



JAMES CARROLL

## Readers Write

# CHANCE ENCOUNTERS

**AS A COLLEGE JUNIOR I INTERNE**d with Planned Parenthood. Saturday mornings at 6:30 A.M., I would open the clinic door to a line of women already waiting outside in the cold. They had come, some from hundreds of miles away, for abortions. My job was to take their medical histories, answer their questions in a legally mandated counseling session, and provide emotional support while the doctor performed the procedure. Most women held my hand, cried, and told me stories of bad relationships, poverty, and loss. Others stared at the ceiling while I hovered nearby. One patient turned to me in the middle of her abortion and said, "Your compassion is overwhelming."

Sometimes I would encounter patients by chance in public. I always felt nervous when this happened, because I

was bound by confidentiality not to initiate contact with them. Once I spent an entire lifeguarding class treading water next to a former patient, and we never spoke. I ran into another woman at a swanky art exhibit; she acknowledged me with a slow nod from across the room. Drunk students often came up to me at keg parties to list all the reasons they'd chosen not to have a baby, as though they were seeking some sort of absolution. I felt differently about them than I had at the clinic, where they'd been scared and vulnerable. In the outside world, I thought of them as careless for having gotten pregnant and selfish for having ended their pregnancies.

Today I have an eleven-week-old son, and I rock, soothe, and nurse him all day long. Sometimes I think of how I judged

those women who terminated their pregnancies. They were wise to realize that they could not take on this difficult job. They made the best decision they could.

*Elizabeth O'Brien  
Inverness, California*

**WHEN I WAS LIVING IN BERKELEY**, California, I returned home from vacation to find that someone had broken into my apartment. My television was gone, along with most of my household appliances, and garbage and cigarette butts were scattered on the carpet. I rushed into my bedroom, where I was relieved to discover that my computer and my guitar remained untouched. Then I saw two feet poking out from underneath the covers on my bed.

I should have called the cops, but I wasn't thinking clearly, and instead I

nudged the burglar awake and asked him to leave.

"Yeah, could you give me a few minutes?" he said.

I recognized him as a homeless — and probably mentally ill — person I'd seen on the streets.

"Sure, I guess," I said, and I left the room, feeling as though I were the one intruding.

When I came back, he was trying to steal my DVDs. I snatched them from his hands and escorted him out. Minutes later I noticed him attempting to break into my neighbor's apartment, at which point I called the police.

After the man was arrested, an officer asked me to identify him for the police report. I was nervous: would the homeless man seek revenge on me for ratting him out? But he looked harmless with his hands cuffed behind his back and his face expressionless. Our eyes met, and I turned away.

"That's him," I said.

Later I imagined how the homeless man had come to be asleep in my apartment: Perhaps he'd been ready to make his getaway with an armload of my possessions when he saw my bed. It had been so long since he'd slept in one, nestled beneath real sheets. He couldn't resist.

Hans Oh  
Glendale, California

**THE PLANE WAS FULL OF TOURISTS** flying from Delhi to Jaipur, a popular vacation spot in India. My eyes were riveted by one passenger in particular: demure smile, twinkling eyes, auburn hair, bright blue scarf. After the plane had landed, she walked from one end of the tiny airport to the other, as if searching for someone. When she passed me, I asked, "Is anything wrong?"

A car was supposed to pick her up, she said, but it wasn't there, and she couldn't remember the name of her hotel. I told her she could come to mine and make some calls: there were only three hotels in town. It turned out we were staying in the same one, and we had dinner together that night. I found out she was from Germany and would return there after her vacation.

Eight months later I was in Frankfurt for a conference and had a free evening, so I

called her. She picked me up from my hotel, and we had dinner at her place. I ended up staying the night. After I returned home to India, we phoned and wrote each other often, and I kept her photo on my desk. But the relationship ended, in part because of the distance between us.

Five years later I missed a connection at a London airport and ordered an espresso while I waited. I looked up from the first sip to see her twinkling eyes and auburn hair. We embraced, and she told me she worked in England now. I abandoned my flight and took her to my favorite Westminster restaurant. Over dessert, I asked, "Do you ever wear scarves anymore?" She searched in her bag, found a scarf, and placed it around her neck. The same bright blue scarf. I could have wept.

Manish Nandy  
Reston, Virginia

**AT THE SUPERMARKET I GOT IN LINE** behind an elderly man who was unloading cans of dog food onto the checkout

belt. I had recently acquired a puppy, so I asked what kind of dog he had. He looked at me with red-rimmed eyes and said he had a big German shepherd named Coco, who was his best friend. He'd lost his wife a year before to cancer, and just that morning he'd heard that his oldest daughter had cancer too. (I figured she was about my age.) His eyes brimmed, but no tears fell. I expressed my sympathy, and he mumbled thanks, paid for the dog food, and left, looking as sad as any person I had ever seen. I resolved that if he was still in the parking lot when I got outside, I would talk to him.

He was just getting into his old Toyota pickup.

His name is Floyd, and he and I have met for breakfast every week or two since then. Coco died two winters ago, so Floyd is on his own now. I call him several times a week to see how he's doing. "Everything's quiet," he often tells me. We agree that quiet is good.

