

SARAH MARSHANK

being
self*ish*

— AN UNORTHODOX MEMOIR —



MY JOURNEY FROM ESCORT TO MONK TO GRANDMOTHER

*I dedicate this book to my beloved husband, Steven, whose
fierce love remains the cauldron within which I simmer...
the soil from which I blossom.*

A Note to the Reader

An autobiography tells the story *of* a life, memoir tells a story *from* a life.

All accounts in this memoir are true to my memory.

Some events and characters are a blend of more than one.

All names have been changed except for Steven, Jun Po, and Edie.

Table of Contents

broken

7- 72

open

73 - 136

wild

137 - 204

still

205 - 290

awake

291 - 364

alive

365 - 404

epilogue

405 - 422

broken

I'm pacing the perimeter of the abandoned tennis court behind my small secluded cottage in Bonny Doon, California. I'm alone, hunched over, looking down at the deteriorating concrete beneath my bare feet. I wonder how it is that things fall apart. How it is that I am falling apart. Walking in circles helps calm the incessant chatter in my head. The rhythm of my stride generates welcome space between my thoughts.

I take advantage of the opening and ask for help.

Who are you asking?

I can't say for sure. I only know that if angels or guardian spirits or even a God exists, this is the time for one of them to show up.

Don't you think they'd have shown up by now?

Maybe I'm not listening in the right way.

Or maybe you don't deserve their help.

Maybe you should shut up.

Are you going to have this baby or not?

I don't know!

Maybe you'd better decide.

I'd hate it if somebody else made this decision for me, but I'm not doing a very good job of making it for myself. Despite being raised in a traditional Jewish home, I don't believe in any particular

religious code of ethics. I'm searching for my own sense of right and wrong.

A vision appears before me. It's a boy, roughly three years old, with skin the color of caramel. Golden curls frame his sweet face. He has my blue-green eyes. They're vivacious. I drop to my knees and reach for my child as he extends his arms towards me.

We're almost embracing when I notice his father, Malik, beside him. I freeze. Behind Malik stands his whole family. Strangers to me, they crowd together like an angry mob. They're African, wild and impossible for me to understand. I want to grab my son and run.

"GO AWAY!" I shout as I reach for my little boy. But they grab him and won't let go.

I collapse beside the crumbling tennis court and cry. I wish my tears could wash away this entire mess and leave me free to get on with my life.

If only.

I roll onto my back and stare at the redwood forest surrounding me. This patch of land was cleared to build this tennis court almost forty years ago but the owners stopped maintaining it at some point. Now the forest is slowly reclaiming what was hers.

I roll onto my side.

I recognize the weed growing in front of my face.

"Plantain's great for skin irritations," my herbology teacher taught me. "Chew it to a pulp, then place it on inflamed areas."

I want to rip it from the earth and plaster it on my brain. Console the hysteria plaguing my psyche like a rash gone rogue.

Get up.

I stand, brush the dirt off my soft cotton dress, and redo my ponytail. I continue pacing.

If I don't have this baby, then I can just get on with my life, continue along the path I've been on.

And what path is that?

You know! The path I'm on. MY path. The path that doesn't have me birthing the child of some Rastafarian man I hardly know and certainly don't love. The path that doesn't have me live through another abortion. The path that leads me to fulfillment of my dreams, to a meaningful career, to my perfect mate, to happily-ever-after. THAT path.

Shit. You're starting to lose it. Relax. You can handle this.
Neither decision is the end of the world. Do you hear me?

"Not the end of the world," I repeat like a mantra, planting one foot in front of the other.

Not the end of the world.

"Just the end of MY world," I shout, this time out loud.

Less than a year ago I had my first abortion. My boyfriend Mark and I had been practicing the rhythm method, exploring natural birth control as an alternative to latex or hormones. I took my temperature daily to track my ovulation. We abstained when I was fertile. The rest of the time he religiously pulled out. Until the time he didn't. Even though my temperature indicated we were safe, we weren't. I got pregnant.

Moving to California three years ago was supposed to satisfy my longing for a life eluding me in the Midwest. Even though I couldn't name precisely what I was yearning for, I could feel it. When I left the University of Michigan in the middle of my junior year and moved to Santa Cruz, my ideal future felt close. Until I got pregnant.

