



WILLIAM CARTER

Readers Write

HELP

BACK THEN I SPENT MY DAYS WASH-ing greasy pots and pans in a restaurant kitchen and my nights drinking myself to sleep. Each morning I'd stagger to work hung over to find burnt, crusty pans stacked to the ceiling. Head throbbing, I'd vow never to take another drink, but by noon I'd feel well enough to have a beer; by seven I'd be returning from the liquor store with three six-packs and a pint of Jack Daniels.

Then Randy, a four-hundred-pound, grinning hulk of a man, was hired. He'd come from an extended stay at the local rehab and made no secret of it, which irked me. I poked fun at him and his Alcoholics Anonymous "cult," with its childish belief in God, but he never took offense and was always kind. I figured he wanted to sleep with me.

Then he started soaking my pots and pans before I got to work, so that they'd be easier for me to clean. He even seemed happy to do it and never asked for anything in return. Now I felt sure this Jesus freak was messing with my head.

I kept on drinking, and Randy kept on soaking my pans. And we started talking: about life, and about drinking. I decided

to prove to him that I could quit without anyone's help.

After a month of abstinence, I celebrated with a drink, and then another, and another. At the end of the night I blacked out behind the wheel and almost killed myself. I'd taken my best shot at quitting and failed. I couldn't do it on my own. So I knocked on Randy's door and asked if he'd take me to an AA meeting. It was both the hardest and the easiest thing I've ever done.

A.Z.

Jersey City, New Jersey

IN THE SUMMER OF 1974, WHEN I WAS twenty-six, I moved from Colorado to Florida to live with my parents. I was divorced and broke, with a five-year-old son. My judgmental parents made my life miserable and frequently reminded me that they were sacrificing their summer to help us. Mother baby-sat while I worked. She washed my son's mouth out with soap daily and enumerated his many crimes for me as soon as I got home.

I had originally planned to stay for a year, but after the first week I made a new plan: I would return to Colorado as

soon as I could save enough money for the trip.

One night someone threw a brick through the rear window of my Honda, filling the back seat with broken glass. My insurance company sent me to a Honda dealership fifty miles away to have it replaced. There I talked to a salesman named Frankie: graying hair, stocky build, silk shirt with the top button undone to reveal a thick gold chain. I explained about my window, and how I needed to get it fixed before I could go home to Colorado. Frankie motioned for me to follow him.

At the parts department, the clerk told Frankie that it took three months to get a rear window from the factory in Japan.

"I want one tomorrow," Frankie said.

Two days later I dropped off my car to have the new window installed, and Frankie gave me a ride to work in his big white Cadillac with the license plate that read, FRANKIE. He tapped the leather steering wheel with his diamond rings and talked fast. I was nervous about his intentions until he told me his mother had recently come to live with him. I

told him about my divorce, my parents' sacrifice, and my son getting his mouth washed out with soap. Frankie shook his head.

That afternoon my car was ready as promised, except for a rubber seal the factory still needed to send. I was set to leave for Colorado in two weeks.

When I returned to the dealership for the seal, Frankie pointed to my front bumper. "What's this?" he asked. I told him I'd rear-ended a car at a stop sign. He popped open the hood and showed me that the fan had hit the radiator, damaging it. Driving from Miami to Colorado would cause the radiator to blow. I needed a new one.

The long, hot summer with my parents caught up with me, and I burst into tears. "I can't afford a new radiator!" I cried.

"No," he said, "but I can." He put his car key in my hand. "See you tomorrow afternoon."

As I got into his Cadillac, he yelled, "Don't hit anything!"

"What does he want in return?" my parents asked at dinner that night. "Nobody helps someone out like that unless they want something."

The next day, when I got to the dealership, my car wasn't quite ready: Frankie was having them give it a complete tune-up. While we waited, he took me across the street for coffee. *Here it comes*, I thought. He reached across the table and held my hand. My chest tightened.

"I got a girl like you," Frankie said. "Ran away right after her mother and I divorced ten years ago. I hired detectives, drove all over the country looking for her. I like to think somebody's watching out for her."

On the way back to my car, Frankie slipped me a hundred-dollar bill and his business card. "You need help, you call me." As I got behind the wheel, he asked, "You didn't hit anything with my Caddy, did you?" I shook my head. He smiled and squeezed my shoulder. "Good girl."

Mary Zelinka
Albany, Oregon

I WAS NINE YEARS OLD WHEN MY parents divorced and my father moved to another country with a much younger woman. My mother, just turning forty

and clutching at her rapidly diminishing self-esteem, was left to bring up four children alone.

My mother had never known her own father and had been abandoned by her mother at the age of six. Now she set out to "find herself" (this was the seventies), returning to school, seeing a therapist, and taking a job outside the home. She also confirmed her attractiveness by attending singles dances. Tall and willowy, she attracted many men, but brought home only those who were her intellectual inferior. A procession of losers, roughnecks, and philandering loudmouths came into our lives. Most were loathsome and should never have been invited into a house with three young girls in it.

