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GEORGE SAUNDERS

THE SEMPLICA-GIRL DIARIES

from *The New Yorker*

GEORGE SAUNDERS was born in 1958 in Texas and raised in Chicago, and graduated with a degree in geophysics from the Colorado School of Mines. He says, "Any claim I might make to originality in my fiction is really just the result of this odd background: basically, just me working inefficiently, with flawed tools, in a mode I don't have sufficient background to really understand. Like if you put a welder to designing dresses." He earned an MA in creative writing from Syracuse University in 1988.

Saunders is the author of eight books, including *Tenth of December*, which won the inaugural Folio Prize in 2013 (for the best work of fiction in English) and the Story Prize (best short story collection) and was a finalist for the National Book Award. He has received the MacArthur Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the PEN/Malamud Prize for excellence in the short story and was recently elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2013 he was named one of the world's 100 most influential people by *Time* magazine.

Critic Alan Cheuse said, "George Saunders is the real thing, the successor to such dark comedians of ordinary speech as Donald Barthelme and Grace Paley. He's a Vonnegutian in his soul and, paradoxically, a writer like no one but himself": Saunders's fiction often explores the impact of modern consumerism and technology.

George Saunders teaches at Syracuse University and lives in the Catskills.

★

SEPTEMBER 3RD

Having just turned forty, have resolved to embark on grand project of writing every day in this new black book just got at OfficeMax. Exciting to think how in one year, at rate of one page/day, will have written three hundred and sixty-five pages, and what a picture of life and times then available for kids & grandkids, even great-grandkids, whoever, all are

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welcome (!) to see how life really was/is now. Because what do we know of other times really? How clothes smelled and carriages sounded? Will future people know, for example, about sound of airplanes going over at night, since airplanes by that time passé? Will future people know sometimes cats fought in night? Because by that time some chemical invented to make cats not fight? Last night dreamed of two demons having sex and found it was only two cats fighting outside window. Will future people be aware of concept of "demons"? Will they find our belief in "demons" quaint? Will "windows" even exist? Interesting to future generations that even sophisticated college grad like me sometimes woke in cold sweat, thinking of demons, believing one possibly under bed? Anyway, what the heck, am not planning on writing encyclopedia, if any future person is reading this, if you want to know what a "demon" was, go look it up, in something called an encyclopedia, if you even still have those!

Am getting off track, due to those fighting cats. Hereby resolve to write in this book at least twenty minutes a night, no matter how tired. (If discouraged, just think how much will have been recorded for posterity after one mere year!)

SEPTEMBER 5TH

Oops. Missed a day. Things hectic. Will summarize yesterday. Yesterday a bit rough. While picking kids up at school, bumper fell off Park Avenue. Note to future generations: Park Avenue = type of car. Ours not new. Ours oldish. Bit rusty. Kids got in, Eva (middle child) asked what was meaning of "junkorama." At that moment, bumper fell off. Mr. Renn, history teacher, quite helpful, retrieved bumper (note: write letter of commendation to principal), saying he too once had car whose bumper fell off, when poor, in college. Eva assured me it was all right bumper had fallen off. I replied of course it was all right, why wouldn't it be all right, it was just something that had happened, I certainly hadn't caused. Image that stays in mind is of three sweet kids in backseat, chastened expressions on little faces, timidly holding bumper across laps. One end of bumper had to hang out Eva's window and today she has sniffles, plus small cut on hand from place where bumper was sharp.

Lilly (oldest, nearly thirteen!), as always, put all in perspective, by saying, Who cares about stupid bumper, we're going to get a new car soon anyway, when rich, right?

Upon arriving home, put bumper in garage. In garage, found dead

large mouse or small squirrel crawling with maggots. Used shovel to transfer majority of squirrel/mouse to Hefy bag. Smudge of squirrel/mouse still on garage floor, like oil stain w/embedded fur tufts.

Stood looking up at house, sad. Thought: Why sad? Don't be sad. If sad, will make everyone sad. Went in happy, not mentioning bumper, squirrel/mouse smudge, maggots, then gave Eva extra ice cream, due to I had spoken harshly to her.

Have to do better! Be kinder. Start now. Soon they will be grown and how sad, if only memory of you is testy, stressed guy in bad car.

When will I have sufficient leisure/wealth to sit on hay bale watching moon rise, while in luxurious mansion family sleeps? At that time, will have chance to reflect deeply on meaning of life, etc., etc. Have a feeling and have always had a feeling that this and other good things will happen for us!

SEPTEMBER 6TH

Very depressing birthday party today at home of Lilly's friend Leslie Torrini.

House is mansion where Lafayette once stayed. Torrini's showed us Lafayette's room: now their "Fun Den." Plasma TV, pinball game, foot massager. Thirty acres, six garages (they call them "outbuildings"): one for Ferraris (three), one for Porsches (two, plus one he is rebuilding), one for historical merry-go-round they are restoring as family (!). Across trout-stocked stream, red Oriental bridge flown in from China. Showed us hoofmark from some dynasty. In front room, near Steinway, plaster cast of hoofmark from even earlier dynasty, in wood of different bridge. Picasso autograph, Disney autograph, dress Greta Garbo once wore, all displayed in massive mahogany cabinet.

Vegetable garden tended by guy named Karl.

Lilly: Wow, this garden is like ten times bigger than our whole yard.

Flower garden tended by separate guy, weirdly also named Karl.

Lilly: Wouldn't you love to live here?

Me: Lilly, ha-ha, don't ah . . .

Pam (my wife, very sweet, love of life!): What, what is she saying wrong? Wouldn't you? Wouldn't you love to live here? I know I would.

In front of house, on sweeping lawn, largest SG arrangement ever seen, all in white, white smocks blowing in breeze, and Lilly says, Can we go closer?

Leslie Torrini: We can but we don't, usually.

Leslie's mother, dressed in Indonesian sarong: We don't, as we already have, many times, dear, but you perhaps would like to? Perhaps this is all very new and exciting to you?

Lilly, shyly: It is, yes.

