



CRAIG J. SATTERLEE

Readers Write DECISIONS

I LIVED IN BERKELEY AND WORKED AT the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, a nuclear-weapons research lab, where I developed computer war simulations. On Sundays I went with my girlfriend to Quaker meetings, where people sat in each other's company without the pressure to speak. One Sunday some fellow congregants asked if I wanted to join a protest at Livermore Lab. I told them I had to work that day. No one asked me where.

The first Gulf War started. The military used one of my computer simulations to calculate probabilities of hits and kills. Suddenly the simulations were no longer so abstract. Thousands of people were dying. I wanted to join my girlfriend and others who were protesting the war, but I didn't feel I could as long as I worked at the lab.

At the lab's next team meeting, I announced I was leaving. I no longer be-

lieved in what we were doing, I said, and wanted to find work I could feel good about. My office door would be open to anyone who wanted to talk to me about my decision.

One by one, the three military officers assigned to my project dropped by. Each said I was doing the right thing.

Dave O'Keefe

Palm Desert, California

IT WAS 1968, A YEAR AFTER THE SUM-mer of Love, in San Francisco: Drugs were readily available. Janis Joplin and the Grateful Dead performed frequently around Golden Gate Park. And I was determined to liberate myself from the uptight, war-mongering values of my parents' generation. I made a conscious decision to be unfettered by conventional notions of commitment.

Nick was drawn to my free-spiritedness. We shared an interest in getting high

and a belief in open relationships. I also admired his entrepreneurial spirit. Dozens of plastic baggies, each containing a precisely measured ounce of pot, were hidden under his bed.

One evening Nick returned home late. The next morning he told me he'd met up with an old girlfriend. When I asked if he'd slept with her, he said yes.

My distress must have shown on my face, because he said, "Guess we never talked about this, did we?"

"What's to talk about?" I said nonchalantly. "Don't be bourgeois."

Nick and I stayed together for years, conducting not-very-secret affairs. It wasn't until I stopped drinking and doing drugs that we finally split.

Nine years of sobriety later, I went to visit friends on Maui. There I met Mark and went home with him that same night: my first one-night stand in years. After I returned to California, Mark came to

visit. When I broached the subject of sexual freedom versus monogamy, he said he was boringly conventional.

"Me, too," I said.

*Janina Lynne
North San Juan, California*

MY FATHER WAS DYING AT HOME FROM a rare type of cancer. My normally calm mother, a former nurse practitioner, was eighty years old and utterly exhausted from years of caring for him. For the past few weeks, she told me, he had been sleeping during the day but wide awake and combative at night.

I began spending nights with them, my mother and I in the double bed, my father in a hospital bed in the same room. His personality and even his way of speaking had changed, and I had to relearn how to communicate with him.

A lifelong devout Catholic, my father was losing his faith and worried that maybe there wasn't a heaven after all. He was afraid to die. I promised that, as he died, I would stay with him and hold his hand. If he saw that he was going toward something beautiful, I told him, he could let go of my hand. He visibly relaxed. "That's a beautiful story," he said.

On his last evening — it happened to be Father's Day — I sat holding his hand until my mother said, "You're keeping him here by doing that. He needs to go. Let him go."

Reluctantly I freed my hand from his.

My father died while I was asleep in a chair across the room.

For years I've been haunted by my broken promise to my father. Did I give him permission to leave his earthly life, or did I leave him alone when he needed someone most?

Name Withheld

BEFORE I GOT ENGAGED, I DIDN'T think I ever wanted to have children, but my fiancé and I talked about it and decided that children would be a part of our lives *someday*. Then I got pregnant on our honeymoon. We made the difficult decision to have an abortion.

Four years later, we were ready. I got pregnant and miscarried at fifteen weeks. It seemed that I was being taught a lesson. I wondered if I deserved to be a mother.

I got pregnant again a year later. When I made it past fifteen weeks, I felt relieved and started to enjoy the life growing inside of me. Then, at twenty-two weeks, tests indicated the baby had a life-threatening spinal-cord disorder and probably wouldn't live to see his or her second birthday. We had to decide whether to terminate the pregnancy or carry it to full term. We chose to have our child.

Our daughter came into the world on July 12, 2005, with ten fingers, ten toes, and no signs of brain or spinal-cord defects. The doctors had made a mistake. It was the best decision we've ever made.

Name Withheld

MY UNCLE WAS AN IMPORTANT MAN in the Texas prison system, and each year he invited my father and me to the annual prisoners' rodeo. On my first visit I was six, and we ate lunch in the officers' executive dining room, where a well-scrubbed but underfed inmate served us with all the formality of an English butler. Pinned to

the man's prison uniform was an engraved name tag bearing his sentence and crime. I could read the word *life*, but the other word was new to me.

"What does m-u-r-d-e-r spell?" I asked my father.

The prison administrators regarded me with amusement. Finally the inmate spoke up. "It spells 'murder,' ma'am," he said, addressing me with military discipline. "I killed another man, and I will be in prison for the rest of my natural life because of it." Then he slipped back into the genteel manner of a servant and asked, "Would you like a cracker?"

The experience made a deep impression on me. I never forgot what happened to people who broke the law.