Before he retired, Floyd worked in textiles and metal fabrication, except

**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
Blood	June 1	December 2008
Saying Yes	July 1	January 2009
Instructions	August 1	February 2009
The Dinner Table	September 1	March 2009
Faith	October 1	April 2009
Moving In	November 1	May 2009

during World War II, when he was a gunner with the 30th Infantry Division. He arrived on Omaha Beach eight days after D-day (there were still bodies washing up) and made it through the Battle of the Bulge. He has outlived two wives, one daughter, several dogs, and any number of friends.

Now eighty-seven, Floyd is stooped and has only one working eye and few teeth. He bathes on Sunday nights, the same night he does laundry. He owns a little Cape Cod house off a busy street, cooks for himself ("My mother taught me everything"), tends his garden, mends what's broken, and worries about what will happen to his things "if" he dies.

Ours is an unlikely friendship. We always have breakfast at the same diner and never have to look at the menu. Floyd talks; I listen. He tells me about his childhood, the war, his jobs, his friends who've died recently, and what's happening on his favorite TV shows. He often complains that he doesn't have any ambition, but he's mending his back stairs, and last fall he planted a hundred spring bulbs. He says he's going to live forever. I've learned not to argue.

*Margaret Boyer Mann  
Hamden, Connecticut*

**THROUGHOUT HIGH SCHOOL I DATED** a studious and religious girl named Myra. I was her opposite — an alcoholic juvenile delinquent — but we fell in love despite our differences, or maybe because of them.

At seventeen I was sent to reform school, and two years after that I was arrested for burglary and did time in a maximum-security prison. Near the end of my sentence, I was placed in pre-parole forestry camp, from which I managed to sneak away. I stole a car, drove to my old neighborhood, and arranged a meeting with Myra at a lake several blocks from her home. When I told her of my escape and my plans to go to California, her eyes filled with tears, and she asked if she could come with me. I surprised myself by saying no; I didn't want to drag her into my mess.

I spent the next decade in and out of prison for crimes ranging from drunk and disorderly conduct to armed rob-

bery. Then, at thirty-one, I married, fathered two sons, and settled into a sober and law-abiding existence.

Eleven years later I was working at the baggage-department counter of the Greyhound bus depot when one of the drivers dropped off a purse that had been left on his bus. That afternoon, a woman came to inquire about the purse. It was Myra.

"Andy?" she stammered.

"Good to see you, Myra," I said, and I walked around the counter and lifted her into the air. As we hugged, I detected a strong scent of alcohol. Her hair was mussed, her makeup was smeared, and deep worry lines surrounded her eyes.

Later an old friend filled me in on Myra's downhill slide: A longtime alcoholic, she had been divorced twice and arrested a couple of times for drunk driving. She had lost custody of her three children.

When I reflect on the way our situations have reversed, I wonder how her life might have turned out if she had run away with me on that summer day twenty-five years ago.

*Name Withheld*

**IN THE BACK SEAT OF MY CAR, MY** three-year-old daughter is crying because she has dropped the cracker she was eating, and I have no more to give her. Her high-pitched wails shatter my nerves. Beside her, my nine-month-old son is also in tears: frightened by his sister's crying, tired of being confined to his car seat, and distressed that he is separated from me. His breath comes in hiccups, and his sweaty hair clings to his forehead.

It's been a long day. I want to go home, drink a glass of wine, shower, and get some sleep, but instead I will spend the evening cooking dinner, giving bottles, cutting up food, cleaning up potty-training accidents, breaking up fights over toys, holding one crying child, then the other — sometimes both — reading stories, singing songs, and putting my children to bed. Then, after their bedroom doors are closed, my husband will turn to me wanting to make love. I feel irritated at the thought.

To drown out the sound of my children's misery, I turn up the volume on the CD I'm listening to. It was given to me

by a co-worker I have a crush on. Lately his company at work is all I have to look forward to. I tell myself that I'm attracted to him only because my life is so hard right now; that what I'm feeling is not love but a desire for escape. But this crush is threatening to turn into something more — if only for me — and, as I sit at the red light, listening to his favorite music and the cries of my children, I know I must get over him. It's been fun, but it isn't real, and the risks are unfathomable.

The light turns green, and I'm preparing to drive off when a white car in the next lane catches my eye. It's my co-worker, waiting to turn left. My heart jumps, and for a second I imagine I could unbuckle my seat belt, open my door, and slip into his passenger seat, leaving my car and my children's tears behind.

Then the driver behind me beeps his horn, and I accelerate through the intersection toward home. By the time I pull into my driveway, the kids have fallen asleep, but the CD plays on, and I'm still thinking of my co-worker in the car beside me, and the impossible possibility of going with him.

*Name Withheld*

**IN 1969 I WAS AN INFANTRYMAN IN** Vietnam. Our company was stationed near Saigon and patrolled the jungles just north of the city. We also set up nighttime ambushes in the peanut fields beside the main highway, near foot trails that disappeared into the surrounding jungle. More often than not, these missions were uneventful, uncomfortable, and wet. During monsoon season, you could set your watch by the slate gray clouds that rolled in just before dark and dumped sheets of rain.

