



GINA KELLY

## Readers Write

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### ON THE EDGE

**I HAVE \$8,600 IN NOT-SO-CRISP BILLS** packed away in my canvas overnight bag, along with two pairs of shorts, two shirts, four socks, two pairs of underwear, and, for some reason, a small penlight. I am a forty-eight-year-old man, and tomorrow morning I'm running away.

I've become nothing more than a provider of excess and extravagance, working to pay for Izod shirts, plasma TVs, Ugg boots, and sushi binges. I am giving up my most valuable asset, my time, to provide baubles for uncaring, spoiled offspring who refuse to earn money for themselves. I have spawned an ungrateful five-car, nine-phone-line family joined to me solely by finances. I can no longer put up with kids who despise and use me, sick parents, chemically dependent siblings, a therapist who thinks I'm an ass, and, most hurtful of all, a spouse who is totally indifferent.

Running away is like a living suicide: everything in your life ends, only you get to keep going. I hope to find a new, cell-

phoneless existence with more experiences and less clutter. I know my departure will be seen as selfish, but there is no alternative. Tomorrow morning I'm going to get into my car, drive to the traffic light, and make a left turn instead of a right.

I'm going west. It's too cold up north, and I know too many people down south. If I go east I'll be in the ocean, and I decided against that last year. So it's west. I am resolute: I will make that left turn tomorrow morning at exactly 8:50. I will.

*Name Withheld*

**WHEN MY FIVE-YEAR-OLD SON DIED** unexpectedly, just seven years after my daughter was stillborn, I found myself on the brink of despair, reminded of my loss wherever I went. While grocery shopping, I would freeze in place as I came to my son's favorite treats. It was easier to stay home and go hungry. A simple evening out could turn into a disaster because of a well-intentioned comment or a line in a

play. Once, at the movies, I found myself gasping for breath after an unexpected scene involving a child's death.

I rarely ate and slept no more than a couple of hours a night. To keep the pain at bay, I remained in a constant state of busyness, from crack-of-dawn runs to late-night meetings. If I stopped, I was swallowed up by grief.

My doctor and my therapist encouraged me to take antidepressants. I refused. I had to learn to live as a childless mother. In my darkest moments, though, I swallowed alcohol and sleeping pills, aware that the combination might provide the desired exit from this life.

Nine years after my son's death, I began to wonder what those intervening years might have been like had I not been flirting with suicide all the time. What would happen if I gave up this longing for death? What would fill the empty spaces? Could I find my way back to a healthy life that included the possibility of happiness?

I made a commitment to try to live a full life rather than one overshadowed by death. How long was I committing to? The rest of my life? No, that was too long a span. One day? Still too much. How about one moment at a time? OK.

It has been sixteen years since my son died, and twenty-three since I lost my daughter. I will always miss my children and what my life might have become with them. Yet my heart has a fullness to it now. It is the small, everyday things that bring contentment. I must allow each moment to give me satisfaction, or I will forever live with sadness. In a world where so many suffer, I am grateful for what I have rather than angry over what I've lost.

*Martha Weinstein  
Tallahassee, Florida*

**SINCE MY PARTNER HAS BEEN STATIONED** in the Middle East, I've felt drugged. I can't work, clean house, or have a conversation. Some days are better than others. I recently had a productive morning, but then, just before lunch, it hit me, and I couldn't stand it one more minute. I ate cookies in the rain, then M&M's in the dark of my office, willing people to go away.

It hurts to know I have less status than I would if I were his wife. If he dies, I won't be given the chance to refuse the flag they hand to widows. It doesn't matter that we share a house and have been together longer than many married couples. It's funny: If he dies, I'll wish we had gotten married. If he lives, it won't matter.

