



Readers Write

ASKING FOR HELP

MANILA, CALIFORNIA, LIES ALONG the state's last fifty miles of unspoiled beach. The shore there is studded with jade fragments from China and redwood burls from upriver logging camps. The continually shifting sand dunes often bury coastal trees, leaving their top-most branches at eye level.

On a perfect day in 1972, I crossed those dunes to the beach by myself and tripped on LSD. After seven hours, the sun turned a magnificent orange over the ocean, and I started to head home, still experiencing some retinal display. But the path through the dunes had disappeared, blown away by the wind. I got turned around and wandered past the same clumps of weeds again and again. Soon the sky was black, and I was exhausted, stumbling into branches, scratching my face, scolding myself, and crying.

Then I heard laughter. Seeing a distant glow, I trudged over a dune. A dozen men were drinking beer around a sheltered

campfire, their Jeeps and dune buggies parked haphazardly in the sand. They turned to look at me: a lone, shivering, wild-haired girl emerging from the darkness with a blood- and tear-stained face.

For a moment we regarded each other like members of two different prehistoric tribes. Then I broke the silence.

"I'm lost," I said. "Can you help me get out of here?"

To my surprise, they burst out laughing. Then one man quietly came forward. He had a wide, jagged scar running from his temple to his lip. He smiled warily, as if he expected me to be repulsed by the sight of him, and offered me a ride. To my dazzled eyes, the scar was insignificant. He was my rescuer. He was beautiful.

He took the long way over the dunes, happily showing off in his Jeep. When we finally stopped outside my place, he turned the engine off, and we sat in silence. Hesitantly, he asked if I would go out with him sometime.

As gently as I could, I said, "I don't think it would work out."

He must have realized this, too, because he threw his head back and laughed. Then he gave me the broadest smile.

*Robin Daley
Thousand Oaks, California*

A MAN WITH BROKEN FRONT TEETH and a sad face stands in front of the drugstore as if waiting there, a little boy beside him. The store is closed. I've come all the way out here for nothing. Big drops of rain fall on my new dress as I run back to my car.

"Ma'am?" the man calls. "Can you give us a lift to Madeira? We been waitin' for the bus for a long time. I don't know when it's gonna come."

Why is he asking me? I have neither the time nor the inclination to help him.

"I'll pay you, ma'am."

"No, I can't. Sorry."

"That's OK, ma'am."

Feeling lousy, I rush to my daughter's house, and the two of us hurry to the synagogue. It's Yom Kippur. All through the service, I mouth the words about kindness to strangers and think of the man with the broken teeth and the little boy.

The worst part of it is, I know that if he were to ask me again, I would still say no.

Name Withheld

IT WAS A HOT AUGUST IN NEW YORK City, 1977. I was renovating a loft in Soho and had to move out of my old apartment by the end of the month. My days were filled with packing crates and construction headaches. I was feeling overwhelmed. Then, in the course of one week, my mother's nursing home in Pittsburgh called to say that her health was failing; my sister, who also lived in Pittsburgh, suffered a cardiac arrest; and my gynecologist discovered a huge fibroid tumor on my uterus.

Because the tumor had developed so quickly, my doctor thought it might be malignant and wanted to remove it as soon as possible, even though the operation might damage my uterus. The thought of a future without children was unbearable to me.

Meanwhile, my thirty-six-year-old sister was unconscious and on life support. Her husband said the prognosis was not good. Her heart had been stopped for as long as ten minutes before they managed to resuscitate her.

I could hardly comprehend these crises, much less determine which to attend to first. I had lost my father just four years before. Now I might lose the rest of my family, too.

I called my friend Suzi, hoping that she could help me make some decisions. Her boyfriend, Mick, answered. Suzi was away for the weekend, but Mick knew about the turmoil in my life. He was also a psychiatrist.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"Not very well," I replied.

"How about a cup of coffee and a walk?" he offered.

Mick and I walked all over Greenwich Village that afternoon.

"How do you feel?" he asked after I had been quiet for a block.

"I feel like God hates me," I said. "And I hate him. He's taking everything!"

We were standing on lower Fifth Avenue in front of an Episcopal church. A Vespers service was in progress.

"Let's go in," Mick said. "Confront him!"

We caught the last few prayers. The familiar liturgy made me weep instantly. As everyone was leaving, Mick approached the young priest and asked him to talk to me.

This has to be the low point of my life, I thought. A psychiatrist is turning me over to a priest. I looked at the priest's sweet, boyish face and wondered what on earth he could possibly say that would help me.

He listened attentively to my story. "Maybe my sister will die," I sobbed. "Maybe my mother will die. Maybe my tumor is cancerous and I'll never have children. I have to move in two weeks. I don't know what to do first, and I despise God for heaping all this pain and terror on me."

I paused, hiccuped, and blew my nose. I knew this was pointless. There was no

answer he could give that would be useful.

