

Open Letters.

True tales of modern life



June 25, 2000 (Vol. I, No. 1)

This week,
Open Letters features the collected letters of:
Chana Shvonne Williford,
Lynn Crosbie,
Paul Tough,
X.,
and Marc Herman;
as well as a conversation between Sarah Jones and Deirdre Dolan.

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Open up.



This issue contains language that may not be appropriate for younger readers. Chana Shvonne Williford, for instance, writes that living with three guys “fucking SUCKS”; Lynn Crosbie says she doesn’t care that Toronto Maple Leafs goaltender Curtis Joseph has a “hot ass” (and then later refers to something called a “crease camera”); Paul Tough uses the word “jazzy”; and Sarah Jones, while speaking of her friend Judy, recalls that one day Frankie “just started liking her butt.”



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Like a Heart Attack

A letter from Chana Shvonne Williford, on meeting a new guy.

Dallas, Texas • June 19, 2000

My Sarahkins,

Get out the Drama-Chana label once again. Well, not really. Well, I don't know. Jesus, Sarah. I'm never gonna get all this right, am I? I'm going nuts because living so far away from school is taking a toll on my grades and that depresses me. It also sucks because it makes it hard for me to have a job while I'm in school, which makes me financially dependent upon Clint. Not only that, but I am living with three guys...and we know how that goes. They mess the place up, I clean. Which fucking SUCKS because I have the longest and hardest days of any of us. And all they every want to do is party party party. I told Clint the other day that I want to move out. It was horrible. He cried! I don't know how to deal with other people when they cry...unless I can understand wholly why they are crying. But this is ridiculous.

Anyway, he's pretty much gotten over it. I mean, I've made my decision. I have a friend closer to school that I wouldn't mind moving in with, and she would let me slide on the payment until I get a job (which shouldn't take long at all). I also want to talk to my sister about her and her kids moving to Dallas, though. It would help them out because Leah (my sister) would be able to find a better paying and stable job in a larger city than our hometown. Her husband is in prison, she has four kids to feed, and hasn't had a job in ten years. If she could just rent out her house she could use that money to pay for an apartment in the Dallas area. I could live there and help out so she'd be making a profit from that AND have a job at the same time. I'd probably have to stay closer to the Dallas area, but I don't mind all that much...but get ready to scream at me when I tell you why.

Okay...here goes. You know I can't ever make myself write a Reader's Digest condensed version of a story, so I hope you have a little time to read.

My roommate Geoff, who just turned 19, is going out with the 31-year-old stripper next door, Amy. She's really cool, a lot like my sister, and has two kids (Savannah, 11, and Gunner, 8). So that's a pretty surreal situation. Anyway, like I said she's pretty cool and we all go out occasionally. Last week Clint and I went out with Geoff and Amy and our other roommate Eric (41) and some other people. We went to a tattoo-and-piercing shop, because Amy

knows the owner and wanted Geoff to get his tongue pierced. After we had been there for a while I had to go to the bathroom. It was in the back of the shop, past all the tattoo artists' rooms.

So I went to the bathroom and was walking back, totally minding my own business, when I hear this voice say "Hey...you...girl! Pretty girl! With the glasses!"

Up until the "glasses" part I thought he had been talking to someone else. I was way past his room by that point. I did a 360 when I heard that part and kinda stuck my head in his doorway with a quizzical look. He was tattooing some guy who was grinning like a cheshire cat.

So the tattoo artist started asking me some questions, most of which I don't remember now because I was so taken aback that he thought I was pretty. I had no makeup on (not that I'm not pretty without makeup, but...), I also had frizzy unwashed hair, my horrible black thick-rimmed glasses on, and some stupid green cargo pants with a shitty long-sleeved shirt on. I had had a rough day and I showed it. He kept talking, asking who I was there with and other things.

Amy eventually noticed that I hadn't come back from the bathroom and saw me standing in his doorway, so she came back to see what was going on. Now, like I said, Amy is a pretty hot stripper. So there she was standing next to me with her voluptuous bod, making me feel completely diminished like the stick-rail I am. Amy said hi to the tattoo guy. He sort of glanced at her, said "hi" and looked back at me, opening his mouth to say something.

Before he could get it out, Amy (drunk) said, "Hey, don't you remember me?"

"No," said Tattoo Guy, and then looked back at me and started to say something again. He got about a word out when Amy interrupted again.

"You know, I'm the girl that comes in all the time and raids the jewelry case...the stripper that's always here."

Another quick glance in her direction.

"No." Eyes back on me. "I was just talking to your friend here...she's kinda cute."

Amy, like the dear she is, says, in a horribly offended tone, "KINDA?"

Tattoo Guy cracked a small smile and stared right at me. "Yeah, you're right...she's fucking beautiful."

Okay. Can Chana turn 40 different shades of red? I think she can! I have NEVER been hit on in a nice way before. Hell, I haven't been hit on at ALL in so long I didn't even remember what it felt like. Our group got ready to leave right after that, so I never really said anything back. But it made me think.

