



GLORIA BAKER FEINSTEIN

tack “boy” on the end. As Dwayne continued his monologue on how the only way out of this was to do the damned surgery and stop messing around with examinations, I hopped over the fence, washed the heifer’s back end, and inserted a well-lubed, sleeved arm. The calf pulled his tongue away as I gently squeezed it, so I knew he was alive. His feet felt large, a good indication of his size, but he was in the correct position.

I applied a halter to the heifer’s wildly tossing head and tied the rope to a nearby corner post. Dwayne finally walked over to lend a hand, still voicing his objections. I said a silent prayer: *Please let me pull this calf so I don’t have to perform a Caesarean on a wild beef cow in a cold, muddy lot with a delusional senior citizen and a half-drunk chauvinist for assistants.*

With much maneuvering, we got the heifer on the ground and secured to wobbling fence posts. As I positioned my chains and my calfjack — a device that helps extract the newborn — Dwayne’s son Adam showed up with his three kids. Adam’s response to his father’s grumbling about my gender and my attempt to pull the calf was “Shut up and watch, Dad. You might learn something.”

I felt relief as Adam got down in the mud with me and grabbed one of the handles of the jack. We began to pull, timing our exertions with the heifer’s contractions. Dwayne yelled, the heifer bawled, the kids cried out in disgust, and the dogs tried to sniff the coming calf.

Once I felt the calf’s shoulders pass through the heifer’s pelvis, I knew he could be delivered vaginally. I took a deep breath and rotated the calf to ease the rest of him out. He coughed and snorted, shaking amniotic fluid from his eyes and nose. Then he cried for his mother, who replied vigorously.

Dwayne was silent. Roger shuffled over and said, “I knew you could do it.” I checked the heifer for uterine damage, cleaned up the calf, and began hosing blood, mud, amniotic fluid, urine, and manure off myself and my equipment.

When I was done, I packed up the truck, answered the kids’ questions, and made a final check on the calf, who was receiving an enthusiastic bath from his mom. As I pulled out of the corral and

## Readers Write

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### SMALL VICTORIES

“I HOPE YOU’RE GOOD AT C-SECTIONS, ’cause you’re gonna have to cut this calf out,” Dwayne said as he climbed out of his pickup.

My anxiety grew at the thought of a Caesarean section. I was only just beginning my second spring of calving as a young veterinarian. Roger, the owner of the ranch, was elderly and fragile and would be of no help pulling the calf. Dwayne, a neighbor, was supposedly there to help, but he just stood outside the pen commenting to nobody in particular that the calf was too big to be delivered; he had felt inside the cow earlier that day, and there was no room for

his hand, much less a calf, and he didn’t see how some girl vet was going to be able to pull it.

Dwayne stood with his hands in his pockets and Roger shuffled out of the way as I opened the barn door and shooed the heifer into the chute, running after her to close the gates and get her secured in the head catch. Then I grabbed a stainless-steel bucket filled with warm, soapy water and my obstetrical chains. “You’re not going in there, are you, girl?” Dwayne asked, referring to the chute in which the heifer was caught.

“Of course I am. I have to examine her.” It took all of my willpower not to

passed the small group of men, Dwayne said, "Good work."

*E.L.  
Missoula, Montana*

**WHEN I GAVE MY BABY UP FOR ADOPTION** nearly forty years ago, the social worker at the agency bent the rules and allowed me to read some case histories of families who were waiting to adopt. I chose a family based solely on the fact that they had a piano in their home.

My son was born on a cold, windy November afternoon. As I was admitted to the Catholic hospital in the throes of labor, I signed a paper saying that I didn't want to see my baby after he was born. I watched the birth in a mirror, and the doctor laid the baby on my belly, but I did not touch him. He was not mine. He belonged to the family with the piano.

On my second day in the hospital, one of the nurses mistakenly brought the baby to me. He was crying loud and hard for his mother. I fainted. When I awoke, a nun was standing at the foot of my bed, asking God to forgive me.

I slept with many men in my life after that. I even married some of them. But I never again conceived a child.

Twenty-one years after my son was born, the state where he was adopted opened its adoption records, and I initiated a search for him. Two years later, I received a postcard from him that said simply, "Hi." We wrote each other letters, sent anonymously through the agency. We talked on the phone almost every day for months. Finally we agreed to meet.

At the busy airport gate, we knew each other instantly. We spent the next few days telling one another about our lives. We had the same laugh and found the same things funny. Some days, when we met in the hotel lobby, we were dressed nearly alike. We both knew the names of all the stars and how they moved across the sky. Our favorite key was D minor. When he left, I collapsed in grief for my loss.

We have met many times since then, and taken trips together. We've even visited each other's families. One night, in a small cabin on a lake, he told me he loved me, and he held me and rocked me in his arms.

My son and his wife are going to have a baby in a few months. The crib I have bought for my grandson waits for him in a room of their home. I will hold this baby; he is mine. They are all mine now.

*Sandra Van Doren  
Clayton, North Carolina*

**WHEN MY SISTER LESLIE CALLED, I** was prepared to hear another hard-luck story. The last time we'd spoken, more than two years earlier, she'd asked me for money. I was determined to refuse this time, knowing that the money would go for drugs.

Instead of asking for money, Leslie told me that our father had died.

Dad had been living with Leslie, and he'd had a series of strokes. He'd gone into the hospital a few days before, and now he was gone.

"He told me to tell you to keep writing," she said.

I laughed wryly. I'd given up on writing decades ago, after Mom had said she would no longer help pay my college tuition

if I changed my major to English.

