



Readers Write

SELF-CONTROL

ON THE SEVENTEEN-HOUR RETURN trip from France, my husband and I had one of our typical fights. It continued in the baggage-claim area. "You always think you're right," I shouted. "Well, you're not!" He walked away, leaving me with our two toddlers and four oversized suitcases. I waited an hour, thinking he'd come back. He didn't.

The kids and I eventually got home, where my husband was sitting watching TV. As I started to speak, he interrupted me: "Give me your word that you'll never raise your voice to me in public again." I apologized but refused to make a promise I likely wouldn't keep.

"My dear wife," my husband said, "do you think there haven't been times when I've wanted to haul off and slap you? Times when I've been so frustrated with you that I could actually feel your skin under my palm, and imagine how good it would feel,

not to hurt you but to shut you up? But I made a promise to myself when I was eighteen that I would never lay a hand on a woman. That's a promise I live by."

I was shocked. In our fourteen tumultuous years together, he had never laid a hand on me, nor made a threatening gesture, nor even called me names. I, on the other hand, have hurled many insults that I've later deeply regretted. I'd had no idea that his refusal to retaliate was due not to an innate personality trait, but to his self-control.

*Cathy B.
San Mateo, California*

MY HUSBAND AND I WERE MOVING to a new town in Ohio and bought a house in a predominantly white neighborhood. I thought nothing of it until the first time I went to vote. As I stepped up to the table, the elderly female poll worker took

one look at me and said, "You're in the wrong precinct."

How could she know that without checking for my name in the ledger? Then it came to me: because black people did not live on this side of town. I was so angry my hands began to shake, and I grasped the edge of the table. I wanted to turn it over on top of her.

Seeing my barely contained rage, a younger male poll worker grabbed the ledger from her and asked for my name. I only vaguely heard him, since I was thinking about smashing the woman's face in and my subsequent phone call to my attorney and whether I could make bail in time to get in to work later that afternoon.

"Ma'am, please give me your name."

The desperation in his voice got my attention. I told him my name through clenched teeth.

“Sign right here.”

I glared at the old woman, who started to say something.

Say it, I thought, and I'll stab you with this pen.

She said nothing. I signed my name, took the card, and walked to the booth to vote.

*Melanie Payne
Fort Myers, Florida*

GROWING UP, I WAS EXPECTED TO participate in competitive sports. My parents said it would help me develop into a well-rounded adult; the unspoken reason was that they didn't want overweight children.

Never athletically gifted, I looked for sports where team members wouldn't depend on me very much. I signed up for the track team in my freshman year of high school, though I hated running and never felt like I belonged on the team. One day, while lagging behind the group, I ran into two team members who were skipping practice and going to the mall. I went with them, and we gulped fruit punch at the mall snack shop.

On the walk back to school the girls made themselves throw up. After watching them do it, I reluctantly tried it too. Gagging myself brought tears to my eyes, but no results. Then, on my fourth try, red liquid gushed out of my mouth and nose. The girls clapped. I was part of their group now.

As the track season progressed, throwing up became easier. I started to look forward to our secret weekly ritual. For the first time, I felt in control of my body.

By the end of the year I was purging alone. Throughout high school, college, and medical school, I used this ritual to feel in control. Fourteen years, eighteen cavities, and four therapists later, I'm learning that real self-control means giving up my secret behavior.

Name Withheld

MY LOVER AND I ARE TRYING TO END our affair. We agree to stop meeting, but two days later we're in his truck, my pants around my ankles, his face buried between my legs.

Three days later I tell him I think my husband knows about us. My husband

was crying in bed this morning while I pretended to sleep. We agree again to stop seeing each other, believing my husband doesn't deserve an unfaithful wife and a false friend.

Two weeks later my husband goes on a weeklong business trip. For the first time, my lover and I spend the entire night together.

Name Withheld

IT WAS A HOT JULY AFTERNOON, AND MY mother, my daughter, my son Soren, and I were on a cross-country car trip. When we set out from the motel that day, our next destination was Niagara Falls. We had been driving about a half-hour when Soren, then eight years old, asked for a drink. Forgetful and easily distracted, he hadn't thought to get a drink before we left. I told him I would not stop for him and that he needed to learn to think ahead.

After we got to Niagara Falls, we found a drinking fountain, but it was broken. I refused to buy Soren a drink. Our sight-

seeing was ruined by his constant complaints about thirst. Back on the road I finally agreed to stop at a Burger King, where I made him drink from the tap in the bathroom.

