



READERS WRITE THE PHONE CALL

I WAS IN THE PROCESS OF MOVING TO A new state and changing jobs when my left breast began hurting and swelling. I wasn't worried. Breast cancer was not painful, I had always read. I was relieved when, after a mammogram — my very first — the doctor said it was a benign cyst and not to worry about it. Avoid coffee, he said. Come back in a year.

Eight months later, I saw my gynecologist. "I have fibrous breasts," I explained. She sent me for another mammogram that day. I wanted to reschedule because I was concerned about getting to a concert later that night. She insisted. I asked them to

hurry. It might be benign, the radiologist told me, but it might be cancer. *He has to say that to all his patients*, I thought as I hurried to meet my friends for the concert. I wasn't worried.

Two days later, hot bright sunshine streamed through the kitchen skylight. A CD by the band I'd been to see in concert played on my stereo. I was wearing blue-jeans and a white blouse that I'd bought ten years earlier in college. My hair was still long and blond and pulled back into a ponytail. My left arm was still slender and could reach the highest kitchen shelf — which is what I was doing, putting gro-

ceries away on that hot summer day, when the phone rang.

*Sheila Griffin
Waukesha, Wisconsin*

ABOUT TWO YEARS AGO, MY MOTHER DISAPPEARED. Though I had seen it coming, it was still a shock. Just three months before, Mom had married Ed, whose first order of business as husband was to have their phone disconnected. Any time we spent with Mom was kept brief, and Ed was always present. Little by little, he isolated her from us. Mom was so under Ed's spell that she believed her survival depended



on him, when, in reality, he depended on her to support his drug addiction.

My brother Daniel took Mom's disappearance especially hard. He fell into a depression and ultimately attempted suicide.

Two months after Mom disappeared, I got a call from her. I didn't know whether to be grateful or angry. I told her about Daniel, and she gave me the number of where she was staying with Ed. (At least there was a phone this time.) Ed had dragged her down to Delaware in hopes of beating a jail sentence for driving under the influence. I promised to call her in a

couple of days when I had more information about Daniel's progress.

The next morning, as I woke from a dream about Mom, I felt an odd tugging sensation. I ran to the phone and dialed the number she had given me the day before. Ed answered, sounding a little too pleasant. I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up. He was rambling on about how great Delaware was and how he and Mom couldn't wait to visit me in New York City. Finally he said, "I bet you'd like to say hello to your mom."

"Is she there?"

"Yep, she's right here next to me. Hold on. . . ."

"Good morning, sweetheart!" I heard her say.

"Mom, is everything OK?"

"Well, it's really raining hard today. That's why Ed can't go to work with Bob on the roofing project."

"He's been beating you, hasn't he?" I said.

"Yep, that's right. You can't work on the roof when it's raining."

"Are you locked in? Can you get out?"

"Like I said, it's really been raining hard." Then her voice became a whisper. "He's in the bathroom now. I'm scared. He came home at three in the morning, high on crack, and started beating me. He threatened to cut me to pieces. I just don't know what to do. He won't pass out or go to sleep."

I could hear Ed's voice returning in the background. Sounding calm and collected again, Mom brought up Daniel: "I know how worried you are about your brother, and my friend Rose is a great person to talk to about this sort of thing. I see her at church every Sunday. Let me get you her number."

Ed hollered that he had left Rose's card on the kitchen counter. Mom read Rose's work and home phone numbers to me. My hand shook as I wrote them down, careful not to make a mistake. Tears streamed down my face. "I love you," I said, knowing I might never see her again.

"I love you, sweetheart," she replied.

I hung up and called Rose, who knew where to send the police.

Jean
New York, New York

I WORK AT A LOCAL CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION as a nurse practitioner. First thing every morning, we see ten to twenty inmates who are undergoing alcohol withdrawal. It usually takes many years of heavy drinking before someone has serious symptoms, but occasionally a younger person will exhibit them.

A few days before Passover, I was taking care of a man in his late twenties named Dave, who was having such severe withdrawal symptoms that he couldn't be brought to the clinic area for treatment. As I spoke with Dave about how I could help, I sensed he was trying to muster up the nerve to say something. Finally he asked whether I was Jewish. When I confirmed that I was, he blurted out his concern about having access to matzo for Passover during his incarceration.

