

The Closest Thing to a Normal Life



Michael Méndez Guevara



Praise for *The Closest Thing to a Normal Life*

“With humor and undeniable charm, Michael Méndez Guevara navigates the complexities of grief and shows how our deepest relationships ultimately shape our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. *The Closest Thing to a Normal Life* reminds us what it means to find one’s place in the midst of chaos and change.”

—Matt Mendez, author of *The Broke Hearts* and
Barely Missing Everything

“Alarmed that your students are reluctant to pick up a book? Tempt them with the first pages of *The Closest Thing to a Normal Life*, and I predict they will be fighting to be the first to get their hands on your copy. The narrator takes readers on the roller coaster ride of his senior year—ups and downs that are testament to his gumption and resilience. Ethan-Matthew’s search for ‘normal’ is a contemporary odyssey.”

—Carol Jago, associate director of the California Reading
and Literature Project at UCLA, taught high school
English for many years and is past president of the
National Council of Teachers of English

“High school is hard enough without having to start over in a place that was never supposed to be home, living a life that was never supposed to be yours. Ethan-Matthew Cruz Canton wasn’t planning to spend senior year in his dad’s childhood bedroom, pretending he’s totally fine (spoiler alert: he’s not). After losing both parents at once, he’s stuck in a school where friendships go back to the sandbox, just trying to survive. But then come the unexpected connections, tangled emotions and a pull that makes him question everything. *The Closest Thing to a Normal Life* is heartbreakingly real, laugh-out-loud funny and for anyone who’s ever felt lost, out of place or unsure of where they belong.”

—Annie Jenson, host of The History Solarium Book Club

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For all my former English and journalism students who said, “Mr. G, you should write a book.”

For Veneé, Zachary, Zane and Zion—my favorite Guevaras who inspire me and survived my creative endeavors.

For Andrew Smith—this wouldn’t have happened without your help.

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Thanks to the students who had me as a teacher with whom we would write every day in class and share our writing with each other. Over two decades of teaching, students would often say to me, “Mr. G, you should write a book.” After a nod and smile of appreciation, we would go on with our learning and that would be the end of it—until it wasn’t. Thank you to my former English and journalism students whose stories, experiences and encouragement have fueled and inspired my writing. I will always believe student journalists are some of the bravest people for putting their words out in the world for others to consume and critique.

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This is for every person struggling to embrace their true identity, I hope it doesn’t take you as long as it took me. Peace, love and Rock Chalk.



1

This room never used to creep me out.

I've spent lots of nights in this room over the years. I've drooled on the pillows in this room, bled on the carpet in this room when I discovered the absolutely wrong way to close a pocketknife. I've forked over teeth to the tooth fairy in this room, and I've hurled my guts out in this room after protesting that one more Christmas cookie never hurt anyone. I also discovered what it means to be a man in this room so many times that I had to learn to do my own laundry to keep the effects of my raging hormones between me and my socks.

Grams and Gramps just thought I was the most industrious child ever. "Aren't you just the sweetest thing? So willing to help. You just set those filthy things right there, and I'll take care of them," Grams would say.

"No, Grams. I want to do them. You always do so much for me," I'd say quickly.

I can't imagine trying to explain to her how my socks managed to get so crusty. Dad, of course, smirked at every one of those conversations between me and his mother. Grams would throw shade at him and insist I was just darling.

Honestly, I think Dad knew exactly what was going on, but he had the decency to feign obliviousness. After all, he was the

one who insisted Mom stop barging into my room back at home and that she knock before entering.

Dad was cool about that stuff, so you would think with so much of my DNA literally and figuratively in this place that I would feel right at home in my dad's childhood bedroom. But I don't. I shouldn't be here right now. I've never been here at this time of the year, and I hate it.

Three months from now for sure, I would lie here in this bed watching YouTube videos late into the night until falling asleep and then roll out of bed the next day when I got tired of sleeping. I'd stumble into the kitchen in nothing but my boxers and house shoes, and Mom would mutter some half-hearted edict about marching back to the room to get some clothes on. The piles of pancakes or waffles or breakfast tacos—those are a thing in Texas—would do their Sirens and Odysseus thing on me, and I would stuff my face until I felt the need to go back to my room for more videos and a nap.

Gramps would eventually knock on the bedroom door and say some cheesy-old-person thing like “Daylight's burning” or “Only lying dogs sleep in this house.” Then he'd get me up to join him in watching whatever marathon series was playing on the History Channel, or we'd toss the frisbee in the backyard, or shoot hoops in the driveway. About three miles up the road from their house was a Catholic university that strung lights in every tree on campus, and each year we'd pick an evening to stroll through campus oohing, aahing and taking pictures.

As a typical teen, I wasn't supposed to like any of that stuff. I was supposed to rebel against my grandparents dragging me to yet another drive-through live Nativity scene put on by the local Lutheran church, but I looked forward to it every year. Nothing beat Christmas break with Grams and Gramps.

Except it's not Christmas break, and now I live in this room.

