New York Times Bestselling Author

Gary Sinise



SNEAK PEEK

Chapters 1-3

Graceful Warrior

The True Story of a Son, a Father, and a Family Who Carried Each Other Through

Graceful Warrior

The True Story of a Son, a Father, and a Family Who Carried Each Other Through

Gary Sinise

with Marcus Brotherton



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Graceful Warrior

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Grateful American: A Journey from Self to Service

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Overture

When You Love Life

December 30, 2023

My son, oh my son.

Tonight, you are struggling to breathe, but I force myself not to panic. Instead, I think, *Okay, we can handle this. We've been here before. We're going to get through this, just like we've gotten through everything else.*

I can see the problem. Where your spine is surgically fused, it's holding your body tight. You're trying to summon up a deep cough, enough to clear your lungs, but you can't push your shoulders forward to produce the needed intensity.

"I'm a little worried," I hear your home nurse say.

You stay calm despite the struggle, that affable grin twitching at the corners of your mouth like it so often does. I love your positive default demeanor, even in the midst of all this trouble. You love life, and everybody around you loves you in return.

But you're clearly struggling. And we need to do something. I punch 911 into my phone, while the nurse helps you cough again as best as possible. You rasp in another breath. Another breath, this one more slowly. Another, waiting.

At last we hear the ambulance screech to a stop in our circular driveway. The paramedics load you carefully onto a blanketed gurney, and I can see in your eyes that you want your mother, Moira, to stay home tonight so she can rest. It's getting late, and she and I have just returned home from a visit

at your sister's house. I want Moira to rest, too, because she bears the burden of her own fragile health.

Moira lingers by your gurney as the paramedics move toward the door. "Wait," she says. "I want to kiss him goodbye." They hold for a moment while she bends down and kisses your cheek. The paramedics wheel you out through the garage then load you inside the ambulance and close its doors. I hug Moira tight, then jump into my Ford Explorer and rush to the emergency room behind you.

Your hemoglobin is low. You need a blood transfusion. That's what they tell us in the ER. They find a vein in your arm and insert an IV. The fresh blood begins to flow into your circulatory system. There's power in the blood. Your numbers slowly rise back up to where they need to be.

They examine your chest, and they're trying to reach down your airway with a tube to clear out your lungs. You're unsettled, and I can see you're distressed. But they get you stabilized enough so you can breathe easier at last. They admit you into the hospital, and I follow along as the orderlies wheel you on your gurney to a room upstairs. There, I brief the nurses on your daily medications and the specifics of your condition. This is so hard. I want to be confident things are under control, but I am quite concerned.

Oh my son, my beautiful son. On your best days, you have been reduced to wheelchairs and lying in a hospital bed in our house. You, once a music major at the prestigious Thornton School of Music at USC. You, who became a professional drummer and toured the world with bands. You, who once played drums on the *Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon. You have lost the fine motor skills in your hands. You haven't been able to drum for the past five years.

When you lie in your bed at home you spend hours reading and studying the world's best literature—classics both ancient and modern—Aquinas and Thomas à Kempis, St. Augustine, and C. S. Lewis.

In my mind's eye, I can see your bookshelves, lined with the volumes you've devoured. You poured through *Mere Christianity* and *The Screwtape Letters*. You loved Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, and Admiral William H. McRaven's *Make Your Bed*, and John Eldredge's *Wild at Heart*.

You write in your journal and make lists of things you still want to learn,

new projects you want to tackle, dreams you still want to accomplish, places you want to visit, and people you want to see.

You like Iron Man and the Avengers. You love penguins and have your own Christmas tree in your room with a bunch of fun penguin ornaments all wearing Santa hats. You like painted lighthouses, beacons of hope. A big goofy stuffed "Olaf" sits at the foot of your bed, the ever-affable snowman from *Frozen*. You like to eat Walker's shortbread.

Your social life, mostly online these days, is rich with friendships and depth. You write and read letters and send emails and texts. You call your buddies from college days and share laughs over FaceTime. You absolutely adore your sisters and your little nieces and nephew, and they absolutely adore you back.

You and your mom are so close. She spends so much time with you. Each day you have long talks and watch movies together on the TV in your room and discuss them afterward. With every game they play, you cheer for the Chicago Cubs.

