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**Gary
Dell'Abate**

with
Chad Millman

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**THEY CALL ME
BABA BOOEY**

Gary Dell'Abate
with Chad Millman

Spiegel & Grau
New York
2011



They Call Me Baba Booey is a work of nonfiction.
Some names and identifying details have been changed.

2011 Spiegel & Grau Trade Paperback Edition

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Published in the United States by Spiegel & Grau, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

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Originally published in hardcover and in slightly different form in the United States by Spiegel & Grau, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., in 2010.

Photograph credits can be found on [this page](#).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dell'Abate, Gary.

They call me Baba Booey / Gary Dell'Abate with Chad Millman.

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-0-679-60443-3

1. Dell'Abate, Gary. Radio producers and directors—United States—Biography.

I. Millman, Chad. II. Title.

PN1991.4.D46A3 2010

791.4402'33092—dc22 2010035302

[B]

www.spiegelandgrau.com

Cover design: Greg Mollica

Title-type design: Justin Thomas Kay

Front-cover photograph: courtesy of the author

v3.1

To my beautiful wife, Mary:

I couldn't do it without you.

Thanks for your love and support.

To Jackson and Lucas:

You are not just my kids, you are my best friends.

To Mom and Dad:

I wouldn't be who I am without you.

God have mercy on the man who doubts what he's sure of.

—BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN, "BRILLIANT DISGUISE"

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BECOMING BABA BOOEY

The Cure for What Ails Me

1997

“Why are you talking to me like this?”

Oh shit, I thought. I had just cracked open the back door of my house one afternoon in early March 1997 and heard my wife, Mary, asking that question. She sounded pissed and confused. She never sounded pissed and confused.

Mary is blond, kind, demure, and quiet. She is steady. I liked her when we first met because we didn't argue; we had conversations. I didn't do that with anyone else I knew. Ever. My entire life, from the time I was born to the first and only professional job I've ever had, producing *The Howard Stern Show*, has been built around chaos and confrontation. But Mary's world was full of happy, respectful people who treated her well. It had never occurred to her to ask, “Why are you talking to me like this?” because no one ever did. (I never asked because that's all *anyone* did.) Someone on the phone was yelling at her. And she was confused. Genuinely very confused, as if she didn't know the person on the other end of the line.

The truth was, she didn't, at least not really. But I did.

I knew who Mary was talking to the second I opened the door. It was my mom. My beautiful, warm, fierce, absolutely 100 percent certifiably crazy mom, Ellen.

You know that movie *Misery* with Kathy Bates, where she plays the nut job who kidnaps James Caan and breaks his ankles with a sledgehammer? There is a scene where it is raining and Kathy Bates's character looks uncommonly sad. “Sometimes when it rains I get really blue,” she says. Well, *blue* was my mom's favorite word when I was growing up. Feeling blue. Having the blues. Bad weather, an argument with one of her six brothers and sisters, or a perceived slight from a neighbor could trigger it. When she felt fine she could gab all day long in a voice that sounded like Mary Tyler Moore with a Brooklyn accent. But if I asked her a question and her answers were short and curt or just a simple yes or no, that meant trouble. I knew a storm was brewing. It would lead to days and days of feeling blue, causing her to sleep in all morning because she had spent

most of the night pacing. Or screaming. Or both.

She was clinically depressed, only no one knew to call it that at the time.

Early on, when Mary and I started dating and then got married, I did a good job of hiding my mom's instability. It wasn't too hard. She could be as tender as she was unhinged. When I was growing up she'd buy random gifts to keep around the house and pass out to my friends when the mood struck her. But those friends had also seen her end phone calls she didn't like by slamming the receiver down five or six times—*Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!*—and then walk into her room, throw the door closed, and let out a holy, ear-piercing scream. They all understood how hot and cold she could run. In high school my friend Frank said to me, "You know your mom's crazy, right?" I said, "Yeah." Then he said, "But she's your mom." He knew what the score was. My dad was an ice cream salesman, normal as can be. My mom was ... not exactly normal. Frank and I laughed about it. I just shrugged my shoulders, as if I were raised in a '70s sitcom.

After Mary and I were married and then especially after we had our first son, Jackson, shielding her from my mom became pretty much impossible. Sometimes I would take the phone in my room and hide so Mary wouldn't hear me talking my mom down. It started to create a little trouble between us, in a way that wasn't at all like living in a sitcom.

And it came to a head that day in March, nearly five years after we were married. As Mom yelled at Mary for God knows what, I knew there was no more hiding it. That call was followed by one from my older brother Anthony, which ended in the two of us having a fight. And then came a call from my dad, which also ended in a fight. And finally there was one more call from my mom, which, yep, ended in a fight.

When the calls finally stopped, Mary looked at me and said, "Your head is so fucked up over your mom. You have to go see someone."

