

**WHEN OUR STEPMOTHER, CLARABELLE,** came into our lives in 1952, she was twenty-eight and had just graduated from college. A beautiful woman with a tiny frame and glowing red hair, she was ready to bring order, even perfection, to our house. But she wasn't ready to take on three kids, ages twelve, ten, and six.

We were accustomed to a different type of mother, one whose house was a bit of a mess and whose meals were often disasters, but who hunted snakes with us, cooked us Lipton's noodle soup with blades of grass on top and called it "grass soup," and could swim from the pier to the dam and back again without resting. When her kidneys began to fail, our mother had driven herself in our family vehicle — a Willy's Jeep — all the way from southern Illinois to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota to see if she could try some new drug or treatment. She was brave, she was fun, she was unique — and she died anyway.

Less than a year later, Dad brought home Clarabelle. She scrubbed; we dirtied. She rearranged our rooms; we transformed them back into smelly messes. She made lovely meals; we gobbled them down as if they were our due. Sometimes, out of the blue (or so it seemed to us), she'd disappear behind the locked door of her bedroom for days, even weeks. She must have come out when we went to school, but when we came home, she was in there again.

One time, Dad took the bedroom door off its hinges to enter, and she screamed as if he were pulling out her nails. I was glad we lived on ten acres of land so none of my friends could hear her. She was embarrassing.

I came to love Clarabelle, but not until after my first child was born. With my son's birth came the knowledge that mothering is really quite a job. As I struggled to raise a good child, I thought a lot about my stepmother. I considered her

youth, and how it must have felt to live under the shadow of our mom. She could never win that contest — not by making the most perfect baked Alaska in the world and bringing it flaming to the table; not by planning a big birthday party for me and my nine favorite friends; not by redecorating my room with curtains that matched my bedspread. No matter what she did, I found something to hate her for — mostly her dark moods.

As an adult, I forgave her these lapses. In my fantasies, I rewrote our story: we all went to therapy and got along perfectly. In reality, I began to enjoy being around her on visits home.

Clarabelle's death from cancer at thirty-eight — the same age at which my mother had died — was a blow. We were just getting used to each other. She had long before stopped being a door-slammer and a hider, but she was still trying to make things orderly in her house. (It must have been easier without us children.) Cancer was just too messy for her, though.

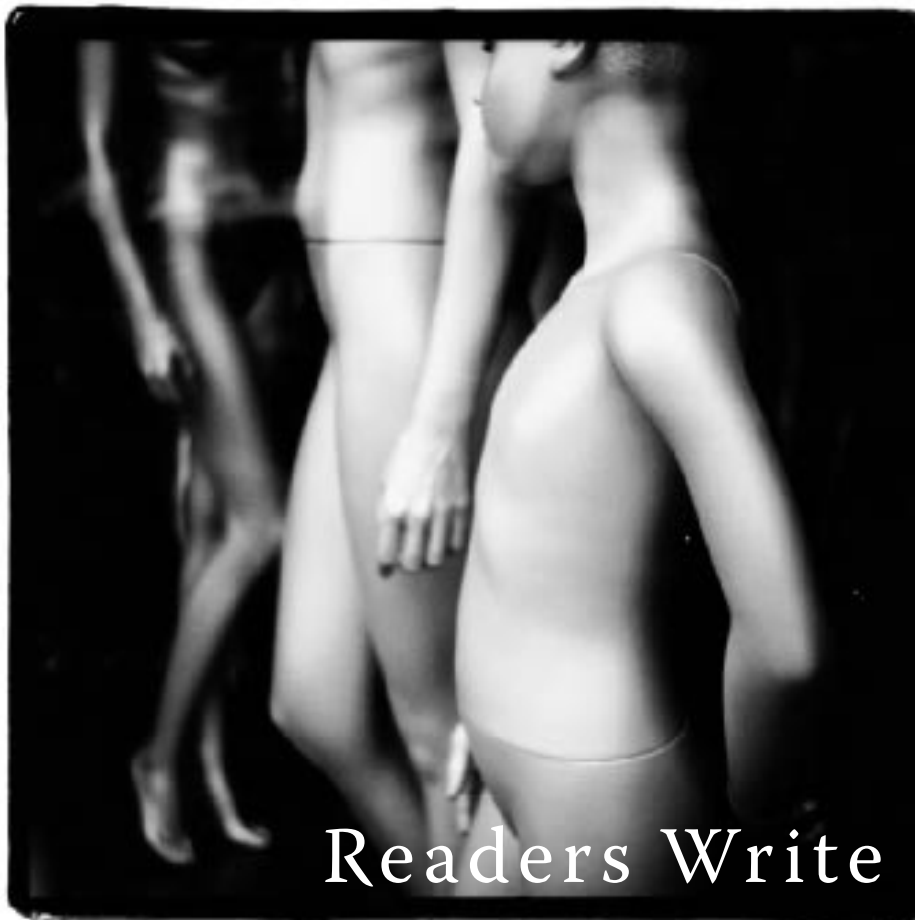
I was eight months pregnant when I last talked to Clarabelle on the phone. I told her that, if I had a girl, I'd name her Carolyn — after my mom — and give her Clarabelle's middle name, Grace. She thanked me and said she was honored. I told her I loved her. Her voice breaking, she told me that she loved me, too.

