

WEEK 7, FEBRUARY 19

AUDITION

By **Saïd Sayrafiezadeh**

September 3, 2018

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/09/10/audition?verso=true>

The first time I smoked crack cocaine was the spring I worked construction for my father on his new subdivision in Moonlight Heights. My original plan had been to go to college, specifically for the arts, specifically for acting, where I'd envisioned strolling shoeless around campus with a notepad, jotting down details about the people I observed so that I would later be able to replicate the human condition onscreen with nuance and veracity. Instead, I was unmatriculated and nineteen, working six days a week, making eight dollars an hour, no more or less than what the other general laborers were being paid, and which is what passed, at least for my self-made father, as fairness. Occasionally, I would be cast in a community-theatre production of Neil Simon or "The Mystery of Edwin Drood," popular but uncomplicated fare, which we would rehearse for a month before performing in front of an audience of fifteen. "You have to pay your dues," the older actors would tell me, sensing, I suppose, my disappointment and impatience. "How long is that going to take?" I'd ask them, as if they spoke from high atop the pinnacle of show business. In lieu of an answer, they offered a tautology. "It takes as long as it takes," they'd say.

It was spring, it was rainy, it was the early nineties, meaning that "Seinfeld" was all the rage, and so was Michael Jordan, and so was crack cocaine, the latter of which, at this point, I had no firsthand knowledge. As for Jerry Seinfeld and Michael Jordan, I knew them well. Each evening, having spent my day carrying sixty-pound drywall across damp pavement and up bannisterless staircases in one of the state-of-the-art family residences being pre-wired for the Internet—whatever that was—in a cul-de-sac eventually to be named Placid Village Circle, I would drive to my apartment and watch one or the other, Seinfeld or Jordan, since one or the other always happened to be on. They were famous, they were artists, they were exalted. I watched them and dreamed of my own fame and art and exalt. The more I dreamed, the more vivid the dream seemed to be, until it was no longer some faint dot situated on an improbable time line but, rather, my *destiny*. And all I needed to turn this destiny into reality was to make it out of my midsized city—not worth specifying—and move to L.A., where, of course, an actor needed to be if he was to have any chance at that thing called success. But, from my perspective of a thousand miles, L.A. appeared immense, incensed, inscrutable, impenetrable, and every time I thought I had enough resolve to uproot myself and rent a U-Haul I would quickly retreat into the soft, downy repetitiveness of my home town, with its low stakes, high livability, and steady paycheck from my father.

The general laborers came and went that spring, working for a few weeks and then quitting without notice, eight dollars apparently not being enough to compensate even the most unskilled. No matter. For every man who quit, there were five more waiting in line to take his place, eight dollars apparently being enough to fill any vacancy. I was responsible for showing the new recruits around on their first day, which took about twenty minutes and got me out of carrying drywall. Here's the porta-potty. Here's the foreman's office. Here's the paper to sign. They wanted to know what the job was like. They wanted to know if there were health benefits. They spoke quietly and conspiratorially, as if what they asked might be perceived as treasonous. They wanted to know if they might have the opportunity to learn

some plumbing or carpentry. “You’ll have to talk to the boss about that,” I’d tell them, but the answer was no. What they should have been asking me was if there was a union.

No one knew that I was the boss’s son. About once a week my dad would show up in his powder-blue Mercedes and walk around inspecting the progress, displeased and concerned, finding everything urgent and subpar, showing neither love nor special dispensation toward me, nor did I show any toward him. This seemed to come easily to the two of us. I was just another workingman in wet overalls and he was just another big shot in a three-piece suit and a safety vest. The roles we played were generic, superficial, and true. Later, he’d tell me, “I’m doing this for you, not for me.” What “this” was was not entirely clear. “One day all of this will be yours,” he’d say. “This” was three subdivisions and a ten-story office building downtown. “This” was the powder-blue Mercedes. According to my father, he wanted me to learn the meaning of hard work up close and personal so that I would know what life was really like, but also because he wanted me to experience what he had gone through growing up on the outskirts of town with six siblings, odd jobs, and no help from the government. In short, I was living a version of his life, albeit in reverse.

From time to time, I would be paired up with a guy named Duncan Dioguardi, who was my age but looked ten years older, and who liked to order me around—put this here, put that there. He enjoyed the power, while I enjoyed the cold comfort of knowing that I could burst his bubble by telling him who my dad was, but a good actor never breaks character. Clearly, I was a novice and not very good at hard work, as Duncan and my father had already surmised. I got winded fast. I got apathetic fast. I cut corners when I could. I waited for opportunities to go to the porta-potty. I waited for opportunities to smoke cigarettes. The cigarettes got me winded faster. “You need to get into shape,” Duncan would tell me. “Why don’t you use your next paycheck to buy yourself a ThighMaster?” This was a joke for him. He would walk around in short-sleeved shirts, impervious to the chill, a tattoo of a snake coiling around his bicep and crawling up toward his neck, en route to devour his face, a dramatic and striking image if ever there was one, doubly so against his pale skin, slick with drizzle. In the meantime, I slouched beneath drywall, imagining L.A. in the spring, waiting for lunchtime, quite proficient at not being the boss’s son, and all the while reassuring myself that one day in the future I would be performing some version of this role with nuance and veracity, out of shape or not. “What did you draw from to create the character?” the critics would ask me. “Why, from real life,” I would say.

