



KATHLEEN MENKE

Readers Write

RIVALS

MY OLDER SISTER AND I EACH WANTED Dad's undivided attention. If he read a chapter of *Winnie-the-Pooh* to me, Sandy asked for two chapters. If he pushed me on the swing for two minutes, she wanted three.

As we grew up, our shared bedroom developed an invisible line down the middle, and we were absolute rulers of our separate territories. I could cross her side to get to the stairs, and she could cross mine to go to the toilet, but that was it.

Sandy was taller, with shiny black hair and radiant brown eyes. I was shorter and plumper, with dirty-blond curls and green eyes. When our artist uncle came for a visit, Sandy was witty and articulate and monopolized him. At our middle school, she played a beautiful Virgin Mary in the Christmas pageant, while I worked the lights. In our ballet presentation, Sandy was the elegant swan, while I was an unmoving tree.

Things didn't improve in high school. The first boy I ever dated was enticed away by Sandy's charms. Feeling bad, he fixed me up with his friend Peter. Then, while I was working a month-long summer job

at the shore, Sandy fixed Peter up with a friend of hers.

Our rivalry diminished when Sandy went off to college, but the subtle jockeying for position continued: Who was accepted to the better school? Who earned higher grades? Who had the more lucrative summer job?

As adults we both married. Sandy had one child, while I had three. We tried to avoid competing through our children, but when her son was accepted to medical school, I sensed an air of superiority.

Our rivalry ended last Christmas Eve, when Sandy died of pancreatic cancer. I miss her every day.

*Harriet D. Odium
West Simsbury, Connecticut*

MY MOTHER'S BIRTHDAY WAS APPROACHING, and I was determined to do something special for her. Even at sixteen, I could see how sad she was, and I wanted to make her happy.

A year earlier, as part of a kitchen renovation, my father had installed a new electric stovetop. When he'd removed the

old one, it had left a long hole in the face of the cabinetry. The hole really bothered my mother, and I often wondered if he had left it there just to aggravate her. As my gift to her, I decided to fix the hole.

My father was a talented woodworker who built everything from hand-carved chairs to whole additions to our house. His basement workbench felt off-limits to me, but I mustered my courage and clandestinely used his tools to cut a board that exactly covered the hole. Then I glued three decorative ceramic tiles to the board and epoxied it in place the night before my mother's birthday. It really did look good. My mother was thrilled, and I was proud to have pleased her.

Later that day my father let me know that he was not happy with what I'd done. It was *his* job to fix things around his house, he said. I was never to do it again. I feared my father, and I heeded his warning. But I had won a small victory: my gift remained intact as long as they owned that house.

*Alex B.
Corning, New York*

IN THE MAXIMUM-SECURITY HOUSING units, many inmates join a prison gang for protection. If you do, chances are you'll eventually be placed in an exercise group that contains a rival gang member. Even before you've returned to your cell, word will have spread that they've assigned two rivals to the same yard. Everyone knows there will be a fight tomorrow. The shot-callers tell you to draw blood. You don't want to, but you wonder if you should carry a shank anyway. Your rival probably will.

Notes are passed from cell to cell. You listen for the sound of metal scraping on concrete, sniff for the smell of burning plastic — telltale signs of a weapon being manufactured. You're able to convince the shot-callers that you'll do better with just your fists. You don't want to kill this guy you don't even know. You hope he is smart enough not to use a shank, to realize that you are both only pawns.

The next morning, after a long night of planning and praying, you stretch, shadow-box, and psych yourself up. As you are led to the exercise yard, your legs quiver slightly with the adrenaline rush. Those who don't want to be involved begin moving away from the open area. The guard manning the gun tower readies Big Bertha, a nonlethal weapon that fires wooden blocks to quell riots.

