

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

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*Coping With the Decline and Death
of Toxic* Parents*

**Wounding/Absent/Narcissistic/Traumatic*

Copyright 2019 by Nick Nolan

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***Disclaimer: This book is not a substitute for mental health services.
If you or someone you know is experiencing an emotional or health
crisis, call 911.***

For Jaime, who's listened, loved, and made me laugh for thirty-two years.

In Memory of Dave Rogers 1955 - 2019

Introduction

It seems like horrific parenting is all over the news lately.

Those thirteen Turpin children, who were tortured and chained by their Evangelical Christian homeschooling parents.

Sarah Hart, who intentionally drove her wife and six children off a cliff.

Kevin Spacey's father, who—according to an article in the UK newspaper the *Daily Mail*—was a child rapist and neo-Nazi, and whose wife turned a blind eye to her husband's sexual abuse of their adolescent son Randall, Kevin's elder brother.

Each of these situations is so heinous, so objectionable, that everyone's reaction is the same: *How could they?*

But what about those cases that linger in the gray areas for years or even decades, where the abuse is not quite as egregious but nonetheless inflicts unforgettable damage? Years later, how does that adult survivor weigh his or her anger against a sense of duty when that offending parent—or the parent who stood by—is aged and in failing health?

That's what this book is all about.

I've heard people say, "I had a good childhood," or, "My childhood was horrible," because rare is the adult who's ambivalent about how things were when they were short and vulnerable.

But what if you were like me, and growing up felt like a long highway of soul-grinding years interspersed with occasional happy rest stops...so the idea of completely disowning your parents just wasn't—and still isn't—a reasonable option?

I'm guessing it's been tolerable for you up until now, because as soon as you were old enough, you moved out to begin your *real* life: You stumbled upon some good friends and began collecting furniture. You steadied the tiller of your career. You learned the necessity of paying those Visa and phone bills on time, and you joined a gym or began jogging or biking as your metabolism waved goodbye to your twenties.

Maybe you got married and had a kid or three.

One year melted into the next, your children grew up and moved out, and you started pondering where it might be nice to retire....

In the meantime, you steeled your patience enough to be civil to Mom or Dad around the holidays or when a relative blew into town; you huffed and sighed when selecting a Father's Day or Mother's Day or anniversary card; and you sat dutifully at yet another family gathering, throwing knowing sideways glances to your siblings every time Dad launched another caustic zinger or Mom let her disapproval be known through a dismissive comment or that pinch of her face and roll of her eyes that green-lighted another bickering match.

It's only a few hours, you told yourself, while refilling your glass of merlot or cracking open another Budweiser or slicing yourself another wedge of pecan pie. *I can do this.*

Then one day you got *the call*:

"Mom's had a heart attack." Or "Pop took a really bad fall."

For me it was, "Dad's had a *major* stroke, and...uh, things don't look good."

That's when all of my childhood demons slid down the banister from my emotional attic.

"Look at the bright side," I told myself nineteen years later, on what seemed like my thousandth trip to visit my father—and occasionally my mother—in the hospital. "At least they didn't fill in the blank me."

Because even though my childhood was more *Twilight Zone* than *Father Knows Best*, I always told myself my parents did the best they could.

But maybe they didn't. And maybe there were some commonsense options they should've explored.

Like counseling. Divorce. Antidepressants.

Or maybe just a little genuine introspection and consideration.

And now this father who routinely told me, *If I didn't know your mother better, I would swear you were someone else's son*, has been on the ledge of death so many times over the past two decades, I've lost count. And each time, I've suitcased my anger, postponed whatever I was engaged in, and driven across town to be face-to-face with a man who has nothing to say to me.

Why do I bother?

For the same reason you do:

Honor thy father and mother was branded onto our psyches to the same degree we were potty-trained.

So you took responsibility for almost anything that was wrong.

Perhaps you became the best son or daughter in the family.

Maybe you rebelled and wound up in rehab. Or jail.

Maybe you moved to the other side of the country.

Maybe you did OK, but like someone who'd been wounded during wartime, you were a person for whom things never felt right.

I know those feelings.

No Place Like Home isn't only my story about being raised by a father suffering from probable chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE (which can only be diagnosed postmortem, and as of this writing he's still alive); *No Place Like Home* also shines a light on the clinicians who help people who continue to be poked and nagged by their childhood demons, especially as they're confronting their WANT or LOW parent's age-related decline.

As this book's cover indicates, WANT stands for Wounding/Absent/Narcissistic/Traumatic. These were the singular terms that each of the clinicians I interviewed used...so I pieced them into an easy acronym that's synonymous with *hunger, neediness, dearth, lack, and absence*, just as LOW, my other acronym, describes the Look the Other Way parent, who fails to shield his or her child from emotional and/or physical harm.

For example, my mother—who allowed her children to be abused—adamantly refuses to use antidepressants or to seek counseling, and even though she's been married to an emotionally unavailable bully for more than sixty years, her only refuge seems to be wrapping her depression around herself like a cozy blanket.

I ask myself, *Why didn't she leave him?* One might argue that “women didn't do that back then,” but “back then” was in the 1960s and 1970s and 1980s, not the 1940s.

She could have. She should have.

But she didn't.

So a little about me:

Not being a licensed clinician, I'm probably not qualified to write a self-help book, if that's what this is: My highest academic accomplishments—and I'm proud of these—are a BA in psychology, two years of postgraduate study that earned me a California Clear Teaching Credential, twelve graduate units in an unfinished MFT program, and five Book of the Year awards

along with some critical accolades for my four published novels. Professionally, I worked in retail furniture sales for fifteen years while slowly assembling my aforementioned BA; then, after graduating, I worked for about four years with homeless LGBTQ youth in residential treatment. And for the twenty-plus years since, I've taught grades four through seven in California public schools while writing books in my spare time.

While I was deliberating with my former therapist over whether or not I was competent to write *No Place Like Home*, he said, "You're competent because you've ridden the pony." I asked what he meant, and he told me, "You've witnessed and survived significant abuse and trauma but come through it all—with the assistance of both therapy and a loving partner—as a stable, productive, and happily married man."

And so I began writing this book.

First, I chronicled my recollections of growing up in a household headed by a patriarch with probable CTE.

Next, I interviewed practicing doctors and licensed therapists to learn how they might help a patient/client come to terms with her or his own WANT or LOW parent who's in failing health. (In case you're wondering what the differences are between the doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, clergy, and others who help folks feel better emotionally, a quick visit to NAMI.org—the National Alliance on Mental Illness—will probably help to clear up some confusion you might have; NAMI's explanations are user-friendly and succinct.)

After that, I recorded the remembrances of two women and a man who've also *ridden the pony*—or rather *the rodeo bull* in certain cases—been bucked off and trampled, and then climbed back up into their saddles thanks to their courage, stamina, and the professionals who taught them how to better utilize their reins and spurs.

Finally, I compared stories and looked for commonalities and compiled everything into what you'll be reading.

I hope *No Place Like Home* helps you to find peace and to heal...but if nothing else, it'll reassure you that you're not alone.

Best wishes, and thank you for taking a chance on my work.

Sincerely,

Nick Nolan
Los Angeles, California
June 2019

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Chapter 1

Death and Texas

"I'm gonna run ahead to the park!" Jay shouted over his shoulder, as Romeo strained at his leash and harness like an Iditarod husky after the *bang!* of a starting gun.

I waved. "Absolutely, go!"

I glanced down at Princeton sniffing the base of a crepe myrtle tree, its bark as smooth as polished stone. Princey—at ten—was as ponderous and gentle as Romeo was brash and bold; we always laughed about our dogs being complete opposites: a hunter who needed to chase anything that moved and a retriever who needed to scrutinize everything that was nailed down.

"Come on, boy," I urged Prince as Jay rounded the street corner's hedge and disappeared...but Mr. P once again demonstrated his determination to solve this newest olfactory dazzler by bracing his legs and pushing his nose deeper into the tree's base.