When lunchtime arrived, I’d sit around with the other general laborers, thirty of us on upturned crates in an unfinished living room with a spring breeze blowing through the glassless windows, eating roast-beef sandwiches and talking about money problems, home problems, work problems. My problems were not their problems, but I wished they were. Their problems were immediate, distinct, and resolvable; mine were long-term, existential, and impossible. When I spoke, I tried to approximate the speech patterns of my co-workers—the softened consonants and the dropped articles—lest I reveal myself for the outsider that I was. No hard “k”s, “x”s, or “f”s. The irony was that my father’s specified plan of self-improvement for me dovetailed with my own: experience real life up close and personal.

The other general laborers knew one another from high school or the neighborhood or the previous work site, which had paid ten dollars an hour. They hoped that the subdivision wouldn’t be finished until fall, maybe even winter. They didn’t mind working forever. They were still counting on a chance to learn a trade—but half of them would be gone in two weeks. As for me, I’d grown up in Timpani Hills, where none of these men would have had any reason to visit unless they’d come to do some roofing. I’d gone to the best schools and had the cushiest upbringing, including a pool in the back yard and weekend acting classes, where my dad would watch me perform on parents’ night, misty and proud in the front row, his boorishness temporarily abated, supportive of his son’s passion and talent until he realized

that his son was intending to pursue acting as something more than a hobby. Now all that history was inconsequential, pulsed inside the blender of collective toil. No one would have been able to tell me apart from any of the other general laborers I sat with on my lunch break, smoking cigarettes amid exposed crossbeams. Just as no one would have been able to tell that I was the boss's son. To the latecomer entering the theatre, I was indistinguishable from the whole.

Just as no one would have been able to tell that I didn't really want to give Duncan Dioguardi a lift to his house after work, but his car had broken down—yet one more item to be added to the list of immediate problems. What I wanted to say was “Why don't you ride home on a ThighMaster?” But what I actually said was “Sure, jump in!” I could hear the sprightliness in my voice, all false. It was Saturday. It was four o'clock. The foreman was letting us off early because the drywall hadn't been delivered on time. The new recruits wondered if they would still be paid for a full day. There was an argument that made sense only on paper. “Go enjoy the weather,” the foreman said, as if he were bestowing the good weather upon us. Indeed, the sun was high and there was no rain. When the breeze blew, it blew with promise. I should have been savoring the first official nice day of spring; instead, I was driving an hour out of my way down Route 15. The traffic was slow-going. We stopped and started. We stopped again. Duncan Dioguardi apologized for the traffic. Inside the car he was surprisingly thoughtful and courteous. He had his seat belt on and his hands were folded in his lap. “Setting is everything,” my dear old acting teacher had once told me, and then we had done exercises to illustrate this concept: forest, beach, prison cell.

“I don't mind traffic,” I told Duncan. I was being courteous, too. I softened my consonants. I dropped my articles. Through the windshield, our midsized city crawled past at a midsized pace. Midsized highways with midsized cars. Midsized citizens with their midsized lives.

We talked about work and then we talked about ourselves. Away from the subdivision, it was clear that we had little in common. He told me that he'd been doing manual labor since he was fifteen, beginning with cleaning bricks at a demolition site on the north side of the city. I was taking weekend acting classes at fifteen. “A nickel a brick,” Duncan told me. “You do the math.” I wasn't sure what math there was to do. Duncan was the one who should have been taking acting classes, not me, receiving instruction on how to transform his supply of hard-earned material into that thing called art. He'd already lived twice the life that I'd lived, while having none of my advantages. He was what my father had been before my father hit it big. But Duncan Dioguardi was most likely never going to hit it big. His trajectory seemed already established. If I wasn't careful, *my* trajectory would soon be established. The tattoo of the snake heading up to Duncan's face was not an affect but as apt a metaphor as any of what the past had been like for him, and what the future held. He needed no affect. *I* was the one who needed an affect. “Don't ever get a tattoo,” my acting teacher had told me. “A performer must always remain a blank slate.” So here I was, playing the role of general laborer, with flawless skin and stuck in traffic.

