

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## The Red Bow

By George Saunders  
2006

*George Saunders is an American writer of short stories, essays, children's books, and novels. In this short story, a young girl is killed by a rabid dog and her family works to make their community safe again. As you read, take notes on how the narrator and Uncle Matt get the community on their side.*

[1] Next night, walking out where it happened, I found her little red bow.

I brought it in, threw it down on the table, said:  
My God my God.

Take a good look at it and also I'm looking at it,  
said Uncle Matt. And we won't ever forget it, am I  
right?

First thing of course was to find the dogs. Which  
turns out, they were holed up back of the — the  
place where the little kids go, with the plastic balls  
in cages, they have birthday parties and so forth  
— holed up in this sort of nest of tree debris dragged there by the Village.



*"Red Ribbon" by M. McIntyre is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0*

[5] Well we lit up the debris and then shot the three of them as they ran out.

But that Mrs. Pearson, who'd seen the whole — well she said there'd been four, four dogs, and next night we found that the fourth had gotten into Mullins Run and bit the Elliotts' Sadie and that white Muskerdoo that belonged to Evan and Millie Bates next door.

Jim Elliott said he would put Sadie down himself and borrowed my gun to do it, and did it, then looked me in the eye and said he was sorry for our loss, and Evan Bates said he couldn't do it, and would I? But then finally he at least led Muskerdoo out into that sort of field they call the Concourse, where they do the barbecues and whatnot, giving it a sorrowful little kick (a gentle kick, there was nothing mean in Evan) whenever it snapped at him, saying Musker Jesus! — and then he said, *Okay, now*, when he was ready for me to do it, and I did it, and afterwards he said he was sorry for our loss.

Around midnight we found the fourth one gnawing at itself back of Bourne's place, and Bourne came out and held the flashlight as we put it down and helped us load it into the wheelbarrow alongside Sadie and Muskerdoo, our plan being — Dr. Vincent had said this was best — to burn those we found, so no other animal would — you know, via feeding on the corpses — in any event, Dr. Vincent said it was best to burn them.

When we had the fourth in the wheelbarrow my Jason said: Mr. Bourne, what about Cookie?

[10] Well no I don't believe so, said Bourne.

He was an old guy and had that old-guy tenderness for the dog, it being pretty much all he had left in the world, such as for example he always called it *friend-of-mine*, as in: How about a walk, friend-of-mine?

But she is mostly an outside dog? I said.

She is almost completely an outside dog, he said. But still, I don't believe so.

And Uncle Matt said: Well, Lawrence, I for one am out here tonight trying to be certain. I think you can understand that.

[15] I can, Bourne said, I most certainly can.

And Bourne brought out Cookie and we had a look.

At first she seemed fine, but then we noticed she was doing this funny thing where a shudder would run through her and her eyes would all of a sudden go wet, and Uncle Matt said: Lawrence, is that something Cookie would normally do?

Well, ah . . . said Bourne.

And another shudder ran through Cookie.

[20] Oh Jesus Christ, said Mr. Bourne, and went inside.

Uncle Matt told Seth and Jason to trot out whistling into the field and Cookie would follow, which she did, and Uncle Matt ran after, with his gun, and though he was, you know, not exactly a runner, still he kept up pretty good just via sheer effort, like he wanted to make sure this thing got done right.

Which I was grateful to have him there, because I was too tired in mind and my body to know what was right anymore, and sat down on the porch, and pretty soon heard this little pop.

Then Uncle Matt trotted back from the field and stuck his head inside and said: Lawrence do you know, did Cookie have contact with other dogs, was there another dog or dogs she might have played with, nipped, that sort of thing?

Oh get out, get away, said Bourne.

[25] Lawrence my God, said Uncle Matt. Do you think I like this? Think of what we've been through. Do you think this is fun for me, for us?

There was a long silence and then Bourne said well all he could think of was that terrier at the Rectory, him and Cookie sometimes played when Cookie got off her lead.

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When we got to the Rectory, Father Terry said he was sorry for our loss, and brought Merton out, and we watched a long time and Merton never shuddered and his eyes remained dry, you know, normal.