Mary was the one pushing me to see a shrink, and that really meant something to me. I don't think she has ever really believed in therapy, but I do. With a family like mine, I thought about therapy a lot, and it didn't frighten me at all. Everyone needs help at times. Howard and Robin talked about their own experiences in therapy plenty of times on the Stern show. Plus, I had lived in New York for a long time—almost everyone I knew was seeing a psychiatrist or went to a support group. My close friend Patty had always told me that seeing a shrink was a fantastic experience because you can get someone's complete attention for fifty minutes and they put your thoughts into perspective. I always liked the way she described it.

But Mary telling me to go get help was the push I needed. That's not to say it didn't freak me out—if my skeptical wife wants me to go, I must be really acting crazy.

First, I had to find someone. I had heard through the grapevine about Alan, a therapist that a good friend of mine and some people I knew in the music business had seen. The lead singer for a band I liked went to Alan, too. I felt like he was the shrink to the industry. That was cool. And when I called him to make the appointment he sounded like a regular guy, not someone playing Freud in the movies. I felt as though I could talk to him and he would be straight with me.

As soon as I made the appointment I thought to myself, *Now it's on, the adventure begins.* I was a little bit nervous. But mostly I had been so distraught I welcomed the

change. I can only describe it as how I feel when I am sick and I make a doctor's appointment and I know that after I see the doctor I will feel better. I saw this as the antidote to what ailed me. If this went well I was going to be feeling better. I was excited.

Two weeks later, March 24, 1997, I had my first appointment.

That morning I was in my office at K-Rock at 5:35, as I am every morning. As the show's producer, I need to be in early and I need to know everything that happened in the world between when I went to bed and when I got to my desk. I checked emails and typed up a list of what was on the show that day. Howard showed up at 5:45, read the paper, and had some breakfast, then we chatted for about five minutes, a day like any other. I didn't mention that I was seeing a shrink that afternoon. Not a chance. I hadn't told my mother, my father, or my brother. I was not ready to share news like this on the show.

At 6:01 Howard went on the air. And at 6:05 he called me into the studio. "What are you doing to your hair?" he asked me. "It looks like you got caught in the rain."

"I put gel in my hair," I said.

Whenever you do something different, someone on the show will call you on it. The exhausting part is not knowing what "different" actually is. Do something radical and you know you will get killed. I once shaved my mustache and immediately everyone told me I looked terrible and that I should grow it back. I kind of expected that. But if I had any thought that putting gel in my hair that morning would warrant discussion on the air, I wouldn't have done it. In fact, I was wishing I hadn't.

"You put way too much gel in," Howard said.

"They put gel in my hair on the *Fox After Breakfast* show and I liked it, so I wanted to try it," I said.

We had done the Fox show to promote the movie *Private Parts*, which was based on Howard's book and had come out just two weeks earlier. It had debuted at No. 1. Being in the movie was a very happy thing for me. I went to the premiere with my parents, wife, brother, and sister-in-law. Mary and I walked the red carpet—heady stuff for a radio producer.

"It looks like it's lying on your wet hair," Howard said. "It makes your teeth look bigger."

"I think it looks okay," I said. "I'll go back to my regular hair tomorrow."

Then I left. And this is the flip side of working at the show. Was Howard just breaking my balls or was he doing me a favor? Was it good radio or was it the truth? Sometimes hurtful things were said and I'd talk to Howard during the break. He'd say, "I was just doing a bit." I still wouldn't know if what was said on the air was the truth or if what was said on the break was a lie. It's a labyrinth.

But it's not why I needed to see a shrink.

My appointment was late in the day. I allowed plenty of time to get downtown. I knew that if you're late to see a psychologist the whole appointment becomes about why you're late. K-Rock was on the corner of Madison Avenue and Fifty-sixth Street and Alan's office was in Greenwich Village, near New York University. I gave myself ninety

minutes to get there, because I wasn't sure if I'd find a parking spot. I was ready for the appointment and had been looking forward to it for two weeks. I was already convinced that peace of mind was just a handful of fifty-minute sessions away. But I'd be lying if I said my parking obsession wasn't just another part of the neurosis that was sending me to Alan.

I am always early. I don't like to be in a rush when going anywhere. I need to know where all the doors are, as they say, wherever I am. I like to scope out a scene. Surprises are not my thing. I grew up with lots of surprises, some of them nasty, every day. So the things I can control, I tend to try and control. I crave predictability. For instance, my drive to work is full of checkpoints that keep me comfortable. I pull out of my garage in Connecticut at 4:50 every morning. At 5 A.M., as I get on Interstate 95, I turn on 1010 WINS. If I hear the sports at 5:15 and I'm not on the Bruckner Expressway, I know I'm behind schedule. At 5:20 I turn on some music and no later than 5:30 I pull into the garage at the Sirius XM offices. I am at my desk by 5:35.

As I drove down Fifth Avenue to see Alan, I obsessed about the appointment. Who was this guy? What was he going to do? Was he going to ask me to lie on a couch with a piece of tissue under my head so I wouldn't get gel on the pillow? Would I click with him? What if I hated him? My friends who were in therapy told me I might have to see a few psychologists before I found one I clicked with. If that was true, then I'd have to talk to them again to find a new guy. Where was I going to park?

