

honorable mention, fiction

The Color of Music

by Mel Finefrock

for Ben

I've never seen so much as a wink of light in my life. I was born prematurely, and the lack of oxygen flow to my brain during my birth completely destroyed my optic nerve. My blindness hasn't stopped me, though. My parents embraced the situation readily, and I had a great support system at school. I was also known for running and playing with wild abandon as a girl, and can be expected to engage in similar bursts of energy even now, at the ripe old age of twenty.

My favorite thing to do when I was little, though, was to spy on people. If I was interested enough in something, my attention span could last for hours. I could lie under the bushes in front of my house all day with a Braille book, a doll, a blanket, and a travel thermos of Kool-Aid and listen to the birds, the bugs, the cars, and the people all bustling about. Sometimes, I'd hone in on a good game of pretend among the Baker siblings across the street or a fight between the older boys on the corner. I'd hear many a good wipe-out on bikes and skateboards and would appear on scene, screaming for my mom to come out and help. But of all these guilty pleasures, my favorite was eavesdropping on the gossip of love-struck preteen girls and fantasizing about when I'd finally fall in love.

One steamy August afternoon when I was six, a new family began moving in next door to me. My parents were quick to help unload boxes from the moving van, but they wouldn't let me so much as lift a finger. At a loss for what to do, I sulked over to my bushes and set up camp, and Samantha the Spy was at it again. I heard two new voices--one male, one female. They were both shy and quiet. I was hoping they had a kid I could sucker into playing with me before everyone else got to him or her, but no such luck, or so it sounded.

That's when I felt a slightly larger hand clamp on my shoulder. I screamed in fear and lurched from my crouching position, promptly spilling my drink and giving the bush a cherry Kool-Aid bath. The intruder took the thermos from my hands and set it gently down on its base in the dirt. I guessed that it was a boy, because he was taller than me. But then again, most people were and still are.

He grabbed my wrists frantically and began gesticulating wildly, though I had no idea why. He never said anything, and finally I put two and two together that something wasn't quite right. By this time, my mom rushed over, with the new lady at her heels, to explain what was going on.

"Sam, this is Dakota," Mom chirped. "He and his parents are going to be our new neighbors! Isn't that exciting? I told Mr. and Mrs. McGregor you two might like to play."

"Mommy, why is he moving my arms?" I asked.

"He's deaf. He speaks sign language," Mrs. McGregor chimed in. "We warned him you couldn't see, so he thinks that if he holds your wrists while he signs, you'll understand what he's saying."

"What is he saying?" I rasped.

"Easy, Dakota," Mrs. McGregor laughed, catching his left hand. "You'll break her arms. She doesn't know sign language like you do." Then, turning to me, she said, "Here, I'll translate."

Via his mother, Dakota said to me, "Hi! I'm Dakota, your new neighbor. What's your name? Would you like to play? Can we be friends? I hope you can understand me!"

A short but profound silence descended upon us then. Something about Dakota's enthusiasm touched even my six-year-old heart.

"Can you translate for me?" I asked Mrs. McGregor.

"Of course," she replied. "Go for it."

"My name's Samantha, but you can call me Sam," I began, a little shy at first. "I'd love to be your friend, and yes, I'd like to play. And I can't understand you yet, but I will."

We took a break for lunch, and Dakota and his parents explained to me how people in deaf culture give others names, rather than spelling them out alphabetically. Dakota made a name for me right on the spot, which was a jumping letter S to symbolize my infectious energy. His, he both explained and demonstrated, was the letter D incorporated into the word "friend," since that was what his name meant. I was instantly intrigued and glad to have a new friend.

Dakota was a year my senior, so he always looked out for me at school. I showed him around initially, since the campus was known territory to me, but he always played with me at recess, walked me home, and warded off bullies who didn't understand that even though I was different on the outside, I was just like anyone else on the inside. We were practically inseparable, always holding hands whether he was guiding me or not. Everyone thought we were an item, but we knew nothing of such things just yet. Even with all that daydreaming I'd done about Prince Charming in the past, I had no idea that Love was right in front of my face and I literally couldn't see him. But we had fun just the same, basking in our friendship and childish innocence.

Dakota and I had many ways of communicating. He could read lips fairly well, so I could taunt him from across the room if I wanted to. He also used an augmentative communication device in school, which spoke aloud whatever he typed into it. I taught him basic Braille, and genius that he was, he caught on right away. In turn, he showed me the manual alphabet in sign language so that we could communicate in shorthand without anyone else knowing what we were saying. We liked the secrecy of it, because we could technically pass notes in class without even breaking out a sheet of notebook paper.

One rainy afternoon when I was in third grade and Dakota was in fourth, his mom made a quick grocery run and left the house under our care. Dakota had the bright idea to have me scream in his ear as loud as I possibly could.

“But you won’t be able to hear me,” I pounded into his hand in protest.

