

My BlackBerry started buzzing on my right hip just as the crowd got its first glimpse of Barack Obama. I'd put it on vibrate, since I knew I'd never hear the ringtone once Obama appeared on the floor of the Toyota Center in Houston. The roar was immediate as he glided into the arena from a corner tunnel, and grew louder still as each of his loping strides carried him into fuller view of the crowd. By the time he jogged gracefully up the stairs to take the stage, I couldn't hear a word of the instructions my cameraman was yelling at me from four feet away.

I was standing on the media riser—a plywood platform set six feet off the arena's concrete floor, atop rickety scaffolding concealed by rectangles of rough royal-blue fabric. A dozen TV reporters were crammed together, each provided with a four-foot-wide broadcasting space marked off by electrical tape.

As chief White House correspondent for CBS News, I'd been assigned to cover Hillary Clinton during the Democratic primary campaign. I'd loved getting the assignment, seeing it at the outset as just the kind of validation I'd been looking for from a new set of bosses. In the last year of his increasingly unpopular presidency, George W.

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Bush wasn't going to generate enough interest to get me on the evening news regularly. Lame ducks never did. So the White House was not the place to be.

When the assignments for the campaign had been doled out three months earlier, Obama was intriguing but still a long shot. Clinton was clearly the plum. Covering her positioned me not just for a short-term supply of lead stories but also for another few years on the biggest beat in TV news if she went all the way.

But since then, Obama's strong performance had raised the possibility that I hadn't landed the plum after all. I'd grown eager to see him live on the campaign trail. The breathless descriptions I'd been reading of the raw emotion Obama generated in the crowds hadn't set any standards for journalistic objectivity, but the reporters who wrote them hadn't oversold.

Standing in front of the camera making my last-minute preparations before I went on, I looked to my left and saw an African American man in his mid-thirties hoist a boy onto his shoulders so the kid could get a better look. The man's face was pulled tight in a severe smile, astonished to be sure but cautious as well, as if he wasn't quite sure he could trust what he was seeing. The expression on the face of the five-year-old was simpler: innocent, undiluted joy. Even if the boy didn't fully understand the meaning of the moment, he was on his daddy's shoulders. That alone was apparently reason enough for his ear-to-ear grin.

Houston might have seemed like an odd place for Obama to be on February 19, 2008, given that it was primary day in Wisconsin, but he was already looking ahead to the Texas primary in two weeks. I checked my watch, which I kept on New York time no matter where I was to stay synchronized with CBS headquarters in Manhattan. It was 9:15. At the bottom of the hour, I would update my report with a live shot for the West Coast feed of the *CBS Evening News*.

If, as some grizzled cameraman once told me, TV news is "hours of boredom, moments of terror," the live shot is the moment of terror. Not only can your whole day go to hell in an instant; your whole career can. There's a gazillion ways to screw up the shot—technical

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screwups, editorial screwups, going blank just when you're supposed to speak to seven million people—and every member of the live-shot team spends the last fifteen minutes checking and rechecking potential trouble spots to prevent TV tragedy.

On the media riser in Houston, Rob the cameraman and Giovanni the sound tech checked cables and lights while Chloe the producer linked up with the control room in New York. Inside the TV truck parked just outside the Toyota Center, the satellite operator made sure we had a steady broadcasting signal. As the correspondent, my obsession, naturally, was with myself. In my fifteen-minute run-up to the live shot, I flitted from applying a new layer of powder on my forehead to checking my tie knot, from smoothing the wrinkles in my suit jacket to making sure my earpiece fit snugly. Then I took a moment out of tending to the cosmetic touches and barked at the ever-calm Chloe to double-check the facts of what I was about to report.

Most of my two-minute story was a preproduced video spot running roughly a minute and a half and providing an overview of what was at stake in the Wisconsin race. That gave me fifteen seconds to introduce the spot live and fifteen seconds on the back end to add a final thought. The whole idea was to provide a way for me to update my story if anything had changed from the 6:30 East Coast broadcast. Good thing, because a few minutes after 9:00, we received word that Obama had been declared the winner in Wisconsin. Harry Smith, substituting for Katie Couric in New York, would handle that headline in his toss to me. My job was to seamlessly weave a reaction to Obama's win into my live intro.

