

manhood, marriage,
and **the tumor**
that tried to kill me

shrinkage

BRYAN BISHOP

“Bryan puts the *can* in cancer and the *bone* in boner!”
—JIMMY KIMMEL

.....
FOREWORD BY
**ADAM
CAROLLA**
.....



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manhood, marriage,
and the tumor
that tried to kill me

Foreword by Adam Carolla



THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
NEW YORK

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For Christie, my 50/50 partner

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About the Author

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foreword

I met Bryan in 2002 when he was a young phone screener for *Loveline*. At the time, he had a few more hairs and a lot more pounds, but he always had confidence. Bryan is smart and knows it. And wants you to know it. As you read this book, you'll see just how sharp and clever he is.

That's why, when I got the job taking over for Howard Stern on the West Coast in 2006, I brought Bryan with me to screen calls. I could not imagine anyone else being equal to that monumental task. You have to pick up the phone, talk to the person, type their question, *and* put them on hold. There are very few people who can pull off that Herculean task.

Bryan, despite spelling his name with a Y, later became part of our on-air family because of his uncanny ability to memorize thousands of sound drops and the corresponding codes on the computer (sorry for all that tech jargon; I forgot you may not all be as computer savvy as I am).

When the radio station flipped formats to a computer playing Rhianna songs, I took him to work with me on my CBS sitcom pilot, "Ace in the Hole," as a "floor PA" or something like that. Essentially a runner for the studio taping days. I knew that if the show got picked up he'd easily make his way up the ladder and I wanted to get him in on the ground floor.

The night before he was due to start working I got a call. It was a black chick who wanted to know if I was satisfied with my cable provider. I was. Then I got another call. It was Bryan and he did not have good news. Dizziness and other symptoms he'd been feeling as the radio show was collapsing were the result of brain tumor. The irony of the guy with the biggest brain on the staff—the guy who has the encyclopedic mind, the guy who goes on game shows—having it attacked by a tumor was sadly lost on no one.

I hung up with him and immediately called Dr. Drew. Drew simply said, "Death sentence." God bless that bedside manner. The last person Drew diagnosed with a death sentence was my wife's best friend, Jennifer, who was dead within six months at age thirty-three.

This is where Bryan's journey begins and my foreword ends. I've got some stuff on TiVo I need to get to. I won't say much more, I don't want to step on any of the stories you're about to read. But I will answer one question I'm sure all of you have at this point. No, the CBS pilot didn't get picked up. I blame it on the fact that we didn't have Bryan handling whatever the hell it was that he was supposed to be handling.

—Adam Carolla

Prologue

If you're reading this, it means I'm already dead.

Just kidding. I'm not dead.¹ I've just always wanted to say that. It's one of three things I've always wanted to say with 100 percent sincerity but never had the right opportunity. The other two:

“I suppose you're all wondering why I've summoned you here tonight” and ...

“Can your casino please provide me with a security escort so I can safely transport my winnings back to my helicopter?”

Of those three phrases, you can clearly see why I chose the first one to start off this book. Although, it's *technically* not the first time I've used that line. Or maybe it is. You be the judge.

When I was first diagnosed with brain cancer at age thirty, my fiancée (Christie) and I decided to make out a last will and testament. In a sad reflection of my (im)maturity, I cared far less for what was *in* my will than how it started out. I insisted that it start with the line “If you're reading this, it means I'm already dead.”

This was comedy of the highest order to me. To Christie, not so much. But this gallows humor would, I believed, help me get through whatever challenges cancer was going to throw at me. So please bear that in mind as you read this book. If a joke seems morbid or twisted or in some other way irreverent, just remind yourself, “This is the guy who thought it would be funny to start his last will and testament with ‘If you're reading this, it means I'm already dead.’”

Please, enjoy.

1.

Breaking Bald

or, A Not-So-Mini Biography

“I suppose you’re all wondering why I’ve summoned you here tonight.”

I wanted to start this chapter off with an appropriate quote. Let’s see ...

“I was born a poor black child.” —*Navin Johnson*

Close, but that one isn’t quite right.

“The details of my life are quite inconsequential.” —*Dr. Evil*

That’s more like it. But here we go anyway with the obligatory “biography/early-life chapter.” I try not to make it too painful.

My parents (Mike and Nancy) were married on October 15, 1977, in the San Francisco Bay Area. It was apparently a hip seventies wedding; their first dance was to Chicago’s “Colour My World,” and the groomsmen wore ruffled tuxedos. After the reception, the newlyweds were whisked away in a 1932 Packard. They were from large Catholic families. My dad was twenty-three and the youngest child of four. My mom was just twenty years old and the middle child of five. They had met at a grocery store near San Francisco called QFI. Not in the produce aisle like in some romantic comedy, they both worked there. I was told that QFI stood for Quality Foods International and was at one point the third-largest grocery-store chain in the San Francisco Bay Area. I would argue that by confining yourself to one geographic region, you forfeit the right to call yourselves *international*, but I admire their bravado.

