

# Big Feelings by Ian Saunders



The magic of Ian Saunders’s “Big Feelings” is in its shape. The story is told through slim sentences and stanza-like passages, a structure “meant to mirror the Notes app itself,” written from the perspective of a nanny to children whose father has died. Saunders gives the reader glimmers into the tremendous endeavor of taking care of young, grieving children and all the tender strangeness this contains.

Saunders commands point of view with a light touch: second-person needs subtlety to really enmesh the reader into a story. In his author’s note, Saunder says he chose to write “Big Feelings” this way to establish “an artificial intimacy with the reader, a similar dynamic to what happens when you enter into the space of a family’s daily life.” It also bolsters the sense of alienation the narrator feels as the border between work-life and family-life blurs. With strong dialogue and effective language choices, “Big Feelings” resonates: “You have created a counterfeit family. Out of overtime and tickle fights. Out of absence. You try to be the person they need you to be. To be Daddy and Mommy and everything else.” —*CRAFT*

When you arrive, the boy is perched on the kitchen island with a serrated knife in his hand.

Stabbing at the vacuum-sealed top of a plastic cereal bag.  
When he sees you in the doorway, he grins a wild grin.  
And he stabs another stab.  
You throw your keys to the ground and leap across the room.  
You snatch away the knife with fearless agility.  
The boy is too shocked to react. He didn't know you had that in you.  
You didn't know you had that in you.

The sun hasn't risen yet but it already feels like the whole day is sour.  
You slot the bread knife back into its block.  
And add a line to the mental list of things this job requires you to be.  
(Knife de-escalation specialist.)

When you turn to face the boy, you try to summon righteous fury.  
To scold him like an angry god.  
But all you can manage is, "Buddy. Why?"  
"I couldn't get it open," the boy says. "And I'm hungry for breakfast."  
"Let's ask for help next time. Using a sharp knife is not a choice."  
You talk this way now—let's this, let's that. In the plural.  
Everything either is, or is not, a choice.  
"Mommy said not to wake her up anymore," he says. "And you're late."  
You glance at the oven clock to your left. 7:07.  
The boy is five years old. He is very concerned with time.  
The boy is five years old. He is a tornado.

These days, he wakes up around 5:00 a.m.  
He wakes up around 5:00 a.m.  
And he raids the pantry to binge eat through grief he can't explain.  
Leaving granola bar wrappers and half-eaten apple cores in his wake.  
The boy has become an agent of creative destruction.  
Cutting holes in couch cushions and writing *FUCK!* on the wall.  
"If you don't respect our things," his mother says, "you don't get to have things."  
She has confiscated his Nerf guns and his safety scissors.  
And filled their home with washable markers.  
So the boy has found new ways to create.  
(To destroy.)  
"Daddy used to help me with breakfast," he says.  
*That is not a choice, you think.*  
"I know," you say.

You cut the mutilated Mini-Wheats bag open with a pair of scissors.  
You pour a bowl for him. And a bowl for you.

The girl pounces on your back in a sneak attack.  
And clings tight while you wash last night's dishes.  
She never used to hug you. Now, she never misses an opportunity.  
“Get dressed,” the boy commands. “We need to leave in twenty-one minutes.”

These days, the girl wakes up late.  
You can't get her to sleep on time.  
You have tried warm milk and chapter books and a white noise machine.  
But she hates to read and rain sounds don't calm her storm.  
She can't get to sleep on time.

The girl is almost eight years old.  
She is very concerned with getting her hair just right.  
The girl is almost eight years old.  
“Seven and eleven months,” she says.

Just before you leave, their mother sticks her head out of her bedroom.  
Like an anxious actor peeking through the curtain.  
Her first appearance of the day.  
The boy and the girl run to her and kiss her through the door frame.  
She says *love you*—to them.  
She says *thank you*—to you.  
She says *bye*—to everyone.  
You had almost forgotten she was here.

You begin the walk to the girl's school.  
The boy complains, like he does every day.  
He drags his feet and begs you to carry him.  
“No,” you say. “It's only three blocks.”  
“It's three whole blocks!” the boy whines.  
“You're a big boy now,” you say. “You can walk.”  
“8:17,” the boy says. He taps his father's watch. “Late.”  
So you disobey yourself and let him climb up your back.  
(You regret letting him wear the watch today.)