Two years later my widowed father got engaged to a pushy, self-indulgent woman, and they were married in a lavish ceremony. My new stepmother would not allow the demands of parenting to cut into her lively social schedule, so she and my father began leaving me overnight with my step-grandparents whenever

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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
Falling	May 1	October 2006
Nine To Five	June 1	November 2006
Gambling	July 1	December 2006
Nothing To Lose	August 1	January 2007
Help	September 1	February 2007
Good Friends	October 1	March 2007

they had tickets or a reservation.

Their evenings out on the town were nights of terror for me. My stepmother's father crept into my bedroom and molested me and made frightening threats about what he would do to me if I told.

I didn't tell, but one night when I was ten I refused to go and stay at my step-grandparents' house anymore. My stepmother exploded with rage, and we began a shouting match that ended with her perfectly manicured hands around my throat. My father pulled her off me, and she left. I never saw her again.

The next day I made up my mind to tell my father what my step-grandfather had done to me. But before I could gather the courage, my father said, "If I ever find out that someone has hurt you, I'll kill them." His eyes told me he meant it.

I went outside and lay on the ground with my dog and reached a firm decision never to tell my father about the abuse. I'd seen prison, and I didn't want him to end up there. My silence would keep him safe.

Name Withheld

IT'S BEEN THREE MONTHS SINCE I QUIT chewing tobacco. I run my tongue across my gums and think about it a hundred times a day: Copenhagen. Chewed it for twenty-five years. Goes perfectly with a cold beer.

On my first trip to my old drinking haunt since quitting, I order a beer and watch sports highlights on tv. Someone taps my shoulder. It's Barry. He's always got a can of Copenhagen. When I ask, though, he says, "Nope, man, left it at home. I'm trying to cut back. Worried about the gums, you know?"

"That's all right," I say, lying. "Haven't had any in a couple of months myself." I drain my can of weak beer and get up to leave.

Outside I climb into my old van and take the back roads home. A convenience store catches my eye, and I remind myself how good I've been the past few months. I used to chew so much I didn't even mind swallowing the juice. Preferred it, actually.

The liquor store comes into view, and I tell myself I need some beer for home. No Copenhagen, just beer. I go in, choose a

quart of Pabst, and proceed to the check-out. The guy behind the counter is in his sixties, and his cheek looks pudgy. He's chewing. And why shouldn't he be? Hell, this is Wyoming, isn't it?

"Will that be all?" he asks.

I look at his lip. He doesn't spit, but swallows the juice.

"I'll take a can of Copenhagen snuff, please."

"Chewed this stuff for forty years," he says. "First thing in the morning till I go to bed at night. Don't think I'll ever be able to quit." His face has no expression. He's just stating facts. I thank him and leave.

The label says, "Fresh Cope. It satisfies, since 1822." My thumbnail traces the edge of the lid, breaking the paper seal, and I open the can and hold it under my nose. Finally I take a pinch and savor it, swallowing the loose specks. I don't think I'll ever quit either.

*Kirk VanDyke
Laramie, Wyoming*

I'VE DECIDED NOT TO TALK TO MY son about his future, about the fact that he doesn't have his college degree, that his job ends soon and he hasn't a clue what he'll do next. At twenty-four, Ian is old enough to decide what to do without my help.

When he was in high school, I vowed many times to stop talking to him about missed assignments and low grades, but I always broke down, because I couldn't stand to watch him waste his talents.

Now his friends have all graduated from college. Soon they'll get married, buy houses, have children. And he'll still be living in the same cheap apartment, getting by on low-paying jobs.

Is this so terrible? He's not on drugs. He barely drinks. He seems to enjoy visiting his father and me and can talk intelligently about many subjects.

I think back to when I was twenty-four. I had just finished graduate school and was drifting. I didn't know what I wanted. The job I eventually took was far below my abilities and paid much less than I should have earned. What did I want from my mother then?

I wanted her approval. I wanted her to show some delight in me.

So I watch videos with Ian and delight in his knowledge of movies, his encyclopedic memory for actors' names, and his spirited analysis of the films. I'm groping my way — slowly and with many missteps — from judgment to acceptance.

*Nancy W.
Seattle, Washington*

IN MY TENTH YEAR OF INCARCERATION at a Florida maximum-security prison, I took *jukai*: my Zen Buddhist layman's vows. The other members of my prison Buddhist group were there, as well as our free-world teacher Doshin and Dai-En, the master who flew down from New York to conduct the ceremony.

Doc, my friend and fellow Buddhist inmate, also took his vows that day. He had helped me start the group just a few years before, when he was fresh out of two years in solitary confinement. He did most of the footwork, research, and negotiating with the Southern Baptist chaplain, who informed us that Buddhism wasn't even listed as a religion in the *Department of Corrections Chaplaincy Manual*.

We were told we would need an outside sponsor, so we began writing to Zen groups. Their responses were full of encouragement but no offers to sponsor us. I was ready to give up when Doc quoted an old Zen saying: "When the student is ready, the teacher will arrive." Sure enough, Doshin answered one of the many letters we sent out. He came to the prison and taught us zazen practice and the Heart Sutra. Another dozen inmates joined our group, and we eventually became recognized by the Department of Corrections.

