



READERS WRITE

FAKING IT

CHRISTMAS OF 2000 FOUND ME LIVING with my husband and two children in an apartment in the center of Paris, our fourth year abroad thanks to my husband's corporate job. Our Christmas letter that December was filled with accounts of the sights we'd seen and places we'd traveled during the previous twelve months. We enclosed a photo of the children standing on our little balcony, leaning against the beautiful ironwork railing with the Eiffel Tower in the background.

My best friend from high school sent me a similarly upbeat Christmas letter, with photos of her children and accounts of the year's achievements. After the holidays, she e-mailed me to say that she was jealous and in awe of the life I was living and how happy I must be. I read her e-mail a few times before responding:

"Dear B.," I wrote. "Don't believe everything you read. I've never felt so lonely and empty in my life. We are talking about divorce, and I think it will happen soon."

She wrote back to say how sorry she was, then added, "Since you told me your real story, let me tell you mine. I'm having my second affair, and my husband and I are both on antidepressants and in counseling. I work long hours at my job and am never home. I think my son is depressed."

I've since gotten divorced, moved back to the States, and started a new life. I've never sent another Christmas letter, and I never believe the ones I get.

*Katherine T.
Cambridge, Massachusetts*

IN 1979 I UNDERWENT TRAINING WITH a spiritual self-improvement program founded on the belief that enlightenment could be beaten into a person over the course of a week. In the training session before mine, a young man had drowned during what was called a "stretch" exercise. He was supposed to be overcoming his fear of water, but was unable to make himself swim the length of the lake.

I took part in the training because I wanted to be comfortable in my own skin, without the constant fears and insecurities I'd suffered since childhood. Somehow I made it through most of the week. Then it came time for the stretch. One couple had to fly round-trip from Portland to Seattle sitting in different parts of the plane and

Photo: Mark Townsend

saying, “Cock-a-doodle-do!” every five minutes. Another couple had to hitchhike to a nearby town wearing Pink Panther suits. When it was my turn, the trainer told me to buy some sexy lingerie and pretend to pose for fifty *Penthouse* centerfolds. He said it would help me overcome my “little-girl act.”

I was the only teenager in training. I was also the only one who wasn’t “getting it.” In their words, I hadn’t “popped” yet. I knew I needed to have a breakthrough during the stretch, but when I sat down on the floor in my skimpy lingerie in front of forty men and women, I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t even fake it — and no amount of yelling and screaming by the trainers could make me.

Two days later I graduated from the training. Two days after that, I had a nervous breakdown.

*Kimberli Matin
Pittsboro, North Carolina*

AFTER AN ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS MEETING, one of the old-timers took me aside and told me the way to overcome my problem was to “fake it until you make it.”

I thought this was the stupidest piece of advice I’d ever heard. Why on earth would someone in AA advocate pretense as a way of life? Wasn’t that precisely what I was trying to stop doing? I was already getting through my days by mimicking the gestures, behaviors, and words of people who seemed normal.

Then my husband and I moved from Canada to Silicon Valley, where he intended to acquire his Ph.D. The first thing that hit us was the cost of living: two thousand dollars a month for a house whose roof acted like a conduit for rainwater. Orange mushrooms grew on our living-room carpet. The local Goodwill was more expensive than my favorite Canadian stores. I needed to find work, and a part-time job wasn’t going to cut it. My husband had the crazy notion that I’d make a good teacher.

My first substitute assignment was at a middle school in the poorest area of San Jose. Within a few months I’d had a rock thrown at my head, been told that I was nothing but “fucking white shit” by a twelve-year-old, and had my wallet stolen. I’d also dropped fifteen pounds from my already slight frame. Every new assignment made

my stomach churn with anxiety. But I pretended to care about these kids, because if I admitted how I really felt, I wouldn’t have been able to get out of bed to come to work.

