

watched with *Ma* These *west* trees (I know like *snap*) are  
 not my old *east* trees that I knew by heart: *sycamore*,  
*dogwood*, *beech* I do not, as yet, know *west's* trees' names  
*western* trees' names But will will soon can learn am  
 learning all the time.

Know: *night*, *star*, *moon*

Know: *walk*, know *hide*

Know: *path* and little bit smiling take it.

GEORGE SAUNDERS, LIBERATION DAY (2022)

## MY HOUSE

Who would sell a gem like that? Well, Mel Hays. That was his name. Per Jordan at Hillside Realty. He was mad to sell. Sick wife, had just retired, couldn't keep the place up. Odd duck, Jordan said, required a personal meeting with anyone thinking of offering.

My God, we hit it off. Hays was big, shaggy, friendly, funny: the brother I'd never had. He'd worked for the village, had a thing for history. Me too, I said, and we shared a mutual history-nerd blush. What I loved about the place were exactly the things he loved about it: the barn (built in 1789); the six leaning hitching posts, each capped with a different serpent face; the oak from which the wrong man had been hung for treason; the smaller oak planted over the spot where the man's body lay buried for fifteen years before his family came to dig him up.

Ghosts? I asked.

Ho ho, he said, touching my arm, meaning: There's more to say on that matter, friend.

The door to the room where the wife was sick stayed closed. But the rest of the house, Good Lord. Bookshelves everywhere,

of mahogany and maple, strange half-rooms stuffed with cased artifacts: a Tahitian oar, the neck of a fiddle played at Antietam, a child's jacket from the time of Washington, smudged, just there, with mud from the period.

Amazing, I said.

We've been lucky, he said.

The interior showed signs of the neglect associated with the wife's illness and their shortage of funds and I resolved, in the name of this surprising warmth between us, to meet his asking price.

Just because.

Because I had it.

By the time we came back out onto the wide porch I had so admired from the road we were friends and the house, it seemed, was mine. There's a family of foxes who come to sit over there in the arbor, he said. And: Those dogwoods flower white like crazy in early April. And: You'll want to watch the basement walls for cracks in the winter.

It had a manor-house feeling and sat high on a hill overlooking the quaint little village.

I thought of my friends moving awed through the wide front hall, craning their necks up that mysterious winding stairwell, and then I'd guide them upstairs to the room where, in such-and-such a year, So-and-so had endured a difficult childbirth. I'd do research on the house and compile my findings in a leather-bound book, to be placed in the pentagonal recess in the narrow hall that led to the former servants' quarters. All my life I'd believed I'd someday live in a place like this, had suffered the distance between such places as they existed in my imagination and the places in which I'd actually lived (before Kay, with Kay, after Kay left): their low ceilings, ugly heat vents, hollow pine doors. To live here would be, I imagined, a

sort of exorcism of all the limitations I'd ever felt. Here one sensed—craftsmanship, yes, but also, my God—the past, the living past: the parties held, the food served, the dust motes of 1862, the war goodbyes of 1917, the whispered late-night dramas that had forever altered the lives of the people who'd once moved down these very hallways and now lay buried in the village graveyard I'd visited on the way over, trailing my hands over the mossy stones, reading names aloud, thinking, Poor bastards, you no longer walk in the sun.

Hays paused us at an orchard. Apples and pears had once hung thick on the trees and carpeted the ground, he said. Now, well, no. There was some sort of disease. He'd been preoccupied.

And he gestured up at the window of the sickroom of the wife.

I'll hire a gardener, I thought, get it back to health. He seemed to read my mind and the look on his face said: You showing up here, now, to steward this beloved place, and with the means to do so, proves that such a thing as good fortune truly exists.

Our handshake seemed to mean: Let's burn through the technicalities, get the thing done.

It kills me, he said. To think of losing this place forever.

I get that, I said.

And I did. My mind leapt ahead, to that sad future someday when I, too, would lose it forever.

It's heaven, he said. It's been a heaven for the two of us.

I believe it, I said.

Maybe, he said, and a look came over his face, a self-doubting look, and I found myself wanting to offer whatever he needed.

It was strange, very strange, to like someone so much on a first meeting.

Go on, I said.

Maybe I could drop by now and then, he said.

And I thought: Well, yes, sure, it would be good to see him once in a while.

But then he went on.

Spend a day or two, he said. Stay in the guest room, maybe.

I didn't say no. I didn't. But a look must have passed over my face. Wouldn't a look have passed over yours? Dropping by . . . well, maybe. But spending "a day or two"? "In the guest room"? Did he mean my guest room or theirs? The room they had designated or the one I soon would—

It was one too many, somehow.

