Foreword

In early 2000, I got onstage, I told a story at this thing called The Moth, and something in my heart and head felt better. I remember talking about my biggest screwups, about some childhood dreams that hadn't come to pass, and about how my attempts to pursue them at half-steam were clumsy and ill-fated. The story I told that night, about going to Austin to become a singer-songwriter and discovering the hard way that I wasn't prepared or particularly good at songwriting, felt like the most deflating stuff any of us go through in personal defeats. Up to the moment I stepped onstage at The Moth that night, my life felt as if the stain of failure had been on me since about age twenty. But when I opened my mouth and shared a story about the details of that trip to Austin, the crowd laughed. Which made me smile through the bundle of nerves I was that night, and somehow made me feel like maybe, just maybe, everything would be okay in this life.

If I can recommend storytelling to you for any reason at all, it would be that storytelling helps you realize that the biggest, scariest, most painful or regretful things in your head get small and

surmountable when you share them with two, or three, or twenty, or three thousand people. The other reason I can recommend storytelling, and learning about it with the book you're holding, is that we're all disappearing — you, me, everyone we know and love. A little heavy for a foreword maybe, but when you tell stories, you do yourself a kind favor by taking a moment to write your name in the wet cement of life before you head to whatever is next. This is a much more selfless act than conventional wisdom would have you believe. It's a little like leaving a note in the logbook on the trail that others will be hiking after you, a note that might give the next hiker a clue: "Keep your eyes open for rattlesnakes by the bluff at the two-mile mark" or "There's fresh water at the fire lookout if you're running low" or "I live in the woods now, and I don't care if I never see an iPhone again after staring at one for a decade until my head was tortured, my eyes were ruined, and my heart was broken."

Telling stories about your life lets people know they're not alone; and it lets some of the people closest to you — like family and loved ones — see your life apart from the context of family and without the kind of revisionist hindsight we can sometimes fall into concerning the ones we love most. Opening your mouth, getting out of your head, and your house, so you can be fully engaged in your life and the lives of others for the night — that's what storytelling is all about, if you ask me. Or maybe it's just as my friend Jesse Thorn joked: "Storytelling. In case you're not familiar with it, it's kind of like a less-funny stand-up comedy." That line cracked me up — in some ways, it's right on the money. Then weeks later, it oddly made me realize why I love storytelling so much: at its best, it's not out to razzle-dazzle you at any cost. There's no adversarial relationship with the audience; they're not people leaning back in their chairs, drinking their two-drink minimum, signing an implicit contract that basically says "You

better make me laugh." There is no volley of anger like I've seen in comedy clubs; just a crowd of people who want to hear what you have to say and in some cases might be stepping up to the mic right after you to share something about themselves.

Sometimes it's the funniest thing you've heard, and you're rolling. Other times someone is getting attacked by a shark. Or going to space. Or sitting next to their crashed car and reevaluating their life. Or wondering how they got caught up in a world of white-collar crime. Or just dealing with an average Tuesday evening and trying to make sense of life like the rest of us on the planet. How can you not walk out of that room a changed person after feeling that connection?

In my early years of hosting The Moth StorySLAM, I never gave much thought to the numbers the judges in the audience hold up to score each storyteller. The scoring has always seemed in the spirit of fun, a device used to get the audience involved and to add some friendly stakes to the show. And early on, it never seemed to me that the storytellers were any more concerned with the scores than would be, say, a few friends throwing darts in a bar or playing poker for acorns on a camping trip. Even when we weren't great onstage (and I'm also pointing the finger at myself here, as a host who sometimes tries to tell a story in the top or middle of the show), it was just part of the fun, because we were all there for each other, laughing or shrugging it off when a story went sideways on us. If nothing else, when I bombed something, I figured maybe I had been of service — hey, maybe someone in the audience who was too nervous to put their name in the hat and share a story heard me and thought, "What am I afraid of? I'm not going to do any worse than that guy!"

At some point as the years started racing past, I noticed storytellers caring about the scores; sometimes people would get angry if they didn't get the score they thought they deserved.

