

**SAMPLE**

THERE'S SOMETHING IN THE BACK YARD

Richard Snodgrass

In vain do individuals hope for immortality, or any patent from oblivion,  
in preservations below the Moon.

Sir Thomas Browne

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SAMPLE

PRELUDE

*According to some of the Hopi stories, when everyone lived in the First World, far under the surface of the earth, the first people didn't look like people at all; instead, they looked like insects, like ants. And when that world, the First World, was eventually destroyed by fire, the insects, the ants, crawled up into the Second World, which was still under the surface of the earth, where they became other creatures, like tadpoles, with gills and webbed fingers and bulging eyes. And when the Second World was eventually destroyed, this time by water, they crawled up into the Third World, still under the surface of the earth, where Hurúng Wuhti, the Woman of Hard Things—or maybe it was Spider Grandmother—decided to make creatures that looked a lot like people as we know them, except that they had tails. Now, the people, of course, were ashamed of themselves, because they knew (even if the gods didn't) that people weren't supposed to have tails. But as it turned out they were more like people than they could ever imagine: they didn't need fire or water or some natural catastrophe to destroy their world, they mucked it up so badly by themselves that it soon became unlivable. And that's when they entered the present world, that's when they climbed up onto the surface of the earth, this, the Fourth World, and people came to look just as they do today, like people. But as to how this world turns out, what people make of the Fourth World, the Hopi stories, at least the ones told outside the kivas, don't say, the outcome hasn't been determined yet, the stories are still going on....*

ONE

1

One morning, in a house a few miles north of Flagstaff, Arizona, a man by the name of George Binns was sitting in his study on the second floor, sitting at his desk staring at a blank sheet of paper, a sheet of paper on which he hoped to begin a poem, or maybe a short story, or maybe even a sketch for a novel—hoped to begin something, at least—as he thought about his lover’s thighs (which, though he thought they were lovely thighs, had nothing at all to do with the poem or short story or anything else he hoped to write; but that was only part of the problem), when he heard his wife call out:

“George, look out the window.”

George, in response to her command, promptly looked down at his shoe—or, rather, down at the baseboard register beside his shoe, the place where his wife’s voice usually came from when he was in his study, knowing, even as he looked there, that this time Mary Olive’s voice came not from downstairs in the kitchen but from their bedroom, at the other end of the second floor. He looked at his watch: 8:42. What on earth was she doing up at this hour? She usually slept till noon, it was an unspoken agreement they had: she took over the house in the evenings (and, usually, late into the night) and he had the peace and quiet of the mornings to himself; or, as they used to joke about it at parties in New York, he worked daylight and she worked graveyard.

“George. Look out the window. There’s something in the back yard.”

*There’s something in the back yard.* Twenty-five years of marriage had taught him that such a statement from Mary Olive could mean anything from the presence of an unfamiliar butterfly to a crew of workmen ready to take off the rear of the house. (That had happened once, years before, when they lived in Pennsylvania, when he was teaching at Penn State: a crew of workmen arrived one day to start an addition on the back of the house. The problem was that they got the wrong house; George ran out to stop them just as the backhoe bit into the rear walk, the flagstones popping up like tiddlywinks. Mary Olive had seen the men and equipment arrive while she fixed lunch, and announced it with those same words: *There’s something in the back yard.* Even then she did things like that, he thought to himself now; she played her little games even then.) The blinds in front of his desk were still closed against the morning sun. He listened; he didn’t hear the sound of heavy equipment. Somewhere up in the trees, on the hill behind the house, the magpies were making a fuss about something—rak rak rak rak rak rak rak rak rak— but that wasn’t unusual; in the distance he could hear the growl of a chain saw—Don, their nearest neighbor, half a mile down the road, probably working on his woodpile. Offhand, George couldn’t imagine what she could be so upset about.

“George!”

George sighed. He leaned forward over his typewriter, took off his glasses, and lifted one of the slats of the blinds; then he stood up and opened the blinds. Mary Olive was right: there was indeed something in the back yard. Through the branches of the trees, the twin pines on the terrace in the back yard whose branches filled his study windows, he could see something standing in the dry wash at the far end of the yard.

