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The Deaf Musician

A sentence is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung.

—Robert Frost

On a day such as this it will have been the case that Jessie has tripped and skinned her knee.

Later, she will say, “It’s because of the way the sun was chasing the clouds. I looked up to see, and tripped.”

She will say, “I love days like that, the in and out of sun and clouds, shadow and light.”

She will say, “My Band-Aid had butterflies on it.”

And maybe this happened a long time ago, and maybe it will happen in the future. There were tears in Jessie’s eyes as she hunkered for a long time on the sidewalk, blowing—*puff, puff, puff*—on her knee. If she went home, Jessie knew that her mother would paint the scrape with mercurochrome or iodine, something orange or blueberry-colored, something that stung like the dickens. Jessie knew that she herself would scream and scream, causing such a scene that her mother would send her to her room to calm down, which by then would be difficult for her. Jessie felt very calm right now, and that’s how she wanted to stay. She blew and blew—*puff, puff, puff*—on her knee, as the clouds and the sun played hide and seek high above and shadows passed over her here below on earth. This was when Jessie was five.

By the time she was a woman, Jessie had developed exquisite caution. It didn’t happen overnight, not like once she tripped and after that always looked both ways to cross the street or paid close attention to such things as not walking under ladders or stepping on cracks, the carefulness was not immediate like that. But there was a beginning to it, perhaps even that one day she scraped her knee, as Jessie grew increasingly alert throughout her childhood and young adulthood to the sorry fact that the world was a sad and dangerous place.

But she also once kicked a loose mound of dirt at a neighborhood house construction project, expecting it to collapse in a poofy cloud

of softness, but instead it was hard underneath, like a rock, and tore her toenail off, and another time at back-to-school night when the teacher said that they could take their framed (with black tape and glass) art work home for their parents, Jessie was so excited (this was before her caution took hold) that she wouldn't let her mother carry the prize, running ahead with it instead to show her father, who'd missed that part of her classroom, but her father was already in the car, and when Jessie reached for the car door handle, the framed (with black tape and glass) art slipped from her grasp and shattered on the pavement below. All around her ankle, where glass had flown up, little baubles of blood blossomed.

So probably this was a long time ago, since schools these days are more alert to liability and such.

Behind her, her mother was snapping something like, "I told you to let me carry it, why are you always so clumsy?" while below, on Jessie's young leg, blood continued to gather, then stream.

But maybe this can still happen in the future. Maybe there will come a time when people will go back to glass because plastic, even with recycling, will have filled up all the waste disposal space there can ever be.

Another time, Jessie was in high school now, she let go of the parallel rings for no reason on earth. One minute she was hanging upside down, back arched, toes elegantly pointed in her new white gymnastics slippers; the next she was landing—*kerplat*—on her head. Everyone laughed, but her neck hurt for weeks, and Jessie was beginning to wonder. Perhaps she should be taking more care. Then a neighbor child was run down by her father backing out of his driveway in a rage, and Jessie understood this as a final warning.

On the day that Jessie tripped and skinned her knee—a brilliant January day, toward the ragged end of the last century (so now you know), with clouds coming and going on a gusty wind, and the rain that intermittently fell from them a cold, cleansing one that left the world momentarily glistening, and then, all at once again, darkness and rain—and sometime late in the afternoon, two events simultaneously occurred: a brilliant rainbow split the space between one rumpled gray clump of clouds and another to form a perfect parabolic iridescent arc, and a boy was born who lacked the ability to distinguish phonetic difference. Even as an infant, all consonants

sounded alike to him, and he was able to discern only a limited range even of vowels. Thus language, to the boy, was like humming, and as he grew he developed the most mellifluous of voices, pitched somewhere around middle C.

In other respects, he was like normal children, with his ups and downs, his curiosities, his periods of what his parents called “exuberances.” As an infant, his little arms flailed and his appetite was voracious. As a toddler, he emptied and threw things; later on, he excavated dumpsters. And although all sorts of normal boys from all kinds of good families were also known to exhibit similar behaviors, most people assumed, because of this one boy’s linguistic limitations, his were caused by a genetic mental abnormality.

His parents, who knew better, were at their wits’ ends. They were fine and loving parents, who harbored enormous love for their son, and of course they wanted to do the right thing, but neither could agree on what that was. The father was convinced they should just give him time, that, in sufficient time, he’d turn out all right, like all the rest—already his right arm showed promise, and the father had visions of Little League fame. The mother, who had carried him for nine months in her womb, knew better.

“There’s just something about him,” she said. “When you talk to him,” she said, “he doesn’t look right.”

But the audiologist who finally tested him just smiled at them benignly and insisted his hearing was fine.

