

Monday, November 21, 2022

To Sophia on her 14th Birthday:

(alternatively, A Love Letter to a Total Stranger)

HAPPY BIRTHDAY
DAGMAR!!!

There is scarcely anything else in the world I could wish for more than to be with you. Sometimes, I don't care if the whole world forgets about me as long as you remember me. There is so much I want to tell you. In fact, you're currently reading the fourth or fifth version of this letter. I started writing it months ago, but now I need FedEx to get it to you on time because I waited until the end to re-write it.

You have a father who loves you and thinks about you every day. It hurts to be apart from you. I dream of the day we can be a part of each other's lives again.

I believe there is an undiscovered country out there for us.

I barely know you at all. I knew you a little back in 2015, but you were a child then. I don't choose to live in the past, but the past is all I know. For years, I sent you Olive Garden gift cards because when you were little, you told me you liked it there. I wanted to give you gifts that you liked. I know your mother prefers Cracker Barrel. But honestly, I was never turned-on by grits and catfish. My parents never tried hard to expand my palate, so I wanted to expand yours. I turned Morey on to sushi, but as far as I know, she only likes salmon nigiri. It's a shame because there's so much else. Uni (sea urchin). Ebi tempura. And toro sushi – if you can find it!

I wanted you to visit me in Abu Dhabi so we could share baba ghanoush, and authentic Arab shawarmas, and ebi tempura, and seaweed salad, and sushi made with eels, and crab fried rice. Sure as Hell beats grits and catfish. Baba ghanoush – it’s smoked eggplant mashed into a paste with sesame oil and garlic. Your aunt Kimberly used to make it, but there’s nothing like genuine, authentic Arab food made fresh by some Lebanese guy named Mohammad, who learned to make it from his grandmother, and served with fresh bread directly out of a hot oven. It’s amazing. I can’t wait to get back to Abu Dhabi.

At this writing, I’m in Mexico City. I’ve been here several times during your life. I like it here. Many years ago, I walked around and found a nice park. I found one specific bench that had a nice view. I had my GPS receiver with me, so I made a pinpoint. That pinpoint is still in my GPS receiver and I was able to find that exact bench again. I thought it was cool that I could be in some strange faraway land and find exact same spot twice – years apart. And guess what? Mexico is a Hague nation (it rhymes with ‘vague’). Ask your mother right now if you can go to Mexico to visit your dad. She once said you could only visit me in Hague countries. Well.....

I already looked at the airlines. You could be with me here in Mexico City in just a few hours. There are flights from Lynchburg to Charlotte and from Charlotte directly to Mexico City. It’s easy. You could, for example, fly here for three days, a holiday weekend, and not miss any school. And of course, I’ll send you back home. Right now, I’m in the Condesa neighborhood. You can look it up. It’s clean and safe, lots of police, lots of Americans, lots of English being spoken. You’re taking Spanish in school, right? Practice here. *Tomare los tacos de pescado con salsa verde y una cerveza. Por Favor.* My Spanish started with “Where’s the bathroom?” in Panama in 2013. It’s the most important. For the most part, you can improvise everything else.

The last time I saw you, we were having dinner on Riverside Avenue in Lynchburg. I remember the date: Friday, January 23, 2015. It was snowing. I was still wearing a coat and tie from court. I remember you asking me, “Why are you wearing fancy clothes?”. I bought that suit in Antwerp, Belgium two years earlier from a small tailor that had been in business since the 1860s. The tie I was wearing was the same tie that I wore when I married my first wife in California. Have you ever seen a picture of her? <http://black.blue/50.jpg>

I thought it was fitting to have that tie go full-circle. That suit is in storage right now in Dubai. But when I see it, I'm reminded of our last dinner in Lynchburg.

When I mention these places – Belgium, Dubai, California – can you find them on a map? I'm a huge geography enthusiast. A “maphead”. I want you to know that about me. When Morey was little, I made her memorize the names of each of the Hawaiian Islands and their biggest city including its English translation. She knew that Honolulu, on the island of Oahu, for example, means “splendid harbor”. I wonder if she remembers that. You were born in Waimea (literally, “red water”).