Storytelling was getting a lot of press at this point — *The Moth Podcast* was up to tens of millions of downloads a year, and tons of other great new storytelling shows were popping up around the country. And it was around this time that I started noticing a different kind of people coming around — a more competitive type of personality. I was vexed, frankly. It had always seemed like the most humble, fun-loving thing in the world to me. I mean, even the name of it never sounded cool: *storytelling*. How could you develop an ego or agenda to become internet- or podcast-famous (actual things, swear to god)? It's a little like wanting to have the biggest house on the tiny-home scene.

It seemed like there was a phase when suddenly people who you could tell were seasoned actors or comedians were there; it felt like they were just there looking for a way to get another gig on their résumé, hanging around just long enough to see if this was going to be the thing that got them on TV somehow. Oh, no — the cool kids were coming around!

I felt I was developing a way of sussing out people who were the real deal and not just coming around for a hot minute to use storytelling as a stepping-stone. That had to be right about when I met Matthew Dicks. And here's the twist: not only could you tell he was the real deal, the kind of person you wished was a family friend back home, but he somehow made me see that it was okay to want to work at getting better at this stuff. He's the person I would watch whenever I was lucky enough to be hosting a show he was in. He taught me that trying to get better at storytelling also meant trying to get better at being a friend, or a son, a boyfriend, a brother, or just a better person. He's a guy you can tell has been as heartbroken as you or me or anyone else carrying a heart around on earth, but he manages to set that aside, in the background and subtext of his stories.

It would be easy for a guy like Matthew Dicks to get onstage

and tell an emotionally overwrought story to manipulate listeners into feeling something; oversharing and "emotion porn" are super-fast ways to get a reaction from an audience in the heat of the moment, and they wear off just as fast, leaving a mental hangover in their wake. But Matthew Dicks forgoes the aforementioned tricks and instead tells stories like the one about trying to impress his mom by jumping his BMX bike off the roof of his house growing up. And having it end miserably, but not without his sister nailing her cue of turning to their mother, as instructed by Matt, and exclaiming a then-popular TV show's catchphrase: "That's incredible!" This story is a perfect example of how Matt somehow gets you to feel bigger emotional stakes in subtext instead of hitting you over the head with them.

Matthew came along at a time when the New York storytelling scene needed someone to remind it that storytellers are, first and foremost, a family, no matter how large, no matter how many different shows exist, no matter in how many different cities or countries. The family might be millions of people all over the world at this point, but Matthew Dicks is the guy who makes you realize it was that big all along. That those of us performing on this so-called storytelling scene haven't been doing anything new at all, just stepping up to a mic to partake in something that's been happening since the dawn of time.

This book is the helping hand they didn't have in the caves of Altamira. I mean, in fairness, they didn't need it back then — they seemed to do just fine at telling stories. But the world has changed a bit over the past thirty-five thousand years, and the book you're holding is a great resource. I've always said that a good storytelling show feels like a cross between therapy, rehab, and hanging out after dinner with friends. The idea of reading a book to get better at telling stories might seem a little academic, but you're about to find out that this is a book written by someone

with a great heart, who believes you've got a great life full of stories in you and ahead of you.

I have to admit I have a soft spot for the way Matt fell into storytelling — that he went to a Moth StorySLAM to make good on a promise, secretly hoping deep down that his name wouldn't get called. And once he was in that room with everybody, he stuck around, but it's almost as if he didn't quite know what good could possibly come from it. Matthew Dicks hasn't so much written a book about storytelling technique, or angling to get ahead in the smallest waters of the entertainment scene, or marshaling the will and ego to elbow your way past folks. He's written a book about you and how it would be great to have you hanging out and telling stories with everyone. Even if you don't quite know what good could possibly come from it.

