

or faraway Virginia. She took me with her to do the day work: dusting, vacuuming, sweeping, polishing the furniture, or washing the dishes. We traveled on the bus to the white people's homes, transferring from one bus to another three different times, traveling two hours or more. The farther we rode out to Virginia or Maryland, the whiter the complexion of the riders on the bus. By the time we arrived at our destination, Mama and I were the only Black people on the bus.

My mother and I cleaned for Reverend and Mrs. Soules, white evangelists who occasionally preached at our church, Shiloh Baptist, in Washington, D.C. He could hear, and his wife, who was deaf, spoke in a shrill falsetto voice, so shrill it was barely tolerable to listen to, especially when she stood before our deaf congregation to sing. And sing she would. She signed broad sweeping hand gestures while simultaneously singing full-throated in a variety of notes, most of which did not resemble the tune itself. The Black deaf churchgoers enjoyed Mrs. Soules' deaf singing and tolerated Reverend Soules' preaching every four or five weeks. The Soules were really an anomaly since they were the only white people at Shiloh Baptist Church, a church of at least a thousand hearing and fifty deaf black people. Here was Shiloh Baptist on Ninth and P Streets, N.W., in the midst of a predominantly black neighborhood, and there was Reverend Soules passionately preaching and signing his soul out to save Black deaf churchgoers from going to hell. Daddy said it was funny that the good reverend's last name was "Soules" and that they had come to save souls. But it was Mama who was eager to tell me that Reverend Soules would lose his soul now, since he made love to a young deaf girl. Reverend Soules had publicly confessed the egregious sin to his wife and to church members in his own white deaf church, a guarantee that the news would spread like

wildfire within the deaf communities, black and white, since everyone knew that news traveled faster in the deaf community than in the hearing world. Word-of-mouth gossip can zip like lightning from one deaf household to another, with deaf folk traveling from near and far to spread the word.

As I say, rarely did white people come to our house, and if one did, we assumed that the white person was there in some official capacity. And so it was on this particular day. Daddy, wearing his favorite red flannel plaid shirt and old wrinkled tan slacks, was sitting in his favorite chair in the living room reading the comics in the *Washington Post*, stopping every once in a while to sing:

My bonnie lies over the ocean.

My bonnie lies over the sea.

Bring back, bring back, bring back my bonnie to me.

Dad's voice screeched in a high-pitched wail, "*I am singing, 'My bonnie lies over the ocean,'*" he signed to me with glee. Clearly proud of himself, he continued to make the shrieking noise, grinning all the while.

"Your voice awful," I signed back to him, thinking that he r-e-a-l-l-y can't hear himself because if he could, he would never sing. He looked at me, determined now to sing even louder, and with more resolve. His face was boyish, almost pretty by many women's standards, a sweet cherub face. His mulatto complexion and his long black straight hair, with a slight wave framing his face, gave him a handsome look. His thin lips opened again to let out the loud wail.

Sunday was Daddy's only day off after working six days a week at Sam's Shoe Repair Shop. He took delight and relish in acting childlike, happy he was free for at least a day from the

drudgery of repairing heels and soles, free from the occasional stench of people's feet imprinted in old shoes, free from the lingering smell of leather and shoeshine wax.

IT WAS 1953, I was ten years old and in the fifth grade at Richardson Elementary School. I was sitting on the floor, watching our five-year-old television, when the naked lightbulb flashed over the front door in the living room, flicker . . . flicker . . . flicker. Daddy went to the door when he saw the lightbulb flashing, and I followed, a few steps behind him. A big broad-shouldered white man stood there, looking very somber.



Herbert learned his trade as a shoe repairman and cobbler at the Maryland School for the Colored Blind and Deaf at Overlea located outside Baltimore, Maryland. With pride, he was a shoe repairman his entire life and boasted that he repaired the shoes of J. Edgar Hoover, famed head of the FBI.

“Herbert Childress?”

Daddy looked down at me, expecting me to begin interpreting the man’s words. I uneasily and shyly moved closer beside Daddy and said, “My father can’t hear or talk.”

Standing in the doorway, the man looked at me slightly puzzled, then looked at my father, and back at me.

