



HARRY WILSON

## Readers Write

## LETTERS

**THE SHOP WAS OPEN FROM 10 A.M. TO** noon and again from 2 to 4 P.M., because in Austria everyone needs a good, unhurried lunch, and anything you can't do today you can do tomorrow. I slipped into the narrow, dim space and inhaled the smells of loose tobacco, milk chocolate, and stacks of thick paper. Passing the roundish proprietor in his hunter green boiled-wool cardigan, I stopped at the wall of pens: thirty-seven shades and ten different tips. They all made urgent, dramatic marks on the tissue-thin pink airmail paper. After much deliberation, I chose the midnight blue fine-point, handed over the crumpled two-hundred-schilling note I'd received for selling my plasma earlier that day, and took the change to a cafe, where I could sip my coffee for hours as I wrote letters home.

This was before e-mail, and my only

choice was between the expensive instant gratification of a phone call and the languorous pace of a letter that would be hopelessly out of date by the time it was read. Letter writing was a dreamy and timeless activity, like walking somewhere when it would have been faster to drive. Sometimes I would drop little pieces of my life into the envelope: a bus ticket, a bar coaster, a page of a newspaper, or a leaf from Hellbrunner Allee, where I walked every day.

While in Austria I received my first and only Dear John letter. Considering how long it took overseas mail to arrive, he'd probably already forgotten me by the time I opened the envelope. He'd had a change of heart, he said, and hoped I wouldn't be mad. This he scrawled with a cheap ballpoint pen on a scrap of notebook paper. The letter was so small he

didn't even need to fold it.

*Toni Ouradnik  
Mountain View, California*

**MY HUSBAND AND I LIVE WITH MY** father in a big, rambling farmhouse. My brother and his family have settled here, too, and three generations of us jostle about the drafty rooms. We listen to baseball games on the radio, watch the children dance to marching songs on the Victrola, and mow acres of lawn.

In spare moments we listen to my father tell of his upbringing as the child of Salvation Army officers, of his travels through Europe and North Africa on a motor scooter, and of the years he spent in Spain working on a novel. Being a practical man, he teaches us how to repair the dripping faucet, patch a leaky pipe, and refinish the dining-room floor.

As my father becomes less mobile, he retreats to the living room, where he sits in his chair watching television, or to the kitchen, where we take turns cooking meals and sharing gossip. People hint to me that our situation is odd, that I should have moved out of my father's house when I got married. But it works for us.

One night in February, my father slowly walks to his bedroom with his cane, calling out, "See you tomorrow." The next morning I find him lying beside his bed, dead.

For weeks I walk through the house, touching his things: a cuff link, an ash-tray, an old suitcase with a Greek Line shipping label. In the second week after his death, I find the letters: just a handful, seven or eight, written years ago to my grandparents on his old Underwood typewriter. When I try to flatten them out, the brittle paper begins to tear and crumble. I handle them gently, reverently. My father's words come back:

Here he is living in Spain with my mother. The car is broken down, and he's trying to have it fixed. They are visiting Portugal and arranging to come back to the U.S. in the fall, on the SS *Anna Maria*. "Don't be sad," he tells my grandmother when her mother dies. His daughter (me) is learning to speak and sing "Heigh-ho" and "all that jazz children do." Right now she is going to bed. "And she's objecting! One should always object," he writes, on that distant spring evening in Madrid.

I read the letters every night for the rest of the winter and on into spring, after my miscarriage. They comfort me. On the typewritten pages we are all young again and full of possibility.

But they don't bring him back.

*Renee E. Fox  
Canterbury, New Hampshire*

**IN THE SUMMER OF 1971 I RECEIVED** a postcard from Greece signed simply "Mark." It was addressed care of the couple I was staying with just outside of Vancouver. I would be at their house only until the end of August, at which point I planned to leave Canada and hitchhike around Europe.

On the front of the postcard was a mosaic with a sun in the middle. On the back, written in blue felt pen using all

lowercase letters, was this message:

*heather —  
i live in an olive grove, dense and  
green, among broad bands of ferns  
fired to golden hues by thick yellow  
bolts of greek sun penetrating the  
olive canopy: in an isolated val-  
ley among scattered farmhouses,  
grape vineyards and wheat fields.  
and you? hope you are well and  
active, alive — love, mark*

The thing is, I have no idea who Mark is. Few people even knew where I was staying that summer, let alone had the address. How could this Mark not only have known, but thought to carry the address with him on his travels?

