

i
feel
bad
about
my
dick

DARRYL
PONICSÁN

Lamentations of Masculine Vanity
and Lists of Startling Pertinence

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or It Is What It Is
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(But You Don't Have to Write It)
(And I Don't Have to Read It)

CHAPTERS THAT DID NOT MAKE THE CUT

AFTERWORD

I feel **BAD** ABOUT my **MURSE**

It is not so much that I hate my murse, it is that I must carry one at all. Was a time I could carry all that I needed in my pockets, but as time went on the stuff I needed to carry multiplied. Here is what I need now whenever I leave the house: iPhone, sanitizing wipes, Altoids, penlight, Palomino Blackwing pencil, stylus, Mount Blanc fountain pen, Black Mountain leather sketch book with a hundred-dollar bill tucked in there somewhere, Think Thin high-protein bar, and Ibuprofens.

But wait, there's more. A French-made knife, two pairs of glasses, car keys for my keyless Nissan, loyalty cards for Ralph's, True Value, B-12 shots, and the Regal Theater, Toyota ear buds, homeopathic cough drops, and whatever else I might need for any particular urban expedition. That's in addition to what I still carry in my pockets: wallet, hankie, house keys, change, a Japanese-made knife, and some sort of talisman. (The knives are for opening things. *All* things. Anxiety over tampering has imposed a security on ordinary products tantamount to Jodie Foster's first interview with Hannibal Lecter. I used to be up to fighting my way out of a biker bar. Now I can't open a bag of chips without a sharp knife. Some blister packaging requires a heavy-duty wire snippers.)

Not all dudes carry murses, for fear of appearing unmanly, which means the great majority of dudes don't want to be seen near one. I see young dudes out and about in black T-shirts and skinny jeans, which was David Duchovny's entire wardrobe for *Californication*. I don't know how they do it. (Yes, I do, now that I think of it. The flashlight is in the phone. No need for notebooks, pen, or pencil, because there's an app for that. They pay with their phone, no need for cash. Their loyalty cards are on the phone or they have renounced loyalty, something I'm thinking of doing myself. Their eyesight is 20-20. They're unconcerned about germs, trusting in their own immune systems. Most of what I have to carry could be condensed into an iPhone, if I had the kind of brain that works that way, which I don't. The iPhone is just one more thing I have to carry.)

My purse is about the size of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. (It can be argued that reading that book, cover to cover, is almost as great an achievement as having written it.) My purse has no label or designer logo. I suspect it was handmade by a leather craftsman and sold originally at a street fair. I bought it forty-odd years ago at a friend's garage sale, for two dollars. This friend was ten years older than I and he had owned it long enough to want to get rid of it. I did not carry it regularly until I moved to Palm Springs, where it doesn't matter if you carry a purse or not: you're still going to be perceived as gay. The leather is brown and distressed, but anything over fifty years old is going to be a little brown and distressed (like a dick). It has outside compartments for one set of glasses and two writing instruments. It has eight slots for cards and a slot for your checkbook. Behind the slots is a place for hiding another hundred-dollar bill. All of that is on the outside, under a flap. The inside always surprises me by how much I can stuff into it. It's quite a production.

An anti-purse dude might point out that I could wear cargo pants and dispense with the girly accessory. Given a choice between cargo pants, or God forbid, cargo shorts, I'll take the purse. (I'll take two purses.) No way you can wear cargo pants and not look like a dick. (Nora Ephron, I'm sure, would never have worn cargo pants. I've never seen any woman wear them.)

The purse stays in the picture.

I LOVE LA

You might wonder how, even in 1965, a dude could roll into LA with three gallons of gas left in the tank and \$95.25 in cash and coin, and not wind up having to do some pretty unsavory stuff to stay there. Fortunately I had a friend named Manzo who had moved to Los Angeles from New York the year before and it was he who urged me to relocate from the East Coast. He called LA a “great hick town.” I could stay with him, he said, until I got a foothold. He was a jazz saxophonist and singer working in juvenile detention. He advised me to take the civil-service exam, as he had, and work for the county, as he was, until I could write a book and he could get a record contract. Even so, I had to sell some of what little I had and borrow the rest to get over the hump. It was mid-summer and schools had already staffed their faculties. I was not sure I wanted to return to teaching anyway. I aced the civil-service exam and was offered a job as a social worker, OAA, Old Age Assistance. A three-week orientation and training period preceded my taking it to the streets but I was soon making calls on clients in the same beater TR-3 that brought me across the country.