It was four-thirty. If I was lucky, I'd be home by six. Maybe I would take a nap, assuage my fatigue and apathy, wake up fresh and do something productive, like read a script and enlighten myself. Sometimes I would lie in the bathtub and read aloud from my stack of current and classic screenplays, playing every single character, men, women, and children. Even the stage directions were a character: *Fade in. Int. bathtub—night. Fade out.* Everything was deserving of voice. Meanwhile, Duncan Dioguardi and I lit cigarettes, one after the other, inhaling first- and secondhand smoke. We fiddled with the radio. Tupac came on. Tupac was all the rage. We nodded our heads to Tupac. Apropos of Tupac, I told Duncan about how I was planning to move to L.A. I said it casually, as if this plan were already in the works rather than a doubtful dot on an undrawn time line, and I was unexpectedly filled with a brief

but heartening sense that, merely by my vocalizing that something would happen, something would actually happen—as per pop psychology. Duncan told me that he had lived in L.A., between starting high school and dropping out of high school. What else had Duncan done by the age of nineteen? Where else had Duncan lived? He was so far ahead of me in the category of life that I would have been unable to catch up even if I began living *now*. “What was L.A. like?” I asked him. I could hear my counterfeit casualness being usurped by genuine yearning. “It was magical,” Duncan said. He got quiet. He contributed no follow-up details. He stared out the windshield. “See this traffic?” he said. I saw this traffic. “This isn’t L.A. traffic,” he said. I pictured L.A. traffic on a Saturday at four-thirty, sun high, never rain, bumper-to-bumper, all of it magical.

Suddenly, I was telling Duncan Dioguardi about my innermost desires, speaking confessionally, spilling my guts, spelling out exactly how I was going to become an actor, how I was going to rent a U-Haul, not give the boss any notice, fuck the boss, drive a thousand miles in a day, arrive in L.A., find an agent, find a place to live, start auditioning for film and television, maybe even “Seinfeld.” “Keep an eye out for me on ‘Seinfeld,’ ” I said. If you say it, it will happen. Somewhere along the way, I had stopped dropping articles and softening consonants, because it was too difficult a ruse to maintain while also trying to be authentic. I told Duncan about having performed in “The Mystery of Edwin Drood,” twice, at the rec center, one fall and the following fall. I’d had only a small part but I’d got some laughs. I didn’t tell him that there’d been fifteen people in the audience. Perhaps he’d heard of the production? There had been a four-star review in the *Tribune*. No, he hadn’t heard of it.

“You can do better than that bullshit,” he said.

It was five o’clock. We were moving fast now. The traffic was gone. So were my cigarettes. We were inspiring each other with our uplifting stories of promise and potential. Duncan was telling me about his own plans for the future, which mainly involved having realized that he’d wasted the previous year, and the year before that. He was determined to make up for it. He knew precisely what needed to be done. He spoke generally. In response, I spoke generally, too, providing platitudes where applicable. “You can do whatever you set your mind to,” I said. “It’s mind over matter,” he said. “That’s right!” I said. “That’s right!” he said. We were in agreement, and yet I had the peculiar feeling that we were referring to different things.

He was telling me where to turn. Turn here. Turn there. Left. Right. Right. I was entering territory with which I was unfamiliar, because I’d grown up cushy. We drove beneath an overpass that led into a down-and-out neighborhood of weather-beaten, two-story, red brick homes, a hundred of them in a row, every one identical, just as the houses in my father’s subdivision were identical, but at the other end of the economic spectrum. This was a neighborhood of odd jobs and no help, where people shopped for dinner at the convenience store. “I trust them as far as I can throw them,” Duncan said, referring to I know not what. This was outsized struggle in a midsized city. Turn. Turn. Turn. The Spice Girls came on. The Spice Girls were all the rage. Apropos of the Spice Girls, Duncan was asking me if I wanted to party tonight. He was asking as if the thought had just occurred to him. It was Saturday, after all. It was five-thirty. It would be a shame to let these windfall spring hours go to waste. It would be a shame to go home as I always did, lie in the bathtub, have another night of living life through the soggy pages of screenplays, getting closer to twenty years old, my time line unravelling like a ball of yarn. I somehow knew that the word “party” in this context meant one thing: getting high. What I really wanted was to stop at a convenience store and get more cigarettes. “Don’t waste your money,” Duncan said. He could buy me more cigarettes, no problem. He pointed to one of the identical buildings. If I gave him ten dollars he could get me a carton of cigarettes at half price. If I chipped in thirty dollars he could get the two of us cigarettes *plus*. “Do you want cigarettes *plus*?” Duncan asked. “Do

you want to party?" He was speaking now entirely in the language of euphemisms, and I was fluent.

"Yes," I said. "I want to party."

It was six o'clock and we were in the basement of Duncan Dioguardi's house. Or, more to the point, we were in the basement of his *mother's* house, where he was staying until his security deposit cleared. "Banks," he said, generally. His mother wasn't home, but she kept a nice house, much nicer on the inside than it appeared on the outside, with hardwood floors and crown molding, and I thought about how these were the kinds of detail that would have eluded a person who had merely driven through the neighborhood without bothering to stop, like the passenger on a cruise ship who thinks he knows the island from the port. Duncan's basement was more bedroom than basement, with Mom's touches, sheets tucked in, cozy and comfortable, except for a boiler in the corner that was making clicking sounds. Stacked up in a pile were some carpentry manuals for beginners, yellow books with hammers on the covers. "I dabble with those sometimes," he said. Then he added, "But they won't give a guy like me a chance." I wasn't sure if "whatever you set your mind to" would apply in this instance.