I have kept this postcard for more than thirty years. Every so often I get it out and look at it, hoping this will be the moment when my brain will make a connection and offer up a memory. But it never has. The postcard remains, like life, madden-

ingly and wonderfully mysterious.

*Heather MacAndrew  
Victoria, B.C.  
Canada*

**NOT LONG BEFORE HE DIED IN BERLIN,** Germany, my father sent me the letters I had written to him between the ages of seven and ten. They date from 1947 to 1950, a period when Mother and I were struggling to survive in the Soviet occupation zone.

These Dear Vati letters were addressed to a man who had been imprisoned for child molesting when I was a year old, and who was obliged upon his release to serve on the German home front during the war, cleaning up after air raids; a father who had salvaged a teddy bear from a smoldering ruin and sent it to his daughter. (It would be my only childhood toy.)

These Dear Vati letters came from a child who often heard her mother speak of her father as "the pig"; a child who vaguely knew that her father had done

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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
Possessions	January 1	June 2005
Saturday Night Games	February 1	July 2005
Taking A Stand	March 1	August 2005
Self-Control	April 1	September 2005
True Love	May 1	October 2005
	June 1	November 2005

something that had to do with little girls, something despicable.

My mother and I had left Berlin in 1944 after our apartment was destroyed in an air raid. My father had stayed and ended up in the American occupation zone after the war, where he found employment as a truck driver. He had access to food and essentials, like shoes, nails, and light bulbs. We lived in a town of six thousand at the Czech border and had nothing. In my letters I begged him to send us food. I disliked, distrusted, even despised this man, and yet he was my father.

Meticulous drawings illustrate the letters: a stocking with holes, our temporary house, our vegetable beds, the overflowing Elbe River. I remark on the trivia of life: the weather, a neighbor, illness. I request flour and sugar for a birthday cake. One letter reports that a food package arrived empty, its contents stolen. A picture of a crying face accompanies the line. Another letter says, "Mutti was desperate because we had nothing to eat in the house."

I remember what my mother said to me one night when I woke up hungry: "We don't have any food in the house, but if only I could, I'd carve it out of my flesh." I never again mentioned hunger. I never cried or complained. I didn't want to increase her burden.

At the age of seven, I write jubilantly, "We've got an outhouse now!" Before that we had only a bucket, the contents of which we poured into holes we'd dug in the garden. I tell my father of mending stockings by candlelight, because there is often no electricity. I report receiving four nuts, eight rolls, and an egg for my birthday, and Mother a basket filled with wood. I write that we filch wood from the forest when we have nothing left to burn. Once, we were almost caught but got away by jumping on our sled, on top of the logs we had stuffed into potato bags. Another time we were caught, and Mutti cried, begged the man not to denounce her, and bribed him with a damask tablecloth we had.

When I was nine, Mutti's finger became infected to the bone. For weeks she was unable to sew for income or do any work at home. I wrote proudly that I was doing all the household and garden chores,

including sawing logs and splitting wood. And when the Elbe River flooded, I had to balance on boards propped on high sawhorses to get to school.

More drawings: of the mountain I saw from my window; of the Christmas tree we cut down and decorated with candles and homemade ornaments; of the garden and the vegetables and flowers in it.

These letters are my father's greatest gift to me. I cry whenever I read them. I have not stopped crying yet.

*Name Withheld*

**MY HIGH-SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHER,** Nancy Thompson Harris, told me that if I kept working at it, I could be a "splendid" writer. She said she was saving all my letters for when I became famous. She and I wrote each other from the day after my high-school graduation to the week before she died: almost twenty years. Her teacherly cursive filled the front and back of many yellow legal pages. She called me "dear heart," recommended books and movies, and filled me in on the politics of the English department.

Nancy always wrote me back immediately upon receiving my letters. When I was away at college, it was thrilling to have such a responsive audience for my latest wise and mature insights. Years later, however, when I had three young children, I would sometimes wait to write back, to give myself some breathing room.

Even after Nancy got cancer, her letters remained upbeat. She described chemo and radiation. She sent photos of herself in various hairdos that made the most of very little hair. She wrote about using marijuana for the pain and about her plans to move in with her sister. By then I was writing back the moment I received her letters, and it was her responses that had slowed down considerably.

One summer day I got a letter from Nancy's sister. Nancy was gone. I remember wailing. My husband took our three children out of the house that afternoon so I could be alone.

If Nancy did save all my letters, they are gone now. I am not going to be famous, so it's no great loss. I do wish I had them, though, to help me re-create the twenty years during which I became an adult, a

wife, a mother, and a friend to one of the liveliest women I have ever met. Knowing my letters were being saved pushed me to be disciplined about my writing: to take care with every sentence, to dig deep, to make it "splendid." I think that might be what she intended all along.

