



JAMES CARROLL

## Readers Write

# FINDING OUT

**I HAD A SECRET TO CONFESS TO MY** mother, who was coming from the Midwest to California to visit me. The year before, I had broken my engagement to a man. Mom knew this. What she didn't know was the reason: I'd fallen in love with a woman.

My mother and I had always been close, but I sometimes felt there were things about my life she could not understand. In her mind, my happiness and well-being were synonymous with marrying the right man. Still, her visit felt like the time to come clean; after all, my girlfriend lived with me.

The day my mother arrived, I poured myself a glass of wine, took a deep breath, and blurted out the whole story. She

was surprised but not as shocked as I'd thought she would be. It turned out I was the one about to be shocked.

Before meeting and marrying my father, my mother said, she'd had a five-year relationship with a woman.

"Does Dad know?" I asked.

"No!" she answered, making me promise I would never tell him or anyone else in our family. I promised but felt sad that, after nearly fifty years, she still needed to be so secretive.

My mother told me she had met the woman in college. After two years, their friendship turned romantic; the woman already had a young daughter, and they became a family, but it didn't last. My mother said their breakup so devastated

her that she saw a therapist for months afterward. Only their closest friends knew about their relationship — after all, it was the 1950s, and though my mother and her lover lived in a big city, they dared not even hold hands in public.

My mother admitted that, though she'd been married twice, she had never felt that same kind of love for anyone else since. But she said she wasn't sorry she'd married my father, because she had my brother and me to show for it.

So I was not the only keeper of secrets in the family. The guilt I'd experienced over leaving my fiancé and hiding the truth suddenly seemed like nothing compared to what my mother had endured. I still wish things could have been

different for her, and I am thankful that they are different for me.

*Kennedy Grace  
San Diego, California*

**DURING WORLD WAR II MY GRAND-**father Frank died aboard his submarine while it was stationed in New London, Connecticut. The cause of death was a gunshot wound to the stomach, and it was ruled a suicide, though there was speculation in my family that he had been murdered or that the death had been accidental, because he'd shown no symptoms of depression.

I am named after him and grew up feeling that I had inherited his mantle, which carried with it the mystery surrounding his death. When I was fifteen, I asked my grandmother, then in her sixties, exactly how my grandfather had died. She could still barely talk about it. An inquest had been held to determine the circumstances of his death, she said, but she'd always felt that some kind of coverup had taken place.

In the winter of 2000 I found myself with a three-hour layover in the Honolulu airport, and I decided to visit Pearl Harbor. At the submarine museum a helpful curator produced a thick file on my grandfather's sub. (It had been transferred to the Pacific and had gone on to great fame in the war.) In the file I found a letter written by a former crew member stating that my grandfather had shot himself on board the boat while it had been stationed in Connecticut. I photocopied all the papers in the file and returned to the airport just in time to catch my flight to Los Angeles.

The next morning I began looking up phone numbers for names listed in the file and eventually tracked down Captain S., my grandfather's immediate supervisor, now in his late eighties. He told me the rest of the story.

My grandfather Frank, he said, had been sexually harassing one of the enlisted men, threatening to make his professional life miserable if he didn't accept my grandfather's sexual advances. The young man had decided to report the incidents to his commanding officer. Another sailor testified to similar treatment, and the captain arrested Frank and held

him on the boat until he could be transferred to the base brig. He was confined to quarters when he shot himself.

Had his death been classified as a simple suicide, Captain S. told me, my grandmother, who had five young kids to raise, would not have received wartime widow benefits. So, during the inquest, the ship's officers had closed ranks and sworn that Frank had endured severe mental hardship on their most recent patrol in the North Sea, making his death "war-related."

"It seemed," Captain S. said, "like the honorable thing to do."

*Francis B.  
Port Townsend, Washington*

**I WAS ATTENDING ART SCHOOL OUT-**side Los Angeles and had been up for thirty-six hours working on a painting when the phone rang. The voice at the other end said, "Is this Susan?"

I said yes, though I was immediately suspicious. My adoptive sister had been having her druggie friends call me on her

behalf to ask for cash. I steeled myself for another appeal.

"My name is Margie Grey. I'm your sister. . . ." I waited for her to finish and say she was my sister's friend, but instead there was silence.

"What?"

"You were born in May 1961, right?"

"Yes . . ." Her voice sounded familiar. In fact, it sounded like my own when it was recorded and played back to me.

Margie said she had been looking for me for almost ten years. She was my biological half sister.

Contrary to what I had assumed, my birth mother had not been an unwed teenager when she'd given me up for adoption at birth. She'd been thirty-six and married with a four-year-old daughter — Margie — and I'd been the result of an extramarital affair.