The girl wants to hold your hand.  
Because the boy is on your back.  
“All the way there,” she says.  
“Don't you let go,” she says.  
You move as a unit, a three-headed, three-legged race.  
They must have a secret contest: who can be nearer to you.

Something changes once you get within a 200-foot radius of the school.  
The girl suddenly wants to be her own person.  
She drops your hand real fast.  
“Don’t you let go,” you joke.  
The girl doesn’t laugh.  
You used to cross the street with her, all together.  
But she doesn’t like that anymore.  
You and the boy wave goodbye. She nods her head back.  
Two short, weighted nods, one for each of you.  
The kind you give a crossing guard.  
(But, actually, she hugs the crossing guard.)

You piggyback the boy all the way back to your car.  
Three whole blocks.  
The boy pretends that you are his horse.  
He doesn’t include you in this game, but you can tell he’s playing it.  
Because he is saying “giddyup” under his breath.  
You buckle him into his booster seat.  
And you cue up the playlist you made for him.  
The one with “Life Is a Highway” and “Purple Rain.”  
The one you listen to every day.  
(Your Spotify algorithm is fucked.)

The boy is thankful that his school is too far to walk to.  
And that it only lasts for three hours.  
You are thankful to get him dropped off.  
And that it lasts for three whole hours.  
And you think, today, I will use this time well.  
Today, you will take that walk you have been meaning to take.  
Today, you will water your plants.  
You will catch up with your friends.  
But you climb into your backseat and set three alarms.  
And you catch up on your sleep instead.



At noon, at the park, the boy hands you a stick and asks to play lightsaber duel.  
This is his favorite thing to do.  
So, you run and dodge across the park.  
And you smash your broken branches together.  
The boy hits too hard. He believes in the game too hard.  
His mother wants to channel this energy into something positive.  
So, now, on Saturdays, the boy takes fencing lessons.  
It hasn't helped in the way she meant it to.  
And, now, he attacks you with purpose and precision.  
(Remember to thank her for that.)  
Sometimes, it feels like he is actually fighting for his life.  
Maybe he is.

You leave a trail of bark where the battle has raged.  
By the swings, on the slide, underneath the jacaranda trees.  
"Don't make me destroy you," you say.  
"I'll never join you," the boy yells.  
During this game, you are only allowed to speak in *Star Wars* quotes.  
You put on your best Darth Vader voice.  
"I am your father," you say, although, immediately, you wish you hadn't.  
You let the boy knock the stick out of your hand.  
"I win," he says.  
"I don't want to play this anymore," you say.

These days, the boy is quick to anger.  
Too quick, maybe, but it's hard to blame him.

You would be angry too.  
He is angry now. At the park.  
Something about the park is wrong.  
He swings his arms at you and hits you in the stomach.  
He isn't angry at you, though, not really.  
You're in the path of his mad.  
You're the closest thing to the center of his gravitational pull.  
(He is getting too big to be throwing punches like this.)  
You are supposed to hold him tight; you are supposed to hug him.  
Right now, you'd prefer to take the beating.  
To absorb his little fists.  
For today, you are a crash test dummy.  
You rip out a page of your planner and say, "Draw your mad."  
He draws a perfect circle and then tears the paper in half.  
Somehow, that makes sense.

"2:45," the boy says. "Time to pick up my sister."  
The boy always calls the girl my sister.  
Like you wouldn't know who he was talking about otherwise.  
To remind you who is family and who is not.

In the car, the boy asks to hear "Hypnotize."  
"I don't know which song you mean," you lie.  
He sings the chorus with his five-year-old lisp.  
"Biggie," he asserts. "Add it to my playlist."  
Shit. You forgot you played that for him.  
The boy remembers everything.  
He has started to copy your jokes, to say things the way you say them.  
You can't help but feel proud of this. Also worried.  
Worried about what else you've been teaching him.  
(Because you hadn't meant to teach him anything.)

In the car, the boy asks if you will marry his mother.  
You look at him in the rearview mirror and say, "Of course not."  
The boy frowns and asks, "Why not?"  
And there are dozens of reasons why not.  
But in the moment, all you can think to say is, "Because I don't love her."  
And once you've said it, you wonder if that's totally true.  
Because don't you love her, in some strange, small way?  
If you didn't, what exactly is it you're doing here?  
What is the point of any of this?  
Money, you think.  
The exchange of goods and services, you think.

You love the boy, at least.  
(Maybe that's the true part.)