He didn’t bother spelling please.” Instead, he took both my hands and placed them on his ear. It was final.

I screamed. He didn’t hear, of course. We went on with our day, constructing and demolishing Lego castles, and I wondered if the whole ordeal saddened him. I wondered, as our masterpieces fell to tiny plastic smithereens, if he mourned the inability to hear the hollow, shattering sound they made.

And yet, I had battles of my own to fight with regard to my disability. One day after summer school, Dakota marched in the door with a picture he’d drawn for me instead of paying attention to math, which was the reason he had to go to summer school in the first place. How did I know it was a picture? My mom went ape-crazy over it, was how I knew. In fact, according to various sources, Dakota was quite the young artist. When he slapped it jauntily down onto the table next to my half-eaten peanut butter crackers and Kool-aid, I wasn’t sure how to react. We’d known each other for three years now, and he thought I might be able to see a picture, just the way he’d hoped he’d be able to hear me screaming in his ear? Dakota was a dreamer, that was for sure.

“What did you draw for me?” I spelled into his eager palm.

“A rose,” he responded. “Can you see it? I colored it in really bright.”

To satisfy his curiosity, I held the paper up close to my face, straining to see what was etched on its surface. Shaking my head sadly, I placed it gently back onto the tabletop.

“Then I’ll tell you what it looks like,” he began.

This rose, Dakota said, was in full bloom and was a soft hue of pink, which he compared to the pink fleece blanket I had in my room. Its stem was long and elegant and green, which he said was like the smell of freshly-mowed grass in the summer. He was careful to remind me of the punishing sting of its thorns, which I’d experienced many a time during my rosebush spy excursions. Mom and Dad had ripped out the old, leafy ones the previous summer and replaced them with thorny pink roses, because they wanted to wean me of my quirky, undercover ways. He then proceeded to snatch a knife from my mom’s hand and cut a rose from one of the bushes in the front yard, for tactile feedback. The picture, as well as the rose, are ranked among the most valuable things I own. From then on, we did our best to show each other our worlds. More than ever before, Dakota was my eyes and I was his ears. He explained to me that he had hair like sand and eyes like the ocean, whereas I had hair like night and eyes like the moon. I took the liberty of giving account to sound--the whisper of trees in the wind, the heart-moving harmonies in music, and even the more discordant sounds, like nails on a chalkboard.

When I turned ten, Dakota gave me the best birthday present I've ever received. I had no idea, but he asked his mom to teach him how to say my name. He made involuntary noises from time to time, but had never uttered a single word in his life, not "Mama" or "Dada" as a baby or even his own name. My name will never hold the same meaning again; the way it rolled off his tongue will stick with me forever. Sometimes when we'd play Legos or Braille Scrabble, he'd inasmuch sing my name to himself, almost as if he was afraid he'd forget how to say it.

Things took an interesting turn when I was sixteen. One afternoon, we were sitting over Kool-Aid and algebra in Dakota's bedroom when I heard him slam his calculator down with a pensive sigh. I knew something was up, but waited for him to speak.

"Samantha," he said aloud, then reached across the desk to intercept my hands as they dutifully read Braille without really reading at all.

"Yes?" I answered, as if he would hear me.

"Everyone says you have the voice of an angel," he wrote. "I know I can't hear you, but I have this insane urge to try anyway. At the very least, I want to feel you."

My heart sputtered for a moment, then jolted back into motion. I let go of his hands, stood up, pushed in my chair, and crossed to his side of the table. Again I took his hand and led him to his bed, where we both perched nervously on its edge. Then, he placed both hands gently about my neck and laid his head on my chest as I sang "You Are So Beautiful to Me." At first, I started out weak and shaky, but with each note I felt my voice rise above me, bounce off the walls, and hit me right back in the face. I heard the door creak ajar and knew his mom had come to investigate the presence of music in her deaf son's room. When I finished, the most deafening silence fell upon us, even more profound than the one that passed when Dakota and I first met. In that moment, as I wiped away his tears that now saturated my shirt, I wondered ever so slightly if silence was even close to the nothingness that pervaded his eardrums, or if, in itself, it was a sound. And, more importantly, I felt a wild pang of love and compassion rising from within. I realized now, all the playing and caring and learning and communicating and sharing we'd done had only been the path that led me to fall head over heels in love with him, even more severely than I might stumble over a hazardous obstruction in the halls at school.

That was when he began to spell.

"I am such a wretch!" he hammered away furiously. "To be graced by the mere vibrations of your voice is a most precious gift, and yet I still selfishly grieve the absence of its audible melodies and yearn to connect them with the colors I see inside you and out."

Dakota was by no means a schoolboy, but he was definitely a genius. His eloquence stunned me for a moment, and then the floodgates opened. His hand rested patiently in mine, waiting in expectance of my answer. I had no light to shed, other than to beg the question,

"Music has color?"