My father was a high school geography teacher for many years. Did you know that? I think there are many things you don't know about me or my family. I'm half of you. When I was a child, my father brought home maps and atlases for me to study. You've probably never used a paper atlas. But there's something magical about studying pages and pages of maps. If I could be your father, you'd know how to read maps, I promise. Driving maps, topographic maps, aviation sectionals, even bathymetric maps. Do you even know what ‘topographic’ means? Or ‘bathymetric’? Oh God, there is so much to teach you. There are unexplored worlds at your feet.

I wanted to teach you to drive. Seriously. You and Morey both. I thought about this from the time Morey was born. I think I'm a great driver. I learned to drive in the snow. And I've driven in big cities with intense traffic, sometimes at night, sometimes in the rain. I can drive a manual transmission. I know how to drive off-road. Proof: <http://black.blue/88.jpg> I've driven across the USA several times. I can teach you to pass the tests. I can teach you to be a great driver. I wanted to teach you with long drives to include map reading, route planning, and – most important – plan the soundtrack. Maybe take an overnight trip to the Outer Banks of North Carolina. I'd have you drive the whole way and we'd have dinner on Avalon Pier. I'm listening to “Avalon” by Roxy Music now. It's on your iPod. Here is an online copy: <http://black.blue/avalon.mp3>

By the way, nothing stops you from learning to drive in Abu Dhabi (HINT!). Learn to drive there – with a million crazy Indians and Pakistanis – and you can then handle ANYTHING, anywhere.

I bought you an iPod a few months ago for your birthday. I've been slowly adding music to it: music that's emblematic of my youth and songs that have very special meaning for me. They remind me of a place, a person, a time in my life, an event, a triumph or a tragedy. I want to share my life with you. But I am not sending it to you now. I wanted it to be a birthday gift, along with gift cards or cash or clothes or a phone or a laptop or whatever you want. But I have no idea what you want. I've sent you gifts in the past, and I have no idea if you've received them. I've sent you books and flowers and toys and gift cards and letters and post cards and lots of things. In fact, here's a list of things I've sent you in past years: <http://black.blue/sent> Did you receive ANY of them? Did you ever see this website? <http://sobe.black.blue> If not, I urge you to take a look. There are a lot of stories, photos, information and links.

I'll happily send you the iPod if you want it. Just tell me. I'll send anything you want. If you had a phone, I'd love to have the number. I send you e-mails. I asked your mother to set-up a time to let me call you on Skype. But no one ever gets back to me. I don't want you to think I don't care.

If you have a phone, you can send me messages with SMS or WhatsApp or Signal. My number is +971 50 377 1969. I have a mailing address in the USA. It's all listed: <black.blue/contact> My Instagram is [@greatblueview](https://www.instagram.com/greatblueview) YouTube Channel <http://tinyurl.com/beckeryt>

Get to know your father. For starters, here are 25 things you probably didn't know about me: (well, I could only think of 21, but that's close enough)

1. Paris is not a city; it's a world. I was only 17 when I first visited Paris, not much older than you are now. I've been back there several times. When I left the war in Iraq, I first went to Paris and flew home from there. I've even had dinner on the Eiffel Tower with your mother. Nothing compares to the energy of being young and free and exploring a new country, a new continent, a new world. Back then, when I was 17, my eyes were open wide; the world was my oyster. I was never so awake. College would start for me a few weeks later. Adult life, with all of its fun and responsibilities, would begin soon. But for a brief moment, standing at the top of the Eiffel Tower, I had the rare privilege to choose any future I wanted. Think about it: I could have gone anywhere and done anything. You only have that choice when you're 17. Paris has changed over the years. But for me, Paris means hope; it means optimism; it means possibilities; it means new life. I'm American but Paris feels like a hometown. I would love to take you there someday. I don't speak a word of French, but I can find my way around just fine.

2. When I was 29, I spent a night in the desert push-starting my Jeep. I doubt you'll ever push-start a car. But many years ago, you could literally push a car to get it started if the battery died. I was living in California and driving a beat-up old Jeep that, for a while, had an electrical problem. Nevertheless, I decided, like an idiot, to drive it across the desert on Interstate 40 near Death Valley. After a few hours, my Jeep died completely. I carried a spare battery, and changed it out. But that one died, too. Then I got out, pushed hard, got it rolling, then quickly hopped in, put it in gear, and it would spring to life.

