



GINA KELLY

Readers Write

## FAME AND FORTUNE

**I WAS BORN AND REARED IN SOUTHERN** Illinois, in a rural community so small that by the time the back of the bus entered town, the front of the bus was already leaving it. I was exposed to country music at a young age through my father's record collection: Hank Williams, Eddy Arnold, Lefty Frizzell, Merle Haggard. Their tunes and stories captivated me, and by the time I was fourteen I had written ten or eleven songs that I sang around the supper table and at our local pool hall.

I knew that the music I loved came from Nashville, Tennessee, so after high school and a number of dead-end jobs, I packed up my guitar and suitcase and

hitchhiked down to Music City.

Twenty-five years and a hundred songs later, I'm still on the outside looking in. I live on Music Row in a cockroach-infested apartment with no heat or air conditioning, and I spend all my money on demos and food. I have sold my blood at the Church Street plasma center to feed my songwriting habit.

I've never had a song recorded, though I've come close a few times. It could be Music Row politics, or my lack of contacts, or the changes in the industry, or bad timing. Or maybe my songs just suck. My family says my songwriting dream has destroyed my life, and I admit there are times when I wish I had never listened

to my daddy's record collection. But then again, there was nothing for me to do in my hometown. I would rather be one step away from the gutter in Nashville than living a comfortable life back there.

Years ago, during a late-night songwriting session, a fellow writer told me, "You have to want this more than you want to be loved." I didn't understand him then. I do now.

*Kim Harold Burns  
Nashville, Tennessee*

**I MOVED TO PARIS WHEN I WAS NINE-**teen with the goal of becoming an actress or a model. I'd already been rejected by several New York City modeling agen-

cies, but I wasn't going to let that stop me. I'd studied acting, dance, and voice. I was pretty and on the tall side at five feet nine — though not tall enough by New York standards. At 132 pounds, I wasn't as thin as I needed to be either, but I was working on that.

I had an agent waiting for me in Paris. Well, maybe not *waiting*, exactly. While having dinner at a close friend's house, I'd hit it off with her father's visiting colleague, whose *brother* François was a casting agent in Paris. I got his number, packed my suitcases, and headed for France.

It all went well at first. I slept on the floor at a good friend's apartment, in a tiny room that smelled strongly of tea and soap. Every day I walked for hours through the cold gray city, practicing my high-school French. I sat in real French cafes, drinking grand crème and smoking cigarettes, and I went to parties where I was surrounded by glamorous, creative people.

François was working on a television project that he said would be the first French miniseries. The star was the aging singer Johnny Hallyday. I was to be an extra in a bar scene. I arrived at the studio early and, after hair and makeup, moved to the soundstage, where the other extras and I were placed around a bar facade. Johnny Hallyday's arrival on set was greeted by an awe-filled hush. The filming was just as I'd imagined, with the director yelling, "Cut!" — only in French. He yelled it quite a lot, as Hallyday had difficulty remembering his lines.

After my successful turn as an extra, François gave me the name of a talent agent, whom I met with in a blindingly sunny office on the Rue Marbeuf. He nodded approvingly at me and got me a job performing at a shopping mall in the northern suburb of Sarcelles: six girls parading through the mall to promote a live race-car demonstration on the promenade. The event ended in a disaster when the race car lost control and swerved into the crowd, injuring several onlookers.

Next I auditioned for a TV show. When I discovered that the script called for me to flash my breasts, I only mimed exposing myself for the production staff. I didn't get called back.

Then my agent sent me to try out for a necklace advertisement, but the woman across the desk coldly observed that I seemed to have gained some weight since my pictures had been taken. You see, I'd discovered that the corner market near my new apartment sold Milka, my favorite chocolate bars, by the three-pack. They'd become a staple in my diet.

As my social life slowed to a crawl, I stopped marketing myself and instead read Nabokov novels and ate Milka, reveling in its heady, velvet sweetness. I slept on a thin foam mattress and woke in the morning to stare at cracks in the ceiling and the mess of lilac-colored candy wrappers on the floor. I sometimes rallied and took a walk in the Paris air, but the glimpses of other people's glamorous lives only left me feeling more adrift.

I began dating Adrien, a photographer I'd met on the race-car job. He was wonderful company but smoked too much pot and always looked emaciated. We had little money, and I had to scrape together my centimes to buy a baguette

and a small jar of Nutella. Otherwise I would go to Adrien's apartment and eat his roommate's food.

Deciding I needed a change, I cut my hair myself. It came out short — *very* short — and patchy in the back. It did not look good.

Adrien and I parted ways. My agent stopped calling. My father's most recent wire transfer — which I'd assured him would be the last — had run out. I was overdrawn at the Crédit Lyonnais. I found a job waitressing at a macrobiotic restaurant, but I couldn't understand the Japanese cooks, and they couldn't read my handwriting on the orders. After two shifts, I admitted defeat. Some Italian girls let me sleep on their sofa, and I spent my days cutting pictures from old fashion magazines. Twenty-five pounds heavier, my shorn hair growing back unevenly, I flipped through the glossy pages and ached with desire for what I somehow still believed could be mine.