In the car, the boy overheats like an engine.  
These days, he runs too hot.  
He falls asleep mid-sentence.  
So you park at his sister's school.  
And you unbuckle him.  
And you hold him against your chest, his head draped over your shoulder.  
(He is getting too big to be carried like this.)  
You glance at his dangling wrist, just to check.  
3:05.

Their father collected watches to keep the time he didn't have.  
The boy doesn't know the word "cancer."  
He only knows that Daddy was very, very sick.  
And that the watches in the closet are his now.  
He knows that Daddy was very, very sick.  
And that now he isn't anything.

You inherited their father's acquaintances.  
A pod of pick-up parents with nothing in common but their kids' dismissal time.  
(And even less in common with you.)  
You have found ways to chat, though.  
About life's setbacks and minor disasters. About almost nothing.  
Bad weather and lost sunglasses and sore backs.  
They aren't sure what to say to you anymore.  
Death has turned them into saints and hippies.  
Now, it's always: *Lifting you up in prayer.*  
Or: *Sending positive energy your way.*  
They all want to help but none of them seem to know how.  
"Let me know what I can do," they say.  
"Anything," they say. "I mean it!"  
They don't know whether to adopt you or canonize you.  
"You're an angel," they say. "Heaven sent."  
And they only ask questions they don't want the true answers to.  
"How are the kids doing?"  
"Are you taking care of yourself?"

The boy stirs awake and you set his feet on the ground.  
He frowns at you.  
"I'm still tired," he says.  
"So are my arms," you say.

The bell rings and the girl runs out of the gate surrounded by the sea of her classmates.

And she greets you from a distance.  
(With a short, weighted nod.)  
And a kid you haven't met asks her who you are.  
Because you look too old to be her brother.  
And too young to be her dad.  
And she says, "That's my babysitter."  
Which is what she always calls you.  
Which is what they both always call you.  
And babysitter feels sort of right.  
But not exactly right.

A year ago, their parents hired you.  
(To be their babysitter.)  
(To learn their rhythms.)  
(To fill the chasm in their family that hadn't quite opened up yet.)  
(To play the father figure.)

A year ago, their father told you he didn't have much time left.  
That it could be any day now.  
He always spoke of his death in ifs and whens.  
(And he lived eleven more months of any day now.)  
You wonder how it must have felt, casting his own understudy.  
Knowing he couldn't go on.  
(Knowing he couldn't go on like this.)  
You remember that day so clearly.  
How their father said, "We may need you to start soon."  
How their mother said, "Can you start tomorrow?"  
And it's funny now.  
That you had the confidence to say, "Sure."  
(And that you started the very next day.)  
That you had the audacity to think you could play this role.  
But then again, here you are.

You think of titles for yourself that fit better than babysitter.  
Like, nanny. Or chaperone.  
Or personal chef. Or chauffeur.  
Or surrogate. Or substitute.  
Or best friend. Or worst enemy.  
Dishwasher. Housekeeper.  
Playmate. Childcare professional.  
Caregiver. Or is it caretaker?



You wonder if there's any difference.  
(Or if what they call you makes any difference.)

Something changes once you exit the 200-foot radius of the school.  
The girl wants to be near you again.  
She grips onto your hand all the way to the car.  
"It's Thursday," you remind her.  
"I know," she says.

On Thursdays, you take the girl to see her talking doctor.  
"She's like a doctor," the girl says. "But for your feelings."  
This is what she tells her friends.  
So that they understand.  
With you, she uses the real words.  
(Child psychologist.)  
"Well, what do you have to talk about?" her friends ask.  
"Lots of things," she says.

You and the girl watched.  
Watched the hospice men roll her father away and destroy the evidence.  
All the evidence that he was even sick.  
All the evidence that he was even dead.  
They stole back their oxygen machine.  
And their special bed.  
And their IV drip.  
They raided the medicine cabinet and took back every pill left untaken.  
Every day prescribed but unlived.

You and the girl watched.  
Watched the hospice men struggle down the stairway.  
Watched them load up their truck.  
Watched them drive away.  
"I get it," the girl said. "They needed the death things back."  
She wondered aloud who would be next to die in that bed.  
And who would breathe their last breath into that tube.

The talking doctor is tall and has a kind face.  
And it seems like she is good at her job.  
You're not sure what her job actually is, but you know it involves crafts.  
You and the boy wait in the lobby.  
And you play a superhero-themed memory matching game.  
The boy wins, four times in a row.  
He remembers everything.