I'd been dating Mark longer than any other lover, but six months isn't enough of a foundation for marriage. Committing to him *and* a child felt scary and reckless. I was madly absorbed in my studies in Alternative Education at UCSC, enjoying my job at a popular restaurant on campus, and passionately involved in protests against the proliferation of nuclear power. The life I imagined for myself was materializing, but becoming a mother at twenty-two was never a part of my vision.

Terminating that first pregnancy was a relatively uncomplicated decision. After a very brief consideration to run away with Mark and become barefoot and pregnant for the next ten years, I chose the procedure confidently. Abortion isn't a big deal in my world. After all, it's the eighties. Roe v. Wade is ten years old. I knew two other girls who aborted their pregnancies. I viewed the undertaking as casually as having my wisdom teeth pulled; something I didn't need was going to be removed.

Simple.

Mark and I split up soon after. The abortion hit us harder than we imagined. Not knowing how to cope with our feelings, we each withdrew. Mark trekked off to India and I dove deeper into my studies at school. The decision to end both the pregnancy and the relationship was mutual. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that somehow I'd failed. I was inconsolably sad. I tried therapy, which provided some support, but hiring a professional to ease my pain only succeeded in distracting me from it in the moment. As soon as a session ended I was buried under a certain bewildering sorrow.

Slowly suffocating.

I'm not the same person I was a year ago. I'm not sure who I am now. All I know is that having experienced one abortion, I can't so casually choose to have another. Not because I feel it's morally wrong, per se. It's more the uncertainty around knowing *how* to make this decision that troubles me. I'm not sure if I believe abortion is Wrong, capital W, or just wrong for me. I need more time to sort this out and time is something I don't have. I'm already three weeks pregnant. I'm afraid if I have this abortion and I realize afterward it was a mistake, I won't emotionally recover. I'm equally afraid if I have this baby out of fear of punishment or to avoid the psychological consequences, then I'll resent my child and be a horrible parent.

My philosophical reflection is overridden by my body's desperate plea.

“Not another one,” it begs.

How will I ever reconcile these various parts of me?

Good question!

My attention is drawn again to another hallucination.

Malik appears on the other side of the court walking towards me. He glides his small tight frame over to where I stand trembling and smiles at me with dazzling white teeth.

He looks so real.

His eyes are dark, like his skin, and angled, making him look part Asian. His matted black hair is bound up high in a tri-colored knitted cap with one long dreadlock hanging down his back.

“Leah.” The ghost calls me by my Hebrew name.

I close my eyes and try to remember Malik’s affection towards me. Memories of his kindness are fading.

“I don’t think we should have this baby,” I finally whisper to him. “I’m not ready to be a mom. There’s so much I still need to learn. And, no offense, but you know I don’t love you the way I want to love the man I marry and have kids with. Besides, you’re a black man, and a Rastafarian. My family would freak out.”

I’m scratching the cuticle of my thumb raw with my index finger.

“I understand,” Malik says in his Jamaican-British hybrid accent. “But there’s another alternative. You can give birth to our child and then give him to me.”

I open my eyes and turn away from the vision, feeling unhinged. The sun is low in the sky and a chill grabs me on the front of my neck. I start to walk fast again, trying to get warm.

Malik and I met shortly after Mark left for India. My friend Laura introduced us. Malik is her boyfriend. I met Laura in a World Religion class last semester. I came to class curious about how other religions view death and find meaning in life, whereas Laura had already found her answers. Through Malik and Rastafarianism.

Malik suggested we have sex. He said having sex would erase my body's memory of Mark and help liberate the grief from the abortion. Laura said it was okay with her. She agreed that making love might heal my soul. I was willing to give it a try.

Malik and I did it only once.

The sex was awkward. Forced. I closed my eyes when Malik entered me, hoping his thrust would break through my sadness and make me feel happy again. But my body remained tight, my hope for even the tiniest amount of pleasure thwarted by his instantaneous ejaculation.

When Malik rolled off me, we discovered the tear in the condom.

It wasn't your fault.

I wish I would've used my diaphragm for added protection.