I tugged at his leash again and sighed as my phone buzzed inside my pocket, alerting me to a new text:

Hi I know this is weird but I thought you would want to know that my mom passed away yesterday.

Oh my God. Brandy's mom. *Finally.* Knowing that Jay was probably a quarter mile away by now, I tapped a reply:

Are you OK? How's your dad? I can't talk now but tomorrow? I want to talk to you.

It was pretty gnarly at the end call me whenever you can but we're both good

I opted to call her just as Prince finally decided to move along.

"Hey," she said.

Princeton sauntered a few feet and then stopped again. "Brandy...are you really OK?"

"Yeaahh," she replied in that Peppermint Patty-ish voice I'd first heard in high school Latin class; hearing it now was as comforting as pulling on a well-worn sweatshirt.

"Can I call you tomorrow...like around nine or ten?"

She coughed. "Um, yeah. That'll work."

"Great. I'm on a walk with Jay and the dogs and we've got a full day planned. *But I want to talk to you.* Sure you're OK?"

"I'm OK—good, actually." And she was; I heard the *good* in her voice just as clearly as I could usually hear the *stressed and angry and really sad*. "We'll talk then."

"OK. Love you."

I ended the call and began trotting toward the distant, diminutive figures of man and dog waiting for us by the park's entrance.

At last, we caught up.

"Were you on the phone?" Jay asked.

"For just a sec." I paused, catching my breath before climbing the dusty trail before us. "Brandy just texted me. Her mom died. I wanted to see if she was OK."

Jay side-eyed me as the dogs picked up speed. "So...it *is* true what they say about death and taxes...or is it *Death and Texas*?"

“*Death and Texas*, that old Charles Durning film where the football superstar is convicted of murder?” I asked. “How do you remember that?”

“Because it reminds me of your father,” Jay mumbled. “Especially now that we know about—”

“Don’t remind me,” I said. “But in this case, it’s *taxes*. As in *inevitable*. Nobody believed Brandy’s mom would ever die.”

“Just like your dad!” Jay shouted, as Romeo began barking at a distant jackrabbit.

“But *my* dad’s still alive!”

The rabbit vanished under a bush, so Romeo quieted.

“Exactly.” Strolling peacefully once more, Jay looked over at me. “Do you know much about Gore Vidal?”

“I read a collection of his works—and I noticed he doesn’t like commas. Why?”

“I just watched this documentary about him,” Jay began. “He lived such a lavish and exceptional life, and he said something that made me think of you: One interviewer asked him, ‘If there were one thing you could’ve changed about your life, what might that have been?’ And Vidal answered without hesitation, ‘My mother. She was awful, and she was a terrible drunk. She and I did battle for years because I was the only person who ever stood up to her. But there came a time when after the worst of our fights I told her, “This is it. I’m done.” I left and never saw or spoke with her again, and she died twenty years later.’”

“I can’t imagine why that reminded you of me.” I laughed, thinking that Mr. Vidal never felt his mother loved him—probably because she didn’t.

Just like Brandy’s mom probably never loved her.

In my first novel, *Strings Attached*, there’s a moment when teenage Jeremy and middle-aged Arthur chat, and eventually the subject of love comes up. Jeremy asks how one knows when one is in love, and Arthur answers, “Just like you know when you’re hungry and then you know when you’re full...you can’t make yourself hungry when you’ve stuffed yourself, or convince yourself you’re not hungry when you’re starving. Unless of course you have an eating disorder.”

And that’s what having a wounding or absent or narcissistic or traumatic parent is like: telling yourself you were loved when you seldom—or ever—felt you were. Your parent might have gone through the motions: house or apartment, food, clothes, medical care, rules and regulations, Little League games, and so on...but there was that dead-eyed look in their eyes that met yours when you walked into the room.

The look that was always on my father’s face.

When he looked at me.

If I’d known the reason for that empty stare back when I was a kid, maybe everything would’ve been different.

Chapter 2

Reign in the Desert

“Morning, Gail,” I panted, my leather messenger bag falling off my shoulder while I clutched an armload of papers to my chest. I swigged some lukewarm coffee from the commuter mug in my left hand as I scanned the countertop for a pen to sign in with my right.

“Hi, bubbeleh,” Gail replied, a grin illuminating her face even as she scanned some official-looking letter. I loved Gail. Humble and cheerful, she was also a brilliant educator, a kind human being, and an unflappable multitasker.

Finally spotting a pen, I scribbled my initials on my time card and glanced at the clock on the wall. *Three minutes until the bell rings.*

I had just turned on my heel to hurry toward my classroom when I felt a gentle tug on my elbow. I glanced over my shoulder.

“How’s your father?” Gail asked, her smile suddenly supplanted by a grimace of concern and her eyes telling me she was poised to offer any support needed—in spite of our mutual morning time crunch.

The bag fell off my shoulder once more; I caught it mid-plummet.

Cue my sad face? Nope.

Stonily, I met her gaze. “He’s, uh...well, pretty much the same.”

Gail’s expression pinched tighter. “I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks. Really, *thanks.*”

The bell rang, and we crisscrossed the office toward our cross-campus destinations.

After sending off my students at the end of the school day, I drove home to snatch a twenty-minute nap. Then, after awakening and brushing my teeth, I made certain the dogs had fresh water and headed out the door to my dusty black SUV.

Minutes later I was hurtling east through Los Angeles’s evening rush-hour traffic, heading toward the skilled nursing facility in Glendale that had recently become my father’s home.

A quarter hour or so into my commute, the brake lights on a gold Toyota Camry in front of me lit up like red neon, so I trounced my brake pedal and lurched to a stop. Quickly, I scanned the lanes next to me for a moving spot to sidle into.

But no one was rolling. *Shit!*

I felt my forehead flush, a sure sign that my blood pressure was climbing.

Relax. I dipped my eyelids for a moment. *Breathe.*

As I slowly released the deep breath I’d drawn, a horn blared behind me and my eyes batted open. Traffic had begun moving.

And as my right foot depressed the accelerator, a familiar hypothetical question buzzed through my consciousness like a wasp: *After working his ass off all day, would my father drag himself across the freeways of Los Angeles—at nearly four dollars a gallon—to visit me in a hospital or a nursing home? Better yet: Would he do it once a week for nineteen years?*

In 1999, my father suffered a massive stroke brought on by his lifetime of smoking cigarettes, along with his out-of-control blood sugar, beer drinking, and consumption of ice cream servings that resembled scale models of the Matterhorn at Disneyland...not to mention his roiling anger and sour marriage and what we now suspect is probable CTE: all ingredients that churned

in a cauldron that had been bubbling since 1956, when the man and woman who would someday be my parents echoed the words *I do*.

"We call this a stuttering stroke," Dr. Anderson advised me out in the hospital's hallway, his voice hushed. "And the occlusion is inoperable; it's in the blood vessels inside his spinal column; if it were in the carotid artery, we could do a bypass, but in his case that's impossible."

I shoved my hands deep into my jeans pockets. "What're the—"

"His left side is completely paralyzed," Anderson interrupted. "It's doubtful he will ever walk again, but there's always a chance." He paused, leaning in. "More than likely he won't survive this; we can get him stabilized after this event, but then the pathway will become occluded again and it will kill him."

"Like...how long do you think he has?"

"Could be a week. Six months at the most."

But he's only sixty-nine. "Have you told my mother this?"

"I'm only telling *you* this—for now. I want to...well, wait a bit and see how he fares over the next twenty-four hours before discussing this with your mother. She's been through a lot already."

"Yeah, she has." In fact, my mother's own beloved father had passed away a mere three weeks earlier, at the age of eighty-nine, after a slow-motion slip-and-slide that began with him walking into this same hospital after a fainting spell but ended with him inexplicably—five months later—*toe-tagged* and rolling to the morgue. "Let me talk this over with my sister Miriam," I told him. "You know, the nurse?"