“Look,” she said, turning some knobs on her machine and pointing at the window in the booth where the boy sat, looking small in his oversized headphones. And sure enough, he raised his hand, and grinned his toothy grin, and then he pointed at his right ear and whistled.

Sometime later, the speech pathologist, examining the audiologist’s reports, confessed she didn’t know.

“Could be,” she said, with an apologetic shrug, “you’ve got a genius who just won’t talk to you.”

And when the parents pleaded, she shook her head, perhaps a bit rueful, saying she was really truly sorry but there was nothing more she could do for him.

“Such a pity,” she said, “such a lovely boy.”

Was the boy lovely? The boy was blond. And the boy, who’d started reading, had turned out to be reasonably mild mannered, espe-

cially given the frustrations of his daily life, but by the time he entered school, he was so out-of-step with other boys his age that, immersed in chapter books and especially fond of some rather dry basic introductions to music theory, he was considered a misfit, or geek. Unable to make any connection between the elegant (the boy would see the letters of the alphabet, as well as all forms of musical notation, throughout his life as elegant) words on the page and the sounds people made when they spoke, the boy's desperate struggles to speak were grotesque and alienating. Also, he excelled in math and could perform complex equations in his head (this was only kindergarten), but the numbers stayed as if locked up inside him, which he experienced as a personal torment. He had a name, but couldn't hear or say it, he could only write it, and when Jessie went up to him on the playground, he was jabbing it furiously in the dirt.

"Jeremiah," she said in the finest voice Jeremiah had ever heard, clear as a bell and completely intelligible, and he looked up at her from where he was squatting and such a smile bloomed across his face that Jessie blushed and said, almost apologetically, "My name starts with J too."

Jessie, at the time, is ten years old, and Jeremiah is five, brought together in this instant by the Buddy Program at their school, which pairs fifth graders, on their way out, with kindergartners half their age, on their way in. The idea is that the older children will introduce the younger ones to the ins and outs of school, showing them around and making them feel welcome and at ease. For most, it's a once a week obligation, the older children doing some fun educational activity with the younger ones, but for others, maybe those, like both Jessie and Jeremiah, without siblings, or those in foster care, or whose moms are dying of cancer, or who have volatile dads, the relationship can become very close, extending even to a lifelong attachment, even in children this young.

When Jessie finds Jeremiah writing his name in the dirt and he hears her say it, clear as a bell, it is, again, one of those intermittently cloudy and sunny days, but sometime toward the middle of October. This, the official meeting of fifth grader with Kindergarten Buddy, is supposed to have happened in the kindergarten classroom, along with all the others pairing up, but on this particular day, when the big kids stomp in, all blustery and noisy, with a lot of loud laughter, Jeremiah panics and runs outside to the corner of the kindergarten

playground, just on the other side of the wood play structure and next to where there might have been a swing once. Jessie, a normal enough child but for her sensitivities, is terribly disappointed. She had wanted a golden-haired girl, with curls, someone with whom she might play dolls, or teach how to cut snowflakes out of ordinary unlined white paper. But, instead, the name the teacher handed her was "Jeremiah," the strange boy who ran away and hunkered in the dirt as if nothing at all were happening on his behalf.

"Girls are supposed to get girls," she complained bitterly. "Why do I have to have a boy?" Jessie didn't say and a weird one at that, a loner like me, she didn't say but thought, just remembering the running-off episode, the stick and the name in the dirt.

The teacher pursed her lips and got that little frown between her brows, which met there, hair all the way across the bridge of her nose like a stretched out parentheses. "Now Jessie," she said, "the big kids help the little ones, you know that." And when Jessie didn't budge or change her tune, the teacher added, "You're special, you know, and he is too. You're more grown up than other kids, you have so much to offer." And then, somewhat sternly, "There are more boys in kindergarten than in the fifth grade. You're not the only one. This is just how things worked out."

At this moment, and for no particular reason, Jessie recalled the day she tripped and skinned her knee. She remembered the sun chasing the clouds, and she felt a little bit like that, though she couldn't tell which. *If I were the sun or the clouds*, she said to herself, *which should I be?* These were the actual words she formed in her head, and when she said them later to Jeremiah, he gave her such a miraculous smile that it seemed to her a kind of answer.

Years later, Jessie will look back and begin to understand that, though as the older Buddy, she had believed she was in charge, in fact it had always been the other way around, with Jeremiah, from the start, taking all the important leads of their lives, for in time, the boy would grow up to have extraordinary gifts. He would, for example, become a brilliant composer, known also for his sexual prowess, and though he never slept with Jessie, his Kindergarten Buddy, life-long friend and devoted translator, sometimes he would need her to be in the room to help him express his amorous thoughts. Sometimes Jessie would sit at the end of the bed and, as his hum-

ming ebbed and flowed, words, like rain, came out of her mouth, and sometimes tears ran from her eyes. And then, for the longest, saddest time, she did not. And yet, what Jeremiah had to teach her was not about the music, nor even the sex; it was about the way he moved through the world, not at all cautious, and alert to the slightest nuance of light or gesture, of anything, really, except words.