One day, during a PE class, I learned that you shouldn’t stand on the white numbers painted in circles on the ground, because they belonged to children who had died, usually violently. My students took me on a guided tour of the numbers: this one for the girl who had hanged herself because she’d gained too much weight and her boyfriend didn’t love her anymore; that one for the kid who’d taken a stray bullet from a drive-by shooting.

I graduated to full-time teacher. At night, in front of the bedroom mirror, I practiced my confident demeanor. During the day, I programmed every move: the cold, reproving look; the I’m-a-veteran-and-expect-compliance stare; the get-tough pose; the I’m-so-proud-of-you smile. I pretended to know what to do when a young girl came to me and admitted that her brother had

been molesting her for years. The police came, and I sat, gently stroking the girl’s arm, asking the questions the male officers couldn’t.

I can’t say when pretense became a reality, but somehow I reinvented myself, one choreographed move at a time.

*Maritza Dahl
Cupertino, California*

I HAVE A REPUTATION FOR GETTING things done. I used to deserve it, but not anymore. I gave up getting anything done about ten years ago, and no one’s noticed. I still look the part: I dress reasonably well, apply makeup to the appropriate areas of my face, and walk fast, as if I know where I’m going. But the truth is, I’m wandering around aimlessly. I get a few things done once in a while, but I procrastinate heavily and spend enormous amounts of time looking for things I’ve misplaced because I’m so disorganized. Nevertheless, people continue to think I’m a genius.

I have developed tricks that get me

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
April 2003	Asking For Help	November 1
May 2003	Marijuana	December 1
June 2003	Vanity	January 1
July 2003	Wasting Time	February 1
August 2003	Size	March 1
September 2003	Blessings In Disguise	April 1

through typical work situations. For example, to stay awake during meetings, I sit up straight, focus directly on the person who's talking, and try to remember what I'm wearing. (It takes longer than you might think.) I have to keep my shoulders back so I don't accidentally see a sleeve. The posture makes me look extremely attentive, and the memory game puts a look of intense concentration on my face.

Do I feel like a phony? Yes, but I used to be the real thing. That's the key to faking it — you have to know what it's like to be authentic, even if you haven't been that way in years.

Susan Meyer
Beverly Shores, Indiana

I GREW UP IN FEAR OF GETTING ON MY mother's bad side. If my older sister misbehaved, my mother would wait until my father came home and instruct him to take my sister upstairs and "give her a good whipping." With great dread I would watch them climb the stairs. Then I would hear her screams.

Some forty years later, I was speaking to my sister about our parents, and she brought up the whippings. "Do you know what really happened?" she said. "Dad would take me upstairs to the bedroom and say, 'OK, start yelling,' and we would laugh quietly together between my fake screams."

E. Constant
Monterey, California

WHEN I MARRIED MY FIRST HUSBAND, at the age of eighteen, I was already faking sexual satisfaction. Within two years, I knew we weren't compatible, but by then I was pregnant and financially dependent on him. Soon after our son was born, we sank to an all-time low. He was jealous of the attention I gave the baby, insensitive to the changes in my body, and critical of my decision to put child rearing above housecleaning. He told me that our problems in bed were my fault: I had become frigid.

I was trying to figure out how to leave this man when, thanks to a persistent neighbor and my own emotional confusion, I became a born-again Christian. Although my newfound religion offered me some comfort, it also made divorce out of the question. If I was to be a "godly" woman,

I needed to submit to my husband. "Faking it" was now not only a survival skill; it was a religious obligation.

My deception went on for ten more years. I didn't see it as lying, because my intentions were honorable: to be a good Christian and keep my family together. A marriage counselor, whom we were seeing at my husband's insistence, suggested we "act as if" we felt connected and loving even if we didn't. He believed that if couples did this, sometimes the act would become real. I clung to that advice the way an alcoholic clings to booze, with the same disastrous results.