Less than three months after the wedding, my mom found out she was pregnant with me. That would be a shock for any twenty-year-old newlywed, but it was especially shocking for my mom, who had a copper IUD inserted in her at the time. For those of you who weren’t sexually active women in the 1970s, a copper IUD (intrauterine device) was a form of birth control that a doctor would implant inside a woman’s hoo-ha (the technical term for her reproductive organs). Worldwide, it’s the most commonly used type of reversible birth control, meaning a doctor can remove it from a woman’s body at any time. The failure rate for these devices is low, especially in the first year—as low as 0.1 percent. Yet my mom’s IUD failed, resulting in a bald, bouncing baby boy. I know what you’re thinking, and I agree: This can only mean that I am the Chosen One.



This is what happens when your birth control fails. God, I'd kill for that head of hair today. (*Bishop Family*)

I was born on September 13, 1978, in San Mateo, California, about fifteen minutes south of San Francisco. Like most babies, I was born bald, and I actually had a nice, full head of hair until I was about thirteen years old, when it began falling out. So you could say I had a run of about twelve good years with hair.

Three years after me my brother, Adam, was born, in 1982. So by the time my parents were in their midtwenties, they had been married for four years and had two young sons. I spent the first nine years of my life in San Bruno, California, also about fifteen minutes south of San Francisco. Growing up in San Bruno was like growing up in Manchester, England, with slightly better food. It was constantly cold and foggy. In every picture of me taken outside from birth to age nine, I'm wearing a coat or sweater (or both). There are pictures of me at the *beach* with a heavy jacket on. Fortunately, there aren't a lot of pictures of me outside; I was known as "the indoor kid" and Adam was known as "the outdoor kid." Ironically, this has stayed true all the way to our current professions: I crack wise on my podcast (indoors) and Adam is a project manager for one of the largest landscaping companies in the Bay Area (outdoors).³



The happy family. Check out my sweet boots. (*Bishop Family*)

We weren't poor—or if we were, I didn't know it. But we definitely weren't rich. My parents hadn't gone to college. In fact, at that point, nobody in my family had; I came from a blue-collar family. My dad's dad (my grandpa Frank) was a garbageman in San Bruno. My mom's dad (my grandpa Robert Lorenzini, or, as he was known to everyone, Babe) was a fire captain in South San Francisco. But from their working-class upbringing my parents had learned resourcefulness. For example, my mom learned how to decorate cakes when she had me. So when it came time for special request birthday cakes, she was able to make them herself. One year I had a Big Bird cake, complete with yellow coconut shavings. Another year, I had a sweet Transformers cake, upon which my mom had "drawn" a Decepticons insignia.⁴ Were they equal to the quality of something you might see on *Ace of Cakes*? No, but they were close, and for a fraction of the cost. And I never knew the difference. All I knew was that I had a totally awesome Transformers birthday cake, and all the other kids were jealous.⁵



This resourcefulness wasn't just reserved for cakes. My childhood birthday parties featured "games" that were usually along the lines of pin the tail on the donkey, beanbag toss, or sack race. All homemade, of course. Perhaps the best example of my parents' resourcefulness when it came to party games was a relay race where two teams of kids took turns running across the yard to a pile of my parents' old clothes, and the first team to throw the clothes on over their own clothes and then take them off again were the winners. Not exactly heady stuff, but you know what? We had a blast! Kids don't care how much you spend on their birthday parties. *Adults* care how much you spend on your kids' birthday parties. My parents probably spent \$35 total on tiny beanbags, a piece of plywood, and some paint for my birthday. Compare that to a few hundred bucks for an afternoon bounce-house rental, which kids are going to get tired of after about half an hour, and pony rides, which are probably going to give your kid encephalitis. Add in the inevitable lawsuit when the pony wrangler gets drunk and accidentally "drops" his overalls, and it's just not worth it.



Here we are at my fifth birthday, playing the clothesline game. Everyone got a bag of clothes, and whoever hung all of theirs on the clothesline first won. Later, I realized that we were just doing my parents' laundry for them. *(Bishop Family)*

Vacations were resourceful, too. Many summer and winter vacations were spent at my grandparents' house in Lake Tahoe, California. My dad's parents had retired and moved to a cabin in the mountain town, about four hours east of San Francisco. It was a great place to vacation as a child. It was warm in the summer and it would snow in the winter. My grandma Marie was ... well, someone might describe her (diplomatically) as challenging. I'll say she was eccentric. She loved card games (really, anything that involved an element of gambling), yet she hated playing with children. Once in a while, she would get roped into playing a big family game of Go Fish or something, and one of us kids would do something a kid does, like spill a soda or play out of turn, and she would explode, "THIS IS WHY I DON'T PLAY WITH KIDS!" She was part Syrian, and I picked up some Arabic curse words.

from her as an impressionable child.⁶ She wasn't exactly a health nut: Her favorite foods, as I recall, were chicken skin, pizza (with extra salt liberally sprinkled on top), coffee, frozen Milky Way bars, 7UP, and peanut-butter-and-butter sandwiches. Actually, that last one was a lunch special that she would make for me (I was overweight). She barely tolerated some of my cousins, yet she loved the hell out of me. I was never exactly sure why; maybe it was because as the youngest child, my dad was *her* baby, therefore I was her baby's baby? Regardless, I could do no wrong in her eyes.

