

Some Maybe Revealing Reactions to Stuff That Happens Involving Money, Fame, and Fear:

(Conversations with Dakota Fanning)

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Like three AM on a Tuesday I get a call from Dakota Fanning. “What up,” she says, then asks for “the guy who wrote that thing about me that was about me but wasn’t actually about me.”

“I am that guy,” I tell her.

A couple of months ago, a Pacific Northwest online literary press posted this thing of mine called *Stories from the Collective Consciousness*. The shtick was that every week or two I’d release a chapter dealing with how I thought people thought a celebrity might act in some weird-ass situation. Gary Busey becomes a mall Santa Claus for a day. Emeril Lagasse becomes disenchanted with the soup quality at a local homeless shelter. Et cetera. Dakota, if I remember correctly, was supposed to be focusing hard—I mean actually jutting her tongue and pressing it flat against her upper lip—on the best way to propel a dart into a bullseye, when the opening salvo from Memphis-area rockabilly band The Dempseys derailed the trajectory of said dart into the whiskey glass of Brazilian power lifter Paulo Vitor damo da Rosa. Power lifter is pissed, Dakota plays it cool, and ultimately she winds up winning over his respect by hustling him at nine-ball.

Anyway it turns out that she stumbled upon her story via her mom, who was being sort of adorably mommish and soaking up every piece of information on the internet about her daughter. Dakota tells me on the phone that although she enjoyed the segment very much, there was no way she would ever reject an Oreo cookie in favor of one of those Milano vanilla-chocolate 'wafer sandwiches', *especially* when the Oreo was served with milk—and given that said rejection figured prominently in one of *Stories...*' pivotal sequences, she was concerned that I fundamentally misunderstood her as a human being.

And that's just a shame, she says. But she has a plan to remedy all that. With a fortuitous gap in her shooting schedule starting roughly right now, Dakota thinks the best thing to do is to go on a road trip and set things straight. She wants to know if that would be cool with me. I tell her that sure it sounds sweet and that yeah I'll see her tomorrow and that she should have a good morning or night or whatever time it is. Then I roll over and go back to sleep.

A day-long cruise up the Pacific in a '94 brown Ford Bronco later, she's sitting there on the street honking two staccato Waah-Waahs in the direction of my modest Queen-Anne townhouse. I trot outside with my clothes and toothbrush and notebook in a plastic Safeway bag. She keeps her seatbelt on and leans across the passenger seat, sticking her hand out through the rolled-down window. I take it and shake it.

"Hi," she says. "I'm me!"

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It's my third or fourth celebrity interview ever and I've got all my questions written out in impeccable cursive in my notebook. I haven't asked any of them yet. Instead Dakota and I riff on weird cloud shapes for close to an hour: "Bulbasaur!" "Kim Jong-il!" Then we listen to the sounds the wind makes when you roll the windows down to different levels—first halfway, then a quarter, then almost all the way up save for the littlest sliver, the ittiest bittiest bit. The sounds range from vacuum to dryer to busted drinking straw. Before we know it we're halfway through Washington headed to Helena, and the mountains engulf us. It is beautiful. I am nervous. I am rather warm for mid-May. I am wondering why she is driving a Ford Bronco, of all vehicles.

"OJ Simpson," she says.

I point out that her car is brown even though his was white.

"That is not a bad point," she says.

"So do you think, having been a prominent child actress, that it's difficult to transition out of aspects of your character that, like it or not, your audience frequently projects onto you—that for example you might have to actively try to assert your maturity, as in say for example the very graphic assault sequence in *Hounddog*, when, under different circumstances, you wouldn't have to do that otherwise?"

"Are you fucking serious?"

“Yes, I mean, it seems like it'd be a real pain in the ass for everybody to think of you all the time as this nice innocent little girl when, I mean, we were all nice innocent little girls and boys at some point in our lives, like Meryl Streep and Helen Mirren were once nice little innocent girls, or whatever, but that's not what people see, you know? They see you with your blonde hair and no front teeth and it's like 'Hello, I'm an adult now,' and it just seems like that'd be kind of hard to deal with, is all.”

