

Chapter 1

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Welcome to the DEAF-WORLD

HELLO, my name is Ben Bahan, and I am from New Jersey. I went to the Marie Katzenbach School for the Deaf, a residential school in West Trenton. I have Deaf parents. My mother went to the same school I went to; my father went to different schools but graduated from the New York School for the Deaf in White Plains. I grew up in the DEAF-WORLD. My parents were active in Deaf clubs and associations and took me and my hearing sister to those places when we were young. After I graduated from the Katzenbach School, I went to Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. Then I moved to California to do research in American Sign Language (ASL) linguistics at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla. In 1980, with Joe Dannis, I became a founding partner of DawnSignPress, and have been vice-president ever since. I also taught ASL at several community colleges and worked at the California School for the Deaf at Fremont for two years as a dormitory counselor. Then, in 1985, I decided to advance my education, so I entered Boston University. While pursuing my doctorate in applied linguistics there, I helped direct the Deaf Studies Program in the School of Education. Meanwhile, at Boston University I met my wife, Sue Burnes, who is also a Deaf child of Deaf parents. There are a lot of stories to tell about what has happened since then, but let us jump now to where I am today—back at Gallaudet University as an assistant professor in the newly formed Deaf Studies Department.

Let me also introduce my colleagues and co-authors, Harlan Lane and Bob Hoffmeister. Harlan is hearing, but I first met him through his book about the history of the DEAF-WORLD, *When the Mind Hears*. I recall that when I read it I felt an overwhelming sense of pride in the accomplishments of the past and in the DEAF-WORLD, which has survived despite attempts to eradicate it. In Harlan's book, Deaf people at last had a document, similar to a monument, to which we could point, making sure that succeeding generations would not forget how we were treated by many of those in the hearing world who claimed to want to help us, and how our language was suppressed. A specialist in the psychology of language, Harlan received his B.A. and M.A. from Columbia University and his Ph.D. from Harvard, where he was a student of renowned psychologist B.F. Skinner, who chaired his thesis work. Harlan has taught at the University of Michigan; at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he earned a state doctorate in linguistics; and at the University of California at San Diego. A man with many titles, he is University Distinguished Professor at Northeastern University, Research Affiliate at M.I.T., and Research Associate at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary. Harlan's background makes for important contributions to this book. But to the DEAF-WORLD his contribution is much more important, because in the world of hearing intellectuals, we Deaf people are often looked upon as deficient, in need of intervention. Harlan, by contrast, believes, as we do, that we are a language minority, and he takes up our point of view and champions it in the hearing world.

While Harlan looks at the DEAF-WORLD from his perspective, which is that of an intellectual, Bob Hoffmeister faces the issues from the trenches, because he is a *coda*, the hearing child of Deaf adults. I first got to know Bob the same way many Deaf people first learn about each other, not through books so much, but rather face-to-face. Bob grew up on the campus of the American School for the Deaf in West Hartford, Connecticut, where his parents were teachers. As a child, he was exposed to every nook and cranny of the DEAF-WORLD. Like many *codas*, as a young adult he decided to stay away from the Deaf community, but was eventually drawn back into it and went on to become a specialist in ASL language acquisition and bilingual education for Deaf children. The themes of psychology, language, and Deaf education run through Bob's

academic training: B.S. at the University of Connecticut; M.A. from the University of Arizona; and Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota. Bob is currently a professor at Boston University and director of the Programs in Deaf Studies. In 1980, at Boston University, he created the first university major and specialization in Deaf Studies in the U.S.

The paragraphs above may strike you as odd ones to be the opening passage of a book about Deaf culture (or any book, for that matter), but they are here for a purpose: to give you a taste of that culture at the very outset of the journey upon which we are now embarked, into the world Deaf people call the DEAF-WORLD.¹ When members of the DEAF-WORLD meet, they introduce themselves and their companions as Ben has here introduced the three of us who will be your guides on this journey. They give capsule life-histories so that each can see how the others are connected to the DEAF-WORLD network. For unlike other cultures, Deaf culture is not associated with a single place, a "native land"; rather, it is a culture based on relationships among people for whom a number of places and associations may provide common ground.

Deaf people in the U.S. use the sign DEAF-WORLD to refer to these relationships among themselves, to the social network they have set up, and not to any notion of geographical location. Instead of a spot marked X on a map, the term is used to account for many places, from the clubs where Deaf people meet to socialize or to play competitive sports, to associations where they exchange ideas and through which they engage in political action, to religious organizations. In other words, the meaning of the ASL sign *WORLD* in the compound DEAF-WORLD corresponds to one of the meanings of the English word *world*, as stated in the American Heritage Dictionary: "A class or group of people with common characteristics or pursuits and a particular way of life."

