

Introduction

I'm a bit unusual. I have no family or friends. I'm a virgin at 67. In the back of my mind, there is a constant feeling of dread that I cannot shake, a combination of failure, loneliness and humiliation. My first and last thoughts each day, and endless times in between, are: *I wish I were human. What would it be like to be human?* In reality, I'm only too human, but with so many things lacking in my life, I don't feel completely so.

I am mentally ill. I've always struggled with anxiety and depression. At one point, I felt so hopeless that I attempted suicide (spoiler alert, it didn't work). In my thirties, I started taking medication for depression and undoubtedly always will. I'm also autistic, a developmental disability rather than a mental illness. I have what used to be called Asperger's Syndrome and is now considered to be a part of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD, which covers everyone from those who are "high-functioning," such as myself, to those who never learn to speak). I have, to a degree, some other conditions that often accompany ASD: Tourette Syndrome, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Like many people on the spectrum, I'm much more logical than intuitive. I come across as sort of flat and unemotional, but I'm easily hurt by things people say and have a lot of anger inside me. Every little change in my environment may bother me, so that I'm always changing the thermostat on the air conditioner and hate background noise that you might not even notice. I never feel completely relaxed, which is made obvious by tics like blinking and turning my head away when I'm speaking to someone. I love to read but have trouble concentrating. The things on my desk have to be arranged just so. The symptoms go on forever. Yet I'd never even heard of Asperger's Syndrome until I was in my fifties. There's nothing to be done about it now, but the concept at least offers the comfort of understanding.

And then there's the issue of sex. Though I'm genetically male and have male sex organs, I identify more with being female, but not so much that I want to transition and live as a woman. In some ways, I'd like to be a genetic female and a lesbian, as I'm attracted to women, but that is only a fantasy. So I'm stuck in a netherworld where I'm not exactly this, not exactly that, not exactly anything.

I retired in 2019 after 41 years working as a cook, a job I hated. My family relations are nil. My mom, who died in 2007, was loving but, like me, fighting to stay afloat in life. She was never strong mentally and eventually developed bipolar disorder. That led to my parents' divorce when I was in my twenties. My father, who died in 1980, was nice on some levels, but cold and rejecting on others. My younger sister and much younger brother are, like me, individuals, but I'm more like my mom, while they're more like my father. I haven't spoken to either of them in many years.

So what does this add up to? Someone who is unhappy and doesn't cope very well. As a child, and even sometimes in adulthood, I was bullied. I didn't leave home till I was 27 and only then because I was told to. I haven't had the same experiences most other people have: dating, marriage, children, a career I feel good about, a circle of people I love and am loved by.

My adult life has been narrow: working for a living, being an activist (mostly doing human rights work with Amnesty International in Miami, but also for a few months in Africa twenty years ago), and otherwise keeping my nose in newspapers and books. The first I had to do, the second gave me a chance to live my values, the third gave me the intellectual life I'd been too lazy to pursue as a child and was completely absent from my jobs.

I have achieved very little in life. I have survived living on my own, gained the knowledge that I base my life on and fought to achieve what modest emotional maturity I have. And I have worked with my only two gifts—being intelligent and caring about other people—to make this beautiful and horrifying life that we share a little better. And I have worked hard to hold on to enough hope to go on with my life and eventually write this book.

I've always wanted to tell my story, to have the satisfaction of standing before the world and saying: *This is who I am. I'm different, struggling, hurting, but still a living breathing human being. And I deserve respect.* If you're at all like me, maybe my story will make you feel less alone. But if you're nothing at all like me, perhaps you will understand what a life lived in isolation is like. When the world looks at you, it sees a human face. This story is mine.

Chapter 1: Finger Painting in The City Beautiful

I remember being in kindergarten and the class being led in singing *If You're Happy and You Know It Clap Your Hands*. I sang and clapped along but felt that I was hiding a terrible secret: I wasn't happy. I never have been. This, and many other things, have always set me apart from others, so that I've had to wonder: Why am I different? How did I come to live as an outsider, alone and afraid? Was I born this way? Was I made this way? Whose fault is it? Is it anyone's? Is this what I deserve? Are what I think and feel true, or just one more way that I can't play up to the mark?

