

Prologue

*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

You'd think I was still figuring it out but, at ten, I knew the drill — or at least I thought I did. Exiting Mom's car, I was accompanying her on an errand that would define our lives.

I squinted against the glare from the black top, watching her. Mom's dark eyes and youthful face were set with purpose. Her straight black hair matched her jacket and slacks and her black-and-gold necklace radiated dignity. She locked her freshly-washed, white Jeep and guided us toward the Department of Social Services. The hard clicks of her heels were the only lively rhythm within earshot, which is ironic because she couldn't hear them.

Unlike many other Children of Deaf Adults, or CODAs, as we're known, I'd never been near this office. I'd long been proud that, though many Deaf people end up on welfare, my mom wasn't one of them. She was Deaf, not "disabled" — whatever the hell *that* meant.

But now we were one of those families picking up a government pity-paycheck on the sad side of Los Angeles. Van Nuys was a waste of beige strip malls strung together by neglected streets, a place battered by an ember-red sun, a weak tree or two nudging its roots into the sidewalk. It felt like a hospital, the way it was devoid of character and full of sickness.

Well, I didn't think we were sick. I didn't care about money. And I didn't get why we were there.

But Mom had a good reason to be picking up Social Security Disability Insurance, or SSDI: My dad had thrown us into a divorce case ugly beyond expectation, and she had only recently discovered his obsession with getting such checks. He'd lie and misrepresent his situation to get those checks. So, she wanted to know how it worked. How good the pay was. If the pay changed when you had a family or were married. What he was doing to get them.

And I was coming along in case there was no interpreter. She couldn't hear them after all, and they didn't sign. I felt like a soldier charging into battle, especially since Mom was so stressed by the divorce proceedings: Mom's lawyers said she couldn't work because it'd hurt her case, but not working was driving her crazy and tightening her budget. So this paycheck would help financially while giving her a better sense of what Dad had been up to for years.

We'd kill two birds with one stone.

Mom was laser-focused on the office just ahead. In the parking lot to my left, I noticed a rickety, brown-green Oldsmobile pulling into a parking space. The driver's door opened to reveal an older, overweight woman with poorly-applied makeup. She was turning her head, about to

look in my direction, when a guy with curly, red hair, some salt-and-pepper stubble, and stained clothes ran up to her.

He pulled a gun on her. He pointed it through the window into her face. He said, “Get the fuck out of the car right now.”

Holy shit, I thought.

He moved to let her leave. She clutched her purse and dropped her keys in the car, then sped away.

I glanced in front of me. A mom had her two kids against her, keeping their heads forward with her hands while her own head craned left.

The man got into the car and slammed the door, eyes on the wheel. I mentally noted that he’d put the gun in the passenger seat. His eyes fired at the rear-view mirror. Coast was clear. The engine sputtered to life. The man calmly shifted into reverse, and drove away.

I turned to Mom and, both speechless and signless, pointed 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 looked at me with eyes as calm as a windless lake and signed: “Maybe they know each other.”

Welcome to the Deaf experience.

Maybe I should have tugged at her shoulder to describe the carjacking, but it didn’t seem worth the effort. The danger had passed. And, anyway, we were about to go into an important meeting. This way at least one of us could be calm and focused on the task at hand.

I followed Mom into the stale air of the social security office, where our task began. One minute I was my mom asking questions about SSDI, the next minute I was the government employee answering them, and the next I was the form my mom was filling out, explaining what each of my lines meant. I pushed the carjacking from my mind. I did my job. It was only when we left the office two hours later and found a new car in the same parking space that I felt the jolt of anxiety zip across my shoulders.

The woman was nowhere to be seen.

I wrote the core of this book while traveling cross-country on an Amtrak train. As I passed forests and mountains and seas and valleys, the train’s lulls and lurches began to relax the two-and-a-half decades of inimitable tensions that had held my story captive. I found in my tensions the same brisk pace, the same endless conversations with curious strangers, the same darkness and lightness, the same overwhelming feeling of discovery as the ride I experienced.

This book also required my friends and family to journey alongside me, boring beneath the surface to bring long-buried facts to light.

Still, names and details have been changed where I didn't get permission to share individual stories. Some of the scenes I describe are composites of experiences I've had, mostly for anonymity's sake, sometimes to make up for lapses in memory. The dialogue is reconstructed from memory, mostly from the emotional remnants that have lingered over the years. The major events are recorded as I remember them, or as I understand them from those I've spoken to.

I will assume you know nothing about Deafness, so I'll introduce you as we go.

A professor from my college once said: "Insecurities don't disappear as you get older. They only get more complicated." In the heart of my youth, I hope that the experiences, insecurities, and victories I communicate make for interesting reading.

Robert Malka