

AUTHOR OF THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

BARE BONES

**FAIL
UNTIL YOU
DON'T**

**FIGHT. GRIND.
REPEAT.**

**BOBBY
BONES**



**FAIL
UNTIL
YOU
DON'T**

Fight Grind Repeat

BOBBY BONES

 **DEY ST.**
An Imprint of WILLIAM MORROW

Dedication

To my dog, Dusty. Sadly, you'll never get to read this.

Mostly because you didn't know how to read.

Because you were a dog.

RIP, buddy: 2003–2018.

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Introduction

Fight, Grind, Repeat or . . .

Your Motivational Guide to Being Less Terrible at Life

When I decided to write another book (even though I didn't know if I had another chapter in me, let alone a whole new book in me), I wanted to write about how to face your fears. I figured I'd describe a lot of the fears I've felt in my life and how I faced them all—like the superhero that I am. But, to be honest, that would be a load of crap. And my fans are quick to smell the BS. (It's weird to call my people “fans.” When I think of “fans,” I picture a Green Bay Packers diehard with face paint and no shirt fighting the elements in subzero temperatures. My people aren't fanatical about me. They understand me—or at least can stomach me for relatively large amounts of time. That's all I really need. And I appreciate that.)

So instead of hitting you with a fake face-your-fears-it's-amazing read, I'm going to tell you the story of when I faced my biggest fear. And I'm writing this just a few hours after it actually happened. Basically, this is the book version of an NFL instant replay. Except not so instant, because you're reading it months after it happened, because these books take *forever* to get published.

Rest assured, the details are still fresh in my brain as I sit here in the Little Rock airport, a familiar and comfortable setting. I'm surrounded by nice folks decked out in Arkansas Razorbacks hats and T-shirts. About ten people have already stopped to tell me that they listen to my show. I appreciate when anyone stops me to say they tune in to the morning show I've been doing in some shape or form for nearly twenty years. (Man, I'm getting old. I know I started radio at seventeen, but twenty years? So, my career is as old as some of the girls I've considered dating. I mean, I know twenty is too young for me. They can't even get into a casino. But I'll start taking rejections at age twenty-five or so.)

Although my morning show is nationally syndicated, it's always cool when someone from where you grew up says they listen. It's especially sweet in Arkansas, my first home (with Austin and Nashville coming in second and third). Despite all that good stuff, my cage is a little rattled right now. Mostly because of that fear I just mentioned. (You know, the one we discussed before debating openly if I'd still date a college sophomore. To reiterate, I don't think I would.)

Before I reveal the mysterious fear, a little backstory.

You know all about this if you read my memmmmmwarrrrrr (a.k.a. memoir), *Bare Bones* by Bobby Bones (that's me); or have listened to my radio show, where I talk a lot about myself; or have stood anywhere within twenty feet of me in the last hundred months. But just in case you don't fit into any of those categories, here's a quick version—I don't know my biological father. I mean, I know *who* he is, like his name and where he comes from. It's the same place I came from. (Not the same vagina. That would make him my "brother-dad," and I'd have a reality show on TLC right about now.) But that's about it.

This stranger, otherwise known as my dad, left my mom and me around the time that my memories started being formed. So I have only fleeting impressions of him sort of being there, but no full-on memories. No ball playing. No whuppins. No "you'll eventually get girls to like you," or "you can't date that many girls at once." (Amy, my cohost and moral compass, set me straight on that one.)

So, yeah. I don't know my dad. He's never been a part of my life. It's sad. So sad that I decided to turn it into a joke for my stand-up act. Here it is:

THE SADDEST JOKE I'VE EVER WRITTEN

*I was on Facebook yesterday looking at the tab of **People You May Know** and my biological father popped up. (Long pause for effect.) I didn't.*

I'd now like to do an impression of my biological father . . . (Then I walk offstage.)

(In my mind, that joke was a real hit, even though it just confused the audience. But I love it. I love creating any sort of emotion. I love to make people confused and question if they are supposed to laugh. I love to make people feel, which often means taking them out of their comfort zone.)

