



READERS WRITE REDEMPTION

I REMEMBER SISTER MARTHA STORMING into our seventh-and-eighth-grade classroom at Saint Catherine's, black habit billowing behind her, large silver cross rattling against the oversize rosary she wore. She was stout, with thin, tight lips and small black eyes like raisins. A starched white cap with a black scarf pinned to it hid her hair and framed her puffy face, the only part of her that showed from beneath the habit.

That was the year John, a sixth-grader, developed a crush on me. Looking back at my pictures, I'd say it wasn't because of my physical beauty. I had straight brown hair with severe bangs, a chubby, freckled face, and the beginning of breasts that I desperately tried to hide by keeping my arms crossed or holding my books tight to my chest.

John and I would sometimes visit during recess or lunch and sit together on the bus. We talked about what was happening at school or the latest movie playing at the Strand Theater. For my birthday, John presented me with a chain-link ID bracelet with my name engraved on one side and his name on the other. I was very proud of his gift and enjoyed showing it off.

One day Martha came bustling into the classroom in one of her darker moods. She summoned an eighth-grader named Julie to the blackboard to solve a math problem. A thin, self-conscious girl with a speech impediment and a scar on her lip from being born with a cleft palate, Julie struggled to find the solution. Martha pressured her: "Well, what's the answer? Haven't you learned anything? Are you just stupid?" Then Martha looked skyward and uttered her favorite phrase: "Oh, Lord, give me patience."

Apparently, the Lord didn't, because Martha grabbed Julie by the shoulders, shook her, and slammed her into the blackboard. Crying, Julie stumbled back to her desk with Martha yelling at her every step of the way. Then Martha turned to the row I was in.

Seeing that my turn was coming, I began working feverishly on the problem. Two other girls ahead of me failed to solve it and suffered the consequences. When Martha called me up

to the blackboard, I picked up the chalk and shakily wrote out an answer.

"Wrong!" Martha bellowed, hitting the blackboard with a long wooden pointer. "All you have time for is boys and bracelets!"

I stared at her with a mixture of anger and disbelief. Then she took me to the nearby study room, where she put her face so close to mine that I could see droplets of oil oozing from the pores of her pasty skin. "I've seen you with that boy," she said. Her breath was warm and smelled like garlic. "What have you been doing with him?"

"We were just talking," I mumbled.

"Don't you lie to me, young lady. What has been going on between you?"

"Nothing!"

"Has he touched you?"

"No! Never!"

"Why did he give you a bracelet?"

"Because he likes me, I guess."

"Are you going to get married?"

I stared at her in shock: "Married? I'm only twelve years old!"

Martha told me that she never wanted to see me talking to John again, and that from that day on he and I would ride different buses. "Now we're going over to the chapel, where you can say your act of contrition and ask forgiveness for your sins."

She marched me out of the school building and across the gravel parking lot to the nuns' convent — just a house, really. I had never been inside it before. In the "living room" were three short rows of pews facing a small altar, which held a statue of the Virgin Mary looking down at the baby Jesus in her arms. The only illumination was the faint light coming through the heavy damask curtains.

"Now pray for your sins," Martha commanded.

As I knelt there, the only sin that I could think of was the total, absolute hatred I felt for her, a nun, a bride of Jesus, a holy person. We'd all been warned over and over by the sisters, starting in the first grade, not to carry home tales about what happened at school. When some children told, in hopes that their parents would do some-

thing about the abuse, the result was often a whipping at home, too, because they must have done something wrong to upset "the good sisters."

The lump in my throat and the heaviness in my chest turned into loud sobs.

Sister Martha beamed with pleasure at what she believed were tears of penitence and remorse. She had saved me. I was redeemed.

Joan F. Bowen
Warsaw, Missouri

I WAS A CITY KID, BUT ONE SUMMER when I was about ten years old, my family went to Michigan for a camping trip. My dad let me bring his old BB gun along, and I went strolling through the woods with it one morning. From what seemed an impossible distance, I aimed at and actually hit a chipmunk. The thrill lasted about one second before it turned to horror. The BB did not kill the poor creature — at least, not right away

— and the chipmunk let out a shriek as it crawled back into the trees.

