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## *School Days*

LITTLE GIRL, BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU SAY

Little girl, be careful what you say  
when you make talk with words, words—  
for words are made of syllables  
and syllables, child, are made of air—  
and air is so thin—air is the breath of God—  
air is finer than fire or mist,  
finer than water or moonlight,  
finer than spider-webs in the moon,  
finer than water-flowers in the morning:  
and words are strong, too,  
stronger than rocks or steel  
stronger than potatoes, corn, fish, cattle,  
and soft, too, soft as little pigeon eggs,  
soft as the music of hummingbird wings.  
So, little girl, when you speak greetings,  
when you tell jokes, make wishes or prayers,  
be careful, be careless, be careful,  
be what you wish to be.

—Carl Sandburg, *Wind Song*

All summer long my mother's hands lilted, preparing me for the first days of school. "Soon soon, September come, you go to big, wonderful school, be with hearing children, learn read, write, talk good English words."

"Ben," she signed to my father, "Ruth start school next week. We buy new dress. Important she pretty."

My crossed eyes wandered, scars left by measles, whooping cough and scarlet fever in rapid succession. My mother's early efforts to straighten my dark eyes with daily exercise failed; they moved at their own discretion toward the bridge of my small straight nose. My hands reached up continually, nervously smoothing my silky black hair down the sides of my face, covering my ears. Then, I was ashamed of my ears, pushing them close to my head with my small speaking fingers, remembering all the years they were taped to my skull. And those tiny hearing ears had to be perfectly formed for Momma's deaf eyes. Each time my hair pulled away with the adhesive tape, I winced, and my mother signed, "Don't worry, make you beautiful ears. We fix stick-out ears." Her signs were gentle and I hurt.

She could not hear my garbled speech. My language imitated hers, facsimiles of words she learned to say without the gift of sound. I understood all her words, the spoken ones and the signed ones. She never mastered the modulated pitch of normal speech, proclaiming her words just below the level of a shrill scream. Her sentences were signed, spoken in deaf shorthand, prepositions and conjunctions usually omitted. Strong verbs enunciated in the present tense; the words *today*, *yesterday*, and *tomorrow* added for absolute clarity. And it was all lyric.

I spoke as my mother spoke. But my speech, in that I tangled the words I heard, was more confusing than hers, clearer than hers, all mixed up. I spoke shyly. Oral words strained from my

throat. I flinched when people did not understand my words, words stirred with the sounds of silence. I longed for the great school that would teach me to be a hearing, speaking child.

I remember my voice as a young child. Unsafe. I lurched in unstated loss, in sound I did not hear properly. My speech, like my eyes, was cockeyed, cross-eyed, my tongue twisted profoundly by deaf sound. I had a voice that blathered swollen English sounds, a voice that crumpled consonants too difficult for the deaf to pronounce.

I served as my mother's voice, shopping for fresh food. When I asked the green grocer for "one lib domadoes," his eyes squinted, and I recognized the pinched narrow face that didn't understand. I pointed to the soft red mound piled high and my finger indicated the words of my mouth. He recognized my mother and me, and was usually quick to serve us, but when he was busy he shouted, "Girlie, speak right. I'm loaded with customers here. I have no time for you. Come back when I'm not so busy!"

My throat lumped when my mother asked, "Why he not wait on me now, I must go finish shoppings. What take so long time?"

I shrugged without speech, not a sign, not a verbal mouthing.

"I come first before that fat women, tell man, it is my turn now."

I remained silent. My mother, irritated, shouted at me with her hands, voice silent, "You stubborn girl, not good, not tell man what I say. Not fair."

I opened my mouth in pretended speech but emitted no sound.

I did not explain my own shame at being misunderstood.

"Come"—she pulled my sleeve—"we shop other vegetable store."

“Momma,” I signed, “wait, it is our turn soon. He not understand all I say.”

“Why he not understand you, you hearing child, you speak hearing language.”

“Not perfect, Momma, sometimes I make mistake when I speak in out-loud words.”

Her eyes dropped to the ground. When she raised them they were blue soft, and she said what she said so often when thwarted by hearing cruelty. “Never mind, we wait, we wait until store empty and vegetable man have time to understand your hearing words.”

