Me Talk Pretty One Day

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID SEDARIS

Born in New York State in 1956, David Sedaris is the second of six children. An engineer at IBM, his father was relocated to North Carolina when Sedaris was still young, taking the family to Raleigh, where Sedaris spent the rest of his childhood and adolescence. After graduating from high school, Sedaris attended Western Carolina University, majoring in art because he wanted to match his younger sister Gretchen's artistic talent. Before long, he transferred to Kent State University, where he continued to major in art until he finally dropped out in 1977, at which point he devoted himself to conceptual art and started taking crystal meth—a habit he eventually kicked around the time he stopped practicing conceptual art. In 1983 he attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, graduating in 1987. While he was living in Chicago, the radio host Ira Glass heard him reading from his diary in a club and asked him to come on his show, *The Wild Room*. Sedaris's appearance on *The Wild Room* went over extremely well, and he became a regular contributor to National Public Radio, reading humorous essays on the air and becoming popular amongst public radio listeners. On the success of his radio appearances, he published his first book, *Barrel Fever*, in 1994, followed by *Naked* and *Holidays on Ice* in 1997 and *Me Talk Pretty One Day* in 2000. He has now published 11 books and is a regular contributor to Ira Glass's radio program *This American Life*. His work also frequently appears in *The New Yorker*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There are very few—if any—historical references in *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. The most historically engaged moment comes when readers are invited to reflect on the social atmosphere of North Carolina during the 1960s, when Sedaris was a child struggling to hide his sexual orientation. At that point in time, many people were openly homophobic, making it especially hard for him to be forthright about his identity (though it's worth noting that this kind of homophobia still has not fully abated). Another historical aspect of *Me Talk Pretty One Day* is Sedaris's hesitancy to embrace technological change. Although his father has been excited about the proliferation of the internet for years, Sedaris doesn't want to start using email when it becomes readily available. However, his sister Amy eventually convinces him of the benefits of the internet after showing him a lewd video, helping him appreciate the internet and its sudden popularity (an experience that presumably took place sometime in the late 1990s).

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of David Sedaris's other books are quite similar to *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, since most of them feature him as the central protagonist and recount humorous and poignant moments throughout his life. Some of these titles include *SantaLand Diaries*, *Naked*, *Let's Explore Diabetes with Owls*, and *Calypso*. In terms of authors who are similar to Sedaris, Dave Eggers bears certain similarities, especially since his memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* blends the lines between fact and fiction—something Sedaris often does in order to emphasize the comedic elements of his essays. *Me Talk Pretty One Day* is also similar to Augusten Burroughs's memoir *Running with Scissors*, since both books feature quirky parents and the difficulties of childhood and adolescence. Because of his emphasis on humor, Sedaris's writing is also comparable in some ways to the work of George Saunders, including Saunders's short story collections *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* and *Tenth of December*. Because Sedaris isn't just an author but something of a public persona, *Me Talk Pretty One Day* might also be considered alongside other celebrity memoirs, including Amy Poehler's *Yes Please*, Tina Fey's *Bossypants*, and Mindy Kaling's *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?*

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Me Talk Pretty One Day
- **When Published:** May 2, 2000
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction, Memoir
- **Setting:** Raleigh, North Carolina, New York City, and France
- **Climax:** Because *Me Talk Pretty One Day* is a collection of essays and vignettes, there isn't just one climax.

EXTRA CREDIT

The Talent Family. David Sedaris and his sister Amy—a famous comedian herself—have worked together to write several plays, including *Stump the Host*, *Stitches*, and *The Little Frieda Mysteries*. Whenever they collaborate, they write under the penname "The Talent Family."

Family Drama. Sedaris sold the film rights for *Me Talk Pretty One Day* in 2001 to the filmmaker and director Wayne Wang. However, he later put an end to the project because he was worried the film would present his family in an unflattering light.

PLOT SUMMARY

Me Talk Pretty One Day is a collection of essays about the everyday life of the author, David Sedaris. The book's first essays detail his upbringing in North Carolina. As a child, he lives with his father, mother, and sisters. The opening essay recounts the time he's forced to see a speech therapist in the fifth grade. Every Thursday, Miss Samson (the therapist) takes him out of class and brings him to her office, where she tries to train him to banish the lisp he has when saying the letter *s*. Sedaris hates this, partially because he's one of the few boys in school who needs speech therapy. This, he believes, aligns him with a group of children who are unpopular, and he senses that the teachers might as well refer to them as the "future homosexuals of America." Thinking this way, he wonders if his teachers are also capable of identifying the future alcoholics or "depressives" in their classrooms. Defying Miss Samson, he starts avoiding all *s*-words, using elaborate synonyms. A strict woman, Miss Samson dislikes this, but nothing she does gets Sedaris to stop. At the end of the year, she opens up to him and speaks emotionally about her failure as a speech therapist and about her depressing life. Seeing this, Sedaris tells her that he's sorry, and she starts laughing, triumphantly informing him that she tricked him into using an *s*.

At another point in his childhood—as outlined in "Giant Dreams, Midget Abilities"—Sedaris goes with his family to a jazz concert. His father, Lou, is obsessed with jazz, always forcing him and his sisters to listen to his record collection. In another life, Sedaris thinks, his father would have made a good musician. Because he never pursued this dream, though, he decides after the jazz concert that Sedaris and his sisters should start a family band. None of them are interested, but Lou signs them up for lessons. Forced to learn the guitar, Sedaris finds himself sitting in a small room with an instructor named Mr. Mancini. Mr. Mancini is a little person, though Sedaris refers to him using the pejorative, politically incorrect term "midget." Sedaris makes no effort to learn guitar, finding himself more fascinated by Mr. Mancini than by the instrument. When Mr. Mancini advises him to give his guitar a name, he decides on Oliver, but Mancini says it has to be a woman's name. Eventually, he decides to show Mr. Mancini a routine he has developed on his own, which involves singing commercial jingles he's heard on TV. In response, Mr. Mancini thinks Sedaris is coming on to him and asks him to leave, saying he doesn't "swing that way." After this, Sedaris tells his father that Mr. Mancini said his fingers are too small to play guitar, and he never returns for another lesson.

Sedaris's relationship with his father is a thread that runs throughout *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, as Sedaris outlines his father's idiosyncrasies in essays like "Genetic Engineering," in which he describes his father's obsession with mathematics and technology. As an engineer at IBM, his father often speaks at length about the future of computers or about other topics that bore Sedaris. He even pursues these conversations with Sedaris when they're on vacation in a beach town, where his lecture about how estimating the number of grains of sand in the world attracts nearby fishermen who ironically ask him to calculate the cost of land they had to give up when rich families came to the beach town and turned it into a vacation destination. Failing to register their facetious tone, Lou diligently sets to work trying to answer the question.

Later, Sedaris goes to college and decides to be an art major because he wants to be as artistically talented as his older sister Gretchen. However, he shows little talent, so he transfers to another school and tries a different discipline within the arts. When this doesn't prove successful, he drops out and moves into an apartment in Raleigh, where he develops a taste for meth and conceptual art. Falling in with a group of experimental artists, he scoffs at art that isn't avant-garde, claiming to be anti-establishment when, in reality, he and his friends are mostly interested in taking drugs and making things that even they don't understand. Surprisingly, his work is accepted by a local museum, but this embarrasses him because his friends resent his success, claiming he sold out. As time passes, he develops an interest in bizarre performance art. During one of his final shows, an audience member heckles him, poking fun at the loftiness of his absurd display. Sedaris realizes the voice belongs to his father. By the end of the show, everyone thinks his father is *part* of the performance, and they compliment him on his wit. This frustrates Sedaris, and when he later runs out of drugs because his dealer goes to rehab, he gives up performance art.

Lou Sedaris has unique relationships with his children, always holding them to high standards and getting disappointed when they show no interest in the things he values. In "You Can't Kill The Rooster," Sedaris describes the beautiful relationship his father has with Sedaris's youngest brother, who calls himself The Rooster. Lou has high hopes for The Rooster because none of his other children have fulfilled his dreams. The Rooster, however, has no intention of following his father's plans, and his personality is in direct opposition to Lou's. And yet, this doesn't bother Lou; when The Rooster calls his father "bitch," for instance, the old man simply smiles. Observing this relationship, Sedaris and his sisters are baffled that the two men get along so well, but Sedaris recognizes a tenderness running between them—a tenderness that transcends the fact that The Rooster doesn't live the life Lou originally wanted for him.

In terms of accomplishments, Sedaris interrogates his own working life in "Learning Curve," in which he's hired as a writing professor despite his lack of experience. At first, he focuses on nothing but what he'll wear, but he soon realizes that he also needs to think about how to fill up class time, so he starts watching soap operas with the students under the pretense

that this will help them learn to write. When an older student furiously asks why he's qualified to critique one of her essays, he finds himself at a loss for words. After a moment, though, he realizes what he needs to say: "I am the only one who is paid to be in this room." This seems to work, but then the student asks how *much* he earns, and when he answers, the students unite with each other for the first time all semester, loudly laughing in unison.

Later in life, Sedaris moves to New York City and lives in a small apartment. He strolls through the city in the evenings and peers into the windows of townhouses, wishing he could live in such beautiful buildings. When he gets hired as a personal assistant to a rich woman named Valencia, he's delighted that he can spend several days a week in her house, but the job soon gets old because Valencia annoys him by pretending to be poor. She haggles over prices and tries to underpay people who need the money more than she does. In keeping with this, Sedaris's wage is much less than it should be, but he puts up with her because he doesn't feel like finding a new job. When a group of movers comes to move some furniture from her townhouse to a friend's apartment, though, they offer Sedaris a job, and he accepts it. Riding away with them in their truck, he realizes that this is where he belongs—in a crowded vehicle with kind people, not in a beautiful townhouse with meanspirited rich people.

While living in New York City, Sedaris meets Hugh, a man who lives in a nice apartment and owns a small house in Normandy, France. This intrigues Sedaris, who starts dating him and eventually visits France for the first time without knowing the language. On that first visit—outlined in "See You Again Yesterday"—he only knows how to say "bottleneck," and he says it whenever he meets somebody. The next time, though, he tries to acquire a few more words, and his process continues on each subsequent visit. At this point in the essay collection, Sedaris devotes himself to chronicling what it's like to live in France as an American, especially when he and Hugh move to Paris for several years. During this time, he struggles to learn French under the tutelage of a frightening and rude teacher, walks around the city listening to a French audiobook for medical doctors trying to learn clinical phrases, considers the way French people view Americans, and tries unsuccessfully to remember which French words are masculine and which are feminine—a practice he finds frustrating and ridiculous. Sedaris pays close attention to the various assumptions and stereotypes that come along with national identity, especially in "Picka Pocketoni," in which an American couple riding the metro in Paris mistakes Sedaris for a French pickpocket and says rude things about him because they assume he can't speak English. This makes Sedaris hate them, though he also recognizes that part of his anger has to do with his own pretentiousness. This realization only makes him hate them even more.

In addition to examining cultural identity, Sedaris thinks about the ways in which intelligence impacts his sense of self. In the essays "21 Down" and "Smart Guy," he reveals his fear that he's unintelligent, making it clear that he wants to be seen as a genius who can easily complete crossword puzzles and has a high IQ. Unfortunately for him, though, he isn't particularly gifted at crossword puzzles, and when he and Hugh take an IQ test, he discovers that he's "practically an idiot." Hugh, on the other hand, has an incredibly high IQ, a fact that makes Sedaris feel even worse about himself. Trying to console him, Hugh tells him not to take his score to heart, adding that Sedaris is perfectly good at a number of things, including vacuuming and naming stuffed animals. There might be other things Sedaris is good at, Hugh offers, saying that he needs time to think of what, exactly, these things are.

All in all, *Me Talk Pretty One Day* sheds light on the little details of everyday life, highlighting strange encounters Sedaris has had in a number of different contexts. Accordingly, there are too many small interactions laid out in the book to mention here. What's important to grasp, though, is that Sedaris is interested in exposing not only the absurdities that people overlook in daily life, but also the humor that can be found in even the most mundane situations. To drive this point home, he ends the collection with a story about his father's approach to storing food. This topic might not sound all that interesting, but Sedaris manages to emphasize the humor of his father's strange behavior. When Lou visits him in Paris, he explains that he found a small brown object in his suitcase and tried to eat it. This is because Lou never wastes food and has no problem eating things that look spoiled. Placing the object in his mouth, he chewed it for five minutes before realizing it was a disintegrated piece of his hat. Hearing this, Sedaris knows his father will now store the hat with the rest of his rotting food, saving it for a time when he has nothing else to eat. And instead of criticizing Lou for this, Sedaris simply appreciates the humor inherent in his beloved father's odd behavior.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

David Sedaris – David Sedaris, a humorist and essayist, is the protagonist of *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. The book's essays all feature him in one way or another, though he often writes about his family members, too. Originally from New York State, his family moves to Raleigh, North Carolina when he's young. His father, Lou, is an engineer at IBM and has high expectations for Sedaris—expectations that Sedaris has no interest in meeting. Whereas his father is invested in mathematics, science, and sports, Sedaris is most interested in style and a number of other odd fascinations. He and his sister Amy have especially eclectic obsessions, finding humor in things that would normally disgust, appall, or disconcert others. Uncomfortable with the idea of being inadequate, Sedaris

decides as a young man to go to art school because his sister Gretchen is a talented artist and he wants to experience the same amount of praise she has earned. However, he isn't nearly as talented and ends up dropping out of school, at which point he develops an intense drug habit and gets into conceptual art. This phase eventually passes, and he later moves to New York City, where he fantasizes about living the life of a wealthy person. Nonetheless, he finds that working as a mover is much more gratifying than trying to attain upward mobility by associating with rich people. After meeting his life partner, Hugh, he starts spending his summers in France, where Hugh owns a small house in the countryside. So begins Sedaris's hilarious efforts to learn French, an endeavor that comes to a head when he and Hugh move to Paris for several years and Sedaris frequently finds himself having stilted, strange conversations. No matter what he's doing, though, Sedaris is a chronicler of everyday life, somebody who is sensitive to the absurdity inherent in things people often overlook or take for granted. By writing about these things, he exposes vast amounts of humor in life while letting his own insecurities and idiosyncrasies play themselves out for all to see.

Lou Sedaris (Sedaris's Father) – Lou Sedaris is David Sedaris's father, a quirky man who has worked as an engineer at IBM for the majority of his life. A curious soul, Lou tries to get his children interested in the things he thinks are fascinating—things like jazz, math, science, and the future of the internet. A supportive father, he does whatever he can to help Sedaris and his siblings, though Lou tends to do this on his own terms, meaning that he often loses sight of the fact that his children are completely uninterested in what he himself values. A product of another time period, he has outdated views about how women should look and behave, which is why he obsesses over his daughters' appearances. In particular, he invests himself in Amy's good looks, relishing her beauty and thinking that her attractiveness will lead to great success. Regarding his sons, he doesn't know what to make of Sedaris's lack of masculinity or academic accomplishment, though he doesn't seem to mind that his youngest son—who calls himself The Rooster—has also failed to live up to his expectations. At the same time, though, it's evident that Lou cares about all of his children and only wants the best for them, even if he doesn't know how exactly to support them in ways they'd actually appreciate.

Miss Samson – Miss Samson is a speech therapist who works with Sedaris to eliminate his lisp. When Sedaris is in the fifth grade, Miss Samson takes him out of class to help him properly pronounce words containing the letter *s*. A strict young teacher, she carefully enunciates when she speaks and implores him to do the same, suggesting that his lisp is nothing but a sign of laziness. Sedaris hates working with Miss Samson, especially because he feels as if she has destroyed his efforts to hide his sexual identity as a young gay person trying to fit into the heteronormative environment of North Carolina in the 1960s. Thankfully for him, Miss Samson only stays at his school for a semester before going elsewhere. In their last session, she tells him that she feels like a failure and opens up about how hard it is that her fiancé is fighting in the Vietnam War. However, her tenderness is an act, one intended to trick Sedaris into using an *s*, since he has taken to avoiding such words. "I'm thorry," he says, and she immediately looks up and laughs, telling him he has a lot of work ahead of him.

Mr. Mancini – Mr. Mancini is Sedaris's guitar teacher, whom Lou Sedaris forces his son to see after deciding that his children should form a family band. Sedaris uses the derogatory term "midget" to refer to Mr. Mancini, who is a little person. Mr. Mancini dresses sharply and speaks about the guitar in sexual terms, instructing Sedaris to treat his instrument as if it's a woman he's making love to. This makes Sedaris deeply uncomfortable, but Mr. Mancini doesn't seem to notice. After seeing Mr. Mancini at the mall one day and watching as a group of teenagers make fun of him because of his height, Sedaris decides to open up to him, feeling an unspoken connection with the man and hoping that he will finally be able to show him what he's actually interested in—namely, the idea of becoming a singer who sings commercial jingles in the style of Billie Holiday. When he shows Mr. Mancini his routine, though, Mr. Mancini tells him that he doesn't "swing that way," thinking that Sedaris is coming on to him. This is so uncomfortable and discouraging that Sedaris later tells his father that Mr. Mancini said he has the wrong kind of fingers to play guitar, enabling him to quit once and for all.

The Rooster (Paul Sedaris) – Paul Sedaris is Sedaris's youngest sibling. By the time of his birth, most of the Sedaris siblings have already made it clear that they aren't going to live up to their father's dreams for them. For this reason, Paul becomes Lou's final hope. Lou does all he can to get Paul to become an Ivy League student and a star athlete, but it becomes clear early on that none of this will happen. In fact, Paul—who refers to himself as The Rooster—breaks all of his parents' rules. His father never curses, but The Rooster calls everyone (including Lou) "bitch" and "motherfucker." What's more, The Rooster smokes marijuana in the living room even though Sedaris and his siblings weren't allowed to smoke marijuana *anywhere*. When he graduates from high school, The Rooster attends a technical school, but he drops out in the first semester to work for a landscaping company. Despite their differences, though, The Rooster and Lou Sedaris have an incredibly close relationship. This is largely because Lou appreciates The Rooster's directness, even if The Rooster says things Lou himself would never say. Furthermore, The Rooster is the only Sedaris sibling who lives near home, meaning that he's the one who—after their mother dies—looks after Lou. A kind soul, he makes sure that his father knows he's there for him, even if he does so while calling him "bitch."

Valencia – Valencia is a wealthy woman from Colombia who lives in a beautiful townhouse in Manhattan. Sedaris is initially thrilled when he starts working as Valencia's personal assistant because this means he can spend several days a week in her home, thereby getting him that much closer to leading the life of a wealthy person in New York City. However, he quickly tires of his job because Valencia is extremely unreasonable. Although she's rich, she likes to act like she has very little money. This means that she frequently tries to haggle with people who obviously need money more than she does, a spectacle that never ceases to annoy Sedaris, who is himself underpaid. Valencia also owns a small publishing press, though she has only published a couple of books by former Beat poets nobody has heard of. One day, Valencia learns that a local pet shop has lost an exotic bird named Cheeky. The reward for finding Cheeky is $750, so Valencia tells Sedaris that they should find the bird and split the reward. She then points out the window and insists that Cheeky is outside on a nearby branch. When Sedaris looks, he sees nothing but a pigeon, but Valencia forces him to try to capture it. This happens several times, and Sedaris is demoralized by the idea of chasing pigeons. For this reason, he quits when he's offered a job at a moving company.

Hugh – Hugh is Sedaris's romantic partner. A good cook, he lives in an old chocolate factory that has been turned into an apartment. Hugh's father worked for the U.S. State Department, a job that required quite a bit of travel. Because of this, Hugh lived in multiple African countries as a child, an experience that makes Sedaris extremely jealous. Before they start dating, Sedaris goes to Hugh's apartment to borrow a ladder and sees that Hugh is in the middle of baking an apple pie and listening to country music. In the course of conversation, it comes up that Hugh owns a small country house in Normandy, France. Armed with this information, Sedaris decides to woo Hugh so he can enjoy Hugh's seemingly fantastic lifestyle. Needless to say, he does exactly this, moving in with him and accompanying him on his yearly trips to France. A smart but relatively reserved man, Hugh receives an incredibly high score on the IQ test that he and Sedaris take together—a fact that leaves Sedaris, who receives a very low score, feeling especially inadequate. To make him feel better, Hugh insists that Sedaris is good at a number of things. When asked to list a few examples, though, he can only come up with two: vacuum cleaning and naming stuffed animals.

Sedaris's Mother – Sedaris's mother is a heavy-drinking woman with a sense of humor that Sedaris himself seems to have inherited. This is evident when she attends a museum to see one of Sedaris's conceptual art pieces. Turning to the curator, she drunkenly tells a joke about the art, saying that she told a woman in the bathroom, "Honey, why flush it? Carry it into the next room and they'll put it on a goddamn pedestal." Although many of the essays in *Me Talk Pretty One Day* mention Sedaris's mother, very few of them reveal any details about her, instead simply noting her presence. All readers know is that she has a sense of humor, drinks heavily, and dies at some point when Sedaris is a young man, thereby leaving Lou Sedaris on his own.

Gretchen Sedaris – Gretchen Sedaris is David Sedaris's younger sister. A talented artist, she receives fantastic amounts of praise from her teachers. In response, both of her parents want to take credit for her skill. Lou even sets up a small painting studio in the basement and proves his own abilities. Envious of the attention Gretchen gets from her art, Sedaris tries to posture as an artist, eventually deciding to major in art in college. By the time Sedaris gives up and drops out of art school, Gretchen is on her way to the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design.

Lisa Sedaris – Lisa Sedaris is one of David Sedaris's sisters. When Lou takes Sedaris, Lisa, and Gretchen to see Dave Brubeck play jazz, he decides that the three siblings should form a family band. Lisa is assigned the flute even though she has no interest in learning to play. She later comes up with an excuse to stop going to her music lessons after Sedaris tells his father that his own teacher said he had the wrong kind of fingers to be a musician.

Patrick – Patrick is the boss of the moving company Sedaris works for after quitting his job as Valencia's personal assistant. Although Patrick is in charge, he doesn't like to be referred to as the boss because he is a communist. A deeply principled man, he drives his movers around in a bread truck and sometimes turns away business if he thinks a person is too rich. Despite this eccentricity, Sedaris enjoys working for Patrick, finding it satisfying to go through the city and help New Yorkers move.

Richie – Richie is one of the professional movers who works for Patrick. Sedaris learns that Richie is a murderer who spent time in prison as a teenager because he killed his sister's boyfriend. When he talks about this, he doesn't express remorse. In fact, he doesn't even say that he'll never kill anyone again, claiming that this is too great a promise to make. Sedaris, for his part, enjoys listening to Richie's stories and is impressed by the man's ability to offer good interior decorating tips to the people they help move.

Alisha – Alisha is Sedaris's friend from North Carolina who visits him in New York City several times every year. An easy houseguest, Alisha is perfectly content to do whatever Sedaris wants. This pleases him because he hates going to tourist attractions—something he's forced to do when Alisha decides to bring a woman named Bonnie with her on one of her visits. Alisha doesn't know Bonnie very well but thinks she's nice, though she eventually learns that this isn't the case when Bonnie reveals her domineering side by forcing her and Sedaris to go to New York's busiest tourist attractions.

Bonnie – When she accompanies Sedaris's friend Alisha to New York City, Bonnie annoys Sedaris by insisting that he show her all of the city's busiest tourist attractions. As someone who has never left North Carolina, Bonnie is a highly suspicious traveler, constantly accusing people of charging her too much or trying to take advantage of her because she's from out of town. When she decides to go to tea at the Plaza Hotel, Sedaris suggests that she wear formal clothes, but she refuses to do this. This secretly pleases Sedaris because he's certain the staff at the Plaza will admonish Bonnie for underdressing. Much to his surprise, though, he discovers that Bonnie fits right in at the Plaza Hotel, joining a swarm of tourists who have foregone any kind of dress code. Following Bonnie throughout the city in this manner, Sedaris begins to realize that he doesn't actually know New York as well as he previously thought.

Sedaris's French Teacher – Sedaris's French teacher is a harsh young French woman who takes any opportunity to disparage her students. She is especially hostile to Sedaris, telling him point-blank in English that she hates him. Later, she tells him in French that every moment she spends with him makes her feel like she's having a caesarean section, and though this is highly insulting, Sedaris is overjoyed because he fully understood what she said—a sign that his French is improving despite his teacher's cruel methods.

Martin – Martin is an American man Sedaris encounters on the metro in Paris. Turning to Carol—the woman with whom he's traveling—Martin speaks loudly about Sedaris, saying that he smells awful and that this is characteristic of French people. Martin then insists that Sedaris is a pickpocket and that he wants to steal Carol's wallet. Sedaris knows that Martin says these things under the assumption that Sedaris can't understand English, and this arrogance makes Sedaris feel as if he has permission to hate Martin. However, he also realizes that his disdain for Martin and Carol is somewhat pretentious, but this realization only makes Sedaris hate them all the more. In the grand scheme of things, Sedaris uses both Martin and Carol as representations of the kind of American arrogance and ignorance from which he hopes to distance himself by living in Paris.

Carol – Carol is an American woman Sedaris encounters on the metro in Paris. Carol listens intently as Martin—her travel partner—speaks loudly and disparagingly about Sedaris, operating under the assumption that Sedaris is French. When Martin says that Sedaris is a pickpocket who wants to steal her wallet, Carol is deeply troubled, fully believing him. It never occurs to Carol or Martin that Sedaris might not be a pickpocket or, for that matter, that he might not be French. Accordingly, Sedaris frames them as perfect representations of American arrogance and ignorance.

Reggie – Reggie is a man who works with Sedaris at a cleaning company. Proud of his intelligence, Reggie frequently boasts that he has an IQ of 130 and that, because of this, he deserves to have a better job. He also suggests that Sedaris is unintelligent and that he'll never be good at doing anything but sweeping. Years later, Sedaris thinks of Reggie when he decides to take an IQ test and ends up receiving a painfully low score.

Maja – Maja is one of Sedaris's friends who lives in Paris. When Lou comes to visit, she goes to dinner with Sedaris and his father and is confused when Lou tells a story about accidentally eating a piece of his own hat. Her shock reminds Sedaris not only that his father often behaves quite strangely, but that he (Sedaris) has become so used to this behavior that he hardly notices it.

Jodie Foster – Jodie Foster is a famous American actor. When Sedaris's Parisian hairdresser finds a picture of Jodie Foster walking her dog, he doesn't know why she's holding a plastic bag. Hoping Sedaris can shed light on this, he shows him the picture, and Sedaris explains that Jodie Foster is carrying a bag of dog poop—something that confounds and disgusts the hairdresser. Sedaris, for his part, suddenly feels patriotic, feeling more connected to his home country than ever.

