A Bridge to Understanding

Or, The Life of a CODA (a Child of Deaf Adults)

Robert Malka

To Mom, who's shown that no day deserves to pass without either a prank or a dance.

"...just as painters emphasize the subject's face and eyes to convey character while focusing little on the rest of the body, so I...devote myself to signs of the soul in men, and through these to portray the life of each, where I leave it to others to describe their great accomplishments." — Plutarch

"Be yourself; everyone else is already taken." — Oscar Wilde

"Can you hear me now?" — Verizon Commercial

PREFACE

My mom's deafness first clattered into my life, she tells me, when I was eight months old and trying to get her attention.

I'm sitting in my high chair before my dinner, a bowl of spaghetti ringing with the tones of a thick marinara sharpened by balsamic vinegar and basil. I can only appreciate its richness for a moment before I discover that, calling out to her, she's not turning around.

The kitchen's fluorescent lights continue to hum without a flicker – the microphone that flashes the house lights to get her attention lives in my room, not the kitchen. Suddenly the universe is ignoring me. She's washing the dishes, all of them clattering against one another, and I'm sure the lights will go off and my mom will hear me if I can be louder than the running water, louder than the clinking plates.

At first I call because I want attention, but now it's a battle of egos. I want to be heard. I want to be the most important thing in my mom's life. I cry out.

Nothing.

I scream louder. Still nothing. I climb higher and higher in pitch and volume, from demand to need to panic to fear of abandonment. Shriek. Shriek. Shrieks in between breaths until, seeing the spaghetti before me as a reminder of this fresh neglect, I grab the bowl and throw it onto my head, the blood-red sauce wriggling down my face, the noodles flinging themselves along me and the floor.

I was going to wear my neglect as if it were a helmet, its remnants splayed along my shoulders.

My mom, now finished with the dishes, turns around and sees the mess along my seething face. Life is mostly a long string of surprises for a Deaf person and my anger is just that – a surprise. And now I am a mirror to those surprises – a second-hand witness to them, an experiencer of them.

"Oh noooo, Robby," she voices. Concern appears along her face. It's too late for me: Concern all you like, but I've heard you loud and clear.

She tries to get me out of my chair and I cry and resist, and she notices my anger. She puts me back down, washes her hands of the warm red sauce, grabs a pan and a wooden spatula, turns to me and says: "Robby, I can't hear you." And she points to her left ear with her spatula and shakes her head before knocking

them against each other. *Clunk clunk clunk.* Over and around to the other ear — the same point, the same banging. *Clunk clunk clunk.* “If you want to get my attention, you have to come up to me and tap me,” she signs and voices after she puts the pot and spatula down, emphasizing the tapping on her shoulder and leg. “Okay?”

My face widens from its squinted anger into an open curiosity. Here is a doorway I’ve been looking for, a path to being seen and understood. Seeing my calm, mom picks me up to wash the spaghetti off me and make another plate.

I would tap her on the leg when I needed something — most of the time.

That miscommunication was the first time I learned that others are different and see the world differently from me. We hearing people are frustrated when we don’t get the memo. Deaf people struggle to get the memo for their entire lives. Surviving (let alone thriving) in a deaf life means adopting some unique coping mechanisms, and passing on that lifestyle to your kids even when they can hear makes for some interesting kids. Growing up with Deaf culture as a hearing person brings me endless questions from curious passersby, the most common of which are: What was it like to be raised by Deaf parents? (I don’t know the difference, so I couldn’t tell you.) Are there multiple signed languages? (Yes, they tend to vary by country, with a totally different vocabulary, grammatical structure, and so on – and there’s no comprehensive international sign language.) Do you know braille? (Braille is for the blind. I learned it in school, though.)

I’ve written this essay to make sense of my life, partly for your enjoyment and partly for my own growth. My hope: That you read my story and see some of yourself and those around you in it. CODA idiosyncrasies abound here, and I hope I illuminate those tendencies that in the end drive us all forward, into light and darkness alike. Finding the universalities in each moment is the work I like to believe everyone finds rewarding, a gift from each to each.

That said, let me say what this is not: It’s not a comprehensive review of what being a CODA is like. It’s not meant to be a literary achievement filled with my life’s most dramatic moments. It’s not meant to be a wealth of insights I’ve discovered from my own life, but where insights naturally come from these specific experiences I include them.

This essay is a series of vignettes focused on something you’ve probably never thought about before, and I hope it’s thoughtful enough to leave an impression. And at stake in that understanding is creating a more open and inclusive world. If I can contribute with this slim first draft of my life, consider me satisfied.

Let's note from the start that I'm lucky: Many CODAs are addicts, or ex-felons, or dead. Something about how we've lived compels so few of us to see it as a gift worth sharing with the world. That's where I come in: I hope to adequately portray it as the gift that it is. And I hope that any CODAs who read this will recognize, if they don't already, that they're not alone.

Two last things: First, I've written this as if you know nothing about Deafness.

Second, nowhere do I mean to pretend that a CODA experiences all that their Deaf family and friends have experienced. CODAs don't get thrown out of their car by cops who think they're being disobedient for not responding, even though the only problem is the cop's willful ignorance of their deafness. They are not chained to hospital beds because they're trying to sign to the doctor that they need something. Their claims of abuse in domestic violence cases don't ironically fall on deaf ears because the authorities prefer to speak with the victim's hearing partner. We don't have trouble going up to a cute person in a coffee shop (hearing *or* Deaf) to ask them out. We don't have trouble talking to our parents or family members, as so many Deaf people born into hearing families do. We don't experience learning difficulties in the way Deaf people do when in school. We don't necessarily get bullied, and certainly not for the same reasons. We can hear and appreciate Beethoven: Our world isn't even slightly muted.

