DAVID SEDARIS

CALYPSO

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David Sedaris

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For Joan Lacey

Company Man

Though there’s an industry built on telling you otherwise, there are few real joys to middle age. The only perk I can see is that, with luck, you’ll acquire a guest room. Some people get one by default when their kids leave home, and others, like me, eventually trade up and land a bigger house. “Follow me,” I now say. The room I lead our visitors to has not been hastily rearranged to accommodate them. It does not double as an office or weaving nook but exists for only one purpose. I have furnished it with a bed rather than a fold-out sofa, and against one wall, just like in a hotel, I’ve placed a luggage rack.

The best feature, though, is its private bathroom.

“If you prefer a shower to a tub, I can put you upstairs in the *second* guest room,” I say. “There’s a luggage rack up there as well.” I hear these words

coming from my puppet-lined mouth and shiver with middle-aged satisfaction. Yes, my hair is gray and thinning. Yes, the washer on my penis has worn out, leaving me to dribble urine long after I've zipped my trousers back up. But I have two guest rooms.

The consequence is that if you live in Europe, they attract guests—lots of them. People spend a fortune on their plane tickets from the United States. By the time they arrive they're broke and tired and would probably sleep in our car if we offered it. In Normandy, where we used to have a country place, any visitors were put up in the attic, which doubled as Hugh's studio and smelled of oil paint and decaying mice. It had a rustic cathedral ceiling but no heat, meaning it was usually either too cold or too hot. That house had only one bathroom, wedged between the kitchen and our bedroom. Guests were denied the privacy a person sometimes needs on the toilet, so twice a day I'd take Hugh to the front door and shout behind us, as if this were normal behavior, "We're going out for exactly twenty minutes. Does anyone need anything from the side of the road?"

That was another problem with Normandy: there was nothing for our company to do except sit around. Our village had no businesses in it and the

walk to the nearest village that did was not terribly pleasant. This is not to say

that our visitors didn't enjoy themselves—just that it took a certain kind of

person, outdoorsy and self-motivating. In West Sussex, where we currently

live, having company is a bit easier. Within a ten-mile radius of our house,

there's a quaint little town with a castle in it and an equally charming one

with thirty-seven antique stores. There are chalk-speckled hills one can hike

up, and bike trails. It's a fifteen-minute drive to the beach and an easy walk to

the nearest pub.

Guests usually take the train from London, and before we pick them up at

the station I remind Hugh that, for the duration of their visit, he and I will be

playing the role of a perfect couple. This means no bickering and no

contradicting each other. If I am seated at the kitchen table and he is standing

behind me, he is to place a hand on my shoulder, right on the spot where a

parrot would perch if I were a pirate instead of the ideal boyfriend. When I

tell a story he has heard so often he could lip-synch it, he is to pretend to be

hearing it for the first time and to be appreciating it as much as or more than

our guests are. I'm to do the same, and to feign delight when he serves

something I hate, like fish with little bones in it. I really blew this a few years

back when his friend Sue came for the night and he poached what might as well have been a hairbrush. Blew it to such an extent that after she left I considered having her killed. “She knows too much,” I said to Hugh. “The woman’s a liability now and we need to contain her.”

His friend Jane saw some ugliness as well, and though I like both her and Sue and have known them for going on twenty years, they fall under the category of “Hugh’s guests.” This means that though I play my role, it is not

my responsibility to entertain them. Yes, I offer the occasional drink. I show up for meals but can otherwise come and go at my leisure, exiting, sometimes, as someone is in the middle of a sentence. My father has done this all his life. You’ll be talking to him and he’ll walk away—not angry but just sort of finished with you. I was probably six years old the first time I noticed this. You’d think I’d have found it hurtful, but instead I looked at his

retreating back, thinking, *We can get away with that? Really? Yippee!*

Three of my sisters visited us in Sussex the Christmas of 2012, so Gretchen and Amy took a guest room each. Hugh and I gave Lisa the master bedroom and moved next door to the converted stable I use as my office. One of the