On his dresser was a Magnavox TV, twenty-five-inch, with a built-in VCR, presumably left on all day, tuned to ESPN, where the announcers were oohing and aahing over, who else, Michael Jordan, who was doing, what else, winning. He glided down the court. He floated through the air. He elbowed his defender in the chest. Everything he did had style, even his mistakes. He was the perfect blend of beauty and power, of grace and aggression. No one would have dared tell Michael Jordan, "It takes as long as it takes."

My carton of cigarettes was in my lap, cradled lovingly, half price, as promised, already torn open by me, cigarette smoke going straight up into my face, and in Duncan's palm was the adventure I had come here for, two small white cubes—yellowish, really, crumbs, really—bought at full price. "This is what you get for twenty dollars apiece," he said. "You do the math." Had I been the latecomer to this play, I would have thought that these two small cubes had been chipped off the edge of some drywall, so insignificant did they look. If Duncan had accidentally dropped them on the floor, they would have been lost forever in the grain of the hardwood. But Duncan, handling them with such care and attention, as if he were a doctor operating over a nightstand, demonstrating speed and precision, using one of Mom's table knives to gently break the two white chips into even smaller white chips, would never let them drop on the floor. This was the stuff of theatre, basement theatre, the six-o'clock show, and I had a front-row seat to the action, from which I was able to watch what happens when the actor does not have the right props with him, because this actor is "not a pro, and not intending on becoming a pro." What Duncan was, though, was ingenious, withdrawing a roll of aluminum foil from beneath his bed, no doubt procured from Mom's cupboard, and a box of Chore Boy, also from beneath his bed, with little Chore Boy wearing a backward baseball cap, a big grin on his face, because life is nothing if not delightful, especially when one is cleaning. He could have been a character from a fairy tale, Chore Boy, innocent and archetypal, his stumpy arm beckoning the consumer toward some enchanted land. Soon, a perfect aluminum-foil pipe emerged from Duncan Dioguardi, glinting silver in the Magnavox light, reminding me of the way some family restaurants will wrap your leftovers in aluminum foil in the shape of a swan. But into this particular swan's mouth disappeared a piece of the Chore Boy, followed by one small chip off the drywall, and then Duncan Dioguardi ran his lighter back and forth, orange flame on silver neck, and from the swan's tail he sucked ever so gently, cheeks pulling, pulling, until, like magic, he tilted his head back and out of his mouth emerged a perfect puff of white smoke.

He considered for a moment, eyes closed, then eyes opened, gauging, I suppose, the ratio of crack cocaine to baking powder, and then he offered an appraisal. "Not bad," he said. He looked at me. Was it my turn now?

No, not yet my turn. First we must watch Michael Jordan, because the aluminum-foil pipe needed time to cool down, a necessary and dramatic interlude, the basement boiler ticking off the minutes. It was almost the end of the basketball game, and beads of sweat dripped elegantly down Jordan's shaved head as he huddled with coaches and teammates, half listening to advice that had long ago ceased applying to him. He showed no signs of trepidation or anxiety about the fate of the game. He already *knew* the fate of the game. As for the advice that Duncan Dioguardi was now offering me, I listened carefully. This is how you hold the pipe. This is how you inhale the smoke. "This isn't a cigarette," he said. "You don't suck it into your lungs." He was patient, the way a good coach should be. Then he clicked the lighter and I was pulling as he had pulled, not too hard, not too soft, just right. I had expected the foil on my lips to taste like something, but it tasted like nothing. I had expected the smoke to smell like something, but it smelled like nothing. I had expected the high to alter me in some profound and mystifying way, but the effect was underwhelming and anticlimactic. Mostly, I felt clear-eyed and levelheaded, disappointingly so. "Not bad," I said anyway. The only thing that was unexpected was the sudden sense of fondness that I had for Duncan Dioguardi, good coach that he was, and, dare I say, good friend. Sure, I barely knew him; sure, we had had different upbringings; but we had shared something on that ride down Route 15, and we were sharing something now, within his home, which he had welcomed me into, and in this way, yes, I could consider him a friend. The passenger who had remained only in the port, browsing the trinket shops, delighting in duty-free, would never have known this subtle but essential detail. Just as he would never have known that there was indeed a distinct smell hovering in the room, of the Chore Boy being cooked alive, not dissimilar to the odor when the plumbers had come through the subdivision, soldering the water lines, the new recruits watching them with envy and admiration.

That spring, my dear old acting teacher came to my rescue by way of a phone call, out of the blue, asking if I might be available to audition for a play that he was directing at the Apple Tree Theatre. "So wonderful to hear your voice again," he said. He said that he had always remembered me fondly from those Sunday classes years earlier—Intro to Acting I, followed by Intro to Acting II—where he would instruct a dozen teen-agers in the world of make-believe. We played games, we played inanimate objects, we played adults. "There are rules even for make-believe," he would tell us. Everything he said had the ring of truth and revelation. He had the empathy and kindness of the elderly. If there had been an Intro III and IV, I would have taken those, too, all the way up to C. I was always forlorn when my dad arrived to pick me up in his powder-blue Mercedes, the engine kept running. On a few occasions, my teacher had taken him aside and told him that his son had a future in theatre. "That's good to know," my father had said, but the future he was envisioning was real estate.

