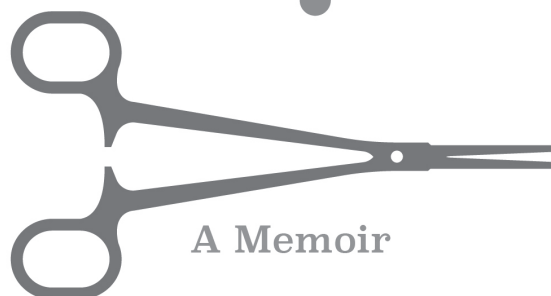

THIS
PENS
BUSINESS



A Memoir

GEORGANNE CHAPIN

with Echo Montgomery Garrett

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This memoir is based on the author's memories along with her many years and experiences as a prominent leader of the movement to protect every child's right to normal, intact genitals. She has devoted the past two decades of her life to this cause and has written and spoken widely on the topic. This book also contains portions of emails and communications from different people, whose lives and relationships have been damaged by the practice of male genital cutting. Several names have been changed for the sake of privacy.

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Chip, age 21, and Ernesto, age 2½

For my brother Chip Chapin,
whose wounding shortly after birth
provoked my eventual awakening to the
terrible truths about circumcision.

~

For my son Ernesto Echeverria, who thanked me for sparing him,
introducing me to a world of knowledge I'd never imagined.

~

For my friend Lucie Wood Saunders,
who asked how I got into "this penis business."

~

For every person who has been damaged by the mindless
and promiscuous practice of genital cutting.

~

For my close friends and family who have
encouraged me to write this book.



Contents

Preface	1
Prologue Revelation	5

Part One: Roots

Chapter One: Lonestar	9
Chapter Two: Aloha, Again, to My Greek Family	15
Chapter Three: The Duke of Sparta	21
Chapter Four: Early Lessons on Race, Class, and Colonialism	27
Chapter Five: New Mexico, New Father, New Name	31
Chapter Six: My Baby Brother Is Cut Twice	37
Chapter Seven: Uncivil Rites	43
Chapter Eight: All The Way	51
Chapter Nine: Grooving to the Offbeat	57
Chapter Ten: Brother from Another Mother	63

Part Two: Identity

Chapter Eleven: A Certain Image	71
Chapter Twelve: Barnard Girl	77
Chapter Thirteen: Music and Men in Magical Mexico	85
Chapter Fourteen: Barnard Redux, Anthropology, and South American Music	91
Chapter Fifteen: On My Own	97
Chapter Sixteen: Marrying and Making Beautiful Music	105
Chapter Seventeen: From Bolivia to My Real Life	109
Chapter Eighteen: Best Laid Plans	115
Chapter Nineteen: Hopscotch	119
Chapter Twenty: The Missing Piece	123
Chapter Twenty-One: Gambler	129

**Part Three: Balancing Act: Administration, Idealism, Advocacy...
And A Personal Life**

Chapter Twenty-Two: From Student to Healthcare Professional	137
Chapter Twenty-Three: Seeking Justice	143
Chapter Twenty-Four: A Path Appears	147
Chapter Twenty-Five The Accidental Insurance CEO	153
Chapter Twenty-Six: The Demise of My Marriage	159
Chapter Twenty-Seven: Single Working Mom	167
Chapter Twenty-Eight: Triumphs and Travesties	173

Part Four: Becoming An Intactivist

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Law School?	179
Chapter Thirty: The Titans of Intactivism	185
Chapter Thirty-One: Professional Intactivist in Training	189
Chapter Thirty-Two: Founding Intact America	197

Part Five: Action and Accountability

Chapter Thirty-Three: Smoke and Mirrors, Courtesy of the American Academy of Pediatrics	205
Chapter Thirty-Four: Intact America Battles the Medical Powers That Be	211
Chapter Thirty-Five: Lives Lost	221
Chapter Thirty-Six: Families Fall Apart	227
Chapter Thirty-Seven: What's Sex Got to Do with It?	235
Chapter Thirty-Eight: What's Religion Got to Do with It?	245
Chapter Thirty-Nine: How Big Is the Penis Business?	251
Chapter Forty: Circumcision Cuts Through Us All	259
Chapter Forty-One: Skin in the Game	265
Epilogue: Unfinished Business	279
Acknowledgments and Honorable Mentions	291
About the Authors	299
Notes	302

An activist is someone who cannot help but fight for something. That person is not usually motivated by a need for power or money or fame, but in fact is driven slightly mad by some injustice, some cruelty, some unfairness so much so that he or she is compelled by some internal moral engine to act to make it better.