“Tell him he’s under arrest.” He paused a moment and then gave Daddy a white folded paper, glaring at him. The white man hesitated; he may have thought we didn’t understand the gravity of the situation when he stared at my father and then at me saying, “I have to take your father to jail.” My signs became excitable as I told Daddy that the man says you are going to jail.

Daddy stared down at the paper, “*What? What?*” alarm spreading on his face. I didn’t know why he was going to jail, so I just repeated my signs, “Man say you jail.”

“*Jail? Jail? For what?*” Flustered, not believing what he was seeing, he said, “*Mistake. Wrong. Jail what for?*”

I saw the panic on Daddy’s face. The confusion and fear. I began to feel a sense of foreboding.

“My daddy wants to know what is he going to jail for.”

The man, standing there in the doorway, facing my father and me, did not seem as confrontational as he had been a second or two earlier, and his words became more patient.

“Tell him they say he has done a bad thing. He has to get a lawyer. But first he has to come with me to the police station.”

My father was led to the police car, where he slid onto the backseat. At the station, Daddy scribbled on a notepad that he would like them to call his sister, Arnell Richmond. Arnell was his youngest sister and freely used homemade signs, gestures, and an occasional letter in fingerspelling when talking with her brother. When uncertain if he understood her, she would pull out notepaper and pencil and write to him.

In the following days and weeks, the house took on a gray cast of hopelessness and gloom, with seething anger quietly pervading the rooms. Tension, bickering, and a plague of sadness consumed us all. The shadow of fear hovered over us: the fear of the police, the lawyers, and the white people who were going to make Daddy go to jail. Words such as “bail” “summons” and “character witnesses” were thrown about, words I didn’t understand, as hearing people came to the house to talk to my father. I was expected to understand, expected to interpret, expected to make certain Daddy understood what was taking place. That’s when I realized how smart he was—he understood my signs and fingerspelling even when I did not. I didn’t know what I was saying, I was just spelling out the words or using a hand sign that might translate the sentence correctly. I had no idea what it all meant. But Daddy did, as he calmly asked me a question or two and nodded his head to indicate he comprehended it all.

It was my aunt Arnell who made me understand the seriousness of the accusation and of Daddy’s situation.

“My lawd, my lawd, she said. “Der’s this man runnin’ round pullin’ out his thing and tryin’ to scare all the children. Oh my goodness, what’s dis world comin’ to? Crazy people everywhere. I know dat’s not Herbert. Herbert would n-e-v-e-r do anything like dat.”

When I heard the reference to “thing,” I thought she meant a gun.

“You mean he’s pulling out his gun,” I said.

“No, no, chile, the man pulls out his ding-a-ling outda his pants. Oh my God, oh my God.” She flopped in Daddy’s favorite chair, kicked off her shoes, exposing her swollen feet, and gasped for air as she graphically gave the details as she knew them using homemade invented gestures to talk to my father

since she barely knew any formal sign language. Aunt Arnell exaggerated her thin lips and facial expressions so that Daddy could read her lips to understand some of her words. He pulled out pen and paper and wrote to her. And she nodded her round head and looked affectionately at Daddy as he wrote.

Arnell had hazel eyes, a light mulatto complexion, a very stout body, and stringy straight hair that caressed her sloping shoulders. Arnell's most endearing feature was one that all could easily see: she adored my father. "We'll git you oudda dis mess. Lawd have mercy. Lawd have mercy."

Mama was stunned by it all, and as a result, she didn't know what to do. She had no experience with lawyers, jails, or even the police. The only thing she knew how to do was to become virtually invisible and not talk to Daddy or me about the whole mess.

Arnell hired a lawyer, who in turn gave us all the legal particulars, explaining to the family these facts: Daddy was accused by a woman who lived three or four blocks away of indecent exposure. A man had roamed around the neighborhood pulling out his "ding-a-ling" for all to see, and while doing this ghastly thing, he made creepy awkward sounds. The weird man did this at all hours of the morning, day, and afternoon, frightening children going to and from school.

The intervening weeks, although blurry and vague, whizzed by, and the trial was suddenly upon us. The first day I sat in the courtroom audience wearing my Sunday-go-to-church dress Mama made for me. I am awed by the austere mahogany walls, how slick the wood, how smooth, and how rich. There were white men everywhere, dressed in gray or black listless clothes, and not one wearing a smile. Big, unfamiliar legal terms were casually bandied back and forth in the courtroom between the lawyers and the judge. Some of the white men leaned over

and talked to other white men. I sat there in the pews, not understanding anything but trying my best to absorb everything, feeling out of place, struggling to be comfortable.