Leslie's mom: Please, go, enjoy.

Lilly races away.

Leslie's mom, to Eva: And you, dear?

Eva stands timidly against my leg, shakes head no.

Just then father (Emmett) appears, says time for dinner, hopes we like sailfish flown in fresh from Guatemala, prepared with a rare spice found only in one tiny region of Burma, which had to be bribed out.

The kids can eat later, in the tree house, Leslie's mom says.

She indicates the tree house, which is painted Victorian and has a gabled roof and a telescope sticking out and what looks like a small solar panel.

Thomas: Wow, that tree house is like twice the size of our actual house.

(Thomas, as usual, exaggerating: tree house is more like one-third size of our house. Still, yes: big tree house.)

Our gift not the very worst. Although possibly the least expensive — someone brought a mini DVD player; someone brought a lock of hair from an actual mummy (!) — it was, in my opinion, the most heart-felt. Because Leslie (who appeared disappointed by the lock of mummy hair, and said so, because she already had one (!)) was, it seemed to me, touched by the simplicity of our paper-doll set. And although we did not view it as kitsch at the time we bought it, when Leslie's mom said, Les, check it out, kitsch or what, don't you love it?, I thought, Yes, well, maybe it is kitsch, maybe we did intend. In any event, this eased the blow when the next gift was a ticket to the Preakness (!), as Leslie has recently become interested in horses, and has begun getting up early to feed their nine horses, whereas previously she had categorically refused to feed the six llamas.

Leslie's mom: So guess who ended up feeding the llamas?

Leslie, sharply: Mom, don't you remember back then I always had yoga?

Leslie's mom: Although actually, honestly? It was a blessing, a chance for me to rediscover what terrific animals they are, after school, on days on which Les had yoga.

Leslie: Like every day, yoga?

Leslie's mom: I guess you just have to trust your kids, trust that their

innate interest in life will win out in the end, don't you think? Which is what is happening now, with Les and horses. God, she loves them.

Pam: Our kids, we can't even get them to pick up what Ferber does in the front yard.

Leslie's mom: And Ferber is?

Me: Dog.

Leslie's mom: Ha-ha, yes, well, everything poops, isn't that just *it*?

After dinner, strolled grounds with Emmett, who is surgeon, does something two days a week with brain inserts, small electronic devices? Or possibly biotronic? They are very small. Hundreds can fit on head of pin? Or dime? Did not totally follow. He asked about my work, I told. He said, Well, huh, amazing the strange, arcane things our culture requires some of us to do, degrading things, things that offer no tangible benefit to anyone, how do they expect people to continue to even hold their heads up?

Could not think of response. Note to self: Think of response, send on card, thus striking up friendship with Emmett?

Returned to Torrini's house, sat on special star-watching platform as stars came out. Our kids sat watching stars, fascinated. What, I said, no stars in our neighborhood? No response. From anyone. Actually, stars there did seem brighter. On star platform, had too much to drink, and suddenly everything I thought of seemed stupid. So just went quiet, like in stupor.

Pam drove home. I sat sullen and drunk in passenger seat of Park Avenue. Kids babbling about what a great party it was, Lilly especially. Thomas spouting all these boring llama facts, per Emmett.

Lilly: I can't wait till my party. My party is in two weeks, right?

Pam: What do you want to do for your party, sweetie? Long silence in car.

Lilly, finally, sadly: Oh, I don't know. Nothing, I guess.

Pulled up to house. Another silence as we regarded blank, empty yard. That is, mostly crabgrass and no red Oriental bridge w/ancient hoofprints and no outbuildings and not a single SG, but only Ferber, who we'd kind of forgotten about, and who, as usual, had circled round and round the tree until nearly strangling to death on his gradually shortening leash and was looking up at us with begging eyes in which desperation was combined with a sort of low-boiling anger.

Let him off leash, he shot me hostile look, took dump extremely close to porch.

Watched to see if kids would take initiative and pick up. But no. Kids

only slumped past and stood exhausted by front door. Knew I should take initiative and pick up. But was tired and had to come in and write in this stupid book.

Do not really like rich people, as they make us poor people feel dopey and inadequate. Not that we are poor. I would say we are middle. We are very, very lucky. I know that. But still, it is not right that rich people make us middle people feel dopey and inadequate.

Am writing this still drunk and it is getting late and tomorrow is Monday, which means work.

Work, work, work. Stupid work. Am so tired of work.
Good night.

SEPTEMBER 7TH

Just reread that last entry and should clarify.

Am not tired of work. It is a privilege to work. I do not hate the rich. I aspire to be rich myself. And when we finally do get our own bridge, trout, tree house, SGs, etc., at least will know we really earned them, unlike, say, the Torriniis, who, I feel, must have family money.

Last night, after party, found Eva sad in her room. Asked why. She said no reason. But in sketch pad: crayon pic of row of sad SGs. Could tell were meant to be sad, due to frowns went down off faces like Fu Manchus and tears were dropping in arcs, flowers springing up where tears hit ground. Note to self: Talk to her, explain that it does not hurt, they are not sad but actually happy, given what their prior conditions were like: they chose, are glad, etc.

Very moving piece on NPR re Bangladeshi SG sending money home: hence her parents able to build small shack. (Note to self: Find online, download, play for Eva. First fix computer. Computer super slow. Possibly delete "CircusLoser"? Acrobats run all jerky, due to low memory + elephants do not hop = no fun.)

SEPTEMBER 12TH

Nine days to Lilly's b-day. Kind of dread this. Too much pressure. Do not want to have bad party.

Had asked Lilly for list of b-day gift ideas. Today came home to envelope labeled POSSIBLE GIFT LIST. Inside, clippings from some catalogue: "Resting Fierceness." *A pair of fierce porcelain jungle cats are tamed (at least for now!) on highly detailed ornamental pillows, but their wildness*

is not to be underestimated. *Left-facing cheetah*: \$350. *Right-facing tiger*: \$325. Then, on Post-it: DAD, SECOND CHOICE. "Girl Reading to Little Sister" figurine: *This childhood study by Nevada artist Dani will recall in porcelain the joys of "story time" and the tender moments shared by all. Girl and little girl reading on polished rock*: \$280.