Jokes aside, when it comes to not having a dad, I've been sad, angry, resentful, apathetic (having repressed all the previous feelings), and then sad again. That's a cycle I've repeated for about the last thirty years of my life. And, as I was thinking of the scariest things I've ever done—you know, for a relatable and engaging anecdote to open my new book—I felt like it would be hypocritical not to describe my biggest fear. And that is . . . meeting the person I've turned into the ultimate villain in my mind. My dad.

I let my anger and fear keep me from ever reaching out. I thought I was punishing him for not being around when I was a kid. In reality, though, I was punishing myself. It wasn't until I started thinking of the central ideas of what I wanted this book to be about that I felt I finally had to take that polar plunge. (That's the stupid group of people who jump into the water in winter because they say it's so invigorating. But most of the time, I think they just end up with pneumonia.) Although I might have been subconsciously looking for any reason, I decided to reach out to my dad after all these years because I didn't want to feel like a hypocrite when I wrote about all the positive results that come from facing fear.

The adventure started with a text to my cousin Mary asking if she had his number. She did. Crap! Now I had to reach out. Again, if I wanted to lecture you about chasing your biggest fear, you would come back at me about why I hadn't done mine. So I was in it to win it. Or, as they say on the streets, "I was in it because I was writing a book about failure and didn't want the whole thing to be a farce." Yeah, that's street lingo.

"Hey. It's Bobby Estell," I texted, thinking if I just wrote "Bobby" he probably wouldn't know who it was. (I nearly texted, "It's your long-lost son Bobby." But I wasn't sure he would get the sarcasm.)

"I'm going to be in town," I continued, "and wanted to know if we can meet up."

Then I waited for a text back.

One hour—nothing.

Two hours—nothing.

I assumed he wasn't like me, the guy who keeps his phone in his hand the entire day, but it was still nerve-racking to not get a text back after a few hours. I had really put myself out there by sending that message. The least I would expect was an answer, even if it was "No."

I was traveling that day, so I didn't have a lot to do except stare at my phone, which made time drag by even slower and my anxiety ramp up even more. I began to think he wasn't going to text me back at all. Rejected again.

Finally, about four hours and twenty-three minutes later (but who's counting?), I got: "That sounds good. Let me know."

What did that mean? "Sounds good"? And "let me know"? AND why did he take four hours to get back to me? Was he on a job site, getting an MRI, trapped in a well? Or did it actually sound *not* good to him . . . I don't know what I was expecting. "WOWOWOWOWOW!!! 😊 Glad to hear from you. I've been meaning to text you for the last 30 years but I couldn't find your number. 😊"

Nahhhh.

But still.

Over the next few days, I distanced myself from my nagging doubts. If there were an Olympic sport in compartmentalizing emotions, I'd take down Muhammad Ali or Michael Phelps as being the greatest of all time. Right then, I separated myself from it. *Bam!* Much like doing the Tide Pod Challenge, I acted like I didn't want to go through with it, but secretly I wanted to see what all the fuss was about (both meeting my dad and eating Tide Pods). (By the way, WTF are people thinking eating those small packets of washing detergent? And by people, I mean adults who are smart enough to put videos on YouTube. There's no reason we need to do PSAs for twenty-three-year-old Internet attention whores who choose to eat soap. For moms with babies, I get it. "Hey, new moms! Watch out that little Katie doesn't eat those packets that look a lot like candy . . ." But for adults to learn on the news: "Don't eat detergent, because you can die." They already know that! To report on the obvious is to do nothing but compel fools to continue eating the clothes-cleaning poison. That's right: I blame you, *Today* show!!! Sorry. I'm just dealing with a lot of Tide Pod stories right now. Onward.)

The trip to see my father became just a date on the calendar. I booked my flight from Austin to Little Rock and carried on with my life. *Nothing to see here.* (Imagine me whistling after I say, "Nothing to see here," like they always do on television from the fifties. Yeah, that was me playing it cool.)

