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Goucher College Fiction Workshop
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Static, Rumble, Jazz

By Madison Mattison

We sat in the newly refurbished theater, filling out the first few rows from the stage. Distant chatter carried throughout, but to me it was a chaotic cluster of noise. I took my hearing aid out, wanting to sit in the quiet with voices now far away until the director arrived. I spent the time we had to wait reading through comics on my phone looking up occasionally to see that more people had gathered. My feet were kicked up on the seat in front of me and my back was comfortably reclined. Soon in the reflection of my phone a shadow seemed to hover above me. I looked up to see a girl smiling down, holding onto the straps of her bookbag.

She smiled cheerfully, too cheerfully. I watched her lips move picking up only a few words which were: “Can...next... you?”

I quickly put together that she wanted the seat next to me, but I pretended not to know what she was saying by waving my hands up to my ears and shaking my head.

Her face wore confusion for a few seconds until her eyes fell on my shoulder, spotting my hearing aid resting there.

Her hands then moved gently in the air as she gave the sign for 'sorry' and then 'sit'. I had no control of the shock and general annoyance I had. This usually doesn't happen I can usually get away with faking it, but I couldn't with her.

Before I was able to respond everyone scattered and rushed to their seats. The both of us looked up to where the director was marching in on the stage, clapping his hands together. The girl pushed past me, forcing my legs back to the ground and my body to lean forward. Now sitting upright, making room for her while saving my legs my aid fell to the floor. I shuffled my hands around the dust and grains, in search of the device. Once my hand was around it, I brought it up to my lap to dust it off before putting it back behind my ear.

I glanced over quickly to the stranger beside me, who was focused and engaged on what I could now hear the director saying. I turned my attention back to the stage.

"Welcome all! It is such a joy to have you all here to help us with the spring presentation for our graduating seniors this year. We have a lot to accomplish in a little bit of time, but I thought today we start with some icebreakers and team building exercises," he sang cheerfully.

At the time I didn't know what Mr. Keshner had written on his sheet of paper and what roles we were all assigned to. I had no idea that for the rest of the semester I'd be stuck with the girl beside me. Though, when Mr. Keshner called us all up to the stage for our first icebreaker, we were the last on stage, so we were partners. I had an inkling as I looked a little too long in this stranger's eyes that she'd be hard to get rid of.

Our first exercise was a super cliché experience in any theater department or group: to mirror each other.

“I’m Nina,” she signed without words.

“I can hear you now,” I said without signage.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Isaiah,” I said and sign.

She smiled.

We began the exercise. I followed her lead, noticing she’s much better at this than I am. At first, I was sloppy, and she was almost surgical – doing everything I did while I was doing it. It felt as if she knew what I was going to do, as if she was in my head. When Mr. Kesher called time, I let out the breath of air I’d been holding in. We were released after another short exercise and about twenty minutes of a logistics run through – when rehearsals were, our responsibilities and assignments.

He ended with assignments and when my name was called next to Nina’s, I felt myself sinking down a little in my seat. We found each other’s faces from opposite ends of the room, hers wearing a smile that was true, and mine hiding behind a nonchalant nod. Something about Nina intimidated me. I wasn’t sure if it was the fact that she was maybe a half inch taller than me or that she moved with this energy and knew where she was, knew who she was.

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I was able to easily get Nina off my mind on the way home through the busy city hoping from train to bus. In my room, I sat at my overcrowded desk, pushing aside pages torn out of my notebook, pens left with no ink and other gadgets I’d collected over

the week. I made room for my laptop. Its old battery ran, the fan vrooming harshly, leaving my desk hot. I scrolled down what felt like an endless web page full of sneakers in different colors and designs. Under my feet were the strong bass and vibrations of the music coming from my speaker.

I spent the next two hours putting together my dream cart – \$1400 and two customizations. I looked over my shoulder to investigate the strange energy I felt of someone watching me, and saw my sister in the doorway. She hadn't been there long; her work uniform was still on, and her tired eyes seemed to wander around the poster filled walls before landing on me.

'Your music loud,' she signed. I reached over and twisted the round knob to where I could barely feel the beat.

'Didn't know you liked M.e.t.a.l.i.c.a,' she added when I turned back to face her.

I shook my head. 'I don't, I like that song,' I signed back.

She turned her head out to the hall as her ears perked up. "Mom wants you," she informed me when she turned her head back.

My eyes dropped to the floor. It took a couple of deep breaths to muster the energy to reach for my hearing aid and walk downstairs. My sister and I went opposite directions when I joined her in the hall. I had only wished she followed behind me.

