

# { marked by love }

Shortly after our youngest daughter was born, my husband learned that he had a rare genetic kidney disorder. We were supposed to be celebrating the birth of our little girl, and instead we found ourselves caught up in a swirl of medical diagnoses. We learned that a transplant could be postponed for a time, but Quinn nevertheless had to change his eating habits, adjust to frequent hospital visits for tests and consultations, and take a seemingly endless number of pills to manage his blood pressure.

Over all of this hung the dark cloud of uncertainty: when exactly would Quinn need a transplant? And when the time came, would a match be available?

During that period, Quinn's brother discovered that he suffered from the same disease. He found out the hard way—when he suffered kidney failure and was hospitalized—and we almost lost him. A third brother was able to provide a matched kidney at the last moment, and we prayed that when the time came for Quinn's surgery the right donor could be found.

After six years, we were no longer able to manage Quinn's disease from home. He would need a transplant in the next few months. We met with the transplant team at the hospital and were informed that we had been placed on a cadaver donor list. The doctors asked whether one of Quinn's family members might be able to donate instead, thus speeding up the process.

I blurted out, "I want to be tested as a donor."

The doctors looked at me in amazement, but I continued to insist that I wanted to be tested. Their reaction quickly turned to concern. Clearly I hadn't been paying attention when they told us how slim a spouse's chances were of being a successful donor. Still, they agreed to perform the basic blood test, probably in order to shut me up while they considered more realistic options.

What the doctors didn't know was that I had a feeling I was supposed to help my husband beat this disease. In the time since he had been diagnosed, Quinn and I had both started going to church, and one thing I'd learned was that long odds don't bother God in the least.

Three days later I listened to someone from the hospital tell me over the phone, "Not only are you a match—you're an almost perfect match!" I would be able to give a kidney to Quinn, and we would come out the other side of this tunnel together.

Despite our excitement about the match, we had to defend our decision constantly. Friends and family asked us to reconsider, since we had children and both my husband and I would be undergoing major surgery at the same time. Yet none of their objections loosened the sense of peace we felt holding us tightly.

Two weeks before the surgery, I was called in to meet with a hospital psychologist to talk about what to expect. He asked me if I knew that many live donors go through a difficult time after the surgery. I could end up resenting my husband for causing the scar—we might never be able to look at each other in quite the same way again. He told me that it wasn't too late to change my mind, and encouraged us to wait for a kidney from a cadaver.

I told the psychologist that my mind was already made up, but that night I did feel fear begin to creep in. I'd seen the scar Quinn's brother had received—it looked like he'd been in a bar brawl with a shark.

Up to then I'd pushed aside all thoughts relating to *my* part of the surgery, but as I soaked in the bathtub, I began to cry. Was I really

meant to go through with this when there were other options? Would the ugly scar change the way Quinn looked at me? Would I still be beautiful to him? I heard my tears dripping into the water as I prayed. *I'll do this, but I need strength. Take away my vanity. Please help me.*



The morning of the surgery, Quinn and I were wheeled into pre-op on separate stretchers. I wish I could say that we gazed meaningfully into each other's eyes, like a scene in a romantic movie; but the truth is that we were too doped up to do much more than offer each other lopsided smiles and a final hand squeeze. As we were rolled away from each other, everything turned black.



Two weeks later, still heavily bandaged, I went to my post-op appointment to have the dressing removed from my back. I would finally see the extent of the damage to my skin, which I had only been imagining since the surgery. Quinn was healing perfectly, and the transplant had been a success, but fear for myself was still lurking.

As the doctor removed my bandage, he chirped, "That looks beautiful!"

I responded to what I assumed was sarcasm with a quip of my own: "Oh, is it healing well? How ugly is it, doctor?"

Looking at me strangely he asked, "Don't you know?"

When I said that I didn't, a small smile played on his lips. "We were able to have a visiting plastic surgeon come in to finish your operation," he explained. "Your scar will hardly be noticeable in a year or so."

