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Me Talk Pretty One Day

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Go Carolina

ANYONE WHO WATCHES EVEN THE SLIGHTEST amount of TV is familiar with the scene: An agent knocks on the door of some seemingly ordinary home or office. The door opens, and the person holding the knob is asked to identify himself. The agent then says, “I’m going to ask you to come with me.”

They’re always remarkably calm, these agents. If asked “Why do I need to go anywhere with you?” they’ll straighten their shirt cuffs or idly brush stray hairs from the sleeves of their sport coats and say, “Oh, I think we both know why.”

The suspect then chooses between doing things the hard way and doing things the easy way, and the scene ends with either gunfire or the gentlemanly application of handcuffs. Occasionally it’s a case of mistaken identity, but most often the suspect knows exactly why he’s being taken. It seems he’s been expecting this to happen. The anticipation has ruled his life, and now, finally, the wait is over. You’re sometimes led to believe that this person is actually relieved, but I’ve never bought it. Though it probably has its moments, the average day spent in hiding is bound to beat the average day spent in prison. When it comes time to decide who gets the bottom bunk, I think anyone would agree that there’s a lot to be said for doing things the hard way.

The agent came for me during a geography lesson. She entered the room and nodded at my fifth-grade teacher, who stood frowning at a map of Europe. What would needle me later was the realization that this had all been prearranged. My capture had been scheduled to go down at exactly 2:30 on a Thursday afternoon. The agent would be wearing a dung-colored blazer over a red knit turtleneck, her heels sensibly low in case the suspect should attempt a quick getaway.

“David,” the teacher said, “this is Miss Samson, and she’d like you to go with her now.”

No one else had been called, so why me? I ran down a list of recent crimes, looking for a conviction that might stick. Setting fire to a reportedly flameproof Halloween costume, stealing a set of barbecue tongs from an unguarded patio, altering the word hit on a list of rules posted on the gymnasium door; never did it occur to me that I might be innocent.

“You might want to take your books with you,” the teacher said. “And your jacket. You probably won’t be back before the bell rings.”

Though she seemed old at the time, the agent was most likely fresh out of college. She walked beside me and asked what appeared to be an innocent and unrelated question: “So, which do you like better, State or Carolina?”

She was referring to the athletic rivalry between the Triangle area’s two

largest universities. Those who cared about such things tended to express their allegiance by wearing either Tar Heel powder blue, or Wolf Pack red, two colors that managed to look good on no one. The question of team preference was common in our part of North Carolina, and the answer supposedly spoke volumes about the kind of person you either were or hoped to become. I had no interest in football or basketball but had learned it was best to pretend otherwise. If a boy didn't care for barbecued chicken or potato chips, people would accept it as a matter of personal taste, saying, "Oh well, I guess it takes all kinds." You could turn up your nose at the president or Coke or even God, but there were names for boys who didn't like sports. When the subject came up, I found it best to ask which team my questioner preferred. Then I'd say, "Really? Me, too!"

Asked by the agent which team I supported, I took my cue from her red turtleneck and told her that I was for State. "Definitely State. State all the way."

It was an answer I would regret for years to come.

"State, did you say?" the agent asked. "Yes, State. They're the greatest."

"I see." She led me through an unmarked door near the principal's office, into a small, windowless room furnished with two facing desks. It was the kind of room where you'd grill someone until they snapped, the kind frequently painted so as to cover the bloodstains. She gestured toward what was to become my regular seat, then continued her line of questioning.

"And what exactly are they, State and Carolina?"

"Colleges? Universities?"

She opened a file on her desk, saying, "Yes, you're right. Your answers are correct, but you're saying them incorrectly. You're telling me that they're collegeth and univerthitieth, when actually they're colleges and universities. You're giving me a th sound instead of a nice clear s. Can you hear the distinction between the two different sounds?"

I nodded.

"May I please have an actual answer?"

"Uh-huh."

" 'Uh-huh' is not a word."

"Okay."

"Okay what?"

"Okay," I said. "Sure, I can hear it."

"You can hear what, the distinction? The contrast?"

"Yeah, that."

It was the first battle of my war against the letter s, and I was determined to dig my foxhole before the sun went down. According to Agent Samson, a "state certified speech therapist," my s was sibilate, meaning that I lisped. This was not

news to me.

“Our goal is to work together until eventually you can speak correctly,” Agent Samson said. She made a great show of enunciating her own sparkling s’s, and the effect was profoundly irritating. “I’m trying to help you, but the longer you play these little games the longer this is going to take.”

The woman spoke with a heavy western North Carolina accent, which I used to discredit her authority. Here was a person for whom the word pen had two syllables. Her people undoubtedly drank from clay jugs and hollered for Paw when the vittles were ready - so who was she to advise me on anything? Over the coming years I would find a crack in each of the therapists sent to train what Miss Samson now defined as my lazy tongue. “That’s its problem,” she said. “It’s just plain lazy.”

My sisters Amy and Gretchen were, at the time, undergoing therapy for their lazy eyes, while my older sister, Lisa, had been born with a lazy leg that had refused to grow at the same rate as its twin. She’d worn a corrective brace for the first two years of her life, and wherever she roamed she left a trail of scratch marks in the soft pine floor. I liked the idea that a part of one’s body might be thought of as lazy - not thoughtless or hostile, just unwilling to extend itself for the betterment of the team. My father often accused my mother of having a lazy mind, while she in turn accused him of having a lazy index finger, unable to dial the phone when he knew damn well he was going to be late.

