

True Life Stories: **Your Friend, Always**

by Joyce Maynard

From: Brown, Harriet, ed. *Mr. Wrong: Real-Life Stories About the Men We Used to Love*
New York: Random House Ballantine Books, 2007. p. 184-196. *Vogue Magazine*, February 2007
<http://www.joycemaynard.com/columns-articles/true-life-your-friend-always.shtml>

(1) I was thirty-nine years old. I was living with my three children in a small New Hampshire town, writing a syndicated newspaper column about my life. But my life at the time was going badly. My mother had died the year before, within days of my husband's announcement that he didn't want to be married to me anymore, and now the two of us no longer spoke, except to deliver some new and bitter accusation. (2) I was rapidly going into debt with my lawyer, and being evaluated by a guardian ad litem whose assignment it was to assess the job I was doing as a mother for the purpose of recommending to the court which parent was the more fit to raise our three children.

The winter was cold. Christmas was coming. I was an orphan. And then one day, a letter dropped through my mail slot.

(3) I had been a writer long enough by this point to recognize the origins of this particular letter. The return address was written in pencil, for starters, but more significantly, it was accompanied by a long string of digits. I knew what that meant: its author was in prison.

The letter began with an unlikely salutation: *Dear Lady Joyce*. At the facility where he was presently incarcerated, the author of this letter told me, most of the inmates favored publications along the lines of *Penthouse* or *Biker Chick* for their reading matter. (4) As for himself, he waited all week for Saturday – the day my syndicated column appeared in the local paper, which was delivered to the prison library. He loved reading my stories about life with my kids – baseball practices and birthday parties, a misplaced hamster, a disastrous encounter between my son Willy and an eggbeater he'd thought to put on top of his head while in the "on" position.

(5) "It makes me feel like I'm part of a regular family, reading what you write," he told me. "I like to pretend I'm there in the kitchen with you, having some of your homemade biscuits." At the bottom of the page, he explained to me that though his real name was Dennis, he went by a nickname, which was how he signed his letter, with the words "For real, your friend always, Lucky."

(6) The letter touched me. As far removed as his circumstances were from my own, something in the tone of loneliness and longing was recognizable. And so I sent him back a note.

"Dear Lucky, thank you very much for your letter..." Because it was Christmastime, I enclosed our annual family Christmas card photograph: me and my children, sitting under our tree. I wished him a happy holiday, though truthfully, I didn't hold out a lot of hope he had one of those in his future that December, any more than I did.

(7) In record time, there was a new letter from Calipatria State Prison – this time twice as long. He must have studied that photograph for a long time, because he'd noticed every single thing about it: the mismatched socks my son Willy wore (just barely visible under the cuffs of his pants). Audrey's earrings and braces. The fact that Charlie appeared to

be left-handed. My golden dress, which my lawyer boyfriend, Don, would have called tacky; but to this man, I looked like a princess. He signed off, “For real, Lucky.”

(8) This was the moment, probably, when a more sensible woman would have ended the correspondence. But his words – which had touched me in the first letter – now brought tears to my eyes. In a handwriting so tiny I had to strain to read it (an effort to conserve paper, probably), he told me about his own family: his childhood in the orange groves of southern California, his parents, Ava and Hank, his grandmother Mamie, who used to tell him stories and bake anadama bread. (9) His family was poor, but his grandmother made him little figures out of orange peels to play with. He wrote about his dog and his first car and a certain stretch of Highway 1 he loved, around San Luis Obispo. He described a trip he wished he could take me on, along the Pacific Coast Highway, on the back of a motorcycle, writing with so much detail it was as if we had actually traveled every mile. I had never ridden on a motorcycle.

(10) He talked about me and my children, too, in a way that confirmed, if there was any doubt, how devotedly he’d followed my columns, and for how long. He knew all my stories, knew about the farm in New Hampshire I’d left, when my marriage ended, about our dog Opie and how he pulled me up hills when I went Rollerblading and held his leash, and Willy’s love of the Oakland A’s, even though we lived in Red Sox country.