—EVE ENSLER

My theory is that there is less indelicacy in speaking out your highest, deepest, tenderest emotions to the world at large, than to almost any individual. You may be mistaken in the individual; but you cannot be mistaken in thinking that, somewhere among your fellow-creatures, there is a heart that will receive yours into itself.

—NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

PREFACE

Over the past two decades, more people than I can count have asked me how I became involved in fighting against infant circumcision. How did I come to understand that the routine amputation of American baby boys' foreskins has lifelong consequences for everyone in that baby's orbit? The answer is that I paid attention. I listened, and I learned.

In the beginning, my response required little thought because the answer seemed obvious. "Well, it just makes no sense to cut off part of a newborn baby's body." Or I'd ask rhetorically, "Why is it okay to cut a boy's genitals, but wrong to cut a girl's genitals?"

As time went on and I heard from more and more men of all ages who despaired their loss of foreskin, from mothers wracked with guilt because they'd signed off on circumcision surgery and saw their babies return from "the procedure" spent and traumatized, and from fathers who said variations of "I thought my son should look like me, and my son suffered." Story after story alerted me to an undercurrent of sadness and regret in men who had been circumcised.

Like so many other injustices, circumcision has a complicated history. Beginning with the Victorian era in the mid 1800s, circumcision was used as a social control on men and boys, whose sexual appetites were perceived as immoral and even dangerous.¹ Circumcising baby boys

came in vogue among the wealthy elites in the 1920s when childbirth became a province of a new surgical specialty: obstetrics and gynecology.

This scientifically spurious medical practice became embedded in American medicine by the 1940s in the wake of World War II, when the military pushed it as a matter of cleanliness and conformity. By the 1950s, 90 percent of all women in the United States gave birth in hospitals, and foreskin amputation was becoming “routine,” billed as a fee-for-service” procedure in a privately funded medical care system. In contrast, other English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia, while sharing the Victorian history of medicalized circumcision, began to give up the practice as they established government-funded medical care and declined to pay for “treatments” that had no utility. In Canada, the frequency of male circumcision today varies by geography and policy of the various provinces; it will likely stop there when circumcision ends in their neighbor to the south. Today in the United States, the medical industrial machine peddles circumcision from the moment the sex of the unborn child is known.

As I learned more, I asked myself and others: *How can it be ethical for a doctor to cut a healthy, normal body part off a person who has no say in the matter?* I also began to wonder: *How deep does this problem go?*

This book is an attempt to explore and explain the answer to these questions, and respond to my anthropologist friend Lucie Saunders’ musing, delivered in her intentionally preserved Virginia accent with a fluttering of her hands: “How did you get into this ... this *penis* business?”

To answer these questions, I have called upon seven decades of my own memories and experiences and have considered those of family members born before and after me. I was compelled to examine how my somewhat unorthodox upbringing and uncommon world views, my

professional pursuits, my personal losses, and my compassion for the losses of others, along with my anger against injustice, all came together to make me a leader in the most compelling human rights frontier of the 21st century. I can think of nothing more important than protecting children from harmful and medically unnecessary surgeries on their sex organs, carried out without their consent to satisfy the demands of culture, profit, parental preference, or religion.

Perhaps the most essential question I have been asked, and the question I was driven to explore as I was writing this book, is *Why do you care?*

I care because male circumcision is a painful and gratuitous injury inflicted on baby boys. I believe that the trauma and damage it causes is at the root of much misunderstanding and painful conflicts within family constellations—between parents and sons and between intimate partners over their lifetimes. I want to convey the profound emotional, sexual, and cultural consequences of routinely and casually mutilating male genitalia in medical settings throughout the United States. And I want infant and child circumcision to end.

I look forward to a time when hospitals stop selling the surgical practice of foreskin amputation as a healthy choice—because there is no evidence to uphold that claim; when doctors simply say, “I don’t do that procedure” because they no longer want to mindlessly hurt babies; and when nurses join together and announce, “We are not going to be accomplices in this assault on newborn boys.”

I await the day, long overdue, when American insurance companies and the U.S. government stop paying for the “benefit” of circumcision—which has already happened in other westernized countries that corrected their course based on scientific evidence that circumcision was extremely

invasive, conferred no benefit to boys' health, and imposed considerable risk and unjustifiable costs upon children and their families.

My hope is that you will come away from this book willing to think about, first, how “this penis business” may have impacted your own life and, second, what you can do to ensure that future generations are protected from its wide-ranging harmful effects, including catastrophic injuries and even death. My hope is also that you will use what you learn here—as well as your own common sense, natural empathy, and compassion—to begin speaking out about something most people don't want to hear or acknowledge.

