



SCOTT STOUGHTON

Readers Write

BLOOD

WORKING AT MY FAMILY'S HOCKEY rink during my college years, I got to see a lot of blood, most of it from superficial cuts to the face that looked gory until cleaned up. Though I never had even a basic first-aid course, I got so good at applying bandages that players often told me later how much the emergency-room staff had admired my work.

No matter how much blood I had to

wipe off a hockey player, it never really got to me. I wasn't one to fall apart so easily. But then my dad would walk into the office with a cut for me to dress. He would sit down on the worn wooden bench, his face and hands covered in oil from having worked in the compressor room all day, and show me a gash on his hand or arm. He had probably injured himself hours earlier, but he would always wait until the job was finished before he would ask me to patch him up. The sight of just a drop of his blood made me tremble. Bloody hockey players were a dime a dozen, but I had only one dad.

*Kathy L. Abbott
Beverly, Massachusetts*

I WAS TWELVE WHEN I STARTED MEN-struating. I stared at the bloodstained toilet paper in disbelief, then searched in vain for the blue box that my mother had pointed out to me on the bathroom shelf months before.

When I couldn't locate the box, I went to my dresser drawer for the kit the nuns had handed out after we'd watched the grainy filmstrip in the sixth grade. I found the elastic sanitary-napkin belt, but the lone pad that had come with it was long gone. I'd practiced putting it on so many times that the ends had torn, and I'd discarded it. I stood there holding the stretchy belt with nothing to attach to it, sticky blood between my legs. Then I ran to find my mother.

She was outside smoking a cigarette and having a rare moment of solitude in front of the chicken coop.

"I got my period," I blurted out.

"Oh!" she cried, blushing.

"I can't find any pads."

She jumped up and went into the house, where she dug through the bag of rags she kept on a hook.

"You'll have to use a rag, just like I did as a girl," she said.

I was mortified. How could I wear a bulky rag held in place with safety pins?

In the bathroom I stood rigid as my mother pulled down my bloodstained cotton underpants, knelt in front of me, and attached the pins to each side of the folded rag. The top of her head brushed against my pubic hair as she stood up. "When you change the rag," she said, "rinse

it out in the sink, and put it in the wash basket. I'll buy you some pads as soon as I can."

If it had been up to me, I'd have buried the used rag deep in the trash, but my mother never wasted anything.

For two days I was excused from chores, and I sat around reading books and feeling as though I had a pillow between my legs. Later I overheard my mother whispering to my father that the reason there were no pads on the shelf that day was that they couldn't afford them. My mom had been using rags herself to save a few dollars.

The thought of my mother wearing rags during her own periods so that I could have store-bought pads made me want to help. I started saving my babysitting money to buy boxes of sanitary napkins, which I left where I hoped my mother would see them, so she would use them, too.

*Mary Potter Kenyon
Manchester, Iowa*

I CAME BACK FROM LATIN AMERICA with some kind of illness. Since I was broke, I went to the local free clinic, where I'd worked as a home-health aide, helping people with late-stage AIDS to die with dignity. (In 1993 a dignified death was about all we could offer.)

Before the clinic nurse drew my blood, she asked if I wanted to be tested for HIV. I agreed, though I didn't think I needed to be tested; I'd been negative the last time and had had only safe sex since then.

A week later I came back for the test results. I knew something was up when they ushered me into a quiet room with a solemn-faced counselor. He told me I was HIV-positive.

I was silent for a long time as I tried to figure out who might have infected me. I'd had a few fleeting encounters, but they'd all been safe. There was one man who'd kept buying me drinks and then convinced me to go home with him. We'd had protected sex, and I'd spent the night. I'd been really drunk; maybe I'd blacked

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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
Choosing Sides	January 1	July 2009
Fences	February 1	August 2009
The Middle of Nowhere	March 1	September 2009
Rain	April 1	October 2009
Selling Out	May 1	November 2009
Anger	June 1	December 2009

out and he'd taken advantage of me.

The counselor accompanied me to make a follow-up appointment, and then he left me with a handshake and a wan smile of commiseration. It was a smile I would see a lot.

