



READERS WRITE
DESIRE

Photo: Jason Langer

HE HAD THE CUBICLE NEXT TO MINE AT work and would visit me at my desk, sitting on the floor and gossiping. We became good friends. Our coworkers used to joke that we were secretly dating, but I never even felt attracted to him.

One winter evening, he and I went out for a drink after work. At the bar, he mentioned that a woman in our office had teased him, saying that he and I were an item. We laughed. Then he put down his drink, placed his hand over mine, and said, "So, do you think she's out of her mind, or is there some truth to that?"

I giggled awkwardly, trying to disentangle my friendly affection for this man from the sudden presence of his hand on top of my own.

"I don't know," I said. "What do you think?"

"I don't know either," he answered. Then he said, "Let's get out of here."

On the street corner, he kissed me. *Well, this is fun*, I thought. But it didn't stir any feelings in me.

When we were done kissing, he seemed about to burst with excitement. "This changes everything!" he said.

I ended up dating that man for more than a year. I cared for him and always wished that I could desire him, but I never did.

Name Withheld

SOMETIMES I CATCH MYSELF STANDING on the prison yard and staring past the razor wire and the fences at the trees and ponds and fields beyond. I've done fourteen years and have three more to go.

When I get out, I'm going to have to learn how to job-hunt all over again, how to do my taxes, how to drive, how to eat in a restaurant without hollering over to the next table, "You going to eat that?" Maybe I'll have trouble sleeping without a stainless-steel toilet a foot from my head, or watching a television without fifty men shouting in the background. But I'm willing to work at readjustment, as long as I can walk out of these gates a free man.

The other day, I ran into Buzzard, an old friend from Baker, the prison I

was in before this one. He asked when I would get out, and I told him, "Three years to go!"

"You want out bad, don't you?" Buzzard said.

"I'd bite off my left big toe and swallow it just to be free again," I said.

"That's the way it is," Buzzard said.

"So, when do you get out?" I asked.

Buzzard sighed. "I got out about five years ago, right after you transferred here."

"Oh," I muttered. I was too embarrassed to ask the next question, but he answered it anyway.

"I was busted for using and selling cocaine. They gave me extra years for being a repeat offender."

Then he changed the subject.

These days, my desire is more specific: I want to get out and stay out. Because I don't think I can make it through a second time.

*David Wood
Bowling Green, Florida*

IN MY REPRESSIVE BRITISH FAMILY, ANY manifestation of sexual desire, no matter how innocuous, was taboo. The summer of my fourteenth year, I was snooping around another boy's cubicle at boarding school and discovered a copy of *Penthouse* hidden under a pile of books. I opened it to a photograph of a svelte brunette reclining on a four-poster bed, her pale blue pajamas unbuttoned to her waist, eyes closed in some unspeakable reverie. Her small breasts were startlingly white in contrast to the rest of her flawlessly bronzed body. The picture was so clearly developed, I could see the gossamer sheen of tiny golden hairs that crisscrossed her belly like the strands of a spider's web.

But the detail that still careens around in my head whenever I think of that photograph is the way she hooked one thumb in the waistband of her pajamas, deliberately pulling them down to reveal a superbly sculpted navel, deep as oblivion, deep enough

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

Upcoming topics and deadlines are:

ISSUE	TOPIC	DEADLINE
December 2002	Against The Odds	July 1
January 2003	Scars	August 1
February 2003	Falling In Love	September 1
March 2003	Perfection	October 1
April 2003	Asking For Help	November 1
May 2003	Marijuana	December 1

to drown in.

This is what desire boils down to for me — not building skyscrapers, or composing symphonies, or traveling the globe, but a small depression in the middle of a woman's belly, three-quarters of an inch from end to end: an "innie," unpierced, the deeper the better.

Sometimes I dream that I'm a young man who spends his summers wandering the streets of Brussels with a digital camera; a young man who acts on his desire in a way that, for me, is unthinkable. He approaches women — in parks, museums, sidewalk cafes — and asks if he may photograph their navels. Many, perhaps most, say yes.

