



AMY R. BOLES

## Readers Write

# DECEPTION

**IN THE SPRING OF MY SEVENTH-**grade year, I came down with a resilient but otherwise unremarkable case of bronchitis. One night I was having trouble breathing, and my mother took me into her bathroom and turned on the shower as hot as it would go. Standing in that foggy bathroom, inhaling big lungfuls of steam, I got a crazy idea: I would stop breathing.

After a moment I waved my arms in a distress signal. My mother remained calm at first. She swatted my back a few times, the way mothers do. Then her face

grew worried. I took a breath.

"What happened?" Mom asked. "Are you all right? Were you choking?"

"I don't know," I said. "My lungs just sort of locked up." I waited a few beats for dramatic effect and then stopped breathing again. This time I added a hitching movement in my chest. No sound; just hitching.

Keeping her displays of terror to a minimum, my mother drove me to the emergency room, where I practiced my form in the waiting area. I decided to make the attacks a manageable forty-five to sixty

seconds in length (although on occasion I went for as long as a minute and a half), and the hitching became more of a spasmodic jerking. The entire room was captivated by my performance.

Once in a hospital bed, I displayed my shocking symptoms for an assortment of doctors and nurses: First my chest would hitch once, like a hiccup, and my breathing would cease. Then I would widen my eyes and roll them back and forth, as if alarmed. I'd randomly contract my chest muscles and cause my limbs to twitch and shake.

Within a couple of hours, I'd been subjected to blood draws, vital-sign monitors, and a metal probe that was shoved down my mildly anesthetized throat. One doctor finally suggested that I might be making the whole thing up.

Outraged, my mother transferred me to another, better, hospital across town.

To my chagrin, I was placed on the pediatric ward. I would have preferred to be in with the dying patients. But I had faith that if I continued to display my symptoms in a convincing and consistent manner, the doctors would have no choice but to bump my status to "critical." I really was quite sick. In addition to my bronchitis, I'd developed a high fever and a propensity for vomiting that I used to my advantage.

I was king of my own small kingdom. When a clown came into my room, under the misconception that balloon animals would cheer a twelve-year-old, I simply conjured an attack, and he was out the door in an instant. If I wanted my mother to stay by my side, I maintained a worrying regimen of five or six attacks an hour. If I wanted her to leave me alone, I scaled back the spasms and said, "I'm feeling sleepy." It worked every time.

One day a doctor came in to prepare me for an MRI. I'd never had one before, and I asked what they would be looking for.

"Mostly brain tumors," he casually informed me.

I was positively delighted. I told every visitor that the doctors suspected brain cancer.

Several days later, with the doctors still befuddled, my mother decided to do some research of her own. She concluded with near certainty that I was having an allergic reaction to the cough medicine I'd taken. When she told me this, I affected fascination and relief, though I secretly wished for a more dramatic cause than cough syrup.

After about a week in the hospital, my fever and bronchitis had cleared up, and I gradually reduced my attacks until they "vanished" altogether. The doctors were apprehensive about letting me go, but my mother insisted, and I was allowed to return home.

To this day, my mother warns me to stay away from Robitussin.

*Name Withheld*

**WHEN MY TWIN DAUGHTERS WERE** infants, I often referred to them as my daytime baby and my nighttime baby. Lily couldn't bear to be out of my arms during the day, and Shira needed to cuddle at night. When my husband and I finally nudged them out of the family bed at the age of four, Shira lamented, "I don't like getting older. Everything changes."

As glad as I was to have access to my husband, I missed snuggling with the girls. But I held firm and explained to them, "A mommy who doesn't sleep enough is a crabby mommy." I told them not to wake me unless they were sick or had had a very bad nightmare. And I praised them lavishly when they made it through a night without calling for me.

One night I lay in bed and heard Shira whimper. Hoping she'd fall back to sleep, I didn't go to her. Then a tiny voice called

out quietly, "Mommy?" She was trying to be good. Though I wanted more than anything to gather her into my arms, I lay still. A rule is a rule, and I knew I would lose much ground if I gave in.

The calling stopped. Good. Maybe she'd gone to sleep. Then I felt the covers being carefully lifted, and, with a degree of stealth that must have been very hard for a four-year-old, Shira climbed into my bed. She edged toward me until we were just barely touching. I pretended to be asleep and breathed in her sweet smell. There would be time enough in the morning to remind her that big girls sleep in their own beds.

*Robyn Samuels  
Tarzana, California*

**I CHEATED ON MATTHEW WITH HENRY,** on Bill with Ethan and that boy from Berkeley (what was his name?), on Steve with Ron — until I returned home one morning to find Steve dumping my belongings in the front yard. I cheated on

**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
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
Apologies	September 1	February 2005

Daniel with Heather. I cheated on Susan with Craig. I had sex with a man four hours after responding to his personal ad. He was an attorney and made jokes about the pedophiles he'd defended. As he was taking off my shirt, I thought, *I don't even like you*. But the only thing I didn't let him do was come on my face.