She laughs hysterically and says nothing.

We are rolling through this dynamited pass, and the drainage channels in the hills are etched across the rocks like the creases of a brain. I ask her if she doesn't really want to talk to me about it, and tell her if she doesn't that it's fine, that it's cool.

“Dude, I want *very* much to talk with you,” she says.

“Okay, well then, what do you--”

“I want to *talk* with *you*,” she says, and floors the gas.

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Maybe ten or twelve miles outside Missoula and I have got to piss like a fiend. Dakota has been testifying at length to the virtues of Mexican Coca-Cola, a twenty-four pack of which she keeps in the back seat floor, and so I've machine-gunned like three of them so far.

“It's good shit,” she says. “Really.”

The stuff is indeed good shit. For her part she has kept strictly to a 72-oz. Big Gulp! of pure soda-fountain H2O, the kind you dispense by pressing the little white tab that hangs next to the Minute Maid spigot. She procured neither a top nor a straw for the glass, and drives with it sitting there sloshing around between her legs. Every once in awhile she'll palm the thing and take a massive swallow. Except for one harrowing skid around a bend when the cruise control started tripping out, not a single drop has spilled.

We resolve to whip into the next gas station. I am still gripping my notepad. We've been singing Cherry Bomb. I am better at singing Cherry Bomb than Dakota Fanning. I am actually disconcertingly good at singing Cherry Bomb. At one point I stick my head out the window and sing Cherry Bomb to a van in the next lane. The van has a ladder on top and the ladder rattles as it passes. Its passengers respond by mooning both of us. Dakota asks me to drive for a second. We execute a Jackie Chan-like switch-seats-while-driving maneuver. We do not crash. Dakota Fanning moons the passing van, a hang and not a press. Her technique is truly inspired. The van's driver honks twice and thumbs-ups and the van passes on. I hand Dakota her drink. She takes a Big Gulp and puts it back into her lap.

A big green sign tells us we're approaching somewhere. I take the exit. I ask her whether she's planning to acquiesce to the tremendous societal pressure that is surely mounting even now which suggests that despite many temptations to the contrary she should put her career in entertainment on hold to receive a quality college education. She says, "Herpa Derpa Derp" and makes a farting noise with her mouth. She points past my face and says,

“Look, a hitchhiking dragon with a Roy Orbison hairstyle.” I attempt to discover this dragon. She yanks my notebook out of my hands and shakes her finger in my face like Dikembe Mutombo and flings the notepad out the window and leans back in her chair. I tell her she probably has a point. We start to pass a gas station. I whip into the gas station. I go inside. I flash the cashier a peace sign. I enter the restroom. I take a very very very deep breath. At long last, I indeed piss like a fiend.

After I return to Earth and flush twice and dabble my fingers with water and piddle with my hair in the mirror, I exit the restroom to see Dakota holding a fistful of Slim Jims and a 20oz bottle of Pepsi.

“Everything come out alright?” she asks.

I make the A-OK symbol with my fingers and check to make sure I zipped my fly. Success. Dakota heads over to the cashier, and I troll the candy aisle for those awesome Granny Smith-flavored candy worms with the sugar crystals and the yellow package. More success. I pay for my Gummi Worms and notice Dakota thumbing through one of the issues of Buck'N'Bass they've got sitting in a rack by the door. She's sucking on the Slim Jim poking out of the wrapper like a kind of meat popsicle, her Pepsi cradled cozily in her armpit. The cap is still screwed on.

I open the door and lean against it and motion for her to go ahead. She does. I follow her out and head to the car and hop into the passenger seat when I notice the mother lode of Coca-Cola that's still there chilling in the back. I point to her Pepsi and make a what-the-fuck gesture.

