

SCOTT BUTTERFIELD

AUTOBIOGRAPHOBIA

I have long known I am a misanthrope. That's why I'm such a good P.O. Let me come back to this.

Why are we so good-looking? Because of all the animals, we're the only ones that say so.

My sister, after proclaiming her love for me, accused me of my love for her. She had pinned me against the fridge with a monster hug. I couldn't move my arms. Over and over she thanked me for sending the money and how this meant I really loved her, after everything we've ever been through, to do something like that, she was floored, just floored. And she really loved me. It was strange and quiet, like the aftermath of a siren in the night. I said I needed a cigarette, worming my way out of her grip. She was ready to cry. I had never, ever, in forty-one years seen so much as a watering in those eyes. I wanted a hatchet to scalp her. I am letting this be expressed. Outside was overcast, drained of all color. As I lit up my second cig with the butt of a dying one, a squirrel gathered leaves in its mouth and scampered up a tree, and wave after wave of sickening panic broke in me then and long after I left the house. Two weeks paid vacation requested, granted.

14

Evolutionarily speaking, we are way overdue for a worldwide pandemic. Spanish Flu n to the x power. Blow a kiss good-bye to Infrastructure. The boy comes to college in a bubble, or not at all. We may just hit that goal of 500,000,000 people. Left alive. The funny thing is that the move seems worthy of excitement.

If God lived on my block, I'm sure the house would be huge. All redbrick with three chimneys, and lots of windows to let the light in. Six-foot-tall golden spikes would enclose the yard, true-greened even in drought. Nobody else would live in God's house. He's going to heat up his own chicken noodle soup and prepare his own fruit salad. He's not going to welcome the poor couple in the small apartment, the old woman who works at the cash register, the young bricklayer, the lame boy with the funny legs that curve in,

the dabbler, the cheat. And the blind man, yes, everyone knows his name. God's swimming pool would be clean. God's yard would be clean as his silence. The people will yell and claw and plead at the gates. They will turn to each other and ask, "Why can't we get in?" And soon, all bad habits will be confessed between them, the laziness and selfishness admitted, and how horrible they've become, how horrible, how horrible, but the gates don't budge, and no shadows pass by the windows, and they despair, disperse with broken necks as the night rolls in, feet sore from standing, hands sore from pounding, if God lived on my block.

The most important thing I do is find some time in the morning and smoke a cigarette and prepare myself for the merciless onslaught of everyday life.

If you pledge, out loud or in your own head, to love something, you are condemning yourself to a life of chronic pain. This is easy to imagine if you take the time. Just close your eyes and blank your mind as thoroughly as you can. Then call up in the most vivid, sensual, and emotional detail whatever you deeply love: a child, a dog, your camera. Hold this and feel it. Just hold it. Now destroy what you deeply love. Destroy what you love in the most expedient way possible, destroy, destroy. After, what is left? Repeated punches to your gut. A hot iron in your head. You will want to throw yourself off the overpass to stop the ache, the burning. Self-torture is psychotic. Everybody in this room is going to die.

15

My sister does not remember my first memory. We were together, alone, outside at night, on the back porch, and it was cold. Frozen snot cold. My shoulder cold. I was three or four. She had me in her arms, rocking me, patting me gently on the back. She said, "Are you feeling better? Are you cooling down?" My hood was drawn and pulled tight, scrunching my face like a sponge. She slid a gloveless hand up under my coat and shirt and felt my chest. "You're still burning up," she said. And really, it's the cold that I remember.

I monitor the conduct and behavior of criminal offenders on probation and parole. The most essential skills for this vocation are: reading well, speaking well, thinking well, perceiving well. I learn of the offender's upbringing, education, addictions, criminal history, cognitive abilities, personality, what they like to do in their free time. The ideal is to establish rapport with the

offender, to explain procedure and bolster autonomy and self-confidence if emotionally unstable, defensive, or fearful. This is the *ideal*. Practically speaking, as long as I don't make friends with a pig before it's killed, I have no qualms about eating it. I select their rehabilitation programs. I consider the severity of their breaches. I determine the risks they pose to themselves and the community. I am the Revoker.