To escape, I began to wander the neighborhood. I was drawn to a brick farmhouse — an anomaly in our suburb — with a fenced-in pen where a cocker spaniel nursed five golden puppies: eyes barely open, bellies round with mother's milk. Their bottoms wiggled when I ap-

proached.

The house and dogs belonged to Mr. Grant, who was nearly ninety. I'd stop by on my way home from school to see the pups, thrilled by their growing attachment to me, and often stay past dark, talking with Mr. Grant. He'd lie on the sofa, and I'd listen to stories of his childhood in Scotland and look at photos of his ancestral home, a dilapidated stone castle. I enjoyed his attention and looked forward to his greeting each day: "Ah, you're here. I'd thought you'd run off and gotten married."

One afternoon, while running shoeless in Mr. Grant's yard, I stepped on a nail protruding from a piece of wood. Incredulously, I examined the wood dangling from my foot, then limped into the house. Seeing my ashen face, Mr. Grant rose from the sofa and, with one confident motion, pulled the nail out.

He gently bound my foot in a towel and, once the bleeding had been staunched, applied peroxide and wrapped a bandage

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
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
Fame And Fortune	August 1	January 2008

expertly around the wound.

That small, simple gesture had a lasting impact. It taught me what it felt like to have a man be kind and nurturing. I wish my mother could have learned the same lesson when she was a girl.

*Wendy R.
Portland, Oregon*

I BECAME A NURSE BECAUSE I WANTED to help people. My first job was in a busy rural emergency room. Methamphetamine abuse, unemployment, and poverty were rampant in the area, and I was overwhelmed during my twelve-hour shifts. Some patients were critically ill or injured, but most had come there because they had no other access to medical care. They'd often wait more than four hours to be seen, their anger building. I became the target of their rage.

One night a mother brought in her five-year-old son; he'd gotten sand in his eyes and needed to have them irrigated. We had to sedate him for the procedure, so I asked one of my co-workers to hold him still while I gave him a shot of Demerol. The co-worker was African American, and the boy started shouting, "You motherfucking niggers, I hate you! Fuck you all!" His mother stared at us complacently, not saying a word.

Throughout the procedure we were bombarded with insults and obscenities no five-year-old should know. I hid my tears, embarrassed because someone might think a small boy calling us names had gotten to me.

Over time my sadness turned into anger. I responded to cruel words with cruel words of my own. I was rough when physically restraining those who were high or mentally ill. I made tasteless jokes while resuscitating patients. I didn't allow families to come back to the patient area and be with their loved ones. My immaturity and self-importance had eclipsed my compassion and desire to help.

After working there for five years, I moved to a different hospital, where I now have fewer patients. I look back with regret, and hope that if I'm ever put in that situation again, I will handle it differently.

*J.P.
Rocklin, California*

THE DAY AFTER MY HIGH-SCHOOL graduation in 1963, I left an abusive foster home and ended up in Long Beach, California, far from the small town where I'd spent my childhood. A Catholic-run thrift store hired me to gather hangers for a dollar an hour. I desperately needed a better-paying job, so I hit the pavement wearing my one good outfit and pink high heels. I took tests and filled out endless applications, but no one would take the risk of hiring a skinny teenager with no work experience.

Then I answered an ad in the paper for a file-clerk position. The interviewer, Miss Grannis, gave me hope. She didn't say I was too young or too inexperienced. Instead she said, "Call me in a couple of days."

I called the next day, and the next, and the next, begging for the job until I wore her down. "Be here at one o'clock today, and don't be late," she finally said. I ran from the thrift store to my rented room to change clothes. I had seventy-five cents to my name, enough for three bus rides.

My adrenaline pumped as I hurried to the bus stop. I waited while several buses passed, but the Number 10 did not arrive. At 12:30 my anxiety turned to panic, and I raised my hand to hail a cab, just as I'd seen people do in the movies. I'd never been in a taxi before. When one stopped, I jumped in. "Where to?" the driver asked. I gave him the address and said, "Take me as close as you can for fifty cents," thinking I'd keep one quarter for the bus ride home.

"You can't go anywhere for fifty cents," he said, staring at me in the rearview mirror.

Near tears, I blurted out my story about the job, how badly I needed it, and how I had to be there by one o'clock, or I wouldn't get it. I offered him the whole seventy-five cents.

"Keep your money," he said, speeding away from the curb. I arrived in time to get my first real job, with my coins still in my sweaty hand. The cabby wished me luck and waved as I walked to the door.

I worked hard filing invoices and answering the phones. Miss Grannis taught me a lot about manners and grammar and how to dress properly, things you often

don't learn in foster homes. It's too late to thank both the taxi driver and Miss Grannis for their help, but I'll never forget either of them. They were the first of many people willing to help a scared kid become what I am now: a retired psychotherapist who has tried to help as many people as possible reach their potential, no matter what the odds.

