

Friendship

Stories

Selections

Chain of Love

This is a true story of something that happened just a few years ago at USC.

You know, he almost didn't see the old lady, stranded on the side of the road. But even in the dim light of day, he could see she needed help. So he pulled up in front of her Mercedes and got out. His Pontiac was still sputtering when he approached her. Even with the smile on his face, she was worried. No one had stopped to help for the last hour or so. Was he going to hurt her?

He didn't look safe: he looked poor and hungry. He could see that she was frightened, standing out there in the cold. He knew how she felt. It was that chill which only fear can put in you. He said, "I'm here to help you ma'am. Why don't you wait in the car where it's warm? By the way, my name is Bryan."

Well, all she had was a flat tire, but for an old lady, that was bad enough. Bryan crawled under the car looking for a place to put the jack, skinning his knuckles a time or two. Soon he was able to change the tire. But he had to get dirty and his hands hurt.

As he was tightening up the lug nuts, she rolled down the window and began to talk to him. She told him that she was from St. Louis and was only just passing through. She can't thank him enough for coming to her aid. Bryan just smiled as he closed her trunk. She asked him how much she owed him. Any amount would have been all right with her. She had already imagined all the awful things that could have happened had he not stopped.

Bryan never thought twice about the money. This was not a job to him. This was helping someone in need, and God knows there were plenty who had given him a hand in the past. He had lived his whole life that way, and it never occurred to him to act any other way. He told her that if she really wanted to pay him back, the next time she saw someone who needed help, she could give that person the assistance that they needed, and Bryan added, "...and think of me."

He waited until she started her car and drove off. It had been a cold and depressing day, but he felt good as he headed for home, disappearing into twilight.

A few miles down the road the lady saw a small cafe. She went in to grab a bite to eat, and take the chill off before she made the last leg of her trip home. It was a dingy looking restaurant. Outside were two old gas pumps. The whole scene was unfamiliar to her. The cash register was like the telephone of an out of work actor: it didn't ring much. Her waitress came over and brought a clean towel to wipe her wet hair. She had a sweet smile, one that even being on her feet for the whole day couldn't erase. The lady noticed that the waitress was nearly eight months pregnant, but she never let the strain and aches change her attitude. The old lady wondered how someone who had so little could be so giving to a stranger. Then she remembered Bryan.

After the lady finished her meal, and the waitress went to get change for her hundred-dollar bill, the lady slipped right out the door. She was gone by the time the waitress came back. She wondered where the lady could be, and then she noticed something written on the napkin under which were four \$100 bills. There were tears in her eyes when she read what the lady wrote.

It said: "You don't owe me anything, I have been there too. Somebody once helped me out, the way I'm helping you. If you really want to pay me back, here is what you do: Do not let this chain of love end with you."

Well, there were tables to clear, sugar bowls to fill, and people to serve, but the waitress made it through another day. That night when she got home from work and climbed into bed, she was thinking about the money and what the lady had written. How could the lady have known how much she and her husband needed it? With the baby due next month, it was going to be hard. She knew how worried her husband was, and as he lay sleeping next to her, she gave him a soft kiss and whispered soft and low, "Everything's gonna be all right; I love you, Bryan."

Water For A Friend

It was one of the hottest days of the dry season. We had not seen rain in almost a month. The crops were dying. Cows had stopped giving milk. The creeks and streams were long gone back into the earth. It was a dry season that would bankrupt several farmers before it was through. Every day, my husband and his brothers would go about the arduous process of trying to get water to the fields. Lately this process had involved taking a truck to the local water rendering plant and filling it up with water. But severe rationing had cut everyone off. If we didn't see some rain soon...we would lose everything.

It was on this day that I learned the true lesson of sharing and witnessed the only miracle I have seen with my own eyes. I was in the kitchen making lunch for my husband and his brothers when I saw my six-year old son, Billy, walking toward the woods. He wasn't walking with the usual carefree abandon of a youth but with a serious purpose. I could only see his back. He was obviously walking with a great effort...trying to be as still as possible. Minutes after he disappeared into the woods, he came running out again, toward the house. I went back to making sandwiches; thinking that whatever task he had been doing was completed.

Moments later, however, he was once again walking in that slow purposeful stride toward the woods. This activity went on for an hour: walk carefully to the woods, run back to the house. Finally I couldn't take it any longer and I crept out of the house and followed him on his journey (being very careful not to be seen...as he was obviously doing important work and didn't need his Mommy checking up on him).