Discouraging, I felt. Because (1) why does young girl of thirteen want such old-lady gift, and (2) where does girl of thirteen get idea that \$300 = appropriate amount for b-day gift? When I was kid, it was one shirt, one shirt I didn't want, usually homemade.

However, do not want to break Lilly's heart or harshly remind her of our limitations. God knows, she is already reminded often enough. For "My Yard" project at school, Leslie Torrini brought in pics of Oriental bridge, plus background info on SGs (age, place of origin, etc.), as did "every other kid in class," whereas Lilly brought in nineteen-forties condom box found last year during aborted attempt to start vegetable garden. Perhaps was bad call re letting her bring condom box? Thought, being historical, it would be good, plus perhaps kids would not notice it was condom box. But teacher noticed, pointed out, kids had big hoot, teacher used opportunity to discuss safe sex, which was good for class but maybe not so good for Lilly.

As for party, Lilly said she would rather not have one. I asked, Why not, sweetie? She said, Oh, no reason. I said, Is it because of our yard, our house? Is it because you are afraid that, given our small house and bare yard, party might be boring or embarrassing?

At which she burst into tears and said, Oh, Daddy.

Actually, one figurine might not be excessive. Or, rather, might be excess worth indulging in, due to sad look on her face when she came in on "My Yard" day and dropped condom box on table with sigh.

Maybe "Girl Reading to Little Sister," as that is cheapest? Although maybe giving cheapest sends bad signal? Signals frugality even in midst of attempt to be generous? Maybe best to go big? Go for "Resting Fierceness"? Put cheetah on Visa, hope she is happily surprised?

SEPTEMBER 14TH

Observed Mel Redden at work today. He did fine. I did fine. He committed minor errors, I caught them all. He made one Recycling Error: threw Tab can in wrong bucket. When throwing Tab in wrong bucket, made Ergonomic Error, by throwing from far away, missing, having to get up and rethrow. Then made second Ergonomic Error: did not squat

when picking up Tab to rethrow, but bent at waist, thereby increasing risk of back injury. Mel signed off on my Observations, then asked me to re-Observe. Very smart. During re-Observation, Mel made no errors. Threw no cans in bucket, just sat very still at desk. So was able to append that to his Record. Parted friends, etc., etc.

One week until L's birthday.

Note to self: Order cheetah.

However, not that simple. Some recent problems with Visa. Full. Past full. Found out at YourItalianKitchen, when Visa declined. Left Pam and kids there, walked rapidly out with big fake smile, drove to ATM. Then scary moment as ATM card also declined. Nearby wino said ATM was broken, directed me to different ATM. Thanked wino with friendly wave as I drove past. Wino gave me finger. Second ATM, thank God, not broken, did not decline. Arrived, winded, back at YourItalianKitchen to find Pam on third cup of coffee and kids falling off chairs and tapping aquarium with dimes, wait staff looking peeved. Paid cash, w/big apologetic tip. Considered collecting dimes from kids (!). Still, overall nice night. Really fun. Kids showed good manners, until aquarium bit.

But problem remains: Visa full. Also AmEx full and Discover nearly full. Called Discover: \$200 avail. If we transfer \$200 from checking (once paycheck comes in), would then have \$400 avail. on Discover, could get cheetah. Although timing problematic. Currently, checking at zero. Paycheck must come, must put paycheck in checking pronto, hope paycheck clears quickly. And then, when doing bills, pick bills totaling \$200 to not pay. To defer paying.

Stretched a bit thin these days.

Note to future generations: In our time are such things as credit cards. Company loans money, you pay back at high interest rate. Is nice for when you do not actually have money to do thing you want to do (for example, buy extravagant cheetah). You may say, safe in your future time, Wouldn't it be better to simply not do thing you can't afford to do? Easy for you to say! You are not here, in our world, with kids, kids you love, while other people are doing good things for their kids, such as a Heritage Journey to Nice, if you are the Mancinis, or three weeks wreck-diving off the Bahamas, if you are Gary Gold and his tan, sleek son, Byron.

There is so much I want to do and experience and give to kids. Time going by so quickly, kids growing up so fast. If not now, when? When will we give them largesse and sense of generosity? Have never been to

Hawaii or parasailed or eaten lunch at café by ocean, wearing floppy straw hats just purchased on whim. So I worry: Growing up in paucity, won't they become too cautious? Not that they are growing up in paucity. Still, there are things we want but cannot have. If kids raised too cautious, due to paucity, will not world chew them up and spit out?

Still, must fight good fight! Think of Dad. When Mom left Dad, Dad kept going to job. When laid off from job, got paper route. When laid off from paper route, got lesser paper route. In time, got better route back. By time Dad died, had job almost as good as original job. And had paid off most debt incurred after demotion to lesser route.

Note to self: Visit Dad's grave. Bring flowers. Have talk with Dad re certain things said by me at time of paper routes, due to, could not afford rental tux for prom but had to wear Dad's old tux, which did not fit. Still, no need to be rude. Was not Dad's fault he was good foot taller than me and therefore pant legs dragged, hiding Dad's borrowed shoes, which pinched, because Dad, though tall, had tiny feet.

SEPTEMBER 15TH

Damn it. Plan will not work. Cannot get check to Discover in time. Needs time to clear.

So no cheetah.

Must think of something else to give to Lilly at small family-only party in kitchen. Or may have to do what Mom sometimes did, which was, when thing not available, wrap picture of thing with note promising thing. However, note to self: Do not do other thing Mom did, which was, when child tries to redeem, roll eyes, act exasperated, ask if child thinks money grows on trees.

Note to self: Find ad with pic of cheetah, for I.O.U. coupon. Was on desk but not anymore. Possibly used to record phone message on? Possibly used to pick up little thing cat threw up?

Poor Lilly. Her sweet hopeful face when toddler, wearing Burger King crown, and now this? She did not know she was destined to be not princess but poor girl. Poorish girl. Girl! not-the-richest.