Cheeky – Cheeky is an exotic bird that escapes from a Manhattan pet shop. The reward for Cheeky's return is $750, so Valencia tells Sedaris that they should find the bird and split the reward. She then instructs Sedaris to chase after several pigeons that land on a nearby tree branch, frustrating him so much that he eventually takes a new job as a professional mover.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ivan – Ivan works as a professional mover with Sedaris. A Russian immigrant who takes medication for schizophrenia, he—like Richie—has an uncanny ability to help movers make decisions about where they should place their furniture in their new apartments.

Lyle – A folksinger who lives in Queens, Lyle works as a professional mover with Sedaris.

Dave Brubeck – Dave Brubeck was a famous American jazz pianist. A jazz enthusiast, Lou Sedaris takes Sedaris, Lisa, and Gretchen to see Brubeck perform in North Carolina—an experience that inspires him to force his children to learn instruments so they can form a family band.

Billie Holiday – Billie Holiday was a famous American jazz vocalist. Sedaris admires her voice and dreams of one day singing commercial jingles in her style. This is Sedaris's only musical aspiration, but his father forces him to take guitar lessons with a man named Mr. Mancini instead.

Mädchen I – Mädchen is the name of a German Shepard that the Sedarises own while living in Raleigh, North Carolina. When Mädchen dies and Lou Sedaris brings home a new German Shepard, they start referring to the first dog as Mädchen I, since they name the second dog Mädchen II.

Mädchen II – Mädchen II is the name of the second German Shepard that the Sedarises own while living in Raleigh, North Carolina. Whenever Mädchen II does something bad, the Sedarises chastise her by saying that Mädchen I would never have done such a thing.

Melina – Melina is the Great Dane that Sedaris's parents own after their children have moved out. A large dog, Melina is Lou Sedaris's pride and joy—a fact that sometimes disconcerts Sedaris, who suspects that his parents care more about Melina than about him.

Neil – Neil is the female cat Sedaris owns while living in Chicago.

Sophie – Sophie is the Great Dane that Lou Sedaris brings home to replace Melina after Melina dies. Although Lou loved Melina, he is exhausted by Sophie and quickly realizes that he made a mistake by getting a new dog right after Melina's death.

Amy Sedaris David's sister. Amy is beloved by Lou in part because she is beautiful, but Amy herself is uninterested in such things. She is quick-witted and a prankster, and she often introduces David to new things or new ways of encountering the world.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

IDENTITY AND INSECURITY

The essays collected in David Sedaris's *Me Talk Pretty One Day* cover a wide range of topics, but nearly all of them revolve around the way Sedaris thinks about his own identity. With this in mind, he interrogates his sexual orientation and the many efforts he makes to cultivate an interesting and alluring personality, whether this means becoming a conceptual artist or trying to blend into life in Paris as an American who can barely speak French. What's most noteworthy about his preoccupation with his own identity, though, is that it largely centers around his obsession with how *others* perceive him, not necessarily on how he feels about himself. Accordingly, many of the essays in *Me Talk Pretty One Day* are fueled by a sense of insecurity, as Sedaris strives to embody a certain identity instead of embracing the one he already has. And yet, the essays themselves are also unapologetic in their rendering of Sedaris's singular personality, ultimately suggesting that his preoccupation with how he presents himself is, in fact, an integral part of who he is. By spotlighting his self-consciousness in such a confident way, then, Sedaris suggests that experiencing insecurity is simply part of what it means to be human.

Sedaris's attempt to come to terms with how his identity fits into the world at large emerges in the book's first essay, "Go Carolina," in which a speech therapist removes him from his fifth-grade class to work with him on getting over his lisp. Each Thursday, he must get up in the middle of class and go to Miss Sampson's office to practice the proper pronunciation of the letter *s*. This, he feels, calls attention to him, and he becomes embarrassed by the fact that he is one of only a few students in school who are forced to work with Miss Sampson. To make matters worse, he doesn't want to identify with the other boys who need speech therapy, since none of them are popular. Nevertheless, there's nothing he can do to avoid this association. In retrospect, he jokes that the teachers might as well have called him and the other students with lisps the "future homosexuals of America," going on to suggest that their lisps "betrayed" their efforts to fit into the heteronormative world of North Carolina in the 1960s. In this moment, Sedaris implies that he's mortified he might not be able to hide his sexual identity as a young gay man, thereby revealing his insecurity about who he is and how others might perceive him in light of this.

Of course, it's reductive to draw conclusions about sexual orientation based on stereotypes about how people speak. However, Sedaris's discomfort about working with Miss Sampson says something about his desire to be the one to control how he presents himself to the world. This desire is especially apparent in "Twelve Moments in the Life of the Artist," in which Sedaris decides as a young man that he must be an artist, despite his evident lack of talent. His eventual decision to adopt an identity as an avant-garde artist signals just how far he's willing to go in order to have control over his public image. After dropping out of two art programs, he makes friends with a number of conceptual artists and starts taking meth with them. The first time he takes speed, he knows immediately that he has found his favorite drug, since speed "eliminates all doubt," allowing him to stop asking questions like, "Am I smart enough?" and, "Will people like me?" That Sedaris is so eager to silence these questions in the first place is worth noting, since it indicates just how much he cares about how others view him. To that end, his fear of being seen as inferior or unextraordinary has led him to seek out ways of eliminating his self-consciousness. Along with taking drugs, one way to do this—it seems—is by adopting a rather extreme personality as an artist who creates pieces that are too strange and obtuse for most people to grasp. This, in turn, is a way of feeling superior to the average person and ignoring his insecurities, though he later realizes in a sober moment that the identity he has adopted as a misunderstood artist is rather meaningless and unrewarding.

As Sedaris gets older, he doesn't feel the need to go to such extreme lengths to hide his insecurities or micromanage his

public image. However, this is not to say that he manages to leave behind his feelings of inferiority. In fact, he appears to *embrace* his insecurities, as evidenced by the mere existence of *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, a book that puts self-consciousness on full display. For instance, Sedaris doesn't shy away from writing multiple essays about his lacking French skills when he moves to Paris. Instead of trying to take attention away from his linguistic challenges, he examines them in great detail in essay after essay. What's more, he responds similarly to the experience of taking an IQ test. After a lifetime of secretly hoping he might be a genius, he receives an embarrassingly low score. And although he laments this outcome, the very process of lamenting—the process of writing it as a personal essay—suggests that he has learned how to unabashedly accept his shortcomings. In this sense, these revelatory and confessional essays are themselves testaments to Sedaris's ability to come to terms with the person he is without taking drastic measures to hide his true identity. As a result, he frames such identity-related insecurities as not only natural, but also unavoidable and—in the end—worth laughing about.

HUMOR, COMMENTARY, AND OBSERVATION

David Sedaris's *Me Talk Pretty One Day* is a collection of anecdotal essays, most of which have the same simple goal: to provide humorous commentary about everyday life and human behavior. Whether Sedaris is writing about an awkward situation at a party or the distorted perceptions people have about other cultures, his attention to life's details renders him uniquely capable of taking something familiar and helping readers see it anew. Most often, he does this by unveiling the various absurdities that people tend to overlook in their daily lives, making even the most ordinary occurrence suddenly seem ridiculous and illogical. This, in turn, encourages readers to second-guess or reevaluate things they might otherwise take for granted. As a result, these essays reorient readers in their own perspectives, and though the vast majority of the pieces lack any kind of overarching moral, the very absence of greater meaning suggests that life is worth examining regardless of the circumstances—even if just to laugh about these circumstances.

From a craft perspective, the vast majority of the essays in *Me Talk Pretty One Day* culminate in something like a punchline. These concluding lines often undercut the message Sedaris has built throughout the essay, contradicting any resolution he may have made in the preceding pages. A perfect example of this formula is the way Sedaris structures "Big Boy," an essay in which he recounts visiting the bathroom while attending an **Easter** dinner at a friend's house. He announces to his friends that he has to use the restroom, intending to pee and quickly return. When he enters the bathroom, though, he finds an enormous poop in the toilet. Appalled that somebody would leave this, he tries to flush it, but it won't go down. Trying again and again, he begins to panic, realizing that he's been in the bathroom for quite some time. He frets that, if he's unable to flush, the others will think *he's* the one responsible for what's in the toilet—a thought that mortifies him. Eventually, though, he manages to flush it down, and as he washes his hands, he wonders if there's a lesson to be learned here about humility or vanity, thinking that he shouldn't care so much if others think he left the poop in the toilet. With this in mind, he ends the essay with the following line: "I resolved to put it all behind me, and then I stepped outside to begin examining the suspects." The final part of this sentence contradicts Sedaris's newfound resolution to put this experience behind him. Instead of learning a lesson about humility—instead of accepting without embarrassment that everyone defecates—he focuses on guessing who left the poop in the toilet. In doing so, he humorously casts aside any moral to be taken from the story, leaving readers with an anecdote that uses comedy to call attention to the fact that the calculations people make in social settings are not only frequently absurd, but also hard to ignore—as evidenced by his inability to simply move on from this awkward moment.

Inviting readers to reexamine the things they've most likely taken for granted, Sedaris extends his humorous commentary to cover (and interrogate) broader societal topics. To that end, essays like "Jesus Shaves" explore cultural differences and, more specifically, how things that seem completely normal to certain people might seem utterly bizarre to others. "Jesus Shaves" outlines an experience Sedaris has while taking a French class in Paris. In a conversational exercise, the topic of Easter comes up, and one of the students notes that she doesn't know what Easter is. The class is comprised of students from all over the world, and this particular woman hails from a Muslim-majority country that doesn't celebrate Easter. In response to her question, many students start describing Easter. When one person says, "One too may eat of the chocolate," the teacher asks who, exactly, brings the chocolate. Chiming in, Sedaris says, "The rabbit of Easter. He bring of the chocolate." He's certain he has answered correctly, but his teacher looks at him incredulously, saying, "A rabbit?" Going on, she explains that in France, a flying bell swoops into the country from Rome to deliver chocolate on Easter. This befuddles Sedaris, who asks how the bell could possibly know where everyone lives—a question that the teacher turns around on him, asking how a rabbit would know this. He concedes that this is a fair point, but he also notes that at least rabbits have *eyes*. This is the kind of joke—and overall interaction—that characterizes Sedaris's attention to the many oddities humans are capable of ignoring once they get used to a certain idea. By interrogating these customs, he effectively destabilizes them in a way that allows readers to reconsider things they might otherwise take for granted.

Never one to overlook even the smallest detail of daily life, Sedaris calls on ordinary experiences in order to construct amusing, anecdotal essays, and if it ever seems in *Me Talk Pretty One Day* that an essay doesn't have a *point* in the traditional sense, that's most likely because it doesn't—Sedaris isn't interested in sculpting arguments, he's interested in portraying life as it is and, moreover, making observations that most people overlook. In this way, his commentary urges readers to more closely examine their lives while also appreciating the humor and absurdity that comes along with seemingly normal human behavior.

CLASS AND BELONGING

In *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, David Sedaris reckons with class and status, often trying to figure out how he fits into society at large. This is especially apparent in his youth and young adulthood, when class disparities feel particularly glaring because he is still in the process of establishing himself both financially and, to a certain extent, culturally. During his first few years living in New York City, for example, he acutely feels the distance between his working-class lifestyle and the wealthy, privileged existence he yearns for. However, as he grows older, his class-consciousness begins to give way to something more meaningful—namely, the desire to find a place where he can enjoy a sense of belonging. In other words, he gradually learns that, though it would perhaps be nice to have lots of money, what matters most to him is leading a life that gives him a feeling of acceptance. In turn, Sedaris's examination of wealth and class in *Me Talk Pretty One Day* leads to a message about the importance of finding a sense of belonging, regardless of socioeconomic factors.

Relatively early in *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, it becomes clear that Sedaris was raised in the midst of a certain kind of class-consciousness. When his family moves from New York to North Carolina, his parents go out of their way to keep him and his siblings from identifying with what they see as North Carolina's "backward way of life." This underscores their classist outlook on southern culture and, more generally, on working-class communities. Telling their children not to say things like "y'all" or "ma'am," they go to great lengths to prevent Sedaris and his siblings from using the regional way of speaking. "We might not have been the wealthiest people in town, but at least we weren't one of *them*," Sedaris writes, outlining his parents' belief that southerners who speak a certain way are worth less respect. From an early age, then, Sedaris learns to divide the world up into factions, breaking people up into categories according their socioeconomic standing.

This preoccupation with class and status later brings itself to bear on Sedaris's life when he moves to New York City as a young adult. Instead of feeling like one of the wealthier members of his surrounding community, he can't deny the fact that there are people in the city who are exorbitantly rich. He, on the other hand, is a young man with hardly any money to his name, despite the fact that he comes from a financially comfortable family. Lacking money in the city makes him feel a "constant, needling sense of failure," since he is "regularly confronted by people who [have] not only more but much, much more" than him. While taking walks in the evenings, he likes to look into the windows of beautiful townhouses and wonder what it would be like to live in such luxury. As luck would have it, he gets to experience this wealth vicariously when a rich woman named Valencia hires him to be her personal assistant, allowing him to spend several days a week in her enviable townhouse. Unfortunately for him, though, this experience is quite unpleasant, largely because Valencia likes to pretend that she's struggling financially even when it's obvious that she's rich. According to Sedaris, Valencia must have gotten the idea that "broke people" have better lives than anyone else, since she seems to believe that people without money are "nobler or more intelligent" than rich people. With this in mind, she haggles for money, underpays Sedaris, and generally romanticizes the idea of poverty. In turn, it becomes clear that people tend to want whatever they don't have—even if that means idealizing financial insecurity.

Eventually, Sedaris begins to prioritize happiness over status and wealth. For instance, rather than continuing to work for Valencia so he can indirectly experience a wealthy lifestyle, he decides to work with a group of kindhearted professional movers. These men have very little money and most likely come from socioeconomic backgrounds that Sedaris's parents would frown upon, but he realizes that he'd rather be with people who accept him and treat him nicely than spend his life around insensitive people like Valencia. "My place was not with Valencia but here, riding in a bread truck with my friends," he writes, ultimately prioritizing a sense of belonging and acceptance over wealth and the dream of upward mobility. As he gets older, he gradually abandons his focus on wealth, moving to Paris and finding pleasure not in an extravagant lifestyle, but in the slow project of learning the French language—or, in other words, learning how to fit into a social environment he finds himself drawn to. As a result, readers see that money and wealth are faulty indicators of happiness and that contentment often has little to do with a person's ability to climb a financial or social ladder.

FAMILY, LOVE, AND SUPPORT

One thread that connects many of the essays in David Sedaris's *Me Talk Pretty One Day* is his attention to the ways in which family members and loved ones interact. Moreover, Sedaris looks at how exhausting and emotionally draining it can be to put up with a loved one's eccentricities. This dynamic is especially on display in *Me Talk Pretty One Day* because everybody in Sedaris's family—including Sedaris himself—seems to have so many

eccentricities to begin with. More than anyone else, though, his father gets swept up in his own farfetched ideas and idiosyncratic beliefs, subjecting his children to his intense fascinations and expecting them to share his whims, many of which fail to interest Sedaris and his siblings in the slightest. And though they often get fed up with him and hope that he'll simply leave them alone, it's rather obvious (both to them and to readers) that his tiresome and quirky behavior is, above all, a manifestation of how much he loves his family and wants to support his children. Of course, the ways that he tries to support them are narrowly confined to his own beliefs about what would be best for them, but readers get the sense that Sedaris and his siblings put up with this because they know he only wants to help them. In turn, Sedaris paints an endearing yet somewhat unconventional portrait of what it means to care for somebody, essentially implying that loving people sometimes means knowing how to put up with them.

Part of Sedaris's exploration of familial relationships indicates that a sense of obligation often arises when well-intentioned family members go to great lengths to do something for their loved ones. This dynamic is apparent in "Giant Dreams, Midget Abilities," in which Sedaris's father gets so swept up in the idea of getting his children to create a family band that he completely ignores the fact that none of them actually wants to learn how to play an instrument. Inspired after seeing a concert by the jazz pianist Dave Brubeck, Sedaris's father signs Sedaris, Gretchen, and Lisa up for music lessons despite their protests. Swallowing his resentment, then, Sedaris starts taking guitar lessons out of a sense of obligation to his father, though he rarely practices because he has no interest in learning to play the guitar. Similarly, his two sisters don't take to their instruments, but this doesn't deter their father, who is thrilled by the idea that his children are taking music lessons. As the three siblings clang out terrible musical phrases, their mother tries to drown them out by turning up the radio, but their father is overjoyed, saying, "A house full of music! Man, this is beautiful." Considering this, Sedaris notes that nobody could ever call his father "unsupportive," even if "his enthusiasm border[s] on mania." By acknowledging his father's support even though it irks him, Sedaris recognizes that his father is only trying to contribute to his overall happiness. The only problem, of course, is that his father focuses on what would make *him* happy, not what would make his children happy.

The flipside of this dynamic is that, despite his burning desire to push his children toward the things he himself values, Sedaris's father is capable of loving them even when they ignore his overbearing attempts to influence their lives. Sedaris outlines this in "You Can't Kill The Rooster," describing the odd but touching relationship that his father has with Sedaris's youngest sibling, who calls himself The Rooster. The Rooster is significantly younger than the other Sedaris children, and because the other siblings haven't completely met their father's expectations, he becomes their father's "last hope." This means that his father counts on him to turn into the kind of man he hoped Sedaris might become, but The Rooster does the complete opposite. Instead of speaking in what his father would see as a cultured manner, he swears constantly, calling everyone—including his father—"bitch" and "motherfucker." He also frequently smokes marijuana in the living room, and instead of going to an Ivy League school as his father hoped, he drops out of a technical school and starts working as a landscaper. And yet, his failure to live up to his father's expectations does nothing to interfere with their extremely close relationship. Indeed, Sedaris's father and The Rooster have a touching bond, and his father never fails to find positive things to say about his youngest child, regardless of the fact that The Rooster is the complete opposite of what he has always hoped for in a son. In the same way that Sedaris has learned to live with (and even tentatively appreciate) his father's overbearing nature, then, his father has learned to love The Rooster for who he is—not who he (Sedaris's father) wants him to be.

All in all, Sedaris's portrayal of close relationships encompasses the idea that supporting loved ones doesn't necessarily require doing much more than simply loving them in spite of their shortcomings. This sentiment surfaces throughout *Me Talk Pretty One Day* and applies to Sedaris's relationship with his partner, Hugh, as much as it applies to his relationship with his father. In turn, readers see that love often functions in unglamorous but fairly pragmatic ways, as Sedaris demonstrates that successful close relationships are sometimes founded on little more than the ability to tolerate or overlook otherwise frustrating traits.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

EASTER

When Sedaris discovers that French people have different Easter traditions than Americans do, Easter becomes a representation of the ways in which cultures vary from each other even when they seem fairly similar. When one of Sedaris's foreign classmates asks the class to tell her about Easter, Sedaris explains that the Easter Bunny delivers chocolate to children. Hearing this, his French teacher corrects him, saying that the French version of the story is that a bell flies in from Rome to deliver the chocolate. This makes little sense to Sedaris, who asks how a bell could possibly know where to take the chocolate. However, his teacher turns this question back on him, asking how a rabbit would do this. In turn, Sedaris recognizes that French culture is even more

foreign to him than he originally thought. What's more, he's also forced to more closely consider his own culture. As a result, Easter becomes a catalyst for him to reexamine the things he takes for granted about his home country, ultimately demonstrating how necessary it is for people to remain open-minded.

SEDARIS'S WALKMAN

While living in Paris, Sedaris listens to his Walkman so much that it begins to signify his hesitancy to fully immerse himself in French culture. Walking through the city, he listens to audiobooks, including a book intended for English-speaking doctors trying to learn French medical phrases. It's not hard to see that this information will not prove useful, since Sedaris isn't a doctor. Nonetheless, he practices phrases like, "We need to start an IV. [...] But first could I trouble you for a stool sample?" While saying these things, he imagines himself at fancy Parisian parties, envisioning turning to a beautiful host and delivering these strange medical phrases. Despite this unrealistic fantasy, he recognizes that listening to his Walkman amounts to little more than avoidance, as he puts off dealing with the insecurity he feels surrounding the idea of moving through life in Paris without the protective shield of his Walkman. In this way, the Walkman symbolizes the barriers people build to keep the world at bay, especially when they find themselves in uncomfortable or nerve-wracking environments.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Back Bay Books edition of *Me Talk Pretty One Day* published in 2001.

Go Carolina Quotes

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.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Miss Samson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sedaris has just been taken out of class by a woman named Miss Samson. He doesn't yet know that she is a speech therapist who has been assigned to work with him to eliminate his lisp. Consequently, he worries that he's in trouble, frantically trying to guess why he has been singled out. Needless to say, his list of potential "crimes" provides some early insight into the nature of Sedaris's humor, highlighting his ability to laugh at himself, his own anxieties, and his somewhat deviant nature. Moreover, though, the fact that he never even stops to consider the possibility that he's "innocent" underscores an important thing about the way he moves through the world. Although it's true that some of his behavior is less than perfect, none of his "crimes" are all that serious, especially for a child his age. Nonetheless, he assumes that he is in trouble, as if he secretly believes he deserves punishment. In turn, readers see that Sedaris is the kind of person who frequently second-guesses himself, constantly afraid of doing something to upset others—a dynamic that will arise time and again throughout *Me Talk Pretty One Day*.

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!"

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Miss Samson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

David Sedaris grew up in the heteronormative, often narrowminded world of the South in the 1960s. In this environment, everyone assumes that young boys love football or basketball. In fact, this is such a commonly-held, deeply-rooted assumption that Sedaris has learned to how to adjust accordingly, having discovered that it's all but unacceptable for a boy to admit that he's uninterested in sports. When someone asks if he's rooting for Carolina or State, he knows that they're referring to the area's two

football teams, but this is as far as his knowledge takes him. After all, he doesn't *care* about these teams, let alone know anything about them. Unfortunately for him, though, he doesn't exist in an environment in which he could simply be honest about his lack of interest in sports. With this in mind, he tries to appeal to whoever asks him the question in the first place, hoping to endear himself to his conversational partners. In doing so, he learns how to manipulate conversations to avoid uncomfortable interactions. Sadly, though, he also learns how to hide his insecurities—something that, in the grand scheme of things, is quite sad.

"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?

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Miss Samson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Sedaris refers to Miss Samson as "Agent Samson" because of the way she originally took him out of class, acting like a special agent arresting a criminal in an action movie. As he works with her, he thinks about what other people might think about him and his fellow lispers. According to Sedaris, Miss Samson and her fellow teachers have called attention not just to his lisp, but to the fact that he is gay. This, he suggests, is something he and the other boys who lisp have tried hard to hide, but Miss Samson has ruined their ability to do this. By saying this, he demonstrates his desire to keep his true identity from his peers, teachers, and family members. This suggests that his immediate environment isn't one in which he feels comfortable revealing his sexual orientation, even if his teachers are apparently capable of singling him out as gay—this, at least, is what Sedaris seems to think; whether or not this is actually this case is questionable, but what matters is that Sedaris feels exposed by his lisp and by the fact that he has to work with Miss Samson. This, in turn, makes him feel even more self-conscious and insecure than he already was as a closeted gay person in the unaccepting world of the South during the 1960s.

Giant Dreams, Midget Abilities Quotes

"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."

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Lou Sedaris (Sedaris's Father), Mr. Mancini

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange takes place between Sedaris and his teacher, Mr. Mancini, during his first guitar lesson. Much to Sedaris's chagrin, Mr. Mancini talks about the guitar in sexual terms, urging Sedaris to name his instrument. Hoping to avoid the sexual undertones of his teacher's suggestion, Sedaris decides to name his guitar after his hamster, Oliver, but Mr. Mancini finds this unacceptable—a sign that Mr. Mancini holds the assumption that all young men are attracted to women. To that end, Mr. Mancini explicitly says that Sedaris has to name his guitar "after a girl, not a guy." Once again, Sedaris is put in a position where has to hide his sexual orientation in order to win the approval of those around him. Accordingly, he agrees to call his guitar by a girl's name, choosing Joan and deciding to withhold the fact that this is his cousin's name. Like many of Sedaris's recollections of his

childhood, this moment is quite funny even if it's sad that he has to pretend to be somebody he's not. Struggling to describe Joan, he worries about having insulted Mr. Mancini by suggesting that being tall is a positive trait. That he self-consciously takes this back demonstrates that Sedaris is more sensitive to his teacher's feelings than Mr. Mancini is to his, going out of his way to make sure he doesn't insult an integral part of Mr. Mancini's identity (the fact that he's a little person) when Mr. Mancini himself made no effort whatsoever to do the same to Sedaris.

❝ You certainly couldn't accuse him of being unsupportive. His enthusiasm bordered on mania, yet still it failed to inspire us.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Lou Sedaris (Sedaris's Father)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of Lou Sedaris, who is so invested in supporting his children that he often fails to notice that they don't necessarily want the kind of support he offers them. More specifically, Sedaris reflects on his father's obsession with the idea of helping him and his siblings create a family band. Although this is a nice sentiment that underscores Lou's desire to give his children something meaningful and valuable (the gift of music), the problem with this form of fatherly support is that his children are completely uninterested in pursuing music Nonetheless, when Sedaris and his siblings loudly practice their instruments at the same time—creating a terrible array of sounds throughout the house—Lou is overjoyed. This is what Sedaris means when he says that his father's "enthusiasm border[s] on mania." No matter how clear it is that his children have no interest in playing music (nor talent), he retains his excitement. This is most likely because he isn't actually paying attention to what they want or feel. Instead, he focuses on the fact that his children are living out *his* fantasy. In turn, readers see that Lou Sedaris can be myopic in the way he supports his children, though this doesn't take away from the fact that he wants to make them happy in the first place, which is why nobody could ever "accuse him of being unsupportive."

❝ […] 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.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Mr. Mancini

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Sedaris has these thoughts after seeing Mr. Mancini at the mall one day. While eating in the food court, he spots his guitar teacher ordering food at a nearby counter, standing on his tiptoes to see over the edge. Sedaris then notices a group of teenaged boys laughing loudly at Mr. Mancini, making fun of his height in an extremely obvious way. Witnessing this suddenly helps Sedaris see his teacher differently. Rather than thinking of Mr. Mancini as somebody with whom he has nothing in common, Sedaris feels connected to the man. As a closeted teenager living in a heteronormative environment, Sedaris knows what it's like to have trouble fitting in. Furthermore, Sedaris feels that he understands what it's like to experience the unchecked cruelty of 12-year-old boys. Thinking this way, his entire way of viewing Mr. Mancini refigures itself, as Sedaris goes from feeling apathetically about his teacher to empathizing with him on a deep level. In keeping with this, readers see that Sedaris connects with people who know what it's like to face hardship.

