

LIVING HALFWAY

For the big brown dog.

I miss her.

And for the little yellow puppy.

Someday I will miss her, too.

ADMISSION

This book started out as a collection of rants from a foul-mouthed, 57-year-old chain-smoking lady living in a run-down trailer park.

She'd come to life in moments of vexed observation, when I'd notice irritating human behavior, but didn't want to do the actual complaining myself. I chose her voice because she was of the opposite sex and not at all with the times: she lived within her means, still called herself a waitress (instead of a 'server,' to the chagrin of those crazy chick-libbers she worked with) and had little aptitude for the digital age.

For reasons best left to a talented therapist's analysis, I began referring to this lady by my porn-star name. My skill-set, unfortunately, isn't well-suited to that particular branch of the film industry tree, so I employed a popular party trick and married the moniker of my first pet to that of my childhood street.

From the ragged aluminum stair serving as her front porch, Tweety Park bitched to her younger neighbor about the selfie-obsessed Instagram darling two doors down, the oblivious

cell-phone user who almost ran her over, and the entitled jerk who left their plastic bag of dog waste by her trailer for the poop fairy to throw away. She'd make up new words on the spot, when whatever answers she'd learned on *Jeopardy* failed her, and hide dull pearls of hardscrabble wisdom in the grit of her monologues.

Tweety's neighbor, despite her more politically correct leanings, couldn't help but laugh at these often inappropriate, and occasionally explicit, takes on modern life. People who find fault in almost everything can be funny, like most successful, caustic comedians.

But are they happy?

I imagined Tweety's amused, yet concerned, neighbor inviting her next door to watch a video about how to manifest a better life. Tweety had already seen those quacks from 'The Secret' on *Oprah*, but reluctantly agreed, if only to get her woo-woo neighbor off her back. Midway through the video, Tweety realized the so-called 'thought-leader' was just trying to sell her most recent book, and abrasively decided that manifesting must be for pussies who didn't want to find a real job.

Tweety's words, not mine.

I started to love this lady, until I realized she was, kind of, well... me.

Then I got nervous.

I'd spent a few years buried in self-improvement culture, after my first published book inspired what would be the late, great Dr. Wayne Dyer's last book. He took me on the road with him,

this incredible grandfather of motivation, where I sang and spoke on stages I could only dream of stumbling across when I was chasing my music dream. He even invited me to perform on his last PBS special, and the words he whispered in my ear as I left the stage will stay with me forever.

Those beautiful memories float far above the leftover sludge I found in self-help-land's reedy swamp of bullshit, which teemed with the hypocrisy between many 'thought-leader' messages and the way they actually lived their lives. Wayne also noticed the sanctimonious posturing, and called it out amidst kind pleas for authenticity, until he died peacefully in his sleep on the island he loved.

I miss him.

Wayne's dawn ritual was to incant *thank you, thank you, thank you* the moment he got out of bed. Mine has become crushing wild sage between my fingers as I walk the game trail behind my small ranch, which reminds me to be grateful, especially when my sleepy head isn't quite there yet.

I was holding the fragrant remnants to my breath one recent morning when a huge bull moose emerged on the ridge. He looked through me for a few moments before dropping out of sight, as Wayne's wise, commanding, unmistakable baritone echoed across the canyon.

He said I'd better start speaking my truth.

And that lady in the trailer park?

She was part of it.

So, I followed the chain-smoking muse. I embraced her cussing, her brashness, her unapologetic struggle, until her story became my own, and our merged voices evolved into a tongue-in-cheek-titled book, penned by my alter-ego.

Manifesting is for Pussies by Tweety Park started exchanging hands, and readers were soon letting me know how deeply they saw themselves in the stories. They also told me that there's nothing like a book with *Pussies* in the title to require excessive, repentant explanations and disclaimers.

