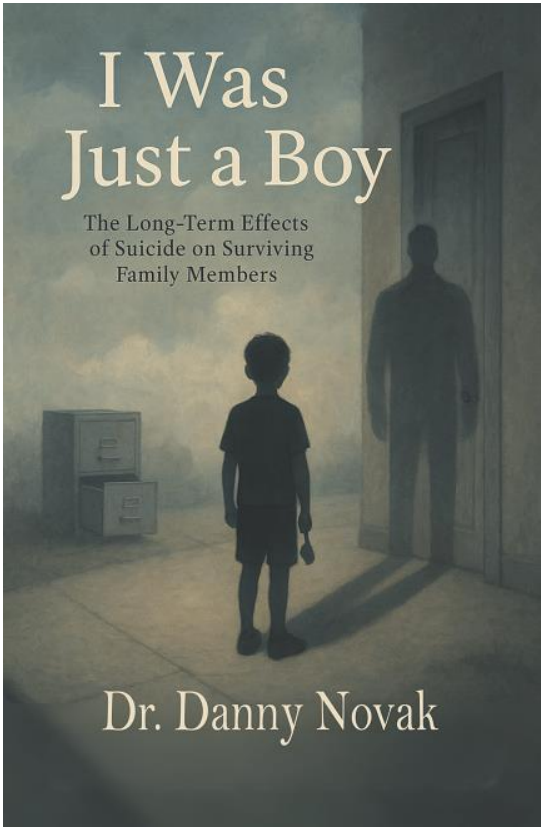

After his father's suicide, a young boy grows up surrounded by silence, secrets, and unanswered questions. This powerful story explores grief, family trauma, resilience, and the lifelong search for healing and understanding.

I Was Just a Boy:

The Long-Term Effects of Suicide on Surviving Family Members

By Dr. Danny Novak

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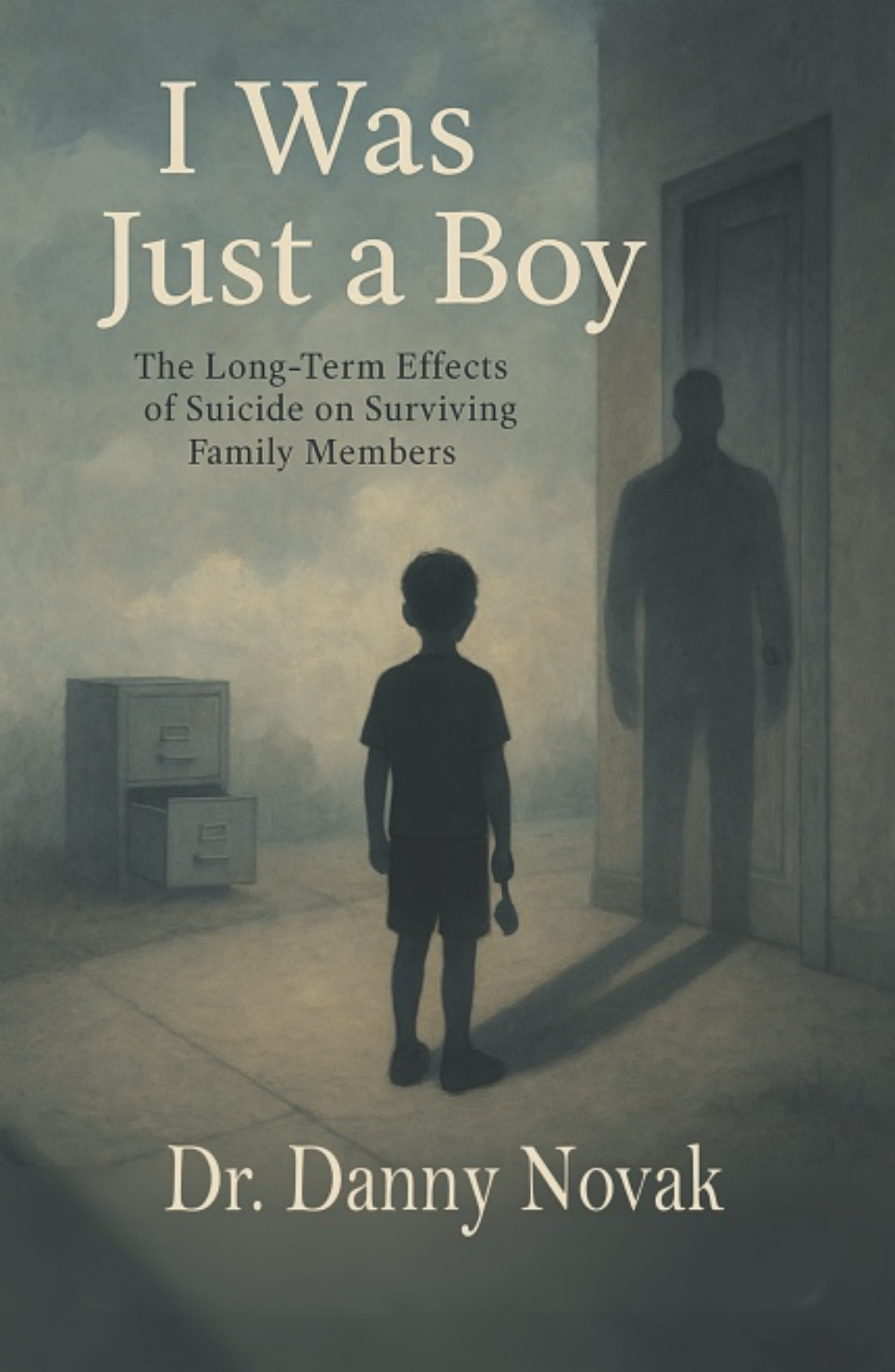

