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1980

SNEAKING AWAY

Sneaking away on a hot May afternoon, Michael carries his brother Gordy's *Boy Scout Handbook* and a flashlight into his bedroom closet, and slides the door shut. It is pitch-black under the plastic-bagged longcoats and tweed jackets; a thin lining of dust is heavy on the shoulders. He doesn't turn on his flashlight yet: He must turn up his body aids. He thinks he can hear his own heart throbbing so madly next to the microphones on his body aids, but he is immediately distracted by the lintballed dust itching his nose. Michael has just turned fourteen.

His eyes adjust to the darkness. He can see a few cracks in the plaster wall, the dust clinging to his sweaty legs, and the different gradations of dust all around him. Aimee and Frankie, his younger sister and brother, also like to hide in here. But today everyone is gone, for it is balmy out; he hopes his absence is not noticed.

He shifts his crouching position for more comfort before he aims his flashlight away from the bottom of the closet door and opens the

handbook. He finds the page titled INDIAN MANUAL ALPHABET, and stares at its twenty-six handshapes. His parents, teachers, and speech therapists have told him not to learn any signs.

Yet he finds the handshapes irresistible. He searches for *M*, and looks at it on his hand.

M? he wonders. *Why like that?*

Then he notices the *N* on the page. He sees the difference: *M* has three fingers folded over the thumb; *N*, two. Yes, it resembles the claws of those two letters. He runs through the alphabet slowly, trying to see how or why the handshape was created for each letter. He runs through it again and again, until he feels fairly sure he has it down.

His name? “M-i-c-u-a-e-l O-s-b-o-r-n-e.”

He checks the spelling again, and realizes his *H* fingers should lean sideways. He spells his name again until he can spell it quickly.

THUD.THUD.THUD. Michael jolts from the banging on the door. His arm has gotten too sore from holding it up so high that he drops his flashlight. He stuffs the handbook behind a pile of shoes just as his younger sister Aimee slides the door open. “Michael! What are you doing in there? We were looking all over for you. We’re going to Burger Chef. You wanna come?”



In the station wagon they cruise through Olney to Burger Chef. Michael tries to act nonchalant as he watches for that older deaf man. He doesn’t know his name, and he notices that his parents always pretend he is not there whenever he is. He takes in the metronomic fingerspelling on the man’s hand as two young girls watch and giggle with him in that secret language.



Two days later, Michael takes his ten-speed bike and pedals furiously into town, up this way and that, seeking that deaf man at every bench

he has seen him sit on while passing out the manual alphabet cards. At last, he sees him strolling out of the A&P near St. Rosita's Church, and slows down after him until he sits on a bench in front of a tavern.

The man's face changes suddenly into a question. He points to him and then his own ear and to his mouth. "You deaf?"

Michael is immobilized. He gets off his bike and brings it up to behind the bench. He fingerspells slowly, "A-g-a-i-n."

The man points to Michael's hand and brings his own fingertips together against the palm of his other hand. "Again." He gestures fingerspelling and looks exhausted by the whole idea, and then smiles. "Again."

"Again?" The sign feels different.

The man nods with a grin on his face. He points to Michael and then to his own throat, and shakes his head no-no.

"You don't want me to use my voice?"

The man shakes his head, and points to his own lips. He squints his eyes as if lipreading is too painful for him.

Michael is hit by a desire to run away, but the blue flames of the man's eyes beckon him to stay. "W-h-a-t—"

"What." The man shows him the sign, a simple slash across the palm.

"Y-o-u-r—"

"Your."

"N-a-m-e—"

"Name. My name T-o-n-y R-a-t-h-e-s. Yours—what?"

"My name M-i-c-h-a-e-l O-s-b-o-r-n-e."

"Good. Better hearies think they know fingerspell names."

"What was *that*?" Michael has reverted back to his voice.

Tony closes his eyes shut and points to his throat: Still a no-no. Finally, he opens his eyes and smiles. "You m-u-s-t must l-e-a-r-n learn." He points to the fingertips of his *V* and then his eyes: Wherever his *V* looks, his eyes also follow.

"What?"

"L-o-o-k." He demonstrates the various uses of that *V* as a pair of eyes.