My therapy sessions were scheduled for every Thursday at 2:30, and with the exception of my mother, I discussed them with no one. The word therapy suggested a profound failure on my part. Mental patients had therapy. Normal people did not. I didn’t see my sessions as the sort of thing that one would want to advertise, but as my teacher liked to say, “I guess it takes all kinds.” Whereas my goal was to keep it a secret, hers was to inform the entire class. If I got up from my seat at 2:25, she’d say, “Sit back down, David. You’ve still got five minutes before your speech therapy session.” If I remained seated until 2:27, she’d say, “David, don’t forget you have a speech therapy session at two-thirty.” On the days I was absent, I imagined she addressed the room, saying, “David’s not here today but if he were, he’d have a speech therapy session at two-thirty.”

My sessions varied from week to week. Sometimes I’d spend the half hour parroting whatever Agent Samson had to say. We’d occasionally pass the time examining charts on tongue position or reading childish s-laden texts recounting the adventures of seals or settlers named Sassy or Samuel. On the worst of days she’d haul out a tape recorder and show me just how much progress I was failing to make.

“My speech therapist’s name is Miss Chrissy Samson.” She’d hand me the

microphone and lean back with her arms crossed. “Go ahead, say it. I want you to hear what you sound like.”

She was in love with the sound of her own name and seemed to view my speech impediment as a personal assault. If I wanted to spend the rest of my life as David Thedarith, then so be it. She, however, was going to be called Miss Chrissy Samson. Had her name included no s’s, she probably would have bypassed a career in therapy and devoted herself to yanking out healthy molars or performing unwanted clitoridectomies on the schoolgirls of Africa. Such was her personality.

“Oh, come on,” my mother would say. “I’m sure she’s not that bad. Give her a break. The girl’s just trying to do her job.”

I was a few minutes early one week and entered the office to find Agent Samson doing her job on Garth Barclay, a slight, kittenish boy I’d met back in the fourth grade. “You may wait outside in the hallway until it is your turn,” she told me. A week or two later my session was interrupted by mincing Steve Bixler, who popped his head in the door and announced that his parents were taking him out of town for a long weekend, meaning that he would miss his regular Friday session. “Thorry about that,” he said.

I started keeping watch over the speech therapy door, taking note of who came and went. Had I seen one popular student leaving the office, I could have believed my mother and viewed my lisp as the sort of thing that might happen to anyone. Unfortunately, I saw no popular students. Chuck Coggins, Sam Shelton, Louis Delucca: obviously, there was some connection between a sibilate s and a complete lack of interest in the State versus Carolina issue.

None of the therapy students were girls. They were all boys like me who kept movie star scrapbooks and made their own curtains. “You don’t want to be doing that,” the men in our families would say. “That’s a girl thing.” Baking scones and cupcakes for the school janitors, watching Guiding Light with our mothers, collecting rose petals for use in a fragrant potpourri: anything worth doing turned out to be a girl thing. In order to enjoy ourselves, we learned to be duplicitous. Our stacks of Cosmopolitan were topped with an unread issue of Boy’s Life or Sports Illustrated, and our decoupage projects were concealed beneath the sporting equipment we never asked for but always received. When asked what we wanted to be when we grew up, we hid the truth and listed who we wanted to sleep with when we grew up. “A policeman or a fireman or one of those guys who works with high-tension wires.” Symptoms were feigned, and our mothers wrote notes excusing our absences on the day of the intramural softball tournament. Brian had a stomach virus or Ted suffered from that twenty-four-hour bug that seemed to be going around.

“One of these days I’m going to have to hang a sign on that door,” Agent Samson used to say. She was probably thinking along the lines of SPEECH THERAPY LAB, though a more appropriate marker would have read FUTURE HOMOSEXUALS OF AMERICA. We knocked ourselves out trying to fit in but were ultimately betrayed by our tongues. At the beginning of the school year, while we were congratulating ourselves on successfully passing for normal, Agent Samson was taking names as our assembled teachers raised their hands, saying, “I’ve got one in my homeroom,” and “There are two in my fourth-period math class.” Were they also able to spot the future drunks and depressives? Did they hope that by eliminating our lisps, they might set us on a different path, or were they trying to prepare us for future stage and choral careers?

Miss Samson instructed me, when forming an s, to position the tip of my tongue against the rear of my top teeth, right up against the gum line. The effect produced a sound not unlike that of a tire releasing air. It was awkward and strange-sounding, and elicited much more attention than the original lisp. I failed to see the hissy s as a solution to the problem and continued to talk normally, at least at home, where my lazy tongue fell upon equally lazy ears. At school, where every teacher was a potential spy, I tried to avoid an s sound whenever possible. “Yes,” became “correct,” or a military “affirmative.” “Please,” became “with your kind permission,” and questions were pleaded rather than asked. After a few weeks of what she called “endless pestering” and what I called “repeated badgering,” my mother bought me a pocket thesaurus, which provided me with s-free alternatives to just about everything. I consulted the book both at home in my room and at the daily learning academy other people called our school. Agent Samson was not amused when I began referring to her as an articulation coach, but the majority of my teachers were delighted. “What a nice vocabulary,” they said. “My goodness, such big words!”