He gave me a barely perceptible nod. "She understands these situations."

"Thank you, Dr. Anderson."

The man nodded, turned, and clip-clopped away.

But Dr. Anderson had been wrong.

Against all odds, my father went on to survive the event and even regained some mobility.

But inevitably, he would wind up in the hospital again.

Head injury from a fall.

Bowel obstruction.

Spiraling/tailspinning blood sugar.

Intestinal resection.

Dehydration. Inexplicable fatigue. Kidney failure. Heart attack.

Another stroke.

And each time I drove to the hospital—just as each time a call came in from either of my sisters or my mother—I wondered, *Is this it?*

Over the past decade, my father has frequented a local skilled nursing facility, or what used to be called a nursing home. It's near my parents' house, so when he's there my mother visits him twice a day, occasionally three times.

But since it's the better part of an hour from where I live, I had to make peace with visiting my father only once or twice a week.

Upon a recent trip, I learned that he was stubbornly refusing to perform any of the exercises the physical therapist was prescribing.

During mealtime, he told the courteous staff, "I'm not gonna eat that shit."

He called the female attendants bitches, and he squeezed one's forearm so hard she thought it might be broken.

He even took a swing at one of the male attendants. With his "good" arm.

If all of this sounds like the reactions of a man living in depressing conditions, this isn't the case: The facility is actually pretty nice. Fresh paint. Shiny floors. Homey feel. No screeching patients or diaper stench. In fact, a plaque on the wall says Medicare rated it five stars. *This year.*

So it wasn't the facility that was eliciting such brutish behavior.

This was simply my father's narcissistic personality magnified by multiple brain infarctions and probable CTE and depression and physical discomfort; and although he was being more than a little difficult to deal with, to my sisters and me, the nursing staff was simply riding out the aftershocks of the childhood earthquake we called *Dad*.

But there had also been some benefits to having had him as my father...some moments when he'd been able to dig within his brutish persona to extract kind and thoughtful deeds worthy of my emulation and respect.

Like the summer evenings when we'd stroll through the better sections of an adjacent neighborhood and he'd ask which house I liked and why: I'd point out the shallow wooden balcony on the two-story 1920s Monterrey Spanish revival; or the arched Palladian window on the Italianate mini-villa that showed a spacious, artfully lit interior; or the carpet of lush emerald dichondra that was to our yellowed St. Augustine lawn what diamonds are to rhinestones.

Or when he'd take me to the Los Angeles Auto Show each year, and I'd gape at the concept cars or dazzle my father with my knowledge of horsepower, build quality, and top speeds.

And those awkward times when he'd patiently tried to teach me how to box...or hit a baseball...or catch a football, all of which—through no fault of my father's—was as successful as training a sloth on a trampoline.

Finally, there were those late nights when we'd watch *Monty Python's Flying Circus* together and laugh—sometimes to the point of breathlessness—at the silly, brilliant skits.

But occasions like these were like rain in the desert...ephemeral downpours that lent welcome relief to the coyotes and jackrabbits, and nourishment to the Joshua trees and wildflowers, until the furnacelike heat predictably returned, blazing hotter than ever.

And now like some "king" reigning over snakes and cacti, my father held court over a landscape of calloused caregivers and a family that was long ago toughened by his blazing anger and withered heart.

Thus grew our thorns.

Two weeks later I was driving to the hospital again, this time St. Joseph's in Burbank.

Whether from lackadaisical managerial decisions or a sinister conspiracy, most hospital parking lots in Los Angeles do not take credit cards—cash or checks only, which no one carries anymore. So after swearing a stream of profanities that would've impressed a rap star, I parked on a faraway side street, waited in the raging afternoon sun for the crosswalk light, and then signed in at the reception desk before pressing the elevator button for the sixteenth floor.

Inside Room 1621, I spotted my mother sitting in a chair by my father's bedside, her now familiar mask of weariness weighing heavily upon her features.

I padded in, kissed my mother's cheek, and stepped back. "How's he doing?"

"Not well," she replied. "In the nursing home he spiked a fever, so they did some lab work that showed an infection. He's also dehydrated again, and his right leg's bent into a ninety-degree angle."

“His *right* leg? But that’s his good one.”

“I know.”

“Did he have another stroke?” I asked.

Mom grimaced. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Do they know what kind of infection he has?”

“Apparently just a bladder or urinary tract infection. He’s on antibiotics. The nursing home was afraid it was going to be that MRDO he had last month.”

MDRO, I mentally corrected. Multiple drug resistant organism, which doesn’t even respond to vancomycin, the SWAT team of antibiotics. “That’s good. Anything else?”

“High blood sugar,” she sighed. “But I want him to get well enough that he can come to the restaurant on Sunday.”

My mother’s eightieth birthday was only days away, and this would be the first time in their nearly sixty years of marriage where it looked like she would be stag—or doe—on her special day. “Maybe if you had the party at a restaurant closer to the nursing home, we could all visit him after dinner?”

“He’s not going back there,” she stated imperiously. “I’m *through* with nursing homes. He’s coming back to our house when he leaves this hospital.”

Now, if my mother had been talking about coming home with hospice care, I would’ve been down at the front desk helping her fill out the paperwork. But it was clear that she believed he was going to get better. And I wasn’t going to argue with her.

I appraised Dad lying in his hospital bed: pale and motionless but for the slight rise and fall of the sheet covering him, his mouth slack; and with neither upper nor lower teeth installed he looked like something the coroner had just slid out from inside a metal-sheathed wall.

I stood quickly. “Gotta go. Been a long day and I’ve got work at home.”

“I want him at the restaurant on Sunday,” Mom reiterated. “If his grandsons are there, we can probably get him out of the car.”

It would be easier to bring the restaurant to him, I thought. *Roof, walls, windows, and ugly vinyl booths*. “It’ll take me nearly an hour to get home with traffic,” I said. “It’s been a long day.”

My mother glanced up at me, eyes mournful. “You’re sacrificing a lot to be here.”

I was touched. This was the first time my mother had acknowledged what it took to slide a hospital visit into my schedule, and it stunned me. I bent down and kissed her cheek. “I love you,” I told her. “I’ll see you Sunday at the restaurant.” Mom nodded and smiled wistfully. “I appreciate you coming.”

As I turned to leave, I glanced back at them once more: Mom slumped in that cheap chair, her face aged, fragile, and sad; my father’s motionless head tilted chin-first toward heaven. And I thought, *Is this how sixty years together ends? A once bright and shining love tarnished by anger, regret, resentment, and disease?*

That sight of them pushed me to tears as I made my way along the unfamiliar hallways in search of the elevators that would transport me back to my life.

My *happy* life.

As I lurched toward my car in the blistering, airless September evening, my thoughts rewound to a text I’d received in my classroom some months back from my younger sister, Gwen:

Dad took another swing at Mom.

I reread the text and dropped my teacher’s edition on my desk. “Um, I need to take care of this,” I told my fifth graders.

As I crossed the room to open the door between my class and my room partner Cathryn's classroom, my students were uncharacteristically quiet; they'd become skilled at reading my facial expressions and body language, so they could tell something was brewing.

Through the doorway I signaled Cathryn—deep in a grammar lesson—by waving one hand and holding up my phone in the other. She nodded solemnly; we'd long ago developed our own semaphore for in-class situations that needed out-of-class attention.

I turned and made my way out to the ramp in front of my classroom bungalow.

Gwen answered on the first ring. "Hi."

"What happened?"

"She was changing his diaper and he swung for her jaw."

"Did he connect?"

"Not this time."

"What do you mean, *this time*?" I asked. "I also noticed you used the word *again* in your text."

"Mom swore me to secrecy, but he's punched her in the stomach."

"*What?!? When?*" I felt my face flush and prickle.

Suddenly I was four again. *D-don't hit her! D-don't hit her!*

"It happened a while ago—and he's been pretty good since then. I went over and put the fear of God in him."

"Ooohhhh, *please* don't keep things like this from me."

