

"Hysterical! Mark Rosenberg is the gay, Jewish love child of Ignatius J. Reilly and Chelsea Handler." —Alison Arngrim, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Confessions of a Prairie Bitch*

Mark Brennan Rosenberg



EATING MY FEELINGS

*Tales of Overeating, Underperforming,
and Coping with My Crazy Family*

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Mark Brennan Rosenberg


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The names and identifying characteristics of many of the people and places mentioned in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

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For Jason.

Every day you are missed.

In loving memory.

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Acknowledgments

About the Author

I've had more ups and downs with my weight than Oprah. Unlike Oprah, however, no one really gives a shit. I've never carted all of my fat onto a soundstage in a wheelbarrow. There have been no cameras following me around while I hike my fat, black ass up forty flights of stairs. I've had my issues with food, but America was not watching, until now.

I guess I should introduce myself. My name is Mark Brennan Rosenberg and I'm pretty much a whiter, skinnier, gayer version of Oprah with a much filthier dialect. True, I don't have my own talk show or my OWN Network, but the similarities between the two of us are unbounded. Oprah has struggled with her weight and so have I. Oprah has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on diets, trainers, and nutritionists and so have I. Oprah is a strong black woman and so am I. Unlike Oprah, I go even further, dig deeper, and get to the underbelly of how bad weight issues can get. I've never seen an episode of *Oprah* that tackled the nightmare of eating birthday cake off the floor. Never have I seen an episode of her show that delved into what can happen when you want to fuck your personal trainer, but have absolutely no intention of actually working out. I'm also quite certain that Oprah doesn't have Grindr on her iPhone. Well, guess what? I do. I am picking up where she left off and we are leaving no stone unturned and no bucket of chicken uneaten.

Together, you and I are going to take a journey into my struggles with weight, food, and body image. I know if you're reading this that means you're on page two. I know, books are long and reading is very hard and God forbid you create a world within your own imagination when you could be watching *Jersey Shore*. If you picked up this book and actually bought it, you probably only did so because you liked the cover, you are a friend of mine, or I verbally threatened you to do so, but have no fear. What you are about to read is a series of essays, all of which have a recurring theme. Meaning you can read one, a few, or all of them without hurting yourself from thinking too hard. I find this helpful to know beforehand, as most people these days seem to have the attention spans of guinea pigs.

Before we begin this magical voyage, here are some definitions of a few phrases that are mentioned throughout the book, just so you know what they mean ahead of time.

- **“Swamp Ass”**: Swamp ass happens when you go from cold to hot or hot to cold and your ass sweats so much that your underwear sticks to it.
- **“Body Be Right”**: This is a common phrase I like to say when I see a guy with a really killer body. Its meaning is heightened when you say it with the inflection that a fourteen-year-old black girl may use.
- **“Date-Rape-Drug Wasted”**: This commonly happens at gay bars when a guy is so drunk that you think he could potentially have been date-rape drugged.
- **“Eating My Feelings”**: Well ... we'll get to that one in due time.

It may also be helpful to know some of the pop-culture references I refer to as well. I'm

child of the 1980s and '90s, and since no one has an appreciation for the classics anymore, may help to briefly discuss a few things I reference frequently.

- *Clueless*: A movie that came out in the 1990s that propelled Alicia Silverstone to superstardom for about six months and gave America catchphrases like “as if.” If you don’t know what this movie is, then you probably aren’t (A) gay or (B) a girl who grew up in the 1990s. If you don’t fall into one of those categories, you should probably stop reading this book right now.
- *All My Children*: A daytime television show that introduced the world to Erica Kane, the woman America loves to hate. In fact, my first book, *Blackouts and Breakdowns* (currently on sale in bookstores everywhere), was dedicated to her.
- *Dynasty*: A very popular 1980s nighttime drama that featured women in dresses with shoulder pads fighting in lily ponds over a man who was in his late seventies and probably couldn’t get it up anyway. Also known as the greatest show in television history.

Now that we’ve covered that, get ready for a shit parade beyond your wildest dreams. you’re hesitant about reading on, just pretend that Oprah actually wrote this book. I’m pret sure she would approve.

HOMEY MOST CERTAINLY DON'T PLAY THAT

Our story begins in a sleepy suburban town outside of Washington, D.C. Our heroine, Mark, an overweight ten-year-old with an affinity for soap operas and show tunes, has found himself in a delicate condition that raises the questions: How much Halloween candy is too much? How inadvertently racist, offensive, and foulmouthed can one boy be at such a tender age? How did he get that way?

“You can do what you wanna do ... in living color.”

Every Sunday night I parked my fat ten-year-old ass on the couch to watch the most glorious television show ever, *In Living Color*. For whatever reason, I thought it was the funniest program on TV, but my parents thought otherwise.

“Mark, I don’t think that program is suitable for someone as young as you,” my mother would say. My mother is how I imagine all middle-aged housewives to be. Very well put together on the outside, bat-shit crazy on the inside. She basically embodies all of the characteristics of a person I would call a friend in adulthood, which is why we’re besties now.

“But, Mom,” I would retort, “they have the Fly Girls.”

I always wanted to be a Fly Girl. In my opinion, that was about as high on the entertainment food chain as you could get.

Not only did *In Living Color* have Fly Girls, it had pretty much everything you could want from a television show at the time. MC Lyte would make an occasional cameo, you could find out what was playing in theaters that week because the Men in Film would snap for the movies they liked, and there was of course the pièce de résistance: Homey D. Clown. I loved Homey—the ex-con who plays a clown—and his take-no-prisoners attitude toward life. If someone pissed him off, he would lash out by hitting them over the head with a sock full of tennis balls. Because Homey did not play that, many people were injured as he tried to delight the world. I know one ten-year-old he entertained, and that was me. I wanted to be Homey, except for that pesky ex-con part, because I had no desire to go to jail. For whatever reason, I always wanted to get back at “The Man,” and although I had no idea who the man was, I knew I hated him because Homey had told me to. Perhaps it had something to do with that fact that I was a constantly hungry ten-year-old, filled with angst because my parents continued to refuse to serve cake for breakfast.