❝ 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.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Billie Holiday, Mr. Mancini

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

After Sedaris sees a group of 12-year-old boys making fun of Mr. Mancini in the food court at the mall, he feels a sense of camaraderie with his teacher. This camaraderie is based on the fact that he feels sorry for Mr. Mancini and the way society at large discriminates against him—a feeling with which Sedaris is familiar as a gay adolescent living in a rather homophobic environment. Feeling connected to Mr. Mancini, Sedaris decides to be straightforward with him about the fact that he has no interest in learning the guitar. Instead, he tells Mr. Mancini, he wants to sing commercial jingles in the style of Billie Holiday. He then launches into a heartfelt song about bologna, and though he has practiced this routine a number of times in his bedroom, he soon sees why he has never dared to put himself out there in this way. Indeed, Mr. Mancini reacts quite negatively to Sedaris's routine, thinking that Sedaris is making a romantic pass at him. Worse, he calls Sedaris a "screwball," and though this word doesn't bear any implications about a person's sexual orientation, Sedaris understands all too well that Mr. Mancini is using it to refer to the fact that Sedaris is gay. In this moment, then, he learns that people who experience prejudice often still perpetuate bigotry.

Twelve Moments in the Life of the Artist Quotes

❝ Either one of these things is dangerous, but in combination they have the potential to destroy entire civilizations. The moment I took my first burning snootful, I understood that this was the drug for me. Speed eliminates all doubt. Am I smart enough? Will people like me? Do I really look all right in this plastic jumpsuit? These are questions for insecure potheads. A speed enthusiast knows that everything he says or does is brilliant.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

After Sedaris drops out of art school because of his lack of artistic talent, he moves to Raleigh, North Carolina and starts taking crystal meth and practicing conceptual art. This combination, he says, has the "potential to destroy entire civilizations." This is because meth is capable of silencing a person's reservations, effectively putting an end to any sense of insecurity. Of course, questions like "Am I smart enough" and "Will people like me" are exactly what drive Sedaris to drugs in the first place, since he's desperate to ignore his many insecurities. In a way, it makes sense that he would want to silence these worries, especially when it comes to art. After all, one of the first times he ever tried to express himself artistically, his guitar teacher called him a "screwball." Experiences like this have taught him to second guess himself and to be wary of ever trying to put himself out there in a creative, expressive way. And yet, he still wants to be seen as an artist, since this might help hide his other insecurities. Accordingly, drugs like meth help him stop thinking about his shortcomings, instead giving him a false sense of assurance that everything he does is "brilliant."

❝ Immediately following the performance a small crowd gathered around my father, congratulating him on his delivery and comic timing.

"Including your father was an excellent idea," the curator said, handing me my check "The piece really came together once you loosened up and started making fun of yourself."

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Lou Sedaris (Sedaris's Father)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

When Sedaris puts on a piece of performance art at a local museum, his father heckles him from the audience, making fun of the entire production. This infuriates Sedaris, but it adds a helpful bit of levity to the performance. In fact, Lou's sarcastic remarks actually make the piece noticeably better, which is why the curator at the museum commends Sedaris for including his father. Of course, this mortifies Sedaris, who is enraged at his father for making light of his art and, moreover, upset that everyone else seemed to like Lou's heckling better than the show itself. In other words, this chain of events challenges Sedaris's ego as a "brilliant" artist, an image he has been cultivating ever since he dropped out of college and decided to pursue conceptual art in the first place. Indeed, conceptual art has—until this moment—enabled him to act like a mysterious, tortured, and genius artist. Now, though, his father has forced him to make fun of himself, thereby undercutting is efforts to be taken seriously.

You Can't Kill the Rooster Quotes

❝ Our parents discouraged us from using the titles "ma'am" or "sir" when addressing a teacher or shopkeeper. Tobacco was acceptable in the form of a cigarette, but should any of us experiment with plug or snuff, we would automatically be disinherited. Mountain Dew was forbidden, and our speech was monitored for the slightest hint of a Raleigh accent. Use the word "y'all," and before you knew it, you'd find yourself in a haystack French-kissing an underage goat. […]

We might not have been the wealthiest people in town, but at least we weren't one of *them*.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Sedaris's Mother, Lou Sedaris (Sedaris's Father)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sedaris explains his parents' determination to keep their children from adopting a stereotypically southern way of speaking. Having moved to Raleigh, North Carolina from New York State, they have clear prejudices against the way southerners speak, forbidding Sedaris and his siblings from using words like "ma'am" or "ya'll." In fact, their bias against the southern lifestyle goes beyond a simple aversion to the regional dialect; in addition, Sedaris's parents don't want their children to adopt any kind of North Carolinian behaviors. This is because they have classist ideas about what is and is not respectable. According to them, it is unseemly to use chewing tobacco, just as it is classless (according to them) to drink sodas like Mountain Dew. This perspective suggests that the Sedarises see themselves as superior to their North Carolinian neighbors, a point Sedaris makes explicit when he notes, "We might not have been the wealthiest people in town, but at least we weren't one of *them*." According to this way of thinking, class isn't just about money, but about how people conduct themselves in public. This close attention to the way people behave is something Sedaris adopts and integrates into his adult life, and though he doesn't necessarily set forth the same kind of classism as his parents, he *is* unsparingly judgmental about the way people conduct themselves.

❝ There was no electricity for close to a week. The yard was practically cleared of trees, and rain fell through the dozens of holes punched into the roof. It was a difficult time, but the two of them stuck it out, my brother placing his small, scarred hand on my father's shoulder to say, "Bitch, I'm here to tell you that it's going to be all right. We'll get through this shit, motherfucker, just you wait."

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Sedaris's Mother, Lou Sedaris (Sedaris's Father), The Rooster (Paul Sedaris)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

In "You Can't Kill the Rooster," Sedaris contemplates the tender relationship between his father and his youngest sibling, Paul (who calls himself The Rooster). This relationship makes very little sense, considering that Lou Sedaris has different values than The Rooster, who swears at him and says things that Lou wouldn't even dream of saying. However, Sedaris implies that these differences don't matter when it comes to certain familial relationships. Rather than letting their differences drive them apart, Lou and The Rooster simply ignore the many ways in which their lives are opposite to one another. All that matters, it seems, is whether or not they support each other—and they do. Shortly after Sedaris's mother dies, a hurricane whips through Raleigh and damages portions of Lou's house. The Rooster is the only one of all the Sedaris siblings to check in on his father. Not only that, he goes out of his way to stay with Lou and to make sure his father knows that he's there for him no matter what. Although he communicates this message in a crass and rather hilarious manner, the fact remains that he has demonstrated his unequivocal support. And this, Sedaris intimates, is all that matters when it comes to being there for a loved one.

The Learning Curve Quotes

❝ I was given two weeks to prepare, a period I spent searching for a briefcase and standing before my full-length mirror, repeating the words "Hello, class, my name is Mr. Sedaris." Sometimes I'd give myself an aggressive voice and firm, athletic timbre. This was the masculine Mr. Sedaris, who wrote knowingly of flesh wounds and tractor pulls. Then there was the ragged bark of the newspaper editor, a tone that coupled wisdom with an unlimited capacity for cruelty. I tried sounding businesslike and world-weary, but when the day eventually came, my nerves kicked in and the true Mr. Sedaris revealed himself. In a voice reflecting doubt, fear, and an unmistakable desire to be loved, I sounded not like a thoughtful college professor but, rather, like a high-strung twelve-year-old girl; someone name Brittany.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

Sedaris reflects on his time as an adjunct writing instructor in this passage, allowing readers to observe his efforts to seem authoritative, qualified, and knowledgeable. Wanting to embody a certain professorial image, he focuses first on his visual presentation, obtaining a briefcase so he can properly play the part of a distinguished academic. He then practices introducing himself to the class, standing in front of a mirror so he can fine-tune the way he presents himself. As he tries out different voices, it becomes increasingly clear that the thing he's most worried about is how his students perceive him, not necessarily whether or not he's capable of teaching them anything. To that end, his method of preparing for class is rather superficial and hollow, since he doesn't spend any time actually putting together a lesson plan or thinking about the knowledge he wants to impart to his students. Instead, he worries about how his voice will sound, and it is this worry that comes through when he finally does address his class in a voice that isn't assured or professional, but hungry for approval. Of course, his voice most likely betrays his "doubt, fear, and [...] unmistakable desire to be loved" because he knows that he has very little to offer these students. Once again, then, he lets his insecurity get the best of him, allowing his fears of inadequacy to fuel his actions rather than simply accepting who he is and going from there.

❝ I jotted these names into my notebook alongside the word *Troublemaker*, and said I'd look into it. Because I was the writing teacher, it was automatically assumed that I had read every leather-bound volume in the Library of Classics. The truth was that I had read none of those books, nor did I intend to. I bluffed my way through most challenges with dim memories of the movie or miniseries based upon the book in question, but it was an exhausting exercise and eventually I learned it was easier to simply reply with a question, saying, "I know what Flaubert means to me, but what do you think of her?"

As Mr. Sedaris I lived in constant fear. There was the perfectly understandable fear of being exposed as a fraud, and then there was the deeper fear that my students might hate me.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

When Sedaris is hired to be an adjunct writing instructor, he has to contend with his abiding sense of inadequacy. This dynamic is exacerbated by the fact that he truly *isn't* qualified to teach writing, at least not at this point in his life (which is before he has published anything). Unsure of what to tell his students to do, he urges them to smoke while they complete various in-class writing assignments. Perhaps sensing his lack of direction or expertise, a student raises his hand and points out that authors like Jane Austen didn't need to smoke while they wrote. Sedaris pretends to have read the authors this student mentions. In reality, though, he has very little knowledge of the classic literary canon. Interestingly enough, he also has no intention of *learning* about these authors, instead relying on himself to get out of such situations by saying things like, "I know what Flaubert means to me, but what do you think of her?" (Gustave Flaubert, for what it's worth, was a man.) Saying this kind of thing helps him get out of awkward conversations, but it doesn't help him confront his deep-seated fear that he will be "exposed as a fraud." If he were really committed to avoiding this fear, he would actually commit himself to boning up on his literary knowledge. Instead, though, he decides to focus on his insecurities without actually doing anything about them, thereby allowing them to grow, which only makes them seem harder to address. In this way, readers see how insecurity can perpetuate itself and make a person feel helpless.

> "Who are *you*," she asked. "I mean, just who in the hell are you to tell *me* that *my* story has no ending?"

It was a worthwhile question that was bound to be raised sooner or later. I'd noticed that her story had ended in mid-sentence, but that aside, who was I to offer criticism to anyone, especially in regard to writing? I'd meant to give the issue some serious thought, but there had been shirts to iron and name tags to make and, between one thing and another, I managed to put it out of my mind.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

After handing back student essays one day, Sedaris is caught off-guard by a student who wants to know why he's qualified to critique her writing. This student is older than the others and, in fact, older than Sedaris himself by roughly 15 years. This only adds to his preexisting sense of insecurity and his fear that he doesn't actually deserve to have any kind of authority over his students. After reading this student's essay, he noted that it ends in the middle of a sentence. Of course, this is a perfectly reasonable thing to point out, but the student is incensed that he would deign to make such a remark. She's especially sensitive, Sedaris thinks, because the essay she wrote is about her messy and complicated divorce. Taking out her anger on Sedaris, she asks him the question he has feared ever since he started teaching: why is he qualified to "offer criticism to anyone"? This is a matter he has intended to address on his own time, wanting to plan out a response before it ever comes up in an actual conversation. Unfortunately for him, though, he focused on superficial things instead of thinking up an answer, leaving him completely unequipped to respond to this student's question. This exact situation is the kind of thing he has always dreaded, since it touches on his fear of failure and inferiority. What really makes this conversation difficult, though, is that he truly isn't qualified to be a teacher, meaning that he's not only unprepared to demonstrate his authority, but also unable to justify that authority in the first place.

Big Boy Quotes

> One more flush and it was all over. The thing was gone and out of my life. […] And I was left thinking that the person who'd abandoned the huge turd had no problem with it, so why did I? Why the big deal? Had it been left there to teach me a lesson? Had a lesson been learned? Did it have anything to do with Easter? I resolved to put it all behind me, and then I stepped outside to begin examining the suspects.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

While attending an Easter dinner at a friend's house, Sedaris excuses himself to use the bathroom. Once inside the bathroom, he finds a large turd in the toilet and is unable to flush it. Instantly, he begins to panic, fretting that his friends will think he's the one who clogged to toilet. This fear only increases as time passes. Eventually, though, he manages to resolve the situation, and it is only in this moment that he finds himself capable of coming to terms with the fact that clogging the toilet is something that might happen to anyone. Instead of pretending as if he doesn't defecate, he thinks, perhaps he should learn a lesson from this moment, one that would help him leave behind his insecurities and his self-consciousness. And yet, as soon as he leaves the bathroom, he sets himself to "examining the suspects," trying to figure out which of his friends left the stool in the toilet. In turn, readers see that Sedaris is much more interested in judging others than reforming the way he thinks about himself and his own self-image.

The Great Leap Forward Quotes

> In the evenings, lacking anything better to do, I used to head east and stare into the windows of the handsome, single-family town houses, wondering what went on in those well-appointed rooms. What would it be like to have not only your own apartment but an entire building in which you could do whatever you wanted? I'd watch a white-haired man slipping out of his back brace and ask myself what he'd done to deserve such a privileged life. Had I been able to swap places with him, I would have done so immediately.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Sedaris's

Mother, Lou Sedaris (Sedaris's Father)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Sedaris lives in New York City and fantasizes about leading a rich, rewarding life as a wealthy person in the most beautiful townhouses of Manhattan. This is nothing more than a fantasy, but it accentuates his desire for upward mobility, though what he's most interested in isn't making money but simply living a certain kind of lifestyle. In particular, he romanticizes the life of old men leading "privileged" lives, thinking that he would trade his youth for such an existence. This underscores the extent to which he wants to make a "great leap forward," as the essay's title indicates. This, perhaps, is fueled by the mentality with which he was raised, since his parents instilled in him a certain appreciation of wealth and elegance. Of course, Sedaris isn't necessarily classist like his parents (who think of themselves as better than their neighbors in North Carolina), but he clearly *does* hold the rich in high esteem, wanting nothing more than to be one of them.

❝ Somewhere along the way she'd got the idea that broke people led richer lives than everybody else, that they were nobler or more intelligent. In an effort to keep me noble, she was paying me less than she'd paid her previous assistant. Half my paychecks bounced, and she refused to reimburse me for my penalty charges, claiming that it was my bank's fault, not hers.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Valencia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of Valencia, the wealthy woman for whom Sedaris works as a personal assistant in Manhattan. Sedaris originally takes the job as Valencia's personal assistant because he wants to be in the general proximity of wealth, finding the idea of spending his days in Valencia's townhouse thrilling and, in that way, vaguely fulfilling. However, Valencia herself isn't quite as charming as her house, especially because she has a grating habit of pretending she's poor when it's quite obvious to anyone paying attention that she's exorbitantly rich. Nonetheless, she romanticizes the idea of being poor or working-class, thinking that people without money are "nobler or more intelligent" than wealthy people. Unfortunately, this means that she conducts herself as if she doesn't have money, paying Sedaris less than he should receive and even blaming him when his checks bounce. This suggests that, although she herself wants people to think she's poor, she doesn't care about people who are actually struggling to make money—in other words, she has no empathy for the very people she tries to emulate. Furthermore, the mere fact that she pretends to be "broke" indicates that people seldom want the lifestyle they already have; whereas Valencia wants to act like somebody in Sedaris's socioeconomic sphere, Sedaris wants nothing more than to embody the qualities of somebody from *her* sphere. In both cases, neither of them are content with the lives they're leading.

❝ Moving people from one place to another made me feel as though I performed a valuable service, recognized and appreciated by the city at large. In the grand scheme of things, I finally had a role to play. My place was not with Valencia but here, riding in a bread truck with my friends.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Richie, Ivan, Patrick, Valencia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

When Sedaris finally decides that putting up with Valencia's mistreatment is too much to bear, he takes a job as a professional mover. In this capacity, he rides around in Patrick's bread truck all day, going from apartment to apartment and meeting all kinds of people. To his surprise, he discovers that this work is deeply rewarding, something he actually enjoys doing. By contrast, working for Valencia did nothing but allow him to spend time in a townhouse—but being in a townhouse isn't the same as *living* in a townhouse, and the annoyances he had to put up with in order to keep his job as Valencia's personal assistant were constant reminders that he was not actually leading the life of a wealthy person. Instead of trying to pretend he's rich, then, he chooses to accept that he's a member of the working class. As soon as he makes this decision, he's able to actually enjoy himself, realizing that he can take a sense of

belonging from his experience with Patrick and the other movers. In keeping with this, readers see that it's often better to prioritize happiness and camaraderie over status and wealth.

City of Angels Quotes

I was mortified, but Bonnie was in a state of almost narcotic bliss, overjoyed to have discovered a New York without the New Yorkers. Here were out-of-town visitors from Omaha and Chattanooga, outraged over the price of their hot roasted chestnuts. [...] The crowd was relentlessly, pathologically friendly, and their enthusiasm was deafening. Looking around her, Bonnie saw a glittering paradise filled with decent, like-minded people, sent by God to give the world a howdy. Encircled by her army of angels, she drifted across the avenue to photograph a juggler, while I hobbled off toward home, a clear outsider in a city I'd foolishly thought to call my own.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Alisha, Bonnie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sedaris walks toward Rockefeller Center in New York City during Christmastime. He's doing this because his friend, Alisha, brought a woman named Bonnie with her on her visit to the city, and Bonnie loves tourist activities. This doesn't sit well with Sedaris who abhors going to tourist attractions in his own city, thinking that these are poor representations of what it's like to live in Manhattan. However, he's astounded to discover just how many people align with Bonnie instead of him, feeling as if he has nothing in common with the people who make up the "pathologically friendly" crowd moving toward the Rockefeller Christmas tree. Considering this, Sedaris writes in a disparaging, tongue-in-cheek manner, sarcastically suggesting that the people around him have been "sent by God to give the world a howdy." When he uses the word "howdy" to make fun of Bonnie and her fellow tourists, he calls upon the same form of classism his parents taught him when he was a child living in Raleigh, North Carolina, casting judgment on the use of colloquial terms in the same way his parents forbade him from ever using the word "y'all." No matter how much disdain he has for Bonnie and her seemingly uncultured ways, though, he can't escape the fact that he's vastly outnumbered in this moment—an indication that he doesn't know New York City quite as well as he thought and, moreover, that he has no more right than anyone else to identify with it.

A Shiner Like a Diamond Quotes

My father has always placed a great deal of importance on his daughters' physical beauty. It is, to him, their greatest asset, and he monitors their appearance with the intensity of a pimp. What can I say? He was born a long time ago and is convinced that marriage is a woman's only real shot at happiness.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Amy Sedaris, Lou Sedaris (Sedaris's Father)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

This is an explanation of the way Lou Sedaris approaches the topic of his daughters' physical attractiveness. A man with outdated ideas, he tends to objectify women by suggesting that beauty is his daughters' "greatest asset." Because of this belief, he "monitors their appearance" extremely closely, trying to ensure that they're making use of their "asset[s]" in the way he sees fit. Needless to say, this is an overbearing and unenlightened thing to do, especially since this mindset reduces women to their physique, disregarding everything else than makes them human. Furthermore, Lou's tendency to micromanage his daughters' physical appearances is yet another example of how he lets his own values and convictions overshadow all else, since he fails to take into consideration the possibility that his daughters don't care what he thinks about the way they look. Indeed, he subjects them to his scrutiny because he thinks this is the only way to make sure they'll have a "real shot at happiness," thereby implying not only that they have nothing of use other than their beauty, but also that they're incapable of putting this beauty to use without his help. Both of these beliefs are obviously misguided, but this doesn't stop Lou from continuing to put this kind of pressure on his daughters, since he believes that this is the only way they will find happiness. Once more, then, readers see that Lou's efforts to support his children are often relentless even if they're also misguided (and possibly harmful).

Me Talk Pretty One Day Quotes

❝ Before beginning school, there'd been no shutting me up, but now I was convinced that everything I said was wrong. [...]

My only comfort was the knowledge that I was not alone. Huddled in the hallways and making the most of our pathetic French, my fellow students and I engaged in the sort of conversation commonly overheard in refugee camps.

"Sometime me cry alone at night."

"That be common for I, also, but be more strong, you. Much work and someday you talk pretty. People start love you soon. Maybe tomorrow, okay."

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Sedaris's French Teacher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

After Sedaris moves to Paris, he enrolls in French classes to devote himself more seriously to learning the language. He does this because he wants to finally throw himself into French culture instead of simply getting by with his eccentric and limited French. And yet, the class has the opposite effect: he suddenly becomes self-conscious about his halting speech. This is largely because his French teacher is relentless and cruel, constantly making fun of him and his classmates when they make mistakes. It makes sense that this would have a negative impact on Sedaris's confidence, but an unexpectedly positive outcome develops in combination with his newfound self-consciousness—namely, a sense of camaraderie with his fellow students, who commiserate with one another outside the classroom. Hearing the others assure each other that they will "talk pretty" someday, Sedaris is buoyed by optimism and a feeling of support, even if his French teacher has otherwise dashed his confidence and made it more difficult to exist in Paris as an American. In this way, he transcends his feeling of being an outsider, finally eking out a sense of belonging in a city that otherwise seems impenetrably foreign.

Jesus Shaves Quotes

❝ In communicating any religious belief, the operative word is *faith*, a concept illustrated by our very presence in that classroom. Why bother struggling with the grammar lessons of a six-year-old if each of us didn't believe that, against all reason, we might eventually improve? If I could hope to one day carry on a fluent conversation, it was a relatively short leap to believing that a rabbit might visit my home in the middle of the night, leaving behind a handful of chocolate kisses and a carton of menthol cigarettes. So why stop there? If I could believe in myself, why not give other improbabilities the benefit of the doubt? I told myself that despite her past behavior, my teacher was a kind and loving person who had only my best interests at heart. I accepted the idea that an omniscient God had cast me in his own image and that he watched over me and guided me from one place to the next. The Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, and the countless miracles—my heart expanded to encompass all the wonders and possibilities of the universe.

A bell, though—that's fucked up.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Sedaris's French Teacher

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sedaris has just sat through a confusing conversation in his French class about Easter. He and his classmates have tried in vain to explain the tradition of Easter to a fellow student who is unfamiliar with the holiday because she doesn't come from a nation that observes Christian holidays. As they attempted to describe the tradition, though, it became clear that there are a number of different approaches to Easter throughout the world. In particular, Sedaris learns that French people don't believe in the Easter Bunny—instead, they believe that a flying bell swoops in from Rome to deliver chocolate. This discrepancy gives Sedaris pause, inspiring him to examine the nature of tradition and religious belief. Although he himself isn't religious, he realizes in this moment that he has a certain kind of faith, one that has led him to this very classroom. To that end, he has chosen to believe that he "might eventually improve" his French. This idea is so lofty, he implies, that he might as well believe "other improbabilities," like that his meanspirited French teacher actually cares about him or that God is "watch[ing] over" him. Thinking this way, Sedaris opens himself up to the many "wonders and possibilities of

the universe," letting himself let go of the skepticism and judgment to which he normally clings so tightly. However, this essay is no different than the others in *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, meaning that it prioritizes humor over substance. In keeping with this, Sedaris undercuts everything he has said about embracing faith by suggesting that it's "fucked up" for anyone to think that a bell could fly to France from Rome and deliver chocolate. When he says this, he demonstrates his characteristic irreverence, making it clear that he's most interested in highlighting the absurdities that people often overlook.

21 Down Quotes

I asked myself, *Who wants to be handcuffed and covered in human feces?* And then, without even opening my address book, I thought of three people right off the bat. This frightened me, but apparently it's my own private phobia. I found no listing for those who fear they know too many masochists. Neither did I find an entry for those who fear the terrible truth that their self-worth is based entirely on the completion of a daily crossword puzzle. Because I can't seem to find it anywhere, I'm guaranteed that such a word actually exists. It will undoubtedly pop up in some future puzzle, the clue being "You, honestly."

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

Demonstrating his classic fear of inadequacy, Sedaris obsesses over his crossword-puzzle abilities. After learning that his attractive ex-boyfriend (whom he always assumed was unintelligent) is able to complete the Friday crossword puzzle in *The New York Times* without much effort, Sedaris is devastated. Feeling inferior, he devotes himself to getting better at crossword puzzles. In his efforts to do this, he purchases a reference book, and it is in this book that he finds a list of phobias. Intrigued, he studies these phobias and discovers that some people are terrified of being beaten, tied up, locked in a dark space, and smeared in human feces. It strikes him as quite odd that this is considered a phobia, since it seems completely rational to fear such a thing. After all, "*Who wants to be handcuffed and covered in human feces?*" Upon asking himself this question, Sedaris is horrified to realize that he knows multiple people who would love for this to happen to them. He then immediately frets about the fact that he might know too many masochists, but this doesn't appear to be an actual phobia. That he looks in the first place, though, highlights just how insecure he is about himself, fearing that there's something wrong with him. Similarly, he recognizes that he has staked his entire sense of self-worth on "the completion of a daily crossword puzzle." This is a genuine fear, since he truly *has* conflated his sense of self with this arbitrary task. By calling attention to this dynamic, then, Sedaris makes it clear that he's well aware not only of his intellectual insecurities, but also that these insecurities are rather irrational.

