

SIGNING

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A man entered the classroom, wrote “English” on the board, and drew an X through the word. Then he wrote “Voice” and drew an X through it as well. He pretended to take both words from the board and throw them out the window.

Next he wrote “Curtis” and pointed to himself.

Curtis was large and bearish with a round face and curly hair. There was a slight squint to his eyes, as if he closely examined everything and missed very little.

He drew a stick-figure girl and made a sign, touching his thumb lightly to his jaw and stroking downward. His lips formed the word “girl,” and he indicated that everyone should imitate him.

Feeling awkward, I stroked my jaw with my thumb and looked around. Other students were

doing the same. Curtis next drew a boy and taught us a sign similar to a boy gripping the visor of an imaginary baseball cap. After everyone imitated him, he drew a heart around the boy and girl, crossed his wrists, and held them against his chest in a sign that conjured affection. “Love,” he mouthed as the students imitated the sign.

He grinned a conspirator’s grin and drew a large diamond ring on the girl’s finger, and made the sign for “marriage,” a clasping of both hands into a tight bond. His hands then followed the contours of a swollen belly, and he made a sign as if cradling a baby in his arms.

He signed with the grace and purpose of a dancer or athlete. I sat up straighter in my chair and realized I was entirely enjoying the lesson.

“Baby,” his lips formed. Like everyone else, I imitated him, rocking an imaginary baby. On the chalkboard, Curtis drew a small boy standing with his parents. After another pregnancy and cradling motion, he drew a girl. In this nursery rhyme progression, the signs for sister, brother, mother, father, grandparents, and family followed easily.

When the chalkboard pictured an extended family of fourteen members, Curtis wrote, “15- minute break” on the board. I was startled by whispers and scraping chairs. Having become accustomed to a silent classroom, I found this to be a strange reminder that the world was filled with noise.

I arrived at the Deaf Association for my second sign

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language class to find the guy at the reception desk, whose name plaque said “Jake,” engaged in a spirited sign conversation with Curtis. I stood about five feet away and watched. It occurred to me that spending more time with Curtis would be one way to learn sign language in a hurry. I’d lied in an interview and said I already knew how to sign. The job started in September. I had two months to learn.

Curtis turned to me and made the sign for “hello,” which resembled a salute with the fingertips touching the forehead. I saluted back and signed, “How are you?”

It was a small comfort to understand his standard response: “Fine, and you?”

“Fine,” I signed. I was trying to figure out how to continue the conversation, but he backed away and made the sign for “See you later.”

Left alone with Jake, I figured I may as well ask. “I was just wondering how long it takes to learn sign language.”

“After a year of classes, you should have the basics. Then you have to practice.”

A *year* of classes? My heart thumped. “How much will I learn over the summer?”

“You can get started, have some basic conversations, stuff like that. Why?”

I steadied myself and said, “I just wondered,” then I turned to look at the assortment of photographs thumbtacked to the movable wall behind the reception desk, candid shots of what appeared to be large social events. Curtis was in several of the

photos. In one, a group of fifteen or so people were huddled together, their arms around one another, smiling at the camera. In another, Curtis appeared with a tall, willowy girl with sandy-colored hair.

“Is that Curtis’s girlfriend?” I asked Jake.

“Nah. That’s Lauren. Lauren is hearing.”

That was an odd thing to say. I turned to look at him. “So what if Lauren is hearing?”

“You asked if she was his girlfriend. Curtis doesn’t date hearing girls.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

I smiled. *Oh yeah?* I thought. *Maybe I’ll have to change that.*

After class, I sat on a bench in the glass-enclosed bus stop with my sketch pad on my lap, sketching the street scene: a row of shops and restaurants, including a florist and coffee shop with striped awnings. With cobblestone sidewalks and old-fashioned streetlights, it was a picture of New England charm.

I looked up to see Curtis and another guy walking toward the bus stop, signing and laughing about something. When Curtis saw me, he stood up straighter and stopped smiling. I went back to my drawing. In my peripheral vision, I saw the motion of their hands. Sometimes one of them made a grunting sound.

A bus came, and Curtis’s friend boarded it, leaving Curtis by himself. We were the only two people at the bus stop. I stole a look at him, and he

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saluted stiffly.

I signed, “Hello,” then looked back down at my sketch pad. I felt him watching me. I looked up to see that, in fact, he was looking at my hat.

He signed, “I like your hat.” The signs were easy to follow: he pointed to himself, then he made the sign for “like,” lightly touching his chest and snapping his fingers together. Then he pointed to my hat.

“Thanks,” I signed. I made the signs for “you have good” and finger-spelled “taste” because I didn’t know the sign.

