

## *readers' notes*

### ON A WAY THROUGH

Infertility, reason unknown.

It's a small notation, concisely ambiguous. It seems to follow me, one doctor to another in this pilgrimage to pregnancy. I'm told it's common, this "reason unknown", but the knowledge is not a relief. I've been prodded, poked, scanned, imaged – there is nothing to see, nothing to fix, nothing. Nothing but a darkened shadow on an ultrasound, an empty womb that holds nothing but hopes and dreams that slowly decay.

My counselor says that of course I have every right to be angry, to grieve. Her face is slightly flushed, her cheeks and breasts rounding and softening as her own baby grows within her. When she told me—apologetically, sorry that this must be said—I told her it didn't matter, that of course I wanted to continue our counseling relationship. It was the right thing to say, but I've been making fewer and fewer appointments. I ache inside.

Infertility has been like being in a dark room—four walls, no windows, no doors, no outlet. Your eyes will never adjust, and you keep searching for a way to turn on the lights. You wave your arms wildly—is there a switch? A string to pull? A lamp? You search again, and again, and again. Your fingers are red, bleeding—rubbed raw from running over the same hopeless walls, searching for something that may not exist. Tired, disillusioned, you desperately expend your heart and soul, with no guarantee that there even is a light to begin with.

You begin to think that perhaps you are

destined for this darkness. Perhaps there is not going to be a way through.

**HANNAH HASSLER, DUNCANVILLE, TX**

When I was in middle school I had a diary I kept every day. In it I detailed all the unsurprising prattling on of a melodramatic preteen. In reading those pages again, there's one theme that recurs relentlessly—I like girls. But I can't like girls. But I like girls. It's alarming how long it took me to, literally, see what was written before me. I guess I wasn't yet ready to go through.

I spent a good long time trying to find a way around, but it just couldn't be done. Eventually, I was going to have to take a deep breath and push through.

I came out when I was twenty-four, and, just as I had feared a decade earlier, parts of my life immediately began to fall apart. Facing the people I loved who didn't understand or were hurt by my hiding away for so long was brutal. But I grew stronger, wiser, closer to my community and to the truth. Today, happily married to the woman I love, I'm so glad that I chose the hard way, through the weeds to the clearing, where the sun shines clear and warm.

**MIKHAL WEINER BROOKLYN, NY**

New paths are offensive and screech of difference. They squeak of rebellion. The day I decided to unapologetically express my views and allowed my sound to be heard, stones were thrown. It's a danger to be different. It is a danger to appear as anything that has not been culturally accepted.

You sound loud and brass. But I think the West Indian sound was meant to be played loud and unashamed. As a Caribbean woman, as a Christian, as a pansexual, I will dance to these loud melodies. My sound shall not be silenced.

**KATRINA MCINTOSH GASPARILLO, TRINIDAD**

I talked myself OUT of the possibility that my son had Asperger's syndrome throughout elementary school. He was diagnosed at thirteen. We had already spent years of reading books about learning disabilities, seeing psychologists, trying therapies with a very wide range of unsuccess.

I scrambled to find out all I could. In the age of Google everyone knows how hit or miss this can be. In the dark of night, I'd go online. Facebook groups, blogs, podcasts and Ted talks. I looked for veterans who had been in the trenches and might have that one little nugget of advice that could save us.

There is such a thing as too much information. So much talk on the importance of early detection. Missed that boat. So many stories of kids who were much more severely impacted than mine. So much sadness and despair. At first, I kept reading these stories because it made me feel better; at least we're not dealing with THAT.

By seventh grade our son was only attending school 1/2 days. He was acting like a scared, cornered animal. We pulled him out of high school completely the fall of his freshman year. There was a big sigh of relief, but we still felt guilt and a sense of failure.

