

The
Polio
Journals
Lessons from
My Mother

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Prologue

I GREW UP IN AN ELEGANTLY DESIGNED HOUSE that sat nestled in a canyon on the outskirts of Beverly Hills. In 1963, when I was eleven, my parents, Carol and Bob Rosenstiel, hosted a party to honor the author James Baldwin on the recent publication of his book *The Fire Next Time*. These were the tumultuous years of the civil rights movement, and Baldwin's book was pivotal in exposing the insidious and invisible toll of racism on African Americans.

My parents' house, designed by renowned architect Victor Gruen to their specifications, was ideal for a gathering of over two hundred people. It was not the first time they'd entertained that many guests. As for all such galas, my father pushed back the four wooden panels that separated the living room from the music room, where my mother, a professional harpsichordist, spent hours every day. The plate-glass wall that separated the living room from the garden and pool gave the impression that the interior and exterior areas were one unified living space. Outside, under the large tent installed for the occasion, dozens of tables were adorned with white linen cloths along with strategically placed heaters to warm the cool evening air. Although the entire property was fenced in, the front gate remained open this evening to welcome our many friends and prominent members of the community who would attend the event.

I remember observing my mother during the party. She was in the living room, sitting in her wheelchair and holding a cigarette in her right hand, conversing with a friend who sat on a couch nearby. Though her body was thin, my mother's arms were strong from years of pushing her wheelchair. Her brown hair was cropped short around her ears and blue veins protruded from her arms and hands, a comforting sign that she was full of life and not to be defined by her paralyzed legs. She wore a black skirt and sweater that clung tightly to her body, her signature strand of pearls was draped around her neck, and soft balletlike black shoes were wrapped tightly around her child-sized feet. She leaned over to her friend, gently touching her leg in a reassuring manner. It filled me with happiness to see her so animated.

Intent on talking to all of her guests, my mother skillfully maneuvered her wheelchair through the crowd. She kept her glass of dry vermouth held tight between her right leg and the side of her chair, freeing her arms to push her wheelchair. With a broad grin on her face, she craned her neck upward as she continued

to mingle with the many partygoers. The warm and contented expression on her face did not betray the fact that she actually hated large gatherings, as the strain of looking up left her neck hurting well into the next day.

Early in the evening my father, surrounded by a crowd of guests, stood in the long entranceway hall, which was defined by a wall that extended almost two-thirds the length of the house, from the front door to the living room. The wall, perpendicular to the living room, was about a floor and a half in height and contained my father's extensive art collection. He proudly pointed out his most prized possessions, including his three Chagall lithographs—*Jeremiah's Lamentation*, *Jeremiah*, and *David and Absalom*—as well as the signed Henri Matisse etching *Jeune Femme et Son Chien*.

Later on, my father and I listened to a heated argument between Baldwin and one of our guests, Judd Marmor, a well-respected Jewish psychiatrist who was a favorite among Hollywood celebrities. Marmor had recently pioneered the notion that homosexuality was not a psychiatric disorder but rather a variant of normal sexuality. Regarding the existing prejudice against black Americans, Marmor contended it was the responsibility of African Americans to assimilate into society in order to improve their position. He used the example of immigrant Jews at the turn of the century, who successfully overcame the stigma associated with their past by embracing the American dream, pursuing an education, and eventually achieving a secure financial status. Baldwin vehemently disagreed, underscoring one of the main points in his book—that African Americans live in a world where the dominant society controls all aspects of their lives, from where they reside to what jobs they can obtain. Although it creates an illusion of successful integration, this accommodation on the part of blacks only reinforces for them society's prevailing view that they are in some fundamental way inferior to others. Black people grow up knowing about the white culture but not their own, he said, and although both races need to learn to live in harmony, this is best achieved by African Americans embracing their own experiences and culture. Likewise, Baldwin said, it is cowardly for Jews to believe that the only means of escaping their devalued status as immigrants is to aspire to live like everybody else. Although it would be years before I understood the relevance of this discussion to my own life, at the time I felt proud of my parents for championing the rights of all individuals, irrespective of their race.

The next morning the house was spotless, thanks to our maids, who had cleaned up the night before. When it was time for lunch, we all pitched in—my parents, my brother, and I. My mother opened the refrigerator door and retrieved

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the leftovers the catering company had neatly stored in plastic containers on the shelves. She balanced the food on her lap as she pushed herself to the round kitchen table that looked out onto our front garden. Opening the containers of food, she waited as my father and I set the table, as the kitchen cabinets were installed too high above the counters for her to reach for even a glass. Then she transferred herself from her wheelchair onto one of the red high-back wooden chairs that stood out against the stark whiteness of the kitchen walls, countertops, and floor.

