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Between Two Worlds

PERHAPS THE first time I knew I lived in two worlds was when I was seven. I remember one Sunday morning riding in the backseat of my father's car along the narrow two-way road through small town after small town, the familiar way from our California home in Fullerton to Los Angeles, where my family attended church. My father parked our 1953 Chevrolet in its usual curbside spot, forgoing the parking lot, just twenty feet away from the entrance. In the early morning, we were shaded from the warm sun by mature trees lining the street.

It was the custom in our small family to arrive earlier than other church members, but we waited in the car until the service started. I sat with my sister Debbie, who must have been four, as we spoke to each other in English. My parents, known to the fine people of Wilshire Ward Deaf Branch as Melwin David Sorensen and Eileen Richards Sorensen, sat in the front, signing to each other in ASL. I glanced away from Debbie to see what my parents were saying to each other as their hands flew through the air: just a routine, friendly conversation, about the goings-on in the church community. Every once in a while my mother would stop and look back at Debbie and me with a smile before her hands would bolt into action again,

continuing her conversation with my father. The two conversations going on in our private family bubble was normal to me: one conversation voiced, the other signed.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed two boys about nine and ten approaching our car, then standing about near the back door on the driver's side staring at us. Their eyes were trained on the front seat and not on Debbie nor me. Neither boy wore "church clothing," but they definitely lived in the neighborhood. My voice broke off in the middle of a sentence to follow their gazes; they were gawking at my parents. One boy scrunched his face and raised his hands to mock my parents' signing with indistinct handshapes and gestures, wiggling his fingers and throwing his hands out in front of him. His gestures were wild, incoherent, meaning nothing. The other boy laughed, and the gesturing boy laughed in unison. The entire scene lasted a minute or two at most.

I caught my own face in the rearview mirror. As I saw the bafflement on my face, anger erupted from me. I leaned forward to tap my father and mother on the shoulder and signed, *Look at what those boys are doing!* My mother gave a sidelong glance in their direction, looked at me with a smile, and shrugged it off. Her implication: These boys were not worth her time. I can only assume that these inappropriate expressions were not the only time my parents encountered people mocking them. Although I was angry and puzzled, I followed my mother's lead. Debbie, not really understanding the magnitude of what had just happened, laughed as though it was a fun game.

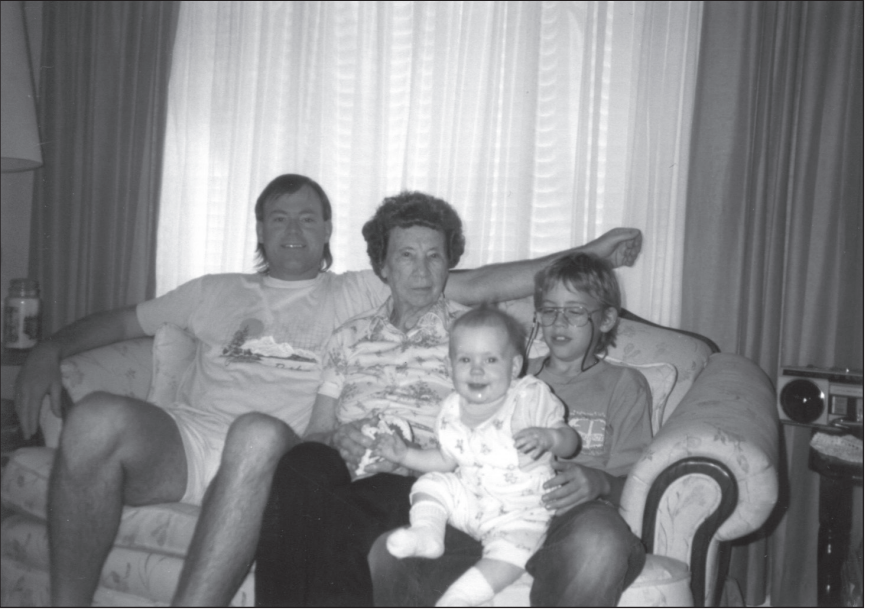
Mere minutes after the boys had left, we emerged from the car and headed into the church. My parents went in one direction, their Deaf Branch, and I took responsibility for Debbie as we went in another direction to Sunday school with our hearing peers.