"OK." Gwen sounded harried, and I could hear two of her kids screaming in the background. "Could you call and talk to him?"

"I'll do better than that," I replied, knowing I couldn't postpone today's after-school tasks. "I'll head there first thing after work tomorrow and see him, man to bully."

"You'd better clear it with Mom first," Gwen warned.

"I'll let her know I'm coming. And...I want to hear it from her mouth—see if she'll tell me what he did or if she'll cover for him."

"You should know something else," Gwen began, sotto voce. "He's also been doing that forearm-twisting thing with the women who come to help, but only one of the men. The small one. He won't do it to Ryan."

Ryan was big. *Really big*. "So he's still the bully," I stated. "And he knows who'll strike back."

"Yep."

"I'll talk to her and see what's going on. Thanks for letting me know."

I ended the call and tapped my mother's number into the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mom. Gwen just told me Dad took a swing at you."

Silence. Then a deep sigh. "I was hurting him. And I lost my patience. It was my fault."

"*What do you mean it's your fault?* Without you, he would've been dead a decade ago."

"We were arguing and I couldn't get his feet into position, so I threw them down onto the bed. I hurt him—and he reacted."

"Gwen told me about his twisting-the-arm thing he does. And now it's with the attendants?"

"Except for Ryan."

"What do you want me to do?"

“*Be his friend*,” she pleaded. “Come over more often. He’s always in a better mood when members of the family visit—at least for a few days.”

My temples throbbed. *So now his abusive behavior was my fault?* “Will you be home tomorrow? Around three?”

“Let me check.” The phone went silent. And then: “He has a doctor’s appointment at ten, but we’ll be home by three.”

“See you then.”

I ended the call, not having any idea about what I might say, only knowing that the time had come for someone—in this case, me—to shake him up.

I went to bed that night without a plan and woke up baffled and emptyheaded, blinking at the brightening ceiling and walls, wondering, *What could I possibly say that might make things safer for my mother as well as for his other caregivers?* But even after making it through another school day and then navigating the jam-packed freeways to their house, I still had nothing.

I rolled my SUV to a stop in front of my parents’ home, shut off the engine, and reached for the door handle.

Then—like a cartoon character with a lightbulb suddenly glowing over his head—I had an epiphany: *Do what no one’s ever done before: Speak the truth. Stand up to him.*

I felt relief as I pushed open my car door, realizing that I didn’t care how he might react. He couldn’t hurt me anymore.

But he was hurting others, and I needed to stop him.

Chapter 3

Raging Bully

“I’m not afraid of dying,” my father’s mother—tucked inside crisp hospital sheets—told her son, “but your boy hates you, and I’m sorry that I won’t be around to do anything about it.”

It was the summer of 1964.

Nanny, as we called our grandmother, had just received news that her colon cancer was terminal, and her husband and children and friends were understandably devastated.

At fifty-nine, the elegant silver-haired matriarch of the family, who had once been runner-up to Katharine Hepburn in a Connecticut high school beauty pageant, was too young and too vital to her family to perish; indeed, her husband worshipped her, her youngest daughter was only fourteen, and she had five other grown children—and three grandchildren—whom she adored.

The following October, she passed away just a few days after her sixtieth birthday.

I was then but three years old, and true to Nanny’s prediction, I spent the next five decades hating my father.

An Irish bull of a man who’d boxed and played football throughout high school and college, he’d been scouted by both the Rams and the 49ers but at five foot eight (and 220 pounds of solid muscle) had been told that he was too short to play professionally. As a boy, he was beaten by his own father, until at fourteen he was able to knock out the man (Dad relayed this to me several times as the happiest day of his childhood); then at the age of eighteen he had been paid a hundred dollars (a princely sum back in 1948) to spar, on several occasions, in New York City with legendary boxer Rocky Marciano (“His shots to my head were like getting hit with bags of cement,” he used to tell me); later, after joining the US Air Force, he boxed his way and taught hand-to-hand combat and jiu-jitsu through four years of the Korean War.

My parents began courting in 1952 and were married in August of 1956, after Dad was honorably discharged from the air force, permanently deaf in his left ear from a blow to the head he received in the boxing ring. He never saw battle overseas because “the officers kept me stateside because when I boxed, they knew I’d win.” Only recently did two things dawn on me: (1) Those officers *probably had some cash riding on Nolan*, and (2) Dad’s violent outbursts were probably attributable to all of the knocking around that his brain had endured.

But more on that later...

My sister Miriam—blond, blue-eyed, and adorable—arrived in August of 1957; early photos portray her as a diminutive, grinning toddler with Mamie Eisenhower bangs and an infectious, toothy smile.

Unfortunately, that smile was destined to be permanently changed.

Then in March of 1961, I arrived weighing almost nine pounds; I was *a difficult birth* according to my mother. She also blamed her significant pregnancy weight gain—seventy-five or so pounds—on me instead of on the chocolate she habitually consumed; she held on to that girth until diabetes took her pancreas hostage sometime in her late sixties.

I don’t have a cozy first memory of my father. But there are photos of him holding the infant version of me. We’re both smiling, presumably giggling; in those days, Dad probably imagined that someday I’d be just like him: athletic, good-looking, aggressive, swaggering.

Instead, it quickly became apparent that I was a “broken boy,” and if there’d been an Olympic decathlon for childhood maladies, I’d have easily taken bronze. Maybe even silver.

Diagnosed with an extreme case of eczema at around six months, I was derided by my unsympathetic cousins as a *crawling scab*.

A year later, this chronic skin condition was linked to all-you-can't-eat food allergies, most of the earth's pollen, all mammal dander (goats, we learned, were inexplicably exempt), and even milk; so after my mother permanently banished our beloved dog, Danny, to the backyard (after providing him with a secondhand dog house) and severely limited the scope of my food intake, I developed rickets.

Then, just as I was learning to walk (pigeon-toed, which necessitated clunky, black, cartoonish shoes), I developed a suffocating case of asthma. This was *before inhalers were invented*, so each miserable attack lasted several hours and sometimes all night.

I wouldn't stop sucking my thumb, so my front teeth were gapped and buck.

I cried a lot.

My triple Salchow was the stubborn stutter/stammer I developed at around the same time that my grandmother began failing.

"You'd be talking just fine," Mom relayed to me years later, "then Dad would walk into the room and you couldn't spit out a single word."

I'm guessing Nanny noticed this as well.

I should add that my father confessed that tragic opening vignette about his mother in the hospital room to me in my late teens—in the same conversation when I expressed my doubts about my masculinity to him—and my first shattering thought was, *If other people besides Nanny saw me as this horrified child, why didn't anyone do anything?*

But more on that in the chapters discussing the Look the Other Way, or LOW, parents.

At four years of age, and following Nanny's death, I attended speech therapy at Occidental College with a nice lady named Mrs. Reed; she wore tailored suits and cat's-eye glasses, and she spoke to me in near whispers. Mrs. Reed changed my life, because my stutter/stammer pretty much vanished by the time I started kindergarten, even though it occasionally resurfaces when I'm under duress.

Although my maternal grandparents had sold my parents their house at a discount—just before I was born—in a charming suburban neighborhood, so Miriam and I might enjoy *a real home and a big backyard* to run around in, my father was as disinclined to keep the exterior clipped, mown, and painted as my mother was to keep the interior sparkling, uncluttered, and gracious.

Grandad's precise, geometric privets bristled into chaotic blobs; the stucco's pink paint peeled, our windows' mullions blistered, the St. Augustine grass—as if it were wisely attempting to escape—stretched strawlike tendrils out onto the sidewalk, and the old, unwashed Rambler and Ford parked out front appeared to be waiting for the junkman.

Inside, smeared dishes teetered in the sink, carpeting stretched threadbare, and stuffing molted from the sofa; faucets leaked, drapes sagged, and ceilings were marbled with tea-colored veins, permanent reminders of last winter's rains. Our once elegant dining table—long ago my great-grandmother's—was surrounded by only one of its original companion chairs; joining it now was a motley gang of garage sale castoffs or trash-night curb finds.

