

a million that zip into their holes before I can get hold. The thunder booms a little closer.

Late in the tide, Dicky starts saying, "Help," again, just kind of saying it out loud every twenty steps or so, groaning comically. He's found some good mud, is plunking worms into his box three and four at a dig. "Help," he moans, kidding around. Then he shouts, "Truey, let's quit." It's an old joke, and from across the flat Truman Lock gives Dicky the finger. Dicky excavates his way through the mud, pulling worms, pulling worms, dunking them in his box, saying, "Help, Truey. Truey, help," a mantra for the dig. Then he bellows, loud as hell across the mud, "Truey, get me outta here," and then he shouts it again.

## David Sedaris

DAVID SEDARIS is the author of *Barrel Fever* and *Holidays on Ice*, as well as collections of personal essays, *Naked*, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, and *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*. His essays appear regularly in *Esquire* and *The New Yorker*. Sedaris and his sister, Amy Sedaris, have collaborated under the name "The Talent Family" and have written several plays that have been produced at La Mama, Lincoln Center, and the Drama Department in New York City. These plays include *Stump the Host*, *Stitches*, *One Woman Shoe*, which received an Obie Award, *Incident at Cobbler's Knob*, and *The Book of Liz*. Sedaris's original radio pieces can often be heard on *This American Life*. In 2001, Sedaris became the third recipient of the Thurber Prize for American Humor. He was named by *Time* magazine as Humorist of the Year in 2001. He has also edited *Children Playing Before a Statue of Hercules: An Anthology of Outstanding Stories*. In 2005, Sedaris was nominated for two Grammy Awards for Best Spoken Word Album, *Dress Your Family in Corduroy & Denim*, and Best Comedy Album, *David Sedaris: Live at Carnegie Hall*.

Give me your life, your pain, your bottomless sorrow—  
it's not like you're going to do anything with it.

Although we'd discussed my upcoming visit to Winston-Salem, my sister and I didn't make exact arrangements until the eve of my arrival, when I phoned from a hotel in Salt Lake City.

"I'll be at work when you arrive," she said, "so I'm thinking I'll just leave the key under the hour ott near the ack toor."

"The what?"

"Hour ott."

I thought she had something in her mouth until I realized she was speaking in code.

"What are you, on a speakerphone at a methadone clinic? Why can't you just tell me where you'll put the goddamned house key?"

Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I just don't know that I trust these things."  
 "Are you on a cell phone?"

"Of course not," she said. "This is just a regular cordless, but still, you have to be careful."

When I suggested that, actually, she didn't have to be careful, Lisa resumed her normal tone of voice, saying, "Really? But I heard . . ."

My sister's the type that religiously watches the fear segments of her local Eyewitness News broadcasts, retaining nothing but the headlines. She remembers that applesauce can kill you but forgets that in order to die, you have to inject it directly into your bloodstream. Announcements that cell-phone conversations may be picked up by strangers mix with the reported rise of both home burglaries and brain tumors, meaning that as far as she's concerned, all telecommunication is potentially life threatening. If she didn't watch it on the news, she read it in *Consumer Reports* or heard it thirdhand from a friend of a friend whose ear caught fire while dialing her answering machine. Everything is dangerous all of the time, and if it's not yet been pulled off the shelves, then it's certainly under investigation—so there.

"Okay," I said. "But can you tell me which hour ott? The last time I was there, you had quite a few of them."

"It's ed," she told me. "Well . . . eddish."

I arrived at Lisa's house late the following afternoon, found the key under the flowerpot, and let myself in through the back door. A lengthy note on the coffee table explained how I might go about operating everything from the television to the waffle iron, each carefully detailed procedure ending with the line, "Remember to turn off and unplug after use." At the bottom of page 3, a postscript informed me that if the appliance in question had no plug—the dishwasher, for instance—I should make sure it had completed its cycle and was cool to the touch before leaving the room. The note reflected a growing hysteria, its subtext shrieking, Oh, my God, he's going to be alone in my house for close to an hour! She left her work number, her husband's work number, and the number of the next-door neighbor, adding that she didn't know the woman very well so I probably shouldn't bother her unless it was an emergency. "P.P.S. She's a Baptist, so don't tell her you're gay."

