

David Sedaris
from METAL PRETTY ONE DAY

The Late Show

I'M THINKING OF MAKING a little jacket for my clock radio. Nothing fancy or permanent, just something casual it can slip into during the wee hours. I'm not out to match it with the curtains or disguise it to look like something it's not. The problem is not that the clock radio feels underdressed, the problem is that I cannot bear to watch the numbers advance in the heartless way common to this particular model. Time doesn't fly — it flaps, the numbers turning on a wheel that operates much like the gears on a stretching rack.

For the first twenty years of my life I rocked myself to sleep. It was a harmless enough hobby, but eventually I had to give it up. Throughout the next twenty-two years I lay still and discovered that after a few minutes I could drop off with

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no problem. Follow seven beers with a couple of scotches and a thimble of good marijuana, and it's funny how sleep just sort of comes on its own. Often I never even made it to bed. I'd squat down to pet the cat and wake up on the floor eight hours later, having lost a perfectly good excuse to change my clothes. I'm now told that this is not called "going to sleep" but rather "passing out," a phrase that carries a distinct hint of judgment.

As a perverse and incredibly boring experiment, I am now trying to prove that I can get by without the drugs and the drinking. It was hard for the first few months, but then I discovered that I *can* live without these things. It's a pretty miserable excuse for a life, but technically it still qualifies. My heart continues to pump. I can put socks on my feet and make ice; I just can't sleep.

I've never gone to bed early, and have no intention of changing my schedule. There's always a little hump at about eleven o'clock, which I've traditionally gotten over by drinking a lot of something. I'm used to holding a glass or can and raising it to my mouth every thirty seconds or so. It's a habit my right hand can't seem to break.

Having decided in advance that I will never use the word *decaf*, I began looking for a new beverage. My disappointing search taught me that, without the blessing of vodka, tomato juice is a complete waste of time. Even when you buy it in a bottle, it still tastes like the can. I've learned that soda gives me a stomachache, grape juice gives me a headache, and that

nothing is more disgusting than a glass of milk, especially French milk, which comes in a box and can sit unrefrigerated for five months, at which point it simply turns into cheese and is moved to a different section of the grocery store.

Following a brief and unsatisfying flirtation with lemon-tainted water, I finally settled on tea, which is something I'd never placed beside coffee in terms of things that will keep you awake. I've never been one of those people who talk about a "sugar rush" or claim to feel the immediate effect of a vitamin tablet. I'm not terribly in touch with my body but have noticed that, taken in great quantities, tea is actually pretty serious. Drink twelve cups at about eleven P.M., and you'll really notice the difference between going to bed and going to sleep. Even if you're lucky enough to lose consciousness, you'll find you still need to get up every half hour just to empty your bladder.

So here lies the new me. It's 5:48 in the morning, I'm thinking of making an outfit for my clock radio, and I'm so full of caffeine that my scalp itches. To read a book or attempt a crossword puzzle would be an admission of defeat, and I know that if I let my mind wander, it would most likely head off in the direction of the liquor cabinet. Rather than practicing my irregular verbs or trying to make sense of my day, I pass the time by replaying one of my current, ongoing fantasies. These are the epic daydreams I would normally call forth while walking around town or waiting in line at the grocery store. They're like movies I edit and embroider and watch over and over again, regularly recasting the villains and updat-

ing the minor details. My current inventory is more than enough to keep me busy, and includes the following titles:

Mr. Science

Alone in my basement laboratory, I invent a serum that causes trees to grow at ten times their normal rate, meaning that a person can plant a sapling and enjoy its fruit or shade one year later. It really is a perfect idea. Nobody likes waiting for a tree to grow — that's why more people don't plant them; it seems hopeless. By the time they've matured, you've either died or moved to a retirement home.

My trees grow at an advanced rate for anywhere from two to five years before tapering off to normal, and they are a wild success. Instant parks are created. Cities and subdevelopments are transformed seemingly overnight, and the hurricane states erect statues in my honor. Frustrated parents attempt to use my serum on their children, but it doesn't work on people. "Sorry," I say, "but there's no cure for adolescence." The lumberjacks and environmentalists love me equally, but a problem arises when a group of lesser scientists spread the rumor that the leaves of my trees cause cancer in laboratory animals. I then discover a cure for cancer just so I can say, "What was that you were carrying on about?"