Plurals presented a considerable problem, but I worked around them as best I could; “rivers,” for example, became either “a river or two” or “many a river.” Possessives were a similar headache, and it was easier to say nothing than to announce that the left-hand and the right-hand glove of Janet had fallen to the floor. After all the compliments I had received on my improved vocabulary, it seemed prudent to lie low and keep my mouth shut. I didn’t want anyone thinking I was trying to be a pet of the teacher.

When I first began my speech therapy, I worried that the Agent Samson plan might work for everyone but me, that the other boys might strengthen their lazy tongues, turn their lives around, and leave me stranded. Luckily my fears were never realized. Despite the woman’s best efforts, no one seemed to make any significant improvement. The only difference was that we were all a little

quieter. Thanks to Agent Samson's tape recorder, I, along with the others, now had a clear sense of what I actually sounded like. There was the lisp, of course, but more troubling was my voice itself, with its excitable tone and high, girlish pitch. I'd hear myself ordering lunch in the cafeteria, and the sound would turn my stomach. How could anyone stand to listen to me? Whereas those around me might grow up to be lawyers or movie stars, my only option was to take a vow of silence and become a monk. My former classmates would call the abbey, wondering how I was doing, and the priest would answer the phone. "You can't talk to him!" he'd say. "Why, Brother David hasn't spoken to anyone in thirty-five years!"

"Oh, relax," my mother said. "Your voice will change eventually."

"And what if it doesn't?"

She shuddered. "Don't be so morbid."

It turned out that Agent Samson was something along the lines of a circuit-court speech therapist. She spent four months at our school and then moved on to another. Our last meeting was held the day before school let out for Christmas. My classrooms were all decorated, the halls - everything but her office, which remained as bare as ever. I was expecting a regular half hour of Sassy the seal and was delighted to find her packing up her tape recorder.

"I thought that this afternoon we might let loose and have a party, you and I. How does that sound?" She reached into her desk drawer and withdrew a festive tin of cookies. "Here, have one. I made them myself from scratch and, boy, was it a mess! Do you ever make cookies?"

I lied, saying that no, I never had.

"Well, it's hard work," she said. "Especially if you don't have a mixer."

It was unlike Agent Samson to speak so casually, and awkward to sit in the hot little room, pretending to have a normal conversation.

"So," she said, "what are your plans for the holidays?"

"Well, I usually remain here and, you know, open a gift from my family."

"Only one?" she asked.

"Maybe eight or ten."

"Never six or seven?"

"Rarely," I said.

"And what do you do on December thirty-first, New Year's Eve?"

"On the final day of the year we take down the pine tree in our living room and eat marine life."

"You're pretty good at avoiding those s's," she said. "I have to hand it to you, you're tougher than most."

I thought she would continue trying to trip me up, but instead she talked

about her own holiday plans. “It’s pretty hard with my fiancé in Vietnam,” she said. “Last year we went up to see his folks in Roanoke, but this year I’ll spend Christmas with my grandmother outside of Asheville. My parents will come, and we’ll all try our best to have a good time. I’ll eat some turkey and go to church, and then, the next day, a friend and I will drive down to Jacksonville to watch Florida play Tennessee in the Gator Bowl.”

I couldn’t imagine anything worse than driving down to Florida to watch a football game, but I pretended to be impressed. “Wow, that ought to be eventful.”

“I was in Memphis last year when NC State whooped Georgia fourteen to seven in the Liberty Bowl,” she said. “And next year, I don’t care who’s playing, but I want to be sitting front-row center at the Tangerine Bowl. Have you ever been to Orlando? It’s a super fun place. If my future husband can find a job in his field, we’re hoping to move down there within a year or two. Me living in Florida. I bet that would make you happy, wouldn’t it?”

I didn’t quite know how to respond. Who was this college bowl fanatic with no mixer and a fiancé in Vietnam, and why had she taken so long to reveal herself? Here I’d thought of her as a cold-blooded agent when she was really nothing but a slightly dopey, inexperienced speech teacher. She wasn’t a bad person, Miss Samson, but her timing was off. She should have acted friendly at the beginning of the year instead of waiting until now, when all I could do was feel sorry for her.

“I tried my best to work with you and the others, but sometimes a person’s best just isn’t good enough.” She took another cookie and turned it over in her hands. “I really wanted to prove myself and make a difference in people’s lives, but it’s hard to do your job when you’re met with so much resistance. My students don’t like me, and I guess that’s just the way it is. What can I say? As a speech teacher, I’m a complete failure.”

She moved her hands toward her face, and I worried that she might start to cry. “Hey, look,” I said. “I’m thorry.”

“Ha-ha,” she said. “I got you.” She laughed much more than she needed to and was still at it when she signed the form recommending me for the following year’s speech therapy program. “Thorry, indeed. You’ve got some work ahead of you, mister.”

I related the story to my mother, who got a huge kick out of it. “You’ve got to admit that you really are a sucker,” she said.

I agreed but, because none of my speech classes ever made a difference, I still prefer to use the word chump.

Giant Dreams,

Midget Abilities

MY FATHER LOVES JAZZ and has an extensive collection of records and reel-to-reel tapes he used to enjoy after returning home from work. He might have entered the house in a foul mood, but once he had his Dexter Gordon and a vodka martini, the stress melted away and everything was “beautiful, baby, just beautiful.” The instant the needle hit that record, he’d loosen his tie and become something other than the conservative engineer with a pocketful of IBM pencils embossed with the command THINK.

