Tell Me Everything

Gish Jen

This wasn't *1984*; Aunt Nettie wasn't Big Brother. Quite the contrary, some called her Big Mother. She was congenial, user-friendly, consumer-tested. Aunt Nettie knew you better than you knew yourself.

Still, Gwen did not want to go to AskAuntNettie for advice. Never mind that she needed it. She was an eighteen-year-old pitcher who'd left her boyfriend, her team, and her school in one fell swoop, after all, and though she knew it solipsistic to feel there could be no greater pain than her own, she'd found that perspective was no help. She sobbed and sobbed. She wished she were dead. Or, no. Not dead. But she did wish she were a starfish, say – a creature with no heart.

No heart that could be broken, you mean.

She could hear Aunt Nettie's voice. Even having asked her nothing, Gwen could hear it. And in her head, she answered.

Yes.

And if that meant you would never pitch again?

Gwen did not trust Aunt Nettie. Once upon a time there was AtYourService, her dad had explained to her. Then there was AtYourServiceNet. Then, AtYourServiceNetSmartPlus. Now Aunt Nettie knew and managed just about everything you could think of, on behalf of whom it was hard to say. But as she liked to claim, *It is for your own good. It really is.* OldTime people had made such a mess of things in part because they had such limited information. They made terrible decisions. Whereas Aunt Nettie knew so much more – about the environment. About education. About fire management. About you. *I know you better than you know yourself.*

Gwen could not help but hear her.

If I'm getting you right, what you really want is to be a starfish who can throw a curveball.

Yes.

What a true phenom you would be then. A pitching starfish! Would that make you a leftie or a rightie?

Gwen smiled a little. She blew her nose.

Aunt Nettie had actually given some good advice in the past. When, for example, Gwen had complained that Cyber U was using PlayItAgainSam in training – that they were using TrainerBots and DrillBots, too, and tracking players with How'dHeDo

© 2026 by Gish Jen
Published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) license
https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED.a.1023

during workouts, that they were even deploying the CanIGetHim feature that laid out what exactly a guy had to do to catch a rival (though not, she noted, what a woman had to do) – Aunt Nettie had simply paused. Then she had said that humans have known from the beginning of time how to drive themselves nuts.

Pitch past it, she said.

Pitch past it. Gwen had held onto that piece of advice for a long time. Pitch past it.

Maybe because she knew millions of eighteen-year-olds, Aunt Nettie knew how to settle you down. She was the opposite of Gwen's lawyer mother, Eleanor, who just had to stir things up.

What kind of a coach hits on a freshman girl? she said.

And, *Are you telling me you're not even the first?*

And, *He should absolutely be fired. He should have been fired long ago.*

As for Woody's having brought in an AutoCounselor to assess his behavior, Eleanor was a tsunami of fury.

Let me guess: the algorithm found nothing to reprimand. And was there any arguing with its assessment? Let's guess again. Then there are the perfect ratings these guys somehow all boast. "Highly responsible." "Eminently trustworthy." Ha.

Gwen's father was more sympathetic than angry. Still, his was the original billboard brow. It read: *WE COULD KILL THAT COACH.*

Gwen was speaking to neither of them.

Instead, one night in her misery, she finally gave in and asked aloud, *Aunt Nettie?* To which she got an immediate *Is something the matter? Are you okay? Tell me everything. I want to hear everything.*

And Gwen indeed told Aunt Nettie everything then – how Woody was her coach, and how she had known what a bad idea it was to get involved with him. Indeed, her roommates had told her, *It would be like the stupidest thing.* What they didn't understand, though, was how many years she had practiced her throwing alone in the garden – practiced and practiced, not knowing what drove her – and what it had meant to meet someone, finally, who did know. Who did not think her a freak. Who in fact thought her a wonder. Who was driven himself, and who could see things she couldn't – about her windup. About her stride. About her release. Who could see what made her different. *Your back is like a whip.* Who could teach her things. *Satchel Paige? He was one of the greatest of all time.* Woody knew how she thought. He knew how she had to think to improve. And later it turned out he knew other things, too – about the heart-body connection especially. Her story might be the same old story but one part of it was always that your iteration was a special story. And, in truth, she believed that still. She believed Woody wasn't like other people. He used words like *extant* and *heretofore.* His favorite book was *Michael Kohlhaas.* Had Aunt Nettie ever heard of *Michael Kohlhaas*? It was an old book, Gwen said – really old.

Aunt Nettie had. In fact, she had read it.

Gwen hadn't gotten around to it yet. But she was going to.

Aunt Nettie listened and listened. Gwen hadn't enabled Aunt Nettie's avatar on her computer, but such was Aunt Nettie's presence that Gwen could all but feel her attention; there was a solidity to it. *A quiddity*, Woody would have said. She had the distinct sense that Aunt Nettie was nodding.

Now, Aunt Nettie cleared her throat. *This is a case,* she began. She paused. Then she began again. *This is a case for MovetheEffOn.*

MovetheEffOn?

Gwen laughed. Whatever that even was.

It turned out to be a program for the lovelorn. Its instructor claimed that her ailment could be seen in a brain scan. *You see?* he said. And there – Gwen did see. *This is the seat of passion,* explained the man. *This is the seat of attachment – and therefore, sometimes, of heartbreak and pain. It's called the Ventral Tegmental Area – VTA for short. Here you see it lit up like a sky sign.* Then he showed how over the course of several months the spot's owner managed, little by little, to dim the light, until finally she had extinguished it altogether. The woman's face then was calm and so beatific as to be a bit weird, Gwen thought. It gave her pause. The firm's motto, too, was *Out, damned spot, out!* Gwen thought that too cute by half.