My life began in August 1953, when I was born to a publicist dad and stay-at-home mom, then just 24 and 21. I was the Cold War era. The Korean War armistice had been signed just three weeks before. World War II was still pretty fresh in people's minds.

Miami was a different place then. People still debated whether the city's name should be pronounced *My-a-mee* or *My-a-muh*, with a southern accent. A popular bumper sticker said, "When guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns." I didn't know what it meant, or I would have been afraid.

There were a half-million people in Miami then, still pretty sizable, but not quite a fifth of what we have now. It was, so to speak, the southernmost suburb of New York City. Now it's the northernmost suburb of Latin America and the Caribbean. These changes have made Miami stronger, endlessly complex, too expensive and impossible to drive in. In a half-century or so, we'll probably be swamped by the rising sea, which will be tragic. But only that, and not our different origins, will defeat us. Perhaps before that happens, the Dolphins will have won another Super Bowl. If not, they should really hit their stride playing underwater.

My family lived in a nice little house in Coral Gables (which refers to itself as The City Beautiful), though in one of its few less-expensive sections. We lived there until I was five, but I honestly don't remember anything about the place except for an orange tree we had in the back yard. I was there with my folks one afternoon when my father took an orange down, cut it open for me with a pocketknife and I ate it there and then, it's sweet, sticky juice spilling onto my hands. I could never explain why this one small memory has stayed with me, but I've always loved oranges and my family was happy then.

When I came back to my old neighborhood recently, for the first time in 60 years, it was lovely, full of very old but well-kept two-bedroom homes—a type builders no longer feel profitable enough to bother with. Of all the houses on the block, mine had changed the most. A small pool had been built in the back yard and an addition—a third room—was under construction. The orange tree was gone, lost maybe to one of the different diseases that have attacked citrus trees over the years. I didn't really think I'd recognize the house in any way—and I didn't—but some part of me probably still hoped I would. Regardless, it will always be the address on my birth certificate.

My Dad worked in public relations—for all the years I remember, in one firm. I was 27 when he died, and I think he gave that company 26 of them. He'd graduated from the University of Miami in 1951 with a degree in journalism. The year before, he and my mom had become engaged. It was announced in the now-defunct *Miami News*, with a picture of my mom looking quite happy and content. While still in college, my dad began working as a sportswriter for the same paper. I have an old picture of him on assignment interviewing a speedboat racer. It shows him as a smiling, confident young man, very much in his element. He continued with that for a while before deciding to start his own public relations outfit. It

didn't succeed, so he made a deal to bring his accounts to the firm he was with until his death. I found this out from my mom. My dad would never have told me that he'd started a business that went under.

At one point, when I was still very young, he needed to take on a second job to support us, so he did PR work at night for a Jai Alai fronton. I truly admire him for this, but he was away from home so much that I once didn't recognize him when he came to the door. I clearly remember him being upset by this and reassuring me that he was my dad. It hurt me that I saw him so little, and him as well.

It was while we were in that first house that I started kindergarten. It was 1958, when Elvis was in his heyday and Ike in his second term. The class was offered at a Jewish community center (a YMHA, or Young Men's Hebrew Association), near our house. My teacher was Mrs. Cole, a slim woman in her sixties, who both my mom and I liked and respected. My mom even addressed her as Mrs. Cole, though I thought that was embarrassing for an adult woman to do.

I really can't remember what we did in kindergarten, with two exceptions: taking a nap in the middle of our school day and finger painting. I told Mrs. Cole once at naptime that I couldn't get to sleep, but she said, not unkindly, "Just put your head down anyway and take a rest." But why, I thought, do I have to do this if I'm not tired and can't fall asleep (which has never been easy for me)?

Before we took up finger painting, she told us to go home and find a smock to wear to protect us against paint drips. When I told my folks, my dad smiled and said, "Hey, you can use one of my shirts," taking one from a cardboard box of wrapped, lightly starched shirts he'd gotten back from the dry cleaner. It came down to my knees but certainly did the trick.