He was cupping both hands in front of him as he walked; being very careful not to spill the water he held in them... maybe two or three tablespoons were held in his tiny hands. I sneaked close as he went into the woods. Branches and thorns slapped his little face but he did not try to avoid them. He had a much higher purpose. As I leaned in to spy on him, I saw the most amazing sight.

Several large deer loomed in front of him. Billy walked right up to them. I almost screamed for him to get away. A huge buck with elaborate antlers was dangerously close. But the buck did not threaten him...he didn't even move as Billy knelt down. And I saw a tiny fawn laying on the ground, obviously suffering from dehydration and heat exhaustion, lift its head with great effort to lap up the water cupped in my beautiful boy's hand.

When the water was gone, Billy jumped up to run back to the house and I hid behind a tree. I followed him back to the house; to a spigot that we had shut off the water to. Billy opened it all the way up and a small trickle began to creep out. He knelt there, letting the drip slowly fill up his makeshift "cup," as the sun beat down on his little back. And it came clear to me. The trouble he had gotten into for playing with the hose the week before. The lecture he had received about the importance of not wasting water. The reason he didn't ask me to help him. It took almost twenty minutes for the drops to fill his hands.

When he stood up and began the trek back, I was there in front of him. His little eyes just filled with tears. "I'm not wasting," was all he said. As he began his walk, I joined him...with a small pot of water from the kitchen. I let him tend to the fawn. I stayed away. It was his job.

I stood on the edge of the woods watching the most beautiful heart I have ever known working so hard to save another life. As the tears that rolled down my face began to hit the ground, they were suddenly joined by other drops...and more drops...and more. I looked up at the sky. It was as if God, himself, was weeping with pride.

Some will probably say that this was all just a huge coincidence. They don't believe that miracles really exist. That it was bound to rain sometime. And I can't argue with at...I'm not going to try. All I can say is that the rain that came that day saved our farm...just like those actions of one little boy saved another.

I don't know if anyone will read this...but I had to send it out. To honor the memory of my beautiful Billy, who was taken from me much too soon.... But not before showing me the true face of God, in a little sunburned body.

No Regrets

If I knew it would be the last time that I'd see you fall asleep,
I would tuck you in more tightly and pray the Lord, your soul to keep.

If I knew it would be the last time that I see you walk out the door,
I would give you a hug and kiss and call you back for just one more.

If I knew it would be the last time I'd hear your voice lifted up in praise,
I would record each action and word, so I could play them back day after day.

If I knew it would be the last time I would be there to share your day,
I could spare an extra minute or two to stop and say, "I love you," instead of assuming you would know I do.

Well, I'm sure you'll have so many more, I can let just this one slip away. For surely there's always tomorrow to make up for an oversight, and we always get a second chance to make everything right. There will always be another day to say our "I love you's", and certainly there's another chance to say our, "Anything I can do's?"

But just in case I might be wrong, and today is all I get,
I'd like to say how much I love you and I hope we never forget:

Tomorrow is not promised to anyone, young or old alike,
Today may be the last chance you get to hold your loved one tight.

So if you're waiting for tomorrow, why not do it today?
For if tomorrow never comes, you'll surely regret the day,

That you didn't take that extra time for a smile, a hug, or a kiss,
Too busy to grant someone what turned out to be their last wish.

So hold your loved ones close today, whisper in their ear,
Tell them how much you love them and that you'll always hold them dear.

Take time to say: "I'm sorry," "Please forgive me," "Thank you" or "It's okay."
And if tomorrow never comes, you'll have no regrets about today.

A Sandpiper To Bring You Joy

She was six years old when I first met her on the beach near where I live. I drive to this beach, a distance of three or four miles, whenever the world begins to close in on me. She was building a sandcastle or something and looked up, her eyes as blue as the sea.

"Hello," she said. I answered with a nod, not really in the mood to bother with a small child.

"I'm building," she said.

"I see that. What is it?" I asked, not caring.

"Oh, I don't know, I just like the feel of sand."

That sounds good, I thought, and slipped off my shoes. A sandpiper glided by.

"That's a joy," the child said.

"It's a what?"

"It's a joy. My mama says sandpipers come to bring us joy." The bird went gliding down the beach. "Good-bye joy," I muttered to myself, "Hello pain," and turned to walk on. I was depressed; my life seemed completely out of balance.

