

One family's struggle to survive when they are stripped of their rights and livelihood during the years between 1947-1954, known as the McCarthy era. Told from the oldest child's point of view as their normal life is destroyed when her parents refuse to name names. This is a story for anyone who has felt torn between family loyalties and the outside world and who has had to grow up too soon.

This American Family: Growing up as a red diaper baby

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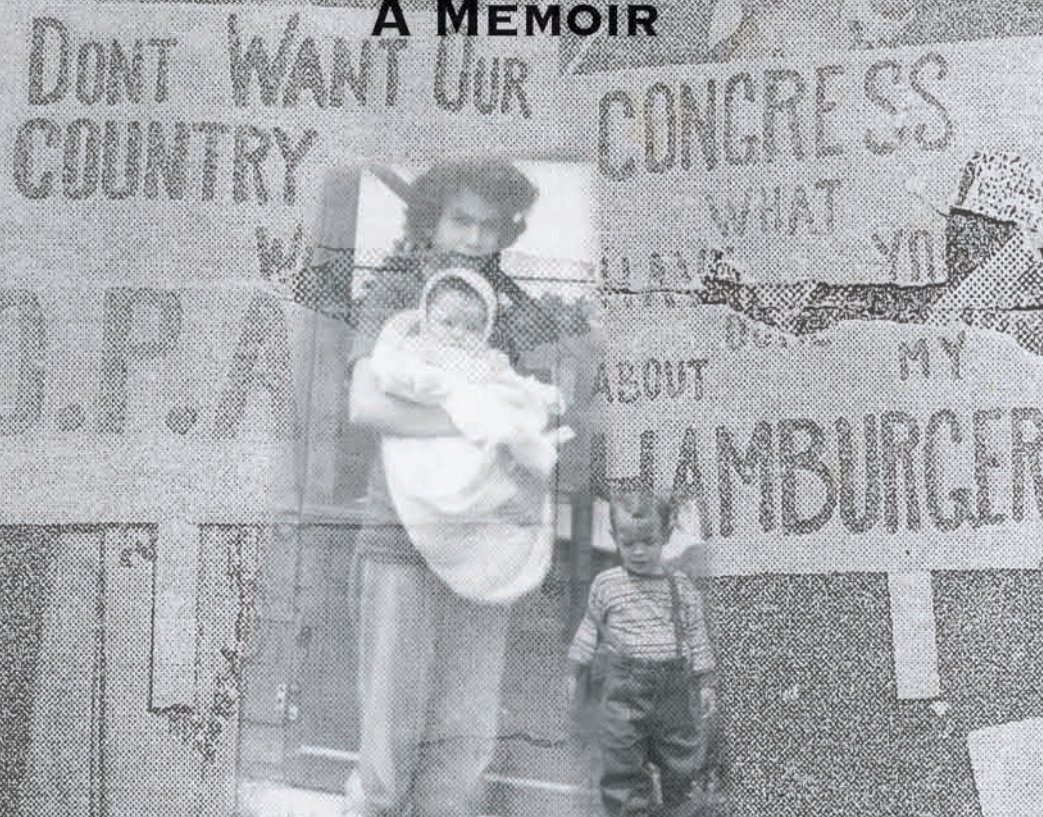
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THIS AMERICAN FAMILY

GROWING UP AS A RED
DIAPER BABY

A MEMOIR



CHRIS CHRISTIE

This American Family

Growing Up As A Red Diaper Baby

A Memoir

Chris Christie

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CHICAGO, 1947

On a summer morning when I was about five years old, my mother and I walked into the front door of the apartment building where we lived with my grandparents in Hyde Park on Chicago's South Side. Standing in the lobby beside my mother, idly watching as she reached into our mailbox, I realized suddenly that the letters above the box were not the same letters that spelled our name. "Mama," I burst out, "that's the wrong mailbox. That's not our name."