(11) He had also read between the lines, to an amazing degree. Although I had said little in my column about the divorce, he knew he had no use for my ex-husband, to put it mildly. How could any man let a treasure like me go? he wanted to know. And though I might have told him a few reasons why – and my former husband certainly could have expounded at length on the subject – I was in the mood to hear words of simple appreciation and unbridled praise, and that’s what Lucky offered.

(12) I will tell you now one thing about men in prison: as much time as the rest of us spend going to jobs, taking care of our houses and meals, our children, our pets, carrying on relationships and breakups, paying bills – having sex perhaps, if we are lucky – that is time men in prison have for writing letters. Not surprisingly, they get good at it. Their letters are very long. They pack a lot into those letters.

(13) So when I wrote a sentence to Lucky, as I did that first time, he wrote back five pages. When I wrote back a paragraph, he sent ten pages. When (barely ten days later, having received two more responses) I wrote back a full-page letter, the envelope that arrived back, in record time, contained fifty pencil-written pages, with writing on both sides.

(14) He wrote now about what a brave woman I was, raising three kids on my own as I was doing, driving two hours to take them to a ball game in Boston, shoveling the snow to get them to school on time, working like a dog to put food on the table – and he knew I was a good cook, too, he could just tell from reading my columns.

(15) “What I’d give for a slice of your pie,” he wrote. *Just to smell those cookies in the oven.*

In all those fifty pages, there was nothing of romance or sex, only the deepest kind of respect and affection, and something else too: I got the sense, from what Lucky wrote, that he understood me in some strange way, as nobody had for many years.

(16) I was dating someone at the time, though admittedly the relationship had grown somewhat tepid. But immersed as I was in a bitter and scary divorce and custody battle, I took comfort in the fact that Don was a litigator with a major Boston law firm – a kind of lawyer who (as he himself explained to me) ate nails for breakfast, or acted as if he did, anyway, when any kind of legal battle came up.

(17) Still, it had not escaped my notice that Don was lacking in a certain kind of courage on other fronts. A few months earlier, for instance, on a camping trip together to Oregon – a journey he had undertaken somewhat reluctantly – Don had refused to eat any of the wonderful plump marion berries surrounding our tent because they hadn't been washed.

(18) Now I was hearing on a daily basis from a man in Calipatria, California, who didn't seem to have this kind of problem. His letters contained a kind of animal passion and fearlessness that made my heart beat faster when I read them. More than I wanted to admit, I found myself looking forward to Lucky's letters.

(19) A person might be thinking here – and I would not argue if he or she did – that I appear to be a woman lacking in a certain level of judgment. But I know a good writer when I see one, or read one. And over the years, I've encountered a few – virtually none of them the equal of the man who had now embarked on the practice of sending me daily missives from Calipatria.

(20) Lucky never wrote about life in prison. He wrote to me about his life before he got there – wonderful, funny, tough, gritty, and authentic letters, with not a cliché in the whole hundred pages.

It was clear he had experienced a lot of loss in his life, too. His first wife had died in childbirth, so he had raised their daughter on his own. (21) He had gotten married again – to the most beautiful woman in the state of California. But one day when she was riding on the back of his Harley, he'd had an accident. She was horribly burned, and so disfigured she refused to let him ever lay eyes on her again. She disappeared shortly after that. His parents had died too. Like me, he considered himself an orphan, he wrote.

(22) And then his daughter had died, of a rare fever. The letter he wrote about her death – accompanied by a photograph of a beautiful three-year-old lying in an open, flower-strewn coffin – was among the most wrenching I had ever received.

I could have said I was just offering a little kindness to a man in prison, or maybe (less admirably) that I was curious about his story. (23) But here was the truth: My desire to write back to Lucky came out of something more than the simple impulse to offer kindness, and it was about more, too, than fascination with his story. More and more, over the course of that long winter – as my court case dragged on, as the snow fell, and I watched my children riding off to their father's house on Friday nights, and I lay in bed wishing I could call my mother, only she was dead – it was Lucky who offered comfort.

