



GLENN CALLAHAN

Readers Write

GOOD FRIENDS

WHEN WE WERE YOUNG PARENTS, my husband and I moved in next door to Ma Baker. A widow in her midseventies, Ma had raised thirteen children and still scrubbed her laundry on a washboard, pieced together quilts on a treadle sewing machine, and grew her own food.

Eager to start a garden, I called on Ma for expert advice. Following her instructions, I tilled an area to match the size of her large plot, and we spent many hours planting and cultivating our adjoining gardens. Ma's gardening methods were not exactly scientific. "You can get more beans from a crooked row than a straight one," she'd say. She worked in the early morning to avoid the heat and often knocked on my door, calling me out to dig potatoes or fight "the vine": the dreaded creeping Charlie that constantly threatened the fruit of our hard work.

At harvest time I realized I'd planted more than I could ever eat. I was overwhelmed by this bounty. Again, Ma came to the rescue, teaching me to can and "put up" the abundant produce. When I didn't think I could handle the chore, she came over and said, "We'll just work side by side."

*Celeste Poole
Carlock, Illinois*

WE WERE A TIGHT BUNCH: FOURTEEN friends, seven couples in our thirties who lived life with abandon while raising families and holding down jobs. We gathered frequently for dinner parties, barbecues, ski trips, jaunts to the beach. Late at night we'd dance in someone's living room, or take bong hits in the basement, playing music and laughing until the tears fell.

Our relationships were all long past

the honeymoon phase. Wives complained about their spouses; husbands were looking for more action in the bedroom. But everyone seemed basically happy — everyone except me. My relationship had lost its fire, and I wanted to feel that flame again.

I found it with two of the other women's husbands. We weren't ending our marriages, we told ourselves, just making our hearts beat faster. Besides, their wives would never find out.

Eventually the truth did come out, and more disclosures followed. (I wasn't the only one who'd been unfaithful.) My relationship with my partner ended, and friendships were severed. I struggled to repair what I could, but my betrayal had been too great.

That group of friends is no more. They were some of the most important rela-

tionships in my life, and I helped destroy them.

Name Withheld

I'D NEVER BEEN FRIENDS WITH A soldier. In college, I'd walked by the ROTC building and felt an enormous divide between myself and anyone who would pass through those doors.

Now I was married and owned a home, and one day Tracy had stopped on the sidewalk to compliment me on my garden. A forty-year-old major in the army reserves, she was my neighbor, and a mom, like me. We met frequently for coffee. We grieved together when George W. Bush was elected to a second term. We shared mulled cider after taking the kids caroling at Christmas. When I naively asked why she'd joined the army, Tracy said, "I liked the idea of leadership."

The day came when Tracy told me she'd been called up for duty in Iraq. How do you send a friend off to fight a war neither of you supports? I decided to host a going-away party. I hung banners the children had painted. A friend brought red-white-and-blue decorations, which I put up with ambivalence. I cut lengths of yellow ribbon for guests to take home and tie around a tree. The cake had candles (the children insisted), and we sang "For She's a Jolly Good Fellow" and toasted our brave friend.

Tracy gave a brief speech. Though the army had prepared her to leave, she said, no one prepares the loved ones to be left behind. She urged all of us who had an opinion about this war to make our voices heard.

One neighbor interrupted: "On the other hand, many of us are proud of what you're doing."

An excruciating pause followed. Then Tracy cleared her throat and went on with her farewell.

My first e-mail from Tracy in Iraq was a Q and A chain letter: last movie you saw, first car, favorite this and that. Then I came to: "What are you most afraid of?"

"Loss of limb or mortal injury in combat," Tracy had typed.

We continue to correspond. I send news of neighborhood-association elections. She jokes that her vote should count more now that she totes an M-16. At times

I feel envy: she is focused on matters far more serious than dishes, weeds, children's homework, and an unfulfilling part-time job. After she survives this, her career is likely to advance. Deployment has also been a boon to her fitness: she's lost thirty pounds. But when explosions wake her from her military bunk, I know she'd gladly be overweight and under the covers of her bed at home, grateful for another day of ordinary tasks in suburbia.

I may have missed knowing a lot of Tracys when I was a college kid shouting, "U.S. out of Latin America!" But now, later in life, she has helped me understand how a soldier can be my friend.

*Sonia Koetting
Fort Collins, Colorado*

I CAME FROM A STRICT BAPTIST HOME; Carol had grown up in a ramshackle hovel out in the country. At fifteen she was married and had a daughter. She and her husband lived in a new trailer — their "mobile mansion," we called it. I thought

she was the luckiest gal in town, not having to answer to anyone, no strict parents tracking her every move, no school.

I was dating a friend of Carol's brother, and lately my boyfriend had grown sullen and possessive. He'd throw me against a wall when he got mad at me and sometimes threaten to kill himself. I kept quiet about it until we had a fight at my parents' house that ended with my father ordering my boyfriend off the property. He refused to go, and it took four sheriff's deputies to subdue him and shove him into the back of a patrol car.