Wishing won't change a fucking thing.

"I can't have this child and then just give it away," I decide aloud, imagining a life separated from the child conceived in my body.

If I birth it, I raise it.

Malik's invisible presence still hovers above me.

"GO AWAY!" I scream as I swat furiously into the sky.

"I warn you, Leah," the voice is loud. "If you kill our child, you'll go to hell."

I begin to run, rattled by this curse. His condemnation infiltrates my psyche and lodges in the cracks forming there.

I'm familiar with Malik's moral beliefs because I've been studying his religion for months now. Rastafarians claim to be the lost tribe of Israel and the carriers of the authentic messianic teachings of Judaism. I began re-reading the Old Testament with Malik. Malik's interpretations of the Biblical stories offered me a whole new perspective on being a Jew. I was an eager student. Malik and I covered a lot of topics during our studies together. But he never mentioned hell.

The sun has dropped behind the trees and I feel painfully cold. Wholly abandoned.

“*You’re* to blame,” I cry out to Malik, wherever he is.
“*You’re* the one who should go to hell. It was *your* bad idea, *your* stupid penis, and *your* defective condom that caused this.”

But the aftermath of those irreversible ten seconds lives in *my* body now. It doesn’t matter how it got here or who the father is. I am pregnant.

Whether I have this baby or not, I am ruined.

You should’ve known better.

I brace against my inevitable breakdown, desperate for a clear and confident decision to miraculously appear. But I’m tumbling fast with nothing to hold onto.

My brother Jacob turns up on my doorstep the next morning uninvited and unannounced. Although I'm startled, I'm not surprised he's here. Showing up for one another began when we were little. Once when he was two I accidentally locked him in the bathroom. I stayed home from kindergarten that day and sat outside the bathroom door, my eye glued to the keyhole so I could see him. I told him stories until the fireman arrived to break the lock.

"You okay?" he asks me now as he drops his backpack on the floor and pulls me in for a hug.

"No," I admit. "I'm a mess."

"I had a feeling," he says. "I've tried calling you a hundred times with no answer, so I impulsively hopped on a plane last night."

It was just a week ago when I saw Jacob in Detroit while visiting our family for Passover. I wish I hadn't gone. I'd discovered my pregnancy only days before and wasn't planning on telling my family until after I'd decided what I was going to do. But I caved and told my mom while we were preparing a *matzah brie* together. Being in my childhood home must have lulled me into believing it was a good idea to share it with her.

I broke the unleavened bread into bite-sized pieces and dropped them into a bowl of cracked eggs. Then, as if I'd been held under water and finally surfacing, I blurted out the news in a gasp.

As if confession was like breathing, natural and unfettered, freeing me from the burden of a secret. Instantly I knew it was a mistake. My mother would-not-could-not understand.

But it was too late.

I stood at the kitchen counter coming undone, one part of me reeling with shame for being unintentionally pregnant again and another part frozen behind a stifled panic. I watched my mother fold into herself. Her long fingers wrapped tightly around the bowl as she slid it closer to her.

My mother doesn't care much for discussing inner struggles. Her own or anybody else's. She's built for operational tasks, like shopping and laundry. Though small in stature, she easily gave birth five times and cared for a growing family while working as a first-grade teacher. She was highly praised for her performance at school. Hundreds of former students still pay homage to my mom for the impact she had on their lives.

They got a piece of her you never did.

"Well," she said, as she carefully poured the raw egg mixture into a sizzling frying pan. I stared at the back of her neck, imagining the look on her face. "I know a doctor who can probably get you in for a procedure right away."

She didn't ask how I was feeling, how it happened, or even who the father was. I walked over to face her, searched for sympathy behind her malachite eyes, and attempted to embrace her unyielding body. Then I went to my bedroom and had a total melt down, crying for the mother I didn't get in this life, sobbing into the belly of my tattered Raggedy Ann doll.

I slept fitfully, unable to get comfortable in my childhood twin bed. I rose before dawn and called a cab, hoping it would arrive before anybody woke up. When my father heard the car, he ran barefoot into the driveway to stop me. His striped cotton pajamas and disheveled gray hair made me think of Albert Einstein.

