



DOUG FATH

## Readers Write

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### COMING CLEAN

I WAS HOME ON BREAK AFTER MY FIRST year at an Ivy League university when my parents called a “family meeting,” the first and last we ever had. My mother explained that she was not in love with my father anymore and they were getting a divorce. Then she packed up and left.

She came back to him briefly that fall. After she left the second time, my father showed up unannounced at my apartment. He was a doctor: stoic, silent, respected in the community. I had never seen him look so gray and broken. I was living with an alcoholic who pissed in potted plants, smashed mirrors, and later tried to hang himself with an extension cord in my kitchen. We sat on my front stoop — my father, my suicidal boyfriend, and I — and stared at the dreary street where I lived. It

may have been the worst day of my life.

Five years later, I asked my father for help. I had never asked before, but Thanksgiving was coming up, and I found myself unable to visit him. I had been in a methadone program for almost three years but was still shooting heroin. I couldn’t bring myself to buy a plane ticket and go through the motions, pretending everything was all right while I suffered through withdrawal on the guest-room bed. So on a Sunday morning, instead of calling my dealer, I called my father. “I have to tell you something,” I said.

I feared my father was still so bereft over the divorce that hearing about my problem would be too much for him. Maybe I was afraid he would abandon me, like my mother had.

But he didn’t. He came to see me within a week. At the airport I caught him looking at the track marks on my arms. We were both scared. This wasn’t the way things were supposed to be. But it was the first completely honest moment of my life.

*E.C.  
Los Angeles, California*

I WAS PLANNING A CROSS-COUNTRY move and determined to do it right this time: to have a job and a place to live before my eleven-year-old daughter and I packed up and left. So I flew out west to search for work. I interviewed for a position as program director at a nonprofit violence-prevention training center. The executive director was an ex-priest with a gentle manner and a lively sense of humor. During the interview I showed him two violence-prevention manuals: one I had coauthored, and one we’d used at my last job. I told him I had written both. He was impressed. I felt certain the job was mine, but he couldn’t notify me for two weeks.

After returning home, I sat on the porch and thought of my father, a charismatic, lovable man, but also a bigamist, a check forger, and a pathological liar who died an alcoholic at the age of fifty-two. There on the porch, I felt his presence so strongly that I almost dropped my coffee cup. I knew then that I had to tell my prospective boss I was a liar, even if it destroyed my chance of getting the job.

First, however, I had to tell my daughter.

She woke up the next morning chattering about the move. Feeling sick but still sure of my decision, I interrupted and explained to her that I had told a lie and taken credit for something I hadn’t done. I told her that I was going to tell the truth, but it probably meant we wouldn’t be moving after all.

My daughter looked at me as if seeing me as fully human for the first time. Then she brightened and said, “Maybe he’ll be so proud of you for telling the truth, he’ll give you the job anyway.”

I almost cried at her belief in happy endings. That would be wonderful, I told her, but it wasn’t likely.

The executive director called that

afternoon to offer me the job. I inhaled slowly and told him what I'd done. There was a long moment of silence. He asked if I could start in two weeks.

*Name Withheld*

**LATE ONE NIGHT, I FOUND THE OPPORTUNITY** I'd waited weeks for: a chance to talk to Mom without Dad or my siblings around. Would I be able to say what I had to say? My sins weighed heavily on my seven-year-old heart.

Mom sat on the couch doing a crossword in the dim light, her face wrinkled with concentration. When she saw me out of bed, she frowned. She was about to order me back to my room when she noticed I was shaking. Taking me into her arms, she asked if I was cold.

"No," I said. "I have something to tell you."

And so I told her about the twelve-year-old boy next door who'd been convincing me to play doctor with him in his tent for more than a year. "He does stuff like this," I told her, and I pointed toward my genitals. "Please don't hate me, please."

Mom continued to hold me tight. She kissed the top of my sweaty head and said, "I don't want you ever to act that way again, because I know you're a wonderful little girl, and I want everyone to think that of you." Then she added, "I love you very much. Nothing could ever make me not love you, but promise Mommy you'll be as nice as she thinks you are."

