



READERS WRITE

SAFETY

IN LATE SUMMER OF 2001, I WENT ON A five-day solo backpacking trip through the woods of northern Maine. The first two days I followed a well-traveled path along a river and slept in rustic bunkhouses with several other hikers. The next day, however, I was to climb the imposing Mount Katahdin by myself and spend the night in a lean-to near the summit. On the fourth day, I would reach the top, traverse the tablelands, and descend the other side, arriving at civilization in the form of Chimney Pond Campground.

The trail to the lean-to was beautiful, rocky, and remote. If I were injured in a fall, it could have been several days before anyone happened by, so I was very attentive to my footing, and grateful for the opportunity to experience this sense

of danger, which made me feel more alive. I spent the night in the lean-to, feeling both the vulnerability and the sacredness of my solitude.

The next morning I continued my climb, remaining acutely aware that any accident could be disastrous. To calm my fears, I told myself that there would be other hikers at the top, and I would be safe there again. When I reached the summit, however, I remained totally alone.

Though the view was magnificent, my vague fear became an uncomfortable sense of fragility. I was so small and weak next to the power of the wild and unsentimental mountain. A common summer lightning strike could have put an end to my frail existence. For days no one would have known that I was dead.

Uneasy yet exhilarated, I spent most of the day exploring the vast, lonely tablelands. Finally, it was time to head down. Once again, the trail was long, steep, and treacherous. Exhaustion from four days of hiking increased the chances of a misstep. On my descent, I thought to myself: *When I reach that ridge, I will be safe. . . . When I make that turn, I will be safe. . . . Another half mile, and I will be safe.*

In this manner, I eventually reached Chimney Pond Campground. Although I'd made it off the mountain, I realized that I was in no way perfectly safe. I could still get a brain tumor or die in a plane crash. We are never really safe from the possibility of misfortune or tragedy.

And yet the thought came, too, that we are always safe. We are all part of the

Oneness that can neither be created nor destroyed. We are never safe, and we are always safe.

The week after I returned from my mountain sojourn, a well-loved doctor in our town lost his two teenage daughters in a car accident.

Several weeks later, nearly three thousand people were murdered in New York City as they began their workday on a brilliant, sunny Tuesday morning.

*Peggy Hamill
Union, Maine*

I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME I FLEW IN an airplane and looked out the window at the desert below. The dark lines of the waterways reminded me of the veins on the backs of my mother's hands while she cooked dinner or eased the ache of growing pains in my legs.

Years later, when my mother was slowly dying, I fled to those desert streams for succor. With three other women, I backpacked into a canyon. The broad, shallow creek at the bottom was clear and warm. While my friends talked and laughed and played in the water, I retreated to a tiny cave formed by broken slabs of rock that centuries ago had slid down the mountain and landed just so by a ledge.

I was a young single mother raising a child, working, and going to school all at once, so I hadn't had time to grieve my mother's illness. There in the cave, I clung to myself and to the rocks as I went from rage to grief to breathless fear. Watching cancer inexorably destroy my mother's body had triggered in me an acute awareness of my own vulnerability. Suddenly it wasn't safe to be in the sun for fear of melanoma. It wasn't safe to play in the stream for fear of wicked shards of glass that might lie hidden among the rocks. It wasn't safe to be in my own body.

Eventually, I had to crawl out of my cave. I forced myself to step into the stream despite the possibility of broken glass. I lay back and let the gentle water carry me for a little while, until I could breathe again. Then I stood and returned to the ledge. A flash of light caught my eye. Where just moments ago there had been nothing but bare rock, there lay a large, shiny safety pin. *Very funny*, I thought.

After the funeral, my sister and I went

back to our mother's house to go through her belongings. Months before she'd died, we had decided who would have what, but now that she was gone I wanted it all: everything she had ever touched, worn, or breathed on. I wanted to gather it all up into my arms and hold it to me like a shield, to keep me safe.

The last task was to divide her jewelry. My sister and I took turns claiming what we had already chosen until the box was almost empty. Then we discovered something in it that neither of us had ever seen before — a huge silver safety pin.

That pin, like the one from the canyon, came home with me.

*Jan Waterman
Tucson, Arizona*

MY PLAN TO MOVE TO LOS ANGELES AND become a professional actor started over lunch at a friend's house in Lansing, Michigan. Jane and I were complaining about minor annoyances and major dissatisfactions in our lives when she made the off-hand comment "Oh, you and me, we're

always going to complain about our lives and never do anything about it."

My life up to that point had been a series of false starts and missteps: A couple of years at community college. A couple of relationships that lasted till the demands of adulthood made them too stressful. A couple of years acting in summer stock. A tour with a cheesy male singing group. A brief flirtation with dinner theater. But my tentative stabs at an acting career always ended with a return to the comfort and security of my Lansing community-theater womb. I had pretty successfully avoided anything in life that would challenge me beyond my rather limited comfort level. I was probably as safe as it's possible to be.

