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Dear Ms. Messner,

In the summer of 2018, my family moved from Connecticut to Illinois. At first, I was bitter and furious because I had to move and leave all my friends behind. The reason we moved was because my maternal grandmother was diagnosed with dementia. As I spend more time here, I realized that my grandmother is way more important than friends. It's a 13 hour drive to Illinois, and if I hadn't moved, I probably would have seen her once or twice a year. She can never remember what and when she ate, and she will ask for her eyeglasses twenty times a day and my mother's response is always, "You didn't bring them." Just last week she forgot my name. So it's getting pretty serious. I heard that people can die of dementia by forgetting how to breathe. It sickens me to see my grandmother suffering, but she's a strong person. Stronger than me!

Your book, The Brilliant Fall of Gianna Z, helped me learn about how dementia affects people. Like Gianna's grandmother, my grandmother once took a walk and got lost. We had to drive around the block to find her! Later, she said that she forgot what our house looked like, even though she comes to our house three days a week. That's when you know it's getting major, so It makes me want to spend more time with her. In the book, Ruby's grandmother collapsed on the dinner table and died. Nothing was wrong with her, but sometimes death can be

random and cruel. My grandmother can pass away any second of any day, and it makes me want to spend as much time with her.

At the end of your book, you mentioned a memory book. That sounded like a fantastic idea to me, so I started making one. Right now I only have a few pictures of my family and her. But soon, it will grow into a book of cherished memories. She might forget these memories, but I definitely won't.

Your book changed my thought process. I used to think spending time with my grandmother was a chore, because we saw her at least three times a week. Because she's Korean, she doesn't understand me well, and I had thought I had "better" things to do, like watch TV or play on my iPad. Now, I see spending time with her as something I enjoy and cherish. I've been spending more and more time with her. We do puzzles and play games. Our favorite game is Hat-to or Korean Poker. And I've done all that without ever thinking, *I wish I was doing something else right now*. Now each time I open the puzzle, she will do the things I taught her, without forgetting. I see that as a big improvement because she's remembering what I taught her. It also makes me happy, spending time with her. Christmas is coming up and I want to do something special, because this might be the last Christmas I have with her. I'm thinking of writing a card to her in Korean, saying how much I love her, and how much she means to me.

Like Gianna's grandfather, who died of cancer, my paternal grandfather died from prostate cancer. The sad thing is, I only had a chance to meet him once because he lived in Singapore. Imagine that, only being able to see a family

member once. And to top that, I knew he had cancer the only time I saw him. I thought about him every day and when we Facetimed, I would tell him everything. The day he died, I was traumatized, and I cried myself to sleep. This experience taught me to be thankful that my maternal grandparents are seeing us often, something I had never thought of before.

In your book, you mentioned the poem "Birches" by Robert Frost. I researched the poem and read it. The main idea of the poem is that the boy swinging on the birches, goes to someplace not on earth, to imagine anything he wants. I like to think my grandmother does that too. She becomes dazed now and then, and I think she's in that same place as the boy swinging on the birches. She feels... distant. Like she's not even there. And it's bittersweet. Each time she does that, I like to think she's "swinging on the birches", but also, it's a reminder that she has dementia. I also relate to this poem myself because I daydream *all* the time. My mind just goes to a fun place where I can dream. Still I know I have to come back to earth and focus on class. But still, it's fun to dream.

I have a question for you, Ms. Messner. What tree are you? Gianna and Zig played the game where they would name what tree people were. I took the survey and it says I'm an American Beech. That means I'm courageous and determined. My grandmother took the survey (with the help of my mom translating) and she's a Red Oak. That means she's easy-going and strong, and I agree with the survey. She is strong because she has been battling dementia,

and she is easy-going because if something comes her way she will always attempt it. I admire her and hope someday to be just as strong as her.

Thank you for writing a book that I could relate to and learn from. It was so inspiring and valuable to learn about dementia so I can better understand and support my grandmother.

Sincerely,

Dear Naoki Higashida and David Mitchell,

Imagine trying to study in your bedroom, and in the background you hear your brother screaming over his dinner not being served at exactly 8 o'clock. And in the back of your mind, you dread that the same tantrum may repeat itself again tomorrow. These are the ongoing background noises in my house. Sometimes I can ignore them, but sometimes they can be overwhelming. These tantrums and their maker, my autistic brother Danny, have always been a part of my life. They frustrated me and maddened me until I had read your book, *The Reason I Jump*, that explains the mind of an autistic person and the reasons behind their actions.

I found it amazing that you, Naoki, can write so well about the experience of being autistic and about how your body feels and the strangeness of your speech. You explain that you feel as if you are lost in a foreign land where you don't speak the local language and you are relying on your other senses to "orient" you. This really opened up my mind about autism. I finally understood my brother's need for schedules and repetition. They are his "street signs" on which he depends to not feel lost. This also helped me understand why my brother makes repeating sounds and often needs to touch things. I know he is simply using his other senses to orient himself in his scary world and find comfort. You also help me understand the mystery of why my brother asks the same questions over and over and demands the same answers. Just like you, he is using repetitive or "set pattern conversations" as you call them because this is the only language he is sure is recognizable by others around him. By writing this, you gave me insight on how confusing my brother's world could be for him and how his intention is to really connect with me rather than to annoy me.

