(1) Critical Essay: Hearsay: how stories of deafness and deaf people are told
(2) Creative work: The Art of Being Deaf

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at
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School of English, Media Studies and Art History
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This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

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Statement of Contributions to Jointly Authored Works Contained in the Thesis

McDonald, Donna and Elizabeth Ferrier, eds. M/C Journal-deaf 13.3 (June 2010). http://journal.media-culture.org.au/ I prepared the Call for Papers, commissioned 70% of the contributions, arranged for 50% of the referee reports and edited 60% of the articles. Dr Ferrier arranged for the balance of the referee reports and edited the remaining articles. I conceptualised and wrote most of the lead editorial article and Dr Ferrier contributed by providing additional literary studies context and conceptualisation for some of the articles. Dr Ferrier uploaded the entire text to the M/C website with the assistance of Dr Axel Bruns.

Statement of Contributions by Others to the Thesis as a Whole

Dr Stuart Glover (The University of Queensland) and Dr Merv Hyde (Griffith University) were my Advisors throughout the entire project. Dr Gillian Whitlock (The University of Queensland) provided an advisory role in the latter part of the project.

Statement of Parts of the Thesis Submitted to Qualify for the Award of Another Degree

None.


**Published Works by the Author Incorporated into the Thesis**


**Additional Published Works by the Author Relevant to the Thesis but not Forming Part of it**

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Abstract for *The Art of Being Deaf* and *Hearsay: how stories of deafness and deaf people are told.*

This doctoral project in creative writing investigates deaf identity. In *The Art of Being Deaf*, the author explores her deaf identity through memoir. In the accompanying critical essay, *Hearsay*, she examines how other people tell stories of deafness and deaf people’s lives. The memoir and critical essay draw on disability studies, deaf studies, sociology, literature, literary studies and auto/biographies, combined with the author’s personal experiences of, and insights into, deafness and ‘being deaf.’

In *Hearsay*, the author examines representations of deafness in fiction and life writing by both deaf and hearing writers. She argues that literature is both a rich resource and a blunt instrument in conveying the complexities of identity, in particular, the elusive deaf identity. Despite the diversity of deaf characters in fiction, and memoirs of and by deaf people, most historic and contemporary stories of deafness appear to be burdened with grief. Their underlying premise is usually that deafness is something to be overcome, lest you be defeated by it. The exceptions prove the rule. However, a close reading of some of the diverse, competing representations of deafness and deaf people’s lives allows the reader to variously witness, immerse themselves in, and navigate their way through those experiences of deafness. The author concludes that she herself is as much a product of a particular time—the second half of the twentieth century and the first quarter of the twenty-first century, with all their upheavals and advances in technology and global politics—as she is of her parents’ hopes and her own individual efforts as a deaf woman.

In *The Art of Being Deaf*, the author explores the impact of her deafness on her life; and seeks to better understand her deaf self in relation to her family, friendships, education, work, and love. She resists the memoir trends of triumphalism, conversion, and trauma because she considers that these trends offer only a limited understanding of the complexity of people’s lives. She views these trends with suspicion because of their undertows of pity, ‘freak’ voyeurism, and ‘There but for the grace of God go I’. Using memory work and mindful about the multiple ‘identity’ perspectives that emerge in memoir, the author unfolds her personal story as narrator and subject, child and adult. She shows the layered complexities of her life, and illustrates that other things arrest her attention more vigorously than her deafness. It is not just a ‘deaf life,’ it is a busy life with the same concerns as any other person. In this way, the author frames her own memoir of deafness away from the conventional trope of the triumph of individual effort towards a notional understanding that several complex, and sometimes competing, influences shape deaf lives.
Keywords

deaf, deaf memoir, deafness in fiction, deaf identity, hearing loss

Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classifications (ANZSRC)
200508 Other literatures in English 80%, 130312 Special Education and Disability 10%, 111703 Public Health and Health Services Care for Disabled 10%
HEARSAY:

How Stories About Deafness and Deaf People Are Told

Critical essay submitted with creative work, *The Art of Being Deaf*, for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing, The University of Queensland

Donna M McDonald BA BSW MA
The sense of our own identity is fluid and tolerant, whereas our sense of the identity of others is always more fixed and quite often edges towards caricature. We know within ourselves that we can be twenty different persons in a single day and that the attempt to explain our personality is doomed to become a falsehood after only a few words . . . And yet . . . works of literature, novels and biographies depend for their aesthetic success precisely on this insensitive ability to simplify, to describe, to draw lines around another person and say, ‘This is she’ or ‘This is he.’

A.N. Wilson, *Incline Our Hearts*

Until recently, most testimony of deaf lives has been ‘hearsay’ in more senses than one . . .

G. Thomas Couser, *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability and Life Writing*

. . . the hearing line, that invisible boundary separating deaf and hearing people.

Christopher Krentz, *Writing Deafness: The Hearing Line in Nineteenth-century American Literature*
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Chapter 1
Masks: Unveiling My Story

In my memoir, *The Art of Being Deaf*, I explore my experiences as a deaf child and deaf adult. My recounting of my experiences and sifting through my memories yield to my improved understanding of my ‘deaf self.’ This new self-knowledge is partly an inevitable result of the reflective tasks involved in writing a memoir, but it is also partly the result of my research into other people’s stories of deafness, in fiction and memoir.

I had already reflected that literature had the capacity to influence the reader’s world view; otherwise why read at all? Or for that matter, write? I agreed with Ato Quayson (14) that ‘Literature does not merely reflect any already socially interpreted reality, but adds another tier of interpretation’ contingent upon both the historical and cultural contexts of the narrative as well as the reader’s own history and culture. While Quayson is interested in the aesthetics and the ethics of disability representations in literature, I am interested in understanding how literature allows or disallows the complexities of individual lives to rise up and over their declared disability. I had observed that the lives of people who have a disability tend to be portrayed as if that disability is their one and only defining motivator. Because I was intent on portraying my own life not just as a ‘deaf life,’ but as a busy life filled with the same concerns about family, education, work, friendships and love as any other person, my question was, ‘How are the lives of other deaf people, fictional and real, portrayed?’ I thought that the answer to this question would help me to better understand my task as a memoirist. This is the quest that launched my foray into *Hearsay: How Stories About Deafness and Deaf People Are Told*. But first, I will provide some context to my quest.

Most deaf children are born into hearing families and have little contact with deaf adults. This has implications for how they regard themselves. Their hearing parents want them to be *normal*, to fit in. The parents’ fear of deafness for their child can be overwhelming. A battle of wills ensues between the hearing family and the deaf child. Issues of identity are at stake. How, then, do little deaf children grow up into healthy adults? Comfortable in their deaf selves and competent in the hearing world?

I once asked a group of twenty parents—hearing mothers and hearing fathers—about their experiences of deafness prior to discovering their children were deaf. Three mothers spoke up; the rest of the audience looked quizzical as if they were still lost in the point of the question. One mother recalled seeing a movie with a deaf boy in it but she could not remember what the movie...
deaf; no-one in the group had seen *Children of a Lesser God*, the 1986 film based on Mark Medoff’s play and starring Marlee Matlin, the deaf actor of television’s *West Wing* fame. Another mother said that she had worked in an office with a deaf colleague and a third mother said that she had had an unrequited teenage crush on a deaf boy at her school. No-one could recall reading any books which told positive stories of deafness. All the parents in this group agreed that their experiences of deaf people had been slight and, in fact, they continued to be exceptional rather than regular. In nodding their assent, they seemed to consider that this near-absence, almost-invisibility, of deaf people in their world was a significant reason for their lack of knowledge of deafness and deaf people’s lives.

Despite their own children being deaf, they did not routinely witness the lives of other deaf people, and nor did they seek out, either for themselves or for their children, documented stories, fiction or biographical, of deaf people’s lives. They continued to rely on the accidental (and rare) brush with a deaf adult, their children’s school environment, and conversations with other parents as their main sources of guidance, knowledge, and hopes about their deaf child’s prospects. They were startled when I said, ‘I don’t routinely encounter deaf people either. I don’t know much about deafness.’ Just because I was born deaf and was immersed as a little girl in five years of oral-deaf education, this did not give me a passport into understanding deafness in general or my deaf-self in particular. On being transplanted from the deaf school to a regular school as an eight-year old girl in grade three, I was not thereafter exposed to the intimacies of deaf culture or the lessons of deaf history. I came late to the task of exploring the implications of this severance from other deaf people in my life.

I was the sole deaf child in a family of five muddling along in a weatherboard war commission house in Brisbane, Australia, during the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties. My father had been in the army during World War Two, was an official for the boxing events at the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games, and worked as a bookie. He had a gift for telling stories. My mother had spent her childhood on a cherry orchard in Young, worked as a nurse in war-time Sydney, and married my father in Townsville after a whirlwind romance on Magnetic Island before setting up home in Brisbane. I had an older sister and an older brother; both could hear. My parents—who also could hear—did not know of any deaf relatives in their families, and my sister and brother did not have any friends with deaf siblings. There was just me, the little deaf girl.

I was a pupil in an oral-deaf education program for five years until the end of 1962, when my parents took me out of the Gladstone Road School for the Deaf in Dutton Park at the age of eight and sent me to All Hallows, an inner-city girls’ school, for the start of Grade Three. I was not
to begin a new life immersed in the hearing world. I had no way of understanding that this act of transferring me from one school to another was a profound statement of my parents’ hopes for me. They wanted me to have a life in which I would enjoy all the advantages and opportunities routinely available to hearing people. Like so many parents before them, ‘They had to find answers that might not, for all they knew, exist . . . How far would I be able to lead a ‘normal’ life? . . . How would I earn a living? You can imagine what forebodings weighed on them. They could not know that things might work out better than they feared’ (Wright 22).

Shortly before my fiftieth birthday, I found myself reflecting on the impact of that long-ago decision made on my behalf by my parents. They made the right decision for me. The quality of my life reflects the rightness of their decision. I enjoyed a satisfying career in social work and public policy, embedded in a life of love and friendships. This did not mean that I believed that my parents’ decision to remove me from one world to another would necessarily be the right decision for another deaf child. I was not a zealot for the cause of oralism despite its benefits. I was, however, stirred by the Gemini-like duality within me—the deaf girl who is twin to the hearing persona I show to the world—to tell my story of deafness as precisely as I could. Before I could do this, I had to find that story because it was not as apparent to me as might be expected.

In an early published memoir-essay about my deaf girlhood, ‘I Hear With My Eyes’ which was prompted by a psychologist asking me whether my deafness had had a big impact on my life, I wrote about my mother’s persistence in making sure that I learnt to communicate by speaking rather than signing, the assumed communication strategy for most deaf people back in the 1950s. I crafted a selection of anecdotes, ranging in tone, I hoped, from sad to tender to laugh-out-loud funny. I speculated on the meaning of certain incidents in defining who I am and the successes I have enjoyed as a deaf woman in a hearing world. When I wrote ‘I Hear With My Eyes,’ I searched for what I wanted to say. I thought, by the end of it, that I was done with it. I was ready to move on, to write about other things. However, I was delayed by readers’ responses to that essay and by my subsequent public speaking engagements.

Some people who read my essay told me that they liked my candour. Others said that they were moved by it. Friends were curious and fascinated to get the inside story of my life as a deaf person as it has not been a topic of conversation or inquiry among us. They felt that they had learnt something about what it means to be deaf. Many responses to my essay and public presentations had relief and surprise as their emotional core. Parents cried on hearing me talk about the fullness of my life and seemed to regard me as having given them permission to hope for their own deaf children. Educators invited me to speak at parent education evenings because: ‘To have an adult who has a hearing impairment and who has developed great spoken language and is able to
communicate in the community at large—that would be a great encouragement and inspiration for our families’ (Brown).

I was uncomfortable with these responses because I was not sure that I had been as honest or direct as I could have been. What lessons on being deaf had people absorbed by reading my essay and listening to my presentations? I did not set out to be duplicitous, but I may have embraced the writer’s aim for the neatly curved narrative arc at the cost of the flinty self-regarding eye and the uncertain conclusion.

Let me start again. I was born deaf at a time, in the mid 1950s, when people still spoke of the ‘deaf-mute’ or the ‘deaf and dumb.’ I belonged to a category of children who attracted the gaze of the curious, the kind, and the cruel with mixed results. We were bombarded with questions we could either not hear and so could not answer, or that made us feel we were objects for exploration. We were the patronised beneficiaries of charitable picnics organised for ‘the disadvantaged and the handicapped.’ Occasionally, we were the subject of taunts, with words such as ‘spastic’ being speared towards us as if to be called such a name was a bad thing. I glossed over this muddled social response to deafness in my published essay. I cannot claim innocence as my defence. I knew I was glossing over it but I thought this was right and proper: after all, why stir up jagged memories? Aren’t some things better left unexpressed? Besides, keep the conversation nice, I thought.

The nature of readers’ responses to my essay provoked me into a deeper exploration of deafness. I was shocked by the intensity of so many parents’ grief and anxiety about their children’s deafness, and frustrated by the notion that I am an inspiration because I am deaf but oral. I wondered what this implied about my childhood deaf friends who may not speak orally as well as I do, but who nevertheless enjoy fulfilling lives. I was stunned by the admission of a mother of a five year old deaf son who, despite not being able to speak, had not been taught how to Sign. She said, ‘Now that I’ve met you, I’m not so frightened of deaf people anymore.’ I was unnerved that so many parents of children newly diagnosed with deafness were grasping my words with the relief of people who have long ago lost hope in the possibilities for their deaf sons and daughters.

My shock was not directed at these parents but at some unnameable ‘thing out there,’ but I could not understand why—some five decades after my mother experienced her own grief, bewilderment, anxiety and quest to forge a good life for her little deaf daughter—contemporary parents are still experiencing those very same fears and asking the same questions. Nor could I understand why parents still receive the news of their child’s deafness as a death sentence of sorts, the death of hope and prospects for their child, when the facts show—based on my own life
sentence, the diagnosis of deafness simply propels a child into a different life, not a lesser life. Evidently, a different sort of silence has been created over the years; not the silence of hearing loss but the silence of lost stories, invisible stories, unspoken stories.

I contributed to that silence. More than that, I *authored* it. For as long as I could remember, and certainly for all of my adult life, I had been deliberate in avoiding being tagged as ‘a deaf person.’ My very silence about my deafness *was* my ‘story.’ Some of my silence about deaf identity politics was consistent with my desire not to shine the torch on myself in this way. I did not want to draw attention to myself by what I did not have, that is, less hearing than other people. I thought that if I lived my life as fully as possible in the world that includes both hearing and deaf people, and with as little fuss as possible, then my success in blending in would be eloquence enough. If I was going to attract attention, I wanted it to be on the basis of merit, on what I achieved. Others would draw the conclusions that needed to be drawn, that is, that deaf people can take their place fully in the hearing world. My silence became a habit, and like so many enduring habits, it did not always sit comfortably with me; I felt that I was compromising myself in a way that I could not quite grasp.

I also understood that if I was to be fully ‘successful’ in the hearing world, then I ought to isolate myself from my deaf friends and from the deaf culture. I continued to miss them, particularly one childhood friend, but I was resolute. I never seriously explored the possibility of straddling both worlds, despite the occasional invitation to do so. Instead, I let myself be content to hear news of my childhood deaf friends through the grape-vine. This was, inevitably, a patchy process that lent itself to caricature. Single snippets of information about this person or that person ballooned into portrait-size depictions of their lives as I sketched the remaining blanks of their history with my imagination as my only tool. My capacity to be content with my imagination faltered.

Despite the construction of public images of deafness around the highly visible performance of hand-signed communication, the ‘how-small-can-we-go?’ advertorials of hearing aids and the cochlear implant with its head-worn speech processor, deafness is often described as ‘the invisible disability.’ My own experience bore this out. I became increasingly self-conscious about the singularity of my particular success, moderate in the big scheme of things though that may be. I looked around me and wondered, ‘Why don’t I bump into more deaf people during the course of my daily life?’ After all, I am not a recluse. I have broad interests. I have travelled a lot, and have enjoyed a policy career for some thirty years, spanning the three tiers of government and scaling the competitive ladder with a reasonable degree of nimbleness. Such a career has got me out and about quite a lot: up and down the Queensland coast and out west, down to Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Adelaide and Hobart, and to the United Kingdom. And yet, not once in those thirty years did I get to
took place in London when I attended a local government conference in which the keynote speaker was the-then Chairman of the Audit Commission in the United Kingdom, James Strachan, a man whose charisma outshines his profound deafness.

After my return to Australia from England, a newspaper article about an education centre for deaf children in a leafy suburb of Brisbane, prompted me into action. I decided to investigate what was going on in the world of education for deaf children; and so, one warm morning in 2006, I was ushered into a sunny room crowded with little boys and girls who either wore hearing aids tucked in behind their ears or cochlear implants with the processors latched onto the side of their heads. Some young mothers and fathers, their faces stretched with tension, stood or sat around the room’s perimeter watching their children. They smiled at me in a friendly but uncertain way. I smiled back, wondering what to say. I stayed to listen and watch. A couple of the mothers volunteered information about their children and I nodded in a bond of shared pleasure in their son or daughter.

As I watched the children at the education centre that summer morning, I saw that my silence had acted as a brake of sorts. I had, for too long, buried the chance to understand better the complex lives of deaf people as we negotiate the claims and demands of the hearing world. While it is true that actions speak louder than words, the occasional spoken and written word must surely help things along a little. I also reflected on the apparent absence of the inter-generational transfer of wisdom and insights born of experience rather than academic studies. It seems that each new generation of parents approaches the diagnosis of their newborn child’s disability or deafness with fear, helplessness and dread for their child’s fate. I am not querying the inevitability of parents experiencing disappointment and shock at receiving unexpected news. Of course not; it is natural to expect and want your newborn baby to conform to notions of ideal health and perfect abilities. I accept that to be born deaf means to be born with less than ideal hearing. All the same, it ought not to be inevitable that parents endure sustained grief about their child’s prospects. They ought to be illuminated as quickly as possible about all that is possible for their child. In particular, they ought to be encouraged to enjoy great hopes for their child.

I mused about the power of story-telling to influence attitudes. In his essay, ‘Signs of Life: Deafness and Personal Narrative,’ G.Thomas Couser claims that ‘Life writing can play a significant role in changing public attitudes about deafness’ (221) but then casts doubt on his own assertion by asking, ‘To what degree and how do the extant narratives of deafness rewrite the discourse of disability? Indeed, to what degree and how do they manage to represent the experience of deafness at all?’ (225) Georgina Kleege raises a further issue in one of her university course outlines. She begins by acknowledging that ‘Autobiographies written by people with disabilities offer readers a glimpse into lives at the margins of mainstream culture, and thus can make disability seem less
another form of freak show?' Such uncertainty is indicative of the mismatch between the rise of the disability memoir with its concomitant analysis of its role in shaping public attitudes and identity politics on the one hand, and the specific study of representations of deafness and deaf people in either fiction or memoir. The latter remains relatively unexplored in the field of literary disability.

Stories from the Deaf community did not speak for me as my life has not been shaped by the framing of deafness as a separate linguistic and cultural entity. Nor was I drawn to the militancy of identity politics that uses terms such as ‘oppression’ and ‘oppressors’ to deride the efforts of parents and educators to teach deaf children to speak (Lane, Padden and Humphries). This seemed hostile and did not sit comfortably with me, especially given that I had benefitted so much from integrating into the world of the maligned ‘oppressors.’ (During the course of this research-writing project, however, my views mellowed. I became more flexible about, and responsive to, the varied experiences of deaf people). As I cast around for stories of deafness and deaf people with which I could relate, I reflected on how infrequently I encountered deaf characters in literature despite being an avid life-long reader, and the relative paucity of autobiographies by deaf writers or biographies of deaf people by either deaf or hearing people.

I wondered whether written stories of deafness, memoirs and fiction, shape public perceptions or whether they simply respond to existing public perceptions of deafness. For example, during a visit to the office of a national organisation which works on behalf of deaf children and their families, I met with the public relations manager who showed me her office with missionary pride. The walls were papered with newspaper from ceiling to desk-top. Three walls of tiny black newsprint relieved only by the glare of a window pressed in on me. I leant across one of the desks to peer at the newsprint and saw that they were newspaper and magazine articles, many of which were illustrated with photographs of smiling children with hearing aids or cochlear implants. They told stories of how whole these young children were despite their deafness. They quoted children saying, ‘I can do anything even though I’m deaf’ and ‘Just because I’m deaf, that doesn’t mean I can’t [insert activity].’ It felt creepy. It was like a scene from an AusAid advertisement with those black children with swollen bellies, or a Lenten appeal campaign from the nineteen-fifties rousing Catholics to make donations to ‘save the pagan children.’ I would not have been surprised to hear music piped into the office, perhaps Handel’s Messiah. I realise that my discomfort about this evangelicalism, which is enthusiasm gone mad, is at odds with my awareness that deafness and hearing loss do shape lives in particular ways, and that public awareness campaigns about services for deaf people along with stories of hope and optimism are important. All the same, my discomfort persists. As Susan de Gaia, a deaf academic at California State University wrote in a personal email to me, ‘Analysing the way stories are told can show us a lot about who is most powerful, most
heard, whose perspective matters most to society. I think if we polled deaf people, we would find many things missing from the stories that are told about them.’

Fighting my reluctance in staking out my persona as a deaf woman and mustering the ‘Conviction as to the importance of what [I have] to say, [my] right to say it’ (Olsen 27), I decided to write The Art of Being Deaf, an extended personal-memoir style essay reflecting on my own life experiences and supported by additional research. This presented me with a narrative dilemma because my deafness is just one of several life-events by which I understand myself. I wanted to find fresh ways of telling stories of deaf experiences while fashioning my memoir to show the texture of my life in all its variousness. A.N.Wilson’s observation about the precarious insensitivity of biographical writing was my guiding pole-star:

The sense of our own identity is fluid and tolerant, whereas our sense of the identity of others is always more fixed and quite often edges towards caricature. We know within ourselves that we can be twenty different persons in a single day and that the attempt to explain our personality is doomed to become a falsehood after only a few words . . . And yet . . . works of literature, novels and biographies depend for their aesthetic success precisely on this insensitive ability to simplify, to describe, to draw lines around another person and say, ‘This is she’ or ‘This is he’ (175).

While writing The Art of Being Deaf, I read other people’s stories of deafness. My first search of the literature using the keywords ‘deaf autobiographies,’ ‘deaf biographies,’ ‘deaf people’ and ‘deaf characters’ yielded surprisingly few journal articles or books. (I found more over time but it took a lot of searching: even the most detailed literary research guides do not have categories such as ‘disability literature’ or ‘deaf studies,’ although they have categories such as ‘women’s studies,’ ‘gay/lesbian literature’ and ‘African American literature’). A quick scan of the publishers’ blurbs and abstracts revealed a tendency by most writers and memoirists to portray deafness as a melancholy condition, or as a subject of caricature, or as a problem to be understood, overcome or resolved. I thought that if this was the only literature that parents of deaf children had access to, then it was not much wonder that they were so anxious and afraid for their deaf children’s future. The language used in the titles of books, essays, videos and other documents on deafness emphasises an ‘otherness’ experienced by deaf people that is apparently bleak, hopeless, and lonely. Certain words and phrases are used with oppressive repetition: deaf as a post; from silence to speech; they grow in silence; broken silence; fitting into a silent world; her soundless world. They conjure up images of isolation, alienation, muteness, and a world of separateness ‘endured’ by people with hearing loss. Medical and educational writing have a particularly apocalyptic tone about the consequences of deafness and the failure to deal with them. Go down this surgical
pathway or use that technological intervention; put your child in a specialist or mainstreaming or inclusive classroom setting; tick the correct box or all will be lost.

(Similarly, when Australian academic, Des Power, entered the term ‘deaf’ into the Internet search tool, Google Alert in 2005, he found that while ‘Successful deaf people are discussed without making too much of it’ (517), when ‘deaf’ was used as a metaphor, ‘Invariably, the sense that a reader would get from reading these reports is negative: Deafness is something that leads to undesirable events and outcomes’ (517). Tom Willard satirises this tendency in the media in his essay, ‘How to Write Like a Hearing Reporter’).

I switched to memoirs, hoping to find more sympathetic companions for my ruminations on the meaning of deafness in my life, but my first selections were dismal. Autobiographies by deaf writers such as Helen Keller’s *The Story of My Life* (1903) and David Wright’s *Deafness* (1969) subscribe to the theme of loss-filled melancholy by framing their lives as battles against adversity in which they triumph through heroism and stoicism respectively. Henry Kisor’s 1990 memoir, *What’s That Pig Outdoors?* projects an image of cheerful force and determination as if these qualities are all that is required for a deaf person to succeed in the hearing world. While the intention of these writers may be to assure the reader that all’s well that ends well, their common starting premise is essentially that to be deaf is a burden which either dominates you or you dominate it (Wright, Kisor).

I then embarked on a course of procrastination, slowing down my reading, because I felt bruised by these stories which set up deafness as the enemy within. I was particularly reluctant to read memoirs by hearing children of deaf parents such as Lennard Davis’ memoir, *My Sense of Silence: Memoirs of a Childhood with Deafness*, and by hearing parents of deaf children such as *Deaf Like Me*, Thomas Spradley’s account of his life with his deaf daughter, Lynn. Even now, I remain variously daunted, confronted, and drained by the raining blows of grief in family narratives. Finally, I lit on the idea of turning to fictional representations of deafness, and this was the key to the door of insight that I was looking for. Contemporary fictional narratives of deafness and deaf lives by hearing writers such as Vikram Seth’s *An Equal Music*, Frances Itani’s *Deafening* and T.Coraghessan Boyle’s *Talk Talk* captured my attention in a way that the memoirs by Helen Keller, David Wright and Henry Kisor had not. By examining the narrative/ novelistic approaches to deafness in these novels and other fictions, I was able to distance myself from the attitudinal injuries inflicted during my earlier memoir reading. This led me back to a more engaged reading of memoirs on deafness dating from 1840s tracts on a ‘deaf and dumb boy’ to the autobiographical accounts of deafness by twentieth-century and contemporary deaf writers such as Frances Warfield, Bainy Cyrus, Hannah Merker, and Christopher Jon Heuer whose writing ring with humour, honesty,
This essay, *Hearsay*, comprises my reflections on deaf narratives. In it, I examine the representation of deafness and deaf people in literature in general. I compare the portrayal of deafness in fiction (mostly by hearing writers, with rare exceptions) with how deaf people either write about themselves, or are written about, in memoirs and auto/biographical writing.

In Chapter 2, ‘Gestures: Deafness in Fiction,’ I provide a brief literature review of deafness in fiction and examine in more detail the representation of deafness and deaf people in three contemporary novels: *An Equal Music* by Vikram Seth, *Deafening* by Frances Itani, and *Talk Talk* by T. Coraghessan Boyle. In Chapter 3, ‘Voices: Deafness in Biography, Memoir and Auto/biographical Fiction,’ I review other writers’ discussions of deafness narratives, in particular Thomas Couser’s essay, ‘Signs of Life’; consider the autobiographical task of the deaf writer; and examine the rise of deaf memoirs and novels by deaf and hard of hearing writers, dating from the 1840s to 2009. In Chapter 4, ‘Disruptions: The Reluctant Memoirist,’ I explain how I incorporated what I learnt from my readings into my memoir, *The Art of Being Deaf*. I also explain how my investigations into my life coupled with the act of writing my memoir changed my relationship to my deafness and thus my understanding of myself, of ‘who I am.’

I entered into this reading and research project with misgivings. I was initially troubled by the seemingly rare appearance of deaf characters in fiction, and then was preoccupied with the apparent preponderance of grief in those deaf fictional and memoiristic narratives that did surface. Those narratives’ emphasis on the triumph of individual effort over adversity also grated. However, upon the conclusion of my extensive reading coupled with my reflections, I found that there is not only a substantial body of literature across many genres featuring deaf lives, but also a fresh field for literary studies which, in turn, opens up the possibility of an improved understanding of deafness and deaf people’s lives.

It is true that the tropes of grief, trauma and triumphalism dominate deaf narratives. So much so, that the casual reader could mistake these themes for being the only stories of deaf people’s lives. In addition, deaf narratives can be blunt instruments in conveying the complexities of identity, in particular, the elusive deaf identity. The underlying premise of much deaf fiction and memoir is usually that deafness is something to be overcome, lest you be defeated by it. The exceptions prove the rule. However, this does not mean that those deaf narratives do not tell us other things.

The considerable diversity of deaf narratives, historically and contemporaneously is especially compelling. My search for representations of deafness and deaf characters in fiction, biography, memoir, and autobiographical fiction revealed that deaf lives appear in a range of genres, a variety of occupations, at all levels of society from the impoverished to the more well-to-
these texts also reveals that the authorial concern about the quality of deaf people’s lives is a recurrent, if sometimes subtle, characteristic of deaf narratives. What I initially took to be an unhealthy and somewhat maddening preoccupation with the characteristics of loneliness, alienation, grief, and the like for deaf people, I eventually understood to be the possibility of providing the ‘general reader’ with insights into the lives of deaf people. Historical and contemporary fictional representations of deafness and memoirs of deaf people’s lives can tell us much, not just about deafness and hearing loss, but also about the social, cultural and educational values of the day. In other words, even when narratives of deafness might be contentious, inaccurate, exaggerated, or just plain silly, they also provide us with a rich resource of deaf epistemology. Deaf narratives provide the ‘general reader’ alongside specialists in a range of enterprises—such as education, health, social work, philosophy, and law—with fresh ways of understanding deafness and deaf people’s lives. This is particularly significant given that the lives of deaf people seem to be mostly invisible to the general population.

Curiously, I found that many fictional representations of deafness and deaf people’s lives seem more credible than some memoiristic representations of deaf experiences. Or, to put it another way, I found that I was more readily able to suspend my disbelief while reading fictional accounts of deaf lives than when reading memoirs of and by deaf people.

Because fictional deaf characters are usually just one of many characters competing for the reader’s attention, their significance and ‘visibility’ to the reader depends on the narrative plot or theme. They are rarely called upon to be the hero or heroine. In addition, fictional representations of deafness and deaf characters usually hew to the complex tasks of creating narrative. These tasks include holding the reader through suspense and surprise, making the reader either sympathise with this character or rail against that character, with-holding the closure the reader seeks, and then sometimes granting that closure (H. Porter Abbott, *Narrative* 86). As willing readers, we are also willing collaborators in making the narrative come to life. Consequently, I observe in Chapter 2 that even when the fictional deaf character’s role is reduced to a symbol or signifier (such as alienation and loneliness as exemplified by Grania in Frances Itani’s novel, *Deafening*) rather than ‘fleshed out’ into a more realistic or naturalistic character (such as Julia in Vikram Seth’s novel, *An Equal Music*, and Dana in T. Coraghessan Boyle’s novel, *Talk Talk*), the reader may succumb to the pull of the narrative of deafness—if not the credibility of the deaf character herself—because the reader has already succumbed to the pull of the power of the whole narrative. I also argue in Chapter 2 that fictional representations of deaf people’s lives are capable of providing the reader with a variety of perspectives of deafness—such as a witness (*An Equal Music*), as an immersed participant (*Deafening*), or as a navigator (*Talk Talk*). While these different perspectives of deafness separately
create competing experiences of deafness for the reader, they collectively provide a rich resource for a nuanced understanding what it means to ‘be deaf.’

Similarly, memoirs of deafness also provide competing perspectives of ‘being deaf,’ and this is as it ought to be, given the variety of our individual lives. However, their success as persuasive works of narrative depends on the reader’s willingness to accept the memoirist’s version of his or her account of deafness. In Chapter 3, ‘Voices,’ I make an unhappy comparison with fictional representations of deaf lives, when I observe that memoirs by notables such as Helen Keller, David Wright, and Henry Kisör strike me as having a strenuousness about them, as if striving to persuade the reader that their lives were heroic efforts of self-driven achievement that were respectively blessed, blighted, or undaunted. These memoirists position their deafness (and blindness, in Helen Keller’s case) as the central conflict in their narrative rendering of their lives. This may, in fact, have been true-to-life for them. However, as a deaf reader— and thus reasonably well versed in the challenges of being deaf alongside the usual challenges of living a full and satisfying life—I found such a narrative rendering of deafness too simplistic to accept. In contrast, I found in Frances Warfield’s reportage style memoir, *Keep Listening*, Bainy Cyrus’s plain-spoken style essay, ‘All Eyes,’ and Hannah Merker’s meditative reflections on her hearing loss, *Listening*, that resonance of honesty and grittiness one might expect to encounter in private journals. While these three women evidently wrote for a reader other than themselves, their writing seems more engaged with the task of reflection than persuasion—the paradox being that their memoirs thus *do* become persuasive accounts of deaf lives in all their possibilities.

Still on the topic of autobiographical perspectives of deafness, in Chapter 3, I use David Lodge’s semi-autobiographical novel, *Deaf Sentence*, and Philip Zazaove’s novel, *Four Days in Michigan*, as illustrative examples to argue that writers must keep abreast of contemporary cultural debates when writing about subjects such as deafness and disability. If they do not, they risk falling into the trap of disability stereotyping and clichés. Both Lodge and Zazaove have a hearing loss—Lodge’s loss is age-related, while Zazaove has been deaf since childhood—but their authorial appraisals of deafness are polarised. Lodge approaches it as a humiliating disability, while Zazaove approaches it as both a disability that has historically limited many deaf people’s education and employment opportunities, and as a cultural determinant that has acted as an identity marker/shaper for many deaf people and their families. It is unwise to generalise from just two novels of deafness by a hard of hearing writer and a deaf writer, other than to note that their credibility as narrators of deaf lives seems to be no less and no greater than the credibility of the hearing novelists such as Vikram Seth, Frances Itani, and T. Coraghessan Boyle.

The upshot of all this reading is that my preconception about the rarity of deaf characters in
body of literature featuring deaf lives. Nevertheless, I argue that it remains true that the field of literary studies is largely silent about representations of deafness, deaf lives, and disability in all genres of literature.

In Chapter 4, ‘The Reluctant Memoirist,’ I found that I, as a deaf woman, benefitted from such a broad reading of deaf lives. Such a finding suggests a further lesson about the potential role of deaf literary studies in education and in the development of identity. Earlier in this chapter, I raised a question about how deaf children can develop their sense of self within their hearing families. In the light of what I have experienced, I suggest that deaf children and their families might also benefit from similarly reflective reading about other deaf people’s lives.

The heritage of diverse and extensive deaf fiction (much of which is hallmarked by the role of a deaf heroine), together with deaf memoirs, biographies, and life narratives (many of which are by women) acted as a prompt for my reflections upon my own deaf life and deaf self. In doing so, I answered my early musings about whether stories of deafness shape, or respond to, public perceptions. I found that they have the potential to do both: careless writing can reinforce stereotypes but thoughtful writing in any genre has the power to change attitudes. Certainly, my own attitudes about deafness changed. By reading other people’s stories of deafness and deaf people’s lives, I found that I became less judgemental of my own ‘deaf self’ and more open to the possibilities of relaxing my guard, of allowing other people into my private ‘deaf self.’ In this spirit of exploration, I invite the reader into my own memoir, The Art of Being Deaf.
Chapter 2

Gestures: Deafness in Fiction

‘So we arrive, at last at the pulse and purpose of literature: to reject the blur of the ‘universal’; to distinguish one life from another; to illumine diversity; to light up the least grain of being, to show who it is concretely individual, particularized from any other . . . Literature is the recognition of the particular’ (Ozick, *Art and Ardor*, 248). But not, apparently, if the characters are deaf.

In this chapter, I examine how deaf characters in fiction are portrayed, and in particular, I examine the claim that deaf characters were traditionally used as generic literary devices, rather than ‘particularized’ as individuals. In doing so, I briefly review a selection of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century representations of deaf lives, relying largely on the seminal anthologies of deaf characters in literature by Trenton Batson and Eugene Bergman, and by Brian Grant, together with analyses by Robert F Panara, an American pioneer in deaf literary studies, and an annotated bibliography by Jonathon Miller. I then examine, through my own close reading of the respective texts, the portrayal of deafness and deaf lives in three late twentieth- and early twenty-first century novels: Vikram Seth’s *An Equal Music*, Frances Itani’s *Deafening* and T. Coraghessan Boyle’s *Talk Talk*. I chose these novels because they were published within a few years of each other and were reasonably well known with a wide readership. I was also curious about how contemporary hearing writers tackled the task of writing about deafness. I conclude this chapter by finding that while it is true that deaf characters in fiction were, and still are, used to signify ‘otherness,’ this literary device does not necessarily result in a reductionist understanding of deafness. Rather, when we examine such a body of narratives with deaf characters within their historical, social and cultural contexts, we are exposed to diverse portrayals and meanings of ‘being deaf.’

Historically, from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and continuing through the twentieth-century, writers tended to use deaf characters in fiction as a literary device to symbolise traits of ‘otherness’ such as saintliness, loneliness or isolation rather than casting them as fully realised expressions of their characters’ individuality. Batson, Bergman, and Miller have observed that these characters, usually slotted into a minor narrative role, were rarely allowed to take their place in the story without having to perform a symbolic task such as alienation or serving as a source of special knowledge, laden with stereotyping constructs of pity, victimisation and crude assumptions about the helplessness and silence of deaf people e.g. *deaf and dumb*, *deaf mute*. Christopher Krentz, in *Writing Deafness*, illuminates the cultural contexts for the sometimes competing renderings of deaf lives by hearing authors in nineteenth-century American literature (and also argues their significance in identity formation for both hearing and
However, Robert F Panara debates the perception that deaf people have been neglected in fiction and drama, or that their image has been distorted. (Panara, who lost his hearing through illness as a ten year old boy, published extensively on the subject of the deaf writer in America. His 1960 publication, *The Silent Muse: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry by the Deaf* included 100 poetic and 28 prose works by American deaf writers between 1835 and 1960. It was the first such compilation of writing by deaf writers (Lang 106)). In his essays examining the use of deaf characters in fiction, drama and science fiction, Panara defends several writers, including the eighteenth-century novelist, Daniel Defoe, who created the first literary deaf character in his 1715 novel, *The History of the Life and Surprising Adventures of Duncan Campbell*. Nevertheless, in this very example, Panara concedes that the exploits of Duncan Campbell ‘are too sensational and exaggerated even to seem probable. For example, Duncan Campbell becomes so adept at speech and lip-reading that he completely disguises his deafness whenever he so desires’ (*Deaf Characters in Fiction and Drama*). Panara’s other examples of ‘realistic’ deaf characters include rogues, imposters, fakes and charlatans: evidently, Panara moves in a richly picaresque world! He concedes that these characterisations are used as ‘melodramatic devices for added humor, mystery or intrigue’ thus apparently contradicting his claim about the realistic individuation of deaf characters. He then goes on to write, ‘it is heartening to find that these characterisations do not debase or ridicule the infirmity of deafness’ (my emphasis), thus revealing his own take on deafness as a plight.

In Jonathon Miller’s 1992 annotated bibliography of deaf characters in fiction ‘The rustle of a star’ (The title is taken from the final line of Robert F Panara’s 1946 poem, ‘On his Deafness,’ in which he imagined that he could choose to hear ‘the rustle of a star!’), he identifies 136 fictional works published in English with deaf characters. His list contains entries from a 300 year period and is divided into four parts: adult novels, short stories, fiction for young adults and older children, and fiction for young children. It does not include poetry or dramatic works. He also notes patterns in the portrayals of deafness: for example, deaf characters used by hearing authors as symbols of alienation (Harry Crew’s *Gypsy Curse*), or as sources of special knowledge unavailable to hearing people too involved in the clamour of life (Carson McCullers’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*). Miller’s bibliography does not go beyond mentioning such attitudes towards deaf characters. Instead, he directs the interested reader to Trenton Batson and Eugene Bergman’s 1985 anthology, *Angels and Outcasts: An Anthology Of Deaf Characters In Literature*, and Brian Grant’s 1989 anthology, *The Quiet Ear: Deafness in Literature*.

(A more recent review, in June 2010, of deaf characters in fiction can be found in Sharon Pajka-West’s essay, ‘Representations of Deafness and Deaf People in Young Adult Fiction.’ Pajka-West also maintains a blog, ‘Deaf Characters in Adolescent Literature’ at [http://pajka.blogspot.com/](http://pajka.blogspot.com/) where she holds a collection of adolescent books with deaf characters, websites, author interviews and book reviews).
The anthologies by Batson and Bergman, and Grant include many literary excerpts from books cited in Miller’s list. The bibliographies in both anthologies are extensive. Grant’s anthology provides the broader and more diverse selection as it includes excerpts from speeches, poetry, and dramatic scripts as well as prose. Both anthologies contribute substantially to our understanding of how deafness has historically been portrayed in fiction and memoir. In addition, as the commentaries in the anthologies are shaped by the editors’ world views of hearing loss and deaf identity politics respectively, they also contribute to our improved understanding of the diverse experiences of deafness and deaf lives.

Grant was partially deafened as a result of injury during his service in World War Two, and so his anthology is shaped by his own sense of loss, leading him to introduce many of his excerpts with emotively laden words about the ‘suffering’ of deaf people. For example, he observes that Harriet Martineau ‘was plagued by deafness from childhood’ and ‘gave advice to her fellow sufferers’ in her *Letter to the Deaf* (27). In contrast, Batson and Bergman, former Gallaudet University academics, are assertive in their editorial approach, stripping their motivation of all sentiment and claiming that the anthology makes it ‘possible to know much about the attitudes in the western world toward deaf people, and how these attitudes have changed’ (ix). (Gallaudet University, founded in 1864, is the world’s only university in which all programs and services are specifically designed to accommodate deaf and hard of hearing students). Batson and Bergman also take the opportunity throughout their commentary to advance the cause of American Sign Language. Their polemical petticoats show in their attack on the deaf writer, Albert Ballin, when they judge his authorial voice in *The Deaf Mute Howls* to be limited by ‘the chains of deaf Uncle-Tomism’ (269) because he ‘is too apologetic, too ambivalent’ (269) in his efforts to describe his hardships. They sink the boot in even further, ‘What the Uncle Toms don’t realise is that Uncle Tomming offers a fake promise: even after one becomes ‘white’ or ‘hearing,’ one still is not accepted—if anything, one is even more despised, and now not only by the majority, but by his own group as well’ (316). It is an ugly comment with echoes of school-yard bullying. Their judgement against Ballin also assumes that there can only be one true and right ‘deaf voice,’ an assumption which flies in the face of decades of research, debates, studies and the like searching for a better understanding of what it means to be deaf.

(The special issue of *American Annals of the Deaf*, Winter 2009/2010, 154.5 provides a summary overview of deaf epistemologies, highlighting the variety and abundance of their sometimes competing, sometimes companionable, perspectives. Similarly, the special ‘deaf’ issue of *Media and Culture* 13.3 (2010) is an exploration of possibility. All the essays and writings explore in varied ways different ways of knowing the experiences of deafness; and almost all the essays emphasise diversity and the experience of fragmentation and change, rather than identity. Identity shifts and takes on meaning in relation to others and situations).
In view of Tillie Olsen’s book, *Silences* (1978), about the silencing of women writers, together with the repeated observation of other writers and scholars that deaf people tend not to write because of their purported language limitations (Couser, Kisor), the number of excerpts of writing by deaf women autobiographers included in Brian Grant’s anthology is surprising. They include the Victorian feminist Harriet Martineau’s *Autobiography* (27), deaf-blind writer Helen Keller’s *The Story of My Life* (35-37), poet Dorothy Miles’s *Gestures* (51), writer Jessica Rees’s *Sing a Song of Silence* (55-57), journalist Frances Warfield’s *Keep Listening* (38-40) and actor Elizabeth Quinn’s *Listen to Me* (52). All these women lost their hearing as a result of childhood illnesses such as meningitis or scarlet fever. This imbues their writing with the melancholy of loss and the bravado of achievement.

The theme of loss is the shadow in most of the fictional representations of deafness and deaf people by the hearing writers in Grant’s anthology. In addition, many of the stories are bleak, tragic, dour or comedic in a slapstick sort of a way, playing to culturally perceived stereotypes of deafness. For example, the excerpt from CP Snow’s *Last Things* includes this observation: ‘Often she wore the expression, at the same time puzzled, obstinate, and protesting that one saw in the chronically deaf’ (143). Some of the images of the isolated deaf outcast are confronting. For example, Alfred de Musset’s *Contes* includes the story ‘Pierre and Camille’ which Brian Grant describes as a ‘classic of the fictional treatment of deafness’ (98). This story is set in 1760, in Le Mans, France, where ‘deaf mutes were looked upon as a kind of being separate from the rest of humanity . . . They inspired more horror than pity (96). Similarly, Carson McCullers’s novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, tells the grim and morbid tale of Singer who is deaf and his friend, Antonapoulos, who is apparently cognitively impaired as well as deaf. When the latter is despatched to an asylum in a distant town, Singer misses his friend and is lonely. Upon learning that Antonapoulos has died, Singer shoots himself in his chest from grief. McCullers’s heightened portrayal of deafness and intellectual disability as an allegory of loneliness was deliberate and knowing. She refused to research these disabilities, preferring to rely on her own crude assumptions which she intuitively knew would be readily accepted by her contemporary readers (Krumland 35).

Few of the fictional excerpts in the Grant anthology ring with jubilation or exuberance. Charles Dickens’s approach to writing about deafness provides the exceptions which prove the rule. For example, in *Great Expectations*, Pip meets the elderly and deaf but cheerful father of Wemmick, Mr Jaggers’s clerk. Wemmick, is also jocular and practical in his interactions with his father (99). Fictional representations of deafness also seem to lack mindfulness that their reading audience potentially includes deaf people. The dismissive asides, jarring humour and gossipy tone assume a posture of authorised finger-pointing and staring at the ‘plight’ (or ‘infirmity’) of the deaf person. While it is rude to stare at deaf people when they are signing to each other and it is uncharitable to speak unkindly about deafness, these conventions are not observed when writing about deafness. If anything, the conventions are over-
Grant’s anthology is not all gloom. It is also rich with historical, contemporary, literary and poetic perceptions of deaf experiences which slowed my reading to such a contemplative pace that I would reflect on my own experiences, compare them and say ‘yes, this is so’ or ‘no, that has not happened to me.’ I became so engaged with Grant’s anthology that I mentally reorganised his selections (which he has categorised by genre: anecdotes, auto/biography, letters and essays, fiction, juveniles, drama, verse and the bible) into life-topics such as grief, education, family, spirituality, music, love, children, and women. In doing so, I saw how I might enliven my own memoir, *The Art of Being Deaf*, by infusing it with the voices of these earlier writers.

I turn now to examine in particular three contemporary novels, *An Equal Music* by Vikram Seth (1999), *Deafening* by Frances Itani (2003), and *Talk Talk* by T. Coraghessan Boyle (2006). I chose these three novels for several reasons. They are all reasonably well known with a wide readership. However, none of these novels has been previously read or written up from the perspective of deaf literature studies (aside from my own published articles: see References). All three novelists are hearing writers: I was curious to understand their perspectives of deafness, and to ascertain their ‘authority,’ if any, to write about deafness. Finally, despite being published within a few years of each other, the novels differ markedly in their representations of deaf characters and deafness. Because their competing perspectives of deafness are shaped by their thematic concerns—music, history and identity—they position the reader to respectively witness, be immersed in, and navigate experiences of deafness. In this way, the reader is exposed to diverse understandings by hearing writers about deafness and deaf lives.

In most fictional stories featuring deafness and deaf people, the reader sees the life of the deaf character through the perceptions and experiences of the hearing narrator. And so it is in Vikram Seth’s novel, *An Equal Music*. Here, Seth tells the story of a renewed love affair (after a lapse of ten years) between musicians, Michael and Julia, set in present-day England. Julia is a pianist and now married with a young son, and Michael is a violinist with the Maggiore, a string quartet. Following their reunion, Michael persuades Julia to play with the quartet on a European tour. However, Michael eventually discovers that Julia has recently lost her hearing and is still adapting to her loss. The reader discovers the implications of Julia’s deafness by witnessing Michael’s grief-laden reactions and other people’s responses to her different hearingness. Their grief is all the more sharp for taking place within the drama of music. (For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see Donna McDonald’s 2009 essay, ‘The Silence of Sounds.’)

In contrast to this witnessing perspective, Frances Itani’s novel, *Deafening*, immerses the reader in the deaf experience through the narrative device of the deaf heroine’s interior monologue supported by an omnipotent narrator’s observations of other people’s responses to her deafness. In this way, the reader is
Grania and her husband, Jim, is set during World War 1 against the imaginative sound-tracks of the gunfire of the war in Europe and the quiet of small town life in Canada. Thus the reader receives a social history of the attitudes towards ‘the affliction’ of deafness and the education of deaf people at the turn of the twentieth-century as well as a fictional love story.

Changing tack from both these perspectives, T. Coraghessan Boyle’s adventure novel, Talk Talk, uses the crime of identity-theft to navigate the reader through issues of identity-formation, not only for the deaf heroine but for all the major characters in his novel. When the heroine, Dana Halter, who lost her hearing as a child, discovers that she is the victim of credit-card identity theft, she pursues the thief, Peck Wilson, across North America with her boyfriend, Bridger. Dana’s deafness is independent of the unfolding drama; thus, Boyle meets the narrative challenge identified by Lennard Davis that ‘[w]hen characters have disabilities, the novel is usually exclusively about those qualities . . . the disabled character is never of importance to himself or herself’ (Bending over Backwards, 45). In Talk Talk, the reader is drawn into a plot driven by the crime of identity-theft, rather than by the impact of deafness on people’s lives.

Curiously, not only is deafness feminised in these three novels, but also the three deaf heroines have romantic relationships with hearing men; in the real world, most deaf women partner with deaf men. This feminisation of deafness hearkens back to the Victorian era in which deaf-muteness was feminised and ‘even eroticised in a variety of adorable or inspirational gesturing women’ (Gitter 167). Similarly, as Christopher Krentz observes, ‘Most deaf characters in nineteenth-century American canonical literature are children or women; in writing deaf people, hearing authors seemed to need to infantilize or feminize them . . . We do not encounter strong deaf males in these pages’ (105).

Vikram Seth and An Equal Music

Vikram Seth’s novel, An Equal Music, has been variously reviewed, and occasionally derided, as a love-story between two concert musicians, one of whom has lost her hearing.¹ But as a deaf reader, I am surprised that Seth’s novel is not more widely acknowledged for his rendering of hearing loss and deafness. This lack of acknowledgement could be attributed to a generalised under-reading of Seth’s text. As H. Porter Abbott notes in his study of narrative, readers simply cannot absorb all the information in any given narrative text all the time; readers either overlook things that are present in the narrative or put in things that are not in the narrative (86). However, one reviewer who did observe the presence of

¹ Some review selections include: "(O)ne of the most moving love stories you will ever read." Khushwant Singh, Hindustan Times. 14 April 1999; "Seth's novel is a wonder-work: irresistible, tense, deeply moving." John Carey, The Sunday Times. 28 March 1999; "As a love letter to the canon of classical music, Seth's novel has a touching fervency," The Observer. 28 March 1999; "M. Seth's novel is a wonder-work, irresistible, tense, deeply moving." The Economist. 15 May 1999.
deafness in Seth’s novel complained, ‘The deaf angle is a bit annoying’ (which pretty much reflects the attitude of many hearing people towards deaf people). I argue that An Equal Music is an effective portrayal of one person’s experience of deafness—in both Julia’s hearing loss and in other people’s responses to her different ‘hearingness.’ While a love story shapes the narrative arc, the novel spends much energy exploring the weight of sound and the paradoxical weightiness of its twin sensation, silence. Seth uses music—and its nemesis, deafness—to explore sound and silence, including their roles in the rise and fall of relationships and their capacities to transmit emotion.

A strength of Seth’s novel is that his focus is not so much on the grief at the loss of hearing, the usual narrative associated with deafness, but more on the pragmatic response of the deaf concert pianist, Julia, to her loss. Seth’s portrayal of love between the two musicians, Michael and Julia, shows that their love is flawed not by Julia’s deafness but by Michael’s self-absorbed temperament and Julia’s marriage. Julia is portrayed as a strong, attractive, and talented woman whose hearing loss is evidently a severe blow as she is a musician, but is not cast as a tragedy in her life. Julia’s deafness is not the tragic narrative element in this story: instead, it is the ill-fated love between her and Michael.

Seth’s detailed rendition of a musical life and of music itself is intriguing. Not only does he render the sensation of deafness for the hearing reader, he also renders the history and detail of sound in all its variousness for deaf readers such as me. For example on hearing Beethoven:

the man who deafly transfigured what he so many years earlier had hearingly composed (my emphases) speaks into us across land and water and ten generations, and fills us here with sadness, here with amazed delight (79).

Seth captures the transition in Beethoven’s music from ‘hearingly composed’ to ‘deafly transfigured,’ and also conveys that in his deafness, Beethoven composed something more magnificent than what he had composed in his full hearingness. A few pages later, Seth describes the act of playing of Beethoven’s music: ‘the steeple-chase-cum-marathon, the ethereal, jokey, unpausing, miraculous, exhausting quartet in C sharp minor, which he composed a year before his death’ (109). In piling on such an excess of adjectives at such a hectic pace, Seth conveys both the penmanship and the sounds of Beethoven’s composition.

In another passage, when Michael has still not discovered that the music is beyond Julia’s hearing, Seth writes:

There is something tender and indefinably strange and searching about her playing, as if she is attending to something beyond my hearing (my emphasis). I cannot put my finger on it, but it undoes me. I sit with my head in my hands, as Mozart drops note by note into my mind (133).
This passage sustains the suspense of imminent discovery and it also represents music as an entire body and spirit experience, not just an aural event. Michael absorbs Mozart in his mind, rather than in his ears: the sensation of music enters into his whole being, with his hearing being just one sense by which he experiences it. While Michael describes his own experience of ‘hearing’ music in his mind and body, he could just as easily be describing Julia’s experience of music now that she is deaf; that is, Julia apparently also experiences her music through her aural memory, as well as through the pressure of her touch on the piano keys.

Seth subtly discloses Julia’s hearing loss. Instead of an unheralded ‘bombshell’ revelation, Julia’s secret is yielded bit by bit. When Julia and Michael meet again for the first time after a separation of several years, the text teases the reader with clues about the change in Julia: “Hello.” There is an intentness to her gaze’ (92). As a deaf reader, I understood this clue about Julia’s deafness immediately. In the same instant of recognition, I also understood that Michael had not ‘got it,’ and that perhaps the hearing reader would not necessarily get it either. Michael, perhaps like many hearing readers, instead interprets this as a demonstration of Julia’s intensity of emotion for him, that perhaps she still loved him after all. From then on, I enjoyed being ‘in’ on Seth’s authorial task of sustaining the suspense of discovery and wondered how he would cast the inevitable revelation. I caught myself not only tracking the revival of Michael and Julia’s love affair, but also critiquing Seth’s rendition of Julia’s hearing loss and the other characters’ responses to her deafness.

Seth repeats the motif of ‘the attentive gaze’ over the next several pages and throughout his novel. For example, ‘Julia is looking at me with a very direct gaze, tender and attentive’ (100). He sustains the suspense while littering the text with clues. For example, while Michael and Julia wander around an art gallery, Michael observes ‘She seems to be unaware of my presence, unresponsive to my comments’ (101). Seth skilfully builds the tension of non-disclosure in the following scene:

She stands by the radiator, shivering, and looks out at the rain. I stand behind her, my hands on her shoulders. She does not shake them off.