But we are there when our moms and dads are chained to those hospital beds, and at five years old we see the look of helplessness on their faces. It is we who explain the situation to the doctor, often to be rebuffed in the same way our Deaf parents are. It is we who must interpret, from doctor to mother, that she has only eight months to live while we're just culminating from elementary school. It is we who sign as our parents do, who make the same facial expressions as they do, who act as they do, who at times even sound as they do, and who, while growing up, interpret the world as they do. And it is we who live as bridges between the hearing and deaf worlds, walked on as people cross from one universe of understanding to another, while we exist somewhere in between, always searching for a bridge's dignity, always eager to be more than a bridge between worlds into whom we only somewhat belong. But – for those of us who dream – there comes the chance to be a bridge from somewhere old to somewhere new.

It's the strange way we reside in multiple worlds, the way we interpret them, and the way they interpret us, that I hope drives you to read on.

Wherever you come from, never stop seeing how you're seeing the world.

Robert Malka

FAMILY

My mom was born in Morocco as the last of five children, three of whom are deaf. Her parents don't sign, and there were virtually no services for the deaf outside of hearing aids; she grew up in a world where people were regularly ashamed of the idea of talking with your hands. She attended schools for the Deaf where some of her teachers regularly called Deaf people "disgusting, repulsive, and lowly creatures." Her music teacher failed her for being deaf. She usually couldn't understand her teachers because there was no sign language interpreter in the classroom; she would return home to work with tutors who spent hours teaching her the same material. She missed the millions of words one hears regularly in society and at home, missed all the stories and nuances and spontaneous discoveries that come with hearing outside conversations and arguments and gossip in coffee shops, houses of worship, and on the street, missed whole elements of the human experience as portrayed through music and television without subtitles, missed the thousands of social mores and rules of our world.

How much would you know about your universe – how different might you be – if your parents taught you little, your school frustrated you, and you had little spontaneous access to the outside world? This is the world my mom was born and raised into.

But she is profoundly gifted intellectually and damningly tough; she's had tremendous support from people who believed in her, and all the trust in herself to know that she deserved better. She has always found innumerable close friendships. She loves her languages[1] and how closely-knit the Deaf world is. And her Deafness protected her from a loud household by preventing her from hearing the conflicts of a determined but frustrated family. Eventually, the home Deafness gave her became a home to leave: Her grandparents, seeing her potential, urged her to go to America. For her as for many others, it was a land of opportunity.

She arrived with $1,000 in her pocket, making extra money however she could. With no English (written or spoken) until much later in life, she navigated the world with charisma, fearlessness, and a combination of cunning and kindheartedness.

Her determination continued even when she married someone she didn't like, and that's how I came into the world.

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[1] There is more than one sign language in the world, and they're languages as English, French, or Pashtun are.

My dad is the youngest of two born into an insipid family. Growing up in England, his parents treated him like he was a child incapable of deeper thought. He learned from them the sick and fanatical materialism of our modern world and none of the soul which makes it possible. Early in life he was sent to a boarding school for the Deaf, where the other kids bullied him for being well-off, leaving his days hard, unrewarding, and miserable. He uses a hearing aid and can speak relatively well, but still needs to lipread to understand what someone is saying, which still cut out most television, all music, and almost all spontaneous interactions. No one I know of ever believed in him, and nowhere do I remember seeing him belong.

He moved to America with his parents and brother, having no sense of direction and weighed down by fossilized anger and encroaching depression. He met my mom through a mutual friend and, believing that she might give him some sense of status due to her beauty and a sense of control over the relationship due to her bad English, proposed to her in public, where she felt incapable of saying no. They married soon after, and then I was born: to an earnest and well-meaning mother, a tragic disappointment of a father, and the Deaf world, with all its nuance, with all its lack of knowledge, with all its intimacy, but bearing, to the joy of my extended family, working ears.

My families were so obsessed with my working ears that they forgot I was still going to grow up in a Deaf world. The Deaf world, especially in the 90's and earlier, was a world deprived of information. I learned alongside my parents — and where possible, passed along what I knew. You don't know what you don't know, and my parents knew less than they thought they did. My mom had strong values, but struggled to apply them, knowing so little about the world she lived in. My dad, saddled with rage, made choices that led him away from growth. Also note: Some Deaf people are illiterate and only since the 1990s has closed captioning (for TVs) or interpreters (for interacting with the outside world) been mandated by federal law. (The Americans with Disabilities Act, which mandates the use of interpreters but rarely penalizes companies for *not* providing them, doesn't fully meet that need even today.)

Deaf people are always the last to find out about something and get the story straight. Those around them rarely bother to explain what's going on, so their understandings and truths are almost always half-understandings and half-truths. News stories almost always have to be "re-" explained ("Why is there war between these two countries? I only ever understood that they don't like each other"). Emergencies where people move quickly towards an exit leave Deaf people in shock ("Do I have to go with everyone? What's going on?"). Deaf people often nod during a conversation to show they're processing something, not to show that they agree or understand; so when doctors explain what a medication is for and what a

medication will do, the Deaf person's nodding is often taken as agreement. When the medication takes effect and the Deaf person is surprised to be experiencing nausea and gets upset, both doctor and patient are shocked that no communication occurred even though words were said. Ditto for court cases and judge questions. Imagine what gossip is like with such miscommunications.

But I had huge gaps, too. I learned about *The Beatles*, *The Who*, and *Black Sabbath* in middle and high school. I mispronounced words until people corrected me. I missed references to old and new shows, sayings and idioms, which colleges were great and why. The list goes on and on.

People were excited about my working ears because they seemed to give me a path out of this bubble of silence, but they forgot that I'd be pulled into the politics of living in both worlds as an eternal, mostly-invisible mediator. My mom spent her time getting the world to accommodate her while figuring out how to meet her needs on her own (or with my help) in the meantime. Life became a series of political initiatives, one after the other: I quickly took over society's job to provide communication access, teaching her what we needed to know when I learned it. If I went to interpret for her at a bank, for example, we would ask questions until we reached the fundamentals of the banking and legal systems and spend our off-time digesting and reframing the challenges before us.

But my dad, while lucky enough to be born in an English-speaking country and could speak, read, and write in English, used none of those privileges to make his Deafness a gift. Instead, he tried to destroy the world that he felt destroyed him. He was always preparing for a show. He threw some of the loudest shows I've ever seen.