— ***Dan Kennedy,*** host of *The Moth Podcast*

PREFACE

A Coward Tells a Story

It's July 12, 2011. I'm sitting in the Nuyorican Poets Café in downtown Manhattan on a Monday night, though the buzz in the room makes it feel like a Saturday. It's hot and crowded. A possible firetrap. The smell of stale beer lingers in the air. Hipster is piled upon hipster, sitting in metal folding chairs, standing at the rear of the club, and crowded around small, wobbly tables. A spotlight is trained on a small stage peppered with Igloo coolers, black electrical cords, and audio equipment. A single microphone stands at center stage under the spotlight's warm glow.

Dan Kennedy — a man I've never met but whose voice I know from his audiobooks and *The Moth Podcast* — is standing onstage, hosting the show. Dan is lean, with a wry smile and dark hair. He's in his midthirties. Relaxed. Confident. Everything that I imagined from listening to his voice so many times. Plus, he's funny. Effortlessly funny. Also sweet. Within minutes, he's wormed his way into my heart.

This is my first time attending a Moth StorySLAM. The first time I plan to take the stage and bare my soul. Ten minutes ago, I

dropped my name in a canvas tote bag. Dan called it a hat, but I didn't dare quibble over terminology. All I know is that from that proverbial hat, ten names will be drawn to tell stories.

I'm praying that my name doesn't get picked.

After months of imagining this moment, the last thing I want to do now is perform for this audience. I'm only here because I stupidly promised my friends that I would someday tell a story at The Moth. Now all I want to do is bolt. Either that or sit here silently for the rest of the night. I'd be willing to remain silent the rest of my life if I could avoid going up on that stage.

Two years ago, my friend Kim recommended that I listen to The Moth's weekly podcast. The Moth, an international storytelling organization, produces shows that feature true stories told live onstage without notes. Experienced storytellers, terrified rookies like me, and the occasional celebrity take the stage to share meaningful moments from their lives with hundreds and sometimes thousands of people. Kim suspected that I'd enjoy the stories featured on *The Moth Podcast*, and she was right.

Listening to The Moth's storytellers, I instantly fell in love with their vulnerability, humor, and honesty. A Moth story offered me a rare glimpse into an entirely new world. I was amazed by the instant connection I felt to storytellers whom I could not see and did not know.

I didn't know it at the time, but even though storytelling seemed mysterious and impossible, I was already immersed in the craft. Whether I was delivering a talk about my latest novel or speaking to parents during an open house or even flirting with my future wife, it turns out that I have been telling stories for a long time.

More importantly, I also had a natural affinity for sharing my less-than-noble moments with others. I've always known that embarrassment could get a laugh. Telling about my most shameful

and foolish moments had always brought me closer to listeners. Honesty is attractive. A friend of mine once said that I "live out loud." It describes me well.

Perhaps I first learned this lesson on the page. Having written a blog since 2004, I've long understood the power of unbridled honestly and unflinching vulnerability. I've managed to capture the attention of a sizable audience by writing openly and truthfully about my life. I've established friendships with people from around the world through the power of my words. But this was new. Listening to a storyteller share a private story so openly in front of an audience captivated me.

I eagerly awaited Tuesday afternoons for the new episodes of *The Moth Podcast* to drop. I researched other storytelling podcasts and began listening to them too. Consuming stories in greater and greater numbers. I didn't know it yet, but I had begun my education in storytelling.

Over the course of the next year, The Moth grew in popularity, and as it did, more and more people began finding their podcast. Friends who'd become fans of The Moth were soon calling me, telling me that I should go to New York and tell a story.

"You've led such a horrible life!" they'd say. "Your life has really sucked. You'd be great at storytelling."

Although I wouldn't say that my life has sucked, they weren't entirely wrong. To say my life has been colorful would be an understatement. The short list of moments that my friends were referring to includes:

- Paramedics brought me back to life through CPR *on two separate occasions*.
- I was arrested, jailed, and tried for a crime I did not commit.
- I was robbed at gunpoint. Handguns pressed against my head. Triggers pulled.