I contracted herpes, but I didn't tell my partners until after I'd had sex with them, if then. I believed that I was brave and free and had thrown off patriarchal constraints on my sexuality. Really I was reenacting the patriarchal structure of my childhood home. My angry and distant father once punched my sister in the stomach for having spilled milk. Another time he threw my crying brother against a bunk bed.

Dad seemed serene only when he noticed a beautiful woman. He'd comment on what he found sexually attractive about her. "She has very good-looking legs," he'd announce, as if revealing a fierce truth. I learned there was only one way to get positive attention from a man.

For me sex was a way to win affection from people who didn't really care about me. It afforded me a certain victory, even when I lost my dignity.

In graduate school, I became friends with David. After graduation, he and I left for different cities, but we stayed in touch. He was a delightful pen pal, clever and funny. I would sit in the sun and savor his letters (this was before e-mail) and carefully compose a response.

The first time I went to visit David, we steamed up the windows in his apartment. The next day he called to confess that he hadn't enjoyed the sex. He was sorry he hadn't stopped to tell me. "I wasn't really in my body last night," he said.

I was strangely relieved by his admission, and eager to make one of my own. "I wasn't entirely honest with you either," I said. "I have herpes."

He was silent for a few seconds, then said, "That's not what friends do to each other."

He ended our relationship. I was paralyzed by depression for weeks.

A few years earlier, a therapist had suggested I try a twelve-step program. I went to my first meeting in a dimly lit room above a West Hollywood cafe.

Five men sat in a circle, looking sad and lonely. I didn't want to think I was like them. *What am I doing here?* I thought as I took a seat.

A young man with gentle eyes spoke first: "Hi, my name is Martin, and I'm a sex and love addict." He said he was HIV-positive and had slept with more than a thousand men.

My tears started and would not stop. Martin was me — a different gender, a different person, but me nonetheless.

I struggled to lead a sexually honest life. For starters, I told all prospective partners that I had herpes. To my surprise, this did not deter many of them. But I still had sex with strangers. I still lied — to my partners and to myself.

One day it dawned on me: I had to limit myself to sexual behaviors that I would not be tempted to lie about. I am embarrassed now at how obvious this seems, but at the time it was a revelation. I decided that, when faced with the possibility of having sex, I'd ask myself, *Is this something I will lie about later?* If the answer was yes, I wouldn't do it.

This practice has cleared up a lot of my confusion. It's as if some peaceful part of me is floating just above the scene, gazing down with compassion — and do I want to lie to her?

*Name Withheld*

**WHEN I WAS GROWING UP IN THE** seventies, I did drugs but avoided heroin. Everyone knew that when it was time to fix, a junkie would tell God a lie.

In 1991, after a year on parole, I hit a tough streak and began smoking crack. An acquaintance showed me how. My swift descent into addiction was predictable, but my newfound ability to lie caught me by surprise. My bosses wondered where my delivery money was. My eighty-six-year-old grandmother was amazed that new tires cost so much. Within a year I had burned everyone I knew, smoked all my possessions, and dropped thirty-five pounds. I had one goal in life: another hit.

As I drove away from my second armed robbery in twelve hours, headed for the "dope hole" in a freshly stolen convertible, I burst into laughter. Outright stealing felt like the most honest thing

I'd done in years. No more lies. It was such a relief.

*John Kingham  
Bowling Green, Florida*

**IN HIGH SCHOOL I WAS INVOLVED IN** student government, had major roles in school plays, never dropped below a 3.2 grade-point average, and was elected to speak at my graduation. I was even voted "Best Sense of Humor."

I loved school. Really it was not so much school I was in love with, but the other students. Geeks, jocks, stoners, cheerleaders — they all fascinated me. I ached for some deeper connection with all of them.

Yet at some point every day I would be gripped by the fear that someone would find out I was a fraud. Once people realized I did not deserve this happiness, it would all come to an end.

On the way home, I would become "Dumps," the nickname given to me by my stepfather. My shoulders slumped, and I scooted silently around the house, absorbing everyone's cruelty like a kicked dog.

Before my parents had divorced, my birth father used to corner me in a room and threaten me with a backhand until I cried. Disgusted by my tears, he would then deliver a brutal spanking for "being weak." By the time I turned six, there was nothing he could do to make me cry.

Although I doubt they suspected what had gone on, my mother, my stepfather, and my siblings unconsciously followed suit with a stream of verbal hostility. Perhaps I even encouraged them. It was the closest thing I knew to intimacy.

I was not allowed to have friends over or to attend most social functions, so I sneaked out my bedroom window several nights a week. I didn't make much at my part-time job, and I couldn't ask my parents for money, so I shoplifted most of my clothes. By the end of my senior year, I'd stolen thousands of dollars' worth of merchandise. My family never noticed.