I started leaving those Facebook groups. I stopped reading the newsletters. I quit looking for new information. I look at MY kid instead of case studies and I see a fifteen-year-old who laughs, hugs and helps around the house. Yes, he spends too much time

on his computer and suffers from profound social anxiety, but he also cooks dinner, takes the dog for a walk, and he doesn't talk about dying. It's the long way around.

**KRISTINA BARTLESON SEATTLE, WA**

At the office, Terry said I looked like I'd been crying.

"I left Dan," I said, my body shaking, my world shaking.

I had left him once before, but came back after a week, lonely and confused. I didn't love him anymore—or did I? I knew I didn't like him, but I was terrified of being alone. Where would I live when the house-sitting gig was over and my friends came back to town? How would I tell my parents? What would I say to my friends?

All the other mornings she'd noticed my red, puffy eyes, I had lied: bad reaction to eye makeup. Allergies. The biggest lie: the stitches in my lip were from falling in the bathroom. The truth: My husband threw an ashtray that bounced off the floor and hit me in the face.

There were other arguments when he punched a hole in the wall or broke the bathroom door trying to "talk" to me while I cowered inside. We had a two-year-old son by the time I left for good.

Then came ten years as a single mother looking for love in all the wrong places until I understood exactly how I had abandoned myself.

One Saturday afternoon, I went to an Impressionist art museum, bought a book in the gift shop, and ate lunch in the cafe. On the train home, content and alone, I was whole.

**LINDA C. WISNIEWSKI DOYLESTOWN, PA**

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You could see it in their eyes—fear and assumption.

They stare with their Atlantic blue eyes, blond hair, and reddish, plumb cheeks. They smile at each other and complement one another, until I pass by. Then silence accompanies their stares, making me feel the rusted grudge crawling underneath my sky that they hold for me. Goosebumps, that's what you call them.

A toddler came to my seat wearing overalls and a white tee, staring at this rare creature he never seen before, or had, but never in a good way. Mom comes. She grabs his hand and throws a threatening look at me.

Not for my actions, rather for what I wrapped over my head. Not about the statement I had on my shirt "We Should Be All Feminists," rather for the hidden hair underneath my "rag."

I took a nap, and when I woke up, my head scarf was not on my head. I have no clue what had happened during my heavy sleep. I was so shocked I didn't say anything. I was afraid that I may scare the other passengers if I demanded the right to cover a portion of my own body.

Luckily, I met people off the airplane who were nice, thoughtful, curious and beautiful. They accepted me and respected my choice.

**LINA BAAZIZ CONSTANTINE, ALGERIA**

Empty hotel room, mid-morning in New York City. The air conditioning unit roars to life, overpowering the street noise, and the

lime green numbers on the digital cable box read 10:36. I am waiting for the minutes to count down before I must leave for a video shoot in Queens.

I sit upright in the desk chair, resting my back and my knees before my body will be called into action, lifting camera cases, carrying tripods and light stands and pushing an equipment cart loaded with video gear.

I am a forty-eight-year-old man with severe osteoporosis complicated by compression fractures in the thoracic and lumbar regions. How much more can this brittle spine take before the vertebrae implode, before the bones are pulverized into dust?

So this is just a short essay—throwaway words scribbled in a pocket notebook, thoughts unspooling while waiting for the clock to hit 10:45 a.m., departure time. The minutes tick away and my tarrying ends. No more sitting, as work demands must be met.

Rise, I tell myself. Switch off the desk lamp and move across the thin, navy blue carpet. Open the door and exit the room. Allow effort to conquer the anxiety. Let motion and activity chase away these Thursday morning meditations imbued with self-pity. Go down the stairs today. plets and stained on the

**FRANCIS DICLEMENTE SYRACUSE, NY**

She laid in bed unable to respond, just breathing. Her body was shutting down. She had held my hand the day before, an uncharacteristic show of affection. She

had done that only one other time, and that was a week earlier. She was no longer the Screaming Monster Dragon. No longer my abuser.