Name Withheld

THE FIRST TIME WILLY CALLED, HE'D been kicked out of his apartment for disturbing the neighbors and not paying the rent. I'd known Willy only a month, but he was a likable guy: balding, forty-something, and suffering from bipolar disorder and the early stages of multiple sclerosis. I drove him around to food banks and shelters and the community job office. From the way the social workers talked, I suspected Willy had been in similar jams before.

Five days later Willy called again. He'd been staying with his mother at a community for seniors only, sneaking in and out, but he'd gotten caught, and now she was making him leave. I stored his belongings at my apartment, then drove him to a shelter, half regretting my decision to help him. I didn't need anyone else's problems to worry about, and I was beginning to think that I'd adopted Willy's.

The next day he called to tell me he'd been kicked out of the shelter because of a dispute with another resident. It couldn't all be bad luck, I thought.

Willy got a job at a junkyard, where they let him live in the storage shed. About that time, my car died. Willy said he could fix it, so I had it towed to the junkyard. He seemed positive and energetic, and said he'd been taking his medication. I brought him some food and an aloe vera plant for the spider bites he got sleeping in the shed. He said he'd have my car running in two weeks.

Two months later my car still wasn't fixed. Willy talked as if it was only a few hours away from completion, but he didn't have time to work on it.

When he finally returned the car to me, it ran rough. I gave it away and got another. I was done with Willy. Giving away my car was my symbolic release from him and his problems.

Three days later Willy called. He'd been fired and wanted to know if I had some extra food I could spare.

I'd been getting groceries from the food bank myself, because I was still paying off my new used car. But I glanced around at my relatively clean apartment and thought of the last time I'd seen Willy. He hadn't bathed in weeks and looked as if he were living in a hole. I started filling a bag with groceries for him.

*David Wood
St. Petersburg, Florida*

AS A CHILD, I ALWAYS WANTED TO put coins in the cups or hands of the beggars we passed on the street. "You can't give money to every homeless person," my mother said.

At thirteen I took a trip to India, where people were literally dying in the streets and homeless children swarmed around us.

In high school I joined community-service organizations and helped with soup kitchens, clothing drives, and job-training programs. But despite our efforts, the people we helped remained on the streets.

I became politically active, believing that it was the social structure that kept people down, regardless of the training or clothes they were given. But the activists I looked to for guidance seemed as lost as I was.

In college I set my sights on a career in healthcare. No other area of service seemed as black-and-white as this: if someone is hurt, you heal them. Then, as a premed student, I volunteered to give anonymous HIV tests at a needle exchange. I found that most medical advice is ignored.

I thought back on my trip to India and decided to go where people needed help the most: underdeveloped countries. I went to Nicaragua and worked as a nurse's assistant in a rural clinic. I had little to do, because few people wanted to travel all day to the clinic on the off chance the doctor would be there. (She didn't keep regular hours.)

I saw other ways in which resources were poorly used. For example, a philanthropist gave money to build an auditorium for a school that had no functioning latrines. To learn how to organize people

and use skills and materials efficiently, I decided to get my master's degree in public health.

I now have my master's but, like many of my peers, cannot find a job in my field. I have given up hope of affecting change on a large scale. Still, I often ask myself how I can attack the causes of human suffering at the root, or at least help alleviate one person's pain.

The other day I was pondering my dilemma when I walked past a homeless man in a wheelchair.

"Hey, pretty lady," he said, "you got a dollar? I just want something to eat."

"Sorry," I replied.

Two blocks later I realized I'd missed my chance.

*Veronica Westerfield
San Francisco, California*

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, VERITA MOVED in next door to me. At eighty, she was beginning a new life in a new place. I was a newly divorced single mother. Verita had always lived life on her own terms, and I was just learning how.

Verita had come to my town to be near her only remaining sister. When the sister died shortly after Verita's arrival, I became her surrogate family. We were both decorative painters and interior designers, and we talked endlessly over coffee and wine about travel, work, and current events.

I remarried, with Verita's blessing. (She said if I didn't marry him, she would.) As the years passed and her health failed, I became more involved in her life, driving her places and helping with chores. Verita had always been self-sufficient and had trouble asking for help. I tried to anticipate her needs so she wouldn't have to ask. When her savings ran out, my husband and I purchased her home and let her stay there rent-free. I even took care of her bills. (She never knew that her heart medications cost more each month than she received in Social Security.)

A fall put Verita in the hospital, and she never regained enough strength to live on her own again. I arranged for a nursing home, breaking my promise never to put her in "one of those places."

After two weeks in the home, Verita asked me what would happen if she

stopped taking her medications. I knew, but let the visiting hospice nurse explain it to her: essentially she would "drown" from fluid in her lungs. Verita made the decision to stop taking her pills that day.

The nurses were required by law to offer medications at the prescribed time — in this case, every three hours — and each time, they had to state the consequences of refusing the meds. Verita was so distressed by this that she grabbed me and said, "You've got to help me." It was the first time she'd ever directly asked for my help. I did what I could to get the nurses to make an exception, but it was no use.

Verita died three days later, on July 4, Independence Day.

*Cristie Coffman
Hobbs, New Mexico*

(end of excerpt)