

# SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH HARRY

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Harry is gardening. Flowers, he tells me. For the dog. Dogs need flowers too. Really, I tell him. Harry doesn't trust me. He thinks I'm being sarcastic, that I'm making a joke at his expense. I've been practicing deadpan for years. For survival. Dogs have sensitive noses, he lectures me. Not like you and me. That's why they lick things all the time. Not like you and me. Um, I say.

Harry loves animals. Almost as much as he loves plants. How he eats *anything*, I can't imagine.

You don't disagree with Harry. Not ever. He reacts really badly if you do. He might even hurt himself. And then blame you.

We can't rent the ground floor apartment, I say to our lawyer. The ground floor apartment is for Jennie. Jennie? he asks. He's thinking *girlfriend*. Or maybe *aunt*. Dog, I say, timing my response so he has enough time to think: girlfriend? aunt? He looks at me. Our Dad's dog, I say, and I wink at him. Heirloom, I say. Important part of our lives. As it were. The lawyer doesn't stop looking at me. He doesn't laugh. It's making me very uncomfortable. I don't like it when people look at me instead of laughing at what I've said. Deflection, it's all about deflection. Money, he says finally, and then with some intensity he says, still staring at me: You need money. You need

income. Desperately. For estate taxes. For repairs. To pay accountants. To pay me. No one will give you a mortgage with the house looking like that. And with no income. No one.

I'm embarrassed, I'm turning red. All this intensity is way too much for me. Harry insists on it, I tell him. Money isn't everything, I tell the lawyer, smiling. Finally he laughs at me. I'm always making people laugh. It's how I survive. People without a sense of humor? They scare the hell out of me.

This is hard to write down. I usually turn it into a string of jokes, weave it into a narrative arc that has everyone giggling—broad slapstick. Three stooges. Slipping on bananas. I always make it sound like I'm exaggerating. Or even lying. I'm trying to tell it straight now. Without jokes. Or visual puns. This isn't easy. This is really hard. Perhaps this is impossible. Every time I make a joke in this narrative, I've failed. Every time I exaggerate, or imply that I'm exaggerating, I've failed. Forgive me. It's hard for me to be serious about what happened to us. It's how I survive.

We were hit. Punched. Knocked about. All the time. Manic-depressive mother. Or maybe she was borderline. Something unhealthy. Something that led to extreme mood swings and violence. Something incurable deep inside her that made her enraged if you forgot your keys or talked too loud or wet your bed out of fear or left your toys out where she could see them.

She was compulsive, not cruel. She didn't burn us with cigarettes. Or starve us. At least not very much. She actually loved us. She'd just lose it. Regularly.

Many years later I talk to my father about it. Obliquely, as it were. Um, you fought a lot? I ask. Before you got married, I mean? Every day, he says. I had to keep buying new dishes for her, he adds. We laugh heartily. I played a lot of dodge ball as a kid, he says, it sure came in handy don't you think? We laugh heartily again. One time I was late for dinner, he tells me. You know, a date. Um, I say. Ten minutes, he says. Really, he adds. She threw the meal at me, he says. While I was still outside the house. Out the window she threw it at me. The whole meal. Pot, casserole bowl. Plates. Mashed potatoes. Falling out of the sky like overweight clouds. Stringbeans. Like green rain. And knives too. Forks. Glinting in the sunlight. Napkins fluttering down. Tablecloth like a big ghost coming at me from above.

Um, I say to him—to stop the poetry. He looks at me. So, I say. He waits for me to go on. This kept happening, I say finally. It sure did, he tells me. Up until the day before we got married, he says. That day was okay. And then after, it started in again. The next morning. Right, I say, so it sounds like maybe there's a compatibility issue brewing here, that maybe things aren't going so well, if you catch my drift. He doesn't say anything. So, I say. And then I wait. He looks at me. Okay, I say, so why did you get married *at all*? Why didn't you think: this isn't working out? This really isn't working out. And why on earth did you have *children*? He says: I thought it would stop after we got married. And then I thought it would stop after we had children.

Apparently that's not uncommon. I've heard it from others. *Pick one*: Once we're married/have children, he'll (a) lose the obsession with toy trains (b) drop the internet pornography habit (c) stop drinking. Once we're married/have children, she'll (a) stop gambling (b) stop drinking (c) fall in love with me. Not quite.

And besides, she was one of those gorgeous ones. My mother, I mean. I've seen pictures. Very impressive. Especially in a bathing suit. Maybe that had something to do with it too. People don't think too much about the futures they build for themselves. They're too focused on the here and now. And by the time the here and now has become the there and then it's too late.

