

A Plague of Tics by David Sedaris--Full Text Version

When my teacher asked me if she might visit with my mother, I touched my nose eight times to the surface of my desk.

"May I take that as a 'yes'?"

According to her calculations, I had left my chair twenty times that day. "You're up and down like a flea. I turn my back for two minutes and there you are with your tongue pressed against that light switch. Maybe they do that where you come from, but here in my classroom, we don't leave our seats and lick things whenever we please. That is Miss Chestnut's light switch, and she likes to keep it dry. Would you like me to come over to your house and put my tongue on *your* light switches? Well, would you?"

I tried to picture her in action, but my shoe was calling. TAKE MY OFF, it whispered. TAP MY HEEL AGAINST YOUR FOREHEAD THREE TIMES. DO IT NOW, QUICK, NO ONE WILL NOTICE.

"Well?" Miss Chestnut raised her faint, penciled eyebrows. "I'm asking you a question. Would you or would you not want me licking the light switches in your house?"

I slipped off my shoe, pretending to examine the imprint on the heel.

"You're going to hit yourself over the head with that shoe aren't you?" It wasn't "hitting," it was tapping; but still, how had she known what I was about to do?

"Heel marks all over you forehead," she said, answering my silent question.

"You should take a look in the mirror sometime. Shoes are dirty things. We wear them on our feet to protect ourselves against the soil. It's not healthy to hit ourselves over the head with shoes, is it?"

I guessed that it was not.

"Guess? This is not a game to be guessed at. I don't 'guess' that it's dangerous to run into traffic with a paper sack over my head. There's no guesswork involved. These things are facts, not riddles." She sat at her desk, continuing her lecture as she penned a brief letter. "I'd like to have a word with your mother. You do have one, don't you? I'm assuming you weren't raised by animals. Is she blind, your mother? Can she see the way you behave, or do you reserve your antics exclusively for Miss Chestnut? She handed me the folded slip of paper, "You may go now, and on your way out the door I'm asking you to please do not bathe my light switch with your germ-ridden tongue. It's had a long day; we both have."

It was a short distance from the school to our rented house, no more than six hundred and thirty-seven steps, and on a good day I could make the trip in an hour, pausing every few feet to tongue a mailbox or touch whichever leaf or blade of grass demanded my attention. If I were to lose count of my steps, I'd have to return to the school and begin again. "Back so soon?" the janitor would ask. You just can't get enough of this place, can you?"

He had it all wrong. I wanted to be home more than anything, it was getting there that was the problem. I might touch the telephone pole at step three hundred and fourteen and then, fifteen paces later, worry that I hadn't touched it in the exactly right spot. It needed to be touched again. I'd let my mind wander

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for one brief moment and then doubt had set in, causing me to question not just the telephone pole but also the lawn ornament back as step two hundred and nineteen. I'd have to go back and lick that concrete mushroom one more time, hoping its guardian wouldn't one again rush from her house shouting, "Get your face out of my toadstool!" It might be raining or maybe I had to go to the bathroom, but running home was not an option. This was a long and complicated process that demanded an oppressive attention to detail. It wasn't that I enjoyed pressing my nose against the scalding hood of a parked car -- pleasure had nothing to do with it. A person *had* to do these things because nothing was worse than the anguish of not doing them. By pass that mailbox and my brain would never for one moment let me forget it. I might be sitting at the dinner table, daring myself not to think about it, and the thought would revisit my mind. *Don't think about it.* But it would already be too late and I knew then exactly what I had to do. Excusing myself to go to the bathroom, I'd walk out the front door and return to that mailbox, not just touching but jabbing, practically pounding on the thing because I thought I hated it so much. What I really hated, of course, was my mind. There must have been an off switch somewhere, but I was damned if I could find it.