Dr. Danny Novak

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-961267-36-7
Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-961267-37-4
Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-492-2

This is a work of nonfiction. Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved.

Dr. Danny Novak

2026

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Novak, Dr. Danny
I Was Just a Boy: The Long-Term Effects of Suicide on Surviving Family Members by Dr. Danny Novak
Library of Congress Control Number: 2026906449

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Chapter 1:
Mom

Except for birth dates, all of the following information was shared with me through our many conversations over many months. My mother, Helen Novak, was born on August 31, 1929. She comes from a large family with five brothers and one sister: Philip, Matthew, Peter, Thomas, Andrew, and Irene. Mom and her family grew up on the northwest side of the city, but everything changed when a major expressway cut through the neighborhood and forced them to move.

She was just a teenage girl when she became her mother's caregiver, caring for her during her mother's severe illness caused by a misdiagnosed brain tumor. Mom remembered helplessly watching as seizures shook her mother's frail body.

"Seventeen seizures in a row," she once told me. Her voice was steady, but her eyes seemed distant. She didn't know what else to do except shove a stick into her mother's mouth to prevent her from biting her tongue off. I asked her where the rest of the family was when that happened. She told me her dad traveled a lot, and she couldn't remember where the rest of her family was.

This experience would profoundly influence her life from that point on. She had no one to nurture her; no one to be her mother. I wonder if, as all of us developed inside her as tiny forms of life, we could sense the anxiety and helplessness this poor girl endured. Her mother died when she was fifty.

My mother married my dad when they were both about nineteen. Their life together began quickly, leaving little time to settle in. My oldest sister, Linda, was born shortly after they married, and from the

start, life was marked by instability and hardship. My mother, Helen, recalled that time with much trepidation.

When she spoke to me, I sensed her relief in finally sharing her side of the story. I received little background about my parents' teenage years. I don't know how they met or how long they were engaged. I don't know if they went on a honeymoon. Young and hopeful, my mother married him in search of an escape, only to find herself in a new nightmare.

