



The Art of Confession

Novelist Darin Strauss
grapples with grief,
guilt, and a new genre
by Andrea Crawford

“Half my life ago, I killed a girl.”

With these words, novelist Darin Strauss begins his first book of nonfiction. *Half a Life* (McSweeney’s), which won the 2010 National Book Critics Circle award for autobiography in March, opens on a Saturday afternoon in 1988 when Strauss (GSAS ’97), a graduate of the MFA program and now associate professor of creative writing at NYU, was in the final month of his senior year of high school. He was driving three friends in his family’s Oldsmobile to play miniature golf on Long Island, when Celine Zilke, a fellow student from school, riding her bicycle along the shoulder of the road, swerved in front of his car.

It was a stunning admission, one that until recently few people outside of Strauss’s closest circle knew about. But a few years ago, when he was 36 years old—exactly twice his age as when the accident occurred—Strauss learned that his wife was pregnant with twins. At that point, he says, “I started to understand a little more viscerally how parents would feel losing a child.” The moment resonated, too, because Strauss felt he had been living his life since the accident for two people—just as the girl’s mother had told him to do (*see excerpt on page 48*). The confluence of events called for a reexamination, he says from his office in the Lillian Vernon Creative Writers House, “and the way I examine things, I guess, is writing them.”

It soon became obvious that the 2006 Guggenheim fellow, whose work has been translated into 14 languages, had actually been writing about his past all along without realizing it. His first novel, the international best-seller *Chang and Eng*, told the story of conjoined twins and opened with the death of one: “This is the end I have feared since we were a child.” His second novel, *The Real McCoy*, a 2002 *New York Times* Notable Book, introduces a man who comes to New York City and “hides his identity,” Strauss notes, “which is basically what I did.” His third novel, the 2008 best-seller *More Than It Hurts You*, portrays a suburban family living with a troubling secret. Passages of it follow the real events of Strauss’s life so closely that similar scenes appear in both the novel and the memoir.

In facing his past directly, Strauss began writing what he thought would be notes only for himself. These turned into an unpublished essay and then into a segment that aired on the public-radio program *This American Life*. That would be the end of it, he assumed, until e-mails started coming in. After a woman asked for the text of the broadcast to share with a boy from her town who had been in a similar accident, Strauss decided to expand the essay into a book, in the hope that he might help others. The soft-spoken author is quick to apologize that this “sounds really lame and self-congratulatory,” but he knew that such a book might have helped him. After publication, messages continued to arrive in the hundreds, from veterans and others with post-traumatic stress disorder, from people who have lost family members in accidents like his.

While Strauss didn’t write the book to make himself feel better (“If I wanted to do that,” he says, “I would have just written the journals”), the process of publishing it has transformed him. It has meant months of giving interviews, answering questions at public readings, and talking about the tragedy with strangers, a repeated act of confession that the author has found cathartic. “It makes it easier to talk about,” he says. “Now [it’s like] I’m going to AA, basically, standing up before a room of strangers and talking about something that’s difficult to talk about to anyone.”

The healing power of confession, of course, is well documented. But outside the privacy of a therapist’s office or religious confessional, it can be a fraught act. Certainly today when politicians confess wrongdoings as part of media strategies to retain power and authors invent memoir in order to publish books, confession has become demeaned and devalued. Strauss approached the work keenly aware of this context—both as a person who had a story that demanded honesty for the other people involved, and as a novelist who knows what good narrative requires.

Strauss had set some ground rules for himself: He didn’t want to traffic in sensationalism, profit from misery, make a confession, or ask for forgiveness. “Good stories don’t take sides,” he says. “I wanted to treat my younger self as a character with flaws, as a novelist would, and say, ‘How did this person act in ways that are less than perfect?’” An editor recommended, in fact, that he cut one particularly unflattering scene that occurs in the immediate aftermath of the accident, in which he overplays his emotional response in order to impress some young female bystanders. Strauss left it in—as well as a number of other painfully honest admissions. “I thought, if I don’t make myself look bad, then there’s no reason to do the book,” he says, because “then you stop being a writer and become a PR person or a politician, which is the last thing I wanted to do with this.”