“Here,” the girl says, once her session is done. “I made this for you.”  
She hands you a piece of black construction paper smeared with glitter glue.  
She is always giving away her art.  
(Your fridge is covered with it.)  
You take the time to really examine it, getting lost in the sticky stars.  
“Thanks,” you say. “Really nice galaxy.”  
“It isn’t a galaxy,” she says. “It’s a self-portrait.”

A spring rain begins to fall.  
“Can we?” the girl asks.  
“Can we?” the boy asks.  
So you drive back to their apartment.  
And they slip on their boots.  
“Is Daddy’s watch waterproof?” the boy asks.  
“Of course,” you say.  
(But, of course, you don’t know.)  
You spend the rest of the afternoon in the rain.  
Walking in circles around their block.  
Jumping in puddles and soaking yourselves to the bone.  
You have spent the year pouring yourself out.  
So you try to catch each raindrop.  
And hope this will refill you.

In the rain, you get a text from their mother.  
*Can you stay late tonight?* she types.  
*Midnight?* she types. *1 at the latest.*  
*Some friends are going out* she types.  
*Thirsty Thursday* she types. *Don’t feel like you have to say yes.*  
But you do say yes.  
You always say yes.  
The girl looks up at the dripping jacaranda blooms.  
“Daddy used to say those flowers grew just for me .”



When you get back up to their apartment, the boy and the girl are drenched and shivering.

So you start up the bath water.  
And they peel off their clothes.  
And the boy places his watch with care next to the sink.  
“It’s still ticking,” he tells you.  
And you let them bathe together.  
Usually, this is not a choice.  
(Because they have a tendency to fight.)  
The boy likes to sink his plastic dinosaurs.  
So the girl wears a snorkel mask and dives down to save them from drowning.  
They agree not to fight tonight.  
And they wash each other’s hair.

You dry yourself with the heat from the stove.  
As you cook blueberry pancakes for dinner.  
The boy and the girl stay in the bath until all their fingers prune.  
Until you call them for dinner.

When you eat together, it feels like family.  
And you can almost forget.  
The loss and the money of it all.  
“What about Mama?” the boy asks.  
“What do you mean?”  
“Her pancakes will be cold.”  
“Your mom will be back late tonight,” you say. “Past your bedtime.”

The boy frowns and shovels another slice into his mouth.  
“That’s okay,” the girl smiles. “I want seconds.”  
You have created a counterfeit family.  
Out of overtime and tickle fights.  
Out of absence.  
You try to be the person they need you to be.  
To be Daddy and Mommy and everything else.

The boy can barely keep his eyes open.  
He taps his watch he’s put back on.  
“7:02,” he says. “Time to put me to bed.”  
The boy is five years old. He is very concerned with time.  
So the girl starts her homework.  
And the boy brushes his teeth and climbs into bed.  
And you sit on the carpet and read to him.

The boy likes a book series about people who survive tragic events and live to tell the tale.

Like the Hindenburg. Or a hurricane. Or a bear attack.  
Tonight, he wants to hear *I Survived the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906*.  
On the cover is a boy, in the center of the city, surrounded by flames.  
“This is too scary for bedtime.”  
The boy shakes his head. “It isn’t.”  
“It is to me,” you say.  
“Don’t be scared,” the boy says, patting your head.  
“They survive,” he says. “It’s right there in the title.”  
You wonder if the boy will live to tell the tale.  
(If you will.)  
He falls asleep after one page.  
You unhook the watch from his wrist.  
And lay it with care on his bedside table.  
For tomorrow.  
“7:18,” you say, to yourself.

After a battle with a subtraction page, the girl finishes her homework.  
And you join her on the floor to play pretend.  
She lets you into her world.  
Where magic is real and death is a myth.  
Where she can be whatever she wants.  
Tonight, she is a vampire princess with a pet crocodile.  
Who owns a chain of successful coffee shops.  
You are the court jester and her best barista and her pet crocodile.  
You are everything else.

The girl never wants a bedtime story.

She wants to hear what you were like at her age.

(Do you think we would have been friends?)

Or, she wants to talk about her daddy.

(Tell me whatever you can remember about him.)

Or, she wants to read you a poem she wrote.

(The fish in the sea / deep down in the sea / the fish deep in the sea are free)

She wants to tell you about her big feelings.

(I get so mad and I wish I could do that thing where I sing so loud that I break a glass.)

Or, she wants to hear about yours.