And I wasn't happy.

We're always going to complain about our lives and never do anything about it.

I didn't want that to be true. I desperately *needed* for it not to be true. I didn't want to be one of those people who meander through life putting more value on the illusion of safety than on being truly alive.

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
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
October 2003	Excuses	May 1

I've lived in Los Angeles for a little over a year now. I'm the lead in a bad one-act play, set to open next week at a theater on Santa Monica Boulevard. I also work at a bookstore, making barely more than minimum wage. My savings are gone. I got rid of my car after one too many repair bills and haven't yet figured out how I'll get another one. I wrestle with a sometimes overwhelming desire to have my slightly dull, unchallenging, safe life back again.

For the time being, though, I'm staying in LA. It will be interesting to see what happens next.

*Jim Hoffmaster
Los Angeles, California*

I WORK, RELUCTANTLY, AS SAFETY MANAGER for a division of the world's largest environmental service corporation. I accepted the position for what I was told would be only a few months in exchange for a one-time fifty-dollar bonus. I didn't know that once you accept a responsibility in this place, it won't go away until you do.

I tried to make a difference at first, until I realized that the various department managers did not have the time for safety meetings. None of them really cared. The meetings were just one more task on a long list of tasks they weren't paid enough to perform.

So now I simply change the date at the top of last year's meeting notes and fax them to corporate headquarters every month. No one has said anything to me in three years. I realize this probably isn't the safest thing to do.

Name Withheld

I KNEW, WHEN I ENTERED BAKER CORRECTIONAL Institution, that I wasn't tough by a long shot. I didn't know how to fight and was afraid to carry a shank, let alone use one. For the first year I fended off the advances of muscled old cons who wanted to play house. But in time, I discovered that if I didn't gamble, didn't steal, didn't borrow, and didn't mess with punks, I was more or less safe.

Hardee Correctional Institution, to the south of Baker, was where other prisons sent their troublemakers: the young ones who thought they were immortal, the older ones who just didn't give a shit anymore. We picked up snippets of news

about Hardee from transfers: They'd just had their second riot this year. The thieves there traveled in packs, and the guards looked the other way to avoid a trip to the hospital and early retirement. Hardee, we were told, was full of gangbangers and butt-fuckers with an endless supply of shanks and pipes buried all over the compound.

Then one day, without warning, I was transferred to Hardee.

On the way there in the prison bus, my knees were shaking. I was heading into the war zone. I practiced appearing aloof, enraged, dangerous. But you could only fake so much before you had to show what you got. And I didn't have much.

The bus pulled into the gate. After checking in at the property room, I carried my belongings to my assigned dorm. Now I was on the compound itself. The other inmates appeared relaxed and laid back. The calm before the storm, no doubt.

I found my rack and began unpacking. A large black inmate stepped up behind me. *Here it comes*, I thought, and I turned around.

"Just so you know," the man said, "we don't tolerate thieves in this dorm. If you're a thief, you'd best move out. If you're straight up, you're welcome to live here." He held out his hand. "My name's Mark."

"David," I said, shaking his hand. Was this a trick? Was he testing me in some way? I began to relax in spite of myself. "I'm not worried about robberies," I said. "It's the stabbings and riots that get my attention."

Mark smiled. "Last riot was six months ago. All the troublemakers who weren't shipped out are doing three to five years in the box. Administration got tired of all the shit. Now they only ship mellow dudes like you and me here, to make it peaceful. So don't worry. We're safe."

*David Wood
Bowling Green, Florida*

WHEN I STEPPED OUT OF MY APARTMENT, I noticed a group of boys walking down the street. There were about seven or eight of them, all in their early teens. As they approached my parked car, one pointed to the rainbow-flag sticker on the bumper and yelled, "Fag!"

By the time I got to the sidewalk, al-

most all of them were pointing at the car, laughing, and yelling, "Fag!" or, "Dyke!" I crossed the sidewalk and stepped into the street.

"What up?" one of the boys said to me. I nodded back and said, "Hey."

When I got near my car, another boy asked, "Hey, that yours?" I continued past him, quickly unlocked my door, and got inside. I looked up through a windshield covered in gobs of spit. As I drove away, they threw rocks and chunks of ice at my car.

Now, four years later, I work in a middle school in a rough part of Boston. I hear the word *fag* on an almost daily basis, though never directed at me. The students don't know I'm a lesbian yet. (I don't have a rainbow-flag sticker on my forehead.) But if a student asks me, I know that I will tell him or her the truth.

If I become known throughout the school as a lesbian, I risk harm to my property and myself. At the very least, I expect I would hear some epithets. I'm afraid — at times, very afraid. Yet I'm more afraid of the students not knowing the real me, of hiding behind lies to protect myself, of not giving them the opportunity to react differently than those boys did.

