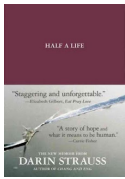


Half a Life



How many times have you been distracted while driving and seen a cyclist jut into the road or a child chasing a ball, or even a scampering beagle? You brake and think, thank God. But for Darin Strauss, newly eighteen, setting out with friends for a game of Putt Putt on a warm spring day at the tail end of his senior year, things did not go that smoothly. A cyclist suddenly veered across a lane and a half--and as he braked all he saw was a yellow spoke reflector catch the light and a head crash into his windshield. For him, the worst had happened. The police cleared him, said it was not his fault. The local paper reported this, but Strauss has had to live the rest of his life with the guilt and pain of this accident.

He tried to do the right things. He attended the funeral despite the fact that some relatives glared at him. There in a church office, he met Celine's parents for the first time. Celine's mother made him promise, "Whatever you do in your life, you have to do it twice as well now. Because you are living it for two people."

One of the toughest things Darin did was to return to North Shore High School on Long Island where Celine had also been a student. He had to confront stares, anger, and whispered conversations. His buddies and even Celine's close friend shared words of support, but he felt overwhelmingly guilty and confused. Imagine his great relief two weeks later when he escaped his home town for Tufts University. No one there knew about the accident. Not just during college but through his 20s and early 30s, Darin barely told anyone. He felt obliged to inform new girlfriends. Afterwards, each of them treated him differently--some pitied him, one strange girl even screamed at him that it was his fault. In fact, it was his future wife's measured response to his deep secret that made Darin certain that she was the right mate for him. Even his career choice, writer, he thinks stemmed from the accident that day; he needed to tell stories.

In college, Darin often ignored his studies because of a compulsive need to compute formulas: "the girl with the bicycle cuts ten feet in front of you--impact will arrive in something like 700 milliseconds." He then figured out how long it should take the average person to activate the brake. His conclusion--it would be another 500 milliseconds.

Despite the subject this beautifully written memoir draws you in and allows you to experience an alternative universe, full of sorrow and remorse, one that you are grateful *that there but for fortune go you or I*. Other coming-of-age memoirs that make great reads are Tobias Wolff's This Boy's Life and Mary Karr's The Liars' Club.

Posted by Dory L. on April 26, 2011

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