



DUNCAN GREEN

Readers Write OUT OF REACH

MY FIRST MEMORY OF AUNT HELEN is of her sitting on the side of my bed and singing “You Are My Sunshine.” I was three.

A few weeks ago, as I was tidying up my house, I passed the living room and heard my now-seventy-two-year-old aunt singing the same song. I stopped, went to my piano, and played the simple tune.

“What are you playing?” Helen asked. “I like that music.”

I encouraged her to figure out the melody, but she couldn’t, so I sang the words as I played. Just as the chorus began, her face lit up. “I know that song,” she said. “It’s my favorite song.”

Helen, my mother’s baby sister, is mentally retarded — not severely, but enough to keep a “normal” life just out of her reach. While my eight siblings and I grew from toddlers to middle-aged men

and women, she remained childlike and never moved out of her mother’s house. When my grandmother passed away fourteen years ago, Helen went right on living in the house alone. Family members took turns inviting her to stay with them on the weekends, buying her groceries, and seeing to it that she attended family events.

Two months ago Helen fell and fractured her tailbone. Two weeks after that, she fell again. In that moment I knew that our grandmother was finally holding my twin sister and me to the promise we’d made long ago: to take Helen in.

On being released from the rehab center, Helen moved in with me. My sister moved in too, to help out, and a friend who specialized in elder care gave us a hand. When Helen arrived, her feet were so swollen she couldn’t feel them, and

she was unable to get up and down by herself. A note said she needed twenty-four-hour supervision.

Those first few weeks with Helen were difficult. She was not happy about leaving her home. Our efforts to get her well were met with complaints — to us and to every relative she could call. The thought of not having *all* her stuffed animals, dolls, and knickknacks was devastating to her.

Only after we were able to turn two rooms of my home into a miniature replica of Helen’s house did her anxiety begin to subside, and she actually began to enjoy living with us. My sister and I are adjusting, too: to our diminished space, to the responsibility of caring for another person after several years of living alone, and to Helen herself, an emotionally immature and needy woman-child.

At a recent birthday dinner for my mother, Helen laid her head on my shoulder and said, "Pam, I didn't think I wanted to live with you and Penny, but I really like it. I am so happy."

Helen's physical disabilities (she also has multiple sclerosis and can barely get around, even with her walker) mean she requires our constant attention. Her incessant, repetitive talking is difficult to bear. But just when I think I can't take any more, I remember all the things in life that have been out of Helen's reach. And I take a deep breath and listen.

*Pamela J. Martin
Dallas, Texas*

IF AN OBJECT ISN'T BETWEEN SIX AND fifty inches off the floor, he can't reach it. If the restaurant is two steps up from the curb, he can't go in. If the park is down by the river and there is no ramp, he can't get there. Too many rocks, too much mud, or uneven cobblestones mean another place he can't go — at least, not without considerable effort or help. His life is restricted to even surfaces, where wheels will roll smoothly.

Yet he will tell you the advantages of being in a wheelchair: Little children speak to him easily and naturally. Many women have beautiful posteriors. Real friends are sorted from false friends. He is loved. Life is good.

I love him. He likes me well enough, and enjoys my company, but he remains distant. He has given up on the idea of a woman loving him in this way. He has emotions for other people, but not for me.

I try to understand and accept his detachment. Of course, I don't want to think that I am somehow unattractive. And I hope he isn't rejecting me for my own good, to save me from the difficulties of life with a paraplegic. I try to keep my heart open. I practice patience and non-attachment. I didn't know the meaning of "out of reach" until I met him.

*Rebecca Forbes
Lock Haven, Pennsylvania*

WHEN I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL, MY mother and I lived with my grandparents. Though my grandmother and grandfather were not very religious, they would

allow no Christians in their Jewish home. Nor would they allow contact with the Jewish community, because they were ashamed of their daughter's mental illness, which they alternately feared they had caused and felt certain was just an act. Mother was isolated from the world, but she was always seeking a closer relationship with God.

One Saturday afternoon Mother and I had the house to ourselves. I heard the doorbell ring, and I went to the front door to find Mother speaking with two young men in white shirts, ties, and dark pants: Mormon missionaries. She invited them in, and we sat in a circle in the living room.

The young men said they wanted to help Mother learn the ways of Mormon and perhaps accept Mormonism as her faith. I remember the joyful anticipation in her voice. It was so unusual to hear. The Thorazine or lithium or Haldol dulled her emotions.

Everyone in the family wanted something more for Mother: My grandmother

wanted her to find a job and a husband. I wanted her to be active and care about her appearance. Her brothers wanted her to participate in life and lose weight. I think what my mother wanted most was release from the fog of her medication. She wanted the sort of vibrant connection to life that she remembered from her youth.

As the young missionaries got up to leave, they invited us to pray with them. With bowed head, one missionary called out, "Heavenly Father," and the hairs of my arms stood up. I felt a warmth across my back and a whisper of air rush through the room. Could this be the God Mother was seeking? It alarmed me to think of something so much bigger than us.