- I lived with a family of Jehovah's Witnesses, sharing a small room off their kitchen with a guy named Rick, who spoke in tongues in his sleep, and with the family's indoor pet goat.
- I was the victim of a widespread, anonymous smear campaign that included a thirty-seven-page packet of excerpted, highly manipulated blog posts that was sent to the mayor, the town council, the school board, and more than three hundred families in the school district where I teach. This packet compared me to the Virginia Tech killer and demanded that I be fired, along with my wife (who was teaching with me at the time) and my principal. If I wasn't fired, the authors of the letter warned us, the packet would be sent to the press, and legal action would commence.
- I discovered that I am a carrier of a gene that will ultimately lead to a disease that killed my grandfather, my aunt, and my mother.

That's just the tip of the iceberg.

My friend Rachel recently told me about the time that her alarm company called as she and her husband were driving home from Cape Cod. "Your house might be on fire," the representative from the alarm company warned. "We're sending the fire department over right now just in case."

Rachel and her husband, David, spent the next twenty minutes wondering if their house was a smoldering pile of ash before finally pulling onto their street and discovering it was a false alarm.

"Oh!" I said excitedly when she was finished telling her story. "That reminds me of the time my house caught fire when I was a kid, and firefighters pulled me from my bed while I was asleep!"

"*Of course* that happened!" she said, rolling her eyes. "I have

a story about my house possibly burning down, and you have a story about an actual fire, complete with firefighters and a midnight rescue. Is there anything that *hasn't* happened to you?"

It was a good point. I've led a difficult life in many regards.

So as more of my friends began finding *The Moth Podcast* and listening to the stories, more and more of them began reaching out, encouraging me to go to New York and tell a story for The Moth.

Tell the story about the time you went headfirst through the windshield and died on the side of the road!

What about the time you accidentally flashed our sixth-grade math class?

What about the time you called your dog back across the street into the path of an oncoming truck?

Tell the story about the time you were hired as a stripper for a bachelorette party in the crew room of a McDonald's!

Weren't you hypnotized onstage once and somehow ended up completely naked in front of the entire audience?

"Yes!" I told my friends. "I'll go to New York and tell a story."

They were excited. They were certain that I would succeed. They were so enthusiastic that I couldn't help but get excited too. I was going to tell a story for The Moth. I told everyone about my plan. I was going to take the stage at a Moth StorySLAM in New York City and compete against the best storytellers in the world. I was going to bare my soul just as I had heard so many storytellers do on the podcast. I couldn't wait.

Then I didn't go.

Despite my excitement, I also knew the truth: I wasn't a storyteller. I didn't know the first thing about storytelling. I was a novelist. I made my living by inventing my characters and plots. I didn't tell true stories. I wasn't burdened by annoying facts and

inconvenient truths. My talent lay in making up stuff quietly in a room by myself.

Not only did I have no idea how to craft a true personal story, but I was also terrified about performing in front of hundreds of disaffected New York hipsters wearing organic denim rompers and drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon. They were the cool kids from high school who listened to underground indie bands and oozed irony. I was terrified. Though I'd been working as a wedding DJ for almost two decades and was more than comfortable speaking to large audiences, I'd never actually *performed* in front of an audience before. No one had ever expected me to be entertaining or funny or vulnerable or honest. I simply steered the party in the right direction. Kept the best man sober and on his feet through his toast. Introduced "Mr. and Mrs." to their wedding guests for the very first time. Coaxed overwrought aunts and exhausted coworkers onto the dance floor for the Electric Slide. Mainly I spoke clearly and played music. I wasn't prepared for the high-stakes world of storytelling.

So instead of heading to New York, I remained safely at home. I taught my fifth graders, DJed my weddings, wrote my novels, and avoided The Moth. I made excuses, which were really lies.

I'll go over winter break.
I promise I'll go once I finish my next novel.
Maybe I'll give it a shot during my school's April vacation.
I'll just wait until this school year ends.
I'll go next year.

I became an excuse machine. The excuses became part of a playlist of lies that was perpetually cued up in my head and fell instantly from my lips. Each excuse was worse than the last. Each excuse made me feel worse than the last. And it was getting hard to keep my excuses straight — which ones I'd told to which group of friends.