The only really bad memory I have of kindergarten is of peeing myself one day. For some reason, a man was watching us for a time in a room we weren't usually in, and I was afraid to ask to go to the bathroom. I was agonizing over whether to speak up, and whether I could hold it in. Finally, I lost control, the pee formed a puddle on the floor and the man asked angrily, "Are you going to clean that up?" The other kids laughed as I looked down, feeling their eyes on me, wanting to disappear.

Incredibly, I went through something similar in high school. I hadn't felt the need to move my bowel in the break before my fifty-minute Algebra Two class but did shortly after it began. I should have just excused myself and gone to the bathroom, but I had so little self-esteem that I instead sweated it out until the end, afraid that I might lose control. Had I done so, I can't imagine how I ever would have lived it down.

Even at five, I had a cloud over me. The other boys were tougher. I was quiet and shy. One day at the Y, another boy asked if he could be my friend, and I said no because he too seemed to be shy, and I was afraid that being his friend would defeat my attempts to hide my own weakness (although I can't imagine I was fooling anyone).

A year after kindergarten, I was back at the Y to take a karate class. I wore the standard martial arts uniform, loose white pants and white robe, the latter tied with a beginner's white belt. Our class practiced in a room where thick gray mats had been laid out the floor to cushion us when we were thrown by an opponent. The first thing we were taught was how to break our fall when this happened. One way I remember is to land on one side of your body, let's say the right, with your right leg extended, your left leg in a vee with the knee pointing up, your chin tucked in and your right arm slapping the mat hard as you landed and expelled your breath with a loud HUUHH!

When we'd shown we could fall properly, we were taught our first throw. In it, you grab (if you're right-handed like me) your opponent's left arm and bring it over your left shoulder as you pivot so that your back is against your opponent's front. At the same time, you get your hips lower than his, grab him around the waist with your right hand, lift him up with your hips and flip him over your shoulder. I was amazed that it was so easy to lift and throw another kid my size, and it made me feel stronger.

I was a fairly good athlete, small and thin, but agile, and fit from playing sports with my friends. I learned the moves just fine. Then I had my first bout, against the only other kid as small as I was, and he threw me and won. Instead of seeing the bout as a loss, I saw myself as one. Fearing the other boy, and assuming I'd be beaten every time, I quit the class.

When I was six, my parents bought a small house in what is now called Miami Gardens, in the northeastern part of our county. But for a few months before we could move in, we lived in an apartment

building. Our unit had an actual icebox instead of a refrigerator. An iceman came around each day to deliver big blocks of ice, and we'd put one on a rack above a drip pan. The iceman left the back of his truck open while he made deliveries, and some older boys would take leftover bits of ice for themselves, so I joined in. I recall so well how cold and refreshing they were on a hot day. Before air conditioning was common, any little bit of relief helped.

Our new house was small and simple, but a little bigger than the one in the Gables, and perfectly fine for us. Our neighborhood was right in the middle of the middle class, nothing fancy, but I always liked it because there were a lot of other boys to play with. Everyone had kids then, so you could always get up a game. We used to play baseball in the yard of a nearby church (which is now mostly a parking lot) or just bat the ball to each other in the street. After dinner, we'd play dodge ball or kickball in the street, and that was the one time the boys and girls played together.

I had a room of my own but, until I was seven, only an old convertible sofa to sleep on. Its mattress was a bit lumpy and uncomfortable, so when my folks told me I would be getting a bed I was pleased, but still asked uncertainly: "Will it be a real bed?" and was thrilled to learn that it would.

The only thing our house lacked was air conditioning, which few homes had then. The local supermarket was the first place I experienced it. Going there to buy candy with other boys was a treat, but some of them stole candy once when I was with them. I don't remember if I joined in, but a year or two later took some raisin crackers off a shelf in a grocery store I'd gone to with my mom. I'd told her that I'd be back in a second and snatched them, but a store manager saw this and chewed me out, telling me that I was a thief and that he wouldn't stand for that in his store. He had me take him to my mom and I felt ashamed when he told her what I'd done—and immediately afraid of what my father might say. I was crying as my mom pulled into our driveway, saying, "I don't want Dad to think I'm a bad boy." She calmed me, and I don't even remember what my father said, though I'm sure he wasn't happy about it.

