



WILLIAM CARTER

## Readers Write WINNERS AND LOSERS

**I'VE NEVER BEEN COMPETITIVE.** When I was a child, blowing gigantic bubble-gum bubbles was my idea of athleticism. Just the thought of team sports could reduce me to a quivering mass of anxieties: What if I got picked last? What if I couldn't kick the ball straight? What if everyone made fun of me? By the time gym period rolled around, I would stumble onto the playground already defeated.

In high school I was caught cutting an entire semester of gym class. I told the principal that Aristotle believed gym-

nastics should be a matter of individual achievement, not team competition. The principal yawned and called my parents.

Now I'm forced to attend off-site corporate-bonding retreats where we learn to be "team players." I always feel queasy beforehand, and crabby after I get there. I once asked a motivational speaker at one of these events what his own advice had wrought. He spread his arms wide and looked around the audience beaming, as though preaching to a

room full of insurance salespeople were proof of his success.

*Mechele Shoneman  
Morganville, New Jersey*

**THE SUMMER I WAS TWELVE, I FOUGHT** my first and only fight. Word had gotten to me that Shirley, who lived down the street, said I had been talking about her behind her back — a classic pretext for a fight. One day I was riding my bike when I saw her walking toward my house with my supposed friend Wanda. The deliberate manner in which they made their way down the block told me something was up.

I sped home and ran inside to tell my mother that Wanda and Shirley were coming to beat me up. I wanted to hide, but my mom sent me outside and locked the screen door behind me. She knew the rules of the street: you have to stand up for yourself.

I had no choice but to sit in the yard and try to look cool. I watched them approach out of the corner of my eye. As they stood over me, I pretended to be fascinated by the grass. Shirley started throwing leaves and twigs in my hair, and I threw them back onto her feet. She said she'd heard I'd been talking about her, but before I could respond, she jumped on me and started punching. In the distance I heard my mom cheering me on from the front door: "Get her, Theresa. Get her!"

I fought hard, but I didn't stand a chance. Mom finally stopped the fight, sending Shirley and Wanda on their way. Then she welcomed me into her open arms, as if I'd just won a title bout.

*Theresa Baultrippe  
St. Paul, Minnesota*

**AS A COLLEGE FRESHMAN, I WANTED** to join a certain fraternity. Two guys I'd looked up to in high school were members, and I wanted to be part of their community of supportive, articulate, ambitious black men. I studied hard, became active in student groups, and attended as many of the fraternity's functions as possible.

In spring of my sophomore year, fraternity "rush" was about to begin. Friends of mine were also planning to pledge the fraternity, and we talked about how we

could support each other during the six weeks of hazing we'd have to endure. We all assumed we'd be invited to pledge.

On induction night, when the fraternity brothers came in person to invite applicants to pledge, the chapter president knocked on my door. "Sorry," he said, "we just don't feel like we know you well enough to invite you to join the brotherhood." I was devastated and wondered how I'd face my friends, all of whom had called to tell me they'd been invited to pledge.

I later found out that I'd been turned down because some frat brothers didn't want any "potential homos" in the chapter.

That rejection helped me come out of the closet and into self-acceptance. The following year, I received a chancellor's award for being the most outstanding man in the junior class. I felt honored — and vindicated. A few years later, the fraternity's president-elect announced in a chapter meeting that he was gay.

*C. Brown  
San Francisco, California*

**WHEN I WAS A TWELVE-YEAR-OLD GIRL** in East Germany, an older friend taught me chess. He had learned the game while a prisoner of war, captured by the Russians during World War II. I was the only child of a single mother, friendless and stuck in a remote settlement. The attention he gave me seemed priceless, but it turned out there was a price: he had to win.

His winning didn't bother me at first; after all, I was just learning. After a few months had gone by, however, I began to wonder why he didn't let me win occasionally, just for encouragement. Why did he need such cheap victories?

I eventually grew angry and resolved to beat him. I memorized his moves and learned to recognize some simple tricks. I put him in positions I had been unable to resolve and watched how he extricated himself. Finally the day came when I won. He shook his head, speechless. I felt a deep satisfaction.

I'd been raised by a mother preoccupied with survival, amid social turmoil and poverty. I grew up feeling rejected by her family, who shunned us because Mom had left my father. Around the age

of ten, I'd become fiercely competitive in an effort to prove my worth. Winning made me feel secure in that atmosphere of great insecurity, but it also concealed a deep sense of worthlessness.

Did my chess teacher, dehumanized by Hitler's army and Stalin's prison camps, have similar reasons for wanting to win, even over an adolescent girl?

Now I feel only empathy for both of us.