I guess this is turning into a long story. But picture me out in the empty desert, alone, no cell phones back then, stopping every 30 minutes on the side of the freeway to push-start my Jeep in the darkness, and driving it until it slowly died again. I had no choice but to press on. If the police saw me, they would call a tow truck and I didn't have the money for that. I finally made it to Needles just before dawn.

In the great American novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, the story briefly takes place in Needles; it's a great book if you have the time. Noah, the son, leaves his family when they get to Needles. I always liked the name Needles for a desert town. In real life, there was a little restaurant in Needles called *The Wagon Wheel*. It was still there the last time I checked. I ate there every time I stopped in Needles. I can still picture it in my head.

3. On my 49th birthday, a prostitute spit in my face. No, I didn't pay her to do it. In October 2018, I was flying from Mexico to Abu Dhabi. The plane stopped in Beijing, China. For no extra charge, the airline allowed passengers to spend a few days in Beijing if they wanted to. American tourists can spend 96 hours in China without a visa. I exercised this option. I got to see the Great Wall of China and other landmarks such as the Temple of Heaven and the Forbidden City. It was just a coincidence that I was there on my birthday – October 11. I was alone. I treated myself to a nice dinner on my birthday. But when I left the restaurant, a Chinese woman approached me and offered her “services”. She spoke some English and she was very demanding. When I walked away, she followed me. I told her ‘no’ many times. She was very persistent. Finally, she spit in my face and walked off. I wasn't even angry; I was impressed by her moxie. Happy Birthday.
4. I earned my pilot's license in Hawaii. Your mother was my first passenger. I dreamed of someday flying my kids around. My flight instructor was formerly in the Army. Once we were practicing power-on stalls (it's a maneuver that, if done incorrectly, can result in loss of control of the airplane). I did the maneuver incorrectly and started to lose control. I looked to him for guidance, but he just sat there with his arms crossed and said, “If you kill us both, I will kick your ass in Heaven”. I liked him.
5. My signature is in outer space. Before I met your mother, I worked for a large aerospace company called Lockheed Martin in Sunnyvale, California. I was a software engineer on a project called MILSTAR. It's a satellite constellation that provides communications to the military. On April 30, 1999, the third MILSTAR satellite was launched, the one I worked on. Its official spacecraft designation is USA-143. The employees were allowed to sign their name on a heat shield with a Sharpie. The satellite is orbiting around the Earth to this day, but it's in a useless orbit thanks to – ironically – a software bug.
6. I rarely get headaches. I can go an entire year without a headache. I try to sympathize with people who get migraines. But I've never had one.

7. During your lifetime, I was working at a job where I could listen-in to cell phone calls. The governments of some countries like to monitor certain people. For a while, that was my job. What's interesting is that I was listening to cell phones as a fun hobby back in 1997 and 1998 in California. I bought a special radio that could tune-in. I used to record calls and then write music to accompany them. Example: on your iPod, there's a song called "Heidi". Here is an online copy: black.blue/heidi.mp3

8. My father's father was a tool and die maker. His name was James Francis Becker. Your mother's father's father, Edward Norman Morey, was also a tool and die maker. They never met each other. It's just a coincidence. So, what's a tool and die maker? It's a skilled man with a job in a machine shop where they make one-of-a-kind tools that can't be bought in any store. It's the 'elite' of the industrial jobs. It requires real talent; you can't learn it in college. It's a dying art. The job hasn't changed much in 100 years.

Both of those men were very good at what they did. I had the chance to meet your mother's grandfather before he died. He joked that, for him, a "half day" of work was 12 hours. My grandfather was taciturn; he didn't say much at all (so when he did speak, I knew he wasn't lying). They were great men. Your forefathers were not Soy Boy fags who liked cats and yoga. They were Real Men who worked hard all their lives, raised families, built homes, and only accepted the most difficult jobs. They were tough and daring, and helped create a civilization that you now enjoy whether you realize it or not. They made sacrifices to make the lives of their descendants better, including those they would never meet, like you. May you have such men in your life someday.

9. I have skied in the Alps, in southern Austria. It's the best skiing on Earth. I'm not a great skier, but it was a thrill. I would love to teach you to ski.

10. I can name every nation on a map of the world. Almost. The Caribbean nations still throw me sometimes. But Africa? Asia? No problem. Comoros, Monaco, Turkmenistan, the Kingdom of Brunei. I can find them all. Can you?