As she reflected on that time in her life, it almost felt as though she knew what the future held for her. She did her best with what she had, a truth I have come to understand more deeply over time.

Mother: *We lived in Grandpa's house (her father's place), but the state or city took it over through eminent domain to build the expressway. We were renting from the city, but they wanted to tear it down, and we had no money to move, which made me cry a lot because I did not want to leave. To me, it felt like a place of doom because he grew up under such crazy circumstances with your dad's Polish mother and father.*

My parents' twelve-year marriage was already strained and scarred. My mother was only thirty-one when my father died by suicide, but by then, she had already endured what felt like a lifetime of sorrow.

I am the middle child. By the time I entered this world, my mother's heart was already heavy with pain. My father's trauma, stemming from his own chaotic, abusive childhood, had long woven itself into the fabric of their marriage. The volatile storms of his moods, his anger, and his abusive tendencies had scarred not only my mother but also the very air we breathed. After learning about epigenetics, I realized those feelings had already been shaping us all before we were born. The

tension of their world seeped into my bones before I knew what fear was. I was carrying the echoes of battles fought long before my first breath.

The interviews with my family, combined with the research I read about suicide, confirmed what I already knew: the ramifications of domestic violence and suicide last a lifetime. The long-term effects are similar to those of aftershocks in areas that have recently experienced an earthquake. Unlike those aftershocks, which may last a few days, these seemingly never go away.

Chapter 2:
Father

My dad, Stan Novak, was born on August 9, 1930, and he died on March 9, 1961. I was only six years old when he passed away, leaving me with fleeting memories and a lifetime of questions. My recollections of him are fragmented moments of connection that a little boy clings to, later pieced together from stories my family shared. My father's story, equally tragic, was one of violence and unresolved trauma.

Over the years, my family members may have remembered certain events that happened to us, but they never shared them in great detail. One thing that kept surprising me throughout this process was that we never sat down as a whole family to talk about what happened to Dad. He had just died; years of abuse had ended, and the conversations afterward had no reference to what had just taken place. The precedent was set: no talking about any of this.

The reality of this situation and others like it is that there will never be definitive answers for my remaining family members. There will never be total closure; there will never be a solution that could ease feelings of guilt, shame, or abandonment. One thing I know for sure is that the person who committed suicide is gone forever.

Aside from what I remember from those early days, almost everything I know about my dad came from my mother, and much of what we shared was new to me. It wasn’t until I began the interview process that a much darker truth started to emerge. Most of what happened in our house wasn’t pleasant, and much of it had been buried—intentionally or not—under layers of silence and survival. What I discovered was shocking. I was carrying fragments of him:

vague memories and glimpses of moments which felt like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle still in an unwrapped box. But hearing the whole story shattered whatever image I had quietly held. I realized how little I truly knew about the man whose absence had defined my life.

My mother began telling me about her life with my father. Perhaps, as she sought to understand why her husband had done what he had, she told yet another story I had never heard before. She was convinced his crazy family was ultimately responsible for what happened. Ironically, her vision may have foreshadowed his future actions.

Mother: *Your dad lived his life in the shadow of an overprotective mother, and he was unable to escape the guilt and manipulation. That kind of overbearing control left scars that could never heal. When he was studying for his exams during his junior year in high school, his mother dreamed (in those days, she called it a dream book) that something terrible would happen to Dad. She refused to let him leave the house for school. Seeing no other way out, he jumped from the first-floor bathroom window and ran to school to take the test. She came to school screaming (hearing that story should have opened my eyes, but it didn't), and Sister Superior took her to the office, where she was allowed to sit while Dad took the test. When the test was over, she took him home.*

And the dysfunction didn't stop there. He was still dominated, even after we were married. For example, we stood up for a wedding in November, and he asked his mother to watch the girls. She agreed, but stipulated that, "Right after Mass, you come right home. Stay until five o'clock, go to dinner, and then come right home." So, we, who stood up for the wedding, were back in our house at nine o'clock at night.