As we traveled on for the next two weeks, Soren continually complained about being thirsty. Then came the uncharacteristic bed-wetting, headaches, and lethargy. My mother recognized the symptoms of juvenile diabetes. When he was diagnosed in a Chicago hospital, I cried uncontrollably.

*Dean Smith
Gaston, Oregon*

MY MOTHER WAS A BUSY WOMAN. She taught first grade, did housework, cooked meals, packed lunches, gardened, and decorated the house. She had sewing circles and book clubs, directed a musical, and was PTA president. She planned events and activities with a fierce efficiency. Every morning she had me drink a jelly jar of tap water, then placed me on the toilet and waited impatiently for my

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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.)

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
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
Coming Back	April 1	September 2006

bowels to move.

More often than not, I crapped in my pants at nursery school instead.

S.M.H.
Seal Beach, California

IT SOUNDS PRETTY CRAZY TO TAKE a knife, or a paper clip, or a razor blade and cut yourself and say it makes you feel better. A lot of people don't understand how the pain of living can be so bad that cutting brings relief. They don't know that each drop of blood holds a thousand unshed tears, a thousand moments of unspoken rage.

If you could cry or get angry, you would. You aren't stupid. But to express emotion is to risk the wrath of those who cause you pain. Nothing is worth that. And so you cut.

You cut to control your pain, to wash away the rage. You cut when you choose, unlike the abuse, which happens without warning. Cutting belongs to you. The more you keep it secret, the more control you have.

I know all of this because I used to cut. Nobody knew. I was married twenty-three years before I told my husband and learned to stop. I'm good at keeping secrets.

And yet, to heal, some secrets must

be told. I breathe and lift the razor off my arm and speak the truth. That is the real control.

Name Withheld

PREPARING BREAKFAST FOR MY BOYS one Sunday morning, I saw that an egg had slipped off the counter and tumbled to the floor without my noticing. *How odd*, I thought. *I didn't even hear it splatter.*

The following Sunday at breakfast, I discovered that, once again, an egg had fallen to the floor. That day I wrote in my journal: "What is it I need to pay more attention to that's in danger of breaking?"

Two months later, getting ready for a business trip to Boston, I felt dizzy. I didn't want to miss my plane, so I continued my morning ritual. The dizziness persisted, accompanied by a lack of feeling in my hands. I recalled that "numbness in the extremities" is one of the signs of a heart attack. When I was a boy, my father had dropped dead of a heart attack while we were playing ball.

A half-hour later I was in the emergency room, where doctors confirmed I was having a heart attack. A month later I underwent a quadruple bypass.

The two dropped eggs, I believe, were a divine message. If not for them, I would have flown to Boston, in complete control,

and most likely been dead on arrival.

Kenny Moore
Totowa, New Jersey

I'D ALWAYS CONSIDERED MYSELF A model of self-control. I didn't eat too much, drink too much, or spend too much. I never called in sick at work or let my finances get out of hand. I was punctual, reliable, and always there for friends and family.

Then I met my boyfriend. Suddenly all those things that once had been important now seemed minor in comparison to him. I left my husband and our giant house, and gave up my possessions, my security, and my friends. My orderly existence quickly vanished.

I don't regret a thing; I've become a new person in the process.

My boyfriend, though, has a lot more self-control. He is unable to leave his wife for me.

Name Withheld

I WAS CAUGHT SCALING THE CHAIN-link fence, trying to escape, and was taken back to the treatment room in Ward C and wrapped in cold, wet sheets that made me shiver. Lying tightly bound on a gurney, I devised a new plan to win my freedom: I decided to exercise self-control, follow all the rules, and do exactly what the nurses said.

Miss Stern came into the room to check on me. "Thought about what you did today?" she asked.

"I really messed up," I said, fighting the urge to cry. "I learned a hard lesson, and I'm actually feeling better, more calm."

"Is that so?" she said. "Well, you're still not getting out of here tonight. It's back to my ward for a while, until you straighten up."

It was all I could do not to scream. But my new plan gave me hope as I steeled myself for the consequences of my failed escape: another round of shock treatments, more meds, and "constant observation."

I passed the time playing double solitaire with Suzy, another patient on the ward, and smoking endless cigarettes lit by student nurses. Suzy was sixteen and had been there for two and a half years. Whenever she moved "up" a floor — a sign of improvement in a patient's condition

After A Fight

JEFF WALT

We sit at opposite ends of the living room while anger prowls the house quietly, filling his dark sack with our antique laughter, our precious mornings in bed, the silver evenings in the hammock. Nothing left but the sharp words we keep locked in our mouths and the hard, unforgiving chairs where we pretend to read. When I look up, you look up, and we know something is missing. We stay that way for a moment, like two people who have heard a strange noise outside late at night: our eyes bright with fear, but ready to kill if we have to.