CHILDHOOD

One of my earliest memories is a flash: blue and red lights alternating through the windows, painting the ceiling and front door. Some harsh noises cut the air, a mix between garbled commands and muted helicopters. Apparently I had been told to stay away from the front door, but I couldn't help it: I stood on the carpeted pink stairs ten feet away, soaking up all the confusion, chaos, and fear out of a morbid interest.

It seemed unrelated, but my whole life I had day-and-nightmares of a man entering calmly into my classroom with a weapon and opening fire. The nightmare changed as I watched more movies and heard of more school shootings, so that eventually I witnessed every grotesque detail: My teacher inanimate behind his desk. My peers running to the back of the classroom as blood splatters onto desks and walls. The stoic, numb face of the killer as he stands by the door, occasionally pausing to add ammo.

I thought everybody had these gripping fantasies. It seemed so natural and part of my identity that I believed it was integral to the human experience. That changed after I spoke with a college friend: We were at a coffee shop sharing tea and life stories when I brought up my nightmare. To my initial relief, she expressed a similar nightmare. Then she explained why.

She was at the Aurora, CO massacre. Around midnight, a guy decided to enter a movie theater full of fans huddled for *The Dark Knight Rises* and pump bullets into them for as long as he could. He entered the theatre in a military gear "costume," then snuck out through the emergency exit to get his weapons before re-entering, twenty minutes into the film, to throw tear gas and open fire. He killed twelve and injured seventy. In spite of the madness and some close calls, she and a friend made it out.

After hearing her story I explored my memory and approached my mom about it. "Wow, you remember *that*?" She signed with greatly raised eyebrows, indicating in American Sign Language that she's asking a question (and, from the rest of her face, showing surprise). "Of course I know what you're talking about."

She continued to sign the story to me. It turns out that my experience was nothing like that horrifying massacre, but the fact that I related to my friend in that one moment shows how big even the smallest moments in our lives can loom.

My dad made it his part-time job to find neighborhood deals he could negotiate to make the seller lose more money than she intended. When he couldn't get what he wanted, he hurt people. Enter a 1977 Rolls Royce Silver Wraith which was, so the rumor goes, once owned by O.J. Simpson. It was big and black

and royal and had a little jar of Grey Poupon mustard in the glovebox, something that apparently only O.J. Simpson would have left in his car. In the backseat, little wooden desks folded out as if we were on an airplane, and there were personal side lights for reading or work. It drove nicely and, my dad loved to brag, was the last year Rolls Royce vehicles were partly hand-made.

A man was selling it for $5,000 in 1994 and my dad had to have it — but he didn't have the money. After a few conversations and a handshake deal, the seller decided that it would be okay for him to take it home and he could be paid back in a couple days.

My dad went to my mom and asked to borrow $5,000 to pay for this car, since she did have the money for it. She agreed and gave him the money. He never paid the guy back.

So of course after a week the seller came to our house to take either the car or the $5,000. When my dad saw the seller approaching he came to me, his almost-three-year-old son, and said to call 911 because "there's a man outside with a gun who wants to kill us."

This is roughly what I said to the 911 operator.

My dad hoped to scare the seller off, and then explain the "mistaken" call to 911 using his deafness. Within minutes, helicopters and a volley of police cars appeared outside the house telling the man to get on the ground. (This is what I still remember.) My mom was upstairs and only saw the commotion as she was coming downstairs, after the damage was done. The man and my dad settled the case later in small claims court, and my dad paid for the car – with my mom's money. The man decided not to press charges for the phone call, maybe out of a misplaced sense of pity.

My dad could have called 911 using his teletypewriter (TTY[2]), but he got more credibility by including his son. And he did it for the Grey Poupon in the glovebox: The car, it turns out, was never owned by O.J. Simpson. His evidence for that claim when pressed? That a friend of his saw O.J. drive the car once on a freeway, ten years before he bought it.

My dad was so desperate for a sense of self-importance that he needed to believe his fancy car was owned

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[2] The TTY was a usually-bulky device made of a digital strip (to read text) and a QWERTY keyboard. When you wanted to call a hearing person, you would dial a number and reach a relay service agent, who would type what the hearing person was saying to you, and then say to them what you were typing. It was tedious: We speak/sign faster than anyone types, and some Deaf people typed slowly. Also, some Deaf people couldn't read or speak English, making TTY unusable. Hearing people often didn't want to deal with this inconvenience, so it often made life harder, especially if the hearing person's first impression of the Deaf person was a TTY call. One plus side: The calls were often recorded onto a roll of paper.

by someone known for getting away with murder.

This memory is the beginning of a very long career of being an informal, and then professional, sign language interpreter. From the age of two to twenty-five – twenty-three years – I worked anywhere from two to thirty plus hours a week, often informally and eventually for pay, being there for my mom and sometimes my dad. When my mom needed to call her mom, I waddled away from my toys to interpret between them. When there was a conflict at the store between my mom and a hearing person and neither understood the other, I stepped in. And, as an ugly divorce case rushed into my life at ten, I was used both as a weapon in the courtroom and as my mom's only line of defense against an army of merciless attorneys, debt collectors, and police officers. Afterwards, I helped my mom build a company in Deaf[3] telecommunications as a glorified secretary-interpreter, communicating with the outside world and helping write business plans, refining and projecting her voice into the world, and pitching to executives and investors as both Chief Operations Officer and The CEO's Interpreter, starting when I was seventeen.

By the time I was twenty-three the trauma of my earlier years had caught up to me: I couldn't write a single company email without collapsing onto the floor, staying sometimes for hours in a catatonic stupor. It was only once I walked away from the ramparts that I was shocked to find them able to stand on their own against life's slings and arrows. Nobody told me how devastating it is to find yourself suddenly unimportant and deprived of an identity, even if the decision to walk away was mine. But I needed that bitter medicine I gave myself: I needed to individuate, to see what *I* was like, to see how far my own voice could reach, what it sounded like, and what I wanted to say. The challenge of being a lifelong interpreter is making sense of your own voice after it's been intertwined with another's for so long. This intertwining – and individuating from it – has been the essence of my childhood experience.