The fall of 1990 was magical. The world was delighting in the musical stylings of Taylor Dayne, and talented people such as Ian Ziering and Arsenio Hall were about to come into their own. I was wrapped up in third-grade bullshit and loving every minute of it. My best friend at the time, Kelly Harmon, had decided to rename herself yet again. She was no longer going to call herself “Katie.” The previous year she had gone by Katherine. This confused me so I decided I would call her “Katie-Kelly-Katherine” in order to prevent any further confusion on my part. When Halloween rolled around, she told me that she was going to be Sleeping Beauty and asked me what I was going to be.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I guess I’ll be a hobo again.”

For the last three years, I rocked out a fabulous hobo costume that my mother had designed. This may have something to do with the fact that most upper-middle-class families

have never actually seen a homeless person; they do, however, seem to think hobo costumes are the most adorable outfit choice for children come Halloween.

“That’s cool,” Katie-Kelly-Katherine responded.

“Yeah,” I replied, “but I have been a hobo like three times now and I am beginning to feel like making fun of homeless people is wrong.” Bust out your soapbox, young Marisa Rosenberg. “I don’t have any ideas.”

“You could go as Barney Rubble. Just turn your hobo gear into a brown frock and call it a day.”

“Barney Rubble? What a dumbass idea,” I replied, duly noted, and used the following as my Halloween costume. But this year I needed something with a little kick. Besides Katie-Kelly-Katherine, I had no other friends, and I wasn’t quite sure how to make them. I was fat and the rest of the kids liked to play sports, not watch soap operas, so there was a definite divide in the friends department. On one side there was myself, a soap-opera-loving, brownie-baking tyke who appreciated everything Susan Lucci wore and had a strong affinity for things that glittered. On the other side there was everyone else. Luckily, I had a friend in Katie-Kelly-Katherine because she watched *All My Children* and the conversations were endless. The rest of the kids weren’t as cool, and I think some of them watched NBC soaps, which was unacceptable as far as I was concerned, because if a soap opera didn’t feature Erica Kane, Victoria Buchanan, or Lucy Coe, there was no sense in watching it to begin with.

I needed to find a Halloween costume that would wow the class and get me as much candy as possible, but I had no idea where to find inspiration. I thought about going as Lucy Coe from *General Hospital* and wearing a hot red wedding dress, but quickly realized that would only be a good idea if I wanted to get punched in the neck repeatedly by every bully in school for the next fortnight. The Sunday before Halloween, I was sitting in front of the TV and like a gift from Jesus Christ himself, I had the best idea ever.

“I KNOW!” I yelled. “I will go as Homey D. Clown for Halloween!”

“Who is Homey D. Clown?” my mother asked.

“He’s the funny ex-con-turned-hilarious-clown on *In Living Color*,” I said.

“I don’t know,” my mother said. “I’ll sleep on it and get back to you.”

The next day after school, we were off to Spencer’s Gifts to buy my new kick-ass Halloween costume. We bought a huge red Afro wig, makeup, and an outfit just like Homey’s. I was ecstatic that my mother was finally doing what I told her to do and thought it would be a nice segue into getting everything I wanted for Christmas. The next night was Halloween and fat kids everywhere were rejoicing, myself included. Halloween is the one holiday (aside from Thanksgiving and Kwanzaa, depending on your religious beliefs) where every child acts like a complete fat-ass. Every Halloween I regaled in the fact that yet again I would be able to eat as much candy as I wanted to, without being judged by my bone-thin brothers for gorging like a pig.

That evening, I put on my costume and filled a sock with tennis balls, just like Homey’s Red Afro wig: check. Yellow clown suit with big red buttons: check. Big floppy red shoes: double check. However, a very important aspect of the costume was missing. I just looked like a dumb-ass clown and it really wasn’t the look I was going for. I was pissed.

“MOM!” I yelled.

“What the fuck are you yelling about?” she replied. That Halloween, all of the adults were

coming over to my parents' house to get shit-faced while their kids went trick-or-treating.
God bless the suburbs.

"I don't look like Homey at all," I said.

"Awww ... you look cute," one of my mom's dumb drunk friends said.

"Seriously?" I replied. "I look like any dumb-ass, run-of-the-mill clown."

"Mark! Language!" my mother said.

The adults all laughed as I turned around and walked up the stairs. I felt defeated. I thought I had the most amazing costume idea ever, but now I was regretting my brilliant plan. I wandered into my parents' room to see if my mother had a red wedding dress lying around, thinking I could pull off Lucy Coe after all. After searching her closets for a half second, I stumbled upon something of my father's and came up with an even better idea.

The doorbell rang and my mother answered: "Hello, dear."

"Hi, Mrs. Rosenberg," Katie-Kelly-Katherine responded.

"Hi, ah, Carrie?"

"It's Katie now."

"Right," my mother replied. "MAAAAARK! KATHY'S HEEEEERE!" She went back into the kitchen while Katie-Kelly-Katherine waited in the foyer. My house on Silverstone Court was amazing. We had a staircase that wrapped around the foyer, so every time I walked down it pretended to be Krystle Carrington on the opening credits of *Dynasty*. Every morning, I would stroll down the stairs, stopping midway to pause, look at the camera that wasn't there, and then continue walking. I loved her and her shoulder pads. I wanted to be her and I was every time I would strut down that spiral staircase. But that evening, I had a surprise that may have been better than Krystle Carrington herself bursting through our front door with news that Denver Carrington had been taken over once again by Alexis. I officially had the best Halloween costume ever.

