

FICTION JUNE 13 & 20, 2011 ISSUE

HOME

By George Saunders



Like in the old days, I came out of the dry creek behind the house and did my little tap on the kitchen window.

“Get in here, you,” Ma said.

Inside were piles of newspapers on the stove and piles of magazines on the stairs and a big wad of hangers sticking out of the broken oven. All of that was as usual. New was: a water stain the shape of a cat head on the wall above the fridge and the old orange rug rolled up halfway.

“Still ain’t no beeping cleaning lady,” Ma said.

I looked at her funny.

“Beeping?” I said.

“Beep you,” she said. “They been on my case at work.”

It was true Ma had a pretty good potty mouth. And was working at a church now, so.

We stood there looking at each other.

Then some guy came tromping down the stairs: older than Ma even, in just boxers and hiking boots and a winter cap, long ponytail hanging out the back.

“Who’s this?” he said.

“My son,” Ma said shyly. “Mikey, this is Harris.”

“What’s your worst thing you ever did over there?” Harris said.

“What happened to Alberto?” I said.

“Alberto flew the coop,” Ma said.

“Alberto showed his ass,” Harris said.

“I hold nothing against that beeper,” Ma said.

“I hold a lot against that fucker,” Harris said. “Including he owes me ten bucks.”

“Harris ain’t dealing with his potty mouth,” Ma said.

“She’s only doing it because of work,” Harris explained.

“Harris don’t work,” Ma said.

“Well, if I did work, it wouldn’t be at a place that tells me how I can talk,” Harris said. “It would be at a place that lets me talk how I like. A place that accepts me for who I am. That’s the kind of place I’d be willing to work.”

“There ain’t many of that kind of place,” Ma said.

“Places that let me talk how I want?” Harris said. “Or places that accept me for who I am?”

“Places you’d be willing to work,” Ma said.

“How long’s he staying?” Harris said.

“Long as he wants,” Ma said.

“My house is your house,” Harris said to me.

“It ain’t your house,” Ma said.

“Give the kid some food at least,” Harris said.

“I will but it ain’t your idea,” Ma said, and shooed us out of the kitchen.

“Great lady,” Harris said. “Had my eyes on her for years. Then Alberto split. That I don’t get. You got a great lady in your life, the lady gets sick, you split?”

“Ma’s sick?” I said.

“She didn’t tell you?” he said.

He grimaced, made his hand into a fist, put it upside his head.

“Lump,” he said. “But you didn’t hear it from me.”

Ma was singing now in the kitchen.

“I hope you’re at least making bacon,” Harris called out. “A kid comes home deserves some frigging bacon.”

“Why not stay out of it?” Ma called back. “You just met him.”

“I love him like my own son,” Harris said.

“What a ridiculous statement,” Ma said. “You hate your son.”

“I hate both my sons,” Harris said.

“And you’d hate your daughter if you ever meet her,” Ma said.

Harris beamed, as if touched that Ma knew him well enough to know he would inevitably hate any child he fathered.

Ma came in with some bacon and eggs on a saucer.

“Might be a hair in it,” she said. “Lately it’s like I’m beeping shedding.”

“You are certainly welcome,” Harris said.

“You didn’t beeping do nothing!” Ma said. “Don’t take credit. Go in there and do the dishes. That would help.”

“I can’t do dishes and you know that,” Harris said. “On account of my rash.”

“He gets a rash from water,” Ma said. “Ask him why he can’t dry.”

“On account of my back,” Harris said.

“He’s the King of If,” Ma said. “What he ain’t is King of Actually Do.”

“Soon as he leaves I’ll show you what I’m king of,” Harris said.

“Oh, Harris, that is too much, that is truly disgusting,” Ma said.

Harris raised both hands over his head like: Winner and still champ.

“We’ll put you in your old room,” Ma said.

On my bed was a hunting bow and a purple Halloween cape with a built-in ghost face.

“That’s Harris’s beep,” Ma said.

“Ma,” I said. “Harris told me.”

I made my hand into a fist, put it upside my head.

She gave me a blank look.

“Or maybe I didn’t understand him right,” I said. “Lump? He said you’ve got a—”

“Or maybe he’s a big beeping liar,” she said. “He makes up crazy beep about me all the time. It’s like his hobby. He told the mailman I had a fake leg. He told Eileen at the deli one of my eyes was glass. He told the guy at the hardware I get fainting dealies and froth at the mouth whenever I get mad. Now that guy’s always rushing me outa there.”