I'll give another example of my childhood experience here, this time related to my parents' divorce.

When I was ten I had to help my mom communicate with her attorneys, who thought it was okay for a minor to interpret sensitive (and materially tough) information so they could save money on an interpreter. One memory cuts through the rest.

I was sitting shotgun in my mom's white, aging Jeep while we lurched along the I-405. Cars were whizzing past us and some were furiously honking at us to change lanes. My mom's hands were on the

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[3] Deaf is capitalized to mean functional, or cultural, deafness which includes sign language. If I mean to talk only about working or non-working ears, I use the lowercase d "deaf."

wheel, knuckles white, staring only at me as I signed to her what I was hearing on the phone. She had just said in American Sign Language for me to interpret, with some desperation in her eyes, that she didn't have any more money to pay her divorce attorney. That if she didn't have some inkling of kindness from him, her custody of me was at stake. That he had already made several big-time mistakes on her case, which themselves weren't fixed. My uncle, who was helping fund our case, was stunned to believe that attorneys in America could spend $15,000 simply talking on the phone, making little progress, laughing all the while.

Her attorney was speaking through me to let her know that the money that she had paid to retain him was gone – again – and that he and his staff were unwilling to touch her case until she paid him more money. This was at an inconvenient time, since the next court case essential to determining custody was two weeks away, and they had come nowhere near close to completing preparations. He had cunningly blackmailed by date.

She asked him if he could hold off just a little longer on getting paid, at least until he won the money from her case. He said he didn't take such bets. She asked him if he could reduce the hourly rate, since he was using her son as an interpreter to get away with not having to pay for one. He said there were no exceptions to his hourly rate. She asked him if he could at least fix the errors he made. He said those errors came from miscommunications (which he argued he didn't cause), and so wasn't responsible. So, he said, she had to pony up.

She was asking for mercy. But her attorney spoke with a tone so icy it numbed my ear as I interpreted back: "Well, I guess you'll lose your case, then. If you can't give me another $15,000, you'll have to find another lawyer." The look on my mom's face as she turned back to look at the road, along with the unearthly, indescribable cry Deaf people make, tears following, has never left me.

A lot of feelings grew from that experience. Excruciating pain was one, not only for myself and my mom but for the fact that she was seeing this message from me. It was my hands and my face that my mom saw; I was the one voicing her condemnation to a certain future. And because I had no idea how to behave in this situation, I felt I had no ability to defend my mom – or myself.

Yet I felt important beyond belief. I was the center of the universe. Without me, my mom could not have gotten the information she did. She was dependent on me. She needed me to navigate this treacherous hearing world with its cruel and shady characters. And she needed me to reflect her in *her* voice, not in mine. I could modify her message only insofar as it worked within her goals. I was her tool, an extension of her, helpful while feeling helpless. It is a deadly combination. Don't we all feel something like this

when a ‘friend’ uses us to talk about their ex, or to gossip about people they dislike, when part of us wishes they’d leave us alone and the other part of us loves that they’re choosing us to be the bearer of their thoughts, however unhealthy or unwanted they are?

This leads to one of two real choices in a kid’s mind: Hang tight and do what needs to be done as others dictate to you, or run away from the world you see unfolding before you towards the nearest coping method. Or do both, if you want your life to be interesting. Often, because Deaf people are themselves deprived of helpful coping methods, they give little helpful tools to their kids, who are left to fend for themselves while being there for the difficult experiences their parents go through, day-in and day-out. The reality of this can be grim: kids fighting to get what their parents need with little regard for rules they don’t know or understand; managing their parents’ emotions; and coming to terms, more generally, with all the incongruities of living a Deaf life as a hearing person. But more on this to come.

EDUCATION

When I was nine I began writing my daily thoughts in a dark blue journal with a child's naïve enthusiasm: Every night I'd discuss things that could only be interesting to a dull accountant, until I was confronted with my parents' divorce with very few words to understand it. My dad was behaving terribly, so my angry feelings went in his direction. I wrote words of anger and hate at whatever was suddenly unappealing about him.

Had I been left to my own devices, I would have come to terms with my emotions and figured it out more quickly than I did. As the story goes, I was sure that the thoughts I bound in my journal would sit quietly.

That didn't happen.

I came back to the house with my mom one day to find out that my dad had broken into the home and taken a bunch of our stuff, which he claimed was his. One of those things was my journal, which he claimed was his by right of the fact that there were words in it about him.

It is enough to know that your father has betrayed you not only by reading your innermost thoughts, but to know that your most unflattering thoughts about *him* have been read. To then realize that he won't give it back to you is another situation entirely.

But I was not prepared for what actually happened next. Playing his now highly-polished role of being a Deaf pity case, he photocopied the journal entries that he found most offensive and passed them around to as many staff members of my elementary school as he could, telling them that he was the good father and my mom the bad mother, and that he only checked my journal on accident. Now that he found it, he was showing these entries to everyone "out of parental concern," claiming my entries were lies and that he needed all the help he could to get his son back.

And "help" they did. At least one staff member of the school said to me, under the guise of icy sympathy, that I needed professional help. I went to the elementary school psychologist, who pretended to neutrality, reading back to me my own entry and examining her own armchair conclusions. The principal of the school played diplomat, hosting meetings between both my parents in her office whenever police got involved with custody issues.

Not one person said to my dad that he needed serious psychiatric help. It didn't occur to anyone that my consent should have mattered here. I didn't permit him or anyone else to read my journal, nor did he

reach out to me about it or respect my privacy.

He appropriated my experience to get the attention he so desperately needed. And if he could make me feel as crushed and as angry as he felt, then so much the better.

He made so much progress in his goal because of the beliefs people had about what his deafness said about him. We do a disservice to people when we see them as beneath us, not based on the content of their characters but on the story we tell about them before we've taken the time to understand them. Deaf people aren't always harmless, pitiable, and adorable and they certainly aren't always stupid, limited, and incapable. They're people. My dad used the narrative this particular group of people had about the Deaf – that they're misunderstood and less capable, but bear great intentions and know little – to maximum effect. By presenting himself as someone who felt helpless, but had the best of intentions, he cornered his child who, by comparison, seemed cruel and unfeeling.