I pulled up to the address. I was glad it was a residential building instead of a crowded office tower. It was white and old and had a flight of marble steps leading up to a door with white pillars on either side. I drove around the block looking for a place to park and found a spot right away, which was a huge relief. Except then I had twenty minutes to kill. I sat in my car, listened to the radio, and thought about the appointment. I wondered who else might be in the waiting room. Would their something be more fucked up than my something?

When I finally entered the building, it was eerily quiet. There was no doorman, no one walking around. Just an elevator. When I got to the waiting room, there wasn't a receptionist, just some worn-looking furniture and framed posters of flowers on the walls. Across the room was a closed door, a mystery door leading to someplace else. I was alone, the only one with a fucked-up anything in the whole place.

And that's when I started wondering: *What the hell are we going to talk about?* I mean, I knew why I was there, but to get to that we were going to have to talk about a lot of other stuff.

Just then Alan walked through the mystery door into the waiting room. My first thought was, *Hey, it's Judd Hirsch as the shrink in Ordinary People.* He was in his mid-fifties, wore glasses and comfortable shoes, and had a thick New York accent. The guy just looked like New York to me. He reached out his hand. "Gary?"

I was the only one in the room, so I stood up.

"Nice to meet you," he said.

I followed him through the mystery door. We walked down a long, dark hallway with offices lining both sides. Each door had a sound machine in front of it running on static, so no one could hear what was happening on the other side. Alan's was the office at the

end of the hall. My stomach buzzed with nerves, the good kind. I just couldn't help thinking that if the appointment went well, I was going to leave there feeling better.

"Right in here," he said, pointing to his office.

It was less luxurious than I expected, maybe even a little bit shabby. There was no oak library, no couch to lie down on, just a love seat, opposite a leather chair that Alan plopped himself into.

Then he leaned forward, rubbed his hands together like he was warming them up, and said, "So, why are we here?"

"Well," I answered. "Many people must sit on this love seat and tell you that their mother is crazy." I paused. "I have documentation."

He laughed and said, "*Okay.*"

For the next hour I told Alan my deepest, darkest secrets, things I had never shared during a life spent oversharing on the show. In fact no one—not Howard, Robin, Fred, none of the Stern regulars—truly knows how crazy my life was growing up.

Let me tell you, becoming Baba Boeey wasn't easy.

Chapter 1

War Heroes, Psych Wards, Mental Breakdowns... and My Mom

I STOOD ON THE AVOCADO GREEN CARPET of my living room in Uniondale, Long Island. My mom, Elle, walked out of her bedroom, carrying an overnight bag she had just packed. Our house was a one-story ranch, and I watched her as she inched down the hall toward the living room.

She stopped just a few steps from me and bent down, practically kneeling on the carpet to adjust her dress. She always cared about how she looked, no matter where she was going. “Come here,” she told me. I was five years old and she wanted to tell me something face-to-face. She walked closer. She hugged me and said, “Mommy isn’t feeling very well. I have to go away for a couple of days.”

I knew she cried a lot. I knew she screamed a lot. And I knew people didn’t do those things unless something was wrong. I thought she was physically sick and going to a hospital to get better.

My older brothers, Anthony, who was thirteen, and Steven, who was eleven, stood next to her. They knew what was really happening. So did my aunt Maryann, who had come over to watch us that afternoon.

When my mom let go of me she stood up, smoothed down her dress, picked up her bag, and followed my dad, Sal, out the front door. They were headed for the psych ward at Syosset Hospital.

My parents met in 1947 at Webster Hall, a dance place in Manhattan. He was twenty-two and from Little Italy; she was twenty and from Bensonhurst, in Brooklyn. “He walked up to me and asked me to dance,” my mom once told me. “I told him, ‘I heard about all you fellas from Manhattan. You’re all a bunch of gangsters.’ And he said, ‘Yeah, I checked my gun at the bar.’ I thought, *how sarcastic*. That intrigued me.

“My friend Anne thought he was so cute—he reminded her of Humphrey Bogart. He had on a pin-striped suit and really did look like Bogart.”

My mom was stylish, had a big smile, and loved mugging for a crowd or a camera. In every picture I have ever seen of her, from when she was young to today, she looks happy. There was never any sign in her eyes of the trouble behind them. On Saturdays when I was growing up, she'd spend three hours at the beauty parlor getting her hair colored and cut and then she would sit with rollers in her hair under one of those huge dryers. She even had a cape and a hat that made her look just like Marlo Thomas in the opening credits for *That Girl*. She always liked to keep up appearances.

That was true when she was growing up in Bensonhurst, too. Her parents came to America from Sicily and Reggio Calabria when they were both kids. They met in Brooklyn and had seven children over fifteen years. The oldest one, Aunt Josie, was nicknamed the General because she did a lot of the child rearing. My grandmother worked as a seamstress and my grandfather was a construction worker (my aunts and uncles say he helped build the Empire State Building, but I think people say that about every construction worker from back then). My mom was the baby of the Cotroneo clan. The whole family lived together in a multifamily apartment building my grandfather owned.