A tall, thin white man walked up to my father and introduced himself as his interpreter. Daddy shook his hand and was genuinely relieved to see him. The interpreter stood by the witness box. The presiding judge, wearing his black robe, entered the courtroom through one of the paneled doors on the left. He was the scariest white man I had ever seen.

Suddenly a booming voice from nowhere yelled, "Hear ye! Hear ye! Please rise." Everyone stood up, and Mama and I jumped to our feet, holding hands!

The prosecutor launched his case by calling on the neighbor who filed the charges, the woman whose child complained that a man showed her his "private thing" while she was on her way to school.

"The man made these weird sounds," said the woman. "My daughter says it was Mr. Childress because she heard him making that kind of sound when she passed by his house one day when he was cutting grass."

"Objection! Objection! That's all hearsay," yelled Daddy's lawyer.

"I'm going to allow the mother to testify to what her daughter told her," said the judge. "I think it would be too hard on the child to recall all that happened. And I am willing to take the word of the child's mother because she is under oath."

I could hear the attorney sigh as my father was sitting next to him. There was no expression of emotion on Daddy's face, which led me to wonder whether he understood the interpreter's description of exactly what had happened.

A short time later, our lawyer explained to Daddy and Aunt Arnell that not all was lost, because we would now have

our say. He called person after person to come forward stating that Herbert was a very good person. I heard someone whisper that they were character witnesses. There were Mr. and Mrs. Mills, our neighbors across the street, who said they had known Daddy for many years, and “he is a good family man who is very proud of his children. Why, Herbert Childress even lets us take his daughter to Sunday school at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church.”

Then Daddy’s boss, Sam, a short stubby Italian man, came forward to say that Daddy was a very hard worker and was always on time. “In fact, I don’t need to look at the clock in the mornings to tell you what time it is. I just know when Herbert gets to work, it is 8:15 a.m. sharp. Yes sirree, five days a week it’s 8:15, and 8:30 on Saturdays. No. No. I don’t recollect Herbert ever missed a day from work in all the ten years he has worked for me.”

There was the black minister from Shiloh Baptist, who testified that Daddy would come to church on Sunday nights with his family. “Yes, I preach to deaf people on Sunday nights. I don’t know sign language myself—I have an interpreter sign for me, Mr. Harry Lee. But I’ve come to know all the deaf families who attend the services. Well, most of them, once in a while there’d be a new person there from out of town. No. No. I don’t preach every Sunday. Every once in a while, especially on the fourth or fifth Sunday, Reverend Soulles would preach there. He’s a visiting pastor who knows sign language.”

I looked around to see if Reverend Soulles was in the courtroom; he was not. But I did see Mr. Harry Lee, a tall, lanky, very light-complexioned deaf black man who had gained both the trust and affection of the deaf Negro community because he could speak so clearly, and had residual hearing. He often helped his friends by acting as an interpreter or mediator of

sorts. His speech was clear and crisp, easily understandable without any slurs. He must have lost his hearing at a much older age than when Daddy lost his. Anyway, Mr. Lee told of Daddy's civic activities, that Daddy was one of the founders of a social club for the deaf for "colored people."

Then "Banana" came forward, too. Because her complexion was a pale, almost yellowish, coloring, I called her Banana. I never learned her real name. She said that Daddy and Mama would stop at her ice cream fountain shop most Sunday nights after church services, just before catching the streetcar home. It really felt good to see Banana, a six-foot-tall, broad-shouldered woman who seemed to be the nicest person I didn't know.

One by one, people were brought in by Daddy's lawyer to give supporting testimony for my father.

Then it was time for my father to testify. The interpreter came forward, too. Daddy was sworn in, and then a rash of questions were thrust at him by lawyers. The interpreter meticulously translated verbatim in Signed English, signing and fingerspelling literally—word for word, everything that was said.

