

RON CURRIE, JR.

THE UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO LECTURE, 20 SEP 11

When I sat down to begin preparing my comments for this evening, I realized I was stuck before I even wrote a single word. Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon position for a writer to find himself in. We scribes spend a good deal of time staring into space, doing doughnuts in our office chairs, picking our noses, what have you. I feel like I spend more time goofing off than most, sometimes even engaging in behaviors that I don't want to admit to and you don't want to hear about. It probably goes without saying that this is a big reason why you'll rarely see me working in a coffee shop, as authors are evidently supposed to these days.

So anyway, the point is that it's not unusual for me to find myself at a loss for words. But the phenomenon is a bit different when, rather than working on a novel, I'm writing something intended to enlighten young minds, as is said. Part of the problem is that I feel a sudden and unfamiliar obligation to not lie.

That probably sounds a little weird. But consider, for a moment, my job description. I'm a novelist. I am also often described as a fiction writer. I won't bore you with the etymology of the word "fiction." I'll just expect that you know enough about the current usage of the word to understand that it's more or less perfectly synonymous with the word "lie." Given that, it's not at all a stretch to say that I spend most of my days engaged in telling lies. In fact, I get paid to lie. I am, as I stand here before you, contractually obligated to lie. If I suddenly broke my MacBook over my knee and refused to lie anymore, my publisher would probably sue me. And yet, in a situation like this, I find myself invited by very nice people to come and tell a bunch of truth about the three hundred-odd pages of lies I told. That sort of 180 can be a bit confusing, and has more than once left me with no idea at all what to say.

The other aspect of the problem of what to talk to you about, though, is that I'm not sure what someone like me is supposed to say to college students. The only degree I have is a high school diploma. Beyond that, I'm not terribly smart, truth be told. I think I scored something like a 1200 on my SATs. I spent what would have been my college years bussing tables, squandering whatever intellectual promise I had on a relentless intake of mind-altering substances, both legal and not-so. When among my better-educated friends the conversation turns to their college years, the rigors of certain subjects, the scrambling to meet course requirements, I have very little to say and am frankly often confused and, honestly, fucking bored.

So certainly I can't stand here in front of you tonight and advocate for the value of higher education. At least not with a straight face.

I have, in the past, tried the strategy of playing to my strengths and joking about what a waste of time and money college is. It's an easy and probably obvious argument for me to make. After all, here I am, a mere high school graduate who didn't even make National Honor Society. But I managed to write a couple of books and convince someone to publish them, and even got some food pellets, in the form of literary awards, for my scribblings. What's more, institutions like yours now invite me to come and speak to their students on a fairly regular basis. Oh, delicious irony! The guy who flunked trigonometry and went to Key Club meetings drunk as a skunk is now given a mantle of intellectual authority, and a young audience to complement that mantle. And I managed all this without even the faintest whiff of advanced schooling.

So for a while, when speaking at schools, I thought the jokey what're-you-wasting-your-time-here-for approach would be a good way to go. I imagined it would be like a scene in the movie *Good Will Hunting*, when the main character goes toe-to-toe with a pompous Harvard know-nothing. They're arguing about the economics of the original American colonies, and Will, who is a genius, schools the Harvard guy and then taunts him a bit. He says, "See the sad thing about a guy like you, is in about 50 years you're gonna

start doin' some thinkin' on your own and you're gonna come up with the fact that there are two certainties in life. One, don't do that. And two, you dropped a hundred and fifty grand on a fuckin' education you coulda' got for a dollar fifty in late charges at the Public Library." I always loved that bit, and thought it true to an extent, which it goes without saying is a convenient stance for a guy who didn't really go to college.

Unfortunately, though, there were a couple of problems with my make-fun-of-college stratagem. The first is that, unlike Will Hunting, I am not a genius. I have no idea what the economic situation of the American colonies was like, and when Will and the Harvard guy were locked in intellectual combat over the subject, they may as well have been speaking pig Latin for all that I understood.

The second and probably more obvious problem is this: it turns out that people who have committed themselves, both professionally and personally, to the very concept of college tend to not like it much when you spend an hour, on their invitation, joking about the pointlessness of the very thing they've dedicated their lives to. Who knew?

Did I mention that I'm no genius?

