



RITA BERNSTEIN

## Readers Write PORCHES

**WHEN THE THREE O’CLOCK WHISTLE** blew, it meant first shift had ended at the Algodón Textile Mill. (I was an adult before I knew *algodón* means “cotton” in Spanish.) The mill was owned by rich Yankees who, I was told, lived in a castle in New Jersey. We lived on the hill beside the mill, in a shotgun house with a small front porch. The houses on the hill were all alike, each squatting like a hen on four piles of bricks or flat stones. When I heard the mill whistle, I would go and sit on the green metal glider on our front porch and wait for my daddy, who walked home from the mill wearing denim pants, brogan shoes, and a white T-shirt with a pack of cigarettes rolled up in the sleeve. When he got home, we would have “soupy taters” cooked with lots of butter and onion, cornbread, fried liver mush, steamed cabbage, and pinto beans.

After the supper dishes had been cleared and Momma had done her evening work, she’d put on a fresh apron and go sit on the porch. This was the signal that she was ready to receive company. The neighborhood women would come over one by one in their clean aprons to

sit in the straight-back chairs or rockers. There was a Luzianne tea can at the corner of the porch for those who dipped snuff, because Momma didn’t approve of spitting in the yard. As it got dark, the women sat and murmured to one another while we kids played tag under the streetlight or caught lightning bugs, pulling off their “fire” and pasting it around our eyes and mouth so that we looked like monsters in the dark.

When I got older, I tried to sit on the porch, but the women would shoo me away. Sometimes I would quietly crawl under the front steps, mindful of the blackwidow spiders and ever-present litter of kittens. Squatting on my haunches, I learned about the agony of childbirth and the trials of a woman’s monthly time. I learned whose man was chasing that little “split tail” who worked on second shift and whose husband had drunk up last week’s paycheck. I hid under the porch and listened until I was a teenager and was allowed to learn about life in the open from those tired women in their clean, starched aprons.

I often wondered how rich Yankee girls learned about life, living in castles

with no front porch.

*Marilyn Best  
Bessemer City, North Carolina*

**AFTER MY FRESHMAN YEAR OF COL-**lege, I spent a summer living at my parents’ house in Los Angeles, developing my addictions to video games and corn chips. The next summer my folks got me a job with a contractor who built cabins up in the sequoias. I lugged cement, dug ditches, and hauled lumber for the crew. The cantankerous contractor took delight in commenting on the smallness of my muscles and my apparent lack of testicles.

I stayed in a single room on the bottom floor of a three-story cabin. My outside door opened onto a porch just big enough for a rickety wooden bench, an old rocking chair, and a table fashioned from a wagon wheel. It was cramped, but it had a commanding view of a slate ridge across the valley and was just a few feet from a forest of fir, cedar, pine, and aspen. Busy chipmunks and squirrels scampered along tree branches and boulders, and sometimes the porch railing. Lizards darted around the porch, hunting ants.

Their purposeful ways somehow made me feel less anxious and worried about my own life.

Aside from my rodent and reptilian visitors, I had no friends — and also no phone and no television. The only entertainment was a turntable and a dozen Neil Young albums. After work I'd sit on my porch, listen to the records, and watch the sun dip down between two peaks, illuminating the needles of the tallest ponderosa pines. Then I'd eat macaroni and cheese while the stars came out and the crickets chirped and the frogs croaked.

A month into the summer I went back to Los Angeles to visit my friends and family. I was struck by all the pavement and noise and busyness — car horns, airplane engines, blaring sirens. There was also a disheartening paucity of chipmunks. I felt assaulted by humanity. At night the stars were faint imposters of the ones I'd seen from my porch in the mountains.

*Paul Grafton  
Santa Barbara, California*

**HE SKIED, WENT SCUBA DIVING AND** mountain biking, and played handball. Every year he hiked a different stretch of the Appalachian Trail. And then one morning he died. I woke up, and he was lying there beside me dead.