Another place I went with my friends to buy things was a local drug store, where we bought candy, soda (or Yoo-hoo, with a picture of Yogi Berra on the label) and comic books. I loved Superman, Batman, The Flash, and The Mighty Atom, a superhero who accomplished great things though he was tiny. This felt good to me, since I was the smallest of my friends. The comic books were maybe a nickel then, so whatever change my mom gave me went pretty far. I remember buying some one day, when I was eight or nine, and excitedly bringing them home to read. But I was shocked to realize that I had wasted my money, because I now found them too childish to bother with. It was the beginning of a slow disenchantment with pop culture.

Our home had a nice back yard and my dad put up a swing set. I used to swing hard enough that the set's legs would rock off the ground, sending my parents out to tell me to take it easy. And I took their advice—as long as they were watching. I loved that yard. I was watering it once with a hose, spraying water in all directions, when my mom came out and suggested putting the hose down in one spot to see if the water would spread out and cover the yard. It did, and I thought my mom was a genius. I remember telling some other kids about it, I was so proud of her.

But another time, when I was still quite young, my mom invited over a friend—a woman about her age, with a son who was mine. While the women chatted inside, he and I were playing in the backyard in a kiddie pool and he held my head underwater. Somehow, I got my head back above the surface and screamed, terrified that I might have died, and the women came out to put things right. As I recall, my mom was very upset and yelled at her friend. It's the type of thing she might have done. She certainly loved me but didn't handle pressure well. The lady and her son never came back.

Another time, I was just sitting quietly out back when I felt something on my arm and looked down to see ants swarming over it. I was shocked and ran inside to my mom, who this time was quite calm and said I should just go to the bathroom and wash the ants off. This put me at ease, and I was soon rid of them. My mom wasn't capable of reacting consistently, but I did better when she was calm.

The house behind ours had a lemon tree in its backyard. Some other boys and I were together in my yard one day, and one of them went over the chain-link fence separating the yards and grabbed a few lemons. We opened them on the points at the top of the fence, since its wires hadn't been bent over to make a smooth edge. I assume that the points were intended to keep people from climbing over the fence, even if

they cut themselves trying, which seemed cruel to me. No matter, they certainly didn't stop little boys. The lemon tree's owner came out and yelled at us for our pilfering—completely within her rights—but at that age I just thought it was weird and stingy. We'd taken only a few from a tree full of them. Sadly, with the lemons opened, I realized that they were really far too sour to eat.

We would have done better eating a watermelon from the little patch cultivated by one of my friends, Alex, who lived next door to the house with the lemon tree. Oddly, I don't recall if he shared them with us, but we certainly never stole one.

Alex and I bonded over baseball. When we were six or seven, we would often play in the street in front of his house. We would pretend we were members of the New York Yankees, who then reigned supreme. Alex would be Mickey Mantle and I would be Roger Maris. We struggled, at first, to get the knack of throwing the ball up by ourselves and hitting it in the air to the other guy. There was one particular day, though, when we suddenly played better, hitting nice line drives and snagging them well, which really made me us both happy. At that age, I think my life's only goal was to be better at sports.

The one downside to playing in the street, of course, was that it chewed up the baseball, so we would often go to that church field. It was a nice open space with more than enough room for us, bordered by rows of pine trees that always left lots of needles and cones on the ground. Alex and I would sometimes pretend that we were in a game, with me pitching and him catching. He would call balls and strikes and tell me if I struck each batter out or walked him. The point was to see if I could get three outs before walking an opposing player in to score.

I enjoyed playing there, although I was always aware that I was a Jew on Christian property, an outsider, a member of a minority that some were hostile to. I was stopped once around this time by an older boy on the street who said in a threatening way, "Are you Jewish?" I was afraid to say yes and afraid to say no, but I told him that I was. Maybe I was just afraid to be caught out in a lie, but I think it was also because my mom took pride in being Jewish. I've always felt that erasing this part of my identity would be doing the work of anti-Semites. The other kid responded with a laugh and said, "Well, I'm going to let you go, since you're a nice guy." I was shaken by the incident and heard such hostility at other times over the years, but the fear of facing it took a lot more out of me. It was just one way in which I felt marked as an outsider. I remember my class reading a story once about a man who was wrongly driven from a city for some perceived offense and thinking: *that's me*.