I dutifully produced report cards but hid any awards or certificates I received. I lied about play rehearsals, saying I'd been at work or the library. At home I'd drink stolen alcohol in my room and write love poems to a boy who did not love me back. If I felt particularly bad, I would cut my torso with a knife, being careful to cut

only places my bra would cover. Then I'd paint my face with the blood.

Don't ever idealize the homecoming queen. She could be me.

*Jeanne L.  
Ibaraki-Ken, Japan*

**I DON'T THINK MY BOYFRIEND OF** four years has ever met the real me. I swear to him that I don't like clothes that are too revealing. I insist I don't listen to raunchy rap music. I deny that I find other men even remotely attractive. I lie because I want him to think I'm special, not like every other girl out there.

He is the only person I've ever slept with. At least, that's what I tell him.

*Name Withheld*

**MY FATHER TAUGHT ME THAT IT WAS** OK to lie, and that people who didn't lie were idiots who would suffer for playing by the rules. "Look at that poor Joe Burns bastard," he would say. "Never cheated on his taxes, never cheated on his wife, and look what happened: his wife left him and took every dime he had — and then he was audited!"

"It's a tough world" was my father's mantra, and "If you don't screw them, they'll screw you." It's a persuasive argument when you're five years old and your drunken father keeps a loaded gun under his pillow.

After I became an adult, my father called me one night with a proposition: He had bought a used Audi that turned out to be a lemon. He wanted to transfer the title to my name and then report the car stolen. It would become a "Tijuana taxi," my father said. We would split the insurance money. I told him I wasn't interested in risking a felony so that he could make a couple of thousand dollars. He hung up in a rage, but not before saying, "Some daughter you turned out to be."

It took me many years to realize that my father had no ethics, and that my own were often questionable. These days the worst thing I do is try to reuse bus transfers.

*Shannon M.  
Seattle, Washington*

**MY HUSBAND AND I WERE PLANNING** a home birth, which made my in-laws ner-

vous. Oh, they didn't come out and say it. But their doubts were plain in their taciturn responses when I told them about my midwives and the birth cottage.

The birth was hard, the antithesis of the relaxed, spiritual event I'd expected. When I saw my son for the first time, I felt drained, raw, and near dead.

Enter my pushy, judgmental in-laws, anxious to hear how horrible it had been, how wrong I'd been about the whole thing, how glad I would be to have the next one in the hospital, with an epidural and *doctors* surrounding me. "You can sit and watch tv through the whole thing!"

I did not satisfy them. I lied. I said it had been wonderful, that my husband had been more traumatized by it than I. (He'd thought I was dying.) I said it had been a little harder than I'd imagined, but the pain had been manageable, and only the last half-hour or so had been really rough. I told them I wanted a home birth for my next child.

Later, as the doctor was stitching me up, he accidentally hit a spot with no anesthesia, and something inside me snapped. The truth came out with the tears: It had been awful. I'd hated it. I would have begged for drugs if I'd been at a hospital. I sobbed and held my midwife's weathered hand. The doctor looked confused. I was ashamed of my weakness and angry with my body for not having cooperated in letting me have the birth experience I'd wanted.

My husband is proud of me, but the truth is, my continued dedication to home birth is pure obstinacy. I wish I could be honest about the pain, the exhaustion, the feeling of hopelessness I endured. But I can't. I want to be right.

*Emily Arnold  
Sevierville, Tennessee*

**ALL THE CHILDREN IN MY LARGE** Irish family attended Catholic school, where we were taught to handle pain, whether gnawing hunger or a parent's angry slap across the face, by "offering it up for the poor souls in purgatory." I believed whatever hardship I endured would not only save someone else's soul but also hasten my own journey to heaven.

My faith helped me cope with my mother's undiagnosed manic-depression.

I obsessively recited novenas that promised miracles if performed correctly and with devotion. I believed the priest's assurances that if I prayed diligently, sacrificed, and accepted God's will, my mother would know peace.

I was twelve years old and home alone with my mother when she attempted suicide. After failing to reach my father and my grandmother, I called an ambulance and then the parish priest. The ambulance came and went, and I waited on the front porch for Father M. to show up and comfort me, reassure me, lift the burden of responsibility.

When Father M. arrived, he asked if my mother had still been alive when the ambulance had left. I said I thought she had. "You know," he said, "if she dies, she cannot be buried in a Catholic cemetery. Suicide is a mortal sin."

While my mother recovered, I struggled with the realization that I would find neither compassion nor comprehension in the teachings of my church. I began to seek insight at the public library instead. But my parents still expected me to attend church.

I left the house by myself each Sunday morning, telling my parents that I was going to early Mass because I wanted the rest of my day free. I walked to the doughnut shop a few blocks from the church, drank a cup of cocoa, and perused the day-old newspapers. Walking home an hour later, I composed a plausible theme for the morning's sermon, in case I was asked. My fictional accounts seemed to bring my mother peace of mind.

*Susan Haines  
Anchorage, Alaska*

*(end of excerpt)*