It wasn't until I was on the flight to Little Rock that it thumped me in the ear: I was going to meet the man who helped bring me into this world,

then disappeared over thirty years ago, and for all that time hid in plain sight. He lived no more than a few miles from me for a lot of the time I was growing up, but for that story you'll have to read my first book.

One of my favorite creatures is the butterfly. (It's not my absolute favorite. That would be dogs, with koalas coming in a close second. I got to hold a koala in Australia, and he didn't bite or take a crap on me, so I was pretty pumped. After that, the koala shot up the favorites list very fast.) I say I love butterflies because I love that feeling of butterflies in your stomach that you get when you're nervous. We don't have a lot of times in our lives when we get to be genuinely nervous about a potentially positive outcome. Being nervous is uncommon; it's uncomfortable; it's stressful. That's why it's awesome. Being nervous is how I feel alive. To me, it's a rush. A mental bungee jump.

On the plane to meet my dad, though, I wasn't nervous. At least not in the awesome way. I was overwhelmed with thoughts about where this whole thing would lead. I wondered if my father was suspicious of my motives. I'm the one who has yelled on the radio and written in a book that I was pissed about his sudden departure all those years ago. And yet here I was initiating contact by texting him out of the blue. What could he be imagining—that I wanted to beat him up? Or be best friends? Did I need a kidney?

I was trying to get into his head more than I was worried about what was going on in my own. This was no doubt an intellectual defense mechanism, because I knew that a few layers down, I was petrified.

As soon as my flight landed in Arkansas, I texted him that we should meet for lunch the following day at a BBQ restaurant I had found online and chosen for its convenient location. I had initially thought about meeting in a park or just on a bench somewhere, but then reconsidered. That was just too weird. If someone who I hadn't seen in years told me to meet him at a park in the middle of the day, I'd instantly assume it was because he wanted to jump me for money . . . maybe to buy that new kidney I was talking about.

The next day, at exactly noon, I drove into the parking lot of the BBQ joint and—*bam*—there he was, sitting inside his truck. I knew it was him because I had seen him in a couple of pictures over the years. And I also could just tell. He looked like me more than anyone else I'd ever met. Or should I say, I looked like him.

Now, I had purposely showed up right on time in order to avoid this situation. I hoped he'd be early and inside waiting on me. Not the opposite. This was now turning into a first-date-with-a-hot-chick experience. Except instead of a hot chick, insert "the man who abandoned me thirty years ago."

I turned off the gray Jeep Cherokee I had rented, got out, and walked directly into the restaurant. I didn't want to walk inside *with* him.

Who opens the door for who? Pass on that situation.

The awkward talk and walk, side by side? Pass on that, too.

The BBQ place was the kind where you order from a counter, get a number, seat yourself, and wait for your food. I was looking up at the menu above the counter when he walked in and stood right behind me. He was wearing a blue work uniform. Blue on blue, and extremely white tennis shoes. Let me commend his white shoes, by the way, because I know those were probably work shoes, and they were as clean as could be. I got a pair of white Yeezys and before I could get them out of the box, somehow they looked like they had been in a charcoal bath. White shoes are THAT hard to keep clean. So I respected that. He also had on a camouflage ball cap on top of his long hair.

With my dad too close to ignore and continue ordering, I turned to him. "Hey, man. Good to see you," I said, reaching out my hand to shake his and thinking, Please don't try to hug me.

He didn't. He shook my hand and said it was good to see me as well. We had a brief, uncomfortable conversation about what to eat. (Luckily, I already knew what I wanted. I know what I want to eat before I get to a restaurant almost every time I go to one. I prepare for the menu as if it were a driving test. Although I don't have to cheat with menus like I do with driving tests. I've never NOT cheated the eyesight part of the driving test. You see, I *can't* see. I have one eye that simply doesn't work. My right eye only sees light and fuzzy shapes. And when I look into that machine with said eye, I see nothing but a bright yellow stain mocking my inadequacy. If you google the right things, you can memorize that current test. I shall say no more for fear of having my driver's license revoked, but, yes, I'm always trying to game the system.) Then I put in our order and sat in the back of the restaurant.