I marveled at how fast his fingers flew. Everything he signed was grammatically correct. There were no gestures, no omissions or changing of signs to make a point clearer. As I listened and watched the interpreter, I saw how his signs were different from those signs Mama and Daddy taught me. He signed the word "what" with an index finger going across the palm of the other hand, while I used both hands palms up and shake them a little, and the word "how" was signed differently, too.

As the interpreter continued his crisp translation, putting the lawyers' questions to my father, Daddy began to frown. His eyes squinted and he shook his head.

"I not understand," said my father.

The interpreter tried to sign the questions again, this time changing a phrase or word in an effort to be understood.

Daddy paused and signed, "*Say again, please.*" He squinted his eyes again, longer this time, and slowly shook his head, "*Not understand. Not understand you say. Say again.*"

The interpreter obviously frustrated, turned to the judge and said, "It's clear that Mr. Childress does not understand my signs."

Now the lawyers and the judge became agitated, not knowing what to do. Apparently, this was an obstacle they had not anticipated.

The judge then said to the interpreter, "Ask him if he has a preference for an interpreter? Is there someone he d-o-e-s understand?"

Then the interpreter signed slowly, intently, "You know someone who can sign you can understand?"

"Yes, my daughter Maxine sign."

The prosecutor and the interpreter looked in the direction my father was pointing. I sat on the front row, behind the swinging wooden gate, separating the courtroom audience from the legal people.

"Are you Maxine? Can you interpret for your father?"

I meekly nodded and then stood up to walk through the swinging gate. My knees trembled as I walked erectly, thinking to myself, "I can't be scared, so scared I don't know how to sign those big words." The lawyers began to talk in a quiet tone, almost whispering, as they put their questions in simple phrases.

"Ask your father where he works."

"You tell I shoe repairman, Sam's shoe repair." Daddy signed and fingerspelled each word slowly, deliberately, and with extreme measure.

Ask your father what time he goes to work.

"I leave home 7:30. I arrive work sometimes 8:15, 8:30. I buy coffee before work (at) White Castle."

"Ask your father if he has ever been late or missed certain days from work."

"No, I never late. One time bus break down. I late one hour. Most time never late, never miss work."

"Ask your father if he knows that he makes weird sounds when he talks."

"I don't know, I can't hear," said Daddy. There were a few chuckles in the courtroom.

"Ask your father if he drinks alcohol," the lawyer wanted to know.

I quickly had a conversation in my head: "Alcohol? Does he mean alcohol I rub my body with . . . no, no, that can't be. Maybe he's asking about a glass with whiskey in it, or does he mean beer which has alcohol in it—Daddy drinks a lot of beer." My thoughts zigged and zagged in my mind. My fingers were quivering, as I began to fingerspell the word "do," then signed the words "you drink" then my hands visibly trembled, as I spelled out the word "alcohol." Daddy looked at me with a piercing stare.

He had read my mind as he signed, *"Which? Beer or whiskey?"*

I heard my voice; it sounded shrill, as I tried to be loud enough for the prosecutor to hear me. I must get the signing correct . . . just right, but I must help Daddy. I knew he drank cans and cans of beer.

"My father says which one, beer or whiskey?"

"Whiskey," said the prosecutor.

I signed the word "whiskey."

"Yes, I drink whiskey."

Ask your father how much whiskey he drinks.

My hands felt sweaty as I became even more tense. I heard the silence in the room and wondered if everyone was holding their breath to see how Daddy would answer the question.

"I drink this much." Daddy, pulling together his thumb and index finger in one sign, made a gesture signaling the approximate size of a shot glass of whiskey.

"My father says this much." And I imitated the sign my father made.

The lawyer shook his head and laughed. Spectators laughed. The judge snickered. They're all laughing, I thought. That means everything's all right. I looked over at Daddy, who sighed in relief to see others smiling, and he began to smile himself.

Finally, the lawyers made closing statements; afterward the jury plodded out of the courtroom one by one. Then there was the anxious waiting; one, two, three hours later. When the jury returned, a woman appearing very refined in a gray tweed suit announced the jury had reached a verdict. The original interpreter stood in front of my father and began to sign, "We the jury find the defendant, Herbert A. Childress, not guilty."

I sat directly behind Daddy when I heard the verdict and saw his broad arched shoulders suddenly slump down in relief. His lawyer turned to him, shook his hand, and people came from everywhere to congratulate him. But it was obvious Daddy was not happy; he nodded his head and swept Mama, Arnell, and me out the courtroom to the elevators.