Now my teacher was calling to say that he had never forgotten me, that I had made a strong impression on him, even at the age of fifteen, and that he thought I would be perfect for the role he had in mind. The way he spoke made it sound as if he had already come to a decision, and reading for the role was only a technicality. Still, I knew enough to know that nothing was ever guaranteed, that auditioning was only one step toward being cast, that a play was only one step toward a movie, and a movie was only one step toward fame. But that my teacher had sought me out after all these years was a sign that I was truly talented, that the hope I had been harboring was not false, and that I was living a life where the unexpected could indeed occur.

When I showed up for the audition a week later, I was disheartened to see that it was far from a foregone conclusion. I was one of twenty young men who had apparently all been

students of my acting teacher, and all of whom he had apparently remembered fondly. We were perfect replicas of one another, dressed in khakis, hair blow-dried, walking around doing the same vocal warmups that we had been taught: *B-B-B-B*, *T-T-T-T*—no softened consonants here. In our hands we held head shots of our giant faces, lit to make us appear older, wiser, and better-looking than we actually were, and on the back were our résumés, numbering ten or fewer credentials, twice for “The Mystery of Edwin Drood.” In thirty years, the list of credentials would be longer and our head shots would be younger.

Things were running behind. The auditions were supposed to have started at ten o’clock, first come, first served, but it was noon and they’d made it only through twelve hopefuls. I was No. 19 on the list. I was anxious. I was hungry. I was taking time off from work. “A dentist’s appointment,” I’d told the foreman. “Do that on your own time,” he’d said. Instead of eating food, I smoked cigarettes, standing in the doorway, six feet from a sign that said “No Smoking,” exhaling out into the spring air, alongside my fellow-actors who looked like me. We bantered, we joked, we lit one another’s cigarettes, we pretended we were not consumed with insecurity and competitiveness. To help pass the time we talked about classical and postmodern theatre. If I had gone to college, I might have known what I was talking about. The walls around us were adorned with posters of plays past, announcing four-week runs to nowhere. Every so often the big brown door of the theatre, with its single round pane of glass, something like a porthole, would swing open, offloading the previous aspirant, a carbon copy of myself, whose face conveyed, in equal parts, relief, defeat, and premature delusions of being cast.

When it was finally my turn, I was surprised to see that my acting teacher, whom I had remembered at best as middle-aged, and at most as old, was probably only in his early thirties. He had seemed tall back then, too, but now he was short and I was tall. He was standing in the middle of a row of seats, with stacks of scripts beside him, and when I handed him my head shot he looked at me without the faintest recognition, but then when it suddenly became clear to him who I was and how much I’d changed in the intervening years he stepped forward and embraced me. I felt his empathy and kindness draped around my shoulders, expressed without reservation, and if the embrace had continued much longer I might have cried. He wanted to know how I’d been, and what I’d been doing, but since the auditions were running behind there was no time to catch up.

What was being decided here and now was whether I would be cast in a central role as a character who would be onstage for all three acts but had zero lines. I could not tell if this was a step backward or forward for my career. If I had to pick one, I would have picked backward. According to my teacher, it was forward. “He holds the play together,” he said. To this end, he needed to see how I “moved through space,” since moving through space would be the only thing I would be doing. So I took my place onstage, apprehensive beneath a single blinding spotlight, and waited for his direction, which was, simply, “Show me the color red.”

This was not something I had been anticipating. I had been anticipating, for example, being asked to mime pouring a glass of water, something I remember being quite good at. Without warning, we had entered the realm of symbolism and abstraction. We had entered game playing and fun. But all I could think of was the tremendous predicament of being asked to embody a *concept*. Was a color even a concept? If I had been fifteen still, I would have done what he asked, happily, without thinking twice. I would have done every color. “Here’s fuchsia!” “Here’s cadmium yellow!” There would have been joy in exploration. Now my brain felt calcified and literal, the effects of aging. I could think only of making a semi-bold choice, like lying on my back and moving interpretatively. But lying on my back would obscure me from my teacher’s vision. “If the audience can’t see you,” he would sometimes say, “then who are you doing this for?” I lay down anyway, the hard stage pressing against

me, dust getting all over my khakis. The foreman would say to me later, “You got dirty from going to the dentist?” For lack of any other idea, I channelled the character of the foreman, and then I channelled the drywall, which was not a character, and I thought about smoking a cigarette, because in my world of make-believe the color red smokes cigarettes, which was what I did, lying on my back, eyes closed, moving conceptually, this way and that, blowing smoke into the yellow spotlight of blindness, and when I stood up and dusted myself off I had, most wondrously, been given the role.

