



RITA BERNSTEIN

## Readers Write

### TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

**IN THE SUMMER OF 1993, I WAS ONE** of a group of college students who studied abroad in Saratov, Russia. Although two years had passed since the fall of the Soviet Union, life there was still relatively free of Western influence.

Most of the other students and I hailed from Wyoming, where wide-open spaces are abundant and people are in short supply. In Saratov we lived in cramped rooms in crowded apartment buildings. We stood in long lines to wait for the bus and, once onboard, were forced to stand intimately close to our fellow passengers, enveloped in their body odors and heavy perfumes.

The other students had difficulty adjusting to our new environs, but I drank

in the crowds, people, and noise. What I appreciated most was the Russians' near-nonexistent sense of personal space. Whether exchanging pleasantries or discussing matters of great import, they stood toe to toe and eye to eye with one another. Locked in conversations with locals, I could see the tiny pockmarks and pores in their faces, examine their carefully applied makeup, and make an educated guess as to what they'd eaten for lunch. With their humanity — and mine — so exposed, there didn't seem to be any room for artificiality. I felt connected to people in a way I never had at home.

Culture shock came when I returned to America, where we keep even people we know at arm's length. I longed for the

sense of connection I'd felt in Russia. I wanted someone — anyone — to stand toe to toe with me and tell me of his life.

*Susannah R. Conn  
San Diego, California*

**EXHAUSTED FROM A LONG WEEK AT** work, I was trying to transplant some perennials in my flower garden on Saturday, but my two-and-a-half-year-old had other plans. She demanded my full attention and would cry and whine whenever I tried to get her to play by herself or work with me in the garden. With each tug on my arm and complaint in my ear, I felt my jaw tighten. Finally I yelled at her and told her to go play with her daddy in the backyard. Then I took a deep breath and

returned to digging up a day lily that was crowding an iris.

When I heard my husband start the truck, I dropped my shovel and ran to the backyard. I could see the truck backing up and my daughter behind it, retreating into a row of bushes on one side, looking confused. Her expression seemed to ask, *Why was I supposed to come back here?* I couldn't breathe. Then my husband saw her and shut off the engine.

I felt relief and shame. My inability to manage my frustration had nearly cost us our daughter's life. I didn't deserve to be a mother.

Parenting forces you to see who you really are. In that moment, I reminded myself of my own mother, who'd always made me feel as if I were in her way. I'd hated that. Now I had become just like her.

*Name Withheld*

**FOR MOST OF MY ADULT LIFE I HAD** difficulty distinguishing sexual touch from merely affectionate gestures, like hugs and hand-holding. Perhaps I'd received too little physical affection from my parents in childhood. (I cannot recall ever kissing or hugging my mother.) I was a bookish, depressed, and withdrawn teenager, socially insecure and conflicted over touching and being touched. At age twenty-one I married the first woman I'd ever slept with. Even after marriage, I didn't know how to appreciate nonsexual touch as pleasurable in its own right.

In my late thirties I began practicing yoga to get more acquainted with my body. It occurred to me that this might help me freely enjoy the touch of others. When I discovered there was a therapist in my area who combined talk therapy with assisted yoga poses, I mustered my courage and signed up for a series of one-on-one sessions.

The therapist was encouraging and skillful, and my levels of trust and comfort increased. At the sixth session, however, there was trouble. The therapist manipulated my leg in a way that caused sudden sexual arousal. Guilty and embarrassed, I told her what had happened. In subsequent sessions we simply talked about my problems without touching. Finally she referred me to a male colleague.

My new therapist seemed convinced that massage therapy could play a key role in my healing, but I resisted mightily. The very idea of receiving a massage was tangled up with sexual fantasy for me, and I didn't want to embarrass myself again.

Five more years passed before the wisdom of his recommendation hit home. A few days before my forty-eighth birthday, I made an appointment for a full-body massage with a female therapist.

As the massage therapist's hands gently cradled my head, I felt my anxiety subside. Her touch was sensuous, strong, and affirming, yet entirely nonerotic.

I didn't cry during the massage, but I wept profusely later that afternoon, and the next day, whenever I thought of how wondrously different I felt. After four decades, my body had been given back to me.

*W.M.*

*Guilford, Connecticut*

**THE WORST THING ABOUT PRISON** for me is the lack of personal space. I hate contact with other inmates. If someone is standing within a few feet, I will move away — if I can. A friendly arm thrown around my shoulders is quickly thrown off. And I refuse to shake hands. I don't like to think of where that other man's hand might have been — or what it was doing while it was there. Besides, I want both my hands free, just in case.