A month later Doc decided to take his vows. He told me I should take mine too. Though I had been practicing on my own for almost ten years, the compassion and discipline of Buddhism felt beyond me.

"How do you know I'm ready?" I asked. "I still cuss, fight, jerk off, and eat meat, and when I meditate my mind wanders like mad."

Doc smiled. "Taking your vows formalizes your commitment to your belief. It doesn't mean you're a saint or high priest."

To prepare for *jukai*, Doc and I had to sew our *rakusus* — black, robelike gar-

ments. Needles were considered weapons in prison, so we had to sew them in front of the chaplain every Sunday afternoon. I was uneasy around the chaplain, but over time he actually warmed up to us “pagan heathens.”

On the day of the ceremony, Doc and I set up the chapel room with sheets and chairs and a makeshift altar with a picture of the Buddha. My mind raced with things that could go wrong. No previous event in my life — not even my sentencing — could compare to this one in importance. When Dai-En was held up at the prison gate (she’d forgotten her photo ID), my anxiety doubled. But the chaplain went and signed for her, and once the ceremony began, my concerns slid off my shoulders like loose silk. There are times in prison when you feel like you are free, and this was one of them.

At the end Dai-En placed Doc’s *rakusu* over his neck and gave him the dharma name of Dai-Moku, or Great Silence. When she placed my *rakusu* on me, I became Ei-Ryu, or Eternal Wanderer, a joke of sorts: I couldn’t wander far in prison, but my mind wandered all the time.

*David Wood
St. Petersburg, Florida*

SIX YEARS OF PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL abuse had made me desperate to leave Saul, but many times he had threatened that if I ever left, he’d make sure he got custody of our son, Jonathan. I couldn’t risk leaving Jonathan to bear the full brunt of his father’s rage alone.

Saul was immensely charming, manipulative, and ruthless, and he had all the money, resources, and power in the relationship. We lived in his hometown, thousands of miles from my family.

One night, I realized that if I fell asleep in the same house as Saul, I might never wake up. All night I crept around the apartment, gathering papers and a few belongings. In the morning, while Saul was in the shower, I called a neighbor and asked her to come get Jonathan and me as soon as Saul’s car was gone.

I had told Jonathan that one day we might need to go to a shelter. After his father left that morning, I announced that this was the day. Any doubts I had about whether I was making the right decision

were dispelled when my son ran to Alicia’s car, calling back to me, “Come on, Mama. Hurry up. Let’s go. We’re finally going to the shelter!” It was just before Halloween, and he was wearing an alligator costume I’d found for him at a thrift shop. The tail swung jauntily behind him.

The four days we spent in the shelter were, to that point, the best days of his young life. A year later, he still asks when we can go back and visit.

Name Withheld

AFTER MY EIGHTY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD father was operated on for pancreatic cancer, the surgeon predicted he’d live no more than two years, perhaps as little as six months.

I visited Dad in Philadelphia after the operation. He had no appetite, but he was eager to go to a Phillies game at the new stadium and to see his two new grandchildren. I stayed a week and listened to his stories. As I prepared to leave, Dad put three twenty-dollar bills in my hand. When I hugged him, his arms remained by his side. Showing emotion was difficult for him.

Later that day, after I’d traveled to Maine for a vacation with my wife and daughter, my father fell on the steps and hit his head. He was rushed to the hospital, where a CAT scan revealed a blood clot in the membrane surrounding his brain.

I drove ten hours back to Philadelphia, arriving exhausted at the hospital. The attending neurosurgeon told my siblings and me that he could operate on my father, but “why would I fix a tire on a car with a bad engine?”

My brother asked what the chances were of permanent damage if we decided to go ahead with the surgery.

“Twenty or 30 percent,” the doctor said, adding that even if my father recovered, he might end up in a wheelchair and have trouble understanding and using language.

We had to choose between saving his life so he could die later from pancreatic cancer or letting him die now from the bleeding in his head. The doctor reminded us that pancreatic cancer was a particularly painful way to go. Death from his head injury would be “like a headache,”

he assured us. We had fifteen minutes to make our decision.

My brother Mark did not want my father to be operated on. Our sister Mary, a nurse, was undecided, as was I. Dad’s enthusiasm during my visit was still fresh in my memory. I called our brother Mike, a doctor, and told him our dilemma. He said the operation would be a mistake. I stressed that Dad was a fighter and had never given up on anything in his life. “Yes,” Mike said curtly, “but this is different.”

We took a vote. I knew it had to be unanimous, to keep the family from dividing. Though I felt certain our father would have taken his chances on the surgery, I voted to let him go. I felt like Judas betraying Jesus in the olive garden.

After the doctors removed his breathing tube, Dad grabbed my hand and said, simply, “Home.”

Sick with cowardice, I told him, yes, we would get him home.

He looked agitated, as if he understood that he would never be going home again. He drew me closer. “Pull the plug,” he managed to say.

That was the last time he spoke. Those words were his final gift to me, a way out of the garden.

*Francis D.
Lincoln, Nebraska*

(end of excerpt)