"Katie-Kelly-Katherine, what's up?" I said as I breezed down the stairs.

"Mark," she replied, "what's all over your face?"

"Shoe polish," I said as I made my way down the stairs and greeted Katie-Kelly-Katherine in the foyer. "Now I really look like Homey D. Clown!"

I had taken my father's black shoe polish and smeared it all over my face. I thought, at age ten, that my Homey D. Clown costume would not be complete unless I was in blackface. In my mind, making fun of homeless people was a bad idea, but going out of doors as a satirical African American clown was completely acceptable.

"I suppose you do," Katie-Kelly-Katherine said.

"Thanks. Pretty amazing, huh?"

"I guess so," she said. "My mom doesn't let me watch *In Living Color*, though. She doesn't like the racial undertones. Whatever that means."

"Not sure. Let's get out of here."

It was the best Halloween ever. Katie-Kelly-Katherine and I hit up all of the rich people's houses and made out like bandits. Fortunately for me, my parading around the neighborhood in blackface didn't have anyone batting an eye because we hadn't yet come across a family of any color other than white. We wandered around all night collecting candy from everyone, and our costumes were a hit. Katie-Kelly-Katherine totally looked like Sleeping Beauty and I, of course, looked exactly like Homey D. Clown. As we made our way back to Silverstone

Court, we decided to hit up my neighbors for some last-minute treats. First we went to the Bauers' house. They lived directly across the street from us. I think Mrs. Bauer was kind of lush, but being in an upper-middle-class neighborhood, everyone called her "eccentric."

"Oh hey," Mrs. Bauer said as she opened the door to her home.

"Trick or treat!" Katie-Kelly-Katherine and I said in harmony.

"Look at you kids," Mrs. Bauer said as the contents of her martini glass swished this way and that. "Candy? Is that you?"

"It's Katie!"

"Well, you look just like Sleeping Beauty," Mrs. Bauer said. "And who are you, your man?"

"It's me, Mrs. Bauer. Mark Rosenberg," I replied.

"Mark? What a costume! I barely recognized you," Mrs. Bauer said. "You Rosenberg? You're Catholic. You're Jewish. And apparently today, you're black. Good luck with that," she said as she dumped candy into our pillowcases and slammed the door.

I wondered if she was hammered or just high on prescription pills as we made our way to their next-door neighbors, the Phillipses. They had a deaf son named Jeff, who we all hated. We may have hated him because he was deaf (kids can be so cruel), but he had a really bad attitude. Earlier in the year, being the fat, gay, equally-as-hated ten-year-old, I decided I was going to try and reach out to Jeff by learning sign language, which apparently pissed him off further. He was so mean to everyone; it's no wonder he was home when we knocked on the Phillipses' door for candy.

"Karen? Is that you?" Jeff said.

"It's Katie!"

"Trick or treat, Jeff," I said.

"We're out of candy," Jeff said.

"I couldn't fully understand you because of your little 'problem,'" Katie-Kelly-Katherine said, referring to the fact that Jeff was deaf, making it harder for us to understand him. "Are you trying to tell me that you're out of candy?"

"Yeah. Seriously."

"You're such an asshole, Jeff," I said.

"You're just calling me an asshole because I'm deaf, aren't you?"

"No, Jeff," I responded. "I'm calling you an asshole because you're an asshole. And my father is still pissed that your parents put up that sign that says Caution: Deaf Child, right in front of our mailbox."

"You two suck! Get off of my property! And while you're at it, wash that crap off your face, Mark. I may be deaf, but you look like a fool!" Jeff said as he slammed the door in our faces.

"God, I hate that kid," I replied. He was almost as bad as that fucking Russian family that lived down the street who continued to refuse to take part in our American tradition of celebrating Halloween. We knew they were home; they just wouldn't answer the door when we knocked. We then walked to the house directly next to ours, the Goodmans.

The Goodmans were like the Huxtables from *The Cosby Show*. The father was a doctor, the mother was just plain fabulous, and they were the only black family within a three-mile radius. I really liked Mike, their son, but he went to private school because they were cool.

than us. Katie-Kelly-Katherine and I rolled up to their home and knocked on the door. Dr. Goodman answered.

“What. The. Fuck?” Dr. Goodman said.

“Trick or treat,” we said in unison.

“What the fuck is this?” Dr. Goodman asked.

“I’m Sleeping Beauty,” Katie-Kelly-Katherine said.

“And I’m Homey D. Clown,” I said. “Homey D. Clown. Homey D. Clown. Don’t mess around. Don’t mess around!” I sang.

“Nice costume, Cassie,” Dr. Goodman said.

“IT’S KATIE!”

“Mark, your costume is ... interesting. Do your parents know you have been walking around in blackface?”

“Ummm ... I actually can’t be sure,” I replied.

“Interesting. I am going to have to have a little talk with them,” Dr. Goodman said. “You know, that’s very racist.”

“I just didn’t want to be a hobo again,” I cried. My plight for the homeless continued: just feel so bad for them. I mean, they have nowhere to live. Essentially, they are homeless. Without a home. Hence why they are called homeless people.”

“Yes, I understand, being homeless is a bad thing,” Dr. Goodman said. “Come inside.” Katie-Kelly-Katherine and I entered the Goodman home and Dr. Goodman gave us a forty-five-minute rundown of the tribulations of the African American and why blackface was racist. We did however get to enjoy a few musical numbers from *The Jazz Singer*, so it was not only educational, but entertaining as well. Just like a killer episode of *Reading Rainbow*.

I went home and washed the shoe polish off my face. I began counting the treats that I had acquired that evening. I always counted and categorized my Halloween candy so that my brothers wouldn’t get their grubby little hands on it. As I was sorting, my mother came into my room in a panic.