‘Julia, I still love you.’

She says nothing. Is it my imagination, or do I feel her shoulders stiffen?

When she turns around it is to murmur:

‘Let’s have some coffee. Have you been waiting long?’

‘Julia!’ I say. It’s one thing to ignore my words but why this deliberate banality? She reads the hurt in my eyes. Still she says nothing . . . (107).

This scene captures the ‘broken transmission’ effects that inevitably occur in communication between a deaf person and a hearing person, especially if the deaf person has not disclosed her deafness. These disruptions are like the worn needle of a record player skipping across an old long-play record.
will find out for himself. As a deaf reader, I am able to put myself in Julia’s shoes. I understand that Julia is not so much afraid of being ‘outed’ as a deaf woman, as unsure about how to break the news. Michael finally learns that Julia is deaf when her young son, Luke, tells him accidentally while they are going for a walk:

‘That’s because mom finds it hard to hear me. She’s deaf . . . Oops!’ he claps his hands over his mouth.

I laugh, ‘Why? Because she makes you practise scales?’

But Luke, his eyes open wide, looks utterly shocked by what he has just said. ‘Don’t tell her—’ he blurts out.

‘Tell her what?’

Luke’s face has gone white. He looks horrified.

‘What I said. It’s not true. It’s not true.’

‘All right, Luke, all right. Take it easy now.’ He says nothing at all for the next few minutes. He looks guilty and alarmed, almost stricken (142).

What is striking about Seth’s description of Luke’s inadvertent revelation and his subsequent desperation to undo the revelation is the manifest horror that is intended; that is, the horror of Julia’s deafness. So terrible is this truth that, despite Luke’s alarm, Michael cannot accept it straight away as fact. He actually laughs it off because he considers it to be too impossible to be true. He must ponder Luke’s words before he can comprehend the possibility of their truth and then translate his comprehension into a reluctant acceptance. As a deaf reader, I was drawn into this fictional drama. I felt the drama and tension of this revelation while reading it despite knowing, because I live the experience of deafness, that there is no terror in the fact of being deaf. The drama is entirely in the discovery of it either by others in their first encounters with the deaf person or by the person losing their hearing, not in the long-term experience of it.

Michael’s comprehension of Julia’s deafness quickly translates into a practical awareness of its implications: ‘the light is going . . . if it is true, it will soon be too dark for her to see what I am saying’ (142). Michael then tries to imagine what Julia can and cannot hear. Seth tackles the challenge of describing the silence of deafness by describing the sounds of hearing:

. . . geese flee, honking. What of this could she hear? How much am I imagining of what she can and cannot? The cawing of a crow, the chacking of a magpie in a plane tree near the Bayswater Road, the buses roaring and sneezing – what can she hear? (143).

By playing in this way with the variety of sounds we encounter all around us, Seth avoids the melodrama of assuming that Julia lives in a soundless world which is often conjured up in the minds of hearing people when they contemplate the awe of deafness.
On the rare occasion that Seth does attempt to describe the absence of sound, he is careful to pull his punches. He steps back from the brink of Gothic high drama, choosing instead to use muted language to describe a muted sense; for example, following Michael’s discovery of Julia’s deafness from her young son, Julia writes a letter to him, in which she describes the sensation of her deafness firstly as being ‘muffled in cottonwool’ and secondly as ‘then suddenly things bang out at me’ (151). This powerfully twinned image conjures up both a silence of sorts and also confinement and fragility: confinement because in not hearing the full range of sound, Julia would feel herself to be limited, and fragility because that limitation would give rise to a sense of danger, of knowing that sounds that she is not aware of but which are so necessary for her safety are ‘out there.’ In the next few sentences in Julia’s letter, Seth conveys even more precisely his understanding that deafness is a nuanced world of subdued sound and silences that become sound-sensations in themselves:

It was a strange transition from the world of sound to the world of deafness—not soundlessness (my emphasis), really, because I do hear all sorts of noises, only usually they are the wrong ones (152).

Julia’s letter is an important milestone because it is the first time that Seth provides the reader with direct access to what she is experiencing and feeling in response to her hearing loss. Given that Seth is not deaf, this is more than an effective act of imagination; it is an act of empathy because he not only accords respect to the interior world of deaf people that is relatively uncommon in fiction, but he also gives Julia the dignity of speaking on her own behalf about her experience of deafness. This is even rarer.

Michael responds to Julia’s letter by first writing a letter to her in which he expresses his confusion, love and questions. He then goes about the task of researching deafness by buying a book on the subject. Seth’s description of Michael’s efforts to learn about deafness is bold; he has Michael trying to imagine the sensation of deafness while listening to music:

I have put on a record of Schubert’s string quintet and it is to the sounds of that music that I make my first acquaintance with the elaborate chaos that lies behind the tiny drumskins of my outer ears (156).

In this same scene, Michael wonders about his place in Julia’s life now, ‘Am I for her a static mark, a reversion to the days when music was for her an actual sense, not merely an imagined beauty?’ (156). Michael’s question here holds a deeper poignancy that Seth apparently did not dare to test more explicitly in his novel, because by contemplating the role of music in their love for each other, Michael also raises the spectre of the role of sound in all its communicative power—and by implication, silence in all its desolation—in forging and sustaining the bonds of love between two people.

*An Equal Music* is effective in portraying deafness because it steers the reader away from some of the clichés associated with hearing loss including its image of absolute silence. Seth’s writing is
hearing, much in the same way that most blind people have some sort of vision. It is extremely rare to be either ‘stone-deaf’ or ‘totally blind.’ Accordingly, Seth evokes the sensation of deafness in the reader in more subtle ways. Firstly, he portrays other people’s responses to Julia’s hearing loss through a series of small, everyday incidents which illustrate the syncopation that can happen in conversations between deaf and hearing people, along with the sometimes inflated adaptations that we make in our efforts to accommodate each other’s needs. Secondly, he describes in meticulous detail the rhythms and cadences of the music being played throughout the novel’s story-line, thus forcing the reader to ‘hear’ the music in their mind’s ear while simultaneously imagining what it would be like not to hear that music in real life.

Frances Itani and Deafening

Frances Itani’s novel, Deafening, can be read variously as a story of love between a young deaf woman, Grania, and her hearing husband, Jim; or as an extended insight by a hearing writer into the world of deafness based on her memories of her deaf grandmother; or as a fictionalised account of a moment in history—the Great War—in which one of the characters just happens to be deaf; or even as a fictionalized tutorial about deafness itself, using the story of love between a deaf woman and hearing man as a vehicle for illustrating certain historical, social and cultural features of deafness.

Itani flags the pre-eminence of her concern with deafness in the title, Deafening, while the book-jacket flap tells the reader that ‘the novel was written as a tribute to Itani’s grandmother, who was deaf from the age of eighteen months as a result of scarlet fever.’ (This carries resonances of Helen Keller, possibly the most famous deaf-blind person in the world. She too lost her hearing at eighteen months as a result of scarlet fever). Itani also establishes the leitmotif for her novel at the beginning with her provocative, and somewhat melodramatic, selection of an excerpt from the Canadian Illustrated News of 1 August, 1874: ‘The Artificial Method is a system founded by one Heinicke . . . [which] aims at developing, by unnatural processes, the power of speech . . . in many cases it is so painful to the poor deaf-mute as to cause blood to issue from the mouth’ (frontispiece). This depressing scene helps to establish the historical, educational and social context of the novel, but I was dismayed, as a deaf reader, by Itani’s authorial choice to open her novel in this way.

I immediately anticipated that the novel would characterise deafness as a burdensome thing, not only for the deaf person but also for families and society in general. My resentment towards both Itani as the writer and Grania as the fictional deaf character swelled even before I had reached the end of the second page. Given that the novel sustains this theme of deafness as a heavy weight in the deaf person’s life, my sullen resentment persisted throughout my reading of it. I did not want this to be the story of deafness that is told today. In fairness to Itani, she places her novel within the historical context of the early 1900s when deafness was regarded as a most terrible affliction and when educational debates about
several other chapters with excerpts on deafness and hearing loss from a range of sources such as ‘Lecture, The Toronto Fair’ (3, 68), Alexander Graham Bell (77), The Canadian (a newsletter by the Ontario School for the Deaf) (103) and Illustrated Phonics (219).

Itani’s evocation of a deaf life is obsessively melancholic but her observations of the things that make life different for a deaf person are authentic. She establishes her authority in the novel’s prologue (xiii, xiv). In just two short pages, Itani tells the story of Grania’s hearing loss through illness, the varied reactions of parental grief and sibling pragmatism to Grania’s deafness, the dilemmas of speech, lipreading and signing—‘Tress and Grania have already begun to make up their own language, with their hands’ (xiii); schooling; social reactions—‘People will think she’s stupid’ (xiv); the marital stress experienced by Grania’s parents; the power of the spoken word—‘If you can say your name, you can tell the world who you are’ (xiii); and the importance of inclusion—‘Include her in everything’ (xiv). She also illustrates the emotion of lip-movements when they are read by a deaf person, for example, ‘Bernard’s lips smile when he says the end of her name’ (xiii), ‘When Tress calls her Graw, her jaw drops’ (xiii), and ‘Mother’s lips make a straight line. She does not smile or laugh’ (xiii).

Unlike Seth’s An Equal Music in which Julia’s deafness is portrayed as just one element of her personality and in which her deafness only affects certain areas of her life, such as her music career, Itani’s Deafening portrays Grania’s deafness as an all-consuming shaper of her personality. Her deafness is seen as a shadow which falls across her whole life, socially and vocationally. Even her prospects for marriage are seen to be diminished: Cora, one of the characters in the novel, asks, ‘Who will marry that pitiful child when she grows up?’ . . . If they don’t find someone deaf and dumb, she’ll end up living with her mother the rest of her days’ (55). When Grania meets and marries a hearing man, Jim, the reader is led to understand that he is a good man. He is, after all, a doctor who heals people. Jim thinks of Grania’s deafness as a place rather than as a sensation or loss, ‘It was a mystery then, the silence where she lived’ (137). This notion that deafness is a place shapes Itani’s fictional recreation of the world of deafness—and thus silence—throughout the whole novel.

Itani provides detailed documentation of the deaf experience, creating for the reader an immersion experience in the world of deafness. She documents the sounds of deaf people’s voices, the physicality and sensuality of the hand flourishes of signed communication, the bitter debates about oral education versus signed education, the occasionally cruel but mostly awkward social responses to deafness, the closeness of deaf friendships, and the impact of deafness on family relationships. Itani not only constructs a narrative world which is wholly dominated by Grania’s deafness, but also portrays Grania’s own interior world as one which is dominated by her contemplation of her deafness throughout her entire life. Grania’s self-absorption about her deafness is so persistent that it inevitably jars, for example, when she looks at Kenan’s war-scarred face, she thinks, ‘What about me? . . . What does Kenan see in my face?
trained’ (294). Given that Kenan, her sister’s husband, has just returned from the Great War so shattered that he refuses to speak, this level of self-absorption is breathtaking and is not entirely redeemed by her own belated acknowledgement of it.

It also has the effect of infantilising Grania by not according her the maturity to look outside of herself and into the concerns of others. In fact, Itani reinforces Grania’s childlike status throughout the entire novel by showing Grania conjuring up characters from her childhood story books in times of stress, with the character of Dulcie making frequent appearances. For example, just before she wonders what Kenan sees in her own face, she sees the sorrow in her sister’s face and imagines the words, ‘Let us run for it, said Dulcie’ (294). Itani’s portrayal of Grania in deaf adulthood as forever caught in the world of girlhood stories holds up a mirror to the way deaf people are diminished in real life. Thomas Couser warns of this ‘Reification of the image of the deaf as children, unable to speak for themselves, having to be represented by others’ (241) in his discussion about parental biographies. Similarly, Christopher Krentz reminds us that the Latin word *infans* means ‘incapable of speech’ and remarks that ‘Speechless deaf characters . . . can appear as if infants, never growing to adulthood through speech, remaining permanently infantilized in silence’ (105).

The character of Grania is so one-dimensional that she is really just a cipher for deafness. Even when Grania finally stands up for herself against Cora’s bullying, she regards her own anger through the lens of her deafness, ‘The raised voice of the deaf, this is what it sounds like when we don’t keep it close’ (252).

**T. Coraghessan Boyle and *Talk Talk***
The narrative drama in both Vikram Seth’s novel, *An Equal Music*, and Frances Itani’s novel, *Deafening*, arises from the impact of hearing loss. In contrast, T. Coraghessan Boyle’s 2006 novel *Talk Talk*—the title is a direct translation from Sign into English, *Talk talk. That was what happened when the deaf got together . . . they talked a lot, talked all the time . . .’ (195)—is a novel featuring a deaf heroine whose deafness is independent of the unfolding drama. It is a fast-paced, contemporary story of a woman named Dana Halter who discovers that she is the victim of credit-card identity theft, compelling her to drive across North America with her boyfriend, Bridger, in pursuit of the thief.

Boyle does not make Dana do the symbolic work of loss, loneliness, alienation or oppression so often given to deaf characters in fiction. Instead, Boyle treats the character of Dana with respect, giving her the multi-dimensional complexity that inheres in all of us. On exploring the issue of identity theft as it is used for criminal purposes, Boyle began ‘Meditating on identity in general—that is, how we distinguish ourselves from each other, how we know who we are in our own minds . . . [and consider that] we know who we are because we have been acculturated and because we have learned to use
describe Dana and her day-to-day deaf experiences with considerable authenticity, weaving his knowledge of deafness into his novel to support his ruminations on identity. As a deaf reader, I enjoyed witnessing, and learning from, Dana’s efforts to integrate her deaf-self into her hearing-world life.

In chapter one, Boyle immerses the reader into the deaf person’s experience of sound by emphasising the quality of watchfulness. For example, ‘She watched him pull a lazy U-turn behind her and activate the flashing lights’ (4); ‘He was saying something, lips flapping as if he were chewing a wad of gristle, but what was it?’ (4); ‘She watched them shift and shrug as if she were some sort of freak of nature, a talking dolphin or a ventriloquist’s dummy coming to life . . . ’(9); and ‘His mouth was drawn tight . . . yes, his eyes said, the deaf live by their own rules . . .It was a look she’d seen all her life’ (10).

He also observes the physicality of sound, for example, ‘His hot breath exploding in her ear with the fricatives and plosives of speech’ (6) and catches the tension of frustration that can occur between hearing and deaf people as they strain to make themselves understood: ‘He had to repeat himself, more furious each time, until she understood’ (6).

However, Boyle moves adeptly beyond this snapshot-series of deaf experiences to establish, in one incisive paragraph, Talk Talk’s plot of wrongful arrest amidst a confusion of identities:

His signing was rigid and inelegant but comprehensible for all that, and she focused her whole being on him as he explained the charges against her. There are multiple outstanding warrants, he began, in Marin County Tulare and L.A. Counties – and out of state too, in Nevada, Reno and Stateline.

Warrants? What warrants? (10).

In this way, the reader is drawn into a story that is driven by the crime of identity-theft, rather than by the impact of deafness on people’s lives. The story of Talk Talk subsequently spools out with Dana’s detention in a courthouse jail, her court appearance and release, her dismissal from the school at which she teaches, her car-chase pursuit of the identity thief across North America with her boyfriend Bridger, his meeting with Dana’s mother, and their final confrontation with the identity-thief, Peck Wilson.

Throughout this adventure, we learn about Dana’s deaf-life, including her attempt to write a book about the Wild Child of Averyron, found at the age of eleven or twelve living ferally in Napoleonic France and, as Dana explains to Bridger, ‘Her throat constricting, . . . “he never did learn to speak”’ (146) despite the efforts of a teacher, Itard. We also learn about the impact of deafness on relationships, deaf politics including the politics of Sign language versus oral speech, hearing technology such as cochlear implants, and the implications of these for Dana’s sense of self. Boyle’s treatment of all this material is more nuanced than this list might suggest. In particular, he captures the paradox of the occasional fragility of Dana’s integration of her deaf-self into her generally exuberant personality. Dana’s boyfriend, Bridger, reveals more about her in his reminiscences about the first time he met her in a dance club and in
recounts the joy of a deaf couple upon learning that their baby was deaf—“Thank God,” they said, “she’s one of us.”—Bridger asks, ‘And what do you mean by that?’ (40). Their conversation becomes strained with Bridger’s confusion and Dana’s hurt:

‘But that isn’t you,’ he said, fumbling around the issue. ‘I mean, you’re not like that.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘You’re not—I mean, you weren’t born like that. Right?’

She’d looked as if she was going to cry, but now she forced a smile.

‘Born like what?’

‘Deaf’ (40) . . .

At the age of four and a half she’d been stricken with spinal meningitis . . . [and] her aural nerves had been irreparably damaged . . . ‘Yes,’ she told him, reaching to bury her hand in the bag of potato chips as if to hide it from him, as if she were afraid of what it might say otherwise, ‘that’s not me’ (41).

Bridger’s assertion, ‘you’re not like that,’ carries the doubt of prejudice coupled with the connotation of a hearing person’s superior sense of self when confronted with deafness. The question of whether Dana was born deaf or acquired it through illness is irrelevant to her. She is deaf. Her hearing loss was not just a single physiological, auditory incident. It continued to shape her sense of self in the wake of people’s responses to her deaf characteristics, ‘Her atonal voice, the non-sequiturs, the fluidity of her face when she spoke, as if every muscle under the skin were a separate organ of communication’ (38).

Unlike the novel, Deafening, in which Frances Itani’s portrayal of the relationship between Grania and Jim seems to be entirely sustained (and stretches credulity) by their shared interest in Grania’s deafness, in Talk Talk, Boyle normalises the relationship between Dana and Bridger by showing them enjoying common interests such as music, dancing and eating out at restaurants, and by having them talk and argue on a range of topics other than deafness. At the same time, he repeatedly shows Dana asserting her allegiance to her deaf-self. For example, she refuses to consider cochlear implants because ‘Even if I could hear something, anything, the best things in the world – music, my own lover’s voice, your voice—I wouldn’t do it. This is me. If I could hear, even for an hour, a minute, I’d be somebody different’ (236).

By navigating the reader through Dana’s own navigation of her deaf-self in her hearing world, Boyle adds a textural layer to his exploration of identity in general. In the end, Dana’s strongly forged sense of self wins out in her pursuit of the thief who has constructed his identity around other people’s credit cards. In a violent showdown between Dana and Peck Wilson at a railway station, he sees her fearlessness and is thus struck by the truth of himself, that he is ‘An imposter in a torn silk, worth nothing, worth less than nothing’ (326). Boyle concludes his novel with Bridger, a digital artist, creating an image on his computer of Dana with a smile, ‘ascendant, with all the blue sky in the universe
crowding in behind her’ (340). It is a romantic image but perhaps it reflects his admiration for all the real Danas of the world.

Deafness and hearing loss are mysteries to hearing people. This is because most hearing people have little or no contact with deaf people (aside from the occasional elderly person with age-related hearing loss). They do not know what deaf people cannot hear, and nor do they readily understand the experience of ‘being deaf.’ Like deaf and hard of hearing people, hearing people live in a world that is largely constructed by, and for, people who can hear (and see). Consequently, most hearing people cannot really know how ‘being deaf’ influences the way deaf people conduct their lives. They have to rely on their imagination, observations, and attention to explanations by deaf people. Such reliance shows up in the competing perspectives of deafness by these three novelists; that is, as witness, immersed participant, or navigator.

None of the above three novelists is deaf and so each must have drawn on his or her own imagination and empathy, in addition to their observations of any deaf or hard of hearing people in their social orbit, and research. Itani’s ‘authority’ for writing about deafness is arguably stronger than Seth and Boyle, given that she drew down on her memories of her deaf grandmother. Curiously, however, Itani’s novelistic characterisation of the deaf heroine’s life is the weakest of the three. The novels by Vikram Seth and T. Coraghessan Boyle engage the reader through the drama that arises from the conflicts among the characters, rather than from their heroines’ deafness. Their novels would still exist in the absence of the narrative element of deafness, because Seth has used it to attenuate the intensity of his exploration of music, and Boyle has drawn on it to add a textural layer to his exploration of identity. In contrast, in Frances Itani’s novel, deafness is everything, and therein lies the weakness of her representation of a deaf person’s life, because it has the effect of cannibalising Grania, the heroine. If Grania did not have her deafness, she would cease to exist as a character because her fictional life is so remorselessly driven by that single element of deafness, apparently detached from all those other life forces which shape, knock and bend us all.

If taken separately and in isolation, the above three contemporary novels with deaf characters—along with their predecessors, some of which are discussed earlier in this chapter—would inevitably provide the reader with a skewed understanding of deaf people’s lives. However in this chapter, I have found that when we examine a body of narratives with deaf characters dating from the eighteenth-century to the present day, and when we reflect on the historical, social, and cultural contexts of those representations of deafness, we allow ourselves to discover an unexpectedly rich diversity in the fictional portrayals of deaf lives and what it means to ‘be deaf.’
Chapter 3
Voices: Deafness in Biography, Memoir and Auto/Biographical Fiction

In the preceding chapter, I found that while fictional representations of deafness separately create competing experiences of deafness for the reader, they collectively provide an extensive and rich resource for understanding what it means to ‘be deaf.’ In this chapter, ‘Voices,’ I briefly review discussions of memoirs of deafness—for example, Thomas Couser’s essay, ‘Signs of Life’—and examine a selection of deaf memoirs dating from the 1840s to the present day. I then discuss my own close reading of the twentieth-century memoirs of Frances Warfield’s reportage style memoir, *Keep Listening*, Bainy Cyrus’s plain-spoken style essay, ‘All Eyes,’ and Hannah Merker’s meditative reflections on her hearing loss, *Listening*. I close with a brief discussion of David Lodge’s semi-autobiographical novel, *Deaf Sentence*, and Philip Zazaove’s novel, *Four Days in Michigan*, as examples of contemporary fictional narratives of deafness by writers who are hard-of-hearing or deaf.

I undertake this examination mindful of Christopher Jon Heuer’s exhortation about the autobiographical task of the deaf writer. ‘The experience of deafness is so unique for each individual and is molded to such an extent by all the other forces operating on a person’s life that, if one were to remove these other forces and components, the experience of deafness alone would be that of a vacuum’ (‘Deafness as Conflict’ 199). With this observation, Heuer brings an astringent clarity to his discussion of the tasks of writing and reading narratives of deafness, whether they are autobiographies or biographies or fictions. He provides the necessary corrective to all those analyses of disability narratives which are laden with well-meaning but tunnel-visioned efforts to understand people’s lives exclusively through the lens of their particular disability, as if nothing else in their lives had any meaning, influence or relevance to the way their lives panned out. Not their father’s alcoholism and war time experiences, nor their mother’s ambition and their own predisposition to melancholy or optimism; not their education, employment, nor their wealth or lack of it; not their place in the family hierarchy nor the place of their birth, and the politics and religion of their time. None of these things are allowed into the narrative mix.

The image of disability in literature is so symbolically powerful that it can override everything else, even to the extent of trapping the autobiographical writers themselves into configuring their life stories within the enclosed box of their disability. ‘Being deaf’ is particularly prone to being fixed to the page by the stiff pin of a one-dimensional identity (Corker, Preface). As I show in this chapter, certain themes recur in memoirs of deafness just as they do in the fictional representations of deaf lives. The dominant memoiristic theme, in addition to the usual themes of
deafness, I find that, just like their fictional counterparts, they also provide competing perspectives of ‘being deaf,’ reflecting the variety of all our individual lives.

**What People Say about Deaf Narratives**

‘Which would you rather be, deaf or blind?’ is a common playground game among children as they make their early forays into imagining the lives of people different from them. Children can be forgiven the tightness of their question in its absence of nuance, but when H-Dirksen L. Bauman starts an essay, ‘Voicing Deaf Identity,’ by citing Helen Keller’s claim that ‘The problems of deafness are deeper and more complex, if not more important than those of blindness’ (47), he injects an unwelcome reductionist note to his discussion of deaf narratives. He goes on to observe, ‘Deaf history may be characterized as a struggle for Deaf individuals to “speak” for themselves rather than to be spoken about in medical and educational discourses’ (47). One could add, ‘and also in fictional and biographical discourses.’

In 1990, Henry Kisor observed in his memoir, *What’s That Pig Outdoors?*, ‘There isn’t a large body of literature about the deaf by the deaf’ (3). His few predecessors included Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (1903), Frances Warfield, *Cotton in My Ears* (1948) and *Keep Listening* (1957), and David Wright, *An Account of Deafness* (1969). Seven years later, Couser wrote, ‘This should not be surprising, for a number of factors militate against deaf autobiography . . . making them unlikely and rare entities’ (‘Signs of Life’ 226). In 2010, Gallaudet University Press had a catalogue of just nine memoirs in its ‘Deaf Lives Series,’ and listed nineteen autobiographies. A longer bibliography of forty-two autobiographies and memoirs of deafness and hearing loss was prepared in 2000 by J.K. Aronson. Both the catalogue and bibliography comprise books which are mostly written by people who have lost their hearing following an illness or trauma but after acquiring language, or by a parent or sibling of a child with a hearing loss, or by the hearing son/daughter of deaf parents. Couser warns that ‘The number of [published deaf] narratives is still so small that each new text is in danger of being taken as more representative than it could be’ (‘Signs of Life’ 283).

Because most of these writers experienced their deafness (or family member’s deafness) as a hearing loss, rather than as a sensory experience integral to the sense of self, it is possible to mount a case arguing that their stories are not primarily about the experience of deafness but are more about their apparently heroic responses to their loss, grief and subsequent journey towards acceptance. The fact that they lost their hearing somewhat clouds the issue, leading the average reader to therefore surmise that these ‘loss’ experiences are representative of all deaf people. They are not, but sightings of the pre-lingually deaf memoirist are as rare as Aspley Cherry-Garrard’s
penguin’s egg. (Aspley Cherry-Garrard was the author of *The Worst Journey in the World*, his account of the fatal Scott of the Antarctica expedition for the search of the emperor penguin’s eggs).

Thomas Couser has given his discussion of contemporary deafness narratives and their place within the genre of disability discourses an odd title—‘Signs of Life.’ It is presumably meant to be a play on words pertaining to Sign language, but it carries the tinge of hearing people’s doubts about the aliveness and intelligence of deaf people (‘deaf and dumb’). Couser suggests that the reader turn to Harlan Lane’s 1984 study, *The Deaf Experience: Classics in Language and Education* for a discussion of accounts by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europeans, and directs his own attention to late twentieth-century American memoirs by writers with moderate hearing loss, parental memoirs of deaf children, memoirs by hearing children of deaf parents, and Deaf versus deaf autobiographies. He also discusses the linguistic risks associated with translating Signed English into Deaf writing. Couser approaches deaf narratives as a question of defining the ‘deaf identity’ within, thus differing from Heuer in his essay, ‘Deafness as Conflict,’ who tackles it more as a question of the writer’s craft, of understanding the intention of what the writer wants to say.

Like Tillie Olsen in *Silences*, Couser recognises that ‘Some groups of individuals . . . find powerful cultural obstacles to life writing’ (6). He claims that the ‘Deaf community does not offer much cultural sanction for autobiography, and literacy in English tends to be low’ (6). He notes that people with a disability or illness often have to contend with ‘pervasive cultural discourses’ (31) from which they must reclaim their life story. Arthur Kleinman describes this dilemma more elegantly:

> Living and writing at the margin of the wider society . . . can be a statement about what is and what is not at stake. Perhaps it is only at the margin that we can find the space of critical engagement to scrutinize how certain of the cultural processes that work behind our backs come to injure us all, constraining our possibilities, limiting our humanity. And perhaps it is at the margin, not the centre, where we can find authorization to work out alternatives that can remake experience, ours and others (5).

Couser also points out the difficulty of autobiography in providing deaf people complete control over their self-presentation (226) but does not acknowledge his own complicity in this difficulty when he imposes his hearing judgments on the deafness narratives in his analysis. He seems to miss the irony of his admission that ‘Deaf children are apparently damned if they do and damned if they don’t try to talk’ (245), when he himself has a pathological script available to fit whatever choice the deaf and hearing-impaired memoirists make—denial, avoidance, faking, romanticising, minimising but never the possibility of successfully integrating the deaf and hearing elements of their personality. The one deaf writer Couser lets off the hook is Bernard Bragg
Lessons in Laughter) of whom he notes ‘the relative lack of introspection and reflection on what it is like to be deaf’ (273).

Bragg’s first language is American Sign Language and his memoir was signed to, and subsequently transcribed and edited by, Eugene Bergman, the co-editor of *Angels and outcasts: an anthology of deaf characters in literature* discussed in the previous chapter. Bragg’s story points to his impeccable ‘Deaf credentials’ (269) and his ‘world is populated by Deaf people’ (273) as he describes his success in making a life for himself almost exclusively within his deaf culture. The quality of his life arises from circumventing or battling against the demands of the hearing world, not by integrating into it. This, of course, carries the risk of being excluded from many of the opportunities of the hearing world. It is curious then, that Couser chooses to hold Bragg up as a model of ‘security in his Deaf identity’ (273) but finds one fault or another with the other deaf and hard-of-hearing memoirists who either aim to enjoy the opportunities of the hearing world or to move between their deaf and hearing lives.

Such a critical streak is not unusual, as Corker records in one of her client-narratives, ‘when I try to explain what my experience is, it is always disputed, it is never good enough for the [hearing] person who is on the receiving end of the explanation’ (Corker 108). Perhaps you have to be deaf to feel this particular sting, but there must be a space in which individual deaf people can write autobiographically and ‘gain recognition, acceptance and affirmation of deafness, without assumptions about “deaf identity” as the main driving force in their lives’ (Corker, 61).

**The Rise of Deaf ‘Voices’**

Christopher Heuer writes, ‘Autobiographies and biographies are merely stories, and stories cannot exist without some type of conflict . . . As we approach the task of relating and reliving the tensions of a deaf life through the craft of story-telling, does deafness become the central conflict, or does deafness instead become merely one component of it?’ (195). It is a good question which possibly points to my belief in the greater authenticity of the fictional representations of deafness than autobiographical ones. Writers of the linear-narrative style of fiction generally work with a cast of characters engaged in conflict, either with each other or against some external force. In contrast, autobiographers and memoirists are, more often than not, motivated by the drive to share their insights about those elements which they believe give their lives a certain shape.

This requires them to select just a few compelling incidents out of all the chaos of incidents that make up their real lives which, in turn, sets up the pretence that their lives have been strategically organised along a single trajectory, allowing them not only to explain their lives but perhaps also to adopt a persuasive position about the rightness of their life choices. Many, and
strike out towards some distant shore of achievement ‘despite’ their hearing loss. Their reflective tones may vary from a sort of acquiescent saintliness (Helen Keller) to dour accommodation (David Wright) and cheerful forbearance (Henry Kisor) but the reader is left in no doubt that their hearing loss is a challenge to be borne, overcome, and vanquished by whatever means is at their disposal. As for those means, it is telling that most deaf memoirists are writers by trade, be it as a journalist, poet, essayist, or novelist. All the same, the success of their memoirs as persuasive narratives depends on the reader’s willingness to accept the memoirist’s version of his or her account of deafness.

Helen Keller, David Wright, and Henry Kisor whose deafness memoirs observe the conventions of a simple linear story (‘and then this and then that’), expend much narrative energy downplaying the impact of their hearing loss on their lives. Even though they place their deafness (and in Keller’s case, blindness) as the central source of potential conflict in their lives, they emphasise the ‘ordinariness’ of their daily lives, thus draining their stories of narrative drama. Kisor’s take on his deaf life experiences is particularly brushed with a hearty grin-and-bear-it quality, although this does not entirely hold him back from the occasional outburst against people whom he perceives as having wounded him. (Kisor’s website at http://www.henrykisor.com/pigII.htm reports that he updated his memoir for publication in August 2010. The new edition addresses changes in the preceding twenty years arising from the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and advances in cochlear implants and communication technology).

Not all deaf writers assume the mantle of courage for the sake of their memoiristic reflections. Paul Jacob, a deaf Australian whose mother died when he was just a baby and who lost his hearing when he was five years old, writes from a deep well of melancholy (occasionally tinged with bitterness) in his memoir, Neither-Nor. Jacobs is frank in disclosing his struggle to define his sense of self in the wake of the losses in his life. Loneliness also surfaces as a strong theme in Gina Oliva’s book, Alone in the Mainstream, a hybrid of research, analysis, and memoir. In this study of the experiences of deaf and hard of hearing children in mainstreamed education in North America, Gina Oliva shares her own memoiristic reflections of attending a regular school as a solitary deaf student, alongside the stories of others who attended public schools as solitary deaf or hard of hearing students. Their personal stories comprise a mixture of the good and the bad. While Oliva’s study is a clarion call for the positive outcomes of mainstreamed education, the theme of social isolation nevertheless weaves its way strongly through the participants’ stories. In contrast, Christopher Heuer’s irreverent attitude to his hearing loss in his anthology of essays, BUG: Deaf Identity and Internal Revolution, is startling: he provokes the reader into gasps of laughter and discomfort at the same time. Heuer rails against the repercussions of his hearing loss with mordant
approach with the throw-away line, ‘Deal with it.’ While Heuer’s anthology is arguably not a memoir, his essays nevertheless tell the reader much about one young man’s responses to his deafness.

I turn now to discuss two examples of nineteenth-century ‘deaf and dumb’ memoirs; a mid-twentieth-century journalistic style memoir, Frances Warfield’s *Keep Listening* (1957); a selection from a recent anthology of deaf people’s writing: an extended essay-style memoir by Bainy Cyrus, ‘All Eyes’ from *Deaf Women’s Lives: Three Self-Portraits* (2006); and Hannah Merker’s book of meditative essays, *Listening*, (1994). I chose these because they offer competing insights into the impact of deafness and hearing loss on the memoir subjects’ lives, and illustrate the historical shifts in the representation of deafness, in particular the shifts in the ‘ownership’ of deaf narratives.

The earlier ‘memoirs’ were, in fact, usually not written by the deaf subjects themselves, and it is unclear—but probably unlikely—if they authorised those public written accounts of their private lives. As education became more available to deaf people and as their place in society became more visible, this gave rise to the increased possibility of deaf people writing their own life accounts, and thus ‘owning’ their life stories rather than having them appropriated by other commentators. I also chose to focus my attention on memoirs by deaf or hard-of-hearing women who did not use sign language as their first language because I was deliberate in seeking out the memoirs of other deaf women whose communication experiences most closely paralleled mine, that is, whose first language was spoken English.

*Memoir of John Kidd Raine, a Deaf and Dumb Boy* (unknown author) and *A Voice from the Dumb, a memoir of John William Lashford* by William Sleight

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the best known deaf people were male, and their diverse lives and experiences—ranging from mute wild boys to accomplished deaf scholars—were the subject of much discussion by philosophers and educators interested in the origin of language and ideas (Gitter 179-180). John Kitto, an English biblical scholar who lost his hearing as a twelve year old boy, was particularly well known in England and the United States through his partly autobiographical book, *The Lost Senses* (Gitter 194). However, the two ‘deaf and dumb’ memoirs selected for discussion here—*Memoir of John Kidd Raine, a deaf and dumb boy* by an unknown author and William Sleight’s *A Voice from the Dumb, a memoir of John William Lashford*—were not written by the memoir subjects themselves, but by people who knew and observed them. Thus, despite their categorisation as ‘memoir’ by their respective authors, these tracts are really short biographies. The experiences of the deaf subjects, John Kidd Raine and John
with the cultural beliefs at that time. In particular, a strong belief in redemption drives both narrators’ perceptions of these boys’ lives. They are not only ‘rescued’ from their ‘plight’ of deafness by being given the tools of writing, reading and comprehension, but the boys are also ostensibly brought closer to God.

John Kidd Raine’s unknown biographer begins his narrative with Raine’s birth at Barnard Castle, England, in April 1819 and ends it with his death on 5 February 1840. In fourteen short pages, Raine’s biographer reports on the demands of teaching deaf children and notes the need ‘to devise new methods of communicating knowledge’ (4). The thrust of this ‘memoir’ is that the deaf and dumb boy, ‘John Kidd Raine, with all his disadvantages, learned not only to read and write but learned the way to heaven’ (12). He achieved this—despite early incidents of drunkenness (5) and thievery (6)—upon being sent to the workhouse whereupon he was ‘was admitted as a scholar into the Wesleyan Methodist Sunday School, and there taught the way of salvation. The method employed for his instruction was in the first instance by giving him a knowledge of the deaf and dumb alphabet’ (7). His tuition became the subject of much public interest with spectators crowding around to watch him study and be examined on his religion lessons (9). ‘A great moral change’ (7) took place. Some time later, he became a teacher (11), and later still, he was a shoemaker’s apprentice until his untimely death a few years later, just short of his 21st birthday (13). The author concludes his narrative with the conviction that John Kidd Raine would go happily to heaven (14).

John Kidd Raine’s life is of interest to his unknown memoirist because of this conversion to a religious life, validating the memoirist’s conviction that the purpose of his tuition in reading and writing was to teach him ‘the wonderful works of God’ (9). The entire narrative is suffused with a sense of the narrator’s marvel, surprise and wonder at the educational and spiritual achievements of the deaf and dumb boy. Such a tone gives credence to Trenton Batson’s claim (‘The Deaf Person in Fiction: From Sainthood to Rorschacht Blot’ 17) that eighteenth and nineteenth-century writing sought to ‘clean up’ deaf characters and make them say and do the right things.

In a similar vein, A Memoir of John William Lashford reveals William Sleight to be a passionate advocate of education for deaf children who ‘if left uneducated, must live and die, “without hope and without God in the world”’ (ii) and ‘How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not read, and how shall they read without a teacher’ (iv). Sleight was a teacher of deaf children at the Brighton and Sussex Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, and evidently a keen scholar of deaf people’s lives as he authored another biography, Charles Lecorgne, the deaf mute of Normandy (1850).

The Lashford ‘memoir,’ published the year after his death in 1848, is essentially an anthology of letters, notes, conversational reports and reminiscences centring on the importance of
reading and writing skills which in turn resulted in his conversion to Christianity; and his subsequent religiosity. No debate takes place in the narrative about the advantages or disadvantages of signing versus speech. Instead, the focus is on educating John William Lashford to provide him with the ability to communicate, a strong sense of values based on the Bible and the teachings of Jesus Christ (33ff), a job as a teacher (58), and friends. Lashford was evidently gregarious as he wrote and received many letters. Several letters are included, thus providing the reader with direct access to his personality which seems cheerful, affectionate and diligent. (In contrast, Memoir of John Kidd Raine does not provide the reader with any direct access to his personality; we only have the unknown memoirist’s singular perspective of him. He remains ‘dumb’ to the reader). Like John Kidd Raine before him, Lashford died ‘happy’ and ‘without a struggle’ in the knowledge that he was going to the ‘glory’ of heaven (79).

**Frances Warfield and Keep Listening**

Frances Warfield, an American journalist and writer, wrote an early fictionalized memoir, *Cotton in My Ears* (1948) before writing a second reportage-style memoir, *Keep Listening* (1957) which takes place between the years 1933 to 1956. Both memoirs bear the hallmarks of her journalistic skills as she deftly converts the incidents of her life into stories replete with the tension of the diagnosis of hearing loss—‘Since childhood I had been somewhat hard of hearing, and under the care of the best ear specialists that could be found’ (*Keep Listening* 11). She describes the drama of adapting to her hearing impairment, and her grief and disappointment with self-deprecatory humour as she stumbles from mishap to mayhem. Each even has a happy ending, with a marriage proposal in the first fictionalized memoir and the restoration of her hearing through surgery in the second reportage-style memoir.

Thomas Couser discusses Warfield’s memoir from an identity perspective. I am more interested in the broader historical sweep that Warfield gives her memoir, and also acknowledge the personal significance of her memoir for me: hers was the first one that I read (and by then, I had read many) which reached out to me. I was engaged by Warfield’s memoir in a way that I had not been by Keller, Wright, or Kisor. My point here is not to undermine the value of these earlier writers but to bring to light my first experience of someone else’s story of their deaf experiences resonating for me in such a positive mentoring way that it gave me heart to proceed with my own writing project, *The Art of Being Deaf*.

*Keep Listening* opens with an absurd paragraph: ‘Many people who are hard of hearing would rather die than admit it. I know, because I was one of them. I used to spend a great deal of time thinking of ways to die, and once in my early thirties, I got as far as drowning myself’
surreptitiously to the Nitchie School of Lip-Reading’ (7). In the following three pages, she keeps up a ‘jolly hockey sticks’ tone of bravado which is amusing and distancing at the same time. She writes of her shame at being deaf, her attendance at lip reading classes, her assessment of the classes, her panic at what being deaf would mean to her life, and her flirtation with a man in the corridor outside the classroom while hiding the fact of her deafness from him, ‘Just suppose he had seen the title of that book’ [Lip-Reading Principles and Practice]. The twist in her tale arrives in the closing paragraph of the first chapter:

That was 1933 . . . But mine is not a story of conquest. It is a story of revolution. I am not hard of hearing anymore. Here is my story of the revolution that has taken place in my world and in the hard of hearing world during the past fifty years (10).

This cliff-hanger sets up the premise and the structure for the rest of the book.

The tone of Warfield’s narrative shifts. It becomes more reflective as Warfield uses her journalist skills to weave reportage into her life story, pegging it to major milestones in her self-described ‘rehabilitation.’ She does not like being hard-of-hearing, to the extent that she distances herself from any misapprehension by the reader that she is deaf. In fact, she writes most emphatically that she is not deaf:

These are, of course, two entirely different handicaps. The deaf are individuals who are born without hearing or who acquire complete or nearly total deafness before the acquisition of speech . . . With few exceptions, they live necessarily in a segregated world. The hard of hearing are those who acquired deafness after having heard normally and therefore acquired speech in the normal way. They live in no segregated world (77).

Couser worries about this, writing that she implies that deaf people ‘are evidently beyond redemption’ (234), but I did not read it so extremely, seeing it instead as a reasonable statement of historical accuracy at the time of her writing, during the nineteen-forties and nineteen-fifties. (The ‘few exceptions’ referred to by Warfield were probably those deaf people who had just enough residual hearing to enable them to lip-read, even without the aid of hearing devices. ‘Wearable hearing aids’ did not become mainstream until the nineteen-fifties when transistors revolutionised electronics).

A few pages later, Warfield shows the power of words to carry an emotion beyond their intended meaning, ‘In the normal hearing world, deaf was still a four letter word. Impaired hearing in 1948 remained as it was in 1933 when I began my revolt: It wasn’t quite nice’ (91). Here, I caught a glimpse into what it must have been like for my parents to discover my deafness in late 1957, almost three years after my birth. The delayed click of life’s chance meant that I was not snapped into an earlier time of a segregated life, but was caught at the margins of a modern time—a
Placing her life-story within the broader sweep of nineteenth and early twentieth-century history, Warfield reports on the history of the hearing aid (from the ear-trumpet to the first ‘wearable hearing aid’ which was nevertheless a cumbersome heavy battery affair, to the transistorised hearing aid of the early 1950s), the early days of the New York League for the Hard of Hearing, cultural attitudes towards deafness and hearing loss, and her own hopes about the future for people with hearing loss: ‘The hard of hearing can come out of isolation, get free from oversensitivity and self-pity. They are off Peculiar Street’ (156). While Warfield’s language is blunt, her views must be read within the context of her times. She observes her life from the perspective of someone who has lost her hearing and wants it back. She writes with the defensive humour of someone who has felt the humiliation of the loss of dignity alongside her loss of hearing: ‘Once [Dr Phillips, an otologist] mentioned hearing aids and I looked right at him and said, “I’ll die first”’ (12). She also writes with the activist’s desire to educate the reader, born of her keenness to share her insights with as many people as possible about the benefits of managing her hearing loss:

Perhaps that was the chief thing I learned, during the 1930s, from lip reading. To hold my head up. It made a lot of difference. I was beginning to like myself a little bit better. I was beginning to like other people, for a change, instead of tying myself into knots trying to make them like me’ (43).

But the quality that sets Warfield apart from other writers of deafness (memoir or fiction) is her detachment from her subject, that is, herself. She writes with a historian’s perspective and a journalist’s lack of sentiment.

Reading Frances Warfield’s memoir of her deaf life was like reading letters from a much loved aunt about the impact of her hearing loss on her life, and her relationship with her ‘hard-of-hearingness.’ Her story reached out to me down through the history of years to such an extent that I realised that I would have liked such a mentor in my own life. The force of this realisation winded me. I felt the warmth of an imagined friendship with Warfield and the chill of its absence. I was disappointed, then, to learn at the conclusion of Warfield’s memoir that her opening chapter’s proclamation ‘I am not hard of hearing anymore’ is literal. Thus, she had written her memoir as a fully hearing woman and so we did not have our deafness in common after all. For some reason, I had assumed that her proclamation was an allusion rather than a sensory truth. I thought it alluded to Warfield having won a newly forged sense of identity that was not so contingent upon how much she could or could not hear. I thought her memoir would be about the successful integration of her deaf life experiences in the hearing world. But no, Warfield is consistent to the end in her dislike of her hearing loss.

The premise of her memoir is that hearing loss has a detrimental impact on people’s lives
being’s basic needs: love, self-acceptance, financial and social adequacy. It can bring tension, anxiety and fear’ (95). She regards her ultimate triumph as being the recovery of her hearing through surgery but not before she undergoes some soul-searching. Warfield reflects upon her reluctance to give up her status as hard-of-hearing despite the availability of new surgical technology/intervention that would most likely restore her hearing; she wonders if she is guilty of capitalising on any perceived advantages of disability. She describes the process of hearing, the mechanics of the ear, and the power of surgical intervention in a way that parallels contemporary discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of cochlear implants.

Warfield’s memoir could be regarded as ‘A conversion narrative, with its sudden and profound change in the status of the narrator’ (Couser 233), but it is equally a narrative in which the heroine triumphs by deliberately erasing her ‘adversity.’ She makes the source of her adversity disappear, which might be comforting to the hard-of-hearing reader seeking such a solution but it also packs the punch of the sell-out, the Hollywood happy-ever-after ending that discomforts the reader because of the realpolitiks hollowness of this hope. By ending her memoir with the resurrection of her hearing through surgery, Warfield runs the risk of implying that the wholeness of her life is also resurrected. Fortunately, Warfield’s memoir is more textured than either of these labels suggest because she tackles so many issues, giving them a historical sweep as well as an immediately personal perspective. Her sense for history distinguishes her memoir from other deaf memoirs which tend to be more inwardly-directed, if not self-absorbed. She conveys a strong understanding of the historicity of the cultural and technological responses to her hearing loss, signaling not only her research into what has gone before but also her hopes for the future. This helps her to emerge from her memoir as a sympathetically decent character. She is flawed, funny, and brave in the face of her fears, ‘My strenuous busyness was convincing; even my good friends were taken in. But for all my gyrating, I was not moving; simply turning faster and faster inside my somewhat-loosened shell. Still hiding. Still afraid’ (59).

The absence of self pity in her writing is appealing as is her enthusiasm in sharing what she has learnt about deafness, hearing technology and cultural attitudes towards hearing loss:

During the six months after I delivered my manuscript to the publisher and before Cotton came out, friends said, ‘Hello, what are you up to these days?’

‘I’ve just finished a book.’

‘Wonderful. What’s it about?’

‘It’s about me.’

‘Delightful. What about you?’

‘It’s about what it’s like to be hard of hearing.’
Dead silence. Pained, embarrassed expression on the face. Desperate pawing of the air for some way to change the subject’ (93).

It was all right. I didn’t blame them. But I did want to talk about impaired hearing. To do something, no matter how small, to help explode the persistent evasion and hush-hush (94).

Warfield’s advocacy is so insistent that it hints at the possibility that surgery may have delivered the sense of hearing to her but she is still, at heart, ‘a hard of hearing person,’ in the same way that deaf people who benefit from hearing technology or cochlear implants usually still understand themselves to be ‘deaf’ or ‘hard of hearing.’ She concludes her book with an optimistic prophecy of hope in which she suggests that the late twentieth-century will not see any divisions between ‘handicapped and unhandicapped’ people. She writes, ‘I think there will be just people. People of different capacities, at different stages of physical, emotional and mental development—all in the process of becoming whole’ (158). Her prophecy is yet to be fulfilled, but it doesn’t hurt to repeat it.

‘All Eyes’ by Bainy Cyrus and Listening by Hannah Merker

Bainy Cyrus’s extended essay-memoir, ‘All Eyes,’ and Hannah Merker’s book, Listening (also excerpted in Jill Jepson’s anthology of literature by deaf and hard of hearing writers, Walls of Stone 1994), are stylistically very different from each other and from their predecessors. Cyrus’s writing is an unadorned statement of the facts as she remembers and experiences them, while Merker’s writing is self-consciously literary and exploratory. More significantly, the appearance of their life stories in two separate anthologies of writing by deaf and hard-of-hearing writers suggests the emergence of a diaspora of such writers, marking an unheralded shift since the days of the memoirs of ‘a deaf and dumb boy.’

Bainy Cyrus’s essay, ‘All Eyes,’ is one of three essays by deaf women in an anthology with the eponymous title Deaf Women’s Lives: Three Self Portraits (2005). All three women attended oral deaf schools but their life-stories depart from that unifying feature. Their stories have undoubtedly been chosen because of their diversity, which includes the experiences of a young Jewish deaf girl in war-time England (Eileen Katz) and the world travels of a proselytizing advocate for total communication (Frances Parsons).

Cyrus’s essay is essentially a statement about the potency of influences in the first few years of any child’s life. However, Cyrus also emphasizes the role of her predominantly oral education during the 1960s and 1970s in determining the quality of her life. Her essay is undeviatingly linear in its autobiographical approach and adopts an informative tone of voice that not only excludes doubt, but is also free of self pity and narcissism. Towards the end of her essay, she implies that this
I appreciated my own life as a deaf person. I was finally at ease with my disability’ (90). An essay free of self pity and triumphalism, Bainy Cyrus’s clear-as-a-bell honesty increases her authority; she has the reader leaning into the page to learn more.

In telling her life-story, Bainy Cyrus is empathetic about the impact of her deafness on her family and on her friendships. She places any hardships that she experienced within the social and historical context of her times. Sometimes, she appears a little too forgiving, for example, on writing about the late diagnosis of her deafness: ‘This paediatrician expressed remorse for not noticing my abnormality sooner. I understand that back then in the early 1960s, pediatricians knew little about the symptoms of any disability’ (3). She goes on, ‘Any of those doctors could have immediately suggested the use of amplification once the hearing impairment was diagnosed, but back in the 1960s, technology wasn’t well advanced’ (5-6). She was four and a half years old before she was finally fitted with a hearing aid, which is very late.

Cyrus describes her oral education lessons in detail, evoking nostalgia with her images of balls, hands on cheeks, puffing and microphones. She describes how deaf people hear and explains why their voices sound flat and unmelodic. She also describes how deaf laughter is usually either silent or inappropriately loud. She describes her emotions in transferring from an oral deaf school to a mainstream school in third grade, igniting my own recollections: ‘As I stood facing my new fellow third graders, a feeling of uneasiness swept over me’ (34).

Her description of the changing nature of her friendships with her deaf friends, Cheryl and Dianne, draws attention. During their adolescence, they found themselves moving away from their shared childhoods of an exclusively deaf world towards adult lives which straddled different worlds, that is, entirely hearing (Bainy), entirely Deaf community (Cheryl), and a bit of both (Dianne). They had to renegotiate their friendships with each other. Cyrus’s honesty in describing her flawed approach to this is moving, and demonstrates her strength of character.

Bainy Cyrus is grateful for her oral education and has no desire to cast herself in the role of ‘oppressed’ or her parents as ‘oppressors.’ She is also uncomfortable with some of her deaf friends’ anger towards their parents for forcing oralism on them (86-89). Her discussion of the oralism versus signing debate is restrained and compassionate, providing guidance to anyone trying to find their own response to it. She concludes her essay-memoir:

Hearing and deaf people need to share. Hearing people shouldn’t ignore deaf people and deaf people shouldn’t resent hearing people. It’s time to break ground and get to work. We need to build a bridge and cross it soon. It has been too long (90).

Hannah Merker writes that her book of essays, Listening, is not a memoir as ‘that is another book’
sound which she misses deeply (Couer 236). Nevertheless, Listening, reads like a memoir, one which traces Merker’s quest to understand the mystery of silence. Merker is Spartan in exposing information about her personal life both before and after her hearing loss as a result of a skiing accident when she was thirty-nine years old, which she also recounts with stripped-bare simplicity:

I do not remember leaving the top. Or falling. I do remember being aware of the quiet, the silence, as if everyone had left the hill and I was there alone. I opened my eyes . . . I could see that people were talking, a movie with the sound system suddenly silenced (6).

She describes her hearing loss as ‘A state akin to being adrift in a fog where the edges of nearby land, other fog-bound craft, are barely visible . . . something is there but definition is vague’ (66). She acknowledges her fears, ‘Cut off, alone in a scary isolation. The world is running forward and you cannot keep up’ (67).

Despite the trauma which would surely have been profound, Merker’s book is shaped by her theme that, ‘The world becomes larger as the mind reawakens to the soaring symphony of everyday life’ (2). She inverts the usual story of hearing loss to make it a story of listening-gain by describing what emerges for her when she listens with all her senses, including her senses of memory and imagination. She uses the artist’s skill of perceiving ‘negative space’ (as in a black and white print of a still-developing photograph in a dark-room) to describe what she hears now, in the place of what she heard before. It is an unusual approach and, inevitably, Merker does not succeed in disguising her longing for the return of her former world of sound, but it is a rewarding approach because of all that she teaches about sound. For example, she writes about her partner’s description of a fog-horn as a ‘Sound not unlike the open G string’ and then tries ‘To recall the rich tone of a violin’s lowest string unstopped by fingers, a plucked evocation of a rising and falling of vibrating air. Once I knew the foghorn, the G string’ (64).

Merker signals her anthropomorphic approach to sound on the first page: ‘The silence around me is invisible’ (1). By describing it as an entity which cannot be seen, she makes silence a character in her story, rich with all the possibilities of a yet-to-be-described personality. In the following essays, Merker describes the act of listening, the physiology of hearing, and asks ‘When is sound noise?’ (126)

(I read one such essay while sitting on a park bench by the Brisbane River. The river current was moving swiftly and I imagined its sound as the slurry of autumn leaves being raked across grass. As I read Merker’s description of the act of listening, I became hyper-alert to the sound of a bird’s persistent call, to the cries and squeals of children playing on the park swings, to the wind rustling through my hearing aids, to a mechanical sound the origin of which I could not define—was it an electric saw perhaps, or the grinding of truck gears? The backdrop of these sounds in that
sounds in peace, uninterrupted by the real-world noise all around me. I marvelled at her curiosity about the ear’s physiology and her longing for sound. I have never been curious about how my ears work or do not work. I have certainly never researched it. I do not long for sounds. Listening and hearing are, for me, plainly functional activities to keep me connected to my world of family, friends and work. I rarely seek out sound just for the joy or comfort of it, the exception being music which I do seek out and enjoy very much. But mostly, and especially when I am alone, I strive to tune out, to avoid sound, to minimize it as much as possible.

