

How to Laugh at Sentimental Fools:  
Comic Memoirs and the Professional Class

by

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*Preface*

This thesis considers a body of American writing that gained prominence in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The comic memoir, typified by David Sedaris, Sarah Vowell, and Augusten Burroughs, has become unusually popular in the last fifteen years. The comic memoir is characterized by humorous, picaresque essays that seek to triumph over a difficult childhood and an absurd world. More subtly, they implicitly contend with the inadequacies of a post World War II culture of meritocracy. By playing the fool, the comic memoirist deflates the pretense of the professional class through entertaining, personal anecdotes. They also address many anxieties that have permeated life for professional workers in recent years. The comic memoirists embrace stoicism and humor in order to bring to light the anxieties that professionals might feel about being credulous, sentimental, inadequate, uncreative, inauthentic, and indistinct. This thesis considers the themes and techniques that these writers developed in order to make sense of the growth of professionalism and meritocracy at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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*Introduction: The Writers, Themes, and Characteristics of Comic Memoirists*

It's a simple situation. A man goes to the park to read and relax. He buys a cup of coffee, sits down on a bench, lights a cigarette, and begins reading a book. The woman next to him asks if he would mind not smoking and the man complies without hesitation. It's a small incident that most people would not remember seconds later. Such a trivial interaction hardly seems like the material for deep reflection. However, in February of 1993, David Sedaris read "Diary of a Smoker" on National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* (*Harper's* 22 – 23). Two months later, the essay appeared in *Harper's Magazine* on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1993 (22 – 23). One year later, it would appear again in Sedaris's first book, Barrel Fever: Stories and Essays (1994). Here and throughout his work, Sedaris dissects the mundane and overlooked elements of his daily interactions. In his retelling of the event below from *Harper's*, Sedaris reshapes the people around him through his own highly reflexive and quirky sense of judgment:

"Diary of a Smoker"

I rode my bike to the boat pond in Central Park, where I bought myself a cup of coffee and sat down on a bench to read. I lit a cigarette and was enjoying myself when the woman seated twelve feet away, on the other end of the bench, began waving her arms in front of her face. I thought she was fighting off a bee. She called out, "Excuse me, do you mind if we make this a non-smoking bench?"

I don't know where to begin with a question like that. Do I mind if we make this a non-smoking bench? There is no we. Our votes

automatically cancel each other out. What she meant was, "Do you mind if I make this a non-smoking bench?"

I could understand if we were on an elevator or locked together in the trunk of a car, but this was outdoors. Who did she think she was? Things irritate me all the time, but I accept this as a fact of life. I would never go up to someone and say, "Excuse me, do you mind if we make this a non-radio-playing block?"

The sandals this woman was wearing should have tipped me off. They looked like the sort of shoes Moses would have worn. I looked at her sandals and I looked at her rapidly moving arms and I crushed my cigarette. I acted like it was no problem and then I stared at the pages of my book, hating her and Moses both.

The trouble with aggressive nonsmokers is that they feel they are doing you a favor by not allowing you to smoke. They seem to think that one day you will thank them for the fifteen seconds they just added to your life. What they don't understand is that I see it as just another fifteen seconds that I can spend hating their guts and plotting revenge. (22 – 23)

This essay is emblematic of Sedaris's work. Like "Diary of a Smoker," Sedaris's stories are short, vivid, and argumentative. His half-dozen collections of essays and short stories present an author who rails against the rest of the seemingly foolish world. Sedaris's essayistic memoirs do not present a protagonist who learns and develops through his encounters with obstacles; nor does he reveal something to the

reader through accomplishment and reflection. Instead, the narrator scoffs at the absurdity of others and reflects on his own inaction, in effect defying the bildungsroman.

Sedaris's writing is witty and artful without being earnest. What stands out about Sedaris is that he does not aspire to the seriousness or formal architecture that generally appears in literary fiction or in serious non-fiction. The qualities that define Sedaris are markedly different from those of other living writers who have studied and taught in universities and whose work is examined in seminar rooms. In this way, Sedaris does not seem to aspire to the same objectives as writers such as Toni Morrison or Philip Roth who are often taken to establish the standards of literary ambition. By contrast, a story like "Diary of a Smoker" seems light and humorous instead of serious or profound. Sedaris does not ask the reader to interpret the anecdote for its true meaning or to appreciate its construction. Even the prose is accessible and appears remarkably simple. Serious, literary fiction generally demands that the reader consider the art form for all its possible implications and the reader approach the excellently crafted work with an appreciation for its portent and emotional depth. Sedaris does not ask the reader to make such efforts. Rather, Sedaris actively rebels against seriousness and the cultivation of intellect by writing artful but entertaining, easy-to-read memoirs.

With wry, entertaining examinations such as "Diary of a Smoker," David Sedaris has become a multi-book bestselling author and an important figure in a recent renaissance of literary humor. Along with his contemporaries Sarah Vowell and Augusten Burroughs, Sedaris has helped to define a distinctive turn-of-the-century style of literature. The comic memoir makes use of the writer's witty

attention to the strange, quirky details of ordinary life. It foregrounds the writer's ability to deflate pretense through acerbic irony. In general, the writers present themselves as protagonists whose picaresque journeys through the landscape of contemporary society allow them to see the delusional, overblown, pretentious, and foolish details that surround both them and us.

This distinctive type of comic memoir came to great prominence during the 1990s. Of the three memoirists, Sedaris published first with Barrel Fever: Stories and Essays (1994), followed by Naked (1997), Holidays on Ice (1997), Me Talk Pretty One Day (2000), Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim (2004), and When You Are Engulfed in Flames (2008). Sarah Vowell published after Sedaris with Radio On: A Listener's Diary (1996), followed by Take the Cannoli: Stories from the New World (2000), The Partly Cloudy Patriot (2002), Assassination Vacation (2005), and The Wordy Shipmates (2008). Augusten Burroughs began comparatively late with Sellelevision: A Novel (2000), followed by Running With Scissors: A Memoir (2002), Dry: A Memoir (2003), Magical Thinking (2004), Possible Side Effects (2006), and A Wolf at the Table: Memories of My Father (2008). The sheer volume of books produced by these three authors in fifteen years suggests that this type of writing has found a large audience that enjoys the comic memoirists' satirical, self-reflexive style. Their substantial and enduring popularity also suggests that these writers provide their audience with something more than the ephemeral pleasure that comes from the authors' witticisms and sensational histories.

Fifteen years after Sedaris's first publication, these three writers have become so successful that they tour America and Europe reading to large crowds who are already familiar with their stories and their worlds. For example, following a reading

by David Sedaris, one audience member shouted, “How’s your brother?” (*David Sedaris Live at Carnegie Hall*). On these tours, the comic memoirists sell out concert halls. Recently, tickets to hear these authors read from their own books have reached \$400.00<sup>1</sup> (which is enough money to buy a hardcover copy of all five Vowell books, all six Burroughs books, and all seven Sedaris books... twice). Their fan base, too, is growing. According to the American Booksellers Association, Holidays on Ice, first published in 1997, became the third best selling non-fiction book in America in 2008. Me Talk Pretty One Day, published by Sedaris in 2000, was the fiftieth fastest selling American book in 2007. In 2008, it climbed to the forty-fifth fastest selling book. Sedaris also had When You Are Engulfed in Flames (2008) in the top fifteen.<sup>2</sup> The numbers alone suggest that there is something significant that Sedaris and the other comic memoirists offer to their readers’ concerns and anxieties.

These comic memoirists create light reading that specifically addresses the readers’ intelligence. Their humor alludes to highly specific cultural details such as French grammar, performance art, colonial history, and consumerism, but through clever presentation, their writing seems lighthearted and easy to read. Despite their apparent lightness of tone, the writers artfully employ these cultural details to suggest their deep ambivalence and anxiety about class and status. This dynamic eliminates the sensation of effortful reading, making their writing entertaining, yet intellectually vigorous and engaging – like a crossword puzzle or a detective novel. For example, in “Diary of a Smoker,” Sedaris adopts many simultaneous roles by choosing not to respond to the woman. Sedaris observes and interprets her as pretentious, over-sold

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<sup>1</sup> November 16, 2006

<sup>2</sup> As of November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008

on popular health topics, and passive aggressive – qualities that he sees as easy to dislike. “Diary of a Smoker” foregrounds Sedaris as the protagonist who becomes the image of potential redemption and the object of comedy. As the object of comedy, he is utterly petty because he asserts that every smoker already knows about the dangers of smoking. Somehow, Sedaris is petty enough to implicitly argue that lung cancer is a far more attractive alternative than listening to someone who allows politeness and sentimentality to interfere with the articulation of a true sentiment. The woman does not ask Sedaris to stop smoking for her sake, but she also does not clearly articulate her objection to second hand smoke. In this way, Sedaris deconstructs the self-righteous and delusional pieties that surround him and may be present in the reader’s environment. He becomes the enforcer of logic and reason in the story and, as he crushes his cigarette, he becomes the simultaneous physical embodiment of passive-aggressive resentment. Herein lies the comedy – a small instance that comes to signify a much larger issue, all told through a highly subjective protagonist whose personal agenda lies at the heart of every story.

Sedaris and his peers write highly personal, ironic narratives that emphasize a unique, outsider’s perspective on the world around them. Like Sedaris, Vowell and Burroughs portray themselves as authoritative and nearly clairvoyant, but they are also utterly petty. Many of their comedic moments are wrought with ironic pathos. The combination of pain and pettiness makes their writing distinctly comic and valuable for deeper reflection. Their stories depict the writers as victims of circumstance and often of cruelty. But rather than making these experiences an occasion for sentimentality, the comic memoirists use irony and satire to undercut

bathos and to establish a mastery over their material and the circumstances around them.

This pattern is most evident in the work of Augusten Burroughs, whose memoirs employ the experiences of suffering and vulnerability to elicit humor. In 2002, Burroughs became widely popular with Running With Scissors: A Memoir, a memoir recounting his life from age six until age seventeen. The book begins by describing an adolescent Augusten who loves cleanliness and decor, seems somewhat OCD, and has very few cares beyond enrolling in hairdressing school. At the same time, he and his mother have fled Augusten's father, an increasingly abusive alcoholic. Burroughs's mother begins seeing a psychotherapist with growing dependency, at which point the story becomes both sensational and devastating. After a series of visits to the psychotherapist's office, it becomes apparent that Augusten's mother and the psychotherapist have an unclear but highly unconventional relationship. Somehow, Dr. Finch, the psychotherapist, convinces Augusten's mother to relinquish parental custody of Augusten to him. Augusten moves into the therapist's house and the memoir recounts a series of bizarre events that ensue, such as Mrs. Finch's walking through the neighborhood with balloons tied to her breasts (92) or Dr. Finch's insistence that his bowel movements are direct signs from God (166).

Ultimately, these strange events culminate in more serious subjects, as the thirteen-year-old protagonist begins a sexual relationship with a thirty-six year old man who lives behind the house. Another focal point for the memoir's more serious subjects is his mother's mental illness. Throughout the book, Burroughs's mother suffers from delusional episodes and uncontrollable mood swings, vacillating

between having public sex with a neighbor to calm discussions about poetry. Eventually, Augusten asserts more self-awareness and independence. At age seventeen, he moves to New York and becomes a male prostitute.

Instead of obsessing over the trauma associated with these events, however, Burroughs treats them as absurd. Rather than depicting himself as wholly a victim of more powerful adults, he chooses to frame his relationships in the memoir in terms of complex power dynamics through humorous details. In regard to his sexual relationship with his older neighbor, Burroughs remembers, “Next to obsessing over hairdressing school, hurting Neil Bookman was my favorite thing to do” (162). However, Augusten’s relationship is always unclear. He does not always display such conscious control over his emotions. Indeed, Augusten often appears emotionally erratic. After Bookman writes Augusten a sixteen-page love letter, Augusten experiences conflicting emotions. “I liked that he felt so strongly about me,” Augusten writes, “But I worried he felt too strongly about me. I guess it scared me in some way” (197). In short, Burroughs’s memoir refuses to dwell on sentiment, even if he often acknowledges his own sentimental tendencies. Instead, he dislocates the trauma of his experience by equating it with a whimsical desire, a quirky detail, or an ambivalent emotion. This caustic wit comes through in his less serious observations as he extends the same sense of reflection and satire to just about everyone, but particularly to descriptions of his mother. In regard to his mother’s growing dementia, he writes:

I began to notice a change in my mother’s eyes. The pupils seemed to dilate, making them appear darker....

Like a sheep dog that can predict an earthquake, I had always been able to sense when my mother was about to go crazy. Her speech quickened, she stopped sleeping and she developed a craving for peculiar foods, like candle wax. (230)

Burroughs wants the reader to view his childhood as a mixture of bravery and fear, but ultimately of survival in a situation that the narrator knows is ludicrous. In Burroughs's world, he is an outsider in the psychiatrist's family, his family, and the world at large. Nevertheless, his memoir presents a narrator who wants sympathy without pity.

More importantly, the memoir presents a theme of triumph over extreme adversity. Burroughs's triumph comes from his own innate cunning. He makes it clear in his memoir that his keen abilities allow him to claim a maturity and awareness that is well above average. He wants the reader to recognize that his natural intelligence, will power, and resilience allowed him to become the successful advertiser turned writer that he is today. In fact, Burroughs almost explicitly expresses this sentiment with regard to his success in advertising in his second memoir, Dry: A Memoir:

Ad people don't care where you came from, who your parents were. It doesn't matter. You could have a crawl space under your kitchen floor filled with little girls' bones and as long as you can dream up a better Chuck Wagon commercial, you're in. (2)

Burroughs wants the reader to see that, despite all the hardships and nastiness he has had to endure, he has succeeded and established himself as a highly intelligent and valuable individual. His traumatic experiences have equipped him with fortitude and will power to prosper in even the most hostile environments of advertising and prostitution. This same sentiment is repeated throughout all of Burroughs's books.

Sedaris employs a somewhat more temperate attitude to trauma and absurdity, yet his mastery of language, timing, and observation similarly emphasize his ability to outwit and survive the oppressive forces that surround him. Sedaris's bizarre breakthrough story came in the form of "The SantaLand Diaries," a story about his employment as a thirty-three year old elf, which gained fame after its 1996 audio broadcast on the radio program *This American Life*.<sup>3</sup> In the story's reprinting in Holiday's on Ice (1997), the reader accompanies Sedaris from the elf-costume shop to his final shift. The story begins by describing his humiliating interview process in which Sedaris seems positive he has failed the drug test (7), his embarrassing experiences learning how to use a cash register (7), and his countless other degrading and absurd misadventures, all of which highlight the ugliness of social misbehavior. When he finally completes the training, Sedaris encounters white mothers who complain that their Santa was a "chocolate Santa" and black mother's who complain that their Santa isn't "black enough" (40 – 41). Throughout his employment, he

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<sup>3</sup> A truncated version of the story first appeared in 1992 on NPR's *Morning Edition*. "When it was first broadcast," it says on the *This American Life* website, "it generated more requests for tapes than any story in *Morning Edition's* history except the death of Red Barber" (Archives 12.24.2004). It also appeared in Barrel Fever: Stories and Essays and again in Holiday's on Ice. The 1996 broadcast on *This American Life*, however, brought Sedaris his widest audience.

observes childless adults who sit on Santa's lap to ask for large-breasted women (14), anxious children whose parents make them spend more time posing for pictures than talking to Santa (18), and mothers who instruct their sons to urinate on the plastic trees (25), prompting Sedaris to bitterly change his elf name from "Crumpet" to "Blisters" (30). Bitter, self-consciously petty revenge is the main theme of the story.

Sedaris employs a journalistic-picaresque attitude toward recording the intricacies of his patrons. A childless woman sneaks a cat into Santa's village and it attacks Santa (30), a contagious child waits until she is on Santa's lap to ask for a cure (25), and out of boredom, children throw nickels at Sedaris's face (35). Sedaris particularly enjoys watching as horrified patrons learn that their holiday photos will not arrive until August (42). As in "Diary of a Smoker," the reader sees an unremarkable event through Sedaris's vision, noting the particular way people with sentiment and disposable income are stupid, cruel, or both. In keeping with this theme, the story ends with his manager affectionately squeezing his shoulder as a gesture of gratitude for all his hard work as she leans the other way and screams at a customer, "Don't tell him I called you a bitch; tell him I called you a fucking bitch because that's what you are!" (44). Indeed, managers, security personnel, and fellow employees seem despicable. Even the Santas that Sedaris works with seem to abuse their power, making Sedaris sing when he does not want to and making fun of the children (36). Whenever a character has a position of power above or equal to Sedaris, as in "Diary of a Smoker," they are made foolish, myopic, and thus laughable. Like Burroughs, Sedaris responds to his own vulnerability and humiliation by turning it into an opportunity for revenge and comic superiority.

Sarah Vowell began her career by writing a very different type of diary, but she expresses the same sense of intellectual and observational superiority to the people around her as Sedaris. Her first book, Radio On: A Listener's Diary (1996), began her highly personalized, self-reflexive style of narration. The memoir recounts the year Vowell spent listening to American radio (1995), an experience that reveals to her a decadent civilization that is paralyzed by fear of criticism. She begins by mourning the loss of Kurt Cobain and goes on to attack Rush Limbaugh. At every stage, she expresses anxiety that people are paralyzed by fear of criticism, which she argues allowed Republicans to win the 1994 congressional election. Her attacks against Rush Limbaugh and the conservative right-wing conspiracy were some of the earliest direct criticisms of right-wing populism and of a meek liberal population reluctant to confront conservatism. As Al Franken did with his best-seller Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Idiot (1996), Vowell found a market niche by responding with anger and mockery to the growing conservative movement of the 1990s, articulating a point-of-view that, although widely shared, was rarely expressed in a mainstream media characterized by caution and balance.