Still processing his words, I stood and walked to the mirror, gently twisting so I could see my back. The scar was a vertical line no

wider than a pencil, and it stretched from my hipbone to the bottom of my bra strap. Just two weeks since my surgery, and already the angry red was fading—as if a gentle hand had traced a smooth line across my skin.

It was beautiful.



Fourteen years after the transplant, my husband remains perfectly healthy. I don't think about my scar every day anymore, but when I do I take a moment to touch it with my fingertips. It is now a thin, pale line. In my scar I don't see pain or sacrifice. Instead I see a mark traced on my body by love, connecting Quinn and me and inviting us to trust that there will be even more goodness and grace in the years to come.

*Sharie Robbins*

# { almost home }

Only five years shy of a century, Oscar Bailey felt old. He was bone-tired. Surprisingly, that wasn't natural for this ninety-five year old man. Old age and Oscar had never really been on speaking terms with each other. From cleaning his chimney to helping a neighbor pull out a stump, and from mowing the lawn to cultivating a verdant, weedless garden, Oscar simply didn't have time for weariness.

That all changed a few years earlier when his beloved wife, Mildred, fell ill. On a freezing day in January, Oscar and Mildred stopped at the market for a jug of milk. Without warning, Mildred collapsed in the parking lot. Oscar was powerless to save her; he could only watch helplessly as the ambulance roared away with his wife inside.

Mildred spent six weeks in the hospital, but she never fully recovered. To make matters worse, she began to manifest the first symptoms of Alzheimer's disease: difficulty making plans, speech deficits, and—hardest of all for Oscar—flashes of memory loss during which she didn't recognize her husband.

Oscar and Mildred had been happily married for seventy years. The children of European immigrants, they rose early, worked hard, ate well, and slept soundly. Oscar had been a forester, and he knew the name of every plant and tree that greened the woods around their home. In the fall, he would harvest blackberries, blueberries, and grapes for making his own wine. Mildred had cooked every meal from scratch, decade after decade, with fruits and vegetables grown in their garden. The house was always spotless, and often the buttery-sweet smell of a homemade cake wafted through the polished hallways.

Two years after Mildred's accident, Oscar knew those days were gone for good. Mildred now spent most of her time in bed, the covers stretched across her frail body and tucked beneath her chin. Even when the sun shone outside, the curtains were pulled closed. She slept, and mumbled, and slept again, usually waking only when Oscar came to spoon soup into her mouth.

Oscar was now responsible for anything and everything that needed doing, inside and outside. At ninety-five, doing everything takes a toll—even on a man as hale as Oscar Bailey. The seemingly endless list of chores was difficult enough: laundry, cooking, cleaning, gardening, paying the bills. But the hardest part was going into Mildred's bedroom, perhaps to give her pills or feed her some lunch. She'd take the pills, eat the food, and not once would her eyes light with recognition. It was like caring for a stranger.

Retiring and moving to an assisted-care facility where they could get more help wasn't an option for a man like Oscar. "We've been in this house for years," he would proudly proclaim, "and we'll die in this house, not some *home*." He pronounced the last word as if it were a curse.

He meant every word, but that didn't remove his exhaustion—or the pain of caring for the woman he dearly loved, but who was no longer the same woman he married. Oscar's body was starting to break down. His back got the worst of it, and each vertebra throbbed with irritation and fatigue. How could he possibly go on?

He couldn't. One day Oscar collapsed on the ancient sofa in the living room. Night was lowering across the woods, the yard, the house—and Oscar felt the darkness in his heart, too. He tried to sit up and rub his own back, but the effort was too much, and it only caused fresh jolts of pain to shake him. The man who could do everything himself was suddenly helpless. Oscar began to cry, and in his soul a desperate prayer for help rose up. *I can't do this, but I can't abandon the only woman I've ever loved.*

With his hands on the small of his back, Oscar felt them clasped by another pair of hands.

“Mildred, what on earth are you doing out of bed?”

