

**CHOCOLATE MILK, OR, THE FINE ART OF FAKING
ONE'S LIFE STORY** June 30, 2010.

In a bestselling book called *A Million Little Pieces* (published 2003), a writer and media producer named James Frey told the would-be true story of his own life as a 23-year-old alcoholic and drug abuser coping with twelve-step rehabilitation. Since the book turned out to be largely fictional, I imagined a very different kind of book written by a very different kind of writer, and here is the result. (Full disclosure: to its everlasting shame, the “Shouts and Murmurs” gang at the *New Yorker* turned this down.)

PUBLISHER'S NOTE: *Following is an excerpt from the sole remaining copy of Peter Piper's GROWING UP HAPPY (Really Neat Books 2008), the critically acclaimed autobiography of a young man lovingly nurtured in an upper middle-class suburb of Los Angeles. With what has been called “searing honesty,” this book tells how the author clawed his way up in a house run by parents whom he fearlessly portrays as kind, generous,, reassuringly conventional, sensitively strict, totally understanding, endlessly amusing, shamelessly heterosexual, and unapologetically rich. Against all odds, he somehow became an impeccably well-bred, well-behaved, well-groomed overachiever whose evocations of time-honored rituals such as polishing the family silver on Saturday mornings and leading his high school debate team to its first-ever LA county championship have been called “heartbreakingly poignant.” Just one day after GROWING UP HAPPY sold out its first printing of 250,000 copies in just seven hours, however, we were shocked to learn that the book and its author were completely fabricated by Zack Zilch, a psychotic ex-gang leader now serving ten years for armed robbery, fifteen years for multiple child abuse, twenty-five years for drug-dealing, and three consecutive life sentences for a shooting spree at his*

high school graduation. Having recalled every single copy of the book and burned them all, we have saved just one for the sake of the following episode, whose deep truth—we believe—transcends the unspeakable pain of this revelation.

I'll never forget the one and only time I ever tasted chocolate milk. Since I had always refrained from any form of sexual activity, since I had never even kissed a girl (and wouldn't until the day Emily said "I do"), and since I would never think of "swigging hooch," "puffing pot," or "sniffing coke," this was the only time in my life that I ever tasted a guilty pleasure.

I was having lunch with the other two top kids in the class-- Sam Reynolds and Vern Prescott, each vying to be number 2, right behind me--and feeling pretty good because I had just aced another chem test and snagged an A-plus ("brilliant, Peter!") on my lit essay, "The Kantian Metaphysics of *Moby Dick*." Suddenly Sam slid a paper packet across the table toward me and said, "Hey, Pete—try one of these." Small, square, dark brown, and stamped flat along its corrugated edges, it looked totally harmless.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Powdered chocolate," said Sam. "Try it in your milk. Tastes great."

Chocolate. He might as well have said *crystal meth*. I can't remember how many times Mom and Dad both told me what chocolate would do to your teeth, your gums, your liver, your brain. One bite, they warned--just one bite—would make you an addict for the rest of your life. No turning back.

But Sam and Vern, I now learned, had been drinking chocolate milk for years with no ill effects. Aside (perhaps) from keeping both of them out of the number 1 spot (no chance of that anyway with me around), it had so far failed to rot either of their brains or anything else. I just had to try this stuff once.

So I took the plunge. Tearing open the packet, I shook the powder into my glass, stirred it in with a knife (no clean spoon handy), and put the ripped packet into my shirt pocket (I never

leave litter anywhere, ever.) Then I drank the whole glass at one go. It was sweet. Pure magic.

But I decided then and there that I would never drink chocolate milk again, and I had to believe that Mom and Dad would never find out.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur. Feeling a little buzz, I almost missed getting extra credit on the history quiz by forgetting who wrote the preamble to the Constitution (Gouverneur Morris came to me just before the bell rang) and barely got to my violin lesson on time. After a shaky start (I damn near flubbed the first harmonic in Massenet's "Meditation"), I sawed my way through the rest of the lesson, biked home, changed my clothes, cut the grass, weeded the peony bed, painted three pairs of shutters, chewed my way through dinner somehow ("Please God," I thought, "don't let anyone around this table mention chocolate!"), and then headed up to my room for what was always the best part of the day: homework at my very own desk.

I was re-checking the complex conjugates of a quadratic equation when I heard a knock at the door. When I opened it, there stood Mom holding out her left palm. Right in the middle of it lay the crumpled dark brown packet that I had left in the pocket of my shirt. She had found it just before tossing the shirt into the washing machine while I was out doing my chores. She didn't need to say a word. The crumpled packet said it all.

"Oh God," I said. I wanted to sink through the floor. Mom still said nothing, but her eyes watered, and for the first time in my life I realized how wrenching a mother's tears can be.

I had to tell the truth. There was nothing else to do. "Yes, Mom, I did it. One of the kids at lunch today"—I'd never say who—"slid me the packet, and I dropped the powder into my milk. But believe me, " I said, "I'll never drink the stuff again because I hated the taste of it."

The second part was a lie, of course (why do we lie, I wonder, to those we love, and to those who love us?), but the first

was true. Forever true. I knew right then that I would never again taste so much as a grain of that powder, and I never have.

Mom took me in her arms and hugged me tight. She never scolded. She never punished. She understood and forgave. But there was one thing more.

“Mom,” I said, “please don’t tell—“

She stopped me with a smile and a finger to my mouth.

“Don’t worry, Peter. I won’t tell him. It will be our secret.”

And I’ve never confessed it to anyone else—till now.