



READERS WRITE

GRATITUDE

IT WAS THE DAY AFTER MY BIRTHDAY, back when I still drank a lot and often, and I was standing in a supermarket express lane with a ripping hangover, buying a pack of cigarettes. A thin and very old woman in front of me was buying a birthday cake — one of those sheet cakes they make at the grocery store. That was it. There was nothing else in her basket. *Hey*, I thought, *someone has almost the same birthday as me.*

The old woman had on a red hat and was one of the oldest people I'd ever seen up close. I kept staring at her — she was so small — when suddenly she looked me right in the eye and just held my gaze. It was unnerving.

Finally, I said, "Whose birthday is it?"

And she said, with a big smile, "Mine!" She was just beaming. I couldn't figure out why.

I reached over, put my shaky hand on her bony arm, and said, "Today is your birthday?"

And she said, "Yes."

"And you're buying your own birthday cake?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well, who's going to help you eat that cake? You having a little party?"

And she said, "No, just me."

Hearing that, I felt my heart give a little, despite that damn hangover. "I'm going to buy your birthday cake this year," I said.

And she beamed again and said, "Why, thank you! Will you have some with me?"

And I said, "Sure. Why not?"

So I bought her cake and my cigarettes, and as I was carrying the cake out to the parking lot, she told me how she'd walked the ten blocks from her garage apartment to the store, and that

she'd brought her own cart, to help her get the cake home. She used the cart all the time; she couldn't just leave it.

So there I was, loading this heavy-ass grocery cart into the trunk of my Monte Carlo while the woman climbed into the front seat. About to pass out from the effort of lifting the cart, I got in and drove her home. Her name was Mary, she said, and she'd come to America from Ireland when she was a little girl.

When we got to her place, I dragged the cart out of the trunk, stashed it in the garage, and carried the cake up the stairs to her apartment. Mary's dining-room table was covered with one of those cheap, plastic, red-and-white-checked tablecloths. I set the cake down and parked myself in a chair. Mary was just humming away, putting on a kettle and spooning instant coffee into these dainty white coffee cups.

Finally, she put a sugar bowl on the table and cut us each a big, square piece of cake. I asked if she wanted me to sing "Happy Birthday," and she said, "Ok!"

So there I was, belting out "Happy Birthday" to Mary, even though the sound of my own voice was killing me. When I was through, we ate our cake and drank our coffee, smiling and nodding, not talking, just happy for the moment.

After we'd eaten, I told her thank you, but I had to go now; I'd celebrated my own birthday the night before and had drunk way too much.

And she said, "Thank you for the cake. I hope that, when you are ninety-four, someone buys you a birthday cake and eats it with you."

I said I hoped so, too.

Maurica B.
Prairie Lea, Texas

MY GIRLFRIEND MEGAN AND I WERE returning home from a trip to Boston. It was Labor Day weekend, and Interstate 95 was a long, snaking line of cars. I noticed a white Cadillac stopped on the shoulder, an elderly couple standing next to it with the trunk open and their suitcases on the pavement. "Looks like they have a flat tire," I said, pulling over.

The woman came toward us, looking relieved. "Thank you so much," she said over and over. I began to help the man with the tire. He hadn't had much success with the spare.

As I loosened the nuts on the tire, the woman gripped my shoulder and told me their story: Her husband had just been diagnosed with bone cancer. He was ninety-three years old. They were on their way back from Nantucket, their last vacation together. "We needed help so badly," she said.

The husband and I changed the tire together, and the wife, tears in her eyes, told Megan again how thankful they were.

Placing the jack back into the trunk, I noticed the wife attempting to give Megan some money. My girlfriend was backing away, her hands in the air. "No, no, really," she said. "It's ok. You don't

have to do that."

"Megan," I whispered, "just be polite." I had decided long ago that when older people wanted to give you money, it was best just to let them.

"You'll take this, won't you?" the wife asked me as I eased the flat tire into the trunk. My hands were full, so she slipped the money into my front pocket. There were tears in her eyes.

Later, as we drove down the highway, I dug into my pocket, wondering aloud how much this woman had given us. I glanced down and saw a folded and wrinkled hundred-dollar bill. "Oh, my God!" I yelled. "It's a hundred dollars." I'd expected maybe twenty bucks.

"Duffy," Megan said, "I'm almost positive there were two bills."

I spread the folded money with my thumb and forefinger: two hundred dollars.

I tried to think of a way to give the money back, but the couple was long gone. I've since realized that it's lucky

I didn't see how much she was giving me. The money was an expression of her immense thanks; it would have been thoughtless to push it back into her hands.

Duffy Franco
Norwalk, Connecticut

MY NEW FRIEND WREN AND I WERE hitchhiking to Las Cruces, New Mexico, where we'd heard there were high-paying government construction jobs. A ride dropped us off at a dusty intersection about three hundred miles north of our destination. Flat, high plateau stretched in all directions. On one corner was a weathered general store with a gas pump out front. Opposite it was a faded saloon. It was 10 A.M., and only a few battered pickups were parked at the bar.

