It has been said that, "Home is where, if you go, they have to let you in." But suppose you don't want to???

MY BACK TO THE WORLD

fiction by William Saroyan

IN NEW YORK, in February of the year 1959, he examined the play he had written during the last days of 1958, the days after Christmas, the somber days at the end of another year. He remembered how poorly the play had grown, how bitterly he had had to work at it, fighting against the wish to throw the thing out, forget it, pick up a book and read, or sit on the back porch overlooking the sea at Malibu, or walk on the beach. But at the same time, he remembered that he was very nearly at the end of his money again, and must not quit, must work, must write on, for the time had come to get the hell away from the house on the beach where for six years he had turned his back on the world, where, only three hours after he had moved into the house, he had begun to write a new work, entitled *My Back to the World* (never finished). A great comedian had asked him to write a play for him, a one-hour play for television, and he had said, "Well, who do you want to be?"

"Anybody who's got guts, who's lived, who's got a way of his own, and something to say."

He began to write the play two minutes after he had spoken on the telephone with the comedian who had called from New York. The guy with guts was a doctor, a fat guy because the comedian was fat, who long ago had married a woman who wanted to sing, perhaps on the stage, perhaps in opera, perhaps in Havana, and he and this woman had become the father and mother of a boy, now seventeen. The play hadn't wanted to grow, to move along, and instead of writing it in three or four or five hours, as he had believed he would, he stopped writing in ten minutes the first time, in thirty-five the second time. He lasted an hour and ten minutes the third day, and then for two days he did no more than read what he had written, revise it, change it, take out, put in, not liking any of it, because he wasn't liking any of anything.

A writer in Pacific Palisades phoned and asked him to a New Year's Eve party, and he said he would be there, but when the last day of the year arrived he thought, "I don't want to go to any New Year's Eve party. I don't feel like seeing a lot of people I've already seen too many times. I don't feel like drinking. I don't want to celebrate the passing of another year." All the same, he went, and it was exactly as he had known it would be. This house in Pacific Palisades, with the big garden, full of the trees I, myself, began to plant fifteen years ago when my kids were little, has always seemed to be heaven. But, all of a sudden, I began to wonder three years ago who the hell wants heaven?"

HE GOT BACK to the shack on the beach at three in the morning of the first day of 1959, and he knew he would soon leave the place forever. He had been planning to leave for a long time in any case, but hadn't from laziness, and from feeling that "I live in heaven, why should I leave?" He had been amused that the other writer had believed that he lived in heaven, too. The only unfinished business on hand was the play he was trying to write for the fat comedian. He examined the thing again, discovered stuff that was useless, cut it out, and moved the play forward ten or eleven minutes of playing time, but still there was no drive in it toward a sensible end. He went to bed and slept four hours, got up, a little hungover, shaved, showered, drank a cup of instant coffee, and went back to work: "I'll finish the play this morning, and that will be that for Malibu. I'll begin to pack immediately after I've got the thing in the mail."

On the ninth day of the year, he turned his back on the house in which he had turned his back on the world. Three days later, he was in New York, where there was more work to do in order to get out of the country. First of all, there was money to be earned. The fat comedian didn't like the play, so that meant the money he had expected, or at any rate had hoped for—at least ten thousand dollars—was out. Now, in February of the new year, the year that was slipping swiftly away, as all of them had done since the war, he was examining the play for the first time since he had written it, to see if he could find out why the comedian hadn't liked it. He couldn't. He was a little surprised, but not especially pleased, to notice that the play was, in fact, a good thing, and that the part for the comedian was just right for him. And yet, the comedian hadn't wanted to do it.

"Well, that's all right, that's always all right. Somebody else, then."

But who?

He decided to try it on Dooley, the producer of Caravan, so he walked up Madison Avenue to Dooley's office, but Dooley was out. He left the play with Dooley's secretary, and three days later when he hadn't heard from the producer he thought, "Well, Dooley doesn't like it, either. Maybe I just won't be able to leave the country, after all. I certainly can't leave unless I can get hold of a little money before the Tax Collector does."

He walked to Dooley's office again, expecting to pick up the manuscript and put it away. Forget it. But after a talk of ten or fifteen minutes, when he got up to go and asked for the play, Dooley said, "The kids in the office have all read it, and they like it. Let me read it tonight." The following day, Dooley telephoned and said, "I kind of like it, but I can't pay anything like what Caravan used to pay."