At first Jessie thought his apparent lack of interest in what people were saying—their actual meaning, that is—was just a profound alienation from language in general (and indeed, throughout his childhood, Jeremiah would be evaluated, again and again, for autism or Asperger's Syndrome), but as they grew older, and closer, she began to recognize that, except with her, it was words alone, as individual units of signification, that left Jeremiah cold. In other respects, language was just a different order of experience for him, who found the harmonious strings of sound coming out of the mouths of others so enchanting that he gave every evidence of listening closely to the speaker until some actual response was required, at which point Jeremiah floundered over even such basic communication skills as eye contact or facial expression. Jessie alone understood that his was a problem only of meaning and that he understood nothing but sound itself, as if the sentence had a sound independent of its meaning, deeper, richer, more insistent on its own imperative and incomparably more lovely, but she also understood (again, not right away, but over time) that it was her very understanding, of this and other matters, that stood between her and her experience of the present moment, to which Jeremiah had such extraordinary access.

"Take a word, any word," she tried to tell him. "It can mean so many things. You, of all people, should appreciate this."

Jeremiah (they were older now) had a small guitar in his lap, and he plucked it, then he strummed it, then he beat the smooth hollow body of it with the tips of his four right hand fingers. Jessie grinned, and, though she felt somewhat shaken, she knew he was right.

"How can you possibly say what you mean using only words?" she admitted.

In college, she argues this without success to her professors.

"Language," she says, "is not our only means of knowing. I, for example," she says, somewhat vaguely, "... I feel," and they give her mediocre grades.

“Listen to this,” she tells Jeremiah on the telephone, and to him alone she is eloquent and convincing and impassioned, though sometimes her words slur together, rendering them indistinguishable as discrete units of either sense or sound.

Jeremiah is eating his peas. They are round, and green, and singular, like numbers in his head. Across the cafeteria table, Jessie is watching him eat. She has never seen a child eat cafeteria peas before, and finds the spectacle engrossing, if pretty disgusting.

“You don’t have to,” you know, she says conspiratorially, and Jeremiah sticks his tongue out, green mash clumped on its tip. “Yuck,” she squeals, and Jeremiah laughs.

Later, they play kickball, one to the other. Jessie kicks the ball, and Jeremiah kicks it back.

Still later, she shows him how to cut snowflakes.

Then, one day Jeremiah is nowhere to be found, and when Jessie asks, the teacher puts her pencil down, a bit gravely, and explains in slow and carefully selected words that Jeremiah, as they always knew, is special, and so he’s being sent to a special school, but not to worry, and now the teacher brightens, Jessie will be getting a new Kindergarten Buddy, a little girl, like she always wanted, with dolls and her own long blond curls, who has just transferred here from another city and is in need of a friend.

Jessie, suddenly protective of the little friend she has already, wails, “No!” then, “Why?”

“Surely, Jessie,” the teacher says blandly, turning back to correct her student papers, “you can see he just doesn’t fit in.”

“Why?” Jessie wails to her mother.

“Oh, Jessie, don’t do this to yourself,” her mother says.

“You don’t understand,” Jessie says, “Jeremiah’s special.”

“Precisely,” the principal says when Jessie, more composed now, goes to him with a formal complaint. “Jeremiah’s new school is for special kids—for kids who don’t fit in.” The principal is going on to say, “There’s a word for it, Jessie, do you understand?” but Jessie is digging for something in her pink-butterfly backpack and seems not to be paying attention. “We call it,” the principal says as Jessie finds what she is looking for and pulls out something white, a piece of folded paper, “Jessie,” he says, “it’s a neurological,” as Jessie unfolds and triumphantly reveals Jeremiah’s snowflake, “disorder,” perfectly

symmetrical and intricate as lace, and the look on the principal's face is one that she wishes she could freeze forever.

Thus, because of Jessie, what the principal had been planning on saying—*I don't expect you to understand this*—never gets uttered aloud, but instead he makes a few telephone calls, involves some other grown-ups, professionals with all kinds of expertise. Jeremiah is brought in to cut his snowflakes in front of the principal and a new psychologist. Some written tests are administered, a whole series of questions Jeremiah reads to himself and answers with a sharpened Number 2 pencil, scoring in high middle school range. There are whispered conversations, more consultations, another audiologist, with better equipment.

"There's nothing wrong with his hearing," she says, pricking a tuning fork and holding it up to the air.

The kindergarten teacher huffs and puffs. "This child," she says, "does not fit in."