If only your dad had Einstein's wisdom.

“Lis, baby,” my father pleaded, his brow tight above worried blue eyes, “Why not stay a few more days? Let us help you sort this out.”

“I can’t, Dad,” I said coldly, as I handed my suitcase to the taxi driver. “I need to go. I’ll figure this out on my own.”

“Let us help you do what’s right,” he begged as I settled into the back seat and closed the door.

I looked away from his hand pressing on the window, imagining him coercing me into a decision born solely out of his standards of right and wrong.

You and mom have no idea who I am. Or what’s best for me.

But as we pulled away, I secretly hoped for him to stop the taxi, rescue me, and make all my trouble go away.

That’s not his job.

I turn to my younger brother now. I notice a hint of my former self in his presence. My together self. Jacob’s cobalt blue eyes shine like star sapphires. Clear and vibrant. Ready for an adventure. Mine are heavy and blood shot.

“I think I might be going insane,” I confess. “I feel pummeled, like I’ve been wrung through one of those bathing-suit dryers we used after swimming lessons when we were kids. Remember those? With the rubber rollers?”

Jacob nods.

“My love of life has been squeezed out of me. And I feel scared,” I admit.

He touches my hand. Says nothing.

I hope he can handle this.

“I can’t believe I got myself into this mess. I can’t fucking believe it.”

Believe it already! Just make a decision, for God’s sake.

“How can I help?” Jacob asks.

I have no answer.

He surveys my tiny kitchen for something to eat, but my cupboards are empty.

“How ‘bout we get some food?” he suggests.

I haven’t eaten in two days.

We drive to my favorite pizza place downtown. I slide into the booth across from Jacob, sinking into the corner, hoping I won’t see anybody I know. We order a large cheese pie and two sodas.

“Lisa,” Jacob reaches across the table to hold my hand.

Because Malik and Laura have been calling me by my Hebrew name, hearing Jacob say “Lisa” jostles me from a stupor. I take a deep breath to reorient my sense of self.

I wonder if I’m psychotic.

I take Jacob’s hand in mine.

“Why don’t you just have another abortion?” he asks, leaning his upper body towards the table. His voice tugs at my heart.

“I’m not sure. I think I might be afraid I’ll go to hell,” I say.

Jacob raises his eyebrows, “Hell?”

“Yeah. Malik says that’s what’ll happen if I abort. I don’t believe in a literal hell, but something’s got a grip on me. Since aborting my pregnancy with Mark I’ve been living in *some* sort of hell.”

Jacob is silent. He looks at me with softening eyes.

“I asked Dad what Judaism’s stance is on abortions,” I continue, “and if I would get into some sort of Jewish trouble for having one.”

“Really?” Jacob lights up. “What did he say?”

“He said that in the future when I do have a child, there would be a consequence only if it’s a boy. My son wouldn’t be entitled to receive the *pideon haben* blessing for a firstborn boy, because he technically wouldn’t be first-born.”

“That’s it?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, so no hell,” Jacob seems relieved. “And as for that blessing, who cares?”

“Yeah, but what if it’s not true?” I counter. “What if Dad just doesn’t know, like so many other things about life he doesn’t know. Or maybe he knows but didn’t want to tell me because he never liked Mark and didn’t want me to have Mark’s baby. And forget about Malik. I can’t imagine Dad would ever support me to have a child with a black man. Not *his* daughter.”

I pause to consider my own prejudice, tucked away somewhere.

Is this why I don’t want to have this baby? Does Malik’s dark skin trigger my father’s discomfort, or am I the one who has the issue with it?

How can you know the difference?

A chubby waitress in tight jeans places a steaming round pizza on the table. The cheese is perfectly golden. Jacob slides a slice onto a plate and hands it to me. I blow on it, then fold and bite. The calories go right to my brain. I feel suddenly sturdier. Jacob silently scarfs down his piece.

“Do *you* think hell exists?” I ask.

“I dunno, Lis,” he answers with his mouth full. “But if I were you I wouldn’t worry about it.” Jacob slides another slice of pizza onto his plate. “Since you already had one abortion, you’ve already earned a sentence to hell if that’s what happens. So, if you have another abortion, d’ya think God’s gonna make you serve two terms back to back?”

