chapter ONE

Two women are hanging out clothes on adjacent clotheslines. It is 1941, late fall in Massachusetts, and in the air there's still the promise of warmth. A little girl runs back and forth between the two walls of sheets and towels; she likes the bright white, the way the sun bounces off it, the damp coolness of the fabric. She presses it between her hands, to her face. She plants a corner of a towel in her mouth. The taste is cold and clean.

"Bonnie, stop that," her mother says. The women continue their conversation.

Bonnie holds her hands high, runs for one sheet flapping like a sail in the wind. She pushes through, feeling the cotton against her palms, then on her face, and as she reaches the world on the other side the damp sheet rushes over her head. She does this again, taking off her wool hat so she can feel the coolness in her dark curls.

"Bonnie, be still, please?" Her mother gives the neighbor an apologetic look.

"I have three," the neighbor says. "Teenagers now. I've been through it all."

Bonnie continues charging toward the sheets, running under them, hands held high.

"Bonnie Poitras! I said stop this instant!"

The neighbor watches as Bonnie runs under her laundry, this time grabbing a towel and tugging hard. The towel falls to the ground, and Bonnie with it. The ground at her face is cold and hard, but she doesn't cry.

"That's enough," her mother says. "You see what you've done? This was clean and now you've gotten it all dirty, and it's not even ours."

Bonnie looks surprised, like she has only just now been reminded that there was anyone else present. And what has made her mother so mad?

"It's no problem," the woman says.

"I'm sorry," the mother says. "It's the terrible twos. She just won't lis-

ten." She leans down, her face close to Bonnie's. "Now you sit down right here and just wait until I'm finished."

Bonnie sits.

"And put your hat back on, you'll catch a cold."

Bonnie does.

When Thelma Poitras hangs up the last sock, she gathers her basket and the remaining clothespins and calls out to her daughter, "Okay, honey, let's go inside."

Bonnie is looking at the clouds. One of them looks to her like a poodle she saw once. She likes the way you can see them move if you watch for a long time.

"Bonnie," her mother says louder. "Let's go in and make some lunch." The neighbor cannot help noticing the child's face—it registers nothing.

"Honestly," Thelma says, shaking her head. "She will not mind." She walks over to where Bonnie sits looking up at the sky.

"You know, I don't think she hears you," the neighbor says.

"What?"

"Her face. It looks like she's not hearing what you say."

Thelma pulls Bonnie up by the arm, brushes off the back of her coat.

"Oh she hears me alright, don't you, Bonnie?" Again, she squats in front of the child. "How old is Bonnie?" she says. Bonnie holds up her right hand, two fingers. "That's right. Two. Can you say terrible twos?" Her mother repeats this, smiling. "Terrible twos. Say it."

"Tewwible twos," Bonnie says.

The neighbor laughs. "She speaks well for her age," she says.

Inside, Thelma cannot stop thinking about what Helen said: I don't think she hears you. Bonnie's willfulness was intermittent; at times she could be very obedient. She puts Bonnie in the high chair, gives her a spoon, tapping it on the wooden tray. "Play the drum for me," she says. Bonnie smiles and beats with the spoon three times. Thelma stands back a ways, still facing her daughter. "Play the drums," she says. Bonnie hits her tray three times and laughs. Thelma goes to the stove, stirs the spaghetti sauce, and says loudly, "Play the drums for mommy." Her back is to the child. Bonnie doesn't play.

She repeats this. "Bonnie, honey, play the drums." She hears nothing, then turns to face her daughter, who waits patiently for lunch, the empty spoon planted firmly in her mouth.

Facing her, Thelma says, "Play the drums?" Bonnie pulls the spoon from her mouth, bangs it repeatedly on the tray, laughing. She does it again and again, while her mother watches. She can't understand why her mother won't smile.

THE FEEL OF SILENCE

Immediately upon discovering that I had a profound hearing loss, my parents decided that my only chance at normality lay in playing games. Word games.

Thus, rather than calling me deaf, which I clearly was (and am), they called me hard-of-hearing. Someone who was deaf was not permitted to attend a school for hearing children. Someone who was merely hard-of-hearing, however, did not have to be relegated to the segregated world of the deaf. (Back then schools rarely tested for hearing, and so my parents' word was accepted at face value.)

The word "deaf" was almost never spoken in my home. Nor, if I could avoid it, did I deliberately tell anyone that I was deaf until I was in my midthirties.

Some people call that denying my deafness. I prefer to call it facing reality, for I learned at an early age that to live freely and easily in this hearing world, to be treated as an equal, I had to fake hearing. Something happened to people who learned I was deaf before they really knew me. Equal treatment became impossible. I learned that whenever I was introduced as "Bonnie Poitras, who is deaf," the chances were ninety-nine out of a hundred that I would be treated like a retarded child.

Still, at some point in my adulthood I got tired of playing word games. Yes, I am deaf. And I make no bones about it. I am very profoundly deaf, and no medical procedure, no hearing aid, has yet been invented that can cure my profound deafness. But there is nothing wrong with my brain. I'm as smart as most of the people I know, and smarter than some. And there's nothing wrong with my vocal chords, either (contrary to the derogatory terms *deaf and dumb* and *deaf mute*).

Now, instead of demanding equality by faking an ability to hear, I simply demand equality, period.

chapter TWO

It's not so surprising that my mother didn't realize I was deaf until I was two. She and my father, Jim, were both nineteen when I was born. A striking couple, they were physical opposites. My very pretty mother had blond hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion and was five feet one inches short. My handsome father had dark hair and eyes and a dark complexion and was six feet two inches tall. When I was born, they'd been married six days short of a year and were still happily playing house. My mother was ecstatic to be a mommy and played with me all day long, as if I were a little doll. For hours, she'd read to me, talk to me. Sitting on her lap, watching her lips, I followed most of what she said.