My mother stood in the hall before the mirror, fully dressed in her uniform for her second job. She wore it with this outwardness, rubbing in the stress of leaving one shift to go the next.

"I asked you to take the trash out, and when I get home in the morning those dishes in the sink better not be there," she said, barely looking in my direction.

I nodded.

“Hello?” she asked.

“I heard you, mom,” I said. “I’ll take care of it.”

She stood and watched my face for some time, slowly softening her eyes.

“How was school?” The expression she wore was full of concern and worry. I shrugged, allowing no expression on my face. I couldn’t let her know that it was different. That things had changed, and the large group of people I once called my friends had all separated and got scattered. That during lunch the long stretched out table that was once overcrowded with all of us stacked on top of each other is now where they keep the trash bins.

“It was okay,” I settle with to help ease her doubts.

Thinking about it, I quickly remembered how we abandoned our trays, slid them to the side and made room for a show. Everyone bounced to the drumming I made on the table and the songs of others. No one knew then that what I heard sounded like it was fighting its way through from behind a closed door. Now the noise sounds even further away from the other side of the door.

I could tell she didn’t believe me because her eyes narrowed. Before she was able to respond her head turned back towards the hall.

“They called me to check in. Have you been struggling?”

“No,” I stated defensively, unsure of what I’d be struggling with.

“You still need to prove to me that going back to this school was a good idea.” I watched her lips move with a sharpness that cut into her pride. I knew in some ways deep in the corners of her mind she hoped she was right – that I couldn’t handle it.

“It was a good idea – you don't have anything to worry about.”

“I need to go, or I'm going to be late for work,” she said, not acknowledging my words of assurance. She grabbed her purse and headed towards the door. I stood there in the hall with my arms hanging at my side, and watched the door shut behind her. Didn't she know that I was trying?

I never understood my mom's worry about me returning to my performing arts school. I thought that now I had a hearing aid to help me make out the world around me a little bit better she would stress less. She had seen how unhappy I was at my old school. How annoyed I was at the sign interpreter who was always on her phone and when she did sign it looked like she was fighting off early onset arthritis. I didn't feel myself at that school--, it felt like something was wrong with me. I wanted to go back to the music and the people who had different colored hair and weird styles of fashion.

Why couldn't she accept that?

Monday on my way to lunch I was greeted by the faces I used to surround myself with. but now our interactions have been reduced to a head nod or high five while we're still in motion. I sat myself at a table away from the crowds with my hearing aid out enjoying the calmness of the static that buzzed in my left ear. I was halfway into biting into my apple when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to see Nina yet again standing over me.

'Your shoes I like,' she signed and pointed at the kicks.

I nodded. She took the seat across from me uninvited. I watched as she sat down and unpacked her lunch. I looked around the room in search of anyone else who

would be watching what's happening. She pulled out a variation of vegan snacks and began munching on them. She pulled out her phone and started typing before she turned the screen towards me.

"So where are you from? You look familiar," I read from her notes app. I placed my hearing aid back in my ear to keep her from typing.

"I just transferred back." I kept it simple.

"Oh. That makes sense."

"Yeah," I responded plainly, encouraging the conversation to end.

She was silent for a few seconds, and I became hopeful.

"Did you hang out with a large crowd freshman year?"

I wondered about the relevance of her question before nodding softly.

"Yeah! You guys used to make a whole lot of noise in the cafeteria! What happened?" Her eyebrows fixed in a way which I read as condescending, but it honestly could've just been her face.

"Different lunch periods and classes I guess."

"So how long have you been deaf?" she asked. There was no introduction, just the bluntness of the question she had been wanting to ask all along.

"I'm not... profoundly deaf yet," I answered.

"Yet?"

"Yeah, eventually I won't be able to hear even with this aid." I said gesturing up to my ear.

"My dad's deaf. That's how I know how to sign," she shared, then added quietly, "If you wonder how."

I nodded, keeping my words reserved.

“What’s your concentration?” she asked, stabbing her straw into her boxed apple juice.

“Music, percussion to be exact.”

“Cool. Mine is theater,” she said with wide wondrous eyes.

I nodded. *I could tell.*

“What made you wanna help out with the spring production?” She asked, chomping down on a carrot.

I shrugged. “I just wanted to.”

Her eyes narrowed and she nodded her head suspiciously.

She was pretty, but in a strange way. Her eyebrows were overcrowded, yet refined in these fierce arches that made her narrowing look evermore judgmental. I found myself getting sucked in, lost, searching for myself in her large black eyes. Her face was oddly clear compared to all the other sixteen-year-olds I knew and she never wore makeup aside from the occasional gloss. The only thing that took up space were the small specks of freckles that were sprinkled about. Her hair hung, reaching her shoulders, and wrapped around itself, decorated with shells and jewels and not fully locked yet. Halfway through lunch she put just the front up in a messy knot, so it wasn’t all in her face.