Odd, really, the engines that move us: this hole in the middle of a stranger's abdomen; this dearth of flesh. *Umbilicus*. Or, as one of my dusty dictionaries tells me, "The central point or middle of any thing or place."

The central point . . . of any thing or place. Not bad, as dusty dictionary definitions go.

Henry Dickson
Roswell, New Mexico

I FOOLED AROUND WITH A MARRIED woman last night. It started when she nibbled on my ear, and I didn't dissuade her, though I knew I should have. Then we kissed.

She said she'd been wanting to do that ever since we'd met eight years ago. We were both married then. Now I'm not. I had wanted to kiss her, too, since the day I first noticed her softness and grace at work. But I've always suppressed my feelings — until last night.

Once, I witnessed her unappreciative husband putting her down in public for some ridiculous offense. I remember thinking: *She's a diamond in the rough, pal. Why are you talking to her like that?*

She's told me they haven't had sex in quite some time. "We're just playing house," she said. She also said that her spouse has dabbled in drugs and been arrested for it twice.

How do two people get themselves out of such a jam: a loveless marriage; a thing called "playing house"? One tries

drugs, another nibbles on an ear. Are these acts justified? Are they worth the pain? Doesn't everyone lose? I should know the answer to this last question because my own wife nibbled on another man's ear — before we got divorced.

Today I will talk to my priest. He will tell me to offer up my sexuality to the Lord. But what's the Lord going to do with it? Isn't it better for me to use my sexuality to console a lost soul?

Name Withheld

LIFE SHOULD BE SIMPLER NOW. AFTER you survive the pain and chaos of an abusive relationship, you're supposed to become a well-adjusted adult who's learned the cost of being naive. And I have learned. I have passed the test in all areas but one: desire.

It isn't easy to express desire for someone who has hurt you badly, but what do the Buddhists say? "The truth is beautiful, even when it is ugly." And the truth is I really did love this man, in all his terrible glory.

I have come through this intact. I have resurrected the woman I once was, and she and I sit and pray and write and love as fiercely as before. But there are times — especially when I hear one of those god-awful Jimmy Buffett tunes — that I think of him the way I needed him to be, or wanted him to be. He wasn't always horrible. When he was good, he was divine: passionate, funny, intelligent, charming. Best of all, he adored me. But there was no middle ground with him — no ground at all, for that matter.

Maybe I would not yearn for him now had there been a real end to our relationship. The last words I heard him say were "I want my Boston Garden cup back." Then it was jail, followed by an anticlimactic piece of paper reading, "Dissolution of Marriage."

As a friend so bluntly put it, "The ending is that you are *alive!*" That may be true for some, but if I had just two wishes in this tragic world, the first would be for world peace, and the second would be to hold him once more, to wrap my legs around his body and cry reckless tears.

Name Withheld

MY LIFE USED TO BE RULED BY DESIRE. I would bounce around from man to man like a pinball bopping against buzzers, nibbling one guy's neck while planning an illicit rendezvous with someone's husband. At work, I'd pull an all-nighter to finish an important project, because I just *had* to get that promotion, and afterward rush across town to pick up a fresh baggie of pot to celebrate. Looking back, I wonder whether what I felt was really desire or just compulsion.

By my early thirties, I was having sex with three different guys, all of whom knew each other. I was running like mad sixty hours a week at my job, then getting fried the rest of the time because I was so strung out from working and worrying about my love life. Every minute of every day, I wanted something *intensely* — and it was never the thing that I happened to have at that moment.

Finally, something snapped, and I walked away from the whole swirling mess. I quit my job, sold everything I owned, said goodbye to all my friends, and rode my bicycle two thousand miles across the Midwest. I still didn't know what had made me want everything with such a passion. I only knew I didn't want to live like that anymore.

For the next eight years, I was numb. If I wasn't feeling everything intensely, it seemed, I felt nothing. Food was bland and tasteless. I was dead and empty inside. I kept telling myself this was normal, that this was what I'd longed for: no desire.