That was as close to perfection as we got.

*Ann Garcia  
Las Vegas, New Mexico*

**THE ULTRASOUND TECHNICIAN** GAVE me my unborn son's picture on a small curling square of paper. I stuck it on my refrigerator door, and every time I passed by, I rubbed my pregnant belly. The blurred, almost indecipherable image was, to me, a tiny, perfectly formed face.

Now I hold my twelve-week-old son. He is not the child I imagined. His porcelain skin is pale and mottled. His fat, dimpled arms are laced with delicate stitches at one wrist and fading bruises at the other — reminders of countless IVs and blood draws. From beneath the neck of his hospital t-shirt peeks another line of stitches that stretches the length of his chest. His sweet mouth sucks instinctively on the ventilator tube as he



DUNCAN GREEN

## Readers Write **PERFECTION**

dreams of warm comfort.

Then he awakens and gazes at me as solemnly as he did the moment we first met, before I knew of his congenital heart defect and chromosomal abnormality, before the child of my imagination vanished. And I find myself turning away from that imagined child and embracing my beautiful, perfect son.

*Kathryn E. Trump  
Groton, Massachusetts*

**FOR TWO YEARS, NICK LIVED IN THE** next cell over from mine, and for two years, his cellmate Isaac griped: "That bastard Nick. He never stops talking, and he takes a shit for exactly fifteen minutes every morning. I mean, he *times* himself. And he constantly complains."

"Some people just have strange habits," I said.

"You don't know," Isaac said.

Nick went back to court in September, and by the time he returned to prison, Isaac had a new cellmate. My cell, however, had an empty bunk. Nick requested it.

I braced myself for Nick's antics. What would he do? Indeed, after breakfast every morning, he asked me to leave the cell for fifteen minutes so he could take care of business. And he did time himself. *No big deal*, I thought. But that wasn't all.

Nick made his bunk with military precision, kept his shoes and shower slides in a straight line under the bed, and organized his footlocker so precisely it looked like the inside of a pocket watch.

One day, he said to me, "David, you're going to have to keep your clothes neater on your hook. The arm of your jacket touches my head when I sit on my locker and read."

"If my clothes bother you," I said, "sit on your bed."

Every time I hopped onto my upper rack, Nick complained that dust particles floated down onto his mattress. If I didn't sweep the floor when I came in from the outside, he cried, "Grit everywhere!" He didn't like where I put my dirty clothes, the way I stacked my books on the floor, or how I hung my towel.

One time I came in off the yard to get my radio. Nick looked up from his book. "Well, don't that beat all?" he snorted. "I just swept and mopped our floor,

and you tracked dirt all over. You could have stomped your boots outside!"

