

# PREFACE

## *Love and Misunderstanding*

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It is a difficult task to reconcile the parents I knew so well as I was growing up to the young man and woman who wrote these delicate negotiations of lovers. To all outward appearances, they are not the same people. My mother was twenty-six when the correspondence began and my father, thirty-eight. Much older now than they were then, I look back across the years and try to imagine how they must have felt. The woman, who appears so feisty and self-assured in her letters, must have been terrified of leaving the warm security of her family and venturing forth on a journey to the New World to take up housekeeping with a man who was little more than a stranger. It may well be that Eva Weintrobe and Morris Davis had not actually met more than four or five times before she sailed for the States to be married. As Eva writes, “I am taking a very big risk.” Her hesitation was well-founded because, as it turned out, Eva never saw her mother again.

Morris, at the time of their correspondence, was living with his father in a cold-water flat in Brooklyn. It must have been an unrewarding existence. He had little money. His work

consisted of long hours of drudgery. His social life, aside from the Deaf club, was probably less than satisfying. The prospect of marrying a young and beautiful bride was, no doubt, a consummation devoutly to be wished.

I do not know the young woman who wrote these letters. The mother I knew was a submissive and docile wife who rarely argued with or contradicted my father. Over the years of their marriage, the force of his personality must have come to dominate hers and place her in a subservient role. However, she did, from time to time, show flashes of that humor, strength, and self-confidence that resonate in her letters. I can't imagine my mother being coquettish, as when she writes, "Shall I say a kiss?" She was always the dutiful wife, even when she did not agree with my father's decisions. She didn't display any of the sharp-edged sense of humor that had her write, in response to Morris's suggestion that they marry in England and then have him go alone to America, with her following him after she had secured her visa, "It is allright for cricketeers [ballplayers] & film stars, but Jewish people never do things like this."

My mother was also self-reliant then, as she demonstrates when she writes that she has saved enough money to buy her own wedding dress. When I envision my mother, I do not picture her as self-reliant.

Only five of Morris's letters have survived. Where are the rest of his letters, we wonder? Where are his long-winded protestations of love and his detailed pages of instructions? What did he say to kindle my mother's interest? We can only speculate that he was the more emotional and sentimental partner who saved Eva's letters while she discarded most of his as not worthy of preserving for posterity. What did he say to

woo her and convince her that he was the one to marry? What declaration of affection persuaded her to give up the infamous “Leeds boy” and travel to New York to marry Morris? He seems to be the one pursuing the relationship at all costs, the one with the largest stack of emotional coins to lose. I cannot imagine my father as the ardent suitor. His personality was far from that of the gentle lover.

It was a given in our family that my father was smarter than my mother, but one could be convinced otherwise by these letters. His letters go on without many memorable phrases, while hers are sharp, to the point, and perhaps more skillfully written. Hers are certainly more fun to read, as reflected in her saucy retort to him, “Did you expect me to propose first?”

Morris’s declaration of love and his proposal of marriage came soon after the onset of the correspondence. This was not at variance with his nature, which was somewhat impulsive. But Eva’s strong-willed comments like “You have no right to balance my love for you in whether I go to America with you or not” and “Nothing will make me change my mind” surprise me and make me wonder what she was like as a young woman. She certainly was not like that as a mature woman, when she rarely exerted her will. However, when Eva says, “I will be a good wife to you,” I know that her promise and prophesy were to come true as the marriage ripened into old age.

It is interesting to note the range of emotions—from anger to love, from joy to bitter disappointment—that these letters contain. Eva is shocked by Morris’s impulsive actions in asking favors of her relatives and is proud when she scolds him, “I wonder what our relatives think of us now.” I cannot recall

ever seeing my mother shocked, since she always retained her sense of pride and dignity in front of others. I often thought of her as a regal person who, in my mind, bore a striking resemblance to Queen Elizabeth.

The thread that carries through from these letters to the people I knew as my parents is the expression of emotion. My mother was a reticent person and was reluctant to make a great display of her emotions, whereas my father was more openly demonstrative of affection and, possibly, more in need of expressions of love.

Now, as I re-read their correspondence, I am drawn back into the dim recesses of memory as I become a child again, recalling what it was like to journey through a Deaf world. Images, sounds and people rise from the past to reassert their places in my consciousness. Events I hadn't thought of in years become as fresh as yesterday's newspaper.

Eva became deaf at the age of six. When I was a child, I was told that she had fallen over backwards in a rocking chair and had hit her head, and that was the cause of her deafness. I later learned that she had contracted meningitis, from which she recovered fully except for the loss of her hearing. When she became deaf, she already had facility of speech (with a delightful English accent from the town of her birth, Liverpool), so she was able to make herself understood to the hearing world with little difficulty.

Morris, on the other hand, became deaf when he was eighteen months old. The family myth held that his teenage aunt had dropped him down a flight of stairs. It wasn't until many years later that I saw the scars behind his ears and learned that an operation had been performed upon him when he was an infant. The exact nature of his childhood illness

was shrouded in mystery, but the butchery of the turn-of-the-century English medicine was evident because he told me that both of his eardrums had been removed by a surgeon.

