

The 400 Pound CEO

By George Saunders

At noon, another load of raccoons comes in, and Claude takes them out back of the office and executes them with a tire iron. Then he checks for vitals wearing protective gloves. Then he drags the cage across 209 and initiates burial by dumping the raccoons into the pit that's our little corporate secret. After burial comes prayer, a personal touch that never fails to irritate Tim, our ruthless CEO.

Before founding Humane Raccoon Alternatives, Tim purposely backed his car over a frat boy and got 10 to 12 for manslaughter. In jail, he earned his MBA by designing and marketing a line of light-up Halloween lapel broaches. Now he gives us the broaches as performance incentives and sporadically trashes a bookshelf or two to remind us of his awesome temper and of how ill-advised we'd be to cross him in any way whatsoever.

Post-burial, I write up the invoices and a paragraph or two on how overjoyed the raccoons were when we set them free. Sometimes I'll throw in something about spontaneous mating beneath the box elders. No one writes a better misleading letter than me. In the area of phone inquiries, I'm also unsurpassed. When a client calls to ask how their release went, everyone in the office falls all over themselves transferring the call to me. I'm reassuring and joyful. I laugh until tears run down my face at the stories I make up regarding the wacky things their raccoon did upon gaining its freedom.

Then, as per Tim, I ask if they'd mind sending back our promotional materials. The brochures don't come cheap. They show glossies of raccoons in the wild contrasted with glossies of poisoned raccoons in their death throes. You lay that on a housewife with perennially knocked-over trash cans and she breathes a sigh of relief. Then she hires you and you get a 10% commission.

These days, commissions are my main joy. I'm too large to attract female company. I weigh 400. I don't like it, but it's beyond my control. I've tried running and rowing the stationary canoe and Hatha yoga and belly staples and even a muzzle back in the dark days when I had it bad for Frieda, our document placement and retrieval specialist. When I was merely portly, it was easy to see myself as a kind of exuberant sportsman who overate out of lust for life. Now, no one could possibly mistake me for a sportsman.

When I've finished invoicing, I enjoy a pecan cluster. Two, actually. Claude comes in all dirty from the burial and sees me snacking and feels compelled to point out that even my sub-rolls have sub-rolls. He's right, but still it isn't nice to say. Tim asks did Claude make that observation after having wild sex with me all night? That's a comment I'm not fond of, but Tim's the boss. His T-shirt says, "I hold your purse strings in my hot, little hand."

"Haha, Tim," says Claude. "I'm no homo. But if I was one, I'd die before doing it with Mr. Lard."

"Haha," says Tim. "Good one. Isn't that a good one, Jeffrey?"

"That's a good one," I say glumly.

What a bitter little office. My colleagues leave hippo refrigerator magnets on my seat. They imply that I'm a despondent virgin, which I'm not. They might change their tune if they ever spoke with Ellen Burtomly regarding the beautiful night we spent at her brother Bob's cottage. I was by no means slim then but could at least buy pants off the rack and walk from the den to the kitchen without panting. I remember her nude at the window and the lovely seed helicopters blowing in as she turned and showed me her ample front on purpose.

That was my most romantic moment. Now for that kind of thing, it's the degradation of Larney's Consenting Adult Viewing Center. Before it started getting to me, I'd bring boot-loads of quarters and a special bottom cushion and watch hours and hours of Scandinavian women romping. It was shameful. Finally, last Christmas, I said enough is enough. I'd rather be sexless than evil. And since then, I have been. Sexless and good, but very, very tense.

Since then, I've tried to live above the fray. I've tried to minimize my physical aspects and be a selfless force for good. When mocked, which is nearly every day, I recall Christ covered with spittle. When filled with lust, I remember Gandhi purposely sleeping next to a sexy teen to test himself. After work, I go home, watch a little TV, maybe say a rosary or two. 30 more years of this and I'm out of it without hurting anybody or embarrassing myself.