However, it was her third book Assassination Vacation (2000) that made Vowell widely successful. In this book, she travels to different historic landmarks in order to consider the assassinations of U.S. Presidents. The book follows Vowell to the Lincoln memorial (25), to a museum that contains a rare letter detailing the process that the mortician used to remove Lincoln's brain from his skull (51), and through the landscape of the assassins' pilgrimages. Like Sedaris and Burroughs, Vowell makes her own experiences and observations the focus of her writing. Like them as well, she appears at once a cranky and marginal figure who can nevertheless

speaking with absolute confidence about every subject that crosses her path. For example, convinced there is more to know about the Lincoln assassination, Vowell describes her experience searching for Dr. Mudd's house with her companion Matthew Klam. This bewilderingly difficult experience leads her to the certainty that Mudd was guilty of conspiring with John Wilkes Booth to assassinate Lincoln:

About ninety minutes into the roughly ten-mile drive from the restaurant to the Dr. Samuel A. Mudd House, I am convinced of Mudd's guilt. Klam and I, armed with one road atlas, two historical maps of John Wilkes Booth's route, an old article from the Washington Post travel section, directions from various locals gassing up their cars, and six printouts from MapQuest.com, are lost for two hours. Mudd's house in rural Maryland is so hard to find, even in daylight, even with a lap full of maps, that I don't see how Booth and Herold, who were horseback riding under the influence of the whiskey they acquired at the Suratt Tavern, could have found Mudd's house in the middle of the night if they didn't know exactly where they were going, and whom they could trust. (59)

This is not sober historical analysis; rather, the point is to highlight Vowell's misadventures and the pleasures of her wit as she turns her travels into comic material. Like Burroughs and Sedaris, she casts herself as an outsider and appears comic and inept. She expresses a sense of exhilaration at historic landmarks that is comically unshared by her companions (33), her friends gawk at her, bewildered by

her odd retelling of the musical *Assassins* (3), and throughout, she expresses the feeling that she is “the odd man out” on historical tours designed for “elderly retirees” and “kids who are forced to endure them” (105). Throughout the diary and her other works, she unabashedly describes people as “jerks,” “idiots,” and “morons.” She never loses her sense of self and always focuses her highly researched and analyzed findings through her personalized analyses.

The impious persona and the ironic attitudes these writers cultivated fit well in the rapidly evolving publication industry of the 1990s. Benjamin Compaine and Douglas Gomery’s Who Owns the Media shows that the 1990s were a period of unprecedented book sales. They attribute this expansion of the book selling industry to many factors, but the creation of book mega-stores was perhaps more helpful to comic memoirists’ careers than any other factor. The rise of nationwide bookstore chains Barnes & Noble and Borders created new methods of marketing. This linked together chain stores, the Internet, and mass media by allowing them to advertise certain authors to carefully researched market niches (134). Sedaris, Vowell, and Burroughs benefited from this transitional phase in book publishing and marketing by carving out untraditional pathways to popularity.

Sedaris, Vowell, and Burroughs’s routes to success were unconventional. They did not attend prestigious, undergraduate colleges or receive Master of Fine Arts degrees from elite universities; nor did they begin their careers as prominent journalists in publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Time Magazine*, or *The Atlantic*. Instead, they came to prominence through unusual paths

that allowed them to emphasize original and unconventional attitudes toward literary skill and craftsmanship.

The key venue for David Sedaris and Sarah Vowell was Chicago Public Radio's *This American Life*, currently broadcast by Public Radio International and National Public Radio. Created and produced by NPR veteran Ira Glass in 1995, *This American Life* provides alternative views of American life by bringing ordinary, unknown people to attention. In a recent interview, Glass described *This American Life*, "We're taking the tools of journalism and applying them to people whom you wouldn't normally apply them to – people who aren't famous, people who aren't powerful, people just like you and me" (Soloman). The show is one hour long and segmented among three distinct yet thematically connected non-fiction stories. The program routinely features subjects and people whose stories never make headline news, such as people who live alone, children of the depression era, housewives who accost corrupt meter maids, and morticians. The premise, aside from the self-described mission to answer, "what it's like to be here, now, in America" ("This American Life"), is that everyone has a story that can be told in a compelling, interesting way.

Glass particularly sought to promote unrecognized talents like Sedaris and Vowell. Glass and Sedaris first met in Chicago where *This American Life* began and is currently produced. In 1991, after having recently moved to Chicago, Glass attended a café reading where he heard the then the unknown Sedaris. Sedaris read from his diaries and something resonated with Glass. At the time, Sedaris was almost forty years old and finishing a creative writing degree at The School of the Art

Institute of Chicago.<sup>4</sup> Glass called Sedaris the same year and asked if he had any holiday-themed stories for an upcoming show. Sedaris did – “The SantaLand Diaries.” Through Glass’s direct involvement with National Public Radio, “The SantaLand Diaries” originally aired on NPR’s *Morning Edition* in 1992 (“NPR”), although it was the 1996 broadcast on *This American Life* that made Sedaris so successful and helped bring *This American Life* a wider audience (“David Sedaris,” Gale Literary Databases). From there, “The SantaLand Diaries” was adapted into a play and *This American Life* has grown so popular that it now has a television show alongside its radio broadcast. Eventually Sedaris became a regular commentator on NPR and still frequently appears on *This American Life*.

Vowell’s story is similar. While she is currently a Contributing Editor to the show, she too got her fame by reading on *This American Life*. She also crossed paths with Glass via the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. A graduate of Montana State University, Vowell worked briefly as a journalist for the San Francisco Weekly before enrolling as an art history major at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. After graduating only a few years behind Sedaris, Vowell set out to write her first book. In 1995, she traveled the country, listening to the radio and eventually published Radio On: A Listener’s Diary in 1996. The book did not sell or review well, but as he did with Sedaris, Glass found something resonant in Vowell’s prose, despite the fact that both Glass himself and NPR were criticized in the book. On July

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<sup>4</sup> The School of the Art Institute of Chicago is renowned for its fine arts programs, but the creative writing degree is considered second rank at best. In Sedaris’s story “The Learning Curve” (Me Talk Pretty One Day), he mentions that the creative writing class was often considered the easiest way to fulfill the English requirement. He also mentions that the previous professor had decided to abdicate his position because he found that delivering pizzas was a more lucrative profession.

4<sup>th</sup>, 1998, Glass dedicated the entire hour of *This American Life* to Vowell's stories. The attention brought Vowell wide exposure, which expanded her popularity. She then went on to write for *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and other prominent publications ("Sarah Vowell," Gale Literary Databases).

Burroughs, too, owes much of his success to NPR and *This American Life*, although he is less indebted to Ira Glass. He read excerpts from Running With Scissors: A Memoir on NPR's *Morning Edition* when the book was first published ("NPR"). His mother, however, appeared on the NPR program *All Things Considered* in 2006 to tell her version of the story. Keeping with its theme, the program sought to humanize her and presented Augusten's mother as a distraught mother acutely aware of her own mental illness. In retrospect, she recognizes her failures as a mother and even remembers fond memories of her and Augusten as they critiqued each other's poetry (Shapiro).

*This American Life* cultivated an aesthetic during the 1990s that these writers were particularly gifted at developing. The show emphasizes a highly personal viewpoint and promoted writers who exude an intelligent and idiosyncratic persona. In particular, *This American Life* sought stories that were at once both sad and funny ("This American Life"). Emphasizing these qualities, Sedaris, Vowell, and Burroughs found an opportunity to develop a literary style that was intentionally at odds with established genres. One should not expect to find them in the Best American Fiction, Best American Nonfiction, or Best American Essays collections. They generally avoid the vocabulary and diction associated with literary essays or serious journalism, disavowing authority, sobriety, and seriousness. Instead, these books aspire to sound

highly personal and informal. They read as if they were written with minimal editing and give the illusion that the author just sat down at the computer or typewriter and began without ever going back.

Taking that approach has allowed the comic memoirists to take a particularly successful slant on a prominent literary fashion of the 1990s, when a number of best-selling memoirs such as Mary Karr's The Liar's Club (1995) and Frank McCourt's Angela's Ashes (1996) topped the bestseller lists and set a pattern that would be imitated by countless other writers. Karr, McCourt, and their imitators told stories of their experiences as sensitive children who suffered through terrible privation and cruelty. Their memoirs announced their victory over psychological injuries that still haunt them. At the center of their stories was a writer who was as vulnerable and painfully aware as the protagonist.

That story structure struck a chord with a particularly large niche in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Sedaris, Vowell, and Burroughs offered a distinct version of this emerging genre. They sought to write highly personal memoirs that emphasized the protagonists' journey through a cruel world. Their stories often emphasize the pathos of personal suffering through tales of loss, bereavement, injury, and disease. But they almost always focus on the unusual and on the wit and humor that hold at bay the dangers of becoming maudlin or sentimental.

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<sup>5</sup> As William Zinsser notes in his book How to Write a Memoir, the popular memoir style formed itself around a highly visible formula. In short, he argues that all memoirs of this sort involve a larger tragic event, but the narrator succeeds by focusing on the smaller details of personal relationships, quirk, and materiality. Zinsser shows how the memoir style appears ingrained in detail at the deliberate cost of larger, more serious themes.

Augusten Burroughs more closely reflects the memoir style of the 1990s than the other two writers. In his memoirs, Burroughs describes growing up in the unusual milieu created by the anger of his philosophy-professor father, the mental illness of his poet mother, and the autism of his elder brother. His latest book, A Wolf At The Table: Memoirs of My Father (2008), gives the reader another view of his odd family. Here, Burroughs depicts his father as a hate-filled alcoholic who took no joy in having Augusten as a son. Eventually Burroughs becomes a fully sentient and analytical pre-teen who views his relationship with his father as a struggle for survival. “Prey knows when it has escaped,” he writes in both the beginning and the end of the memoir, recounting the time when his father chases Augusten into the woods wielding a knife (2). The two never establish a relationship and the book finishes with the same tone and scene with which it begins – a sad and horrifying chase through the woods in which Augusten flees his father who wields a knife and wants to murder him.

Dry: A Memoir (2003), the sequel to Running with Scissors: A Memoir (2002), picks up the teenage Augusten after he has fled his home to become a prostitute living in New York City and follows him as he eventually becomes a successful advertising executive earning over two hundred thousand dollars a year. The narrative is framed by Augusten’s descent into alcoholism, his rehabilitation, and his eventual relapse. At age thirty, he is completely drunk and sits down at his computer, begins writing, and seven days later has his first book Sellelevision: A Novel, a thinly veiled satire of consumerism that blurs the line between reality and absurdity. In writing this first book, Burroughs later commented that he found that he

drank less and less often until day four, at which point he achieved complete sobriety (“Bio”). One year later, the book was published.

Sedaris also casts his story as an unlikely victory over failure and adversity. Like Burroughs, he uses an unusual childhood and youth as comic material. Throughout his stories, Sedaris appears powerless and chronically inept, but any superior figure to Sedaris appears despicable. Parents appear to be cruel dictators or caricatured stereotypes, teachers act sadistically, and employers are crude and selfish. Sedaris assigns very little intellectual agency to his older siblings. At the heart of his stories, however, the protagonist announces his victory over a traumatic childhood and misspent youth by acknowledging it and writing a story.

Sedaris’s essays relate the history of his unusual family. Sedaris was born in New York in 1956 but moved to Raleigh, North Carolina soon after because his father was transferred through IBM. His mother Sharon, an often brutally unsentimental woman, smokes and drinks at every possible opportunity, but seems imbued with observational gifts that make her both cruel and superior to the world around her. Sedaris’s father Lou is a foil to Sharon. He is a fanatical jazz enthusiast, obsessed with financial stability, and in his own, bizarre way, a devoutly attentive parent. Sedaris’s siblings are all bizarre in their own way, but three siblings get special attention in his books. Lisa, as we will see in chapter two, closely resembles the comic memoirist’s likely audience. Although she appears stable and conventional, she seems quirky in a very recognizable way. She is paranoid about saying anything private over a phone (Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim 142), generally does not drink (Naked 242), and finds the suffering of dogs to be far more tragic than

the suffering of people (Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim 152). “My sister’s the type,” Sedaris writes:

who religiously watches the fear segments of her local Eyewitness New broadcasts, retaining nothing but the headline. She remembers that applesauce can kill you but forgets that in order to die, you have to inject it directly into your bloodstream.... Everything is dangerous all of the time, and if it’s not yet been pulled off the shelves, then it’s certainly under investigation – so there. (Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim 142)

Amy, the sister with whom he is closest (her voice appears alongside Sedaris in many of his audio books and the two have produced a number of plays together), resembles something of an aloof con artist in the books. “At the age of ten,” Sedaris writes:

Amy was caught taking a fistful of twenties from an unguarded till at the grocery store. I was with her and marveled at my sister’s deftness and complete lack of fear. When the manager was called, she calmly explained that she wasn’t stealing, she was simply pretending to be a thief. “And thieves steal,” she said. “So that’s what I was doing.” It all made perfect sense to her. (Me Talk Pretty One Day 134)

Finally, Paul, the youngest sibling, is a caricature of a redneck who strikes an odd balance between family devotion and extremely bizarre social choices. For example,

on the day of Paul's wedding, the men in Sedaris's family gather in Paul's hotel room before the ceremony. Paul takes a sip of his father's coffee, spits it back, and shouts, "That shit's like making love in a canoe... It's fucking near water" (Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim 171).

The common theme of Sedaris's stories is that he has clever responses to the heedless cruelty of more powerful people. For instance, "Go Carolina," the first story of Me Talk Pretty One Day, presents Sedaris as an elementary school pupil who must deal with sadistically benevolent teachers who are determined to cure him of his lisp and who are blind to the sexual orientation he already understands. The story reflects Sedaris's most common theme of adults who think of themselves as helpers and who appear villainous to the sensitive, creative child who tries to elude their grasp. In "Giant Dreams, Midget Abilities," Sedaris tells his guitar teacher that he wants to quit in order to pursue a stage career, a confession that prompts the teacher to engage in a cruelly homophobic attack. Sedaris sings a few lines, at which point the teacher says:

"I'm not into that scene"

A scene? What scene? I thought I was being original.

"There were plenty of screwballs like you back in Atlanta, but not me, I don't swing that way – you got it? This might be your 'thing' or whatever, but you can definitely count me out... I mean, come on now. For God's sake, kid, pull yourself together." (Me Talk Pretty One Day 29)

As in most of Sedaris's writing, the humor and pathos of this passage results from the way that Sedaris reveals the cruelty of authoritative figures who do not realize that they reveal themselves to the writer as foolish and petty.

Sedaris graduated from the Raleigh Public School system. He then went on to Kent State University. At Kent State, he spent most of his time focusing on getting drunk and high, dropped out, and moved back into his parents' house. His father kicked him out of the house soon after because of his sexuality, despite his mother's disagreement, and he moved in with his sister Lisa with the stipulation that he leave his Joni Mitchell records behind (Me Talk Pretty One Day: Audio, part 3, 1:06:40 – 1:06:48). He enrolled in another college, dropped out, and became a methamphetamine addict. Sedaris spent many years addicted to methamphetamines and working as a conceptual artist, creating abstract works that neither he nor his audience particularly understood (Me Talk Pretty One Day 39 – 59). During this time he held many part-time, low-skill jobs, such as a housepainter and an apartment cleaner. Many years later, Sedaris returned to college and received a degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where he eventually was asked to teach at least one class on creative writing. He continued to work low-skill jobs until his appearance on *This American Life* offered him financial stability.

Sarah Vowell did not go through drug addiction, nor did she encounter the same degree of childhood trauma as her fellow memoirists, but like Sedaris and Burroughs, she casts herself as an outsider whose marginalization gives her an eye for the absurdities of her surroundings. Vowell was born in 1969 in Muskogee, Oklahoma. Her mother is a beautician and her father is a gunsmith. Growing up in a rural town, Vowell took special note of a lack of female role models, idealizing

“Charlie’s Angels” for its depiction of “career-oriented women” (“Sarah Vowell,” Gale Literary Databases).

Throughout her work, Vowell’s tone remains true to the persona she established in Radio On: A Listener’s Diary – utterly sarcastic. Both Take The Cannoli: Stories from the New World and The Partly Cloudy Patriot comprise short essays that are highly judgmental. In The Partly Cloudy Patriot, she examines Al Gore’s loss of the presidential race because he did not completely sell his quirkiness as an approachable commodity (86 – 118). She reads letters that she wrote to her congressman that seem more suited to a teenager writing fan letters to pop icons (79 – 86). For Vowell, what is of interest is how her life and times reflect the dangerous and absurd currents of American history. For example, her most recent book, The Wordy Shipmates (2008), examines the documents of John Winthrop and other Puritans in hopes of debunking the mythology associated with America’s founding. It also seeks to show how President Bush’s War in Iraq is completely consistent with the mistakes of the past. “On March 19, 2003,” she writes:

President George W. Bush announced that “American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to defend the world from grave danger.” Five days earlier, Vice President Dick Cheney appeared on *Meet The Press* and his words redrew the seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, replacing the Indian with a citizen of Baghdad. (26)

The recent comic memoirists aspire to be highly entertaining and lightly subversive at the same time. They focus their stories on their own personal interactions and opinions. Vowell's writing has its own personal and political agenda while Sedaris and Burroughs seek to claim triumph over their painful childhoods through displays of humor and bravery. Curiously, these writers also use their writing to poke fun at the generally well-educated, intelligent niche that comprises the largest portion of their audience. In writing about his family, Sedaris questions both his and his audience's underlying assumptions about family values and sentiment. Burroughs uses his triumphs to criticize the culture of American meritocracy by suggesting that his own experiences and innate abilities have allowed him to become successful. Vowell uses her writing to deflate the absurdities that surround modern politics and asks her readers to consider her attacks for their perceptive acuity.

What is most central to their work is that the memoirists achieve these ends through humor. As we shall see, mockery and humor become the literary tools that these writers rely upon to convey their deeper themes. They rely on their readers' assumptions and common knowledge to elicit laughter, to resonate with their readers' lives, and to convey a sense of import through humor. Their writing does not demand that the reader consider their agendas and designs, but as we will see, the comic memoirists of the late 1990s and early 2000s rely upon the reader's basic assumptions to offer illumination in a world that they feel is utterly deluded.

*Chapter One: The Comic Memoirists and American Meritocracy*

As we have seen in the introduction, the comic memoirists during the 1990s owe much of their success to the opportunities provided by public radio. In order to understand comic memoirists' rise to prominence through public radio, one must understand the people who comprise public radio's audience. In short, NPR and other public radio stations appeal to young professionals. As market research reveals, public radio's key demographic are wealthy, well-educated, computer-literate young people who are likely to think of their work as a career ("NPR Audience Profile"). Those qualities are likely to be still more pronounced in the audience for *This American Life*, the program that has been so important to the success of Sedaris and Vowell (Conciatore). As David Brooks observes in Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There, this audience is also marked by a few deep concerns. They are likely to be concerned about the environment, social welfare, and human rights issues, while they nonetheless work hard in order to enjoy the luxuries that accompany high wages. In other words, the prime audience for the new comic memoirists is the people who, in the 1990s, Robert Reich labeled "Symbolic Analysts" (The Work of Nations). They rely on their knowledge, analytic skills, and creativity to become financially stable and to make evaluative judgments about the world and people that surround them.

