

# Sun River

*Stories*

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Black  
Lawrence  
Press

*For Amy*

# Contents

Opening Night	1
Assisted Living	6
Involvement	27
Tenants	48
Sandpoint	64
A Kind of Person	88
Annika and the Hulk	108
Common Tongue	127
Sun River	141
Afterlife	165

# Opening Night

*1997*

The parents had been fighting, but the daughter had a play that night and as always with their fighting it was the children who realigned them, like the deep gravity without which galaxies disband. She was an aardvark. The daughter was, in the play, and now through the house the mother chased her daughter with the aardvark's head in her hands, its snout bouncing, trying to cap the mask on the little one's head. The father waited in the living room with his camera. It was just like his wife, he thought, to turn a goddamn photograph—one photograph—into an ordeal like this. Grab the girl, snap her picture, move on with our lives—that would've been his approach. He glanced at his watch. Finally the girl was captured, capped, and handed the spear she would wield at the play's climactic moment. The mother arranged her before the camera, beside the hearth, and backed away delicately, as if the girl were a fragile item that could tip over and shatter. She was such an item, in fact. And if the mother that night had grasped how truly fragile the girl was—how instantaneously her small form could totter, fall, and become a thousand scattered pieces never to be whole again—then there would never have passed a moment such as this one, where her nervous hands let go.

Flash.

The father studied the picture the camera ejected, flapping it in the air to help along the exposure. The girl's brother, the son, lay on the living room floor with Anthrax Apprentice filling his headphones. *The sky*, the song screamed, *the sky. The sky is on fire.*

The family got into the car and glided through the evening, late sunlight flashing in the trees. Glaring out at them, from the daughter's lap, was the aardvark's vacant head. The sun flickered in its eyeholes, as if some malevolence were awakening there.

What if I forget? the daughter asked her family.

You won't forget, the father assured her. Nor would she. She had only the line: "A deal's a deal, and those are my termites!"

But what if? the daughter said.

The father glanced at her in his rearview mirror. Well, he said. Then I'll buy you a dipped cone.

We were getting dipped cones anyways! the daughter protested.

Well, the father said. I guess you have nothing to worry about, then.

They turned into the parking lot of the school, where various parents in eveningwear were herding along titmice and flocks of eagles. The eagles caught the boy's attention. Those eagles are gay, he observed.

They are *not*, his sister said.

Son, the father warned.

They have mascara. They're very fashionable, the boy said.

The father again glanced in his rearview, but nothing serious was brewing between his children. They loved each other. He loved them. Their mother loved them and he and their mother loved each other, even when they were fighting. This much was clear: it was the four of them as a unified entity, set against everything else. He parked the car, and his daughter jumped out and ran ahead of the family, weaving through the parking lot, dragging her clattering spear behind her.

The show, as they had known it would be, was magnificent. Animals of all description, all armed and ravenous, whirled plotlessly toward a climactic showdown between the aardvark and the orangutan. When it was time for that showdown, the stage lights dimmed, and into a single glaring

spotlight walked their furry daughter and the overgrown child who played the ape. For flanges, someone had sawed a football in half and strapped a lobe of it to each of the boy's cheeks. He had no lines to say. The only dialogue in the entire performance, in fact, belonged to their daughter, who now cleared her throat and pounded the butt of her spear onto the stage. "A deal's a deal," she cried. "And those are my termites!"

At her word, the lights came up and the full kingdom of animals cast aside their weapons and whirled and danced. From the wings of the stage flew volleys of small candy, Tootsie Rolls and Hershey's Kisses and things, that the animals fell upon and devoured greedily. *Termites!* bel-  
lowed an adult voice from offstage. *Termites!* the voice bellowed again, and more candy showered onto the scene.