Sadly, I find my feelings for Frieda returning. I must have a death wish. Clearly I repulse her. Sometimes I catch her looking at my gut overhangs with a screwed-up face. I see her licking her lips while typing and certain unholy thoughts go through my head. I hear her speaking tenderly on the phone to her little son Len and can't help picturing myself sitting on a specially reinforced porch swing while she fries up some chops and Len digs in the muck.

Today as we prepare a mailer, she says she's starting to want to be home with Len all the time. But there's the glaring problem of funds. She makes squat. I've seen her stub. There's the further problem that she suspects Mrs. Rasputin, Len's babysitter, is a lush. "I don't know what to do," Frieda says. I come home after work and she's sitting there tipsy in her bra, fanning herself with a racing form. Before I know what I'm saying, I suggest that perhaps we should go out for dinner and offer each other some measure of comfort.

In response, she spits her Tab out across her cubicle. She says now she's heard it all. She goes to fetch Tim and Claude so they can join her in guffawing at my nerve. She faxes a comical note about my arrogance to her girlfriend at the DMV. All afternoon, she keeps looking at me with her head cocked. Needless to say, it's a long day.

Then at 5:00, after everyone else is gone, she comes shyly by and says she'd love to go out with me. She says I've always been there for her. She says she likes a man with a little meat on his bones. She says pick her up at 8:00 and bring something for Len. I'm shocked. I'm overjoyed. My knees are nearly shaking my little desk apart.

I buy Len a football helmet and a baseball glove and an aquarium and a set of encyclopedias. I basically clean out my pitiful savings. Who cares? It's worth it to get a chance to observe her beautiful face from across a table without Claude et al. hooting at me.

When I ring her bell, someone screams, "Come in." Inside, I find Len behind the home entertainment center and Mrs. Rasputin drunkenly poring over her grade school yearbook with a highlighter.

She looks up and says, "Where's that kid?"

I feel like saying, "How should I know?" Instead I say, "He's behind the home entertainment center."

"He loves it back there," she says. "He likes eating the lint balls. They won't hurt him. They're like roughage."

"Come out, Len," I say. "I have gifts." He comes out. One tiny eyebrow cocks up at my physical appearance. Then he crawls into my lap holding his Mega Death Dealer by the cowl. What a sweet boy. The Dealer's got a severed human head in its hand. When you pull the string, the Dealer cries, "You're dead and I've killed you, Prince of Slime," and sticks its Day-Glo tongue out. I give Len my anti-violence spiel. I tell him only love can dispel hate. I tell him we were meant to live in harmony and give one another emotional support. He looks at me blankly then flings his Death Dealer at the cat.

Frieda comes down looking sweet and casts a baleful eye on Mrs. Rasputin and away we go. I take her to Ace's Volcano Island. Ace's is an old service station now done up Hawaiian. They've got a tape loop of surf sounds and some Barbies in grass skirts climbing a paper mache mountain. I purposely starve myself.

We talk about her life philosophy. We talk about her hair style and her treasured childhood memories and her paranormally gifted aunt. I fail to get a word in edgewise, and that's fine. I like listening. I like learning about her. I like putting myself in her shoes and seeing things her way.

I walk her home. Kids in doorways whistle at my width. I handle it with grace by shaking my rear. Frieda laughs. A kiss seems viable. It all feels too good to be true. Then on her porch, she shakes my hand and says great, she can now pay her phone bill, courtesy of Tim. She shows me the written agreement. It says, "In consideration of your consenting to be seen in public with Jeffrey, I, Tim, will pay you, Frieda, the sum of \$50."

I take a weekend vacation and play Oilcan Man nonstop. I achieve level nine. At the end of night three, I step outside for some air. Up in the sky are wild clouds that make me think of Tahiti and courageous sailors on big sinking wooden ships. Meanwhile, here's me, a grown man with a joystick burn on his thumb.