I took a deep breath and said to him, "I *did* stomp my boots outside. A few little sand particles still stuck, and now they've dropped off. I'll sweep tonight, OK?"

"Oh, right. Tonight. And for the rest of the day, I have to walk on your grit. Do you think I like your messes?"

"That's not a mess," I said. "This is a mess."

I pulled out my bottle of baby powder and deliberately sprinkled it over every surface. Nick's eyes bulged. It felt wonderful.

*David Wood  
Bowling Green, Florida*

**WHEN MY BROTHER AND I WERE CHILDREN**, people always complimented my parents on how well-behaved we were. Whenever my mother conducted a Bible study with a potential convert, we sat perfectly still and silent — sometimes for hours, sweating in the summer heat and longing for the fresh air and grass outside.

On Saturdays, my family went preaching door-to-door. We split up, and each of us had a bag to hold our Bibles and the literature we handed out, telling people how Armageddon was coming and all the wicked would be destroyed. Most folks shut their doors in our faces. But we just smiled and told them to have a pleasant day.

Every afternoon, my mother had dinner on the table at 4:30 sharp, because my father expected to sit down and eat the minute he came home from work. Not only did dinner have to be on the table, but it had to be cool enough (but not cold) that it could be eaten right away.

While we ate, our father grilled my brother and me about our day: Did we bring our Bibles to school? Did we tell the other kids about the Truth? What exactly did we say and whom did we say it to? If our answers weren't good enough, he reminded us of the imminence of Armageddon and handed out whatever punishment he thought we deserved. By our teens, we were given a choice: we could

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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
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
Small Towns	September 1	February 2004

take a beating or receive a month of a lesser punishment. We usually took the month, but one time, with a defiant glare in his eye, my brother chose the beating.

That was the last beating my father ever gave. He died not long thereafter, while we were attending an annual religious convention. He had a heart attack in the hotel room, right in front of us. Terrified, I asked his permission to leave the room, but he said no and ordered me to sit on the edge of the bed. As soon as he lost consciousness, I bolted.

After the ambulance took his body away, my mother told us to get dressed for the last day of the convention. Still in shock, I obeyed. All day, I maintained perfect composure, not even shedding a tear.

*Catherine Torelli  
Marlborough, New Hampshire*

**AS A YOUNG CHILD, I THOUGHT THAT** Jesus Christ was perfect — probably the only perfect person who'd ever lived. Nevertheless, I was determined to become perfect myself, to follow a Christ-like path, to be better than everyone else. (Obviously, my determination to follow Jesus' path far exceeded my understanding of it.)

In my mind, there was only one perfect choice in any situation: Kellogg's cereals were good; Post's and General Mills' were to be avoided at all costs. The New York Mets were the best baseball team; the Yankees embodied everything I disliked. CBS surpassed NBC or ABC, Nike shoes were better than Adidas, and the Beatles and Bob Dylan were the only musicians worth listening to. There was only one "perfect" girl, whom I worshiped from a distance; all others were flawed.

In high school, my obsession intensified. What had been just a personality quirk turned much more serious. It took a nervous breakdown in college to return me to reality. I spent many years learning that perfection doesn't reside in just one person, action, or thing, but in everyone, every action, and everything.

I now see that imperfection itself is perfect: the irregular strand in the Navajo rug; the misshapen garden vegetable; the unexplained typo that inevitably shows up in the magazine I edit; the misstatement

that ends up deepening a conversation. Every part of reality expresses its own perfection, not by meeting anyone else's standards, but simply by being itself.

*Chris Roth  
Dexter, Oregon*

**I HAD MY SON BY CESAREAN SECTION** because I was too out of shape to push out a ten-and-a-half-pound baby. I never practiced my breathing or studied childbirth manuals. I'd written "DRUGS" in giant letters on my admittance papers because I was afraid of the pain.

My husband was so abusive that, for the first two years, my infant son and I slept on the couch; I was afraid the 2 A.M. feedings would wake his father. When my son was six months old, my husband announced that he was old enough to be spanked. In an attempt to make my son into a man, my husband bloodied the boy's lip, shook him, slapped him, and screamed in his little face, all before he was five years old.

