

David Sedaris

Happy-Go-Lucky



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For Ted Woestendiek

Ban everything. Purify everything. Moral cleanse everything. Anything that was bad or is bad, destroy it. Especially in the forest, where you live your life as a tree, wielding an axe.

—Sigmond C. Monster

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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

Active Shooter

It was spring, and my sister Lisa and I were in her toy-sized car, riding from the airport in Greensboro, North Carolina, to her house in Winston-Salem. I'd gotten up early to catch my flight from Raleigh, but still she had me beat by an hour. "I like to be at Starbucks right when they open, at five a.m.," she said. "Speaking of which, I was there a few months ago and saw a lady with a monkey. I don't know what kind, but it was small—not much bigger than a doll—and was in a pink frilly dress. And it was just so... upsetting to me. I wanted to go up to this woman and ask, 'What do you plan on doing with that thing once you lose interest in it?'"

Like a lot of pet owners I know, Lisa is certain that no one can take care of an animal as well as she can. "Look at how that guy is dragging his Irish setter on that leash!" she'll say, pointing at what to me just looks like a man walking his dog. Or, if the dog is *not* on a leash: "That beagle's about to be hit by a car, and his owner's not doing a thing about it." No one's spaniel has the shots it needs. Nobody's bird is eating correctly or getting its toenails trimmed to the proper length.

"What made you so sure this woman was going to lose interest in her monkey?"

Lisa gave me the look that said, *A monkey—of course she's going to lose interest in it*, and said, "A monkey—of course she's going to lose interest in it."

It was right around there that we came upon a billboard for a firing range called ProShots.

"I think we should go to that place and shoot guns," Lisa said.

And so it was that on the following afternoon we arrived for our three o'clock appointment. I had assumed for some reason that a firing range would be outdoors, but instead it was situated in a strip mall, next to a tractor-supply store. Inside were glass display cases filled with weapons and a wall of purses a woman could hide a dainty pistol in. This was a niche market I knew nothing about until I returned to Lisa's house later that day and went online. There I found websites selling gun-concealing vests, T-shirts, jackets—you name it. One company makes boxer briefs with a holster in the back, which they call "Compression Concealment Shorts" but which I would call gunderpants.

Lisa and I quite enjoyed wandering around the store. ROSSI R352—\$349.77, read a tag beside one of the pistols. Were I in, say, an office-supply shop, I could have made a judgment concerning the cost, but I have no idea how much a gun goes for. It was like pricing penguins or milking equipment. My shooting experience was limited to air rifles. Lisa had no experience whatsoever, so before stepping onto the firing range we sat for a forty-minute gun-safety class taught by a retired Winston-Salem police officer named Lonnie, who co-owned the business and was dressed in one of its T-shirts. The man was perhaps in his early fifties, his pale eyebrows and wire-rimmed, almost invisible glasses shaded by a baseball cap with the Blackwater logo on it. He might not be someone you'd choose as a friend, but you wouldn't mind him as a neighbor. "I shoveled your drive while you were asleep," you could imagine him saying. "I hope you don't mind. I just wanted the exercise."

There was a classroom at the back of the store, and, after seating us side by side at one of the desks, Lonnie took the chair across from us. "The first thing you need to know about firearm safety is that most people are stupid. I don't mean you folks personally, but people in general. So I have a few rules. Number one: Always assume that every weapon is loaded."

Lisa and I leaned back, wincing, as he laid two guns in front of us. One was a Glock something, and the other—the nicer-looking one—was a

snub-nosed .38 Special.

“Now, are these loaded?” he asked.

“I am going to assume that they are,” Lisa answered.

Lonnie said, “Good girl.”

I found a gun once while cleaning someone’s apartment in New York. It was under the bed where the pornography should be, wrapped in a T-shirt, and it was in my lap before I realized what it was. Then I froze, the way I might have had it been a bomb. Eventually, very carefully, I nudged it back into place, wondering what the person who owned this looked like, for I had never met him.

I used to think that guys with beards had guns. Then I realized by asking around that guys with beards had *fathers* who owned guns. It was amazing how spot-on this was. I once met an Asian American fellow with a very sketchy goatee—no more than a dozen eyelash-length hairs on his chin—and when I guessed that his dad had bullets but no gun, he said, “Oh my God. How did you know?”

This was before beards came back into style and everyone grew one. Now I think that guys who wear baseball caps with their sunglasses perched on the brims have guns, if—and this is important—the lenses of those sunglasses are mirrored or fade from orange to yellow, like a tequila sunrise. As for women, I have no idea.

Lonnie had moved on by this point and was teaching us how to pick up our guns. Like most people raised on water pistols and dart-shooting plastic Lugers, we automatically reached for the triggers, a no-no in the Big Book of Safety. “These weapons absolutely cannot fire unless you tug that little piece of metal,” Lonnie said.

