

Fifty Four

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I am fifty four years old and I have never had a girlfriend. Never had sex with the same woman more than twelve times, never picked up a woman at a wedding, never slept in a camping tent with a woman or had sex on a kitchen counter.

I have had sex with just enough women to have forgotten one of their names.

I have never mailed or received a love letter.

“Why?” is too big a question. Why do people live in Fresno?

When I was eleven, the summer after seventh grade, a girl grabbed me at a party and took me into the bedroom and kissed me for an hour. The taste of her lips was bubble gum and cigarette smoke and I felt trapped and embarrassed and happy. The girl, whose name was Brenda, lived across town and went to a different school, so we passed notes via a girl my brother was hanging out with.

One day I was at a Little League game at Memorial Park, and Brenda and two other girls came down the street wearing warmup jackets. They sat in the short wooden stands chewing gum. The dugouts were recessed like at real baseball fields, and from the top of the rough concrete steps I could see over the roof. The girls waved at me when they saw me. I was on the Lions’ sponsored team, and we were playing the Elks. We had navy blue and gray uniforms and we were sponsored by Foster’s Freeze. When I pointed to Brenda and the other girls, one of my teammates said she was ugly.

I reported this observation to her in a note that was passed to her the following week. I was just reporting someone else’s idea, as if it was understood that I didn’t agree. I didn’t tell my parents or anyone else. Shortly I got a visit from the girls who

were carrying the notes back and forth. One of them passed me the St. Christopher medal I had given Brenda with a sad look and a shrug. I never saw Brenda again.

We moved to Virginia for two years, and when we came back I started at Samohi. That made four new schools in four years, and I had depended on my older brother Bob for inclusion in any social scene. He was a year and a half older than I was, and very charismatic and self-assured. I envied him the ease with which he became the center of any social circle.

I never went to a single pep rally or football game. I belonged to no clubs. I was two years younger than all the other kids because I had skipped second grade, which left me untouchable as far as the girls in my classes were concerned.

I remember walking from the science building one day ahead of Mary Morgan. I hadn't spoken yet that day. Many of the days in my senior year I walked from class to class and took notes and tests, and never said a word, just like at home. The silence was a game I played, a vow of not speaking unless spoken to.

I stood on a landing overlooking the ocean. It was a cold windy day in January. I watched her walk down the steel stairs. She had freckles all over her nose and cheeks. Her long brown hair flew in the wind. She passed me without a look. There was a shelf of slate gray clouds hanging over the bay, and the cold wind buffeted me. My hair stood out like a sideways pyramid, long and fiercely uncontrollable.

I didn't go to the Prom or Grad Night at Disneyland. After the cap and gown ceremony, in which the principal mispronounced my name, I got drunk with my brother and the neighborhood kids.

I fell hard for my brother's ex-girlfriend Sue. I went to the beach with her all the time for the next few years. I was not allowed to touch her. She said sex would ruin our friendship. I lived in a state of delusional hope that she would somehow change her

mind. At some point I moved into an apartment in Santa Monica with another guy, and one day I picked her up to come over because her car was broken.

When she climbed into the front seat of my van, I looked at her for a moment. Her lips were freshly glossed, her blonde hair shone. She was all I wanted in the world. I thought her dress was nicer than what she would have worn to work, and her makeup and hair were perfect, never more beautiful. I knew with a sick feeling of humiliation that she was dressed up for my roommate. I wanted to turn around and drop her off, but I swallowed my pride and took her home, pretending it was OK. When we got there I left them in the living room as soon as I could and went into my room. At two AM I was awakened by the stereo from the living room. I walked out naked to turn down the blasting Doobie Brothers. I got back in bed and realized I could hear her moans from the other bedroom.

One night a year later I told her on the phone after two sixpacks of Schlitz that I couldn't be friends any more.

I lived on Twelfth near the 10 Freeway a couple of years after that and fell in love with my neighbor Barbara. She was tall with brown hair that went halfway down her back. We spent a lot of time together at her place or mine, and we were close and affectionate. We invented pizza kisses, kissing each other with our lips covered in olive oil. We slept together a couple of times in the next three years, but she didn't want to cross the line into being official, and dated other men the whole time.