The Mr. Science look changes from one night to the next. Sometimes I'm tall and fair-skinned. Sometimes I'm dark and stocky. The only constant is my hair, which is always thick and straight, cut in such a way that if surfacing from a dive,

my bangs would fall to my lower lip. I keep it combed back, but every so often a lock will break free and hang like a whiplash down the side of my face. Mine is a look of intense concentration, the face of a man who's forever trying to recall an old locker combination. When receiving my Nobel Prize, I'm so lost in thought that the peacenik seated beside me has to elbow me in the ribs, saying, "Hey, buddy, I think they're calling your name."

I'll sometimes have dinner with a group of happily cured cancer patients, but for the most part I tend to keep to myself, ignoring the great mound of social invitations heaped upon my desk. Without making any great fuss about it, I cure AIDS and emphysema, meaning that people can once again enjoy a cigarette after a rigorous bout of anal sex. There will be a lot of talk about "turning back the clock," most of it done by people whose clocks will not be affected one way or another. Psychologists will appear on TV, suggesting that our former AIDS and cancer patients are desperately in need of counseling. "We have to teach these people that it's okay to live again," they'll say. Their self-serving message will be met with great peals of laughter, as will the flood of books with titles such as *Getting Over Getting Better* and *Remission Impossible: The Conflict of Identity in a Post-Cancer Society*. After decades of falling for such nonsense, the American people will decide they've had enough pointless anxiety. Antidepressants will go out of style, and filthy jokes will enjoy a much-deserved comeback.

I cure paralysis because I'm tired of watching skate-

boarders race down the wheelchair ramps, and I cure muscular dystrophy just to get rid of the Jerry Lewis telethon. I eradicate mental retardation so no one will ever again have an excuse to make a movie based upon an old television series, and I cure diabetes, herpes, and Parkinson's disease as personal favors to some of my favorite celebrities. I invent a pill that will allow you to drink seawater, and another that will erase the effects of either twelve cups of tea or seven beers and two scotches.

All my discoveries make headlines, but the most controversial is a soap that rejuvenates aging skin. You take a bath or shower, lather yourself with my product, let it sit for three minutes, and once it's rinsed off, you look as though you're twenty-five years old. The effects last for three days, and the process can be repeated indefinitely. The soap is insanely expensive, and everybody over the age of forty simply has to have it. Suddenly, nursing-home residents resemble oddly dressed graduate students, and beautiful women in adult diapers are driving very slowly and blocking the grocery store aisles with their carts. I like imagining the confusion my product will generate: the startled look of the authentic young single as his date deposits her teeth in a bedside jar, the baby-faced eighty-year-old forgetting he'd agreed to play Father Time at the New Year's party. Former beauty queens will attempt to reclaim their titles, and no one will suspect a thing until the talent competition, when they offer their renditions of "Sonny Boy" and "Ain't We Got Fun."

Sadly, my soap will not work on everyone. If you've had

a lot of cosmetic surgery in the past — your eyes lifted, your wrinkles pumped with collagen — your youthful self will appear freakish and catlike, like one of those aliens rumored to have visited the town of Roswell, New Mexico. For reasons that confound medical science, the product also fails to affect those working in certain professions — the editors of fashion magazines, for example. Here are people who have spent their lives promoting youthful beauty, making everyone over the age of thirty feel like an open sore. Now, too late, they'll attempt to promote liver spots as the season's most sophisticated accessory. "Old is the new young," they'll say, but nobody will listen to them. Television executives will also be left out, especially those whose job it is to move a program from Sunday at eight to Wednesday at nine-thirty, then back to Sunday and on to Thursday, all so they can sell a few more soft-drink or taco commercials. When petitioned by these people to please, for the love of God, come up with something that can help them, I'll redesign that goofy plastic bird that perpetually lowers its head into a little cup of water. My version will work just like the old one but — get this — it'll be wearing a pair of sunglasses!