The last time I was alone at my sister's place, she was living in a white-brick apartment complex occupied by widows and single, middle-aged working women. This was in the late seventies, when we were supposed to be living in dorms. College hadn't quite worked out the way she'd expected, and after two years in Virginia she'd returned to Raleigh and taken a job at a wineshop. It was a normal enough life for a twenty-one-year-old, but being a dropout was not

what she had planned for her self. Worse than that, it had not been planned for her. As children, we'd been assigned certain roles—leader, bum, troublemaker, slut—titles that effectively told us who we were. Since Lisa was the oldest, smartest, and bossiest, it was assumed that she would shoot to the top of her field, earning a master's degree in manipulation and eventually taking over a medium-sized country. We'd always known her as an authority figure, and while we took a certain joy in watching her fall, it was disorienting to see her with so little confidence. Suddenly she was relying on other people's opinions, following their advice and withering at the slightest criticism.

"Do you really think? Really?" She was putty.

My sister needed patience and understanding, but more often than not I found myself wanting to shake her. If the oldest wasn't who she was supposed to be, then what did it mean for the rest of us?

Lisa had been marked Most Likely to Succeed, so it confused her to be ringing up gallon jugs of hearty burgundy. I had been branded Lazy and Irresponsible, so it felt right when I, too, dropped out of college and wound up back in Raleigh. After being thrown out of my parents' house, I went to live with Lisa in her white-brick complex. It was a small studio apartment—the adult version of her childhood bedroom—and when I eventually left her with a broken stereo and an unpaid eighty-dollar phone bill, the general consensus was, "Well, what did you expect?"

I might reinvent myself to strangers, but to this day, as far as my family is concerned, I'm still the one most likely to set your house on fire. While I accepted my lowered expectations, Lisa fought hard to regain her former title. The wineshop was just a temporary setback, and she left shortly after becoming manager. Photography interested her, so she taught herself to use a camera, ultimately landing a job in the photo department of a large international drug company, where she took pictures of germs, viruses, and people reacting to germs and viruses. On weekends, for extra money, she photographed weddings, which really wasn't that much of a stretch. Then she got married herself and quit the drug company in order to earn an English degree. When told there was very little call for thirty-page essays on Jane Austen, she got a real estate license. When told the housing market was down, she returned to school to study plants. Her husband, Bob, got a job in Winston-Salem, so they moved, buying a new three-story house in a quiet suburban neighborhood.

My sister's home didn't really lend itself to snooping, so I spent my hour in the kitchen, making small talk with Henry. It was the same conversation we'd had the last time I saw him, yet still I found it fascinating. He asked how I was doing. I said I was all right, and then, as if something might have drastically changed within the last few seconds, he asked again.

Of all the elements of my sister's adult life—the house, the husband, the sudden interest in plants—the most unsettling is Henry. Technically he's a blue-fronted Amazon, but to the layman, he's just a big parrot, the type you might see on the shoulder of a pirate.

"How you doing?"

The third time he asked, it sounded as if he really cared. I approached his cage with a detailed answer, and when he lunged for the bars, I screamed like a girl and ran out of the room.

"Henry likes you," my sister said a short while later. She'd just returned from her job at the plant nursery and was sitting at the table, unlacing her sneakers. "See the way he's fanning his tail? He'd never do that for Bob. Would you, Henry?"