To show how fine she was, Ma did a jumping jack.

Harris was clomping upstairs.

“I won’t tell you told about the lump,” Ma said. “You don’t tell I told about him being a liar.”

Now this was starting to seem like the old days.

“Ma,” I said, “where are Renee and Ryan living?”

“Uh,” Ma said.

“They got a sweet place over there,” Harris said. “Rolling in the dough.”

“I’m not sure that’s the best idea,” Ma said.

“Your ma thinks Ryan’s a hitter,” Harris said.

“Ryan is a hitter,” Ma said. “I can always tell a hitter.”

“He hits?” I said. “He hits Renee?”

“You didn’t hear it from me,” Ma said.

“He better not start hitting that baby,” Harris said. “Sweet little Martney. Kid’s super-cute.”

“Although what the beep kinda name is that?” Ma said. “I told Renee that. I said that.”

“Is that a boy or a girl name?” Harris said.

“What the beep you talking about?” Ma said. “You seen it. You held it.”

“Looks like a elf,” Harris said.

“But girl or boy elf?” Ma said. “Watch. He really don’t know.”

“Well, it was wearing green,” Harris said. “So that don’t help me.”

“Think,” Ma said. “What did we buy it?”

“You’d think I’d know boy or girl,” Harris said. “It being my freaking grandkid.”

“It ain’t your grandkid,” Ma said. “We bought it a boat.”

“A boat could be for boys or girls,” Harris said. “Don’t be prejudice. A girl can love a boat. Just like a boy can love a doll. Or a bra.”

“Well, we didn’t buy it a doll or a bra,” Ma said. “We bought it a boat.”

I went downstairs, got the phone book. Renee and Ryan lived over on Lincoln. 27 Lincoln.

Twenty-seven Lincoln was in the good part of downtown.

I couldn’t believe the house. Couldn’t believe the turrets. The back gate was redwood and opened so smooth, like the hinge was hydraulic.

Couldn’t believe the yard.

I squatted in some bushes by the screened-in porch. Inside, some people were talking: Renee, Ryan, Ryan’s parents, sounded like. Ryan’s parents had sonorous/confident voices that seemed to have been fabricated out of previous, less sonorous/confident voices by means of sudden money.

“Say what you will about Lon Brewster,” Ryan’s dad said. “But Lon came out and retrieved me from Feldspar that time I had a flat.”

“In that ridiculous broiling heat,” Ryan’s mom said.

“And not a word of complaint,” Ryan’s dad said. “A completely charming person.”

“Almost as charming—or so you told me—as the Flemings,” she said.

“And the Flemings are awfully charming,” he said.

“And the good they do!” she said. “They flew a planeload of babies over here.”

“Russian babies,” he said. “With harelips.”

“Soon as the babies arrived, they were whisked into operating rooms all around the country,” she said. “And who paid?”

“The Flemings,” he said.

“Didn’t they also set aside some money for college?” she said. “For the Russians?”

“Those kids went from being disabled in a collapsing nation to being set for life in the greatest country in the world,” he said. “And who did this? A corporation? The government?”

“One private couple,” she said.

“A truly visionary pair of folks,” he said.

There was a long admiring pause.

“Although you’d never know it by how harshly he speaks to her,” she said.

“Well, she can be awfully harsh with him as well,” he said.

“Sometimes it’s just him being harsh with her and her being harsh right back,” she said.

“It’s like the chicken or the egg,” he said.

“Only with harshness,” she said.

“Still, you can’t help but love the Flemings,” he said.

“We should be so wonderful,” she said. “When was the last time we rescued a Russian baby?”

“Well, we do all right,” he said. “We can’t afford to fly a bunch of Russian babies over here, but I think, in our own way, we do just fine.”

“We can’t even fly over one Russian,” she said. “Even a Canadian baby with a harelip would be beyond our means.”

“We could probably drive up there and pick one up,” he said. “But then what? We can’t afford the surgery and can’t afford the college. So the baby’s just sitting here, in America instead of Canada, still with the lip issue.”

“Did we tell you kids?” she said. “We’re adding five shops. Five shops around the tri-city area. Each with a fountain.”