She moved two blocks away to an apartment behind our landlord's house. She got a boyfriend and was increasingly difficult to see or talk to. One day I was standing in the alley at her place, looking at her over the roof of my car. She stood behind her boyfriend next to his Volkswagen. He shouted at me, "She doesn't want any kind of relationship with you!" Barbara wouldn't look at me, just stood there looking at the

ground. There was nothing I could say to that. I slumped into my car and drove away. I never saw her again.

By this time I was drinking beer all day every day, and I went off to Denver to learn surveying. I loved the precision of measuring and the logic of geometry. They were in sharp contrast to my inability to realize any relationships. On the way back to LA I suffered an alcoholic grand mal seizure at a campground on the American River. I awoke under an oak tree with a circle of unfamiliar faces over me. I didn't know where I was. Awareness seeped in and I got up shaky and afraid. I didn't drink for a few months, but started again, which lasted until January of '87. I called a detox place, on my knees on the hardwood floor in a corner of my room at my mother's house. My father had died the previous fall, and my younger brother and I moved in to help her.

I quit drinking but did cocaine for seven years and seven months more. I used to sleep on sheets I let get black with sweat and never washed. All my clothes fit in one load of laundry. I held onto my surveying job, often going to work rubber legged after all-nighters. I had a green Honda Accord with a slow leak tire that needed air every day.

Finally I tested positive for cocaine when I had to take a drug test and got fired. I spent most of my last money on coke and swore I would never do it again, and then the next Friday night I called the dealer. So again I was clamped down with the hush. Every noise sounded unnatural, so I made fewer and fewer noises, bumping the volume on the television with the remote, then down again, then up again. The silence sounded unnatural as well, so I tried to make natural-sounding noises, like turning the pages of the TV Guide. By this time I lived for free in my mother's earthquake-damaged condo on Euclid. She was staying with my brother in Culver City. Every wall in the place had giant cracks in stairstep patterns in the thick plaster. Several of the windows were

boarded over with plywood, including the one in the room where I slept. I turned the light off at eleven and pretended to sleep, convinced the people walking by on the sidewalk could hear me breathing. Eventually I fell asleep, and woke up, and something changed, a shift, a realization that I might be able to change.

I knew of AA, and I had been to a few meetings when I stopped drinking, but never surrendered. This time I was scared but ready to try something, anything but what I had. I went to my brother who was sober and he recommended a treatment place, where I did an outpatient program in addition to attending meetings.

One night a few months later I was at an outpatient group on a Tuesday night. There were fifteen people there, some residents of the facility and some outpatients like me. The room was a converted garage with blue indoor-outdoor carpet and too many fluorescent lights. I remember Ram the burned guy had scars all over his face, and the girl whose father was a famous movie director. The facilitator was a man named Howard, who had been sober for fifteen years. He had cut his shoulder once and stuffed heroin into the cut to get loaded. He sat on a chair in the circle and announced it was break time, and then he said, "After break, it's secrets night. Anybody got a secret?"

I walked to the bathroom, and knew I had to tell it. My hands were shaking when I got back into the room. I sat in my chair, afraid and vibrating with anxiety. I had never told anyone, not my best friend, or my mother, my brothers, anyone. The others filed back in. Howard called us to order and asked again, "Secrets?" My hand went up, and I said, "I have one."

The silence was touchable. I focused only on Howard and I said "Except for some hugs from my family at Christmas, I haven't had much human contact for ten years."

More silence. I felt the need to clarify. "I haven't touched a woman in ten years."
In case they hadn't gotten it.

"Well," Howard said. "That's a secret. Anybody else?"

I'm sitting on my friend Lisa's floor with my back against an exercise ball shoved against the end of the coffee table. She sits in front of me between my legs for a back rub. She's wearing little shorts and a loose tank top. Her skin is soft and smooth and she smells like soap. I start on her neck muscles, rubbing above and below her shoulder blades, lift up her shirt and work down her spine to the soft area above her shorts. She hitches my hands back up to the spot on her shoulder. This is the only way she lets me express affection other than buying her dinner every Friday night before the meeting. She won't lean forward and slide the shorts down, or lift the tank top off in that incredible sexy move that women make when all the doubt is removed. I rub her neck and her back for twenty minutes until I've had enough of the heaven-and-hell combination of being liked but not desired. I kiss her shoulder and get up to leave. She stands and give me a half hug, turning to one side to avoid a full embrace.