The second time I smoked crack cocaine was the spring I worked construction for my father on his new subdivision in Moonlight Heights. By this point, the electricians had finished pre-wiring for the Internet, whatever that was, the floors had been poured, the windows had been installed, and the general laborers had come and gone, eight dollars an hour not being enough. I would show the new recruits around, bathroom, foreman, paper to sign, and then I would go carry drywall in the sunshine. I was aware that I had been waiting for Duncan Dioguardi to invite me to party again, but no invitation had been forthcoming, and to broach it myself seemed as though it would traverse an essential but unstated boundary.

This time it was a Tuesday evening, after our shift, around six o’clock. Duncan’s car had broken down again. “Sure,” I said, “jump in.” I could hear the sprightliness in my voice, now authentic. The traffic was just as bad as ever and we crawled forward with our windows rolled down, the spring breeze blowing in, the cigarette smoke blowing out, dusk all around us. “I’m sorry about the traffic,” Duncan said, as he had said before. “I don’t mind,” I said. We talked about the subdivision for a while, and then we were quiet, mulling over I know not what, and then I broke the silence with the fantastic news that I’d been cast in a play, and that the way I saw things it was only a matter of time before I would be renting the U-Haul and making my move.

Duncan was happy for me. He shook my hand. He slapped me on the back. “Whatever you set your mind to,” he said. I told him that I’d get him a free ticket for opening night. He told me, “I’ll be able to tell people I knew you *when*.” I was not used to such expansiveness. I could feel myself blushing. “Not many lines,” I told him. Obviously, the truth was that there were *no* lines. But I thought it was important to at least try to keep things in some perspective. Humility first, fame second.

“Lines don’t matter,” Duncan said. Success was what mattered, and success called for celebration.

“Aw,” I said, “I sure appreciate that.” But it was a work night, after all.

No, it wasn’t. It wasn’t even seven o’clock. It would be a shame to let such good news go to waste. “Let’s celebrate,” Duncan Dioguardi said.

I knew that, in this context, “celebrate” was another word for “party,” which was, of course, itself another word.

The traffic was gone and I was driving fast. If I had had an ability to observe myself, I might have questioned why I needed to get where I was going in such a hurry. Under the overpass I went, fifteen miles above the speed limit. Turn, turn, turn. Duncan Dioguardi didn’t need to tell me where to turn. He wanted to know if I had forty dollars to chip in. For forty dollars I’d have to stop at the A.T.M. The A.T.M. was in the convenience store, where people were shopping for dinner. At the A.T.M., I noted with satisfaction that my savings were considerable—eight dollars an hour adds up.

His mother was home when we got there. “Meet my friend,” Duncan Dioguardi said. The word “friend” was not a euphemism. His mother was sitting in the living room watching “Seinfeld.” She said, “You’re welcome here anytime.” She was being warm. She was being hospitable. She was laughing at what was happening on TV, and a few moments later Duncan and I were in the basement, also laughing at what was happening on TV. Jerry was saying

something logical, and George was frustrated, and Elaine was rolling her eyes, and here came Kramer bursting through the front door. When Duncan opened his hand, I imagined for a moment that, instead of the insignificant chips off the drywall, he was holding a palmful of giant chunks, the size of golf balls, one pound each.

“You do the math,” Duncan said.

Beneath his bed was the Chore Boy, but its symbolism had gone the way of the euphemism. Now when we smoked, we used, of all things, a broken car antenna, which, according to Duncan, he had found lying on the sidewalk. This was a neighborhood where car antennas lay on the sidewalk. The smoke came out of Duncan’s mouth in the same white puff that lingered in the air of the basement theatre. “Not bad,” he said, again. And when it was my turn I also said, “Not bad,” but I meant it this time. I was the passenger on the cruise ship who has become acquainted with the island. The same warm feeling of friendship for Duncan engulfed me, followed by an unexpected but welcome sense of optimism concerning my prospects—extraordinarily promising they were, weren’t they, beginning with those three acts I was going to have onstage and heading toward a career. It was eight o’clock. Another episode of “Seinfeld” was just getting under way, the back-to-back shows courtesy of NBC, the interweaving story lines being established in that first minute: someone determined, someone displeased, the fatal flaw introduced, followed, thirty minutes later, by the abrupt resolution, and all of it funny, until all of it suddenly was *not* funny.

Suddenly I was in possession of that thing called clarity. I was watching the most vapid show in the history of television—it had always been vapid and we, the viewers, had always been duped. I could see straight through it now—solipsistic, narcissistic, false reality, easy tropes, barely amusing. The clarity that I *thought* I’d had moments earlier had not been clarity at all but, rather, its opposite, delusion, which was now being usurped by an all-encompassing awareness, horrible and heavy, through which I understood at once that I was not talented, had never been talented, that my life as a general laborer was proof of this lack of talent, and that being cast in a role with zero lines was not a step toward fame but a step into obscurity in a midsized city. Who but a fool agrees to move through space for three acts without saying a word?

