



CLEMENS KALISCHER

## Readers Write SMALL TOWNS

**GROWING UP IN BROOKLYN, I THOUGHT** all the eccentrics lived in big cities. Then I became editor of a tiny newspaper in a drab Louisiana town where every breath stank of sulfur from the local paper mill. The police chief's brother, a sergeant on the force, was caught stealing antidrug funds. The sour-faced editor I'd replaced had baked treats for local officials in exchange for information. (The first time I asked the sheriff for the crime reports, he replied, "Where are my cookies?") The town manager spit tobacco juice on my office carpet. Even the tragedies were bizarre: at a local funeral parlor, one minister killed another and severed his victim's head.

The crime and scandal shocked me, as did the racially segregated bars, stores, mortuaries, and even high-school proms — this, in the 1990s. At the same time, people were often kind and generous.

Our overworked obstetrician showed up with a bottle of champagne to celebrate our daughter's birth. An employee of mine muttered about "Yankees" behind my back but stitched a beautiful quilt for our baby. Although she had voted for racist candidate David Duke, her son had married a Panamanian, and she adored her dark-skinned granddaughter. People were always more complicated than they seemed.

As a kid I'd felt anonymous even within my own apartment building, but in that town I soon knew almost everyone. My wife hated to shop with me because people would stop us every few minutes to praise or condemn something I'd written in the paper. Most loved my first-person narratives, but hated my editorials favoring gay rights or racial equality.

We left that town after two years, and I don't miss it. But after a decade in Los

Angeles I've come to appreciate the value of a place where the pace of life is slower, where the video-store clerks know your name and the neighbors drop by unannounced, where people — whatever their faults — have few pretensions. Here in the big city, I don't know my neighbors' faults, because I don't know my neighbors. Now it is anonymous urban life that I want to escape.

*Mike Cross-Barnet  
Los Angeles, California*

**LAST YEAR, MY FIANCÉ AND I MOVED** from Minneapolis to his birthplace in western Minnesota. After twenty-six years in the city, I was ready to trade pollution, traffic, and sprawl for front-porch lemonade and harvest-moon dances.

A month after the move, though, I started to feel lonely. It wasn't just the distance from friends and family back

in the city; I felt like a different species. I had always thought of myself as extroverted, but in the eyes of my new neighbors I just talked too much, and usually about things that didn't concern them, like movies, pop culture, and fashion. I sat silently through talk of irrigation methods and rhubarb recipes.

While I struggled to define myself amid my new surroundings, I began to change. I started to enjoy driving slowly down an empty road. Sometimes I'd cross over into the opposite lane, just because I could. The days' journeys were becoming just as important to me as the destinations. I learned to identify plants and weather patterns. I figured out inexpensive ways to entertain myself and sometimes went a whole week without buying anything.

Sometimes I stand at the edge of the prairie and still feel lonely, but more often I feel myself expand into the wide-open space.

*Autumn Compton  
Montevideo, Minnesota*

**MY HUSBAND AND I HAVE LIVED ON** a military base for nearly four years now. We must always be on our best behavior. You never hear loud parties or rowdy kids here. There are no junked cars or dead appliances in yards. Dogs are always on a leash, and poop is always scooped. Lawns are edged, hedges trimmed. You will never see a housewife picking up the morning newspaper in her bathrobe and curlers, or a bare-chested, potbellied neighbor drinking beer. You *will* see the occasional tank roll by, and every six weeks a B-1 bomber flies over to honor graduates from the Officer Training School. It's possible to live here and never venture outside the gates.

The base sits on the banks of the Alabama River, which floods each spring, covering the golf course. On the river road you can walk your dog or ride a horse and forget for a short time that the threat condition is Bravo.

My husband has twenty months to go until his thirty years of service are up. We plan to retire to a small town and collect junk.

*Susan K.  
Montgomery, Alabama*

**FOR TWO YEARS, I LIVED IN A SMALL** town on the windswept steppe of central Mongolia. Baganuur had been built by the Russians to house the families of the miners and engineers who worked in the nearby coal mine. As the only Peace Corps volunteer for thirty kilometers, I was something of a celebrity. Most people knew my name, and letters addressed simply to "Cindy, English Teacher" would invariably find their way to me.

I lived in a crumbling brick apartment building with unreliable plumbing and fierce heat. (The Mongolians couldn't believe that I actually *liked* living alone, *without a TV*.) I had to climb seventy-eight steps to get to my unit, but the good news was that the drunks hardly ever made it up all those stairs.

I quickly learned my way around. To buy meat, I had to walk down the only road for fifteen minutes to a single-story, whitewashed building filled with headless, flyblown carcasses. To buy cooking oil and dry noodles, I went to the other end of town, where Nyamkaa and Solongo

teased that they would find me a Mongolian husband. For a haircut, I climbed the stairs of Apartment Building 31, where Saraa would politely ignore my miserable language skills and cut my hair exactly the way I wanted it. If I needed something sewn or altered, Dashzeveg in Apartment Building 18 would expertly take my measurements and have the garment ready in three days.