My God...my heart was all aflutter after that. Not just because of the sweet and obviously honest way he was interested in me. I mean, he OBVIOUSLY saw something in me, and most people don't do that right off the bat with me. Not to mention...he was really really good-looking.

I was hooked.

The next day, while Clint was at work, I meticulously remade myself. I washed my hair, shaved my legs, put on matching underwear (not that I planned on letting him see it, but it just makes me feel better, you know?), pulled my hair back and put on makeup. I wanted to look so completely different that he wouldn't realize it was the same person.

I went to the shop before it got busy and looked around at some of the portfolios. The artists were sitting around on a couch in the front of the store just sort of bullshitting, but the guy from the night before wasn't saying much. One artist was talking about a woman he had tattooed the night before who had an orgasm while he was tattooing her. She gave him a \$20 tip. They were all having a good laugh, and they were all staring at me as I stood looking through the books.

Finally someone asked me if I was looking for anything particular. The guy from the night before had been staring at me the most and he suddenly, out of nowhere, just says, "I'll give you a free tattoo if you'll be my girlfriend." All the guys laughed at him, started ribbing him and calling him pathetic, saying, "Yeah, girlfriend for a night!" and he looked hurt and looked at me and said, "No, really...marry me."

I turned red and said something to the effect of "I

don't know if I'll ever get married," which was a good answer because some guy said I was a smart girl and started ribbing some other guy there who had gotten married on a whim and screwed up his life in some manner. The attention was off me for a while, so Tattoo Guy decided to get up and come to the counter in front of me and ask me exactly what I was looking for.

Now, I really DO want a new tattoo. I really wasn't coming JUST to see this dude. So I actually had a few pictures and ideas that I had brought with me, one of which was to go around the dragon I already have on my back. So I had to show him the dragon on my back. All the guys instantly started drooling and some other guy went, "forget him, marry me!" They all gawked over it for a few minutes and then Tattoo Guy asked if I would look at his book.

So while we were going to his room I told him that he had stopped me last night. I was right, he didn't remember me from the night before because I looked so different...but as soon as I told him he goes, "Wow, that's great! I thought I had seen two of the most beautiful women in the world two days in a row and I was going to have to kill myself pining after both of them...but they're the same person!" Swoon.

We sat down and I flipped through his book and looked at some of his drawings. Meanwhile, he asked me all sorts of questions and told me about himself. He made no attempt to hide the fact that he was all OVER me. But he was not rude about it in the least, not pushy, just absolutely sweet sweet sweet. He has this softspoken manner, and these beautiful blue eyes...oh God, Sarah. You should see these eyes. I thought I could swim in them.

So his name is Steve and he told me about his growing up in Montreal. His family is all French-Canadian and they all speak French (double swoon?). I asked how old he was, to which he replied "twenty-eight, how old are you?" When I said "twenty" he immediately asked if I liked older guys.

I couldn't do anything but tell the truth. I'm horribly attracted to younger men. Or younger-LOOKING men. There was a look of concern in his eyes...like his heart was doing the same thing as mine, fluttering around in there like a heart attack.

He asked if I dated much, and I told him I was seeing someone (I can't lie, dammit), but that it was

on the rocks (it is...more on that later). He looked a little depressed, and countered with "well, I'm as single as it gets." He looked a little embarrassed before he started his next line, sort of holding his head down and looking at his thumbs..."But I *do* like to date...(slight 2 second pause as he raises his head to look right at me)...you."

Okay...here's where I turn four HUNDRED shades of red. How utterly sweet can you get? TELL ME?!?!? Where did this man come from? The sweet factory? Oh my god. Swoon, swoon, SWOON! My heart did flip-flops, fireworks went off, you name it.

It was getting late, so I attempted to make an exit before I just completely asked him to marry me right there. He agreed to design a piece for me and gave me his card. He asked me for my name and phone number, which I wrote on the back of one of his cards, and asked what my usual schedule was. I told him I get home on weekdays after 7:00 p.m. and am home all day on the weekends.

Every time the phone rings after 7 o'clock my heart jumps.

I can't help it. Call me crazy. Clint and I have been having horrible differences lately. Things just aren't working out correctly. I'm running out of time to write this letter (God...I told you it was windy), so I'll probably have to clue you in on the details of the situation when I get home or tomorrow since today is Clint's day off and he'll be around. But you can bet you'll get the scoop. You're the ONLY person who will get the scoop.

I'm so glad I have you to tell these things to. Can you imagine all of that stuff cramped up inside me all the time? I'd burst.

I really have to go catch the bus now. I love you, Sarah. Tell me what you think. I'm not married, you know. Not that I don't love Clint, but GOD. GOD! Did this guy just drop out of the sky? I've already pictured myself moving to Montreal and having dozens of little Tattoo Guy babies. I'm horrible.

God save the queen (of drama),

Chana



Thy Pads...

A letter from Lynn Crosbie, on her love for a certain goaltender.

Toronto, Ontario • June 20, 2000

Dear Paul,

The weather is damp and grey here, the waters filled with toxins. Celine Dion is lying prostrate after a turkey-baster insemination; *Mamma Mia!* is still going strong; and the New Jersey Devils and the Dallas Stars are vying for the Stanley Cup.