I felt my mother stiffen. Her eyes scanned the lobby, but we were alone. She turned then and knelt down on the hard, grey floor beside me, taking me by both arms, looking hard into my eyes, speaking in a tight voice. "You must never, ever say that again where anyone can hear you. We could be hurt!" I can still see the strange name, Greenberg, in silver letters across that mailbox, as clearly as if I had seen it only yesterday. I feel myself holding my breath; see the green landlord paint on the walls, the sunlight streaming in the big, glass doors, and everything freezes. Those few moments are like a movie still I carry around inside my head.

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...“We interrupt this program to bring you a special news bulletin from CBS World News,” stated the tense voice of a radio commentator. “A press association has just announced that President Roosevelt is dead...”

-Columbia Broadcasting System, 5:49 P.M., EST,
April 12, 1945

...At Harmon Station on the Hudson River as the funeral train passed through during the grey early morning, a man said to a stranger standing beside him, “I never voted for him. I should have but I never did. We’re going to miss him, miss him terribly...”

-Albert Kahn, *High Treason: The Plot Against the People*

The McCarthy era does not date from 1950, when Joseph McCarthy made his first charges. It dates from 1947, from the joint efforts of Truman, Attorney General Tom Clark, and J. Edgar Hoover. They gave the House Un-American Activities Committee its weapons—the lists it could use on witnesses, the loyalty program for which it could demand ever stricter enforcement, the presumption that a citizen is disloyal until proven loyal, the denial of work to any man or woman who would not undergo such a proving process. The List meant that everyone must henceforth watch his or her contacts, where one went, whom one saw—a gregarious misstep into the wrong meeting, a check signed for some charitable cause, a more than casual acquaintance with radicals, could put you on the List and forbid you a job...”

-Gary Wills, Introduction to *Scoundrel Time* by
Lillian Hellman

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No less extraordinary than the “evidence on which the government employees were charged with disloyalty was the manner of their interrogation by the loyalty boards. Here, taken from the transcripts of loyalty board hearings are some typical questions addressed to Federal employees by the boards:

Are your friends and associates intelligent, clever?

Have you a book by John Reed?

There is a suspicion that you are in sympathy with the underprivileged. Is this true?

Was your father native born?

How do you feel about the segregation?

Did you or your wife ever invite a Negro into your home?

-Albert Kahn, High Treason: The Plot Against the People.

The Smith Act trials which began in November, 1948, indicted eleven people who were accused of being members of the Communist Party and therefore, guilty of belonging to a group advocating or teaching the forcible overthrow of the government. On October 15, 1949, the jury reached the verdict of guilty. They were given five years and a fine of \$10,000 with the exception of one who was given three years because of an exemplary war record...

-Howard Zinn, A People’s History of the United States

Chicago, 1948-1949

Our last year in Chicago, the year I turned seven and the last year of my real childhood, I could still slip across an invisible boundary that separated my family from the rest of the neighborhood and blend in with our neighbors along Greenwood street in Hyde Park. But even here I knew not to mention the strange name on our old mailbox or the scar on my mother's leg.

We lived on the second floor of an ordinary red brick apartment building. Even now, if I close my eyes, every room in that long-lost apartment is bright with memory. I can see the dust from the old carpet drifting in the air, feel the sun streaming in the tall bay windows in the living room, the softly varnished wood of the pocket doors separating the living room from my bedroom. My bunk beds are pushed against the far wall, and the sick dolls in my doll hospital are asleep in the boxes lining the perimeter of the room. Was there a window in the corner? Or did I mix it up with a Mrs. Piggle Wiggle story? Because that's how it was in my family, mixing the real with the make believe until they were so thoroughly blended that it became hard to sort it out.

If I let myself drift down the long hallway with bedrooms on both sides, I come to the end, where the hall opens into the dining room, the center of our family space. There are two easy chairs and a reading lamp where Grandpa sat most evenings, and where I learned to read from the big dictionary I

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opened and spread across my lap. We ate most of our meals at the dining table in the middle of the room. At the far end, the room opens into the kitchen with a smaller wooden table that served as a kind of counter where Grandma kneaded bread or cut out biscuits, where I could stand and watch her push the dough back and forth, smelling the yeast and listening to stories about people and places that would become more alive to me than the real places yet to come, places I never asked for, places I never wanted.

