



ANNA KAUFMAN MOON

Readers Write

INSTRUCTIONS

“JUST PUT YOUR PENCIL RIGHT HERE. It’s simple,” my friend’s mom said.

I doubted it. I didn’t think I’d ever be able to write the number 8.

I was six years old and visiting my friend’s house. She lived down the street and around the corner from me in a nice apartment.

“Give it a try, honey,” her mom whispered in my ear.

Could I really do it? I put my pencil on the page, held my breath, and started

to move my hand. The number 8 appeared!

“It’s magic,” I said. I didn’t believe for one second that I had written the number. My friend’s house must have been magic. It was full of crayons and dolls and games — all the things that you couldn’t find in my home. At our apartment there were loud voices and scary men and drugs being passed around.

Though it’s been nearly thirty years since I learned how to write my numbers,

I still feel that mom’s whispered breath tickling my ear.

*Nikki D.
Wilsonville, Oregon*

IN THE 1950S I ATTENDED SAINT Mary’s Academy, a New Orleans school for colored girls run by the only order of black nuns in the United States, the Order of the Holy Family. The school was located on the corner of Orleans and Bourbon Streets, in the heart of the

French Quarter, and the building had originally been a ballroom where the notorious pirate Jean Lafitte had come to court the beautiful octoroons — women with one-eighth African ancestry. Each day I climbed a mahogany staircase underneath crystal chandeliers on my way to chapel or to Latin class.

The nuns gave us strict instructions not to walk up Bourbon Street on our way home from school; we were told to go a few blocks up to Dauphine and catch our buses in front of the A&P. Of course my friends and I — a bunch of twelve-year-old Catholic schoolgirls in blue-and-white uniforms — made a mad dash around the corner onto Bourbon at least once a week. From 8 A.M. to 3 P.M. we learned about the Virgin Mary, but after three we entered the world of Mary Magdalene, the whore.

Even in the early afternoon Bourbon Street was alive. The hawkers outside the strip clubs would open the doors to give us peeks. By the time we got to Canal Street, we had seen the equivalent of an entire striptease. I'll never forget the window display for a stripper named Alouette. The tassles on her pasties lit up and twirled electronically. The French song "Alouette" was never the same for me after that.

We passed stores that reminded me of toy stores, because they displayed pink plastic and rubber things in their windows. Once, we went inside one, and I got a queasy feeling in my stomach. One girl picked up a pencil with a little pink penis eraser on top, and we all ran out of the store in a burst of giggles.

When we arrived at Canal, we stopped at the newsstand to buy candy bars and browse through *Mademoiselle* magazine. Swapping bites of Milky Way and Baby Ruth, we became innocent Catholic schoolgirls again, ready to go home to our parents and their usual question: "What did you learn today?"

*Francine Verrett
Los Angeles, California*

ONE QUIET WINTER AFTERNOON MY mother showed me how she applied her makeup. As she pulled each item from her kit, she explained where she'd bought it and how it should be used. She had done

this fifteen years earlier, when I was in high school and just learning to wear makeup myself. But the purpose of today's lesson was different: now she wanted me to know how to apply her makeup for her after she was no longer able to. My mother was battling cancer, and the doctors thought she may live only six more months. I didn't think makeup was a high priority when one is facing death, but I listened patiently to her instructions.

I also went with her to make arrangements for her funeral service. The funeral director ushered us into a room decorated in colonial style and gave us some books of sample programs and thank-you notes to review. My mother asked which thank-you note I liked best. Of course my favorite was different from hers, and an odd discussion ensued over who should get to choose: I would be sending them, so shouldn't I pick them? But it was her funeral, so shouldn't she have the final word? In the end I let her decide. It was always easier that way.

Then we went into a room full of caskets, where Mom selected a moderately priced model with a light blue interior that she thought would match the dress she planned to wear. As she peered into the casket, I could tell she was imagining herself lying in this box, wearing her dark blue velvet dress, her makeup perfectly applied.

After Mom passed away, I had no decisions to make. She had left me explicit instructions on whom to call, what the pastor should say, what gifts to give the ladies who helped at the church, and how her hands should be laid across her Bible in the casket. On her desk I discovered a recording she had made for me. I put it in the player, curious to hear what she'd needed to say. And there she was, slowly telling me, step by step, how to apply her makeup for the funeral; she was afraid she'd left some details out of the earlier lesson.

My mother was not one for warm sentiment, but her trusting me with the in-

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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
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
Borrowing	August 1	February 2010

timate details of her beauty regimen, so that I could instruct the funeral director, was a sign of her love. I'm glad she made the tape. It is the only recording I have of her voice.

