



Underneath

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In the late winter of 1932, Edward Sorensen stopped speaking. While it is true that he witnessed the death of his brother that day, which was February 6, a Saturday, and that he himself suffered the loss of the baby toe on his left foot, it was widely considered to be a self-imposed silence, and not a result of the trauma, both physical and emotional, that he experienced that afternoon.

The silence was more than simply not speaking. Edward didn't sigh, or grunt, or make any sort of noise that would have been useful in his family's attempts at communication. He was as silent as the death that had taken Thomas under the water.

The closest Edward came to speaking, before that night in July when he started up again, was on the second of May, what should have been his brother's fifteenth birthday, when his parents decided to donate Thomas's things to the Salvation Army, including the baseball that Edward wanted for himself. He did end up with the ball; when his parents were occupied with packing the boxes into the car, Edward slipped the ball under his sweatshirt and carried it up to his room, where it lived under his bed for almost a year and was eventually lost when the family moved to Chubb Hollow Road.

"Yes," was the first thing Edward said when he decided to talk again. The cousins from Connecticut were visiting, and while the men threw horseshoes up on the lawn and the women washed dishes in the kitchen, the children toasted marshmallows over a small fire on the beach.

While any sort of confection was a treat in those quiet years between the War and the Great Depression, a bag of marshmallows was a treasure almost beyond imagining. But Uncle Joe knew a man who worked in a candy factory in Massachusetts, and that man had given Uncle Joe a bag of marshmallows one morning on the train, and Uncle Joe had brought that bag to upstate New York in July of 1932. There were about fifty marshmallows in the bag by cousin Gene's count, and there were seven cousins. Gene, the oldest at 13, sketched complicated equations in the damp sand, calculating with authority that each cousin should receive eight and three-quarters marshmallows. Six sets of sand-dusted hands reached out to receive their bounty of puffed white sugar: Kathryn with her blond hair in pigtails; Howard and Ivan, each wearing a single shoe; George, just five, who had recently survived chicken pox and was still spotted with crusty scabs; and Evelyn, the second oldest, who secretly questioned her brother's mathematical aptitude but took her eight-and-three-quarters without complaint. Gene's calculations being slightly off, only four rather smallish marshmallows remained in the bag after he had taken his own. He turned to Edward, who had been gazing into the fire, and said: "Want the rest?"

And Edward said: “Yes.”

He spoke again that night, laying in the grass in the backyard, under a bright canopy of stars and a small fingernail moon. The younger children had been sent in to bed, but Edward, Evelyn, and Gene had been granted permission to camp out. They had at first sprawled themselves across the yard, each taking up as much space as possible, arranging their rough grain sack beddings just so, placing shoes and socks at even intervals to mark boundaries. But after the last light in the house had been extinguished, and the sounds of night—water lapping against the dock, crickets calling from the long grass near the shed, something small but quick scampering through the garden—closed in around them, they drew close together, and finally ended up in a tight row, looking up at the stars.

“Can I see your toe?” Evelyn whispered. It was not lost on her that Edward wore his clunky brown shoes even when they were playing on the beach.

“Sure,” Edward said, and that was word number two.

The night sky offered little in the way of light, but Gene and Evelyn could still make out the missing piece of Edward’s left foot. They marveled as he wiggled the remaining digits, and asked many questions: Did the little stump itch? Was it hard to run? Could he still swim?

Edward answered their questions easily enough. If he experienced any trouble with his voice after nearly five months of disuse, it was not apparent to his cousins. When Evelyn and Gene had exhausted their questions, the cousins lay silently for some time. A small orange cat by the name of Lou wandered over and made a place for herself behind Evelyn’s knees.

Just as Edward was about to close his eyes, Gene said: “Tell us what happened, won’t you?”

If his mother and father, settling down for the night, heard the sound of their son’s voice and sat up in bed, clasping hands in joy and surprise, they gave no sign.

The next morning at breakfast—fresh blueberry muffins and strong coffee—

Edward's mother may have betrayed her surprise with a small twitch of her hand, which upset the creamer, but she said nothing. Edward's father, once a blustery man prone to exaggeration and exclamation, raised an eyebrow.

