



RITA BERNSTEIN

Readers Write

NOW OR NEVER

THE MORNING BEFORE MY COURT date, I began to pack. The idea of being a fugitive was frightening, but it was better than the likely alternative: a ten-year prison sentence for the relatively minor offense of robbing a drug dealer.

Everything was set for me to flee the country: all I had left to do was say my goodbyes. I spent the day getting stoned and driving around with a friend to visit all the people who were important to me. Some of them supported my decision; some didn't. My closest friends knew I

was avoiding the consequences of my actions yet again, but they didn't lecture me about it.

At nightfall, as my friend drove off, I thought about what I was about to do. Once I took this step, all I had ahead of me would be more problems with fewer people to help me. I had grown used to running away, but at that moment, standing in front of my parents' house, I was tired of it. I stumbled inside, determined for once to do the right thing. I was twenty-one, and for the first time in my life I

would choose the difficult but responsible path.

That was nine years ago. In eight months my sentence will be over. Life in prison hasn't been easy, but if I had chosen to run, I believe I'd be dead right now.

*Alex Papalaskaris
Troutville, Virginia*

"DO YOU WANT TO FEEL BETTER THAN you've ever felt in your whole life?" he asked.

I hesitated. Better than I'd ever felt?

That sounded good. Better at all would have been pretty good, in fact. I was seventeen and living in a strange city three thousand miles from my family. Though no stranger to pot and psychedelics, I had never even seen cocaine before that night. Now I was considering letting someone I'd just met inject it into my arm.

Beads of sweat shone on his forehead. "C'mon. I promise you'll like it. You can't not."

We were sitting on a futon, our voices hushed because my housemates were making chili on the other side of the door. He rested a blackened, bent spoon on top of a dictionary between us, pulled two orange-capped syringes out of his bag, and handed one to me. He popped the cap off his, stuck the needle in a glass of water next to his bed, and pulled water up into the syringe. With shaking hands he unfolded a pink piece of paper and tapped the powder inside it into the spoon, then squirted the powder gently with water from the syringe.

"The works are brand new," he assured me. "And I've got alcohol swabs."

I thought of a friend who had died in a car accident a year earlier, just before I'd dropped out of high school. After that, I had promised myself I'd live life as fully as I could. How could I pass up this opportunity and still say I was keeping my promise?

When he stuck the needle into the spoon, the sound of metal scraping against metal made me shiver.

He held up the syringe full of cocaine, tapping it to get the bubbles to rise. Then he repeated the process with the syringe I was holding. When he was finished, he handed mine back to me. I accepted it hesitantly. Would this change my life?

"I'll do the first shot, just in case it's bad," he offered, already rolling up his sleeve. I watched as he wiped his arm with the alcohol swab and injected the cocaine. After he'd pulled the needle out, he set it on the bed and lifted his arm to his mouth, licking the blood. He turned to me with bulging eyes. "You've got to do yours," he breathed. "It's great."

A voice inside me still protested.

"I'll do it if you don't want it," he said.

Wait, wait: I had to think. This wasn't a good idea. But I didn't want to miss my

chance. What if I died the next day? Would I regret not having had this experience?

"C'mon, babe," he whispered. "It's now or never."

Joyanna Priest
University Park, Maryland

MY THREE-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER, Devon, was excited about my mother's visit. Devon had met her grandma only once and had no memory of it. She happily played in the airport while we waited for Grandma's plane to land.

I was looking forward to my mother's visit as well, but for different reasons. I had a three-week business trip to Asia coming up, and I wouldn't have been able to go if Mom hadn't been willing to stay with Devon. I couldn't have imagined entrusting my daughter to anyone else for that long.

When my mother arrived, she rushed to scoop her granddaughter into her arms, and Devon squealed, "Grandma, you're here! Do you like where Mommy works?"

My mother and I exchanged puzzled

glances. "But, honey," my mother said to Devon, "we're at the airport. Maybe tomorrow we can go and see where Mommy works."

"No, Grandma, Mommy works here. She works on airplanes."

I realized then that my child was three years old, and I had missed much of her life as I'd jetted around the globe. I loved my job, but that day I went home, called my boss, and resigned. My mother, my daughter, and I spent the next three weeks getting to know one another as a family.

Bridget McNamara-Fenesy
Portland, Oregon

MY PATIENT SITS OPPOSITE ME AND tosses her hair behind her shoulder. She has striking features, teal blue eyes, and intractable epilepsy. No matter which medication I prescribe for her, she either still has seizures or becomes too sleepy to function.

