



FAWN POTASH

Readers Write

TESTS

MY SIXTH-GRADE SPELLING MARKS were always perfect. Mr. A. would hand each test back to me with a hint of a smile on his face and proudly tack my work on the wall for open-house night.

One day Mr. A. returned my test with one spelling word marked wrong. I had made a mistake! As we lined up to go to the auditorium to see a film, Mr. A. must have seen how devastated I was, because he looked at me with a serious but kind expression and said, "You're a human being."

By the time we filed into the auditorium, the spring had returned to my step.

*Mary B. Cantoral
Warrenville, Illinois*

MY TRADITIONAL CHINESE PARENTS dreamed I would marry a nice Chinese boy with an engineering degree and a good job. Instead I brought home Jeff, who was not only Caucasian, but unemployed.

Jeff and I had met while working as summer interns in New York City. Jeff went to Stanford, I to Harvard. We agreed we wanted only sex, and only for that summer, but somewhere between the baseball double-headers and the late-night necking on the Staten Island Ferry, we fell in love. I brought him home at Christmas to meet my family.

On Christmas Eve my family sat down to a lavish Chinese meal. After I bragged that Jeff needed no knife and

fork, my brothers presented him with a special pair of chopsticks made of polished ivory. I cringed. Even a lifelong chopstick user would have had trouble holding food in those long, slick tapers. The rest of us had easy-to-handle bamboo chopsticks. Jeff was doomed.

Then Jeff said, "These chopsticks are too nice to waste on me. I think that the eldest and most respected person should have the honor of using them." With that, he switched chopsticks with my dad.

"Such audacity," my mother clucked in Chinese.

"He's quick-witted, though, and a diplomat," my father said with an approving chuckle.

Jeff ate heartily and even burped a

few times — the proper Chinese way to show appreciation for a good meal. My parents' reserve began to melt. Here was a *gway lo*, a Caucasian who really knew how to enjoy Chinese food.

That was the first of many tests Jeff passed with my family. He and I have been married for more than twenty years.

*Gloria Lau
San Francisco, California*

I'M A NURSE IN THE SURGERY DEPARTMENT of a community hospital. Because I live in a small town, I know most of the women who come in for breast biopsies. They always wake up from the anesthesia wanting to know their test results. "The doctor will be in soon," I say. Although I pretend to be aloof and professional, I am anxious, too. As the surgeon comes into the recovery room, I observe his body language. If the test is positive, he will shuffle his feet when he stands at the bedside. After thirty years of this work, his shoulders seem permanently hunched from his burden.

Because family and friends are not allowed in the recovery room, I am the only witness when a woman receives the good or bad news. When it's bad, the surgeon gets right to the point and doesn't stick around for long. There usually isn't much reaction anyway. Denial is the first response. I'm also fairly liberal with morphine.

I've been a nurse for twenty-five years and know how to handle most situations, but I still haven't figured out what to do in this one. I want to tell these women to go to the best cancer center, or to eat macrobiotically, or to try alternative medicine, or to have double mastectomies and get perfect breast implants (the size they've always wanted). I want to tell them that heart disease, not breast cancer, is the number-one killer of women. I want to say something that will erase the past three minutes of their lives. I want to say that I'm sorry. I am so sorry.

Instead I offer ice chips, inject more morphine into their IV, and hope they stay in denial for as long as possible.

Name Withheld

MY THIRD YEAR IN PRISON I BECAME a teaching assistant. Helping inmates

gain literacy skills was my way of giving something back.

For security reasons teachers were rotated to new classes every three months. Because inmate TAs could be fired by a new teacher, this rotation always caused a lot of anxiety.

That spring, all the TAs were nervous about being assigned to Ms. H.'s class. A career government worker, she was rumored to hate men. Word was she'd fire any TA who didn't submit to her authority.

As luck would have it, I became her TA. I could feel her scrutinizing my classroom etiquette and my interactions with staff and students. One day, in the office teachers and TAs shared, I noticed my name and my conviction (burglary) on Ms. H.'s computer screen. When a staff member looked up an inmate's crime, it was never a good sign. I expected I would soon lose my job.

A few days later I walked into the office and saw Ms. H.'s purse lying open on her desk. Inside, in clear view, were a

fistful of twenties and a cellphone. It was against institution policy to have cellphones or valuables, especially large sums of money, in the office or the classrooms. It looked as though she had at least four hundred dollars, almost six months' pay for a TA. That sum would give me plenty of time to find another job. Because the office was used by others, she'd never know I was the one who'd taken it. And even if she did figure it out, she wouldn't be in a position to say anything, since she had violated a security rule.

Later that day the TAs and teachers gathered for our weekly education meeting. When Ms. H. walked in, it was obvious that she'd been crying. The head of our department stepped forward.

"I've worked with all of you for some time," she said. "I know this is a prison, but I hate to believe that there is a thief in our midst."

"We're surrounded by thieves," the math teacher pointed out. "Why don't you tell us what's going on?"

Ms. H. sputtered, "My purse is miss-

READERS 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.)