Manzo lived in a three-story rooming house on Washington Boulevard, in a black neighborhood. The room was big enough for both of us, bathroom down the hall, though we had to share a bed. Shortly after I started my gig as a social worker and was learning my way around town, the Watts Riot erupted. Not that Rodney King exercise, but The Big One. Mayhem in the streets, blood in the heart, bullets in the air, Molotov cocktails rolling around in the trunk. We lived within the curfew area, which was cool for Manzo because he was black. I was on the blond side. I’d been nothing but comfortable moving around the ’hood, but Manzo told me I ought to make myself scarce for awhile until the smoke cleared. Before I tell you about all that, however, I have to back up to that TR-3, which stays in my memory like a bad happenstance.

I traded sideways for it, giving up a ’55 Ford hardtop Crown Victoria, a responsive and dependable beauty, which if it’s still around is worth twentyfold what it cost new: \$3,000. I swapped it and some cash for a ’59

British nickel-and-dimer sports car so configured that the driver could drop his arm outside and crush a Marlboro on the macadam. Cut so low at the elbow, the car was a magnet for large dogs and often I had to pull away from a stop sign leaning far to my right with some mutt's snout *inside* my ride and snapping at my ass. The car was in color white, but shortly before I left on my cross-country adventure my father asked me if I wanted to have it painted. My folks had a mom-and-pop auto parts store and as a teen I had to work there. One of my duties, in fact, was mixing paint. It didn't matter that I was color-blind. It was a simple process of having a customer pick out a chip and my following the precise formula to arrive at the right color. Anyway, some grease monkey always owed my dad money and sometimes he had to get it back in trade. Thus the offer to paint my car.

The old man told me to pick out a chip from the book, mix the formula, hand over the keys, and he would do the rest. A single choice from any large field makes me dizzy but I eventually found what I saw as a pleasant gunmetal gray, unique among the multitude of colors I browsed. In a few days the car was delivered back to K&K Auto Parts. The old man and I stood on the curb inspecting it. Quite a good job to pay off a debt, I thought. My dad looked at it and said, "This is the color you picked out?" I said it was, pleased with myself. He walked away shaking his head. Neilly, the barber, walked by on his way to the shop. He shook his head as well.

"What?" I said.

"Li'l Monk, you got a pink car?"

But, wait, there's more. I requested that on each door the painter tape off my shorthand signature, a *dp* slanted to the left. White on pink.

That's the car I drove across America and around the streets of black LA, I of blond hair and fair skin, looking like a low-rent pimp in training. Since my color-blindness extended to my choice of clothes, my ride and I appeared to belong to each other. Before the riots I was part of the 'hood. I would call on clients, eat at Louisiana Hot Link joints, have my hair cut at black barbershops, drink at black bars, chat up black girls, and no one ever stopped to say, "Who the hell are you?"

On DUDE MAINTENANCE

Personal maintenance has always been on the top of every woman's to-do list, but dude maintenance is a recent phenomenon. Growing up, I never heard a man utter the hyphenated word "mani-pedi," or either half of it for that matter. Though we did pay close attention to our hair—that D.A. (duck's ass) didn't occur naturally (except in ducks)—once out of our teens we let our hair take care of itself, which for some of us meant bidding good-bye to it. We shampooed our hair with the same soap we used to wash our skin. The word "product" as it referred to hair treatment was not yet in use. Grease was the word. Going gray was proof of maturity. Hard work was exercise enough. Leathery skin was manly. Picture Charles Bronson next to Leonardo DiCaprio. We were Bronson dudes. We were masculine. Toxic now, it appears, but admired back in the day, by men and women alike. (A forty-year-old woman recently cried on my shoulder about her husband: "I just wish he would be a *man*." [Subtext: "Like you."])

Dudes may plan for the future but on a grooming level, we live one day at a time. Which is not to say, live every day as though it were your last. What, like sick in bed and shitting yourself? Live every day like you have a hundred years left, is my advice. Time is a terrible thing to attempt to control. Let it find its own way.

Whenever my mother said, when I was under her roof, "You either have to get a haircut or take up the violin," I went to Neilly, my Italian barber on South Main Street, and asked for a Pietro Pistole, the simple haircut favored by the manly hero of the *Peter Gunn* TV series, then popular. The Peter Gunn-do appealed to the observer because it was uncomplicated and neat. It appealed to the wearer because it was undemanding. You wet a hand and ran it over your hair from one side to the other. Done. The bonus was that it would be months before your mother would have to repeat her snide remark.

