



Readers Write

EXCUSES

I WAS NEVER A BIG FAN OF FORMAL education, so when my son decided he had better things to do than attend his high-school classes, I supported him. He wanted to become a filmmaker, and I wrote notes to excuse him from school so that he could shoot film and go to the movies.

He attended only enough classes to graduate, and I wrote many excuse notes, always to a woman named Ms. Finn. I pictured Ms. Finn as half librarian, half

prison warden, frowning at my notes, scrutinizing every word, looking for some hole in the iron-clad excuses I had concocted. This battle of wits with Ms. Finn inspired me to write even better excuses, brimming with legitimacy. I raised the excuse note to an art form.

Then one day my son told me Ms. Finn was not actually reading these notes. In fact, she was barely looking at them. Ms. Finn, it turned out, was a long-haired free spirit not much older than my son.

The image of Ms. Finn as a carefree hippie sapped the intrigue from my excuse writing — until I came up with a new angle: I would write excuse notes so outrageous that even she couldn't ignore them. With each failed attempt, I turned up the heat, to the point where my notes lost touch with reality:

“Dear Ms. Finn, Michael has yellow fever.”

“Michael has grown suspicious of his pets.”

“Michael just learned that he has an evil twin.”

But my personal favorite was the simplest. On a large piece of paper, I wrote just three words: “No clean clothes.”

*Marilyn Kalish
Great Barrington, Massachusetts*

TWELVE YEARS AGO, WHILE ENROLLED in a graduate writing program, I met two significant people in my life: the woman who would become my wife; and Barb, a dear friend and the best critic of my writing I ever had.

It made no sense for Barb and me to become friends. We were opposites in every way. She dabbled in drugs, had once worked as a phone-sex operator, and slept with men of questionable character. But I always knew I could count on Barb to tell me the hard truth: about my stories, about my life, about my relationships.

Shortly after I began dating my future wife, Barb warned me that if I stayed with this woman, everything I wanted would slip through my fingers. She felt as though she was watching me die, she said.

“Pick me as your friend, or her as your lover,” Barb told me, “because I won’t stay around to watch you wither away in conformity.”

Two years later, I was engaged and living far from the town where I’d attended that writing program. An old acquaintance called with the news that Barb had died from AIDS. She had told almost no one she was sick, keeping up appearances even as she prepared to die. Though we’d had our falling-out, I was disappointed that she hadn’t called me.

When people asked why I didn’t go to Barb’s funeral, I told them my fiancée wouldn’t let me. When, several weeks after Barb’s death, I gave up on serious writing, I blamed the sound of Barb’s angry criticisms in my head. When I abandoned university teaching — the one remaining facet of the literary life I’d always wanted — I told myself it was to focus on my duties as husband and father.

As my marriage unraveled a few years later, I claimed that leaving the university hadn’t been my decision at all, that I had been bullied into taking that path. None of it, I said, not a single bad decision in

the preceding eight years, had been my fault.

A year ago, I resumed writing after a ten-year hiatus. I’m taking responsibility for how my life has turned out and peeling back the layers of excuses that have prevented me from living. I’d forgotten how hard confronting life without excuses could be.

Recently, I stumbled upon one of Barb’s notes on a story of mine. “People are guided by will and emotion,” she wrote. Though we might blame others for the things we do, she said, our own minds and hearts govern our actions. If Barb were here, I’d tell her that she was right.

Name Withheld

I HAD A PHYSICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY abusive childhood, and as a young adult I came to the agonizing decision that it would be best if I didn’t have children.

Several years later, my brother and his wife asked if I would be the godmother

of their first child and take the role of “hands-on aunt.” I had to say no. Even to be secondarily responsible for a child seemed beyond my capabilities.

My mother, my husband, and my closest friend all accepted my explanation for why I was not up to this task. They nodded their heads sympathetically and said, “No wonder.” But I don’t buy my own excuse. I despise myself for failing my brother, his wife, and their child. I have lived for ten years with the shame and regret.

Name Withheld

ALEX WAS A CHARISMATIC TEENAGER, and the most entrepreneurial student I have taught in my fifteen-year career. He started his own grocery-delivery business and frequently came to my class bleary-eyed because he’d been up all night itemizing produce, cereals, and cleaning products.

“Alex,” I’d say, “where’s your *Hamlet* essay?”

He would smile and shrug his shoul-

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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
Out Of Reach	November 1	April 2004
Second Chances	December 1	May 2004
Lessons	January 1	June 2004
Stepfamilies	February 1	July 2004
Hard Work	March 1	August 2004
Fitting In	April 1	September 2004

ders. "Fisch, what can I say?"

I'd let him off every time.

Alex had the lead in the school play. On opening night, while the other drama students celebrated with their families, I noticed him standing alone, leaning against the wall and trying to appear aloof.

"Are your folks coming tomorrow night?" I asked.

