

RECOGNITION

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I'VE OBSESSED over being great. I've wanted, at one time or another, to do things like a Super Hero, like I was the Green Lantern or Aqua Man. I've needed to make changes in my life several times. I've needed to find a woman and settle down. I've needed to stop watching pornography. I've needed to seek therapy, and I have, actually, on several occasions. But, mostly, I've looked at myself in the mirror and imagined Barbara Walters was interviewing me. I'd smile at her, and blink, and I'd blush, and we'd be discussing whatever it was that I had done to earn her admiration, hell, the world's admiration. For hours I would obsess over all of my answers. I'd think about secrets to tell on national TV, you know, the stuff of headlines, the things that made me not only great, but also interesting. And I'd stand there, face pressed against the bathroom mirror, mumbling my replies. Yet over time, especially when I was older, I found that this practice didn't make me great; it made me quite odd, actually. No matter how much I practiced, no matter how many times I told Barbara Walters that I'd stopped masturbating because it was morally wrong, I still wasn't any different.

MY MOTHER once told me an interesting story about my father. It wasn't a particularly natural thing for my mother to do, because, at the time, she professed great hatred for my father. My parents were only married for six months before my mom became pregnant with me. Dad ran out on her, on us, really, during the fifth month of the pregnancy. He was just gone one morning and it took her almost ten years to find him, and by then it was too late.

So I never really knew my dad growing up, aside from the stories my mom told, which she usually ended with: You'll never grow up to be him, will you? She always said that, I think, because inside she still loved my father, still thought about him. It wasn't like they hated each other for several years and then got divorced. And you don't just stop loving someone because they've broken your heart. You hate them, sure, but the difference between love and hate for people who really care about each other isn't so great.

The interesting story about my dad was from when my mom and dad were just teenagers. Dad played the saxophone in a high school jazz band called the "Gold Notes" and mom used to go to all of their shows, which

meant she spent an awful lot of time at old folk's homes and Bar Mitzvahs and places where people wanted to hear high school kids butcher jazz classics. But, mom said, she was in love and when you're in love you don't mind wasting time. The "Gold Notes" played a gig at the Robesone Home for the Aging in Portland, and after my dad got done shaking up the old folks, he went outside to smoke a cigarette with my mom. There was a fellow sitting in a wheelchair underneath an evergreen tree staring at the sky and talking. My dad walked over to him, because, my mom said, at the time my father was always interested in the words of old people. Dad stood behind the man and mom thought he was going to tap him on the shoulder, or maybe offer to push him around in his wheelchair, but instead he just stood there, motionless. In time, my dad started saying things my mother couldn't hear and the man in the wheelchair started smiling, and then laughing, and eventually, he started to cry, though not the convulsive cries of someone in pain, my mother was quick to point out. No, she said, it was the kind of crying that makes you think about being relieved. Eventually, the man in the wheelchair closed his eyes and let his head loll down onto his chest. When that happened, my dad tiptoed back to where my mother was standing. Mom asked him what had occurred, what had made the man in the wheelchair smile and laugh and cry, and dad said that the man had finally heard from God. That, dad told mom, when he got up close to the man in the wheelchair he understood that the man wasn't talking to the sky but was talking to God. The man was blind and angry with God for everything that had happened to him. Why hadn't God ever answered any of his prayers? Why did he have to be blind and confined to a wheelchair and why did his children put him in a home when, dammit, he could live with them? So, mom said, my dad told him that he had big plans for him up in heaven, that he wasn't going to just be an angel, he was going to be God's right hand. And he told the man in the wheelchair that children make mistakes sometimes and he was sorry that he hadn't been more prompt with his help but that he was aware of the situation. I knew this story shed a favorable light on my father, so I wondered for a long time why my mother even told it to me. Nobody wants to believe that their father is the anti-Christ, but why tell your child a story about his

father playing God? Everyone wants to believe that their parents are gentle, loving people who aren't prone to murder, mayhem, or whatever the current en vogue crime is. But the truth is that nobody has parents who are near perfect, nobody has parents who are super heroes. I think now that when my mother told me this story about my father, I was only 10 or 11, is when I started talking into the mirror. After finding out that God had run out on his wife and unborn son, I think that is when I started my quest for greatness.

NOT LONG ago, five years maybe, I was dating a girl named Jessica. We'd met in a support group — Children Who Can't Love — and started having sex after a session called "Telling the Secret" where we were admonished to tell the group our darkest "current" secret. I told the group that I had masturbated in the men's room at Dodger Stadium twice in the last month. The truth is that I hadn't masturbated at Dodger Stadium, but that I had wanted to, I mean really wanted to. That didn't seem like a good enough secret. So in lieu of my actual secret, I made up a secret that would make me sound a bit more fucked up than I actually was. Jessica, when her time came, admitted that she had been having fantasies about a four-way sexual encounter with her boyfriend, his father, and her priest. You can't bullshit a bullshitter, I thought. That was no fantasy. If you can talk about a secret that fucked up, then you are doing it. You're lying, I said, and the entire group fell hushed.