The act of listening is elevated to ‘the language of listening’ in Merker’s discussion of Sign which she extols as ‘That exquisite choreography of silent movement and expression and fluttering fingers’ (66). Despite this show of enthusiasm for Sign language, Merker is apparently not skilled in it and her advocacy for it in just one brief paragraph seems tokenistic. Her brevity also plays to the hearing person’s typically Hydra-headed attitude to Sign—generous in lauding its beauty but slow to accept it as a valid language, let alone learn it. In any case, not all people sign well. Some people are ungainly in their signing techniques just as some people have harsh voices. Of course, a beautifully signed conversation is something to behold; I recall meeting an elderly man who signed as fluidly as if his hands were catching falling folds of silk.

Merker draws the reader’s sympathy because she is writing as someone who continues to mourn a loss. She attempts to reconcile with her loss, not by overcoming it or battling it as if her hearing loss is an enemy, but by immersing herself imaginatively in her world of muted sound in all its variations. Unlike Bainy Cyrus and Frances Warfield, she lets in few incidents and even fewer people. Despite her belated disclaimer at the end of her book that it is not intended to be a memoir, her essays nevertheless give the impression that she is insulated in a bubble: the reader is provided with little insights into her life beyond her compass point of hearing loss. In her book, Merker’s relationship with sound, dogged by her longing for it, becomes her entire story.

All three women—Frances Warfield, Bainy Cyrus, and Hannah Merker—write assertively and confidently about their experiences, providing the reader with varied insights into the possibilities of contemporary deaf lives. Cyrus exposes the shifts and strains in her relationships as a result of her deafness; Warfield whips up the mayhem of a busy urban life with its jangle of noise and confusion; and Merker backs away from such complexity as she set herself a different narrative quest, distilling her story to the rhythms of sounds.

Mindful as I am of Couser’s warning not to overstate the representative qualities of just a few published deaf narratives (‘Signs of Life’ 283), I hesitate to corral these memoirs into a single ‘finding.’ However, we can glean some unifying themes. The reader learns much about the
people in all the memoirs discussed in this chapter. Despite the longstanding perception of deaf people as ‘isolated,’ the deaf subject in memoir is placed firmly within the context of his or her times: the reader sees, and comes to know, the deaf subject within the swirl of life taking place either around or with the deaf subject. Each memoir acts as a call to arms: in each, the memoirist advocates for a better understanding of the difficulties and possibilities of deaf lives. Each memoir also draws the reader’s attention, either by allusion or by direct discussion, to the importance of education, work, and relationships (family and friendships) to the quality of deaf people’s lives. Taken together, all the memoirs discussed in this chapter provide a historical sweep, illustrating the improved quality of deaf people’s lives, notwithstanding their difficulties, and their ability to speak up for themselves—that is, to ‘own’ and write their life-stories—compared with those of the ‘deaf and dumb boys’ of the nineteenth century.

**Contesting Cultural Clichés**

Novelists and memoirists—be they deaf or hearing—must keep up with the times when writing about deafness and deaf people, and inject their stories with respect for contemporary understandings about disability, deafness and identity—wars if they are ‘To disrupt patterns of perception familiar to the reader’ (Shelley Fisher Fishkin, 135). They ought to contest cultural clichés about deafness and the lives of deaf people.

Despite his authorial reputation, David Lodge’s 2008 autobiographical novel, *Deaf Sentence*, fails this test. (Of course, reading this novel as strictly autobiographical is problematic as we do not know what is fiction and what is autobiographical, other than that both Lodge and his novel’s narrator, Professor Bates, have age-related hearing loss). In *Deaf Sentence*, the narrator, Professor Desmond Bates, who is nearing retirement adopts an unrelieved ‘grumpy old man’ approach in his reflections on his age-related deafness. As foreshadowed by the novel’s title, Professor Bates plays a one-note song of self-pity as he tells his story of his deteriorating hearing, yielding only once or twice to sardonic doubts about the authenticity of his reflections: ‘I was almost persuaded by my own story, moved by the pathos of my imagined plight’ (151). Self-pity may be a predictable response to hearing loss but it is an unattractive trait that leaves little room for new self-knowledge when sustained for the duration of the novel. While it would be unreasonable to expect any person, fictional or real, who has enjoyed hearing all his life to adapt quickly to his hearing loss and simultaneously develop a deaf consciousness, it is reasonable to assume that a writer of Lodge’s stature and experience would have taken the time to bone up on his deaf literary predecessors with a view to enriching his own narrative. The sole deaf exemplar from whom the narrator, Professor Bates, draws some sort of companionable consolation is Beethoven—an all too
oft-quoted example by hearing people seeking to establish a knowing nod in conversations with deaf people, as if Beethoven is the only other deaf person in history.

It could perhaps be argued that David Lodge is disrupting ‘patterns of perception’ in his novel. After all, how well does the general public understand the consequences of age-related hearing loss let alone deafness? Certainly, I have already been taken to task for the severity of my judgement by colleagues who have reminded me the issues arising from elderly hearing loss are of a different order from the issues arising from congenital deafness such as mine. I agree. However, given that David Lodge has openly declared that he is losing his hearing and said in a 20 April 2008 Sunday Times interview that he wrote this novel to explore the implications of that loss, the shallowness of the deaf narrator’s reflections remains surprising. It is certainly a missed opportunity for a deeper and more rounded personal story of hearing loss, albeit fictionalized, instead of serving up the old ‘plight’ story of deafness under the guise of comic satire (and, coincidentally, confirming Christopher Krenz’s observation about the absence of strong deaf male characters in fiction (105)). Lodge’s tin ear is particularly disappointing as his novel seems so unmindful of his writing predecessors—hearing and deaf, novelists and memoirists.

In contrast, Philip Zazaove’s 2009 novel, Four Days in Michigan, a family saga set in contemporary Michigan (North America), shows both the depth and vivacity of his deaf characters’ lives. Zazaove who declares in the preface that he has a profound hearing loss (apparently since childhood), takes the reader into the fictional lives of two families as he weaves the story of a disrupted romance between Sandra who is deaf and Rudy who is hearing. (Again, we see the feminisation of deafness). Their story is told from the perspective of the now elderly and ill Sandra as she reminisces about her long ago affair with Rudy—those four days in Michigan—and spans several decades, from the early years of World War Two up to today. Through Sandra, the novel’s narrator, Zazaove takes the reader on a Frommer’s tour of historical and contemporary deaf family life, deaf politics, deaf education (taking in the historical inequities of educational opportunities for deaf people), religious cultures, North American history (highlighting its melting-pot immigrant culture) and Washington politics.

Conversations are represented in this novel as being conveyed in both American Sign Language and in spoken English. The bilingualism is not laboured as the switch from one language to the other is smoothly illustrated by such simple words (and their variations) as ‘sign,’ ‘said,’ and ‘watch.’ The attentive gaze is also a recurring motif, as it is in the novels by Vikram Seth, T.Coraghessan Boyle and Frances Itani. However, the narrative momentum from this novel arises from the zeal with which Zazaove plots the consequences of the differences between the two families, not only because one is hearing and the other is deaf, but also because the former is
daughter. Thus, the narrative conflict sought by Christopher Heuer in stories of deafness lies not only in the differences that arise between deaf and hearing people, but also in the conflicts arising from the different philosophical values of their religions and family expectations.

I have also remarked on Philip Zazaove’s novel because novels about deaf lives by deaf writers published by mainstream publishers (that is, other than specialist/educator publishers such as Gallaudet University Press) are still so unusual. The reasons for this are not clear. It could be because mainstream publishers do not consider novels about deaf lives to be a commercially attractive proposition, or there may be a manifest disinterest by the ‘general reader’ about such novels. However, it is more likely to be the case that there are few deaf and hard of hearing writers who are keen, willing, and able to write novels featuring deaf characters wrestling with the same issues of love, conflict, adversity, adventure, redemption and all those elements of narrative that feature in any novel. One successful published deaf Australian novelist confessed her own reticence to me in these words: ‘I would feel as though I was cheating in some way if I wrote about deaf people in my novels. I would feel too much as though I was writing about me.’

This brings me to my next point about writing against the cultural currents. Given the rarity of published deaf lives by deaf writers, it appears that deaf people are turning to the internet to tell and receive stories of deaf lives. Web-logging (or ‘blogging’ as it is more commonly known) and video-blogging (also known as ‘vlogging’ or ‘vidding’) have become important vehicles for deaf writing. On 27 September 2010, my Google search pulled up 267,000 results in 0.04 seconds in response to the key words ‘deaf blogs’ and 5,520 results in 0.15 seconds in response to the key words ‘deaf vlogs’ (with ‘Youtube’ being a significant publishing outlet). Titles included compilations of ‘best of,’ information directories, dating services for deaf people, and advisory outlets in addition to blogs for short stories and mini-biographies, for examples:

http://www.deafread.com/ (Deaf Read: Best of Deaf Blogs and Vlogs);
http://www.deafspot.net/deafblogs/index.html (Deaf Blogs.net: deaf weblog directory);

Examining this internet ‘deaf publishing’ phenomenon is beyond the scope of this particular essay, but Australian academics, Mary Power and Des Power, have examined the enthusiastic adoption by deaf people of short messaging services (SMS) in their article, ‘Everyone here speaks TXT: Deaf people using SMS in Australia and the rest of the world.’ In addition, even a cursory review of the deaf blogs appears to indicate that the internet is creating spaces for deaf people to be more widely heard and seen in unprecedented volumes through their on-line auto/biographies and exchange of stories, albeit in short bursts of self-commentaries, information, advice and general
chronology of life narratives. In doing so, they may, just possibly, be creating a new wave of deaf histories (or ‘herstories’), breaking free of the constraints and clichés of the hearing world’s perceptions of deaf people’s lives.

While the lives of deaf people seem to be invisible to the general population, and while the field of literary studies is largely silent about representations of deafness and deaf lives in all genres of literature—most such scholarship has been undertaken by writers and academics who are deaf or hard of hearing—there is, nonetheless, a substantial body of literature featuring deaf lives. The observation by scholars such as Batsman, Bergman, Miller and Krentz that deaf characters largely tend to shoulder the literary tasks of alienation, loneliness and grief is borne out. However, in focusing on the dominance of this particular trope, we cannot ignore the considerable diversity that is contained in those narratives, fictional and memoiristic, about deafness and deaf people’s lives.

Reading historical and contemporary fictional representations of deafness and memoirs of deaf people’s lives can guide us into learning much, not just about deafness and hearing loss, but also about the social, cultural and educational values of the day. We can learn what works and what doesn’t work, while being mindful of Ato Quayson’s warning that ‘The epistemological effect of representation is quite different from the emotional effects of misunderstanding and stereotyping in the real world’ (30). As a result of our close reading of deaf narratives, we can reflect upon why certain beliefs, attitudes and values in a particular historical era were held about deaf people, and perhaps as a result of our reflections, we might be moved to change the world rather than just read and comment on it.

Certainly, this has been my own experience. We must all take our sense of connectedness from where we can best find it. For some deaf people, it is within their own Deaf community. For others such as myself—those of us ‘oral-deaf people’ who find our way predominantly in the hearing world while acquiescing to the struggles, discomfort and difficulties that arise—such a sense of connectedness can, perhaps, be buried or lost. Being able to access the heritage of deaf memoirs, biographies, and life narratives can be enormously helpful: it is as if the hand of mentoring reaches down to the reader across the span of history. Although I do not identify myself as being ‘culturally deaf,’ (insofar as I do not belong to a specific Deaf community), undertaking the extensive reading of deaf narratives during the course of this research project changed my own self-concept as a deaf woman. I enjoyed the companionability of it, but only once I got over my fright at seeing so many different documented versions of deaf experiences, and it was a fright. For a while there, it was like walking through the Hall of Mirrors in Luna Park. Did I really look like that? Or no, perhaps I was like that? But no, here’s another turn, another mirror, another face.
It was only when I stopped searching for the right mirror, the single defining portrait, that I enjoyed seeing my deaf-self/hearing-persona experiences reflected in, or challenged by, what I read. The fictional imaginings by hearing and deaf writers of deaf characters, the observations of biographers of deaf people, and the recollections of deaf memoirists stirred into fresh life my own buried memories, prompting me to review them so that I could examine my responses to those experiences more contemplatively and less reactively than I might have done originally.
Chapter 4
Disruptions: The Reluctant Memoirist

Having read and critiqued several novels with deaf characters and memoirs by deaf writers, I was now faced with the task of composing my own narrative of deafness with a view to answering several questions about the impact of my deafness upon my life. I wanted the answers to those questions to be crafted in a fresh way to shake stale perceptions of deafness and what it means to be deaf. In this chapter, I describe how I tackled this challenge.

I was daunted by the prospects of breaching my own privacy as well as intruding upon the privacy of others. This was a troubling hurdle as I did not want my memoir to be an exercise in disability tourism for the curious but merely idle reader. I was mindful, too, of the ‘Catch-22’ involved in writing my memoir. My parents’ benchmark for my ‘success’ as a deaf woman was the degree to which I blended in with, and integrated into, the hearing world and yet, to answer the questions of others about my deafness, I was required to elevate myself above the tidewater of anonymous integration. Given that personal privacy was being sacrificed, I wanted my memoir to matter, to grab the reader’s attention and give them pause to reflect, to wonder, and perhaps even to provoke them into asking more questions that might bring about an improved understanding of the lives (and needs) of deaf people.

How was I to do this? I had observed that most memoirists seemed to write with the narrator’s voice of certainty. Their writing portrayed confidence in their knowledge of how certain events and circumstances affected their lives, giving their narratives the propulsive trajectory of the archer’s arrow—straight ahead with only a slight arc before landing in the bull’s-eye of the summative conclusion. Whether their confidence was deserved or flawed depended on the reader’s willingness to accept the memoirist’s version of events, but their trump card would always be, ‘It happened to me. I remember.’ In addition, even allowing for the memoirist’s usual concession that memory deceives, many deaf and hard-of-hearing memoirists seemed to derive their narrative certainty from their recollection of a time before their hearing loss. They remembered that time as their lost paradise of perfect hearing. Their memoirs came with the archetypal back-story of happy times disrupted by the devastation of illness or other trauma bringing with it the carnage of hearing loss. Their narrative task was to convey their capacity to endure, to conquer, to achieve, to quell: to do whatever it took to overcome this terrible thing that had befallen them. I, on the other hand, have no such memory of hearing loss because I was born deaf. My memory is not of hearing-like. Unlike most deaf memoirists, I have no sense of being a prisoner of silence or any other such thing. So when people tell me how well I have done in my life despite my
deafness, I want to rail against the persistently held belief of others that my deafness has been my life’s burden. It has not.

But having made this claim, my confidence ebbed away. I did not really know the extent to which my deafness affected my life and the lives of others, in particular the lives of my family, because like David Wright, ‘About deafness, I know everything and nothing’ (5). Despite being deaf all my life, I knew little about it other than my own experience of it, and I made little effort until recent years to understand myself in relation to my deafness. In my memoir, The Art of Being Deaf, I took on this task of self-examination and set about answering such questions as: Who am I in relation to my deafness? What does my being deaf mean in relation to other people? What additional tasks in developing my sense of self have I had to take on board (or avoid) because I am different from other people? (Corker, 4). Brenda Jo Brueggeman’s 2009 study, Deaf Subjects: Between Identities and Places, captures the nature of my quest when she writes:

"Lately, the deaf subject is also anxious. She is anxious about her identity, anxious about her place, anxious too about her anxiety. Attempting to cope with her anxiety, she tries to remember what some philosophers and great authors have told her about her subjectivity, her anxiety, and the placing and questioning of her very identity (1)."

Writing any memoir is like building a relief map of one’s life with hills, valleys and plateaus, with the rivers, creeks and lakes flowing through the eruptions in the earth. In my memoir of deafness, I foreground incidents associated with my being deaf as if they have been the consistently solid hills and valleys in my life. However, in my memoir of my grief following the death of my son, Jack—published in Australia by Allen & Unwin in 1991 as Jack’s Story—I did not mention the fact of my deafness at all. Not once. In the immediate aftermath of my son’s death, my grief consumed all my attention, and even now, over two decades later, it remains an attendant hum to my days. Evidently, there is a shakiness of perspective in memoir writing.

My memoir of grief also differs from my memoir of deafness in its impetus. This may seem self-evident given the respective topics but it has implications for the reader’s access to my emotions and ideas in both narratives. Jack’s Story is essentially a tidied-up version of my daily journal entries over a period of almost two years. During this time, my emotions in all their turbulence were highly accessible to me and thus also to the reader. However, in The Art of Being Deaf, I had to work hard at remembering not just incidents but the emotions I attached to them at that time, whilst bringing forward those remembered emotions into the present day for the purpose of reflecting on, and interpreting, those incidents and emotions all over again. Sometimes, my remembrances yielded to mellowness and humor; sometimes to renewed anger and distress.

One thing was certain right from the start. I would not, could not, and refused to, frame my
reasons. Firstly, I understood my external experiences of *deafness* to have been largely a series of adaptations to specific incidents ranging from the hurtful and irritating to the difficult and outrageous, rather than an uninterrupted struggle against hardship. At the same time, my inner sense of myself as ‘*being deaf*’ has been mostly sanguine. Secondly, the ‘triumph over adversity’ memoir usually starts with the premise that life was good until some terrible thing happened. The memoir then unfolds as a series of dire consequences and apparently insurmountable obstacles against which the heroic writer successfully battles. The memoirist’s character emerges as a survivor. In contrast, the narrative arc of my life has been (and, of course, continues to be) less apparent. My struggles have had less to do with the specific auditory detail of my deafness and more to do with the general questions of life that confront all of us. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, my deafness emerged fully formed with my birth, and so I did not experience that cataclysmic fracture between ‘*hearing*’ and ‘*no hearing*’ described so vividly by other memoirists who became deaf through illness or trauma. Thus, the unfolding of my story is not about conquering battles, but about inviting the reader into my world to see what it feels and sounds like. The narrating ‘*I*’ character in my memoir unfolds as a searcher, and that search is not limited to understanding my deafness but extends to understanding the nature of my relationships with others, including the search for love.

I understand that my mother may regard me as her triumph because she established the foundations for my deaf-hearing life with all its opportunities according to her vision and hopes for me, but it does not follow that I therefore regard myself, or my life, as a triumph simply by dint of succeeding as a deaf woman in the hearing world. My life, like the lives of possibly most people, has been an accidental series of incidents, events, and explorations linked by long periods of tedium in which little or nothing seems to happen. I was about half-way through writing my memoir when I read Paul John Eakin’s analysis of Jonathon Franzen’s essay, ‘My Father’s Brain’ which Eakin describes as ‘An unusually nuanced treatment of the connection between narrative and identity’ (*Living Autobiographically* 52). Eakin characterises Jonathon Franzen’s essay as:

> two stories of the will—the father’s and the son’s—to maintain the integrity of selfhood. Moreover, Franzen deliberately makes it impossible to separate these twin stories of the will: what he is and what his father is, are both bound up in the stories—‘his story’—and ‘my story of myself’—that expresses their linked identities (55).

This seemed relevant to the themes in my memoir of deafness. I saw how my early life had been shaped by the exertion of my mother’s will so that I gained the necessary competencies to participate fully as a deaf woman in the hearing world. I also accepted that I had been a largely unreflective but usually compliant accomplice to my mother’s will. I saw too how my exploration into my relationship with my deafness entailed separating my will from hers—even if it still came
hearing world. The external bearings of my life were not at issue for me. I had no quarrel with the quality of my life: the positive results of access to education, meaningful work, reasonable income, an attractive home, and loving friendships all spoke for themselves. What was at stake was my own personal understanding of myself, or as Eakin might define it, separating my mother’s will from the private essence of my hearing persona/deaf identity. Of course, this task is not peculiar to deaf people. All children need to undertake the adult task of separating from their parents, but it is possibly more apparent for deaf children, especially those who are born into hearing families.

Shaping my discoveries
I originally planned to explore my relationship with my deafness through the multiple-threads of writing several personal essays, with each essay tackling a separate topic such as education, work, family life, friendships, spirituality, music and so on, as my story-telling vehicle rather than as a single-thread memoir of deafness. Because I was conscious that ‘identity narratives generate identity judgements’ (Eakin, Living Autobiographically 141), I thought that the multiple-thread approach to crafting my memoir might avoid the pitfalls of a single identity-driven linear narrative in which I unwittingly set myself up as an exemplar of one sort or another, be it as a ‘successful deaf person’ or as an ‘angry militant deaf activist’ or as ‘a deaf individual in denial attempting to pass as hearing.’ But in seeking to avoid these sorts of stories, what autobiographical story was I trying to tell?

Because, other than being deaf, my life was not especially unusual. It has been pitted here with deep sadness and lifted there with joy, but it has been mostly a plateau held stable by the grist of daily life. I am not being self-effacing here: having read the autobiographies of David Wright and Henry Kisor, I wonder whether their stories would have been published if they had not been deaf, because their rendering of their day-to-day lives is not the stuff of suspense. Christopher Jon Heuer recognises this dilemma when he writes, ‘neither autobiography nor biography nor fiction can survive without discord. Without it, we are left with boredom. Without it, what we have is the lack of a point, a theme and a plot’ (‘Deafness as Conflict’ 196).

I embarked on the task of writing The Art of Being Deaf with the conviction that I had something positive to say and demonstrate about my deaf life, but as the project proceeded, I stumbled. In the absence of my deaf friends or mentors, and in the climate of my own reluctance to discuss my concerns with hearing people who, when I flagged any anxieties about issues arising from my deafness, tended to be hearty and upbeat in their responses, I had to work things out for myself. Hindsight told me that I may have downplayed much of my deafness-related difficulties, leaving the heavy lifting work to my parents, teachers, work colleagues and friends—‘For it is the
complying with what was expected of me, usually to good practical effect but at the cost of enriching my understanding of myself and, possibly, even at the cost of intimacy.

When this latter possibility reared its head, my project hit the wall. I lived alone and was not in a relationship; I did not like this. I wanted to be part of something—a family—and I wanted to enjoy the give and take of a special relationship, an intimate relationship. Did my deafness or my being deaf have anything to do with this? I did not know. Coincidentally, at this time, a screenwriting workshop by Michael Hauge provided me with a fresh insight which in turn set me on a new path in crafting my memoir. In his lectures and books on screenwriting, Hauge talks and writes about the ‘hero’s wound.’ He says that it usually happens in early life and certainly by adolescence; it is the hero’s task (or heroine as the case may be) to identify and resolve that wound and its consequences. I wondered if my wound was not so much my deafness but the separation from my childhood deaf friends which in turn set up the habit of guardedness and self-sufficiency within me, thus forestalling any real prospects of an enduring intimate relationship.

In any event, I changed my mind about writing a series of essays on discrete topics. I saw that I could solve the problems of triumphalism, the one-dimensionality of the conventional disability memoir, and the risks of disability tourism by weaving my memoir around two narrative arcs. These were, firstly, my quest to understand my relationship to my deafness and its impact on my life, and, secondly, my adult quest for enduring romantic love.

Thus, using memory work and increasingly mindful of the multiple identity perspectives that emerge in memoir (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 22 & 72), I unfold my story as narrator and subject, child and adult. I show that other things arrest my attention more vigorously than my own deafness. I show the layered complexities of my life. It is not just a ‘deaf life,’ it is a busy life with the same concerns, including love, as any other person. Just as ‘Other people are not the failed attempts to be you,’ so deaf people are not the failed attempts to be hearing. My choice of love as the theme for my second narrative arc resonated deeply with several parents of deaf sons and daughters with whom I shared an advance draft copy of my memoir. I was deliberate in this thematic choice because as well as providing an additional source of the discord and conflict so necessary for engendering drama in narrative, the depiction of romantic love in the lives of people with a disability still seems to be startling to others. It struck me as a useful device for challenging ‘cultural ideas about the normal and the whole’ (Quayson 25).

Having first set the scene with a description of an incident from my deaf childhood followed by a brief description of what my deafness feels like today, the springboard event from which I started my exploratory journey memoir was a question that a psychologist had asked me—‘Your hearing loss, it must have had a big impact on you? I had also recently read about William Du Bois
chagrined to learn that I had been beaten to the punch by Christopher Krentz in his 2007 study, *Writing Deafness*). I wrote my memoir of deafness with the two narrative arcs weaving around this ‘hearing line’ that I regarded as the porous membrane between my public hearing-deaf persona and my private deaf self that I constantly, if not always consciously, negotiate. The ‘hearing line’ is the stable constant; it never changes. In contrast, the visibility of my private deaf self and public hearing-deaf persona fluctuates in response to circumstances, events, insights (or lack of), and opportunities missed and taken.

By closing my exploratory journey with a brief description of my response to a life-threatening illness and debilitating treatment program, I was aware that the shock of this late news had the potential to distract the reader from my memoir’s central question—what was the impact of my deafness on my life (and by corollary, on my sense of self)? After much mental wrestling, I chose to embrace the risk of such distraction and to disclose this event, partly because of its significance, but mostly because I believed (and still believe) that its inclusion flags at least two major issues worth drawing attention to. Firstly, the fact that I persevered with writing my memoir of deafness throughout an extended period of illness, treatment, hospitalisation, and recovery illustrates the unquenchable drive I had in finally telling my story. Having been voluntarily silent for so long, I was not now going to be involuntarily silenced. Secondly but of equal importance, my illness provoked an uprising of friendship in my life, the depth of which I had previously been unaware and which shamed me into being grateful for what I have, the absence of romantic love notwithstanding. The thrust of this shame-driven gratitude had such a propulsive force that it moved me to a decisive vocational undertaking: I would from this point onwards work harder for improved education and employment opportunities for deaf people.

In the concluding summative chapter of the memoir, I attempted to distil the main points of my discoveries arising from my exploration of the psychologist’s question. This proved to be the most challenging writing task because of my persistent reluctance to be definitive. I hesitated to draw lines around issues and to say categorically ‘if this, then that.’ (I take some mild comfort from Ato Quayson’s postulation that some disability narratives are framed as a hermeneutical impasse where the disability remains elusive and never fully accounted for, or is discussed within a structure of persistent doubt (49 ff)).

Having decided to abandon the essay format to take up this two-plots narrative approach, I faced a new dilemma, this time about writing honestly and truthfully while protecting the privacy of the people in my memoir, including my own privacy. I did not want my book to be a ‘tell all’ or a trauma account (or a ‘pity-party’ as a colleague so crisply warned). Nor did I did want to hurt people or breach good faith in my friendships. I had also followed the controversies around Norma
Room which was clearly intensely autobiographical. I admired this ‘novel’ but wondered why she had chosen to market it as such; I could only assume that she did it to protect herself in the wake of an earlier controversy with her non-fiction book, The First Stone. Garner had been savaged by critics for the way she had attempted to disguise one of the characters in that book. (She split one ‘real life’ person into several fictional characters in the book at her publisher’s urging, in a vain effort to forestall litigation).

I understood that my memoir would be an act of exploration. I began with some assumptions and navigation tools: I assumed, for example, that I would simply write down my memories about what it was like to be deaf, and use the topics of school, education, work and friendships as my navigation tools to guide me through the larger story of my deafhood. However, each time a memory surfaced, and each time I wrote down that memory, I found myself questioning that memory. Did it really happen in this particular way? After all, my life is not a solo act; it is also a fragment of other people’s lives. What would the other people involved in my recollections say? How would they remember this incident or that conversation? I was mindful, then, of unanswered questions about the impact of my deafness on my parents, my son, my sister and brother, the men with whom I formed romantic relationships, my nieces and nephews, my friends, work colleagues, and others whose lives have crossed paths with mine. I could not speak for them. I tried to imagine myself into their lives and to put myself on the other side of the mirror, but given my continued reluctance—even now—to ask outright the simple question ‘what has been the impact of my deafness on you, on our relationship?’ that’s all my efforts could be. Acts of imagination.

I mulled about how to tell the ‘facts’ of my life while disguising some of the ‘characters’ in my memoir. I especially wanted to disguise the men who had played such significant roles in my search for enduring love, partly because their lives had moved on and I had a distaste for airing any personal details from years ago which had the potential to disrupt their current lives. Mostly though, I wanted to protect myself. The answer was delivered to me by Somerset Maugham. I had bought a re-issued edition of his novel, The Razor’s Edge and I was hooked by his first two sentences, ‘I have never begun a novel with more misgiving. If I call it a novel, it is because I don’t know what else to call it’ (1). He went on to explain his misgivings about writing his recollections of a man he once spent time with, but of whom he knew little outside that contact. He wrote, ‘I only want to set down what I know of my own knowledge’ (1). He continued, ‘In the present book, I have invented nothing. To save embarrassment to people still living, I have given to persons who play a part in this story names of my own contriving, and I have in other ways taken pains to make sure that no one should recognize them’ (1-2). Throughout this novel, Maugham regularly reminded the reader that he was about to ‘invent something’ or recount something that he had been told second-hand. In
himself as the reliable narrator and the reader as the intelligent participant in his story-telling relationship. Maugham trusted the reader to discern what is ‘true’ and what is ‘not true’ without kicking up a fuss or crying ‘fraud!’

Mindful as I was that this might have just been a literary device for Maugham’s fictional novel, I nevertheless turned to Maugham as my guide to managing the ethics of weaving fiction with fact in my memoir. I gave notice to the reader whenever I changed the names and identifying characteristics of people in my book, but otherwise retained the names of family members, friends, teachers and work colleagues. I also assumed some licence in reporting some conversations as I relied on memory rather than transcripts in setting these down. In addition, I wrote the Prologue, a scene from my childhood, in the third person. This opening scene, which describes my mother driving an old model Holden with an infant (myself) in the back seat, evokes the era which informed my mother’s opinions and decisions about my education and ‘hearing-deaf’ upbringing. I wrote this in the third-person to attenuate the distance between myself as the adult narrator competently negotiating the ‘hearing line’ and myself as the deaf child; and also, to give myself the licence to describe a significant childhood event—the beginning of my education at the Oral Deaf Preschool—the details of which I could not remember with the clarity demanded of the ‘truthful memoirist,’ and which I had only been told second-hand by my mother. Like Maugham, I trusted the reader to be discerning in recognising when I was evidently drawing on my imagination to enliven my story.

I have a final note about what stays ‘in’ and what stays ‘out’ of memoir: even if what is written about someone is positive, that person may object to that disclosure. I discovered this in a devastating manner. A close family relative read an early excerpt of my memoir when it was published in a journal. In that excerpt, I briefly mentioned, almost as an aside, that we had shared a certain happy event. Those ten words acted as a lightning rod for my relative’s long-harboured (and until then, unknown) resentments about me. I was then subjected to a sustained campaign of explosively angry letters, e-mails, text messages and voice-mail messages over a period of eighteen months. The relative’s anger was overwhelming. I removed the offending words but the harassment campaign cast a pall of censorship across my written recollections of family events: much detail is missing (for example, the impact of my father’s alcoholism on the family), but enough broad-brush stroke descriptions have been disclosed for the reader to get the general gist of things.

Given that the thrust of my relative’s hostility was that I was self-indulgent in writing about my deafness, and that I ought to be writing about other, ‘more important’ matters, the question then arises: Why did I persist? My terse answer is that I was tired of being silent about my deafness. My longer answer—focusing on my reflections about the potential of memoir to shape readers’ views
**Learning from other voices**

In writing this memoir of deafness, I stand in line behind several other deaf people who have written about their lives in an effort to build a bridge across the hearing divide: Helen Keller; David Wright; Frances Warfield; Henry Kisor; Bernard Bragg; Bainy Cyrus; Hannah Merker; Christopher Heuer; Joseph Valente. The variety and richness of our lives give the lie to the begging-bowl image of the ‘poor deaf and dumb person’ or to the pathology-driven interpretations of deaf lives. While we may share certain experiences (such as the ‘dinner table syndrome’), our responses to those experiences are diverse and individual. The impulse to tell our stories—especially if we are seeking to correct the record of false impressions, misunderstandings, secrets, and plain bunkum—is universal, but the gift of courage to attend to those stories, to really lean in close and grasp the lesson within, is rarer. Such courage requires patience, a quality not always in abundant supply by people who can hear unassisted when confronted by a deaf person with a broken voice or dancing hands. This might explain, in part, why there are relatively few memoirs written by deaf people.

The frustration of not being attended to, free of the fog of stereotyping, and the hurt of being taken for a fool restrain the impulse to tell our stories.

Thomas Couser’s discussion of deafness narratives in his chapter, ‘Signs of Life,’ illustrates my point here. Couser seeks to focus on the wholeness of the writer’s identity by placing his or her deaf experiences within their broader social context. All the same, he makes occasional misbegotten forays into the grammar of pathology, and some of his analysis feels borrowed, as if he is simply repeating the views of Deaf activists. This is especially evident in Couser’s ease in adopting Harlan Lane’s pejorative language about the ‘audist establishment’ and his efforts at pop psychology when he writes, ‘The desire of some deaf individuals to pass as hard of hearing, if not as hearing, suggests the continuing power of the stigma attached to deafness . . .’ (224). Without disputing the power of stigma, I take exceptional issue with Couser’s attribution of ‘passing as hearing’ as the deaf person’s deliberate desire to hide their deafness when what is more likely to be the case (and it is so for me) is that most deaf people just do not go about their daily lives thinking about their deafness. Hearing people can place undue emphasis on how deaf people feel about their deafness. Certainly, some hearing people might find an encounter with a deaf person in some way confronting, but it does not necessarily follow that all deaf people must find their own deafness confronting. They don’t; I don’t.

The phrase ‘deaf passing as hearing’ is also said with the certainty that it means something. But what does it mean? Is it meant to signify that the deaf person must always proclaim, announce, call out her deafness as her trump card of identity? Or is it meant to signify that the deaf person who speaks well, who is oral, and who does not inject her conversations with repetitive alerts of ‘I may
cruel. Thomas Couser—and others who might use this term, ‘passing as hearing,’ unreflectively—cannot have it both ways. For so long as Sign language is marginalised as a ‘second language’ rather than universally accepted as a companion language to the individual’s native language (such as English, Spanish, Italian and so on), then deaf people are required to communicate orally with hearing people as best as they can. It is unjust then, to turn on that deaf person and implicitly accuse her of fraud. Most deaf people go out of their way to avoid seeing signs of impatience on hearing people’s faces—the eyes rolled towards heaven, the whitening of the stretched upper lip-line, the flared nostril as they seethe with their irritation at having to repeat what they’ve said because the deaf person missed it the first time. Many deaf people develop the tic of ducking their heads in the onslaught of the sneering jibe ‘What? Are you deaf or something?’ Deaf people learn to keep their cool in the face of the crudely-cast question, ‘Why do you talk like that?’ And yet still, deaf people must face this accusation of ‘deaf passing as hearing.’

And what does it mean to ‘be deaf’? I am struck by the apparently low level of awareness about the diversity of deaf experiences. I once worked with a man in England who, on belatedly realising that I was deaf, was moved to declaim ‘Are you really deaf? You don’t act deaf!’ He leant towards me across the table at which we were sitting to peer at me more closely, as if he needed to reassess his vision of me, to reconfigure what he was really seeing. Despite learning to adapt to his theatricality, I was shocked into a nervous laugh and asked ‘What does acting deaf look like?’ He blushed, cast a look to the ceiling, and then with an ‘in for a penny, in for a pound’ attitude, he held up his hands, palms facing each other, and rotated one hand around the other, jiggling his fingers as he did so. I didn’t say anything in reply. In the face of my staring silence, he pushed on, ‘Can’t you sign? Aren’t you supposed to sign?’ I said ‘no.’ He really was quite baffled but I saw in that conversation how I was supposed to look as a deaf person. I was supposed to look like a person with a rubbery face of cursive eyebrows and elastic cheeks, mouthing words soundlessly and waving my hands at chest-height. I was supposed to be communication in movement, an exercise in the kinesthetics of speech. If I wasn’t this, if I was, God forbid, a deaf person who speaks clearly and who conducts myself in such a way as to avoid causing too much disruption or inconvenience to others without drawing attention to myself, well then, I must surely be a fraud, a fake, merely someone who ‘passes as hearing.’

This gives rise to a manifestly opaque understanding of identity, be it hearing, deaf or somewhere in between. It is as if deaf people are only allowed one image. And what might that image be? The deaf and dumb person, the deaf mute person, or the person who makes ‘animal-like noises’? (Couser 245). Do hearing people go around announcing their aural status? Of course not. Why then must deaf people do so? Actually, I was shocked when I first encountered the phrase. It
carry an emblem like the white cane of blind people or the bell of the leper. It felt accusatory but I didn’t know what the accusation was. Did I stand accused of complying too well with the demands of the hearing world: speak clearly, don’t make funny faces when you speak, don’t use your hands to speak, just sit quietly, don’t draw attention to yourself by the way you speak, just watch, observe, listen, conform, comply. All these demands rushed to the surface of my being when I read ‘deaf passing as hearing.’ Years of effort, hurt, and resentments swelled in my heart. I wanted to scream at this writer, Thomas Couser. In fact, in the quiet of my lounge room, I did cry out. ‘Oh, for God’s sake!’ I felt trapped by the accusation of this man who has never met me, who does not know me. I can’t be deaf because it irritates people. I can’t be hearing because, well, I’m deaf. What can I be then? (Brenda Jo Brueggeman’s October 1997 essay, ‘On (Almost) Passing,’ explores the same question. She writes, ‘I couldn't be "deaf" any more than I could be "hearing." I was "hard-of-hearing"; and I was as confused and displaced, in either "Deaf" or "Hearing" culture, as this multiply hyphenated term indicates.’)

I have written at some length about this because I want to underline the precariousness of not just Couser’s analysis of deaf narratives, but of anyone’s analysis (including mine). It is difficult enough for even the memoirist to have a precise insight into her own motivations, intentions, and impulses when setting down her recollections to the best of her abilities, but for third parties to presume to have that understanding is a risky claim.

Nevertheless, I eventually shook off my own restraint in writing my memoir of deafness because I understood that by releasing my story of deafness for public scrutiny, I was adding to the knowledge of deaf lives as told by deaf people, rather than as ‘explained’ by people who can hear. I was also adding to a sort of repository of images of deaf people. My memoir is not intended to be representative of deaf people’s lives: how can it be? I cannot experience the deafness (or hearingness, for that matter) of others, and I have struggled to understand the impact of my own deafness on my life, let alone other people’s deafness. In writing this portrait of myself, I have provided a certain image of one deaf life, one to be aspired to, ignored or shunned. Whatever the reader’s response to my memoir, it is important that this particular image of a deaf life is available, alongside the diversity of other deaf narratives, because otherwise how do we know who we are—or test who we can be—if we never see ourselves reflected in what is written?

Just as importantly, how do others understand us if our stories about deafness and what it means to be deaf are missing from what they read? How do hearing parents of deaf children navigate the course of their young children’s lives if they do not have an array of life-stories from deaf adults from which to learn? From which to cherry-pick this experience and reflect upon that insight, weaving them into their own instincts about the best thing to do for their children.
adults, they therefore have little understanding about how to navigate the territory before them. As Frederick Schreiber observed,

   We are your children grown . . . We can, in many instances, tell you the things your child would like to tell you, if he had the vocabulary and the experience to put his feelings and needs into words. We, too, had parents who went through all the anguish and indecision you face . . . if I were your child, I would want to tell you my greatest need is to be able to communicate (‘The Deaf Adult’s Point of View’ 191).

   Reading deaf fiction and memoirs during the course of this writing project help to guide my reflections on my deaf life and deaf self. While I familiarized myself with theories of self in general (Mansfield) and deaf identity in particular (Lane, Sacks, Corker, Padden and Humphries, Brevik), I was deliberate in relying on my own responses to my experiences. I took as my model, Montaigne, the ‘first writer of lay introspection’ (Auerbach in Lopate 44). One of the most radical of Montaigne’s practices was to follow his thoughts no matter where they led him (Auerbach in Lopate 44). Lopate observed that Montaigne insisted ‘that we ought first to look at our own personal experience—the book of life—and try to learn from it’ (45). Similarly, I attempted to do this by providing my own lived perspective of deafness in my memoir, The Art of Being Deaf. My aim was to supplement, or contest where appropriate, fictional representations of deafness (which I observed tended to be written by hearing writers rather than deaf writers) and other deaf memoirs.

   In undertaking this approach, I played on the multiple meanings of ‘art’ in my memoir’s title. I explored the life-long art of integrating my private deaf-self into my public ‘hearing-deaf’ persona, along with the artifice of this effort. I wrote about my relationship with the art of music. I tried to breathe new life into long-ago memoirs and novels of, and by, other deaf writers. I referred to the poetry of deaf writers, and I acknowledged the varied professions of deaf people around the world. All this was so that I could not only share what I had learnt about deafness, but also to counter the perception held by many hearing people that deaf people live in a bubble, separated from sound and even from the rest of life, as if they were homogenized in some way. I had a strong commitment to providing a sense of heritage or historical connection and continuity with other deaf people’s lives. In a nutshell, I wanted my memoir of deafness to be noisy, resonating with the sound of many deaf and hearing voices, not just my own.

   In drawing on the writing of other deaf memoirists—be it poetry, prose or dramatic scripts—I have become a member of the diaspora of deaf writers sharing their experiences. Most of these writers are predominantly British and North American. Couser writes, ‘Despite a series of significant books about deafness and deaf individuals, there has been no great outpouring of autobiographies by deaf Americans’ (226). Nor, I might add, by deaf Australians even though there
Wright, journalist and novelist John Dalley (*Only the Morning*), memoirist Paul Jacobs (*Neither-Nor*); journalist, activist, blogger and essayist Michael Uniacke, (*Deaf Dawn* and *Deafness Gain*, his two-part unpublished memoirs), and novelist Jessica White (*A Curious Intimacy*).

**Conclusion**

We can learn about the diversity of deaf experiences and the nuances of deaf identity by reading memoirs of deaf people and novels with deaf characters. Whether they are written by hearing or deaf writers, by providing different perspectives on deafness, they have something useful to say, demonstrate and illustrate about deafness and deaf people.

While I have acknowledged the possibility that my memoir of deafness might be ignored or shunned, I nevertheless hold out the hope that my memoir, *The Art of Being Deaf*, might provide a mentoring role to other deaf people and families. Certainly, the reactions of several parents who read an advanced draft of my memoir illustrate the thirst for a glimpse into the possible futures of their deaf sons and daughters. They variously reported that while they experienced mixed feelings and were emotionally stirred up by my memoir, they would keenly recommend it to ‘Parents of children who are deaf or have a hearing loss. Deaf children or adults’; ‘Readers who enjoy autobiographies and stories of resilience. People who like reading inspiring stories about people who have overcome adversity to become successful adults’; ‘Anyone who wants to gain an insight into one deaf person's perspective on deafness. Professionals must read this. Family members must read this. And audiologists too.’

Many parents revealed their interest in the technical aspects of my deafness. They said they enjoyed reading my descriptions of what I could hear and not hear; and the conceptualization of lip-reading as an art rather than a science as described to me by one of my pre-school teachers. Some parents mentioned that they would like to read more about my mother. I dithered about this and decided that I had struck a sufficient balance between revelation and privacy. One parent was startled to discover the difference between my experiences of deafness and parents’ experiences, that is, the gap between the ‘lived’ and the ‘observed’ experiences. She said, ‘The insight into the perspective of the deaf child is enlightening and uplifting.’ All the parents were moved by the theme of love in my memoir (with some clamouring for a happy-ever after ending!) One parent, who does not have a deaf child, said, ‘Your memoir opened a door to a world that I couldn’t have imagined. I was left wanting to know even more. Your story told me things. I learnt from it.’

My memoir only makes sense if it is read within the broader historical, social, and cultural contexts of my time. I am as much a product of a particular time—the second half of the twentieth-century and the first quarter of the twenty-first-century, with all their upheavals and advances in
However, the act of writing my story of deafness has changed not only my relationship with myself, in all my hearing-deaf self certainties and subtleties, but has also changed my relationship with others. Researching the impact of my deafness on my life, my family, and my friendships has led me down several paths of self-pity, anguish, and anger but in the end, the final destination has been clarity. I feel more confident about asserting my connectedness to my deaf self, and I aim to wield this new confidence as a tool for advancing the educational and employment opportunities of deaf people.
Epilogue

The Sleeper Awakes

She leant across the picnic hamper and reached for my hearing aid in my open-palmed hand. I jerked away from her, batting her hand away from mine. The glare of the summer sun blinded me. I struck empty air. Her tendril-fingers seized the beige seashell curve of my hearing aid and she lifted the cargo of sound towards her eyes. She peered at the empty battery-cage before flicking it open and shut as if it was a cigarette lighter, as if she could spark hearing-life into this trick of plastic and metal that held no meaning outside of my ear. I stared at her. A band of horror tightened around my throat, strangling my shout, ‘Don’t do that!’ I clenched my fist around the new battery that I had been about to insert into my hearing aid and imagined it speeding like a bullet towards her heart.

My heart raced as if I’d been running for my life. I swung my legs around to the side of my bed and pulled myself upright into wakefulness. The back of my neck was damp with perspiration. I waited for my agitation to subside but it was slow to fade. I went to the bathroom to splash cold water onto my face. The mirror showed me that the whites of my eyes were stained red. I had been crying in the dream. I rested my forehead on the cold enamel of the bathroom sink.

Hearing aids are personal, intimate even. I hate people asking me questions about them and only answer such questions out of the long-ingrained sense of duty drummed into me as a child by my mother. ‘Answer their questions. They are not being unkind. They are just interested, that’s all.’ But questions about my hearing aids by hearing people feel as intrusive as questions about my weight. I am fiercely protective of them and rarely entrust them into the care of others, not even my closest friends. I certainly don’t like other people touching my hearing aids. It is a shocking breach of intimacy, like exploring my ears, using the tips of their fingers to trace the outline of the vacuum where sound should echo. I don’t even like people looking at them for any longer than passing curiosity warrants. The crude handling by the woman in the dream was nightmarish.

All the same, the ferocity of my reaction shook me. It made me stop and wonder. The epiphany was swift to strike: this dream was the first time in my life that I could recall being deaf in my dreams. I was born deaf and have lived in apparent harmony with my deafness all my life and yet my dream-self has no consciousness of being deaf. In my dreams, I hear sounds and conduct conversations with ease.

A couple of nights later, my deaf-self asserted itself again in another dream. This time, I woke with a sense of marvel. My dream had taken me to a commemorative event at the Gladstone Road Oral Deaf School at Dutton Park which I attended in my early childhood. I was surrounded by
My attention was distracted by the arrival of a newcomer. As he approached the group, I saw that it was a friend who is not deaf. I called out to him with joy, ‘Hello! What are you doing here?’ He smiled at me, ‘I wanted to see what your early life was like’ and, turning to greet my deaf friends, he signed his name, spelling it out letter by letter on his fingers with easy grace. His enthusiasm was infectious, and prompted my friends to cluster around him, keen to teach him new signs.

These two dreams arrived as I researched my memoir of deafness, *The Art of Being Deaf* and this accompanying critical essay, *Hearsay*. I had already been reflecting and writing for several years about my relationship with my deaf-self and the impact of my deafness on my life, but I remained uneasy about writing about my deaf-life. I had lived all my adult life apart from the deaf community; belatedly casting myself as a deaf woman with something pressing to say about deaf people’s lives felt absurd. The urgency to tell my story and my keenness to contest certain assumptions about deafness were real, but I was hampered by anxiety. I doubted my right to speak out. The dreams felt potent, as if my deaf-self was not only asserting itself but also awakening me to the subtlety of the dance between my private deaf-self and my public deaf-hearing persona.
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THE ART OF BEING DEAF

Creative work submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing,
The University of Queensland

Donna M McDonald BA BSW MA
‘The whole body was removed/from the vibration of the air, they lived through the eyes/The clear simple look, the instant full attention.’

Ted Hughes, *Deaf School*

‘Long continued disability makes some people saintly, some self-pitying, some bitter. It has only clarified Sally and made her more herself.’

Wallace Stegner. *Crossing to Safety*.

‘Love is a central theme in the autobiography we each write as we try to understand our lives; but we may feel that we become only more confused the more we reflect upon it.’


‘Gratitude is the memory of the heart.’

Jean Massieu, deaf student and teacher in France, 1772-1846
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Through the Eyes of a Child

If you had been walking across the William Jolley Bridge that sultry February morning, and if you had been looking out for it, you would have seen a cream coloured car with absinthe-green panels. A new 1957 Holden, it pointed south towards the Oral Deaf Preschool at Yeronga. As an unknowing bystander, you would not have understood the significance of its journey at the time. Not many people did; not even the participants in that journey could have reasonably anticipated what would follow in the years to come. The car was heading not just to a school, but to an entire new world of opportunity, a world that promised spoken speech as well as an education for little deaf children.

The driver of the car was a thirty-three-year-old woman with dark hair falling in waves down to her shoulders. She wore black-rimmed, bat-wing style glasses that framed her olive-green eyes and black eyebrows. The fierceness of her glasses was softened by her summer frock with its pattern of roses, cinched waist and bell-capped sleeves. The woman looked ahead of the car in front of her and saw that the pace of the traffic had faltered. She pulled on the car’s gear-stick and tapped her fingers impatiently on the steering wheel. In the back seat of that car was her three year old daughter with wispy blonde hair and a dimple in her left cheek when she smiled. But now, the little girl’s chin was crumpled in a fury of crying. A breeze filtered through the open car windows. It lifted her hair off her forehead but did nothing to ease the pink flush of her face. Her cries sounded like the tearing of metal. Her shrieks ebbed into the defeat of hiccoughs before gathering new strength for another onslaught of rage. She grabbed her left ear as if to peel it from her head. A pink button was pushed into its ridges and hollows. The plastic cord dangling from it had its other home in a metal box, the size of a cigarette packet, encased in the pocket of a grey gabardine harness strapped around her body. The little girl tugged at the cord once, her hand dimpling with the effort. She tugged it again, and then she gave it the hardest tug of all.

The mother heard the catch of breath and glanced up at the rear vision mirror just in time to see the pink button wrenched free from the little girl’s ear. It popped out with a force that launched it up, up and out, out into the air beyond the car window. The button’s cord traced an arc before falling into the dust beneath the wheels of the following cars. The little girl slumped back against the sticky vinyl of the car seat, her hair still fluttering in the breeze, her sea-green eyes blinking against the white clouds of softness falling into her
PART ONE
Chapter One: Deaf

1.
When I choose to turn my hearing aids off and so switch off the world of sounds, I enjoy this as an unfolding of delicious relief. It is like sigh breathing into my ears. My shoulders relax from their ‘pinned to the ears’ position of strain. My face relaxes. Everything in me relaxes. I don’t feel on alert to the world. I don’t feel as though I’m on guard. I am at home in my silence, free to fill it up with my own sounds, the sounds of memories, reveries and hopes.

But I only feel this if the closure of sound is of my choosing: I panic if I am out and about, and my hearing aids fail me in some way. I feel unsafe then, as if I have been blinded by a fall of muddy sound that I cannot find my way through. When I turn my hearing aids back on, the air momentarily becomes harsh and stinging. In that split-time when sound crashes against silence, I must re-engage with my world. I have to adapt each time, but having adapted, I do enjoy the renewal of the loud and the soft, the bellow and the whisper, the variousness of sounds in all their musicality and clamour.

2.
‘Your hearing loss must have had a big impact on you?’ Dust motes hung in the arrow of sunshine between the psychologist who sat in the far corner of the timber-panelled room and me. The distance between us was daunting. I stretched and flexed my fingers to release the tension in them and, closing my eyes for a few seconds, slid further down in the low-slung chair. It was hard to sit up straight in it. The psychologist ran his right index finger around the inside of his shirt collar as if it was strangling him. His question hung in the air along with the dust motes.

I was forty-five years old but a childish refusal welled up in my chest. I didn’t want to answer the psychologist’s question. The bluntness of it offended me. It had come from left-of-field; I hadn’t seen this one coming. He had already asked many questions about my work which was the reason I had turned up in his office in the first place. I went to see him on the suggestion of a social work colleague, Jennifer. We had worked together in the area of disability policy on and off for almost fifteen years, and she had observed my mounting distress about the gap between my public service career achievements and my disappointments in romantic relationships. I tried to shrug off his question.

‘Hmm, not really.’
Short silence. I tried again. ‘Perhaps?’
‘Your deafness. It must surely have had a profound impact on you as you were growing up.’ No rising inflection this time. A declamatory statement infused with a sort of strange anger, as if he was frustrated at having to repeat himself. The force of the psychologist’s words was muffled by his beard which fluffed up around his mouth blurring the outlines of his words. Lip-reading him from so far across the room was like reading fading print. I could make out the vowel sounds, but was that a ‘p’ or a ‘b’? I used my arms to pull myself upright in the chair again and cast around for a way to deflect the psychologist’s attention.

His question didn’t just offend me; it irritated me. It seemed voyeuristic; I couldn’t see its relevance to my work stress. It was a variation on a theme. I had been asked versions of this question all my life, usually followed by the crude and presumptive statement that ‘being deaf must be terrible for you.’ Because I fell into that apparently confusing category of ‘oral-deaf’—I could not hear without my hearing aids but I did not communicate by signing with my hands; I could speak with my voice—I would also be asked ‘What sort of deaf person are you?’ After all these years and all these questions, I still found it difficult to summon up an off-the-cuff answer that would satisfy both me and the person doing the asking. If I went against my grain and said ‘yes, being deaf has had a big impact on my life,’ the questioner would want to know more, careless about my feelings in being the object of such scrutiny; if I said ‘No,’ injecting a note of warning into my voice not to pursue the topic, the questioner would don an expression of knowing scepticism, registering my ‘denial,’ and would then launch into a hammering diatribe to get me to drop my denial, to ‘face facts.’ I knew that my life was different in some ways because of my deafness, but the differences did not seem to be particularly plentiful or exceptional.

I went to a school for deaf children from when I was three years old until I was eight years old, before being transplanted to a ‘normal’ school. I had to make adjustments from time to time: I sat towards the front of cinemas and work conferences to make sure I could see to hear, and I disliked dimmed lighting whether it was at a fireside campsite, in a restaurant, or on a friend’s back deck because it put my companions’ faces in shadow. I thought that was about it really. I was tongue-tied and unwilling before the psychologist.

I decided to agree with him. ‘Oh yes, a big impact.’ I ran out of puff because I couldn’t think of anything else to say that he might like to hear and that I was prepared to reveal, but it was the right tack to take because he dropped the subject. We spent the last ten minutes of the session tossing around ideas for managing my stress. He told me that I needed to meditate every now and then throughout the day, and that it would be good if I could go for a walk each morning to clear my head. I smiled at him.
I walked down the hill from Wickham Terrace, through the city, back to my office in Mary Street shaken by the certainty in the psychologist’s voice. I was not obtuse. Of course, I understood that I was different from others simply by dint of being deaf, but it was not something that I gave much thought to. I had other things on my mind. The psychologist had asked me an earlier question. ‘Have you had any trauma in your life?’ ‘Trauma?’ ‘Yes,’ his voice filled with insinuation. ‘Any significant harm?’ ‘No.’