A few weeks later my boyfriend and I were back together and watching cartoons when we started to argue. He stormed out. I waited to hear his car race down the drive, but instead I heard a loud *pop*. I ran outside to find him standing on the back porch gasping for air, a bullet hole in his chest. Someone called an ambulance, but he died before he got to the hospital.

Carol prevented me from cracking

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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
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Fame And Fortune	August 1	January 2008
Parties	September 1	February 2008

up. She kept me me busy and would stop by the house and say, "Come on, girl, get your ass up." With her help, the fog of grief lifted.

When I turned sixteen, my parents helped me buy a car. Carol and I rode around in it, listening to Don Henley's "Boys of Summer." On weekends she'd drop her daughter off at her mom's or a neighbor's, and we'd go to the beach and smoke pot.

We worked a stream of crappy jobs that did nothing but interfere with our social lives. I blew our gig as lawn-care workers when I mowed between the customer's house and the air-conditioning unit, severing the electrical connections.

Carol eventually landed a high-pressure sales position in which she thrived. I went into law enforcement at nineteen, became a traffic cop, finished my college degree, and curtailed the drinking. Though we ran in different circles, we stayed in touch. Whenever I heard "Boys of Summer" on the radio, I thought of Carol.

Years later my sixteen-year-old daughter got into an auto accident when she ran a stop sign on her way to school. She was in a coma with a broken neck and wasn't expected to survive.

I don't know how Carol found out about it, but when she burst through the doors of the ICU, I'd never been so thankful to see anyone. "We'll get through this, girl," she said. I believed her.

And we did. After nine months in the hospital and thirty-six surgeries, my daughter came home. She still has difficulties that break my heart. I cry to Carol about how I want things to be back to "normal," but Carol only reminds me that my daughter survived.

Now Carol faces embezzlement charges from an employer and will go on trial soon. Whatever happens, I'll be there for her. I wish I could whisk her away to a time when our biggest concerns were scraping together pizza money and applying suntan oil.

*Becky H.
Holt, Florida*

DURING COLLEGE I SPENT A SEMESTER in London, but a tight budget and a busy class schedule kept me from ex-

ploring. As spring break approached, I made plans to experience the delights of the city, and I knew just whom to call to join me.

Nicole was my best friend back home in the States. She had just purchased a ticket to Ireland for the break, but I asked if she would visit me in London instead. She said she'd change her flight and see me in two weeks.

Ecstatic, I bought tickets to plays and concerts, stocked up on our favorite foods, and prepared my flatmates to meet Nicole: a six-foot-tall, transgender woman with dreadlocks who often wore suspenders, plaid pants, and purple sunglasses. She was in Narcotics Anonymous and had been sober for two years. She was also the funniest person I'd ever met.

The day Nicole arrived, my mother called to tell me my father had ruptured a lung. She asked me to please come home. Nicole helped me pack and buy an airline ticket. I left her in a city of strangers.

My father died a few days later. At his funeral, still jet-lagged and bewildered, I was forcing myself to greet friends and family when I walked Nicole, dressed in an elegant man's suit. Weathering the curious stares of our nosy, small-town neighbors, she brought me water and squeezed my hand as I endured the receiving line.

I asked her how she'd gotten there, if she needed a place to stay, if she'd spent all the money she'd saved for her trip. She told me she couldn't imagine not being there for me. She was staying at the local inn, where she had negotiated a room in exchange for fixing a bathtub. She showed me her hands, stained with grease. I collapsed into her six-foot-tall body and wept.

*Sarah McCarron
Lewes, Delaware*

I'VE KNOWN KEITH FOR NEARLY twenty years. We share a love of art and literature, and once discussed politics, science, and the nature of God. Now a series of strokes has left Keith unable to verbalize his thoughts. He's reduced to a few phrases such as "Please," "Love you," "Thank you," and "Oh, baby." His frustration is plain to see.

At first I was scared of this new Keith.

It was as if the friend I'd known was dead. Eventually I realized that Keith is still himself, and still my friend, despite his limited ability to communicate. To some extent, Keith can carry on a conversation using shrugs, nods, and head shakes. Smiles say a lot.

Several of Keith's old friends have abandoned him; others talk to him only on rare occasions and speak loudly and slowly when they do. They'd be surprised to learn that Keith's cognitive abilities — and hearing — are largely intact.

Although I've gotten past my initial discomfort with my friend's diminished state, I know I'm not completely over it. One side of Keith's body is now withered, his arm and hand drawn into a ball. He could use a massage, I'm sure, but sometimes I can't even bring myself to touch him. Maybe I'm not such a good friend after all.

*W.E.C.
Springfield, Illinois*

MY HUSBAND WAS ALWAYS A RECLUSE. I was responsible for any social life we had. But when the school where we both taught transferred us to Spain, our roles reversed. Suddenly I was the one balking at partying all night and doing everything in big, noisy groups, as was the custom there. My husband began meeting people for coffee in the afternoon and drinks in the evening. He joined a friend to go running and biking, activities he had pursued only solo before.

