

IT'S A COLD FRIDAY MORNING, AND the sun is just coming up. Shivering beneath my down parka, I climb the high rock wall at the entrance to Vandenberg Air Force Base. My wife and a few others are with me, and in my hand I carry a bottle of blood drawn from my arm last night by a friend. Five days from now the war in Iraq will begin.

As camouflage-clad military police jump from their white cars and rush toward me, I splash my blood over the sign at the base entrance, and my friends, my wife, and I begin to pray: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. . . ."

A couple of years ago, these same words were featured in a TV commercial celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the U.S. Air Force. While F-16s flew in formation across the screen, a voice intoned, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace." At the time my wife and I were in Iraq, in defiance of UN sanctions, to bring medicine to children in hospitals there. On that trip I discovered a deep compassion for a suffering people — and a disdain for the policies of my government.

I am handcuffed as my blood drips from the sign. Within an hour, the blood has been washed off, and I am standing before a federal magistrate, flanked by two airmen armed with rifles. At fifty-three years old, for the first time in my life, I will go to prison, where I will sleep better than I did before taking my stand. Watching news of the bloodshed in Iraq on the prison tv, however, I will wonder if I could have done more.

*Dennis Apel
Guadalupe, California*

WHEN I WAS A TEENAGER, MY SMALL-town high school expelled unmarried pregnant students. Our town was said to have the highest per-capita teen-pregnancy rate in the nation. Every year, high-school graduation rates fell because so many pregnant young women were forced to quit school.

In 1973 I became the first pregnant student in my town to be allowed to stay in school. Of course, I had concealed my pregnancy at first. Then, when I was six months pregnant, I'd married my boyfriend. The school had no policy against



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Readers Write

TAKING A STAND

married pregnant students, so I was allowed to stay.

Staying in school wasn't easy. My physical teacher believed I should suffer for my "sins." When I was nine months pregnant, she made me serve as the pin setter for bowling. I wobbled around setting pins upright and toppled over twice.

Shortly before my daughter was born, a student named Laura told me that she

too was expecting. She wasn't married, so the principal planned to expel her.

I immediately went to the principal's office and plopped down in the chair across from him. My condition clearly made him uncomfortable. I argued that Laura, a straight-A student, deserved to complete school. He seemed uninterested. "I'll just sit here until you decide," I said. He looked nervously at my belly, as

if I might give birth at any minute. He could see that I wasn't going anywhere — and that the sexual revolution, so long denied in our school, had finally reached his office.

Laura was allowed to remain in school and graduated with our class.

*Carol Obrochta
Richmond, Virginia*

THE ANESTHESIOLOGIST REACHED for my arm. Only ten years old, I was frightened of what might happen. "Tell me everything you need to do before you do it," I said.

"Just give me your arm," he ordered.

"You're not listening to me!" I jerked my arm back. "Tell me what you're going to do first!"

The anesthesiologist rolled his eyes and reluctantly explained it to me.

Over the next few years I had to get tough with many doctors and nurses. I hated the way they talked down to me, and I wondered if they treated adults differently.

"How many of you have actually broken bones yourselves?" I said one day to my physical therapists. Only one of them had, and it was just a toe. "Then take my word for it when I say it hurts, or I can't move it. You can't treat me like I don't know how I feel."

When I was ten, I was fearless.

*C.S.
Northampton, Massachusetts*

WHEN I WAS A TEENAGER, MY STEPFATHER was my confidant and my ally against my mother. She had never understood him, certainly not the way I did. She withheld sex from him, and she betrayed me with her emotional abandonment.

That's how I saw it then — never mind that she single-handedly ran the house, filled our holidays with beauty, worked full time, and got us to school and work with full bellies and clean clothes.

As I matured, I paid a price for the bond I forged with my stepfather. His hugs began to last too long. His body movements became suggestive. His paternal kisses turned sexual.

Years later, after I'd grown up and moved away, he called. "I need to talk to

you — about your mother and me," he said. She was divorcing him.

"I'm listening," I replied.

"No, not on the phone. I need you to come here," he begged.

"I have too much homework," I lied.

"Why did you send me that letter before your wedding," he asked, "the one that brought all that old stuff up again?"

