



MY ITALIAN GRANDMOTHER CRIED EASILY and often: when she received news of a relative's illness, when her oldest son walked in the door after a year's absence, or even just when the Pope appeared on tv. Each time, her crying would go from a weepy trickle to a raging torrent in seconds. Her face, hair, and blouse would soon be wet with tears. Sometimes, during a lull, she would pull me to her, planting salty kisses all over my head and face, saying, "I love you; oh, I love you, *belligramma*," her Italian pet name for all her American-born grandchildren. "Don't be sad like me."

For a few weeks each summer, I visited my grandmother's farm in upstate New York. Once a week, we went into town to tend my grandfather's grave. He'd died of complications from surgery several years earlier, and my grandmother was vigilant about keeping pots of geraniums blooming by his headstone from April to October. We had to fetch water from a distant spigot and haul it up a steep hill to wet the soil in the pots. After we had swept away the dead leaves and watered the plants, my grandmother would fall to her knees and sob inconsolably. Then I would receive her salty hugs and kisses.

Years later, I learned that my grandfather had been alcoholic, and abusive toward my grandmother; during one drunken confrontation in the barn, he'd threatened to kill her with a pitchfork and throw her body in the manure pile so it would never be found. It was tough to reconcile that story with my memory of the sobbing woman who made sure there were always flowers blooming at his grave.

Leslie LaChance
Knoxville, Tennessee

MY TWIN SISTER, T., HAD BEEN MISSING for fourteen years when she was found rummaging in the trash for food on the opposite side of the country. Her apartment had nothing in it but a chair and a big plastic bag full of rubber bands. She had stopped picking up her Social Security checks, and the landlord was about to evict her. The authorities put her in the state hospital

Photo: Deanna Dikeman

READERS WRITE
VISITING RELATIVES

and contacted our parents.

When T. and I talked on the phone, the conversation revolved around food. “So, what do you think of food banks?” she said. I asked if she’d eaten yet that day, and she said, “Yeah, I have two meals — and you’re not getting mine!” She wanted to know how many doughnuts I had consumed this year, as if that were a sign of wealth.

Two months after she resurfaced, I went to visit T. at the state hospital. My sister sat squinting at the football game on a TV suspended from the ceiling. Every once in a while, she would glance at me out of the corner of her eye, and her lips would curl into a sly smile.

T. looked like herself, only older, and incredibly skinny. Her hair had grown long and was starting to gray. Her gums were bleeding. We didn’t know what to say to each other at first. “Stop smiling,” she said, and we both cracked up. “Could you take your earrings out?” she asked politely. “They are too small.”

We took a walk to the end of the hall. T. moved slowly and deliberately, like an elderly person. She rattled the door handle to the exit, but it was locked. She told me jokes that only she could understand. I knew they were jokes, though, because we both laughed at the punch lines.

When we went to T.’s room, I saw she had no clothes except the few items they had given her, among them a pink jumper six sizes too big. “I can’t figure out how to put it on,” she said. It was just as well; it would have looked ridiculous. “OK,” she said suddenly, “I’ll just change, and we’ll go out to dinner.” With that, she went into the bathroom and took a shower. When she came out, she left the water running.

“You have to turn the water off,” I told her.

“I’m trying something,” she said.

The shower basin was almost full when I turned the knob.

T. lay down on her bed and announced that she was tired. I covered her up and talked to her, telling her about my dogs and my recent trip to the beach. “I’m going to sleep now,” she said, and she shut her eyes tight and

lay very still.

“Are you asleep?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered.

Sarah W.

Watertown, New York

MY BOYFRIEND MAX AND I WERE CAMPING in southern New Mexico and searching for peyote when we came across some datura plants. We knew from reading Carlos Castaneda that datura also induced hallucinations if ingested. Hippie junkies that we were, Max and I immediately boiled the plants in water to make tea.

I drank two mugs of the potent brew and, after vomiting up my veggie burger, spent the next twenty-four hours in a waking dream: I saw and spoke with childhood friends, an ex-boyfriend, and my deceased dog. The cactuses appeared very much alive. They twisted themselves into perverse sexual positions and begged me to make lesbian cactus love to them. When I refused, they laughed at me and tried to grab me with their fat, spiny arms. I was horrified — and turned on. I think I even rolled on top of one.