(24) I had friends. I had a boyfriend who called me on his car phone, driving home from work, before heading off to the gym – a man who took me out to expensive restaurants on weekends. But at the end of the day, more often than not, I found myself climbing into bed

alone with a glass of less expensive wine and the latest of Lucky's letters. And there was always a new one; they arrived on a daily basis now.

(25) On Valentine's Day, Don took me out to dinner, during which he received a call on his cell phone requiring immediate attention. Lucky made me a drawing. Unlike my ex-husband, he wasn't much of an artist, he wrote, but a guy on his cell block, who was more the artistic type, had made the outlines for him, and he'd colored it in: a picture of Mickey Mouse holding out a bouquet of flowers.

(26) At some point over the course of that winter, Don and I took a trip to the Pacific Northwest again. Hiking with him on that trip (never his favorite activity), I had spotted a bug of such an extraordinary size and shape that I had taken it upon myself to locate a glass jar, and punched holes in the lid, for the purpose of bringing it home to show my sons.

(27) On the plane home, Don had expressed extreme discomfort at sitting next to me, knowing that this bug was in my purse. And maybe partly to provoke him – maybe, even, with the image of Lucky in my head – I had said, “You know, for five hundred dollars, I'd eat this bug.”

(28) He'd been disgusted. “What am I talking about?” I'd said. “I'd eat this bug for a hundred.” And when that got an even more horrified response, I'd held the bug up to my lips and told him, “I'd eat this bug for ten bucks. “ Our relationship ended soon after this.

But the relationship with Lucky – whatever it was – continued to develop, and with a kind of intensity and emotion I could no longer deny.

(29) When I wrote back now – as I did, at greater length than before – I didn't simply respond to his stories. I told him mine. Not as long or as impassioned as his, but I told him about my life and about my children. I described a terrible argument with my son Willy, then age seven, that had started when I accused him of disrespect and he had walked out of the kitchen and gone up to his room, and put on a Guns N' Roses CD, top volume.

(30) I had stormed into my son's room then. I had taken his CD player away, I told Lucky. My son called me a terrible name. I slapped him. He picked up the phone and called his father, who was now charging me with child abuse.

And here I was, at eleven o'clock on a Friday night in February, pouring out my story to a man I'd never met, in the Calipatria correctional facility. And reading, closely, what he wrote back by way of advice.

(31) Lucky knew what it was to be an angry little boy, he wrote. He'd treated his mother badly, too, in the past. Looking back, he felt terrible remorse.

“He's trying to be a man,” Lucky wrote. “He wants to prove how tough he is. He wants to show no woman's going to push him around.”

(32) Of course, if my son's father were there where he belonged, Lucky wrote – or if *he* were Willy's dad – he'd be taking the boy aside and having a good hard talk with him. “It's too much for one woman to do all on her own,” he wrote. “Even a strong woman like you needs a loving man at her side.”

That man would be him, of course.

(33) As for me: I wasn't sending Lucky any words of love, but if I looked deep in my heart, I would have had to say, love was what I had begun to feel for him. It was love that had nothing to do with dinners in good restaurants or vacations to the Caribbean. This kind of love was about nothing more or less than the purity of a true heart. And maybe, too, there was an element of relief in there, that this man was not going to show up on my doorstep tomorrow to disappoint me. (34) He was locked up in California, three thousand miles away. I could just know that somewhere on the planet was a man who, as he reminded me in every pencil-written letter, would cut out his own heart and hand it to me, if that's what I wanted.

I know how this sounds. So I will say, in my defense, what any woman who has been single for a while probably knows already. I had been out in the world of dating long enough by this point to understand that just because a man you may be dating is a cardiac surgeon, say, or a tenured professor at some Ivy League university, or a partner in a major Boston law firm, is no guarantee that he won't be a sociopath. (35) Now I was receiving daily expressions of undying love and passion from a man who had been labeled by society as a complete outcast. It probably said something about the previous thirty-eight years of my life, but I had begun to consider the possibility that maybe I had actually located the one truly good, honest man on the planet. Someone who was – as he himself reminded me every time he signed off – “for real.” (36) And everything about him (including his grammar and spelling, not to mention his address) suggested that this was so.