She is also an unmarried mother, and we have talked about her finding someone

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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
Instructions	August 1	February 2009
The Dinner Table	September 1	March 2009
Faith	October 1	April 2009
Moving In	November 1	May 2009
Crushes	December 1	June 2009
Choosing Sides	January 1	July 2009

to live with her, in case she has a seizure, but she says she can't. Her seven-year-old son prances around the room, then rolls a magazine up into a tube and asks me to "talk into the microphone." I tell him I need to speak to his mother right now. I am trying to explain to her the importance of seeing an epilepsy expert who can evaluate her for surgical treatment. Her son pushes the rolled-up journal into his mother's face, and she says, "Mommy loves Teddy. Mommy is speaking into the microphone for Teddy."

I look at my watch. My next patient is waiting. "It's important that you consider this treatment," I tell her. "The mortality rate for status epilepticus is 50 percent." Status epilepticus is a state of continuous seizing and can occur anytime an epileptic stops taking anticonvulsant medication. This patient frequently forgets to refill her medications on time.

She leans forward, grabs her son around his waist, and pulls him into her. "He takes care of me now. There really isn't anyone else."

I repeat that she needs to consider this surgical treatment.

"Yes, yes," she says. "Next time we can talk about it."

Name Withheld

MY YOUNGEST SISTER, MY WIFE, AND I were in Juárez, Mexico, trying vainly to arrange for my brother-in-law to fly from Athens, Greece, to Mexico City. Kaled was stuck at the Athens airport without any money, having just deserted the army of a Middle Eastern country. He had only a few hours before he would be discovered and apprehended.

After four Mexican travel agencies failed to get us a plane ticket, we decided to go back across the border to an agency in El Paso, Texas. I looked at my watch: time was running out. I hoped our agent wouldn't be too nosy; we couldn't tell her that we were helping a deserter escape.

With extraordinary efficiency, the agent in El Paso purchased the ticket and thirty minutes later confirmed that Kaled had picked it up.

At two o'clock the next day, we drove to the old Juárez airport, which was like something out of *Casablanca*. Kaled came through customs without any trouble, and

we were halfway to the revolving door when an official came over and asked Kaled to come to his office.

I told Kaled to give me all his papers, everything. Then I handed the pile of papers to the official, asking casually if we might have a few moments with Kaled while he checked the documents. Once the official was distracted, we disappeared into the crowd of travelers, leaving all of Kaled's documents — and his identity — behind.

Name Withheld

BACK IN THE LATE 1970S AND EARLY '80s I worked part time as a saxophonist in the casinos of Reno and Lake Tahoe, Nevada. I was what they called the "added tenor": most house bands had only four saxophones, but when a big-name act came to town, an extra tenor sax would be added to beef up the section.

One day a bandleader called and asked me to play for Tony Bennett, who had a two-week run coming up at Harrah's in Reno. I had never played for Tony Bennett, and I happily accepted. Within a couple of hours, another bandleader called and asked me to play for Frank Sinatra. I was thrilled, until he told me the dates: Sinatra was opening in Tahoe the same night Bennett was scheduled to open in Reno. I asked if I could call him back. He said sure, but he needed an answer within a half-hour.

What to do? I'd agreed to the Bennett job first, but I wanted to be able to tell my grandchildren someday that I'd played for the incomparable Frank Sinatra, and I might never get another chance.

I called the first bandleader back and explained my situation. He was gracious and told me he would release me from the Bennett gig if I wanted, but he advised me against it. He said Sinatra was a legend, but he was also moody. Working with him could be a pleasure, or it could be miserable. On the other hand, Bennett was always a sweetheart. I decided to stay with Tony Bennett.

On opening night the rehearsal went well, and Tony Bennett couldn't have been friendlier. I was relaxing with the other musicians in the band room before the show when in walked several saxophonists who'd been hired to play for Sinatra.

We asked what they were doing in Reno so close to showtime. It turned out Sinatra had been in a foul mood at rehearsal. He'd fired the entire saxophone section.

Jeff Jones

Shingletown, California

MY ONE-TIME LOVER JUDY LOVES TO kiss and eat and laugh, but now her mouth is so filled with thrush that she can barely talk. An intravenous feeding tube hangs from her arm, and her last solid meal was weeks ago, before the ambulance was called.

Though painfully modest about her body, Judy uses the commode beside her hospital bed in front of me, her tangled tubes pulling aside her gown, leaving her exposed. She is winded by the exertion of getting out of bed and indifferent to the strangers walking past the open door. Dark red lesions cover her breastless chest. I close the privacy curtain. I still love her so much. Maybe more than ever.

When I'm away from the hospital, I call the nurses' station at all hours for updates. I don't know what it is I hope to hear anymore. Judy is forty-seven years old, and all I want to do is take her in my arms and rock away her loneliness and fear; the indignity and fatigue from this years-long battle; the many losses and betrayals, including my own.

Mostly she is sedated and dozing. This makes me anxious, because time is running out, and I want to spend as much of it as I can with her. Yet I'm relieved, because Judy likes to sleep and suffers less when she does. I cover her swollen legs with a sheet.

