

Song of Myself

A Memoir

By Robert Malka

Part I: Eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

And God called to the man, “Where are you?”

He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

And The Lord said, “Who told you that you were naked? From the tree — from which I commanded you not to eat — you ate!”

The man said, “The woman you gave to be with me — she gave from the tree, so I ate it.”

Then God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”

Genesis 3:9-13

One.

*I too throb to the brain and beauty of the earth, and of all the growths of the earth,
I too have felt the resistless call of myself. — Walt Whitman*

At ten years old I'm sure I know best, that I've seen all there is to see, but somehow every day is still a surprise.

I'm going with Mom to the Department of Social Services. It's in Van Nuys, part of Los Angeles, as a bland and dull building between empty strip malls, cracked streets, and a couple limp trees under an ember-red sun. I get out of her clean white Jeep, squinting against the blacktop to watch her exit. I'm in an orange t-shirt and bloated cargo shorts. She has straightened black hair and matching jacket and slacks. Her black-and-gold necklace radiates dignity. And while she takes us to the building, I think about how the clack of her heels against the sidewalk are the only calming sound within earshot, though she can't hear them herself.

Unlike many other Children of Deaf Adults — people call us CODAs — I've never been near this office. I've been proud that, though lots of Deaf people end up on welfare, my mom hasn't been one of them. She's made it all on her own. And anyway, she's just Deaf. Capital-D Deaf. Sign-language-using, culturally Deaf. Not “disabled” — whatever *that* means.

But here we are, another family picking up a pity-check. It feels like that, at least, the way the city is so full of sickness, so dull and void. But Mom has a good reason to be picking up Social Security Disability Insurance, or SSDI: My dad, who's also Deaf, has thrown us into an ugly divorce case, and it's only because of the case that she found he was using her name, and mine, to get extra government money. She's been learning about a lot of his lies lately, and he's even worse than she thought he was. So she's starting her investigation at this office: She wants to know how it works. How good the pay is. If the pay changes when you have a family or if you're married. What he's doing to get them.

And I'm coming along in case there's no interpreter. She can't hear them after all, and they don't sign. I feel like a soldier charging into battle, especially cause Mom is so stressed by the divorce proceedings: Mom's lawyers say she can't work because it'd hurt her case, but not working is driving her crazy and we don't have a lot of money. So this paycheck will help financially while giving her a better sense of what my dad has been up to for years.

We'll kill two birds with one stone.

Mom is laser-focused on the office ahead. In the parking lot to my left, I notice a rickety, brown-green Oldsmobile pulling into a parking space. The emergency brake creaks. The driver's door opens to reveal an older, overweight woman wearing poorly-applied makeup. She turns her head, about to look in my direction, when a guy with curly red hair, some salt-and-pepper stubble, and stained clothes runs up to her.

He pulls a gun on her. He points it through the window into her face. He says, “Get the fuck out of the car right now.”

Holy shit.

He moves to let her leave. She clutches her purse and drops her keys in the car, then speeds away.

I glance in front of me. A mom has her two kids against her, keeping their heads forward with her hands while her own head cranes left.

The man gets into the car and slams the door, eyes on the wheel. He puts the gun in the passenger seat. His gaze fires at the rear-view mirror. Coast is clear. The engine sputters to life. The man calmly shifts into reverse and drives away.

I turn to Mom and, both speechless and signless, point at the vanishing car as if to say: “Did I just see my first carjacking? Could that have been us? What should we do?”

And she looks at me with eyes calm as a windless lake and signs: “Maybe they know each other.”

Maybe I should tug at her shoulder and explain the carjacking, but I don’t see how speaking up will change things. And anyway we’re about to go into an important meeting. Better that at least one of us be focused on the task at hand.

I follow Mom into the stale air of the social security office, where Mom, skipping the line, demands a meeting, saying she spoke with a woman on the phone. I sign what she says. Eventually an overweight woman with a dour face and a white blouse escorts us to a cramped office with hardback chairs and lumpy bottoms, where my work really starts. One minute I’m my mom asking questions about SSDI; the next minute I’m the government employee answering them; and the next I’m the form my mom is filling out, explaining what each of my lines mean. It’s only when we walk out of the office two hours later to find the parking space filled by another car that I feel the jolt of anxiety zip across my shoulders.

It’s only then that I realize: How is interpreting at a government office different from seeing a carjacking next to an unaware parent? In both, my abilities leave me utterly and indescribably alone.