Inside that apartment, it is always quiet, the street noises blurred by the thick walls. I hear the click of my grandmother's heels on the linoleum, smell oatmeal bread baking in the kitchen and feel safe again, wrapped in the smells and sounds, the air fragrant around me. I fall into a kind of swoon so that even today, 50-some years later, there are times I do not want to rise to cook my lunch or mow the lawn, but would rather lie back, eyes closed and drift into that warm place where childhood was still safe, and life was a kind of perpetual poem.

In the evening when my mother came home from the union office, she'd change out of her good, black suit, the one she wore to work both winter and summer and charge into the kitchen trailing the scent of White Shoulders. My Scots-Irish grandmother would be making supper, the air redolent with warm yeast blended with the odor of meat being boiled tough and dry.

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My mother knew all kinds of stories about people suffering and then rising up to convince their bosses or their governments to treat them better. She'd lean up against the sink in her black suit pants and tell about her day working in the union office. My mother's favorite stories took place in her glory days in the 1930's, before she became a mother, when she had been a fulltime union organizer for the newly-formed Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO), battling bosses and sometimes even other labor organizers, the kind who wanted to hog the real organizing and let *her* do the typing. Sometimes, by default, she got the real work, meaning the dangerous stuff. She'd stand there, her eyes bright, holding a dish as if she'd forgotten where it went, and tell these stories about her youth, when she had been young and full of politics. She had helped to organize Chicago's packing plants and its steel empire, giving up her evenings to all night meetings, her days to organizing strikes or union hall parades. Once, she said, they sent a young woman riding a horse, Godiva-like down Michigan Avenue, combing her golden tresses.

"You had to be tough in those days to stay alive," she said, her dark eyes flashing. "One time, someone called the union office looking for an organizer to stop company goons from intimidating workers who were trying to form a union at a pickle plant. Well, the guys were all out, so they sent me. I walked right in the back door of the plant, and someone said they had all those workers in the

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basement, so down I went. They had them sure enough, up against the wall and were throwing knives over their heads. You can bet they were surprised to see a young woman. But I marched right in and yelled, ‘Stop!’ at the top of my lungs. And they did.” By this time her usually pale cheeks were flushed with righteousness, her eyes dancing. I’d be half-listening, watching for the food my mother had forgotten all about.

My grandmother, standing at the stove mashing the potatoes that went with every supper, would kind of nudge her with one hip saying, “Git out the way,” and plop down a pot of potatoes, her face red from the heat. I breathed a sigh of relief and let the potato steam rise into my nostrils and hoped there might be gravy.

On Saturday mornings, my mother wrapped an old scarf around her hair, put on one of Grandpa’s raggedy shirts and went down the hall to the living room, where she threw open the blinds, letting the sunlight pour into the tall windows that faced the street. This room stood unused most of the time, except at night when people came for meetings and sat stiffly on our old brown sofa and discussed the “issues of the day,” their voices low and serious. Grandma usually hustled me back to the dining room, saying, “Leave them be. They have fish to fry.”

When she pretended to do housework, I trailed behind her, plopping down on an overstuffed chair, pulling at the threads of the fabric, and watching her run the vacuum around the faded roses on the carpet. For my mother, dusting and vacuuming

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weren't real work, but a bane of life to be gotten through quickly and avoided when possible. I always knew that the important work had to do with saving the world. It usually didn't take her long to lose interest in the carpet.

"Never trust the cops," she told me, switching off the vacuum. "They're just over-grown bullies paid to defend rich people." She told me about working with the Unemployment Councils during the Depression, how people like her from the Council would arrive on the scene after someone had been evicted for non-payment of their rent and their furniture had been removed and set out on the street. After security left, they'd help carry the furniture back inside until the landlord showed up and the whole thing began again. Sometimes they could slow things down long enough for the family to find another place to live.

