

**AUTOBIOGRAPHY
WITHOUT WORDS
PETER CHERCHES**

Autobiography Without Words by Peter Cherches

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Some of the pieces in this collection have appeared in the following journals, anthologies, and websites:

Annandale Dream Gazette, Appearances, Black Scat Review, Contemporaries, Gargoyle, Grand Tour, Guys Write for Guys Read, Hambone, Little Star, Lost and Found: Stories from New York, Mr. Beller's Neighborhood, MungBeing, New Flash Fiction Review.

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I plan to publish my autobiography without words. The book will consist solely of blank pages in white and black and shades of gray. It will open with a thin, translucent sheet of white paper. The sheets will gradually get thicker, and from ages three to six or seven the white sheets will be as bright as sunshine. Then a little gray begins to creep in, gradually but progressively, until around age 12 or 13, when the pages become a charcoal gray. Over the next few years the pages progress to black, a black as dark as deep night. Quite a number of these black pages. Too many of these black pages. But then the story takes a turn for the better. At the top of the pitch-black pages a little white, a little light, begins to creep in, and over the next several years of our tale the white eventually takes over the black. From there on, we have many, many pages of white, not always the brightest white, maybe, sometimes a little off-white, but still white. Then, toward the end of the book, the still-white pages become crumpled, but crumpled in an amusing way, the author hopes. Crumpled in a way, the author hopes, that will sum up the entire story.

KIDS

While I was out for a walk one recent afternoon I saw a couple of kids on the street who reminded me of two of my childhood friends. Actually, they more than reminded me of my friends, they looked exactly like them. And they were wearing clothes that looked like mid-sixties styles. One of the kids had a small transistor radio to his ears. “Have you heard the rumor?” one of the boys said to the other.

“What’s that?” his friend asked.

“Koufax is gonna retire,” the first one said.

“Bullshit,” replied the friend.

“No kidding,” the first kid said. “They said it on the radio.”

I pulled up closer to them and could hear the radio. Music was playing. It was “Summer in the City,” by the Lovin’ Spoonful. Must be an oldies station, I figured.

Next thing I knew, one of the kids turned to me. “You know,” he said, “you look just like our friend Peter.” Then he added, “If he was an old bald guy, that is.”

YOUNG PETER CHERCHES, A FILM BY MARTIN SCORSESE

I was thrilled, of course, when Scorsese's people contacted me to tell me that Marty wanted to make a film about an incident in my childhood, and that he was prepared to pay handsomely for the rights. And, though the contract didn't give me any say over casting, Marty was thoughtful enough to introduce me to the young actor who'd be playing me in the film. We had arranged to meet at Bar Pitti, in *The Village*, at one of the outdoor tables. I was the first to arrive, and I ordered a glass of Vermentino to sip while waiting. Marty and the kid showed up about ten minutes later. The kid looked to be about eight, the age I was when the events of the film take place.

I must say I was rather disturbed that the kid was wearing a yarmulke. He didn't look Jewish, though. As a matter of fact, he was blond with a little goyish nose and looked a lot like Jay North, from "Dennis the Menace." Hmm, an orthodox kid who looks like a gentile, I thought, this has possibilities. Still, I couldn't make peace with the yarmulke.

"There's a problem," I told Scorsese. "I didn't wear a yarmulke as a kid."

“Don’t worry,” Marty replied. “We can shoot around it.”

Now when I was a kid I had dirty-blond hair and I didn’t look particularly Jewish. And my family was totally secular; we never went to synagogue. I did, however, have a bar mitzvah, which was essentially a secular ritual, an excuse for a party, all religious trappings aside. It was, in fact, during my quickie bar mitzvah lessons with Mrs. Goldstein, our local Evelyn Wood of painless haftorah prep, that I became a resolute atheist, too late, alas, to cancel the big event at Leonard’s of Great Neck. So you can understand why I was apprehensive about being played by a kid in a yarmulke.

But I did want to give the kid a chance, so I started chatting with him. He turned out to be incredibly bright, charming and witty—he reminded me of myself as a kid. I was starting to like him. Still, the religion thing was something I was having trouble making peace with. I knew I wouldn’t be able to get him to renounce Judaism, but I figured if I could at least get him to scoff at other religions I’d be somewhat placated and we could put our differences aside.

“All right, you’re an orthodox Jew,” I said, “so I guess that means you believe in God. But I’ll bet you think all other religions are pretty ridiculous, right?”

“Not at all,” the kid replied. “I think there’s much to admire in all the world’s religions. In fact, I think we should all try to emulate Jesus Christ.”

Oy vey, this is not going to work, I thought. As much as I liked the kid, I was sure he didn't possess the requisite irreverence to pull off a convincing portrayal of me as an eight-year-old, especially considering the nature of the events at the heart of the story.

When the kid went inside to go to the bathroom, I expressed my doubts to Marty. "He's a good kid," I said, "but he just doesn't seem right for the part."

"Don't worry, Pete," Marty said. "This kid is good. Real good. Talented beyond his years. You just wait and see. I think you'll be thrilled when the project is finished."

Well, like I said, my contract doesn't include any say over casting, so I left it at that. The kid came back, we finished our drinks and our meeting, shook hands and went our separate ways.

Shooting starts in about a month, and I'm told the film should hit the theatres sometime next year. I hope Marty's right about the kid.

THE WORST THANKSGIVING

My worst Thanksgiving was the one where I ate a Swanson turkey TV dinner, alone. I think I was about nineteen at the time, and in the midst of a brief depression.