I spent the next few hours wandering around a bookstore, looking for self-help books about living with HIV. Instead I picked up a volume of Anne Sexton's collected poems. I remembered having read her *The Awful Rowing toward God* while I'd been studying to be a Catholic priest. Doubting God had been my guilty pleasure back then. Standing in the bookstore, I read: "God went out of me / as if the sea dried up like sandpaper, / as if the sun became a latrine." I was now in that boat with Sexton, and my doubt turned to fury: Why had God done this to me? I had been a Catholic Worker, gone to jail for peace, taken care of AIDS patients. What kind of cruel joke was this? Was it because I had left seminary? Was it because I was gay?

I spent the night with a friend who had worked at the clinic with me. When I arrived at his house, he and his male lover held me for a long time while I cried. They invited me into their bed that night — not for sex, just for closeness — and I lay with them for a while but couldn't sleep, so I moved to the couch. My days of sleeping with other people were over, I thought.

The next week I returned to the clinic for my follow-up appointment and a second blood test. The nurse dropped the vial of blood and wiped up the spill with some water and bleach. The fumes made me nauseous, and when he stuck me the second time, I fainted. I came out of it shaking and sweating and thinking that this was what I would have to face for the rest of my short life: constant needle sticks, clumsy nurses, the reek of bleach, and coming out of faints covered in sweat.

Another two weeks later I was back at the clinic for the results. The receptionist sent me to the office of the medical director, who knew me. I felt ashamed: Shouldn't I have known better? How could I have been so reckless? But the medical director's eyes showed no judgment, only concern and some other emotion I couldn't read.

"I have some unfortunate news," she said, then quickly added, "but *good* news for you." She told me I was not HIV-positive after all; the test result had been a false positive. She apologized, saying it was an incredibly rare occurrence. From her manner, I guessed she thought I might sue the clinic. But I was jubilant. I had been released from my death sentence. At the same time I realized that many others, equally innocent, still had to serve theirs.

Joseph Byrne
Washington, D.C.

I'D HAD A CRUSH ON JOHN FOR ABOUT a year when he came to my house for a party. It was one of the first warm nights of spring, and we all decided to drive a couple of miles outside of town to drink some beer in the woods. The line of cars wound along the gravel road through the forested hills. I drove close behind the car John was riding in, wondering if he would notice me, be attracted to me, *like* me.

We reached our destination, a clearing near a creek, and before long we were all a little drunk. (As high-school sophomores we weren't experienced drinkers.) Everything was great until John started causing problems.

John came from a tightknit, religious family, and he had come to this party only because I'd urged him. When he got drunk, he started to berate himself for sneaking around behind his parents' backs. Another boy told him to shut up, but John wouldn't, and the two of them exchanged punches. John got hit in the mouth, and his lip started bleeding, and he started crying, and . . . well, it put a damper on the party.

As the person who had invited John, I volunteered to give him a ride home. Once we were in my '56 Chevy and away from the group, he started in once more about how bad he felt for having broken his father's trust. He swore he would never do it again, but, as for that night, he didn't want to let his parents see him drunk. I suggested we go park by the river and talk while the alcohol wore off.

I pulled into a spot hidden by trees, shut off the engine, and turned to face John: I had him alone in my car! In the

dark! I brushed his bangs back from his glasses, and he thanked me for taking care of him in his "state" and apologized for having been an ass and having ruined the party. I said I thought everything had worked out perfectly, because I had wanted to drive him home. We gazed at each other without speaking. Then he said he wanted to kiss me, but his lip was bloody. I told him it didn't matter.

My first kiss tasted like blood — salty and metallic — and I loved it.

Carrie Thiel
Kalispell, Montana

IN FEBRUARY 1969 I WAS AN EIGHTEEN-year-old "newbie" experiencing his first of 544 nights in Vietnam. After three hours of sleep the other recruits and I were roused in typical army fashion: all lights on and much unnecessary screaming. I spent the day waiting in line: for field gear; for paperwork; for vaccinations and more vaccinations.

At evening chow time a staff sergeant burst into the mess hall and, in his best staff-sergeant voice, demanded, "Everyone with o-positive blood, raise your hand." I raised mine. (I later learned to be more circumspect in my response to the demands of sergeants.) "Come with me," he ordered.

After a short jeep ride he deposited me at the entrance of a field hospital. Inside were three gurneys. Two held lifeless bodies covered by sheets that were saturated with blood. The floor was awash in gore. My memory says a quarter inch of it, but now I wonder if that's possible.

On the third gurney a Vietnamese man writhed in pain. "Three VC got caught in a firefight outside the perimeter," a medic explained. "We need to keep this one alive." He took my blood and sent me on my way.