Even though I was in my twenties when it came out, I deeply enjoyed Calvin from *Calvin and Hobbes*. He was an anomaly in popular entertainment. He has no friends, no extracurricular activities. His baseball tryout was a humiliating bust. School is a circus with a hostile audience. Home is slightly better. He has a strained relationship with his parents, at best (although he has flooded the bathtub), and Moe, Susie, Rosalyn, Miss Wormwood, they all detest him. He loves sledding and dinosaurs. His most real, true, and important interactions exist only in his head. He is, essentially and emotionally, completely alone. And he's fine with that.

16 The eyes of a mother who tossed her six-month-old in the back of a Ford Explorer to avoid repossession, screaming to the men, "You can't take my baby. You can't take my baby." Near dawn, stepping into a house that smells like cat piss (and there's no cat) to breathalyze a man, a three-time drunk-driving man, whose last arrest came when his truck blocked both lanes of traffic and he was on the side of the road attempting to resuscitate a dead opossum. And there was that teenage boy who broke into a pigeon sanctuary one night just for fun, but then ripped the heads off of all twenty-four birds inside because "one of them pecked at me."

Cigarette number one was at eleven. I snuck it from Shelly Salloman's backpack at lunchtime. My sister caught me later that night in my room, and it blew her mind like a shotgun would a chipmunk. She bought a pack of Parliament Lights (still my brand) and put Tabasco sauce on the filter of each one and made me smoke until I puked. I tried to fight back, but she was a shortstop on the high-school fast-pitch team. I was coughing blades for a week. Mom and Dad asked, but nobody said nothing. "I just got sick" was the excuse. When they weren't around, my sister would cross her arms and smirk like a donkey. Sometimes she would say, "I did you a favor. You'll thank me." Never a half-assed apology, no letting me in on the joke.

Here's an example of how I used to operate: Darren E. Rollyns is on his way into my office for his monthly check-in. Last time we met, I asked him to give me a urine sample. It came up clean. So I scanned the test results into my computer and changed the numbers, then printed off a new page. His urine is now THC positive. I am going give him these results and see how he reacts. Because I am certain he is using. I tested him the first ten times we met. He was always clean. Then I let him go for five months and tested again. Clean. But I knew from the way he talked to me. And I have seen where he lives: in a seven-bedroom college house with roommates who are *never* there when we schedule a home visit, even in the early morning, and the house is always immaculately clean and fresh, like a lot of Febreze was sprayed over everything and the windows were left open for a day. If I could only hook him up to a lie detector and watch the needles when I ask him, "Have you been staying clean?" Darren's reaction to the fake test results would be telling. This certainty doesn't happen often. I read of a world-class neurosurgeon. He had a hundred percent success rate. He was flown all over the world to operate on heads of state and business leaders. Then the neurosurgeon began to develop crippling migraines. No physiological source was found. He went into psychotherapy. The therapist got him to confess something he'd never confessed before, from fear of being a laughingstock and destroying his reputation. What happens, he told her, is that as soon as he learns that someone needs surgery, he gets himself to the patient's bedside. He sits alone and looks at the patient's head, sometimes for thirty seconds, sometimes for hours at a stretch. He waits. He waits for a distinctive white light to appear around the patient's head. When it appears, he knows he can go ahead with the surgery and the patient will survive. I don't see any light, but you get the picture.

17

It was apparent when I was young. Everybody, every single person, straining to put on any face but fear while driving automobiles in gridlock, sleepwalking to the fridge, having too many babies, resentment *everywhere*, just doing everything in the worst possible way, like voting for the presidential candidate that gets them the most excited, and how the truly dark rooms of their lives were the most lived in. It was a giant fucking shit-show. Drugs and Capitalism are boring. Most Music is indifferent to me. I wasn't the biggest fan of Nature. I did like that mock trial in tenth grade, where I played the prosecutor. I guess I could trace the vocational steps, B.S. Sociology, Intern

State Gov't, assistant to a bounty hunter, etc. etc., but really I couldn't say why I am a P.O. It's true: I'm modestly content at my job, which is something I hadn't expected in life. I think the answer lies somewhere in the fact that a fan of the Dallas Cowboys became a fan of the Dallas Cowboys because either

- a) They grew up in Texas
- b) They have fond memories of family and friends watching the Dallas Cowboys
- c) They are from another state and rebel against parental and cultural authority by choosing the Dallas Cowboys
- d) They idolize an athlete who happens to play for the Dallas Cowboys
- e) They innately respond to a lone star, the body of a horse, lawless towns, that ridiculous frontier.