"W-a-t-c-h. S-t-a-r-e." As he does this, Michael notices a slight

change in his eyes when a girl of about six years old walks past with her mother. “She w-i-l-l will grow b-e-a-u-t-i-f-u-l beautiful w-o-m-a-n woman. You l-i-k-e like g-i-r-l-s girls?”

“Yes,” Michael lies. He still dreams about Nick, a varsity quarterback who used to be his best friend when they were younger.

“H-o-w o-l-d how old you?”

“1-4.”

“No. Fourteen.” He holds up the closed fingers of his 4 towards himself, then beckons him. Michael copies it quickly and opens up like a flower blooming.

The afternoon evaporates in the melting of Michael’s voice. He is ecstatic when he arrives home.



“Michael.” Mom and Dad sit morosely at the kitchen table. “Michael.” It’s the first time that Michael has ever thought of them old, or looking beaten.

“What?” Michael signs, and then remembers his voice. “What?”

“You’re not supposed to be talking hands with that man.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not good for your speech, and then we’ll never understand you.”

Michael storms upstairs and buries his face on the bed. His face is hot inside the pillow where he has constantly dreamed a world all his own. He’d know every sign in the world. He would be so clear that everyone would see the fallacy of speaking with their voices and clamor to sign instead.

No one in his family would tattle-tale to Mom and Dad about his signing. He would gossip to them if they lapsed into using their voices.

No speech therapist would admonish him gently when he tried to gesture by way of explaining something. He would feel more confident about using his voice without worrying about enunciation.

None of his classmates would stare at his earmolds or the cords

out of his collar. *Everyone* would wear hearing aids and take those early morning two-hour trips to Lansel for audiological exams . . .



He wakes up at seven in the morning with a strong urge to pee. He clambers downstairs and is relieved to find that no one else is up yet.

When he steps out of the bathroom, Dad is drinking a glass of orange juice. “Morning.”

“Good morning.” Dad’s eyes seem so sad as Michael lipreads. “How are you today?”

“Okay. I guess.”

Dad’s face turns past Michael, and he turns to find Mom saying, “Good morning, Michael.”

“I’m not sorry,” Michael says abruptly. “I’m not going to be.”

Dad turns away as if slapped in the face.

“Michael . . .”

“Mom. Dad. It’s too frustrating for me. It’s nothing for you to talk with your voices. For me, it’s just hard work.” Michael glares at them sullenly before he tiptoes upstairs and slips back into bed.



Two hours later Michael changes from his old gym shorts into another pair, one with two pockets, and a fresh T-shirt. He eats a bowl of cereal and downs a glass of orange juice. Frankie runs back into the kitchen as he puts his dirty dishes into the sink of suds and says excitedly, “Judy ran away!” Judy is their huge German shepherd usually chained to a pole in one corner of the backyard.

“Where’s she now?”

“The Crowleys up the street got her. Gordy’s bringing her back.”

“Really.” For some reason he can’t feel more excited about all this.

“What’s wrong with you? You never talk to me.”

“What’s there to talk about?”

“Aren’t you going up the street with me?”

“Oh, do I have to?”

As they walk out the door, Judy comes prancing into the house, the chain of her leash banging loudly along on the floor, and slurps water from her pan. Gordy comes in and shakes his head.

While Frankie tries to slip the lock off the leash on the panting Judy, Michael is already sneaking away on his ten-speed toward town.



All morning he doesn’t see Tony anywhere.

After lunch he tries again, but still no sign of him.



Two days later he finds Tony sitting on the same bench. “How you?”

“Fine.”

“What?”

“Voice no-no. Fine f-i-n-e fine.”

“Fine. Oh. Fine.”

Michael learns Tony is a janitor at the elementary public school, and has lived alone since 1969. Tony invites him to his apartment, just above the tavern.

Michael walks upstairs after him. The place is well-kept. He finds it rather odd that the living room and bedroom should have so many stuffed animals placed about; he has never known of an older man having such things.

They sit in the living room and continue chatting while they drink lemonade. “How d-o you understand T-V?”

“C-l-o-s-e-d c-a-p-t-i-o-n.” He points to the huge brown box with a few knobs on it, and turns on the TV. He turns the channel until he finds a program with white captions set in black strips at the bottom of the screen.

Michael is entranced. “Where c-a-n you g-e-t it?”