Encouraged by my mother’s tenderness, I spoke up: “Mister, our turn now. We in hurry.”

He turned to my mother, patted my head and said, “Sorry, it’s been so busy. Now, what do you want?”

“One lib domadoes!” I enunciated each word carefully in my mother’s shrill pitch.

He hesitated, not quite understanding me. I caught his pause and pointed once again to the tomatoes. He took my hand and placed a tomato in it. “This is a tomato, and you want one pound, not one ‘lib.’ ‘Lib’ is short for ‘pound.’ Tell your mother to pick her own tomatoes, but not to squeeze them.”

I signed his instructions to my mother and she reciprocated with her radiant smile as she leaned over the tomato bin to make her selection.

He led me into the store laden with fall produce and named everything we passed, correcting my pronunciation and pitch, repeating the word, waiting for me to repeat and repeat each vegetable he named until my repetition was correct.

“Now ask your mother what else she wants.”

“Potatoes, three libs, and parsley, good fresh green, no spoiled brown nice lettuce, cumbers, onion . . .” Her list went on. And I said the words as I had just been taught, disregarding my mother’s speech.

“What’s your name, girlie?”

“I am Rathee, what is your name?”

“I am Max, and the next time you come, wait for me, I will take care of you and your mother.”

“Thank you.”

“How old are you?” he asked, grinning at me.

“I am five, next year I am six.”

Max asked, “Tell me your name again. ‘Rathee’ is a new name for me.”

I stopped, embarrassed. I had given him my mother’s name for me.

“Rathee” is pronounced like the word “rather” with a double “ee” rising at the end. It was my mother’s call. My own name, my private identity, deaf said.

“Max, my name is Ruth, my mother calls me Rathee; it is hard for me to say Ruth in the right way.”

The word *rather*, spoken in casual conversation, still elicits a turn of my head, a response to the person who unwittingly almost calls me by my childhood name. It is a hearing misuse of my mother’s voice. The name Ruth was not my name, not the name that connected me to my mother. It was a second name, a renaming into the hearing world, my passage to school.

My mother’s promises that “teacher will teach you talk perfect English” enchanted me. She assured me that school was the place where I would learn what she couldn’t teach me, “many new words,” where I would learn “hearing” language. In time I did

learn, but the vibrant language of her hands was not matched by oral speech—not ever, not then, not now.

That summer, on Sunday mornings, deep in the bedroom of warm sleep, my father sat on my bed filling me with the wonder of language.

“Watch me!” he said as he rose to his feet. “I show you hearing sounds.”

He raised his arms above his head, and with his hands plucking sound from the air, as a harpist plucks music from strings, he poured melody into his ears. And as he poured song into his head, he told me with a grand smile that school was where I would drink in what he couldn’t give me, the sound that he could not hear. Again and again, he played with imagined sounds from the air with his hands. Each motion that touched sound for him was a gift to be opened on my first day of school.

He signed, “School big present, has big blue ribbon, open ribbon, learn to speak!”

*I*t was not to be. I was placed in a class for mentally retarded children. My mother and father’s promise of joyous learning was broken. I was apparently a stupid girl, and I was so ashamed that I told no one about the boring days of repetitive teaching, about the vacant stares around me as the teacher pressed on. I shrank, never uttering a word, joining the others in their slowness.

Each morning my mother hurried with excitement. My dress was still warm from the iron as she slid it over my head. She combed my hair and stroked my head with pleasure.

“I go school myself, Momma. Big girl. I careful in street.” I signed these words with my lips tightly closed.

I did not want her to see my classmates. I was determined to go to public school alone. I was not afraid of the streets, or of the roaring elevated train that passed over my head as I walked to school. I could do that alone. But I knew that I couldn't fool my mother. Something had gone awry at school. There was no magic.

My mother was deaf, not stupid, not "deaf and dumb." Just deaf. On that first Thursday afternoon after school, my mother, with her well-honed intuitive sense, asked me in the language of hands, "Why you not happy at school?"

Instead of telling her how much I loved school, my hands blurted, "The children in my class are stupid. I learn nothing, just cut paper, play with crayon. Teacher speaks silly baby words, over, over again. Dull time at school."

