

Claiming One

E.J. Runyon

Inspired
Quill 

Praise for Claiming One

Runyon tells her stories with an unashamed truthfulness. The work is edgy, but never gratuitously so, never for the sake of edginess. At the same time, there exists a compelling emotional accessibility. If you are willing to risk reading, it will challenge you, capture your attention, and dare you to continue till the very last.

– Catherine Ryan Hyde,
author of *Pay it Forward* and *Jumpstart the World*

With this first collection, Runyon is following in the tradition of the great regional American writers. Flannery O'Connor, John Fante, Bret Harte, and Sinclair Lewis. The triumph of their stories was due in part to the writers' craftsmanship and vision, but also to the honesty of the narrative which grounded the fictive worlds deeply in reality.

– Adam Burgess,
owner of *Roof Beam Reader*

WARNING: REAL LIFE AHEAD

Step into these 17 worlds. Into lives as they are lived. These are the people you recognize on buses or in cafes. The people you might disregard because of how they live, or who they love.

At one time or another, a story can be told about any of us. Recognition may be discomfoting, but don't fear it.

Take a chance.

Don't look away.

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The Giant Rubber Gorilla

MY VOICES'RE ALL on the inside, afraid to come out. They know all the words. It's the pronouncing that stops them. They don't scare anyone (like some of the women on my floor at the Hotel scare me). But when you only see words inside your head, how can you be sure you're saying them right? Saying things wrong is worse than not saying them at all. My aunt Lillian can stare holes through a person if they don't say things in just the right way.

Gina and Aunt Lillian think I'm just their crazy second cousin, waiting in Gina's backseat for my weekend ride, up and down dreary streets going nowhere, like walking some cooped-up pet. Too many voices in my head to be kept at home and too young for the old folks' residence.

When my daddy left and my mamma started in with her razor blades, I moved into Aunt Lillian's house to stay. I slept in a tiny bed in Cousin Gina's room when we were both small.

Aunt Lillian never should've shown me all Gina's fifth grade spelling papers and grammar homework. When I proved to be good at it, she threatened, "I'll show you, missy, too smart for your

own good.” Now I believe I got so far ahead of myself, there’s this blank space where I never got around to being me. I think they hate me for it now.

Gina stops for gas at the corner. She pumps, then sticks her head in the driver’s side. “Mother, you want a Coke?”

Lillian takes off her lady’s pastel hat, fussing with her seatbelt like Gina hasn’t said a word. She tries to reach for the radio knob, but her wrinkled arm won’t go that far, strapped in like she is.

“Mother, a Coke?”

Lillian breathes out so hard the hanging rainbow car deodorizer twirls in the sunshine.

“Mother, yes or no?”

Lillian grunts, straining towards the knob. “Get me one of them big ol’ mushies. Make it red.”

“Slushy. They’re called slushies.”

“Like I got to explain myself to you, Regina Raeanne. You know what I mean. Who do you think you are, your father?”

Gina’s head backs up at this. “Okay, a red one.” Then, about to turn, she leans again. “Anything to eat?”

“We can wait for a Jack in the Box.”

Gina pulls her head all the way out, not catching my eye. She walks away. Then Lillian twists in her seat, shouts out the window, “Regina! Nothing for this one. I don’t want to stop ten times for bathroom breaks.”

Through the rear-view mirror I can see Gina doesn’t turn around. She nods, her hand out behind her, waving Lillian’s shout away. *I know, I know.*

That leaves me and Lillian in the car. If my good voice was working, I’d say something to her and she’d laugh. I’d say something right; maybe she’d turn around and smile at me. But Mrs. Farr at the Board and Care Hotel took my good voice. She’s

using it to make obscene phone calls to the government, so it's all slimy now.

I want to tell Lillian that Mrs. Farr's embezzling all my SSI money, so there's hardly any left for English muffins. Not even the plain type. If I had my good voice, I'd be sitting in the front seat with Lillian right now, driving around, pointing out places I used to work at, last time I was well.

Gina's shadow hits me before the sound of her shoes do. But I don't flinch; she'd never hurt me. She slips me a soda; quiet, low, out of Lillian's line of view. It's nice and cool. I like the feel of the can on my fingertips.

