

PROLOGUE

It was one of those crystal-clear evenings in the late winter of 1969. My mother, my brother, and I had recently moved into a new high-rise apartment building in Forest Hills, Queens, with a spectacular view of Manhattan.

I was sitting in our new bedroom with Arlene, a friend who'd stopped by after our last class at Forest Hills High School. We could see the entire skyline from my bed by the window and watched the sun set over Manhattan. Arlene gazed at the city lights as I passed her the joint.

All of a sudden, on the other side of the bedroom there was a stirring beneath a huge, homegrown pile of rubble. It was as if this unidentifiable mass of a mess had taken on an animated life of its own.

"What's that!?" Arlene asked in a hushed but urgent tone; she was ready to bolt should the inexplicable commotion continue.

"Oh, that's my brother," I answered, deadpan.

On one side of the bedroom by the window was your average teenage mess, plus a few oddities: a skinny ten-inch-long mirrored hash pipe made by Mexican Indians; an eight-track tape deck; an issue of the *East Village Other*; a copy of *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* by Lenny Bruce; and some guitar picks.

On the other side, my brother's side, was the pile.

It had levels, or more like tiers: clean and dirty shirts; pants, socks, and assorted underwear; a pair of brown suede, calf-high fringed boots (like the ones Ian Anderson wore on the cover of the Jethro Tull album *Stand Up*); all covered by a huge Afghan shepherd's coat. Below, in another layer, were records, newspapers, rock magazines, and wrappers and boxes from various food groups, all surrounded by dishes, cups, and glasses that doubled as ashtrays, containing liquids that had created multicolored foam—beer-mug-type heads that had risen up to and above the rims of the glasses.

Sheets and blankets snaked their way in and out of the living sculpture. An unseen mattress lay on the floor supporting the escalating geological wonder that was my brother's side of the room.

"Uh, are you sure that's him?" Arlene asked, somewhat confused, in that I hadn't even glanced over in the direction of the mysterious mass. "I don't see anybody."

"Yeah, that's him," I replied, "unless there's a new tenant in there that I don't know about."

Arlene giggled, half genuinely, half nervously.

Hearing our voices, my brother cleared through enough of the debris to pop his head up and see what was going on.

His sunglasses were already on.

They were rarely off.

"Hey, how ya doin'?" he said to Arlene. They'd seen each other around the neighborhood.

"I'm okay," Arlene said to my brother. "Did we wake you up?"

Looking out the window and seeing that it was almost dark, my brother replied, "No, no, that's okay, I was up."

As he started to clear his way out of the heap, we realized *he didn't have any pants on*.

Arlene said, "You know, I kinda gotta get goin'. I told Alan I'd stop upstairs."

"Yeah," I said. "My mom will be home soon, anyway."

I moved to the middle of the room to shield Arlene's view.

I didn't have many girls come over after that.

My brother—the guy without the pants—lived on to become Joey Ramone, with quite an amazing story.

I lived on to tell it.

I.

I SLEPT WITH JOEY RAMONE— AND HIS MOTHER TOO!

Our parents, Charlotte Mandell and Noel Hyman, grew up within a few miles of each other in Brooklyn, New York.

Oddly enough, they met for the first time over a hundred miles away at the Nevele Resort in the Catskills. The upstate resort area, also known as the “Borscht Belt,” had become a post–World War II hot spot for young Jewish singles looking to hook up.

Fortunately for my brother and me, not to mention millions of Ramones fans, our mom and dad *did* hook up, on New Year’s Eve in 1946.

They met when my mother, Charlotte, was nineteen. By the time she was twenty, she’d married Noel: “I wanted to get out of the house,” she said.

Our father’s parents were born in Brooklyn of European Jewish descent and humble means. Mom’s parents were also born in Brooklyn and Jewish, but were more affluent. Charlotte’s family wasn’t sure about the match.

“I wasn’t living up to my father’s expectations,” Charlotte explained. “In the beginning, Noel was fun. He was an older guy with a convertible. I wanted excitement in life, and so did he. We had a good time together.”

After their wedding, the couple moved into a modest flat on Ninety-fifth Street on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Noel was the hardworking owner of a fledgling trucking company called Noel's Transfer. Charlotte took a leave from her job as a commercial artist at an ad agency when she became pregnant with my older brother.

Jeffrey Ross Hyman was born on May 19, 1951, at Beth Israel Hospital in downtown Manhattan. The young couple and their mutually ecstatic families celebrated the joy of Jeff's arrival, but the blessed day did not pass without extreme distress. The major encumbrance in my brother's life had actually formed before he'd ever taken his first breath. As nature would have it, a mass of what might have been another fetus that never developed had become attached to his spine. The medical term for the condition is "sacrocoygeal teratoma"; it describes a type of tumor with cells vastly different from the surrounding tissue. It occurs once in every thirty-five to forty thousand births, with 75 percent affecting females. If the tumor is promptly removed, the prognosis is good. If elements of the teratoma are left behind—or diagnosis is delayed—the risk of malignancy increases. When he was born at six pounds, four ounces, the teratoma was the size of a baseball.

