

Siddharth Arora lives an ordinary life in the New England suburb of South Haven, but his childhood comes to a grinding halt when his mother dies in a car accident. Siddharth soon gravitates toward a group of adolescent bullies, drinking and smoking instead of drawing and swimming. He takes great pains to care for his depressive mother, Mohan Lal, an immigrant who finds solace in the hateful Hindu fundamentalism of his homeland and cheers on Indian fanatics who murder innocent Muslims. When a new woman enters their lives, Siddharth and his mother have a chance at a fresh start. They form a new family, hoping to leave their pain behind them.

With *Haven* is no simple coming-of-age tale of a hero's journey, blurring the line between victim and victimizer and asking readers to contend with the lies we tell ourselves as we grieve and survive. Following in the tradition of narratives by Edwidge Danticat and Junot Diaz, Sawhney draws upon the measured criticism of postcolonial writers like Michael Ondaatje but brings to his subjects distinctly American irreverence and humor.

SOUTH HAVEN

A NOVEL

HIRSH SAWHNEY



PROLOGUE

Siddharth Arora has no way of knowing it, but today is the last day he will ever see his mother. He is on the armchair in the family room, straining his ears so he can hear the television. His father and Barry Uncle have been making a racket all morning, and Siddharth has been trying to watch a game show. His mother thinks he is too young to watch game shows. Thinks he should spend time on better things. Going to friends' houses, or having them over. He enjoys these things. But would trade them all in for the television. He could sit in front of the television every waking hour of the day. He wouldn't mind sleeping in front of it.

His father hates the television. Thinks it is evil. A cancer that will ruin the greatest civilization on earth. His father thinks he should spend more time reading. Arjun reads a lot. Arjun studies and gets good grades. In two years, Arjun will be away at college. The thought of his impending departure sometimes keeps Siddharth awake at night.

Siddharth clicks his tongue. Says, You wanna keep it down?

Barry Uncle is perched on a ladder behind one of the sofas. White leather sofas that Siddharth's mother has recently purchased against his father's wishes. Barry Uncle says, in his raspy voice, Hah, boy? Speak up.

Siddharth scowls. Says, Keep it down!

Barry Uncle chuckles, then coughs. Says, Boy, you don't need to hear that show. You don't need to listen to those blondes. Just sit back and admire the beauty. Barry Uncle rests a knife on the leather sofa. Wipes his shiny brow. Says, Have a look at that redhead. I'd buy a washing machine from her any day. I'd buy ten. Reminds me of my ex. Before she blimped out, that is.

Gross, Siddharth says. But he is pleased that Barry Uncle has spoken to him about women. He turned ten five months ago, and thinks they should speak to him like a grown-up. They should speak to him the same way they speak to Arjun.

His father, Mohan Lal, is wearing shorts and a green collared shirt that is stained with paint. He says, Siddharth, didn't you hear your mother? Get off your butt and go!

Two minutes, he says. The show's gonna be over in two minutes. Mohan Lal says, With you it's always two minutes. He hands Barry Uncle some sort of tool. Says, Try this, it's wider. It will give you more leverage.

Barry Uncle says, Gimme a dull rock for all I care. Says, Mind over matter. You hear that, boy? When it comes to the hard stuff, it's always mind over matter.

Whatever, says Siddharth.

Mohan Lal and Barry Uncle are removing the old wallpaper from the family room. The wallpaper is a mural of trees and a river from some national park that Siddharth has never visited. He wants the family room to look sleek. Modern. Like a mansion in Beverly Hills or Fairfield County. He wants the family room to have a modern black lamp from Europe, a modern black lamp right beside the new leather sofas. When his mother bought the sofas, she told Mohan Lal to relax. That she knew how to care for their household. Mohan Lal exploded. Said, Yes, I'm an idiot! I know nothing about caring for my household.