I walked with Max through the desert for miles in my bare feet. When we got back to our campsite, I peed inside our tent, then became really scared. Convinced I had finally gone too far and would never return to my normal state, I began to cry. Max freaked out, ripped our tent from the ground, rolled it into a big ball, and threw it into the trunk of his Buick. I climbed into the back seat, and we sped north, not stopping until we were on his mother’s front porch in Des Moines, Iowa.

Max’s mother opened the door and looked at us with confusion and concern. I was shaking, and my feet were bleeding. Max was smoking and pacing. He told her he didn’t know where else to go, that we would stay for only a few hours.

Without a word, Max’s mother hugged him, then asked me if I wanted a bath. I said yes and, still disoriented, mumbled that my bike had been stolen — something that had happened months earlier.

Later that evening, Max’s mom and I sat on her porch swing and talked. She offered me a three-speed bike that was collecting cobwebs in her basement. She also said, in a firm but quiet voice, “You’re going to be OK.”

I didn’t believe her — not yet.

Molly Snyder Edler
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

MY FATHER WAS A FUNDAMENTALIST preacher who did not allow drinking, smoking, swearing, card playing, watching television, or wearing makeup or short pants. My mother’s relatives did all these things, and every couple of years, my family would make the long trip from Nebraska to Cincinnati, Ohio, to visit them. As we drove through Iowa and Illinois, my father would warn us of our aunt and uncle’s behavior and remind us that they were Catholics and not saved, and that it was our responsibility to save them.

At the time, the ironclad manner in which my father ruled our home was all I knew. I did not question my mother’s passivity and apathy. I assumed all children needed to be beaten regularly with a board and taught to swallow their feelings and be good “ambassadors for Christ.”

Aunt Ruth’s house couldn’t have been more different from ours. A feisty matriarch, she wasn’t afraid of firing off her opinions at anyone — including my father. She wore dark red lipstick, painted her nails, and smelled of exotic perfume. She let me eat and say what I wanted, and would whisper to me that my father was “nuts.”

Uncle Ray, the hardworking breadwinner, seemed amused by his wife and content to let her rule the roost. Each evening, he came home from his white-collar job at Cincinnati Gas and Electric, changed into Bermuda shorts, mixed up a highball, and plunked down in an easy chair, glad to be away from “the goddamn office.” I loved the way he tore open a pack of cigarettes, exhaled smoke through both nostrils while talking, and finally stubbed the spent cigarette out and bent the filter over in half.

I envied my cousins, who were not

burdened with prayers, Bible reading, and long hours at church. They didn't worry about going to hell, setting a good Christian example, or getting caught listening to pop music. They could grow their hair and decorate the walls of their rooms any way they wanted.

My relatives' house was filled with the sounds of family life. Meals were times for laughter and storytelling and occasional bickering. My father hated the place so much that he would often wander off by himself, especially in the evenings, when my relatives would gather in the living room in their pajamas to watch television and talk.

It was on one such evening, nestled on the couch between my cousins, that I began to question how normal my family actually was. Unlike mine, this family of sinners seemed full of love. I was supposed to be saving them, but, in reality, they were saving me.

John B.
La Jolla, California

AFTER A FULL DAY AT WORK, A LONG flight made longer by delays, and a midnight ride down I-95 in a rental car, I pull into my mother's driveway in Florida. I'm tired, cranky, and wondering why I've come.

My eighty-four-year-old mother's house is beyond messy — more like a health hazard. I can smell a rancid odor before I even walk in the door. By the time I reach the kitchen, the stench is overwhelming. Every dish in the house is lying out — on the counter, on the chairs, on the floor, even stacked on top of the refrigerator. Only the cabinets are pristine in their emptiness. I open a pale blue Tupperware bowl and find the remains of sliced peaches in heavy syrup, now crawling with fruit-fly maggots. I lift the lid of a pan that has sat on the stove for an unknown number of days or weeks, releasing a smell that could peel paint.