He showed me the sign for “taste,” touching his lips with two fingers and his thumb. Awkwardly I imitated him.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

I made the sign for “home.”

“You know a lot of signs,” he said.

“I’ve been practicing.” Then, to change the subject, I asked, “Where are *you* going?”

He pointed the other direction and made a sign by first pointing to his temple and then making the sign for “tree.” It took me a moment to understand: Braintree, a town south of Boston. When I got it, I laughed, and repeated the sign for practice.

“I’ll show you another one. This one always makes hearing people laugh.” He made a sign by closing his fist into the manual letter *S* then pointed to his ear.

This one also took me a moment. “Sears?”

“Right!”

I smiled and spelled “clever,” on my fingers.

He pointed to my sketch pad. “Can I see?” He spoke as he signed, his voice coming from deep in his throat, low and hoarse, like a gravelly whisper. I shrugged and showed him the drawing I was working on. He looked at the drawing for a long time, then looked at me, astonished. “It’s beautiful! You’re really good.”

I felt a little thrill. “It’s okay,” I said aloud. Then, remembering that he couldn’t hear, I shrugged modestly and made the signs for “just okay.”

He looked back at the drawing, and I looked, too. The drawing was pleasing, whimsical and light, like a whisper.

I took advantage of the moment to say, “I have to learn sign language by the end of the summer.”

“Why?”

“That’s when my job starts.” Despite his rule against English, he was obviously a good lip-reader.

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

“Okay.”

“Should we start next week after class?”

I made the sign for “fine,” touching my thumb to my chest with my palm open and my fingers spread like a fan.

My signing improved steadily as we met for tutoring each week in his office, strictly businesslike at all times, except for once when he told me about the twelve years he’d spent in a residential school for the deaf. “For twenty hours every week I was drilled like

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this: To make the *F*, put your lower lip against your upper teeth and make a sound. For *V*, do the same but add voice. I still can't make *D* sound different from *T*. All for nothing."

"Not for nothing," I said. "Look how well you speak."

"I used to think so. I tried to say Merry Christmas once and it came out sounding like Mary eat me."

I wanted to say something sympathetic to assure him that they shouldn't have laughed. He said, "I guess it's kind of funny."

"It is a bit obscene."

With that, we both giggled—my giggles silent, muffled by my hands covering my mouth, his louder, like a series of grunts.

"That stuff happens all the time!" he said. "I was visiting my sister, and she asked me, 'Where's the baby?' and I said, 'In the trash.'"

Again, we both burst into a peal of laughter. After we stopped laughing, I lingered a few more moments, hoping he'd ask me to stay, but the usual awkwardness descended again, so I gathered my things, gave what I felt was a lame smile, and waved good-bye.

After my tutoring job started, I didn't think about Curtis again until the day he sent me a text message. He needed tutoring in English, he said, because he wanted to try to pass the state architecture exam. Mostly he needed vocabulary work. Would I tutor him in exchange for the same hourly rate I'd paid him

over the summer? He'd throw in an American Sign Language lesson too. Wondering if all he wanted was vocabulary work and hoping it wasn't, I agreed.

“What's the opposite of confluence,” I asked, finger-spelling “confluence.”

Curtis, sitting across from me on the rug in my living room, leaned forward to study the word. I could see he was tired. “Separation,” he signed.

“Right.”

He looked glum and said, “I'd never be able to pronounce this word.”

“Nobody ever *says* words like ‘confluence.’ You just have to know what it means for silly tests.” My signing had improved so much that he didn't need to use his voice or try to read my lips.

He closed his study guide and gathered his pencils.

“Can I look at that sketch pad?” he asked.

“Sure.”

He flipped through the pad, pausing over a sketch of indoor plants on a windowsill set against a snow-covered quad, which I'd drawn on one of those magical winter mornings in Massachusetts when the world is covered with ice and the sun makes the branches sparkle.

“These are really good,” he said.

“You flatter me.”

He leaned back against the bookcases and straightened his legs. I glanced at the distance between our knees: about twelve inches—to far to

accidentally brush against him.

He turned and looked at me for a long moment. Then he picked up the sketch pad on the end table. It was a small, three-by-five pad for thumbnail sketches. He flipped through and found that it was mostly empty.

“Can I?” he asked.

I nodded. From his bag he took an ordinary number two pencil. He looked at me steadily, glancing occasionally at the pad as he drew the outline of my face and sketched in my features, the curve of my chin, my brows.