Then I had an idea. Rather than performing for strangers in New York City, I'd start my own storytelling organization in my hometown. I had no idea what that might entail, but anything sounded better than New York.

Yes, I decided that it would be easier to write a business plan, explore nonprofit status, negotiate contracts with venues, book storytellers, and purchase sound and recording equipment than it would be to stand on a stage in Manhattan and tell a five-minute story. Better to launch a company so I could tell stories for friends and family than compete against seasoned professionals in front of complete strangers.

This was the solution. I would create an opportunity to tell stories in a warm, safe, and accepting environment somewhere nearby. Maybe even right around the corner from my home. Brilliant.

Then I didn't do that either. Just as I did with performing for The Moth, I delayed. I made excuses. I assured my friends that I'd begin producing my own storytelling show any day. I'd find the perfect venue and launch an organization dedicated to storytelling and modeled after The Moth. But instead of doing that, I deflected their inquiries. Pushed back time lines. Made more and more excuses. Just like when I'd gone to New York to perform, I was afraid.

My failure to follow through on my promises began eating away at me. This was one of the only times in life when I'd said that I was going to do something without any real intention of doing it. Guilt and shame began to weigh on me. I started to think of myself as a coward. Finally I couldn't take it anymore. I had to come clean. I had to do the thing I was afraid to do.

In June of 2011, I told my wife, Elysha, that I needed to go to New York and tell a story. I said that I wouldn't be able to live

with myself if I didn't. "One and done," I said over a dinner of chicken and rice. "I'll check it off the list and never look back."

"Sounds good," she said, far too nonchalantly for my taste. Elysha has this consistent, annoying confidence in my abilities. She assumes that I'm capable of almost anything, which both undermines her appreciation for my abject terror and sets expectations far too high for my liking.

"I'll get tickets," she said, thus spelling my doom.

This is how I find myself sitting at a wobbly table in a packed performance space, praying that Dan Kennedy won't call my name. With luck, I can return home and tell my friends that I tried like hell to tell a story at The Moth. Bad luck got in my way, I'd explain. My name remained stuck in the bag. This failed attempt at storytelling might buy me a year of dignity. Maybe my friends would forget about my promise entirely.

Things are looking good for me. Name after name has been drawn from the hat, which really is a tote bag, despite what Dan Kennedy continues to say, and my name has yet to be called. Storytellers have taken the stage and told their stories on the theme of "ego." I've liked most of the stories too. Overall the storytellers seemed to know what they were doing and adored the spotlight, although not everything has gone perfectly for them. An older man who called himself Uncle Frank told a story that referred to his penis. When Dan Kennedy asked for scores from the three teams of judges, each held up two white cards indicating the storyteller's score on a ten-point scale (though it appeared to really be a 7.0–10-point scale, with tenths of a point differentiating stories).

Except that one of the teams ignored the 7.0–10 norm and gave Uncle Frank a 5.0, a score so low that it didn't make any sense. His story wasn't bad at all. I really enjoyed it. I flinched when the score was announced, almost as if I'd been the one scored poorly. The score seemed harsh and irrational. More to

the point, the scoring suddenly seemed unpredictable and terrifying. I didn't know Uncle Frank at the time, but already I wanted to hug him.

"What's up with the score?" Dan Kennedy asked the judging team who'd rated Uncle Frank the lowest. "You really think his story was that bad?" Dan's quick defense of Uncle Frank reassured me.

"I heard that guy tell a story last week," one of the female judges yelled. "He talked about his penis in that story too. I'm sick of his penis."

The room burst into laughter and applause. Dan laughed. Even Frank managed a smirk.

Instead of laughing, I tensed up. My story didn't refer to my penis, but I had a few penis-related jokes about my last name. I wondered if these references might not sit well with the judges either.

But it looks as though I need not worry. The night is nearly over. Nine names have been drawn from the tote bag, and mine is still safely inside. Just one to go, and I can escape this night unscathed.

Dan opens the final slip of paper and reads the name:

"Matthew Dicks."

