



SCOTT STREBLE

## Readers Write **THE BEDROOM**

**AFTER OUR DIVORCE, MY EX-WIFE** and I shared custody of our two-year-old daughter, who stayed at my house three nights a week. My daughter would have difficulty falling asleep, so I'd lie in her bed with her, sometimes for hours, until she was out. Then I'd sneak away, only to feel her climbing into bed with me later in the night. Eventually I invited her into my bed, where she'd fall asleep in minutes. I imagined she needed this closeness to make up for our lost time together. I suppose I needed it, too.

My daughter wasn't a quiet sleeper: she rolled a lot, threw her legs over me, and once kicked me in the throat so hard I couldn't breathe. Sharing a bed, however, brought us both comfort. As a man,

I was aware that some people might see this arrangement as inappropriate, so we pretended she had her own bed. I figured she'd outgrow her need for the odd sleeping arrangement eventually.

Eight years later, after I remarried, she started to sleep in her own room. My daughter is fifteen now and would be mortified if she knew I was telling this story. I've loved many women, but I've never felt closer to anyone.

*Name Withheld*

**WHEN I WAS TWENTY, I MARRIED** Oscar, a Bolivian I'd met while working on a vegetable farm in Virginia. I was one of the few nonnative Spanish speakers on the farm and could hold my own

in conversations over pepper plants and raspberry canes.

When I first saw Oscar, he was on his haunches picking beans. He had a kind face and glossy black hair that fell sexily across his eyes. He smiled at me, and I later learned that his friend, at that moment, had leaned over and said, "I predict you will marry that girl."

For nearly a year, Oscar and I rented a drafty room in the boss's modern brick farmhouse. Our full-size bed took up half the space, but we were content to spend most of our time in it. The bed, a hot plate, and a space heater were enough to get us through the four Virginia seasons. Once, when Oscar and I hadn't left the room all day, his sister Maria left sandwiches

for us on the doorstep.

In that bedroom we spoke only Spanish; I was more eager to refine my skills than Oscar was to work on his English. We cooked eggs and greens foraged from the farm. Oscar taught me the folk dances of Bolivia, drilled into me the importance of saving money, and urged me to go back to college.

The bedroom was also where, several months after we'd married, Oscar cried and told me he'd made a terrible mistake. He said he loved me, but he was still married to a woman in Bolivia. I was devastated, and Oscar was genuinely contrite.

We got an annulment and somehow managed to remain friends. Even now, he sends me the occasional e-mail, telling me how his daughters are prospering and how his wife beat breast cancer. He and his family live in the States, and I've met them. My friends find this outrageous, but I have no regrets. For a short time we loved each other well.

M.B.

Rochester, New York

**I USED TO WISH FOR THE DAY WHEN** I'd want to do something creative, like build furniture or write short stories, as much as I wanted to obey the animal call to the bedroom, where fleeting moments of sexual gratification often ended in confused emotions and broken relationships.

Now that wish has been granted — by age and a pinched sciatic nerve that makes it impossible even to lie down in my own damned bed. Gone are the wasted days of sexual passion. My life is full of cerebral and artistic interests. But I yearn for a night of painless sleep, for a drug powerful enough to dull the pain in my back. The bedroom has become a place to store clothing and confirm that the aging man in the mirror still exists: nothing more. It may as well be roped off with red velvet, like the chambers of a dead president.

Jamie Huling

Nashville, Tennessee

**MY MARRIED BEDROOM WAS FAMOUS** for its swan-shaped bed, crafted by my ex-husband, a woodworker and furniture

maker. The foot of the cherry-wood bed was carved into a swan's neck and head, six and a half feet tall. On the headboard was a painted swamp scene with a built-in reading light, and the sides looked like the sides of a small boat.

My ex still drapes his arm over the swan's neck and tells the story of Leda and the Swan to impress visitors, especially the women. He was often mistaken for Mick Jagger when we were together, and though his rock-star quality has been dimmed by years, pounds, and smoke, the bed remains fantastic enough to captivate an audience.

As romantic as the bed was, our marriage was troubled. We were both too young when it began. At first I relished my role as supporter of and inspiration to the great artist, but then I learned that his creativity took precedence over my own — unless mine was domestically expressed. There were many problems with our house as well. Though it was a won-

der of curved walls, turrets, and fantasy details, few projects were ever completed. There were leaks in the roof and gaps where the walls and ceilings met, and it was heated by wood that he chopped or I dragged in from the forest.

During the last winter we lived together, he left to spend a weekend with his new girlfriend. I was not innocent in that department, but he chose to leave me in that falling-apart house during a winter storm. A cold rain fell and coated everything in an inch of brittle and twinkling ice, beautiful and dangerous.