Oscar turned and squinted. The room was dim, but he could still see fine with his glasses on. And he was the only person in the room. Shocked, he turned back around, bringing his hands into his lap.

Still he felt the warm, strong grip of another pair of hands enfolding his own. Then the unseen hands began to massage Oscar’s, gently but firmly rubbing his palms, his bony wrists, the aching joints in every finger. Oscar stared ahead, seeing nothing but feeling every detail.

Through Oscar’s hands spread waves of warmth and comfort, waves that washed into every corner of his cold and weary body. His fingers, touched by a mysterious visitor, became the epicenter of encouragement, and soon a feeling of peace and relief settled over his entire being. Long after the massage ended, Oscar sat on the couch, savoring the blessing, and certain he had been visited by God.

That night Oscar experienced the gifts night is meant to bring: rest, calm, and the hope of a new day.

In the morning, Oscar’s aches and pains returned. When he brought Mildred her breakfast, she didn’t recognize him. After breakfast, he did a load of wash and swept the porch, feeling the familiar burning in his lower back. That night, his body was as tired as ever, and the next morning he woke up and did it all again.

The mysterious touch that massaged Oscar’s hands wasn’t meant to solve all his problems or do all his work for him. Oscar was ninety-five years old. He didn’t need a bottomless well of strength with which to live a whole new life. What he needed was simply a cup of cold water so he could run the final lap. After that encounter, he could almost hear the cheers as he rounded the final turn—*Well done, good and faithful friend*—carrying his wife of seventy years to the finish line in love, in peace, in the house that had been their home for all those sweet and tender years.

David Michael Smith

# { surviving suicide }

If you met me in 2003, you wouldn't have noticed anything remarkable. My life wasn't perfect, but it wasn't a total mess, either. I was like countless others around this country. I was divorced, and raising my young son by myself, but I had a good job as a commercial painter. We had enough money to get by, and even though every day was a struggle to balance work and motherhood, things were pretty good. I'd been at the same company for five years, and a promotion and raise were right around the corner. The future wasn't exactly *bright*, but it was slowly getting lighter.

That's when the storm clouds rolled in. A misunderstanding at work, coupled with a vindictive coworker, cost me my job. Knowing my son was relying on me to provide for him, I immediately began to search for a new job. But as the days turned into weeks and the weeks into months, I was unable to find work. The higher my bills piled up, the lower my spirits sank. I'd worked steadily since I was fifteen, but now employment evaded me no matter how hard I looked. Being unable to make ends meet caused me to feel worthless and depressed.

My life continued to erode. My car was repossessed—I now had no way to get to work even if I somehow found a job. Then one day I opened the mailbox to find an eviction notice, and the last spark of light inside my heart felt like it was snuffed out. Desperate to provide for my son, I contacted every social safety-net program in my state. Yet despite being a single, out-of-work mother on the verge of losing my house, I was told that there was no help available—not

even food stamps! I honestly didn't know how I would keep a roof over our heads and food on our plates.

Stress and helplessness pressed down on me. It was as if I were being slowly but surely crushed into the dirt, and I doubted I would ever be able to lift my head. One night it all became too much. The pain, the anger, the shame—I needed to escape at any cost. The instant the thought of suicide entered my head, I could think of nothing else. It felt like the answer to my problems. I'd tried everything, and now the only way out was to end it all.

While my son watched television in the living room, I slipped into my bedroom and locked the door. In one hand I held a fifth of liquor, and in the other a bottle of sleeping pills. After spinning some of my favorite sad songs on the CD player and drinking almost half the bottle of liquor, I began to feel numb. As the pain of my life faded, I began to work up the courage I needed to escape. I tapped about twenty sleeping pills into my shaking hand and took a deep breath—a breath I knew would be one of my last.

As I lifted my hand, ready to toss the pills into my mouth and wash them down with more liquor, I heard a tiny noise. It was the rustling of a piece of paper being slipped underneath my locked door. Hand halfway to my mouth, I froze and stared at the paper—even from the bed I could read the childish, messy script of my son.