Recently my sister asked me to send money somewhere. We were in her living room. I had to shut off the TV.

"What? To who?"

18 "You know that guy Richard I've been talking to, from the dating website?"

"Singles over Fifty? Still?"

"He needs me to send him money."

"Didn't you tell me that he had his *own* money?"

"Yes."

I kept blinking at her. "How much do you need me to send?"

"I can't tell you that."

"You can't tell me that."

"Not unless you agree to send it."

"Where?"

She took a deep breath. "To Africa."

I flipped. "Where the fuck in Africa?"

"Ghana. Accra. It's the capital."

"How much?"

"I can't tell you that."

It terrified me how calm she was. "What's he need the money for?"

"Will you send it?"

"Have you given him money before?"

"Please just send it."

“Tell me how much.”

“If you send it.”

This went on for an hour or so.

In the eighth grade, I was called down to the office after they read my Statue of Liberty essay for Memorial Day. I wrote it from the point of view of the Statue. The principal, Mr. Mayer, who kept an eye on me after this, and my teacher, Miss Stone, who stayed away after this, threatened to suspend me for two days and make it public. They knew I was a smart student. Why would I write something like this? The Statue is fed up with welcoming all these ragged, poor, and diseased people onto her shores; things just seem to get worse. Her skin is dry. Her arm is tired from holding up the light. There are more storms. One day she looks out onto her land and sees it simply, totally overrun. Enraged and saddened, she rips the crown from her head and breaks the tablets over her pedestal. And then the rampaging begins. She lays waste to major cities, torches the fields, trashes the lakes and rivers, and squashes the guts out of the crowds in her way. Bombs and guns are useless. Her green armor is indestructible. And when she's cut a path to the Pacific and looks back over her groaning, charred, and shattered land, she stands tall and puts her hand over her heart and says, “I pledge allegiance to Myself, and the United States of my Being, and to my Purpose for which I strive, one Statue, by herself, unrepentantly, with pity and charity from none.”

19

Somehow I ran out of olive oil to grease the pan with. The cookie dough sat in the bowl like a neglected pet. I turned the oven off. The small corner grocery store was open past midnight, but they only had the most generic kind of canola oil, and it was marked up. A Korean-looking couple in front of me in the checkout line argued in a language that seemed brutally choked from the throat. The cashier, a lanky blonde woman, looked at the ceiling. On all sides were a million little voices screaming. But it was the cougar behind me, clad in purple and black, half-drunk with box of white wine under her arm, yapping away on a cell phone about firing her personal trainer because she demanded, like, constant perfection, a dangling carrot in front of the treadmill, but when she came into the gym today, the trainer was, like, lying on a sofa eating yogurt-covered pretzels, and she didn't seem like a dangling carrot anymore.

Perhaps I should tell you about Darren E. Rollyns. He's 5' 10", 149 pounds, black hair, brown eyes, African-American, born 6-28-89, a junior at the University of Wisconsin–Madison majoring in computer science. Last fall he was busted in his friend's Cadillac Eldorado with a quarter-ounce of marijuana. His friend took full responsibility for the three pounds in the trunk. It was Darren's second offense in two years. But he had a good lawyer and posted bail. He was sentenced to two years probation and a ten-thousand-dollar fine (deferred until graduation), with the stipulation that he stay clean and attend to his studies. If he violated the terms of probation or was arrested for strike three, he faced twelve months in jail and a twenty-thousand-dollar fine. Not nearly a severe enough deterrent, if you ask me.