I was not allowed to bring in matzo for him, so, with Dave's permission, I called the rabbinic chaplain. Rabbi M. was harried because of the upcoming holiday, and he made it very clear that he was not willing to drop off matzo at the jail unless he knew for certain that this young man was Jewish. (It seems inmates of other faiths frequently request kosher food, thinking it might be of higher quality — although I doubt many people would lie to get matzo.)

I handed the phone to Dave, who, through his tremors, recited the names of his mother, father, and grandparents, the date of his bar mitzvah, and so on. Still not satisfied that Dave qualified for Passover food, the rabbi wanted to telephone the boy's father. Dave's eyes caught mine as he pleaded with the rabbi, "No! It'll kill him if he finds out I'm here. He's got a bad heart." He handed the phone to me, saying tearfully that all he wanted was a piece of matzo; why was that so hard?

By now I was regretting having initiated this process. But the determined rabbi wanted to try once more.

Dave took a deep breath and, at the rabbi's request, began reciting the Hebrew blessings he'd learned for his bar mitzvah. Struggling to summon them from memory, he bobbed back and forth in his jail garb, davening uncomfortably, until the rabbi believed him.

Name Withheld

MY FATHER HAS TAKEN THE TURN INTO dementia, going beyond forgetfulness and a distant manner into a world where his home of forty years is somebody else's house. He no longer drives (though he still believes he can). Someone picks him up and takes him to the family business, which my sister now runs. But she has little time for him while he's there, and he has no work to do, so he gets bored and wants to come home.

There's nothing for him to do around the house, either. He sits in his tobacco-stained recliner and flips through the TV channels. Bored, he gets up and goes to his bedroom, which he believes is not his. He is visiting, he thinks, and he has always hated visiting, so he begins to pack. He has an ancient suitcase into which he throws old suits, mismatched socks, torn belts. He takes it all out to his truck, but the engine fails to crank. (My brother-in-law has removed the distributor cap.) So he goes to the phone and tries to call someone to come and get him. Sometimes

he stands at the front gate and waits for his ride. Other times he forgets that he is waiting and walks away. Somebody always finds him and brings him back to the house that is no longer his home.

Recently, he told my sister that he was going to call home and get somebody to pick him up. Tired, she told him to go ahead. He dialed the familiar number: his own, the number of the phone that he held against his ear. He listened, then put the phone down and looked up at my sister.

"It's busy," he said. "I guess I'm stuck here."

*Paul T. Carney
Louisville, Kentucky*

I'M AT A BUSINESS FUNCTION WHEN I receive a message to call my parents immediately. My parents live two thousand miles away, and I talk to them only once a month. "This had better be good," I mumble as I go to the restaurant pay phone and dial the number. Busy.

I just talked to my parents a week ago.

The call was mechanical, mostly about me and my new job. When I asked, "How are you?" Mom replied cheerfully, "Oh, much better, honey," and I remembered guiltily that she'd had a touch of pneumonia a few months earlier. She is an old-fashioned mother, never complaining, her needs easily overlooked.

Ten minutes later, I repeat the collect-call procedure. (I am still young enough to assume that I can call collect when phoning my parents.) The long-distance carrier uses an automated operator. I have to state my name, which will be relayed to whoever answers the phone.

Finally the phone rings. "Hello?" my father answers, sounding more agitated than I have ever heard him, almost out of control.

The recording begins: "Good afternoon! Will you accept collect charges from . . ." Here my recorded voice chimes in with a noncommittal "Terez."

"Yes, Operator," my father says. "I'll —"

But the recording is still playing: "If you want to accept the charges, press one now."

My father is so distraught that he doesn't realize he's talking to an automated message. "Operator, I accept the charges!"

The recording continues: "If you choose to decline the charges, press two."

"Operator," my father shouts, "I accept!"

But the recording only repeats.

I shout, "Dad, you have to press one!" But of course he can't hear me.

"Operator, I accept!" are the last words I hear him say before we are disconnected.