“MARK! DON’T EAT THAT CANDY!” she yelled.

“What the hell?” I said.

“There is a rapist or a serial killer or a child molester or something on the loose and he’s poisoned bags of candy,” my mother said. This was coming from a woman who believed pretty much anything she was told. Earlier that year, she was convinced that Bat Boy had given birth outside of the National Cathedral, so all of her children were told to steer clear. She was also an advertiser’s dream come true. If JoBeth Williams told my mother to buy Playtex, you better believe she bought it.

“Are you hammered right now?”

“No.” She paused. “Well ... a little. But it’s true! Now give me your candy before you’re poisoned too,” she said as she gathered all of the candy that I had just categorized on my bed and dumped it into the trash can. Knowing I was not above eating out of a trash can, she took the can and dumped it into the garbage outside.

“DAMN THAT WOMAN!” I yelled. She had taken my candy away, and with it she took my childhood as well. All I wanted to do was acquire as much candy as possible so I could gorge like a pig and not get judged for being a fat-ass, and now my mother had totally ruined my plan.

Because of this experience, I learned never to judge people by the color of their skin, what they look like, or where they are from, even when I was trying to use it to my advantage to get free food. I hate everyone regardless of any of that.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN RELIGION

Every good story needs a good villain, and Mark found his in his evil whore of a stepmother, Stacey. Our heroine's father is about to drop the biggest bombshell of all time on Mark and his beloved siblings. As our journey through Mark's fatness continues, he finds the answer to the question philosophers have been plagued with for years: What's so fucking great about being Jewish anyway?

There is always a lot of confusion as to who belongs to what religion in my family. So let me clear a few things up: My mother is Catholic. When she had her first child—my oldest brother, Tony—he was baptized and raised Catholic. While all of this was going down, my father—who is a Jew—was married to his first wife, a lovely woman named Faith. They had two daughters—twins, my sisters Kimmy and Jamie—and raised them Jewish. Then my father married my mother and adopted my oldest brother, Tony, because his father had apparently been abducted by aliens and left my mother shortly after Tony was born. Then my parents got together and had me and my little brother, Kevin. So the Rosenberg clan is essentially the quintessential American family with a mixture of different religions, beliefs, and levels of guilt. When you mix Irish Catholic and Jewish, you have one drunk, guilty household on your hands.

When I was very little, my parents' religious differences never interfered with everyday life. Kevin and I were both baptized and went to Catholic school and my father never seemed to mind. To appease my father our family even celebrated the important Jewish holidays, so he could teach his children about his own beliefs. All was quiet on the religious front. That is, until my parents got a divorce and my father decided to remarry a Jewish whore named Stacey.

Stacey was more like a high-class escort with a law degree and less of a whore, but I hated her nonetheless and my hatred for her began early on. She was, in my eyes, evil in its purest form. She had the air of Cruella De Vil every time she walked in the room, except she had a much even worse hairdo. I'm also pretty sure she had murdered a puppy or two before meeting my father. I believe that I hated Stacey so early on because my mother had this unwarranted assumption that she and my father had had an affair before he divorced my mother. With no evidence to prove her story as truth, I took my mother's side without any question of whether she was right or not, as anyone would do. Shortly after Stacey and my father began dating, they got married and didn't tell anyone. That is, until the day of my elementary school graduation. All five of my father's children and Stacey's son, Paco (who shared with me a mutual love of Julie Andrews films and cake. I liked him and would have considered him an ally if his mother hadn't danced on the devil's playground), gathered at our favorite Chinese restaurant for what we thought was a casual evening of moo shu and shooting the shit, until my father dropped the biggest bombshell ever.

"We have news," my father said as he bit into an eggroll.

"Your father and I got married," Stacey said as she showed off the huge ring my father had given her.

"Is this a joke? I said. "Are we being filmed for *Candid Camera* or something?" Where was

Dom DeLuise when I needed him most?

“Nope, when we were on vacation in Orlando last weekend, your father and I decided to tie the knot. We brought pictures!” Stacey said as she began passing around photos of “the big day.” I sat there in disbelief. At the tender age of eleven, I could not picture my father with anyone other than my mother, even though they had tried to kill each other at least five times each. No eleven-year-old wants to see his father married to someone other than his mother, especially not if that certain someone is the whore of Babylon. I also didn’t want him to be with a woman who was so emotionally unhinged that a blind man could sense her craziness at twenty paces. “Well, I certainly have lost all desire to visit the state of Florida ever again,” my sister Jamie said as she passed the wedding photos to my brother Tony.

“I don’t get it,” my little brother Kevin said. “What about Mom?”

“Your mother will move on,” Stacey said. “Or you can call me Mom now, if you want to.”

“I am not going to be able to get the taste of vomit out of my mouth for the rest of the day. Thanks, Stacey,” my sister Kimmy said.

“Kimberly!” my father barked. “Please try to treat your new stepmother with a little respect.” Had Stacey done anything to garner any ounce of respect, perhaps she would have.

While looking at the wedding pictures, Tony said that they needed to change the city name from Orlando to Whorlando now that Stacey had visited. My father quickly realized that news of his wedding was not getting the warm reception he had hoped. I could see defeat in his eyes. All he really wanted was to move on from my mother, but everyone else at the table knew that the person he had chosen to move on with was evil in its purest form. Tony handed the wedding pictures to me and I glanced through them. I quickly stumbled upon a picture of Stacey’s son, Paco, hugging Mickey Mouse.

“Wait ... what?” I gasped. “Why is Paco hugging Mickey Mouse? Did you all get married and stop at Disney World on your way home?”

“It’s not what it looks like,” my father replied.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me with this right now,” I replied. I had been pushing for a trip to Disney World for the last eighteen months.

“We needed a witness for the wedding,” Stacey replied.

“Seriously, bitch? Don’t play me like that,” I said.