But my mother didn't grow up rich. My mom likes to tell the story about how she worked for nothing but hand-me-downs and had to put cardboard in her shoes because the soles had holes in them. She worked at Macy's while in high school and she'd bring her check home and hand it over to her mother, who cashed it and took all the money, except for a couple of bucks she kicked back to my mother.

None of the Cotroneos moved out of the building until long after they were married. Newlywed kids lived in one of the building's apartments until they could save enough money to buy a place of their own. Of course, most of them didn't move very far away. I had an uncle who moved to Los Angeles and an aunt who lived near us in Uniondale. Everyone else settled within a quarter mile of each other in Bensonhurst. Growing up we went to Brooklyn at least a couple of Sundays every month for huge Italian family dinners, the kind that began at three in the afternoon and started with three or four kinds of pasta piled with different meat sauces. That's when my aunt Angie, who probably never set foot outside Brooklyn, used to say to us, "Brooklyn is the best place in the world. I don't know why anyone would want to live anywhere else."

As close as they were, my mom's family loved arguing. It was like they couldn't stand to be too far away and then couldn't stand the sight of each other. Chaos reigned at those family meals. My father called them the Fighting Cotroneos.

His family was different. He grew up in a railroad flat in Little Italy, on the corner of Moore and Hester. His family was quieter and a little sadder. When my dad was small—"Too small to remember all the details," he once told me—he had a one-year-old brother who died from a throat infection. The funeral was held in his parents' apartment.

My dad was always in great shape and kind of looked like a low-level hood. There's a great picture of him and my mom from their wedding in 1951. They both have ink black hair—he has it down to her shoulders and his is slicked black. He's got on a double-breasted black tuxedo with a white tie—he was a dead ringer for Yankees shortstop Phil Rizzuto. They were both rail thin, but my dad had butcher's hands. Thick and strong.

He wasn't afraid of a fight, either. There was always tension with the Chinese where he lived because Chinatown and Little Italy are basically right on top of each other. One night he

got into a fight with a kid from across Canal Street—which separates the two neighborhoods—and beat the crap out of him. A week later my dad saw the kid again, only this time he was in the back of a police car, pointing at him. Two cops got out, picked my dad up, and arrested him. He ended up spending the night at the Tombs, which is what they called the jail in lower Manhattan. It deserved the nickname.

My dad was pretty smart. A junior high teacher recommended him for Stuyvesant High School, one of New York City's top public schools. "But I was always goofing around with the kids in my neighborhood, so I dropped out. Never graduated. You weren't supposed to know that," my dad once told me when I interviewed him for a family history video.

He wasn't a thug—but he lived on the periphery of the mob that ran Little Italy. And he liked to gamble. Even though he grew up on the Lower East Side, my dad loved the Brooklyn Dodgers. In 1951, when Bobby Thomson of the New York Giants hit a game-winning home run to beat the Dodgers for the National League pennant, my dad lost a shitload of money. He was listening to the game on the roof of his building and was so upset he threw the radio over the edge.

Years later, I was signing autographs at an event and Giants hero Thomson was there, too, right next to me. I told him that story so he signed a picture for my father, which read, "Tommy Sal, Sorry about the radio, Bobby Thomson."

My dad knew enough about gambling and the guys running the rackets in his neighborhood to know it wasn't the life for him. When World War II started he had just dropped out of high school so he decided to join the army. For more than a year he moved through the United States, training at Fort Dix in New Jersey, then in Illinois, and finally in Hawaii, "for jungle training," he said. When he finally shipped out to fight in the Pacific he thought he was headed for the Yap Islands, but the officers on the ship announced that plans had changed. They were headed for the Philippines.

My mother later told me that when the two of them went to see *Saving Private Ryan* it was so harrowing; it put my dad right back in the war. He was seventeen when he landed in the Philippines. Unreal. When I was seventeen I was reading album liner notes trying to figure out who played horns on a Bob Seger record. My dad told me, "It was just like that movie. Guys were puking as they bounced around the waves. Then the front of the boat comes down and we run into the water and it's just every man for himself, guys were being killed right next to me on the beach."

He spent his war on the front lines as a medic, even though he hadn't even graduated from high school. It didn't matter. He wasn't doing battlefield surgery. His job was to patch someone together quick so they could stay alive long enough to get attention from the real doctors. Medics didn't have the option of ignoring it when one of their guys was screaming. No matter how bad the gunfire, they had to get low and go. And they were constantly under attack. "Banzai attacks," my father called them. They happened at night. "You don't hear them. It was hand-to-hand combat with bayonets. Every hill, every village was a battle."

There was one firefight he remembered that went on for two straight nights. They were under heavy attack, and my dad was in a foxhole when he heard someone yelling, "Medic! Medic!"

"We were dug in and the Japs were dug in and we were shooting at each other," he said. "Our men were hurt in the middle of no-man's-land and the officer called for me. I crawled

out there, bandaged them up, gave them sulfur, and dragged one guy back at a time. couldn't stand up because fire was coming constantly. It's all luck, who lives."