"How much can you pay?"

"Well, five thousand."

"If you say five, I've got to say six," he told Dooley, and Dooley astonished him by saying, "If you say six, I've got to say seven."

Was he joking, or had he made a little mistake?

"You've got a deal," he said quickly, "it's yours for seven thousand, and let me tell you this is the kind of bargaining I think the world ought to know about."

He had the check a few days later, and so it was time to go, but the only ship he could get, that would take him to Venice, didn't sail for ten days. O.K., so he would write a lot of letters to people in Europe, and have some kind of program to follow as soon as he got there. He wrote the letters and he received replies, some by cable and some by airplane, and it looked as if he was all set. All set for what? For starting all over again? Dooley sent around the young director of the play, and he went over the play with him. Dooley's publicity man, a graduate of Harvard, asked him to please forget his policy of avoiding publicity; to see only two reporters, on behalf of the play: the man on *The Times*, and the man on *Newsweek*. So he said O.K.

On the second day of the year, though, in Malibu, a kind of spiritual sickness had taken possession of him, the like of which he had not known since he had been alone in New York, fresh from San Francisco, in December of 1928, when he had been twenty years old. In the fever of the flu that had kept him from going to work at the Postal Telegraph Office in Washington Market on Warren Street, three days before Christmas in 1928, he had known that his real sickness was homesickness. But this time there was more to it, there was this new sickness with it. He longed desperately to be home, although when he had left San Francisco for New York by Greyhound bus, late in August, he had believed that he had left home for good. His mother had wished him well, and had urged him to live proudly. He had scarcely said goodbye to his two sisters and to his brother. And now, after only four months in New York, he was homesick. He wanted to smell where they lived. He wanted to be there. And he was more than three thousand miles away. "It's because I've got this flu," he thought, "and as soon as I'm over it, I'll forget it, and go about my business."

HE HAD EXPECTED his writing to become miraculously good simply because he had reached New York at last, but it hadn't done that at all.

On Christmas Day, one of the messengers at the telegraph office, a boy named Dominic Balletta, came up to his small room with a package of dried fruit, and he thought, "I will never forget this man, this boy from the New York slums who has been pursued all his life by truant officers and police, who has done petty stealing since he was a small boy, because this is the man who came to see a sick man on Christmas Day."

Dominic said, "I just tought I'd take da subway all da way from Brooklyn and come up here and tell you all da boys down at da office miss ya. Remember coffee and sash weights first ting after opening the office, and den around eight,

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remember da pizzas? I din't tell the boys I was going to come up here, I just looked in the manager's book for your address. You stay in bed all da time you need, don't worry about nuttin, your job's always waiting for you down dere, and—well, I mean, are you O.K.?"

"Yeah, Dominic, I'm almost over it, now. I'll come to work tomorrow morning."

"No," the boy said. "Take your time. Get *all* better. You came to work with a fever when you should have stayed home in da first place. Dat's what done it. Dis time, get all better, den come back for the old coffee and sash weights, and da pizzas. O.K.?"

AFTER THE boy had gone he went back to sleep and dreamed some more about being home, and when he woke up he knew the homesickness had got him all the way. The flu had come and was going, but this other sickness, which *had* to be homesickness—you couldn't call it anything else—he had heard about all his life. But this was the first time he had experienced it; the first time he was experiencing it—this sickness was taking over completely. It was all he could do to keep from bawling like a small boy, unloved and lost, soft and self-pitying. He got up and fetched water from down the hall, first to drink, and then to shave and wash in. Then, he put on his clothes, the suit he had bought at an upstairs place for eleven dollars, and the dollar shirt, and the dime tie, and the dime socks, and the shoes that had been half-soled and heeled three times, but he was wobbly and weak, and after he was dressed he had to sit where Dominic had sat, the only chair in the small room.

"This is a sickness I never knew, but now I do. The flu is nothing, a sickness like the flu makes me laugh, because I've been there before, even in the big epidemic that came along during the First War. But this sickness, this is different, and I just *can't* laugh at it."