Ironically, these people are also the objects of the new comic memoirists' satire. In "Diary of a Smoker," Sedaris does not just attack the aggressive non-smoker; he attacks everyone like her. Sedaris makes the woman appear emblematic of everything that he believes is foolish about self-improvement. In the comic memoirists' writing, fashionable means of self-improvement – such as self-help

guides, meditation, whole grains, and preaching – become means of self-delusion. More importantly, the comic memoirists turn self-improvement into a delusional form of assertive self-importance.

A significant part of the interest in these writers is their suggestions that they are above self-delusion. Curiously, they employ the same techniques that their audience employs to judge the world. Through experience, analytic skills, and creativity, Sedaris feels justified in his attacks against the non-smoker's credibility and agenda in "Diary of a Smoker." The comic's gentle mockery creates a strange dynamic between the writer and his audience. The comic and his audience are very similar people with similar fundamental goals; but, even as the comic memoirists subtly emphasize the qualities necessary to professional advancement such as intelligence, discipline, education, and self-cultivation, they also consistently make fun of the kinds of wealthy, well-educated people who make up the predominant part of their audience. The curiosity that arises from this relationship can be summarized in two questions. 1) How is the comic able to pinpoint the anxieties that surround the professional class? 2) Why does the audience enjoy being critically examined and made into fools?

This chapter addresses how the writers formed a symbiotic relationship with their audience by tracing the evolution of higher education and professionalism in the recent culture of an American meritocracy. This historical approach is rooted in the social, economic, and cultural changes that reoriented American life after World War II. Through this lens, the comic memoirists' work seems deeply shaped by the developments that helped expand education and professionalism after WWII. These writers paradoxically depict themselves as both marginal and superior to the major

institutions of professional life. In this way, the life stories they offer provide a critical view of the values implicit within America's ostensible meritocracy. Two particular issues permeate their work: first, they are concerned with class status and have an interest in distinguishing creative work from menial labor; second, they are obsessive about establishing personal authenticity while criticizing the authenticity of others. Each of these concerns can be partly understood as a response to a culture of meritocracy. Sedaris, Vowell, and Burroughs respond to the intense pressures that arose alongside American meritocracy by presenting themselves nominally as losers. However, the failures they present act paradoxically to show how crucial the idea of talent and success have become in American life. By presenting these stories, the writers cast themselves as genuinely gifted individuals whose abilities have yet to be truly measured.

After the end of World War II, the institution and culture of higher education expanded to include many people who once would have had very little chance to attend college. Between 1945 and 1975, undergraduate enrollment in the United States increased by nearly 500 percent and graduate enrollment increased nearly 900 percent. Undergraduate enrollments rose from 3.5 million to 8 million within the 1960s alone. By 2001, there were 14.5 million undergraduates and about half of American workers attended college, making college a new and necessary step in "basic education" (Menand, "College: The End of the Golden Age"). In the words of Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, the U.S. experienced an "academic revolution" in the decades after WWII (The Academic Revolution).

Sedaris, Vowell, and Burroughs grew up during the last years of the golden age of higher education (Menand, “College: The End of the Golden Age”), but were unable to fully participate in the most alluring and prestigious features of college life because of their odd upbringings. Consequently, their narratives fit awkwardly with the dominant trend of the postwar middle class. Their stories show them avoiding self-assessment in an age when testing became the dominant method of establishing worth in a fledgling meritocracy. As we shall see, the work of the comic memoirist aspires to capture much of the emotional stress of meritocratic life, even while their works uphold the very values and institutions of education, professionalism, and meritocracy that they appear to critique.

America’s postwar meritocracy arose from two central and complementary developments. The SAT was the key invention that established an efficient system for allocating opportunities to enter a new and elite professional class. The SAT did so by testing the natural ability of high school students and by popularizing the idea that natural aptitude should determine an individual’s potential for achievement (Lemann 48). In addition to the SAT, the vast expansion of higher education and the establishment of the multiversity opened avenues for new types of students in the decades after WWII.

The SAT, originally developed at Harvard by Henry Chauncey, replaced the older system of the College Board, which had stressed learning and refinement rather than ostensibly natural aptitude. The SAT was a much simpler, standardized method of scholastic assessment that was designed to measure a student’s inherent ability instead of his cultural training. The test was premised on a vision for American education that sought to promote a society that refuted the notion of inheritable social

class. In Chauncey's higher education system, "everyone should start on equal footing, and the abler graduates would rise to higher positions strictly because they deserved to" (Lemann 48). Thus, the college population changed to include many more people. "The Old Boy," Andrew Delbanco writes, "with his Rudy Vallee (Yale '27) intonation and the 'Gentleman's C' became an anachronism" ("College: An Endangered Species?"). He was replaced by a new college ideal – the talented, entrepreneurial youth who sought advancement and public responsibility through his training and ability. Harvard and other institutions quickly adopted the testing method in the first years of WWII. Soon after, universities began admitting applicants from outside the Ivy League's traditional Northeastern base. Students from the Midwest and West, Catholics and Jews from urban centers, and eventually women and ethnic minorities all gained access to the nation's elite educational institutions.

The college boom occurred for two reasons, both of which are central concerns of the comic memoirists. First, The GI Bill financially encouraged WWII veterans to enter college and become skilled in a peacetime economy. This dramatically increased the number of people that gained access to college. The GI Bill's large reach, along with the opening of new avenues toward higher education, normalized college and deflated the notion that college was solely a rich man's interest. Second, the postwar economic boom vastly increased demand for a highly skilled, technically savvy work force. Together, both the government and civilian populations worked to invest the national interest in education as a patriotic and socio-economically valuable endeavor. As a result, between 1955 and 1970, right at the height of the college expansion and the comic memoirists' births, the combination

of the baby boom and government aid put almost two thirds of high school graduates into colleges (Menand, “College: The End of the Golden Age”).

The postwar boom in education vastly expanded America’s professional class. Alongside the expansion of the college system, the federal government funded the expansion of highly skilled, technocratic positions by investing in science, technology, math, and foreign language. Through the National Defense Education Act (1958), the government outsourced most of its scientific research to major universities (MIT, Harvard, Chicago, Yale, and Princeton). The wealth of funding in turn influenced the universities to begin training people to become experts in the aforementioned fields. The investment in technocratic fields has continued ever since. Particularly in the last two decades of the twentieth century, professional training became the fastest growing segment of the higher education system. Between 1978 and 1991, graduate enrollment increased in these fields by thirty percent (Lucas 230). As the demand for experts increased, a professional class emerged composed of highly trained individuals who had proven themselves and were capable of securing a formal, institutionalized degree.

The word “professional” is in itself vague and a central theme of the comic memoirists, so it seems prudent to take a moment to explain the meaning of the term as it is being used here and the ways it may most relate to the comic memoirists. In the sociologist Steven Brint’s study *In An Age of Experts: The Changing Role of Professionals in Politics and Public Life*, Brint describes the main difference between professional and other types of labor by noting the professional’s autonomy over the way in which he completes his work. The professional’s autonomy depends on the understanding that professionals are academically trained experts in specialized

fields. Professionalism also signifies that an individual is equipped to provide a public service that takes precedence over mere pecuniary rewards (24). “As an ideology,” Brint writes, “professionalism had both a technical and a moral aspect. Technically, it promised competent performance of skilled work involving the application of broad and complex knowledge, the acquisition of which required formal academic study. Morally, it promised to be guided by an appreciation of the important social ends it served. In demanding high levels of self-governance, professionals claimed not only that others were not technically *equipped* to judge them, but also that they could not be *trusted* to judge them” (7). A professional, like a lawyer, doctor, teacher, or advertiser, is thus formally trained, self-managing, and free of direct control. Professionalism signifies that an individual can succeed and can be trusted as an autonomous expert. More importantly, the rewards that professionals receive and the freedoms that they enjoy will be justified by their service to the public (7).

Eventually, a rift emerged between high-wage earners who were professionals and low-wage earners who were not professionals, as high levels of education increasingly became necessary for economic advancement. In an increasingly professional, expert-based economy, it should not be surprising that job descriptions often list “must have a four year bachelors degree” or “M.A. mandatory” or that a widening wage gap developed between high school graduates, on the one hand, and college graduates and post-graduate degree holders, on the other. By 1978, college graduates earned 38% more than high school graduates. By 1990, the difference had expanded to 79% (Phillips). This rift expanded in part because of the rise of technologies that reward a certain degree of expertise. Claudia Golden and Lawrence

Katz see the growth of computer-based technologies as the deciding factor that split low and high-income earners. “Skill-biased technological change is not a new phenomenon,” they explain, “But computerization, a recent form of skill-biased technological change, has increased the relative demand for skill in a non-monotonic manner. Computers strongly complement the non-routine or abstract tasks of high-wage jobs, but they directly substitute for the routine tasks found in many traditional middle-wage jobs” (2 – 3). As a result, the high and low wage earners also divided along the lines of knowledge workers and physical workers.

The gap between college-educated and non-college educated workers was and still is especially evident in the mass geographic relocation of college graduates to large cities. During the 1980s, a large percentage of college graduates moved to a handful of major metropolises such as New York City and San Francisco (Moretti 2). By contrast, those who could not gain the necessary certification were forced into a sort of geographical stasis. Recently, economists have linked the concentration of college graduates to the existence of high wage inequality (Moretti 1). In short, computerization and a geographically centered professional class fostered wage inequality that the comic memoirists would address in various ways.

One curious and relevant outcome that arose from the creation of a professional class was universities’ ability to confer professional status on writers through the establishment of the M.F.A. and its signature method, the workshop. Mark McGurl’s article “Understanding Iowa: Flannery O’Connor, B.A., M.F.A.” explains the history of the writing workshop and its influences on the production of fiction today. For the purposes of understanding Sedaris, Vowell, and Burroughs, McGurl’s essay presents a dominant mode that these writers avoided in order to

become writers themselves. McGurl's article explains how the workshop environment established creative writing as a serious discipline, complete with its own set of principles, guidelines, and even textbooks. As the title suggests, one of the most important figures in disseminating this type of writing was Flannery O'Connor. O'Connor's stories employ a high degree of seriousness and meta-reflexivity, two virtues that were cultivated by professional training in the workshop. In O'Connor's writing, every sentence, word, and turn became the material for laborious scrutiny and consideration. O'Connor's example also helped make discipline and reflexivity prominent virtues in postwar American fiction, casting those qualities in implicit opposition to credulity, ideological zealotry, and rigidity. Her work became typical of the aesthetic and ethical virtues that would be celebrated in the serious fiction of the postwar era.

The workshop insisted that the writer write about personal experiences, but it also suggested that writing was a highly rigorous discipline that freed the writer and reader from the imprisonment of their experiences. As a result, less complex texts came to seem either amateur or sub-literary. This second category is where Sedaris, Vowell, and Burroughs exist and consistently outsell their contemporaries who thrive in the workshop environment.

At first glance, the comic memoirists appear to rebel against the late twentieth century meritocracy. No issue is more prominently treated in their work than schooling and professional success, subjects to which they return with obsessive consistency. In short, they cast strong doubt on the effectiveness of America's educational institutions. The comic memoirists' work implicitly presents a contrasting

vision of popular recognition that disavows the authority of degree-granting institutions to adequately measure natural ability. The number of books that Sedaris, Vowell, and Burroughs sell allows them to insist that their own ability is valuable despite the constant and overwhelming failures depicted in their narratives. More importantly, they defy the aforementioned workshop. Instead of writing about serious subjects, these writers focus on quirk and banality. Instead of seeking immortality in their writing, these writers seem highly ephemeral. Above all, they are unapologetically unserious. Much of their work looks like an attack on the premises of formal education.

Anyone who reads Me Talk Pretty One Day, for instance, is bombarded by Sedaris's many educational and vocational failures. The titles of the stories themselves – “The Learning Curve,” “See You Again Yesterday,” “Me Talk Pretty One Day,” “I Pledge Allegiance to the Bag,” and finally “Smart Guy” – suggest a theme of education's failure to instill any knowledge or skills in Sedaris. For example, enrolled in a French language class, Sedaris finds himself well below the ability of everyone else. Near the end of the course, he realizes that he can make sense of his teacher as she screams at him, “You exhaust me with your foolishness and reward my efforts with nothing but pain, do you understand me?” Sedaris's accomplishment is clothed in failure as he responds, “I know the thing that you speak exact now. Talk me more, you, plus, please, plus” (Me Talk Pretty One Day 173). Although Sedaris can understand his teacher, he still lacks the necessary powers of articulation to communicate his accomplishment, ultimately failing in a doubly ironic way. His failure highlights how important education is in shaping the chances of an individual and highlights his futility within the education system. On the face of it,

Sedaris – like Burroughs and, to a lesser degree, Vowell – looks like a failure at school. Yet, this is only one layer of the memoirists’ critique. As we shall see, the comic suggestion is that institutions fail to recognize the writers’ abilities, not that the memoirists themselves are without merit.

One of the most prevalent tropes in the comic memoirist’s satire against education is the insistence that higher education is absurd and misleading. For example, Vowell’s recent book, The Wordy Shipmates, criticizes the value of the educational reforms that occurred after WWII. In the following discussion about the limits of her knowledge in American history, Vowell argues that her education set her up for long-term failure:

Like any other American educated in public schools, my youthful encounters with New England colonials focused on Plymouth in 1620 and Salem in 1962. Which is to say that I read *The Crucible* in eleventh grade and I participated in elementary school Thanksgiving pageants in which children wearing construction-paper Pilgrim hats linked arms with others wearing Indian costumes consisting entirely of gift-shop souvenir Sioux headdresses and sang “God Bless America” and “This land was made for you and me.”

But really, as a child I learned almost everything I knew about American history in general and British colonials in particular from watching television situation comedies. (16 – 17)

The chapter continues with explanations about how television shows from *The Brady Bunch* to *The Simpsons* have taught her more about American history than her entire formal education. Her criticisms about having Pilgrims and Sioux sing together attacks the educational merit of her upbringing, but her artful prose and allusions suggest that she is an extremely intelligent author who is highly knowledgeable and skilled in her linguistic creativity. Her allusions to the Sioux instead of just Indians, *The Crucible*, and *Redcoats* suggest she is well read and knowledgeable. Part of Vowell's agenda with this deliberate display of intelligence is to suggest her own merit and ability despite the failures of her upbringing. She subverts the notion that the public school system is capable of educating people by exposing the institution's shortcomings, but she simultaneously confirms the idea of the meritocracy by succeeding in her books and by recognizing the education system's faults. This is a sentiment that the comic memoirists of the last fifteen years share. These authors criticize their experiences in school in order to suggest that it is their natural ability that allows them to critically evaluate the education system as a whole.

Whereas Vowell's memoirs confirm the ability of an individual to rise in society through intelligence and merit, Sedaris's memoirs confirm that an individual without natural ability cannot enter into the upper echelons of a meritocracy. Affectionately referring to his brother as the "Rooster," Sedaris writes about both Paul's and his inability to rise in society through training:

Like most everyone else in our suburban neighborhood, we were raised to meet a certain standard. My father expected me to attend an Ivy League university, where I'd make straight A's, play

football, and spend my off-hours strumming guitar with the student jazz combo. My inability to throw a football was exceeded only by my inability to master the guitar. My grades were average at best, and eventually I learned to live with my father's disappointment.

Fortunately there were six of us children, and it was easy to get lost in the crowd. My sisters and I managed to sneak beneath the wire of his expectations, but we worried about my brother, who was seen as the family's last hope.

From the age of ten, Paul was being dressed in Brooks Brothers suits and tiny, clip-on rep ties. He endured trumpet lessons, soccer camp, church-sponsored basketball tournaments, and after-school sessions with well meaning tutors who would politely change the subject when asked about the Rooster's chances of getting into Yale or Princeton. Fast and well-coordinated, Paul enjoyed sports but not enough to take them seriously. School failed to interest him on any level, and the neighbors were relieved when he finally retired the trumpet. His response to our father's impossible and endless demands has, over time, become something of a mantra. Short and sweet, repeated at a fever pitch, it goes simply, "Fuck it," or on one of his more articulate days, "Fuck it, motherfucker. That shit don't mean fuck to me."....

Unlike the rest of us, the Rooster has always enjoyed our father's support and encouragement. With the dream of college officially dead and buried, he sent my brother to technical school,

hoping he might develop an interest in computers. Three weeks into the semester, Paul dropped out, and my father, convinced that his son's lawn-mowing skills bordered on genius, set him up in the landscaping business. "I've seen him in action, and what he does is establish a pattern and really tackle it!" (Me Talk Pretty One Day 62 – 66)

Although Sedaris or Paul's failures are valuable for consideration, it is the father's unwillingness to admit that his sons are not naturally gifted that is of interest here. Lou engages in an unspoken class struggle through his son, but he finds himself unable to make his children excel. Despite all his efforts, the Sedaris children cannot amount to Ivy League status through extra training or financial encouragement because they simply do not have the natural ability to succeed. Sedaris's sarcastic suggestion that his father presumes genius in Paul's lawn-mowing ability suggests Sedaris is aware of the culture of meritocracy and that he has enough acumen to mock his father, who does not even realize he has been seduced by its demand for natural ability. Like the now booming SAT preparatory businesses, Lou tries to train and coach his son into a more successful lifestyle. Unlike SAT coaches, however, Lou finds himself unable to succeed.

But, as unappealing as Lou Sedaris appears in his son's writing, these writers' true critique lies with the institution of higher education itself. More than anyone, Sedaris thematically attacks all forms of education. Nearly half of Me Talk Pretty One Day revolves around his horrid experiences with a sadistic French-language teacher. The first two stories also engage in this theme. As we have seen in the

introduction, “Giant Dreams, Midget Abilities” describes his guitar teacher who appears insensitive and homophobic. In “Go Carolina,” most of the narrative describes the antagonistic relationship between a young, sensitive Sedaris and a self-glorifying speech therapist. Regardless of whether he reflects about his time as an adult or as a child, teachers seem inadequate and abusive to Sedaris. As a general trend, Sedaris seeks to undermine the confidence the reader generally has in the education system.

A similar attitude is apparent with Burroughs. By age nineteen, without any formal education, Burroughs became an advertising copywriter and then worked his way up through the industry. By twenty-four, at a time when many Americans his age had just finished college, he had become an executive. In the first two pages of Dry: A Memoir, Burroughs establishes himself as intelligent and talented, even though he is not educated in the traditional sense:

Advertising makes everything seem better than it actually is. And that’s why it’s such a perfect career for me. It’s an industry based on giving people false expectations. Few people know how to do that as well as I do, because I’ve been applying those basic advertising principles to my life for years....