For that he earned a Bronze Star. Not that he wanted to discuss it. Ever. I remember when John Kerry was running for president my dad saw him on TV and said, "I don't like that guy." I asked him why and he said, "Because he's always talking about his medals." This was when the Republicans were claiming Kerry hadn't earned his Vietnam honors. I said, "Dad, he was being attacked. I thought if anyone would be on his side it would be you." But my dad said, "I don't care. You don't talk about it. Talking about it is wrong."

Later in the war, while in Okinawa, my father's unit was under fire and an artillery shell exploded above his head. A piece of shrapnel pierced his backpack and became embedded next to his lung. They shipped him out to a hospital, performed surgery, let him recover for a month, and then shipped him back to the front lines. "As they were giving us new weapons and clothes for a major offensive, we got word that Truman had dropped the bomb. The war was over. Two weeks later I came home."

I once asked my dad if he'd ever killed anyone and he ignored the question. But my older brother Anthony claims that, before my father died, he confessed to doing some bad things over there.

When he came home he hustled, delivering coffee around Manhattan, polishing costumes and jewelry, working as a proofreader for a publishing company. He was a young guy on the make. And my mom was a young woman with a little bit of sass. When I think of them courting each other I envision the movie *Goodfellas*, particularly the scenes in the nightclub. My parents always used to talk about going to the Copa. I also hear my mom imitating her mother, who called my dad "the Mott Street gambler."

"When he would be coming over my mother didn't even say his name," my mom told me. "She just said, 'Is Mott Street coming over?'"

It wasn't that my grandma didn't like him. She was just wary of guys who dressed like gangsters, lived in the city, and courted her daughter. Still, that didn't stop my parents from getting married at a Coney Island Italian restaurant called Villa Joe's, in front of one hundred friends and family.

Naturally, after their weeklong honeymoon in Miami, they moved into an apartment in the Cotroneos' building in Bensonhurst. Their life together seemed like the beginning of their own American dream. "Back then," my father once told me, "your mom was normal."

The night after my mom went into the hospital, my dad and I took a ride to the Syosset psychiatric ward. I was five, too young to visit her there, but my brothers weren't, and they had spent the afternoon with her. It was time for them to come home, and my dad thought the car ride would be a good opportunity to explain what was going on.

He never talked to me like I was a kid. I try to talk to my kids the same way—honestly. There were plenty of times when, after my mom experienced a screaming fit or broke down in tears, he told me I hadn't done anything wrong, that it wasn't my fault. Mom was upset. And he made sure I understood it wasn't his fault, either.

Syosset Hospital was twenty-five minutes from our house. While driving, my dad said to me, "Your mom is sick. But not the regular kind of sick."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

“Her brain his sick,” he answered. “And when she acts sad or angry it isn’t her fault. She doesn’t want to be like this.” That sounded good to me. I knew enough to think that doctor made people better.

The hospital was a big, gray, stone building that was six stories high, tall for Long Island. We pulled into a circular driveway that was surrounded by flowers and then walked into the first-floor lobby, which was bustling with people. To a five-year-old, it was a fantastic place. The walls were painted a bright yellow; there was a gift shop and couches to play on and a vending machine in the corner. It wasn’t a mental institution. It was exciting. And it was where my mother was, so it was where I wanted to be.

The door to the psych ward happened to be directly off the main lobby, and the entry was always protected by a security guard, who looked like he was defending Fort Knox. That was because it wasn’t just a regular door, but something heavy that moved back and forth with wires and cables. You had to push a button that opened it. My father worked in the ice cream business—first as a deliveryman and then in sales—and I had been to his office in the Bronx. It had a blast freezer that was kept at 40 degrees below zero to store inventory. I loved that the door to my mom’s room at the hospital looked just like the one at the ice cream factory. As I got older, I realized it also looked like the last line of defense in a cell block.

Since I couldn’t go in to see my mom, I waited in the lobby with one of my brothers, while the other one was with her. Then they’d switch, and the other one would keep an eye on me. This was our routine every other night for two weeks.

In the mornings a family friend from Brooklyn we called Jeanie Blah Blah made us breakfast and helped get us ready for school. We kids didn’t know her real name. Everyone called her Jeanie Blah Blah behind her back because she never, ever shut up. She was like a utility aunt, an honorary Cotroneo who grew up near my mom and knew all the siblings. She wasn’t married, smoked like a chimney, didn’t work, didn’t have children, and was always around. When someone needed some extra help with the kids, they called Jeanie Blah Blah. Once, she showed up at our door for a party and Steven yelled, “Jeanie Blah Blah is here!” The adults practically died.

After school Jeanie gave us a snack and then for dinner my aunt Maryann, who was really my cousin but was closer in age to my mom than to us, either brought us food or had us over to her house since she lived nearby. Then, after dinner, we’d go back to the hospital.

