

Hippie Child: How a Young Boy Helped Parent his New-Age Mom



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Think your childhood was non-mainstream? A little kooky? Perhaps on the bizarre side? Well check out the hand Josh Safran was dealt being born in the early 70s in a commune in San Francisco during the height of Flower Power and the counter-culture.

Safran makes his childhood first in city communes; later in remote cabins in the mountain wilderness actually sound happy. Credit his mother, Claudia, for that. Highly intelligent, emotionally warm, full of passion for political change and hope for a just world, Claudia imparted to Josh many values. Yet, she also barely kept food on his plate and never gave him a beautiful home. In fact for one three month period, they lived in a visqueen shelter on tree stumps in a rain forest. Yet these are failings of poverty not intent. Much worse were allowing her lovers to abuse him and to threaten them both by driving under the influence of alcohol on icy mountain roads, often in the dark.

The book is sad, poignant, funny, and a surprising page turner from beginning to end. Check out this hook of an opening sentence "By the time I was ten, I had hitchhiked thousands of miles and befriended hundreds of remarkably strange people." Here's a short list of them: Crazy John, Uncle Tony (no blood relation), conniving Bob, deal-making Ervi, etc. Bob was a boyfriend of Claudia's who convinces her strict mother to lend them three thousand dollars to buy a green bus for the family to live in. They also resided in an ice cream truck and several shacks in the mountains.

Despite Claudia's high ideals, she moves in with and later marries, Leopoldo, an El Salvadoran ex-soldier with anger issues and a major drinking problem. When he starts beating Claudia, young Josh does not know how to stop him because he is also abused by this man.

For most of his childhood, Josh has little schooling, but lots of books. Even his so-called home schooling is sporadic. Finally, at age 11, he ignores the taunts and beatings by both girls and boys and settles in to Stanwood Middle School in Washington State. When he first starts school, he and his family are living in a dripping lean-to with no shower or even a toilet. After school, he sits on a stump in the rain and tries to do his homework until Leopoldo makes him stop. Luckily, for Josh a dedicated teacher stays after school to teach him cursive and to bring him up to speed on math.

Free Spirit is an amazing story of a fatherless young man succeeding by his own will alone. It's also a vivid recollection of a harsh childhood that is brightened occasionally by deep friendships, a mother's love, and the magic of books.

For a similar book try Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*; it shares a Washington State setting and a harsh, physically abusive step-parent.

Posted by Dory L. on October 2, 2013

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