
A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir

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For my children, Erin, Charles, Sarah, and Alice

one

It had never occurred to me that anything bad might happen to me. I was fourteen years old that summer of 1953, with buckteeth, a crew cut, a love of swimming, football, and comic books. I had a dog named Pat. I was a Boy Scout. I liked girls. I was just out of my freshman year in high school. This was in Barrington, Illinois, a little town, population 5,320, thirty-five miles northwest of Chicago. Where I lived in the village, you could walk to the end of the block and A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir out into empty fields, rolling hills of tall grass; no one owned this land as far as we knew. It had little lakes where we would cut down saplings and build lean-tos and sometimes camp out overnight—no grown-ups, just the kids, boys and girls. My sister Bets, three years older than I, was one of the oldest of the kids; she was always my best friend, and with her, I knew I was always safe.

But parents lived in constant dread those days, especially in the summertime, fearful that their children might come down with polio. Polio struck suddenly, without warning, and left its victims dead, or paralyzed, washed up in wheelchairs, white-faced, shrunken, with frightened eyes, light blankets over their legs, or lying on their backs inside iron lungs—great heavy

contraptions, like little one-man submarines, constantly shushing and hissing with the intake and exhaust of the air pressure that made a person's diaphragm expand and contract, breathing for him because the muscles in his chest had stopped working—his head and feet sticking out uselessly at either end.

Parents were crazed by this. There was no cure for polio, not even any reliable treatment. It could not be prevented. It triggered the sort of anxiety and frenzy and sorrow that have been set off in recent years by AIDS, or, long ago, by the bubonic plague. Medical researchers had known as far back as the turn of the twentieth century that polio was a virus. Later it was discovered that the virus entered the mouth, usually, traveled to the intestinal tract, and then invaded the nervous system. It was called poliomyelitis, I was told, because it stripped away from the nerves their myelin sheath, which acts like insulation around an electrical cord, so that the nerves short-circuited, sizzled, and died. They stopped sending signals to the muscles, and so the muscles stopped working. Arms and legs lay limp and useless. Some children with polio could no longer raise their heads off their pillows. Some could no longer breathe. But no one knew what to do about it.

And not everyone believed the medical researchers knew what they were talking about. There was a constant buzz about polio back then. One *A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir* magazine article that summer said polio was related to *A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir* diet. Another article said it was related to the color of your eyes. Kids at summer camp got it, and when a boy at a camp in upstate New York got it that summer, a health officer imposed a frantic quarantine and said no one would be let out of the camp till the polio season was over. There was a lot of it that year. The newspapers published statistics every week. As of the Fourth of July, the papers said, there were 4,680 cases in the United States—more than there had been by July 4 in 1952, which had been reckoned the worst year for polio in medical history. The final tally at the end of that year *A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir* had been 57,628. Of course, none of these numbers were reliable; odd illnesses were added to the total, and mild cases went unreported. Someone said that public gatherings had been banned altogether in the Yukon. In Montgomery, Alabama, that summer the whole city broke out; more than 85 people caught it. An emergency was declared. In Tampa, Florida, a twenty-month-old boy named Gregory died of it; five days later, his eight-year-old sister, Sandra, died of it while their mother was in the delivery room giving birth to a new baby.

The rules were: Don't play with new friends—stick with your old friends, whose germs you already have; stay away from crowded beaches and pools, especially in August; wash your hands before eating; never use another person's eating utensils or toothbrush or drink out of the same glass or Coke bottle; don't bite another person's hands or fingers while playing, or (this one for small children) put another child's toys in your mouth; don't pick up anything from the ground, especially around a beach or pool; don't have any teeth pulled during the summer; don't get overtired or strained; if you get a headache, tell your mother.

Even so, kids caught it. In the big city hospitals, kids were stacked like cordwood in the corridors. Massachusetts General Hospital, it was said, looked like a "medieval pest house." Carts and wheelchairs clogged the aisles; sixty monstrous iron lungs had been jammed into one ward room. On the South Side of Chicago, a mother cried just to see the name above the door

of the place where her child was taken: the Home for Destitute Crippled Children.

Maybe the worst trauma I had suffered recently had been my father's insistence that now that I was out of grammar school, I needed to throw away my comic book collection. But even that blow had been tempered by my mother, who interceded to rescue the "Li'l Bad Wolf" series of comics, which she said were not bad for me.

My greatest passion was football. I'd played A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir it since I was five or six, with the certain assumption that I would be a college player, maybe a professional. The best college team in the country then was Notre Dame, and my father had a friend, an automobile A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir dealer, who had a friend who was friends with Notre Dame's athletic director, Moose Krause. So, three times in my growing-up years, we drove to South Bend, Indiana, A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir to see Notre Dame play. These were the days when Frank Leahy was the coach. It's hard to imagine what that name meant to a football-playing boy in the A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir Midwest. Michael Jordan. Arnold Schwarzenegger. Obi-Wan Kenobi. I remember going into the locker room before a game against Michigan State and seeing piles of hundreds of jerseys. A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir Each player had several dozen jerseys with his number on them, and it was explained to me that these were tear-away jerseys, so that if a tackler got hold of nothing but your shirt, it would just come off in his hands, and you'd be gone. My plan was to play quarterback for Notre Dame, and I was encouraged to believe—by Frank Leahy and Moose Krause and the coaches back home—that this was not impossible.