They are all gone now: Mother, Grandmother, Grandfather. There is no one left to ask, "Do you remember Mother's constant quest for faith? Do you remember her conversations with Jehovah's Witnesses on street corners, her visits to Catholic and Presbyterian churches, her passion for stained glass and the message of Jesus'

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.

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Weddings	May 1	October 2004
Coming Clean	June 1	November 2004
Letters	July 1	December 2004
Hero Worship	August 1	January 2005
Apologies	September 1	February 2005
Grace	October 1	March 2005

love?" Without others to talk to, it is hard to reach an understanding and, ultimately, to forgive. And whom would I forgive in this story?

*Lisaana Otter Morley
Portland, Oregon*

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL SUNDAY AFTER-noon the year I turned fourteen and my brother eighteen. China had just started to enact economic reforms, and foreign music, movies, and fashion were flooding in. Most Chinese, though, were still working for government-owned companies, living in government-owned apartments, and watching government-edited news. My father was the head of a state-owned company, and we lived in an apartment on the sixth floor of a company building.

My brother loved motorcycles and oil painting. He was going through a difficult time with my parents, and one night he quarreled with my mother and stormed out. The next afternoon, I was reading my favorite magazine on the veranda when Mother started to worry about my brother. He seldom stayed gone so long. I began to worry too. But the paper of the magazine smelled lovely in the sun. *He'll probably be back for dinner*, I thought, and I went back to my reading.

That afternoon, unknown to us, my brother was in his motorcycle workshop on the first floor of the building when twelve strangers broke in and started to beat him. My brother tried to fight back, but someone hit him in the head with a tire iron, and he lost consciousness.

When he woke up, he lay helpless on the floor. He couldn't call us for help because, like most Chinese families in those days, we did not have a phone. Though just a half dozen floors away, we were unreachable.

A neighbor found my brother and carried him home just before dinner. The tire iron had cracked his skull. After seventeen hours of surgery, he survived, but he lost his vision and has never been able to paint or ride a motorcycle again.

The police found out that my brother's assailants had been hired by a teenage girl who worked in my father's company. A week before the incident, my father had criticized the girl for bringing strangers

into a restricted area.

My brother got married, had a child, and then divorced. I long ago became used to the fact that he is blind. But sometimes I still wonder: what if I had followed my instincts that afternoon and gone to look for my brother?

I have moved to the United States. My brother still lives in China, which is becoming more and more like the U.S.: they have insurance for everything; the rich are becoming richer; the poor are getting left behind. It is hard for my brother, living there alone since the divorce. When I worry about him, though, all I have to do is pick up the phone.

*Jing Y.
Marietta, Georgia*

HIS INTERNET PROFILE PAGE LISTED *Doonesbury* as his favorite comic strip. That says a lot about a person here in Middle America, so I wrote to him. We flirted for a while and finally agreed to meet. On a hot day in August he greeted me with a rather sad bouquet of flowers, wilted from the heat. Within four days we were making love.

I called him "Birdman" because he was an artist and liked to draw birds. He'd had a tough life: two ex-wives, an emotionally delicate son, a struggling business, a blind mother, and a mentally handicapped aunt. I was fresh from a hellish divorce, with zero self-confidence. The relationship worked pretty well.

Birdman told me about growing up with an alcoholic dad who would steal his bike and sell it for booze money. They'd go on hunting trips together, and his father would pick up prostitutes and have sex with them while Birdman tried to sleep. Later, when his blind mother inquired about the trip, he would always cover for his father.

I told Birdman that I was smitten with him, though I knew him only in the bedroom. "In a couple of weeks," he replied, "you'll be trying to figure out how to get rid of me." I never did.

It was his manliness, his sharp wit, his voice as thick as honey that made me love him. I focused on the things I liked, and turned my gaze from the things that hurt.

From the very beginning, our rela-

tionship fit in a box with **SEX** in big block letters on top, and that was that. *Enjoy it while you can*, I told myself. *Think of him as your French lover. Think of him as your secret. Think of him as your midlife surprise.*

Sometimes I felt as if I were his private whore. He'd call me up at ten o'clock at night and ask if I wanted "company." I'd say yes, and he would come over around midnight. We would talk for a few minutes, then go to the bedroom and make love. Afterward he would leave.

But if I'd dared to have a cup of coffee with him, that would have been going too far. Then I would have known that there were other women. I would have known that there was no real connection between us. I would have found out the things that make most women run.

One day in January, while Birdman was waiting for the furnace repairman, he asked me to come over. After we made love, he followed me out his front door. The glare from the winter sky was too bright. I don't know why I said it, but I did: "I love you." He replied in kind, without hesitation.

That Valentine's Day, while the country feared another terrorist attack, he made me a duct-tape heart.

One night we had a "talk." He compared our relationship to that of a dog and its owner: the owner will far outlive the dog, and so the relationship will inevitably end, but that does not deter him from loving the animal. I listened, nodded, and smiled, though I was more than a little bruised.

Later, at home, I went outside and looked up at the moon. It had been a summer of fires; the moon was mango colored, its outline as soft as a child's plush toy. Each time I turned my head, it looked different. How long did I stand and look up at the moon? When did I realize that it wasn't the moon that was out of reach, but me?