My best friend, Bill, attended that church with his mother, stepfather and half-sister, who was my sister Susan's age. They invited both her and me to a service once. She went, but I didn't, fearing I suppose that the church congregation would pressure us to give up Judaism. Perhaps the intent really was to try and convert us, but I was the only one in my family who was afraid of this. My parents left going there up to us.

I went to the first four grades of school at Parkway Elementary, so named because it's right next to the Florida Turnpike. There was a skinny, shallow creek behind the school that separated it from the roadway. Some other boys and I once crossed it, even though it was said to hold the occasional cotton-mouthed moccasin. A few of the boys could clear the creek in one jump, but I couldn't make it across without landing one foot in the water. One time, we actually *saw* a moccasin—its jaws open to reveal the white lining that gave it its name—abruptly ending my imitation of Lewis and Clark. The school is still there, though now built out to accommodate more children, as with all my old schools. There is still a big shade tree right behind the classrooms, where a teacher used to take us to play duck duck goose. I can recall tapping someone on the head and tearing around the circle of kids—a bit thrilled and a bit afraid—trying to get back to my starting point before I could be caught.

On my first day of school, I was walked there by an older girl who lived next door to me. My mom, looking out for me, had asked her to, even though I'd told her I'd been there before with friends. In school, I did fine, taking easily to reading and math. I remember that the first book we read had the sentences, "Look Jane. See Dick." I thought that was too easy, and still think of things that are embarrassingly simple by that line: *The movie wasn't very good—sort of "Look Jane. See Dick."*

When I was in first grade, I very much liked Diane, a classmate whose friendliness to me showed that the feeling was mutual. When Valentine's Day was approaching, we were all instructed by our teacher to buy cards for our classmates, so my mom took me out to buy a bag of maybe 25 small, identical Valentine's cards. But I got an individual card for Diane and wrote something personal in it, instead of just "for Diane from Steve." I kept, for some time, the card she'd gotten me (though I don't remember if it was generic or something special) tucked away inside the sofa bed I still had then.

I liked the first three grades pretty well and was delighted that the young woman who taught my second-grade class read to us every day after lunch. I can vividly recall a novel she read about a boy learning to be a bullfighter. The book described him learning the different ways in which the *matador* (literally, *killer* in Spanish) could approach the bull and pass his cape over him as he charged. One of these was the *Veronica*, in which the matador holds the cape straight out in front of them with both hands. I can still remember our teacher excitedly saying, "Veronica!" each time he did this. This story time was certainly one thing that kept alive the love of learning I had inside me—though I did precious little with it at the time—and I've always been grateful to our teacher for caring enough about us to do that.

As a child, I didn't read much beyond the sports page. I mostly just watched TV and played with friends every hour that I could. I would watch anything on TV: The Mickey Mouse Club, Superman, anything. And I loved it. It was nice, but escapist. I always knew that I should read more but was too lazy. But I do remember finding a novel in my school library once, a story I can barely recall being about a family facing some terrible difficulties in a very cold climate. I read it feverishly until I was done, not even watching TV at night, which was unprecedented. I was so dependent on TV that, when ours was out for repair, I would feel absolutely lost. But my experience with that book was a one-off and, sadly, it never happened again until I was an adult.

I didn't like my fourth-grade teacher, a rather sour middle-aged woman. Whatever pleasure and motivation I'd felt before that disappeared, and my grades fell. But I didn't much like being in school anyway. Being nervous and impatient—but also being somewhat nonconformist—I didn't like the regimentation: sit down, stand up, say the Pledge of Allegiance (which I viewed as a bore, but see now as the type of thing that us down the path to Vietnam), walk in quiet, gender-segregated lines to the cafeteria, obey your teacher in all things. In one grade, misbehaving students were forced to stand in a corner and balance books on their outstretched hands until their arms hurt. (Thankfully, it never happened to me.) In kind, this was no different than torturing prisoners by making them maintain stress positions for hours. I wanted to speak up but was too afraid. People speak of teaching children values in school; overwhelmingly, the value taught was obedience to authority. I really lived for recess, lunch and the final bell. I remember almost nothing of what we were taught, apart from the basics of reading and math, and probably could have learned it in vastly less time if I'd had the awareness and discipline to study on my own. It was a cliché in the films of the era for a child to say, "I hate school!" but I did.