“Man, oh man, will you get a load of the chops on this guy? I saw him once at the Blue Note, and I mean to tell you that he blew me right out of my chair! A talent like that comes around only once in a lifetime. The guy was an absolute comet, and there I was in the front row. Can you imagine that?”

“Gee,” I’d say, “I bet that was really something.”

Empathy was the wrong tack, as it only seemed to irritate him.

“You don’t know the half of it,” he’d say. ” ‘Really something,’ my butt. You haven’t got a clue. You could have taken a hatchet and cut the man’s lips right off his face, chopped them off at the quick, and he still would have played better than anyone else out there. That’s how good he was.”

I’d nod my head, envisioning a pair of glistening lips lying forsaken on the floor of some nightclub dressing room. The trick was to back slowly toward the hallway, escaping into the kitchen before my father could yell, “Oh no you don’t. Get back in here. I want you to sit down for a minute and listen. I mean really listen, to this next number.”

Because it was the music we’d grown up with, I liked to think that my sisters and I had a genuine appreciation of jazz. We preferred it over the music our friends were listening to, yet nothing we did or said could convince my father of our devotion. Aside from replaying the tune on your own instrument, how could you prove you were really listening? It was as if he expected us to change color at the end of each selection.

Due to his ear and his almost maniacal sense of discipline, I always thought my father would have made an excellent musician. He might have studied the saxophone had he not been born to immigrant parents who considered even pot holders an extravagance. They themselves listened only to Greek music, an oxymoron as far as the rest of the world is concerned. Slam its tail in the door of the milk truck, and a stray cat could easily yowl out a single certain to top the charts back in Sparta or Thessaloníki. Jazz was my father’s only form of rebellion. It was forbidden in his home, and he appreciated it as though it were his own private discovery. As a young man he hid his 78s under the sofa bed and regularly snuck off to New York City, where he’d haunt the clubs and consort

with Negroes. It was a good life while it lasted. He was in his early forties when the company transferred our family to North Carolina.

"You expect me to live where?" he'd asked.

The Raleigh winters agreed with him, but he would have gladly traded the temperate climate for a decent radio station. Since he was limited to his record and tape collection, it became his dream that his family might fill the musical void by someday forming a jazz combo.

His plan took shape the evening he escorted my sisters Lisa and Gretchen and me to the local state university to see Dave Brubeck, who was then touring with his sons. The audience roared when the quartet took the stage, and I leaned back and shut my eyes, pretending the applause was for me. In order to get that kind of attention, you needed a routine that would knock people's socks off. I'd been working on something in private and now began to imagine bringing it to a live audience. The act consisted of me, dressed in a nice shirt and tie and singing a medley of commercial jingles in the voice of Billie Holiday, who was one of my father's favorite singers. For my Raleigh concert I'd probably open with the number used to promote the town's oldest shopping center. A quick nod to my accompanist, and I'd launch into "The Excitement of Cameron Village Will Carry You Away." The beauty of my rendition was that it captured both the joy and the sorrow of a visit to Ellisburg's or J. C. Penney. This would be followed by such crowd pleasers as "Winston Tastes Good Like a Cigarette Should" and the catchy new Coke commercial, "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing."

I was lost in my fantasy, ignoring Dave Brubeck and coming up for air only when my father elbowed my ribs to ask, "Are you listening to this? These cats are burning the paint right off the walls!" The other audience members sat calmly, as if in church, while my father snapped his fingers and bobbed his head low against his chest. People pointed, and when we begged him to sit up and act normal, he cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted out a request for " 'Blue Rondo à la Turk'!"

Driving home from the concert that night, he drummed his palms against the steering wheel, saying, "Did you hear that? The guy just gets better every day! He's up there onstage with his kids by his side, the whole lot of them jamming up a storm. Christ almighty, what I wouldn't give for a family like that. You guys should think of putting an act together."

My sister Lisa coughed up a mouthful of grapefruit soda.

"No, I mean it," my father said. "All you need are some lessons and instruments, and I swear to God, you'd go right through the roof." We hoped this was just another of his five-minute ideas, but by the time we reached the house, his eyes were still glowing. "That's exactly what you need to do," he said. "I

don’t know why I didn’t think of it sooner.”

The following afternoon he bought a baby grand piano. It was a used model that managed to look imposing even when positioned on a linoleum-tiled floor. We took turns stabbing at the keys, but as soon as the novelty wore off, we bolstered it with sofa cushions and turned it into a fort. The piano sat neglected in the traditional sense until my father signed Gretchen up for a series of lessons. She’d never expressed any great interest in the thing but was chosen because, at the age of ten, she possessed what our dad decided were the most artistic fingers. Lisa was assigned the flute, and I returned home from a Scout meeting one evening to find my instrument leaning against the aquarium in my bedroom.

“Hold on to your hat,” my father said, “because here’s that guitar you’ve always wanted.”

Surely he had me confused with someone else. Although I had regularly petitioned for a brand-name vacuum cleaner, I’d never said anything about wanting a guitar. Nothing about it appealed to me, not even on an aesthetic level. I had my room arranged just so, and the instrument did not fit in with my nautical theme. An anchor, yes. A guitar, no. He wanted me to jam, so I jammed it into my closet, where it remained until he signed me up for some private lessons of fered at a music shop located on the ground floor of the recently opened North Hills Mall. I fought it as best I could and feigned illness even as he dropped me off for my first appointment.