I rolled my eyes, forcing my thoughts off her. The bell rang just in time, releasing me from my seat. I grabbed my drumsticks and tray and left before Nina could chase after me.

As I had expected it was hard to shake her. I saw much of her around campus, around the cafeteria during lunch, and of course at rehearsals. When working together our conversations were brief, but she had a way of making them carry for longer than they needed to.

Though after we'd spent some time in the booth the awkwardness subsided. Even though she would find ways to slip in questions about why I chose to spend my time alone despite knowing many people. I found easy ways of escaping her moments of psychoanalyzing me and direct the attention back on her.

"So why Drama?" I would ask. She loved talking about her dreams. Had a way of painting them in the air above her head in many colors. Thoughts of emotion and flashing lights, being on a stage with someone like her in the audience with the same dream, beaming.

There were a few times we would laugh together at how frantically Mr. Kesher moved back and forth on the stage. At lunch she gave me a reason for keeping in my hearing aid, which I didn't mind. And after rehearsals we'd walk to the train station together before parting ways.

Soon she intimidated me less. I didn't mind when our conversations lingered on to where Mr. Kesher had to clap his hands and tell us to refocus.

She leaned over pressing her head into my shoulder, and I let out a snort.

"Okay everyone! Great job. Next week will be tech week, so expect you to come and perform at your best."

"More like hell week," Nina wrote down and showed me.

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After I got off my train, I dragged my feet home. I took the long way avoiding the quick commute. It was the first warm day from the cold winter months. I wanted to feel the breeze blow through my shirt for as long as I could. I entered the house, greeted with a familiar scent of expensive cologne mingled with my mom's cooking. I felt the warmth growing inside as I excitedly turned the corner into the living room. I saw my uncle seated on the couch and my mother standing before the wall of family photos that lined the walls. Our faces lit up at the sight of each other.

My uncle, like my father, was a traveling musician, and even through our closeness I didn't see much of him. Some of my favorite memories are when I was young, and he and my father would teach me music tirelessly. Before my hearing started to fade my dad had this desire to teach me music. How to listen to it, how to play it, and most importantly how to feel it.

It started with a tickling of the keys and learning of certain chords. One day together they took me to a music store and told me to pick an instrument. I lifted up two sticks, both different sizes and neither the right size for me at the time. My father laughed, gently correcting the size of the sticks and from there the beating began. I followed the tempo of my heart, and that rumble became my favorite sound until it became my favorite feeling.

"How are you?" my uncle signed.

"Good," I responded with a shrug.

"Just good?" He teased me by bringing his arms up to my shoulders.

"How's the tour going?" I asked.

“One more show Thursday night,” he answered. I saw over his shoulder beside the couch his sax. The idea started brewing in me and when I looked up at him and asked about it, I could see his eagerness too.

“You brought your sax?”

“Take it with me everywhere I go.”

“We should play!” I was enthused.

“I accept nothing’ less,” he said, holding his arms wide out. He took a step back and reached down to unbuckle the case. I dropped my bag, pulling my drumsticks out.

“Isaiah, don’t you have homework?” my mother said interrupting the jam session that was about to take place.

“I did everything already,” I answered, which was the first time I was honest when it came to playing before homework.

“Well then go freshen up and set the table for dinner-- your sister will be home soon. Y’all can play after.”

I couldn’t understand the resistance in my mother’s eyes, but I put my sticks back for the time being and left the room silently.

After we cleared the table and cleaned the sticky barbecue off, our hands, the living room welcomed us back. While my mother cleaned, she allowed us to play. My Uncle with his sax, my sister at the keys and me rumbling on the drums. My uncle started with a tap on the piano, setting the tempo for me. I followed and just felt everything else.

Our jazz started off slow, me leading this time, my sister soon followed and then my uncle. We talked to each other with those instruments, checking in, edging on,

debating. My uncle took the loudest voice for some time, with the agreement of my sister and me. I grew louder, and my uncle welcomed me. My sister was the moderator, keeping us steady and on track in the background. My opinions were thunderous as my drum rumbled and bass boomed, growing louder and with each round more aggressive. My sister played a little louder, telling me to stay calm. I brought more peace. She was quiet again and my uncle came back in with the bright side of things, as he always does.

What felt like twenty minutes to us was a century to my mother. She came in, the kitchen and dining room spotless. Not having any more to clean, she inserted her presence, which told us to wrap up. My uncle looked down at his watch and pretended it was late and that he had to go.