The gate opens. You and your opponent eye each other's hands, looking for weapons. Relieved to find one another unarmed, you butt heads like rams during the rutting season. Blows are traded. Guards are running toward you. *Boom! Boom!* The wooden blocks hit your flesh and bounce off onto the concrete. The guards use pepper spray. It's all over. Aggression spent, you lie prone on the ground: a split brow, a busted nose, cuts and scrapes all over. You and your rival meet each other's eyes, both pleased with the outcome.

After being treated, you return to your cell and start getting notes from members of your gang about what a good job you've done. You are deemed a "stand-up convict." The shot-callers have something to laugh about until another new guy comes along.

Name Withheld

WHOEVER IT IS, I HATE HIM. OR HER. It doesn't matter. Viewing the remains of this person's depredations makes my skin prickle with outrage. How could anyone else have found my secret spot? I can't even explain how *I* found it. One day I was driving through the Berkshires when I glanced up a wooded hillside, and the thought came to me: *Maybe there.* I pulled onto the shoulder, parked the car, and followed a pair of tire ruts into the woods. A quarter mile in, I spotted the first small morel mushroom.

"Follow water" is my mushroom-hunting motto. Here that meant struggling through an acre of brambles to an open, grassy glade with a few decrepit apple trees — and so many morels! Thirty, forty, fifty. The more I looked, the more popped into view. And they were huge — six inches high, at least; waxy, unreal, golden; a mycological fantasy fulfilled.

I relished each one as it went into my basket. At home I photographed the heaped bounty on my kitchen table. Then I ate some of them sautéed in cream and

brandy, dried a few for winter, and shared the rest with friends.

Every year I returned, always in the second week of May if the winter had been mild, the third week if the snow had been heavy. I battled the tick-infested brambles to pluck the morels from the warm grass — until this year.

When I arrived at the glade in May, I found nothing but flat, waxy stumps. An unknown rival had found my secret clearing and made off with the harvest.

So the game is on. Next spring I will go early. I will go often. I will go as stealthily as a cat. Next year those morels are mine.

*Pat McDonagh
Northampton, Massachusetts*

MY HUSBAND, GORDON, WAS IN THE seminary, and Will and Elizabeth lived next door to us in married-student housing. The three of them were pastors in training; I was the unholy tag-along. We cooked meals together, borrowed each other's cars, and had Friday-night drinks

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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
Stealing	October 1	April 2008
Chance Encounters	November 1	May 2008
Patriotism	December 1	June 2008
Now Or Never	January 1	July 2008
Up All Night	February 1	August 2008
Porches	March 1	September 2008

at Archie's pub. One snowy Friday in late January, after a few beers, we stole some plastic trays from the seminary dining hall and went midnight sledding on Suicide Hill, a steep incline with an imposing wrought-iron fence at the bottom. The challenge was to barrel down at top speed and bail out just before colliding with the fence.

After a couple of dizzying solo runs, someone suggested tandem races. Will climbed aboard behind me on the tiny "sled," wrapping his legs and arms tightly around my middle. Gordon glared at Will, then took the front position on Elizabeth's sled. Suddenly he and Will were rivals, and I had become the prize.

We pushed off. The race was a blur of white powder and icy wind. I felt a kind of electric charge from Will's hands. As the fence rushed toward us, Will squeezed me tight and said in my ear, "We'll bail on three. Ready? One, two, . . . *three!*"

We rolled off just six feet from the iron fence, while our makeshift sled sailed over the spiked posts. It took us a while to untangle our limbs and get to our feet. Soaking wet and chilled to the bone, we laughed and marveled at our narrow escape. I had completely forgotten about Gordon and Elizabeth.

Gordon's ride had ended badly. Elizabeth had jumped off in plenty of time, but he had ridden on without her and slammed feet first into the fence. He wasn't getting up.

"My God, Gordon," I said, "are you OK?"

He winced with pain, then snapped at me, "No, damn it, I am not OK. Go get the car. I think I broke my ankle."