"The snowflakes," Jessie overhears the principal say one time, "don't prove anything, I know. But you don't understand," and Jessie hears the tension in his voice, "there is just something about this boy."

Finally, it is just the principal and, of course, Jessie and Jeremiah's parents, standing between Jeremiah and the special school, and then, later on, there is the music teacher too.

Although there are strict rules for this, for who can learn what when, and although primary children are allowed only to sing, with instrumental lessons coming in the upper elementary grades, and although Jeremiah is still in kindergarten, one day he picks up Jessie's flute that she has borrowed on a trial basis from the school just as the music teacher is walking by outside the door, and this, too, may someday be called fate. The music teacher, after all, comes only once a week. The flute is badly bent and some keys stick. But Jeremiah's breath draws such sound from it, as if it were a perfect instrument and he a trained musician, and this is how it happens that he learns to play the flute.

Between this singular event and the meteoric rise of his career as a musician, so much depends on Jessie, who is nothing if not dogged, and though in person she can seem as diffident and unassuming as any girl could, she has a knack of getting her own way that the person who gives in only realizes later, feeling not quite

deceived, but surely tricked, as if with egg on the face that the person never even saw coming. So Jeremiah gets to stay in regular school, where for eleven years he never speaks, not one mortal word, though he skips grades three and seven and continues to score, on his tests, off the charts. Still, the teachers are nonplussed.

“Sometimes,” one says, “He hums.”

“In my class, he never stops humming,” another says.

“Do you know he does all the math in his head?” still another marvels. “Advanced calculations, complex equations. Stuff I could hardly do in college.”

In the high school music magnet Jessie convinces Jeremiah’s parents to send him to just before leaving for a distant university herself, the teachers stop talking and start listening. By this time, Jeremiah is proficient at many instruments, and between his breath (on the flute) and his fingers (on the violin), no one, not even Jeremiah can tell which is the more expressive.

But for Jessie, far away now and struggling with her academics, this is a difficult time. All she’s ever wanted, at least since she was in fifth grade, has been recognition and acceptance for Jeremiah, but now that he has it, she has never felt so sad or lonely. What she knows in her heart but does not want to put into words is that Jeremiah is branching out, discovering, if not now then sometime soon, that while the tongues of other girls do not articulate like hers, they nonetheless have their purpose. Tormented by her own small-minded mean spirit, unwilling to acknowledge the bald fact that she is jealous, Jessie is never not holding, though not always in a good way, Jeremiah in her thoughts. And then without any preface or warning, the scar on her knee starts to itch.

“There’s nothing wrong with your knee,” the doctors at the student health center tell her. “That scar is old, hardly even a scar, completely superficial in the first place. Besides,” they tell her, “there’s nothing you can do about scars.”

“But it’s unbearable,” Jessie tells them. “I can’t concentrate in class. I can’t even sleep.”

They give her creams, injections, oral antihistamines, herbs. They tell her try heat, try cold. They refer her to the counseling center. The only thing that helps is when Jeremiah plays his flute to her long distance, and then they learn how to stream it on-line.

Someday, when they are much older, say, in their forties, they will look back on this time and remember Jessie's suffering as both a blessing and a sign. By this time, Jessie will no longer even remember when or how she got the old scar on her knee, hardly even a scar, she admits. She will have stopped noticing its persistence, marked especially by the way it turns blue when the temperature drops to the fifties. By this time, Jessie will be using wrinkle cream, coloring her hair, and turning her attention to such sundry concerns as mortgage refinancing and 401k plans. But Jeremiah will remember playing the flute long distance, he will remember the MP3 recordings he made for her just so she could concentrate enough to take a test. And he will remember the day Jessie called him to announce she'd decided on medical school, but one closer to him, maybe even in the same city again, wouldn't that be nice. After everything, Jessie had decided to become a dermatologist.

"You think it is all about pimples," she said, "but there's a girl in my class. On the surface, she's OK, but the acne goes inside, huge cysts burrowing deep into her body. There's nothing they can do," Jessie was breathless, "but cut them out, over and over. In dermatology," she finished, almost heady with the implications, "it's all about cutting."

Jeremiah was humming loud on the other side of the country. He was wondering about prerequisites and thinking that Jessie never liked blood.

"And money."

Jeremiah hummed a little louder.

"Doctors get paid more when they touch." Now Jeremiah imagined a violin. "And in dermatology, every visit involves touching." A very costly violin. "Plus with melanoma," Jessie played her trump card, "it's the coming plague. I'm going to make a fortune, you just watch."

Jeremiah got a drum stick and beat it on the telephone receiver, three times, for do what you want. Jessie always did, and so far, things had worked out.

Still, the logistics proved more difficult than they had imagined. Jeremiah had his heart set on Julliard but then Jessie got into UCLA and it was everything she had let herself hope for.