One of her habits would most mold me into the person I am today. My grandma had a movie collection that put most video stores to shame. But she never bought a movie. These were the resourceful Bishops, remember. She owned two VCRs and would make a duplicate of every single movie she ever rented. You know those FBI warnings that pop up before every movie you rent? My mom would tell me they were aimed at my grandma. She had shelves and shelves of video tapes purchased in bulk from Costco, each with about three copied movies on it. She cataloged every movie on an index card, complete with (and I'm not joking or exaggerating) a description of the movie, a list of the actors, and *a star rating*.

But illegally pirating rentals was only part of her OCD/hoarding-disease combo. Every week, once the day *TV Guide* was released, she would drive to the grocery store and buy a hot-off-the-press copy. More than once, I witnessed a poor manager using a box cutter to cut open a box of *TV Guide* while she stood there berating him. "Why aren't these on the rack?! They're supposed to be on sale today!" Then she would go home and—with a highlighter—go through every movie playing on every channel and set up her recording schedule for the week. On many occasions, if someone wandered too close to the VCR while she was recording a movie, she'd yell, "Don't touch anything! I'm recording!" If you were lucky, she'd be in the kitchen, getting herself a frozen candy bar and a 7UP. In which case you got "yelled at" by a yellow Post-it note that she affixed to her VCR: "DON'T TOUCH-RECORDING!"

I was in movie heaven. This is probably how I became an indoor kid. Here I was in the glorious Sierra Nevada mountain range. I could fish or ski or snowboard or go for a hike. But, no, what did I do? I watched movies with my grandmother.



My grandpa Babe, just before he retired from the fire department. (*Bishop Family*)

So I got my love of movies, my love of fattening foods, and my love of gambling from my dad and mom. But I got my love of trivia from my mom's parents. I'll explain.

My parents had me and my brother when they were relatively young, meaning that by the time we were nine and twelve, for example, they were barely in their thirties. They wanted to go on vacation and have fun without two young children in tow. So they'd often leave me with one set of grandparents and leave Adam with the other. One time, when I was about twelve, they left me with my mom's parents, Babe and Betty, for about five days. Babe Lorenzini, as I said earlier, was a retired fire captain in South San Francisco. They would give me a card for my birthday or Christmas with money inside—ten or twenty bucks, something age appropriate. From as far back as I can recall, whenever my grandfather gave me any gift money, he would write inside the card, *Remember, education is money!* It was a simple and smart piece of advice.

Well, during the few days that I stayed with them, Grandpa Babe decided to reinforce this advice that education really did equal money. Being that they were grandparents, one of their favorite afternoon activities was watching *Jeopardy!* Only this time, we would watch it together. My grandfather said I could play along with the contestants on TV, and for every question I got right, he'd give me a quarter. Then, for every question I got right in Double Jeopardy! he'd give me fifty cents. And if I got the Final Jeopardy! question right, he'd give me a dollar.

My grandpa hadn't accounted for a couple of things. First, I was a smart kid. I had been selected for a school program called GATE, which stood for Gifted and Talented Education. Mostly we played computer games and solved riddles, but I got to miss an afternoon of class once a week, so I was thrilled. Second, I was an unusually well-read kid. Remember, I was the indoor kid. I doubt my brother would have done as well at answering *Jeopardy!* questions. He was busy with other things such as "having friends" and "being good at sports" and "not getting beat up by bullies." You know, stupid stuff that I didn't have time for. Finally, my grandpa failed to take into account that *Jeopardy!* aired twice a day, every day. So we were set for ten viewings of the show while I was staying with

them.

I don't remember exactly how much money I won off my grandpa during that stay, but I know it was in excess of \$40. Which is kind of astounding, if you consider it was mostly accumulated in twenty-five- and fifty-cent increments. I remember being overwhelmed by my winnings. Forty dollars is a lot of money to a twelve-year-old kid of relatively humble beginnings, especially in 1990.

Sadly, this is easily one of the two or three greatest highlights of my life from this period.⁷ I was in middle school, which is a tough enough time for anyone, but consider the following: I was overweight, I had glasses. Thick ones. I was smart/nerdy and I liked things that nobody else cared about, least not all the cool kids. Such things as Oakland A's baseball⁸ and WWF wrestling⁹. I was losing my hair, which made me sort of a genetic freak. I was barely average at sports, which meant I wasn't making a ton of friends on the baseball diamond. And I had just moved to town a couple of years earlier, which meant that while everyone else had friendships that went all the way back to preschool, I hardly knew anyone.

Really, I had no friends. People think this is an exaggeration, so I'll be totally honest with you. During the excruciating years between ages nine and fourteen, I had two friends: Joe Knipp and Kenny Bourquin. Joe was a friend from Little League and Kenny was a social misfit like me, who loved *Saturday Night Live* and *Get Smart*. Again, we were thirteen. It always amuses me when I run into someone from my middle school and I introduce them to my wife. She'll say, "How do you guys know each other?" And the person will answer, "Oh, we were friends in middle school." Social decorum dictates that I smile and nod and act pleasant, but inside, I'm saying, "Really? We were friends? Because I don't remember getting invited to your birthday parties. Or talking to you. Ever."