On Friday morning, my mother and I left for school together. My pleas to go alone were ignored. We walked slowly in Brooklyn's September light to the brick schoolhouse. I clung to my mother's hand, the hand that promised me wondrous schooldays. She would make it right. She would tell the teacher that I wasn't stupid; she would tell the teacher that I could sign when I was eleven months old.

"Come Momma," I said, "take you to meet teacher."

"No," she said, "we see a principal."

"But Momma," I protested, "we see teacher first."

"No," she insisted, "I see only principal." Her hands were firm.

We walked through the cafeteria that smelled of yesterday's free lunch. When we got to the principal's office, I came prepared with a timid speech for the school clerk. My mother did not wait for me to translate her words. She took me by the hand like any hearing mother. She opened the only closed door in the labyrinth

of desks and secretaries scattered behind the oak counter, separating students and staff from the administrative arm.

Miss Nathanson, the principal, calmly lifted her round face to us. She had straight chestnut brown bangs, cut flapper style; horn-rimmed spectacles like mine, halfway down her nose; and the hint of a smile. Her voice asked, "Can I help you?"

"Yes," I stammered.

My mother was still.

"What is your name, child?" Miss Nathanson's open smile touched me.

I told her, "My name is Ruthie."

My mother took charge. "Tell principal I must speak with her about your class."

Miss Nathanson was quick. I did not have to explain to her as I had done so many times in the past with the "others." She grasped my mother's deafness. She reached for the pen and pad on her desk; she wanted direct contact with my mother through the written word.

My mother shook her head vehemently. With all her concentration, she breathed four words very clearly. "Ruthie talk for me." Her hands were at her sides as she lowered herself to her knees and signed to me the words and thoughts that I was to interpret. I was proud of her spoken words, proud of her beautiful signs.

"Tell her," she signed, "I not write notes. We talk together with your voice, Ruthie. Not change mind."

As the sentences flowed back and forth, from my mother's hands to my voice, from Miss Nathanson's voice to my five-year-old hands, I was my mother's interpreter, as I had been so many times before, but this time she was pleading for me. Miss Nathanson understood the words I spoke, the words that



sounded like a deaf child speaking, and the words that sounded like a normal child. They were mixed together and her keen intuitive sense listened, separating deaf sound from hearing sound, never asking me to repeat a word.

At the end of our three-way conversation, Miss Nathanson said, "Ruthie, child, tell your mother to buy you a radio!"

"A radio? We are too poor," I answered.

She was adamant. "Tell your mother."

"Momma," I signed, trembling, "principal say buy me a radio. I will learn talk better."

These sensitive women looked at each other eye to eye, wordless. My mother shook her head with pleasure at this simple way to teach me to listen and to talk.

So it was that a radio came into my life. It was a dome-shaped walnut box that had a dial. "When I turned that dial, a miracle occurred. Normal adult voices came into my home, voices that were warm to the touch, voices that etched themselves into my head. I connected to hearing voices. I heard the news and programs for children. I heard music for the first time. The music made me uncomfortable. I didn't feel that I should listen to music's magnificence. My parents would never hear it. I moved the dial.

On Monday, my class was changed. The children were laughing and bright. And then without warning, my new teacher called my name and asked me to come to her desk. I obeyed, timorously.

"This is Ruth Sidransky, everybody. She is new. And she knows something we do not!"

My body faced the class. My eyes were cast to the floor.

This nameless teacher bent her large teeth to me and said in a piercing voice, "You know another language. You know sign language. Class, little Ruth's parents are deaf and dumb."

I felt the heat rise from my ankles to the backs of my knees, up my back, crawl into my skull until my ears were red with shame. I stood there motionless.

She continued to chirp, “Now, show us how you sign, how you speak with your parents.”

I did not move. Teacher, without name, pressed on, “Tell the class, ‘I am happy to meet you all.’”

Exposed, my arms dangled at my sides, speechless. Her voice strident, she commanded once more, “Say something for the class.”

My fingers were limp. She put her hand on my shoulder, a demand to sign-speak. My arms lifted, my fingers fumbled incoherent letters.

“That’s a good girl. Now tell us, what did you say?”

I whispered, “Good morning, all.” I looked at this young woman and begged, “Sit down, please?”