"Jeremiah," she pleaded, even knowing everything he would be giving up, "think of all that sun." She was thinking cancer, her future

fortune, and also California, but Jeremiah, and he hardly skipped a beat, thought ocean. Suddenly, though he'd always imagined he would head east to fame and fortune when he finished high school, he turned his thoughts in the opposite direction, and considered his one memory of the sea, more lovely than any human pitch and perfectly rhythmic to boot. So Jeremiah considered USC, for theory, and Cal State Northridge, for performance and music education, and there he discovered the deaf.

When Jeremiah flew out for a visit he left a blizzard and landed in Santa Ana, eighty degrees and still, the shadows of things—trees, buildings, the human body—etched in the sidewalks. He shed his black coat like a clumsy carapace and went out to catch the shuttle to the valley. What happened next is open to debate, with not even Jessie sure she ever fully understood.

That day, all those years before, when Jeremiah was digging his name in the dirt with a stick and Jessie said it out loud, clear, for the first time, as a bell, with a “j” at the front, and then an “r”, and an “m” in the middle and all those marvelous vowels, and Jeremiah heard it, for the first time, and knew it, the sound of his name, as Jessie said it, to be the same as what he wrote, and all the words that were to follow she was to say to him, that day had changed his life forever, and though they never really knew how it was that of all the human speakers and their many languages, Jessie was the only one Jeremiah understood, nonetheless they accepted this as fate. Now, fate was preparing to intervene again, and, really, were either of them ready for this?

There was a tree, maybe some kind of Chinese locust or even jacaranda, and it was flowering in February, Jeremiah would always remember that. And underneath the tree, just a pair of students, standing and talking, one to the other, the conversation animated and, apparently, amusing, but they weren't making any sound or even moving their lips, but only their hands, like separate things before them, instead. It's not that Jeremiah didn't recognize what they were doing—he wasn't a complete hick from some backward corner of the country. Jeremiah knew all about deafness (had himself been subjected to countless audiological exams throughout his life), and ASL and other forms of signing. He knew about it all, but he'd never seen it, and then he turned the corner of a bland concrete

building, and there they were, talking in sign, and then, as he watched, a whole crowd gathered, six or seven students, all talking with only their hands.

Now, for the first time, Jeremiah wanted to tell Jessie something he could not tell her with his music. He thought perhaps he might tell her that Cal State Northridge had the largest population of deaf students in the country, more even than Gallaudet, and he thought that she might understand, but, also for the first time, Jeremiah wasn't sure. For so long they had been a perfect pair—Jeremiah younger and hence not available to Jessie, not in that way, not yet in the way he'd become famous for, and now for the past four years on the other side of the country as well, and Jessie with that particular mellifluousness of voice that, for whatever reason, Jeremiah understood like no other. What began when Jeremiah was in kindergarten, or maybe years before, when Jessie skinned her knee, was permanent and deeply embedded. But Jeremiah, and really, who could blame him, Jeremiah wanted more.

Also, at this very moment Jeremiah was on the verge of the idea that Jessie had been rendered, by the simple process of substitution and replacement, irrelevant, or even obsolete. It was a concept that would set him reeling, and that, in the exotic tenderness of the next few days, also leave him tentative and high. But oh, though Jeremiah thought he might know what he was doing as he watched the other students talk, he did not and could not, not really. Jeremiah glanced down at his own hands, a bit sweaty from the heat and famous for their skill and expressiveness in music and, though this would come later, in bed, and such a feeling passed over him that, for the first time, an eerie silence descended all around him, no *hums* or *whoos* or *ploppings* of animals or plants, just the *swushed* whisper of fingers brushing the air, the swoops of the arcs of hands.

That night, long-distance, Jeremiah played a new song of desire for Jessie, and there was something wild about it, almost soaring, a lifting up out of the self, that scared her. As far as she was concerned, the sooner they got to L.A., the better, and she started making her arrangements.

But of course in the whole scheme of the rest of her life, what she would want and get and what ultimately would be denied her, Jessie was right to be scared, and wrong to ignore it. In retrospect, years later, she would think that she didn't even apply to NYU. She could

have done that much for Jeremiah, she would think, but she didn't. Jessie wanted sun, and so they ended up in California, where she believed they would be happy and rich, but where what she did not foresee, Jeremiah's autonomous access to language, and the consequences thereof, would be very nearly intolerable as, little by little, Jeremiah removed himself from her.

