



## Readers Write

### HARD WORK

**MY FATHER LOST HIS LEG IN WORLD War II.** No one in our family ever talked about his missing limb, though I grew up surrounded by heavy wooden prostheses. (He insisted on keeping the old ones for some reason.) Wooden legs stood behind every door in our house, and they were always falling down unexpectedly. We would be eating dinner, perhaps, and one would crash like a giant redwood.

I didn't like crossing the street with my father. He would hold on to me for balance and limp across, never fast enough for my taste. I would watch in a panic as the cars came toward us. *We are going to die*, I'd think. From the safety of the far curb, my mother would chide him: "Leo, come on. You can walk faster than that."

My father was a salesman at a men's clothing store and stood all day long at

his job. Occasionally, I would glimpse him getting dressed for work, hopping across the bedroom to grab one of the legs leaning against the wall. He would start by putting a special sock over his stump, to make the leg fit better. Those thick, funnel-shaped socks were always drying in the bathroom, hanging in a neat row over the shower rod. I would see them every day as I got ready for school: a row of hand-washed socks with faded brown stains. I saw them so often I barely noticed them.

Years after my father died, I remembered those socks and the brown stains. How could I have been so oblivious? The brown stains were blood, so much that even my mother's constant hand-washing could never fully remove it.

*Marilyn Kalish  
Great Barrington, Massachusetts*

**I AM READING SIGMUND FREUD'S *THE Ego and the Id*.** This is not easy. I read perhaps half a paragraph a day. Here's a sentence chosen at random: "When it happens that a person has to give up a sexual object, there quite often ensues an alteration of his ego which can only be described as a setting up of the object inside the ego, as it occurs in melancholia; the exact nature of this substitution is as yet unknown to us."

I read this sentence three times. I go back and review the sentences leading up to it. I read the sentence again.

I press on.

*Sparrow  
Phoenicia, New York*

**WHEN I DISCOVERED THAT THE OLDEST** of my three teenagers was drinking and habitually smoking pot — by him-

self — I sought professional help for him and quit my teaching job of twenty-five years. I couldn't continue to be a mentor to other kids when my own child's life was in a shambles.

To pay the bills, I got a job selling seafood at a local market, but I didn't want to interact with customers, so I asked to work at the lobster pound instead. The owner of the market understood my situation. She put me on the phone with her brother. His first question was "Can you lift fifty pounds?"

"Sure," I said, thinking I could lift that much once in a while.

On my first day, I put on my orange waterproof coveralls and boots and was shown into the pound. My job was to haul crates of live lobsters out of the pools and unload the "bugs," as they were called, into boxes, which were then sealed and put onto a pallet. We packed upward of three hundred boxes a day.

I was the only woman loading crates in the lobster pound. I was also the only

Democrat. The men were gruff and strong, and their jokes were hilarious. Later I found out that they watched their language in front of me.

I worked hard, kept up, and learned how to drive a forklift and cook the lobsters in a huge metal vat. I also learned how to take a ribbing, and how to give one, too.

It was the most physically demanding job I've ever had. Every afternoon, I would come home exhausted, strip off my clothes, and step into the shower. But I got into shape; in fact, I trained for and ran the Maine Marathon while working there.

That job helped me to see clearly that when our lives fall apart, everyday contact with other people is what saves us from isolation. It keeps us sane.

*Nancy Wheaton  
Portsmouth, New Hampshire*

**WE HARVEST THE SALAD MIX AND** other leafy greens in the early-morning

mist. Tomatoes, beans, and beets can be harvested later in the day, as long as they're kept in the shade. The 150-foot rows of beans stretch out before me like miniature hedges. I bend over and brush back their leaves in search of the pods they conceal from view. (I'd do the same if someone were after my offspring.) Once we've harvested several hundred pounds of produce, we wash, bunch, weigh, bag, and box it, then load the boxes into the van and drive to the city.

After delivering to our forty regular customers, we set up our stall at the farmer's market — a tent, two tables, wicker baskets for displaying the produce, price signs — and begin to banter and haggle, hoping to make five hundred dollars for the day. At 7 P.M., it's time to tear down our little tent, pack up our leftover produce, and head over to a restaurant where the chef buys from us at a discount. Then it's back to the farm in the twilight to unpack the truck. Tomorrow we'll be going to a bigger market, so the harvesting will be even heavier.

Sometimes, as I pick in the morning mist, I'll hear the thick hum of traffic from the encroaching suburbs, and I'll think about all the people who commute to jobs they may not like, looking forward to their two days off each week and retirement on the horizon. That seems to me the hardest work of all.

S.C.  
*Carnation, Washington*

#### **AN OXYGEN MASK PRESSES AGAINST**

Anita's bluish lips, its long tube like an elephant's trunk. Despite all our efforts, Anita's lungs are failing. We need to intubate — insert a breathing tube directly into her windpipe — but Anita and her daughter are adamant: no heroics. So we, her nurses, fiddle futilely with the machine and watch the bright blue numbers indicating her oxygen level drop lower and lower.