"You mean the one that asked why you can't say you're sorry for molesting me?" For the first time, I'd said it out loud to him.

"God damn it, why do you keep bringing it up?"

"Because you never admit you did anything wrong," I said. Then I told him I had to go.

My stepfather killed himself a few weeks later, after first taking my mother's life.

*L.B.
Madison, Wisconsin*

WHEN MY SON BEN WAS FOUR YEARS old, he found out about the plight of the

Siberian tigers nearing extinction, and he wanted to grow up to "poach the poachers." He would practice lying in wait behind a bush with his popgun, ready to pounce on anyone who threatened to kill a poor, innocent tiger.

When Ben was entering kindergarten, tennis shoes with flashing lights on them were popular. The week before school started, I took him shopping for new school shoes. The only light-up shoes left at Payless were covered with purple flowers and pink hearts. Ben wanted them. When I explained to him that I was worried he might be teased if he wore them to school, he said, "I'll just tell the kids they're my love shoes." I paid for them, and he walked out of the store, his love shoes lighting his way. Later, his kindergarten teacher told me the other children had accepted his explanation.

When he was a freshman in high school, Ben went out for cross-country track. The coach trained the team hard enough to cause an epidemic of shin

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
The Middle Of The Night	October 1	March 2006
Decisions	November 1	April 2006
Winners And Losers	December 1	May 2006
Neighbors	January 1	June 2006
Waking Up	February 1	July 2006
Temptation	March 1	August 2006

splints and kicked boys off the team for the smallest infractions. Before the final race, Ben took a week off from training to try to heal his shin splints. The coach scratched him from the race as punishment for not training harder. The day of the race Ben begged her to reconsider, but she just smiled her laconic grin and triumphantly shook her head. When the starting gun exploded and the pack began to leave, Ben looked at me almost apologetically and took off after them.

Ben placed high enough to win his first medal. I think his teammates were more proud of him for having defied their coach's unreasonable demand. The coach ended up taking Ben's medal away from him, but that only inflamed his passion to fight injustice.

Ben is now a freshman in college. He is no longer interested in saving Siberian tigers, wearing love shoes, or running races. His focus now is peace in the Middle East. I worry that he will move to Israel, and I know my stubborn protests will not prevent him. He will pack a suitcase and leave, and I will be left behind with my admiration and my fear.

*Rosalyn Hafner
San Diego, California*

I WASN'T A CUTE, LOVABLE CHILD. Even as a young girl, I knew that beautiful people were treated better.

When I was seven, my adoptive mother sent me to a convent boarding school, a regimented world where no one dared challenge authority. Nurse Halby was the guardian of our sixteen-bed dorm room. She hated children like me: hair never in place, asymmetrical features, no important lineage or gifts. She never missed a chance to call us "ugly," "evil," or "possessed."

Each night at lights-out Nurse Halby cooed to her favorites and spat insults at those she disliked. One night, not satisfied with the affection we had shown her, she wailed, "No one loves Nurse Halby!"

Fifteen girls — both the loved and the unloved — emptied out of their beds to hug and kiss the beast. Only I remained behind. Before the swarm dispersed, Nurse Halby noticed me. "Oh, so Grace is the only one who does not love Nurse

Halby?" she snarled.

I felt alone and abandoned. But to those fifteen other children I became a giant that day.

*Grace West
Hoschton, Georgia*

IN THE EARLY SIXTIES, MY FAMILY lived in Alabama, the "Heart of Dixie," or so the state motto says. I was taught to take pride in the fact that our city did not fall to the Union Army during the Civil War: General Lee may have surrendered, but we never did.

One evening my father came home from work at the meatpacking plant and announced that there was to be a cross-burning in our neighborhood that night. A white man from out of town had brought his black wife to live here, and the Ku Klux Klan would not stand for such an affront.

After we'd finished our supper, Dad took down his shotgun and gave it a cleaning. Mom pitched a fit. She didn't think Dad should be involved with this mess; after all, he was a married man with a family. Dad left her crying on the porch as he climbed in his old Dodge pickup and drove off.