One way to understand what we mean by DEAF-WORLD is to examine how one gets to be a member of that world, and who its members are. Generally, we can say that the inhabitants of the DEAF-WORLD are people who possess *DEAF-WORLD Knowledge* (more on that below) and who share the experience of what it is like to be Deaf. But within that overall definition, there are distinctions to be made. For one thing—and perhaps this will surprise you—the extent of a person's hearing is not the central

issue in deciding membership in the DEAF-WORLD. There are people who have very limited hearing or none at all but choose not to be part of the DEAF-WORLD. Conversely, there are many Deaf people who hear well enough to use a telephone and speak well enough to be understood, but choose to live in the DEAF-WORLD.

Like other language minorities, most people in the DEAF-WORLD were born into it. However, unlike other minorities, children born into this one gain access to the language and culture at various ages. Some start that acquisition at birth, some later in life—for example, on arriving at a preschool for Deaf children, or even as late as adolescence. And not all members of the DEAF-WORLD are born into it. A small percentage lose their hearing after learning spoken language and mainstream culture, and then undertake to acquire DEAF-WORLD language and culture.

Signed language is the most important instrument for communicating in the DEAF-WORLD. The language competency of the members varies, depending on whether signed language is their native language (true only of the children of members of the DEAF-WORLD) or whether they learned the language as small children or later in life. (As we shall see, very few Deaf children of hearing parents learn signed language from infancy, when learning languages is easiest and mastery greatest.) But regardless of when they learn it, from the day Deaf Americans enter the DEAF-WORLD, ASL becomes their primary language, and is, in itself, a big chunk of DEAF-WORLD Knowledge. Using it, Deaf people can join the networks, local and national, which link the members of the DEAF-WORLD. They can learn the accumulated wisdom of generations of Deaf people, master the subtleties of relating appropriately in that world, and become familiar with the culture, history, traditions, values and signed-language literature of the Deaf society.

Sometimes hearing people who are genuinely interested in the DEAF-WORLD and desire to participate in it feel that they are not accepted. In the same way, for example, American expatriates might feel they are not totally accepted in France. But it is not true that hearing people are unwelcome among the Deaf. It's just that Deaf people, like all people, have a need for being, at least part of the time, with others who share the same language and culture, values and concerns. In this regard, the DEAF-WORLD might be likened to a revolving door that spins at its own

rate. If you are able to walk in and keep up the pace and, more importantly, are committed to staying the course, then you are more than welcome. Most hearing people, however, only want to go around once or twice and then exit, back to their own circle of friends. The impression that hearing people have—that the door is spinning too fast for them to join in—is partially accurate, for when Deaf people use their own language among themselves, they use it at their own pace. When they behave differently from hearing people, they are following customs of the DEAF-WORLD. The DEAF-WORLD has its own rate of spinning; it may slow down now and then, here and there, for some “outsiders,” but when it returns to speed, it is the newcomer's responsibility to keep up. In this respect, is it really any different from any other culture?

The goal of this book is to slow the spin enough so that those of you who wish to do so may enter and join us for a while. As we thought about how best to do this, it occurred to us that, because a vital part of Deaf culture is stories and the telling of stories (as in any culture where knowledge and tradition are passed down face-to-face), and because Ben is known as a storyteller in the DEAF-WORLD, we might start off with a story. This story will illuminate some of the themes to be discussed, and more importantly, give you some notion of the ways members of the community differ from one another, as well as what they have in common. For in considering the culture of any community, it is essential to keep in mind the diversity of those who belong to it, even as one focuses on what binds them together and makes their group distinct from others.

You will discover more about storytelling as a vital part of Deaf culture in subsequent chapters. Here, suffice it to say that in order to become a storyteller, there is a path you must follow; along the way, you are given opportunities to demonstrate your talent in front of an audience. Eventually you may be acclaimed and recognized. Storytellers like Ben are more than entertainers; they are the culture's oral historians and teachers, and their stories have messages embedded in them about DEAF-WORLD values.

Oral historians in any culture without a written language have several ways they can go about telling their stories; they choose among them depending on the audience, the story, and their resources. They can tell their stories live in front of an audience; record them on film or videotape;

translate them into a language of broader communication that has a writing system (most often English or French); or compose them in that written language in the first place. Ben composed the story you are about to read in English. Sometimes DEAF-WORLD stories have to do with the relationship between the DEAF-WORLD and hearing people. The story to be told here is one of those. It is divided into three parts, one in each part of this book. Its setting is a place that is a constant in the DEAF-WORLD, a Deaf club. It concerns a hearing reporter who has been assigned to write a series of articles on Deaf people. To do this, the reporter visits a Deaf club and interviews four members.

