



Readers Write

THE LAST TIME

I WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD, AND MY family was picnicking at Will Rogers State Beach in Santa Monica, California. While I played in the shallow, rocky surf, my brother and sisters jumped over the swells farther out. Between us was the “ditch” — an underwater trench probably only a few feet deep, but an impassable barrier to me. I asked my dad to carry me over

it, as he had done many times before, so I could float in the gentle swells.

This time he refused. “Cross it yourself. You can swim. You’ll be safe.”

I attempted to cross several times, but in each instance fear swept me back to the shore. I whined and pleaded for help until at last my father said, “If you don’t cross by yourself, I’ll never bring

you back.”

Desperate, I plunged into the ditch, gulped salt water, and reached the other side. I was proud. I had been carried across for the last time.

Dad is now eighty-eight and succumbing to Alzheimer’s. Shuffling steps have replaced his once-confident stride. On a recent visit, he held my hands and looked

fearfully into my eyes as I led him toward a ramp to go outdoors. He stopped at the threshold, unable to will his feet over. With a trembling voice he said, "I'd better go back inside."

If I can't get you across today, I thought, I'll never be able to take you outside again. But it would have felt cruel to pressure him, so I let him retreat to his chair.

*Tim Brandy
Ashland, Oregon*

MY FRIENDS DON'T UNDERSTAND why a missed cellphone call at dinner from my sister-in-law Jenny has me so panicked. My brother Matthew, Jenny's husband, suffers from depression and has been suicidal. I try to call back but can't reach her. Throughout the meal I eye the phone on the table beside me, willing it to ring again.

When I finally reach Jenny later that evening, I am relieved to hear that my little brother is still alive. Jenny is in Pennsylvania, and Matthew is at their home in Washington, D.C., but she's managed to extract from him a promise that he won't commit suicide this weekend.

I drop my plans and fly to D.C. On the plane, to calm my fears, I assure myself that Matthew has to stay alive to pick me up at the airport; he wouldn't leave me there all alone. When I see him waiting for me, I burst into tears.

Since Jenny is out of town, Matthew and I have the whole weekend to spend together. He laughs in the morning when he finds me asleep on my back in the sofa bed, legs together, arms out to my sides. "You sleep like Jesus," he tells me as I sit up groggily. I am just happy he's here to laugh at me.

Matthew's been depressed since he was about twelve years old, but he's always had a biting sense of humor and is the one person who has unfailingly looked after me. Lately his medications have quit working for him, he says. He's trying new combinations, which cause stomach problems and headaches. It's enough to make a healthy person depressed.

We spend Saturday at the museums, keeping our minds busy so we don't have to talk too much about our emotions. In the east wing of the National Gallery of Art, we stand together and look up in

wonder at the Alexander Calder mobile, creaking in the sunlight. It's not until we get back to Matthew's house that evening that we discuss why I'm there.

I ask him not to do it, but he won't promise me anything. I tell him I could have him committed to a hospital, but I also know my little brother could convince the doctors he's sane, then come home and kill himself anyway; the only difference would be that he'd hate me first for having betrayed him. I try to pull rank on him as his big sister. I try to set conditions: not until after Thanksgiving; not until after his thirtieth birthday this fall; not until after my wedding. (He laughs at the last one, as I am perpetually single.)

Then I start in on the reasons to live: the next Harry Potter book; afternoons at the museum beneath the Calder mobile; our mother's chocolate desserts. Matthew humors me, but I have suffered depression myself (the medications worked for me), and I know that the pleasures of the

world are not enough to relieve it. As his big sister, I have beaten up bullies for him. I have done everything I can think of to make his world more bearable. But this I can't fight.

On Monday Jenny is back from Pennsylvania, and we all go to group therapy together. Then on Tuesday morning I have to go to the airport and return to my job. Though I know we haven't changed Matthew's mind, Jenny is hopeful. It's sunny out. Matthew is headed to work. "I wish you wouldn't," I whisper in his ear as I hold him close.

Matthew committed suicide the following Friday.

*Katharine L.
Boston, Massachusetts*

I SPENT THE BETTER PART OF MY senior year of high school under the influence. I'd start drinking or smoking pot first thing each morning and continue well into the night. I made bad decisions, had run-ins with the law, and experi-

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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
Finding Out	April 1	October 2008
Immigrants	May 1	November 2008
Blood	June 1	December 2008
Saying Yes	July 1	January 2009
Instructions	August 1	February 2009
The Dinner Table	September 1	March 2009

enced blackouts, yet I have few regrets. Any time that I spent drunk or high was time I didn't feel the psychological pain of my childhood. And, being a shy and lonely girl, I had a lot of fun that I never would have had sober.