Judy is a published author, a winner of literary awards who gets paid to teach others how to write. I've long wanted to be a writer, but I'm afraid to let people read my work. I scribble down my life in secret and worry about who will find my notebooks when I die.

I'm reading out loud to Judy from the newspaper about how her beloved Cleveland Indians beat the Boston Red Sox ten to seven when she stirs, opens her brown eyes, and looks at me intently, pointing an English-teacher finger in my direction. "Time to start writing," she says.

Her hoarse voice is almost inaudible, and I consider pretending I didn't hear.

I want to protest, but her gaze is steady, waiting.

A.G.
Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio

I STAND IN MY KITCHEN AND SIP THE last bit of coffee from my cup. Outside, the Montana winter sky is as gloomy as my mood. I look at the clock, sigh, and prepare to face another day as a high-school English teacher.

It hasn't always been this way. I used to have idealism and passion. I worked to create a program to help at-risk students — but that program got axed. Then I worked with honors students, many of whom tried so hard to succeed that they became depressed, or developed eating disorders, or practiced self-mutilation. Now I work mostly with seniors whose apathy and disdain toward school have drained away any passion I had left.

I've made many connections with students, but it isn't enough to make me want to stay. It doesn't compensate for the hours and hours of grading and lesson planning I must do at home. It doesn't make up for the students who resent my presence in their lives and see me as an interruption to their cellphone calls. Layer the mind-numbing school bureaucracy on top of all this, and the job becomes unbearable. I'm ready to quit.

But here's the problem: I am forty-eight years old and have been teaching only thirteen years. I am too young for retirement benefits but too old to have many more chances at a new career. If I stay, though, I'm frightened of what I might become. I've seen teachers who have hung in there after disillusionment has set in, and I can't bear to think of myself skulking through the days like that, either having dropped all pretense of teaching kids, or making them the target of my quiet, desperate rage.

I have come to the conclusion that this is my last chance to pursue a new career path. The decision to leave teaching has been as painful as the decision to leave my first husband. It all feels so familiar: the shock, the denial, the anger, the grief. This job, like that marriage, has broken my heart, and it's time for me to go.

C.T.
Kalispell, Montana

MY FATHER WAS AN EXPERT AT DODG-ing the consequences of his abusive behavior. His worst episodes were often followed by such severe depression and self-recrimination that we ended up comforting *him*. He sometimes threatened to kill himself by circling a "death day" on the calendar. He'd say life was not worth living unless "things changed."

Just before Christmas the year I turned nineteen, he circled a new death date. My mother was out for the evening and had not yet seen it. I knew that when she did, she'd turn to me and say, "Now see what you've done!" And she'd roll her eyes, sigh in exhaustion, and pamper him without ever mentioning the circled date.

I decided to ignore his latest threat, and my hurt father walked out of the room, shoulders hunched. A few minutes later the electricity went off. I froze, terrified that he'd electrocuted himself. But then our tenant John, whose apartment was also in darkness, went to the basement, found the fuses Dad had removed from the fuse box, and put them back in.

As the evening progressed the blackouts continued, and the fuses were better hidden each time. John and I shivered as we crawled around the cellar floor, searching under heavy table saws and in bins of nails. John was more amused than irritated, calling my father "quite the prankster," but my anger grew with each incident.

The fourth or fifth time, we couldn't find the fuses. We scoured the basement for almost an hour before John gave up and went to look for my father. He found him in his camper in the driveway, drinking from a gallon bottle of wine and refusing to surrender the fuses. John came back and suggested we do without electricity. "He's feeling really bad. I wouldn't bother him."

But I'd been frightened of my father for too long. I got his .45 handgun — the one he always threatened to use to end his life — and I loaded it by candlelight. A small voice warned me to stop, but the feeling of power and purpose was exhilarating.

I picked my way over the snow and ice to the camper and went inside. "Not getting enough attention?" I asked my father. He didn't answer. Then I pointed the

loaded pistol at his heart and offered to kill him right there.

His first reaction was a grin, but it faded when I cocked the .45 and told him I was tired of his threats. My voice and hands were shaking. I brought my left hand up to support my right. "So this is it: your chance to end it all. Just say the word, and I'll fire. Let's get it over with, or I never, ever want to hear another threat from you."

We stared at each other for a long time. Finally I took his silence for an answer, and I placed the gun at his feet and said, "Just in case you change your mind."

As I walked back to the house, I braced myself for the sound of a shot, but none ever came. The electricity was back on within half an hour. My father never circled another death day.

Twenty years later, after my father had died of natural causes, my mother told me he'd once said that I'd given his life back to him.

Helaine G.
Massachusetts
(end of excerpt)