



IGOR MALIJEVSKÝ

Readers Write **FALLING IN LOVE**

HER NAME WAS LISA BETH COBB, AND I saw her for the first time on the archery range of Camp Entwine, my first summer away from home. Her blond hair shone in the morning sunlight. She might as well have taken one of those arrows and shot me right through the heart. I gladly would have died for her on the spot. And, in a way, I did.

My best friend that summer also professed to love Lisa, and on the last day of camp, we decided to ask her who she liked better. I remember standing side by side with David while Lisa, she of the dirty-blond hair and perfect little pug nose, carefully appraised us as if we were two finalists in a beauty contest.

I was no beauty, having the slightly rounded shoulders of an eight-year-old boy already laboring under the enormous weight of Self. David, on the other hand, was as light and carefree as air. Even before Lisa spoke, I knew what the answer was going to be.

I never saw her again, but for several years after that, every night at bedtime, I would pray, *Dear God, please help me to marry Lisa Beth Cobb.*

*Al Neipris
Mansfield, Massachusetts*

FOR FOUR YEARS, MY LIFE WAS RULED by an unexplained illness. My heart would not pump properly, and breathing — taking in that elusive, invisible substance air — was incredibly difficult. An oxygen tank was my constant companion for more than a year.

I was eventually allowed to untether myself from the tank for short periods, and I began to walk a little each day. In spite of my progress, I felt like giving up. My heart was heavy from the end of a relationship and the loss of several family members, two dear friends, and my beloved dog within a short span. I could not work, could not play, could hardly think.

One day on my walk, I heard yelping sounds and saw a litter of newborn puppies in a fenced-in yard. I wanted to get closer, but I knew the mother would probably be protective, so I walked on.

The next time I passed the house, the puppies had squeezed through a small hole in the fence and were tum-

bling about in an overgrown alleyway. The mother was pacing the yard, looking worried. I walked down the alley to round the puppies up, and suddenly they were all over me: untying my shoes and chewing the laces; jumping onto my legs and clamping their little jaws on to my jeans. Laughing, I succumbed to their attack and lay down in a mass of weeds. For the first time in many years, all my worries dropped away.

Then reality set in, and I went to the house to tell the owner that his puppies were loose. He thanked me and invited me back to see them anytime. He even suggested that I might want to adopt a puppy. I had not planned on having another dog in my life, however. I still had no idea if I would be alive in a month, or a week, or a day.

I went to visit the puppies often, and found myself smiling more, mesmerized by these lively little beings. One in particular stood out. He was on the shy side and much furrier than his lit-

termates. He stayed close to his mother and was the only one who ever played by himself. The owner had nicknamed him “the Little Coward,” because he always ran and hid from the man.

I adopted that little puppy and named him Atlas. Thanks to him, I decided to stop living as if I were dying.

*J. Nichols
Portland, Oregon*

WHEN I WAS SIXTEEN, I WAS CAP-tivated by Herman Wouk’s novel *Marjorie Morningstar*. Marjorie, the protagonist, was just like me: passionate, romantic, idealistic, and ambitious. Her fierce aspiration to become an actress led her into the tempestuous world of the theater. And, like me, she expected her life to unfold dramatically: Passion! Love! Fame! Excitement!

Most of the book is spent chronicling Marjorie’s infatuation with a charismatic, talented songwriter-director. But in the end she gives up on him and marries a

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	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Size	March 1	August 2003
Blessings In Disguise	April 1	September 2003
Excuses	May 1	October 2003
Laughter	June 1	November 2003
Idealism	July 1	December 2003
Turning Thirty	August 1	January 2004

lawyer. She trades her brilliant-yet-flawed songwriter for the companionship, stability, and integrity of a nice but unexciting man. I didn't understand it at all. *What about the passion?* I thought as I turned the last page.

I'm thirty-eight and have never been married. In my early twenties, while my friends were playing house with their partners, I was living in Hollywood, trying to become an actress and having short, turbulent affairs with talented, beautiful men who didn't bother to get to know the real me. Later, while my friends were marrying and having children, I was traveling around the world and living out of my backpack in a ceaseless search for new adventures and possibilities. I met some fascinating men and developed a few infatuations that consumed me, hollowed me out until I was empty but for one idea: *make him love me*. Whether he did or he didn't, the relationship always ended, and I felt tragic but grateful for the experience. My biggest fear was that it wouldn't happen again.

I see now that it was movement I needed: not the love, but the falling.

I've been dating the same man now for a year and two months — a record for me. If I were to compare him to other men I have known, he wouldn't rate as very exciting. His biggest dream is to build a house in a meadow and have a dog to run around it. He would rather water his garden than travel. His job, though lucrative and steady, has nothing to do with art. He is smart, emotionally healthy, and has a great sense of humor. Though he's sometimes a little intimidated by my intensity, I think he loves me more than any other man that I have met. It's easy to be with him.

I have noticed that I can stick out my hand when he's walking a little bit behind me and know — just *know* — that he will see it, and grab it, and hold it.

I have never been more afraid.

*Michelle Gaudreau
Portland, Oregon*

LAST YEAR, I MET A YOUNG ARTIST. He was uncommonly talented, as focused on art as I am on writing — and forty years my junior. Unlike myself at his age (twenty), he didn't throw his youth away

in riotous living. His wisdom stunned me. I found myself looking forward to seeing him each week with an eagerness I'd not known since being widowed.

When we went for coffee one afternoon, I sat across from him, hardly able to breathe for the pounding of my heart. He told one wry, witty story after another, and my palms began to sweat. What was wrong with me? Was I coming down with the flu?

*Linda Bulloch
Savannah, Georgia*

OUR SHIP, A PATROL FRIGATE WITH a crew of 190 men, leaves San Diego in the last week of January 1944. We are due to arrive in the Pacific theater of war in early March.