He turned to a fresh page. He reached over and touched my chin, turning my face slightly to the side. He drew me again, this time with my eyes slightly narrowed, the curve of my lip and small pertness of my nose and chin exaggerated. It wasn't quite right because it wasn't quite me. He continued sketching and something emerged in the expression that I didn't recognize as mine: a light mischievousness. A few more strokes near my pupils added a steely determination.

I took the sketch pad and looked at the drawing. “It's really good.”

“It's all right. Your turn.” He handed me the sketch pad and pencil.

I looked steadily at him and sketched in his face, the curls of his hair, his neck and shoulder. He had good bone structure, so I emphasized the square of his jaw and the slant of his eyes. I drew sinewy lines suggesting the muscles of his neck and arms—then,

feeling a flood of warmth through me, I stopped, suddenly self-conscious. It occurred to me that either I was a prude, or I had gone way too long without romance if drawing the lines of his neck and shoulders had such an effect on me.

He reached for the drawing and looked at it for a long time.

Just then, my phone rang in the kitchen. The ringing was a shock after sitting so long in absolute silence. I gave such a start that my foot hit the trunk. He stared at me. The phone rang a second time.

“My phone,” I signed. When the phone rang a third time, I signed, “It’s probably a telemarketer.”

Curtis stood up. He closed the study guide, gathered his pencils, and put everything back into the portfolio. “I guess I’d better go now.” Suddenly closed and tense, he picked up his coat and waved good-bye. The phone rang once more, then the apartment was silent.

Next day, he sent a text message: *‘I’m sorry. That was stupid. And rude.’*

I searched for a response. “That’s okay,” seemed wrong, as if encouraging him to vanish without notice. So I tried for a joke: *‘I agree. I told the phone that ringing like that was stupid and rude, and the phone promised never to do it again.’*

“*Ha ha,*” he responded. *‘My phone doesn’t listen to me either.’*

I was trying to figure what to say next when he sent another text inviting me to dinner at his favorite

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Italian restaurant.

As it turned out, his favorite Italian restaurant was only a few blocks from his apartment. I wasn't, as they say, born yesterday. I knew his design was for us to end up in his apartment.

His apartment surprised me—bare walls, lamps without shades, white scruffy walls, brown shaggy carpet. The only attempt at decoration was a photograph of Frank Lloyd Wright's *Falling Waters* tacked to one wall. I didn't expect his apartment to look like a prison cell, or interrogation room.

“What's with the lamp shades?” I asked.

“Lamp shades?”

“You don't have any.”

He laughed. “I'm lazy.”

The apartment seemed to have been built in the twenties, with real carved wood trim on the windows and doors. From where I sat on the couch, I could see that the floor tiling in his kitchen was kiwi green.

“Can I look at your kitchen?”

“Go ahead.”

The kitchen, unbelievably enough, had a dusty-pink refrigerator with a single door that looked like it dated from the 1940s. The tile on the countertop was orange and peach. The kitchen was no more than five feet across. I poked my head back into the living room and signed, “This kitchen is brilliant.”

“I don't so much mind the green floors and orange tile,” he said. “But the pink refrigerator I can do without.”

“I love it. It's zany and playful.” I returned to my

place on the couch. “Just recently—”

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

I imitated him, but he shook his head again. Taking my hand, he corrected my sign by curving my fingers inward with the fingers facing back. I held still, letting him shape my hand, not drawing back even when I should have.

He turned my palm upward. With his index finger, he drew a horizontal line across my palm followed by a curved line, making the sign for “what?” in my hand.

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

I looked away first, glancing at my hand resting in his, then his knees. When I looked back at his face, he was still watching me. We stared at each other for what seemed like forever. I knew he would kiss me, but the moment of waiting went on and on until it felt absurd that we were just looking at each other. He shifted again, moving closer so that our knees were touching.

I made the sign for, “Well?”

He blinked, startled. “Well, what?”

“Well, are you going to kiss me, or do I have to kiss you?”

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He laughed and touched my chin, then kissed me. When he signed, “It’s too late for you to go back,” it took me a moment to realize what he meant.

“I guess I’ll have to sleep on the couch,” I signed.

“No,” he signed. He took my hand and led me into the bedroom. Feeling awkward, I reached for the light switch, but stopped. With the light off, we couldn’t talk.

“Leave it on,” he signed.

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

The next morning, after I asked enough questions, he told me about an Art Sign performance that would be held at the Deaf Association. “I’ll bet you didn’t know we have our own poetry,” he said.

“No, I didn’t.” I didn’t like how I felt when he made the sign for “we.” The sign itself, first touching one shoulder, then swinging the hand around to touch the other, formed a circle, and seemed to shut me out.

After I gave a few hints, he invited me to the performance.

