



ISTOCK/THINKSTOCK

GRAND-PRIZE WINNER: TIMELESS

By Michelle Brueger, Bennettsville, South Carolina

I've always been a daddy's girl. On road trips, we competed over who sported the most hawks first. Our favorite competition was, upon seeing each other, who could say the words "I love you best" first. If I got him first, Dad would reply, "I'll get you—just wait."

My dad died the night before my 50th birthday. The next day, Mom brought me a gift, saying, "This is from your dad. He bought it for you five years ago." Inside was a beautiful gold pocket watch. Engraved on the inside were the words *I love you best—Gotcha*.



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THE REST OF THE BEST: THE GIFT

By Mary Elizabeth Paschall, Aurora, Colorado

In the late '50s, I rode the bus ten miles to work. I carried very little cash and only enough bus tokens to last each week. One night as I walked to the bus stop, I met a beggar who had no legs. I stopped, opened my billfold, and discovered that I had no money and no bus tokens. I apologized profusely but, frankly, was shaken because I had no way to get home. The beggar reached into his pouch and pulled out a handful of coins. Embarrassed, I took enough for the bus, and he said, "God bless you."



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THE REST OF THE BEST: THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE

By Rebekah Aman, Tallahassee, Florida

Music is universal. I learned this while cradling a seagull unfortunate enough to swallow a hook. After calling the wildlife rescue center and learning that all its vehicles were out on other business, I carefully swaddled the wild bird in a towel and carried him to my friend's car. The only way to keep him calm was by singing. For 30 minutes, I sang softly to the small creature until finally delivering him to those who could help. I'm not certain what happened afterward, but for that brief period, we connected—two vastly different species bridging the gap through song.



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THE REST OF THE BEST: MEANT TO BE FAMILY

By Mary Pray, Wiscasset, Maine

“I am smart. I can draw and sing. I would be so kind to a mama and baba ... Why does no one want me?” asked 12-year-old Levi in China. Levi has cerebral palsy.

My daughter saw that post. She and her husband were adopting four-year-old Jacob. Adopting two seemed crazy, but her heart felt Levi’s pain. They listed pros and cons. The pros won!

Was this emotion or divine intervention? Two days later, a new photo was posted showing Levi with his foster brother. It was Jacob! We knew then both boys were meant to be part of our family.



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HONORABLE MENTION: THE ROUTE TO FREEDOM

By Thu Huynh, Honolulu, Hawaii

My story began one morning when I fled Vietnam with my father. We headed to China, hoping for a boat to Hong Kong. One night, we tried for a boat, but it was full, leaving us behind to wander the perilous dark. Nearby, buffaloes stood fixed, dogs barked, and crickets chirped. At one point, we stumbled over a grave site, and Father kowtowed for forgiveness. Then somewhere a stranger appeared and sheltered us. Another boat became available eventually, and in the end, I disembarked into a whole new world to begin yet another story of my life



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HONORABLE MENTION: I SAY HELLO

By Patrick Wright, Powder Springs, Georgia

There she was. Beautiful, gentle, funny, and kind. Hands shaking, voice cracking, I say hello. Now we are married, with a house, a dog, and an amazing two-year-old son. Piles of laundry, piles of diapers, piles of dishes, and piles of laughter are all around us. Do we really want another? Yes, we do. My wife, tired and uncomfortable from this second pregnancy, says it's time. Hand in hand we make it to the hospital. A little while later, I see her. There she was. Beautiful, gentle, a miracle. Hands shaking, voice cracking, tears streaming, I say hello.



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HONORABLE MENTION: “HER CHEEKS ARE PINK!”

By Alison Livingston, Saline, Michigan

At 23, I had a new six-inch scar across my abdomen and it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I had endured two years of end-stage kidney failure. My journey began with disbelief, shifted into determination, and culminated with my younger sister, my hero, saving my life. After a successful kidney transplant, a nurse wheeled her hospital bed into my room. My pale complexion had already changed and my sister’s first words were, “Her cheeks are pink!” Her kidney was working behind my beautiful new scar...and still is, eleven years later. Thank you, Shannon!



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HONORABLE MENTION: WHAT I DON'T HAVE

By Kathy Cornell, Haddam, Connecticut

Sometimes I tend to think about what I don't have; a house on the ocean, a big career that I could use to impress the people at my high school reunion. Then I hear his car in the driveway. I think we'll grill tonight. Later we'll watch some reruns of sitcoms from a long time ago that remind me of when we were young. He'll doze off and it's time for the day to end. We'll say good night to the cats. We're all still here; a miracle. When I'm very old, I will wish for a day like this.



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HONORABLE MENTION: A LIFETIME OF LEARNING

By Ralph Pippert, Kiel, Wisconsin

From horsepower to moon rockets. I have learned acts of kindness changes both you and them. I pondered this: Trick? Secret force? Magic?

While teaching in Malawi, walking at dusk along a hillside overlooking the rift valley, I saw three specks of light.

My imagination answered my pondering: I saw a mother, babe at her breast, child at her knee, tending a meal at the fire.

Mothers' love explains it all: the consequence of acts of kindness, dynamism of evolution, root of all culture. Mother love, master source of all love, explains it all.

It's been a great 91 years.



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HONORABLE MENTION: MY FATHER'S TEARS

By Nancy Abeshaus, Wakefield, Rhode Island

Three times in my life I saw my father cry.

The first was when his mother died. I was seven.

The second was at the airport when my brother departed for Vietnam.

The third was when my father was in his eighties. My mother, in late-stage Alzheimer's, resided in a nursing home. He had visited her daily for 10 years, except for three months when he broke his foot.

Finally he could walk again.

"I thought Mother forgot me," he said, "but when she saw me, she smiled and said, 'I love you.'"

Then my father sobbed.



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HONORABLE MENTION: FORGIVEN

By Edna Peters, San Jose, California

“Mom, I’m going to have heart surgery tomorrow and know I’m not going to make it. I’m just calling to tell you goodbye and ask you to forgive me for all the heartache I’ve caused. I know I’ll have the smallest funeral ever because I don’t have any friends left. Please forgive me.”

He died three days later in prison, loved and not forgotten by friends.

A Facebook posting resulted in his funeral not being the smallest one ever as he feared. His childhood friends, neighbors and extended family members were there and the chapel was full to the brim.