Picka Pocketoni Quotes

People are often frightened of Parisians, but an American in Paris will find no harsher critic than another American. France isn't even my country, but there I was, deciding that these people needed to be sent back home, preferably in chains. In disliking them, I was forced to recognize my own pretension, and that made me hate them even more.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Carol, Martin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

While riding the Paris metro one day, Sedaris stands next to an American couple. As he does so, the man (whose name is Martin) turns to the woman (whose name is Carol) and loudly says that Sedaris smells bad. Martin assumes Sedaris is French and cannot speak English—a bad assumption to make, since many French people are fluent in English. As he continues to listen to Martin and Carol, Sedaris is thrilled to have a concrete reason to dislike them. This leads him to realize that "an American in Paris will find no harsher critic than another American," an idea that plays on the fact that people often hold their own cultures to an impossibly high standard. In normal circumstances, Sedaris's American identity would link him to Martin and Carol, though he has very little in common with them. Now, though, he has the chance to distinguish himself from them by playing into their mistaken belief that he's French. However, he soon realizes that hating Martin and Carol reflects poorly on him because it highlights his "own pretension" and his unwillingness to embrace his fellow Americans. And because he's the kind of person who abhors anything that forces him to face his own insecurities or shortcomings, this only makes him dislike Martin and Carol even more. In this moment, then, readers note once again just how fragile Sedaris's ego and sense of self really are.

Smart Guy Quotes

❝ My brain wants nothing to do with reason. It never has. If I was told to vacate my apartment by next week, I wouldn't ask around or consult the real estate listings. Instead, I'd just imagine myself living in a moated sugar-cube castle, floating from room to room on a king-size magic carpet. If I have one saving grace, it's that I'm lucky enough to have found someone willing to handle the ugly business of day-to-day living.

Hugh consoled me, saying, "Don't let it get to you. There are plenty of things you're good at."

When asked for some examples, he listed vacuuming and naming stuffed animals. He says he can probably come up with a few more, but he'll need some time to think.

Related Characters: David Sedaris (speaker), Hugh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 246

Explanation and Analysis

In his 40s, Sedaris decides to take an IQ test because he has always secretly believed that he's a genius. He convinces Hugh to take the test with him, certain that this will make him feel smart no matter what happens, since he's convinced that Hugh is significantly less intelligent than him. However, he discovers that this is not the case. In fact, Hugh receives a very high score, whereas Sedaris receives an embarrassingly low score. This is largely because IQ tests measure a person's ability to think logically. Sedaris, for his part, is all but incapable of using "reason," preferring instead to daydream, losing himself in fantasy worlds rather than thinking logically. For this reason, he's especially lucky to have found somebody like Hugh, who is "willing to handle the ugly business of day-to-day living." This, it seems, is how Hugh supports Sedaris, making it easier for him to navigate his way through the world. And yet, Hugh isn't necessarily good at soothing Sedaris or making him feel better about his various insecurities. When trying to console him in the aftermath of the IQ test, Hugh fails to come up with anything that will actually make Sedaris feel better about himself. That he tries to comfort Sedaris by suggesting that he's good at vacuuming is funny, but it also highlights an important idea about skill and intelligence—indeed, Hugh might be good at thinking logically, but he isn't necessarily good at navigating emotion. This, perhaps, is where Sedaris has an advantage over him.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

GO CAROLINA

Like a television show in which cops come to a perpetrator's house, knock on his door, and tell him to come with them, David Sedaris is sitting in his fifth grade class when a woman enters and asks to see him. Instantly, he thinks about all the things he's done wrong recently: he lit a supposedly flame-resistant Halloween costume on fire, stole grill tongs from somebody's unwatched porch, doctored the word *hit* on a poster by the school's gym. Frantically wondering why he's in trouble, he doesn't even stop to think that he might be innocent.

That Sedaris immediately assumes he's done something wrong when somebody singles him out suggests that he is the kind of person who constantly fears punishment or disapproval. Of course, this is a natural way for a kid to respond to a stranger bursting into his classroom and asking to see him, but Sedaris's guilty conscience is tinged with both insecurity and humor—a combination that characterizes his general outlook on life throughout the essays in Me Talk Pretty One Day.

Walking down the hall, the woman who summoned Sedaris introduces herself as Miss Samson. She then asks if he roots for "State or Carolina." Sedaris knows this is a common question in North Carolina, where everyone is obsessed with college football and loyal to their teams. Sedaris, for his part, doesn't care about sports, but he's learned that it makes people suspicious if he tells them that he—a boy—doesn't like football. Accordingly, he always tries to guess which team the other person likes. Looking at Miss Samson's red sweater, he interprets it as an indication that she roots for State, so he says, "Definitely State. State all the way." Hearing this, Miss Samson slyly asks him to repeat himself because she is, as Sedaris later finds out, a speech therapist sent to work with him on eliminating his lisp when saying the letter *s*.

Sedaris feels as if his lack of interest in sports sets him apart from everyone else in his community. Given that many of the essays in Me Talk Pretty One Day *examine—albeit in offhanded ways—traditional conceptions of masculinity, it's important to note that Sedaris doesn't conform to what everyone seems to see as the typical manifestation of boyhood. In other words, his lack of interest in football has larger implications, suggesting his sense of alienation and his divergence from traditional gender roles.*

In her office, Miss Samson tricks Sedaris into saying a number of words that contain the letter *s*. Whenever she speaks, she goes out of her way to emphasize her perfect enunciation, often pointing out that Sedaris's lisp is a sign that his tongue is lazy. Sedaris comes to dread his sessions with Miss Samson, especially because the other boys who have to see her are unpopular, though he can't help but acknowledge that they are similar to him. "You don't want to be doing that," these boys' fathers often tell them. "That's a girl thing." These boys—including Sedaris—are always forced to hide their true interests because they aren't considered manly enough. In retrospect, Sedaris notes that there should have been a sign on Miss Samson's door that read: "FUTURE HOMOSEXUALS OF AMERICA." He also wonders if his teachers could identify the future alcoholics and "depressives."

Again, Sedaris's sense of alienation from the heteronormative world of North Carolina in the 1960s becomes apparent. In this case, he feels uncomfortable about the fact that he is associated with a group of boys who don't conform to stereotypical gender roles. Consciously or not, it seems, Miss Samson and the other teachers have singled out young boys who are interested in things typically considered feminine, and though a lisp obviously can't reveal a person's sexual orientation, Sedaris's teachers have nonetheless called attention to the fact that these boys aren't like their more masculine peers—something that undoubtedly makes it harder for Sedaris to attain a sense of belonging in his school.

Newly self-conscious about his lisp, Sedaris starts avoiding *s*-words at all costs. To do this, he uses elaborate and longwinded alternative phrases, finding synonyms in a thesaurus he convinces his mother to buy him (through what she refers to as "endless pestering" and he refers to as "repeated badgering"). This does not entertain Miss Samson, who tries hard to trick Sedaris into using words that contain the letter *s*. Still, it's no use, and his lisp doesn't improve—nor, for that matter, do any of Miss Samson's other students improve at their enunciation. Finally, just before Christmas break, Sedaris has his final meeting with Miss Samson, who is about to move to a new school. Letting down her guard, she tells him that they'll spend their last session having a casual conversation, but he still refuses to use *s*-words.

Sedaris's inventive ways of avoiding s-words is a perfect representation of how he deals with adversity. Instead of going along with Miss Samson's rules, he comes up with a creative—albeit rather ridiculous—way of side-stepping his problem altogether. Needless to say, it's quite humorous to think of a fifth-grader using long words found in the thesaurus in order to avoid using words with the letter s*, and it is this kind of sly humor that runs throughout* Me Talk Pretty One Day*, as Sedaris uses comedy to address his own shortcomings.*

Miss Samson tells Sedaris about her holiday plans, revealing that her fiancé is at war in Vietnam. This means she'll spend Christmas alone with her grandmother. As she continues to talk, she admits the disappointment she feels that none of her students have improved. She says she wanted to prove herself by helping them but now she feels like a failure. "My students don't like me," she says. As she covers her face with her hands, Sedaris says, "Hey, look, I'm thorry." Instantly, she looks up with a smile, saying, "I got you," and laughing at him. That night, Sedaris relays this story to his mother, who says, "You've got to admit that you really are a sucker." But because he's never banished his lisp, he prefers to use the word "*chump*."

Miss Samson tricks Sedaris into using the word "sorry" by appealing to his emotions. Instead of treating him with her characteristic strictness, she opens up. In doing so, she makes it seem like they have finally made a personal connection, and though Sedaris doesn't particularly like Miss Samson, he does appreciate the opportunity to relate to another person. In other words, Miss Samson cruelly plays on Sedaris's desire for a sense of social acceptance. On another note, it's worth recognizing that "Go Carolina" culminates in a joke about the fact that Sedaris has never gotten over his lisp. For all intents and purposes, this humorous final line is the most important part of the entire essay, serving as the pay-off. This formula repeats throughout Me Talk Pretty One Day*, a book more interested in making humorous observations than pursuing any kind of argument or philosophical idea. Simply put, many of Sedaris's essays work toward punchlines that conclude the narrative in a satisfying, zany way, meaning that his musings largely exist for the purpose of making the reader laugh and—in some cases—reflect on life's many small oddities.*

GIANT DREAMS, MIDGET ABILITIES

Sedaris's father, Lou, loves jazz. He works at IBM as an engineer, but Sedaris has always thought he might have made an excellent musician in another life. Every evening, he comes home from work and listens to his record collection, forcing Sedaris to sit with him and listen closely to the jazz greats. No matter what Sedaris says, his father always thinks his son isn't listening hard enough or appreciating the music as much as he should be. The Sedaris family now lives in North Carolina, but they used to live in New York State, allowing Lou to make trips to New York City to hear jazz legends at storied venues. When IBM relocated him, he was appalled at the idea of living in a place like North Carolina, which he felt lacked culture. These days, he's forced to express his appreciation for jazz through his record collection.

The beginning of "Giant Dreams, Midget Abilities" (which, readers should note, makes use of the outdated, offensive term "midget") makes it clear that Lou Sedaris is somebody who forces his own interests onto his children, hoping they will appreciate the same things he does. This introduction also hints at the fact that Lou has certain prejudices against southern places like North Carolina, which he thinks isn't cultured enough. In this way, Sedaris subtly invites readers to reflect on the ways in which socioeconomic class factors into his upbringing, implying that his family sees itself as more refined and sophisticated than their new neighbors in North Carolina.

One night, Lou takes Sedaris and his sisters Lisa and Gretchen to the nearby university to see a concert by the jazz pianist Dave Brubeck. Brubeck is, at the time, playing in a jazz combo with his sons, and this gives Lou an idea: the Sedaris siblings should start a band. He is extremely excited about this after the show, and by the time the family gets home, it's clear there'll be no stopping him from pursuing it—despite the fact that neither Sedaris nor his siblings want to play music. The only interest Sedaris has in music is his dream of singing commercial jingles in the style of Billie Holiday, beautifully singing about cigarettes or other products. However, he and his sisters go along with their father's idea because they have no other choice.

Lou Sedaris's enthusiasm emerges in this section as something of a burden on his children. Although he just wants to introduce them to a hobby that they might enjoy, his excitement seems to overshadow his ability to see that none of his children actually want to do this. Consequently, the Sedaris siblings have to put up with their father's overbearing nature. This dynamic resurfaces throughout Me Talk Pretty One Day, *as Sedaris grapples with the fact that he and his father have very different ideas about what is and is not worth doing in life.*

Lou buys a baby grand piano and signs Gretchen up for piano lessons even though she's never voiced an interest in the piano. He then buys Lisa a flute and signs her up for flute lessons. Finally, he gives Sedaris his instrument. "Hold on to your hat," he says, "because here's that guitar you've always wanted." Hearing this, Sedaris is convinced that his father has confused him for somebody else. He has never asked for a guitar, though he *has* asked repeatedly for a "brand-name vacuum cleaner." The guitar, on the other hand, is completely unappealing to him, even in a visual sense, since it doesn't go with the strict nautical theme of his bedroom. Nonetheless, his father signs him up for guitar lessons and drops him off for his first session at a nearby mall, driving away as Sedaris yells that he doesn't want to play guitar.

Again, it becomes clear that Lou Sedaris has let his own interest in music eclipse all other concerns, failing to recognize that his children don't share his enthusiasm. As Sedaris tries to make sense of why his father thinks he wanted a guitar, readers come to understand his eccentric nature—after all, it's quite uncommon for a young boy to want a "brand-name vacuum cleaner" more than a guitar. With this in mind, it's not that surprising that Lou Sedaris miscalculates what his son wants, since it's obvious that Sedaris has unique and unconventional interests. And yet, the fact that Lou doesn't recognize this is further proof that he has let his own interests—along with his assumptions about what young boys like—overshadow his ability to discern what his son actually wants.

Inside the music store, Sedaris meets his guitar teacher, a little person named Mr. Mancini. Sedaris is fascinated by Mr. Mancini, whom he thinks of as a "midget." Mr. Mancini is a sharp dresser, and twelve-year-old Sedaris is instantly intrigued by him, paying more attention to his height and physical proportions than to the task of learning guitar. Mr. Mancini notices Sedaris's fascination and doesn't like it, though he says nothing. Instead, he lights a cigarette and explains that he learned to play guitar during just one summer in Atlanta, Georgia, which he refers to as "Hotlanta G.A." He says that there are countless attractive women in Atlanta and starts talking about a woman named Beth, after whom he named his guitar.

Perhaps to deflect Sedaris's impolite fascination with the fact that he is a little person, Mr. Mancini starts talking about women. In doing so, he unknowingly turns the tables on Sedaris, undoubtedly making him the uncomfortable one—after all, Sedaris is not only a mere 12-year-old who probably doesn't want to talk to an adult about sexual attraction, he is also completely uninterested in women in the first place. As a result, both Sedaris and Mr. Mancini find themselves in a situation in which they have to deal with the ways in which other people conceive of their identities. In turn, readers see that it is often difficult to control one's own self-presentation, since people often make assumptions about each other and treat one another according to their own preconceived notions.

Mr. Mancini tells Sedaris it'd be helpful if he named his guitar, so Sedaris decides to call the instrument Oliver. This confounds Mr. Mancini, who says Sedaris should name his guitar after a girl. Sedaris, for his part, wants to call his guitar Oliver because that's his hamster's name, but he follows Mr. Mancini's instructions and says he'll call his instrument Joan. What he doesn't say, though, is that Joan is his cousin's name. "So tell me about this Joan," Mr. Mancini says. "Is she something pretty special?" Scrambling, Sedaris tries to describe Joan saying, "She's tall and…" Suddenly, he feels awkward for talking about height, so he tries to back up by saying, "She's small and has brown hair and everything." In response, Mr. Mancini asks if Joan is "stacked," but Sedaris doesn't know how to answer because he's recently realized that he never notices anyone's breasts at all.

Mr. Mancini's insistence on talking about women and their attractiveness is deeply uncomfortable for Sedaris, since he is in the midst of realizing his sexual orientation and has recently noticed that he's not attracted to women. In all likelihood, this isn't something he has shared with anyone, so he obviously doesn't want to talk about it with Mr. Mancini. For this reason, he simply goes along with his teacher's questions. This leads to a humorous exchange in which Sedaris unconvincingly tries to approximate the way he thinks a heterosexual man like Mr. Mancini might talk about women. In the same way that he pretends to like football in "Go Carolina" in order to avoid judgment, he now postures as a heterosexual young man, ultimately hiding his true identity.

As Sedaris and his sisters continue their music lessons, their interest in learning their instruments doesn't increase. On the rare occasion that they practice, the house fills with terrible sounds. Sedaris's mother responds by turning up the radio, but his father raves about how fantastic it is to have a house full of musicians. Although his excitement almost seems like a form of "mania," Sedaris notes, nobody could ever say that Lou Sedaris is unsupportive of his children.

It's true that Lou Sedaris is quite supportive, as evidenced by the unyielding way he encourages his children even when they're clearly terrible at music. However, this support has a relatively narrow scope, as Lou focuses primarily on encouraging his children to pursue his *passion, not theirs. As a result, Sedaris and his sisters don't necessarily benefit as much as they could from their father's support, since they have no interest in excelling in music in the first place.*

Sedaris continues to see Mr. Mancini. His main interest is still on Mr. Mancini's height and how he does everyday things like shave. Meanwhile, he doesn't practice, prompting Mr. Mancini to give him advice like, "You need to believe you're playing an actual woman," adding that Sedaris should "grab her by the neck and make her holler." This makes Sedaris quite uncomfortable, and he doesn't understand why his sisters' teachers don't compare *their* instruments to boys. Fearing that sexual desire might actually lead to musical talent, he decides to stay away from Lisa's flute, worrying that he would reveal himself as a prodigy. Instead of playing an instrument, he decides, he will devote himself to singing.

Sedaris grapples with his own identity (and, more specifically, his sexual identity), and this process brings itself to bear on his experience as a music student. As Mr. Mancini continues to sexualize the guitar in a heteronormative manner, Sedaris becomes jealous of his sisters because their teachers don't integrate such private matters into their lessons. Thinking this way, he is once again forced to consider the fact that he isn't attracted to women even though everyone in his life seems to assume he is. When he looks at Lisa's flute, then, he decides once and for all to stay away from it, just in case its phallic shape gives away his attraction to men.

At the mall one day, Sedaris sees Mr. Mancini ordering food at a fast food restaurant. Nearby, a group of teenagers make fun of him, prompting Sedaris to feel protective of Mr. Mancini. Feeling sorry for Mr. Mancini and somewhat possessive of him, Sedaris thinks that if anybody should get to laugh at Mr. Mancini, it should be him, not these boys who don't even know the man.

Although Sedaris hasn't previously felt any kind of connection to Mr. Mancini, he suddenly relates to him when he sees a group of teenagers making fun of him. This is perhaps because Sedaris knows what it's like to feel different than everyone else, since he is a closeted young gay man living in a heteronormative context. Because of this, he finds himself capable of empathizing with Mr. Mancini even though he himself is not a little person.

At his next lesson, Sedaris wears a tie and informs Mr. Mancini that he hasn't practiced at all. He also admits that he named his guitar after his cousin and that he has no intention of ever learning the guitar. Instead, he says, he wants to sing like Billie Holiday, explaining that he wants to sing commercial jingles. He even has a routine already, he says, closing his eyes and launching into a bologna commercial that he often sings when he's alone in his bedroom. When he finishes and opens his eyes, Mr. Mancini puts his hands up and says, "You can hold it right there. I'm not into that scene." This confuses Sedaris, but Mancini continues, saying that there were "plenty of screwballs" like Sedaris in Atlanta but that he doesn't "swing that way." He then says, "For God's sake, kid, pull yourself together."

Sedaris opens up to Mr. Mancini after seeing him at the mall and feeling sorry about the way teenagers make fun of him for being a little person. Deciding to be straightforward with his teacher, he makes himself vulnerable by revealing his only true musical interest, which is undeniably eclectic. But instead of seeing Sedaris's musical routine as creative (albeit somewhat strange), Mr. Mancini thinks—for some reason—that Sedaris is coming on to him in a romantic or sexual way. Worse, he calls Sedaris a "screwball," revealing his homophobia. As a result, Mr. Mancini not only subjects Sedaris to the same kind of mean-spirited intolerance that he himself faces as a little person, but also insults Sedaris's attempt to put himself out there by singing.

After his lesson, Sedaris tells Lou that Mr. Mancini said he should quit music because his fingers aren't suitable for the guitar. This disappoints Lou, but he accepts the excuse. Taking a cue from their brother, Gretchen and Lisa give similar excuses, and though their father tries to tempt them with new instruments, they ignore him. When he tries to make them listen to a record he hopes will inspire them, Sedaris realizes that his own dreams of becoming a musician will never return, since he now associates music with Mr. Mancini telling him to pull himself together. As he and his sisters walk away from their father, he offers them each $5 to simply listen to the record he has chosen, but they pay him no attention, going to watch television with their mother instead. That night, Lou falls asleep listening records, dreaming as the music plays.

To his credit, Lou Sedaris doesn't force his children to continue playing music after they quit. He does, however, express his disappointment, and though Sedaris and his siblings don't seem to care all that much that they have failed to fulfill their father's musical dreams, the fact remains that he continues his attempt to force his passion onto his children without fully recognizing that they have no interest in pursuing what he himself values.

GENETIC ENGINEERING

Lou Sedaris is a skilled and smart man, the kind of person David Sedaris thinks could have invented the microwave "under the right circumstances." He's extremely competent at fixing things, but Sedaris and his siblings have learned to steer clear of him when he's working on something because they know he'll bore them to tears with long-winded explanations about what he's doing. One day, Sedaris finds an old IBM advertisement in which his father is sitting next to a large computer. He asks Lou about the picture, but his father launches into an explanation about the technology that IBM was advertising, failing to answer the only thing Sedaris is curious about, which is whether or not the people who took the picture of him allowed him to wear makeup.

One noteworthy aspect of Sedaris's relationship with his father is that Sedaris is clearly capable of appreciating Lou even though he has very little in common with him. Whereas his father likes talking about science and technology, Sedaris would rather discuss things like makeup. And yet, despite the lack of overlap between their interests, Sedaris still respects and even—to a certain extent—admires his father.

On vacation in a beach town in North Carolina one summer, Sedaris and his sisters focus on their attempts to become the tannest person in the family. Every year, they hold a contest at the end of vacation, but they all know Gretchen will win because she's naturally darker than all of them. Still, they and their mother try to get as much sun as possible, lying on the beach for hours at a time. While taking a break from tanning one day, Sedaris goes for a walk on the beach and finds his father standing near the water and staring at a group of fishermen. Sedaris can't help but notice how tan these men are from working in the sun every day, but his father interrupts these thoughts by calling him over and asking him if he could estimate how many grains of sand exist in the entire world.

When Lou interrupts Sedaris's thoughts about tanning to ask him a comedically difficult question about the number of sand grains in the entire world, readers will once more note just how different Sedaris and his father truly are from each other. Needless to say, Sedaris has no interest in trying to calculate how many grains of sand there are on earth, but he most likely knows that it's futile to tell his father that he'd rather think about how tan the nearby fishermen are. As a result, readers see the extent to which their relationship is based on their familial connection, not on their interests.

Sedaris is deeply uninterested in his father's question about the number of sand grains in the world, and he inwardly laments that his father is about to explain how he might go about answering such a question. Nonetheless, there's nothing he can do to stop Lou from going on at length and drawing an elaborate equation in the sand. As he does this, the nearby fishermen stop working and listen to him, eventually asking if he's a tax accountant. One possible reason they ask this, Sedaris thinks, is because they don't have much money and are no longer able to live by the ocean, having been priced out of their beachfront properties when the town became a tourist destination.

Although it isn't always the primary focus, the topic of socioeconomic class often comes up in Me Talk Pretty One Day, *as Sedaris makes sense of where he and his family fit into the world's broader economic structures. In this moment, he makes it clear that his family is fortunate enough to vacation in a place that is clearly too expensive for many people to live in. Moreover, he hints at the tense dynamic between families like his and people like these fishermen, whose lives have been upended by a sudden influx of wealth into the surrounding community—an influx of wealth brought on by people like the Sedarises.*

One of the fishermen asks Lou Sedaris, "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?" Without hesitation, Lou says that this is an interesting question and sets to work trying to solve it, drawing a new equation in the sand. As he lectures the fishermen in this manner, Sedaris stands there wondering if the light bouncing off the water will tan the underside of his chin and help him win the pageant with his sisters at the end of their vacation.

Lou Sedaris fails to register the fisherman's thinly veiled criticism when he actually tries to answer the man's question about the monetary value of a grain of sand. Instead of recognizing that this man is chastising him for coming into the area and making it harder for working-class families to survive, Lou focuses on actually trying to answer this facetious question. Meanwhile, Sedaris tunes out and thinks about an entirely different matter, once more proving just how little he identifies with his father's interests (though he is, it seems, capable of recognizing the awkward social and class dynamics that his father is apparently unable pick up on).

TWELVE MOMENTS IN THE LIFE OF THE ARTIST

Sedaris's sister Gretchen proves her impressive artistic abilities early in life, painting beautiful watercolors. As she goes through school, her teachers heap praise on her. Both of her parents eagerly try to take responsibility for her talent, claiming that she inherited it from them. Inspired by his daughter, Lou sets up an easel, paints a number of landscapes, hangs them on the wall, and then stops painting altogether. Seeing this, Sedaris figures that if his father can paint, he can too, so he tries his own hand at art, though his ambitions have less to do with the actual craft and more to do with his fantasy of one day painting nude male models. He imagines becoming a famous artist who dresses in long scarves, and he relishes this image of himself above all else.

The fact that Sedaris is motivated by jealousy to become an artist is important to note, since it suggests that he tends to measure himself against others. Instead of focusing on the person he already is, he compares himself to people like Gretchen, ultimately indicating that he's somewhat insecure about himself and unwilling to simply let himself be the person he is.

When Sedaris leaves for college, he's relieved to get away from Gretchen's talent, which makes him outrageously jealous. Deciding to major in art, he worries that he will be too "physically excited" by the nude models in class, but when a model actually comes in to pose, he's disappointed to discover that she is a woman. Uninspired, he gets frustrated with his lack of ability, so he switches to pottery, making a number of ugly mugs that his mother uses as cat bowls when he gives them to her for Christmas.

Sedaris's attempt to measure up to his sister Gretchen leads him to pursue a degree in art even though he doesn't even seem particularly interested in what that might entail. Of course, he likes the idea of drawing nude models, but this is a superficial reason to major in art. Consequently, he has very little to hold on to when he finds himself uninspired by this path. Instead of quitting art altogether and focusing on something he might actually enjoy, though, he takes up pottery, clearly unwilling to let go of the idea of himself as an artist because he has integrated it into his self-image.

Sedaris transfers to a different college and once again decides to major in art, though he eventually stops going to class and instead spends time with a group of self-proclaimed filmmakers who spend most of their time smoking bongs and watching pretentious movies. Sedaris enjoys this lifestyle but soon drops out because, though he feels quite adept at *acting* like a genius artist, the school doesn't offer him any credit for this.

Above all, Sedaris relishes the mere idea *of being an artist. This is because it gives him something interesting to which he can attach his identity, lending him an edgy persona that will perhaps hide his insecurities. But because having a pretentious personality doesn't translate into anything valuable in the real world, he drops out of school—a decision that underscores the extent to which he has prioritized his self-image over all else, since he's apparently unwilling to let go of his image as a mysterious artist even if it means having to drop out of college.*

Sedaris moves back to North Carolina, renting his own apartment in Raleigh, where he gets into crystal meth and conceptual art—a combination he says is extremely dangerous. As soon as he takes his first dose of speed, he feels instantly rid of all forms of doubt, no longer asking himself questions like, "Am I smart enough?" and "Will people like me?" All of a sudden, he feels very smart, like an artistic visionary. During this time, he starts hanging out with other conceptual artists who are into taking hard drugs. Together, they celebrate art that is nonsensical, the kind of art that doesn't require "God-given talent" but, rather, moody and provocative ideas.