Margie's father (my birth mother's husband) was mentally ill and had admitted himself to a hospital. While he was institutionalized, my birth mother,

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
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
Rain	April 1	October 2009

Kathleen, met a GI at the local army base and had an affair with him. The GI, who was transferred to Alaska just after he learned of the pregnancy, assumed Kathleen would have an abortion across the border in Mexico. But Kathleen was Catholic. She decided to have the baby and keep it.

After her husband found out, he sent her a letter from the mental hospital, threatening to divorce her and take Margie away if she kept me. So Kathleen gave me up for adoption by a well-to-do family who already had one adopted daughter.

When I was born, Kathleen was the society editor for the newspaper in her small Southwestern town. To help her save face, a colleague arranged for the paper to report that she'd had a stillbirth. Even Margie didn't know I existed until she became pregnant at seventeen and Kathleen told her about me.

Now Margie said Kathleen wanted to call me in a half-hour. Was that OK?

How could I say no?

Thirty minutes later the phone rang again, and my birth mother and I talked for more than an hour. I was astonishingly comfortable with her. We had the same sense of humor — even the same laugh.

We met in person during the Christmas holiday. Margie came too. Kathleen had tracked down my birth father, who was now married and had two sons. So, with that one phone call from Margie, I acquired a birth mother, a half sister, a niece and nephew, a birth father, and two half brothers.

Kathleen died of leukemia just eighteen months after I'd met her. One of the things she left me was a white box with "1961" written across the top. It was full of sympathy cards sent to her after my "stillbirth."

*Susan B.  
Maplewood, New Jersey*

**I WAS TEACHING ENGLISH AS A** second language in Japan when Haruko joined my class. She told me that she'd recently had a nervous breakdown. It wasn't hard to believe: she was pale, seemed perpetually nervous, and spoke with a slight tremble in her voice.

In class Haruko's English was some-

times formal or stilted, making it incomprehensible to her classmates. She didn't seem to care. From the start she was focused on me, the teacher. She was always the first to arrive and would talk to me until class started. After class she'd make conversation with me until we got off the elevator and turned to walk different paths home. Although it seemed unfair to the other students that she dominated my time, I enjoyed our discussions and hoped I could help her through a rough period.

At the year-end party I sat at the same table with Haruko's father, who was a professor at the university where I taught. After a few drinks he confided to me that he was worried about Haruko's mental health and future. Could I look after her? I felt moved that he would ask me and told him I would try.

Over the winter break Haruko got a secretarial job in my department. Meanwhile I found out that my live-in girlfriend was pregnant, and we made plans to be married that summer. I felt a superstitious need to keep a lid on the pregnancy until we got past the first trimester, when miscarriages are most common. But I told one colleague, who hinted to Haruko that I had "big news," but he couldn't say what it was.

"What's your big news?" Haruko asked me the next day. I told her it was still a secret, but I would be able to tell her soon. When I asked Haruko whether she would be taking my class that year, she answered, "It depends on your news." Her reply seemed to confirm my suspicion that she had feelings for me.

At the start of the new year our department had a party to celebrate, and I got a little drunk. I was talking to Haruko and her fellow secretaries when one of them asked about my girlfriend. Unable to contain my joy at the prospect of becoming a father, I shared the news. Haruko went to the ladies' room looking upset. The party was winding down; I thought about sticking around to make sure she was OK, but I worried I would make the situation worse. *Only time can soothe unrequited love*, I thought. I got on my bicycle and rode home.

A few days later I opened my e-mail at work and learned that, right after the

party had broken up, Haruko had committed suicide. She'd jumped from the top floor of a building. Some department members were planning to attend her funeral that afternoon. I insisted on going even though I was dressed in faded jeans and didn't have anything to change into.

Seeing Haruko's picture above the coffin broke my heart. I spotted her weeping father and, recalling our conversation, felt a sense of failure. I began to cry too, soaking my handkerchief. It was a beautiful spring day. I just wanted Haruko to be there to enjoy it.

*J.S.  
Tokyo, Japan*

**MY STEPMOM, BETSEY, MADE ME DO** things that my mom and dad never had, things that were, to my teenage point of view, stupid and pointless, like changing my sheets, scrubbing the bathroom floor, and writing thank-you notes.

When Betsey's first grandchild was born many states away, there was a scare during delivery, and our household was on edge all night. Betsey overheard a phone conversation I was having with a friend and misinterpreted it, thinking that I was planning to wear a skimpy outfit to the mall behind my dad's back. Later Betsey and Dad came marching into my room, and my father stood by as Betsey laid into me with a fury I'd never experienced in my sixteen years. "Your dad carries you around on a satin pillow," she shouted. "For all I care, you can go to hell!" I tried to explain that she'd misunderstood, but they turned and left.

The next afternoon Betsey picked me up from school. In the car, while waiting for the light to change, she broke the silence. "I know what I said last night hurt you."

I felt my chest tighten, but I stared straight ahead and said nothing.

She cupped my chin in her hand and turned my face to meet hers. "I didn't mean what I said, Angie."