Luckily, I sort of hit my stride, socially speaking, in high school. It all started with a summer film program for high school students held at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. It was the summer before my senior year of high school. I had learned about a summer journalism program at Northwestern, held by the National High School Institute (NHSI). This was kind of like applying to college: I had to submit my transcript, my SAT scores, letters of recommendation, the whole nine yards. I was rejected by the journalism program (no doubt due to my terrible grades—more on that in a minute), but I got a letter a week or so later that basically said, "I know we rejected you from our journalism program, but would you consider attending our Creative Media Writing program instead?" I looked into it, and *creative media writing* meant "screenwriting." I had never considered screenwriting before but (a) I loved writing, (b) I loved movies, (c) I didn't have a bunch of close friends, and (d) the friends I did have were all serious baseball players, which meant they'd be busy all summer playing in their respective summer leagues. So, faced with the choice of a summer spent screenwriting with like-minded students at a prestigious university versus sharing a bedroom with my thirteen-year-old brother, I eagerly accepted their offer.

Starting in 1987, my brother and I were roommates. When Adam was 5 and I was 8, my family moved into a two-bedroom, one-and-a-half bathroom house in San Carlos, California. Think about that: four people, two bedrooms, one shower. Adam and I would share a bedroom for the next ten

years, all the way through middle school and high school (for me). They say “familiarity breeds contempt.” Let’s just say I was *very* familiar with my brother for those years. For the record, teenage boys should *not* share a bedroom. What probably seemed like an adorable experiment when we were and 5 (“They’ll *love* getting to play together all day, every day!”) became a powder keg of raging testosterone by the time we were sixteen and thirteen. Just a poorly conceived plan from the start.

So you can see how I was chomping at the bit to get out of the house. That it was a scholastic endeavor meant my parents were behind it 100 percent. It was one of the few times I had shown an enthusiasm about something related to my education. I had saved up enough money from my after-school grocery-bagging job to pay the summer tuition,¹⁰ so off to Illinois I went. It was a magical summer. I learned a ton about movies and writing, but the summer was more important for me socially. Whereas I had previously been shunned or mocked for my nerdier tendencies—my enthusiastic love of movies or trivia or wrestling or sports—now I was in an environment where such knowledge was celebrated. That’s a small piece of advice I have for any parent whose teenager is going through a tough time. Find something that the teen loves—sports, for example—and find a place where the teen can be celebrated for it. If your teen isn’t a great athlete, but he loves sports anyway, send the kid to sports-announcing camp (they actually have those) and watch him or her blossom. If they’re bookish and into science, send them to science camp or space camp. That summer I grew my love of movies, expanded my style of writing, and made some great friends—I even met my good buddy JD, who would eventually be the best man in my wedding. I returned to school for my senior year and became a confident, outgoing, and almost-popular person.

That (mostly) carried over into college. Somehow, by the skin of my teeth, I got accepted into USC. My grades were abysmal, but I had a relatively high SAT score, a couple of glowing letters of recommendation, and I put together a portfolio of my published writing samples, as if to say, “See, I wasn’t goofing off and playing video games the whole time I wasn’t doing my homework; I was actually bettering myself!” It must have worked because I was somehow allowed to enroll in the fall of 1996. In my four years at USC, I changed majors once (from print journalism to creative writing), had three semicelebrities for professors,¹¹ and even founded a fraternity. When I enrolled in college, I had no idea what a fraternity even was. I went through rush my first semester as a freshman, but didn’t exactly fall in love with any of the houses on USC’s Fraternity Row. Once the semester got rolling and I hadn’t joined a fraternity, I kind of felt left out. So me and my buddy JD—the same guy I had met the summer before at Northwestern (he had enrolled at USC at the same time as me)—decided to join a house the next semester. Before we could, though, a couple of recruiters came from the national offices of Pi Kappa Phi. They said they were founding a chapter at USC and needed some strong leaders to start the chapter. They should have been honest and said they needed some suckers, but we didn’t find that out until later. I figured, here was a chance to do something really interesting and unusual—rather than just join a house, we’d establish our chapter and mold it in our image, carefully selecting members who reflected the ideals that we set forth in our charter.



The gentlemen of Pi Kappa Phi. There I am, front and center, back when I was just known as “Balding Bryan.” I think this picture was taken at an event on a boat. There is also one other “celebrity” in this picture. Bonus points if you can spot him. (Author’s collection)

Basically, we were idiots. Founding a fraternity chapter is an insane amount of work. If you’re a college freshman just interested in having fun and drinking beer for four years, pick a good fraternity and join up. Not that my experience wasn’t enjoyable; it was, I believe, exponentially more rewarding for me than if I had simply joined another, established house. But I wasn’t like most people. I wasn’t interested in just drinking beer for four years.¹² In my time as a founding father of Pi Kappa Phi’s Delta Rho chapter, we earned our charter, bought a house in the middle of the Row, and raised a ton of money for charity along the way. I served as the chapter’s historian (alumni-relations chair, essentially) and rush chairman. My senior year, the other members voted me Brother of the Year. What I’m about to say may sound corny (because it *is* corny), but it’s the greatest honor of my life before or since. My brothers—many of whom I’d recruited as rush chairman—of the chapter I helped found essentially said, “Of all the people doing all they can for this house this year, you did the best.”

