



SUSAN RAE TANNENBAUM

Readers Write

SAYING YES

AT 5 A.M. THE AMTRAK LOUNGE CAR was deserted except for Leo the attendant, who was wiping glasses and preparing for the day shift, and me, scribbling in my journal because I was too excited to sleep. I was moving across the country with a man I had fallen in love with only

a few weeks before.

Leo noticed my notebook and asked, “You a writer?”

I said I was.

“You write poetry?”

He needed assistance writing a poem for his church newsletter: an acrostic trib-

ute to a deacon in his church. As I helped him compose a few lines, he asked where I was going. I told him I was heading for Oregon with my “fiancé” — I didn’t feel quite right telling this churchgoing man that Fritz was my lover.

A few hours later I was back in my seat next to my dozing boyfriend when Leo appeared at the head of the car, a line of teenagers following him, each carrying a cupcake adorned with one flickering candle. (They belonged to a traveling 4-H club, I found out later, and had agreed to help Leo with his surprise.) “Folks,” Leo announced, “we need more young couples like Fritz and Devon here, ready to commit to a life together and to the responsibilities of matrimony.” The other passengers craned their necks to see us. My lover of four weeks looked over at me as if startled from a dream. Then, with only a slight hint of panic in his voice, he asked, “Will you marry me?”

“You don’t have to . . .,” I whispered.

“No, I mean it,” he replied.

I said yes, and the other passengers burst into applause.

Weeks later, after our impromptu wedding ceremony, a box arrived in the mail from an address in Chicago. It was from Leo. Inside were our names engraved in balsa wood, a collection of Amtrak souvenirs, and the church newsletter containing the poem I’d helped him write.

Thirteen years later Fritz and I are still married, with three beautiful children, and I still use my battered Amtrak key chain, a gift from our personal Cupid.

*Devon Balwit
Portland, Oregon*

RIGHT FROM THE START I FOUND IT all too easy to accommodate my only son. He was well-behaved, got good grades, and smiled easily. I wanted him to be happy, no matter what it took. Even his *potential* pain was more than I could bear. (They really should come with instruction manuals.)

Over the years I said yes a lot — to speed skates, BMX bikes, the latest shoes, and the smelly hair product that rendered his beautiful curly hair straight so it would match everyone else’s at school. When he asked for a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle birthday cake, I got out the green food

coloring and used white Chiclets for the turtle's teeth.

That little boy with the easy smile is all grown up now. Every Wednesday I wait for my phone to ring. The calls come from a state correctional facility surrounded by tall fences topped with razor wire. When the automated operator asks if I will accept the collect call, I press 1 to say yes.

*Erika Webb
DeLand, Florida*

MY NEIGHBOR WAS TEN AND A HALF and I was eleven the first time he kissed me — full on the mouth with a little too much tongue. We lived in the suburbs and spent afternoons at each other's houses while our parents were at work. We soon progressed from French-kissing to getting naked and exploring one another's bodies. We were too young to want sex, but the sneaking around and fear of getting caught were powerful draws.

Two years after that first kiss my now twelve-year-old neighbor was ready. We'd already been having oral sex for a year, and he saw intercourse as the next step. On a hot summer day I finally said yes.

I continued to say yes for several years, though I felt tremendous guilt and confusion. For him, though, it was simple: he loved me in his adolescent way.

We were always "just friends" to everyone else and never acted as if we were dating. We stopped having sex only after we became enrolled in the same high school. While everyone else in school was telling exaggerated tales about their sex lives, I lied about mine and wanted nothing more than to be a virgin again. But as my high-school friends lost their virginity at keg parties or in the back seats of cars, I began to feel less regret.

Now that neighbor boy and I both have families of our own. We are still friends and see each other several times a year. I believe our innocent exploration helped make me the confident, sexually fulfilled woman I am today.

*L.S.
San Diego, California*

MY HUSBAND AND I HAVE COME TO visit our son and his family. Before breakfast I watch as our daughter-in-law be-

gins the process of getting our son out of bed, showered, dressed, and into his wheelchair. He is forty-two and has battled MS for twenty-seven years. We have seen him go from running cross-country to using a cane, then a walker, then a power chair. This morning he is stiffer and weaker than usual because he's recovering from pneumonia, but he's determined to go to work, as a physician at a medical clinic.

My husband could simply lift our son and place him in his chair, but our son and his wife want to do it their way, which involves a series of lifts, pivots, holds, pushes, pulls, and hugs. Engaged in what they're doing, they seem unaware of my presence. Their six-year-old twins get ready for school as they would on any other day. Our son stands and holds on to a bar while our daughter-in-law pulls up his pants. Then she maneuvers him into the power chair, puts on his socks and shoes, and struggles to place his feet on the footrests. Finally she pulls his shirt

over his head and brushes his hair.

When they have completed their morning routine, our son lifts his hand for a high-five. Our daughter-in-law slaps her palm against his, and they say in unison, "Yes!"