More than once, I returned from school to find Dad snoring in the living room's green vinyl recliner, the black-and-white Zenith blaring, and my mother either hibernating in the far bedroom or gloomily stirring a pot on the stovetop.

"Why's Dad home so early?" I'd casually ask, masking my disappointment and fear.

"He's just off work," she'd reply, not wanting to let me know he'd lost his job again; money was always tight, and even when Dad was employed, *after payday* was the most-often-heard phrase of my childhood, next to *stop crying* or *I'll give you something to cry about*.

Only the arrival of a shiny, new company car heralded hope.

As a professional ball-bearing salesman serving a large metropolitan territory, Dad sought jobs that supplied a late-model American car to replace the rusting, dented Rambler.

But almost as soon as the new car appeared, it would vanish:

The appliance-white 1966 Buick Wildcat. One week.

The manila-beige 1967 Chevy Chevelle. Three weeks.

The cocoa-brown 1968 Plymouth Satellite. One month.

The sapphire-blue 1969 Plymouth Fury wagon. Three weeks.

Then the much-loathed 1965 Plymouth Valiant that Dad bought because the only job he could find didn't provide him with a company car: This six-cylindereed, three-on-the-tree gem featured pogo-stick shock absorbers, vinyl benches that roasted (or froze) our backs and thighs, an AM radio perpetually blasting KFWB News and Traffic, and the gag-inducing toxic reek of Dad's Tiparillo smoke, a brimming ashtray, and a glass Listerine bottle leaking under the front seat. On weekends, my parents reliably argued as we all sped toward church; it's easy to understand now why Miriam and I referred to the color of any car with oxidized blue metallic paint as Headache Blue. We still do.

During this era, I began attending elementary school in a middle-class neighborhood where all the other boys' fathers held *real dad jobs*: ophthalmologists and dentists and advertising executives and so on. So when asked about my father's profession, I half lied, knowing he'd served, years ago, in the US Air Force. "My father is a Blue Angels pilot," I announced to the class during show-and-tell one day, while holding up—as *proof*—a glossy postcard I'd dug up somewhere; I pointed to the sleek blue plane with its yellow trim as bright as dandelions against the dazzling, cloud-dappled skyscape. "This is a picture of his plane."

It wasn't until April of 1970, after the arrival of baby Gwen, that things began to change: With three kids and a wife to support, Dad hunkered down and found a better-paying job that provided him with a newer Ford LTD (celery green with a white vinyl top; 429 V-8), and Mom was able to trade her two-hundred-fifty-dollar junker for a late-model Plymouth Sport Suburban station wagon: understated ivory with glossy fake-walnut panels slabbing its flanks.

Our house was on an avenue with a fairly steep descent. When I came home from elementary school each afternoon, I would round the corner at the top of our street and gaze down at all the sequential emerald-green rectangles of grass separated by driveways and bordered by a ribbon of cement sidewalk.

But smack in the middle of this tidy suburban block was a rectangle unlike the others.

It was as yellow as a haystack.

So I decided to do something.

When I was about ten, my father was more than happy to demonstrate the proper use of our old gasoline-powered lawn mower. After I mastered this, I figured out how to fix the sprinklers. Finally, I dug a ladder out from behind our garage, found some garden shears, and began trimming our hedges.

Emboldened by my success and the way the house was shaping up, I hefted out the large extension ladder we kept in a shed, scavenged the garage for some dented cans of paint, found a scraper and some paintbrushes, and proceeded to paint the areas of exterior stucco that resembled shin scabs ripe for picking.

"That looks nice!" came a voice from below. I turned to see Mrs. Waller, the only person on our block who drove a Cadillac—and whose home was a showplace in its own right—standing on the sidewalk, arms akimbo.

“Thanks!” I shouted from atop the ladder, my chest swelling.

I don’t remember if my father noticed anything different when he came home, and my guess is he didn’t...or maybe he rationalized my hard work as a manifestation of simply being *too thing oriented*. But I cut him some slack, because he had as much aesthetic acumen as I had athletic ability. My point is I learned that if there was something I wanted, I had to stretch my limits to find out if my reach was long enough—and usually it was for just about everything...except feeling loved by the pair who brought me into this world.

One day after school—much to my joy—my mother drove us to Seeley’s Furniture in South Glendale. There I convinced her to buy a tuxedo-armed, channel-back sofa and a pecan-wood coffee table with book-matched veneers. Soon after, my parents splurged on an antique dining table and chairs that could be spied each evening through the lace curtains (Sears Best) that I helped Mom hang.

Dad continued with his gainful employment and was seasonally outfitted with some new wide-lapel suits; Mom, despite still hefting that extra seventy-five pounds, began dressing more stylishly and getting her hair *done* every other week; Miriam—now a *foxy* young lady with a stunning figure, azure eyes, long blond hair, and an indefatigable smile—could be seen speeding away with her many high school friends; and Gwen was a chubby, giggling toddler with a plethora of brightly colored plastic toys.

I was...well, the sort of awkward teen who would’ve made Napoleon Dynamite look like Nick Jonas by comparison, but I still made futile attempts to blend in with the other boys: Hang Ten shirts, Ocean Pacific shorts, flip-flops and puka shells, and hair edging down over my ears.

Yep, the Nolans were finally beginning to look like the other families in our neighborhood, at least if one were ambling by.

But Mom still slept too much. She ate compulsively and then dieted haphazardly.

Miriam usually fled our house before dinnertime, her blooming anorexia eclipsing the need for anything more than an apple and a yogurt past breakfast.

Gwen, too young to stay awake past her seven thirty bedtime, enjoyed the armor of sleep.

And I crept into my bedroom and closed the door. I had geometry to flummox me, a clarinet to practice, and Joni Mitchell to keen with. And like someone living next to the railroad tracks who grows accustomed to the clanging and rumbling, I acclimated to our *House of Sad*.

But with Dad, there was little variation to the grayscale of his personality; he’d go from coal-black detachment to ashen indifference to white-hot rage: One minute the house would be calm, but then something would set him off that caused both parents’ voices to be raised until my father’s insults bullied my mother’s protestations into quiet sobs.

His rages made me jump for cover: As a child running from his knock-the-wind-out-of-me smacks (*Your father doesn’t know his own strength*, Mom used to tell me), I dove for the backs of messy closets and the undersides of the bushes in our front or backyard; then as a sullen teen, my preferred camouflage became my accommodating and compliant personality.

Up until this year, I figured Dad was simply an unlikable bully.

But now I suspect that his hair-trigger rages and extended depressions and sullen moods and excessive drinking and crippling anxiety attacks and flat affect were manifestations of what’s popularly called concussion syndrome, and more specifically known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE).

This knowledge has changed everything for me.

Because now I know that some of it wasn't his fault, even if I'll never forget what he did to us.

Chapter 4

The Past and the Furious

Entering through the kitchen door, I needed to take only a few steps before I found my father in his wheelchair at the dining table awaiting his lunch.

I went over to him and shook his hand. “Hi, Dad.”

“Hi,” he grumbled unsmilingly.

“How’re you doing?”

“OK.”

“Where’s Mom?”

“Around somewhere.”

I pulled out a chair and sat. “I heard you took a swing at her.”

Just then, my mother sprang from my father’s bedroom, her expression pinched. “*Oh, not now,*” she groaned at me. “We were having a good day today, and he was looking forward to your visit.” She shot me an exasperated look that said, *You’re ruining everything.*

I ignored her fury and faced my father. “You took a swing at Mom,” I repeated.

“What have you been telling him about me?!” Dad snarled as he turned to her, his face that all-too-familiar Jackie Gleason* mask: crimson complexion, taut neck cords, bulging eyes. “I did not try to hit you!”

“Yes, you did,” Mom countered dispassionately, settling back into her chair. “Two days ago. When I was getting you into bed.”

