



JAN STÜRMAN

Readers Write

COMING BACK

PARTWAY THROUGH COLLEGE I TRANS-ferred to UCLA and moved into a studio apartment near campus. When I introduced myself to my new neighbors, many of them were hesitant to open their doors. “I’m not a Jehovah’s Witness,” I said. “I’m not selling anything. I’m just moving into Unit 3.”

I loved my simple life with one room, no TV, and only my uncle’s hand-me-down record player, some good books, and my new friends to occupy my time. Working out at the health club was part of my daily ritual. I’d park in a large garage, and as I left after my workout, I’d speak to the man in the ticket booth. He was from Mexico and knew little English. Since I wanted to learn Spanish, we began to trade words: I’d teach him an English word, and he’d teach me the same word in Spanish, all in less than a minute.

After graduation I moved away, but I returned two years later to visit my sister, who belonged to the same health club. Leaving the club with her, I discovered that the Mexican man was still working in the ticket booth. When he saw me, his eyes lit up, and he said, “Where have you been?” I told him I’d moved to Seattle. Looking as if he was going to cry, he said, “You are the only person who ever spoke to me.”

*Kim Hunter
Los Altos, California*

I WAS NINETEEN WHEN MY ROOM-mate asked if I wanted to drive with her from Minnesota to Mexico. It was 1972, and I’d never seen the ocean or a palm tree. My impressions of Mexico had been shaped entirely by Zorro stories.

I planned to stay for two weeks, but

remained for two months. We spent the night in mountain villages, washed our clothes in stone basins, and ate tamales in people’s kitchens. I also saw crippled people begging on the streets.

Coming home was a shock. The houses looked like castles, the lawns like golf courses. There were Cadillacs everywhere. My neat, orderly neighborhood was free of peddlers, beggars, and germs, but also free of music, dancing, color, life. I saw who I was for the first time: rich, secure, naive, American.

*Nancy Bee Zhao
Minneapolis, Minnesota*

AT TWENTY-ONE, I TOOK A ROAD TRIP to New Orleans with my eighteen-year-old sister. Everything I knew about New Orleans came from *National Geographic* and a Janis Joplin song.

It was January, and as we traveled along the Gulf Coast, away from our parents and the little town where we'd grown up, my sister seemed different, more confident. She held the wheel in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She'd recently started smoking, and it made her shyness seem cool.

In Tallahassee, Florida, a rear power window of our old Buick got stuck in the down position during a rainstorm. The first garage we went to told us it would cost three hundred dollars to fix. We kept looking until we found a kindly mechanic who said he'd put it back up for twenty bucks. It would be fine as long as nobody pushed the DOWN button again.

While he fixed the window, we told him about our big trip to New Orleans. He finished up, and we tried to pay him, but he shook his head. If we really wanted to do him a favor, he told us, we should turn the car around and go back home. Two beautiful, naive girls like us, he said, alone in the "City of Sin," were a disaster waiting to happen.

That evening we checked into a New Orleans youth hostel. We stayed up all night, drank too much, and cavorted with European tourists. A funny American boy named David was staying at the hostel, too. Though he had bad skin and his clothes didn't fit quite right, my sister and I took an immediate liking to him. When the three of us went places, he would walk with one of us on each arm while men stared in amazement at his luck. Sometimes David would run ahead and climb lampposts to impress us. In the evenings he played Leonard Cohen songs on his guitar.

He flirted recklessly with both of us, whispering in my sister's ear while he squeezed my knee under the table. Why did we let him get away with it? We were smitten. It was New Orleans. We were drunk. Maybe if he'd been more handsome, we would have been more suspicious. We even forgave him for accidentally rolling down the back window of our Buick.

Secretly, I imagined that David preferred my sister. The thought of the two of them together made me jealous, so when my sister said, "I don't think either of us should kiss him," I agreed. We made a pact.

A few nights later my sister went out on

a date with a Swedish boy from the hostel, leaving me alone with David. We sat for a while on a pier, looking at the Mississippi. We drank coffee at Café du Monde. We lay on park benches in Jackson Square. We drank mysterious drinks at a bar on Royal Street. David held my hand, and we wandered through the French Quarter. People who passed us said, "Oh, you look so good together!" At three in the morning, as we passed my parked car on the way back to the hostel, David opened the door to the back seat. I mentioned my pact with my sister. He laughed and started kissing me. We made out until the sun came up.

That night I told my sister to pack her things: we were going home. I waited until we were just over the border into Mississippi before I told her that I'd broken the pact. She cried an awful, convulsing cry. "I'm sorry," I said, but she didn't respond. She didn't look cool anymore; she looked like my little sister.

When I told the story recently to a friend, he thought it was hilarious.

"You don't understand," I said. "We made a pact."

"Those kinds of pacts don't count," he said.

But when I think of my little sister crying in a Mississippi hotel parking lot, I know they do.

S.B.

