Dear Baby

William Saroyan

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By

William Saroyan

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DEAR BABY

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By William Saroyan

Novel

THE HUMAN COMEDY

Stories

DEAR BABY

MY NAME IS ARAM

SAROYAN'S FABLES

PEACE, IT'S WONDERFUL

THE TROUBLE WITH TIGERS

LOVE, HERE IS MY HAT

LITTLE CHILDREN

THREE TIMES THREE

INHALE AND EXHALE

THE DARING YOUNG MAN ON THE FLYING TRAPEZE

Plays

GET AWAY OLD MAN

RAZZLE-DAZZLE

THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

SWEENEY IN THE TREES

ACROSS THE BOARD ON TOMORROW MORNING

THREE PLAYS

MY HEART'S IN THE HIGHLANDS

THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE

LOVE'S OLD SWEET SONG

This book is for

CAROL SAROYAN

What's said in this small book is not what I would finally say to you, but let it be the first of many gifts of love: a valentine made out of everything I was in the years long gone, before I saw you.

Acknowledgment: Only two or three of the stories in this collection have not appeared at one time or another in one or another of the following living and dead, little and big magazines: *Collier's, Harper's Bazaar, The Little Man, Hairenik* (Armenian-American Weekly of Boston), *The Coast, The Yale Review,* Heywood Broun's *Nutmeg, transition, Rob Wagner's Script, Vogue,* and *The Atlantic Monthly,* whose editors I thank.

A number of these pieces have been given new titles and each of them has been revised.

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The room was a large one on the seventh floor of the Blackstone Hotel on O'Farrell Street in San Francisco. There was nothing in it to bring him there except the portable radio-phonograph, the one record, and darkness.

He came into the room smiling, and walked about, trying to decide what to do. He had six hours to go, and after that a time so long he didn't like to think about it.

He no longer saw the room. During the day the blind of the only window was drawn to keep the place dark. At night he turned the light of the bathroom on and kept the door almost shut so that only enough light came into the room to keep him from walking into something. It happened anyway. It wasn't that he couldn't see as well as ever. It was simply that he was alone again all the time and wasn't looking. There was no longer any reason to look.

He remembered everything.

At the core of everything was his remembrance of her.

He walked about quietly, turning, bumping into the edges of doorways and chairs and other objects in the room, moving unconsciously, his eyes unable to see because of the remembrance. He stopped suddenly, removed his hat and coat, stretched and shook his head as he did when he was confused in the ring.

It was nothing.

He could go on as if he had never known her. He could

be boisterous in act and loud in laughter, and some day be all right again. He could go on like everybody else in the world, but he didn't know if he wanted to. Lazzeri said he was in better shape than ever, but Lazzeri didn't know what he knew.

The odor of her hair, the taste of her mouth, and the image of her face came to him. His guts sickened. He smiled and sat on the bed. After a moment he got up, went to the portable machine, turned the knob, and put needle to disc. Then he stretched out on the bed, face down, and listened to the music, remembering her, and saying: "Dear baby, remembering you is the only truth I know. Having known you is the only beauty of my life. In my heart, there is one smile, the smile of your heart in mine when we were together."

When the telephone rang he knew it was Lazzeri. He got up and turned off the machine.

"Joe?" Lazzeri said.

"Yeah."

"Are you all right?"

"Sure."

"Remember what I told you?"

"What did you tell me?"

"I want you to take it easy."

"That's what I'm doing."

"Don't go haywire."

"O.K."

"What's the matter?"

"I've been sleeping."

"Oh," Lazzeri said. "O.K. I'll see you at nine."

"O.K."

"Something's the matter," Lazzeri said.

"Don't be silly."

"Something's the matter," Lazzeri said again. "I'm coming right up."

"I've been sleeping," Joe said. "I'll see you at nine."

"You don't sound right," Lazzeri said.

"I'm fine."

"You haven't got somebody in that room with you, have you?"

"No."

"Joe," Lazzeri said, "what's the matter?"

"I'll see you at nine," Joe said.

"You're not going haywire on me again, are you?"

"No."

"O.K.," Lazzeri said. "If you're all right, that's all I want to know."

"I'm all right," Joe said.

"O.K.," Lazzeri said. "If you want to be alone, O.K. Just don't go haywire."

"I'll see you at nine," Joe said.

He went back to the machine, turned the knob, and then decided not to listen to the music any more. That's what he would do. He wouldn't listen to the music any more. He would break the record. He would give the machine away. He would lift the blind of the window. He would turn on all the lights and open his eyes. He would come to the room only to sleep. He would go down to the pool-room on Turk Street and find a couple of the boys. He would shoot pool and listen to the boys talking about cards

and horses and the other varieties of trouble they knew. He would go up to a couple of the places he used to visit and find some girls he used to know and buy them drinks and ask how they'd been and hear them tell of the troubles *they* knew. He would stop being alone.

He began to laugh, at first quietly and then out loud. He laughed at himself—the wretched comedy of his grief. Then he laughed at everybody alive, and began to feel everything was going to be all right again. If you could laugh, you could live. If you could look at it that way, you could endure *anything*. While he was laughing he heard *her* laughing with him, as clearly as if she were in the room. He became sick again and stopped laughing, knowing it was no use.

He remembered her as if she were still alive, walking beside him along one of many streets in one of many cities, her face childlike and solemn, her movement beside him shy and full of innocence, her voice so young and lovely he would stop anywhere to hold her in his arms while she said seriously: "Joe, people are looking."

