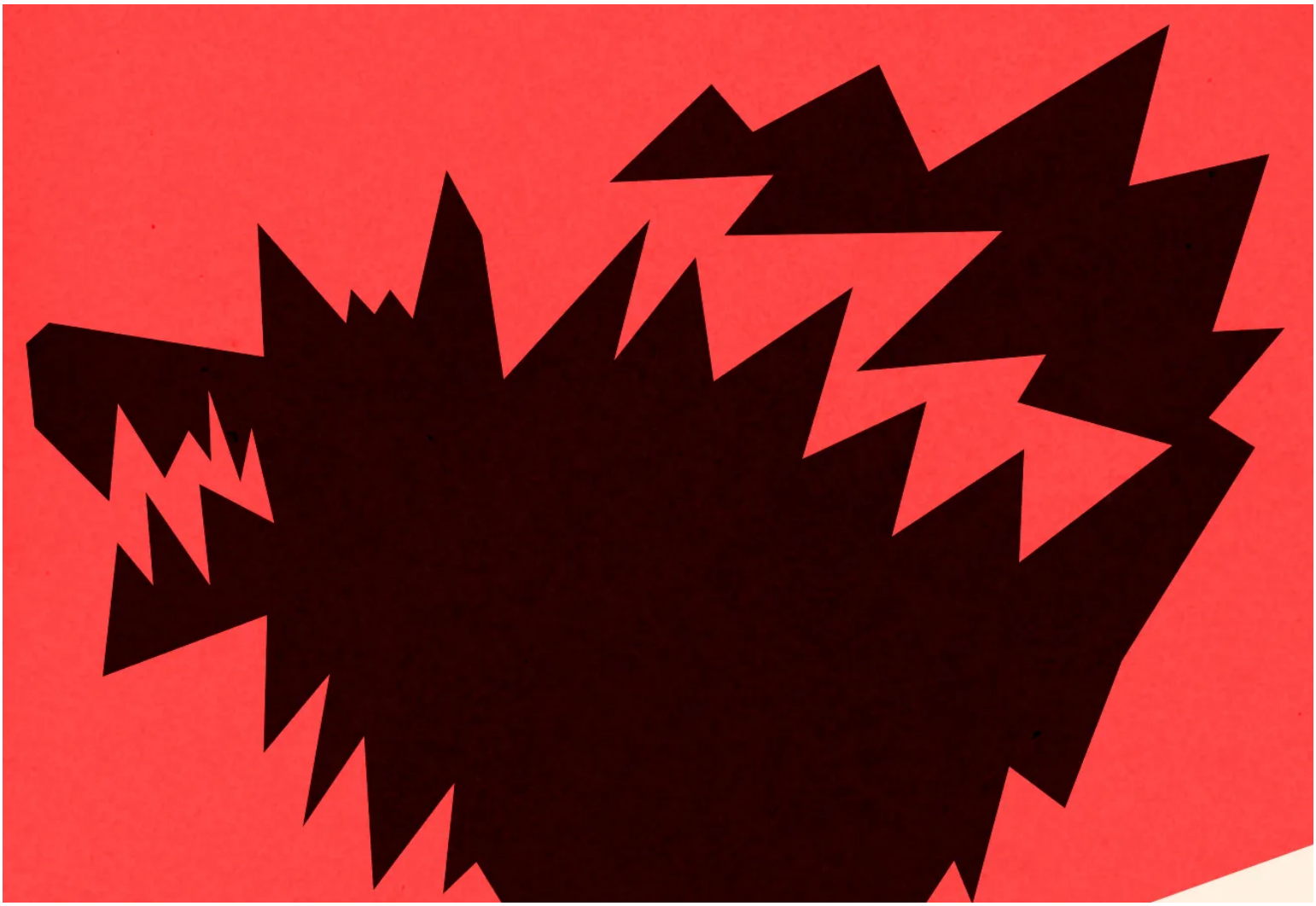
PERSONAL HISTORY

AND YOUR LITTLE DOG, TOO

Two small dogs, both unleashed, rushed toward me, snarling, and one of them bit me on my left leg, just below the knee. It all happened within a second.