"What's your name?" She wouldn't give up.

"Robert," I answered. "I'm Robert Peterson."

"Mine's Wendy... I'm six."

"Hi, Wendy."

She giggled.

"You're funny," she said.

In spite of my gloom I laughed too and walked on. Her musical giggle followed me.

"Come again, Mr. P," she called. "We'll have another happy day."

The days and weeks that followed belonged to others: a group of unruly Boy Scouts, PTA meetings, and an ailing mother. The sun was shining one morning as I took my hands out of the dishwasher.

"I need a sandpiper," I said to myself, gathering up my coat. The ever-changing balm of the seashore awaited me. The breeze was chilly, but I strode along, trying to recapture the serenity I needed. I had forgotten the child and was startled when she appeared.

"Hello, Mr. P," she said. "Do you want to play?"

"What did you have in mind?" I asked, with a twinge of annoyance.

"I don't know, you say."

"How about charades?" I asked sarcastically.

The tinkling laughter burst forth again. "I don't know what that is."

"Then let's just walk." Looking at her, I noticed the delicate fairness of her face.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"Over there." She pointed toward a row of summer cottages. Strange, I thought, in winter.

"Where do you go to school?"

"I don't go to school. Mommy says we're on vacation." She chattered little girl talk as we strolled up the beach, but my mind was on other things. When I left for home, Wendy said it had been a happy day. Feeling surprisingly better, I smiled at her and agreed.

Three weeks later, I rushed to my beach in a state of near panic. I was in no mood to even greet Wendy. I thought I saw her mother on the porch and felt like demanding she keep her child at home.

"Look, if you don't mind," I said crossly when Wendy caught up with me, "I'd rather be alone today."

She seems unusually pale and out of breath. "Why?" she asked.

I turned to her and shouted, "Because my mother died!" and thought, "My God, why was I saying this to a little child?"

"Oh," she said quietly, "then this is a bad day."

"Yes," I said, "and yesterday and the day before and-oh, go away!"

"Did it hurt?" she inquired.

"Did what hurt?" I was exasperated with her, with myself.

"When she died?"

"Of course it hurt!" I snapped, misunderstanding, wrapped up in myself. I strode off.

A month or so after that, when I next went to the beach, she wasn't there. Feeling guilty, ashamed and admitting to myself I missed her, I went up to the cottage after my walk and knocked at the door. A drawn looking young woman with honey-colored hair opened the door.

"Hello," I said. "I'm Robert Peterson. I missed your little girl today and wondered where she was."

"Oh yes, Mr. Peterson, please come in. Wendy spoke of you so much. I'm afraid I allowed her to bother you. If she was a nuisance, please, accept my apologies."

"Not at all-she's a delightful child," I said, suddenly realizing that I meant what I had just said.

"Wendy died last week, Mr. Peterson. She had leukemia. Maybe she didn't tell you."

Struck dumb, I groped for a chair. I had to catch my breath.

"She loved this beach; so when she asked to come, we couldn't say no.

She seemed so much better here and had a lot of what she called happy days. But the last few weeks, she declined rapidly..." Her voice faltered, "She left something for you ... if only I can find it. Could you wait a moment while I look?"

I nodded stupidly, my mind racing for something, to say to this lovely young woman. She handed me a smeared envelope, with MR. P printed in bold childish letters. Inside was a drawing in bright crayon hues - a yellow beach, a blue sea, and a brown bird. Underneath was carefully printed:

A SANDPIPER TO BRING YOU JOY

Tears welled up in my eyes and a heart that had almost forgotten to love opened wide. I took Wendy's mother in my arms. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry," I muttered over and over, and we wept together.

The precious little picture is framed now and hangs in my study. Six words - one for each year of her life - that speak to me of harmony, courage, and undemanding love. A gift from a child with sea-blue eyes and hair the color of sand, who taught me the gift of love.

Portrait of a Friend

I can't give you solutions to all of life's problems, doubts, or fears.

But I can listen to you, and together we will search for answers.

I can't keep your feet from stumbling.

I can only offer my hand that you may grasp it and not fall.

Your joys, triumphs, successes, and happiness are not mine;

Yet I can share in your laughter.

Your decisions in life are not mine to make, nor to judge;

I can only support you, encourage you, and help you when you ask.

I can't prevent you from falling away from friendship, from your values, from me.

I can only pray for you, talk to you and wait for you.