I vowed to be worthy of all her wonderful, undeserved love.

I wanted to tell her about Dad, too, and I almost did, but I was afraid if I said those words, God would strike me dead.

*Name Withheld*

**IN THE LATE FIFTIES I HAD AN EARLY-**morning paper route, and every morning I rode my bike past my schoolmate Randy's house. It was the oldest, most rundown house in the neighborhood. His dad was a janitor. They had chickens in their yard. Randy's forehead was bigger than the other kids', and his eyes seemed smaller. I never saw him smile.

One morning, as I rode past, I saw Randy's mother open the side door and come

out to sweep the porch. She was bald.

When the school bus stopped in front of the school that morning, I stood up in the aisle and yelled, "Randy's got a bald-headed momma!"

It was one of those moments when one's senses are heightened. I remember the close humidity of the bus; the taste of toothpaste in my mouth; the smell of Tide in everyone's clothes; how the laughter trapped Randy as helplessly as an insect in a quart jar.

If I had been him, I would have curled up and prayed to die. To Randy's credit, he lurched from his seat and came at me, swinging his lunch sack. I knocked it to the floor and pushed him down. The other kids howled as I stomped on his sandwich.

Until then, I'd been only marginally popular, but that day I became a star.

I'm fifty-five years old. It makes me cry to write this. I don't know if I'll ever forgive myself.

*Name Withheld*

**MY PARENTS WERE TURNING MY OLD** bedroom into a study for my dad, and they gave me an ultimatum: either I boxed up the artifacts of my childhood, or they'd throw them out. My husband, Jay, sweetly offered to help me sift through the odds and ends and mounds of papers. Every so often, I came upon something that made me stop and smile.

We found several photos of me from my awkward period — more of an era, really. What had possessed me to hold on to these photos? I remembered stealing them from my parents' private stash for the express purpose of destroying them, lest they fall into the wrong hands. Jay looked at these sad images with fondness and sympathy, however. Thanks to him, I was able to laugh and be thankful that I had made it through adolescence with only minor bumps and bruises to my psyche.

Then we came across a bundle of cards and handwritten notes held together by a weary rubber band that gave up as soon

**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.)

We publish only nonfiction in Readers Write. 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
On The Edge	December 1	May 2005
Possessions	January 1	June 2005
Saturday Night Games	February 1	July 2005
Taking A Stand	March 1	August 2005
Self-Control	April 1	September 2005
	May 1	October 2005

as I touched it. Despite Jay's impatience, I insisted on reading every one. How else could I possibly decide which to toss? I laughed and sighed over silly, conspiratorial notes from high-school classmates and candy-sweet cards from friends.

At first, I mistook Neal's card for just another from a school friend. Then I opened it and saw his photo. Neal and I had dated briefly in college. Looking into his eyes in the photo, I heard his voice in my head and couldn't keep from wondering where he was and whether he was happy.

Then I remembered Jay sitting across from me. I quickly closed the card and went to place it back into the stack. But Jay was looking at me with an inquisitive smile.

"Is that Neal?" he asked.

I briefly considered lying, but knew I had to tell him the truth. "Yes," I answered sheepishly and handed the card and the photo over to Jay.

"He was a pretty good-looking guy, wasn't he?" Jay said.

"I thought so."

He placed the photo and the card on the "keep" pile.

*Kavita Das  
Chicago, Illinois*

**MY OLDER HUSBAND ENJOYED SEX** but had performance problems that even Viagra couldn't solve. His fear of impotence became so great that he began avoiding sex altogether. After several celibate years, I finally admitted to myself that the situation was unacceptable. I either had to divorce him or take a lover.

Divorce was out of the question. My husband and I loved each other and were great friends. Though I'd been increasingly angry over our lack of physical intimacy, I still needed him, and he needed me.

But taking a lover was difficult. When I sat down to place my ad on the Internet dating site, I was so nervous I could hardly type. I spent the next five months secretly combing through respondents' letters — until I met S.