The powers-that-be forgot, as many of us do, that our understanding of others is just a story that can be changed, and the person towards whom we do the most injustice when we believe in only one version of a story is ourselves. It is we who lose out on the chance to grow when we become afraid of an ocean whose bottom we can't immediately see. For all the suffering victims go through because of endless injustices, the victim overcomes these indignities when he realizes the people who harmed him are themselves plateaus, moments he can *climb over* to reach higher peaks.

HOME

I only have one memory of my parents fighting as a kid, though they fought all the time. I'm kneeling over some toys, prostrate, curious, and reserved. I look to my left and see them in the kitchen. A sickly power dynamic is at work: My dad is leaning into my mom. He's signing at a speed that even I can't understand. His eyes are bulging. He's wheezing as he mouths each word. His sign space stretches as far as his arms will reach. My mom, on the other hand, is partly hidden from my view in the dining room entryway. She's leaned back in fear, but the little I can see of her face is staunch and stoic, ready for anything. What little she's signing is very quiet, her sign space minuscule but puncturing.

But outside of my dad's fanatical wheezing they're both totally silent. That's why I remember this fight so well.

If there's any question I'm asked the most often, it's "what was it like to grow up in a household with Deaf people?" And the answer that most consistently surprises?

It was loud. Really loud.

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The way Deaf people are so loud because they hear so little, and the way that makes so little sense to hearing people, sums up the Deaf experience from a CODA perspective in a nutshell.

I wake up to my mom calling my name rather loudly. She doesn't know if I've gotten up yet, so within ten seconds she calls my name again, sometimes a little louder than the time before. She does this repeatedly until she either comes in to check on me, or until I go to the kitchen to let her know that I'm up. Sometimes she'll call me to help her out with something (after school, say, or on the weekends) and I'm in the bathroom, with no way to let her know I'm in there and will be out as soon as I can. In such cases, she just calls repeatedly until I materialize. This can drive someone crazy, but old habits die hard.

After getting myself ready I show up to the kitchen. Cupboards and drawers get slammed as she's getting what she needs. When she walks around, it can sound a little heavier than you might expect because she (and I) haven't learned to soften our walks. I'm so used to this way of living though that I don't even notice: I'm rechecking my homework, reading soundly, or playing a Game Boy. We eat. There are flowers on the table, and I'm not sure why they're there, because every time she wants to talk with me she moves the flowers to make eye contact. I still do that whenever something's blocking my line-of-sight. I make a

lot of eye contact generally, and I'm always pretty sure it'll weird people out, but most people just say that I seem as if I'm listening intently and that it's not a big deal.

Today she drives me to school. We're talking the whole way, but to do that, she has to look away from the road and her hands have to balance their time between the wheel and our conversation. This happens all the time: I remember when a friend and I drove with my mom, and she was going 90 on the freeway while chatting with her friend. He was holding onto the door for dear life (in 7th grade), and I chuckle that Deafness makes for dangerous driving, and gives CODAs an unnaturally iron stomach. These days, I FaceTime Deaf people while driving, and vice-versa. We all try not to do it, but we've become so used to managing the madness that we're all still alive. Don't ask me how.

School finishes and I arrive home. Because it's winter it's already getting pretty dark, so I turn on all the lights immediately. Rooms I'm in have to be really bright; if they aren't, I lose my focus. This is fine if I'm at a party or a movie theater, but when I'm with friends at dinner, wherever dinner is, light has to be more than "ambient."

My mom asks me if I have some time to help with errands. The answer is almost always yes, partly from habit, partly from a sense of duty, and partly from a need to feel important, so we go. She wants to get a new bank account for some reason or other, so I'm there to interpret. I look at the coffee at the bank and I'm thankful it's shitty coffee because I can't drink it anyway — since I'm spending time interpreting, it's not that easy to relax, let alone with caffeine coursing through me. Ditto for innumerable phone calls she needs me to make that are a) confidential or b) need someone who understands the situation better than a typical interpreter. I think back to all the times I'm at dinner with friends and my mom wants to ask them some light questions, or vice-versa — not that I'm a fast eater to begin with, but it means I'm the last person to finish my meal. Mom signs when she's chewing, and the hearing person responds when the knife and fork are in their hands, so their rhythm means I can barely a) pick up my knife and fork or b) chew. If you ever want to feel misanthropic, now is the time.

Some CODAs hear their parents vacuuming and can't stand the noise, so they unplug the vacuum cleaner while their parents vacuum away. (Don't ask me, I'm not the asshole here.) The parents often don't notice until five to ten minutes later, and then they have to circle back and do most of the room again. You'd think you can *feel* if the vacuum is on, but some people just zone out.

We get home and my mom wants to make a phone call to the credit card companies she's having some trouble with. Because of the divorce struggles, she's maxed out all her cards and she wants to see if there's a way out. I get us on the phone and at the beginning I interpret her concerns to the customer

service representative on the line. She can't afford to pay him off, and they say it's not possible to negotiate. She cries and leaves the room, leaving me on the line, so I push. I tell them they'll get nothing from us without compromise. After a back-and-forth, he sighs. "We can do $5,000," he says, a big change from the original $17,000 she owes. I'm still speaking as her, so I say "I" can do that. Email confirmation is sent. He says, "Bye, Ms. Malka." I hang up the phone and bring the news to her. Her face tells me there's hope. Best news I've had all day.

In the evening, after I've watched TV and finished most of my homework, I get into a fight with my mom. We sign a lot, but we're also using our voices cathartically, so there's plenty of yelling. If *she* can hear it though she'll stop the fight and try to make us both quieter, for fear neighbors in our apartment complex will hear. (My dad used to yell all the time; being reminded of the fact that I'm acting like him can make the fight stop in its tracks, but keep my anger fuming anyway.) The fight is usually unfruitful so I go back to my "room" (an upstairs loft with no doors) and get on the computer. If she wants my attention later in the evening, she'll call me or go to the base of the stairs and flicker the lights so I'm reminded to look at her. Visual signals work much better than audial signals for me. If I want her attention, I'll stomp loudly on the floor (since vibrations move well through our floor) and I'll wave my hand or flicker lights until I get her attention to ask her what she'll need tomorrow.

