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Teri Kanefield

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Signs · Teri Kanefield

CURTIS ENTERED THE CLASSROOM, wrote “English” on the board and drew a large X through the word. Then he wrote “Voice,” and drew an X through it, also. He pretended to take both words from the board and throw them out the window. No English and no voice allowed in his classroom.

After drawing a stick-figure girl, he made a sign, touching his thumb lightly to his jaw and stroking downward. His lips formed the word “girl” as he indicated that everyone should imitate him. Awkwardly Natalie stroked her jaw with her thumb and looked around. The other students were doing the same. Curtis next drew a boy and taught them a sign similar to a boy gripping the visor of an imaginary baseball cap. After everyone imitated him, he drew a heart around the boy and girl, crossed his wrists and held them against his chest in a sign that conjured affection. Natalie was amused by the nursery-rhyme progression of the lesson. “Love,” he mouthed as the students imitated the sign.

Curtis grinned a conspirator’s grin as he drew a large diamond ring on the girl’s finger and taught them the sign for marriage, a clasping of both hands into a tight bond. His hands then followed the contours of a swollen belly and he made a sign as if he were cradling a baby in his arms. “Baby,” his lips formed, and everyone in the class imitated him, rocking their imaginary babies. On the chalkboard, Curtis drew a small boy standing with his parents. After another pregnancy and cradling motion, he drew a girl. The signs for brother, sister, mother, father, grandmother, and grandfather followed.

When the chalkboard pictured an extended family of nineteen members, Curtis glanced at his watch and wrote “15 minute break” on the board. Natalie was startled by whispers and scraping chairs. Having become accustomed to a silent classroom, it was strange to be reminded that the world was filled with noise.

After the third class, Natalie, sitting on a bench in the glass-enclosed bus stop studying her sign language book, looked up to see Curtis and another man walking toward her, signing, laughing about something. The moment Curtis saw her watching him, he stood up straighter and stopped smiling.

Flustered, not sure why she had caused this reaction, she looked back into her book. In her peripheral vision, she saw the motion of their hands. Once in a while one of them made a grunting sound.

A bus came and Curtis's friend boarded it, leaving Curtis by himself. When Natalie looked at him, he made the sign for "hello," touching his fingers to his forehead in a sign resembling a salute.

If she was ever going to talk to him, she might as well try now. "How are you?" she signed.

"Fine. Where are you going?" He spoke as he signed, not exactly using his voice, but creating a hoarse, throaty whisper that she could understand.

"Home," she told him as she made the sign. "I live near Cambridge." She spelled out Cambridge using the manual alphabet.

He responded by teaching her the sign for "Cambridge," which was the sign for "city" made with the handshape "C."

She asked where he was going, but her signs came out more like, "Where going you?"

He pointed in the other direction and made a sign by first tapping his temple and then making the sign for "tree."

It took her a moment to understand. "Braintree," a town south of Boston. When she got it, she laughed and repeated the sign for practice.

He moved closer. "I'll show you another one. This one always makes hearing people laugh." He closed his fist into the manual letter "S" and pointed to his ears.

For a moment she didn't understand. Then she laughed. "Sears?"

"Right." The corners of his mouth lifted into a smile, but still nothing like the way he had laughed minutes before with his friend. She remembered how impishly he had smiled when he had taught the class the sign for "love." It occurred to her that spending time with Curtis would be one way to learn sign language in a hurry.

"I need to learn to sign," she said, making the signs she knew as she spoke. "By the end of the summer." Despite his rule against English in his classroom, he was evidently a good lipreader, fortunately for her.

"Why?" he asked.

"That's when my job starts. How much can I learn by then?"

"Basic conversations, stuff like that."

“I’ll need more.” She had lied in the interview and said she already knew how to sign. She had a lot to learn by September. “I saw your card. You give private lessons.”

“I gave lessons last summer,” he said. “One hour for twenty dollars.”

She thought for a moment, and then answered. “Two hours for thirty dollars.”

He smiled. “Okay.”

Her signing improved steadily as they met for tutoring each week in his office, strictly businesslike at all times, except for once when he told her about the twelve years he had spent in a residential school for the deaf. “For twenty hours each week I was drilled in speech like this: To make the ‘F,’ put your lower lip against your upper teeth, this way, and make a sound. Fffff. For ‘V,’ add voice. I still can’t make ‘D’ sound different from ‘T’. Twelve years of drilling, for nothing.”

“Not for nothing. Look how well you speak.”