On the morning of February 6, 1932, Edward and Thomas Sorensen woke to find six inches of freshly fallen snow standing between themselves and a day of ice-skating on the lake. The new snow meant shoveling the driveway, the path to the shed, both porches, the dock, and the driveway and porches of Old Man Winter next door. Then, after the shoveling was complete, there was brushing off to be done: the car, Old Man Winter's car (which he never drove and which, Thomas discovered sometime during January break, had sunk half a foot into the ground during the long December rains and was now frozen in place), the dog house roof, the chicken coop roof, Old Man Winter's chicken coop roof, and anything else from which their mother, gazing out the kitchen window as she peeled potatoes for supper, saw fit to remove the snow.

After snow chores there were usual Saturday chores: collecting the day's eggs, cleaning out the chicken coop, walking the dog – a chore that fell to Edward and which he particularly loathed, given that the dog had free reign of the property all day and could therefore, technically, walk himself—hauling the garbage to the compost pile, and walking the quarter mile to Millard's and back for a week's worth of butter and milk.

There was a brief respite for lunch: hunks of cold beef on crusty bread, and warm oatmeal cookies fresh from the oven. Then it was time for homework; Thomas had twice as much as Edward, which Thomas found to be quite unfair, and so he caused a fight that ended with a half hour of standing in the corner for both.

And so it was after four o'clock before the brothers finally put on their heavy coats and wool mittens and allowed their mother to place matching red wool hats upon their heads. Their father had sharpened their skates that morning; Edward's drew blood on the pad of his thumb when he tested it "to be sure it was ready." A bandage later and the boys were on the ice, 75 feet from the shore, hockey sticks in hand.

Hockey had become an obsession the winter before, when a family of four boys, the Morehouses, arrived on the lake one snowy morning and invited Thomas and Edward out to play. For three months the boys chased each other back and forth between two homemade goals, brandishing broomsticks with gusto, if not grace. Their grandfather had given them the hockey sticks for Christmas. Finally.

A stiff wind had picked up, freezing the top layer of snow to an icy crust. The Morehouse boys were not around, but after twenty minutes or so Steven Tomion and Sam Martin skated over. The noise of the game attracted several on-lookers, among them Rachael Tomion, Steven's older sister and the object of Thomas's current crush, and Olivia with the unpronounceable last name, who had moved away to California and then come back again the previous spring. Butch Hollowell, the most talented hockey player on the eastern branch of the lake, arrived at the game with a handful of boys from Hammondsport. They'd been ice fishing near the Bluff for most the day, and along with their hockey sticks and homemade shin guards, they brought with them several good-sized trout gasping their last breaths in a large brown basket.

Edward remembers only flashes of the game: Sam Martin getting an elbow in the eye and doing an admirable job of not crying; Rachael cheering when Thomas scored; the look of horror on Thomas's face when the ice cracked beneath Edward's feet and he went under.

He smacked his head on the way down, a good crack on the right temple, but he didn't pass out. He was in the water and under the ice, and he could see boots above him, and a bright red blur that was Thomas's hat, or maybe Butch's scarf. More ice cracked then, and the boots were gone. Muffled, distant, came the sound of someone screaming. Then a hand grabbed the top of Edward's head and pulled. Only his hat was rescued.

The gloveless hand came down again. Edward saw the ghostly outline of his brother's face—he'd lost his glasses in the fall; everything was blurry, but that was also the water, of course—and could see his brother's lips forming words: "Help," "God," and, over and over: "No."

Edward felt a tug on the top of his head. He kicked with his skates, willing himself to the surface. But instead of Edward reaching the surface, Thomas was down in the lake with him. They looked at each other through the murky water. Thomas gave Edward a thumbs' up, reached down into the darkness beneath him, wrapped his arms around Edward's knees, and gave him a violent shove.

Edward's body belched onto the ice. He could feel his left skate dangling into the water, but found that he couldn't move his leg.

"Oh no oh no oh no," Rachael said from somewhere very close by.

"Get back!"

It was Edward's father, his deep voice booming, silencing Rachael's litany and sending a flock of crows into the darkening sky. Edward saw his father's face come into focus just above his. He smelled pipe tobacco and something sweet but old, like cinnamon, and felt his father's rough mustache press against his lips. Hot air poured down his throat.

"Breathe, son," his father ordered.

"I am," Edward tried to say, and passed out.

Thomas never surfaced; his body was found lodged against the entrance to the Outlet during the spring thaw, and he was buried next to Grandfather Sorensen in mid-April.

In the dark of the summer night, as Edward's voice at last grew raspy and faded to silence, Evelyn reached out and placed the last marshmallow in the palm of Edward's hand.