“They can’t go off if you drop them?” I asked.

“Absolutely not,” he told me. “Almost never. So go on, David, pick up your Glock.”

I screwed up my courage and did as instructed.

“Good job!”

When it was Lisa's turn, her finger went straight for the trigger.

"Busted," Lonnie told her. "OK, now, David, I want you to pick up the thirty-eight, and Lisa, you go for the Glock."

We'd just advanced to rule number two—never point your weapon at another person, unless you intend to kill or wound them—when Lisa explained why she was taking the class: "If anyone ever tries to shoot me? And accidentally drops the gun? I want to know how to handle it properly."

"That is a very good, very smart reason," Lonnie said. "I can tell you're someone who thinks ahead."

Oh, you have no idea, I thought.

Our safety session went a little over schedule but still allowed us ten minutes of shooting time, which, in retrospect, was more than enough. Seeing Lisa standing ramrod straight with a loaded Glock in her hand was as startling to me as seeing her in front of an orchestra waving a baton. Her first bullet hit the target—a life-sized outline of a man—and missed the bull's-eye of his heart by an inch at most.

Where did that come from? I wondered.

"Good girl!" Lonnie told her. "Now I want you to plant your legs a little farther apart and try again."

Her second shot was even closer.

"Lisa, you're a natural," Lonnie said. "OK, Mike, now you give it a try."

I looked around, confused. "Excuse me?"

He handed me the .38. "You came here to shoot, didn't you?"

I accepted the gun, and from then until the time we left, my name was Mike, which was more than a little demoralizing. Not getting the "Wait a minute—the David Sedaris?" I have come to expect when meeting someone was bad enough, but being turned into a *Mike*, of all things? I thought of the time a woman approached me in a hotel lobby. "Pardon

me,” she said, “but are you here for the Lions Club meeting?” That’s the Mike of organizations.

Lonnie didn’t forget my sister’s name—on the contrary, he wore it out. “Good shot, Lisa! Now do it with your left eye closed.” “What do you say, Lisa, ready to give the thirty-eight a try?”

“Do I have to?” she asked. The fact was that she was—that both of us were—already bored. Taking my final shot, I thought of a couple I know in Odessa, Texas. Tom repairs planes, so he and Randy live right there at the airport, in a prefabricated house beside the hangar he works out of. One night, late, a large, crazy-looking man who turned out to be an escaped mental patient drove through the high chain-link fence surrounding their property and pounded on their door. “I know you’ve got my mother in there!” he shouted. “I know you’re holding her hostage, you bastard!”

It was absurd, the things he was saying, but there was no dissuading him.

Tom and Randy were on the other side of the door, bolstering it with their bodies, and when it started to come off its hinges, Tom ran for his pistol.

“You have a *gun*?” I asked, surprised, I suppose, because he’s gay.

Tom nodded. “I fired at where I thought his knees would be, but he was bent over at the time, so the bullet went into his neck.”

It didn’t kill him, though. Enraged, the escaped mental patient got back behind the wheel and drove through the massive garage-style door of the hangar. Then it was out through the back wall and onto the tarmac, where he made a U-turn and drove into Tom and Randy’s house.

“Wait,” I said. “This is like a movie where the villain refuses to die.”

“I know!” agreed Randy, who directs his local arts council. “I’m the pacifist in this relationship, never held a gun in my life, but there I was while this madman was driving past my chest of drawers, shouting, ‘Kill him!’”

As Tom aimed his gun again, the guy passed out from blood loss, and not long afterward the police showed up. By then, the door was hanging by a thread and had bullet holes in it, the hangar was practically destroyed, and there was a stolen car at the foot of their bed. *This*, I thought, *is exactly why people buy guns*. The NRA could have used their story as a commercial.

Who would I want to shoot? I asked myself, looking at the silhouette in front of me and wondering if there was also a female version. Of course, it wouldn't have mattered who I imagined killing. The bullet I fired was so off the mark, my only hope was that my enemy would laugh themselves to death.

At the end of our session, Lonnie pulled in our target and wrote Lisa's name above the bullet hole that came closest to the heart. Above the one that was farthest away, he wrote, "Mike." Then he rolled it up and handed it to us as a souvenir. Later, as I paid, Lonnie said that North Carolina had pretty good laws. "We're a very gun-friendly state," he said.

I told him that in England a man was sent to prison for shooting a burglar who was breaking into his home, and Lonnie's jaw dropped. It was as if I'd said that where I live, you have to walk on your hands between the hours of six a.m. and noon. "Now, that's just crazy," he said. Turning to the fellow next to him, he asked, "Did you hear that?" Then he turned back to me. "I'm telling you, Mike, sometimes I don't know what this world is coming to."