I think about the days when he was around, and I felt I could get nothing done. Now I have all the time in the world, and our house is still a mess. Today I pass people holding signs that say, "Support our troops." *I do, I think, but not this war.*

*Kristin McFarlane  
Kittery, Maine*

**WHEN MY BROTHER WAS DRAFTED** into the army in 1942, I volunteered to serve in his place. It seemed like the right thing to do: he was married; I was a bachelor. Besides, I'd heard that if I signed up with the Army Corps of Engineers, they would teach me cartography and put me to work drawing maps. I'd always

had artistic tendencies, and I was eager to get out of Baltimore and explore the unknown.

As it turned out, the army needed typists, not mapmakers, but it did send me across the Pacific to Oro Bay, New Guinea, where we lived with deafening air-raid sirens, humidity the rains never relieved, and rats the size of small dogs. I was depressed for three months.

We were given daily doses of Atabrine to keep us from catching malaria, but I came down with a case of it anyway and spent a week in an open-air hospital listening to the kookaburra birds and guzzling quinine while Frank Sinatra sang "That Old Black Magic" in the background over and over.

When I was released from the hospital, I went from depression into a manic episode. I couldn't stop talking. It was clear to me that the war had to be stopped and all the top brass fired, and I was on my own private lecture tour to spread the word.

Finally I snapped from lack of sleep

and took off on foot for the island airport. I hitched a ride with a major, who drove me straight to the station hospital. Halfway there, I turned to him and said, "I know what I'd like to do: I'd like to screw you."

That did it. I was pronounced insane and transferred to a larger facility in Port Moresby, where they greeted me with a straitjacket. I wriggled out of it three times, and when they buckled me back in for the fourth time, I started to cry as I'd never cried before. They submerged me in a tub of ice water to make me stop, then strapped me onto a shelf in a plane bound for Brisbane.

At the hospital in Brisbane I met a fellow patient named Harry who confided that he hated the army and had figured out that if he downed a whole bottle of Atabrine, it would put him temporarily out of his mind. Maybe I wasn't crazy after all.

As the effects of the malaria medicine began to wear off, I was more able to keep my mouth shut, which is crucial when

**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
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
Decisions	November 1	April 2006

you're a psychiatric patient. One night, while I was drinking from a water fountain, I stuck my head under the trickle of water to relieve a headache. The nurse on duty read this as a suicide attempt, and I wound up in a solitary cell. I decided to entertain myself by tearing up my sheets to make a dress. That was read as another suicide attempt and doomed me to sitting naked in a cell with a bare mattress.

I was finally sent to a hospital in Kentucky. As my spirit wilted in defeat, the doctors pronounced me "improved." By the time I was completely depressed, I was released to my family.

It took me at least two years to feel a part of humanity again. Yet surviving that ordeal gave me the courage to accept who I am and stick up for myself, which I have been doing for the past sixty years.

*Maurice Roth  
Silver Spring, Maryland*

**MY ESTRANGED HUSBAND AND I SAT** across the conference table from each other, accompanied by lawyers who take apart marriages for a living.

My husband and his attorney were discussing how to offset what money might be owed me by increasing the estimated value of the noncash assets I'd received: the house, possibly even the furniture, which held more memories than value. At that moment I felt like a piece of chipped pottery myself: twenty-five years of marriage had not increased my worth but diminished it. Our children were in college; my "job" was complete, and my husband's new playmate needed toys.

We didn't reach a settlement that morning. I drove home on the interstate, crying so hard I could barely see. Feeling soul-weary, I pulled into the garage and closed the garage door behind me. I didn't turn off the engine. I thought about the past twenty-five years and the low value my husband placed on them and me. Sleep looked really, really good.

Then I remembered the painter who was upstairs, painting my bathroom sunshine yellow, a color I'd picked out just days before.

I'm not sure whether I turned off the engine so the painter wouldn't be traumatized by finding my body, or because the idea of a sunshine yellow bathroom

made me happy. He did a good job, and it's a glorious color.