“I used to think I could speak well. Then after I graduated I went to a Christmas party at my uncle’s house. When I was leaving, I said ‘Merry Christmas,’ and everyone laughed like they’d die. I begged my mother for hours before she’d tell me why they laughed.”

“Why did they?”

“My words came out sounding like, ‘Mary eat me.’”

She wanted to say something sympathetic to reassure him that they shouldn’t have laughed. Then he said, “I guess it’s kind of funny.”

“Not really.” But she imagined him announcing “Mary eat me,” after a Christmas dinner, and for a terrible moment she was afraid she’d laugh. He’d hate her if she laughed.

“It is a bit obscene,” she said.

With that they both giggled, hers silent, muffled by her hands, his louder, like a series of grunts. It was the first time he laughed with her.

“Maybe it’s funny now,” he said, speaking somewhat louder, “but it was humiliating then.”

“I’m sure it was,” she said soberly, and then made the sign for “sorry,” rubbing her fist against her chest in a circular motion.

After her tutoring job started, she stopped thinking about Curtis until he called her on the telephone through the Deaf Relay system. He needed

tutoring in English, he said, because he wanted to try to pass the state architecture exam. Mostly he needed vocabulary work. Would she tutor him in exchange for the same hourly rate she had paid him over the summer? He'd throw in an American Sign Language lesson, too. Wondering if all he wanted was vocabulary work and hoping it wasn't, she agreed.

"What's the opposite of," Natalie signed, and then wrote, "confluence."

Curtis, seated across her kitchen table, leaned forward to study the word. She could see he was getting tired. "Separation," he signed.

"Right."

"But most of these words I couldn't possibly pronounce."

"Neither can I," she signed. "Nobody ever really *says* these words. You just have to know what they mean for silly tests." Her signing had improved so much that he didn't need to use his voice or try to read her lips.

He closed his study guide and gathered his pencils. From where he stood near the door to the hallway, he could see the small bookshelf facing the living room. "Can I look at your books?" he asked.

"Sure."

He sat on the floor in front of the bookshelf. Most of the top row was filled with art books and technique books from her college art classes. He turned and signed, "Do you draw?"

"A little bit."

"May I see?"

"It's not very good, really," she answered, thinking that with an MA in architecture, he was probably really good.

"I want to see," he signed.

Her drawings were stacked under the desk in the corner of the room. Some were charcoal, sprayed with lacquer to set them, but most were in pencil. She handed them to him and watched as he slowly flipped through them. He paused for a long time over one that had been a class assignment her senior year: three eggs on a white china dish with two bright lights casting shadows, a sunlit burst of ovals, in all directions. The only flaw was that one of the eggs stubbornly remained smaller than the others. The next was a study in perspective, the awnings and storefronts of Brattle Street in Cambridge, the kind of thing she did easily, but that bored her. Her impatience showed in the sloppily drawn window signs and fuzzy cobblestones.

Curtis paused over the sketch of indoor plants on the window sill set against the snow-covered quad outside her dormitory window, which she had drawn on one of those magical winter mornings in Massachusetts when the world is covered with ice and the sun makes the branches sparkle.

He looked at her. "These are really good."

"You flatter me."

He leaned back against the bookcases and straightened his legs. She glanced at the distance between their knees: about twelve inches—too far to accidentally brush against him.

He turned and looked at her for a long moment. Then he picked up the sketch pad on the end table. It was a small, three-by-five pad for thumbnail sketches. He flipped through it and saw that it was empty. "Can I?" he asked. She nodded. From his bag he took an ordinary number two pencil. He looked at her steadily, glancing occasionally at the pad as he drew the outline of her face and sketched in her features, the curve of her chin, her pale eyebrows. He exaggerated the size of her glasses so they nearly hid the upper part of her face.

"That's me," she signed.

"Not quite."

When he reached toward her and took off her glasses, she was too startled to react at all. He set her glasses down on the trunk. After turning to a fresh page, he drew her again, this time with her eyes slightly narrowed, the curve of her lip and small pertness of her nose and chin exaggerated, making her face almost pretty. He continued sketching and something emerged in the expression that she didn't recognize as hers: a light mischievousness. A few more strokes near her pupils added a steely determination. With her own drawings, she sketched and fussed, slowly building texture. His drawing was the opposite, light and delicate, just a few pencil strokes hinting at much more. Watching, she felt the way she always did when watching someone truly talented.

Just then the telephone rang, the ringing a physical shock after sitting all evening in absolute silence. She gave such a start that her foot hit the trunk. He stared at her. The phone rang a second time.

"The telephone," she signed. When the phone rang a third time, she jumped up and went into the kitchen to answer it. "Hello?" she listened to the voice for several seconds before she realized it was a recorded sales announcement.