In the car on the way there, we always sat in the same places: I was in the back behind Anthony, who sat where my mom would have been sitting in the front. And Steven sat behind my dad. We didn’t talk on those trips. My mom was the chatterbox. I am a chatterbox. But my dad was always stoic. He even mowed the lawn in double-knit pants, collared shirts, and brown shoes. When my mom bought him sneakers he returned them and said, “These are for kids.” Steven tended to keep to himself; he was the only person in my house who could find a way to disappear while he was standing right in front of you. And Anthony, at this point in his life, was full of rage and rebellion, a streak he was already prone to. I’m sure watching his mother deteriorate didn’t help.

Instead of talking, we listened to the great AM pop station of the time, WABC. Music was something we all loved.

At the hospital, I would sit and wonder what was happening behind that ice cream freezer door. But as I waited with one of my brothers in the lobby, they never talked to me about it.

They didn't talk to each other, either. While Steven and I shared a room at home, the age difference between us ensured that he and Anthony were much closer to each other than I was to them. Anthony tells me now the two of them never discussed what was happening either, because they were too freaked out. They didn't want to go behind that door. But what were they going to do? It was our mom.

I saw her once. By accident. One of my brothers was coming out and the other was going in. I was sitting in the yellow lobby, bobbing up and down on my knees, peering over the back of the sofa, as I did whenever the cables started whirring and the door began sliding open. I was about to turn back around when, just then, I caught a glimpse of my mom.

She was shuffling to the front of the door, her black hair matted down in a way she would never let it be at home. There were paper slippers on her feet and a hospital gown hanging loosely from her shoulders to the floor. She tried to smile. She slowly lifted her arm to wave. Then one brother walked out, another walked in, and the doors whirred shut. And just like that, she disappeared.

Chapter 2

Blind Rages and Bedwetting

AFTER TWELVE YEARS IN BROOKLYN—only a couple of them spent at Hotel Cotroneo—my parents moved to Uniondale. For \$21,500, they bought a 1,500-square-foot, three-bedroom, one-bath brick ranch with a basement. I was two years old when we moved in. My mom had a field of avocado green carpet installed over the wood floors. She covered the living room couches with sheets so no one messed them up. I think I saw the actual cushions of those couches five times in the twenty-three years I lived at home.

It was a tiny house. There was nowhere to hide. And the only constant was that my mother was completely inconsistent.

No one can pinpoint the day she started to change. No one in her family ever talked about her having a history of mental illness—despite all the intense arguing. Anthony says she was pretty with-it until he was about nine or ten. He says it was after I was born and when we moved to Long Island that she snapped.

Her stay in Syosset Hospital didn't change things. When she came home she was always sleepy and could barely get out of bed. The doctors had given her pills to take, but they didn't seem to be helping. I never felt angry with her. I never stopped believing my dad when he told me it wasn't her fault. It just seemed like the more that doctors tried to help her, the worse it got. I'd have grown up angry if she had been an alcoholic who never quit. But you can't tell someone to stop being crazy.

So we all learned to deal with it.

Some days I came home from school and before I could put my book bag down she had her coat on and was frantically looking for the car keys, practically buzzing around the house. Then she'd push me out the door, saying, "I've been waiting for you; we have to go, a lot of stuff to do." We'd drive to the Macy's in the Roosevelt Field mall or return a book to the library or drop something off at the Cancer Society, where she worked as a volunteer. Other days I'd walk in and she'd be at an ironing board in the kitchen, happily watching Mil

Douglas on the Zenith she rolled in on the TV stand from the living room. Those were the good days, the enjoyable days.

Then there were the days when I'd get home and the house would be silent. By the time I was in school full-time, Anthony was in high school and Steven was in junior high. They had already been through my mom's up-and-down cycles and found ways to stay out of the house until dinner. I wasn't old enough yet. When I walked through the door it was just my mom and me. I knew the silence meant she was sleeping, or had spent most of the day sleeping and was resting. She'd slowly walk down the hall from her room to the living room, wearing her robe and looking tired. This is what happened when she was blue. She would tell me she was sick and tightly clutch her collar around her neck, complaining of a sore throat. Those days I had to play quietly by myself. I remember thinking to myself, *She is sick a lot*. Now I wonder if the physical symptoms were a part of her mental illness or the side effect of all the pills she was taking.

Somehow, though, she always pulled herself together for dinner. Our kitchen was tiny and decorated in avocado green to match the carpet. The avocado upholstery on our chairs matched the avocado fridge, which complemented the faux-oak table in the center of the room that seated six. I was always stuck at the end of the table right in front of the oven, and the door couldn't be opened if I was sitting at the table. When my mom had food to get out, I had to move.

Every night I and my brothers and my mom ate dinner together at six. I sat in front of the oven, Anthony sat next to my mom, and Steven sat by himself across from them. My dad sat at the opposite end from me. But he usually came home too late for dinner. We were not a family who ate out, except for the occasional Sunday trip to Borrelli's—the only place we deemed good enough to replace a proper Italian meal—or pizza at a place called Anthony's. But mostly, my mom cooked, and she was a great cook. Chicken cutlets. Broiled steak. She occasionally worked as a food demonstrator—meaning she was the lady in the mall with a microphone around her neck who made something in a wok and then handed out samples. I remember being in ninth grade when she did the wok demo. We ate Chinese three days a week. In tenth grade it was the pasta maker, which looked like a toaster with a hand crank.