No party, no present. Possibly no pic of cheetah in I.O.U. Could draw cheetah but Lilly might then think she was getting camel. Or not getting camel, rather. Am not best drawer. Ha-ha! Must keep spirits up. Laugh-ter best medicine, etc., etc.

Someday, I'm sure, dreams will come true. But when? Why not now? Why not?

SEPTEMBER 20TH

Sorry for silence but wow!

Was too happy/busy to write!

Friday most incredible day ever! Do not need to even write down, as will never forget this awesome day! But will record for future generations. Nice for them to know that good luck and happiness real and possible! In America of my time, want them to know, anything possible!

Wow wow wow is all I can say! Remember how I always buy lunch-time Scratch-Off ticket? Have I said? Maybe did not say? Well, every Friday, to reward self for good week, I stop at store near home, treat self to Butterfinger, plus Scratch-Off ticket. Sometimes, if hard week, two Butterfingers. Sometimes, if very hard week, three Butterfingers. But, if three Butterfingers, no Scratch-Off. But Friday won TEN GRAND!! On Scratch-Off! Dropped both Butterfingers, stood there holding dime used to scratch, mouth hanging open. Kind of reeled into magazine rack. Guy at register took ticket, read ticket, said, Winner! Guy righted magazine rack, shook my hand.

Then said we would get check, check for TEN GRAND, within week. Raced home on foot, forgetting car. Raced back for car. Halfway back, thought, What the heck, raced home on foot. Pam raced out, said, Where is car? Showed her Scratch-Off ticket. She stood stunned in yard. Are we rich now? Thomas said, racing out, dragging Ferber by collar. Not rich, Pam said.

Richer, I said.

Richer, Pam said. Damn.

All began dancing around yard, Ferber looking witless at sudden dancing, then doing dance of own, by chasing own tail.

Then, of course, had to decide how to use. That night in bed, Pam said, Partially pay off credit cards? My feeling was yes, okay, could. But did not seem exciting to me and also did not seem all that exciting to her.

Pam: It would be nice to do something special for Lilly's birthday.

Me: Me too, exactly, yes!

Pam: She could use something. She has really been down.

Me: You know what? Let's do it.

Because Lilly our oldest, we have soft spot for her, soft spot that is also like worry spot.

So we hatched up scheme, then did.

Which was: Went to Greenway Landscaping, had them do total new

yard design, incl. ten rosebushes + cedar pathway + pond + small hot tub + four-SG arrangement! Big fun part was, how soon could it be done? Plus, could it be done in secret? Greenway said, for price, could do in one day, while kids at school. (Note to self: Write letter praising Melanie, Greenway gal—super facilitator.)

Step two was: send out secret invites to surprise party to be held on evening of day of yard completion, i.e., tomorrow, i.e., that is why so silent in terms of this book for last week. Sorry, sorry, have just been super busy!

Pam and I worked so well together, like in old days, so nice and close, total agreement. That night, when arrangements all made, went to bed early (!) (masseuse scenario—do not ask!).

Sorry if corny.

Am just happy.

Note to future generations: Happiness possible. And happy so much better than opposite, i.e., sad. Hopefully you know! I knew, but forgot. Got used to being slightly sad! Slightly sad, due to stress, due to worry vis-à-vis limitations. But now, wow, no: happy!

SEPTEMBER 21ST! LILLY B-DAY(!)

There are days so perfect you feel: This is what life about. When old, will feel whole life worth it, because I got to experience this perfect day.

Today that kind of day.

In morning, kids go off to school per usual. Greenway comes at ten. Yard done by two (!). Roses in, fountain in, pathway in. SG truck arrives at three. SGs exit truck, stand shyly near fence while rack installed. Rack nice. Opted for "Lexington" (midrange in terms of price): bronze up-rights w/ Colonial caps, EzyRelease levers.

SGs already in white smocks. Microline strung through. SGs holding microline slack in hands, like mountain climbers holding rope. Only no mountain (!). One squatting, others standing polite/nervous, one sniffing new roses. She gives timid wave. Other says something to her, like, Hey, not supposed to wave. But I wave back, like, In this household, is okay to wave.

Doctor monitors installation by law. So young! Looks like should be working at Wendy's. Says we can watch hoist or not. Gives me meaningful look, cuts eyes at Pam, as in, Wife squeamish? Pam somewhat squeamish. Sometimes does not like to handle raw chicken. I say, Let's go inside, put candles on cake.

Soon, knock on door: doctor says hoist all done.

Me: So can we have a look?

Him: Totally.

We step out. SGs up now, approx. three feet off ground, smiling, swaying in slight breeze. Order, left to right: Tami (Laos), Gwen (Moldova), Lisa (Somalia), Betty (Philippines). Effect amazing. Having so often seen similar configuration in yards of others more affluent makes own yard seem suddenly affluent, you feel different about self, as if at last in step with peers and time in which living.

Pond great. Roses great. Path, hot tub great.

Everything set.

Could not believe we had pulled this off.

Picked kids up at school. Lilly all hangdog because her b-day and no one said Happy B-day at breakfast, and no party and no gifts so far.

Meanwhile, at home: Pam scrambling to decorate. Food delivered (BBQ from Snakey's). Friends arrive. So when Lilly gets out of car what does she see but whole new yard full of friends from school sitting at new picnic table near new hot tub, and new line of four SGs, and Lilly literally bursts into tears of happiness!

Then more tears as shiny pink packages unwrapped, "Resting Fierceness" plus "Girl Reading to Little Sister" revealed. Lilly touched I remembered exact figurines. Plus "Summer Daze" (hobo-clown fishing (\$380)), which she hadn't even requested (just to prove largesse). Several more waves of happy tears, hugs, right in front of friends, as if gratitude/affection for us greater than fear of rebuke from friends.

Party guests played usual games, Crack the Whip, etc., etc., in beautiful new yard. Kids joyful, thanked us for inviting. Several said they loved yard. Several parents lingered after, saying they loved yard.