The Toronto Maple Leafs, of course, have been out of the playoffs since a humiliating loss, in six games, to the Devils (whose offensive prowess and neutral-zone trap made the Leafs look like

Thorazine-addled mental patients).

I was surprised to receive your email after your abrupt departure from *Saturday Night*, as I never heard from you again after our meeting in February in which I made my fervent plea to interview the Maple Leafs' goalie, Curtis Joseph. I assumed that by wearing a poncho to our meeting I had offended your unyielding good taste. I imagine that it is homesick amnesia that has prompted you to ask me why I came to see you in

the first place, or maybe my request has germinated in some dark, recessive quarter of your mind. At any rate, I am very pleased, in response to your inquiry, to explain this *fleur du mal*.

The bloom, I am afraid, has gone off the rose that was once my searing ardour for CuJo (his nickname, derived from the eponymous Steven King lunatic dog whose face is reproduced, in the manner of van art, on Joseph's mask), but I will attempt to remember what it was like when I was an intrepid idolater, hunting Big Game.

It has been years since I first developed an attachment to CuJo, ever since he was photographed arriving, from St. Louis, at Pearson Airport in the summer of 1998, with his blonde wife and three children in tow. On this occasion he made an impertinent remark about the then-Leafs goalie Felix "The Cat" Potvin, something to the effect of "This town isn't big enough for the both of us."

Joseph had been acquired for the Bionic sum of six million dollars a year by Leafs President and administrative mastermind Ken Dryden. (I tried to read Dryden's book *The Game* this year to prepare to write about goalies, but his training as a lawyer makes his prose tediously argumentative, e.g., "Bowman is tough. Not simple. A tough coach. Tough but fair. It's not simple, working with Bowman, it's fair and tough, simply.") I was just starting to watch hockey in earnest. I fixated on Joseph immediately, with the kind of wary fascination that attends the arrival of any new sheriff in town.

I need to explain, immediately, that any affective relationship with a hockey player is necessarily divided into the binary positions of passion and contempt. (Like the paradox encoded in the Marilyn Manson mantra "love to hate hate to love," unrequited adoration is both exhilarating and humiliating. A star's brightness, physicists and the lovelorn maintain, depends on two things: "how much light it radiates" and "how far it is [from you].")

Although I had been watching hockey, every single Leafs game in fact, I had yet, at this point, to feel a close or urgent link to the game. As a female, in the past, I would always enter a dulling, hierarchic, or traditionally male-dominated sphere (graduate school, literary events, trips to Canadian Tire) by forming an erotic attachment with one of its constituents. (Have you ever gone to a party that is filled with horribly ugly people, and found yourself drawn to the least repellent woman there, seeing her, in this context, as

Olympia herself? If so, then you understand my first principle: attachment *in context* is both tenuous and powerful.)

Hockey players are, for the most part, very young, acneic and stricken with accelerated male pattern baldness; their finest assets, their athletic bodies, are concealed by inflated pads and bulky, tasteless costumes. You can imagine my conundrum.

Curtis Joseph however, is moderately handsome, and approximately my own age: he is, more importantly, possessed of beautiful blue eyes.

I want to pause at this point and restate the paradox and emphasize the precise point of my fixation.

Curtis Joseph *the man* is a golf-playing, charity-surfing, utterly ordinary married man with a hockey wife named Nancy and children, whose initials are emblazoned in a shamrock on his helmet, that bear these unforgivable names: Madison (the mermaid in *Splash*), Taylor (the kid on *Home Improvement*) and Tristen ("Iselte" will no doubt follow). His favourite food, according to the official Maple Leafs website, is "chicken wings."

CuJo *the goalie* is, in the position of the team's protector and great hope, a preternaturally skilled player, one whose athleticism takes the form of variations on the Kama Sutra, and whose eyes, framed by the bars of his cage, are

Skies over great lakes, roiling,
Cezanne cobalt, Van Gogh navy
agate, indigo
submerged shale,
Byron's eyes that Coleridge described as *open
portals of the sun*,
Blue moons, shining on and so on and so
on.

Staring in to these eyes courtesy of a CBC crease camera, I felt just like Milos Forman's Salieri (played by scenery-chewing F. Murray Abraham) enraged into humility by the sight of beauty, unreachable, behind bands of steel.

I remember telling you in your office (after I showed you one of my orisons to CuJo, beginning "O Stalwart! Thy pads are the womanly shields of the Bee, stinging my heart with manly venom") that desire, it seems to me, is an engine that moves improbable machinery.

A simple analogy would be choosing to live in,

say, Calgary, because you have fallen in love with a cowgirl, effectively forsaking all sense and reason.

The improbable machinery, in my case, was my capacity to be a genuine hockey fan: a hard-core, stone-cold, "Whack that fucking Barnaby!" fan whose Saturday nights are spent contemplating, in feverish reverence, a Canadian game.