*Sigrid McLaughlin  
Santa Cruz, California*

**EVERY SUMMER SINCE WE MOVED TO** Texas, my husband, Levi, and I have driven thirty hours to upstate New York to visit his parents. Although they have a fine house, we sleep outside, in a tent my in-laws bought for us, because Levi is allergic to Patches, their beloved dog. They came up with this solution after two trips to the emergency room to treat Levi's severe allergic reactions.

Our visits have grown shorter each year. At night we quickly get into the

tent and try to zip it up without letting the bugs in. Then we lie on top of our sleeping bags and sweat in the eighty-five-degree heat.

One night we heard the sliding glass door open and Patches scurry down the steps. He sniffed around the tent, then chose a spot near our heads to relieve himself. After he'd darted back into the air-conditioned house, he sat at the glass door, looking down upon us. I swear he was smirking.

*Tammy R.  
Houston, Texas*

**IT BEGINS INNOCENTLY ENOUGH.** AN old girlfriend of my husband's sends him an e-mail, which he shares with me. "I hope you remember me," it reads. "We knew each other in college for about three years."

"What do you mean we 'knew each other'?" he writes back. He asked her to marry him, and she broke his heart.

More e-mails pass back and forth, and my husband shares them with me

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
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
Praying	November 1	April 2007

less and less. He begins talking to her by phone. It has been forty years since he's heard her voice, but it sounds the same, he says. She has been married twice, has one child, and is recently divorced and back in their old hometown.

One night I come home late and find him crying by the phone — gut-wrenching sobs from some deep, forgotten place. Hunched over his desk, his head in his hands, he tries to explain his feelings. He doesn't regret marrying me, he says, but he is still tormented by their long-ago breakup. I listen and try to be sympathetic. It is hard to hear him talk about how his life might have been different, if only. I don't exist in that "if only."

They decide to see each other in person. They need it "for closure," or "to honor their time together," or "to see if there is anything there." Pick one.

"Who knows," my husband says to me, "maybe we can all be friends."

The day of his departure, he gets up early to pack. I don't feel like his wife, but like a daughter seeing her father off on his first date after a divorce. As he heads for the airport, I sit at the table in my pajamas and hang on to my coffee mug as if it were a life raft on a storm-tossed sea.

I could lose him. Maybe I already have.

J.R.

*Albuquerque, New Mexico*

**IN THE LAST SEVEN YEARS, I HAVE** left a well-paying job to raise my children; moved from Georgia to Quebec, Canada; survived breast cancer; and begun a new career as a yoga instructor. I'm happy with my life, but I sometimes lose sight of my accomplishments, especially when I compare myself to others.

A woman in my book club is a self-proclaimed "overachiever." She has a successful career; three lovely children; a handsome, supportive husband; a gorgeous home (and a vacation home); and plenty of money. All before turning forty. At our recent book-club meeting, this overachiever talked about her career problems. She'd interviewed for a high-ranking television job but knew she wouldn't get it, and this had her in a funk. Her story sparked a discussion about careers. When I didn't speak up, the over-

achiever asked how my yoga teaching was going. I said I enjoyed it, though I hadn't started to charge for classes yet.

I felt like a loser. The sense of competitiveness ruined what I'd hoped would be an intimate evening with friends.

I'd like to blame the overachiever, but I know it's my own definition of winning that keeps me from enjoying life.

Marci B.

*Montreal, Quebec, Canada*

**I'M ATTENDING A HIGH-SCHOOL** cross-country track meet, waiting to see one of my children compete. Right now they're running the girls' 5K race. Because part of the course is wooded, we lose sight of the runners for much of the competition.

Ten minutes into the race, the lead runners emerge from the woods, and the other parents and I stop chatting and pay attention. As they get closer, I notice that one of the girls in the lead is at least a hundred pounds overweight. *How is this possible?* I think.

As the runners cross the finish line, the overweight girl veers to the left and continues around the track. She has completed only one lap of the two-lap race. We'll have to wait for her to finish before the next race can begin.

Maybe some parents are thinking about getting home late for dinner, but I'm thinking about that girl out there all alone, how she didn't look at any of us as she plodded by in her jersey and shorts. The tension is palpable, and a few spectators make jokes, but mostly it is quiet. I think about the courage it takes for her to keep going. Could I do that?

Fifteen minutes later, the overweight girl comes into view, and her teammates run to her, yelling her name. As she crosses the finish line, she is surrounded by dozens of cheering fans.

Anjelina Citron

*Bellingham, Washington*

**IN 1987 I WENT TO PRISON AS A SEX** offender. I met good people in prison and developed a better attitude. The question was, could I maintain that positive attitude following my release?