In the quiet, I was able to see her as the little child who had been traumatized and emotionally frozen in pain. That was her reality. I was simply born into her pain. This was the remnant of my mother who tortured my childhood.

I talked to her after decades of her refusal to listen. I cried. I found I did love her and grieved for her loss and mine. Said I was sorry and I loved her. I know she heard. She died the next day and I, after sixty-five years, I am at peace.

**DUANE HERRMMAN TOPEKA, KS**

It's empty around here. There's a lot of stars, a mostly cadaverous quiet except for the wind or coyotes, complete absence of trails snaking up the trammeling mountains, which are mostly just precarious rocks and dense trees, a mean rise tipped by a sandstone jutt, the last vestiges of the old country.

The Old Country.

It's a beautiful place from a distance, the kind of place that allows you the freedom to shoot weaponry in your backyard without the fear of someone calling the police—and the people around here do enjoy a good blasting session. My neighbor's daughter likes to come up from the city on the weekends and shoot her shotgun about. The dogs really hate her.

It's a long drive for her, and she's assured me that on the drive up she sticks to "just the road beers." Then after she pulls up at my neighbors, her dad's, she'll finish a 750ml Jamo to feather the edges of the visit. She kills about a bottle a day, give or take a few fingers. And she brings a lot of ammo and has her way with it too.

I don't think she has a particular target

or anything she's aiming for; just shoots generally at the mountain, near as I can tell. That's where civilization stops, where the elongating penumbra of the western face dips us into shade at an early hour. Sometimes she'll shoot well into the night. It's a nice sound, the stretching echo. Keeps the dogs desperately curled at my feet.

**NV BAKER OJO FELIZ, NM**

I start to notice several months into my journey with this disease that my pupils change frequently. Sometimes, they are constricted when they should be dilated. Sometimes, they are slightly different sizes. Sometimes, my eyes just seem to darken, as if they are declaring their own exhaustion, the pain that sits behind them. I get to the point where I check my eyes every time I pass a mirror. I ask my mother, "How do they look?" I become obsessed. Sometimes, I lean so close against the glass that I lose sight of myself. It's just a pair of eyes. Wild, brown eyes, a little gold, with dots at the center that seem to have a mind of their own, the way they shrink and flare open. Sometimes I have to catch myself, remind myself that it's really just me in the mirror. These are my eyes. Though sometimes I feel like a stranger in my body, my pain, this shell of my former self, I am not quite such a stranger to my own reflection.

**STEPHANIE HARPER LITTLETON, CO**

They don't tell you that the desert is freezing at night. That the sand becomes dark as coal dust, and leeches the heat and joy out through the soles of your feet as you keep on walking. They don't prepare you for the long weary miles of trudging, where you stare down at the shrouded ragged wraps just for something to focus on, trying not to think of the blisters they cover. No

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one mentions that the sun beating on your head will make your thoughts start to leak out of your bleeding ears, and that you will see mirages right in front of your eyes and not only on the horizon. That there will be so many false starts, that you will sleep leaning against non-existent palm trees, or that what you hope is the end of deprivation is so often just a shimmering haze that will start to buzz into a frenzied shatter when you are mere steps away. They don't tell you that you will begin to search on the ground for pieces of yourself in a distressed stupor as you try to recollect the time before. Nor of the monsters that you know walk behind you, keeping exactly in step so that no matter how fast you turn, you cannot catch them. No, they don't tell you what it is like, those who have passed this way before. Who would believe them?

**KEREN DIBBENS-WYATT KENT, UK**

Head down—glassy-eyed stare tethered over faltering steps. Here I find myself stumbling over damp, broken earth: stones of granite, foothold roots, and puddled, murky water. It's a masochist's game, this mountain running *thing*—entering the trailhead while the rest of your world sleeps. The minutes pass and accumulate into hours; you center yourself, searching for your breath, stride, and cadence. This is your release; this is your escape; this is your faith.

