

**THINGS THE
GRANDCHILDREN
SHOULD KNOW**

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SUMMER OF LOVE

I WAS DRIVING THROUGH THE PITCH BLACK

Virginia night, down the perfectly flat blacktop that was once a railroad track, across that high bridge over the ravine, thinking about the details of how one night I was going to drive off it. I was sure I'd never live to the age of eighteen, so I never bothered making any plans for the future. Eighteen had come and gone a year ago, but I was still breathing. And things were only getting worse.

The summer of 1982. That disgusting, sticky, humid weather where your back soaks through your shirt just from taking a short drive. By midsummer everything was a mess. My sister Liz's boyfriend flipped out in our kitchen

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one night and attacked me with a butcher knife. Soon after, Liz tried to kill herself for the first of many times. Swallowed a bunch of pills. Her heart stopped the moment we got her to the hospital, but they were able to revive her.

Pretty soon after that, Liz and my mom went out of town to visit relatives and I found my father's dead body lying there sideways on my parents' bed, fully dressed in his usual shirt and tie, with his feet almost on the floor, like he just sat down to die at fifty-one. I tried to learn CPR from the 911 operator on the phone, carrying my father's already-stiff body across the bedroom floor. It was weird touching him. That was the first time we had any physical contact that I could remember, other than the occasional cigarette burn on my arm while squeezing by him in the hallway.

I figured driving off the bridge might be the best way to deal with the crushing, lost, and empty feeling of being me. A dramatic way to go, of course. I was a kid. Later in life it would usually be a gun I imagined using on myself. Not quite as dramatic as driving off a bridge in your hometown. You can chart my development this way. In more recent years I would think about pills most often. That dramatic stuff is for kids. I'm mature now.

At the end of the summer, which I had already started referring to as The Summer of Love, I drove my gold '71 Chevy Nova away from home for the first time. I had bought the car that I called 'Old Gold', complete with a

stop sign used in place of its rusted-out floorboard, for a hundred bucks from my hot, blonde cousin Jennifer, who years later would die on the plane that hit The Pentagon, September 11, 2001. She was a flight attendant. Sent a postcard from Dulles airport that morning that read 'Ain't Life Grand?' in big letters on the front.

My father worked at The Pentagon back around the time I was born. If I believed in curses, I'd have to wonder if the plane hit the part of the building where my father's office once was. But I don't believe in curses. Life is full of ups and downs. There have been some extremes in my life's case but, considering I had no plan, and very little of the kind of self-esteem you need to get by in this world, things could be worse. I'm just wandering through here, seeing what happens.

I don't know what happens when you die and I don't expect to find out until I die. Probably nothing, but you never know. For now, I'm still alive, and I've come to realize that some of the most horrible moments of my life have led to some of the best, so I'm not one for eating up people's melodrama. Just another day to me.

It felt weird leaving my mom and Liz in the house, but it was time for me to get out of there. I had long ago become the man of the house, since no one else was laying down the law, and when my father died that really cemented my status. But I knew if I didn't get out of there soon, I may never get out.

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However crazy things got, I could always lose myself down in my room in the basement (walls painted black), reading Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* with the headphones over my ears cranking The Who *Live at Leeds* or John Lennon's *Plastic Ono Band* or whatever it was I was into that year. Even at this terrible stage in The Summer of Love, I could transport myself, driving Old Gold and watching the sun go down while I listened to Sly Stone sing 'Hot Fun in the Summertime' nice and loud on the shitty cassette deck duct-taped under the dashboard.

I got to Richmond and enrolled in school. I had no interest in school, but everyone else seemed to be doing it and I had no other plans. Because my grades were so bad in high school, due to complete disinterest on my part, I was only accepted on a part-time basis. Felt totally alone and miserable.

One night I was walking past one of the city campus buildings and heard the sound of pianos. I walked in to discover it was the music section of the school. I wasn't interested in studying music that way but was dying to play something, anything. I began sneaking into one of the piano practice rooms every day or night, always worried about being caught, since I wasn't supposed to be there. It was the only time I felt good, banging away on the keys, making up little songs as I went along. Sometimes I'd imagine a lot of people listening to what I was playing, and liking it. One night I got into it so much that I broke one of

the big, low piano strings, which made a sound like a shotgun going off. I quickly left the building before I got in trouble.

I was sinking deeper and deeper into despair. I wasn't the least bit interested in any of my classes. My only relief was music. I began to feel what could almost be described as a lust for writing and recording music. I would walk dazed through the streets of Richmond, dreaming of going back to my mother's piano and setting up a tape recorder and microphone.



SOME NIGHTS, ALL THESE YEARS LATER, I'LL SIT here and think about when I was really young and how great it felt when things were OK and we were all there in the house: my father reading the paper, Liz playing Neil Young over and over in her room, my mom laughing her goofy laugh at something that wasn't that funny to begin with. When I think about the feeling of being in the middle of that, I'm overwhelmed with desire, like I'd give anything to spend a night back there again.