I may not have had many friends before my senior year in high school, but at least I was a good student. Oh, wait, strike that. I was a *horrible* student. Just terrible. Despite being deemed “gifted” at age ten and placed in a special program for like-minded fifth-graders, my grades started to slip. Actually, they “slipped” the same way Tom Cruise’s character slipped off the roof of a building at the end of *Vanilla Sky*. Twice in middle school, I achieved a grade point average below 2.0. I once failed PE in the sixth grade. Not because I couldn’t do any of the exercises, but because every day I forgot my green gym shorts that we were required to wear. If you forgot any part of your PE uniform, you got docked a point. Well, I got docked a point every single day that semester. That same semester, I took a yearly standardized test that was mandated by the school district. It measured you aptitude-wise and was partly designed to identify kids with special needs who were performing beneath their grade level. In every area related to English—reading comprehension, language, etc.—I tested at a 12+. That meant I was reading and writing at above a twelfth-grade level as a sixth-grader. It was the highest score the test could report. So when I brought home a report card with a 1.67 GPA and an F in PE, m

parents were understandably confused and angry.

The cracks in the armor had started to show years earlier, but nobody had recognized them. In my first few years of school, I got straight A's in all subjects. But in the behavioral section—the portion where they give you an O (outstanding), an S (satisfactory) or an N (needs improvement)—I got a lot of N's. The comments, from year to year, were along the lines of “Bryan is very hyper in class” and “Bryan needs to do a better job of controlling his outbursts.” I remember dozens and dozens of occasions when a teacher would scold me for yelling an answer out of turn. My only vivid memory of second grade is from the very first day. I was the new kid in class—I had changed schools again the year¹³—and when the teacher asked the class a question, I blurted out the answer. She gently reminded me, “Now, Bryan, I know you're new here, but in this class, we raise our hands.” You'd think my public shaming would have corrected my behavior, but nope. At the end of the semester, my report card had that familiar refrain: “Bryan is disruptive in class.” In fact, here's a sampling of actual comments made by my teachers on my elementary-school report cards:

“Likes attention! Speaks out of turn” ... “VERY verbal. He needs to control his self-discipline in group situation” ... “A bit mature mouth (‘No way, Jose’—teenage jargon)” ... “Excitable. Can get carried away” ... “Needs to be more patient” ... “Chooses to act out and not only disturb his classmates but has not been able to finish his own work” ... “Many daily assignments have not been completed on time” ... “Behavior has deteriorated in class. Principal will be phoning to set up a conference” ... “Needs to watch his self-control at times, as he gets very involved and forgets that he is to work reasonably quiet” ... “Needs to apply more consistent daily self-control effort” ... “Often not on task in class” ... “Excessive socializing in class” ... “Study skills need improvement” ... “Inconsistent quality of work.”

And of course a whole bunch of N's in Demonstrates Self-Control, Demonstrates Self-Discipline, Conduct, and Listens Attentively.

So by the time I got to middle school, things had spiraled out of control. Despite testing at a college level for reading and language skills, and despite being placed in a program for gifted students just a year or so earlier, my academics were falling apart. I would forget assignments all the time, and when I would remember them, I'd forget to do them until the last minute. On many occasions, teachers would announce to the class (as the final bell rang), “Don't forget, your final projects are due tomorrow,” and I'd think, “Oh, crap, I don't even know what she's talking about.” My parents have home-video footage of me hurriedly applying dried macaroni to the roof of a model Spanish mission at the kitchen table. “What is that, Bryan?” my mom asked from behind the camera.

“It's my report on a Spanish mission,” I said.

“It is? When is it due?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Hm, first I've heard of it,” she muttered passive-aggressively.

It wasn't just assignments I'd forget. I lost my glasses on an almost monthly basis in middle school. Sometimes I'd find them—in my locker or in a jacket pocket—sometimes I wouldn't. There

home-video footage of this, too. My mom taped me sitting in front of the TV—as close as I could get—squinting to see because of my severe nearsightedness.

“Bryan, where are your glasses?” she asked. My parents asked me this all the time. It was like the chorus to the world’s worst song.

I looked at the camera. “Um, they’re in my locker,” I lied. Of course I had lost them again.

“Oh, I see,” my mom said, clearly not buying it. My forgetfulness was apparently placing financial strain on my family. One day, my grandpa, Frank, (of all people) took me aside and said, “It’d be really helpful if you could find your glasses. It’s really putting a burden on your mom and dad.” That’s how you know we weren’t rich, by the way. A \$90 pair of glasses was about to financially break a family of four.