He also rejects any notion of closure, which he calls a term of “psychobabble” that doesn’t reflect the way life works. “You never get over something like this,” he says. “It’ll always be with me, but hopefully more integrated now into the rest of my life, in a way that’s healthy. I’m sure when my kids start riding bikes, I’ll be a little freaked out, more than most parents, but the key thing is to have brought it into the fabric of my life, so it’s not this stray strand.”

No matter what the book has done for him personally, Strauss has given readers a fascinating portrait of a now-extinct period in American life, a time before Google when an 18-year-old could go away to college and leave his tragic headlines behind. *Half a Life* is as much a psychological portrait of human grief and the emotional toll of secrecy as an elegantly crafted work of narrative art by an accomplished novelist who hopes never to write a memoir again.

Excerpted from *Half a Life* by Darin Strauss

My father and I went to the funeral alone. I'm not sure why my mother didn't join us. It wasn't that I hadn't wanted her to. But as a family, we'd fallen into a set of dance steps: when calamity happened, Mom would stand off to the side, looking into her soda until someone would ask if she wanted to join in or not.

When it comes to the funeral itself, my memory squints and mumbles.

At the church door I took a shaky gulp and wrapped my palms around the handles and my heart was a live bird nailed to my chest. Selfishness was thrumming at me: Don't open this door, just take off! Maybe it only *seems* like the right thing to do, showing up today, but probably mine is the last face her parents and friends and whoever wants to see, yes that's true maybe it only *appears* that the more mature thing is to open this door right now, but in fact the braver thing is maybe to *not* face it. I mean, I am the guy who drove the car and I'm showing up to her funeral? Are you serious about this? Because no one and I mean no one would expect you to have to, even if it is the manlier thing to do, or whatever, because you're not even a man yet really, etc.

My father stood at the door and showed no expression of any kind: it was up to me. I opened the door.

I bowed and averted through the crowd, I swallowed and hesitated. This was—and remains—the hardest thing I've ever had to do. But I was relieved to feel tears on my face. Among the selves jostling inside me was an actor who could manipulate people, while the frightened kid in there sweated out his confusion. Real tears, some part of me knew, were right. I wasn't fully aware of most of this: I felt so much but understood so little, could express so little. I greeted the wetness on my face with relief.

An old man clamped his eyes on me as if he wanted to cut my heart out. Imagine outliving not only your children, but your grandchildren. The man was frail, with the body—slim hips, short, a big belly—of a schoolgirl eight months into a mistake. He stood to the left of my path and didn't move; my father and I had to glide around him. His head revolved carefully, never releasing me from the grip of his gaze. I turned and looked—my father had, too—and the man kept staring.

(I now think tears don't mean anything so

much as overload. You don't know *what* you feel. So tears spill out.)

I was bewildered and guilt-ridden and I hadn't even faced Celine's parents yet.

And then I did. Some mortician or other heartache functionary shunted me into a back-chamber where they were—it was like a green room for this particular death's celebrities. I tried, for some reason, not to cry here, as if *that* was what was expected of me. I was trying to act as a kind but hard-judging person would want me to act.

I had the child's faith that going through every official rite—psychiatry, returning to class—would restore me to an appropriate place in everyone's eyes. *Darin was brave enough to go to the funeral. He didn't duck, nor did he shirk. He did The Right Thing.* I hadn't realized that the hard-judging person was myself.

Celine's father, a big man, came to me with a surprisingly light step. He didn't know what to do with his face. It was soft and jowly, and he wore glasses that gave him a Tom Bosley, *Happy Days* aspect. This made me think he'd be gentle and understanding.

In the long moment before he found words, and as he took my hand, Mr. Zilke settled on an expression, a hard-won glint of: *I will be friendlier than you have any right to expect me to be.*

"You're Darin."

My voice and my face behaved as if this were a regular meeting between cordial strangers. I was nervous about sounding nervous, and nervous about sounding anything but nervous. (Even now I feel my face go red as I remember this: having complicated her parents' grief with the question of how to treat me was perhaps the worst thing I could have done. A possibly brave act for me, but awful for them.)

Celine's mother joined us. (The thing is, I still don't know what would have been the right and respectful thing to do, other than having shown up.) I think her mother attempted a smile, but not a single muscle obeyed; she stood there exempt from all expression. Then her cheeks flared a difficult color. She was preparing to do something.