So I throw the game cartridge in the trash and go back to work. I take the ribbing, I take the abuse. Someone snipped my head out of the office folder and mounted it on a bride's body. Tim says, what the heck, the thought of the visual incongruity of our pairing was worth the \$50.

"Do you hate me?" Frieda asks.

"No," I say, "I truly enjoyed our evening together."

"God, I didn't," she says. "Everyone kept staring at us. It made me feel bad about myself that they thought I was actually with you. Do you know what I mean?" I can't think of anything to say so I nod. Then I retreat moist-eyed to my cubicle for some invoicing fun.

I'm not a bad guy. If only I could stop hoping. If only I could say to my heart, "Give up. Be alone forever. There's always opera. There's angel food cake and neighborhood children caroling and the look of autumn leaves on a wet roof." But no. My heart's some kind of idiotic fishing bobber. My invoices go very well. The sun sinks, the moon rises, brown and pale as my stupid face.

I minimize my office time by volunteering for the Carlisle entrapment. The Carlises are rich. A poor guy has a raccoon problem, he sprinkles poison in his trash and calls it a day. Not the Carlises. They dominate bread routes throughout the city. Carlisle supposedly strong-armed his way to the top of the bread heap, but in person, he's nice enough.

I let him observe me laying out the rotten fruit. I show him how the cage door coming down couldn't hurt a flea. Then he goes inside and I wait patiently in my car. Just after midnight, I trip the wire. I fetch the Carlises and encourage them to squat down and relate to the captured raccoon. Then I recite our canned speech congratulating them for their advance thinking. I describe the wilderness where the release will take place, the streams and fertile valleys, the romp in the raccoon's stride when it catches its first whiff of pristine air.

Mr. Carlisle says thanks for letting him sleep at night sans guilt. I tell him that's my job. Just then, the raccoon's huge mate bolts out of the woods and tears into my calf. I struggle to my car and kick the mate repeated against my wheel well until it dies with my leg in its mouth. The Carlises stand aghast in the carport. I stand aghast in the driveway, sick at heart. I've trapped my share of raccoons and helped Claude with more burials than I care to remember, but I've never actually killed anything before.

I throw both coons in the trunk and drive myself to the emergency room, where I'm given the first of a series of extremely painful shots. I doze off on a bench post-treatment and dream of a den of pathetic baby raccoons in V-neck sweaters yelping for food. When I wake up, I call in. Tim asks if I'm crazy kicking a raccoon to death in front of clients. Couldn't I have gently lifted it off, he asks, or offered it some rotting fruit? Am I proud of my ability to screw up one-car funerals?

I tell Tim I'm truly sorry I didn't handle the situation more effectively. He says the raccoon must've had a said last couple of minutes once it realized it had given up its life for the privilege of gnawing on a shank of pure fat. That hurts. Why I continue to expect decent treatment from someone who's installed a torture chamber in the corporate basement is beyond me. Down there, he's got a Hide-A-Bed and a whip collection and an executioner's mask with a

built-in Walkman. Sometimes when I'm invoicing late, he'll bring in one of his willing victims. Usually, they're both wasto.

I get as much of me under my desk as I can. Talk about the fall of man. Talk about some father somewhere being crestfallen if he knew what his daughter was up to. Once I peeked out as they left and saw a blonde with a black eye going wherever Tim pointed and picking up his coat whenever he purposely dropped it. How do people get like this? I thought. Can they change back? Can they learn again to love and be gentle? How can they look at themselves in the mirror or hang Christmas ornaments without overflowing with self-loathing?

Then I thought, I may be obese, but at least I'm not cruel to the point of being satanic. The next day, Tim was inducted into Rotary and we all went to the luncheon. He spoke on turning one's life around. He spoke on the bitter lessons of incarceration. He sang the praises of America and joked with balding, sweetheart ophthalmologists and after lunch hung his Rotary plaque in the torture chamber stairwell and ordered me to Windex it daily or face extremely grim consequences.