things he noted during their stay was that, with the exception of Amy and me,

no one in my family ever says goodnight. Rather, they just leave the room —

sometimes halfway through dinner—and reappear the following morning. My

sisters were considered my guests, but because there was a group of them and

they could easily entertain one another, I was more or less free to go about

my business. Not that I didn't spend time with them. In various pairings we

went on walks and bike rides, but otherwise they sat in the living room

talking, or gathered in the kitchen to study Hugh at the stove. I'd join them

for a while and then explain that I had some work to do. This meant going

next door to the stable, where I'd switch on my computer and turn to Google,

thinking, *I wonder what Russell Crowe is up to.*

One of the reasons I'd invited these three over—had gone so far as to buy

their tickets—was that this felt like a last hurrah. Except for Paul, who has no

passport but tells me with great certainty that, according to an electrician he

met on a job site, it is possible to buy one at the airport, we are all in our

fifties now. Healthwise, we've been fortunate, but it's just a matter of time

before our luck runs out and one of us gets cancer. Then we'll be picked off

like figures at a shooting gallery, easy targets given the lives we've led. I'd counted the days until my sisters' arrival, so why wasn't I next door, sitting with Hugh in our perfect-couple sixteenth-century kitchen with its stone floor and crackling fire? Perhaps I worried that if I didn't wander off, my family would get on my nerves, or—far more likely—I would get on theirs, and that our week together wouldn't be as ideal as I'd told myself it would be. As it was, I'd retreat to my office and spend some time doing nothing of consequence. Then I'd head back into the house and hear something that made me wish I'd never left. It was like walking into a theater an hour after the picture has started, thinking, *How did that kangaroo get his hands on those nunchakus?*

One of the stories I entered late concerned some pills my sister Gretchen had started taking a year and a half earlier. She didn't say what they were prescribed for, but they were causing her to walk and eat in her sleep. I saw this happen the previous Thanksgiving, which we spent together in a rental house in Hawaii. Dinner was served at seven o'clock, and around midnight, an hour or so after she'd gone to bed, Gretchen drifted out of her room. Hugh and I looked up from our books and watched her enter the kitchen. There, she

took the turkey out of the refrigerator and started twisting off meat with her fingers. “Why don’t you get a plate?” I asked, and she looked at me, not scornfully but blankly, as if it had been the wind talking. Then she reached into the carcass and yanked out some stuffing. This was picked at selectively,

one crouton mysteriously favored over another, until she decided she’d had enough, at which point she returned to her room, leaving the mess behind her.

“What was that about?” I asked her the next morning.

Gretchen’s face adjusted itself for bad news. “What was what about?”

I told her what had happened, and she said, “Goddamn it. I wondered why I woke up with brown stains on my pillow.”

According to the story I walked in on late, Thanksgiving had been a relatively good night for Gretchen. One morning a few weeks after the turkey

episode, she walked into her kitchen in North Carolina and found on the countertop an open jam jar with crumbs in it. At first she thought they were from a cookie. Then she saw the overturned box and realized she had eaten something intended for her painted turtles. It was a nutrition bar, maybe four

inches long and made of dead flies, pressed together the way Duraflame logs

are. “Not only that,” she said, “but when I was through, I ate all the petals off

my poinsettia.” She shook her head. “I noticed it on the counter next to the

turtle-food box, and it was just a naked stalk.”

I returned to my office more convinced than ever that this would be our

last Christmas together. I mean, flies! If you’re going to eat your pets’ food in

your sleep, why not think preventatively and exchange your turtles for a

hamster or a rabbit, something safe and vegetarian? Get rid of the houseplants

while you’re at it—starting with the cactus—and lock up your cleaning

supplies.

Later that evening, I found the sisters stretched out like cats in front of the

woodstove. “It used to be that whenever I passed a mirror, I’d look at my

face,” Gretchen said, blowing out a mouthful of cigarette smoke. “Now I just

check to see if my nipples line up.”

