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Limitations

Charlie Griggs

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Limitations

Her son fails the hearing test at the hospital after he's born. The second man to let her down in half as many years. Where is Dad? Did he take their son's hearing when he left?

She can't be angry at this baby. His eyes aren't even open yet – look at his father's nose – and she could coo his name, she does, she whispers it to him, certain he's going to turn, open his eyes, look at her. It's going to be okay. It's all going to be okay.

The staff take him back and she's alternately numb and in excruciating pain. Look what you've done. Look what you've done. She'll never have the chance to tell him that. Which one? Father or son? I did this, it was me, I did.

She falls asleep, still sweating, still furious. Tomorrow she'll hold him again and she'll whisper his name and he'll cry but he won't hear his own name, his own anguish.

They gave her something. Her eyes close and she imagines her son looks nothing like her.

**

The hearing aids are ineffective. So what? What does that mean? Well, there are other options, has she considered a cochlear implant? It could help. Really, a lot of hearing parents with deaf children find it to be just the best option hands-down. Hands-down, the otologist says. He was referred by her family practitioner, the one whom she visits occasionally to check-up on her diabetes.

Her parents help pay for the implant without her asking. Even as an adult, she receives a weekly allowance. There's a hospital wing dedicated to her father. Neither money nor work are issues.

It's habit now that the child watches her lips when she speaks. After the surgery, his imitations of the movements her mouth makes, his formless ululations, begin to strengthen, to sound closer to the real words.

His mother is ecstatic. It worked!

Right after he was born, she bought books on American Sign Language and reasoned that she'd learn to speak with him that way. But her fingers were knobby, probably from too many years of cracking her knuckles. She struggled with the alphabet, her ugly, clumsy digits tracing and re-tracing the same twenty-six signs, or close approximations thereof, to herself in the mirror night after night until the frustration fermented.

Shelving the ASL books, it was time to try out the hearing aids. During those weeks of speaking clearly – loudly, she'll even admit – into his face, hoping that he would hear anything, anxiety and guilt pressed into her each time she passed that book case with its colorful spines advertising the same painful, finger-cramping acronym. When she finally conceded that the aids didn't work, she boxed them up with the ASL books and her guilt and pitched them all up into the attic, allowing the retractable staircase to creak one final admonition before confronting the topic of cochlear implants.

It takes a couple weeks, but his speech improves. It's a miracle, she cries into her pillow one night. The pillowcase smells like her shampoo and she keeps shifting her face against its material trying to find spots where her tears haven't soaked through and the scent remains.

But his verbal improvements plateau and she becomes concerned.

The boy is still young, the otologist tells her. He's still learning to recognize speech patterns, lip movements – this isn't a bad thing. He's smart. He's a smart boy. But the implant hasn't worked, that's all. This isn't the end. The deaf community is tightly knit. He's going to be okay.

Surgery is scheduled; they remove the implant. There's a scar over his right ear. The otologist says it won't be visible when the hair grows back.

They work on reading together. First he'll look at the page, absorb the symbols, the corresponding drawings. Next he'll watch her lips as she reads it to him and then he'll try to re-read it imitating the movements with his own mouth. It's a success. The boy learns to read, slowly at first, but, like the otologist said, he's quick, he's a smart boy.

**

Springtime and the boy has just turned five. There's a party, mother and son, a few of her friends from the church she attends infrequently. Her parents were invited and, as expected, sent only an apology and a check for the boy's college fund.

The church friends' children have been instructed to speak clearly and look her boy in the eye when interacting. She's provided balls – soccer, football, bocce – because language isn't the only way to communicate and as for social interaction? It's an area in which he's been desperately lacking. So, here he is, set up in the backyard with a group of five other children, none of whom he knows outside of his mother's pre- and post-mass chit-chats with her friends, during which time the kids are left alone at their parents' knees to entertain themselves. It's a start. She hopes today he can really build something, through sports or whatever.

There's a banner with his name on it suspended above the back deck. Underneath are two coolers, blue for the children, red for the adults. The picnic table is covered by a bumblebee tablecloth, as if by inviting the caricature, the real thing might stay away. A breeze threatens, but bottles of red wine, breathing at each corner of the table, keep the cloth pinned down. The grill smokes. One of her friend's husbands has agreed to cook the turkey dogs and veggie patties.