“Okay, Grandpa, I will,” I said. And I 100 percent meant it. I wanted nothing more than to remember such things as, oh, I don’t know, doing assignments and not losing my glasses every two months. But I was completely incapable of doing so. My absentmindedness wasn’t limited to bus school projects, either. I rarely did homework. Again, not because I couldn’t or because I didn’t want to, I would just ... space out, I guess. My poor parents would tear their hair out trying to figure out why I was doing so poorly in school. They had me put on a program where I physically handed each of my teachers a chart every day with my homework assignments on it. It was supposed to remind me to actually *do* the homework. Instead, I just stopped bringing the form to my teachers. My parents would incredulously ask, “Why?” It’s a good thing they never took me to a therapist. He would probably have thought I was trying to kill them with my indifference.

My problems continued into high school. I attended Junipero Serra High School, an all-boys Catholic School in San Mateo, California. One day, in Mr. Sullivan’s sophomore honors English class, he gave the class an extra-credit assignment. We had to write an essay on some topic—it was toward the end of the semester and I had already mentally checked out. I had somehow tested my way into the class—that is, I achieved a high enough score on my placement tests the summer before that they had put me in the advanced class—but had performed so poorly that semester that my demotion back to regular English the next year was all but inevitable. So when Mr. Sullivan handed out the extra-credit assignment to everyone, I stuffed it into my backpack and thought, “Eh, I’ll get around to it later tonight.” Then, I pulled out a piece of paper and started to doodle. Forty-five minutes later, Mr. Sullivan announced, “Five minutes left.” I thought to myself, “What the hell is he talking about? And why isn’t anybody talking?” I looked around and saw the entire class with their pencils in their hands writing furiously. To my horror, I realized that the extra-credit assignment wasn’t a take-home assignment—it was an *in-class* assignment. I panicked, realizing that everyone else in class had spent the last forty-five minutes writing their extra credit essays. In that instance, what was I going to do? I feebly wrote a few sentences, then the bell mercifully rang. Everyone dropped his paper off on Mr. Sullivan’s desk. I wrote a final sentence or two, then meekly dropped my paper onto his desk. I instantly saw that I had only written a paragraph, whereas all the others had used the front and back of their papers.

“Nice effort,” he said to me sarcastically. For a moment, I wanted to protest, but what was I going to say? “Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention when you explained the assignment”? I was damned if I did and damned if I didn’t. I said nothing and walked out of class with my tail between my legs.



“The worst student”?! Come on! Look at that face! (Actually, stop looking. Let’s just pretend this picture never happened.) (*Bishop Family*)

Mr. Sullivan wasn’t the only teacher I ran afoul of during high school. I probably pissed off more teachers than I didn’t. My junior-year history teacher, Mr. Bertetta, was a cool guy. He’d graduated from my high school in the sixties, and he always wanted to tell us about going to see the Doors or the Rolling Stones in college. I should have been enraptured—all I listened to in high school was classical rock—but instead, I would uncontrollably blurt out whatever came to mind, just to annoy him. One day, after I’d particularly disrupted class, I came home from school to find my very pissed-off mom waiting for me by the answering machine. She pressed play and revealed a very angry message from Mr. Bertetta. It included the sentence “Your son is the worst student I’ve had the misfortune of teaching in twenty years.” Part of me wants that on my tombstone. My mom, not so much.

2.

Making ADHD Pay

or, How I Turned a Disorder into a Career

It wasn't until a decade later that I realized what had been going on for all those years. For two years in my twenties, I worked for Channel One News, an in-school news network for teens. This cross between MTV News and CNN was an incredible incubator of young news talent; it notably helped launch the careers of a young Anderson Cooper, Maria Menounos, Lisa Ling, Serena Altschul, and Bryan Bishop. Actually, I wasn't allowed anywhere near the cameras. I was a writer for their Web site. Every morning, we would all gather in the conference room and watch that day's episode, so we saw what the kids saw. One day, the show did a story on ADHD (attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder) for teens. I barely looked up as the story started—I didn't know much about ADHD and I wasn't all that interested. But as I heard the doctor being interviewed, a few things he said started to grab my attention. He said that kids with ADHD aren't dumb or slow—in fact, they're often of high intelligence and are (or should be) in advanced classes. He also said kids with ADHD were forgetful, often misplacing essential supplies such as textbooks and backpacks. They have trouble remembering to turn in homework assignments, despite repeated reminders. They daydream, have trouble listening when spoken to, and struggle with directions. And—this is the one that made me sit up in my chair—they're often dismissed as just being “hyper.”