*I love you mom.*

Tears poured down my cheeks as I lowered the fistful of sleeping pills. I thought of my sweet, innocent son on the other side of the door. He didn't know how deep in debt we were. He didn't worry about having a big house or what kind of car we drove. He only cared about two things: Did I know he loved me? And did I love him back?

At that moment I was certain of the answers to those questions all the way to the core of my being. As I poured the sleeping pills back into the bottle, my soul cried out with love for my son. Setting

aside the pills and the liquor, I grabbed a pen. Through my tears, I struggled to write a note back to my son that told him just how much I loved him. Then I got down on my knees in front of the door, the love note clutched in fingers that moments ago had been ready to toss down my final drink. I started to slide the note back under the door, and instantly it was pulled out of my fingers.

My son was still on the other side of the door, waiting to hear from his mother.

If the moment I poured sleeping pills into my hand was the darkest of my life, the moment after my son received my note was one of the happiest. I flung open the door and scooped him into my arms, and we covered each other with tender kisses. There was no way he could understand at the time, but my son saved my life that night.

My son is twelve now, and it's been a privilege watching him grow into a young man. Life doesn't look like a fairy tale—we're not where we want to be financially, and there always seems to be something to worry about—but the important thing is that I'm still living it with my son at my side. We have a roof over our heads, food to eat, and best of all we have the faith, hope, and love to keep moving forward. No matter what life throws at me, I will never again forget that the gift of my child's love is worth more than anything in the world.

Hidden away somewhere safe, I still have my son's note. I will cherish it until the day I die because it reminds me of the night I almost died for the wrong reasons—and it reminds me that love really can save a life.

*Lisa Lane*

# katie's gift

In 1985, Kathryn Alice Burchett was born into our family. We were overjoyed to welcome our first daughter into a home with two boys. My wife, Joni, and I had both secretly wanted a girl, and Katie's arrival thrilled us. She would be daddy's special girl and mommy's little partner.

We anticipated that she would light up our lives. What we couldn't know was that Katie's life would be both more tragic and more incredible than we could ever imagine.

The way the doctor announced Katie's birth told us something was very wrong. Whispered orders and urgent instructions flew around the delivery room. Moments later, our happiness was shattered by the knowledge that something was very wrong with our baby girl.

Katie had a terminal neural tube birth defect. Her condition, known as anencephaly, meant that her brain had not developed normally in the womb. A large portion of her brain was simply missing, and she was not expected to live beyond a few days. The delivery room doctor summed up Katie's condition in cold terminology: "Her condition is not compatible with life."

Not compatible with life? His words didn't make sense to us. The daughter we'd dreamed about was right there with us, alive.

Our shock and grief were as deep as they were sudden. Katie would never enjoy a normal life, even for the tiny number of days she was expected to live. There was no cure, no hope for even modest improvement. I still recall nearly every agonizing word I choked out as I relayed Katie's condition to our friends, family, and—most pain-

fully of all—our two young sons. The day she was born, we had to start thinking about her death.

Katie would never open her eyes. She couldn't smile. She lacked the ability to regulate her own body temperature, so her room temperature had to be constantly monitored. Part of Katie's condition was an area of exposed tissue at the back of her skull that never healed and had to be covered regularly with sterile dressing.

Despite all this, Katie confounded the doctors by living. She refused to let go of life.

Joni's devotion to Katie shone like a beacon in those dark days. She insisted that we bring Katie home with us. I worried about the effect that caring for Katie at home might have on the boys. Truthfully, I was probably more concerned about the effect on *me*. But Joni would have it no other way, so I showed husbandly wisdom by agreeing to bring our daughter home.

Soon, little Katie had established her place in our family's routine. She responded to her mother's touch and learned to drink from a bottle. She even grew a little. We took her on a family camping trip. For one precious summer, Katie was a faithful fan at her older brothers' baseball games.

A lot of people, including some close friends and family, thought our decision to bring Katie home was a mistake. Some made hurtful remarks. A kid at school taunted our oldest son by saying his sister didn't "have a brain." (No doubt something the classmate had heard at home.)