Miranda Hersey  
Groton, Massachusetts

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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.)

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 |
|-----------------|------------|------------------|
| 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    |
| Saying Yes      | July 1     | January 2009     |

**MY SECOND-GENERATION ITALIAN** American parents wanted me to be a doctor. It was the only profession that would have made them proud. My mother even told her friends, before I'd selected a college major, that I was going to medical school.

When I announced to her and my father that I was studying to become a geologist, she asked, "What is that? A foot doctor?"

My father corrected her, telling her — with a wink in my direction — it was a type of gynecologist.

No, I said, geology had nothing to do with medicine. A geologist studied the earth, rocks, and minerals. My mother was crushed. "Why would you want to do that?"

Over the next four years, I tried to convince my parents that geologists could earn fame, if not fortune: the geologist Harrison Smith had walked on the moon during the Apollo 17 mission. My parents spent those same years trying to turn me away from geology, the way other parents might try to persuade their son he isn't really gay. They talked to our parish priest about my choice, encouraged me to spend time at the hospital with my cousin Tony "the neurosurgeon," and showed me pictures in *Life* magazine of smiling young doctors.

Even after I'd graduated with my degree in geology, my parents weren't defeated. They started telling family and friends I was an archaeologist, and that my work took me to remote parts of the world in search of rare artifacts. In reality I worked in Montana, looking for gold deposits. When I returned home for the holidays, relatives would ply me with questions about my travels to Peru and my plans to write a book about my adventures.

At first I tried to put down these rumors. But after a while I realized I had nothing to gain by calling my parents liars. So I made up wild tales about excursions to Outer Mongolia and the Amazon. My latest "book" is about the pre-Neolithic sites I discovered in central Africa — while escaping from cannibals.

*Thomas Cammarata  
Seattle, Washington*

**A WEEK BEFORE I GRADUATED FROM** college, my dad won several million dollars in the state lottery. I went out to celebrate with friends, and we threw dollar bills into the air and watched them spiral down with the falling flakes of snow. I remember thinking how different everything would be from then on.

My dad had spent his whole working life tending bar and cooking at the small restaurant he owned. He wore a prosthetic leg as a result of a birth defect, and all those years on his feet had been hard on him physically. One of the first promises he made after his big win was that he would pay for any further education my siblings and I wanted.

Requests for money poured in from people we knew, and from some we didn't. Within a year the notoriety had become overwhelming, and my dad and stepmother moved from the small community where they'd lived for twenty years to a place where no one knew them. Instead of pouring beers, my dad spent his days grooming his yard, tending to his pool, and pampering his new dog.

Tensions arose between my dad and relatives who expected handouts. Money became a sensitive subject between him and me as well, and after a few arguments I learned not to expect anything, even when I moved to a new city with only five hundred dollars in my pocket.

It's been ten years since then, and I hardly think about the lottery money anymore. For all I know, it's gone. I have learned to be self-sufficient and am going to graduate school for expressive-arts therapy, paying for it through student loans and scholarships. After many years of being withdrawn from society, my dad is now reaching out and counseling people who've lost limbs — most recently, soldiers returning from Iraq. He just came back from an amputee convention, where he ran a road race and took dance classes. I am proud of my father and know he is proud of me. But I still miss the way things were before.

*Name Withheld*

**A SMALL GROUP OF WOMEN FRIENDS** and I gather every autumn for a writer's retreat in a remote corner of northwestern Montana. We are teachers, house-

wives, and artists who love to read and write. None of us is famous; none of us is rich.

It is a rugged retreat: no makeup, no bras, no husbands or kids, and no agenda other than daily writing. Each of us has her own cabin overlooking the river, with a bed, a table, a chair, and a wood stove that we have to feed in order to stay warm. We read and write by candlelight and even use an old-fashioned outhouse that leans ever so slightly. In the evening we gather to eat, drink wine, and share what we've written (or not).

One afternoon when the weather was glorious, we gathered on the banks of the river for our midday meal. But there was one woman whose mood wasn't in sync with the day. During her morning writing, she'd had a crisis of confidence. If she was ever going to become a famous writer, she said, she should have at least had some success by now. Her eyes filled with tears.

Like a Greek chorus, the rest of us reassured her of her brilliance, showered her with comforting platitudes, and reminded her that, to us, she was already wildly successful. She seemed comforted and even laughed a little.

As I walked back to my cabin, I felt my own seeds of doubt. I wasn't rich or famous either. My mark on the universe was no more significant than that of the fly buzzing around the sun-warmed glass of my cabin window. I spent the afternoon fighting back the tide of my own uncertainty. I told myself everything I had said to my friend a few hours earlier. I cried, then slept.