11. I drove across the USA four times in an old beat-up Jeep, including a trip through southern Texas in the summertime with no air conditioning. I had to wear shoes otherwise I'd burn my feet on the metal floor. That was an interesting drive; there are a million more funny stories from that adventure.

12. I flew to Hawaii for the first time ever on December 7, 1989. I still remember the date. It was raining when I stepped off the plane in Hilo on the Big Island. It felt like a Baptism. A few days later, I was sitting at Kalakaua Park in Hilo and a crazy babbling homeless man approached me, called me by name ("Christopher", not just "Chris") and he knew that I wanted to take flying lessons and get my pilot's license. I hadn't ever seen him before. How could a crazy babbling homeless man know this about me? To this very day, I cannot explain it.

13. Four years after the incident in Hawaii, there was a film called Grand Canyon. It's still one of my favorite movies. In it, there's a crazy babbling homeless man who appears to be a prophet: he knows the personal thoughts of a stranger, and gives her life advice. It's a crazy idea: maybe God exists, but he doesn't speak to priests and Holy Men; maybe he only speaks to crazy babbling homeless people.

14. I have no tattoos or piercings. None. I think Tramp Stamps are ugly and stupid.

15. I hiked from the South Rim of the Grand Canyon to the river, and back up to the rim in a single day. I'm sure other people have done it, too, but I never met anyone who has. I was in the best shape of my life then, but still, the hike almost killed me. There are signs on the trail, warning hikers not to try. I started before sunrise. Near the end, I remember lying down on the trail, totally exhausted, and other hikers were asking me if they should call 911. But I finished it on my own. The most grueling day of my life.
16. I saw my first total solar eclipse in Hawaii on July 11, 1991. Ever since then, I've wanted to see more of them. It's one of the reasons I paid for your trip to South Carolina a few years ago. I wanted you to see a total solar eclipse.
17. There is an active volcano on the Big Island of Hawaii and I've seen it more than 100 times from the air. When I first came to Hawaii, I got a job with a helicopter tour company in Hilo. They took tourists over Kilauea volcano. When there was an empty seat, I always took it. The lava flow changed every day, so no two trips were the same, and I got to see it change over time. When I first lived in Hawaii, there was a lovely beach village called Kalapana. Check a map; it's no longer there. I watched Kalapana slowly disappear over the summer of 1990. I have memories of Kalapana. I have old pictures of me standing on the beach that's no longer there.
18. I visited Auschwitz. World War Two, I suppose, is a bit less relevant today than when I was your age. But hopefully they still teach about it in school. Auschwitz was an infamous Nazi prison camp where they sent the Jews to die. It's a museum today, but you can still visit the gas chambers and see the piles of shoes and suitcases left behind by the Jews. They were told they were simply moving, so they brought suitcases and pots and pans and everything else. I don't believe in ghosts. But that place is fucking haunted.
19. I used to write music. I'm not sure I was very good at it, but for a long time, I was very inspired and enthusiastic. I took piano lessons as a kid, but synthesizers started to be popular when I was about your age. I begged Nana Julie to buy me synthesizers and electronic drum machines. Very little of my music exists today. Most of it was lost over time or only ever recorded on cassette tapes that are long gone. I've put all my music on your iPod. My "artist name" was "RadioMetric". Of all the music I've written, here is my favorite song: black.blue/track4.mp3
Here is my first "album": black.blue/radiometric
Here was my music rack in 1999: black.blue/12.jpg
20. Dumb jobs. I tried to create a list of all the dumb jobs I had when I was a young man.
 - a. When I was in high school, I worked at a Pizza Hut restaurant. I was also taking karate lessons at the time. One of the guys at my karate class also worked at that Pizza Hut. When our schedules overlapped, I remember doing karate moves with him in the kitchen on a slippery floor when the manager wasn't looking.

My friend Mike worked there, too. Once, he and I were told to come in very early, before sunrise, to clean the rugs. It was the winter, and it was cold as fuck. We took the rugs to a car wash and took turns holding them up while the other sprayed them with cold soapy water. We had to take turns because our hands kept getting numb from the cold. Everything was muddy and wet and frozen and shitty. Ah, good times. The pay was "\$4 an hour plus everything you can steal".