In that instant, more than a decade of academic misery finally snapped into focus. The whole time when everyone thought I was hyper or forgetful or that I just didn't care, I was actually suffering from crippling Attention Deficit /Hyperactivity Disorder. Suddenly, it all made sense. The shouting out in class. The lost glasses. The unheard instructions. The forgotten homework assignments. The high test scores. The blown extra credit. It all added up. After the staff meeting, I went straight to my desk and did a little extra research on my own. I came across this checklist from the National Institutes of Health on ADHD symptoms in children. I was shocked at how accurately it described me as a young person:

- *Fails to give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes in schoolwork—Yep.*
- *Does not follow through on instructions and fails to finish schoolwork, chores, or duties in the workplace—Bingo.*
- *Does not seem to listen when spoken to directly—What's that you say?*
- *Has difficulty organizing tasks and activities—You bet.*

- *Avoids or dislikes tasks that require sustained mental effort (such as schoolwork)*—Bingo again.
- *Often loses toys, assignments, pencils, books, or tools needed for tasks or activities*—100 percent.
- *Is easily distracted*—I’m sorry, what’d you say?
- *Is often forgetful in daily activities*—That’s a lot of bingos.
- *Has difficulty playing quietly*—Yep.
- *Is often “on the go,” acts as if “driven by a motor,” talks excessively*—To this day, in fact.
- *Blurts out answers before questions have been completed*—All the time.
- *Has difficulty awaiting turn*—Absolutely. My God, read my teachers’ comments above!
- *Interrupts or intrudes on others (butts into conversations or games)*—Yes, yes, a thousand times, yes!

I was convinced. My parents, on the other hand, were not. When I presented them with this newfound evidence of my childhood disability, I treated it like a revelation. “Look! Remember all those negative comments on my report cards? Finally, we have an explanation as to what the hell was wrong with me all those years! Rejoice!”

My mom furrowed her brow and frowned. “Hm. I don’t know about that.”

“But listen to all these symptoms!” I pleaded. I basically described my childhood for them in about thirty seconds. “It all adds up!” I declared triumphantly.

My mom thought about it for two seconds—literally, she was silent for two seconds—then said, “No, it was more passive-aggressive.”¹⁴

Passive-aggressive! As though I *chose* to put myself through a nightmarish adolescence. That’s like a person who’s born gay saying, “I wasn’t *born* this way, I *chose* to make the first eighteen years of my life a living hell. Why, you ask? Who knows! I guess I’m just passive-aggressive that way!”

Luckily, in my adulthood, I figured out ways to turn most of these negative traits into positive ones, and I’ve ended up with a career that takes advantage of a lot of my ADHD “symptoms.” My job, essentially, is to interrupt Adam (or the show) with a comical aside; literally, I blurt out my contributions, be it verbally or through my sound effects. Of course, I do my best to time it so I’m not interrupting him midsentence (some might say I fail in this regard). Because the show is live and totally improvised, there’s no script to follow, no lines to forget, and no cues to miss. Mentally, we’re on the go the whole time, constantly changing directions and making it up as we go along. All the equipment I need—my sound-effects machine, my computer, my mixing board, and my microphone—stays in the studio, so there’s nothing I can lose or forget to bring to work.

Being the sidekick on *The Adam Carolla Show* is the perfect job for me. It plays to my strengths while mitigating my weaknesses. But I haven’t always been so lucky. Before I started my career in entertainment, I had a series of part-time and barely full-time jobs to try to make ends meet. My first job ever was bagging groceries at a local supermarket for two years. I followed that illustrious career choice with stints as a bartender, a writer for a Web site that never launched, a summer-camp counselor, a high school junior varsity football coach, and a secret shopper for Jack in the Box fast-food restaurants. I was fat (228 pounds) and unhappy. I needed a career change. I decided to focus on doing something—*anything*—related to the entertainment world. But I had to start at the bottom.

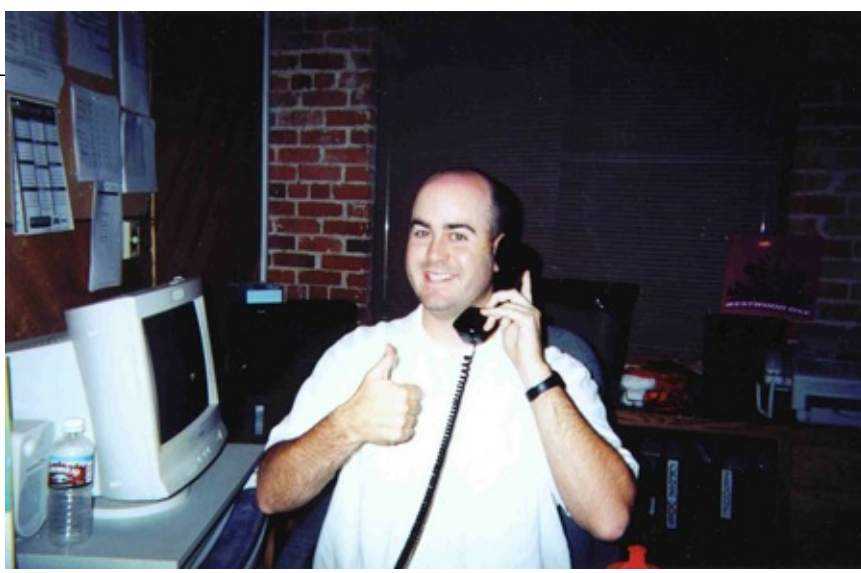
Call Screener, 106.7 KROQ-FM (Los Angeles)