He was smaller than me. I liked that, because if things got ugly I knew I could take him to beatdown town, except for the small fact that I've never

actually punched anyone. Still, I liked that I was bigger. My brain started to draw complex maps of the unknown terrain ahead.

What do I say first?

Did I really use the phrase “beatdown town”?

I’m such a loser.

I decided to go with thanking him for taking off work to meet me as an opener. Then I asked *the* most important question first. I mean, sitting in front of me was someone who was supposed to be the most important man in my life and I hadn’t seen him in thirty years. Now was my chance to find out what I wanted to know more than anything else. So I just went for it. I asked it. Straight up.

“Will you pull your hat back?” I asked. “Do you still have all your hair?” He let out a nervous chuckle and pulled his hat back.

“I’ve still got it all,” he said.

He wasn’t bald! Or even losing his hair! As a matter of fact, he has lots and lots of it. He basically looks like everyone from Lynyrd Skynyrd. That was awesome, and I was grateful. He may not have bought school supplies, taught me how to shave, or awkwardly told me it was “normal for men to play with themselves,” but he did give me good hair genes. And before you tell me, “Hair is all on your mom’s side,” that’s BS. It’s been proven 123,413,232 times that it can come from either or both. I have a lot of friends who are just as bald as their dad. So, hair. Check!

The food came. I noticed his hand was shaking when he took a bite of his sandwich—and that was pretty much the only bite he took. However nervous I felt on the plane yesterday or even in the parking lot a few minutes earlier, it was clear my dad was way more nervous. There was something about seeing how rattled he was that settled me down. When crazy situations arise, most of us fall into roles. Mine was the calm one. He hardly touched his food, but I was devouring mine. As I went through an entire rack of ribs, I had them bring me an extra plate for the bones and more paper towels.

We talked about what he does now (he works with my cousin Josh, who runs a roofing company) and about how he had been sober for a while.

“I’d really like to drink,” I said, “but it doesn’t seem to be a good spot for any of us with our genetics.” He agreed and urged me to stay away from it since I’ve gone this long without touching the stuff.

He talked a lot about his horses. “I get back to my land whenever I can to make sure they are fed and taken care of,” he said with obvious pride. I was happy to hear that.

I wanted to talk about jail. See, a lot of my family has been to jail and I wanted to know why. He told me he had only done a “few rounds” for dumb stuff, and for very small amounts of time. We talked about my cousin Derrick, who made the national news a couple of years earlier for escaping prison.

“I couldn’t believe that it was on *Good Morning America*,” I said. “The cops were calling asking if I knew anything.”

He said the same thing happened to him. I think they showed up at the house of pretty much every Estell to see if Derrick was there. By the way, google “Derrick Estell prison escape.” That’s my first cousin!

I don’t remember my dad asking me any questions. Part of me thinks that he listens to the show and reads things like this book, so he has a good idea of what’s happening with me. Part of me thinks he was just too freaked out. Either way I was okay, because being in his physical presence was enough.

For once in my life, I just wanted to sit across from my dad and have a conversation, even if it was about nothing. And for forty-five minutes, over lunch, I did. Sure, he’ll never be my “dad” in the way most people use the word, but by not reaching out to him because I was scared of rejection I wasn’t giving either one of us a chance to change the story. As a defense mechanism, I had turned him into the Joker or Bane, a supervillain out to destroy my life. By avoiding him, I had made him into something much larger than he actually was—someone who has screwed up a lot, someone who is extremely flawed, someone just like me.

The End.

Except . . . not really. That was the perfect ending for this section: dramatic and heart-wrenching, with a hint of self-reflection. But I don’t go down like that.

Can I first say how awkward it was for me to write the word “dad” in reference to the man I had lunch with? I just got tired of writing “biological father” in every paragraph. I wouldn’t call him “dad” to anyone, except for the fact that I’m a lazy writer. I also won’t call Kid Rock “Bob.” (His real name is Robert Ritchie, and his friends call him Bob.) I’ve spent some time with Kid Rock recently through work, and everyone keeps telling me to call

him “Bob.” Even Kid Rock says, “Call me Bob.” Won’t do it. I nod and say, “You got it, Kid Rock!” He will always be freaking Kid Rock. And I’m a huge dork.