There were 15 of us, plus our group leader Chet, and everyone glared at me.

I'd broken the biggest law of our support group: No cold pricklies. You're a big liar, I said, and Jessica actually smiled at me. Chet stood up, pointed at me and said, Leave. On my way outside, Jessica ran up and threw her arms around me. She said, You're right. I am a liar. I've been fantasizing about you.

For the next four months we played these games where we would lie to each other about everything. It was like being on the *Hollywood Squares* 24 hours a day. We'd go to parties and after a few beers Jessica would stand up and announce that she had something very important to say. So everyone would gather around, and I'd just stand back and wait for the avalanche. She'd pace back and forth, and everyone would watch her because she was pretty and awful at the same time, and then she'd just tilt her head back and exhale. I just had a miscarriage in the bathroom, she said once. It was nothing, really, she said, just like a big blood clot, but it happened and I'm sorry. After a while, people stopped inviting us to parties because it ruined everyone's good time when Jessica would proclaim that I'd recently strained her abdomen with my overly thick penis in the guest bedroom, and was anyone here a doctor? At home, I found myself telling false secrets to anyone who would call or drop by. I have ball cancer, I

told the Domino's delivery guy. This might be my last meal and it took you 45 fucking minutes to bring it to me. Do you know that I'll never get those 45 minutes back? You are personally responsible for refunding me 45 minutes of life, you prick, I said. The delivery guy just handed me the pizza and said that he was new and didn't know the neighborhood and man, his dad had ball cancer, so he knew what I must be going through, and Godspeed, brother, Godspeed. And so Jessica and I would walk around the house with all these little secrets hanging behind us like threads until one day it occurred to me that I had no idea who Jessica was. Perhaps it was some kind of resentment thing, but I kept thinking that if I was going to become truly great, I mean like Elvis or Nero, then I'd need to be more mysterious about my secrets and less willing to live my life with a woman who knew all of my secrets: even the ones that weren't true.

Jessica moved out of my life with relative ease and I went and looked for a new support group.

I WENT to three support groups a week for almost two months until I found one I really felt in control of. The key to support groups is not in the particular dysfunction they purport to help, but what you get out of the other people's suffering. The perfect atmosphere existed in Christ Ruined My Life, which met Tuesdays in the basement of Bob's house. I sat in the same chair every Tuesday and said nothing for three months. Lillie thought Jesus had made her a drug addict. Bob, our leader, said Jesus had never done anything for him except turn him into a sinner. If I hadn't read the Bible, Bob said, I wouldn't have known I was breaking so many damn rules. They'd sit there, the 11 of them, and talk about their shitty lives and I'd smile and I'd nod and in my mind I was Barbara Walters and this was my show. I didn't need to have a story to be great; all I needed to do was show up and pass judgment every Tuesday. Yes, Lillie, you are a drug addict. Yes, Bob, you are a fat slob and I do think you are going to hell for what you did to that Girl Scout when you were 13. All the while, in my silence, I was preparing my monologue, my great 50-minute diatribe about how Jesus had ruined my life.

I would touch on all the secrets that I had stored up. I'd mention things like my aversion to crab cakes, my predilection towards women who like it from the rear, and my hatred of all things Disney. But then a funny thing happened on the Tuesday I planned to ascend to greatness, the Tuesday when Barbara Walters got interviewed by all the movie stars she'd soft-balled over the years: Bob got arrested for buying a hooker. Bob's wife posted a note on the door saying that our support group was canceled FOREVER and we should all PRAISE JESUS.

I visited Bob once in prison, it wasn't his first offence you see, and I told him that he had really helped me

come to grips with my own troubles.

Bob looked at me through the smoked glass window and said, Did you bring me some cigarettes like I asked?