Then I thought: He won't take me up on it once he's out; he's just talking, to be comforted.

Recovering my manners, I said yes, of course he would be welcome, they would, always welcome, anytime at all.

But now there was a look on his face.

Anytime at all, I said. Truly.

He gave me a pat on the back, said we'd see how things went, made a vague, despairing gesture at my car, as in: There it is, you know where it is, off you go.

I thought: Too bad. But, then again, where is it written we have to be friends?

I sat in the car awhile, looking up at the house, already loving it more than I'd ever loved any place in my life.

I called Jordan, had her make the full-price offer, plus ten percent. Next morning, she called back, mystified. It seemed he'd changed his mind. About selling. It was the oddest thing, she said. No way he could afford to keep the place. His agent said the same. Together, they were trying to figure out what the hell had gone wrong. Hays was on a tiny pension, his wife was

dying, there were medical bills, the house had been on the market for two years, mine was the first offer.

Did you say something? she asked. Do something?

He said he sometimes might want to come and stay over, I said. Like, overnight. And I just, you know, hesitated.

That's weird, she said. I mean, sounds like you were well within your rights.

I think so, I said. I didn't say no. I just . . .

And that did it? she said. Wow.

We went back, offered more, then more, until, finally, we were offering more than a third again above his original asking price.

But it was still a no.

In January the wife died. I sent a condolence card, with an offer to meet for coffee, got no response. I started driving by now and then just to torture myself. That spring, the roof of the side library collapsed after a tree fell on it. Soon the tree had become part of the house. After a heavy summer rain, the front porch I'd loved so much sank into the earth a foot or so on the south end; three of its columns bowed and cracked. Then one gave way and the two halves of it lay in the yard and the lip of the roof there drooped and you could see into the rusty, filth-packed gutter. By October the grand front lawn was overgrown and wild turkeys were foraging there. You'd see them, big and ugly, strutting around like dinosaurs.

Some nights a single light showed from an upstairs window.

Finally I wrote him a letter. Was there not some way to fix this? Wasn't it in our mutual interest to talk the thing through, come to some agreement? I got no answer, wrote another. We're both good people, I wrote, this is a win-win, can't we let bygones be bygones? I am deeply sorry, I said, that I did not

respond more generously in the moment. I was just taken aback. Briefly. I didn't say no, after all; I only hesitated. Was that an unforgivable sin? Surely a person could forgive the mistake of an instant?

Nothing.

A third letter: Wasn't he ashamed of himself, for being so obstinate? Was this not, what we two old men were enacting, exactly what has ailed the world since time immemorial? Did he really think it was appropriate to make the sale of a property contingent on installing himself as a sort of permanent possible houseguest? What sort of dream world was he living in?

No answer.

A fourth: You'll die, I'll get the house, trust me. Why not sell now? Use the money to live a better life than the tormented one it would appear you are living, sitting up there lonely and bitter, letting that beautiful place, a place you loved, a place the two of you loved, go to seed. Shame on you, I hope you're enjoying the fruits of your arrogance, you stubborn, mean-spirited old bastard.

That one, to my credit, I never sent. I wadded it up, burned it over the stove.

I had fallen ill. I am ill now. My time is short. I burned that letter to prepare myself to face what is coming with as pure a heart as I can manage.

I need to write another. Of course. I know that. If only for my own benefit.

I am truly sorry, it will begin. Sorry for my part in this. What did you deny me, really, after all? A beautiful year or so, in a lovely place. It would have made me happy. But what is it, a year, in the grand scheme? Nothing. What are ten years, a hundred, a thousand? I am going, friend, I am all but gone, I believe you prideful and wrong but I have no desire, now, to cure you. Your

wrongness was an idea I had. I am all but gone. My idea of your wrongness will go with me. Your rightness is an idea you are having. It will go with you. For all of that, I hope you live forever, and if the place falls down around you, as it seems to be doing, I hope even that brings you joy. It was always falling down around you, everything has always been falling down around us. Only we were too alive to notice. I feel the truth of this in my body now. I am trying not to be terrified. But I am sometimes, in the night. If you are a praying man, pray for me, friend. Friend who might have been. Friend who should have been.

That letter exists in my mind. But I am too tired to write it. Well, that is not true. I am not too tired.

I'm just not ready.

The surge of pride and life and self is still too strong in me. But I will get there. I will. I will write it yet.

Only I must not wait too long.