- b. I was a bouncer at a college bar in Cortland, New York; it was called Pandemonium or something stupid like that. It's no longer there. Really loud music and idiot drunk college kids. That job didn't last very long.
- c. I was a newspaper pressman. I helped run an actual newspaper press, with big barrels of ink and huge reels of paper and big machines with moving parts. The newspaper was called The Cortland Standard. It still exists. When I was a boy, I delivered that same newspaper for a year on my bike.
- d. I was a technician at a radio station called KNOT AM-FM in Prescott, Arizona. It was sold a long time ago. I mostly cleaned the equipment, but I sometimes blew things up by accident. I have a good friend named Dennis Deja. Maybe you've heard me mention him before. I met him there. Yes, his last name really is Deja, and he's heard every "Déjà vu" joke there is. Here we are: black.blue/34.jpg His girlfriend's last name is "Danger". Seriously. She's heard every "Danger is my name" joke there is.
- e. I was a black-and-white film developer in Santa Barbara, California. I forgot the name of the place, but it was at the corner of Cliff Drive and Camino Calma. This was before digital cameras. Serious photographers still shot lots of film that had to be developed in tanks with chemicals. I knew how to do that. Sometimes we would get film from Los Angeles and I would see celebrities in the prints, just hanging out at home like normal. One day, a girl came in and specifically asked for a female employee. She handed over two rolls of film and quietly asked for discretion and privacy because the photos were X-rated, of her and her boyfriend. The female employee agreed to be discrete, but later forgot, and put the film in my batch for processing without telling me. Later, when she saw my eyes get really, really wide, she realized her mistake. Wow, how did people survive before digital cameras? College girls usually just took pictures of cats.
- f. I was an IT guy at a hospital for a few months in Cortland, New York. It was the overnight shift. I worked alone. I had the entire department to myself. I loved it. Sometimes, it's nice to work totally alone and have complete control over the entire domain with no boss. Overnight, I had to run a bunch of batch jobs on the computers and make print-outs. I had to fix any dumb little problem the daytime workers left behind. It was an eight-hour shift, but I could usually finish in four or five hours. The rest of the time, I'd play computer games, play my own music, sleep, watch movies, wander around the hospital, order pizza, invite friends over, go up to the roof, go to the Emergency Room and flirt with the young nurses, shred random things in the hospital's monster industrial shredder, and generally goof-off until the morning. I used to look up the private medical reports of my former classmates and ex-girlfriends for fun. But that's a crime now. Both my father and my mother worked at the same hospital when they were much younger. The shredder was fucking amazing: pizza boxes, phone books, bottles, coins, an umbrella, tennis racket, paint cans, old phones, full cans of Coke... "Let's play: WILL IT SHRED?" The only real challenge was to be awake and appear busy when the boss walked in at 8:00 AM. More than once, she caught me sleeping. Watch the 1991 film *Career Opportunities* to see how the world of a working man can be in love with night, and pay no worship to the garish sun.

- g. I was a room service server at the Hilton Waikoloa Village in Hawaii, but when I worked there, it was called the Hyatt Regency Waikoloa. One night, I brought food to a suite where The Temptations were staying. Probably before your time. Another night, I was sent to a VIP suite to refill the ice and drinks. The guests weren't there, but the suite had a piano. So, I sat there – in some super-luxury Presidential suite – and played “Right Here Waiting” by Richard Marx. It has a cool piano intro. It's on your iPod.
- h. I was a graphic artist (sorta) for a publisher who ran the business out of his house. He was a hoarder. I didn't even know that word back then. This was before the TV show Hoarders. It was a 3000 square-foot house, but I swear 2900 square feet was nothing but junk. You literally could not walk through some rooms. If you threw anything away, even worthless shit, he would panic irrationally. It's funny, but a little sad, too, that some people's brains are wired like that. Some people have real problems.
- i. I was a “kitchen bitch” for a few weeks at the Hollywood Restaurant in Cortland, New York. A neat place. My father used to take me there when I was a kid. They had a jukebox and you could pick songs directly at the tables. The restaurant is still there. When I married your mother, my Best Man was a friend named Mark. I have fond memories of Mark in high school. We often had parties at the Hollywood Restaurant. We were there one night and he was blitzed on stolen alcohol he was sipping from a McDonald's cup. I didn't drink then, but that was a fun night. Two years later, Mark would breakup with his girlfriend in that same restaurant after he caught her doing drugs in the bathroom. Once, I had a huge crush on a girl named Jeanine. Here we are: <black.blue/17.jpg> Our one and only date was at the Hollywood. She later sold junk on cable TV shopping networks; here she is: <black.blue/Jeanine.m4v>.

