

Old Book, Fresh Wisdom

Mark 1:3, Matthew 3:3, Luke 3:4, John 1:23

George Saunders is one of the finest fiction writers of our time. He's written one novel—*Lincoln in the Bardo*—and many short stories. I want to tell you today about one of his stories. You can find it and read it for free in an old issue of *The New Yorker* online.¹ It's called 'The Semplica-Girl Diaries'.

The narrator in this story is a 40-year-old man who we know only through his diary entries. He writes in this diary twenty minutes every night so that he can leave a record of his 'life and times' for his children and grandchildren. Often he writes in incomplete sentences and half-thoughts, so as you read this story you get a sense of being inside his head.

He and his wife have three children; the oldest is thirteen. And it's clear from the very first diary entry that there is not enough money in this family. They drive an old car whose bumper falls off one day. He lays it across the children's laps in the back seat until they get home. The only thing that grows generously in their tiny, messy yard is crabgrass. Their dog poops next to the back door. You get the picture.

One day the whole family is invited to a birthday party for a friend of the oldest daughter, Lilly. The birthday girl's family, the Torrini's, are fabulously, ostentatiously rich. Their property has six garages, each with its own fancy car; a stream that's stocked with trout; a Victorian style treehouse for the kids. One of the Torrini's birthday gifts to their thirteen-year old daughter is a ticket to the Preakness, because she's recently discovered that she loves horses.

This father, our narrator, is shamed by the contrasts of that day: the opulence of a life they glimpse vs. the shabby one they live. All the way home he rides sullen, conscious that Lilly's birthday is in just two weeks; that he cannot afford any of the lavish gifts she now knows to ask for. He writes in his diary that night:

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.

We feel for this father, who works hard and cannot get ahead, who in fact gets further behind with every month's Visa and American Express bills. He loves his children with his whole heart. He wants to give them *everything* that he has, and everything he does not have. He writes:

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? ... If kids raised too cautious, due to paucity, will not world chew them up and spit out?

And then one day, just before Lilly's birthday, a scratcher ticket he allows himself to buy one of every payday, is a winner. \$10,000 comes to him—by sheer luck. He is suddenly—if not rich, then at least momentarily not poor. He and his wife decide to splurge it all on something they know will delight Lilly, make for her a birthday she will never forget. And he is dazzled, filled to the brim with the satisfaction of a gesture of outrageous generosity. This is what he has always wished he could do for his children. He writes,

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!

On Lilly's birthday his diary says:

*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.*

I'm not going to tell you the whole story because I really hope you read it. But I will tease you with this: in his rush to pour everything into one fabulous, perfect birthday for the daughter he loves and wants to be happy and proud of him, a day that will replicate the luxury he saw at the Torrinis', this father makes a terrible mistake. He does something that will do more moral damage to his family than any minor poverty ever could. Even at the end of the story he doesn't see it quite clearly, but we do, we who are eavesdropping on his diary entries.

We see in this unnamed narrator what is easy to miss in ourselves: that even the best impulse, the most selfless-seeming love, can sometimes lead you in the wrong direction. Because we can't always see clearly—ourselves or the big picture. What appears true is not always the truth. Goodness cannot always be identified by our first instinct.

I heard George Saunders interviewed recently. He's an incredibly thoughtful and kind man, deeply immersed in Buddhism. He talked about what Buddhists often call the 'monkey mind', that darts all over the place instead of holding stillness. 'I often ruminate over things,' Saunders said; 'I turn them over and over in my mind, *aspiring to some victory...*' That phrase struck me as so true of my own mostly-unconscious thought patterns, thinking and re-thinking my perspective, my worries, other people's actions. My central, heroic role in my own story. *Aspiring to my own victory.*

Every one of us operates out of something we might call 'my story'. *Me*, or *you*, at the center of a web of relationships, work, circumstances. We are all self-centered; it comes with being a thinking, self-reflective human being. Beyond you, there's a larger circle you might call 'our story'. A narrative and purpose you're living alongside a community of others you identify with: your family, the company you work for, your church. Your country, your people. You might be part of multiple 'our stories'; it's a life skill to be able to traverse back and forth from one group identity to another without losing yourself, your story. In *The Semplica-Girl Diaries*, the narrator/father was responsible to his family's story. We hear his internal, personal narrative in his diary entries, but he was inseparable from his family's story.

For us, people of faith, there's another circle, bigger and more expansive than even *our* story. It's *The Story*. The story that is true for every *me* and *us*, the big picture that all the other stories are part of. *The Story* is God's story. It's a narrative that begins with a Creator whose love for Creation is inexhaustible, who will go to any length to know us, who is generous without any reference at all to what we deserve. *The Story* is the frame that places everything I see, everything that happens to me, inside a larger picture. It gives me my place in the world. And sometimes it tells me that my vision is incomplete, that the losses that look like endings are actually located somewhere closer to the middle of the scene. Sometimes it reminds me that the little 'victories I aspire to' are unworthy of so much attention. Sometimes *The Story* tells me that even my best intentions—just like that well-meaning father's—have gone a little off-kilter.

I need something more reliably true than even my own good intentions. I *am* inclined to look for love in all the wrong places. I need *The Story*. And the Bible is where I find it. Followers of Jesus find *The Story* in Jesus' life and in the tradition he carried with him. That's what it means to call ourselves Christian: we find our final, ultimate place of belonging in a story that we didn't make up for ourselves. A story we are not the heroes of. A story that we make our own by way of humility, our willingness to pay attention to something bigger than ourselves, bigger even than *our* loves.

We read the Bible—we immerse ourselves in its stories—so that we can carry *The Story* inside of us. So that *The Story* becomes our story too.

In the New Testament, all four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John—begin their accounts of Jesus with a secondary character, a supporting actor. John the Baptist—who we all know, Jesus knew, John himself knew, was not ever going to be the central character in this story. John was always going to be a forerunner at best, someone who cleared the way, pointed people in another direction. 'Don't stop here,' John would say to them. 'Keep looking.' John's work was to 'prepare the way', the Gospel writers say; to 'make the paths of the Lord straight, the way smooth.'

We need those forerunners. What opens you to the truth—the story—that's bigger than your own? Who prepares you for the ways God will come to you again? Maybe it's the community of church, where we gather around and tell *The Story* again. Maybe it's music or poetry, or a piece of well-written fiction, that cracks you open with empathy. Maybe it's being outside, in nature that dwarfs your little victories with its beauty. Maybe it's conversation with someone who's so different from you, that when you leave your vision has been adjusted. Maybe it's spending time with someone you love so much that it feels like your heart expands beyond your body.

Whatever it is, do it. Do more of it. But don't stop there. It's preparing you, taking you somewhere. It is leading you beyond your own story. Beyond even *our* story. Because everything that is true will lead you to *The Story*, which is the most true thing of all.

ⁱ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/15/the-semplica-girl-diaries>