

david sedaris: Me talk pretty one day

ME TALK PRETTY ONE DAY

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."

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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 univertthitieth, 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,

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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

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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?"

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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 fianc  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?"

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I didn't quite know how to respond. Who was this college bowl fanatic with no mixer and a fianc  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.