Jeremiah used the money he was going to spend on Julliard to rent a little place in Venice by the beach. At first they looked in Malibu, but people were too rich there even for Jessie. Then they looked in Topanga, which was in a canyon not far from the beach. Jessie liked the oak trees, the dappled sunlight, the muted scurrings of animals, coyote howls and owl cries. But it was a hard, narrow drive on the curved canyon road, and Jeremiah found night there too quiet, too much like the middle of the country, and the coyotes were frightening to him. He'd come to California for the surf, and surf was what he'd have, and Venice had both surf and traffic, the homeless, street performers, *everything*, he declared, spreading his arms wide and grinning to signify his satisfaction, *a man could ever want*. Venice was also not far from UCLA, and so Jessie and Jeremiah settled in for the duration, and began their long hauls to the future.

At first, things were harder on Jeremiah than they were on Jessie, even including the rigors of med school. For one, he had a longer commute, up over the mountains and into the dun-colored air of the valley that made his eyes and throat sting and turned the world ugly and gray. Also, between when he had visited Northridge and when he arrived for classes, the school had collapsed in an earthquake and was now just an ugly maze of plastic domes and unpleasant bungalows that stank, and for awhile Jeremiah considered transferring to USC. But wherever he went at Northridge, he saw deaf people hanging out and talking, a most extraordinary scene that, in truth, he longed to be part of.

However, there was something else in college Jeremiah hadn't counted on: unlike at his music magnet high school, here it didn't matter how sweetly or proficiently he might play his many instruments, he still had to pass freshman comp and other breadth requirements where activities like group work and class participation made up a huge part of the grade.

One day, Jeremiah's English teacher took him outside the bungalow and told him to wipe that smirk off of his face.

"These kids," she said, clearly annoyed and raising her voice to be heard over the noise of a nearby bulldozer, "haven't had the same privileges as you, and most of their parents never even went to high school." The teacher had such a fierce look on her face, and she was gesticulating wildly with her hands, but Jeremiah could tell it didn't mean anything. "English is not their first language," she went on, "some lost their homes in the earthquake, and maybe you write like a dream, young man, but you owe them, at the very least, the courtesy," she was really mad, "of a response."

Jeremiah gazed serenely out across a dusty field where a crane dangled three drinking fountains from its maw. When he'd visited this campus a year before, it looked OK, with a low concrete buildings around a central quad, and a small grove of orange trees, but now it was all buzzing and yawing, the external world in as much disarray as his own internal one, and this teacher going off for no reason.

"You look at me, young man, when I speak to you," she was still chewing him out when a pair of deaf students came around the corner of the bungalow on the dirt path below, carefully avoiding the coils of wire and other construction debris, but deeply engaged in conversation, their hands quick and graceful before them, and as Jeremiah turned to follow their progress, a bit dreamily, the teacher sputtered and stopped.

"Oh," she said, "I'm so sorry. Are you? I didn't know."

Jeremiah lifted his hand in what he had gathered might be a gesture of greeting, and the deaf girl turned toward him and waved.

"No way," the teacher said, beet red, as Jeremiah turned to go back into the classroom. "But I'm supposed to get a notice," the teacher was really whining now, though already she was thinking that she'd never seen a deaf student write like Jeremiah. Then she followed him back inside, muttering, "Where's your interpreter anyway?"

So Jeremiah was tested again, and the audiologist, who fed him a series of *bleeps* and *bloops*, reported, as before, that there was nothing wrong with his hearing. Also, for the first time Jeremiah's larynx was examined for signs of damage, but it, too, was found to be perfect. Nonetheless, Jeremiah did not speak, and as he did not sign but

seemed to want to, arrangements were made for him to learn. When Jessie heard this, she was outraged.

“What’s wrong with you the way you are?” she said, a bit groggy from late study hours and a failed lab the night before. “You’re a genius. Isn’t that enough?”

Jeremiah did something with his hands Jessie didn’t understand, and she went into her bedroom and wept, though that may have been from sheer exhaustion, as she was always tired in those days. Now, looking back, how would they have changed things?

By the end of the year, Jessie moved out. “I’ve been your buddy since you were five years old,” she said. “Where would you be without me?”

And as Jeremiah answered with his hands, she felt like spitting at him. Medical school was hard enough without having to deal with Jeremiah acting out, and Jessie was dead tired. Between where she was in second year and where she wanted to end up, in dermatology, it was years, and years, and years. But isn’t this the way lives spin out anyway—unpredictable, seemingly out of control, but with what will later seem like a kind of purpose?

One day, Jessie falls and skins her knee, and almost the next, it seems, she is peeling cancer off the bodies of people who, unlike her, had never learned to be careful. One day, Jeremiah is writing his name in the dirt, and then almost the next, it seems, he is performing before huge auditoriums of euphoric fans. From the day Jessie opens her own practice, she plays Jeremiah’s music in the waiting and exam rooms, and her patients recover in droves. But no matter what, from the time that he is five, she has never been able to get Jeremiah to be cautious.