Oh my God, I thought. *When did that start happening?* The last time we

were all together for Christmas was 1994. We were at Gretchen’s house in

Raleigh, and she started the day by feeding her bullfrog, who was around the

same size as her iron and was named Pappy. He was kept in a murky, heated

thirty-gallon aquarium on her living room floor, next to three Japanese newts

who lived in a meatloaf pan. It was a far cry from a normal Christmas, but

what with our mother recently dead, it seemed better to break with tradition

and try something completely different: thus my sister's place, with its feel of

a swamp rather than the house we had grown up in, which now felt freighted

with too much history. Gretchen's waist-length hair has gone silver since that

Christmas, and when she walks in her sleep, she limps a little. But then,

we're all getting older.

On our first day together in Sussex, we piled into the Volvo and rode to the

town with the thirty-seven antique stores. Hugh drove, and I crawled into the

way-back, thinking happily, *Here we are again, me and my sisters in a*

station wagon, just like when we were young. Who would have imagined in

1966 that we'd one day be riding through southern England, none of us

having realized the futures we'd predicted for ourselves? Amy was not the

policewoman she'd so hoped to become. Lisa was not a nurse. No one had a

houseful of servants or a trained proboscis monkey, yet we'd turned out OK,

hadn't we?

In one of the antique stores we visited that afternoon, we saw a barrister's wig. It was foul, all the colors of dirty underpants, but that didn't stop Amy, and then Gretchen, from trying it on.

"That's OK," Lisa said when it was handed to her. "I don't want to get y'all's germs on my head."

Their germs, I thought.

The sun set at around four that afternoon, and it was dark by the time we headed home. I fell asleep in the way-back for a few minutes, and when I awoke, Lisa was discussing her uterus, specifically her fear that its lining may have grown too thick.

"What on earth gives you that idea?" Amy asked.

Lisa then mentioned a friend of hers, saying that if it could happen to Cynthia, it could just as easily happen to her. "Or to any of us," she said.

"And what if it does?" Gretchen asked.

"Then we'll have to get them scraped out," Lisa reported.

I lifted my head over the backseat. "What's a uterus lined with, anyway?" I imagined something sweet and viscous. "Like whatever it is that grapes are made of."

"That would be grape," Amy said. "Grapes are made of grape."

"Actually, it's a good question," Lisa said. "What *is* a uterus lined with?

Blood vessels? Nerves?"

"Your family," Hugh said. "I can't believe the things you talk about when you're together."

I later reminded him of the time his sister, Ann, visited us in Normandy. I walked into the living room after returning from a bike ride one afternoon and heard her saying to her mother, Joan, who was also staying with us, "Don't you just love the feel of an iguana?"

Who are you people? I remember thinking. That same night, after my bath, I overheard her asking, "Well, can't you make it with camel butter?"

"You can," Mrs. Hamrick said, "but I wouldn't recommend it."

I thought of asking for details—"Make *what* with camel butter?"—but decided I preferred the mystery. That often happens with company. I'll forever wonder what a guest from Paris meant when I walked into the yard one evening and heard her saying, "Mini goats might be nice." Or, odder still,

when Hugh's father, Sam, came to visit with an old friend he'd known from the State Department. The two had been discussing the time they'd spent in Cameroon in the late sixties, and I entered the kitchen to hear Mr. Hamrick say, "Now was that guy a Pygmy, or just a *false* Pygmy?"

I turned around and headed to my office, thinking, *I'll ask later.* Then

Hugh's father died, as did his old friend from the State Department. I suppose

I could Google "false Pygmy," but it wouldn't be the same. I had my chance

to find out what one was, and I blew it.

One of Hugh's greatest regrets is that his father never saw the house in

Sussex. It's the kind of place that was right up Sam's alley: a ruin

transformed in such a way that it still looks pretty beat-up. The main

difference is that now the wiring is safe, and there's heat. Mrs. Hamrick

visits, though, and sometimes she and Hugh will sit in the kitchen and talk

about Sam. It's not the snippets of conversation that betray him as the subject

but rather their voices, which, almost a decade after his death, are still brittle

and reverential, full of loss and longing. It's how my sisters and I used to be

when talking about our mother. Now, though, after twenty-seven years,

almost every discussion of her ends with the line "And can you believe she

was so young?" Soon we'll be the age she was when she got cancer and was

killed by it. Then we'll be even older, which just seems wrong, against nature

somehow.