By David Sedaris

December 8, 2025



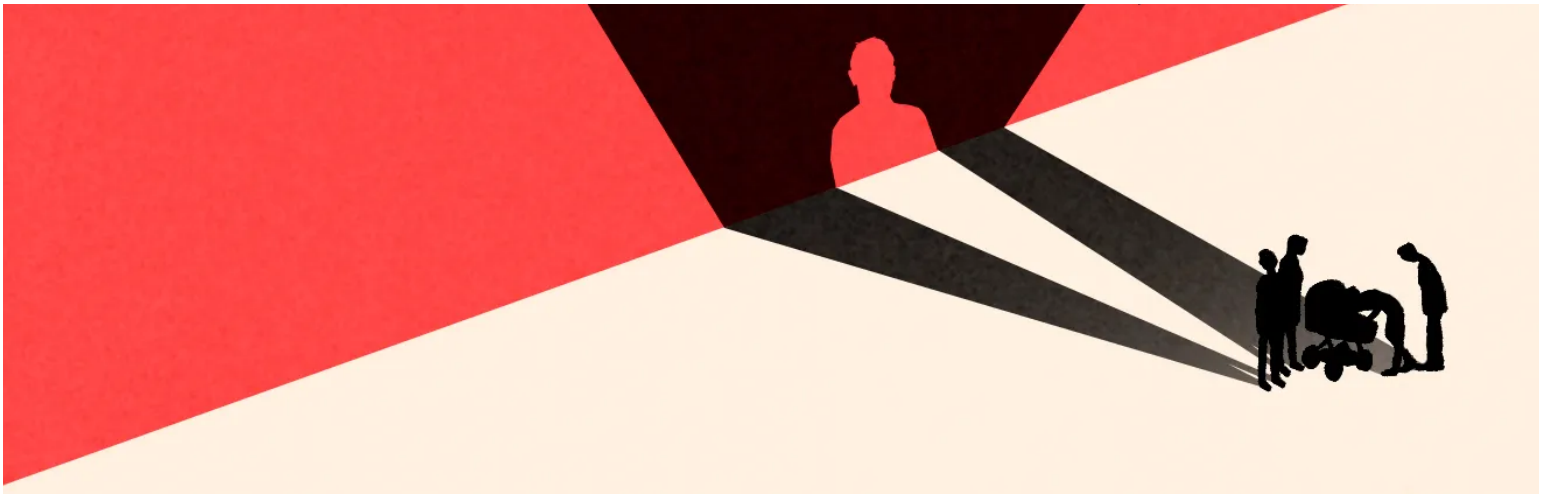


Illustration by Jack Smyth

There's a place in Portland, Oregon, that sells these doughnuts I like, and I was walking to it early one afternoon when a dark-haired man twenty or so feet ahead of me turned to shout, "Why are you following me?"

"I'm not," I said, and I pointed past him, farther down the block. "I'm following that guy in the blue sweatshirt."

I've been coming to Portland since the late seventies, and there are days when everyone I encounter on the street there seems either drug-dependent or mentally ill. Since the mid-nineties, all my visits have been work-related. I go at least once a year and stay downtown, within walking distance of the theatre I perform in. The city always had more than its share of panhandlers, strident ones who'd yell, "You could at least say hello, asshole!," as you passed them by, but the place took a definite turn for the worse in 2020, when voters approved a measure to decriminalize the possession of illicit drugs, at least in small amounts. After that, you saw people dealing openly on the street. You saw addicts shooting up outside restaurants and grocery stores and came upon them bent over in what's commonly called "the fentanyl fold," seemingly unconscious yet

somehow still on their feet. *How is it that they don't topple over*? I've always wondered.

I have done a mountain of drugs in my lifetime, and not just recreational ones. At twenty-one, I was seriously addicted to meth. Yet I managed to quit—not through the strength of my character but because my dealer moved to Florida and there was no one in Raleigh, North Carolina, to take her place. After withdrawing, I prudently stuck to pot, acid, mushrooms, Quaaludes, and Ecstasy. I tried heroin only once, and, to no real effect, would snort cocaine, though not often because it was too expensive. And I drank and was an alcoholic. In 1999, I quit everything—woke up one day and realized that, in the jargon of A.A., I was sick and tired of being sick and tired.

I'm not obnoxiously sober—at least, I don't think I am. I don't scold people or preach at them, but if their habit impinges upon my freedom or comfort I can be less than generous with my sympathy. It's not that I *say* anything; rather, I *think* it, and in a way that no doubt shows on my face. "Good God, man," my expression likely reads. "Pull yourself together."

