



WILLIAM CARTER

## Readers Write

# THE LAST WORD

**IN THE EARLY SEVENTIES, WHEN MY** BA in English wasn't getting me a job, I decided to learn carpentry. I was unprepared for the degree of discomfort many male carpenters felt seeing a woman do "their" work. To steel my resolve, I told myself I was making it easier for the next female to take this path.

In my third year of apprenticeship I got hired to work on a subdivision in the Chicago suburbs. Herb, the foreman, had several strategies for convincing people who "didn't fit in" to quit. Sometimes he'd saddle me with a project that required two people. Other times he'd partner me with the cantankerous drunk who had bigoted opinions on everything. The junior foreman, Troy, taunted me like a grade-school bully. Once, trying to unnerve me, he shook the post that supported the elevated

beam on which I was standing. They all persisted in calling me "Susie" instead of my real name.

After a couple of months I pulled in five minutes late one morning. At the 9:30 break Herb waddled up with a look of triumph on his face and handed me my last paycheck. "You're paid until noon," he told me, "but you can leave now."

I took a deep breath, pocketed the check, and picked up my hammer. "What was the measurement on that joist again?" I asked my partner.

Herb shifted uneasily. "I said you can leave right now."

"If you're paying me until noon, I'm working until noon," I told him. No one said another word.

*Janine DeCoster  
Minneapolis, Minnesota*

**WHEN I WAS A TEENAGE GIRL, IT** wasn't unusual for my mother to leave me by myself while she traveled. Soon after my sixteenth birthday she left for a ten-day trip to India. On the ninth day she called to tell me she wasn't coming home.

"When's your new arrival date?" I asked; she often changed her plans when traveling.

"No," she replied, "I mean I'm not coming back at all. I've decided that I need to stay here with my guru."

Once I'd confirmed that she was completely serious, we discussed the arrangements. Then we hung up, and I sat on my bed and tried to absorb the news: She was gone. She had been my tormentor for years, and now I was free of her. I should have been jubilant, but instead I felt a confused mix of rejection, humili-

ation, and hopelessness.

My basic survival needs were met: my mother paid the bills and allowed me to use her credit card freely; the house was cleaned by a woman who would sometimes leave me home-baked bread. But I still felt isolated and lonely.

I was about to turn seventeen when my mother returned from India for a visit. She planned to stay for only a month before going back to her new home at the foot of the Himalayas.

One night I ventured into her room to speak to her. She was lying there with a book, her long brown hair fanned out on the pillow, and she invited me to sit on the edge of her bed. We spoke about her life in India and what she had learned. She assured me that her time with her guru had been transformative; she was now “90 percent quiet inside.”

Her apparent equilibrium angered me: she had abandoned me and didn’t seem to care how I felt. Not once had she asked what my life had been like in her absence. So I decided to tell her.

As I spoke, I could see her struggling to stay calm. At one point she started to shout, but she caught herself and settled back onto her pillow.

“It just seems like you don’t care about me,” I said at last.

Her eyes flashed with rage, but she took a deep breath before speaking. “Well, it’s too bad that you feel that way,” she murmured.

“Right,” I said. “You just don’t care.” I got up and started to walk away.

I heard a shuffling behind me and turned to see an ornamental rock sail by my head. It knocked a hole in the wall and hung there, stuck. Then my mother seized me by the shoulders, slammed me into the door, and hit me open-handed across the nose. “Don’t ever tell me I don’t care about you!” she screamed.

L.R.

Charlottesville, Virginia

**IN MIDDLE SCHOOL I WORE RAINBOW-**striped sweaters that had belonged to my mother in college. (It would be years before they would be considered “vintage” and “cool.”) The girl who sat next to me in school called me “Rainbow Brite,” after the cartoon character. It was my first real

encounter with the fashion police.

*(end of excerpt)*

In ninth grade it was my socks. They too were hand-me-downs from my mother and matched my outfits, which were often purple. A girl in my homeroom teased me relentlessly about them.

One day my class took a field trip to the University of Maryland. I dreamed of the freedom and acceptance I might find on a college campus as a student. In the bookstore I saw a pair of rainbow-striped socks adorned with the school’s mascot, a turtle. I bought them without hesitation and wore them to school the next day, along with my purple shorts and sneakers. I pulled the socks up as far as they would go and walked proudly into my homeroom. As I took my seat, my tormentor turned to face me.

“Nice socks,” she said with a snicker.

I stretched out my legs for a good long look, then stared her right in the eye and said, “Thank you.”

Leah R. Berkowitz

Durham, North Carolina

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Singing	September 1	March 2011
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Shoes	November 1	May 2011
Rites Of Passage	December 1	June 2011
Fights	January 1	July 2011
Paying Attention	February 1	August 2011