Something that, from this distance and from this elevation, partly blocked by the branches of the trees, appeared to be a brightly colored eight-foot-tall bird.

Calmly, keeping his dignity, his control of the situation, George left the study and went down the hall to the bedroom at the other end of the house. He was in his early fifties, a tall, heavysset man—you might want to say he was more than heavysset, you might say he was large, you might say he was fat, even, but that isn't quite it either—with a full head of wavy salt-and-pepper hair and a strong jaw. From the back he appeared to be of normal proportions, but head on (or as best seen in profile) his chest and stomach swelled out in front of him, not in a potbelly that drooped over the tops of his trousers, but in a graceful arc, a natural buffer, so that it was possible to imagine that, if he ever fell forward, he would rock back and forth on the ground. Mary Olive stood at the bedroom window, peeking through the curtains, through the crack between the closed blinds and the window frame, clutching her nightgown about herself as if afraid that what she peeked at might peek back. He joined her at the window, looking over her head.

“Didn't you hear me, George?”

“Yes, dear. That's why I'm here.”

“There's something in the back yard.”

“I know, dear. I can see it.”

She turned and looked up at him. “You don't seem very worried about it.”

“We don't know if it's something to be worried about, do we, dear?”

He smiled reassuringly, not really looking at her, and stretched his neck away from his collar. She was also in her early fifties, a slim, erect woman with high cheekbones, quick though cloudy blue eyes, and her tawny-gray hair pulled back into a



straggly bun. She was a handsome woman—she looked nearly the same at fifty as she had at thirty; on the other hand, a thought that occurred to George at those moments when he wondered what he missed in life, at thirty she had already looked fifty—and could be striking if and when she wanted to be; the thing was, she no longer seemed to want to be, or at least that was the way it seemed to George. He particularly disliked seeing her in the mornings, before she washed and dressed and had her coffee—in the mornings her skin was oily, the circles under her eyes were as dark as bruises, and her features often appeared to have slipped down a notch during the night. As he stood close to her now, looking over her hair and out the window, she smelled of cigarettes, sweaty slept-in clothes, and last night's wine.

“Can't you see it from your study?”

“Not very well. The trees are in the way.”

“What do you think it is?”

“I don't know, dear.”

From this window, without the branches of the pine trees in the way, the something in the back yard no longer looked like a brightly colored eight-foot-tall bird. From this window, the something in the back yard looked like a man in a cape with a very tall, very blue, very pointed hat. George and Mary Olive stared for a moment in silence through the gauze curtains, through the crack between the blinds and the window frame, a totem pole of lookers. Then Mary Olive turned around quickly and stretched up and gave him a quick sloppy kiss on the cheek.

“Mary Olive! What was that for?”

“That's because you came when I called. That's because you're my big brave

protector.”

He looked at her to see if she was making fun of him, but from the smile on her face—a half-smile really; it was the other half, the unknown half, that bothered him—he couldn't tell. He wiped the slobber from his cheek and looked back out the window.

“So what are you going to do about it, George?” Mary Olive stared up at him, into the side of his face.

“About what, dear?” George said, afraid for a moment she meant the kiss on his cheek.

“About whatever it is that's down there in the back yard.”

“I'm going right down and take care of it, of course.” He bent over slightly and patted her on the shoulders, repeated the form of her shoulders, outlined her, patted her into place.

“My big brave George.”

“Well, what did you think I was going to do about it?”

“You're absolutely right, George.”

“We have to know what it is, don't we?”

“Of course, George.”

“Harrumph,” said George. And thought: *Is she laughing at me?*

Mary Olive advanced on him, lips puckered. “Give us another kiss, George. You always look so handsome when you're trying to act sure of yourself.”

“What do you mean?” George said, drawing back. “I am sure of myself.”

Mary Olive smiled at him, pulled up the corners of her mouth at him—a quick jab of a smile—but before she said anything else he turned around and left the room,

clomping stately, determinedly, landing with his weight on his heels so the house reverberated with his progress, so she would be sure to hear him, down the stairs and through the first floor of the house to the back door.