“S-e-a-r-s.” He looks under his coffee table and pulls out the catalog. He opens it to the right page easily, and as Michael looks at the price, he notices how well-worn the print has become from much perusal. *Expensive, but better than nothing.* Michael nods, memorizing the page number so he can point it out in the catalog later to Mom and Dad.

He puts it down on the coffee table, and finds Tony sitting on a chair. “Like girls? What k-i-n-d?”

Michael hesitates. No one’s ever asked him so pointedly about that; besides, he knows he is still in love with Nick.

“I d-o-n-t k-n-o-w.”

“You don’t-know? Come-on. You know what you like.”

“What do *you* like?”

“You not bla-bla-bla out-there? You-and-me, good-friends.”

Michael nods hesitantly.

“Me-like girls y-o-u-n-g. Understand?”

He nods again.

Tony says, “Wait.” He enters his bedroom, and Michael turns up his hearing aids to hear his actions better. All he can comprehend out of the various sounds he hears is a door opening and closing.

Tony carries out a pictorial magazine and opens up to the middle.

Michael blanches: The girl can’t be older than nine years old.

“Sorry. Me-misunderstood you. You not tell? You not tell, promise you not bla-bla, don’t-want lose job, deaf find job hard—”

“Stop!” he shouts at the top of his voice.

Tony stands still, fear quivering in his eyes.

“I’m sorry. I don’t want any more personal questions.” Michael is not sure how to sign all of that; at least Tony is lipreading him very intensely.

“Sorry. You not t-e-l-l?”

He shakes his head. “M-u-s-t g-o.”

“Me understand. T-a-l-k again?”

“M-a-y-b-e.”

Michael gets on his bike and pedals as far as he can go, and he finds himself on the winding road to Olney Lake. He stops at the

Thomas Bridge over the Abbott River, and watches the shimmering rays reflecting back into his face.

He pedals laboriously back home.



Four months later, on a September Saturday afternoon, one of his older sisters Glenna runs upstairs and tells Michael, “The police wants to talk to you!”

“What?” Michael puts his mark in his book, and follows his sister Glenna to the kitchen. He sees Mom looking on very anxiously while Aimee and Frankie sit on one side of the kitchen table.

A tall, stocky uniformed man with a trimmed moustache and a slight beer belly extends his hand. “Hello, Michael. I’m Officer Bowie, and this is Officer Wilson.”

Michael feels the warm thickness of their hands and whispers, “Hello.”

“We have some questions to ask you. For the sake of our records, we have to ask you some preliminary questions.”

Michael stares with a puzzled face. “What was that?”

“Your friend Anthony Rathes—you know Tony the deaf guy here in Olney—was arrested for having dirty pictures in his house.”

Michael looks at Mom, and then Glenna. *What should I say?*

“Do you know him?”

“Yes . . .”

“Did you know he had dirty pictures?”

“No.”

“He says you told on him.”

Mom says, “He can’t use the phone yet.”

“Oh.” Officer Bowie is relieved. “That clears up a lot of things. Someone else called and told us about his stuff. But did you know he had that stuff?”

He swallows some air before he says, “Yes.”

“Did he do anything to you? You know?”

“No! He just showed me a magazine and I told him I didn’t want

to see him any more! I just wanted to learn sign language! That's all, that's all!"

"Calm down, it's okay. You're not in trouble."

Mom asks, "Michael, why didn't you tell someone?"

"He's deaf like me."

Everyone in the kitchen seems still for a second upon hearing this. Michael blinks his eyes to fight his tears.

"Can you talk with your hands?" Officer Bowie wiggles his fingers.

"Some. A little bit."

"Could you come along with us and try talking with him?"

"No! I don't want to!"

"So he did *do* something to you."

"No! You got it all wrong. He asked me if I liked girls, and I thought he meant girls my age, but I misunderstood him. He thought I liked girls the way he liked them."



When Michael rides through downtown, he sometimes stops across the street from Tony's building and stares up at his window; all his stuffed animals have been taken away. He wonders whether Tony will find a deaf jailmate like himself, so neither one of them will ever be lonely. He wonders again if he himself will end up like him, and hungers more than anything to sneak away again, so he could commit that sweet crime of language without any hearies watching.

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