Once we sat down, dinner lasted about five minutes and was almost always eaten in front of the Zenith. We watched the news, the Vietnam War unfolding on our screen as we shoveled food into our mouths.

It was actually television, more than food, that brought us together. None of us could believe it when *The Sound of Music*—Best Picture in 1965!—appeared on TV just a year later. We couldn't wait to watch it. It was an event! Saturday nights in our house were ruled by Carol Burnett and *All in the Family*; Sundays belonged to Ed Sullivan. And then during commercials we talked about the musical acts, with my dad usually joking, "You call that music? That's not music!" Then he'd break into a Frank Sinatra song from the 1940s.

We all laughed, especially my mom.

When she was in a good mood and balanced, she was all love. She was very physical, and she would grab my friends and kiss them on the head and say, for no reason at all, "Oh your mother must be so proud." She'd be so warm, telling all the neighbors and my friends to come over, that her kitchen was never closed. The problem was, you never knew when the mood was going to change. She would spend three days being as warm and loving as anyone

you'd ever seen. And then three days of being a normal mom. And then on the seventh day she'd wake up saying she was feeling blue.

Most people in their lives have "an incident" involving their parents, the moment when their mom or dad just loses it and rage trumps being rational. Well, we had "incidents."

Sometimes my mom would plop food down at dinner and then angrily bang some pots and pans while she washed them, before dropping them altogether in a loud clang. We never knew what had set her off. She'd walk into her room screaming and slam the door. You couldn't believe the words that came out of her mouth. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. A sailor would have blushed. She'd come out, we'd think it was over, and then she would dial a number, usually one of her sisters, and fight with whoever could provoke her into a rage. Then she'd slam the phone down five or six times and go back into her room and scream some more. "These people think they live on an island," she liked to say. "Like you live all by yourself and can do whatever you want. They think they can pull one over on me, they think I don't know, they think I don't see. I see, I see what's going on."

The episodes didn't frighten me in a way that made me cower under the table or flinch when my mom came near me. I always loved her. But they affected me in other ways. How could they not? I had a bedwetting problem until I was in second grade. And I felt horrible about it. Not because my parents got angry with me or because my brothers made fun of me. Neither happened actually. I was too young for my brothers to think of me as a rival worthy of the torment. I just felt bad because I didn't know why it was happening. I was peeing in my sleep so often that my mom went to the drugstore and bought an expensive machine that connected to the bed. It had an alarm that went off whenever liquid hit the mattress. We never even connected it. That night my dad got home and said, "What good is that? If the alarm goes off when liquid hits the mattress, it's too late." My mom said she was going to return it and that's when Steven chimed in, pretending to be our mom calling the pharmacy. "Hi, this is Mrs. Dell'Abate, I'd like to return the piss machine."

One morning, showing a little frustration, my mom said to me, "You have to stop doing this." I said back, "I know. I want to." If I had known then what I know now, I would have said, "Stop screaming like a banshee and maybe I will stop peeing in my bed."

Mostly, when my mom lost it, Anthony, Steven, and I never said a word to one another. When she morphed at dinner, we just kept eating, giving one another looks. But we didn't want to talk because whoever spoke would draw attention to himself and become the target of her rant. Other than my mom yelling, no one said a word.

Blind rages like that only have to happen seven or eight times before you adapt and get used to it. Every explosion, we'd all just wonder how long the episode would last. The length was never something you could gauge. My dad would get home, hear what was going on, and say, "Okay, this is what we get today."

From where I sat, it always seemed like my mom was the one looking to pick a fight. One day she accused my father of cheating. I was at home when she called his office and started screaming at his assistant and the boss's assistant. When he got home he told her she couldn't call his office and yell like that. She screamed back, "I don't care!"

Mostly, though, when my father walked through the door and my mom started with him, he'd say, "You know what? I am not going to fight with you tonight." Then he would sit in his chair and read the newspaper. She'd still try to pick a fight with him. Sometimes she

would grab me and say we were leaving and moving back to Brooklyn. The first time that happened, it freaked me out. I remember crying. I wondered if I'd ever see my dad and brothers again. And where were we going to live when we got to Brooklyn? But I couldn't ask her any of these questions because she was ranting nonstop. Ranting and driving. We would be in the car on the Long Island Expressway. Then just as quickly as we had left the house, she'd get off the LIE, turn around, and take us home. We'd wake up the next morning and she'd act like everything was normal.

I learned to act like everything was normal, too. When I was a little older, my mom would scream and yell from the time I went to school in the morning until my dad got home at night. I would go to sleep and she'd still be screaming. She was manic. I wasn't sure if she ever slept. I'd curl up in the fetal position in my bed and scream into the pillow out of frustration. But then the next day, I had to get up. I had to forge ahead. What was I supposed to do? Wake up in the morning and fall apart? That was a survival skill. Maybe I thought if I got up and acted like it didn't happen—and she kept acting like nothing happened—then it wouldn't happen again. If everything was back to normal I preferred we go with that idea and hope it stayed that way.