That Sedaris likes meth because it eliminates self-doubt confirms that he struggles with insecurity. This, it seems, is why he adopted an identity as a misunderstood artist in the first place: an attempt to mask the fact that he's not comfortable being himself. Now that he's on drugs, though, he doesn't worry about such things, and his approach to art completely changes. Because conceptual art is often based on subverting expectation, it doesn't matter that Sedaris isn't all that skilled when it comes to executing traditional forms of art. Consequently, he's able to both indulge his desire to be seen as an artist while disregarding his lack of talent. And all the while, he avoids questions like, "Am I smart enough?" and "Will people like me?"

One of Sedaris's conceptual artist friends is a man who has been building a "nest" for six months. The nest is made of human hair, which the artist collects from local barbershops. In this style, Sedaris starts making his own strange art piece by filling wooden crates with garbage and recording everything he puts in, including toenail clippings, eyelashes found on his sink, and other little pieces of trash he finds around his apartment. Eventually, he takes one of these crates to the local museum and submits it for consideration for one of their upcoming shows. Upon learning that his piece has been accepted, he's quite excited until he realizes that all of his friends were rejected by the museum. Because of this, they speak disparagingly about his art, suggesting that their own proposals were more avant-garde and meaningful than his.

Sedaris has finally found ad context in which he fits in, even if this means creating art with which very few people will engage—and doing so alongside people who don't actually appreciate him or his artwork. To that end, his so-called friends don't even feel happy for him when he manages to get his odd art piece accepted by the local museum, instead disparaging him because they're jealous. This suggests that Sedaris's new peers are just as insecure as him. It also indicates that these people are less interested in supporting him than in gaining recognition for themselves. In turn, it becomes clear that Sedaris's new social circle isn't all that rewarding, even if he's capable of convincing himself otherwise by taking drugs.

At the museum exhibition, none of Sedaris's friends come to see his work. The only people who do come to support him are his drug dealer and his mother. At one point, he hears his mother drunkenly tell the curator that she told a woman in the bathroom a joke about the art. "Honey, why flush it?" Sedaris's mother said to this woman. "Carry it into the next room and they'll put it on a goddamn pedestal." Two months later, when the museum gives Sedaris his crate back, he burns it—an act that his friends respect. From that point on, he focuses on participating in his friends' performance art pieces. Because they are all on speed, the performances make perfect sense to them, though anybody who's sober would have no idea what to make of these odd and disturbing showcases.

Sedaris continues to posture as a mysterious, smart, misunderstood artist, though people like his mother make it difficult for him to ignore the fact that his output is bizarre and inaccessible (though it is to her credit that she at least comes to the museum to support him in the first place). No matter what anyone else says, Sedaris believes in the value of what he's doing, largely because he's on drugs that help him ignore any kind of insecurity. In this condition, it's easy for him to participate in ridiculous performance art pieces that mean nothing even though he and his friends think they're doing something extraordinary.

Sedaris invites his parents to one of his friends' performance art pieces that takes place in an old abandoned warehouse. Instead of complimenting the two-and-a-half hour show, though, they complain about the fact that they had to sit on the hard floor for so long, and this upsets him, though he decides that their inability to appreciate the show simply means that he and his friends are "ahead of [their] time."

Sedaris's belief that he and his friends are "ahead of [their] time" underlines the self-aggrandizing nature of his artwork. He invites his parents to see the performance art piece, implying that he cares about their opinions and wants to show them what he's been working on. However, as soon as it becomes clear that they don't like this kind of art, he writes them off, choosing to believe that he's simply more intelligent than the average person. This, of course, is a reversal of how he would feel if he weren't on drugs—after all, one of the main reasons he takes drugs in the first place is to silence questions like, "Am I smart enough?"

Sedaris's friend group begins to splinter when the person who directed the first performance piece develops an idea for a new show and everyone gets upset that they always have to do his ideas instead of theirs. As the group disassembles, Sedaris is invited by the museum to participate in a performance art festival; he agrees to do it for "political reasons." In reality, he says yes because he needs drug money. Trying hard to come up with ideas, he realizes that it's hard to put together a show, even when everything is abstract and strange. When the performance piece takes place, he is extremely high on speed and is freaked out that everybody is watching him. Step by step, he tries to calm himself down by reminding himself what he's supposed to be doing, thinking, "*I'm slicing this pineapple now*," and, "*Next I'll just rip apart these sock monkeys*[…]."

The fact that Sedaris's friend group disbands so easily suggests that they weren't very close in the first place. Unlike many communities of artists, these people are clearly more interested in taking drugs and talking about their own self-indulgent ideas than actually supporting one another. Despite this discouraging turn of events, Sedaris continues to make conceptual art. At this point, though, the only reason he does so is to earn drug money to fuel his addiction. With this in mind, he creates a nonsensical performance art piece that is so strange that even he seems to question its worth.

Getting on his knees and preparing to cut his own hair in front of the audience, Sedaris hears a voice say, "Just take a little off the back and sides." The audience titters with laughter, and Sedaris realizes that the voice belongs to his father. Encouraged by the laughter, Lou continues to make humorous remarks, eventually saying that Sedaris actually *should* open a barbershop because it's clear he's "not going anywhere in the show-business world." Everyone laughs. Furious, Sedaris thinks about how his father has no clue how people are supposed to act in art museums. After the show, though, the curator congratulates him, praising him for thinking to include his father in the piece. The curator adds that the show really improved when Sedaris "loosened up and started making fun of" himself.

On some level, even Sedaris can tell that his performance is ridiculous and meaningless. Still, though, he's justifiably infuriated when his father ridicules him in front of an entire audience. This moment illustrates the nature of their father-son relationship, as Lou fails to appreciate Sedaris's interests. And yet, Lou also adds a bit of levity to an otherwise dreary show, thereby helping his son. Of course, he does this in a misguided, frustrating way, but the overall effect is a positive one, since everybody appreciates his remarks and assumes that he was part of the show. This, in turn, is a perfect representation of his approach to fatherhood: he supports his children, but his own terms.

Emboldened by audience compliments after Sedaris's show, Lou starts suggesting ideas for Sedaris's next show. One day, he calls Sedaris and suggests an idea, and Sedaris responds by saying he'd rather put a gun to his head than hear more of his father's proposals. Thinking this over, Lou says, "The bit with the gun just might work. Let me think about it and get back to you." Shortly thereafter, though, Sedaris's performance art career comes to an end when his drug dealer decides to go to rehab. Sedaris tries to convince her that she doesn't need rehab, fearing that he won't be able to finish a performance piece he's been commissioned to do. Try as he might to dissuade her, though, his drug dealer leaves, and Sedaris loses his will to create.

Again, readers see the ways in which Lou's overbearing style of parenting frustrates Sedaris. Of course, Lou is only trying to help him, but he fails to recognize that Sedaris sees his suggestions as intrusions on his creative process (however meager that creative process is in the first place). When Sedaris's drugs run out, though, this problem goes away because he no longer has the will to create performance art, thereby confirming that his interest in conceptual art was fueled not by true artistic passion, but by a drug-infused desire to posture as a creative and intelligent artist.

An unidentified amount of time passes. Sedaris recovers from the withdrawals he experienced after ceasing his meth habit. Still, he continues to attend performance art shows, but he doesn't know why because he no longer enjoys them or, for that matter, sees merit in them. After watching a show in which a woman gorges herself on sickening amounts of food, he darts out into the evening and walks home, glad to be sober and happy that he no longer tries to find deeper meaning in the abstract, disparate parts of life.

On the surface, this essay is about Sedaris's experience as an artist. However, it's also about his journey to overcome drug addiction and, moreover, his attempt to find himself as a young man. And though he hasn't necessarily determined who, exactly, he wants to be, he at least manages to leave behind some of his insecurities, enabling him to stop posturing as somebody he isn't.

YOU CAN'T KILL THE ROOSTER

When Sedaris's family moves from New York State to Raleigh, North Carolina, his parents forbid him and his siblings from adopting the regional dialect. Although everyone around them says "ma'am" and uses the word "y'all," the Sedaris children are warned against integrating such terms into their vocabulary. "We might not have been the wealthiest people in town, but at least we weren't one of *them*," Sedaris notes, referring to North Carolinians who speak in this manner.

When Sedaris's parents ban him and his siblings from using words like "ma'am" and "y'all," they send a certain message to their children, one that suggests that they are somehow above acting like everyone else in North Carolina. Indeed, his parents appear to have a rather classist attitude, effectively teaching their children that, though they aren't extremely rich, they are better than their working-class neighbors. Needless to say, Sedaris picks up on this prejudiced sentiment as a child, which is why he is so attuned to issues of class and wealth in the essays that make up Me Talk Pretty One Day.

Nobody in the Sedaris family adopts the North Carolinian way of speaking, but this changes when Sedaris's youngest brother, Paul, is born. Paul is the only Sedaris to grow up in North Carolina, so he naturally develops a southern way of speaking. Moreover, he is quite crass, the kind of person who—as an adult—calls Lou Sedaris on the phone and says things like, "Motherfucker, I ain't see pussy in so long, I'd throw stones at it." He has more or less been speaking like this ever since he was in the second grade. He also talks so quickly that even his friends struggle to understand him. "You can't kill the Rooster," he often says, referring to himself by the name he uses when he feels "threatened." Sedaris notes that if someone were to ask why, exactly, he calls himself The Rooster, Paul wouldn't give a clear answer.

After establishing his parents' classist attitude and their sense of superiority over the people in their immediate environment, Sedaris introduces readers to his younger brother Paul, a man who defies everything his parents believe about class. Instead of adopting the refined and condescending attitude his parents celebrate, Paul embraces an unapologetically crass way of moving through the world. As a result, Sedaris presents readers with something of a culture clash, illustrating the ways in which Paul—or "The Rooster"—challenges his parents' classism.

Sedaris and his sisters have never been allowed to say "shut up," but by the time The Rooster is a teenager, his parents don't even say anything when he yells, "Shut your motherfucking hole." Similarly, whereas Sedaris and his sisters weren't allowed to smoke marijuana, The Rooster is simply not allowed to smoke marijuana *in the living room*, and he even breaks this rule on a regular basis without repercussions. Seemingly no matter what The Rooster does, Sedaris's parents are thrilled by him. When The Rooster leaves a bong on the dinner table one day, Sedaris's mother puts flowers in it and says, "I think it was very nice of Paul to give me this vase."

Throughout his life, Sedaris has had a somewhat strange relationship with his father, who tries to support him but always does this in ways that overshadow what Sedaris actually wants. By contrast, Paul apparently enjoys the unadulterated support of both his parents, regardless of the fact that he breaks all of their rules and puts their classist values to the test. By spotlighting this dynamic, Sedaris shows readers that his parents are capable of accepting people for who they are, even if they've sometimes failed to do this with Sedaris himself.

Sedaris's father has always had high expectations—expectations that Sedaris and his sisters have not necessarily managed to meet. He has always wanted a child—and specifically a son—who attends an Ivy League university, plays football, and is in a jazz combo. Sedaris, for his part, doesn't do any of these things. For this reason, Lou places all his hopes on The Rooster, whom he dresses in suits and clip-on ties when he's only ten years old. The Rooster is also forced to take trumpet lessons and play on sports teams, but none of this sticks. At a certain point, The Rooster dismisses his father's attempts to influence his life, saying, "That shit don't mean fuck to me."

Although Sedaris's parents eventually accept The Rooster for who he is, Lou still tries to turn him into the kind of son he has always wanted. Unlike Sedaris, though, The Rooster is more comfortable with voicing his lack of interest in such things, proclaiming that his father's expectations "don't mean fuck" to him. Sedaris, on the other hand, tries to satisfy his father even when he's uninterested in doing whatever Lou wants him to do, as evidenced by the fact that he took guitar lessons as a child even though he didn't want to. And yet, Lou has a soft spot for The Rooster, not for Sedaris—a sign that, though he wants to influence his children's lives, he doesn't actually care all that much whether or not they listen to him. In this backward way, then, he actually emerges as a rather supportive and loving father.

Lou Sedaris is a man who can't even bring himself to say "goddamn," let alone tell a dirty joke. When he's with The Rooster, though, he simply smiles and laughs when his son calls him "bitch" and "motherfucker." When The Rooster is an adult and goes out in public, people are appalled to hear the way he speaks to his father, but Sedaris knows that the relationship between the two men is tender and loving. Like The Rooster, Lou Sedaris is a very blunt man, even if he's unwilling to curse. For this reason, he appreciates The Rooster's direct way of speaking, praising his son for knowing how to speak his mind. The Rooster didn't go to an Ivy League school, but he still has the uncompromised respect of his father. Having dropped out of technical school, he works in landscaping, and his father raves about his lawnmowing abilities.

Again, it becomes clear that Lou Sedaris is a loving and supportive father even when his children fail to live up to his expectations. What he really respects, it seems, is a person's ability to be straightforward. Since The Rooster is more than capable of doing this, then, Lou has a soft spot for him. Sedaris, on the other hand, has always tried to please Lou by going along with his ideas and quietly struggling to meet his expectations (to a certain extent, that is). In doing so, he doesn't speak his mind like The Rooster does. In turn, readers will perhaps pick up on the message that it's best to unapologetically be oneself in life, even if this doesn't align with others' values.

The Rooster is the only Sedaris sibling to have stayed in North Carolina, so he spends quite a bit of time with his father, especially after his mother dies. Trying to console Lou, he urges him to move on, saying, "What you need now is some motherfucking pussy." And even though Lou ignores this advice, the fact of the matter remains that The Rooster is the only sibling who visits him on a regular basis. When a hurricane sweeps through Raleigh and wrecks part of Lou's house, The Rooster comes over with a large bucket of candy and stays with his father for a week, a time during which there is no electricity. Sitting in a house with newly opened holes in the roof, The Rooster puts his hand on his father's shoulder and says, "Bitch, I'm here to tell you that it's going to be all right."

In this moment, readers see that it's possible for people to transcend superficial differences in order to connect with and support one another. This is what happens when The Rooster consoles his father in the aftermath of a hurricane that damages his house. Although The Rooster doesn't soothe Lou using words that Lou himself would ever use, he still reaches out to his father in an attempt to make him feel better, demonstrating that he's there for him in times of hardship. In turn, it becomes clear that supporting loved ones often means overcoming inconsequential differences.

THE YOUTH IN ASIA

When Sedaris is a child, his family owns a dog that gives birth to a litter of puppies. When it seems as if one of these puppies has died, Sedaris's mother puts the small animal in the oven and turns it to a low heat, telling her children to stop accusing her of cooking an animal, since she's just trying to warm it up. Shortly thereafter, she takes the puppy out of the oven, and to the amazement of everyone, it is alive and well, the heat having restored its health. Sedaris's parents then give away all of the puppies.

Some of the essays in Me Talk Pretty One Day—including "The Youth in Asia"—offer up small studies of everyday life. These essays often lack a specific message, overarching philosophy, or argument. Instead, Sedaris's ability to relate his memories in an engaging way is what drives these essays. In "The Youth in Asia," he turns his attention to the ups and downs of owning pets, ultimately using his memories of his past pets to chart his own growth from childhood to adulthood and, moreover, to tell stories about his family members.

When the family dog dies several years later, Lou brings home a German shepherd that they decide to call Mädchen. When Mädchen dies, Lou brings home another German shepherd and names it Mädchen II. Whenever Mädchen II does something wrong, Sedaris's father scolds her by saying that Mädchen I would never have done such a thing. Meanwhile, Sedaris's mother focuses on her elderly cat, whom she eventually decides she must put down. In the aftermath of this, Sedaris and his sisters make prank calls to their mother, pretending to be from cat magazines and asking if they can put the family cat on the cover. Soon enough, Mädchen II dies, too, but nobody feels particularly sad about it—nobody, that is, except for Lou, who suddenly devotes his life to caring for her in the last days of her life, holding her paw as she's put to sleep.

The great irony of owning pets is that although people take animals into their homes to make them happy, this ensures that their hearts will eventually break when those pets inevitably die. Sedaris is well aware of this dynamic, as evidenced by the number of pets his family goes through when he's a child. To stave off this heartbreak, though, his father simply goes out and gets new pets whenever one dies. This, however, is not the same, as evidenced by the fact that Mädchen II can never live up to her predecessor, Mädchen I.

After Sedaris and his siblings move away from home, their parents get a Great Dane named Melina, to whom they devote their entire lives. Sedaris finds it disconcerting that his parents seem to care more about Melina than him, but he doesn't say anything, except for when his mother gets Melina to attack him as a joke, the large dog jumping on him as his mother cracks up. When Lou walks Melina, he's proud of her huge size and never tires of the predictable jokes other people make when they see her, laughing when they say things like, "Hey, you got a saddle for that thing?"

In "You Can't Kill The Rooster," Sedaris writes about his parents' unwavering love for his youngest sibling, Paul. In "The Youth In Asia," he writes about their devotion to their dog Melina, whom they seem to love as much or more than their children. With these two essay topics in mind, it's clear that Sedaris is quite aware of the fact that his parents have seemingly reserved the lion's share of their love for Paul and Melina—not for Sedaris himself. In a book that examines family dynamics and what it means to love and support others, this is an important thing to keep in mind.

During the time that his parents own Melina, Sedaris lives in Chicago with a female cat named Neil that he adopted from his sister Gretchen. When Neil falls ill, a vet suggests that she be put on dialysis. This is an expensive treatment, though, so Sedaris seeks a second opinion. Another vet suggests that Neil be put to sleep. As the vet says this, Sedaris loses himself to the memory of an old Japanese movie that used to play sometimes on television. In one part of this movie, an overweight boy is forced to shimmy up a flagpole at school. Having only made it several inches up the pole, the boy tells his friend that he can't do it. Eventually, he falls off the poll, and his friend runs away. Calling Sedaris back to the conversation, the vet says, "So the euthanasia," and Sedaris agrees to put Neil to sleep.

Sedaris thinks about the Japanese movie featuring the two young boys because the word "euthanasia" sounds like "youth in Asia." Setting aside this joke, though, he is faced with a difficult decision: whether or not to medically ease his cat into death. This, of course, is the hard part of owning a pet, since owners are often required to make terrible choices about whether or not their beloved companions live or die.

At the vet's, Sedaris can't bear to watch Neil die, so he goes to the parking lot while his boyfriend makes the final arrangements. Waiting for his boyfriend, Sedaris weeps by the car, unable to hide because he doesn't have the keys. When his mother dies not long after this event, his father is left on his own with Melina. The dog is a great comfort to Lou, who refuses to leave to visit his adult children because he would never think of putting Melina in a kennel. Then, when it becomes clear that Melina should be put to sleep, Lou can't bring himself to do it, even if "the youth in Asia beg[] him to end her life." Still, he eventually agrees to put her down, but he immediately goes out and gets a new Great Dane named Sophie.

Needless to say, people have to contend with death and loss in all areas of their lives. In the same way that owning a pet sets a person up for heartbreak, loving people potentially runs the same risk. Lou Sedaris faces this harsh reality when his wife dies, though at least he has Melina to comfort him (not to mention his many children). When he's forced to put down Melina, he immediately tries to replace her, something people can't do when their spouse dies.

Almost immediately, Lou Sedaris realizes he has made a mistake. When he walks Sophie, he no longer finds pleasure in hearing people comment on her size, nor does he feel energetic enough to keep up with the dog. Instead of laughing at the jokes people say when they see her, he just acknowledges them and continues on, trailing behind his massive dog.

Although it might seem like a good idea to replace a dog to ease the pain of losing a beloved pet, Lou Sedaris sees that it's not always possible to simply move on by spending time with a new animal. In the same way that his wife cannot be replaced, Melina can't be replaced either, no matter how much Lou likes Sophie. And yet, it's quite possible that Lou will learn to love Sophie on her own terms, integrating her into his life so that she becomes something of a family member—just like Melina was.

THE LEARNING CURVE

After graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Sedaris is offered a position as an adjunct writing instructor. He is completely unqualified to do this, having never published anything, but he accepts the job, focusing on how he'll present himself, what he'll wear, and the briefcase he'll take to class. When he finally gets to the classroom and sets down his briefcase, though, he realizes he hasn't prepared at all. Worse, he sees that—contrary to his expectations—his students aren't going to just start talking and asking questions. Rather, he has to figure out what to talk about and bring them out of their shells. On his first day, he gives them an in-class writing assignment. The next class, he brings cigarettes and ashtrays, since he himself can never write without smoking.

Sedaris's position as a writing instructor is a perfect storm for his fear of inadequacy, since he doesn't have any teaching credentials. To make matters more difficult, he focuses on the wrong aspects of his role as a teacher, thinking exclusively about how he will present himself to his students. This makes sense, considering that his first instinct is always to worry about how he appears to others. And yet, it doesn't matter whether or not he looks professional if he doesn't know what to do once he's standing before his class—a situation that only exacerbates his insecurities about his role as an instructor.

Sedaris is proud of his idea to let his students smoke until a student with asthma raises his hand and says that Aristophanes never smoked, nor did Jane Austen or the Brontë sisters. Sedaris listens to this, writing down the names of these writers so he can look them up later. He hasn't read much, mainly watching movie renditions of classic literature. As the semester continues, Sedaris fears that his students will find out that he's a fraud. In order to assert his authority, then, he frequently gets up to open or close the door, figuring that only the professor has the right to control the temperature and noise level of the classroom. With this in mind, he obsesses over the door, causing his students to wonder why he cares so much about whether it's open or closed.

As an instructor, Sedaris thinks almost exclusively about whether or not he deserves the authority he has over his students. Of course, his fear of inadequacy is compounded by the fact that he actually doesn't *know what he's doing. Despite this dynamic though, it's worth pausing to note that, for all his insecurities and lack of confidence, Sedaris is quite comfortable admitting his own shortcomings—after all, the majority of the essays in* Me Talk Pretty One Day *list the many ways in which he fails to measure up to other people's expectations. In this way, Sedaris frets over his feelings of inadequacy while unabashedly owning up to them as if they're nothing to be ashamed of.*

Sedaris assigns his students to write a letter to their mothers in prison, thinking that this is a fantastic assignment until a student comes up to him after class and, distraught, tells him that both her father and her uncle are in prison. After this experience, Sedaris stops giving his students in-class assignments, instead inciting conversations about celebrity gossip or asking them for good recipes—he does this under the pretense that such conversations will spark creativity, but in reality, he's just desperate to find ways to fill up class time. He also gives the students an opportunity to publicly discuss their sex lives, but most of them don't want to do this. Consequently, Sedaris starts screening soap opera episodes in class, using the time to catch up on television.

Once Sedaris gets over the initial anxiety surrounding teaching, he leans into his role as an instructor—despite the fact that he still doesn't feel as if he knows what he's doing. Rather than posturing as a well-versed professor, he does whatever he wants. In doing so, he exercises his power over the class even though he feels like a fraud. In other words, he doubles down on his insecurities while also completely owning up to his lack of experience, paradoxically remaining true to himself even though he's terrified his students will see him for who he is.

When an anonymous student complains to the writing department about Sedaris's use of class time, he tasks his class with writing predictions about what will happen on the next episode of the soap operas they're watching. He thinks this is a great assignment, though he's incensed when a student guesses that one of the characters will choke on a sandwich. This appalls Sedaris, who knows that a main character in *One Life to Live* would never die in such a disgraceful way. Feeling as if he has taught *One Life to Live* as seriously as his colleagues teach James Joyce or William Faulkner, he no longer allows his students to watch television in class, instead giving them boring essay assignments.

Sedaris's unconventional teaching style catches up with him when a student complains about his strange pedagogical practices. Instead of letting this scare him into running a traditional class, though, he merely adds a writing assignment to the periodic viewings of soap operas like One Life to Live. *In doing so, though, he realizes that his students aren't taking the class seriously, and the fact that this makes him so angry suggests that he truly believed in the value of his lessons about soap operas. In turn, readers get the sense that, though Sedaris resorted to watching television in class because he didn't know what else to do, he has more or less managed to convince himself that this is a sound approach to teaching writing. In a certain way, then, he has come to see himself as a legitimate instructor.*

One of the students in Sedaris's class is a woman who is much older than the students. She is, in fact, older than him. She never contributes to class discussion, and she always sits on the opposite side of the table as everyone else. After returning essays to the class one day, though, Sedaris is surprised by this woman's reaction to his written comments. In her essay, she wrote about her messy divorce, and though she rendered her intense emotion, she also ended the piece in the middle of a sentence. "Who are *you*," she asks Sedaris. "I mean, just who in the hell are you to tell *me* that *my* story has no ending." Sedaris has been dreading this question about his qualifications all semester. Unsure of what to say, he asks if can tell her the following day, but she says no.

Finally, Sedaris has to reckon with his worst fear—namely, that his students will challenge the legitimacy of his authority. He fears this because he feels inadequate, knowing that he doesn't have the experience or credentials to justify why, exactly, he's qualified to critique his students' writing. When he scrambles and fails to come up with an answer, readers once again see the extent to which his insecurities interfere with his ability to be himself, since he could simply dismiss this student's question as inappropriate or rude and move on. Instead, though, he indulges her question because it's something he's been asking himself since he started teaching.

All eyes on him, Sedaris tries to answer why he's qualified to be a writing professor. Then, suddenly, it hits him: "I am the only one who is paid to be in this room," he says. As soon as he says this, he knows it's a satisfactory answer and even a "perfectly acceptable teaching philosophy." From this point on, he will be able to teach confidently, knowing without question that he deserves his position. Swelling with conviction, he asks his students if they have more "stupid" questions, and the older student raises her hand once again and asks how much Sedaris makes. In response, Sedaris answers honestly and then watches as the class unites for the first time all semester, all of them laughing so loudly that he has to close the door so they don't disturb the "real teachers" in nearby classrooms.

Just when Sedaris manages to cement his authority by pointing out that he's the only person in the room who was deemed worthy of teaching, he loses all semblance of power by answering his student's question about how much he gets paid. He didn't need to answer this question and could have easily dismissed it, but the fact of the matter is that he lacks experience and isn't used to fielding difficult questions from students. Indeed, he answered out of a sense of naivety and inexperience—the very things that made him feel insecure and inadequate in the first place. And this time when he rushes to close the door, the act doesn't establish his authority. Instead, it helps him hide his feelings of inadequacy from the people in neighboring classrooms.

BIG BOY

While attending a friend's Easter dinner in Chicago one year, Sedaris excuses himself from the table to quickly visit the bathroom, saying he'll be right back. When he enters the bathroom, he sees a massive poop floating in the toilet. Disgusted that somebody would leave this, he tries to flush it. It doesn't go down. He only wants to pee and run some water over his face, but before he can do that, he has to find a way to get the large turd down the toilet, so he flushes again and again. This doesn't work. As he frets over the situation, somebody knocks on the door, and his sense of urgency increases. If he stays much longer in the bathroom, he realizes, his friends will think he's the kind of person who takes his time while "defecating" at parties—an idea that mortifies him.