Or the time that, because of a cold, she had missed the union picnic across the street from Republican Steel when the C.I.O. was trying to get union recognition. Chicago police had panicked during a yelling match and opened fire. As men ran to protect their families, several were killed and wounded. She forever berated herself for not being one of them. Her fellow union organizer Herb March had been there and had pushed his young son under a parked car to save him. Then Herb dipped his picket sign in the blood of a fallen worker, took it to the meeting later that night, and yelled, "The blood of the workers runs in the streets of Chicago."

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Secretly, I felt sorry for Herb's son, Bob, hiding under the car, alone in the dark, and I was glad she hadn't been there to be beaten or killed, but I knew she'd scoff at these feelings, the way she scoffed at any sign of weakness.

"Being a scab is the worst thing you can be," she said. "Better to be an outright crook than a dirty scab." Scabs were people, she had me understand, who took other people's jobs when they were out on strike. "Never, never cross a picket line," she told me, as if I might be going to cross one at any moment. I'd imagine it then, a line drawn on the pavement: On one side, the sun was shining on the pearly gates of the heaven Grandma used to whisper about when no one else was home--a place where God lived and where all little children went when they died, where her dead baby boys lived now. And on the other side, there were terrible men with long pointy noses like the ones Grandpa drew for me, their faces twisted with hate, shaking their fists at us.

Those scowling faces loomed large in my imagination. I had seen them for myself once when I was younger and had gone with my mother to picket a store. We had been marching around a busy street with signs painted in bright colors saying "Unfair To Workers," and handing out sheets of paper called "flyers" to passers-by. It was a cold day, and I was dressed in my winter coat. My mother pulled my knit hat way down over my face, and it kept getting in the way. I was carrying flyers like everyone else, but was having trouble holding onto the sheets of

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paper with my mittens. Somehow in all the commotion, I strayed a little out of the line of marchers, and when I pushed my hat back, I found myself standing in front of the store, feeling nervous because I couldn't see my mother any longer. I tried to carry on anyway, smiling like my mother had told me to do and handed a flyer to each of two older men leaning up against the store window. One smiled at me and took the paper, kind of nodding, his eyes gentle, but the other pushed it away and me with it, and glowered at me, his face twisted, his eyes dark with fury. Then suddenly my mother was there, and had scooped me up in her arms, saying, "Never mind, honey, those are the men we're picketing against. They aren't nice people." Then she turned her back on them and carried me back to the safety of the line of our people. But I couldn't help looking back at them, and they were still standing there, the one who had taken the flyer from me was staring off into space, past us. He had dropped the flyer to the ground, and it fluttered in the chill wind. The other man still glared at my mother's back, muttering something under his breath.

Sometimes, when she lost interest in cleaning, my mother left the vacuum cleaner in the middle of the living room floor and pulled me into "the music room," a kind of glassed-in sunroom where our piano sat in solitary elegance, waiting to be played. She only knew two songs, "Deck the Halls," and "The Internationale," and she played them both and sang them with gusto. Even in the

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summer when the windows were open and she could be heard out in the street, she played them and sang with her usual enthusiasm. "Awake ye prisoners of starvation/ rise ye wretched of the earth..."

After she finished playing, she put a record on the phonograph, and then even music became a lesson to be learned. While the deep bass voice of Paul Robeson filled the apartment, she told me that Paul Robeson was a great singer, actor and athlete, beloved by many, but persecuted by the government because he was a Negro and because he stood up for justice for everyone. When Robeson came to the part in "Old Man River" where he sings, "We must keep fightin' until we're dyin'," my mother's eyes got teary, and she sang so loud she drowned him out.