Your faith is rich. You pray every day, asking all the hard questions about faith and sorrow and a God whose own beloved Son wasn't spared from pain.

My son, you might be reduced to wheelchairs and hospital beds and your room at home with us . . .

But there is magic in your life.

In spite of all the pain you endure, in spite of all you've lost, this radiant light flows from heaven and through your spirit and shines so brightly within you. Everybody can see this light.

This, I take notes on. This, I wish I had more of within myself. This, is what I want to tell the world about you.

You personify your favorite quote from St. Augustine, who grappled with the brevity of his own mortal days and concluded, "You made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

My son, my son, your story is this: Even now, even here, even struggling in this hospital bed, even after enduring hard day after hard day after hard day—oh, how you still summon the valor to love life.

———

I have to dry my eyes. I'm not normally a crier. These days, I cry so easily. But I've got a larger story to tell you, the reader, in this book.

Let's back up to August 2018, long before hospital beds and wheelchairs and midnight runs to the emergency room. As I was finishing writing and editing my first book, my son, McCanna "Mac" Anthony Sinise, told Moira and me that he was having some trouble sleeping due to pain in his lower spine. Mac was twenty-seven years old then. He had been in a bicycle accident in Europe during one of his band tours and hurt his tailbone, so he'd been carrying around a pillow to sit on. A doctor had prescribed Advil, but Mac's pain and discomfort weren't going away.

A professionally trained drummer, Mac toured with a number of different bands. After a few years, he wanted to settle down and not travel so much, so he took a job with the Gary Sinise Foundation, helping shine a spotlight on our nation's defenders and first responders. Quickly Mac caught the vision, leaning into the work of serving others. Mac gave tours. He archived files. He worked with veterans and their families. He started an incredible podcast. Everybody loved him at the foundation. A valiant spirit, lanky and taller than me, he wore an easy smile and a keen shock of unruly hair. Mac wasn't normally someone who carried a cushion around.

With his tailbone still hurting, we sent him to a spine surgeon who ran some tests and found a tumor. There's no way to brace yourself for the magnitude of that kind of news. They diagnosed it as a chordoma, an extremely rare form of bone cancer that grows at the base of the spine or the skull and affects only about three hundred people a year in the United States.

Fortunately, this type of cancer can be surgically removed and has a 70-percent cure rate. The surgeons were optimistic, and Mac had the surgery. Everybody felt hopeful.

Sometime later, Mac, Moira, and I were watching the Cubs play the Pirates on TV when Major League Baseball held one of those "Stand Up to Cancer" moments. Probably you've seen one on TV, or maybe you've been at a game where you've witnessed one firsthand. These special tributes, fundraisers that reaffirm a united commitment to fight cancer and raise money for cancer research, have been happening regularly for the past fifteen years. They always strike me as profoundly powerful.

At the end of the fifth inning, we watched how the baseball game came

to a complete stop. Players, umpires, coaches, and managers all came out onto the field and took to the sidelines. Fans stood. Normally a stadium is loud, but everybody grew quiet. Slowly, the camera panned around the field and the stadium. People were holding placards that read, "I stand up for . . . " and underneath was a space where they'd written the name of somebody they love who'd been affected by cancer.

I'm sure the occasional person remained sitting, but what spoke so clearly was how a whole stadium of people looked to be on their feet. Some people held more than one placard. Some held as many as five. Row after row after row. Name after name after name. The camera zoomed in and I read several: *I stand up for Charley. I stand up for my mom. I stand up for my grandpa. I stand up for Uncle Dave. I stand up for kids in the fight.* You didn't see people talking among themselves. Tens of thousands of people all stood united in one long, fierce, and reverent tribute.

Sitting there with Moira and Mac, I choked up. I had seen these tributes before, but something struck me anew. I glanced at Moira. I thought about her father and brother who both lost their battles with cancer. Then I glanced at Mac. I thought about how everybody experiences difficulty. No human being is immune. You have either gone through pain, or you're going through pain right now, or you're going to go through pain soon. That's why we all need something larger than ourselves. That's why we need something to hang onto.

That's why we can't lose hope.

My book, *Grateful American*, was released in February 2019, and for the next several months, everything was a whirlwind for me. I traveled to various cities on a book tour and appeared on a string of TV shows, radio shows, and podcasts. The book debuted at number three on *The New York Times* bestseller list and stayed on the list for six weeks, and we were all thrilled at the outpouring of such good will. I signed thousands of books and shook a lot of hands.