And, my God, the look on Lilly's face as all left!

Know she will always remember today.

Only one slight negative: After party, during cleanup, Eva stomps away, picks up cat too roughly, the way she sometimes does when mad. Cat scratches her, runs over to Ferber, claws Ferber. Ferber dashes away, stumbles into table, roses bought for Lilly crash down on Ferber.

We find Eva in closet.

Pam: Sweetie, sweetie, what is it?

Eva: I don't like it. It's not nice.

Thomas (rushing over with cat to show he is master of cat): They want to, Eva. They like applied for it.

Pam: Where they're from, the opportunities are not so good.

Me: It helps them take care of the people they love.

Eva facing wall, lower lip out in her pre-crying way.

Then I get idea: Go to kitchen, page through Personal Statements. Yikes. Worse than I thought: Laotian (Tami) applied due to two sisters already in brothels. Moldovan (Gwen) has cousin who thought she was becoming window-washer in Germany, but no: sex slave in Kuwait (!). Somali (Lisa) watched father + little sister die of AIDS, same tiny thatch hut, same year. Filipina (Betty) has little brother "very skilled for computer," parents cannot afford high school, have lived in tiny lean-to with three other families since their own tiny lean-to slid down hillside in earthquake.

I opt for "Betty," go back to closet, read "Betty" aloud.

Me: Does that help? Do you understand now? Can you kind of imagine her little brother in a good school, because of her, because of us?

Eva: If we want to help them, why can't we just give them the money?
Me: Oh, sweetie.

Pam: Let's go look. Let's see do they look sad.

(Do not look sad. Are in fact quietly chatting in moonlight.)

At window, Eva quiet. Deep well. So sensitive. Even when tiny, Eva sensitive. Kindest kid. Biggest heart. Once, when little, found dead bird in yard and placed on swing-set slide, so it could "see him family." Cried when we threw out old rocking chair, claiming it told her it wanted to live out rest of life in basement.

But I worry. Pam worries: if kid too sensitive, kid goes out in world, world rips kid's guts out, i.e., some toughness req'd?

Lilly, on other hand, wrote all thank-you notes tonight in one sitting, mopped kitchen without being asked, then was out in yard w/flashlight, picking up Ferber area with new poop-scoop she apparently rode on bike to buy w/own money at Fas Mart (!).

SEPTEMBER 22ND

Happy period continues.

Everyone at work curious re Scratch-Off win. Brought pics of yard into work, posted in cubicle, folks came by, admired. Steve Z. asked could he drop by house sometime, see yard in person. This a first: Steve Z. has never previously given me time of day. Even asked my advice: where did I buy winning Scratch-Off, how many Scratch-Offs do I typically buy, Greenway = reputable company?

Embarrassed to admit how happy this made me.

At lunch, went to mall, bought four new shirts. Running joke in department vis-à-vis I have only two shirts. Not so. But have three similar blue shirts and two identical yellow shirts. Hence confusion. Do not generally buy new clothes for self. Have always felt it more important for kids to have new clothes, i.e., do not want other kids saying my kids have only two shirts, etc., etc. As for Pam, Pam very beautiful, raised w/ money. Do not want former wealthy beauty wearing same clothes over and over, feeling, When young, had so many clothes, but now, due to him (i.e., me), badly dressed.

Correction: Pam not raised wealthy. Pam's father = farmer in small town. Had biggest farm on edge of small town. So, relative to girls on smaller farms, Pam = rich girl. If same farm near bigger town, farm only average, but no: town so small, modest farm = estate.

Anyway, Pam deserves best.

Came home, took detour around side of house to peek at yard: fish hovering near lily pads, bees buzzing around roses, SGs in fresh white smocks, shaft of sun falling across lawn, dust motes rising up w/sleepy late-summer feeling, LifeStyleServices team (i.e., Greenway folks who come by 3x/day to give SGs meals/water, take SGs to SmallJon in back of van, deal with feminine issues, etc., etc.) hard at work.

Inside, found Leslie Torrini over (!). This = huge. Leslie never over solo before. Says she likes the way our SGs hang close to pond, are thus reflected in pond. Calls home, demands pond. Leslie's mother calls Leslie spoiled brat, says no pond. This = big score for Lilly. Not that we are glad when someone else not glad. But Leslie so often glad when Lilly not glad, maybe is okay if, just once, Leslie = little bit sad while Lilly = riding high?

Girls go into yard, stay in yard for long time. Pam and I peek out. Girls getting along? Girls have heads together in shade of trees, exchanging girlish intimacies, cementing Lilly's status as pal of Leslie?

Leslie's mother arrives (in BMW). Leslie, Leslie's mother bicker briefly re pond.

Leslie's mom: But, Les, love, you already have three streams.

Leslie (caustic): Is a stream a pond, *Maman*?

Lilly gives me grateful peck on cheek, runs upstairs singing happy tune.

Note to self: Try to extend positive feelings associated with Scratch-Off win into all areas of life. Be bigger presence at work. Race up ladder (joyfully, w/smile on face), get raise. Get in best shape of life, start dressing nicer. Learn guitar? Make point of noticing beauty of world? Why

not educate self re birds, flowers, trees, constellations, become true citizen of natural world, walk around neighborhood w/kids, patiently teaching kids names of birds, flowers, etc., etc.? Why not take kids to Europe? Kids have never been. Have never, in Alps, had hot chocolate in mountain café, served by kindly white-haired innkeeper, who finds them so sophisticated/friendly relative to usual snotty/rich American kids (who always ignore his pretty but crippled daughter w/braids) that he shows them secret hiking path to incredible glade, kids frolic in glade, sit with crippled pretty girl on grass, later say it was most beautiful day of their lives, keep in touch with crippled girl via e-mail, we arrange surgery for her here, surgeon so touched he agrees to do for free, she is on front page of our paper, we are on front page of their paper in Alps?
Ha-ha.

(Actually have never been to Europe myself. Dad felt portions there too small. Then Dad lost job, got paper route, portion size = moot point.)