I made up my mind eons ago that I would not let that happen, that I would

also die at sixty-two. Then I hit my midfifties and started thinking that

perhaps I'm being a bit harsh. Now that I've scored a couple of decent guest rooms, it seems silly not to get a little more use out of them.

When visitors leave, I feel like an actor watching the audience file out of the theater, and it was no different with my sisters. The show over, Hugh and I returned to lesser versions of ourselves. We're not a horrible couple, but we have our share of fights, the type that can start with a misplaced sock and suddenly be about everything. "I haven't liked you since 2002," he hissed during a recent argument over which airport security line was moving the fastest.

This didn't hurt me so much as confuse me. "What happened in 2002?" I asked.

On the plane, he apologized, and a few weeks later, when I brought it up over dinner, he claimed to have no memory of it. That's one of Hugh's many outstanding qualities: he doesn't hold on to things. Another is that he's very good to old people, a group that in the not-too-distant future will include me.

It's just this damned middle-aged period I have to get through.

The secret, of course, is to stay busy. So when the company leaves, I clean their bathrooms and strip their beds. If the guests were mine—my sisters, for

example—I'll sit on the edge of the mattress and hold their sheets to my chest, hugging them a moment and breathing in their smell before standing back up and making my rickety way to that laundry room I always wanted.

Now We Are Five

In late May 2013, a few weeks shy of her fiftieth birthday, my youngest sister, Tiffany, committed suicide. She was living in a room in a beat-up house on the hard end of Somerville, Massachusetts, and had been dead, the coroner guessed, for at least five days before her door was battered down. I was given the news over a white courtesy phone while at the Dallas airport. Then, because my plane to Baton Rouge was boarding and I wasn't sure what

else to do, I got on it. The following morning, I boarded another plane, this one to Atlanta, and the day after that I flew to Nashville, thinking all the while about my ever-shrinking family. A person expects his parents to die. But a sibling? I felt I'd lost the identity I'd enjoyed since 1968, when my brother was born.

"Six kids!" people would say. "How do your poor folks manage?"

There were a lot of big families in the neighborhood I grew up in. Every other house was a fiefdom, so I never gave it much thought until I became an

adult and my friends started having children. One or two seemed reasonable,

but anything beyond that struck me as outrageous. A couple Hugh and I knew

in Normandy would occasionally come to dinner with their wrecking crew of

three, and when they'd leave several hours later every last part of me would

feel violated.

Take those kids, double them, and subtract the cable TV: that's what my

parents had to deal with. Now, though, there weren't six, only five. "And you

can't really say, 'There *used* to be six,'" I told my sister Lisa. "It just makes

people uncomfortable."

I recalled a father and son I'd met in California a few years back. "So are

there other children?" I asked.

"There are," the man said. "Three who are living and a daughter, Chloe,

who died before she was born, eighteen years ago."

That's not fair, I remember thinking. Because, I mean, what's a person

supposed to do with *that?*

Compared to most forty-nine-year-olds, or even most forty-nine- *month*-olds,

Tiffany didn't have much. She did leave a will, though. In it, she decreed that

we, her family, could not have her body or attend her memorial service.

"So put *that* in your pipe and smoke it," our mother would have said.

A few days after getting the news, my sister Amy drove to Somerville with a friend and collected two boxes of things from Tiffany's room: family photos, many of which had been ripped into pieces; comment cards from a neighborhood grocery store; notebooks; receipts. The bed, a mattress on the floor, had been taken away and a large industrial fan had been set up. Amy snapped some pictures while she was there and, individually and in groups, those of us left studied them for clues: a paper plate on a dresser that had several drawers missing, a phone number written on a wall, a collection of mop handles, each one a different color, arranged like cattails in a barrel painted green.