There had been a persistent leak over the swan bed, and before my husband ran off, he'd suspended a black plastic tarp over it, just in case. The next morning the temperatures reached the mid-forties, and the ice began to melt. When I awoke, the tarp above me was tight as a tick. In the few seconds it took me to comprehend what was happening, the tarp gave way, dumping a load of freeze-

**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
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
Chance Encounters	November 1	May 2008

\*This is not an error. We've revised our deadlines.

ing water all over me and our bed. As I struggled free of the soaking blankets, I said out loud, "This is my last winter in this house." It was.

*Stephanie U.  
New York, New York*

**AT TWENTY-FIVE MY SON AZJA (PRO-**nounced "Asia") moved out of our house and into an apartment with his friend Eric. He and Eric reveled in their new bachelorhood, partying and playing video games till dawn. Although I was happy for Azja, I hated seeing his empty bedroom. So I invited my ailing mother to move in with me, and I transformed Azja's masculine, African-themed bedroom into a feminine boudoir for Mom.

A few months later Eric called, crying, barely able to talk. He'd gotten back from work that day and discovered Azja on the kitchen floor, dead from an asthma attack.

I hated every moment of the weeks that followed. The worst part was dealing with my suddenly healthy, attention-seeking mother. I needed to be alone. I wanted Azja's room back.

I took a second job, bought my mother a condo, and reclaimed Azja's bedroom, re-creating the African décor. Three months after his death, I lay on Azja's bed, played his drums, and sobbed.

*Madonna O.  
San Diego, California*

**I HAD HIP-REPLACEMENT SURGERY** in December, then an aneurysm in January, which put me in the hospital for a month. When I came home, I moved into the bedroom down the hall while my husband of fifty years continued to sleep in our king-size bed. I would rest better knowing that my recovering body could keep its own hours.

But when I was ready to move back into our bedroom, my husband didn't want me there. He'd found that he slept better alone; my late-night reading disturbed him, and my snoring kept him awake.

I told myself this arrangement was sensible, but I missed touching, cuddling, knowing he was near. We sacrificed closeness so my husband could have his precious sleep.

Eight years later I think of the fifteen yards from one bedroom to the other as a symbol of the gulf between us.

*Name Withheld*

**IN MAY 1989 I VISITED A COMMUNE** and fell in love with the place. I told the residents I planned to return in the fall to live there permanently, and they seemed happy with the arrangement. When I came back, however, there was no room saved for me. The residents explained that people often said they would return, but didn't.

It was not the homecoming I'd anticipated, but I still wanted to live there, so I moved into the old tobacco barn near the main cabin. The floor was made of uneven planks. The tin roof leaked. Gaps between the clapboards let in rain and mosquitoes. Snakeskins hung from the rafters. In the daytime it was hot as an oven; at night it was cold and drafty. Every morning the roosters woke me up at dawn.

Once I'd convinced the residents I wasn't going to leave, they found me a room in the main cabin. Looking back, though, I think fondly of the sun pouring in through the clapboards in the morning, the rain hitting the tin roof high above at night, the way I'd fall asleep and wake to the smell of hay. I believe that barn was the best bedroom I've ever had.

*Nathan Long  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

**WHEN OUR MOM, WHO'D ALWAYS BEEN** a devout and faithful wife, left our dad for another man, it was traumatic for the entire family. My younger brother was especially distraught and did not speak to Mom for two years, until after her second husband had died of cancer. Even then, there was tension between them.

Years later, when Mom was admitted to the hospital for a serious illness and fighting for every breath, I stayed with her day and night. When she showed signs of improvement, I went home to her house, exhausted. Instead of sleeping in the guest room, I decided to take a nap in Mom's bed. I went to sleep surrounded by her sweet scent, feeling that the sheets were her arms hugging me close, the way they did in my childhood.

When I told my brother about this

the next morning over coffee, he said nothing, just continued reading the newspaper. Later I noticed that the covers on her bed were askew, and it was apparent that he had slept there too, though he'd never mentioned it. Our mother died the following week.

*Name Withheld*

**IN MY LATE TEENS I WENT TO VISIT** my grandmother in Denmark and met a young man from the nearby village. He and I spent an evening out dancing, and when we came back to my grandmother's cozy home by the sea, a single orange lamp was glowing in the guest bedroom where I slept. After the loud discotheque, we were looking forward to a place where we could stop and really look at one another and hear our hearts beating.

When we got inside, we found my grandmother had placed the room's twin beds so that the feet were together, and between the two beds was a little round table with a candle waiting to be lit (matches provided). Next to the candle was a tray with a thermos of coffee (still warm), two pottery mugs, and a few pieces of homemade spice bread wrapped in soft linen.

The boy and I softly chuckled at this little tableau of my grandmother's, inviting us to share coffee and cake and perhaps a good-night kiss, and then climb into our separate beds, blow out the single candle, and dream our gentle dreams by the sea.

*Kara Lynn Esborg  
San Francisco, California*

**I WET THE BED REGULARLY UNTIL** adolescence. Every night I'd pray to God that I'd wake up dry, and nearly every morning I woke up wet. The occasional dry mornings only made the wet ones more devastating.