Have been sleepwalking through life, future reader. Can see that now. Scratch-Off win was like wake-up call. In rush to graduate college, win Pam, get job, make babies, move ahead in job, forgot former presentation of special destiny I used to have when tiny, sitting in cedar-smelling bedroom closet, looking up at blowing trees through high windows, feeling I would someday do something great.

Hereby resolve to live life in new and more powerful way, starting THIS MOMENT (!).

SEPTEMBER 23RD

Eva being a pain.

As I may have mentioned above, Eva = sensitive. This = good, Pam and I feel. This = sign of intelligence. But Eva seems to have somehow gotten idea that sensitivity = effective way to get attention, i.e., has developed tendency to set herself apart from others, possibly as way of distinguishing self, i.e., casting self as better, more refined than others? Has, in past, refused to eat meat, sit on leather seats, use plastic forks made in China. Is endearing enough in little kid. But Eva getting older now, this tendency to object on principle starting to feel a bit precious + becoming fundamental to how she views self?

Family life in our time sometimes seems like game of Whac-A-Mole, future reader. Future generations still have? Plastic mole emerges, you whack with hammer, he dies, falls, another emerges, you whack, kill?

Sometimes seems that, as soon as one kid happy, another kid "pops up," i.e., registers complaint, requiring parent to "whack" kid, i.e., address complaint.

Today Eva's teacher, Ms. Ross, sent home note: Eva acting out. Eva grouchy. Eva stamped foot. Eva threw fish-food container at John M. when John M. said it was his turn to feed fish. This not like Eva, Ms. R. says: Eva sweetest kid in class.

Also, Eva's artwork has recently gone odd. Sample odd artwork enclosed:

Typical house. (Can tell is meant to be our house by mock-cherry tree = swirl of pink.) In yard, SGs frowning. One (Betty) having thought in cartoon balloon: "OUCH! THIS SURE HERTS." Second (Gwen), pointing long bony finger at house: "THANKS LODES." Third (Lisa), tears rolling down cheeks: "WHAT IF I AM YOUR DAUGHTER?"

Pam: Well. This doesn't seem to be going away.

Me: No, it does not.

Took Eva for drive. Drove through Eastridge, Lemon Hills. Pointed out houses w/SGs. Had Eva keep count. In end, of approx. fifty houses, thirty-nine had.

Eva: So, just because everyone is doing it, that makes it right.

This cute. Eva parroting me, Pam.

Stopped at Fritz's Chillhouse, had banana split. Eva had Snow-Melt. We sat on big wooden crocodile, watched sun go down.

Eva: I don't even — I don't even get it how they're not dead.

Suddenly occurred to me, w/little gust of relief: Eva resisting in part because she does not understand basic science of thing. Asked Eva if she even knew what Semplica Pathway was. Did not. Drew human head on napkin, explained: Lawrence Semplica = doctor + smart cookie. Found way to route microline through brain that does no damage, causes no pain. Technique uses lasers to make pilot route. Microline then threaded through w/silk leader. Microline goes in here (touched Eva's temple), comes out here (touched other). Is very gentle, does not hurt, SGs asleep during whole deal.

Then decided to level w/Eva.

Explained: Lilly at critical juncture. Next year, Lilly will start high school. Mommy and Daddy want Lilly to enter high school as confident young woman, feeling her family as good/affluent as any other family, her yard approx. in ballpark of yards of peers, i.e., not overt source of embarrassment.

This too much to ask?

Eva quiet.

Could see wheels turning.

Eva wild about Lilly, would walk in front of train for Lilly.

Then shared story w/Eva re summer job I had in high school, at Señor Tasty's (taco place). Was hot, was greasy, boss mean, boss always goosing us with tongs. By time I went home, hair + shirt always stank of grease. No way I could do that job now. But back then? Actually enjoyed: flirted with counter girls, participated in pranks with other employees (hid tongs of mean boss, slipped magazine down own pants so that, when mean boss tong-goosed me, did not hurt, mean boss = baffled).

Point is, I said, everything relative. SGs have lived very different lives from us. Their lives brutal, harsh, unpromising. What looks scary/unpleasant to us may not be so scary/unpleasant to them, i.e., they have seen worse.

Eva: You flirted with girls?

Me: I did. Don't tell Mom.

That got little smile.

Believe I somewhat broke through with Eva. Hope so.

Discussed situation w/Pam tonight. Pam, as usual, offered sound counsel: Go slow, be patient, Eva bright, savvy. In another month, Eva will have adjusted, forgotten, will once again be usual happy self.

Love Pam.

Pam my rock.

SEPTEMBER 25TH

Shit.

Fuck.

Family hit by absolute thunderclap, future reader.

Will explain.

This morning, kids sitting sleepily at table, Pam making eggs, Ferber under her feet, hoping scrap of food will drop. Thomas, eating bagel, drifts to window.

Thomas: Wow. What the heck. Dad? You better get over here.

Go to window.

SGs gone.

Totally gone (!).

Race out. Rack empty. Microline gone. Gate open. Take somewhat frantic run up block, to see if any sign of them.

Is not.

Race back inside. Call Greenway, call police. Cops arrive, scour yard. Cop shows me microline drag mark in mud near gate. Says this actually good news: with microline still in, will be easier to locate SGs, as microline limits how fast they can walk, since, fleeing in group, they are forced to take baby steps, so one does not get too far behind/ahead of others, hence causing yank on microline, yank that could damage brain of one yanked.

Other cop says yes, that would be case if SGs on foot. But come on, he says, SGs not on foot, SGs off in activist van somewhere, laughing butts off.

Me: Activists.

First cop: Yeah, you know: Women4Women, Citizens for Economic Parity, Semplica Rots in Hell.

Second cop: Fourth incident this month.

First cop: Those gals didn't get down by themselves.

Me: Why would they do that? They chose to be here. Why would they go off with some total —

Cops laugh.

First cop: Smelling that American dream, baby.

Kids beyond freaked. Kids huddled near fence.

School bus comes and goes.