You told me you didn't know much about hockey (though I'm sure, like most men, you know enough to keep you safely in the small-talk zone, e.g., "I don't know, Balfour's looking pretty good"). I must tell you, it's a lot more complicated than it seems, and in order to want to learn what constitutes icing, offside, or interference, for example, to learn anything beyond pure shop talk (useful in the company of strange if barbarous men), you need a strong motivator.

Growing up male in the same city your whole life is usually enough (men, generally, are bigger sports fans than women, likely because any one of them, in the putative democracy that is pro sports, could grow up to play in the major leagues). Female sports fans tend to fall into four categories: the actual jock/fan, or player; the Hatpin Mary, a lovable elderly butch figure with leather lungs and foam fingers; the demi-fan, who claims to love the game "because my dad used to watch it with me when I was a little girl"; and the actual or dissembling "puck slut," whom the cameras pick out often, due to her penchant for blonde bouffants and tight pink sweaters.

When I decided, nobly, that CuJo had beautiful eyes (as opposed to a hot ass), I moved deeper into the mechanics of the game, stone-skipping every category of female and male affiliation.

I read a local bishop discussing Jesus in the paper a few months ago, and he said that when He beholds you, you are utterly beheld. Critical theorists love to rattle on about "the gaze," but in this case, I think I was transfixed in the way of the Wedding Guest, the eyes of the Mariner drawing and suspending me into his Rime.

CuJo once said in a *Saturday Night* puff piece that he was a shy child who learned to express himself through sports. If I had had a chance to interview him, I would have asked (after insisting he was looking at me, right *at me*, every time the camera picked him out) exactly what he was expressing of himself through his butterfly bends, flying leaps, and two-pad rollovers. Because it

certainly was not the articulation of semi-literate golfing; rather, he expresses nuclear heat and energy, a persona his person cannot contain, off-ice or offstage.

In September of 1999, I was invited to a Leafs practice by a sports journalist friend. I had no legitimate reason to be there, so I clung to the sidelines, staring shyly at the disrobed players' shower shoes and smelling the perfume of their rank uniforms.

When I was in the changing room, CuJo appeared, dressed exactly like me, all in black, and looking attractive and composed. I felt nothing, seeing him, other than a slight chill when he sat down and began signing photographs like an automaton.

Prior to that, however, while cruising the corridors, I had glanced down the rink aisle and saw him crab-walking toward me in full uniform. I fairly swooned. It was on that day that I realized the superhero element of my fetish: I recalled that as a child I had had a painful crush on Spiderman but found Peter Parker repulsively bland and straight. Uniforms or costumes, particularly to women (or gay men), are erotic because they both conceal and reveal something intangible, even epicene, about their wearer. They signal power, and how fluid power is; in my own converse case, by dyeing my hair and dressing in tight sweaters, for example, I could perform the kind of sexuality that might get me a pass to the deeper recesses of the changing room (the showers).

Once I loved him, I was just like any fan, no matter how much theory I expended, no matter that I felt that our eyes, when locked through the television monitor, could produce a syncretic energy capable of winning games and wrapping the goal posts in psychic plexiglas.

I contacted his management; I called in every favour I could think of, trying to bring myself closer to something I now realize is better and brighter, like a genuine star, at a vast distance.

I logged onto his website (www.curtisjoseph.com) and read innumerable wan letters from fans who believed he would write back: many of these fans were children wanting to learn how to better use their blockers or gloves: it seemed unlikely he ever read a single word. He does, however, use this site to sell what you called "Beanie Babies," authorized, cheap little plush dogs bearing his

signature for the low low price of \$65.00.

Looking back, like Frederick Exley, I never wanted merely to be a woman "among many, a fan": I wanted something that is quintessentially teenage, and is not; to look at someone and see him looking back.

Teenage girls need the torturous factor of distance in their longings: it is a better and safer way to view the train wreck of their own molten feelings. As an adult, I decided to walk through the wreckage and attempt to wrest something away.

I was never able to reach him, as you well know, which had surprisingly few consequences regarding my love of the game: I had already been safely ferried to the ice, and once there, the game, as true fans know, is bigger than the sum of its parts.

So, Paul, this is a circuitous answer to your question: now that CuJo is out of the playoffs, I still love him, but with the kind of maternal love I feel for men I have outgrown, who have outgrown me.

I logged onto the website today, and saw that he had finally answered his fans' letters, with sweet little bromides about enjoying the game and having fun. I felt a little teary-eyed, I confess, with pride. And not the pride that once raged in my eyes, after he squashed my perverse hopes and lateral dreams (CuJo carving my initials on his helmet after a night drinking scorpions in a dark Tiki bar; reading my poems with trembling hands and heart; smiting his eyes in a fit of passion and handing them to me, transmogrified: two azure doves).

I was once, like the boy in the throes of simony in Joyce's "Araby," "a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger."

Yet, as the Devils pounded him, and each Leaf, into submission, I wished for better things, as one does, after falling stars.

All the best,

Lynn



A Billion to One

A letter from Paul Tough, on a moment of coincidence.