So anyway, eventually I smartened up and abandoned that tack. But where did this leave me, in regard to what I should say to you tonight? Well, it left me where I started: nowhere. Staring at a blank page, an activity I'm beginning to think I've spent way too much of my life engaged in.

But then I thought, okay, it's an institute of higher learning, and you're an author, and they're expecting you to come and talk about some Big Ideas and sound really smart, and even though you aren't really smart and don't have any education to speak of, you can totally pull that off if you try hard enough. You can make them think you're smart. If you bullshit vigorously enough, they might even want to buy you drinks.

I'd reclaimed some self-confidence, however briefly. Now, though, I needed a Big Idea to hang my discussion on. Again, this presented some problems. I'm not an academic, as we've established. I'm not even a particularly deep or insightful thinker. I'm more like a dancing bear or organ grinder monkey. I have one trick that I do well, and that's writing fiction. It's a trick that can, understandably, give people the impression that I am a deep, insightful thinker. The fact that this is not the case is what makes it a trick in the first place. Consider the dancing bear for a minute—people might watch him dance and say to themselves, "Wow, look at him go. That's a really smart bear." But the thing is, he's still just a bear, right? No matter how smart, he's still just a bear.

In any event, I had been thinking a lot, in working on my new book, about what constitutes truth and reality, both in writing and in everyday life. And because I'd been so preoccupied with that idea for so long, and because I imagined it might be the sort of Big Idea that smart people at colleges write dissertations about, and because you are smart people at a college, I thought maybe I should come and talk to you about that.

So I started writing. And as I wrote, I began to think that this idea of mine was really Big. I began to think I was a lot smarter than I usually give myself credit for. I had a notion that the entire lecture would form a brilliant challenge to your ideas about what is real and what is not, about what is true and what is not. And I wanted to start challenging you from the very beginning, at the part of the lecture where I'm supposed to just come out and clear my throat and thank you all for being here. This is what I wrote:

Quote: "Both decorum and my own agreeable temperament compel me to thank you for coming. To thank you for taking an hour or so out of what for you is a busy and exciting time to sit and listen to the first of what are surely many lectures in your immediate future. And I really am grateful for your presence here. Don't get me wrong. Most novelists will tell you they've spoken to empty rooms before, and it isn't any fun, and so even if the only reason you were in this auditorium was because someone threatened your family, it wouldn't make any difference to me.

“Nevertheless, I am somewhat reluctant to thank you. This reluctance stems from my incomplete understanding of whether or not you are compelled, as captives of the University of Toledo’s First Read program, to be sitting here today. In other words you’re sitting here with the academic equivalent of a gun at your back. In that case my thanks should rightly go to whoever is holding the gun—members of your new faculty, presumably.

“Understand, my goal here isn’t to point out uncomfortable truths for their own sake, or to make you squirm in your seat with the private knowledge that yeah, you were thinking on your way over here that you really didn’t want to attend, that the book was boring and you put it down halfway through and didn’t see how listening to the guy who wrote it could be much more interesting. I wouldn’t blame you for that. I’ve read boring books. I’ve given up on boring books. And I’ve sat through agonizingly boring talks. Novelists are notorious for them. Part of the reason for this, I think, is that like most people we’re convinced that nearly everything that passes through our heads is endlessly smart and interesting and maybe even important for others to hear. We’re not different from most people in that regard. The way in which novelists are different, mostly, is that someone has reinforced our delusions of grandeur by actually giving us a stage to pontificate from. Thus, my presence here today.

“No, my aim, in wondering out loud who to thank, is to illustrate how often in life our behavior in any given situation does not match the reality of that situation. It’s something I find endlessly interesting. In this case, decorum dictates I should thank you all equally, as one organism, for being here today. But you’re not one organism, united in your attentiveness, hanging on my every word. Some of you have already checked the time on your phones. Some of you are thinking about that very alluring new person you’ve noticed during orientation but have not yet learned his or her name. A handful of you may have fallen asleep. A majority of you, of course, are paying close attention...at least so far. But so it seems to me that I’d do something of a disservice to everyone here, the attentive and distracted alike, to just issue a generic blanket thanks and forge ahead.”

Imagine forty-five minutes of that sort of half-assed intellectual gamesmanship. If I’d continued in that vein it would have been a lot like watching a guy without feet try to play soccer.