When I was thirteen, my crazy mother gave me away to her lunatic psychiatrist, who adopted me. I then lived a life of squalor, pedophiles, no school and free pills. When I finally escaped, I presented myself to advertising agencies as a self-educated, slightly eccentric youth, filled with passion, bursting with ideas. I left out the

fact that I didn't know how to spell or that I had been giving blowjobs since I was thirteen. (1 – 2)

Burroughs establishes himself as an expert because of real world experience and not because of academic study. His suggestion about his ability is that it is valuable because it is personal and earned. More importantly, he knows he has the ability to succeed because he can identify the skills necessary for success and where he attained these skills. Burroughs uses his lack of formal education to establish himself as disengaged from the educational system. His lack of training would normally exclude him from any professional career such as advertising, but as the reader learns, his natural talents are far more valuable and thus his lack of credentials become irrelevant to his success. For Burroughs, the ability to perform a task is more valuable than the credentials that confer authority and ability. “Few people know how to do that as well as I do,” Burroughs writes, “because I’ve been applying those basic advertising principles to my life for years.” Whereas the SAT was meant to use a standardized testing method to sort people in a meritocracy, Burroughs shows the meritocratic vision fulfilled without the system’s tests and schools. In this way, Burroughs supports the idea of a merit-based society while he attacks the actual system that assesses people’s natural ability. The implicit claim is that the system’s testing method is inadequate to recognize his genius.

At the same time, Burroughs also suggests that he has been deeply harmed by his exclusion from formal education. As with Sedaris and Vowell, Burroughs cannot help but imagine how his life could have been better had he been able to use higher education in conjunction with his strange yet valuable upbringing. The closest that

Burroughs ever comes to enrolling in college is a short fantasy in which he argues with his mother about which college to attend.

Sometimes I fantasize about having a mother who wears a pleated navy skirt, crisp white shirt and a pale blue sweater draped casually across her shoulders. Her tan leather bag doesn't rattle with prescription bottles when she tosses it on the seat of the car. And this version of my mother can be made happy with something from the Macy's catalogue instead of the Physician's Desk Reference....

When I hand her my report card, all A-'s, she would say, "You know, it might not seem like much, but that extra effort, that extra ten percent, could mean the difference between Princeton and Bennington." Then she would smile at me in a way that suggested a private in-joke. "Bennington, darling. Think about it. Lesbians."....

So when I turned eighteen, I would apply to USC. My mother would be aghast. "Good God, you can't be serious. The University of Southern California? Have you been smoking pot? What can you be thinking? What are you going to major in, fast food preparation technologies? Surfing?"....

And in the end, I would go to Princeton. Because in so many ways, my mother would have been right. And it would make her so much happier, could make life so much better if I just agreed. So I would agree... I would agree to at least try prelegal studies....

Of course, I probably would have turned out to be an alcoholic lawyer who hated my mother for overprotecting me, so I guess it all averages out in the end. (Dry: A Memoir 169 – 171)

There is a paradox in this. Burroughs seeks to confirm his own genius by expressing disdain for elite colleges. Nevertheless, he fantasizes about a normal mother and normal life through a debate over which elite university to enroll in. Burroughs cannot help but acknowledge college's ubiquity and normalcy and its control over his self-image.

Burroughs's fantasy-engagement with this system confirms his outsider status because he cannot enter the system in its most ideal form, but it is hardly unique among the comic memoirists. After fantasizing about playing Frisbee on an Ivy League quad (Naked 143 – 152), Sedaris reluctantly goes to Kent State and fails there. Vowell remembers Montana State University as a highly anti-intellectual environment, and the reader gets the sense she would have preferred a more elite institution (Take the Cannoli: Stories from the New World 55 – 70). Similarly, despite Burroughs's unengaged attitude toward education, at the heart of his stories lies an adolescent narrator who seeks sympathy for an unhappy childhood, using the dream of out-of-reach college as a fantasy escape in a time when going to college was easier than ever.

Burroughs lack of education makes him seem like a paradoxical expert. In one sense, his bizarre rise through the advertising world confirms his outsider status because it is so atypical. In another sense, he is, by most definitions, a professional.

His company relies on his creativity; therefore, he is granted complete autonomy over the manner and mode in which he completes his work. This fulfills most of Brint's definition of the professional. Ironically, in Burroughs's depiction, advertising becomes a haven of genuine intelligence, ability, and creativity where Burroughs is judged on his ability to succeed by the company's standards and not by a formal evaluation process. Nevertheless, he expresses ambivalence about the professional culture of advertising. For Burroughs, advertising seems like another form of prostitution, but without the social stigma. Like prostitution, Burroughs's experiences and innate abilities allow him to succeed in advertising in a way that is inaccessible to his formally educated peers. For example, assigned to create a new ad campaign for Junior Mints candy, Burroughs unflatteringly presents his client as dim-witted and myopic. Burroughs suggests the advertising campaign that they have established is extremely simple to understand.

And yet, the client was perplexed.

In total, we took him through the storyboard six times. And each time, I read the script slower and slower until I at last felt I was giving street directions to a dog.

“So. Then. You. Will. Have. These. Words. Come. On. The. TV. Screen. When. We. See. The. Scene. Is. That. Correct?”

I looked him in the eyes and I said, “Yes.”

And he said, “But. When. Will. We. See. The. Mints?”

And I said, “Within. The. Context. Of. The. Scene.”

And he said, “Within. The. Context?”

And I knew I'd blown it. One should never use words like *context* when speaking to a client responsible for a product that costs less than a dollar....

The client had another idea. "Do we even need the car? Couldn't we just have the people standing somewhere? Maybe in the grocery store, in front of a display of Junior Mints? And then we could super those '...mint' words as they ate the mints?"

As diplomatically as possible I said, "Seeing many different people eating Junior Mints inside of a supermarket is not going to be very interesting to people."

And the client looked at me as though I had just told him that his deformed, four-eyed child was deformed and had four eyes. "Well, why not? Why wouldn't that be interesting? I think it would be very... motivating."

I wondered if he'd earned an MBA just so he could say the word *motivating* at this very meeting. (Possible Side Effects 107 – 109)

The sheer lack of accomplishment in this passage becomes irritating for both Burroughs and the reader. The long, slow paced argument between the informally educated Burroughs and the formally educated M.B.A. is so emotionally trying that Burroughs succeeds in aesthetically convincing the reader of the client's stupidity. More importantly, he subverts professionalism and credentialed authority by inverting the conventional power structures that exist between the educated and

uneducated classes. Ideally, the client's degree should imply that he is highly educated and capable at business. As marketing is part of business, Burroughs seems astonished that his client is so foolish. Burroughs makes the client's graduate degree seem useless and highly artificial.

In short, the comic memoirists implicitly claim that they know how to run things better than the people who do run things, but their criticisms of educated professionals become strangely paradoxical. To return to "Diary of a Smoker," Sedaris knows that second-hand smoke is dangerous, but he also knows that quitting the habit is less valuable than his need to claim superiority over the woman. For Sedaris, the deciding factor that confers authority in the narrative is experience. All three writers seem to be in search of professional status, but since they seem reluctant to claim authority through education and familiar forms of achievement, they turn to stories about unskilled labor. To the comic memoirist, unskilled labor confers authority on an individual because it forces him to gain knowledge through experience.

Burroughs's menial-labor jobs offer the most illuminating examples of this strategy. At eighteen years old, Burroughs decides he is going to start an ad agency. After wandering into a sail making shop in Marblehead, MA, a town he describes as having more sailboats per capita than people, he is offered a position as a sail cutter. Even though he intended to enlist the sail makers as clients, he notes that the offered position pays seven dollars and fifty cents per hour and that the manager did not mention the words "deep-fry" or "toilet" during the interview, so he accepts. "I'd never been offered a position so quickly," he writes, "The usual process involved filling out an application, waiting two weeks, then being rejected" (Possible Side

Effects 169). This sarcastic remark establishes the position as unskilled. His being hired without any credentials suggests that anyone could do this job. Yet, on the first day of his new job, Burroughs receives a complicated and highly mathematical list of tasks, all required to correctly cut a sail.

“First thing to do is input the two-dimensional numbers. The luff, leech, and then foot for what we call *mainsails*. Okay? And luff, leech, and foot” – he scratched the side of his nose with the eraser of his pencil – “or luff and clew positions for the headsails. Then we just fill in the specifics for head width, roach, leech hollow, and the foot round. See what I mean?”

I did not see what he meant, but I nodded, which meant, *I see that you have a large Adam’s apple and I am very tempted to reach over and touch it.* (Possible Side Effects 173)

The first thing that stands out is the esoteric terminology associated with this ostensibly unspecific job. Burroughs suggests that “luff, leech, and foot” are all unfamiliar, highly specific terms that require intimate knowledge of sailboats in order to understand. Burroughs is eventually fired after he ruins a sail because he cannot use geometry to cut correctly. The suggestion about unskilled labor in this story is that unskilled does not mean uneducated. The grotesque irony is that Burroughs is not skilled enough to be unskilled. Somewhere in the rise of American meritocracy, the rhetoric of unskilled and skilled labor drastically changed, and Burroughs was left

behind. Like in advertising, a diploma means nothing compared to the ability to actually perform a task.

Ultimately, Burroughs cannot mock the sail-cutter as he can mock the M.B.A. The sail-cutter does not purport to have an abstract knowledge that is conferred by a degree, but he instead uses mathematics to generate tangible results. Burroughs's failure offers a complexity that presents an insight into the memoirists' sense of order and idealism. Since Burroughs cannot claim superiority to the sail-cutter, there must be something similar between Burroughs the successful advertiser and Burroughs the failed sail-cutter. Experience and material success seem to be the dominant tropes for success in Burroughs's meritocracy. Therefore, without experience and proven success, both the young Burroughs and the M.B.A. fail.

One overarching manifestation of this failure is the comic's inability to employ the resources at his disposal to build wealth or generate merit. Just as the young Burroughs was not able use a high school education, computers appear to be the limiting factor for Sedaris. As Claudia Golden and Lawrence Katz suggest, computers played a central role in creating the income and status gaps of the late twentieth century. During the rise of computers, Sedaris was between twenty and forty years old, old enough to experience and resist the swift change in American culture but young enough to adapt if he tried. Sedaris often writes about his hatred of computers and how he prefers to bring a typewriter with him instead of a laptop. At one point, Sedaris worked as a house cleaner in New York. His low-wage, manual labor often forced him to encounter technocratic, high-wage earners. In "Nutcracker.com," he describes cleaning a house with a computer and pauses to express his loathing:

By the early 1990's I was living in New York and working for a house cleaning company. My job taught me that regardless of their purported virtues, computers are a pain in the ass to keep clean. The pebbled surface is a magnet for grease and dirt, and you can pretty much forget about reaming out the gaps in the keyboard. More than once I accidentally pushed a button and recoiled in terror as the blank screen came to life with exotic tropical fish or swarms of flying toasters. Equally distressing was the way people used the slanted roofs of their terminals to display framed photographs and great populations of plush and plastic creatures, which would fall behind the desk the moment I began cleaning the screen. There was never any place to plug in the vacuum, as every outlet was occupied by some member of the computer family. Chords ran wild, and everyone seemed to own one of those ominous foot-long power strips with the blinking red light that sends the message YOU MUST LEAVE US ALONE. I was more than happy to comply, and the complaints came rolling in. (Me Talk Pretty One Day 144 – 145)

Sedaris's disgust for computers presents an insight into the problems of wage inequality. Sedaris, a low-wage earner, abhors the very device that is both the metaphorical and literal gateway into high-wage earnings. He physically encounters the obstacle that impedes him and, instead of trying to use it, recoils in horror. He does not see the computer as a gateway toward higher wage potential, but as an

obstacle that impedes him from completing his cleaning job. The bundles of wires, the tiny keys, and the blue screen are aspects that make his low-skill job significantly more difficult. In highlighting these details, Sedaris wants the reader to reexamine the computer without its purported symbolic value. “More than once,” he writes, “I accidentally pushed a button and recoiled in terror as the blank screen came to life with exotic tropical fish or swarms of flying toasters.” While most of his audience may find this image to be commonplace, Sedaris defamiliarizes it in order to suggest that a swarm of flyer toasters is not only bizarre, but that it should not be considered acceptable.

Sedaris’s hatred for computers is doubly ironic since the people who would read this story are most likely computer savvy, high-wage earners, many of whom experience Sedaris through audio books, computers, and iPods. Sedaris has about two-dozen stories that are similar to this one in which he fails as an elf, a cleaner, and a mover. Like Burroughs, he illuminates the skill sets necessary for theoretically unskilled jobs.

Also like Burroughs, Sedaris directly engages with the professionalized nature of creative writing. As in Burroughs’s world, experience and material success become the informal tests of ability. In a story titled “The Learning Curve,” Sedaris writes:

A year after my graduation from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, a terrible mistake was made and I was offered a position teaching a writing workshop. I had never gone to graduate school, and although several of my stories had been Xeroxed and stapled, none of

them had been published in the traditional sense of the word. (Me Talk Pretty One Day 83)

The mistake Sedaris references is the notion that someone would mistake his talent for writing and observation as indications of professional status. As he explains, he does not hold the necessary degree that certifies his capabilities. Sedaris's ironic position as a creative writing teacher becomes more complex when the reader takes into account the differences between Sedaris's writing and the type of writing he is supposed to foster. Sedaris seems highly aware of this problem. Instead of choosing to guide his students toward the techniques and values emphasized by the workshop, Sedaris emphasizes plot and character by having his class analyze soap operas. He scoffs at students who try to be too creative by ending a story mid-sentence. At every moment, he promotes plot of over sentimentality and contrived sensationalism over artful subtlety. Expressing no sympathy for the workshop tenets, Sedaris writes about one student, "The returning student had recently come through a difficult divorce, and because her pain was significant, she wrongly insisted that her writing was significant" (94).

Eventually, Sedaris encounters a student who questions his authority. Sedaris defends his position very simply by saying that the difference between himself, the professional, and the students, the amateurs, is that Sedaris "is the only one who is paid to be in the room." He then remembers, "We could do whatever I wanted because I was a certified professional – it practically said so right there on my paycheck" (95). Despite his attempts to subvert professional writing's authority, his logical argument for the professional nature of writing seems flawless. The irony of

Sedaris's statement is that he knowingly acknowledges his own lack of expertise, but he recognizes that the paycheck indicates that someone trusts him to act autonomously as a professional. Thus, as in Burroughs's world, the mark of professional status becomes not formal education, but the ability of one individual to market his skills in a profitable manner. For Sedaris, his second-rank degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago does not confer his professional status. What matters is that he has been able to market his skills to generate revenue; therefore, he is a professional. It is hard to imagine that Burroughs and Vowell would not agree with this utilitarian assessment.

In the ways we have seen, the comic memoirists portray themselves as outsiders to the institutions of American meritocracy. Their stories highlight the anxieties about schooling, testing, and success that are now central features of middle-class life. At the same time, they depict themselves as far outside the educational, professional, and social institutions that shape the lives of most of their readers. The comic memoirists mean to present themselves as free from the feelings of routine and conformity that those institutions often evoke. The comic memoirist's appeal likely comes from their ability to succeed without the homogenizing effects of education and the cult of professionalism.

David Brooks's Bobos in Paradise, which became a bestselling work of popular sociology in the same years that the work of the comic memoirists were gaining a mass audience, makes some highly relevant observations about this strange sense of homogeneity. Like Robert Reich's Work of Nations, the majority of Brooks's book deals with the tensions between the two conflicting dynamics of the

professional class: material success and social idealism. Brooks examines how the new, educated elite have found means to maintain the professional ethos of public service and self-cultivation while still leading a remunerative lifestyle. Brooks premises the book on the assertion that – at the end of the twentieth century – the tension between these two goals had become intense. In the 1990s, Brooks argues, professional elites were not content to be either social idealists or to be profit maximizers. His observations resonate well with the desire of the 1990s elite to resolve this conflict by making their leisure also seem like a form of cultivation and self-improvement.

Vowell's writing in particular addresses these concerns. Her writing is artful and leisurely, but it is also educational and intellectually engaging. Her newest book, The Wordy Shipmates, is sarcastic and humorous, but it also offers a capsule history of Puritan New England and implicitly an ambitious theory of American history. After she examines a long list of primary documents, for example, she concludes that "Puritan lives were overwhelmingly, fanatically literary" (13). A phrase like this seeks to appeal to the reader's intelligence and sense of humor.

Vowell seems to be acutely aware of her ability to entertain through illumination because she foregrounds some highly cultural images before her text. Before the reader engages with the actual text of The Wordy Shipmates, the reader encounters the following images: the original crest of the Bay of New England, a Map of New England Colonies and Tribal Lands circa 1636, and a lengthy quote from Melville's Moby Dick. Unless the reader can recognize and appreciate Moby Dick's prestige and the historic value of the two images, these preambles would be alienating. Vowell's book presumes a high degree of intellectual curiosity. Like all

her writing, The Wordy Shipmates seeks to illuminate the history that did not make it into textbooks. She emphasizes the un-romantic aspects of colonial history and in doing so asserts the subject matter at hand is both interesting and entertaining. The fact that Vowell's book is selling very well should confirm a good a number of Brooks's speculations. First, there are still enough people willing to spend \$18.99 on this print book to make it a profitable venture. Second, the majority of her readership is intelligent. Third, the readership's leisure-time or pleasure activities are not generally decadent or self-indulgent but are meant to advance their cultural capital in an entertaining way. But Vowell's political satire and cultural references are only half of the appeal for the new elite.

The other thing these writers offer is experience in a world that seems more genuine and authentic because it is difficult and undesirable. The comic memoirist's insistence on his or her own exceptional life and difficult childhood connotes a sense of originality that is absent from standard professional life. In many ways, the comic's unusual journey to success is a version of the pastoral – an idyllic longing for a simple life that is usually marked by unique experiences and base occupations. This is nothing new in literature or art, but it is one of the more important features that define this new genre because the authors use the material of their own underclass lifestyles to assert their authenticity.