Looks fine, I said.

Is fine, said Father Terry. Watch this: Merton, genuflect.

[30] And Merton did this dog stretchy thing where he sort of like bowed.

Could be fine, said Uncle Matt. But also could be he's sick but just at an early stage.

We'll have to be watchful, said Father Terry.

Yes, although, said Uncle Matt. Not knowing how it spreads and all, could it be we're in a better-safe-than-sorry type of situation? I don't know, I truly don't know. Ed, what do you think?

And I didn't know what I thought. In my mind I was all the time just going over it and over it, the before, the after, like her stepping up on that footstool to put that red bow in, saying these like lady phrases to herself, such as, Well Who Will Be There, Will There Be Cakes?

[35] I hope you are not suggesting putting down a perfectly healthy dog, said Father Terry.

And Uncle Matt produced from his shirt pocket a red bow and said: Father, do you have any idea what this is and where we found it?

But it was not the real bow, not Emily's bow, which I kept all the time in my pocket, it was a pinker shade of red and was a little bigger than the real bow, and I recognized it as having come from our Karen's little box on her dresser.

No I do not know what that is, said Father Terry. A hair bow.

I for one am never going to forget that night, said Uncle Matt. What we all felt. I for one am going to work to make sure that no one ever again has to endure what we had to endure that night.

[40] I have no disagreement with that at all, said Father Terry.

It is true you don't know what this is, Uncle Matt said, and put the bow back in his pocket. You really really have no experience whatsoever of what this is.

Ed, Father Terry said to me. Killing a perfectly healthy dog has nothing to do with —

Possibly healthy but possibly not, said Uncle Matt. Was Cookie bitten? Cookie was not. Was Cookie infected? Yes she was. How was Cookie infected? We do not know. And there is your dog, who interacted with Cookie in exactly the same way that Cookie interacted with the known infected animal, namely through being in close physical proximity.

It was funny about Uncle Matt, I mean funny as in great, admirable, this sudden stepping up to the plate, because previously — I mean, yes, he of course loved the kids, but had never been particularly — I mean he rarely even spoke to them, least of all to Emily, her being the youngest. Mostly he just went very quietly around the house, especially since January when he'd lost his job, avoiding the kids really, a little ashamed almost, as if knowing that, when they grew up, they would never be the out-of-work slinking-around uncle, but instead would be the owners of the house where the out-of-work slinking uncle etc., etc.

- [45] But losing her had, I suppose, made him realize for the first time how much he loved her, and this sudden strength — focus, certainty, whatever — was a comfort, because tell the truth I was not doing well at all — I had always loved autumn and now it was full autumn and you could smell woodsmoke and fallen apples but all of the world, to me, was just, you know, flat.

It is like your kid is this vessel that contains everything good. They look up at you so loving, trusting you to take care of them, and then one night — what gets me, what I can't get over, is that while she was being — while what happened was happening, I was — I had sort of snuck away downstairs to check my e-mail, see, so that while — while what happened was happening, out there in the schoolyard, a few hundred yards away, I was sitting there typing — typing! — which, okay, there is no sin in that, there was no way I could have known, and yet — do you see what I mean? Had I simply risen from my computer and walked upstairs and gone outside and for some reason, any reason, crossed the schoolyard, then, believe me, there is not a dog in the world, no matter how crazy —

And my wife felt the same way and had not come out of our bedroom since the tragedy.

So Father you are saying no? said Uncle Matt. You are refusing?

I pray for you people every day, Father Terry said. What you are going through, no one ever should have to go through.

- [50] Don't like that man, Uncle Matt said as we left the Rectory. Never have and never will.

And I knew that. They had gone to high school together and there had been something about a girl, some last-minute prom-date type of situation that had not gone in Uncle Matt's favor, and I think some shoving on a ball field, some name-calling, but all of this was years ago, during like say the Kennedy administration.

He will not observe that dog properly, said Uncle Matt. Believe me. And if he does notice something, he won't do what is necessary. Why? Because it is his dog. *His* dog. Everything that's his? It's special, above the law.

I don't know, I said. Truly I don't.