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Neighbors	January 1	June 2006
Waking Up	February 1	July 2006
Temptation	March 1	August 2006
Coming Back	April 1	September 2006
Falling	May 1	October 2006
Nine To Five	June 1	November 2006

ing with my cellphone and \$625 in it.”

“You brought a cellphone into the institution?” someone asked.

A tear slid down Ms. H.’s face.

“Ms. H., are you sure you brought your purse into the institution?” I asked. “Why don’t you check your locker.”

“Let’s do that,” the department head said, and she led the tearful Ms. H. away.

Now, four years later, Ms. H. heads the department, and we are the best of friends. She knows she didn’t put her purse in her locker, where she found it that day, with her cellphone and money still in it. She also knows that I had something to do with its being there. She treats us all fairly, as individuals.

Name Withheld

IN 1964 I WAS LIVING IN A BOARDING house on California Street, two blocks from San Francisco’s Chinatown. I paid ninety dollars a month for room and board and spent much time at the famous City Lights bookstore, reading poetry and books about personal growth.

One afternoon I heard that Maxwell Maltz would be giving a lecture that evening. I had read his book *Psycho-Cybernetics*, which popularized “success conditioning,” a method of self-improvement based on “reprogramming” the subconscious. The lecture was to be held in an old building in a fading neighborhood whose streets were full of homeless people.

As I entered the building that night, I saw a man, apparently drunk, lying on the floor in a pool of his own urine. His arm stuck out at a strange angle, as though broken, and he was obviously in pain. Part of me wanted to help him, but another part of me wanted to appear cool and groovy to the comely young women who were there to attend the lecture. Along with the rest, I climbed the stairs to the lecture room, ignoring the man’s plight.

At the top I turned and saw a bejeweled woman wearing a fur enter the building. Without hesitation, she walked right over to the drunk man, touched him, tried to comfort him, and inquired about his arm. Then she asked someone to call a social agency to come help him.

Given a choice between “personal

growth” and the opportunity to relieve human suffering, that wealthy woman was the only one among us who passed the test.

*James Tipton
Fruita, Colorado*

WHEN I BECAME ROMANTICALLY involved with Chris, I still believed a woman could save a man with the power of her love. Chris was an ideal candidate for saving. Dark and moody, he was separated from his wife and torn up about losing his children. His wife claimed that he had threatened her with a hammer, but he portrayed himself as the victim.

Though Chris kept pushing me away, I was determined to convince him that I truly loved him. If only he’d let himself be loved, I believed, he could become whole.

Chris had a devoted dog named Ranger, a remarkable animal who possessed a calm dignity and a steady gaze. He seemed more like a peer than a pet. One day Chris told me he believed people should take responsibility for their animals. Since he could no longer take care of Ranger, he had taken the dog into the woods and shot him in the head.

I was deeply shocked, but I decided this was Chris’s way of testing me. He wanted to expose me to his dark side to see if I would reject him. So I said nothing.

Chris soon found someone else to whom he could reveal his dark side, and he dropped me. Today I can’t remember what Chris looked like, but I still remember Ranger’s face.

*Julie G.
Centerville, Ohio*

I WAS SPENDING A SATURDAY EVE-ning with my mother, who was dying of cancer. We were sitting up in the bed my father had moved into the living room, watching a movie and trying to forget for a while the disease that would kill her in a few months.

Halfway through the movie, my friend Scott, who was in town from Chicago, called to see if I wanted to go out drinking. “Scott’s only going to be here for a couple of days,” I told my mom.

She tried to smile. I realize now that she was exhausted and in pain, humbled

by her inability to care for herself, and afraid of dying. No doubt she wanted me to stay to watch the rest of the movie, so she could draw comfort from my company. But what can a weary old woman say to her twenty-two-year-old son when he wants to go out drinking with his buddy?

“You go ahead,” she said.

So I went. I’m sure Scott and I had a good time. But I would exchange that night in an instant for another chance to be a good son.

*Lawrence Pelo
Denver, Colorado*

“IT LOOKS LIKE YOU’RE HEADED toward in vitro fertilization,” our reproductive endocrinologist said after another month of unsuccessful treatments. Three years of trying and failing to conceive a child was weighing heavily on my husband and me, and on our marriage.

As the doctor described the next round of treatments, I felt a familiar knot form in my throat. The injected medicines I’d taken so far had caused terrible headaches. To me the doctor’s words meant more injections, more hormones, more bloating, more headaches. I saw myself twelve weeks in the future, curled up in a little ball on our bed, crying after another failed attempt.

I told the doctor I didn’t understand what wasn’t working, that my husband and I were both healthy. She said again that 15 percent of infertility is unexplained. My husband listened seriously, nodded his head, and said, “I understand.”

The doctor handed my husband a lab slip. “This is for you,” she said. “We need you to get some blood work done in order to have the treatments approved by your insurance.”

Wordlessly we walked to the lab. While my husband had his blood drawn, I sat in the waiting room and imagined the lab technician wiping his arm with alcohol and tying a tourniquet around it. “Just a little stick,” she’d say. “You won’t feel a thing.”