One evening during this time, I was in front of another child's house and a boy started yelling insults at me in front of many other kids, both boys and girls. I was dumbstruck. I had no idea what to do, so just suffered it. The bully got away with it, and I knew that I had been humiliated in front of my peers.

Maybe when I was very young, I felt differently, but by this point the pattern was set. I couldn't stop people from hurting me. I couldn't fire up and combat them. I'd just feel shocked at their cruelty and freeze. How could this be happening? I hated them for wanting to hurt me and myself for being too weak to stop them. Then my anger would turn into anxiety and depression. My manner was nervous, I blinked a lot, and sometimes stammered under stress. Many kids saw at first glance that I was afraid, and some leapt to take advantage. At that age, I couldn't have used adult terms to describe how I felt. I just knew that I was afraid and had a hard time accomplishing things. The least difficulty might make me feel that it was hopeless. But I wasn't so depressed that I couldn't function. That would only come in adulthood. As a kid, my life was pretty much on rails: I *had* to go to school, and I *could* usually escape my troubles through play and watching TV. At whatever age I started hearing terms like mental illness, I knew that they applied to me. I held within me the constant fear that my weakness would be discovered and exploited. I still do.

But I almost never spoke of any of this to my parents. I felt a combination of shame at not being stronger, fear of disapproval by my father, and not wanting to hear that I should just step up the challenge

and I'd be all right. Time and again, I had painfully learned that I didn't have the strength to do this. I said something to my mom once after I'd had some type of confrontation with another boy. She laughed, made a weak punching motion and said, "Give him a *zetz*," Yiddish for hitting him. She laughed not out of meanness, but because she was fearful herself and couldn't face the gravity of the issue. Neither my mom nor I ever fully matured. No one was ever physically afraid of us. Nor did either of us have the force of personality to win true respect.

I needed someone to teach me to be strong and accept me when I wasn't. Building my confidence was the biggest thing missing. The only other time I recall speaking of this to my parents, I blurted out, near tears, "I'm a coward." My father said, "Of course you're not," as incapable as my mother of dealing with this. He once told me, "Never start a fight, but never walk away from one either." I think of this now as *parenting by proverb*, as if intoning wise words could have made me capable of living up to them. When I hear of parents going to their child's school to complain about bullying, I'm sort of shocked and amazed. It must be a great comfort to those children that they can confide in their mother and father. For me, I hardly know which was the bigger deterrent: being too ashamed to open my mouth or feeling they had nothing to offer.

I wish I could escape the past, but I can't. My mind is a merry-go-round I can't find a way off of—endless memories of being attacked and humiliated, fearful fantasies of how it might happen again, pipe dreams of being a vastly better version of myself. But no matter how often I imagine myself as a competent human being—and I may switch fantasies every few seconds to find one that, just for a moment, feels right—I always return to feeling on the defensive. Sometimes, this causes only a bit of pain; at others, it's tormenting. It may go on for minutes before I can stop it, and when I do, it may only be for seconds. I am never really free of this. Unless something like a movie occupies my mind completely, it goes on without end. I can't imagine why, but on top of all this, there is always some earworm playing in my mind, often just silly pop music I don't even like. Believe me, getting stuck on something like *Dancing Queen* is no fun. All of this makes concentration hard, and the more stressed I am, the worse it all is. Thankfully, it's less intense now that I'm retired. It was always worst at work.

One day, I was at the home of Andy, a boy who lived a few doors down, and he said, "I'll show you mine if you show me yours." So we showed our penises, but I later felt guilty enough to tell my mother about it. Thankfully, she said that it was nothing, but feelings of guilt and fear regarding sex have always been with me—I'm not sure why.