The community education center where I worked had once been a Russian kindergarten. There were still big cutouts on the wall of roosters and cats wearing hats and boots. The day before I left, my co-workers presented me with a beautiful wool rug and a silk *dell*, the traditional native costume. I tearfully accepted their gifts and asked each of them to say something into my cassette recorder. Many of them said, "Namaig bitgii mart" — *Don't forget me*. I wouldn't, I promised.

Now, back in the States, I keep my photos from Mongolia in a box. Sometimes I take them out and gaze at each

**R**EADERS 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
Hard Work	March 1	August 2004
Fitting In	April 1	September 2004
Weddings	May 1	October 2004
Coming Clean	June 1	November 2004
Letters	July 1	December 2004
Hero Worship	August 1	January 2005

face fondly, trying to recall the shared laughter, impromptu language lessons, and endless cups of salty milk tea.

I am already forgetting.

*Cindy Y. Ogasawara  
Seattle, Washington*

**I GREW UP IN A CENTURY-OLD FARM-**house outside the small Oregon town of Philomath. On the weekends my mom exhorted my siblings and me to play outside, whatever the weather. We would act out intricate scenarios based on the Hardy Boys books or, less frequently, Nancy Drew mysteries. We didn't have a television in the house until I was seventeen, when we inherited my grandparents' 1950s-era black-and-white set.

Rather than send her children to school in backwoods Philomath, my mother petitioned the school district to bus my siblings and me to the infinitely more "progressive" school system in Corvallis. We were the final stop on the bus route, and the ride lasted an hour each way.

Though no one in my family said it, I understood that Philomath was "low class." We rarely went there, except on our way to the beach. The only times Philomath became acceptable were during the summer festival, when I rode my horse in the parade, and during the Benton County Fair, when we fraternized with Philomath 4H-ers in the pig barn.

I graduated from Corvallis High in 1970 and wandered aimlessly for a while before settling on San Juan Island, Washington, where I married and had a daughter. The nearest town is so small that, over a period of twenty years, the same judge has presided over my marriage, my divorce, and my daughter's hearing for underage possession.

My mother may have intended bigger and better things for me, but I'm not comfortable anywhere except a backwoods town — the smaller, the better.

*Linda T. Campbell  
Friday Harbor, Washington*

**WHEN I WAS NINE, MY FAMILY MOVED** from Washington, D.C., to a log cabin at the foot of the Appalachians. Harmony, Maryland, had hardly grown since the late 1700s. When I lived there, it had ninety-

nine residents, five churches, and a Coke machine.

I hated the place. Accustomed to the diversity and culture of Washington, I felt as if I'd been dropped into Hicksville. Hardly anyone in my class had even left Maryland. (I had lived in Paris for three years.)

There was nothing to do in Harmony. Our cabin was a half mile down a dirt lane, and there was no one my age to play with except a shy farm boy named Donny. Our TV got only three channels, and they were full of static.

As a teenager, I spent my free time in the woods, contemplating my miserable life. Late at night I'd walk the mile into town, where I'd peer into people's houses and make fun of their tacky decor. Then I'd buy a soda from the Coke machine and walk the steep road back to our cabin, wondering why I had to be stuck in such an awful place.

For me, Harmony was the source of both a deep depression and the meditative life I needed to get me through it. I don't forget how unhappy I was, but I also remember how the woods saved me. I don't forget how the rednecks teased me at school, but I also remember how that farm boy Donny apologized one day for his friends' behavior. I don't forget how lonely I was, but I also remember those walks to the Coke machine and see them now as a spiritual practice of sorts.

What I most want now in my life is a sense of community: something the people in Harmony seemed to have; something that I, an outsider, never understood.

*Nathan Long  
Richmond, Virginia*

**WHEN I WAS CONCEIVED, MY PARENTS** moved from Minneapolis, Minnesota, to a small farmhouse in the country. They tell me that they did this for my benefit.

There is never anything to do here, so people turn to drugs to cure their boredom. Pot is always available, and alcohol, and cocaine. The teenagers in the towns surrounding us are primarily drug addicts, and their parents are either pot-heads themselves or oblivious to their kids' problems.

I know many girls who got pregnant

before their senior year. Most of my friends never graduated from high school. "Hicks," my stepsister likes to call them. It's true, but I was fond of them. For a while I found myself attracted to older boys who were content to stay in these small towns their entire lives. I slept with these boys in their parents' basements, or in their trailers, or in campers down by the river.

I have grown up fast and learned the hard way that it is better to be alone than to choose the wrong company. That's why now I spend most nights sitting at home with my family. I can't wait to leave this place. I hope I never come back.