I make myself hot chocolate and go to bed.

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I notice hearing people have this intuitive, hard-to-reconcile feeling about Deafness: If you're not hearing the world — if you're not logged into it — you somehow can't take space in it. We want to imagine that the silence one experiences is also the silence one expresses. But it's the opposite: internal silence means external loudness. The fact that Deaf people can't naturally control how loud they are means that they'll tend to noise, not silence, unless they learn the very foreign language of hearing. The Second Law of Thermodynamics reigns supreme: We don't realize how much effort it takes to be quiet, how much effort it takes to live in a smaller space. If we gave each other the chance, we'd all take up as much space as possible.

When my parents fought, it was a no-holds-barred noise-fest. Voices were used to let out the pent-up anger someone had while hands took the lead in carving out an argument, a sentiment, or an abusive sentence or two. While I never experienced the lack of boundaries to such an extreme myself, some CODAs can speak at length about how their parents would ask them for help by barging into the bathroom, or while they were making out with their partner in their room. If you can imagine a private

moment you've had, there's a CODA out there who can describe that same moment being indelibly ruined by parents who prioritized their needs over their children's development. It's hard *not* to blame parents for something like this; all the same, envision a world that you're cut off from nevertheless making constant demands on you, and you're unable to address those demands. How do you know what's important and what's not important? What's urgent and what can wait? What's true and what's not true? What if you read a document and the only words you could pick out were "Fire," "Job," and "Pay?" *Could* you wait? *Would* you wait? Or would you, as I've heard and seen many Deaf people do, ask in sign language: "MEAN WHAT, THIS?"[4] ("What does this mean?")

The more you think about it, the more interesting it gets: Society teaches us to take up only a certain amount of space. How much space we get to have depends on our sex, status, height, race, environment, individual assertiveness, and so on, but we have all unconsciously internalized the rules. When you talk, for example, don't you automatically change the volume of your voice to fit the environment without thinking? Have you ever had that one friend you're always embarrassed to be in public with because they talk more loudly than the environment 'allows?'

We don't think well of people stepping 'out of line,' as it were; and the way someone conducts themselves through sound is more offensive in our society than visual statements. For example, if you heard someone ranting and raving on the street, you automatically assume the person to be insane, to *look* crazy, and to behave crazily. These days in many places in America, there is much less resistance towards looking a certain way, but sensitivity to sound seems to remain the most important social skill in the western world. How long could you stand to be around a person who made random verbal noise every time they chewed, even if it was unintentional? How long would you tolerate that at a restaurant? It's just as, or more, irritating than someone who smells terrible.

Many Deaf people didn't get the memo on these rules so they don't follow them. We know something they don't, but most people don't know why they don't know. Deaf people are therefore often ostracized socially and can never figure out why. Their hearing children often resent them for not getting it, and then for putting them into the middle of this strange world, a world centered on seeing language instead of hearing it.

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[4] The all-caps style is referred to as 'glossing,' a way of writing out sign language, which often doesn't explicitly *say* its prepositions but rather *shows* them. (If we say, "The cup is on the table," we can sign the word "table" and sign the word 'cup' on top of the word 'table.')

THE WORLD

Not long ago my mom wanted to buy a fancy trailer. Because it's hard even in 2016 to get an interpreter, she asked me to help: We found a day where I didn't really have anything important or urgent to do and then took the slow drive south to find reasonably affordable, inviting mobile homes.

After six hours of interpreting, sleuthing, and riding around in a golf cart, we found the right one and went into an office to sign the paperwork. A slightly overweight Italian-American with a round beardless face rose to greet us and said to make ourselves comfortable. (I'll call him Ken.) We all shook hands. I sat next to my mom and faced my chair towards her. (This isn't usually a good place to be interpreting from; you want to be across from the Deaf person and next to the hearing person so that the Deaf person can maintain eye contact with the hearing speaker, but there wasn't room in this office.) Then we began to negotiate the final details of the purchase.

"So! You really got a good deal out of Sam, huh?" Ken glances behind him with a smirk to a much taller, balding white dude, who grins back. He was the dealer we worked with, a respectable enough guy during our search. "Congratulations on your purchase."

"Thank you," she smiles. "I'm really excited to take it home and live in it." She makes an exaggerated sleeping motion and we laugh. Then we get down to business.

"A couple things I want to go over with you before we get you out of here," he said. "We'll cover the warranty for the trailer; some products that'll help you keep your vehicle clean; and then we'll get you the agreement stating that you intend on owning this particular RV and the terms and conditions that apply to it.

"I'm printing out the contract for you right now, which we'll go over first—" his hand is fingering the air over the printer — "and you'll just have to sign and initial a few places on it as I explain to you the terms of the agreement."

She interrupts: "What about getting an extended warranty on the RV?"

"I'm gonna get to that in a second. We'll print something separate for it." He picks up the papers from the printer and lets them fly through the air before laying them out in front of her. He points to where she should sign and initial and explains each element of the contract. She looks at me to understand each piece, then looks back at the contract to sign or initial.

What is it to be an interpreter? Simple, we think: It's a person whose job is to transmit an oral message from one person to another, from one language to another. (A translator does the same thing, but for the written form.) And what's a message? Is it "what one party verbally communicates to the other party"? What about the emotion in which the message was expressed? And what about all the things which are implied by a verbal message: inside jokes, innuendos, allusions, references, ironic silences, omitted words —are those part of a message, too? Of course, right? We just don't think about it day-to-day.

The listener's behavior is information. Not only is the interpreter listening to and speaking for the speaker, and listening to the listener, he is also listening to how the speaker listens to the listener; and so on, in an infinite feedback loop.

