



JADINA LILLEN

Readers Write SECOND CHANCES

MY PARENTS DIVORCED A FEW YEARS ago, after thirty-eight years of marriage. When my mother called to give me the news, I was sure my father had cheated on her. He'd always struck me as a ladies' man. Had he slept with a woman Mom knew, I asked — or, worse, a friend of hers?

"Oh, Sara," Mom said. "No, honey. He had an affair with a man."

So my dad was gay, after having pretended for almost forty years to be straight. That sure explained his grumpiness.

Dad, however, insisted that he was not gay; he'd only been "experimenting." Mom and I worried that he would quick-

ly remarry and keep "experimenting" on the side. We worried that he would start drinking heavily again. We worried that he would have no friends without Mom.

But Dad soon started talking about his friend Frank: "My friend Frank and I went . . ." "My friend Frank said . . ." We learned all about Frank: He was a retired elementary-school teacher and principal. He told hilarious stories about his mother, a bossy old woman with whom he had lived until her death. He liked to garden, and when he transplanted some hostas at Dad's, he patted the earth around each one and assured the plant, "You'll be just fine right here." When a stray cat showed up at the retirement community where Frank lived, he took it in and named it Snooks. When Snooks had a run-in with a raccoon, Frank paid the four-hundred-dollar vet bill.

I liked Frank already.

Mom met Frank when he volunteered at the community foundation where she works. "He's very jolly and friendly," she said. "And sort of rumpled-looking. Not at all what I expected."

Dad, the snappy dresser, with a sloppy guy? Dad, who had been known to grouse when a checkout clerk asked if he wanted a bag ("Of course I want a bag! Why would he ask me that? I paid for that bag, you know") — this crabby man was with someone jolly?

A few months later, I met Dad and Frank for dinner at a restaurant. My husband was out of town, so I brought my five-year-old daughter Susanna with me. (There was no way I was going alone to meet my dad's gay lover.) I sat across from Frank and obsessively licked my teeth to remove the flecks of lipstick I was afraid were stuck to them. Frank was utterly charmed by Susanna — and, apparently, by me. My dad guffawed at everything anyone said, and the evening passed merrily.

In April, Frank had a heart attack. (Dad referred to it as a "cardiac event.") The doctors put in a stent, and Frank and Dad were soon back to their routine of "high tea" (i.e., cocktails) with friends every afternoon and dinner out every night. They zipped around town in Dad's convertible, wearing baseball caps to pro-

fect their bald spots from the sun.

Then, in June, Dad had his own cardiac event. When he was released from the hospital a few days later, I took him by Frank's place to pick up his keys. We arrived during high tea, taking everyone by surprise. Frank forgot himself and hurried to Dad, grabbing him in a firm embrace.

And, yeah, Dad hugged him back.

Sara S.

North Manchester, Indiana

IN THE MIDSEVENTIES I SPENT A YEAR interviewing and observing patients at two psychiatric hospitals in the Andes as part of my fieldwork for my PhD in medical anthropology. The patients' stories, particularly the women's, were filled with such pathos that I often wept as I typed up my notes.

When I got back to Seattle, I spent a year doing anything I could to avoid working on my dissertation. I felt overwhelmed by the somber weight of my experience and unable to produce an outline from my mountain of notes. One day the chairman of my dissertation committee called. "We really should have a meeting," he said. "We need to know how you're doing."

The night before the meeting, I sat up late, agonizing over what to say. I would have been the first person in my family to earn a PhD, but I had lost track of the goal. The whole process had become a bizarre, blind rush to avoid failure. And now I had failed.

In the morning I met with the committee of three: John, the committee chairman; Noel, a medical anthropologist; and Gene, a Latin America specialist. These were men I respected. Now I had to disappoint them — and myself.

"The truth is that I haven't written anything," I began, glancing guiltily at them. "I didn't find out anything original." My voice wavered. "I can't write a dissertation. I'll just have to give up the PhD." I started to cry.

Gene pushed a kleenex box across the desk to me. "Here," he said. "Go ahead and cry. We don't care."

John said he was no stranger to writer's block. In fact, he was known for it. What if I just started writing? If I gave them

some pages to read, anything at all, they would promise not to criticize it. "You're doing a pretty good job of that yourself," he added.

With that promise, I went home and began to write. Paragraphs came pouring out, and then pages. I skipped from subject to subject: a reflection on a patient; the difference between Catholic and Protestant versions of guilt; a short essay comparing two films. Soon I had forty pages.

In that stack of paper, those kind men and I found the skeleton of the dissertation I would finally write — a respectable contribution, full of the lives I had striven to understand. Without their help in disarming my implacable inner critic, I would never even have started it.

Margaret Hollenbach

Ashland, Oregon

ONE AFTERNOON IN JUNE, FOR REASONS that I can no longer remember, I chose to catch the crowded 5:13 bus home, rather than wait for the half-empty 5:23.