For some unexplained reason, it was considered shameful to become deaf through illness, as if it were somehow the fault of the patient. If one became deaf through an accident, that is to say suddenly and because of an external shock, it was not quite as much of a stigma. I never knew if this was a prejudice of our family alone or if other deaf families shared the same belief.

My father's speech was difficult for hearing people to comprehend because he had never heard the sounds that words made. His manner of speaking was coarse and guttural, but he had a keen intelligence that he was not bashful about displaying. If I made a mistake in sign language, he was sure to correct me vehemently. This was his territory and he was the guide, the expert tracker and wagon master.

As soon as I could talk, I became the emissary through whom my parents were able to communicate with the hearing world. And so a child assumed adult responsibilities.

It was a mixed blessing. I felt important because of the power that language gave me as the key to enter the grown-up world. But I also felt embarrassed because of my parents' disability. This embarrassment was a continual and unwelcome companion on my travels around New York City with my mother and father. I wasn't ashamed of them in the safety of our home, but I dreaded those trips on the subway and pretended that I wasn't traveling with that deaf couple seated next to me who were conversing in sign language, an event that engendered great curiosity among the other passengers.

When I was four years old, I locked my mother in a

closet. I don't remember why I did it. We were alone in our three-room apartment in the Bronx, and my mother was cleaning out a clothes closet. I slammed the door shut and stood there listening to her frantic repeated cries of "Gerald! Please open the door! Turn the doorknob!" There was no way to open the door from the inside of the closet. Picture this helpless woman, deaf to her surroundings, now deprived of her most important sense and enclosed in the closet's darkness. As the story was recounted to me later, I finally opened the door after about ten or fifteen minutes and was greeted with a hug, not a spanking. Such was the loving nature of this woman.

The occupations open to deaf people at that time were few. Most of my parents' friends were tailors or printers. One was a teacher of deaf students. Since he did not have to work with his hands, he was granted a measure of respect.

My father was a tailor. He would wake up at 5 o'clock each morning to go to work. He had an electric alarm clock with a plug-in cord attached to a buzzer. This buzzer, which he put under his pillow, would vibrate to wake him when the alarm went off. He would then wake my mother to prepare his breakfast while he shaved.

My mother was a seamstress. She seemed to be working constantly as I was growing up. I remember that her hands were always in motion, always in the process of producing something, whether a garment or a meal. When my brother and I were young, she worked at home. Wealthy ladies (or so I considered them) would come to our small flat to be fitted and measured for garments. My mother would get down on her knees, pins in her mouth, to ensure that the hems of the dresses were level with the ground. The ladies would nod and smile and gesture, "Very good."

Almost every week, usually on a Sunday afternoon, my parents took me to the Deaf club. The Deaf club met in a large empty room in a community center, with folding tables and chairs leaning against the stark brick walls. There were always games and cheap toys and candy for the children. The members were invariably friendly, and I played with the hearing children of these deaf adults. I can't recall any deaf children and I wonder now why there were none. We, parents and children, sat on metal folding chairs and watched American movies with English subtitles shown on a folding screen by a 16-millimeter projector, which often broke down and left burn holes in the film. The Deaf club to a hearing boy was a quiet world of flying hands, occasional grunts, and clacking teeth. As I grew older, my visits to the Deaf club became less frequent, but my mother and father went every week without fail. The Deaf club was their haven and the nexus of their social life. It was a meeting place, a support group, and a communications center, since many of the deaf did not have a telephone or a TTY during the years I was growing up. Some of these people had been my parents' friends from early childhood in England, and some of these friendships had lasted for seventy-five years.

Perhaps it is ironic, but my father bought me my first phonograph. A man who couldn't hear went into a music store and bought a portable record player and a forty-five single of Patti Page singing "How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?" It was a rudimentary machine. Its sound wasn't very clear, but it played music loudly—and that was enough for a young, undemanding child.

The appearance of a television set in our home in 1950 was a significant event. That Emerson console became the centerpiece of our evenings. Before my father purchased the televi-

sion, my entertainment was an Emerson radio that sat on our kitchen table. My father always knew when the radio had been turned on contrary to his wishes, even when I had shut it off, because he would place his hand on top of the radio and feel the heat from the vacuum tubes, which was a telltale giveaway.

Our family signed up for telephone service in 1956. Before then we would use the phone of a neighbor across the hallway if we needed to make an important call. A new responsibility was added to my list: I now had to make all the phone calls that heretofore other people had placed for my parents. My father would dictate the script and stand in front of me to read my lips and ensure that I repeated his words exactly.

I remember the last time I had to interpret for my father. It was at a union hearing before an arbitration panel to present my father's case for some allegedly unjustified vacation days he had taken. There was some dispute as to whether he was entitled to the time off and vacation pay. I was a man by then, and for the first time felt like one as I translated his words. My father was as persuasive and as long-winded in presenting his case as he had been in his letters. The panel ruled in his favor. We had been a team, and a successful one.

I cannot recall my parents ever complaining about their deafness. To them it was a fact of life, like eating or breathing. They were simply healthy, intelligent human beings who did not have the function of hearing. Their lives were full, but had one quality different from the lives of hearing people: their existence was in a Deaf world, encircled by the hearing one. I grew up in that Deaf world, but I left it behind when I became an adult. And now this fortuitous discovery of long-forgotten letters gives me a welcome opportunity to see my mother and father in a new way.