More on this in a second.

"So, the warranty." He stretches upward. The full veneer of his belly pops through his button-down. "The RV comes with a one-year limited warranty, if you prefer not paying extra. We do however have an extended warranty lasting seven years that we can do for $2,495. It'll cover everything that could go wrong with the vehicle; there's an extra charge to get a mobile technician out to the RV, even with the extended warranty, so I just want to make sure you're aware of that."

Mom's forehead crinkles as she decides there's room to negotiate. She raises her eyebrows in expectation as she says: "Oh come on, you can give me a better price than that."

Ken's expression quickly shifts as he eyes my mom in a moment's hesitation. Up, down; up, down. "The warranty is $2,495. We can finance it over a couple years."

"Give me $2,200." My mom looks at him firmly, coyly.

He makes a mock show of resignation with his hands thrown up. "I can't do it, I've got to keep the lights on."

She looks at him and makes an exaggerated, sweeping hand motion as she mouths "come onnnnnnn." I supply the voice. There's some laughter.

He gives another focused look and smirks with bravado. "What are you going to give me for that discount? A— a home-cooked meal?"

If I were an ideal interpreter, I would be articulating one person's whole *being* to the other person(s), and the more quickly and accurately the better. The problem with this is that people are always becoming, always showing new parts of themselves. As an interpreter, I bear in mind how these moments are expressions of a person's entire history and still-becoming, as they choose to express it. If this sounds abstract and ridiculous, listen to someone you know as if you were in their presence for the first time, and try to imagine being a mirror for this person. Imagine expressing this whole person's nature to someone else. If you feel you're good at this, try doing it for somebody you probably can't relate to *at all:* How might you interpret the ravings of someone society considers insane, or the approaches of a sexual predator? How about the vengeance of a screaming racist, or a fragile victim in the throes of a trauma far beyond your understanding?

I cannot overstate the intense, dramatic nature of "interpreting." While the empathic foundation of being an interpreter is addressed just by being human, the ideal emotional/intellectual state for an interpreter is probably beyond reach: Such a person would empathize with everyone and be able to articulate for everyone. Today's interpreters are far from this ideal. I know of no interpreter training program (ITP) which even makes the *magnitude* of this work clear to up-and-coming interpreters.

Interpreters need to clearly communicate the message *and* allow misunderstandings to happen, as they happen. So: the same way people misunderstand each other daily with no third party to fix things, the interpreter's job is to express the misunderstanding—and the things that can result from it. The interpreter's job, in this sense, is not to exist. All this requires an almost inhuman emotional distance, which some might find unbearable on a personal level. The emotional line between personal autonomy and submission to circumstances is one interpreters straddle daily.

But in this and other conversations I wasn't following interpreter rules because in those situations I was a Child of Deaf Adults signing for my mom. Emotional distance can also be a liability.

So, let's go back to this creepy dude licking his lips at my mom, and how I handled it.

I interpreted his home-cooked meal remarks with a stoic, monotone face: "I can't do that. It's too low."

At first, my mom's face looks blank. "Come on, you gonna smile for me?" He goaded. I didn't interpret that either. She organically looks at him and makes this childlike, pouty face, and he laughs. "Yeah, I like that."

I immediately suppressed the wave of anger I experienced witnessing my mom get objectified. So, why didn't I speak up and call him out? First, it's in poor taste to appropriate my mom's speech; she's perfectly able to speak for and defend herself. Second, in being impulsive and calling him out, I might hurt my mom's goal, which is to get the best deal she can get on this trailer. (This experience of making things difficult for my mom with otherwise good intentions has happened before, in more dramatic situations.)

But I can't sign this man's words to her in the first place. I can't dirty my hands with them. I can't be his messenger and see my mom's potential reaction. So, I'm left doing what many CODAs do: I say nothing and take in the reality of what I'm seeing, with nobody else missing a beat.

"You know what, I like your mom." He leans back in satisfaction. "$2,195. I'll even take the $5 extra off, and you can get a Starbucks with it." I sign the price change and she grins, and everybody shakes on it.

She signs the extra papers, rejects the other products he wants her to buy, and we walk out with the agreement for her new RV.

"Nice guys," she tells me.

And I can't seem to say a word.

To play a role for long enough is to become stuck in that role, and almost every CODA I've met has been an emotional age of roughly six to thirteen years old, with a crudely pasted adult mask hanging on their faces. And we all tend to say the same thing: our childhoods feel burdensome because of how non-consensual they were. Can you imagine interpreting the above conversation as a two- or six-year old? How much of an impression does the above conversation have on you if you're a seven-year-old girl?

CODAs often grow up angry without being sure who the object of their anger should be. Should we be angry at our parents for being Deaf, who have put us in a difficult position? Should we be angry at how little they know, at how much many of us have to modify their comments to make them make sense to hearing people? Or should we be angry at every hearing person who doesn't get where we or our Deaf family are coming from? The most difficult part of our experience, it seems to me, is coming to terms with why we're needed at all: for hearing people, finding an interpreter is an inconvenience they wish they didn't have to deal with. For the Deaf community and their hearing children, getting an interpreter is a question of survival. When an interpreter can't be afforded or found, we jump in to fill the gap.

Meanwhile the Deaf community passes on to their children the same bleak skies — the same self-limiting beliefs, the same struggle to be heard, the same cognitive dissonances. And yet we find out that because we have working ears, even those beliefs don't belong to us. What then? Often, a lifetime of interpreting or being intimately involved with the Deaf community, this time for money, itself a coping mechanism to relive our childhoods on our terms.

Going into the hearing world isn't often much better. Having grown up "figuring the hearing world out" to interpret their worldviews back to the Deaf around us, we have no idea how to treat them. How do we look past our self-limiting beliefs to belong to a group that's put down people we've known and loved? That's put *us* down and minimized us? How do we talk about our background in Deafness? Who would understand? Who wants to understand?