After I'd found a seat — the last one — I heard music. It was not the buzz of some fellow passenger's headphones, but a live voice. A man was singing a few seats ahead of me, just loud enough that I could hear. The words he sang were in an African language, and although I couldn't understand them, his song sounded to me like a ballad of longing for someone far away.

When he stopped, I wanted to thank the man and let him know how much I'd enjoyed his music, but the aisle was packed with standing commuters. I hoped that he would still be on the bus when it came to my stop, but he exited at Thomas Street, long before I got off. I cursed my slow-wittedness: I should have hopped off when he did, talked to him, and then taken the next bus home.

On a hot afternoon in August, I left work early and caught the 4:37. My favorite seat, above the center wheels, was vacant. Sitting directly ahead of this seat, however, was a homeless-looking man in filthy pants and a flannel shirt with several

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Coming Clean	June 1	November 2004
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Small Victories	November 1	April 2005

missing buttons. For a brief moment, I considered choosing a seat farther away. Then he began to sing. It was the same man.

I sat down behind him and listened while I wondered how I would make my move. (Approaching strangers is not easy for me.) At the red light before Thomas Street, the singer pulled the cord for his stop and fell silent. I took a deep breath and said, "I've really enjoyed your music. Thank you."

The man turned around, smiled shyly, and extended his hand, which I shook. His name was Solomon, he said, and he was from South Africa. He talked about growing up under apartheid, but his accent was so thick I wasn't always sure what he was saying. I did learn that his deceased mother had been the director of their church choir. He honored her memory by singing the songs she'd taught him when he was a child.

Solomon said he wasn't sure he sang his mother's songs correctly. I told him they sounded wonderful to me. The woman in the seat ahead of him turned and said, "Yes, they were lovely." The girl across the aisle thanked him as well.

At Thomas Street, Solomon exited the bus. The doors closed, and as the bus pulled away, I saw him standing on the sidewalk, bowing to us like a maestro.

*Paul Dexter
Seattle, Washington*

CAROLINE AND I DATED IN COLLEGE. We planned to get married, but at the end of our junior year we had a big argument and called it off. When I returned after summer vacation, I wanted to patch things up, but she was engaged to someone else. Six months later she was married.

Two years after that, I traveled from Oregon to Pennsylvania by bus to attend my brother's wedding. Along the way I made a detour to New York City to see Janice, a woman I had dated briefly after Caroline. I invited Janice to the wedding, and for two weeks she stayed at my mother's house, helping with the preparations. After the wedding, Janice and I were engaged with astounding speed. I accepted my role of future husband like

a high-school actor accepting a minor role in the school play.

Janice returned to New York, and I took a Greyhound to Florida to visit my father. While there, I ran into Caroline's brother, who told me that Caroline had separated from her husband. I felt something shift within me. She was up at Harvard, working on her law degree, her brother said. I asked him if he thought she might like to see me.

"Actually," he said, "she was wondering if she would ever run into you."

After a few beers, I convinced the brother to call Caroline. She seemed surprised when I got on the phone. "I could drop by for a visit," I said. "It's on my way home." I was heading back to Oregon. Only the South Pole would have been a bigger detour, and we both knew it. She said that a visit would be all right with her.

Two days later, the Greyhound dropped me off near Harvard, and I walked the streets at midnight, looking for her address. She'd said she could spare only one day, but I would have been happy with five minutes.

I found the house and knocked on the door. Caroline answered in her bathrobe and invited me in. It was late, but we stayed up talking. I told her about my fiancée, and she told me about her studies. At some point she began crying. Then I began to cry.

Twenty-four hours later I was back on the Greyhound for Oregon, now engaged to two women and wondering what to do about it.

*David Wood
St. Petersburg, Florida*

IN THE CHILLY HILLS OF NORTHWESTERN Pennsylvania, where I grew up, toads were not common. My mother's sweet exclamations upon sighting one led me to think of them as special creatures to be admired and protected. Even today I regard the appearance of a toad in my garden as a gift.

A few years ago on a fall day, I was furiously digging in the compost bin while giving my four-year-old daughter an ecology lesson. There are always a multitude of worms and insects in the compost, so when I saw some movement, I ignored it

and continued jabbing with the shovel. Out of the bin rolled a toad, bleeding from the stump of its amputated front leg.

To say that I was distraught wouldn't come close. My daughter's exclamation of "Mommy, look what you did!" exacerbated my guilt. I picked up the poor little creature, who was in such shock that he made no attempt to get away, and placed him in a warm part of the compost bin, thinking he might be more comfortable there in his final moments.

That night at the dinner table, my daughter announced, "Mommy killed a toad today." So much for my being an ecological role model.

The following spring, I was digging compost, this time with great trepidation, when I saw a sudden motion. I stopped digging, and out hopped a three-legged toad, alive and looking well-fed!

I took him in my hands and ran to show my kids, anxious to share this minor miracle with them — and also to put an end to my status as "toad killer." After they had expressed their wonderment, I placed him in a soft, muddy part of my garden, far from the compost bin.