Tucson, Arizona

WHEN I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL, MY mother worked at Newberry's department store. I walked there after school every day and did my homework in the "ladies' lunchroom." But first I would go to the menswear department in the basement to visit Mom. I always paused on the landing of the basement steps and looked for her in the maze of aisles. As soon as she saw me, her face lit up.

Mom died years ago. I recently returned to my hometown on a business trip. The downtown had declined, and many of the stores were abandoned. The Newberry's building was now an antique mall. I hadn't set foot in it for more

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.)

We publish only nonfiction in Readers Write. Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Good Friends	October 1	March 2007
Praying	November 1	April 2007
Too Close For Comfort	December 1	May 2007
The Bedroom	January 1	June 2007
Guns	February 1	July 2007
Change Of Heart	March 1	August 2007

than thirty years. As I started down the stairs to the basement, I felt an impossible hope that Mom would be there, waiting. I wanted nothing more than to stand on the landing and see her loving face looking up at me.

*Margaret Mitchell
Cottonwood, Arizona*

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN SIX MONTHS I am back at work. I haven't been to work since Leo died. Leo was our baby boy.

It is strange to be here. Everyone is being oddly kind, as if they don't quite know what to do with me. When my office mate asks me how I am, I'm not sure what to say. I managed to get out of bed today, dress myself, and get to work. My husband and I have continued to go to the grocery store and feed ourselves. I haven't moved back to my hometown. I haven't killed myself.

"I'm doing OK," I say.

Name Withheld

I WAS SIXTEEN WHEN I COMPLETED my confirmation into the Presbyterian Church and was asked to make a financial pledge. Since I didn't have any money, I pledged my time.

I was given the job of duplicating audiocassette tapes of Sunday sermons for members who were unable to attend church. Then I was asked to deliver one to Mrs. B., who was blind and lived alone. My teenage mind quickly rehearsed the scenario: drive to shut-in's house, put tape in mailbox, and leave.

But she did not have a mailbox. I was forced to knock, and Mrs. B. invited me in and offered me a Coke in a small glass bottle. Her apartment was cluttered but clean and smelled of burnt toast and baby powder. I settled into a chair and listened to her story about being "turned out" at the age of eight to work in a coal mine in Colorado. She told me she'd been born prematurely and had spent her first two months of life in a shoe box.

I came back week after week to drop off the tapes, and our visits became longer. I learned Mrs. B. had once been an artist. Her oil paintings of desert scenes were stacked along a wall.

At the beginning of summer, the church took a break from sermons, and

my visits with Mrs. B. ended. As I left her that last day, we embraced.

"I hope you have a nice life," she whispered.

"Oh, Mrs. B., I'll come back!" I promised.

But Mrs. B. knew what teens were like. That September I signed up to fold the weekly bulletins for Sunday worship. I never saw her again.

*Leslie Levenson
Boxford, Massachusetts*

MY DAUGHTER PAULA COMES INTO my bedroom to tell me she has fed the cat and the bird and is about to leave for school. I ask her to get a couple of cans of tomatoes down from the shelf before she goes. I want to make spaghetti today.

"Sure," she says.

Paraplegia is hard for an eight-year-old to understand. One day a man came to the door and asked to speak to her mother. Paula told him I couldn't come to the door because I was a "paramedic."

Now I hear her rinsing her cereal bowl, then brushing her teeth in the bathroom. "Bye, Mom," she calls.

It has been six months since the accident. The cast digs deep into my groin and legs, but it allows me to be up in my wheelchair. Some nights, if I lie still, I can sleep without it on.

I'm excited about making spaghetti. We've been having a lot of soup and sandwiches and TV dinners that Paula prepares as I yell instructions down the hall. We usually eat together on my bed watching TV.

I put on my cast, lift myself into the wheelchair, and roll into the kitchen. No cans of tomatoes on the table or the counter. I check the pantry, and there they are, high on a shelf. I use the broom to knock the cans onto the floor, where I can get them.

Sitting sideways to the stove, I manage to brown the meat and onions, and I am stirring spaghetti sauce when Paula bursts through the door yelling her apologies for having forgotten to get the cans down. When she sees me cooking, her eyes widen, and she asks, "Do you walk when I'm not home?"

For the first time since the accident, we sit together at our kitchen table and

eat. I say to myself, *I'm back.*

*Karen L. Perez
Fort Smith, Arkansas*

MY BROTHER COMES HOME FROM prison a different man. He has a new Muslim name. His body, once thin and wiry, is muscular and massive. His son, now four, helps him unwrap the gifts we've bought him over the two and a half years he's been in prison. My brother puts on the T-shirt I gave him. It has an outline of Africa on it with the word *Home* in the middle.

Now he is free. Except for visits with his parole officer. And his ankle bracelet. And the curfew. Except for the three days a week he spends at the rehabilitation center, where he sits with other freed men watching television for five hours at a time. No counseling. No training. No healing.

My brother gets letters from his friends in prison. He keeps pictures of them. He is home, and he is still there.