(What do you do with your sad?)

And you listen as she talks herself to sleep.

(I wish Mommy was here.)

And you add another title to your list.

(Talking doctor.)

You wash tonight's dishes.

And you fold tomorrow's laundry.

You treasure your counterfeit family.

You love them in a way you can only express with action.

How you remember the names of their favorite stuffed animals.

How you search for the boy's missing socks.

How you sit in the doorway when the girl has nightmares.

How you sing her to sleep.

You think, tonight, I will use this time well.

Tonight, you will read that book you have been meaning to read.

Tonight, you will catch up with your friends.

You can never keep your plants alive.

So you tend to this apartment.

You pluck the Legos from the carpet.

And you finish a bottle of their mother's wine.

You put in your headphones and you dance for no one. For yourself.

You curl up on the couch with a beach towel blanket.

And you start to cry. But you don't know exactly why.

This place is more like home than anywhere else.

In the night, the girl joins you on the other end of the couch.

And she asks if Mommy will die too.

If she'll be an orphan.

You say, "You're okay."

And you say, "It's okay."

You play with her hair as she cries herself back to sleep.  
You try your best to be the person she needs you to be.  
To get this part right.



You stir awake and glance at the time on your phone. 5:12 a.m.  
Their mother turns her key in the door soft and slow.  
And she steps into the apartment with a pink donut box under her arm.  
*1 at the latest, you think.*  
These days, their mother gets home around 5:00 a.m. (Most days.)  
She gets home around 5:00 a.m. after drinking through grief she can't explain.  
She pulls the coffee from the pantry and brews a pot.  
You rub your eyes and join her in the kitchen.  
"Sorry," she says. "My phone died."  
(You both know this is not a reasonable excuse.)  
She hands you a maple bar as a peace offering.  
And she sits at the counter next to you and bites into one of her own.  
And you eat your donuts together in a quiet communion.

"How did everybody do?" she asks, like she always does.  
"We survived," you say.  
And that feels only sort of right.  
So you say, "Well, we did our best."  
And that feels better.  
"That's good," she says. "Thank you."  
And you realize why you can never stay mad at their mother for long.  
This is the best she can do right now.

It's in her eyes.  
And you can't shake the feeling that maybe she's an understudy, too.  
She never meant to be a single parent.  
This is a role that wasn't written for her.  
And she doesn't quite know the right lines.  
"Get them to school," their mother says. "And then you can go home."  
She finishes her donut and disappears behind her door.

A moment later, you hear the boy tiptoe out of his room, ready to raid the pantry.  
(These days, he wakes up around 5:00 a.m.)  
But he stops in his tracks when he sees you in the kitchen.  
And his sister asleep on the couch.  
You've stopped the tornado in his tracks.  
And the boy glances down at his watch.  
"5:24," he says. "You're early."  
"I'm late," you say. "Late to leave."

This morning, you agree to drive.  
In the car, the boy asks again if you will marry his mother.  
"I already answered that," you say.  
"But you spent the night," he says.  
"That was not on purpose," you say.  
"Well, will you... At least, will you stay?" he asks. "Will you be with us forever?"  
"No," you laugh, a gut impulse. But that feels harsh.  
You try to be the person he needs you to be.  
You look at him in the rearview mirror.  
And you shake your head and say, "Not forever."  
"But I want you to stay forever," he says.  
"That is not a choice," you say.  
The boy frowns and asks, "Why not?"  
And there are dozens of reasons why not.  
But you think of that picture book. The one you always read him.  
Where that bear saves the bird who's fallen from its nest.  
And the bird is thankful. And the bear nurses it back to health.  
And the bird is happy. For a while.  
But not for forever.  
Because it can't fly inside the bear's house.  
It can't be the bird it needs to be. It can't grow.  
So the bear has to let the bird go.  
And the bird goes.  
It flies away.  
(But it comes back, every once in a while.)  
You say, "It's like that."

And the boy nods.  
He understands.  
But once you've said it, you wonder if you understand.  
And you wonder which of you is the bear.  
And which is the bird.

**IAN SAUNDERS** is a writer living in Southern California. He is at work on his first novel and on a collection of short fiction, both of which focus on connection and loss, on the heart-crushing and the absurd and the space somewhere in between. “Big Feelings” is his debut short story. Ian can be reached at his website [ian-saunders.com](http://ian-saunders.com), or on Twitter @ian\_saunders.

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