Even simple questions — “Where are you from?”, “How old are you?”, “Any kids?” — make my gut clench. I am suspicious of men who show an interest in me. At best they're striking up a conversation for the sole purpose of turning it to their favorite topic: themselves. At worst, their questions are a lead-in to a sleazy come-on, the offer of a relationship in which they are the dominator. Most interrogators are looking for a weakness, some personal bit of information that can be used against me. I would no more reach out

**R**EADERS 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
Airports	June 1	November 2007
Getting Ready	July 1	December 2007
Fame And Fortune	July 1*	January 2008
Parties	August 1	February 2008
The Last Time	September 1	March 2008
Stealing	October 1	April 2008

\* This is not a typo. We're revising our deadlines.

to forge a bond of humanity with them than the lord of a castle would lower the drawbridge during a siege. They want to hurt and humiliate me for their own entertainment.

There are a couple of people to whom I talk, to satisfy my need for human contact, but suspicion and alienation define even those relationships. I don't share personal information with them. The only reason I've chosen to speak to them at all is because I fear them less than I do the others. We will never be close. Nobody will ever be close to me. I am safe behind these bars and concrete walls and coils of razor wire. I can't get out of this prison, but at least no one can get in.

*Jeff West  
Tennessee Colony, Texas*

**FOR MY SIX-YEAR-OLD AUTISTIC** grandson, a hug can feel like an assault. A haircut can be torture. Even someone sharing a room with him can be too much. He often says to me, "Get away of my face," even when I'm on the other side of the room. If he leaves, he will point his finger at me and say, "You stay here. Don't follow me." He wears only red shirts turned inside out so that the seams and tags do not irritate his skin. He will sit quietly, wrapped in the frayed baby blanket he calls "friend," and stare out the window for hours.

I know it's the chaos in his mind that makes him avoid people, or any sensory input. I'm grateful for those times when his mind is calm, and he can risk a short dip in the pool of sensation. Then he will muss my hair, wrestle with me, chase me around the house, and hug me tight. When he comes to visit, he jumps from the car, runs across the lawn, and leaps into my arms yelling, "Papaw, you found me!" He is a constant reminder that, in this life, there is nothing so wonderful as to be found.

*Gary King  
Roanoke, Virginia*

**IN SPRING AND SUMMER I HIKE INTO** the vast and barren Chugach Mountains of Alaska, where I can be alone. I meet no people, but among the ridgelines and small valleys I have many encounters with wildlife: ptarmigans, ground squir-

rels, Dahl sheep, bald eagles. Moose greet me on the path to the mountains; ravens squawk from branches; rabbits scatter into bushes.

Today I have just begun to climb my second mountain when a loud snort, like that of a horse, erupts behind me. *How could a rider get up here?* I think. Then I turn to see a grizzly bear galloping at me.

He is faster than I would have thought, his loose black lips wobbling from side to side. I scramble upward but realize that I will not reach the sheltering rocks above me in time. *I will die today*, I think. The idea quite surprises me.

When I glance back, however, I see that the bear has turned. Its huge flanks roll rhythmically as it charges off down into the valley. It's the most wonderful sight I have ever seen.

*Joel R. Dennstedt  
La Mesa, California*

**ONE DAY WHEN I WAS ELEVEN, I WAS** walking to my grandmother's house after school. Autumn leaves crunched under my feet, and I swung my shiny new black purse back and forth as I went.

Suddenly a young man appeared and began walking right beside me, far too close. He asked how old I was, where I went to school, if I liked boys, and if I had ever been kissed. I gave one-word answers and stared straight ahead.

As we came to Grandma's block I turned into the alley, hoping to reach her house faster that way. Alarmed by my abrupt change of course, the man asked where I was going. I told him I was going to my grandmother's. He asked which house was hers, but I didn't answer.

Suddenly he grabbed me and spun me around to face him. He said he really liked little girls and asked if I'd give him a kiss. He had me by my arms, and when he leaned in toward me, I turned my face. At that moment his grip loosened, and I jerked my right arm free and began hitting him with my little purse as hard as I could. He cursed and let go of my other arm to cover his face. Seizing the opportunity, I ran as fast as I could to my grandmother's house.

My aunt was there, and she and my grandmother listened intently as I ex-

plained through tears what had happened. They hugged me and assured me that I had done the right thing.

When Mom came to pick me up, I told her the whole story, still tearful and upset. She listened calmly, made sure I was OK physically, and then explained that I was not to tell anyone what had happened, especially not my dad. If he found out, he'd want to kill the man, and since I was unhurt, she said, it didn't really matter if Dad knew or not.

I was so stunned I stopped crying. I hadn't expected her to be this unemotional about it, nor to ask me to keep it a secret, as if it were shameful. Though I couldn't name what I felt then, I can now: betrayal.

*Carrie T.  
Kalispell, Montana*

**FOR SOME REASON — I WAS NEVER** given any specifics — my father left shortly after I was born. Mother was attending college and working long hours as a nurse, so the burden of caring for me fell mostly on my grandparents, who lived next door.