Once Jeremiah discovered ASL, a whole new world opened up for him, and he received it and was received by it without ambivalence or a shred of regret. It was a heady time, and as he entered language for the first time in his life, he found he was so famished for simple human discourse that he went all the way through college without remarking that his new friends were utterly incapable of appreciating the one thing that gave both meaning and purpose to his life.

Jessie knew this. “And what do they think of your music?” she said, packing up the dishes, which were hers.

When Jeremiah reached for the chip bowl (he was having a party that night), Jessie's heart filled with anguish and her knee started to itch. For so long it had been this way—Jessie, the only person Jeremiah understood, could understand him in return only through his music. The simple stuff, like *pass the salt* or *let's go to the movies*, was as far beyond his powers of communication as the world of adventure would always be for Jessie. Her knee didn't just itch, it burned. She left Jeremiah the chip bowl and went out to save lives.

It was during this time, the next several years, that Jeremiah developed his sexual prowess, even as he grew into an uncommonly handsome young man. His skin was always burnished to a deep, dark tan, and his hair, sun-bleached, gleamed gold. Everything was golden about Jeremiah, even the records he cut. But despite his life-long history of normal audiology reports, he could not stop his growing reputation as the deaf musician.

"Like Beethoven?" people would say.

"No, this guy," they said, "has been deaf from birth. It's the most amazing thing. And he didn't even sign until he was in college."

For ten years, Jeremiah and Jessie fall out of touch, and this is the saddest time of their lives, though it is also, in many ways, the most successful. Both of them can be said to have experienced the inordinate good fortune of having discovered a true calling in life, and for awhile, as Jessie pursues dermatology training through several post graduate fellowships and residencies, she is too busy even to mourn Jeremiah's absence. But once she joins an exclusive Beverly Hills skin group, which is always packed with patients bitterly enduring long waits to have blemishes fixed, she begins, once again, to follow Jeremiah's achievements and increasing fame. In her daily life, as she walks from exam room to exam room, her heels click purposefully on the old tile floor, and she almost never thinks about her knee, or the time she stubbed her toe or fell from the rings in high school, but she is so terribly lonely.

One question might be, does Jessie even know this much about herself—that she is lonely? Another might be, what does she care?

Then a night comes that she dreams about dropping something fragile that shatters, drawing blood from her legs, and when she wakes up, her one thought is *how could I have been so careless?* That day she starts playing Jeremiah's music in the waiting and exam rooms,

and almost overnight, though the waits are still long, the patients are calm and content even during procedures. Also, they recover in droves, and there are at least a few who experience spontaneous remission from their melanomas just waiting for their appointments.

Meanwhile, Jeremiah, the famous deaf musician known also for his sexual prowess, is losing some of his own focus and drive. Now that he has a whole community of friends and his own personal interpreter, a petite blond in tight, black t-shirts, he has almost forgotten what it was like when he could hear and understand, clear as a bell, only what Jessie was saying to him. It's not that he's forgotten Jessie—indeed, on the wall of his study he has a series of framed white snowflakes they cut out together when they were in grade school. And of course, he will always be grateful for the way she went to bat for him back then, getting him in to the music magnet when his own parents were leaning toward vocational school. But the crystalline feeling of words coming at him in a transcendent arc of sound, each a discrete unit, each linked to those around it, all resonant with meaning and nuance, that feeling, which he'd only ever had with Jessie and her impeccable enunciation, was something he now experienced only as loss. For awhile, this loss leaves him stunned and reeling, and then, like that, it finds its way into his music, the same empty space at the core of his compositions that haunts his own experience of self, and from then to the end of his career there is nothing in the world left to stop him or the soaring career.

Critics remark on the depth of feeling in his music, never before heard from someone so young, especially not his generation. One compares it to an inconstant winter's day, to the feeling of the precise moment when clouds again eclipse the brightness of the sun and all becomes suddenly dark, saturated with the sudden sense of something gone missing, a trenchant, or resonant absence, and the music itself not quite a lamentation, the critic opines, but yet an incomparable expression of something so far beyond the self that it might even be said to contain all the accumulated grief of history, but yet with something otherworldly and redemptive about it.

When Jessie hears this latest work, she collapses in tears on her bed. Maybe, if she'd stayed in the Venice apartment, she thinks, maybe if she'd let him go to Julliard. As for Jeremiah, in the absence of Jessie's clear voice, he sometimes feels as if he is truly going deaf. It's not that sound is not there, just as it's always been, but that his

inability to distinguish phonetic difference had only ever been knowable, even to himself, in the wash of Jessie's phenomenal phonemes. This—the remembered wash of Jessie's phenomenal phonemes—is what Jeremiah has been reaching back to with his music, and Jeremiah has the whole world listening.