“What?” she says.

“Well...?”

“Well What?”

“I mean, Coke or Pepsi?”

“Now that right there,” she says, “is a motherfucking question,” and tosses the bottle over her shoulder into the back seat.

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We're edging toward Billings and the landscape is an immense nothing. The sky hangs. I have absolutely no idea where we're headed. The one time I asked, she just tapped me on the nose with her finger and told me to hold on one second. Then we drove for an hour and showed no signs of stopping.

“It'd be cooler if I interviewed *you*,” she is telling me.

We're talking now about what led me to do the original series of celebrity stories in the first place. I said it's crazy how we form these conceptions of people in our minds based on this tiny tiny tiny tidbit of information we have about someone, and we call that conception a 'person', and we give that person a name, and we talk to other people about that person, but the person in our minds has nothing really to do with the human being walking around on the planet somewhere eating deli sandwiches and listening to an iPod through little white ear-buds

or whatever. So my goal was to create characters that were believable enough for my audience to buy that Gary Busey or whomever *really would* behave that way, even though none of us has any idea at all.

“See, I am sitting here next to you,” she continues, “without any kind of 'conceptions' about you or me or anybody. I don't know enough about you to write some kind of story—but I know you're fun to rock out in the car with. I know you have the squirreliest cheeks. I know you like to use a lot of hundred-dollar words for God-knows-why and I'm sorry, really, but it takes all my energy to keep from laughing in your face. People don't say this to you a lot—I mean, call you out, do they?”

“I guess not.”

“That's good. Where are you from, anyway?”

“I was born in Memphis,” I tell her.

“Do you usually drive with the windows down?”

“In the summertime, and also in the winter when it's late and I might possibly have had a little to drink and I don't want to fall asleep at the wheel.”

“Where's the coolest place you've ever been on a date?”

“Definitely the three-dollar Better than Ezra concert at the Ampitheatre with the backstage passes and hand-picked roses. Not even close. They asked somebody if they knew the guitar part to *Desperately Wanting* and randomly I did, so I was all waving my hands or whatever and the crowd pushed me onstage and I rocked the hell out, and then I called Shea

out of course and she acted all shy, but she got up on stage and all of us sang the last entire like half of the song together.”

“That sounds awesome.”

“It was.”

“Lucky girl.”

“She's married now,” I said.

Dakota is wearing Daisy Dukes. Her sunglasses bulge around her eyes and make her look like a raccoon, and in the reflection off one of the lenses I see myself talking, my lips moving. Behind her, parallel to us, a tractor trundles forward in a slow, straight line, billowing smoke.

“Why do you care so much?” she says.

“Like generally?”

“That's not where I was going, but sure, yeah.”

“Because I can't imagine not.”

“And why do you care so much about this 'celebrity' stuff?”

I have no idea why I answered this question the way I did. I could have said that I *didn't* care, that I didn't understand why she thought I cared, that there was no reason to even think that there was any reason to care—that this subject simply made for good stories, was interesting to think about, provided a 'meaningful glimpse into the collective construction of identity' or whatever. That too it was awesome to be onstage, metaphorically or otherwise. That finally in performing and being seen, in writing and being read, there was something vital

we all hoped to share, some experience which ought not to be endured alone, some comfort in knowing that there were people out there who got it, etc. etc. etc..

Instead I said, "I want to build pyramids."

"Oh My God Holy Shit Me Too!" she said.

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We pull into a Motel 6 somewhere in the middle of the Dakotas. It is late as hell and very dark. She alights from the Bronco and hands me my Safeway bag.

"Classy," she says.

"Yes ma'am."

We enter the lobby through one of those single-person revolving doors, which I succeed at navigating on the second try. Dakota flops down on this loveseat that sits in front of a fake stone fireplace. Its fabric is embroidered with very red needlepoint, and precious puffy pillows nestle in the nook between the chair-cushion and the armrest. She throws one of the pillows at me. I catch it and toss it back. I walk toward the marble countertop.