San Francisco, California • June 21, 2000

Dear Deirdre,

I was in a bookstore today, in the plays section, which is a section I don't ordinarily spend a lot of time in. I was looking at Tom Stoppard plays (I'd forgotten he'd co-written *Shakespeare in Love* until I saw the closing credits in your hotel room Saturday night), like *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, which I read the opening scene of, sitting cross-legged on the carpeted floor.

Then I picked up another Stoppard play, *The Real Thing*, and started reading it at the beginning of

the first scene. There was music playing in the store, and at this particular moment it was "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off." You know: you say tomato and I say tomato. Picture this: the song's still playing, and I'm reading, and I get to the third page, where this man and his wife are having a disagreement about the pronunciation of a word, and the man, the character of the man, says, in a sing-song voice, "Let's call the whole thing off." And I read those words just as the song comes to its jazzy conclusion, with the singing of that very line.

I looked around for someone to tell, but there wasn't anyone, and I wasn't sure how big a deal it was anyway. True, it was probably the only time that line occurred in any book in the play section, but it probably appears in other books; there's probably a scene in some novel where someone jokingly sings "Let's call the whole thing off." And I don't really believe in coincidence; I know the mathematical fact that yes, maybe hearing "Let's call the whole thing off" sung while reading the line "Let's call the whole thing off" is a one-in-a-billion chance, but I've read a billion books and listened to a billion songs while I read, and they've never once synched up until now, so it's just the law of averages that it would happen at this moment, on this particular afternoon. There's no significance behind the song, or the line, or the play, or the sentiment; I shouldn't take it as a sign to stage the play or buy the CD or, in fact, to call the whole thing off, or to decide on a thing that I might want to call off and then call it off, and give as my reason that I received a message in the form of the confluence of a line from a song and line from a play.

But it is a little weird that the scene I was reading right before *The Real Thing*, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, is actually about probability and chance and meaning; it's the scene, as you probably remember, where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are playing a game where they flip a coin and if it's heads Rosencrantz gets the coin and if it's tails Guildenstern gets it (or perhaps vice versa; I can't remember, even though I read it this very afternoon), and it keeps coming up heads (that much I remember), seventy or eighty times in a row, a billion-to-one chance, but as Stoppard has the characters discuss, there's nothing so odd about that; each flip is just as likely to be a head as a tail, so it's no surprise, really, that each one is a head.

What I wonder is whether life is better or richer or cooler if you go around believing in coincidence and signs and auguries, seeing meaning in every billboard and opportunity in every meeting. There's something about that kind of life that seems young and hopeful. It strikes me as particularly collegiate, though that may be only because in college I was hanging out a lot with Howard and Beverly, two of the most superstitious people I've ever met. They used to flip coins for every decision, from ice cream flavors to grad-

uate school. They worshipped randomness.

There's a way of thinking about the world when you're young, before you've learned all the rules of social order and acceptable behavior and career path, where you think that anything can happen, when you believe in ghosts and angels and UFOs and government conspiracies and true love, and everything seems connected, or at least sometimes it does.

Like when I went to see *Hannah and Her Sisters* with Howard and Beverly and Ashleigh at Loews 84th, and in the movie Woody Allen is dissuaded from killing himself by seeing a Marx Brothers movie at the Metro Theater at 99th and Broadway, which was in fact the very same theater where I'd seen the very same Marx Brothers movie a week earlier, with Ashleigh.

Or the time when I was hanging out with Lara and Mary and Alexis in high school, and Lara and I were going out to eat or something, and there was a deck of cards on the table, and as we were walking out I cut the deck and said "four of diamonds" and turned it over, and it was.

I can still feel the feeling that I had on each of those two occasions, of wanting to be part of something big and significant and magical, and half-believing that I was; of half-believing that I shared mystical connections with the people around me, as well as with Woody Allen, or Tom Stoppard for that matter. I don't really feel that any more, even when I receive such a clear and obvious bell-ringing light-flashing sign as picking up entirely at random a play I've never read, by Tom Stoppard, a playwright who writes about coincidence, and starting on page one, and by page three a character is singing the song that's playing in the bookstore.

What did I want? A character to say, "Hmmm, don't you think Paul Tough should call the whole thing off?" And another character to say, "Yes, perhaps he should"? Would that have satisfied me?

Yes. That would have done it. But nothing less.