The attractively dressed woman walked over to us while we were standing at the elevator with the lawyers. She looked directly at me. "Tell your father I was one of the jurors. I just knew he couldn't have done those things."

Then Daddy's lawyer said, "Aren't you pleased so many people have come to help you. It doesn't mean the woman who brought these charges against you didn't believe this happened. It was just a case of mistaken identity."

I looked at Daddy and signed, "Lawyers say woman make mistake."

He grimaced. His eyes, his face, his breathing, even his stature, all conveyed hatred.

"She make me shame. I pain. I pain my heart. People think bad man me. They think because I deaf, I bad things. I hate woman." He flicked his middle fingers off his thumbs, signing the word "hate" as if it were venom.

As we left the courthouse, we began to go in separate directions. Mama had somewhere to go. Aunt Arnell went in another direction, the lawyer in still another. I planned to go with Daddy to the bus stop, where I would go home, and he to his job. As I walked alongside him, I suddenly heard his teeth grinding, gritting against each other. It was a soft gnawing sound. Grit. Grit. Grit. His upper teeth were grinding against his lower. I looked at him; he was staring directly ahead. His clenched lips were pulled in tightly. His pretty face, pale almost colorless, looked puffy and filled with agony. The fingers on his right hand were moving back and forth as if he were playing the piano. Was he talking to himself? His mind seemed far away. I wanted to say something soothing, but I didn't know what to say to him. We walked beside each other for a few steps. As we crossed the street, he grabbed my hand, looked both ways for approaching cars. I was suddenly conscious of the dampness in the air, the wet autumn-hued leaves on the ground, and the brisk gentle wind blowing in our faces. I clenched his big hand and felt the calluses of hard work. Holding his hand felt so good and secure.

I began to long for things to be as they were. I wanted the old daddy back, the daddy who would smile that wry smile, coyly, when I asked him how did he kiss Mama because his lips were too thin.

"My secret," he said.

I wanted the daddy back who forgave me for sneaking into his room and trying to steal Fanny Farmer candy given him by his white deaf friend. I wanted the daddy back who would let me comb and plait his hair and would smile when his hair clearly was too straight to be braided and would then unravel. I wanted the daddy back who sang "My bonnie lies over the ocean" with such glee. I'd even forgive him for yelling at us, getting drunk, and insisting that we ate too much and spent all his money. The daddy who drank too much beer and told jokes only he thought were funny. It would be all right if he yelled and screamed at us the way he used to. I just wanted that daddy to come back.

Although he was holding my hand, I felt him slipping, slipping through my fingers, his bitterness, his fury, his anger was slipping, slipping into his world of revenge, of getting even.

"I kill her!" "Sheen! Sheen!" "Mong Fong!" "Mong Fong!" his pronunciation of "shit" and "motherfucker."

In the days and weeks following the court trial, Daddy became obsessed with the idea of getting even with the woman, and he continually shrieked obscenities everywhere: when he sat in the living room reading the newspaper, he began to swear, "Sheen, mong fong"; when he ate dinner, he grimaced at the food and said, "Sheen, mong fong"; even when he went to the bathroom, I heard him through our thin walls, "Mong fong." He came home from work reeking of booze and still yelling obscenities.

"I sue her. I take her house. I take everything. I no care she poor. She must pay." His hands, his face, his body, wanted revenge.

Some weeks later I went with him to see a lawyer. We entered his small office where the well-dressed, chocolate-brown-complexioned lawyer listened carefully as we retold the saga of what had happened to my father. The lawyer responded in measured words, “Well, I certainly believe he has a case. Does she own her own home? Where does she work? We can attach her salary.” I sensed my father’s momentary optimism that he would at last have sweet vengeance.

We left the lawyer’s office to catch the bus and report to Aunt Arnell that we had good news—we were going to sue the woman. We caught the H Street bus and disembarked on Twelfth Street, N.E., at Arnell’s row house, only a few miles from Capitol Hill. Daddy traveled this bus route at least once a week to visit his sister, just to eat her home-cooked meals and converse with her by fingerspelling and gesturing a few words. She was the one person he could always depend on to help him. But just as important, she gushed with love for him while bringing him up-to-date news from Tennessee.

