



JAMES CARROLL

Readers Write **GETTING READY**

MY CELLMATE STAYED ON HIS BUNK and out of my way as I packed two laundry bags with everything I wanted to take. I went through my prison footlocker, tossing out unimportant papers and useless slivers of soap. I had already given away my good sneakers and my old watch to inmates who needed them.

I was getting out after sixteen years, and though I tried to act calm, I could not keep my hands from shaking. The free world had changed: I knew because I'd watched it on television. I'd listened on the radio as the second airplane had hit the tower in New York City. But knowing about the changes and living with them were two different things. I didn't know how to drive, find a job, or do my taxes.

When a prisoner leaves, sometimes

his buddies will throw him under the shower and smear lotion and baby powder all over him as a way of saying goodbye. I'd asked my friends not to do that — I was too old for such games — but now I wished they had. It would have been a sign that they cared.

The next morning, when the doors opened after count, I went by each cell to say goodbye. When I stopped by Jack's cell, his towel was over his door because he was on the toilet. He stuck his hand out to shake mine and wished me luck. (He told me later in a letter that he'd been crying and hadn't wanted me to see him.)

The corrections officer summoned me to go to the administration building, where I would wait several hours for my release papers. Donnie, who had been my

cellmate for a while, helped me carry my laundry bags, heavy with books and papers. We stopped outside the administration building, and I gave him a hug. As bad as I wanted to be out, I would miss him. I would miss a lot of the men I was leaving behind. My hands trembled. Returning to the free world was scarier than my first day in prison. Who would have figured?

*David Wood
St. Petersburg, Florida*

MY BIG BROTHER AND I LIVED WITH our grandparents and hadn't seen our mother and father since they'd moved from El Salvador to the United States in 1990. Now it was 1999, and they wanted us to come live with them in Las Vegas, Nevada,

so the family could be together again.

We'd heard that the journey to the U.S. was long and dangerous and could kill us. We'd heard stories about how people traveled in the back of big trucks without windows or holes to let in air. We'd heard that we would have to walk long distances and run from immigration officers. To prepare ourselves, my brother and I walked everywhere we went: to the store, to school, to the capital of San Salvador. When we would go to the lake or the beach, we would practice holding our breath underwater, just in case we had to ride in a truck where there wasn't enough air. I began saving fruit we could eat on our journey. My brother collected cans and sold them so we would have money.

When the day came for us to leave for the United States, we learned that our parents had arranged for us to travel by bus, car, and airplane. All the preparations we'd made were for nothing. We didn't have to walk across a desert or ride in the back of a truck. We didn't suffer like so many others.

*Juan Ostorga
Las Vegas, Nevada*

I WAS AT BASKETBALL PRACTICE THE first time I got my menstrual period. I remember running down the court and suddenly feeling as if I were leaving my body. (In a sense, I was.) An unfamiliar dizziness came over me, followed by a wet itch in my crotch. When I went to the locker room, a small brown spot on my underwear confirmed my fears. I stuffed toilet paper in my panties and went about the rest of my school day feeling panicked at the possibility of visible spotting on my clothes — and at the thought of dealing with this every month for the next forty years.

I'd been amply forewarned. Two months earlier, my stepmother, Diane, had sat me down at the kitchen table and officially prepared me for it. She had purchased a young woman's starter kit, complete with various types of pads, panty liners, and tampons. And she presented me with the book *Dear Diary*, which answers a young girl's questions about her first period. I listened obediently, but I didn't feel ready. Secretly I believed it

would not happen to me — at least, not for a very long time.

Twenty-two years and roughly 260 periods later, I walked down the corridor of the oncology unit to Diane's hospital room. My father sat at her bedside, crying quietly and taking notes as she told him, in her orderly way, what she wanted for her funeral service: cello music by J.S. Bach; a single red rose for each woman in attendance; a reading from Proverbs.

When Diane died eighteen days later, she was ready. But we weren't. This wasn't supposed to happen for a very long time.

*Kathy Swink
Decatur, Georgia*

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, IT SEEMED THAT every frightening event was preceded by the command to "get ready." So when my mother told me to put on my Sunday dress, I nervously asked why.

"Never mind. It's a surprise. You're going to Aunt Mae's while I take care of some business."

The mention of "some business," combined with a "surprise," made me even more uneasy.

I put on my best dress, white knee-high socks, and shiny black patent-leather shoes, and we drove through town to the narrow street of row houses where my aunt and cousins lived. When we walked in the front door, my two cousins were sitting on the couch, both dressed as if for a special occasion. Tom, who was seven (a year younger than I), sat still, while Janet, only four, played with a wheeled toy on the end of a stick that rang bells as she rolled it back and forth.

After my mother had left, Aunt Mae went into the kitchen and came back with a plate of cookies: "You can each have two; that's it." Then she sat down opposite us, brushed her apron across her lap, and said, "Now, Uncle Buddy's coming home today."