My father didn't discourage this ambition, but he was a man who wore a three-piece suit and bifocals with thin silver rims. He shined his shoes and put shoe trees in them every night. Handsome, dignified, graying at the temples, he was unfailingly gracious and considerate (my mother said a gentleman always considered not simply another person's rights but also her preferences), as well as short-tempered and given to sudden rage if another driver pulled out in front of him so that he had to call the bastard a stupid son-of-a-bitch. My father was a businessman, at that time a vice president of the Commonwealth Edison Company of Chicago, and he believed in the promise of technology. In those days, when Ronald Reagan appeared in television commercials for General Electric and said, "Progress is our most important product," my family agreed with him.

We had driven cross-country that summer to Colorado, where my sister Sookie, five years older than I, was finishing her junior year at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Well, Bets and my mother and I drove out; my father took a plane out and back because he was busy at the office. My mother was a timid driver. She was the baby of her family. Her older sister, Douga, had gone to New York to be an actress, and instead became one of the stars of radio, among the inventors of the early-morning talk show. Douga met and married the founder and publisher of *Yachting* magazine, and the two of them lived in a triplex on Park Avenue, just like New Yorkers. But my mother was shy and tender. And I always felt, as the baby of *my* family, that she and I knew each other intimately, without a need for words: we were always A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir close.

It took several days to get to Boulder, driving through the cornfields and the wheat fields of

Iowa and Nebraska and on into the tornado lands of Dorothy's Kansas, staying in small motels along the way. This was the first time I'd gone farther out into the world than to South Bend, and I was excited to see other people's lives and wonder about how they lived them. My friend Dave's grandfather, Grampa Buckley, who had a seat on the Chicago Grain Exchange, used to drive out this way a couple of times a year to look at the fields. He would get out of his car and talk to the farmers, walk out into the corn and wheat and soybeans and feel the crops with his own fingers. This was how he discovered one year that the soybean crop was going to be a disaster—and the coming shortage of soybeans would drive their price sky-high at harvesttime. As he went from town to town, he would call back to his office in Chicago and say, "Buy soybeans," until he cornered the market that year in soybeans.

This country, in the fifties, was the most wholesome country history has ever seen. Of course there were no drugs in schools, and no guns. For a girl to get pregnant in high school—as one did in Barrington—was a major community event. The child's father was a star on the high school basketball team, the president of the Honor Society, a bright boy with a promising future. The mother was a cheerleader, and a bright girl with a promising future. The town's consensus was that the girl should drop out of school right away to prepare for the birth, and the boy should be allowed to finish his junior year in high school and then get a job to support his family, which is what they did. When the child was three years old, the mother got a job at the checkout counter at the Jewel Tea supermarket.

Driving cross-country, across a country distinctly intact—in such sharp contrast to all the photographs of war-ravaged Europe that had recently filled the minds of growing children—a boy could be forgiven for having a sense of the everlasting peace and prosperity that President Eisenhower liked to talk about. We drove through small towns that had not changed in decades. Wherever new houses had been built, they were ranch houses, with vast picture windows on their fronts. Imagine feeling safe enough to put nothing but a sheet of glass between yourself and the world. In the Middle Ages, as in most periods of history, people built homes with walls two feet thick, massive bolted doors, ironwork over the windows. But in these past ten thousand years, for a period of about twenty years, so secure did an entire nation of people feel that they opened themselves up with complete vulnerability to anyone who had a rock. This is how safe we felt we were in the fifties, how safe I felt driving cross-country with my mother and Bets.

I thought of Sookie, the eldest of the three of us children, the way Winston Churchill said he thought of his mother: "She was like the evening star. She loved me dearly, but at a distance." Sookie was glamorous to me. I'm talking about a college girl from the Midwest, but she seemed immensely sophisticated to me, and she was dating a guy at the University of Colorado who wanted to be a professional golfer. My father thought he was a bum, and I guess he was, but he was a good-looking guy, maybe a little too slick, and very cool, the way natural athletes are, with their loose-limbed, easy way of moving. I tried to imitate him.

That may have been where I picked up the virus—in Boulder, or somewhere along the road to Boulder, in Kansas or Nebraska, from a water glass in a roadside diner, or a doorknob at a motel. I don't know. No one knows. But the incubation

period is about fourteen days, and it was fourteen days after we arrived in Boulder, when I was back home in Barrington, that I came down with what felt like the flu, but not quite: an ache, a general sense of unease, a little light-headedness, that whitening out around the edges of my vision that I noticed first in the sun at the swimming pool where I was that afternoon. My lower back felt as though it needed stretching out. I thought maybe I'd pulled a muscle diving off the high board. For a while I A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir lay beside the pool, waiting for the ache A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir and tiredness to go away, but, feeling restless, A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir I got up again A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir and went home to lie down out of the sun in the coolness of the living room.

That night I had a date, finally, with Stephanie Sibley for a high school summer dance. There was to be dinner and A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir swimming. A local country club had let the students use its clubhouse, and there would be an evening of wandering out onto the veranda, strolling out onto the golf course—like a black-and-white movie from the thirties. She had gotten a formal dress. I had rented a tuxedo with a white jacket. I was anxious about my date, but nothing else, not wanting to be sick so I couldn't go.

By the time I picked up Stevie—an older friend was double-dating with me, and drove—I was working hard to be relaxed and casual and happy. I told her I didn't feel well; I didn't want her to catch whatever it was I had. She laughed and said she didn't care. In the parking lot at the club, I felt dizzy. Entering A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir the club, I would have felt self-conscious and out of place, intimidated by the doorman, but my attention was too narrowly focused, by now, on how unsteady I felt on my feet. This began to A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir seem strange to me, but so strong is the dating instinct for an adolescent boy that I repressed any thought that A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir I was sick.

A Nearly Normal Life A Memoir

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