I did not tell him about my son, Jack. I did not have a track along which to lay down my words safely. Instead, I bent my head and saw that the flesh across my knuckles had started to loosen with age. I thought of the creamy touch of Jack’s baby hands.

I could have recited the facts. Jack was twenty-two and a half weeks old when he died suddenly thirteen years earlier. He had been my solemn-faced baby boy; my chest ached each rare time he smiled at me. At the back of his head, a tuft of hair stuck up which I slicked with a lick to make it stick up even more. He liked to lean forward so that he could see his world open up before him; he would never sit back. I was thirty-two years old at the time, but still unprepared for the flurry and spin of my days and nights as my life expanded with the fullness of this baby of mine. And then grief came through my door, became my twin; my son hummed his last breath into the cold sky above his cot, and ghosted into my shadow child. I was unprepared, then, for the stillness, the silence without echoes, and the airlessness that seeped into my bones, into my heart.

But these facts would not have told the whole story. I could not have explained to the psychologist how my sorrow felt like a heavy weight, but that I was reluctant to relieve myself of this pain. To do so seemed like an act of disloyalty to my son, and I preferred, instead, to adjust to its bulk somehow. I lived my life cautiously as if that might make a difference. I worked hard, kept up my friendships, and was moderate in my diet, drink and fitness schedules. Jack’s father was long gone. After we buried our son at the Pinaroo Lawn Cemetery, we were unable to console each other. Instead, I fought with him, not in blame but in an unceasing and desperate urge to kick my pain away, to give it another reason. Our struggle was terrible. He left me, unable to bear the gap in my arms, the tearing away of the flesh and blood that formed our son. I loved him and hoped his flight was temporary, but his absence stretched into years. He made a new life for himself, remarried and had a new child. A daughter this time. My love for him drained away until there was nothing left at all.
I was afraid that this made me a shallow woman and fretted about my apparent incapacity to keep love alive. Other men passed in and out of my life, but I could not muster the necessary wherewithal to keep them close to me. I didn’t like this. Despite my wish to be in a secure relationship, fear was a constant companion. This was no great surprise. Once bitten, twice shy; and I’d already been bitten more than once, having also survived the collapse of a brief marriage long ago. My friends chivvied me along and tried to encourage me to enjoy all that was good in my life. When I revealed to one of them that I believed being in a relationship would provide me with a sense of history, an enduring constancy, he chided me. ‘That has to come from within you. No-one else can give you that.’

4.
I didn’t go back to that psychologist. I dealt with my stress by getting involved in a new work project but I wanted to do something dramatic. I was single, lonely, and tired of my life. I wanted to break free of my torpor, and so when someone I knew in England suggested that I apply for a job over there, this seemed like a great idea. I sent off an application to England and hoped that this would be my escape route.

But the odd thing was, I could not forget the certainty in the psychologist’s voice. It haunted me. He had repeated his question about my deafness, rephrasing it for emphasis: ‘It must surely have had a profound impact on you as you were growing up.’ I felt unsettled by his words. I was assailed by doubt and wondered why I felt so jarred by a question that I had, for most of my life, learnt to shrug off.

I mulled over the basic facts of my biography: I was the sole deaf child in a family of five muddling along during the 1950s and 1960s in a weatherboard war commission house at The Grange, a Brisbane suburb with dusty streets, a creek at the bottom of a hill, and shops with faded awnings and sawdust on the floor. My father, Jim, had served in the army during World War Two (Ceylon and New Guinea), was an official for the boxing events at the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games, and worked as a tally clerk on the wharves during the week and as a bookie on Saturdays. Everywhere he went, he wore his felt hat with the little feather in the band. Whether to shield his Irish complexion or because he fancied it gave him a certain flair, I don’t know. He had a gift for telling stories that made people laugh; he even made himself laugh. My mother, baptised Eloise but known to all as Jackie, was a short woman with a broad smile and green eyes that hinted at secrets she would be willing to share in exchange for a chat and a cigarette. She spent her childhood on a cherry orchard in Young, worked as a nurse in war-time Sydney, and discovered my father in a whirlwind romance in North Queensland. He sent her a gilt-edged postcard of the sun setting on a
beach with swaying palm trees, embossed with the words ‘Memories of Magnetic Island.’ On the back, he had written in his convent-bred penmanship, ‘Mine are happy. Are yours?’ Words to woo a girl with romance in her heart. They married and set up home in Townsville and then moved to Brisbane. My older sister, Cecily, wore her dark hair in thick Annie-Oakley style plaits and strove to turn her fair-skinned complexion into gold with the help of Coppertone lotion. My older brother, Michael, all sun-bleached hair and sturdy brown limbs, went on hikes along the Kedron Brook on summer days. My parents did not know of any deaf relatives in their families. There was just me, the little deaf girl, but I was not a child given to the moody contemplation of my deaf life. The fact that I wore a hearing aid but that my sister and brother did not was not remarkable to me. That was just the way things were.

Coincidentally, during this time of introspection, I was invited by an editor to write a piece for a literary journal, and so, with the psychologist’s question still on my mind, I made it the trigger for a short article. Still feeling defensive about his question, I wrote mockingly about the psychologist and presented my deaf childhood and adult life as a series of happy vignettes with only the occasional disruption to my sanguine self. I conceded, in this short article, that I had missed my deaf childhood friends when I left them behind, that I had once experienced discrimination at university, and I wondered about the impact of my deafness on my sister and brother, as well as on my parents, but dealt with this in an ‘all’s well that ends well’ tone. I wrote it more as a writing exercise than as an exhumation of the psychologist’s question. The editor would not publish my article. He felt that I had gilded the lily, downplayed the significance of certain events, and avoided other questions altogether. He encouraged me to explore the topic more intently. While I wondered why this editor was so reluctant to accept my cheerful version of events—must misery lurk in every story?—I accepted his challenge.

This was more difficult than you might expect. I do not go about the daily business of my life measuring how much I hear or don’t hear, feeling barbs of revelation about my deaf self, and I wondered why it should be of such interest to anyone else. My being deaf is not usually the subject of self-absorption. I don’t need to hear to think and my private musings wander along the same topics as anyone else: my work, my relationships with my friends and family, my hopes and dreams about love. I can tune into my thoughts as soundless as they are. I like the muffled air of silence and, in fact, I am writing all this with my hearing aids turned off; I enjoy the sense of being set apart from real life. But when I made myself consider the audiological facts of my deafness for this chapter, I was surprised by what I discovered.

I already knew that my deafness was unrelated to the rubella epidemic that had occurred during my mother’s pregnancy, but I now learnt that the opaque medical words used to define the
absence or subduing of sound within me—‘moderate-severe, sloping to profound, unknown aetiology’—do not reveal what I can hear or cannot hear. For several days during the course of writing this book, I experimented with sounds by tapping, clapping and dropping things; by standing still on a busy footpath listening out for bird calls, people chatter and car horns; and by turning my hearing aids on and off in different situations. I made notes about what I could or could not hear. I worked out that without my hearing aids, if I am concentrating, and if the sounds are made loudly, I am aware of those sounds at the deeper end of the scale.

Sometimes, it’s not so much that I can actually hear them; it’s more that I know that those sounds are happening. My aural memory of the deep-register sounds helps me to ‘hear’ them, much like the recollection of a tune replaying itself in my imagination. I discovered this hearing-shadow effect during one of my sound-experiments. I swim with friends regularly and had assumed that I could faintly hear the vowel sounds of their voices without my hearing aids. But one day, while I was talking with one of my swimming companions, I realised that I could not hear him at all. Nothing. Zilch. I had tricked even myself because I am so proficient at lip-reading, and because I know what his voice sounds like when I wear my hearing aids. What I was actually doing was ‘dubbing’ my friend’s apparently soundless words with my recollection of his voice from our conversations when I wore my hearing aids.

With and without my hearing aids, if I am not watching the source of those sounds—for example, if the sounds are taking place in another room or even just behind me—I am not immediately able to distinguish whether the sounds are conversational or musical or happy or angry. I can only discriminate them once I’ve established the rhythm of the sounds; if the rhythm is at a tearing, jagged pace with an exaggerated rise and fall in the volume, I might reasonably assume that angry words are being had. I cannot hear high-pitched sounds at all, with and without my hearing aids: I cannot hear sibilants, the ‘cees’ and ‘esses’ and ‘zeds.’ I cannot hear those sounds which bounce or puff off from your lips, such as the letters ‘b’ and ‘p’; I cannot hear that sound which trampolines from the press of your tongue against the back of your front teeth, the letter ‘t.’ With hearing-aids, I can hear and discriminate among the braying, hee-hawing, lilting, oohing and twanging sounds of the vowels . . . but only if I am concentrating, and only if I am watching the source of the sounds. Without my hearing aids, I might also hear sharp and sudden sounds like the clap of hands or crash of plates, depending on the volume of the noise. But I cannot hear the ring of the telephone, or the chime of the door bell, or the urgent siren of an ambulance speeding down the street.

My hearing aids help me to hear these sounds, but again, not all the time. When my youngest nephew, Alexander, was six years old, he was a curious-minded boy and not easily moved
to laughter. He liked to reflect aloud on the mysteries of arithmetic, posing such wonders as ‘Isn’t it amazing how when you add up two odd numbers the answers are always even?’ One day, as I drove him home from an outing at a children’s theatre, I glanced down at him in the passenger seat next to me and saw that he was smiling to himself. He looked up at me and his smile grew wider. I smiled back at him: I was clearly an aunt who knew how to give her nephew a good time. And then Alexander looked thoughtful; it was as if he had twigged to something that I had not. He spoke up. ‘A police car is chasing us!’ My heart jumped as I looked up at the rear vision mirror and saw the flashing blue and red lights behind me. I looked back down at the speedometer. I braked the car to a halt by the kerb, and rolled down my window. Alexander, full of excitement, twisted and turned in his seat as he watched the police officer come over to my car window and scribble out a speeding ticket for me.

5.
I was curious about what it would mean for me if I reopened the psychologist’s question for my private exploration. What was the impact of my deafness on my life? What threat would be posed to me if I tackled this question head-on? Would it mean that I would actually feel and be more deaf? And why did I feel so uncomfortable about this prospect? In the months following my visit to the psychologist, my reflections took on a more urgent, even querulous, tone. Having let the first questions to take hold in my imagination, new ones tumbled in. Where were my childhood deaf friends? What would my life have been like if I had stayed at the deaf school? Why did I not encounter other deaf people in my field of work in public policy? What were the ingredients for my success in integrating in the hearing world? How were my relationships affected by my deafness: not just my friendships but also my romantic relationships too? Eventually, I found myself confronted with the ultimate question: what was holding me back from finding, and then telling, my own story of deafness?

In making the decision to understand the impact of my deafness on my life and to answer those questions that were unsettling me, I was unsure whether to undertake my journey solo, as it were, without any guiding tools other than my memory and imagination. I wondered if it would be cheating to combine my recollections with research on deafness by experts because the thing is, although I’m deaf, I did not consider myself to be an expert. In fact, I didn’t know all that much about deafness or deaf culture. I had not made it my business to make a study of it. If anything, I had made a virtue of avoiding such introspection, led by my mother’s aspirations that I would live wholly as a hearing person separate from the deaf community. I did not even know many deaf people anyway. I was married, too, that my memories would be contaminated by the influence of
those other expert voices. I decided to begin my investigation at the beginning; I needed to return to my childhood.
Chapter Two: Reunions

I found a handful of photos, stored in a plastic envelope sleeve, taken when I was a child at the Deaf School. Those photos now presented themselves as riddles to me. I took them out of the envelope every now and then, and scattered them across my desk and looked down at them, aware of the tug of nostalgia, but aware too of another feeling, a sadness of sorts, which I tried to understand each time I experienced it. I couldn’t remember the little girl that I was when they were taken. I felt confronted by this absence of memory as I scanned the photos, reprising my memory’s gaps across these childhood years. I felt troubled by it; discomfited by my apparent lack of loyalty to my deaf childhood given that I seemed to remember so little of it.

Some of the photos looked as though they were snapped spontaneously; they had the blurred look of a bumped camera or lens not adjusted properly. Others had the formal composition of professional portraits, having been taken for public relations purposes to promote the Deaf School. These were taken at the bungalow-style Oral Deaf Pre-School at Yeronga, a riverside suburb in Brisbane. The school pioneered an education curriculum designed to teach deaf children to speak, not through the dance of their hands, but through the effort of explosive vowels forced up through their sparrow-small chests and throats, and puffy, burring, hissing consonants shaped by their tongues and lips. The photos showed teachers at work—there was Miss Clare Minchin who I remembered as having blue stars for eyes, and there was Miss Maryanne Casey, sweet and gentle, whose wedding we attended.

The later photos were taken at the Gladstone Road School for the Deaf which I attended after the Yeronga Preschool. Standing like a welcoming beacon on the top of a hill in Dutton Park, it was a red-brown brick Tudor style building with mullioned windows and many rooms, set in terraced gardens and green lawns with spreading Poinciana trees and Moreton Bay Figs. In the grounds were swings, monkey bars, a slippery slide, and a carousel roundabout for children. Downstairs was a large area where we had dancing classes, taking our turns to balance on top of Mr. Pritchard’s shiny black shoes, grasping his fingers as he glided across the floor talking to us all the while, trying to infuse in our emerging word-forced voices the motions of swinging and swelling, the tides of sound’s rise and fall. Mr. Pritchard was my last teacher at the Deaf School; he went on to become a religious minister. He sketched in my brand new autograph book, in yellows and blues, the outline of a beach and sky and water and wrote about the grains of sand on the beach. It was an allegory of sorts, about God. I didn’t understand the words but knew that the meaning was designed to be encouraging. Mr. Pritchard was the person who first introduced me to philosophy.
meant that I needed to be guided by my own conscience, my own beliefs. My mother had a similar philosophy, only she called it ‘running your own race.’

My favourite photo was a black and white class photo of the class of ’62. I would have been seven years old by then. I was positioned in the middle of a group of seven children—five girls and two boys. Narelle, John, Sharon, (me leaning forward), Kay, Colin, and Margaret. Five of us sat on a brick garden wall, our legs swinging above the ground, our hands in our laps uniformly posed, right hand resting on top of the left. The two tallest girls in the class stood sentry-like, clasping their hands, at the opposite ends of the group. We did not look directly into the camera. Instead, our eyes were turned to something or someone beyond the left border of the picture: what lay outside that left frame? It must have been winter because we all wore pullovers, their dark colours providing the background texture for the long looping cords of our metal-box hearing aids.

When I looked at all those photos, I felt tender towards the children. Without exception, all our faces revealed undercurrents of bewilderment, as if we were aware that something was missing, but we were not sure what the missing thing was. We certainly didn’t know we were missing sound, because we didn’t experience the absence of hearing as a loss. Our worlds were complete: we didn’t yearn to hear; we weren’t wracked by grief or alarm or dismay because we couldn’t hear; we didn’t see ourselves as wanting or different in any way at all. I felt safe at that school where for five years, in my gray uniform with maroon trim, I was taught how to listen, to watch lips and to talk. The more I gazed at the photos of my deaf school days, the greater was the distance that I felt I had travelled since then. By some process of alchemy, I had been transformed from a deaf child sequestered in a school exclusively shared with other deaf children into a woman who, though still deaf, lives and works and dreams in a world in which her friends and colleagues hear sounds unaided. I wondered how this had happened, and so during a quiet moment at work one day, I pulled out the White Pages, found the numbers I was looking for, and made two telephone calls. One to Miss Casey, now Mrs Kelly, and one to Miss Minchin.

2.
‘What was I like? Can you remember?’ I asked Maryanne Kelly, the infant school teacher whom I’d known as Miss Casey, 42 years and a lunch time after the last time we had seen each other. I had kept abreast of the main events in her life through the grapevine. Her mother lived around the corner from my mother; they had combined to act as a lightning rod for news of us over the years. I knew about Mrs. Kelly’s four children and many grandchildren; she knew the vagaries of my career. Even so, I was nervous about seeing her. I didn’t want to impose on her for news from another time. I had already spoken briefly on the phone with her to organise the meeting, and she
had sounded nervous too: ‘I’m not sure what I’ll remember. What if I can’t remember what you want to know?’

I had driven to her home where we greeted each other with affection and awe, because there we were, together in her dining room overlooking Moreton Bay, after all these years. The small girl in me recognised the young teacher with the gentle smile in the still-youthful grandmother standing before me. Our conversation flowed easily, leap-frogging from topic to topic in no special order. Maryanne’s curiosity meant that some of the jumps in conversation were random and unpredictable, sometimes halting me in my mind-tracks so that I could take the necessary swerve to follow her course of thinking. Her husband Tony enjoyed the occasion too, encouraging Maryanne with this story and that anecdote. ‘Tell about how you . . .’ he prompted her at intervals.

Several things became apparent: her dedication to her vocation; the playfulness she brought to her teaching; her prescience in suspecting that oralism was being forced with zealotry upon deaf children, whether it was suitable for them or not. Maryanne’s retelling of her teaching days revealed strength of emotion that may have even surprised her. She remembered all our names, our hearing histories, our idiosyncrasies, our temperaments. She remembered our parents’ ambitions for us. Her remembering was not only sharp and clear: it was also filled with warmth and humour, but most of all, with a continuing concern for us all. She was still worried about one little girl in particular. ‘Oralism wasn’t suitable for her. She was just so profoundly deaf. We couldn’t get the pitch of her voice down, no matter what we did. I don’t know what happens to such children now. What happens to them? Oh! And the dancing lessons!’ She leant towards me in laughter at that memory. It made her happy; her mood shifted. She described how much we liked to dance, to feel the vibrations of the floor boards beneath our feet as we moved up and down in time to music we could not hear.

Those days had a big impact on her. She had not expected to be a teacher of little deaf children without language: her ambition at Teachers’ College had been to teach literature to high school students. But she went where the Education Department sent her. The first few weeks were awful: ‘The noise! I couldn’t bear the noise. All that slamming of desks and loud voices and stamping feet . . .’ I reared back, my mouth agape. ‘I don’t remember any noise at all.’ We looked at each other in surprise and renewed comprehension of our different starting points. She hears, I don’t.

Maryanne showed me the wedding photo of her with us, with the class of ’61, and laughed when I showed her that I’d brought the same photo with me, along with some others. She fell about at a class photo of us dressed as fairies and elves. ‘Just look at you!’ And at the one in which my hair is cut freakishly short! I’d cut my plaits off the day before! I exclaimed. ‘That’s right! That’s
exactly the sort of thing you did!’ she laughed. Her merriment was infectious. ‘And what was I like?’ I asked. ‘You! You were so vibrant! You were full of life; so keen. You just loved everything. You were just such a happy little child.’ She paused. ‘You were right out there. Everyone gathered around you. It must have been a real wrench changing schools, going from the security of a small loving group to such a big school.’ She looked at me; I agreed, briefly acknowledging how several years passed before I stopped missing Sharon, my best friend.

Maryanne talked about how the teachers back then basically muddled through as best as they could. They were pioneering an approach that they knew little about and for which they received only limited specialist training or support. At the same time, they were required to teach the regular academic education curriculum, sorting out for themselves how to get such information into the profoundly, severely, moderately and mildly deaf children ranged before them. Back then, and this is possibly just as true today, the quality of children’s education lay as much in the strength of their teachers’ commitment towards their charges as it did in the soundness or otherwise of a particular educational approach. Oralism had its fans and its critics: the true believers considered it to be the only option if deaf children were to take their full place in the hearing world; the opponents regarded it variously as a form of cultural imperialism or as simply unrealistic, demanding too much of the deaf child and too much of that child’s family. It eventually gave way in the late sixties to the next educational trend: ‘Total Communication’ in which the child chose to sign, speak or do a combination of both.

I left my meeting with Maryanne Kelly feeling overwhelmed, in tumult. I was stunned by my good luck. I was lucky to have been in the right classroom—her classroom—at the right time; and I was relieved to have been granted the opportunity to talk with her after all these years. I began to sense that the absence of hearing in my life had been, and still is, filled not just by sound, but by the love, care and attention of many people.

I experienced this again some weeks later when I met with Miss Clare Minchin, my infant school teacher who I had remembered as having blue stars for eyes. She met me at the front door of her home, the sounds of classical music swelling from the lounge room behind her. Age had not dimmed her: the light still shone from her eyes. She greeted me with a question, ‘Can you hear this music? Isn’t it absolutely wonderful?’ I felt the same tug of surprise that I had experienced when Maryanne described her memories of the noise of the deaf school. My memories of Miss Minchin were limited to her teaching me the fundamentals of sound; that she enjoyed the fullness of sound in all its musicality had never occurred to me. Like Maryanne Kelly, she remembered the children in my class at the Deaf School with affection. And also like Maryanne, she conveyed a strong sense of custodianship towards her classroom of deaf children. She was moved by the responsibility of it.
all: she saw the task of teaching children even the minimum of speech as being essential for their personal safety and needs.

But rather than talk about her memories of those days, Clare Minchin was keen to share her knowledge about oral deaf education. She explained how she had been sent to Manchester University in England by the Oral Deaf Pre-School Association in the early-to-mid nineteen fifties to learn about the latest teaching methods. She returned to Brisbane bearing the trophy of specialist knowledge on oralism and now she wanted to transfer to me the excitement of that knowledge. She had loved teaching ‘the little deaf children.’ She was passionate about it, and even now, was still immersed in the detail of it. When I commented on Mrs Mason’s failed efforts to teach me the ‘ess’ sound, she leapt at the opportunity to teach me anew: ‘Can you do an “ess” now? Do you know what an “ess” is? It’s the thin line, the very thin air. “Sshh” is the broad air.’ She took my hand, held it up to her mouth and pushed out her lips. I could feel the shirring of moist air on the back of my hand. ‘Well, “ess” is the thin air.’ She held onto my hand, stretched her lips, and pressed together her top and bottom teeth to show me. ‘Thin air,’ she repeated. I felt the hiss on my skin and promised to practice this in front of the mirror back home.

I asked Clare why she thought I had succeeded in the oral deaf education system while some others had not. She was quick to answer. It was a question for which she knew the answer from a life-time’s vocation in teaching. ‘Deafness for some people doesn’t impede a lot, but for some, depending on their degree of deafness and their ability to lip-read, well it’s harder. Yes, it’s harder.’ She paused. ‘I’ll give you what I think about lip-reading.’ She pointed towards a window. ‘If we look outside and see a tree, and three people sit in the same position and draw what they see is the tree, they’ll each draw it differently. The first one will sort of draw a stick type of tree, like a child. The next one will do better, perhaps put some leaves on it, a bit more detail. But the third one is an artist and draws it properly, draws it so you know what it looks like—unless of course he’s a modernist, a Picasso! Right.’

She stopped to catch her breath. She wanted to be sure that I understood her point. ‘So what happens with the artist is this: their eyes see, their brain tells their hands what to do, how to do it. Right. Lip-reading: your eyes see to tell your brain to copy those lip movements. There’s not much difference, is there? Between eyes seeing the tree and the hand drawing it, or eyes seeing the lips and the brain copying the shapes.’ She leant back into her chair. ‘But look, that’s only my theory. I’m not an expert on this. Not at all. That’s just my interpretation of why some deaf people have the ability to talk in the hearing world.’

Clare Minchin’s conceptualisation of lip-reading as an art rather than a science made sense.
or read every single syllable enunciated to me. I spend much energy guessing what is being said by filling in any missing information by drawing on the circumstances of the conversation. Many words have different meanings in different contexts, and I need to pick my way through this web of word-trickery. My mother remembers an early childhood example of my comprehension in understanding the elasticity of words when she said to me once, ‘We’ll have to catch a bus.’ I looked surprised and then scooped the air with my cupped hands, laughing ‘Catch a ball!’ I scooped the air again, shouting ‘Catch a bus!’

Clare expanded on her theory. She explained that this sense of artistry needs to be supported by a sense of confidence. Unless a deaf child feels confident enough to ask a new hearing friend to repeat what they have said, or to remind a teacher to face the classroom when they are speaking, then that deaf child is unlikely to succeed in oral integrated or mainstream education. ‘That’s why you did well,’ she said. Her voice held an undercurrent of wistfulness: she wanted every deaf child to benefit from oralism just as I had done. She was a ‘true believer,’ and she saw that the hard choices made on my behalf all those years ago by my parents and by my teachers had reaped significant benefits for me throughout my life, particularly in expanding my education and work opportunities. Still, her insights about the artistry and confidence required to succeed in oralism sounded a warning bell: it was not suitable for every deaf child.

2.
By one of those strikes of serendipity that happens in life every now and then, during this time I received an invitation to attend the ‘class of 62’ reunion of my classmates from the Deaf School. When I realised that I would not able to attend the reunion as I would be in England by then—having succeeded in my application for a work permit as a policy manager with Kent County Council—I arranged to have lunch with the reunion’s organiser, Jennifer. We had not seen each other or even been in contact with each other since 1962, but when we saw each other again, uncomprehending of our private histories that had aged us, we embraced with all the warmth and affection of unbroken friendship. I gripped her shoulders, bracing my arms straight out so that I could gaze on her better. She held my gaze; I could see compassion and gentleness in her eyes. Jennifer had brought photos with her; some of them were already familiar to me, others were new. As we riffled through the photos together, exclaiming over this person and that person—Jennifer knew who was doing what; she had assigned for herself the role of ‘memory-keeper’ and knew all their careers, marriages, children, divorces and grief; she’d kept in touch with all their news—I started to cry. I could not explain to Jennifer, or to myself for that matter, my sense of having lost something by not being a part of my childhood friends’ evolving lives.
On seeing my tears, Jennifer insisted on arranging for a few of my old deaf school classmates to meet me for an after-work drink. Between packing up my home and taking my other farewells with the usual round of lunches at friends’ homes and dinner celebrations in New Farm’s Italian bistros, I found a time in my diary for three days later, shortly before I left for England. Five of us gathered at the Moray Street café, smiling at each other, excited and awkward in our efforts to breach so many years in such a brief splice of time: Carmel, who still sported a scar from the gash on her forehead from when she had fallen off the monkey-bars in the playground; Wayne, one of the little boys in my pre-school class but who now bore the maturity of the senior Australian Customs officer that he was; Matthew who was my first boyfriend, carrying my things for me when we were both four years old at the Oral Deaf Preschool at Yeronga, and who had visited me at least once almost every year for the last twenty years; and Jennifer. We tried to chat: we wanted to share our news and our clannish excitement, but the differences in our communication styles were too great to be breached easily or quickly. The others were able to sign to each other, but I could not sign: I had not learnt Auslan, the Australian sign language. Our ability to comprehend speech varied markedly, so that we spoke with each other at different speeds and different pitches and even in different grammar (Auslan is a visual and spatial language that does not always follow the word-order of spoken English), depending on who was holding the floor at any one time. I spent much of the hour smiling; I was happy to be with my deaf companions. I did not feel any need to do or be anything more than that: I just simply liked being with them.

As we parted from each other amidst promises of seeing each other again soon, I felt the weight of difference bearing down on me. I was different from my deaf friends too: they could at least communicate with each other. The psychologist’s question had lodged itself in me; I could not shift it. I had returned to it over and over again, but I could not work it out. It was a complex question that could not be easily answered. I was tempted to let it go.

3.

As it happened, a suitcase gave my quest new momentum. I had gone to my mother’s home to borrow one of her suitcases for my big trip to England. She owned several: a small tartan one that you can pull along to save straining your back; a large caramel brown vinyl one with fake straps and buckles stitched on the outside; a tartan overnight shoulder bag. I burrowed around the shadowy basement room, looking for a suitable one. I was full of anticipation, looking forward to my adventure. I felt myself filling up with new and as yet unlived stories, and was in this mood of dreaming when my mother called out to me, ‘Look at this!’ She sounded excited. She had stumbled across an old Globite school case: it was dark brown, cardboardy in texture, with faded green and
orange stripes down one side. It was dented, old and dusty. Looking at its surface, I sensed mysteries hidden within its archival mustiness. My mother said: ‘I’d forgotten about this. I’ve kept your old things in here,’ and she opened up that school case, and set free into the air all the noise, smells, and sounds of my girlhood years.

I looked down at my childhood paintings resting on what looked liked layers of rubble. My mother rummaged and pushed some things aside and held other things up for me to see. I was caught up in her excitement. There was my Grade Two catechism project book. And there was an exercise book—with the legend inscribed on the front: ‘The Department of Public Instruction’—from my days at the Deaf School. I riffled through the pages and could remember, could smell, my school days. I could smell the Clag glue, the purple dye of the Roneo stencilling machine, the plastic bowls with apples diced up in small, brown discoloured pieces swimming in orange juice and the dust of the white chalk. And I could see Mr. Pritchard standing tall at the blackboard, in front of his class of twelve children, teaching the story of Androcles and the Lion. I remembered how my very best friend, Sharon, and I had listened intently to Mr Pritchard, watching him as he turned the pages of a book, and how we had sat next to each other at a long bench as we copied down this story of friendship and affection. And there it was in my exercise pad. I wanted to dive into that Globite school case and sink into its bed of memories.

My curiosity was now alight: I wanted to know more despite my anxiety that I would be somehow overwhelmed by new knowledge. I wanted to ration my research to protect myself from being drawn into an imagined vortex of deafness that would engulf my identity and spit it back out into the hearing world as another person altogether. Who that person would be and why I should fear her, I wasn’t sure. I knew that I disliked the phrase ‘the deaf’ with its implication of just one race, a single cultural entity. I didn’t like the connotation that all people who are deaf must necessarily define themselves and their lives by the fact of their deafness. I certainly didn’t define myself as a member of ‘the deaf community.’ I also bristled at the packaging of the words, ‘the deaf,’ into emotive phrases such as the ‘predicament of the deaf,’ accompanied with tags such as ‘haunted by their isolation.’ I particularly resented the phrase ‘hearing impaired’ with its violent implication that a flaw in my ears —was it a rip, a tear, a wound?— had torn right through my body.

I started reading Oliver Sacks’s book, Seeing Voices. I had bought this book several years earlier. I loved the title and was drawn to the book because of it. I had kept the book next to a miniature Rococo silver-framed photo of Jack on a shelf in my bedroom where I could see both the book and the photo readily. Months would go by and I would not take any notice of that book, but every now and then I would pick it up and simply look at the title, Seeing Voices, and contemplate.
its meaning for me. However, I had abandoned my first reading of it halfway through. I felt that
Sacks romanticised the idea of being deaf: his book is a paean to deaf people and to sign language.
He was prone to drawing larger-than-life conclusions from just a handful of anecdotes; he had a
tendency to marvel at the achievements of certain deaf people with excessive incredulity. The more
I read, the more uncomfortable I became. I marked the spot about half-way through the book where
I gave up reading when Sacks observed:

‘I had felt there was something very joyful, even Arcadian about Gallaudet and I was not
surprised to hear that some of the students were occasionally reluctant to leave its warmth
and seclusion and protectiveness, the cosiness of a small but complete and self-sufficient
world, for the unkind and uncomprehending big world outside.’

This was simply too much for me. I was irritated by his sentimentality. I was irritated by the
implication that these mature, intelligent young people attending university to further their
education and carve out their piece of the employment sector in the future were actually children
wanting to shelter within their deaf identity. (Founded in 1864, the Gallaudet University in
Washington DC, USA, is the world's only university in which all programs and services are
designed for deaf and hard of hearing students). Of course, it is probable that many deaf people—
like many hearing people—do want to hide from a difficult world. But I felt frustrated by Sacks’
trivialising the cultural politics of the deaf community by the way he painted a naïve portrait of
sanctity and bliss within the world of ‘the deaf” in valiant opposition to a brutish hearing world.
Perversely, I had to also admit to a renegade pang of yearning when I read Sacks’ description of
Gallaudet University. I recognised the instinct for wanting to be completely at home.

When I picked Oliver Sacks’s book up again with the resolve to read it from cover to cover,
I had a sense of standing at the edge of a diving board, springing up and down on my toes, testing
the tension of the board, flexing my muscles before stretching up, arching out and diving headlong
into and through the air and hoping to slice through the water below cleanly without a splash. I
suspected, however, that once I let go of whatever it was that was holding me back from this
particular dive into my identity, I would be met not by a silent swoop into the well of
understanding, but by much noisy and unsettling ripples of multiple views, clashes and upsets. I
sensed the inevitability of unwelcome news; the confusion of conflicting memories. A good friend,
on learning of my intention to write about my deaf-life, said, ‘Oh, you don’t want to do that. Don’t
go digging around. You’ll just get upset. Everything’s fine.’ I didn’t talk of it again with her. I kept
my counsel.

I could not stop my quest now even in the face of such discouragement. Talking with my
deaf-school teachers and reuniting with my childhood deaf-school friends whetted my appetite to do
exactly what my friend told me not to do: I wanted to dig around more. Instead of being satisfied with learning about the importance of my deaf school education and the loyal affection of my deaf friends, I felt as though I had been given pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that I had not yet made sense of. When I packed my suitcase for England, I made space between the layers of clothes for my notebooks and cassette tapes from my interviews with Mrs Kelly and Miss Minchin. I squeezed in the Oliver Sacks book as well. These would be my companions in England.
Chapter Three: Wrong Snow

1.
Eighteen months after those conversations with my preschool teachers and that reunion with my childhood deaf classmates, I returned home to Australia from England empty-hearted. I had settled into a nice apartment overlooking the River Medway in Rochester, enjoyed the buds of new friendships, and had muddled my way through a complicated housing policy project with Kent County Council. Paris was just a Eurostar day-trip away from my front door. But despite all those signs of a promising new start in my life, I had got myself caught up in some mayhem of the heart.

It had begun innocuously enough. I shared an office with Seumas (not his real name) in Maidstone’s County Hall building where we fell into the habit of getting together in the cafeteria to mull over policy projects. He had curly hair which sprang out from his head in a halo of shock, and a closely shaved beard which he would stroke as if he had once lost all his hair and still could not quite believe in its return. He also had the habit of gazing directly at me when I spoke and holding his gaze a little longer than politeness calls for. It was unsettling and provocative. I would blush and, making a mental note to hold my nerve, try to cultivate the appearance of sang-froid in response.

Giving off the air that it was his responsibility to show England to me, Seumas took me on excursions to explore the ramparts of Dover Castle, the pathways through Sissinghurst Gardens, Ely where its cathedral emerged from the flatness of the surrounding Fens like a candle on a cake, Bath Abbey with its lengthily inscribed memorials (‘died after a long and tedious illness,’ ‘a woman of mild manners . . . a graceful persuasion fell from her lips’), the shingle-seaside bleakness that is Dungeness, and the historic pubs in London’s Charing Cross. I thanked him. He shrugged, ‘It’s no hardship,’ and used the long car-trips to pump me for details of my Australian life and to fill me with the absurdities of English life. Seumas talked as if it was an opportunity to get the facts right for himself: he would talk about this historical event or that geographical feature, pause and reflect, back-track over what he had said, and then move forward again having made things clearer in his own mind. He thrust questions at me as if they were duelling instruments. ‘Do you know the difference between right and wrong snow?’ No, I didn’t. Seumas explained it. The hapless British Rail once blamed train delays on a fall of unusually light and powdery snow which could not be caught by the snowploughs; it was the wrong type of snow. Seumas gave in to his unrestrained curiosity about everything. Where other people are guided by the conventions of courtesy about what is or is not polite to ask, Seumas was not. He asked me why I had come to England, was I
running away from something or had I come in pursuit of an adventure? Perhaps romance, even? He was gleeful and rubbed his hands together in mock-mischief. ‘I’ll get the story out of you!’

The difference between attention and affection was not always clear-cut for me, and sometimes I let myself be seduced by very little, a kind word perhaps, or a teasing smile, maybe even just a perceptive comment. Seumas’s attentiveness pushed me into that slip-stream between love’s illusions and life’s truth. I reminded myself that we were simply work colleagues enjoying the early days of friendship, nothing more.

Not long after my arrival in England, Seumas accused me, ‘Are you really deaf? You don’t act deaf.’ He leant towards me across the cafeteria table at which we were sitting to peer at me more closely, as if to reassess his vision of me, to reconfigure what he was really seeing. I was startled into a nervous laugh and asked ‘What does acting deaf look like?’ He blushed, cast a look to the ceiling, and then with an ‘in for a penny, in for a pound’ attitude, he held up his hands, palms facing each other, and rotated one hand around the other, jiggling his fingers as he did so. I didn’t say anything in reply. In the face of my staring silence, he pushed on, ‘Can’t you sign? Aren’t you supposed to sign?’ ‘No.’ I saw his scepticism; saw, too, how I was supposed to look as a deaf person. I was supposed to look like a person with a rubbery face of cursive eyebrows and elastic cheeks, mouthing words soundlessly and waving my hands at chest-height. I was supposed to be communication in movement, an exercise in the kinaesthetics of speech. If I did not do any of these things, then I could not really be deaf, or perhaps I was simply not deaf enough. My adeptness in speech and lip-reading confused people. How could I call myself ‘deaf’ if I could comprehend the spoken word and speak in reply?

2.
It was a reasonable question. After all, I had asked it of myself during my early reflections on my deafness, and had gone in pursuit of answers in those few weeks before I left Australia for England. In my Rochester apartment, I unpacked the tapes and notes of my conversations with Maryanne Kelly and Clare Minchin, and laid them out beside my laptop, intent once more on responding to the editor’s challenge to write honestly about the impact of deafness on my life. I replayed the tapes several times, the women’s Australian accents sounding loud in my Rochester apartment, and compared my hand-written notes with what I could hear on the tapes and remember in the solitariness of my apartment. Perhaps it was because I was alone, but my recollections made me wistful.

Feeling mellow, I wrote my recollections of my deaf childhood determined to project a positive portrait of my life as a deaf woman. I was acutely in my distant for years now in which
confessional stories default to plight and tragedy, without any particular illumination of causality or lessons to be shared. My resolution was easy to sustain because I regarded my professional achievements as the direct products of my oral-deaf education as well as the parental support I enjoyed, combined with my relentless capacity for work and the luck of having generous mentors throughout my career. But I put the essay away unfinished because I did not know how to end it. The question of the impact of my deafness on my life remained unanswered.

3.

Some time passed, and Christmas came and went too. My work at Kent County Council kept me absorbed. I also took advantage of England’s many bank holiday weekends to travel in Europe in between the excursions across England with Seumas. By now, he had disclosed that he was struggling with sobriety. This rattled me as I had been diligent in avoiding men who drank too much. I knew about the rigours of alcoholism—my father’s alcoholic descent and subsequent life-long recovery had worn a groove into the patterns of our family life—and a strain entered into our friendship.

I spent more time with other friends, and filled my e-mails and postcards to home with stories about Margate’s jellied eels and Derek Jarman’s garden at Romney Marsh, the Manchester United fans’ hymnal chant of ‘We only had ten men!’ as they downed the Tottenham HotSpurs in a historic victory, and the virtues of wellies for tramping across the fields of Speldhurst. Whenever friends from Australia came to stay, I hosted dinner parties, filling my apartment with a mess of English and Australian voices. I loved the company of my friends and was lonely in their absence. They all shared the gift of laughter and when I was with them, I forgot I was alone.

Then destiny dealt a swift blow. Seumas lost his erratic battle with sobriety with a self-crucifying thoroughness, giving life to the word ‘maelstrom.’ He was sacked. The hell of his alcoholic collapse struck too close to home. Despite my father’s late-in-life commitment to the Alcoholics Anonymous fellowship, his alcoholism had taught me this much: steer clear. My friendship with Seumas told me otherwise: I wanted to stay close. Instead, it was Seumas who put the distance between us. My survival instincts were blunted despite the intervention of an Australian consultant in London who counselled me on detachment. He talked about the guises of love in all its variations, and used words like ‘miracles’ and ‘gifts,’ and said things that sounded mystical and spiritual. I hadn’t had such a conversation before. He said too, ‘You have to recover yourself. You must write. Writing will be your recovery.’ I thought about my unfinished essay on my deaf childhood, and knew he was right. My colleagues were chasing new jobs, my work projects were near completion, and I was homesick. And so it came about that my closest friend in
England, Judy, hosted a farewell dinner party for me at her home in Folkestone, before driving me to Gatwick Airport the following morning. My time in England had run its course.
Chapter Four: A Great Big Wash of Tears

1. **Be careful what you pray for.** The refrain echoed in my mind as I went about the business of rebuilding my life back home. My old public service career in Queensland held the same appeal as yesterday’s left-overs. I lasted exactly ten days before handing in my notice permanently. My manager was very nice about it and she wished me well. ‘What are you going to do?’ My career plans were vague but I answered with the boldness that resilience calls for. ‘I’m going to write. I’ll work for myself as a freelance policy analyst and write.’ She nodded. We both knew that I was faking my courage. But even false courage creates its rewards: work projects came my way and a real estate agent called me about an apartment overlooking the Brisbane River. It had the feel of a tree-house, perched up high in the gable of a family home, and so I moved in there rather than turf out the tenants in my own Art Deco apartment just down the road.

I returned to the routines of my Sunday swimming club and picked up the habits of old friendships as best as I could. I wasn’t entirely successful; a few friends complained that I had changed in a way that they did not like. I was distant in my manner, reluctant to talk about the final weeks of my time in England. This was difficult territory to negotiate, because despite my grief for Seumas, I valued all that I had experienced during my eighteen months in England but could not find the right words to explain this to myself, let alone to anyone else. I fell out of favour with a couple of people who lost patience with my quietness, but my closest friends stayed the course with me. They fed and watered me, took me to my favourite holiday retreat, Stradbroke Island, where we swam in the sea under a blue sky, asked me the occasional questions, and tolerated my confusion. My mother sat with me many times over several weeks, tapping her fingers on the chair, before she finally asked, ‘What on earth happened?’ Her question tore more tears from me, provoking her to comment, ‘You don’t have much luck with the men, do you?’ My tears dried up in a wheeze of outrage but before I could defend myself, she ruminated, ‘Never mind, I’ve never had much luck either.’ Given that she had been married for forty-seven years to my father until his death eight years earlier, and was now eighty years old with nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, this made me smile.

In between times, I wrote. I had finished my essay on deafness, ‘I Hear With My Eyes,’ and given it to a prospective publisher. In this essay, I wrote about my enthusiasm for my childhood deaf friends and recounted what my teachers had told me. I also wrote about my mother’s persistence in making sure that I learnt to communicate by speaking rather than signing. I crafted a
speculated on the meaning of certain incidents in defining who I am and the successes I had enjoyed as a deaf woman in a hearing world. I searched carefully for what I wanted to say and concluded my essay with the words ‘I can listen, speak and communicate . . . precious gifts sown in my life when I was just a child.’ While I believed in the truth of these words (and still do), I was also aware that by ending the essay in this way, I had not taken the opportunity to tackle the status quo of deaf people’s standing in the world. Somehow, I had implied that it was better to be deaf and to speak than not, but I had not sufficiently explained why I believed this or even challenged why this should be so. I sat on my discomfort and hoped it would go away. I told myself it was not that important.

While I waited for the publisher’s reply, I wrote about other things. I wrote about my hopes in my diary as soon as I woke up in the mornings. I wrote outlines for novels after breakfast and before I started work for the day. I wrote letters and sent e-mails to friends when I should have been working. I wrote poems in the late afternoons and public policy papers for clients in the evenings with a glass of wine for company, losing track of time only to discover its passing when hunger pangs struck too late at night for me to be bothered to prepare a decent meal. The local Thai take-away was my new best friend. My taste in food was not the only thing to change: so did my taste in reading. I turned to books on love, religion, and meditation: I re-read Thomas Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain*; discovered Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist monk and activist; scrolled addictively through Amazon on line for reviews of new books; and used the back of art postcards to copy sentences by other writers exhorting readers to find fresh ways to see their world. I just about knocked myself out, I was in such a mania of self-improvement, intent on changing myself so that I could change my life.

Falling under the thrall of seeing meaning where there is none, Seumas’s story about wrong snow struck me as an apt metaphor for my own approach to life. At the time, I reasoned that I was not in a romantic relationship because something must be wrong with me, not because of wrong men, unlucky circumstances, or bad timing. Not even because that’s just the way things turn out for some of us. Most of the time, I did not seriously think my being deaf was the reason I was not in a romantic relationship, but every now and then, the question would stray into the periphery of my consciousness: maybe it *was* the reason? In any case, I was resolute: I had to change something in my life, whatever that ‘something’ might be, and I wanted to learn how to do this.

2.

Women who become pregnant for the first time often comment that their whole world suddenly appears to be full of pregnant women. They had not noticed them before, but now, here they were, all around them. Their individual experiences may not mirror at all. I experienced a similar curiosity.
completing my essay on deafness. Suddenly, every second newspaper article seemed to be about deafness, hearing loss, deaf culture, deaf children, and cochlear implants. Advertisements about hearing aids also proliferated, especially the annoying ones touting the virtues of ‘invisible’ hearing aids. A newspaper article about a centre for deaf children in a leafy suburb of Brisbane finally stirred me into action, and I arranged a meeting with the centre’s clinical director. She was a small person with large energy; her passion was bracing. Ever quick to assert the power of cochlear implants, she asked me, ‘Have you considered having an implant?’ I said no, and that I doubted I would be a suitable candidate. She gazed at me for a few moments and pronounced, ‘I’m sure you’d benefit from it.’ Her authority was compelling. I agreed to consider it.

Having won this concession from me, she walked me into a sunny room crowded with a mess of little boys and girls, all arrayed in a democracy of shorts, shirts, and sandals. Mothers and fathers, their young faces stretched with tension, stood or sat around the room’s perimeter watching their children. The noise in the room was orchestral, rising and falling to a mash of shouts, cries and squeals. A table had been set with several plastic plates in which diced pieces of browning apple, orange slices and melon chunks swam in a pond of juice. Children clustered around it, waiting to be served, bringing to life one of my childhood photographs. I redirected my attention to the director who introduced me to a couple of the mothers. They smiled at me in a friendly but uncertain way. I smiled back wondering what to say. They volunteered information about their children, describing their hearing history before slipping into portraits of their personality. I murmured encouraging sounds in reply. When the little ones finished their morning fruit, they were rounded up to sit cross-legged at the front of the room, before a teacher poised with finger-puppets of ducks. I pulled up a red plastic chair, its tiny size designed to accommodate an infant’s bottom, and lowered myself onto it to watch the proceedings. The boys and girls leaned forward in laughter as they watched their teacher perform the story of a mother duck and her five baby ducks. Her hands moved in a flurry of duck-billed mimicry. “Quack! Quack! Quack!” said the mother duck!’ The parents trilled along in time with the teacher.

I drove home from that education centre in a reflective mood. I fretted over how parents still absorbed the diagnosis of their newborn child’s disability or deafness with fear, helplessness and dread for their child’s fate. I wanted to tell them all, this very minute, about all that is possible for their child. I wanted them to be encouraged to enjoy great hopes for their child.

3.

A year later, when my essay, ‘I Hear With My Eyes,’ was published in a national journal, I was pleased to see it in print and felt a sense of achievement. I’d done the necessary self-reflection and
had said what needed to be said. The deed was done, and now I could move onto other matters.
Aah! But not so quick! I was held up by readers’ responses to my essay, and by the tumble of
questions put to me by parents of deaf children.

Some people said they liked my candour. Others said that they were moved by it. Friends
were curious and fascinated to get the inside story of my life as a deaf person as it had not been a
topic of conversation or inquiry among us. They felt that they’d learnt something about what it
means to be deaf. Many responses to my essay and public presentations had relief and surprise as
their emotional core. Parents cried on hearing me talk about the fullness of my life and seemed to
regard me as having given them permission to hope for their own deaf children. Educators invited
me to speak at parent education evenings because, as one of them wrote, ‘To have an adult who has
a hearing impairment and who has developed great spoken language and is able to communicate in
the community at large—that would be a great encouragement and inspiration for our families.’

Leaving aside the circus-freak overtones of this particular comment, I was uncomfortable about
these responses because I was not sure that I had been as honest or direct as I could have been.
What lessons on being deaf had people absorbed by reading my essay and listening to my
presentations? I had not set out to be duplicitous, but had I embraced the writer’s aim for the neatly
curved narrative arc at the cost of the cool self-regarding eye and the uncertain conclusion?

In my essay, I had ignored the historic context of being born deaf at a time, in the mid
1950s, when people still spoke of the ‘pitiful deaf-mute’ and the ‘deaf and dumb.’ I had
downplayed the fact that I belonged to a category of children who attracted the gaze of the curious,
the kind, and the cruel with mixed results, and who were bombarded with questions we either could
not hear and so could not answer, or could hear and that made us shrivel in our loss of dignity. I had
not drawn attention to the fact that we were the patronised beneficiaries of charitable picnics
organised for ‘the disadvantaged and the handicapped.’ We were also the subject of taunts, with
words such as ‘spastic’ being speared towards us as if to be called such a name was a bad thing. I
could not claim innocence as my defence. I had known that I was glossing over it but thought that
this was right and proper: why stir up jagged memories? Aren’t some things better left
unexpressed? Besides, keep the conversation nice, I had thought.

I had also rejected the mythologising of deafness. I had wanted my story to be free of
dramatic conflict, of the pendulum swings of emotion. I wanted to be persuasive in the telling of my
life as a deaf girl/deaf woman as a regular life. I knew that I stood accused of being disingenuous
because my life has been different—and, to tell the truth, quite interesting—because of my
deafness. A small part of me quite liked the romanticising of deafness, and who wanted to be plain
old ordinary? But this was mischievous of me. The reality was that I had worked very hard to be
‘ordinary’ so that I could enjoy my place in the hearing world with my tertiary education, my career, my friendships and relationships. I also understood my life to have been shaped by the influences of many people, events and circumstances, and not just by the fact of being deaf. These influences—for example, my Catholicism, my convent school education, the city in which I grew up, my work—were like the interconnecting threads of that children’s string game, cat’s cradle. It was not possible to isolate one thread without damaging or distorting the pattern of the cradle. Similarly, I was reluctant—am still reluctant—to isolate the fact of my deafness as the most significant shaper of my life, although it was true that my parents’ love, riven with my mother’s determination to wrest a life for me unconstrained by the limits of my hearing, had been a propulsive force. My rectitude, then, posed a particular challenge as I tried to make sense of the mix of memories, imagined scenes, inherited stories, and personal values about what matters and what doesn’t, to understand the rightness or otherwise of the psychologist’s question, ‘Your deafness, it must have had a big impact on you?’

The combination of grief and hope in readers’ responses to my published essay was provocative. I was especially shocked by the intensity of so many parents’ grief about their children’s deafness, and frustrated by the notion that I was an inspiration because I am deaf but oral. I wondered what this implied about my childhood deaf friends who did not speak orally as well as I do, but who nevertheless enjoyed fulfilling lives. I was also stunned by the admission of a mother of a six year old deaf son who not only could not speak but had not been taught how to Sign. This mother, a doctor, said, ‘Now that I’ve met you, I’m not so frightened of deaf people anymore.’ Her small boy stood next to her, uncomprehending, his head bowed and his arms limp by his side. Her face was alive with the thrill of revelation. She seemed to be completely blind to my silent horror; surely my face must have shown how appalled I was? My shock may strike the average hearing person as naïve, but I was unnerved that so many parents of children newly diagnosed with deafness were grasping my words with the relief of people who have long ago lost hope in the possibilities for their deaf sons and daughters.

My shock was not directed at these parents but at an apparently unabated prejudice. What was going on out there in the big world that, five decades after my mother experienced her own grief, bewilderment, anxiety, and quest to forge a good life for her little deaf daughter, contemporary parents were still experiencing those very same fears and asking the same questions? Why did parents still receive the news of their child’s deafness as a death sentence of sorts, the death of hope and prospects for their child, when the facts show that far from being a death sentence, the diagnosis of deafness propels a child into a different life, not a lesser life? Evidently, a
different sort of silence had been created over the years; not the silence of hearing loss but the silence of lost stories, invisible stories, unspoken stories.

I had contributed to that silence. My own silence had acted as a brake of sorts. I had, for too long, buried the chance to better understand the complex lives of deaf people as we negotiate the claims and demands of the hearing world. For as long as I could remember, and certainly for all of my adult life, I was careful to avoid being identified as ‘a deaf person.’ Although much of my career was taken up with considering the equity dilemmas of people with a disability, I had never assumed the mantle of advocacy for deaf people or deaf rights. Some of my early silence about deaf identity politics was consistent with my desire not to shine the torch on myself in this way. I did not want to draw attention to myself by what I did not have, that is, less hearing than other people. I had thought that if I lived my life as fully as possible in the hearing world and with as little fuss as possible, then my success in blending in would be eloquence enough. If I was going to attract attention, I wanted it to be on the basis of merit, on what I achieved. Others would draw the conclusions that needed to be drawn, that is, that deaf people can take their place fully in the hearing world. But now I looked around me and wondered ‘Why don’t I bump into more deaf people during the course of my daily life?’ I was not a recluse. I had broad interests, travelled a lot, and had enjoyed a public policy career for some thirty years, spanning the three tiers of government and scaling the competitive ladder with a reasonable degree of nimbleness. Such a career had got me out and about quite a bit, and yet not once in those thirty years did I get to share an office or a chance meeting or a lunch break with another deaf person. The one exception that proved the rule was my meeting in England with James Strachan, a man whose charisma outshone his profound deafness, and about whom I will write in a later chapter.

My certainty about what I’d claimed in that essay wobbled: I wobbled. I wondered who I was.

4.
The financial strain of working for myself, the corrosiveness of my disappointment in love, and the burden of my resentful fear at the prospect of being single for the rest of my days, coalesced into the question, ‘What’s the point of it all?’ It was too much. Two telephone conversations rescued me from despair.

The first one took place shortly after I made a mad dash from Australia to London and back home again within six days in pursuit of a policy position with the UK Design Council. I had not cut my ties with England. If anything, my friendships with my English friends had strengthened with a diet of telephone calls and e-mails about their lives in Speldhurst, Tonbridge, Folkestone,
Somerset and London. Seumas was keeping me posted about his efforts to pull himself together through an addiction recovery program, and Judy had even come out for a holiday, exciting me into showing her off to my Australian friends with a round of dinner parties and visits to my favourite beaches at Noosa, Byron, and Stradbroke. And so when I was invited to attend a job interview in London, it presented itself as a chance to start over again in England. I was equivocal, I wasn’t really enthusiastic; it would mean another upheaval, but nor did I feel strong enough to say ‘no’ to such an invitation. Luckily, I was rescued by the prospective employer’s lack of enthusiasm for me. Still, the whole exercise took its toll, and so when an old school friend, Maria, heard the exhaustion in my voice on the telephone just a day or so after my return from the London interview, her response was instantaneous. ‘You must go on a retreat,’ and she gave me the details, and I did. At that Bethel healing retreat, run by two former nuns in a hillside house which tilted into its ageing, papery timbers as it overlooked the sea, I learnt a little more about the compassion of love. I came to understand that the teacher I was looking for in my life lay within me. I was also shown how to meditate.

The second telephone conversation took place a few months later. It was Easter Monday but it was the most un-Easterly of all Easters for me. I had another work deadline to meet and more real estate agents to call; I had sold my New Farm home and was in search of a new home by the river. It did not feel like a feast day at all. It was just another public holiday. Just another day. I sank into a deep melancholy, was immobilised by it. I tried to sleep it off but was too wide awake. I made an effort to distract myself with work but could not settle. I turned my attention to a new essay on deafness written by a colleague whereupon I fell into a great big wash of tears. In the essay, my colleague had recounted a deaf teenage boy’s experience: he was successful in all that he did but he nevertheless succumbed to depression and attempted to kill himself; he survived his own attack to reveal that he was very lonely; he did not know any other deaf people and had never met any deaf adults; he had concluded this meant that deaf people die young.

