

MIKE BIRBIGLIA

with POEMS by J. HOPE STEIN

The
**NEW
ONE**

PAINFULLY TRUE STORIES
from A RELUCTANT DAD



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Note to Readers: In the recounting of the events in this memoir, chronologies have been compressed or altered and details have been changed to assist the narrative. Where dialogue appears, the intention was to re-create the essence of conversations rather than verbatim quotes. Names and identifying characteristics of some individuals have been changed.

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Contents

[*Cover*](#)

[*Title Page*](#)

[*Copyright*](#)

[*Dedication*](#)

[*The Book Starts Here*](#)

[*Zombie Kid-pocalypse*](#)

[I. SEVEN REASONS](#)

[1. I Love My Marriage](#)

[2. My Body Is a Lemon](#)

[3. I Don't Know Anything](#)

4. I Have a Cat

5. I Have a Job

6. There Shouldn't Be Children Anymore

7. People Aren't Great

II. VOWS

III. IT'S HAPPENING

Relentless

Flat Soda

We Got a Win!

Bomb Jokes

The Poo Doesn't Smell

Clean Forks

Bleeding

Danger Zone

Daddymoon

Baby's Eyes

Sympathetic Eating

Natural History.

IV. MONKEY ARRIVES

A Reality-Bending Experience

A Renewal of Vows

A Sleepwalker and an Insomniac Walk into a Bed

Hiccuptown

We Wub You

Dating My Wife

My Side of the Story

V. PRETENDING

VI. MONKEY WON'T SLEEP

There's No Me in We

Friendly Advice from Other Parents

Sex Maybe

Great Job

Trying

The Legs Don't Reach the Floor

It Is What It Is

VII. ME AND MY WIFE ON A PLANE THAT'S CRASHING

VIII. CAN I HAVE THIS HOUSE WHEN YOU DIE?

IX. SO WE DON'T CRY

X. 525,600 PHOTOS

XI. NATURAL CAUSES

[Sugar Fries](#)

[Organic Toxic Waste](#)

[YMCA](#)

[Slice of Life](#)

[**XII. THE NEW ONE**](#)

[We Learn to Dance](#)

[The Flu](#)

[The Eighth Reason](#)

[Coutz](#)

[**OONADAD**](#)

[*The Book Ends Here*](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*Discover More*](#)

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[The Book Starts Here](#)

In June of 2016 my wife, Jen, and I took our fourteen-month-old daughter, Oona, to the Nantucket Film Festival. When the festival director picked us up at the Nantucket airport (which was basically someone's backyard with planes in it), she asked if I would tell a story at the festival's storytelling night.

She said, "The theme is jealousy."

I said, "I don't think I want to tell a story."

Jen said, "You're jealous of Oona. You should talk about that."

There was a playfulness with which Jen was needling me, but also... she was right. The theme of the night could have been any number of things: "fear," "change," "fear of change," "loneliness." But the theme was jealousy. So that's where I began.

That afternoon I started opening up my journals and sharing with Jen some of my deepest, darkest, and funniest thoughts about our decision to have a child. Writing is always a process of trial and error, but this was writing about my own errors, so the errors felt compounded, like I was reliving my own mistakes and failing at that too. Jen and I shared with each other our sides of what had gone down during the pregnancy and in that first year with our daughter.

I told a story that week. It went pretty well. And so it began.

Over the next two years, Jen and I continued to write about this subject.

Our work evolved into an entire show called *The New One*, which ended up on Broadway.

The more I performed the show, the more people told me that the stories gave them a sense of catharsis—not just parents but also people who resist all kinds of change. So I pored over my journals, dug deeper, found a lot more stories, and created this book: *The New One: Painfully True Stories from a Reluctant Dad*. The book became something I had never expected to write. I confessed things to the page that I was previously uncomfortable confessing to myself. As I worked on the book, Jen showed me some poetry she was writing about the same themes. That poetry is sprinkled through these pages (those are my favorite parts).

So here it is. We hope you enjoy it. This book is an experiment. We figured it out as we went along.

Sort of like a family.



little astronaut

a newborn rests her head on the earth of mother.

everything else is outer space.

—J. Hope Stein

Zombie Kid-Pocalypse

My brother, Joe, used to be so cool, then he had two kids and now he's a loser.

Well, he's not a loser, but I will say his house is a lot less fun. Not that my life is that much more *fun*. It's just that I'm comfortable. I live in Brooklyn with my wife, Jen, and our cat, Mazzy, and we have long decided that we are not going to have kids. It's one of the things Jen and I have always had in common. Sometimes we drive away from visiting our friends who have kids and confide in each other, "Fuck that," from the privacy of our crumb-free sedan.