Bob had returned from work a few minutes earlier and immediately headed upstairs to spend time with his own bird, a balding green-cheeked conure named Jose. I'd thought the two of them might enjoy an occasional conversation, but it turns out they can't stand each other. "Don't even mention Jose in front of Henry," Lisa whispered. Bob's bird squawked from the upstairs study, and the parrot responded with a series of high, piercing barks. It was a trick he'd picked up from Lisa's border collie, Chessie, and what was disturbing was that he sounded exactly like a dog. Just as, when speaking English, he sounded exactly like Lisa. It was creepy to hear my sister's voice coming from a beak, but I couldn't say it didn't please me.

"Who's hungry?" she asked.

"Who's hungry?" the voice repeated.

I raised my hand, and she offered Henry a peanut. As he took it in his claw, his belly sagging to the perch, I understood what someone might see in a parrot. Here was this strange little fatso living in my sister's kitchen, a sympathetic listener turning again and again to ask, "So, really, how are you?"

I'd asked her the same question, and she'd said, "Oh, fine, you know." She's afraid to tell me anything important, knowing I'll only turn around and write about it. In my mind, I'm like a friendly junkman, building things from the little pieces of scrap I find here and there, but my family's started to see things differently. Their personal lives are the so-called pieces of scrap I so casually pick up, and they're sick of it. Our conversations now start with the words, "You have to swear you will never repeat this." I always promise, but it's generally understood that my word is no better than Henry's.

I'd come to Winston-Salem to address the students at a local college, and also to break some news. Sometimes when you're stoned, it's fun to sit around and think of who might play you in the movie version of your life. What makes it fun is that no one is actually going to make a movie of your life. Lisa and I no

longer get stoned, so it was all the harder to announce that my book had been optioned, meaning that, in fact, someone was going to make a movie of our lives—not a student, but a real director people had heard of.

"A what?"

I explained that he was Chinese, and she asked if the movie would be in Chinese.

"No," I said. "He lives in America. In California. He's been here since he was a baby."

"Then what does it matter if he's Chinese?"

"Well," I said, "he's got . . . you know, a sensibility."

"Oh, brother," she said.

I looked to Henry for support and he growled at me.

"So now we have to be in a movie?" She picked her sneakers off the floor and tossed them into the laundry room. "Well," she said, "I can tell you right now that you're not dragging my bird into this."

The movie was to be based on our preparrot years, but the moment she put her foot down, I started wondering who we might get to play the role of Henry. "I know what you're thinking," she said, "and the answer is no."

Once, at a dinner party, I met a woman whose parrot had learned to imitate the automatic ice maker on her new refrigerator. "That's what happens when they're left alone," she said. This was the most disturbing bit of information I'd heard in quite a while. Here was this creature, born to mock its jungle neighbors, and it wound up doing impressions of man-made kitchen appliances. I repeated the story to Lisa, who told me that neglect had nothing to do with it. She then prepared a cappuccino, setting the stage for Henry's pitch-perfect imitation of the milk steamer. "He can do the blender, too," she said.

She opened the cage door, and as we sat down to our coffees, Henry glided down onto the table. "Who wants a kiss?" She stuck out her tongue, and he accepted the tip gingerly between his upper and lower beak. I'd never dream of doing such a thing, not because it's across-the-board disgusting, but because he would have bitten the shit out of me. While Henry might occasionally have fanned his tail in my direction, it was understood that he was loyal to only one person, which, I think, is another reason my sister is so fond of him.

"Was that a good kiss?" she asked. "Did you like that?"

I expected a yes or no answer and was disappointed when he responded with the exact same question: "Did you like that?" Yes, parrots can talk, but unfortunately they have no idea what they're actually saying. When she first got him, Henry spoke the Spanish he'd learned from his captors. Asked if he'd had a good night's sleep, he'd simply say hola, much like the Salvadoran women I

used to clean with in New York. He goes through phases, favoring an often repeated noise or sentence, and then he moves on to something else. When our mother died, Henry learned how to cry. He and Lisa would set each other off, and the two of them would go on for hours. A few years later, in the midst of a brief academic setback, she trained him to act as her emotional cheerleader. I'd call and hear him in the background screaming, "We love you Lisa!" and "You can do it!" This was replaced, in time, with the far more practical "Where are my keys?"

