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A CLIENT CALLED NOAH

A Family Journey Continued

"One of the Notable Books of the Year"
— *The New York Times Book Review*

Josh Greenfeld

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CONTINUED

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A Harvest/HBJ Book
HARCOURT BRACE JOVANOVICH, PUBLISHERS
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A B C D E

“Whether by the process of selection, or simply because he understands so well the art of narrative, Josh Greenfeld has given this personal history some of the best qualities of fiction.”

— *The New York Times Book Review*

“Noah has found a place, not only in real life but in the minds of those who, thanks to his parents, have come to know him.”

— *Time*

“Greenfeld’s candor and acerbic wit make the book at once flinchingly honest and droll.”

— *Los Angeles Times*

“A work that stuns the reader with its revelations of human frailty and fortitude. . . . A wise and ultimately uplifting look at the torments and triumphs of brain-damaged children and their families. Moving and powerful.”

— *Kirkus Reviews*

“*A Client Called Noah* is about that long war called family life, its tragedies and its triumphs. Josh Greenfeld wears both its stripes and its medals for valor, as do all the members of the family. This is a book about those who not only endure but prevail.”

— John Gregory Dunne

ALSO BY JOSH GREENFELD

A Child Called Noah

A Place for Noah

Harry and Tonto

O for a Master of Magic

The Return of Mr. Hollywood

For Noah

INTRODUCTION

In *A Child Called Noah* I described my son Noah in 1970 this way:

At the age of four Noah is neither toilet-trained nor does he feed himself. He seldom speaks expressively, rarely employs his less-than-a-dozen-word vocabulary. His attention span in a new toy is a matter of split seconds, television engages him for only an odd moment occasionally, he is never interested in other children for very long. His main activities are lint-catching, thread-pulling, blanket-sucking, spontaneous giggling, inexplicable crying, eye-squinting, wall-hugging, circle-walking, bed-bouncing, jumping, rocking, door-closing, and incoherent babbling addressed to his finger-flexing right hand. But two years ago Noah spoke in complete sentences, had a vocabulary of well over 150 words, sang the verses of his favorite songs, identified the objects and animals in his picture books, was all but toilet-trained, and practically ate by himself.

What was the matter with Noah? For the longest time it seemed to depend upon what diagnosis we were willing to shop around for. We'd been told he was mentally retarded; emotionally disturbed; autistic; schizophrenic; brain damaged; or that he was suffering from a Chinese box combination of these conditions. But we finally discovered that the diagnosis didn't seem to matter. . . . There was no single viable treatment immediately available for Noah, no matter what category he could eventually be assigned to.

In 1977, just as Noah was eleven, I wrote in *A Place for Noah*:

My son Noah was—and is—brain-damaged. He suffers from severe developmental disabilities and acute deprivation in his fine motor processes; he is definitely mentally retarded and naturally has a behavior problem. We have yet to discover the exact reasons—which area of the brain and what perceptual faculties are not functioning properly.

But encircling him with an Orwellian word such as *autism*—one that cosmeticizes rather than communicates—is no help. . . .

How is . . . Noah now? He is doing better than he has done, but not as well as I would have hoped. If I had once seen his malady as transient, I now know it to be permanent. But I still must deal with it on a transient—or existential—basis. I still both enjoy Noah and endure him. . . .

This book begins where *A Place for Noah* ended and chronicles our family life up until November 15, 1980, my wife Foumi's fiftieth birthday. I have not brought the time frame further up to date out of respect for the privacy of my older son, Karl. We all need the protective buffer of hang time, especially while we're still growing up. And if I had to worry about stepping on too many recent feelings and incidents it would have made complete candor impossible.

Because again I have tried to communicate as honestly as possible our family lives on a day-to-day basis, our confusions and muddles along with our dreams and hopes. Once more I have culled the pages of my journal and transcribed them in order best to recapture the immediacy of the experiences. And in concentrating on a briefer time frame, I hope I have rendered more faithfully the density—and intensity—of our trials. In order to protect the innocent and ward off the guilty, I have sometimes found it necessary to mask completely the real identities of certain people and places. The rest is truth.