He sent me a photograph of himself – and in case a person might suppose he was a handsome man, I will say simply, he was not. But I had been married to a handsome man. I knew how far that got you. (37) In this photograph, which he'd gotten someone to take expressly for me, Lucky stood in front of a cinder-block wall that appeared to be outside, in some kind of prison exercise yard. In the picture, he had a long and scraggly beard, and some kind of bandage over his head. He was wearing what he had told me, in the letter that came with the picture, was his best shirt. Misbuttoned.

(38) And still, it didn't matter. I was moved by this man. As unwise as I told myself it was, at the end of the day, the thoughts that most comforted me were of his fierce and wild willingness to protect me. My lawyer ex-boyfriend, hearing of my ex-husband's various legal efforts in our divorce, had talked of filing motions, interrogatories, taking depositions. But I liked better what Lucky said when he heard what was going on. If he were there, he wrote, he'd make the man eat his underwear.

(39) Friends to whom I cautiously disclosed news of the correspondence (though not its full significance in my life) were expressing concern. Invariably, they asked what crime he was in prison for. I didn't know, I explained. Unfamiliar with the etiquette of these things, it struck me as a little rude, asking, and Lucky hadn't volunteered the information.

(40) It was almost spring now. Lucky's letters had begun to include tips to pass on to Willy, a pitcher, about ways to improve his motion, and jokes for Charlie, reminders to me not to let any boy mess with Audrey or there'd be hell to pay from you know who. (It was definitely a challenge, conveying pitching know-how on paper, but he tried, though upon reflection I opted not to share Lucky's pointers with my younger son.)

(41) Meanwhile, the battle over custody of my three children was getting worse, with a court date set for summer and legal bills so high I didn't even open them sometimes. When Lucky started talking about my coming out to California to visit him – and in fact, you could get an apartment, very cheap, not far from Calipatria – I realized I was in too deep. I sent him a letter to say there was no future for us. “I think we should discontinue this correspondence,” I wrote.

(42) Within a week came the news: Lucky was getting out on parole soon. First thing he planned to do once he was out: come see me. With luck, he'd be in New Hampshire for the start of Little League season.

For the first time in the six months of the relationship (there it was, that word), I registered fear. I didn't want Lucky to visit. A man on paper, a man who came in once a day through the mail slot, was as much of a man as I could deal with right about then.

(43) Now, though, his letters took on a new excitement and passion, if such a thing was possible, as he described to me how it would be when he got to my house. How he pictured me opening the door to him. How he would put his arms around me. And more.

I did, then, the thing I'd resisted before. I called the prison. It took a while to work through the channels, but finally I got a woman on the phone who was the counselor assigned to prisoner number D076952 – Lucky.

(44) I tried, as I laid out my story, to do so in the most businesslike and unemotional fashion possible, but the facts spoke for themselves. “I've been corresponding with this inmate for a while,” I told the woman. “Now that he's getting out on parole, he's been talking about coming to visit my children and me. So I thought I should just find out . . . what he was in for.”

(45) Long silence on the other end of the phone. “I must tell you,” she said, “we are prohibited from divulging this information over the telephone. I could lose my job.”

“I understand,” I said. Already, I was feeling like a fool, and worse, a woman of faint heart. I had betrayed the trust of this good man.

“But you seem like a nice person,” she said, and her voice was grave. “So I'm going to do it anyway.”

(46) “First tell me,” she said. “Are you alone where you are? Do you have someone nearby that you could talk with if you needed to?”

I was OK, I told her. I wasn't but I pretended otherwise.

“To begin with,” the voice on the other end of the line told me, “your friend will not be released on parole any time soon. Considering the fact that he is serving two consecutive 80-year sentences, he will not be eligible for parole until sometime after the year 2150.”