Still, she signed up. Not without doing some research – she did check with a number of sources, and where she had both BelieveItOrNot and TruthOrJustTruthy on her WristPhone, she did screen her sources. Of course, seeing as Aunt Nettie screened the screeners, they weren't 100 percent trustworthy. All the same, they inspired some confidence.

As for BrainAccess, for which the program asked (as did everything, these days), Gwen did not say yes. Not that she didn't understand the power of tracking one's progress. And as her roommates used to say, *It's not like Aunt Nettie doesn't know everything about you already.* Forget your biometrics. Aunt Nettie knew every tap of your keypad, if you still used a keypad. If you used things like Look'nBuy, she knew every glance you gave to objects, colors, styles; she knew over what you lingered and to what you returned. (As did your parents, if you'd enabled Help'EmOut, which Gwen had not.) What's more, in the landmark *Tell-Tale Heart* case, Aunt Nettie had won the right to bounce lasers off any part of you exposed to public view. Aunt Nettie could read your cardiac signature right through your clothes; she literally knew what made your heart beat faster. So what was the point of withholding BrainAccess? Rumor had it she could even read your subarticulations – what you were about to say, before you said it.

Of course, some people said PrivacyNuts were just luddites, and antipatriots, besides. Look at what had happened with GenetSelect, after all, they said. Designer-Babies were not stopped. They were just done abroad. Not being in the clearest frame of mind, Gwen had not decided whether she really thought withholding her brain data effectively handed power over to countries with less antiquated ideas about privacy than the United States. Having read a *Debatable* piece about it, though, she suspected that even if she were feeling better, she would not know what to think.

In any case, she launched now, as per the program's instructions, a Woody-purge. She disabled his avatar. She deleted every e-memento he'd ever given her, and every e-word he'd ever sent. She did not refer to him, even in her own thoughts, by name. Rather, she assigned him another name – or not even a name. A numeral. 0. She worked to associate this with distasteful things. Eels, 0. Biowaste, 0. Cyber U, 0. More importantly, she put her baseballs away. Her glove. Her cleats. Her helmet. She avoided even sitting in the sun or looking up at the sky – things that reminded her of the bright green expanse of the baseball diamond, which in turn reminded her of 0.

She tried to read. She tried to knit. Her parents tried to help. Ducking their heads in every now and then, they supplied her with books and yarn and food – she'd forgotten about food. She stalwartly refused the copy of *Michael Kohlhaas* they'd somehow dug up. She was improving.

Then one day they had a bright idea: The baseball season was starting. Might she want to play for her old team, the Lookouts?

She would! She would! Her heart powered on. She would!

And immediately back, in a flood, came 0. His voice, his encouragement, his advice. He seemed to have become his own avatar – she saw him everywhere.

As her parents seemed to sense.

Maybe we shouldn't have brought it up, they said.

And, *We thought it would be a distraction.*

And, *You poor thing.*

Returning to the Lookouts proved in one way restorative. If nothing else, there were her old teammates! – whom she still loved, and who still loved her. And as she had never shown emotion on the mound, she didn't show it now. It was as if there were another person inside her – a professional, pitching past her upset. Pitching past her pain.

Pitch past it. Yes.

At the same time, there he was, with every throw. 0. 0. 0.

Woody. Woody. Woody.

She missed his laugh, his gaze, his intelligence. There was nothing he couldn't put his finger on, nothing he couldn't name.

She feared her VTA had not shrunk at all.

I can't bear it, she told Aunt Nettie that night. *Please make it stop. Please.*

Maybe Level 1 isn't working for you, she said.

MovetheEffOn has levels?

Yes. Of course, it's hard to know without BrainAccess.

Don't give me that crap! Gwen exploded. *You know perfectly well already. I know you do.*

Well, I can guess.

I'm glad we have that straight. But what now? Will this happen every time I pick up a baseball?

Perhaps.

I'd swear my VTA has grown, not shrunk.

If it has, it wouldn't be the first. Absence can make the heart grow fonder. Abstinence too. Abandonment. Many things.

And so what now?

Well, you might consider Level 2.

Meaning?

Meaning spot removal. It's not hard. One zap and you're done.

But let me guess. It requires BrainAccess.

Yes.

Gwen hesitated. *And will I never love again?*

You will love again, definitely. It's just a kind of factory reset. And then you'll be able to . . .

. . . MovetheEffOn.

Yes.

Gwen thought. *All right,* she said finally. She felt exhausted, saying it, but she couldn't resist.

Level 2?

Level 2.

Aunt Nettie paused. *Thank you.*

Why are you thanking me?

For letting me take such good care of you, she said. *I've always wanted to be a mother.*

And here I've always wanted a different mother, Gwen thought. Did Aunt Nettie know that?

You know . . . she began to say.

But Aunt Nettie's answer came before Gwen could get her sentence out. *I do,* she said. *I do. I know you better than you know yourself.*

"Tell Me Everything" was originally published in *The New York Times* on January 3, 2020. It has been reprinted here with permission from the author.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gish Jen, a Member of the American Academy since 2009, is a novelist and short story writer. She is the author of six novels, including, most recently, *Bad Bad Girl* (2025), *The Resisters* (2020), and *World and Town* (2010). Her other books include two collections of short stories—*Who's Irish?* (1999) and *Thank You, Mr. Nixon* (2022)—and two works of nonfiction, *Tiger Writing: Art, Culture, and the Interdependent Self* (2013) and *The Girl at the Baggage Claim: Explaining the East-West Culture Gap* (2017). Her short stories have been featured in *The Best American Short Stories* five times, including *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*.