At this remove, if I had to sum up *A Child Called Noah* in a single word it would be *denial*. And the one word for *A Place for Noah* would probably be *rage*. So it should almost follow, as a textbook example of the adjustment process, that perhaps the word that might best encapsulate this book is *acceptance* or *resignation*. However, either word implies a passivity that seems alien to both my past accounts and present recollections of the period limned. In fact, I never before, nor ever since, have felt so vibrantly alive.

When I last wrote about Noah he was still nonverbal. But somewhere I believed the spark to communicate still smoldered within him. His brother, Karl, a year and a half older, was then twelve years old, perched at the precarious edge of adolescence. Most of Foumi's energies were directed toward running a day-care center for the developmentally disabled that we had established. But she was also working on a novel in Japanese that she hoped to get published. And as for me, I was still writing for the movies and television, but like some traditional cliché character out of a tired old script was also trying to find the time to get a novel of my own done. We lived in Pacific Palisades, a section of Los Angeles that was then having its brief moment in the media sun because Ronald Reagan lived here. But he lived in another part of town and has long since moved away. We still live in our part of town.

A word about the title: *Client* literally means one leaning on another, usually for protection; the word *incline* comes from the same root. *Client* is also the official designation or description assigned to Noah by the governmental agencies responsible for the supervision of his care.

Pacific Palisades, California
May 15, 1986

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January 20, 1977

In my house the sound of reality is plop-plop-plop. Last night Noah shit everywhere: on the bathroom mat, the hallway carpet, his own bedroom rug. This morning Karl woke up complaining of nausea and diarrhea. While I don't like to see him sick I prefer his being ill to Noah's.

Next the dishwasher backed up and flooded the kitchen. I was able to fix that by cleaning out the clogged drainage pipe with a wire clothes hanger. But then the washing machine wouldn't agitate. I didn't know how to fix that so I called a repairman who has yet to come.

I spent the rest of this inaugural morning watching Jimmy Carter walk down Pennsylvania Avenue with his family to the White House and envied him. Not his presidency. But the fact that he doesn't have to worry about broken washing machines and sick kids. Just the fate of the nation instead.

And now I'm off to lunch with a producer. The yearn of the stage, the call of the screen, like shitting kids and malfunctioning machines, are but time-fiddling ways of avoiding writing. No wonder I am prey to them.

January 21, 1977

The repairman pronounced the washing machine dead upon his arrival. I rushed out and bought a new one, with the deal-breaker

being that it had to be delivered by five o'clock. We can't be without a washing machine for a single day. Meanwhile, thankfully, Noah is in a good mood and Karl feels better. I drove them both to school this morning.

January 22, 1977

Suddenly, it's summer—on a lovely Saturday. Foumi went with Noah to our day-care center. She is the director and she had to resolve a transportation problem for a new kid and meet a new parent. I took Karl to breakfast, to his soccer game, to lunch, and then to a movie with some of his friends where I gave the kids an open tab at the refreshment counter. They took advantage, too, knowing a real sucker father when they saw one.

January 23, 1977

Last night both Karl and I had different versions of our recurring dreams. His dream: "You die. And when you die Noah becomes normal. So Foumi closes the day-care center and tries to kill all the parents so their children can become normal too. But the police arrest her. And then Noah goes crazy again."

My dream isn't as well plotted: It always involves a little girl, a daughter, who precociously can crawl at two months and is not brain-damaged in any way.

January 24, 1977

Noah's school keeps a complete change of clothing on hand in case of a toilet accident. This morning when I drove Noah there I brought along a freshly laundered set. But I forgot the extra pair of socks. So I took mine off and left them there. Greater love hath no barefoot father.

January 25, 1977

Last night we squeezed out of Karl a report on Noah for his Health class assignment. The teacher had wanted the kids to do one of those copy-and-cull-from-the-encyclopedia reports. I can't stand that sort of academic rigmarole. I told Karl to write what

he knows. And, after much prodding, pushing, and tugging from me, he finally did. This morning, when I told him his report wasn't bad at all, he blithely replied, "I know. I put in some real catchy things."

The weather is warm, springlike, eternally hopeful. I miss winter until I read of the weather back East. I am happy to be here now, happy to be with my family. But there has to be a better way to top an evening than bathing Noah.