One time we dressed up the troops and went to have family pictures taken, only to have the photographer insist that Katie open her eyes. Even when we explained that she physically could not open her eyes, he refused to take our picture; he argued that the lab would not develop any pictures in which eyes were closed.

One Sunday morning, a friend called to tell us that Katie wasn't welcome in the church nursery. The other moms feared that Katie

might die in their care and traumatize a volunteer worker. They also worried that the opening at the back of Katie's skull might generate a staph infection. If they had come to us with their concerns, we might have been able to allay some of their fears. But the decision was made without our input, and we could no longer take our baby daughter to church.

When Katie was three months old, Joni decided she wanted to have another baby. I wasn't sure. What if the same birth defect manifested itself again? Even so, we decided to trust God, and soon Joni became pregnant. We celebrated Katie's first birthday at the end of Joni's second trimester, and just three months later a healthy baby boy joined our family. Katie couldn't see Brett, but she could feel his soft newborn skin.

Life grew even more hectic. My work as a television director required me to travel, and Joni was at home with Katie and three boys aged eight, five, and brand-new.

One evening in May 1986, Joni and I made plans to get away for an evening. We had a nurse come stay with Katie and Brett, and we took the older boys to a friend's house.

Late that night after picking up the boys, we pulled into our garage and started to get out of the car. Suddenly two men wearing black masks and brandishing guns burst into the garage, screaming at us not to move.

They forced us into the house. One of the gunmen held the boys, Joni, and the nurse at gunpoint. As Joni prayed fervently in the living room, I experienced a supernatural calm—believe me, it was not of my own doing. The leader walked me around the house and threatened to harm my family if I didn't reveal where things were stashed. He demanded cash and grew angry when I told him that all our money went to pay Katie's medical bills.

Our oldest son, Matt, heard the exchange. "Mr. Robber," he said, "you can have my piggy bank." They actually took it.

All the while, Katie slept quietly in her room. Both intruders seemed to be terrified of her. Perhaps they thought she had something contagious, since we had a nurse in the house. Whatever the reason, they steered a wide path around her room and never threatened her.

Before they left, the robbers forced us into a bedroom and jammed the door shut from the outside. But of course, the bedroom those rocket scientists locked us in shared a common bathroom with Katie's room. As soon as they left I went through Katie's room and outside to my car phone (they had cut our phone lines) to call the police.

Soon the ordeal was over, and we began to regain some of the calm that Katie never lost. Some of our possessions had been taken, but the things that matter most to a family—our lives, our love, and our hope—remained beyond the grasp of the thieves. Aside from some tough talk and waving pistols, they didn't harm us in any way. It was as if they were operating under a "steal but do not assault or maim" directive. We found out later that the two gunmen did far worse things to other victims before they were caught, including sexual assault. We were the exception, and I'm convinced that Katie's presence spared our family of those terrors.

Some people wonder about Katie's purpose in living fourteen months, since every medical opinion maintained she would die within a few days of birth. In my heart I'm persuaded that there are many reasons our baby girl stayed with us for so long, reasons bigger than I will ever comprehend fully.

But I will always be convinced that Katie lived as long as she did for two particular reasons. First, so that her brother Brett could join us and for a season we could be a whole family. Even though it was short, we will treasure that time for as long as we live. And second, to be our guardian angel during that robbery. Katie's severe physical abnormality, coupled with her almost otherworldly serenity, so unnerved the robbers that they abandoned their hyperviolent pattern of behavior.

Just weeks after the robbery, Katie's heart began to fail. On June 4, 1986, on a warm summer morning, Katie died with her family at her side.

From the time she was born Katie could never smile; her only facial expression was a tiny frown or grimace. But when Katie's life began to ebb away, a feeling of peace entered the room like a comforting breeze. As her courageous spirit finally left her tiny body, a wide smile lit her face for the first time. I will always believe her smile was a response to the heavenly escort whispering, "Well done, little one. It's time to come home."