“Are you calling my mother a bitch?” Paco asked as he got up from his seat in anger. I quickly shut my mouth before getting my ass kicked.

“So wait a second, you took Paco on vacation, told none of us about it, then decided to get married?” Jamie said. “This is bullshit.”

“It’s not what it looks like,” my father replied. “We needed a witness.”

“I’ve been to Florida plenty of times,” Kim said. “Give a Cuban a few bucks and there’s your witness.”

“We wanted it to be special,” Stacey said.

“Wait a second,” Tony said as he looked at his watch. “I have about three weeks left to deal with all of you in person before I go off to college and decide whether or not I pick up the phone when you call,” he said. “And I drove here, so I don’t need to sit through this.”

Tony grabbed Kimmy and Jamie and left Kevin and me to fend for ourselves at the Chinese restaurant with my father, the whore-bag, and Paco. The waitress came by our table to refill our water, but quickly fled as she saw my older brother and sisters leave the restaurant in

frenzy. I don't know if I was more pissed that my father, Stacey, and Paco had taken a trip to Disney World without me or that my father had married quite possibly the most evil person in the world and opted not to let any of his children in on it until the day of my elementary school graduation, the most important day of a young man's life. Saying I was pissed was an understatement. For the first time in my life, I had lost my appetite. I had a plateful of chicken-fried rice sitting in front of me and I couldn't eat. Stacey's marriage to my father had made me anorexic. Well, at least for the rest of the evening.

My father drove my little brother and me to my elementary school graduation, where my mother was waiting for us. Before accepting my diploma, I told my mother I had some serious gossip for her after the ceremony. As I walked onto the stage, I heard her yelling "WHAT THE FUCK?" I realized that there was no need for hair braiding, cookies, and gossip afterward because she had already found out the news.

Little did I know my elementary school graduation was not going to be the only important day ruined by my arch nemesis. She went out of her way to ruin everything for me, and my father allowed her to do it. A few years into their marriage, the big question of "Who is going to die Jewish?" came into play. I believed that my father wanted to pressure Kevin and me into becoming Jewish to stick it to my mother one last time.

When I was around twelve years old, Stacey broached the subject for the first time.

"How would you like to have a Bar Mitzvah?" she asked.

"How would you like to go fuck yourself?" I replied.

"MARK!" my father yelled. "Watch your language and listen to what your stepmother is asking you."

"It would be fun," Stacey said. "You can have a big party and get lots of gifts," she continued, "and if you do a good job, you can take a trip anywhere you want to go. I heard Disney World is lovely this time of year."

"Seriously?" I asked. I knew what they were doing. At this point, they both should have known where my loyalties lay. I was on Team Trish and nothing was going to sway my vote. I knew if I had a Bar Mitzvah, it would crush my mother, and that was exactly why my stepmother had proposed this idea in the first place.

"You're both retarded," I replied. "I know your game, woman," I said to Stacey, "and I ain't playin' it!" The only reason I even spoke to my father or stepmother was because I was court ordered to. I literally *had* to see them every other weekend and once a week. That period in my father's life was miserable for everyone involved. I hated Stacey, if not for her conversations like this one, then for the fact that she was a straight-up cunt.

I could see panic in my father's eyes. He wanted so badly for his younger boys to be Jewish to impress his new wife and knew his window of opportunity was closing. I was already thirteen, was a borderline racist, and had a mouth like a sailor that could preclude me from ever setting foot in any temple. Watching *One Life to Live* every day allowed me to spot a crook from a mile away. I knew Stacey's trickery and certainly wasn't dumb enough to fall for it. So my father focused on my little brother, Kevin. He was always an easier target because he was younger and did not watch as much television as I did.

Shortly after our conversation, Kevin came back to my mother with exciting news: "I am going to have a Bar Mitzvah!"

I think my mother may have done a spit-take in response to this, but regained her

composure with, “Okay, Kevin, whatever you want to do.”

I sat there wishing I had been able to shield my little brother from my evil stepmother's clutches, but knew it was too late.

“Stacey said that I could have a big party and take a trip wherever I wanted to go. It's going to be so much fun,” Kevin replied. Little did he know about the three years of rigorous work he was going to have to put in before having this big party and taking this wonderful trip. Kids are so stupid. Shortly after Kevin left the room, my mother picked up the phone and called my father.

“WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS ABOUT KEVIN HAVING A BAR MITZVAH?” she yelled into the phone.

“It's his decision,” my father said.

I know what you're thinking. How did I know what my father was saying on the other end of the phone? Two words: Erica Kane. She taught me everything I needed to know about the art of eavesdropping, so naturally, I was listening in on the other phone with my finger on the mute button.

“He told me that you and”—she stopped herself—“I can't bear to say her name, but the woman, promised him a big party and a big trip. Is that true?”

“Of course not. I mean he would obviously have a big party. That's what a Bar Mitzvah is.”

“No it isn't, you idiot!” my mother said. “You don't even know your own fucking religion. Having a Bar Mitzvah is not just a huge party. Thank God my father is not alive, because he would kill you right now.”

“Calm down, Pat.”

“You know that if my father were alive right now, none of this would be happening. But he will not get in the way of what is going to make Kevin happy, and since you've already put it in his head that he's going to do this, I guess I can't fight it or I'll be the bad guy.”

“He has made his mind up and we should just let him do what he wants to do,” my father said.

“No, you and that bitch made his mind up. I cannot believe that you are doing any of this but I will tell you one thing right now. I am not paying for any of this shit. You and that slut can take care of it and don't forget to invite my side of the family. You know they like a party.” With that, my mother hung up the phone.

My father had won this round, and my mother knew it. She looked at me after I rejoined her from the other room and asked, “Why aren't you having a Bar Mitzvah?”