20

June would seem a good month for an outdoor wedding, but a wicked rainstorm forced everyone inside the park shelter. The vows were quick and people started drinking. Hal, my sister's new husband, came up after the ceremony with a piece of black-and-white cake on a red paper plate. "Nice to finally meet you," he said, shoving the cake into one of my hands and shaking the other. His grip was tight and his hands powdery. "Mmm-hmm," I said, setting down the plate on the nearest table. I lit a cigarette. There was a long silence in which we both watched the lightning out the window and I exhaled circle after circle of smoke. He started to say something about the weather, but I excused myself to the bathroom. When I returned, he was on the dance floor with a bridesmaid while my sister was talking to a table of her friends. There was a loud crack of thunder, so close, and nervous laughter filled the little shelter. Glasses went up for a toast. The couple kissed. Cheers and cheers. My sister never wanted kids. Hal took business trips to Las Vegas. Twelve years later he left my sister and moved to Chicago to set up his own fish tank cleaning business. Eons passed before she could throw away a picture magnet on the fridge of them cheek-to-cheek and soaked from the rain. All she said to me that day was, "Here, tie these balloons to something so they don't float away."

The game has two players. Player One can choose one of four strategies: to cooperate (which comes with a small cost), to dissent, to cooperate *unless* he knows he can dissent *without* being punished, and to dissent *unless* he knows that Player Two rewards cooperation or punishes dissention. The last two strategies are *opportunistic*, meaning players use them to take advan-

tage of a *possible* incentive. Player Two responds to Player One with one of four strategies: no incentive, only punishment, only reward, both punishment and reward. In any interaction between two random players, a wide variety of strategic dynamics occur; however, there is one pair of strategies that tends to be the ultimate evolutionary outcome: when Player One uses opportunistic cooperation (i.e., he cooperates *unless* he knows he can dissent *without* being punished), then Player Two will use only punishment. Neither player can benefit by changing his strategy if the other keeps his unchanged. The time it takes to reach this outcome is greatly reduced if Player Two has a strategy that involves rewards, which entices Player One to cooperate. In other words, the Model accurately represents the two-step incentive strategy to which all human populations tend to evolve: step one is rewarding, and step two—the more lasting step—is punishment.

Darren enters my office and takes off his hat, a flat-brimmed Boston Red Sox hat that was tilted up and to the right. He wears white gym shorts and a green shirt with the image of a city in computer code. He sits, not keeping still, elbows on knees, elbows on chair, elbows on knees. I adjust my chair two notches higher so I won't slouch.

"How are you doing?" I say.

"Good," he says.

"How is school going?"

"It's fine. I just passed my exam in English."

"Are you still on track to graduate next year?"

"Yeah. After this semester, I've got nothing but classes in my major."

"And are you looking for jobs during the summer?"

"Yeah. I got this friend who works at a bank in Madison, and he might be able to hook me up with some kind of job in electronic security."

I nod and smile. He leans back in his chair. "And are you staying clean, Darren?"

He does what he always does: folds his hands in his lap and looks down at the carpet. "Yes. Yes, I am." And *then* he looks back up at me.

"Are you telling me the truth, Darren?"

I can hear him swallow. "Yeah. I'm clean." He crosses one leg over the other, his hands still on his lap, and gives me a poker face. He shrugs. "I'm clean."

I smile, probably too big, and take out the test results. This is going to be beautiful.

My father worked at a foundry, casting parts for conveyer belts. His hair was always greasy, but his teeth were white when he smiled, which was only sometimes because smiling is hard, often a pointless and unnecessary social convention, and he was always too tired. How he stuck the peas on his fork and moved from his chair to his bed. He didn't smoke or drink or hunt. My mother was a nurse, oncology. I didn't understand that. She was a smart person, but her hands were too big. And though she loved to clean our cuts, she didn't like hugging us very much. Something with her great-grandpa when she was young. My sister told me a ghost story to put me to bed. I've forgotten the details. A family of bad cooks. Always traces of peanut butter in the jelly jar.

22

Duchamp was detached. How else could he turn himself into a Rose? Pessoa split himself in seventy-two. The Vonnegut who said, "Every human is an unwavering band of light" is different from the Vonnegut who said, "The Earth's immune system is trying to get rid of us, as it should." Søren wrote whole pages where not a single word was his. Why do people like Lady Gaga? Because that's who she really is. I am a generous cannibal. By all means, sample me.