The farcical title suggested more of a misogynistic anti-self-help missive, rather than an offering of true stories about finding what works in life by discovering what doesn't... stories told with frustration, vulnerability, and honesty, by a man who broke down on the interstate to someday and left his dream car to rust on the shoulder. A man who settled in the nearest little has-been ghost town, where he started living halfway and...

Wait a minute.

Living Halfway.

That's a better title.

Still a whole lot of *fucks* running through this thing, though.

This really happened.

*If present, past, and future break apart and bleed into one
as you read, consider that the light around you is sourced
from your present, reflected off the mirror of your past,
and bent through the lens of your future.*

*Where you are, where you've been, and where you want to be,
all influence what you see right now.*

*And if you're sensitive to offensive language, you should probably
go back to whatever you were doing a minute ago.*

HELLO

Maybe you've recently puked up some ayahuasca in a Laurel Canyon VRBO, or dropped a half-hit of LSD at a tech-sponsored Burning Man camp, in an accelerated search for some sort of life-affirming wisdom you can't quite grasp.

Grasping anything of value can be tough sledding, especially when you have five fingers fumbling with the self-driving feature on your Tesla, and the other five holding your phone.

You're not alone.

Lonely, perhaps.

But not alone.

Many of us have grown tired of living halfway to someday, stalled out on popular culture's road, paved with impermanence and ultimately hollow promises. The social media age has only magnified this delusion of comparative happiness, and we desperately need a reset button, some sort of shift in awareness that

will give the colors of our lives a deeper, truer vibrancy.

I say *you* and *we* and *us*, but who the fuck am I kidding?

This is about me.

SHITBAG

I'm a million miles away, floating along the western edge of the nature preserve down the street from my house, where the dawn mist clings to the willows and a soft sea wind blows dove melodies from the cottonwood trees.

Tribal legends have drifted for ten thousand years through these mystic reeds, rooted in the nourishing collision of fresh water from the coastal mountains and the saltwater bounty of the ocean. I've been gone from this place for a while, but now I drift here, too, in this confluence of ancient and personal history.

My fingers brush the waist-high grass as I breathe deep and walk moccasin-quiet through the early morning peace, daydreaming that instead of a reluctant warrior, I'm Russell Crowe at the end of *Gladiator*, brushing the same waist-high grass on a battle-weary return home to my beautiful family.

A self-composed cinematic theme song lifts this scene into the heavens of redemption, and I am triumph embodied, I am success realized, I am a dream come true and a lost love found, I am everything I thought I'd be by now, I am a crinkling, strained

crunch under my right foot.

I stop mid-stride, and look down to discover a little pink piece of plastic peeking out from under my shoe.

But this isn't just any little pink piece of plastic.

This is a little pink plastic bag of dog shit.

Somebody has watched their precious LuLu take a dump, wrapped the waste in a little pink plastic bag, and left the accomplishment on the side of the trail.

Who does that?

I'll tell you who.

shitbag (n) *an individual bearing the marks of entitlement who wilts in the face of responsibility*

A shitbag.

Because I saw this same little pink plastic bag with the double-knot right here yesterday, and gave the depositing party the benefit of the doubt, hoping they'd pick the special delivery up on their way out.

But now I know they had no intention of coming back. They elected to abandon their shit for someone else to deal with. Maybe the burden was too heavy to carry, or they were worried they'd get a disease, although that Tinder swipe at the wine bar is likely a more reliable infectious option.

I have a lot of experience in this area.

Well, not in banging a Tinder swipe.

Everything about my old dog was big and brown, and I used to carry plastic bags of her substantial turds out of this nature preserve. The only transmission I ever encountered was a warmish palm, not exactly unwelcome on chilly walks, but the pebbles in this bag are rock-hard cold from being left outside overnight.

Shitbags must have some sort of strength in numbers, which makes them feel better about leaving their shit for other people to deal with. I've been seeing little pink, black, brown and green plastic bags lurking everywhere, from the side of this trail to the beach, sidewalk and riverbank. I even saw one hanging from a tree last week, like a Christmas turd ornament.