A neighbor helped me through the worst of it. After the ordeal was over, I returned home to . . . nothing. It was the first time I had been alone in years. I could not stand the thought of sleeping in our bed, so I grabbed his sleeping bag, because it smelled of him, and I slept in it on the back porch. I slept on the porch every night for a week. Sometimes I still do.

*Snowflake  
Jacks Creek, Tennessee*

**I'D BEEN ADOPTED AS A NEWBORN,** and the day I turned eighteen I went to the county clerk's office and asked to see my adoption records. A clerk escorted me behind a closed door and proceeded to scold me, saying that my records were sealed and it was against the law to open them. "Your parents adopted you because they love you," she said. "Now go home and be content with that."

But I believed I had a right to know the name of my biological mother, so I

didn't give up. I lied to get the information I needed and discovered that she lived in the town where I'd grown up and that she had no other children.

Despite how determined I'd been to find her, it took me ten years to get up the nerve to write her a letter, which she never answered. I waited a few more years and wrote her again. Nothing. A few years after that, I wrote a third and final letter, telling her it was all right that she didn't want to know me, but I'd appreciate it if she would send me her family medical history. Still no reply.

I decided to leave my birth mother alone, but whenever I visited my hometown, I would drive by her house: a small two-story on a tree-lined street. The front porch had been glassed in and was cluttered with knickknacks. One night I saw her sitting on the porch, reading. A lamp shining over her shoulder lit her face. I knew it was she because I had seen a picture of her in the newspaper years before. I parked in front of the house next door,

got out, and went halfway up the neighbors' walk, careful to stay out of the circle of illumination from their outdoor light. I stood in the dark for a long time and watched my birth mother read. Then I stepped into the circle of light. Only a driveway and a pane of glass separated me from the woman who'd given birth to me. If she'd looked up, she would have seen me. But she didn't.

I continued my drive-bys whenever I was home for a visit, but I never saw my birth mother again. After she'd died, her friends tracked me down. They hadn't known of my existence until they'd found my letters, stacked next to the reading chair on the glassed-in porch.

*Lonnie Hull DuPont  
Jackson, Michigan*

**GROWING UP IN THE SMOKY MOUNTAINS** of east Tennessee, I spent a lot of time on the front porch of our log house, where we'd shuck sweet corn and eat family dinners on summer evenings, or while

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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 one-year 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. Please include your e-mail address and phone number. 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
Faith	October 1	April 2009
Moving In	November 1	May 2009
Crushes	December 1	June 2009
Choosing Sides	January 1	July 2009
Fences	February 1	August 2009
The Middle of Nowhere	March 1	September 2009

away lazy weekends with friends.

Now I return to that porch for comfort whenever life's pressures and disappointments threaten to overwhelm me. The view it provides of the mountains gives me a sense of stability. No matter what turmoil is going on in my life, those mountains are the same.

A few hours away, in southern West Virginia, my friend Maria has a different view from her front porch. Her house has been in her family for generations and was once tucked into a peaceful Appalachian hollow. In recent years, however, a big coal operation has ravaged the environment around her house, blowing up the mountaintops, burying the streams in debris, and turning the forests into a toxic moonscape.

Maria recently went to court and saved one valley from a swift and permanent burial. But jobs there are hard to come by, and when the mining company laid off part of its workforce in response to her legal action, some locals made threats against Maria. To protect her family, she has built a chain-link fence around her house. The day the workers erected it, she sat and cried. Meanwhile the mountains she sees from her front porch continue to come down.

A few months ago I dreamed that a coal company was blasting apart the mountains I can see from my parents' porch, and I felt rage and sadness. I am working with Maria to try to save her mountains, because I know she would do the same for me.