Grandfather prided himself on being a good Catholic and raised me to be one as well. This meant attending not just Mass, but also Sunday school, Catholic school, altar-boy classes, and other church activities. I remember spending many a Saturday morning with my grandfather's old shoeshine box, shining my Sunday shoes to his exacting specifications while the neighborhood kids were outside playing.

Grandfather spent much of his time seated at the head of the kitchen table with his ever-present cup of coffee, giving me lectures. Grandmother would meekly assume her spot alongside him, chain-smoking, sipping a glass of beer, and nodding her approval at everything Grandfather said. On and on he would drone, repeating the same handful of antiquated platitudes with a solemn air of authority. Since he was always right, I knew that disagreeing would only prolong the speeches. It was like church: I didn't like it or see the point in it, but I had to sit through it, at least until my mother got home from work.

Summers were the worst. Every morn-

ing, after my chores, Grandfather would give me a reading assignment from the Hardy Boys books, which I quickly came to despise. If I could answer Grandfather's questions about the book he'd assigned, I would be allowed to watch TV or ride my bike for an hour. Once in a while my aunt would bail me out, and I'd spend the day at her place. (She had a swimming pool!) Or, if I was really lucky, Mother would have a day off work. Those days spent out of Grandfather's reach were the best. Yet, as liberating as they were, they were tainted by the knowledge that I would soon have to return next door.

*Christopher H.  
Huntingdon, Pennsylvania*

**WHEN I WAS THIRTEEN, I VISITED** Mexico City and rode an overcrowded subway car on which passengers were squeezed too tight to move. I found myself pressed against a stranger. He had average looks: not too heavy or too old. We were face to face, our torsos and hips touching, with no possibility of adjusting our position to a more decorous one. I didn't mind, exactly, though I pretended to. The amused look on the man's face told me he surely didn't.

Just as I was trying to figure out whether the man had an erection under his jeans, I met the vigilant gaze of my father, pinned two thick feet of humanity away. The moment was insufferable. It was exquisite.

I don't remember how long I had to ride like that, only that I was both relieved and sad when the man's body and mine were no longer touching.

*Name Withheld*

**I MET HIM WHILE WORKING IN A BUSY** casino kitchen where he was a chef. Like me, he was a musician and lover of the outdoors. We spent a summer day canoeing on the river, drinking vodka and beer. On the way home, our car ended up in a swamp. I crawled away from the accident with seven broken bones and a dislocated spine. He died before my eyes.

Now I work for a suburban ambulance service. People say I've recovered miraculously well: I no longer need medication to get out of bed in the morning, and my disability hardly bothers me anymore. I've learned that a lot of love, and a little bit

of faith, can pull me through unrelenting grief.

But then there are nights like tonight. First a desperate, bloodied patient asks me if she's going to die, searching my face for the truth as my partner and I load her into the helicopter. I know her terror more intimately than she could imagine. Next I sit with a patient who has tried to commit suicide. She tells me of her overwhelming tragedies, the antidepressants that don't work, the numerous doctors and therapists who haven't helped her. Again my seemingly stable foundation is shaken. What separates us? How am I qualified to care for her?

Thanks to my own gifted clinicians, I'm able to control the intrusive memories of that fatal day. But alone at home, I stand naked in front of the mirror, inspecting my many scars, and wonder if my recovery is only a fragile illusion.

*Name Withheld*

**EARLIER THIS YEAR MY HUSBAND AND** I had our second baby, sold our house, and moved to a new city. Then my husband lost his job. He sat at home and spent his time surfing the Internet on my laptop — the one he'd said would be "all mine" when he'd bought it for me after my old one died.

We competed for time on my computer, both of us longing to disappear into a virtual world that had nothing to do with our stressful lives. As soon as I was pulled away from the screen to play with the kids or make a meal, he would pounce on it and disappear for hours. I monitored his trail of websites: technical patents, fan sites for late-night cartoon shows, videos of obscure bands from the sixties. These virtual traces of him felt like an invasion into my own Internet world of writing projects, trashy celebrity gossip, and recipes I was never going to make. I seethed quietly and eventually pulled rank and kicked him off.

My husband bought his own laptop. Now we lie in bed at night, our respective screens illuminating the darkened room with an eerie blue light.

*Kristin C.  
Seattle, Washington*

**MY EX AND I HAVE BEEN DIVORCED**

for almost two years now, but we still live in the same small apartment complex. Our buildings are right across from each other because we want our eleven-year-old son to be able to see both of us anytime he wants.

My ex is a good father to our son and a good friend to me, but sometimes it's a little too much, having him so close. He watches out the window, waiting for me to get home from work. A few seconds after my lights go on, the phone rings. He comes over to watch TV, talk politics, and share the occasional bottle of wine.

I'm praying he'll find a girlfriend soon.

*Moira M.  
Granville, Ohio*

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