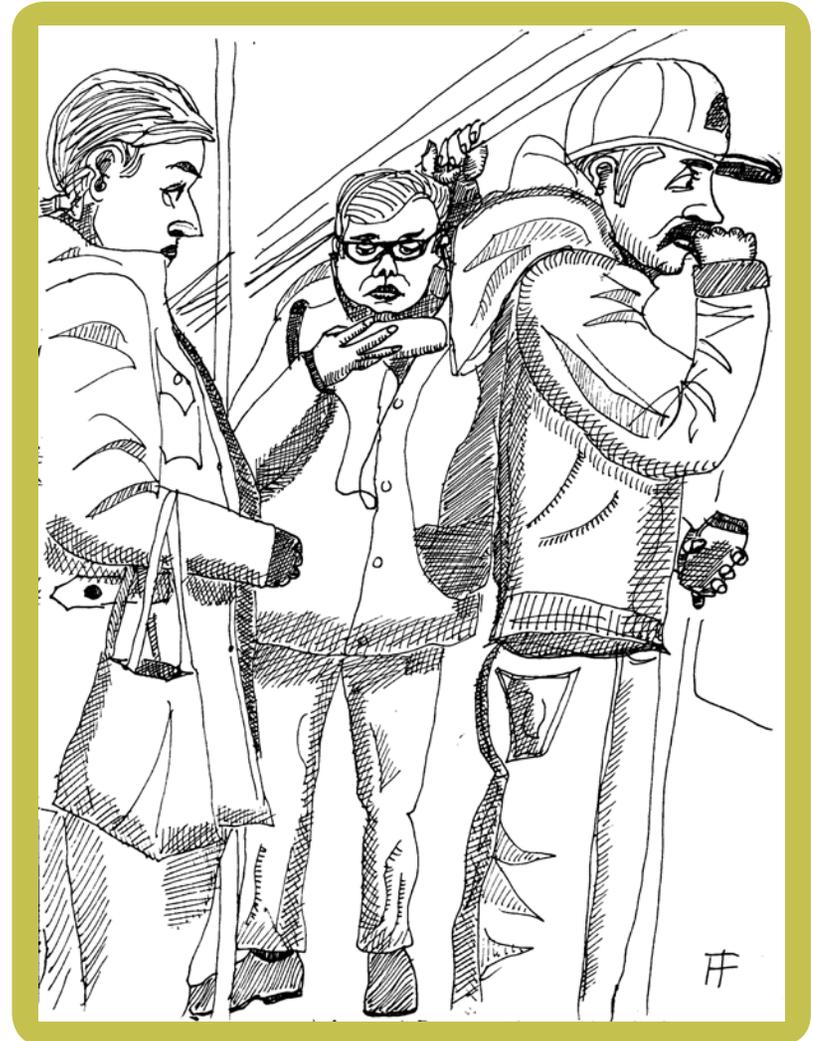


t h e Q u i e t c a r

Story by Paul Hostovsky

Most mornings my wife and I take the train to work together and the people on the train think I'm Deaf because my wife is usually signing up a storm and going a mile a minute with her hands and face and elbows, because she's chatty in the mornings, and I usually just nod a lot and let her do most of the talking, because I'm not chatty in the mornings, but sort of dreamy and laconic and basically still half asleep. So we're different that way. So she does most of the talking with her fingers and eyebrows and head-tilts while I contribute only the occasional Y-shaped "Oh, I see" or maybe a finger-flicked "How awful" just to show her that I'm following, because in sign language it's rude to stare impassively at your interlocutor without giving them a sign that you're following, even if you're not following because you're still half asleep and it's feeling like too much work before you even get to work.