After we finished our coffees, Lisa drove me to Greensboro, where I delivered my scheduled lecture. This is to say that I read stories about my family. After the reading, I answered questions about them, thinking all the while how odd it was that these strangers seemed to know so much about my brother and sisters. In order to sleep at night, I have to remove myself from the equation, pretending that the people I love voluntarily choose to expose themselves. It's a delusion much harder to maintain when a family member is actually in the audience.

The day after the reading, Lisa called in sick, and we spent the afternoon running errands. Winston-Salem is a city of plazas, midsize shopping centers each built around an enormous grocery store. I was looking for cheap cartons of cigarettes, so we drove from plaza to plaza, comparing prices and talking about our sister Gretchen. A year earlier, she'd bought a pair of flesh-eating Chinese box turtles with pointed noses and spooky translucent skin. The two of them lived in an outdoor pen and were relatively happy until raccoons dug beneath the wire and chewed the front legs off the female and the rear legs off her husband. "I may have the order wrong," Lisa said, "but you get the picture."

The couple survived the attack and continued to track the live mice that constituted their diet, propelling themselves forward like a pair of half-stripped Volkswagens.

"The sad part is that it took her two weeks to notice it," Lisa said. "Two weeks!" She shook her head and drove past our exit. "I'm sorry, but I don't know how a responsible pet owner could go that long without noticing a thing like that. It's just not right."

According to Gretchen, the turtles had no memories of their former limbs, but Lisa wasn't buying it. "Oh, come on," she said. "They must at least have phantom pains. I mean, how can a living creature not mind losing its legs?" Her eyes misted, and she wiped them with the back of her hand. "My little collie gets a tick and I go crazy." Lisa's a person who once witnessed a car accident saying, "I just hope there isn't a dog in the backseat." Human suffering doesn't faze her much, but she'll cry for days over a sick-pet story.

"Did you see that movie about the Cuban guy?" she asked. "It played here for

a while, but I wouldn't go. Someone told me a dog gets killed in the first fifteen minutes, so I said forget it."

I reminded her that the main character died as well, horribly, of AIDS, and she pulled into the parking lot, saying, "Well, I just hope it wasn't a real dog."

I wound up buying cigarettes at Tobacco USA, a discount store with the name of a theme park. Lisa had officially quit smoking ten years earlier and might have taken it up again were it not for Chessie, who, according to the vet, was predisposed to lung ailments. "I don't want to give her secondhand emphysema, but I sure wouldn't mind taking some of this weight off. Tell me the truth: Do I look fat to you?"

"Not at all."

She turned sideways and examined herself in the window of Tobacco USA. "You're lying."

"Well, isn't that what you want me to say?"

"Yes. But I want you to really mean it."

But I had meant it. It wasn't the weight I noticed so much as the clothing she wore to cover it up. The loose, baggy pants and oversized shirts falling halfway to her knees: This was the look she'd adopted a few months earlier, after she and her husband had gone to the mountains to visit Bob's parents. Lisa had been sitting beside the fire, and when she scooted her chair toward the center of the room, her father-in-law said, "What's the matter, Lisa? Getting too fat—I mean hot. Getting too hot?"

He had tried to cover his mistake, but it was too late. The word had already been seared into my sister's brain.

"Will I have to be fat in the movie?" she asked me.

"Of course not. You'll be just . . . like you are."

"Like I am according to who?" she asked. "The Chinese?"

"Well, not all of them," I said. "Just one."

Normally, if at home during a weekday, Lisa likes to read eighteenth-century novels, breaking at 1:00 to eat lunch and watch a television program called *Matlock*. By the time we finished with my errands, the day's broadcast had already ended, so we decided to go to the movies—whatever she wanted. She chose the story of a young Englishwoman struggling to remain happy while trying to lose a few extra pounds, but in the end she got her plazas confused and we arrived at the wrong theater just in time to watch *You Can Count on Me*, the Kenneth Lonergan movie in which an errant brother visits his older sister. Normally Lisa's the type who talks from one end of the show to the other. A character will spread mayonnaise onto a chicken sandwich and she'll lean over, whispering, "One time, I was doing that? And the knife fell into the toilet."

