

Love Letter

By [George Saunders](#)

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Dear Robbie,

Got your e-mail, kid. Sorry for handwriting in reply. Not sure e-mailing is the best move, considering the topic, but, of course (you being nearly six foot now, your mother says?), that's up to you, dear, although, you know: strange times.

Beautiful day here. A flock of geese just now came in low over the deck, and your grandmother and I, holding the bright-blue mugs you kindly sent at Christmas, did simultaneous hip swivels as they zinged off toward Rosley and, I expect, an easy meal on the golf course there.

Forgive my use of initials in what follows. Would not wish to cause further difficulties for G., M., or J. (good folks all, we very much enjoyed meeting them when you stopped by last Easter), should this get sidetracked and read by someone other than you.

I think you are right regarding G. That ship has sailed. Best to let that go. M., per your explanation, does not lack proper paperwork but did know, all the while, that G. did lack it, yes? And did nothing about that? Am not suggesting, of course, that she should have. But, putting ourselves into "their" heads—as I think, these days, it is prudent to try to do—we might ask, Why didn't M. (again, according to them, to their way of thinking) do what she "should" have done, by letting someone in authority know about G.? Since being here is "a privilege and not a right." Are we or are we not (as I have grown sick of hearing) "a nation of laws"?

Even as they change the laws constantly to suit their own beliefs!

Believe me, I am as disgusted as you are with all this.

But the world, in my (ancient) experience, sometimes moves off in a certain direction and, having moved, being so large and inscrutable, cannot be recalled to its previous, better state, and so, in this current situation, it behooves us, I would say, to think as they think, as well as we can manage, to avoid as much unpleasantness and future harm as possible.

But, of course, you were writing, really, to ask about J. Yes, am still in touch with the lawyer you mentioned. Don't feel he would be much help. At this point. In his prime, he was, yes, a prince of a guy striding into a courthouse, but he is not now the man he was. He opposed, perhaps too energetically, the D.O.J. review/ouster of sitting judges and endured much abuse in the press and

his property was defaced and he was briefly detained and these days, from what I have heard, is mostly just puttering around his yard, keeping his views to himself.

Where is J. now? Do you know? State facility or fed? That may matter. I expect “they” (loyalists) would (with the power of the courts now behind them) say that although J. is a citizen, she forfeited certain rights and privileges by declining to offer the requested info on G. & M. You may recall R. & K., friends of ours, who gave you, for your fifth (sixth?) birthday, that bronze Lincoln bank? They are loyalists, still in touch, and that is the sort of logic they follow. A guy over in Bremerton befriended a guy at the gym and they would go on runs together and so forth, and the first guy, after declining to comment on what he knew of his friend’s voting past, suddenly found he could no longer register his work vehicle (he was a florist, so this proved problematic). R. & K.’s take on this: a person is “no patriot” if he refuses to answer a “simple question” from his “own homeland government.”

That is where we find ourselves.

You asked if you are supposed to stand by and watch your friend’s life be ruined.

Two answers: one as a citizen, the other as a grandfather.

(You have turned to me in what must be a difficult time and I am trying to be frank.)

As a citizen: I can, of course, understand why a young (intelligent, good-looking) person (perpetual delight to know, I might add) would feel that it is his duty to “do something” on behalf of his friend J.

But what, exactly?

That is the question.

When you reach a certain age, you see that time is all we have. By which I mean, moments like those overhead geese this morning, and watching your mother be born, and sitting at the dining-room table here waiting for the phone to ring and announce that a certain baby (you) had been born, or that day when all of us hiked out at Point Lobos. Those baby deer, the extremely loud seal, your sister’s scarf drifting down, down to that black, briny boulder, the replacement you so generously bought her in Monterey, how pleased you made her with your kindness. Those things were real. That is what (that is all) one gets. This other stuff is real only to the extent that it interferes with those moments.