In one particular story in Me Talk Pretty One Day, Sedaris conveys the importance of this sense of experience by placing himself in his audience's position of observing a more exceptional childhood than his own. The ironically titled story "Remembering my Childhood on the Continent of Africa" describes how Sedaris's partner grew up in Africa. Sedaris recounts romanticizing Hugh's past for its

experiences and notes his own jealousy of Hugh's much more interesting upbringing. Sedaris's audience is placed in a similar relation to his own stories. To a readership of college-educated professionals, stories that start with "I bought my drugs from a jittery, bug-eyed typesetter whose brittle, prematurely white hair was permed in such a way that I couldn't look at her without think of a late-season dandelion" (Me Talk Pretty One Day 46) have an exotic allure that suggests genuine experience. Sedaris acknowledges the appeal of this kind of pastoral vision by comparing his upbringing to Hugh's.

Certain events are parallel, but compared with Hugh's, my childhood was unspeakably dull. When I was seven years old, my family moved to North Carolina. When he was seven years old, Hugh's family moved to the Congo. We had a collie and a house cat. They had a monkey and two horses named Charlie Brown and Satan. I threw stones at stop signs. Hugh threw stones at crocodiles. The verbs are the same, but he definitely wins the prize when it comes to nouns and objects. An eventful day for my mother might have involved a trip to the dry cleaner or a conversation with the potato-chip deliveryman. Asked one ordinary Congo afternoon what she'd done with her day, Hugh's mother answered that she and a fellow member of the Ladies' club had visited a leper colony on the outskirts of Kinshasa. No reason was given for the expedition, though chances are she was staking it out for a future field trip....

They weren't rich, but what Hugh's family lacked financially they more than made up for with the sort of exoticism that works wonders at cocktail parties, leading always to the remark "That sounds fascinating." It's a compliment one rarely receives when describing an adolescence spent drinking Icees at the North Hills Mall. (194)

Sedaris's marginal attitude is ironic considering the first eighteen stories of the book – all of which detail Sedaris's childhood and are themselves exotic stories – have sustained the reader for nearly two hundred pages. Before Sedaris suggests that his childhood was comparatively unexciting, the reader experiences Sedaris as he falls into methamphetamine addiction and recovers, resists a battery of villainous teachers, and burns his conceptual art pieces in penitence for his brief success. Sedaris shows himself as someone who is simultaneously the pastoral image that opposes mainstream society while he admits that he too sees the pastoral image that exists opposite his own life. This allows Sedaris to establish a rapport with the audience that centers on a key concern of the professional elite – a feeling of being indistinct.

Like all of the work of the comic memoirists, "Remembering My Childhood on the Continent of Africa" speaks to crises of authenticity in the late 1990s. Sedaris suggests that no one (with the possible exception of Paul Sedaris) can escape the mentality of constant comparison and testing. Sedaris compares his exotic life to Hugh's exoticism and finds his own life "unspeakably dull." Anyone who reads Sedaris finds that his life is quite exciting, but the sensation of inauthenticity that pervades Sedaris suggests he is acutely aware of this crisis of authenticity around him. The reader sees Sedaris's life as a pastoral interpretation of American

meritocracy, as Sedaris finds a similar pastoral image in the life story of his partner Hugh. In either case, the individual searches for cultural capital. Just as Hugh's stories, as Sedaris says, would be far more interesting to hear at a party, Sedaris's stories about failure would suggest an exotic allure that is generally hidden from the professional class. In this way, the memoirists incisively appeal to a key anxiety that pervades the professional class. The comic memoirists suggest that in order to seem interesting and authentic, individuals must define themselves in terms of their deviations from conventionality rather than by expressing their successes within conventional pathways.

*Chapter Two: The Satire of Professionals*

The comic memoirist's ability to address their audience's concerns is an important asset to their success. As we have seen, the comic memoirists' picaresque journeys through America's meritocracy attempt to resonate with the reader's ambitions and anxieties. Burroughs's fantasy about going to a university in his late teens aspires to reflect a similar situation in his audience. In a similar vein, Vowell's memory of her inane elementary school play implicitly invites the readers to question the value of their own educations. Despite his displays of acumen, Sedaris's fear of new technology suggests that smart, capable individuals cannot rely on their cunning and intelligence alone to prosper in a highly technocratic economy.

However, the above analyses distort the writers' texts by evoking more pathos than humor. The one-phrase summaries above suggest that the protagonist has lived a difficult life and deserves pity and admiration from the audience. But pity is not the main emotion the comic memoirists evoke. Rather, they use humor to simultaneously mock their readers and invite them into the story. Like Mark Twain, they have found a method by which they can employ humor as a means to achieve illumination. In fact, there are some highly relevant similarities between Twain and the recent comic memoirists. Both Twain and the comic memoirists succeed as mass popular entertainers by playing the fool in the service of social satire. In both cases, humor allows the writers to offer entertainment in conjunction with pointed critique. Discussing the limited ways that critical readers have often appreciated Twain, James M. Cox makes some observations that directly apply to the comic memoirists, "The attitudes of acceptance fall essentially into two categories: those which try to discover meaning in the book and those which insist that it is a humorous book. Critics who

pursue the meaning, the myth, the sociology, or even the structure of the book, usually fail to explore its humor. Their typical reaction is likely to be, ‘Of course the book is humorous, but behind the humor there is a serious world,’ and they proceed to search for this seriousness” (157). Cox correctly sees this as a faulty approach. Rather than relegate the humor to a lesser degree of analytic consideration, the moments in which a writer chooses to employ humor must be seen as an integral asset to the writer’s agenda. In order to make sense of Sedaris, Vowell, and Burroughs within the culture of meritocracy, one must analyze the moments in which they choose to employ humor instead of pathos or sentiment. The comic memoirists create a dynamic that uses humor to illuminate the reader’s delusions and how those delusions influence the readers’ understanding of the serious world.

This chapter focuses on one particular story by David Sedaris. “Ashes” originally appeared in the book Naked and is provided in the appendix. In “Ashes,” Sedaris recounts two central events from his family history, using them to address a preoccupation that is central to all his work – the difference between genuine, meaningful emotion and misleading sentimentalism. Among the main purposes of Sedaris’s comic writing is his effort to distinguish between true sentiment and false sentimentality. That contrast, which is closely bound up with Sedaris’s ambivalent attitudes toward the professional class, permeates his writing, as it does his contemporaries Vowell and Burroughs. The contrast between sentiment and sentimentality is treated with particular eloquence and artistry in “Ashes.” The essay revolves around two contrasting and intertwined plots – one concerning his sister Lisa’s wedding, the other addressing his mother’s stoic attitude towards her progressing and ultimately fatal lung cancer. In depicting his mother’s stoicism,

Sedaris ultimately reveals a deep and genuine affection that is illuminated only by their shared distaste for sentimental display. In this way, Sedaris suggests that the delusions that surround sentimentality can be avoided through stoicism and rationality. At the same time, he also suggests that overt displays of affection are inherently superficial and that sentimentality is often a sinister characteristic.

Whereas the previous chapter sought to demonstrate how Sedaris, Vowell, and Burroughs represent a broad trend in current writing and considered some of the key thematic concerns that their works address, this chapter addresses the techniques they use to unveil the delusions that they believe mark much of the modern meritocracy. Sedaris was chosen because he most accurately represents this vogue in writing and because he employs the techniques of this genre more consistently and successfully than his peers. In analyzing this essay, I begin by reviewing some critical theories of comedy.<sup>6</sup> In particular, the theories of humor put forth by Henri Bergson and Christina Larkin Galiñanes offer illuminating means of reading Sedaris's writing. Bergson presents a nearly exhaustive description of how humor operates by categorizing all humor as a form of imitation. Galiñanes builds on Bergson's approach by reconciling it with recent research on the importance of incongruity-resolution to the cognitive function of jokes. Extending this theory of comedy from attention to jokes to an account of humorous narratives, Galiñanes provides a structural analysis of the way that comic fictional narratives exploit incongruity-

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<sup>6</sup> Although Aristotle and Frye are seminal figures in comedy theory, they focus on comedy as a narrative genre and are not primarily concerned with the techniques writers use to evoke laughter. Their theories are not particularly useful in this analysis. Freud's theory about jokes and their relation to the unconscious, with its emphasis on the importance of repression, does not seem relevant to these writers' observational comedy.

resolution. In Galiñanes analysis, the moment of laughter becomes a moment of illumination that resembles an epiphany. Laughter marks the recognition of an incongruity between the text and the reader's common knowledge and a moment in which the reader must reexamine his assumptions to make unexpected information comport with her established expectations. In this way, Sedaris and the other comic memoirists use humor to deflate the sentimental and intellectual pieties that they believe delude the professional class.

In one sense, Bergson's entire theory can be summed up as follows: all imitations of people that seem mechanical are funny. Bergson's theory divides humor into two equally important and connected elements: act and execution. If an act imitates human behavior but the execution seems rigidly mechanical or contrived, the result is laughter. For example, a man who runs along a path is not necessarily funny, but if the scene also shows a monkey running behind the man, the image becomes humorous. The monkey imitates the man's actions, but since the monkey is physiologically different from the man, the monkey's gestures will be inherently more awkward. Thus, humor arises because of the imperfect imitation of an act. The same thing can be done in writing. In "Remembering My Childhood on the Continent of Africa," discussed in the previous chapter, Sedaris's comparison to his partner Hugh operates under Bergson's theory at the level of the sentence and the image. Sedaris writes, "I threw stones at stop signs. Hugh threw stones at crocodiles." Through careful and intentional presentation, the juxtaposed images become humorous because Hugh's memory appears as an incongruous imitation of Sedaris's memory. Sedaris's image seems normal, but the addition of Hugh's image disrupts

that normality and thus becomes a wryly-executed imitation of the first image. Even at the level of syntax, the second sentence deliberately imitates the first sentence.

In essence, Bergson's notion that mechanical imitations in particular generate laughter comes from the recognition of an imperfect mimicry of an organic entity. The aforementioned monkey is only humorous because he is incapable of perfect mimicry. The same principle holds true for people. In Sedaris's world, teachers, doctors, and other professionals appear to be imperfect imitations of their proper archetypes. For example, every teacher Sedaris encounters attempts to nurture and educate Sedaris, but Sedaris sees the teacher's attempts as paltry imitations of a teacher. Thus, even well-meaning teachers become objects of mockery.

A similar dynamic holds true for almost all the characters in Sedaris's stories. As we shall see, every character who seems humorous exhibits a sense of authority, professionalism, and petty rigidity through imitation. In "Ashes," Sedaris implies that Lisa refuses to serve alcohol at her wedding because she feels this gives her a more righteous character, Sedaris's mother refuses to abandon her unhealthy habits when she develops cancer, and his father resembles the women from "Diary of a Smoker" as he rails against smoking, drinking, and any behavior that he deems wrong. What these three characters have in common is their inflexibility and their imitations of a distinct type of character that the reader would likely recognize. This structure will hold true for much of the analysis, although it will appear in some variant forms. Therefore, it seems prudent to explain the processes that allow Bergson to arrive at the act-execution theory of comedy.

First, as laughter is the product of imitation, humor "does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human" (8). Laughter is necessarily the product of social

interaction (9). In one sense, this is because humor is an interactive process. When one person missteps or tells a joke, another person laughs at him. In another sense, laughter is necessarily a social phenomenon because it requires a sense of expectation and self-awareness. The comic memoirist, just as the man who falls down in front of a crowd, expects laughter to arise from his actions. Because the man who falls down has an expectation to be laughed at, he becomes an object of humor. If the individual had not expected humor to arise from his action, the viewer or reader might be inclined to pity the man. Consequently, “Laughter has no greater foe than emotion” (8). The comic memoirists rarely invite the reader to sympathize with their feelings of sadness and pain. Instead, as previously discussed, they dislocate the trauma of their experiences with a witty observation or a sarcastic remark.

Second, since humor is necessarily related to social interactions, the audience’s sense of removal from a joke determines whether a joke induces laughter or pity. In general, Bergson contends, vice is humorous, whereas sin is not. Comedies often use love, sex, and lies to evoke humor, but they less often employ murder, violence, and malice (15). A joke or event seems humorous so long as it is considered close and relevant to the reader and not if it is unimaginably beyond the reader’s realm of expectations or his routine encounters.

Third, the imitation must seem mechanical, rigid, and inelastic. According to Bergson, the purpose of rigidity is to illuminate the foolishness that is inherent in the imitated behavior. For example, a priest who blindly follows his theological education may seem comical or even cartoonish. However, once the priest admits his own fallibility, he becomes humanized and no longer imitates the reader’s schema of a priest. Similarly, the monkey is only funny because it cannot perfectly mimic the

running man. Were it to mimic the running man precisely in movement, it would appear too similar and thus seem humanoid and monstrous. The imitators must retain their own qualities while imitating the qualities of another (22).

Fourth, whenever manner, intelligence, or the soul seeks to outdo the material world and fails, humor occurs. If a scene or phrase seeks to highlight a person's intangible attributes and fails by highlighting one's physical attributes, the scene becomes funny. Bergson uses the example of a funeral eulogy. If the eulogist says, "he was virtuous and plump," humor arises. In another sense, whenever something material dislocates the focus of something non-material, humor arises (21).

Finally, inversion and rearrangement are forms of imitation and are therefore funny. For example, a clown walks into a business meeting. In this case, the absurdity imposes itself onto an unfunny situation. The inverse may also occur. If, for example, two people are in an apartment that is filled with chickens, one may turn to the other and say, "I told you so." In this case, humor comes from the imposition of a familiar, unfunny phrase onto an absurd situation (24 – 36).

Bergson's theory of comedy has proven to be foundational for more recent theorists who extend his insights by emphasizing the importance of incongruity and resolution, the currently dominant framework in academic analyses of comedy. Galiñanes works in this tradition and offers a concise systemization of Bergson's theory of humor. From her perspective, all humor arises from an initial stage of bewilderment that is quickly and summarily resolved. According to Galiñanes, humor arises because the comic subverts the reader's prior knowledge and his expectations. She relies on the reader's wealth of knowledge or his common sense, which she sees

operating in narrative expectations that she labels “scripts” (81). The script is the reader’s anticipation of what, given a certain scenario, should come next. The readers’ encyclopedic knowledge of the world creates a set of assumptions in their daily lives (107). While this assumption may seem like common sense, it is this kind of formalized expectation that the comic exploits in order to create laughter.

According to Galiñanes, a joke works by following a common sense script and then introducing an incongruity that creates a sense of bewilderment. When an individual reads a narrative, he involuntarily selects the elements that fit his schemas. For example, to return to the previous Sedaris anecdote, the first sentence – “I threw stones at stop signs” – is normal and establishes a rapport with the audience. To throw stones at a street sign is unremarkable and therefore follows the reader’s script. Near the end of the joke, there comes a point in which a new element called the Script-Switch Trigger is introduced that deviates from the reader’s script. The Script-Switch Trigger is the moment that triggers laughter in the reader by abruptly switching scripts or registers (82). In this case, the script continues until the final word of the second sentence, “crocodiles.” This is the moment in which one script is abandoned for another and confusion arises. The reader then acknowledges the deviation and uses his intelligence to make sense of the deviation. The revelation of the joke’s architecture produces laughter because it is unfamiliar and is recognizable as a deliberate parody of the initial script.

Sedaris starts most of his stories like this. For example, the story “Nuit of the Living Dead” is a parody of the shock-horror movie *Night of the Living Dead* and expresses a Script-Switch Trigger within the title, albeit retrospectively. The joke arises from an incongruity that is imposed upon a script. In this case, French language

is imposed onto an American movie title. Ultimately, the more successful joke comes from a Script-Switch Trigger that deviates from a previous joke. In the following passage, the first two lines of “Nuit of the Living Dead” contain two jokes that rely on one another in order to create a sense of bewilderment:

I was on the front porch, drowning a mouse in a bucket when this van pulled up, which was strange. On an average day a total of fifteen cars might pass the house, but no one ever stops, not unless they live here.

(Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim 246)

The first joke comes from the absurdity of Sedaris drowning a mouse in a bucket. The phrase “I was on the front porch” establishes the original script by implying a scene of suburban leisure or rural homeliness, but it then deviates with “drowning a mouse in a bucket.” At this point, Sedaris has made one joke. However, he continues to explain that the true absurdity in the scene is the van that has stopped in front of his house. Sedaris deviates from the reader’s initial script, from the new script that he has created, and from general common sense. As we shall see, Sedaris is unusual in that he is able to layer many jokes into a single sentence.

Bergson and Galiñanes’s theories offer consistently useful means to unlocking Sedaris’s technique. In the following passage from “Ashes,” the Sedaris family has gathered atop a mountain where Lisa has decided to be married:

We gathered together for the wedding, which took place on a clear, crisp October afternoon. The ceremony was held upon a grassy precipice that afforded magnificent views of the surrounding peaks, their trees resplendent in the fiery red and orange. It was easy to imagine that we were it, the last remaining people on the face of the earth. The others had been wiped out by disease and famine, and we had been chosen to fashion a new and better world. It was a pleasant thought until I pictured us foraging for berries and having to bathe in ice-cold streams. Bob's family, hearty and robust, could probably pull it off, but the rest of us would wither and die shortly after we'd run out of shampoo. (241)

The first joke the reader encounters is Sedaris's corruption of the pastoral image. To Sedaris, a world in which only he and his family survive apocalypse seems appealing. In this joke, the initial script implies the pleasures of romantic solitude in nature until the phrase, "The others had been wiped out by disease." This is a joke because the phrase corrupts the bucolic script. Sedaris layers this joke by adding, "It was a pleasant thought." This joke operates by emphasizing the new script, depicting the speaker not as romantic lover of nature, but as a petty misanthrope. Finally, Sedaris elicits his biggest laugh at the end of the passage with a final deviation from the previous scripts. Before the final word, the bucolic scene reflects an image in which the American pastoral appears pleasant and desirable. Sedaris makes this sentiment very clear through adjectives as he describes the trees as "fiery" and "resplendent" in order to suggest that their beauty is worth note. These adjectives evoke classic and

pleasurable images of the beautiful, Romantic, pastoral, and picturesque genres. In this way, Sedaris invites the reader to invest his own sense of value into the scene. At this point, the registers switch and the Trigger activates. Sedaris deviates from the bucolic script with a facetious suggestion that he would die without shampoo. The absurd suggestion abruptly switches the linguistic registers and the physical locations. The scene moves from nature to industry, as well as from large, bucolic imagery to a minute object. Therefore, the reader will likely laugh at that moment as it is the largest and most absurd incongruity in the passage.