I can't give you boundaries, which I have determined for you,

But I can give you the room to change, room to grow, room to be yourself.

I can't keep your heart from breaking and hurting,

But I can cry with you and help you pick up the pieces and put them back in place.

I can't tell you who you are.

I can only love you and be your friend.

A Rose For My Friends

I got a dozen roses,
From a friend the other day;
But I only have one left,
For I gave them all away.

I gave one to my sister,
Who to me is very dear,
In hopes that it will bring to her
A little floral cheer.

I took one to a friend
Who's not feeling very well;
The flower or the visit -
Which helped more I could not tell.

One went to a friend
I haven't known for very long.
She struggles, so in some small way
I hope this helps her carry along.

The rest went to the ones
Who've helped me in so many ways;
They have been a cheerful presence
On my very dreary days.

The roses were so pretty
I just could not keep them all,
Except one single bud standing
Beautiful and tall.

My friend gave me the flowers
To help brighten up my day,
But the biggest joy I received
Was in giving them away.

This one is for you.

How Many Friends?

The old man turned to me and asked
"How many friends have you?"
Why 10 or 20 friends have I,
And named off just a few...

He rose quite slow with effort
And sadly shook his head
"A lucky child you are
To have so many friends," he said

But think of what you're saying
There is so much you do not know
A friend is just not someone
To whom you say "Hello"

A friend's a tender shoulder
On which to softly cry
A well to pour your troubles down
And raise your spirits high.

A friend is a hand to pull you up
From darkness and despair...
When all your other "so called" friends
Have helped to put you there.

A true friend is an ally
Who can't be moved or bought
A voice to keep your name alive
When others have forgot.

But most of all a friend is a heart
A strong and sturdy wall
For from the hearts of friends
There comes the greatest love of all!!!

So think of what I've spoken
For every word is true
And answer once again my child
How many friends have you???

And then he stood and faced me
Awaiting my reply
Softly I answered
"If lucky...one have I"

"You!!!!"

Friendship Recipe

1 Cup of Friendly Words
2 Heaping Cups of Understanding
4 Heaping Tsp. of Time and Patience
A Pinch of Warm Personality
A Dash of Humor

Measure Words Carefully.
Add Heaping Cup Of Understanding.
Use Generous Amounts Of Time And Patience.
Cook On The Front Burner
But Keep Temperature Low: Do Not Boil.

Add Generous Dash Of Humor
And A Pinch Of Warm Personality.
Season To Taste With Spice Of Life.
Serve In Individual Molds.

Ways to Make Her Smile

1. Tell her she is beautiful.
2. Hold her hand at any moment . . . Even if it's just for a second.
3. Hug her from behind.
4. Leave her voice messages to wake up to.
5. When she is upset, hold her tight and tell her how much she means to you.
6. Recognize the small things . . . They usually mean the most.
7. If you are talking to another girl, when you're done, walk over and hug her and kiss her . . . Let her know she's yours and they are not.
8. Write her notes or call her just to say "Hi."
9. Introduce her to your friends . . . As your girlfriend
10. Play with her hair.
11. Pick her up (she loves it).
12. Get upset if another guy touches her (especially when she doesn't like it).
13. Make her laugh.
14. Let her fall asleep in your arms.
15. If she's mad at you, kiss her.
16. If you care about her, then (we all know this is a challenge) TELL HER.
17. Every guy should give their girl three things: a stuffed animal (she'll hug it every time she goes to sleep), jewelery (she'll treasure it forever), and one of his t-shirts (she'll most likely wear it to bed). Also don't forget to bring her flowers or something special once in a while.
18. Treat her the same around your friends as you do when your alone.
19. Look her in the eyes and smile.
20. Hang out with her on weekends (guys, this WILL NOT, I repeat WILL NOT kill you).
21. Kiss her in the rain (girls love this).
22. Kiss her just for the heck of it.
23. If your listening to music, let her listen too.
24. Remember her birthday and get her something, even if it's simple and inexpensive. It came from YOU. It means all the world to HER.
25. When she gives you a present on your birthday, Christmas, or just whenever, take it and tell her you love it, even if you don't! (women put a lot of thought and effort into your gifts, because we care about you and appreciate you; even if it's not exactly what you wanted!)
26. Always call her when you say you will. It may not seem like it, but it does hurt her and makes her thinks you don't care. So call even if you can only talk for a minute.