Now, you may say (I can hear you saying it and see the look on your face as you do) that this incident with J. *is* an interference. I respect that. But, as your grandfather, I beg you not to underestimate the power/danger of this moment. Perhaps I haven’t told you this yet: in the early days, I wrote two letters to the editor of the local rag, one overwrought, the other comic. Neither had any effect. Those who agreed with me agreed with me; those who did not remained unpersuaded. After a third attempt was rejected, I found myself pulled over, up near the house, for no reason I could discern. The cop (nice guy, just a kid, really, from my perspective) asked

what I did all day. Did I have any hobbies? I said no. He said, Some of us heard you like to type. I sat in my car, looking over at his large, pale arm. His face was the face of a kid. His arm, though, was the arm of a man.

How would you know about that? I said.

Have a good night, sir, he said. Stay off the computer.

Good Lord, his stupidity and bulk there in the darkness, the metallic clanking from his belt area, the palpable certainty he seemed to feel regarding his cause, a cause I cannot begin, even at this late date, to get my head around, or view from within, so to speak.

I do not want you anywhere near, or under the sway of, that sort of person, ever.

I feel here a need to address the last part of your e-mail, which (I want to assure you) did not upset me or “hurt my feelings.” No. When you reach my age, and if you are lucky enough to have a grandson like you (stellar), you will know that nothing that that grandson could say could ever hurt your feelings, and, in fact, I am so touched that you thought to write me in your time of need and be so direct and even (I admit it) somewhat rough with me.

Seen in retrospect, yes: I have regrets. There was a certain critical period. I see that now. During that period, your grandmother and I were doing, every night, a jigsaw puzzle each, at that dining-room table I know you know well, we were planning to have the kitchen redone, were in the midst of having the walls out in the yard rebuilt at great expense, I was experiencing the first intimations of the dental issues I know you have heard so much (too much?) about. Every night, as we sat across from each other, doing those puzzles, from the TV in the next room blared this litany of things that had never before happened, that we could never have imagined happening, that were now happening, and the only response from the TV pundits was a wry, satirical smugness that assumed, as we assumed, that those things could and would soon be undone and that all would return to normal—that some adult or adults would arrive, as they had always arrived in the past, to set things right. It did not seem (and please destroy this letter after you have read it) that someone so clownish could disrupt something so noble and time-tested and seemingly strong, that had been with us literally every day of our lives. We had taken, in other words, a profound gift for granted. Did not know the gift was a fluke, a chimera, a wonderful accident of consensus and mutual understanding.

Because this destruction was emanating from such an inept source, who seemed (at that time) merely comically thuggish, who seemed to know so little about what he was disrupting, and because life was going on, and because every day he/they burst through some new gate of propriety, we soon found that no genuine outrage was available to us anymore. If you’ll allow me a crude metaphor (as I’m sure you, the King of las Bromas de Fartos, will): a guy comes into a dinner party, takes a dump on the rug in the living room. The guests get all excited, yell in protest. He takes a second dump. The guests feel, Well, yelling didn’t help. (While some of them applaud his audacity.) He takes a third dump, on the table, and still no one throws him out. At that point, the sky has become the limit in terms of future dumps.

So, although your grandmother and I, during this critical period, often said, you know, “Someone should arrange a march” or “Those f___ing senators,” we soon grew weary of hearing ourselves saying those things and, to avoid being old people emptily repeating ourselves, stopped saying those things, and did our puzzles and so forth, waiting for the election.

I’m speaking here of the second, not the third (of the son), which, being a total sham, didn’t hurt (surprise) as much.

Post-election, doing new puzzles (mine a difficult sort of Catskills summer scene), noting those early pardons (which, by the time they were granted, we’d been well prepared to expect, and tolerate), and then that deluge of pardons (each making way for the next), and the celebratory verbal nonsense accompanying the pardons (to which, again, we were, by this time, somewhat inured), and the targeting of judges, and the incidents in Reno and Lowell, and the investigations into pundits, and the casting aside of term limits, we still did not really believe in the thing that was happening. Birds still burst out of the trees and so forth.

I feel I am disappointing you.

I just want to say that history, when it arrives, may not look as you expect, based on the reading of history books. Things in there are always so clear. One knows exactly what one would have done.