The July morning was already hot, even though the sun had yet to clear the peaks of the mountains to the east; George stepped out the back door and into the hot air, into the smells of dust and pines and the dry grass. The upper yard extended some twenty feet or so from the rear of the house on a built-up terrace; beyond the terrace wall, a retaining wall of native volcanic stone, the lower yard—it was more of a field than a yard; he kept the grass on the terrace watered and trimmed but ignored the lower yard, the field, the sparse brown grass in the sandy soil—sloped gently for another hundred feet to a split-rail fence along the bank of a dry wash. The wash was five or six feet deep and twice as wide; George had called it a gully when they first moved here, a year earlier, but Don, their neighbor, who was also in the English Department, has insisted that, in this part of the country, such a thing was called a wash. On the other side of the wash, the forests of pine and aspen climbed the foothills of the San Francisco Mountains. George walked across the terrace, through the grouping of white wooden lawn furniture sitting under the twin pines, and stood on top of the retaining wall, looking down at the end of the field. Up on the hillside, a dozen or so magpies continued to clatter in the trees, talking to themselves about something, their black-and-white wings flashing as they flew from branch to branch, not alarmed really, just noisy, the same as they were most of the time, giving their repeated rasping call—rak rak rak rak rak rak rak—that George thought (he was proud of this simile and tried to use it in practically every poem and short story and letter he had written since they moved to the West) sounded like a car that wouldn't start.

But from where he stood, on top of the terrace wall, he couldn't tell much more about the figure in the wash than he could from the second-floor window; in fact in some ways, without the extra elevation, he could tell even less, the figure half hidden from view now by the split-rail fence, except that from here it appeared the figure was wearing a tall blue dunce cap.

George turned around back toward the house; Mary Olive stood in the upstairs window, shrouded in the gauze of the curtains, clutching her nightclothes about herself, watching him. He shrugged, held out his palms to show he still didn't know who or what it was. She said something to him behind the glass and shook her head and flicked her hand at him, motioning him to go on down and look at it. George clenched his teeth and growled in the back of his throat—how dare she flick her hand at him, as if he needed to be told what to do; he had half a mind to go back in the house and throttle her (*Throttle*, he thought: *now that's a curious word. Why would you say you wanted to throttle someone unless you wanted them to do something more or faster? I've got to remember to look up the meaning when I get back to the house*), but he turned and went down the terrace steps and marched out across the yard.

Halfway down the slope, however, he wondered if he wasn't being a bit hasty. He wondered if he shouldn't have a weapon of some kind, something to hold in his hand, at least—the figure in the wash was holding a long stick, a staff. But it was too late now; no matter what the guy was holding or how big he was—and as George got closer he could see the guy was very big indeed—he couldn't turn back now, not with Mary Olive watching from the window. When he got to the fence he was breathing heavily and sweating and he rested his weight, rested the bulk of his stomach, against the top rail. The

figure in the cape and the blue pointed hat was poking the end of his staff among the rocks on the bank of the wash, his back turned toward George, and George was glad the guy hadn't noticed him yet, that he had a moment to get himself together. He had no doubt that he could handle this situation, that he could take care of this fellow, whoever this fellow was, find out what this fellow wanted and what this fellow thought he was doing here—find out if he was a fugitive from a service-station opening, or the entertainment for a kiddie party who got lost, or just a kook—George just needed a little time to figure out how.

2

The hat wasn't a hat at all; it was a mask, a blue, cone-shaped mask several feet tall, topped off with white feathers and strands of red yarn tied at the very point, and more tufts of feathers and more red yarn sprouting out from the sides, where the ears should be; a fox skin was wrapped around the neck as a ruff. The figure wore a white kilt with a thick red-black-and-green sash around the waist, the ends of which cascaded down at the side, and moccasins; tied around his shoulders was a long blanket or cape that draped down the back to his knees. The cape was spotted in tropical colors—red and yellow and green—and undoubtedly had been very beautiful at one time, though now the material was old and the colors faded. The figure's check, arms, and legs were painted alternately blue and yellow. In his right hand he carried a long staff with small ears of corn tied around the top and tipped with feathers; in his left hand was a small sack and a bundle that included an earthen jug and a white arrow-shaped board with an ear of corn

tied to it.