*Mary Anne Pontzer
Springfield, Missouri*

MY FATHER CRASHED HIS BICYCLE ON a mountain road near his home in New Mexico. He was airlifted to the trauma center in Albuquerque with a fractured skull, broken ribs, a deflated lung, and, most worrisome of all, a brain injury. Two days later, after arranging care for my own young children, I boarded a plane.

My father was not a warm and nurturing parent. He was demanding, impatient, critical, a perfectionist. My brother and I had responded to his criticism in different ways: I strove for perfection, becoming valedictorian of my high-school class. My brother muddled through at three different high schools and dabbled in drugs and petty crime. Neither of us got what we were after: our father's loving attention.

I'd always wondered how I would respond if my father became sick and needed me to care for him. Now I was about to find out.

The man lying in the hospital bed looked nothing like the imposing father

of my youth. The booming, opinionated voice was gone, and moans and confused gibberish had taken its place. Then he saw me, and his eyes brightened. "Hello, sweetheart," he said.

He repeated this dozens of times a day. His short-term memory was impaired, and each time he opened his eyes and saw me, it was as if I had just arrived. And each time I was his "sweetheart," his "darling," his "little girl."

Over the next three days I sat by his bed, held his hand, bathed him, brushed his teeth, massaged his legs, and stimulated his memory. I also basked in his love. Finally, my simple presence was enough to delight him.

*Karen H.
Kent, Washington*

MATTHEW WELWOLIE WAS A FISH farmer in the village of Belefana in Liberia, West Africa. Despite his diminutive stature, he was a "big man" in the community, with several wives and at least four homes. He had a big heart, too. I rented one of his homes, and we became friends, sharing conversations about America, palm wine, Nelson Mandela, and our families. He called me his "American son."

I had joined the Peace Corps right out of college and been sent to Liberia to help build fishponds. I worked with "Mr. Matthew," as people called him, and several other farmers in the village. I was also a regular guest on a local radio show, where I promoted fish farming. My girlfriend, Jill, a Peace Corps volunteer from Michigan, moved into Mr. Matthew's house with me. Our dog Sid ran with the children of the village while I played guitar. Life was good.

Then rebels invaded the country from the east and began fighting their way toward the capital. The government emptied the villages with calls for fresh troops. Many never returned.

One afternoon Peace Corps officials arrived in a blue pickup and gave us two hours to pack. They told us not to tell our Liberian friends about the evacuation, for fear it would panic them.

So we lied. We left our radios and our clothes behind, and I looked Mr. Matthew in the eye and told him we would

be back soon. I never even thanked him for all he had done for me.

The war lasted thirteen years, and more than two hundred thousand people were killed. Rebel leader Charles Taylor became president and helped fuel a brutal regional war. Taylor's soldiers cut off the limbs of women and children, raped girls, and looted nearly every village.

Jill and I had gotten married soon after returning to the States, and we planned to go back to Liberia someday, to find out if any of our neighbors had lived, maybe bring them some medicine and money. As the fighting continued, however, and we began to raise children, we realized that we would never go back.

Last year I was stunned to get a letter from Mr. Matthew. He had escaped the war and was living in Allentown, Pennsylvania, with one of his sons.

On a sparkling spring day, I stuffed an envelope full of cash, grabbed my photo albums, and drove the three hours to his home. I parked the car and looked up at the porch, where a frail, gray old man sat staring at traffic. He looked lost and confused. I gripped the steering wheel and cried, thinking about what Mr. Matthew had been through, how he must have struggled to stay alive. What could I possibly say to him? Then I opened the door and got out. When he saw me, he broke into a wide grin.

*Paul Eagle
Baltimore, Maryland*

ON THE VERGE OF TURNING THIRTY, I made some changes in my life. I switched from pursuing a PhD in film studies to working on an MFA in creative writing. I left a joyless marriage and bought a little white house in Iowa City, Iowa, just big enough for my dog and me. I had no idea what to expect: Would I fail in the new program? Would my friends shun me after the divorce? Would I spend the rest of my life alone?

A few times each summer, enterprising shrimpers from Galveston, Texas, would arrive in town and sell their catch from the back of a truck in the Dairy Queen parking lot. Midwesterners starved for fresh seafood eagerly anticipated the coming of the shrimp truck.

One day in May, about a year after I'd

bought my house, my friend Sarah and I saw the truck and spontaneously decided to host a "shrimp feed." We bought several pounds and made some calls. Later that afternoon, twelve people sat around plastic tables in my backyard, drinking beer, eating grilled shrimp, and watching the sun go down. My peony bushes were in bloom. I felt happier than I remembered having felt in a long while.

I fell in love with one of the guests at that party. He brought a new playfulness to my life. When we were together, we giggled a lot. Both of us had spent our twenties lingering in relationships that we should have left long before. After sharing the reason for his years of ambivalence, he asked me why I had stayed in my marriage.

"I thought that, at the age of twenty-six, I was too old to start over," I said.

We both burst out laughing.

*Lynne Nugent
Iowa City, Iowa*

(end of excerpt)