Siddharth hates it when they fight. Each time they fight, he worries about divorce. He has learned at school that half of all marriages end in divorce. But his parents usually make up quickly. The night they fought about the sofas, Siddharth stayed up late with his ear pressed to their door. At first, his parents exchanged angry whispers. But then he heard rising laughter. His father's laughter. His mother has a harder time laughing after fights.

The sound of footsteps. It distracts him from an advertisement for a toy he wishes he could own. His mother's footsteps. Shit, he thinks. Shit is no longer a new word, but he still feels a small thrill upon uttering it. The Connor boys from next door started

using it first. Eric and Timmy Connor have taught him many new words. Cunt. Dyke. Motherfucker. He feels older when he uses these words. Stronger.

He turns his head and glimpses his mother. Swallows. Knows he must accept that his time in front of the television is over.

His mother says, Siddharth?

Yeah?

What did I say? Go get ready.

But I am ready.

He watches his mother check herself in the hallway mirror. The mirror hangs beside the ugly Indian sculpture that her sister gave them on her first and only visit to America. His mother is parting her closely cropped hair down the middle, parting it down with her pudgy fingers. He misses her long black hair, which used to fall in a braid down her back. But Mohan Lal prefers this new manly style. He was the one who encouraged her to chop it all off. Mohan Lal said short hair is the mark of a modern woman. The mark of independence. Arjun said, Dad, this is a free country. Let her do what she wants.

Siddharth notices his mother is showered and ready, wearing pants and a tucked-in shirt. A silk shirt with a floral print. She is ready, in case the hospital calls her in. The VA hospital that she hates. The VA hospital where she has worked for the past twelve years. Today she is on call, and Siddharth hates it when she's on call. For then he might have to be alone with his father. But today Barry Uncle is here, which means there will be laughter if she goes. There will be chatter, even if it is about Gandhi, Warren Hastings, or the Mughal Empire. Siddharth hates it when they talk about India.

His mother says, Don't be smart. Go get the brushes, fill a cup with water. Use a paper cup. And put some newspaper down on the table.

It is Saturday, and his mother gives him art lessons on Saturdays. Together they make cubes, bowls, and cups. They shade them in with special pencils. Lately, his mother has been placing various objects on the table. A pear, a candle, a spoon. And he has

had to draw these objects. After he sketches them in pencil, he and his mother mix watercolors on the back of plastic yogurt lids and paint them. She keeps all of their art supplies in a brown plastic tackle box. He wishes they would use the box for something important, like fishing. Mr. Connor is an expert fisherman.

He sighs. Says, Okay, in five minutes. I'll do it in five minutes. He wonders if it won't be so bad if his mother gets called into the hospital. Just for a few hours. Then he'd miss his art lesson. Then he'd get to stay on the armchair.

Barry Uncle whistles suddenly. Says, Looking sharp as usual. But I miss that long black hair of yours. That hair was something gorgeous. It was sexy.

Siddharth grimaces. Says, Gross.

Mohan Lal says, Chief, your problem is that you are always looking backward.

Barry Uncle says, Boss, I don't know why you've always been so ashamed of tradition.

His mother clears her throat. Says, Barry, I'll let you know when I need your opinion.

I love you too, sweetheart, says Barry Uncle.

Siddharth sits up, stretches his arms toward the ceiling. Heads toward the closet outside of the bathroom to get the brown tackle box with the art supplies. But on the way there the phone rings, and he turns to grab the yellow receiver. In case it's the Connor boys. In case it's his brother, checking in from Hartford. Something might be wrong in Hartford, where Arjun has been for the past two days at a youth-in-government conference. Something might have happened to Arjun.

His mother beats him to the phone. She says hello, then laughs. But it's not a happy laugh. She shakes her head and rolls her eyes. Says into the receiver, What can I tell you? We could have avoided this. Says, I told him not to do it, but he's always in a rush. He never listens. She puts the phone down, grabs her purse from the white leather sofa. Grabs her keys from the drawer under the phone that holds the yellow pages, the takeout menus, and the postage stamps. Kisses him on the head and walks out the door.