My father’s glare met mine again, and I saw that his expression was indignant. I pressed on. “I also heard that you’ve been twisting the forearms of the caregivers. Only the women and the small guy. But not Ryan. You’re a bully.”

“They hurt me,” he countered.

“*You need to listen to me,*” I began with a slow, steady baritone, my eyes holding his eyes, alpha to alpha. “The people Mom hires to take care of you aren’t from an agency. So they aren’t insured. If you injure them, they can sue you for their medical bills and charge you with assault. Then they’ll own this paid-for house and whatever savings you still have.”

The look in his eyes suggested my words were registering, so I continued.

“And if you hurt Mom again I’m going to call Harry and Bart, the only friends you still have, and tell them you’re physically abusing your eighty-year-old wife. Then I’ll tell them that you knocked out Miriam’s front teeth when she was six years old.”

His eyes bulged bigger. “I did not!”

“Yes, you did!” I yelled back. “You were driving up to Granny and Grandad’s, and Miri was bouncing up and down on the back seat, so you hit her in the mouth and knocked out her teeth!”

He stared at me wide-eyed, and I could see that he didn’t remember any of this, so I changed the subject.

**Comedian Jackie Gleason’s character Ralph Kramden, in the 1960s comedy The Honeymooners, would—when furious with his wife, Alice—shake his fist, bug his eyes, and roar his infamous catchphrase, “Someday, Alice...to the moon!!” This told her that if she wasn’t more quiet/obedient, he’d deliver a right hook so hard she’d become airborne and defy Earth’s gravitational pull; the studio audience reliably cackled and hooted at these “hilarious” moments, but whenever my family watched these episodes, none of us cracked a smile. Even today, the opening theme for The Honeymooners makes me run from the room.*

“You’re in this condition because you refused to stop smoking; even after your heart attack, six-way bypass, and stroke, you kept on smoking. And if not for Mom, you would’ve been dead a long time ago. She checks your blood sugar and gives you insulin twice a day, cooks for you, shops for you, drives you to your doctor’s appointments, and changes your diapers. So if I hear one more word about you twisting arms or trying to hit someone, I’ll call the police and have you arrested. And they’ll put you wherever they put people like you. *Do you understand what I’m telling you?*”

“I understand.”

“Because this is your only warning, Dad. *Do you believe me?*”

“I believe you.”

“Now, apologize to Mom.”

My father turned to my mother. “I apologize for trying to hit you.”

Thus ended the confrontation.

More than a week passed without any word from my mother.

Her silence stymied me, because I’d just tried my best to protect her, just as I had as a little boy when I stood in the no-man’s-land between them during one of their arguments, where Dad was shouting and Mom was sobbing, with my arms spread wide—as if my sapling arms could deflect crashes from his tree-stump fists. “*D-d-don’t hit her!*” I pleaded, tears streaming. “*D-d-don’t hit her!*”

But no words of gratitude came.

I mentioned this to Doc Reed, my therapist friend (and no relation to my childhood speech therapist).

“The cycle of abuse usually goes like this,” Doc explained. “The abused person ratchets up their nagging or pokes a finger at the abuser until he or she explodes. Then there’s a heartfelt apology and a period of contrition followed by a honeymoon, before the apathy settles in again, so the abused individual begins—consciously or not—picking another fight. They somehow need that contrition and honeymoon, in spite of the physical and emotional injuries sustained.”

I mulled this over. “I guess that’s why my mother didn’t want me to confront him that day, and why she tried to blame his behavior on me when we spoke about it over the phone.”

“*She what?*”

I explained to him about her supposition that if I visited more often, my father would be nicer to her.

“It’s amazing that you turned out as functional as you did,” Doc told me. “The abuse you experienced and the mixed messages you received would be enough to drive any child into an adult personality disorder.”

When I arrived home that evening, I broke down for what seemed like the first time in a decade.

I blubbered—for about twenty minutes—like a child whose puppy vanished through a hole in the fence onto a freeway on-ramp.

And Jay listened and soothed and supported me as only he can.

Then we opened a bottle of wine and made dinner, and we talked about our days.

Luckily, his had gone pretty smoothly.

That night as I rested in bed, listening to Jay snore in concert with the dogs, a scene returned to me:

1964. Sunday evening.

We're in Dad's 1952 Nash Rambler—daffodil yellow with a kelly-green roof. Miriam, now six or seven, is perched on the back seat; I loll unfettered next to her, making my way from the seat to the car floor and back again. Miriam, impatient with the nearly hour-long drive, begins bouncing up and down on the seat, making its springs squeak annoyingly.

"Stop that!" Dad bellows from behind the wheel, as he motors up La Crescenta Avenue toward Tujunga.

Miriam stops bouncing and we continue, my father's cigarette smoke billowing out through the lowered window, my mother silent in the seat next to him.

Ten minutes later...

Miriam, having forgotten our father's warning and being excited by the thought of visiting with her loving granny and grandad, begins bouncing up and down again as I continue exploring the car's thick rubber floor mats.

The signal at Honolulu Avenue turns from yellow to red, and as the Rambler slows to a stop, my father jerks his hand back over his right shoulder and delivers a jiu-jitsu chop to his daughter's face.

Miriam's two front teeth are knocked from her mouth and she lets loose a scream, my mother cries out in surprise, and I dive for cover below the front seat.

The light turns green and my father pulls over and Mom jumps out and yanks back the front seat to grab her daughter and see how bad the damage is and if there's anything she can do to repair the little girl's mouth and to soothe her son, who's also crying and terrified.

Ten minutes later...Dad pulls the Rambler into Granny and Grandad's driveway, where Mom ushers Miriam—sobbing and toothless, with the front of her pretty new dress streaked with blood—into their house to get cleaned up in front of her horrified grandparents.

Reliving this, I'm now fully awake.

Dad works out in his backyard gym every night, bench-pressing 350 pounds, then performs a set of curls, then squats, and finally military presses, before hitting his peanut bag—a punching bag the size of an eggplant that's designed for speed. I hear DAH-da-da-DAH-da-da-DAH-da-da as he pummels the ballooned leather; and just to make sure his hands and wrists stay tough enough to cave in someone's head, he smashes his bare fists into the wooden four-by-fours that hold up the open beamed roof of the structure, which in more gracious years served as a lattice-walled summerhouse, complete with built-in brick barbecue; it's like a Victorian tea room had been relegated to public storage.

The memories start hitting me in waves:

"Stop it!" Mom yells from across the room, knowing how important it is to maintain her own distance. "You're hurting him!"

Like a terrified mouse in the jaws of a cat, I try to escape.

But it's no use.

Dad twists my arm and throws me back atop the bed and holds me in a wrestling lock so tight I can scarcely breathe. He'd started gently—grabbing my arms, then pulling me around the

shoulders and waist as I tried to run off—but then his grip became a vise. He always starts gently, but then it's like he doesn't know when to stop.

Laughing maniacally, Dad pushes my face into the coverlet. My neck hurts.

He lifts me into the air and then drops me onto the bed with such force that the air punches out of my lungs—my asthmatic lungs.

Crying now, I extricate myself and Dad chases me through the house from bedroom to bathroom, so I fling open the kitchen door and sprint outside. Is he behind me? I hear his heavy footfall. I leap toward one of the safe zones I've discovered for times like these—in this case, it's the space behind the privet hedge lining the driveway. I crawl inside and hunker down, throwing a hand over my mouth to quiet my panicked wheezing.

I watch in silence as his legs amble by, and then I hear the door open and close.

I'm safe. For now.

I blink at the ceiling, wondering, How old was I?

I can't recall.

How big was I?

The answer comes immediately: doorknob height.

Both of my tiny hands grip the doorknob—it's at eye level—with all of the strength I can muster, while Dad—the unseen monster—slowly twists the knob from the other side. I'm crying and trying to hold that knob steady. My hands are no match for his.