I am blessed with a full head of unruly hair, and since my mother is gone the duty of ordering it trimmed falls to my Exotic Wife. Whenever she says, "I didn't know I was marrying Art Garfunkel," I go to Dylan, a top San Francisco hair stylist who charges \$150 a clatter. I am comped, however,

because I am his father and I put him through Vidal Sassoon, a training longer and more intense than the police academy, which was his first choice until he got arrested with an animal-rights group for breaking into a UCLA lab and freeing the subjects of their experiments. (I named him after Bob Dylan, whose hair I tried to emulate. Not Art Garfunkel, lady.)

The reason I still have a full mane, apart from having had a grandfather who had one at my age, is that I don't shampoo it unless I have to, and I default to the cheapest shampoo on the shelf because on any given day I can't determine if my hair is normal, oily, or dry, and you have to know that now in order to buy shampoo, or you'll be like the dude who orders a sauvignon blanc with a well-done steak. (Dylan disapproves. He has his own high-end product line and thinks every man ought to pamper his hair with the best money can buy.) Conditioner is a relatively new product, to me. I don't know when it was discovered that hair, like a bicep, has to be conditioned. It's only a way of selling two bottles of stuff instead of one, but I go along with the gag.

I'm grateful for the hair on my head because the once downy hair of my legs is long gone. The once-dark matted hair on my chest, through which the occasional woman liked to run her manicured fingers, is gone as well. The new and unexpected places from which hair now spouts is not where I would like to see it, and in fact I mostly don't: in the ears and up the nose.

Before leaving the house for a social event, my E.W. will tactfully circle me, peek up my nose, stand on tip-toes to peer into my ears, and more often than not will send me back to use a battery-operated contraption invented for the purpose of protecting wives from such embarrassments. She bought me my own illuminated magnifying mirror to encourage me to mow the nasal lawn, but it makes my nose and all the skin around it, meaning my face, look frightful, and I wind up feeling bad about my face. Look away! (See "Chapters That Did Not Make the Cut": "I Feel Bad About My Face (Look Away!)")

Truth be known, I felt bad about my nose long before I started feeling bad about my dick. From childhood I had a deviated septum, which breathing-wise made me feel like I had a cork in my nose. I had the problem surgically corrected as an adult, but that left me with a glass nose. Should I take one on the honker it would wind up flattened against my face, like an old ham 'n'egger. To the average civilized dude a glass nose might not pose much of a problem, but I often seemed to be in close proximity to punches being

thrown. A sucker and a sucker punch will eventually find each other. After the surgery, by necessity I became a diplomat. I won't even get into my lost olfactory sense. Odors that might drive others for the industrial-grade mask never seem to bother me, and I never smelt it even though I might have dealt it.

Yes, when my E.W. does her pre-exit examination I feel like a lower life form being groomed by his further evolved mate, but I don't complain. You can always tell if an old dude lives alone, or if his wife no longer cares, by the hair growing out of his ears.

POSTSCRIPT:

On the subject of facial hair, beards are back. They are now required by Major League Baseball, where every player looks like an Amish farmer in uniform. I wear a beard myself some times, from stubble to ten-day growth. I find it good camo for the second chin. (I feel bad about my chin!) (See "Chapters That Did Not Make the Cut.")

Full fuzzy beards, however, are not a good look for dudes, especially the younger ones. Looking like a Montana woods hermit will limit your possibilities in life, unless you have a 100-mph fastball or a .300 batting average. Truth is, most dudes dislike shaving. As a kid, I couldn't wait to shave, and for a few years I enjoyed it as my passport into the fraternity of men. Then it became one more thing I would rather not do. I have enough to do.

Several explanations for why the beard became once more *de rigueur* have been posed, but I believe a contributing factor was the flood of razors on the market. Dudes went dizzy trying to decide which one to use. Forget electric razors, which are useless. I'm talking about what came after that double-edged blade that went into a silver safety razor, and the foams and lotions that came with it. That double-edged blade fit every razor in existence. Now, in addition to a plethora of disposable plastic razors, a staggering array of razors in all colors of the spectrum crowd the shelf, each requiring a specific blade replaced in a unique way. All of these razors are cheap, by the way. It's the blades that are expensive. Don't get me started on pre-shave and after-shave lotions, and the foams, and, God save me, the moisturizers, the one application without which a man turns into a savage, you are made to believe. It's easier to stop shaving altogether.