She didn't sound happy about it, which puzzled me. She loved her brother almost as much as I did. I thought he was the most handsome man in the world in his

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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
Now Or Never	January 1	July 2008
Up All Night	February 1	August 2008
Porches	March 1	September 2008
Finding Out	April 1	October 2008
Immigrants	May 1	November 2008
Blood	June 1	December 2008

U.S. Air Force uniform. When he would come home on leave, we'd visit him at Grandma's, and he'd play with us till he was exhausted and had to take a nap on the couch in the back room. He'd warn us not to come in and bother him, or else he'd cut our ears off. I'd crack open the door, peek inside, and giggle. Uncle Buddy would open his eyes and make a scissors motion with his fingers, and I'd close the door fast.

After we'd eaten our cookies, Aunt Mae gave us each a little stiff cotton flag on a stick, and she had us sing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

"Now let's do it again," she said when we were done, "and when we sing, 'Glory, glory, hallelujah,' let's really wave those flags!" We sang and marched and waved our flags, and Aunt Mae got up and marched in front of us, like the majorette of a band. For a while I forgot to worry about where my mother had gone.

When she returned a little while later, we piled in the back of the dusty blue Plymouth and rode across town to a beautiful house with a long driveway. A man came to our car and opened the doors for us. I felt like a lady. It was the most beautiful house I'd ever seen close up. There were gardens all around, and everything smelled fresh and clean. We ascended the steps of the deep porch, and another man in a suit opened the door for us and greeted my mother formally. I wondered if Uncle Buddy was going to meet us here, but I was afraid to ask.

We were shown to a large room with many chairs and a lot of flowers at the far end. While my mother went up to the front alone, my aunt bent low and told us that Uncle Buddy's soul had gone to heaven, but we could see his body here. "What you see is just a shell," she said. "Don't be afraid."

C.R.
Scarsdale, New York

AFTER I'D GRADUATED FROM HIGH school, my controlling mother made it clear that she and my father would not pay my college tuition if I moved out of their house. Afraid I couldn't support myself on what I earned as a waitress, I chose to suffer her physical and mental abuse for four more years.

In my last semester of college, with my diploma in sight, I secretly made plans to get my own place. Gleeful with anticipation, I found a roommate and put a deposit down on an apartment. In my free time between classes and waitressing, I purchased cheap plates, glasses, pots, pans, and utensils, which I stored at my boyfriend's house. I felt powerful and cunning as I transferred most of my savings out of the joint account my parents had cosigned with me when I was sixteen and into a new account of my own.

Two weeks before my move, I told Mom. She was incensed, called me a "slut," and said I couldn't leave. When I told her I was going, she tried to hit me. Instead of ducking her punch as usual, I grabbed her wrist in midair.

"Don't you ever try to hit me, or you will never see me again!" I said in a steely voice.

In that moment, all her power over me drained away. For the first time, I saw her clearly: a frail, aging, unhappy woman worn down by life. Instead of rage, I felt compassion. I was free.

Name Withheld

IT WAS MY WEDDING DAY. THE GAUZE of my dress itched me as I teetered on treacherously high heels. My mother pinned on my veil, gave me a gentle kiss, and left the dressing room to be seated in the church. She assumed I was ready, but I wasn't so sure. At the age of nineteen, I'd flunked out of college and, having little idea how to support myself, had decided to marry an equally clueless twenty-one-year-old.

I went into the church foyer, where my stepfather, Paul, waited. I seldom saw him in anything other than the coveralls he wore when he worked in his gun shop. The sight of his burly body stuffed into a tight black suit might have made me laugh if I hadn't been so nervous.

Paul was in his sixties and had been married twice before, with no children of his own. When he'd married my mother, he'd gotten more than he'd bargained for: a passel of teenagers with whom he would wage a steady and stubborn war. As a stepfather, he'd frequently been insensitive, narrow-minded, and unkind.

Under pressure from my mother, Paul

had agreed to pay for my wedding and reception. To my surprise, he'd even offered to walk me down the aisle. Now he took my arm, but he did not move toward the open door to the sanctuary. Instead he leaned his balding head toward me and said softly, "You don't have to do this."

"What?"

He didn't point out that I was too young and hardly in love, nor that my fiancé was no more ready for marriage than I. He simply said, "You can walk away right now. You don't even have to face them. I'll tell them for you."

"But the invitations, the party, all that money."

He shook his head. "Doesn't matter. I'll take care of it."

His concern left me speechless, but not for long. I took his arm and turned toward the door. "Let's go," I said. "I'm ready."

Paul was silent as we began our walk down the aisle.

My stepfather never mentioned that moment again. Forty years and two marriages later, I still marvel at his generosity and wisdom.

K.A.

Johannesburg, South Africa

IT IS OCTOBER 1962, AND I AM THIR-teen and attending a boarding school for girls in northern New Jersey. My classmates and I sit at small wooden desks carved with graffiti while our teacher, Miss Elfman, tells us in methodical detail about the power struggle between the Soviet premier Khrushchev and President John F. Kennedy. Kennedy has set up a naval blockade against the Soviet ships that are headed for Cuba with a cargo of missiles. If the Soviets don't retreat, the U.S. has promised to attack. We may be on the brink of nuclear war.