Nobody wants to find themselves in the situation Sedaris now finds himself in. However, Sedaris is especially upset by such things, allowing the experience to exacerbate his insecurity. Rather than simply accepting that everybody "defecates" and that this isn't actually that *big of a deal, he worries incessantly about how everyone else will view him if they think he clogged the toilet. Once again, then, readers see just how much he cares about what others think of him.*

Looking at the poop, Sedaris honestly considers reaching into the toilet, grabbing it, and throwing it out the window. He can't even do this, though, because the apartment is on the first floor and some neighbors who are outside might see him do it. In light of this, he uses the handle of a plunger to start breaking the stool into smaller pieces. Meanwhile, the person outside the bathroom knocks again, and he says that he's almost out. Thinking about the fact that everyone has bowel movements, Sedaris wonders if this experience has taught him a lesson. Flushing once more, the stool finally disappears down the toilet, and Sedaris decides to forget about the matter, opening the door and immediately setting himself to the task of "examining the suspects."

Many of the essays in Me Talk Pretty One Day *culminate with a final sentence that functions like the punchline of a joke. In this case, the entirety of "Big Boy" exists to support the humor of the final line, in which Sedaris contradicts himself. After successfully flushing the toilet, he finally reflects on the fact that everyone clogs toilets sometimes and wonders if he has learned a lesson from this experience. This lesson, it seems, might be about how he should learn to care less about how others view him, or perhaps it's about how he should avoid making a big deal about embarrassing situations. As soon as he leaves the bathroom though, he starts "examining the suspects." This is the essay's final line, and it effectively erases Sedaris's newfound resolution to forget about the matter entirely. Instead of moving on from this experience, he decides to subject his friends to the very same kind of judgment that he was so afraid they might place on him if he didn't manage to flush.*

THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

Sedaris moves to New York City and lives in a small but decently priced apartment. He has very little money to his name, so he likes to walk by townhouses in the evenings and pretend that he lives in them, fantasizing about leading a life of wealth and luxury. He has never gotten jealous about money before, but now that he lives in New York, he can't help but notice the stark differences between the rich and the middle class. At one point, he gets hired as a personal assistant to a wealthy Colombian woman named Valencia who lives in a beautiful townhouse. This means that he gets to spend several days a week at her house, allowing him to appreciate what it feels like to be in the proximity of this kind of lifestyle.

Once more, Sedaris's attention to class disparity arises in Me Talk Pretty One Day. *This time, though, he approaches the issue from a different perspective. Although he's used to recognizing that he comes from a family who has more money than most of the people in his immediate environment, he now faces the fact that he has much less than many of the people around him. This is especially apparent because he lives in New York, a city where the extremely wealthy and the extremely poor live more or less alongside one another. In this context, Sedaris suddenly becomes jealous of other people's wealth, wishing he could live in a townhouse and lead a life of luxury. With this in mind, he decides to live vicariously through Valencia by working for her, doing what he can to feel wealthy.*

Unfortunately for Sedaris, Valencia turns out to be a very grating person to be around. The thing that irks Sedaris the most is that she acts like she's struggling financially, trying to make it seem like she's poor when, in reality, she's very rich. This means she always tries to pay people less than she owes them, convincing them to give her discounts by pretending to be strapped for cash. When Sedaris witnesses this, he's startled that Valencia would feel okay taking money from people who clearly need it more than she does, but he never says anything. As for his own experience with her, she underpays him and treats him unkindly, demanding unreasonable things of him. Worse, his paychecks frequently bounce, and she says this is his bank's fault.

When Valencia acts like she doesn't have money when she actually does, she trivializes what it means to struggle financially. Whereas Sedaris knows what it's like to barely scrape by in New York City, she lives in luxury. And yet, she tries to hide her lifestyle by behaving like she's desperate for money. This is especially aggravating because it means that she takes money away from people who actually need it, prioritizing her vanity and self-image over others' livelihood.

Valencia owns a small publishing company that publishes insignificant poets who turn to her for financial assistance, leeching off of her. When she believes that certain foreign bookstores owe her money for selling the few books her publishing company has published, she orders Sedaris to call them—even if the outstanding debt is less than twenty dollars. Tasked with this job, Sedaris pretends to make these calls, claiming the bookstores don't pick up. One day, Valencia shows him a flyer she found announcing that a pet store lost an exotic bird named Cheeky. The reward for finding Cheeky is $750, so she suggests that she and Sedaris find the bird and split the cash. Sedaris thinks this is absurd but agrees because he has no other choice.

It's clear that working for Valencia is emotionally draining and aggravating, since she is such an unreasonable person. However, Sedaris took this job in the first place so he could get a taste of what it's like to be wealthy in New York City. Because he works out of Valencia's townhouse, he can at least feel as if he's in the vicinity *of the kind of life he'd like to lead. And yet, he's also forced to carry out pointless and unrewarding tasks while dealing with Valencia's strange whims—things that undoubtedly keep him from enjoying the wealthy environment in which he finds himself.*

While working at his desk in Valencia's townhouse, Sedaris hears Valencia whispering at him and pointing outside. Gesturing to a pigeon on the branch of a tree outside the window, Valencia says that they have found Cheeky. She then tells Sedaris to coax the pigeon inside. He tries to tell her that this is a pigeon, but she refuses to listen. Thinking of all his bounced checks, Sedaris realizes that even if this pigeon *were* Cheeky, Valencia would find some way to take more than half of the reward. With this in mind, he finds himself unable to go after the bird, his pride keeping him from calling out the name "Cheeky." Before long, the pigeon flies away, and Valencia berates Sedaris.

Working for Valencia often means going along with rather demeaning tasks—tasks like chasing a pigeon and yelling, "Cheeky!" This, it seems, is the price Sedaris must pay for trying to enter into the world of Manhattan's wealthy elite. The question remains, however, whether or not being in this context actually lends him anything of tangible value. Given that he's reduced to trying to coax a pigeon inside, it seems obvious that this job is not *worth his while.*

Soon enough, Valencia gets Sedaris's attention again, claiming that Cheeky has returned. Looking outside, Sedaris sees another pigeon. Again, he lets the bird fly away. Valencia insults Sedaris, telling him he's good for nothing. This scene repeats time after time throughout the week, and Valencia gets so frustrated with Sedaris that she starts calling to tell him not to come in on the days he's supposed to work. He knows he's going to get fired, and he hates working for Valencia, but he also doesn't feel like quitting and finding a new job, so he endures her mistreatment.

By this point, Sedaris knows that getting to spend time in Valencia's beautiful townhouse isn't worth having to deal with her unreasonable requests. However, he doesn't quit because he doesn't feel like finding a new job, and while this might make him seem somewhat passive or lazy, it's worth keeping in mind that he's trying to survive financially in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Accordingly, then, leaving his job would mean he would have to open himself up to uncertainty, not knowing where his next paycheck would come from. In this way, his financial situation keeps him from pursuing a happier life.

One day, a mover arrives to take furniture from Valencia's house to an apartment she's rented and furnished for one of her authors. The mover's name is Patrick, and he quickly sees that Valencia will not tip him even though she misled him by saying that this is a one-man job, which it most certainly is not. Feeling sorry for Patrick, Sedaris helps him carry a sofa downstairs, but Patrick is the one who feels truly sorry, since he can tell that working for Valencia is terrible. Accordingly, he offers Sedaris a job as a mover. Sedaris accepts, joining Patrick's rag-tag team of movers. Patrick is a communist who hates being called "boss," and he drives his workers around in an old bread truck.

Finally, Sedaris manages to escape his job at Valencia's. His new job as a mover is much different than his job as Valencia's personal assistant—rather than spending his days in the vicinity of extreme wealth and trying to vicariously experience a life of luxury, he will now be riding around in the back of a communist's bread truck. In this way, it becomes clear that he has given up on his desire to integrate himself into wealthy society, instead deciding to take a job that won't be demeaning and aggravating.

The other movers include Ivan (a Russian immigrant dealing with schizophrenia), Richie (an ex-convict who murdered a man when he was a teenager), and Lyle (a folksinger from Queens). Sedaris particularly enjoys talking to Richie while sitting in the back of the truck, listening to him say things like, "I can't promise I'll never kill anyone again. [...] It's unrealistic to live your life within such strict parameters." He also likes working as a mover because it gives him a good chance to meet New Yorkers, and he learns how his fellow city-dwellers live. What's more, he gets a thrill out of the fact that people are sometimes afraid of him—all he needs to do, he notes, is throw down a dolly with some extra force and suddenly a client will frantically say, "Let's just all calm down and try to work this out."

It's unsurprising that Sedaris enjoys talking to an ex-convict like Richie. After all, Me Talk Pretty One Day *is full of essays in which Sedaris examines his own interest in morbid, strange, and unconventional topics. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that he would like hearing about Richie's experience as a murderer. During this time period, Sedaris also relishes the opportunity to present himself as a different kind of person than he really is, liking the idea that his clients think he's dangerous. This allows him to step into a new identity, one that is menacing and ominous—two things Sedaris doesn't normally embody. This dynamic also engages Sedaris's interest in class, since his clients clearly associate working-class people with danger and violence, assuming that anyone who works as a mover is unpredictable and tough.*

Sedaris begins to feel as if his place in the world isn't with people like Valencia, but "riding in a bread truck with [his] friends." He also enjoys talking to the customers while driving them to their new apartments, sitting next to them in the loud truck. Under such circumstances, the customers open up about their lives, telling Sedaris and the others extremely personal details. Sedaris finds this especially amusing because the truck's noise forces the customers to shout otherwise private information. "THEN SHE WHAT?" Sedaris and his fellow movers might ask, and the customer might say, "FUCKED HER EX-BOYFRIEND ON THIS SOFA I'D BOUGHT FOR OUR ANNIVERSARY." Hearing this sort of thing, Sedaris might ask, "HOW MANY TIMES?", and when the customer wonders why it matters, he might say, "IT DEPENDS. HOW MUCH WAS YOUR RENT?"

More than anything else, Sedaris is interested in other people, wanting to learn about the things that drive them to behave the way they behave. For this reason, he loves listening to his clients' private stories while riding in the bread truck. In this capacity, he's able to provide humorous commentary on the everyday lives of his fellow New Yorkers, proving that his job as a mover is already much more rewarding than his job as Valencia's personal assistant. Rather than trying to climb the social ladder by associating with people like Valencia, he realizes, he's much happier spending time with people he actually likes while doing a job that is fulfilling even if it isn't prestigious or glamorous.

Because of his communist values, Patrick dislikes moving rich people. Sometimes when he, Sedaris, and the others show up at a wealthy young hot-shot's apartment, he takes one look around and cancels the job, making up an excuse about something in the bread truck having suddenly broken. When Sedaris later points out that they would have earned good money, Patrick assures him that "guys like that are bad news." However, Patrick is more than willing to go out of his way to help attractive young women move, even if some of these customers create more work than necessary for the moving team. For instance, this happens when Sedaris and the others arrive at a young woman's apartment to find that she has packed nothing. Sedaris expects Patrick to turn right around, but instead he orders everyone to get to work while the woman talks on the phone the whole time.

Patrick has strong principles, which he prioritizes over wealth. This is all well and good, but Sedaris doesn't like it when his boss turns clients away, since this means Sedaris misses out on money. Considering that Sedaris doesn't necessarily share Patrick's stringent communist values, then, it's understandable that he might get upset when Patrick turns down an opportunity to make money. To exacerbate this dynamic, Patrick throws his principles to the wind if his clients are attractive young women, ultimately suggesting that he's willing to bend his own rules—but only when it suits him.

Whenever Patrick turns away business from rich clients, Sedaris complains. Unfazed, Patrick tells him that they'll make good money the next day, then asks how much money Sedaris needs anyway. When Sedaris says he wants enough money to buy a town house, Patrick informs him that he's "in the wrong business." Thinking about this, Sedaris concedes that Patrick is correct. Still, he can't help but think that his job as a mover has made him much happier than he was working for Valencia. These days, he is able to walk through the city and not care that other people have more money than him. He goes to movies, smokes a little marijuana, and generally feels untouched by jealousy, knowing that—at the very least—he doesn't have to call out the name Cheeky while chasing a pigeon.

Despite his misgivings about Patrick's business decisions, Sedaris is confident he made the right choice by leaving Valencia behind. Although he still wants to become rich someday, he has learned to accept his current life, appreciating his newfound ability to cast aside feelings of financial jealousy. In turn, readers see that it's often better to prioritize happiness and dignity over the desire to become rich.

TODAY'S SPECIAL

Sedaris and his partner, Hugh, go out to a fancy restaurant in New York City before going to a movie. Because he didn't bring his own, the restaurant gives Sedaris a suit jacket to wear, and it looks absurd on him. Trying to ignore this, he and Hugh place their orders, struggling with the absurdly intricate and strange nature of the meals, which include dishes like "raw Atlantic swordfish served in a dark chocolate gravy and garnished with fresh mint." Sedaris makes a joke to the waiter, pretending that he's tired of eating this dish yet again, but the waiter doesn't appreciate the humor. This causes Sedaris to reflect on the strange nature of dining in New York City, where restaurants pair unlikely foods with one another and arrange meals in ways that make them disconcertingly unrecognizable.

Once again, Sedaris observes the subtle ways in which society at large often takes ridiculous things for granted. In this essay, he turns his attention to the fine dining industry in New York City, criticizing it for taking itself too seriously and—more importantly—for losing sight of what really matters: satisfying customers with tasty food. To that end, he intimates that fancy restaurants have become too focused on finding unconventional ways to cook and plate the meals they serve. By calling attention to this, he invites readers to laugh at the self-seriousness of fine dining.

Chief among Sedaris's complaints about dining out in New York is that customers aren't allowed to smoke in restaurants. If he had his way, he thinks, he would like a chef to figure out how to prepare and cook a cigarette. When it's time for dessert, he repeatedly tells the waiter, "I just couldn't." After paying the check, Sedaris and Hugh walk to the movie theater, rushing because Sedaris wants to get something to eat on the way there. Stopping at a cart, he orders a hotdog with mustard, thinking about how his friends can't believe he's willing to each such food. "How can you eat those?" they ask, pointing out that these hotdogs are often made of pig's lips, hearts, and eyelids. To Sedaris's mind, this means the hotdogs only have three ingredients, making them much simpler and more "timeless" than the food he eats at fancy restaurants.

That Sedaris would prefer to eat a hotdog made of the most unappetizing body parts of a pig says something about his approach to food. Indeed, he isn't impressed by creative flourishes or obscure flavor pairings. Instead, he cares exclusively about taste and simplicity. And since hotdogs taste good regardless of what body parts they're made of (within reason, that is), he appreciates them much more than the small helpings he receives in overpriced restaurants—something that says something about his lack of interest in indulging a supposedly high-class lifestyle for the sake of status and self-image.

CITY OF ANGELS

Sedaris has a friend named Alisha who visits him in New York City several times a year. To his mind, she's the perfect guest because she doesn't care what they do; she is willing to just go along with Sedaris's daily life. However, she brings a friend along one year around Christmastime. The friend's name is Bonnie, and Alisha doesn't know her well, though she thinks she's nice. Bonnie has never traveled outside of North Carolina, and by the time she and Alisha arrive in New York City, Alisha whispers, "Run for your life" to Sedaris. It turns out that Bonnie is extremely rude and constantly thinks people in New York are trying to take advantage of her. For this reason, she yells at the cabdriver who takes her and Alisha to Sedaris's apartment, refusing to tip him. Worse, she's not content to simply go along with Sedaris's daily routine.

Sedaris enjoys chronicling the ins and outs of daily life, but he also likes creating character studies of intolerable people. This is exactly what he does in "City of Angels," in which he presents Bonnie, a woman who will clearly disrupt his life as long as she's staying in his apartment. Of course, it's obvious that Bonnie is quite rude, but it's also worth noting that Sedaris is a fairly stubborn host. Furthermore, he reveals a bit of his own snobbery when he goes out of his way to point out that Bonnie has never left North Carolina—a detail that he seems to hold against her, as if she is woefully uncultured. To be fair, Bonnie does seem rather inexperienced, but Sedaris appears to use this as a reason to dislike her, effectively subjecting her to the kind of classist judgment that he himself often criticizes.

Bonnie has an itinerary planned for her time in New York. The problem, though, is that Sedaris hates going to tourist attractions, which aren't the kind of destinations New Yorkers frequent. When he tries to show her a few casual, lesser known spots, she criticizes the locations. When they all go out to eat, Bonnie yells at the servers, accusing them of overcharging her. Later, she forces Alisha to take her to a Broadway play, and though Sedaris thinks this will satisfy her, she dashes out the following day with Alisha to go to the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, the UN, and the South Street Seaport. When they return, Sedaris is astounded to hear that Bonnie still wants to go to the Plaza Hotel for high tea. Then, when he suggests that she shouldn't wear denim overalls to high tea, she yells at him.

Bonnie is only interested in seeing New York City's tourist attractions—a fact that Sedaris holds against her. Rather than wanting a unique and authentic New York experience, she would prefer to go to the places that have the most crowds, effectively surrounding herself with other tourists. Of course, this isn't all that surprising, since it's understandable that somebody who's never been to New York City would want to see landmarks like the Empire State Building or the Statue of Liberty. Sedaris, however, can't fathom the idea of visiting these places, adopting an attitude of superiority over Bonnie. In doing so, he reveals his own narrowminded perspective while also highlighting Bonnie's unwillingness to venture beyond the stereotypical New York experience.

Sedaris walks Bonnie and Alisha to the Plaza Hotel for high tea, secretly loving the idea that Bonnie will be chastised for underdressing. Sedaris relishes this, especially since he did his best to convince her to change, meaning that he won't have to feel guilty when she's insulted by a fancy waiter. And yet, when he comes back an hour after dropping them at the Plaza, he's appalled to see that the place is overrun by people who are exactly like Bonnie. Everyone, it seems, is from out of town and is dressed for comfort, not style. On the way back from the Plaza, Bonnie says, "Now those were some nice New Yorkers," referring to the other tourists she saw at high tea. Sedaris tries to explain to her that these people aren't *real* New Yorkers, but it's no use—Bonnie is convinced.

The irony of Bonnie's visit is that she ends up seeking out the places in New York that are most in line with her normal lifestyle. Although going to high tea at the Plaza Hotel seems like a uniquely New York experience, the truth is that only tourists actually do this kind of thing, meaning that Bonnie ends up consorting with people like herself instead of meeting people who live in Manhattan. This frustrates Sedaris, who is especially annoyed when Bonnie claims that the other tourists at the Plaza are "nice New Yorkers." What's even more disconcerting to him, though, is that he was wrong: Bonnie wasn't *chastised for underdressing, meaning that she might actually have a better understanding of New York City than Sedaris himself.*

After attending high tea, Bonnie forces Alisha and Sedaris to continue following her around to various other tourist attractions throughout New York City. It's almost Christmas, so there are thousands of people crowded by the giant Christmas tree at Rockefeller Plaza. Sedaris hates walking through this part of town and dislikes how many people—how many *tourists*—are beside him, but Bonnie loves the experience and feels, in Sedaris's words, "overjoyed to have discovered a New York without the New Yorkers." While she takes in the hectic scene of tourists, Sedaris fights through the crowd to make his way home, suddenly feeling that he is an "outsider" in the very city he used to think of as home.

Forced to come face to face with a side of New York City he normally avoids, Sedaris realizes that his own vision of the city doesn't define the entirety of Manhattan. This, in turn, makes him feel as if he doesn't know New York as well as he thought, realizing to his horror that a person from out of town can visit the city and enjoy it without even experiencing the lifestyle he himself leads—an idea that challenges his somewhat snobby belief that his version of New York is better than Bonnie's.

A SHINER LIKE A DIAMOND

Lou Sedaris has a special place in his heart for his daughter Amy. This is because Amy is his most attractive daughter. He often talks about how Amy will "shine like a diamond" in front of a camera, which is why he's especially happy when a magazine decides to include her in a photographic feature of "interesting New York women." With this on his mind, he calls Sedaris to make sure Amy is taking the opportunity seriously, wanting her to benefit as much as possible from the feature. This causes Sedaris to reflect on his father's old-fashioned approach to physical attractiveness. Lou believes Amy's beauty is her "greatest asset," so he keeps close tabs on her looks. In fact, he pays close attention to *all* of his daughters in this regard, always quick to point out when they've gained weight.

Once again, it becomes clear that, although Lou Sedaris cares fiercely about his children, he often tries to support them in misguided ways. To that end, he subjects Amy and his other daughters to his outdated belief that physical beauty is a woman's "greatest asset," a viewpoint that reduces women to their looks. When he calls Sedaris to make sure that Amy is taking her upcoming photoshoot seriously, he demonstrates his characteristic overbearing nature while also showing that he wants the best for his daughter. Simply put, his interest in his children's lives isn't always helpful, but it does prove his desire to do what he can to support them.

When Sedaris and Amy visit Lou for Christmas one year, Amy wears the bottom half of a "fatty suit." Thinking his daughter has gained an incredible amount of weight, Lou is beside himself. When Amy goes to the bathroom, he laments to Sedaris, asking what happened to her and saying that she's "killing him." Sedaris goes along with Amy's joke, telling his father not to say anything. Plus, he adds, he's heard that many men like women with such large rear-ends. Eyeing his son with extreme disappointment, Lou says, "Man, what you don't know could fill a book." For the rest of Amy's stay, Lou makes frequent comments about her eating habits, suggesting that she must be eating too much because she's bored. He even offers to pay her to seek "professional help," adding that he'll pay her for every pound she loses.

Amy is well aware of Lou's obsession with physical beauty. Because she herself doesn't seem to care much about such things, she decides to poke fun of her father's overbearing preoccupation with her looks. In doing so, she draws attention to his inability to see beyond her looks, revealing just how superficial his ideas about beauty truly are. Although he only wants to support his daughters, he does so in a way that puts unnecessary pressure on them to conform to outmoded ideas about body image and self-worth.

The morning that Amy and Sedaris are scheduled to leave their father's house, Amy takes off the fat suit. Her father is extraordinarily relieved, admitting that she fooled him. In the coming months, he continues to talk about the fat suit, saying that, though Amy tricked him, he always thought she was still beautiful—even with the fat suit on. This, he says, is because she's beautiful "both inside and out." However, this mentality recedes when he starts obsessing over her magazine appearance, calling Sedaris time and again to ensure everything goes well.

Lou Sedaris is able to celebrate Amy's inner beauty only after learning that she hasn't gained any weight. Although he says that he was capable of seeing through her physical appearance when she was wearing the fat suit, it's clear that this is not the case, based on the fact that he couldn't stop talking about her weight, saying that she was "killing" him. This, in turn, proves that the support he shows his children isn't quite as unconditional as he'd like to think.

When Lou calls to ask how the photoshoot went, Sedaris pretends not to know. In reality, he knows that Amy didn't wash her hair before the shoot. While waiting to be called by the makeup artist, she complimented the other women who were going to be featured, praising their beautiful outfits. When it was her turn to see the makeup artist, she said she wanted to look like somebody had "beaten the shit out of" her. The makeup artist obliged, drawing huge black eyes and other wounds on her face. Amy loved this look. After the photoshoot, she walked through the streets, and whenever somebody asked what happened, she smiled and said, "I'm in love. Can you believe it? I'm finally, totally in love, and I feel great."

Once again, Amy demonstrates how little she cares about beauty. Instead of trying to look pretty in the way her father wants her to, she would prefer to turn the photoshoot into an opportunity to exercise her sense of humor. In this way, she prioritizes being herself over satisfying her father's overbearing hopes or expectations.

NUTCRACKER.COM

As an engineer at IBM, Lou Sedaris has always fantasized about the internet, speaking at length to Sedaris about its future capabilities. This has always bored Sedaris, though he has to admit that his father accurately predicted the large-scale proliferation of the internet and the ways in which it has made its way into contemporary life. Still, he resists technology, preferring to use typewriters over computers. He detests the ugly holiday cards he receives from people who make their own family newsletters using absurd fonts. Unwilling to change his own habits, he lugs his typewriter everywhere he goes, attracting quite a bit of attention from people who think typewriters are already outdated. This frustrates Sedaris, who can't stand it when airport security forces him to unpack the typewriter to inspect it, or when people in neighboring hotel rooms complain about the noise the machine makes when he uses it.

"Nutcracker.com" is Sedaris's ode to the technology he grew up with, as well as a lament of the rapid ways in which the world changes. Frustrated that nobody uses typewriters anymore, he detests the proliferation of computers and the internet, feeling as if these technological advances have pushed his lifestyle to the sidelines of contemporary society. Inherent in this frustration is an overall resistance to change, as if a new way of life will threaten how he moves through the world. In this way, new forms of technology feel like assaults on the identity Sedaris has formed as somebody committed to a certain way of doing things.

"You should really be using a computer," everyone tells Sedaris when they see him using a typewriter. Even more annoying to him is the fact that everyone wants to use email instead of writing physical letters. Accordingly, he's disappointed when Amy gets a computer and tells him she only uses it for email. Trying to show her brother the benefits of using email, she shows him a video somebody sent her of a naked man lying face-down on the floor. A woman enters the room dressed in pointed shoes with "pencil-thin heels," and when the man moves so that his testicles come into view, she responds as if she's just seen a mouse, stomping on his testicles, "kick[ing] them mercilessly." Sedaris is mesmerized by this and suddenly understands why his father has always cared so much about the internet: it is "capable of provoking such wonder," he thinks.

What Sedaris fails to consider about the internet is that he might actually be able to use it in ways that appeal to him. Before Amy shows him this strange video, he thinks that the only reason to own a computer is to write emails—something he's uninterested in doing because he likes writing physical letters. When Amy shows him the video of a man getting his testicles trampled, though, Sedaris realizes that the internet is vast and strange—just like life itself. Rather than taking away his ability to live the way he wants, then, this technology will give him new ways of exploring the interests he already has.