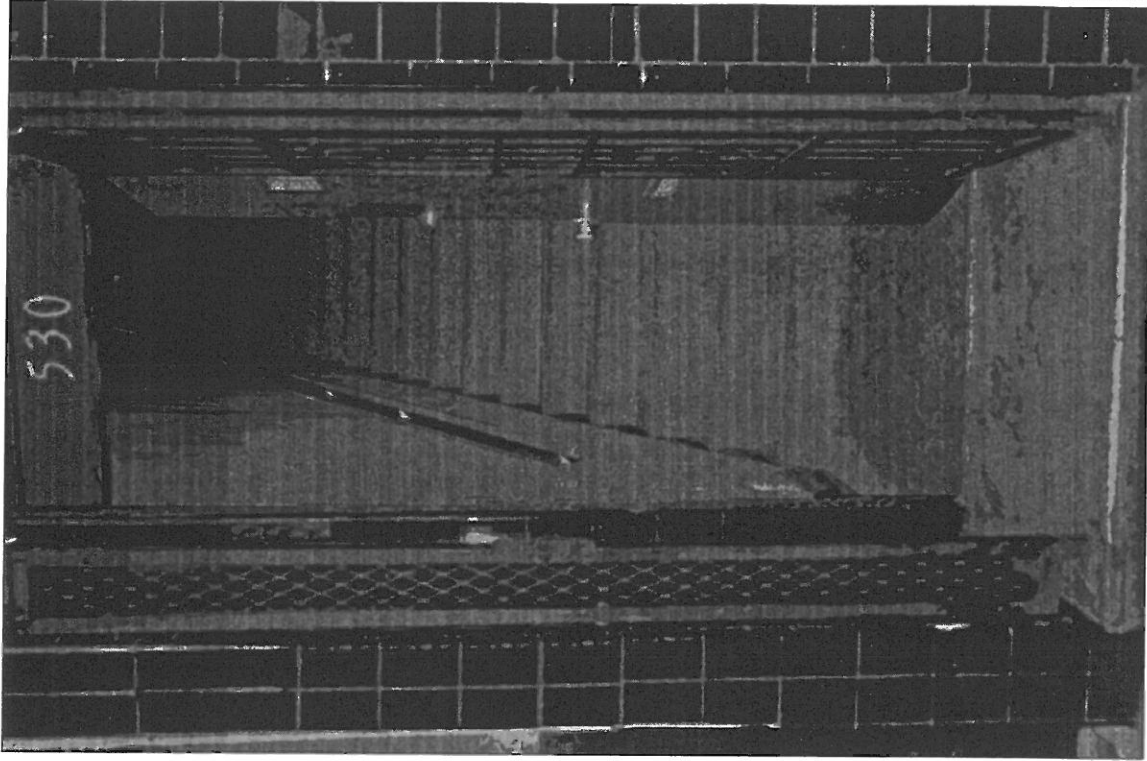
The lives of the four Deaf characters in this story are based on the lives of real Deaf people; however, the names of the characters and the schools they attended (except for their universities) are fictional and the characters are to some extent composites, so that we may bring up many issues succinctly without introducing you to too many people.

AT THE METRO SILENT CLUB I

*Gloria Cosgrove was getting worried. She had been waiting to meet Jake Cohan, with her yellow-lined pad of paper and ballpoint pen, for over twenty minutes. She'd begun to wonder if she'd come to the right place until she saw two people speaking signed language go in the door beside which she was standing. Now she thought maybe she'd gotten the time wrong or that something else had happened. She and Jake had set up this interview a few days before through a TTY relay operator, and she didn't have much confidence that the operator had gotten it right.**

With Jake typing what he wanted to say and the operator reading it to her and then typing her replies for Jake to read . . . well, she just didn't trust it. Besides, Jake had been reluctant to set up this meeting, and had only agreed after double-checking with the director of the Deaf education

* A TTY relay operator uses a TTY (the acronym comes from teletypewriter) to relay calls between hearing and Deaf clients. A TTY resembles a typewriter with an electronic display. As each key is struck, the device emits a distinctive tone that is transmitted over the telephone line and causes the corresponding letter to appear on both users' TTY screens. See chapters 12 and 15.



Ken Norton

Fig. 1-1. Entering the San Francisco Club for the Deaf. Stairs to the second floor are a hallmark of Deaf clubs in the United States.

program at the state university, whom Gloria had interviewed first and who had recommended Jake to her. He'd been "burned before," Jake said, but he didn't elaborate.

She glanced once more down the street, where the streetcar was just pulling out, and spotted a dark-haired man who appeared to be in his mid-forties heading in her direction. He glanced to the right and left twice before stepping off the curb, and again when he was halfway across the street. This must be Jake, she thought, as he hurried up to her. Gloria held out her pad and pen, but instead of taking them, he extended his hand and said, "Hello, I am Jake, are you Gloria Cosgrove?"

For a moment she was too astonished to respond. She hadn't been sure how she was going to communicate with Jake, but the last thing she'd expected was that he could speak, and she felt silly standing there with her pad and pen. She recovered quickly, however, and, relieved that the communication problem was solved, returned his greeting and explained that she had been looking forward to meeting him and his friends and was worried that something might have happened. But instead of responding to her implied question about his late arrival, he said, "There are interpreters inside," and took her arm. She flushed with embarrassment. Obviously he hadn't understood a word she'd said, and once again she wondered what she'd let herself in for.