Although I'm starting to feel alive again, I still don't have any real desires anymore. I don't want anything enough to go out there and get it, the way I used to. I don't even want sex. There will always be a part of me, however, that would absolutely love to smoke a joint. That's the one desire that never dies.

Margie Willis
Seaside, California

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN MY PRIMARY focus was on being a mother to my children. My husband got my leftover energy — and that only grudgingly. I had resigned myself to a life of dutiful

sex, rationalizing that I'd had fun in my twenties, but now it was time to get serious and raise a family. It's a wonder my marriage survived.

Looking for fulfillment in some other area, I enrolled in night school to learn the art of massage. At my first class, the massage teacher gave a brief welcoming speech and then invited the anatomy-and-physiology instructor to introduce himself.

We've all heard the phrase "Greek god" used to describe a handsome man. Well, this man literally was Greek (his father was an immigrant), and he certainly looked godlike to me. He wasn't perfect by cover-boy standards — he had a bad haircut and was slightly overweight — but his body chemistry and his dark, droopy eyes immediately got my attention. When I realized that I would be seeing this man one night a week for the coming year, the desire that had slipped away from me in recent years came roaring back. I schemed to get his attention — which perhaps is why I graduated with the highest grades in anatomy.

Outside of school, my fantasies about my teacher could take over at any time: when I was driving, cooking, falling asleep. In one, I got to make love with him guilt-free: the school was besieged by outlaw pornographers who held us at gunpoint and threatened to shoot people if I didn't have sex with my teacher for their film. Of course, I complied.

Then school ended, and, without my teacher's regular presence, the fantasies began to fade. I had rediscovered desire, though, and I wasn't about to let that wonderful ache elude me again. Summoning my courage, I let my husband in on all the new fantasies that triggered my libido; after all, we had once been incredible sexual partners — before our children came along. Fortunately, he was willing to listen, and he now holds the reins to my desire . . . and occasionally the crop.

*Elle Locklin
Midlothian, Virginia*

IN MY EARLY TWENTIES, I WORKED IN A nursing home. I was usually assigned

to the day shift, but one evening I was filling in for another nurse near bedtime. Earl, a pleasant, dapper man of about eighty, was sitting in a wheelchair outside his room when I came around to pass out medications.

After I gave Earl his pills, he said to me, "Where's my good-night kiss?" I smiled and started to move on, but he persisted: "Lucille always gives me a good-night kiss." So, just to shut him up, I leaned over and kissed him.

As our lips met, a wave of intense desire rippled through me. I walked away feeling confused, and hungry for more of that good feeling.

*Anita Snyder
West Lafayette, Indiana*

EVERY MAY, THE EIGHTH-GRADE STUDENTS at Our Lady of the Valley Parochial School selected a May Queen to lead a parade in honor of the Blessed Virgin. A large statue of Mary — dressed in pale blue, with porcelain white skin — was carried at the head of the procession. I entered eighth grade with only one desire: to become that year's May Queen. I couldn't imagine anyone more qualified than I was: devout, pious, and pure, I prayed the rosary on my bare knees, volunteered at a nursing home, and read to the younger children on the bus.

At the time, the school population was made up primarily of white farm kids from the lower valley. There were few Hispanics, and even fewer who looked like me: dark, with frizzy hair and crooked teeth. Nevertheless, I offered up daily sacrifices to the Virgin in hopes that I would be picked.

On the day of the election, as we students voted, I recited silent prayers to Mary. My heart raced with anticipation while the nun read the votes aloud. My name was read only once: my vote. The girl chosen to lead the parade was blond, blue-eyed, and popular. Each day after school, she would head to the bathroom, apply heavy makeup, and hike up the skirt of her uniform. On the bus home, she would sit at the back and make out with her boyfriend of the week.

That summer, I received my first

kiss, and soon after that, my desires became less pious. But I never stopped praying to Mary. These days, my house is filled with images of the dark Virgin of Guadalupe — symbol of love and hope for the disenfranchised.

*Yolanda B. Briscoe
Santa Rosa, California*

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