I cried as if I had never cried before. The boy’s story was inside me. It bumped up against the psychologist’s question—‘Your hearing loss must have had a big impact on you?’—which hummed like radio echo-waves beneath the surface of my daily activities and nightly dreams. I lay down on the floor, my head on a pillow, with the aim of quietening myself by meditating. Closing my eyes, I breathed in time to my tears and eventually my tears subsided, and my breath was more even. I watched the vivid red-scarlet colours behind my closed eyes for a long time and kept watching as the red transformed itself into purple; it was as if a red roof had slid back to reveal the purple sky. Peace settled in me. I kept still. As I lay there, on the prickly carpet, taking in the purple
colours, the name of a friend whom I had not seen for too long bubbled up into my mind. Maryanne.

We had known each other years ago. She had long black hair falling down to her waist, and liked to promote herself as a hippie, but despite her zany take on life, she was, at heart, too solid to be a real hippie. At first, our friendship was based on the light ease of mutual friends, conversations about books, and gossip. Then, our affection deepened when Jack died; we shared a bond of grief, both of us lost babies too young. Over the years, I had drawn on her older wisdom; still did, despite her physical absence; ‘Love is always close to you,’ she liked to tell me. She lived now with her husband in the northern rivers area of New South Wales where she wrote and he painted. Maryanne. I had been meaning to telephone her to get news of a mutual friend, Louise, in Canada. Now was the time to call her again.

‘What’s up, sweetheart?’ She came straight to the point when she heard the tears in my voice. ‘Is it Jack?’ ‘No, not this time.’ We spoke of our shadow-children for a few minutes—their presence remained strong for each of us—before I answered her opening question, ‘No, it’s as if I’ve got empty-nest syndrome. I’ve worked so very hard all these years to cope with my sadness, to keep busy, but now it’s time for me to stop working so hard. It’s time for me to live my life differently and I’m finding it very difficult even though I know I must.’ Maryanne murmured humming-like sounds in a series of sustained breaths while I said my words. She didn’t say anything. I kept going. ‘I’ve been thinking. I’ve been wondering.’ I stopped. I could not say the words that were in my chest. ‘Yes, sweetheart? You’ve been wondering?’

I pushed on. ‘Well, sometimes I think that my happiest days were when I was at the Deaf School,’ and I could not say anything more. I breathed heavily. Maryanne waited at the other end of the line. I gulped air and expelled it in the question, ‘I wonder if I feel so lonely because I don’t have any deaf people in my life?’ I wasn’t precisely sure what I meant by this question given that I had my childhood deaf friends I could call upon, but the absence of their routine presence in my adult life seemed wide and gaping. Maryanne erupted. ‘I love this!’ she sang. ‘This is just so exciting!’ She cried out in exclamation marks in her excitement. ‘You are on the right track! You know you are!’ And I did know.
PART TWO
Chapter Five: Talk Speak Words Sign

1.
Some months later, I signed up to Auslan classes. At the end of the first lesson one summer evening, I rang my sister.
‘You’ll never guess what I’ve just done.’
‘No.’
I stood in my kitchen, phone in hand, and watched steam rising from the kettle. My face felt hot, at odds with the cold tension settling into my jaw.
‘I’ve just been to an Auslan class. You know, Australian sign language.’
‘Godalmighty,’ Cecily’s alarm barrelled down the telephone line. ‘Don’t tell mum. It’ll kill her.’
‘Don’t say that. Don’t even joke about it.’
‘I’m not.’
My heart hammered as I reached for the kettle before the water boiled over.

2.
The following Saturday, I told Cecily’s daughter, my niece, Jess. She looked into the dregs of her coffee. A blur of white and black flounced by us; a waitress in a hurry. ‘Well?’ I prompted Jess. She chewed the inside of her cheek. Worried. She stopped frowning and smiled. ‘Won’t Grandma guess when you start slipping into the occasional sign? That’s not going to be too good for you, is it?’

3.
Such was the power of oralism in my family that the very idea of learning Australian sign language throbbed with the potency of sin. Many sins. Sloth. Exhibitionism. Forming cabals. Deaf people who signed did not work hard enough at talking. They drew attention to themselves. Worse still, they gathered together in tight communities, isolated from the rest of the world. For these sins, there was no forgiveness through penance; instead, the penalty of banishment from the ‘normal’ hearing world was the unvoiced threat. Not just for me but for all my family. Cecily demanded, ‘You must remember! None of us was allowed to learn the deaf person’s alphabet. Mum tore the pages out of the back of the encyclopaedia so that we couldn’t learn it.’

No matter that I had a life-time of speaking aloud etched into my history, and that I was not seeking to be absorbed into the Deaf-signing community. Besides, wasn’t I the poster girl for oralism? A 1960 television magazine had reported my mother’s claim that I was ‘a new person
said without being able to hear any spoken words.’ This might have been so, but my mother went on to stretch credulity: ‘She has become an avid TV fan as a result of this and can sing the entire theme of the “Mickey Mouse Club” from beginning to end.’ I was barely five years old. And now here I was, nearly fifty years later, sitting through my first Auslan class at the centre for Deaf Services Queensland feeling as though all the security cameras in the world were trained on me: caught! Each week for ten weeks, I attended those Auslan classes bristling with the frisson of extreme risk, and nervous about doing my homework too diligently. What if I started backsliding in my spoken speech? What if I woke up one morning entirely mute and resistant to verbal communication? What if I signed?

4.

Most children are curious about where they come from. Such curiosity marks their first foray into sexual development and sense of identity. I do not remember expressing such curiosity; it congealed, instead, around stories of my deafness. It was as if I had two births, with the date of the diagnosis of my deafness marking my real arrival, over-riding the false start of my physical birth three years earlier. My mother said that once she realised I was deaf, she was able to get on with it, the ‘it’ being to defy the odds of a constrained life for her deaf child. She came out swinging. By hook or by crook, her deaf daughter was going to learn to speak and to be educated and to take her place in the hearing world and to live a normal life and that was that.

I grew up with the notion that my mother had been shocked into the realisation that I was deaf during Guy Fawkes festivities one hot November when the night-sky had exploded with the flashlights and noise of fireworks, and infant children had cried in fright, and I had contentedly sucked my fingers. But in the course of writing this book, I learnt that while this incident took place, it was not the trigger of discovery. ‘No,’ my mother said, ‘No, I’d been worried for a long time because you weren’t speaking.’ She had mentioned her concerns several times over a period of many months to her doctor, a man whom she regarded as a friend and so trusted completely, but this doctor assured her. ‘Everything’s fine,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry.’ But my mother did worry. She traipsed around town from specialist to specialist; why wasn’t I talking like my older sister and brother? Once or twice, she was told that I was mentally handicapped or just slow, but she knew with all the sureness of a mother’s heart that this was simply wrong. It didn’t fit with what she saw in me each day: my alertness, my ability to read her moods and my world from the most subtle cues. My mother was defiant about this: once, a woman on a tram recoiled from me and asked ‘Is she retarded?’ Mum snapped back, ‘No. Are you?’ Her eyes dared the woman, a stranger to her, to speak again.
My mother took to watching me closely, saw my own watchfulness, and wondered about that. One day, as she pegged some washing to dry on the clothes line, with me playing around her feet, she dropped a peg from the laundry basket onto the lawn, stood still with her hands by her sides, and said, ‘Donna, pick up the peg.’ Nothing. No reaction. But when she pointed to the peg, I hurried over to pick it up for her, and put it in her outstretched hand. Another time, she stood at the kitchen doorway and called out, ‘We’re going to the shops now.’ Again, nothing, but as she walked towards me with her handbag, I stirred with excitement: we were going shopping! Then there was the bath towel test: she sang out that it was time for my bath; I ignored her; she walked over to me trailing a bath towel by her side and I ran happily to the bath. In this way, my mother gathered her data and came to her knowledge: my eyes were doing the work of my ears. I knew how to comprehend my world, but I couldn’t hear and I couldn’t speak. Time must have stalled for my mother; she must have felt suspended between disbelief and clarity; she dithered. A good friend of hers, Mrs Hackett, finally set time rolling again when she blurted out one hot December day, ‘Did you know that your Donna’s deaf?’ Overwhelmed by what she had just said, Mrs Hackett cried, wanted to take back her words, but my mother said that this was the jolt she needed. She was not being silly; something was wrong with her youngest child and something needed to be done. Now.

She made an appointment with the Commonwealth Acoustics Laboratory housed in a sandstone building next to Anzac Square in Brisbane’s Adelaide Street. Some of the questions puzzled her. ‘Can Donna drink through a straw? How does she walk up the stairs, bilaterally or does she put forward the same foot each time, and steady herself on each step before proceeding?’ My mother reported that yes, I could drink through a straw, but that as a matter of fact I did walk up the stairs awkwardly. As well as these questions—my mother still doesn’t understand their purpose or what her answers revealed about me—the audiologist put headphones on me and made sounds for awhile. He showed my mother how the dots and crosses on the hearing assessment graph were in the wrong squares, much too low down on the page. The downward sloping lines connecting these pencil marks on the graph meant that I could hear deep pitched trumpet-like sounds directly channelled into my ear, but not the high pitched ones, neither the murmur of conversation nor the call of birds.

At the next appointment, I was fitted with a hearing aid. By 1957, hearing aid technology had advanced since the first editions of the ‘wearable hearing aid’ which consisted of a black transmitter with two cords, one connected to the ear-piece and the other to the battery which was worn separately, strapped to the thigh. Mine was a compact transistor-like box about the size of a square drink coaster and just thick enough to hold an AA battery, with a pink plastic-coated cord linking it to the ear-piece. I wore my metal box in a light cotton harness underneath my clothes for
fifteen years. An instrument for piercing silence, it absorbed and conveyed sounds, with those sounds eventually separating themselves out into patterns of words and finally into strings of sentences. Through the fog of learning how to watch, listen and speak over the next several years, I saw, heard and said its name as ‘hirrinayde.’ When I switched my metal box on, I was switched on, and when I switched it off, well then, I was switched off. It was just another piece of clothing. I was nine years old before I realised what the words were—‘hearing aid’—and absorbed their meaning as being something to help me hear. I was simultaneously surprised and embarrassed. Surprised because I did not understand myself as someone who required help to hear; I was deaf, certainly; that much I understood. Embarrassed because, of course! I did need help to hear; how could I not have understood that material fact earlier?

My mother’s heart must surely have stopped, for a juddering split second, when she heard the words lodged deep within her, waiting to be released by the cool voice of a professional, ‘Your daughter is deaf.’ She yielded up this diagnosis to my father back home. How carefully my mother must have chosen words designed not to fracture her husband’s dreams—or would they have been fears?—for his little girl. She would have wanted her words to act as a trajectory of hope. All the same, my father reacted ‘very poorly,’ mum said. The corners of her mouth tightened: she was wry in her assessment. ‘He put his pork-pie hat on his head and just went out. He found a reason to go out every night, what with his meetings with this club and that association. He manufactured any excuse at all not to be around so that he didn’t have to talk about it. He kept it up for about six to eight months.’ She was matter-of-fact about this, simply raising an eyebrow. ‘Oh you know how it is. Men don’t like to think there’s anything wrong with their children. They think it reflects badly on them.’

My father chased down more specialists in search of a cure for my deafness, but he eventually gave that away to join a fund-raising association of parents bent on establishing the Oral Preschool for the Deaf at Yeronga. I was among the first intake of children in the year it opened, 1957. The momentum for this school resulted from a visit to Australia in the early 1950s by two leaders of British oralism, Sir Alexander and Lady Irene Ewing from Manchester in the United Kingdom. They advocated early diagnosis and early educational support so that deaf children could communicate in the hearing world by using spoken language. The membership list of the parents’ association recorded the men’s names—Mr JN Nicholson, Mr I Perry, Mr J Kinnane, and so on—together with their occupations as clerks, truck drivers, accountants, sales managers and a physiotherapist; their wives’ names and occupations were not listed. My mother took on the role of Honorary Treasurer of the Women’s Pre-School Auxiliary and my father was the Treasurer of the Pre-School Association.
swirl of his signature, recorded my father’s visit to Parliament House to lobby the politicians, and included a transcript of his interview with Radio 4BK’s ‘Getting to Know You’ program on 28 December 1958. Here, my father gave force to his theatrical timing. The interviewer asked, apparently in some anguish, ‘But surely something can be done medically to cure their deafness?’ My father answered, ‘I’m afraid there are no Christmas bells for deaf children, Mr Kiley.’

All these parents fought against ignorance and bureaucratic pettifogging nonsense. For several years, the State Government which maintained the School for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind in the neighbouring suburb of Annerley opposed the existence of the new oral pre-school. One 1959 morning newspaper reported the claims of an education public servant that it was sufficient to ‘give deaf children an education favourably comparable with that of the ordinary primary school.’ He said there was no need to go further than grade eight as most deaf children did four or five years manual training or domestic science. Imagine it. In 1959, Soviet Russia crash-landed Luna 2 onto the moon as the first man-made object; the United States launched the first weather station into orbit and took the first pictures of Earth from space; and yet back in Australia, an education bureaucrat said it was unrealistic for deaf students to aspire to catch the cross-river ferry to the University of Queensland on the banks of the Brisbane River where they might study to be a veterinary surgeon, social worker, teacher, engineer, lawyer, or doctor. In the face of such lassitude, those parents’ ambitions for their deaf children must have been fired up by anger, as well as fear and frustration.

My sister and brother were only children themselves—eight and six years respectively—when they first took on the news of their three year old sister’s deafness. They learnt they had to face me when they spoke to me. They watched my mother as she taught me about the purposefulness of sounds, as she pressed my hand against her lips so I could feel the expulsion of air shaping letters, and as she splayed my fingers against the pulsing of words bubbling up her throat. They transformed themselves into word-mirrors for me: with their cupid-mouths stretched, they shaped and reshaped sounds for me to see. Some sounds were beyond my reach; some shapes held more than one meaning: to my eyes, ‘yellow balloon’ was ‘lello balloon,’ the ‘y’ and the ‘l’ looking the same on people’s lips. My sister, Cecily, remembers having to adopt new routines intended to establish conversation with me. She explained, ‘We had to say, “Good morning, Donna. How are you today?” and you had to reply, “Good morning, Cecily. I’m very well, thank you.” The only problem was that sometimes I would say something else, like “Good morning, Donna, you stink!” and you would still try to say your words verbatim.’ Innocent to my difference, I reflected back to my family an image capable of being shaped by their love and attention and, evidently, occasional teasing. Without knowledge, without speech, and immersed in my world of visual, tactile, and intuitive but noiseless senses, I was variously coaxed, dragooned and persuaded into the
world of hearing, a world of bubbles, balloons and fingers placed on lips to learn the shape, taste and feel of sounds, their push and pull of air through tongue and lips.

I remember some of these things clearly, but other memories are more like a pulse, a humming beat of a song that I can’t quite catch. My memories are not whole, just fragments of images, whiffs of smells. I don’t remember any sounds from my infant days at all. I don’t remember squeals of happiness, or the sound of my teachers’ voices, or the rabble of the playground. I don’t remember tidbits of eavesdropped conversations, or fairytales whispered in sing-song lilts to me at night. I don’t remember any of this because I didn’t experience it in the first place. Instead, my aural memory is one of quiet, as if I had lived in a chamber of silence. Not total silence: more like a muffledness, as if a heavy blanket was thrown over all the sounds of my childhood.

5.
Each Tuesday evening, as I pushed open the door to the Auslan class, I held hopes of finding something new about my deaf history. I was filled with a sense of adventure, and thought that the act of learning the mechanics and culture of sign language would help me to better understand my own relationship to my deafness, especially given its influence on other people’s perceptions of what it means to be deaf. On the first night, I discovered that my Auslan teacher for the term was going to be Jennifer, the same Jennifer who had sought me out a few years earlier to arrange the reunion with my deaf school friends. We hugged each other and laughed before settling into the protocols of the teacher-student relationship. She stood at the front of a white-board and I joined the other students seated around her in a ragged semi-circle of chairs.

Jennifer handed out sheets of paper with stamp-sized pictograms of hands mobilised in the shapes of the Auslan alphabet and some commonly used words, phrases, greetings and questions, and then asked each of us to say why we wanted to learn this language of hand signs. An interpreter, a young man with a husky voice, sat with us and spoke aloud the words that Jennifer signed. It was odd, at first, to hear a man’s voice transcribing her words. As the students gave their reasons in voices of varying pitch, confidence and age, the interpreter silently signed and mouthed their words back to Jennifer. One boy who looked to be just seventeen years old and wore the boots of an apprentice said that he wanted to get to know a deaf girl he’d met at a dance recently; a Greek man in his twenties flushed as he explained that he had just become an uncle, his new-born nephew was deaf, and he wanted to participate fully in his nephew’s life; two young women with swinging blonde hair and dressed in the smart navy pleated skirts and crisp white shirts of a travel agency said their deaf customers had difficulty communicating with them and so they planned to become fluent in Auslan and develop a niche market providing a travel service for deaf people; and a third
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girl’s voice bubbled with her excitement, ‘I’ve always wanted to learn a second language!’ Her brother bobbed his head, ‘Me too!’

I was the only deaf student in that class of twelve and the others were fascinated to discover the existence of a deaf person who could not sign. Their exclamations of ‘Why not?’ crashed into their incredulity, ‘You speak so well!’ and into their curiosity, ‘Why are you learning Auslan?’ I kept my answer simple; said that I wanted to speak with my old class mates from the Deaf School, had vague ideas of seeking them out.

It was a threadbare answer. I was embarrassed by the truth. My deafness didn’t automatically mean that I was empathetic about other people’s difficulties. I was as guilty as anyone else in my lack of imagination about the individual stories that lie within each of us. This was despite the insistence of others that I must be the holder of certain values, as someone who is sensitive to ‘these sorts of things’ simply because I was deaf. I was just a small child, playing with friends at a neighbour’s home down the road, when I was first made aware of this. We had crowded around the kitchen table, waiting for a batch of newly-baked cupcakes to cool so that they could be coated with sugary pink and white icing. As we fidgeted and jostled, one of the children told a long-winded joke which finally ended with the punch line of a person with spastic hand movements inadvertently jerking a cone of ice-cream into his face. I had long lost track of the story but as everyone in the room laughed, I smiled too. Then the joke-telling child went red-faced, flicked a look at me, and mumbled, ‘Sorry, I know you don’t like that sort of thing.’ Her deference was unwarranted; after all, my childhood deaf friends and I were dispassionate about the blind children at the Deaf and Blind School where we would go for the annual sports day. We didn’t like playing with them. My sister recalls those Deaf and Blind School sports days: ‘The blind kids would run to the bell and the deaf kids didn’t even know it was being rung.’ Their expressionless faces with eyes turned skywards instead of towards the horizon ahead and their unco-ordinated walking unsettled me. I felt uneasy about the blankness of their faces with their soft open mouths; I didn’t want to bump into them as they weaved their way across the sports field. And, as I’ve just realised with a guilty jolt while writing this, my deaf friends and I would have complained in our loud unleashed voices about those little blind children, completely unmindful that they could, of course, hear us.

The thing is, I have always hated the stereotype, ‘If deaf, ergo, must then sign.’ I had had so little contact with other deaf people since my childhood that I could not understand why they would choose to sign. I knew about the heat of self consciousness—I cannot make the sound ‘ess,’ and I can still see, with chest-burning sickness, the contorted spittle spoiled mouth of the nun who mimicked my efforts as a fourteen year old girl trying to say the word ‘scissors,’ thus sentencing me to forever act out the picture of putting to signify that particular word—and yet, I was unable to put
any slack for other deaf people. I was doing my best; why wouldn’t they? I was chronically judgmental about this. I felt that deaf people who signed instead of using their voices were letting the team down in some way; that they ought to pull themselves together and just try. Really, they should just get with the program. It was not until I renewed my connections with my childhood deaf friends and listened to their stories that I discovered that my occasional episodes of self-consciousness about my speech were amplified a hundred-fold for them, stretching into unrelenting spasms of hurt in the face of other people’s mockery of their skating, sliding, hiccuping, ricocheting voices—sounds that hearing people horrifyingly describe as animal-like grunting; how do you think that makes deaf people feel?—and hunting them off into the shelter of the signing deaf community.

All the same, I had occasionally experienced renegade feelings of wistfulness about elements of deaf culture. I could see the beauty of sign’s ballet, of the lean and pull of the body in the conversation’s sway, and when I saw Marlee Matlin playing the role of the angry but beautiful deaf woman in the movie based on Mike Medoff’s play, *Children of a Lesser God*, I saw how her signing was sensual and seductive. William Hurt fell in love with her. Maybe if I signed, I’d be sensual and seductive too?

I was in a place, now, where the use of hands for language was not only a practical skill for deaf people but also a desirable talent to enjoy, even when you didn’t have to know it; even when you could hear and you could speak. In that classroom, the ability to sign was no indicator of whether you were deaf or hearing. In a way, the Auslan classroom was a modern-day version of Martha’s Vineyard as described by Nora Ellen Groce in her 1985 book, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language*. This was the community in Massachusetts where the high incidence of hereditary deafness created a culture in which not only were the hearing people bilingual in English and the Island sign language, but a hearing woman could say in reply to a question about those who were handicapped by deafness, ‘Oh, [...] those people weren’t handicapped. They were just deaf.’ Up the front of the class-room, Jennifer signed with authority. With dignity. And always with humour. She smiled a lot. She wanted us not just to learn Auslan, but to love Auslan, the sweep and stretch and flow of it all. ‘Wriggle your fingers. Clench your fists. Relax your hands,’ she commanded us. ‘Stretch your eyebrows up high,’ she cried out. ‘Now frown, frown, frown,’ she urged us. But we couldn’t frown. We crumpled into giggles instead. She laughed at us. ‘Frown!’
At the end of the term, Jennifer invited me to a party at her home where I met up again with some of my childhood friends from the deaf school: Carmel, Wayne, Dianne, Kay and Kenneth. We exclaimed over each other, ‘How long has it been!’ The party was a festive occasion. It was noisy in the way that all successful parties are, and everyone chatted happily with each other—some in signed English, some in spoken English, and occasionally some of us used a mix of mime and gestures when our fluency in either sign or spoken word was missing. We drank and ate through the afternoon, swapping our news and telling our plans.

When I talked with Kenneth about my ‘deaf project,’ he grew serious, dropping his lightness of spirit. He gripped me by my upper arms and said, ‘You must write about us. Tell our stories. People don’t know about us, how hard we worked as children to learn to talk, to fit in. They think all deaf people sign. You know about the Stolen Generation? Well, we are the Forgotten Generation.’ My stomach contracted with tension. I nodded. I gave him my promise. ‘Yes, I’ll do that. I’ll write about us.’ I drove home from that party with the palms of my hands perspiring on the steering wheel. Kenneth’s words played over and over, like tinnitus. I couldn’t end their noise in my brain.

I called into my mother’s home and sat at her kitchen table. Nursing a cup of tea, I told her what Kenneth had said. I thought she might pacify me. I thought she might say something like, ‘Oh don’t worry about what Kenneth said.’ But she didn’t say that. She didn’t pacify me. She went quiet for several moments and then said, her voice thick with the worry that I was trying to shake myself free of, ‘That’s a big responsibility for you to shoulder. But you’re up to it. You can do it.’
Chapter Six: The Six Month Plan

1.
I was exuberant. Everything was going well and I was mindful of my good fortune. I had moved into my new apartment away from the inner city area but still close to the river, had enough paid work to keep financially afloat, and was buoyed by my friends’ enthusiasm for my ‘deaf project.’ At the bottom of my red tote bag was a mess of notes on deafness scribbled on the torn-off edges of newspapers, lipstick stained serviettes, yellow post-its and business cards. These were the accretions of the many conversations in coffee shops, conference rooms and the verandahs of my friends’ homes that I pursued in between my policy projects for the Queensland Law Reform Commission and the Office of the Public Advocate. I went to conferences and seminars on deaf identity, deaf advocacy, and deaf education, and learnt about advances in the diagnosis of deafness and hearing loss in new born babies, along with the latest in cochlear implants and hearing technology. I shook off the weirdness of deaf people being studied—it seemed so Margaret Meadish—and stumbled into debates about signing versus speaking. One English hearing academic told me that he preferred to sign rather than speak. I thought this was peculiar at the time, and still do.

It was as if I had come out of a closet. Everyone I met wanted to know about my ‘deaf project’; how was I getting along with it? What was I learning? One friend was forthright in her excitement. ‘Great! Now you are letting us talk about it! I’ve been too scared to ask you questions before. You’ve always put up such a shield.’ Surprised by this claim, I pressed her. ‘What do you mean?’ She answered by telling her own story of discovery. She was a teenager when, through a casual comment to her father—‘Don’t I look Jewish in these photos?’—she stumbled on the realisation that her mother was Jewish. More than this, almost all of her mother’s family had died in concentration camps during World War II; her mother, then just a young girl of fourteen, had escaped from Germany on the eve of war. My friend’s parents had gone to considerable lengths to keep this a secret from their daughters because her mother dreaded the consequences of exposure, even in the benign Brisbane suburbs of the 1970s, and her father supported her mother throughout her fear-locked silence. My friend said: ‘It’s a strange thing to discover an identity you own that you didn’t know about.’ Later, she wrote, ‘Looking back, I think my determination to claim my Jewishness is an equal and opposite reaction to the power of the denial of Jewishness in our home [. . .] what is hidden and repressed in our natures will try to force its way into the open. I also believe that I was rejecting the shame attached to our identity.’

I speculated about the possible parallels between this friend’s experiences and mine. After
hearing person. In fact, her vigilance in keeping me apart from the deaf world had bordered on inflexible. What emotions lay there? And why had I been such a willing and complicit partner for so long? My friend’s use of the word ‘shame’ shook me. Surely, my mother wasn’t ashamed of my deafness? Or was I the person carrying that shame? No, no, no; that couldn’t be right. No, it wasn’t right. But there was no arguing with the fact that, historically, deafness was deemed a terrible affliction.

For the first time in my life, I immersed myself in reading other people’s accounts of deafness. I trawled up and down the book stacks in the library, scanning the spines of books which looked faded with age rather than with wear and tear; they had the dusty look of books that were rarely read. And why not? With titles cheerlessly conveying solemnity rather than hope, who would really want to read them? Certain words and phrases were used with oppressive repetition: the isolated deaf child; from silence to speech; they grow in silence; broken silence; fitting into a silent world; her soundless world. I was struck too by the crudeness of some of the writing, as if the hearing writers assumed that their words would never be read by deaf people, or as if the deaf reader—being so ‘other’—could not possibly feel distressed or angered by the hearing writers’ special claims of insights into the world of deafness. After just a few visits to the library, I wanted to push all these books off the shelves, sweeping them out of reach—and not just my reach, but everyone’s reach. Medical and educational writing had a particularly apocalyptic tone about the consequences of deafness and the failure to deal with them. Go down this surgical pathway or use that technological intervention; put your child in a specialist or mainstreaming or inclusive classroom setting; tick the correct box or all will be lost.

Deafness was something that had to be overcome, resisted, avoided, healed, and even vanquished if the deaf poet, David Wright, was to be believed. I had gone looking for his 1969 memoir, a slim volume of 212 pages with large print, at the recommendation of a friend. I weighed the book in my left hand as I contemplated it. Its pages were roughly cut at the edges rather than cleanly sliced. I liked this touch; the roughness gave the book the feel of a personal journal. It looked as though it had been written in privacy for an audience of only one or two intimate friends. I turned to the first page with some apprehension. I wanted to enjoy reading this memoir because the friend who had recommended it to me had enjoyed it. But even from the first few pages, I was filled with dread: this was not a man happy with his deafness. He found it a torment. All the same, I was shocked by his claim, ‘When I went up to Oxford, I resorted to private magic. I dropped the Christian name “John” by which I was known at school and by my family. It was a symbolic exorcism of my deaf persona.’ He did not expand on this revelation, stating his case with just that single short, sharp sentence. Wright’s reaction towards himself and to his deafness appalled me.
He regarded his deafness as such an awful, perhaps even evil, thing that he wanted it expunged from the record of his body and his soul. His hatred of his deafness left me breathless with horror; what else did he write in his memoir? I did not stay with his story to find out; he was not a person I wanted to spend time with. I trembled with anger. I wanted to find this man and confront him. Despite my long-held silence about my deafness, I had never repudiated it. I still do not repudiate it. More than this, I resent the efforts of people who would take my deafness away from me with statements such as ‘You seem just like a hearing person.’

I ploughed on with other books and withstood the assaulting language by squeezing my feelings into a compact space deep within me. The persistent implication that deafness is a trauma was confronting, because it was so alien to my own experiences. I didn’t feel traumatised or stricken in any way by my deafness, but when I stumbled across the title, *The deaf child and his family*, a fierce current whooshed through me, prompting me to e-mail a friend, ‘It strikes me as sad and peculiar that I would have been a source of such grief, panic, and anguish in my own family about something that holds no such feelings for me.’ My friend wrote back with flinty cheeriness, ‘The grief for the child “lost” or missing is a real experience and I am sure that your parents had some difficult times. Still they survived!’ All the same, the message in the literature was clear: to be the parents of a deaf child was to believe that your child’s future would be bleak, lonely, isolated; that your deaf child would endure a life of otherness, something alien to the life that you knew and that you had dreamt for all your children.

I had seen this fear as a child, not in my mother, but in a black-and-white movie on television one night about Helen Keller, the deaf and blind American scholar who was lauded during the mid-twentieth century as the world’s most famous handicapped person. I would have been twelve years old—fully immersed in my hearing world-school life at All Hallows and long separated from my friends at the Gladstone Road Deaf School—when I first saw the movie, *The Miracle Worker*, based on William Gibson’s play, with the actor Anne Bancroft as the twenty year old teacher, Annie Sullivan, and Patty Duke as the child, Helen. I sat in a cane chair close to the glare of the television set, plugged into it by the cord of my stereo-headphones. Our pet British bulldog, Cleo, with rheumy eyes and wheezing bellows of a chest, lay between me and the television set. The movie opened with a scene of Helen Keller’s mother screaming, ‘She can’t see! She can’t hear!’ as she backed away from a baby’s cot in a spookily dark room of night-shadows. It was awful. I was filled with her skin-shredding terror. The rest of the movie was taken up with people crying and shouting a lot over this wild child, Helen, struck blind and deaf through illness. I was appalled by it all—too young to sort out the theatrics of movie-acting from the emotional truth of the Helen Keller story—and did not dare ask myself if perhaps my parents, if someone had cried...
over me just because I was deaf. It would have been unthinkable for me to talk about it with either my sister or my brother, or with my school friends. I simply didn’t have the emotional grammar for such an intimate conversation; I didn’t even know that it was possible to talk about these things. Weren’t you were supposed to absorb your worries and just roll along somehow? Which is what I did, distracted by the other preoccupations that shaped my life—keeping up with my school work, making friends, and holding on tight during the family storms that marked my father’s pull away from the addictions of alcohol to the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The memory of that image of Helen Keller’s weeping mother came back to me now, over and over again. I couldn’t shake it off. I even went to the State Library to watch the film again; perhaps I’d imagined that terror? Perhaps if I saw the film again, I could erase that childhood memory and replace it with a different one? But no. It was every bit as distressing as I had remembered. I saw new things in it; saw the brutality of Annie Sullivan’s teaching methods; the sentimentality of the scene where Helen Keller puts her hand under the tap with running water, and pronounces ‘wa-wa’ as she finally understands the experience of naming what she sees and experiences. Saw too the fierceness of a mother’s love, rejecting thoughts of defeat and other people’s pessimism and pleas to be realistic, face facts. My throat constricted with the tension of holding back my tears; I was in a public place. I cried later, in the privacy of my home. I couldn’t have told you then why I cried; there were so many reasons. I cried with the reawakened pain of own parents’ distress on discovering my deafness so many years ago; I cried for all those parents today who still endure that heartache on discovering their child is deaf. I cried, too, with frustration because all these tears were over something—deafness—that does not warrant such grief. To be deaf is not a death sentence. To be deaf means a different life; of course it does, but this does not mean it’s a lesser or terrible life. And if it does, it shouldn’t. Not today.

It’s an odd thing, but whenever I tried to justify my belief that deafness is not a terrible thing to my friends and companions over the unfolding months, I met with resistance. Some insisted on seeing my entire life as a sustained act of heroism in which I have triumphed over my ‘adversity’ of deafness; others suggested that my frustration was really another expression of grief over my ‘hearing loss’ (even when I explained with drawn-breath-impatience that I had not actually lost or mislaid my hearing; I never had it in the first place and so how could I experience it as a loss?); and still others claimed that I was in some sort of denial. They volunteered their unsolicited insights; their list of claims was extensive. I countered their questions with my own questions and assertions: ‘Surely, you’ve suffered because you haven’t had a normal life?’— ‘What’s normal?’ ‘Haven’t people been cruel to you, called you names?’— ‘Most people are kind rather than cruel.'
‘What about music, hey? What about all that you are missing out on there?’—‘But I enjoy music! It mightn’t be what you hear but I like it!’

My answers did not cut much ice. The husband of one friend was smug with his certainty: ‘You’re wrong. That’s not how you feel. You’re just not facing up to things.’ Unbelievable. How dare he assume that he knew better than me the meaning of my deaf experiences? I wanted to hit him, and in fact, I did whack him across the shoulder: ‘You’re not listening to me!’ I shouted. I didn’t care that people in the wine bar were staring at me, wondering at my anger. He infuriated me even more by nodding sanguinely, recrossing his gangly legs at his knees. He simply refused to be moved by the force of my emotions. My closest of friends—those who had been with me through my school and university years, and who had shared an office with me during my public service career—listened without scepticism to what I was saying. Two or three expressed a smiling surprise at my assertion of my deaf self; ‘I’ve never thought of you as deaf’ and ‘You’ve always just been, well, you!’

2. In my impatience to challenge people’s perceptions of deafness and deaf people’s lives, I accepted invitations to speak at meetings of parents with deaf and hearing impaired children. One day, I invited my mother along to a meeting. I had the idea that the young parents would enjoy meeting her and listening to her stories rather than mine, especially since she was an older mother who could now talk with the perspective of time on her side. I was right; they did. One of the mothers wrote to me afterwards: ‘Your mum really encouraged our parents with her wisdom and thoughts about the importance of family. Please thank her on our behalf for being so brave.’

My mother had been doubtful but willing. She stood at the front of the room, her vulnerability under control, in all her formal dignity as if before a Senate Committee, and answered the young parents’ questions precisely and without embellishment. Although she allowed herself the occasional flourish of humour, her answers leant towards accuracy rather than theatre.

‘Yes, the older children were very good. They were very keen to be helpful.’

‘No, they had never said anything resentful, nothing at all. If anything, they were defensive on Donna’s behalf. They looked out for her.’

‘Yes, I taught Donna to read. I got into trouble from one of her teachers! But I believed in the importance of reading. She had to read. It was essential.’

‘No, I didn’t want Donna to sign. I wanted her to speak. I wanted her to be able to play with the other children in our street. That’s why we lived on the north side of the river, away from the deaf community.’
'Well, there was a small group of us mothers. We got together and encouraged each other. We worked hard too, raising funds and even set up a second-hand clothes shop.'

‘A plan? Yes, I had a six month plan. People would ask me, “Are the six months up yet?” and I would answer, “Just another six months to go!” and after five years, the six months were finally up. I felt ready to send her to All Hallows.’ This was a gamble for my parents. It was their political act of change based on the world they understood in 1962. Transferring me from a special school for deaf children to a regular school was a profound statement of their hopes for me. They wanted me to have a life in which I would enjoy all the advantages and opportunities routinely available to hearing people.

My mother’s story of nuggetty determination emerged strongly, and I enjoyed hearing it again myself. She never volunteered much to me, as I was growing up, about what it was like to be the mother of a deaf child during the nineteen-fifties, to be part of that pioneering group of mothers and fathers who placed their children in an oral education program intended to teach deaf children to speak their words out loud rather than to sign them silently but so expressively with their hands. She did not give herself the luxury of reflection. She was not of the generation which constantly weighs up, measures, and examines the soul’s register for debts and credits. She certainly did not use the word ‘grief’ with me. Instead, her language of grief had always been determinedly driven towards action, achieving and ‘righting’ things. She preferred to talk of the incidents which made her laugh. She especially liked to talk about her role—along with some other mothers, Mrs Perry, Mrs Oakden, and Mrs Nicholson—in establishing a second-hand clothes shop in Duncan Street, Fortitude Valley, to raise funds for the oral deaf preschool. A favourite anecdote was about one of the mothers, Tess Kinnane, who had kicked off her too-tight shoes one day. Throughout this particular day, the shop had filled with women bustling in and out of the change rooms, tossing tried-on items of clothing onto the floor, and rummaging for items from other boxes. The volunteer helpers had been frantic in their efforts to shepherd the discarded clothes back to the right places. Tess called out, ‘Hey, I’ve lost my shoes!’ ‘What colour were they, Tess?’ One of the women clapped a hand over her mouth. ‘Oh dear, I sold them.’ Over the years, my mother repeated this story to me several times, and yet, each time she laughed as if for the first time and shook her head at the folly of it all.

When I asked my mother about her sorrow, she denied being terribly sad on finally having her suspicions confirmed; well, perhaps just a little sad. She said, ‘My main feeling was one of relief. “Oh, now I know! And I can do something about it!”’ And ‘do something,’ she did. She saw she had a job to do, and like the country-born woman from central New South Wales that she was, she got on with it. I asked my mother who had been the source of her inspiration—had it been...
another family member? someone well-known? perhaps Helen Keller as a result of her visit to Australia just a few years before I was diagnosed as deaf? She shook her head and remained silent with her head bowed for several moments. She seemed to be struggling to compose herself. She looked back up at me and said, ‘No. I remember the day when I felt really fired up for you. I was visiting the Gladstone Road Deaf School and I saw this girl with red hair. Her name was Sandra. Oh, she was so bright! Clever as! Her face was just alive with intelligence. She had quick eyes and she was keen to learn. She wanted to learn everything.’ My mother smiled flickeringly at the memory. ‘And I thought to myself, if that girl Sandra can do it, then so will my daughter.’

As we walked out of the parents’ meeting towards the car park, my mother wiped her eyes with her floral-print handkerchief but spoke in her matter-of-fact voice. ‘They really shouldn’t take it all so seriously,’ she said. She sounded irritated. ‘They are so intense.’ The 35 minute drive back to her home was quiet. I concentrated on watching the traffic; my mother concentrated on her own thoughts. As I pulled up in front of her home, wondering what to say to break our silence, she turned swiftly to me and said, ‘Thank you, love,’ in a tone that allowed for no idle last minute chit-chat. But, in the instant that she put her feet down outside the car to stand on the footpath, she leaned around, turned back to me, and in a voice clouded with wonder and sadness and history and loss and all those other emotions that fill our hearts in the early hours of dawn when we are trying to muster our hopes to go on, she said, ‘You know, Tess Kinnane and I were just like those parents today, when we were at Yeronga with you and Sharon,’ and closed the car door before I could reply. In her voice and in her words, I heard an admission of her own long-ago fears and understood that courage is pragmatism in motion. In the turmoil of the uncertain moment, you don’t feel brave. As the waves of heartache, fear and distress wash over you, what you do is this one thing. You let yourself give into the tidal pull of doing what must be done.

3.
In the midst of all this activity, Damian (not his real name) came into my life. It was summer; a time of Sunday barbecues and drinks on friends’ balconies in the evenings. He was a friend of a friend. I had encountered him around the ridges of my social circle before but had not paid him any attention despite his lively personality and infectious laugh that made everyone smile. Everyone, that is, except his wife. Her chilly presence had acted as a deterrent to even the most innocent of small-talk between us. But at one of these social gatherings, it was apparent that his wife was no longer his wife, and so it came about that Damian handed me a glass of wine and said, ‘You’ve got a hearing problem.’ He inflected his voice to turn it into a question. The other party guests jostled around us,
opening bottles of beer and uncorking wine. Some fuss was being made about the choice of music to be played.

I gave my usual answer. ‘No, I don’t have a hearing problem, I’m deaf,’ and as usual, my answer created a rippling effect. Startled. Nonplussed. Not sure what to say next. I was obdurate; didn’t help out. I took another sip from the glass of wine and looked around the room at the others. It dawned on me that the thumping sensation in my ears was the marching sounds of Carl Orff’s ‘Carmina Burana’ coming out of the stereo-system. I felt Damian’s gaze on me. I looked up at him—he was unusually tall but did not have that slouching habit of some tall men—and wondered why I had not noticed before how his honey-coloured hair was always tousled as if he had emerged from a rough swim in the surf. I glanced away from him but my eyes strayed back towards his eyes; they were dark green, just like the ocean on an overcast day. He looked thoughtfully back at me, and then it was his turn to catch me off-guard. ‘I’m interested. Would you mind talking with me about it?’ In Damian’s refusal to be rattled by me, I saw sincerity and so I relented.

That conversation led to an exchange of e-mails that led to a dinner invitation, and before long we found ourselves settling into a shaky rhythm of movies, dinners, coffee breaks, text messages and phone calls. Sometimes we went out by ourselves; occasionally we met up with other friends and family. We were both busy; our lives felt hectic; our families, friends and work all conspired to keep our diaries full. It was the usual routine of courtship—we talked, laughed, amazed each other—but I did not feel casual or routine about my feelings. Damian asked me a lot of questions about my deafness. He wanted to read what I had written about it. It was as if he was trying to understand all the elements that made me ‘tick.’ I was bemused by this, but also flattered; his curiosity about me was seductive. His enthusiasm for me combined with his gentle nature seemed to establish him as someone I could rely upon. Even his height seemed a persuasive credential. I pressed my joy close to myself; so closely, that I didn’t tell anyone about my bursting hopes that, just possibly, love had come into my home when I was least expecting it.
Chapter Seven: Music Lesson

1.
Damian e-mailed me regularly between our excursions to the movies, dinners and coffee outings. He would also telephone me from his work for a quick chat or send me text messages on my mobile phone. I looked forward to logging into my ‘In-box’ and seeing his name in bold type, right there in the midst of all my work e-mails. Damian. I always clicked onto his name first, ahead of the other e-mails, to read his latest bit of news. When my mobile phone buzzed with the chirrup of an incoming text message, I would rummage urgently through my bag or around the top of my desk to find it, hoping that the chirrup signalled yet another message from him. In this way, even though we did not see each other all that often, I felt a bond of intimacy building between us. I liked to think about him; and I liked to think that each telephone call, e-mail and text message from him meant that he was thinking of me too. Late one evening, he sent me an e-mail about the French film festival. Would I like to go? Yes! I was free most nights! I waited to hear back from him.

2.
Growing up deaf in a hearing family draws on the same skills needed for walking across one of those wobbling rope-and-plank bridges cast up high across rainforest creeks: both demand agility in moving back and forth across borders; balance in mind as well as body; and confidence tempered by caution. The difference between the two tasks is that the first one continues life-long, and the second is a one-off journey completed in a matter of minutes, tension-filled though they might be.

As a child, I sat through meal times at the dinner table—that place and time in the early evening when we gathered as a family—in a daze of incomprehension. I had the choice of eating what was on the dinner plate before me while foregoing watching what was being said around the table, or I could watch the words being mouthed by my parents, sister and brother, and let the sausages and vegetables on my plate cool. I only understood what was being said if I made the concentrated effort to do so—forking in a mouthful of mashed potato in between glances at the words sailing across the table—or if I insisted on their repeating what they had just said in the moments that I had my eyes down to the plate. I would pull at my mother’s arm and assert myself: ‘What are you saying?’ When a friend asked me to give an example of the sorts of conversations I might have missed out on during those childhood meal times, I scoffed at him. ‘If I knew the answer to that question, I wouldn’t have missed out, would I?’

But in hindsight, I understand now why I do not share my family’s casual knowledge about
been the grist for those dinner time conversations. I never did catch up; I still have many gaps in my stocktaking of who did what with whom and when. This makes me feel foolish. Every cry of ‘You must remember that/her/him!’ feels like an accusation, as if I have been remiss in some way. I made my way through a world, at home and outside, in which people’s mouths opened and closed in a rhythm that did not always make sense to me. When they did not face me and speak directly to me, I was tense with wondering: what had they said? could I ask? or was I asking too much, too often? I was never fully in the know and lived with the chronic discomfort of cluelessness: what’s going on? It was as if the actions around me were taking place on a film that had torn away from its spool on the projector, and was now flapping around and around, casting confusing shadows and images against the wall. At home, I dealt with this by submerging myself in my own imaginative world and letting the voices of my family slurry above me and around me. It was simply a sludge of sound, the rise and fall of volume and pitch. I would search my family’s faces and see what meaning I could read into their expressions. I don’t recall any sense of exclusion. Not really.

After all, our family life was held together loosely by the conventions of the time. If she was not out at work, my mother could usually be found either in the kitchen preparing our next meal, in the piano room ironing our clothes, or downstairs hosing the yard; occasionally, she might walk down the road to have a cup of tea and slice of cake with Enid, her good friend. My father always seemed to be ‘out’; he was not a strong presence in the house, a common enough condition of fathers during the ’fifties and ’sixties. I was content to play with my dolls (measuring up and sewing new clothes for them) or read my library books or, as I got older, do my homework, while my sister talked on the telephone in the lounge room and my brother strummed his guitar and sang in his bedroom. Sometimes, I felt miffed about not understanding everything that was going on or being said. Mostly, I remember the calmness of being left alone, although I did experience occasional shivers of paranoia, especially if my insistence on having something repeated to me was met with an impatient ‘Oh, it doesn’t matter.’ I would wonder: ‘Are they talking about me? Have I done something wrong?’

When Damian did not follow up his email invitation to me about the French film festival, the discomfort of broken communication was familiar to me. All those fractures in my conversations around the dinner table with my family, in the classroom with my teachers and the playground with my class-mates, and with my work colleagues and friends over the ensuing years lay beneath my skin. I didn’t panic, not immediately, but I did sink slowly beneath the rising tide of worry. What had I done wrong? What cues had I missed? Had Damian said something to which I had not reacted properly? To distract myself, I did what I always did: I turned to my work, I had much to do. Just as I had pressed my joy to myself, so I kept quiet about my fears.
2.
When I was a little girl with wispy hair tied in two bunches, I wanted to write books. One afternoon, I gathered together some sheets of paper, packed them into a neat block on the top of my chenille-covered bed, knelt by the edge of the bed, gripped my HB pencil in my right hand, and gouged out a title: *My Stories*. But I could go no further. Despite the urge to transpose into writing those sounds that I was learning to read, I could not translate the pictures I saw on my mind’s screen into word-images on the page before me. I had no voice within me that would let me put my stories down on paper. It was as if I was inside a balloon, straining to break through its membrane.

In the dragging days of Damian’s silence, I felt myself drawn back to the oppression of that balloon. I did not know what to say or how to say it.

3.
He broke the silence. Finally. But the words he chose to end his e-mail of apology quickened my breath. ‘Sometimes, silence is golden.’

‘Oh no!’ Damian grabbed his head with both hands and bent double at the waist. ‘I wasn’t even thinking of you being deaf. I wasn’t, you know, I didn’t mean . . .’ By now, he was jiggling his knees up and down in a hyperactivity of remorse. We were sitting on my balcony overlooking the courtyard garden made green and leafy during the drought by regular dousings of grey water caught in laundry buckets. I shifted my seat to be in the shade; it was a bright sunny morning with the first bite of autumnal coolness. Damian had brought baked bagels still warm from the oven and I had made a pot of English Breakfast tea. I teased him. ‘For such a Mr Havachat, why on earth would you write such a thing?’ My question stilled his movements. He looked up from his *mea culpa* position, saw that my curiosity was genuine, and said with the hesitancy that comes with not wanting to make the other person feel foolish, ‘Brian Poole and the Tremeloes?’ He sang a few bars, tapping his right foot in time to the beat. I shook my head. I had never heard of either the band or their 1967 hit song. I was eleven years old when ‘Silence is Golden’ hit number one in the United Kingdom; their fame had bypassed me, and I still lagged behind in my music history forty years later. I had missed a whole generation of rock’n’roll because I could not pick out the words of the lyrics through the mesh of the instruments.

I did not tell Damian this but I could see from the uncertain expression on his face that he thought my world of music must be limited. I chose to ignore what I saw; it was easy to do. I was practised at it. Anyway, it was not the time to stand at my deaf-lectern; it was the time for laughing and for consoling and for telling each other our news. We hugged our goodbyes that morning, and I tasted the promise of seeing each other again on another line.
This incident, small though it was, made me stop and think about the place of music in my life. My weak musical literacy often creates a disruptive ripple in conversations, causing the other person either to breathe in sharply with disbelief or breathe out with a whoosh of dismay. Even though I grew up in a house of music as a child—there was always a record playing or a radio turned on or a guitar being strummed—I approached the act of listening to music as a task. It was a pleasurable task but it was something to focus upon rather than to relax with. I didn’t breathe in the music as it floated across the air; I willed it into myself.

My earliest recollection of music was watching my mother play on an old-fashioned pianola installed in the front lounge room of our home. I would have been three or four years old, and I alternated between watching the rotation of the paper reel with its Braille-like music notations or lying on the floor to watch the pedals as my mother pumped them with her feet. I cannot remember hearing the music itself but I must have felt its thump and fall through the pianola’s heavy timber frame, perhaps in the same way that Helen Keller described in an essay, *The Finer Vibrations*. She wrote that when she kept her hand on the piano-case, she could feel the strum of melodies, but could not easily distinguish a tune that was sung.

My mother encouraged my interest in music even when she must have been uncertain about how much of it I was able to take in. She bought a miniature piano-organ for me when I was six years old. A luscious honey-gold colour, it was the topic of the day for ‘Show and Tell’ in Mrs Mason’s class. A few years later, a full sized piano was dragged into the dining room and my mother arranged for me to have piano lessons from Mrs Pringle who lived on the top of a hill a few streets away. The first year of my Friday afternoon lessons was spent on tunes such as ‘Row, Row, Row Your Boat’ and ‘Polly Put The Kettle On.’ It was a step up from playing the metal triangle I had been issued in grade four at All Hallows. The transparency of this effort by the teachers to include me in the music classes had not escaped me, even then, even as a nine year old. I felt silly, not just because I was saddled with a tinny instrument that I was told to strike every now and then—the other girls had ‘proper’ instruments such as violins, recorders, flutes—but also because I felt that I could not reasonably protest. My piano lessons included sitting for the AMEB music examinations. I look back now and marvel at the composure of the examiners and their kindness towards me. I encountered one examiner a few times; she was a high-profile pianist, but far from being intimidating, she always smiled at me with great warmth as if urging me to succeed in my musical efforts. After several years of piano tuition, I was able to pummel my way through ‘Für Elise,’ but I was no threat to Evelyn Glennie, the deaf concert percussionist from Scotland.
So, while I enjoyed listening to music, I usually discovered songs and musicians through conversational stumbles such as the one with Damian. They rarely came to me unbidden because I did not have the habit of playing radio music as the accompaniment to my days and nights. When I was at school and at university, I could not join in conversations about the latest hit-parade songs. It was like watching a foreign-language movie without the subtitles: I saw and heard my friends’ excitement in sharing what they knew, but I could not understand the details and did not like to ask. More than this, I was impressed by my friends’ extensive knowledge of music and wondered how they found so much time to sit down and listen to so much radio. Of course, they didn’t. While I crouched up next to the stereo-player encased in a honey-toned sideboard in the lounge room and either pressed my hearing aid to one of the speakers or put on my headphones, they simply turned on their radios and absorbed their music with the same unthinking skill as breathing. I was baffled once by the enthusiasm that a school friend, Janeane, showed for listening to carpenters; my bewilderment grew when she said that her boyfriend liked listening to them too. Why the delight in the rasp of saw on wood, the knock of hammer on nail? When my sister came home after work with a new LP record, ‘A Song for You,’ I felt an exploding ‘pop!’ of understanding: the record was inside a red cover illustrated with a white heart beneath a black stylised inscription, ‘Carpenters.’ I studied that record in the same way that others study a field of esoteric knowledge; I wanted to keep up with my friends.

My not knowing contemporary music meant that I lacked an important currency for teenage conversation. It also meant that I missed the significance of certain world events. Back then, music was the vehicle for reflecting back to society the revolutions that were taking place—feminism (Helen Reddy’s I am Woman), sexual liberation, anti-war movements, Black Power, recreational drug taking and so the list goes on. Much of this wafted over my head: with the exception of the Vietnam War, I was oddly unmindful of the scale of historic social and political events taking place at the time. (But perhaps I was not so odd. Perhaps it is the nature of ‘history’ to be invisible to us at the time of its making; as something that happens in the past).

The sound of radio—be it the news, talk-back shows, classical music, the best of the ’sixties, or the latest in indie-rock—adds to the texture of our daily lives: it does not just create a curtain-like backdrop to our activities; it drops a web of invisible sound-threads criss-crossing suburbs, cities and entire continents to connect one lone person to the next. I like this image of being connected to my neighbours and friends by such spidery sound-threads but, in reality, I cannot stand the shirring of radio-rustle in the air around me. It is an irritant, intruding into whatever it is that I am attending to at the moment, whether it is a conversation, a book, or work. I only enjoy music if I sit down, put my headphones on, and listen to it in a deliberate act of concentration, and then...
enjoy it immensely, letting the pulse of the music play not just through my hearing aids and into my ears, but also beat across the soft skin on my chest, seeping into the core of my bones. I especially like it if I have a copy of the lyrics so that I can give meaning to the sounds I can hear; a long time ago, in a rare act of collaboration, my father transcribed for me the words of the Rolf Harris song, ‘Two Little Boys.’

I also enjoy gifts of music. This detail hit me hard one Christmas, not long before my fortieth birthday, when a work colleague gave me a present. I was surprised by the gesture of the gift from my colleague, but when I unwrapped the paper from the small square and saw that it was a compact disc of songs by the Indigo Girls, I was momentarily bemused. In my adult life, no-one had ever given me a gift of music. No record, no tape, no sheet music. Nothing. That compact disc was the first time I had been given anything musical since my childhood. I played it over and over again for months, as much for the joy of the gift itself as for the music.

5.

Damian’s song of silence came to life. The words came to pass. Talking is cheap, people follow like sheep /Even though there is nowhere to go [...] /How many times will she fall for his line / Should I tell her or should I keep cool . . . Damian said he would call me, come to my home again the next weekend. He did not call me; he did not come to my home. The contagion of his silence settled like dust over my days, and my quest to understand better my deaf self stalled. I attended to the more urgent task of rising above this latest disappointment.
Chapter Eight: But My Eyes Still See

1.
In the following weeks, I thought often about that sunny morning with Damian on the balcony and remembered other things. Things that should have alerted me to the fragility of his feelings for me. I remembered the pulse of other emotions on Damian’s face. I saw, in hindsight, more than his uncertainty about my relationship with music; I also saw his conflict about me. I had underestimated the urgency of his anxiety about proceeding with me. He had much going on in his life. He said it was too much. It was impossible, he said. He was a single parent; he could not do justice to our relationship and honour his family obligations at the same time. ‘Duty before love,’ he said with a lilting effort at humour. I had argued mildly with him. ‘But Damian, we are only in the early days of getting to know each other. Can’t we just roll along as we’ve been doing?’ He had not answered my question. Instead, we found ourselves talking about our friends, our work, and our families. We had hugged our goodbyes, but as for tasting the promise of seeing each other? Perhaps I imagined this as I watched Damian walk backwards down the stairs, his eyes on me all the way to the entrance of the apartment building. In my first disbelief at Damian’s withdrawal from my life, the Tremeloes’s song of mute distress felt like an epitaph.

