



ERIN CORBAL

Readers Write

NOTHING TO LOSE

I USED DRUGS VIRTUALLY EVERY DAY of my life: cigarettes and booze by ten, pot by thirteen, then psychedelics, cocaine, and pain pills. When my pill sources dried up, I switched over to heroin. In my final year of using, I consumed a fifth of cheap booze, a gram of heroin, and eighty-seven milligrams of methadone a day.

I was thirty-nine when I finally de-

ecided I needed some help. Weighing 130 pounds and not having bathed in a week, I stumbled into a drug-treatment referral service. I expected to be placed in a nice detox center with clean sheets and plenty of medication, but I landed in an emergency room, where doctors offered to put me in what they called a “social-model” detox. I asked if I’d get any medications.

They said I’d receive “support.” I wanted to know if that was the new green pill I’d heard about.

I told them I’d go to the social-model detox, though I had no intention of doing so. My real plan was to rob a liquor store as soon as I left. But while I was signing my release papers, they confiscated my car keys and paid for a cab to take

me to detox.

I went through withdrawal in a dingy rooming house that had been converted into a long-term recovery center. By the third night I was sweating, shaking, vomiting, and cramping. My roommate was a recent graduate of the center who had relapsed. He coughed and hacked and cried over and over, "I just wanted to try it one more time." *Why does he have to be in here with me?* I thought. *Why?*

And then a quiet voice in my head asked, *So, what about it, Jimmy? You want to try it one more time?*

And I knew: I did not want to try it one more time. I saw that I'd needed all the pain I had visited upon myself to lead me to this point. And I saw there was a loving order to the universe that had delivered me to this broken state. With nothing to lose but my pain, I surrendered and let go. I haven't used since. That was fourteen years ago.

*Jimmy Cioe
Albuquerque, New Mexico*

I WAS BORN BIOLOGICALLY FEMALE, but never felt comfortable in my body. As a child I was constantly mistaken for a boy and wished I could become one. At nineteen I came out as a lesbian, yet still I felt a nagging discomfort with my gender. People often mistook me for a man, to the extent that I was once threatened with arrest for using a women's restroom.

When I was twenty-seven I saw a film about a female-to-male transsexual. He said sometimes you have to be willing to give up everything you have to get the one thing you have always wanted. I thought about this and began to consider transitioning from a female identity to a male one. The transition would involve hormone treatments that would significantly alter my appearance. When I talked with my girlfriend about it, she was furious. "I finally fall in love with a woman," she cried, "and now you tell me you want to be a man?" Not willing to sacrifice the relationship, I told her I wouldn't go through with it.

After we broke up, my desire to transition returned. My therapist didn't know how to handle the issue and referred me to a second therapist, who said I must have a misogynous streak. Friends reacted ner-

vously and told me I'd never find a partner. My parents were scandalized when a male acquaintance transitioned to female. My dad asked me, "You're not going to do that, are you?" I assured him I was not.

Now, many years later, I find that the pull hasn't waned. I've met others who have transitioned and are happy and complete in their male bodies. Many have partners and successful careers. Some have experienced hardship and lost contact with family members and friends, but none regrets his decision.

At almost forty years of age, I have finally made the decision to start testosterone injections. I worry that I might lose my job and my family and friends. I struggle with feelings of embarrassment and shame. Yet I'm finally willing to risk everything for the truth.

J.G.

St. Paul, Minnesota

EARLY ONE EVENING IN 1972 I BOR-rowed my parents' Ford Fairlane to drive my best friend to the "big city" — Indian-

apolis, Indiana — to celebrate her eighteenth birthday. While cruising downtown looking for entertainment, I turned onto a busy thoroughfare, and a speeding sedan slammed into the passenger side of the car. Thankfully my friend and I suffered only bruises, but the car was totaled. We phoned my parents, who were relieved we were all right and told us to take the bus home.

By the time my friend and I had filed an accident report, it was midnight, and the cavernous Greyhound station was all but deserted. We sat down to wait for our 4:15 A.M. bus. Two young men with long, flowing hair, each carrying an army-surplus duffel bag, approached us. They were hippies, strange and beautiful, hitchhiking from New York City to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, and they asked if we knew where they could "crash" for the night. We explained that we were not from Indianapolis, and told them the story of how we'd already crashed once that evening. They volunteered to keep us company until our bus arrived.

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

Guns	February 1	July 2007
Change Of Heart	March 1	August 2007
Rivals	April 1	September 2007
Telling The Truth	May 1	October 2007
Airports	June 1	November 2007
Getting Ready	July 1	December 2007

My friend and I found them fascinating, so unlike the strait-laced Midwestern farm boys in our brutally dull and backward hometown. After a few hours of conversation about their travels and adventures, the hippie boys asked if we would like to go to New Orleans with them. We said yes.