The show was dazzling light. It was color and motion. The giraffes, as they chased the candy, trailed green streamers from their ears; the bats swooped in iridescent capes; a blue haze, suggestive of boreal fog, seeped through the gauzy scrim. And the parents and the boy, seated together in the auditorium, watched the girl who was their daughter and sister. She was having trouble obtaining candy. The getup made her clumsy. Dragging tail and spear, she waddled after one thrown handful, only to have it claimed by swifter beasts. She pivoted to waddle after another: same result. But the girl had been the star. She had delivered grand oratory. And her parents, poised together at the edges of their seats, wondered: What could be in our little girl that she finds desperate meaning in such nonsensical words? What feelings must burn in her heart, and where will her life bring her? Already, the truck that would claim the girl had embarked from its vague origins, and was barreling toward town. Its throaty engine screamed through its gears; its dim headlamps raced through black timber. But the parents didn't know this. They knew only that their daughter was a strange creature in a strange drama, and the vessel of an enigmatic future.

It happened this way:

The curtain fell, there was cheerful applause. The curtain lifted, revealing the bowing cast, and the audience exploded out of itself, whistling and screaming. Finally the children retrieved their weapons and tails

and climbed off the stage to join their families. The aardvark's family celebrated with ice cream. And while placing their order, the father trusted his wife's eyes at the exact moment she trusted his. It was no more than that. Turning from the counter, the father saw through the window of the ice cream parlor the girl in her costume waddling across Sprague Avenue. At the opposite curb there waited some other animals, a pair of kangaroos, her costars. The father uttered something unintelligible, and pushed past his wife and son and through a crowd of strangers to the door.

They never identified the make or model of the truck. For all the police knew, it was welded together from parts, in a backwoods garage. And so, for the remainder of his life, all the father had of the truck was the glimpse he caught of it as he burst onto the sidewalk and shouted his daughter's name. The vehicle, he would later recall, had round, frog-eye headlamps, and a grill like the cattle guard of a locomotive. There was no housing for the engine. It stood naked behind the radiator. The cab was entirely dark. The father's only impression, beyond these qualities, was that the truck had emerged from the mountains. He didn't know why he believed that, but he did. The truck was a malicious spirit. It'd slunk from the mountains, like a wolf, and like a wolf it had carried off a lamb. After some months of this sort of talk, the detective on the case had to explain to the father that he wasn't being helpful. Had the father seen a license plate? Could he describe the driver?

There was one thing the father knew: he oughtn't have shouted. That was why the little girl stopped. Then it happened. That was it: it happened and was done. And rather than screeching brakes, there was the roar of cylinders as the monster peeled away. Farther down, the truck fishtailed into the night.

Traffic in both directions froze, as if the universe had been paused. The only sounds were crying children and the father's soles beating the pavement. He hadn't seen where his girl had landed. He ran a ways up the street, then ran back. From the ice cream parlor, there spilled a throng of strangers; from the throng of strangers spilled the mother and son.

The family ran at confused vectors, searching the shrubs and, farther up, a weeded lot. They had no words to offer each other. They themselves might've been strangers.

A woman with thick spectacles eventually found the girl in some brush. The family heard the woman cry out. Each froze where each was standing, a lone pillar in those dark weeds. Then, as one, they fell upon the scrap of darkness where the woman was standing. People they didn't know crowded about them. Sirens wailed in the distance, and when finally the family looked up from the crumpled figure, and looked into each other's faces, they were, for each other, no more than dim memories of the loved ones they had been.

The police arrived, and must've radioed that the matter was decided; when the ambulance appeared, it was without lights or siren, and the EMTs as they stepped from the vehicle were shy. Damaged as she was, lifting the daughter from the brush wasn't a straightforward proposition. A policeman led the family aside. The father brought his wife and son under his arms, but no more than his arms held them. Driving home that night, after providing and signing their statements, the boy gazed out of his window, the mother out of hers, and the father watched the road. They arrived home and parked in the garage, the engine ticking as it cooled. They went inside, and their separate directions.