I tried to twist out of her grasp, but she held firm, apologizing and explaining the stress she'd been under the night before with her grandson's birth. "I do love you," she said.

I felt sure she didn't. How could she?

I certainly didn't love her.

When I was in graduate school, I grew depressed and went into therapy to discuss my parents' divorce, the growing rift between my dad and me, and my unresolved anger toward my mother, who'd died six months after I'd started college. Many sessions, however, revolved around my relationship with Betsey. It had been seven years since that day in the car with her. Why couldn't I just get over it?

During one session my therapist asked me to imagine Betsey was in the room with us. Then he asked me to pretend to walk over and hug her.

"OK." I did it. "So?" I said.

"No, I mean *really* hug her. Hug her until you want to let go, and then keep hugging. Hug her until she tries to pull away."

Tears wet the corners of my eyes, and I started to make excuses: "Why do I have to be the one to do it? She's the one who . . ."

My therapist gave a knowing smile. "You cannot change other people, Angie," he said. "You can only change how *you* respond to them. And sometimes you have to go first."

"But how do I know hugging her is going to do anything?"

"Because you are afraid to do it."

Several weeks later I went home for a visit. All weekend long the thought of hugging Betsey nagged at me. I wondered if I would chicken out. I wondered what Betsey's reaction would be.

On Sunday I got set to head back to school and exchanged the usual pleasantries with my dad and Betsey. I knew the moment had come. If I didn't do it now, I never would.

I hugged my dad, who planted a kiss on my cheek. And then I hugged Betsey. The customary hug time of a few seconds passed, and I felt her try to pull back, but I didn't let her. She uttered a small laugh of surprise. I kept hugging until she hugged me back, which caused my tears to come, and then sobs. Rubbing my back, she whispered into my neck, "It's OK. Let it out."

When we finally parted, Betsey held my face in her hands — just as she had that day in the car — and smiled as if she'd been expecting this. And that's

when I found out she really did love me.

*Angela S. Weisser  
Louisville, Kentucky*

**WHEN MY PARENTS CALLED ME INTO** the living room, they had their "serious-talk" faces on.

"What would you think about going to Disneyland?" my dad asked.

I was eleven — a little old for Mickey Mouse, but game. I asked the question I always did when my parents offered to take me on a trip: "Can I bring a cousin?" I was an only child, and vacations with just my parents could become tedious.

"No, Aunt Patsy is coming," said my mom.

Good enough. Patsy was my mom's sister; she had never married, and she spoiled me rotten.

We spent two days at Disneyland riding in teacups and listening to annoying dolls sing "It's a Small World." On the third day my mom surprised me by taking one of my dresses out of her suitcase. "Put this on."

I balked. I didn't like to wear dresses.

"We're going to see Alecia today," she said. Alecia was a friend of my mom's who had recently moved to Los Angeles. I protested weakly but soon gave in, knowing that I was not going to win this battle.

Alecia lived in a small apartment an hour from our motel. On the way there, Mom and Aunt Patsy pointed out sights to me, but I was still in a snit and refused to be awed by the big buildings and busy freeways.

When Alecia answered the door, her eyes were moist. We had a long and boring visit. As Alecia walked us back to our car, she pressed a piece of paper into my mom's hand. "He's a miracle worker, Martha," she said.

"Good. I need a miracle," Mom replied. I noticed that Aunt Patsy's eyes were wet, too.

As we pulled out, Mom started reading directions from Alecia's note to my dad. I assumed Alecia had supplied us with a shortcut back to Disneyland, but after a few wrong turns, my dad pulled up in front of a church.

I was appalled. It was just like my mom and Aunt Patsy, both products of Catholic boarding school, to drag me to church on

vacation. I decided to sit it out in the car with my dad, a proud agnostic, but then Dad got out, too, and I was forced to join their small procession as they climbed the steps of the church.

A priest met us at the door. "We're here to see Father Aloysius," said my mother quietly. He nodded and led us through a chapel and into a dark room. "Have a seat. The father will be in soon."

I sat in silent fury that church had hijacked my vacation.

Soon an elderly priest walked in, and my mom made the introductions. He asked us to hold hands. Then he began reciting prayers in a heavily accented voice. When my dad joined in, I was dumbfounded. Once the praying was over, the priest turned to my mom and asked, "How can I help you?"

"I have cancer, acute lymphocytic leukemia," my mom said softly. "My doctor has given me six months to live."

*J.O.  
Oregon*

**HERE ARE A FEW THINGS I FOUND** out about my parents after I came out to them as a lesbian:

1. They house a tremendous amount of rage.
2. Homophobia can transform loving parents into hateful foes.
3. The promise of heaven, coupled with the fear of hell, dictates their beliefs.
4. Their relationship with their daughter is of little importance compared to their relationship with God.
5. One of the three of us will probably die before I ever see them again.

Sometimes I wonder who came out to whom.

*Name Withheld*

*(end of excerpt)*