One night that spring, my sister Laurie and I were driving around with our friends Pete and Deb in our parents' red Ford van with the tinted windows. We listened to music and passed bowls of dope. (If anyone had bothered to vacuum the carpet in that van, they would have heard a *tick, tick, tick* as hundreds of dope seeds were sucked up.) It was one of the first warm nights of the year, so we had the windows open, and the blossoming trees and bushes smelled good. My usual worries — an unrequited crush on Pete; what I was going to do after graduation — weren't troubling me that night.

Then it started to rain, hard. Up ahead, at the bottom of a hill, the street was flooded by the heavy downpour. The water was at least three inches deep. One of us — it wasn't me — suggested we stop and get out.

I stepped hesitantly from the van and into the huge puddle. The rain continued to come down, and in an instant we were soaked, hair plastered to our heads, clothes clinging to our skinny bodies. We danced and laughed and splashed one another, not caring whether we looked cool. Nothing mattered, but in a *good* way. All of our adolescent worries were released in the deluge. I lay down on my back and let the cool water fill my ears. It was a moment of pure ecstasy and joy. I had the strange sensation of knowing who I was and rejoicing in it.

In the months that followed I would lose my virginity, go through a bout of depression, and start the first in a series of meaningless jobs. That night would be the last time I felt truly free.

Anne K.
Rockville, Maryland

MY GIRLFRIEND KATHLEEN'S MOTHER escorted me to the guest room for the night, explaining that, even though her husband was away, I still had to obey his rules and not sleep in the same room with their daughter. I made knowing eye contact with Kathleen as I thanked her mother

for letting me sleep over. By morning the snowstorm would have blown through, and I'd be on my way back to the military base.

After Kathleen's mother had gone to bed, I waited two hours, then slipped out of the guest room and followed the light of the television down the stairs. In the living room, Kathleen was alone on the couch, a long T-shirt pulled over her knees. Her face lit up when I appeared, and she cast an imaginary fishing line and reeled me in. She hooked her fingers into my jeans and ran them back and forth along the inside of the waistband, brushing against my erection. Then she unbuttoned my fly and lifted her shirt, and we rolled onto the floor.

Kathleen and I had broken her stepfather's rules many times before and had never been caught. We weren't caught that night either. At dawn I was in uniform and on the road.

That was the last time I crept down those stairs, saw the enthusiasm in Kathleen's eyes, and felt the power and pleasure of ejaculation. A few weeks later I was injured in a freak accident and permanently paralyzed.

Name Withheld

PARENTS USUALLY MARK THEIR CHILDREN'S firsts — first food, first words, first steps — but lasts often slip by unnoticed. I don't remember the last time I carried my son up the stairs in the crook of my arm. Or the last time I read him a bedtime story, closing the cover of *Goodnight Moon* when I was done. Or the last time he and I kissed on the lips or crossed the street hand in hand. Or the last time he called me "Daddy." I don't remember because I didn't know it was the last time. Had I known, I would have cherished it more. I would have held on tighter.

Edward Warner
Saxtons River, Vermont

THE FIRST TIME MY HUSBAND AND I danced was at our wedding. Actually, we didn't dance; we just posed for the camera. During our marriage I twirled around the house while picking up after the kids, but Russell, though he loved music, just wasn't a dancer. When he was in a playful mood, he sometimes did what he called

"sit-down dancing" — staying in his chair and moving his feet to the beat.

The kids grew up and moved away, and Russell and I were making plans for enjoying our retirement when he suddenly fell ill and had to have major surgery. To brighten his hospital stay, I brought him a portable CD player and a few CDs.

One evening as visiting hours drew to a close, Russell put in his favorite CD, grabbed my arm, and danced me around his hospital room: our first dance in twenty-five years of marriage. Then he walked me to the elevator, and we kissed good night in an unusual public display of affection.

A few hours later the phone woke me. Russell had died — a hemorrhage of his carotid artery due to a postsurgical infection. Our first real dance had also been our last.

Margaret Cherre
Friendship, New York

SUE AND I MET IN A MEDITATION ASHRAM, where we were assigned to be roommates. That first night in the kitchen after dinner, I was wiping the counter with long, sweeping arcs of my sponge when Sue came by with an armful of dishes. Seeing my careful technique, she said, "You love this, don't you?"