# Assisted Living

The meeting to decide everything, the one where I sat with my Rottweiler attorney across from Gwen and her bloodthirsty counsel, and scrap-by-scrap we tossed our assets onto the table for the dogs to quarrel over like steaks—that meeting, which my Rottweiler had informed me there was no coming back from (if Gwen and I weren't getting divorced before the meeting, he'd said, we certainly would be after), was scheduled for bright and early Monday morning. The Thursday before that, I was sitting in our kitchen, or at least what would remain our kitchen for a few days longer, before becoming (probably) Gwen's kitchen. Birds swooped back and forth past the window. I thought about how nuts it was that Monday morning I was going to awake, yawn and stretch, and then venture forth into the day to have my life torn asunder. Divorce, I thought. Di-vortia, from the Latin *divortium*, meaning a parting of ways, a fork in the road. That was happening to us now, as it happened to so many couples. We now were a couple divorce happened to. "Huh," I said aloud.

I tapped my lips, gazing out the window. A parting of ways. Becoming apart. That always had been, to my mind, an intriguing obverse. First "a part," then "apart." With the "a" and "part" parted, it meant two things were joined. With "a" and "part" joined, it meant things were parted. It was the kind of mental fuckknutting I engaged in when trying not to experience too deeply my pending divorce. "Words," I muttered, a squirrel outside tightrope along a wire.

The phone rang. I observed it curiously, as if ringing telephones weren't a language I spoke. I made no move to answer it. Instead, I tried to recall if that telephone always had been there. So far as I knew, we'd done away with our landline years ago. Perhaps Gwen had fished this phone from the trash and re-bolted it to the wall as an inscrutable, spiteful gesture? My wife, certainly, was capable of such acts. In her toolkit were all manner of gestures that no semiotician could possibly parse, but which I, her husband, was expected to understand immediately, and be shamed by.

On the umpteenth ring, Gwen appeared from the other room (rather than establish separate residences, we'd established, in one home, a viperous stalemate) and ran her gaze back and forth along the plane separating me and the phone. "Is there something about this you don't get, Mark?" she said.

"No one's calling me at that number."

"So just let it ring. Terrific."

She snatched up the receiver. The call lasted several minutes, and I didn't catch a word of it. Instead, I watched my wife's face: her mouth mouthing words, her brow cycling through expressions. That woman, I thought. That wife of mine, molting into my ex-wife. Until a few years ago, she'd been a beautiful creature. The skin under her eyes had been only faintly pouchy, which had given her a weary, despondent air that men (this man among them) pined for. Her figure had been angular and nimble, like a deer's. And now? Well, Gwen's posture was poor, and portions of her midsection lumped and bulged. The skin under her eyes sagged badly, and throughout her face ran awful, furrowed wrinkles, as if God had scored her with a box cutter.

Not that any of this mattered. We were old, Gwen and I. In fact, all that truly disturbed me about Gwen's decline was her eyes, which as the rest of her had softened and drooped had become sharper, more vivid and mad. What I saw in her eyes, those icy eyes, was my wife's hardened resolve. Despite all forces to the contrary—despite the inertia of our marriage, despite my pleading and reasoning—she would leave me Monday. It would happen, and I'd be alone.

Call concluded, receiver cradled, Gwen said, as if I'd been listening in, "Can you believe that? Is that not incredible?"

"I wasn't listening to your call, Gwen," I said.

She drew breath to speak, then let it out. "You're right," she said. She glanced around, patting her pockets. It was as if she were gathering personal effects for her departure.

"What do you mean, 'incredible'? Who was that?"

"Forget it," she said.

"No," I said. "I'm sorry. Come on."

Gwen smoothed an eyebrow, then twirled her hand, dropped it at her side. "It was Roberta," she said.

"Okay." Roberta was Gwen's dinosaur of a grandmother. She called now and again.

"She's getting married," Gwen said.

I tilted forward in my chair.

"I know..." she said.

"Married? *Married?*"

"I didn't get all the details."