But I was on to something. I knew I had to talk to you today about reality as it actually exists moment to moment, as opposed to how we pretend it is. Because I know, after talking about Everything Matters with many people in many different places, that having read the book, the thing you’re likely to be most interested in is where the circumstances of the book and the circumstances of my actual life intersect. To an extent, I’m responsible for this interest. I’ve set up the question. I placed a large portion of the story in the part of the world where I myself grew up. I gave the book’s hero a family that you could easily imagine was very similar to my own real-life family. I made him around my age. I named the guy Junior, for God’s sake. So that people are curious about my real life shouldn’t come as any surprise to me, I guess. Especially in a culture so desperate for “reality” that television shows about antiquers not only go on the air, but have strong audiences. Seriously. Antiquers. The show is called “American Pickers,” on the History Channel. Let’s put aside, for a second, the fact that “American Pickers” sounds like a show about a group of four-year-olds with nasal fixations. I don’t know how it is these days, but when I was a kid, antiquers—the kind of people who sifted through old garbage in creepy roadside barns and seemed to spend every moment of every weekend at a flea market—were pale, ill-looking chain smokers who may or may not have had a half-dozen corpses buried in their basement. Now, somehow, they have their own television show.

Despite this collective obsession with “reality” as it’s presented to us by television producers, though, it was a surprise to me that people were interested in my real life. For a number of reasons, beginning with my own naivete and running straight through the question of what, exactly, is the difference between the real and the fake, the authentic and the not-so.

But I knew that I had to tell you something about myself. And then I thought some more and realized that while I had no education, and wasn’t terribly smart, and couldn’t lay claim to any Big Ideas, I could probably offer something from my own experience that might be of value to you at this juncture in your lives. Something from my time enrolled in the school of hard knocks, as they say.

As I considered this, spinning around in my office chair, picking my nose, staring into space, I realized that all I had to offer of any value could be distilled to a single word: persist.

I'll say it again: persist.

In *Everything Matters*, this is the lesson that Junior has to learn over and over again. In the face of an ever-rising tide of despair, Junior must persist. It starts, of course, before he's even born, when he learns about the end of the world from the unidentified Greek chorus that accompanies him throughout his life. Then he nearly dies being birthed. After that he grows into a strange, withdrawn, morose kid who few people like, a kid who lives almost entirely in his own head. He is, in a word, miserable.

I certainly didn't make it easy for him, from the very beginning. Part of the reason for this is because it was not easy for me, in my very own real life, at this time. So if you wanted to ask how Junior and I are similar, this would be a good place for me to begin an answer. I was a sickly kid who spent most of his time in his own head. I read nonstop. I played a lot of *Dungeons and Dragons*. I taught myself to program computers, back at a time when computers were far from ubiquitous and learning how to program them earned you your *Socially Awkward Geek* badge for life. God help me, I had terrible skin rashes. I was terrifically self-conscious, about the way I looked, the way I smelled, the fact that my family was fairly poor, especially when contrasted with the families of the few friends I had.

Also, much like Junior, I suffered from a powerful fear of and obsession with apocalypse. This was the end of the Cold War, which probably had something to do with my preoccupation. But really, for years, I was convinced that the world was always just around the corner from coming to an end. And I had no filter to help me ascertain the difference between things that were serious problems, and things that could actually bring about the end of the world. The Iran hostage crisis seemed just as personally dangerous to me as any talk of nuclear conflict with the Soviets. When Reagan mixed it up with Qaddafi in the early eighties, I was pretty convinced that one morning Libyan paratroopers would drop from the sky onto our playground and start gunning me and my classmates down. This last may have been the predictable result of too many viewings of the movie "*Red Dawn*," which begins with Cuban paratroopers raining onto the athletic fields of a Colorado high school and opening up students and teachers. I'm not sure what the tactical purpose of decimating a high school might be, but it seemed a real enough threat to me at the time.

All this seems a bit run-of-the-mill and sort of funny now, and while that is true, from my adult perspective it seems pretty obvious that in essence I was just really fucking depressed, really early in life.

So anyway, me and Junior, united in lonely geekdom, mirroring one another in our conviction that the end of the world is just around the corner. Sad and anxious and more or less bereft of human connection. But we persisted, he and I.