Tuesday, a car pulls up as Claude and I approach the burial pit with the Carlisle raccoons. We drag the cage into a shrub and squat, panting. Claude whispers that I smell. He whispers that if he weighed 400, he'd take into account that people around him and go on a diet. A pale girl in a sari gets out of the car and walks to the lip of the pit. She paces off the circumference and scribbles in a notebook. She takes photos. She slides down on her rear and comes back up with some coon bones in a baggy. After she leaves, we rush back to the office.

Tim's livid and starts baby-oiling his trademark blackjack. He says no more coons in the pit until further notice. He says we're hereby in crisis mode and will keep the coons on blue ice in our cubicles and if need be, wear nose clips. He says the next time she shows up, he may have to teach her a lesson about jeopardizing our meal ticket. He says animal rights are all well and good, but there's a big difference between a cute bunny or cat and a disgusting raccoon that thrives on carrion and trash and creates significant sanitation problems with its inquisitiveness.

"Oh, get off it," Claude says, affection for Tim shining from his dull eyes. "You'd eliminate your own mother if there was a buck in it for you."

"Undeniably," Tim says, "especially if she knocked over a client trash can or turned rabid. Then he hands me the corporate Visa and sends me to Hardware Niche for coolers.

When I get back to the office, everyone's gone for the night. The Muzak's off for a change and loud wax and harsh words are floating up from the basement via the heat ducts. Before long, Tim tromps up the stairs swearing. I hide pronto. He shouts thanks for nothing and says he could have had more rough and tumble fun dangling a cat over a banister, that there's nothing duller than a clerk with the sexual imagination of a grape.

"Document placement and retrieval specialist," Frieda says in a hurt tone.

"Whatever," Tim says and speeds off in his Porsche.

I emerge overwhelmed from my cubicle. Over her shoulder and through the plate glass is a shocked autumnal moon. Frieda's cheek is badly bruised. Otherwise, she's radiant with love. My mouth hangs open. "What can I say?" she says. "I can't get enough of the man."

"Good night," I say and forget about my car and walked the nine miles home in a daze.

All day Wednesday, I prepare to tell Tim off, but I'm too scared. Plus he could rightly say she's a consenting adult. Instead, I drop a few snots in his coffee cup and use my network access privileges to cancel his print jobs. He asks can I work late, and in spite of myself, I fawningly say sure. I hate him. I hate myself.

Everybody else goes home. Big clouds roll in. I invoice like mad. Birds light on the dumpster and feed on substances caked on the lid. What a degraded cosmos. What a case of something starting out nice and going bad.

Just after 7:00, I hear him shout, "You, darling, will rot in hell with the help of a swift push to the grave from me." At first, I think he's pillow talking with Frieda by phone. Then I look out the window and see the animal rights girl at the lip of our pit with a camcorder. Tim runs out the door with his blackjack unsheathed.

What to do? Clearly, he means her harm. I follow him, leaving behind my loafers to minimize noise. I keep to the shadows and scurry in my socks from tiny berm to tiny berm. I heave in an unattractive manner. My heart rate's in the ionosphere. To my credit, I'm able to keep up with him. Meanwhile, she's struggling up the slope with her hair in sweet disarray, backlit by a moon the color of honey, camcorder on her head like some kind of Kenyan water jug.

"Harlot," Tim hisses, "attempted defiler of my dream," and whips his blackjack down. Am I quick? I am so quick. I lunge up and take it on the wrist. My arm bone goes to mush and my head starts to spin and I wrap Tim up in a hug the size of Tulsa.

"Run," I gasp to the girl and see in the moonlight the affluent white souls of her fleeing boat-type shoes. I hug hard. I tell him drop the jack, and to my surprise, he does. Do I then release him? To my shame, no. So much sick rage is stored up in me. I never knew. And out it comes in one mondo squeeze and something breaks and he goes limp and I lay him gently down in the dirt.