My father always tells the truth as he sees it. He's kind of straightforward. Kind of honest and decent. Kind of sweet and simple. And kind of obtuse. About people, anyway. He was one of those enablers you sometimes read about. The clueless spouse cleaning up after her serial killer husband. Thinking all the while: what's with all the beet juice? Or spaghetti sauce. Or whatever it is.

He didn't really know what she did to us, I have to give that to him. And he wouldn't have understood if I had told him. Perhaps he wouldn't have believed me.

Our father is dead now. Recently died. Lived a long life. Died in his eighties, his faculties still intact. Something for me to look forward to.

Because of his death, Harry and I have inherited jointly: one brownstone building worth a couple of million dollars. And some cash. About eight hundred dollars. Not enough cash for *anything*. The brownstone has four stories, and is in absolutely terrible shape. Doors fall down regularly. That sort of thing. I live on one floor. Harry lives on one floor. Our father lived on the ground floor with the garden. Irma, an old lady, lives on the top floor. She's got cancer. You don't throw

an old lady out who has cancer. Unless you'd like nightmares for the rest of your life. That leaves only one possible floor for income. The ground floor. Where the dog now lives. We need income. Desperately. To justify a mortgage. For estate taxes. For repairs. To pay lawyers. And accountants.

I'm still in graduate school. History. I specialize in the history of witchcraft. Folk beliefs about Satan. And other demons. Astaroth, Baal, Caliban. That sort of thing. Not a lot of future in that. Not a lot of future in history, come to think of it. Harry is a computer geek who works as a consultant for polling agencies. He crunches numbers at night while he drinks vodka and beer. I do some lecturer adjuncting when I can get it. English Composition. Critical Thinking. There isn't going to be a lot money coming in. Neither of us have health insurance. Neither of us have pensions. Both of us are in our fifties. It's kind of grim. Our future, I mean.

Maybe Harry hit on the trick by accident. Mom had just slammed me in the face, and when I collided with the floor, I tasted blood again. Then, just as she turned to do the same thing to Harry, he threw himself on the floor first. Hard. She was taken aback, didn't move for a moment. That's all the time he needed. He swung his arm up into the bed leg. Hard. Broke it. Started screaming from the pain.

That was the first time. He kept it up. In one room she'd start to yell, and then in the other I'd hear Harry throw himself against a window. She'd stop yelling. Not punch anyone. Instead, we'd take Harry to the hospital.

If you're a kid, and you hit on a trick, you run with it. That's what childhood is all about. Adults think there are borders: we do this *this much* and no more. Like the borders are natural or something. Children haven't heard about borders. Unless adults drill their existence into their little heads.

My trick hadn't been as successful, although it sometimes worked. I would pretend to be furniture. Freeze. I could hear when she was enraged. Before she knew, I mean. Patterns in her breathing would change. In her tone of voice. And I'd freeze. Not move. Hope I wouldn't be noticed.

Meanwhile, Harry had discovered religion. He kept making little crucifixes, leaving them all over the house. GI Joe miraculously transformed into Jesus on the cross. And then he got into the Salem witchtrials because of some movie we saw. Little bonfires with toothpicks, little parchment condemnations he'd written himself fluttering over the burning dolls he'd gotten his hands on somehow. Mom screaming when he almost set the couch on fire. Burnt holes in the rugs. But she didn't touch him.

She'd automatically gotten custody. Because she was the mom. That was how they did things in those days. She lost custody after Harry threw himself under a car. The driver had fast reflexes and Harry was okay. It seemed a nice place to hide, he said innocently, when he was asked why he'd done it. Hide from what? he was then asked. So it didn't take her long to lose custody of us. After Harry had thrown himself under the car, I mean.

Children run with the tricks they've hit upon. All their lives. It worked in junior high school and in high school. Bullies avoided Harry. If you pushed him, he fell down a lot harder than you expected. And he somehow scraped himself bloody on the sidewalk and all over you. The teacher aghast, saying, what happened? Harry saying innocently: Johnnie beat me up.

Adults were very slow to catch on. Teachers, I mean. Nowadays everyone knows how teenagers, and even younger children, can act out their family dysfunctions, mutilate themselves. But not back in our day.

Some things work. At least for a while, Harry ruled. In grammar school. In junior high school. In high school. A boy's status turned on how well he played chicken. Still does. After a while no one played chicken with Harry. You'd end up a mess and you'd still lose. Harry always generated buzz. The time he jumped into the back of a garbage truck while it was crunching plywood and some metal rods. The time he blew up several beakers in the chemistry lab. Ate the dissected frog. While speaking French.