It was a kachina, or at least George thought it was a kachina. There were pictures of kachinas all over the Southwest, and especially around Flagstaff—there were kachina restaurants, kachina drive-ins, kachina motels; his checks from the bank had kachinas on them, his students at the university wore T-shirts with kachinas on them. They were one of those things he had always meant to learn more about since they moved here—he was going to learn more about the Grand Canyon and Southwestern wildflowers and take weekly hikes in the mountains too—but he never got around to doing it. Now he wished he had, oh, how he wished he had, because he realized, standing in front of this tall masked figure poking around his back yard, that, besides knowing that kachinas had something to do with the Indians, something to do with the nearby Indian reservations—Don and Sally talked about kachinas all the time, why hadn't he paid more attention; he thought they were dancers of some kind, gods maybe—he really had no idea what a kachina was.

George's bowels gave a watery *ker-chunk*.

The kachina, if that's what it was, appeared to be looking for something, using the butt end of his staff to prod among the rocks. As the kachina turned toward the fence, George could see that the face of the mask was smooth, with no protruding features; there were only two long black rectangles painted like slits for the eyes, and an inverted black triangle painted for the mouth—an expressionless face, neither friendly nor fierce; neutral. Finally the kachina stopped his poking around and sighed, then noticed George and looked up. They stared at each other for a long minute, and George thought: He's looking at me as if he's wondering what *I'm* doing here.

George's bowels gurgled profoundly; he was afraid he might have to run for the house.

"Hello," George said, clamping his buttocks hard.

The kachina cocked his head, hesitated, then nodded once.

"Ah. . . may I ask what you're doing?"

The kachina shifted his footing on the edge of the wash so that he could get a better look at George; as he moved, the rattles inside a turtle shell tied to his right leg just below the knee gave a dry whisper, like branches rubbing together. Otherwise the kachina was silent, the mask expressionless. George stretched his neck away from his collar, cleared his throat.

"Who are you? What are doing down here?"

The kachina turned his head slightly, as if to ask George the same question.

George tried to think if it could be someone he knew, someone playing a joke on him. The only person he could think of was Don, but this fellow was at least a foot taller, even without the mask, and sixty pounds heavier than Don; besides, from what George could see, this guy's skin was reddish-brown—it was either an Indian or somebody using, in addition to everything else, body makeup. George had Indian students in his classes, but he didn't know any of them very well, they were generally withdrawn and kept pretty much to themselves—after a year he still couldn't tell the difference between the Hopis and the Navajos. He was almost sure it couldn't be anyone he knew. But who was it, then? George moved away from the fence so he wasn't leaning on it, so he could stand as tall as possible. His bowels seemed secure.

"This is my place. I—I mean we, my wife and I—we own this house."

The kachina looked past him as if he hadn't noticed the house before. Then he looked at George and nodded—was he approving? George, in a sudden flight of whimsy, almost said thank you; he blinked, a very slow, determined blink, trying to clear his mind, trying to start over. I've got to get hold of myself, he told himself, I own this property, this is my place, I'm in control here. The kachina seemed to look at George curiously, as if wondering what the problem was, then turned around so he faced the hillside, the turtle-shell rattle punctuating his movements. On the back of the cape, worked into the splashes of tropical colors, was a drawing, a vague image of a large bird with a man's head; a second fox skin, which hung from the kachina's waist, stuck out below the bottom edge of the cape, almost touching the ground, as if the kachina had a tail. Up in the trees, the magpies were still clattering. Rak rak rak rak rak rak rak, rak rak rak. The kachina raised his staff toward the peaks of the mountains, rising above the forests on the hillside. The magpies quieted down.

That was just a coincidence, George told himself.

The kachina turned around again and thumped the end of his staff in the dirt, apparently pleased with himself.

This is ridiculous, George thought, nobody's going to believe this. Here I am trying to talk to some guy wearing a cape and a blue cone on his head. He's probably some crazy and I'm going to get myself killed.

The kachina shook his head, looking at him intently, as if to say, You don't have to worry, I'm not going to hurt you.