We pull out of the station and head to the freeway. Store signs, other cars, people on the street, all moving faster than I can settle anything in my mind. When we get to a yellow light the car slows. I can align my eyes for a second. A white and red sign on the lawn of a dirty stucco house reads: *Deepwater Bail Bonds – Open 25 hours*. Then the car starts moving again. Aunt Lillian asks, "So, what's on the agenda, today?"

"You tell me, dear."

"You're driving, missy."

"Well it is my car, Mother."

"Like I don't know it's yours?" Lillian says. "Honey, you never let me forget it."

Gina makes a strangled noise in her throat. Her hand reaches behind her head, smooths down the short curls at her nape. Then her fingers tuck the flag of the clothes-tag flat into her T-shirt. Gina used to ask me to do that, when she was fifteen and I was ten. She'd let me into the backseat for rides without Aunt Lillian. Gina's neck was always so smooth. I'd volunteer even when there was nothing to fix.

Aunt Lillian snorts and clamps her teeth down on the straw sticking out of her slushy. I hold the coldness of the soda to my

wrist; numb myself to ice. One of my voices whispers: *She's right, you know.*

Gina reaches for a button on the radio. "You want that personal achievement station? It's on AM."

"Find me some music with no words."

"Jazz?" No answer from Lillian. "Mother, Classical?"

"Oh, whatever." Then Lillian pushes out more air, complaining, "what's the rush, lead-foot? It's Sunday, slow down."

At the next stop sign we pass a junkyard. Rusted body parts lean up against the chain links like they're begging for release. Gina says, "Mother, let's not take the freeway, let's drive down Amstead all the way to the beach."

"OK, let's stop at—Lord. What is that, a boy or girl?" Lillian's pointing to a figure we've just passed, in white make-up, black t-shirt and jeans.

Gina chuckles as she glances at the kid. "That's a who-cares-anyway."

"You can say that again. And I thought you were bad with your teenage *shinola*. Lord." Lillian's eyes follow the kid, until she catches me in her line of vision. Deep lines like old wounds run across her forehead, and down from the corners of her mouth. Then she frowns, faces front again. "Why don't they try church instead of street corners? What that kid's mother must be going through."

Gina watches the kid out of her rear-view mirror, "Looks like it's a girl—she's flirting with a skinny boy—perfect match."

"Just 'cause it's flirting with a boy doesn't mean squat these days, you should know that." Gina makes that throat sound again, keeps her hands on the wheel. The car speeds up until Lillian grabs hold of the rubber strap above her window, saying, "Anyway..."

In the silence Lillian touches the top of her bun. She lowers her chin to her chest and stares, near-sighted, at the flower-print on her

left shoulder. Picks something off with her fingertips like she's weeding some delicate fabric garden.

"How about we go to Big Biffy's for lunch? They got a new one with a yarn store two doors down. I need some 'F' hooks for the afghan we're crocheting at church."

Gina slows down a bit, tilts her head. "Sounds like a plan, but not a sound plan." She nods to me. "She won't stay in the car after lunch."

Yes I will.

Lillian sighs. "Then let's go to the yarn shop first. We'll come get her from the car after, for lunch."

"Yeah?"

They think awhile. Lillian says, "Nah, let's just skip the yarn shop; I'll get the hooks later. Lacy said she'll be by during the week."

"How's she doing? Gene still holding on?"

"Just barely, poor man—at least your father had the decency of *wham*, dying all at once."

In their silence, my head fills with whispers I can hardly feel. Gene, Lacy's husband, is dying, the same way Gina's dad did. I try not to listen, but faintly, like the scars from all my operations that Mrs. Farr insists I haven't had, I hear singing in my head: *foul decay, run away, lost kiss, last dismiss, here today, slow decay, late for lent, desiccant.*

I *would* have stayed in the car while they went for yarn.

There's a giant rubber gorilla tied to the roof of a building. Its arms are outstretched; they look pretty strong. I want to climb the roof, have the gorilla be mine, to protect me, to listen to my voices. So I can go out on my own, without Lillian. But it's staring out into the distance; we don't make eye-contact.