Sending the money turned out to be a bitch and a half. I drove to my sister's house for the cash, and she told me to go to the Western Union at Kmart on 60th Street. Surprise, surprise, the service was temporarily down. An old lady, ghost-pale and slow, whose nametag read "Ester— One Year of Service!", gave me directions to a nearby tobacco shop, more with her hands than her voice. My sister's neighborhood wasn't familiar to me. I got lost for a bit. The tobacco shop was on a main street, and you had to pay for parking. Seventeen minutes for a quarter. I threw in fifty cents. This part of my sister's neighborhood isn't all that safe for me because I dress business casual, am white, and was carrying one thousand eighty-nine dollars cash (extra for the wiring fee). I tried to hide my panic by putting on a mean face. Yes, motherfucker, I have an errand to run. The shop was empty, but it took the two Indian men behind the glass partition a while to figure out exactly how to help me. I was speaking through my teeth, and they looked annoyed. I had

to wait thirty-three minutes for the phone call that authorized the transfer. Meantime, I smoked five cigarettes, asked myself why the hell I was doing something I would never do, and watched two black boys with baggy jeans and basketball jerseys buy a bong. They stared at me like I was an assistant principal. And the parking ticket. Twenty bucks.

Racine, Wisconsin, population 79,592. Side roads and main lines are forever being torn up and repaired. The lakeshore smells of sweet sewage sometimes. My two-bedroom house is on the far west side, and I sleep well because a workaholic power couple and two short, sixty-something women live on either side of me. There are never strange cars in the driveways. I have a backyard, then a fence, then a public park. There was a long-haired boy alone on a seesaw. He seemed genuinely interested in the rocks underneath him, turning them over and kicking them with his feet. Sometimes he would choose a special one for his hands and hold it to the sun. This is what he was doing when a skinny kid ran up to him, eager and game for whatever. With only a few blurry words and without even waiting for a sign, the skinny kid mounted the seesaw. The long-haired boy threw his rock away and muttered to himself like an old man interrupted from his drink. After a while, neither looked like they were having any fun.

23

The earth may break this year. The earth may go on. Either way, the parachute isn't opening. The little tests of life—returning library books, eating breakfast, getting gasoline—are very hard to ace.

I hold out the paper. Darren grabs it from my hand. "This is impossible," he says, shaking his head back and forth. "I haven't been smoking."

"Then why did you fail the test? You tested positive. It's right there."

"But I haven't been smoking." His voice is rising. He notices and draws his shoulders in. Softer this time. "I've been staying clean." He perks up. "Test me now. I'll take a test now."

I sigh, short and loud. "That will only prove you may be clean *now*," and I indicate the sheet in his hands, "but you weren't clean *then*."

"I haven't been smoking."

"Then how did it come up positive? Did the technicians alter your sample? Did I alter your sample?"

“No,” he says quickly, tapping his foot on the floor. He takes a deep breath and can’t take his eyes off the paper. The signs of panic are easy to spot. A very strong silence builds up in the room. He slowly hunches forward in the chair, looking into his hat. I speak low, as evenly and as accusingly as I can.

“Did you think you could use one of those cleansing tonics they sell at smoke shops? Did you think you could take pills and drink gallons of water? Did you think that I wasn’t going to test you anymore?”

He opens his mouth to speak. I do not blink. *And then he closes his mouth and looks back down to the floor.* And this is it. This is his confession. That is plain to see. “I’m going to recommend that your probation be revoked. Unless”—and I take a calculated breath—“you have anything to say for yourself.” I can hear the blood flowing in my head.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

For a few seconds, he remains focused on the floor, and I can see the deep concentration in his eyes, and it’s like he’s having a vision, the space before him a crystal ball where his future is played out in curling smoke—handcuffs, an orange jumpsuit, a number, the bus, the bars, the metal toilet, cellmate, boredom, boredom, boredom, fear, fear, fear, visiting time, shame, the release to a larger prison, where every job application will be *permanently* stained. He tilts his head toward me ever so slightly. He doesn’t rush me hard like Antonio Gonzalez last week when I revoked his ass for battery. And he doesn’t try to intimidate me like Bradley Holtz, the frat-house treasurer who got caught with cocaine. I don’t care if your dad is a judge. And he doesn’t cry or beg like the girl who keeps getting busted for meth and blaming it on her meth-head boyfriend. No. Instead, Darren E. Rollyns just looks at me with a kind of bitter understanding, as if he now knows that this world, the only world there is, puts absolutely no value on his life, that it does not—for one single second—give a fuck about him, that it is in fact openly hostile and indifferent to him, and that he cannot change or control this, *it is beyond him*, and he does not see me in my eyes, he sees the face of this faceless Power, unappeasable, unappealable, and then, for the last time, Darren E. Rollyns looks back down to the floor. A strong feeling of kinship rushes over me. I want to shake his hand. I want to reassure him that everything was worth it, that he will be rewarded at the right time, that he will be praised, because he has experienced what only a lucky few humans ever experience: the loss of all hope. But I control myself. I clear my throat and arch my back in the chair. I stand and walk to my filing cabinet, removing a plastic bag and plastic