At a young age, Dad had become a husband, a father, and a professor of biochemistry, only to find that he couldn't tolerate my spiteful mother, the clamor of four little children, and the drudgery of teaching. As he saw it, all that was left for him was to work for forty more years and fulfill his responsibilities.

Rather than face his situation, Dad drank until Mom divorced him. Then he drank to escape his failure as a husband and father. He drank his way into and out of another marriage. He drank until he was fired from his job. He drank until he had to keep a jar of wine next to his bed, or else he would vomit at 4 A.M. from lack of alcohol in his blood.

Finally my brother Miles, just fifteen at the time, loaded Dad into the car and drove him to the nearest hospital, where doctors operated on his liver. When Dad awoke, a doctor told him he was lucky to be alive and that if he ever took another drink, he would die. Alone in that hospital bed, with the fear of death in him

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Self-Control	May 1	October 2005
True Love	June 1	November 2005
Tests	July 1	December 2005
Playing With Fire	August 1	January 2006
Coffee	September 1	February 2006
The Middle Of The Night	October 1	March 2006

and no one left counting on him but himself, Dad decided to clean up.

After Dad recovered, he went on disability and became a Buddhist. He lived with Leslie and helped her kick her methamphetamine habit. He also smoked grass with her when his disability check came in. He was an utter failure by society's standards, but I think he had found some joy, and even brought some to his daughter.

The last time I talked to him was in 1995. "My old bartender lives near you, you know," he said, and he laughed.

"Really." My replies were terse. Pity and rage battled for dominance in me. He had let my mother and the alcohol make all the tough choices for him, never giving me a clue how to do any better.

"Well, listen," he said, "don't you ever stop writing."

I didn't take his advice. I stopped. Until now.

*David R.  
Sonora, California*

**"YOU'RE PLAYING!" ONE OF MY STUDENTS** said.

I looked up from the book. "I am not playing," I said. The class smiled.

"So Ewell was messing with his own daughter?"

I was teaching "at-risk" high-school freshmen *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a required book. Many of them were shocked and fascinated by the story of racism and incest.

"It says right here that he did," Chuck answered. He read a line slowly and carefully while everyone listened.

"Man," Alvi said, "that's *nasty*. And then he goes and pins it on the black guy. And his daughter don't say anything either. It's just not *right*."

The bell was about to ring, but many of their books were still open.

"This book is *straight*," Emmanuel said. "I don't really like books, but this one is good."

After they left, I clutched the book to my chest and closed my eyes until the next class wandered in.

I likely did not raise any test scores that day. Most of them would forget to do their homework. One of them probably fell asleep in class. I did not save them from drugs, gangs, abuse, pregnancy, vio-

lence, or fear of failure. I did not instill in them a lifelong love of learning or respect for literature. I hadn't even chosen the book. All I did was read them a story. And they walked out of my classroom knowing that at least one book in the world holds some truth for them.

They'll never know that such days are the only reason I continue to teach.

*Christine Elgersma  
Oak Park, Illinois*

**I WAS ONLY A FEW MONTHS SOBER** when I was invited to a gathering at a friend's house. My do-it-alone sobriety had so far not included a party with loud music, dancing, and drinking.

I never even considered not attending. Though I'd stopped drinking, I was still a drunk: saying no was not in my repertoire. But I was anxious. How could I be at a party without drinking? How could I be interesting and witty without a drink in my hand? How could I dance, for heaven's sake, without being drunk?

At the party, I filled a plastic cup with Diet Coke. I tried to talk to people, but the music was too loud. Someone asked me to dance, and I did, self-consciously. Afterward I grabbed my cup from the windowsill where I'd left it and took a swig. But it wasn't my soda; it was someone else's whiskey.

I spit the liquor back into the cup and returned it to the windowsill. Then I rushed to the host's bathroom, found a toothbrush and toothpaste, and brushed until the taste of whiskey was gone.

It was my first sober party. I may have spit into a stranger's beverage and used someone else's toothbrush, but, by God, I didn't drink.

*Martha F.  
Albuquerque, New Mexico*

**I SPENT TWO YEARS IN GUINEA, WEST** Africa, as a Peace Corps volunteer. The Guineans did not understand why a woman my age (early twenties) wasn't married, didn't have children, and did not know how to pound rice or gut a chicken. I was, in their eyes, in need of food, family, and a few life lessons.

A mother in the village where I lived made sure to drop off food at my hut every mealtime. At first I accepted the

food shyly. Soon our polite greetings at the door stretched into conversations. I began to take my meals outside, next to her family's rice bowl.

After dinner, her children played in the moonlight, and she and I sat in big wooden chairs talking about our day, our lives, the future. She asked about my family in the U.S., my prospects for marriage, and how American parents disciplined their children. I listened intently to her stories about her marriage, the death of her first child, her parenting experiences. Underneath the night sky, I was free to be myself, and I sensed that, after a long day of work, she could too. Despite all of our differences, we were two women in the world.

When I got back to the U.S., family and friends were grateful for my safe return. "Thank goodness you survived!" they said. Everyone wanted to hear about the "weird" food and "primitive" living conditions. When I began to talk about the mother who'd been my best friend in Guinea, my listeners seemed to lose interest.

One evening I went out to dinner with an old friend. He asked about my experiences in Africa, and I began to talk about my friend.

"What's her name?" he asked.

I was shocked. In the months since I had returned to the U.S., I'd tried to tell this story countless times, and no one had ever asked the mother's name.

"Domanine," I said. "But I called her 'Mom.'"

*Annie Mascorro  
Missoula, Montana*

*(end of excerpt)*