The real end of the story with my—gulp—“dad” is a lot less dramatic. We’ve exchanged a few texts since that lunch, and I plan to reach out next time I’m home. I never thought we were going to turn into Andy Griffith and his son, Opie. The greatest outcome from that lunch is that I will no longer NOT go home because he is around. This fairy-tale ending is still growing its wings. Hopefully nobody dies!

What I hope you take away from this is that sometimes we assign completely false narratives to stories because they make life easier to understand. I did. I imagined my real dad lying in bed at night, laughing like a maniac about how he had wronged his son. Totally false. He didn’t like it any more than I did. But it was easier for me to believe that over the truth, because it allowed me to make him the bad guy. The truth is that he is just flawed. I am also flawed, and I hope people can understand and forgive me like I have my dad.

HOW THE HECK IS THIS A SELF-HELP BOOK?

By now, you’re probably wondering how this depressing story about a deadbeat dad and his neurotic son is going to lead to self-improvement, right?

I’ll be honest. At first, I wasn’t sure I wanted to write this book. I’m not a guy who looks for signs in the universe to tell him things. I believe that if you search hard enough for the answer you already know, you will find it. As human beings, we generally follow an instinct but still chase affirmation from something bigger than us to tell us that instinct is right. But I’m not a normal human being, and I’m not going to do that. I don’t believe in luck. I don’t believe in destiny. Instead, I believe that our lives are powered by countless microdecisions. Some dude found a million-dollar lottery ticket on the sidewalk walking to work one day. What if he hadn’t gone to work? What if he hadn’t chosen that sidewalk? What if he hadn’t looked down at the ground? All of these are factors that we assign to luck. But I believe every single thing that happens to us, good or bad, is affected by decisions we make.

The title of this book should be a tip-off that this isn't going to be some think-positive-thoughts-to-success kind of program. I always come to things from an underdog's point of view, and who am I to offer any kind of "program," anyway? My preferred place to start is the bottom, where, as they say, you have nowhere to go but up. And when you start from the bottom and succeed, you also have a theme song. Cue Drake's "Started from the Bottom."

The point of the lunch-with-my-dad story isn't even that I had faced my biggest fear. For years and years, I had thought about meeting him, even at times obsessed over it, but I never, ever made a single attempt. As those years kept ticking by, the act of trying just got bigger and harder—and so I had to turn my dad into a villain to explain my inaction.

By giving the act of meeting my dad one legitimate, full-hearted try, I knew that no matter what happened, I wouldn't fail. At least not in the long run.

In my book (both literally and figuratively), failing isn't bad. Oftentimes, people won't try things because they're afraid to fail, but my philosophy in life is all about *winning by losing*. That might sound like a foreign concept, because the general rule is that if people are good at something, they win. But really, from all I've learned, the biggest winners are also the biggest losers. And I definitely put myself in the biggest loser category. Not to be confused with the TV show *The Biggest Loser*. The only episodes I've seen are the ones where the contestants bust through the paper of their old selves and *poof*, they are one hundred pounds lighter. That show makes losing a hundred pounds look pretty easy, even though obviously it isn't. I'd like to equate the finale of *The Biggest Loser* with your life. Most people will just see you bust through the paper in whatever transformation you've made and think, "Ah, that was so easy for you." But they don't know you've been grinding on a treadmill for hours when the cameras were off. They don't know you've been getting yelled at by Jillian Michaels for licking the plastic wrapping on a cookie a few too many times. They don't know! But I do know, because I'm someone who has failed so often that eventually I learned something useful to break the cycle. And I plan to give you the information to turn heartbreak and failure into inspiration.

I developed the strategies I lay out in this book (including embracing failure) out of necessity. I had a dysfunctional upbringing that lacked any of the resources—financial or cultural—that people typically need to succeed.