Fast forward to the period in Junior's life that most closely resembles this time in your own lives. He's graduated from high school, and his girlfriend Amy, the only person with whom he has ever forged a meaningful connection, has become convinced that he's batshit and handed him his walking papers. The result is not pretty. Heartbroken and directionless, he takes up residence at his brother's town house in Chicago and sets about committing slow suicide with drugs and booze.

I alluded earlier to the fact that I "didn't really go to college." What this means in detail is that I spent a little more than a month at Clemson University in South Carolina. Like Junior, I was deeply in love with a girl who had decided she wanted nothing to do with me. Like Junior, I was medicating my broken heart with drugs and alcohol. And this is where the idea and importance of persisting truly comes into play in my own narrative, because this was also the first time in my life when I was genuinely in danger of losing it. If things go a little bit differently, a little to the left or to the right, I never pen any books, and I sure as hell am not standing here talking to you today about the importance of persistence.

Because, like Junior, my problem wasn't just a broken heart. That certainly factored into it, but something deeper and more dangerous was at work, too, something that had dogged the edges of my consciousness throughout childhood, and then during my senior year of high school took full, terrible bloom, threatening suddenly to snuff me out.

This is not hyperbole, here. I couldn't think. I couldn't stop crying. I couldn't get out of bed. I wanted, eventually, to die. I had no idea what was wrong with me. I thought I was going fucking crazy. In fact, I had descended, unchecked, into the first full-blown depressive episode of my life.

David Foster Wallace, who sadly knew all too well what he was talking about, offered the most apt metaphor I've ever encountered for depression: "Imagine that every single atom in every single cell in your body is sick...intolerably sick. And every proton and neutron in every atom...swollen and throbbing, off-color, sick, with just no chance of throwing up to relieve the feeling. Every electron is sick, here twirling off-balance, and all erratic in these funhouse orbitals that are just thick and swirling with mottled yellow and purple poison gases, everything off balance and woozy. Quarks and neutrinos out of their minds and bouncing sick all over the place."

So you understand I'm not talking about the everyday blues here. I'm talking about it felt like my brain was screaming but I couldn't open my mouth. I'm talking about every time I looked at a sharp object the first thing that came to mind was plunging it into my throat. I'm talking about not being able to trust myself walking along a roadside for fear I would, on desperate impulse, jump out in front of a semi.

This is what's referred to dryly by psychiatrists as "suicidal ideation." It did not feel like "suicidal ideation." It felt like, "holy fuck, my brain is actually going to pry open my skull and flop out and hit the pavement with a wet thud and run away."

And this is much the same experience that Junior has in the moment when he decides to help Reggie Fox commit a terrible act of domestic terrorism. It's despair. And make no mistake; in my experience at least, there is no feeling worse than genuine, unleavened despair. It causes people to behave in all sorts of horrifying ways. They let go of and neglect things that are actually important to them in the times when they aren't despairing. They stop eating, and brushing their teeth, and going to work or school. They even kill themselves. Sometimes they kill themselves by increments, with drugs or cigarettes or what have you, and sometimes they cut right to the chase and nibble the barrel of a .45, or else fashion themselves a nice sturdy noose.

So that's where I was, at the exact same age that you are now. Instead of skipping lectures and going to football games and sleeping in on Saturdays, though, I ended up in a hospital ward full of all kinds of strange and unhappy people, living in a room with a door that opened both ways to keep me from barricading myself inside, and with a mirror made out of metal so that I couldn't break it and slash myself.

The doctors told me I was depressed—this was news to me, so that was nice, in a way, to finally put a name on it. But what wasn't nice—what was, in fact, almost as bad as being depressed itself, and took as long and as much effort to come back from—was the shame of having surrendered all claims to self-determination. I rose when told to, ate when instructed, attended group and individual therapy when scheduled. I had to earn shoelaces and a belt. I spent a lot of time speculating about what my high school friends were doing, and how it was possible that my trajectory had diverged so violently from theirs. I said whatever I thought the doctors and therapists wanted to hear, in an effort to get out of that place as quickly as possible. And when I did get out, I swore I would never go back, even though I imagined at that point I really had no where else to go.

It turned out I was wrong on both counts. I would go back in the hospital, much to my chagrin, and I had plenty of other places to go—it would just take me a long time to get to any of them.