*Marcia Pearson
Troy, Montana*

AT ABOUT TWO IN THE MORNING I got a collect call from my friend Lucy, who was in the county jail. She was weeping and hysterical and begging me to come bail her out.

She had been in jail once already, for shoplifting, but that was before I'd known her. This time her offense was more complicated: She'd had a fight with her girlfriend, Brenda, and then had left for the hospital to get her medication. (Lucy is borderline and bipolar.) When she got back to her apartment, the police and an ambulance were there. Brenda had cut her wrists, and a neighbor had heard her screaming and called the police. Lucy

READERS 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 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
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
Narrow Escapes	July 1	January 2010

was distraught. The police had to drag her back three times to keep her from throwing herself on Brenda in tears. Finally they handcuffed Lucy to a table and arrested her for obstruction.

Brenda and Lucy's relationship was turbulent, but I knew that Lucy loved this woman and would never leave her. I told Lucy to let me know when they set her bail.

"But I want to go home now!" she said. "Brenda needs me!"

"I can't get you out until I know how much your bail is," I said. "Just stay put and try to relax."

The next morning I found out that her bail was \$250. If I bailed her out, I would be short on rent and unable to pay bills. Neither Lucy nor Brenda was currently working. Over the years I'd loaned Lucy money several times, and she'd always paid me back, but it had been only ten or twenty dollars. I told Lucy I couldn't do it.

"But I have nobody else to help me!" she said.

"Let's wait and see what happens," I said.

Lucy called again that night. I could tell she was depressed. She couldn't get her medication in the jail, and they were talking about putting her on suicide watch. "Please," she said.

The next day, at work, I had lunch with Rosie. She had good sense, and I expected her to tell me how I would never get my money back from Lucy. Instead she looked me in the eye and said, "That girl's crazy, but she makes you smile. You're like family to her." Sure, I would regret spending the money, she said, but I'd regret it even more if I didn't.

The next day I went to the county jail and paid Lucy's bail. She never said thank you; she just asked for a cigarette. I drove her to see Brenda at the hospital, then took her home. Two weeks later she paid me back in full. I never figured out how she did it.

Name Withheld

IN 1963, WHEN I WAS FIFTEEN YEARS old, I told my parents I was a homosexual. My father said he would get me help. "Help" turned out to be a psychotherapist who insisted that if I had sex with enough women, I would be cured.

I did as the doctor suggested. In high school and college I had sex with many women and felt confident that I was turning straight.

One year, while the college was closed for break, my friend Steve and I were the only ones left in the dorm. I was writing a poem when Steve poked his head in my room and asked if he could sleep in my upper bunk; he was feeling lonely. I said sure.

He went to take a shower, and when he came back, he put his hands on my shoulders and massaged them. Then he reached under my arms and pulled me up. I felt his wet chest through my T-shirt. I heard his towel fall.

"No," I said. "No. No."

He turned me around and kissed me. I sighed and said yes.

*Jason Reynolds
Portland, Oregon*

I WAS FIVE WHEN I CAME TO LIVE with the Espositos, who were taking me in as a foster child. Their apartment was on the first floor of a two-family home, the last house on a dead-end street, next to a vacant field.

I was a quiet, watchful girl. All my life I'd been moved from one temporary "home" to another, beginning with my birth mother's rooming house in Hell's Kitchen, New York City, and passing through various orphanages and foster homes. Time after time I'd assumed my bad behavior was the reason I'd been sent away.

The Espositos had a boy named Stevie, about nine, a wiry kid with black-brown hair and sharp blue eyes. I assumed that Stevie was their biological child, since they always trusted his word over mine, but today I wonder if he might have been a foster kid like me.

One day Mrs. Esposito had to go out, and she asked Stevie to baby-sit me. He and a friend were sprawled on the living-room rug drawing horses and cowboys. The dark drapes were drawn, and the only light was a floor lamp with a chipped milk-glass shade. Before she left, Mrs. Esposito said, "Remember, Lucy, do as Stevie says. He is in charge, OK?"

"Yes, Mrs. Esposito," I said. I was already afraid of Stevie and had been

blamed for several of his pranks.

After she was gone, Stevie saw me gazing at his toy dashboard, with its plastic windshield and working steering wheel. "You want to play with that?" he asked. "Go ahead — but don't break it!"

Surprised by his sudden generosity, I carried the toy to a spot on the other side of the room, turned my back to them so that I wouldn't be watched, and spun the steering wheel from side to side, pretending to drive a carload of kids to the ice-cream shop.

"Hey, Lucy, we're bored drawing cowboys," Stevie said. "How about we draw you instead?" I looked over and saw a wicked expression on Stevie's face. He told me to take off my panties and hold up my skirt: they wanted to draw what a girl looks like "down there."

I stayed put and held on to the toy steering wheel.

"If you don't do it, I'll tell Ma that you took my toy and broke it, and you'll be in big trouble!" And he came over and kicked the windshield of his own toy, cracking it.

I slowly stood up.

"Come on! Take off your panties!"

As tears streamed down my cheeks, I pulled my panties down around my ankles.