I stared at Gwen. Then, still staring, I dropped my jaw open and laughed and laughed.

"Goddamn it, Mark." Gwen looked off, pissed. "Can you just... can you be an adult?"

"That woman must be a hundred and eight years old!" I cried.

"She's a hundred and one," Gwen said, as if a hundred and one were a marriageable age.

"What I want to know," I said, "is who's slipping it in that old raisin?"

Gwen left the room. It was her right to do that, but there were only so many places she could hide from me. I followed her into the study, where she'd dropped on a sofa to read magazines.

"Is it a shotgun wedding?" I said. "Is Berta gone with child?"

"We're not talking about this anymore," Gwen said.

"Did you tell her to think this through? She probably feels giddy and everything, but marriage is a long road."

Gwen turned a page.

“You’d hate to see this go twenty or thirty years then fall apart. She’d be all on her own at a hundred and thirty-one.”

I thought for sure that’d win a smile from Gwen, but it didn’t. Her eyes glided down the page.

“When’s the big day?” I said.

“Saturday,” she said absently.

That made sense. We weren’t going to see a three-year engagement with this one. “I can do Saturday,” I said.

Gwen lifted her eyes. After a moment, she tossed aside her magazine. “Mark, you are not coming to this wedding.”

“Oh, you bet that I am, sister. You don’t get to tell me what to do.”

Aspen Gardens Assisted Living Facility was a sprawling, single-level complex surrounded by vast parking lots and staked trees. This was my first visit there. Somehow, I’d imagined a stately campus of Gothic halls with high dormers presiding over manicured quads. There’d be bell towers, grottoes—Roberta Desmond wasn’t the sort of woman I could imagine in undignified quarters. But Aspen Gardens, as we pulled up, appeared to have been constructed yesterday, and didn’t appear resilient enough to last till tomorrow. The siding panels, for instance, were oversized for the walls they covered, causing them to bow in places and bulge in others. The trees on the property still bore, on their trunks, Jim’s Home and Garden price tags. And not one of the trees, that I saw, was an aspen.

We parked by a white van I supposed was used for recreational excursions, and were exiting the car when Gwen said to me, over the roof, “You know, Mark, just fucking shut up today, all right? I don’t want a word from you.”

I hadn’t said peep in an hour or longer, and didn’t say anything then. Gwen marched into the building. I slammed the car shut and strolled after her, twirling my keys, whistling. It was a brilliant, sunny Saturday, a fine day for nuptials.

The lobby at Aspen Gardens, I saw as I entered and removed my shades, might as well have belonged to a free clinic in a blighted neighborhood. “Oh my,” I heard myself say. The lighting was sterile, and was reflected in the dull sheen of tile floors. Noises rang off the floors—shoe clicks and PA announcements, the soft insistence of telephones. Gwen leaned at the receptionist’s desk, interacting with a clerk. Snatches of their conversation pinged through the bad acoustics: “Roberta Desmond... guests... granddaughter...”

On one of the walls, I observed a series of incongruous prints. One featured a cowboy campfire, another a sailboat, a third a milk truck. The prints were discordant not only in theme, but in style and sizing—aligned on the wall, the three paintings resembled the randomized output of a slot machine tray. And they were all the room offered by way of personality. The other walls were blank acreages of cinderblock.

In such conditions, one can’t expect human endeavor to thrive. And it appeared that even Gwen’s attempts at ascertaining the location of Berta’s wedding were meeting with frustration. “Roberta...” I heard her tell the clerk, “...Desmond.” For each of the letters in her grandmother’s surname (which it occurred to me then was the surname Gwen herself might reassume in the coming weeks), she tapped a finger on the desk: “D-e-s-m-o...”

“Ma’am,” the clerk said, lifting his hands for forbearance. “Ma’am...”

He was an apple-cheeked little eunuch, gesturing now at his computer screen. “Okay, Roberta’s in the system. She’s a resident here. Okay, we’ve established that. But events like the one you’re describing require *scheduling*, and I don’t see any...” He gestured helplessly at the screen.