I could hardly believe what we'd just agreed to. I thought about our high school and its rigid rules for behavior and dress. I thought about my paranoid-schizophrenic father and his years of unpredictable violence, followed by even more years of drug-induced stupor. I thought about how I'd considered suicide at sixteen because I'd felt like an alien in my family, my community, my own skin.

By chance I spotted a boy I knew waiting in line to purchase a bus ticket to our town, and I asked him to deliver a copy of the accident report to my parents. Eyeing the two strangers by my side, he hesitantly agreed. *That's it*, I thought. *That's the last of my responsibilities*. The four of us then marched to the freeway on-ramp and stuck out our thumbs.

*Kathleen C.
Elmira, Oregon*

I GOT PREGNANT THE FIRST TIME I had sex. I was nineteen and in college; Jeffrey was twenty and leaving soon for Vietnam. Under pressure from my parents, I went to live in a home for unwed mothers and gave my daughter away, believing it was best for her. I dealt with my heartbreak by imagining we would meet and become friends one day, after she turned eighteen.

She was thirty and had a daughter of her own when she finally agreed to exchange letters with me. She made it clear, however, that she did not want to meet. My heart broke all over again, but I thought that if I kept things light in my letters and showed interest in her life, perhaps she'd change her mind. I wrote about her birth and sent family photos to help her figure out where she got her looks. She wrote about her busy life as a new mother and a doctor.

After a while I saw that I would not win her over this way, and I decided she deserved to know who I really am. I wrote of my unconventional life, my activism,

and my adventurous spirit. I told her that I fast and dance for hours to bring on visions, that I believe her birth was not a mistake but rather a deep karmic agreement made by both of us.

I have not heard from her since.

*Anne Jackson
Morgantown, Pennsylvania*

WHEN DOCTORS TOLD MY PARENTS TO quit drinking or die, my mother heeded the warning, but my father continued to drink and to smoke three packs of cigarettes a day for the next ten years. By the time he finally stopped drinking, the damage was done. He lived in a wheelchair and was dependent on others for everything from a cup of coffee to a bath.

My mother took care of him until she slipped and fell, breaking her back and knee. She was hospitalized, leaving my father home alone. I flew to California and assumed the role of his caregiver. I couldn't stay forever, though, and I urged my father to move from their second-floor apartment to the nursing home where my mother now lived. He refused, insisting he'd take care of Mama when she returned.

If he was able to take care of her, I asked, why was I doing everything for him now?

"Because you're here!" he bellowed.

"Fine!" I yelled. "Take care of yourself, then." As I left, I thought, *Arrogant bastard*. We were both trying to adjust to the role reversal.

At the nursing home I told my mother I'd been unable to convince Dad to leave the apartment.

"I've been taking care of him for sixty-four years," she said. "He's never done anything for himself. He needs to come here now." She called him from her hospital bed and in a soft voice said, "I need you to do this one thing for me. I can't get well if I'm worried about you being home alone." Her face remained cool and self-assured while she listened to his protests. I'd never seen her stand up to him before. "Rita can't stay here and take care of you forever," she said. "I know. I love you too." She clicked the phone off. "He was crying," she told me.

Two days later he moved into the facility with Mom. I sat with him on the patio while he drooled and chain-smoked. He tried to put up a good front, and so did I.

The day I was to return home, I found Dad fighting with his nurse; they'd confiscated his cigarettes and wouldn't let him go outside at will to smoke.

I wrote the nursing home a note: "I understand that you have rules and safety precautions, but in the best interest of my father, I am asking that you let him smoke. He's eighty-six. He's in a wheelchair. He can't read or write anymore. He can't drink or even go out for a walk. At \$160 per day, surely someone can help him out to the patio a few times each day for a smoke. It's his only pleasure. He's got nothing else to lose."

*Rita H.
Tucson, Arizona*

GROWING UP IN A LITTLE LOUISIANA town during the pre-civil-rights days of "separate but equal," I wasn't allowed to enter the library or sit on the first floor of the only movie theater. I graduated from high school on a Friday, and on Saturday I left the state. My mother stood in the doorway of our shack with tears in her eyes. I smiled, trying to cheer her up and to hide my pain. My father escorted me to the bus station, and I took the bus to New Orleans. There I would get on a train to the East Coast. A relative had given me enough money for my train ticket. Other than that, I was penniless. At least I had nothing to lose.

I went on to graduate from college and receive a master's degree, and I return to my hometown often. It hasn't changed much since the days of Jim Crow. Blacks attend the old (formerly all-white) public school. Caucasians have their private academy down the road. The main employer in town is a correctional facility. Many blacks are on welfare. Most Caucasians have left town to build their own enclave on the lake.

When I see news coverage of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the devastation in New Orleans, I know that many of the folks who drowned came from the little towns scattered across Louisiana. They left home penniless and landed in New Orleans. But no relative had given them money for a train ticket.

*Rebecca P. Mixon
Lansing, Michigan
(end of excerpt)*