*Alayne C.  
Millville, New Jersey*

**I WAS JUST A TEENAGE GIRL, A RUN-**away. When it became clear the driver who'd picked me up was going to rape me, I jumped out of the moving pickup truck, got up, and ran toward the woods, looking back over my shoulder to see what he'd do. He turned his pickup around in the middle of the highway, but then drove past me. I made for an embankment, where I lay still.

He came back, driving slowly with the window down, looking intently at the side of the road. I prayed he would get tired of looking or remember he had someplace else to be. If he found me, he would most likely kill me.

After a while he gunned the engine and drove away. I didn't trust him though. Maybe it was a trick to get me to come out of hiding. I waited.

I was in rural Texas on a two-lane road. I had run away from a juvenile institution. If he caught me, no one would ever know what had happened to me, and my last hours would be filled with pain.

I decided I'd better get moving. I'd stay a safe distance from the road for a few miles, just in case. Hunched down, I started heading north, keeping one eye on the road. I couldn't shake that skin-creeping feeling that someone was watching me. What a shitty night: I was crawling in a ditch, I possibly had broken my collarbone, and a would-be rapist was looking for me.

I was lying in the tall grass, out of breath from fear and exertion, blinded by the pain in my right shoulder, when I heard a sound behind me. Oh well, if I had to die, I might as well turn and face it. Maybe I'd get eaten by wolves. Anything would be better than getting fucked by a drunk cowboy.

I turned and looked in the direction of the noise. At least forty eyes were calmly gazing at me from the other side of a fence.

Cows.

When I started crawling again, they moved along with me. When I stopped, they stopped. "Go away!" I whispered.

"He'll know I'm here if you keep following me like this." But they were determined to keep me company. They chewed aimlessly and meditated on the small human female crawling along.

When I reached the end of the fence, they had to stop. They piled up into the corner, watching my retreating back. I sat down to rest. I was alone in the world except for those cows.

I lay down on the ground and went to sleep. In the morning they were gone.

*Leslie Blackshear Smith  
New Orleans, Louisiana*

**"WHEN SOMEONE SAYS HE'S GOD AND** tells you to kill somebody," my brother Walter counsels me, "don't listen to him." He says this as if he were giving me an insider stock tip.

Diagnosed thirty years ago with schizophrenia, my brother spent years in mental hospitals and halfway houses. Now he lives on his own in a residential hotel in Baltimore, supported by our father. Walter likes to hang out in the hotel bar, chain-smoking and nursing a Coke. He calls me once or twice a week because, unlike our other siblings, who are busy raising children, I make time to talk to him.

Before his illness, my brother had everything going for him: he was bright, popular, a successful entrepreneur. Then, inexplicably, he wandered off. He called from Santa Fe and didn't know how he'd gotten there. Our father had to go and bring him home. When it happened again, Walter was hospitalized.

Walter yearns for a normal life. He wants to find a regular job, get married, and have children. But at some level he understands that he couldn't sustain a long-term relationship. He operates three small businesses that share a single answering machine. The most profitable — supplying promotional items like printed caps and water bottles — brings in a few thousand dollars a year. He has a girlfriend but knows they could never have children. "She's crazy too," he says.

Walter stays on his meds mostly, and if you met him you'd probably think he was just eccentric. But when he skips a dose, he rants about the people who are trying to kill him or ruin his business:

usually “the blacks” or “the Germans” or sometimes Max Fisher, the automobile magnate from Detroit, where Walter and I grew up.

“Why would Max Fisher want to put you out of business?” I ask. But reasoning with him doesn’t work, so most of the time I just listen and hope the episode will pass without a crisis. Still, I worry that Walter’s psychotic breaks are getting more frequent.

“Don’t tell Dad what I told you,” Walter says before we hang up. “You’re the only one I can tell.”

*Name Withheld*

**YEARS AGO, A BAD CAR WRECK LEFT** me with my jaw wired shut. After a month, my doctor told me that my jaw hadn’t healed properly and would probably have to be rebroken and wired together again. Then my live-in girlfriend informed me that she was leaving me for a lover with a working tongue. At the end of the day, taking the long dirt road home, I found my dog dead in the ditch — victim of a hit-and-run. I’d loved that dog.

