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Lost In Dictation (Blasphemy, Sediton & Outright Lies)

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Lost In Dictation

Blasphemy, Sediton & Outright Lies

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Blasphemy, Sediton & Outright Lies

N. Barry Carver

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Resolution

It's a shame that, in the 21st century, there are still men of my age who do not know who fathered them.

Setting aside the moral issues, I need to know about my family medical history and bloodlines. What if, unknowingly, I were to end up involved with my half sister? Or hit the lottery only to have my picture in the paper draw droves of unknown cousins with desperate requests? How would I know which to dismiss without care? At forty-eight, I still don't know if I should be honoring the birth of a savior, celebrating the miracle of lights or dancing naked in the woods on the dark of the moon.

But morality has its part too. I never married. I have been very careful not to father a child... for, after all, what kind of man am I? In my cells and down in my secret soul, what am I destined to become? I have held the "nature versus nurture" debate my whole life and, I believe, I have been a good man. I am not deformed or handicapped. My brain functions at the level of my peers and my demeanor is such that I dare not speculate aloud that it is actually slightly superior.

My development has been uneventful. I never had a stitch or broke a bone until I fell on my wrist two years ago. So, what was so bad about me that... he didn't want me?

I thought getting my DNA sequenced would clear up some of the questions – and it did to a great degree. I just didn't know it would lead... here – to an "Extended Care Facility" next to the V. A. hospital in Los Angeles. It's clean enough I guess but, like all of its kind, it is a hopeless place, full of pain and need.

In trying to remain true to the idea I have that I am a good man, I allowed my DNA report to be checked against the long lists of people waiting for transplants. Instantly it came back with a match – an exact match.

The request had come from a doctor in Santa Monica. An open request – meaning the anonymity of the recipient was not an issue. There, in crumpled letters on the faxed computer printout, was the name I never knew but that genetics guaranteed was... my father. I only later found that it wasn't really his name either.

"John Sierra" was the name he'd been given when he was found unconscious. It seems the police brought him to St. John's on the 18th of December, and they name all unknowns sequentially – starting with "John Doe", "John Echo" and so on. Having been brought in late in the year, they'd worked their way through the alphabet to the "S's." The most recent paperwork

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shows a correction and gives to him what I had come looking to get from him: my last name.

The urgent tone in his doctor's voice convinced me to rush. Changing to larger planes at both Indianapolis and Denver, I arrived at LAX too late to do anything but find a room. I did not think myself overly excited or worried, but I did not sleep at all. As I've sat in the outer waiting room, I've had a chance, between the smells of disinfectants and the rising heartburn of an empty stomach, to think about what did keep me awake. It was anger.

How could he leave Mom and me to fend for ourselves without a word? She filed a police report only to be told that young actors here often change their names and disappear without a trace. She found it hard to imagine at first, but word had come back to her of his unfaithfulness. As the years and rumors mounted, she finally accepted that he'd simply left. We moved from Pico Rivera to the hills of Kentucky in 1959 – I was three years old. She never mentioned her time as a young "starlet" in Hollywood, and I'm surprised every time I see her in some Sunday afternoon movie filling time on the off-channels. I'm sure he must appear in a few as well....

Did he even bother to check on us? Did he know that she died just three years later and I, having no traceable roots, was passed through two foster homes before settling in with a small horse rancher and his wife? They had cleared all the obstacles to adoption – only to lose their own son just seven weeks before I arrived. He was all the things I was not, but they did

their best to make me feel I was more than the poor substitute I saw myself as. After the accident that took Tommy, they were never going to let me get anywhere near a horse.

The doctor finally called me, and we sat in a tiny office just inside the main doors. A large window displayed an emergency room of sorts – curtain walls making room after room. No hospital scrubs here, just ordinary street clothes. The professionals couldn't be detected from the visitors, if indeed there were any visitors. No one rushed. The emergencies they were here to treat were half-hearted affairs where the outcome would, eventually, be the only ticket out of here that anyone ever gets.

Who was this man? Every image I have of the '50s is one, if not of innocence, then at least of respect for the status quo. Sure, the job of trying to get acting work is stressful and destabilizing... but the jobs of husband and father are choices too. Very few are ever really forced into these roles, and I just can't imagine the cowardice it would take to renege on those contracts. How could he?