"Let's get you up the hill first," Will said. We made a chair with our forearms, and Gordon grudgingly half sat on it and half hopped back up the hill, one agonizing step at a time. When we reached the top, we were sober and drenched with sweat. I went inside for the car keys. When I came out, Will was offering to come with us to the hospital.

Gordon shook his head, his face stony. "You've done enough for one night, thank you." Nobody asked what he meant. Deep down I think we all already knew: Will and I were in love.

B.W.
Jacksonville, Florida

LINDA WAS THE MOST POPULAR GIRL in high school: tall and fashionable, with flashing green eyes that could dismiss you with a glance. She had blue-black shoulder-length hair that flipped up perfectly at the ends. My hair was chestnut-colored and flowed past my waist: my "crowning glory," my mom called it.

Linda and I never spoke, but sometimes she'd catch me looking at her, and I'd turn away quickly when our eyes met. Secretly I would have given anything to be one of the popular crowd, but I acted the part of the rebel instead, wearing black clothes, too much eyeliner, and a military-surplus jacket.

In the middle of my junior year, I started to blossom. I got the lead in the school play, began dating the captain of the football team (cute, but dumb), and was asked to rush the Chantells, an illegal off-campus sorority. All the popular girls were members, including Linda. I wondered why they'd asked me. Clearly I wasn't their type. Maybe they wanted a little diversity, or maybe they thought I was a diamond in the rough. No matter. This was my chance.

My interview went well. All the sorority sisters were nice to me. I thought my transformation from fringe-dweller to popular girl was complete. I hung out after school the next day, hoping one of the Chantells would find me and we'd celebrate. Instead I got a call at home that night from a sorority sister who said sorry, but they'd decided against me. No reason given.

Crushed, I became even more of a rebel. I marched in antiwar demonstrations. I stopped dating the football captain and started dating a James Dean type. I smoked pot, read Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Ram Dass, and did yoga and Transcendental Meditation. I pushed the pain of the sorority rejection to the back of my mind till I almost forgot about it. Almost.

At my thirtieth high-school reunion, I spotted Linda at the bar, surrounded by her old sorority sisters. When Linda saw me, she came over to my table, still looking pretty and trim, black hair hovering just above her shoulders.

"I've owed you an apology for thirty years," she said. "I was the one who black-

balled you from that sorority in our junior year. I made up lies about you. I'm really sorry."

"But why?" I asked. "What did I ever do to you?"

"You were my rival," she said, not meeting my eyes. "You were the rebel. Nothing stopped you. You got the lead in the play, and you were good, not afraid in front of all those people, like I would have been. You marched against the war. You did all the things I was afraid to do. You were my hero."

"Your *hero*? Why couldn't I just be your *friend*? Why did you have to make my life hell?"

It was my hair, she said. Hers wouldn't grow past her shoulders, no matter what she did to it. It was thin and brittle. Mine was so long and thick. She was jealous, that's all. It wasn't fair that I should have it all.

Alexis R.
Marina del Rey, California

I WAS BORN JUST ONE YEAR AFTER MY brother, and I grew up as the little sister in his shadow. In school he left a trail of dazzled teachers behind him, many of whom asked me outright, "Are you as smart as your brother?" I became a perfectionist and an overachiever, afraid that if I didn't excel, I'd simply disappear.

In high school my brother wrote a witty column for the school paper. The journalism teacher pestered me to follow in his footsteps, but I steered clear and instead chose photography, a subject in which he'd never displayed any interest.

I continued taking pictures after I graduated, but it was a decade before I showed my photographs in public. A friend who owned a coffee shop cajoled me into letting him put some of my images on the walls. I began to participate in open studios and group gallery shows.

Then I noticed my brother taking a few photos on a family vacation. I'd never seen him with a camera before. It was unsettling. Before I had the chance to wonder what he was up to, he had begun exhibiting at prestigious galleries. He was invited to join an artists' collective and introduced himself at parties as a photographer. My modest little coffee-shop shows suddenly seemed contempt-

ible. After nearly two decades, the joy I'd found in photography simply disappeared. I put my gear in storage and tore out my darkroom to make space for my husband's office.