After entering the building, they climbed a long steep stairway and proceeded down a dimly lit corridor to an open doorway with a sign beside it announcing the Metro Silent Club. Gloria's heart was beating rapidly—from the climb or nervousness, she wasn't sure which—as they walked through the door. Before her was a big room with a bar at one end and a small makeshift stage at the other. Scattered about the edges were a few round tables and chairs. There were some twenty-five people present, with concentrations at strategic locations: a dozen or so at the bar, signing madly; a couple over by a telephone with a machine attached to it, on which one of them was typing, and which she supposed was a TTY; two sets of four at tables, playing cards; and two people by the stage who looked as out of place as she felt. But what struck her most was the eerie silence. Despite all the activity, there was very little noise.

She was still taking in the scene when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She glanced around to see a young man who began signing to her.

When she said she didn't understand, he frowned and shook his head and again signed something. Frantically she looked around for Jake, but he was signing away with the two people over by the stage. She started to call him, then realized the uselessness of that and made a move in his direction, only to find the young man's hand once again on her shoulder. Was she going to get bounced from this place? In her confusion, she had forgotten her pad and pen, but the young man, apparently taking pity, now reached for them and wrote something and handed them back. Who are you? she read. What are you doing here? She flushed, and once again looked toward Jake. How could she explain in a few words what she was there for? Finally she wrote, I came with Jake Cohan, and handed the pad back. The doorkeeper nodded, left her standing there and went to consult with Jake, who returned with the people he'd been talking to; they turned out to be interpreters, one of whom now translated for Gloria as Jake explained to the doorkeeper that Gloria was a reporter and that it was okay with the club president for her to enter the club and do an interview.

As she, Jake, and one of the interpreters seated themselves at a table, Gloria asked Jake, through the interpreter, "Is it always that difficult to get into this club?"

Jake laughed. "Oh no," he signed (while the interpreter spoke), "he knew you weren't a member, and if you're not, there's a cover charge. I'm sorry it was a bit awkward, but you wanted to learn about the DEAF-WORLD. That kind of thing—being at a loss because you can't understand what people are saying, or because you can't make yourself understood—is the sort of experience Deaf people have every day on the job or when they go shopping or wander into a strange neighborhood."

While Gloria was digesting this, he went on, explaining that the Metro Silent Club was one of the oldest in the region, founded in 1933, and that people had been coming there ever since to socialize, and "because the drinks were cheaper," though nowadays it was only open on weekends. He'd arranged for her to meet several of the members for a group interview. Was that all right with her?

Before she could answer, he was waving his hands to summon three people from across the room, who pulled up chairs and joined them.

"This is Laurel Case, Roberto Rivera, and Henry Byrnes," Jake said. "I asked them to join us in the interview because they all come from dif-

ferent backgrounds, so they can give you an idea about the varied backgrounds of the people in this club. Also, they can show you how different their lives are in other respects as well. That way maybe you'll be able to tell your readers how strongly we're bound together in the DEAF-WORLD. Despite major differences, we do all belong to this club."

Clearly Jake had taken charge of the interview, and Gloria wasn't sure she liked the idea. It was almost as if he were challenging her. But she'd come here to get a story. Shrugging, she pulled out her tape recorder. At least she wouldn't have to worry about background noise obscuring the interpreters' voices.

"Okay," Jake said, "we'll start by introducing ourselves. Who wants to go first?"

When the others glanced at each other, clearly at a loss, Jake announced that he'd get the ball rolling. "My parents and brother are Deaf," he said. "I grew up in Peabody, Massachusetts, and my brother and I went to the Cogswell School, a residential school for the Deaf. After that came Gallaudet University. Now I'm an independent-living counselor at a rehabilitation center run by Deaf people. I'm forty-five years old, divorced, and live in a townhouse in the city. Roberto?"

Roberto nodded to Gloria and his hands started moving. "Everybody in my family but me is hearing. I was born in Puerto Rico, and we moved to Lowell when I was about eighteen months old. I became Deaf a few months later from spinal meningitis. I went to public school in Lowell where I was in a self-contained class."

"What does self-contained mean?" Gloria asked. She had to keep reminding herself to look at Roberto, as she had been told, and not at the interpreter. Roberto and the others, on the other hand, watched the interpreter; it was disconcerting.

"We'll explain later," said Jake. "Go on, Roberto."

Roberto nodded. "I work as an assembler at a plant that makes household appliances. I am twenty-seven years old and not married, but I have a girlfriend."

Laurel went next. "I grew up in Fairfield, Connecticut, outside New York City. Everyone in my family is hearing. I was educated at the Hubbard School, a residential school for the Deaf that had a strict oral program. I was first exposed to signed language six years ago when I

entered Gallaudet. Now I can't stop signing. I work in the post office." "She's twenty-five," Roberto said. "She just broke up with her boyfriend."