Wren, who at twenty was two years older than I, and who said he was a full-blooded Apache, entered the saloon with me, and asked if anyone

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
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
January 2003	Scars	August 1
February 2003	Falling In Love	September 1

was headed south. No one was. So we went back outside to try our thumbs. We could see cars approaching from miles away; they'd slowly get bigger and then whoosh by.

Around noon, a sky blue Volkswagen pulled into the saloon parking lot, and a short, pale, pudgy man got out. He wore a rumpled summer suit and Buddy Holly glasses. Wren asked if he was going to Las Cruces. He said he was, but when Wren asked if we could hitch a ride, the man simply said no. Then he locked his car and went inside the saloon for lunch.

Wren was furious. This man was going right to Las Cruces and had room in his car, yet he'd refused to take us. The more Wren thought about it, the hotter he got. Finally he went over to the man's car, pulled out his knife, and, bending low, quickly slit all four tires. He was calm when he returned. The tires would last only a few miles, he said, before they went flat, leaving the man stranded, at the mercy of passing drivers.

A half-hour later, the man came out of the bar and walked toward us across the hot gravel. At first, I was afraid he'd seen Wren, but he didn't seem angry. In fact, he apologized that he couldn't drive us to Las Cruces and said he had taken up a collection at the bar and gotten us enough for two one-way bus tickets. We could buy them at the general store across the street. The bus would arrive in an hour. He handed us the money.

We were speechless. As he turned to go, I wanted to run after him, confess what we'd done, and give him the money back, but I just watched as his car disappeared slowly into the distance.

Later, I remembered that, when he'd handed us the money, neither of us had thanked him.

*Brechin Morgan
Milford, Connecticut*

LORI AND I ARRIVED AT OUR NEW UNIVERSITY jobs on the same day and were assigned adjacent offices. She was very independent and had an extremely loud and hearty laugh. We became fast friends. A year later we were married.

In our seventh year of marriage, I teased Lori that we were living "the good life." We both had recently been granted tenure and promoted at the university. We owned a nice house in a wonderful neighborhood. Lori was pregnant with our first child, and I loved her as intensely as I had on the day we were married.

Two weeks before the baby was due, as Lori and I sat down to dinner, she was struck with a pounding headache, blurred vision, vomiting, and pain in her chest. We went to the hospital, where a doctor gave her pain medication and sent us home. Around noon the next day, I went into the living room and found Lori sitting on the sofa, crying quietly. I sat down and tried to comfort her: "Only two more weeks, and everything will be ok."

She looked at me and wiped away her tears. Then suddenly her face froze, her eyes rolled up in her head, and she fell over backward. I raced to the phone and dialed 911. I screamed for help, holding Lori in my arms, watching as her face turned blue.

Within minutes, firefighters and paramedics arrived and began resuscitating Lori. I moved over against the wall, trying to stay out of their way.

Lori was rushed to the emergency room. After an agonizing thirty minutes, three solemn doctors delivered the news to me: Lori was dead. The baby, a girl, had suffered severe brain damage due to lack of oxygen and was being kept alive by a ventilator. The doctors encouraged me to go to the neonatal intensive-care unit and spend time with her.

Our daughter, Mackenzie Morgan Irving, was beautiful: five pounds, twelve ounces, with a line of curly hair across her head. I hugged her, kissed her, and cried over her. Several hours later, we turned off the ventilator. To my surprise, Mackenzie's breathing became more regular. A nurse handed me my baby, and I felt like a real father.

I held Mackenzie for three hours before she stopped breathing. It was a very quiet and peaceful death.

Every day, I feel the intense loss of Lori — my best friend, my lover, my

colleague, my wife. Mixed in with my sadness, however, is an appreciation for the eight wonderful years we had together. Lori made me a better person, and for that I am grateful.

*Michael Morgan
Vancouver, Washington*

IT'S A SATURDAY MORNING IN AUGUST, and I'm feeling happy and languid, driving and smiling at my friend Raja, who is trying on my cheap sunglasses and mugging. My two-year-old son, Jack, is sitting in back in his car seat. Instead of speeding through a yellow light, I roll to a gentle stop.

Seconds later, I hear it, violent and final: the profane thud of a fast-moving vehicle hitting a body. It vibrates distinctively in the tiny bones of my ear, this sound of someone's fate being decided. I look and see a man lying on his side in the middle of the road, still as death, his body twisted and slack, his crushed bicycle nearby. For a moment, it seems nothing is moving: no people, no cars — not even my heart. Then the rush of time accelerates again.

"Raja," I say, "take Jack. I have to go and help that man." Raja argues and clutches my arm, but I shake him off and open the door.

Another driver has gotten out and is calling for an ambulance on her cellphone. Her face is drained of color. "It was a dark blue pickup," she tells me shakily as I approach. "The driver just took off."

As I draw closer, I know it will be bad, and that the man will die. I also know that somehow I'm meant to be here. I kneel down and touch him, this big man with long, reddish hair and eyes the color of the sky. He's conscious and struggling, staring straight ahead, his breath loud and ragged. Dark blood and lighter brain matter pool together on the pavement. Even in his state of shock, I think he knows that these are his last moments. He's terrified.