That night we gathered around the campfire. Someone passed a bottle of tequila, and we sang songs, laughed, and even howled at the moon. Snowcapped mountain peaks loomed in the moonlight, and my earlier doubts slowly faded. The quest for fame and fortune seemed unimportant — for that night, at least.

*Julie Greiner  
Kalispell, Montana*

**WHEN I WAS FIVE, MY MOTHER BEGAN** regularly telling my older brother and me that she was going into our bedroom to write and wasn't to be disturbed. (I don't know why she chose our room in which

to work.) She said she was writing a novel about the end of the world, and we should prepare for her to be away a lot after she became famous. My brother and I didn't even know what a novel was.

The largest item in our crowded bedroom was Mom's writing desk: a squat wooden work table of the sort a graphic designer might use. It looked ugly to me. Mom labored there on her novel day after day, and we tried not to disturb her. I don't remember what we did while she was shut in our room, but somehow we didn't feel too alone; we had friends in the neighborhood whose mothers were more available.

Mom worked on that novel for more than fifty years. It went through endless revisions and was rejected by seemingly every publisher in the English-speaking world at least twice. Mom sometimes showed us her growing stack of rejection letters, as if they were evidence of her progress.

For her seventy-fifth birthday, I created a website for her novel, posting the unintelligible first chapter. I had one of her friends show her the website, on which the novel's title was rendered in moving red flames. Mom was pleased to be "published" at last. I even sent her some phony fan letters that I wrote. Mom is eighty-eight now and nearing the end of her world. She has never discovered my deception.

*Name Withheld*

**MY FATHER OWNED A SMALL GROCERY** store in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York. Despite his lack of money and social status, people were drawn to him. He had an understated charisma, due in part to his absolute lack of concern for wealth and fame. When a well-known author, who had taken to eating lunch on the store's porch, had a book reach number one on a national best-seller list, my father's only comment was "You switching from bologna to boiled ham now?"

If anything, Dad was a reverse status-seeker, always avoiding the spotlight. He would hate that I am writing this, but he's been gone a long time. Whenever I see someone from my childhood, we end up telling stories about him.

One year, for my father's birthday, a prominent multimillionaire who summered in our town sent a gift of Indian Pipe Madeira wine, bottled in the early 1800s. My father never opened it. Another wealthy vacationer brought the crown prince and princess of Liechtenstein to my father's store to meet him. To my dad, they were simply a couple of "summer-folk."

Once, the CEO of Tetley Tea came to our home and sat on the back steps with my father, who took the opportunity to point out that, in his opinion, their tea bags were too small. A short time later that CEO sent my dad a case of teapot-sized tea bags. Those my dad *did* open.

*Catherine Holmes  
Loudonville, New York*

**ONE OF THE MANY THINGS MY FIRST** husband couldn't stand about me was my unshakable belief that my children and I were uniquely gifted individuals. "Why do you think you're so special?" he would ask, usually when he'd been drinking.

I believed that he was special too, of course — at least, at first. I'd worked hard to put him through medical school. I thought he was smart and talented and would bring our family wealth and status in the community. (I never questioned whether wealth and status were really what I wanted.)

Unfortunately my husband's bipolar disorder and alcoholism both went untreated until long after our divorce. My children did grow up to do extraordinary things with their lives, and I got a PhD. It turned out we didn't need to bask in his glory. We earned our own.

*C.D.  
Gladwin, Michigan*

**IN A SMALL TOWN, I DISCOVERED,** A person can become famous just by teaching high school. At work I was just Ms. O'G., but outside the classroom — at the store, the gym, a restaurant — I was a celebrity. My male students would smirk when I purchased tampons at the grocery; my female students would shriek when I came out of the shower at the Y wrapped in a towel. Reports of my menstruation and cellulite ran rampant.

On the first anniversary of my moth-

er's death, I planned to drink a beer and smoke a cigarette in her honor. I don't often drink, and I'm rabidly antismoking, but my mother had been just the opposite, and I was feeling nostalgic for the scents of my childhood.

I stopped at the local gas station to get a six-pack and some cigarettes. On my way out, I ran into Jay, a former student of mine who was now a senior. Like a movie star surprised by the *paparazzi*, I was caught, beer and Marlboro Lights in hand.

"I can't believe you just bought cigarettes," Jay said.

I often lectured my classes on the evils of smoking. I bad-mouthed cigarette companies and impressed the kids with my ability to distinguish a student who smoked from a student whose *parents* smoked just by sniffing their jackets.

Jay's initial shock turned to disappointment. "Damn, Ms. O'G. The beer, OK. I get that. But cigarettes. Damn."

My little private party — just me and my complicated relationship with my mother — had been crashed by my public persona.

I've since quit teaching. The last of my former students are finally leaving town or else adjusting to finding me next to them at the gym, or the bar. I like being anonymous again.

*Mary Ann O'Gorman  
Ocean Springs, Mississippi*

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