*Dave Burchett*

# yellow is the color of love

I knew Daddy was real sick. I was fifteen, so Mama and Daddy were trying to put on a brave front. I could tell, though. Cancer had made his body rail-thin, and every day when Mama and I visited he seemed even weaker. But he always made an effort for me.

Daddy called me his Baby Doll. He tried to sit up and tell me jokes and stories, but the radiation made him groggy. Not even the fresh flowers he loved—bunches of irises, or yellow roses, or gerbera daisies—could cheer up that room. I couldn't understand what was happening. How did my strong Daddy wind up in that hospital bed?

Being adopted by Mama and Daddy was the best thing that had ever happened to me, and I couldn't cope with this. My emotions were like a ticking bomb, and one day they just...exploded. I couldn't sit around watching my father die! So I ran away from home.

I was gone two days—two days away from Daddy's side, during which time my every thought was about him. I finally decided to return. I had to get back to the hospital. He needed me. Without going home, I went straight to Daddy's room, not knowing what to expect.

His hospital room was stark and smelled like disinfectant. Surrounding his bed were my aunts. They all stopped talking when I entered, and I noticed then that my father was sitting up in bed. He

was smiling. My aunts stepped back as I walked forward. I began to cry as I leaned over my father and kissed his hairless head.

“Daddy, I’m so sorry for hurting you. I’m back, Daddy.”

He strained with the effort of wrapping his thin arms around me. In my ear he whispered, “Baby Doll, I love you. I forgive you, and I’ll always love you, no matter what.” I cried into my father’s neck, and felt the almost childlike weight of his arms on my back. When I felt his body shift, I pulled away gently from his embrace. As I wiped snot and tears from my face with the back of my hand, I saw that he was looking out the window beside his bed. He raised his arm and pointed.

“What is it, Daddy?”

“See there, Baby Doll?”

I looked outside the window and saw only the parking lot. “Where, Daddy?”

“Outside the window.” He smiled. “Angels. Waiting for me.”



Two days later, Mama and I buried Daddy. We stood side by side in front of his casket. Atop it was a spray of roses, their petals the color of spring sunshine.



The pain of losing my father darkened everything. I began to rebel, no longer caring what my future would look like. I became depressed, cut off all contact with my friends, and refused to go to school.

The one-month anniversary of his death was approaching, and it was the same date my parents had adopted me. When Daddy was alive, he threw a party every year on that date to celebrate. There would be no more parties; that day would forever after be a day of mourning.

I stayed away from Mama. I tried to keep so busy that I wouldn't have time to think or feel.

On the morning of the one-month anniversary, I was sitting alone in my room when Mama knocked on the door and asked if she could come in. We had barely spoken since Daddy died.

"What do you want?" I asked, my voice filled with anger.

She stood still. Her eyes were the only part of her that moved, and she searched my face for a long moment. "I thought we could ride to the cemetery today."

I wanted to scream. But a tiny part of me realized that Mama needed to go, and that realization made me understand that *I* needed to go, too. I needed to see my Daddy. I stood from my bed and crossed the space between me and my mother. I hugged her tightly, and then we walked slowly to the car.

On the drive to the cemetery, Mama stopped at the florist's shop. I looked at her, puzzled. "Your daddy left something for you," she said. "Go inside, and I'll wait here."

Inside, I told the woman at the counter my name. She walked into the back room and returned with a bouquet. It was one dozen yellow roses, and a card was attached. With shaking fingers, I opened the card. It was a small square of paper, but it contained the world, wrapped for me and written in my father's script:

Baby Doll,  
I'm no longer with you on earth,  
but remember I'm always in your heart.  
I love you.  
Daddy



{ yellow is the color of love }

Recently, as I was admiring a fresh-cut yellow rose, a friend asked me, “Why do you love yellow roses so much, when your favorite color is purple?”

I brought the flower to my nose and breathed deeply. “Because,” I said breathing again, “yellow is the color of love.”

*Debra Elliott*