Funny, when you're "up" like that, how life can throw you a huge, unexpected punch to the jaw.

In May 2019, Mac went in for another routine scan. We met with the surgeon to go over the results, and the news landed hard.

The chordoma was back.

Over the next few years, as our family battled this calamity together, we saw how, when difficulty happens, it's natural to feel anger, frustration, or despair. Grappling with the truth of those emotions while not coming apart is a big part of the fight. But sometimes you do come apart, and that's okay too. It happened to me more than once.

We also saw how, in those difficult times, we can either turn toward the negative or the positive. The choice is ours.

In time, our son would model for us a type of tenacity that I have seen for years now in the lives of our nation's warriors when they get wounded. Mac wasn't fighting for our collective freedom like they are. He was fighting for his personal freedom, his ability to keep going. What we saw through Mac's example was that when we turn toward the positive, we are able to live to the fullest for as many days as we are given. We can also inspire the same resilience in others.

As a family, we decided to tell this story to you, because even though the waters grew deep for us, it's also a story of healing, courage, grace, hope, and massive amounts of love. It's mainly the story of one person, Mac, a graceful warrior, but it offers a larger scope. You'll see there's a huge reason I'm telling all this to you, a reason I hope will benefit your life in a meaningful way.

Will you come along with me on this journey? Be assured this is definitely *not* a book about cancer. It's a book about the strength and hope to press on when the odds seem insurmountable, when you might feel fatigued by the weight of life. What I want to do is point you toward all the strength and hope imaginable.

Okay. First up, we need to begin with a photo of John Malkovich, flying pencil swords, and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Oh, and I'll also tell you about a boy who bit his sister.

Wait? What did he say?

Part One

BEGINNINGS

Chapter One

Pencils and Swordplay

October 23, 2024

My house whispers today.

Sitting on a painted wooden rocker on my front porch in Tennessee, I find myself in a rare moment of reverie. Across the road, trees blaze in reds, yellows, and golds against the bright blue autumn sky. This afternoon's wind is warm and steady, and the flap of the American flag in front of our house keeps a beat like a metronome.

My life rarely grows quiet, but today, with my laptop open, I stare at a blank screen, the cursor blinking. I turn seventy next year, a milestone filled with reflecting, reliving, and looking back. But as I write this book, the chapters aren't coming quickly. With the passage of time, the weight of experiences and responsibilities has grown, and I find I need to think harder. I have more life to sift through. I've seen my share of joys and sorrows, as we all do if time and circumstances favor us enough to reach this age. I've witnessed firsthand how life is made purposeful through helping others, and how true dedication to service demands effort and always carries a cost. Yet it brings tremendous satisfaction—and that's been the tenor of my life for several decades now, always trying to do a little more.

My mind shifts to what's coming next in my calendar. My days are filled with looking out for my family, appointments, projects, concerts, appearances, the good work it takes as founder and board chairman of a foundation that honors our nation's defenders, veterans, first responders, their families, and

those in need. For a moment these good things distract me from my blinking cursor.

One initiative at the Gary Sinise Foundation is to build specially adapted mortgage-free smart homes for severely wounded veterans. We've built dozens of these homes over the years, and we're set to hit one hundred before the end of 2025. If you're severely wounded in service to our country, this is one way we can pull together as a nation to recognize your sacrifice and give something back. I've met so many incredible individuals who have pushed forward after being injured in battle or in the line of duty as first responders, and I've learned much from them and their families as they persevere and overcome challenges.

One of those heroes is Army Ranger Joshua Hargis, a K9 handler during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. During a night mission on October 5, 2013, Josh and his outfit came under heavy attack. Tragically, four team members died on the battlefield, along with Josh's beloved dog, Jany. Josh lost both legs, one above the knee and one below. A few weeks from now, on Veterans Day 2024, I will attend our ninety-fourth home dedication event, where we will present the keys to a brand-new, mortgage-free, smart-technology house to him, his wife Taylor, and their two young sons.

This new home stands as our nation's gift to him, a testament to Josh's courage and selflessness, and the enduring strength of his family.

A few weeks later, during the Christmas season, we will kick off our annual Snowball Express event with some eighteen hundred family members of fallen military heroes. The path to healing should never be walked alone.