“But I’m sick!” I yelled, watching him pull out of the parking lot. “I have a virus, and besides that, I don’t want to play a musical instrument. Don’t you know anything?”

When it finally sank in that he wasn’t coming back, I lugged my guitar into the music store, where the manager led me to my teacher, a perfectly formed midget named Mister Mancini. I was twelve years old at the time, small for my age, and it was startling to find myself locked in a windowless room with a man who barely reached my chest. It seemed wrong that I would be taller than my teacher, but I kept this to myself, saying only, “My father told me to come here. It was all his idea.”

A fastidious dresser stuck in a small, unfashionable town, Mister Mancini wore clothing I recognized from the Young Squires department of Hudson Belk. Some nights he favored button-down shirts with clip-on ties, while other evenings I arrived to find him dressed in flared slacks and snug turtleneck sweaters, a swag of love beads hanging from his neck. His arms were manly and covered in coarse dark hair, but his voice was high and strange, as if it had been recorded and was now being played back at a faster speed.

Not a dwarf, but an honest-to-God midget. My fascination was both evident

and unwelcome, and was nothing he hadn't been subjected to a million times before. He didn't shake my hand, just lit a cigarette and reached for the conch shell he used as an ashtray. Like my father, Mister Mancini assumed that anyone could learn to play the guitar. He had picked it up during a single summer spent in what he called "Hotlanta G.A." This, I knew, was the racy name given to Atlanta, Georgia. "Now that," he said, "Is one classy place if you know where to go." He grabbed my guitar and began tuning it, holding his head close to the strings. "Yes, siree, kid, the girls down on Peachtree are running wild twenty-four hours a day."

He mentioned a woman named Beth, saying, "They threw away the mold and shut down the factory after making that one, you know what I mean?"

I nodded my head, having no idea what he was talking about.

"She wasn't much of a cook, but hey, I guess that's why God invented TV dinners." He laughed at his little joke and repeated the line about the frozen dinners, as if he would use it later in a comedy routine. "God made TV dinners, yeah, that's good." He told me he'd named his guitar after Beth. "Now I can't keep my hands off of her!" he said. "Seriously, though, it helps if you give your instrument a name. What do you think you'll call yours?"

"Maybe I'll call it Oliver," I said. That was the name of my hamster, and I was used to saying it.

Then again, maybe not.

"Oliver?" Mister Mancini set my guitar on the floor.

"Oliver? What the hell kind of name is that? If you're going to devote yourself to the guitar, you need to name it after a girl, not a guy."

"Oh, right," I said. "Joan. I'll call it…Joan."

"So tell me about this Joan," he said. "Is she something pretty special?"

Joan was the name of one of my cousins, but it seemed unwise to share this information. "Oh yeah," I said, "Joan's really … great. She's tall and …" I felt self-conscious using the word tall and struggled to take it back. "She's small and has brown hair and everything."

"Is she stacked?"

I'd never noticed my cousin's breasts and had lately realized that I'd never noticed anyone's breasts, not unless, like our housekeeper's, they were large enough to appear freakish. "Stacked? Well, sure," I said. "She's pretty stacked." I was afraid he'd ask me for a more detailed description and was relieved when he crossed the room and removed Beth from her case. He told me that a guitar student needed plenty of discipline. Talent was great, but time had taught him that talent was also extremely rare. "I've got it," he said. "But then again, I was born with it. It's a gift from God, and those of us who have it are very special

people."

He seemed to know that I was nothing special, just a type, yet another boy whose father had his head in the clouds.

"Do you have a feel for the guitar? Do you have any idea what this little baby is capable of?" Without waiting for an answer, he climbed up into his chair and began playing "Light My Fire," adding, "This one is for Joan."

"You know that I would be untrue," he sang. "You know that I would be a liar." The current hit version of the song was performed by José Feliciano, a blind man whose plaintive voice served the lyrics much better than did Jim Morrison, who sang it in what I considered a bossy and conceited tone of voice. There was José Feliciano, there was Jim Morrison, and then there was Mister Mancini, who played beautifully but sang "Light My Fire" as if he were a Webelo Scout demanding a match. He finished his opening number, nodded his head in acknowledgment of my applause, and moved on, offering up his own unique and unsettling versions of "The Girl from Ipanema" and "Little Green Apples" while I sat trapped in my seat, my false smile stretched so tight that I lost all feeling in the lower half of my face.

My fingernails had grown a good three inches by the time he struck his final note and called me close to point out a few simple chords. Before I left, he handed me half a dozen purple mimeographed handouts, which we both knew were useless.

Back at the house my mother had my dinner warming in the oven. From the living room came the aimless whisper of Lisa's flute. It sounded not unlike the wind whipping through an empty Pepsi can. Down in the basement either Gretchen was practicing her piano or the cat was chasing a moth across the keys. My mother responded by turning up the volume on the kitchen TV while my father pushed back my plate, set Joan in my lap, and instructed me to play.

"Listen to this," he crowed. "A house full of music! Man, this is beautiful."

You certainly couldn't accuse him of being unsupportive. His enthusiasm bordered on mania, yet still it failed to inspire us. During practice sessions my sisters and I would eat potato chips, scowling at our hated instruments and speculating on the lives of our music teachers. They were all peculiar in one way or another, but with a midget, I'd definitely won the my-teacher-is-stranger-than-yours competition. I wondered where Mister Mancini lived and who he might call in case of an emergency. Did he stand on a chair in order to shave, or was his home customized to meet his needs? I'd look at the laundry hamper or beer cooler, thinking that if it came down to it, Mister Mancini could hide just about anywhere.