cup. "I suppose I could give you a chance," and I write the date on a sticker and affix it to the bag. "If you piss clean today, you will be considered clean." Darren E. Rollyns does not speak. He gives back the paper and takes the cup as if in dream. Less than a minute later, I have clear, warm, light-yellow urine. When he leaves, I crumple up the fake test, but the sound of the paper collapsing in my hands gives a deep chill and panic to my heart, as if I tripped a wire, and the walls, spiked and sharp, are now closing in on me, and in a fumbling run I burst out of my office into the humid May sun, away from the people milling around the entrance, toward my car, where I can stand alone and pound a new pack of smokes against my palm.

I was somewhat close to marriage twice. This was in my thirties. Heather Lisando and Sophie Caverstein the potential brides. It was insane. I wasn't totally averse to relationships, if I could control them. Sometimes my control got the best of me, and some women are just emotional sadomasochists. And they don't use safety words. With each girl, my sister told me to marry, get it over with, settle, people never really find the perfect one, the words coming out of her mouth like an army of butterflies. There was nothing I could do but radically end things. Regret? Regret is for the terminally ill and returning soldiers. I wanted Heather and Sophie to become like the millions of other moments in my life I couldn't remember. For a while they were. Last time I checked, Sophie was a Reiki Master in a thriving commune near Seattle, and Heather was an advertising consultant living in Morocco. My sister is still talking to Richard. He bought a plane ticket with the money and is supposed to come back to the U.S. by the end of the month. His home base is St. Louis. I don't know what he does. My sister wants to drive down and see him. There are times when I feel I've dodged bullets or picked up a stray limb, that I've been sick so long the sickness is not something I have but something I am. Racine is Wisconsin's asshole. I could've been a New Age healer's first husband. I could've been an expatriate.

25

On the table of my dentist was a *Time* magazine. A paper presented at an anthropology conference in Australia suggested that Neanderthals interbred with *Homo sapiens*, and we still carry their genetic code. After examining the DNA from 1,983 people around the globe, the leader of the research team concluded that Neanderthals did not disappear or go extinct. "Their genes remain in our DNA to this day," he said, in a chipper voice, I imagine.

“Everybody has a little Neanderthal left in them.” Deeper in the magazine, a small paragraph summed up a recent series of experiments by the French with chimpanzees and gorillas, which aimed at testing the subtlety of thought in the species. The title of the paragraph was “Apes Found Suffering Self-Doubt.” I don’t know if any of this is for the better.

Last night was dinner at my sister’s. She heated up some spaghetti. I stayed out of the kitchen. The hum of the fridge all too knowing. We ate on her couch. She insisted on watching TV, her new favorite show. Every week a retired Navy Seal rescues a different hostage held by terrorists around the world. I got up to smoke a cigarette at a commercial break, and she said, “No, you can stay inside.” “But you hate the smell,” I said, bristling at her newness. She just shrugged—it’s okay, her body said—and went back to the TV. I cracked a window and lit up. “I’m really glad you came over,” she said, setting the fork down and holding the plate in one hand. “This is fun.” I took a long drag and blew it out my nose. The show came back on, right in the middle of a raid on a compound. “Yeah. It is fun.” She looked at me then with such a bright face and put her free hand on my knee, and I just didn’t know this person, I just didn’t know: who is my sister? I didn’t want her hand there, but I didn’t want to tell her to take it off, so I glanced at the TV, the guns and bombs, and said, “Can you turn this down? It’s too loud,” and she lifted her hand off my knee and turned it down, because it was.