The children roll bocce balls across the lawn to one another. Her son is laughing on the grass as he catches one of the toys with the seam of his pants and propels it from between his legs to one of the other kids sitting on his knees, clapping in anticipation.

You're doing all you can, really, one of her friends tells her, gently shaking her by the elbow to capture her attention.

With school starting in the fall – I'm worried is all, she says, gulping Syrah.

A second friend speaks up, You need to contact them, see? Right away. And here's what you do: you let them know the situation, tell them – here's what you say: the boy needs a translator, someone who can sign to him in class or

–

A sigh hisses through front teeth; clutching hands cramp.

Right, the second friend says. I'm sorry, that's right. The signing. I forgot.

It's tough, she says, wrenching knobby knuckles.

A situation like this, the first friend says, always is. You really should come to mass more often. There's support there; it's a network and we're there and God's there and you should be too. Especially, the first friend gestures across the lawn to the boy, in a situation like this.

I'll try again, she says. I can learn it. I can teach it to him. It'll be better that way.

It'll be better, the second friend says.

We're here, the first friend says.

He's learned how to read, how to write – and so fast, too, she says.

He's smart, the first friend agrees.

A really bright specimen, the second one says, not like my little shit.

To that they toast, finishing their drinks.

Her eyes drift back across the picnic table with its plate of grilled meat and meat substitutes and skim over the lip of a bottle of malbec, they glance down the deck's stairs, and bound into the lawn, tracing the path of a low-arcing soccer ball as her son catches it in his chest, stumbling back a step before regaining control and clumsily passing the ball off with the side of his foot.

The boy is gifted and with his reading and his writing and now this – sports! An athlete! She had no idea. Is signing really a priority right now? Can't it wait until school starts? That way at least he'll be receiving instruction from someone who knows, really knows, what they're doing.

Can't they wait until school starts?

She decides they can.

**

Summer is busy. They read. He writes. She calls the local elementary school about setting up an aid for the boy, someone who can teach him ASL, relate what the teacher says to him. The deaf school is seventy-five minutes away, otherwise she'd enroll him there. This is going to be all right. He'll fit in fine.

And what will she do with her free time once the boy is out of the house every day? She doesn't need work. What did she do before the boy was born? Well, that was different, see, because his father hadn't left yet. . . Hobbies. She'll need hobbies.

So, when the boy is off writing or reading on his own or on a play-date with one of the other church kids, she's busy trying out all sorts of new crafts, exploring all manner of new interests.

She begins knitting. Again clumsy fingers disappoint.

Next up, she researches aerobics classes because it's not that she's out of shape per se, but children can change a woman's body and self-improvement, it's really a must, isn't it?

Hasn't she been trying to convey that same message to her son? It couldn't hurt, especially with the whole diabetes thing.

Workout DVDs begin piling up around the home entertainment system. Of the dozen or so she orders, she watches all twelve (sometimes putting on the subtitles and letting the boy join her) and actually tries four of them. One of them she completes. Twice.

Around the time she realizes that the home workout DVDs are probably not going to be used as frequently as she almost wants, the boy begins asking her for art supplies. Having never been much of a painter herself, she feels slighted. Why is it that everything has to come back to these fingers? His so adroit and yearning for more, more language, more expression; hers so gnarled and helpless and only wanting to be left unchallenged, unmocked.

Together on the sofa, her ankles crossed and perched on the corner of the coffee table, his feet dangling off the edge of the leather cushion, she's said no twice already.

Mom, please, he writes in a spiral notepad, *colored pencils or watercolors, that's all*. Writing is easier for the boy. Though his language skills have improved drastically, when he's upset it becomes difficult to concentrate on the proper lip and tongue formations, coordinating them together, so he writes his grievances instead. As a sign of respect, she writes back to him rather than letting him read her impassive lips.

After digesting his plea and before responding, she pays close attention to the small dark hairs on the back of her palms. She plucks at one and curls her fingers in discomfort when it comes out, follicle and all. Discarding the hair, she picks up the pen and writes, *We have pens and pencils, lots of paper, do you really need more supplies?*

The boy is five with a temper – not hers, by God. Absentee father to blame for that one. Well, he leaves the room without responding to her pens and pencils and paper compromise, small man huffing out of the living room, familiarly furious. He bleats tears down the hallway until they become muffled by the bedroom door.