The woman is nowhere to be seen.

Two.

I was born in Lancaster, California on February 28, 1992 as Robert Jacob Richards to Greg Richards¹ and Nataly Malka-Richards and it's a marvel that I was born.

I wonder if I could perceive, as an infant, the tension and excitement surrounding my presence. Even as the twenty-five-year old I am, when Mom's mom has detailed the story of my birth, of discovering my hearing, she's jittered with a fear-borne ecstasy, as if she were re-living one of her happiest moments.

It probably went like this:

I was in my crib, helpless but aware. If I had been able to see my room, I'd have noticed milky-white bars giving way to dull pink walls and little jingling animals hanging above me. And I would also have noticed my Grandma, whose presence I surely felt. Grandma, with her curly red hair, thick glasses, and anxious face, hovered over my white cage and nervously turned the wind-up musical box that would reveal my fate and future.

She wound the toy to its maximum, until a tinny "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" overtook the room. Each tone met Grandma's thudding heart. I lay quietly, too involved to show expression, listening and soaking in those notes that were, for me, a new and exciting world. At last the song ended and I cried my cry of want. More music. More sound.

Grandma leapt for the music box and wound it again, watching my face sink into contentedness.

Fate had decided: I was hearing — my ears worked — could I hear the angels singing? Grandma celebrated, she told me, and I wondered if she acted similarly to those who believe their misshapen legacy will not be carried beyond them. She ran downstairs to the kitchen where Mom was cooking dinner and, calling "Nataly!" until she remembered her daughter was deaf, tapped her eagerly on the shoulder before letting her daughter lip-read: "Robby's hearing, he can hear! Thank God, thank God, our prayers have come true!"

And what face did Mom wear? In her clear brown eyes, I imagine, a battle was raging between joy and disappointment: Of course, it's great that her child is hearing. But why should that negate her reality? Her deafness, hard already, had been made harder by a world that circled her dreams as sharks would circle a raft with few survivors.

How should she have interpreted her mother's joy? That just because her son is hearing, he would live a life worth living — God Willing? But she set the question aside: Mom decided that, for my sake, celebration was essential, and she hugged her mom. "What a blessing!" Mom verbalized. "That's wonderful to hear." She turned to Greg and interpreted Grandma's message into American Sign Language: "Robby is hearing! Isn't that wonderful?"

And Grandma noticed on his face a jealous sneer, only for a moment, before it was concealed with shouts of happiness. She smiled, but her eyes didn't crinkle.

“Wonderful, wonderful!” He spoke and signed. “Oh, how wonderful!”

For some, the worst thought is that their children will transcend them.

My mom was born in Morocco as the last of five children. Two of her siblings are also deaf. Their deafness is probably genetic, but we're not sure which gene is to blame.² No extended family member is deaf.³

Morocco in the 1960s was a nation just free of colonialism, still finding itself. At the time of Mom's birth, merchants had mostly stopped traveling by donkey at 3 AM to sell wares in villages, only to fight bandits on the way home. Just years before, the jobless starved in the streets. Doctors worked, but they also prayed. Girls were married at twelve and had twelve kids, if they could stay alive that long. Boys worked till they were toothless men. Dinner was killed, skinned, and hung in the hot morning air; buying it meant tolerating flies. Education existed — if you were French, or Jewish, or lucky.

So there weren't exactly services for deaf people in Morocco. And my grandparents were three for five.

How did Mom's parents handle her deafness when she was born? We've never discussed it as a family, the agonizing silence after her birth, of cradling a third deaf child in their arms. The baby crying a cry she herself couldn't hear, hoping the universe would respond. The perhaps questioning look of the doctor, part of a world that saw deaf people as beasts, wondering why God would “gift” these people three deaf children. Their children's future loomed: What would weddings be like when music was outside their range? Would they experience love and friendship? Would they read? Would they learn? Would they drive? Would they be more than their ears? If they lived long, God Willing, would they live lives worth living?

¹I have anonymized my biological father, among others, so that I can speak freely.

²Genes account for half of the cases of congenital Deafness, and 120 different genes causing deafness have been found. Check out the Appendix to learn more.

³Lowercase-d “deaf” describes ears that don't work, and uppercase-D “Deaf” describes people who consider themselves culturally Deaf (including people who prefer to use sign language as their primary language). A minority of deaf people are Deaf. The Appendix gives estimates on percentages.