I live in the forest now, and for years I have made sure that the many chipmunks around our house roam unmolested and get their fair share of the birdseed. I contribute regularly to a dozen or more animal-rights groups and shelters. I write letters to my congress-people on behalf of threatened species. I rarely eat meat.

But I do not feel any sense of redemption. The memory of that wail, nearly forty years later, still makes my eyes tear and my guts hurt.

Name Withheld

I HESITATED IN THE DOORWAY OF THE examining room before going in. The sight of my patient repulsed me: a grossly overweight woman of about fifty with coarse hair on her chin, a stained, loose-fitting housedress covering her bulk, and hideously swollen legs with skin like tree

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.)

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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
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
June 2003	Vanity	January 1

bark, red and oozing with infection.

"You look like the boy that plays the piano at church," she said, giving me a toothless grin. I was ashamed at my reluctance to touch her.

Over the next few months, I managed to rid her of the infection, but with her weight, her failing heart, and her weak lungs, it was obvious that she could not care for herself. She refused to leave her apartment for a nursing home, though, clinging fiercely to her last bit of independence. When she could no longer physically make it to my office, I took my medical bag and, feeling very altruistic, made a house call.

Wearing my benevolence proudly, I stepped up to Number 8 and knocked. As the door swung in, I was enveloped by the passionate sound of gospel singing. Around twenty-five people were squeezed shoulder to shoulder in the tiny apartment. Her church, too, it seemed, had decided to make a house call. There, in the middle of the room, sat my patient, smiling. In that moment, I saw her as the beautiful human being that she was — swollen legs and all.

After the singing had finished, she gave me a hug and thanked me for coming. Although I realized the futility of treatment, I wrote her prescriptions and promised to visit again the following week. She died three days later.

When I think of her, I feel the warmth of people able to forgive a friend's failed body and embrace her spirit.

*Jason Ridgel
Cleveland, Ohio*

JUST WEST OF GREENWICH VILLAGE IS New York City's meat-packing district. Every so often, an underground nightclub or retail establishment will take up residence in the area, but for the most part, the meat-packing district at night is a dark and lonely place — one of the loneliest places in the city. If you walk far enough, past Tenth Avenue, you will eventually run into the West Side Highway. And where the desolation of the meat-packing district meets the anonymity of the highway, there is a bleak but steady glimmer of light from the Liberty Motel.

The Liberty is a rent-by-the-hour establishment. (Actually, the rooms are rented for one and a half, three, or six hours.) A man from my office introduced me to the place. He wasn't my boyfriend, or even a friend, really. He was just a man I worked with and had sex with at the Liberty Motel.

When he was feeling chivalrous, he would meet me at the train station and walk with me through the dark, deserted streets of the meat-packing district to the motel. Sometimes, though, he didn't bother meeting me at the train. I never told him how I hated to make that walk alone, how it frightened me.

Usually, we'd split the cost of the room fifty-fifty. This wasn't a courtship, after all, but rather a mutually beneficial arrangement. He insisted that we get a room with an adjoining bathroom, so that I could freshen up afterward. He didn't do that for just any girl, he said. I was grateful for the special treatment.

My very last visit to the Liberty Motel happened to be on a night when he treated for the room, and this time we got one with mirrors on the ceiling. The mirrors made me self-conscious, but he seemed pleased, so I didn't say anything. (Things were always easier to bear when he was in a good mood.) I also didn't complain because the weather was awful that night — freezing-cold February rain — and I had forgotten my umbrella, so I was anxious to get out of my cold, wet clothes.

"Daddy" (as he liked for me to call him) always needed to be in control, and I was passive enough to enjoy lying there and letting him take over. But the ceiling mirrors messed up our routine: I was doing everything I could not to see them, which meant I had to be on top. This didn't last long: I've never been very aggressive, and Daddy preferred to take the dominant role. So, after a few long minutes of uncomfortable fumbling, we settled back into our usual positions, and I just shut my eyes to avoid seeing our images reflected in the ceiling.