Over the years, I became adept at faking it everywhere except in bed. I could accommodate my husband, but I had to disconnect from the experience. His ongoing commentary on my "sexual dysfunction" did little to make the situation better. After he'd urged me to open up more in bed, I decided to give it one last shot, to see if I had any latent sexual desires left. Turns out I did, and when I talked about them in bed one night, my husband accused me of having an affair. He didn't see where else I could possibly have gotten all those ideas.

In my twelfth year of marriage, I ran into an old high-school boyfriend. The chemistry between us just about knocked me over. That night, I discovered that I was decidedly not frigid, and I realized how much faking it had been costing me emotionally. The following year brought confusion, separation, loss, divorce, grief, freedom, and the end of faking it. Ironically, my faith in God has become stronger than ever. I realized I'd been faking it in that relationship, too.

Name Withheld

I FAKE ALMOST EVERY ORGASM. I'VE GOTTEN so good at performing the requisite moans, groans, and higher and higher pitched cries that sometimes even I'm not sure whether I've had one or not. I fake it for a number of reasons: because it's the easiest way to end bad sex; because I know it's going to take me more time to have an orgasm than the guy has patience; to satisfy the guy's ego. But mostly I fake it to free myself to focus on the fucking.

In my forties, I've discovered that I love the act of fucking so much that I

no longer care about having an orgasm. I become utterly absorbed in the pumping movement of our bodies, the energy rushing through me like tiny pinpricks all over my skin, the sensation of being filled up, and feeling the exact moment when he starts to come. In the midst of all that, I can't be bothered to touch my clit, or to make him touch my clit, or to find some contorted way to stimulate my clit.

I have fucked thirteen men since my divorce, and my performance has failed to convince only two of them. The first was a one-night stand who took the time to make me come after he uncovered my deceit. The other is the one I fell for.

Name Withheld

"SO, IS THERE REALLY A MUSTANG RANCH?" my friend Rob casually asked the cashier as we placed two bottles of soda on the counter. We weren't thirsty, but, in our seventeen-year-old minds, only an idiot would walk in and ask such a thing upfront.

Not taking his eyes from the register, the clerk recited, "Follow the freeway out of town until you hit the Mustang exit. It'll be on your right."

I turned my flushed face away from the surveillance camera in the corner. I had a vision of a Nevada state trooper with a button-straining potbelly, a thin mustache, and a direct hot line to my mother.

It's not as if we actually planned to partake of the services offered at the brothel. We just wanted to be able to tell our friends back home in eastern Washington that we'd "been to" the Mustang Ranch.

The "ranch" turned out to be two nondescript buildings surrounded by a monstrous parking lot filled with limos and mud-spattered 4x4s. Rob found a parking spot, killed the engine, and proclaimed, "Well, let's go in and give it a look."

What? I hadn't planned on that. But then, if word got out that only Rob had gone in . . . "Yeah, let's go," I said, fighting back nausea.

The spacious lobby was a study in warehouse chic. Thick dark red carpet reached every corner, and an enormous chandelier hung from the ceiling, casting a crystal glow on the gold-framed nudes on the walls. Six women in revealing evening wear glided single file to the center of the room and, to my horror, turned to

face us.

Not being conversant in brothel protocol, I walked past the six women to a booth marked CASHIER. Inside sat a wiry man with a mullet haircut, a Marlboro smoldering at the corner of his mouth.

"Uh, how much is it?" I blurted out, much louder than I'd intended. I glanced sheepishly over my shoulder at the women. They stared with calm and knowing smiles, instantly obliterating any vestige of coolness I had retained up to that point.

"You need to choose a lady and go to the room," the cashier said. "Prices will be discussed there."

Sensing our discomfort, one of the women mercifully approached us. She was poised, beautiful, and elegant, with a red sequined gown whose neckline plummeted to her navel. She scared the hell out of me. Gently placing her hand on my shoulder, she said in a matronly tone, as if speaking to two lost toddlers in a Wal-Mart, "Why don't you boys just sit down and cool off for a while?"