Blowing the live shot would ruin the rest of the night and most of the next day, until I had another chance at one. Forget a thick Rolodex of sources or a finely honed ability to bang out sharp, urgent copy under deadline pressure; network news reporters are judged first and foremost by their ability to flawlessly deliver a four-sentence live introduction to a pretaped story with an insouciant air of command to millions of viewers. In the minds of the executives who run the network news operations, a single “um” or “uh” can undermine

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a reporter's credibility. And God save the correspondent who actually breaks eye contact with the camera to look down at his notes.

Over the years, I'd wrestled the live-shot demons to the ground. Somewhere between a live bungee jump on the local news in Syracuse and a live battlefield report under missile fire the night the war in Iraq started, I'd reached an accommodation with the pressure. Like learning to play the piano, speak French, or hit a nine iron, it was all a matter of repetition. In Syracuse, Raleigh, Miami, Dallas, Skopje, Brussels, Riga, and Amman, I'd figured out how to cleanly negotiate all the dangers and threats a live shot could present. I wasn't Edward R. Murrow, but I rarely flubbed. I still got butterflies when a director's gruff voice would urgently cue me, but hundreds of successfully negotiated live shots over the years had liberated me from the thought of a spectacular flameout recirculated in perpetuity on YouTube.

Or at least I thought it had. In the last few weeks, I'd grown less able to ignore the thoughts of failure. CBS News, my professional home for the past dozen years, had been through a violent shake-up. My new bosses were unfamiliar with my rock-solid live reports from the Iraqi battlefields. Not only were all the executives long gone who'd watched me go live flawlessly for ten minutes at a time, under fire, in the triple-digit heat of the Iraqi desert without a single "um," but so was Dan Rather, whose favor I'd earned and protection I'd enjoyed. Lately there'd been hints that my Clinton coverage had caused my stock to fall with the new executive team, but I wasn't sure. It could've easily been my paranoia, honed, like every TV reporter's, to museum-grade quality. Then came a meeting with my boss, CBS News president Sean McManus, which confirmed my suspicions with brutal clarity.

Most network news correspondents worked on three- or four-year contracts. The executives negotiated your next deal based on how often you'd been on the air during the last one. The system had been good to me over the years. I'd pushed for and received high-profile assignments—Afghanistan, Iraq, the Kerry campaign—to guarantee me an ever-increasing supply of exposure and airtime that I was able to redeem for big raises at the end of each of my three-year deals. But less than two weeks earlier, for the first time in my career

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at CBS, I'd pushed for a shot at a big job coming open and had the door resolutely slammed shut. Waiting on that riser, I felt some extra pressure. I needed to nail the live shot to see if I could wedge that closed door back open just enough to let a sliver of light through.

I could feel a film of sweat on my palms. Since that meeting with Sean, I'd been shaky going live, like a professional golfer suddenly unable to make a three-foot putt after twenty years of sinking them without a second thought. In golf it's called "the yips," a dreaded condition indicating that after years of battling the pressure, your nerves are shot. I was fighting a sinking suspicion that I'd contracted the broadcasting yips.

Which explains why at 9:28 New York time, I was standing on that platform in Houston, attempting to shut out eighteen thousand delirious voices chanting "Yes we can" by reciting the new copy I'd just dashed off about Obama's win. I needed to set it in my frontal lobe. I'd have one chance, and the slightest sense of panic could throw me off and cause me to go blank. Like a supplicant quietly chanting a prayer to ward off evil, I rehearsed my first line over and over, hoping to ensure a smooth start to my live shot when it was for real.

"Right now Barack Obama is riding a surge of momentum that the Clinton campaign would do anything to stop." I paused and took a deep breath, like I was between sets of bench presses. "Right now Barack Obama is riding a surge of momentum that the Clinton campaign would do anything to stop." I stopped and collected myself again. "Right now Barack Obama is riding a surge of momentum that the Clinton campaign would do anything to stop."

I couldn't decide where to put the emphasis: "a *surge* of momentum" or "a surge of *momentum*." I kept repeating it both ways, hoping one would sound better than the other to my ear. What the fuck was wrong with me? Forty-five years old, two Ivy League degrees, the chief White House correspondent for CBS News, and I was paralyzed with indecision about which of two words my bosses would want me to hit hardest.