Many years from now, he will blame himself for wishing that call to come. He will wonder, as a rational, atheistic adult, if the universe was trying to teach him some sort of lesson. But in that moment, all he feels is relief. Contentment. In that moment, he feels powerful. Lucky. Wonders if he should wish for other things. For money. For his parents to buy a Japanese luxury sedan, or perhaps an Audi. For Barry Uncle and Mohan Lal to shut the hell up. For them to be called away too.

The rest of the day slips by in a blissful haze of game shows, cartoons, and reruns. His mother calls once to say that she will have dinner at the hospital. She'll probably sleep there because they might have to operate on somebody in the middle of the night. He is disappointed, especially since Barry Uncle has gone, and his father has become grumpy. Mohan Lal has made him change the channel to public television, which is airing a program about the fall of the Berlin Wall and a new era of peace and prosperity. As Mohan Lal watches his program, Siddharth lies on the leather sofa with his feet on his father's lap. He daydreams. About Chris Pizzolorusso's birthday party next weekend. It will be at Skate World, and it will be his first boy-girl party since the first grade. He daydreams about their upcoming family vacation to Florida. Maybe Arjun and he will pick up girls. They have plans to go snorkeling, and he wonders if they might find a sunken treasure in the middle of the ocean. Then they'd be rich. Then his mother wouldn't have to be on call anymore, and he wouldn't have to be alone with his father on Saturday evenings.

Mohan Lal interrupts his reverie. Says, Son, time for a shower, I think.

I just showered yesterday, says Siddharth.

Mohan Lal laughs. Says, Son, I can smell you from here. Go shower.

It's your farts, Dad. You're stinking up the whole room.

They both laugh.

Arjun gets home at seven, and the three Arora men eat dinner together. Mohan Lal has prepared his famous tacos, made with

hard El Paso shells. Red kidney beans, raw onions, and grated orange cheese. Arjun tells them about his youth-in-government conference. Explains that he and Adam Aaronson designed a bill that would discourage people from staying on welfare.

Siddharth is growing bored. Doesn't like the fact that his father listens so attentively when Arjun speaks.

Mohan Lal says, Son, a strong state must protect its vulnerable citizens.

Siddharth isn't totally sure what vulnerable means. But he knows his father has said this word incorrectly, pronouncing the *v* like a *w*.

Mohan Lal says, Arjun, I'm proud of you. One day you'll make a great politician. One day you'll be a man who will make a difference.

Arjun says, Thanks, but politicians make diddly. I'm gonna be a radiologist.

Siddharth and Arjun go to bed around eleven. Within minutes, Arjun is snoring. Siddharth is happy to have his brother nearby on a Saturday night. Usually, Arjun is out on the weekends. Out with Adam Aaronson. With his friends from the cross-country team, the school newspaper. Sometimes they go drinking. The drinking makes Siddharth nervous, but he has agreed not to tell his parents. His father doesn't need another excuse to get angry with Arjun. Mohan Lal blows up when Arjun isn't working hard enough. For his mother, it's the opposite. She gets annoyed when Arjun doesn't take time out to relax. Siddharth agrees with her. He thinks Arjun needs to learn how to chill. Thinks Arjun should watch more television.

Siddharth falls asleep peacefully, contented by the knowledge that his mother will have the next few days off. He thinks, Maybe we'll have our shitty art lesson tomorrow. Thinks, Maybe art lessons aren't so shitty. At six in the morning, a thunderous pounding wakes him up. He struggles to open his eyes, the light feeble outside his window. At six in the morning, he stares from his bed as his father barges into their bedroom. Mohan Lal shakes Arjun. Mohan Lal's wispy gray hairs are tousled, and he is wearing nothing but his tight white underwear.

