



HIROSHI WATANABE

## Readers Write **GRACE**

I WAS PARKING CARS FOR THE CITY of Austin over the December holidays. It was temporary work, simple but tedious. While working there, I met Mario, who was from somewhere in Mexico. He didn't speak any English, and I'd always been too lazy to learn much Spanish. Mario wore a red wool hat with earflaps and

coughed incessantly. When he'd finished a coughing fit, he asked another employee for a cigarette. The guy reluctantly gave him one.

Mario was old. I wondered if he was suffering from emphysema. I assumed he couldn't afford health insurance. I thought about this as Mario pulled more

smoke into his lungs.

One night after work, I noticed Mario attempting to walk home. (He lived about ten miles away.) I thought about offering him a ride, but Mario smelled bad, I was tired, and I dreaded that awkward ten-mile drive in which I'd have to struggle to speak Spanish. I drove off slowly, hop-

ing that somebody else would pick him up. Luckily somebody did.

The next time Mario and I worked together, I was feeling under the weather. The flu was going around. I sat down on a trash can to rest and looked up at the sky, wishing I were anywhere but there in that parking lot.

Mario came over and patted me gently on the back. He extended his hand. In his palm was a vitamin-c lozenge.

"You take," said Mario.

On my last day of work, I drove Mario home. When I dropped him off at his apartment, he smiled widely and gave me a thumbs up, then disappeared into the dark building.

*Matthew Bell  
Austin, Texas*

**IN SEPTEMBER 2001, AS AMERICA WAS** reeling from the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, my family was dealing with its own drama: my husband had just been diagnosed with colorectal cancer.

Jim had experienced symptoms of his disease for six months before receiving a correct diagnosis. Dr. S. had thought it was irritable-bowel syndrome and put him on a special diet. When Jim's symptoms didn't go away, Dr. S. advised him to stick with the diet anyway.

Finally Jim went to another doctor, who immediately ordered blood tests and a colonoscopy. They found cancer, and a CAT scan revealed that it had metastasized to his liver.

Upon hearing this, I experienced a number of feelings, mostly incredible anger at Dr. S. for having let his disease go undiagnosed all those months. Colorectal cancer is one of the most treatable cancers if it is caught in its early stages, but deadly after it has reached the liver. I could not temper my rage.

Jim had surgery that fall, and a few days later the chaplain from his work came to the hospital. The chaplain asked if there was anything we wanted to pray for. I thought that we should ask God to cure Jim's cancer, but before I could speak, Jim said, "Could we pray that Margie would forgive Dr. S.?"

I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised. Jim knew the anger was hurting

me, and he had always placed my well-being over his own.

Perhaps the most important thing I learned from Jim, during the ten short years we were married, was how to live with grace. He demonstrated it not only on that day in September, but every day of his life.

*Margie Carr  
Lawrence, Kansas*

**A FEW YEARS AGO I HAD A DREAM** in which an old high-school classmate named Steve was ushering me into my graduation ceremony. I awoke to a flood of shameful memories. I had bullied and terrorized Steve all through school, mercilessly pouncing on every sign of weakness: his short stature, his figure skating, his effeminate manner.

As an adult, I'd spent years in therapy recalling my own history of abuse at the hands of my brother and father, and now I felt a sense of horror, recalling how I had done the same to Steve. I wanted to make amends somehow.

That Christmas, when I was home for the holidays, I looked up Steve's number in the phone book and called him.

He was very quiet at first. I thought perhaps he didn't recognize my name, but now I think he was taken aback. I told him how ashamed I was of the way I had treated him and how sorry I felt. He agreed that I had been a real bastard and told me I had made his life miserable. We spoke for only about fifteen minutes.

The following Christmas Steve sent me a card thanking me for that call and saying how much it had meant to him.

How do such things happen? How is it possible that Steve has forgiven me? How could I have had such a dream?

*Doug B.  
Ottawa, Ontario  
Canada*

**AFTER BEING SOBER FOR FIVE YEARS,** I naively believed that if I led a good life, bad things wouldn't happen to me. Then, in just one year, my husband's seventeen-year-old brother was killed in a boating

**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
Taking A Stand	April 1	September 2005
Self-Control	May 1	October 2005
True Love	June 1	November 2005
Tests	July 1	December 2005
Playing With Fire	August 1	January 2006
Coffee	September 1	February 2006



JAMES CARROLL

accident, and our first child, Dylan, died just an hour after being born. I decided that whatever power was in charge of the universe was punishing me for my past. Deep down, I believed that I deserved this punishment.

My husband and I tried to have another child right away, but we were unable to conceive. There was no medical reason why we couldn't. It just wasn't happening. I spoke to my dead son several times a day. My self-absorption knew no bounds.

One morning, in a moment of clarity, I realized I needed help. I called a Christian counselor who specialized in grief.

I had some reservations about seeking religious counseling. I did not want to hear, one more time, how my son's death had been God's will. I explained to the counselor that I was, at best, ambivalent about the existence of God. If I did believe in a higher power, then I hated him. I told her I did not want or need sympathy. I needed someone to push me through this. She bravely took on the assignment.

After a few sessions, she said that an image kept occurring to her in which I stood before God, clutching my son, unable to give Dylan over. She suggested we try a role-playing experiment: she would be God, and I would give my son to her.

I almost laughed. How quickly she'd

suggested she play the role of God. *What an ego*, I thought. But I was paying her a lot of money; perhaps I should at least try the experiment.

It was an alarmingly difficult thing to do, but I did manage to hand over my son to her.