Portland recriminalized hard drugs in 2024, but it's tough to put that fucked-up genie back in its bottle. I lost count of the strung-out addicts I passed on my way to the doughnut shop and back, and I had just headed out from my hotel again when I came upon three men and a woman, all

in their late thirties. The four were gathered around a baby carriage, and as I neared the woman lowered her head into it and took a powerful hit off a pipe. Just as I registered that the carriage was empty, two small dogs, both unleashed, rushed toward me, snarling, and one of them bit me on my left leg, just below the knee. It all happened within a second.

"He just bit me!" I said.

The woman stood upright and pushed her hair away from her face. She was pretty except for her mouth, which was thin-lipped and hard-looking. "Huh?"

"Your dog just bit me!" I repeated.

"No, it didn't," one of the men said.

I raised my pant leg and pointed to the broken skin. "Yes, it did," I told him. "Look!"

The group collectively shrugged and turned back to the business of smoking fentanyl.

"How is this O.K.?" I asked.

Blank expressions.

"You should wash it," the woman said, leaning again into the baby carriage with a lighter in her hand.

“I should call the police is what I should do,” I told her.

“Whatever,” one of the men said.

If I had a dog and it bit a man who was just passing by, I’d freak out, and hard. After apologizing until he begged me to stop, I’d give the guy my phone number and e-mail address. I’d offer to take him to the hospital. I would execute the animal in front of his eyes—whatever he wanted. Here, though, the only one who cared was me.

“The baby carriages are fairly new,” a pharmacist at the drugstore I went to afterward said. “People use them to get sympathy and to hide their drugs in.”

She asked when I’d last had a tetanus shot, and suggested that I go to the emergency room. And I meant to, really. Then I recalled the people whose dog bit me. The thought that their day would proceed uninterrupted while mine would be spent in what I imagined would be a very sad and busy hospital was more than I could bear. And so I returned to my hotel room deciding I would rather die.

That night, I had a show in the town of Salem, and, boy, did I talk about my afternoon, at least while I signed books beforehand.

“You have to understand that these addicts, especially those with an opioid-use disorder, lead incredibly difficult lives,” the first person I spoke to, a woman with long, straight hair the color of spaghetti, said.

“How is that an excuse?” I asked. “Her dog *bit* me.”

“Well, you’re still better off than she and her friends are,” the woman continued.

Unfortunately, I had already finished signing her book.

“I was bitten by a dog today,” I said to another woman sometime later. “It was with these people who were smoking fentanyl and pushing a baby carriage.”

“What kind of dog was it?” she asked.

“Whatever Toto was in ‘The Wizard of Oz,’ ” I told her.

“Oh,” she moaned. “A cairn terrier. That poor thing.”

“Did I leave out the part where it bit me?” I asked.

“ ‘End feudalism’? Do I need to tap the sign?”

Cartoon by Maddie Dai


“People like that aren’t in any condition to take care of their animals,” the woman said. “That’s the really sad part.”

“Is it?” I asked, pointing to the bandage on my leg. “Is that the really sad part?”

The next person in line asked, “Did you get their names?”

“I really don’t think they’d have given them to me,” I told him.

"No," he said. "The names of the dogs. It might have helped the authorities rescue them."

That was when I quit talking about it. I mean, how hard should it be to get a little sympathy when an unleashed dog bites you? *What if I were a baby*? I wondered. *Would people side with me then*? *What if I were ninety or blind or Nelson Mandela*? *Why is everyone so afraid of saying that drug addicts shouldn't let their dogs bite people*? Actually, I know why. We're afraid we'll be mistaken for Republicans, when, really, isn't this something we should all be able to agree on? How did allowing dogs to bite people become a Democratic point of principle? Or is it just certain people's dogs? If a German shepherd jumped, growling, out of one of those Tesla trucks that look like an origami project and its owner, wearing a MAGA hat, yelled, "Trumper, no!!!," *then* would the people in my audience be aghast?

A few months before the incident in Portland, news broke of a Canadian tourist who was wading in the Atlantic when a shark she was trying to photograph bit off both her hands. I read about it on half a dozen websites, and on each of them the comments were brutal. How awful, I thought, to lose your hands and get no sympathy whatsoever, not even "I'm sorry you're so stupid." That's what keeps me from feeding bears in national parks, or attempting to hug a baby hippo with its mother watching. In my case, though, all I did was walk down a street two blocks from an art museum.