I've done something wrong, so Dad pushes the door open. I'm terrified. He grabs me, puts me over his knee, and spansks me. His hand whistles, cutting the air, and the smack on my scrawny butt kicks the air from my lungs. How many will I get? Three's minimum, but it could be eight or ten...Sometimes he doesn't know when to stop. The pain is blinding. Then he stops at last and I'm sobbing, snot trailing down my nostrils like snails from cracked shells. "You're lucky," he tells me. "My father always used a belt." I go to Mom for comfort, and she says, "Don't blame Dad for hitting you so hard. He does it for your own good—and he just doesn't know his own strength."

A word comes to me...repose.

"Your father always looks angry," Mom tells me. "Even in repose."

It's 1974 and we're strolling down the aisle at Sears looking for some back-to-school clothes for me. I pick up some plaid bell-bottoms and begin riffling through a nearby ringer, searching for a vest to match; I'd recently watched a Partridge Family episode and was now determined to look like David Cassidy. "What's repose?"

She fixes a disparaging look on the pants in my hands, so I refold the bell-bottoms and place them back on the shelf. "When he's relaxed. Asleep. Even asleep he looks mad. And, well, you know what he looks like when he's angry..." Her voice trailed.

"You mean his Jackie Gleason face?" I ask.

"Yes, his Jackie Gleason face."

"Why does he get so mad?"

Mom shrugs, picks up some straight-from-the-factory Levi's, and checks the leather size patch. "I have no idea. But he's always been that way." She hands the stiff-as-cardboard jeans to me. "Here, go try these on."

So I grew silent and compliant; I anticipated every move I made so as not to incite his wrath. And like the dog that's been kicked quickly figures out whom to cut a wide circle around, I ascertained that my father was best avoided.

But sometimes a boy needs his dad.

Especially for things he can't talk about with his mom.

Like when my body began to unexpectedly mature, and adolescence hit me harder than my father ever could.

Chapter 5

Growing Up Ken Doll

During elementary school I assiduously dodged my father, whom I remember as sullen and silent when he wasn't complaining about something or snapping orders.

He did, however, make some efforts on my part—presumably at my mother's behest: We joined Indian Guides (*Pals Forever!*) when I was in fourth grade, and eventually I became a Boy Scout and Dad drove occasionally on the weekend outings.

But by the time I quit Scouts after several years of attendance, I had attained only the meager rank of Tenderfoot (that's one rank up from Scout, which you're assigned upon showing up in uniform to your first meeting).

Why?

Because any of the merit badges my father might've been able to help me with focused on athletics (physical fitness, swimming, etc.) and were simply out of the question due to my lack of strength and coordination, and there was no one else to walk me through the other nonathletic processes (woodworking, bookbinding, and so on). I recall thumbing repeatedly—futilely—through the *Boy Scout Handbook* trying to find *something* I could master on my own, but I'd consistently come up empty-handed, so Tenderfoot I remained until finally convincing my mother that there was no point in proceeding further. (As I perused the list online while writing this, seeing that the Scouts now have badges for things like theater, world brotherhood, and sustainability, I felt a surge of unexpected grief, thinking, *I'd have loved to have earned those!*)

So in the end, the Scouts taught me something invaluable: *If there's something I want, I'd better get it myself, and if I can't figure out how, I should go after something I can tackle.*

Thus began the countdown to the launch of my adult life—which blasted off when my voice changed at twelve.

This physiological, *audible* change is nature's smoke alarm, and it should compel a boy's father (or another trusted male elder) to alert the clueless kid about the other parts of his body that are shooting sparks. There's a lot to be made aware of: pubic hair, grooming, deodorant, erections, masturbation, sexuality...even *love*.*

Contrarily, the extent of sex education I received from my father was—while showing me one of his old Norelco electric razors—instructing me to first splash hot water on my face. And then: “This is where the cord plugs in,” he mumbled. “And you flip this back to open it up and clean it; just knock it on the sink.” Then he pointed to his Old Spice aftershave on the shelf. “You can use that if you want.”

Everything else I learned the hard way:

I welcomed the emergence of my pubic and armpit hair the way any middle-aged golf pro might welcome melanoma.

Then, my first orgasm was with another boy my age during a sleepover.

We were both about thirteen, and sometime during that dark, restless night our hands found each other and we brought each other off; but when I felt the wet stickiness on my belly, I assumed it was blood and cried out, “You broke it! You broke it!”

Nearing hysterics, I ran into his bathroom, where I saw that everything looked OK.

*Author's note to the adult males reading this: Whatever discomfort you as a dad, other relative or other adult have about being open about these physiological changes is nothing compared with the unease and confusion a boy feels when no one's explained to him what the

hell's happening to his body...so please reach beyond your comfort zone and be a pal. Your son/grandson/brother/nephew will be forever grateful.

Taking it as a good sign that I could still urinate, I went back to my sleeping bag on his floor and told him all seemed OK.

The next day on a local hiking trail—camouflaged by the heavy foliage of some native scrub oak—we repeated what we'd done the night before.

"You're a *fag*," Mike chided after we'd finished.

I continued buttoning my jeans. "At least I wasn't the one saying, 'Oh, that feels so good, oh...don't stop,' last night." I laughed into his reddening face. "*So who's the fag?*"

Thus ended both our sleepovers and our friendship.

But not my consternation.

Secretly, I began gathering information. I rode my bike to the local library and found books on anatomy, checked the index, and read what I could about puberty. Furtively, I flipped through the pages looking for anything that might placate my guilty conscience, curiosity, and self-loathing.

There were keywords I'd scan for:

Masturbation, which was cheerily defined as *self-flagellation* or *self-abuse*.

Circumcision, which described the surgical removal of the prepuce (*What's that?!*) from the head of the male sex organ. (I was oblivious to the fact that I'd long ago been circumcised, so the thought of having anything surgically removed from my penis terrified me more than I can express; the reader can only imagine the relief I felt when someone—most assuredly *not* my father—brought me up to speed a couple of years afterward. But why didn't my father explain anything like this to his son? And what's more, what does it say about the parents who raised me that I knew *it just wasn't OK for me to even bring up the subject of my penis?* It's as if I were growing up as a Ken doll fathered by GI Joe: We were males, our arms and legs bent, we wore appropriate clothes, but there was nothing but empty space between the legs. Nothing.)

And the granddaddy of all buckshot-loaded words when one is thirteen years old: *homosexuality*.

Crouched in one corner of the Grandview Branch Public Library in Glendale, I gained comfort after learning that the ancient Greeks were guiltless participants in the celebrated custom of male-male love. I also learned that just that one year prior—1973—*homosexuality* was removed by the American Psychiatric Association from its seemingly endless list of mental disorders. Finally, I read columns penned by Ann Landers in which she stated unflinchingly that homosexuality was not something to be changed; in addition to this, she proffered the revolutionary point of view that homosexuals should be accepted for who they are. (While writing this just now, I felt my eyes dampen as those long-ago emotions of relief and gratefulness swelled once more.)

But true to my upbringing as well as societal norms, I fought it. *Hard*.

After all, I could never devastate my mother, and my father would kill me.

One Sunday, I found a neatly typed slip of paper stuffed into the pew next to the missals:

"Dear St. Jude, Please beseech our Heavenly Father on my behalf to change in me that which I have not the power to change, and through His mercy and His forgiveness it will

be done!" Say this prayer ten times each day for ten days in church and you are promised the change you seek!

I figured this was too good a deal to pass up, so I secreted the paper into my pocket and made the resolution to ride my bike to church for the next ten days.

And I did so for five or six days but finally gave up. Why?

One reason was because the bike ride to St. Robert Bellarmine Church in Burbank was about five miles, mostly uphill, from our house in Glendale. And my bike was an eleventh-hand ten-speed with mushy tires and a frame seemingly forged from lead water pipes.