The doctor had been stammering about something while I was lost in thought – apparently my father was no longer in immediate danger and, I think, he was telling me that there was no reason to do anything more for him. He'd also told me that he was not brought in on December 18th of this year, but I rejoined the conversation too late make any further heads or tails of it.

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He stood up as if we had finished talking and showed me to one of the cubicles on the ward. I wasn't really prepared when he opened the curtain. There lay a man half my size – and more than half the way toward becoming a mummy. His body was contorted, wrist and arms bent into the shape that only long illness produces. His sunken eyes and uneven wisps of beard disguised his face but in the mix I could still see the foundations of my own countenance. I hated him.

How dare he disparage my mother, leave me to an unknown fate and then, after all that neglect, allow himself to be found here in this pitiful state? His predicament would have melted the resolve of most – but not mine. "How long does he have left?" I asked without flinching – it was really the only question left.

"Hours."

"Fine." I turned from the bed and headed for the door. I would not get the satisfaction of telling this pathetic old man how much of my good life he'd missed and what a lousy human being he was for doing so. Now that I'd thought so much on it, I guess this is really what I'd come all this way to say – and there was no one to hear it.

On the way out, they stopped me long enough to sign off on whatever they wanted to do with him next and how, as a veteran, his burial was covered. They gave me a discolored envelope bound with a string. I had already started the rental car when I decided to look inside.

The string snapped as I tried to untie it. On top of the bundle inside was just the insert from a wallet. It held two faded bus passes, eighty-eight cents in old coins... and a picture of Mom. I confess it stopped me. I didn't expect to find an I.D. but to have no other picture but this 50-year-old shot of the woman he left was shocking.

Amid the pile of medical notes that were the bulk of this packet was a police report of the "John Doe" who had been brought in. The carbon copy was smudged illegible in many places – and the entire form was poorly hand written – but it told the story of a police chase following a bank robbery. Nothing impressive by today's standard I'm sure, but it ended with the gangsters' car crashing through a crowd at a crosswalk at Lincoln and Colorado on December 17th, 1956.

An unattended infant was found in a stroller at the scene. Papers in the diaper bag led police to return the child home. A woman, rushing for the bus, was killed in the crash. The police reasoned that, since the woman was a near neighbor, that the child was in her care when she was killed - though the mother did not recognize the dead woman's name or photo. This, I assumed, was another chapter of mistakes I had never heard before.

"John Sierra" wasn't found until the next morning. The impact had tossed him deep into pile of trash around the corner. When the sanitation workers found him, freezing, bleeding, twisted and discarded, it was a

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miracle he was still alive. If such a thing can be called a miracle.

Rifling through the old medical exams, I found it was true. The desiccated old man in there waiting to die had been first in the hospital, and then here, ever since. His fits of consciousness never lasted more than a day or two in that first year. An emergency tracheotomy never allowed him to speak again, and although his right hand was crushed in the accident, the notes he had managed to write lead the doctors to the conclusion that his mind had been mutilated as well. He could not give his address... or even his name. His left-handed scrawls only confirmed the diagnosis of mental incompetence. Though none of those writings were included in the envelope, the Psych reports stated that, between incoherencies, he repeated a desire, a need, for finding the "divine." Always misspelled, and gouged deep in the paper, he repeated it again and again, more demandingly each time.

With my face full of tears older than anything else I own, I made my way back to his bedside, sat down and waited for his hour to come. He died at 6:04 p.m. Christmas day.

You might think I lost something that day – that my quest for father and family was killed by a random act when I was still in diapers.

You'd be wrong. While I still don't know whether my salvation is entrusted to churches or temples or just to me – I do know more than the doctors ever could. You see, through pain and delusion, an inability

to communicate normally and barriers too many to count, he gave me reason to celebrate this day. With that shaking hand he did not demand, as the doctors believed, the "divine" be delivered to him – though seeing the ultimate truth does take a bit of faith.

The unknown neighbor woman was a red herring that only workaday detectives could have dreamt up to clear their books of a mystery. No, it was my dad pushing my stroller that day.

My name is Devin.

What my father wanted was me.

Death Of A Salesperson

Out of gloom
Bright Summer's day
Our Hero, shortly,
Comes this way.
Never a foul
Word to say
And yet he has
The bills to pay.