*Mary Anne Hitt  
Blacksburg, Virginia*

**GROWING UP IN AN ORPHANAGE, I** often felt like a prisoner. My only refuge was the courtyard of the old mission. I'd wait until late afternoon, when the tourists would be gone and the courtyard — filled with bougainvillea, flowering trellises, and bird song — would be all mine. Then I would squeeze my six-year-old body through an opening at the top of a barred window and drop down onto the clay tiles.

I could usually find a sizable cigarette butt in the sand-filled pot next to the entrance of the church. I would sneak up to the altar and light my cigarette with

the flame of a devotional candle. Then I'd scurry up the steps to the bell tower and stand on the outer edge of the landing, where I couldn't be seen, to smoke and feel the nicotine rush.

The bell-tower landing, because of its height and location next to the church's main entrance, was a perfect vantage point from which to survey the valley below. It was my private sanctuary where I smoked and dreamed of running away. I wondered how far I could get before being caught. There were houses dotting the tops of the distant canyon walls, and I always imagined one of them was my grandmother's home. If only I could get to her, I thought, I would be safe.

My grandmother actually did live somewhere in those hills, but I knew if I ran away, she would send me back. The only thing worse than being in the orphanage would have been the humiliation of having my grandmother reject me.

*Francis Collin Brown  
Port Townsend, Washington*

**THE FOUR OF US — TWO SETS OF TWO** brothers — shared a sleeping porch from 1949 to 1960. Not one of us ever thought to complain, even when we woke freezing at 3 A.M. despite our electric blankets, which were all set to 10 and plugged into one extension cord.

The unheated, uninsulated porch had just enough room for two metal bunk beds and two chests of drawers; no closet. We covered the windows with cardboard and rags to cut down on drafts. A single forty-watt bulb inside a milky white globe hung from the ceiling. (Sometimes the globe was shattered in the warfare among us.) We kept the floor swept and the beds made to boot-camp standards. During the Kansas winter the wind rattled the windowpanes and caused the curtains to dance; in the summer the heat left us gasping for any air we could capture from the one oscillating fan.

Our house was located near the Kansas State Industrial Reformatory, and when an inmate escaped, a siren would wail to warn the neighborhood. We once stayed up all night with trip ropes, hoping to catch an escapee and receive a reward. Another night I dreamed an escapee broke

in and was coming toward my bed with a butcher knife raised. For months I slept with the covers over my head and my body pressed against the wall.

Today the others and I all live in upscale houses with large master-bedroom suites; none of us is any happier for it.

*Ronald Riffel  
Sarasota, Florida*

**WE WERE FIRST COUSINS, A NINETEEN-**year-old girl and a sixteen-year-old boy, entwined and panting on my parents' Main Street front porch in small-town Alabama. I believe I still had my bra on, but the rest of our clothes were off. His tongue twirled *there*, where I'd never let a boy put his tongue before. My mouth sucked at him *there*. (I'd never made it with an uncircumcised boy before.) A few times headlights came slicing through the predawn gloom, and we cowered to avoid being spotted. Our bodies slapped against each other, the paint-peeled concrete scratching my back under his frenetic thrusting. We shouldn't have been doing this: I had a boyfriend; he had a girlfriend. His mother was asleep not five feet away inside the house.

Suddenly the porch light blazed on above our heads, and he grabbed his clothes and ran around to the back of the house. I yanked my shirt over my head and followed him, bare bottomed, to the dark backyard, where he crouched in the dirt underneath the not-quite-finished back porch my dad was building. He pulled his clothing on while we laughed and convinced ourselves we'd gotten away with it. We talked for a while about the ethics of what we'd done — neither of us felt particularly guilt-ridden — and waited until we felt sure that whoever had turned on the lights was asleep. Then we went back inside.

In the morning no adults gave any indication they'd seen anything. I assume they're still blissfully ignorant regarding the transgressions between first cousins on an open front porch in small-town Alabama.