Yours,

Paul

Inheritance

A letter from X., on her son and his father

Winnipeg, Manitoba • June 22, 2000

Dear Mike,

He's thirteen and a half, which you probably know, and things are happening. So, first thing this morning, when his eyes open and his sheet is as always inexplicably half off his bed, he grabs his CD remote control and pushes play and we hear Fatboy Slim all over the house (same house as always, only it's red and yellow now, not blue). He comes downstairs, all arms and legs and skinny, he's tall, taller than me, in his Joe Boxer boxers and sits at the dining room table eating Honey Nut Cheerios and reading yesterday's comics. He has the number 60 on his leg in black marker. That was his number yesterday at the provincial basketball try-outs, which he didn't make due to lack of confidence, said the coach, though he's got the moves, and next year he'll be older and ready. It doesn't bug him, none of his friends made it this year, and his school coach had told them they wouldn't but that it would be a good experience. That's what he and his friends said to each other after the try-out. Hey, good experience, eh? Oh yeah, excellent experience. Now *that* was a good experience! They're pretty funny. Then he goes downstairs and has a shower, listening to Kid Rock, heard of him? Last fall C. and him went to Minneapolis for a Vikings game and Kid Rock was staying in the same hotel, drinking in the bar, but O. was too shy to go up to him and say hello. There's one song he plays over and over which goes everybody knows my name, say it way out loud, or something like that, over and over, loud while he showers. Sometimes he sings along, but not today. Then he has to decide to wear shorts or jeans because it's June here and you know what that's like. He decides on shorts, long and baggy, with the elastic top of his underwear visible above his shorts, and his shorts low on his hips, and his Nike hooded sweatshirt (he used to boycott Nike and McDonald's, but not recently) and his Adidas runners and white socks, and still, in spite of showering, a faded 60 on his leg. His vaguely hairy shin.

He's got a choice this morning for lunch: bagel and cream cheese, turkey sandwich, or peanut butter and banana sandwich. He chooses peanut butter and banana. He plays around with the dog for a while, tells G., his ten-year-old sister (yup, I got pregnant again) who's getting ready for running club, that when HE had running club they

ran in the rain because they were tougher back then, and then he checks out his reflection in the toaster oven and off he goes to catch his bus for school. Have a good day, I tell him, and he says you too. I can't call out to him after he's left the house with I love you, or Do you have your lunch? This mortifies him. Later today he's got a different basketball practice for the regional team, which he did make, and he's going to miss his baseball game to go to the basketball practice. His baseball team is called the Sabres, and he pitches and catches, and he's a great pitcher with a wicked curve although he prefers to catch, and if you could see him make the throw from home plate to second you'd know how good he is. Then I guess he'll come home and eat ice cream with chocolate sauce and watch some bad television, he loves the comedy channel, and Letterman, he loves Letterman too and thinks it's cool that Letterman and Nolan Ryan and his grandma all had the same kind of heart surgery, maybe check out something on the net like the phone number of that phone booth in the middle of the desert so he can call it some day and then go to bed after some kidding around and he'll call out from his freshly painted green and charcoal bedroom, hey, whoever put my sheet back on, thanks!

What's he doing at night, what's he dreaming? Do you believe that dreams can be inherited? That they can encode themselves on our DNA and we can give our dreams and our nightmares to our kids? Some people believe it. You and he could be dreaming the same dream one night and the next morning passing each other on the street and not even recognizing each other. Then he'll get up again and come downstairs and tell us he forgot to put his cream on his foot for the athlete's foot he has, and we'll say make sure you keep it clean and dry, and he'll say uh-huh. As for what goes on inside his head, really goes on inside his head, he's a thirteen-year-old boy, you tell me. I remember once you said never uproot a kid in junior high. I won't.

I know you want to know one thing, but I'm not gonna tell you whether he talks about you or not or what he even remembers. I've tried to keep track of you through your brother but I don't think he lives here anymore either. A family of

gypsies. The last time I saw his wife, she was loading up their kid, who also has red hair, into a minivan right across the street from our house. A cute little kid and I almost called O. over to the window to have a look at his cousin for the first and only time. But I didn't because it seemed too complicated. I don't know. Where do you live? Japan still, or what, Australia? Like you'd tell me.

I'm not asking for money, I'm not asking for anything. I just want to tell you about your kid before there's no kid left, and we're both a hundred years old. It seems so stupid not to talk. Keep a stiff upper lip, there are a million things I could tell you, but you don't get to choose.

X.



Balance

A letter from Marc Herman, on how to type in a hammock.

Grenada, West Indies • June 23, 2000

Dear Dad,

It is a misconception that you sleep in a hammock with your feet at one end and your head at the other. You'll fall out. The proper way to do it is to lie diagonally, cutting across the hammock's width. The Wapushani Indians of Southern Guyana, who along with their neighbors the Macuxi make the world's best hammocks, sometimes sit entirely sideways in theirs. They make them from just one, perhaps a few, strands of rope, woven back and forth like a fishing net. You could hang an elephant in one and it wouldn't break. It is nearly impossible to fall out of a Wapushani hammock, because they are long, broad ovals that catch you no matter how you move (mothers trust their babies to them). If you happen to go to southern Guyana, and range far enough into the savannahs to reach one of the villages, you will find the people using them like chairs, sitting upright, stable and confident.

The nearby gold miners do not have the money for artisanal hammocks, and they are not usually Indians, so they don't get their beds made by an aunt and hung in the family home. They use inferior hammocks, though still better than most available in North America. Rather than a net, a miner's hammock is a large cloth rug, usually decorated with a colorful design, tied to poles in

the mining camp with thick nylon rope. The rope in the Wapushani hammock is soft and deceptively plain-looking, like old twine, integral to the rest of the weaving. In the miner's hammock it is a crude graft of the annoying, yellow rope often used for pool rafts in North America. It frays easily and tends to refuse knots, but costs little and rarely breaks.