His suit is shined
His accounts are pressed
His breath is at its
Sunday Best
Can't recall
Being depressed
And all his sins
Have been confessed!

Schooled "white collar"
Don't you know
But the company brass
Put on a show
And the "little guys"
Just had to go

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Out-sized, down-sourced
No more dough

Found another
Job to do
Which was hard
(There are so few)
Proudly handled
Always true
But, alas –
'Twas out-sourced too.

Still, here he comes
Aimed to please
You can't tell
He's on his knees
But paychecks do not
Grow on trees
From six figures
Down to threes

Maybe it's your
House today
Where he'll stop
And have his say
Maybe, if
You're not away
You will choose
To make his day

Would you like
To buy some blush?
Perhaps cologne?

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A Fuller brush?
Fix a leak?
Bugs to squash?
O, I know,
Perhaps a flush?

Hero's got a
Mouth to feed
A sagging roof
Sidewalk to weed
They said success
Was guaranteed
So why are there
So many in need?

Nevermind
We must refrain
From thinking things that
Give us pain
Maybe here he'll
Treat a stain
And all will be
Just fine, again.

Ring the bell
Wait and see
How surprised
They all will be
That Hero came
To set them free
From all of life's
Drudgery

Now there comes

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An end to dread
While Hero waits
To make his bread
Before a single
Word is said
A vessel burst
Inside his head
And Hero falls
Like so much lead

The lady of the house
Is shocked
To find a dead man
On this spot
And puts him in
A flowerpot
Near the brand new
Brush she got
Off a guy who
Now is not.

Moral:

If your life is
On the brink
Take a breath –
Stop and think
Troubles last
For just a wink
So go ahead
Enjoy a drink
And to your thoughts
Make this last link:
"Relief" may be closer
Than you think.

Pocket

Isn't it true of all of us that, as we age, we find more of our parents in ourselves? Sometimes it is an unhappy realization, but good or bad, we recognize that there is some weight to the argument that the apple never falls far from the tree. For most of us, I hope, it is also true that those everyday, throwaway memories with Mom and Dad – and probably just because so many of them were that: thrown away – become precious. Your own smile, on occasion, may be interrupted by the recognition that you're observing a behavior that is exactly what your Mom was smiling about all those years ago and that you have only just now gotten the joke.

Mom and Dad are long gone now, buried before their time with little more than gravestones to mark their passing. Modestly educated, they were products of their time. To each of the six children that survived them, however, they imparted... I cannot say wisdom... but some sort of common sense that seems far above the national average – as well as a sense of entitlement beyond all connection to any of our present statii. It is a wonder.

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I don't think that Dad ever rode in an airplane. I know he "shipped out" to both the Second World War and Korea but I believe, in those days the accent was on "ship". Mom did fly once that I remember, but only in the direst circumstance. By contrast, I have traveled the world freely from the edge of Russia to southern Japan, and half the fifty states in between – mostly, by air. This one point should give you an inkling of just how much my experience and theirs diverge.

And still, I started this note to you with how much we are our parents and, on that point, I'll share the following moment:

As I've written previously, my Dad was, from years before my arrival, an assembly line worker. He helped to build Packards and, when they stopped being made, moved on to building Fords. He worked the afternoon shift and used to get home long after the kids should have been in bed. In his thick workers togs, the color of deep forest and smelling of oil, he would arrive at our tract house in Inkster.

I'm still fond of that house, though the years have been less kind to it than they've been to me (and they haven't exactly treated me as if I have an aging portrait in the attic). It's still a white sided house with cheery blue trim and aluminum awnings, but time has worn little tear-like trails at the corner of each window, and the roof sags slightly as if it too has simply been asked to carry on a bit longer than should have been expected. The front porch – just a cement stoop really – has tubes like plumbing pipes holding its cover overhead. These tubes are roughly the diameter of a

quarter – and I know this because I, for years I think, popped every quarter I was given down one or the other of them. They are, for all I know, still there and, being quite ancient now, more than likely worth a small fortune. If the neighborhood were not as sour and unfriendly looking as it had become on my last visit, I would have asked to replace those worn supports and split the treasure with the latest occupants. But that's both another story and something I will never do.

After work, Dad would pull into the driveway, and those still awake (through whatever slippery means they'd managed) ran to the door and waited for that salt-and-pepper crew cut to come in and command us all to bed. Each time I survived the yawning and eye rubbing to greet the old man's return from labor, I'd bury my face between that dark green collar and a somewhat scratchy cheek.