I freeze. I can't believe he's called my name. I was convinced that I was in the clear. I'd already begun the mental drive on I-95 back to Connecticut as the conquering hero. I was already preparing my tale of woe:

"I put my name in the tote bag at The Moth. Sadly, it wasn't drawn, but still, mission accomplished. I tried, damn it, which is more than I can say for a lot of people. I'll try again someday, maybe."

Now those dreams are dashed under the weight of having to walk onstage and tell a story.

Then it occurs to me: No one in the club knows me. I'm a stranger in a strange land. If I don't move or say a word, Dan will eventually give up on Matthew Dicks and call another name. This has already happened during the first half of the show. A name was drawn, and the storyteller failed to materialize. Dan tossed the paper aside and drew another. I can do the same thing. I can just sit still and remain silent.

That is exactly what I do. I don't move. I don't make a sound. Then Elysha's foot connects solidly with my shin. I look up.

"That's your name," she says. "Move it."

I'm trapped. I have to tell my story. My terrible wife is making me. I rise and slowly make my way to the stage. I ascend the steps and find myself standing beside Dan Kennedy. He shakes my hand and smiles, acting as if this stage is no big deal. As if standing in front of a throng of expectant New Yorkers is something we do every day. I'm a little starstruck.

As Dan begins to step aside to allow me to approach the microphone, Jenifer Hixon, the show's producer, calls out to Dan, reminding him that he hasn't recorded the scores for the previous storyteller yet.

Dan turns to me. "Sorry," he says. "Wait just a minute." He motions for me to step off the stage so he and Jenifer can record scores from the judges on a large paper chart.

Instead I remain onstage. I stumble over to the coolers along the wall and sit. I don't want to tell my story. I don't want to compete. I don't want to be here at all. I want to go home and forget this stupid idea forever. But if I'm going to tell my story to this room of storytelling connoisseurs and judgmental New Yorkers, I want to do well. I don't want to look like a fool. With this in mind, it occurs to me that spending a couple minutes onstage, getting a sense of the space and lighting and the audience, might help.

So I stay. I soak in the scenery. The height of the stage.

The angle of the spotlight. The position of the audience and the microphone. I try to relax. I try to make this space my home.

Jenifer records the scores from the prior storyteller. It's time for me to take the microphone and tell my story.

I hate this night. I despise every bit of it.

Then I begin speaking my first words into the microphone and fall instantly in love. Alone on the stage, standing before a room packed with strangers, I tell a story about learning to pole-vault in high school. I reveal my secret desire for my teammate to fail, so I could look better than he did in our teammates' eyes. I bare my soul to that room. I tell them about the ugly truth that resided at the center of my seventeen-year-old heart. I make them laugh. I make them cheer.

When I finish, I step off the stage and return to Elysha and our wobbly table. I have no idea how I've done, but I know it felt great. I already want to do it again.

Dan Kennedy asks the judges for their scores. When the final score is announced, a woman sitting beside me leans over and says, "You won!"

I look at the scoreboard. She's right. I've won my first Moth StorySLAM. I can't believe it. I return to the stage for a bow. Jenifer informs me that I'm automatically entered in the next GrandSLAM championship. I have no idea what a GrandSLAM is or what she's talking about, but I smile and thank her. I shake Dan Kennedy's hand.

I can't believe it. The next day I write the following blog post:

> *Yesterday was one of those days that I will never forget. Last night I had the honor of telling a story at one of The Moth's StorySLAMs at the Nuyorican Poets Café in the Lower East Side. My goal was to simply be chosen to tell my story, but at the end of the night, I was fortunate enough to be named the winner of the StorySLAM.*

I got home last night around 1:30, went to bed around 2:00, woke up around 5:30 to play a round of golf, and I was still walking on air. I know it sounds a little silly, but in the grand scheme of things, the birth of my daughter was probably the most important day of my life. Next comes the marriage to my wife, and then the sale of my first book, and then maybe this. Definitely this. It was that big for me.

Perhaps I'll tell more stories in the future, and The Moth will become old hat for me. Maybe this day will recede into the past with other forgettable memories. But on this day, at this moment, I couldn't be happier.