"Can I help you?" the woman behind the counter asks. A blank gold nameplate is pinned to the lapel of her shirt.

"Just a room for both of us. Single night. Can I ask when checkout is tomorrow?"

The woman looks at Dakota.

“Twin beds, definitely,” I say.

She blinks.

“We're on a roadtrip.”

Dakota has gotten up off the loveseat and has perched her chin on the counter in front of the concierge. She is making faces at her reflection in the service-bell.

“It's nothing weird or whatever,” I tell the concierge.

“Um. We can't really rent a room to anyone under 21.”

“I mean,” Dakota says, and pulls out a wad of cash from her back pocket. It is a literal wad of hundred-dollar bills. Like you might see in a music video. A few stray Benjamins fall to the ground. Dakota leans over and picks them up. She licks the tip of her finger and begins to flip through her stash.

“I believe it's possible that we might be able to work something out,” the woman says.

“Thank you so much,” Dakota tells her.

She turns to me.

“Now,” she says. “Mind taking my stuff up to the room? I need to run an errand.”

“Sure,” I say, and lean on the counter.

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Our combined score on Expert is unbelievable. I feel like I should be posting this shit to YouTube. We're something like 98% on Through The Fire And The Flames, and would be higher if the kick-pedal on this drum set wasn't sticking on every double-tap. My mind is blown. It is four or five in the morning. The lights are off. She is shredding the guitar so fast that I cannot differentiate the different colors on the screen. The thwop of drumstick onto panel sounds like the cleaving of meat. I slow. She flourishes. We finish. She is sweating.

"That was so good," I tell her.

Dakota's 'errand' involved bee-lining to a Wal-Mart and investing in the Rock Band III Concert Kit, replete with guitar and drums and bass and microphone and swivel-stands for every single piece. By the time I got downstairs, she was trying to bull the entire set through the rotary door in one trip.

"Need help with that?" I asked.

"Nope. I got it. Yes."

Eventually we muscled everything upstairs, and Dakota rented out all the adjacent rooms 'so we wouldn't disturb anybody.' Then we started playing. This was roughly six hours ago.

"I am pretty sure that nobody on the planet except for Eddie Vedder should ever attempt Pearl Jam vocals," she says. She has ninjaed a drumstick from me and is scrolling through songs by tapping on the cymbal.

"Epic disagree."

"It's just kind of embarrassing."

"What, is this one of those karaoke rules like 'Never sing Freddie Mercury, because I promise, you can't?'"

"Sorta."

"...but what?"

"It's like," she says. "Like he has *conviction*, like he knows something. He's certain. Give the man a megaphone or whatever. When anybody else does it, it's like they've read something on Wikipedia and are just parroting what they heard."

"Sheets of empty canvas."

"Oh good God no--"

"Untouched sheets of clay."

She throws a sock at me.

"So now you really know something about Eddie Vedder, do you?" I ask her.

"You have got a point," she says.

Earlier I had bought, against my better judgment, a few of those little airplane-sized bottles of Merlot that they sell in hotel lobbies for exorbitant prices, and I reach back now onto the counter to nab one.

"You going to offer me one of those there, stingy?"

"Aren't you like four or something?"

"Hardy har," she says, grabs a bottle, and twists the cap off with her teeth.