I remember your dad's younger brother, Walter. We affectionately called him Uncle Wally. He had a drinking problem and often drank to excess. Uncle Wally lived on the second floor of our apartment building. One night, we were all awakened by someone screaming, and the place was filled with smoke. It turns out Uncle Wally had fallen asleep in his bed with a lit cigarette and had set himself on fire. He died not long afterward from those burns.

My dad's other brother, Frank, was a Harbor City police officer. Mom would tell stories about how he was a mean bully and how he mistreated my dad. My mother told me a story about Uncle Frank: My Aunt Irene, Mom's older sister, called him to say they were concerned about my father's increasingly irrational behavior.

Mother: *So, Frank came over later in the evening, and he looked at my husband and said, "Helen is afraid you are going to shoot somebody with the gun. She wants me to take away the guns." Well, I didn't say anything. I just let my brother-in-law, the big shot, say what he had to say to my husband, and then he left. That is one of the times he beat me. When he started the beatings, I did what I always did and took one of the kids. The girls were a little bigger, but I would take Danny or Tommy and hold them close so he wouldn't touch me anymore. I think that happened during the week he died.*

I asked her, "Do you remember the first time he hit you? Was it before or after I was born?"

She said it started before I was born. She again blamed the dysfunction within my father's family as the primary reason. She mentioned that my dad was in complete denial about what was going on with the dysfunction that existed on his side of the family.

Until then, that was the closest my mother has come to admitting that there were incidents of domestic violence in our home. At that moment, Mom paused, as if reconsidering her previous statement. Acknowledging that her husband was physically abusive to her was something she rarely did. She had lived in denial for many years. Yet there I was, sitting in her living room, hearing Mom admit that my dad beat her. It was surreal to listen to her tell me that, in fact, he also beat me.

It was almost like Mom let the cat out of the bag just by telling the truth. True to his classic abusive behavior, he justified his actions by accusing my mother of betraying him by talking about his behavior to his older brother. I had to stop there for a minute and ask Mom when the physical abuse started. I was curious about when the cycle of violence began and felt compelled to ask her.

"When did the violence start? When did he start hitting you? When you were dating?"

She replied, "Not when we were dating, because if he did, my brothers would have taken care of him."

At that stage of the conversations, a friend suggested looking into the work of Alice Miller, a Swiss psychologist who studied childhood trauma. Her work had a profound effect on me, helping me better understand how emotional legacies are passed down through generations. Her work also helped me to understand something I could never fully express: the emotional turmoil of loving someone who also scared me. It can be very confusing for a child to love someone who is both emotionally and physically harmful to them. That must have also caused enormous confusion among my two older sisters.

For a child, the need for connection is so basic and urgent that their parents often justify mistreatment with stories that end with a moral, like, "it's for your own good." I began to wonder how deeply ingrained the lie had become in the story I had told myself about my own childhood.

I was present for many of the beatings that took place, but I remember very few. Dissociation was one of the first defense mechanisms I developed. My mind could protect me when my body couldn't. My bed was near the kitchen doorway. You had to pass by me to reach the bedrooms, which were behind my sleeping quarters. I had a front-row seat to just about everything that happened in that part of my world. I saw everything that went on in our house. I remember seeing my father bounce my mother's head off a concrete wall. I yelled at him to leave her alone. He stopped, closed the door, and kept beating her. I later found out that was not the only time it happened. Our house was like a giant vault where all the family secrets were stored.

Another time, I remember my two sisters running past me, screaming as they went into their bedrooms. My father followed soon after, removing his belt as he passed me. I heard both of my sisters screaming in obvious pain soon after. There was fear—constant, shape-shifting fear—living in the walls. As a child, how could I possibly make sense of what was happening in my own house? I only knew that the air felt heavy, that silence could be dangerous, and that pretending everything was okay would become second nature.