Surgery to remove the teratoma was extremely risky due to the location of the mass, but it was unavoidable, as far worse complications would occur if it were left intact. A few weeks later, when doctors deemed Jeff's tiny body strong enough to withstand the trauma of surgery, the procedure was successfully completed. Some scarring of the spinal tissue was inevitable, which could cause neurological problems down the road. The extent of these problems was indeterminable at the time, but doctors were hopeful it wouldn't have a devastating effect, if any, on Jeff's development.

A relieved Mom and Dad nurtured Jeff back to health, and it appeared that my big brother was on his way to growing up a normal, happy boy.

About a year later, Dad, Mom, and Jeff headed to Queens, settling in a middle-class Jewish area called Forest Hills. They moved into a garden apartment snuggled in a corner of the neighborhood where the Long Island Expressway and the Grand Central Parkway intersect. Their apartment was conveniently located smack between the city's two major airports, La Guardia and Idlewild Airport.

In front of the house, there was a footbridge that spanned Grand Central Parkway and took you into the huge Flushing Meadow Park, the site of the 1939 World's Fair. The park featured Meadow Lake, where people could rent rowboats during the day and at night watch great displays of fireworks staged throughout the summer. Forest Hills was a friendly little community, a fun place for kids to grow up safe and sound.

THEN ONE NIGHT in October 1953, via Dad's instinctive impulses and with Mom's unyielding assistance, I began gathering myself together. Nine months later, I met up with them and Jeff for the first time.

They named me Mitchel Lee Hyman.

Born on July 15, 1954, in Forest Hills General Hospital, I passed inspection with only a couple of webbed toes noted on my permanent record. Dad drove us to the new house he'd recently purchased for the expanding family. It was right across the street from the garden apartment complex they'd lived in previously. Our house had a great little backyard with a small cherry tree, and as Jeff and I grew, so did the tree.

As far as my brother and I knew, we were a happy family then; but only a few years later, we began to hear harsh tones coming from our parents' room. Jeff and I shared a bedroom down the hall from Mom and Dad's, on the top floor of the house.

Jeff was a good big brother. When I would get scared at night, either from the boom of the fireworks across the lake or after seeing a scary movie like *Invaders from Mars*, *The Crawling Eye*, or *The Thing*, I'd run to his bed for protection.

"Jeff! Help!" I'd scream. "The monsters are under my bed and they're trying to get in!"

"Come on in," Jeff offered, pulling back the covers. "You can sleep with me. You'll be safe here."

Jeff was only five years old, but he seemed oblivious to the dangers that lurked under his bed. Maybe for Jeff, real life was scary enough; the crescent-shaped scar across his lower back reminded him what real danger was.

Our friends David and Reba lived down the street, and our mom became well acquainted with their parents, Hank and Frances Leshner.

"I remember," said David Leshner, "we used to run around in the parking lot by my house and make up crazy games, like Doody Boy."

The game was basically tag with a glorified name. Instead of "it," you were the "Doody Boy." The main strategy was to not get stuck with the name at the end of the day, or you'd have to walk home with everybody laughing at you, yelling, "*Hey, Doody Boy!*" Somehow, Jeff often wound up the Boy.

One day, a bunch of us were playing in the dimly lit basement labyrinths of a nearby apartment complex.

All of a sudden, some kid yelled, “Run! There’s a ghost!”

We all screamed and bolted for the exit.

Even above the din of kids shrieking, everyone could hear the clang as my skull became intimate with an iron pipe in my path. I crumpled to the floor and started to cry. The next thing I knew, Jeff was picking me up and saying, “We better go home.”

Though everyone was running away, Jeff stayed to get me out of there.

Blood covered my eyes and face. Jeff put his arm around me, held my hand, and got me home to our horrified mom and dad, who rushed me to the doctor. I got my first taste of hard drugs and first feel of stitches—five of them, right in the middle of my head.

When the anesthesia began to wear off, I opened my eyes to see Jeff smiling down at me as he held a mobile of little colored airplanes above my head. He’d made it for me while I was sleeping.

“Do ya like it?” Jeff asked.

“Say thanks to your big brother,” Mom said to me. “He got you home.”

“Thanks, Jehhh . . . ,” I mumbled, still half-asleep, as Dad hung the mobile over my bed.

Actually Jeff and I didn’t call our father “Dad.” We called him “Bub,” a nickname we gave him when he’d come home shouting, “Hey Bub!” as he’d hoist us in the air.

