



Readers Write

HERO WORSHIP

MY HUSBAND, BILL, AND I OWN THE local pharmacy, and though we are both pharmacists, my husband is the one who stands behind the counter and talks to everyone. I am usually in back, taking care of more mundane tasks.

Recently Bill agreed to be an unofficial “big brother” to Louie, a twelve-year-old boy in town. But Bill lacked the time for the endeavor. And so, as happens with many projects, Louie was handed over to me.

Louie had never known his real father. His mom had lived with her boyfriend for several years and had a daughter by him. Things were OK until the boyfriend, who paid child support for three other daughters, decided it would be cheaper if his girls came to live with him. And so seven people crowded into a three-bedroom apartment. There was no money, no affection, and no peace. Louie’s mom hated the boyfriend’s daughters. Louie called his mother by her first name, never “Mom.”

I took Louie shopping for new clothes. (He had never been to a mall.) We went to movies and restaurants and picked out his costume for Halloween. I helped him

with his homework, and I often accompanied him and his mom on doctor visits. I felt uncomfortable, but Louie wanted me there, so I went.

One day, Louie came into the pharmacy after school and said, “Guess what.”

“What?” I said.

“I had to write a paper at school about someone I thought was a hero.”

“Like Spider-Man?” I asked. Spider-Man was the supreme being in Louie’s world.

“Yeah, I was going to write about Spider-Man, but the teacher said it had to be someone we know.” He paused. “Do you know who I picked?”

I shook my head.

“Guess,” Louie said. He was all grins.

“Your grandma?” I said. Louie loved his grandma and talked about her often.

“No, not Grandma,” Louie said. He looked as if he couldn’t believe I had guessed wrong. “Someone nice who does everything for me and who everybody likes.”

Was Louie talking about me? Had I truly made such a difference to him? My face began to grow warm.

“Your mom?” I said feebly.

Louie made a face. “Not her. Do you give up? Do you want me to tell you?”

I nodded and prepared to look surprised.

“It’s Bill!” Louie shouted. “I wrote my paper about Bill.”

“Oh,” I said in a small voice. Louie hardly saw Bill, who was always busy with the pharmacy or community activities.

“Yeah, ‘cause he’s a pharmacist, and he helps people, and he’s really nice. He tries to make sure people get well when they’re sick.”

“That’s great,” I told Louie, hiding my disappointment behind a fake smile.

Later, I told Bill that he was the hero of Louie’s English paper.

“Not you?” Bill asked. “But you do everything for that kid.”

I shrugged, feeling hurt and rejected. What did it take to be Louie’s hero? How much did I have to do for him before he would look at me with stars in his eyes?

Later in bed, it began to make sense. Heroes are usually inaccessible, beyond our reach, objects of worship. And that’s what Bill was to Louie. I, on the other

hand, was always around, always accessible, always within reach.

Name Withheld

ROBERT BLY HAS BEEN MY HERO SINCE the early eighties. A couple of years back, he was scheduled to give a poetry reading in town, and a friend invited me to a dinner for Bly after the reading. The idea of breaking bread with my idol was almost too much.

At the reading, I soaked up Bly's words and presence. After he was through, I raised my hand and asked a question that ran on a bit, becoming part comment. I don't remember Bly's answer so much as the intensity of my need to have an exchange with him.

During dinner I talked too much, performing more than conversing. I began to feel a little embarrassed, unable to manage the high. Later I felt vaguely ashamed.

I remembered a time in 1970 when my mother had attended a Margaret Mead lecture at my old high school. After Mead was done speaking, my mother leapt up to ask the first question. She rambled on, digressing into an autobiographical narrative, until finally Mead asked, "Madam, what is your question?" Within a month my mother had been hospitalized for a manic episode. For the next six years, she struggled with bipolar disorder, ultimately losing her life to a drug overdose.

I keep thinking that Robert Bly is my Margaret Mead. I've gotten professional opinions that I am not bipolar. Still, I can't shake the connection. My mother died at fifty-six; I'm fifty-four.

The experience with Bly helped temper my hero worship and pointed me back toward the heroic energy in myself. I want to enter elderhood with a clear and humble sense of what to do with that energy.

Bill Prindle

Silver Spring, Maryland

AT SIXTEEN, I WAS A HIGH-SCHOOL dropout and "fundraiser" for an environmental organization. My job entailed hanging out at the office for several hours, followed by several hours of walking around the suburbs knocking

on doors and asking strangers for money. My colleagues were bright, cynical, unambitious misfits in their early twenties. I admired them and desperately wanted to fit in, but I was too young.

My co-worker Crow was on tour with his band when I started at the organization, but all the old-timers (i.e., those who had been around longer than six months) had stories about him. There was the time Crow took acid, got undressed, and climbed on a table at a hotel bar; the time he decided to break into the zoo's aviary and "free" the sleeping ducks; and the time he mooned a senatorial procession.

When Crow returned from his ill-defined "tour," the occasion merited several wild parties, but his antics soon wore thin with my co-workers. I couldn't understand why. I was enchanted by Crow, who treated me like a sidekick and a little sister. In return, I idolized him.