"Well, that's what you get for walking," the world seemed to say.

I said to a neighbor when I got back to New York, "I was bitten by a dog last week!"

And he asked in a scolding tone, "What did you do?" As if it was most certainly my fault.

"Nothing," I told him. "I was walking down the street and passed four people smoking fentanyl."

"I didn't know you could smoke it," he said.

This was like me telling someone I got hit by a car and him responding, "What kind of mileage did it get?"

"Did you go to a doctor?" my neighbor asked.

I said I'd spoken to a pharmacist, and my neighbor said that wasn't good enough: "You need to see your physician *now*."

Again, I resented the onus being placed on me, and not on the dog or its masters.

Was it always this way? I wondered.

When I was ten or so, one of the three television networks we had in the mid-sixties started broadcasting "The Wizard of Oz." It came on once a year and was a real event in our household. I would make tickets and my sisters and I would turn our basement into a theatre, with popcorn and everything. At the start of the movie, the wealthy landowner Almira Gulch cycles across the plain to Aunt Em and Uncle Henry's rural Kansas farm. She's come because Toto bit her on the leg. "That dog's a menace to the community," she says, eventually producing a folded legal

document from her dress pocket. “I’m taking him to the sheriff and will make sure he’s destroyed.”

Even as a child, I’d watch Uncle Henry force Toto into the basket, with Dorothy sobbing in the background, and think, *It’s only fair. I mean, he did bite the woman*.

Interesting, to me, was the word “destroyed.” That was what you did to a dog that hurt people. Regular dogs were simply “put to sleep.” The result was the same but one was harsh-sounding and the other seemed almost like a kindness. *One little shot and it would all be over*, I’d think, looking sideways at our live-in grandmother, who hadn’t purchased one of my ten-cent “Wizard of Oz” tickets but was occupying a front-row seat, even though she didn’t speak English and would certainly fall asleep before the movie turned from black-and-white to (purported) color.

A few days after I was bitten in Portland, I wrote a short essay about the experience, which I read at a show in Anchorage, Alaska. The audience reacted much the way people had at the Salem book signing. “Really?” I said. “I get *nothing* here?”

“Dogs are really good judges of character!” someone called out from the darkness.

I had other essays to get through that night, and, though I read them with what I hoped seemed like precision, I was a thousand miles away, wondering, *Is it true that I deserved to get bitten*? *Am I a worse person than a drug addict who allows their dog to attack people*, *and who’s likely stealing to support their habit*? *Is it because I’m not sympathetic enough*, *or because earlier in the day I’d considered buying a sports coat that cost five thousand dollars and didn’t even fit me*, *thinking it would look good tossed over a chair*?

Why am I always so willing to accept the worst idea of myself, even when it's put forth by strangers?

Then I remembered that my sister Gretchen was bitten in the face as a toddler, and still bears the scar on her cheek. Who's evil at that age? And why wouldn't the dog have gone for my father, who was standing two feet away, and was a massive dick? Hugh was bitten by a stray dog in Ethiopia and had to get fourteen rabies shots in his back—Hugh, who has never told a lie in his entire life and has always gone out of his way for the elderly. My friend Dawn was bitten as well. It happened about sixty years ago, and, though she'd done nothing to provoke the attack, she got blamed for it.

"By whom?" I asked.

"My grandmother," she told me. "That's who Becky belonged to."

"You've got to be kidding me," I said, my incredulity directed not at her being held responsible but at the animal's name—Becky! That's as good as a donkey my friend Kimberly has named Cameron.

To this day, when Dawn sees a dog approaching, even on a leash, she steps into the street.

I do the same thing now. Me, a former drunk and meth addict who could very well have rabies. The only symptom I've noticed so far is an almost blinding rage, but give it time. ♦

Published in the print edition of the December 15, 2025, issue.

New Yorker Favorites

- The best movies, books, TV shows, albums, jokes, and podcasts of 2025.
- Holiday gift guides for kids, coffee nerds, food lovers, nostalgists, tech enthusiasts, and your host.
- When an Ivy League school turned against a student.
- How to cycle like a Dutchman.
- The day the dinosaurs died.
- The brothers behind Warner Bros.

Sign up for our daily newsletter to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

David Sedaris has contributed to