“Maybe,” I chuckle nervously at the absurdity.

“Well, then, who cares? You’re screwed no matter what.”

I hate this.

Jacob looks up and smiles at me. His love touches the edges of my emptiness.

“But what if you’re not going to hell?” Jacob continues. “What if there’s a way to get through this and move on? Don’t you think it makes sense to take a chance? Having a baby right now seems like it could be too much for you to handle and unfair to the kid. And to Malik.”

I nod.

“You can have children later, Lis, with somebody you love,” he says. “You’ll survive this. You’ll figure things out. If anybody can do it, it’s you.”

I draw a long sip of Sprite through the straw until I’m sucking air between melting ice cubes. I’m not so sure Jacob is right about me.

“And here’s what little I do know about souls,” Jacob adds. “It seems like every religion has a way of fixing ‘em.”

“Such as accepting Jesus as my savior?” I say sarcastically.

“Who knows?” Jacob is optimistic. “Try to stay positive. Be open. Life is full of possibilities.”

I push away the thought of becoming a Christian and for a moment envision a life even better than any I’ve ever dreamed of. I can’t see the details, but I’m charged with a wave of pure hope.

Suddenly my thought stream gets hijacked and I perceive a different outcome. I see a frazzled woman leaning against a pole in an airport. She’s waving goodbye to a young child with wild curly hair. The child’s boarding a plane by himself. He’s off to spend Christmas in Jamaica with his dad.

I feel suddenly nauseous, like I might not be able to keep down this pizza.

I lean into the booth and rest the back of my head on the seat. I close my eyes. Indecision surfaces for the millionth time.

I’m completely drained.

It’s time to act.

I surrender to the most sensible choice.

Before I change my mind, I tell Jacob, the one man I’m certain loves me unconditionally, “I’ll have the abortion.”

“Okay,” he says, “I’ll arrange everything. Don’t worry.”

The waitress sets our bill on the table.

We stand to leave.

I reach for the ground beneath my feet.

It drops.

Jacob and I catch a red-eye that night and land at Detroit Metro Airport early on a humid Sunday morning. Our parents meet us at baggage claim. I feel so humiliated I can barely look at them.

I wish I had my shit together.

I hate that my parents are involved in this. I should be able to handle life on my own, without their help.

We drive in silence from the airport to a brick office building. The parking lot is deserted except for one silver Mercedes. A man gets out. He's short and stocky with a receding blond hairline. He takes off his sunglasses to greet us.

Dr. Levine is here to repay a favor to my mom.

My family waits in the car while Dr. Levine leads me into the empty building, turning on lights as we go. He takes me to a treatment room and starts arranging objects on a surgical tray. I can't bear to look. I'm concentrating intently on getting through this. I feel like I'm underground, waiting for this whole thing to be over so I can dig myself out and find my way back to the living.

I undress from the waist down and get on the table. I know the routine. I place my feet in the cold metal stirrups.

I close my eyes, vowing to hold my tears for later.

Not the end of the world.

“I’m going to numb the surface area and then insert something into your cervix to dilate it a bit before I proceed.” He speaks to me but I’m barely listening. I’m holding my legs steady and whispering a desperate plea to whomever or whatever is listening that I’ll be okay when this is over, that I’m not fucking up my life forever.

Dr. Levine drags a wheeled gadget close to us. It looks like a small portable vacuum. The air is stifling. He inserts a wand-like object into my vagina and flips a switch. The machine’s whizzing sound startles me and I grip the sides of the table.

In less than three minutes it’s over.

My second child is gone.

Both the man who fertilized my egg and the man who just sucked the fetus out of me have dramatically impacted my life. Meanwhile their lives go on as usual.

This pisses me off.

You have no idea what Malik is feeling.

Dr. Levine hands me a maxi pad and a prescription for Vicodin, then leaves me alone in the room to dress. As I step into my underpants I reel from a chilling wave of dread.

What have I done?

The irreversibility of the last ten minutes overtakes me. I confront the reality that in my efforts to clean up the mess I got myself into, I’ve just made it worse. Like washing my mistake away with a dirty sponge.

I place the pad in my crotch and begin to weep quietly.