Arjun groans. Says, Dad, what the hell?

Siddharth cringes because Arjun has said hell in front of their father. Now Mohan Lal might erupt. But Mohan Lal doesn't react. He just says, Get up, son! Get up. I need to talk with you.

If it were later in the day and he weren't so sleepy, Siddharth would protest. He would say that he is old enough to hear whatever is about to be said. But once Arjun follows Mohan Lal out of the room, Siddharth closes his eyes. He closes his eyes and falls back asleep.

He arrives at the Connors' just before six thirty. Eric and Timmy are still sleeping, so he sits in their family room and watches cartoons on their big-screen television. Mrs. Connor is beside him, smoking cigarettes and ironing the family's church clothes. Siddharth is jealous of this large television. He is jealous that everybody from his school gets to meet up at church.

Eric and Timmy wake up at a quarter to eight, and he is relieved. The three of them head out to the garage and examine Eric's new bike jump, which he constructed with spare plywood, nails, and two-by-twos. Eric is three years older than Siddharth, and now in junior high school. Timmy is two years older than Siddharth, but he is only in the fifth grade because he stayed back when he was eight years old. The Connors are his best friends, but he thinks Eric is cooler than Timmy. Eric is like a superhero, the way he can build jumps and do back handsprings. The way he can do a flip in the air without taking a running start.

Mr. and Mrs. Connor adopted Eric and Timmy from Laos, a place Siddharth can't locate on a map. But his father has told him that America has ruined that part of the world. Mohan Lal says that the only reason the Connors adopted Eric and Timmy is because they screwed up their first kids. Their real kids. His mother gets upset whenever Mohan Lal says this. She tells him to be more compassionate. To mind his own business.

After admiring the bike jump, the boys grab Timmy's brand-new Daisy air rifle and head to the backyard. They stray into the Aroras' back lawn, and Siddharth is glad to be closer to home.

Realizes now that he has been uneasy at the Connors. He has been uneasy even though he usually loves it there. He tells himself Arjun will pick him up soon. That his mother was just having a little car trouble and they shouldn't be much longer.

Timmy Connor says, Your dad needs to cut the grass. He always lets it grow so freaking long.

Siddharth feels ashamed of his father. Annoyed by Timmy. Says, He'll mow it. He's a busy guy.

Timmy says, Your dad's tractor sucks. You know what my dad says when your dad cuts the grass? He says, Hey, guys, grab the popcorn, old Hajji's at it again.

Siddharth isn't sure what this means but knows it isn't nice. Says, Whatever, I bet my dad makes more money than yours.

Eric Connor says, You both got no fucking clue what you're talking about.

Eric takes aim at Siddharth's mother's squirrel-proof bird feeder, which dangles from the maple tree behind their screened-in porch. A cardinal is nibbling at some seed there. Siddharth wants to tell him to stop. Wants to tell him that this is his mother's feeder, and he shouldn't shoot. But he also wonders if Eric will actually go through with it. Wonders what it will look like to see a dead bird.

Eric turns from the feeder toward Siddharth's old jungle gym, which is being claimed by the woods. Is engulfed by vines and the branches of a black cherry tree. He fires. Hits the metal slide, which clangs loudly. The Capasso kids, who are enemies with the Connors, can probably hear it. They can probably hear it all the way down the street. Siddharth isn't sure if he likes the gun. The noise. Eric fires again, and the clang echoes more loudly. It's a frightening sound, but one that fills him with adrenaline. He can picture his mother. Imagines her lecturing him about shooting BBs in the backyard.

Eric tells Timmy to raise his leg in the air. Says he wants to shoot Timmy on the sole of his sneaker.

Siddharth can already picture the blood dripping onto the grass. Says, You sure that's a good idea?

Eric says, Don't be a pussy. You'll see—I'm gonna shoot you next. It hurts less than a bee sting.

Timmy raises his foot in the air. Siddharth swallows. And then the bell rings.