Hope can be a powerful thing.

Chapter 3

Throwing Shoes, Swinging Shrubs, and the Shock of My Life

ONE COLD AND CLOUDY AFTERNOON in late fall, some time after my mom had been hospitalized, I came home from first grade and found her hurrying to get out of the house. Today was going to be that kind of a day, I thought. She put me in the car and drove me to a doctor's office. I had never been there before. I didn't know it was a psychiatrist.

She sat in the waiting room with me, sobbing hysterically, and when she was called in she just left me sitting there. She didn't think twice about that. But back then mothers smoked while they were pregnant and let kids ride without car seats. They didn't always think about their child's welfare. I waited, wondering if this doctor was going to make her feel better, but when she came out she was crying even harder. The doctor stood behind her. His name was Dr. Peck, and he looked like someone out of a textbook: heavysset with a tweed jacket, Sigmund Freud beard, and glasses. I wondered, *Is this my mom feeling better?*

She cried all the way home, a twenty-minute drive. I didn't know what was going on or what kind of doctor she had been seeing. I wondered if they had hurt her or used scary instruments on her. At home the crying got even worse, and as she often did, she walked into her room and slammed the door. I heard her screaming, "Papa, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry." But she didn't sound mad. She wasn't yelling at anyone. And this was strange to me. Normally when she acted like that she came back out screaming. But she wasn't mad, not at me or her sisters or my dad or anyone. I was confused, so I waited, until the light faded away and it turned dark. Then my brothers came home. And at 5:30 my mom came out and made us dinner. It was as if nothing had happened.

This kind of crying happened more after she got out of the hospital. This was also when she started to self-medicate. Her philosophy was, if the doctor told her one pill would make her feel less blue, then maybe she should take two.

She'd go to one doctor and get a prescription, then go to a different doctor and get a different prescription. Then she'd go to a third doctor for a third. She collected pills. Because

she wouldn't level with any of the doctors, and because none of them knew about her other medications, it was impossible for them to diagnose her. That added to her downward spiral. When she moved out of the house years later, her medicine cabinet was full of pills. My brother Anthony, who packed her up, told me she had harder stuff in there than anything he'd ever found on the street when he was younger.

Because of what was happening at home, I was the kind of kid who wanted to evaporate from public. I never wanted any trouble, never wanted to draw attention to myself. I became very good at compensating so friends who came over couldn't tell what was happening with my mom. On the days she was feeling well, my friends and I hung out at the house. But if my buddy came over after school and it was one of her off days, I'd quickly say, "Hey, why don't we go to the park?"

But sometimes circumstances made that difficult.

My mother insisted on being the class mother for my field trips. This was incredibly anxiety-producing for me; she could have a meltdown at any moment. Plus, she was almost always late, which meant there was ample opportunity for a dramatic entrance. That alone would draw the kind of attention I wanted to avoid. The first few years I was in school, I had been safe. Then came my fourth-grade trip to the Empire State Building.

My class was leaving for the city on a bus a few hours after the schoolday had begun, which meant my mom would have to meet us at school. When it was time to leave, all the kids were sitting in their seats on the bus and our teacher stood in the front, checking his watch. There was no sign of my mother. My leg bounced up and down with nerves as we waited and waited and waited for my mom to show up. Finally the teacher said to me, "We're going to have to leave in two minutes."

Then my mom came screeching up in her car, threw it in park, jumped out, and ran onto the bus. She was panting as she said, "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry I'm late." Already I was nearly invisible. I remember it being excruciatingly embarrassing. I didn't think it could get worse. Until we got to the top of the Empire State Building.

I was looking out over the city on the observation deck when I heard screaming. I turned around and saw my mom—with one high heel on and the other in her hand, gripping it as if it were a weapon—chasing some of my classmates. She was yelling at them to stop misbehaving and start listening. They were half laughing, half wondering why this woman, Gary's mom, was coming after them. At one point the heel on the shoe she was wearing broke and she started screaming at the kids for making her break her shoe. I wanted to go into a corner in the building and die. Or better yet throw myself off the observation deck. For the rest of the year kids asked me what was wrong with my mother. I was the kid in class with the crazy mom. My mom was oblivious to how that incident could scar a fourth grader for life. Instead she'd bring it up and say, "Can you believe how badly those kids were behaving?"

But for the most part, no one outside of our house and immediate family knew the extent of what was happening with my mom. My dad didn't call the school when she was in the hospital to let my teacher know. And it's not like she walked around the neighborhood trading pills with other housewives or muttering to herself in her housecoat. Her manic incidents were isolated enough—once a week some months and none during others—that if you heard screaming from my house you'd just think someone was having an argument. Uniondale was blue-collar and Italian. Screaming was commonplace.

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