“Five more minutes, mom,” I pleaded.

She shook her head. “You have school tomorrow.”

My sister had already excused herself, having to get up early for work.

I sighed and placed my drums back out of the way. I gave my uncle a tight squeeze, wishing he could stay longer.

I kissed my mom good night on the cheek and left the room.

Halfway up the stairs, just as I reached up to take my hearing aid out, something kept me in that stairwell, just to linger for a few more moments.

“Why were you so tough on him?”

“I was not tough, he has school.”

“That’s not what I mean. You give him such a hard time. He just wants to play music.”

“Music isn't everything.”

“You twenty years ago wouldn't be saying that.”

“Well, that's the thing, it was twenty years ago.”

“Don't you remember what it felt like?”

“What, all those nights Oscar was on the road. The few months at a time he was here with the children? How I was alone having to raise them, having to face what Isaiah has to go through, alone.”

“You were not alone, and Isaiah is fine.”

“You're not here Lou. You don't get to tell me my boy is fine.”

I lost some of what they said as their voices went to a whisper, or their steps got further away from me. I could just feel my heart against my chest.

“Well, I don't want him to end up like Oscar!” That was a shout. “And I don't want him to be different, because then people will treat him different.”

I removed my hearing aid and rushed to my room before the stinging in my eyes amounted to much. I turned on my music and blasted Metallica so loud that I could feel it from my bed. I let those vibrations rock me to sleep.

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The next day it rained, which was fitting for my mood. All the way up until practice I just dwelled on my mother's words. I started plotting out ways I could show her I wasn't as much of an outsider as she thought I was.

At rehearsal Nina and I sat in the booth, testing out the equipment that had been out of use for some time.

“Hey, are you okay?” she asked leaning over to where I could see her face.

I nodded.

“I can take the sound if you wanna do lights,” she offered. She was making me feel incapable. Which I knew wasn’t her intention, but I had pride.

“As long as this is in”, I pointed to my aid. “I can hear fine. Besides, eventually I’ll just pick up the cues.”

“Okay, I just thought-”

“I’m good.”

Silence came in quickly and sat in the room with us. Sometimes I felt it was my closest friend, always coming to my rescue. A lullaby of static that soothed the burning of my ears.

The rest of rehearsal we were silent, only speaking up to update each other on the status of the equipment.

I carried the grey cloud I’d had all day with me after rehearsal, even though the sun came out and Nina was soaking its rays in her skin.

“I love it right after it rains, don’t you?” she said, spinning out and following behind me. I walked faster than usual, ignoring her.

“Isaiah, what is your problem?” she asked as we reached the corner.

“Can you please leave me alone!” I yelled.

Nina took a step back, her eyes lowered.

“I don't need you always hovering over me! I have other friends, I'm not a loner. If I am it's by choice because I like it! I like being alone, and I like silence. I much rather prefer the humming in my ear without this,” I snatched my hearing aid out, “Than you yapping around me all the time. I'm not your charity case so stop feeling sorry for me!”

Her lips remained pressed together for some time. Her eyebrows were wrinkled upon her forehead.

“For the record, I never felt sorry for you. Maybe I do now,” she said.

“You do realize I can't hear you!” I said back.

She was now angry.

She backed up holding up both her middle fingers.

A few days later, for the first time in a while I did feel alone. I kept my hearing aid out during lunch, but I wished I needed it, and that I had a reason for wearing it.

...

Monday came around and I was back in the booth; alone for some time before Nina arrived. She dropped her bag and flopped down in the chair on wheels that rolled back ever so slightly, not even acknowledging me. I disliked not being seen, but I knew that it was my fault her shoulders were cold towards me. Nina had seen a friend in me and that was something I couldn't see in myself.

I turned to her. She was already focused on the lighting board and ready for the action on stage to begin. I pressed my hand gently onto her arm and she looked at me, her eyes judging me like before.

I sign to her, “I'm sorry for being a jerk.”

She took time to search my eyes. After rolling hers, she put her hands out in front of her, palms facing her stomach and moved them back and forth a couple of times.

“Whatever,” she signed, but just before looking away she tugged at the corner of her lips, telling me that she could forgive me and would eventually get over how I yelled. I smiled down at the soundboard feeling this growing warmth in my chest.

Taking her cue from the stage and the orchestra below, Nina dimmed the house lights. I pressed a button to unmute a mic and the sounds of narrations swirling with the hum of a violin was a symphony playing in my ears. For the first time in a long time I was pleased, happy to hear something other than the sound of the static buzzing faintly, happy I could hear what Nina could hear and for a moment live in her world.