*Name Withheld*

**I GREW UP IN A SMALL TOWN IN TEXAS** in the early fifties. Like most small towns, mine had its share of characters.

Buck was the first policeman our town ever had. He was a huge man who sweated a lot and was always ready for a fight. He deterred crime simply because no one wanted Buck mad at him.

Once, Buck got a hankering to tour Oklahoma in the city-owned police car. He came back after about a week. No one at city hall had the guts to call him on it. People would talk to Buck's wife about the three commodes in his front yard — he used them as flower planters — but no one could make him drag the toilets to the dump.

Dotty was another character in town. She wore men's clothing and pumped gas at the Texaco. She was very neat and kept a like-new Pontiac in her garage while she drove an old pickup everywhere. She once came into our house when we weren't home because she wanted to see what we'd done with the place. She even stripped the beds to find out what brand of mattresses we had. Like Buck, Dotty had a fierce temper, and no one questioned her strange behavior.

The street beside Dotty's filling station was covered in red gravel, and when the wind blew from the north, the dust turned the side of her station red. She was always washing it off with a hose.

When the city came to grade the road, Dotty objected. It would stir up too much dust, she said. She blocked the trucks until Buck came in the police car with the lights and siren going. He told Dotty

that the city owned the road, and that it was going to be graded whether she liked it or not. The two of them screamed at each other until Dotty grabbed her chest and fell to the ground. An ambulance came to take her to the hospital, where she would be pronounced dead on arrival: a heart attack.

As the ambulance pulled away, Buck signaled to the workmen and said, "Start grading, boys."

*Tom B. Poindexter  
Houston, Texas*

**IN MY TWENTIES I SHARED A HOLLY-**wood Hills home with a sixty-year-old French alcoholic who, when he wasn't throwing up in the bathtub, called me pet names in French. After eight months, I packed up my belongings and left.

Some waiter friends of mine in LA had invited me in on a multilevel marketing meeting (aka a pyramid scheme), and I'd promptly signed up my mother. Now I was moving to the Midwest to go into business with her. She lived in a yellow duplex at the end of a cornfield in Indiana, where she had somehow wound up with her second husband, soon to be her ex. Our plan was to rid ourselves of debt and difficult men once and for all.

I was stunned when I walked into the town's only bank and the teller said, "You must be Jan's daughter." My mother and I didn't even have the same last name. My mother explained to me that new faces in town were rare, and nearly everyone had heard that her daughter was coming to live with her. Still, I felt a sense of foreboding.

Maxine, my mother's landlady, occupied the other side of the duplex. In our first conversation, she told me about coming home one day and finding her ex-husband wearing her lingerie. From there she moved seamlessly to "I understand your mama and you are starting up a home business?"

Our newspaper ad read: "Earn \$1,000+ a week just by talking to your friends!" We attracted curious respondents from an industrial town east of Porter, where people were as desperate and naive as my mother and I. They arrived in battered cars and left saying they'd "think about it."

Eventually we signed up Don, a retiree who needed extra money to pay off medical bills. We liked him. He was motivated. Meanwhile, Maxine's greetings grew chilly. My mother said she was menopausal.

The next month, two people actually showed up for a training meeting. Elated, I walked them out to their cars with their starter kits and contracts. I was heading back into the house when Maxine called me over to her side of the yard, where she was frantically weeding her rose beds. She leaned in close to me, as if trying to draw me into the bushes.

"I'm going to put a little bug in your ear, honey," she whispered loudly. "I tried to tell your mama, but she don't listen. Now, don't get me wrong. I know Jan's got her troubles, and I know she's trying, but I can't have any more of these meetings going on at the house. It's not me. It's the neighbors complaining about all the cars."

The only neighbor I could see was Maxine's sister, two cornfields away.

Maxine snapped her gum as she lopped off branches. "Honestly, honey," she said, "I don't have a problem with coloreds. I've even got a friend over in Valpo whose daughter sometimes trades clothes with one. But the neighbors are complaining. You'll just have to have your meetings somewhere else."

When I told my mother, she waved her hand as if shooshing an annoying gnat. "Oh, she's always creating some drama."

A few days later we held another meeting with three hopefuls in attendance. When I stepped outside the next morning, Maxine was hovering in her rosebushes. I pinned on a smile and waved. She motioned me over.

"Look here," she began in a friendly but forced tone. "If these meetings don't stop, I'm going to have to evict you. Nobody's trying to keep you from running your business, understand, but you can't do it on my property. The neighbors don't want those people here, and they're telling me to do something about it."

Later that day, I told my mother I was going back to California. Before the week was up, I was wedged into rush-hour traffic on the Hollywood Freeway, not quite sure where I would sleep that night, but

thankful for the anonymity of the city.

My mother eventually made it back to California. Don the retiree won ten thousand dollars on a scratch ticket and paid off his medical bills. I got a job translating Venezuelan soap operas. As far as we know, Maxine still lives alone in her whites-only cornfield.

*Shannon Mahan  
Seattle, Washington*

*(end of excerpt)*