Greenway field rep (Rob) arrives. Rob = tall, thin, bent. Looks like archery bow, if archery bow had pierced ear + long hair like pirate, was wearing short leather vest.

Rob immediately drops bombshell: says he is sorry to have to be more or less a hardass in our time of trial, but is legally obligated to inform us that, per our agreement w/Greenway, if SGs not located within three weeks, we will, at that time, become responsible for full payment of the required Replacement Debit.

Pam: Wait, the what?

Per Rob, Replacement Debit = \$100/month, per individual, per each month still remaining on their Greenway contracts at time of loss (!). Betty (21 months remaining) = \$2,100; Tami (13 months) = \$1,300; Gwen (18 months) = \$1,800; Lisa (34 months (!)) = \$3,400.

Total: \$2,100 + \$1,300 + \$1,800 + \$3,400 = \$8,600.

Pam: Fucksake.

Rob: Believe me, I know, that's a lot of money, right? But our take on it is — or, you know, their take on it, Greenway's take — is that we — or they — made an initial investment, and, I mean, obviously, that was not cheap, just in terms of like visas and airfares and all?

Pam: No one said anything to us about this.

Me: At all.

Rob: Huh. Who was on your account again?

Me: Melanie?

Rob: Right, yeah, I had a feeling. With Melanie, Melanie was sometimes rushing through things to close the deal. Especially with Package A folks, who were going chintzy in the first place? No offense. Anyway, which is why she's gone. If you want to yell at her, go to Home Depot. She's second in charge of Paint, probably lying her butt off about which color is which.

Feel angry, violated: someone came into our yard in dark of night, while kids sleeping nearby, stole? Stole from us? Stole \$8,600, plus initial cost of SGs (approx. \$7,400)?

Pam (to cop): How often do you find them?

First cop: Honestly? I'd have to say rarely.

Second cop: More like never.

First cop: Well, never yet.

Second cop: Right. There's always a first time.

Cops leave.

Pam (to Rob): So what happens if we don't pay?

Me: Can't pay.

Rob (uncomfortable, blushing): Well, that would be more of an issue for Legal.

Pam: You'd sue us?

Rob: I wouldn't. They would. I mean, that's what they do. They — what's that word? They garner your —

Pam (harshly): Garnish.

Rob: Sorry. Sorry about all this. Melanie, wow, I am going to snap your head back using that stupid braid of yours. Just kidding! I never even talk to her. But the thing is: all this is in your contract. You guys read your contract, right?

Silence.

Me: Well, we were kind of in a hurry. We were throwing a party.

Rob: Oh, sure, I remember that party. That was some party. We were all discussing that.

Rob leaves.

Pam (livid): You know what? Fuck 'em. Let 'em sue. I'm not paying. That's obscene. They can have the stupid house.

Lilly: Are we losing the house?

Me: We're not losing the —

Pam: You don't think? What do you think happens if you owe someone nine grand and can't pay?

Me: Look, let's calm down, no need to get all — Eva's lower lip up in pre-crying way. Think, Oh, great, nice parenting, arguing + swearing + raising specter of loss of house in front of tightly wound kid already upset by troubling events of day.

Then Eva bursts into tears, starts mumbling, Sorry sorry sorry.

Pam: Oh, sweetie, I was just being silly. We're not going to lose the house. Mommy and Daddy would never let that —

Light goes on in my head.

Me: Eva. You didn't.

Look in Eva's eyes says, I did.

Pam: Did what?

Thomas: Eva did it?

Lilly: How could Eva do it? She's only eight. I couldn't even — Eva leads us outside, shows us how she did: Dragged out stepladder, stood on stepladder at end of microline, released left-hand EzyRelease lever, then dragged stepladder to other end, released right-hand EzyRelease. At that point, microline completely loose, SGs standing on ground.

SGs briefly confer. And off they go.

Am so mad. Eva has made huge mess here. Huge mess for us, yes, but also for SGs. Where are SGs now? In good place? Is it good when illegal fugitives in strange land have no money, no food, no water, are forced to hide in woods, swamp, etc., connected via microline, like chain gang?

Note to future generations: Sometimes, in our time, families get into dark place. Family feels: we are losers, everything we do is wrong. Parents fight at high volume, blaming each other for disastrous situation. Father kicks wall, puts hole in wall near fridge. Family skips lunch. Tension too high for all to sit at same table. This unbearable. This makes person (Father) doubt value of whole enterprise, i.e., makes Father (me) wonder if humans would not be better off living alone, individually, in woods, minding own beeswax, not loving anyone.

Today like that for us. Stormed out to garage. Stupid squirrel/mouse stain still there after all these weeks. Used bleach + hose to eradicate. In resulting calm, sat on wheelbarrow, had to laugh at situation. Won Scratch-Off, greatest luck of life, quickly converted greatest luck of life into greatest fiasco of life. Laughter turned to tears.

Pam came out, asked had I been crying? I said no, just got dust in eyes from cleaning garage. Pam not buying. Pam gave me little side hug + hip nudge, to say, You were crying, is okay, is difficult time, I know.

Pam: Come on inside. Let's get things back to normal. We'll get through this. The kids are dying in there, they feel so bad. Went inside.

Kids at kitchen table. Opened arms. Thomas and Lilly rushed over. Eva stayed sitting.

When Eva tiny, had big head of black curls. Would stand on couch, eating cereal from coffee mug, dancing to song in head, flicking around cord from window blinds.

Now this: Eva sitting w/head in hands like heartbroken old lady mourning loss of vigorous flower of youth, etc., etc. Went over, scooped Eva up.

Poor thing shaking in my arms.

Eva (in whisper): I didn't know we would lose the house.

Me: We're not — we're not going to lose the house. Mommy and I are going to figure this out.

Sent kids off to watch TV.

Pam: So. You want me to call Dad? Did not want Pam calling Pam's dad.

Pam's dad's first name = Rich. Actually calls self "Farmer Rich." Is funny because he is rich farmer. In terms of me, does not like me. Has said at various times that I (1) am not hard worker, and (2) had better watch self in terms of weight, and (3) had better watch self in terms of credit cards.