When she went back into the living room, he was no longer leaning back comfortably. Instead, he hunched forward, his elbows resting on his knees, one fist cupped inside the other palm. It was too awkward for her to sit where she was before, within inches of him, so she sat on the rug facing him.

“I guess I’d better go now,” he signed.

She walked with him to the door. For a long time after their awkward goodbye, she sat on the couch staring at the drawings of her face, at the expression which didn’t seem like hers.

He called the next night through the Deaf Relay system and apologized for leaving in such a hurry. He asked if they could get together for another lesson the following week. She agreed, thinking that the next time he was in her apartment she would unplug the phone.

“Just recently—” she signed, but he shook his head. They were sitting on her couch after the next lesson. The way he looked at her made her stop, forgetting what she was about to sign. She still wasn’t used to the steady, unwavering way he stared at her, a look which took in everything.

“Like this.” He made the sign for “recently,” placing his right index finger curved against his cheek.

When she imitated him, he shook his head again. Taking her hand, he corrected her sign by curving her fingers inward with the fingers facing back. His hand felt warm on hers. She held very still, letting him shape her hand, not drawing back even when she should have.

He turned her palm upward. With his index finger, he drew a horizontal line across her palm, making the sign for “What?” in her hand.

She couldn’t answer without pulling her hands back. Instead she turned his hand up, and asked, “What, what?” in his palm. He smiled, looking directly at her. With great difficulty, she managed not to look away. She had thought his eyes were hazel, but now she saw that they were a pure, watery green without a touch of hazel.

He looked away first, glancing at her hand resting in his, then at her knees. When he looked back up, she was still watching him. She knew he would kiss her, but the moment of waiting went on until it became absurd that they were simply looking at each other.

Abruptly she pulled her hand back and made the sign for “Well?” Then she asked, “Are you going to kiss me, or do I have to kiss you?”

The surprise on his face made her able to lean forward and give him a quick kiss on the lips. That was all the encouragement he needed. He pulled her close to him and covered her mouth with his.

At first when he signed, “The busses have stopped running,” she had no idea what he was talking about.

“It’s too late for me to go home,” he signed.

“Do you want to sleep on the couch?”

He looked at the couch, which was more like an old-fashioned love seat with a stiff back and winged arms. “No,” he signed.

When they moved into her bedroom, she started to turn off the light, but stopped. With the light off, they couldn’t talk.

He was watching her to see what she’d do. “Leave it on,” he said, “for a little while.”

Hours later, when they fell asleep, the light was still burning.

The next morning, after Natalie asked enough questions, he told her about an Art Sign performance which would be held at the Deaf Association.

“What’s Art Sign?” she asked.

“Sign Language poetry. I’ll bet you didn’t know we have our own poetry.”

“No I didn’t,” she said, not liking how she felt when he made the sign for “we.” The sign itself, first touching one shoulder and then swinging the hand around to touch the other, seemed to form a circle shutting her out.

After she gave a few hints, he invited her to the performance. But that evening, as she entered the Deaf Association, she wondered if she had made a mistake. Curtis stood near the stage with a group of people who were signing too rapidly for Natalie to guess what they were talking about. She recognized an occasional sign, but that was all. When Curtis saw her, he waved, but a moment later someone tapped his shoulder and absorbed him in a sign conversation.

Two young men, about twenty years old, leaned against the reception desk. As she approached, one made the salute for “Hi,” and then began signing rapidly.

“Please—slow,” she signed, using the ASL idiom. Then “My ASL is rusty.”

“Are you hearing?” the other one asked. Her signing must be an obvious give-away. She still wasn’t comfortable with all the ASL facial expressions.

“What’s your name?” one of them asked her.

After she finger-spelled her name, he spelled his own name, Ray, and then turned to a woman who had just joined them and signed, “This is Natalie. She’s hearing.”

The woman turned to look at Natalie. Her expression, polite and distant, made Natalie wish that she hadn’t come. “How do you know sign?” the woman asked.

“I tutor a deaf boy in a public high school.”

She nodded, making the sign for “interesting,” snapping her thumb and middle finger out from her chest.

“Where are you from?” Ray asked Natalie.

Surprised by the question, she said, “California.”

“My brother lives in California,” he said. Both Ray and the woman signed slowly and deliberately for her, as one would speak to a foreigner.

“Where in California?” Natalie asked.

When he made a sign which she didn’t recognize, she nodded as if she understood. It was exactly what she told her student Alex never to do. He was forever pretending he knew what people were saying when he didn’t.