This teacher, I presume, spoke in ordered sentences all the rest of the morning. I only heard the hiss of syllables, meaningless sounds, spitting from the open slit in her face, I turned my head from her mouth, turned my ears from her soundings and sucked on the pain—my lollipop. Her callousness held me captive. I had nowhere to hide from her open gaping, from her fascination with freaks. She was no different from the staring passerby from whom I could escape, at whom I could stick out my tongue, but I was powerless before this master of spoken language.

Slowly, in the passage of days and weeks, I began to see this teacher, whose name has disappeared from memory, as a friend. I watched her mouth, heard her syllables and formed them into spools of meaning; sentences wound one on the other—language tunes, arias, andante, pianissimo. And after that, school was as promised by my father and by my mother, wonderful.

I fingered the sound of sound into my hands. I spelled the letters of the word into myself, into my body. When spelling was too difficult for me to discern instantly, I made up a sign for the new word, signing and saying, saying and signing until the word was mine, an immutable possession.

I searched for an oral-speaking mother, any mother would do. Beguiled by the prospect, I flirted with the girls in my class, charming them, wheedling an invitation for milk and cookies “on the way home.” I chose my friends on one pretext and one pretext alone. Would their mothers sit and talk, *oral* talk with me? Would they sit at the kitchen table with me and ask me about my school day? Would they respond to my vocal speech? Could I pretend for the moment that this woman was my mother, pretend just for a little? But I could not abandon my mother, Mary, and left abruptly each afternoon, running home, all the way home to Momma. Mothers with speaking mouths painted in different shades of scarlet slipped into my dreams . . .

I lay in bed at night, waiting for someone to come, someone to hear my cry. “I am lonely, my tooth hurts. I am afraid, I have to go to the bathroom. Does no one hear me cry?” I had a nightmare, the monsters came and I screamed. And still, no one came.

I left the warm wetness of my bed, left the security of my sheets and went with cold feet to my mother’s bed. I touched her and woke her. Without a sound, she raised the covers and pulled me into her bed, surrounding me with her sleeping body. She held me but she didn’t hear me. I didn’t speak my urgent fear. She was asleep. And I slept with her, safe from the silent darkness.

Silence struck me broadside. It was my secret catastrophe. I was the unmarked child of affliction. I was neither deaf nor blind nor lame. I was imprisoned within myself, within the shroud of silent days and nights, within the sense that no one responded

to me. I found human response in fantasy, with word games and sound games; it was my refuge.

I pigeonholed sound, forcing it into a square shape. It didn't fit. I rolled sound in my hand, rolled it into a ball as I rolled wadded gum that had lost its sweetness. I rubbed my hands together as I rolled clay, shaping sound into a cylinder. It was unshapable, amorphous. It eluded me. Sound was an illusion. It had no substance.

I had a voicebox that could accurately speak sounds that I heard. But there were stumbling blocks. I looked at objects, and when I couldn't name them, I chose creation. I structured my own words. I called crunched paper "gribble balls." Mashed potatoes were "shalamus potatoes," a washcloth was a "wepp" (my vocal translation of *wipe*). My vocabulary was studded with words that suited me.

I was a child inventing a child's language, cutting paper dolls out of ten-cent paper doll books, giving names, speaking words that were mine alone. I shared them with no one after my futile attempts to teach my hearing friends the new words. They looked away from the strange combination of sounds.

I collided with sound; I whispered to its thunder and asked, "Why do you crash from the sky?"

"Bertuple!" was God's answer.

It was a serious word, and no one understood it but me.

I returned to my paper dolls, looking for my childhood; I gave my imaginary companions names that rang with mystery. I created "Perchanane" for the paper lady of the Civil War era, delicate and sweet in her white hooped skirt. "Bredadamo" was the handsome male, in soldier blue, off to fight for the Union army. This was my language, mine. It had its own hum, its own resonance.