Crow and I hopped trains, hitchhiked, broke into swimming pools and graveyards, and shoplifted oranges and ciga-

rettes. He procured hash and psychedelics and shared them generously with me. He introduced me to street musicians and homeless people, from the merely eccentric to the insane mutterers. He taught me how to act tough so I wouldn't get ripped off buying dime bags in the park, and how to roll a fat, tidy joint. I never refused anything he suggested, and I defended him to his critics. I thought he was beautiful and brilliant and tragically misunderstood.

But Crow grew restless. He had pissed off everyone he knew (except me), he said, and it was time for him to move on. I missed him terribly and tried to follow in his footsteps, embarking on my own journey to wildness, shooting up any drug I could dissolve in a spoon.

For the next five years, I thought of Crow often and kept up with his whereabouts through friends. Then one day I bumped into him at a convenience store. He was in a hurry, but he gave me the address of the place where he was staying. I stayed up late that night, imagining our

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Saturday Night Games	February 1	July 2005
Taking A Stand	March 1	August 2005
Self-Control	April 1	September 2005
True Love	May 1	October 2005
Tests	June 1	November 2005
	July 1	December 2005

reunion.

The next day, he buzzed me up to what turned out to be his mother's apartment. His hair didn't look as shiny as I remembered. His skin was dull and gray, his lips chapped. I noticed food between his teeth, spittle at the corners of his mouth, the way his eyes darted around when he was trying to be funny. The stories he told sounded suspiciously like the ones he had told me years earlier, only with new names. His wildness seemed affected, theatrical. I excused myself to go to the bathroom, where I took a long, hard look at myself in his mother's mirror. I saw someone who I did not want to be.

J.P.

University Park, Maryland

I MET PAT IN MY CONSCIOUSNESS-raising group. A few years older than I, she had gotten pregnant young and been through a disastrous first marriage. Now she had married Clay, a graduate student of whom she spoke with awe and wonder. Money was tight, she told me, and parenthood had its problems, but together they could handle it.

I admired Pat. She had experienced life, whereas all I'd ever done was go to school. At the age of twenty-two, I had never had a serious relationship, and I feared I never would.

"Why don't you come over for dinner and meet Clay's friend Gary?" Pat volunteered.

Gary was quiet and shy, and only slightly more experienced than I. The only thing he and I had in common was our fierce admiration for Pat and Clay, but it was enough. We moved in together after three months.

It was a disaster. We spent much of our time with Pat and Clay, either as a couple or individually, seeking their advice on our struggling relationship. Pat would explain to me that I needed to be more of this and less of that. I tried, but with no success.

One balmy summer evening, I asked for advice yet again while Pat was preparing dinner. "Sometimes relationships just don't work out," she said, bringing her knife down on the carrots. The next week, Gary broke up with me.

I was devastated. In addition to losing

Gary, I had lost Pat and Clay, who quickly replaced us with some newlyweds in need of guidance.

Pat and Clay eventually relocated to the West Coast, and I lost track of them. Years later, I was sitting in a bar in Cleveland with Mike, whom I'd just met at a work-related seminar. Mike had just moved to Cleveland from San Francisco and was telling me the long, sad story of his unhappy marriage and divorce. Eager to change the subject, I said, "I once knew some people who moved to San Francisco, and it affected them strangely. The husband had been a socialist, but last I heard he was calling himself a 'Marxist from an ESP perspective.'"

Mike's jaw dropped. "You don't know them!" he said.

Mike and his wife had been newlyweds with relationship issues. Pat and Clay were "helping" them.

"The last time I saw my wife," Mike said, "she was standing next to Clay, wearing only a towel."

Karen K.

Palatine, Illinois

ON A WARM JUNE EVENING WHEN I was sixteen, I helped my mother and father celebrate their twenty-first anniversary at home. My sister was off at college taking a summer course, and it was a quieter celebration than usual. We didn't get out the records and dance and frolic and toast to what a good life we had. Mother had been on the phone a lot that summer, always while Dad was at work. And Dad's usual three afternoons a week at the golf club had turned into daily visits.

Halfway through our silent meal, I said, "What's up with you two?"

Forks and knives went down, and both my parents began to cry.

It was no one's fault, they said. They had grown apart.

I saw at once that it was true. Mother read; Dad didn't. Dad lived for golf; Mother loathed it. Mother wanted to work toward her PhD; Dad was content with his high-school diploma. The one thing they had in common was we girls.

Outwardly we were a seemingly perfect family. Dad won the Rotary Club's "Father of the Year" contest in 1980.

Mother won the local women's league's "Mother of the Year" contest in 1981. They filed for divorce in 1982.

Though as a teen I usually seized any opportunity for histrionics, I showed abnormal maturity and restraint following my parents' announcement. By the end of the evening I was consoling them and assuring them they would find their soul mates: "You're both so young: only forty-two!"

My parents became heroic figures to me that evening. They taught me an important lesson in courage: Don't let other people's mores and expectations dictate how you should live. And they taught me something I've shared with my married-with-children friends: Don't stay together for the kids.