My words here are orderly. The passage of time and the love of friends have allowed me to tidy up my thoughts and to put them down now on this page, steadily and at the rate of one word at a time. Still, I cannot describe the knifing pain that I experienced, along with the whimpering confusion, feverish anger, and hot resentment with life—and with a God whose reliability I was already dubious about—without resorting to the language of melodrama. But it seems that through no fault of either Damian or mine, the collapse of our friendship triggered in me a collapse of confidence in my judgment, not just about love but about life. I had been so full of hope for the possibilities of our friendship, and now I was full of anger. How many more losses and how much more grief was I supposed to endure? Surely there was a quota posted somewhere and just as surely I was double-dipping and someone else was skipping out of their fair share of sorrow? It didn’t help that I was lurching towards the twentieth anniversary of my son’s death; I was in the midst of organising a commemorative ceremony for Jack with my family at the local Catholic church, St Agatha’s. It also didn’t help that so much of my reading about deafness was soaked in grief and trauma.

As I trawled obsessively over the details of my short friendship with Damian, I caught myself re-assessing his every gesture, look, laugh and conversational gambit. In that game of
and came up with new interpretations of our friendship and his abandonment. See, even now I continue to change my words to describe that event: loss, withdrawal, abandonment. Which was it? How did it really go? My doubts about my judgment spilled over into my investigation of my deaf life. After all, wasn’t everyone—those writers of the trauma of deafness and those friends insistent on challenging my explanations—trying to tell me that my deafness was a loss and that I was denying it? Well, was I denying it? Had I been too glib? Were there other interpretations of my life that I was turning a blind eye to, casting in a Pollyanna-like glow? I wanted to be honest; it was important to be honest.

In my mind’s eye, I kept seeing the tear-streaked faces of parents at those support meetings and conferences I attended. One mother, clutching a crumpled white tissue in her hand, had asked me in a voice filled with the effort to be composed, ‘Is there anything your mother could have done better or differently for you?’ before she fell back onto a chair in a crumple of tears, more wet tissues, and stray hair across her forehead. I had been mesmerised by the depth of her sorrow, swelling as it did from fear and pre-emptive guilt. This mother was readying herself to plead guilty for all the actions and inactions she was yet to take on behalf of her young deaf son and daughter. Along with her assumption of guilt, she wanted pre-emptive absolution for the life that she feared for her deaf children; would they endure intolerably different lives from their hearing children, lives of inadequate education, menial jobs, isolation, and perhaps even exclusion from love? I owed her, and the other parents, my honesty. I had told her, ‘No, every decision my mother made on my behalf was the right one.’ My voice had been loud. I had been firm. ‘There is nothing that she did that I would wish that she hadn’t done.’ The mother looked unconvinced. I tried again. ‘Although I do very much wish that she had not cut my hair so short.’ The mother smiled wetly at this, along with the other parents in the room who joined together in a free-fall of laughing solidarity. I heard again, too, the voice of another mother who asked, ‘Who will love my daughter as much as I love her?’ And of course, her question snagged on my own fear: which man would love me?

2.

During this time, I went browsing in a music store at the local shopping centre in search of sheet piano music by the choral group, ‘Secret Garden.’ I listened to their songs of contemplation when I meditated, and wanted to teach myself to play their songs on my small upright Samick piano. The sound system in the music store that Saturday belted out excerpts from swing, blues, jazz, rock, pop, disco, rap, and world music but it only stocked fat songbooks with titles such as ‘Easy Classics for Children’ and ‘The Best of the Sixties.’ No single-song sheet music.
I turned to a plump woman in a wheelchair next to me and commented, ‘Isn’t it a shame that you can only buy music in fat books?’ She didn’t acknowledge me and I thought that I had perhaps offended her with my use of the word ‘fat,’ but when I kept looking at her, she gave a start and said, ‘I’m sorry, I’m deaf, what did you say?’ I giggled and said ‘So am I!’ I was gleeful at the two of us, both deaf, browsing through rows of sheet music. I asked the other deaf woman what instrument she played. When she answered, ‘I’m trying to learn the piano,’ her voice held that sound of profound deafness, as if she was speaking through a membrane of water blocking her throat, or perhaps as if she was trying to swallow a yawning boredom. I wondered if I sounded like that; my vanity prickled; I hoped not. The woman went on to explain that she was in a music group; everyone else in the group was hearing. I boggled a bit at this. My eyes widened. I remembered my school-days envy of my classmates heading off to orchestra practice, when I had been fascinated—was still fascinated—by their skill in playing their own instruments while at the same time hearing, and staying in tune, in time, with so many other instruments around them. ‘Oh my, that’s brave of you. Are you any good? Can you play the piano well?’ She laughed unselfconsciously. ‘I don’t know!’ I laughed too, but uncertainly. She went on. ‘I don’t mind. I just like learning. If I was perfect at music or anything, I’d have nothing new to learn.’ I recounted this conversation to my friends at the swimming pool the next morning whereupon we all laughed together. The other woman had finished her explanation by saying, ‘Actually, I take out my hearing aids when I’m playing in the group so I’m not distracted by the noise of all the instruments.’

3.
I was in the mood for light music and books. It was time to shake off the gloom which cloistered my days. I turned to Vikram Seth’s novel, An Equal Music. I had read this novel several years earlier, and fallen in love with Seth for writing a novel which so beautifully combined music, deafness and romantic love; with the deafened concert pianist, Julia, for being such a gutsy, talented, and attractive heroine for whom hearing loss was not a tragedy; and with the flawed hero, Michael, also a concert musician, for loving her, deafness and all. The very act of reading An Equal Music had filled me with mellow stirrings. It was time to re-read it.

In most stories which feature deafness and deaf people, the reader sees or experiences the life of the deaf character through the perceptions and experiences of the hearing narrator. And so it is in Vikram Seth’s novel of love and music. I learnt what it meant for Julia to be deaf by observing Michael’s grief-stricken reactions to her. I witnessed the ‘broken transmission’ effects—like the worn needle of a record player skipping across an old long-play record—that occur in communication between a deaf person and a hearing person, especially if the deaf person has not
disclosed her deafness. And I saw, too, the lengths that Michael went to, in his efforts to protect Julia upon discovering her deafness.

Seth wrote about music in detail, describing both the sensation of deafness for the hearing reader and the mysterious variousness of musical sound for deaf readers. His descriptions called up my own early memory of sound: as a child, I liked to stand under the shower and hear the noise of the water raining down onto my shower cap. I would tighten the cap down over my ears, like a helmet and, with my eyes closed, I would capture the water’s roar in stereo. But one evening, I let myself be lost for too long in this reverie: the shower curtains whipped back; I opened my eyes; my mother’s face, a twist of terror, filled the frame. Her fright fled on seeing me, standing there, wet and alive. She looked angry then, the anger that comes with the gut-wrenching relief of discovering that all is well with your child. I saw her snap, ‘What are you doing? I heard the noise, the water coming down on your head . . .’ I was staggered. She could hear the noise of the shower from outside? This was surely impossible? Evidently not. From then on, I only let myself taste the sound of roar in small guilty doses by ducking my head in and out of the shower, alternating between the crash of water belting down on my plastic shower cap and the soft thrumming of waterfall on my neck and chest. The sounds were as different as pebbles and satin.

In this spirit of playing with sounds, I sat with my copy of An Equal Music tagged with yellow flags and heavily underlined throughout, slipped a CD into my Bose system, and tried to comprehend the music Vikram Seth wrote about: Haydn’s Quartet in A major, opus 20 no.6; Mozart’s Sonata for piano and violin in E minor, K304/300c; Bach’s Contrapunctus 1 from The Art of the Fugue; Beethoven’s String Quintet in C minor, opus 104; Schubert’s Trout Quintet; Vivaldi’s ‘Manchester Sonata’ No.1 in C major; and Vaughan Williams’ ‘The Lark Ascending.’ It was a chastening experiment. No matter how hard I concentrated, those first musical sounds of violins and pianos playing in harmony always petered away to a tiresome crush of instruments from which no melodies found their way to me. I just didn’t have the right hearing capacity, even with both my hearing aids turned up to full volume, to understand what I was listening to. This made me curious. What did hearing people hear? Seth described the act of playing of Beethoven’s music as ‘the steeple-chase-cum-marathon, the ethereal, jokey, unpausing, miraculous, exhausting quartet in C sharp minor, which he composed a year before his death.’ I was incredulous; all I heard was a messy burr. But in another passage, Seth wrote of Michael, ‘I sit with my head in my hands, as Mozart drops note by note into my mind.’ This, I did understand; I too experienced some music as an entire body and spirit experience, not just an aural event. Like Michael, I absorbed music in my mind, not just my ears, letting it enter into my whole being.
I caught myself enjoying Seth’s novel at two levels: firstly, I followed the revival of Michael and Julia’s love affair; and secondly, I watched out for how Seth described Julia’s hearing loss and the other characters’ responses to her deafness. He disclosed Julia’s hearing loss subtly, yielding up her secret to the reader bit by bit. When Julia and Michael met again for the first time after a separation of several years, Michael observed a change in Julia: ‘There is an intentness to her gaze.’ I understood this clue about Julia’s deafness immediately, and also understood that Michael had not got it. Michael, perhaps like many hearing readers, interpreted this as a demonstration of Julia’s intensity of emotion for him, that perhaps she still loved him after all these years apart. Seth repeated the image of ‘the attentive gaze’ throughout his novel. I wondered about my gaze on Damian’s face. How had he felt? Michael finally learnt that Julia was deaf when her young son, Luke, revealed it accidentally:

‘I didn’t get that. You’re mumbling.’

‘It’s the way I speak,’ says Luke with sudden sullenness.

‘But you spoke so clearly just a little while ago.’

‘That’s because mom finds it hard to hear me. She’s deaf...Oops!’ he claps his hands over his mouth.

Luke’s inadvertent revelation and his white-faced desperation to take back his words were tinged with horror, as was Michael’s disbelieving denial of Julia’s deafness.

Now, all this suspense, secrecy, revelation, horror, and anguish are well and good in fiction, and I was drawn into the drama of it all as an involved reader, but in real life, the harbouring of secrets is the foundation stone for unnecessary grief. I was appalled on behalf of the little boy, Luke, by the drive for secrecy. What was so terrible or shameful or confronting about his mother’s deafness? Seth used secrecy as a plot device because Julia was worried about the impact on her concert-playing career once her deafness became public knowledge. Okay; so let’s accept that for a moment. This still does not explain Julia’s withholding from Michael, the man she once loved and apparently continued to love; nor does it justify co-opting her son into the guilt that secrets confers. My own parents and siblings—indeed, my entire extended family of aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews; I had no grandparents, they had died young—never showed the slightest inclination to compress my deafness into a wafer of secrecy. Far from it. They were open, chatty, and proprietorial about my deafness. Elderly aunts and uncles would ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’ at Christmas parties, weddings, and funerals over my academic successes. ‘Imagine that,’ shaking their heads. ‘All that even though you’re deaf,’ sighing. One cousin, Ian, having convinced himself as a teenager that the photo of a little girl on the charity collection tins on the tables in his local milk bar, The Blue Bird Cafe, was me, encouraged his mates to put their loose change into the tins. Other cousins would bail me up at family festivities or call me at home about this newspaper article or that radio show about deaf people. This especially happened a lot during the time of the militant deaf...
students’ movement at the Gallaudet University, a liberal arts university for deaf students in the United States of America. My sister routinely rang me in a hurry of news-giving to tell me about yet another deaf person she had met, spoken with, heard about, seen in the distance at a shopping centre, or who she had just learnt attended the same church as me. It was the same with my parents’ friends too; they were uniformly stout in their assessment, ‘Of course, your mother worked very hard on your behalf.’ They were all interested; they were all keen to be in the know, to be a part of my deaf life. Sharing stories of other deaf people and quizzing me about my deafness helped them forge their bond with me.

My sister’s second son, Simon, was particularly interested and as a seven year old boy, his curiosity took a forensic turn. His teacher had taken his class on an excursion to a sensory-education unit where children were placed in darkened rooms to experience blindness, sent into wobbling-walk tunnels to experience mobility difficulties, and wore headphones to learn about deafness. This was all supposed to teach the children empathy for others. Simon had boasted to his class teacher, ‘My auntie, well, she’s deaf!’ For several weeks after this excursion, he would gaze at my hearing aid, reach his hand up towards it, and ask, ‘Can I have a go?’ To which I would take my hearing aid out of my ear, bend down and hold it to his ear, and watch his face crease into a grin of satisfaction as he listened to its whistling squeal. After some weeks of this, my sister observed that Simon’s hearing appeared to be erratic. He didn’t always answer her when he was called. Perhaps his hearing wasn’t as sharp as it should be? That would explain his interest in my hearing aid, wouldn’t it? Ever vigilant about the need for quick action, she booked him in for an audiology appointment. Her vigilance grew into alarm during the appointment; in the waiting room, she kept looking at her watch; the audiologist was certainly taking his time in there with young Simon; things must be really serious. At last, the audiologist came out of the test room. His face was full of good humour. Simon’s pale face, on the other hand, was a study; it was filled with the intensity of doom that sparrow-boned seven year old boys can convey when they see their world collapse around them in a brick pile of broken hopes. The audiologist spoke first. ‘I take it that Simon’s aunt is deaf?’ My sister gasped, ‘Yes.’ ‘Well, it seems that our Simon here would like to be deaf too. He wants to wear a hearing aid like hers.’ The audiologist turned to Simon and clapped a hand on Simon’s shoulder. ‘But you don’t need one, do you?’ Simon cast his eyes down and shook his head. ‘Oh, for God’s sake!’ My sister unloosened her relief at the news and irritation at the wasted time; she laughed later, when she retold the story of Simon’s efforts to be deaf. Twenty years later, the story’s repeated telling had given it the sheen of family legend, the sort that gets retold every Christmas Day. ‘Remember the time when Simon told that guy he could hear the quiet sounds but not the loud ones!’ More laughter.

Back in Seth’s novel, An Equal Music, following Michael’s discovery of her deafness, Julia wrote a letter to him, in which she gave a vividly precise description of deafness as another sensation, ‘not soundlessness’ She wrote that she felt as if she was ‘muffled in cottonwool’ and other Suddenly things...
bang out at me.’ I understood Julia’s sense of fragility, perhaps even of danger. She knew that sounds were ‘out there’ that she was not aware of; her sense of personal safety was compromised. Michael’s letter of reply to Julia was filled with his confusion, love and more questions. His efforts to learn about deafness mimicked my real world efforts to understand hearing. He tried to tune into the world of deafness by reading a book about it while listening to music, a record of Schubert’s string quintet: ‘It is to the sounds of that music that I make my first acquaintance with the elaborate chaos that lies behind the tiny drumskins of my outer ears.’ In this same scene, Michael wondered about his place in Julia’s life now that she was deaf. In contemplating the role of music in their love for each other, he raised the spectre of the role of sound in all its communicative power—and by implication, silence in all its desolation—in forging and sustaining the bonds of love between two people. I fretted briefly; was this key to understanding what had happened between Damian and me?

4.

Prior to meeting Damian, my romantic relationships had been largely silent about my deafness. Being deaf was such an elemental part of my ‘I-ness,’ that I did not pay much attention to it, either with care or grievance. In her drive to assert my normalcy (and possibly also because of her distaste for any scent of self-pity or crutch-seeking), my mother had deflected my early tentative efforts at talking about the implications of my deafness. Once, when I was twelve years old, I asked her whether my deafness would affect my boyfriend prospects. ‘No! Not at all!’ she cried out. I was gratified. She went on, ‘You’re a very kind girl and you sew well.’ Now, even at twelve years of age, I knew that kindness and sewing skills were not going to be the sufficient, if useful, ingredients for getting boyfriends.

For whatever reason, I had never talked at any length about my deafness with the men in my life, all of whom were hearing. Not with my first boyfriends at university, nor with the man to whom I was married for a short time, and nor later with Jack’s father or the men I dated after him. I would have answered any questions about my deafness that they cared to ask, but they did not ask many, and I did not volunteer much; they must have tried to second-guess my needs. In hindsight, I suspect that they simply understood my deafness as an auditory loss rather than as something that might shape my sense of self. Admittedly, Seumas had been openly curious, but his curiosity—which could take a Bertie Wooster turn; he liked to mouth words at me to test if I could understand him, and when I replied in full voice, he would fall about in a wheezing heap of joy—circled around the mechanics of deafness, hearing and language. His questions seemed to have little to do with getting to know me; they were not designed to improve his understanding, or mine, for that matter,
of what my deafness might mean for our friendship. I did not take his curiosity seriously, or reflect upon his questions beyond the conversations in which they took place.

In my romances, my brief marriage, and my relationship with Jack’s father, we did not ignore my deafness entirely. That would have been silly, but any references to my deafness revolved around domestic matters such as having a telephone with a volume control adapter, or checking the seating and lighting arrangements when we went out to restaurants or to the movies, or arranging for a friend to help me look after Jack when his father was away from home on work business. (When Jack was born, I felt a secret twinge of betrayal when I expressed my relief that he was not deaf. I didn’t know who I was betraying but the emotion was there all the same). It wasn’t that I deliberately censored our conversations to strip them bare of deafness. No, it was more that my deafness did not spring to mind as a topic of conversation and nor did it occur to me that it might be a matter requiring negotiation in an intimate relationship. Extended discussions about what my deafness might mean for either me, or for them, or for the quality of our relationships simply did not happen. The men with whom I got romantically involved did not take the initiative to enquire either through misplaced sensitivity, or because they didn’t know what they needed to understand, or because (as one former boyfriend recently owned up to me) ‘I didn’t realise you were deaf when I first met you and then after a few days of knowing you, it just didn’t seem relevant to us. It still doesn’t.’

I tossed aside the occasional jarring note as just ‘one of those things.’ As something that life throws up sometimes. As something to put up with. I flinched if, on missing what they said and asking them to repeat it, they answered, ‘Oh, it doesn’t matter. It wasn’t important’ and turned away from me. They complained when I pretended to understand what was being said when I clearly did not. My smiles, intended to cover my incomprehension, apparently did not hide the blankness in my eyes. They would probe me then, their own frustration showing, ‘Doesn’t what I say matter to you?’ Of course it did. The question flustered me. Their words, all the ones I didn’t hear as well as the ones I did hear, mattered a lot to me, but I could never break free of the double-edged sword of asking them to repeat their words, because . . . well, you know by now what would happen: they would say, ‘Oh, it doesn’t matter. It wasn’t important,’ and so the circle of uncertainty would continue, around and around again.

With this experience behind me, Damian’s novel insistence in understanding my deafness pressed my buttons. His questions were searching; I understood them to mean that he was searching to understand me; it was seductive. When he withdrew his friendship from me, I felt terribly exposed because in talking about my deafness with Damian in a way that I had not done with any other man, I had ventured on the daring to also talk about other matters and . . . and what? I did not
know what to think; it was confusing. I knew that Damian had not left me because of my deafness, but I did want to know if, and how, my deafness affected my relationships with men beyond the practical considerations of speaking up, speaking clearly, speaking face-to-face. There was an elephant in the room and I wanted to know its message.

5.
When I thought about it a bit more, I decided that my deafness did not have much to do with my being single. After all, several of my friends were single and they weren’t deaf. Wasn’t there some statistic about meteors and single women and available men?

On the other hand, that statistic didn’t automatically rule out the possibility that my deafness was irrelevant to my single status, did it? And actually, a memoir on deafness I had read, the one by Bainy Cyrus, claimed that the success rate of marriages between deaf women and hearing men was pretty low. Really low. That was discouraging. Then again, I had only ever dated hearing men; why was that? Why had I never seriously considered the prospect of dating deaf men? (Leaving aside, for the time being, that I rarely met any single, available men let alone had the opportunity to apply the deaf/hearing filter to that particular gene pool).

I remembered something else; something that my mother had said to me when I was sixteen. I was going to school dances in church halls with the usual accoutrements of orange cordial, strobe lighting, and floorboards stamped in time to anthems such as ‘Peggy Sue,’ ‘Rock Around the Clock,’ ‘Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow,’ ‘I Only Want to Be With You’ and, of course, that end-of-night crowd pleaser, ‘Running Bear.’ The other girls looked keen in their mini-skirts and boots, but the boys looked worried and their palms sweated during the close body-to-body sway of the slow dance songs. I was awkward with boys. I liked their company but could never really believe that they enjoyed my company in return, and so I embarked on the fatal course of feigning disinterest in the boys whom I liked enormously for fear of discovering their disinterest in me. I actually thought the boys who chatted with me were being kind rather than sincere. I also hid my hearing aid as best as I could beneath my long hair even as I wondered why I was doing this: after all, I would be ‘outed’ eventually (and probably sooner rather than later). My lack of confidence meant that I spent a lot of time hanging around the perimeter of the hall or in the women’s toilet chatting with my friends, spinning out the evening as best I could. Sometimes, I would sit outside the dance hall alone in the cool moonlight air to get relief from the press of noise and strain of pretence, and wonder when romance would enter my life.

After one such evening, I walked into my parents’ bedroom and chanced a question that was on my mind. ‘Do you think that my being deaf has anything to do with boys not asking me out?’
My father tilted his head reflectively but my mother’s reply was immediate. ‘Rubbish! Standing around with a long face stops boys. Look cheerful and you’ll be right.’

6.
I tried to be cheerful now by practicing gratitude. The twentieth anniversary of Jack’s death was upon me and I called Jack’s father. This took some doing. We had parted on good terms when I left Australia for England four years earlier, but we had not been in contact with each other since then. I tracked him down and a short while later, we met in a cafe near the riverside Botanical Gardens where he explained that he did not want to take part in a commemorative ceremony. He liked the idea of it, understood that I saw it as an opportunity for healing, but said that he preferred to deal with the anniversary privately with his own family.

With that sorted, we reminisced about our son over our coffees. We smiled wryly at some of our memories, as if Jack was still very much present in our lives. Jack’s father talked about his work as an investor of sorts and his new family which I greeted with guarded interest, and I told him about my ‘deaf project’ which he took up with gusto. I was startled by his enthusiasm. ‘That’s great! You must do this. Absolutely.’ He nodded vigorously. ‘People will be really interested in it.’ I didn’t press him further about this: what hurts or mysteries or doubts—or even joy, pride and humour—about my deafness had he nursed during our life together? Later, I wished I had asked him. Why didn’t I? Again, what was I afraid of?

I went ahead with the ceremony to commemorate Jack’s life one Sunday in early June, after mass with Father Adrian. I wanted to acknowledge not just my loss but also the loss to my family, especially my nieces and nephews who had held Jack too. I gave them each a polished marble egg with the word ‘love’ or ‘joy’ etched into it, and thanked them for their support all these years. Organising such a ceremony outside the stock-standard Catholic rites was unusual in my family; it was a one-off event. We blushed, muttered, and shuffled our feet as we stood around the altar. My mother looked stern in her effort to hold in her emotions. Cecily chewed the inside of her cheek. My youngest nephew, Alex, grinned helplessly. My eldest nephew, Jason, his eyes raised heavenwards, examined the church ceiling as if assessing its sturdiness. Chris, my brother-in-law, thumped me on the shoulder afterwards; said, ‘That was bloody terrific.’ Heartfelt.

7.
The passage of time lulled me into feeling strong. I called Damian. This was a mistake. He answered the phone with a voice vibrating with fatigue, but on hearing my greeting, he chattered brightly for a few minutes before descending into the dulled tones of depression as he struggled to...
explain, again, his decision to remain apart from me. In the way that these things happen, we talked for longer than was helpful for either of us. When I said, ‘I don’t know how to end this conversation,’ he answered, ‘No. I don’t either.’ We held our silence together for several moments before one of us—it might have been me; it might have been him—said, ‘I’ll call you in a couple of weeks. Maybe have coffee?’ I pressed the dead handset to my forehead and could not find any gratitude within me at all.

I spilled the beans. I spoke of my heartache to friends; listened to their counsel as they poured themselves another glass of wine or cup of tea in my kitchen, or lit up their cigarettes on my balcony. Gerard was frantic on my behalf; his dark eyes brimmed with anxiety, ‘You’ve got to keep trying! Go back to him! Keep talking!’ But most of my friends counselled otherwise. ‘Detach. Move on.’

‘Remember the nice times you had with him.’

‘I bet he’s a Gemini. You can never trust a Gemini.’

‘It’s just bad timing.’

‘Keep your heart open to love.’

These words made sense during their utterance—even the crack about the flightiness of Geminis—but the wisdom always died before it could reach my heart. I floundered; knew what I had to do but sank deeper into my melancholy with each passing day. Rose rang. Our friendship had been forged during our university years when we wandered around the campus together, and spent our long summer breaks hitch-hiking through New Zealand or getting lost in the grand cities of Europe. We were witness to each other’s twanging grief during times of unwise love. She got down to tin tacks. ‘Distract yourself with work,’ she said, her gentle voice doing nothing to mask her firmness of intent with me, ‘And do one nice thing for yourself each day.’

It was easy to take the first piece of advice. As usual, I had a heavy schedule of work deadlines. This time, I was racing against the clock to write a short book about guardianship for the Queensland Law Reform Commission. I forced myself to be grateful for the distraction as well as the income, but my soul was not in it and so, as soon as I could, I took up Rose’s second piece of advice. I returned to Bethel to be comforted by the routines of silence in the retreat by the sea. There, I renewed my zest for my ‘deaf project.’ My heartache, while eased, took longer to be healed.
Chapter Nine: In the Beginning Was the Word

1. When I say out loud the words, ‘the retreat by the sea,’ I hear a dreamy sing-song rhythm. They carry the beat of a nursery rhyme that a parent might tell her sleepy child, her head at rest on her pillow. I felt at rest at Bethel. The salt air, white sand, and blue shiver of the Pacific Ocean all cast their magic spell, but the most magical thing of all was the silence of companionship. The days of silence demanded a certain discipline for most hearing people, but I slid into it like a warm bath. The relief of moving among a group of people entirely unimpeded by the expectation that I would have to be on guard for sounds, watch for the direction in which they came from, decipher them, and respond to them by listening, speaking, laughing, or whatever was required of me was in itself restorative.

But the real gift of that silence lay in sharing it for five whole days and five whole nights with other people. I loved this. I loved eating my meals, reading the retreat literature, writing in my journal, watching the sea, and sitting alongside twenty other people all held in the spell of a companionable silence. I knew the silence of unwelcome aloneness and crushing loneliness, that drenching silence of melancholy; knew also the silence imposed by grief and terror; and the silence of guilt and anxiety too, of holding secrets that cannot be told. There’s another silence; the silence of magnificence, the sort that forces wordlessness upon you on contemplating the grandeur of landscape; I had fallen victim to this awe during a visit to Central Australia where the red dirt, dappled with violet and yellow wildflowers, stretched into infinity to meet nothing but the glare of sky. The Bethel silence of companionship held none of this. It was the silence of comfort breaking into joy.

I was familiar with the idea of silent spiritual retreats, having gone to a Catholic girls’ school; an annual retreat was part of the school calendar. Back then, my friends and I enjoyed them as a pleasant break from the classroom schedule. We whiled away the days by reading our Victoria Holt and Susan Howatch novels slipped in between the pages of books about Italian girls made saints for choosing death over the loss of their virginity—Maria Goretti’s name sticks in my mind; why we were not taught how to defend ourselves against assault is beyond comprehension. God was not a high priority in my reflections during my school years. I didn’t think much about God at all, to be honest. Not even when I went to Mass on Sundays or to the Benediction service on the first Friday of each month in the school chapel. And not even when I was in the Sodality of the Children of Mary which I was keen about because I fancied wearing the blue cape over my white dress. I
day-to-day routines; something interesting might happen; and if nothing new happened, then I had
won some quiet time for myself. I also liked the hymns. Much of what the priests said sailed over
my head. I thought about good and bad, and strove to do the right thing, but my thinking was
inchoate.

I was jolted into trying to think more crisply when, just a month after the Bethel retreat, I
heard a nun speak at a conference in Sydney. Her topic was the Gospel of John and its opening
verse: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ A
robust, bosomy and wholesome-looking woman in her fifties, she emphasised the beat of the words
by slicing the air with one hand in time to their pulsing rhythm. She told how, in a society in which
few people read and so relied on the traditions of oral story-telling, the early Christians needed to
hear the word of God if they were to learn about God. It was regarded as an important part of their
humanity. I drifted off, mulling over how deaf people developed their spirituality in the absence of
hearing.

I had been prepared for my first Holy Communion and first Confession when I was six years
old by attending classes at the local convent. My mother picked me up from the Deaf School each
afternoon and drove me to those classes for several weeks. I could not remember how my presence
was explained to the other six year old children in that convent class. Was my deafness explained to
them? Who did the explaining and how was it done? Whatever the process, it must have been
satisfactory enough. I still had my catechism notebook from those days. In it were the standard
catechism questions and answers written in the dogged handwriting of a child, all illustrated with
my crayon drawings and pictures of angels, saints, nativity scenes, and miracle after miracle. The
Nativity. The Last Supper. The Resurrection. Ascension Thursday. The Assumption of Mary into
heaven. My mother had helped me with the rote learning by changing some of the words. She had
evidently thought about how to change conceptual words into ‘doing’ words to guide me through
my early religious instruction. ‘Question’ was replaced by ‘ask’ and ‘answer’ had been replaced by
‘tell.’ Some of the questions and answers came back to me as I sat in the conference room that day.
I could hear the sing-song of six year old girls and boys chanting to the black-robed nun standing in
front of the blackboard with its inscription *AMDG (All My Duty for God)* in the top right hand
corner:

Ask: Who made the world?
Tell: God made the world.
Ask: Why did God make me?
Tell: To know Him and love Him and to be happy.
Tell: By learning about God.

And then the penny dropped. I came to, sat up straighter in the conference auditorium, leant forward, and paid more attention to the nun’s lecture. She was also saying that people needed to see God as well as hear His Word. She seemed to have a thing about sight and sound. I could not follow her argument. What I did understand in that telescoping moment was this: historically, people’s capacity for spirituality was understood to be an essential part of their humanity. If they did not have God in their lives, they were not fully human. I trembled. It was the first time that I grasped the historical aversion for deafness: deaf people could not hear; without hearing they could not know God; without knowing God, deaf people could not be human. It was crude logic, wasn’t it? Awful. And what’s more, I believe that a quiver of that prejudice remains today, two thousand years after John wrote his gospel.

I left that session in a distracted state. I had to give a paper immediately after lunch. Mine was about how writers write about silence, and what that meant for how stories of deaf people are told. I burned with what I had just learnt. I saw that my immediate task was to stay calm and to use my presentation to shake at least some of the conference participants’ notions of what it means to be deaf. Perhaps I was not as calm as I aimed to be; the small audience of twelve academics and researchers was transfixed from my first opening salvo: ‘I’m deaf and I’m here to talk with you about stories of deaf people and what they might mean to you.’ An occasional nod showed me that people were responding to my words. One woman watched me with such intensity that I doubt that she even blinked. She came up to me after I finished speaking: ‘Do you know, in all my years of teaching literature in universities, I have never heard anyone give a paper about deafness in literature?’

I nodded, said, ‘I can well imagine. That’s my point. Stories of deafness have to travel out beyond disability and medicine into the world of novels and films. We learn about who we are as much by what we read and see about ourselves, as by what we are told and by what we experience.’ She gazed at me as if in a daze, grabbed my hands in a clasp, and then raced off to the next conference session. I felt breathless. I had broken through; my words had mattered. Conversations—if not conversions—begin with words.

2.

Miracles. The New Testament reports that Jesus healed the lame, blind and deaf. Charlatans in the nineteenth century sold potions in green glass bottles inscribed with the promise, ‘Cure for Deafness.’ When I was a little girl, an Archbishop once splashed holy water from Lourdes onto my hearing aid and waved his hands in the sign of the cross over my head. It was there. Miracles somehow...
Simon—the same one who wanted to be deaf—must have believed in miracles. Or perhaps he turned into a deaf-sceptic; if he wasn’t allowed to be deaf, then why should I be allowed to be deaf? Picture this: Simon, still seven years old, pounding up the stairs at the back of his home. He’s shouting.

‘Mum, Mum! Donna’s not deaf any more!’

His mother is unmoved. She continues buttering the bread rolls for lunch. ‘Oh? Why do you say that?’

‘Because she’s in the pool, and, and, and (he’s breathless; his excitement is overwhelming him), and she’s swimming without her hearing aid on, and, and (significant pause here, juts his head forward), She Can Understand What I’m Saying!’ He’s triumphant. His face is alight. Even his freckles shine.

His mother turns to Simon, puts the butter knife down on the bench, eyes him, and says, ‘She can lip-read you.’

‘Lip-read me?’

‘Yep, she doesn’t have to hear you. She can understand what you’re saying without her hearing aid.’

‘Oh.’

Simon may have been disappointed, but I think this is quite a good miracle in itself.

3.

Several months after that conference in Sydney, I read about Hall Caine’s novel, The Scapegoat, in which Israel, the Jewish hero, seeks the salvation of his daughter, Naomi, born deaf and blind. Israel establishes a routine of reading each night to his daughter, from the Book of the Law:

Thus, night after night, when the sun was gone down, did Israel read of the law and sing of the Psalms to Naomi, his daughter, who was both blind and deaf. And though Naomi heard not, and neither did she see, yet in their silent hour together, there was another in their chamber always with them—there was a third, for there was God.3

I liked this assumption of God’s presence in deaf-blind Naomi’s life. I felt that Hall Caine understood Naomi to be fully human, fully spiritual, notwithstanding her inability to see and her inability to hear.

I had, by now, also read Helen Keller’s memoir, Story of My Life, the inspiration for the play and movie, The Miracle Worker. I came across that famous scene of the young deaf-blind

Helen at the well where she not only discovers that words have meaning, but experiences this discovery as a kind of intellectual and spiritual baptism. She wrote, ‘I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul.’ The trouble is that I do not believe Helen Keller’s account. Her reportedly ‘spontaneous’ insight smacks of a retrospective reshaping of events. Her ‘spiritual awakening’ seems overly adult. She was, after all, just a child at the time. I certainly never experienced such a childhood awakening on discovering the spoken word and its meaning.

The only childhood frisson about words that I can recall was when I realised that I could lip-read. I would have been five years old at the time and still at the Gladstone Road School for the Deaf. I had not yet learned my alphabet by rote, and so when the teacher called me to the front of the class to recite it, I was anxious. I simply didn’t know it, but then one of my classmates, Matthew, started mouthing the letters to me. A. B. C. D. . . . Watching the movement of his lips, I repeated the letters with a fluency that felt new to me. I still remember the relief of having ‘performed’ successfully, but even this relief was not enough to awaken my soul.

As a child, I took everything for granted. I took my deafness for granted; the gradual acquisition of language for granted; and the eventual total immersion into the hearing world for granted. This is not to say that I was always sanguine. Not at all. Sometimes, I felt sad, lonely, separate from others, and confused, but I never questioned why this was so. I led a child’s life; it was entirely unexamined. I simply accepted things, and got on with the tasks of fitting in and adapting. I suppose, now, that over the years this may have resulted in my suppressing any overt exhibition of my sense of deaf self. On the other hand, I learnt the qualities of effort, tenacity, and perseverance.
Chapter Ten: The Best of Both Worlds

1.

Now, all this reading was well and good but it did not shine much light on how my deafness had shaped my life. I was heated about some things, but I was not struck by an epiphany on my road to Damascus, nor zapped by a revelation of zig-zag lightning clarity. I didn’t feel transformed by what I had learnt so far. Keen as ever to allay parents’ fears, yes. More assertive about claiming my deafness, yes, most definitely. When a friend asked me whether I ever think that I am not deaf, that I can hear, it’s just that I need a machine to sustain my hearing ability, I was emphatic. ‘I always know I am deaf. Always.’ But, transformed and enlightened? No. And nor was there any improvement in the quality of my romantic love life, if that was any yardstick to go by. Perhaps I wasn’t digging deep enough into my soul. Wasn’t this a mandatory part of one’s search for identity? To wrench pain from your soul and, by some process of alchemy, wrestle meaning out of that pain? I made a list of deaf-hurts:

‘Hey! Are you deaf or something?’ Accusatory. As if it’s a crime to be deaf.

‘Would. Madam. Like. Help?’ Rounded vowels. Excessively clear articulation. The studied tolerance of a sales assistant who has attended a Deaf Awareness Seminar and spotted my hearing aids beneath the tuck of my hair.

‘What? What are you saying? What did you say? I can’t understand what you’re saying!’ Mind-numbed bewilderment. Dull waitress in a cafeteria faced with my request for a raisin toast and cappuccino. Alright, my ‘rrr’s and my ‘esses’s are not enunciated with crystalline clarity. But, given that we are in a cafeteria which only serves toast and coffee, and given that the words raisin toast and cappuccino can only ever look and sound like ray-sin toast and cap-pu-chee-no no matter how many times they are said or who says them, I want to reach over and rip her heart out.

I looked at the list. It was short but I didn’t feel like pursuing it. Being accusatory, patronising, or dull-witted are hardly federal offences, even if they do inflict pain and even if the pain erupts as cries of frustration or glassy-eyed smiles to ward off the insult. (Alternatively, when people treated me as if I was a fool—as if I was dumb—I would retaliate by treating them like a fool. Not the wisest course of action if the recipient of my feigned scorn was someone with real retaliatory powers, such as a bank manager). In the bigger scheme of life, the deaf-hurts were petty and trivial, weren’t they? Slings and arrows. Character building. I had to dig deeper.
Something happened. Something exciting. I discovered Sandra, that little girl with the red hair at the Gladstone Road Deaf School who had so inspired my mother all those years ago. I found her on my laptop.

The path to finding Sandra was built during my ‘digging into my psyche’ phase. Bored with myself, I went in search of other deaf people who might also be asking questions about deaf identity. A friend suggested that I write to a fellow he knew in Melbourne; he was deaf too, and was writing a book about his experiences as one of three deaf children—his parents and one of his sisters were hearing. His name was Michael. And so I wrote to Michael, I e-mailed him. He e-mailed back. I replied to his e-mail and before I knew it, we had settled into a rhythm of almost weekly correspondence, swapping bits and pieces of our life stories, as much as we dared to reveal in our separate cocoons of not-knowing-each-other. I was hair-trigger cautious; I didn’t want to be ‘Damian-ed’ all over again. We trod safe waters, told each other what we were reading and the stories we wanted to tell the world. He wrote, ‘I have a soft spot for David Wright [the South African deaf poet whose memoir I had turned my back on], because it was the first time I had ever read anyone attempting to tell what it was like to be deaf.’ Michael, a journalist and disability advocate, had the gift of enquiry and he was generous with me in sharing his knowledge, ideas and discoveries. He had spent much of his adult life asking questions about deafness and deaf people’s lives—his pet project was Henry Lawson, a nineteenth century Australian writer and poet who was deaf as a result of a childhood illness—and on finding answers that he didn’t like, answers that played to prejudices and stereotypes, he would take them on. His e-mail-stories to me about his battles were cheerful and full of good humour, but his doggedness showed through, as did his research.

Michael led me to the group of deaf academics who corresponded with each other on the internet. When I logged on to find them, I saw that they were from all over the world. Finland. Japan. Saudi Arabia. Netherlands. Canada. England. Ireland. North America. This excited my curiosity; the northern hemisphere was evidently a hot-house of deaf talent. I was also terribly impressed by the scale of their achievements. These deaf academics held bachelors and masters degrees and doctorates in child psychology, agriculture, literature, medicine, science, theology, philosophy, education. The honours list was long. They were experienced researchers, lecturers, teachers, writers, and thinkers. I recognised a couple of names by their literary reputations and noted that several other names popped up often during e-mail flurries. Hannah Merker. She’d written a book of essays, Listening. Susan De Gaia was a regular correspondent. She wrote,
whose perspective matters most to society. I think if we polled deaf/Deaf people, we would find
many things missing from the stories that are told about them.’ Christopher Krentz. He’d written
*Writing Deafness*, about the ways nineteenth century American deaf and hearing writers thought
about deafness. (Here, I discovered the correct meaning of the word, *antebellum*. For some reason, I
had always thought it was a type of fabric, perhaps a suede-leather-like concoction; maybe of
French origin. It’s not, of course; I had confused it with *vellum*. *Antebellum* is a historical term
referring to the period before the American Civil War. Odd, how one can get a fixed idea about the
meaning of words simply by the lilt and tilt of their vowels). The lengthy e-mail exchanges covered
topics as random as phantom sounds, biblical stories about deafness, music (cyber-space was noisy
on this subject; several deaf academics wrote with detailed descriptions of their joy for song, dance,
and musical instruments along with their bemusement at hearing people’s bemusement about that
joy), and inevitably, that evergreen—the debate about signing and oralism. Many of them wrote of
their reliance on sign language, of their wish for its greater acceptance and support. I followed the
trail of these discussions in the night quiet of my study, illuminated only by the bluish-white glare
radiating from the laptop screen. Their sense of community was strong; immense distances
separated them but they wrote with a casual familiarity with each other, as if they were kicking
around a ball together at the local park. I didn’t take part. Diffidence held me back. What did I have
to say that was new or clever or perceptive? I was a novice in the deaf identity debate. Besides, I
was an oral deaf person; I fell into that sometimes-disparaged category of ‘not deaf enough.’ Would
I be welcomed into this diaspora of deaf academics? I didn’t know.

And then one Sunday night, the first paragraph of an e-mail in these exchanges snagged my
attention. It said, ‘I believe personal story-telling is essential in understanding the diversity of our
deaf situations, and learning to respect our differences within the d/Deaf umbrella. Basically, these
are “being-in-the-world experiences.”’ Ah-ha, I thought. This writer was treading across the same
ground as I was. She had a lot she wanted to say about her deaf experiences, but was unsure of her
right to say it. She was going to mark out her rightful claim simply by recounting her personal
experiences. I liked her instincts. I read on. And as I read on, goosebumps tingled up and down my
arms. My excitement rose as if I was a child lost in a fairy-tale. This writer—I jumped down to the
bottom of her e-mail to check her name, ‘Sandi,’ before reading on; the name didn’t register—wrote
that she could

‘recall my own school situation when I was put into the first oral deaf class in Brisbane (in
Queensland, Australia) in the 50s, firstly in the Deaf School, where the oral deaf class was
segregated carefully from the signing deaf children. We were put into a tiny little room in an
allocated. We had different lunch times, to ensure there were no contacts with signs, and then we were moved to a small Oral Deaf school.

‘Not long after that, I was sent to a mainstream class situation (as an “experiment”). It was a shock to my system going from a tiny class of 9-10 deaf children to a huge class of 43-45 hearing children! Of course, I had no choice but to try to work within the system. One of the strategies I learnt was to talk with the teacher about how I would benefit from learning in the hearing class, as I was lip-reading totally at that time. Interpreters were unheard of in those days. I would always sit at the front, with one child taking turns each term to sit with me, to write down notes for me, and to explain (mouthing the words) anything I missed during the sessions. It was a system that worked very well for me, as we both learned very quickly—the hearing student “double-learning” and the deaf student absorbing information. If there were problems, I’d check with the teacher. I think being young children, we were flexible with the learning, so it was a very good system for me within the hearing situation. This was okay as long as I had one teacher for the whole year, as I got used to lip-reading him or her.

‘High school was very different with six different subjects and six different lip-reading patterns to learn, plus all the other lips in the classes! I learned to adapt my strategies, and was fortunate with one student sticking with me for most subjects the whole school duration. That student received excellent grade marks from the “double learning”, and I benefited as well. I cannot remember being lonely or isolated at school, but I do remember “fighting” for my right to learn, though at that time (in the 60s) I didn’t know about “rights”. I believe it was a subconscious way to “survive” within a system that I had to deal with.’

I was gobsmacked.

Was this my twin sister separated at birth or what? No. Our experiences may have been the same but this woman had had more guts than me. Not in a million years would I have had the nerve to ‘talk with the teacher about how I would benefit from learning in the hearing class.’ I grinned at this; I read this line several times. It really took my fancy. I thought about how terrific it would have been to have ‘Sandi’ with me at All Hallows to ‘talk with the teacher.’ She would have stood up to that teacher, Miss Morrison, in Grade Four who repeatedly sent me to the back of the classroom for being ‘disruptive.’ This because I dared to ask the girl next to me, Julie, to tell me what Miss Morrison was saying; her back was always turned to the class; she was either wilful, stupid, or lazy in her refusal to face me when she spoke. I knew enough not to back-chat her. I would fiddle with my hearing aid instead, hoping this would draw her away from me. Now...
She played dumb. I would walk to the back of the class, avoiding the girls’ eyes. My difficulties with this teacher must have shown up in my school work; I was pulled out of her class for one afternoon every week for several weeks—I don’t remember now for how long—to go to the Deaf School for some sort of educational ‘top-up.’ I didn’t really mind this. It was a relief to be out of Miss Morrison’s way. My chief grumble about going back to the Deaf School was that I had to go to the ‘Big School’ at Annerley where it was dark and dingy, and where I didn’t know any of the other children. I would have relished going back to the Gladstone Road Deaf School where I might have met up with my old classmates. Sharon. Kay. Matthew. I lamented. Sandi, where were you when I needed you? And then, ‘Sandi’?

I turned my attention back to the laptop keyboard, wrote a short note introducing myself, and asked in closing, ‘I wonder if you are the same Sandra who was a year or so older than me with red hair? And you were taught by Mr Bellagoi? Fingers crossed in anticipation.’

3.

When I was at the Deaf School, I didn’t comprehend myself as being ‘a deaf child with special needs.’ Even though I was being taught about sound and how to speak, I must have assumed—if I gave it any thought at all, which is unlikely—that this was how everyone learnt to speak, that this was what everyone did at school. I only understood myself to be deaf and different when I was switched from a school for deaf girls and boys to a private girls’ school that had no deaf children, All Hallows. I cannot remember if I was consulted about this move; perhaps I was, perhaps not. (Were seven year old children consulted on such serious matters in those days? Or is the practice of consulting children about major decisions a latter-day development?) What I do remember is that I seem to have gone through the motions of this move in a dreamy, fugue-like state. One day, I was in the Deaf School’s grey uniform with maroon trim and distinctive smell of newly ironed gabardine, and the ‘next day’ (actually, it would have been eight weeks later, at the end of the summer holidays), I was in a new martial brown uniform with box pleats and more buttons than anyone could possibly need. I was pleased to get a new uniform but didn’t think too deeply about what it meant.

At this school with no other deaf children, I was slow to understand that it was me who was different. I was so dazzled by the newness of this convent school with the nuns in their black robes and white wimples creasing their foreheads, and by the noise and chattiness of the other girls that I thought that they were different. In the first few days, I watched them all from the angle of observing their difference. But when my new classmates eventually gathered up their boldness to ask their tumbling questions about my hearing aid and about my speech, I finally twigged. I was the...
object of curiosity. When the reality finally broke through the clouds of my foggy comprehension that I had left my old school for this one, I cried a few mornings on arriving at the new school. I told my teacher, Sister Mary Eugenia, that my head ached. The nun must have rung my parents because my father then drove me to school each morning for awhile until the realisation settled within me that this was it; I was here to stay.

Photos of me from that time show me standing at attention in the back yard, in my uniform with straw hat and brown gloves, Globite bag in hand. My old grey uniform with maroon trim was folded away in a bottom drawer. Each morning, my mother combed my long hair tightly back off my face into a pony-tail, revealing my hearing aid with its pink cord looping its way from my left ear to inside the collar of my uniform down to the bulge near my waist. The box of sound pressed warmly against my flesh, the up-down volume button rustling against the cloth of my uniform. I would try to loosen the tightness of my hair so that it covered my ears; but no, the band was fastened securely. ‘Mum, it’s too tight, my ears stick out.’ I would pull at the ribbons, mussing up my hair. Cecily, watching this, chewed her bottom lip in sympathy. My mother would call out. ‘Leave it; let everyone see your beautiful ears!’ She wanted to send me off to my new school with the rhythm of bravado in my footsteps: I was deaf; I wore a hearing aid; that was that. I was doubtful, this wasn’t a good idea. I wanted my hair falling loose, the way it had been before.

I seethed to my mother about the girls’ questions. ‘Answer the questions, just tell them. They aren’t being unkind, they just want to know, that’s all.’ My mother was brisk. But I cried, my voice breaking: ‘They ask me all the time!’ My deafness acted as a magnet for my new classmates. ‘Why do you talk like that? Why can’t you say ‘ess’? Why can’t you sit with me at the back of the class? Why can’t, why not, why . . .?’ I could not find a way to satisfy the thirst of my questioners; little girls themselves, they were unable to contain their voyeurism. I especially hated the shy, sly requests to look at my hearing aid, not just the metal box tucked away under my pleated school uniform but the ear-mould too. The gaze of so many eyes brought the girls too close to me, as if they were peering into my very ears. I was ashamed too because—and this shame was unspeakable—my ear-mould invariably held traces of yellow-brown crusty ear-wax caught in the curve of their ridges, just like grains of sand caught inside sea-shells, but without the romance of the sea. I wished my ear-mould could look shiny.

At best, my answers gave me fragile cover; at worst, they opened the door to more frightening questions. ‘Why can’t you hear? Did you do something wrong?’ The accusation twanged, swelled to a roar, and soared like a loosed arrow to its target. The ‘something’ part of the question glanced off my cheek but the ‘wrong’ bit pierced my chest. I sucked in air, searched my questioner’s face for cruelty, but saw only a freckled face knotted with the wanting to know.
coughed up my answer, trying to catch my breath. ‘I was just born that way. I was born deaf. You know, I was just born,’ stumbling now, ‘not to hear.’ The last words felt clumsy in my mouth, took up too much room, stretched my lips unnaturally. I backed away into the shadow of a doorway. ‘I didn’t do anything wrong,’ my voice faltered. ‘There’s nothing wrong.’ Even as I repeated the words, I felt queasy. I was not sure.

I didn’t think the girls were being deliberately cruel; they were too consistently cheerful and willing, in the way of all little girls with ribbons in their hair and short socks crinkling around their ankles, to enfold me into their skipping games and ring-around-the-rosy for me to fall prey to that notion. It was more that I found their curiosity baffling. After all, I didn’t ask them about their hearing, did I? Why were they being such sticky-beaks? It was rude, that’s what it was. Rude. Besides, I didn’t know how to answer their questions. They were practical girls. Mechanically minded.

‘How does your hearing aid work?’
‘Why do you talk like that?’
‘What can you hear?’
I didn’t know the answers to these questions. Why would I? I just put my hearing on each morning and took it off each evening; I wasn’t ripping the back off the metal case to find out how it worked. And what did they mean by ‘talk like that?’ How was I talking? I sounded alright, didn’t I? No-one had ever commented to me on my voice before. What was I saying differently now? (apart from that awful ‘ess’ sound; I knew I couldn’t do that one; would never do it). And what could they hear? How could I answer such a question? How did anyone describe what they could and could not hear? Why couldn’t they settle down and leave me alone and just go along with things? What’s with all these questions! They rained down like Hitchcock’s black birds swooping down on Tippi Hedren. I tried to answer the girls in a way that maintained my eight year old dignity and stalled their curiosity. The torrent of questions eventually subsided; a renegade one would surface every now and then, but I never ever again experienced such an assault of peering into my ears, my sounds, myself.

I was exercised by the challenge of interpreting the whirl of sounds around me in the classroom and playgrounds, my teachers and classmates swinging from face-contorting exaggerated clarity of speech to forgetting to face me so that I could see what was being said. I worked hard to be ‘normal,’ to be invisible inside the wider group around me. Despite the effort required of me, I had no sense of injustice about this. Instead, I accepted that it was my task—with hurts and all—to fit into this new world that had no other deaf children. I was compliant. After awhile, I collected new names to remember: Susan, Maria, Julienne, Dianne, the twins Deborah and Phillepeau. The
girls enjoyed my quietness and the intensity of my gaze on their faces. They mistook this for a fascination with their conversation, not knowing my fatigue from the effort of comprehending quick words, of catching sentences slipped through murmuring lips, of watching for nuances of impatience as I missed their meaning. My smiles disguised my lapses of concentration. I longed for the carefully spaced words of my old teachers at the Deaf School; I missed the theatre of my conversations with my old friends, their faces lively with meaning and their hands gesturing the story when their words could not. I was school-sick: I didn’t want to learn any more new names. I liked the old ones: Sharon, Matthew, Kay, Jenny. I had not said ‘goodbye’ to Sharon, my best friend, because I had not understood that I was leaving her. I still did not grasp it. I wondered when I would go back to my old school; how long was I going to be at this new school? I did not want to ask my mother. Somehow, such a simple direct question was beyond my grasp.

Even a year after I started at my new school, when I was nine years old and in grade four, I sometimes stood at the cross-wire fence bordering the playgrounds and imagined that I could see across the muddy river to the Deaf School. I wasn’t unhappy but I felt tense and on guard; I was in the wrong place. I didn’t belong at the new school; I belonged at the Deaf School. On the first day of each new school year for a few years, I would wait, looking out with hope for Sharon with her shy smile and hair tied back into a pony-tail. I never expressed my hope aloud to anyone: I held it to myself. Somehow I knew the voicing of this hope out loud would clang. It would jar in a way that I did not understand. Instead of killing the hope swiftly by exposing it, I secured it to myself for too many years, allowed the hope to wilt a little more each year. I lost a little bit of heart.

It took me the rest of my primary school years before I accepted that I was staying at All Hallows and made real efforts to belong. In grade seven, I went about the business of making new friends, ‘recruiting’ them by just asking, ‘Will you be my friend?’ Despite its bluntness, this was a surprisingly effective technique. Over time, I learnt through closer observation that the art of friendship was subtle. It lay in the ebb and flow of exchanges among the girls, which could be cryptic, involving as they did the codes of adolescence along with a lot of aimless hanging around beneath the eaves of the classroom windows or in the shade of the trees on the terraced lawns. I hung around, grew more involved in school life, and made friends. I walked to the bus-stop each afternoon with Roslyn and Maria; went to the movies with Susan and Angela; stayed over at Michelle’s home on the other side of the city; took off on beach holidays with Janeane; and swapped silly stories with Marion and Charmaine that made us laugh outside our English and History classes.