By reading your book I also understand why my brother sometimes has repeating tantrums. The autistic sense of time is different. It does not have clear breaks as it does for me. Yesterday and today are the same. Memories can become mixed and flashbacks are often difficult to tell apart from current happenings. That is such a weird thing! But this explains why certain tantrums repeat themselves. You explain that certain things trigger old memories and you cannot tell the difference of what happened in the past and what is happening now and the same intense rush of emotions come flooding in "like a tsunami." Sadly, you are just as bothered by it as others around you, yet at the same time, you are "held hostage" by it. This was very powerful for me. Before this, I thought my brother was just being difficult. This book made me realize that this was not under his control.

*The Reason I Jump* revealed to me how hard it was being in an autistic person's body-the sense of feeling lost, the constant memories holding you hostage, and the inability to connect what you want to say with what comes out. I also appreciate that they are as embarrassed about their behavior as an outsider may be and are constantly working to "hold it together." Yet you also gave me a great view of how beautiful an autistic mind can be. Your thoughts are articulate, your heart is kind-and giving, and you really want to connect. You find beauty in nature and mankind. By reading this book, I have learned to connect better with my brother. I understand his "reasons to jump" and empathize with his struggles. The tantrums in

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the backgrounds are still very annoying, but I understand the reasons behind them, and I see his courage despite them. For this, I greatly thank you, Naoki, for sharing your autistic experience, and I greatly thank you, Mr. Mitchell, for exposing it to the world.

Sincerely,

Dear Jean-Dominique Bauby,

I am sitting here writing you this letter. Word by word, letter by letter without a blink of an eye, and I am still amazed that you wrote an entire book by blinking only your left eye. I am astounded as to how you created a language, a system of communication, just by blinking. You did this without verbal communication, but with patience and perseverance working together with your nurse. Your story reminded me of my late great-grandmother.

Although my great-grandmother did not have locked-in syndrome, she had a progressive illness that limited her ability to articulate and successfully express herself. It was difficult and sometimes painful to watch her gather her thoughts, yet only be able to put a fraction of them into words. I cannot imagine how confined she must have felt when she couldn't tell me the name of a song on the piano, that my ballet kick was impressive, or that the cake was delicious. I remember going to her apartment smelling the mothball covered dresses, freshly sprayed perfume, and lavender soap. I would walk into her quiet den and notice her fragile body lying in her recliner chair supported by three pillows and covered with a cotton blanket. She did not say hello to me as I walked into the room, nor did she seem to notice that I was there.

As I sat down on the couch next to her chair and reached for her hand, I knew that she was happy to see me. Even if she did not fully express herself with words, she manifested her love through her soft hands as she took them and gently scratched my arm with her nails. These moments of non-verbal communication were our language of love that helped us communicate. Through the scratch of her manicured red nails on my hand, her appreciation of my bringing her a cup of water, and the occasional smile on her face, I understood that she was my biggest supporter. Whenever I would leave her room, I would make sure to express my love in her native language, German, by saying, "Ich Liebe Dich." I can't imagine how you must have felt when your family members came to visit and you tried to express your love to them knowing that they might not understand.

I read your book, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, after my great-grandmother passed away. Your descriptions of the kind nurse, helpful medical assistants, and pleasant visitors made me realize that the time spent with my great-grandmother not only helped me, but may have comforted her. I know her experience of being trapped in her disease was different than yours. However, my experience with my great-grandmother and then reading your book, made me realize the importance of finding an effective way to communicate and to connect with people even if it may not be in the traditional manner of language. It helped me realize that I enjoy enabling people to express themselves in both nonverbal and verbal modes of communication.

After reading your book, I have realized that unconventional communication is equally, if not more important than traditional language. Your relationship with your nurse and my new found appreciation for my connection with my great-grandmother have inspired me. I want to help people explore different ways of communicating, so that people like you and my great-grandmother will never have to feel as if they are unable to express themselves fully.

Although I do not know my career choice, I do know that I want to be able to connect with people both verbally and without words.

Your novel has reminded me that this process requires creativity, optimism, and non-traditional thinking. I have taught students English by using puppets and encouraged a blind woman to draw her first painting. This is just a start. I want to do so much more, I would love to develop a creative arts program in my community and give people an outlet to express themselves. Perhaps I could even implement a program in elderly homes where children and the residents perform together forming a relationship through music. In this way, I hope to increase the quality and meaning of peoples' lives.

Your book has made me realize that the moments spent with my great-grandmother were moments of connection through touch, smell, and sound. They were significant moments even though they were usually not filled with words.

Thank you so much for sharing your story with me and I will try my best to ensure that the butterflies will live on forever.

Sincerely,