



READERS WRITE
AGAINST THE ODDS

Photo: Thomas Tulis

AT CHURCH I MET A HANDSOME MAN with shining eyes. He was well dressed and enthusiastic, but the tattoo on his hand hinted that he had a past. Perhaps he was a recovering alcoholic, trying to make a new start.

We started dating around Thanksgiving, and by New Year's, I had learned that he was not a recovering alcoholic, but an active heroin addict.

I am a small-town girl, a policeman's daughter, now a single mother of four with a career. The idea of having a relationship — of any kind — with a heroin addict is absolutely unthinkable to me. Yet I have fallen in love with him.

We struggle. I have peeled off many layers of stereotypes and misunderstandings and judgments about addiction, about people, about life. I have come to understand that an addiction to heroin — as dramatic as it may sound — is a human weakness, just like any other.

Countless people have advised me to break off this relationship. I have tried. I have broken it off. He has moved away. But he always comes back. I continue to seek the human being behind the label "addict." And, against all odds, I continue to find him.

Name Withheld

MY HIGH-SCHOOL BOYFRIEND AND I MAY not have made it as a couple, but at crucial moments in both our lives, we helped each other beat the odds.

He was a second lieutenant serving in Vietnam, and I was a senior in high school. When I graduated, there was no money for me to attend college, but I was determined to go anyway. That summer I worked two jobs. One was at McDonald's, where I made \$1.60 an hour, a princely sum in El Paso in 1971. The other was a waitress position at a third-rate pizza joint called Swanky Franky's. That job paid minimum wage: seventy cents an hour, plus tips.

With my savings from these two jobs, plus money from a small scholarship, I had enough to pay my tuition for one semester at an American university in Mexico. I went, not knowing what I'd do when the semester was over.

While I was attending college, my boyfriend unexpectedly sent me the money I needed to finish out my freshman year. His

push got me over the hump, and I went on to graduate. I cried when I saw my diploma.

Ten years later, while in Las Vegas for a work-related convention, I contacted my old boyfriend, whom I had not seen in years. He was barely getting by and living in a dilapidated trailer with no air conditioning on the outskirts of town. He owned only one thing of value — a small condominium in another state — and he was in danger of losing it to foreclosure. He seemed depressed, apathetic, and powerless to change his grim situation. (Later, I would discover that he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, a legacy of his service in Vietnam.)

Once home, I sent him three thousand dollars. With only one day remaining, he was able to halt the foreclosure on his condominium. Shortly thereafter, he sold the property and made a tidy profit. Within a year he was married and expecting his first child.

*Cassandra Rhine
Novato, California*

I WAS NOT SUPPOSED TO HAVE THIS LIFE: three children who play flute and piano and Legos in a sun-drenched living room; a husband who is glad to see me at the end of the day; patients who keep coming back; enough money to buy ripe tomatoes out of season.

Heaven knows I have worked hard to get here. As a child, I knew that I would have to struggle for a different life, one where people would be kind to each other and there could be something besides hurt and sadness. I still doubt whether I will ever feel that I deserve this life.

It is hard to enjoy the gifts that I have been given. When my children argue, I worry that they will grow up to hate each other. When they are sad, I worry that they will spiral into depression. When my husband is affectionate, I find fault with him. At work, I keep waiting for my employer to discover my incompetence.

I wonder if I would be more at peace had I taken my life, like my younger brother; or lived alone on disability, like my older brother; or simply gone on living upstairs

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
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
November 2003	Laughter	June 1

at my parents' house, reading novels, volunteering at the local hospital, and eating lifeless tomatoes in January. I would be alone and sad, but I would know that I was home.

*Lucy Garbus
Florence, Massachusetts*

OVER DINNER AT A QUIET NEW YORK HOTEL — the kind where the waiters never hover but are always there just when you need an extra pat of butter — my friend Edie told me she was dying of lung cancer.

I was almost sixty, and Edie was about a decade my senior. (She would never tell me her exact age.) As usual, she looked as if she had just stepped out of Bergdorf's. She was wearing a dramatic hat — not one of those scarves women wrap around their heads while undergoing chemotherapy, but a real hat, one that seemed made just for her.

I asked when she'd found out.

"Six months ago. The damn doctors thought it was bronchitis. They kept treating me for that —" a raspy cough interrupted her sentence — "and missed the damn cancer.

"This chemo," she continued, "I don't know. I think it might be worse than the cancer. What's the point in living if you don't have a life?"

I asked how long they had given her.

"Maybe a year, darling. I have *way* too much to do."

Three months later, I got a call from Edie: "This will be my last birthday, darling, so I'm only inviting the people I want."