My whole body is shaking, and I feel as if I am going to throw up. In my twenty-five years, my father has never so much as lost his composure. To hear his voice so wild with emotion has me frightened. With trembling fingers, I pull out my business calling card. I get my Dad on the second ring.

It's an odd feeling to hear really bad news over the phone in public. A numbness comes over you that keeps the information from sinking in. After a promise to be on the next plane back home, I hang up the phone and look at the black-and-silver box that has just transmitted the message. I can't yet process the rage that I feel toward this box, and toward the auto-

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
March 2003	Perfection	October 1
April 2003	Asking For Help	November 1
May 2003	Marijuana	December 1
June 2003	Vanity	January 1
July 2003	Wasting Time	February 1
August 2003	Size	March 1

mated operator who cut off my father when he was trying to tell me that my mother has died.

*Terez Rose
Boulder Creek, California*

I BROKE UP WITH MY PARTNER OF FIVE years over a pay phone at Eighty-First and Amsterdam. He was in California, and I was in New York City, ostensibly to interview for a job but really to be with my new lover. It was a hot summer night with sporadic rain showers. We didn't have weather like this in California, and it just made me love the city more desperately. In a way, it was New York I wanted, even more than the new guy.

"I found a letter you wrote to him" was the first thing my partner said.

"To who?" I stammered. (I knew he suspected something was up, but I didn't think he knew so much.)

"Guess," he spat back with all the venom he could muster.

The tears were already flowing. I leaned my forehead against the cool steel box around the phone and gripped the receiver with both hands.

While I rocked back and forth and wept loudly, a homeless man came up and asked me for some money. Two people having dinner at a sidewalk bistro shooed him away.

"Can't you see she's upset?" said the woman. "Don't bother her right now."

The homeless man backed off, but continued to loiter nearby. Later, another man came and stood behind me as if waiting to use the phone. Growing impatient, he threw up his hands and barked, "You gonna talk all night, lady?"

The homeless man came over and said, "Man, can't you see she's upset? Go find another phone."

*Julie Tilsner
Berkeley, California*

I FELL IN LOVE FOR THE FIRST TIME WHEN I was eighteen and a college sophomore. I was scooping ice cream for the summer, and Mickey, a woman ten years my senior, worked in the back bakery. She was butch and flirty, and in between the lazy, humid hours of sticky ice cream and grumpy customers, she paid me a kind of attention that I'd never received from a boy.

Mickey wasn't the first woman I'd been attracted to. Weeks earlier, in a drunken moment, my best friend and I had kissed. At the time, I'd convinced myself that it would never happen with any other woman. Mickey made me wonder.

I spent the second half of my summer in a constant swoon, waking to Mickey's voice at my window or passing the afternoons with her by a sunny river. Mickey had another girlfriend, but they had an open relationship, she said. My eyes were so clouded with pink hearts that I believed everything she told me.

When I went back to school, I spent hours on the phone with Mickey, pretending not to notice the street noises in the background and the jingle of quarters in her hand. I was dating a boy, but I lived for Mickey's sweet messages on my answering machine, sometimes five or more in a row. She sent me long letters, gifts, a photo-booth strip of her holding up signs that read "I" "Miss" "You" in the different frames. She was coming to visit me for my nineteenth birthday, just weeks away.

But soon her calls slowed to a trickle and then stopped altogether. I left her messages. I jumped whenever the phone rang. I tried to glide into my room and glance casually at the machine, as if I didn't care whether she'd called. I couldn't concentrate.

Two days before my birthday, I answered the phone and heard Mickey's voice. Twisting the phone cord around my fingers, I asked what was going on. She hedged and gave slippery answers. I demanded a direct response, though I was having a hard time breathing for fear that it might really be over. She denied that she was becoming distant, denied my accusations that her girlfriend really knew nothing about me. She promised that she would indeed be there in two days to celebrate with me.

And then she said, "Oh, man, I'm out of quarters. I'll call you right back."

I sat in my tiny room and smoked for hours, the phone on my lap, my face salty with tears.

*Maggie Bittel
Brooklyn, New York*

(end of excerpt)