I had a blue dress I treasured as a child. I did not know its specific blueness, so I named it “delicious” blue. When my first-grade teacher said, “Your delphinium-blue dress is lovely,” I thought, “Delphinium!” It was a long word, a beautiful word, and so easy to say. I was, as always, ashamed to ask about the word. I wanted to know all about the word, where it came from, who made it up, why it was so lyrical. During recess, when the others went out in the springtime to play, I searched the dictionary and discovered that it was the name of a long, slender flower that grew every year from the same seed, a perennial. There was no picture in the dictionary; frustrated, I imagined an enormous blue daisy. I became more competent as time went on, able to find the meaning of every word I heard and sought, I practiced the words, petted them, cherished them.

Words and sounds lulled me to sleep. My nights were radio nights—the radio my mother bought for me. I awakened in the mornings with the radio voices that I had not turned off enticing me to the new day, boring language into my skull as I slept. I remained in bed, deciphering the words, imprinting them into my memory. Many had no meaning, but, oh, the sounds . . .

“Radio very warm, you forget to turn off again?” my mother asked as she gently pulled the covers from my sleep.

“Yes I leave on all night, I forget turn off.”

“Electric bills cost much money. Not forget turn off tonight, okay?”

I had not forgotten, but how could I turn off the sound?

Before I finished the second grade, we moved from the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn to the East Bronx, to a gray tenement facing the Simpson Street police station. My mother, determined to live apart from my father’s siblings and parents, wanted her own life away from judgmental eyes. So she ex-

changed an apartment with windows to the street for three small dark rooms that faced the brick alley adjoining yet another gray-faced tenement. Months later, unable to bear the sunless days, she said to my father, "Ben, I look for other rooms. I cannot see life in a street. Too lonesome. We have no light from the day."

He knew the meaning of blue daylight. He understood that light had its own intelligence. He answered with approval: "You look Mary, but cannot afford lots money for rent."

On weekend mornings, instead of taking me and my brother Freddie to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to feast our eyes on Canaletto's light-filled canvases, we walked the streets of the Bronx in search of our own light. I was caught up in my mother's excitement.

"This look good neighborhood. You speak to super, Ruthie, see if he has empty rooms." I approached superintendent after superintendent without success. My mother remained undaunted.

One summer Saturday morning, my mother and father, my brother and I boarded the Interval Avenue streetcar. "We go that way," my mother asserted, "get off on nice wide street. Maybe we find street with trees and green grass."

We found Dawson Street. It was a wide street that curved up a steep hill. The modern red-brick building at 891 Dawson Street fanned out over a courtyard flanked with dusty green privet shrubs. All the apartments faced the courtyard or the street. There was one vacant apartment available with three sun-filled rooms.

"Fine," my mother said. "Tell super we take rooms."

"Thirty-nine dollars a month. Too much money," my father balked.

We moved into the apartment on the first day of the new month. My mother and father gave me and my brother the bed-

room. They slept in the living room on a cot. My father made the mattress for the cot with his own hands. He sewed each cloth-covered button into the mattress with his curved needle. I watched him do this, needle in, needle out, until it was done. But the mattress, the metal cot, and the buttons soon became a source of disgust. The metal coils that supported the cot's frame were infested with bedbugs. In the evenings before we went to sleep my father removed the bedding and, with a lighted candle in his square hand, he burned the bedbugs from every crevice he could reach. We watched him as he caught them in his bare hands and squashed them. The acrid smell was sharp. No one spoke during this ritual.

But the kitchen was the first kitchen I ever saw that had sunbeams on the table.

I was eight years old that summer and longed for school to begin again. My English was fluent. I spoke like other children, but I was not like them. I developed other sensitivities. I listened to the inner voices of people, aware of their unspoken words. I could hear what I could see. And I saw. I saw an eyelid lower fractionally. I saw the unseen tremor of a lie within a cheek. I saw a lip quiver when no one else did. I heard and understood the pause, the search for the right word that would mask the truth. I knew people. But they did not know me; I did not reveal myself.

My mother reminded me often, with a clap of her hands, that the essence of life was to "open eyes wide and to see all, to see language speak," as she laced the sign for *language* through her fingers. She taught me to pay attention to life, to be a mystic.

Summer ended in September, and I was admitted to Miss Chanin's third-grade class for gifted children. She was an old lady with faded yellow, tightly curled hair that dropped clumps of scaly dandruff on her navy crepe dress. Her worn black shoes

were tightly laced on her large feet. Although she was slim and short, she waddled. But I loved her and her deep voice that rolled words distinctly from her bright red rouged mouth. At the end of each schoolday I waited eagerly for the fairy tales with the happy endings that she read aloud to us.