"It's all right," I tell him. "God is with you, my darling. It's all right."

I repeat this over and over, stroking his arm and his blood-soaked hair. I'm not sure where the words come from; they're not anything I'd ever think

to say. I'm not religious. I can only guess that they come from the same place as the strange sense of quiet I feel inside.

Every once in a while, the man's body jerks. I try to calm him, though I don't know if he hears me. I feel protective of him and reluctant, when the ambulance comes, to let him go. I know they won't be able to help him. I just want him to feel loved as he dies.

The paramedics take him away, leaving just the large stain on the asphalt. Feeling as though I've been shaken awake from a dream, I wander back to Jack and Raja, and Raja hands me the car keys. When I reach to take them, I notice that my hands and arms are splattered with red, dark as wine. I stare at my hands in the sunshine. They seem to me both terrible and beautiful. Then I start to cry.

Later, at home, I'm overwhelmed by the notion that I've failed somehow; that I didn't do enough for the man, didn't convey to him the intensity of the love I felt. It seemed beyond words. I don't understand what has happened.

Night comes. I try to sleep, but my mind won't stop replaying the scene. I bring Jack into my bed, and his presence soothes me. Eventually, I close my raw eyes.

And then I see him, the man who was hit by the car. He comes spinning toward me in a whirling ring of light. He's brilliant, shimmering like a thousand cut diamonds, but softer. In all my life, I've never seen such beauty. How do I know it's the man with the red hair? I can't explain. It's simply him.

My eyes open. I immediately close them again, wanting to see more, but there's only darkness.

The next morning, I find a notice in the paper about a cyclist who was struck by a hit-and-run driver. The cyclist died in intensive care just about the time I was falling asleep.

Mary Luttrell
Albuquerque, New Mexico

I WAS A SENSITIVE CHILD, EASILY HURT by my siblings' laughter and teasing. I stuttered regularly and mispronounced my r's. My legs were bowed and my feet

pointed in, giving me a peculiar pigeon-toed gait. I often asked my mother if I was adopted, because I was so different from everyone else in the family.

Only in the presence of my godmother, Edna, did I not feel like an ugly duckling. She gave me praise for my accomplishments, spoke soft words of encouragement when I attempted to talk too fast, and listened to my stories without ever mentioning my speech impediments. Around her, I felt like a bright, shining penny, a hand-picked flower. Those feelings lasted well into my teens, when I worked in earnest to correct my speech and my walk.

I am thankful to have known Edna, who is now ninety-nine and still awakens my sense of self-worth.

Ann Wade
Iowa City, Iowa

I AWAKEN AS A NURSE ENTERS MY FOUR-year-old son's hospital room to check his tubing and vital signs. Out the window, I see white petals being blown from the cherry trees by the morning breeze.

I hold the jug for Robert to urinate. His urine has an odd color and odor, tainted by the chemotherapy drugs for his leukemia. After fourteen days in the hospital, I have somehow put aside the disbelief that this is happening to my child.

After the nurse leaves, Robert and I doze until the breakfast tray arrives: time to press the buttons to raise his bed to the sitting position. Each plate or bowl is covered with a plastic lid, and I lift the covers with a magician's flair to make him laugh. Next, he presses the buttons that turn on the morning cartoons. Breakfast in bed with cartoons and Mom's undivided attention: not bad.

While he eats, the doctor arrives. I find my binder and pen so I can write down the information from the lab report: hematocrit, white blood cells, red blood cells, platelets. The doctor tells me that Robert might begin to get sores in his mouth, and he gives me a sheet with instructions for mouth care. I put this in the overflowing "to read later and file" section of my binder.

The rest of the morning turns out to

be fun. Robert and I spend time in the playroom, which is well stocked with watercolors, Play-Doh, puzzles, and a sand table. We push his iv pole outside and sit on a bench and look at the tulips and the flowering trees. It's good to feel the sunshine. We return to Robert's room for lunch and afterward color a picture of a garden and listen to music. Then Robert settles down for a nap. I use his nap time to walk down to the cafeteria.

I have learned to pray in my head while walking. I don't blame God for having let Robert get leukemia, but I do believe God can decide how much longer Robert will live, and this is the focus of my prayer. At the start of the walk, I want Robert to live to be an old man. If not that, I at least want to see him grow up, get married, and have children. I want to see what he will look like as a teenager. I've had four years with him; I want four more. I want at least one more year — one more Christmas, one more birthday. I want to bring him home one more time, away from nurses and spinal taps and iv tubes. By the time I finish praying, the hall has become very narrow.

Then the thought comes to me: *At least we have had this day.* This day of laughing and playing and music and sunshine on tulips. If Robert died tomorrow, I would be able to remember every minute of this day for the rest of my life and take pleasure in it. Some children are killed by cars, and their mothers never get to say goodbye. Some infants die suddenly, and their mothers never see them grow and laugh. Some mothers are too busy or burdened to spend an entire day with their child, just playing. I realize that I am one of the lucky ones.

Kathy Hall
Spokane, Washington

(end of excerpt)