“Sticks” by George Saunders

Every year Thanksgiving night we flocked out behind Dad as he dragged the Santa suit to the road and draped it over a kind of crucifix he’d built out of a metal pole in the yard. Super Bowl week the pole was dressed in a jersey and Rod's helmet and Rod had to clear it with Dad if he wanted to take the helmet off. On the Fourth of July the pole was Uncle Sam, on Veteran’s Day a soldier, on Halloween a ghost. The pole was Dad's only concession to glee. We were allowed a single Crayola from the box at a time. One Christmas Eve he shrieked at Kimmie for wasting an apple slice. He hovered over us as we poured ketchup saying: good enough good enough good enough. Birthday parties consisted of cupcakes, no ice cream. The first time I brought a date over she said: what's with your dad and that pole? and I sat there blinking.

We left home, married, had children of our own, found the seeds of meanness blooming also within us. Dad began dressing the pole with more complexity and less discernible logic. He draped some kind of fur over it on Groundhog Day and luged out a floodlight to ensure a shadow. When an earthquake struck Chile, he lay the pole on its side and spray painted a rift in the earth. Mom died and he dressed the pole as Death and hung from the crossbar photos of Mom as a baby. We'd stop by and find odd talismans from his youth arranged around the base: army medals, theater tickets, old sweatshirts, tubes of Mom's makeup. One autumn he painted the pole bright yellow. He covered it with cotton swabs that winter for warmth and provided offspring by hammering in six crossed sticks around the yard. He ran lengths of string between the pole and the sticks, and taped to the string letters of apology, admissions of error, pleas for understanding, all written in a frantic hand on index cards. He painted a sign saying LOVE and hung it from the pole and another that said FORGIVE? and then he died in the hall with the radio on and we sold the house to a young couple who yanked out the pole and the sticks and left them by the road on garbage day.

Notes
This week we return to fiction, and, as you will see, this exercise is all about imagination. First, notice that this narrator has a big, painful story to tell: the father’s descent into more and more shocking eccentricities; the tragedy of his life and how it affected his children.
Consider how the narrator condenses a lifetime’s experience with this father into a few hundred words. The narrator presents a compressed, selected, and crafted series of clear, precise images and anecdotes. Contemplate all the events and milestones the narrator decided to leave out in order to present this clear narrative arc and emotional effect.

To accomplish this, the narrator is a relentless, reporting truth-teller. Nothing fazes it. Seemingly without self-consciousness, the narrator reports the significant oddities, negative qualities, and increasingly disturbing details, all in the service of the mood, or emotional effect: “he dragged the Santa suit to the road and draped it over a kind of crucifix he'd built out of metal pole in the yard,” and “One Christmas Eve he shrieked at Kimmie for wasting an apple slice,” and “Mom died and he dressed the pole as Death and hung from the crossbar photos of Mom as a baby,” and “He painted a sign saying LOVE and hung it from the pole and another that said FORGIVE?” and so forth.

Notice that the narrator’s primary aim is to continuously reveal the father’s disturbances and the children’s relationship with the father. Therefore, the children are named but the narrator mentions the mother only in passing—and only to reveal something about the father.

Notice, too, that in order to shape and move along this swift, urgent narrative, the PN makes general statements and summarizes as needed: “The pole was Dad's only concession to glee,” and “We left home, married, had children of our own, found the seeds of meanness blooming also within us.”

Finally, this exercise is as much about the imaginative process as it is about the technical points outlined above. In his contributor's notes, Saunders wrote, "For two years I'd been driving past a house like the one in the story, imagining the owner as a man more joyful and self-possessed and less self-conscious than myself. Then one day I got sick of him and invented his opposite, and there was the story." Do you see the incredible opportunity here? The imagination is a powerful force. We can trust it—Saunders certainly did. He allowed rebellious, even transgressive, thoughts to invade his writing mind. Most likely, the act of conjuring this family and father became engrossing. There’s an exciting, uncensored quality to this micro story, even as the narrator makes the emotional toll on the children (and the father) poignantly clear.
Exercise

Follow the writer’s example: take an everyday experience that has caught your attention. Start to daydream. Allow your mind to wander and imagine. If the daydream seems silly or challenging or threatening—great. Go for it. Create an honest, matter-of-fact, and fluid narrator to tell this newly-forming story to the reader. For this exercise, point of view does not matter. Saunders chose first-person plural for probably a few reasons, and they fit the story. That choice is not a discussion point for this particular exercise. Yours can be first, second or third. The point is for your narrator to shape, craft and deliver your new imaginative, “what if” scenario in a few hundred words. Cut to the chase. Get to the emotional heart of the matter.