“That’s great, Mom,” Ryan said.

“That is so great,” Renee said.

“And maybe, if those five shops do well, we can open another three or four shops and, at that time, revisit this whole Russian-harelip issue,” Ryan’s father said.

“You guys continue to amaze,” Ryan said.

Renee stepped out with the baby.

“I’m going to step out with the baby,” she said.

The baby had taken its toll. Renee seemed wider, less peppy. Also paler, like someone had run a color-leaching beam over her face and hair.

The baby did look like an elf.

The elf-baby looked at a bird, pointed at the bird.

“Bird,” Renee said.

The elf-baby looked at their insane pool.

“For swimming,” Renee said. “But not yet. Not yet, right?”

The elf-baby looked at the sky.

“Clouds,” Renee said. “Clouds make rain.”

It was like the baby was demanding, with its eyes: Hurry up, tell me what all this shit is, so I can master it, open a few shops.

The baby looked at me.

Renee nearly dropped the baby.

“Mike, Mikey, holy shit,” she said.

Then she seemed to remember something and hustled back to the porch door.

“Rye?” she called. “Rye-King? Can you come get the Mart-Heart?”

Ryan took the baby.

“Love you,” I heard him say.

“Love you more,” she said.

Then she came back, no baby.

“I call him Rye-King,” she said, blushing.

“I heard that,” I said.

“Mikey,” she said. “Did you do it?”

“Can I come in?” I said.

“Not today,” she said. “Tomorrow. No, Thursday. His folks leave Wednesday. Come over Thursday, we’ll hash it out.”

“Hash what out?” I said.

“Whether you can come in,” she said.

“I didn’t realize that was a question,” I said.

“Did you?” she said. “Do it?”

“Ryan seems nice,” I said.

“Oh, God,” she said. “Literally the nicest human being I have ever known.”

“Except when he’s hitting,” I said.

“When what?” she said.

“Ma told me,” I said.

“Told you what?” she said. “That Ryan hits? Hits me? Ma said that?”

“Don’t tell her I told,” I said, a little panicked, as of old.

“Ma’s deranged,” she said. “Ma’s out of her frigging mind. Ma *would* say that. You know who’s gonna get hit? Ma. By me.”

“Why didn’t you write me about Ma?” I said.

“What about her?” she said suspiciously.

“She’s sick?” I said.

“She told you?” she said.

I made a fist and held it upside my head.

“What’s that?” she said.

“A lump?” I said.

“Ma doesn’t have a lump,” she said. “She’s got a fucked-up heart. Who told you she’s got a lump?”

“Harris,” I said.

“Oh, Harris, perfect,” she said.

Inside the house, the baby started crying.

“Go,” Renee said. “We’ll talk Thursday. But first.”

She took my face in her hands and turned my head so I was looking in the window at Ryan, who was heating a bottle at the kitchen sink.

“Does that look like a hitter?” she said.

“No,” I said.

And it didn’t. Not at all.

“Jesus,” I said. “Does anybody tell the truth around here?”

“I do,” she said. “You do.”

I looked at her and for a minute she was eight and I was ten and we were hiding in the doghouse while Ma and Dad and Aunt Toni, high on mushrooms, trashed the patio.

“Mikey,” she said. “I need to know. Did you do it?”

I jerked my face out of her hands, turned, went.

“Go see your own wife, doofus!” she shouted after me. “Go see your own babies.”

Ma was on the front lawn, screaming at this low-slung fat guy. Harris was looming in the background, now and then hitting or kicking something to show how scary he could get when enraged.

“This is my son!” Ma said. “Who served. Who just came home. And this is how you do us?”

“Sousa’s back!”

“I’m grateful for your service,” the man said to me.

Harris kicked the metal garbage can.

“Will you please tell him to stop doing that?” the man said.

“He has no control over me when I’m mad,” Harris said. “No one does.”

“Do you think I like this?” the man said. “She hasn’t paid rent in four months.”

“Three,” Ma said.

“This is how you treat the family of a hero?” Harris said. “He’s over there fighting and you’re over here abusing his mother?”

“Friend, excuse me, I’m not abusing,” the man said. “This is evicting. If she’d paid her rent and I was evicting, that would be abusing.”

“And here I work for a beeping church!” Ma shouted.