SEE YOU AGAIN YESTERDAY

Sedaris has never idolized France like some people do. The only reason he now lives in Normandy is because of his relationship with Hugh, whom he meets through a mutual friend. He needs to borrow a ladder, so his friend refers him to Hugh, who happens to have a ladder. When Sedaris fetches it, he's impressed by Hugh's apartment in an old chocolate factory. Coming inside, Sedaris smells apple pie and realizes Hugh has stayed home on a Saturday night to bake and listen to country music. Sedaris is picky when it comes to finding long-term lovers, always capable of identifying something about a person that annoys him. However, when he learns that Hugh has a house in Normandy, he pictures himself living a foreign, exciting life in France. Living abroad would be a challenge, and he likes the idea of overcoming this challenge, so he decides to pursue Hugh.

Instead of focusing on Hugh himself, Sedaris thinks about all the ways his own life could improve if he had what Hugh has. This, it seems, is how he approaches their relationship, seeing it as a convenient arrangement that will enable him to lead a better life. Of course, there are most likely other reasons that Sedaris decides to pursue Hugh, but they exist outside the scope of this essay and, for that matter, outside the scope of Me Talk Pretty One Day *as a whole. In keeping with his previously established desire to lead a wealthy, rewarding life, he gravitates toward Hugh because doing so will allow him to live a refined, international life between France and the United States.*

Nine months later, Hugh moves in with Sedaris. Together, they plan to spend the month of August in Normandy, but Sedaris backs out at the last minute, realizing he's afraid of going to France. Everyone in France, he thinks, is cultured and refined. Worse, they will never accept or like a person like Sedaris. Plus, Sedaris is convinced that French people dislike Americans, and this idea disconcerts him because he—like all Americans—has been raised to believe that the United States is the best country in the world. However, he overcomes his fears after he sees the fantastic things that Hugh is able to buy for him in France. According to Sedaris, Hugh isn't very good at shopping, so the fact that he's able to buy such interesting gifts indicates that it's quite easy to find intriguing items—like taxidermy kittens—in France.

In alignment with Sedaris's strange tastes, he is deeply impressed by the fact that a person can easily buy things like taxidermy kittens in France. By suggesting that this is the primary reason he decides to go with Hugh the next time he goes to France, Sedaris characteristically frames a big life decision in a humorous, off-handed way. Despite this humor, though, it's worth noting that he originally stays behind in the United States because he doesn't feel cultured or elegant enough to travel to France—yet another sign of the ways in which his close attention to class differences impacts his daily life.

The next summer, Sedaris accompanies Hugh to France, looking forward to the shopping and the ability to smoke in restaurants. The only French word he knows is "bottleneck," but this doesn't discourage him from making conversation. Whenever he sees somebody, he says, "Bottleneck." Contrary to what he thought about how the French might treat Americans, everyone in Normandy is pleasant and ultimately thrilled that Sedaris has come all the way from the United States just to vacation in Normandy. In fact, everyone loves that Sedaris is from New York City, which Sedaris thinks most French people see as the best place in the United States. Everyone around him seems to think that he has had intimate run-ins with major celebrities, and when he indulges this idea by offhandedly mentioning the famous people he *has* seen, a group of teenagers starts hanging out in front of his and Hugh's house.

Sedaris's stories about his time in France allow him to interrogate the idea of national identity. As he tries to integrate himself into French culture, he gains a new perspective on his own background, seeing New York City through new eyes. However, he has yet to actually attempt to fit into life in Normandy, as evidenced by the fact that the only word he knows is "bottleneck." Until he makes a true effort to learn the language, it seems, he will remain something of an outsider in France, even if his neighbors are eager to make his acquaintance.

Sedaris tries to improve his French vocabulary, learning new nouns like "ashtray," "hammer," and "screwdriver." Still, this doesn't enable him to converse with his neighbors, and he starts feeling like an odd man-child—a grown adult with a toddler's vocabulary. The problem, though, is that people don't treat him like a child. At the very least, toddlers receive positive reinforcement for putting their limited vocabulary on display. Frustrated, Sedaris tries to convince himself that he doesn't even care about learning French, instead focusing on completing a number of repairs to the house and—when he and Hugh visit Paris at the end of the summer—buying incredible souvenirs.

Sedaris's frustration and overall lack of interest in applying himself to the task of learning French makes it hard for him to feel at home in France. Even though everyone is kind to him and nobody looks down on him in the classist way he originally feared, he can't deny that he occupies a strange position in French society because of his meager linguistic skills. In other words, he strongly feels the impact of his inadequate French skills, but he isn't quite willing to devote himself to improving.

Back at home after his first trip to France, Sedaris relishes his ability to speak to strangers. He's also more aware of the people he sees who are from other countries. These people timidly make their way through the life in New York City. Watching this, Sedaris realizes that Americans tend to move through life abroad with an ingrained sense of security and privilege, always knowing they can say, "We'll just call the embassy and see what *they* have to say."

At home in the United States once again, Sedaris finds that his perspective on his home country has shifted. More specifically, he identifies a form of American arrogance, which gives people undue confidence when they're abroad. It is perhaps this kind of arrogance that emboldened Sedaris himself to say "bottleneck" whenever somebody spoke to him in French, not caring that he couldn't properly navigate everyday conversations. That Sedaris recognizes this dynamic when he comes home from France suggests that traveling is capable of broadening a person's perspective.

The next summer, Sedaris goes back to Normandy with Hugh. This time, he says things like, "See you again yesterday!" When he leaves at the end of the summer, he once again vows to take French classes before the following year—a resolution he abandons as soon as he gets home. The next summer, he learns 300 new words, none of which are useful to his everyday life. He now knows how to say words and phrases like "exorcism," "facial swelling," "death penalty," "slaughterhouse," "sea monster," and "witch doctor." The following summer, he learns new words by reading a gossip magazine, though this is also useless in his everyday life in the countryside. The next trip, he learns phrases people actually use, imitating dogwalkers and picking up their strict commands.

Slowly but surely, Sedaris learns French. However, he goes about this process in a very unconventional way, opting to learn odd phrases like "facial swelling" before mastering how to have a simple conversation. Because most of the essays in Me Talk Pretty One Day *are primarily structured to make readers laugh, it's unsurprising that he focuses on his quirky approach to learning French, providing humorous commentary on the difficulties of learning a new language.*

After Sedaris's sixth trip to France, he knows 1,564 words. In New York, a large hotel begins construction outside his and Hugh's apartment window, so they decide to move to Paris for a couple of years. Sedaris now looks forward to learning French in earnest and, moreover, to smoking wherever he wants.

Moving to Paris presents Sedaris with an opportunity to immerse himself in an entirely new way of life. However, the thing he's most excited about isn't that he will gain new experiences, but that he'll be able to smoke indoors—something he used to be able to do in the United States before restaurants and stores banned smoking. In this way, he approaches his relocation to Paris as a way of recapturing something he lost instead of gaining something new.

ME TALK PRETTY ONE DAY

Living in Paris, Sedaris returns to school as a 41-year-old. He attends a school with a number of other international students, many of whom are from different countries. Although the other students don't speak perfect French, Sedaris is intimidated by their confidence. During his first class, he struggles to understand his teacher. Although he can comprehend most of what she's saying, certain crucial words elude him. When she asks the class if they know the alphabet, Sedaris's first reaction is to laugh because it's been so long since somebody has asked him this. But then, after thinking about it, he realizes that he *doesn't* know the alphabet, or at least doesn't know how to recite it in French.

Realizing that he doesn't know how to recite the alphabet in French, Sedaris experiences the humbling nature of learning a new language. Although he has previously demonstrated a lack of motivation to integrate himself in French culture, he has now decided to earnestly set himself to the task of learning French. In doing so, he has to face the harsh fact that he is not above anything and must approach his studies with the humility of a young child. Given that Sedaris often struggles with feeling inadequate, this is undoubtedly a challenging predicament.

Sedaris's French teacher asks her students to say their name, nationality, occupation, something they like, and something they dislike. Whenever people say what they dislike, she makes fun of them, saying things like, "How is it that we've been blessed with someone as unique and original as you?" As class goes on, she becomes increasingly hostile, and Sedaris frets about what he'll say. He has no idea what to say he loves, since he doesn't know the necessary words to explain that he loves looking through medical textbooks about "severe dermatological conditions."

On top of the fact that signing up for French classes forces Sedaris into an uncomfortable place of humility, his teacher is frighteningly mean. No matter what he does, then, it seems he won't be able to escape ridicule and embarrassment—two things that will no doubt exacerbate his preexisting feelings of insecurity and fears of inadequacy.

When his turn comes, Sedaris lists the kinds of food he hates. He then says that he loves typewriters, the word "bruise" in French, and his floor waxer. In saying this, he misgenders the words for typewriter and floor waxer—something his teacher berates him for. As she insults him, he says nothing, deciding not to explain that he thinks it's ridiculous to assign genders to inanimate objects. Why, he wonders, would anyone ever decide that a crack pipe is a woman or a dishrag a man? Still, he says nothing and lets his teacher go on. Eventually, she goes to the next person and then the next, continuing to mercilessly insult her new students.

In this section, Sedaris comments on the strange fact that the French language assigns genders to its nouns. It is this kind of casual observation about things that most people take for granted that characterizes Sedaris's writing, revealing not only his unwillingness to accept supposedly normal ways of doing things, but also his ability to highlight just how strange some things truly are. Unfortunately, though, he's too self-conscious about his French to express this to his teacher in the moment, so he simply sits back as she belittles him.

Throughout the semester, Sedaris and his fellow students learn to put up with their French teacher's irascible nature, realizing that her mood changes drastically by the minute. She often throws chalk at them, and though she never punches anyone, Sedaris stays on his guard just in case. One day she turns to him and, in perfect English, says, "I hate you." As he gapes at her, surprised that she has used English even though they're not allowed to speak anything but French, she adds, "I really, really hate you." Trying to deal with this environment, he starts studying for hours every night, laboring over his homework and completing fill-in-the-blank sentences with phrases like: "A quick run around the lake? I'd love to! Just give me a moment while I strap on my wooden leg." His teacher is unamused by this attempt at humor.

In order to deal with his cruel French teacher, Sedaris devotes himself to his work like never before. More importantly, though, he doesn't lose his sense of humor. In fact, he indulges his knack for quirky comedy by integrating it into his homework. This is a perfect representation of how he uses humor in all aspects of his life, prioritizing it above even his own feelings. In this regard, then, one might argue that Sedaris's preoccupation with comedy is something of a coping mechanism, though this argument might also be too prescriptive, since the essays in Me Talk Pretty One Day *are uninterested in actually mining such deep psychological or emotional matters.*

Sedaris's interactions with his terrifying teacher make him extremely self-conscious about his speaking skills. Before studying with her, he felt confident enough to use his French even though it was very bad. Now, though, he's too afraid to even answer the telephone. The only thing that makes him feel better about being a student in this woman's class is the fact that his peers are also struggling. They huddle together in the halls before class and talk about how they cry at night. Consoling each other, they say things like, "Much work and someday you talk pretty." When Sedaris took a French class in New York City, the students were competitive with each other. But here, the students feel a sense of camaraderie.

Sedaris's French teacher is obviously meaner than she should be, creating a hostile classroom environment that ends up scaring people like Sedaris from even trying to use their French. At the same time, though, her cruelty encourages the students to unite with one another, trying to support each other instead of competing with one another like the students in Sedaris's French class in New York City. At the very least, then, Sedaris knows he's not the only person who dreads coming to class.

Sedaris begins to feel as if he'll never be able to learn French. One day, though, his teacher looks straight at him and says, "Every day spent with you is like having a cesarean section." In this moment, he realizes that—for the first time ever—he has understood every single word spoken to him in French. This doesn't mean he can respond, but he's delighted just to understand his wicked teacher, listening to her as she adds, "You exhaust me with your foolishness and reward my efforts with nothing but pain, do you understand me?" Ecstatic, he uses his flawed French to tell her that he *does* understand, pleading for her to go on, saying, "Talk me more, you, plus, please, plus."

Even though Sedaris dislikes his teacher and is afraid of her, he is overjoyed when he realizes that he has finally understood an entire phrase in French. Rather than resenting her for insulting him, he celebrates the fact that he's making progress, thereby indicating that he has managed to focus on his attempt to learn French instead of on his various insecurities. Indeed, his ability to ignore his teacher's insult suggests that he has achieved a new level of self-assurance.

JESUS SHAVES

In French class one day, Sedaris's teacher starts a conversation about holidays. She normally goes from one student to the next in an orderly fashion, asking questions out of the textbook in a way that makes it easy for Sedaris to anticipate which question will fall to him. Today, though, the students are encouraged to answer whenever they feel like it. This means that most of the answers end up coming from a middle-aged Moroccan woman who grew up speaking French. She is in Sedaris's class because she wants to work on her spelling, but she is otherwise fluent. With confidence, she smugly leans back in her chair and shouts out the answers. However, when the teacher asks what people do on **Easter**, the Moroccan woman asks, "Excuse me, but what's an Easter?"

One of the ways Sedaris explores identity in Me Talk Pretty One Day *is by comparing and contrasting national customs, setting one culture next to another so that he can more objectively consider the practices of his own nation. This is precisely what he does in "Jesus Shaves," as the Moroccan woman's lack of knowledge about Easter grants him the opportunity to look at the holiday anew and interrogate it from an alternative angle. (To clarify, the Moroccan woman most likely doesn't know about Easter because Easter is a Christian holiday, and Morocco is a predominantly Islamic country.)*

Sedaris doesn't care much for **Easter**. As a Greek-American family, the Sedarises always celebrated Easter according to the Greek Orthodox tradition, which meant Sedaris and his siblings didn't get to go on Easter egg hunts on the same day as their peers (since Greek Easter takes place several weeks later). While celebrating, they would toast each other with red eggs, and whoever had the only unbroken one was supposed to enjoy a year of good luck. The only year Sedaris won, his mother died, he got robbed, and he had to go to the emergency room. Despite his reluctant attitude toward Easter, though, he thinks he can confidently help his classmates describe the holiday to the Moroccan woman. One student says that Easter is "a party for to eat of the lamb," explaining that "one may too eat of the chocolate."

Sedaris uses the conversation about Easter in his French class as an opportunity to reflect on his own experience with the holiday, revealing that his relationship with Easter isn't necessarily the same as the average American's. Still, he's familiar with the way most non-Greek Orthodox families celebrate Easter, though his own alternate perspective only further demonstrates that there are multiple ways of looking at the same thing—especially when that thing is a religious holiday. With this in mind, he prepares readers to challenge the things they have perhaps always taken for granted about Easter.

When Sedaris's French teacher asks who brings the chocolate on **Easter**, Sedaris raises his hand because he knows the French word for "rabbit." "The Rabbit of Easter," he says. "He bring of the chocolate." Perplexed, his teacher stares at him, asking if he really meant to say *rabbit*. Sedaris assures her that he spoke correctly, explaining that the Easter Bunny comes in the night with a basket of food. The teacher shakes her head and says that in France a flying bell comes from Rome to deliver the chocolate. This confounds Sedaris, who asks how the bell would know where people live. In response, his teacher asks how a rabbit would know this, and though he recognizes the validity of this question, he can't help but feel that rabbits at least have *eyes*. Confused, the Moroccan woman who asked about Easter isn't listening anymore.

The confusion that arises when Sedaris and his teacher talk about Easter perfectly encapsulates the surprising cultural differences that often exist between two nations, even when those nations might not seem that different from one another. Indeed, the differences between Morocco and France are rather evident because one nation is predominantly Christian while the other is mostly Islamic. In reality, though, France and the United States are just as foreign to one another in some regards as France and Morocco. By putting this dynamic on display, Sedaris invites readers to reconsider the things they take for granted about their own cultures and what they think they know about other countries.

After trying to describe **Easter** to the Moroccan woman, Sedaris wonders if he and his classmates would have been able to effectively describe the holiday even if they *could* speak perfect French. How, he wonders, could they possibly have made sense of Christianity, especially with all of them coming from different backgrounds? This, Sedaris notes, is the nature of religion—it requires people to have a patient kind of faith, one that helps them believe things that are otherwise difficult to explain. In the same way that religious people cling tightly to their faith, Sedaris knows that he and his fellow students need to have their own kind of faith: the faith to believe that they will someday get better at speaking French.

Sedaris isn't religious, but he does recognize the beauty and value of faith. Admiring the kind of devotion it takes to believe in something bigger than oneself (something spiritual and mysterious), he applies a religious way of thinking to his own life, acknowledging that his attempt to learn French requires a similar kind of forward-looking optimism. This is one of the few times throughout Me Talk Pretty One Day *that he allows himself to become somewhat sentimental, casting aside humor in the interest of making a sincere observation about the nature of faith.*

If, Sedaris thinks, he can convince himself that he'll someday become fluent in French, then he should also be able to believe in Christianity. Thinking this way, he considers God and humanity and feels his heart "expand[ing]" to accommodate the universe's many beautiful miracles until, suddenly, he returns to the original topic of conversation, thinking, "A bell, though—that's fucked up."

Sedaris lets a rare form of poetic wonder creep into the end of "Jesus Shaves," celebrating the beauty of faith instead of focusing on making a joke. However, he only does this to build himself up to the punchline of this essay, when he says, "A bell, though—that's fucked up." By saying this, he cheekily contradicts everything he has just said about embracing the mysteries of life and believing in things he might otherwise see as difficult to comprehend. He also ironically makes it seem as if believing in a rabbit who delivers chocolate is more logical and sane than believing in a flying bell, ultimately implying that it's absurd to believe either of these things. In turn, he once again urges readers to appreciate the ridiculous ideas that society has taken for granted and accepted as reasonable.

THE TAPEWORM IS IN

Before living in Paris, Sedaris takes a French class in which his teacher has him and his fellow students listen to cassette tapes of people speaking French. In these tapes, innocent and boring young people have uncomplicated conversations about where to eat or about the things they like. Sedaris has never been the type of person to use a **Walkman**, but he's surprised to find how much he enjoys listening to this tape while walking through the streets of New York City. Later, in Paris, he continues to walk through the city wearing the Walkman. This is mainly because he has nothing better to do, since he doesn't like going out with his classmates, all of whom are too young and enthusiastic (which makes him feel old and out of place).

Although Sedaris is no longer as insecure as he was when he attended art school (or when he was on crystal meth and making conceptual art), it's clear that he is still quite self-conscious. For this reason, he enjoys the privacy that his Walkman affords him, since it allows him to walk in public without having to worry about interacting with others. The fact that he doesn't like spending time with his fellow classmates also supports the notion that he is insecure, since he's worried about feeling out of place with his younger peers.

Walking through Paris with his **Walkman**, Sedaris listens to books on tape. The books are in English, and though he doesn't necessarily like them, he enjoys the feeling of having something to listen to as he goes through the city. When he finishes these, he tries to find tapes that are in French but discovers that books like *Fontaine's Fables* are too difficult for him to enjoy. Fortunately for him, though, his sister Amy sends him an "audio walking tour of Paris," along with a book called *Pocket Medical French*, which is a small phrasebook that comes with a tape intended to teach English-speaking doctors how to pronounce medical terms. At first, he listens to the walking tour and learns interesting things about his neighborhood (like that people used to get burned alive near his apartment), but then he switches to *Pocket Medical French*.

Again, Sedaris's attachment to his Walkman underscores his desire to retreat into his own world even as he goes out in public. What's more, his interest in Pocket Medical French *once more reminds readers of his eclectic and comedic taste, confirming that he would rather indulge his strange interests than actually put himself out there by interacting with the people he passes on the streets of Paris.*

Listening to *Pocket Medical French*, Sedaris learns how to say things like, "Remove your dentures and all of your jewelry," and "You now need to deliver the afterbirth." Of course, he hasn't yet had occasion to actually *use* any of these phrases, but listening to the cassette makes him feel as if he'll one day be able to walk through Paris without his Walkman and consort with passersby in perfect French. With this in mind, he imagines himself drinking champagne at a party and turning to his host and asking if he has "noticed any unusual discharge." Or, while boarding a yacht, he might look at a young countess and say, "We need to start an IV. But first could I trouble you for a stool sample?" Until then, though, he notes that readers might find him walking through Paris and muttering, "Has anything else been inserted into your anus?"

Listening to Pocket Medical French *on his Walkman allows Sedaris to escape into a different world, and a decidedly strange one at that. By focusing on his odd, macabre interest in the practice of medicine (and, for that matter, by focusing on his humor), he manages to sidestep the stressors that come along with getting by in a foreign city. What's more, listening to medical terms in French makes him feel like he's learning something, thereby making the activity seem worthwhile even if it's unlikely that he'll ever actually use any of this knowledge.*

MAKE THAT A DOUBLE

Sedaris continues to struggle with correctly determining whether or not certain words in French are masculine or feminine. It simply doesn't make sense to him that a language would gender its nouns, especially when there seems to be no logic driving this system. For instance, the word "vagina" is masculine—a fact that drives Sedaris crazy. According to him, there are two kinds of French that Americans in Paris tend to speak: Hard French and Easy French. Hard French is the kind of French he is trying to learn, which requires actually learning the language and using it correctly. Easy French, on the other hand, is just yelling English at French servers. Whenever Sedaris hears an American yelling that he wants a steak, for instance, he angrily thinks about how little this person knows, thinking, "That's *Mister* steak to you, buddy."

As a resident of Paris, Sedaris is able to recognize American arrogance when he sees it. He has already identified the confident way that Americans move through foreign countries, but now his concern is about how some Americans don't even try to speak French when they're in France. Of course, it's worth noting that he himself was perfectly comfortable living in Normandy for an extend period of time without knowing any French except for the word "bottleneck." Nonetheless, he is now invested in learning to speak correctly, and it is precisely because this takes so much effort that he resents his fellow Americans for not even trying.

One of Sedaris's French friends tells him that French people never confuse the gender of a word. Even children, she says, don't make this mistake. This discourages Sedaris, who develops a new technique: avoiding the problem altogether. Knowing that pluralizing words often obscures their masculinity or femininity, he starts asking for things in large quantities, meaning that he will frequently come home with four pounds of tomatoes or multiple radios. Needless to say, this places a financial strain on him, but Sedaris doesn't mind. Finally, Hugh forbids him from going to the grocery store until he gets better at French, and though Sedaris can tell he's mad, he knows Hugh will cheer up when he opens the multiple CD players Sedaris got him for his birthday.

Once again, Sedaris presents readers with an essay meant primarily to deliver a punchline. This time, the punchline is about how Sedaris bought Hugh multiple CD players for his birthday. Along the way, though, Sedaris airs his thoughts about how difficult it is to learn French, calling attention not only to the strange fact that French genders its nouns, but also to his own insecurity surrounding his lacking French skills. In this way, then, this essay is a perfect representation of the way Sedaris thinks, hitting on his insecurity and his knack for humorously revealing absurdity in everyday life.

REMEMBERING MY CHILDHOOD ON THE CONTINENT OF AFRICA

Hugh spent a large portion of his childhood in various African countries, something that makes Sedaris deeply jealous. In particular, Sedaris is envious that Hugh got to do things like go on a fifth-grade fieldtrip to an Ethiopian slaughterhouse, where the children watched as a man shot a piglet in the head. By contrast, Sedaris's class only ever visited places like Colonial Williamsburg, which he found unbearably boring. While living in Ethiopia, Hugh went to a movie about a talking car, and when he exited the theater, he saw a dead man hanging from a nearby telephone pole. When he later told his friends about this, they said, "You saw the movie about the talking car?"

It almost goes without saying that Sedaris and Hugh had drastically different childhoods. What's most noteworthy about the way Sedaris thinks about Hugh's upbringing, though, isn't that he's jealous that Hugh got to go on adventures and experience foreign cultures—rather, he's jealous that Hugh has intense, gruesome stories to tell. This traces back to Sedaris's desire to be seen as interesting and mysterious, as if seeing a dead man hanging outside a movie theater would give him a certain amount of social currency. In reality, the experiences he wishes he had are most likely traumatic, but Sedaris doesn't stop to think about this because he's focused on what kind of person he might be if he had his own intriguing stories to tell.

Thinking back on his upbringing, Hugh often has to remember where in the world he was living during a given period. Because his life seems so interesting, Sedaris wishes he could claim it for his own. In fact, he often *does* claim Hugh's life as his own, remembering the time that his class visited a slaughterhouse or the time he saw a dead man swinging from a telephone pole. Whenever his own memories fail to interest him, he simply plumbs Hugh's, taking whatever seems most interesting from his lover's past.

Again, Sedaris wishes he had a more interesting childhood. Without bothering to consider the fact that some of Hugh's most interesting stories most likely came along with some kind of trauma, he decides to claim them for his own, thinking first and foremost about what it would be like to have such fascinating stories. In turn, he once more reveals his desire to make up for something in his own life.

21 DOWN

If asked by a student why it's important to learn something, Sedaris figures that a teacher can always say that the knowledge will inevitably come in handy when the student grows up and starts doing crossword puzzles. Sedaris himself was never all that interested in crossword puzzles until he decided to say hello to a former boyfriend one day. Although they broke up, he and this man are still friends. The ex-boyfriend was and still is extremely handsome, and it is because of this that Sedaris has always assumed he must be stupid. Otherwise, he thinks, it would be "simply unfair" for him to be both attractive and intelligent. When he swung by his ex-boyfriend's office one day, though, he was horrified to see his former lover using a pen to complete the Friday crossword puzzle in *The New York Times* while speaking on the phone.

That Sedaris is mortified to see his attractive ex-boyfriend competently completing a crossword puzzle without seeming to exert much effort perfectly aligns with his characteristic feelings of insecurity. Time and again, he demonstrates his fear of inadequacy, and this is the exact kind of situation that excites this fear. According to Sedaris's worldview, it's excessive for somebody as attractive as his ex-boyfriend to also possess a fierce intelligence, especially since this makes Sedaris feel particularly bad about himself—a sign that he fears not only the possibility that he's unintelligent, but also unattractive.

Sedaris is horrified to find his ex-boyfriend successfully finishing Friday's *New York Times* crossword puzzle because he knows that the puzzles get progressively harder throughout the week. Worse, his boyfriend says that doing the puzzle is just something he likes to "do with [his] hands" while he's on the phone. From that point on, Sedaris dedicates himself to getting better at crossword puzzles, but it takes him two years to get to the level where he can finish a Thursday puzzle—and even that takes him seven hours.