I should have left that marriage, but I was afraid I couldn't make it on my own. I told myself that I was overreacting to the abuse; if only I did better, cooked better, acted better, I reasoned, things would get better. And always, when things were at their worst, my husband would turn on the charm and be on his best behavior.

My son retreated from this hostile world that I had brought him into. He didn't speak until he was four. When he wanted something, he grunted, screeched, cried, and hit me. I assumed that I deserved this. His father was ashamed — until he realized how much sympathy he received from other people because of it.

I took my son to speech therapists, hearing specialists, and counselors. I tried Ritalin for a week, but cried every time I saw the light in his eyes fade. I let my son watch too much television because it calmed him. I let him eat Happy Meals and yellow-number-five cheese and white bread and bologna. He wore nothing but sweats and T-shirts; other fabrics made him agitated. Worst of all, I put my son in a day care full time because being home alone with him made me feel depressed, lonely, and desperate.

When my son finally began to speak, he spent hours talking to himself in the

driveway, staring up at the clouds, as if conversing with the gods. I often wondered what they were talking about.

I enrolled my son in public school a year late because I thought another year of preschool would do him good. Kindergarten was a disaster. All the students wore uniforms, and the buttoned shirts and pants were torture for him. The school wanted to test him, but I insisted on taking him to the university instead. He was sent home with a diagnosis of autism. He was six.

I finally left my husband, having found a new man who was kind and loved my son immediately and unconditionally, the way a dad should. I married this man in a formal ceremony, and my son wore a tuxedo, despite all the buttons. He was excited to be dressed like his new dad.

Our son now goes to a new school, where he's in a special-education class. He is very good at art, and though he still likes to talk to himself, he does so fluently. He loves history, computer games, cartoons, and his friends from school. We live in a big house at the end of a cul-de-sac, where we grow vegetables and fruit and avoid Happy Meals.

This summer, my son and I were driving somewhere, and I was listening to him talk about a cartoon he had seen. Then he stopped and smiled at me. I asked what was he thinking.

"I was thinking that you are as beautiful as the sparkles on the water on a sunny day, Mom. You're perfect."

*Sheryl P.  
Bremerton, Washington*

**A FEW YEARS AGO, MY MOTHER SAID** of an acquaintance, "I think it's sad to see what a perfectionist she is. It makes life so difficult for everyone around her."

I was too stunned to comment. My mother's own standards of perfection exceed those of anyone else I've known. In our house, tidiness was paramount. Nothing was ever out of place. In the linen closet, the stacks of sheets and towels were tri-folded in both directions. The clothes in her closet were grouped by style and color, with equal spaces between the hangers. Beds had to pass a military-type inspection: I used to leave an obvious crease in the middle just to

get it over with.

The idea of someone using different techniques from hers was, and still is, incomprehensible to my mother: the *only* way for the toilet paper to unroll is over the top. She once sent me back to the grocery store to exchange some lemons I'd bought because the grain on the peel was too coarse, an indication the lemons wouldn't be juicy.

How does one tell an eighty-year-old woman that she is the ultimate perfectionist? I can't imagine. I wish I could ask her what fears and insecurities drive her to exert such control over her environment.

Then, when my self-righteous indignation clears, I think of her astonishing vocabulary and love of knowledge, despite the fact that she could never attend college. She taught herself cake decorating from magazine articles and made my siblings and me incredible theme cakes for our birthdays, even during the years when she worked full time. It was magical to open the refrigerator door and see the sheets of wax paper lined with exquisite pink rosebuds. Those cakes were a highlight of my childhood.

For my mother's eightieth birthday, I was determined to repay her with a rose-covered cake. Having taken a cake-decorating class a couple of years ago, I set aside an afternoon for the task and got to work. Two days and three trips to the store later, my kitchen, apron, and face were splattered with powdered sugar and pink icing, and I was contemplating throwing my icing roses into the yard. Why would anyone want to impose that much order on icing?