But of course, in other respects it turns out that Jessie was right: melanoma is the coming plague. And when Jeremiah succumbs to it, he knows just where to go.

"I'm glad you've come to me," she says in the bright light of the office that shows Jeremiah's tears as luminescent pools, not quite welling over, in his eyes. Jessie knows that he knows that they both know that he isn't crying over his prognosis, which is poor, but over all the years they've lost, and for what? Jessie would be crying too, she thinks a bit wryly, if she hadn't had so much professional practice at not. "Melanoma's bad, but there's still a lot we can do."

Jeremiah starts to sign something, then stops himself, embarrassed, and reaches out for Jessie's hand, humming. Jessie knows just what he means, and it scares her as much as it soothes her. This is not, they both are thinking, what they ever had expected from their lives, but *la, la, la*. And then, in the same moment, both of them are laughing.

From then until the end of their time together on this earth, Jessie and Jeremiah are again inseparable, but it is not going to be easy this time either. Jeremiah still has his lovers and Jessie still has her voice, but what neither of them knows and could never have anticipated is that chemotherapy, while ultimately ineffective against the cancer itself, does something no one would have thought possible, and restores, at the end of his life, Jeremiah's ability to distinguish phonetic difference. It happens all at once, in a flood of savage sound, and when Jeremiah realizes what has happened, he is torn between rage and grief, and his hands become clumsy.

Meaning made everything so unbearably ugly that Jeremiah's last days were filled with anguish, made more exquisite by the fact that, of all the human beings on the earth (Jeremiah's hearing extended now to every language) Jessie was the only one he could not understand. She would come into his hospital room, and her mouth would move, her tongue flap, but try as he might, Jeremiah could not sort

the sounds out, and to hide his despair, he would close his eyes and turn away.

For her part, Jessie would watch him chatting with visitors and nurses, fellow musicians, conductors, ex-lovers, even music critics, equally fluent in multiples languages, but when she tried to speak to him, he turned stone-faced and distant, and every time, her heart would break and her tongue, inside her mouth, would go all numb, and swollen, and knotted.

“Maybe,” she surmised to a colleague, “it’s not the chemotherapy, but the cancer. Maybe it’s got to his brain. I’ve known Jeremiah since he was five years old, but sometimes he doesn’t seem to recognize me.”

And Jessie bent to scratch her knee, fighting back her own, unprofessional tears.

Nor could Jeremiah bear to listen to music, the sounds of which were so painful to him that they only made him want to drift more rapidly toward death. At the end of her medical tricks, Jessie thinks maybe she should take him to the ocean, maybe the sound of the surf would somehow soothe him, but given his condition, it is too dangerous, and the beaches are closed anyway during the day. So in desperation, she goes to his house and finds his original flute, still slightly bent despite all the repairs and useless by now, and on the same trip she finds the framed snowflakes. Between the one and the other, Jessie is not sure how to choose, so she brings them both—snowflakes and flute—to Jeremiah’s room, and though she tells him her knee is itching again, Jeremiah shakes his head and makes, instead, cutting motions with his elegant fingers. And this is how it happens that Jessie finds surgical scissors and they start cutting snowflakes again.

But no, not yet, it doesn’t have to end this way, not with the toxic sun outside, and purple clouds, and Jeremiah dying at the final end of it—the high, sweet, flute-like sound of the breath going out of him finally the saddest sound Jessie has ever heard, and then her knee itching like mad for the rest of her life, without any hope or possibility of a reprieve, not like that. We have a long way to go between now and when the melanoma strikes him down, and, really, anything could happen in that time: we could cure cancer, the

ozone layer could repair itself, Jessie could convince Jeremiah to wear sunscreen.

For now, though we know how it will end, if it gets that far, frankly we hope that it doesn't, because we also know how dearly we are going to need Jeremiah's music, and how no one can do it without him. There's probably a trick here. It may be as simple as listening, with our hearts and very closely, the way Jeremiah did, then waiting things out to see what happens next. Of course Jeremiah's heart was a most remarkable organ, and who can really say?

Perhaps, in the end, it will be said instead that Jeremiah was never properly or fully imagined, that his essential lack had nothing to do with his hearing, which, after all, was just fine. But the truth is that, in the absence of what we have come to know as phonetic difference, nothing at all may remain of the split between being and meaning, and for the longest time, as long as Jeremiah had his Jessie, his one true-hearted friend and devoted companion, he didn't have to choose. But Jessie was a modern girl too, bereft of much hope for the future and fraught with her own neurotic fears—hence, exquisitely cautious, and acutely vulnerable to rejection—and maybe this alone counts as her failure.

On a day such as this, it will have been as if it had been raining.

In the meantime, whenever any child trips and skins her knee, kiss it gently, for this may be the best that we can do.