"Pull up your dress," Stevie ordered.

I pulled it up, my legs tight together.

"Now stand with your feet apart so we can see better down there."

I complied and stood there while the boys drew pictures, ribbed each other, and laughed. I wished that Mrs. Esposito would walk through the door, but she didn't.

When they were done, Stevie brought his sketchbook over to me and shoved it in my face, saying, "I'm good, huh, Lucy?" He poked my shoulder and looked back at his friend. "Say, 'Yes,' Lucy! Say, 'Yes, you are good, Stevie.'"

"Yes," I mumbled. "Yes, you are good, Stevie."

L.O.

Cambridge, Massachusetts

THERE WERE ONLY TWENTY MINUTES left before my son and I needed to walk out the door for school and work. My tears welled up as he refused to put his shoes

on and struggled to get free of my grasp. I was physically exhausted and also tired of pretending to be happy. I could hear my husband in the kitchen making himself breakfast. The night before, he and I had talked about separating. It was an enticing idea, but we could barely afford to live together, much less apart. Not to mention that neither of us would be able to give up custody of our son. Four years earlier our older son had died, and neither of us could ever walk away from the child who remained.

I set a bowl of oatmeal on the table in front of my son, who screamed, "No!" and climbed down from his chair and ran off. Instead of following him, I headed straight out the front door, not even putting on my shoes, and I sat down on the steps to cry. I glanced at my watch; I'd give myself two minutes. My eyes trailed down the street toward the highway beyond. I could hear planes taking off from the airport. If I'd had any shoes on, I might have walked down that street and kept going. I tried to imagine what that would feel like — just to walk away.

I heard the door open behind me and glanced at my watch again. Three minutes had gone by. We would be late.

"I think he wants something else for breakfast," my husband said. "Are you coming back inside? Is everything OK?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I'm fine." I stood up, wiped my eyes, and wondered how fast I could heat up waffles.

J.S.

San Antonio, Texas

JIM, MY COLLEAGUE AT A U.S. EMBASSY in Central America, was the toughest consular officer when it came to granting visas to local citizens. Their pleas to visit relatives or to study in an American college, he told the other officers, were spurious; all these "brown people" really wanted was to get into the U.S. and stay there to make money.

Jim enjoyed his reputation as a difficult officer to get by, and he reveled in rejecting the majority of the applicants he interviewed. Over coffee he'd recount how he had uncovered their scams and saved our country from intruders. Once, he told me of the local surgeon who'd fed him an unconvincing story of wanting to

travel to the U.S. to learn a new surgical procedure. What he really wanted, Jim said, was to earn an American surgeon's large salary. He had denied the man a visa.

One night the next week Jim's three-year-old son developed a respiratory problem. By morning he was in a critical state. The nurse practitioner at the embassy's medical center began calling local doctors, who suggested that the child be taken to a nearby teaching hospital, where a surgeon had treated similar cases. Desperate, Jim and his wife rushed their son to the hospital. The specialist was the same young surgeon to whom Jim had denied a visa the previous week. The hurried surgery was a success, and Jim was able to bring his son home after a few days.

A week after the surgery, Jim reversed his decision to deny the surgeon a visa.

Name Withheld

I WAS IN SOUTHWEST IOWA ON THE ninety-ninth day of my six-month bicycle tour of the United States. My original plan had been to ride from the West Coast to the East and back, but I'd abandoned that itinerary after having met a woman named Carol in Birmingham, Alabama. I'd stayed with her too long, and instead of continuing to the coast when I'd left, I'd headed north to Indiana, then turned west to start back toward California.

As I slipped back onto the highway that morning, I got a whiff of home: the smell of wild Western grasses on the wind. It was spring on the Great Plains. The sun rose, and I stopped to remove my windbreaker and stow it in my pack, and I thought of Carol. I'd ridden a thousand miles since I'd left her door. Suddenly I wanted to turn back.

I was recently divorced and enjoying the freedom to do all the biking, hiking, and mountain climbing I wanted. Did I really want to get into another relationship so soon? There were highways to explore, trails to follow, and sheer rock faces to climb. On the other hand, did I want to spend the rest of my life alone? To my surprise, I realized I was thinking about getting married again. It made no sense.

I stuffed the jacket into my pack, climbed aboard my bike, and turned east.

I rode a hundred yards, then turned back west. Finally I stopped. It was a Friday, and Carol would be out of town for the weekend. If I didn't call that day, I wouldn't be able to speak to her until Monday. I felt I had to propose marriage right then, or I would regret it for the rest of my life. It didn't matter that I had known her exactly thirty days. It almost didn't matter that she would probably say no. What mattered was making that call.

I pedaled into the next town, found a pay phone, and dialed her number. She didn't say yes, but she didn't say no either.

I rode the rest of the way home to California, and the following September Carol moved to San Jose to be with me. We were married the summer after that. We recently celebrated our thirtieth wedding anniversary.

*David F. Harvey
Talent, Oregon*

(end of excerpt)