S. and I have been lovers for two years, happily giving each other the physical intimacy that neither of us receives at home. (S.'s wife, a devout Catholic, was raised to believe that sex is sinful, and detests it.)

Having S. in my life has made me feel more fulfilled. Our bimonthly meetings might as well be a prescription from a doctor, they heal me so thoroughly. In turn, my marriage has improved. The anger I felt over the absence of sex has subsided, and my husband no longer feels pressured. We're more relaxed together now.

No one knows about my lover, and I plan to keep it that way. Coming clean would only hurt my husband, and possibly S. and his wife. When you stop and think about it, who would benefit from such an admission?

*Name Withheld*

**WHEN I WAS SEVENTEEN, I WORKED** three menial jobs but couldn't save any money because of how my old Volkswagen drained my finances. When the engine began to give out, I took it to Foster Neff's garage.

A widower of about seventy with a blocky torso and a jowly face, Foster had a small shop a couple of blocks off Main Street. He didn't make much money, but he was content. It took him forever to do any work — an oil change could take three hours — but he let me pay on credit.

Foster gave me an estimate of four hundred dollars, parts and labor, to make the Volkswagen's engine right. I could pay him a little bit every week, he said.

He started work on the car on a Tuesday morning and called me on Wednesday the following week to say it was finished. He told me to take the car and drive it through the weekend to make sure everything felt right. I offered to pay him fifty dollars up front, but he declined. The bill, neatly written out in pencil, was stuck under the windshield wiper. I put it in the glove box. When I turned the key, the engine sounded strong and eager. I drove away.

That evening, Foster suffered a quiet heart attack during the Wednesday-night service at the Lutheran church. The person who turned off the lights noticed him still sitting in the twelfth row, his eyes closed.

Foster had stuck both copies of the bill beneath my windshield wiper. No one knew he had done the work or that I owed him for it.

I told myself that when I had the money

I'd pay the debt to his heirs, but when I finally did have the money, I needed it for something else. The car passed out of my life. There were more cars. And more life.

I never did pay for those repairs. Thanks to the ubiquity of Volkswagens, old and new, I get reminded of it only about once a day.

*Tom Carter  
Berea, Kentucky*

**I GREW UP IN A CHURCH THAT PREACHED** hellfire and damnation, and my sole desire as a teenager was to be an instrument of God's will. At every service and prayer meeting, I listened carefully to the message that God sent through his ministers.

One night the youth minister, who was married with children, told me that he wanted to kiss me. I said no, but I also felt curious. I was sixteen and had never even held hands with anyone. He kept insisting, and I finally agreed. Of course it went beyond a kiss.

The youth minister said that he believed God had a plan for us. He didn't think God would make him feel this way unless God meant for us to be together. The minister also said that he loved me. I believed every word. I felt special and chosen. Somehow I was going to be a helpmate for God's own minister. It was not for me to understand how this would come to pass.

After eight months, the minister decided to end the affair. He said that I was the serpent, Satan's ally, and that he'd been praying for strength against me. I got down on my knees and cried as he prayed to God to cast evil from me and cleanse my soul.

I felt abandoned by the Almighty and contemplated suicide. Despondent, ashamed, and guilt-ridden, I broke down crying during a piano lesson. My piano teacher — who was also my church's music minister — asked what was wrong, and I confessed everything to him.

Six weeks later the youth minister moved to another church in a larger city. He was given a big send-off, with all manner of praise and potluck casseroles. Before he left, he insisted that I apologize privately to his wife. I did as he

asked and begged his wife to forgive me. I was told never to speak of what had happened, and I didn't. My life went on, but the feeling of God's presence in it never returned.

In my thirties, through grace and good luck, I met an extraordinary man, an atheist who had the patience and hard-headedness to endure years of my misdirected anger and finally win my trust. Our daughter is now sixteen, the same age that I was then. She has not been raised in any church, but I still worry about her vulnerability, her unquestioning nature, her idealism. I think of my fury should any trusted adult do to her what that youth minister did to me, and I finally understand that what happened to me was predatory, abusive, and profoundly wrong. I can weep now for the young girl I once was.