Depressing as it was, arriving at the front stoop of the house meant that I had completed the first leg of that bitter-tasting journey to my bedroom. Once home I would touch the front door seven times with each elbow, a task made more difficult if there was someone else around. "Why don't you try the knob," my sister Lisa would say. "That's what the rest of us do, and it seems to work for us." Inside the house there were switches to be acknowledged. After kissing the fourth, eighth, and twelfth carpeted stair, I wiped the cat hair off my lips and proceeded to the kitchen, where I was commanded to stroke the burners of the stove, press my nose against the refrigerator door, and arrange the percolator, toaster, and blender into a straight row. After making my rounds of the living room, it was time to kneel beside the banister and blindly jab a butter knife in the direction of my favorite electrical socket. There were bulbs to lick and bathroom faucets to test before finally I was free to enter my bedroom, where I would carefully align the objects on my dresser, lick the corners of my metal desk, and lie upon my bed, rocking back and forth and thinking of what an odd woman she was, my third-grade teacher, Miss Chestnut. Why come here and lick my switches when she never used the one she had? Maybe she was drunk.

Her note had asked if she might visit our home in order to discuss what she referred to as my "special problems."

"Have you been leaving your seat to lick the light switch?" my mother asked. My mother read the note from Miss Chestnut and lit a cigarette.

"Once or twice," I said.

"Once or twice what? Every half hour? Every ten minutes?"

"I don't know," "Who's counting?"

"Well, your goddamned math teacher, for one. That's her job, to count. What, do you think she's not going to notice?"

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“Notice what?” It never failed to amaze me that people might notice these things. Because my actions were so intensely private, I had always assumed they were somehow invisible..When cornered, I demanded that the witness had been mistaken.

“What do you mean, ‘notice what?’ I got a phone call just this afternoon from that lady up the street, that Mrs. Keening. She says she caught you in her front yard, down on your hands and knees kissing the evening edition of her newspaper”

“I wasn’t kissing it. I was just trying to read the headline.”

“And you had to get that close? Maybe we need to get you some stronger glasses.”

“Well, maybe we do.” I said.

“And I suppose this Miss...” My mother unfolded the letter and studied the signature. “This Miss Chestnut is mistaken, too? Is that what you’re trying to tell me? Maybe she has you confused with the other boy who leaves his seat to lick the pencil sharpener or touch the flag or whatever the hell it is you do the moment her back is turned?”

“That’s very likely,” I said. “She’s old. There are spots on her hands.”

“How many?”

On the afternoon that Miss Chestnut arrived for her visit, I was in my bedroom, rocking. Unlike the obsessive counting and touching, rocking was not a mandatory duty but a voluntary and highly pleasurable exercise. It was my hobby, and there was nothing else I would rather do. The point as not to rock oneself to sleep: This was not a step toward some greater goal. It was the goal itself. The perpetual movement freed my mind, allowing me to mull things over and construct elaborately detailed fantasies. Toss in a radio, and I was content to rock until three or four in the morning, listening to the hit parade and discovering that each and every song was about me. I might have to listen two or three hundred times to the same song , but sooner or later its private message would reveal itself. Because it was pleasant and relaxing, my rocking was bound to be tripped up, most often by my brain, which refused to allow me more than ten consecutive minutes of happiness. At the opening chords of my current favorite song, a voice would whisper, *Shouldn’t you be upstairs making sure there are really one hundred and fourteen peppercorns left in that small ceramic jar? And, hey, while you’re up there, you might want to check the iron and make sure it’s not setting fire to the bay’s bedroom.* The list of demands would grow by the moment. *What about that television antenna? Is it still set into that perfect V, or has one of your sisters destroyed its integrity. You know, I was just wondering how tightly the lid is screwed onto that mayonnaise jar. Let’s have a look, shall we?*

I would be just on the edge of truly enjoying myself, this close to breaking the song’s complex code, when my thoughts would get in the way. The trick was to bide my time until the record was no longer my favorite, to wait until it had slipped from its number-one position on the charts and fool my mind into believing I no longer cared.

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I was coming to terms with “The Shadow of Your Smile” when Miss Chestnut arrived. She rang the bell, and I cracked open my bedroom door, watching as my mother invited her in.