I pick up as many of those bags as my small hands and match-stick forearms will hold, carry them wherever they need to go, and throw them away. Like I'm doing right now.

Imagine the world if we all dealt with our own shit, instead of packaging it up pretty and leaving it for someone else to deal with.

I'm talking about life here, shitbag.

And your little pink plastic bag of shit.

You run, because you believe in Forrest Gump under the Spanish moss. You can hear Jenny yelling *Run Forrest, Run!* as you sprint down the dirt road next to him, as the gravel dissolves to sand, as you become one, as the metal and springs and bullies and bullshit holding you back disintegrate, until you run into the rest of your life, across the Alabama football field, through the deserts and mountains, and into everyone's hearts.

That may not be you, but I wanted that to be me.

And I may have taken flight over these reeds on a mythic dragon, but I now stand before a very different beast, with talons of thievery and wings of decline, circling my mom's sky in a cruel waning twilight. Ever since the claws of dementia have tightened their grip, she whipsaws between two extremes, abrasively judging everything around her, while lightly caressing my back like she used to do when I was sick in bed with an underdeveloped immune system.

I pull in a breath heavy with ocean mist, turn away from the coast, and head deeper into the wetlands.

Nothing like coming home to find out how far I haven't come.

I'm assaulted on my exhale by a brash, excited voice, bouncing against the static of an AM-radio wall and thundering down the trail like a steam train. A bearded hipster in skinny jeans and a denim jacket brushes past me, looking straight down at his phone.

Stroking it with his thumb.

COCKSTROKE

This stretch of wetlands opens to a wide beach bordering the Pacific, where wave after traveling wave waited at sunrise to grace my feet, at the end of their own thousand-some mile journey. Rolling salt water buckets offered to wash away the sand clinging to my jeans, gray t-shirt, and every inch of exposed skin, but I was runnnnnnnnnnnngggggg.

Partly because I fell asleep on the beach last night. But mostly because when you leave on the back of a magic flying dragon, a majestic beast with talons of tenacity and wings of promise, and return in the rump of a Lyft driver's Corolla two decades and a buried friend later, that's what you do.

runnnnnnnnnnnngggggg (v)
*movement popularized by
Forrest Gump, in which taking
steps anywhere is valued over
taking steps nowhere*

You run, with the ghost of a young dog galloping through the surf, across these same grains of eroded earth that cushioned hopeful steps a dream ago.

Except he's not only stroking it, he's talking to somebody on speakerphone at the same time, so the trees and I can hear about the sweet deal he's making on a Tesla Model X.

I don't know why he's so excited. Of all things to seek approval for, he's slobbering over being allowed to rent a six-figure glorified soccer-mom minivan masquerading as a sport-utility vehicle, which he'll never actually own and doesn't do anything utility, especially short on battery a hundred miles from a charging station.

I'd rather have a Tesla jam on the jukebox than on the freeway.

Remember that band?

Signs, signs, everywhere the signs.

Here's a sign. Of demise.

This guy with a pomaded dome and well-coiffed facial hair has his head at a right angle to his body, stroking and over-talking on his California-designed but Chinese-made iPhone, mindlessly flailing through a space that resonates with traces of the sacred.

Deer sleep in these wetlands, hawks circle this sky, an ancient riverbed empties into that sparkling ocean, and he's stomping blindly through this beautiful sliver of nature, blathering about a composite of metal and wires and batteries and rubber that's waaaayyyyy better for the environment.

Hey! Watch where the fuck you're going!

He looks up mid-cockstroke, like a startled chipmunk with his nuts in his hand.

Yeah YOU.

I wave him past me, shaking my head
and muttering under my breath.

cockstroke (v) to
engage in a selfish act
of disrespect for one's
self or surroundings

Fuck.

These phones make us think we're connected.

I don't know about you, but I don't stroke it when I'm connected.

Only when I'm lonely.