Time slows. We power through four or five more songs, and it feels like I am suspended in the air. The depression of the keys and the thud of the drums and the hum of sound into the microphone all require zero effort. Our rhythm is fluid. When the guitar bits ease up she starts to hop up and down like Eddie Van Halen. At one point I jettison a drumstick and play the set with my hands like congas. Gradually the sun emerges. I realize I am beat. I realize I am spent. I tell her if she wants to play more she can be my guest but thank you very much ladies and gentlemen I am out of here. I fall directly from the stool onto my pillow. She says, Good job champ! She says, No Pjs? I am still wearing my pink Converse Chuck Taylors. I am still wearing my white Rory fedora. I say, Don't need, and groan. She tells me I am doing it wrong. She tells me cotton is comfy. She grips the base of her shirt with both of her hands. Then in one brisk motion she turns as she pulls it up over her head, and into my frame sweep the cusps of two perfectly-formed breasts, and I see her, and I see them, and then I see her back, and the sinews of her muscles look exactly like paths on a treasure map, and the blades of her shoulders look exactly like the buds of angel-wings. Then her pajama-shirt is out of her backpack, and it is on, and it is dotted with images of SpongeBob Squarepants, and the sleeves of the shirt dangle past her arms like willow fronds.

She looks over her shoulder at me, directly at me, and falls onto her bed.

“Good night,” she says, and I sleep like something holy.

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We hit the road late, like three in the afternoon, and she is driving fast. She is dogged. She is focused. She is determined to be somewhere. A silver Honda passes us in the left lane and we coast in its wake like the sidekick in a V of geese. The windows are down and the radio is blasting and both of us have said very little. Outside the sun burns hot and steady and casts no shadows on anything anywhere.

“This is a side of you I haven't seen before,” I tell her.

“Hm?”

“It's like you're driving an ambulance.”

Her hands clutch the wheel at ten and two, and she juts her head forward as she passes traffic like some kind of turtle.

“Oh no dude it's nothing like a thing,” she says. “We just have to get to this place by sundown, right.”

“Ah.”

We blaze southward. After awhile the signal from the radio dies, and we turn the static down, and the whip of wind inside the cabin both feels and sounds exactly like the sensation you get inside your head when you wake up early on a cloudy day. She cranks up the windows.

“I would never, ever, have guessed that you were anything like this,” I say to her.

“I'm not like this,” she says.

I roll my window back down and stick my hand out the side and play with the wind. It tickles my fingers. She laughs and does the same thing. I turn my head to look at her, and at the exact same moment she turns her head to look at me, and we both realize that we both decided to look at one another at the exact same time, and we smile like idiots.

“D. Hey. At the hotel last night did you mean to, like—”

“Everything about me is deliberate,” she says.

In retrospect I have no idea how it happened. Maybe a car stalled or the shoulder lurched or we just weren't paying a damn bit of attention, but at this very moment the world itself shuddered and a sound like the crust of the Earth collapsing ripped through my body and hung in my bones. All was motion. Colors blurred and spun. Glass became the absence of glass. Things made noises. Then my jaw snapped shut against its will and only then did I realize we were rolling, the Bronco tumbling along the highway like something extraneous, its metal bending into grotesque shapes, the passing traffic skittering like ants, searing sun ablaze, ground and sky locked in churning tango. My seat belt held me like a mother.

Then the tumult eases and although I throw up into my own lap and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and throw up into my lap again I am able take off my belt and kick open the door and exit the wreckage. I am crawling on all fours and a shoe has come off and I dry heave a couple of times and I say Shit and Fuck and Damn and I say Shit again to make sure and I wipe my face with the palm of my hand and simply do not believe that there is no blood

anywhere, but despite all of that I am fairly sure my body works. No other cars look hit. The Bronco looks like abstract art.

I struggle to my feet and try an upright posture. My spine does not collapse. Traffic passes well to my right. I am alive. I inhale and exhale deeply. Then I see her, a fleck of blonde against the pavement, red and dusty, and I am running, I am sprinting, I am hurling myself towards her and skidding to a halt on my knees. I say Shit oh shit Jesus. She is not moving. I pat down about fifteen places on my body at once and find my cell phone and get out my cell phone and dial 9-1-1 and miss the keys and start saying things into the receiver well before I realize no one has answered.

