THE BOY WHO REALLY, REALLY WANTED TO HAVE SEX

The Memoir of a Fat Kid

by John McNally

Skinny Excerpt!

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life,

or whether that station will be held by anybody else,

these pages must show.

—Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

Please allow me to introduce myself . . .

—Mick Jagger, “Sympathy for the Devil”

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Prologue: Picture Day

My grade school photos tell the story.

In kindergarten, my hair is thick and parted on the side; it has been recently cut by a professional—i.e., the corner barber. My expression, however, is that of someone much older—a man who's been told by his accountant that he just lost everything in the stock market. I am in my last two years of being thin, but I don't appreciate this fact since I am just a boy and not a soothsayer.

In first grade, a lock of hair has twisted onto my forehead like Superman's, but my eyes are bloodshot and my shirt is stained from where I've been weeping. I'm in a new school in a new city, and I have been reprimanded by every teacher I encounter for not knowing where I should be. Thus begins my hatred for authority figures.

In second grade, my hair is crooked, cut that very morning by my mother. I've put on a few pounds since my weeping photo. My vest, which looks like something a plump Frankenstein might have worn in one of the later Universal sequels, is too tight. I'm trying to smile, but I'm clearly disturbed by my new appearance.

In third grade, my hair is slicked to the side and behind my ears—slicked with what, I do not know. I'm wearing wire-framed glasses and look as though I might have been the very accountant who informed my kindergarten self that he had lost it all. Furthermore, I look pleased to have delivered the news.

In fourth grade, I've gained a preposterous amount of weight, and my long hair curls out in every possible direction. Despite what I'm wearing—a polyester turtleneck / plaid-sweater one-piece that is more tablecloth than shirt—I'm smiling more than I have in my previous

photos; my eyes are gleaming. If I wasn't nine years old, you'd think I was enjoying the first day of a bender.

In fifth grade, I've returned to looking somber, no smile, but it's clear I'm amused by the situation I'm in. This is the fifth school I've attended in five years, and I'm starting to learn irony. My hair, flat once again, has more bulk than ever before.

In sixth grade, I have no control over my hair. It juts out at odd directions, and the beauty school trainee who did the job cut my bangs too short. I'm missing two upper teeth and wearing a puka shell necklace. I'm laughing—God only knows why.

In seventh grade, I'm fatter than I've ever been. Whatever problems my hair is having is a moot point next to my weight. My future as a security guard is looking frighteningly more promising. (Oh yeah. One more thing. I appear to be growing breasts. *That's* how much weight I've gained.)

In eighth grade, my hair is a sculpture—thick and wavy—kept in place with a can's worth of Aqua Net. If someone were to come near me with a cigarette, I'd go up in flames. My prescription glasses have tinted lenses. The good news is, I'm starting to slim down, and the blue leisure suit is looking pretty sweet on me.

And so it goes. Fat one year, not quite as fat the next. Hair parted, hair feathered, hair crooked, hair left to its own volition. In grade school, I was a lycanthrope that could never quite make the final transformation from man to beast. My body would get a stage or two into the metamorphosis and then pause before returning to some previous incarnation, or, rather, some new, mutated version of my original self.

But then came high school. Something profound happened. I became cool—or, perhaps more accurately, the *potential* for cool descended upon me. It didn't happen overnight, but it felt

as though it had: one year, I was a 210-pound, five-foot-four seventh grader; two years later, I was a 125-pound, five-foot-eleven (and still growing) freshman at Reavis High School. I was, for all practical purposes, a different person. Girls not only liked me, they pursued me! Not the girls who had known me as a smart-ass fatso; those girls didn't know what the hell to make of me and therefore kept their distance. To them, I was probably a genetic mutant, a freak show attraction, as appalling as naked conjoined twins doing cartwheels across a splintery stage. But those other girls—girls I would have pined for in grade school, girls who didn't know the fat me—began flirting with me. They sometimes whispered startling things in my ear. It was every fat boy's dream, and I should have wallowed in it.

My life, I realize now, could have been a scene right out of Robert Guccione's *Caligula*. It was 1979, the tail end of the sexual revolution—before herpes, before AIDS. No one was afraid of sex. Even Jimmy Carter had confessed to *Playboy* that he had lust in his heart—a quote taken out of context and exploited, but still . . . Lust! I understood! True, I was only thirteen years old, and I would have been happy with a serious make-out session in the backseat of an older girl's Nova, but my mind often ran rampant with more erotic (and unlikely) scenarios. Sex on a roller coaster. Sex at a Meat Loaf concert. For all practical purposes I should have been cool, but there was a problem: I had been uncool for so long that I had no idea how to handle the transformation. I was like the guy who lives in a school bus until he wins the lotto. We all know this story. This guy, the lotto winner, doesn't know how to handle his newfound wealth, and so he goes a little crazy, indulging every possible vice while annoying everyone who comes into contact with him. I was the fat-to-skinny version of his rags to riches. I know now that being cool has more to do with attitude than looks, but this was lost on me at thirteen. In truth, I was cooler

as a fat, ironic kid who made snide comments about teachers during class than I was as a skinny kid who wasn't sure how to respond to girls.