The party was attended by friends who, for the most part, knew each other only through Edie. The evening was sad and wonderful in equal measure.

A year later, on my sixtieth birthday, Edie attended a surprise party. She was only slightly slower, still standing up straight, looking grand, and engaging everyone around her in conversation despite her increasing deafness.

It's now been almost four years since Edie's diagnosis. She's been off chemo for several months now, and is on oxygen. She's contracted diabetes, so she checks her blood sugar and watches what she eats — most of the time. (On a recent visit to a restaurant, she pronounced the soft-shell crabs "positively the best," the lamb chops

"quite fine," and the pineapple upside-down cake "delicious.") The cancer has spread to her liver and to her other lung. The doctors are counting the weeks, but she greets their predictions with a shrug and a smile.

She's pretty much confined to a chair on her sun porch these days, though with help she can manage a walk around her driveway. She is having clothes altered for the summer, and one or two outfits for the fall, "just in case." She increases her oxygen while poring over the *Times* with her magnifying glass.

I go to visit her. "Now tell me what's going on," she says. "I want to know *everything*." We order in Chinese food ("We'll get that hot shrimp thing you like, but I want to try something different"), and things are the way they've always been. Her sharp brown eyes miss nothing. She is fully present, allowing her attention to drift only when I leave the room.

After my visits with Edie, I am unaccountably buoyed; the life force that's been there all along suddenly seems more concentrated. A friend says, "She's teaching you how to die." But I'm not so sure: is she teaching me how to die, or how to live?

*Robert Moulthrop
New York, New York*

MY DOCTOR RAN THE ULTRASOUND OVER my stomach. "One heartbeat," he said. "And another!"

After a long bout of infertility, two miscarriages, and two premature babies, one of whom died shortly after birth, I didn't know if I could handle the news that I was having twins. My already high-risk pregnancy had just become even higher risk. I was terrified. Depression set in. I told my husband I wanted an abortion. My body had failed me too many times; I couldn't be responsible for more dead babies.

My doctor changed my mind. He took care of me, mentally and physically. I saw him weekly for the first three months, twice a week after that. He got me a handicapped parking sticker, signed me up for Meals on Wheels, and put me on strict bed rest after five months. I saw my therapist weekly to work through my fears. I hired extra household help. I tried always to put my pregnancy first and refused to do anything that would jeopardize it.

Still, in my seventh month, I suffered a setback: my doctor discovered a birth defect in the intestine of the boy twin. The hospital's ultrasound facility not only confirmed his diagnosis, but found another possible defect: enlarged ventricles in his brain, which could mean neurological problems.

That night, the stress of the news brought on early bleeding, but I didn't call the doctor. I was in denial. It couldn't be happening again.

The next morning, I could no longer deny the situation. We went to the hospital, and I braced myself for the worst as they tried unsuccessfully to stop the labor. The boy was still in a breech position, so my obstetrician recommended a c-section.

There were at least fifteen doctors and nurses in the delivery room. My son was delivered first, then my daughter. At three and a half pounds each, they looked more like fetuses than newborns. I pumped milk for their feedings, because they were too weak to suck. When my son was three days old, they operated successfully on his intestine. His brain, miraculously, was normal. Both babies came home two months later.

Today they are happy, healthy nine-year-olds. I can hardly believe that I have taken for granted even a single day of their lives. But life goes on, and memories fade.

*Heidi Coffman
Huntington Woods, Michigan*

WHILE NINETEEN YEARS OLD AND STATIONED at an army base in West Germany, I began to lose touch with reality. It was pleasant in many ways and a welcome relief from the anxiety I felt over my family problems and my dislike of the military. (The large amounts of twenty-five-cent-per-gram hash I'd been smoking helped, too.) What comes back most vividly now, thirty years later, are the lucid dreams I had and the feeling of power they gave me. I could fall into a deep sleep and command myself to dream whatever I wanted. Life had taken a magical turn.

It didn't last. I found myself in a mental ward in Frankfurt, listening to an "evil entity" who communicated to me through the hospital PA system. I believed I was surrounded by old friends and acquaintances.

tances: Burl, the forward observer who shot heroin while calling in artillery fire; Southwick, the manic depressive who had promised to hook me up with his beautiful sister back home. They came and went as my psyche ordained.

Thorazine and other antipsychotics didn't work on me, and I was airlifted in a straitjacket to an army hospital in Denver. When I continued not to respond to treatment, the doctors tried electroshock therapy. I remember biting down on the rubber mouthpiece and counting backward from ten while the sodium pentothal took effect. Later I would wake up and recall nothing of the experience.