After some time, I began to write. I had always fantasized about being a writer but had avoided it because of my brother's past success. As my stories began appearing in magazines, I held my breath. I lived in fear that my brother would disappear to use the bathroom and come out ten minutes later with the Great American Novel dashed off on a roll of toilet paper. He hasn't yet. I've decided that even if my brother picks up a pen, I won't put mine down.

*J.P.A.
Oakland, California*

LOUISE WAS MY FATHER'S SECRETARY.

She wore jeweled glasses, had the raspy voice of a chain-smoker, and was unbelievably petite. When I was little, my sister and I played hide-and-seek at our father's law office, and Louise let me squeeze under her desk. One time she took my sister and me to New York City, to the Hawaiian Room, where we sipped Shirley Temples out of coconut shells and spent so much money that we had to scrounge change to pay the parking-garage fee. Louise was fun. She was the antithesis of our mother, who was dour and sad and away in the state mental hospital.

Around my twelfth birthday, I started to notice that Louise and my dad were spending a lot of time together outside of work. Many Saturday nights Louise would show up at our house, and my dad would coat the rims of two cocktail glasses with sugar and make sidecars for them both. Soon they'd be laughing in the kitchen, boiling lobsters on the stove, even though neither my sister nor I would eat seafood. I began to realize that Louise was more than a secretary to my father.

I spent my teenage years locked in silent combat with Louise. I glared at her across the dining-room table and answered her questions with grunts or monosyllables. In return she ignored me or made hurtful remarks about me to my father. "Your daughter eats like a vacuum cleaner," she said one night. He

did not rush to my defense; in fact, he barely acknowledged my presence whenever Louise was around.

Fed up with waiting for my father to divorce my mother, Louise quit her job and moved to Hawaii at about the time that I was leaving for college. After she had been gone a year, my father apparently met her terms, because Louise moved back and reclaimed her place in the front of my father's office, and in his social life.

By the time my father divorced my mother and married Louise, I was living a thousand miles away. On my annual trips back home, I found that my father was showering his new wife with gifts: expensive jewelry, a new house, trips, even a mink coat. During one of my visits, my father and Louise took my husband, Bob, and me out to dinner. Louise worked her charms on Bob, and I sat there fuming as my traitor husband fell under her spell. Later, when I confronted him, he dared to suggest I was being too hard on Louise. Didn't he understand that she had stolen my father away?

When my father died suddenly a few years after that, I saw no need ever to speak to Louise again. It didn't occur to me till much later that I had focused my anger on her because I didn't know how to express my rage toward him.

*Marylu Green
Madison, Wisconsin*

BECAUSE OUR FATHERS OWNED RIVAL drugstores in our small town, Melissa and I weren't exactly friends. We fought about which ice cream was better: Sealtest, which her father sold, or Borden's, which my dad served. My family's store displayed Hallmark cards; her family's store sold American Greetings. We were both certain that the valentines we gave out at school were the best.

In junior high we became part of the same straight-A crowd, and we put aside our petty differences. Some days the gang would meet at my dad's drugstore for Borden's best; other days we'd meet at her dad's store for Sealtest. Though Melissa and I still were not bosom buddies, we got along.

In high school I had a boyfriend from another town. I was so in love with Dave

I almost couldn't stand it. When I was a senior, he gave me a diamond ring. Melissa, who didn't yet have a boyfriend, wrote in my yearbook: "You and Dave are a beautiful couple."

When Dave and I broke up, I was devastated. I cried half the night and later told all my friends the sad news.

Not long thereafter, Dave called Melissa and asked her out. She told me about it over a Coke in my dad's drugstore. "I said I wouldn't go out with him, because of you," my old rival explained, and she reached across the table and patted my hand.

We're both in our sixties now, and still good friends.

*Ann O'Neal Garcia
Hillsboro, Oregon*

end of excerpt