"Nah, my dad doesn't really care what I do. It's OK. I don't do it for him. Acting is for me."

On Monday, Alex came to class empty-handed yet again.

"What's your excuse this time?" I asked.

"I'll tell you after class, Fisch."

When the other students were gone, it all came out: Alex's father beat him. Fed up, Alex had moved out months ago. He'd lived in his car, until it got too cold. Since then, he'd been living in the school building, which was often unlocked due to renovations. He studied by candlelight in the library and showered in the locker room before the buses arrived. He raided the dumpster behind the cafeteria for dinner.

To my knowledge, I am the only one who knew Alex's secret, and I guarded it until well after his graduation.

Three years later, Alex wrote me a letter from college. He was thriving and had started a string of new enterprises to pay for his education. He had decided to change his name legally, to finalize his separation from his father.

To this day, I occasionally look at a bedraggled, bleary-eyed kid in my English class and wonder what happened to him the night before. What excuse will I hear today? Will it disgust me? Amuse me? Break my heart?

*Pam Fischer
Indianapolis, Indiana*

I CAN'T WRITE TODAY. IT'S TOO HOT.

The topic is boring. I'm too tired. I'll get a fresh start in the morning. I need a snack first. Let me sharpen my pencil. My computer has a virus. I have a virus. I have to call my boss. I have to walk the dog. I have to check my e-mail. I have to do my taxes. I have to wash my hair. My dog got sick. My kid got sick. The news

is on. *The West Wing* is on. Letterman is on. I need to work out. The phone keeps ringing. Someone's at the door. I have to rotate my tires. Something came up. It's time for lunch. It's time for dinner. I have a headache. I sprained my finger. I have carpal tunnel. I forgot. I overslept. I didn't know it was due today. I had to work late. I left it on the bus. I left it in my other notebook. It got lost in the mail. My dog died. My muse left. My wife left. The Prozac wore off. I ran out of gas. I ran out of excuses.

*John Unger Zussman
Kapalua, Hawaii*

I SPENT THE BETTER PART OF TWO

failed marriages working part time and scrambling to obtain my teaching credential. Once I was accredited to teach secondary biology, I decided that I didn't care for that age group. I would get my elementary credential, too. My mother, a veteran teacher, was overjoyed when I finished the program. Meanwhile, I was worried about how confining and relentless the grade-school day would be.

I began working as a substitute. Most days I was overwhelmed by the sheer effort of winning over a class and holding out till the end of the day. I began to realize that teaching would consume hours of my personal time, and that the pay for a beginning teacher was significantly less than my previous salary. I found fault with the administrators and decided it would be difficult to work with them.

Invariably, there were a couple of impossible students in every classroom. After the principal caught one of my seventh-graders climbing out a window, I ruled out junior high. Then I spent a frustrating morning with a crayon-chewing, fit-throwing kindergartner who crumpled on the carpet whenever I asked him to do anything. I was not cut out for that grade level, either. I ruled out special education after a student told me he was thinking of ways to kill me. When spring arrived — time for job applications to be submitted — I limited my chances by applying only to schools that were within a twenty-minute drive of my home.

At some point during that summer, I accepted what I should have known from the first day: I did not want to teach. I had

been making excuses for ten years.

Name Withheld

I WAS CONCERNED ABOUT MY DAUGHTER Sarah. She wasn't herself and hadn't been for weeks. Whereas ordinarily we talked at least once, and sometimes two or three times a day, now I got her answering machine. Rarely did I get a call back, and if I did, it was usually her husband, Nick, calling to say that Sarah was in the shower or lying down or not feeling well or just plain too busy to talk. Sorry, he didn't have time to talk either. Sure, he'd give her the message.

If Sarah did happen to answer the phone, she always had an excuse at the ready: "Sorry, we're busy Saturday." "No, I don't think I can make lunch today. I'm not feeling well." "Dinner? Maybe another time, Mom. I promised Nick steak and a baked potato tonight."

One day I decided just to show up on her doorstep and insist that she go to lunch with me. At the restaurant, I would ask her point-blank why she was avoiding me and if she wanted me to stop calling her — even though the thought of it brought tears to my eyes.

As I parked in her driveway, I noticed a bookcase that used to be in her living room lying in pieces on the carport with books strewn about. I wondered what excuse she would give when I asked her about it. Walking to the porch, I saw that all the blinds were drawn. Odd. Sarah hated to keep the house closed up. When she lived at home, she used to go dancing through the house, opening all the windows, even when it was raining, laughing at my objections.

I knocked on the door and waited. No one answered. I tried the handle. Locked. As I turned to walk away, something caught my eye: one of the blinds swaying ever so slightly. I knocked again, and I heard the sound of not one or two, but three locks being unlatched.

"Mom!" Sarah said. "What are you doing here? Why didn't you call first?" She stepped out and pulled the door shut behind her.