“Please,” I whispered. “Please let him feel some pain.”

*Megan Mistry
Northampton, Massachusetts*

THE TRIBE'S NEW SCHOOL BUILDING is as expansive as a shopping mall, painted in rich earth tones, with ceilings as tall as cedar trees. I stroll down the hall looking for the students I once taught in middle school, who are now old enough to graduate. I find a small, determined few. Most have dropped out.

At the tribe's old cinder-block school, my classroom had been a storage shed. The floor bounced; the ceiling sagged. My students and I painted the door with our handprints. Only seven of us could squeeze into the space, but I typically taught only one or two children at a time. That classroom was a safe place where they could tell me stories about their lives. I mostly ignored the lesson plans and instead listened to my students talk.

Each year I had to give them the Woodcock-Johnson standardized test, which measured achievement in categories ranging from science to reading. Though at one point in my career I'd believed the test was a useful tool, during my years at the tribal school I grew to hate it.

Administering the test, I read a prompt: "One child; two children. One ox; two. . . ?"

"What's an ox?" asked twelve-year-old Dean. I wasn't allowed to respond to questions during the test. What was an ox to him? To me?

After the Woodcock-Johnson, some students asked anxiously how they'd done; others retreated as though I'd betrayed them. Dean laughed it off and shrugged away the shame of special education. Then, eyes shining, he told me about crabbing.

Where in that test could Dean show me the best spot to find crabs, and teach me how to throw the females back? Where could he show how to break open the shell and feed myself, or identify the parts that would heal my headache? No test can measure that knowledge.

Today Dean isn't at the tribal school. He's out there somewhere. Life is testing him, and he's testing it right back.

*Nancy Lee Bouscher
Mt. Vernon, Washington*

MY MOTHER WAS A PARANOID SCHIZOPHRENIC who refused care, and my brother

and I were put in foster homes when I was in fourth grade. I saw my mother periodically after that, but I was never alone with her. Now, as an adult, I wanted to reconnect. I decided to take her on a car trip to visit a national park.

Almost sixty, my mother had spent parts of her life homeless or institutionalized, but now lived in a tiny shack in the desert between LA and Las Vegas. She had two warrants out for her arrest. She'd never held a job.

My mother liked to dress up and dance in the streets. She called late-night talk-radio shows so much they stopped taking her calls. She once asked a man in town if he liked his job; when he said he did, she pulled a jar of pickles out of her grocery bag and threw it at him. I wasn't sure I could stand being alone with her for several days, but I wanted to try.

The trip to the national park tested my endurance to its limit. On the way back, my mother screamed and flailed her arms. She threw her steaming cup of coffee out the window and blamed it on me. I was plotting to ruin her life, she said. She recited every horrible thing I'd done as a child. I gripped the steering wheel and tried to tune her out, but her daggerlike words kept getting through. It took all my self-control not to drop her in the middle of the desert.

Two hours later I pulled into the parking lot of the bar next to her shack and unloaded her belongings while she stormed off yelling. As I started my truck to leave, a drunk came out of the bar and leaned into my window. "She's crazy," he said.

"Aren't we all," I replied.

My mother didn't hear any of this. She was busy talking to a stray dog, putting the scarf I'd brought her around its neck, telling the dog it was an ugly scarf.

Driving away, I reminded myself that even though the trip had been a disaster, I hadn't snapped; I hadn't lost my head. I felt as if I had passed a test. Barely. But I'd passed.

*Zephyr M.
El Portal, California*

MY SECOND HUSBAND AND I HAD been married for five years. We both worked long hours, on different shifts, and our weekends didn't coincide. Still,

we shared passions and projects. I believed all was well. Then our marriage was tested.

A pipe burst in our garage, and the plumber who came to fix it was good-looking, friendly, and at least ten years younger than I. After he'd left, I couldn't stop thinking about him. I'd always been a faithful partner, and I wanted to be completely honest in my marriage, so I told my husband about my brief obsession.

I forgot about the young plumber — until the next winter, when he returned to fix a leaky valve in a utility closet. He also talked to me about the pipe he had repaired the previous year, which had burst again because it hadn't been properly insulated. He offered to remedy the insulation problem "on the side," without involving his employer. He — and I — seemed to be trying to prolong our time together.

After he'd left, I called my husband and told him that the same plumber had returned.

"He's not working for us again," my husband said angrily. "He's a sexual predator."

I didn't tell him that the plumber had given me his cellphone number. I also didn't say that, during our conversation, his hand had accidentally touched mine, and I'd felt an intense jolt, like nothing I'd ever felt before, yet somehow familiar.

The young plumber and I had a clandestine lunch. I told him I really loved my husband, had never lied to him before, and was not the cheating type.

That night I confessed all to my husband and swore the plumber meant nothing to me. I haven't seen the plumber since then, but I can't stop thinking about him. Am I telling my husband the truth, or am I lying to myself?

*Name Withheld
(end of excerpt)*