My dad used to lie in this bed in this room in this very spot and stare up at the ceiling just like I am doing now. He used to lie in this bed and do the same things I do in this room, which is a little weird to think about your dad doing that, but everyone has always said how much alike we are. I guess that's why this room now creeps me out. It was never supposed to be my room. Now it is, and all I can say about that is that it sucks.

Senior year, when you're an only child, is supposed to be somewhat akin to a coronation. Your first- and only-born child achieves the monumental accomplishment of completing compulsory education, picks up some athletic or academic accolades along the way—Best Haiku, 7th grade—and you spend the annual budget of a micro country announcing to family, friends and the guy who sat next to you in a cubicle two years ago that your child will receive a diploma along with ten of his closest friends and 400 acquaintances. Parents eat that up.

Granted, my high school accomplishments extended well beyond the borders of the compulsory, but none of that matters anymore because I begin my senior year of high school at a completely new school.

Yes, first-world-problem-party-of-one. Lots of kids transfer high school their senior year, survive and manage to live almost normal lives. Of course, most of those kids don't transfer their senior year to live with their grandparents in the house their dad grew up in to go to the same school their dad graduated from because both of their parents died at the same time. Right?

Yeah, didn't think so.



2

They have this thing at my new school called “Gear-Up Day.” The week before school starts there is one day where each grade has an assigned time to go up to the school and register for classes. You get your textbooks, have your school picture taken if you aren’t a senior, order your yearbook and turn in all manner of forms.

For students, it’s the first official opportunity to come together as a class, to see all those people you didn’t see over the summer. You get to see the teachers you like and the ones you hope to never see again—unless it’s their mug shot on the evening news. Mostly, though, you go to Gear-Up Day to get your schedule of classes, to see who you got for what and which of your friends got it with you.

From the looks of everyone around me, this is supposed to be a big deal, but I don’t care about any of it. All my life I heard stories of my dad’s high school experience and this community. I heard about this small enclave tucked in the middle of the much larger city as its own separate school district. Generations of families linked to the history of the city itself called this community home. My dad went to kindergarten through 12th grade in this district, and that was the norm here. In this tight-knit community, kids grew up together, they had cotillions together, moms Junior-Leagued and lunched together while dads golfed

and fished for tuna in Scandinavia together. But Dad kept me away from all that, from this place where everyone knew everyone—well, almost everyone.

“Name?” asked the woman in front of me, her fingers poised and ready to search the plastic file box in front of her. Before getting to me, I watched her hand schedules to kids in front of me without having to say a word, but with me she looked baffled, curious and possibly annoyed that I interrupted her system. She looks like the kind of person who takes pride in knowing something you don’t know.

“Ethan-Matthew Cruz Canton.”

Her raised eyebrows have all the subtlety of an eyeroll and a dismissal. Yep, outsider, party of one, that’s me.

The schedule she hands me doesn’t surprise me. It has all the classes I would have taken at my old school. I don’t know anything about my new teachers, but how different can things be? I’m in the newspaper production class, which is about all I can manage to even remotely care about. So, stick with the plan, just move down the line, get your textbooks and get out of here. Simple.

I missed senior picture day for the yearbook, but Grams and Gramps have already scheduled a make-up appointment to avoid the dreaded “Photo Not Available” label over my name for posterity. I do get all my textbooks. Basically, I’m as geared up as I’m ever going to be.

Grams and Gramps live less than half a block behind the school. I can pretty much walk to their house and barely break a sweat, even in a Texas heat that can melt your shoes if you stand still for too long. I should probably stop calling it their house and start calling it home, but I’m not ready for that. I’m not sure I’ll ever be.

The house is so close to the football stadium that Grams and Gramps can probably hear the sound of the coin toss hit the astro turf from their living room. Bright lights from the stadium, the

blare of the band rehearsing every night and cars flooding the street in front of their house every Friday night might be enough to make normal people want to move some place less hectic, like, I don't know, a NASCAR track. But it's football, it's Texas and they love it.

On the way to their house, I walk by the field where the drum line bakes in the relentless summer sun of San Antonio, sweat streaming down bodies and pasty skin transitioning from varying stages of pink to red—and it's only 10 in the morning. The entire scene at the stadium looks like something straight out of a Disney teen flick. Cheerleaders stack themselves into pyramids of dizzying heights, band members march in place and random students spread paint across banners the size of small billboards.

There was no American football at my former school. Everyone played *fútbol* (soccer in Spanish). We didn't have cheerleaders nor any of the hoopla. Aside from *fútbol*, things were almost exclusively academic. We did have some sports and found ways to have fun and get into the kind of trouble you're embarrassed to confess to your college and adult friends later in life because you realize how lame you were, but the overall consensus was you went to school to learn.

The hoopla fascinates me, though, and I'm not ready to go back to the house. I stop to observe. I find a spot in the bleachers shaded by the press box. I take out my journal and start scribbling notes. My journal goes everywhere with me. It's a habit you can't help but pick up when your parents are—or rather were... I have to pay more attention to my verb tenses now. Anyway, carrying a journal for notes is something you pick up when both your parents *were* journalists.

Maybe this can turn into my first editorial of the year.

Perfectly coifed ponytails bob to the rhythm of a cheer on the track at the south end of the football field. On the

north end, the drumline beats out cadences with precision and flair.