Or filling out forms. The day-care center devours time. Last night Foumi and I diligently completed our payroll tax and W-2 forms. And today we have another kid coming. A rubella kid who is barely toilet-trained and doesn't listen to commands. But somehow I think it's all worth the effort, that someday we'll remember our kitchen-table activities the same way Exxon recalls its first oil strike.

January 26, 1977

Karl's Health teacher questioned him about his report, asking him if Noah was "autistic." Karl tried to explain to her that there was no such thing as autism—the word means nothing—and that what his brother was suffering from was a form of brain damage. I hope the student was able to teach the teacher something.

Noah is in a good mood these days. And I am too until I realize he is almost ten and a half. Which puts me in a bad mood.

January 27, 1977

Karl received his report card. No A's. Just B's and C's. Nothing exceptional. But not too bad either. His Health teacher gave him only a C. She should be shot for that. He deserved a better grade on the basis of that report alone and I told him so. Suddenly tears began to cloud his eyes. I don't know whether he was going to cry over the injustice of his grade or the tragedy of his brother. But it didn't matter. At that moment I loved him for his vulnerability.

He also has good taste. Last night he went with us to see Truffaut's *Small Change* and giggled all the way through it.

January 28, 1977

I know behavior mod is not the complete answer when it comes to treating children like Noah. At the same time I think it's the best first step. So I can appreciate the dilemma of state hospitals although I don't agree with their solution. On the one hand they are supposed to keep the patients in control. On the other hand they are legally constrained from punishing them in any way. Except they are allowed to administer drugs—which ultimately are a silent, sanitized form of punishment anyway. We assume deterrents are necessary to keep unruly nations in check. Why not brain-dysfunctional people, too? The problem, unfortunately, like integration is too complicated for legislated answers alone.

January 29, 1977

I feel bad that the comedian Freddie Prinz is dead. Not that I knew him. I just relate everything to Noah, especially a death that comes too soon, out of the expected order of things. After all, Noah too died too soon. At the age of two when his brain gave out.

January 31, 1977

We experimented yesterday afternoon, leaving Karl in charge of Noah for three hours. It seemed to work. Noah had no untoward behavior, even though Karl did make the mistake of having his friend Erich over. Which meant that as they played together Noah was ignored. Noah does not like to be ignored. He reminded us of that fact at dinner by refusing to eat and having a tantrum.

Karl seems to be the subject of an experiment in school. He was in an English honors class he liked. Now he will be in an experimental class in which honor students are paired off with remedial students in a tutorial relationship. It doesn't seem to make much sense to me but I'll stay tuned. I might have to get him out of that class. I want him to learn a little more in school rather than for him to teach the little he knows, more or less. In terms of education, what to do with Karl remains

as much a problem as what to do with Noah.

A footnote on the normalcy of the abnormal—or the abnormality of the normal: Foumi has observed that both Karl and Noah prefer using our bathroom to their own.

February 2, 1977

A bad day in Hollywood. As I left a lunch with my agent, a young producer, and an older actress, I realized anew that taking on a movie writing assignment is like volunteering for a rape.

February 3, 1977

Karl seems to like his remedial-honors class, Noah has been in a good mood lately, and Foumi is tired. But then she's always tired. So too is my compassion for her. I guess I'm as worn out as she is.

February 4, 1977

Today I bought a new typewriter that sounds at times like a tit-willow in an electronically operated forest. At other times the Olivetti's squeaky chirps seem like a nervous, high-strung Italian landlady's constant demand for the rent. But mostly it reminds me of the "self-stim" of Noah, the meaningless sounds he singsongs to himself. My whirring electric typewriter is as autistic as my keening mysterious son.

February 6, 1977

Last night Foumi couldn't sleep. First, one of the social workers over at Family Service, where we rent the day-care site, was hinting that we would be asked to leave because it needed the space. Second, Reva Jones, our key worker, the infantry of our day-care center, announced that she is thinking of starting a day-care center of her own for children in the black ghetto. So Foumi was up all night wondering what to do, spinning out options in her head. I don't know what we should do either. But I could sleep. I have learned that with every setback there is a possible advantage. Except with Noah.

Noah is with me now. I brought him to my office this Sunday morning because otherwise sleepy Foumi would not have allowed me to get away. At first he objected coming here. I think he thought it might be the office of some new doctor I was taking him to. But now he's settled down to his usual routine. Doing nothing but bouncing up and down on my couch. While I perform my self-stim at this self-stimming typewriter.

