

Printed advice

BY ANN DUDLEY

Have you ever met someone that has written to a Dear Abby column? Well, I have, and I can say that with certainty because that person is me.

I remember sitting on a porch swing in the sunroom of my friend Janet's house. The sun was streaming in as we huddled over a notebook, carefully figuring out what to say. We were 10, maybe 11, with pen, or more likely pencil, in hand. The two of us were in the same situation.

We were writing to Dear Abby, because who else could help? That was the column we read religiously and discussed among our friends. We talked about it over playing with dolls, or dress-up or on the playground during recess.

For us, the column was a glimpse into the adult world. I remember, most distinctly, the woman who wrote in because times had been hard. She couldn't afford tuna for a tuna noodle casserole to feed her family. So, she had substituted cat food.

Now that times were better, she didn't know how to put tuna back in, because her family liked her casserole as it was. I recall the letter, but I don't recall the answer. I remember being appalled by how that dish must have smelled and tasted. But I also gained insight into how lucky I was, too, that my family wasn't in that situation.

Remembering that woman's dilemma now, my heart aches for her as she was doing the best she could for the family she loved. Advice to the lovelorn, affairs of the heart, slighted feelings, worried mothers. Dear Abby seemed to have the answer for everything.

But we hadn't ever seen advice for our particular problem. You see, Janet and I had both developed early and we didn't know how to talk to our mothers about it.

We agonized over what to tell Dear Abby, and most especially how to sign it. After much deliberation, we landed on "Growing Girls in Oregon." Most importantly, we had implored her to please not publish our letter in the newspaper, thinking that surely, someone would be able to trace it back to us. Janet and I also pledged to each other that we would never tell a soul. I know that I, for one, blew that one along the way for sure.

I don't know how many days or weeks went by. Finally, an answer came. I have no idea what my mother thought about me getting a letter from an unknown person.

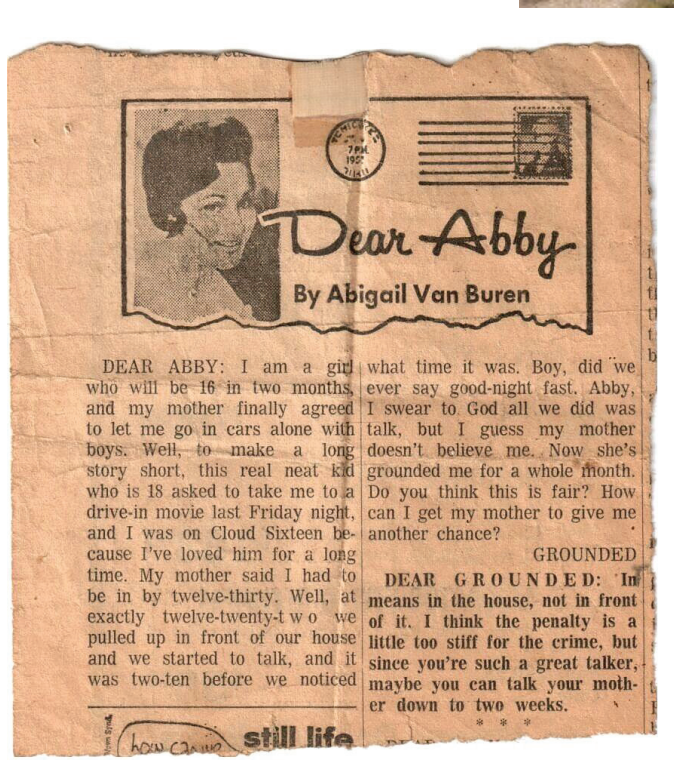
I remember taking it up to my room, closing the door, and probably shutting the blinds for good measure. I can see in my

mind's eye the creamy, heavy stock stationery with Abby's portrait on the top.

But I have no clue as to what her advice was. Probably some gem about knowing these things could be embarrassing to talk about to our mothers, but they had gone through the same thing once upon a time.

Somewhere in my boxes, that letter resides, because I don't think I would have thrown a piece of gold like that away. I did read that letter more than once though, taking it out of its hiding place behind books that were no longer read.