Farmer Rich in very good shape, with no credit cards.

Farmer Rich not fan of SGs. Feels having SGs = "showoffy move." Thinks anything fun = showoffy move. Even going to movie = showoffy move. Going to car wash, i.e., not doing self, in driveway = showoffy move. Once, when visiting, looked dubiously at me when I said I had to get root canal. What, I was thinking, root canal = showoffy move? But no: just disapproved of dentist I had chosen, due to he had seen dentist's TV ad, felt dentist having TV ad = showoffy move.

So did not want Pam calling Farmer Rich.

Told Pam we must try our best to handle this ourselves. Got out bills, did mock payment exercise: If we pay mortgage, heat bill, AmEx, plus \$200 in bills we deferred last time, would be down near zero (\$12.78 remaining). If we defer AmEx + Visa, that would free up

\$880. If, in addition, we skip mortgage payment, heat bill, life-insurance premium, that would still only free up measly total of \$3,100.
Me: Shit.
Pam: Maybe I'll e-mail him. You know. Just see what he says.
Pam upstairs e-mailing Farmer Rich as I write.

SEPTEMBER 26TH

When I got home, Pam standing in doorway w/e-mail from Farmer Rich.

Farmer Rich = bastard.

Will quote in part:

Let us now speak of what you intend to do with the requested money. Will you be putting it aside for a college fund? You will not. Investing in real estate? No. Given a chance to plant some seeds, you flushed those valuable seeds (dollars) away. And for what? A display some find pretty. Well, I do not find it pretty. Since when are people on display a desirable sight? Do-gooders in our church cite conditions of poverty. Okay, that is fine. But it appears you will soon have a situation of poverty within your own walls. And physician heal thyself is a motto I have oft remembered when tempted to put my oar in relative to some social cause or another. So am going to say no. You people have walked yourselves into some deep water and must now walk yourselves out, teaching your kids (and selves) a valuable lesson from which, in the long term, you and yours will benefit.

Long silence.

Pam: Jesus. Isn't this just like us?

Or, rather, agree but wish she would not say. Why say? Saying is negative, makes us feel bad about selves.

I say maybe we should just confess what Eva did, hope for mercy from Greenway.

Pam says no, no: Went online today. Releasing SGs = felony (!). Does not feel they would prosecute eight-year-old, but still. If we confess, this goes on Eva's record? Eva required to get counseling? Eva feels: I am bad kid? Starts erring on side of bad, hanging out with rough crowd, looking askance at whole notion of achievement? Fails to live up to full potential, all because of one mistake she made when little girl?

No.

Cannot take chance.

When kids born, Pam and I dropped everything (youthful dreams

of travel, adventure, etc.) to be good parents. Has not been exciting life. Has been much drudgery. Many nights, tasks undone, have stayed up late, exhausted, doing tasks. On many occasions, disheveled + tired, baby poop and/or vomit on our shirt or blouse, one of us has stood smiling wearily/angrily at camera being held by other, hair shaggy because haircuts expensive, unfashionable glasses slipping down noses because never was time to get glasses tightened.

And now, after all that, our youngest to start out life w/potential black mark on record?

That not happening.

Pam and I discuss, agree: must be like sin-eaters who, in ancient times, ate sin. Or bodies of sinners? Ate meals off bodies of sinners who had died? Cannot exactly recall what sin-eaters did. But Pam and I agree: are going to be like sin-eaters in sense of, will err on side of protecting Eva, keep cops in dark at all cost, break law as req'd (!).

Just now went down hall to check on kids. Thomas sleeping w/Ferber. This not allowed. Eva in bed w/Lilly. This not allowed. Eva, source of all mayhem, sleeping like baby.

Felt like waking Eva, giving Eva hug, telling Eva that, though we do not approve of what she did, she will always be our girl, will always be apple of our eye(s).

Did not do.

Eva needs rest.

On Lilly's desk: poster Lilly was working on for "Favorite Things Day" at school. Poster = photo of each SG, plus map of home country, plus stories Lilly apparently got during interview (!) with each. Gwen (Moldova) = very tough, due to Moldovan youth: used bloody sheets found in trash + duct tape to make soccer ball, then, after much practice with bloody-sheet ball, nearly made Olympic team (!). Betty (Philippines) has daughter, who, when swimming, will sometimes hitch ride on shell of sea turtle. Lisa (Somalia) once saw lion on roof of her uncle's "mini-lorry." Tami (Laos) had pet water buffalo, water buffalo stepped on her foot, now Tami must wear special shoe. "Fun Fact": their names (Betty, Tami, et al.) not their real names. These = SG names, given by Greenway at time of arrival. "Tami" = Januka = "happy ray of sun." "Betty" = Nenita = "blessed-beloved." "Gwen" = Evgenia. (Does not know what her name means.) "Lisa" = Ayan = "happy traveler."

SGs very much on my mind tonight, future reader.

Where are they now? Why did they leave?

Just do not get.

Letter comes, family celebrates, girl sheds tears, stoically packs bag, thinks, Must go, am family's only hope. Puts on brave face, promises she will return as soon as contract complete. Her mother feels, father feels: We cannot let her go. But they do. They must.

Whole town walks girl to train station/bus station/ferry stop? More tears, more vows. As train/bus/ferry pulls away, she takes last fond look at surrounding hills/river/quarry/shacks, whatever, i.e., all she has ever known of world, saying to self, Be not afraid, you will return, + return in victory, w/big bag of gifts, etc., etc.

And now?

No money, no papers. Who will remove microline? Who will give her job? When going for job, must fix hair so as to hide scars at Insertion Points. When will she ever see her home + family again? Why would she do this? Why would she ruin all, leave our yard? Could have had nice long run w/us. What in the world was she seeking? What could she want so much that would make her pull such desperate stunt?

Just now went to window.

Empty rack in yard, looking strange in moonlight.

Note to self: Call Greenway, have them take ugly thing away.