"You know," the priest said, "God can take your anger."

I was astonished. All my life, nobody had been able to withstand the force of my anger. It had ended several relationships. Friends and family had advised me to control it. It scared everybody.

"Everybody but God," the priest assured me.

I don't know why this soothed me, but it did. Perhaps I thought that, if God could accept my anger, he would not abandon me.

My head cleared, and I decided the first thing to do was to get the buyer of the apartment to give me a month's extension. The second thing was to have the surgery. Everything else I would leave to God.

My surgery was a success. The tumor was not cancerous, and the doctor removed it without damaging my uterus. My sister died within the week, having never regained consciousness. I moved

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	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Excuses	May 1	October 2003
Laughter	June 1	November 2003
Idealism	July 1	December 2003
Turning Thirty	August 1	January 2004
Small Towns	September 1	February 2004
Deception	October 1	March 2004

into my loft. My mother lived for four more years, long enough to attend my wedding and to see one of her two grandchildren.

*Anne Elliott
Princeton, New Jersey*

MY FATHER WAS A LARGE MAN — SIX-foot-four and muscular. He radiated such authority that, as a child, I was petrified of displeasing him. You simply did not cross this man and get away with it.

My mother was the opposite — petite and outgoing, just the woman to complement my hardworking, dignified father. Together, they threw card parties with friends, hosted large family gatherings, and went dancing till the wee hours. I thought they were perfect for each other.

So, at the age of twenty-five, I had trouble dealing with the fact that my parents were divorcing.

My dad moved into a sparsely furnished efficiency, and I went to visit him the following weekend. He seemed out of place in the tiny, cramped space and looked miserable, though he was too proud to admit it.

“I’ll take care of your mother,” he told me, “and make sure she has everything she needs.” His eyes slid away from mine, embarrassed.

“What about you?” I asked. “Are you OK?”

“I’ll be fine.”

I fought back the tears and stood up. “Well, I’d better get going. I have to drive back to the city tonight.”

“OK.”

I could see he was debating whether or not to speak. Finally, he asked, “Joyce, would you do something for me before you go?”

“Of course, Dad. What?”

He walked to the tiny kitchenette, opened the fridge, and took something out. “Would you show me how to make a hamburger?” he asked sheepishly.

My father’s idea of a meal when my mother wasn’t home had been a bowl of bread and milk. I pushed away my sadness and smiled at him. My big, strong father needed my help.

*Joyce DeArmond
Urbana, Ohio*

I GREW UP IN A LOG CABIN, BUT MY family’s back-to-the-land life was anything but idyllic. My father, a religious zealot with no reliable source of income, was moody and prone to lash out at us. We lived in near-constant fear of his beatings. Food was meager; sometimes we even ran out of wheat to grind to make flour for bread. The low point was when my mother harvested day lilies. (I don’t remember which part of the plant was said to be edible.)

Thanks to our “voluntary poverty,” we were the constant recipients of charity. Neighbors and acquaintances would show up with bags of groceries or offer to drive us wherever we needed to go. I think our constant asking for help was ultimately more damaging than my father’s hate-filled zealotry. I never felt worthy of anyone’s respect. It took me a long time to stop asking people for things.

Now I hate to ask for help. When my husband asks a friend to give us a hand with something, I cringe. Some people would call that neurotic, but to me it feels like progress.

Name Withheld

MY TWO BROTHERS, LAINE AND BRYCE, could not be less alike, but as teenagers they were both skilled mechanics. Our garage always had a car or motorcycle in some stage of repair.

At the age of thirty-nine, Bryce, the hard-drinking, Harley-riding black sheep of my conservative Mormon family, was diagnosed with a degenerative nerve disease and given three to five years to live. Five years later he was still very much alive but had lost the use of his arms. They hung limp at his sides, his once-massive chest caved in. He refused all help, however, and ingeniously figured out ways to dress and feed himself. Once somebody started doing things for him, he said, it would be “all over.”

Laine, a dentist and self-sacrificing Christian, volunteered to convert Bryce’s Jeep to a foot-operated steering system so that Bryce could drive. The goal was to have the job finished for a big off-road rally in three weeks. It was all that Bryce could talk about, and the slow rate of progress tested his patience.

Laine was about halfway done when he was diagnosed with a melanoma on the arch of his foot. The surgery left him in a wheelchair for six weeks. He called on our dad and all our brothers-in-law to help with the Jeep. None of these men was an experienced mechanic, so Laine directed them from his wheelchair, step by step, through the complex conversion project.

The day before the rally, the foot-steering system still wasn’t working, and we had a family prayer over the Jeep. At ten o’clock that night, the system finally checked out. Laine and Bryce loaded the Jeep onto a truck and drove with a friend all night. They just made it to the rally.

Bryce is still driving that shiny black Jeep, still making his bed with his feet, still refusing anyone’s help.

*Ann Larsen
Salt Lake City, Utah*

(end of excerpt)