So they think I'm Deaf, and I don't blame them, because sign language is conspicuous, sort of loud in a visual sort of way, and beautiful in a dancing sort of way according to people who don't



Artwork by Allen Forrest

understand a word of it but say they wish they did because it looks like dancing. So they notice the loud sign language in the quiet car of the train, which is always the last car on the train, which is where we usually sit and where you're not allowed to talk on your cell phone and all conversation is kept to a minimum. They notice the signing because it's loud in a quiet sort of way and because no one else in the car is talking except for my wife who is talking up a storm and they think I'm Deaf because I'm with her. So I'm Deaf by association. Deaf by proximity. Even though I'm not really signing but mostly just shrugging and nodding and doing a little nominal backchanneling. But I'm in the vicinity, in the signing space, in the conversation even though I'm barely holding up my end of the conversation, according to my wife, who asks me why I'm being so quiet and whether or not I'm following. And when I tell her I'm not feeling very talkative, she says, "Tell me to shut up then."

But I would never tell her to shut up because Deaf people spend all day shutting up among hearing people who don't know sign language. Which is most people. Most people don't know sign language but say they wish they did. And they say other stupid things like, "Can you lipread?" Which is the one sentence every Deaf person can lipread. And when Deaf people answer "No" to the question of whether or not they can lipread, the irony is lost on hearing people. Because hearing people don't get Deaf people. So when Deaf people get with other Deaf people, they talk up a storm in sign

language because they've been holding it in all day every day in a world full of people who don't speak their language. Which is why my wife is signing up a storm and why the people on the train think I'm Deaf and why I'll never tell her to shut up.

So one day my wife decides to take an earlier train because she has a lot of work to do at work and she wants to get an early start which is way too early for me, and when I board our usual train at 7:43 without my wife, a woman sits down in the seat next to me. And I can feel her looking at me. I'm not sure why she's looking at me, so I look down at myself in search of something out of order or out of place, something unseemly or undone or unzipped. And not finding anything, I just look out the window at the houses and trees passing by, and I daydream a little while humming sotto voce to the rhythm of the train. So I'm startled when the woman sitting next to me suddenly taps me on the shoulder. She's holding out her cell phone, gesturing for me to read the message she has typed on the screen: Excuse me, but the woman you usually ride with on the train is always so animated, but I never know if she's happy or angry.

She has typed this message on her phone because she thinks I'm Deaf. And I have to hand it to her because texting on your smartphone to a Deaf person is a much smarter option than "Can you lipread?" So I type back to her: That woman is my wife, and I never know if she's happy or angry, either.

And she smiles at that. Then she begins typing her reply and I think to myself I should probably tell her that I'm

not Deaf, and that we can talk to each other with our voices instead of writing back and forth, but since this is the quiet car where all conversation is kept to a minimum, I don't say anything. So we text back and forth for a while and it feels a little like I'm in that famous Deaf joke—famous among Deaf people—about a Deaf guy who walks into a bar and writes down what he wants on a piece of paper and gives it to the bartender, who writes back how much it costs, and after a couple of drinks the Deaf guy is feeling chatty, so he turns to the hearing guy sitting next to him at the bar and writes something down on another piece of paper, and the hearing guy writes something back, and they're writing back and forth and having a good laugh when another hearing guy sits down at the bar and orders a drink and wonders what all the writing and laughter is about, so the Deaf guy shows him what they were writing, and this hearing guy laughs too and asks for the pen and writes something down on the paper, so now the three of them are writing back and forth and pretty soon the Deaf guy has to take a piss. So he gets up and goes to the bathroom. And when he comes out of the bathroom what do you think he sees? He sees the two hearing guys still writing back and forth to each other. As if they were Deaf. And that's the joke. It's a Deaf joke. And the joke is on hearing people.

So now I'm texting back and forth with this hearing woman on the train who thinks I'm Deaf and I'm feeling a little like I'm stuck inside that Deaf joke. And I don't know how to get out. And I don't know how to tell her that I'm

not Deaf. And the longer I wait, the harder it becomes and the weirder it will be to tell her. And I can't decide if the joke is on me, or on her, or on both of us. Or on everybody in the quiet car who isn't talking because it's the quiet car. And I can't wait to tell my wife.