*Laura L. Noah
Somerville, Massachusetts*

I PICKED UP FARID, SUREIH, AND ABDULLAH in front of their run-down apartment on Chicago's North Side. In their homeland of Somalia, the three belonged to a minority ethnic group and had been part of their country's middle class of merchants and civil servants. Now they were refugees piled into my gray Volvo so I could give them a ride to a social-service office to apply for welfare benefits. My Episcopal church was helping them get settled in the U.S.

Right away I noticed Farid's eye patch — the result, I would learn, of a hand grenade thrown into his family's courtyard by one of Somalia's many warring factions. Abdullah was the only one who spoke English. He had bright, inquiring eyes that made him look as though he was meant for greater things. Sureih, with her sharp Somalian cheekbones and round white eyes, was Abdullah's older sister and Farid's wife.

At twenty-four, I had just returned from six months in Latin America and was in the throes of an existential crisis. For the first time in my life, I saw no prescribed path laid out in front of me. I was scared to make a move toward the future, as any step I might have taken became a life sentence in my head. A return to Washington, D.C., to work on Capitol Hill meant decades of toiling to serve the corporate elite. Back to Guatemala to save the rain forest meant my barefoot children begging their grandparents for money to go to college.

The mood was generally solemn in the car. I assumed that my passengers were anxious about the trip, their third to the welfare office. I'd heard that they had been treated poorly on previous visits and were ashamed at having to ask for help in the first place. I didn't bring much joy to the group myself, mired as I was in self-pity and fear of the future. Mostly we brooded in silence.

As I pulled onto the Dan Ryan Expressway, I decided to break the silence by turning on the radio. After a few minutes, Abdullah sat upright in his seat and said excitedly, "Volume up, please!" I turned it up just as Marvin Gaye crooned the opening lines to "Sexual Healing."

My passengers had heard the song many times in a refugee camp in Kenya while waiting to come to the U.S. They began swaying their heads to the rhythm, and soon we were all singing along: "Sex-u-al heeea-ling . . ."

We sang together, and the sun, which had been peeking out from behind the buildings for a while now, warmed the inside of the car. After the song was over, we sat in silence again for a few moments. But it was a different silence now: warm and safe.

*Kevin Y. Riley
Corvallis, Oregon*

I GREW UP IN EL PASO, TEXAS, DURING the Cold War, very close to White Sands Missile Range and two military bases. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, my school practiced red alerts (duck and cover under your desk and wait thirty minutes for an airstrike) and yellow alerts (run home so that you can die with your family). No one ever suggested that we would make it

out alive. Evacuation of the city was not even discussed.

I often overheard heated arguments between my parents about whether to build a fallout shelter. My mother begged and cried, desperately believing it would save our lives. My father yelled, loud enough for the neighbors to hear, that we couldn't afford to build one, that it would just bake us like a giant oven, anyway, and what about the neighbors who didn't have one? I imagined the neighbors as zombies clawing their way through the steaming, radioactive soil, moaning to be let into the shelter while, safe inside, we ate oranges to keep up our vitamin c.

We never built a shelter. My parents compromised by keeping five-gallon bottles of water around the house.

Those days and nights of extreme paranoia led to pervasive thoughts about safety. I wondered where in the world one could be safe.

Years later my university-professor husband, Jim, and I became bored with our lives in Texas and began looking for a new place to live. I remembered something I'd read in college about a weather phenomenon called an "anticyclone" — a huge atmospheric center where hot and cold air meet to create an outward spiral of fresh wind. One such anticyclone lay over the South Island of New Zealand. We were tired of the heat and storms in Texas. We wrote letters to every university in New Zealand, inquiring about positions. The University of Canterbury, in the South Island, responded.

We lived in New Zealand for twelve years, in a large house on a six-acre farm thirty minutes from the university. The country was incredibly beautiful. A clear, deep stream ran through our land, and the white-capped Southern Alps guarded the far perimeter. Our emerald green fields were home to Hereford cows and flocks of white birds that shot up when disturbed. Double and even triple rainbows graced the horizon. In the evenings, great walls of mist rolled across the fields, enclosing the farm in their ghostly embrace.

When the concept of nuclear winter came to light in the 1980s, a study by the New Zealand government revealed that the whole Northern Hemisphere could burn up and the only consequence for New

Zealand would be a three-degree drop in temperature. This was *real* safety.

But New Zealand was seven thousand miles from our friends and family. It cost ten thousand dollars for our now six-member family to visit relatives in the U.S. Our home was starting to feel like a beautiful prison.

After twelve years, we left for the first job that Jim could find back in the States. It happened to be in Las Vegas. I guess that, in our hearts, we decided it was better to live — and perhaps die — with one's friends and relatives than to be by ourselves in paradise.

*Mary Lamare
Boca Raton, Florida*

(end of excerpt)