Rows of Maples pass overhead. While the sun still hides itself away, life is beginning to stir. Animal tracks appear in the spread of the headlamp light: a bear? I start

whistling aloud.

I'm scaling this mountain, ascending into the sky, and grasping at clouds; bird songs have faded, bark has been dwarfed, and vegetation has failed to germinate; my nostrils are burning, my arched spine aches, my quads are turgid with lactic acid, and my toenails are blackened and loosening. *This is only momentary.*

This is the void. Pendulum legs swing along their XYZ axis. I'm hoping I hear my outsole connect with dirt. The trees are behind me now and I feel like forfeiting.

Step; step; *grasp your quads if you need to*; step; *watch your breath*; step; step; *keep your feet*; *keep your cadence*. *Let go of the pain.*

The sun has risen, the clouds have dispersed, and an infinite skyline lies before me: this summit is the world between my own and that beyond my reach. All of that pain meant nothing, because this, right now, will last forever.

**DEVIN R. LARSEN SOLANA BEACH, CA**

Two weeks of unrelenting, deep innervating pain from a nerve compression in my neck. It races down my shoulder blade into my right hand, which has gone numb. It wasn't one triggering event, as everyone asks about and hopes to avoid for themselves, but too much carrying, moving, doing during a busy holiday season. Too much for a vulnerable body that endured life-saving neck surgery last Christmas and a hip replacement six months later. When will I learn my limitations? Stubbornness, self-sufficiency, doing are in my genes. I just

face it and get through. Living life to the fullest is my mantra, an amplified intention after my twin died suddenly and unexpectedly three years ago.

The pain will ease up, go away – eventually. It's not cancer, like my former patients endured for weeks, months, years. How did my father get through thirteen years? How did my mother-in-law manage severe cancer pain with only Demerol injections, the standard of the 1970s? I first turn to ice, massage, acupuncture, herbal therapies, and aromatherapies. But now I need drugs.

From the recesses of my memory, I hear my five-year-old shout in a defiant, arm-stiffening, "But I need chips and cheese now!" as he finds a way through the intense cravings of high dose steroids for his acute leukemia treatment. That was twenty years ago. He survived, we survived, three years of intense treatments, crises, awakenings. Survival is instinctual. It demands attention. Then awareness, insight, higher consciousness shepherds us to meaning, making sense of whatever it is we are getting through in the moment. In this predawn, filtered light of shapes and dreams, in this singular moment of reflection, suffering is a universal language of humanity. I am not alone.

**JANICE POST-WHITE MINNEAPOLIS, MN**

When I was fifteen, I was taken downtown in a paddy wagon. I was with three friends. I'd not had anything to drink at a party, I was a leader at my school. The serious partiers were in the basement getting high, swallowing mustard to disguise the smell of whatever. I was upstairs in the kitchen chewing a piece of mint gum a cop assured me was to cover the smell of alcohol.

"I don't drink," I replied.

"That's what they're all saying," he barked, "You wouldn't be here if there wasn't cause.

Get in there with the rest of them."

There wasn't cause. I'd gone to the party to see my boyfriend after our team won the basketball championship, only he'd decided the party would get busted, so he skipped the party, and I got caught with two equally innocent friends.

The paddy wagon was packed with bodies, a sweaty, inebriated guy, caught out on the lawn, got loaded in.

"Call me the Claw!" he yelled.

My friends and I were fifteen and afraid we'd be put in the drunk tank with the older men who had been rounded up at the bars. We eventually got to call home; my mother picked me up. We were silent on the drive home. I knew what was coming.

My father raged, "You're responsible! Don't you see? There was illegal activity, you're ruining your reputation!"

A part of me knew then that I was no more who he or "they" said I was, than I am now, forty years later. Here's a secret: You are who you say you are. You can decide, at least, that much.

**SUSAN BALLER-SHEPARD BLOOMINGTON, IL**