With the money I make from my numerous inventions, I build my own spaceship and discover another planet that looks a lot like Earth and is only twenty minutes away. My new world has real estate developers and multinational corporations foaming at the mouth, and I like to imagine the meetings during which they try to explain why the universe needs another Shakey's Pizza or Six Flags amusement park.

I'll listen to their presentations and lead them on a bit before suggesting that the recently named Planet Fuck You Up the Ass with a Sharp Stick might not be for everyone.

The Knockout

I'm one fight away from being named heavyweight boxing champion of the world, and still people are asking, "Who is this guy?" If forced to describe me to a police sketch artist, you might begin by mentioning my nose. It isn't exactly upturned, it isn't "pugged"; but when they're viewed eye to eye, you'll notice that my nostrils are prominent and oddly expressive, like a second, smaller pair of eyes assigned to keep watch over the lower half of my face, home to my full lips and perfect, luminous teeth.

When the sketch artist draws my eyes, you'll step back, saying, "No, I'm afraid that's not right at all." After four or five more unsuccessful attempts, the artist will lose his patience and remind you that "soulful" is not a precise physical description. The difficulty comes in trying to separate my eyes from my eyebrows, which alter my face much the way that varying punctuation marks can change the meaning of a sentence. I've got the exclamation point I wear when ambushed by photographers, the question mark, the period I wear when I mean business, the dash, the thoughtful semicolon, and the series of three dots I rely upon when rudely interrupted or when searching for just the right word. The eyebrows work in consort with my inky black hair, which

weighs in midway between curly and wavy, and calls for the invention of a new word.

"It's . . . cravy," you'll say. "Like a storm at sea if the ocean were made out of hair instead of water."

When the sketch artist throws down his pencil, you'll say, "Okay, then, how's this: he looks kind of like the guy who used to play Cord Roberts on *One Life to Live*. Or, no, I take that back. He looks *exactly* like the guy who used to play Cord Roberts on *One Life to Live*. Is *that* descriptive enough for you?"

It's somewhat surprising that I'm a serious contender for the title of world heavyweight champion, not because I'm slow or weak but because I'm a relative newcomer to the sport. I'd been just another Yale medical student and had never really thought of fighting until I got shut out of an endotracheal intubation seminar and signed up for a boxing class instead. The teacher recognized my extraordinary talent, lined up a few regional matches, and one thing led to another. I looked good in a hooded sweatshirt, and so when asked to go professional, I said, "Okay. Why not?"

This fantasy takes care to avoid the more obvious *Rocky* I-IV comparisons. I never run around New Haven punching the air. Neither do I speak to turtles or greet friends with a nontraditional handshake. Most important, I'm never seen as an underdog. You have to care about something in order to hold that title, and I honestly don't give a damn one way or the other. For me, fighting is just a way to kill time until I get

my medical degree and begin my residency. The boxing world feels cheated by my obvious lack of passion, but the press loves me. They're beside themselves because I'm white, and in writing about me, they're able to express their racial anxieties while pretending not to. People who normally can't stand the idea of violence are suddenly willing to make an exception. Even the Mennonites place their bets and sign up for Pay-Per-View.

The championship bout is five days away when the public discovers I have a boyfriend, who maybe doesn't look like Hugh but definitely cooks like him. I haven't been hiding my homosexuality. I've never lied or purposely avoided the question, it's just that no one has ever specifically asked. I'd never seen it as any big deal, but the news seems to change everything. Those who loved me because I was white now feel betrayed. They'd assigned me to be their representative. I was supposed to kick some black ass in their name, but now they're not sure whose side they're on. Which is more important, my race or my sexual preference?

The question is answered when hate notes and truckloads of pansies are delivered to my training camp, the little sanctuary where I skip rope while listening to taped lectures on coronary collateralization and threadworm infection. The topics don't pertain to my specific area of study but, as I tell the reporters from *Ring* magazine, "I like to keep informed."