George laughed to himself: I'm being silly, he doesn't look dangerous. I don't have to worry, he's not going to hurt me.



The mask was expressionless as before, there was nothing about the features that could change, that could give expression one way or another, but for a moment George had the idea that the kachina with his small upside-down triangle for a mouth, was smiling at him.

I've been working too hard lately, George said to himself, there's too much pressure in the modern world.

The kachina nodded, and continued to smile.

George looked back at the house, but from this distance he couldn't tell whether Mary Olive was still watching him from the window or not. He thought about it for a moment—*This is insane. Do I dare? Yes, the question: do I dare?*—then grinned to himself and shrugged a little *What the hell* cleared his throat, hitched up his pants, and started to climb through the rails of the fence for a closer look.

The kachina stepped back a little, onto the floor of the wash, to give him more room. The turtle-shell rattle clacked.

George was halfway through the fence, one leg on one side, one leg on the other, when he got stuck, his stomach wedged between the rails, his belt hung up on a splinter. He flapped his arms, trying for leverage, then looked over sideways at the kachina.

“Tight squeeze, ha ha.”

The kachina tilted his head sideways, bent over a little, to get a better view.

George sucked in his stomach and got a handhold on the rail above him and pushed his way through, tearing his belt free from the splinter and landing with an “Ooof!” on his hands and knees. He stood up, brushed himself off. “I keep meaning to lose some weight but you know how it is.”

The kachina, with rolls of fat layered on his waist above his kilt, just looked at him.

George harrumphed, straightened his shoulders, tried to regain some of his lost dignity; he moved a couple of steps closer to the kachina, down the edge of the wash.

“Well, now. Can’t you tell me something about yourself and what you’re doing here?”

The kachina thought for a moment, then raised his staff in front of him, a sudden motion. George thought the kachina was going to hit him and ducked, stumbled backward over a rock and sat down heavily on the edge of the bank, his eyes closed, ready for the blow, his arms thrown over his head. When nothing happened, he opened his eyes slowly and peeked between the cracks of his arms. The kachina stood where he was, his staff still raised in mid-gesture, looking at George. George laughed, embarrassed, trying to appear as if he’d meant to sit there all along. He shifted his weight to get a stone out from under him.

“Ha ha, yes, ahem. Well, can you tell me at least if you’re supposed to be an Indian? I mean, are you an Indian? Or if you’re not, is that what you’re dressed up to look like? I mean, is that what this is all about?”

The kachina looked at him blankly.

George was getting disgusted with himself. *I’m not handling this at all well.*

“What I mean is, we haven’t lived here very long. We don’t know anything about Indians or kachinas or things like that. I’ve never seen anything like you before.”

The kachina looked down at himself, then cocked his head sympathetically at George: *Oh.*

The sun had cleared the mountains and the tops of the trees, backlighting the kachina against the shadows of the hillside, the dark green of the forests. George searched the features of the blue mask, the black slits painted for the eyes, the small black triangular mouth, the blank face that nonetheless seemed concerned and friendly, almost as if the kachina was searching George's face in return (*He doesn't know what to make of me, any more than I know what to make of him*), though he still couldn't make out the eyeholes or the eyes, the breathing space for the mouth, some sign of the person inside. But in the strong, angled sunlight, the feathers and red yarn at the point and on either side of the mask glowed, as if illuminated from within, and the entire figure was ringed with light, dazzling. George laughed a little, shook his head slowly.

"This is all very peculiar."

The kachina shook his head slowly in return, mirrored him: *It certainly is.*

The two stared at each other for a moment; then George flinched as he heard a cry from the direction of the house and turned around. Mary Olive was shuffling across the yard and down the terrace steps toward them, still in her nightgown, George's black raincoat thrown around her shoulders, waving a broom over her head.

"Hold on, George! I'm coming! I'm coming!"

"Oh good heavens," George said and looked back at the kachina.

*Now what?* The kachina looked at him.

"I'm afraid to think."

George stood up, brushing off the seat of his pants. The kachina stood behind him in the wash, peered around him, looking up through the rails of the fence, his head cocked, watching the woman with the broom charging toward them, amazed.