Six months before our sister killed herself, I had made plans for us all to gather at a beach house on Emerald Isle, off the coast of North Carolina. My family used to vacation there every summer, but after my mother died we stopped going, not because we lost interest but because it was she who always made the arrangements and, more important, paid for it. The place I found with the help of my sister-in-law, Kathy, had six bedrooms and a small swimming pool. Our weeklong rental period began on Saturday, June 8, and

we arrived to find a deliverywoman standing in the driveway with seven pounds of seafood, a sympathy gift sent by friends. “They’s slaw in there too,” she said, handing over the bags.

In the past, when my family rented a cottage, my sisters and I would crowd the door like puppies around a food dish. Our father would unlock it, and we’d tear through the house claiming rooms. I always picked the biggest one facing the ocean, and just as I’d start to unpack, my parents would enter and tell me that this was *theirs*. “I mean, just who the hell do you think you are?” my father would ask. He and my mother would move in, and I would get booted to what was called “the maid’s room.” It was always on the ground level, a kind of dank shed next to where the car was parked. There was never an interior stairway leading to the upper floor. Instead, I had to take the outside steps and, more often than not, knock on the locked front door like a beggar hoping to be invited in.

“What do *you* want?” my sisters would ask.

“I want to come inside.”

“That’s funny,” Lisa, the eldest, would say to the others, who were gathered like disciples around her. “Did you hear something, a whining

sound? What is it that makes a noise like that? A hermit crab? A little sea slug?" Normally there was a social divide between the three oldest and three youngest children in my family. Lisa, Gretchen, and I treated the others like servants and did very well for ourselves. At the beach, though, all bets were off, and it was just upstairs against downstairs, meaning everyone against me.

This time, because I was paying, I got to choose the best room. Amy moved in next door, and my brother, Paul; his wife; and their ten-year-old daughter, Maddy, took the spot next to her. That was it for oceanfront. The others arrived later and had to take the leftovers. Lisa's room faced the street, as did my father's. Gretchen's faced the street and was intended for someone who was paralyzed. Hanging from the ceiling were electric pulleys designed to lift a harnessed body into and out of bed.

Unlike the cottages of our youth, this one did not have a maid's room. It was too new and fancy for that, as were the homes that surrounded it. Traditionally, the island houses were on stilts, but more and more often now the ground floors are filled in. They all have beachy names and are painted beachy colors, but most of those built after Hurricane Fran hit the coast in

1996 are three stories tall and look almost suburban. This place was vast and

airy. The kitchen table sat twelve, and there was not one but *two* dishwashers.

The pictures were ocean-related: seascapes and lighthouses, all with the

airborne Vs that are shorthand for seagull. A sampler on the living room wall

read OLD SHELLERS NEVER DIE, THEY SIMPLY CONCH OUT. On the round clock

beside it, the numbers lay in an indecipherable heap, as if they'd come

unglued. Just above them were printed the words WHO CARES?

This was what we found ourselves saying whenever anyone asked the

time.

"Who cares?"

The day before we arrived at the beach, Tiffany's obituary ran in the *Raleigh*

News & Observer. It was submitted by Gretchen, who stated that our sister

had passed away peacefully at her home. This made it sound as if she were

very old and had a house. But what else could you do? People were leaving

responses on the paper's website, and one fellow wrote that Tiffany used to

come into the video store where he worked in Somerville. When his glasses

broke, she offered him a pair she had found while foraging for art supplies in

somebody's trash can. He said she also gave him a *Playboy* magazine from the 1960s that included a photo spread titled "The Ass Menagerie."

This was fascinating, as we didn't really know our sister very well. All of us had pulled away from the family at some point in our lives—we'd had to in order to forge our own identities, to go from being *a* Sedaris to our own specific Sedaris. Tiffany, though, stayed away. She might promise to come home for Christmas, but at the last minute there'd always be some excuse: she missed her plane, she had to work. The same would happen with our summer vacations. "The rest of us managed to make it," I'd say, aware of how old and guilt-trippy I sounded.

We'd all be disappointed by her absence, though for different reasons.