After I got out in 2003, I moved in with Manny, an old friend of my father's,

who lived in a filthy house and rarely got up from his La-Z-Boy recliner. I served as caretaker and housecleaner, and also paid my share of the bills. Manny complained about my cleaning, and we argued constantly about the pointless errands he insisted I do. I worked hard to control my anger, reminding myself that punching an old man not only was wrong, but would get me sent back to prison.

Finally Manny arranged for a woman to move into the spare bedroom rent-free in exchange for cleaning the house. As I'd done with Manny, I told Patrice I was a sex offender on probation and that I didn't want any trouble with her. At first she was wary, but eventually we became friends.

One evening I walked in on a heated argument between Patrice and Manny. I tried to referee, but it was too late. Patrice threw a vase at the wall, called Manny a "fucking idiot," and stormed out. Manny then turned his rage on me. I asked him why he made it so hard for people to try to help him. "I don't need your fucking help!" he shouted. "I could fuck up your life, you know."

"Go ahead," I said, and I went outside to find Patrice. We stood together, staring up at the stars. When we heard Manny's voice inside, Patrice crept to the window to eavesdrop. "He's on the phone talking to a cop about you," she said.

I felt sick. I hadn't done anything illegal, but that didn't mean I wouldn't be arrested. Even if I was immediately released, my probation still would have been violated. I'd been an idiot. Maybe I deserved to go back to prison.

A cruiser pulled up, its lights flashing. Then a second one. I thought of my friends back in prison, the lifers who'd had faith that I'd succeed in rebuilding my life. A third cruiser showed up. I hadn't failed those friends, nor myself, I assured myself. I'd done the best I could. When a fourth cruiser arrived, I pulled out paper and pen and wrote down my father's number to give to Patrice. I asked her to call him if I was arrested.

The sheriff's deputies were in the house for fifteen minutes. We could hear Manny shouting. When they came out, a deputy explained that Manny was trying to have us evicted, which was a civil matter, not a



criminal one. “You guys had better move out,” he said. “The guy you’re living with is a real nut.”

As they drove off, Patrice lit two cigarettes and gave me one. My hands trembled, but at least I knew I wasn’t going to lose my freedom again. Eventually we’d have to go back into the house and endure Manny’s profanities, but for now we could enjoy the cool night.

*David W.  
St. Petersburg, Florida*

**OUR FAMILY DIDN’T HAVE MONEY,** but my sister and I attended an expensive Catholic girls’ high school on scholarship. I loved the old buildings, the tree-filled campus, and the statue of a teenage Mary looking thoughtful, holding a book and a sewing basket. Many girls wore expensive overcoats on the bus, but at school our uniforms allowed me to forget the differences in our home lives.

In my junior year Mother Connelly began teaching English. She was young and confident, much cooler than the other nuns, and I longed to be noticed

by her. Unfortunately I was assigned to Mother Morrison for English. I listened enviously as my friends talked about the creative assignments in Mother Connelly’s class. After school, as we waited for the bus, Mother Connelly chatted and laughed with the popular girls in their pricey coats.

That spring Mother Morrison submitted an essay I’d written for her class to a schoolwide contest. At our Monday assembly a few weeks later, Reverend Mother announced the essay-contest winner. When I heard my name, I was both thrilled and paralyzed with fear. Unsure whether to smile or look serious, I walked to the stage to receive my medal.

After the assembly, Mother Connelly approached me and said, “I want to see you in my office in an hour.”

Finally she had noticed me. Perhaps she wanted to congratulate me on winning the contest. After math class I hurried to her office.

“I am appalled,” she said when I walked in. “Don’t you know how to act when you

receive a prize? You walked up there giggling like a fool.” I had been an embarrassment to the school, she told me. Not once did she mention my prizewinning essay.

“Thank you, Mother,” I said, which was what we were supposed to say when corrected, and she dismissed me. I spent the rest of study hall rummaging in my desk and fighting back tears. I began to think she was right. I was a fool. (I now think she was just mad that one of her students hadn’t won.)

At a graduation party, the seniors did a takeoff on Cole Porter’s “Too Darned Hot”: dressed as devils, they pretended to break the rules and sang, “We thought we were cool / but we’ll never be cool, / because it’s too darned hot.”

It was funny, but not true. They *were* cool. Even if they talked in the halls, or got caught wearing cashmere sweaters under their uniforms, or never learned to write a decent essay — it didn’t matter. Their success in life was guaranteed.

*Lynne Davis  
Carbondale, Illinois  
(end of excerpt)*