This remark elicited a slap on the arm from Laurel.

"Okay, you're next, Henry," said Jake, taking command again.

"I am thirty-six years old and was born and brought up in Philadelphia. My family are all hearing. I graduated from the Frank Booth Day School for the Deaf. I am married and have two beautiful Deaf children. I was recently laid off from my job as a graphic artist."

"Well, that's us in a nutshell," said Jake. "Now it's time to change interpreters. They like to change off every twenty minutes or so. Then you can tell us what you're up to, Gloria."

The interpreter, who had been sitting beside Gloria and facing the others, got up and the other took his place. Meanwhile, Gloria tried to collect her thoughts. She wasn't used to being quizzed by her interviewees. Again, she had the unsettling feeling that she was being challenged.

"I am writing about the Deaf community and how, recently, the Deaf seem to be defining themselves and seeing themselves in new ways. I interviewed the director of the Deaf education program at the university, who put me onto Jake. The professor suggested that I meet Jake at the independent-living center where he works, but Jake suggested this place, so here I am."

"Have you ever met a Deaf person before?" asked Laurel.

"Not really, except for my great aunt, who became pretty hard-of-hearing in her old age. I've seen people signing to each other, but except for her, you're the first hearing-impaired people I've actually met."

As soon as the words were out, Gloria wished them back. She'd used the term hearing impaired in her TTY conversation with Jake and he'd set her straight then. Deaf people didn't consider themselves hearing impaired, he'd said, and didn't want to be called hearing impaired. It was like calling a Black person a Negro.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking at Jake. "I didn't mean to say that. You'll have to be patient with me."

Their eyes met, and for a moment Jake held her gaze, as if trying to see into her mind. Then, apparently satisfied, he nodded. "Apology accepted," he said. "At least you didn't say aurally challenged."

As the others laughed, Gloria relaxed. This is going to be all right, she thought, and said, "That's why I need your help. There are a great many people out there like me who don't know how Deaf people really feel. We read about Deaf students protesting at Gallaudet University, shutting the place down until a Deaf president was appointed. We read that, when Heather Whitestone became Miss America, Deaf people weren't happy because she chooses not to sign. We wonder what is really going on. I want you to tell me so I can share it with others. The straight dope."

Again Jake nodded, and this time he smiled. "Okay, shoot," he said. "Where do you want to start?"

"Why don't we begin at the beginning," Gloria said. "How and when did you and your parents learn you were Deaf and what was their reaction?"

And so, with periodic interruptions to switch interpreters, the four began telling her their stories, responding to Gloria's occasional questions, but mostly just talking, giving her—she hoped—what she'd asked for: the unvarnished truth, as they saw it.

Once more Jake went first. "Remember, I have Deaf parents, and that makes my situation different from theirs," he said, glancing at the other three. "Unlike their parents, my parents knew when my mother was pregnant that there was a possibility their child might be Deaf. They weren't really expecting it, though, because it was generally believed in the DEAF-WORLD that if a Deaf couple didn't themselves have Deaf parents it was unlikely that they would have Deaf children. All my grandparents were hearing and my aunts and uncles, too. So my folks weren't expecting a Deaf child. Shortly after I was born, my mother said that she and my father ran a few homemade hearing tests, screaming and banging on the pots to see if I would respond to the sound. Those tests, according to my mother, were inconclusive in her eyes, but my father was sure I was Deaf. She explained that she wasn't sure because sometimes I reacted to the sounds and sometimes I didn't. But they had decided in any case to raise me to be the way they are. So, from day one, I was exposed to ASL and was treated as one of them. My mother did tell me that after the doctors confirmed that I couldn't hear, she and my father felt a sense of loss, but nothing like what hearing parents go through. What my parents faced was the reality that their child was Deaf and they were concerned about the

kind of life I would have and the hardships I'd face, and vowed to make my life better than theirs had been."

Laurel went next: "My parents' reaction was entirely different. My mother told me that when she was pregnant, she and my father had great expectations. I would be like them—college graduates with high-powered careers. About two years after I was born, my mother started to suspect 'something wasn't right,' because I wasn't talking. My father and the rest of the family thought she was being over-anxious. My mother said her suspicion was confirmed one day when my aunt came over for lunch. After she fed me, I fell asleep in the highchair. While they were washing dishes, my aunt dropped a glass. She glanced at me to make sure I was okay, and I was still sound asleep. My parents took me to a specialist who confirmed that I was Deaf. They were devastated by the news, and soon after they were arguing a lot. My father plunged deeper and deeper into his work, while my mother decided to make a new career out of raising me."

"I was two and a half when I became Deaf," Roberto said. "Most of what I know of my situation I got much later from my younger hearing sister, who knows how to sign. My parents experienced the same kind of emotions as Laurel's. The difference is that my parents spoke very little English. So they were extremely confused about what was going on and had little understanding of what should be done to raise a Deaf child. The doctors and audiologists recommended that they contact a Spanish-speaking specialist affiliated with the hospital, who ran an early intervention program for Deaf children at a local school, and that's what they did."