I joined them at the desk. “What’s the issue?”

Gwen looked me up and down.

“What?” I said.

“Would you butt out of this?”

My hands, like the eunuch’s, flew up.

“This doesn’t concern you,” Gwen said.

I backed away, turning away, looking something like a toy getting flushed down the toilet. Gwen and the clerk resumed bickering. “Supervisor” was a word she returned to regularly.

The chairs in the lobby were rigid plastic with metal armrests soldered together. I sat in one, legs crossed, hands folded. This, I began to understand, would be a painful day for all parties. Except, I decided, for this party. For Ol' Marky. That's right: today couldn't touch me. I was here for a wedding. It was a Saturday spent in the company of a woman who was yet my wife.

"...supervisor..." Gwen said again. And again. A queue of strangers formed behind her, people sighing audibly, checking watches. The clerk, agitated, vanished into a back room.

From my disagreeable chair, I contemplated my wife, wondering if she might glance my direction. She did, but the look she gave me wasn't fond. She looked away.

To understand Gwen's distress that morning, you should know some things about her, and about Roberta, and what, years ago, passed between them. We'll start with Roberta, that old queen. As of that morning, the day of her centenarian wedding, Roberta's vitality was anyone's guess (I hadn't seen her in fifteen years), but maybe sixty years earlier, in New York City, the woman by all accounts was a juggernaut. She was senior editor at a multinational house in lower Manhattan—one of the first women to climb that high in that business, and the first woman period to rise over, say, stapler duties at her particular firm (Armour & Sons? Something like that, some good old boy outfit). Some astonishing gap—I forget how it was described—separated her from the next woman down the ladder. Or no, it was this: all the salaries of all the other women at her company didn't amount to half what Roberta earned, and what she made didn't amount to half what a man in her position commanded. Something like that, I don't remember the story. The point was, a woman in Berta's position was like a butterfly cruising at 35,000 feet keeping up with jetliners.

It's easy to imagine how such a woman would impress her granddaughter—and indeed Roberta eventually claimed broad real estate in Gwen's heart—but my wife's admiration was late in developing. The

impediment was Gwen's father, Gary, Roberta's lone child by a third marriage, who didn't, to say the least, participate in the world's adulation of his mom. In fact, where Gary Desmond was concerned, his mother was an embarrassment and travesty. I never met Gary, but if Gwen can be trusted (she can), then he was a dull-witted, reactionary ass. At family dinners, he liked to expound upon the humble, subservient roles all members of society should seek out for themselves—men to the paycheck, women to home and hearth. He never mentioned Roberta except to reiterate, now and again, that she was an affront to wholesomeness and decency. "She's having her carnival now," he liked to say. "But that big top comes crashing down." When it came to parenting, not raising another Berta was Gary's sole ambition.

All this according to Gwen:

In seventh grade, when her visitor first visited, Gary had thrown out the box of tampons her mother had placed under the sink, and replaced them with thick, perfumed pads. They were disgusting, Gwen said. And humiliating. None of the pants her father allowed her were snug or revealing, but even through loose denims or tweeds, the bulge of her napkin was plainly visible. What's more, if she crossed a quiet room, her thighs' chafing *squish* was heard one wall to another. It all seems exaggerated, but Gwen isn't given to exaggeration. Once, she confided, she'd crossed a classroom, during an exam, to sharpen her pencil. Such was the racket emitting from her panties that the instructor, as Gwen returned to her desk, followed her up the aisle to ask politely that she not leave her seat again till the period was finished.

The instructor winced, then chuckled painfully. "Well. Don't get up till the bell rings, anyway." To hear Gwen tell it, the freshly sharpened pencil had remained freshly sharpened till the exam's conclusion. She simply was mortified. She could fill in not one bubble more.

"They're basic," had been her father's justification for the pads. "If I have anything to say about it, Gwen will be *basic* about this."