The car antenna was coming back my way. It was nine o’clock. I had entered a strange dimension of time—it was progressing both slowly and quickly, as marked by the ticking of that basement boiler. Nine was early for night. It would be night for many more hours to come. I was nineteen. Nineteen was young. I would be young for many more years to come. What exactly had I been so troubled by a few minutes before? Light and airy clarity descended upon me. Ah, *this* was clarity, and the other, delusion. I had reversed things, silly, overstated them, compounded them, turned delight into cynicism. I was going to be onstage for three acts, moving through space, another credential to have on my résumé when I arrived in L.A. It was ten o’clock. Was ten o’clock early for night? Was night moving slowly or fast? Was Jerry funny or stupid? We were driving back to the A.T.M. now. I knew I was traversing some essential but unstated boundary, but I traversed it anyway. I wondered if Duncan Dioguardi had ever had a broken-down car or if he had smoked the car, its antenna being the last piece remaining. I wondered if he’d smoked L.A. I wondered if he’d one day smoke his Magnavox TV. This is the last time I’m doing this, I said to myself, even as I knew that saying so implied its inverse. At the A.T.M., I took out another forty dollars. I noted my balance. My savings account was still large. It was midnight. Midnight was still young. ♦

Friday, February 21

<https://therumpus.net/2011/05/dear-sugar-the-rumpus-advice-column-72-the-future-has-an-ancient-heart/>

DEAR SUGAR, THE RUMPUS ADVICE COLUMN #72: THE FUTURE HAS AN ANCIENT HEART

BY SUGAR

MAY 5TH, 2011

Dearest Sugar, Light of My Thursday Afternoons:

I teach a few creative writing courses at the University of Alabama where the majority of my students are seniors graduating in May.

Most of them are English and Creative Writing majors/minors who are feeling a great deal of dread and anxiety about their expulsion from academia and their entry into “the real world.” Many of their friends in other disciplines have already lined up post-graduate jobs, and many of my students are tired of the “being an English major prepares you for law school” comments being made by friends and family alike, who are pressuring them towards a career in law despite having little or no interest in it.

I have been reading a handful of your columns to my students in an attempt to pep them up and let them know that everything is going to be all right. They have written like motherfuckers. They have pictured the kittens behind the sheetrock.

Our school has decided to forgo a graduation speaker for the last five years or so, and even when we did have a graduation speaker, often they were leaders in business or former athletes, and so their message was lost on the ears of the majority of 21- and 22-year-olds. So Sugar, I am cordially asking you to deliver a graduation speech for our little class of writers. While we might have difficulty obtaining you an honorary PhD, believe me when I say that among us are some extremely talented writers, bakers, musicians, editors, designers, and video game players who will gladly write you a lyric essay, bake you a pie, write you a song, and perform countless other acts of kindness in exchange for your advice.

Fondly,

Cupcake & Team 408

Dear Cupcake & Team 408,

There’s a line by the Italian writer Carlo Levi that I think is apt here: “The future has an ancient heart.” I love it because it expresses with such grace and economy what is certainly true—that who we become is born of who we most primitively are; that we both know and cannot possibly know what it is we’ve yet to make manifest in our lives. I think it’s a useful sentiment for you to reflect upon now, sweet peas, at this moment when the future likely feels the opposite of ancient, when instead it feels like a Lamborghini that’s pulled up to the curb while every voice around demands you get in and drive.

I’m here to tell you it’s okay to travel by foot. In fact, I recommend it. There is so much ahead that’s worth seeing; so much behind you can’t identify at top speed. Your teacher is correct: You’re going to be all right. And you’re going to be all right not because you majored in English or didn’t and not because you plan to apply to law school or don’t, but because all right is almost always where we eventually land, even if we fuck up entirely along the way.

I know. I fucked up some things. I was an English major too. As it happens, I lied for six years about having an English degree, though I didn’t exactly mean to lie. I had in truth

gone to college and participated in a graduation ceremony. I'd walked across the stage and collected a paper baton. On that paper it said a bachelor's degree would be mine once I finished one final class. It seemed like such an easy thing to do, but it wasn't. And so I didn't do it and the years slipped past, each one making it seem more unlikely that I'd ever get my degree. I'd done all the coursework except that one class. I'd gotten good grades. To claim that I had an English degree was truer than not, I told myself. But that didn't make it true.

You have to do what you have to do. You can't go to law school if you don't have any interest in being a lawyer. You can't take a class if taking a class feels like it's going to kill you. Faking it never works. If you don't believe me, read Richard Wright. Read Charlotte Brontë. Read Joy Harjo. Read William Trevor. Read the entire Western canon. Or just close your eyes and remember everything you already know. Let whatever mysterious starlight that guided you this far, guide you onward into whatever crazy beauty awaits. Trust that all you learned during your college years was worth learning, no matter what answer you have or do not have about what use it is. Know that all those stories and poems and plays and novels are a part of you now and that they are bigger than you and they will always be.