I wanted a book of my own to read, a book I could take to my bed and read until my eyes closed with sleep. I longed to know more about Hiawatha and his old grandmother Nokomis, who lived together in a wigwam on the shores of the Gitchee Gumee. I read only the story of Hiawatha's conquest of the wicked magician who brought suffering to the tribe. I asked Miss Chanin if there were any more books about Hiawatha.

She answered, "Yes, there are more books in the library."

"What," I asked, "is a library?"

Patiently she explained that I could join a library where there were hundreds of books, perhaps thousands, and that I could borrow a book whenever I wanted to read.

I sat at my gouged wooden desk, stunned, until I remembered that we were poor and asked, "How much does it cost?"

"It is a free public library. Your mother can take you. Stop at my desk after school, and I will give you the address."

I clutched the paper with the scribbled address all the way home from P.S. 39. I stopped for nothing and talked to no one. I walked home hoping that my mother would take me to the library that afternoon. I ran up three flights of stairs. I read our apartment number, 3H, on the door, inserted my key and opened the door. I didn't ring the bell, nor did I knock. My mother greeted me only when she saw me.

She put down her knitting needles, put out her arms, and smiled her beautiful smile. She spoke to me with her voice. She was not ashamed of her singsong voice in my presence.



“What have you in hand?”

“Look, Momma, look I have library paper. We go now, not far.” I spoke and signed simultaneously. I wanted to be very sure she understood my great excitement.

She shook her head. “Not today, we go Saturday. No time today.”

“You know what library is Momma?” I demanded.

“Yes,” she surprised me, “I know.”

“Why not we go before?” I asked.

“No time. We go Saturday when Daddy Ben no work. I promise you.”

My mother’s promises were golden, but it was only Wednesday. I had to wait three more days, three more days and nights. I dreamed of touching paper with words that formed sentences. My hands caressed pages in the air, pages that were smooth and those that were textured with slivers of wood embedded in the print, and pages that were thick and creamy. Best of all, there were pages that had words that would join me to other people’s thoughts.

I could read anything. I read hands and words with complete ease. Sign language is spoken with symbols for most words. But many words that I signed to my parents had no specific sign. These words were spelled out, letter by letter, in the manual alphabet of the deaf. My mother and I sat on many rainy afternoons, writing the letters of the alphabet that I already knew how to sign on the backs of stained brown paper bags. We practiced writing capital letters, lowercase letters and letters in script. My association with the signed letter of the alphabet and the written letter was immediate. For me, reading hands and reading the printed word were the same process. It was all language that connected me to the human mind.

At first light on Saturday morning, I crept into my parents' small bed and shook my mother awake.

"What is wrong?" she asked. "You not feel well?"

"Saturday morning now, you promise take me to library!"

She laughed with delight at my anticipation.

"Too early, go back to sleep. Open later, we go at ten o'clock."

I washed and dressed myself. I carefully pulled my red dotted Swiss dress over my head. I buckled my black patent leather shoes. And I sat on my bed waiting for the hours to pass.

We walked together, my mother and I, past the open fields enclosed with barbed wire, away from Dawson Street, past Kelly Street and Beck Street filled with Saturday-morning shoppers whom I ignored. I was elated. I was going to the library and I would bring home a book.

When we arrived at the imposing site, I ran up the pitted concrete steps into the librarian's feet. "We're not open yet, just a moment."

I could not wait. I blurted, "I want a book, a book I can take home."

This tight-bunned librarian relaxed her face as she peered down over her glasses at me. She invited us in to see her magnificent library before the scheduled opening hour. After she issued me a temporary card, which I clutched as a passport to life, she directed me to the children's section. On my knees, I moved up and down the two-tiered rows of shelves not quite knowing where to put my hands. I stroked the thick hardcover bindings, sensing the gold letters that named each book, I ran my hands over the odd-shaped books, some thick, others slim, all filled with treasure. I reached for a thin horizontal book and sat down flat on the floor. The title page read, *The Coconut Man*. I flipped the pages quickly. There was no

color to distract me from the continuing flow of big black words printed in a single line under each drawing.