*Amy Knife Gould
Chicago, Illinois*

AS MY MOM LED ME DOWN THE DINGY school hallway toward the kindergarten room, I squeezed her hand and pulled in the other direction. She signed, "Let go. Hurting me." I could hear, but she couldn't.

I shook my head no. All I knew about kindergarten was that she wouldn't be staying.

We stood at the swinging doors to the classroom until the teacher noticed us: "And who do we have here?"

I signed to Mom, "Who you?"

Mom signed, "Tell."

"I'm Allyne," I said. "This is my mommy."

"Doesn't your mommy talk, sweetie?"

"Can you talk?" I signed to Mom.

"Deaf!" Mom signed, that one word charged with years of pent-up frustration over inconsiderate people who could hear.

I responded, "She's deaf," leaving out her intonation.

The teacher leaned down to look into my face and said, "Oh, you poor little thing."

Mom tapped my shoulder: "What?"

Reluctantly, hating this teacher and this room I would be left alone in and the burden that had been placed upon me, I signed, "She says I'm poor."

Mom had had enough. Before turning to leave, she shot the teacher a glare. I cried and watched her go.

"Class, pay attention," the teacher said, continuing with her lesson. She proceeded to give us instructions on how to color a scarecrow drawing, describing what color to use in each part of the body. "When you are finished coloring, you may go outside to play."

The other kids picked up their crayons and rushed to fill in their scarecrows. One by one they finished and went to play outside, but I didn't know how to start on mine. When I tried to look at their papers, the teacher scolded me for copying and

sent me to a table by myself. I sat alone, looking from the blank scarecrow to the kids playing outside.

I had learned everything I knew from my deaf parents either through signing or demonstration. It took me years to understand that my brain does not process verbal instructions without visual support. That was the first of many assignments I would not understand, and my kindergarten teacher was the first of many professionals who would scold me for being "uncooperative," "defiant," and "stupid."

*Allyne Betancourt
Sandy, Utah*

IN THE SUMMER BEFORE I ENTERED ninth grade, I had a chance to travel to Puerto Rico with my Spanish class. While I waited to board the flight, my mother pulled me aside and said to me, "Whatever you do, *never* let a boy stick his tongue in your mouth."

I could not get on that plane fast enough. I'd already been reduced to tears that morning by my father, because he thought my dress was too short. The only reason I was going on the trip at all was that my teacher had pulled some strings and gotten me a scholarship to pay for my plane ticket, and my father never could pass up a bargain.

Once my class reached the island, we were introduced to twenty Puerto Rican students with whom we'd be sharing a dormitory. In the mornings we attended language-immersion classes at the university, and in the afternoons we went to the beach, or a historic fort, or a lush rain forest. At night, under the watchful eye of our formidable chaperone Señora Toro, we danced the twist to Latin-flavored rock music.

One night the band played a merengue, and a boy named Juan asked me to dance. He was fifteen and tall, with brown eyes and toffee-colored skin. He taught me the merengue with an air of expertise, clasping my hand, placing his other hand on my hip, and moving his pelvis to the left and right. "Sígueme," he instructed, coaxing me to follow him. Our hips, just inches apart, began moving in unison. My heart pounded.

When the dance ended, Juan led me to

a blooming frangipani bush at the edge of the patio. He put his hands on my waist and drew me close. His smooth face exuded a sweet aroma of cologne, and his lips touched mine. I had just received my first kiss — and then my second, and my third. Shockingly, his tongue insinuated its way into my mouth.

"No!" I cried and pushed him back. "Basta!" — enough!

"Qué?" he asked.

"La lengua!" I said — the tongue! "La lengua es prohibida!"

He was baffled. What could I tell him: *My mother said no?*

Then I remembered where I was — hundreds of miles from my parents. I smiled at the confused boy, wrapped my arms around his warm neck, and invited him to kiss me again.

*Sue Z. Smith
Los Angeles, California*

I WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD AND LIVING in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn. In the 1950s the street was our playground. Three older boys — two big Irish brothers and an Italian kid — seemed always to be waiting to taunt me when I came out to play. They called me "camel jockey" and took turns rapping their knuckles on top of my head. More often than not, I would cry and go back into the house.

One Saturday my dad, who wasn't known for his patience, told me just to stay away from them.

"They're always there," I said, crying. "I just want them to leave me alone."