I CPR like anything. I beg him to rise up and thrash me. I do a crazy little dance of grief. But it's no good. I've killed Tim.

I sprint across 209 and ineffectually drag my bulk around Industrial Grotto, weeping and banging on locked corporate doors. United Knee Wrap's having a gala. Their top brass are drunkenly lip-synching hits of the '50s en masse and their foot soldiers are laughing like subservient fools, so no one hears my frantic knocking. I prepare to heave a fake boulder through the plate glass.

But then I stop. By now, Tim's beyond help. What do I gain by turning myself in? Did I or did I not save an innocent girl's life? Was he or was he not a cruel monster? And standing there outside the gala, I learned something vital about myself. When push comes to shove, I could care less about lofty ideals. It's me I love. It's me I want to protect. Me.

I hustle back to the office for the burial gear. I roll Tim into the pit. I sprinkle on lime and cover him with dirt. I forge a letter in which he claims to be going to Mexico to clarify his relationship with God via silent meditation and a rugged desert setting. "My friends," I write through tears in his childish scrawl, "you slave away for minimal rewards. Freedom can be yours if you open yourself to the eternal. Good health and happiness to you all. I'm truly sorry for any offense I may have given. Also, I have thought long and hard on this and have decided to turn over the reins to Jeffrey whom I have always wrongly maligned. I see now that he is a man of considerable gifts and ask you all to defer to him as you would to me."

I leave the letter on Claude's chair and go out to sleep in my car. I dream of Tim wearing a white robe in a Mexican cantina. A mangy dog sits on his lap explaining the rules of the dead. No weeping, no pushing the other dead, don't bore everyone with tales of how great you were. Tim smiles sweetly and rubs the dog behind the ears. He sees me and says no hard feelings and thanks for speeding him onto the realm of bliss.

I wake with a start. The sun comes up driving sparrows before it, turning the corporate reflective windows wild with orange. I roll out of my car and brush my teeth with my finger. My first day as a killer.

I walk to the pit in the light of fresh day hoping it was all a dream, but no. There's our scuffling footprints. There's the mound of fresh dirt, under which lies Tim. I sit on a paint can in a patch of waving weeds and watch my colleagues arrive. I weep. I think sadly of the kindly bumbler I used to be, bleary-eyed in the morning, guiltless and looking forward to coffee.

When I finally go in, everyone's gathered stunned around the microwave. "El Presidente," Claude says, disgustedly.

"Sorry?" I say. I make a big show of shaking my head in shock as I read and reread the note I wrote. I ask if this means I'm in charge. Claude says with that kind of conceptual grasp, we're not exactly in for salad days. He asks Frieda if she had an inkling. She says she always knew Tim had certain unplumbed depths, but this is ridiculous. Claude says he smells a rat. He says Tim never had a religious bone in his body and didn't speak a word of Spanish. My face gets red. Thank God Blamphin, that toady, pipes up.

"I say in terms of giving Jeffrey a chance, we should give Jeffrey a chance. In as much as Tim was a good manager but a kind of a mean guy," he says.

"Well put," Claude says cynically. "And I say this fatty knows something he's not telling." I praise Tim to the skies and admit I could never fill his shoes. I demean my organizational skills and leadership abilities but vow to work hard for the good of all. Then I humbly propose a vote. Do I assume leadership or not? Claude says he'll honor a quorum, and then via show of hands, I achieve a nice one. I move my things into Tim's office.

Because he'd always perceived me as a hefty milquetoast with no personal aspirations, he trusted me implicitly. So I'm able to access the corporate safe. I'm able to cater in prime rib and a trio of mustachioed violinists who stroll from cubicle to cubicle hoping for tips.

Claude's outraged. Standing on his chair, he demands to know what ever happened to the profit motive. He says one can't run a corporation on good intentions and blatant naivete. He pleads that the staff fire me and appoint him CEO. Finally, Blamphin proposes I can him. Torson from Personnel seconds the motion. I shrug my shoulders and we vote and Claude's axed. He kicks the water cooler, he gives me the finger, but out he goes, leaving us to our chocolate mousse and cocktails.