With Snowball Express, the GSF creates a place where love, support, hope, healing, and remembrance come together. With the support of our sponsor American Airlines, we fly the families—all expenses paid—to Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida.

The park offers more than just fun. There, children and the surviving parents can unwind and connect, discovering moments of joy and laughter in a space designed just for them. It forges lasting bonds between these military family members on a shared journey of grief and healing.

A few days after they leave, we'll do a second trip for over 350 families, hundreds of children of fallen first responders. It's an amazing event that allows us to remember the fallen and honor their loved ones.

My mind flashes back to the task at hand. There is always so much to do,

and I love the mission. Yet today, as I sit on the white wooden rocker with my laptop open in front of me, I am thinking . . .

The difficulty with today's task isn't that I can't remember the stories. Those stories are always there, flooding me with memories. Some of those memories are so beautiful, so filled with joy.

Yet today—and this has become my new reality—all my memories are tinged with an incredible ache.

I think back to the beginning, to the birth of our son. Such great joy surrounds a baby's arrival. Yet even in the midst of such celebration, it's possible that when Mac was born on November 10, 1990, the chordoma was already there, although we didn't discover it until many years later.

But let's back up to 1985, because here's where the fuller context of my family's story begins. Our first two children were born during a journey with the same play, *The Grapes of Wrath*. In 1985, I was the thirty-year-old artistic director of Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago. That year we acquired the rights to do a stage adaptation of the Steinbeck novel, with Frank Galati, an extremely gifted and experienced artist, doing the adaptation and directing it. Developing a play takes time. Frank started writing the script, but we didn't plow ahead with it right away due to Steppenwolf's busy schedule.

In early 1987, I resigned as artistic director, and Moira and I moved to Los Angeles. That fall I headed off to Iowa and began shooting my first movie as a director, *Miles from Home,* with Richard Gere. In the meantime, Frank had finished *The Grapes of Wrath* script and asked me to play the lead, Tom Joad, an ex-con who returns from prison to his home in Sallisaw, Oklahoma, only to find that his impoverished dust bowl family is about to move to California, desperate for work. Production was set for fall 1988.

In the midst of all this flurry, Moira and I wanted to start our family, and in February of '88 she became pregnant with our first child. There you go. You're just cranking on work and marriage and careers, and whammo! The test shows positive. You and your spouse nervously chuckle. You wrap your arms around each other and hold on tight, because you're happy and excited, but you know everything is about to change.

That summer, while I finished editing *Miles from Home,* I was in rehearsals for *The Grapes of Wrath,* which opened shortly after my movie debuted. Complicating matters, when we first presented the play, it was a whopping four hours long. Critics and fans enjoyed the show, but it was a work in progress, and we all recognized it needed to be shortened. We finished performing *The Grapes of Wrath* in Chicago. I flew back to our rented two-bedroom home in the Sherman Oaks area of Los Angeles and kept auditioning for roles in film while edits to the play continued.

That's when Sophie made her debut, November 9, 1988. Moira wanted to name our first-born daughter after her mother, Jane Ella. Her mom was touched, but she asked us instead to name her after Sophia Loren and Anna Magnani, two classic Italian movie stars she admired and loved, women known for their strength. In their honor, our daughter's full name is Sophia Ana, although we spell Ana with one *n*. We've always called her Sophie.

I soon realized that being a new dad is a major adjustment. Suddenly this innocent, vulnerable human completely depends on you. You look at her sleeping in her bassinet and realize she can't survive without your constant attention. You have this moment when you sort of smack yourself in the forehead and exclaim: "Holy cow. This kid needs me!"

She was a marvelous little thing, and Moira and I fell for her with a new kind of deepened love. God gifted us this beautiful life, and it was up to us to protect, nurture, and raise her.

Moira was the most natural mom, relaxed and confident from the start. Me? I was cautious and alert. We kept a cradle in our bedroom so Sophie could sleep near us. Every little peep had me awake, up and fidgety, checking on her. What's wrong? Is she hungry? Should I change her diaper? Yikes! New dad! What does she need?!

Meanwhile, Frank reshaped *The Grapes of Wrath*, cutting it down, and in May 1989, we took it to the La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego, then in June to the Royal National Theatre in London, where critics raved. Producers came on board and the following year we would move to Broadway.