Little did I know how prescient those words would prove to be. Less than six years later, I'd won thirty-four Moth StorySLAMs in fifty-three attempts. Thirty-four wins is among the highest win totals in the two-decade history of The Moth. I'm also a four-time GrandSLAM champion (also one of the highest totals in Moth history).

Since that fateful night in 2011, I've told hundreds of stories in bars and bookstores, synagogues and churches, and theaters large and small to audiences ranging from dozens to thousands. I've performed throughout the United States and internationally, telling stories alongside other talented storytellers and in my own one-person shows. My stories have appeared on *The Moth Radio Hour* and their weekly podcasts many times and have been listened to by millions of people.

I began my storytelling career by listening to storytellers on *The Moth Podcast*. Today people listen to my stories on that same podcast and on the radio. I still can't believe it.

But remember this: I didn't go to school to become a storyteller, and I didn't grow up in a family of storytellers. My parents were like the adults in a *Peanuts* television special. There was occasional mumbling from the other room through a cloud of

secondhand smoke, but little more. My family didn't communicate through story. We barely communicated at all. I grew up in a broken home with a family that had little time or inclination to fill our lives with conversation.

I didn't dream of becoming a storyteller. As I've made clear, I only started telling because my friends shamed me into giving it a try. In other words, I'm not special. I was not groomed to be a storyteller from an early age. Storytelling is not a part of my DNA.

If I can do this, you can too.

But my friends were wrong about one thing. They thought I would be a good storyteller because I've led an unusual and challenging life. They thought that my stories of homelessness and near-death experiences and encounters with the law would make me a great performer.

In that regard, they were wrong. Terribly wrong. Fortunately for both you and me.

You need not spend time in jail or crash through a windshield or have a gun jammed against the side of your head to tell a great story. In fact the simplest stories about the smallest moments in our lives are often the most compelling.

We all have stories. You may not believe this yet, but you will. You just need to know how to find them in your everyday life and then capture them for future telling.

Let me show you how.

Part I

Finding Your Story

No one ever made a decision because of a number. They need a story.

— *Daniel Kahneman*

Writing myself into existence. I think that's what I was trying to do. And it's cool to write a song and then have it come true.

— *Ani DiFranco*

It's a human need to be told stories. The more we're governed by idiots and have no control over our destinies, the more we need to tell stories to each other about who we are, why we are, where we come from, and what might be possible.

— *Alan Rickman*

CHAPTER ONE

My Promise to You

About a year ago, a man in one of my workshops asked, "Why am I here? I don't want to stand on stages and tell stories. I don't want to compete in story slams. I'm not an entertainer. I don't get it."

It was a good question, particularly because the man in question hadn't chosen my workshop. His wife had asked him to attend.

He wasn't the first person to attend a workshop for this reason. "My wife told me to take your workshop" is a surprisingly common reason given by men sitting before me in workshops.

Perhaps you're asking the same question. If you have no desire to stand on a stage and bare your soul, why learn to find and tell great stories?

Not that long ago, I was asking the same question. Two years into my storytelling career, Elysha and I founded that Hartford-based storytelling organization that I'd once talked about with friends. We call it Speak Up. Together we produce shows throughout New England to sellout audiences numbering as high as five hundred people.

About a year into Speak Up's existence, I started teaching storytelling too. But as with my journey to becoming a storyteller, my career as a teacher of storytelling began against my will. As our Speak Up audience grew and people wanted to learn to tell stories, they began asking me to teach them the craft.

I balked. I had no interest. But they were persistent. Many wanted to take a stage and tell a story. Others saw storytelling as a potential asset in their careers as attorneys, professors, salespeople, or therapists. Still others thought storytelling might help them to make friends and improve their relationships. Buckling under the weight of their pressure, I announced that I would teach one storytelling workshop.

One and done.

Ten people spent six evenings with me in a conference room at the local library. I taught them everything I knew about storytelling. I told stories and explained my process for crafting them. I listened to their stories and offered feedback.