Walking into the Deaf Association that evening, I wondered if I had made a mistake. Curtis stood near the stage with a group of people who were signing too rapidly for me to understand what they were talking about. I recognized an occasional sign, but that was all. Curtis saw me and waved. A moment later, someone tapped his shoulder and absorbed

him in a sign conversation.

Two guys about my age leaned against the reception desk. As I approached, one made the salute for “Hi,” then signed rapidly.

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

“Are you hearing?” the other one asked. My non-expressive face and my signing—which was straight Signed English with a few ASL idioms thrown in—must have been the giveaways.

I nodded my fist up and down.

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

I finger-spelled my name, then he spelled his own name. A woman joined us. The guy introduced me and said, “She’s hearing.”

The woman looked at me, her expression, polite and distant. “Why do you know sign?” she asked.

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

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

I looked back at Curtis, who still stood near the stage, deep in a sign conversation with a group of people. Would he ignore me all evening?

“Where are you from?” one of the guys asked me. He had dark straggly hair, pale skin, and acne.

Surprised by the question, I signed, “I was born near St. Louis.”

“My brother is from Illinois. Chicago. Pretty far from St. Louis.”

“Same general neighborhood,” I signed. I was trying to be funny, but nobody laughed.

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“Who do you know here?” the woman asked me. She signed slowly and deliberately, the way one would speak to a foreigner.

Instead of spelling out Curtis’s name, I made his name sign. She looked genuinely surprised. “How do you know Curtis?”

“I was in his sign language class over the summer.” Well, I *had* walked into their club. I supposed it was her right to cross-examine me.

She looked at me more closely, and signed, “Nice hat.” Then: “Great jacket.”

I was wearing one of my thrift store finds, a multicolored tailored jacket in shades of salmon with a matching hat from the 1960s, the kind of suit Jacqueline Onassis might have worn.

“Thanks,” I signed.

I hoped Curtis would rescue me, but he was still signing with the group of people near the stage, acting as if I weren’t there.

More people entered and soon I was surrounded by so much signing that I couldn’t follow any of it.

Another man wearing a blue work shirt and trousers with a nametag that said “Xavier” stitched over his breast pocket introduced himself to me and asked where I was from. When I said I was born near St. Louis, he said he didn’t know anyone from St. Louis. I thought it was a strange introductory ritual. Then he started signing about the performance. I nodded, occasionally making the sign for “really,” or “interesting.”

He grinned and asked, “What’s the greatest

problem facing deaf people today.”

I supposed that by some miracle he hadn't guessed that I was hearing, probably because I'd kept my own signing to a minimum.

“I don't know.” I imitated the way Curtis formed the signs.

“It's a joke,” he said.

“I still don't know.”

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

I tried to match his grin even though I didn't think it was funny. The group moved to admit a newcomer, a man in a tweed jacket. The man signed too rapidly for me to follow what he was saying.

“Aw,” Xavier groaned, and signed, “We've all heard that one before.” He pointed to me and said, “Tell her. Maybe she hasn't heard it.”

“I have a great joke,” Reuben signed to me. “Pay attention.”

“Sign slowly,” I told him.

He signed very slowly, exaggerating his signs and mouthing the words so I easily followed the joke: “A deaf husband and wife stopped at a motel for the night. It was late and they got the last room. After they got their keys, the innkeeper closed the office and went to bed. Across the street was a twenty-four hour market. The man said, ‘I'm hungry. I want to go to the store for food.’ The wife said, ‘I'm going to bed.’ When the man came back with his groceries, he could not remember which room was his. He looked up at the dark building, and tried to remember but

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he couldn't. Then he got an idea. He got into the car and started honking. Honk! Honk! As he honked, the lights in the motel came on, one by one. Soon all the lights were on except for one room. He knew which room was his: the room that was still dark."

I didn't want to laugh, but I did. "Very funny," I told him.

"Even hearing people laugh at that one," he said.

Curtis appeared and sat next to me. Anyone watching would have thought it was coincidental. I looked at him, then faced forward. In my peripheral vision, I saw him ask, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I shouldn't be here."

I waited for him to ask why, but he just sat with his hands resting on his knees, not looking at me. He knew why. Then he signed, "I invited you."

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

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

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

"I'm not ashamed."

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

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

"Your friends seemed surprised to see me here."

He grinned. "I guess so, after all those times I swore I'd never date a hearing woman."

When I noticed the people around watching us, I felt too self-conscious to answer. You cannot have a whispered conversation in sign language. From across the room, people can eavesdrop, which meant plenty of people in the room knew what we'd just said to each other.