"Well?" I said. "Aren't you going to let me in?"

Before she could make an excuse for why she couldn't, I pushed by her. It had

finally dawned on me that something was going on, but I wasn't prepared for what I saw: dishes overflowing in the kitchen sink; leftover food on the counters; clothes and magazines piled on the floor; empty beer bottles lined up on the coffee table in front of the TV; and a large hole in the living-room wall where the bookcase used to be.

"What's going on here, Sarah?" I asked quietly.

She hung her head to hide her face and tugged her robe across her chest. I pulled her to me and held her tight. "Why didn't you tell me?" I asked. "Why?"

"He didn't mean it, Mom. It's just that he's been working extra hours, and when he comes home he's exhausted, and . . . It's my fault, Mom. Somehow I make him mad. I don't do anything right, and you can't blame him. He's just trying to make me a better wife."

Name Withheld

I HAVE BEEN SECRETLY IN LOVE WITH a married woman for the past year and a half. Although my wife knows of my attraction, she doesn't know its full extent. I make excuses to cross a room so I'll bump into this woman. I do projects with her husband just to see her. I arrange our child's car-pool schedule to coincide with hers. I dream up reasons, however lame, to call her.

Realizing that things were getting out of hand, I went five months without contact. Then, two weeks ago, I spoke to her. Since then I haven't slept through the night. I wake up either thinking of the last time I saw her, or wondering when I will see her again.

I feel like a leaf floating and swirling in a breeze. I know that, to be true to myself, my family, and my friends, I have to avoid all contact with her. But part of me just wants to swirl.

Name Withheld

I HAVE BAD WORK HABITS, SO I LEARNED early on to make excuses. But by the time I got to college, all the lying was wearing me down.

One day I decided I couldn't do it anymore. I went up to my political-science professor after class and told him flatly that I didn't have my report.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Nothing happened," I answered. "I just didn't do it."

"Are you sick?" he asked. "Is there an emergency in your family?"

I was stunned. Here I was, ready to tell the truth, and he was making excuses *for me*.

I admitted (falsely) that, yes, there had been a death in the family. The professor seemed relieved. He offered his condolences and gave me a week's extension on the paper.

Name Withheld

I EAT BECAUSE I HAD A BAD DAY. I EAT because I had a good day. I eat because I am not going to start my diet until the first of the year. I eat because I have already blown my diet anyway. I eat because everybody else is eating, and I don't want to appear rude. I eat because I'm home alone and nobody will know that I am eating.

I weigh three hundred pounds because I eat too much. I eat too much because I weigh three hundred pounds.

Name Withheld

I'VE SPENT THE BULK OF MY WORK-ing life in various service jobs: waiter, landscaper, housecleaner, nanny. I have almost gone to graduate school twice, once for law and once for clinical psychology. Both times I was elated at having discovered my purpose in life. Finally I would have an answer for the question "So, what do you do?"

But each time the euphoria wore off, I began to think about what it would be like to work in the mental-health field under managed care; or as a lawyer surrounded by, well, lawyers. More importantly, I began to ask myself how much my choice to go to graduate school was about becoming a person who would inspire respect and admiration in others — especially my father. Graduate school was more about seeking approval and acceptance than it was about following my heart.

I decided to focus on things that would satisfy me deeply. I resolved to write more, climb Mount Rainier, learn to scuba dive, pay off my debts, read the classics, do volunteer work, exercise, practice mind-

fulness, and generally live a rich and fulfilling life.

I've done many of these things, but sometimes, when I come home exhausted after eight hours of changing diapers and picking up toys, I wonder if my commitment to living an authentic life is just another excuse to make me feel better about doing a job I don't want to do.

*Arissa H. Rench
Seattle, Washington*

WHILE I WAS RAISING MY CHILDREN on my own, I went a long time without a sex life. Aside from not having the energy, I felt invisible as a woman. I held back my desires and concentrated on the kids, money, finishing my degree, and going to work in a demanding profession.

After the kids were grown, I began to feel more sensuously alive than ever before, but I was tying my sex life to the idea of finding a life partner, and there weren't any prime candidates on the horizon. It seemed almost cruel — this explosion of sexual energy coinciding with a lack of available men. I wondered whether I should try bisexuality, just to double my chances.

Instead I began looking for lovers rather than potential partners. If a soul mate came along, wonderful, but in the meantime I wanted to celebrate passion and sensuality.

I started an e-mail affair with a married man. He sent me playfully explicit messages that made me laugh. I struggled with my conscience and told myself the affair would never cross over into real life. It was a virtual affair, a fantasy. Meanwhile I was going out of my mind with physical frustration.

I decided to compromise. I told myself that this man's life was his own business. I knew that I'd be contributing to the decline of his marriage, and knew that I'd never trust him as my own life partner. But could it be any worse than all these years of burying a part of myself?

Today the real affair began.

*Name Withheld
(end of excerpt)*