She leans forward, reaching for her glass of claret on the coffee table, and fumbles with the stem before taking a swig and sinking back into the leather, the creaking of which calls her attention to its newness. This sofa, this entertainment system, these goddamn workout DVDs. Parents to thank for it all, no husband and certainly no father to help her out. Her boy storming out of the room like that. With a father around, these things might be different. Or if these damn fingers – she picks up the pen again. She writes *sorry* across the top of the notepad again and again. The words come out sloppy, malformed. It's her hands. That's the problem. No father, then fine. Forget him, kaput! These damn fingers though –

He'll be able to do everything he wants to in school. Patience for now, that's all.

**

Another fight over art supplies. It's August and she only has a couple weeks left until he's in Kindergarten with his new aid to teach him signing and his new friends and the chances to draw, paint, write, to do it all.

This time she loses control completely. No matter how deliberate she tries to form the words on the paper, her hand won't comply. Screaming, desperate, she drops the boy off at her parents' house on the way to the doctor's wondering the whole time if it's really appropriate for her to be behind the wheel at all in this condition. She decides driving's okay. It's okay.

It's diabetic neuropathy, the family practitioner diagnoses.

What does that mean? she says. What the hell does that even mean?

The doctor explains that it's nerve damage. Comes as a result of high blood sugar, so he's gotta ask: has she been taking care of herself? Monitoring her intake?

The cure? she asks.

It's – right now, the best you can do – we can do, the doctor says, is to keep an eye on what you're putting in your body. Exercise, too. But we'll – first, tell me first about your diet.

The visit ends like this: no more wine. The doctor hands her a print-out detailing a new diet and on the back those three circled words in merlot red ink.

As her fingers fold around the steering wheel, she attunes herself to the vehicle. Peering back over her shoulder, she exits the spot and tries to feel the power in her hands as the steering column rotates inside the machine, pivoting the axle and turning the front wheels to the right as she slides out into the parking lot, braces herself to reenter traffic, society, with this new information, this new condition. Nerve damage. She clenches the wheel, straightens it. The car groans once and – thank God, it's automatic – lurches forward, propelling her back into a world where her victimization comes second to the boy's.

Thinking back to their argument, she laughs. Art supplies? *Art* supplies? She can't even write him a goddamn apology note. How – just how the hell is she supposed to teach him how to draw? Staying inside the lines and shading and, and, and everything else too? No – it's her turn to be upset. Now she's the damaged one. Isn't that pathetic?

**

Kindergarten starts in a week. The building excitement, the occasional arguments have both ceased. Now their house is somber. Her parents have been checking in over the phone every few days. Does she need anything? What can they do to help?

Wine and candies and other temptations were sent down the garbage disposal.

When the boy is out of the room, she practices her writing. Clutching the pen in between her thumb and first two fingers, carefully drawing the point across

paper. Cursive is easier. He comes in one day, school right around the corner, to find her practicing her pen strokes. She's at the desk in the corner of her bedroom, hunched over a wide-ruled sheet of paper, spelling out her name, address, and phone number over and over. She doesn't hear him enter, instead focused on those knobby fingers, wondering what went wrong. The desk lamp casts an aureole of light around her work which her aching fist dips in and out of as she alternately writes a line and then shakes the hand out above her head with a groan.

Fingers to her arm and she recognizes his breathing, his touch. She turns and looks down from her seat; the boy's growing, almost as tall as her shoulders while seated.

Blending syllables together in his thick voice, he says to her, "Beautiful – the way you write. It's beautiful."

She watches him watching her lips for a response, but instead she pulls him into her chest and sobs into his hair.

**

Cell phone tinkles in her pocket and she recognizes the school's number on the screen. He's been attending for a week and a half now. To her relief, a few church friends are in his class. He likes recess best. So far he's learned the alphabet, numbers, and some basic introductory phrases in ASL.

Kindergarten only lasts half of a day, so she's alarmed when she receives the call only two hours after dropping him off.

No, no, that's – I'll get him right away, she says. That's right, I'm leaving now.

**

It's mono.

Sometimes between periods of sleep, frail and blanket-wrapped on the sofa, he'll hold his hands up to her across the living room and quickly flit through the alphabet. Hello. Goodbye. My name is. . . and so on.

When she's not in her recliner, she's beside him on the sofa where he rests during the day, holding up his glass of water, clumsily aiming the straw for his lips.