Life is so full of unpredictable beauty and strange surprises. Sometimes the beauty is too much for me to handle. Do you know that feeling? When something is just too beautiful? When someone says something or writes something or plays something that moves you to the point of

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tears, maybe even changes you. It's nice when a non-believer has to question his doubts. That might be what led me to music in the first place. It was like magic. I could transcend the shitty situations around me and even turn them into something positive just by setting them to music.

Maybe I don't like people as much as the rest of the world seems to. Seems like the human race is in love with itself. What kind of ego do you have to have to think that you were created in God's image? I mean, to invent the idea that God must be like us. Please. As Stanley Kubrick once pointed out, the discovery of more intelligent life somewhere other than Earth would be catastrophic to man, simply because we would no longer be able to think of ourselves as the centre of the universe. I guess I'm slowly becoming one of those crusty old cranks that thinks animals are better than people. But, occasionally, people will pleasantly surprise me and I'll fall in love with one of them, so go figure.

So what kind of an ego do you have to have to write a book about your life and expect anyone to care? A huge one! But not so big that I think I was created in God's image. Unless God is a hairy ectomorph with bad posture (God forbid I don't use the almighty uppercase 'G'). And I know I'm not the most famous guy in the world. People aren't making up rumours about gerbils getting stuck up my ass or anything like that. Some people think

I've deliberately shot my fame in the foot with some of my 'career' decisions, but that's really not the case. I never wanted to be famous for the sake of being famous. I decided to try and make something good in the world, as best as I could anyway, and that was the only goal. So, I only do what I want to do, and I spend a lot of my time on Earth saying 'no' to all the stupid things I'm asked to do that I know are a bad idea for me. I'm not a really famous guy, and that's who usually writes books about their lives, but, nonetheless, I've been through some situations and I've decided it's time to write them down. This isn't the story of a famous guy. It's just the story of a guy (who occasionally finds himself in situations that resemble a famous guy's life). There's an inherent ME, I'M SO IMPORTANT thing about doing this that makes me uncomfortable. But I wouldn't do it if I didn't think it happened to be a peculiar story. I'm not so important.

Thanks to my ridiculous, sometimes tragic and always unsteady upbringing, I was given the gift of bone-crushing insecurity. One thing you'll notice about people with mental problems is the constant self-absorption. I think that's because it's such a struggle just to *be* who they are, so they have a hard time getting past it. I am no exception to this rule. But luckily for me, I found a way to deal with myself and my family by treating it all like a constant and ongoing art project, for you all to enjoy. Enjoy! You're welcome!

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Also, judging by my family history, mid-life may have been a long time ago for me. So I do feel like maybe I better write this all down now, just in case I don't beat the odds. Don't want to wait too long.

Now, there are different ways I can go about this. I could do it kind of 'poetic' for you. Like this:

As I stood there on the porch I noticed the pungent smell of fresh cut grass and I could hear the faint hum of lawnmowers all over the neighbourhood. The air conditioning poured out on me as I waited. Finally, Mary came down. I never made it inside. She broke up with me right there. I walked home with the cicadas singing, oblivious to my pain.

Or I could turn it up a notch and get really flowery for you. Like this:

In the distance I could hear the faint hum of lawnmowers. Golden, waxen-chested boys, sweating in the sun, a last experience with genuine physical labour before they bundle duffel bags and ship off to Yale or Brown. I could hear Mary's footsteps on the stairs, she hesitates. I notice a cricket – no, it's a grasshopper – at my shoe. I don't know how Mary feels about me, but this little one sees me for who I really am. We connect for a moment and he hops away. I'm alone now. Mary appears. She's going to break up

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with me, I can see it on her face. She's going to take the unbridled and wholly unconditional love I've offered her and throw it to the ground, shattering it into thousands of tiny, useless shards. I steady myself. I steady myself. (Chapter end.)

Or I could just be straight with you. Like this:

One day in July I went over to Mary's house to hang out for a while. She answered the door but I never even made it inside. She broke up with me on the front porch.

I don't want to waste your time with the flowery shit, so, out of respect for you, gentle reader, I'm going to stick with the direct approach.

I never had an interest in keeping a diary. I had my hands full just trying to live life, so I never kept one. And I didn't feel like I could handle reliving a lot of it. But that's exactly what suddenly appealed to me when my friend Anthony urged me for the thousandth time to write a book about my life. I have this strange mechanism that activates when I think something is off-limits: I know I have to go there. Even if it means painstakingly recalling all the events my selective memory can muster.

In elementary school I was a skinny little kid with long hair who was often mistaken for a girl and was the last, or second to last, to be chosen for school sports teams. Now

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I'm a grown man, spending the second half of his first mid-life crisis hiding behind security guards that try to protect him from the latest obsessed stalker at his rock concerts. How did I get here?