I was very lucky. Lipreading came easy to me, and I was a natural mimic. As far as I knew, everyone understood each other by watching each other's lips and faces. Instinctively I moved my lips the same way my mother moved hers. As I sat on her lap for literally hours each day I could *feel* her talk. And as I tried to repeat the words she said over and over and over to me, "Ma-ma," "Da-da," I made my chest and neck feel the same way hers felt. Just as she blew air when she moved her lips, I blew air when I moved my lips. Had my mother known I was deaf, she could not have worked more effectively or more diligently with me. And I suspect, although no one knows, that I had quite a bit of hearing as an infant and had memory of sound to fall back on. So when my parents learned that I was deaf, I had a reasonable vocabulary for a two year old. Certainly my two-year-old speech did not provide a clue to my deafness.

By the time I was three, my mother had so successfully taught me certain rhymes that I'd be called upon to perform for company. It must've been entertaining. So small, and so young, I'd recite sayings memorized by rote on command. The one I remember still went like this:

Multiplication is vexation.
Division is as bad.
The rule of three perplexes me.
And practice drives me mad.

I said it, they tell me, as perfectly as any hearing child could. And they all clapped for me, and how could I not like that? Early on I learned how to please.

I don't know how my parents reacted to the fact that their first child was deaf. But they had both faced adversity in their lives and had developed an inner strength. My mother's father died when she was a young girl. Her mother, unable to cope with her two youngest children while working full-time, sent my mother and her brother Jackie to live on a farm in a sort of quasi foster child arrangement, where they were expected to work hard for their keep. Between the ages of ten and thirteen my mother lived on that farm. She hated it. And she was desperately grateful when her sister Vivienne, ten years older and on her own, sent for her. At thirteen my mother returned to New York City to live with her sister and mother, eventually working almost full-time and attending high school part-time. To my mother, this was a life of bliss. She felt fortunate to be home.

My father's background was very different. Born in Montreal of French Canadian parents, my father was raised in a bilingual household. The middle of three children of a gentle, religious mother and a forceful, domineering father, he spent most of his school years in Jesuit boarding schools, where the regime was strict. His father was a financier of sorts, who at one point was a self-made millionaire. When my father was in his early teens his family moved to Roslyn, New York, where their estate included butler, chauffeur, and maids. A few years later my grandfather made some disastrous business decisions, and the family was forced to leave their home in Roslyn in the middle of the night to avoid creditors. Henceforth, my grandfather supported his family as an insurance salesman. Despite numerous grandiose schemes, he was never again able to do more than eke out a modest living. Thus, my father, like my mother, worked during his high school years to help the family. Making money, rather than spending it to attend college, was the necessary goal for both of my parents.

That their firstborn was deaf may have been viewed by my parents as just another of life's unpredictable whims. To this day, we've not discussed the matter. I do know that my father's brother, my uncle Maurice, concluded that my deafness must be purely psychological. Working toward becoming a navy pediatrician, he theorized that I would hear as soon as I got over whatever emotional trauma I was suffering. Some other family members agreed with Uncle Maurice's unlearned, but well-intentioned, opinion, and the matter was infrequently discussed in my parents' presence.

Whether they were more distressed about the fact that I was deaf or the possibility that I might have a psychological problem that they may have inadvertently caused is a question you'd have to ask my parents. But I remember, a few years later, my mother's distress when she was unable

to respond to innuendos concerning the terrible shame that my psychological troubles hadn't straightened out. And I remember my own vague guilt, my ill-defined worries about what I had done—or was doing—to keep myself from hearing.

My parents didn't have long to focus on my deafness. In 1944 my father was drafted and sent to fight as a private in the Second World War. My parents were devastated. By then I had a baby brother, Jimmy; he was two and I was four. My father closed the small perfume business he'd started in Springfield, and my mother moved with Jimmy and me to New York City, where my father's parents lived, and where my parents would be able to see each other when my father was on leave from basic training.

It was almost impossible to find affordable housing in New York City at that time. My mother considered herself lucky when, after much finagling, she convinced two elderly sisters to rent her an apartment vacated by a recently deceased third sister, whose obituary my mother had read in the newspaper. No matter that the apartment—on 146th Street between Broadway and Riverside Drive—was in a shaky neighborhood. We were lucky to have a roof over our heads.

We rented the third floor of the brownstone belonging to these two old ladies. One was deaf, one was blind, and both were somewhat senile. Neither could remember from one day to the next that we lived in their house.

One evening a week my mother volunteered at the Red Cross, doing her part for the war effort. A young friend of hers babysat for Jimmy and me. Always at dusk, the little old ladies chained the door. I would watch from an upstairs window on those nights as my mother returned home, cold and shivering on the stoop. She rang and rang the bell. But it was a long time before Mother came upstairs. As she later told me, the scenario went like this: When Mother rang the bell, the sister who could hear would locate the sister who could see and together they'd go to the door.

"Yes?" The woman spoke to my mother through the chained gap. Neither of the women made a move to open the door.

"Hello," Mother said. "It's me, Thelma." She'd muster up a smile.

The sisters would ponder together quizzically and come to no conclusion.

"I'm sorry," the sighted sister said, as she'd begin to close the door, reducing the already narrow gap that connected our mother to us.

"Please, wait!" my mother said. "Don't you remember? I'm Thelma, the one you rented the third floor to. My children are upstairs with the sitter."

Again they'd seek from each other some confirmation of the obvious that neither was capable of.