



JOHN FREE

## Readers Write

### CRUSHES

**WHEN I WAS A GIRL IN RURAL EAST** Germany after World War II, I had no men in my life. Mother was single, and I was an only child. One day when I was twelve, in 1952, a policeman came to our door. Mother was terrified: had they found out that we had stolen wood or owned West German fashion magazines? When it turned out he had come just to take the census, Mother was so relieved she invited him in for coffee and bread.

The policeman, whose name was Helmut, stayed for hours and told us about having been a prisoner of war and having worked in the Soviet mines for six years. He was about fifteen years younger than Mother, and his visit was the beginning of an odd friendship between them. On Tuesday evenings Helmut would come

over on his old BMW motorcycle, which we could hear coming from far away due to the quiet at the end of our dirt road. We would share our bread and vegetables from our garden with him, and he would bring us some of the sausage he was entitled to as a government official. After a while he began to spend the night.

This was my first real opportunity to observe a man. Helmut and I would horse around and wrestle. I admired his strength and practiced pull-ups and lifting a chair by one leg to build my muscles. He taught me chess and card tricks. Mother talked a lot about Helmut and what he might be doing and whether he liked us and when he'd visit next. I thought her obsession demeaned her. On days he was coming, she'd fuss with her

hair and put on her nicest dress — one of three she owned — to make herself attractive. Then she would stand by the window, watching. When he arrived, she'd be nervous but happy; she'd laugh and tease him and show off her singing and guitar playing. I'd never do such things for a man, I decided.

But as the months and years passed, my wrestling matches with Helmut began to give me a strange feeling. I found his smell — leather, sweat, gasoline, and wool — somehow agitating. I admired his black hair, which he combed straight back, and I felt queasy when his dark blue eyes rested on me. And those strong hands! I realized that I, too, waited for the sound of his motorcycle approaching, but I didn't let on.

When I was sixteen it dawned on me that Mother and I were competing for Helmut's attention, which felt shameful. By then I was also attracted to a young man my own age, whom I had met in the hiking club. He visited me occasionally, and we joked and kidded around and wrestled and hugged — all in Mother's presence.

One day Helmut offered me a ride on the back of his motorcycle. Mother was apprehensive and entreated him to be careful, saying that I was her most precious possession.

It was thrilling to speed along the narrow mountain road at ninety kilometers per hour. I'd never felt such a wind against my face, and I leaned into Helmut's back. We came to an overlook, parked, and unpacked the picnic lunch we had brought. As we lingered after the meal, Helmut quickly gave me a hug and a kiss. I was surprised. He smiled happily.

The next day a neighbor asked me how my trip had gone. I felt she was scrutinizing my face as I answered, "Great." Later Mother told me that the neighbor had been worried that I'd been molested, but after talking to me, she'd been convinced I was as innocent as before.

The following year Mother and I escaped from East Germany. For five years Helmut had been like an older brother, a father figure, and a first love to me, and a partner of sorts for my mother. But we'd left without saying goodbye to him because he would have had to arrest us.

S.M.

*Santa Cruz, California*

**AFTER TWO YEARS AT UNIVERSITY,** twenty and disillusioned with higher learning, I headed for London and got a job as a waitress in an Italian restaurant.

At the end of my first day I sat down at the bar. Gary the bartender was also finishing his shift. "Hello, darling," he said brightly. "Pour you a vodka and lime?" I happily accepted and sat on the red leather stool, telling him about my former life as a student. He laughed and teased and shared his Marlboros with me. I loved his accent, his wavy brown hair, and his designer jeans. "Fancy coming out tonight?"

he asked, and we arranged to meet at a club in the center of the city. Though I wasn't sure exactly what kind of invite it was, I did my best to look good.

When Gary showed up at the club, he kissed me and asked, "All right, love?" I tried not to read too much into it, but I was falling for him. He seemed to know everyone there — more kissing, more "love." Did I mention that, along with being twenty and disillusioned, I was also naive? It wasn't until I saw Gary kissing — I mean *really* kissing — a man in leather on the dance floor that I realized Gary was gay. He disappeared with the man around 2 A.M., and I caught a cab home alone, feeling embarrassed.

Despite our awkward beginning Gary and I became friends. Many nights we went out together and crashed in the same bed for a few hours before our shifts started. He'd get up early and make tea and cheese on toast for me. Once, I walked up behind him, slid my arms around his waist, and said, "Gary, now that you've met me,

don't you feel like going straight?"

Gary laughed and said, "Sure, love — straight on to the next man."

*Linda Williams  
Boulder, Colorado  
(end of excerpt)*

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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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Walking Home	September 1	March 2010
The Beach	October 1	April 2010
Sugar	November 1	May 2010
Taking Chances	December 1	June 2010