At 11 A.M. Anita begins slipping in and out of consciousness. Her numbers dip lower, and I consider calling her daughter. Anita isn't my only patient, though, and there is still much I have to do before noon.

After lunch I peek behind the curtain at Anita. She's breathing hard, and her

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**R**EADERS 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.)

We publish only nonfiction in Readers Write. 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
Apologies	September 1	February 2005
Grace	October 1	March 2005
Small Victories	November 1	April 2005
On The Edge	December 1	May 2005
Possessions	January 1	June 2005
Saturday Night	February 1	July 2005

oxygen level is sixty-seven, barely enough to sustain life. Miraculously, she smiles at me and asks for a sip of water. I debate whether to summon her daughter to the hospital while they can still interact. I decide not to call yet. It can take so long to say these things, and I just don't have the time.

I manage to get all my meds administered — at least, the ones that matter — but I'm way behind on baths, and 23-A is ringing for a bedpan.

A bath or two later, I check on Anita again. Her breathing isn't any better. It's time to call her daughter. The man in 23-B can wait for his suppository. I hold the phone gently, as though I could transmit concern through the wires, and say, "Your mom's not doing so well. It could be a false alarm, but I thought you'd want to know."

Five o'clock meds are due. Afterward I pass out the supper trays and check to see if Anita's daughter needs anything — coffee, a shoulder to cry on. A man I haven't seen before is sitting in a straight-backed chair by Anita's bed, rocking back and forth with his hands on his knees. The tension in the room is thick. I guess that he is Anita's son. I have brought some morphine to ease Anita's pain, and I place it gently in her cheek.

"What's that?" asks the son.

I tell him.

Morphine means different things to different people. To this man, it signifies the end of hope. His mouth contorts as he tries not to cry. Then his face crumbles, and his sobs are deep and ugly. I sit on the chair next to him and smell the alcohol fumes rolling off his body. His sister looks away. I stroke his hand and offer solace, but my real goal is to quiet him down so my patient can have some peace. In the back of my mind, I'm thinking that I have only half an hour left on my shift. I don't want this wild card to make me late getting home to my children.

After I've calmed the man down, I take his sister aside. "If he's a problem, you call us. You don't have to deal with this. We'll be the heavies." I have no idea what we'll do, but we're nurses; we'll figure it out.

I am grateful the next day, my day off, when all I have to do is dig a ditch for a

new sprinkler system.

*Name Withheld*

**I GOT MY FIRST REAL JOB ONE SUMMER** between semesters in Catholic seminary, where I was training to become a priest. I hadn't taken a vow of poverty yet and still had bills to pay.

When I heard about a job at a paint factory, I applied and was hired. I would be joining the laboring masses, working and sweating by their side, like the radical French worker-priests I'd read about. I thanked God for granting me this opportunity.

The next day I reported to the factory and started work. The job entailed lifting four-gallon boxes of paint off a conveyor belt and onto pallets, eight hours a day, with a one-hour break. I was exhausted in no time, and my prayers of gratitude quickly turned into prayers for deliverance.

Deliverance came in the form of a tough-talking foreman who saw me struggling on the line and assigned me to help out the factory janitor instead. My new job was to ride the sweeper around the factory floor between towering stacks of paint cans. The hardest part was staying awake; something about the noise and the heat generated by the sweeper made my eyelids droop. I almost crashed into those towering stacks a number of times.

I'd take my lunch breaks with the janitor and a guy named Steve. Steve was in his early twenties, had never been to college, and seemed content to work in the factory the rest of his life. He and I got along well.

When I mentioned I would be going back to school at the end of the summer, Steve asked me what I wanted to become. I told him I wanted to help people and serve God.

"You're going to be a minister?" he said. "That's great!" He went to an Evangelical church and had been saved. He asked me to tell him more about my ministry. As I described for him the life of a priest as I imagined it, he seemed more and more impressed.

"What does your girlfriend say about all of this?" he asked.

"Girlfriend?" I said. "I don't have a girl-

friend. I'm going to be a Catholic priest. I have to be celibate."

A look of pity and horror appeared on Steve's face, and he said he had to get back to work.

Steve avoided me after that. He seemed to view celibacy as a kind of perversion, rather than the way I saw it, as the hardest work of all: to work all day in the vineyards of the Lord and have nothing but a cold, empty bed to fall into at night.

That was twenty years ago. I am not a priest today. I left the seminary after five years. I'm now doing web and graphic design while working toward a doctorate in English. Sometimes I sit at my computer for ten hours straight. I wonder if I work too hard and, if so, why. Maybe it's because I live alone and fall into a cold, empty bed at night. Maybe it's because I'm afraid of making a relationship succeed, of having a family, of creating a home — although, in my case, it would be the home of two men. Maybe I'd rather chain myself to my computer than do the hard work of figuring out how to become happy.

*Joseph Byrne  
Washington, D.C.*

*(end of excerpt)*