"If you want them to leave you alone," he said, "I'll tell you what to do." The next time they came near me, he said, I was to keep my head down and my eyes on their crotches. Once I got an open look, I should kick one of them in the balls and run as fast as I could. "Believe me," my dad said, "if you do that, they'll leave you alone."

The next time I went outside, I did exactly as he'd said. I don't even know which boy I kicked, but I can still feel his tender parts give beneath the force of my foot and hear his cries of pain as I ran down the street. It was thrilling.

A couple of weeks later I did the same thing to another big kid who was trying to horn in on a game of touch football. A great, pent-up anger had been released in

me by then, and I became somewhat of a bully myself. My bullying came to an abrupt halt, though, after I knocked a boy unconscious by pounding his head into the sidewalk.

I'd learned not only to fear other boys, but also to fear myself.

*Thomas Mallouk
Doylestown, Pennsylvania*

AT THE AGE OF TEN I BECAME MY mom's sous-chef. She would tell me what vegetables to cut up and always criticize me for doing it wrong. Then, after she heated her wok till the oil was smoking and flames shot up toward the ceiling, she would start to shout: "Garlic! . . . Now the onions! . . . Bring me the carrots and bamboo! . . . Where's the cabbage? . . . Hurry with the broccoli! Now!"

Ma taught me that if food is seasoned properly before you serve it, there is no need to add soy sauce at the table. As I entered my teens, though, I started to question her excessive use of oil, salt, sugar, and something she called "*ajinomoto*" — all of which she kept by her stove in open bowls.

"Ma, what is that? It looks like sugar and tastes so weird."

"That's *ajinomoto*. It's good for vegetables."

"Why do you add so much?"

"Finish chopping the vegetables!"

After dinner I tried to read the label on the *ajinomoto* container, but it was in Japanese. It would be a couple of years before I found out what it was: monosodium glutamate, or MSG.

When I learned about the health problems associated with MSG, I tried to talk to my mother about it.

"Ma, I've read that it's really bad for you."

"You're crazy. I've eaten it all my life."

"It's this inert chemical that just sits in your stomach."

"You think you know so much 'cause you read!"

"But it makes it so nothing tastes good without it."

"If it's so bad, how come everybody in Taiwan eat it? Everyone in Japan eat it. Now add water, or the vegetables will burn!"

As much as I complained about the seasoning, Ma's cooking always tasted good. Too good.

When I left home and got my own apartment, I vowed to stay away from salt, sugar, and MSG when I cooked vegetables, and I used only a tablespoon or so of oil. My dishes were beautiful and healthy, but they just didn't taste as good as my mom's food.

Ma battled cancer successfully once, but then it came back, and she was bedridden. I stayed at her house for three or four days at a time to help out. She was too sick to cook for herself, so I made her rice porridge and brought it to her on a tray with a flower and a cup of green tea. Even with her energy depleted she managed to criticize the porridge for being not hot enough, or too hot, or too soupy.

We went on like this for a year and a half as she shrank to eighty pounds. On our last day together she asked me to make her a dessert of boiled peanuts. I used Spanish peanuts she had in the cupboard, and we sat in her bed and peeled the skins off one by one and watched an old *All in the Family* episode on TV. It was funny, till one of the characters went to sleep and didn't wake up.

Ma turned to me. "Did she just die?"

"Yes. I think so."

We were quiet for a time, and I finally gave up on skinning the peanuts. I ended up throwing them away. But she was happy because we were trying to cook together. The next night she died.

*Dmae Roberts
Portland, Oregon*

"GO LEFT," SAYS MY GUIDE.

I do.

"No, left!"

"This *is* left," I say with calm assurance.

Pause. "Oh, *my* left."

I move accordingly.

"There's a . . . *thing* in front of you, and you have to go through it."

My guide lets go of my arm, apparently manages this mystery before us, and then says, "OK, come on."

"What sort of thing?" I ask, extending my cane.

"It's a . . . turntable."

I move closer and hear the clicking of

a turnstile.

"There are six stairs," the guide says after we've passed the turnstile. "I counted."

I am suspicious. Usually guides count the risers but not the floor, which is actually a final step down. I am fairly sure there will be seven steps. But who knows? There may be eight or only five.

"I'll just stay a step behind you and hold your arm," I say. "I can feel you moving down the steps."

Finally we get on the bus.

"Where are we going to sit?" I ask.

"Over there," my guide says.

"Over where?" I ask, wondering how long it will be before I can stop giving sighted people instructions on how to give instructions.

*Nancy Scott
Easton, Pennsylvania*

(end of excerpt)