Change begins with connection, communication, and understanding the context of an issue. It continues as a result of conscience and a commitment to action. I could not have predicted that my upbringing, education, and professional experience would lead to my co-founding and becoming the leader of Intact America, an organization dedicated to ending male child genital cutting and upholding human rights. Yet my course to being involved in this penis business was steady and enduring.

Please join me in carrying the message that all children deserve the right to grow up with their bodies and genitals intact, and that the intact male penis with its protective foreskin is a healthy and natural part of the male anatomy. Anyone who denies these truths has an agenda based on neither science, common sense, nor concern for the wellbeing of boys and men and the people who love them.

Prologue
REVELATION

It was September 1998. My son Ernesto and I were spending Labor Day weekend at a farm in Vermont with my half-brother Paul and his wife Katherine's family. Paul's in-laws, Fred and Judy Buechner, were hosting a big gathering for my niece and goddaughter Caroline's christening.

I was hanging out in the kitchen with the women. On a cheese-and-cracker delivery mission, I walked into a raucous conversation among the men in the living room. There was Ernesto, standing and punching his fists into the air, shouting, "You guys just don't know what you're MISSING!"

From the crowd: good-natured jeers.

From Ernesto: "You're like the dude who bought one of those new Cadillacs and can't admit he got a lemon!"

More laughter.

Then, "Except that guy can always fix it or buy another one, but you can't do that. You can't get a new one."

I knew what he was talking about. We'd had a conversation or two about circumcision over the years. Ernesto had mentioned to me that his close friend Willi was the only other kid he knew who wasn't cut. And once, when he was age eleven, and I heard him exclaim from the shower: "Oh my god! This is amazing!"

“What’s going on?” I asked through the closed bathroom door.

“You’ve got to see this, Mom!”

I opened the door, and he was standing there naked and soaking wet. “This is amazing!” he repeated. “I never knew it could slide back and forth.”

Now, we didn’t go naked in our household, and I had not looked at my son’s genitals since changing and bathing him when he was a baby and a toddler. But, having an intact (uncircumcised) husband, I certainly knew what he was talking about. I also could see how genuinely impressed he was with the discovery of the power of a mature foreskin. I backed out and closed the bathroom door.

In the six years between that incident and the Vermont weekend when he pontificated to a roomful of men, I do not remember having a single conversation with Ernesto about his (or anyone else’s) genitals, let alone his pubescent revelation.

But now, the penis once again was a topic of conversation. We headed out Monday morning, Ernesto driving my silver Passat west on Route 315 between Rupert, Vermont, and the New York State line. I asked about the commotion from the day before: “What was all that about?”

“Oh,” he answered, an incredulous look on his face. “Those dudes were trying to tell me that *not* circumcising is a fad. That just makes no sense. How can it be a fad to leave your body the way it was made?”

“Mom,” he continued, glancing toward me in the passenger seat. “I never thanked you and Dad for not having me circumcised. Thank you so much!” He drew out the last two words.

That moment is burned into my psyche. We were cresting a hill and it was a sunny, perfect early fall day. Had I been driving, I would have needed to pull off the road to catch my breath.

Here was my boy, now a young man, fully aware of the exquisite pleasure conferred by a complete penis, and utterly cognizant that men without foreskins were—literally and figuratively—missing something really important. And he was grateful to his parents for sparing him that fate.

As crazy as it seems to me now, until that moment saying “no” to circumcising a baby boy was mainly about common sense. How could it be necessary or important to remove a normal, natural body part from a young child? How could it be that half of the population (males) are born requiring surgical correction? And why on earth would we subject a newborn child to pain when there is no medical need for the surgery in question? Thankfully, my son’s father—born in Argentina and intact—felt the same way I did when our son was born. No discussion, no argument. Just, “Of course, we’re not going to cut off part of his penis.”

But despite my own personal experiences and observations; despite my revulsion at female genital cutting (FGC) and knowing that the damage inflicted was lifelong; despite my loud protests about American hypocrisy in condemning FGC while endorsing male genital cutting—despite ALL of this, I’d never stopped to think about the long-term implications of amputating a boy’s foreskin. I had not devoted much thought to the deprivation of sexual sensation, the alteration of sexual function, and psychological damage ensuing from this primal wound.

Those revelations, those lessons, would come later. But the day my son said, “thank you,” was really the first day I became an **intactivist** (one who campaigns against involuntary, nontherapeutic routine infant or child male genital cutting, commonly called circumcision), a term I had not yet heard of.