In the glass case below the counter were a number of bumper stickers, one of which read, PROSHOTS: PANSIES CONVERTED DAILY.

"That used to be on their billboard until gay people complained," Lisa told me as we walked out the door.

I'm not a person who is easily offended. There's a lot I don't like in this world. There's plenty of stuff that makes me *angry*, but the only things I

can think of that really offend me, that truly affront my sense of decency, are cartoons in which animals wear sunglasses and say “awesome” all the time. That, to me, is crossing the line. It’s not because the animal in question—some rabbit or bear or whatever—is being disrespected but because it’s training children to be mediocre. Calling gay people pansies is just “meh,” in my opinion.

“What was that ‘reason for taking the class’ business all about?” I asked Lisa as we crossed the parking lot to her car. “What makes you think that your attacker is going to drop his gun?”

She unlocked her door and opened it. “I don’t know. Maybe he’ll be wearing gloves and lose his grip.”

As we pulled away, I wondered if depressed people ever took the safety class and turned the guns on themselves once they got on the firing range. “It would be more practical than buying your own Glock or thirty-eight, and there’d be no mess,” I said. “At least not in your home. And, seeing as how you don’t pay until the *end* of the session, it wouldn’t cost you anything. Except, you know, your life.”

Lisa considered this. “I always thought that before I committed suicide, I’d first kill Henry.” She was referring to her parrot, who could easily live to be seventy. “Don’t get me wrong, I love him to death. I just don’t want him to be abused once I’m gone.”

“I thought he went to me after you died,” I said.

Lisa signaled for a turn. “You’d just lose interest in him.”

Not long after we took our safety class, Sandy Hook happened. Two months after that, ProShots emailed a Valentine greeting. It was a photo of a heart shape made of weapons. There were pistols and semiautomatic rifles. Even hand grenades. I read that, after the shooting, gun sales went up, the fear being that President Obama was going to repeal the Second Amendment. The same thing happened after that guy opened fire in a

movie theater in Colorado, and after the massacre at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina.

It's so foreign to me, wanting to own a gun, especially the kind you'd use in a war. I don't know why, but shooting just doesn't appeal to me. I tried it that one time with Lisa and don't feel the need to ever do it again. People on YouTube blow away bowling pins and old toaster ovens in their backyards, and I just don't get it. I've never thought to stalk and kill my own food. I don't worry that a race war is coming and I need to arm myself in advance of it. Nor am I concerned that an escaped psychopath is going to break down my front door in the middle of the night. Things like that clearly happen, but I'd just as soon prepare by having a back door. Where I live now, in the UK, it's hard to get a rifle and next to impossible to secure a handgun. Yet somehow, against all odds, British people feel free. Is it that they don't know what they're missing? Or is the freedom they feel the freedom of not being shot to death in a classroom or shopping mall or movie theater?

Of course, UK stabbings are through the roof, but with a knife you're not going to kill more than a few people at a time. Then too there's not a movement built around bladed weapons the way there is around firearms. I've yet to see a bumper sticker picturing a fencing sword and the words COME AND TAKE IT OR THINK TWICE. BECAUSE I WON'T. A few days after Sandy Hook, I went online and saw an ad for the Bushmaster, one of the weapons used by Adam Lanza. It was a picture of the assault rifle above the words CONSIDER YOUR MAN CARD REISSUED.

Every school shooting is different but the same. We see the news footage, the crying children, the flowers and teddy bears in a pile getting rained on. There are reports that the community is "healing," and then it's on to the next one. The solution, according to the NRA, is for more people to have guns. When President Trump—following the mass murder in Parkland,

Florida—proposed arming teachers, I called Lisa, who sounded skeptical. “Wait a second,” she said. “Where did you read this?”

I thought of a dinner a few years earlier. My sister had joined me for a weekend in Chicago and asked my friend Adam, “Are you familiar with a newspaper called *The Onion*?”

“Of course,” he said.

“I didn’t know what it was, see? Then I read an article claiming that, in order to save money, schools in America were going to eliminate the past tense. After I finished it, I phoned my husband and told him, ‘This is the last straw.’ Because I used to teach, and the way budgets are being cut nowadays, this seemed entirely possible to me.”

“How do you save money by eliminating the past tense?” Adam asked.

“I don’t know,” Lisa said. “I guess I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

It’s probably for the best that someone so gullible is no longer in front of a classroom. Still, I can’t blame her for not believing the armed-teacher business. Who’d have thought that after all was said and done this would be the proposed solution? A few days later, the Blue Mountain School District in eastern Pennsylvania put buckets of river rocks in all its classrooms, the idea being for the kids to stone their would-be assassins.

I think there might be a few who’d reach for a rock, but wouldn’t most of them freeze or just start crying? I know I would.