Late one evening, the night before a treatment, I paced the second-floor barracks where mental patients were housed. "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face," sung by Roberta Flack, came over the PA, and I felt a divine female presence in the room. Unlike the "evil entity," this presence was comforting, and merely wanted me to be aware of her.

I had always been afraid of the dark, yet I was suddenly compelled to go to the pitch-black conference room at the far end of the barracks. I walked past Treatment Room 1, where I would receive shock therapy the following morning, and entered the darkened conference room. It was terrifying at first, but then, like a foul mood lifting, something shifted, and I was no longer afraid. I felt my way around for a while, testing out my newfound courage. I've never had any fear of the dark since.

The next day's shock treatment was my last. I was soon granted passes on weekends, most of which I spent trying to remember the last three months. According to the military, I had totally recovered from my schizophrenic episode, and I was honorably discharged. I never returned to another psychiatric ward.

Unfortunately, I never again experienced that divine female presence, either.

D.L.M.
North Las Vegas, Nevada

EARLY ON IN OUR MARRIAGE, MY HUSBAND and I hitchhiked around the country for a year and a half. For nine months of that time, I was pregnant. I never saw a doctor. I didn't take prenatal vitamins. I

ate in soup kitchens and sometimes from dumpsters. Although this is not how most women would want to spend their pregnancy, I chose to live this way to prove that life doesn't have to look pretty.

Toward the end of the nine months, I could not handle the road any longer, and we settled temporarily in Blythe, California, on the Arizona border. Many homeless people were living by the Colorado River there, and that's where my husband built our bamboo hut.

During our time in Blythe, I felt in tune with nature: the moon, the weather, and the animals were a part of my everyday life. We had a place to stay and a river where we could take a bath and wash our clothes. The only thing missing was knowledge of how to deliver a baby, but I trusted that nature would take its course.

For the most part, the homeless people were as helpful as could be. When word got around about my being nearly ready to give birth, an older couple sought us out. The woman was a former nurse and tried her best to convince me to see a doctor. I refused. She understood and offered us a ride to the hospital if we needed it. (They were the only people around who had a car.)

My water broke on the morning of January 9, 1997, and the contractions that had begun the night before had grown so strong they were almost unbearable. After five hours of hard labor, I decided I had to have help. My husband sent for the older couple, and they came and picked us up.

At the hospital, I could barely walk through the emergency entrance. Nurses quickly helped me to a bed. Their first question was "Who's your doctor?"

"I have no doctor," I replied proudly.

Flabbergasted, the nurses told me that it would be hard to find a doctor to deliver my baby at this point, because I was considered too high risk. Ignoring their concerns, I asked if I could have something to ease the pain, but they said the baby was too close to being born; it was past the time for drugs. I would have to give birth naturally.

Within an hour, I had a very healthy little boy: seven pounds, eleven ounces — pretty hefty for a baby whose mother ate out of dumpsters. They whisked him off to be analyzed, seemingly determined to prove me wrong, to find some defect.

They just couldn't believe a baby could be healthy under these conditions.

But he was.

April Thompson
Nampa, Idaho

MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHER RAISED EIGHT children on a farm in a small town in west Texas. One of her sons, my grandfather, grew up to be a drinker and married a woman who also had no control over her drinking.

While driving drunk, my grandfather hit a little girl. He was incarcerated for a time, and he stopped drinking after that. Instead he smoked and drank instant coffee all day long.

My grandmother was a nervous woman who couldn't sit down long enough to eat. She always complained that the sparrows ate her peaches. To stop the birds, she caught them in a cage in her backyard and pulled their heads off.

Their son, my father, grew up stealing beans for his supper and rounding up his parents from the bars. He got kicked out of high school for blowing up a toilet, then kicked out of the Marines for reasons that remain a mystery.

He married my mother when she was sixteen, and the union lasted ten years, though his fidelity did not. He has now been married three times, with children from each marriage and a few stepchildren picked up along the way. Though diabetic, he continues to smoke three packs a day, guzzle beer every night, and feast on fried foods and ice cream.

Following the family tradition, I got married young, to a man who liked to expose himself to little girls and inhale nitrous oxide. After eight interminable months, I left him, but he followed me everywhere, standing on dance floors and staring while I slow-danced with other men.

Today I live in a nice house in a middle-class neighborhood. I have been married to the man I love for fifteen years, and we have two sons. I teach yoga, and our lives are healthy and full of love. Words like *normal* and *ordinary* carry negative connotations for some, but for me they hold an exquisite pleasure.

S.P.
Fort Collins, Colorado
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