Even if we move away from the Deaf world, we still interpret for – live vicariously through, and for the sake of – the ghosts of our past. Our parents, our Deaf friends and family, still live in our minds, and we still experience the hearing world with caution – with an intellectual and emotional barrier that separates us from day-to-day living. Such is our world, built in many ways by others, and we force ourselves to live in it.

CONCLUSION

(OR: SMALL JOYS AND GREAT HOPES)

"Place little good perfect things around you, O higher men! Their golden ripeness heals the heart. What is perfect teaches hope." – Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Let's end our story on the joys of being a CODA, the moments that felt like gifts, the seconds of intimate inspiration.

When the divorce was going on, a Deaf friend my mom knew saw that I was struggling. He was a longtime martial artist and himself a former martial arts instructor. He took me one day into a random dojo he thought would be a good fit and paid for my martial arts for years. Fourteen years later and I'm still doing martial arts, still in touch with the same teachers, still working from the foundation of athleticism and self-defense that he gave me that I would never have otherwise had, collecting priceless friendships and community along the way. One day when I get my black belt, I hope he'll be there to sign my certificate and witness the oak tree now grown from the acorn he so tenderly placed into the soil.

Theme parks my mom took me to came with a free Fast Pass for "handicapped people." Deaf people are apparently so "handicapped" that they don't get the same thrill out of roller coasters that hearing people do. My mom would turn to me and say something like, "if you're helped by someone else's stupidity, don't protest it." Space Mountain is just as fun the twelfth time around, I assure you. In fact, this rule has applied for most lines we've waited in, skipping to the front and passing through out of a misplaced sense of pity. (Thanks, society!)

I cannot tell you how many dates I've gotten just because I know sign language and girls want to learn it from a native speaker. It's also been a great icebreaker at kickbacks and cocktail parties, and an opening to opportunities I never knew existed. The lesson I've learned: Whatever your story, you're likely best off by sharing it, usually without shame and always with vulnerability. The right people – the people for whom your story is meant – will find you.

For every friend of my mom's who turned on us during the divorce (for reasons neither of us understand), we found another who saved us. One friend was always there to give moral and financial support if we needed it (along with endless nights out and small, thoughtful gifts). Another worked late into the night

helping us process court documents. No words can describe the gratitude I feel towards those who softened the blow of a time that felt monstrous and unfeeling.

From two to ten years old I had three close friends, two of whom were CODAs themselves. Every Wednesday we'd have fajita nights at JD's place and every Friday my mom would host Moroccan nights. At the end of every Friday night, JD would hide in my mom's car and at the end of every Wednesday, after we dropped the family off, I'd try to hide in their house in the hopes that the parents, stuck with the other family's kid, would let us spend the night. It never worked, but the fun was in the hoping, the dreaming, the striving. I attribute the closeness of my relationship with my friends to the closeness of the families, and the closeness of the families to Deafness itself – they who are isolated draw their worlds ever closer to one another. We as children learned the importance and beauty of those close bonds, even if we didn't fully understand what was bringing us all together.

By interpreting as much as I have, I've learned to listen. Not always to say the right thing (because many times I've lacked the vocabulary) and not always to *do* the right thing (because I haven't always been brave enough), but almost always to hear what's coming from the other person or the environment, and to make an environment comfortable enough in which they can be themselves – and then, most beautifully, to witness and help them articulate a clear vision of what they can become, if they let themselves soar.

As difficult as interpreting can be (and as uninterested as I am in making it my life's work), few jobs give you the opportunity to meet people from every walk of life and make you listen to their opinions and *not* interrupt them. Worse, interpreting makes you *say* those opinions as if they were yours. For all that, I've been places I would never otherwise have been and I've learned things I could never otherwise have learned. No doubt these experiences, now planted in the soils of youth, will circle back someday to become something much larger and more impactful.

When I was three years old I saw Bill Clinton on TV, and after learning about his job I knew I wanted to be President of the United States. When I got older and reality began to close in, the thing that has kept me going towards my dreams was knowing that I could bring something fresh to the table. Difference is the lifeblood of dreams, and I'm no exception.

My mom hasn't read a book in years, and yet on her own she crafted a personal philosophy similar to those with high-profile success stories: Richard Branson, Tim Ferriss, Oprah, Sheryl Sandberg, Elon Musk. Getting to interpret for her, to learn how she thinks, feels, and sees the world, has been, in its own way, a privilege. To see her apply her own philosophy in the grittiest of moments and experience success has helped me make sense of my own life, even when it created struggles I was set to overcome.

"What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more' ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.'" – Nietzsche*, The Gay Science*

If there's anything you walk away with, I hope it's this: Society has refused, and often still refuses, to provide the services Deaf people need to live their lives with dignity and respect. I hope that, if there are any changes that we can make with respect to Deafness, it is in communication access, awareness, improved education – bridges to understanding wherever and whenever they're needed. And if you're reading this and know that you can help, I hope that you do.

But don't misunderstand: Yes, kids interpreting for their parents and for society is child abuse that *society* should do its utmost to prevent, since parents and guardians rarely have a real choice in the matter; but to those of us who have already marched through the flames, what does it matter when we can reframe our experiences as a challenge we overcame and are overcoming, a set of experiences which give us the power to be, do, and believe anything we like, and carry the world along for the ride?

If you're a non-CODA reading this, I'm touched. I hope my short essay has exposed you to another life, another perspective. There are no shortage of resources to understanding Deafness, myself included. (Reach out at rjmalka@gmail.com). And where there is overlap between your story and mine, I hope it drives you towards whatever you're looking for, be it depth, authenticity, beauty, or healing. To experience that many of the determining experiences of our lives are fundamentally relatable to one another, even as they can't be perfectly translated into speech, is the joy and flaw of being human, all-too-human.

May you wake up one day saying to yourself: "It is time for the six-year-olds, we eternal, everlasting children, to take the lead in this adult world." No matter the age of the mask you're wearing, rip it off, throw your chains to the chasm beside, and leap forth with full intent: to fly! – to soar! – to *see!* —

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Lastly, to those in my life (Deaf or Hearing) who show their love with every breath. You're an inspiration and I'm indescribably grateful. Thank you.

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