POST-POSTSCRIPT:

No discussion of unwanted hair is complete without mention of the willful elimination of female pubic hair—the bush, the muff, the carpet, the fur, the copper gate—long an aphrodisiac for red-blooded muff-diving dudes. When did women start feeling bad about the bush? When did they, en masse it seems, decide they wanted to look like ten-year-olds down there?

Ladies, a word. Dudes don't want to see the thing, they want to *find* the thing, to bury their faces in the wild Sargasso and inhale the sea air. About the time women starting shaving down there, men stopped shaving up here. Coincidence?

WHAT *a RIOT*

Though Manzo and I lived within the curfew area, we were ninety blocks, more or less, north of the inciting incident and were unaware of what was happening that Wednesday night. People think the whole thing blew up in one mad moment, but it wasn't that way at all. It started with every black man's abiding fear, a traffic stop by a white cop, and gathered momentum from there. Even on the following day I was unaware of anything more than rumors and warnings. It wasn't until Friday afternoon, while having an after-work drink at a bar on Sunset Boulevard and waiting for a girl to clock out of her job, that I became fully aware of the seriousness of what was happening in my new city. It was hot and bright outside, dark and cool inside the bar. Only three other men were there, one of whom happened to be black. We watched the riot unfold on TV.

The bartender's comment: "They should shoot them all."

My eyes went to the black dude, whose chin slowly and sadly dropped to his chest. The bartender realized what he had said and with mumbles tried to exempt the black customer from his hateful comment, but once the stone is dropped you can't stop the ripples. I finished my drink and left.

I had a date to spend the weekend in Santa Barbara with a legal secretary/flamenco dancer. She had a gig there with her troupe, Something Folklorica, and I had not yet been to Santa Barbara, which was supposed to be a charming town. I wouldn't know from that first visit because I spent most of the weekend in the motel room watching TV coverage of the riot.

I did catch two of her several performances on the dance floor of a large Mexican restaurant/club. I shouted "Olé!" at the right moments, foolishly tried to execute the unique Mexican cry of great admiration, and drank my first margarita. I learned what a mariachi was. Meanwhile people were being shot down in Watts. I worried about Manzo, my clients, and my colleagues. Though I hadn't been in LA that long, I had a proprietary feeling toward it.

A curfew was ordered. A map of the curfew area filled the TV screen. Where I lived was within it. I could not go back there Sunday morning as

planned. I had to stay with the girl at her place in Hollywood, that night and two following nights before the curfew was lifted. I didn't mind. Her place was so much nicer than the room I shared with Manzo. Though a man and a woman may make the same money, or not, the woman will always have a better place to live. It is a mystery, yet obvious in small ways. The pillows, the candles, the light, the cleanliness.

On Wednesday I was able to return to where I worked, one desk among many in multiple rows covering a great expanse of floor. I could return to... let's call it "my building," because for the life of me I can't remember the official name. I want to say Welfare Center but maybe that's only what everybody called it. In any case shortly before lunch someone called in a bomb threat and we had to evacuate the building. We milled about on the street two blocks away, hemmed in by National Guardsmen with hands tight on machine guns mounted to the back of Jeeps. We talked while waiting for the all-clear signal, and all of us, black and white, agreed on one thing: Cops don't know how to talk to black people. This whole riot could have been avoided with three minutes of common courtesy and mutual respect. The chief of police, even after time to reflect on it, described the protestors as "monkeys in the zoo."

Something extraordinary, however, in the area of personal racial relationships started up out there on the street outside the Welfare Center. One of my colleagues, Helene, a girl I fancied from afar, as the Brits always say, slipped a piece of paper into my hand.

"My address and phone number," she said. "If you find yourself trapped in the middle of something try to get to my house. You'll be safe there."

Helene was black as coal and bright as a sunrise, a few years older than I, and far more mature. We worked several desks away from each other and had at times teetered on the curb of flirting, but this was 1965.

Sporadic incidents of violence and vandalism lasted for several days, but eventually things died down to a simmer. Back in the field, in my little pink pimpmobile, I sat down with an elderly client who showed me the entry and exit wounds in his arm. My mother came out to visit a year later. I drove her around Watts. "This doesn't look so bad," she said, comparing the neighborhood to the house and street where we lived when I was a child. "It is, though," I said.

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