A man wearing a sports jacket and red tie walked onto the stage. I caught enough of what he was signing to know that he was introducing the performer, Annette Anders. Then a woman walked out on the stage, dressed in black leggings and a flowing black skirt of transparent crepe. She stood for a moment looking at the audience, then, as if completely absorbed in her own thoughts, she looked up at the ceiling.

She began a kind of dance with her upper body, her hands flowing, her arms circling forward and forming an arc over her head. I caught a few signs: "a long time ago," and "a young girl," enough to know she was telling a story. Her expression changed dramatically as she told her story. First she was frightened, biting her lip, staring into space. Then she was dazed.

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

I mentally translated: "Silence is the moment

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

After the performance there was a light murmur and the scraping of chairs as people stood up and went to the reception area where a burgundy cloth-covered table was set with silver warming trays. I smelled the faint, spicy scent of curry. Curtis and I stood awkwardly together.

A man tapped Curtis on the shoulder and he turned aside to answer. Jake, the hearing guy who usually sat at the reception desk, approached me and said, “Hi. What are you doing here?” He signed as he spoke.

“I came—” I looked at Curtis.

“That’s what we thought.” As before, he signed as he spoke. I wondered about his use of the word ‘we.’ What entitled him to lump himself with the deaf people?

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

He didn’t answer, so I repeated, “Are we the only hearing people here?”

“No. Barbara’s husband is hearing.”

“Who is Barbara?” Rebellious, I kept my arms at my side. Curtis approached us, but when he saw me

speaking, my hands by my side, he stopped. I looked away from him.

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

I said, "People are looking at me like my face is green. Why don't they look at you like that? Or Barbara's husband?"

"We're not here with Curtis. You are."

Someone tapped Jake's arm and began signing rapidly.

I drifted toward Barbara and her husband, watching their conversation but unable to figure out what they were talking about. They kept repeating one sign that I had never seen before, and that I guessed was idiomatic ASL: the sign for "think" the index finger pointed toward the temple, followed immediately by the sign for "hearing," the index finger rolling in a horizontal motion in front of the mouth in imitation of words spilling out. The snapping of the hand between "think" and "hearing" made the sign seem bitter and angry.

"Think-hearing," I translated.

I looked at my watch. If I hurried, I could make the hourly bus back to Kendall Square. I grabbed my coat, and walked toward the door. All I wanted was to be home, in my own room, surrounded by the comforting smell of paints and charcoal pencils.

I was almost to the sidewalk when I heard footsteps on the walkway behind me. I looked back and saw Curtis hurrying to catch up with me. I didn't slow down.

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He caught up and, using his voice, said, "I'll give you a ride."

I shook my head and walked on, listening to the angry clicking of my heels and the lighter tapping of his rubber-soled shoes.

In the light of the bus stop, he signed, "I didn't think the evening would go this way. I thought it would be interesting, that you'd learn a lot."

"I did. What's 'think-hearing?'"

"A deaf person who tries to be like a hearing person. Why?"

"Barbara's husband is hearing."

"He's hearing," Curtis signed, "but he's really deaf."

"What are you talking about?"

"His parents are deaf. His brother is deaf. He understands deafness. He's been signing all his life" Curtis signed in the ASL manner that looked like: "His-mother-father-deaf, his brother deaf, he understand deaf."

For the first time all evening, I smiled. "He's think-deaf."

Curtis smiled, too.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Really."

The bus wheezed to a stop in front of us.

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

"Yes." He formed the sign with confidence, his fist nodding up and down.

"Why do you even bother with me. I can hear, after all."

“I like the way you draw.”

The driver honked to hurry me. I boarded the bus and sat near the window, my cheek pressed against the cold glass.

“I’ll call you,” he signed.

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

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

Next day, Curtis invited me to dinner at his place. I was setting the table in Curtis’s apartment and he stood in front of the stove, stirring a pot. The smell of his chili was mouth-watering.

Then the lights went out.

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

I heard him moving the pot. Then he bumped against me, and took my hands. Bending my forefingers, he tapped my knuckles together, making

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the sign for “electricity.” He swept my hands outward, making the sign for “finished.” The electricity was out.

He probably had candles somewhere. In the top kitchen drawer, I’d seen matches.

When I made the sign for, “What now?” he followed my motion with his hands.

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

He led me to the next room and drew me down to the rug, his body covering mine, and kissed me again.

There, on the floor in the darkness, he undressed me and turned me around, bending me into positions that might have embarrassed me with the lights on. As we made love on the rug, the feel of his hands made me forget—just for a moment—that any time the lights could come on. I thought I heard a bird whistling outside and as I wondered what kind of bird would sing at night, Curtis took my hands and crossed my arms over my chest, making the sign for “love.”