*Anjelina Citron  
Bellingham, Washington*

**MY FRIEND PASSED ME THE LETTER** under our desks in seventh-grade math class. She was popular and pretty, and I was short and stocky with white cat's-eye glasses. We'd become friends only because we lived in the same neighborhood and did homework together after school.

The letter was signed "A Secret Admirer," but my friend assured me it was from the boy I had a crush on. The silver band inside was a perfect fit, and I wore it proudly on my left ring finger. I was to meet him after school on Friday, outside the band room, the letter said.

That week I became the center of attention among my friends, who questioned me excitedly about my date. I sewed a new dress and dreamed of my first kiss.

On Friday he was standing by the band room, just the way I'd imagined. But when he saw me, he asked me what I was doing there. He wasn't waiting for me. My friends had told him to wait there for another girl, the one he really liked. They had used him to humiliate me. How stupid I had been to believe that someone would actually like me.

If the girls had staged the prank to make me stop hanging around with them, it worked. I stayed home alone all that summer. When school started again, however, they all asked for help with homework, and I was so in need of friendship that I agreed. No one ever mentioned the letter.

In college I must have fucked about a hundred guys, and a few women too, I was so desperate for love. I married a man who doesn't really love me, and I have let him abuse me for the last sixteen years because I just don't believe I am worth loving. I am still a fool, because I want the same thrill I felt while waiting for that Friday to come.

The girl who passed me that letter

called me yesterday. We haven't talked for years, although we continue to live in the same small town. She was calling to try to sign me up for some pyramid scheme — a "sales opportunity," she called it. I declined politely.

The worst part was that she was still trying to trick me.

*Name Withheld*

**I AM MY NEIGHBOR'S SECRETARY. MRS.** Scott has dictated to me letters to her family, her friends, her enemies, the IRS, and Publishers Clearing House. I have typed up her will. I have sent angry letters to her ex-boyfriend, signed with a fake name. The art of letter writing is alive and well with Mrs. Scott.

Whenever Mrs. Scott needs administrative support, she comes barging through our back door, wooden cane in her fist, looking ready for a fight.

"Suzy Parker, I need something written," she says. Our dog barks. Our bird screeches. Everything comes to a halt.

"What you got to eat around here?" she asks, peering with disdain into the refrigerator. I fix her a cup of coffee the way she likes it, with milk and a heaping tablespoon of sugar. I toast soft white bread, smear it thickly with butter and jam, and place it in front of her at the kitchen table. When she is finished eating, she is ready to get down to business.

I sit at my computer. Mrs. Scott perches behind me on a wooden chair, squinting over my shoulder at the screen, and dictates:

*Dear Publishers Clearing House,  
If I have won the sweepstakes,  
please deduct the \$12.51 + \$2.50  
from my millions and send me a  
check for the balance of what you  
say I have won. It's true, I do have  
a winning smile and therefore de-  
serve to win. Do not send me ANY-  
THING but money. I thank you for  
the great opportunity, and if this is  
not true please don't send me any  
more of your messy mail.*

*Hope you are wonderful,  
Mrs. Gerstine Scott*

*Dear Mrs. Adams,  
Hello, dear. It's been a long*

*time since I heard from you. I al-  
ways wondered what happened to  
our forty-year friendship. You and I  
never really had time to talk things  
over. You always want things to go  
your way, but I know more than you  
think I do. Maybe someday you will  
see what I was telling you all along.  
When you were sick, I was always  
there, but when things happened to  
me, you were never there.*

*God bless, from yours,  
very sincerely,  
Sister Gerstine Scott*

*Last Will and Testament  
To Whom It May Concern,*

*I am Gerstine Scott. In my  
apartment everything except the  
cookstove and the curtain in the  
front room belongs to me. My son's  
name is Robert Douglas. He is the  
one to have everything in this apart-  
ment if something should happen to  
me. As of this day, November 1, 1998,  
I don't owe money to anybody. This  
is decorated in order by Gerstine  
Scott in the City of Oakland and  
the County of Alameda.*

*P.S. Mrs. Jones is the owner of  
the property, and she gets the cook-  
stove and the curtain. Leave Suzy  
Parker my cane. She bought it for  
me when I lost my old one, and I  
greatly appreciated that. Someday  
she is going to need my cane, though  
she don't believe it now.*

*Susan Parker  
Oakland, California*

*(end of excerpt)*