Finally, Henry spoke. "From what my mother has said, my parents went through the same thing Laurel's and Roberto's did. My mother suspected something wasn't right when I was around two years old, but she thought I was just a bit slow in my development and would pick up when I got older. That assumption originated from my grandmother's recollection that my father had begun talking and crawling relatively late. And, like Jake, at certain times I appeared to react to noise, while at other times I didn't. But when I was three, and my situation still hadn't improved, they took me to a doctor, and the fact that I was Deaf was confirmed."

Many years later my mother told me that, after hearing the news, she cried for days. My father withdrew into a shell like a turtle and just wanted to be left alone. After a while, they decided to seek another opinion, and

then another. They went to five different doctors and audiologists within a span of six months. They kept hoping they'd find someone who could help. They just couldn't stop. When I was five or six years old, my mother took me to a faith healer, although I didn't understand that at the time. I remember there was a big audience and I was standing in front of a guy in a dark suit beside an altar. He stuck his fingers into my ears and pulled them out as fast as he could to create a sucking effect. I remember that it hurt."

Nobody said anything for a moment after this, and Gloria took the opportunity to turn the tape over in her recorder while the interpreters changed shift. When everyone was settled again she said, "You've all told me about your parents' reactions to the news of your being Deaf. How about your reactions? How did you feel about it when you were old enough to understand?"

There was no immediate response, and Gloria was beginning to think she'd put her foot in it again, when finally Jake touched her shoulder to get her attention. He pointed to a woman sitting at the bar. "See that blonde girl in the blue dress?" he said. "She's what we call a coda, which is an acronym for child of deaf adults. Everyone in her family is Deaf—her grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins—everybody. She grew up with them on a farm, where everyone signed. She just grew up signing to everyone, not knowing until she first attended school, at the age of five, that the rest of the world used speech to communicate. At school she had to go through speech therapy and learn how to talk.

"You see," Jake went on, "my situation was exactly like hers, only I didn't realize until even later that most of the people in the world communicated differently from my family. The point is, both Rhoda—that's her name—and I grew up thinking that signed language was normal as a way of communicating. We had no idea that other people might make a fuss about it and try to prevent us from using it."

"You're not answering the question," said Laurel.

"I know it," said Jake. "That's because there isn't an answer, not really. You see, none of us knows what we're quote-unquote, 'missing,' from the hearing point of view."

"And once we made it into the DEAF-WORLD, that became the important thing," Henry added. "I mean, the important thing is what we have, not what we don't have."

"Even late-deafened people sometimes feel that way," Laurel put in. "The treasurer of this club, a woman named Alice, lost her hearing when she was sixteen. I asked her once how she felt about becoming Deaf after hearing for sixteen years. She said the experience of suddenly being plunged into a life of soundlessness had been humbling, but the ones who suffered most were her hearing parents and relatives. I thought that Alice's response was somewhat strange, that someone older going Deaf would be traumatized. But Alice wasn't, not really.

"Her family was another matter, though. They thought they were being punished by God for something they or she had done. So Alice ended up feeling guilty. She spent a lot of time trying to figure out what sins she'd committed: sneaking out at night to meet a boyfriend? smoking? kissing before she was fifteen? She said a lot of Hail Marys in hopes of changing things, so her parents could stop grieving. Nothing came of it. And in fact, she says now that when she became Deaf, it was a turning point in her life for the better."

"I. King Jordan says the same thing," Henry said. "He says that losing his hearing at the age of twenty-one from a motorcycle accident was the best thing that ever happened to him. It led him into the DEAF-WORLD and to becoming a student, then a professor, and finally the president at Gallaudet University, none of which would have occurred if he had remained hearing."

Gloria glanced down at her notebook and wrote "GU, I. King Jordan," then underlined the name.

"Why'd you do that?" asked Roberto, peering at the book, which Gloria had left open on the table in front of her. She'd had the feeling from the start that to win and keep the trust of these people, she shouldn't appear to be concealing anything.

"It's just a reminder to myself. I wrote about the protest and I want to go back and review my old notes."

"You were there?" asked Laurel.

"No, but I interviewed a local teacher of the Deaf about it for a sidebar to one of the Associated Press articles. As I recall, she was pretty negative about the whole thing, but I can't remember why. I'll need to go look it up."

"Was she Deaf or hearing?" asked Roberto.

"You know, come to think of it, she was Deaf. Funny, but I forgot all about her when you asked me if I'd met any Deaf people."

"It's not so funny," said Henry. "I bet she did the interview without an interpreter and was probably a very good speaker. I bet she called herself hearing-impaired, too."

"You know, you're right," said Gloria. "How did you guess?"

"It's easy if you know the Deaf community as well as Henry does," said Jake, taking control again. "But we're getting off the track. Henry, what was it like for you when you learned your kids were Deaf?"