I answered an ad on EntertainmentCareers.net for a part-time call screener at KROQ, a legendary alternative radio station in Los Angeles. This was early 2001, so the only thing they were a “alternative” to was pleasant-sounding music. The station was playing *lots* of Limp Bizkit and Linkin Park. I think the only reason I got the job was that I showed up to the interview in a coat and tie. KROQ appealed to a stoner/surfer demographic, so the fact that I could string two sentences together probably separated me from the rest of the applicant pool. Also, the fact that I knew words like “demographic” and “applicant pool.” It was a cool job; far and away the most exciting job I’d had up to then. The pay was terrible—just above minimum wage. One year, the minimum wage in California got raised to an amount that was more than what I was making, so the station had to start paying us a few cents more just to meet it. But I got free concert tickets, occasionally got to meet a celebrity who was hanging out in the halls, and got to tell my friends that I was working at the “world-famous” KROQ, where Carson Daly, Jimmy Kimmel, and Adam Carolla had gotten their start. MTV’s *Total Request Live* and Comedy Central’s *The Man Show* were very popular back then, so my working at the same radio station they had all started out at meant I was tangentially tied to their success. (Give me a break. A few months earlier I was tasting Jumbo Jacks for a living. I was desperate for anything resembling success.)

As a call screener, my job was to take requests from listeners for four hours, which felt to me cruel and dishonest, because KROQ, like all corporately owned radio stations, didn’t really play listener requests. The playlist was generated by the music director and given to the DJs well ahead of time, sometimes by hours. I know this for a fact because my job often included taking the list of songs and ads from the music director’s office and handing it to the DJ. Yet, like idiots, our job was to take requests from the clueless public. “Yeah, you bet, I’ll try to get that on for you” was my refrain. If someone happened to request a song that was already scheduled to play that hour, we were supposed to tell the DJ so they could say, “So-and-so requested this one,” on the air. So it seemed as if we were playing the listeners’ requests when we really never did. It was a ridiculous masquerade, but it fooled a lot of teenage fans of the station’s, so ... mission accomplished?

Call Screener, *Loveline*

After about a year at the station, the producer of the syndicated show *Loveline* approached me in the halls one day and asked if I’d like to start screening calls for *Loveline*. I jumped at the chance. *Loveline* was hosted by Dr. Drew and Adam Carolla and had been a hit TV show already on MTV. I listened to the radio version all throughout high school. Plus, now with *The Man Show*, Adam Carolla was quickly becoming one of my comedic heroes. It also paid a whopping \$12 an hour, versus the \$6.75 per hour I was making at KROQ for a regular midday shift. I thought I was being promoted after a year of exemplary call-screening performance, but I later realized that the one thing people hated to do in radio was work.¹⁵ They needed a new call screener for *Loveline*. Were they going to put an ad online, then read through a hundred résumés and conduct a dozen interviews? Hell no. They walked down to the screening room and picked out the chubby kid who wore a polo shirt to work every day.



In case you didn't believe me, here I am: chubby kid in a polo shirt. (Author's collection)

Working for *Loveline* was awesome. Not only were celebrities on the show almost every night, but *the show was hosted by two celebrities!* Keep in mind that I was still a wide-eyed (and wide-assed) twenty-three-year-old, so meeting actors and musicians was a much bigger deal to me back then. Plus, I got to meet Anderson, the show's engineer. I considered him to be the best sound-effects wizard in radio. In my opinion, he was every bit as important to the show comically as Adam was. When we first met and started working together, Anderson hated me. You've probably surmised by now that I am a fairly upbeat, optimistic person. Anderson is ... not. He used to pull his sweatshirt hood over his headphones to avoid having to talk to me. He mistook my can-do attitude for ass-kissing. Whereas I was a real "go-getter," he was more of a "Go get it yourself, you son of a bitch, and screw you for asking me." Eventually we became friends, but not before he nicknamed me "KAB"—for "Kiss-Ass Bryan"—or "Kabbie" for short.

Writer, Channel One News

After five years of barely making enough money at part-time call-screening jobs to pay my rent, I finally decided to take a full-time corporate gig, complete with an office, a parking space with my name on it, and life insurance. Ironically, it was the last time I'd have any of those things. I was hired by Channel One News to be a writer for their Web site. It was the best job I'd ever had. I had a great boss, fun coworkers, and we produced some great work, although I remember the first couple of stories I turned in to my editor, Beth, were terrible. I tried to convince her that *I was* a good writer, but I just hadn't written seriously in a few years. Luckily she stuck with me, gave me some chances, and made me a much better writer in the process. We even won a Webby Award while I was there for Best Youth Site, beating (among others) Noggin, Scholastic.com, and the Girl Scouts.

I was in my midtwenties. I had a steady and creative office job with full benefits doing what I loved (writing). I had finally dropped the fifty extra pounds I'd been carrying for years. I had quit or been fired from all my previous part-time gigs and was now settling into corporate life when one day in late 2005, while sitting at my desk, I got a surprising phone call, from a guy named Mike Maddocks. I had

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