It's easy to be popular, if you keep doing stuff like that. It's easy to get girls. A lot of girls. Even if your chest is covered with scar tissue.

My strategy had been different. Always tell people what they want to hear. Freeze in place regularly. Then I'd hit on another way to make myself invisible. Make them laugh. Hide behind the joke. Girls laughed a lot. I could always get them to laugh. And then they'd sleep with Harry. The bad boy. They could *see* Harry.

By the time we're thirty, hell, by the time we're twenty-five, things have changed. People don't find it cool anymore when Harry sticks a fork into his own thigh to win an argument. They get scared instead. They avoid him. And me. They think: The alcoholic guy sticks a fork into his thigh and the other one makes a joke about it. Something is not well here.

I've been working on a book about all the varieties of medieval torture. It's tentatively called: All the Varieties of Medieval Torture. Not just witches. Cats too. Really. Especially in Germany and France. That's what's so good about history. It's always a surprise. What we did to each other, I mean. I've got tons of data. The book's been almost finished for twenty years.

I used to see these twin brothers who would wander around the neighborhood together. Wearing goggles, identical blue hoods, pajama bottoms. Talking to each other in an ergot no one else understood while they carried laundry bags filled with bottles. No friends, no social network. Just each other. Now Harry and I are over fifty too. No wives, no girlfriends, no real friends, nothing. No future. Like them. I never thought I'd end up like them. But you do, sometimes. First you're young, a little weird in a kind of cute or interesting way. Thirty years later you're in rehab for the rest of your life, your therapist asking: so how'd this happen, exactly?

You're not so bad off, our lawyer tells me. Sell it. The brownstone. Auction it if you have to. And then he adds: This is off the record. Harry can't stop you because he's got no money.

It sounds like a betrayal to me. Of Harry. But Harry won't see reason, the lawyer tells me. Harry won't even let you rent the ground floor. Harry's always drunk. Are all lawyers this blunt? I ask him. He shrugs. I guess the answer's yes.

If I sell, Harry gets his share, fair and square. Then Harry drinks up his share. Then Harry has no place to live. Throws himself out a window or something. If I sell, I've got to move far away *quickly*. California or something. Start a new life. Use a different name. Make history history. Never ever look back.

At some point you realize that babies don't take baby steps. They develop by amazing leaps and bounds. Numerous words a day. Growth in a rush. Adults are frozen in their tracks by comparison. Baby steps are the steps that *adults* take. All their lives. In therapy, for example. Or when they try to learn something new. Still, a baby step is a *step*. And sometimes, gosh, it's a *step forward*. This is the kind of stuff I read in a self-help book. I memorize passages from it. Chant them to myself. Not Repeating Your History Again, it's called. Cute title. It resonates with me somehow.

Back when we were in our early thirties. Just after Harry started to grow his fingernails long, like a vampire or something. Yellow and twisted. That's when he moved back into Dad's house. Into the apartment he lives in now. He'd been living in a condemned building before that. One time my father goes up to the apartment, watches Harry smoke and drink for several hours. And then pass out. That's when he comes down to my apartment, visits me.

He's done this before. Visiting me after visiting Harry. The enabler visiting *his* enabler. For a pep talk.

Why am I doing this? he asks me. Why don't I throw him out into street until he learns to take responsibility for himself. Let him come back when he's grown up. He is grown up, I say, he's over thirty. You know what I mean, he says. We stare at each other. This is subtle, I think to myself. How am I supposed to get him to get it? I plunge right in. Because, I say, if you do throw him out something terrible will happen to him. And you'll feel guilty. Forever. It isn't my fault, he tells me. I know, I say, whether I know this or not. It doesn't matter whether it's your fault or not, I add. Guilt isn't based on what we've done. And I think: It's often based on what we haven't done. Or on what someone else has done. Or hasn't done.

We stare at each other again. What's wrong with him? he asks me. His mother brought him up, I say. For the most part, I add. His mother brought you up too, my father tells me. Why isn't there something wrong with you? There is something wrong with me, I tell him, you're just not paying attention.

I'm confronting him. I'm confronting Harry. We're in the present. Now. And my hands are shaking. I can feel them shaking. But I don't look at them. I let them shake all by themselves. I keep looking at Harry. At Harry's eyes. Maybe for the first time in years. These things we used to do to survive, I tell Harry, these things that used to work don't work anymore. He looks back at me. Smiles. But he always smiles just before the rage starts. Then he picks up a fork. I'm thinking, don't. Don't do it. You can: Not do this.