Your grandmother and I (and many others) would have had to be more extreme people than we were, during that critical period, to have done whatever it was we should have been doing. And our lives had not prepared us for extremity, to mobilize or to be as focused and energized as I can see, in retrospect, we would have needed to be. We were not prepared to drop everything in defense of a system that was, to us, like oxygen: used constantly, never noted. We were spoiled, I think I am trying to say. As were those on the other side: willing to tear it all down because they had been so thoroughly nourished by the vacuous plenty in which we all lived, a bountiful condition that allowed people to thrive and opine and swagger around like kings and queens while remaining ignorant of their own history.

What would you have had me do? What would you have done? I know what you will say: you would have fought. But how? How would you have fought? Would you have called your senator? (In those days, you could still, at least, record your feeble message on a senator’s answering machine without reprisal, but you might as well have been singing or whistling or passing wind into it for all the good it did.) Well, we did that. We called, we wrote letters. Would you have given money to certain people running for office? We did that as well. Would you have marched? For some reason, there were suddenly no marches. Organized a march? Then and now, I did not and do not know how to arrange a march. I was still working full time. This dental thing had just begun. That rather occupies the mind. You know where we live: would you have had me go down to Waterville and harangue the officials there? They were all in agreement with us. At that time. Would you have armed yourself? I would not and will not, and I do not believe you would, either. I hope not. By that, all is lost.

Let me, at the end, return to the beginning. I advise and implore you: stay out of this business with J. Your involvement will not help (especially if you don't know where they have taken her, fed or state) and may, in fact, hurt. I hope I do not offend if I here use the phrase "empty gesture." Not only would J.'s situation be made worse, so might that of your mother, father, sister, grandmother, grandfather, etc., etc. Part of the complication is that you are not alone in this.

I want you well. I want you someday to be an old fart yourself, writing a (too) long letter to a (beloved) grandson. In this world, we speak much of courage and not, I feel, enough about discretion and caution. I know how that will sound to you. Let it be. I have lived this long and have the right.

It occurs to me only now that you and J. may be more than just friends.

That, if the case, would, I know, (must) complicate the matter.

I had, last night, a vivid dream of those days, of that critical, pre-election period. I was sitting across from your grandmother, she at work on her puzzle (puppies and kittens), I on mine (gnomes in trees), and suddenly we saw, in a flash, things as they were, that is, we realized that this was the critical moment. We looked at each other across the table with such freshness, if I may say it that way, such love for each other and for our country, the country in which we had lived our whole lives, the many roads, hills, lakes, malls, byways, villages we had known and moved about and around in so freely.

How precious and dear it all seemed.

Your grandmother stood, with that decisiveness I know you know.

"Let us think of what we must do," she said.

Then I woke. There in bed, I felt, for a brief instant, that it *was* that time again and not *this* time. Lying there, I found myself wondering, for the first time in a long while, not What should I have done? but What might I yet do?

I came back to myself, gradually. It was sad. A sad moment. To be, once again, in a time and place where action was not possible.

I wish with all my heart that we could have passed it on to you intact. I do. That is, now, not to be. That regret I will take to my grave. Wisdom, now, amounts to making such intelligent accommodations as we can. I am not saying stick your head in the sand. J. made a choice. I respect her for it. And yet. No one is calling on you to do anything. You are, in my view, doing much good simply by rising in the morning, being as present and kind as possible, keeping sanity alive in the world, so that, someday, when (if) this thing passes, the country may find its way back to normalcy, with your help and the help of those like you.

In this, you are, and I am, I hope, like cave people, sheltering a small, remaining trace of fire through a dark period.

But please know that I understand how hard it must be to stay silent and inactive if, in fact, J. was more than just a friend. She is a lovely person and I recall her crossing our yard with her particular grace and brio, swinging your car keys on that long silver chain, her dog (Whiskey?) running there beside her.

I feel I have made my preference clear, above. I say what follows not to encourage. But: we have money (not much, but some) set aside. Should push come to shove. I am finding it hard to advise you. Please let us know what you are inclined to do, as we find that this (you) is all that we now can think of.

With much love, more than you can know,

GPa. ♦

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[George Saunders](#) won the 2017 Booker Prize for “[Lincoln in the Bardo](#).” His other books include “[Liberation Day: Stories](#)” (2022).