I didn't want to tell her it was because I would forever remain on her team, so instead I replied, “It's too much work. That and I hate Stacey, so I try to do the opposite of what would make her happy.”

The news of Kevin's impending Bar Mitzvah spread like wildfire on my mother's side of the family—mainly because I have a big mouth. My cousins and I all stood as a united front and poke jabs at Kevin whenever we got the chance. Now, not only did we have his big head to make fun of, we had his Judaism as well. When the holidays rolled around, I became particularly irritated.

“I don't understand why Kevin continues to get Christmas presents when he is clearly not a Jew now!” I said to my mother.

“Because I celebrate Christmas and if your brother is with me for the holidays, then he will.”

get presents.”

“This is bullshit!” I replied. “I don’t get to have a big party or take a trip, but Kevin gets whatever he wants from both parents. It’s not fair!”

“Life isn’t fair, Mark,” my mother told me, as if by now I hadn’t already gotten the memo on that one.

“My loyalty to you obviously means nothing,” I said.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

After realizing my mother didn’t know that the only reason I had decided not to have a Bar Mitzvah was because I wanted to remain loyal to her, I quickly retreated to my room.

However, I never stopped talking about how big of a Jew Kevin was and how it wasn’t fair that he got to celebrate every single holiday. Easter in particular pissed me off.

“So, let me get this straight,” I said to my brother. “You don’t even believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior, so why the hell are you celebrating his resurrection from the dead?”

“Because Mom is making me go to church, Mark,” Kevin replied. I simply did not understand why this Jew was even allowed in a church. Granted, he wasn’t a real Jew yet but he obviously wasn’t Catholic anymore. He just wanted a party and a trip. In my opinion, Kevin should have been barred from all religions for being a dumb-ass. One Easter Sunday, my mother, brother, and I all sat in church and listened to the sermon. Quite frankly, I don’t believe a good back-from-the-dead story line is best saved for daytime television, but I can’t buy into it once a year on Easter. I don’t think Kevin was really listening, because he was the big Jew now, but all I could do was wonder why he was there in the first place. He’d picked a religion, but was spoiling in the riches of another because apparently the Easter Bunny breezed into Jewish kids’ homes now as well. As we were all getting ready to leave, the priest was sprinkling holy water on the congregation as they were exiting. When my mother, Kevin, and I were about to leave and I saw the priest raise the water to sprinkle Kevin, I did a slow-motion death grab and jumped in his way.

“Mark! What the hell are you doing?” my mother asked.

“Shielding the Jew from the holy water,” I replied.

“Jew?” the priest asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” my mother said as she hustled us out of the church as fast as she possibly could. “Mark, you are so embarrassing.”

“What’s more embarrassing, me blocking Kevin from the holy water or Kevin being a Jew?”

She didn’t answer. That was the last time I ever went to that particular church, because my mother had never been more embarrassed in her life. I decided it was time to put on my Nancy Drew hat and do a little digging to see what it was exactly that was going on at that mystical place they called a synagogue.

A few days after Easter, I took the bus to the local temple to see if all the brouhaha about being Jewish was worth dividing our family over. Because lines had been drawn in the sand, mainly by my big mouth, I felt confused about why I was so against Kevin having a Bar Mitzvah in the first place. I knew I did not want to appease Stacey, but perhaps I was a bit out of line in judging Kevin’s decision. After riding the bus with several of our community’s finest toothless old ladies, I arrived at the temple ready to get to the bottom of my b

Jewish question.

I suddenly felt like a real-life Nancy Drew. But instead of solving the case of who killed the man at the old mill, I was cracking the case of why the Jews were the chosen people. Had I been about fifty pounds lighter, an actual girl, and on a mission that had some sort of purpose other than sticking it to my stepmother, I really could have been Nancy Drew. I had even had the intention of lying to the rabbi and telling him that I was going to convert so I could get the insider secrets to help me figure out why all of this religion business meant so much to everyone in my family.

“Can I help you, young man?” said a lovely white-haired woman as I entered.

“Yes,” I replied. “I would like to speak to someone about converting.”

She looked me up and down and smiled. “Of course, young man. Take a seat and I will see if there is a rabbi around to speak with you.”

The elderly woman walked down a long hallway and into a room, then shut the door behind her. As I sat and waited for someone to come out and speak with me, I looked around the temple. Gone were the crucifixes, prayer candles, and Stations of the Cross that made most churches such a welcoming place. Instead there were beautiful stained-glass windows in a room that simply had a podium with a large case behind it. This place rocked! I had already concluded that the case was filled with candies and cakes to eat every Friday night after temple ended. In my imagination, temple had one-upped church in every way imaginable. Apparently, Kevin had it right all along. Blinded by my imagination of the wonders of what this place held, I then turned my attention back to the hallway to see the woman walking back in my direction with a short man behind her.

“Young man, this is Rabbi Silverman,” the woman said to me.

“I think this place is great,” I said as I stood to shake the rabbi’s hand. “Really like what you’ve done with it.”

The rabbi smiled as the older woman left us. He sat down next to me.

“What can I help you with?” the rabbi asked.

“Well,” I said as I cleared my throat. I had quickly learned as a child of the Catholic Church not to fuck with a figurehead, so I put my big-boy hat on for this conversation. “I’m thinking about converting.”

“Do your parents know where you are right now?” he asked.

“Ummm ... yeah,” I said.

The rabbi knew I was lying.

“No, they don’t,” I replied. “I lied to you. I’m going to hell now, aren’t I?”

“Our people don’t believe in hell,” the rabbi said.

“HOLY CRAP! JEWS REALLY DO ROCK!” I yelled. “No hell! This is awesome!” Having been told several times that week alone that I was going to hell, this was a huge relief. I already understood why Kevin had chosen Judaism over Catholicism. Not only was the temple a lot more welcoming, there was no hell, and a cabinet full of treats were ready for me to devour after the pizza party I had decided was included after temple concluded on Friday nights.