I next saw the counselor three weeks later. On the morning of my appointment, I took a pregnancy test. It was positive. I was convinced that I'd been unable to conceive because I'd been carrying a ghost in my womb.

I now believe that bad things happen to everyone, no matter what kind of life they lead, and the reward of leading a good life is simply that life. I've decided that my past is forgivable, but I'm the one who needs to forgive it.

*Mary Miceli-Wink  
DePere, Wisconsin*

**WE CALLED HER "FAT BETTY." SHE LIVED** across the hallway from me, and two or three times a week she would come over to "borrow" food.

"I went to five food banks today, and they were all out," she'd explain. "I've been looking for a job, but they're prejudiced against me."

I'd usually mumble something about how rough the world is and give her some canned goods or frozen potpies. She

would thank me and quickly rush back to her place.

At first I felt concern for Betty. Then I found out she was a chronic liar who often spread rumors, and that the other residents of our building would have nothing to do with her. Now and then she would sit on my couch and cry about how hard life was, and I would pat her shoulder and mutter platitudes. She told me she'd been walking around looking for a job, but later I talked to the landlord, who said she'd been on the front stoop all day.

One day I was sitting on the stoop myself with my neighbors Carol and Alice. We were talking about Betty.

"I just don't want her coming around me anymore," I said. "She walks into my place with a dark cloud over her head and an unending appetite."

"Don't be soft with her," Carol said. "You're gonna have to tell her how things are. She's a panhandler, and a bad one at that. She could work if she really wanted to." It was just what I wanted to hear.

Then Alice told me what I *needed* to hear: "What if that were you?"

*David W.  
St. Petersburg, Florida*

**I WAS ABANDONED ON THE STEPS OF** a police station in South Korea when I

was just a year old. I had pneumonia and was severely malnourished. It's a wonder I managed to survive. In the picture of me that was sent to my adoptive parents, I look like a sad skeleton, my eyes too large for my face.

My adoptive parents have always believed that a strong survival instinct kept me alive. A massage therapist said I must have been held, really *held*, with love in my first year, and that instilled in me the strength to survive.

Perhaps my birth mother did hold me tight, with love. I'm sure I was breast-fed. (Poor families in Korea can't afford baby formula.) I probably slept cradled next to her. (They can't afford cribs, either.) My birth mother must have hoped for a better life for me. At that time, it was not unusual for Korean mothers to abandon children they could no longer feed.

I lived with a Korean foster family for a year. When I came to the United States at the age of two, I was still bow-legged from malnutrition. The condition went away once I began eating a healthy diet. In Korea, my head had been shaved to prevent lice; it was too expensive to wash children's hair. I was bloated with rice water because my foster family had heard that Americans believed fat babies were healthier.

At first, my adoptive mother tells me, I wouldn't let anyone get close to me. Once I let my adoptive parents get close, however, I wouldn't let them out of my sight. Sometimes I would sleep next to my mother, and if she moved too far from me, I would wake up crying hysterically. I had horrible nightmares, and my parents would come in and lie down with me or sing to me. They held me often.

In my teenage years I must have been in six car accidents, all completely my fault. Each time, the vehicles were damaged, yet no one on either side was badly hurt. I have never broken a bone or needed stitches in my entire life. I rarely get sick. I have no physical scars, except some faint lines around my mouth where my lips cracked from lack of nourishment when I was an infant.

Why have I been given this gift of life, not just once, but over and over again?

*Merri McCormick  
Overland Park, Kansas*

**I ONCE TOOK CARE OF AN EIGHTY-**seven-year-old woman named Helen. Helen's dementia was so bad that she would interrupt herself in order to repeat herself more quickly.

Every day, there were several things she could be counted on to say (and say, and say). One in particular got on my nerves.

"Did you ever hear what happened to Gertie Stern?" she would ask.

Gertie Stern had lived next door to Helen for many years.

"Yes," I would answer, "I heard she moved to the North End."

"I wonder why she moved to the North End," Helen would say.

"Well, I heard that she wanted to be closer to her son," I'd answer.

Helen would think about that for two seconds, then ask, "Say, did you ever hear what happened to Gertie Stern?"

One afternoon, while spreading mayonnaise on a slice of bread, I heard Helen call from the living room, "Did you ever find out what happened to Gertie Stern?"

My fingers curled tight around the knife, and I had an urge to plunge it into the loaf of bread.

"Who's Gertie Stern?" I said.

"You know," Helen answered. "She's the one who moved to the North End."

My grip on the knife relaxed. "Oh," I said. "I wonder why she moved to the North End."

"Well," said Helen, coming more alive, "I heard that she wanted to be nearer to her son."

This new dialogue went on for a few days. Then one afternoon I said to Helen, "Say, did you ever hear what happened to Gertie Stern?"

"Well, I heard that she moved to the North End," said Helen.

"That's not what I heard," I said. "I heard that she dyed her hair purple!"

"I wonder why she dyed her hair purple," Helen said.

"I heard she wanted her hair to match her new couch," I said.

Helen thought for a second, then said, "Did you ever hear what happened to Gertie Stern?"

"Yes," I said. "I heard that she dyed her hair red."

"I wonder why she dyed her hair red," Helen said.

"Well, I heard she wanted her hair to match her grandson's."

"Nah," said Helen, shaking her head and frowning at me. "Her hair's not red. She dyed her hair purple to match her new couch!"

In that job, this was my one moment of grace.

*Loraine Campbell  
Seattle, Washington*

*(end of excerpt)*