I'VE WORKED several jobs and none of them have pushed me closer to what I've obsessed for. When I was 15, I thought I wanted to be a lawyer. At 17, I wanted to play professional indoor soccer. At 25, the County of Los Angeles employed me as a health inspector. I started off small time, investigating rat hole apartment buildings and homeless shelters. I had a badge and a parking decal that said "Official County Business" so for a while I felt like I was on to something. It was a noble job. I was a beacon of hope for a dirty society. What I liked most about being who I was at 25 was my ability to invade the privacy of others on a whim. If an apartment building look crappy, I'd knock on the manager's door and demand a walkthrough. I did this a lot, all hours of the day and night. It was an interesting sort of power. I was subverting the power of the hated building manager – and who doesn't hate their building manager? – by waking his dull ass up at two in the morning on a Sunday and demanding to see paperwork on building codes. Of course later I would feel guilty about breaking the law, because I was breaking the law, but I loved seeing the bewildered faces of people being roused out of bed by their landlord and some guy with a badge. But then, because I was so good at my job, I got bumped up to restaurants and bars. My mom would call me and tell me that she'd seen a cockroach at this restaurant and a dead fly at that restaurant and that I needed to take action. So I'd visit the California Pizza Kitchen and I'd cite them for whatever I could find, and then I'd go to Jerry's Deli and I'd cite them, and McDonald's and Burger King and on and on forever. All I did all day, every day, was piss people off. Nobody liked me for closing down the McDonald's they went to every morning for their McMuffin, even if the allowable amount of rat feces per square inch of dry storage space was off the fucking charts. Around the office, the other inspectors started calling me the Angel of Death. Then, one day, Channel 2 did an expose on the terrible job health inspectors were doing. All anyone could talk about was how this restaurant got an "A" but deserved a "B" and how that restaurant got a "B" but, for God's sake, deserved a "C." I never wanted to be notorious, at least not professionally, and here I was, here we all were, being castigated right in the public eye. I couldn't ever get over that. I'd find myself talking to the mirror, saying, Well, Barbara, you're right. There was one bright star in the Los Angeles Department of Health.

I know that my obsession for greatness has made me stop in the middle of a thousand different activities. In order to surrender to the possibility that my next action, my very next breath, might bring me face-to-

face with my own personal zenith, I've made a few mistakes. Quitting my job was not one of them. I felt no particular intimacy with my coworkers. I even made a point not to tell them any of my false secrets. I went so far as to tell a couple of people I didn't like that I had a terrible secret, a horrible skeleton in my closet, and that I was seeking therapy for it. It wasn't true, well, not entirely true at least. To see the look on a person's face when you tell them that you have a terrible secret and then to go on eating your potato salad as though you haven't even spoken is absolutely priceless. The price of good gossip in an office is extremely high. Everyone in the damn place was taking me to lunch. But I never said another word about my untrue skeleton. I quit that job a living legend in the minds of my coworkers.

IN WHY We Hate Our Families, I was able to make some real strides. I say that as though during my time in Why We Hate Our Families I talked about things that directly related to my problems attaining greatness, which isn't the case. Instead, I would talk with the eight other people in the group about my sex life, which at the time made me hate my family. I would discuss my inability to maintain an erection during intercourse with brunette women, which I attributed to the fact that my mother was a brunette. Charlene, an actual psychologist, but also a person who hated her family and thus needed support, told me that if I was already aware of my problem, then I was halfway to solving it. Charlene had brown hair, was in her early 40s, and smoked these ultra un-hip Virginia Slims cigarettes. By the fifth time Why We Hate Our Families met, I had Charlene's clothes rotation down. She wore the same blue suit every other Thursday. On our tenth meeting, I said, Love that suit, Char. Why don't you wear it more often? That was the last time she showed up. For a long time after that, I worried about Charlene. It was a sophomoric thing for me to say to her. Who was I to act like the clothes rotation police? And what if she still hated her family and had no one to talk to about it? So one day I dug out the Why We Hate Our Families phone list and called her. I said, Gosh, Charlene, I'm sorry if I offended you. I was just trying to be cute. Charlene said, You wear the same two pairs of jeans everyday, don't you? You have four pairs of underwear and they all have threadbare asses, don't they? You have a small dick and an Oedipus complex the size of Texas. She paused for a minute, so I could make a spectacle out of hanging up, but instead I said, Do you want to go out for dinner sometime? Charlene was insane and I dug that. I moved in with her and her three kids and we spent a lot of time walking around in the nude. Her children, all boys, were ages 3, 6, and 14. The 14-year-old thought I was cool and since I was only 27 at the time, I probably was cool. Charlene would leave the door open when we'd make love, which at first made me feel awkward, but

later made me feel liberated. Charlene would buck and moan and shout out my name like a religious mantra, while at the same time her three-year-old would be watching Barney in the next room. Once, the 14-year-old walked into the room when his mother was on all fours. He said, Mom, is it okay if I go to a football game tonight? Charlene said, Sure, honey. I just kept doing my thing while mom and son had an in-depth conversation about football, the need for the garbage to be hauled to the street, and the condition of the 14-year-old's bedroom. To be clear about Charlene's neurosis, and she had plenty, the three children were not the family she needed support for. It was her mom and dad and two brothers who made her seek out therapy. Their disapproval of her lifestyle etched itself in everything she did. And so, with Charlene, I ascended to a plane of greatness that few people ever find. I was living a fantastic story, one for the ages. I was fucking a 40-year-old psychologist who hated her family but liked to have sex with her children watching!