Though I thought of him constantly, I grabbed any excuse to avoid my

guitar.

"I've been doing just what you told me to do," I'd say at the beginning of each lesson, "but I just can't get the hang of it. Maybe my fingers are too shor - … I mean litt -… I mean, maybe I'm just not coordinated enough." He'd arrange Joan in my lap, pick up Beth, and tell me to follow along. "You need to believe you're playing an actual woman," he'd say. "Just grab her by the neck and make her holler."

Mr. Mancini had a singular talent for making me uncomfortable. He forced me to consider things I'd rather not think about - the sex of my guitar, for instance. If I honestly wanted to put my hands on a woman, would that automatically mean I could play? Gretchen's teacher never told her to think of her piano as a boy. Neither did Lisa's flute teacher, though in that case the analogy was fairly obvious. On the off chance that sexual desire was all it took, I steered clear of Lisa's instrument, fearing I might be labeled a prodigy. The best solution was to become a singer and leave the instruments to other people. A song stylist - that was what I wanted to be.

I was at the mall with my mother one afternoon when I spotted Mister Mancini ordering a hamburger at Scotty's Chuck Wagon, a fast-food restaurant located a few doors down from the music shop. He sometimes mentioned having lunch with a salesgirl from Jolly's Jewelers, "a real looker," but on this day he was alone. Mister Mancini had to stand on his tiptoes to ask for his hamburger, and even then his head failed to reach the counter. The passing adults politely looked away, but their children were decidedly more vocal. A toddler ambled up on his chubby bowed legs, attempting to embrace my teacher with ketchup-smeared fingers, while a party of elementary-school students openly stared in wonder. Even worse was the group of adolescents, boys my own age, who sat gathered around a large table. "Go back to Oz, munchkin," one of them said, and his friends shook with laughter. Tray in hand, Mister Mancini took a seat and pretended not to notice. The boys weren't yelling, but anyone could tell that they were making fun of him. "Honestly, Mother," I said, "do they have to be such monsters?" Beneath my moral outrage was a strong sense of possessiveness, a fury that other people were sinking their hooks into my own personal midget. What did they know about this man? I was the one who lit his cigarettes and listened as he denounced the careers of so-called pretty boys such as Glen Campbell and Bobby Goldsboro. It was I who had suffered through six weeks' worth of lessons and was still struggling to master "Yellow Bird." If anyone was going to give him a hard time, I figured that I should be first in line.

I'd always thought of Mister Mancini as a blowhard, a pocket playboy, but watching him dip his hamburger into a sad puddle of mayonnaise, I broadened

my view and came to see him as a wee outsider, a misfit whose take-it-or-leave-it attitude had left him all alone. This was a persona I'd been tinkering with myself: the outcast, the rebel. It occurred to me that, with the exception of the guitar, he and I actually had quite a bit in common. We were each a man trapped inside a boy's body. Each of us was talented in his own way, and we both hated twelve-year-old males, a demographic group second to none in terms of cruelty. All things considered, there was no reason I shouldn't address him not as a teacher but as an artistic brother. Maybe then we could drop the pretense of Joan and get down to work. If things worked out the way I hoped, I'd someday mention in interviews that my accompanist was both my best friend and a midget.

I wore a tie to my next lesson and this time when asked if I'd practiced, I told the truth, saying in a matter-of-fact tone of voice that no, I hadn't laid a finger on my guitar since our last get-together. I told him that Joan was my cousin's name and that I had no idea how stacked she was.

"That's okay," Mister Mancini said. "You can call your guitar whatever you want, just as long as you practice."

My voice shaking, I told him that I had absolutely no interest in mastering the guitar. What I really wanted was to sing in the voice of Billie Holiday. "Mainly commercials, but not for any banks or car dealerships, because those are usually choral arrangements."

The color ebbed from my teacher's face.

I told him I'd been working up an act and could use a little accompaniment. Did he know the jingle for the new Sara Lee campaign?

"You want me to do what?" He wasn't angry, just confused.

I felt certain he was lying when he denied knowing the tune. Doublemint gum, Ritz crackers, the theme songs for Alka-Seltzer and Kenmore appliances: he claimed ignorance on all counts. I knew that it was queer to sing in front of someone, but greater than my discomfort was the hope that he might recognize what I thought of as my great talent, the one musical trick I was able to pull off. I started in on an a cappella version of the latest Oscar Mayer commercial, hoping he might join in once the spirit moved him. It looked bad, I knew, but in order to sustain the proper mood, I needed to disregard his company and sing the way I did at home alone in my bedroom, my eyes shut tight and my hands dangling like pointless, empty gloves.

I sang that my bologna had a first name.

I added that my bologna had a second name.

And concluded: Oh, I love to eat it every day

And if you ask me why, I'll say

Thaaaat Os-carrr May-errr has a way, with B-Oooo-L-Oooo-G-N-A

I reached the end of my tune thinking he might take this as an opportunity to applaud or maybe even apologize for underestimating me. Mild amusement would have been an acceptable response. But instead, he held up his hands, as if to stop an advancing car. “Hey, guy,” he said. “You can hold it right there. I’m not into that scene.”