He doesn't get it, said Uncle Matt. He wasn't there that night, he didn't see you carrying her inside.

[55] Which, tell the truth, Uncle Matt hadn't seen me carrying her inside either, having gone out to rent a video — but still, yes, I got his drift about Father Terry, who had always had a streak of ego, with that silver hair with the ripples in it, and also he had a weight set in the Rectory basement and worked out twice a day and had, actually, a very impressive physique, which he showed off, I felt, we all felt, by ordering his priest shirts perhaps a little too tight.

Next morning during breakfast Uncle Matt was very quiet and finally said well he might be just a fat little unemployed guy who hadn't had the education some had, but love was love, honoring somebody's memory was honoring somebody's memory, and since he had no big expectations for his day, would I let him borrow the truck, so he could park it in the Burger King lot and keep an eye on what was going on over at the Rectory, sort of in memory of Emily?

And the thing was, we didn't really use that truck anymore and so — it was a very uncertain time, you know, and I thought: Well, what if it turns out Merton really is sick, and somehow gets away and attacks someone else's — so I said yes, he could use the truck.

He sat all Tuesday morning and Tuesday night, I mean not leaving the truck once, which for him — he was not normally a real dedicated guy, if you know what I mean. And then Wednesday night he came charging in and threw a tape in the VCR and said watch, watch this.

And there on the TV was Merton, leaning against the Rectory fence, shuddering, arching his back, shuddering again.

[60] So we took our guns and went over.

Look I know I know, said Father Terry. But I'm handling it here, in my own way. He's had enough trouble in his life, poor thing.

Say what? said Uncle Matt. Trouble in his life? You are saying to this man, this father, who has recently lost — the dog has had *trouble in his life*?

Well, however, I should say — I mean, that was true. We all knew about Merton, who had been brought to Father Terry from this bad area, one of his ears sliced nearly off, plus it had, as I understood it, this anxiety condition, where it would sometimes faint because dinner was being served, I mean, it would literally pass out due to its own anticipation, which, you know, that couldn't have been easy.

Ed, said Father Terry. I am not saying Merton's trouble is, I am not comparing Merton's trouble to your —

[65] Christ let's hope not, Uncle Matt said.

All's I'm saying is I'm losing something too, said Father Terry.

Ho boy, said Uncle Matt. Ho boy ho boy.

Ed, my fence is high, said Father Terry. He's not going anywhere, I've also got him on a chain in there. I want him to — I want it to happen here, just him and me. Otherwise it's too sad.

You don't know from sad, said Uncle Matt.

[70] Sadness is sadness, said Father Terry.

Blah blah blah, said Uncle Matt. I'll be watching.

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Well later that week this dog Tweeter Deux brought down a deer in the woods between the TwelvePlex and the Episcopal Church, and that Tweeter Deux was not a big dog, just, you know, crazed, and how the DeFrancinis knew she had brought down a deer was, she showed up in their living room with a chewed-off foreleg.<sup>1</sup>

And that night — well the DeFrancini cat began racing around the house, and its eyes took on this yellow color, and at one point while running it sort of locked up and skidded into the baseboard and gave itself a concussion.<sup>2</sup>

Which is when we realized the problem was bigger than we had initially thought.

[75] The thing was, we did not know and could not know how many animals had already been infected — the original four dogs had been at large for several days before we found them, and any animal they might have infected had been at large for nearly two weeks now, and we did not even know the precise method of infection — was it bites, spit, blood, was something leaping from coat to coat? We knew it could happen to dogs, it appeared it could happen to cats — what I'm saying is, it was just a very confusing and frightening time.

So Uncle Matt got on the iMac and made up these flyers, calling a Village Meeting, and at the top was a photo he'd taken of the red bow (not the real bow but Karen's pinkish-red bow, which he'd color-enhanced on the iMac to make it redder and also he had superimposed<sup>3</sup> Emily's Communion photo) and along the bottom it said FIGHT THE OUTRAGE, and underneath in smaller letters it said something along the lines of, you know, why do we live in this world but to love what is ours, and when one of us has cruelly lost what we loved, it is the time to band together to stand up to that which threatens that which we love, so that no one else ever has to experience this outrage again. Now that we have known and witnessed this terrific pain, let us resolve together to fight against any and all circumstances which might cause or contribute to this or a similar outrage now or at any time in the future — and we had Seth and Jason run these around town, and on Friday night ended up with nearly four hundred people in the high school gym.