My poor mom had to contend with washing my sheets and pajamas every day. More than once she lost her temper and said things I know she regrets. Her words shredded my self-esteem. I began so many days filled with guilt, shame, and self-loathing.

Once, my parents had a salesman over who pitched to them a contraption that supposedly helped bed-wetters. The device was placed under the sheets and

would sound an alarm if it detected wetness, thereby waking the sleeper. As the salesman explained how it worked, I sat there with my mom and dad, feeling so happy that there was something that could help me. Unfortunately, my parents couldn't afford it. Tears of disappointment rolled down my cheeks, but they told me they would get an alarm clock and set it for every couple of hours during the night. The big, brass alarm clock's loud, clattering alarm woke me, but we could never get the timing right, so I still woke up wet.

I finally outgrew the bed-wetting, but not without occasional embarrassing setbacks during my teen years. Slumber parties were excruciating.

Many years later, as I changed my eight-year-old son's frequently wet sheets and heard my husband start to complain about it, I shut him up in no uncertain terms. Maybe I had to grow up ashamed and embarrassed over something I couldn't control, but there was no way my little boy would.

*Carrie T.  
Kalispell, Montana*

**ON THANKSGIVING MY FAMILY IS** heading out the door when the phone rings. It's Mary, my sister-in-law, and she's crying. She has taken their three children and left my brother, she says. They are getting a divorce. When I ask why, all she'll say is that Jim is involved in some kind of "sex thing." She asks me to go to their home to check on him: she's worried he might "do something" to himself now that she is gone.

The "sex thing" is not that surprising to me. I know my brother has hired prostitutes before.

When I get to their house, Jim's car is parked in the driveway. I knock: no answer. The door is unlocked, so I go in and call for him. Again, no answer. Worried, I search the house and find him asleep in bed. I forgot that he works the night shift.

Jim wakes up, and I tell him about Mary's call. I ask what sort of trouble he is involved in. It's not what I thought: Jim is sexually attracted to children. He confessed to Mary that he had touched their children while they slept, and had done

the same to her nieces and nephews when they'd spent the night. (I breathe a sigh of relief that my own sons have never slept over at their house.) He admitted this to Mary because he wants to stop and seek professional help. He'd thought she'd be sympathetic, but she left in a rage, promising he would hear from the police and her attorney.

Then Jim tells me he was repeatedly molested and raped when he was nine by a man who was staying with our family. He protested several times to our parents, but they ignored him. Later our mother told him she'd been molested as a child and assured him that he'd get over it, as she had.

Jim and I hold each other, and I cry for the little brother I remember, and for the man I thought I knew.

*Patrick  
Issaquah, Washington*

**WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, MY BED-**room had an upright piano in it. The instrument towered over me as I lay in bed at night and thought about how much I hated piano lessons and having to practice while other children laughed and played outside my window.

My parents were doctors and had offices in the basement of our house. They didn't want my practicing to disturb their patients, so the logical place for the piano was in my room, on the second floor. It was too wide for the staircase, however, so my father had hired a crane to hoist the piano onto the upstairs balcony. I remember looking out my window at the piano, bound in chains, dangling in mid-air, monstrous and alien.

I've never understood why my father insisted that I learn to play the piano. He didn't listen to music or go to concerts. He'd studied violin as a boy but had given it up. Maybe he regretted that he hadn't stuck with it, and now he was trying again, through his daughter.

When I told my father that I didn't want to take piano lessons, just tennis lessons, he took immediate action: he stopped the tennis lessons. After all the trouble he'd gone to getting the piano into my bedroom, he was determined I would learn to play.

Years later, when we got rid of the

piano, we hacked it to pieces with an axe to get it down the stairs.

My father often said, "As long as you live under my roof, you'll do as I tell you." The entire house was his domain. Claiming a space of one's own was out of the question. Bedroom doors could not be locked, and he and my mother came and went as they pleased. If my father opened my bedroom door after my bedtime and found that I was still awake, he'd be angry.

The last time I slept in that room, as an adult, my parents were away. I'd been to a bar nearby and was high on drugs and alcohol. I picked up a man and brought him home and had sex with him on my childhood bed. I never slept there again.

*June G.  
Brooklyn, New York*

**MY BOYFRIEND'S PARENTS DID NOT** believe in premarital sex and expected him and me to wait until marriage. At his house we weren't allowed to close the bedroom door, but this did nothing to stop us. We had sex on the dock, in the field, even in a church library behind an unlocked door. I have no idea why we weren't caught.

Now he and I have been together longer than we haven't, and our once-firm bodies have softened with age, but we still sneak around — so our three children won't catch us. Behind our locked bedroom door, on a squeaky bed a few feet from our daughter's nursery, we have muffled sex — the best of our lives. We've recaptured the feeling that we are getting away with something.

*Heather Cori  
Olympia, Washington*

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