A clause in my contract states that before the big fight I must submit to a Barbara Walters interview, so I do. The first

few minutes go pretty much as I'd expected. "What would you do if you were choking on a peanut?" she asks. "Show us how a real champ performs the Heimlich maneuver."

The hijinks over, we settle onto the sofa, where she clasps her hands and asks if it was hard for me to come out.

I know then that had Barbara Walters actually been choking on a peanut, I would have done nothing to help her. I hate the way the word *out* has been sexualized and forced into service for all things gay. When *out* is used as a verb, I start to hyperventilate. If some people are "outed," are other people "inned"? Can we say that someone has been "besided" or "overed"?

I have a similar adverse reaction when interviewed by the gay press. "No," I say, "I will not be entering the ring draped in a rainbow-striped flag." I must have been out of the country when they took the vote on that one. I abhor the rainbow stripe and would prefer something along the lines of a simple skull and crossbones. In the last few days before the fight, my eyebrows settle into a semipermanent question mark. I don't understand why I have to represent anyone. Whatever happened to winning the heavyweight championship for Hippocrates? Without really meaning to, I manage to alienate everyone but the endocrinologists, and even some of them are put off by a remark I made concerning blood calcium levels in hypoparathyroidism.

It goes without saying that I defeat the standing champion, but the mechanics of the fight never really interest me. I bleed a little, the other guy bleeds a lot, and then it's over.

If I really can't sleep, I kill time casting and recasting both my coach and the genetically altered Hugh. Then I play around with my retirement speech and decorate the waiting room of my doctor's office.

I've Got a Secret

I'm a pretty, slightly chubby White House intern who's had a brief affair with the president of the United States. Through no fault of my own, the details are leaked to the press, and within hours people are buying bumper stickers reading, SHAME ON YOU! and ANOTHER AMERICAN DISGUSTED BY PRESIDENT PLAYBOY.

My friends and family are shocked to learn that I had sex with a world leader. "Why didn't you tell us?" they ask, though they know it's a silly question. I've always been admired for my ability to keep a secret. I had a baby in high school, and no one ever found out about it. I gave birth in the woods behind my house and put the infant up for adoption just as soon as I'd cleaned myself off. Actually, I just left him in a box outside the agency door. It was a comfortable box, lined with blankets, and I hung around long enough to make sure he'd been found and taken inside. I'm not heartless, I just didn't want to leave a paper trail and have to worry that the child would grow up and come knocking at my door, expecting me to put him on my Christmas list.

Before it became front-page news, I'd almost forgotten that I'd had an affair with the president. It isn't that I sleep

around a lot, it's just that, aside from the fact that he is the president, the relationship wasn't terribly memorable. I'm at home, defrosting my freezer and watching TV when my president interrupts a lousy speech on education to say, "I never had sex with that woman."

Yikes. Okay, I think, *so maybe I made a mistake. He's obviously not the man I thought he was.* I refill my ice cube trays and realize that life as I knew it is now officially over. Sixty years from now some doctor will tell his friends that he's just performed a hip replacement on the girl who slept with the president. That's what they'll call me from here on out, and the most I can do about it is try to set a good example. This will be accomplished by concentrating on my best assets and giving the country what it needs rather than what it wants.

With reporters camped outside my door, I can't really go anywhere, so I find a hardware store that delivers, and decide to paint my apartment. I'm going after the hard-to-reach places behind the radiator when the independent counsel arrives, promising that if I cooperate, I won't have to go to jail. "Well, that's a new one," I say. "Since when does anybody go to jail just for having sex with the president of the United States?" I tell the independent counsel exactly what I've told everybody else, which is nothing. Then I finish painting between the radiators, eat one last block of fudge, and lose twenty-five pounds.

When told I'd better hire a good attorney, I ask them to give me a public defender, whoever's available — it makes no difference to me. Why spend the rest of my life paying off my

legal fees? I say nothing to the federal prosecutors and nothing to the reporters who call and send exotic flower arrangements, hoping I'll grant an interview or release a statement. They're claiming that I'll talk sooner or later, and it pleases me to know that they are wrong. I will never, for the rest of my life, say one word about my unfortunate affair with the president. I won't even mention the man's name. If it comes up in a crossword puzzle, I'll leave the spaces blank and work around them. He can run his mouth all he wants to, but someone needs to exercise a little control.