The man, though low-slung and fat, was admirably bold. He went inside the house and came out carrying the TV with a bored look on his face, like it was his TV and he preferred it in the yard.

“No,” I said.

“I appreciate your service,” he said.

I took him by the shirt. I was, by this time, good at taking people by their shirts, looking them in the eye, speaking directly.

“Whose house is this?” I said.

“Mine,” he said.

I put my foot behind him, dropped him on the grass.

“Go easy,” Harris said.

“That was easy,” I said, and carried the TV back inside.

That night the sheriff arrived with some movers, who emptied the house onto the lawn.

I saw them coming and went out the back door and watched it all from High Street, sitting in the deer stand behind the Nestons’.

Ma was out there, head in hands, weaving in and out of her heaped-up crap. It was both melodramatic and not. I mean, when Ma feels something deeply, that’s what she does: melodrama. Which makes it, I guess, not melodrama?

Something had been happening to me lately where a plan would start flowing directly down to my hands and feet. When that happened, I knew to trust it. My face would get hot and I’d feel sort of like, Go, go, go.

It had served me well, mostly.

Now the plan flowing down was: grab Ma, push her inside, make her sit, round up Harris, make him sit, torch the place, or at least make the first motions of torching the place, to get their attention, make them act their age.

I flew down the hill, pushed Ma inside, sat her on the stairs, grabbed Harris by the shirt, put my foot behind him, dropped him to the floor. Then held a match to the carpet on the stairs and, once it started burning, raised a finger, like, Quiet, through me runs the power of recent dark experience.

They were both so scared they weren’t talking at all, which made me feel the kind of shame you know you’re not going to cure by saying sorry, and where the only thing to

do is: go out, get more shame.

I stomped the carpet fire out and went over to Gleason Street, where Joy and the babies were living with Asshole.

What a kick in the head: their place was even nicer than Renee's.

The house was dark. There were three cars in the driveway. Which meant that they were all home and in bed.

I stood thinking about that a bit.

Then walked back downtown and into a store. I guess it was a store. Although I couldn't tell what they were selling. On yellow counters lit from within were these heavy blue plastic tags. I picked one up. On it was the word "MiiVOX_{MAX}."

"What is it?" I said.

"It's more like what's it for, is how I'd say it," this kid said.

"What's it for?" I said.

"Actually," he said, "this is probably more the one for you."

He handed me an identical tag but with the word "MiiVOX_{MIN}" on it.

Another kid came over with espresso and cookies.

I put down the MiiVOX_{MIN} tag and held up the MiiVOX_{MAX} tag.

"How much?" I said.

“You mean money?” he said.

“What does it do?” I said.

“Well, if you’re asking is it data repository or information-hierarchy domain?” he said.

“The answer to that would be: yes and no.”

They were sweet. Not a line on their faces. When I say they were kids, I mean they were about my age.

“I’ve been away a long time,” I said.

“Welcome back,” the first kid said.

“Where were you?” the second one said.

“At the war,” I said, in the most insulting voice I could muster. “Maybe you’ve heard of it?”

“I have,” the first one said respectfully. “Thank you for your service.”

“Which one?” the second one said. “Aren’t there two?”

“Didn’t they just call one off?” the first one said.

“My cousin’s there,” the second said. “At one of them. At least I think he is. I know he was supposed to go. We were never that close.”

“Anyway, thanks,” the first one said, and put out his hand, and I shook it.

“I wasn’t for it,” the second one said. “But I know it wasn’t your deal.”

“Well,” I said. “It kind of was.”

“You *weren’t* for it or *aren’t* for it?” the first said to the second.

“Both,” the second one said. “Although is it still going?”

“Which one?” the first one said.

“Is the one you were at still going?” the second one asked me.

“Yes,” I said.

“Better or worse, do you think?” the first one said. “Like, in your view, are we winning? Oh, what am I doing? I don’t actually care, that’s what’s so funny about it!”

“Anyway,” the second one said, and held out his hand, and I shook it.

They were so nice and accepting and unsuspecting—they were so *for* me—that I walked out smiling and was about a block away before I realized I was still holding MiiVOX_{MAX}. I got under a streetlight and had a look. It seemed like just a plastic tag. Like, if you wanted MiiVOX_{MAX}, you handed in that tag, and someone went and got MiiVOX_{MAX} for you, whatever it was.

Asshole answered the door.

