

LEST HE FORGET\ IN HIS MEMOIR, CHARLIE PIERCE RECOUNTS\ HIS FAMILY'S LOSSES BROUGHT ON BY ALZHEIMER'S\ AND THE IMMEASURABLE VALUE OF MEMORY

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NEWTON - In a red booth at Johnny's Luncheonette, Charlie **Pierce** is talking about the family curse. All around, men and women are doing business over flapjacks and coffee. But **Pierce** is sipping a diet Coke and avoiding eye contact as he talks about the devastating swath that **Alzheimer's** disease has cut through his family. **Pierce**, a former Boston Herald sports columnist who writes for such national magazines as GQ and Esquire, tells that story with stark eloquence in his upcoming book, "Hard to Forget." But he seems a lot less comfortable discussing it in person. "Not everyone is a hero, not everyone does things well," he says at one point, his eyes closed tight. "This was done badly by my mother and myself. And I did learn from the things I did wrong."

What **Pierce** is talking about is his father's struggle with **Alzheimer's**, which stole the former schoolteacher's mind and finally, in 1989, killed him. **Pierce** is also alluding to the difficulty his family had confronting the disease, which also killed all four of his uncles and is now claiming his father's last remaining sibling, Mary.

In his book, due out in April, **Pierce** writes with searing honesty about his journey through the "country" of **Alzheimer's** and his attempt to come to terms with a disease that strikes at the very essence of self: one's memory. "If I have the right combination of genes, I will get the disease," says **Pierce** almost nonchalantly, as he tackles a plate of corned beef hash. "I panic when I lose my car keys. Losing the car keys is different for me than it is for other people."

Pierce makes brief eye contact and then looks down at the blue and white galleys of his new book. "Who knows? Maybe I'll forget I ever wrote this book."

At 46, Charlie **Pierce** is a writer and local talk-show pundit known for his lyrical prose, his sharp wit, and his prodigious memory, especially when it comes to sports minutiae. **Pierce** is also a writer at large for Esquire, where he opines about sports and politics and everything in between.

"I am good at Trivial Pursuit," he allows. "I hope to continue to be good at it."

Pierce says the book, his first, grew out of an article in GQ, which grew out of his desire to know if he would continue to be good at remembering anything. "My editor at GQ and I were talking about genetic testing and how the scientific advances were way ahead of the law, and he said, 'That's a really interesting story, but we need to find a focus for it in one person,' " **Pierce** recalls. "And I said, 'What about me? I have a genetic link to **Alzheimer's** in my family.' "

That conversation took place in the summer of 1996. **Pierce's** article about his family was published in February 1997, making the short list for a National Magazine Award and giving **Pierce's** agent a book proposal he could sell. But back in the early '80s, when his father was putting his pants on backward and forgetting his only son's name, **Pierce** had no idea there was a genetic component involved. He didn't even know there was a name for what his father had.

It wasn't until 1985, when his father left his house in Shrewsbury to drive to a local store for flowers and ended up in a small town in Vermont, that John **Pierce** was diagnosed with **Alzheimer's**. Even then, Charlie **Pierce** didn't know the extent to which this disease might haunt his future. Or, as he acknowledges, he didn't want to know.

"**Alzheimer's** is a disease you can hide, you can ignore, you can pretend isn't there, for years," **Pierce** says. "And that's what we did. This is the kind of disease that was the worst possible disease for my family."

His parents, first-generation Irish who had settled in Worcester, were the kind "who didn't talk about stuff like this. I think my mother could have handled my father if he had cancer or heart disease or a nonneurological disease,"

Pierce says. "But I think my mother had a problem with mental illness. She was never able to see what was going on with my Dad as anything other than him going crazy on her. And she enormously resented that at a level she couldn't even confront."

In the book, **Pierce** writes about how his mother first pretended that nothing was wrong with her husband, and then, when he was incontinent, she wouldn't hear of putting the World War II veteran in a nursing home. His mother, who died in 1996, was not alone in that denial.

"When my Dad was sick, we were so dispersed as a family, I didn't know anything was wrong with my uncles. I didn't know that my Uncle Jim thought there was a baby in the attic," **Pierce** says. "So I didn't assume a genetic link."

There was an aluminum hypothesis for many years, so I thought my Dad had come into contact with aluminum in the Navy." The theory was that excessive exposure to aluminum might cause **Alzheimer's**.

Pierce writes that he "was rooting very hard for aluminum as the cause of my father's disease." Self-deprecating humor peppers "Hard to Forget" and elevates his story from, in **Pierce's** words, "a primal scream" into a gripping memoir with universal themes. And it lightens the mood in the breakfast booth as **Pierce** explains how he copes with the knowledge that he is at high risk of developing **Alzheimer's**. "I take my vitamin A and my ginkgo every morning," he says, looking down with a hint of a smile.

"It took a lot of time and good help from people like my wife and Joanne Koenig-Coste for me to be able to appreciate the fact that sometimes there is humor there, that **Alzheimer** patients do do things that are funny, and that it's OK to laugh about it," he adds. Koenig-Coste led the support group that **Pierce's** wife, Margaret, discovered and attended regularly. She eventually persuaded her husband to come along, and **Pierce** credits both women with helping him confront the family curse.

There is also a generous dollop of science in **Pierce's** book, which details the genetic advances and the "cowboys" - his name for the researchers - responsible for them. **Pierce** says he enjoyed chronicling the larger-than-life stories of these scientists. But these days he is relieved to be writing stories that don't involve his own family. "It's nice to go back to being a snoop and a pest to other people," he says.

In the meantime, he has no desire to know what his odds are of following his father into the mist of **Alzheimer's**. "I don't know what I'd do with the knowledge," he shrugs. "I could arrange my finances and write a will, but I've already done that."

Pierce also says he wouldn't get tested unless this country's regulatory system catches up with the speed of its scientific advances. "I don't think anyone should get tested until there are absolute safeguards for where that information goes," he says. "Insurance companies can create anything into a preexisting condition, and the potential for mischief with genetic information is vast and terrifying."

Pierce is a lot more bullish about the hopes for an eventual treatment for **Alzheimer's**, if not for himself, then for his children Brendan, 14, and Molly, 6. (His third child, Abraham, 23, is his stepson.) "Between the geneticists and the drug companies, they've got this disease surrounded, and they'll come up with something in my lifetime," **Pierce** says, looking at the table and then pounding it with his fist. "Knock on linoleum."