



Sign Language ABC by Paul Hogseth

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When I was in grade school, I always thought that one of the coolest things was when a new kid would join our class. It was good to see a fresh face and I always wondered what they were bringing to the table. Maybe he was faster than Jack Kemper or a better basketball player than Jimmy Rose. Maybe she was from Minnesota and used to live next door to Michael Damien. Or maybe she was going to be my first girlfriend. This last thought is what came to mind when Laura Cawlins joined our Korger-Chestnut family in the fifth grade.

I remember seeing her for the first time when we were lining up to come in from recess one morning. She had long black hair, freckles, a neat smile, and was threatening to steal the "Tallest Girl in 5th Grade" title from Mandy Phepheles. Laura also turned out to be a very nice girl. I became hooked from the onset. I knew that I had to find an in with this girl quick, before everyone else figured out how cool she was.

And by everyone else, I mean Jacob Johnson. Jacob Johnson was a good looking, smooth-talking friend of mine with a sexual IQ that far surpassed even most high schoolers. He knew Who, What, Where, When, and, Why to "stick it." Notice, I did not say How. He had never done it before. He just had a perverted father. I was no match for him. Did I mention I was sick during our sex education day? (I'll tell you about that later.) Anyway, Jacob had a way with the ladies, and if he knew that you were interested in one of them, it was his duty to get her before you did.

My first plan of action was to get into the head of my opponent. I knew his game all too well. Jacob was going to come at Laura with an onslaught of jokes, a few shoves on the playground, and several well calculated insults that would charm rather than offend. I was no match for him in these areas. I needed to dig deeper and hit her with something that would transcend Jacob's childish flirtations.

I needed help. Most kids are used to asking their parents for help when they have a problem at school or need to know how to do something. I wasn't comfortable with this approach. I felt like it would be very embarrassing for my parents to know I had a crush on someone. I felt like they would tease me (they wouldn't have) or ask about her all the time (they probably wouldn't have). I didn't think I could deal with that, so I went elsewhere for love counseling: *Moonlighting*.

I don't remember what the whole storyline of *Moonlighting* was, but I do remember that at the end of the night, Cybill Shepherd was putty in Bruce Willis' hands. I needed to operate like a Bruce Willis. I decided that the thing that made Bruce so irresistible to Cybill was the way he paid attention to the little things she did and capitalized on them. Some call that sensitivity. I needed to be sensitive and pay attention to Laura. But first I needed to be observant and learn about Laura.

Time passed and I became friendly with Laura as I was with all of my classmates and therefore learned several interesting things about her. She lived with her Mom and Grandma. She was a big Paula Abdul fan and liked to dance. She had a sister named Char who was deaf and as a result was proficient with sign language. I also learned that she lived less than a block away from Jacob Johnson and often times walked to and from school with him.

Goddammitalltohell.

This was not good. With Double-J getting all of this non-stop face time, I didn't stand a chance at becoming her boyfriend. I lived nine miles out of town, so I had to come up with a plan to get my foot in the door that could be efficiently executed on Monday-Friday between the hours of 7:30 and 2:30, without disrupting my classroom performance.

Since time was of the essence in this matter, I devised a plan that included a "quick win" piece of propaganda and an idea that was supposed to wow her and bring my desirability to a level that Jacob couldn't compete with and Laura couldn't resist. The first thing I did was go to the 25-cent toy machines at our local supermarket, Gordy's IGA (downtown, not the one on the lake), where I purchased a button that said I "heart shape" NY. I got home and put a strip of masking tape over the NY and with a black marker and my alphabet stencil ruler wrote "LAURA." From that day forward I would wear this button on my jacket from the moment I boarded the school bus in the morning to the moment before I got off at the end of the day (so my parents wouldn't see). Brilliant.

Now that I was blatantly advertising my feelings on a custom made button, it was time to follow it up with the Bruce Willis Sensitivity Phase. Specifically, it was time to learn sign language. In my mind there was no way Laura couldn't fall for someone who was willing to become bilingual on account of

her step-sister's affliction. I could communicate with her on this whole other level.

Having committed myself to the language of love, I had to begin studying up. I started by going to the Korger-Chestnut library's card catalog and doing a search by subject. I turned up one result; Sesame Street Sign Language ABC with Linda Bove. The ABCs seemed like a good place to start, so I checked it out.

That night I went to my room and got to work. Each page of this book gave a picture of how to do the sign for each letter of the alphabet along with the sign for an object that started with that letter of the alphabet. After a day or two I became comfortable with the letters and was eager to move on to full words. I, however, quickly became frustrated with the uselessness of the words that Sesame Street was trying to start me off with How could I possibly make practical use of the sign for octopus (which is simply fist on top of open downward facing palm)? I needed better reference material.

This was going to require a trip to the public library; a trip that I didn't see happening in the foreseeable future. At that point, I decided that I was sunk and would have to live with the fact that I wasn't meant to have Laura Cawlins. I told myself that the whole sign language idea probably wouldn't have worked anyway. Peeling the tape off my button, I went back to loving NY.

Being a broken hearted 5th grader really wasn't much of a traumatic event. After I conceded defeat, I moped around for an hour or two and quickly refocused on other things, like prepping for my upcoming one for one Wade Boggs for Nolan Ryan card trading session with Brian Lower. I had lots of other interests and lots of great friends at school, including Jacob and Laura. After a while it was actually pretty cool seeing them together, and, in fact, Jacob became a hero to us all when he became the first of our group to French kiss a girl.

Months later, my 5th grade year was coming to an end. At this point I had completely erased from my mind any notion of me and Laura being together but was served one last cruel and embarrassing reminder of my past pursuits. One day Mrs. Rallond, the school librarian, came to our class as she did every two to three months to follow up on overdue library books. I'd never had an overdue library book and didn't think a thing of it as my teacher Mr. Person started reading through Mrs. Rallond's list:

"Craig Knorn: Sharks and Hardy Boys: The Mystery of the Iron Skillet."

"Tara Wogahn: 'Babysitter's Club..."

Then Mr. Person paused and let out a little chuckle. I thought he was a hilarious guy, so when he laughed I knew it had to be something good. But, when I looked up I found that Mr. Person was looking directly at me. Then he said it...

"Paul Hogseth: Sesame Street Sign Language ABC."

At this age, whatever phrase I had in my vocabulary that equated to "Holy Shit" was the exact phrase that went through my head. I felt my face burning up as my classmates broke out in laughter. I was mortified. I quickly glanced at Laura, who was not looking at me but was instead exchanging glances with her girlfriends that seemed to be confirming that I was indeed a dork who had checked out a Sesame Street book. Looking back, I would say their assessment was dead on.

We all have embarrassing events in our lives and for the most part we all get over them. I got over it, and over the next year I realized that there were girls in my home town that were even nicer, cuter, funnier, and taller than Laura. 6th grade at the Chippewa Falls Middle School brought together eight area grade schools and introduced an environment where you can't maintain friendships with all of your grade-school pals like you used to. You start gravitating towards the people that are most like you or in some cases the people you most want to be like. Cliques form and in some ways people start showing signs of the paths they are choosing to take for their futures. Over that year, Jacob and I stayed tight and were actually sitting next to each other the day that Laura Cawlins got her ass whooped and an earring ripped out in a lunchroom brawl. We didn't really say anything about it, but I'm sure we were both wondering how this could be the same sweet girl from Korger-Chestnut Elementary.