His actual name was Evan. We’d gone to school together. I had a vague memory of him in an Indian headdress, racing down a hallway.

“Mike,” he said.

“Can I come in?” I said.

“I think I have to say no to that,” he said.

“I’d like to see the kids,” I said.

“Past midnight,” he said.

I had a pretty good idea he was lying. Were stores open past midnight? Still, the moon was high and there was something moist and sad in the air that seemed to be saying, Well, it’s not *early*.

“Tomorrow?” I said.

“Would that be O.K. for you?” he said. “After I get home from work?”

I saw we’d agreed to play it reasonable. One way we were playing it reasonable was saying everything like a question.

“Around six?” I said.

“Does six work for you?” he said.

The weird part was I’d never actually seen the two of them together. The wife back there in his bed could have been someone else entirely.

“I know this isn’t easy,” he said.

“You fucked me,” I said.

“I would respectfully disagree with that,” he said.

“No doubt,” I said.

“I didn’t fuck you and she didn’t,” he said. “It was a challenging situation for all involved.”

“More challenging for some than for others,” I said. “Would you give me that much?”

“Are we being honest?” he said. “Or tiptoeing around conflict?”

“Honest,” I said, and his face did this thing that, for a minute, made me like him again.

“It was hard for me because I felt like a shit,” he said. “It was hard for her because she felt like a shit. It was hard for us because while feeling like shits we were also feeling all the other things we were feeling, which, I assure you, were and are as real as anything, a total blessing, if I can say it that way.”

At that point, I started feeling like a chump, like I was being held down by a bunch of guys so another guy could come over and put his New Age fist up my ass while explaining that having his fist up my ass was far from his first choice and was actually making him feel conflicted.

“Six o’clock,” I said.

“Six o’clock’s perfect,” he said. “Luckily, I’m on flextime.”

“You don’t need to be here,” I said.

“If you were me and I were you, would you maybe feel you might somewhat need to be here?” he said.

One car was a Saab and one an Escalade and the third a newer Saab, with two baby seats in it and a stuffed clown I was not familiar with.

Three cars for two grownups, I thought. What a country. What a couple of selfish dicks my wife and her new husband were. I could see that, over the years, my babies would slowly transform into selfish-dick babies, then selfish-dick toddlers, kids, teenagers, and adults, with me all that time skulking around like some unclean suspect uncle.

That part of town was full of castles. Inside one a couple was embracing. Inside another a woman had nine million little Christmas houses out on a table, like she was taking inventory. Across the river the castles got smaller. By our part of town, the houses were like peasant huts. Inside one peasant hut were five kids standing perfectly still on the back of a couch. Then they all leapt off at once and their dogs went crazy.

Ma's house was empty. Ma and Harris were sitting on the floor in the living room, making phone calls, trying to find somewhere to go. The sheriff was due back first thing in the morning.

"What time is it?" I said.

Ma looked up at where the clock used to be.

"The clock's on the sidewalk," she said.

I went out. The clock was under a coat. It was nine. Evan had fucked me. I considered going back, demanding to see the kids, but by the time I got there it would be ten and he'd still have a decent point re the lateness of the hour.

The sheriff walked in.

"Don't get up," he said to Ma.

Ma got up.

"Get up," he said to me.

I stayed sitting.

"You the one who threw down Mr. Klees?" the sheriff said.

"He's just back from the war," Ma said.

“Thank you for your service,” the sheriff said. “Might I ask you to refrain from throwing people down in the future?”

“He also threw me down,” Harris said.

“My thing is I don’t want to go around arresting veterans,” the sheriff said. “I myself am a veteran. So if you help me, by not throwing anyone else down, I’ll help you. By not arresting you. Deal?”

“He was also going to burn the house down,” Ma said.

“I wouldn’t recommend burning anything down,” the sheriff said.

“He ain’t himself,” Ma said. “I mean, look at him.”

The sheriff had never seen me before, but it was like admitting he had no basis for assessing how I looked would have been a professional embarrassment.

“He does look tired,” the sheriff said.

“Plenty strong, though,” Harris said. “Threw me right down.”

“Where are you folks off to tomorrow?” the sheriff said.

“Suggestions?” Ma said.

“A friend, a family member?” the sheriff said.

“Renee’s,” I said.

“Failing that, the shelter on Fristen?” the sheriff said.