Then she grabbed my hand and pulled me into the dance, the kind she called "interpretive." She told me she had wanted to be a great dancer, like Martha Graham, but her heart "wouldn't take the stress." Secretly, I thought she looked silly pretending to be a tree, bending and twisting in the wind. But I tried to match the way her slim body gyrated, the dust cloth held high like a banner, and I let her pull me in. We swayed and leapt awkwardly around the room together, bending and twisting to the music.

On those Chicago afternoons when I was still completely in love with her, I took her face in my hands, touching our noses together, looking deep into those dark eyes, seeing the way the light reflected in them, seeing my own face reflected.

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Then we pulled apart and laughed and gave each other butterfly kisses, fluttering our eyelashes against each other's cheeks. I told her over and over that she was the most beautiful woman in the whole world, and she would laugh and say, "Pretty is as pretty does."

But I wasn't fooled by her casual dismissal, because I knew that although my family might spurn compliments as bourgeois, they wholly believed in the power of beauty. She and my grandmother always assessed a woman's looks before going on to analyze her other less important attributes. "She's quite a beauty," grandma might say. "Although a little too thin." "Nonsense," my mother would reply, "You can't be too thin, but I do think her nose is too short. It throws her features out of line."

No part of a person's face was small enough to be missed by their careful scrutiny. It was as if they were about to paint each person they saw, and must first get every plane lined up, each feature perfectly fixed in their collective mind's eye.

According to them, all the women in our family were beautiful, and even though I was included, I never believed them. There was too much talk about my aunts' "skin like peaches." But my skin, they said, "had a tendency to take on yellow," and my eyes had dark shadows under them. When they said I had my father's curls, I heard words like "wiry" and "unmanageable." I would twist those curls around my fingers and wish for hair that was straight, the rich brown color of chocolate cake. But

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I believed in the beauty of the others, my mother and her sisters, the tall, statuesque Christie women, perpetually young and apple-cheeked, combing their long, brown hair by the kerosene lantern in the farm kitchen back in Michigan. I heard their laughter, saw them putting egg white on their pale, Scotch-Irish skin to make it even whiter, and watched while they heated the flat iron on the cook stove for the yards of cotton waists that must be wrinkle-free.

While my family yearned for the beauty of the past, I saw only the loveliness of my mother now. When she came in to say goodnight, her cheeks pink and her eyes dancing, her beauty surrounded me like perfume. I reached for her, winding my arms around her neck, her skin silky beneath my fingers, breathing her in, hoping to keep her there beside me. I held her there as long as I could, breathing her in, never wanting her to go, unwilling to take the chance she might slip away like my father had done. I worried that she might go off to a union meeting, running down the front steps, and rush off into the night and never come back. But I couldn't tell her that because she'd call it nonsense. I knew she wanted me to be brave, and I wanted to be a hero, a union organizer. But in truth, on the nights she went out, I often lay in bed, listening to the radiator's hiss, the building's creak, and I turned in my sleep, and I worried.

So I tried to keep her next to me as long as I could. "Twirl, mama," I begged, and she twirled around and around until the green skirt stood out in a perfect circle around her Betty Grable legs,

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perfect except for the long, shiny scar across the left shinbone where a cop had kicked her with his steel-toed boot.

After my mother put on her serious face and rushed off to the union office, and Grandpa went off to the "dirty factory," I got to stay home with my grandmother and help her hunt down the "filthy microbes." According to her, these microbes could be lurking anywhere, even on the dishes she washed in scalding Clorox water that made her hands slick with suds while the hot, soapy fumes rose into the air, burning my eyes as I watched her rinse each dish in water hot enough to turn her hands lobster pink.

The perpetual war on germs was a kind of daily litany that started with a skin check. For her, skin was a particular harbinger of disease. Every day she scrutinized mine, no change too minute to escape her eagle eye. If my skin looked sallow, she worried I might have caught some dread disease. If it seemed dark, she worried about sun poisoning. And every day I was supposed to report the exact state of my bowel movement. I tried to escape this scrutiny by using the bathroom as little as possible. But this only drove her to distraction since she believed in the sanctity of open bowels.

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