During *Grapes's* run in San Diego, Moira and I took Sophie to the beach on a Monday, my day off. She was about six months old. Moira lay on a towel and napped while I scooped up Sophie, took her down to the ocean, and walked out on some flat rocks to show her the water. She loved it. We bent

over a tidepool to spot minnows. Suddenly I slipped and lurched. My legs flew out from under me, and I threw myself backward with Sophie on my chest to protect her. My contortions worked. I fell flat on my back.

Sophie started crying, scared but unharmed. My back screamed in pain. Every breath I took, pain shot through my torso. With Sophie under my arm, I crawled back up the beach to Moira, and whispered through clenched teeth, "I think we have to go."

The doctor wrapped my ribs, but the ache persisted. I had to go on stage the next evening. There were plenty of shouting scenes in *Grapes,* where I'd need to expand my ribcage. It hurt like hell, but what could I do? The show had to go on.

The incident was my first taste of the pain associated with fatherhood. Parenting is wonderful. At its best, it's one joyful day after another. But if it comes down to a choice between you or your child being hurt, parents will take one for the team. This was my literal and metaphoric lesson: Don't walk on slippery rocks with a baby.

I started to understand how parenting changes you. You learn to think protectively. I used to drive without a seatbelt. We all did back then. But after Sophie was born, my seatbelt was clicked tight every time. So was hers. At one point, I smoked cigarettes. I never smoked much, but back in my theater days, everybody seemed to smoke after a show. Once Sophie arrived, my cigarettes went into the trash.

Just after the London run of *Grapes,* Moira, Sophie, and I went off to Ireland for a week's vacation. Sophie was about seven months old. Moira has Irish roots, and she'd made a movie in Ireland called *The Fantasist* back in the 1980s. I had visited her on the set then, and we wanted to go back. Our buddy, actor Jeff Perry, and his wife Linda, went with us. We were going to meet them later in the day. Moi and I stopped at a seaside pub for lunch and ordered oysters. After lunch we headed off to where we were staying that night, this medieval castle hotel.

Wow. Just after midnight, Moira and I woke up with the worst case of food poisoning imaginable. The oysters came back to haunt us, I guess. We were both sick as dogs. Thankfully, Sophie felt fine, and Jeff and Linda watched her for the rest of the nocturnal hours. But both her parents were moaning from

Saint Patrick's revenge. We felt so miserable we called the front desk, to ask if they could send a doctor.

He arrived just after dawn, full of good cheer. Sophie was back with us by then for a feeding. "Ah, top o' the mornin' to ya!" the doctor said with a smile. "Ya've got food poisoning, have ya? Try a drop o' brandy. You'll be grand. And if that wee babby starts cryin', just dab a bit on her gums. Works like a charm."

February turned out to be a good month for making babies. In preparation for the Broadway run of *Grapes,* Moira, Sophie, and I moved to New York. In early March 1990, Moira began to feel a bit funny. We got a pregnancy test. Standing by the kitchen counter in a friend's Soho loft where we were staying, Moira showed me we were officially expecting another baby.

This delightful news became my North Star as the play opened on March 22, 1990. By then, the play was just beautiful, and once the show officially opened, it became a huge hit. Critics and fans alike recognized it as a great artistic achievement, and it won the Tony award for Best Play that year.

While I was still performing in *Grapes*, when Moira was about six months pregnant, she took Sophie and went to Chicago for a few weeks to act in a Steppenwolf production called *Love Letters.* It was a short run, just two actors, where different casts would rotate every couple of weeks. After her play concluded, they returned to New York, and we moved from the Soho loft to an apartment on Central Park South and Fifth Avenue. It was owned by my friend, actor Joe Mantegna, and we sublet it for the remainder of our time in New York. It offered a stunning park view. Sophie was a busy little thing, and I was working evenings and nights at the theater. Moira would take her outside in the mornings so I could sleep.

One morning, Moira rushed back to the apartment with Sophie in tow. Breathless, she said, "I was just out walking by a restaurant near Central Park when this guy came running out. He was chased by another guy—and the second guy had a knife!"

Horrified, I shook my head. Here were my pregnant wife and our nearly two-year-old, and a man waving a knife had just sprinted past them, far too close to the two people I loved most. The danger was palpable.