You can ask anyone, people on their deathbed, preachers, professional athletes, anybody with a pulse, if they could live an extra day wouldn't they want that day to amount to something? If God looked down upon them and said, I'm throwing in an extra 24 hours for you, use it wisely; don't you think each and every one of them would just go ass-out crazy? That's how I felt everyday; like God was saying, Here's 24 more. There was something wild and confusing about the time I spent with Charlene. Each day I would wake up and think, Man, this is pretty abnormal. But then, I'd sit there and I'd realize that I was living rent-free in a 4,000-square-foot home in Brentwood. It wasn't until Charlene's 14-year-old son blew his head off with a hunting rifle that our sex became more private and needy. It turned into emotional warfare every time we made love. She would scream and cry. She would beg me to tie her up into little knots. She actually said that: Tie me up into little knots. Everything between us became more pragmatic. For a time, I felt that I could save Charlene; that I might even love her. I thought my greatness was at hand.

That perhaps my greatness would be achieved by being a savior for a woman who was barely alive anymore. But there are two kinds of greatness, I think.

There is the voyeuristic variety where you can look at yourself in the way that everyone else looks at you and you can decide that by your deeds or your intrinsic value to the human race, you have made a difference. Or, there is the greatness that is achieved by staring at your own reflection in a mirror for hours on end calculating the imperfections. I looked into Barbara Walters' eyes and she knew I wasn't great yet. Stop telling yourself lies, Barbara said, there's work to be done.

MY MOM and Dad are both old now, and when I see them together I wonder what becomes of love. They sit there like statues; eyes fixed on one another in some kind of mental battle of attrition. It's useless, I suppose, for me to meditate on this question. Because, by the mere fact that they are together, it is safe to assume that love perseveres. Mom found dad again when I was 11, didn't bother to speak to him until I was 18, and moved in with him when I was 32. He is sick, you see, and has no one to take care of him.

Before mom and dad moved in with each other, I would talk to my father three or four times a year. I'd sit with the phone jammed against my ear listening to him apologize, because that was what all the calls were about, his sorrow.

It was always, We could have gone to see baseball games, huh? My dad, your granddad, used to take me to ball games all the time. Did mom take you to ball games? I'm sorry if she didn't. We would have had a good time, he'd say.

And then he'd let out an impenetrable sigh that would hang on the phone line like dead weight. I'd sit there, my ear sweating, trying to think of a response. Society tells us that when someone apologizes to you, your response is supposed to be, It's all right. Or, Apology accepted. But that was never my answer. I never had anything to answer whatsoever. Instead, he'd just keep talking, telling me about growing up in Oregon, traveling through Europe, the women he scored. The women he scored were a favorite topic. Maybe he thought it was manly or that we could bond over it, but all I ever wanted to do was throw up when he talked about the women.

He's sick now, his mind a frozen tomb. My mom spoon-feeds him three meals a day, refuses to put him into a home, and ages a little more every minute. I used to think that I had a power over my dad, an ounce of greatness he never had, because I never left my mom. Now, with his body sagging to the right, his speech only a jumble of consonants, the power rests solely with him. The battle of attrition that mom and dad wage is not one of anger or hate anymore, that one was fought long ago, but of who will admit Love first.

One day, when Mom had to go pick Aunt Claire up from the airport, I sat with dad and watched television. He'd already had his afternoon feeding, so my only real duty was to make sure he didn't die alone. I could never think of what to say to my father. Could never just start a conversation about girls, or baseball, or my support group. I stared at him and he stared back at me and finally I just said, Fuck you. He didn't move, not that he really could, and then I said, Don't worry, I have big plans for you up in heaven.

You won't just be an angel; you'll be my right hand. I know parents make mistakes sometimes, I said, and I'm sorry I haven't been more prompt with my help, but

I am aware of the situation. My dad's eyes widened and I scooted my chair next to his so that we were face-to-face and then I said, Why was Superman allergic to the rock of his own planet? Can you explain the infield fly rule to me? Why did you walk out on mom? Did you ever think about mom when you were scoring with all those women? How many other women did you walk out on? How many little boys and girls grew up without a father because of you? Do you know that I talk to myself in the mirror and try to have conversations with Barbara Walters? I kept going, firing questions at my sick, twisted up, dying little father. I went on and on until the sound of my own voice became a hum in my head, a flat drone of words. Repeating the same question over and over: Do you think I'm great? Dad? Do you think I'm great?