Dr. Levine escorts me back to the parking lot mumbling something about “Michigan weather” and “enjoy your visit.” I want to smack him.

What if I were your daughter?

He reaches out to shake my father’s hand, then hugs my mother.

She thanks him for his kindness.

I lie down in the back seat of the car and rest my head in Jacob's lap. He strokes my hair as I dream of Vicodin and sleeping for as long as possible.

As night arrives I'm awake in bed with a deep ache in my pelvis. The house is quiet. My parents are in their bedroom watching TV. Jacob is out with friends. My older brother David is away at college. My sister Ellen, a junior in high school, can't be bothered with family drama. She's spending the night at her best friend's house. My youngest brother Adam, an eighth grader stumbling his way through puberty, is holed up in his room. I'm not sure he even knows what just happened to me. We sat together earlier at the dinner table, and spoke about nothing real.

Just like old times.

My mom made her signature chicken soup. I sipped from my bowl, hoping for comfort, but my stomach refused it.

See, nothing she gives you ends up being what you need.

I look around my old bedroom. It's still decorated lemon yellow from my adolescence. Books I devoured as a young girl are stacked neatly on the shelves: *The Happy Hollisters*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Nancy Drew*. A pink jewelry box with a ballerina who twirls to music when the lid is open sits on the dresser next to my seventh-grade science fair award.

This place is haunted.

Memories begin to unfurl in my mind. When I turned eleven Peter moved in across the street. I had a huge crush on him. He played baseball with my brothers every afternoon in the summer. I would take them cold drinks, then stay for a while and watch them play. I'd wait for Peter to take an interest in me, but he never did. I stood at the curb feeling invisible, unattractive. Then in sixth grade my mom forced me to wear polyester pants to school when everybody else was wearing Levis. When I heard kids making fun of me I wanted to punch my mother, force her to let me shop for myself, find my own style. But my parents had opinions about

proper school attire. So I ignored the remarks of my peers and pretended their comments didn't bother me. I acted as if I didn't care.

I'm tormented now by the many ways I never fit in.

No wonder you left Michigan. You don't belong here. You never did.

I heave myself out of bed and stumble down the hall to the bathroom, the pad in my underpants heavy with blood. I sit on the toilet, elbows on my thighs, forehead cradled in my hands, and close my eyes.

Another memory appears. I am nine years old. I'm sitting on this same toilet and it's the middle of the night. It's the end of summer. Eleven Israeli Olympians have just been assassinated in Munich by the Palestinian terrorist group, Black September. My parents were talking about this at dinner. A lot of people are upset.

I don't understand humans.

We recently moved into this new house in an undeveloped suburban neighborhood. The shag carpet still smells like rubber cement. I raise the blind on the window next to me. Without the glow of street lamps or city lights, the darkness is thick. I'm intrigued. I open the window and invite the darkness in. I stick my head out and stare at the sky. I've never seen so many stars.

If nobody were here to see them, would the stars still exist?

I sit pondering for some time.

My adult body shivers now. The time and space between that moment and this one contract like plastic wrap too close to a flame. The question about the stars and their observers imbedded itself into my psyche that night. I remember trying to imagine myself not existing, stretching to imagine *nothing* existing.

Now, sitting in the same spot fourteen years later, I open the window again. I peer into the night. I'm filled with wonder. Inhaling

the gentle spring breeze, I invite the curiosity of my nine-year-old self to return to me.

The question arises again. Same, but different.

If there's no God to see my sins, do my sins still exist?

I feel suddenly inspired. Imagining a Godless world tickles some place inside of me. I sense the answer to my question might be so near that all I have to do is reach out and grab it.

Blood leaves my body and lands in the toilet, steady like a metronome. Drip. Drip. Drip. I feel my life force pouring out of me, hear the drops splashing, but can't feel what bleeds. I want to touch my wound, comfort it. After all, I caused it. I imagine it would be easier to suffer the horror of my torn-up uterus than face my despair. I will never know if this is true.

Despair wins.

GET YOUR COPY AT
BEINGSELFISH.COM

BECOME YOUR GURU
SELFISTRY.COM

ALSO AVAILABLE FROM

