

Chapter 14: Reverberations

In the early 1930s, A.G. Bell, Cleveland's school for deaf children, was located on East 55th Street, on the city's east side. My mother recalled my grandmother taking Jerry there as a young boy, down Superior Avenue via streetcar several times a week for speech training.

I conjure my grandmother as a young woman, her beauty starting to fade. On a late winter day in 1934, twenty-nine-year-old Fay Cohen led her three-year-old son Jerry down the steps of their two-family house on Saywell Road in East Cleveland and around the corner onto East 123rd Street, where they'd catch the streetcar and ride west toward downtown.

As a younger woman, Fay Weinbaum modeled for a local furrier. Now, during the dark days of the Depression, she wore a wool coat, broken in and frayed. Her son, this boy who couldn't hear her voice or speak her name, walked beside her, holding her hand.

It was hard not to notice the sadness in Ben's eyes when he looked at Jerry, a pain they didn't talk about. The drug store drained his energy and left him quiet. Fay felt Ben's disappointment when he looked at her, too, as if she'd failed him, as if the whole thing was her fault. Maybe it was. One of the doctors suggested that a fall in the seventh month of her pregnancy might have damaged Jerry's auditory nerve. The doctors didn't know why Jerry was deaf, but they were certain of his prognosis—no cure, no treatment. Their son would always live in a world of silence, of lipreading and artificial speech.

Fay pulled the boy along, his tiny mitten-covered hands fitting neatly in her smooth palms. He liked the streetcar, the excursions into the city, and by now, a full year after they began these journeys, he knew what to do. She didn't have to explain everything, a useless task anyway.

The wind, whipping off Lake Erie, ripped through her sensible coat. Jerry's face, with its dark eyes and olive complexion, contrasted with her pale beauty, which reddened in the March cold. She'd outfitted Jerry in rough wool pants, a miniature copy of his father's, along with a shirt two-sizes too large, a puffy blue coat, scarf and mittens.

The streetcar lurched up and disgorged a few passengers. Jerry stood and waited, his eyes wide.

What was the silent movie in his mind? Did it have a soundtrack—not music, but rhythm? Was it dead quiet, as if he lived underwater?

Fay tugged Jerry along and helped him take big boy steps into the car, which smelled of men, tobacco, hair oil, and coal. The black sheen of his Buster Browns reflected the morning light.

A scene emerges. My grandmother uses the feminine wiles from her brief modeling career. She smiles, the way she'd been taught at I.J. Fox, the way she'd done for those newspaper ads. A businessman in a pinstriped suit, about 35, his thinning black hair parted neatly to one side, springs up and motions her to a seat near the coal stove, tipping his hat. Nodding thanks in response to his yellow smile—he must be a heavy smoker, like Ben—she settles in, warning Jerry to stay on her right, away from the black heat.

The streetcar, black and gray and stiflingly hot, makes a gradual turn onto Superior Avenue, one of Cleveland's grand streets, with its tall elms and formerly great homes settling into disuse. As the streetcar rocks side to side, Jerry squirms beneath Fay's protective arm. She watches him, mouthing "calm down," tapping his chest and smiling. Looking up at her, he's a blank slate. She watches herself being recorded in his brown eyes and wonders again what he's thinking.

The car sways slowly toward Public Square and the city center, stopping and starting in jerky rhythm. Too soon, long before her energy is restored, they reach the intersection of Superior and East 55th Street. Five minutes later they're standing in front of A.G. Bell School.

At the school, Jerry is prodded and poked by adults who hold their faces too close to his. Touching his chin, they move his lips to mimic theirs; he becomes a hand puppet, soft and pliable. Fay sits nearby, patting him, mouthing 'pay attention' and 'watch her mouth,' in her ineffectual way. On previous visits, he'd learned to say his name—*Jeh-ree*—the two syllables skittering around in his throat like marbles.

He learns to say *Mama* and *Daddy*, over and over, so that Fay can make out the words. On each visit, he copies the silent lips of a gray-haired speech teacher who tells him, "You will learn to talk," mouthing the words and pointing to her thin lips, the same mantra every week, until he can finally understand her.

On the way home, exhausted, Jerry closes his eyes, shutting out the visual noise known only to deaf children who watch everything and hear nothing. Both of them, mother and son, doze in the car until the conductor calls out, "123rd," and Fay jolts the boy awake.

Over the next several years, my grandmother would lose much of her own hearing. Though a specialist performed surgery the calcification or bone quickly grew back, and my grandmother turned into the woman I knew so many years later, who spoke in a quavery voice and wore two hearing aids.

From A.G. Bell, Jerry went on to Superior School in East Cleveland and then to Kirk Junior High School, schools with special oral programs for deaf children. Hundreds, if not thousands of hours were spent fulfilling Alexander Graham Bell's dictum that all deaf children must learn to speak. Eventually, by the time Jerry reached junior high, he did develop (partially)

intelligible speech. But my uncle, with his lifeless auditory nerve, could never speak like a hearing person.

How much of his spirit died during all those years of trying to follow the instructions of his oral-method teachers, of being told what to do by his parents and doctors, as if he couldn't think for himself?

Yes, Jerry learned to speak but, as his daughter said years later, "at what cost?"