It's Mrs. Connor's bell, calling them in for lunch.

Eric says, Dangit!

Timmy laughs.

The three boys run toward the Connors' white two-story home. Naomi, the Connors' black mutt, trots alongside them. Mr. and Mrs. Connor are on the back deck, which is adjacent to their inground swimming pool. Siddharth has swum in this pool many times, but he will never swim in it again. The wooden picnic table is set for lunch. Mrs. Connor has made Hamburger Helper and boiled vegetables. He hates his parents' Indian food, but it tastes better than this putrid stuff. It even smells better than Mrs. Connor's cooking.

Everyone sits down. It's late May, but already very hot. Siddharth wipes the sweat from his brow with his T-shirt. Asks, Did my dad call? He's starting to get a little worried. Wonders why they are taking so long. Thinks, They must have gone out to lunch after dropping the car at the garage. He feels a surge of irritation. Of envy. Why do they always do things like that without him?

Mr. Connor adjusts his big steel glasses. Wipes his hands on his fraying jean shorts and takes a bite out of his sandwich. Says, Sit tight—your brother will be here soon. And don't worry. If he's late, we'll take you to church today.

Mrs. Connor bounces a hand off her red curly hair. Shoots her husband a look.

Siddharth definitely doesn't want to go with them to church today. Wonders what that look was all about. Wonders if they're acting weird. Yes, they've been strange all day. Quiet. And nice. They haven't yelled at Eric and Timmy even once. Usually they're always hollering at them. About their chores. About making their beds and not drinking too much Coke. Siddharth gets to drink as much Coke as he wants at his own home. He wishes he could be on one of his new leather sofas right now, drinking a cold glass of Coke.

Mr. Connor shrugs his shoulders. Says, with his mouth full, What? It might do some good, Rita. Relax.

Mrs. Connor says, Siddharth, honey, how about some ice cream for dessert?

Ice cream? says Siddharth. He puts down his sandwich. Something is definitely awry. The Connor boys are only allowed ice cream on very special occasions. He wonders what has happened. Has something happened to his mother? No, that isn't possible. It isn't possible, because he has just considered the possibility of it happening. When he imagines something bad occurring, he knows he is negating the possibility of it ever actually taking place. He tells himself that the Connor boys must be in trouble. Maybe they've found out that Eric has a girlfriend and has gotten really far with her. The Connors go to church a lot, and they probably wouldn't like that. Siddharth's mother doesn't go to church, but she wouldn't like that either. When Arjun said he wanted to start dating, she was the one who got angry. The one who said he was way too young.

His train of thought is disrupted by the sound of the doorbell. It rings three times, in the way that Arjun rings doorbells. He is relieved. Wishes he hadn't eaten so much Hamburg Helper. He could have waited and had lunch with his own family.

He and Arjun walk silently down the Connors' driveway, which they get repaved every year, so it's always smooth and shiny. Unlike the Aroras' cracked driveway, which, as Timmy Connor frequently points out, hasn't been repaved in ages. Since before the Aroras moved into the house.

He says, Arjun, we're taking the long way home.

So? says Arjun.

So, why? Why are we taking the long way home?

Arjun doesn't respond, just places a hand on his shoulder and squeezes. At first this squeeze feels nice. A love squeeze. But Arjun presses down harder. Much harder.

Ow, he says. Quit it.

Mr. Iverson is in front of his mud-colored raised ranch home,

washing down the fanged wheels of his yellow bulldozer with a garden hose. Mr. Iverson drives a Harley-Davidson on weekends. He used to have a ponytail and a beard, but he chopped off his hair and now just has a mustache. He waves. Says, Kiddo, tell your dad I got his part for him. I'll bring it over in the morning. Arjun waves back. Says, Sure, no problem. Siddharth tells himself that everything is okay. Mr. Iverson will bring over a part tomorrow morning, so everything must be fine.