I was with Andy one day on his front lawn and tried to jump on his back as a joke. He hit me in the stomach, and I lay on the ground for a while with the wind knocked out of me, unable to even speak. But even when I got my breath back, I was too afraid to fight him, and he was completely unrepentant. He was my age, but bigger and a very good athlete. I'd started Little League by then and played with kids my own age, but he was good enough to compete with older boys. Another time, he and I were with his sister and he said something about my mother, and that I really was an S.O.B. I didn't know the term, so the insult was lost on me. He was a cold boy and, though I was his friend for a time, I was afraid of him. This was the first time I can remember that someone insulted my mother, but it continued throughout my childhood and within my family until I broke off contact.

Strangely, I told my mother once that I was going to Andy's house and, out of nowhere, she became upset and said, quite harshly, that he was only my friend when it was convenient for him and that he was using me. I realize now that she was right, but at that moment, I couldn't imagine why she'd said it. Maybe something had occurred between my mom and Andy, leading to both their feelings, though I can't imagine what. But more than anything, I was hurt by her tone. I didn't know how she could insult me like that. How could she embarrass me when she was my mom? People outside my family did it, but I expected to be safe with her. But, as I'll tell more about later, it was how her own mother often treated her. Neither she nor anyone else in my family consistently showed me love. I eventually realized that, to one degree or another, they just weren't secure enough in life themselves to make, or even want to make, me feel secure.

My nervous habits cause me a lot of trouble at this age. There was a time when (I don't know how else to say this) sweat in the crack of my rear end would bother me and I'd put my hand behind me and move my briefs up to absorb it. Once, a boy talking to some others as I walked by said "Watch him. He's

the butt picker.” This made me afraid that I would do it, and though I tried to restrain myself, I just gave up and did it anyway, feeling humiliated and hopeless when they laughed.

My reaction to bullying was to be greatly fearful and frustrated, and there were times when this led to aggression on my part against others. I remember trying to bully two boys on my block who were younger and seemed like the only ones I knew who were weaker than me. They were in front of their house once when I passed by with Susan, my junior by three years. I forget what I said to them, but it was intentionally cruel, and they were upset by it. Their mother saw this and came out of the house to yell at me. I was ashamed, knowing that I’d done wrong, but my sister smiled with delight at the pain these boys felt. It was perhaps the first time I realized that she was could be mean, even sadistic, and I found that frightening. She’s never really changed.

It wasn’t the only time I acted this way. I did the same when my parents, Susan and I visited the family of a man my dad had worked with at one of the local newspapers. He went on to become the paper’s Editor. His family was very nice, and undoubtedly cultured, with a piano and metronome in their living room. They had a boy my age, Thomas, who I shoved down onto the back steps of their home—which might have injured him—while our parents talked inside. Again, I was with Susan, who again loved this. Maybe, in addition to trying to compensate for feeling helpless, I was trying to impress her. I was rightly called on the carpet by my parents and their friends. I think I’d attacked Thomas after I said I liked sports and he said he liked reading history. I must have been jealous, since I knew I should have been doing the same. We never again visited that family, who undoubtedly saw me as a problem. Thomas went on to be a reporter and author of many books on local history, just as his father had been. All these years later, I am writing my first book, about how I failed to become an intellectual like Thomas. I’m forever marked by the pain of being bullied, yet I caused that same pain in others.

I wish I could find something more positive from these years, something that would show me as industrious and deep, with something like a mature sense of myself, or even just some happy place of refuge. But I really can’t. I had some nascent feelings about serious issues. I knew that the world was cruel. I remember a moment, when I was maybe seven, shortly after I’d first heard about the Holocaust. I was walking to school, shocked and frightened that people could be so irrational and murderous and that they had hated Jews that much. I made the connection between the small abuses directed at me and that other, ultimate expression of the human capacity for evil. It all connected. Everyone and every group that people hated was on the firing line, and I was powerless to stop it. The one good thing that came of this, for which I’m eternally grateful, was the realization that cruelty is always deeply immoral in itself—and potentially deadly—no matter who is the target.

But there was one more thing that troubled me: I wondered if Jews were innately weak, as I am, and if that was why we had been singled out for, and been unable to stop, this horror. I felt a sense of helplessness and doom. Jews aren’t weak or inferior, yet some irrational part of me wonders if antisemitism is not just a threat to Jews overall but a judgment of me personally.