Coming in, each person got a rolled-up FIGHT THE OUTRAGE poster of the color-enhanced bow, and also on these Uncle Matt had put in — I objected to this at first, until I saw how people responded — well he had put in these tiny teeth marks, they were not meant to look real, they were just, you know, as he said, symbolic reminders, and down in one corner was Emily's Communion photo and in the opposite corner a photo of her as a baby, and Uncle Matt had hung a larger version of that poster (large as a closet) up over the speaker's podium.

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1. the front leg of a four-footed animal  
2. a brain injury from a hard hit to the head  
3. to place one image over another so both are visible

And I was sort of astonished by Uncle Matt, I mean, he was showing so much — I'd never seen him so motivated. This was a guy whose idea of a big day was checking the mail and getting up a few times to waggle the TV antenna — and here he was, in a suit, his face all red and sort of proud and shiny —

Well Uncle Matt got up and thanked everyone for coming, and Mrs. DeFrancini, owner of Tweeter Deux, held up that chewed-up foreleg, and Dr. Vincent showed slides of cross sections of the brain of one of the original four dogs, and then at the end I talked, only I got choked up and couldn't say much except thanks to everybody, their support had meant the world to us, and I tried to say about how much we had all loved her but couldn't go on.

- [80] Uncle Matt and Dr. Vincent had, on the iMac, on their own (not wanting to bother me) drawn up what they called a Three-Point Emergency Plan, which the three points were: 1) All Village animals must immediately undergo an Evaluation, to determine was the animal Infected, and 2) all Infected or Suspected Infected animals must be destroyed at once, and 3) all Infected or Suspected Infected animals, once destroyed, must be burned at once to minimize the possibility of Second-Hand Infection.

Then someone asked could they please clarify the meaning of "suspected"?

Suspected, you know, said Uncle Matt. That means we suspect and have good reason to suspect that an animal is, or may be, Infected.

The exact methodology is currently under development, said Dr. Vincent.

How can we, how can you, ensure that this assessment will be fair and reasonable though? the guy asked.

- [85] Well that is a good question, said Uncle Matt. The key to that is, we will have the assessment done by fair-minded persons who will do the Evaluation in an objective way that seems reasonable to all.

Trust us, said Dr. Vincent. We know it is so very important.

Then Uncle Matt held up the bow — actually a new bow, very big, about the size of a ladies' hat, really, I don't know where he found that — and said: All of this may seem confusing but it is not confusing if we remember that it is all about *This*, simply *This*, about honoring *This*, preventing *This*.

Then it was time for the vote, and it was something like 393 for and none against, with a handful of people abstaining<sup>4</sup> (which I found sort of hurtful), but then following the vote everyone rose to their feet and, regarding me and Uncle Matt with — well they were smiling these warm smiles, some even fighting back tears — it was just a very nice, very kind moment, and I will never forget it, and will be grateful for it until the day I die.

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4. to decline to vote either for or against a proposal

After the meeting Uncle Matt and Trooper Kelly and a few others went and did what had to be done in terms of Merton, over poor Father Terry's objections — I mean, he was upset about it, of course, so upset it took five men to hold him back, him being so fit and all — and then they brought Merton, Merton's body, back to our place and burned it, out at the tree line where we had burned the others, and someone asked should we give Father Terry the ashes, and Uncle Matt said why take the chance, we have not ruled out the possibility of airborne transmission, and, putting on the little white masks supplied by Dr. Vincent, we raked Merton's ashes into the swamp.

[90] That night my wife came out of our bedroom for the first time since the tragedy, and we told her everything that had been happening.

And I watched her closely, to see what she thought, to see what I should think, her having always been my rock.

Kill every dog, every cat, she said very slowly. Kill every mouse, every bird. Kill every fish. Anyone objects, kill them too.