“Hey Bub,” we’d shout back to him repeatedly, hoping for a second or third ride. The name stuck.

Our mom was loving and vibrant. She was always teaching us things, reading us stories, or showing us how to draw. She made sure we listened to all kinds of music, everything from kiddie songs to classics like Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf*. We did everything together as a family. Mom, Dad, Jeff, and I would walk down the street, laughing, all holding hands.

We often had friends and family over for parties in the basement, where Jeff and I would provide the entertainment. We were comfortable playing that room. We would stand on top of the piano and sing songs like “When the Saints Come Marching In” and “She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain.”

Grandma Fanny, Dad’s mom, bought Jeff an accordion, which he loved. He picked it up pretty quickly, playing everything in “oompah” time—probably from listening to too much Lawrence Welk. They got me a little ukulele, which I loved too. Unfortunately, I smashed it to pieces one night,

after our “set,” by jumping off the piano and cracking the little uke on the basement floor. That made quite a memorable sound.

One day, after we’d come home from seeing our first circus at Madison Square Garden, Jeff exclaimed, “Hey! Let’s try the knife-throwing act!”

“Yeah!” I said. “Just like the Fantastic Fontaine Family!”

Jeff grabbed half a dozen steak knives from the kitchen. We went out on the grass by the side of the house, and I lay down with my arms and legs stretched out. Jeff made a drumroll sound.

As he let fly the first knife, Mom shrieked from the kitchen window, “*Jef-fry! Don’t you throw that knife!*”—just as it sailed past my head.

“Aw, c’mon, Mom,” I explained. “We’re just playing circus!”

She came running out of the house with some paper and a box of crayons.

“Don’t you two ever play with knives again, you hear me? Here, play with these,” she said as she handed us the crayons.

As soon as Mom was out of sight, I stretched back out on the grass, Jeff made the drumroll sound—and he threw the *crayons* at me.

In the winter Mom and Dad would often take us upstate to Bear Mountain to go ice-skating or sleigh riding. At the end of the day, we’d go into the lodge and have dinner in front of the huge fireplace.

One time up at Bear Mountain a big motorcade pulled up just as we were about to enter the lodge. We were made to wait outside, along the path to the entrance, while a parade of police officers and men in suits escorted someone inside.

“*It’s the president!*” Dad yelled. “*Wave to him, maybe he’ll say hello to you!*”

Jeff and I looked at each other and then started jumping up and down, shouting, “*Hey, President! Say hello!*”

We were a little nervous. A few months earlier we’d been on the overpass above the Grand Central Parkway when a similar-looking motorcade had been passing underneath. That day, a bunch of us kids knocked some pebbles off the railing of the bridge that trickled down onto the cars below. Jeff Storch, the neighborhood bully, who frequently picked on my brother, threw a rock that made contact with one of the cars in the motorcade. Worse, some cops stationed on the overpass saw us all running away. Jeff and I were now afraid that the president was being escorted by those *same* cops—who might recognize us. But given that we didn’t want to tell our

parents about that incident, we kept waving and shouting to the president.

As he came closer, we caught his attention. The president of the United States stopped for a second and summoned us past security. We thought we were in big trouble, but before we knew it, we were shaking hands with President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Ike told us we'd better be good boys and listen to our parents.

We figured the president had pardoned us.

In the summer, we would walk over to Meadow Lake to go fishing, have picnics, and take out the rowboats. Dad taught us a game called Sink the *Bismarck*. We'd float a can or bottle in the water and throw rocks at it until it submerged. It was our favorite game, though neither of us knew what the hell the *Bismarck* was.

Jeff had a penchant for catching butterflies; he even had a mounting set. He would mount his bounty on a special board with little pushpins and write the name of the species in a designated space underneath. The Mammoth Viceroy was his prized catch. The only problem was that Jeff never followed the instructions for preservation correctly, and invariably they would dry up and turn into bug dust about a week later.

Jeff was as happy a kid as you could find in Forest Hills in the 1950s: rolling down the grassy hills laughing; standing up, spinning round and round in circles with his long gangly arms outstretched; then falling over like a drunken monkey.

Jeff would coax me to join him but warned, "Don't throw up on me!"

I did both of the above.

We found ways to share just about everything, boosting each other up trees on sunny days and switching off verses of "Oh! Susanna" in the basement on rainy ones.

My big brother was outgoing and adventurous, cheerful and talented, and, as I said before, brave. He wasn't weird. He wasn't angry or removed or troubled or sickly or lonely or concerned. Jeff was the smiling, happy kid with the long legs, running through the thick grass, chasing butterflies, calling to me.

When I close my eyes and think of my brother, those are the first things I see.