*J Clements
Address Withheld*

MY FATHER GREATLY VALUED EDUCA-tion, having largely put himself through medical school despite great hardship. So when I finished high school, he insisted that I go to a prestigious Ivy League

women's college.

There, for the first time in my life, I encountered the upper class: debutantes, Episcopalians, ancestral homes, eighteen-karat-gold pins, coming-out parties, bridge, lacrosse, and alcohol — lots of it. On the weekends boyfriends came roaring through the college gates in their little MGs. Some of my classmates kept horses stabled nearby and spent their leisure time at fox hunts, polo matches, and horse shows.

I needed money to fit in, but my father made it clear that sending me to this college was a monumental sacrifice. He paid for room, board, and tuition. That was all. There was no additional money for clothes from Peck and Peck, transportation to Boston for the big Harvard-Yale game, or ski trips and European vacations with my rich classmates. My father even forbade me to have a roommate because it might interfere with the one and only reason he had sent me to such an expensive and exclusive college: to get the best education possible.

"Never forget that you come from a plain Jewish family," he said. "Don't get any big ideas!"

Whereas I managed only C's in the classroom, I achieved social success with relative ease in a fringe group of high-society rebels and misfits, girls who liked to drink, write poetry, and gambol across the fields at dawn in their nightgowns. It took me just three years to become a serious social drinker and a frivolous student. At the end of my junior year, I was expelled.

My father insisted I immediately enroll at New York University to finish my undergraduate degree. There would be no mistakes this time. I would live at home until I got my BA.

I was still in love with the upper class, however. They had enormous wealth without being ostentatious. They socialized skillfully and never offended. I envied their air of courteous indifference. As far as I was concerned, all their good breeding entitled them to privilege.

I went on to graduate school, where my anthropology thesis was titled "The Upper Class and Its Relation to Maximum Upward Social Mobility: An Analysis of the Marriage Patterns of Four American

Upper-Class Families." For three years I researched the family trees of the Rockefeller, du Ponts, Fords, and Mellons. I pored over decades of listings in the *Social Register* and *Who's Who*, and half a century of engagement and wedding announcements in the *New York Times*. I produced thirty-eight tables of data comparing individuals on the basis of religion, occupation, education, and membership in certain metropolitan gentlemen's clubs.

I had a consuming need to demonstrate that, although individuals of lower socioeconomic status could marry into these families, those individuals could not be Jewish. Marriage to a Jew meant eviction from the *Social Register*.

While working on my thesis, I began dating a scion of one of the four families I was researching. He was in his early thirties, tall, blond, and attractive, with the polished manners and unconventional behaviors that only four generations of great wealth and privilege can produce. But he was using his chunk of the family fortune to bankroll an international drug venture and would shortly be indicted for tax evasion. It was time for me to end my doomed romance with the aristocracy.

*June G.
Brooklyn, New York*

IT'S A BRIGHTLY POLISHED OCTOBER morning, and my daughter Ava and I are in the garden. At the age of fourteen months, Ava is endlessly fascinated with seeds, flowers, and trees. We kneel before the lamb's ear, and I pry open the papery, umbrella-shaped pods. Tiny black seeds spill out and line the creases of my palm. Ava folds my fingers over the seeds. *All gone!* She unfurls my fingers, and they miraculously appear again.

We stage this miracle over and over throughout the day. When my daughter vanishes beneath a red scarf, I wonder aloud, "Where is Ava? I can't find her. She's gone!" At this, she pulls off the scarf to reveal a satisfied smile. My daughter is learning that an object that can no longer be seen is not gone forever, but can be retrieved from the void. Eventually she will grasp that when I leave the room, or the house, or the country, I still exist.

My daughter's developing mind bears some resemblance to her grandmother's, which is impaired by Alzheimer's disease, the neurons hopelessly tangled and stunted, dying out as fast as Ava's grow. These two people I love are passing each other on their trajectories of growth and loss. They both misuse words — the moon is "moon," but also "bird." Buttons on clothes confound them. They struggle to maintain their autonomy and often try to do something that far outstrips their abilities. They both long to be with their mothers much of the day.

It is now Ava's third autumn, my fortieth, and Mother's eighty-first. We are in the uninspired pocket garden just outside my mother's room in the nursing home. My mother's hands are shriveled but soft. The stroller and the wheelchair are parked side by side. I know that when I try to leave here with my daughter, my mother will panic. "Don't go," she'll plead. "I have to get home to my mother. She'll think I'm lost. *Where is my mother?*"

I will concoct messages from the dead: "Your mother wants you to eat all your lunch," I'll tell her. "Don't worry. She'll be back later. I'll tell her where you are."

Back at my house, I take out a picture of my grandmother and tell her that her daughter wants to come home. I think of neurons, tangled and clogged, like superhighways at rush hour. Ava wants to know if we can still talk on the phone with people after they die. "I don't know" is the most honest answer I can give. I don't recall ever feeling so lost.

*Maureen Kerl DiSavino
New City, New York*

(end of excerpt)