

Xs and Os

by Tawnysha Greene

When we go up the mountain to see Daddy's sister, her church is bigger than I remember, and she points out the new covered walkway, new structure built at the back of the sanctuary. The new building is where the little kids go and Momma takes me, my brother down the new hallway lined with white walls, scribbled pictures of a shepherd and his sheep by each doorway, some pages with names beneath, some without names at all.

It's my turn to take care of my brother, and when we get to the room where the five-year-olds are, the teacher is a lady I've not seen before. She wears glasses, a blue dress, and smiles at Momma who speaks to her quietly, nods at my brother, me. I don't hear what she says, but I know, because she says the same thing to everyone, that my brother is deaf, that he needs me to stay to tell the teacher what he says, what she says back.

My brother doesn't talk, doesn't sign, never has, but I don't tell the teacher these things. I don't tell her that the real reason is that Momma's afraid, of the teacher, the other kids, that something will happen and nothing will be said. Momma paused when I asked her about it once after church, her fingers lingering over a cup of tea, seeping the bag in the water for a long time, her eyes down. "I don't think he could tell me," said Momma. "I don't think he could tell me if something was wrong."

At our church back home, I sit with my brother in a circle as the teacher reads stories, sings songs. When the kids play Simon Says, my brother doesn't know what to do and I steer him in the right direction, point, nod, resist the urge to sign, words silent, locked at my sides. We can't sign to my brother—Daddy doesn't allow it.

Momma used to sign to my sister, me, before my brother was born. We went to the doctor when my sister was three. When Daddy came home, Momma lay the hearing tests out, marked with Xs and Os, lines connecting them low across the bottom of the page.

I am forty percent deaf in the left ear, sixty in the right. My sister, completely deaf, both ears. We watch a movie in the den while Momma tells Daddy in the kitchen. They can still be normal, she says, knowing my sister can't hear, forgetting I can. She puts a hand to his head, but he bats it away, goes down the hall, shuts the door.

I watch Momma talk to the teacher now as I take my brother to a long wooden table where the other kids sit on yellow plastic chairs, color pictures of Jesus on a mountain in front of a crowd, in his hands, fish and bread that he raises to God. Momma tells the teacher why I am here, puts her right hand to her ear, hand formed in a D, but catches herself before her hand reaches her mouth. She does this sometimes, signs without meaning to when talking to other people.

I open the box of markers, pick out the red and blue ones, ones my brother likes best and pass them to him, point to the blank drawing, and he takes them in a fist, makes wide scribbles that go beyond the page. The classroom my sister and I used to go to—the place we learned to sign—was like this room. A bulletin board on the wall, stars by everyone's name. Black bins of blocks by the doors. A mural on the wall by the windows. The one in the classroom we went to was of smiling children standing in a line, hands out in front of them, forefingers interlocked, a sign we learn to mean "friend." Here, the mural is of Jesus who sits on a rock, smiles down at children who kneel, lie silent at his feet.

We had gone to the class for nine months, just before my brother was born, until the one time Daddy came with us. Momma pointed out our paintings on the walls, the signs we had learned, but when Daddy saw our friends, their wheelchairs, braces on their legs, he left, waited for us in the car, then when Momma drove us home, ran his hands through his hair the way he does when they talk about bills, saying, disabled, retarded, stupid.

The teacher doesn't say any of these words as she brings a little girl to our table, but she stares at my brother's big scrawls on the page, the low, discordant moans he makes when he reaches for the markers he wants, but can't reach. The girl watches, too, as she

lays her page out, colors in the lines, and when she reaches for one of the red pens, the ones my brother has in a pile, he shrieks, moans that turn to howls. She shrinks from him, steps back, the red marker in her hand and I touch his arm, his face, turn it back to me, to the page, the markers he has left. He screams, flaps his arms, bangs the table, and the girl stares, rooted to her spot as the teacher, other kids start to look, too.

I put my chair by his, pull him close, blow on his face, so he closes his eyes, takes a breath. Leaning close to his face, I shush him like I had seen Momma do, forcing my breath out, so that he can feel it against his skin. I do it more, closer, and smell him, a smell of milk, slightly sour, and the lotion Momma uses that smells of sugar on his skin. He quiets and I stroke his head, take the last red marker out of the box, press it in his hand, fold it closed.

My brother rests his head against me and I look up at the girl, still staring, at the other kids, too, try to smile the way Momma does when people look, watch us in the grocery store, at my brother's strained noises, his attempted words different from theirs, ours. I turn his body away from them, back to the drawing, point to it, pick up a marker to draw, too, and he starts to scribble again, colors the spaces, gaps that are left.

I stare at the lines he's made, the red on the page, the blue he's colored over. Jesus, the crowd, the fish and bread are muddled now and I hold the page down to stop it from moving as my brother colors, too hard. The page feels wet under my hand, and when I lift it to see, there is a red stain on my palm where the ink bled through. My brother's fingers are discolored, too, and as he continues to scrawl, I touch the stain with my other hand and expect the ink to smear, but it stays, the ink already dry in the grooves of my skin.