But I couldn't give up on this now-symbolic cake. I completed it, and it became the centerpiece at my mother's birthday bash. I held my breath as she tasted it. She pronounced it wonderful and, better yet, told everyone that *I* had made it.

*Lorraine Plaxico  
Black Mountain, North Carolina*

**MY TWIN BROTHER'S NAME IS NOEL.** "Brothers since birth!" he announces, delighted with his little joke.

Why is it that, so many times, one twin seems to breeze through life effortlessly, while the other twin — myself, in

this case — never gets anything right? Noel was always gentle and supportive as I failed to match his achievements, but my obvious inferiority led to some serious problems as I entered adulthood.

A few years ago I sought the help of a therapist, who revealed to me that Noel's not half the man I think he is. In fact, he exists only in my mind. I'm schizophrenic.

*Nyle G.  
North Carolina*

**WHEN I WAS FOURTEEN, I WAS HOSPITALIZED** for anorexia. On the eating-disorder ward I met Molly, a frail blonde with transparent skin and a faraway look in her eyes. She was in her forties and weighed sixty-five pounds. I had starved my way down to nearly that same weight, but I was shorter and therefore not as emaciated as Molly. Some of my internal organs were, to my dismay, still concealed by a thin layer of flesh.

My family had strong-armed me into the hospital. I was certain that something terrible would happen once I couldn't stick to my daily regime of starvation and exercise. A small part of me, though, felt as if I had been given a second chance, and I made rather steady progress toward recovery.

Molly, on the other hand, was a professional. She'd been in and out of treatment programs for twenty years. Though normally quiet and kind, she would attack anyone who threatened her way of life. She fought a heated and public battle against the hospital dietician over the number of calories in a serving of five prunes. (Molly won and was allowed to leave one prune on her plate.) During mealtimes, she'd discreetly hold food in her mouth until she could spit it out in her bathroom. She ripped out IVs and concealed a sock filled with pennies under her hospital gown during our morning weigh-in. Once, an observant member of the cleaning staff caught her kicking her legs in bed at night in an attempt to burn more calories.

The other patients and I were scandalized by Molly's behavior. Many evenings found us — a sad assortment of anorexics and bulimics — gossiping about her latest revolt. We both admired and pitied her in the same breath. She was an unproclaimed hero to the part of us that

saw fat where there was skeleton, that demanded perfection, no matter what the cost.

Molly was still in the program when I left a month or so later at a relatively healthy weight and state of mind. The image of this grown woman reduced to a screaming wretch over a solitary prune — her tired eyes bulging, the veins of her neck visibly pulsing with each syllable — stayed with me. It probably did more to cure me than anything else.

*Laura Addesi-Carleton  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

**I USED TO WONDER WHY MY BREASTS** don't lie quite right on my chest. They tend to wander out to the sides rather than look flawless and bulbous, like the ones on models in magazines. I told myself that one day I was going to have an operation to fix them.

Last September I had a mammogram that "didn't look quite right." I vacillated between the tough attitude friends and family knew me for and a secret, raw agony. Alone, I contemplated the future without a part of my body that suddenly seemed just perfect to me.

As I sat in the clinic waiting room awaiting the results of a follow-up mammogram, I watched other women receive little slips of paper officially confirming their health. I concentrated on my book and quietly prayed that one of those nurses would call my name and hand me a little slip of paper, too. I also watched as a woman pulled off her glasses, put her face in her hands, and quietly wept.

Finally, they called my name. The nurse held no slip of life-saving paper. She ushered me into an ultrasound room for a closer look at my breast. I could feel my heart beating all over my body. The nurse quietly ran the ultrasound wand over my chest for a couple of minutes, then said the most beautiful word I've ever heard: *cyst*.

"Cysts, actually," she explained. "A clump of them."

I wanted to jump off that table, open the door, and run down the hallway shouting, "I have cysts!" I couldn't, though. What if that woman who did have cancer was still there, still crying?

*Jo Emary  
Radcliff, Kentucky*