He remembered her alone with him in one of many rooms, her presence the first goodness and beauty in his life. He remembered the sweetness of her mouth and the soft hum of her heart growing to the sudden sobbing that brought out in him a tenderness so intense it was ferocious, a tenderness he had always hidden because there had never been anyone to give it to.

He walked about in the dark room, remembering how unkind he had been to her the night he had come home and

found her listening to the record. He pointed at the machine and said, "Where did that come from?"

He remembered the way she ran to him and put her arms around him and the way he pushed her away. He remembered the way she moved away from him and said, "I only made a down payment on it. I'll tell them to come and take it back if you want me to. I thought you'd like it."

The record was playing, and although he knew it was something he liked very much, and needed, and should have known long ago, he went on being unkind. She was on the verge of crying and didn't know where to go or what to do. She went timidly to the machine and was going to shut it off when he shouted at her to let it play. She hurried, almost ran, into the other room, and he stood in front of the machine with his hat on and listened to the record until it finished. Then he shut off the machine and went back to town and didn't come home till after five in the morning. She was asleep. He couldn't understand what right he had to know her, to speak to her, to live in the same house with her, to touch her. He bent over her and touched her lips with his own and saw her eyes open. "Please forgive me," he said.

She sat up smiling and put her arms around him, and he kissed her lips and her nose and her eyes and her ears and her forehead and her neck and her shoulders and her arms and her hands, and while he was doing so he said, "Please remember one thing, baby. No matter what I say to you, I love you. I'm liable to go haywire any time, but don't forget that I love you. Please remember that."

He took off his clothes, got into his bed and went to sleep.

When she got in beside him he woke up and embraced her, laughing, while she whispered his name the sorrowful, serious way she always did when she knew he was all right again.

That was in Ventura, where they had taken an apartment because he had three fights coming up in that vicinity: one in Los Angeles, one in Hollywood, and one in Pismo Beach. He let her come to the fight in Hollywood the night he fought Kid Fuente, the Indian, because he knew how much she wanted to see him in the ring. He got her a ringside seat and after the fight she told him she had sat next to Robert Taylor and Barbara Stanwyck and they had been very nice to her.

"I hope you didn't ask them for an autograph," he said, and she became embarrassed and said, "Yes, I did, Joe."

"Well," he said, "they should have asked *you* for one."

"Oh, they were swell," she said. "They sure liked you."

"Oh, sure," he said. "Sure. Sure. That dumb Indian almost ruined me. I don't know how I won. I guess he got tired trying. I'll be punch-drunk in another three or four months."

"You were wonderful in the ring," the girl said.

He remembered the fight because she had talked about it so much. It was six rounds. He was almost out in the fourth. She had known it and kept talking around it, but one day she said, "I almost cried."

"What are you talking about?" he said.

"I mean," she said, "at the fight. Everybody was yelling and I didn't know whether they were for you or against you and I almost cried."

"When was that?" he said.

"I don't know," she said. "I was so excited. He was fighting hard and you were in a corner and everybody stood up and was yelling. I thought he was hitting *me*."

He remembered being in the corner, taking a lot of bad ones, not being able to do anything about them, not knowing if he wasn't going to be out and saying to himself, "You'll be punch-drunk in no time at this rate." He kept trying to move away, but there was nowhere to go, and all of a sudden the Indian slowed down, he was tired, and he remembered saying to the Indian, "O.K., Kid, that's all." He knew he was going to be all right now because there weren't more than fifteen seconds to that round. He gave the rest of the round everything he had. The Indian was tired and couldn't do anything, and just before the bell the Indian stopped a bad one and fell backward, looking up at him with an amazed expression because the Indian couldn't understand how anybody could take so much punishment and come up so strong.

The bell saved the Indian, but for the rest of the fight the Indian was no good, and he knocked him down once in each of the last two rounds.

"That was a bad spot," he told her. "By rights I should have been out, but the Indian got tired. You can't start slugging that way in the middle of a round and expect to keep it up till the end of the round."

"You looked fine," she said, "and you didn't look sore. Don't you get sore?"

"Sore?" he said. "Who's there to get sore at? That poor Indian is only out to earn a little money, the same as me.

He's got nothing against me and I've got nothing against him. If he can floor me, he's going to do it, and if I can floor him, I'm going to do it."

"Well," she said, "I almost cried. You looked so fine all the rest of the fight, but when you were in the corner the only thing I could see was somebody being hit over and over again."

"I didn't like that myself," he said.

He was glad she hadn't seen some of his bad fights—the earlier ones, the ones in which he had taken a lot of punishment. Lately he'd learned enough about the racket not to get into a lot of trouble. He seldom took advantage of a chance to clinch, but if the worst came to the worst and there was nothing else to do he would do it, rest a few seconds and try to figure out what to do in the remaining seconds of the round. He usually ended every round nicely, coming back if he had been hurt earlier. Of course he had the reach, his legs were good, and even when he was hurt they didn't wobble and he could stay solid.

After seeing the fight with Kid Fuente she didn't want to see any more. The day of a fight she would be sick, sick in bed, and she would pray. She would turn on the phonograph and listen to the record, which had become their music, the song of their life together. And when he'd come home he'd find her pale and sick and almost in tears, listening to the song. He would hold her in his arms a long time, and he would hear her heart pounding, and little by little it would slow down to almost normal, and then he would hold her at arm's length and look into her eyes and she would be smiling, and then he would say, "It only means