Dad came home the next morning after the sun had risen, tired and bleary-eyed. Mom clucked around him like a hen over a lost chick, but pride sparkled in her hazel eyes.

There had been no cross-burning the night before, because my father had spent a sleepless night sitting on a porch and waiting, shotgun across his lap, beside a man he didn't know, to face a flock of cowards wearing sheets whom he knew far too well.

*Daniel H. Harris
Huntsville, Texas*

AT THE AGE OF NINE, I SHOULD HAVE been used to the sound of a child crying from a spanking, slapping, or beating; my older sister and brother and I had all been abused. But this time it was my two-year-old sister wailing. I ran to the kitchen to find my father lifting her into the air by her arm and hitting her.

"Stop it!" I shouted, knowing I was going to get it. And I did. But something had changed. After he was done hitting

me, I turned to my father and screamed, "Get out of my face!" That triggered another spanking. I didn't care. I'd lost my fear, and he knew it.

Afterward, as I lay in my bed crying, my older sister continued to do her homework, my mom kept her nose in a book, and my brother stayed in his room. I felt despair that I was the only one who had come to my sister's defense, but elation that I'd finally stood up to my dad. My little sister never got spanked like that again.

*L.P.
Kings Beach, California*

MY GIRLFRIEND AND I HAD COME TO visit my mother on the farm where she rents a house. We were strolling around the property when the farmer rode up on his tractor, and my mother introduced us as "my oldest daughter, Dietlind, and her friend Michelle." It bothered me that she introduced Michelle as my "friend." We lived together and were planning a commitment ceremony.

Later I overheard my mom tell a friend on the phone that I was visiting with my "roommate." I decided it was time to say something.

Confronting my mother was hard. I love her and didn't want to hurt her. Neither my parents nor my sisters are uptight about my being gay. We're all open-minded liberals. So what was my mother trying to hide?

At first she talked about nontraditional relationships being hard to define. She and her boyfriend, Lincoln, had a ten-year, committed, long-distance relationship. Both my sisters lived with their boyfriends. Only my father had a traditional marriage. Maybe her reference to Michelle as my "roommate" had been caused by the limitations of language, the lack of good terms for such relationships.

I agreed, but I pressed on, asking whether the same "limitations" would have applied if Michelle were a man. My mother finally conceded that because she didn't know how other people might feel about my being gay, she was protecting both me and them. This made me feel as if I had to hide a part of myself in order to be accepted.

More than terminology was at stake.



DANIEL J. HOFFMAN

If I kissed Michelle or held her hand, I risked making people uncomfortable. I even risked our safety. But when I used language to obscure the nature of my relationship, I compromised myself. I wanted my mom to call Michelle what she was: my girlfriend.

*Dietlind V.
San Francisco, California*

IN 1970, EIGHTEEN AND PREGNANT, I left my middle-class home to move in with my drugged-out boyfriend, Jack, and his hard-drinking father, Ed. Jack was an artist, eccentric and angry. I tiptoed around him, telling myself I was the only one who could see the real Jack. I looked forward to his cousin Dorothy's upcoming visit. I fantasized that she'd become my friend and we would bake bread and discuss books together.

The night Dorothy arrived, I folded clothes in the living room while she did whiskey shots at the kitchen table with Jack and Ed. An approaching storm had made the men grumpy and restless. Despite the bad weather, Dorothy insisted, "We're going *out* tomorrow morning, God damn it! I didn't come to hang out with a couple of pussies!"

Later Dorothy came into the living room, brushed the folded clothes onto the floor, and plopped down on the sofa. "I've met girls like you," she slurred. "Pretty little milquetoast, scared-of-life ass kissers." She put her hand to her cheek and blinked melodramatically. "'Oh no, I'm pregnant! Won't somebody take care of me?'"

My loving, middle-class childhood hadn't prepared me for this. After she'd staggered off, I sat there shaking. Where was the fearless defiance I'd shown my parents? Didn't I love myself or my baby enough to make a fresh start? I could have taken Jack's car keys and been in Portland in three hours. The YWCA there took in pregnant teens. Would anyone even notice I'd gone?

I hated Dorothy for what she'd said. I hated myself even more for believing it.

Name Withheld

(end of excerpt)