*J.M.  
Amherst, Massachusetts*

**NO ONE SPENT MUCH TIME ON THE** front porch until I forbade smoking in

the house. Then we put some chairs out there, and a coffee table with an ashtray, and the old couch, and a green dresser we didn't have room for indoors. Before long my sixteen-year-old son, Ben, and his friends were hanging out on the porch every evening, smoking and drinking beer. A neighbor two houses down called the police whenever the kids stayed out there after ten. The police would drive by slowly with a floodlight and yell, "Keep it down!" The officers were probably as glad as I was to have the boys off the streets.

When Pat, my ex-husband, got sick and lost his place to live, he started sleeping on the old couch. The first morning I found him there, he apologized, and the next night he slept under the plum tree in the backyard. The kids and I agreed he could sleep on the porch while we looked for a place for him to stay. He would hoard food in the dresser and gripe about having been awakened by possums sniffing around for it. Then he started complaining about headaches and asking for cup after cup of coffee.

Pat was diagnosed with a brain tumor, and while he got care, my daughter Nora and I began to join Ben on the porch. Nora's high-pitched, hysterical laugh brought the police quicker than ever. One night they said, "Couldn't you just go inside?"

Pat died the following spring, and I repainted the porch, got rid of the couch and dresser, and bought some green plastic lawn chairs. A friend of Ben's set up a grill in the driveway and taught Ben how to smoke salmon. I kept the scene under control by going out in my nightgown at 10 P.M. and standing there until everyone left.

As the years went by, Ben started a business selling newspaper subscriptions, and he and his subcontractors met on the porch in the late afternoons to relax with a smoke and a beer. One of his best salesmen was Dale, a Native American in his midfifties who spent long hours on the porch, philosophizing with anyone who would listen. Every time Dale saw me, he thanked me for letting him sit on my porch. He said it was a sacred spot. Ben told me Dale was fighting colon cancer and asked me to put up with him — it wouldn't be for long. I did, and it wasn't.

Now Ben lives with his girlfriend, but he and his friends still come over occasionally to sit on the porch and cook salmon. They're of legal drinking age now, and better about using the ashtrays. The neighbor either has mellowed out or is losing his hearing. And I sleep right through it all.

*Jean Gant  
Seattle, Washington*

**IN MY LAST SEMESTER OF COLLEGE, I** studied in India and kept an online journal so friends and family could keep up with my experiences. A stranger named Ruth found my journal by chance and became a regular reader of it. She was just a little younger than I was, and when I got back to the U.S., we started chatting by phone. Though I had decided to avoid entanglements with women for a while, Ruth and I became close. I was living with my parents that summer as I tried to find direction. With no job and few friends in the area, I was often depressed, and I'd question my worth. But I felt important to Ruth.

One day Ruth told me that another boy she'd been corresponding with had just died of a heart attack. She was inconsolable. He used to sing her to sleep over the phone, to help her deal with her insomnia and nightmares about her past. Now she asked me if I would sing to her.

I was not in the habit of singing for people, but Ruth's persistence helped me overcome my anxiety. I went outside on the porch so no one else in the house would hear. It was dark and quiet on my suburban street, and the crickets were chirping as I sang Ruth a Smashing Pumpkins song called "Thirty-three." She joked that my voice was terrible, but I could tell she was happy. I sang a few more songs I knew by heart, pausing after each to ask if she was still awake. She replied with progressively quieter cooing until she stopped responding altogether. Believing she had fallen asleep, I said good night and hung up. Before I could step into the house, the phone rang again.

"Alex?" Ruth said in a trembling voice. "I love you."

"I love you, too," I said.

I sang her to sleep two or three times a week after that. Later in the summer

I visited her and held her all night on a hotel bed. Then we had a falling-out and stopped speaking to each other.

But I'll never forget singing into the phone in the middle of the night on the porch of my parents' house. On those nights I sang Ruth to sleep, I slept pretty well myself.

*Alex Joppie  
Chicago, Illinois*

*(end of excerpt)*