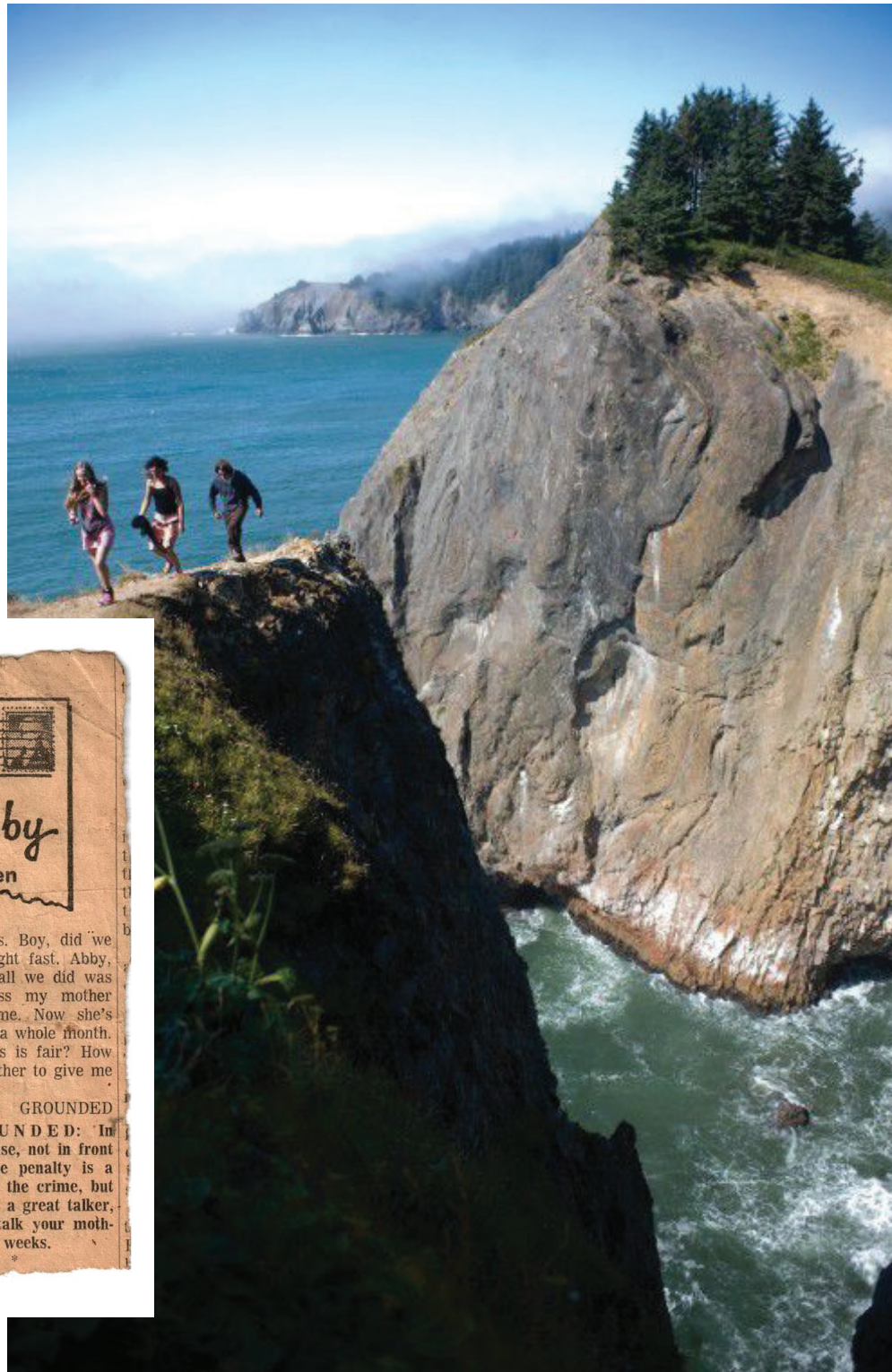
Flash forward 15 years. On my lunch break, I'm reading the paper, and flip to Dear Abby, ready to read about someone else's problem.



Ha Designs

As I start to scan the second letter the words sound all too familiar. My eyes race to the end, to see how it's signed. The color has risen in my cheeks, because I knew what it would say. And there it is, in black and white, "Growing Girls in Oregon."

The editor must have thought that the expiration date was long past due and surely those young girls wouldn't see their letter in print, or even care. But I did, a piece of my non-rational brain still thinking that there was someone out there that would know. The funny thing of it is, that letter was run



Hikers at Oswald West State Park.

more than once.

Coincidentally, about a year after I saw our letter for the first time, Janet unexpectedly came into the office where I worked. It had been a long time since I had seen her, as we had gone our separate ways. After exchanging pleasantries, I told her what I had seen in the paper. She laughed heartily, saying that she had forgotten all about that letter. But I noticed that her color rose, too, thinking about it.

I haven't read Dear Abby in decades, but

when I buy magazines, or come across an advice column in a newspaper, I always stop and read it.

It's a chance to escape into someone else's life for a while. I ponder what advice I would give and then see if I agree with the response. Because I know, from personal experience, that the advice given does matter to someone out there.

This essay was produced through a class taught by Tom Hallman Jr., a Pulitzer Prize winning reporter at The Oregonian.