As I learned more about childhood development, I realized I might have been too young to process those events. That explanation helped ease my guilt a bit. I know in my heart of hearts that I felt so helpless. Those feelings lived within me. I felt guilty for not being able to protect them at a very early age—my first experience with trauma. I couldn't

do a thing about what was going on in our house. I was too small. That part sticks with me psychologically. I felt helpless and couldn't do anything to protect them.

The domestic violence took place in the house, and the ongoing tension that went with it became as present as someone sitting at our kitchen table. My father's actions were inexcusable. Yet, viewed through Miller's lens, they became more tragically comprehensible. Did he have any idea what the consequences of his actions would have on the rest of us? But it may explain the twisted logic of the generational pain passed down as discipline.

The story of me and my family represents an attempt to make sense of the fragments—to see my father not only as the man he was, but also as the child he once was, shaped by a dysfunctional family long before any of us arrived. By trying to understand him, I hoped to gain insight into myself and begin to heal the wounds passed down through generations. The lessons we absorbed were not spoken aloud, but they shaped us all the same: trust cautiously, expect pain, and never believe too fully in your worth.

The damage wasn't always visible—it lived quietly in the way we guarded ourselves, struggled to trust happiness, and sometimes mistook suffering for loyalty, or silence for strength. It is no surprise that we were, in fact, a family of secrets.

Chapter 3:
Family

In 1958, Dad, Mom, Linda, Karen, and I moved into a basement apartment in a three-flat building owned by my father's family on Harbor City's northwest side. We were still three years away from Dad taking his life in the garage located in the back of the house.

My mother called the place where we were living "the House of Horrors." It wasn't just a name; it captured the emotional atmosphere of the time. The basement, haunted by the ghosts of my father's volatile upbringing and his abusive Polish immigrant parents, felt dark, heavy, and unsafe.

My memories of the apartment are that it was very small: a kitchen, a living room, one bathroom, and two bedrooms. Immediately outside the back door of our apartment was a common area we used as a play space when it was too cold to be outside. It had one of those areas where coal was dropped off, which was used to heat the building at some point. I don't remember whether it was still in use at that time.

We lived about one block away from the church and school that we all attended. The neighborhood residents were second- and third-generation immigrants of Polish and Italian descent. I remember it being a quiet neighborhood, where it seemed like everybody minded their own business.

Linda was the oldest child, and through our later conversations, I learned how she really took the brunt of the mental and physical abuse handed out by our father. Linda was about eleven and a half years old when our father died. She was my big sister. She spent most of her adolescent years playing the role of our mother in real life.

Developmentally, according to Piaget, she was at an age when she could see the world through a very different set of eyes. In her mind, everything was classified as either good or bad, correct, or just unfair and unethical. When we discussed Dad's death, Linda said, without hesitation, that she was glad he was dead.

Linda is a little more than five years older than I am. She was only a few years older than Karen, and although they attended the same school, they had little social interaction. She talked about not having many friends in high school and doing very little socially.

By her own admission, Linda spoke about not having a normal childhood; far from it. Mother told me that, after my father's suicide, she was so distraught that she couldn't care for the other children. She went on to say that the second Linda walked in the door after school, she handed the kids over to her.

Karen is four years older than I am. She was very sociable. I remember her friends were all very kind to me. Karen was also a victim of my father's abuse. She was ten years old when our father committed suicide. Karen was into folk music and introduced me to the live music scene. When she was in high school, her friends would visit our house and treat me like one of them.

She and I often talk about how she employed her imagination to cope with her feelings. Karen frequently referenced the movie *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. It is a story about a young girl who invents a happy, carefree, pretend life. The truth is, she has an abusive, alcoholic father. Her use of imagination is typical for a child her age who is dealing with trauma.

When I talked with Karen, she responded with a comment that truly shook me: "I was glad he was dead." Those kinds of answers from both

my sisters piqued my interest and led me to delve even deeper into my family's backstory. That was the first time I had ever heard someone say they were glad their father was dead. How could that be true? I was intrigued, confused, and incredibly sad all at once.