In hindsight, it doesn’t seem possible, but my deafness was rarely commented upon during my high school years, either by my friends or by my teachers. Their efforts to accommodate me...
needs must have been subtle, instinctive, or random, and nor did I did make a public display of asserting my deafness. My friends may have commented on my deafness among themselves; I have no idea, but if they did, I never suffered any untoward splashback. If anything, they sometimes went out of their way to make sure I caught what they were saying. I knew by the occasional awkward silence or sidelong glances among the other girls when I was missing out on the nuances of their conversations, but not to any degree that bothered me (or them, apparently). I lived with the knowledge that a thin membrane of incomprehension separated me from everyone else. When I did feel uncomfortable, I sat quietly until the discomfort passed. Like a suppressed burp. My teachers presumably shared their observations among themselves. I muddled through and certain things were taken for granted: I always sat at the front of the classroom, and the teachers always faced the class when they spoke (no more of that Miss Morrison nonsense). On the other hand, I was not cut any slack in my studies: I had to take part in the oral French language classes with Madame Bougeais, along with the rest of my classmates. I was mutely appalled by this but as things turned out, I learnt to speak high school French adequately; the repetitive mimicry required to master any new language suited my learning style. I studied hard and did well in my subjects, joined the school magazine committee, and signed up for everything that was going to assert my place in the world. Each achievement bolstered my confidence.

My competence was a double-edged sword. Somehow, sometime—I don’t know how or when—my deafness subsided into a state of visible invisibility. I knew I was deaf; everyone around me knew I was deaf; but I was silent about my dance back and forth across that border of hearing-deaf that marked out our differences, a border that was permeable but permanent. For no particular reason that I can recall (other than this was at a time when it was not ‘done’ to talk about oneself), I felt inhibited about speaking about my deafness or describing what I might need to make things easier for myself. Instead, I made a point of smiling a lot, of looking cheerful, to cover my paddling-duck efforts to keep up. This was evidently thin cover: one afternoon as we were packing up our books at the end of a class, Ann, who was audacious enough to wash her hair in henna-dye against all the prohibitions of the nuns and who sat next to me in Modern History, said, ‘You hide a lot, don’t you? You act as though everything is easy for you, but ...’ She cocked her head at me as if daring me to challenge the truth of her words. I laughed off her observation. ‘You’ve caught me out!’

I finished school with high marks (my obsessive study habits paid off) and settled into university life in the same clouds of confusion, excitement and exam-terror as any other student. I was pleased to go to university because I wanted to be where my friends went, and that’s where they were going. I didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life and was merely filled with many
ill-defined hopes. I flirted with the idea of being a poet after my sister introduced me to the poet, Val Vallis. I thought I could finance that occupation by being a journalist until it was pointed out to me that I would have difficulty doing interviews, press conferences and the like. The idea of being a lawyer then seemed the right thing to take on but when I went to court one day to get a better feel for it, that idea went right out the window. I could not hear a single thing being said in the courtroom; didn’t even know when people were speaking and fell into a swivel of head-turning in search of voices like a crazed homing pigeon. I would have liked to have studied to be a teacher but that option had been ruled out by the Department of Education: ‘No deaf people need apply’ was their motto back then. Finally, I settled into that no-man’s land of an Arts Degree before crystallising my intentions to be a social worker.

University life was a mostly benign experience for me. My preoccupations were ephemeral rather than gritty; I was not inclined to the radical student life and could usually be seen in one of the libraries tackling my assignments (‘Describe how the bucolic ideal was reflected in Chinese culture during the T’ang Dynasty’: I had to look up the meaning of ‘bucolic’), or sitting in the refectory with my friends. In all my years at university, I was only once confronted by the impact of my deafness in an incident that played itself out as farce.

In 1973, before the advent of anti-discrimination legislation, a university professor was so enraged to find me in her Japanese language school that she gave me a subject credit in Japanese 101 halfway through the year just to be rid of me. ‘Who do you think you are? Lowering the standard of my classes with your disgraceful diction! How dare you! You’re deaf!’ She pushed herself up from her chair, leaned across her desk towards me, and banged her knuckled fist on top of a pile of papers. I made a stammering attempt to protest but her face was a pale Kabuki mask of fury with white-rimmed lips. She scared me, and to be honest, part of me understood her point of view. I could not speak the Japanese language, and I was never going to be able to speak it properly despite hours each week in the language laboratory because I could not hear certain combinations of sounds specific to the Japanese language, such as ‘ts’ as in ‘tsunami.’ (How do deaf Japanese people do it?) I had enrolled in first year Japanese language because I was fascinated by the scrolling beauty of the Japanese script, the hiragana, katakana, and the kanji. I thought I would steer my way through at least one year by concentrating on the written elements of the language, and learn a little about Japanese culture and history along the way. My efforts to defend myself infuriated the professor. She sucked in her breath and heaved out her compromise in slow, drawn out syllables designed to demonstrate her magnanimity: ‘If you attend all the lectures and the exams, (long pause), just turn up for them (longer pause), I will arrange for you to be granted a credit pass. (Long down-right).”
She collapsed back into her chair, exhausted. My heart pounded. I did not know what to think or what to feel. My friends showed me the way: ‘You lucky thing,’ they said.

Even though I was always pleased to hear news of my deaf school friends on the grapevine, I did not seek them out in my early years at university. Without giving it too much thought at the time, I played out my life as a deaf person immersed in a hearing world. So much so that I bristled whenever anyone attempted to introduce me to another deaf person on the spurious grounds that we would ‘have so much in common.’ All my friends at university were hearing; none of us commented on my deafness (and I didn’t comment on their hearingness). There was another girl in my first year history tutorials who wore a hearing aid. I didn’t regard her as being deaf though; I just saw her as having a hearing loss that needed to be remedied with a hearing aid. I have no idea why I came to this conclusion. Perhaps it was because I had never met her before, she was not one of my deaf school friends. I rarely spoke with her, and she rarely spoke with me. Her speech was clipped and her gaze was cool. A tacit understanding lay between us; we were wary to the point of mutually civil hostility, and buried any curiosity we may have had about each other.

A couple of years later, during my third year at university, a friend invited me to move into her Highgate Hill apartment which she shared with another girl, Bridget. Now, here’s the rub: Bridget was losing her hearing at a rapid rate of knots but I didn’t think she was really deaf either! Some prejudice lay deep within me; apparently, only that particular group of people with whom I had shared my childhood days at the deaf school were really deaf. Bridget and I enjoyed each other’s friendship, but back then, I did not understand her response to her hearing loss which was apparently to embrace the whole world of deafness including signing and deaf theatre. In fact, I was shocked by it. I was shocked that she would turn her back on something that I had worked so hard for—the ability to communicate orally. Because we liked each other, we made tentative attempts to make sense of each other but let our efforts fade away into a glide of mutual, if uncomprehending, acceptance. (When I talked with Bridget about these times several years later, she gave me her own hindsight perspective. ‘I didn’t really embrace my deafness. I wouldn’t use that word. It was more that I was very grateful for the help I was given by the deaf community. They gave me hope. I also got the impression that you felt threatened by my interest in the deaf world.’ On reflection, Bridget’s intuition was right; I was uneasy about her interest in the deaf world; I did not want her to draw me into its culture).

Bridget’s hearing loss became profound over the years and it politicised her, but I felt that her political response was based on a caricature of how a hearing person perceives the world of deafness, that is, as a community of signing deaf. Because my starting point was deafness, my life’s task went in entirely the opposite direction: I embraced the hearing world, which was similarly
based on a caricature of sorts, that is, my public hearing persona excluded the possibility of new deaf friendships and strained my loyalty to my old deaf friends. I did not explore the possibility of straddling both worlds despite the occasional invitation to do so. When one of my childhood deaf friends visited me at my parents’ home, out of the blue, and invited me to join him in the deaf theatre, I could not muster the emotional flexibility that I felt this required. I did not have the confidence to embark on the swings and round-about of moving between the deaf community and my hearing family and friends. Instead, I let myself be content to hear news of my childhood deaf friends through the grapevine but this was, inevitably, a patchy process that lent itself to distortion. Single snippets of information about this person or that person ballooned into portrait-size depictions of their lives as I sketched the remaining blanks of their history with my imagination as my only tool.

As the years rolled on, Bridget’s life diverged so much from mine that we lost common ground. She went on to study at Gallaudet University in the United States and established herself back in Australia as a lecturer in deaf studies; I worked exclusively within the hearing world of government and public policy. It is tempting to conclude that we reversed our places: she, born hearing and then deafened as a young adult, found her place in the deaf community; while I, born deaf and then ‘hearingly’ shaped by my education and upbringing, found my place in the hearing community. However, this does us both a disservice, painting our lives too narrowly within deaf-hearing filters.

6.
Six hours after I hit the ‘send’ button of my e-mail to ‘Sandi,’ her reply popped up on my laptop screen. ‘Your “anticipatory” fingers can uncross now. Yes, I remember you very well . . . who can forget you!’ I smiled and read on, leaning in close as if to soak up each word in my heart’s memory.

‘Yes, I am the same Sandra with the red hair who was a year older than you, and yes, Mr Belligoi was my teacher at Gladstone Road Oral Deaf School, also Mrs Mason and Mr Thomas . . . Do you remember the ballet classes we used to do in the downstairs room?’ and on she wrote for two pages, her every line charged with affection for the young deaf girls we once were. Her descriptions had the power of sepia-photographs. I recalled everything she wrote about as if she was turning the pages of an old album—‘the matron in her crisply starched white muslin headscarf, her neatly pressed white uniform, with the small red cape around her shoulders, her stockings and polished shoes. She would smile while ushering us children towards the nurse for that big needle.’ Like me, Sandra’s parents had encouraged her ‘to the highest possible attainment in education.’ She had gone on to a mainstream school, done well, and believed she had ‘received the “best of both’
worlds” in the deaf and hearing education environments.’ Also like me, she had adopted a stance of self-sufficiency throughout her school years, and while ‘there was a lot of hard slog behind the scenes,’ she had ‘just merely worked hard in tackling problems as they surfaced.’

Sandra’s excitement in releasing her memories onto the page had a bouncing quality, as if she could not contain herself. It felt like a family reunion. We traded more than words with each other; more even than our memories. The two of us had been part of something special. We had both emerged from a particular time in history when our lives might so easily have been pulled more in one direction than the other.

5.
A few weeks later, I met up for coffee again with Jennifer, my childhood friend from the deaf school and erstwhile Auslan teacher, who had once said to me, ‘When we were children, we were all like brothers and sisters. In some ways, we had more in common with each other, understood each other better than our family members.’ Jennifer had travelled a distance to come to my home but I was tired from an unusually long bout of the ‘flu and was not the lively company that I wanted to be for her. Our conversation faltered. Jennifer must have seen something flicker across my face; she was a perceptive woman. She asked me if I was in a romantic relationship or in love. I said ‘No,’ and promptly mentioned Damian, gave a few details. Straight away, she said, ‘Oh, he has a lot of bags. He has much sorting out to do.’ I was worn down, not by her words but by the truth of them. After Jennifer went home, I lay down on my bed. I thought that I would not leave my room again; I was extremely tired.

My tiredness was worryingly persistent. During this time of illness and restless nights in which my sleep was disrupted by night-sweats, I went to several doctors. They mostly nodded a lot and wrote out prescriptions for antibiotics. The medication didn’t help. I tore up the prescriptions and threw out the medication, opting to do longer morning walks instead in an effort to build up my energy. I struggled with my work—in itself an unusual event—and wondered if I was depressed. An old school friend who was a doctor offered to monitor me for a few months: I accepted. Other angels of friendships flew into my life. They picked me up and carried me through weeks of comfort and joy filled with breakfast, lunch and dinner invitations to their homes; with telephone conversations, visits and e-mail hellos; with movies, restaurants and art shows; with laughing, and story-telling, and love.
Chapter Eleven: Working Nine to Five

1. Most people feel equivocal about their work. It’s either good days peppered with bad days or, if you’re unlucky, bad days that only occasionally give way to the good day here and there. I was one of the lucky ones. Despite all the tension of freelancing, about where my next project would come from and the clenched-teeth race to meet my deadlines, I enjoyed my work and I liked my clients. I did not take either the work or the clients for granted, and so, when I kept falling ill with one thing after another in the long winter and into the spring, I did not see this as a chance to slow down, to take a break. Instead, I fretted about not working to my usual twenty-four-seven intensity.

   My capacity for work had always been a defining characteristic; it was ingrained in my DNA. At times of stress, work was my refuge. I didn’t always like this. I often resented it. I shouted at my mother once. ‘Stop asking me about my work! I’m not a machine! Ask me about my friends! Ask me about my life!’ When the shouting was done, I asked myself these questions instead and, in doing so, I thought of another question: how had my deafness shaped my professional life?

2. I was twenty one years old when I started working in my first ‘real’ job, as a recruitment clerk in the Australian Public Service Board. Now, there’s a word that’s not heard or seen much these days, ‘clerk.’ It has been replaced by grander titles such as ‘administrative assistant’ or even ‘executive officer.’ After four years of part-time work, while I was studying at university, as a waitress and house-maid, neither of which I was good at despite my earnestness—I was chronically nervous in the first, would I understand what was being asked of me, said to me? and I was sloppy in the second, not mastering the art of tucking in those sheets hospital-bed-corner-style—I was relieved to get a proper job, in an office, doing things. So, here I was, a Clerk Grade 2/3 and my aspirations lay in being promoted to Clerk Grade 4. I didn’t look beyond that. I had no great ambitions other than to be useful; I was also enrolled at university as a part-time social work student.

   As it happened, I was shunted into a different professional stream and promoted instead to Assistant Research Officer and despatched to the Defence Department in Canberra where I was supposed to put my graduate knowledge of history together with my skills of research and analysis to use. This move came through the encouragement of good bosses. David was the manager of the recruitment services unit and George was my immediate supervisor; he had recruited me. Mr Gordon Rainbow was ‘The Boss’ and was always addressed by everyone as ‘Mr Rainbow’ or ‘The
Rainbow.’ One day, a colleague, Barbara, crooked her finger and signalled me to come over to her desk. I was in awe of her; she was older, perhaps even as old as thirty, with short black hair cut into a bob, and she was loud and confident. She looked like a career woman. I thought this was terrific. She also sat next to this fellow who I had a secret crush on despite his grumpy greetings to me each morning; Ian. Anyway, Barbara called me over and, leaning towards me, said in a conspiratorial tone, ‘The Boss wants to see you.’ No explanation. Nothing. Just ‘The Boss wants to see you. Now.’ I was still new, had only been in the position of Clerk Grade 2/3 for a few months, and sweated at the prospect of going into the Boss’s office. What had I done? Was I in trouble already?

Mr Rainbow pulled a sheet of paper lying on his desk towards him. He waved me to a chair and smiled genially. He really was ‘genial.’ It’s not a word that I would use of many people, but that word was made for Mr Rainbow; his very name, redolent of the shine of colours against a dark sky, suited him. He looked over his glasses and spoke in tones of utmost kindness. ‘I have a letter here from the mother of a young man you interviewed recently. I see from her letter that her son has hydro-encephalitis.’ He looked up at me. ‘You remember him?’ I nodded. How could I for forget? The young man, eighteen years old, had impressed me. We had all sat in that small room with the glazed glass window shielding us from the curious glances of passing office workers—mother, son, and me in the role of Clerk Grade 2/3 interviewing prospective applicants for positions as clerical assistants (the bottom of the public service ranks) in the Taxation Department—and I had been self-conscious about the need to keep the expression on my own face looking restrained, nonchalant even, when all I really wanted to do was to stare at the moon-sized wobbling head in front of me. The mother looked sad, anxious, eager, protective, and proud of her son all at once. He looked calm. Accepting. Ready to accept whatever came his way. I didn’t feel any sense of urgency or plea from him at all. I followed his cue, rather than his mother’s, and conducted the interview.

The mother had written a letter of immense gratitude. It seemed that despite my horror for the young man—all through the interview, I had had a second conversation going through my mind, a conversation of sympathy for him—I had managed to focus all my questions on quizzesing him about his abilities: What did he want to do with his life? What sort of work was he confident in doing? How did he see his career progressing? Apparently, I had asked him whether I thought his hydrocephaly would affect his work performance in any way, but had simply nodded in response to his answer (I cannot remember it) and moved on to the next question, and it was this that the mother was most grateful about. She had written that I was gentle and respectful to her son. Always courteous. I had even put them at their ease.

Mr Rainbow beamed at me. His geniality glowed. He said, ‘Good work. Keep it up.’ And that was it. Our conversation was over. He’d read the mother’s letter to me, smiled at me, and told
me to ‘keep it up.’ I left his office ten feet tall, my heart thudding through my chest cartoon-like, and my face fire-engine-red. I had never been praised for my work before. This was the first time I had ever been told that I had done a good job. And all because I’d been nice to a young man with a disability. That’s how the mother and Mr Rainbow apparently understood it. But I sensed something more. I knew that I had succeeded, not because of any innate qualities within me, but because I’d instinctively followed the young man’s lead; he had been gentle, respectful, and courteous. He had laid down the ground rules for how the interview was to be conducted and I had accepted his challenge. This all happened a very long time ago. The interview with the mother and son would have been done in thirty minutes, perhaps forty-five minutes. Mr Rainbow’s command performance with me would have lasted no more than ten minutes. The whole episode from go-to-whoa would have been less than an hour in duration. Sometimes, we think that our lives are small and insignificant. We wonder who cares about what we think or feel or say. We doubt our influence on each other. I have never forgotten either the young man with hydrocephaly in all his self-acceptance and Mr Rainbow’s praise for a job well done.

3.
At this time, I was invited to attend a meeting at the Cornwall Street Deaf School in Annerley. It was a committee meeting. The details are hazy now. It was a bright summer day; we sat in a ramshackle room, long table, wooden chairs, piles of papers around the perimeter of the room, papers on the table too. I looked out the window several times, wanted to be outside. It was hard to follow what was being said. There was a lot of mumbling, rustling of papers. The other people sitting around the table looked old; they were old. They all wore suits, the women as well as the men.

Actually, not all of them were old. A younger man was present; he was deaf too. He was a cheerful, smiley man. He and I were the only deaf people on this committee that apparently represented the interests of deaf people. We had been invited onto this committee because we were deaf. I knew this was the reason when I received and accepted the invitation, but now that I was in this room, I felt prickly. Nothing I said was cutting through. The old men in their suits turned to me when I spoke, nodded thoughtfully, and resumed their discussion as if I had not spoken. The old women smiled encouragingly at me, but they did not intervene for me. They did not call out to those old men, ‘Hey! This young woman has something of substance to listen to.’ I felt the oppression of being dumb. Not dumb as in stupid; dumb as in being unable to speak with conviction. The cheerful, smiley man spoke a couple of times. Nothing he said cut through either.
I went to one more committee meeting and pulled the pin. I did not go back. More than this, I did not advocate in public again about what it means to be deaf for thirty years. Instead, I made a vow of sorts, not quite a vow of silence, more a vow of mutiny. I did not see the old committee men’s behaviour as entirely sexist, although there was the inevitable flavour of ‘elderly men pitted against young woman’ tone to our interactions. Instead, I felt and saw and understood the experience very much as ‘hearing superiority’ versus ‘deaf naiveté.’ I simmered about this for awhile, not knowing how to ask advice from my friends. In the end, I opted for a militant sort of silence. I chose the path of doing as well as I could without talking about it, without drawing people’s attention to my deafness. Just as my thoughts of God had been inchoate, so were my thoughts about how to make my mark. All I knew was this: talking about what a deaf person can do was not going to be enough. I would show what a deaf person can do, and I would show it with as few words as possible.

4.
In the course of my professional life, I was sometimes asked whether my deafness affected my ability to do my work. I always said ‘No.’ The short answer was easier than the long answer which was, ‘It doesn’t affect my capacity to work but it may affect the sort of work that I can do. However, with the right technology and suitable adaptations, perhaps I can tackle all sorts of work and handle any situation that arises. It also affects the way I work; I make sure I am well organised and as ahead of the game as possible.’ (This degree of preparation had its obvious advantages in that it put me in a good professional light but it also bred an inflexibility into my work habits. I hated being surprised by an unexpected deadline or thrown a new task on short notice). Saying ‘no’ catapulted me into the jobs I wanted, but it also held me back from asking for help. I may have taken my mother’s philosophy of ‘don’t complain; act’ too much to heart, but having said ‘no,’ I felt that I could not reasonably turn around and say ‘well, actually . . . ’ I did not ask for, nor expect, any allowances to be made for me and when they were made, I was surprised and grateful.

Take the time when I arrived to my new job in England. On discovering I was deaf, my work colleagues reorganised all the office furniture—desks, computers, shelving, the whole shebang—so that I could see what they were all saying. They did this entirely on their own initiative and with English cheer. They were nonplussed that I had not asked for this consideration in the first place. ‘Oi! We can’t have you sitting there with your back to us. How will you know when we’re making fun of you?’ Nick demanded. And then there was the time when the Director-General of a government department observed my unusual silence in a board of management meeting. The long and narrow board room had been newly refurbished with recessed, low-voltage ceiling lights. She
looked around the table where my colleagues sat with their faces cast in shadow and drew her conclusions. Not one to shilly-shally, she pulled me aside after the meeting and said, ‘I’ll fix the lights. What else do you need?’

But fitting in had been a driving force in my professional life. I may have taken Robert Frost’s the road less travelled on other matters, but I was uncomfortable about rocking the boat when it came to asserting my rights as a deaf woman in the workplace. My frustrations would simmer and then erupt as a burst of Delphic commentary, catching others by surprise. When a senior executive with a recidivist history of whispering, despite knowing that I could not hear him, once gave an address to my team and closed with the usual question, ‘Any comments?’ I burned with resentment. ‘I haven’t heard a single word you said.’ He nodded, murmured unwaveringly sotto voce, ‘Ah yes, you have a hearing problem, don’t you?’ I snapped, ‘No, you have a speech and courtesy problem.’ As if pulled by a puppet-master’s string, the gaze of all eyes in the room slanted down to inspect the grain and polish of the conference table. I leant back in my chair and fumed.

Even as I write about these isolated incidents, I struggle to find the right way to describe the relationship between my deafness and my professional life. I am not convinced there is one. My curriculum vitae reveals a busy career, filled with work as a social worker, researcher, policy advisor and writer, taking me to places across Australia and England and back again. My staff must have made adjustments, either to accommodate my needs or to orient themselves to the unusual spectacle of reporting to a senior manager who was deaf. I know that some of my colleagues thought I was intense or aloof before realising that my deafness meant that I wasn’t ignoring them; I just hadn’t heard them; they had to get my attention before speaking with me. Sometimes, my workmates gathered anecdotes of mishaps to share at office Christmas parties; they were done in good humour, and actually, a few of the stories were funny . . . such as the time when I gave a presentation on disability to an audience of families and service providers in outback Queensland: a grazier sitting next to one of my colleagues said, ‘She speaks well for someone with a cleft palate, doesn’t she?’ When my colleague replied, ‘Actually, she’s deaf,’ the grazier grimaced. ‘Oh dear God, a cleft palate and deaf. The poor girl.’

One feature of my work life stands out for me. I had never worked with another deaf public servant—let alone another deaf senior manager or executive—until I met James Strachan in England. This is a story worth telling in its entirety.

On a bleak January morning of low grey sky and sleet, a colleague and I caught an early train from Rochester in Kent to Charing Cross in London to go to a conference about reforms taking place at national and local government levels in Britain. It was headlined by politicians and bureaucrats including David Blunkett, then the Secretary of State for the Home Office, and James
Strachan, then the Chairman of the Audit Commission. David Blunkett was recognisably blind as he was always accompanied by his guide dog. He was also a dull speaker, and so I was lulled into a slouch by watching his dog instead of attending to the drone of his voice directed to one side of the auditorium; his advisor had not positioned him squarely at the microphone. When James Strachan walked on to the stage, I hoped that he would be a livelier speaker but had no great expectations.

His voice startled me into sitting up straight. It had the slightly strangled speech-tones of a deaf person; he tended, like me, to ‘pop’ some of his sounds especially the ‘p’ and ‘m’ sounds, those sounds which require compressing your lips. His face was expressive; he reminded me of my old deaf school friends in the way he animated his words with a thrust of his hands and a tilt of his head. He used his whole body in a sway of communication. A stirring of compatriot recognition moved within me. James Strachan was deaf! The skin on my forearms goose-bumped and I had to fight the impulse to stand up and cheer, ‘Go James!’ In that penny-dropping way, I could not recall witnessing any other deaf person in a position of such public prominence. I felt proud of him, as if I could claim some of his success. I looked around at the audience to gauge their reactions, and realised that I was not only enjoying what he was saying in such an authoritative and commanding manner—‘For goodness sake, just get on with it!’ he cried out—but I was also enjoying his achievement in having attained such a high profile, influential position in public life. I imagined that I understood the extent of his success. As I sat there in that crowded auditorium, alongside some of the most talented civil servants in the United Kingdom, I understood too the power of role models. I felt stirred in a way that I had not experienced before; watching James perform with such leadership, despite his evident profound deafness, made me want to strive for a similar challenge. I had turned my back on the senior executive life in the Queensland public service to come to England and I wondered, that morning, about the wisdom of that decision. Or was I just caught up in the drama of James Strachan’s appearance on the stage?

During the morning tea break, I scrutinised him through the filter of my deaf-sensibilities. He spoke quickly and at length as if to fend off the threat of any more words going towards him, as if to deflect the possibility of having to struggle more than he cared for to understand what was being said. His expression was watchful, his eyes scanned the faces of his questioners, and he leant forward to attend to them all the more intently. His concentration was flattering: I could imagine people being willing to confide in him, trusting in his attentiveness.

I had not been looking for such a person but when James Strachan appeared that day, I felt a relief which I did not understand. I wanted to speak with him urgently, to learn more about him but I hesitated. I did not want to embarrass him or myself. I did not want him to think that I regarded him as being simply and elementally deaf. Equally and impossibly, I wanted him to recognise in me...
during that first moment of introduction as being a comrade-in-arms, a co-conspirator in the drama of deaf people taking up front-stage positions in the theatre of the hearing world. I braced myself with courage and walked towards him, smiling as I did so. James turned towards me, his eyes ready for conversation, as I extended my hand of greeting and looked up at his lips.

I stammered. James Strachan came to the rescue by exclaiming, ‘You’re an Australian!’ and spoke confidently about the Australian National Audit Office’s work. Eventually, I blurted out why I really wanted to speak with him: ‘I’m deaf too!’ He looked momentarily appalled. His unpreparedness for my claim took him off-guard and he flushed deeply. I could see that he felt belittled, as if I was only interested in him as an object of curiosity and not because of his evident achievements and wit. I saw this because this is how I feel when people comment to me on my deafness, as if I must be wearing a billboard hanging around my neck with the words ‘Look at me! I’m deaf!’ I rushed to fill the space that my gaffe had created, ‘I’m sorry to disturb you, but I really wanted to ask you if you would read an essay on deafness that I’ve written. I’d like to include you in it. Would that be okay? I would be very grateful.’ By now, I was sweating with the heat of my effrontery. James was agreeable to this and seemed bemused. ‘By all means, of course.’ I started to say something else—I wanted to acknowledge the awkwardness of being seen as a role model—but I shook my head to wave my words away and said, ‘No, I’ll leave it.’ He laughed out loud at this, ‘You are having trouble organising your words. I can see that!’ sparking in me a candle-flame of affection for him.

I finished my essay the very next day, reporting on my excitement on discovering James Strachan, and e-mailed it to him immediately. I hoped to hear from him soon; I promised myself not to harass him. ‘Give him time to digest it. Wait at least six weeks before following it up,’ but I didn’t have to hold myself to this promise because he texted me on my mobile just two weeks later, on Saint Valentine’s Day, while I was walking with friends in the Lakes District. He wrote of being moved by my essay, as was his partner, Tessa; it resonated for him; our experiences were so very similar; would I join him for lunch at Westminster soon? I was jubilant and wrote in my diary that night, ‘Is this a turning point?’ I pinned my hopes for something—but what?—on this chance meeting with James Strachan.

James also e-mailed me with a transcript of a BBC radio interview he had done the previous year. The typed transcript was headlined, ‘No Triumph, No Tragedy’ and opened with the interviewer’s words, ‘James Strachan’s career suggests a man in a hurry. Cambridge at 16, youngest Managing Director of Merrill Lynch, the investment bank, at 32, then gave that all up to pursue one of his great loves—photography, and became a photo journalist. Then another complete change to become only the second deaf chief executive of the RNID, the Royal National Institute for Deaf
People . . . But earlier this year he moved on again—still the RNID’s chairman, he’s also now chairman of the Audit Commission . . . Partially deaf as a child, he’s now profoundly deaf and in face-to-face interviews, like this one, he lip reads.’ I read on. He was right; we did have experiences in common. He chose to lip-read rather than sign ‘because that’s how I was brought up’; he attributed his success to ‘a combination of determination, luck and the people around us’; he had ‘a very determined mother who was very keen to make sure that this [deafness] impacted me as little as possible’; and ‘the deafness just made me very hardworking, some would now say a workaholic.’ While he was diplomatic in his responses to the interviewer’s questions about British Sign Language and whether deafness is a hearing loss problem or a culture with its own language and customs, he was adamant that ‘common sense needs to intervene’ in debates about the rights of deaf children, especially if they can benefit significantly from a hearing aid or other technology such as cochlear implants. I nodded as I read the transcript of his words, scribbling notes in the margins, ‘just like me’ and ‘yes.’ He hammered the interviewer’s challenge that he could be accused of trying to hide his deafness:

‘I don’t think it’s a question of hiding it as much as you can. I mean frankly my deafness impacts every millisecond of my life, except perhaps when I’m fast asleep at night blissfully unaware of what’s going on around me. And it has influenced my life obviously very, very significantly. So to suggest one’s hiding it is not the right word, it’s a question of everybody has a range of strengths and weaknesses and it’s a question of what you actually want to draw attention to.’

I caught the catch-22 that James lived with: the extent of his success evidently raised doubts in other people’s minds about him. Just exactly how deaf was he? Why doesn’t he act deaf?

5.

Early the following month, I met James at Shepherds, a restaurant near the Houses of Parliament. My pulse racing, I arrived a little early. He arrived a little late. My early arrival gave me time to take in the pencil portrait of Michael Caine, the actor, featured at the bottom of the parchment-like menu in homage to his status as a part-owner of the restaurant. James’ late arrival gave him cause to press both my hands in a smiling greeting. I flushed pinkly as I felt the candle-light of affection for him reignite.

James took charge of the conversation, quizzing me about my life but offering only small glimpses into his own life. I learnt that his partner, Tessa, was a government minister and that he was a keen tennis player. He marvelled, ‘You’re the second Australian woman I’ve met in as many weeks. You might have had?’ I laughed; ‘There are twenty million Australians and it’s a big
country.’ James’s questioning of my life was so dogged that it seemed as if he was interviewing me. He was boyishly enthusiastic, exclaiming several times, ‘Yes! That’s right! I know what you mean!’ Eventually, he looked at his watch; he had a three o’clock judicial review appointment and had to rush off. We chatted a while longer on the footpath outside the restaurant, apparently reluctant to take our leave of each other. Finally, with the fall of sprinkling raindrops, James pushed open his umbrella and we kissed each other thrice on the cheeks, French style.

At the office, the colleague who had accompanied me to that conference challenged me, ‘You haven’t fallen in love with him, have you?’ He took to teasing me at every opportunity, ‘How’s your new boyfriend?’ I affected an air of pained tolerance, but secretly, I did have a crush on James. The fact that James was deaf was deeply attractive to me; not only was he smart and funny, but he was deaf! He seemed to be deaf in the same way as I was deaf: he accepted his deafness without sentiment—neither romantic nor resentful—and took on the challenge of being fully immersed in the hearing world. Not only that, he was a high professional achiever just as I have strived to be professionally achieving (although I was, admittedly, not in his league). I had never dated a deaf man. I had had the occasional meal with a childhood deaf friend—Matthew, the one who showed off his strength to me as a four year old boy by picking up my chair and now visited me each year around Christmas time—but my affection for him remained filial. In contrast, my lunch with James set my imagination alight. Honestly, I was suffused with joy. I had talked happily and unguardedly with James in a way that was unusual for me. I had told my stories to him as performance, freeing my hands into gestures arcing through the air, and softening my face into the shapes of frowns, arched eyebrows, grimaces and smiles to illustrate what I was saying.

I was flattered, too, by James’ belief in my writing. ‘You must persevere and shape the essay into a book one day,’ he had said. He asked me to think about working with the Royal National Institute for the Deaf, and, in a later e-mail, commissioned me to write an article for their journal. I wrote about the sounds of England. I remembered how, at first, I was self-conscious about the paddock-wide sound of my Australian voice in contrast to the channelled English vowels of restraint. My voice seemed to clatter and skid all over the place. I had been so anxious about speaking that my jaw was sore with tension. I also had to tackle the regional variations in dialects which are much greater than in Australia; a variety of accents crossed my sound-field every day forcing me to constantly recalibrate the way I read speech. I encountered new sounds I could not hear: when a colleague invited me to walk through the woods of Canterbury one spring evening to listen to the nightingales sing, I was wry. ‘It’s a lovely invitation, but all I would hear is the quiet of the night.’
James’ advocacy as the Chair of the Royal National Institute for the Deaf provoked me into thinking less about my relationship with my own deafness and more about my contribution to the public understanding of other deaf people’s lives. And yet, for all my enthusiasm for James, and despite writing in my diary, ‘End the essay on a note of continuing discovery,’ I had baulked then at exploring my deafness further. I had shied away from the threshold that I had imagined separated my hearing-world persona from a consuming vortex of deaf identity.

6.

Back in Brisbane, I tracked down George, my first work supervisor from all those years ago. I wanted to find out why he had taken a chance on me to give me my first job and then arranged for a special telephone adaptor with a volume control so that I could conduct conversations on the office telephone. As we sat across from each other in a city coffee shop, I asked my question. I waited for him to launch into a spiel about affirmative action and fairness. He looked down into his cup of coffee, laughed in a nervous hiccuping way, and said, ‘It didn’t hurt that you were good looking.’

I was amused by this and enjoyed repeating George’s claim to my friends, but I was also stymied by it. It didn’t ring true. It had the hallmark of skirting around the issue, of being evasive. Was he afraid of treading where angels fear to go? It’s possible. After all, I had been angry, years earlier, to learn that I had been recruited as a social worker at a centre for children with a disability, not because of my qualifications and expertise, but because of my deafness. Even though the children were not deaf—they had cerebral palsy—my deafness apparently conferred me with the wisdom to establish a special rapport with them and with their parents. My manager at that centre was sprightly and unapologetic about her reason for recruiting me. I had felt diminished.

George’s claim, good-humoured though it was, resurrected that memory of diminishment. It also reminded me of my resolve in the early days of my professional life. It didn’t matter, in the end, why people employed me; what mattered was that I proved my worth.
Chapter Twelve: Radio Days

1.
I was invited onto a national radio show, Richard Fidler’s Conversation Hour, to talk about my experiences as a deaf woman. It is customary to confess to nerves when confronted with the prospect of speaking in public, but any sign of nerves that I may have had—the dry palate, the beads of perspiration caught in the groove of my top lip, the jigging left foot—gave way to a greater emotion about thirty seconds into the interview: zeal. The interviewer was friendly and well prepared; a script rested on his lap. I leant forward to catch his questions and cradled them with care to make sure that I gave them my very best attention and my most honest answers. While I was used to fending the occasional question here and there about my deafness, I was a novice in fielding such a cascade of them in public, over a thirty minute period. I met the patter of questions with mounting energy and accelerating emotion, bearing witness to the strength of my attachment to my deafness.

Listeners would have heard my voice quaver as I spoke of my mother’s observations that I was a watchful child, that deafness was once a taboo subject, that I had to be taught there was such a thing as sound before I could be taught how to interpret it and to find meaning in sound, that I went to great lengths to recreate silence because I found it peaceful, that I believed that the purpose of communication lies in our ability to forge relationships, and that whether we speak with our voices or with the grammar of our hands accented by the expressions on our faces and the sway of our bodies, this is the most important thing, to relate, and that I regarded my own deafness as just a part of life, no more, no less. I was vehement in response to a question about the advantages of hearing, and let fall a tumble of words. ‘Of course it's good to hear. It's a simple fact of life that most of the world is hearing ... It's also a simple unadorned fact of life that we need to engage with each other as people, friends, lovers... Given that the dominant communication is speech, of course it's good to be able to hear and participate in that. However, if you are so deaf that you cannot communicate by speech, then you learn other ways of communication... For me the question is not, is it good to hear or not to hear? The question revolves around, what does it take to help us communicate with each other?’

I left the recording studio that warm August afternoon pumped with the adrenaline rush that comes with the relief of confession. I had told my story of deafness, put it out there in public in contest with that odd mixture of sad-sack and triumphalist stories of deafness, and felt pink-skinned with exposure.

The interview was played on air the next day and was to be repeated the following year in conjunction with a planned interview with Graeme Clark, the inventor of the cochlear implant. I
was not sure what I had started or where I was going with this public foray. I was also unsure of my motivation for agreeing to this interview.

It was not the first time I had been interviewed about my deafness. When I was eleven years old, I took part in a television documentary. I was attending All Hallows by then, but the interview took place in one of the classrooms at the Oral Deaf Preschool at Yeronga; large lamps were set up in the room, shining a hot glare in my direction and throwing the corners of the room into darkness. I had recently had a tooth extracted from the back of my mouth and showed off the gap to the interviewer—and to the viewing audience—by opening my mouth like a wide-mouthed frog. Several years later at my father’s urging, I submitted myself to more newspaper interviews and photographs when I graduated from university with my first degree. I was mildly embarrassed by this and let myself be teased by my friends for ‘taking up modelling.’ I bought into my father’s belief that the newspaper articles about my graduation might be helpful for parents of deaf children but I felt uncomfortable about the way my deafness was pulled out of a hat from time to time to make a specific point but was then pushed down into the background for the rest of the time to make a different point.

Now, I worried about being a role model; that was never my intention. Uppermost was my desire to head off at the pass the distress of those young parents trying to come to terms with their children’s deafness. I still believed their distress to be disproportionate to the reality of what was possible for their children. I also hoped to flush out other deaf people and other deaf stories. But after listening to the recording of my interview on the radio the next day in the comfort of my home, I felt drained and weepy. I received several congratulatory e-mails from friends and acquaintances, including old school friends whom I had not seen since our final exams. An e-mail also arrived from the sister of a deaf veterinary scientist, George, who had attended the deaf school a few years ahead of me; I remembered his name—my mother had spoken of his brilliance—and my skin tingled as I read the pride in her words about her brother’s achievements, including his role as a consultant to the World Health Organisation. Filled with that nervous anticipatory excitement of a first date, I wrote back to her which in turn sparked a series of reminiscing, funny e-mails with George for several weeks. My own sister sent me a text message giving me the thumbs up; she thought the interview was very good. Still, I felt hollow-hearted. I wondered why. I was teary on hearing myself recount my distress on realising that I had been the source of pain and panic for my parents simply because I was deaf, a characteristic over which I had no control. I thought that I could compare deafness with autism which I considered to be a devastating disability. At least parents can relate to their deaf child, I thought. Much later on, I learnt from my mother that this, in fact, was her fear: that she would not be able to communicate with me, her youngest daughter.
that I would not be able to talk with her. She told of seeing deaf people in the shopping centre, signing and ‘drawing attention to themselves.’ She revelled in the fact that I could talk to her, that she could talk to me.

After listening to the radio interview, I rang my mother but she didn’t answer the phone. When I tried again a couple of hours later, she wore her matter-of-fact tone of voice.

‘I’ve just been down the road to visit Enid,’ she said. ‘It was a very nice interview. I told Enid about it.’

‘But how did I sound? Did I sound alright? What was my voice like?’

‘I thought you spoke very well. Your voice was very clear.’ She paused. At my end of the telephone line, several suburbs away, I could sense my mother choosing her next words. ‘Everything you said was clear and appropriate.’

I didn’t press her for more. It was enough, for the time being, that I had sounded clear and appropriate.

2.

I pushed on. By now, my befuddled curiosity about my relationship with my deafness had swelled to a desire to leave the enclosed space of the hearing world and to find my way into the deaf community. I wanted to test my deaf credentials as it were. My Melbourne friend, Michael, told me about an upcoming national conference for the deaf; he emboldened me to submit a paper for presentation at the conference. Sandi e-mailed; she was heading off to this conference as well; we promised to meet up there and I felt as though I was preparing for another first date. I had picked up a new work project with the Education Department following my protracted illness of several weeks earlier but my mind moved restlessly away from work, away even from my family, friends and routines. Preoccupied by what I would say at the conference and how I would fit into the deaf community, I moved through my days in a fugue-like state.

I was surprised by the size of the conference. Several hundred people milled around in the foyer and spilled into the convention rooms. Their pitching voices, gesturing hands, lively faces and tilting, swaying bodies appeared before me like the curtain rise of a theatrical event. It was exciting. I was excited. I turned to a woman standing next to me, tapped her gently on the arm to catch her eyes. ‘Excuse me, do you know where the films are being shown?’ And in that splinter of time waiting for her reply, I saw that I was looking at Sandra. I had not seen her since I was a child of six years old and only God knows how, perhaps it was her red hair, but I just knew it was her. I bent down to peer at her name card for confirmation but her eyes widened in the same second of recognition and her mouth opened in a laugh of joy: ‘Donna! You are so beautiful! Oh! We bumped
as if we would never let each other go again. We didn’t yet know much about the surface details of each other’s lives but our intuition of an underground life, of subterranean emotions that have to be mined deeply before being exposed and shared, bound us in that moment. Over the two days of the conference, Sandra and I listened to each other; in our listening, we heard the other’s courage, and understood at last that courage shone within both of us.

I found Michael too. We signalled our way to each other with the help of our mobile telephones, smiling as we bumped together upon our arrival at the same spot. Several people jostled for Michael’s attention, thumped him on an arm or cried out in greetings of delight; he was evidently something of an identity in this world. And through Michael, I reunited with Bridget, my former flat mate from university days, who carried herself now with a still poise, as if she was listening out for a long ago musical note that hung in the air there, just beyond her reach, like the last falling autumn leaf. Billed as the keynote speaker, Bridget was highly respected and she held both the attention and the affection of her audience; they nodded often and waved-clapped at regular intervals during her presentation. Her topic was the place of deaf people in colonial Australia and their access (or lack of it) to justice, education and employment. I liked her detective approach to understanding deaf lives by sifting through the sands of mainstream history. I also felt prickles of envy, admiration, and regret; Bridget had given so much of herself to improving the understanding of deaf people’s lives. I judged myself: shouldn’t I have done this myself, so much earlier? I brooded as her PowerPoint slides flickered across the screen. I was learning that courage lay within me but I saw my cowardice too. I felt that I should have tried harder to bridge my two worlds; I should not have relied so heavily on Matthew, my annual visitor from my deaf childhood, to be the message-bearer from my deaf world. Could I now make up for lost time? And how?

My presentation received a mixed reception. It was on stories of deafness by hearing writers such as TC Boyle in his energetic novel Talk Talk—the title is a translation of ‘conversation’ from Sign into English; ‘Talk talk. That was what happened when the deaf got together . . . they talked a lot, talked all the time . . .’ — and Frances Itani’s depressing novel, Deafening. The latter novel is essentially a fictionalised account by a Canadian hearing writer into the world of deafness based on her memories of her deaf grandmother who lived through the Great War. Itani’s novel is set in the early 1900s when deafness was regarded as the most terrible affliction and when educational debates about signing versus oralism were intense and bitter, and so Itani portrays deafness as a burdensome thing, not only for the deaf person but also for families and society in general. This theme of deafness as a heavy weight set alight within me a long, slow burning fuse of sullen resentment which persisted throughout my reading of it. I did not want this to be the story of deafness that is told today. My suspicions about this book’s potential to cast a cloak of
misunderstanding across contemporary deaf lives were fuelled when one of my closest friends confided, ‘I understand what your life is like now.’ I was aghast: ‘You’ve got to be kidding!’ By happy contrast, *Talk Talk*, featuring credit-card identity theft and a car chase across North America in pursuit of the thief, was my first experience of reading a novel with a deaf heroine whose deafness is independent of the unfolding drama. Better still, Boyle does not make Dana do the symbolic work of loss, loneliness, alienation or oppression so often given to deaf characters in fiction. Boyle’s empathy for Dana was so compelling that I caught myself learning from Dana’s efforts to integrate her deaf-self into her hearing-world life.

That afternoon at the conference, I wanted to share my lessons from these novels with this audience and to unburden my urgency for deaf people to tell our own stories—written, spoken or signed—of our deaf lives. I wanted to mangle the notion that our lives swung or fell on the pivot of our deafness; I wanted to lay out our deafness within the texture of our dreams and our hopes and our achievements, and our failings too. But my words only struck home here and there; unlike Bridget and Michael, I was too much of an unknown to this audience. I looked at the people sitting before me, saw three or four interested faces—their eyes watched either me or the Auslan interpreter standing next to me—but also saw that most of the people were distractible. Some flicked desultorily through their conference papers; others conducted signed conversations across the rows of chairs; still others had their eyes closed. The audience was straining for the conference to end. I was the second-last speaker on the program and, quailing before their boredom, I raced my words along, confused the interpreter and thus, in turn, confused the already restless audience.

It may have been because the conference was heavily slanted to the Auslan signing community, but oralism seemed to be accepted only with enforced gentility, a feigned tolerance. In fact, one of the conference speakers claimed that ‘Oral deaf people live in a suspended state . . . in denial of their deafness.’ My chest tightened. This was maddening. I rejected the judgements that swung on the axis of claim and counter claim in which oral deaf people are either regarded as ‘success stories’ by the hearing world or as ‘deniers’ by the Deaf community.

I came away from the conference disappointed. I could not put my finger on the source of my disappointment at the time. Certainly the lack of interest in my paper piqued my vanity, but my discontent ran deeper than that. It was as if I had run into a briar bush when I had been expecting, perhaps unrealistically, to be gathered into the folds of a welcoming community. When I thought about this conference again some time later, I saw that I had not yet learned how to say what I wanted to say or how to ask the questions I wanted to ask; I was overly sensitive about the risk of hurting people. I also recognised that as an outsider to this particular community, I had to do more to gain their attention and trust. Presenting just one conference paper was, of course, not going to
cut any ice. And finally, I realised something else: I was too conscious about the gifts of speech and language that I had been given, and I was not about to use those gifts as missiles directed towards either camp, deaf or hearing. Virtuous though this ambition might have been, I suspected that my efforts at diplomacy may have been viewed either with distrust or scepticism by the people I was trying to reach out to.
Chapter Thirteen: Fall for His Line

Damian rang. Caught me off-guard. We chatted. I tried to give off an air of heartiness. He backed out of the conversation with the promise to call me again soon, very soon, to make a time for us to get together for a cup of coffee. Being a literal-minded sort of a woman, I took him at his word. I waited for his call.
Chapter Fourteen: Will I Still Be Deaf When I Grow Up?

1.
‘Thank you for saying my name!’ I had sent Sharon, my best friend at the deaf school—the one with the shy smile and hair tied back into a pony-tail—a copy of my published essay, ‘I Hear With My Eyes.’ It included my reminiscences about our childhood friendship, a time when we were so close that people mistook us for twins. In my packet of photos from that time, I treasured one black and white photo in particular; worn around the edges from frequent handling, it showed Sharon and me at a school fete. We had the chubby-cheeked appearance of five year olds, looking pleased with ourselves as we tore wrapping paper from the parcels on our laps. In another photo, possibly snapped on the same day, Sharon and I were dressed as fairies wearing wings of voile stretched across wire frames, wands with flying ribbons and paper star-embossed crowns on our heads.

Sharon had already written a note of thanks to me, but now she reached out to hug me, her cheeks pinking and her eyelashes catching the first fall of tears from her bluer-than-blue, almond-shaped eyes. She had not even put her purse down yet. We were standing in my kitchen, admiring each other and talking across each other, falling over our words to conjure up old memories and new stories. She looked terrific. She wore a black and cream outfit with a matching rope of beads around her neck. Her hair was streaked with golden-blonde highlights, showing off her flawless skin, and her eyebrows were perfectly shaped, arched like a 1950s Hollywood star. ‘I cried and cried when I read your essay,’ she wept. ‘It brought everything back. I remembered everything as it was. What it was like back then. What we were like.’ Her tears prickled my own always-latent tears into life as I stood there smiling foolishly at her. I was transfixed by her choice of words. It seemed to me that Sharon’s excitement went beyond the frisson of seeing her name in print. It sounded like the deep relief of being recognised. It was as if I had breathed life into her story by writing her name not just once in that essay of mine but three times; and more than this, she had not regarded the saying of her name thrice over as a betrayal of her privacy but as an affirmation of her own place in history, even if it was just in the personal history of a long-ago friend.

We had first renewed our childhood friendship during my university years and her early working years; faded holiday snapshots showed us sitting in our bikinis on Balmoral Beach, and dressed in Victorian-period costumes, complete with bonnets, during a visit to the historic Rocks District of Sydney. We confided in each other about our romantic misadventures. Sharon ended a brief courtship with one of my work colleagues even though he shaved off his beard to show his commitment to her; and we had dated the same man a few times, a smooth-talking doctor with a
watched her exchange vows with a good man (not the doctor), the kind of man my mother calls ‘a
keeper.’ Our Christmas cards found their way to each other through all our changes of address
across all the years and marked out the differences in our lives—she with her two children, husband
and stability; me with my professional life, chasing dreams of romantic love. Our most recent
conversation had taken place at Lake Currimundi where I was holidaying with other friends. Sharon
lived nearby. We had walked along the beach that day, the sea wind whipping our hair across our
faces and lashing the sand on our legs, and chatted happily about this and that.

Time passed. All fourteen years of it. For no particular reason but for every reason in the
world, we had not seen each other since. She could not use the phone; I had not made the time
either to call her husband or to discover her e-mail address; she was busy with her children and
home-making, I buried myself in work and wondered how people ever found the time to work and
manage a family-life at the same time; she lived by the beach and I lived in the inner city, we were
only a short car-trip apart but . . . no more buts. It was never too late or too hard to reach across
time’s divides. I rang Tess, Sharon’s mother, who greeted me as if I was a regular caller, unfazed by
the gap of fourteen years that had fallen between us. Tess had advised me a long time ago, longer
than the newly lapsed years, to ‘Be careful not to fall too low in your spirits. It’s too hard to climb
back to the top again.’ It was good wisdom. I always heard it whenever I tottered on the edge of
melancholy. She gave me Sharon’s new address and telephone number. I rang Sharon’s husband.
We set up a lunch date at my home for the next month. It was as easy as that.

Now, we had much to catch up on and settled into a rhythm of news-giving over our lunch
as the afternoon lengthened into its mellow tones. Sharon talked with the usual mixture of a
mother’s joy and exasperation about her now adult children and I updated her on the news of my
eight nieces and nephews. This transformation of children into adults induced in us a marvel at the
passage of time. We took an inventory of our childhood classmates, sharing the little that we knew,
filling in the gaps where we could, and tried to avoid making up the rest. Some names conjured up
their personalities, whole, bright and vivid as ever: Matthew, Jennifer, Kay, Kenneth, Wayne,
Carmel. ‘Matthew’s carpentry business is going well,’ I said. ‘Carmel’s eldest daughter is married
to that A-grade footballer,’ Sharon said. ‘Which one?’ ‘I can’t remember his name!’ Other names
propelled the faces of children to the foreground of my mind’s eye but I could not imagine them as
they were now; it had been too long since my last sighting of them: Norman, Margaret, Narelle,
John, and the ‘other Donna,’ the one with curly hair. And some names had dropped out of our
memory banks altogether: I could not remember Danny; Sharon could not remember Sandra. I told
Sharon of my efforts to learn Auslan from Jennifer. She made a face. ‘Oh, that must be hard.’ She
would make a few signs, the more obvious and easy ones, the universal gestures that we all know.
we played them out to each other over our glasses of wine—‘I love you,’ eating, having a cup of tea, buttering a slice of bread. But like me, she lived her life entirely in the oral, hearing world.

We laughed at my story about my nephew who had wanted to be deaf as a little boy but Sharon bettered it with her own remembrance of childhood make-believe. She had had two little friends who lived in the house opposite her home. She said, ‘The three of us would play in the street together. I had my metal-box hearing aid tucked into a harness outside my dress.’ I could see in my mind’s eye how the pink cord would have looped from it to her ear. ‘And my two friends had their hearing aids,’ Sharon broke into giggles. ‘They had matchboxes sticky-taped to their dresses, and their mother had twisted cotton thread around the matchboxes so that it was tied up to a wad of cotton wool jammed into their ears!’ We both erupted into hee-hawing laughter at this, gulping our wine in hysteria. I loved the delicious harmony implicit in this image; I still smile each time I think about those three little girls playing in the street, all with their hearing aids, one real and two as real as their imaginations allowed them.

But one person’s harmony is another person’s crown of thorns. I mentioned that I had bumped into one of our childhood classmates, Kenneth, at a party several months earlier. I repeated his words to me, ‘You must write about us. Tell our stories . . . You know about the Stolen Generation? Well, we are the Forgotten Generation.’ Sharon looked thoughtful. ‘It’s a good thing to do, to write about us. People are interested. They want to know about deafness.’ She cautioned me. ‘Not everyone likes being deaf. I know some deaf people who ask “why me?”’ Sharon’s brother was deaf, and she thought that deaf boys’ experiences were different from deaf girls, that they were more likely to be bullied or hassled than girls. Her caution pulled me up short in a way that no hearing person’s questions could ever do. I had been so intent for so long—in fact, almost life-long—on defending my position as a person happy and content in her deafness that I had not only closed my heart to those people who find their deafness a source of pain and unhappiness, but I had also been relentless in my own denials. An almost life-long series of denials. All those small and big denials of embarrassment, hiding, retreating, coping, and laughing to cover up my hurts . . .

pushing all those incidents down, down, and further down within me, out of sight, out of mind, out of reach.

One such incident kept surfacing as a story to be told and retold, not by me but by those who were present at the time. It happened several years earlier, just before my fortieth birthday, when I went with my swimming-club friends one weekend to Mooloolaba to take part in an inter-club ocean swim. I am not a natural sportswoman: no eye-hand coordination for golf, tennis or squash; no endurance for running; too squeamish for any of the contact sports; and no sense of spatial strategy for games such as netball and basketball. I can walk and I can swim. That’s it. To swim.
1500 metres in the ocean felt like a victory. It was a victory. The prize was in doing it and I expected nothing more. A photograph taken of a group of us that day, wearing our swim-suits, shows me standing in the middle of the group, swim cap in hand, looking fit and happy.

That evening, everyone crowded into a holiday apartment overlooking the ocean to celebrate in a mess of wine, beer and clowning around, but my elation had subsided. I strained to look enthusiastic. My hearing aid had died on me. A droplet of water had found its way from my wet hair into the microphone circuitry of my behind-the-ear aid (a CSI-like image comes to mind here). I only wore one hearing aid at the time and so did not have a spare. An accident like this had not happened to me before. Ever. I had once fallen (or was I pushed?) into a swimming pool when I was a child, prompting an urgent visit to the Acoustics Laboratory for a replacement hearing aid so that our family holiday to Sydney could proceed the next day. Aside from that, in all the holidays in all the beaches across all the countries in the world that I had ever visited, I had never had any such accidents with a droplet of water. I was angry too because the hearing aid was new. My old metal box hearing aid, hugged close to my body, would not have reacted so wimpishly. (And I’ll bet, now, Evelyn Waugh’s antique ear trumpet would have withstood a hailstorm of rain down its funnel; he reportedly loved his trumpet, although surely it must have been an affectation on his part to be still relying on it in 1957 and later).

