LIFE: AN OVERVIEW
or
Sorry, kids. After this, you're on your own.

When I was a teenager— not exactly when Tyrannosaurus Rex was the neighborhood bully, but a few decades before Taylor Swift squeezed the juice out of her first pimple —I was wandering cocky and aimless amid the halls of Hillside Junior High School and then Bridgewater Raritan High School West in Somerville, New Jersey. I was plagued by worries that shouldn't have troubled me until I was well into adulthood. I was at that age when— not to get overly dramatic about it —I had no idea who I was, what I was doing, or why I was even here. I didn't have Hannah's first clue where I fit in, who I fit in with, or if I fit in at all. I didn't know *how* the world worked, *if* it worked, or who I could trust. Who were my real friends? No one— not my parents, not my teachers, not my relatives or counselors —had ever explained to me why we were learning the things we were in school and what good it was ever going to do us. Worse, the FUTURE were looming, and I felt like there were a million things we needed to know about Life and living that had nothing to do with school. But they had everything to do with how I saw myself when I looked in the mirror, or failed a math test, when my dog died, when my father helped me open my own checking account at the bank and what to do when I "bounced" my first check. It had everything to do with having been taught by my parents to be honest and to treat other people with the same courtesy and respect I wanted them to show me. All around me kids were cheating on their homework and bullying each other. Not everyone, certainly, but enough that I developed a bad case of FOMO. Was there something about teendom I was missing? More troubling still, what they weren't teaching in school that had me up at night tossing and turning had everything with the future me. About getting a job and making enough money to live out on my own (honestly, what were the chances I would ever play centerfield for the Baltimore Orioles?). It had everything to do with Love and how I felt about Christine Neider. I was so lovestruck for the girl I couldn't see straight, and yet I was sure she wouldn't go out with me if I asked her thousand times. Did she even know I was alive?

It frustrated me that my teachers were not teaching us, the students, the information and skills we were going to need to succeed in Life the way our parents and society expected us to— tools like self-reliance, a basic understanding of money, civic responsibility, social and cultural awareness, critical thinking skills, well-calibrated emotional gyroscopes— and, well you get the idea. Oh sure, we were good at social media, video games, and a Whack-a-Mole variety of college prep tests: pre-AP, AP, Honors, STEM, PSAT, SAT, ACT, LSAT. All of them designed, though no one ever said this out loud or in so many words, to prepare us for a future that even the best experts in the world, could see or predict. The technological and geopolitical landscapes change too quickly.

Think about your cell phone. Does it look and function the way a cell phone did four years ago? How long have WhatsApp, Venmo, and Tik-Tok been around? Since 1990, there have been 34 new countries created. A couple of those countries, Kosovo and South Sudan, did not exist when you were born.

But what about a lifetime of being a *person*? A citizen. A responsible consumer? A competent, loving spouse and parent?All of us need to know how to function in the world. All of us will face joys and triumphs in Life; all of us will face heartache and despair. But most of the time in between those highs and lows we'll be spending our time living Life. Doing the everyday stuff. As John Lennon of the Beatles famously said once, "Life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans."

That's what this book is about. Things you need to know to help make your life run as smoothly as possible. Things your school won't teach you.

Before we get started, though, there are a couple of things I want you to know.

One, is that I was a teacher for many years. I taught middle school and high school, the dangerous years. I took on the wild and treacherous teenagers of America with fire in my eyes, steel in my spine, and ice water in my veins. But I also called upon my own vivid memories of what those tumultuous wonder years were like for me when I was a kid.

Second, is that I'm a father. I have two sons of my own.

Third, is that I deliberately did not interview any so-called experts on any of the topics in this book, though such "experts" abound. These little Life Lessons are meant to be informal, just between you and me.

Picture us sitting under a shade tree in the park on a beautiful spring day. We're chatting about this and that— you know, how many bananas are in a bunch, that sort of thing — when out of nowhere the subject of, say, peer pressure comes up. You shake your head in despair and say, "It's everywhere. Adults say, 'Ignore them. March to your own drum beat.' But it's not that easy. I mean, when all of your friends are pressing you to be like them, to look or be a certain way, and you want them to *stay* being your friends, what are you supposed to do? 'Just say no'? It doesn't work that way."

I know it doesn't. Now, I could answer you like a teacher—you know, say something lame like, "Just be yourself! It's okay to say no." Or, "You're an original! You don't have to give in to all the copycats." I don't know about you, but when *I* was a kid . . .

Whoa! Wait a minute! "When *I* was a kid?" What teenager wants to hear, "Why, when *I* was your age . . . ?"

Sorry about that. I was just remembering how Bruce Dertz used to stuff me in my locker at lunchtime every day and how the first thing I saw when someone finally heard my muffled cries and let me out were the insanely cheerful posters taped up on the wall right *above* my locker telling me to "Be Calm and Say No to Peer Pressure." I'd wanted to rip them down and tear them to shreds.

Believe me, kids, I get it. I really do.

Hey. Quick little story I just remembered:

One summer a number of years ago, I was visiting a friend in Puerto Rico who was stationed in Ceiba at what was then Roosevelt Roads Naval Base. Among other things, he was learning to fly. Not jets for the Navy- little four and six-seater Cessna and Beechcraft airplanes.

One morning we decided to combine business with pleasure by taking one of the local flying club's airplanes over to Saint Thomas to get its radio repaired. We figured that since it was going to take most of the day to get the radio fixed, we might as well go snorkeling in one of the nearby lagoons while we waited.

Two things happened that morning that impacted my entire outlook on life and what it means to be prepared. The first was that we flew to Saint Thomas under VFR—Visual Flight Rules —since we had no radio and no way to contact air traffic control. For ninety minutes we had to constantly watch out for other aircraft potentially coming at us

from every direction. Even on a cloudless Caribbean day spotting another small plane coming at you or crossing your path at 120 miles an hour half a mile away is a challenge. But when a twin prop commercial “puddle jumper” overtakes you at 200 miles an hour less than a quarter mile over your left shoulder, you learn just how rapidly Life can change your situation. Or end it.

The second thing that happened that day was that I got more or less cornered by a menacing-looking barracuda while we were snorkeling. There I was, in crystal clear water a hundred yards from shore, being circled by a grinning three and a half-foot barracuda. Now, a barracuda is a pretty scary-looking fish, I have to tell you. Attacks on humans are extremely rare. Barracudas are hunters, hence the mouthful of snaggy, dagger-like teeth, but they’re also scavengers —and I had never come face-to-face with anything more threatening in the water before than a small jellyfish. Knowing pretty much nothing about Caribbean marine life, I had no idea what to do. I didn’t know what the barracudas had in mind, whether he thought I was a large predator and he was waiting around for me to kill something so he could vacuum up the table scraps after I had eaten, or if he was eyeing me with bad intent and a growling emptiness in his stomach. On land, of course, I would have *owned* that barracuda. But in the water? Not so much. I was *his* entrée if he wanted me. I realized in those perilous, helpless moments in the water that there are times when Life presents a problem, a setback, a danger, or a trial to you that there’s just no getting away from. That’s when it helps to be prepared for what’s coming and to know what you’re doing.

Which is why I wrote this book. Life is full of stray airplanes and marauding barracudas. You need to know how to deal with them.