Moira decided she'd had enough of New York, so she took Sophie and returned to our second little rental house in Tarzana, California, while I finished up the show in New York.

We found out the gender of our child ahead of time, and over long-distance calls, Moira and I brainstormed names for our son. One day, a name came to me. I called Moira and said, "Let's name him Mac, after your brother!"

Moira's older brother, Boyd McCanna "Mac" Harris, was a West Point graduate and served two tours in Vietnam, first as a lieutenant, a platoon leader, then as a captain, a company commander. He earned the Silver Star Medal for bravery in combat and later returned to West Point to teach. Moira was overjoyed by the name; her brother had passed away from cancer in 1983, and he was often in our thoughts.

Our son arrived at Valley Presbyterian Hospital (the same hospital where Sophie was born) in Van Nuys, on November 10, 1990, the Marine Corps birthday, and one day after his big sister's second birthday. We named him McCanna Anthony Sinise, and called him Mac for short. The blend of Irish and Italian names felt distinctly American. His middle name, Anthony, was a tribute to one of my grandfather's brothers.

Moira had gone through a long night of labor, and Mac arrived around 5:30 a.m. After spending the night at the hospital with Moira and seeing Mac's birth, I stepped out around 7:00 a.m. to go home, shower, and change. As I drove away, I played the beautiful soundtrack to the film *Glory.*

Stopped at a traffic light, watching the sunrise, I was overwhelmed with emotion. I had not really prayed much before, but I was so thankful I said a quiet prayer. Our son was healthy. Moira was well. My family felt complete and wonderful and safe.

As a baby, Mac was so even keel he could sleep through anything. I often called him nicknames—Mackie, Bud, Budman. In one of my early memories of our son, I was shooting a World War II film called *A Midnight Clear* in Park City, Utah, in winter. We rented a house so Moira and the kids could stay with me. Mackie was about four months old. The movie starred Ethan Hawke, Peter Berg, Kevin Dillon, Frank Whaley, Arye Gross, and me. One night all the actors came over for dinner. Mac was sleeping in a cushy lounge chair.

The guys all bustled into the house, tossing their coats aside. Suddenly I wondered where Mackie was. Without looking, the guys had thrown their

coats over Mac, covering up the baby. Mac just kept snoozing. We quickly uncovered him and chuckled nervously. He was fine. And he hadn't made a sound. Nothing could disturb his sleep.

I had more than one scary moment as a new dad. Once, Mac was napping, and Moira was busy in the house, so I took Sophie to McDonald's, just us, for a treat. I dug into my double cheeseburger and she her Happy Meal. But as we exited the restaurant, my poor little daughter got her finger caught in the door. She started to scream, and I started to howl. I strapped her into her car seat and made her stick her finger in the ice of her Coke while we raced to the Emergency Room. The ice was too cold, so she screamed all the harder. I kept telling her to keep her finger on ice.

It's amazing how calm they can be at the ER. Sophie's finger was smashed but not broken or cut. The doctor said, "Oh, don't worry. Little kids are far more flexible than we think."

With the success of *Grapes*, I had strong momentum in my career. I picked up the rights to *Of Mice and Men* from Elaine Steinbeck, was able to set it up at MGM Studios, and hired the great writer Horton Foote to work on the script. About six months later, we turned it in.

The studio liked the screenplay, and I told them I wanted my buddy John Malkovich to play Lennie, while I'd play George. We got the greenlight and went into preproduction, casting and scouting locations. Life at work was nothing but busy, and so was life at home. Mackie was a chubby baby, happy and secure. Moira did the bulk of the work with our kids, but when I was home in the mornings and evenings, I helped out wherever I could.

I was a more relaxed parent with Mac than I had been with Sophie. Having some experience under my belt helped. Moira breastfed our babies, then they moved to a bottle. I loved rocking them to sleep, particularly when they had that warm-milk, full-tummy, sleepy look. Having your child fall asleep in your arms is one of life's greatest blessings. I read to my kids, played with them, tickled, and chased them. Mac loved to play in the backyard with the hose. Bathtime was a big splashy mess. Anything with water was always a delight.