“One thing I am not doing is going to Renee’s,” Ma said. “Everyone in that house is too high and mighty. They already think of us as low.”

“Well, we are low,” Harris said. “Compared to them.”

“The other thing I am not doing is going to any beeping shelter,” Ma said. “They got crabs at shelters.”

“When we first started dating, I had crabs from that shelter,” Harris said helpfully.

“I’m sorry this is happening,” the sheriff said. “Everything’s backward and inverted.”

“I’ll say,” Ma said. “Here I work for a church and my son’s a hero. With a Silver Star. Dragged a marine out by the beeping foot. We got the letter. And where am I? On the street.”

The sheriff had switched off and was waiting to make his break for the door and get back to whatever was real to him.

“Find someplace to live, folks,” he advised genially as he left.

Harris and I dragged two mattresses back inside. They still had the sheets and blankets on and all. But the sheets had grass stains and the pillows smelled like mud.

Then we spent a long night in the bare house.

In the morning Ma called some ladies she’d known as a young mother, but one had a disk out and another had cancer and a third had twins who’d just been diagnosed manic-depressive.

In the light of day Harris braved up again.

“So this court-martial thing,” he said. “Was that the worst thing you ever did? Or was there worse things, which you did but just didn’t get caught?”

“They cleared him of that,” Ma said tersely.

“Well, they cleared me of breaking-and-entering that time,” Harris said.

“Anyways, how is this any of your business?” Ma said.

“Probably he wants to talk,” Harris said. “Get some air in there. Good for the soul.”

“Look at his face, Har,” Ma said.

Harris looked at my face.

“Sorry I mentioned it,” he said.

“How about moving in a little closer?”

Then the sheriff was back. He made me and Harris drag the mattresses out. On the porch we watched him padlock the door.

“Eighteen years you have been my dear home,” Ma said, possibly imitating some Sioux from a movie.

“You’re going to want to get a van over here,” the sheriff said.

“My son served in the war,” Ma said. “And look how you’re doing me.”

“I’m the same guy that was here yesterday,” the sheriff said, and for some reason framed his face with his hands. “Remember me? You told me that already. I thanked him for his service. Call a van. Or your shit’s going to the dump.”

“See how they treat a lady works at a church,” Ma said.

Ma and Harris picked through their crap, found a suitcase, filled the suitcase with clothes.

Then we drove to Renee's.

My feeling was, Oh, this will be funny.

Although yes and no. That was just one of my feelings.

Another was, Oh, Ma, I remember when you were young and wore your hair in braids and I would have died to see you sink so low.

Another was, You crazy old broad, you narced me out last night. What was up with that?

Another was, Mom, Mommy, let me kneel at your feet and tell you what me and Smelton and Ricky G did at Al-Raz, and then you can stroke my hair and tell me anybody would've done the exact same thing.

As we crossed the Roll Creek Bridge I could see that Ma was feeling, Just let that Renee deny me, I will hand that little beep her beeping beep on a platter.

But then, bango, by the time we got to the far side and the air had gone from river-cool to regular again, her face had changed to, Oh, God, if Renee denies me in front of Ryan's parents and they once again find me trash, I will die, I will simply die.

Renee did deny her in front of Ryan's parents, who did find her trash.

But she didn't die.

You should have seen their faces as we walked in.

Renee looked stricken. Ryan looked stricken. Ryan's mom and dad were trying so hard not to look stricken that they kept knocking things over. A vase went down as Ryan's dad blundered forward trying to look chipper/welcoming. Ryan's mom lurched into a painting and ended up holding it in her crossed red-sweatered arms.

"Is this the baby?" I said.

Ma turned on me again.

"What do you think it is?" she said. "A midget that can't talk?"

"This is Martney, yes," Renee said, holding the baby out to me.

Ryan cleared his throat, shot Renee a look, like, I thought we'd discussed this, Love-Muffin.

Renee changed the baby's course, swerved it up, like if she held it high enough that would negate the need for me to take it from her, it being so close to the overhead light and all.

Which hurt.

"Fuck it," I said. "What do you think I'm going to do?"

"Please don't say 'fuck' in our home," Ryan said.

"Please don't tell my son what the beep he can beeping say," Ma said. "Him being in the war and all."

"Thank you for your service," Ryan's dad said.

"We can easily go to a hotel," Ryan's mom said.