I knew almost nothing about Judaism at that age. Some of it came across to me as a matter of *don’ts*: *We don’t believe in Santa Claus. We don’t celebrate Christmas.* My mom lit Shabbos candles sometimes, and we celebrated Hannukah, ate Matzoh at Passover and sometimes had a Seder. I knew that we were supposed to fast for a day on Yom Kippur. I tried but couldn’t last anywhere near 24 hours. Being Jewish meant the most to my mom. I remember her lighting the candles on Friday night, moving her hands over them as if to gather the flames to her, then covering her eyes and saying a prayer: *Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav vitzivanu l’hadlik ner shel Shabbat.* (Blessed are You, God, Ruler of the universe, who sanctified us with the commandment of lighting Shabbat candles.) My mother gave us at least some sense of being connected to our religion. But I felt, as well, that being Jewish put me in a box. My mom would ask me, sometimes, when I announced that I had a new friend, “Is he Jewish?” What did it matter? I didn’t want people rejecting me for being Jewish. It would have been wrong for me to reject others. And, being in the minority, I wouldn’t have had many friends.

But my Jewish identity was shallow, and two of the things I badly needed to come to terms with, antisemitism and the Holocaust, were almost never mentioned in my family. I think that I had heard of the

Holocaust on the street and had it confirmed for me by my mom. No one ever shared with me any experience of antisemitism that they'd had, or how they negotiated life as a Jew. I didn't have the wherewithal to feel very good about myself in general, let alone as a member of a minority that had the sword of history hanging over its head.

But it's not like I have no good memories of being Jewish. Every Saturday morning, my father would give me some money and I would ride my bike to a nearby deli where, each and every time, I would order a dozen assorted bagels, half a pound of cream cheese, and a quarter pound of Nova Scotia lox. On one Saturday, I walked in and a high school girl who worked behind the counter placed a bag down on it and said with a smile, "That's for you." I didn't really understand, and I just looked up at her, this young woman of maybe 16 who seemed more like 30 to me. So she said to me, "Yeah, this is your order: a dozen assorted bagels, half a pound of cream cheese, and a quarter pound of Nova Scotia lox." I was astonished that she had taken the trouble to have my order ready when I walked in, but she did it to make a little boy feel special—and it worked.

My best friend Bill and I spent a ton of time together, but it's sad to realize that I don't have a sense of who he—or any of my other childhood friends—really was. As children, our horizons were terribly small. Nothing serious was ever discussed, and I never—then or now—would have said to someone: *I'm afraid. I feel like an outsider.* It just couldn't have been done. Girls might have confided among themselves at that age, but even as a young boy you realize that showing weakness will only bring more hostility. Before writing this book, I'd only mentioned such things to people working in mental health. It's quite a commentary that, for many of us, we can only let our hair down with someone who is paid not to be judgmental. It's either that or follow the advice of people in politics: *Want a friend? Buy a dog.*

I do remember that Bill said something to me once, though I don't recall the words, that showed he wasn't completely comfortable with his stepfather, and I thought that was terribly sad. I had a little discomfort with my father at that age, but I still loved him. I'm not sure if Bill would have said that about his stepdad. I can't imagine how I would have coped if I'd been in his situation.

There is just one uncomfortable memory I have of Bill. We were with some other boys once in front of my house. One boy had a magazine with pictures of nude women, and we all hid behind my father's car to look at them. Bill laughed at one point and asked if I was hard—which I was—and put his hand on my crotch. I felt violated, but did nothing, and never told anyone.

Despite my endless fearfulness, and my parents often being fearful for me, the threats that we dreaded most never materialized—except once. There could be no greater terror for parents than that of their child being kidnapped and killed. One day, when I was standing outside of school after it had let out, a car pulled up and a man said he could give me a ride home. He knew me and my parents by name and said they'd asked him to do this. But I'd always been warned against such an encounter and told the man no. I never told my parents, feeling that they would question me endlessly about it and be unbearably overprotective. It's how I would have felt. I clearly recall a moment, a few years later, when I felt that I would never be able to have children of my own, precisely because I would worry so much about them. It's odd that in the one moment when disaster really threatened, I found the strength to protect myself but didn't feel I could tell a soul.