But Mac had his moods. A finicky eater, he sat in his highchair, mouth

clamped shut, brow furrowed. I tried all the regular song-and-dance routines that young parents go through, but it was impossible to get a bite in. Then I discovered a trick. He loved to watch a video called *Kidsongs.* Little kids ran their own TV studio and came out on stage and sang jaunty tunes and marched around. It was his favorite. This became the only way I could get him to eat. I'd stick him in his highchair and throw in the VHS tape of *Kidsongs*. While he focused on the show, I shoved food into his mouth. Hey, chalk one up for Dad.

Moira loved to sing to the kids when they were little. Some of her favorites included "Red River Valley," "Daisy Bell (a bicycle built for two)," and the classic Irish lullaby, "Too-Ra-Loo-Ra-Loo-Ral." I loved to hear her sing. Those early songs, and the strong love they carried with them, seemed to burrow their way deep into the very souls of our children.

To shoot *Of Mice and Men*, we went up the freeway about two hours from Los Angeles to the Santa Ynez Valley, near Santa Barbara. I rented a house for the family, and Moira and the kids visited the set every so often to say hello. It was always good to see them. Mackie was full of life and joy. I have a picture of him from the set when he was almost a year old, with John Malkovich holding him. John can be highly intense, but Mac wasn't ruffled. They both liked each other quite a bit.

When *Of Mice and Men* finished shooting and before I began editing, Moira and I needed a vacation. Her twin sister, Amy, and her husband, Jack, looked after our kids while we flew to Jamaica, just the two of us, for a little getaway. It was a terrific time just getting to know each other again after I'd been so deeply dug in on getting the movie shot. Lots of reggae and fun chasing each other around on the beach.

But it wasn't all shenanigans in Jamaica. Well, maybe it was. Moira and I were perfectly content with two kids, a boy and a girl, the picture of a perfect American family. When it came to making babies, we thought maybe our time in the sun was concluded.

But back in the States, Moira felt a little funny. She took a test. Sure enough, the couple's-only vacation in the sun had worked its charm.

We were expecting our third.

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We moved to another rental house, this time in Encino, up in the hills. It was our nicest house yet. We had a view of the valley, and my career was running on all eight cylinders by then. I had hired my dad to edit *Of Mice and Men,* and we worked on it through the spring of 1992. Moira's sister Amy and her family were staying with us at the time and looked after Sophie and Mac while Moi and I flew to the Cannes Film Festival in France. There, I showed a nearly finished cut of the movie to a packed house. It received a fifteen-minute standing ovation. Studio execs, stars, and my parents were all there. I was nominated for the Palme d'Or award, given to the director of the best feature film of the festival—a great night.

Our third child was due in late August 1992, but Moira was experiencing some spotting, so her ob-gyn decided to induce her on August 20. I'd shot some video for the first two births but not the whole thing as I was busy helping Moi as best as I could, and I was a bit shyer. For the third, I felt far more relaxed. I was now a director with two films under my belt, so I was determined to capture all the action this time. With my wife's consent, I brought in a big ole' home video camera and sat in a chair next to Moi to help her through labor. When they moved her to delivery, I rolled production on the main event.

Moira's ob-gyn was the same person for all three pregnancies, but the good doctor had missed the first two births due to scheduling complications. For the third, she was Johnny-on-the spot. Moira went into labor in the delivery room and wasn't waiting for anybody. A nurse phoned her ob-gyn, who ran across the medical complex to reach the birthing center just in time.

Once again, Moira was amazing, and our precious little daughter came into the world the morning of August 20, 1992. Moira's mother had passed by then, and we wanted to honor her. Her name was Jane Ella, so for our new daughter we just reversed the order to Ella Jane, which was actually Moira's grandmother's name. Ella is twenty-one months younger than Mac, and Sophie was almost four when she was born. Both Mac and Sophie came to the hospital to visit their new little sister. It was beautiful to see. They all grew up close to one another, the best of friends.

We are so glad we had a third child. Ella just kinda snuck in, but Moira and I have always felt blessed for her arrival. Ella was a cherub of a child, and always our littlest. I called her "Tiny Thing" as a nickname, and every now and again I still call her "Tiny," even to this day. She gets a kick out of it. We

were a cuddly family, and I had a comfortable, easy rapport with all three of my children. I remember sitting in a swivel rocking chair with all three, just laughing and telling silly little-kid jokes. One of my favorite photos from that era shows Mackie and me taking a nap on our bed. He's probably two, in little green-and-blue-striped pajamas, and I'm dressed in a favorite Chicago Bears sweatshirt. I kept that sweatshirt for years.