“Who do you know here?” the woman asked Natalie.

She spelled out Curtis’s name.

The woman stared for a moment, genuinely surprised. “How do you know Curtis?”

Thoroughly uncomfortable, Natalie signed, “I was in his sign language class this summer.” Well, she had walked into their club. She supposed it was this woman’s right to cross-examine her.

Natalie hoped Curtis would rescue her, but he was signing with some friends, acting as if she weren’t there. A hundred emotions flitted one after another across his face. He never seemed so animated when talking to her.

Another group of people entered and soon Natalie was surrounded by so much signing that she couldn’t follow any of it. Another man standing to her right introduced himself. He, too, asked where she was from. When she said California, he said he didn’t know anyone in California. She thought it a strange introductory ritual. Then he started signing about the performance. She nodded, occasionally making the sign for “really,” or “interesting.”

Then he asked, “What’s the greatest problem facing deaf people today?”

Natalie supposed that by some miracle he hadn't guessed that she was hearing. Probably because she had kept her own signing to a minimum.

"I don't know." She imitated the way Curtis formed the signs, hoping that she appeared deaf.

"It's a joke," he told her.

"I still don't know."

"The greatest problem facing deaf people today," he said, grinning, "is hearing people."

She tried to match his smile even though she didn't find it at all funny. Then everyone was taking off their coats and hanging them on racks that had been set up by the door. Natalie did the same, looking around for Curtis. She didn't see him anywhere. When everyone drifted toward the chairs, Natalie followed along.

From nowhere, Curtis appeared and sat next to her. Anyone watching would have thought it was coincidental. She looked at him and then looked away, facing forward. In her peripheral vision, she saw him ask her, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I shouldn't be here."

She waited for him to ask why, but he just sat with his hands resting on his knees, looking at her. He knew very well why. Then he signed, "I invited you."

"No, you didn't. I bulldozed you into it."

He hesitated a moment too long. "That's not true."

"Say you're glad I'm here. Say you're not ashamed to be seen with a hearing person."

"I'm not ashamed."

She stared at him in the unwavering manner of the deaf, understanding now why they did it. After a few moments he fidgeted, betraying himself. A person could reveal so much under the intensity of a quiet stare.

"I'm just not used to it," he signed.

When she noticed the people around watching them, she felt too self-conscious to answer. A few people in the row ahead and to the left kept looking back at them. She imagined that Curtis noticed them too.

A man wearing a plaid sports jacket and wide red tie chose that moment to walk onto the stage. Although Natalie couldn't follow his signing, she guessed that he was introducing the performer, Annette Carmichael. Then a woman of about thirty walked out on the stage, dressed in a flowing black

skirt of transparent crepe and black leggings. She stood for a moment looking at the audience, then, as if completely absorbed in her own thoughts, she looked up at the ceiling.

She began a kind of dance with her upper body, her hands flowing, her arms circling forward and then forming an arc over her head. Natalie caught a few signs, “a long time ago,” and then “a young girl,” enough to guess that she was telling a story. With each sign Annette Carmichael formed, a different emotion passed across her features. Now she was frightened, biting her lip, staring into space. Then she was dazed. Watching, Natalie understood exactly why the ringing of the telephone had reminded Curtis that they lived in separate worlds.

Then Annette Carmichael signed, “I know silence.” The sign for silence was usually made by moving both hands down and to the side, but Annette Carmichael spread her hands to include the entire space around her. “I know sound,” she signed, but she didn’t form the sign in the usual way, originating from the ears. Instead she made a gesture as if sounds were all around her.

Natalie mentally translated: “Silence is the moment nothing moves, a moment caught in a photograph. I know a whisper. A whisper is the leaves moving. I know laughter—” As her tempo increased, Natalie lost her meaning. She thought that her student Alex should see this. If he knew how beautiful signing could be, maybe he’d stop mumbling his signs, embarrassed for the hearing kids to see.

After the performance there was a light murmur and the moving of chairs as people stood up and went to the reception area where a table covered with a white cloth and silver warming trays had been set up in the back. She and Curtis stood awkwardly together.

When a man Natalie didn’t recognize tapped Curtis on the shoulder and he turned aside to answer, Jake, the hearing man who usually sat at the reception desk, approached Natalie and, evidently remembering her from the summer course, said, “Hi, what are you doing here?” He signed as he spoke.

“I came—” She looked at Curtis.

“That’s what I thought,” he said aloud, his hands still moving.

“Are we the only hearing people here?” she asked, not signing as she spoke, even though she knew that by not doing so she was breaking an important rule of etiquette.