“That doesn’t mean you can run around doing whatever you’d like,” the rabbi said, smiling. “What is it exactly that I can do for you?”

“Well,” I said, “my younger brother, Kevin, has decided to convert to Judaism and I want

wondering if I should as well.”

“I’m sorry,” the rabbi began, “your younger brother? How old are you? Twelve? Why are so many people in your family converting to different religions?”

After giving the rabbi what would have been an epic PowerPoint presentation on my family, its lineage, and religious background, the rabbi scratched his head and responded, “You have a very interesting family,” he said. “What do you believe in?”

I had to think about this. I had been persuaded by so many people to believe in so many different things at this point, I wasn’t quite sure what I actually believed in.

“I believe I love my mom and dad and brothers and sisters,” I said. “I believe in God, but I’m not sure where he is and I’m not one hundred percent sure that whole ‘back-from-the-dead’ nonsense would hold up in a court of law. I believe that I sometimes say mean things but I am a good person and I believe that the people will forgive me for the mean things I say.”

“Then that’s all you need to believe in for now,” the rabbi said. “You’re still a child, and I think you may be a bit confused because of what is going on with your family. You follow your path, and if it leads you back here, we will welcome you with open arms.”

“Thanks, man,” I replied, “but let’s say I wanted to convert. What would I have to do?”

“Well, first you’d have to learn Hebrew—” he began to say.

I stopped him. “You’ve already lost me. I would need to learn a new language?” I asked. I barely had a handle on English at this point, and there was no way in hell I would be able to throw a second form of communication into the mix. “No dice!”

The rabbi smiled as we both got up and began walking toward the door.

“You’re welcome back whenever you like,” Rabbi Silverman said.

“Yeah, I know, my last name is Rosenberg. I kind of figured I could come and go as I pleased.”

I got back on the bus and once home, made a beeline straight for my brother’s room.

“KEVIN!” I yelled as I flung open the door to his room.

“What do you want?” he asked. He must have been pretty exhausted by my constant badgering him about his shift in religion.

“I just got back from temple,” I said.

“I thought you went to the store to get brownie mix,” Kevin said.

“I lied.” It was so effortless for me at age twelve; I didn’t even bother apologizing for it anymore.

“Why were you at temple?” Kevin asked.

“Because I wanted to see what all the fuss was about,” I said. “Seems pretty cool to me. I am dying to know what is in the cabinets at the front of the room. Do you think it’s cookies?”

“No, you moron! That’s where they keep the Torah.”

“Oh.” My sudden interest in Judaism was waning. “Anyway, I want to know why you wanted to become a Jew so badly.” I had to case the joint myself, but wanted to hear it straight from the horse’s mouth. “Is it because you want a party? Or are you just trying to get in good with Stacey? I don’t trust her, she’s got shifty eyes.”

“This has nothing to do with Stacey,” Kevin said. “I’ve thought a lot about this. I really want to become a Jew because it’s what I believe in.”

“But what about all of the church we went to and the religion shoved down our throats for

all of these years?”

“But it’s not what I believe in. When you’re Jewish you can question your religion. When you’re Catholic, you must do what you’re told and that’s that. That’s not what I want out of my religion.”

Suddenly I realized that Kevin becoming a Jew was not the debacle I was making it out to be.

“Being a Jew sounds great,” I said.

“Then why don’t you become one too?” Kevin asked.

“I thought about it, but apparently you have to learn a whole new language and shit and quite frankly, I don’t have the time for that.” It was true. My afternoons were best spent watching daytime television, which is really the closest thing to a ritual I’ve ever had in my life. “But good luck,” I told Kevin, “and Godspeed.”

I left Kevin’s room and felt good about his decision to continue on his journey to become a good Jew. My journey, on the other hand, led me to the couch with a bucket of chicken and reruns of *Petticoat Junction*, which was not nearly as rewarding but certainly a hell of a lot more entertaining.

Three years passed and it was finally time for Kevin’s big day. Having experienced firsthand what a shit show Bar Mitzvahs could be thanks to my sisters’ double Bat Mitzvah a few years back, I eagerly awaited what Kevin’s would hold. After temple, where no cookies were served, we were all escorted to “Kevin’s Diner.” They had turned our local country club into a diner with Kevin’s name as the theme. Everything was Kevin and nothing was Mardi Gras. Typical. I immediately let my brother know that I thought a diner theme was ridiculous and that he should have gone with a Mardi Gras theme, but he didn’t care. He had a good time and he deserved it, despite my complaining. Even my mother was on board with the merriment. She had the time of her life, and why wouldn’t she have? More than 75 percent of the guests that evening were her Irish Catholic family members, in what I was told was a first for such an occasion.

Now pushing sixteen, I, on the other hand, experienced a series of firsts that night. I drank my first White Russian, had my first one-hundred-dollar steak, and smoked my first cigarette. I still blame my brother for my addiction to cigarettes. That summer, Kevin got his big trip: a journey to the Holy Land. My father decided to take Kevin and Stacey to Israel and Africa as a present for becoming a Jew. Shortly after, I found out that Paco and his girlfriend were joining them as well.

“So wait, everyone is going on vacation, except me. Again?” I asked my father.

“You didn’t want to have a Bar Mitzvah,” my father replied.

“Paco is like twenty-two. And his girlfriend isn’t even a part of this family. Why are they going and I’m not?”

“Stacey invited them.”

“You do realize that you are missing my triumphant return to the stage this summer, in the dinner theater’s epic production of *Bye Bye Birdie*?”

“See, you couldn’t have gone on this trip anyway,” my father said.

“I wouldn’t do the show if I got to go to Israel and Africa, you moron.”

“Don’t call your father a moron,” Stacey chimed in.