February 7, 1977

Noah has bigger hands than Karl. Does that mean he'll become bigger than Karl? He also does not like to be teased. Yesterday I called him "a good boy" ironically. His response: He pulled Foumi's hair.

February 9, 1977

I went to a Writers Guild meeting last night and came home convinced that writers who always get screwed will find a way to screw themselves again. This morning at breakfast I told Karl there might be a writers' strike. "So what," said Karl. "It's not so terrible. It's not like they're farmers or something." "But it means," I said, "that after a while there'll be no new episodes of 'All in the Family,' 'Happy Days,' or 'M.A.S.H.'"" "You mean just reruns?" Karl asked. "Just like summer?" "Yes," I replied. "Gee," Karl said, and poked his egg thoughtfully, "that's terrible."

I had the usual dream again, Noah talking. But this time it wasn't too difficult to wake up into reality. He only said two words throughout the dream: "You bet."

February 10, 1977

At dinner last night Foumi observed that both Karl and Noah eat more than either of us. I guess when the kids put down more food than the parents, it means the Oedipal weight is shifting.

February 13, 1977

The bad news: We got our walking papers from Family Service, our day-care landlord. The good news: They will not just evict us

into the cold, we'll have ample time to find a new day-care site. The best news: Reva will stay with us.

February 14, 1977

Karl slept at his friend Erich's house on Saturday night and yesterday informed me that the trained rat belonging to Erich's kid brother, Maxie, was not that trained. It had bitten him, drawing blood. When I called our pediatrician to learn if there were any special precautions I should take, he asked how old Karl was. I didn't quite realize until I answered him that Karl was twelve.

Which means he's not so young anymore. Theoretically, in another six years he could be sent off into the world on his own. Certainly, in another nine or ten years I'm off the hook with him. With Noah, theoretically I'm off the hook at any time—and never.

February 16, 1977

I observed Karl from a distance as he was walking home from school. He looked lean and trim to me, someone who would grow taller and slimmer. I saw Noah from a distance as he was getting out of the car coming home from day-care. He looked fat, and like someone who would get even fatter. So this morning I made him go light on breakfast.

February 17, 1977

My health tests out good according to my doctor, but my genes continue to haunt me. My cholesterol is up to 301. I will take another test. And if it is still up, lean as I am, I'll have to go on some slim-trim-low-fat-no-taste diet.

February 20, 1977

A winter Sunday in Southern California, the sun shining in a clear blue sky, and I've come to my office to do a little work. I always think that whatever I accomplish on a Sunday is worth double an ordinary day. I've also come here to get away from the

house. Karl and Foumi are arguing about drums: He wants to get a set and play them in the house.

And I feel guilty about the way I treated Noah last night. I struck him unnecessarily when he began to spit and claw at me. So he just did more of the same, reminding me that I have to be patient with him. I have to spend more time teaching him with rewards rather than just chastising him. But why oh why does the parent of a special child have to be more of a teacher and a tutor than the parent of a normal child?

February 21, 1977

We picked up a sign-language book. The sophisticated finger movements seem to me to be beyond Noah's range of motor skills. Perhaps we should try to teach him a simpler homemade language that he can use to communicate just with us. Like touching his throat when he is thirsty. Or a thump on his chest for when he wants to go outside. We could figure out a King Kong kind of language.

February 23, 1977

The family stayed home en masse today. It was one of those day afters that seem to come only after a holiday. What happened was this: Last night Noah had a loose stomach, the shit sliding down his leg. Foumi insisted on giving him a medication even though I argued that it would keep him up all night. And I was right. Then this morning Karl woke up vomiting.

So everybody is at home today with Noah the healthiest, Karl the sickest, Foumi the sleepest, and me the laziest. But I do have a cold, which gives me the excuse to curl up with a book, Alma Mahler's life story. I love to read about old Vienna. I knew when I was stationed in Germany that there is a part of me that is Germanic. I only wish that I had been a better linguist. Perhaps Karl will be. He has a musical sense I never had.

February 24, 1977

Foumi and I decided that living well is not the best revenge. But that if one has health, if one has materials, the best revenge is living longer. An editor I know died at forty-nine playing tennis.