While the laugh at the end of the above passage occurs because there has been a deviation from a script, more important is Sedaris's suggestion that the reader's laughter is a form of self-mockery. Just as Sedaris invests himself in the bucolic scene, the reader is also invited to feel exhilaration and nostalgia for the natural environment. Sedaris mocks himself because he has been seduced by the delusion of a rustic life. This joke – like all jokes – elicits the reader's identification. Sedaris encourages us to think of ourselves as lovers of nature who realize that our appreciation is shallow. In this way, laughter serves a much more ironic purpose than just being entertaining.

In this joke and throughout his writing, Sedaris makes fun of spiritual and intellectual aspirations. In the previous passage, Bergson's theory of matter's dislocating manner operates quite strongly. Despite Sedaris's investment in the bucolic scene and its spiritual overtones, Sedaris reorients his attention to the physical world. The abrupt shift from the spiritual world to the physical world evokes laughter because the spiritual world is meant to seem foolish by comparison. Thus, the

moment of laughter in Sedaris's works becomes the moment of revelation. Sedaris uses laughter to reflect the detriment of sentimentality.

Nowhere is this more powerful than in the crassness and lack of sentiment in Sedaris's mother. In brief, Sedaris's mother Sharon, who appears often throughout Sedaris's essays, is the authority of satire. She seems like a strange contrast to the archetypal American mother. She unapologetically drinks throughout the day, laughs when her children fall prey to the malevolent cunning of their schoolteachers, and forces an adolescent Sedaris to vote for her in the 1968 presidential election ("Undecided"). In many ways, she presents an implicit contrast to the archetypal mother. Nevertheless, she is nurturing and caring in her own way. Sharon and Sedaris share long, late-night phone calls, in which the reader understands that their relationship is intimate and important, despite its outward appearance. She calls him to her deathbed when she develops terminal cancer where she gives Sedaris – and not any of her other children – a check for forty thousand dollars with the warning that he should "cash it fast" (Barrel Fever and Other Stories: Abridged, part 1 1:47:43 – 1:47:54). She openly and uncontrollably sobs when Lou kicks Sedaris out of the house because of his sexuality (Me Talk Pretty One Day: Abridged, part 3 1:05:30 – 1:11:33). On the face of it, Sharon's role as a mother often conflicts with her incisive, petty criticism. Her ostensibly conflicting perspectives as a mother and social critic, however, allow her to nurture her children and prepare them for the nastiness and pretension that exists in the world. In the following passage, Sharon's sarcasm and brutality operate as the Script-Switch Trigger in order to suggest her capability as a mother. Previously, Sedaris had described a childhood contract he and his sisters signed pledging to never marry. As Lisa has nullified their contract, Sedaris and his

mother seem unsympathetic to his sister Lisa's attempt to elevate the significance of her wedding by choosing an unconventional location to have the ceremony.

After living with her boyfriend, Bob, for close to ten years, my sister Lisa nullified our contract when she agreed to marry him.

Adding insult to injury, they decided the wedding would take place not at a drive-through chapel in Las Vegas but on a mountaintop in western North Carolina.

"That's nice," my mother said. "Now all I need is a pair of navy blue hiking boots to match my new dress and I'll be all set." (235

– 236)

While a more sympathetic and passive mother might comment on the creativity of Lisa's decision or might find some subtler way to convey her dissatisfaction, Sharon shows disregard for her daughter's emotions. Bergson's theories of imitation are helpful in understanding this use of humor. The aforementioned mother figure is itself a script since the word "mother" carries with it connotations that would characterize a typical mother. In this way, Sedaris's mother presents an image that is a deviation from the common mother script. Her comment, "That's nice," initially follows the common mother script as it expresses affection; however, as the reader quickly learns, the sardonic qualifications to her seemingly approving comment mean to criticize Lisa's decision. More importantly, Sharon's sarcastic comment criticizes the common mother script itself. Like the bucolic scene before, her initial comment invites the reader to view the passage earnestly, but both Lisa and the reader are

quickly mocked for allowing themselves to indulge in Lisa's shallow desires. Sharon's sarcasm and crassness are meant to conflict with the reader's understanding of a mother and therefore her cruel comment becomes bewildering. Thus, she deviates from the script. As the deviation is clear, plausible, and absurd, it evokes a laugh.

Although laughter indicates entertainment, it also signifies the moment of illumination. The reader laughs because the sense of bewilderment is eventually replaced by understanding. In the above passage, Sharon suggests that the value associated with a unique and creative wedding is not as valuable to anyone else because it creates a physical and monetary burden on the attendees. The notion that the attendees will have to match formal attire with appropriate outdoor gear creates a sense of confusion and incongruity because the combination of two incompatible clothing types is both unfamiliar and inappropriate. Sedaris has Sharon employ Bergson's technique of inversion as she deliberately imposes an unfamiliar aspect – hiking boots – onto a familiar situation – a nice dress for a wedding.

This, in turn, critiques the type of person described in the previous chapter. Laughter indicates the recognition of the absurdity that accompanies Lisa's imposition, but the readers' laughter also indicates that they recognize that the absurdity is necessary in order to satisfy Lisa's wedding request. The laughter that Sharon evokes highlights Lisa's attempt to be both authentic and creative through her mountaintop wedding. Just as Sedaris believes that the woman in "Diary of a Smoker" expresses delusional and misguided values, he finds his own sister to be the product of the current cult of individualism and self-affirmation. In order to fully

understand Lisa's self-delusions, it is important to explicate the reason for Sharon's lack of affection.

In many ways, Sharon seems more authentic than the mother-type because she does not censor herself. One of the most alluring and alienating aspects about Sharon is that she does not respect those who try to communicate desires through abstract, imprecise, or sentimental rhetoric, like the woman in "Diary of a Smoker." Sedaris's mother does not allow affection to interfere with her genuine opinions. Because she appears indifferent to sentimental considerations, Sharon misleadingly appears insensible to highly emotional situations, as is suggested in the following interaction between Sedaris and Sharon. In the passage below, Sedaris has spent considerable time thinking about his mother's cancer. He finds that her cancer changes their relationship, despite his innermost desire that their interactions remain the same. Ultimately, though, Sedaris acknowledges that he is deeply afflicted by his mother's cancer and that this affliction manifests itself in many ways, the worst of which, he believes, make him act artificially sentimental and foolish.

"I love you," I said at the end of one of our late-night phone calls.

"I am going to pretend I didn't hear that," she said. I heard a match strike in the background, the tinkling of ice cubes in a raised glass. And then she hung up. I had never said such a thing to my mother, and if I had it to do over again, I would probably take it back. Nobody ever spoke that way except Lisa. It was queer to say such a thing to someone unless you were trying to talk them out of money or

into bed, our mother had taught us that when we were no taller than pony kegs. I had known people who said such things to their parents, “I love you,” but it always translated to mean “I’d love to get off the phone with you.” (240)

Sedaris suggests that the phrase “I love you” is in actuality a means of signaling boredom or frustration. The key to his criticism is that the phrase is also meant to leave the recipient with a good feeling. In Sedaris’s mind, the phrase has lost its benevolent meaning through overuse and is thus a hollow, artificial imitation of a genuine sentiment. The utterance “I love you” thus becomes the embodiment of a truly artificial sentiment.

Sedaris rebels against such artificial sentimentality while implicitly using that complaint to highlight a less strongly stressed but thus more important and genuine sentiment. The words “I love you” themselves may be true, but because of their intention, they become artificial and end up communicating an ulterior motive other than the words’ true meaning. This, to Sedaris, is foolish. This passage, however, does not suggest that Sedaris and Sharon are truly cold toward one another – quite the contrary. The two regularly spend time talking to one another, which suggests that their phone calls are substantial in their own right. Their deep bond is also apparent when Sedaris reflects on his own artificial utterance and recalls the life lessons that his mother taught him.

In such passages and throughout his writing, Sedaris’s mother appears as a sort of muse for the writer. She seems like the idealized version of Sedaris’s type of critic – honest, direct, clear-sighted, and ruthlessly unapologetic. In Sedaris’s small,

seemingly insignificant deviation from logical behavior, he is immediately set straight and he learns from his mistake. In effect, Sharon becomes Sedaris's version of the good mother. Even if her demeanor may seem unfamiliar, she is revealed to be nurturing and caring. Indeed, the suggestion of Sedaris's humor is that Sharon finds a way to be a good mother without artificiality. In part, this is why Sedaris's explanation of the phrase "I love you" and Sharon's response becomes funny.

What is curious is that this explanation is meant to appear obvious, but Sedaris suggests that the reader has probably never investigated his own assumptions. In this way, Sedaris's comedy is niche-oriented. Sedaris does not write this story for someone who grew up without parents or for someone who came from an unstable home. He writes for someone who is used to talking on the phone to parents and signing off with "I love you." In order to find a joke funny, Bergson contends, the deviation must be familiar enough to allow the reader to recognize aspects of his own life in Sedaris's unfamiliar family.

The most common targets of such humor in Sedaris's writing are the people represented by his sister Lisa – ambitious and pretentious members of the professional class. Almost all the details surrounding Lisa's wedding suggest Lisa is a member of the professional class described in the previous chapter. In her attempts to reconcile material luxury with social idealism, Lisa decides to be married in suit instead of wedding gown (239) and her wedding is on a mountaintop instead of a chapel (240). No explanation is given for these choices, but abstract ideals are suggested through Sedaris's prose. Most important to Sedaris's mother, however, is Lisa's decision to exclude alcohol from the wedding ceremony. Although Sedaris does not give her the chance to explain her motivation for choosing to have a dry

wedding, there is a sense that Sedaris believes that her motivations are fundamentally misguided.

“No booze?” she moaned. My mother staggered toward the buffet table, its retractable legs trembling beneath the weight of sparkling waters, sausage biscuits, and decaffeinated coffee.

“No booze,” Lisa had announced a week before the ceremony. “Bob and I have decided we don’t want that kind of a wedding.”

“Which kind?” my mother asked. “The happy kind? You and Bob might be thrilled to death, but the rest of us will need some help working up the proper spirit.” (242)

Again, Sharon asserts a quick and unfiltered correction to her daughter’s abstract desire. Lisa probably meant to say that she preferred a wedding in which the guests were sober – in every sense of the word – and thus able to fully enjoy the event. However, she does not express this sentiment as such. Instead, Lisa’s phrasing suggests that her decision carries with it a sense of righteous piety, the same kind displayed by the non-smoking woman in “Diary of a Smoker.” Sharon instantly recognizes Lisa’s foolishness. Cutting down Lisa’s piety, Sharon articulately states that she will require alcohol in order to enjoy herself. Unlike Lisa’s desire, an explanation is given, but no explanation is insinuated. In many ways, Sharon’s simplicity is a window to her genuineness. One simply cannot argue with Sharon’s assertion because it is personal and clear. She does not suggest Lisa needs alcohol or that the wedding is somehow more valuable if alcohol is not present. She merely

states, albeit confrontationally, that she personally requires alcohol to enjoy the wedding. Thus, the critical humor becomes directed at the self-important person's determination to impose his or her notions of self-improvement on others. Once again, ambition, pretension, and the culture of self-improvement become the richest material for Sedaris's mockery. As Brooks's work revealed in the previous chapter, these attitudes were strongly associated with the professional elite during the 1990s. In "Ashes," Sharon's brutality allows Sedaris to undercut these attitudes by exposing the vanity of elitist aspirations. He does so by contrasting Lisa's vain desires with Sharon's desires, which seem more real and fundamental. Bergson's theory of the matter's outdoing manner is useful in this analysis. Sharon's need for pleasure outdoes and interrupts Lisa's aspirations and thus Lisa seems laughable.

Through Sedaris's humorous presentation, laughter becomes an invaluable tool in convincing his audience that Sharon's assertions are correct. Again, Bergson and Galiñanes's theories offer productive readings of this technique. Sharon inverts the notion that a symbolically rich wedding can be valuable by turning it into an imitation of a real wedding. In Sharon's view, Lisa's wedding appears to unsuccessfully mimic a real wedding. In a larger sense, this is Sedaris's agenda. Through laughter, Sedaris is able to coerce his readers to laugh at the sentimental pieties that they may have previously left unexamined. In this way, self-mockery becomes pleasurable. At the moment that the Script-Switch Trigger occurs, the bewilderment that the readers experience serves many purposes. First, it subverts the readers' expectations, thereby deflating their notions of correct and incorrect action. Since Sharon seems absurd and yet still seems like a good mother, the reader is asked to question his own notions of what a good mother can be and what form she may

assume. Second, the reader learns from the experience. As Brooks suggests, the introspective guidance that Sedaris offers becomes a form of both self-improvement and recreation – so that, even as he mocks his sister’s yuppie pretensions, Sedaris strangely mimics the cultural aspirations of the professional class. In this way, the laughter that comes from this type of humor is intellectually engaging and stimulating. The reader can feel satisfaction for having read Sedaris’s work and does not have to feel guilty for enjoying the laughter and the sensation of easy reading.

Thus, Sedaris is able to use this incisive humor in a way that mocks the values of his audience while he nonetheless avoids alienating them. The comedian who is able to succeed by mocking the people who support him must find a fine line between direct attacks and apologetic observations. For Sedaris and the comic memoirists, the line they have found operates according to a few basic premises: first, their mockeries must be anecdotal so that the reader may believe that the stories are truly non-fiction; second, the anecdotes must be highly detailed to the people that they describe; third, the details must remind the readers of themselves but always allow them to believe they are different from the objects of mockery. In describing Lisa and Bob’s relationship, Sedaris accomplishes this gentle mockery by noting both the substantial and superficial aspects of their relationship, but he focuses his details on the latter in order to mock the value of their marriage and, in turn, question validity of the reader’s marriage.

My sister was getting married to a kind and thoughtful man who had seen her through a great many hardships. Together they shared a deep commitment to Mexican food and were responsible card-carrying

members of the North American Caged Bird Society. The tacos and parrots were strictly between Lisa and Bob, but the rest of her belonged to us. (241)

Sedaris sees nothing wrong with Bob. He presents Bob kindly in the story and acknowledges his importance to Lisa. Nevertheless, the details he chooses to elaborate upon are highly superficial. Birds and tacos, he argues, are the foundation of their marriage and thus the marriage appears insubstantial. Humor arises from the reader's expectation that the "deep commitment" Sedaris intimates will have something to do with the previous sentence, which refers to serious hardships. Instead, Sedaris once again chooses to focus on the material options, and in doing so suggests that the genuine aspects of their marriage are rooted in delusions. Without the ability to articulate their "deep commitment," Sedaris suggests that the underlying values that support their marriage are superficial.

Regardless of how effective or gentle this mockery may be, it runs the risk of offending the reader. To question the value of an individual's marriage is to question a person's depth and self-awareness. Sedaris finds those qualities to be lacking in his sister. However, this is not the thought process that Sedaris guides his reader toward. Rather, the reader focuses on birds and tacos since they are concrete, recognizable, and closer to the reader's own sense of common knowledge. Similarly, in "Diary of a Smoker," the reader's attention is guided toward the woman and Sedaris's pettiness instead of the suggestion being made about the reader himself. By treating his sister as a fool, Sedaris allows his readers to laugh at pretentious attitudes that to some degree they might well share themselves. He is able to avoid alienating his reader by

foregrounding the superficial details, but inlaid within his criticism is the notion that other marriages may be based on such superficial tenets and therefore may seem equally as artificial as his sister's marriage.

So far, we have seen how Sedaris undermines false assumptions and false virtues, but he has not suggested a practical form of living in which an individual may seem valuable without being self-delusional. That ideal is presented in the subtly admiring portrait Sedaris presents of his mother, a woman who first appears harshly unsentimental yet who is gradually revealed in "Ashes" to possess a rare stoic dignity. In his depiction of his dying mother, Sedaris suggests that authenticity comes from the ability to confront life honestly and without pretense. The difficulty of this seemingly simple lifestyle is precisely Sedaris's point. Sentimentality and the tendency to assign arbitrary value to situations are easy, Sedaris implies, and characteristic of pretentious and rigidly imitative people everywhere. His mother's pitiless unsentimentality, by contrast, ends up looking not merely harsh or cruel, but ultimately brave.

Sharon's ability to embrace a life of stoic rationality allows her to manage her cancer with dignity and to not allow cancer to consume her spirit even as it ends her life. To learn that someone has a terminal illness usually evokes a sense of premature sadness and loss. To Sharon Sedaris, sadness and loss are foolish emotions. Rather than dwelling on the knowledge that she has a limited amount of time left to live, she acknowledges that fact as a part of her life and adjusts herself accordingly. In the following passage, Sharon unsentimentally explains how she herself received the news that she had cancer:

Three weeks before the wedding, my mother called to say she had cancer. She'd gone to the doctor complaining about a ringing in her ear, and the resulting tests revealed a substantial tumor in her lung. "They tell me it's the size of a lemon," she said. "Not a tiny fist or an egg, but a lemon. I think they describe it in terms of fruit so as not to scare you, but come on, who wants a lemon in their lung? They're hoping to catch it before it becomes a peach or a grapefruit, but who knows? I sure as hell don't. Twenty-odd tests and they still haven't figured out what's wrong with my ear. I'm just hoping that whatever it is, it isn't much larger than a grape. This cancer, though, I realize it's my own fault. I'm just sorry your father's still around to remind me of that fact every fifteen goddamned seconds." (237)

Even with the knowledge that she has a terminal illness, both Sharon and Sedaris still see through the absurdities of other people. First, Sharon recognizes, or at least asserts, the ulterior motive for describing a tumor in terms of fruit. Rather than dwelling on its size, she mocks the doctor for not realizing that a lemon, despite its possible connotations, is still the size of a lemon and as such is an unwelcome presence in someone's lung. Second, she remains focused on the ringing in her ears, the one thing that she might still change, all the while casting doubt on her doctor's ability. Finally, and most importantly, she acknowledges that the cancer is the result of her voluntary smoking. She does not experience denial, bargaining, anger, or any of the other emotions that typically accompany tragedy. Sharon's ability to recognize

the true consequences of a situation allows her to approach her situation so ruthlessly that she is able to avoid the pain associated with tragedy. Later in the story, Sedaris mentions that he found it uncomfortable that she canceled magazine subscriptions, bought cigarettes in packs instead of cartons, and sold all her jewelry. “In her own way,” he writes, “she had already begun to check out” (239). While this sentiment would seem sad in a different author, it deliberately fails to evoke pathos from Sedaris. It is difficult to pity a person who appears to be in complete control of her life, even in the final stages.