As I described in my first book, Ella was born with three small holes in her heart. Two closed on their own, but when she was five, she needed heart surgery. There's nothing like being at the hospital when your child is under the knife. You're praying foxhole prayers. Absolute desperation. Thankfully, she healed up just fine.

Mackie and Sophie adored their little sister, but once Mac decided to eat her. He was pretty young, maybe two and a half. So he took a chomp on her arm. I'm not sure if he even knew what he was doing. Little kids put everything in their mouths. She wailed. I got her settled down, then I needed to let Mac know that his little sister wasn't food. Sternly I said, "No biting. You go in your room and stay there." Gently I held the door closed while I stood outside. He was highly remorseful and cried from the other side, "Daddy, no, no, I won't do it again."

I let a few moments pass so he could feel the impact, then I walked in, picked him up, and reassured him. He had big tears rolling down his face. I couldn't keep him in there for long. I just wanted him to know that biting wasn't a good thing.

Meanwhile, my career was firmly on track. *Of Mice and Men* opened in October 1992, and after that I got the lead role in the ABC miniseries *The Stand,* without even auditioning. They simply offered me the part. When *The Stand* aired on ABC, millions of people watched it. It was a great time. But none of that compares to being a dad.

In my mind and heart, I have these images of Mackie, still in his diaper, maybe three years old. He'd fallen in love with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and he would stand in front of the TV with a pencil in each hand doing all sorts of ninja stuff with his pencils, pretending they were swords.

Back then, the world's evil was largely a figment of my son's imagination. I wish that all evil would have stayed that way for him. But like the running

man with knives, and the tumor we didn't yet know about, conflict and tragedy were waiting down the road for us.

We, like all people, would be tasked with confronting that evil. Within the confrontation, we would be called to live to the fullest, for as long as we could. And we would learn in deep ways that no matter what, like so many of the wounded heroes and families I have met over the years, our task was to press forward and never give up.

About the Author

Gary Sinise is an Oscar-nominated actor and winner of an Emmy, a Golden Globe, and two Screen Actors Guild awards, and has been honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, all while advocating for America's veterans for over forty years.

For his service work, Gary has been presented with numerous humanitarian awards, including the Bob Hope Award for Excellence in Entertainment from the Congressional Medal of Honor Society, the George Catlett Marshall Medal from the Association of the U.S. Army, and the Spirit of Hope Award by the Department of Defense. He was named an honorary chief petty officer by the United States Navy, was pinned as an honorary Marine, and received the Sylvanus Thayer Award at West Point, given to a civilian "whose character, service, and achievements reflect the ideals prized by the U.S. Military Academy." He's also the recipient of the Presidential Citizens Medal, the second-highest civilian honor awarded by the president of the United States to citizens for "exemplary deeds performed in service of the nation."

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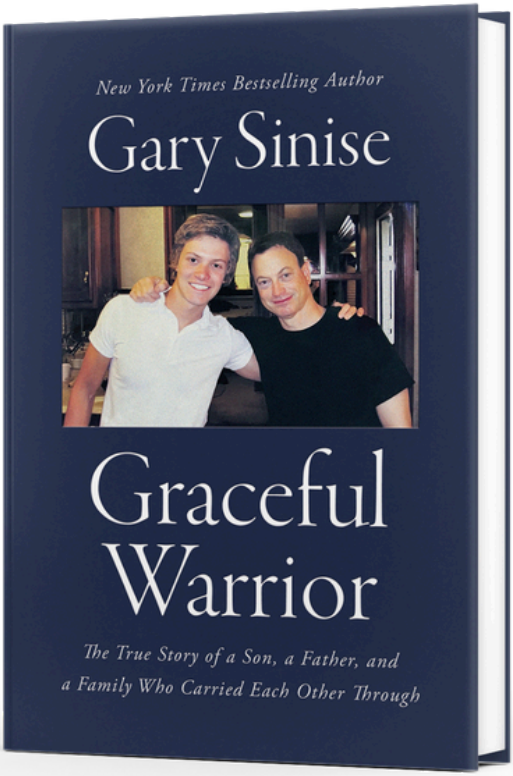
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