But more than that, I suspect that even after day six I felt no ebb in my attraction to males: how my heart beat faster in the locker room after gym class in middle school, or how riveted my eyes were to a shirtless Robert Conrad in *The Wild, Wild West* or to sublime teenage Sandy and his über-handsome dad on *Flipper*, and how I couldn't glance away from tanned-and-blond water polo jock Richard Armstrong—in Latin class—and the way his white puka shells encircled his muscular neck, and so on and so on.

And all through this, even though I had an "intact family" at home, I had nobody to help me gain answers to the questions that chainsawed through my deteriorating psyche each day.

After all, Mom was barely making it through her own days: still overweight, depressed, friendless, and educated yet lacking a career. (And if a housewife is *married* to her house, Mom had been *unfaithful* for years.) But she enjoyed cooking and was an expert; the dining table boasted a delicious, steaming meal almost every evening of each week.

Miriam was working part-time, finishing high school, and dating tan, well-built, long-haired surfers.

Gwen had started kindergarten.

And Dad, well, he went off to work most mornings.

And when his car rolled up in front of the house in the evening, the Ford's wheels crunching the uncollected gutter leaves, my stomach would clench into a fist.

Then he'd hold court at the dinner table, unsmiling and gruff.

My assigned chair—where I chewed my food in silence each night, head down—was next to his.

Then sometimes after dinner, I'd be treated to one of Dad's lectures:

"Yoouu," he'd begin, looking up at the ceiling as if divining parenting tips from God's teleprompter, "want everything the easy way. Yoouu aren't willing to pay the price. Yoouu decide you want something, you start a project, and as soon as it gets difficult you give up and move on."

Or:

"Yoouu...are too 'thing' oriented. All you want is nice cars or a nice house. But you don't have the self-discipline to make these things happen for yourself."

And so on. And it's not that he was wrong—it's just that I was only thirteen, so spending time with my father was tantamount to visiting with insert here the name of the teacher you dreaded most in middle/high school; there was never a fuzzy/warm upside, only an immense sense of relief when the encounter was over.

Of course the irony of his words was never lost on me: the beer and the tobacco he was addicted to, even as a cigarette burned in his hand during his parenting lectures, indicated that he had some issues with *giving up when things got difficult*, just as the only reason our house looked as presentable as it did was because I took over the maintenance as soon as I was old enough to balance atop a ladder.

Then the next morning, I'd wait in my bedroom until Dad's heavy footfall along the hallway indicated he'd pulled on his shoes—which concluded his dressing for work—signaling his imminent departure. Finally, when those heel thumps were followed by the slam of the kitchen door, I knew it was safe to emerge.

I was fourteen when my own depression bloomed charred petals...probably after surmising that my attraction to guys wasn't going away. It was at this same time that middle school was becoming more challenging and my academic workload was increasing, not to mention the chores awaiting me each day upon arriving home, or the carefully penned list taped onto the kitchen cabinet each Saturday morning: laundry, cleaning bathrooms, dumping trash, washing windows, mowing lawns, walking the dog, pruning hedges and trees, pulling weeds, fixing sprinklers, washing and drying dishes, and so on. And as teenagers will do, I became argumentative—at least with my mother.

"Marky and Johnny just passed me on the sidewalk on the way to the park, and they didn't even ask if I could go with them," I told her as she flipped a ground beef patty in a sizzling pan atop the stove; she was back on low-carb this week and this was her lunch. "It's Saturday, and I've worked hard all week at school. I got all my homework done and practiced the clarinet and I did chores!" I said, eyes brimming. "Why can't I just have some fun like every other kid my age?"

"Because these things need to be done," Mom replied coolly. "After you're finished with your list, you can do whatever you want."

"But it's too much!" I cried, exasperated with how muleheaded she was.

"I'm not talking about this with you anymore." She turned off the blue flame, placed her spatula in the spoon cradle, and made her way toward the living room, where Dad sat in his recliner watching a football game, the volume full blast. "Your father can deal with you from now on."

Uh-oh.

Dad was red-faced as he pushed himself up out of his chair and spun around, pointing at me: "*I'm tired of you and your mother arguing so much. Yoouu should listen to her!*"

"But I—"

"You think you've got it hard, buster?!" Dad roared. "*Huh?!?*"

I hung my head.

"When my father had had it with me, we put on gloves and settled it in the ring," he growled. "I shoulda done this with you a long time ago."

I brushed my tears away before looking up. "Done what?"

"Get in the car!" he barked, tossing his head toward the driveway where the new Ford Gran Torino Squire station wagon was parked: refrigerator white with fake walnut paneling; navy blue vinyl seats with fancily embossed headrests; ersatz spoke hubcaps with ruby plastic hubs. "We're going downtown."

"*Why downtown?*"

"Main Street Gym."

Moments later, I slammed myself inside the wagon as my father went inside to don his workout gear: baggy gray sweats, a T-shirt, and some shitty old athletic shoes—*sneakers*, he called them. Minutes later he returned and we began the silent sojourn downtown.

After the streaming freeways narrowed into litter-strewn streets with graffiti-scrawled walls, dusty storefronts, and lurking silhouettes huddled beneath their makeshift Quonset huts, it dawned on me: *Will I survive?* I'd seen Mom's yellowed newspaper clippings of Nolan in the ring,

so it was easy to imagine my stick-figure form quaking across from Dad's hulking physique; a modern-day David shrinking from Goliath because his mother had purposely hidden his sling.

At last my father slowed before swerving into a parking space. Then, like a prisoner from the French Revolution who takes his first glance at the guillotine, I saw the sign: MAIN ST. GYM. (Scenes from *Rocky* and *Rocky II* were later filmed there, and Cassius Clay as well as Dad's old pal Rocky Marciano had sparred inside its storied ring.)

The front wheel bumped the curb, and my father switched off the ignition.

I watched as he swaggered to the entrance and then tried the gym's door.

Locked.

He pressed his face to the glass and then banged on the glass with his knuckles.

Moments later a man opened the door.

They chatted, occasionally glancing over to where I sat, cadaverlike, in the car.

An eternity later, the man closed the door and my father turned and strolled back toward me. He opened the driver's door, sat, and twisted the ignition key.

The rev of the engine was a "Hallelujah Chorus."

"Training some new hotshot," Dad muttered under his breath, "so they're closed."

He yanked the gear selector into drive and gunned the engine.

Finally exhaling as we headed up Main Street toward the Harbor Freeway, I wondered, *What if the place had been open? Would I already be in an ambulance? Or would my mother have burst into the place, waving her arms and yelling, Don't hit him! Don't hit him!?*

Nope.

Mom hadn't objected to the idea of his taking me there, and she hadn't even tried to persuade him to take it easy on me. She just watched from her kitchen window as I got into the station wagon, probably thinking that I was finally getting what I was due, *and boy could she use a toasted, buttered English muffin and a nap.*

Still today, I wonder if the gym was really *closed for some new hotshot* or if my father had changed his mind; I've speculated upon the humiliation Dad might've imagined he'd feel by unveiling—to his old barbell-tossing, tobacco-spitting pals—that his only son was a mincing and fragile adolescent; and what did this imply about Nolan, that his *chip off the old block* was molded out of bone china instead of stone?

Or, like the schoolyard bully whose sinister leer is all that's required for lunch money and cookies to be cast his way, perhaps Dad figured that from now on I'd be cheerily compliant, because he'd proven his point.

Or maybe the guy at the gym's door recalled my father's rages and sensed the clouds of disaster gathering, and he didn't want a boy's tears, bones, and blood on his hands.

Whatever the reason had been for our outing's truncation, Dad's intent to profoundly wound me had been successful.

And he'd done so without even raising a hand.

But the real tragedy was that at this very moment in my life's development, when my pubescent canoe was taking on water in the storm of manhood—and I couldn't imagine my self-esteem...or hope...or prospects for the future sinking lower than they had—instead of throwing me a rope or even a pail, Dad tossed me cinder blocks.

Looking back, I think it was as much a catastrophe for him as it was for me...until what I could only imagine as the worst thing in the world happened:

I fell in love for the first time.