In short, Sharon presents an important contrast to all the other people who fill Sedaris’s universe, including Sedaris himself. Sharon is not confused, arrogant, or self-deluding. Like Sedaris’s brother Paul, though with greater dignity, she presents a pastoral contrast to world of the vain striving that Sedaris otherwise presents. By communicating the truth about her life, her desires, and her needs, Sharon avoids the foolish confusion associated with the human condition and her life continues in the same way it did before she became sick. She does not quit smoking, she continues drinking, and she does not allow her children to evade the truth of her condition, as they try to below:

My brother, sisters and I undertook a campaign to bolster her spirits and suggest new and exciting hobbies she might explore once she was cured and back on her feet.

“It’ll be great,” I said. “You could, I don’t know, maybe you could learn to pilot small planes or volunteer to hold crack babies.

There are a lot of things an older person can do with her time rather than smoke and drink.”

“Please don’t call me stoned on pot and tell me there are lots of things I can do with my life,” she said. “I just got off the phone with your brother, who suggested I open up a petting zoo. If that’s what being high does for a person, then what I really need to do is start smoking marijuana, which would be a bit difficult for me since the last time I saw my right lung it was lying in the bottom of a pan.” (238)

Again, Sharon quickly and brutally chastises her children for attempting to console themselves in the guise trying to show affection and concern for someone else.

Sharon represents an ideal for both Sedaris and for the reader. As much as the reader may not have wanted to have Sharon as his or her mother, Sharon’s ability to fend off sentimental pieties and hold traumatic pain at bay through comic honesty could seem appealing to anyone who has experienced any sort of tragedy. As previously mentioned, Sharon is Sedaris’s muse. She is the ideal critic, often focusing her critiques at her own children. In another sense, she also demonstrates just how difficult it is to live as she does. As Sedaris himself wrestles with the notion of his mother’s dying, he briefly forgets his own satiric distaste for sentimental piety as well as his disdain for the professional ethos of self-improvement and tries to encourage his mother to be a hopeful, self-managing cancer patient. He discovers that she is unwilling to change.

I'd heard of people who had survived cancer, but most of them claimed to get through it with the aid of whole grains and spiritual publications that encouraged them to sit quietly in a lotus position. They envisioned their tumors and tried to reason with them. Our mother was not the type to greet the dawn or cook with oats and barley. She didn't reason, she threatened; and if that didn't work, she chose to ignore the problem. We couldn't picture her joining a support group or trotting through the mall in a warm-up suit. Sixty-two years old and none of us had ever seen her in a pair of slacks. I'm not certain why, but it seemed to me that a person needed a pair of pants in order to defeat cancer. Just as important, they needed a plan. They needed to accept the idea of a new and different future, free of crowded ashtrays and five-gallon jugs of wine and scotch. They needed to believe that such a life might be worth living. I didn't know that I'd be able to embrace such an unrewarding future, but I hoped that she could....

The doctor decided to send her home while he devised a plan. The very word sounded hopeful to us, a plan. "The doctor has a plan!" my sisters and I crowed to one another.

"Right," my mother said. "He plans to golf on Saturday, sail on Sunday, and ask for my eyes, kidneys, and what's left of my liver on the following Monday. That's his plan." (237 – 238)

The key word in this passage is "chose." Sharon chose to ignore her problem without denial. She acknowledges the issue, attempts to resolve it her way, and finds herself

unable to do so. Nevertheless, she is the only person in the story who seems able to fully accept her oncoming death. Just as Sedaris is unable to blindly accept that his mother is going to die, he refers to other people who experience the same emotions he goes through. The people who embark on fad-cures like meditation and whole grains are made to seem foolish and are often marked by overindulgence in sentimentality. Sedaris suggests that people who claim to live better lives by taking a proactive approach toward their treatment delude themselves into thinking that their intelligence can overcome a biological ailment. Sedaris sees the intellectual elite overestimate their power of intellect by embarking on fad-cures and sarcastically suggests, "I didn't know that I'd be able to embrace such an unrewarding future." More importantly, Sedaris himself is deluded by this notion as he then suggests, "but I hoped she that could." Sedaris expresses a paradox. He acknowledges the absurdity that accompanies this sentiment but he deludes himself because of affection into thinking that his mother will recover. Unsurprisingly, she corrects him, and Sedaris's ostensibly genuine concerns appear artificial and laughable.

Thus, Sedaris's inconsistent sentimentalism points to his subtle capacity to place himself in the position of his readers. By doing so, he can humanize his audience at the same time he mocks them. One can imagine that Sedaris's stories would appear much more cruel and brief if they were told by Sharon. Sedaris, however, he is able to recognize the humanity in his audience by allowing himself to occasionally fail at his own rules for life. This allows him to develop two important and related themes. First, he is able to draw his audience into the story, mock them, and avoid alienating them by establishing a rapport with his readers.

Second and more importantly, he recognizes that artificial sentiment – although an object for mockery – is ultimately an indication of an individual’s correct moral alignment. Bergson’s theory of humor argues that people are funny when they engage in vice and not sin. It seems logical then that a person who is socially pretentious or misguided is humorous, whereas a person who is morally malignant is not humorous. Socially awkward people saturate Sedaris’s universe. Teachers, doctors, his father, and the woman in “Diary of a Smoker” all appear socially awkward because Sedaris presents them as bullies. Indeed, it is the characters who are often well meaning who appear the most despicable to Sedaris. In the following scene, the wedding has just finished and many of Lisa’s friends approach Sharon to comfort her because of her cancer. What follows is a series of young women who are motivated by kind intentions, but who look obnoxious and foolish because their desire to be kind turns into a type of pretentious bullying.

With the exception of Lisa, we were not a hugging people. In terms of emotional comfort, it was our belief that no amount of physical contact could match the healing powers of a well-made cocktail.

“Hey, wait a minute. Where’s *my* hug?” Colleen asked, rolling up her sleeves and moving in for the kill. I looked over my attacker’s shoulder and watched as a woman in a floor-length corduroy skirt wrestled my mother into an affectionate headlock.

“I heard what you’re going through and I know that you’re frightened,” the woman said, looking down at the head of thinning

gray hair she held clasped between her powerful arms. “You’re frightened because you think you’re alone.’

“I’m frightened,” my mother wheezed, “because I’m not alone and because you’re crushing what’s left of my goddamned lungs.”

The scariest thing about these people was that they were sober. You could excuse that kind of behavior from someone tanked up on booze, but most of them hadn’t taken a drink since the Carter administration.” (242 – 243)

Sedaris presents Lisa’s friends in two conflicting ways. At first, he assigns them a voice, something rare within his short stories. They are allowed to speak their minds and, although they pretentiously assert that they know Sharon as well as she knows herself, they try to hug her out of genuine care. But then, they become humorous and foolish as Sedaris’s suggests this type of behavior is more suited to drunks than well-meaning people. They become humorous for two reasons. First, they appear as caricatures of the type of person who is overly sentimental. Second, they do not fit within the established emotional setting that Sedaris provided. Thus, they are socially, but not morally, misguided.

At the same time that Sedaris makes fun of sentimentality and suggests that it is coercive, Sedaris uses comedy to rescue true feeling from false emotion. For Sedaris, there is a way in which there can be an ideal situation that recognizes genuine sentiment but still avoids the delusion of sentimentality. Only people like Sharon, however, can maintain genuine sincerity by acting ruthlessly hostile toward false emotion. Ironically, Sedaris presents his parents as the ideal couple. Nearing the

end stages of her lung cancer, the family goes out for dinner after Lisa's wedding and Sedaris describes an interaction between his parents.

My mother filled her wine glass and lit a cigarette.

“What are you doing?” He followed his question with an answer. “You're killing yourself is what you're doing.”

My mother lifted her glass in salute. “You got that right, baby.”

“I don't believe this. You might as well just put a gun to your head. No, I take that back, you can't blow your brains out because you haven't got any.”

“You should have known that when I agreed to marry you,” she said.

“Sharon, you haven't got a clue.” He shook his head in disgust. “You open your mouth and the crap just flies.”

My mother had stopped listening years ago, but it was almost a comfort that my father insisted on business as usual, despite the circumstances. In him, she had found someone whose behavior would never vary. He had made a commitment to make her life miserable, and no amount of sickness or bad fortune would sway him from that task. My last meal with my parents would be no different than the first.

(247)

For Sedaris, this sense of consistency is the most comforting part of the story.

Previously, Sedaris had been dwelling on his mother's death. He tried to comfort her,

tried to avoid comforting her, and tried to delude himself. Ultimately, however, it is the sense of consistency that allows Sedaris to accept his mother's situation as she wishes to deal with it. Unlike Lisa and Bob's relationship, which appears superficial, Sedaris suggests that Sharon and Lou's relationship transcends sentimental pieties. Despite their apparent absence of affection, Lou expresses concern for Sharon's welfare, albeit through hostility and ruthless honesty. Like Sharon, Lou's unwavering honesty is a genuine asset for his marriage, even if it does not always work with his children. Together, Sharon and Lou's marriage appears highly antagonistic and unhappy, but there is something significant about a couple who quickly and summarily express their concerns and anxieties for the well being of their partner. Lou's lack of censorship is akin to Sharon's, and together they present a couple that defy the "happy couple" script but are nonetheless happy, despite Sedaris's sarcastic suggestion that "He had made a commitment to make her life miserable." On the surface, this may be true. The reader may laugh at Sharon and Lou's interactions. Indeed, the reader is invited to do so. But, that involuntary laughter seeks to correct a fundamentals problem that Sedaris sees in the world around him and, in turn, show how his parents' relationship is far more genuine than those marriages that are based on outward displays of sentiment.

In many ways, this type of writing is like a documentary. It exposes some part of the world that may or may not directly affect the audience, but ultimately its purpose is to expose and test the emotional control of the audience members. "It defies comment; it imposes its meaning. It confronts us, the audience, with empirical

evidence in such nature as to render dispute impossible and interpretation superfluous... [documentaries] offer safe exercise for the reader's feeling; they test – but gently – his emotional competence to live in the great world that day” (Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America 14 – 17). The documentary resonates with many of the techniques that Sedaris and the other comic memoirists employ. The comic memoirists' attempt to use unfiltered and involuntary reactions as a means of illumination allows them to expose the reader's innermost assumptions and prejudices. The comics are able to identify and question the primary assumptions made by the reader and shape the world around them into their own assumptions about life through humor and entertainment.

Sedaris, Vowell, and Burroughs seek this same sense of subversive morality. Through entertainment, an avowed denial of sentimentality, and a ruthlessly critical approach to self-delusion, these writers gently test the reader's emotional equilibrium and seek to adjust the audience's values as the writers sees fit. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the final lines of “Ashes.” The last paragraph resonates with the concerns that Sedaris had previously identified, but it also acknowledges that sentiment cannot be absent from the values of any morally aligned individual. After returning from the aforementioned restaurant, Sedaris and his sisters go to a local cemetery to ponder their mother's oncoming death and to smoke marijuana. Ultimately, Sedaris concludes that there is simply nothing he can do to prepare himself for the loss of his mother.

You can't brace yourself for famine if you've never known hunger; it is foolish even to try. The most you can do is eat up while you still

can, stuffing yourself, shoveling it in with both hands and licking clean the plates, recalling every course in vivid detail. Our mother was back in her room and very much alive, probably watching a detective program on television. Maybe that was her light in the window, her figure stepping onto the patio to light a cigarette. We told ourselves she probably wanted to be left alone, that's how stoned we were. We'd think of this later, each in our own separate way. I myself tend to dwell on the stupidity of pacing a cemetery while she sat, frightened and alone, staring at the tip of her cigarette and envisioning her self, clearly now, in ashes. (249 – 250)

The only way, Sedaris suggests, to confront the sentimentality that usually accompanies genuine sentiment is with ruthless stoicism. In the passage, Sedaris's pain is clear. He acknowledges that he has been deeply afflicted by the knowledge that his mother will die, but he expresses ambivalence about being with his mother. He wants to spend time with her, "shoveling it in" as he says, while he nonetheless sits in a cemetery, stoned, and brooding. Sedaris's failure in that moment allows him to reflect on it and express his pain without the foolishness of sentimentality. In the act of writing about the moment, he recognizes his pain and withholds any descriptions of his torment to avoid seeming foolish. By avoiding embarrassing displays of emotion, Sedaris denies humor in the final passage. He presents a mirror image of the Bergsonian comedy evident in his sister's wedding. Face to face with pain, Sedaris seems poised, dignified, and restrained, whereas those who are laughable appear foolish, exaggerated, and mechanical.

Pathos is undeniably present in this essay. “Ashes” means to emphasize Sedaris’s loss by highlighting his inability to speak with his mother in her final moments of life. As much as Sedaris wants to view himself as a stoic person, his bravery seems more like fear. The best Sedaris can hope to do is to try. In doing so, Sedaris believes, he can minimize the pain that comes with loss.

And yet, pathos is not the focus of the final image. The lasting image is Sharon as she contemplates her own mortality in the tip of her cigarette. The entire final image is described in twenty words and the scene that Sedaris describes realistically could not have taken more than a couple minutes, only long enough for a cigarette to burn completely down. Nevertheless, the minutia once again becomes the moment for deep reflection and consideration. The image is a small incident that carries with it enormous artistry and sentiment while it simultaneously rejects sentimentality and the cult of literary esteem.

As both the title and the final word of the story is “ashes,” the reader begins the story with a sense of death, albeit somewhat abstractly. The story ends on precisely the same register and word it began with. As the final word echoes back to the title, bringing the whole story into a sense of completeness, the scripts also align, and Sedaris makes a profound statement about the only appropriate way to express sentiment. Absent from the entire story, but especially the final paragraph, is any embarrassing or false expression by Sharon or Sedaris of their pain. The reader does not encounter tears or, as Sedaris says, “the stupidity of pacing a cemetery.” Sedaris denies the reader any direct view of his or Sharon’s feeling, and the product is a sense of emotion that is nearly impossible to describe, but that seems entirely genuine.

*Appendix: "Ashes"*

The moment I realized I would be a homosexual for the rest of my life, I forced my brother and sisters to sign a contract swearing they'd never get married. There was a clause allowing them to live with anyone of their choice, just so long as they never made it official.

"What about children?" my sister Gretchen asked, slipping a tab of acid under her tongue. "Can I *not* marry and still have a baby?"

I imagined the child, his fifteen hands batting at the mobile hanging over the crib. "Sure, you can still have kids. Now just pick up your eyebrow pencil and sign on the dotted line."

My fear was that, once married, my sisters would turn their backs on the family, choosing to spend their vacations and holidays with their husbands. One by one they would abandon us until it was just me and my parents, eating our turkey and stuffing off TV trays. It wasn't difficult getting the signatures. The girls in my family didn't play house, they played reformatory. They might one day have a relationship – if it happened, it happened; but they saw no reason to get bent out of shape about it. My father thought otherwise. He saw marriage as their best possible vocation, something they should train for and visualize as a goal. One of my sisters would be stooped before the open refrigerator, dressed in a bathing suit, and my father would weigh her with his eyes. "It looks like you've gained a few pounds," he'd say. "Keep that up and you'll never find a husband." *Find*. He said it as though men were exotic mushrooms growing in the forest and it took a keen eye to spot one.

"Don't listen to him," I'd say. "I think the weight looks good on you. Here, have another bowl of potato chips."

Marriage meant a great deal to our neighbors, and we saw that as another good reason to avoid it. "Well, we finally got Kim married off." This was always said with such a sense of relief, you'd think the Kim in question was not a twenty-year-old girl but the last remaining puppy of an unwanted litter. Our mother couldn't make it to the grocery store and back without having to examine wallet-size photos of someone's dribbling, popeyed grandbaby.

"Now *that's* different," she'd say. "A living baby. All my grandchildren have been ground up for fertilizer or whatever it is they do with the aborted fetuses. It puts them under my feet but it keeps them out of my hair, which is just the way I like it. Here's your picture back. You tell that daughter of yours to keep up the good work."

Unlike our father, it pleased her that none of her children had reproduced. She used the fact as part of a routine she delivered on a regular basis. "Six children and none of them are married. I've taken the money we saved on the weddings and am using it to build my daughters a whorehouse."

After living with her boyfriend, Bob, for close to ten years, my sister Lisa nullified our contract when she agreed to marry him. Adding insult to injury, they decided the wedding would take place not at a drive-through chapel in Las Vegas, but on a mountaintop in western North Carolina.

"That's nice," my mother said. "Now all I need is a pair of navy blue hiking boots to match my new dress and I'll be all set."

The first time I met my future brother-in-law, he was visiting my parents' home and had his head deep in the oven. I walked into the kitchen and, mistaking him for one of my sisters, grabbed his plump, denim-clad bottom and proceeded to knead

it with both hands. He panicked, smacking his head against the oven's crusty ceiling. "Oh, golly," I said, "I'm sorry. I thought you were Lisa."

It was the truth, but for whatever reason, it failed to comfort him. At the time Bob was working as a gravedigger, a career choice that suggested a refreshing lack of ambition. These were not fresh graves, but old ones, slotted for relocation in order to make room for a new highway or shopping center. "How are you going to support my daughter on that?" my father asked.

"Oh, Lou," my mother said, "nobody's asking him to support anyone; they're just sleeping together. Let him be."

We liked Bob because he was both different and unapologetic. "You take a day-old pork chop, stab it with a fork, and soak it in some vinegar and you've got yourself some good eatin'," he'd say, fingering the feathery tip of his waist-length braid. Because of his upbringing and countless allergies, Bob's apartment was a testament to order and cleanliness. We figured that someone who carefully shampooed the lining of his work boots might briefly date our sister but would never go so far as to marry her. Lisa couldn't be trained to scoot the food scraps off her soiled sheets, much less shake out the blanket and actually make the bed. I underestimated both his will and his patience. They had lived together for close to three years when I dropped by unannounced and found my sister standing at the kitchen sink with a sponge in one hand and a plate in the other. She still hadn't realized the all-important role of detergent, but she was learning. Bob eventually cut his hair and returned to college, abandoning his shovel for a career in corporate real estate. He was a likable guy; it was the marrying part that got to me. "My sister's wedding" was right up there with "my recent colostomy" in terms of three-word phrases I hoped never to hear.

Three weeks before the wedding, my mother called to say she had cancer. She'd gone to the doctor complaining about a ringing in her ear, and the resulting tests revealed a substantial tumor in her lung. "They tell me it's the size of a lemon," she said. "Not a tiny fist or an egg, but a lemon. I think they describe it in terms of fruit so as not to scare you, but come on, who wants a lemon in their lung? They're hoping to catch it before it becomes a peach or a grapefruit, but who knows? I sure as hell don't. Twenty-odd tests and they still haven't figured out what's wrong with my ear. I'm just hoping that whatever it is, it isn't much larger than a grape. This cancer, though, I realize it's my own fault. I'm just sorry your father's still around to remind me of that fact every fifteen goddamned seconds."