He grunts and whimpers in his sleep and when she hears it, she comes across the room to rub his shoulders, his chest. Needles in hands that move like mixed concrete.

Tea with honey, water, saltine crackers, water, toast, orange juice, water; she pushes for him to drink more, eat more, stay strong, and by the sixth week he's managing those extra bites and sips.

**

Wednesday morning of the seventh week finds her hunkered over cutting board, slicing an orange, filling a glass of water from the filter on the tap, tending to a whistling tea kettle. She recognizes the familiar exhalations of the staircase as her son descends it on his own for the first time since the morning after she took him out of school early. Rubbing her fingers after cutting the orange, massaging her knuckles in the damp dish towel hanging from the door to the oven, she sighs relief because he's better – finally. Now they can get back on track. He'll go back to school and she can focus on taking care of herself, resuming the new diet, keeping herself healthy again.

**

What do you mean? she says. He's in Kindergarten, how much could he have missed?

When you and I were students maybe it wouldn't have been so – well, you know – so involved, the principal says. But it's changing now. Because Kindergarten is – it's more strenuous, see? – much more strenuous than it used to be. And especially with a student like your son who has certain, well, we don't believe in handicaps here, but – shall we say – limitations?

He *needs* to be back in there. This is important. Do you get it? Do you even get it?

We're well into October and the first term – it's practically over. So, all I'm saying is that certain parents might – you could make a very strong case for holding your son back, okay? Re-enrolling him the following year, so he's not so behind the other students, okay?

You know something? This is bullshit.

Please, this is an elemen –

Bull. Shit. You know it too. Now you do.

**

She finds a new hobby: homeschooling begins in November.

In the living room with the boy on the sofa where he slept for so many weeks while she treated the virus, she's set up an easel in front of her recliner. On it a large four-by-four chalkboard which she avoids writing on at all costs, opting for the boy to come up and do it himself whenever possible. There are instances though, when her fingers aren't so bad, when she's been monitoring her intake, where she writes out new words in that same delicate hand he once told her was so beautiful. Other times she'll put up an easy math problem because you can never get started too early with these types of things is what she's learned and he's a smart boy, he's quick just like the otologist said back – when was it? Ah, well, however long ago.

This goes on through the spring and when it comes time to think about re-enrolling him in school, she once again considers the deaf school and once again rules it out on account of its distance. She calls the old new elementary school back up and begins re-negotiating to get the boy an aid, to make sure that he'll be taken care of. All of his church friends are going to be heading into the first grade and she's able to talk with the principal, reasonably, and make her case for the boy's entry at that same level. It takes three phone calls and once everything's resolved, once he's all set to re-enter public schooling, she finds herself in front of the chalkboard on one of her good days, tenderly spelling out a word he read from her own lips during a phone conversation with her parents on which he shouldn't have been eavesdropping anyway, and it's at this exact moment that she realizes maybe it isn't such a bad thing to be the one in charge of her son's future.

Making this kind of minor slip-up with her own tongue is one thing, but imagine how careless these strangers might be in the presence of her deaf son with his sharp eyes and fast brain.

People aren't accountable anymore, she knows that much. And these so-called professionals – like that principal? Ornerly prick who tells her her son can't keep up and she's to trust these people to take care of her boy? No-brainer, this one. He stays. Of course, it only makes sense. He stays.

**

After letting him know, she catches him in the bathroom mirror racing through the alphabet, greeting himself, making basic introductions. When their eyes meet through the reflection, he asks her if he can learn more. From just outside in the hallway, she takes a step forward, leaning into the half-bath, stretching her fingers back against the mold of the door frame. How is Mommy supposed to help you and talk with you? she says.

He asks again.

Honey, I wish. I'm sorry, but you know how it is with these – with my hands. She holds her palms up, knurled digits pleading, and she sulks from the doorway, backing into the hall, eyes still on the mirror, the face of her boy bent over the sink.

**

One of her church friends is a teacher and helps flesh out the boy's first grade curriculum. The questions about ASL, about public school, taper off by the winter and soon it's time to plan the curriculum for second grade.

The odd inquiry still surfaces from time to time, but she's mastered the necessary deflections, if not her own diet. Her hand cramps become regular. The clumsiness spreads; she begins missing the occasional step, catching herself off-balance.

It's for the boy, she reminds herself. All of this for him.