“I’m sorry, I meant to say idiot.”

Stacey then proceeded to roll her eyes at me, which quickly turned into our only form of communication.

Everyone went on vacation but me, again. I stayed behind and sang “*A Lot of Livin’ to Do*” four times a week at a dinner theater for old people eating sixteen-dollar steaks.

THE GREAT BIRTHDAY CAKE FIASCO

Our heroine's fight against good and evil continued. As Mark's father and stepmother lived out every episode of *The Tom & Jerry Show* in real life, Mark was given even more hurdles to leap. Not only was Stacey hell-bent on forcing Mark to partake in outdoor activities, she was also forcing him to bake a birthday cake that would forever put a crack in the faulty foundation of their family.

When my father moved in with my new stepmother, they decided their first decision as a parental team would be to buy my little brother and me Rollerblades.

"But it's January," I said. "What the hell am I supposed to do with Rollerblades in January?"

"Why can't you just appreciate the fact that you're getting a present?" my father asked.

"Because, this present is ridiculous, number one. Number two: this is probably another lame attempt at getting me off the couch and out of doors. Not going to work."

"YOU WILL ROLLERBLADE!" my father yelled.

"Whatever. *Mary Poppins* is on Turner Classic Movies. That's what I will be doing this afternoon." Not that it made one bit of difference whether it was on TV or not, I owned two copies of the film. I just needed an excuse to stay inside.

It was around this point when my evil stepmother walked into the room. She was probably drinking whiskey on the rocks and saying nasty things about my mother under her breath.

"Those skates cost a fortune," the evil whore said. "Get your ass up and get outside NOW!"

"It's like thirty degrees out," I replied.

My stepmother grabbed the Rollerblades, threw them at me, and watched as I attempted to put them on.

"I CURSE THE DAY YOU WERE BOTH BORN!" I yelled.

"Speaking of which," my stepmother said, "tomorrow is your father's birthday. You boys should bake him a cake. I bought cake mix, so when you come in from Rollerblading, that can be your next activity for the day."

My father put his arm around my stepmother and they both smiled. I really hoped that they were not thinking, "Wow, we are really great parents," because they weren't. I would have been better off being raised by Mexican vultures.

Kevin and I put our Rollerblades on and went outside. It was freezing and our street was basically one huge hill that led to a busy intersection at the bottom. I began to think that my stepmother was trying to kill me. It had recently snowed so the street was very icy. Here I was, never having Rollerbladed in my life, standing outside on an icy hill and grossly overweight. Yes, I thought, my stepmother is trying to kill me.

Kevin, of course, had no problem learning how to Rollerblade. He was eight years old, raised as a Jew, played soccer, and was everything my father and moronic stepmother would want in a child—except for the fact that he really liked to set fires on occasion. Meanwhile here I was, eleven years old, as gay as the day is May, and about fifty pounds overweight. There was no way I was going to be able to Rollerblade.

I took a step onto the street and immediately fell flat on my ass. What the hell was m

father thinking leaving me out here to fend for myself? It was freezing and I was dressed like I was auditioning for the sequel to *A Christmas Story*. I got myself up, turned around, and tried to open the door to our house, but it was locked.

“You’re not coming back in the house until you at least try to Rollerblade,” my stepmother yelled from inside as she looked at the now-empty glass in her hand, thus prompting her to turn to the kitchen for a refill.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said under my breath. “What a whore.”

I decided I would do what I did best: give it a half-assed attempt and begin complaining so much that my father would have no choice but to let me back into the house.

I got back up and began my second attempt at Rollerblading. I gathered my bearings and began to glide on the icy street. Suddenly I was headed straight down the hill toward the busy intersection at the end of our street.

“HOLY SHIT!” I yelled. I had no idea how to stop. I was surely going to get hit by a car and meet an untimely death. All that was running through my head was that I hoped the newspaper article that reported on my horrific death read: “Child Dies Because Stepmother is a Stupid Bitch.”

My arms were up as if I were flying down the hill. I quickly realized that was probably making me go faster, so I abruptly dropped my hands to my sides. Cars were racing through the intersection at the bottom of the hill and I saw my life flash before my eyes. I remembered being a baby and how happy I was as a child. Then I laughed as I remembered my brother shitting his pants on the way to school one fall morning and my father being so frantic over it that he nearly totaled his car after hitting a tree. I then remembered my beloved mother and how she would always allow me to watch any Julie Andrews movie I wanted. Even that flop of an Alfred Hitchcock film she was in. I suddenly flashed back to reality. I wasn’t going to let my stepmother win this round. She wasn’t getting rid of me that easily. I knew what I had to do and knew it was going to result in a world of pain.

I sat down as if I was about to take a dump and landed flat on my ass.

“MOTHERFUCKER THAT HURT!” I yelled.

I got out of the middle of the street and crawled up the adjacent sidewalk that was covered in snow. God only knows where the hell my brother went at this point. Apparently, saving my life was not on his radar that day. He was probably inside drinking hot cocoa and laughing at what a fat-ass I was. I continued crawling up the hill until I reached our house.

I walked up the stairs. I had taken my skates off and was now standing on the ice in my socks. I tried to open the door but it was still locked. I looked inside to see my father, stepmother, and brother sitting on the couch watching *Mary Poppins*.

“Assholes,” I said under my breath. I began ringing the doorbell.

My father ran to the door and opened it.

“What happened to you?” he asked.

“I almost died,” I replied as I entered the house. I was dripping wet and had a huge stain on my ass from when I landed on the asphalt during the Rollerblading debacle.

“I’m glad you all were sitting in here enjoying the musical stylings of Ms. Julie Andrews. I just bit it on the hill and almost got hit by a car.”

“Are you okay?” my father asked.

“What do you care?” I replied. “My ass hurts.” That was the first, but certainly not the last

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