My brother looks for a job, but without success. He tries to get to know his son, but the boy still clings to our mother. My brother stops working out, or reading, or writing letters. He turns to drugs. He makes bad decisions. He goes back to prison. This time it will be even longer before he comes home.

*Catina Bacote
Brooklyn, New York*

I WAS LIVING IN THE SOUTH OF France, working as an au pair. The couple were difficult employers, but I was determined to experience France and speak French fluently by the time I left.

I missed my boyfriend in the States. We wrote each other, called every week, and planned to live together when I returned. One night I dreamed that he'd fallen in love with someone else. I called him the next day. My dream turned out to have been prophetic. We broke up, and I decided it was time to go home.

I took a taxi to the airport in Nice. The driver had kind eyes and white hair. As he drove, we began to talk. The French just flowed out of me, easily and beautifully. He said, "Surely you must have a love where you are from," and I told him the sad story of my breakup. "This story

is not over," he said. "Let me tell you my story."

When he was young, he fell madly in love with a girl who lived far away, in Lille. They saw each other as much as they could, and missed each other during the long stretches when they were apart. Then, to his surprise, he developed feelings for a woman with whom he worked. It caused him great pain, but he broke up with the girl from Lille. His relationship with the other woman didn't last. Years later he saw the girl from Lille and regretted terribly what he had done.

"Please don't misunderstand me," he said. "I have married; I love my wife very much. But I wonder sometimes what would have happened if I had stayed with the girl from Lille. Your story is not over."

At the airport I told him my name and asked his. "You must promise not to laugh," he said. "It's Casanova."

*Stephanie Bouffard
Portland, Maine*

MY BEAUTIFUL, BROWN-EYED daughter was gone for three years, even though she slept in the bedroom next to mine the entire time. I could measure the distance between us by the cuts on her arms, shoulders, and legs. She sliced herself with blades — to release the pain, she says. I could not stop her. She could not stop herself.

I felt terrified and angry at my inability to protect my daughter. I made rules to keep her near me: no sleepovers, no late nights out, no time with friends. When that didn't work, I tried giving her the freedom to stay out late and spend unlimited time with her boyfriend. Desperate to make her happy, I spent money I didn't have buying her everything she wanted. But the problems continued. My smart, kind, beautiful daughter was killing herself.

Finally she asked to go away to seek help from strangers. I was shattered, but we both knew that it was her last hope.

The doctors helped her. She now has scars, but no fresh cuts. As each day passes, I hear more laughter in her voice. My daughter is coming back.

Name Withheld

WHEN I WAS SIX, MY FATHER AND I spent a weekend at his parents' farm. He was trying to escape the tension and loneliness at home, as my mother turned more and more of her attention to her college courses. On Sunday we returned to a quiet apartment. When I saw the large area rug in the living room was missing, I said, "She's gone, isn't she, Daddy?"

My parents divorced, and each took one child. I went with Dad. My sister, who was two, went with Mom. After that Mom seemed happier. Our new life was good, until she took my sister with her to Mexico for a semester-long art class and decided to stay.

Around that time I came home from school to find Dad on the bathroom floor, surrounded by vomited blood. They didn't expect him to survive the bleeding ulcer, but he did. We moved to the farm, and Grandma and Grandpa nursed our broken hearts. In June I flew to Mexico City to visit Mom and my sister. A month later, my sister flew back home with me to visit the farm. When her month was up, Dad just didn't take her to the airport.

We lived carefree for a while. My sister rode the school bus with me and made new friends. Then one night at supper, Mom walked into the house, picked up my sister from her chair at the kitchen table, and drove away. It would be four years before we saw each other again.

Mom says she still feels guilty for what she put me through, remembering how I held her leg, sobbing and begging her not to take my sister, and how hard it was for her to pry me off and walk away.

Name Withheld

I WAS BORN LOVING HORSES AND started riding at a friend's farm when I was five, on a large white horse named Pinky. Being on horseback felt natural to me. I took riding lessons on and off as a girl, and as an adult I leased a horse for a short while. Then I had a child and didn't have the time or the money to ride anymore.

But recently I started riding a friend's horse. Some people at the stable where my friend boards her horse encouraged me to spend time with another horse they housed, who had been neglected for years. The little mare's owner never

came to see her. She was a beautiful dun with zebra-like stripes on her legs, but her mane was a terrible snarl, and her eyes were dull. I reached through the fence to pet her and give her a carrot.

After working up the courage, I called the horse's owner and explained to him that I wanted to exercise his horse for him. I wouldn't expect to be paid; I'd do it just because I love horses so much. He consented. I was ecstatic. I bought grooming brushes, a hoof pick, and a small mane comb, and I borrowed a halter and lead rope. I worked for two hours to untangle her mane, then led her out to rejoin the world.

I've discovered she loves being scratched along the top of her neck. When I scratch there, she gently closes her eyes, and I wonder what she's thinking. Every weekend I take her out and feed her carrots and apples. Nothing can keep us apart. One weekend this past winter, she was the only horse who had a visitor.

Name Withheld

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