In the meantime, I, like Junior, continued to spin my metaphorical wheels. But I persisted. In this case, persisting meant, basically, staying alive—again, no mean feat most days—and returning to a love of

reading and writing outside of the structure of school, and doing a decent if somewhat inconsistent job of supporting myself.

So for the next seven years, I did all those things. The girl didn't come back. No one seemed to think much of anything I wrote. The jobs I worked paid for shit, and were sort of soul-crushing besides. Given the long odds of ever publishing a book, and given the even longer odds of ever making a dime at it even if I did manage to publish something, I had no reason to expect my circumstances to ever change. I thought I'd end up one of those sad, angry lifer types you see working in kitchens—the guys in their mid-forties who are surrounded by an ever-changing cast of early twenty-somethings. From the perspective of the lifer, especially when he gets into his thirties, those twenty-somethings serve as living reminders how he's growing old and squandering his life, because they never get any older because they're mostly in college and shuffle off the crap-job treadmill right after they graduate and so are replaced by younger versions of themselves every four years, give or take, while of course the lifer is never replaced. That was what I anticipated my future would look like. I would spend the rest of my working life getting steadily older, while everyone around me stayed the same age.

Still, I persisted, even after I was forced to take a break from the job I hated and again found myself in one of those rooms with the funny doors that open both ways and the metal mirrors in the bathroom that doesn't lock.

This time, as down and desperate as I'd again become, I found I had a fire in me somewhere that hadn't been there before. I was mad as hell, which all things considered felt pretty good, as it was the only thing that convinced me I was still alive in some way. I got particularly mad about being denied the opportunity to vote via absentee ballot in the 2000 presidential election. In fact, I'm still pissed off about it. I mean, maybe it's true that at the time I couldn't really be trusted with any flatware other than a plastic spork, but that doesn't mean I was incapable of making an informed decision about who I wanted to be the next President of the United States.

So yeah, much like Junior in Chicago, I was angry. Not to the point where I was ready to blow up a federal building, but pretty angry nonetheless. And like Junior, I finally, in what felt like the 11th hour, found some direction, some impetus, some anima.

I'd been writing stories, and trying to find homes for them, for years without any success. So among many other things, I resolved that I would give myself until my 26th birthday to sell my first story. If I missed this deadline, I would end the pipe dream of being a novelist, get practical, go back to school, find a decent job that paid well and didn't make me want to poke my own eyes out with a soup spoon.

Understand, I was only 25 at this point. Which I guess I bring that up to illustrate how for me at the time, and probably for you right now, 25 seemed fairly old, seemed like I'd spent a great deal of time acutely unhappy and like my best adult years were draining away and I was running out of time to alter my course. From my perspective now, the idea of 25 being too late to change things is frankly fucking laughable. But such is one of the many follies of youth—no offense intended, but it's true.

Nevertheless, this was the deal I made with myself—sell a story by May 12, 2001, or hang it up and go sell real estate. And it was a deal I meant to keep. In the same way that Junior, after experiencing a revelation in the rented van just before Reggie detonates himself, throws himself into doing whatever he can to save the world from the fate he's known about since birth, I threw myself into writing with a seriousness and intent I had not before deployed. I think part of the reason for this was that I was simply ready to work that hard on my art, but it also, looking back, probably had a lot to do with the fact that, whether I admitted it to myself or not, I really didn't want to sell real estate. I didn't want to sell anything, in fact. Like Lloyd Dobler, the hero of a movie from my formative years that you've probably never seen called *Say Anything*, I didn't want to sell anything bought or processed, or buy anything sold or processed, or process anything bought, sold, or processed, or repair anything sold, bought or processed. Which really is as good a description of the genuine artistic sensibility as any I've ever read.

So, like Junior on his “Chicken Little World Tour,” I knuckled down, spent my days and evenings still working in restaurant kitchens, and my overnights writing and writing and rewriting endlessly. I sent these stories out to the countless literary magazines that publish in near-complete obscurity, and each of my little bits of genius came back to me, unloved and unwanted. The usual bleak scene, until, just a couple of weeks before my 26th birthday, I got my first acceptance from a little startup online-only venue called *Carve Magazine*. They’d been in publication for less than a year, I think. No one read the thing, practically speaking. No one ever read any of the “little” magazines, especially the brand new ones. Nevertheless, I was probably more excited than I would be, five years later, when a big fancy New York house called to tell me they’d love the privilege of publishing my first book, *God is Dead*.