It's fall of 2012 when I wake up on Joe's couch. I'm trudging through his living room, tripping over stuffed pigs and Pack 'n Plays, and I join Joe's family in the kitchen.

I open the fridge and grab a jar of peanut butter, and there is peanut butter on the outside of the jar. So I'm holding a jar of peanut butter covered in peanut butter. And I think, *How the hell did this happen? Did someone grab a handful of peanut butter out of the jar with their hand and then rub it on toast? And where might that person with that lack of judgment also put that same hand?* I toss the peanut butter back in the

fridge and sit at the table with Joe and the kids. Joe's older son, Henry, is five. His younger son is two. The two-year-old is named Merritt, which was a name awarded to him at birth after he had achieved no accomplishments whatsoever.

I plop down at the table across from Joe and his meritless children. The moment my butt strikes the chair, I realize that I'm resting on a sticky yogurt pouch. I look around for a napkin but the table is covered in wet Cheerios and Aquaphor, which are, I believe, the opposite of napkins. I look to my left, where Joe is queuing up a video on his phone of his son Henry. I find this infuriating. I think, *I have Henry live. I don't need Henry on tape.* The video itself: underwhelming. Joe says, "This is a video of Henry picking apples. Make sure you watch until the end!"

I say, "When does it end?"

He says, "It's about twelve minutes long."

I think, *Nobody wants to watch that. There's so much great content out there. I was on YouTube and I saw a ninety-second video of a cat giving another cat a massage. Don't waste my time with "Henry picking apples."*

Joe elaborates on their apple-picking trip. Something about stopping for ice cream on the way home. He fishes around in his phone for photo documentation, which I had not requested.

Joe says, “This is the best photo. It’s Henry eating ice cream!”

I think, *This is a terrible photograph. The lighting is garish. The framing is so tight that I can’t even tell he’s eating ice cream.*

I sit at the breakfast table doing my best to facially express supportive disinterest, and Joe presses on like an air traffic controller on his first day of work.

He says, “Henry ate ice cream even though he hates cold things!”

I think, *People with children don’t know how to tell stories. That’s not a story. That’s a “detail” in a story. Stories have a beginning, middle, and end. What you said is a boring, boring, and a boring, basted in boring sauce and baked at 200 degrees for ninety seconds. At best, it’s a middle. It’s a middle where you’re thinking, “Get to the end!” But there is no end. Or beginning. It’s just this constant flow of “middle.”*

Joe hops up to grab orange juice from the fridge. He’s barely recognizable. This person was never supposed to become a dad. He was too cool to be a dad. He had introduced me to Public Enemy and Nirvana. He taught me how to dance alone in my room to Talking Heads and write jokes and ski off cliffs and smoke pot. Everything I knew about cool through age twenty was mainlined through Joe. Even when our sisters went off to college we continued to share a bedroom and a boom box and a dream, and

his having children felt like a betrayal—like he had forgotten about all the rad stuff we had done together and caved to this mediocre grown-up existence. He was like a marathon runner who, at mile nineteen, is handed a backpack full of boulders. I don't mean to equate children with boulders, but I couldn't come up with a heavy, useless item that also plays video games and eats candy.

To be fair: Maybe I have a low tolerance for children because I've lost a lot of great friends to kids. Because parenting really *is* like a disease. But it's worse than a disease because they want you to have it too. They say things like, "You should have kids too!" And I think, *I'm watching you do it and I'm thinking I'm gonna not do it.*

They're like zombies, hissing, "Youuuuu should eeeaaaat brains!!!" *I'm watching you eat brains and it seems like it ruined your life.*

The way you kill zombies (you probably know this from the movies) is you shoot 'em in the head with a shotgun or chop off their heads with a machete or a samurai sword, which is also the way you kill anyone.

I'm sitting with my zombie brother and his family eating peanut butter Puffins when Henry starts whacking me in the head with a foam bat.

I say, "What *game* is this?!" and I look over to Joe for assistance.

Joe does nothing. He's like a World Wrestling referee. He says, "He's

not supposed to do that.”

I hobble away from the table and duck inside the bathroom. I try to pee, but the toilet has that childproof circle-inside-the-circle-inside-the-circle. Like a carnival peeing game that I’m losing badly. Henry kicks in the door and now I’m peeing into the wall, which has pee on it already.

I lock the door.

I stand there for fifteen minutes doing nothing other than avoiding Joe’s family. I pull out my phone and search for local activities. I exit the bathroom and say, “Joe, we should see this band at the Paradise.”

Joe says, “I can’t go to a concert, Mike. I have kids!”

I say, “Sorry.”