Just then, when I wrote that, I could for an instant smell the Aqua Velva that he would get from me each Christmas.

I wanted the hug, of course, but there was another motive. After the big embrace, I would fish that heavy, double-stitched, pocket on the front of his shirt. It seemed a long way down to the bottom of what must've been less than a three-inch, square of cloth. Deep down, like plumbing the depths of a Cracker Jack box, there was something he'd always put there for me to find – a half-dollar, a pack of Chiclets, a roll of Nicco wafers or Lifesavers... something. Once my little grubbers had latched onto to whatever was

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hiding there, I'd throw him another hug or a peck on the cheek and run off to enjoy my prize.

Sometimes my little sister made the long march too. If not tucked away, she'd have to get a share of the booty. Two years my junior, she didn't comprehend that the extra piece from the Chuckles was the licorice flavored one and that I was not being magnanimous at all by giving her three of the five pieces. When she did catch on, we each got two and left the black, middle one for the next older brother (who still eats things none of the rest of us will). It must be some sort of large family Darwinian survival skill he picked up early on.

Maybe it was only once a week... maybe only once in a great while, but it seemed to me that I repeated this ritual with my father night after night in a long parade of seek and find games. As I got older and the tradition came to an end, I often thought of how many goodies I had pulled from that pocket. I still remember all the candy, all the coins, and all the little toy whistles or vending machine treasures that the dad of five others had put there just for me. He always promised we'd go fishing one day, and though I still don't care for seafood of any kind, I regret that we never got the chance.

It seems fitting that one happy memory brings so many others. I know I did little more than hand wrenches across a space he could easily have reached as "we" worked on the family car, but he did pretend that only I could hook the safety light up under the hood properly. There has never been a little boy who

wanted anything more than to think Daddy needed his help. I leave it with you that it is a measure of men that they make such small, ungainly hands feel useful, and perhaps wordlessly, train their offspring to work, to take pride in their efforts and to teach without judgment or penalty.

Some time between then and now – and long after our game was through – I returned to the pocket of my father’s shirt and again searched it to the seams to find the bounty I knew he’d always give. It was late in ‘69, as the retired clothes were readied for a Goodwill bundle, and I knew there would be nothing to find. I just wanted the comfort of one more something of him before this too was gone – the fishing trip, a forgotten coin, I would even have settled for the black Chuckle. But nothing was there, and now, even the pocket is gone.

The last touch I had of him was the same one he’d had with his father back in ‘66. It is the same one my sons will get and, as hard as that is to imagine, it is an unavoidable truth. It is not some find he chose for me to seek... it is a carved marble marker that his years of military service earned him. It is a cold, white stone that simply carries his name, rank, unit, state and dates of birth and death. On its back, some years later, they added Mom’s name too. It stands, one of thousands upon thousands, surrounding for miles a single flagpole and a flag that stood for a lot more to him than it ever will to me. Some things he could share with me – some he could not. I don’t know if more years would have made us better friends – I just know I’m still angry that I didn’t get them.

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That was more than 30 years ago, and so many other thoughts perpetually crowd my mind that it surprises me sometimes how vivid a few of the old ones are – especially the ones I'd rather never remember at all. But, however it may sound, I have a very small list of regrets. One of them is that I don't remember saying "thank you" for any of those treats. Age is tempering all my memories though....

I am now about the age he died at and, as God is gracious, I have been given two sons. The youngest is just now to the age where he searches my pocket every time I come in the door, and I hereby vow that he will seldom come up empty handed. I'll play that game for as long as he likes, and my smile at it is only interrupted by the recognition of the realization that my father may have had in this process. It doesn't have anything to do with what those things in the pocket are – it is being the provider of them. He got the only "thank you" he wanted: me crawling all over him, rubbing my hands on his scratchy face and showing amazement and a crooked smile at whatever he stashed there at the last minute. I put into his pocket more than I ever took out of it – something he could never have explained to me, but it is something he has given me nonetheless. I know this only now that I stand where his shoes have been. I wonder how many of my predecessors have shared this time-release treasure. I hope one day, far from now, that without explanation, my sons will fall upon this last and perhaps ancient boon.

The pocket wasn't empty. It will never be empty.

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