Gina doesn't take the next turn like she needs to, to get to Big Biffy's. "I don't know. I'm not hungry yet," she says. "Let's just drive around awhile, okay?"

"Well then, turn off that air conditioning." Lillian rolls her window down, sticks her elbow into the breeze. "What a glorious Sunday," she says to the trees.

Lillian is pointing out all the jacaranda trees lined along the streets.

"They're heaven to look at June through September." She breathes in big, her face to the lavender umbrella over us. "You ever see such beautiful trees?" She sighs again. "Little white bunnies and chicks all sitting in the carpet of purple underneath," she turns her face to Gina. "course, I heard the roots get all into your plumbing. Right into everything. Screws it all up. Wouldn't want one in my yard."

Gina mumbles about roots doing just that. She doesn't look over, like she's not even said anything at all. They both ignore the mumble, like they do me.

We slow to a stop at a light. While we wait for the car in front of us to take its turn, Lillian fumbles her slushy cup and it falls out the window, bouncing against the tail-end of a white hatchback that's come up fast on our right. The white car screeches around the corner. I catch a glimpse as it goes, a big splash of red slushy on the bumper.

"Mother!"

"It was an accident," Lillian says, turning with surprise to Gina. "Honest. Oh, my Lord." Then they both start giggling, high, tinkly—like trembling nerves when you've sprinkled glitter on them so they'll show to the light.

Our light's changed. Gina's flying on through the intersection, watching through her mirrors for the bloodied car to come get us.

My can of soda rolls right off of my lap when she slams on the breaks at the next stop. It rolls out of sight under Gina's seat and stays there. The sound and lightness of their laughter hang in the backseat over my head.

Gina teases, "Wait till I tell Lacy and all the quilt ladies what a vandal you are. They won't let you near their babies at Bible preschool once this gets out."

"Gina," Lillian laughs, "I swear, I didn't even see him coming." Holds her hand to her chest, "Oh, Lord!" She reaches up with a single finger to wipe at the corner of her eye. Patting at the air an inch above Gina's arm, Lillian shifts her bottom in the car seat, leans into the space between. Without taking her eyes off the road or turning to Gina, she lowers her voice. She's grinning at Gina, and Gina, she's smiling. Nodding, too.

I don't get it. Never have. If I laughed at Lillian, she'd've slapped me so hard, a hiss in her voice—*you don't exist*, and I'd have to make myself disappear to hide myself. But here they are, off giggling. I listen. Nod. Though I'll never know what it feels like to really know why.

"Jack in the Box," Lillian says.

Gina shakes her head, "Carl Jr. is right up on Powter. They've got a salad bar."

"I don't like their drive-thru; they tacked it onto the building all wrong. Bass-ackwards, I have to do the ordering."

"Okay, then I'll park and go in and order. I can make me a salad."

"Well," Lillian says, "get me a Chicken Club Combo. I'll share mine with her. No ice in the Dr. Pepper."

We pull into the parking lot; Gina stops the car right up against the wall-wide windows. They reflect the sun so our car looks like it's inside, eating fries, slurping malts with the families in

the booths. Gina gets out. Aunt Lillian tells her, “Gimme your keys, I want to hear the radio.”

Lillian’s watching Gina’s every move. Her head works left and right, like Gina’s remote controlled. Lillian only glances away when she sees Gina walk toward the salad bar with her plate.

Gina circles the salad bar, head down. Choices.

A redhead’s at the opposite end of the bar, she and Gina both move toward the middle. When the woman reaches for the same tongs Gina’s going for, their hands must have touched because they both pull back, look up at each other.

Gina’s putting her arms out, hugging like they’re old friends, two plates held out behind two backs. Now Lillian is muttering, “Damn. Oh, Hell. What does she want?” Gina glances to the car then sets her back to us, talks to the short redhead longer. Lillian’s muttering curses until a boy hands Gina her bag of food in exchange for her number. Gina leans into the woman and kisses her cheek before she turns to come back.

Now Gina’s eyes are on her feet as she walks. Her salad plate’s half empty; she’s forgotten a lid. Lillian’s food bag swings from her fingers under the plate. Gina touches the back of her neck with her free hand.