Joe says, “Don’t apologize. It’s the most joy I’ve ever experienced.”

I say, “Congratulations on your ambiguous tone!”

We don’t go out. We stay home and watch these Baby Einstein videos, which have yielded no geniuses, to my knowledge. There’s nothing about the theory of relativity in the one I saw. It was just a pig playing a xylophone and then a dog barks and a lady says, “Pillow!” and then my nephew spits yogurt on his shirt.

That’s when Joe confides in me: “He’s a genius.”

I think, *I’m not seeing it, man, but sure, maybe he’s a genius.*

I fall asleep that night at 7:30 p.m. because being around children makes me want to be unconscious at all times. I wake up at 4:30 a.m. with a fierce cold from sleeping in this petri dish house and a ringing foam bat headache. I stumble into a cab and hobble onto my flight and all I can think is *I just want to be home with my wife and my cat and my couch.*

To be clear: I love my wife and my cat, but I also love my couch.

It's the first thing I ever dropped money on in my life. In your twenties you just *get* a couch on the street—which is a great price. It's literally garbage, this mysterious lump of wood and fabric, and you bring it home to your six roommates and they're like, "Nice."

But then I reached an age—I was twenty-five years old and living in Astoria, Queens—and I thought, *I'm a goddamned man. I'm gonna buy a goddamned couch.* And I went to a department store and sat on what I believed to be the least expensive couch and then gasped when I looked at the price tag. I said to the clerk, "Wait, this one's a thousand dollars?"

"Yes, it is," he said.

"Is there gonna be a sale?"

"This is the sale."

"Do you think you might go out of business?"

"We are going out of business."

I think the reason a couch is so expensive is that it's a deceptively sophisticated piece of technology. It's a bed that hugs you.

A couch is accommodating: *You wanna watch TV? You wanna eat pizza? You sure do like eating. But I like that about you!*

Meanwhile, beds are comfy but they know it: *I'd like to be called a king. I'm gonna need a box spring.*

I don't touch the floor. Get your hands off that tag! I'd like this room named after me.

Couches are humble: *This is about you. You wanna take a nap? Be my guest. You wanna have sex with my arm? I'll think about it.*

In 2008, Jen and I got married at city hall in New York City, which is a great place to get married if you have the chance. Very convenient. We took the subway home. We took selfies on the subway. We ate pizza and hamburgers at this place in our neighborhood called Big Nick's. And then we took a nap—on the couch.

And since then we've spent thousands of hours together on this couch.

We've watched classic films on the couch. We've eaten twenty birthday cakes on the couch. We've laughed hysterically on the couch. We've cried on the couch in each other's arms when we found out we had to put our cat Ivan to sleep. It's soft, yet firm. Filthy, yet spotless. Colorful, yet no one can

agree on what color it is. I think it's green. Jen thinks it's gray. I looked it up—chocolate. Which isn't a color but feels fitting because there's chocolate *in it*.

I love being home on my couch, but I travel for my job. I perform comedy in sometimes a hundred cities in a year—which is more cities than there are.

Some of them are just an Applebee's with a dream.

I love performing, but the travel can be rigorous. And often when I return home I feel entirely empty—just bones and garbage and Diet Coke held together by those plastic ringlets that bind sodas and strangle ducks. I smell like a rental car filled with Popchip farts, Cinnabon wrappers, and Febreze. My breath smells like fast-food barbecue sauce. I use the last drop of caffeine in my veins to push my body across the finish line that is my doorstep, and I collapse on our beloved couch...

And it hugs me.

I say to my wife, "Clo..." (Her name is Jen.) "Leave me by the side of the road."

But she doesn't.

She revives me.

Jen has a soft, sweet voice. It has a thread count of six hundred. It's a

voice that always seems like it's telling you a secret or saying, "I'm gonna make tea."

Jen and I lie on the couch and she orders me a chicken kebab platter and scratches my back, and we snuggle with our cat, Mazzy, and watch a documentary about murder.

And that's what love is.

And it all takes place...

On the couch.

I meditate on this couch/cat fantasy as I squeeze into my JetBlue seat. I notice a baby across the aisle screaming at the top of his lungs. And in that moment, and I can't defend this, but I think, *That baby doesn't need to be anywhere. I'm wearing noise-canceling headphones. Which apparently aren't enough. You need baby... canceling... headphones, which are... condoms... I guess.*

We gotta get babies off planes. We got rid of smoking in the eighties, we could get rid of babies now. Or bring back smoking and get these babies some cigarettes because they're so stressed out.

After an hour that feels like ten, I land in New York and take a cab to our apartment. I melt into our beloved couch and it hugs me.

I say, "Clo [her name is Jen]—people with kids are miserable."