It's not easy to admit, but I had all kinds of built-up anger, too, and it came out in fits and starts.

When Juan Gonzalez, a classmate from one of my many former grade schools, came up to me during lunch and said, "You used to be fat, didn't you?" I pulled the straw from my milkshake back with my teeth and then let it go. A glob of shake hit Juan square in the face. He screamed as though I'd flung battery acid at him, and then he took off running, never to speak to me again.

I'm not proud of what I became: an angry fat kid inside the body of a skinny kid. Eventually, the anger dissipated. But I remained as shy around girls as the fat me had been. Around certain girls, at least. Girls I had wanted to date but couldn't get the nerve to ask out.

Take Sara. She was in my dramatic arts class sophomore year, and I couldn't help myself: I stared at her. She was big boned in a way that was not a euphemism for being overweight. At sixteen, she had already bloomed into full womanhood, and she carried herself with confidence: an adult among children. While other girls got perms that didn't compliment the size of their heads or that made them look like toy poodles, Sara was living, breathing proof that a perm could not only work but could be damn sexy as well. She was also one of the very few girls in my school to understand the knee-weakening power of cleavage. I developed a kind of apnea that year, taking quick, unexpected breaths each time I saw her in a low-cut blouse, that spillage of flesh and temptation. Her cleavage made me feel the way Pentecostals must feel when they begin speaking in tongues. One day in the library, I caught sight of Sara's cleavage. I recognized whose it was and, without looking up take in the whole of her, savored it. Sara was

leaning on the counter, waiting for help, and I was around the counter's corner, staring. When I finally did peek up, Sara was already looking into my eyes and smiling. She had been watching me watch her cleavage. I experienced a quick in-take of breath, my hormonal apnea, and then I looked away. I pined for Sara. She haunted the rest of my school day, she haunted my after-school activities, but most of all, she haunted my nights.

A few weeks later, my cousin called to tell me that Sara liked me and wanted me to ask her to homecoming. My cousin never called, and so my mother, who waited downstairs for me, was suspicious. I knew that when the conversation was over, I would have to answer a litany of questions: What did she want? Why was she calling? My mother liked my cousin, but my mother was also attuned to the nuances of my daily life—who I talked to, who I didn't. Even as I spoke to my cousin, I was trying to come up with answers that would satisfy my mother. What my cousin wanted to know—her reason for calling—was if I liked Sara.

"Well? Do you?"

"Sure," I said. "She's okay. What do you mean by *like*?"

"You know," she said. "Do you *like* her? Do you think she's *cute*?"

"I guess so," I said. "I mean, there are other cute girls, too. She's okay. Sure."

"Just okay? She says you're always looking at her."

"That's crazy," I said. "Looking at her?" I laughed.

"Well," my cousin said, "what do you think? Do you want to ask her to homecoming?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe. Let me think about it."

I wanted to ask Sara to homecoming. Oh, God, I wanted to. But I didn't. In fact, I made sure not to look at her again, either. I had to push all of her—her wild hair, her cleavage—far from my mind.

In addition to my crippling shyness, I was also fearful of rejection, fearful of the accompanying humiliation. Even though it had been confirmed that this girl liked me, this information had been received secondhand, so there was a fraction of a percent chance that she might tell me to go to hell. And that was enough for me to justify shutting her out. For the remainder of sophomore year, she radiated annoyance each day when I walked into our dramatic arts class. I didn't even have to look at her; I could feel it. I spent homecoming day at the Ford City Mall movie theater. I paid for the first movie, then sneaked into the next two. I went alone, because that's what lonely guys do: They go to movies alone while everyone else is out having fun.

The good news was, my hair had never looked better. For those first two years of high school, my coif put up no arguments. By and large, I was able to tame it using a hair dryer and without having to resort to various sprays. I kept it not too long and not too short. Mostly, I wore it parted in the middle. These were the good years for me and my hair, the salad days. But then something happened. Between my sophomore and junior year, a latent gene must have awakened. This occurred after a haircut. For some reason, I was unable to part my hair in the middle anymore. It just didn't work. The beautician suggested combing it straight back. It was a new look—and, in all honesty, it didn't look bad (really, it didn't)—so I casually agreed to it. Little did I realize that I would never be able to part my hair down the middle again—ever! My parting days were over. My hair, which had struggled for control throughout all of grammar school, had laid low for the first two years of high school only to return with a master plan that would finally put an end to this business of trying to be cool.

But while my hair was still looking reasonably good—combed back but stylish—I began to woo a girl named Beckie, and by the spring of my junior year, we were a couple. She and I

had found in each other those physical idiosyncrasies that we liked to wonder over. For me, it was her nose. It was a puggish nose with no discernable cartilage, and so I liked to press it down with my thumb until it was almost flat against her face.

“That doesn’t hurt?” I’d ask.

“Nope,” she’d say. For her, it was my hair. “My stud,” she would say, running her fingers through it. “Look at your studly hairdo.” We were, I had thought, a couple for the ages.