I often wondered whether the wounded Viet Cong soldier had made it. I hoped so. I thought of him as "my" VC.

Three months later I was pulling perimeter guard duty at Dau Tieng base camp. Most soldiers did their best to avoid guard duty, but I liked it. It was the one time when I could think and maybe find some peace amid the incessant pounding of outgoing artillery, the stench, and the heat. I was sitting atop my bunker,

trying to get a glimpse of the stars beyond the incandescence of overhead flares, when the truth came to me: “My” VC had been kept alive only so they could force him to tell whatever secrets he’d possessed. After that, he had been allowed to die.

I was a newbie no more.

*Dan Zahner
Irvine, California*

I AM WHITE, AND MY BROTHER IS black. I am the biological daughter of our parents, and he was adopted at age one. The summer I was nine and he was eight, we were living in rural New Hampshire. My brother was the only nonwhite person in the entire town, and the racial makeup of our family made us celebrities of a sort. People were either openly hostile to us or strangely fascinated. Some did us favors and offered generous gifts. I was still teasing apart what these reactions meant.

My brother and I were participants in a social experiment not of our making, and this made us as close as, if not closer than, most blood siblings. I believed that he had won out over all other possible brothers on the planet to become mine.

One hot summer morning my brother and I were playing together. I was weary from the heat and irritable from hunger; breakfast had been delayed for some unfathomable adult reason. My brother ran outside into our backyard — perhaps to get something for us to play with — and I locked the storm door behind him. In my mind this was all part of a game.

My brother came to the door, tried the handle, and said to me through the glass, “Let me in.” I giggled and taunted him, and his face clouded over in anger. He pulled on the door, but it wouldn’t budge. His eyes were now blazing with rage, and though he was a year younger than I was, he was bigger and stronger. I didn’t know what to do: if I let him in, he might hit me; if I didn’t let him in, he’d grow angrier still.

While I was debating, my brother pulled back his fist and punched straight through the glass. Shards flew everywhere, and so did blood.

I opened the door, and my brother staggered in — stunned and bleeding all

over the floor and both of us. He looked at me with confusion, and I screamed for our mother.

The next hour or so was a blur of tourniquets, frantic telephone calls, wailing sirens, my brother strapped to a gurney, and then the ambulance speeding away. After he had gone, the house was eerily silent, and there was blood everywhere — pooling and staining and smelling as if it didn’t belong outside his body.

I spent the rest of the day alone in my room in a state of terror and guilt. That evening my brother was brought home. I was both relieved and anxious, and I wondered if our relationship could ever be repaired.

I sat in the family room and waited to find out if my brother wanted to see me. After a while he came and sat down, and I nervously apologized and asked how he was. There was a long silence. Then he replied, “Yeah, you shouldn’t have locked me out. . . . But look at this! I’m going to have a really cool scar!” He lifted his bandages to show me the row of stitches on his arm. He’d severed an artery and lost nearly a quarter of his blood. “I could have died, but I didn’t,” he said proudly. My fears that our bond had been broken were allayed, and I asked him for every last detail about his experiences in the hospital.

I imagine now that having been locked out must have been a visceral and subconsciously symbolic experience for my brother. The possibility that he might be rejected for being different was probably always in the back of his mind. But in the more than thirty years since that day, he has never once blamed me or tried to make me feel guilty or any less his sister. And I still feel blessed that he, of all possible brothers, is mine.

*Koko J.
Oakland, California*

AS A LABOR-AND-DELIVERY NURSE for almost twenty years, I can tell you that, when babies come, there is always blood. I know the metallic scent of it and the feel of it on my gloved hands: simultaneously slick and sticky.

I was at work the morning my sister called to tell me that our father had committed suicide. There had been no signs

of depression, no cries for help, just a few financial troubles. He’d gone to the barn and shot himself in the chest after having had his morning coffee and taken out the trash. I booked a flight home for the funeral. Because it had been suicide, there was an autopsy and a speedy cremation. I never got to see my father’s body.

When I arrived at my parents’ farm, I went to the barn where my dad had taken his life, and I dropped to the straw-scattered floor and searched for his blood. All I could find were the three butts from the last cigarettes he’d smoked.

My brother found me there on the dirt floor, touching spots of oil from the tractor that looked a little like blood. I asked him where the blood was, and he told me he hadn’t seen any. We held each other and cried.

When babies come, there is always blood. But my father had left none. He was just gone.

*C.M.
Bonham, Texas*

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