“In public? On a Sunday? You talked to that—in public? What is in your head, girl?”

“Mother, Jo is—”

“Nope.” Lillian cuts her off, “don’t even speak.” She yanks the food in through the window, hisses, “Gimme my change.”

“Mother—” Gina stands, motionless. Then she breathes out like it hurts, “It’s in the bag.” She walks around; past the

headlights, like crossing a stage. Me and Lillian watching some show.

I see Gina's ears grow redder as she waits in her seat, not turning the key. No voice on the radio. She tips the salad out her window, lets it slide off the plate, lets the plate slip from her hand too.

Gina starts the car up, looks over her shoulder to pull out of the parking space. Our eyes meet. She glances beyond me, eyes guilty from more than just this Jo. I keep watch on our window; that redhead's taken a seat, but the trick of the window puts her in the back of our car, right next to me. As Gina pulls out the woman drops away, then she's gone. A whole new voice calls out to me, familiar; *am I to blame?*

Gina's ears are still red, even after Lillian's stopped hissing every few seconds. Once in a while Gina stomps her brakes hard; scolds drivers to 'pick a lane, buddy, pick a lane'. Swerves more to pass cars on their right, won't wait for traffic to speed. Finally she turns onto a quieter street. I'm hungry. Lillian still has hold of the food.

We drive aimlessly. Gina and Aunt Lillian are silent. Their giggling left blocks behind.

"Shit! Squirrel!" Gina shouts. She tries to slam on the brakes but something's wrong; they're not taking, and she ends up pulling the wheel sharp to the right, slamming the car into a rank of garbage cans in the gutter.

Lillian yells, "What the—" holds her hands out to stop from banging into the dashboard. I stretch my legs out to the seatback but slip; fall over, the seatbelt digging into my side.

Lillian is yelling again. Gina is crying. She twists, bends, reaches under the steering column; little tinny sobbing noises.

“You okay, baby?” Lillian asks.

Gina straightens out, comes up with my soda can in her fist. Dented but still unopened. “Under the brake.” Tears still streaming down. She pounds on the steering wheel. “God damned can. Goddammit. God damned lousy squirrel. Fucking-goddamned-mother-squirrel.”

She goes on and on like that. Lillian reaches over, gives her a good slap. Hard. My voices all start up at once, reporting the news: *Wow. She finally touched Gina.*

“Get a hold of yourself. It was only a squirrel. That’s all.”

Gina brings her hand to her cheek. The smell of Chicken Club Combo is in the air. Green from the trees shines in from the windshield. Something bad is happening now, something I can remember but don’t want to. Gina breathes in, speaks in a low, calm voice, “Mother, that was my Jo.”

“No.” Lillian’s head shakes.

“Yes. That was who—”

“Gina, I’m warning—”

“Mother—”

“No.” Lillian shakes harder now, all of her.

Be quiet, I think, don’t say it, Gina. I’ll get in trouble again. She just caught us that once, but look what she did to me for it. Just don’t say anything. Please, Gina, please.

“Yes. That’s the Jo I was living with at school.” She grips the steering wheel, looks through the windshield. “Not Joseph, Josie.”

“You want me out of this car this minute? Do you? This won’t happen, damn you. Not again.”

Gina turns, looks at Lillian through the green. “I don’t—I just don’t care anymore. Maybe you can ruin...” she tilts her head to me, “but not me. No more.”

Lillian catches a breath, holds it tight, but has to finally let it go. Turns her face to the curb. Gina starts the car, drives.

We pass the gorilla again. This time I wave.

At the Board and Care Hotel, Mrs. Farr stands at Gina's door, grabs hold of me as Gina pulls her seat forward; leans, so I can get out the backseat. Gina looks me right in the eye, says low, "Maybe we'll go for a ride by ourselves. Wednesday."

I turn as Mrs. Farr asks, "Ain't you gonna say bye?"

One of my voices tries. "Uh-huh," it mumbles to the car roof. "Bye. I had a nice gorilla." Mrs. Farr makes a *phuff* noise in my ear. And I turn then, back again. It's hard. But I bend, lean my smile in, at Gina. I touch her shoulder, gentle.

And right out loud, it's me.

I say, "Wednesday."