“You are not going to any hotel, Mom,” Ryan said. “They can go to a hotel.”

“We’re not going to a hotel,” Ma said.

“You can easily go to a hotel, Mother. You love a good hotel,” Renee said. “Especially when we’re paying.”

Even Harris was nervous.

“A hotel sounds lovely,” he said. “It’s been many a day since I reclined in a nice place of that nature as a hotel.”

“You’d send your own mother, who works for a church, along with your brother, a Silver Star hero just home from the war, to some fleabag?” Ma said.

“Yes,” Renee said.

“Can I at least hold the baby?” I said.

“Not on my watch,” Ryan said.

“Jane and I would like you to know how much we supported, and still do support, your mission,” Ryan’s father said.

“A lot of people don’t know how many schools you fellows built over there,” Ryan’s mother said.

“People tend to focus on the negative,” Ryan’s dad said.

“What’s that proverb?” Ryan’s mother said. “To make something-or-other, you have to break a lot of something-or-other?”

“I think he could hold the baby,” Renee said. “I mean, we’re standing right here.”

Ryan winced, shook his head.

The baby writhed, like it, too, believed its fate was being decided.

Having all these people think I was going to hurt the baby made me imagine hurting the baby. Did imagining hurting the baby mean that I *would* hurt the baby? Did I *want* to hurt the baby? No, Jesus. But: did the fact that I had no intention of hurting the baby mean that I wouldn't, when push came to shove, hurt the baby? Had I, in the recent past, had the experience of having no intention of doing Activity A, then suddenly finding myself right in the middle of doing Activity A?

"I don't want to hold the baby," I said.

"I appreciate that," Ryan said. "That's cool of you."

"I want to hold this pitcher," I said, and picked up a pitcher and held it like a baby, with the lemonade spilling out of it, and, once the lemonade was pooling nicely on the hardwood floor, spiked the pitcher down.

"You really hurt my feelings!" I said.

Then was out on the sidewalk, walking fast.

Then was back in that store.

Two different guys were there, even younger than the earlier two. They might have been high-schoolers. I handed over the MiiVOX_{MAX} tag.

"Oh shit, snap!" the one guy said. "We were wondering where that was."

"We were about to call it in," the other guy said, bringing over espresso and cookies.

"Is it valuable?" I said.

“Ha, oh, boy,” the first one said, and got some kind of special cloth from under the counter and dusted the tag off and put it back on display.

“What is it?” I said.

“It’s more like what’s it for, is how I’d say it,” the first guy said.

“What’s it for?” I said.

“This might be more in your line,” he said and handed me the MiiVOX_{MIN} tag.

“I’ve been away a long time,” I said.

“Us, too,” the second kid said.

“We just got out of the Army,” the first kid said.

Then we all took turns saying where we’d been.

Turned out me and the first guy had been in basically the same place.

“Wait, so were you at Al-Raz?” I said.

“I was totally at Al-Raz,” the first guy said.

“I was never in the shit, I admit it,” the second guy said. “Although I did once run over a dog with a forklift.”

I asked the first guy if he remembered the baby goat, the pocked wall, the crying toddler, the dark arched doorway, the doves that suddenly exploded out from under that peeling gray eave.

“I wasn’t over by that,” he said. “I was more by the river and the upside-down boat and that little family all in red that kept turning up everywhere you looked?”

I knew exactly where he’d been. It was unbelievable how many times, pre- and post-exploding doves, I’d caught sight, down by the river, of some imploring or crouching or fleeing figure in red.

“It ended up cool with that dog, though,” the second guy said. “He lived and all. By the time I left, he’d be like riding right up alongside me in the forklift.”

A family of nine Indian-Americans came in, and the second guy went over to them with the espresso and cookies.

“Al-Raz, wow,” I said, in an exploratory way.

“For me?” the first guy said. “Al-Raz was the worst day of the whole deal.”

“Yes, me, too, exactly,” I said.

“I fucked up big time at Al-Raz,” he said.

Suddenly I found I couldn’t breathe.

“My boy Melvin?” he said. “Got a chunk of shrapnel right in the groin. Because of me. I waited too long to call it in. There was this like lady-party going on nearby? About fifteen gals in this corner store. And kids with them. So I waited. Too bad for Melvin. For Melvin’s groin.”