So again, persistence is the catchword, here. None of this happens if I don’t persist, in the face of heartbreak, in the face of mental illness, in the face of the astronomically long odds of ever writing anything worth reading, let alone the odds of getting paid to do so.

If you’re keeping track, these are more or less the exact same challenges that Junior has to persist through. Just in case you’re still wondering how much of the novel is autobiographical.

And then there is one of the most trying and painful events in the book, for Junior, an event I was cruel enough to force him to endure twice: the illness and death of his father, John Senior.

When I wrote the bulk of *Everything Matters*, during 2006 and 2007, my own father was sick and dying. He, like John Senior, had lung cancer. Fortunately, we only had to go through that once, which was more than sufficient, let me tell you. When my mother called tearfully with the news of my father’s diagnosis, my life had changed about as dramatically as a life can—I was writing full-time, my first book was about to be published by the big fancy New York house and would go on to win a couple of pretty nice awards, and for the first time ever I had a little bit of money in the bank.

Compare my circumstances with Junior’s at the time he learns his own father is sick—he’s cleaned himself up and is about to complete work on a technology that will allow many of earth’s inhabitants to escape the comet. He’s living with purpose for the first time in his life. He is, much to his surprise, even experiencing something resembling happiness, or at least contentment. Then the phone rings, and life grabs him by the feet and upends him once again.

When I learned the details of my father’s diagnosis, I knew, but did not say to him or my mother, that he was very likely not going to make it. After all, from a certain perspective none of us is “going to make it,” and besides, they’d been given a sliver of hope by a team of doctors in Boston, and I let them hold on to that, lived in silence with my own near-certainty of his impending death. Meanwhile, though, I set about sifting through the piles of information on alternative therapies, clinical trials, and various other forms of desperate measures and black magic. Among other things, I found a mysterious concoction called Sun Soup that had a bit of clinical evidence to suggest it was effective at rolling back precisely the kind of cancer my father suffered from. It is not at all coincidence—and if you like, a quick Google search will confirm this—that the ingredients of Sun Soup and the ingredients of the cancer-killing elixir that Junior formulates at the Merck labs in Boston are exactly the same.

In the novel, of course, John Senior is cured. In real life, sadly, we never found out if Sun Soup was the magic bullet that would have saved my father. At my urging he ordered a month’s supply—at a whopping cost of \$600—but only choked down one portion of the stuff, which looked and smelled like mud, before declaring there were fates worse than death and refusing to eat any more.

I suppose I could have advocated for him to give it a chance to work, but I couldn’t even get the old man to smoke a little pot so he wouldn’t feel like puking all the time. And besides, maybe he was right—maybe there are fates worse than death, and maybe one of them is compromising your dignity by choking down something that is likely no more than snake oil, while the guy who fleeced you for six hundred bucks is somewhere counting your money. What do I know?

In any event, after that my experience of my father's illness and death very closely resembles Junior's experience in his second life, when he tends to John Senior the best that he can, tries to keep his father comfortable and make sure he knows that he is loved. It turns out this is all you can do. I tended to my father most days, and then in the afternoon or evening came home and worked on the book. There were several things that happened that I basically transcribed into the novel as I experienced them. For example, just like Junior, I once had to basically pick my father up from his seat at a restaurant, and he was heavier than I thought he'd be, looking at his wasted form. Also, I helped my father onto the massage table when the masseuse came over, and I was afraid of his bony body and his belly fat with tumors and so I didn't take the care I should have in helping him off with his shirt, I rushed it so as not to have to touch him too much, and I do still feel somewhat ashamed of that moment of cowardice, though it certainly wasn't the only one. And I did have to rush to my parents' house one night when my father couldn't get himself back to bed after going to the bathroom. All that stuff happened, more or less as I had it happen to Junior in the book.