The buzz I felt on my hip as Obama took the stage snapped me out of the inane debate I was conducting with myself. I pulled my

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BlackBerry from its holster. I had no time to check the e-mail beyond the basics—sender, subject heading—just to make sure no one was forwarding any last-second development that would change my story. A quick look told me it could wait:

From: Moughalian, Dave
Sent: Tuesday, February 19, 2008 9:48 PM
To: Axelrod, Jim
Subject: pretty cool

It was from my buddy Dave, who had a habit of sending me e-mails just before broadcast time, usually to vent some impassioned hatred of George W. Bush. I loved Dave, an in-it-for-life friend since we'd been ten years old, but his timing often sucked.

We'd grown up three blocks apart, ran track together, dated the beautiful Parisi sisters in high school, and were roommates for a year after college. His mother was my high school English teacher, a wise and enchanting Armenian who immigrated to America when she was thirty-two and proceeded to teach a generation of kids in our small New Jersey town how to write. In a soft voice dipped in honey and rose water, Mrs. Moughalian had drilled into us a three-word guiding principle: Show, don't tell.

Ever since I'd met him on the first day of fifth grade, Dave had been a calming presence in my life. He took in the chaos of my parents' home—four kids; a demented Hungarian sheepdog with a thick, matted white coat and ceaseless, paint-peeling bark; and my force-of-nature father—like a kid watching a pack of agitated chimps at the zoo. He was curious and intrigued, drawn to something in the overflowing passion of the Axelrod family. Perhaps it made him feel better about the stark stillness in his own home. My father spun through our house like an F-5 tornado. Dave's father, an engineer who was often gone for months at a time on business, would return to brood deeply about his lost old-country life amid stacks of metallurgy journals. I'd always thought Dave needed the roar of the circus to balance the soft voices of the library.

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Once I saw Dave's name on my BlackBerry screen, I knew I could wait until after the live shot to open the e-mail, and I returned to preparing for my imminent moment of terror. In my earpiece I heard the music that signaled the start of the broadcast. I reviewed my newly tweaked live top one more time, took a deep breath, and waited for the toss from Harry Smith.

"Jim Axelrod joins us now from Houston. Jim, a big night for Barack Obama . . ." I took it from there. All the prep work paid off. I nailed the shot, integrating the new information without a single "um" and emphasizing "surge." The control room cleared me, and I was done for the day. I unhooked my earpiece and microphone, careful to keep an impassive expression fixed on my face. I wanted to project a business-as-usual demeanor to mask the elation produced by my clean kill. Relief oozed warmly through my system. There was no better salve for the welts raised during that meeting with Sean twelve days earlier than the hope that I could still turn it all around.

I looked down at my BlackBerry again. There was nothing from New York. On the one hand, that was good news; no rockets launched about some screwup. On the other hand, while I didn't expect any "attaboys" for a job well done—a mistake-free live shot was what they were paying me to deliver, after all—I worried that the bosses had all gone home after the East Coast feed and missed my folding in the new information without breaking a sweat. I needed my new bosses to see what the old ones always had and begin to thicken the ice that had started to feel remarkably thin beneath me.

I might've been done for the day, but Obama wasn't. While he raised the roof delivering his stump speech, I walked off the arena floor and into an outer lobby, looking for a corner that might shield enough of the noise so I could call my wife. I checked in with Stina twice a day, bare minimum, once when she woke up and again just before she went to bed, and tried to catch her several other times so I could talk to our three kids as well. I could tell from the four rings before she picked up, and her sleepy voice once she did, that she'd fallen asleep reading to Bobby, our four-year-old.

"Hi, honey," she said, her voice trailing off. She sounded so worn-

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out. Sure she was tired of raising three kids alone, with me gone for months at a time, but this was more than fatigue. She was worried. This had nothing to do with her husband's new bosses and a change in his professional standing. In the eight years since my father died, she'd watched me head off to cover two wars, suffer enough post-traumatic stress to require several months of therapy, then allow my unrestrained ambition to lead me to an intensely demanding job at the White House. Until his death we'd been walking a path together, holding hands. Then suddenly I'd dropped hers and veered off into some thick woods, chasing something I couldn't catch. The easy joy Stina had always found as a wife and mother had started to leach from her home.

"That's okay, Stina," I told her. "Back to sleep. I'll talk to you in the morning. Love you." I hung up feeling hollow and detached. The balancing act I'd worked out long ago between my scampering up the career ladder and remaining connected to my wife and kids had started to feel badly outdated.