Rob and I stared at each other, searching for some excuse that would bring this nightmare to an end. Suddenly I heard myself say, "You know, we really do need money for lift tickets tomorrow" — as if I had just checked my wallet and discovered that my vacation budget wouldn't cover a prostitute.

Before the last word had left my lips, the cashier had returned to his magazine, and the women had begun drifting out of the lobby.

*Peter Graff
Seattle, Washington*

MY STEPSON SEQUOYAH IS A FINE YOUNG man — considerate, warm, intelligent. I've known him nineteen of his twenty-four years. He has Down syndrome, and to help those who can't quite grasp his speech, he's become adept at pantomime.

My ninety-five-year-old mother lived with us for a time. A small, gentle, agreeable Southern lady, she had lost quite a bit of memory but none of her natural charm and grace. At sundown every evening, however, her dementia took over.

Around dinnertime she would start to look distressed, walk to the front door, and look down the road that led to Statesville. That's where she wanted to go — back to

Walnut Street, to her childhood home, where her father and stepmother would be getting worried about her. "Well, this has been a lovely visit," she would say, "but I mustn't overstay my welcome. I should head home before dark."

"Oh, no, Mom," I would say. "Your parents have passed away. Remember?"

"Well, certainly not. I just spoke with Father this morning."

She could become agitated quite quickly by this conversation. Then one day Sequoyah found a solution: "G.G. Beth," he said to my mother, "your parents are in heaven. I'll call and tell them you're staying here tonight." In a decisive and businesslike manner, he punched the numbers into his palm, held thumb and pinkie to his head, and waited for a ring. Then he asked God if he could speak with G.G.'s stepmother.

My mom watched with eager interest as we all listened to his side of the conversation: "So that's OK? . . . All right, thank you. . . . She'll see you tomorrow."

It was all settled. Mom was relieved that no one would worry, and we were delighted that she could stay the night.

*Martha Gault
Laurel Springs, North Carolina*

THE ONLY HORSE I EVER RODE WAS A plastic steed attached by thick steel springs to an aluminum-pipe framework: the Kennedy-era version of a rocking horse. As you rocked, the springs made a screech that rattled windows and curled toenails.

I was six and my brother Frank was four the day we rode our horse at full gallop, rocking madly, our laughter drowned out by the squeaking of our mount's springs. Suddenly we swung back a little too far, and horse and riders tumbled backward in a noisy crash. I hit my head on the hardwood floor, my brother landed on my chest, and the horse fell on top of us.

My brother cried and flailed about, but I lay still, arms and legs splayed, eyes closed, mouth slightly open: the way I imagined a little boy with a concussion would. Though my head throbbed, I was essentially fine. I pictured my mother cradling my limp body, wailing over her dead son — until I surprised her with a fit of laughter.

As I heard my mother come into the room, I fought to keep the grin off my

face. I felt her lift my screaming brother off me. Then she shook my shoulder. "Oh, my God!" she whispered. "David, are you OK? David!"

I heard footsteps as she carried my brother out of our bedroom, and I basked in satisfaction. I had just pulled off a really good trick. I felt a brief wave of power.

Then I realized that my mother had not returned. I was still lying on the floor, my head throbbing miserably, but I had nobody for whom to perform. Something formed in my stomach: not a physical pain, but a deep dread. I suddenly believed that I was the only one in the house, that I had been left behind.

I opened my eyes and rose from the floor. The silence seemed proof that I had been deserted. I was afraid to call out and discover that nobody would answer. I walked quietly downstairs.

In the living room, my mother was talking on the phone and holding my brother, who had been quieted by a pop-sicle. When she saw me, she dropped the receiver, rushed over, and took me in her arms. Her tears wet my neck.

I never told her that I had faked my unconsciousness that day. My fear of being abandoned came back a year later, when my parents divorced.

*David Wood
Bowling Green, Florida*

(end of excerpt)