It was as if she had glimpsed a deeply hidden secret.

We became lovers, and on weekends we would drive into town under the pretense of "shopping," park on a shaded side street, and make out. We held hands as I drove back but always let go upon entering the ashram's long driveway: sexual contact wasn't allowed in the monastic environment.

When we made love at night, we would stifle our moans, though we were sure the devout woman in the single room across the hall was on to us. In retrospect, I think the whole ashram knew. We were protected, however, by the house rule against speaking of our personal lives.

I saw a future for us together, but Sue became progressively more troubled by our love affair. She saw me as a temptation that she had failed to resist.

One weekend in early May, Sue and I rented a house near Provincetown, Massachusetts. On our last night there, she

poured a small bowl of olive oil, placed it by the bed, and used it to take me to new heights of ecstasy. Afterward we lay together and stared up at the skylight above us.

"We can't be lovers anymore," Sue said firmly.

I said nothing.

"My spiritual practice is the most important thing to me, and celibacy helps me keep my focus," she explained.

I began to cry, and so did she. Although we lived together, in and out of the ashram, for most of the next decade, that was the last time we made love.

Amy H.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

MY FATHER WAS BIGGER THAN LIFE, a tall, broad-shouldered man who could belt out a song at the piano with gusto. He read five newspapers a day while watching two televisions and listening to the radio, all at the same time. There were six of us in our Brooklyn home — my paternal grandparents, my parents, my older brother, and I — but my father was the dominant presence. My first memory is of waking up in his strong arms as he carried me to my crib.

Always a sharp debater and more aware of current events than most teachers, my father had high expectations for me in school. At home he insisted I play the dutiful granddaughter to his ailing parents. Disappointing him was easy. The older I grew, the less acceptable I became. By the time I reached adolescence, my father had become a brooding storm to be avoided. Whenever I heard his car pull up in front of the house, I ran upstairs to my room.

As my father's once-successful sales career began to decline, his physical and mental health plunged as well. Tension filled our house, and at night I would sit at the top of the stairs and listen to the yelling in Yiddish and English from two flights below, where my parents and grandparents exchanged recriminations.

My brother and I grew up and moved out. After my grandparents died, my parents enjoyed their first year on their own in thirty years of marriage. A peace settled over them, and my mother opened

a store in the house.

But their new beginning was short-lived. My father was diagnosed with colon cancer just before his sixtieth birthday. We had cake and opened presents in his hospital room. By then he had shrunk in body and spirit, his booming voice barely a whisper, his yellowed eyes wise and sad.

One day I was feeding him cooked cherries in bed. Like a baby, he opened his mouth for the spoon and swallowed appreciatively. Then he started to choke on a pit. Terrified that I had killed my father, I moved to summon a nurse, but he managed to swallow the pit. I wept to see him breathe and told him I loved him. "Me too," he whispered.

The next day my father lapsed into a coma, and a week later he died. The last time I saw him, he was unconscious and breathing as rapidly as if he had run a race. The daddy I'd adored, the father I'd feared, and the parent I'd ultimately made peace with were like three different men. I said goodbye to all of them.

After my mother became a widow, she created a new identity for herself, going by her first name only — Rosie — and saying she would no longer be defined by any man. She had some good years, free to find the person she was meant to be without the burden of her in-laws' and her husband's needs. My mother and I had always been close and only grew closer as I grew older. She used to say we were "one soul in two bodies." She buoyed me up when broken marriages weighed me down, and I was the one person to whom she could reveal her true heart. Though we lived many miles apart, we remained "one soul" — until disease took from us what distance couldn't.

My mother's mind unraveled in a frightening manner. "Organic brain disease" was the term the doctor used as I stared uncomprehendingly at his kind face. He told me to "find a good home" for her and handed me a brochure, like a road map to a land of confusion and pain.

As my mother declined, she and I lost our connection, and she became hostile toward me, aiming her angry words like missiles. My brother and I moved her first to an independent-living facility, then to a

nursing home, and finally to an Alzheimer's ward, where she became emaciated and haunted. My frequent walks down that ward corridor were the hardest steps I ever took, and I often collapsed against the wall as I left her room.

The last time I saw my mother, she tried to hit me with the one hand she could still move, and she hissed, "Go to hell, you bastard." *I am already there*, I thought.

After many years of feeling alienated and uncomfortable around my father, I'd been able to find peace and acceptance with him before the end. After many years of cherished closeness with my mother, I was left with only guilt and misery at her death.

Elyse Crane

Roanoke, Virginia

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