Even though it's after midnight, I set my bag down, put on yellow rubber gloves, and start to work. My goal is to have a cup of tea tomorrow morning, with a clean cup and spoon and a place on the counter to put them. I perform triage on the dishes, deciding what

must be washed now, what can wait, what will have to be thrown out.

While I'm working, my mother strolls in and says, "I was going to wash those dishes today, but I ran out of time." She is totally sincere, seemingly unaware that she has been uttering the same excuse for well over a decade.

Standing at the sink, I am filled with angry self-righteousness. I want to be calm like a Zen master, but instead I wonder how someone can "run out of time" when she has no job, no responsibilities, and never leaves the house. I wonder how my mother — once so immaculate — can live in such filth day in and day out. Still seething, I deposit the most malodorous items in a trash can outdoors and go to bed.

The next morning, back in the kitchen, I hear my mother walking slowly down the hall. "My, my," she says in her soft Southern drawl, "it is so clean in here I almost didn't know where I was."

Somehow, all my effort suddenly seems worth it. I give her a big hug. Her body is still warm from sleep. Then I put the gloves on and get back to work.

D. Ann Peterson
New York, New York

MY GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE IN SOUTHERN India is a colorful concrete expanse framed by palm trees, with saris drying on clotheslines in the yard. The house is large, even by American standards, but my brother and I — the American cousins — generally confine ourselves to one bedroom, where we spend most of our waking hours fighting over the Walkman, reading Indian comic books, and playing cards. Sometimes we go outside to terrorize Grandmother's chickens, but only if she's not around, and she's usually around.

Shiny black metal bars and thin cotton curtains separate us from the relatives and neighbors who come to stare at the visitors from America. Always smiling, they pull back the curtains and observe that "they look like the father," or "the boy has nice teeth." They do not speak English, and we pretend we don't understand what they're saying. Some reach between the

bars, hold our palms up to their noses, and sniff deeply before letting go.

Soondheri, the family servant, whose name means "beautiful one," is our only friend. She keeps us entertained by shinnying up trees to pick baby coconuts and making toys out of them, or holding us up by our armpits so that we can look into the cavernous well, or teaching us to play games using only rubber bands and tamarind pits. She does all this while managing to cook and clean for twelve people. She can't be older than twenty-five, but has worked in our grandmother's house for as long as we can remember. When we ask Soondheri about her own family, she cries. Our grandmother will tell us only that "Soondheri is a member of this family now."

Soondheri sleeps on a thatched mat beneath Grandmother's bed. There is string through her ears where earrings should be, and her toenails are mangled from never wearing shoes. She eats alone, after everyone else has had dinner. When we point out to our grandmother that no other "member of the family" lives like Soondheri, she sputters, "My God, even the Americans talk like communists!"

At nighttime, our aunties gather outside the front door. Their wedding bangles make a clinking sound as they massage coconut oil into their thinning hair. Mustached uncles arrive on motor scooters and perch on the cement steps, smoking *bhidis*, making fun of politicians, and laughing too much when they disappear behind a tree to urinate.

One night, the electricity goes out, and my brother and I stare unbelieving at the sky. The monsoon clouds have given way, and the heavens are overflowing with pinpoints of light, billions of stars bulging the sky's black-velvet seams. As we crane our necks and point our fingers, the muted sounds of a neighboring family's evening prayers reach our ears. Now and then, an ant crosses the knobby plateau of our toes.

Soon the power returns, and a cousin yells from inside, cautioning us about the mosquitoes.

"It's all right," Soondheri says to him. "There aren't as many stars in America."

And she turns off the light, plunging us back into darkness. Every place we look yields another glowing giant, another tiny jewel.

Kavita Pillay
Baltimore, Maryland

(end of excerpt)

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

Upcoming topics and deadlines are:

ISSUE	TOPIC	DEADLINE
July 2002	Redemption	February 1
August 2002	The Kitchen Table	March 1
September 2002	The Phone Call	April 1
October 2002	Faking It	May 1
November 2002	Safety	June 1
December 2002	Against The Odds	July 1