School doesn't begin for another week, and already students (find out when they started practice) have begun sacrificing to the golden calf of the well-rounded student.

But does it really get them anywhere?

After high school, most of them will never split/perform another hurkie (or is it hurkey—gotta look this up or ask a cheerleader. Correct terminology?) (Sidebar or feature idea—where does the name herkie come from? What's the new herkie?) Most will never march another half-time show or score any kind of point or goal in a school uniform (look up statistics on how many high school athletes go on to play college sports.)

So why do it?

Parents ~~spent a shitload~~ invest thousands of dollars on lessons, fees, camps and coaches hoping for the next virtuoso, prodigy, superstar. But by the time kids get to high school, both the parents and kids have to know this is the end of the dream (or maybe here ends the dream?).

Sure you have your Michael Jordans, who contrary to popular belief (too cliché? Mythos maybe?) wasn't cut from his high school team but spent a season on the JV squad before going on to professional success and GOAT status, but you're not MJ and exceptions to the rule are like snow days in South Texas—they don't happen. Often.

“What are you writing?” I hear a voice say to me.

I was so pleased with my snow day simile that I didn’t notice someone had entered my space.

“Just some observations, things I notice in the world around me.” *Omg—how cheesy did that sound?*

“You’re a regular Jack Kerouac there.”

Right now, there is a pinging in my head. All my synapses are firing into overdrive. I’m impressed by the Kerouac reference but don’t want to look like I’m impressed by it. I want her to know I get the reference without looking like a tool for being impressed that she knows it.

“Well, if you can’t be on the road, chillaxing on some metal bleachers in a high school football stadium is the next best thing.”

My witty retort dutifully awaits her bidding. Will she ignore it, mock it, roll her eyes or do the right thing and recognize me as a born raconteur? (Dad loved describing himself as a “born raconteur.”)

And then, she does it. Even if she didn’t do it, I would know she’s a cheerleader because she’s dressed exactly like the other girls down on the field clapping in exaggerated unison. Her hair, long, thick and the color of espresso is pulled back in the most perfect ponytail, and, well, her deeply tanned legs, *cafecito* with *un poquito de crema*, look like the kind of legs every cheerleader throughout the history of cheerleading has aspired to have.

She tilts her head to the right with a sprightly pop that makes her ponytail dance. I swear, they must teach that head pop move at cheerleader camp or hot girl school. She thrusts her hand confidently forward with all the precision of a Buckingham Palace guard and officially announces her presence.

“Hi, I’m Carmelita Cortínez, but everyone just calls me CC.”

Her boldness throws me for a moment, along with her name. I've never known a Carmelita. Before I realize what I'm doing, I answer with my full name, like I'm some debutant being announced at a charity ball.

"I'm Ethan-Matthew Cruz Canton. Matthew isn't my middle name, Cruz is. That's a thing with some Mexican families, where you get your mother's maiden name as a middle name. But my first name is Ethan-Matthew, still two words but one first name. It was a thing with my parents."

About a half second into my name diatribe, I want nothing more than to stop myself from delineating my family history and just say, "I'm Ethan." But Mom always used them both, wanted them both, so I couldn't do anything to stop this name train from barreling off the tracks and down into a canyon below, just like in *Back to the Future Part III*, which is, in fact, the worst of the franchise. They should have stopped at two. Dad guilted me into a *BTF* marathon with him one weekend Mom was away on assignment.

"That's a lot of name going on there, Ethan-Matthew Cruz Canton." She looks at me with the look I've learned to read my whole life, the you-don't-look-Mexican look. "You're either a law firm in the making or new here."

"I'm new."

"Well, Einstein," she says just before giving me another of those perfect cheerleader head snaps, "I'll see you around." Then she be-bops down the bleachers and back to her flock.

Einstein? What the hell was that? School hasn't even started, and I already have a nickname. I think that's a good thing.

I finish writing my editorial when I get back to Grams' and Gramps' and then read through all the flyers shoved into my hands by every group, organization and association represented at Gear-Up. With no friends in town, I have only YouTube, my

books and my writing to buffer me from the constant doting of my grandparents.

I really can't blame them for wanting to dote on me. My therapist, who specializes in grief, trauma and adolescents, keeps reminding me that it's natural—he doesn't like the word "normal." It's natural for me to feel overwhelmed, losing (I hate that word) both of my parents at the same time and the way it happened, and moving to the States and moving in with my grandparents and leaving my school and friends and on and on. He reminds me that Grams and Gramps are in mourning too. I lost my parents, and they lost their only child and the daughter-in-law that they loved as if she were their own child. I guess, they think they have to be strong for me because everything in our new lives together is all about me. Mom and Dad had a well-articulated fend-for-yourself approach to parenting, not neglectful in any way. Speaking of over-protecting, I swear Grams has been ironing my boxers before she puts them away in the chest of drawers for me. This has definitely complicated other matters for me. Sometimes, I just want to tell her to back off and give me some space, but it's a small price to pay to give Grams something to take her mind off how much it sucks to lose your son and become a parent all over again.