"Yes, Henry," said Gloria. "You used the word beautiful earlier."

Henry's hands were in the air to reply when suddenly the lights in the clubroom flashed on and off, stopping him in mid-sign. That does it, Gloria thought, the electricity's going. No one else seemed concerned, however. Instead, as one, everybody in the room looked towards the stage. "What's going on?" Gloria asked. The interpreter touched Jake's shoulder to get his attention as, up on stage, a man started signing.

"It's a fund-raising effort," said Jake. "He's announcing a raffle. Now where were we?"

"We were starting on my kids," said Henry. "Like Jake's folks, my wife and I weren't expecting our children to be Deaf because we both have hearing parents and the rest of our extended families are all hearing. So it was a surprise to us with both kids, but we were thrilled when we found out. It was pretty confusing for the doctors, let me tell you. The audiologist came in after the test looking very apprehensive and said, 'I am so sorry. The test shows that your baby is Deaf, although there may be a chance of residual. . . .' He stopped because my wife and I were hugging each other, we were so happy. He thought we were nuts."

As Henry and the others burst out laughing, Gloria felt totally lost for the first time since she'd been stopped at the club door. It was one thing to accept being Deaf and get on with your life. It was another entirely to relish the thought. "I . . . I don't understand," she said lamely.

"You think we're nuts, too, don't you?" asked Laurel.

Gloria started to shake her head no, then thought better of it. They could read her face like a book. "Well, yes, sort of," she said. "I mean, I just don't get it."

"You will eventually," said Jake. "I hope. That's what we're here for,

isn't it? For now, let's just say that the DEAF-WORLD places a higher value on Deaf kids than almost anything else. Okay?"

Still bewildered, Gloria knew she had no choice but to wait. Again she'd detected that wariness, in Jake especially.

"How did your parents react to your son's deafness?" she asked Henry finally. "You said they took you to faith healers. I bet they had a hard time dealing with it."

For several moments no one moved, and when Henry at last lifted his hands, it was, she thought, reluctantly. "When our son was born, my parents came over to visit. Periodically throughout the day my father would go into the nursery. I thought he was going to beam with pride at his grandson, but eventually I learned it was something else. After his fourth or fifth trip, I decided to follow him, and I caught him standing behind the crib clapping. He was testing a two-day-old baby! He never said anything, but his actions said plenty. And it hurt.

"It was like finally seeing how my parents reacted when they found out I was Deaf, which, of course, I was too young to remember. I thought that by this time my dad would have accepted the fact that I'm a human being who's happily married with a good job—this was before I got laid off—and not some freak of nature. It gave me a chance to see how they really thought of me. I would have liked them to say, 'Oh it's not a big deal,' but it is to them, I guess, and it always will be.

"My wife's parents were almost worse, because they kept grilling us on how we were going to bring the kid up and recommending speech-and-hearing specialists. They wanted to be sure we raised him to speak. They couldn't accept that we had a pretty good idea of what it was like growing up Deaf and that we were capable of deciding what would be best for our child. They were not pleased when we decided he'd learn ASL first. But we weren't about to put him through what we went through.

"We want our children to have the kind of head start Jake had, growing up just like any hearing kids in the neighborhood, with their parents using their normal daily language. We bring them with us to the Deaf club, the way Jake's parents brought him to the Deaf club—this very one, in fact—where they can find other Deaf kids to play with and Deaf adults too, and storytellers to watch and learn from.

"With me it was so different. Since my parents didn't find out I was

Deaf until I was three, I missed those three years of language and had to wait one more year after that, while my parents tried to pound speech into me and dragged me from one clinic to the next. My mother would accompany me and try to learn different techniques for teaching me how to speak. At home she would make me go through some drills, but I was so stubborn and strong-willed. I threw such tantrums that she would just give up and drive me to the therapist's office and let the therapist teach me. This went on for a while until the last therapist decided I wasn't trying hard enough and recommended that I be enrolled in a day school for the Deaf in the city. There, I finally met other Deaf kids and began acquiring signed language, four years too late. There's no way anything like that's going to happen to my kids. No way."

"Right on," Laurel said. "But if you think you had it tough . . ."

"Actually, I didn't, not the way you did."

"You're so right," Laurel said. "You see, Gloria, after finding out I was Deaf, my parents took me to a specialist in New York City who recommended that they get in touch with a parent-infant program coordinator at his hospital. After the coordinator explained different approaches, it didn't take them long to decide they were going to do their utmost to make me 'normal'—that's the word my mother uses. Signing, they felt, was not normal. It was that simple."

"The first thing that happened was that I was fitted with hearing aids, and from that time on—I was two years old—my mother would take me to a speech therapist in my home town. While I was being drilled, she would devour all the literature she could on how to teach speech and lipreading. Soon she found out about this pre-school home correspondence kit from a clinic in California that specialized in oral instruction. She immediately subscribed. After that, every morning for about an hour, she would sit me down and go over different speech games and drills from that kit. Sometimes it was fun, but mostly it was tedious for both of us."