Seeing his ex-boyfriend complete the Friday crossword puzzle inspires Sedaris to improve on his own crossword skills. It's worth noting that this inspiration comes from a place of jealousy. This suggests that Sedaris is motivated by his own insecurity and a petty sense of jealousy, not out of a healthy sense of competition. Worse, though, is that he discovers he truly isn't *as intelligent as his attractive ex-boyfriend, no matter how hard he tries. In this way, his inability to let this matter go only forces him to confirm the validity of his worst fear.*

Sedaris starts reading reference books and comes across a list of phobias, including one pertaining to people who fear being tied, beaten, locked up, and "smeared with human waste." It strikes Sedaris as odd that this would be labeled a phobia, since this fear is rational. After all, who wants to be "handcuffed and covered in human feces"? As soon as Sedaris asks himself this question, though, he immediately thinks of three friends who might enjoy this. Consequently, he looks up if there's a phobia for people who are afraid they might know too many masochists, but he finds nothing. He also looks up if there's a name for people who fear that "their self-worth is based entirely on the completion of a daily crossword puzzle." If this word were an answer on a puzzle, he thinks, the clue would probably be, "You, honestly."

In this moment, Sedaris reveals that he's perfectly aware of the fact that he often lets his insecurities overtake him. Indeed, he recognizes that he bases his "self-worth" on arbitrary things like crossword puzzles. In characteristic form, though, Sedaris's self-awareness doesn't alter his behavior. In other words, he's perfectly cognizant of the fact that he shouldn't let things like crossword puzzles have so much influence over the way he conceives of himself, but he doesn't do anything to avoid this kind of thinking. Instead, he thinks incessantly about the implications of his crossword puzzle abilities while providing humorous, self-effacing commentary about his pursuit to prove his own intelligence.

THE CITY OF LIGHT IN THE DARK

Whenever people visit Sedaris in Paris, he takes them to the movies. This is because going to the movies is one of the only things he does in Paris. Rather than wandering the streets or going to dinner parties, he sees American movies in their original English, noting the inaccuracies in the French subtitles. Because this is his main activity, he often wonders why he even took French classes, since he's never used the phrases he learned, such as, "I heartily thank you for this succulent meal." Instead, the phrase he uses most is, "One place, please," which is what he says to the ushers at the cinemas he attends. He likes the movie theaters in France much more than those in America, hating that American cinemas sell large trays of food and that people talk so frequently during the film.

Living in Paris allows Sedaris to appreciate a different way of life. Ironically, though, he doesn't do any of the things people would expect an American living in Paris to do, since he is apparently uninterested in taking advantage of the many tourist attractions in the city. This aligns with his overall disdain for tourist activities, as chronicled in "City of Angels." However, he actually does *take advantage of living in a foreign country, relishing the fact that Parisian movie theaters are more enjoyable than American theaters. In this way, he appreciates French culture in his own way.*

In Parisian movie theaters, Sedaris can sit back and watch a film in silence. Because most of the movies he sees are American, he often sees the cities he used to live in, including New York and Chicago. From a distance, he can appreciate the cities without having to put up with the things that annoy him about his home country. Sometimes, though, he sits down in his seat and starts to think about all of the things he could be doing in France, knowing that the beauty of Paris is sparkling outside the dark walls of the cinema. As soon as the lights go down and the movie starts, though, these concerns drift away, and Sedaris's only remaining thought is that he loves Paris.

Once again, Sedaris reveals his self-awareness only to disregard it in favor of doing what he wants. In this case, he recognizes that he isn't taking full advantage of the fact that he lives in one of the greatest and most interesting cities in the world, but then he doubles down on his decision to spend the majority of his time watching American movies instead of exploring Paris. Simply put, he is unapologetically himself, even if he's capable of recognizing the flaws or quirks in his own thinking.

I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE TO THE BAG

Sedaris contends with the assumptions French people make about Americans. Many assume that Americans never smoke, take Prozac, and are overweight. When Sedaris returns to the United States for five weeks, he turns a curious eye on his fellow Americans, wanting to know if they'll confirm the stereotypes other nations have about them. For the most part, he notices that Americans are friendly, chatty, and optimistic, though he certainly has some experiences that confirm the various stereotypes (on the plane back from France, for instance, his American seat-mate asks him how much he paid for his ticket). He also notices a certain amount of American hypocrisy when he stays in hotels and sees signs about preserving water to "save the planet." This is all well and good, he thinks, but this kind of thinking doesn't seem to stop Americans from driving large, gas-guzzling cars.

Again, Sedaris's time abroad puts him in a unique position, giving him an alternate vantage point from which to view his home country through a new lens. This suggests that it's difficult to objectively observe one's own culture while existing in the day-to-day life of that culture. When he comes back to the United States for a short period of time, though, Sedaris has a fresh perspective on the idiosyncrasies of his home country.

Sedaris is often unable to explain the behavior of his fellow Americans to people in Paris. However, he's delighted when he *can* answer questions about American life. This happens one day when he goes for a haircut in Paris and the hairdresser shows him a magazine picture of Jodie Foster. The hairdresser loves Jodie Foster and has been studying this photograph, unable to discern what Jodie Foster is holding in her hand. He can tell Jodie Foster is holding a leash in one hand, but nobody he's asked can tell what she has in the other. "Well," Sedaris says, looking closely, "she appears to be carrying a plastic bag of dog shit." The hairdresser refuses to believe this. As several others in the shop listen, Sedaris tries to explain why Jodie Foster would do this, and as he does so, he feels prouder of his country than ever before.

By this point, it's quite clear that Sedaris has a strange vision of the United States. In "City of Angels," he disapproves of Bonnie's enthusiasm regarding the places in New York City that most people want to visit. Now, though, he feels an odd kind of patriotism about the fact that even celebrities have to clean up after their dogs in public. Why this detail makes him emotionally identify with his country more than anything else isn't all that clear, except perhaps that he appreciates the humor inherent to the idea of a beloved celebrity carrying a "bag of dog shit." More importantly, though, it's possible that he enjoys this interaction at the hairdresser's because it's one of the few times he is able to confidently account for a part of American culture, thereby making him feel connected to his home country.

PICKA POCKETONI

On a hot July day in Paris, Sedaris and Hugh board the metro. It's cramped, and Sedaris is annoyed to see two Americans wrapping their arms around a pole, making it difficult for others to hold. Nonetheless, Sedaris reaches between them and grabs the pole, at which point the man turns to his partner and says, "Peeeeew, can you smell that? That is pure French, baby." Going on, he refers to Sedaris as a "froggy," assuming that he's French and can't understand English. In response, the woman with him asks if all French people smell like this, and he confidently informs her that it's fairly common, adding that he would bet Sedaris hasn't showered for two weeks. Sedaris knows that many American tourists assume that nobody can speak English when, in reality, almost everyone in Paris does. Unaware of this, these Americans have no problem speaking insultingly about him.

Once again, Sedaris encounters American arrogance in Paris. This time, though, he is put in the position of a French person, effectively gaining the opportunity to step outside of his own perspective as an American. Needless to say, this doesn't inspire fantastic amounts of patriotism, since these two people speak so ignorantly and rudely without even stopping to consider the fact that the people around them can probably understand them. As a result, Sedaris gets to feel superior to them by assuming a French identity while also having to contend with the unfortunate reality that they represent his home country in a very unfortunate way.

Sedaris overhears that the man's name is Martin and the woman's name is Carol. He is suddenly glad that—because Martin used the offensive term "*froggy*" and insulted his body odor—he has the right to hate him. Continuing to listen, he hears Martin talking proudly about how he's going to show Carol what he calls "my Paris," saying that he'll take her to the Louvre (which he mispronounces). Hearing this, Sedaris realizes that "an American in Paris will find no harsher critic than another American"—a realization he has based on the fact that he suddenly feels very strongly that Martin and Carol should be shipped back to the United States, "preferably in chains." Having this thought, he's forced to acknowledge that he is being pretentious, and this makes him hate Martin and Carol even more.

Sedaris relishes any opportunity to cast judgment on people he thinks are unreasonable or aggravating. This is why he is happy that he heard Martin insult him, since this gives him license to dislike him. In doing so, he allows himself to feel a sense of superiority, thereby minimizing the insecurity he often experiences. However, Sedaris is also extremely self-aware, and this ultimately works against his efforts to think of himself as better than Martin and Carol. Indeed, he recognizes that his disdain for Martin and Carol isn't just due to the fact that Martin insulted him—it's also related to the way Sedaris feels about American tourists in Paris. Thinking this way, he actively wants to put himself above his fellow Americans, and this—he knows—means that he's pretentious. Instead of holding himself responsible for this character flaw, though, he holds it against Martin and Carol.

As Sedaris adjusts his hand on the pole, Martin tells Carol to watch out for her wallet, saying that Sedaris is trying to steal it. Carol moves her wallet as Martin explains that Sedaris is clearly a pickpocket who rides the trains with a partner in crime, somebody who must be lurking at the other end of the train. Right when Sedaris makes his move, his partner will swoop in and create a distraction. This, Martin claims, is a common scheme. As he speaks this way, Sedaris fantasizes about saying something to him in perfect English, picturing the embarrassed look that would appear on Martin's face. However, he doesn't say anything because he doesn't want Martin to apologize, worried he'd be expected to forgive him. Instead, he just listens to Martin say that, if he hadn't intervened, Sedaris would probably be "halfway to Timbuktu" with Carol's wallet by now.

Martin's worries about Sedaris underscore his distrust of French people and frame him as a narrowminded person who thinks that anyone who isn't American is a possible threat. Of course, readers know that Sedaris isn't threatening at all, but Martin can't see past what he thinks is Sedaris's identity as a non-American. In turn, Sedaris spotlights the ways in which people—and, unfortunately, many Americans—make assumptions about others based on uninformed ideas about what it means to be from a different culture.

The train gets closer and closer to Sedaris's stop. Still listening, he hears Martin continue to rant about how much he hates pickpockets, saying, "I mean, where's a *policioni* when you need one?" This confounds Sedaris, who wonders where, exactly, Martin thinks he is. He then imagines Martin waving down a police officer and saying, "That man tried to picka my frienda's pocketoni!" Wanting to hear Martin say something stupid like this, Sedaris hatches a plan. As the doors open and he and Hugh depart, he will reach into Hugh's back pocket and take his wallet, sending Martin into a fit. When Martin hails a police officer, Sedaris will make him look like an idiot, saying, "I think he's drunk. Look at how his face is swollen."

Martin demonstrates the depths of his ignorance when he uses the word "policioni," which is not a French word. In fact, the word sounds more Italian than French, though it's not even the Italian word for "police." Emboldened by Martin's lack of cultural knowledge, Sedaris fantasizes about making him feel ridiculous. Furthermore, it's worth noting that Sedaris looks forward to saying, "Look at how his face is swollen," a phrase that would make use of one of the strange and mostly useless French phrases he mastered when he was first starting to learn French—a reminder that he himself isn't quite as immersed in French culture as he might like to think.

As Sedaris rehearses his plan in his head, Hugh comes up behind him and taps him on the shoulder to make sure he knows their stop is coming up. Instantly, Sedaris's plan is ruined, as Martin turns to Carol and says that Hugh must be Sedaris's partner in crime. With nothing else to do, Sedaris thinks back to a time he was riding the train with his sister Amy in Chicago. She got off before him, and right as the doors were closing, she yelled, "So long, David. Good luck beating that rape charge." All of a sudden, everyone in the train was staring at him in disgust, and though he tried to explain that Amy was just joking around, anything he said only made him sound even more guilty. This is the kind of thing Sedaris would like to do to Martin.

When Hugh comes up to Sedaris, it becomes impossible for Sedaris to successfully execute his plan. As a result, he has no way of making Martin feel stupid or uncomfortable. This disappoints him because he loves the idea of putting Martin in his place, ultimately wanting to demonstrate just how little Martin truly knows about daily life in Paris. Unable to do this, though, he's left thinking about his sister's quick wit, feeling comparatively uninventive. In this way, then, his feelings of inadequacy once more rise to the forefront of Me Talk Pretty One Day.

Because Sedaris isn't as quick witted as Amy, he can't think of anything damning to say about Martin before leaving the train. As a result, he knows Martin will return to the United States to tell the story of how he saved Carol from a pickpocket. At the same time, Sedaris at least appreciates that he got the chance to step into a different identity, inhabiting the persona of a frightening pickpocket, somebody who snatches wallets and runs away. As he walks out of the train, he notices Martin curling up his fists in preparation and Carol holding her wallet tight to her chest. Stepping onto the platform, Sedaris no longer feels like an American in Paris with his boyfriend, but like a dangerous criminal who is already "halfway to Timbuktu."

Sedaris doesn't get to make Martin feel stupid, but he does get to experience a shift in his own identity—or, at least, a shift in the way other people see him. Interestingly enough, this is not the first time he has enjoyed the idea of someone fearing him. When he worked as a mover, he loved that he could throw a dolly on the ground with a little extra force and suddenly frighten his clients into thinking of him as a menacing person. Similarly, he now welcomes Martin and Carol's uninformed ideas about him, feeling powerful in a way he doesn't normally feel.

I ALMOST SAW THIS GIRL GET KILLED

At a local fair in Normandy, Sedaris and Hugh attend a strange version of a bull fight, in which a group of volunteers run around a makeshift arena trying to play soccer while angry young cows charge at them. There are a number of "protective barricades" for the players to hide behind, but Sedaris finds himself hoping that he might actually see a confrontation between one of the volunteers and the cow. Thinking this way, he wonders what he would do if this happened. He is particularly interested in this question because he has been worrying about his morals ever since he and Hugh went to a fair in Paris and watched as a dangerous ride got stuck. One woman at the very top of the ride was hanging upside down, her protective harness the only thing keeping her from falling. Mesmerized, Sedaris was unable to look away.

A natural storyteller, Sedaris is the kind of person who can't get himself to look away from calamitous situations. He has, after all, built an entire career as a writer crafting intriguing essays, so any moment worthy of attention becomes—for him—something to study in detail. However, he recognizes that there is something uncomfortable about his interest in disaster, correctly intuiting that his fascination is often driven by a morbid desire to see something extraordinary (or extraordinarily bad*) take place. With this in mind, he doesn't know what to think of his desire to see a man get mauled by a cow, nor does he know what to make of his inability to look away from a woman who is possibly on the verge of death.*

At the fair in Paris, a crowd gathers beneath the broken ride. Hugh leaves, not wanting to see what will happen to the woman hanging upside down, but Sedaris only moves closer. All the while, he imagines telling this story at a dinner party, wondering how his friends would react if he opened with the line, "I once saw a girl fall to her death from one of those rides." Because he never knew the woman personally, he figures that his friends wouldn't feel awkward about pressing for details regarding her death. When one of her shoes falls to the ground, he imagines adding this detail, saying, "And then one of her shoes came off." Finally, though, the police arrive and push the crowd away, saying that this is not a show—an assertion that annoys Sedaris.

While watching the woman hanging upside down from the broken ride, Sedaris has no choice but to acknowledge his appetite for danger and travesty. More importantly, his interest is motivated by his abiding desire to be interesting, as he fantasizes about telling a captivating story to his friends about this experience. Once again, then, readers sense that Sedaris is quite eager to present himself as an intriguing, entertaining person.

Soon enough, the emergency responders manage to bring the woman down. Sedaris tries to imagine telling his friends this story, practicing saying, "I almost saw this girl get killed," but it's not the same. Now, sitting in the makeshift arena and watching the angry cow try to maul the soccer players, he convinces himself that it wouldn't be morally questionable if he saw somebody get killed in this context because he is simply "watching a scheduled event." If something goes wrong, he figures, he will simply witness it but won't have sought it out. And yet, this line of thinking doesn't help him when one of the volunteers actually gets mauled by the cow—something that rattles Sedaris to his core, catching him off-guard and making him realize that he's not nearly as tough and morbid as he thought.

As Sedaris sits in the audience and watches the volunteers try to dodge the cows, he worries about whether or not he's immoral for secretly wanting to see things take a gruesome turn. This is a reasonable concern, since he does seem to lack a certain regard for other people, ultimately letting his desire to have a good story to tell eclipse all else. However, he's relieved to find out that he actually does care about other people, as evidenced by the horror he feels when one of the volunteers gets hurt. In turn, he's able to let himself off the hook, reassuring himself that he's not a bad person—a fear that may have exacerbated his other insecurities.

SMART GUY

Sedaris has always thought of himself as a secret genius even though he's never had reason to believe this. While working as a cleaner in his mid-twenties, he works alongside a man named Reggie who won't stop talking about how smart he is, constantly bragging that he has an IQ of 130. Reggie uses this to argue that he should be doing greater things than cleaning, saying he needs more of a challenge. In response, Sedaris suggests that he turn on a fan and try to sweep into the wind. Annoyed, Reggie says Sedaris shouldn't make fun of him because he's smarter than him, estimating that Sedaris himself has an IQ of 72. This, Reggie says, means Sedaris better like sweeping, implying that he'll still be working as a cleaner in 15 years.

It has already been made abundantly clear that Sedaris is insecure about his intelligence. Whether he's worried about his crossword-puzzle abilities or his ability to come up with creative artistic ideas, he constantly frets about whether or not he can intellectually measure up to everyone else. Because of this dynamic, Reggie's comments surely unsettle him, tapping into his deep-seated insecurity about his mental acuity and his fear of inadequacy.

Fifteen years later, Sedaris is still working as a cleaner—but he doesn't sweep, he uses a vacuum cleaner. He doesn't know what Reggie is up to these days, but he thinks of him when he decides to take an IQ test. Despite the fact that he has no reason to believe this, he has always secretly thought he might be a genius. Either way, he doesn't think taking the test will hurt him in any way, since he's a fully established adult who has proven his ability to care for himself. No matter what, he figures, he's "smart enough to get by." What he doesn't consider, though, is that a bad score on an IQ test can overshadow a person's entire history, making sense of a lifetime's worth of mistakes, failures, and bad choices.

It's not hard to see why it's probably a bad idea for Sedaris to take an IQ test. With his fear of inadequacy, a bad result could potentially devastate him, making it hard for him to feel secure about his intelligence. And yet, Sedaris is also the kind of person who unabashedly acknowledges his own shortcomings, at least in the essays that make up Me Talk Pretty One Day. *Consequently, the chance to more thoroughly examine himself outweigh the possible dangers of taking an IQ test, ultimately enabling him to mine the depths of his insecurity to a greater extent.*

Sedaris convinces Hugh to take the IQ test with him, thinking that—at the very least—he will be smarter than his boyfriend. After all, Hugh recently ordered a pizza that the waiter suggested he avoid, and the pizza was terrible. This made Sedaris confident that he's smarter than Hugh. To become a member of the esteemed group Mensa, a person needs to have an IQ of 132 or higher. While taking the test, Sedaris experiences extreme fatigue. During the short break, Hugh chats casually with the test administrator, showing no signs of mental strain. In the final section of the test, Sedaris doesn't even come within striking distance of finishing. A week later, he and Hugh receive their scores. Hugh's letter urges him to try again because he's close to qualifying for Mensa. Sedaris's, letter, on the other hand begins with the line, "We regret to inform you…"

Not only does Sedaris receive a low score his IQ test, but he also discovers that Hugh is significantly smarter than him. This is an especially hard pill to swallow because he was so confident that he would be smarter than Hugh. Worse, he harbored a secret belief that he was a genius—a belief he now must give up because he has hard evidence to suggest otherwise. Unsurprisingly, then, taking the IQ test truly was *a bad idea for Sedaris, who already struggles with feelings of inadequacy and intellectual insecurity.*

"It turns out that I'm really stupid," Sedaris notes, adding that certain cats probably weigh more than his IQ score. The test, he knows, measures a person's ability to think logically. This is why he didn't do well—he doesn't think logically. When he was a kid, he once tried to use mayonnaise as insect repellant. He also thought putting sunscreen on a piece of gum would cure diabetes. Whenever he did these things, his father would sarcastically call him "Smart Guy." Because Sedaris now feels bad about himself, Hugh suggests that everybody thinks in different ways and that there are things Sedaris is quite good at. When Sedaris asks him what, exactly, these things are, Hugh says vacuuming and "naming stuffed animals." Pausing, he says that there must be other things but that he needs time to think of them.

It's true that Sedaris is insecure about his intelligence, but it's also the case that he is uncommonly willing to voice this insecurity. After all, multiple essays in Me Talk Pretty One Day *feature the concerns he has regarding inferiority. In this way, acknowledging his own shortcomings is Sedaris's way of dealing with them in a humorous, manageable way. To that end, he spotlights Hugh's hilarious assertion that he's remarkably good at rather meaningless tasks like vacuuming and "naming stuffed animals."*

THE LATE SHOW

Sedaris has recently stopped drinking, and though he has managed to embrace a sober lifestyle, there's one thing that is especially difficult for him to do without taking any substances: sleep. He used to find it extremely easy to fall asleep—that is, if he drank seven beers and two scotches and then smoked marijuana. Without doing this, though, he lies in bed for hours at a time, tormented by his bedside clock. In order to help himself sleep, then, he has several longstanding fantasies that he thinks about, imagining himself in various absurd situations. The first is a fantasy he calls *Mr. Science*, in which he invents a "serum that causes trees to grow at ten times their normal rate." This means people can plant a tree and reap its benefits in just one year. The science community is floored, and environmentalists celebrate Sedaris for his genius invention.

Sedaris's fantasies in this essay spotlight his desire to be revered and well-liked. In Mr. Science, *he imagines himself as an extraordinarily intelligent person who is lauded for his creativity—a fitting fantasy for someone like him who has a history of wanting to prove his worth through wit and mental acuity.*

In the next portion of *Mr. Science*, Sedaris invents a cure for cancer. He receives the Nobel Prize but hardly sees it as a big deal. Later, he cures AIDS, then emphysema. Because death is no longer something to fear, people stop taking antidepressants. Sedaris also invents a kind of soap that makes people look like they're 25 again—unless they've gotten plastic surgery. With the money from these inventions, he builds a spaceship and finds a new planet that is nearly identical to Earth but takes only 20 minutes to reach. Developers want to buy real estate on the planet, but Sedaris denies them, saying that "Planet Fuck You Up the Ass with a Sharp Stick" isn't for everyone.

Again, Sedaris's fantasy underscores his desire to be a widely respected person who is celebrated for his intelligence. In this section of Mr. Science, Sedaris also cherishes the idea of punishing people for perceived immorality: denying youth to people whose vanity led them to plastic surgery, or turning greedy developers away from this new planet. In this way, Sedaris's fantasies show a sense of superiority that he rarely gets to embody in real life.

In *The Knockout*, Sedaris imagines he's one fight away from becoming the heavyweight boxing world champion. He focuses on his physical features, picturing himself as ruggedly handsome. He's also a former Yale medical student who got into boxing by accident when he randomly signed up for a boxing class and the teacher recognized his talent. Everyone loves him. Five days from the championship match, the public finds out he has a boyfriend. This boyfriend doesn't necessarily look like Hugh, though he does share some similarities. In a pre-fight interview, Sedaris hesitantly answers questions about what it was like to come out, hating the term because he doesn't like using "out" as a verb. Similarly, he tells "the gay press" that he won't wear a rainbow flag on the day of the fight because he hates rainbows. Needless to say, he wins the fight.

In this fantasy, Sedaris indulges his desire to be seen as remarkably attractive. He also still clings to the idea of being seen as intelligent, too, adding that he was a medical student at Yale before becoming a famous boxer. Interestingly enough, he thinks about his identity as a gay man, writing about this topic even though he has largely left it out of the rest of Me Talk Pretty One Day. *However, Sedaris isn't particularly interested in being a representative of the gay community, instead focusing on his own life and—more importantly—his enviable traits.*

In *I've Got a Secret*, Sedaris is an attractive intern at the White House who had an affair with the president. When the press finds out, all hell breaks loose. In the midst of all the attention, Sedaris stays inside and repaints the walls of his apartment. Eventually, though, officials come to the apartment and tell him he has to go to court and that he won't go to jail if he cooperates. He doesn't understand why he would go to jail for having sex with the president, but he goes to court wearing a fancy designer outfit and refuses to say a single word throughout the entire trial. He goes to jail for two years and then publishes a novel under a penname. The novel is *Lolita*, which hasn't—in the fantasy—been written yet. It is widely celebrated.

This fantasy is especially lavish, as Sedaris imagines himself into an alternate version of the scandal that took place when the public found out that President Bill Clinton had sexual relations with his intern Monica Lewinsky. Unlike the other fantasies, the attention Sedaris receives in I've Got A Secret *isn't particularly positive, since in the fantasy he is at the center of a scandal. And yet, the mere fact that he would fantasize about this says something about how much he values attention of any kind, clearly loving the idea of being in the spotlight even if he ends up going to jail for several years—an experience that would only make him seem more mysterious and interesting.*

I'LL EAT WHAT HE'S WEARING

Lou visits Sedaris in Paris and goes to dinner with him and his friend Maja. At dinner, he explains that he found an unidentifiable brown object in his suitcase that evening and put it in his mouth, thinking it might have been a cookie. Maja is confused and asks if Lou had packed cookies. "Not that I know of, but that's not the point," Lou says. Sedaris understands why Maja is taken aback, but he's unsurprised to hear his father's story. For his entire life, Lou Sedaris has saved food in odd places. This is because he saves *everything*, but he especially saves food. While taking his children to the grocery store, he used to ask the staff to show him the backroom where they kept the food considered too rotten to sell. In this backroom, he would eat freely and take discounted items home.

In the final essay of Me Talk Pretty One Day, *Sedaris returns to his father, a man he will seemingly never tire of observing. This time, Sedaris turns his attention to his father's idiosyncratic habits surrounding food and waste, portraying him as an eccentric man who would rather put an unknown object in his mouth than throw it away. And though Maja may not understand why Lou would do this, Sedaris understands all too well that his father isn't bound by rationality. In turn, Sedaris invites readers to reflect on the odd but endearing ways in which family members deal with and even appreciate each other's otherwise incomprehensible behavior.*

Lou used to try to convince his children to eat the rotten food he stored throughout the house. He often put fruit in the medicine cabinet, but he also put things in the crisper of the refrigerator, thinking that this would keep them fresh. Taking a soft, pale carrot out, he'd encourage his children to eat it, taking a soundless bite himself. This mentality is what led him to chew on the unidentified brown object in his suitcase. After chewing for more than five minutes, he realized it was a piece of his old hat. "So you literally *ate* your hat?" Maja asks, and Lou says that he did, though he adds that he "stopped after the first few bites." Hearing this, Sedaris thinks that—now that Lou knows eating his hat won't kill him—he'll store it away so he can eat it at a later date.

Once more, Sedaris puts his father's quirky behavior on display. In doing so, he invites readers to consider the humorous and endearing nature of familial relationships, which often require people to simply accept the mystifying idiosyncrasies of their loved ones. Instead of criticizing his father for eating his own hat, Sedaris chooses to laugh about it, having learned to appreciate his father's whims instead of resisting them. This, it seems, is what it often takes to foster successful relationships with family members.

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