Later, in the dorm room I share with six other girls, I look at my reflection in a full-length mirror. My baby fat has receded into curves; my small features are almost beautiful. I am not ready to be erased from the planet.

Mary Beth, who sleeps in the bed next to mine, has a plan. If we don't want to die virgins, she tells another roommate and me, then we should dress in tight jeans and sweaters, tease and spray our hair,

and climb out the window with her once the other girls are asleep. She is going to meet Pete, the boy with sleek black hair who works at the gas station down the road. He may have friends for us.

It is cold when we sneak out. We land on a stone path and run across a wide field to the dirt road. But the gas station is closed, and Pete is nowhere in sight. Above us the moon is bright and almost full. We race back across the grass, laughing, and finally fall to the ground and lie on our backs, out of breath. My mind is free of fears and plans about the future. I feel the warmth of the girls on either side of me and see the broad expanse of starry sky above.

*Stephanie Hart
New York, New York*

WHEN THE SECOND LINE APPEARED in the window of the pregnancy test, I felt as if the molecules in the room shifted and realigned themselves. This was big, bigger than anything in my life so far. George stumbled sleepily into the bathroom — it was 6 A.M. — and I thrust the test into his hand.

George and I had been seeing each other for only three months and had just moved in together a couple of weeks before. The house was still under construction: we had insulation and a wood stove, but little else. I was miserable in my job, made little money, and had no health insurance. But somehow this pregnancy made sense. I was soon thinking of the bundle of cells in my womb as “the baby.” As the weeks went on, George would pat my belly, hold me while I threw up, and crow, “We’re going to have a critter! How cool is that?”

And then the test results came back. Something was not right. Ultrasounds showed a massive swelling in the baby’s abdomen, clubfeet, and other possible abnormalities. They couldn’t find all four chambers of the heart. We scheduled an amniocentesis, to confirm that there were genetic defects. George and I held each other and cried and talked of nothing else. We scoured the Internet for information and left messages for genetic counselors. And we waited: for an appointment with the perinatal specialist; for the results from the amniocentesis; for someone to

tell us that this wasn’t happening.

We prepared ourselves to be the parents of a child who might need more care than we could give, though we would give him all we could. We braced ourselves for risky and invasive surgeries to save his life. We considered turning down the life-saving surgeries and giving him back to whatever mystery had brought him to us. We got ready to fight hard for his life, and we got ready to say goodbye.

*Rebecca Nellenback
Brooktondale, New York*

WHEN THE NEUROLOGIST USED THE word *dementia*, my first tack was to try to persuade him — and myself — that it was sleep deprivation that had caused me to fail the tests: I’d worked all night at the shelter because my replacement hadn’t shown up. The doctor, of course, didn’t buy it. They expect denial.

It took me a while to accept the diagnosis. I kept thinking of those times back in high school when I’d forgotten to go to gym class. Maybe I’d always had this cognitive impairment.

But I knew it wasn’t that simple. I started taking the pills that might give me a few extra years before the most debilitating symptoms set in. And I began keeping a journal, to cope with my fears and emotions. I debated whether to tell people. If they knew, I wouldn’t have to cover up my memory lapses. But what if they felt sorry for me, perhaps even avoided me? I had many questions: Would it be better to simplify my life, or did my mind need challenges to keep it functioning as well as possible? Could I stay in good humor and learn to accept my shrinking capacities? Could I, a dedicated social worker, continue to feel worthy when I was receiving help instead of giving it?

It’s been more than a year since my diagnosis. I’ve moved to retirement housing in a town closer to my children. I don’t often tell people I’ve been diagnosed with dementia, but I make no secret of my failing memory. I allow myself simple pleasures, like a walk to the store every day. I still write poems, with a lot of help from the thesaurus. I’m getting ready, I hope.

*J.T.R.
Yellow Springs, Ohio*

DAVID AND I HAD EIGHT CHILDREN and were often so busy juggling bills and babies that we neglected each other’s needs. After twenty-seven years, our marriage had grown stagnant. Then, in June 2006, David was diagnosed with stage-IV oral cancer, and doctors recommended immediate surgery.

I was shocked when I first saw him in the intensive-care unit with stitches across his jaw and up the side of his neck where the surgeon had removed the tumor and the adjacent lymph nodes. He looked as if someone had knifed him in an alley.

Though I had never left our children with baby sitters before, for eleven consecutive days I arranged care for them so that I could be with David in the hospital. Because my husband was unable to speak, I found myself searching his brown eyes for every nuance of feeling. Before, I had always urged him to hurry up and get to the point. Now I waited patiently while he labored to write messages on a dry-erase board. I spent hours holding his hand as he slept or watched television. I found I enjoyed spending time alone with him in that hospital room, away from our house full of children.

I began getting ready to see David each morning: I rubbed fragrant lotions on my skin and spent an inordinate amount of time on my hair and makeup. I abandoned my usual loose shirts and jeans and started wearing the skirts and dresses that had been shoved to the back of my closet. It dawned on me one day, as I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, that I was courting my own husband.

*Mary Kenyon
Dyersville, Iowa*

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