A scene? What scene? I thought I was being original.

“There were plenty of screwballs like you back in Atlanta, but me, I don’t swing that way - you got it? This might be your ‘thing’ or whatever, but you can definitely count me out.” He reached for his conch shell and stubbed out his cigarette. “I mean, come on now. For God’s sake, kid, pull yourself together.”

I knew then why I’d never before sung in front of anyone, and why I shouldn’t have done it in front of Mister Mancini. He’d used the word screwball, but I knew what he really meant. He meant I should have named my guitar Doug or Brian, or better yet, taken up the flute. He meant that if we’re defined by our desires, I was in for a lifetime of trouble.

The remainder of the hour was spent awkwardly watching the clock as we silently pretended to tune our guitars.

My father was disappointed when I told him I wouldn’t be returning for any more lessons. “He told me not to come back,” I said. “He told me I have the wrong kind of fingers.”

Seeing that it had worked for me, my sisters invented similar stories, and together we announced that the Sedaris Trio had officially disbanded. Our father offered to find us better teachers, adding that if we were unhappy with our instruments, we could trade them in for something more suitable. “The trumpet or the saxophone, or hey, how about the vibes?” He reached for a Lionel Hampton album, saying, “I want you to sit down and give this a good listen. Just get a load of this cat and tell me he’s not an inspiration.”

There was a time when I could listen to such a record and imagine myself as the headline act at some magnificent New York nightclub, but that’s what fantasies are for: they allow you to skip the degradation and head straight to the top. I’d done my solo and would now move on to pursue other equally unsuccessful ways of getting attention. I’d try every art form there was, and with each disappointment I’d picture Mister Mancini holding his conch shell and saying, “For God’s sake, kid, pull yourself together.”

We told our father, no, don’t bother playing us any more of your records, but still he persisted. “I’m telling you that this album is going to change your lives, and if it doesn’t, I’ll give each one of you a five-dollar bill. What do you think of that?”

It was a tough call - five dollars for listening to a Lionel Hampton record. The offer was tempting, but even on the off chance he'd actually come through with the money, there would certainly be strings attached. We looked at one another, my sisters and I, and then we left the room, ignoring his cry of "Hey, where do you think you're going? Get back in here and listen."

We joined our mother at the TV and never looked back. A life in music was his great passion, not ours, and our lessons had taught us that without the passion, the best one could hope for was an occasional engagement at some hippie wedding where, if we were lucky, the guests would be too stoned to realize just how bad we really were. That night, as was his habit, our father fell asleep in front of the stereo, the record making its pointless, silent rounds as he lay back against the sofa cushions, dreaming.

Genetic Engineering

MY FATHER ALWAYS STRUCK ME as the sort of man who, under the right circumstances, might have invented the microwave oven or the transistor radio. You wouldn't seek him out for advice on a personal problem, but he'd be the first one you'd call when the dishwasher broke or someone flushed a hairpiece down your toilet. As children, we placed a great deal of faith in his ability but learned to steer clear while he was working. The experience of watching was ruined, time and time again, by an interminable explanation of how things were put together. Faced with an exciting question, science tended to provide the dullest possible answer. Ions might charge the air, but they fell flat when it came to charging the imagination - my imagination, anyway. To this day, I prefer to believe that inside every television there lives a community of versatile, thumb-size actors trained to portray everything from a thoughtful newscaster to the wife of a millionaire stranded on a desert island. Fickle gnomes control the weather, and an air conditioner is powered by a team of squirrels, their cheeks packed with ice cubes.

Once, while rifling through the toolshed, I came across a poster advertising an IBM computer the size of a refrigerator. Sitting at the control board was my dad the engineer, years younger, examining a printout no larger than a grocery receipt. When I asked about it, he explained that he had worked with a team devising a memory chip capable of storing up to fifteen pages' worth of information. Out came the notepad and pencil, and I was trapped for hours as he answered every question except the one I had asked: "Were you allowed to wear makeup and run through a variety of different poses, or did they get the picture on the first take?"

To me, the greatest mystery of science continues to be that a man could father six children who shared absolutely none of his interests. We certainly expressed enthusiasm for our mother's hobbies, from smoking and napping to the writings of Sidney Sheldon. (Ask my mother how the radio worked and her answer was simple: "Turn it on and pull out the goddamn antenna.") I once visited my father's office, and walked away comforted to find that at least there he had a few people he could talk to. We'd gone, my sister Amy and I, to settle a bet. She thought that my father's secretary had a sharp, protruding chin and long blond hair, while I imagined that the woman might more closely resemble a tortoise - chinless, with a beaky nose and a loose, sagging neck. The correct answer was somewhere in between. I was right about the nose and the neck, but Amy won on the chin and the hair color. The bet had been the sole reason for our visit, and the resulting insufferable tour of Buildings A through D taught us never again to express an interest in our father's workplace.

My own scientific curiosity eventually blossomed, but I knew enough to keep my freakish experiments to myself. When my father discovered my colony of frozen slugs in the basement freezer, I chose not to explain my complex theories of suspended animation. Why was I filling the hamster's water beaker with vodka? "Oh, no reason." If my experiment failed, and the drunken hamster passed out, I'd just put her in the deep freeze, alongside the slugs. She'd rest on ice for a few months and, once thawed and fully revived, would remember nothing of her previous life as an alcoholic. I also took to repairing my own record-player and was astonished by my ingenuity for up to ten minutes at a time - until the rubber band snapped or the handful of change came unglued from the arm, and the damned thing broke all over again.