Now for a moment I'm going to get a bit more serious, and maybe a be a bit of a downer. I'd like to say: don't ever let someone convince you there's anything—and I mean anything—good about dying. There is nothing redemptive in decline and decay. The hard candy of necrosis has no nougaty center where the human spirit prevails over all. Death is not a 'journey,' a 'part of life,' a 'release from suffering,' or any other such bullshit euphemism we employ to comfort and delude ourselves. And while we're on the subject, no one 'passes on' or 'passes away,' either, and they sure as fuck don't 'cross over.' They die, and then they start to swell and stink in the very next moment. When I knelt in front of my grandmother's casket at the funeral home when I was twelve, I snuck a look at her face and saw—under the grotesque makeup job, the screaming circles of rouge and the bloody lipstick—what I saw was the aspect of a piece of roadkill, her mouth caked dry and her eyes sunk under their lids, like a squirrel in the gutter with its legs up in the air and its entrails drying in the sun. The flies would have been on her, if not for the formaldehyde, is what I'm saying. And then when my friend Ronnie died at boot camp in Parris Island and the Marines shipped him home, the stories we heard were of Ronnie begging not to die on the table in the infirmary, and as far as I know he didn't say anything profound or life-affirming, just, you know, pleaded with strangers to save his life, then died when they failed. And then when my father died I kissed his corpse on the forehead, over and over, and ran my palm along the side of his face, stroked the short sparse hair that remained, and all I could feel was how cold and vacant he already was, how every thought and aspiration and heartache he'd ever experienced was now and forever negated by his sudden nothingness, and I was visited by the understanding that in life we can fool ourselves into believing we are something more, and more permanent, than our constituent parts, but in death the truth becomes impossible to deny: we are nothing more than meat, bones, fingernails, and hair. Broken down further: proteins, mostly. Further still: carbon, hydrogen, phosphorus, and so on. Molecules on loan for our brief lives and times, reclaimed eventually, with grief as interest, by the creditor.

I know that's a drag to hear about, but it sort of brings me around to the big overarching point that talks like this are, in my understanding, supposed to have. In *Everything Matters* I tried to make sense of all this negation and nothingness that surrounds us, and it's debatable whether or not I succeeded. But that's a book, and much to the chagrin of my ten-year-old self, we don't live in books. We live here. Here it's messy and often boring and nonsensical and we keep making the same mistakes over and over again and very rarely learn big important lessons and then put them into perfect practice the way Junior does. Here bad shit happens to all of us sooner or later, and sometimes the bad shit is sort of unimaginably bad. This has probably already been true for most of you, but if you haven't yet experienced some bad shit, you will. And you'll have a very simple binary choice to make: you can persist, or else not persist. This was the lesson I learned over and over again during my twenties, when the faulty wiring in my brain kept putting me in the hospital. Like I said before, if I go a bit to the left or the right during those times, I don't live long enough to be here with you today. I never write any books, either because I'm dead or because I didn't

drum up the balls to pursue what I knew was my only talent. I'm a little worried that I'm veering into territory where this starts to sound too commencement-speechy, or worse, motivational-speechy. People who know me well would tell you that I'm about as far removed from a motivational speaker as anyone you're likely to encounter. Most days I feel like self-improvement is merely a public form of masturbation, at least the way we seem to engage in it as a culture—with book clubs and tearful seminars—and while I have no problem with masturbation, I'm not interested in sitting and listening to someone tell me about its necessity, or how to do it, and I'm definitely not interested in standing on this stage and telling you how to do it.

But enough throat clearing. My point, more or less, is this: I feel as though I'm sort of a dramatic example of how life will inevitably challenge us, and moreover, how it really is our response to those challenges, rather than the challenges themselves, that determines where we find ourselves a decade down the road. This is the lesson that Junior learns—after all, the fact of the comet strike in *Everything Matters* is incontrovertible, and thus like any inevitability ends up having no real effect on how he lives his life, or whether that life has meaning. It's the choices he makes, and not the fact or timing of his demise, that truly matter.

Forgive me if this point seems obvious, or if it sounds an awful lot like a dozen other bromides you've been spoonfed throughout your lives. But it seems to me that it's the obvious truths that bear repeating early and often. After all, they're the ones that even a not-terribly-bright college dropout like me can grasp and absorb, and it often seems like the fact that they're so easy to grasp inclines people to tune out whenever they see one coming their way. We need someone to repeat this shit to us over and over until it sinks in, and even then we still need regular reminders, like booster shots. Given this, I'd advise you to resist the urge to tune out. I promise you'll shorten your learning curve that way.

I mentioned at the beginning that I was, for certain reasons, somewhat reluctant to thank you all for coming. But I have no compunction whatsoever about thanking you for staying. So, thanks for sticking around, and for your indulgence.