By nightfall, the party's kicked into high gear. I bring in jugglers and a comedian and drinks, drinks, drinks. My staff swears their undying loyalty. We make drunken toasts to my health and theirs. I tell them we'll kill no more. I tell them we'll come clean with the appropriate agencies and pay all relevant fines. Henceforth, we'll relocate the captured raccoons as we've always claimed to be doing. The company will be owned by us, the employees, who will come and go as we please. Day care will be available on site. Frieda brightens and sits on the arm of my chair.

Muzak will give way to personal stereos in each cubicle. We will support righteous charities, take troubled children under our collective wing, enjoy afternoons off when the sun is high and the air sweet with the smell of mown grass. And when one of us finally has to die, we will have the consolation of knowing that, aided by corporate largess, our departed colleague has known his or her full measure of power, love, and beauty. And arm in arm, we will all march to the graveyard singing sad hymns.

Just then, the cops break in led by Claude, who's holding one of Tim's shoes. "If you went to Mexico," he shouts triumphantly, "wouldn't you take your Porsche? Would you be so stupid as to turn your life's work over to this tub

of lard? Things started to add up. I did some literal digging. And there I found my friend Tim with a crushed rib cage that broke my heart and a look of total surprise on his face."

"My Timmy," Frieda says, rising from my chair. "This disgusting pig killed my beautiful boy." They cuff me and lead me away.

In court, I tell the truth. The animal rights girl comes out of the woodwork and corroborates my story. The judge says he appreciates my honesty and the fact that I saved a life. He wonders why having saved a life, I didn't simply release Tim and reap the laurels of my courage. I tell him I lost control. I tell him a lifetime of scorn boiled over. He says he empathizes completely and says he had a weight problem himself when a lad. Then he gives me 50 as opposed to life without parole.

So now I know misery. I know the acute discomfort of a gray jail suit pieced together from two garments of normal size. I know the body odor of Vic, a Chicago kingpin who's claimed me for his own and compels me to wear a feminine hat with fruit on the brim for nightly interludes. Do my ex-colleagues write? No. Does Frieda? Ha. Have I achieved serenity? No. Do I have a meaningful hobby that makes the days fly by like minutes? No.

I have a wild desire to smell the ocean. I have a sense that God is unfair and preferentially punishes his weak, his dumb, his fat, his lazy. I believe he takes more pleasure in his perfect creatures and cheers them on like a brainless dad as they run roughshod over the rest of us. He gives us a need for love and no way to get any. He gives us a desire to be liked and personal attributes that make us utterly unlikable. Having placed his flawed and needy children in a world of exacting specifications, he deducts the difference between what we have and what we need from our hearts and our self-esteem and our mental health. This is how I feel. These things seem to be true. But what's there to do but behave with dignity, keep a nice cell, be polite but firm when Vic asks me to shimmy while wearing a hat, join in at the top of my lungs when the geriatric murderer from Baton Rouge begins his nightly spiritual?

Maybe the God we see, the God who calls the daily shots is merely a sub-god. Maybe there's a God above this sub-god who's busy for a few God minutes with something else and will be right back and when he gets back will take the sub-god by the ear and say, "Now look, look at that fat man. What did he ever do to you? Wasn't he humble enough? Didn't he endure enough abuse for 1,000 men? Weren't the simplest tasks hard? Didn't you sense him craving affection? Were you unaware that his days unraveled as one long bad dream?"

And maybe as this sub-god slinks away, the true God will sweep me up in his arms, saying, "My sincere apologies. A mistake has been made. Accept a new birth as token of my esteem." And I will emerge again from between the legs of my mother a sligher and more beautiful baby, destined for a different life in which I am masterful, sleek as a deer, a winner.

"The 400 Pound CEO" is in George Saunders' book of short stories *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*.