Wandering back into the arena, I climbed the stairs up to the media riser, pulled out my BlackBerry, and scrolled down to Dave's e-mail. I hit Open and saw a chart:

YEAR	FIRST NAME	LAST NAME	AGE	TIME
1980	ROB	AXE	44	3:42:43
	ERT	LRO		
		D		
1981	ROB	AXE	45	3:39:53
	ERT	LRO		
		D		
1982	ROB	AXE	46	3:29:58
	ERT	LRO		
		D		

It took a moment for me to realize what I was looking at, and just a split second more for my nose to wrinkle and my eyes to fill. Dave,

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who loved to tool around on the Web, panning for whatever nuggets he could find from our pasts, had found my father's race times for the three New York City Marathons he'd run in the early 1980s.

The tears were no surprise. I'm a world-class weeper. Since she was five, my daughter, Emma, has proudly declared, "My dad cries more than most men." Funerals and weddings are for amateurs. I've lost it at the end of *Charlotte's Web*. But nothing brings the tears more reliably than thinking about my dad.

His was one of those deaths that left everyone shaking their heads and scared the hell out of the men in the neighborhood. Never mind the three marathons he'd run in his forties. He'd eaten right and hadn't been much of a drinker. His parents had been ninety-one and eighty-nine at his funeral. And my mom was a health-food nut who'd made my dad the first guy on the block to mix wheat germ into his yogurt. He bubbled over with vigor. If they could've figured out a way to harness his energy, he could've lit Cleveland for a decade. All that, and he'd died at the age of sixty-three in January 2000, following a nine-year battle with prostate cancer.

I put the BlackBerry back in its holster and watched Obama finish his stump speech. "Yes we can. Yes we can. Yes we can, Houston." The electrified crowd didn't want to go anywhere, but after ten minutes, they realized he wasn't coming back onstage. The houselights went up, and the arena began to clear.

Wanting to look at my dad's race times again, I climbed down off the riser and found a dull-brown metal folding chair, collapsed and leaning against a wall. I grabbed it, unfolded it, and sat down, rocking slightly back and forth with my BlackBerry extended at arm's length to accommodate my rapidly deteriorating vision, which I'd been refusing to acknowledge.

"Okay, let's see here, he ran 3:39:53 when he was forty-five."

I was whispering to myself, lips barely moving, as I went from column to column, performing calculations.

"He ran 3:39:53 when he was forty-five," I repeated, digesting what I was seeing. My mind raced to the next set of numbers. "Then

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3:29:58, when he was forty-six.” That stopped me for half a second. I remembered my dad telling me, when I was a kid and he was in the middle of his marathon years, that breaking 3:30 was a big deal. Going sub-3:30 meant running a little more than twenty-six miles at eight minutes per mile, an impressive pace.

“He broke 3:30 when he was forty-six,” I continued to myself.

I sat and rocked for half a minute more, thinking of the framed photograph hanging in the front hallway of our home in the Washington, D.C., suburb of Chevy Chase, Maryland. There was my father, enraptured, crossing the finish line of one of those marathons, his arms thrusting straight up in triumph. I could use some of that. His body may have been exhausted, but his eyes were dancing. A running magazine had published it, clearly looking to inspire.

“I’d need at least a year.”

I’d never run a marathon, but I’d watched my dad as he planned his training, beginning a year before the race. I knew the kind of dedication required just to finish a marathon, never mind to run one in eight-minute miles. The old man was already in top shape when he did it, having run steadily for four years before he took on the challenge. I didn’t even pause—

“I could do this.”

—which was slightly delusional, given that I was in the worst shape of my life, flabby in every imaginable way. Without much of a fight, I’d surrendered to the grind of the campaign trail, dismissing the thought of exercise as an indulgence the long hours didn’t permit. At that moment, leaning forward in that brown metal chair, elbows on my knees, BlackBerry in my hands, belly drooping over my belt and sagging toward the floor, I couldn’t run around the block.

“It might be just what I need.”

I knew the New York City Marathon was always run in late October or early November. In other words, right around Election Day. No way, especially if Hillary won the nomination. But 2009 was a definite possibility. I’d be forty-six years old. My dad’s age when he ran his last New York City Marathon would be my age running my first.

“Twenty-one months. I could do that.”

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I tried to slow myself down to take full measure of what I was contemplating. But I couldn't. My very next thought was on me in a heartbeat. It wasn't a choice. It was instinct. There was nothing conscious about it.

“I bet I can run it faster than he did.”