During the first week of September, it was my family's habit to rent a beach house on Ocean Isle, a thin strip of land off the coast of North Carolina. As youngsters, we participated in all the usual seaside activities - which were fun, until my father got involved and systematically chipped away at our pleasure. Miniature golf was ruined with a lengthy dissertation on impact, trajectory, and wind velocity, and our sand castles were critiqued with stifling lectures on the dynamics of the vaulted ceiling. We enjoyed swimming, until the mystery of tides was explained in such a way that the ocean seemed nothing more than an enormous saltwater toilet, flushing itself on a sad and predictable basis.

By the time we reached our teens, we were exhausted. No longer interested in the water, we joined our mother on the beach blanket and dedicated ourselves to the higher art of tanning. Under her guidance, we learned which lotions to start off with, and what worked best for various weather conditions and times of day. She taught us that the combination of false confidence and Hawaiian Tropic could result in a painful and unsightly burn, certain to subtract valuable points when, on the final night of vacation, contestants gathered for the annual Miss Emollient Pageant. This was a contest judged by our mother, in which the holder of the darkest tan was awarded a crown, a sash, and a scepter.

Technically the prize could go to either a male or a female, but the sash read MISS EMOLLIENT because it was always assumed that my sister Gretchen would once again sweep the title. For her, tanning had moved from an intense hobby to something more closely resembling a psychological dysfunction. She was what we called a tanorexic: someone who simply could not get enough. Year after year she arrived at the beach with a base coat that the rest of us could only dream of achieving as our final product. With a mixture of awe and envy, we watched her broiling away on her aluminum blanket. The spaces between her toes were tanned, as were her palms and even the backs of her ears. Her method involved baby oil and a series of poses that tended to draw crowds, the mothers

shielding their children's eyes with sand-covered fingers.

It is difficult for me to sit still for more than twenty minutes at a stretch, so I used to interrupt my tanning sessions with walks to the pier. On one of those walks, I came across my father standing not far from a group of fishermen who were untangling knots in a net the size of a circus tent. A lifetime of work beneath the coastal sun had left them with what my sisters and I referred to as the Samsonite Syndrome, meaning that their enviable color was negated by a hard, leathery texture reminiscent of the suitcase my mother stored all our baby pictures in. The men drank from quart bottles of Mountain Dew as they paused from their work to regard my father, who stood at the water's edge, staring at the shoreline with a stick in his hand.

I tried to creep by unnoticed, but he stopped me, claiming that I was just the fellow he'd been looking for. "Do you have any idea how many grains of sand there are in the world?" he asked. It was a question that had never occurred to me. Unlike guessing the number of pickled eggs in a jar or the amount of human brains it might take to equal the weight of a portable television set, this equation was bound to involve the hateful word googolplex, a term I'd heard him use once or twice before. It was an idea of a number and was, therefore, of no use whatsoever.

I'd heard once in school that if a single bird were to transport all the sand, grain by grain, from the eastern seaboard to the west coast of Africa, it would take… I didn't catch the number of years, preferring to concentrate on the single bird chosen to perform this thankless task. It hardly seemed fair, because, unlike a horse or a Seeing Eye dog, the whole glory of being a bird is that nobody would ever put you to work. Birds search for grubs and build their nests, but their leisure time is theirs to spend as they see fit. I pictured this bird looking down from the branches to say, "You want me to do what?" before flying off, laughing at the foolish story he now had to tell his friends. How many grains of sand are there in the world? A lot. Case closed.

My father took his stick and began writing an equation in the sand. Like all the rest of them, this one was busy with x's and y's resting on top of one another on dash-shaped bunks. Letters were multiplied by symbols, crowded into parentheses, and set upon by dwarfish numbers drawn at odd angles. The equation grew from six to twelve feet long before assuming a second line, at which point the fishermen took an interest. I watched them turn from their net, and admired the way they could smoke entire cigarettes without ever taking them from their mouths - a skill my mother had mastered and one that continues to elude me. It involves a symbiotic relationship with the wind: you have to know exactly how and when to turn your head in order to keep the smoke out of

your eyes.

One of the men asked my father if he was a tax accountant, and he answered, “No, an engineer.” These were poor men, who could no longer afford to live by the ocean, who had long ago sold their one-story homes for the valuable sand beneath them. Their houses had been torn down to make room for high-priced hotels and the A-frame cottages that now rented in season for a thousand dollars a week.

“Let me ask a little something,” one of the men said, spitting his spent cigarette butt into the surf. “If I got paid twelve thousand dollars in 1962 for a half-acre beachfront lot, how much would that be worth per grain of sand by today’s standard?”

“That, my friend, is a very interesting question,” my father said.

He moved several yards down the beach and began a new equation, captivating his audience with a lengthy explanation of each new and complex symbol. “When you say pie,” one man asked, “do you mean a real live pie, or one of those pie shapes they put on the news sometimes to show how much of your money goes to taxes?”

My father answered their questions in detail, and they listened intently - this group of men with nets, blowing their smoke into the wind. Stooped and toothless, they hung upon his every word while I stood in the lazy surf, thinking of the upcoming pageant and wondering if the light reflecting off the water might tan the underside of my nose and chin.