“You’ll have to forgive me for these boxes.” My mother flicked her cigarette out the door and into the littered yard. “They’re filled with crap, every last one of them, but God forbid we throw anything away. Oh no, we can’t do that! My husband’s saved it all: every last Green Stamp and coupon, every outgrown bathing suit and scrap of linoleum, it’s all right here along with the rocks and knotted sticks he swears look just like his old department head or associate district manager or some goddamned thing.” She mopped at her forehead with a wadded paper towel. “Anyway, to hell with it. You look like I need a drink, scotch all right?”

Miss Chestnut’s eyes brightened. “I really shouldn’t but, oh, why not?” “Just a drop with ice, no water.”

I tried rocking in bed, but the sound of laughter drew me to the top of the landing, where from my vantage point behind an oversized wardrobe, I watched the two women discuss my behavior.

“Oh, you mean the touching,” my mother said.

“God only knows where he gets it from,” “He’s probably in his room right this minute, counting his eyelashes or gnawing at the pulls on his dresser. One, two o’clock in the morning and he’ll still be at it, rattling around the house to poke the laundry hamper or press his face against the refrigerator door. The kid’s wound too tight, but he’ll come out of it. So, what do you say, another scotch, Katherine?”

Now she was Katherine. Another few drinks and she’d probably be joining us for our summer vacation. How easy it was for adults to bond over a second round of cocktails. I returned to my bed, cranking up the radio so as not to be distracted by the sound of their cackling. Because Miss Chestnut was here in my home, I knew it was only a matter of time before the voices would order me to enter the kitchen and make a spectacle of myself. Maybe I’d have to suck on the broom handle or stand on the table to touch the overhead light fixture, but whatever was demanded of me, I had no choice but to do it. The song that played on the radio posed no challenge whatsoever, the lyric as clear as if I’d written it myself. “Well, I think I’s going out of my head,” the man sang, “yes, I think I am going out of my head.”

Following Miss Chestnut’s visit, my father attempted to cure me with a series of threats. “You touch your nose to that windshield one more time and I’ll guarantee you’ll wish you hadn’t,” he said driving home from the grocery store with a lapful of rejected, out-of-state coupons. It was virtually impossible for me to ride in the passenger seat of a car and not press my nose against the windshield, and now that the activity had been forbidden, I wanted it more than anything. I tried closing my eyes, hoping that might eliminate my desire, but found myself thinking that perhaps *he* was the one who should close his eyes. So what if I wanted to touch my nose to the windshield? Who was it hurting? Why

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was it that she could repeatedly worry his change and bite his lower lip without the threat of punishment? My mother smoked and Miss Chestnut massaged her waist twenty, thirty times a day -- and here *I* couldn't press my nose against the windshield of a car? I opened my eyes, defiant, but when he caught me moving toward my target, my father slammed on the brakes.

"You like that, did you?" He handed me a golf towel to wipe the blood from my nose. "Did you like the feel of that?"

Like was too feeble for what I felt. I loved it. If mashed with the right amount of force, a blow to the nose can be positively narcotic. Touching objects satisfied a mental itch, but I soon found those same urges could be fulfilled within the confines of my own body. Punching myself in the nose was a good place to start, but the practice was dropped when I began rolling my eyes deep in their sockets, an exercise that produced quick jolts of dull, intoxicating pain.

"I know exactly what you're talking about," my mother said to Mrs. Shatz, my visiting fourth-grade teacher. "The eyes rolling every which way, it's like talking to a slot machine. Hopefully, one day he'll pay off, but until then, what do you say we have ourselves another glass of wine?"

"Hey, sport," my father said, "if you're trying to get a good look at the contents of your skull, I can tell you right now that you're wasting your time. There's nothing there to look at, and these report cards prove it."

I'd like to think that some of my nervous habits faded during high school, but my class pictures tell a different story. "Draw in the missing eyeballs and this one might not be so bad," my mother would say. In group shots I was easily identified as the blur in the back row. I was a mess.