Despite their rough construction, the rug-and-nylon hammocks are better suited to the jungle, where the miners work; at night, you can pull half the cloth over yourself to keep out mosquitoes, which carry diseases, starting with malaria and heading sharply downhill from there. The hammocks are also solid fabric, which is important. Small but serious creatures on the forest floor, for example a Bushmaster snake, can't see through the fabric to your sweaty skin, or smell you quite as clearly, and may pass by none the wiser.

I am saying all this not to expose the tremendous quantity of hammock disinformation in the Northern Hemisphere (now entering prime hammock season), but for a more selfish reason. In three months I will be heading to Guyana to research gold mining. I am going to write a book

about it. This will involve several weeks in the area where they find the gold, part of the Northern Amazon, and that means sleeping in a hammock. I've never spent that long in one, and wonder about how it will go.

Can you take notes in a hammock? I did once before, but not for such a long time. I was on a very speculative attempt to write a magazine article about gold mining in the northern Amazon, and had come from Brazil to Guyana by bus and truck. The electricity came on for four hours at night in the towns, and not at all outside them, but I had a typewriter with me. I was so proud: this was the same route Evelyn Waugh and before that Walter Raleigh, and before that Alexander Humboldt and the Dutch cartographer Schomburgk had taken through the same jungle, after all, and there I was, nobody, clomping into town with a small backpack and an old typewriter, bought at a garage sale in Washington D.C. for ten dollars. Of course I couldn't use it at first. Not only did it not have a "delete" key or a cut/paste function, which nearly paralyzed me, there was also nowhere to put the thing. I tried setting it up on the only horizontal fixture in town, a plywood bar under a shaky tin shelter, but the tapping upset the pennyweight scale at the bar's far end, where they measured out the gold dust that the miners were trading for bottles of rum. They did not take kindly to the possibility of my tapping upsetting the gold dust. Other than the bar, all there was for furniture in the camp were hammocks, and a 1962 steel Smith-Corona is not ideally suited to a hammock. Still, I tried. Every time I punched a key the hammock swayed and the typewriter tilted and fell to the ground. The ground itself, which I also tried, was, though not hopelessly muddy, not good to sit in for long periods. So I took notes in a small pad with a flashlight in my mouth, then waited to begin typing everything out until I had caught a plane to Trinidad, where Walter Raleigh had come to grief on a similar pursuit.

From Trinidad I took a sailboat to Grenada. The sailboat tilted profoundly, and it was hard not to stay below deck without vomiting, but halfway through the passage I got things arranged with

twine and battens on the galley table, where I could type when I was off watch. This being a sailboat table, keeping things level was out of the question. A few sail ties, normally wrapped around the relaxed sail while at anchor, held the typewriter to some pieces of wood. Then more ties held the battens to the table's corners, with enormous knots that would embarrass a real sailor. Still, it worked. It was loud, being a manual typewriter, but the captain did not mind because it kept me off the deck, where I had proven to be more trouble than I was worth.

I was the least experienced sailor, so had few jobs to do, and had also gotten on the captain's nerves by throwing up on the wrong side of the boat (you are supposed to get seasick over the lee rail, not the upwind rail, for the same reason you shouldn't spit in the wind, only more so). So I typed out the jungle experience below deck and did only a little actual sailing, then flew home to write my book proposal, which sold two weeks ago or, if you prefer, three years later, a process far more complicated and difficult than finding my way through Guyana.

For the book, I will probably use the typewriter, which I still have, again. It is a peculiarity of the world's development systems that places still without much electricity often have phones. In my past three trips, it was the case that a fax machine was fairly easy to find in the Amazon. I can take all my pages, then catch the truck through to the logging project near a place called Mabura Hill, and fax them home as I go. With the fax there, I'll only have to bring a hammer and nails and build a small stool for the typewriter, then sit sideways in the hammock in front of it, as the Wapushani demonstrate. The fact is, we like books about jungle adventures, but no one has yet figured out how to write one on site, which is sometimes necessary. I know others have done it from notes, but I do not trust myself for accuracy if I don't do it right there, as things happen. If I have a typewriter and stool, I think it's possible.

Later,

Marc



The Most Popular Girl in School

A conversation with Sarah Jones, conducted by Deirdre Dolan.

June 24, 2000

Deirdre: What's your name, how old are you, and what grade are you in?

Sarah: My name's Sarah Jones, I'm twelve years old, and I'm in sixth grade.

Deirdre: Where do you go to school?

Sarah: Shirley Street School in Toronto.

Deirdre: How many kids are there in your school?

Sarah: I would predict 300 people. I don't know.

Deirdre: Who's the most popular?

Sarah: Me. I'm number one.

Deirdre: What does number one mean?

Sarah: Everyone likes you. Everyone loves you. Everyone wants to be around you and stuff.

You're good to them. They're good to you. When you're the populist girl in the school, you get like free chips at lunch time. Everything.

Deirdre: The populist?

Sarah: Yeah, the most popular.

Deirdre: Who gives you chips?