First, a clenching of her body, a steeling herself for something personally odious. She let out a noise: part sob and sigh, part venom. She hugged me quickly, and just as quickly

shrank away.

"I know it was not your fault, Darin. They all tell me it was not your fault." She swallowed, and took me in with exhausted eyes. "But I want you to remember something. Whatever you do in your life, you have to do it twice as well now." Her voice went dim. "Because you are living it

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for two people." Her face was a picture of the misery that had worn out the voice. "Can you promise me? Promise?"

Yes, of course, of course, Mrs. Zilke—and the accident churned my stomach. And here again came that reflector sliding up, like those raindrops on the shrink's Porsche: up and over my windshield. But somehow it still didn't seem right to promise Mrs. Zilke this. How can you commit to something you don't even understand? Was I to become the Zilkes' son now, visiting on school breaks, calling in with news of grades and girls?

I tried to scrub my face of all emotion and message, to let Mrs. Zilke fill it with whatever meaning would bring her comfort.

"Can you promise me, Darin?" Her eyes got very hectic. "*Promise.* You're living for two. Okay? Okay?"

I nodded quickly.

And she continued to gaze at me. Not too unkindly or even severely, just for a long while. I swallowed what had become a big pointy stone in my throat. Some clock somewhere kept beating its subdued cymbal. I looked away and then back. She was still looking at me. *Why are you the one who is still alive?* her eyes seemed to be saying.

I opened my mouth to tell her—what? Nothing. Finally, at once, she turned to leave: she wanted, forever, to have no part of this life she'd doubly freighted. My dad leveled his hand on my back, on my shoulder. A kind of drape of family, holding me, recasting me as his, and our family's.

Next I'm standing before Celine's open coffin. I don't remember how I got here, who's brought me. I only remember the tingly awareness of the two hundred whispers at my back, and how that got every hair on my body to stand

up. Celine looked almost like herself. What I mean is, she now looked more like her high-school self than she had when I'd mistaken her for someone pale and dozing on the road.

I haven't really described her appearance at all. Her face was soft and broad, pretty and unpretending. Pretty without being stagy about it.

Everybody wants life to speak to them with special kindness. Every personal story begs to be steered toward reverie, toward some relief from unpleasant truths: That you are a self, that beyond anything else you want the best for that self. That, if it is to be you or someone else, you need it to be you, no matter what. I'm not sure I can get across just how much I want to be extra-generous to Celine here. Extra-generous and, you've probably noticed, extrawriterly. It's a coward's tactic. I'm trying to write all the difficulty away.

What if I tell you it was windy when I fled the memorial, so that all the trees moaned in protest. Is that puffed up enough, labored and lyrical enough, to seem like something extracted from a novel—and not just a real day of a real boy and a real dead girl?

I want very badly to tell you Celine was unusually beautiful. *Celine was unusually beautiful.* And to equate her with quiet, sleeping Juliet—or some such overdone b.s. Will the tuneful balancing of q and t sounds—the thing I've learned to do with my life after Celine—isolate me from the reality of what happened? (Which was merely this: here was a plainly attractive and nice girl I kind of knew who died after she pedaled into my car.)

The truth is—if I even have access to the truth—I remember Celine only with certain key words: athletic, broad face, good-natured, bicycle. These words call up no images. Real memory is a mix of blast and keepsake. For me, with this event, there is nothing—at least not in the part of the brain I live in. My mind looks away. I see only letters on a page, vowels and consonants, press and flop. There: I'm still try-

ing to write and write and write away the reflector....

So I can't share the image of what lay inside the coffin. I don't have enough mental steam to make it all the way there.

What I do remember is self-centered—my own turning from the casket. I'm hurrying past all the stares in this neat and unreal spectacle. The heels of my unfamiliar dress shoes clack on the church floor. My stomach has been clutched and empty all morning; it's already been a long, hungry day. Soon enough I'm spluttering past the old grandfather, almost at the exit. And my dad keeps buzzing in my ear, "Keep your head up; just keep your head up..." The grandfather's head is dropped so he won't have to bear the sight of me.

I hadn't realized I'd been slouching my own head. I felt buoyed by an almost infant-level admiration for my father, and I wondered if I would ever know the things grown-ups know. I lifted my head. ■

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