Dakota spits. The wad of spit on the pavement is viscous and black and trails back to her lips. She rises into a push-up position. She shakes the dirt out of her hair. Well, she says. She coughs and stands and gets back down onto her knees and coughs again. She motions at me to put down the phone. I say, Are you serious? She says, Yeah, ah, yep, and puts her hands on her hips, and stares intently at the ground between her knees. I say, For real, you're serious? Yeah, she says, I got this.

I sit down on the pavement. I wait. She makes a phone call. Thirty or so minutes later a car of people pulls up next to us and parks. They wear gray suits and hold clipboards. They talk to the police. Maybe an hour tops after that a Maserati Quattroporte swings by. It has a twenty-four pack of Mexican Coca-Cola in the back seat. Someone gets out, and Dakota and I

get in, and it's right then that I realize I know precisely nothing about what it means to be Dakota Fanning, and I probably never will.

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“So we're actually going through with this?”

“Dude. I took you on a trip, and we're going to finish the trip.”

Just like that, we're on the road again. The sun is setting, but this Maserati breezes. I did not know riding in a car could be like this. It doesn't feel like there is any kind of relationship between the car's tires and the road below us. The best example is like a landspeeder on Tatooine.

“We survived,” I tell her.

“Sure we did.”

“Not even that beat up or anything.”

“Not at all.”

“Am I going to ever like see you or talk to you again or hear from you or whatever after this?”

She smiles at me. It's an honest smile. Of course she doesn't say anything. We drive and drive and drive. We talk about things. We agree that Scottie Pippin was incredibly underrated. We disagree over whether Massive Attack is overrated or is rather rated at exactly

the correct point. I tell her without any ulterior motive, baggage, or awkwardness that she is very beautiful, and also that she is very talented, and that watching her perform makes me happier to be a human being, and helps me feel less fundamentally alone.

“Thank you,” she says.

Eventually we take an exit. The orb of the sun sits on the horizon like one of the steel spheres David Bowie contact-juggles in *Labyrinth*. It is waiting to fall. Everything is very green. The pavement turns to gravel, and gravel to dirt, and the road winds and winds and winds. I am conscious of the pace and depth and duration of my breaths. We pull over beside a nondescript valley nestled between four rolling hills. The road navigates the crest of one of these hills. We get out of the car. Dakota opens the trunk and pulls out a red and white checkered blanket.

“Follow me,” she says.

I follow her. She strides toward the valley's center with big, intentional steps. She unrolls the blanket delicately atop the grass. She pats the blanket down and picks a stray blade of grass up off the blanket and tosses the blade somewhere else. She invites me to lay down. I lay down.

The sun has finished waiting. Its bottom half has dipped below the horizon and has spilled its egg-yolk-colored rays into the sky. Soon it will be dark. Soon it will be night. Both of us have our hands clasped behind our heads and we stare straight up away from the Earth. Dakota offers me a stick of Wrigley's. I decline. Your loss, she says. Close your eyes, she says.

For how long, I ask. Until I say, she says. I close my eyes. I fidget. I stop fidgeting. The air is the perfect temperature. The pattern of our breaths is like a drumbeat.

Check it out, she says. I open my eyes. The valley is awash with fireflies. An ocean of fireflies. No way this is real. Down from the sky they descend like paper lanterns, drifting and aimless. They carpet the valley like a city seen from space. A natural phenomenon called something-or-another. The pulse of their rhythmic glow like newborn dawns. The surface of the valley like an infant daybreak. Continually they fall. All around us they fall. They fall on top of us. On our faces. I feel the click of their legs and wings upon my nose. I feel something against my hand. It is her hand. She seizes my hand. It is not remotely romantic. It is the clutch of a hand on something tall and drastic, a grip to avoid a massive fall. They have coated her like a shroud. They are as numerous as stars. The night is black like dying young. I look at her. Her face glows. Her face is light. All light. I feel her squeeze my hand. I squeeze it back.

“Be here,” she says. “With me. Right here. I’m here.”