I recently tracked down my former youth minister and found him still ministering in a different state. I have sent a written account of what he did to me to officials at all levels of the church hierarchy. I have borne this shame for too long. I am returning it to its rightful owner.

*Name Withheld*

**I USED TO TELL PEOPLE THAT WHEN I** went to heaven, I hoped to find the Truth Book, a giant tome with the answers to every imaginable question: Did Lee Harvey Oswald act alone? Was Anita Hill lying? I was a seeker of the truth, and this was my idea of heaven.

Since becoming an atheist, I don't think about heaven anymore, even as a fantasy. Instead I'm courting a new idea. Maybe, when I am about to die, I should tell the world my own truths: *I faked stomachaches to avoid gym class in fourth grade.* (I was embarrassed that I couldn't throw a softball.) *I hooked up with my best friend's date after the junior dance.* (We had sex in his Camaro.) *I left a bar one night after a few too many screwdrivers and backed into a parked car.* (No, I did not leave my name and insurance information.)

I visualize these truths coming faster: *I judge every woman I see based on whether she is thinner or fatter than I am. I used to be bulimic. I've been on Prozac for ten years.*

But then I think about the truths that would hurt the people I love, or have loved in the past, and that is where the fantasy ends. There are some secrets I can never reveal.

*Name Withheld*

**I ONCE SPENT A FEW MONTHS IN A** mental hospital. I had taken speed for almost a year straight and had become so paranoid I'd started carrying a knife. I checked myself into the hospital after I almost stabbed a stranger on an elevator, convinced that he was plotting to kill me.

The paranoia disappeared a few weeks after the speed had left my system. I was still in the hospital, though, because the doctors thought I was just pretending to be well. I never told anybody about the pills, and they never asked.

I was in with the catatonics and the mumblers, on a locked ward where shock treatment was freely given and screams rang out in the night. They rationed our cigarettes and lit them for us and collected our spoons after meals. "No sharps" was the mantra.

Now when a form or application asks, "Have you ever been in a mental hospital?" I always answer no. I'm afraid people will ask questions, and I'll have to explain too much about my past. The truth is a weight I carry. I sometimes consider telling somebody, to lighten the load. Writing it down here is as close as I have gotten.

*Lena Doenna  
Berkeley, California*

**SARA AND I HAD BEEN DATING FOR** a month, but we hadn't had sex. She asked me to meet her one night at her office, and we sat on the floor surrounded by large pillows, tabletop fountains, and the smell of lavender. (She was a massage therapist.)

"We have to talk," Sara said.

*Uh-oh*, I thought.

Sara continued: "I have a problem with my immune system."

"Huh?"

She asked me to hold her, then said, "I'm HIV-positive." Her voice started to crack. "This just isn't fair. This shouldn't have happened to me. Why was I the unlucky one? I let someone do something

to me when I was young and stupid." A couple of years earlier she'd been very sick, she said. She'd had pneumonia and thought she was going to die. Now she was on medication: three different kinds of pills every twelve hours. "But I'm healthy," she added.

Sara was lithe and muscular. The only people I had ever known with AIDS were gay, and they were dead.

"So you're not going to die?" I said.

"They don't really know. There are no elderly HIV survivors. Hopefully I'll live a long and normal life."

I told her I needed time to think. I was scared, angry, and confused. I knew virtually nothing about AIDS and HIV. I wished I had never spoken to Sara after that yoga class. Now I had fallen in love with her. I wanted to have children. Would they have AIDS? Would they live if they did? Why was I being presented with this choice?

One week later, on Valentine's Day, I told Sara I'd stay with her.

It's been two years. We are married and adopting a baby girl from Peru. Sara's healthy and strong. Most days, I forget we even had that conversation.

*Name Withheld  
(end of excerpt)*