Sarah: Little kids. And you see little kids come up and hug you and stuff. They like you so much.

Deirdre: Is there a number two and three?

Sarah: Yes. Two is Chantelle and three is Samantha.

Deirdre: Who's Chantelle?

Sarah: She's one of my friends. She used to be number one.

Deirdre: Does everyone know when number one changes?

Sarah: Yeah.

Deirdre: How can they tell?

Sarah: They can just see.

Deirdre: What can they see?

Sarah: If we're in a group, I'm the first one and then there's the second, third, fourth and so on.

Deirdre: You mean you actually walk at the front of the group?

Sarah: Yeah.

Deirdre: So how many times have you been number one before now?

Sarah: I've had it a couple of times.

Deirdre: When was the first time?

Sarah: Probably in December.

Deirdre: Do you remember it?

Sarah: A little bit. It was fun. It wasn't really a surprise. Everyone said that I should be number one.

Deirdre: What did it feel like?

Sarah: It felt like you were top of the world and stuff.

Deirdre: How did you find out?

Sarah: You just knew.

Deirdre: What time did you know?

Sarah: At lunchtime.

Deirdre: What happened?

Sarah: The kids were giving me all kinds of stuff.



From left to right: Sarah, Jesse, and Chantelle.

Deirdre: How long does it usually last?

Sarah: Maybe a month, two months.

Deirdre: Can you remember what made you go from number one to number two the last time?

Sarah: Um, probably Chantelle would act better than me.

Deirdre: Like what?

Sarah: She'd give people gum and chips and everything.

Deirdre: Chips count for a lot in this school.

Sarah: Yeah.

Deirdre: So what made you become number one this time?

Sarah: The guys stopped liking Chantelle and started liking me.

Deirdre: Why?

Sarah: Well, I'm not cruel to people. But Chantelle is, sometimes. And she'll act all hotshot. She's pretty, but everyone doesn't like that if you go against her you'll be in a fight.

Deirdre: Why doesn't anyone want to fight with her?

Sarah: Because she'll get mad at you and you'll be like an outcast. She'll outcast you.

Deirdre: How?

Sarah: She won't let anyone talk to you. She'll be like, "OK people, don't talk to Sarah. She can hang out with the nerds."

Deirdre: So if she has all this power, how'd you replace her as the most popular?

Sarah: I don't know. She was the prettiest girl there until I came, but she had a bad attitude. I have an OK attitude. They like my personality and I'm not mean to them.

Deirdre: How many different people have been number one so far this year?

Sarah: Me, Chantelle, and Judy one time.

Deirdre: Tall Judy?

Sarah: Yeah.

Deirdre: How'd she get to be so tall?

Sarah: She drinks a glass of milk a day. Her mom makes her drink milk so much.

Deirdre: How'd Judy get to be number one?

Sarah: Frankie just started liking her butt, and after Frankie started liking it everyone else did.

Deirdre: Why did having a nice butt make her popular?

Sarah: They'd tease her and play with her more. But now everyone hates her.

Deirdre: Do you remember how Judy lost number one?

Sarah: Frankie said she had a nice butt and then one day he woke up and goes "uh, her butt's ugly," and then everyone agreed with him.

Deirdre: Does number one, two, three include boys?

Sarah: No. It's only for the grade six girls.

Deirdre: What about kids in fifth grade?

Sarah: Fifth graders don't have to deal with this.

Deirdre: Why?

Sarah: They just can't. They're not graduating.

Deirdre: So?

Sarah: It's never happened before. They can't do it because they're going to do it next year.

Deirdre: Do the boys think it's stupid?

Sarah: They don't care. But the populist girl and guy have to go out. Last year it was Chantelle and Jesse, and the year before it was Chantelle and Jesse, and this year it changed.

Deirdre: You broke up the tradition?

Sarah: Jesse likes me more than Chantelle because he says that I'm pretty and have a nice personality. He doesn't like Chantelle's looks. He says that she's too fat for him and stuff.

Deirdre: Was she less fat last year?

Sarah: No, she was always like this. She has a big chest for a young person. Jesse said he went out with her because that's what everyone wanted, but then one day he thought, "Why am I going out with her?"

Deirdre: Did he explain that to you?

Sarah: Yes.

Deirdre: Where?

Sarah: At the spring concert. He was backstage with me and I asked him, "Why don't you like Chantelle?" Then I asked him, "So who do you like," because I just wanted to hear him say it, and he said me.

Deirdre: Do the guys always decide who's going to go out, or do girls sometimes decide?

Sarah: The guys.

Deirdre: That isn't annoying?

Sarah: You don't have to listen to them always, but sometimes they'll have a point.

Deirdre: Can you already tell which fifth graders are going to be popular next year?

Sarah: Next year Samantha, Amanda, Cecilia, and Ada are going to rule the school.

Deirdre: How come?

Sarah: They're stylish, they're nice, they hang out with us.

Deirdre: Will the whole thing start all over again next year in junior high?

Sarah: Yes.

Deirdre: How do you feel about that?

Sarah: I'm proud of it, that it's going to keep going on and on and on.