I'm a signalman second class. Before our first landfall, I spot Blake, a seaman first class, watching another signalman and me practice semaphore, the naval system of communicating using flags. Blake appears amused by our repartee. When the other signalman lays down his flags to leave, Blake takes his place.

The first message he sends is "Do you have a boyfriend?" Before he's completed "friend," he wags the letter "E," signaling, "Error, erase." He corrects himself: "Girlfriend."

I'm nineteen. Blake's maybe a year younger. His blond hair is like tinted English porcelain, his smile tentative and full of secrets.

Our ship is in a holding pattern until the battle of Leyte Gulf, but we don't know this. I wouldn't mind the wait so much were it not for the heat. I manage to sleep by taking my sack — a thin mattress, pillow, and blanket — topside and laying it on the open deck under the stars. Blake does the same, and we begin finding a spot together.

We could be more discreet, but Blake doesn't give a damn, and, taking my cue from him, neither do I. There may be some who resent our relationship, but for the most part, the crew takes it in stride.

One evening, while we're topside together, Blake asks me to exchange dog tags with him. Each sailor wears two dog tags around his neck. I give Blake one of my tags, and he gives me one of his. We each attach the other's alongside our own.

(I still have the two tags, his and mine.)

Blake quickly becomes foremost in my mind, but I dare not commit my feelings for him to paper. I barely mention him in my letters, and even then never by name. Instead I write his name on the bark of palm trees whenever we go ashore. When there are no trees, I write it on air. He's my first love, and I'm hit hard. There's no separating us . . . until war's end, that is. In his last letter to me, he writes, "I'm doing it with girls now."

Name Withheld

WHAT SAVES ME FROM THE TEDIUM of another day is falling hopelessly in love with the people I meet: the curly-haired barista at the coffee shop who hands me my change as if dipping his fingers into holy water; the girl with Down syndrome who talks loudly about vacationing with her grandmother; the elderly couple who grow giant bubble-gum-colored puffs of dahlias at the corner of Twelfth and Chambers; the toddler girl across the street who bleats sweetly, "Mama, come see!"

Sometimes I fall in love with things: a breeze in a heat wave; strawberries and asparagus and blood oranges out of season; the perfect pair of black sandals, with heels four inches tall; the way the four o'clock sun hits the corrugated tin roof of the auto body shop behind my office.

Always I fall in love with the deep timbre of my brother's laugh; the way my mother says my name; the way my father calls me sweetheart; the way my sweetheart calls me baby.

*Bobbie Willis
Eugene, Oregon*

IT WAS THE FALL OF 1967. I HAD JUST started ninth grade at the local public school. The only child of a four-time-married alcoholic mother, I felt completely alone. I spent most of my time on the street, looking for something to do and avoiding home as much as possible.

One night, I was riding around with a carload of other boys. A new group of Catholic-school girls had just entered public high school, and we were on our way to pick one of them up and take her to the local teen club. We all went to the front door to get her. Her parents were

out, and she and her fourteen-year-old sister were baby-sitting their three younger siblings. This was my first exposure to a large Italian American family: eight children in all. The responsibility of looking after another family member was a new concept to me.

The girl we'd come for was anxious and ready to go, but the fourteen-year-old complained that their parents had asked *both* of them to baby-sit. The girl wasn't buying it and left to go to the club. As we walked down the driveway to the car, her younger sister slammed the front door in anger.

Everyone started to pile into the car. When it was my turn to get in, I looked at the car, then back at the front door. I told the group that I wasn't going to the club; I was going back inside to help baby-sit.

The car pulled away, and I walked up the steps and knocked. She was surprised to see me standing there — we had met only minutes before, after all. But she invited me in, and we played games with the kids, exchanging glances over their heads. I felt a warmth come over me that I had never felt before.

When her parents came home, I left and walked back to my house. But something was different about me. I no longer felt so alone.

We recently celebrated thirty-two years of marriage, but I fell in love with her when she first opened that door.

*Mark Pirtle
North Olmsted, Ohio*

I TOLD MYSELF I WAS NOT GOING TO fall in love with Seth. I had just traveled that long and bumpy road with someone else and had sworn not to go back down it for a long time. I was taking a break from men, from commitment, from all of it. Seth was my roommate. Period.

I tried not to notice when he climbed trees on the property, or when his pants slid below his hipbones while he swung on the rope swing, or when he rented sensitive movies and called my dog "cutie pants." We moved awkwardly around each other in the kitchen every morning, both of us fully dressed.

One day I hauled our roommate Jessica's sewing machine out of storage to alter

a green-and-gold sequined dress that I was planning to wear to the Oregon Country Fair that afternoon. I set the sewing machine on the kitchen table and tried to figure out how to thread it. After many failed attempts and several knots in the thread, I was ready to give up.

"You don't know how to thread a sewing machine, do you?" I asked Seth.

"Actually," he said, "I might."

He sat down at the machine and unthreaded my mistakes. Then, with his thick fingers, he looped the thread from the spool through tiny silver openings and into the barely visible grooves. His face was slack, his eyes intent behind his glasses. He even threaded it through the tiny eye of the needle. I felt as if I could watch him all day.

"There. I think that will work," he said, and he returned to what he had been doing. I fumbled my way through the alterations, suddenly aware of my body and of his presence nearby.

On the way to the fair, I told my friend Jenny what Seth had done.

"He threaded the sewing machine," I said.

"He threaded the sewing machine?" she asked.

"So I could alter this dress," I said. "He threaded the sewing machine."

A few weeks after the fair, Seth and I left behind the awkward mornings in the kitchen and he moved into my room. We just bought a house together.

*Jennifer Savage
Arlee, Montana*

(end of excerpt)