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After the Words

ON CHRISTMAS DAY in 1930, my mother, Eileen Elizabeth Richards, was born in Clarkdale, Arizona, a small farming community about three hours northwest of Phoenix where my grandmother taught elementary school.

Her birthplace couldn't have been more remote. How the family came to Clarkdale was that her father worked for the Arizona Highway Department, and wherever he went, the family followed. They lived in Clarkdale for about two years until my grandparents moved to Littlefield, Arizona, in the Virgin River Valley, along the northwestern border of Arizona and southwestern border of Utah and just south of St. George, Utah, where my grandmother accepted a teaching job. I recall, as a young man, coming up the Virgin River Valley that had shaped my mother's early years. I drove along a plateau when I encountered a highway marker warning of a downgrade for several miles. Once the valley popped into view, I noticed a small community of rural homes dotted with farms. As I approached the valley floor, I saw extensive fields of hay and alfalfa. The Virgin River supplied this farming community with water for agriculture, nourishing it into a lush haven. But forty years ago, this oasis could only be reached by dirt road, another country entirely.



From left, me, Grandma Richards, baby Kyla, and Aaron in my grandmother's front room in Mesa, Arizona.

Her family had spread out all over the map along the border with Arizona, Utah, and Nevada. When my mother was five, the family moved to Boulder City, Nevada, for my grandmother's next teaching assignment. Back then, my grandparents moved to wherever the work was. But one school year later, the family returned to Arizona, moving to Pinedale, a small community in the Mogollon Mountains about 200 miles northeast of Phoenix. There, my grandmother taught for two years in a two-room schoolhouse along with her sister Edna. When it was time for my mother to start school at age six, she enrolled in Pinedale.

The following year, my mother contracted spinal meningitis. She nearly died.

YEARS LATER, she remembered as she signed, *I saw bright lights through a long corridor. There were pretty flowers all around and I felt warm. I*

asked my mother if she had been frightened. She answered with a nonchalant expression and signed, *I was never frightened*. Only later did it occur to me to delve deeper, to wonder about how long she had hovered between life and death, to wonder if that was the moment she lost her hearing. Instead, I took in the wonder of her near-passage through the hall of pretty flowers to the other side.

I never told my mother or my father.

She had not died, but she had crossed over into a different world without sound, the world after the words.

MONTHS LATER, AS MY MOTHER CONVALESCED, she had to be carried around because she was too weak to walk. An older female cousin tended to her. My mother remembers no real distress on her parents' part when they discovered that she could no longer hear—though, at seven, it may have been difficult to be truly in tune with the emotional responses of adults. My mother signed to me, *It seemed that my parents realized that I was deaf and that we just had to get used to it*.

My grandparents lived in Pinedale for only a couple years before they moved to Joseph City, Arizona, where my grandfather built their permanent home. It was not until years later, as an adult and out of curiosity, that I visited Pinedale, nestled among the ponderosa pines. The population of Pinedale was not any more than 300 to 400 people. Pinedale, still a sleepy town, probably has not changed much in population over the past seventy-odd years. One thing I noted as I drove through was the schoolhouse where my grandmother had taught. My mother had attended that same school for her first years before she transferred to the Arizona School for the Deaf and the Blind in Tucson.