My swimming friends saw my tension; they were sympathetic. Jane reached for my hands, held them in her hands. Her smile was bright. ‘Stay! You’ll be fine!’ Wal and John called out, ‘You’ll be okay!’ Their exclamations were full of friendship. Persuaded, I stayed.

The unbelievable happened. A power black-out. A fierce storm with whipping winds, sheeting rain, and lightning strikes bringing down power lines hit the area. The apartment snapped into coal-black. Not even a moonlight’s glow threaded its way into the darkness. I felt movement, felt the pulse of wordless yells, and was nauseous with terror. Tight chest. Constricted throat. Asthmatically breathless. Wanted to run, run, and keep running from that place of blinding darkness and unreadable noise.

Cigarette lighters flickered; matches were struck and dropped, presumably in an exhalation of torched finger-tips. MaryJane found her way to me in the darkness and, putting her face directly in front of me, clasped my shoulders, ‘Are you alright?’ I shook my head. She wrapped an arm around my shoulders, either in sympathy or to brace me with much needed courage, or both. She repeated everyone’s earlier belief in me, ‘You’ll be right. We’ll look after you.’ She had more belief in me than I did. I could not bear it; could not bear to be in this room of noise without knowing what was going on. I wasn’t frightened of what might physically happen to me but I was fear-filled all the same. MaryJane’s kindness comforted me instead of soothing me. I did not understand why at
the time. I did not allow myself to think about it. All I knew was that I had to escape from my panic and the only way to do that was to escape from this apartment of blinding noise. I would have endured the roped-neck tension of driving down the Bruce Highway in the pounding rain, the windshield wipers flailing against the waterfall, to reach the shelter of my home, but my swimming friends—worried about my safety on the wet highway—held me back, released me the next morning: the sky was clear, the sun shone once more. I was limp with relief when I finally turned my car into the driveway of my home where I locked both the front and back doors against the world, slid down to the floor, and slumped into the comfort of my own silence.

While writing this anecdote which was only intended to demonstrate the extent of my panic when faced with the failure of my hearing aids, I glimpsed another reason for my terror. My reaction to the swiftness of the black-falling darkness butting up against a vacuum of incomprehensible sound had anthropological antecedents. It was simply the primeval flight response to the threat of the unknown. But something else happened to me in that storm: a mask had been torn down, the mask of self-assurance, of being competently deaf in a hearing world. I had not even known I was wearing such a mask until the drop of water in my hearing aid, the blackfall, and MaryJane’s kindness reflected back to me, mirror-like, the public face of my vulnerability.

Apparently, a question commonly asked by little deaf children born into hearing families is ‘When I grow up, will I still be deaf?’ They have so little experience of deaf adults in their lives that they wonder if deafness is something they will grow out of, stop being. I do not recall ever asking this question, but over the years, I must have learnt the answer in a different way: I must have learnt that it’s possible, perhaps even desirable, to relinquish your deaf self even while retaining your deafness. And so the task I took from my terror at the beach that night was to strive to be more competent and more vigilant against the threat of public displays of my deaf self-hearing persona clashes. I did not see it as the golden chance to relax my guard, to loosen the mask, or even to set it aside altogether. I did not give myself over to the possibility of a free-fall into trust. Trust in my friends. Trust in myself. Trust in the adaptability of my deaf self, coiled so tightly within.

3.
Sharon and I promised to stay in touch. She said, ‘We must not lose each other again for so long.’ I hugged her tight in agreement and stepped back to watch her settle into her car, drive down the road and off around the corner. Even when her car was out of sight, I stayed on the footpath, reluctant to break the thread between us.
I rang my mother to tell her about my lunch with Sharon. When I said, ‘Sharon’s voice is lovely,’ my mother’s response was quick. ‘You’ve got a lovely voice too. That’s because you both only mix with hearing people.’
PART THREE
Chapter Fifteen: Shattering

1.

My sleep grew frantic, billowing with dreams that tossed me back onto the morning shore, feeling ragged and bewildered. Confrontations with belligerent hearing people. Reunions with my childhood deaf friends. Journeys by buses and trains which never took me to where I was seeking to arrive, but left me lost with my burden of suitcases in English villages and scattered Australian suburbs.

One morning I woke with my heart racing, as if I had spent the evening running for my life. I swung my legs around to the side of my bed and pulled myself upright into wakefulness. The back of my neck was damp with perspiration. I waited for my agitation to subside but it was slow to fade. I went to the bathroom to splash cold water onto my face. The mirror showed me that the whites of my eyes were stained red. I had been crying in my sleep. I rested my forehead on the cold enamel of the bathroom sink and remembered: *The woman leant across the picnic hamper and reached for my hearing aid in my open-palmed hand. I jerked away from her, batting her hand away from mine. The glare of the summer sun blinded me. Her tendril-fingers seized the beige seashell curve of my hearing aid and she lifted the cargo of sound towards her eyes. She peered at the empty battery-cage before flicking it open and shut as if it was a cigarette lighter, as if she could spark hearing-life into this trick of plastic and metal that held no meaning outside of my ear. I stared at her. A band of horror tightened around my throat, strangling my shout, ‘Don’t do that!’ I clenched my fist around the new battery that I had been about to insert into my hearing aid and imagined it speeding like a bullet towards her heart.*

Hearing aids are personal, intimate even. I hate people asking me questions about them and only answer such questions out of the long-ingrained sense of duty drummed into me as a child by my mother. ‘Answer their questions. They are not being unkind. They are just interested, that’s all.’ But questions about my hearing aids by hearing people feel as intrusive as questions about my weight. I am fiercely protective of them and rarely entrust them into the care of others, not even my closest friends. I certainly don’t like other people touching my hearing aids. It is a shocking breach of intimacy, like exploring my ears, using the tips of their fingers to trace the outline of the vacuum where sound should echo. I don’t even like people looking at them for any longer than passing curiosity warrants. The crude handling by the woman in the dream was nightmarish.

All the same, the ferocity of my reaction shook me. It made me stop and wonder. The epiphany was swift to strike: this dream was the first time in my life that I could recall being deaf in...
consciousness of being either deaf or hearing. In my dreams, sounds reach me and I conduct conversations effortlessly.

Two nights later, my deaf-self asserted itself again. This time, I woke with a sense of marvel. My dream had taken me to a commemorative event at the Gladstone Road Oral Deaf School where I was surrounded by my deaf friends, some of us speaking and some of us signing, but all of us chatting and laughing. In the dream, my attention was diverted by the approaching arrival of a newcomer. I could not make out who it was at first—the dream-shape was fuzzy—but as he drew closer, I saw that it was Damian. I called out to him with the sort of joy that sets your heart dancing, ‘Hello! What are you doing here?’ He smiled at me, ‘I wanted to see what your early life was like,’ and, turning to greet my deaf friends, he signed his name, spelling it out letter by letter on his fingers with the nimbleness of a violinist. His enthusiasm was infectious and prompted my friends to cluster around him, keen to teach him new signs.

The dreams felt potent, as if my deaf-self was not only asserting itself but also awakening me to the subtlety of the dance between my deaf-self and my hearing persona. I read more into the dreams even though I knew it was unwise to be so specific: I could not help hoping that this was a message confirming Damian’s acceptance of me. Perhaps it was even a message of romantic love.

2.

My hopes were not entirely foolish: a few weeks before Christmas, Damian invited me to meet him for coffee at an inner-city bookshop-cafe. It had been some months since we had seen each other, and I was excited by his invitation.

Damian’s pleasure on the day was evident too; I looked up from flicking through the pages of a book in time to see his face light up when he saw me; it was as if a switch had been thrown. He sprinted through the bookshop’s aisles and, on reaching me, clasped my arms and beamed down at me. We found a table, ordered our coffees, and he chatted about his work and his children. Everything was going well for him, he said. I saw that he was happy to see me, to be with me. Our conversation ebbed and flowed in the usual way of such conversations between a man and a woman caught up in the brolga-dance of anxiety and uncertain love. We laughed; we spoke seriously; we swapped stories and gossip; we even dared to reveal some of our worries.

When Damian asked me how my ‘deaf project’ was coming along, I told him about two memoirs I had just read, both written by Frances Warfield, an American journalist. The first was *Cotton in My Ears*, published in 1948 and the second was *Keep Listening*, published in 1957. The memoirs bear the hallmarks of Frances Warfield’s journalistic skills as she converts the incidents of her life into anecdotes filled with the tension of the diagnosis of hearing loss, the dance of adapting to...
her hearing impairment, grief of disappointment, self-deprecatory humour as she stumbles from mishap to mayhem, and even a Hollywood-style happy ending in each memoir—a marriage proposal in the first one and the restoration of her hearing through surgery in the second one. My face grew hot as my words rushed ahead of my thoughts; in my haste to impress on Damian the significance of my discovery of this writer, I could not string my words together in the right order.

I wanted to tell him how reading Frances Warfield’s memoirs of her deaf life was like reading the letters of a much-loved aunt. Her plucky spirit shone from the pages. While I did not share her distaste for being deaf—she did not even like the word itself, preferring to say ‘hard of hearing’ or ‘hearing loss’—her voice reached down to me through the intervening years so clearly that I realised that I would have liked such a mentor in my own life. The force of this realisation had winded me. In quick succession, a wholly new realisation blossomed: I had lived my life as an oral-deaf woman in keeping with my mother’s hopes for me. She had no template for how to achieve her dreams and so hacked out her own pathway on my behalf. I had benefitted enormously from this, but similarly, I had no role model in the way of deaf elders and so I also had hacked out my own pathway, dodging this obstacle and that hurdle. Bumping into a wise deaf ‘elder’ from time to time on that pathway might have been nice. Helpful even. The intensity with which I said these words provoked Damian to burst out in surprise, ‘You’re emotional!’ I flinched, laughed off his surprise, and changed the subject to lighter ground.

We stretched our coffees first into an hour and then slid into a second hour with another coffee each before we drew ourselves back into our real-world responsibilities. We smiled at each other on parting our ways, not daring to say too much, and when Damian asked, ‘Do you mind if I call you again?’ I answered, ‘That would be lovely,’ and hoped that my heart had not revealed itself too shamelessly. I waited to hear from him but my hopes ebbed again. I held my counsel; did not confide in anyone at all, too bruised even to give voice to my disappointment. In any case, I did not feel entitled to be disappointed. ‘It was just a coffee-date,’ I reminded myself.

3.
January passed and my wall-calendar showed a picture of a Sunshine Coast beach in February. I kept myself busy with weekends away at the beach with friends and with work projects at the university during the weekdays, and then, during a birthday celebration dinner at a restaurant, I saw Damian. My cheeks felt like two hard little puddings as I shaped a smile at him across the tables separating us. He straightened his back and briefly closed his eyes as if to erase the image of me clear from his retinas; on opening his eyes, his returning smile held the warmth of a salesman. Yet,
and clutching a bundle of birthday gifts, Damian broke away from his dinner companions, strode over to me, and asked if I would like a lift home with him. It was no trouble, he said; he didn’t mind going out of his way. In a churning whirl of hope and helplessness, I let myself be driven home from my birthday dinner by Damian, me straining to keep up my end of the conversation and he chatting away brightly about this and that.

The darkness inside the car, the burr of the passing traffic, and the glitter of the night lights along the riverbank all conspired to create a mood of intimacy but that mood dropped into the chill of prison cell as soon as Damian pulled up outside my home. His bright chat snapped off with the abruptness of a pulled plug and, with his hands holding tightly onto the steering wheel, he looked straight ahead through the windscreen. His split-second change from sunniness to surliness bewildered me. I tried to break the tension by calling on all my convent-schooled manners and said, ‘Thank you for driving me home. It was lovely to see you again.’ Still looking ahead as if standing to attention on military parade, he was terse. ‘I can’t do this.’ I frowned at him, tongue-tied. The silence filled the car. I kept watching him. Damian dropped his hands onto his lap and turned sideways to the steering wheel so that he could face me squarely. He reached for my hands and, holding them in a prayer-like clasp, said in a voice thick with effort, ‘I’m sorry I can’t be the person you want me to be.’ We said more words; he to me, me to him, and sometimes one or the other of us to the night air as if to call on the support of a third, unseen person. I was torn between being cynical to cut him to the quick or throwing a hissy fit, but in the end, I was too hurt to argue any further, to bargain, or plead my case. There was no point, and nor was there any point in my hurting him in retaliation. Instead, I leant over the gear stick between us, kissed his cheek, and got out of his car, bundling up my purse and birthday presents in an awkward embrace.

When I reached the front door of my home, I turned back just in time to see Damian’s arm extended towards me through the passenger window in a wave but I could not see his face. I stepped across the threshold of my home and closed the door.

4.

I shivered and curled up my toes against the pain tearing through my chest. In the solitariness of my bedroom, I cajoled myself, ‘I can get through this.’ I repeated these words mantra-like, until they swayed into the rhythm of the rosary, all the syllables running together, their comfort arising from their rise and fall, that hypnotic lull of the chant. I fell asleep with the promise to myself that I would telephone a counsellor the next morning. It was time, once and for all, to stop yearning for the prospects of romantic love and to start learning how to live a loving life as a single woman.
Chapter Sixteen: All Grown Up Now

1.
Getting over Damian took some time. As usual, work was a good antidote. Over the next few months, I kept myself busy with a teaching gig at a university and took on a writing project for a major commercial management company. My friends helped me with other distractions too: I swam up and down the pool each weekend; went for late afternoon rambles along the Sandgate foreshore; hiked up Mt Glorious huffing and puffing and grabbing at my knees to catch my breath; and hosted Sunday lunches on the balcony of my apartment. I also buried myself in books by Lennard Davis, the hearing son of deaf parents, and Christopher Krentz, a deaf academic in the United States. I liked, now, to think of myself as a member of a diaspora of deaf writers. All these things were restorative in their power, drawing me away from my sadness.

2.
During this healing time, on Sunday 7 April 2008, four of my childhood deaf friends came to lunch at my home: Sharon, Jennifer, Kay, and her husband Kenneth. It rained heavily that day; drought-breaking rain of near-biblical proportions. The gutters overflowed and flooded some streets, causing delays in the traffic. Kay and Kenneth arrived on time despite the chaos, followed not long after by Jennifer, and finally Sharon (who had taken a wrong turning off the motorway) arrived in a fluster of apologies. ‘I’m wet!’ she laughed, shaking herself down. They were all cheerful about getting drenched in the race from their cars to my front door; the drama of rain, umbrellas, and damp hair was a happy distraction for us. I skittered about, foisting glasses of wine and fruit juice onto my guests, and saw that their faces reflected my keenness for everything to go well for this reunion lunch. We watched the rain for awhile, letting it guide our talk until we found the ease of our bearings with each other again.

Over our plates of salad, barbecue chicken and zucchini tart, our conversation dipped in and out of memories of our deaf school days. Rose-tinted glasses coloured our stories as we spoke with affection about our teachers and their quirks. Sharon remembered Mrs Mason’s crafts lessons; Kay said, ‘I’ve still got the plastic beaded coat hangers and place-mats from those classes!’ They recalled Mr Thomas with the force of smitten love that children reserve for their favourite teacher, but I had left the deaf school by then and did not know him. The memories darkened when Jennifer remarked on a teacher who took the infant classes. ‘She told my mother there was no point teaching me. I was four years old. I’d just had an operation on my heart. She said to my mother, “With her
silent; it was an impossible thing to countenance. Sharon, Kay and Jennifer had more stories to tell from those long-ago days than I did. Perhaps this was because they had stayed on at the deaf school for a year or so longer than I had, or maybe it was because they had seen each other regularly all through their adulthood and so were more practiced in reviving their recollections. Kenneth was content to listen, offering a comment here and a question there to push things along. We were like old soldiers of war in the way we told and retold our stories of the deaf school days, polishing and embellishing the details to get them just right.

Our reminiscences shifted gear: we talked about what being deaf meant to each of us. The others knew I was searching for a better understanding of how my deafness had shaped my life and were keen to be part of this search. Kay had even prepared for this conversation by bringing along copies of old school reports and pages of typed-up notes recording her own insights. Like Sharon, Kay was profoundly deaf (although she described herself as ‘hard of hearing’) and spoke rather than signed. She was a reflective woman who, on realising some twenty years after she left her mainstream school that she had not received the education which she deserved and was capable of, undertook an ambitious reading program to make up for lost time. She had foregone her childhood ambition to be a nurse: she was told that her deafness meant this was not a realistic option and instead, had chosen to do office work which she loved, along with marriage and children. Kenneth, a former electronics technician at a university, was partially deaf and spoke with a clipped accent.

‘Some people ask me if I’m Scottish,’ he said, raising his eyebrows at the absurdity of it.

‘I like noise!’ Sharon said. ‘I put my hearing aid on as soon as I wake up, and I don’t take it off again until I’m in bed.’ Jennifer and I caught each other’s eyes, shook our heads, and Jennifer said, ‘No. Quiet is better.’ Sharon was insistent. She told of having her hearing aid stolen when she was at the beach—she had taken it off and put it in a bag while she went for a surf—and how she erupted into tears of frustration when the audiologist said that it would take several days to provide a new one for her. ‘It was awful,’ she said. I remembered my own panic at the beach and knew her feeling of awfulness.

When Kay said she did not like the sound of her own voice, we looked at her in surprise.

‘What? Why do you say that?’ She grimaced. ‘People say my voice is too nasally.’ We could not dissuade her and she went on, ‘I sometimes feel when hearing people tell me that I speak well, it is either a way of them telling me that I must not be too deaf or it is a condescending way of patting me on the back for trying to squeeze my square voice into the proverbial round hole. Growing up, I always got mixed messages about my speech and speaking skills. My teachers and adults would always praise the way I spoke or make a big deal out of it but my peers always told me that I talked funny. They said they had trouble understanding me and that I talked through my nose. So why did...
The adults and teachers tell me different?’ It was a long speech; she did not usually talk at such length. She looked downcast and fiddled with her serviette. In an effort to cheer her up, Sharon said, ‘Oh well, I think my voice is too soft. I wish it was stronger and louder,’ but Kenneth objected, ‘You’ve got a sexy voice!’ Sharon blushed at this and giggled when Kay, Jennifer and I teased her, ‘Oh yes, you do!’

Jennifer spoke about her decision to use sign language when she was a student in a mainstream high school even though she could speak well. It was a brave thing to do; she had to overcome her mother’s opposition. A deaf person’s ability to speak well is not necessarily a meal ticket to easy conversation with a hearing person; it can even be a hindrance because the hearing person is likely to underestimate the degree of effort that is required by the deaf person to achieve such fluency. This type of misunderstanding will be familiar to anyone who has attended foreign language classes—say, French or Italian or Japanese—in preparation for an extended holiday overseas. You arrive at your holiday destination straining at the bit to say ‘Un café au lait, s’il vous plaît’ or ‘Buongiorno, quanto costa?’ or ‘Konnichiwa, arigato’ and then panic at the word-storm that follows when the French waiter, Italian shop assistant or Japanese receptionist greet your linguistic efforts with a flurry of chat in their native language. When they have drawn breath to await your reply, you swallow your disappointment, and you either pull out your language phrase book or, as is more likely, resort to your childhood gift of playing charades. The gestures of mimicry come back to you in full flight, and there you stay—in the land of gesture—until you come back home. And so it comes about that many deaf people either tire of the relentless effort to remain fluent in the world of oral languages or make the political decision to challenge head-on the daily onslaught of ignorance, incomprehension or lack of courtesies: face the person being spoken to; keep the room lights switched on high; stay cool, don’t be snappish or roll your eyes with impatience at the deaf person. Jennifer’s fluency first, in Signed English (that is, sign language which matches each spoken word of English) and later, in Auslan (a visual language with its own grammar), gave her more chances to do what she wanted to do, beyond what she might have achieved without that second language. All the same, despite Jennifer’s enthusiasm for signed communication, Sharon, Kay, Kenneth and I remained sheepish in our lack of skill for it. (I had only completed one semester of Auslan with Jennifer. I would have to do several more years of study to become proficient.) We begged off learning it now, crying out, ‘We’re too old! It’s too hard!’

(That evening after everyone had gone home, I sat on the edge of my bed to read Kay’s typed-up notes and found where she had summed up the dilemma that confronted all our parents—not just Jennifer’s mother—when we were children: ‘When we all left to go to various homes...
schools, our speech improved but we were unhappy in our educational surroundings. On the other hand, if we had stayed on at the deaf school for all the rest of our school days, it’s possible our oral communication would have suffered but we might have been happy in that particular environment in our deaf circle. It was a choice we were not old enough to make but I know my parents made the decision easily: no sign language for me.’ The crispness of her words stung, made my chest tight, she was right; but I was glad my parents chose speech for me.)

None of us were keen on the idea of cochlear implants for ourselves. We agreed that if we were given the option to have one, we would not take it up at this stage of our lives. We had no motivation, such as might stir us if we lost all sound entirely, to seek it out. Our consensus was not driven by hostility to new technology: I had read somewhere that even when the first ‘wearable’ hearing aids were introduced, there were protests that deaf people were being turned into robots. Nor were we stirred into outrage that our deaf identity might be under threat. After all, the cochlear implant was really just a fancy hearing aid worn inside the skull rather than outside; it didn’t take your deafness away; you still had to manage all the stuff that comes from relying on technology to boost your performance in the world of oral speech. It was more that we accepted what we had; for all the difficulties we had with keeping our conventional hearing aids tuned, dry, and out of the range of thieves, they would do. We gained enough benefit from our aids to get by. We were also squeamish about the surgical intervention that is required. ‘Besides,’ Sharon said, ‘If I had a cochlear implant, I would have to hear the noises at night when I turn the lights out and go to bed. That would be too spooky!’ We scoffed at her and Jennifer explained, ‘you can turn the cochlear implant off,’ but she was still doubtful. Kay and Jennifer knew deaf mothers who had chosen to have their deaf toddler-aged children implanted with cochlear hearing devices. We chewed the fat about how difficult this decision must have been, how the mothers must have worried about being judged by some of their deaf friends. They would have relied on their conviction that being able to hear early in life would increase their children’s probability of having clear speech and comprehension, buffering them against discrimination and expanding their life choices in all sorts of ways.

Our mood lightened when Sharon piped up, ‘Remember the dancing lessons?’ Yes! We grinned at each other as Kenneth held out his arms in the dancer’s position, one arm curved higher than the other, and mimed how we placed our little feet on Mr Pritchard’s shoes as he bore our weight in time to music, unheard by us. Those dancing lessons! The joy of them! Sandi had remembered them too.

I did not talk much during the lunch, partly because I was absorbed by my hostess duties but mainly because I wanted to concentrate on what the others had to say. Kay and Kenneth commented...
on my reserve while they helped me to clear the dishes off the table. Kay said, ‘Perhaps you are trying to remember everything we have said but maybe you will tell us more about yourself when we get together again.’ Kenneth echoed her, ‘Yes, we want you to tell us what you are thinking. It takes time, I know, to do this.’ He repeated his wish, the one he had made to me a few months earlier. ‘You must write your story because it’s our story too.’ I was moved by their concern. I had already come to understand, as I sat at the lunch table watching my childhood deaf friends chat, how they had always been an important part of my life even if we had not been present to each other for most of it. We were bound by our unique insider-knowledge: just as deaf people cannot understand what hearing people can hear, so hearing people cannot understand what deaf people experience. In particular, unlike the hearing members of our families, we knew the effort of moving back and forth across the hearing line, the invisible border that does double-duty in separating and joining our deaf and hearing selves.

3.
When I went to the reunion get-together organised by Jennifer before I travelled to England a few years earlier, I had been overwhelmed by her generosity in doing this for me; but that occasion had been held at a café and while I was the ‘guest of honour,’ I had felt more like a visitor parachuting in from another country. This time, my lunch, though small with just five of us, was initiated and hosted by me. Having welcomed my friends into my home, I was welcoming them back into my life. It felt like an act of repatriation. This sounds dramatic but I cannot help that. Later, I realised that our lunch was exactly a year after I began my ‘deaf project’ with an entry in my journal on Good Friday, 6 April 2007, ‘Today, I begin . . .’ It was just a coincidence, but I liked the serendipity of it.

All the same, my reunion lunch left me subdued for several days and I still recall it with a ‘pinging’ sensation, that pluck of the heart and the contraction of the stomach when you see the choices laid out clearly before you. It is one thing to have lunch with your friends reminiscing about the good old days. It is quite another thing altogether when you are given glimpses into their hardships and know that you have the ability to act, not necessarily on their behalf because they are more than capable of doing so for themselves, but on behalf of those who cannot. I had discovered much during the course of my exploration into my deaf life, and I had repeatedly promised myself to ‘do something’ with what I had learnt, especially when I witnessed the leadership of people such as my former house-mate and now prominent deaf academic, Bridget, and my deaf activist pen-pal, Michael. Just as repeatedly, I had let my promise slip away in the tide of distractions. I resolved, once more, to ‘do something.’
3.

A year after that lunch on the balcony of my home with Sharon, Jennifer, Kay and Kenneth, I visited the Rochester National Institute of Technology for the Deaf, in up-state New York, for three days. The warmth of the hospitality was overwhelming. I met with academics, deaf and hearing; gave a presentation to an audience of academics and students, again deaf and hearing, on the topic of deaf identity based on my own search for a better understanding of the relationship between my deaf self and hearing persona; and walked around the campus where I watched the students and academics, rugged up against the ice-cold air and snow-deep paths, talking with each other in both American Sign Language and spoken American. Even the hearing wait-staff in the campus cafeterias signed, when required, to their deaf customers.

From the first moment, I was bedazzled. I fell into a swoon of wonderment, felt the buzz of ‘wow!’ Even though I could not use American Sign Language, I understood, at last, a long-ago comment by Bridget: ‘You don’t really know what acceptance is until you experience it.’ I understood, too, Oliver Sacks’ enthusiasm for Gallaudet University, the same enthusiasm which I had once derided as sentimental and excessive, while also admitting to a renegade pang of yearning. In Rochester, I felt completely at home in that university for deaf students, across the other side of the globe from my home in Australia.

When I was invited to return there to teach, I accepted with a glad heart. And then the next thing happened.

4.

In the final stages of writing this memoir of deafness, I was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma, a cancer of the blood. I was relieved to be told the news; it explained the persistent bouts of fatigue and petty illnesses, such as the minor head cold morphing into what I had jokingly named ‘the twelve week flu.’ I was daunted by the treatment plan that required six doses of chemotherapy over a period of four months. A stem cell transplant was also mentioned. I wondered how I was going to fit the treatment sessions in between everything else in my life. I proposed an idea—Black Adder-like, a cunning plan—to Doctor Frost, the haematologist. ‘How about we wait for a few months before I start the chemo?’ He looked over his spectacles at me. His response was mild. ‘I don’t think so. We’ll start you off next Thursday,’ and he handed over a green and white booklet, called ‘Understanding Lymphomas.’ I flipped through the booklet on the way out of his room and was critical of its design layout, colour scheme, type-font, and corny cartoons. The black text smudged its way across the pages, absent of any meaning.
I sat in my car in the car-park beneath the medical centre and wondered what my first step ought to be. I obviously had to tell someone, but who? Not my mother; she had enough to worry about. Not my sister; she had plenty to deal with too and besides, she was going away on a holiday to Carnarvon Gorge the next day. No point telling her. I went through my list of friends. Nope, couldn’t tell any of them, they were all busy with family and work as well. I was stumped. I sat in the car and drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. Couldn’t decide what to do. Still undecided, I turned the ignition on and drove out of the car-park—oops, in the wrong lane; nearly collided with that four-wheel drive—and headed towards home. My mother. My sister. My friends. My mind tumbled in a spin-cycle mode, and then snapped off at the ‘my mother’ switch; I pulled up at a kerb, called my sister but her mobile phone rang out, and so I drove to my mother’s home to tell her the news.

Saying the words to my mother that Doctor Frost had said to me and watching my mother’s face as she absorbed the news had a tugging effect. I blinked back my first tears and tightened my stomach against a sea-sick motion of fright. My mother hugged me. Her small face looked full. ‘We’ll take care of you. Everyone’s here for you. You won’t have to worry about anything at all.’ I nodded, said, ‘Thanks. That’ll be good.’ I drove home, rang the dentist to confirm an appointment and on being asked to wait, tears broke from me, and I shouted at Jade, the receptionist, told her she was incompetent and demanded to speak to her manager, and no, I wouldn’t hold on, she could bloody well go and get the manager right now because I was not going anywhere, no bloody way was I going to wait for a second longer, I had to have chemotherapy next week, so there, and so what was she going to do about that, hey? I wheezed and sniffled my way to a halt; let myself be consoled by Jade who was schooled in grace. I put the phone down. It rang. It was my sister. We chatted; I told her the news; she stalled momentarily before regrouping, knew it would all be fine, everything would go well, did I say Doctor Frost? She knew about him, he was great, she was going away, I knew that didn’t I? Well, I could e-mail her, her mobile phone would be out of range but I could e-mail her, I had her e-mail address, here it is again anyway just in case I didn’t. I said that Carnarvon Gorge would be cold; I would pop around with my merino wool wrap for her to take away with her. It’s a nice colour, I said, charcoal grey, you will feel cosy and glamorous. Only if you’ve got time, she said. I said I had time.

The rest of the day passed in the usual haze of post-diagnosis confusion, and I did what I always did when under stress; I worked. I finished a report about a disability seminar I had organised for my client, a peak organisation for vocational education and training, and finalised preparations for meetings the next week. With that out of the way, I looked around my home, wandering from room to room. A late afternoon glow washed the rooms in warmth. I stood before...
the Luke Wagner landscape paintings on the walls; touched the tips of the pink and white flowers in their vases; brushed against the glossy art and travel books stacked on the coffee table, and trailed my fingers along the other books pushed into shelves all around me. I sat down on the chesterfield; its pale green and rose-pink tapestry upholstery and brown wood panels inserted in each arm, just large enough to rest a glass of wine, conjured up a well-mannered era of five o’clock cocktails, gathered skirts, and cigarettes held up high, at a certain angle, in long-stemmed holders. My eyes fell on a bank of photos on the walnut-coloured sideboard. Sharon and I smiled in one shot; Rose and I laughed out of another frame. That gave me an idea. ‘I’ll give Rose a call. See what she’s got to say.’

I phoned Rose. Told her. Dismay. Words of comfort and courage. Difficult to say who was doing the comforting and ‘couraging, we both were. My other phone rang. It was Simon, my once upon a time would-be-deaf-if-he-could nephew, now a man of 27 years. Rose said she would call back. Simon and I spoke. I put the phone down. It rang again. It was my niece, Jessica. We spoke. I put the phone down again. Emma rang. We spoke. Rose rang back. We spoke, her mother sent her love. I put the phone down. It rang again. Jason, Simon’s brother, this time. We spoke. I put the phone down. Rose rang back, did I want to go over for dinner? No? That’s okay. Liz rang. Kris e-mailed. So did Jenny and Ian. Maria and Tony too. Bronnie called. And so it went, for the next day, and in the days and the nights and the new days following. Phone calls and e-mails from my friends, all carrying their words of love, all rostering themselves to drive me to the hospital, sit with me, pick me up, take me home, cook meals, and chivvying me to do what must be done.

Their practical care shaped my hopes. It might have been shock, it might have been naïveté, it might have been foolishness but on that first night of sleeplessness, I felt as if I had been washed in spring-waters with the astringency of peppermint. I saw what lay ahead for me. I would endure twelve difficult months—I wasn’t thrilled about this but I would tackle it as if it was another ocean swim race, try not to be pulled under by the riptides, swing one arm over the other until I could surf into the beach on the final breaking waves and run towards my waiting friends—but at the end of that time, I would be well. I would honour my private promise to my son Jack, the one in which I undertook to outlive both my parents, and I would return to the Rochester National Institute of Technology for the Deaf to teach in their spring semester, and then I would come back home where I would work for the best educational opportunities for deaf students in Australia, and I would write, laugh, and love my family and all my friends, deaf and hearing, all the while.
Chapter Seventeen: As Thread for that Weaver

I have been pursued since my girlhood with questions about my deafness, questions jolted into fresh life several years ago by a psychologist who half-stated, half-asked me with the sureness of somewhat who felt the advantage of being hearing, ‘Your deafness, it must have a big impact on your life?’

According to my mood at any given moment, I have variously resisted, objected to, evaded, and even answered some of those questions. As a child, I complained to my mother; as an adult, I bristled and prickled. Now, I have discovered my mother was right when she said, ‘Just answer their questions. They are interested, they just want to know.’ And so here I am today, still obeying my mother and still answering other people’s questions. In the end though, the questions about my deafness that I most needed to answer were my own. Until I embarked on my search to understand my deaf self, I did not give voice to the questions I wanted to ask. I held them close, not giving myself permission or granting myself the nerve to explore, test, and perhaps even drop long-standing habits of understanding myself.

It belatedly occurred to me that I had a confused relationship with my deafness. It was confusion or ambiguity that I could live with, but I saw how it might create a minefield for others to negotiate. It also struck me that I had come reluctantly to the task of getting a handle on the meanings of my deaf experiences, my deafness and my ‘being deaf.’ I had thought, for awhile, that this reluctance was because I felt in some way threatened by the task and I had wondered why this should be so. My fears had nothing to do with shame or the desire to disown my deaf status. They sprang from my experiences and observations: I saw, with slivers of anger lodged in my heart and curdled fright rumbling in my stomach, how many hearing people treat and talk about deaf people, and I nursed the fear that I might also be treated and talked about in such a way, with devastating consequences—including lessened career prospects, compromised friendships, and conditional love. In a tiny, dark, and faraway corner of my heart was also the fear that perhaps I was a lesser person in some way, because here I was, routinely inconveniencing so many people because I couldn’t hear properly and didn’t say every word properly. Admitting this fear to myself, let alone to anyone else, has been hard. I made several false starts in my exploration. I could not understand what was holding me back from finding, and then telling, my story of deafness.

It was only when I realised that my silence was acting as a brake on the quality of my life, and also as a brake on other people’s understanding of the variety of possibilities for deaf people’s lives that I finally acquiesced to the mission of remembering, describing, clarifying, defining, and
other questions that lay behind it. This acquiescence was no easeful slide into a soothing pool of water. Rather, it has been a ragged, tearing, and chiselling experience leavened, at first, with only occasional moments of joy, but as the race towards my mission’s end drew nearer, I noticed a growing sense of ease within myself and with my life. And now, as this is a memoir—my memoir—of deafness, I must persevere with the task of pulling together the threads of my new understanding.

In surmising how my day-to-day relationships might have been affected by my deafness—not just my friendships but my romantic relationships too—I recognized how, in my childhood, my deafness was contained within many borders. Some of these borders were obvious. For example, my entire extended family was hearing and so served as a stronghold against any encroachment by the deaf community. Their enthusiasm for every advance that I made in my deaf-hearing life had the power of a shamanic talisman, warding off the threat that being deaf might overtake my life. Many suburbs and a wide wending river lay between my childhood home and the school for deaf children and the homes of my deaf friends. Even the private girls’ school I attended after an incubation period of five years at the Deaf School was protected by that same river and high stone walls.

As I grew into adulthood, a less apparent border moved into place: an invisible membrane, like porous cling-wrap, grew between my public deaf-in-the-hearing-world persona and my private deaf self. This membrane is permanent and so is the duality of my public ‘hearing-deaf’ self and private deaf self. The dominance of either the public or private self depends on the circumstances in which I find myself. Sometimes, I feel deaf (such as when someone mocks my speech; this happens more often than you might imagine . . . and it still hurts) or openly declare myself to be deaf (such as when I ask for the lights to be turned on high in a room of people), while at other times, my deafness lies dormant within me while I get on with the routines of my daily life. This duality, when revealed, has the power to shock: a close hearing friend from my university days wrote to me on reading about one of my experiences:

‘When I reflected on what you had written, I felt an overwhelming disconnect because, I realized, you had clearly identified yourself as deaf, and I have never thought of you as deaf.

‘So I tried hard to focus my earliest memories of meeting you and knowing you, and the best memories that I could come up with did not define you by deafness. . . I met you for the first time at your parents’ home. We talked about what we were both going to do at university. I remember talking later that night to my mother and telling her how I had met you and how I hoped we’d meet up at university. Was it insensitive of me not to have recognized that you were deaf or was that how you presented yourself?'
‘Anyway, on reading the words about your terror in the blackout, I was jolted by the realization that in all the years we have known one another, in the many turns of our friendship, I may have missed the very essence of who you are. But I do not think that it has been a conscious thing. I have known you and been a friend on different terms; our friendship across the years has been prescribed by the changes of growing and of our life experiences. And I marvel that you have ‘grown up deaf’; I was moved by what you wrote. But I was also sad that you obviously worked so hard to put yourself into another skin—something more mainstream and acceptable. And that as a friend I did not question that you might want otherwise.

‘I suppose I will never think of you as deaf, because that is not how you wanted to introduce yourself all those years ago. First impressions. In any case, I connect more to the romanticism of you; your passions. That is what I have always seen and who I have always known. I guess you are deaf as well.’

My friend’s letter surprised me as much as my story of terror during the blackout had evidently surprised and jarred her. I was touched by her honesty but puzzled as well. I had never intended my deafness to be a secret or an unspeakable quality, and yet, here I was confronted with evidence that this was exactly how I presented myself, not just in formal situations such as the workplace, but even in the company of good, longstanding friends. I wondered if this oversight had arisen because of my life-long compliant attitude towards being ‘hearing-deaf.’ By this, I mean that I have conducted most of my adult life as if my first loyalty is to the hearing world—all of my family and most of my friends are hearing—and not to the deaf community. This remains true, up to a point.

For most of my life my deafness was, for me, a misty trait; a quality within me that I did not feel the urge to contemplate, understand, investigate, explore, or even to accept or reject. I bristled about other people’s attitudes, inquisitions, and comedic takes on my deafness (a comedy, by the way, in which I struggled to find the humour. Strange how being a ‘good sport’ requires little effort by the alleged humorist but a massive resilience by the target). My introspection about my life as a deaf woman was fitful. I was rarely animated by any sense of deaf politics or deaf identity. I scurried among my memories and then let them fade. By and large, I was happy enough to go along with the family line: I was a deaf girl made good. I didn’t want to upset the apple-cart by digging deep and, in any case, I didn’t attribute any significance to my reflections because I thought their private nature precluded them from having a public purpose. Nor did I know the extent to which my deafness affected the lives of others, in particular the lives of my family because, despite being deaf all my life, I knew little about it other than my own experience of it and I made little effort to...
understand myself—or others—in relation to my deafness. This is not necessarily a bad thing. After all, how many hearing people embark on an exploration of the meaning of their hearing (or indeed, any elements of their lives that might mark them out as ‘different’ or ‘other’) to the quality of their lives? My long-standing indifference towards articulating the meaning of my deafness could be read as a sort of default-acceptance of my deafness. It could be seen as proof that, by and large, I just got on with things, just as my parents had hoped that I would.

The one thing that I was always certain about was this: I was always content to declare myself as deaf. ‘Deaf.’ Whether it’s read on the page or said out loud, it’s a short word that carries an explosive power, but it was never a word that I shied away from. The strength of my feeling about this is undiminished even though I have lived my life predominantly as a ‘hearing-deaf’ person. But there is no getting away from the central issue: I am deaf. I buck against being labelled ‘hearing impaired’ which strikes me as a strangely prim expression, as words that need thin, bloodless lips to pronounce. I am deaf. It is as simple as that for me. At the same time, it is not so simple because my deafness is essential to my sense of I-am-who-I-am. It is not just an auditory quality. My deafness is more than the backdrop to my sense of self; it is the context in which I am located. However—and herein lies the twist that I cannot quite explain away—I do not like being regarded by others as a ‘deaf woman’ as if I hold no other qualities, but nor do I like it when people try to ‘take away’ my deafness with comments such as ‘You seem just like a hearing person.’ This grates. I want to be recognised in all my complexity, not as an organism of failed auditory nerves. My private, non-negotiable insistence on being understood by others in a layered, textured, multi-dimensional way has restrained me from publically staking out my identity as a ‘deaf woman.’

This is why I glided over the extent of my university friend’s epiphany as described in her letter, and merely thanked her for sharing it with me. I did not immediately grasp the possibility that while I remained the same, my friend’s epiphanic moment meant that her perception of me was now different and that this might, in turn, change—perhaps enrich—the texture of our friendship. In fact, I shrugged her revelation aside for awhile until I started writing this chapter, whereupon I showed the letter to another good friend, one who had seen me at my worst and at my best and in many times in between. When she said that this had been her experience of me as well, I reacted badly to this second confession. I snapped at her, ‘What? Do you expect me to be Deaf Studies 101? Am I supposed to download everything I know and feel about being deaf every time I meet someone?’ As I machine-gunned my furious words at her, I realised that this was the very same anger I had felt in response to the psychologist’s question several years earlier. In the heat of that memory, I rushed on, my words and heart ablaze. ‘Why must I explain myself over and over again? There’s always this assumption laid on people who are deaf or who have a disability that they are duty bound to
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explain themselves. As if we are Exhibit A. Or a museum piece! You don’t have to explain your hearingness to me or to anyone else for that matter. Why should I explain my deafness to you?’

My friend quailed at my heat, but fought back. ‘Look, I get that being deaf is not the sum total of who you are. I also get that you want to be seen as someone for whom being deaf is no great drama, and that you have had other, more momentous issues in your life to contend with. Jack’s death for one thing. Your cancer for another. And we’ve all been there for you during those times because we love you. We care about you. But I just cannot believe that the way people respond to your deafness has not been an important thing for you to deal with. I don’t understand why you let us talk about these other important times in your life, but you don’t give us any leeway to ask you about your deafness. You’ve had to show a lot of guts over the years. You should give yourself some credit. It’s not all been about your mother’s efforts. You’ve had to put in the hard yards too, and I can’t help feeling that it’s been a lonely experience for you sometimes.’

I felt shaken by my friend’s retaliatory words. They carried truths that I had not allowed myself to acknowledge. I bit my bottom lip to stop my emotions from rising to the surface. Tears were not going to help this conversation. I shifted my gaze away from my friend, towards the lush tropical panorama of her back yard. The green, primeval looking fronds of the palm trees jostled in the late afternoon breeze that was sweeping in from Moreton Bay. The silence was comfortable. Contemplative. Neither of us hurried to fill the gap. Finally, I said, ‘Well, actually, I’ve always missed my childhood deaf friends, even while knowing the positive spin-offs from leaving the deaf school to go to All Hallows. It’s sort of stayed with me as a gap. A missingness.’ My friend nodded and said, ‘You know, it’s quite alright to admit that. You have had a lot of advantages because of your mother’s advocacy for you, but there are trade-offs in every situation. There’s usually a downside in every positive scenario. The loss of your deaf friends in childhood was the downside to your getting that education your parents wanted for you.’ She repeated her conviction. ‘It’s okay to allow yourself to feel sad about things. You don’t have to be brave and stoic all the time!’ We laughed to steady ourselves, and talked some more.

I told this friend, and I set it down here now, that I cannot imagine a life without my childhood deaf friends. It feels impossible to me. I had asked myself, in one of my moments of deep despondency, ‘Where are my childhood deaf friends?’ I have discovered during the course of writing my memoir that they have always been present in my life, even if just by way of memories. It doesn’t matter that I rarely see them anymore. It is enough for me to know that they are there and that I can call on them whenever I need to. Or even when I just feel like it. Having once run around playgrounds, painted on sheets of butcher’s paper, and sat in classrooms with a clan of deaf children through my attendance for five years at the School for the Deaf, I will forever feel a kindred spirit...
with that clan. That kindred spirit locates me; gives me a sense of who I am. I don’t have to explain myself to them.

My conviction about this was reinforced when I met a young Australian writer who had recently moved to Brisbane where I live; a mutual friend had given her my contact details. This young writer is profoundly deaf in one ear and has some residual hearing in the other, but she did not attend a special school for deaf children. Instead, her educational options were swept up in the tides of mainstreaming, integration, choice, and so on with the lexicon of anything but ‘special.’ She is gifted and works hard, enjoys the support of her family, and has earned academic and literary successes. She explained that she was pleased to meet me as she had not known any deaf children when she was growing up and now did not know any other deaf people, let alone a deaf writer such as me. In our conversation, she repeatedly marvelled at how unusual it was for her to speak with another deaf person. She gave the impression of enjoying this opportunity and I was reminded that I too might have liked an older deaf mentor when I was young or just known a deaf adult somewhere on the fringes of my hearing-world life. Even now, as a woman in my fifties, I enjoy meeting older deaf women; conferences by deaf people are good occasions for this reason. I like to learn their stories, discover what their lives are like, use them as touchstones of sorts; they seem so brave.

Now, I realise that one blue swallow does not make a summer, and that it is risky to extrapolate from the isolated example of a young deaf woman navigating her way through the world ‘solo’ as it were, but I cannot help musing about the value of my having that childhood deaf history to fall back on. I also reflect, from time to time, on the conversation I had with Maryanne Kelly, one of my teachers at the Deaf School. I had asked her what she thought about oralism, the method—or rather, a group of methods—of education which emphasises spoken communication rather than signed language. She had smiled at me. ‘Well, you were the success story.’ And then she said it again, with a different emphasis, ‘Actually, you were the success story of oralism.’ Her frown hinted at some misgivings. ‘No doubt about that. Really, it just doesn’t suit so many deaf children. I don’t know what happens to them, now that there are no special schools for the deaf.’

I don’t know either. I am convinced that the intense teaching attention I received from my teachers at the deaf school gave me the necessary basics to do well at the private girls school (Miss Morrison notwithstanding). Having said this, I am nevertheless grateful that my parents took the plunge and transferred me from the deaf school to a private ‘mainstream’ school sooner rather than later. I am sceptical about what the quality of my tertiary education and subsequent professional career prospects would have been if I had stayed on at the government deaf school for the duration, given the generally low expectations held for deaf students by the government education bureaucrats at that time. I also suspect that I might have benefitted from specialist supplementary
support if I had been given it when I first went to university. (This presupposes that I would have swallowed my adolescent pride and accepted such support). Not so much because of the academic demands on me—everyone has to rally through these—but because for the first time in my life, I was thrust into an educational environment that simply did not care, one way or another, about my deafness. I was expected to push my way through any educational obstacles arising from my deafness as if they were mere flotsam cast up onto a beach. Never mind that I might end up being educational wreckage myself. I might have benefitted from being coached in identifying and articulating what I needed. As it was, I muddled along like everyone else.

When I think about my life, I do not think of it as a deaf life; I think of it as a busy life. My sense of deaf-self has expanded and contracted in tune with the erratic rhythms of my life’s trajectory. Throughout my self-assigned purposefulness in all my undertakings—at school, in my university studies, in my career, travels and in my relationships of romance, love and friendships—I was largely indifferent to my deafness, making the necessary adaptive responses by reflex and need. I did not understand the extent to which my deafness shaped the contours of my life along the way; it seemed to be an immeasurable thing, sometimes large, sometimes small, sometimes of no measure at all. My life’s preoccupations have been, and continue to be, about love, friendships, and work. Not about my deafness.

I certainly have no sense of being a prisoner of silence or any other such thing. While it is true that I have felt hurt when hearing people mock the way I speak, and while I have had to work very hard at fitting in, and while I have strained to listen and to speak as well as I can, I nevertheless resile against the persistently held belief of others that my deafness has been my life’s burden. It has not. I know about grief and the force of its power to pull you down. The sudden infant death of my son, Jack, taught me that. Still teaches me. And I know this too: Any grief I have experienced as a result of being deaf has been small when I measure it against my longing for my son. Perhaps the death of my son helps me to tap into the sorrow of those hearing parents who feel, even if ever-so-briefly that they dare not recognise it or confess it, that they have lost their son or daughter when they hear the news, ‘Your child is deaf.’ These parents recover themselves to face the world and to do battle for their deaf child, but I sense their memory of that knifing news lies close beneath their skin. Their sorrow fuels their mission to give their deaf child the very best chance in the world. It is useful this sorrow, but it is also contagious. It can seep into the skin of the child, infusing that child not with the grief of hearing loss but with the tension of uncertainty, of not quite knowing what to do to make everything alright. I am familiar with this anxiety: it courses through my days with the ease of a saline drip, but overflows from time to time—and often at the wrong time!—as panicky, flustered attempts to right that which is wrong or in tearful shouting to make myself understood.
I don’t believe that defining what makes us different from others is an especially useful way of explaining ourselves to each other. I prefer talking about the qualities that unify us and I see that unity as residing in the intangibles of love, fear, loss, yearning, hope, loneliness and all those soul-elements that we have difficulty describing. I have found that when I talk about these intangibles to parents of deaf children as the elements which have shaped my life and my sense of who I am, they lean forward on their seats and their faces flicker with some sort of recognition. Their curiosity about my education, career, spirituality, and music is largely satiated, apart from a niggle here and there. It is loneliness and love, those universal questions we all struggle with, that they want to know more about. These parents also usually want to understand the reasons for my ‘success’ in integrating into the hearing world where other deaf people have apparently failed. Who can answer such a loaded question with any real degree of precision? Especially when words like a ‘success’ and ‘failure’ can give rise to delusions about the power of individual effort. My best stab at an answer to this question is that I have been blessed with luck and opportunity, both brought to life through my parents’ hopes, my own energy combined with loads of tenacity and some courage, and the zeitgeist of the day.

In the end, my life is larger than my deaf self. Each of us has a particular road to travel, with challenges or tasks to fulfil. My particular challenges have included being the daughter of an alcoholic father, the bereaved mother of my son, Jack, and taking on the biggest task of all—the task of unconditional love. Each loss, disappointment, and sorrow has propelled me forward to tackle the next hurdle.

In belatedly coming to terms with my disappointments in romantic love, I seem to have coincidentally resolved my task of integrating my childhood deaf self with my adult ‘hearing-deaf’ persona. The two journeys merged as one. While I worked towards a better understanding of my deaf self, my grief about my romantic disappointments faded, giving way to a calmer appreciation of the love I give to, and receive from, my friends and family. This gift of love shone with an almost shocking clarity during my year long illness: I experienced such an uprising of loving friendship during that time, that I was shamed into gratitude for all that I have in my life. Whether my deafness had any bearing at all on my romantic losses remains a moot point. I doubt that the auditory detail of my hearing qualities had any impact on my relationships, but it is possible that my dual relationship with my deafness may have complicated matters and thrown up other insurmountable issues not yet identified or understood by either me or my erstwhile romantic partners. While attributing a particular cause to a specific result is hazardous in matters of the heart,
my living much of my adult life romantically alone, but in the sheltering and loving company of friends.

In writing my memoir of deafness, I am finally ‘doing’ that ‘something’ which I needed to do. In some ways, I feel as though I have been asleep for most of my life and am only now shaking myself out of my passivity about my deafness. There’s a paradox here: my parents were part of a generation of parents who agitated for educational reform so that their deaf children would learn to speak, be educated to their highest abilities, and go on to rewarding work and fulfilling lives. Unfortunately, for a long time, my own ‘success’ in integrating with the hearing world blinded me to the effects of that compliance. It held me back from speaking out against a culture that remains largely indifferent to the needs of deaf people. Having probed, dug up some memories, and found some answers in response to the psychologist’s question and to my own questions about my deaf experiences, I cannot claim to have a conclusive sensation of ‘arrival.’ Such arrivals are mirage-like; there’s always a new destination to strike out towards, so much more to be discovered.

However, I do enjoy a greater sense of clarity about myself. A shift has occurred in me, and it shows in the significant changes that have taken place and are continuing to take place in my life. It is as if that long ago little deaf girl is now walking comfortably hand-in-hand with the adult deaf woman she has become. I have learned that the love of my friends and family is not conditional upon my ‘performing’ well as a deaf person in hearing society. I have learned that my friends’ curiosity about my deaf experiences and my deaf-self, is borne of affection and a desire to deepen our friendship, not of carnivalesque zoo-like gazing. I have also learned, much to my immense surprise, that talking with others about my deafness has anchored me more strongly to my home, my family, and to my friendships. The act of writing my story of deafness has changed not only my relationship with it, but has changed my relationship with myself and others. It seems to have exerted a magnetic pull of sorts, drawing several of my deaf childhood friends back into my life, each with their individual stories. It has also fuelled my new-found sense of vocation in which I am working to improve the educational and work opportunities of other deaf people and people with disabilities. My commitment to my new professional priorities feels very different from the effort of my long public service career and my more recent years as a free-lance policy writer: it feels in tune with my sense of self as a whole person.

I have found the sense of constancy that I thought being in a romantic relationship would give to me: the friend who told me all those years ago that constancy ‘comes from within’ was right. The invisible membrane between my public ‘hearing-deaf’ self and private deaf self no longer feels like a wall to be guarded or scaled. Instead, I have relaxed my vigilance and am more at home with my deafness among all my friends—deaf and hearing. I have discovered the potency of love in
all our lives and how it sustains us even during those times when we think it is absent. I like to think, now, that maybe the art of being deaf is the art of life, which, of course, is the art of love.
Memory of the Heart

Yesterday, I visited my old preschool for deaf children and spent several hours hunched over large photograph albums covered in off-cuts of wallpaper. A lawn-mower sawed away in a nearby garden; I turned the volume of my hearing aids down to mute the noise.

Page after page of those albums was pasted with clippings from newspapers and photographs from the 1950s and 1960s. They showed how mothers and fathers campaigned for the best education for their deaf children—and the sooner, the better. I smiled on seeing the face of one little deaf girl peering out of several photos, recognised that expression of ‘what’s going on?’ as mine, and I put names to the faces of the other children, pressing a finger down in genuflection on their images at each trip of my memory-wire. There was Norman and there was Wayne, and here was Kay, and there was Jennifer, and here again, Matthew and Sharon. Oh! and there was a photo of my mother! How young she looked back then, with her wavy dark hair and dressed in her slim-line linen suit.

In the fading afternoon light, I turned my attention to the crumbly stacks of meeting minutes and administration files stained nicotine-yellow with age. One or two pages crackled beneath the weight of turning. Much work had been done on the parents association’s constitution; words had been pencilled in by hand over typed words, and pieces of paper were taped here and there to replace old text with new. Finally, there was the visitors’ book, a black foolscap size folder with ruled lines marking out rows and columns: my parents’ signatures, dated 28 July 1957, were inscribed one beneath the other—James Albert in Queensland-convent copperplate script, nine lines from the top of the page, and Eloise Helen in cramped New South Wales cursive style, seven lines further down the page. I traced my fingers over the lines of ink and felt the pulse of my parents’ long ago hopes goose-bumping my skin. I imagined how my parents would have queued up to the table with the visitors’ book, impatient to sign their names, as if by their signatures alone, they would put their stamp on my education, on my life: I would speak and I would learn. I closed my eyes and breathed in and out deeply for a few moments, nursing the book on my lap. When I opened my eyes again, as if surfacing from a dream, I felt the push and pull of love’s tides across all my nights and days. Any loneliness I felt was simply the twin to love, each in orbit to the other.

I shut the visitors’ book, put everything back in the cupboards, looked around the
into the late afternoon air. It was filled with the scent of freshly mown grass and the sound of the castanet claps of crickets.
The Art of Being Deaf: Donna M McDonald

References Cited