This time, when we stepped through her foyer into the living room, our excitement was evident.

“Tell her, tell her what the lawyer said,” my father signed. He could hardly contain his glee, but was soon devastated when Arnell became visibly overcome with weariness. Her once-smooth face now showed signs of worry wrinkles on her forehead and dark bags under her eyes as she sat beside Daddy on the purple velvet sofa, struggling to sign that she had had enough. She shook her head and exaggerated the words, “No, No,” then pointed to herself and slowly fingerspelled the word “tired.”

“Maxine, tell Herbert this case has been a nightmare.” Not knowing a sign for the word nightmare, I signed, “This bad

dream.” Daddy gave her a blank stare, either not understanding me or refusing to acknowledge the possibility of giving up.

Arnell repeated the word “nightmare” several times.

“Oh Lawd, please, please Herbert, let it go. Dis here has been a nightmare. A nightmare, I tell ya, a plain nightmare. Let it go,” she pleaded. “She’s poor. You’ll git nothin’. And it’s goin’ to cost you a whole lotta money to hire a lawyer, too.”

My father told me to tell Arnell that the woman owns her home. And then he asked Arnell, almost as an afterthought, how much a lawyer would cost.

“Well, you tell him, Maxine, that it’s gonna cost him hundreds and hundreds of dollars.” As I translated this for Daddy, I saw him become devastated as the prospect of justice visited became a piercing disappointment; he knew that his sixty-five-dollar-a-week salary wouldn’t allow him to pay for a lawyer.

“I sue her,” he repeated it several times.

But Aunt Arnell was just as adamant. “Let it go,” she pleaded. “The woman is poor. You’ll git nothin’.”

I signed, “No money from woman. Woman poor.”

My father reminded Arnell for a second time that the woman owned her own home, but Aunt Arnell resorted to a threat: “If you do this, I’m not gonna help you.” As I interpreted these words to Daddy, I saw him stare at her, seething, not believing she had the audacity to refuse to help him. He stood up, and without saying good-bye to his sister, he walked out of the room, turned, and beckoned for me to join him.

“Come, we go home.”

We put on our coats and walked into the dark night, down Twelfth Street to H Street, where there were many lit shops dotting the bus route where we waited for the X2 Seat Pleasant bus. As we stepped onto the nearly empty bus, I picked a seat near the driver and squeezed my body by the window, allowing

Daddy lots of space next to me near the aisle. I looked over at his face, no longer beige, but now a pasty taupe color. The muscles in his face were tight, his lips rigid.

As I stared out the bus window, I couldn't see through the glass since the overhead light inside the bus made the window a glaring reflection of myself. Looking at the window as if it were a mirror, I witnessed Daddy's woeful despair. That's when the image came to my mind of deaf people talking about Daddy, thinking he was guilty, even though he was found not guilty. I could see them now, signing, "*Herbert must go jail. He show children his . . .*" and then they would point to that part of the anatomy between their legs at the crotch of their pants and use the sign of the pointing finger shaking up and down. Some would shake their heads in shock, others would snigger and make fun of him, and still others would say something like "*He like many girls, I not surprised.*"

Yes, I now understood why he felt so humiliated, ashamed. And maybe some of his hearing friends at work believed that he could do such a thing, too.

Then I thought about that woman in court, who was so adamant that my father was the one who exposed himself. I thought to myself, "Daddy! Daddy! If it would make you happy, then you should sue her." But I didn't say anything to him and just kept my hands in my lap.

Several years later I realized the extent of Daddy's determination to seek retaliation against the woman who made the charges against him. He paid a heavy price as a result of her accusation: loss of reputation, personal shame, and a feeling of general humiliation for deaf people on the whole. Perhaps my father minimized the price the woman herself may have paid: the impact of her daughter's frightening experience. In his mind, the prices they each paid were not equal. The woman

and her daughter did not pay a heavy enough price since they both could resume their lives, and the mother could encourage her daughter to move beyond the egregious incident. Daddy wanted to level the playing field by suing the woman, so that she would suffer as he had suffered, and would continue to suffer in the years to come.

Yes, Herbert wanted to get his revenge. But he didn't know how. He never sued the woman. But he never was able to let the anger go.