As the conversation turned to the events of the previous evening, my parents traded information but focused on the negative, as usual. They commented on how much weight a particular friend had gained, or which couples appeared to be sparring with each other. I always felt a degree of unease when my parents seemed to make themselves feel better by putting down their friends. Only when I was older did I think more deeply about how the social norms that governed their public lives did not extend to the way they lived in private: how was it that my parents could open up their home (and their wallets) to people like James Baldwin, who were seeking equality in our society, but were content to live in a house that—although ostensibly designed to meet the physical needs of a woman in a wheelchair—lacked even the most common-sense accommodations? As a child I was as oblivious to these incongruities as my parents seemed to be.



In 1927, at the age of two, my mother contracted polio, leaving her paralyzed from the waist down. In the beginning of the twentieth century, society viewed polio as shameful, a result of the unsanitary conditions and low-class status of the people who were afflicted with it. My mother's parents colluded with the dominant view that her disability was a black mark on their family, resulting in their silencing all issues related to her paralysis. They pushed their daughter to live an extraordinary life, hoping that her achievements would mitigate her feelings of low self-worth. By almost any standards, my mother succeeded brilliantly: she was a professional musician who married and raised two children. Her charismatic persona indicated that her paralyzed legs were nothing more than a minor impediment.

When I was growing up, my parents never uttered a word about my mother's paralysis or the history behind it. If the word "polio" was mentioned, my mother would look the other way, an angry expression on her face. I soon learned the unspoken rule in our house: we were never to ask about my mother's

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disability nor were we to think of our family, or my mother, as being limited in ways that others weren't. In fact, I have few childhood recollections of broaching the subject with either of my parents.



After my mother's death in 1985, my father honored her wishes and sent me a package. Inside were the journals she had kept, starting in her fifth decade. Though we had known about them, she had never shared them with anybody. I searched in vain for the accompanying note from my father, but there was none. Curious, I sat down at my kitchen table and began to read. I was fascinated and horrified to learn things about my mother I had never known, including the cruel medical procedures she had undergone as a child and her experiences at school as the only paraplegic student. Raw sadness and rage spilled from every page, yet I was not surprised. Although I was only aware of a few details of her childhood, I knew well her anger and anguish that she hid from the outside world: her screams when she couldn't reach objects in the kitchen, her frequent sleepless nights when she could be found sitting alone on the living-room couch with a drink in her hand, and her anger and frustration at all of us—at my father when he was slow to meet her physical needs, at me when I left her alone to visit a friend, and at my brother when he threw objects on the floor of his bedroom to bar her from entering.

Although I didn't realize it that day in my kitchen, I now know that my willingness to believe that my mother's paralysis was insignificant was a means of protecting myself from my own childhood scars brought on by growing up in a family bound by secrets, forbidden to express pain. At the time of her death, my husband and I, recently married, were about to embark on starting our own family, and I was not ready to disturb the fragile balance I had worked so hard to achieve in my own life. I closed the journals and hid them in my basement. I could not face what they revealed about my mother and myself. Yet, as the years went by, unanswered questions about her life and her disability began tugging at me with increased force.



A series of events almost eighteen years after I tucked the journals away propelled me to reopen them. Just before my father's death, he distributed to family

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members his own memoir, which he had narrated to a biographer. After he died, when I was cleaning up the family house in Beverly Hills, I discovered more of my mother's writings. Hidden in the bottom of a box was an outline, written just months before her death, about key events in her life. I realized it represented the beginnings of a book. Reading my father's memoir, as well as my mother's newly discovered material, gave me fresh insights into my mother's life, my parents' marriage, and my own formative years. I realized too that the generational impact of polio did not stop with me, that the secrets surrounding my mother's disability affected my two daughters as well. It was time to uncover the truth about my mother's life.

Once home, I dug out her journals and, as I read them, finally understood the relevance of the argument that had taken place between Marmor and Baldwin in my parents' home decades earlier. My mother's drive to succeed, to silence all issues related to her disability, was not a choice as much as a means of survival. Although she lived under the illusion that she was integrated into society as if she were just like everybody else, she had paid a high price for it: she felt controlled by others and had internalized society's view of her as being defective, in the same way Baldwin had argued African Americans had in our society. Despite her achievements, my mother never felt valued for who she was, writing in her journal, "I am always scared, I always feel weak and helpless." She had spent a lifetime declaring:

World-out-there: I am not worthless, I am not pitiable, I am not one of society's abominations. I am intelligent. I am an achiever. I can make it with the best of you. I insist on making it with the best of you. I need to, every day, in order to validate myself.

Although our family's extraordinary lifestyle allowed all of us to portray the image that my mother's paralysis was inconsequential to who we were, a closer inspection reveals the opposite: in response to our situation, we developed family secrets and frequently mistreated each other. This book is my attempt to make sense of the legacy of my mother's illness and the price all of us paid for not speaking the truth.