I was a waitress during most of the years that I didn't have my English degree. My mother had been a waitress for many of the years that she was raising my siblings and me. She loved to read. She always wanted to go to college. One time she took a night class when I was very young and my father became enraged with her and cut her textbook into tiny pieces with a pair of scissors. She dropped the class. I think it was Biology.

You don't have to get a job that makes others feel comfortable about what they perceive as your success. You don't have to explain what you plan to do with your life. You don't have to justify your education by demonstrating its financial rewards. You don't have to maintain an impeccable credit score. Anyone who expects you to do any of those things has no sense of history or economics or science or the arts.

You have to pay your own electric bill. You have to be kind. You have to give it all you got. You have to find people who love you truly and love them back with the same truth. But that's all.

I got married when I was in college. I got divorced during the years that I was lying about having an English degree. When I met the man to whom I am now married he said, "You know, I really think you should finish your degree, not because I want you to, but I can tell that you want to." I thought he was sort of being an asshole. We didn't bring up the subject again for a year.

I understand what you're afraid of, sweet peas. I understand what your parents fear. There are practical concerns. One needs money to live. And then there is a deep longing to feel legitimate in the world, to feel that others hold us in regard. I felt intermittently ashamed during my years as a waitress. I'm the only one of my siblings who went to college. I was supposed to be the one who "made it." At times it seemed instead I had squandered my education and dishonored my dead mother by becoming a waitress like her. Sometimes I would think of this as I went from table to table with my tray and I'd have to think of something else so I wouldn't cry.

Years after I no longer worked at the last restaurant where I waited tables, my first novel was published. The man who'd been my manager at the restaurant read about me in the newspaper and came to my reading. He'd been a pretty awful boss—in fact, at times I'd despised him—but I was touched to see him in the bookstore that night. "All those years ago, who would have ever guessed we'd be here celebrating the publication of your novel?" he asked when we embraced.

"I would have," I replied.

And it was true. I always would have guessed it, even all the time that I feared it would never happen. Being there that night was the meaning of my life. Getting there had been my every intention. When I say you don't have to explain what you're going to do with

your life I'm not suggesting you lounge around whining about how difficult it is. I'm suggesting you apply yourself with some serious motherfuck-i-tude in directions for which we have no accurate measurement. I'm talking about work. And love.

It's really condescending to tell you how young you are. It's even inaccurate. Some of you who are graduating from college are not young. Some of you are older than me. But to those of you new college graduates who are indeed young, the old new college graduates will back me up on this: you are so god damned young. Which means about eight of the ten things you have decided about yourself will over time prove to be false. The other two things will prove to be so true that you'll look back in twenty years and howl.

My mother was young too, but not like those of you who are so god damned young. She was forty when she finally went to college. She spent the last years of her life as a college student, though she didn't know they were her last years. She thought she was at the beginning of the next era of her life. She died a couple of months before we were both supposed to graduate from different schools. At her memorial service, my mother's favorite professor stood up and granted her a PhD.

The most terrible and beautiful and interesting things happen in a life. For some of you, those things have already happened. Whatever happens to you belongs to you. Make it yours. Feed it to yourself even if it feels impossible to swallow. Let it nurture you, because it will.

I have learned this over and over and over again.

There came a day when I decided to stop lying. I called the college from which I did not have an English degree and asked the woman who answered the phone what I needed to do to get one. She told me I had only to take one class. It could be any class. I chose Latin. I'd never studied Latin, but I wanted to know, at last, where so many of our words come from. I had a romantic idea of what it would be like to study Latin—the Romance languages are, after all, descended from it—but it wasn't romantic. It was a lot of confusion and memorization and attempting to decipher bizarre stories about soldiers marching around ancient lands. In spite of my best efforts, I got a B.

One thing I never forgot from my Latin class is that a language that is descended from another language is called a daughter language.

It was the beginning of the next era of my life, like this is of yours.

Years after I no longer lived in the state where my mother and I went to college, my first novel was published and I traveled to that state to give a reading. Just as my former awful boss had done in a different city mere weeks before, the professor who'd granted my mother a PhD at her memorial service read about me in the newspaper and came to the bookstore to hear me read. "All those years ago, who would have ever guessed we'd be here celebrating the publication of your novel?" she asked when we embraced.

"Not me," I replied. "Not me."

And it was true. I meant it as sincerely as I'd meant that I always would've guessed it when I'd been speaking to my boss. That both things could be true at once—my disbelief as well as my certainty—was the unification of the ancient and the future parts of me. It was everything I intended and yet still I was surprised by what I got.

I hope you will be surprised and knowing at once. I hope you'll always have love. I hope you'll have days of ease and a good sense of humor. I hope one of you really will bake me a pie (banana cream, please). I hope when people ask what you're going to do with your English and/or creative writing degree you'll say: *Continue my bookish examination of the contradictions and complexities of human motivation and desire*; or maybe just: *Carry it with me, as I do everything that matters*. And then smile very serenely until they say *oh*.

Yours,
Sugar

Positive Obsession

Octavia Butler

<https://eng1301blog.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/positive-obsession.pdf>