Anyway, when the manager hired me, he expected me to stay there for a while. But I took the job only because I wanted to save up money to go see a girl in Daytona Beach, Florida. I secretly planned to quit once I had enough money. And I did. True story. The manager was pissed. It was a shitty thing to do. I'm sure he's long forgotten. But I'll always remember that trip to Florida. Here is the restaurant: <black.blue/23.jpg> and <black.blue/59.jpg>

- j. I was a customer service guy at an FBO at the Santa Barbara Airport in California. FBO = Fixed Based Operator. Its unimaginative name was Santa Barbara Aviation. You'll find an FBO at every airport. They mostly sell fuel to private airplane owners. But some of them, like this one, also arrange catering and booze for private jets; they'll have a lounge for pilots and – most importantly – do almost anything for the VIP passengers, like rent cars for them, or drive them to the beach, or pick up packages for them, or take their golf clubs out for cleaning, or get them some very specific food for their kid like a 6-inch Subway turkey sandwich with no pickles and extra mustard. Seriously. They're rich and don't care what anything costs, they just want service. Some want their asses kissed. I met a few celebrities there. Kenny G. He was nice. You probably don't even know who that is. Michael Jackson's jet bought fuel there, but I never saw him.

- k. I delivered pizzas one summer. The job sucks, but this particular job was magical. Let me explain. It was 1990. I was only 20. I had just spent a few months in Hawaii, and felt alive and awake. I was back in my hometown for the summer; I had just driven across the USA. I shipped my Jeep from Hawaii to Los Angeles, then drove from Los Angeles to New York. It was the trip of a lifetime. When I got to New York, my friend Mark said I could earn some quick cash by delivering pizzas. We delivered pizzas all night. Typically, we were in separate cars, but we'd go together when it was slow.

You know the expression “Misery loves company”? Well, it was a miserable job, but he and I were in it together. He taught me all these clever shortcuts that I never knew. He taught me how to find hard-to-find places. He was a smart-ass and made me laugh. He drove too fast and often didn't stop for red lights. The restaurant officially closed at 2 AM. But the truth is that it really closed when the phone stopped ringing. We might deliver pizzas until 4 AM or later. Drunk college kids are a great market. I would take the roof and doors off my jeep and blast my music (usually Public Enemy or Shinehead – both on your iPod).

We would agree to meet at 4:30 at some parking lot to count our cash, reconnect, reflect, decompress, and watch the sunrise. I'd drive there and I'd find him sitting on the pavement – still warm from the previous day's sunshine – with his truck's doors wide open, blasting the sampler CD “Theodore”. Living Colour. Poi Dog Pondering. Toad the Wet Sprocket. 3rd Bass. These are bands from the CD. I'm sure you never heard of them, but they're all on your iPod. Mark and I would shake hands and go to Frank and Mary's Diner at for breakfast. It was a shit job with shit pay. But it was an amazing time I'll always cherish.

Mark and me in the desert: <black.blue/46.jpg> and <black.blue/81.jpg>

- l. Two years earlier, Mark and I both worked at Cornell University for the summer. We mostly just cleaned things and moved furniture. But we got to live in the dorms for free. Nothing too crazy happened that summer except Mark got fired on the second-to-last day of the job for being an asshole to the boss. But, in fairness to him, she was a total bitch. Mark didn't care. I admired that about him – he didn't care about things that didn't really matter in life.

The university is in Ithaca, New York. The city is not as hilly as Lynchburg, but the university is up on a hill overlooking the city. The building next to our dorm was taller and had a much better view. Mark and I would order pizza then climb the fire escape of the taller building so we could eat on the roof with a view. Mark and I had to clean dorm rooms in the law school. One day, we found a credit card accidentally left behind by a student. I can neither confirm nor deny that he and I enjoyed a few unearned perks that summer.

21. I really miss you, kid. I love teasing you with the name “Dagmar”. I hope you know it's only a tease. And I tease because I love you.

Happy Birthday
Dad