Then came Santa Fe, Texas, where to my family’s great shame the shooter was named Dimitrios Pagourtzis.

We felt the way Korean Americans likely did after Virginia Tech.

“Oh no,” we said. “He’s one of us!”

Luckily the state’s lieutenant governor was casting blame on the number of exits and entrances the building had rather than on, say, Greece. “The school that I taught at is now holding active-shooter drills,” Lisa told me. “That’s where the students—and mine were third graders—turn off the lights and hide in dark corners.” She sighed. “I’m just glad I got out when I did.”

When my sister and I were young, during the Cuban missile crisis, we had atomic-bomb drills. You'd think our teachers would have led us to shelters twelve stories underground, but instead we were told to crouch beneath our desks. What were we thinking, kneeling there with our hands atop our heads? Did we believe the bombs might, at the very most, blow off a few ceiling tiles and that after the attack we'd return to our homes and find everything just as we had left it? Our parents, our pets, dinner waiting with maybe a little dust on it?

Being shot is easier for children to wrap their heads around. If you've got a TV in your house, you know what a gun is and what happens to people when they're hit with bullets. You may not have a clear concept of death—its permanence, its refusal to be bargained with—but you know it's bad. For us at the time, with Lisa in the second grade and me in the first, the atomic bomb was just an abstraction. So when I'd see my sister on the school bus at the end of a drill day—in a dress and patent-leather shoes, her hair just so, looking far more elegant than she ever would as an adult—I wouldn't feel relieved so much as excited, the way kids that age are when they're released into the world at the end of the day. Oh, to be alive, and free.

Father Time

The night before his ninety-fifth birthday party, my father fell while turning around in his kitchen. My sister Lisa and her husband, Bob, dropped by hours later to hook up his new TV and discovered him on the floor, disoriented and in pain. He fell again after they righted him, so an ambulance was called. At the hospital, they met up with our sister Gretchen and with Amy, who'd just flown in from New York to attend the party, which was now canceled. "It was really weird," she said when we spoke on the phone the following morning. "Dad thought Lisa was Mom, and when the doctor asked him where he was, he answered, 'Syracuse'—where he went to college. Then he got mad and said, 'You're sure asking a lot of questions.' As if that's not normal for a doctor. I think he thought this was just *some guy* he was talking to."

Fortunately, he was lucid again by the following afternoon. That was the hard part for everyone—seeing him so confused.

On the night that my father fell, I was in Princeton, New Jersey, the fourth of eighty cities I would be traveling to for work. On the morning he was moved from the hospital to a rehabilitation center, I was on my way to Ann Arbor. Over the next week, he had a few little strokes, the sort people don't notice right away. One affected his peripheral vision, and another, his short-term memory. He'd wanted to return home after leaving rehab, but by this point there was no way he could continue to live alone.

I'm not sure where I was when my father moved into his assisted living center. Springmoor, it's called. I saw it, finally, four months after his fall, when Hugh and I flew to North Carolina. It was early August, and we arrived to find him in an easy chair, blood flowing from his ear at what seemed to me a pretty alarming rate. It looked fake, like beet juice, and

was being dabbed at by a nurse's assistant. "Oh, hello," my father said, his voice soft and weary-sounding.

I thought he didn't know who I was, but then he added my name and held out his hand. "David." He looked behind me. "Hugh." Someone had wrapped his head with gauze, and when he leaned back he resembled the late English poet Edith Sitwell, very distinguished-looking, almost imperious. His eyebrows were thin and barely perceptible. It was the same with his lashes. I guess that, like the hairs on his arms and legs, they just got tired of holding on.

"So what happened?" I asked, though I already knew. Lisa had told me that morning on the phone that the grandfather clock he'd brought to Springmoor had fallen on him. It was made of walnut and bronze and had an abstract human face on it, surrounded by numbers that were tilted at odd angles. My mother always referred to it as Mr. Creech, after the artist who made it, but my dad calls it Father Time.

I'd said to Hugh after hanging up with Lisa, "When you're ninety-five, and Father Time *literally* knocks you to the ground, don't you think he's maybe trying to tell you something?"

"He insisted on moving it himself," the woman attempting to stanch the bleeding said, "and it cut his ear. We sent him to the hospital for stitches, but now it's started up again, maybe because he's on blood thinners, so we've called an ambulance." She turned to my father and raised her voice. "*Haven't we, Lou? Haven't we called an ambulance?!*"

At that moment, two EMTs bounded in, both young and bearded, like lumberjacks. Each took an elbow and helped my father to stand.

"Are we going somewhere?" he asked.

"*Back to the hospital!*" the woman shouted.

"All right," my father said. "OK."

They wheeled him out, and the woman explained that, while the staff would remove bloodstains from the carpet, it was the family's job to get