Now he was waiting for me to tell the fucked-up thing I’d done.

I put down MiiVOXMIN, picked it up, put it down.

“Melvin’s O.K., though,” he said, and did a little two-finger tap on his own groin. “He’s home, you know, in grad school. He’s fucking, apparently.”

“Glad to hear it,” I said. “Probably he even sometimes rides up alongside you in the forklift.”

“Sorry?” he said.

I looked at the clock on the wall. It didn’t seem to have any hands. It was just a moving pattern of yellow and white.

“Do you know what time it is?” I said.

The guy looked up at the clock.

“Six,” he said.

Out on the street I found a pay phone and called Renee.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Sorry about that pitcher.”

“Yeah, well,” she said in her non-fancy voice. “You’re gonna buy me a new one.”

I could hear she was trying to make up.

“No,” I said. “I don’t think I’ll be doing that.”

“Where are you, Mikey?” she said.

“Nowhere,” I said.

“Where are you going?” she said.

“Home,” I said and hung up.

Coming up Gleason, I had that feeling. My hands and feet didn't know exactly what they wanted, but they were trending toward: push past whatever/whoever blocks you, get inside, start wrecking shit by throwing it around, shout out whatever's in your mind, see what happens.

I was on a like shame slide. You know what I mean? Once, back in high school, this guy paid me to clean some gunk out of his pond. You snagged the gunk with a rake, then rake-hurled it. At one point, the top of my rake flew into the gunk pile. When I went to retrieve it, there were like a million tadpoles, dead and dying, at whatever age they are when they've got those swollen bellies like little pregnant ladies. What the dead and dying had in common was: their tender white underbellies had been torn open by the gunk suddenly crashing down on them from on high. The difference was: the dying were the ones doing the mad fear-gesticulating.

I tried to save a few, but they were so tender all I did by handling them was torture them worse.

Maybe someone else could've said to the guy, “Uh, I have to stop now, I feel bad for killing so many tadpoles.” But I couldn't. So I kept on rake-hurling.

With each rake-hurl I thought, I'm making more bloody bellies.

The fact that I kept rake-hurling started making me mad at the frogs.

It was like either: (A) I was a terrible guy who was knowingly doing this rotten thing over and over, or (B) it wasn't so rotten, really, just normal, and the way to confirm that it was normal was to keep doing it over and over.

Years later, at Al-Raz, it was a familiar feeling.

Here was the house.

Here was the house where they cooked, laughed, fucked. Here was the house that, in the future, when my name came up, would get all hushed, and Joy would be like, “Although Evan is, no, not your real daddy, me and Daddy Evan feel you don’t need to be around Daddy Mike all that much, because what me and Daddy Evan really care about is you two growing up strong and healthy, and sometimes mommies and daddies need to make a special atmosphere in which that can happen.”

I looked for the three cars in the driveway. Three cars meant: all home. Did I want all home? I did. I wanted all, even the babies, to see and participate and be sorry for what had happened to me.

But instead of three cars in the driveway there were five.

Evan was on the porch, as expected. Also on the porch were: Joy, plus two strollers. Plus Ma.

Plus Harris.

Plus Ryan.

Renee was trotting all awkward up the driveway, trailed by Ryan’s mom, pressing a handkerchief to her forehead, and Ryan’s dad, bringing up the rear due to a limp I hadn’t noticed before.

You? I thought. You jokers? You nutty fuckers are all God sent to stop me? That is a riot. That is so fucking funny. What are you going to stop me with? Your girth? Your good intentions? Your Target jeans? Your years of living off the fat of the land? Your belief that anything and everything can be fixed with talk, talk, endless yapping, hopeful talk?

The contours of the coming disaster expanded to include the deaths of all present.

My face got hot and I thought, Go, go, go.

Ma tried and failed to rise from the porch swing. Ryan helped her up by the elbow all courtly.

Then suddenly something softened in me, maybe at the sight of Ma so weak, and I dropped my head and waded all docile into that crowd of know-nothings, thinking, O.K., O.K., you sent me, now bring me back. Find some way to bring me back, you fuckers, or you are the sorriest bunch of bastards the world has ever known. ♦

George Saunders has published over twenty short stories and numerous Shouts & Murmurs in The New Yorker since first appearing in the magazine, in 1992. He is the author of "Lincoln in the Bardo: A Novel."

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