My brief depression lasted about fifteen years, roughly from the ages of eight to twenty-three. I was a miserable kid, adolescent, teenager and young adult. My moods ranged from unhappy to inconsolable despair. I made several (probably half-assed) suicide attempts as a teen, one of them in 1970, after attending the first Earth Day festivities at Union Square. Now Earth Days fill me with relief mixed with a twinge of nostalgic misery.

From a bright, outgoing, skinny kid I turned into a chubby recluse. I started gaining weight during a hellish summer at sleep-away camp, when I was eight. By around eleven or twelve I was pretty much a hermit, keeping to my room, refusing entreaties to come out and play. I wanted to be invisible. I used to walk down the street staring at my shoes. By junior high I made a new set of “friends” and discovered pot and alcohol (and antiwar demonstrations). LSD was reserved for special occasions, like concerts at the Fillmore East or all-night Marx Brothers marathons at the Elgin Theater, on

Eighth Avenue. There was a crowd I hung out with, till all hours, but I wouldn't say that more than a few were real friends, though I remember some of them quite fondly—brilliant, funny kids, all troubled in different ways.

Things got a little better when I got to college and started discovering my voice as a writer. But my psyche was still fragile. I think I may have turned down a Thanksgiving invitation when I was nineteen and chose to “celebrate” alone with my Swanson TV dinner.

The real turning point in my life came when I moved to the East Village, in 1979. For a Brooklyn kid, finally getting to Manhattan was a triumph. I felt I finally had control of my life. And I was fortunate to dive headlong into one of the most vibrant literary and performance scenes New York City has ever known.

I don't think I've ever been really, truly miserable since. I joke that I've had more than my quota of misery. Even when I was unemployed for the greater part of a four-year period, not so long ago, I didn't despair. People would ask if I was depressed. “Not really,” I'd say. “I'm anxious all the time and unhappy some of the time, but I'm also happy most of the time, at the same time. I'm emotionally multitasking.”

You can't second-guess or judge anybody's misery. You can't tell a depressed teenager that they have everything, or that they're being selfish, or that things will get better (even if they usually do). Their despair is real, I know. If I could tell a teenager on the brink of suicide anything

it would be: hang in there, I know it's unbearable, but there'll come a time when you can call the shots, when you can tell all the people who are fucking you over to go fuck themselves, or ignore them, it'll be your choice.

BECOMING PETE

I became Pete in 1981, when I grew a beard and started wearing contact lenses. Or was it about a year later, when I shaved the beard and started wearing the black horn-rimmed glasses that would define my face for years to come? I am sure the change from Peter to Pete as my *nom de monde*, as I call it, to distinguish it from my *nom de plume*, went part and parcel with a change in facial appearance.

What was going on in the early-80s? Well, I was in my mid-twenties, and just settling into an adult sense of self, and I guess I was trying out different modes of self-presentation.

The beard didn't work for me. Besides giving me an ongoing facial itch, when it grew bushy with flecks of red it gave me the mien of a terrorist, which I guess was not a look I wanted to cultivate. And I could never get accustomed to contacts. My eyes were always dry, and I couldn't really get used to my face without glasses after wearing them for over a decade. There's something to be said for high cheekbones and deep-set eyes, sure, but I felt that glasses mitigated what I considered to be a mildly Neanderthal appearance (especially pronounced in my brief beard period).

I was coming to a sense of adult self both as a person and as a writer, and I think I wanted to create two intersecting personae, Pete the person and Peter the writer. That part, actually, wasn't new. My earliest publications bore my middle initial, N, which I had never used in other contexts. I think that was because even as a teenager I wanted to separate my writer self from my everyday self. I think the change to Pete came shortly after I dropped the middle initial from my *nom de plume*. Or maybe at the same time.

And perhaps I also felt that the more informal Pete would, however subtly, make me more comfortably feel part of collegial, congenial society, something I had felt apart from during the long depression that lasted from adolescence to my early twenties. Funny, I hadn't thought about that before.

Peter. The writer, the man obsessed with crafting sentences, and with a certain kind of order.

Pete. Regular guy. All-American guy. The kind of guy you could toss back a couple of brewskies with and laugh together at the follies of the universe, at the chaos.

All right, that's probably pushing it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

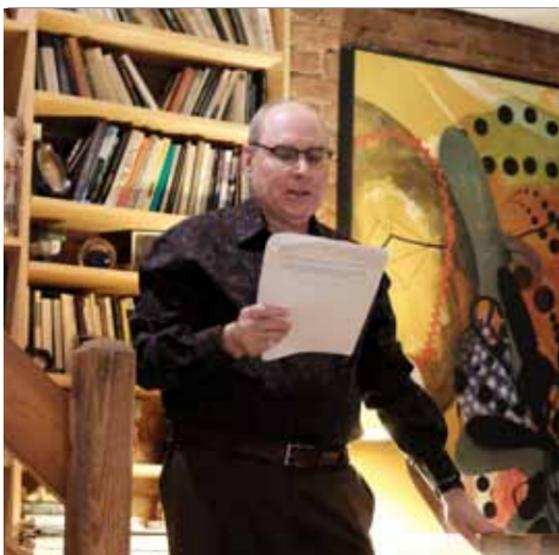


PHOTO BY DEREK BERG

Called “one of the innovators of the short short story” by *Publishers Weekly*, Peter Cherches is a writer, singer and lyricist. Over the past 40 years his writing, both fiction and nonfiction, has appeared in dozens of magazines, anthologies and websites. His first recording as a jazz vocalist, *Mercerized! Songs of Johnny Mercer*, was released in 2016. He is the author of three previous prose collections, most recently *Lift Your Right Arm*, which Pelekinesis published in 2013. Cherches is a native of Brooklyn, New York.



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