Linda and Karen told me stories of how our father beat, humiliated, and abused them well before he died. I couldn't believe what I was hearing, thinking to myself, because I was living within ten feet of them. That process taught me the reasons for my ignorance, if you will. What happened to all of us would affect us in very different ways.

Both of my sisters were constantly on red alert about what was happening around them. Mom and sisters also talked about never knowing what would set him off and living with a constant sense of tension and anxiety.

That conversation led me to learn about yet another byproduct of post-traumatic stress syndrome, known as hypervigilance. Hypervigilance keeps you in a perpetual state of fear, creating the very experience you have been trying to avoid. Hypervigilance is a constantly tense, on-guard state of heightened sensory sensitivity, along with exaggerated, high-intensity behavior whose sole purpose is to detect threats. People suffering from hypervigilance and anxiety are constantly on red alert regarding the happenings in their surroundings. People with hypervigilance tend to have low self-esteem and feel unworthy.

Tommy, my little brother, was just a 14-month-old infant when his father died. I can't even begin to imagine the stress he felt from all of the dysfunction that existed in our house.

Our age difference caused us to live very different lives. I honestly don't remember much about him as my little brother. One memory that

stands out is from one of his Little League games at the local park: the kid batting ahead of him was hit in the chest with a pitch and died right there on the field. Tommy never played baseball again.

Tommy was very quiet as a kid. He started playing the organ at a very young age and has made music a part of his life ever since. Tommy was an artistic kid as far back as I can remember. He has always expressed his feelings through music or writing.

Mom told me more than once that she would hold Tommy close to her so my father wouldn't or couldn't hit her. It makes sense that the youngest often perceive their surroundings more acutely; this is because nature equips infants with sharp survival instincts. When a child's safety is at risk, he clearly knows it, even at that young age.

Chapter 4:
Danny

Before I took my first breath, my life was already shaped by others—by their struggles, pain, and choices. The study of epigenetics has taught me our DNA isn't just a set of instructions; it's a record of everything that came before us. Every decision, every trauma, and every joy leaves its mark. It adjusts to help us navigate what was unfolding around us, even though we weren't born yet.

I was born with a cleft palate, which required multiple surgeries and years of speech therapy. A cleft palate is a congenital condition characterized by an opening or split in the roof of the mouth (the palate) occurring when the tissue does not fuse properly during fetal development. A cleft palate can lead to challenges with speech development and dental issues. There are others, but those two were mine.

My mother told me that my father confined me to the back room of our house, ashamed of the freak of nature he believed he had created. I don't recall those formative years, but I often wonder if, even back then, a part of me sensed that someone didn't truly want me or didn't believe I was good enough to be their child.

My sisters have often told me that, because of my cleft palate, I was the golden child. I got most of the toys and attention, while they got the abuse. I know they didn't mean it, but such statements made me feel terrible. They both told me that, because I was born with this deformity, I may have been spared the violence inflicted on the other members of my family.

As we continued sharing our lives and experiences, it became a little easier for all of us to be honest. As a young child, could I interpret my father's actions as if I were the cause of all that chaos? One particular stage of development, a developmental trait of a child my age, as Piaget describes, is egocentricity: I believed the whole world revolved around me. To this day, I still carry this guilt.

I have vivid recollections of the various rehabilitation activities I undertook to heal my cleft palate. According to my mom, I had five surgeries to repair the cleft palate at a very young age. Before one of my surgeries, I lay on a gurney in a hallway at St. Michael's Hospital, feeling woozy from the preoperative sedative the nurse had given me. I always had my stuffed animal friend, Gregory, with me. He kept me company during those times in the hospital when I was alone. One of the surgical nurses approached me and politely informed me that Gregory would not be allowed in the operating room. She assured me he would be waiting for me in the recovery room. Rules are rules, so I handed my friend over with specific instructions on how to care for him while I was in the operating room. Upon regaining consciousness in the post-operative unit, I was still nauseous from the lingering smell of the ether used for anesthesia. The first thing I did was ask where Gregory was. Nobody seemed to know. Finally, someone said Gregory was lost. I never saw him again. I was heartbroken. Gregory had been with me the whole time; now he was gone.