MY MOTHER WAS postlingually deaf, which means she acquired her spoken language skills before she lost her hearing, so subsequently she had existing speech skills. She had words, but after she became deaf, her words were in one world, and her parents' words were in another. Still, her family expected her to speak, not knowing any other way. She learned how to lipread very well. *My mother and I wrote a lot,*

whereas my father and I would talk, she explained. She was comfortable with her mother, who was always available to her. But it was the opposite with her father, who was always gone a few days at a time. My mother seemed resigned to the fact that she was deaf and accepted it as part of her life. She shrugged off the inconvenience. She took it in stride that she had to put forth extra effort to communicate with hearing people by lipreading or writing. However, it was clear when I saw her conversing with other deaf people that she was exuberant and animated. Conversation was easy with them, while it was always a strain to communicate with hearing people.

There came a time when it was obvious to the family that my mother would benefit from being in a school for deaf students. By 1938, my mother's family had settled in Joseph City, east of Flagstaff in northern Arizona, and my grandmother had been hired to teach elementary school. My mother attended fourth grade there until the next school year, when she got into the Arizona School for the Deaf and the Blind in Tucson, about 250 miles away at the opposite end of the state. My mother never knew how her parents learned about the deaf school but suspected the suggestion came from someone in the school district or state's education department.

Through conversations with my grandmother and my mother over the years, I have gleaned that the decision to send my mother to Tucson was by all accounts decided without any discussion with my mother. My grandmother, being an old-school country teacher, believed the school in Joseph City could not provide the education my mother required, especially now that doctors had determined that she was indeed deaf. My grandparents struggled with the decision to send her to the southern part of the state, especially with the obstacles of transportation. When I asked my mother questions about this experience, her response was matter of fact: decisions were made, and she didn't give it much further thought. Naturally, this was the best decision my grandparents could have made.

IN THE FALL OF 1939, my mother began her formal education and acculturation into the Deaf community. I asked her how she felt about

leaving her parents and living with people she did not know. She responded, *I do not know. All I knew was I had to learn sign language.* Her own mother attempted to sign but learned only the manual alphabet. Although my grandmother could fingerspell words, she did not understand when someone else fingerspelled to her. My grandfather never learned sign language or how to fingerspell, which my mother simply took as a way of life.

My mother never remembered feeling left out or isolated from her family. However, she enjoyed going home from school, usually via different modes, she told me: by car, but many times by train. She would take the train west to Phoenix, north to Flagstaff, and east to Joseph City.

For return trips, usually only at Christmas or during summer breaks, she often took the bus to Phoenix, and then Aunt Mert, my grandmother's sister, would drive her home. Sometimes my grandparents would come down and pick her up. The next seven years apparently were not very eventful, and she felt that attending the deaf school was no different than any other school. She recalled plenty of friends and getting along well with her teachers and fellow students.

Although my mother was not very athletic and never played sports, she enjoyed watching from the stands. My grandmother told me that my mother was very smart, serving as the class secretary in her junior and senior years as a result of impeccable English and writing skills.

SOON THE TIME CAME for my mother to go to college. The decision to go to Washington, DC, to attend what was then known as Gallaudet College was a foregone conclusion. My grandparents expected my mother to go to college, graduate, and find a secure job. In May 1946, at age fifteen, my mother had done so well at Arizona School for the Deaf and the Blind that she graduated early, and that following fall, she matriculated to Gallaudet, the only major liberal arts college for deaf people in the world.

THERE SEEMED TO BE NO "specialness" over the fact that my mother could not hear, judging from the fact that my grandmother never liked to

talk about her feelings or emotions. *My parents never talked about my deafness*, my mother told me. In later years, my grandmother told me she was, indeed, grieved by her daughter's hearing loss.

Only now as an adult can I appreciate what my grandparents went through for my mother, believing their separate lives were in her best interest. Armed with my experience working with deaf individuals in education and agencies providing services for deaf people, growing up in Deaf culture, and being a therapist for deaf individuals, I certainly see things differently. At the time there were few options for my mother. Had I been in their shoes, I would have indeed sent my daughter to Tucson, and on to Gallaudet, though in so many ways, they might as well have been sending their daughter to another world.