Then she went back to bed.

Well that was — I felt so bad for her, she was simply not herself — I mean, this was a woman who, finding a spider, used to make me take it outside in a cup. Although, as far as killing all dogs and cats — I mean, there was a certain — I mean, if you did that, say, killed every dog and cat, regardless of were they infected or not, you could thereby guarantee, to 100 percent, that no other father in town would ever again have to carry in his — God there is so much I don't remember about that night but one thing I do remember is, as I brought her in, one of her little clogs thunked off onto the linoleum, and still holding her I bent down to — and she wasn't there anymore, she wasn't, you know, there, there inside her body. I had passed her thousands of times on the steps, in the kitchen, had heard her little voice from everywhere in the house and why, why had I not, every single time, rushed up to her and told her everything that I — but of course you can't do that, it would malform<sup>5</sup> a child, and yet —

[95] What I'm saying is, with no dogs and no cats, the chance that another father would have to carry his animal-murdered child into their home, where the child's mother sat, doing the bills, happy or something like happy for the last time in her life, happy until the instant she looked up and saw — what I guess I'm saying is, with no dogs and no cats, the chances of that happening to someone else (or to us again) went down to that very beautiful number of Zero.

Which is why we eventually did have to enact our policy of sacrificing all dogs and cats who had been in the vicinity of the Village at the time of the incident.

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5. to cause someone to develop abnormally



But as far as killing the mice, the birds, the fish, no, we had no evidence to support that, not at that time anyway, and had not yet added the Reasonable Suspicion Clause to the Plan, and as far as the people, well my wife wasn't herself, that's all there was to it, although soon what we found was — I mean, there was something prescient<sup>6</sup> about what she'd said, because in time we did in fact have to enact some very specific rules regarding the physical process of extracting the dogs and/or cats from a home where the owner was being unreasonable — or the fish, birds, whatever — and also had to assign specific penalties should these people, for example, assault one of the Animal Removal Officers, as a few of them did, and finally also had to issue some guidelines on how to handle individuals who, for whatever reason, felt it useful to undercut our efforts by, you know, obsessively and publicly criticizing the Five- and Six-Point Plans, just very unhappy people.

But all of that was still months away.

I often think back to the end of that first Village Meeting, to that standing-ovation moment. Uncle Matt had also printed up T-shirts, and after the vote everyone pulled the T-shirt with Emily's smiling face on it over his or her own shirt, and Uncle Matt said that he wanted to say thank you from the bottom of his heart, and not just on behalf of his family, this family of his that had been so sadly and irreversibly malformed by this unimaginable and profound tragedy, but also, and perhaps more so, on behalf of all the families we had just saved, via our vote, from similar future profound unimaginable tragedies.

[100] And as I looked out over the crowd, at all those T-shirts — I don't know, I found it deeply moving, that all of those good people would feel so fondly towards her, many of whom had not even known her, and it seemed to me that somehow they had come to understand how good she had been, how precious, and were trying, with their applause, to honor her.

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6. **Prescient (adjective):** having or showing knowledge of something before it takes place

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best describes the main theme of the short story?
  - A. Tragedy can help bring communities together and motivate them to take action.
  - B. Sometimes people don't realize how much someone means to them until they're gone.
  - C. Losing a loved one can cause people to think and act in extreme ways.
  - D. The best way to heal from a tragedy is to make sure that tragedy is never repeated.
  
2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "Jim Elliott said he would put Sadie down himself and borrowed my gun to do it, and did it, then looked me in the eye and said he was sorry for our loss, and Evan Bates said he couldn't do it, and would I?" (Paragraph 7)
  - B. "But losing her had, I suppose, made him realize for the first time how much he loved her, and this sudden strength — focus, certainty, whatever — was a comfort" (Paragraph 45)
  - C. "well they were smiling these warm smiles, some even fighting back tears — it was just a very nice, very kind moment, and I will never forget it, and will be grateful for it until the day I die." (Paragraph 88)
  - D. "Kill every dog, every cat, she said very slowly. Kill every mouse, every bird. Kill every fish. Anyone objects, kill them too." (Paragraph 92)
  
3. PART A: How is the narrator most impacted by his daughter's death?
  - A. He becomes willing to go to extreme measures to make sure no one else feels the same pain that he does.
  - B. He becomes cold and uncaring towards other people and animals in the town.
  - C. He becomes confused and unable to differentiate between current events and memories of his daughter.
  - D. He becomes distant and no longer invested in helping Uncle Matt find and kill the remaining infected dogs.
  