When his running friend invited us to a masquerade party, my husband spent hours designing a costume. At the party I finally met the friend. I was amused to be introduced to a young man with a penchant for flattery and hair mousse. This was not whom I'd pictured.

As my husband became sociable, he also started to dress up more, as men do in Spain. One night I saw him standing in front of the mirror, pushing up the sleeves of a silk sports coat and running his fingers through his hair, preparing to meet his running buddy at 10 P.M. on a school night. That's when it dawned on me that they were more than just friends.

*Eva M.
Bellevue, Washington*

I NEVER FELT CLOSE TO MY FAMILY and demonized them, which made it easier to leave home. When my father tried to tell me family was important, I told him that my friends were my real family.

Bernie was one of my closest friends. We met in college and took psychedelics and rode motorcycles together, often talking of how free our lives would be after graduation. One day when I was stoned, I crashed my motorcycle, crushing my left leg. The next hour was the longest of my life: I was brought to the hospital in an inflated rubber bag to hold my leg together. Only when my father showed up at the hospital did I feel safe.

During my two-week hospital stay, Bernie visited me only once. He brought me flowers with a hit of LSD in each petal. I didn't see him or any of my other friends for the rest of the summer. The nonstop party went on without me while my parents nursed me back to health.

Today my father is dead. I long ago made peace with him and told him that he and my mother were my real family.

Bernie, who's still my friend, is now a lawyer whose life revolves around banker boxes of insurance-company paperwork. On the phone not long ago, Bernie was voicing his work-related frustration to me when, out of nowhere, he brought up my accident. He asked what had happened, because he couldn't remember.

"Oh, that was a long time ago," I said. "It's not important now."

Recently I visited a cousin I've seen only occasionally over the last thirty-five years. When I arrived, she'd organized a backyard barbecue in my honor. All those family members I'd demonized were there, just as weird as I remembered, but also happy to see me. I was glad to see them too.

*Richard D.
Seattle, Washington*

I GREW UP IN THE BRONX IN THE Amalgamated Houses, the nation's oldest moderate-income housing cooperative, home to multiple generations of union members, labor activists, and socialist Eastern European Jewish refugees. As young girls, my two closest friends and I were deeply concerned about fairness and justice in all our interactions.

We went to great lengths to ensure that our time together was distributed evenly among activities that satisfied each of us. If two of us wanted to skateboard and one wanted to play games, we spent two-thirds of our time skateboarding and one-third at games.

My friends both lived in an apartment building three blocks from my home. We often got together at my house, because it had the most space to play, but I was envious that my friends lived in the same building and could visit each other anytime, even at night in their pajamas. I often felt lonely when they left and wondered if they were having fun without me.

Years later, at my wedding, my two friends offered a toast. Reminiscing about our childhood, they told a story: One afternoon, after leaving my house, they determined it wasn't fair for them to spend extra time together. So they split up and walked home via separate routes. They continued the practice for years, but never mentioned it to me.

I owe the success of every friendship that has followed to the example of this early model.

*Donna Gallers
Great Barrington, Massachusetts*

MY BEST FRIEND AND I MET WHEN we were twelve. We shared everything: secrets, failed diets, dreams about the future, anguish over blind dates. She married first and moved across the country, but we talked several times a week on the phone. When I married, I wore her sister's wedding dress.

Our lives went in different directions. I juggled children, family life, and work while she focused on her career. But she was the first person I called when I was accepted to graduate school and when I decided to remarry. We wept together at the cemetery where we'd both buried our parents.

Then I developed medical problems, and open-heart surgery left me weak, housebound, and afraid of dying. In our conversations, I made frequent references to feeling old. One day my friend snapped, "You spend too much time on depressing thoughts." When I explained that talking about aging helps me han-

dle my fears about it, she said, "I rarely think about these issues, and they are not a topic of conversation amongst my women friends."

I'm still hurt and angry. I want to ask why she dismissed my fears, but I am afraid of another harsh reply. Do my complaints about aging remind her of anxieties she avoids?

How am I to restore our intimacy if I cannot fully reveal myself to her? I wonder if our friendship can survive this, or whether it will die before either of us.

*Jacqueline H.
Oakland, California*

MY FRIEND HAD THREE ABORTIONS when she was young and later in life worried that it would be hard for her to have children. When she got married, she immediately got pregnant. Then, at eleven weeks, she miscarried. This was followed by another pregnancy and another miscarriage. When, on the third try, she made it into the second trimester, we were all happy for her and talked freely about the baby. But she gave birth at twenty-two weeks, and the baby lived only a few minutes.

My friend became afraid to leave her house. She told me her breasts had hardened, as if her body were punishing her for having no child to feed. For the first time I didn't know how to be a good friend to her. I couldn't fathom her sadness or what she might need while in mourning. Sometimes I just sat with her and her husband in their horrible grief.

A few weeks ago my friend told me that she's pregnant again. I want to be happy for her, but I'm scared.

*Sasha P.
San Francisco, California*

(end of excerpt)