After burying him, I was exhausted and dejected. I felt like getting high but discovered that my small patch of pot plants had been ripped out of the ground. Getting drunk was out of the question: if I were to get sick with my mouth wired shut, my lungs would quickly fill with vomit.

Thinking that some comfort food might ease the pain, I liquefied a can of Campbell’s Chunky soup in the blender. I put the straw up to the gap between my teeth and began to suck furiously. No soup entered my mouth. I discovered that the clear plastic top of the blender had fallen into the soup and been ground into tiny fragments of plastic, which plugged up my straw. I sat down and began to laugh. Suddenly I knew that everything was going to turn out all right.

*Bill Maxson  
Nogal, New Mexico*

**IN THE SUMMER OF 2004, TWO DEV-**astating hurricanes — first Charley, then Frances — hit central Florida within three weeks. Charley’s fierce winds upended hundred-year-old trees and destroyed homes and businesses. Frances dropped

rain for three days, leaving behind flooding, more downed trees and power lines, blocked roads, and debris piled high at every curb. (A third hurricane, Jean, was yet to come.)

As the damages were being assessed, neighbors offered each other hot coffee from their propane cooker or an extension cord from their generator. But after a few days, the adrenaline rush wore off, and tempers started to wear thin. We were hot without air conditioning, dirty from the lack of hot water for bathing, hungry from food going rotten. We had to hunt for ice and chain saws (to clear fallen trees). The neighborly veneer cracked, and people became angry, depressed, on edge.

Phones, faxes, TV, computers, e-mail: these have all become necessities. Stripped of our easy comforts and conveniences, we were bereft. With the immediate crisis past, we returned to “me first” mode. I grieved the loss of the easy neighborliness, the willingness to go the extra mile for someone else.

*Louise Franklin Sheehy  
Maitland, Florida*

**THE SATURDAY MORNING BEFORE** my eighth birthday, I was eating a bowl of cereal at the kitchen table. My mother informed me it had been a lean year for our family, and tuition at Saint Thomas Catholic School had gone up.

“Anyway,” she said, “a good education is worth more than presents.”

Just then my father ambled in unshaven, reached into the refrigerator, and came out with a can of beer for breakfast. He sat down at the table and motioned to me with the can.

“Come over here and tell me what you want for your birthday.”

I stole a glance at my mother’s back, hunched over the sink.

“Come on,” he urged. “You must want something.”

I sat on his lap, but couldn’t find the words.

My mother loudly threw several plastic cups into the sink and added liquid detergent.

“Did she say we couldn’t afford presents?” my father asked.

“A birthday is no reason to go into

debt,” my mother announced to the faucets, steam crawling up over her arms.

A vein bulged in my dad’s neck. “So, old tightwad wants to spoil everything again.”

“Easy for you to say,” my mother muttered under her breath. “You’re always out of town when the bills are due.”

My father dumped me off his lap, and I hit the floor with a hard smack, sending a painful jolt from my tailbone to my head. I wanted to be picked up and hugged. Instead my father strode across the room, grabbed my mother’s throat with his huge hands, and squeezed.

“Ask the goddamn pope for money if we are so goddamn poor!” he shouted.

After a final shake, he released her. My mother’s neck had red marks on it. She coughed and cried softly, in raspy sobs.

I pulled myself up off the floor and stood between them. I wanted to hate them, but I couldn’t. They had been fighting ever since I could remember; I just wanted the war to be over. I prayed for this every day at school, but my prayers were never answered.

I could tell that round two was just minutes away. My dad was crushing his beer can with his fist, and my mother was sighing again. I was going to be eight years old in a few days, and I didn’t care. I screamed at the sky outside the kitchen window, “I hate my birthday! I don’t want anything! I hate it! I hate it!”

*Carole U.  
Franklin, Tennessee*

*(end of excerpt)*