Then she'll settle back in her seat and I'll spend the next ten minutes wondering why on earth someone would make a chicken sandwich in the bathroom. This movie reflected our lives so eerily that for the first time in recent memory, she was stunned into silence. There was no resemblance between us and the main characters—the brother and sister were younger and orphaned—but like us they'd stumbled to adulthood playing the worn, confining roles assigned to them as children. Every now and then one of them would break free, but for the most part they behaved not as they wanted to but as they were expected to. In brief, a guy shows up at his sister's house and stays for a few weeks until she kicks him out. She's not evil about it, but having him around forces her to think about things she'd rather not, which is essentially what family members do, at least the family members my sister and I know.

On leaving the theater we shared a long, uncomfortable silence. Between the movie we'd just seen and the movie about to be made, we both felt awkward and self-conscious, as if we were auditioning for the roles of ourselves. I started in with some benign bit of gossip I'd heard concerning the man who'd played the part of the brother but stopped after the first few sentences, saying that, on second thought, it wasn't very interesting. She couldn't think of anything, either, so we said nothing, each of us imagining a bored audience shifting in its seats.

We stopped for gas on the way home and were parking in front of her house when she turned to relate what I've come to think of as the quintessential Lisa story. "One time," she said, "one time I was out driving . . ." The incident began with a quick trip to the grocery store and ended, unexpectedly, with a wounded animal stuffed into a pillowcase and held to the tailpipe of her car. Like most of my sister's stories, it provoked a startling mental picture, capturing a moment in time when one's actions seem both unimaginably cruel and completely natural. Details were carefully chosen and the pace built gradually, punctuated by a series of well-timed pauses. "And then . . . and then . . ." She reached the inevitable tailpipe, and just as I started to laugh, she put her head against the steering wheel and fell apart. It wasn't the gentle flow of tears you might release when recalling an isolated action or event, but the violent explosion that comes when you realize that all such events are connected, forming an endless chain of guilt and suffering.

I instinctively reached for the notebook I keep in my pocket, and she grabbed my hand to stop me. "If you ever," she said, "ever repeat that story, I'll never talk to you again."

In the movie version of our lives, I would have turned to offer her comfort, reminding her, convincing her, that the action she'd described had been kind and just. Because it was. She's incapable of acting otherwise.

In the real version of our lives, my immediate goal was simply to change her

mind. "Oh, come on," I said. "The story's really funny, and, I mean, it's not like you're going to do anything with it."

Your life, your privacy, your bottomless sorrow—it's not like you're going to do anything with it. Is this the brother I always was or the brother I have become?

I'd worried that, in making the movie, the director might get me and my family wrong, but now a worse thought occurred to me: What if he gets us right?

Dusk. The camera pans an unremarkable suburban street, moving in on a parked four-door automobile where a small, evil man turns to his sobbing sister, saying, "What if I use the story but say that it happened to a friend?"

But maybe that's not the end. Maybe before the credits roll, we see this same man getting out of bed in the middle of the night, walking past his sister's bedroom and downstairs into the kitchen. A switch is thrown, and we notice, in the far corner of the room, a large standing birdcage covered with a tablecloth. He approaches it carefully and removes the cover, waking a blue-fronted Amazon parrot, its eyes glowing red in the sudden light. Through everything that's come before this moment, we understand that the man has something important to say. From his own mouth the words are meaningless, so he pulls up a chair. The clock reads 3:00 A.M., then 4:00, then 5:00, as he sits before the brilliant bird repeating slowly and clearly the words, "Forgive me. Forgive me: Forgive me."