They pass the ever-present puddle in front of his bus stop, which he and the Connors use as a skating rink in winter. Pass Mr. Hines's Mercedes, which is parked on the street for some reason, with a green cloth draped over it. Siddharth loves that car, the only nice car in the neighborhood. Wishes his father would spend less money on books—and that his mother wouldn't make them go to India—so that the family could be seen in such a car. The sight of the cream-colored vehicle peeking from under a corner of the cover makes him forget about Arjun's heavy hand.

There are way too many cars parked in front of his own driveway. There's a car he doesn't recognize, a long Lincoln, and there's Barry Uncle's Accord, even though he's supposed to be in New Jersey on business. But his mother's LeBaron isn't there. Maybe she's sick, he thinks. Maybe her shitty boss made her work again, even though she's supposed to have the day off after being on call.

When they get to their mailbox, Arjun pauses. Siddharth doesn't look at him. Doesn't want to hear whatever Arjun is about to explain. He stares at the daffodils and crocuses sprouting at the base of the mailbox. His mother planted these bulbs several weeks ago, and he'd grudgingly agreed to help her. The flowers look pretty now, and he might like to paint them. He wants to charge toward the house, break into a run, like he always does upon reaching the mailbox. But Arjun's hand squeezes him again. Hard.

What the hell! says Siddharth.

I need to talk to you, says Arjun.

He stares at their single-story home. Thinks, Eric Connor is right. The wooden exterior looks shitty, and they should get aluminum siding. Arjun kneels down, so that he is eye level with

him. Siddharth notices that his brother's glasses are smudged and stained. That his brother's eyes are red. That his brother's breath reeks like he hasn't brushed his teeth in several days. Siddharth wants to cover his ears. To place his hand over Arjun's mouth. To run back to the Connors'. But he stands frozen. And Arjun tells him.

Upon hearing the news, he feels like spitting at his brother for playing such a cruel joke. But knows that Arjun will hit him hard, so hard that he'd cry. And he doesn't want to cry. The last thing he wants to do right now is cry. He says, Fuck you, Arjun. He has never said fuck in front of his brother before, let alone to him. It makes him feel better.

Arjun's face scrunches up. He begins to sob. Pulls him into his chest. Siddharth stays there for a minute, breathing in his brother's sweat and tears. Then can't take it anymore. He pushes Arjun away and charges toward the house. So that he can tell on Arjun. So that he can find out what's really going on. So that he can tell his brother that he's an asshole. A baby.

He sees Barry Uncle on the sofa, and as soon as he walks in, Barry Uncle looks away. There's an Indian woman there, and he knows her, and there's a white man with a big belly, and he knows him too. But he can't locate their names anywhere inside his brain. He sees his father in the kitchen, pouring hot water from a kettle into mugs. Mohan Lal, who wears sweatpants and the same colored polo all summer, has on a thick gray suit. He's wearing a thick, gray suit even though he doesn't have to go back to work until September.

Mohan Lal puts down the kettle and smiles a faint smile.

Siddharth steps toward him. Thinks, If he's making tea, then everything must be okay.

Mohan Lal says, Come here, son.

Where's Mom? asks Siddharth.

Come here, give your father a hug.

He obeys. Thinks, If she were really dead, Dad wouldn't be smiling.

Mohan Lal puts his arms around him. Siddharth squirms. He

doesn't like the scratchy feel of wool on his face. And his father smells bad. Like mothballs.

Mohan Lal says, Arjun has told you?

Arjun says, I told him.

Mohan Lal says, Look at this. No tears from my brave son. What a brave young son I have. The bravest boy in the world.

Siddharth lets go of his father and turns to Arjun, who is standing in the doorway that leads to the family room. Tears are pouring out of his brother's eyes, and he isn't wiping them away. Siddharth thinks, I'm the brave one. I have to be the brave one. In that moment, the fact that he is the brave one makes it all feel okay.