4. PART B: Which quote from the story best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "Uncle Matt and Dr. Vincent had, on the iMac, on their own (not wanting to bother me) drawn up what they called a Three-Point Emergency Plan" (Paragraph 80)
  - B. "Then Uncle Matt held up the bow... and said: All of this may seem confusing but it is not confusing if we remember that it is all about This, simply This, about honoring This, preventing This." (Paragraph 87)
  - C. "God there is so much I don't remember about that night but one thing I do remember is, as I brought her in, one of her little clogs thunked off onto the linoleum" (Paragraph 94)
  - D. "What I'm saying is, with no dogs and no cats, the chance that another father would have to carry his animal-murdered child into their home" (Paragraph 95)

5. PART A: How does Uncle Matt's reference to Emily's bow throughout the story develop the theme?
- A. It shows how much Uncle Matt cared for Emily as he never goes anywhere without her bows.
  - B. It shows how Uncle Matt uses various bows to dramatize Emily's death and demand action from people.
  - C. It emphasizes how difficult it is to let someone you love go as Uncle Matt tries to keep Emily's memory alive through her bow.
  - D. It suggests that Uncle Matt doesn't truly care about Emily, or her death, as he uses the bows to manipulate people.
6. PART B: Which TWO details from the text best support the answer to Part A?
- A. "I brought it in, threw it down on the table, said: My God my God. / Take a good look at it and also I'm looking at it, said Uncle Matt. And we won't ever forget it, am I right?" (Paragraphs 2-3)
  - B. "And Uncle Matt said: Well, Lawrence, I for one am out here tonight trying to be certain. I think you can understand that." (Paragraph 14)
  - C. "And Uncle Matt produced from his shirt pocket a red bow and said: Father, do you have any idea what this is and where we found it?" (Paragraph 36)
  - D. "But it was not the real bow, not Emily's bow, which I kept all the time in my pocket, it was a pinker shade of red and was a little bigger than the real bow" (Paragraph 37)
  - E. "But losing her had, I suppose, made him realize for the first time how much he loved her, and this sudden strength — focus, certainty, whatever — was a comfort, because tell the truth I was not doing well at all" (Paragraph 45)
  - F. "and at the top was a photo he'd taken of the red bow (not the real bow but Karen's pinkish-red bow, which he'd color-enhanced on the iMac to make it redder and also he had superimposed Emily's Communion photo) and along the bottom it said FIGHT THE OUTRAGE " (Paragraph 76)
7. Which statement describes the narrator's reaction when Father Terry's dog is put down against his will in paragraph 89?
- A. He is sympathetic but does nothing to stop the dog from being put down.
  - B. He is indifferent towards Father Terry's distress and helps put the dog down.
  - C. He is upset with Father Terry and his reluctance to put down his dog for everyone's safety.
  - D. He is ashamed of his actions as he realizes that he has gone too far.

8. How are the details that the narrator provides about his wife important to the development of the story's theme (Paragraphs 92-94)?

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. In the story, the narrator and Uncle Matt eventually put down all of the cats and the dogs in the area to be sure the infection doesn't spread. Why did they think this was the right decision? How do you feel about their actions? What else could the narrator and Uncle Matt have done to protect people from rabid animals or to keep the disease from spreading?
  
2. To what extent do you think grief motivated the actions Emily's family took? Why would making sure that there are no infected animals in their community help ease their pain?
  
3. In the story, many of the people in the village go along with Uncle Matt's plan. Why do you think this is? How does Uncle Matt appeal to the emotions of the community? Can you think of a real-life situation in which grief or strong emotions caused people to go to extreme measures?