Even if you weren't getting along with Tiffany at the time, you couldn't deny

the show she put on—the dramatic entrances, the nonstop professional-grade

insults, the chaos she'd inevitably leave in her wake. One day she'd throw a dish at you, and the next she'd create a mosaic made of the shards. When allegiances with one brother or sister flamed out, she'd take up with someone

else. At no time did she get along with everybody, but there was always someone she was in contact with. Toward the end it was Lisa, but before that

we'd all had our turn.

The last time she joined us on Emerald Isle was in 1986. "And, even then, she left after three days," Gretchen reminded us.

As kids, we spent our beach time swimming. Then we became teenagers and devoted ourselves to tanning. There's a certain kind of talk that takes place when you're lying, dazed, in the sun, and I've always been partial to it. On the first afternoon of our most recent trip, we laid out one of the bedspreads we'd had as children and arranged ourselves side by side on it, trading stories about Tiffany.

"What about the Halloween she spent on that Army base?"

"And the time she showed up at Dad's birthday party with a black eye?"

"I remember this girl she met years ago at a party," I began when my turn came. "She'd been talking about facial scars and how terrible it would be to have one, so Tiffany said, 'I have a little scar on my face and I don't think it's so awful.'

"'Well,' the girl said, 'you would if you were pretty.'"

Amy laughed and rolled over onto her stomach. "Oh, that's a good line!"

I rearranged the towel I was using as a pillow. "Isn't it, though?" Coming

from someone else the story might have been upsetting, but not being pretty was never one of Tiffany's problems, especially when she was in her twenties and thirties, and men tumbled helpless before her.

"Funny," I said, "but I don't remember a scar on her face."

I stayed in the sun too long that day and got a burn on my forehead. That was basically it for me and the beach blanket. I made brief appearances for the rest of the week, stopping to dry off after a swim, but mainly I spent my days on a bike, cycling up and down the coast and thinking about what had happened. While the rest of us seem to get along effortlessly, with Tiffany it always felt like work. She and I usually made up after arguing, but our last fight took it out of me, and at the time of her death we hadn't spoken in eight years. During that period, I regularly found myself near Somerville, and though I'd always toy with the idea of contacting her, I never did, despite my father's encouragement. Meanwhile I'd get reports from him and Lisa: Tiffany had lost her apartment, had gone on disability, had moved into a room found for her by a social service agency. Perhaps she was more forthcoming with her friends, but her family got things only in bits and

pieces. She didn't talk *with* us so much as *at* us, great blocks of speech that were by turns funny, astute, and so contradictory it was hard to connect the sentence you were hearing with the one that preceded it. Before we stopped speaking I could always tell when she was on the phone. I'd walk into the house and hear Hugh say, "Uh-huh…uh-huh…uh-huh…"

In addition to the two boxes that Amy had filled in Somerville, she also brought down our sister's 1978 ninth-grade yearbook. Among the messages inscribed by her classmates was the following, written by someone who had drawn a marijuana leaf beside her name:

Tiffany. You are a one-of-a-kind girl so stay that way you unique ass.

I'm only sorry we couldn't have partied more together. This school sux

to hell. Stay

-cool

-stoned

-drunk

-fucked-up

Check your ass later.

Then there's:

Tiffany,

I'm looking forward to getting high with you this summer.

Tiffany,

Call me sometime this summer and we'll go out and get blitzed.

A few weeks after these messages were written, Tiffany ran away and was subsequently sent to a disciplinary institution in Maine called Élan. According to what she told us later, it was a horrible place. She returned home in 1980, having spent two years there, and from that point on none of us can recall a conversation in which she did not mention it. She blamed the family for sending her off, but we, her siblings, had nothing to do with it. Paul, for instance, was ten when she left. I was twenty-one. For a year, I sent her monthly letters. Then she wrote and told me to stop. As for my parents, there were only so many times they could apologize. "We had other kids," they said in their defense. "You think we could let the world stop on account of any one of you?"

We were at the beach for three days before Lisa and our father, who is now ninety, joined us. Being on the island meant missing the spinning classes he takes in Raleigh, so I found a fitness center not far from the rental cottage, and every afternoon he and I would spend some time there. On the way over we'd talk to each other, but as soon as we mounted our stationary bikes we'd