"My mother tells me now that many times she wanted to give up, but she forced herself to stay with it. In the evenings, my father took his turn drilling me for another half-hour. An hour and a half every day. My mother says there were many times when she had to bribe me with candy or toys. And not only was I corrected during the speech sessions, I was corrected throughout the day. For example, when I asked my mother where

something was, if I pronounced the word wrong, she would correct me and make me say it right before telling me where the thing was. My mother was more a therapist than a mother."

Gloria was saddened by Henry and Laurel's obvious anger with their parents. Of course, it was different for Jake. And Roberto? He seemed to read her mind: "Before today I used to envy Laurel and Henry, because they had a good education," Roberto said. Now I'm not so sure. I said my parents were devastated when they learned I was Deaf, but the fact is, my sister told me that. They never showed me that they felt that way. I was the third child in a family of five children and the only one Deaf."

"The language we used at home and in my neighborhood was, and still is, primarily Spanish, so I grew up around three different languages: Spanish, English and signed language. I am most comfortable using signed language, though, and feel it is most natural for me to communicate my ideas and feelings, so I primarily use ASL, which makes me different from the rest of my family."

"My mother speaks very little English, because most of the time she stayed home raising us children. My father has a little more English because of his work. But even though my father speaks more English, I find him hard to understand. I actually understand my mother better; I guess some basic Spanish has stayed with me all these years and also, she is better than my dad at miming things. Even my Deaf Anglo girlfriend used to understand my mother much better than my father. They could have good conversations using gestures and facial expressions, and my mother knows some basic signs."

"You see, when they found out I was Deaf, and placed me in that early intervention program, I met other Deaf children. Then, later, when I was about four, the program encouraged my parents to learn Signed English so they could communicate with me.* My father was unable to go because they scheduled the classes at three in the afternoon, when he was working. But my mother went to a few classes and picked up some rudimentary signs, like NO, BATH, EAT, FATHER, MOTHER, BED. Then she stopped going because no one there spoke Spanish and she figured she could learn signs from me, since I was already correcting her. She would come home and

* Signed English is one of the systems designed to represent English manually using some signs, but not grammar, borrowed from ASL and some invented signs. See chapter 9.

sign some signs wrong, and I would shake my head and say WRONG, and show her the right way. I guess my mother figured I would teach her even better than the teachers. It turned out that we stuck to our own way of communicating, which was a combination of gestures, homemade signs, and signed language.

"That's what I'm getting to. I mean, I don't recall my mother ever making me sit and try to talk, like Laurel's mother and Henry's. She just brought me up like the other kids in the family."

"You were lucky," said Laurel. "You learned to sign pretty early and didn't have to wear hearing aids. That was the worst, for me and my mother. She'd put them on me in the morning and a few minutes later would find me walking around without them. I would take them off and hide them. She tried using two-sided tape to stick them on my head, but I'd still pull them off. Once my dad found a set—five-hundred-dollars' worth—in the toilet. Two little pink, shrimp-shaped things. He laughs about it now, but then it wasn't so funny. My parents were relentless. I was going to talk, come hell or high water. Signing was absolutely forbidden."

"Yet here you are," said Henry.

"That's right," said Laurel. "Here I am. Even though I speak well and can lip-read well enough to carry on a decent conversation with hearing people, now I am more in favor of signed language. Until I learned it, I had no idea how much I was missing out on. When I did realize it, I became angry with my parents, because I'd learned from them, and from my teachers, that any involvement in the DEAF-WORLD would isolate me from the world in general and make me a very limited person. Now I know this to be false. I can't believe I actually believed it, because in fact the opposite is true. Being in the DEAF-WORLD makes me even more worldly."

The others nodded their agreement. "So you see," Jake said, "no matter how you raise your Deaf kids, no matter how much speech you try to drill into them, chances are they will end up becoming a member of a club like this one, because signing just comes naturally to you if you're Deaf. You just gravitate towards the DEAF-WORLD. Learning ASL as a baby, the way I did, gives you a head start, that's all."

Roberto glanced at his watch and said, "I need to call my friend now, so can we take a quick break?"

"That's a good idea. I'll go buy everybody drinks," Gloria said.

"What would you like?" "Coke." "Coke." "Scotch and soda." "Beer." Grabbing her purse, she got up and went to the bar, only to find that the bartender was taking orders in ASL and she had to go back to the table for her pad and pen. By the time she'd returned to the table with the drinks, the interpreters had gone outside for a smoke. Jake, Henry and Laurel were signing away and laughing uproariously.

Jake wrote on her pad: We're talking about Laurel's experience buying a new car. Hilarious.

Gloria sat there watching the conversation ping-pong back and forth, listening to their laughter. Then suddenly she thought she knew what it must have been like for them growing up—all except Jake. Even though she was among a lot of people in the clubroom, she felt completely alone.