My sister Amy was with me when my mother called. We passed the phone back and forth across my tiny New York kitchen and then spent the rest of the evening lying in bed, trying to convince each other that our mother would get better but never quite believing it. I'd heard of people who had survived cancer, but most of them claimed to get through it with the aid of whole grains and spiritual publications that encouraged them to sit quietly in a lotus position. They envisioned their tumors and tried to reason with them. Our mother was not the type to greet the dawn or cook with oats and barley. She didn't reason, she threatened; and if that didn't work, she chose to ignore the problem. We couldn't picture her joining a support group or trotting through the mall in a warm-up suit. Sixty-two years old and none of us had ever seen her in a pair of slacks. I'm not certain why, but it seemed to me that a person needed a pair of pants in order to defeat cancer. Just as important, they needed a plan. They needed to accept the idea of a new and different future, free of crowded

ashtrays and five-gallon jugs of wine and scotch. They needed to believe that such a life might be worth living. I didn't know that I'd be able to embrace such an unrewarding future, but I hoped that she could. My brother, sisters and I undertook a campaign to bolster her spirits and suggest new and exciting hobbies she might explore once she was cured and back on her feet.

"It'll be great," I said. "You could, I don't know, maybe you could learn to pilot small planes or volunteer to hold crack babies. There are a lot of things an older person can do with her time rather than smoke and drink."

"Please don't call me stoned on pot and tell me there are lots of things I can do with my life," she said. "I just got off the phone with your brother, who suggested I open up a petting zoo. If that's what being high does for a person, then what I really need to do is start smoking marijuana, which would be a bit difficult for me since the last time I saw my right lung it was lying in the bottom of a pan."

In truth, her lungs were right where they'd always been. The cancer was too far advanced and she was too weak to survive an operation. The doctor decided to send her home while he devised a plan. "The doctor has a plan!" my sisters and I crowded to one another.

"Right," my mother said. "He plans to golf on Saturday, sail on Sunday, and ask for my eyes, kidneys, and what's left of my liver on the following Monday. That's his plan."

We viewed it as a bad sign when she cancelled her subscription to *People* magazine and took to buying her cigarettes in packs rather than cartons. She went through her jewelry box, calling my sisters to ask if they preferred pearls or gems. "Right now, the rubies are in a brooch shaped like a candy cane, but you can probably get more money if you have them removed and just sell the stones." In her own way she had already begun to check out, giving up on the plan before it was even announced. *But what about us?* I wanted to say. *Aren't we reason enough to carry on?* I thought of the unrelenting grief we had caused her over the years and answered the question myself. It was her hope to die before one of us landed in jail.

"What's Amy planning on wearing to this little Pepsi commercial," my mother asked, referring to the mountaintop ceremony. "Tell me it's not that wedding dress, please."

Lisa had decided to be married in a simple cream-colored suit, the sort of thing one might wear to work on the day of their employee evaluation. Figuring that at least somebody ought to look the part, Amy had the idea to attend the ceremony dressed in a floor-length wedding gown, complete with veil and train. In the end, she would up wearing something my mother hated even more, a pink cocktail dress outfitted with detachable leg-o'-mutton sleeves. It wasn't like her to care what anyone wore, but she used the topic to divert attention from what we came to refer to as her "situation." If she'd had it her way, we would never have known about the cancer. It was our father's idea to tell us, and she had fought it, agreeing only when he threatened to tell us himself. Our mother worried that once we found out, we would treat her differently, delicately. We might feel obliged to compliment her cooking and laugh at all her jokes, thinking always of the tumor she was trying so hard to forget. And that is exactly what we did. The knowledge of her illness forced everything into the spotlight and demanded that it be memorable. We were no longer calling our mother. Now we were picking up the phone to call our mother with cancer. Bad day at work? All you had to do was say, "I'm sorry I forgot to vacuum

beneath the cushions of your very lovely, very expensive Empire sofa, Mrs. Walman. I know how much it means to you. I guess I should be thinking of more important things than my mother's inoperable cancer."

We weren't the ones who were sick, but still, the temptation was so great. Here we could get the sympathy without enduring any of the symptoms. And we deserved sympathy, didn't we?

Speaking to our mother, we realized that any conversation might be our last, and because of that, we wanted to say something important. What could one say that hadn't already been printed on millions of greeting cards and helium balloons?

"I love you," I said at the end of one of our late-night phone calls.

"I am going to pretend I didn't hear that," she said. I heard a match strike in the background, the tinkling of ice cubes in a raised glass. And then she hung up. I had never said such a thing to my mother, and if I had it to do over again, I would probably take it back. Nobody ever spoke that way except Lisa. It was queer to say such a thing to someone unless you were trying to talk them out of money or into bed, our mother had taught us that when we were no taller than pony kegs. I had known people who said such things to their parents, "I love you," but it always translated to mean "I'd love to get off the phone with you."

We gathered together for the wedding, which took place on a clear, crisp October afternoon. The ceremony was held upon a grassy precipice that afforded magnificent views of the surrounding peaks, their trees resplendent in the fiery red and orange. It was easy to imagine that we were it, the last remaining people on the face of the earth. The others had been wiped out by disease and famine, and we had been chosen to fashion a new and better world. It was a pleasant thought until I pictured us foraging for berries and having to bathe in ice-cold streams. Bob's family, hearty and robust, could probably pull it off, but the rest of us would wither and die shortly after we'd run out of shampoo.

My father wept openly during the ceremony. The rest of us studied his crumpled face and fought hard not to follow in his example. What was this emotion? My sister was getting married to a kind and thoughtful man who had seen her through a great many hardships. Together they shared a deep commitment to Mexican food and were responsible card-carrying members of the North American Caged Bird Society. The tacos and parrots were strictly between Lisa and Bob, but the rest of her belonged to us. Standing in a semicircle on top of the mountain, it became clear that while Lisa might take on a different last name, she could never escape the pull of our family. Marriage wouldn't let her off the hook, even if she wanted it to. She could move to Antarctica, setting up house in an underground bunker, but still we would track her down. It was senseless to run. Ignore our letters and phone calls, and we would invade your dreams. I'd spent so many years thinking marriage was the enemy that when the true danger entered our lives, I was caught completely off guard. The ceremony inspired a sense of loss directed not at Lisa, but at our mother.

"No booze?" she moaned. My mother staggered toward the buffet table, it's retractable legs trembling beneath the weight of sparkling waters, sausage biscuits, and decaffeinated coffee.

"No booze," Lisa had announced a week before the ceremony. "Bob and I have decided we don't want that kind of a wedding."

“Which kind?” my mother asked. “The happy kind? You and Bob might be thrilled to death, but the rest of us will need some help working up the proper spirit.”

She didn’t look much different than she had the last time I’d seen her. The chemotherapy had just begun, and she’d lost – at most – maybe five pounds. A casual acquaintance might not have noticed any change at all. We did only because we knew, everyone on that mountaintop knew, that she had cancer. That she was going to die. The ceremony was relatively small, attended by both families and an assortment of Lisa’s friends, most of whom we had never met but could easily identify. These were the guests who never once complained about the absence of alcohol.

“I just want you to know that Colleen and I love your sister Lisa so much,” the woman said, her eyes moist with tears. “I know we’ve never been formally introduced, but would you mind if I gave you a big fat hug?”

With the exception of Lisa, we were not a hugging people. In terms of emotional comfort, it was our belief that no amount of physical contact could match the healing powers of a well-made cocktail.

“Hey, wait a minute. Where’s *my* hug?” Colleen asked, rolling up her sleeves and moving in for the kill. I looked over my attacker’s shoulder and watched as a woman in a floor-length corduroy skirt wrestled my mother into an affectionate headlock.

“I heard what you’re going through and I know that you’re frightened,” the woman said, looking down at the head of thinning gray hair she held clasped between her powerful arms. “You’re frightened because you think you’re alone.”

“I’m frightened,” my mother wheezed, “because I’m *not* alone and because you’re crushing what’s left of my goddamned lungs.”

The scariest thing about these people was that they were sober. You could excuse that kind of behavior from someone tanked up on booze, but most of them hadn’t taken a drink since the Carter administration. I took my mother’s arm and led her to a bench beyond the range of the other guests. The thin mountain air made it difficult for her to breathe, and she moved slowly, pausing every few moments. The families had taken a walk to a nearby glen, and we sat in the shade, eating sausage biscuits and speaking to each other like well-mannered strangers.

“The sausage is good,” she said. “It’s flavorful but not too greasy.”

“Not greasy at all. Still, though, it isn’t dry.”

“Neither are the biscuits,” she said. “They’re flaky but not too flaky.”

“Not too flaky at all,” she said.

We watched the path, awkwardly waiting for someone to release us from the torture of our stiff and meaningless conversation. I’d always been afraid of sick people, and so had my mother. It wasn’t that we feared catching their brain aneurysm or accidentally ripping out their IV. I think it was their fortitude that frightened us. Sick people reminded us not of what we had, but of what we lacked. Everything we said sounded petty and insignificant; our complaints paled in the face of theirs, and without our complaints, there was nothing to say. My mother and I had been fine over the telephone, but now, face to face, the rules had changed. If she were to complain, she risked being seen as a sick complainer, the worst kind of all. If I were to do it, I might come off sounding even more selfish than I actually was. This sudden turn of events had robbed us of our common language, leaving us to exchange the same innocuous pleasantries we’d always made fun of. I wanted to stop it and so, I think, did she, but neither of us knew how.

After all the gifts had been opened, we returned to our rooms at the Econolodge, the reservations having been made by my father. We looked out the windows, past the freeway and into the distance, squinting at the charming hotel huddled at the base of other, finer mountains. This would be the last time our family was all together. It's so rare when one knowingly does something for the last time: the last time you take a bath, the last time you have sex or trim your toenails. If you know you'll never do it again, it might be nice to make a show of it. This would be it as far as my family was concerned, and it ticked me off that our final meeting place would take place in such a sorry excuse for a hotel. My father had taken the liberty of ordering nonsmoking rooms, leaving the rest of us to rifle through the Dumpster in search of cans we might use as ashtrays.

"What more do you want out of a hotel?" he shouted, stepping onto the patio in his underpants. "It's clean, they've got a couple of snack machines in the lobby, the TVs work, and it's near the interstate. Who cares if you don't like the damned wallpaper? You know what your problem is, don't you?"

"We're spoiled," we shouted in unison.

We were not, however cheap. We would have gladly paid for something better. No one was asking for room service or a heated swimming pool, just for something with a little more character: maybe a motel with an Indian theme or one of the many secluded lodges that as a courtesy posted instructions on how to behave should a bear interrupt your picnic. Traveling with our father meant always having to stay at nationally known motor lodges and take our meals only in fast-food restaurants. "What?" he'd ask. "Are you telling me you'd rather sit down at a table and order food you've never tasted before?"

Well, yes, that was exactly what we wanted. Other people did it all the time, and most of them had lived to talk about it.

"Bullshit," he'd shout. "That's not what you want." When arguing, it was always his tactic to deny the validity of our request. If you wanted, say, a stack of pancakes, he would tell you not that you couldn't have them but that you never really wanted them in the first place. "I know what I want" was always met with "No you don't."

My mother never shared his enthusiasm for corporate culture, and as a result, they had long since decided to take separate vacations. She usually traveled with her sister, returning from Santa Fe or Martha's Vineyard with a deep tan, while my father tended to fish or golf with friends we had never met.

The night before the wedding, we had gone to a charming lodge and eaten dinner with Bob's parents. The dining room had the feel of someone's home. Upon the walls hung pictures of deceased relatives, and the mantel supported aged trophies and a procession of hand-carved decoys. The night of the wedding, Lisa and Bob having left for their honeymoon, we were left on our own. My sisters, stuffed with sausage, chose to remain in their rooms, so I went with my parents and brother to a chain restaurant located on a brightly lit strip of highway near the outskirts of town. Along the way we passed dozens of more attractive options: steak houses boasting firelit dining rooms and clapboard cottages lit with discreet signs reading HOME COOKING and NONE BETTER!

"What about that place?" my brother said. "I've never tasted squirrel before. Hey, that sounds nice."

“Ha!” my father said. “You won’t think it’s so nice at three A.M. when you’re hunched over the john, crapping out the lining of your stomach.”

We couldn’t go to any of the curious places, because they might not have a sneeze guard over the salad bar. They might not have clean restrooms or a properly anesthetized staff. A person couldn’t take chances with a thing like that. My mother had always been willing to try anything. Had there been an Eskimo restaurant, she would have been happy to crawl into the igloo and eat raw seal with her bare hands, but my father was driving, which meant it was his decision. Having arrived at the restaurant of his choice, he lowered his glasses to examine the menu board. “What can you tell me about the boneless Pick O’ the Chix combination platter?” he asked the counter girl, a Cherokee teenager wearing a burnt orange synthetic jumper.

“Well, sir, there isn’t much *to* say except that it doesn’t got any bones and comes with fries and a half-gallon ‘Thirsty Man’s’ soda.”

My father shouted as if her dusky complexion had somehow affected her hearing. “But the chicken itself, how is it prepared?”

“I put it on a tray,” the girl said.

“Oh, I see,” my father said. “That explains it all. Golly, you’re a bright one, aren’t you? IQ just zooming right off the charts. You put it on a tray, do you? I guess that means the chicken is in no position put itself on the tray, which tells me that it’s probably been killed in some fashion. Am I correct? All right, now we’re getting somewhere.” This continued until the girl was in tears and we returned empty-handed to the car, my father muttering, “Jesus, did you hear that? She could probably tell you everything you needed to know about trapping a possum, but when it comes to chicken, she ‘puts it on a tray’.”

Under normal circumstances my mother would have worked overtime to protect the waitress or counter help, but tonight she was simply too tired. She wanted to go somewhere that served drinks. “The Italian place, let’s go there.”

My brother backed her up, and a short time later we found ourselves seated in a dimly lit restaurant, my father looking up at the waitress to shout, “*Rare*, do you know what that means? It means I want my steak the color of your gums.”

“Oh, Lou, give it a rest.” My mother filled her wine glass and lit a cigarette.

“What are you doing?” He followed his question with an answer. “You’re killing yourself is what you’re doing.”

My mother lifted her glass in salute. “You got that right, baby.”

“I don’t believe this. You might as well just put a gun to your head. No, I take that back, you can’t blow your brains out because you haven’t got any.”

“You should have known that when I agreed to marry you,” she said.

“Sharon, you haven’t got a clue.” He shook his head in disgust. “You open your mouth and the crap just flies.”

My mother had stopped listening years ago, but it was almost a comfort that my father insisted on business as usual, despite the circumstances. In him, she had found someone whose behavior would never vary. He had made a commitment to make her life miserable, and no amount of sickness or bad fortune would sway him from that task. My last meal with my parents would be no different than the first. Had we been at home, my mother would have fed him at seven and then waited until ten or eleven, at which time she and I would broil steaks. We would have put away

several drinks by then, and if by chance the steaks were overcooked, she would throw them to the dog and start all over again. Before moving to New York, I had spent two months in Raleigh, painting one of my father's rental units near the university, and during that time our schedule never varied. Sometimes we'd eat in front of the television, and other nights we would set a place for ourselves at the table. I try recalling a single one of those evenings, wanting to take comfort in the details, but they are lost to me. Even my diary tells me nothing: "Ate steaks with Mom." But which steaks, porterhouse or New York strip? What had we talked about and why hadn't I paid attention?

We returned to the motor lodge, where my parents retired to their room and the rest of us hiked to a nearby cemetery, a once ideal spot that now afforded an excellent view of the newly built Pizza Hut. Over the years our mother had repeatedly voiced her desire to be cremated. We would drive past a small forest fire or observe the pillars of smoke rising from a neighbor's chimney, and she would crush her cigarette, saying, "That's what I want, right there. Do whatever you like with the remains; sprinkle them into ashtrays of a fine hotel, give them to smart-assed children for Christmas, hand them over to the Catholics to rub into their foreheads, just make sure I'm cremated."

"Oh, Sharon," my father would groan. "You don't know what you want." He'd say it as though he himself had been cremated several times in the past but had finally wised up and accepted burial as the only sensible option.

We laid our Econolodge bedspreads over the dewy grass of the cemetery, smoking joints and trying to imagine a life without our mother. If there was a heaven, we probably shouldn't expect to find her there. Neither did she deserve to roam the fiery tar pits of hell, surrounded for all eternity by the same shitheads who brought us strip malls and theme restaurants. There must exist some middle ground, a place where one was tortured on a daily basis but still allowed a few moments of pleasure, taken wherever one could find it. That place seemed to be Raleigh, North Carolina, so why the big fuss? Why couldn't she just stay where she was and not have cancer? That was always our solution, to go back in time. We discussed it the way others spoke of bone marrow transplants and radiation. We discussed it as though it were viable option. A time machine, that would solve everything. I could almost see its panel of blinking lights, the control board marked with etched renderings of lumbering dinosaurs and ending with Lisa's wedding. We could turn it back and view our mother as a young girl, befriend her then, before her father's drinking turned her wary and suspicious. See her working in the greeting-card section of the drugstore and warn her not to drop out of school. Her lack of education would make her vulnerable, causing her to overuse the phrase "Well, what do I know" or "I'm just an idiot, but..." We could turn it back and see ourselves as babies, our mother stuck out in the country with no driver's license, wondering whom to call should someone swallow another quarter or safety pin. The dial was our, and she would be at our mercy, just as she had always been, only this time we would pay attention and keep her safe. Ever since arriving at the motor lodge, we'd gone back and forth from one room to another, holding secret meetings and exchanging private bits of information. We hoped that by preparing ourselves for the worst, we might be able to endure the inevitable with some degree of courage or grace.

Anything we forecasted was puny compared to the future that awaited us. You can't brace yourself for famine if you've never known hunger; it is foolish even to

try. The most you can do is eat up while you still can, stuffing yourself, shoveling it in with both hands and licking clean the plates, recalling every course in vivid detail. Our mother was back in her room and very much alive, probably watching a detective program on television. Maybe that was her light in the window, her figure stepping onto the patio to light a cigarette. We told ourselves she probably wanted to be left alone, that's how stoned we were. We'd think of this later, each in our own separate way. I myself tend to dwell on the stupidity of pacing a cemetery while she sat, frightened and alone, staring at the tip of her cigarette and envisioning her self, clearly now, in ashes.

(Sedaris, Naked 234 – 250)

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