It was a simple story. A lonely little boy wanted to make a man to be his friend. He constructed a large rag body, but his man had no head. So the boy scoured the beach on his tropical island and found a coconut that had been washed ashore. He perched it on his man. The coconut man had no eyes, no ears, no mouth, no nose, but he could feel with his well-made hands. He could sign with his hands. His signs made him human. He left the boy, his creator, and went in search of someone who could carve out the rest of his senses.

I wanted to finish this book at home, in secret. Holding the book tightly under my arm, I approached the librarian with a timorous question: "May I take this book home?"

"Yes, and you may keep it for two weeks."

I read the book again and again, before lunch and after lunch. As my brother napped, I read the book to my mother, signing each word for her. When he awakened, I asked my mother to take me back to the library to get another book. My mother, with good humor, agreed. We set out again. This time Fred came with us.

The same librarian was there when I returned the book. With her yellow pencil fitted with a dated rubber stamp, she checked in my first borrowed book.

"I want another book please."

"I am sorry, but you cannot have another. You may not take out books, return them, and take out another on the same day with a temporary card. You will have your permanent card next week."

My eyes pleaded with her.

She shook her head. "Rules are rules."

Not wanting her to see my tears, I turned and rushed down the steps to my mother.

“Don’t worry,” my mother said, “I buy you a funny comic book.”

On Monday morning I walked sadly into Miss Chanin’s classroom. Thirty eager voices didn’t ease the library loss. I sat down at the back of the room.

“Ruth,” Miss Chanin called, “that is not your seat. You belong in the front of the room. You wear glasses and need to sit where you can see the blackboard.”

I returned to my seat and sat quietly all morning.

As my class filed out for lunch in an orderly line, Miss Chanin stopped me and asked, “Would you like to have your lunch with me? I need a monitor to help me sort out some books.”

I looked at her gratefully. We sat together in the classroom filled with the empty wooden seats and desks. I faced my beloved teacher and, glowing with conversation, ate my egg salad sandwich. At home we ate in silence. Our hands could not talk and eat at the same time. When I finished my meal, I crumpled the red milk carton into my paper bag with the crusts of bread I loathed, and dropped the mess into the waste basket under the teacher’s desk.

“I am ready to help you now, Miss Chanin.”

She opened the locked closet door in the back of the room. The books were piled in complete disarray. Some fell out of the closet onto the floor.

She instructed me. “We have to separate the books that are torn and that have pages missing from those that can still be used. You will put the books in good condition on the desks and the others you will leave on the floor.”

I worked methodically, touching each book I held, wishing that it were mine. I found the book from which Miss Chanin read us my favorite fairy tales. In it was the story of the singing maid

Romaine, who enchanted the king of the realm with her lyrical voice. This kindly ruler invited Romaine to come to the palace to sing. Although she missed her poor old aunt and her thatched cottage, she was filled with joy. The raven-haired child sang at the palace every day. But after a month she grew listless because she wanted to be just like the king's fair daughter, Altheda. One day her fairy godmother appeared and granted her wish. Romaine lifted her voice in song, so great was her happiness. She couldn't sing. Horrible sounds came from her throat. After three days, Romaine summoned her fairy godmother with a bell and pleaded to be herself again.

The dainty fairy said, "The princess cannot sing, Romaine, and if you wish to be like her, you will not sing."

"Ruth!" Miss Chanin said sharply. "This is no time to read."

I looked up at her from the floor, still holding the torn book in my hand.

"I have to go to the office for a moment. You keep working until I get back."

When she walked out of the room, I took the tattered text to my desk and slid the book into my blue and green plaid canvas bag. I wanted that book to be mine. All afternoon I sat nervously in my seat, hoping that she would not discover the missing book.

At three o'clock I walked, white with fear, from the classroom. No one followed me home. I put the stolen book in my drawer and touched it lovingly. It had no front cover. It had no title page. That night, in bed, I took out the book and arranged the pages in order. I tied the loose pages together with white string. Each night for weeks I read the words on every page until I memorized the entire book.

I have the book, still, hidden in a drawer.