There was another time I was in the hospital after one of my operations. I was lying in my hospital bed when I heard the nurse whisper to my parents not to say goodbye to me as they were getting ready to leave. The concern was that, if I started to cry, I might tear the stitches holding the roof of my mouth together. I was just a little kid, yet I can still remember seeing them walk quietly toward the door, doing my best to hold back tears.

There was always some therapy to do. One in particular consisted of blowing into a straw-like device that propelled red-dyed water through several glass tubes. I had to go a little farther each time. I can still hear the cheers in the room when the red-dyed liquid passed the required goal. I had to try to blow up a balloon, and I can still remember the smile on my surgeon's face when I finally succeeded.

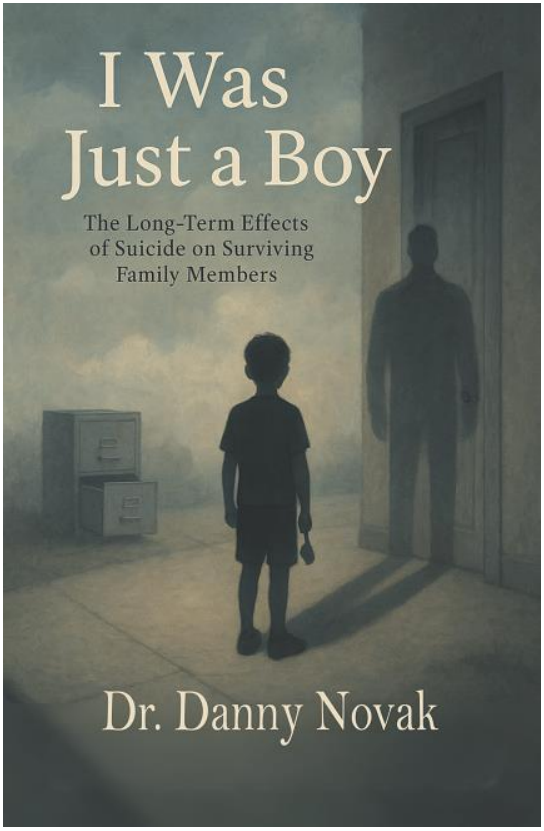
Mom enrolled me in a speech camp in a city far from where I lived. In my seven- or eight-year-old brain, I thought I was there for a week. Later, my older sister told me I was there for the whole summer. I still have the notebook we created with all the sounds and associated words. My speech therapy went on for years. I guess my normal was very different from that of other kids in the neighborhood, only I didn’t know the difference.

My childhood memories resemble a film with missing reels. I have vivid recollections of the various rehabilitation activities I undertook to heal my cleft palate. Stories like this always make me question how and why I can clearly remember specific moments from my life. Yet, I have so few memories of any instances of my sisters being hurt during our childhood.

But survival always comes with a cost. While dissociation and hypervigilance protected me when I needed them most, they also left behind an invisible mark. As I got older, I found it difficult to trust my feelings, memories, and even my sense of reality. Moments should have been filled with connection or joy, but often felt muted, distant, or unreal. It was as if part of me was always just outside of my life, watching but not truly participating.

Learning to reconnect with myself and trust my own experiences again became one of the most challenging—and yet essential—parts of

my healing journey. I remember times as an adult, well into my forties and even fifties, driving alone, looking out the window of my car, and feeling as if I were watching a movie. That feeling was as real as the day is long. The concepts of hypervigilance and dissociative disorder began to make sense. The trauma, self-doubt, and endless questions all have their roots here. Yet so does hope, the hope for a path forward, even amid the darkness.



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