My public defender means well, but there's no way I'm going to testify in an outfit designed by Liz Claiborne. He's hoping to promote an image of quiet conservatism, but please! I'd rather go to the chair than appear before the entire world dressed like a department manager at J. C. Penney. Rather, I take my cue from *Gone with the Wind*: the scene in which Scarlett is forced to attend Miss Melanie's birthday party. She's just been caught behind the lumberyard with Ashley, and the whole town is talking about it. If she'd had her way, she would have stayed home, but Rhett Butler forces her to attend wearing a dress that screams *guilty* yet looks so good that you're left wondering why she'd ever lowered herself to chase after Ashley Wilkes.

Given the high visibility factor, every designer in the world wants to dress me for my grand-jury appearance. I go with one of the young English upstarts and choose a slightly exaggerated, magnificently tailored suit that emphasizes my new, waspy figure. Accessorized with the right mix of confi-

dence and haughtiness, it reduces my audience to a world of leering carpetbaggers and gasping Aunt Pittypats. The moment I enter the courtroom it is understood that I am the most audacious and beautiful woman in the world. When called to the stand, I give nothing but my first and last names. The transcription will record that all subsequent questions were answered with either "You've got to be kidding" or "I honestly don't see how that's any of your business." The judge holds me in contempt, and the fashion press notes that my suit jacket neither strained nor bunched when my hands were cuffed behind my back.

I don't know how long they might sentence someone for refusing to disclose the details of an affair, but I imagine it wouldn't be more than a year or two. I do my time quietly but maintain a polite distance from those who would like to profit from my friendship. It looks really bad that the president allowed me to go to prison, and people will often try to tap what they imagine to be my considerable wellspring of anger. As always, I say nothing. In keeping my mouth shut, I become an anomaly, an icon. My name is now a code word, not for a run-of-the-mill sex act but for someone who displays an inordinate amount of dignity, someone beautiful and mysterious and slightly dangerous.

After prison I publish a novel under an assumed name. The book is *Lolita* word for word, and I'm allowed to write it because, under the conditions of the fantasy, Vladimir Nabokov never existed. Because it is so magnificent, my book creates a huge stir. Reporters go hunting for the author; when they

discover it's me, I think, *Goddamnit, can't you people find anything better to do?* I now have a reputation as both a dignified enigma and a genius, but I don't want people reading *Lolita* because I wrote it. My masterpiece is demeaned by their pointless search for a hidden autobiographical subtext, so I give up writing, live off of the money I've made from careful stock investments, and quietly spend the rest of my life sleeping with professional football players.

In reviewing these titles, I can't help but notice a few common themes. Looks seem rather important, as does the ability to enlighten, disappoint, and control great numbers of people who always seem to be American. In a city where every woman over the age of fifty has blond hair, my Mr. Science miracle soap would surely have the Parisians lined up all the way to Bethlehem. But it doesn't interest me to manipulate the French. I'm not keyed in to their value system. Because they are not my people, their imagined praise or condemnation means nothing to me. Paris, it seems, is where I've come to dream about America.

My epic fantasies offer the illusion of generosity but never the real thing. I give to some only so I can withhold from others. It's fine to cure the leukemia sufferers but much more satisfying to imagine the parade of opportunists confounded by my refusal to cooperate. In imagining myself as modest, mysterious, and fiercely intelligent, I'm forced to realize that, in real life, I have none of these qualities. Nobody dreams of

the things he already has. I'm not sure which is more unlikely: the chance that I'll sleep with the president or the hope that I will one day learn to keep a secret.

There are other fantasies involving magic powers, impossible wealth, and the ability to sing and dance. Though I can hypnotize the mafia and raise the dead at will, I seem incapable of erasing the circles beneath my eyes. My dramas don't help me sleep, they simply allow me to pretend that I'm somebody else, someone who's not lying saucer-eyed on a sweat-drenched mattress, watching the minutes flap forward and awaiting the dawn of another dry day.