I was finally starting to relax into the old routine when it happened. At first I thought that our wet clothes had combined with the heat of the room to

produce actual clouds of steam, blanketing the room like a wet fog. But this was more than just steam. There was some kind of presence in the room with us, filling every inch of the air. There was something familiar about it. Then, in my heart, I understood: the presence filling that room was God himself. The Divine had chosen to reveal himself to me there in that motel room.

As I lay naked in bed, staring at the ceiling mirrors I could no longer see, God gathered me up in his arms and pulled me away from the man on top of me, away from the things that were being done to me, until all I could feel was a gentle rocking, like being held securely in the arms of a father who loves you dearly. I felt the unconditional love of God pouring into me, and I heard him whisper in my ear, his voice simultaneously as loud as thunder and as quiet as the patter of a gentle rain. God called me by name and said simply, "Why are you doing this to yourself?"

Those words broke a dam inside of me, and for the first time, I allowed myself to feel the lifetime of loneliness that had sent me seeking companionship here at the Liberty Motel. I felt emptied to the core, and then the unconditional love of God filled me up again and made me whole. That night, I understood the power of redemption.

I don't remember how long it took for the man to finish, or if he even noticed that I had started to cry, or what I said to him when it was time to leave. I just remember that, when I left that place, I didn't go home. I wandered aimlessly up and down Tenth Avenue and the West Side Highway, ignoring the cabs and squad cars that slowed and beeped as they passed, urging me to come out of the freezing rain. I walked and walked and let the cold rain soak me, cleanse me. I was no longer afraid to walk those streets. I was walking with God now; what was there to be afraid of?

Hours passed, and I started to see the lights of Times Square. I had somehow meandered all the way back to my apartment: more than forty blocks. When I got home, I opened my Bible at random to Psalm 139. I'm not sure

whether I'd ever read it before: "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your Presence? If I go up to the heavens, You are there. If I make my bed in the depths, You are there."

And I knew it to be true, for I had made my bed in the depths, and God had found me, even there.

*Catherine M. Kolwey
Brooklyn, New York*

LATE 1967, IN TUY HOA, VIETNAM, A departing soldier handed me his copy of Bernard Fall's *Vietnam Reader*, an anthology of views on Indochina. A few days earlier, a sniper had taken a couple of shots at me while a firefight was going on outside the perimeter wire. For a nineteen-year-old sentry-dog handler recently arrived in Vietnam, that book would become a profound background to the gunfire and panicky walkie-talkie reports and explosions that marked the start of the Tet Offensive.

With time and distance and more reading, the war began to look to me (and still does) like neocolonial meanness tainted with racism. It served very few Americans well, and even fewer Vietnamese. And, contrary to the prevailing myth at the time, it did not enhance democracy anywhere. Afraid of the communist menace, we sabotaged ourselves in the 1956 elections, abandoning our anticolonial heritage and our commitment to defend democracy. I know there were Viet Cong atrocities, but in Phu Yen Province, they rather consistently hit military targets. By the time my year was up in Vietnam, I had started to feel as if my nation and I needed some redemption.

In late October of 1968, home on leave, I sat in a friend's funky apartment discussing the upcoming elections with his friends and neighbors. It was Richard Nixon versus Eldridge Cleaver versus Hubert Humphrey versus George Wallace. Knowing that I'd just spent a year doing perimeter patrol at a small napalm-delivery base, they asked me how I planned to vote. I was still too young, I told them: old enough to guard tactical nuclear weapons in Ohio or napalm in Vietnam, but not mature enough to pass judgment on Nixon-

Humphrey-Wallace-Cleaver.

On the first Tuesday after the first Monday in June of 1972, I voted in the Democratic primary, putting an x next to the name of George McGovern, the ex-bomber pilot turned peace candidate. Some small sense of redemption came with casting that ballot, along with the knowledge that maintaining a healthy democracy would never be a simple matter.

*George R. Cartter
Atascadero, California*

(end of excerpt)