One day, while I was sitting at my kitchen table, Beckie walked behind me to mess with my hair. My mother was cooking dinner. The fluorescent lights were bright, unforgiving. Beckie touched my hair. She thumbed the crown of my head.

“How cute,” she said.

“What?”

“There’s a tiny bald spot here,” she said.

“What? No there’s not.”

“Mrs. McNally,” she said. “Come here. Look.”

My mother walked over, next to Beckie, and parted the hair on my crown. (For the record, my mother was the least sentimental person I have ever known.) “She’s right,” my mother said. “You’ve got a bald spot.”

I had spent my entire life pushing aside any and all empirical evidence that confronted me. My father was bald; my brother was going bald; a few uncles on my mother’s side were bald. I was convinced, however, that I would not go bald. I’d always had hair—lots of it!—and so the idea of not having hair seemed preposterous. I’m sure this is how rich people think before losing all their money in a bad investment. I’ll never be poor! they think, and then, a few years later, they jump off the roof of the tallest building in town.

"Quit touching it," I said, dodging everyone's fingers. "You'll only make it worse."

After the bald spot, which was probably no bigger than a dime, had been revealed, there was no going back: It would only get larger. Beckie and I began to argue. We never mentioned the bald spot again, but it had come between us. If Beckie wanted to go one place, I wanted to go another. If I liked a new song, she didn't.

The end came a few weeks later, in the front seat of my mother's Ford LTD, in the parking lot of R&D's, a grim little ice cream shop where we often went for milkshakes. I had already bought us the shakes when she finally broached the subject. "There's something we need to talk about," she began. Even as she gave her reasons for ending it, she absently picked lint off my shirt and straightened it with her palm. I realize now how to interpret these gestures, that I was being cleaned up before being sent out into the world. Many years later, when my first wife began picking lint from my shirt and straightening it with her palm, I knew we didn't have much longer together.

I spent my post-Beckie days in a funk. It was the August before the start of my senior year. A new movie had just come out: *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. No movie spoke to me more than this one. I would stay in the theater after it had ended and then watch it a second, sometimes a third time. I returned to it, day after day, until I ran out of money. One afternoon, I was short a dime and stood outside the movie theater, asking if anyone could spare some change. I was sixteen years old, going bald, and begging for money. Who knew my fall would come this fast, this hard?

On the day of my senior picture, I couldn't get my hair to do what I wanted it to do. It was too poofy, too odd looking. I wanted to stay home from school, but my mother wouldn't have it. "Not for your hair," she said. I showed up late, miserable. In my photo, I'm trying to

smile, but you could see it in my eyes: I'm depressed. My hair, on the other hand, is clearly enjoying this victorious moment. It is a crazy red pompadour, about four inches too high and absurdly wavy, not at all a look I would consciously have given myself. Who, except for a bottom-rung Elvis impersonator, would have?

As I write this I am, by any objective and honest account, bald. I eventually had to admit defeat, as do all bald guys, except for those who try comb-overs or pay for plugs. I refuse to go that route. I've worn baseball caps for years—first to hide the baldness, then out of mere habit. On those days when I don't wear one, I'll reach up to adjust it, only to realize that something's missing from my head.

As with the tiny bald spot, it's difficult to see the whole story when you stand too close. Isolated memories are like the dots of an impressionistic painting. This dot is orange; that dot is green. This dot is about love; that dot is about fear. Only when you stand back and see how the clusters of dots look together do you see the larger painting. This memoir began as dots, but the more dots I explored, the more I began to see the broader landscape—the portrait of a boy whose appetites, both literal and figurative, are large and whose heart is always yearning for more than he has. And so the arrangement of this book is the arrangement of memory itself: seemingly free-floating but connected by the same undercurrent of desires, wants, weaknesses. If my school photos were a deck of cards, this memoir is me shuffling them, flipping one over, studying it, and then shuffling them again, flipping over another photo, and so on, until the larger story forms.

Every story must begin somewhere, so imagine a boy. Imagine he's you. Only once during the entirety of your grade school career do you arrive in the morning before anyone else has shown up. You have the entire blacktop to yourself. It's magical, really. The idea of being

the first to show up has never occurred to you. Who normally shows up first? You have no idea. The season is fall, but it's inching into winter. The sky is dark; the moon is still visible. And then, as the sun begins to rise, your classmates appear, the ones who make your heart race with yearning, the ones who make your heart race from fear, the ones you don't even notice though you must surely see them every day, the ones you notice every morning if only because they are the lonely standouts. Soon they are all here. The sky is getting ever-so-slightly brighter, but the moon remains. It's one of the strangest things you've ever seen, the moon and the sun both visible, and you want to point it out to everyone, but you keep it to yourself. Like so many other moments from your life, you'll save it. Quietly. Tuck it away. Collect it. This moment; this dot. Little do you realize you'll remember this morning for the rest of your life. Little do you realize that each day is a small miracle full of every imaginable horror and beauty. You pull down your knit cap and go stand in your designated line, and then you wait your turn as the great march indoors begins, the school day officially commencing.