As with storytelling itself, I quickly realized how much I enjoyed teaching the craft. Deconstructing the elements of a good story. Building a curriculum around what I knew and was still learning. Listening to stories and helping to find ways to shape them better. Turning my students into the kinds of people who can light up a room with a great story.

My "one and done" workshop has grown into something I do regularly and with zeal today. I travel the world teaching the art and craft of storytelling.

The people I teach are varied and diverse. I teach performers and would-be performers who want to become better storytellers. Some have never taken the stage before, and others are grizzled veterans looking to improve their skills. Many of these former students have gone on to take the stage at The Moth, Speak Up, and other storytelling shows. In August of 2016, one of my students

beat me in a Moth GrandSLAM competition for the first time. I finished second, and she finished first. Perhaps I taught her a little too well.

I teach attorneys, salespeople, and business leaders who want to improve their presentation skills, sales pitches, and branding.

I teach novelists, essayists, screenwriters, television writers, poets, archivists, and other creative sorts who want to refine their understanding of story.

I teach professors, schoolteachers, ministers, priests, and rabbis who want to improve their lectures and sermons and hold the attention of their audiences.

I teach storytelling to people who want to improve their dating skills. I teach people who want to be more interesting at the dinner table. I teach grandfathers who want their grandchildren to finally listen to them. I teach students who want to tell better stories on their college applications. I teach job applicants who are looking to improve their interview skills. I teach people who want to learn more about themselves.

People have quit therapy and opted to participate in my storytelling workshops instead. While I don't endorse this decision, it's apparently working for them. Wives send their befuddled husbands to my workshops, hoping that storytelling will spark something inside them. Later they tell me how their husbands have opened up like never before. One woman told me that her husband has opened up "a little too much."

People take my workshops again and again to discover more about themselves and find ways to connect with other people through their own personal narratives. A married couple once spent their anniversary attending one of my all-day workshops because they knew it would be a chance to laugh together and learn about each other. They brought champagne.

I teach the children of Holocaust survivors who want to

preserve the stories of their parents and grandparents. I teach psychiatrists and psychologists who want to help their patients reframe their lives through story. I teach politicians, labor organizers, health-care advocates, and educational reformers who need to change hearts and minds.

I promise that whatever you do, storytelling will help. While I am often standing on a stage and performing, there are few things I do in life that aren't aided by my ability to tell a story. Whether I'm teaching the metric system to my fifth graders, pitching Speak Up to a new venue, selling my DJ services to a prospective client, or making small talk at a professional development seminar, storytelling helps me achieve my goals. Storytelling makes me a better dinner companion. It compensates for my inability to hit a golf ball accurately. It makes me far more palatable to my in-laws.

No matter who you are or what you do, storytelling can help you achieve your goals. That is why you are reading this book. That is why that man was sitting in my workshop that day.

In these pages, you will find lessons on finding, crafting, and telling stories that will connect you to other people. Make them believe in and trust you. Compel them to want to know more about you and the things you care about.

You'll find specific examples of well-told stories. Exercises designed to locate meaningful, compelling stories in your life. Step-by-step instructions for crafting those stories.

I hope to entertain as well. As much as I want you to learn to become a storyteller, I can't help but tell some stories along the way. In addition to teaching you how to tell an effective, entertaining, and moving story, I hope to give you a peek into my life as a storyteller. My plan is to pull back the curtain and show you some of the highs and lows of my storytelling career. In short, I plan to tell you some stories.

I also want you to trust me. There's no codified curriculum

when it comes to storytelling. No universally accepted laws or rules, no canonical absolutes. Storytelling is more art than science. It's an ancient form of communication and entertainment that has been practiced since humans first developed language, but the rise in the popularity of personal storytelling is relatively new. There are no official schools of thought. No hard-and-fast formulas.

But I tell my students this: If you apply my strategies and methods to the craft, you will become a highly successful storyteller. Not every storyteller agrees with my strategies, but every student who has followed my instruction has become an effective, entertaining, successful storyteller.

My instruction works. You too can be a great storyteller. It's time to learn how.