On one such evening my squad of seven was assigned to set up an ambush beside a trail that wrapped around the base of a hill jutting from the jungle's edge. The rest of the platoon — about thirty men — was camped on top of the hill. Rain dripping from our helmets, my squad and I waited for the cover of darkness so we could take up our ambush position behind a large log. Suddenly the crack of close-range gunfire broke the soggy monotony. One of us had come face to face with a Viet Cong who'd appeared

out of the jungle. Just like in a B-grade western, the U.S. soldier had beaten the Vietnamese to the draw. With our position exposed, we abandoned the ambush plan and pulled back to the top of the hill with the rest of the platoon for the night.

At daybreak a column of North Vietnamese regular-army soldiers crossed the highway and snaked its way down the trail beside our hillside position. I estimated more than five hundred men, at least a battalion. We were close enough to hear them talking as they passed by. When they came upon their fallen comrade on the trail where we had left him, the column halted and sat down in front of us for twenty minutes. Impossibly outnumbered, we didn't so much as twitch a muscle the entire time. After they'd disappeared into the jungle, we called in air strikes, but they were gone.

Our commanding officers were livid that we had not attacked. (Body counts were considered a sign of progress in that war.) Silver stars and purple hearts could have been won. Our platoon sergeant was sent away in shame. But I believe our platoon lived that day because that Vietnamese soldier — probably an advance runner — had happened across our path and gotten shot. Had we set up the ambush, that enemy battalion would have come right over the top of our position.

Thirty-nine years later I still think of that soldier's crumpled body with a strange mix of gratitude and guilt. His death saved us.

*Bill Wertz*  
*West Harrison, Indiana*

**IT'S A LONG DRIVE TO THE AIRPORT** at 5:30 in the morning, and there's not much on the radio but songs that bore me and news I'd rather not know about. As usual, a fantasy takes over: I'm sitting on the plane and look up to see you walking down the aisle. Why you after more than twenty years? We spend the next few hours reminiscing, catching up, apologizing, forgiving, and telling truths that we weren't able to tell back then.

In real life I get to the gate, sit down, and look around. I have a game I play of guessing what people are like by looking at their shoes. Across from me is a pair

of men's sandals, good chestnut leather, worn over tan socks. A personality is starting to take shape: Casual, a seasoned traveler. Cotton pants. *New York Times*. Well-worn leather briefcase. Fine hands. A face that looks like yours might at sixty or so. I look away. My heart pounds. No, it's not you. I'm making it up.

A four-year-old girl across from you asks you where you're going. I strain my ears but can't hear the answer. You show her that trick where it looks like you separate your thumb at the joint. Yes, it must be you.

I try to read, but I'm stealing glances your way. I should just go up to you and say, "Excuse me, but I think I know you." No, it's too much of a coincidence, and it's only because I was thinking about you. This man could be anyone. A couple of times I shift my position as if I might get up, but I chicken out. Once, our eyes almost meet. You stand up and start to walk in my direction, but you change course. Are you thinking the same thing?

We board the same plane and fly. From where I'm sitting, it's hard to investigate discreetly whether it's you. We land, and everyone stands up. Passengers take out their cellphones. You are holding *Car and Driver*. It has to be you. I walk the long passageway with you right behind me. *Turn around!* I say to myself. But I don't. Four years later I still don't know why I watched you walk away, back into my past, where you belong.

*Julie Orfirer*  
*Ashfield, Massachusetts*

**AS A FEMALE FRESHMAN IN COLLEGE,** I volunteered at a group home near campus, assisting the boys there with their homework a few times a week. I became close with the five residents, aged twelve to fifteen, all of whom had been removed from abusive homes. I had grown up in a middle-class suburb, where I had been unaware of lives like theirs. By the end of the year, I'd changed my major from veterinary medicine to psychology-sociology. I wanted a career working with high-risk adolescents.

I graduated and got a series of jobs at detention centers and public schools. After six years, I went back to the same university to get my graduate degree. A

woman in my program was volunteering at the group home where I had done my tutoring, and I asked her about the five youths I had worked with — in particular, Matthew, who I'd thought was bound to be successful. She said he had been convicted of rape and assault at the age of eighteen and was in prison. I was stunned and disappointed.

About a year after that conversation, I was walking to my car off campus late one night when I saw two tall figures coming my way. Other than them and me, the streets were deserted.

I turned off the sidewalk and walked between an old home and the strip mall where my car was parked. The two men split up: one came around the house in front of me, while the other followed behind. I tried to stay calm, but my stomach churned with fear. Then a parking-lot light above my car illuminated the face of the man approaching me. I recognized him immediately.

"Matthew," I said, "it's me, Rene," and I went over and hugged him. He introduced me to his friend as his old tutor from years before. We laughed and chatted, and neither of us mentioned his time in prison. I got in my car and drove off, still trembling and astonished by my good luck.

*R.R.*  
*Bayfield, Colorado*

*(end of excerpt)*