**

By the third grade, she caves and buys an art set. Colored markers, watercolor paints, crayons, a ruler; the boy is thrilled. He voices his thanks, then goes up to the four-by-four chalkboard on its collapsible easel and writes in large crooked letters, *Thank you*.

With the new art supplies, his free time is spent at the dining room table, drawing and tracing and crafting, which takes some of the pressure off of her, allowing her focus to shift back to her diet, back to those workout DVDs. She completes one or two a week and begins going for walks around the neighborhood in the evenings after dinner. She feels better. She looks better, she thinks. Her son's art finds its way to the fridge and the best pieces are framed, put up around his and her bedrooms. Some modicum of jealousy persists as she observes him at work and clenches her own inadequate

hands. This son of hers – God, what talent! Her appreciation of his craft quells her jealousy.

One evening after postprandial walk, she comes home to find him bent over three squares of paper, working on one after the next. She leans over his shoulder and makes out the image of a hand in a variously flexible position on each. His fingers dart across his workspace, pull a notebook under the shadow of his chin, write something, and then he passes the spiral back over his shoulder to his mother. She reads, *My initials in sign.*

Reaching past him, grabbing a spare pencil from the table, notebook supported with the other forearm, she writes, *Pretty! So proud of you!* before placing the notepad back on the table by his elbow.

The squares are pushed aside and he drags their conversation into his line of sight.

Standing back, she watches the bob of his shoulders as he writes. When he's done, he hands the notebook back over his shoulder, then turns to watch his mother read the message. *All I remember.*

They watch each other. He holds up the pencil but when she reaches for it and pauses, he lets it fall to the floor and he stands up, glowering, and leaves her alone in the room, heading out the front door, left open behind him.

She enters the foyer from the dining room. The edge of the carpet is turned up over top of itself from his hasty departure and she corrects it, smoothing it out with her toes. On the front patio, she can see him crouched down on the steps, shoulders once again bobbing, hands over his face.

**

The art supplies as diversion have failed. The boy, learning something of manipulation from stormings-out, has begun asking about ASL and re-enrolling in a real school all over again. They fight and the fighting justifies her occasional glass of wine, other infrequent dietary liberties. Toward the end of the school year, fourth grade already rearing up in sight, he approaches the topic yet again on account of his mother's deteriorating penmanship.

Don't you think it'd be better with me in school? You could spend time on yourself and I'd be able to learn other things too, he writes.

She grimaces when she grabs the pen and writes back, *Your poor mother isn't a good enough teacher anymore, I see. It's not me, it's my hands, is that it?*

NO.

What is it? Why this again? What have I done wrong?

The boy squirms forward on the sofa's leather. He holds pen to the paper, head cocked, struggling for a response. As he thinks, she lifts the chalkboard off the easel and leans it against the wall. Then grabbing the easel by its legs, trying to fold it in, she fumbles it in her grasp and it clatters to the ground. With the side of her foot, she nudges it out of the way and sits in her recliner to watch the boy struggle for his response.

He writes something, leaves the room.

Grabbing the notebook and following him into the dining room where he's gathering up his art supplies, she reads the inaccessible, finger-cramping acronym he's written on the page. She twists his head up by the chin, forcing his eyes to her lips. No, she says. No, let's get this out of the way right now. Don't you walk out on me again. Let's get this out of the way, because I am sick – absolutely *sick* – of having the same argument with you every damn year.

You hear me?

Suddenly conscious of her word choice, face falling, she begins crafting her apology in the notepad she still holds. Carefully, painfully, she writes: *I'm sorry, sweetie. I'm sorry. When you're ready, when we're both ready. Okay? Promise. Pinky swear.*

Sliding the message across the table with one hand, she uses the other, her writing hand, to lift his chin again, gently this time, making sure that he can see her eyes so that he knows she's being sincere. She proffers a pinky and he bolts.

Calling his name in a scene reminiscent of the boy's numerous other departures, of his father before him, she beats tabletop and chest and head and temple with her useless goddamn hands, more helpless than ever now, more callous and alone. She thinks how nice – no, more than that, how easy – it would be if, like the other, he didn't come back at all.

About Charlie Griggs

Charlie Griggs is an assistant editor for the literary journal Fiction International. His writing has been published or is forthcoming in *Black Scat Review*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Foundling Review*, *Sleipnir Magazine*, and *Zoom Street*.