“Dennis, or Lucky as he calls himself,” she said, “killed his parents. Killed and then decapitated them.”

(47) She said more, but I only took in part of it. He had been on the loose for a couple of years before the police in southern California had found him, she said. He was hiding out on a ranch, picking oranges. In the course of the arrest, he shot a deputy, left him brain damaged. This was fifteen years ago. He remained in maximum security, considered to be the most dangerous kind of prisoner.

(48) "I'd be grateful," she said, "if you would not let this inmate know you have spoken to me. He is a highly explosive individual."

What she recommended, she said to me, was that I take a gradual approach to breaking off the relationship (there was that word again; suddenly it left me nauseous). Assuming breaking it off was what I wished to do, she added.

Yes.

(49) But I couldn't do what the counselor suggested, and simply, slowly begin to disconnect myself from this man. The next day, when the latest letter from Lucky dropped through the mail slot, I left it lying on the floor of my front hall where it landed. I did not open the next one, or any that continued to show up, daily, for many, many weeks after that.

(50) At some point, a long time after I'd gotten the news about Lucky and ceased writing to him, I opened one of the letters that continued to arrive. The words I read hit me like a blast of some noxious gas – toxic and putrid as decaying flesh. The handwriting was familiar, but the same hand that once filled the pages with words of loyalty, compassion, and understanding – and undying love – now formed accusations of wrath and contempt beyond any I had encountered in my life. (51) I used to say, of Lucky, that he was a man who – unable to make love to a woman in flesh – had developed the ability to make love solely with words, more powerfully than I would have known to be possible. Now I discovered the power of words on paper – his – as a force of unspeakable violence. His words did everything but draw blood.

After that, I didn't open any more of his letters, though they continued to arrive – no longer daily, but now and then – for close to a year.

(52) That summer, I spent four days in court in the trial over custody of the children my ex-husband and I still shared, though the two of us could no longer speak to each other. The judge ruled that our children could continue to live with me and visit their father on weekends. I was ruled to be a fit mother, after all. The thought did not escape me that had the court known about my correspondence with Lucky, the judge might have concluded otherwise.

(53) I did not look again at the letters in the box in the back of my closet, but I couldn't throw them out. Maybe because they contained a part of my history that – troubling as it was – I needed to document. Maybe it was simply my abiding belief that you don't throw out good writing.

So I kept Lucky's letters, a reminder of a person I was once, and hoped I wasn't anymore. It was many years before I could bear to take them out and look at them again:

(54) *Now listen up, baby. I don't have much to give you in the way of trinkets and such. I'm betting there's guys out there lining up to take you out to fancy restaurants and put a ring on your finger – 24 karat, who knows? Guys that'll buy you a car, buy you a house, fly you to Gay Paree. Me I can't even plant a kiss on those sweet lips of yours, not that I wouldn't chew off my right arm to do it.*

(55) *All I can give you when the day is done is one goddamn thing, and that's my heart. I see who you are. I know you like I know my blood. I read what you wrote and I read between the lines too, baby.*

(56) *I'd die for you. I'd kill for you. There isn't words to say it, but if you close your eyes and take a breath, you'll feel it. Someplace in California, there's a man locked up in a concrete box that's got you in his brain right now. Put your hand on your heart, baby, and feel it beating, imagine me inside you.*

I'm with you now. I'll be with you forever.

(57) Thirteen years have passed since that long and lonely winter – the hardest of my life, or one of them, anyway – when I found my comfort in the letters of a double murderer who called me Lady Joyce. The part about loving me forever proved untrue, no doubt, but the other part – about remaining in my brain – has a certain truth.

(58) I do still think about him sometimes. Perhaps he thinks about me, too. It is an odd thing to know that in a cell in southern California, even now, all these years later, there may still be a photograph of me and my children taped to a cinder-block wall: Willy in his Oakland A's jersey, my daughter wearing braces, my son Charlie holding a Boston terrier who is dead now. Myself at age thirty-nine, in my golden Christmas dress.