— something always landed her back in Ward C.

On my last day in C, Suzy gave me her grandfather's playing cards in a zippered oxblood leather case. I cried, telling her I'd see her again, that she'd be moving up, too. I knew I'd never return to Ward C.

In Ward B we could light our own cigarettes, pick our own clothes, and shower and dress unobserved. It was hard to stay out of trouble, but my resolve was strong. After my eighteenth birthday, with twenty-eight shock treatments under my belt and a "clean record" for three months, I was told that the board was considering releasing me by summer. I knew then I could make it.

*Judith A. Fisher
Gualala, California*

IT WAS CHRISTMAS AFTERNOON, AND we were driving back from my sister's house, where we'd gone to see what Santa had brought my niece and nephew. I was twelve. Suddenly a car veered onto our side of the road. My father swerved to avoid it, and we smashed into a telephone pole. The other car kept going.

Mom was pinned beneath metal and glass in the passenger seat, whimpering, "Daddy, oh, Daddy. Mama's hurt." My father was silent, his head resting against the steering wheel. My little brother Sam cried softly beside me. Missy, my three-year-old niece, had vanished from her perch up front, between my parents. Frigid air and whirling snowflakes came in through a hole in the windshield.

I slid open the side door of our van and sunk up to my thighs in snow. I found my niece, who'd flown through the windshield and was now crying in a snow pile. Incredibly, she didn't look hurt. We were near the Kronholms' house, where my older brother's friend Eddy lived. I trudged toward their house and pounded on the door.

When Eddy saw what had happened, he bolted out and brought back Sam and Missy. Eddy's mom wrapped us together in an afghan and plunked us in front of the TV. I could hear voices outside and see the blinking lights of the emergency vehicles. Special equipment was brought in to cut my mother free. My older sister arrived and told us Dad had regained

consciousness and was talking. Later Mrs. Kronholm told us our mother would be OK.

But Mom wasn't OK. For a long time she couldn't walk, and when she did it was with a walker. Because of her immobility, she gained weight and developed diabetes. Over the years that disease claimed her toe, her foot, then her limbs.

On the day of the accident I never cried. I just saw that something awful had happened, and I did what I could to fix it. Alone in bed that night, however, I finally broke down and sobbed.

*Wendy Anderson
Highland Park, Illinois*

I USED TO LASH OUT VERBALLY AND physically whenever I felt someone was trying to take advantage of me, but over time I became more easygoing. I thought I had my anger under control, until my son turned two.

A typical curious toddler, my son pushes the boundaries of my tolerance. I'm not the patient mom I wish I were. I lose my temper frequently and struggle to keep from harming him. My son wrests control from me daily, leaving me feeling helpless and angry. Though I've never been physically violent with him, I know that every angry roar leaves a scar. Controlling my rage is the greatest test I've ever faced.

*Molly Maslin Arbogast
Baraboo, Wisconsin*

MY PARENTS GAVE UP A CONVENTIONAL middle-class existence for a back-to-the-land lifestyle. They eschewed jobs and a steady income and embraced poverty as the human ideal. I was the poorest child in my public elementary school and often felt humiliated by our perpetual lack of money. If I complained, my father, who spent his time writing in small notebooks, would ask me, "Would you want me to work in a factory?"

Having learned that many of my classmates' parents worked in factories, I always responded with an enthusiastic "Yes!"

In high school I began to feel differently. My penniless home life made me both interesting to my peers and eligible for college grants. Like my parents, I began

to disavow the "rat race," and wasn't shy about asking friends for rides, a place to stay, even money.

After graduate school, I moved back home and worked at low-paying jobs that I didn't take seriously. I showed up late or drunk and clowned around, when I didn't call in sick. My lack of self-discipline irked my father. But it was impossible for me to take his lectures seriously, having witnessed his own self-indulgent work habits. He was the one who'd taught me that earning lots of money was a sign of poor character and lack of virtue.

Years later I finally realized the satisfaction that comes from disciplined, reliable work. Still I struggle to balance work with my creative impulses. For example, I am writing this instead of doing a freelance job that would help pay my bills.

*Name Withheld
(end of excerpt)*