He longed desperately, astonished, to hear his mother's voice, even in anger, shouting at him, and he kept believing that with sickness so intense there was probably a way by means of which he might transport himself across the continent instantly, from this trap of a room to the third-floor apartment, big and roomy and full of light, at the corner of Sutter and Divisadero, in San Francisco: number 2378 Sutter Street, telephone number SUtter-7475. Well, should he telephone?

"This is me. I just telephoned to say Merry Christmas, that's all. Everything's great! I've got a great job, and my writing is going great. I expect to finish my first novel by the end of January. I expect it to be published by the end of February, and by the end of March I expect to be rich and famous. The first money I make I'm going to buy you a brand-new house and fill it with brand-new furniture."

HE SAT a long time, fighting off the wail of the lost, and then when it seemed as if he was going to lose the fight, and be humiliated, he got up quickly, to leave the room, but at the door his knees gave way, making him curse his sickness, the flu and the homesickness both, and his own self, for being so vulnerable. He got out at last, though, fighting the weakness in his knees, and went down the dirty marble steps, smeared with spit and vomit stains, one step at a time, his hand on the railing, moving slowly, and then at last reached the street and the white snow of Christmas Day. He walked to the subway station, got off at Times Square, walked down 42nd Street to his main hangout in the city: The Public Library. He went in and looked up Guy de Maupassant in the card index files, wrote the numbers on a slip, and was soon reading about how the writer had lived, and then one of his stories, and back to how he had lived, and then, all of a sudden, he could fight the sickness no more, he could bury it no more. To bawl in the great reading room of the Public Library in New York, on Christmas Day, would be unthinkable, and yet it seemed to be happening, or almost happening. He got up quickly and walked, glancing back once to notice if anybody was watching—out of the reading room, out of the card index room, down the hall, down the two flights of stairs, out to the street. And now, praise God for his tender mercy, the bawling wasn't happening by itself any more. His getting up and going had stopped it. He was busy again, and when you're busy, that's when you've got half a chance; that's when there isn't time for even inconsolable grief. He stood beside one of the great stone lions at the entrance to the library and just looked at the snow on Fifth Avenue, and the people walking in it, making a slush. "How lovely is the world, how lovely it is to be alive, and what an ache it is in the heart."

He got back to Times Square, moving slowly, watching the people—screw-ups all of them, wonderful, wasted, tired, sick, dying screw-ups—cherishing them, loving them, but at the same time having only contempt for them, deep loving contempt because they had long ago given up, because there was no use trying. He went home and got back into his stinking bed, stinking from the sweat of the flu, and he fell back into the sleep of home. But there, he had no impulse at all to bawl. The sleep lasted from four in the afternoon until two in the morning. When he woke up, he knew he had fought off the flu, entirely.

He opened the telegraph office at a quarter to six. Dominic came along a few minutes later; they went for coffee and sash weights. When Amato, the manager, came to the office he said, "John, make out my voucher, I'm going home."

Five days later, on the train traveling through New Mexico, the little retired Italian grocer from Brooklyn who had a satchel full of good stuff to eat, which he insisted on sharing, said of the great wasteland, "If this is God's country, He can have it."

The bus had taken ten days to travel from San Francisco to New York.

Going back the train took seven. He was home again at 2378 Sutter Street, but he didn't tell anybody what had brought him home. Perhaps he didn't need to.

His mother said, "You eat some good food, you take a good rest, you read your books."

BUT THAT SICKNESS, that New York Christmas Day homesickness had been the only time he had known his pride to almost fail.

Long years later, the sickness came back, only he wasn't twenty now, he was fifty. He wasn't far from home, he was home.

His home had been in Malibu since 1952, so why was he homesick?

"This world is not my home, I'm only passing through," the revivalist hymn said.

Was that it? Was the homesickness out of something like that? He had been driving his old rattletrap Cadillac when the sickness first came to him. At first, he almost didn't notice it, but it grew, and the next day, driving to Santa Monica to see about having his Malibu junk put in storage, the sickness came back, worse than ever, stronger than ever, stronger even than it had been thirty years ago in New York. Why?

"Well, it must be that I am dying, that's all. The home I long for this time is the only home, the first, the last, and the only, but I'll be damned if I wouldn't rather go to Europe instead."

And so he did.