"About *this*?" Gwen's mother had screamed. At that point in their marriage, Tammy Desmond would still confront Gary. It wasn't like

later, when she'd clam up and allow him the say of things. (Though this is all secondhand—I never met Tammy, either.) “Just what do you mean by ‘this,’ Gary? You mean being a woman? Because that’s not very basic!”

As with many confrontations, Gwen overheard this from her upstairs bedroom. Though it didn't last long. Gary, unwilling to engage, simply waited in silence till Tammy shut up.

“It's *complicated*, Gary,” Tammy cried, but no, he dwelled in silence.

Naturally, high school for Gwen was miserable. Chaperoned dates clear through senior year, a curfew at sundown. Upon enrolling in college, Gwen was so brainwashed that she couldn't have guessed with any accuracy what she wanted from an education, or from life, even if her opinion on such matters was sought, which it wasn't. The deal her father offered was this: two academic years. If she was engaged by year two, he'd fund year three. But any fourth year would be at her husband's discretion, and on that fellow's dime.

“He wants a scholar for a wife,” Gary had said, “then that's his can of worms. I won't load that gun for him.”

One peculiar trait of Gwen's brainwashing was that it disoriented her emotional compass while leaving her considerable intelligence, and cunning, intact. In other words, arriving at college, she succeeded brilliantly at the perverse enterprise her father had laid out for her. By her first midterm, she'd obtained a steady squeeze named Alex: an engineering student, an athlete, a Christian. By sophomore midterms, they were engaged. She even refused the proffered third year. They were wed. Gwen assembled a home.

Only in her mid-twenties did the gravity of this nonsense begin weighing on her. Her depression found numerous manifestations, but basically she just physically slowed down. At first, she'd woken early to prepare Alex breakfast and coffee. Now, she slept long past breakfast, past Alex's departure. When finally she did arise, it was to putter about the house with the television roaring. Then she quit bathing. The house fell apart. At most, she left cold cuts in the fridge for Alex's dinner, then collapsed into bed.

As of that juncture in her life—Gwen was twenty-four—the only Roberta Desmond narrative she'd heard had been her father's diatribes about wholesomeness and doomed big tops. Gwen had adopted this view of her grandmother. (On what grounds would she have rejected it?) But it was that year, at the nadir of Gwen's depression, that *Vogue* ran a profile of the legendary Roberta Desmond, Publisher. It was totally by happenstance that Gwen saw the article. The neighbor's *Vogue* was mistakenly delivered to her door, and fascinated by the magazine's glossy texture and colors, she'd begun leafing through it.

Gwen and I still owned, as of the morning we visited Aspen Gardens, several copies of that *Vogue*. November, 1978. We kept them on a high, clean shelf, and I can still picture clearly the article's opening fold. Page 106. You turn from 105, and it's like drawing back the curtain of a Victorian boudoir. Immediately, you're clobbered with velvet, baroque paintings, a four-post bed. Seated at the photograph's center, upon an ornately scrolled armchair, is Roberta Desmond. Even in 1978, she's quite old. Viewed as a whole, the photograph is not unlike famous portraits of George Washington. In fact, the oblique angle of Roberta's blanched features matches precisely the angle of our founding father's mug on the dollar bill. Across the bottom of the page, in engraver's type, are the words AMERICAN ICON.

To hear Gwen tell it, she stared at that photograph for an hour before realizing this was her grandmother. Then she read the article. Then she read it eight times over. Finally, bathing for the first time in days, she caught the Metro-North line into the city. One component of Berta's reputation was her 100% willingness to make even the most influential personalities in the literary world wait. And keep waiting. (Somewhere there's a printed account of John O'Hara waiting so long in Roberta's lobby that he falls sideways from his chair and cuts his forehead.) But upon hearing that her granddaughter was visiting, Roberta hovered out from her office like a gleaming apparition and announced to everyone present: "My little lamb. Escaped at last from the wolves. Everybody go home."