“No, Barbara’s husband’s hearing.”

“Who’s Barbara?” Rebellious, Natalie kept her arms at her side. Curtis turned to approach them, but when he saw her speaking, her arms motionless, he stopped. She looked away from him.

Jake pointed to Barbara and her husband. Barbara’s husband’s hands were moving rapidly.

“People are looking at me like my face is green. Why don’t they look at you like that? Or Barbara’s husband?”

“We’re not here with Curtis. You are. No one ever imagined Curtis showing up with a hearing woman.”

Curtis hardly showed up with me, Natalie wanted to say.

When someone tapped Jake on the arm and began signing to him, she drifted toward Barbara and her husband, watching their conversation but unable to figure out what they were talking about. They kept repeating one sign which she had never seen before and which she guessed was idiomatic ASL, the sign for “think,” the index finger pointing to the temple, followed immediately by the sign for “hearing,” the index finger rolling in a horizontal motion in front of the mouth in imitation of words spilling out. The snapping of the hand between “think” and “hearing” made the sign bitter and angry.

“Think-hearing,” Natalie translated. At that moment, she only wanted to leave.

She was out the door, buttoning her coat, walking toward the street when she heard the door open behind her. She looked back and saw Curtis hurrying to catch up with her. She didn’t slow down.

“I’ll walk you to the bus stop,” he signed, matching her stride.

She nodded but refused to look at him, listening to the angry clicking of her heels and the lighter tapping of his rubber-soled shoes on the sidewalk. After they were sitting in the light of the bus stop, he signed, “I didn’t think the evening would go this way. I thought it would be interesting, that you’d learn a lot.”

“I did. What’s ‘think-hearing?’”

He drew himself up straighter. “A deaf person who tries to be like a hearing person.”

“Like Alex?” Alex, who was being mainstreamed in a public high school. Alex, who desperately wanted to fit in with the hearing kids.

A beat of time passed. Then another. “Exactly like Alex.”

“Barbara’s husband is hearing.”

“He’s hearing,” Curtis signed slowly, “but he’s really deaf.”

“What are you talking about?”

“His parents are deaf. His brother is deaf. He understands deafness.” Curtis signed in the ASL manner which, to Natalie, looked like: “His parents deaf, his brother deaf, he understand deaf.”

For the first time all evening, Natalie smiled. “He’s think-deaf.”

Curtis smiled too. They both looked up as the bus wheezed to a stop in front of them.

“I’m sorry, Natalie, really.”

“Are you sorry you ran out of my apartment when the phone rang?”

“Yes,” he formed the sign with confidence, his fist nodding up and down.

“Why do you even want to bother with me. I can hear, after all.”

“I like the way you take care of Alex. I like the way you draw.”

The driver honked to hurry her. She boarded and sat near the window, her cheek pressed against the cold glass.

“I’ll call you,” he signed.

The glass fogged under her breath. She wiped the window and signed, “Okay.” When he grinned, she remembered he once had told her that what he liked best about sign language was signing between cars on the highway and through closed windows.

Natalie dreamt that she was in a dimly lit room surrounded by dozens of people who wouldn’t talk. They weren’t deaf—they heard her perfectly, but they chose not to answer. Their hands made swift motions, and when she didn’t understand them, they laughed at her. Her first hazy sensation was that she was back at the Art Sign performance. As she came fully awake, she imagined people asking if she was hearing, and probably also: “What’s *she* doing here?”

The next time she saw Curtis, she was tempted to tell him about her dream. She was setting the table and he stood before the stove in her kitchen, stirring the chili she had made earlier. Then the lights went out.

“What happened?” She spoke into the darkness before remembering that speaking aloud would do no good.

Curtis bumped against her and then took her hands. Bending her forefingers, he tapped her knuckles together making the sign for “electric-

ity.” Then he swept her hands outward, making the sign for “finished.” The electricity was out.

She had candles someplace, but she didn’t know where. In the top kitchen drawer were matches, but without candles they were of no use.

When she made the signs for, “What now?” he followed her motion with his hands.

He touched her chin and kissed her, and then took her hands and formed the words, “What else?”

He led her to the next room and drew her down to the rug, his body covering hers. He undressed her and turned her over, bending her into positions she had never imagined and would have been too embarrassed to allow with the lights on. As he made love to her there, on the rug, the feel of his hands made her forget—just for a moment—that any time the lights could come on. She thought she heard a bird whistling outside, and as she wondered what kind of bird would sing at night, Curtis took her hands and crossed her arms over her chest, forming the sign for “love.”