True heroes are rebels and risk-takers; sometimes they fail, but they always admit it. My parents' decision to divorce allowed them both to have loving and happy second marriages. And I declared my independence and proudly marched out of the closet not long after my parents showed me that life is too short to waste time pretending.

Mary Beth Simmons

West Conshohocken, Pennsylvania

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, WE DIDN'T have a lot of money, so it seemed strange that we had a cleaning lady. Ann was a tough, sinewy, bawdy woman. She came weekly and always sat for a half hour at the kitchen table, having coffee with my mother. Then Ann would wrap her hair in a kerchief, pull out a pail, fill it with water and a foul-smelling cleaning solution she brought to the house in a plain shopping bag, and begin scrubbing tiles and bathroom walls.

Ann's son Tommy would sometimes come with her. I was eight, and he was fourteen. He and I would watch television or maybe build a windmill with my erector set. He read comic books to me and told me the guy on TV wasn't the real Superman because he couldn't do half the things Superman could do in the comics, like travel to other planets and go back in time.

Tommy sat back on my bed with his long legs crossed and the comic book folded in half so that he couldn't acci-

dentally read ahead. After he'd left with his mother, I'd climb up on my bed and try to imitate him, crossing my legs, folding back the comic book, and even snapping it on my leg when I had finished, the way Tommy did.

One time Tommy and I set up an elaborate battlefield with my green plastic army men. Tommy placed each one as strategically as Napoleon, with soldiers not only on the floor, but hidden behind bed legs and high up on bookshelves. As soon as we were finished setting up, though, Tommy had to leave. The battle would have to wait until the following week.

I left every soldier in place, walking carefully across the room all week long so as not to knock a single one over. I asked my mother to be careful when she was putting away my underwear and socks. I showed my father, a veteran of World War II, the battle plan. And I kept the door of my bedroom shut so that no one would disturb the waiting troops.

But the following week Tommy didn't come. His mother said he was with his father. And so I played alone, and when I was done I placed each piece back in the exact spot Tommy had chosen for it.

Again the next week he didn't come. "With his father," Ann said.

So I waited another week, guarding my army men, playing with them disappointedly when Ann showed up alone once more. I sat on the bed and folded back an old issue of *Superman* and snapped it on my leg when I was finished reading it. What Ann didn't tell me was that Tommy had gone to live with his father for good.

I eventually returned the soldiers to their drawer. I don't know how long it was before I stopped wondering if I would ever see Tommy again.

*Michael J. Cohen
Carmel, New York*

MY HUSBAND AND I HAVE TWO SONS, ages eight and four. A couple of years ago I purchased a short book about Sacagawea, the Shoshone woman who served as an interpreter and guide to Lewis and Clark on their expedition to find a northwest passage to the Pacific. I read the book aloud to my boys on a long car trip. Thus began their fascination with Meriwether

Lewis and William Clark and the Corps of Discovery.

Since then we have celebrated Lewis and Clark's lives over and over, reading books, watching documentaries, attending reenactments, collecting memorabilia, and hiking along the Missouri River to spots where Lewis and Clark camped. My four-year-old asked for a Lewis and Clark birthday cake, and I am busy working on Lewis and Clark costumes for Halloween. Wherever we go, my boys wear their (faux) coonskin caps and carry their (faux) leather canteens. When the little one scraped his knee on the gravel, the older one scoffed and said, "Lewis and Clark didn't cry when they fell."

I'm not sure why my sons have such an interest in these two men. Perhaps it's because we are farmers and live off the land — at least, as best we can in this day and age. Perhaps it's because they have many acres to play on: the boys can pretend our barn's sprawling hayloft is Lewis and Clark's keelboat, or hike through cornfields in search of a new species of plant.

Their constant questions about their idols sometimes overwhelm even me, a lover of history, nature, and books. (As I write this, one of them interrupts to ask what Lewis and Clark used as toothpicks.) Sometimes, when they ask why Lewis and Clark did a certain thing, I hastily reply, "They just did it because they were heroes."

*Lana Dannenbring-Eichstadt
Wolsey, South Dakota*

I SPENT A LOT OF TIME ON MY GRANDPARENTS' Kansas farm growing up. My tall, handsome grandfather was my hero. One of my most vivid childhood memories is of the time when my grandfather asked Uncle Albert to bring the yearling in from the pasture for butchering. Albert led the calf in on a rope and tied it to a stake. We all stood by for the killing. I was ten years old.

The calf trembled. My grandfather raised the sledgehammer to crush its skull. Then he started crying, dropped the hammer to the ground, and told Albert to take the calf back to the pasture. Grandpa walked to the barn, stifling a sob. Grandma asked him later what they

would do for meat for the winter, and he told her they'd buy it in town, but it wouldn't be one of their cows. After that he raised milk cows and sold milk.

My grandparents had a huge vegetable garden and an orchard of fruit trees. They had a henhouse and sold eggs. Grandma canned, and the cellar was always full of good things to eat. As for me, I became a vegetarian, though we didn't call it that back then.

*Carol B. Knight
Phoenix, Arizona
(end of excerpt)*