Anatomy of Friendship

My mother used to ask me: "What is the most important part of the body?" Through the years I would take a guess at what I thought was the correct answer. When I was younger, I thought sound was very important to us as humans, so I said, "My ears, Mommy."

She said, "No. Many people are deaf. But you keep thinking about it and I will ask you again soon."

Several years passed before she asked me again. Since making my first attempt, I had contemplated the correct answer. So this time I told her, "Mommy, sight is very important to everybody, so it must be our eyes."

She looked at me and told me, "You are learning fast, but the answer is not correct because there are many people who are blind."

Stumped again, I continued my quest for knowledge and over the years, Mother asked me a couple more times and always her answer was, "No. But you are getting smarter every year, my child."

Then last year, my grandpa died. Everybody was hurt. Everybody was crying. Even my father cried. I remember that especially because it was only the second time I saw him cry. My Mom looked at me when it was our turn to say our final goodbye to Grandpa. She asked me, "Do you know the most important body part yet, my dear?"

I was shocked when she asked me this now. I always thought this was a game between her and me. She saw the confusion on my face and told me, "This question is very important. It shows that you have really lived in our life. For every body part you gave me in the past, I have told you were wrong and I have given you an example why. But today is the day you need to learn this important lesson."

She looked down at me as only a mother can. I saw her eyes well up with tears. She said, "My dear, the most important body part is your shoulder."

I asked, "Is it because it holds up my head?"

She replied, "No, it is because it can hold the head of a friend or a loved one when they cry. Everybody needs a shoulder to cry on sometime in life, my dear. I only hope that you have enough love and friends that you will always have a shoulder to cry on when you need it."

Eight Friendship Gifts

1. **THE GIFT OF LISTENING...**

But you must REALLY listen. No interrupting, no daydreaming, no planning your response. Just listening.

2. **THE GIFT OF AFFECTION...**

Be generous with appropriate hugs, kisses, pats on the back and handholds. Let these small actions demonstrate the love you have for family and friends.

3. **THE GIFT OF LAUGHTER...**

Clip cartoons. Share articles and funny stories. Your gift will say, "I love to laugh with you."

4. **THE GIFT OF A WRITTEN NOTE...**

It can be a simple "Thanks for the help" note or a full sonnet. A brief, handwritten note may be remembered for a lifetime, and may even change a life

5. **THE GIFT OF A COMPLIMENT...**

A simple and sincere, "You look great in red," "You did a super job" or "That was a wonderful meal" can make someone's day.

6. **THE GIFT OF A FAVOR...**

Every day, go out of your way to do something kind.

7. **THE GIFT OF SOLITUDE...**

There are times when we want nothing better than to be left alone. Be sensitive to those times and give the gift of solitude to others.

8. **THE GIFT OF A CHEERFUL DISPOSITION...**

The easiest way to feel good is to extend a kind word to someone, really it's not that hard to say, Hello or Thank You.

A Garden Just For You

For the garden of your daily living plant three rows of peas:

1. Peace of mind
2. Peace of heart
3. Peace of soul

Plant four rows of squash:

1. Squash gossip
2. Squash indifference
3. Squash grumbling
4. Squash selfishness

Plant four rows of lettuce:

1. Lettuce be faithful
2. Lettuce be kind
3. Lettuce be patient
4. Lettuce really love one another

No garden is without turnips:

1. Turnip for meetings
2. Turnip for service
3. Turnip to help one another

To conclude our garden we must have thyme:

4. Thyme for each other
5. Thyme for family
6. Thyme for friends

Opinions of Friends Are Important

He was in the first third grade class I taught at Saint Mary's School in Morris, Minn. All 34 of my students were dear to me, but Mark Eklund was one in a million. Very neat in appearance, but had that happy-to-be-alive attitude that made even his occasional mischievousness delightful. Mark talked incessantly. I had to remind him again and again that talking without permission was not acceptable. What impressed me so much, though, was his sincere response every time I had to correct him for misbehaving: "Thank you for correcting me, Sister!"

I didn't know what to make of it at first, but before long I became accustomed to hearing it many times a day. One morning my patience was growing thin when Mark talked once too often, and then I made a novice-teacher's mistake. I looked at Mark and said, "If you say one more word, I am going to tape your mouth shut!"

It wasn't ten seconds later when Chuck blurted out, "Mark is talking again."

I hadn't asked any of the students to help me watch Mark, but since I had stated the punishment in front of the class, I had to act on it. I remember the scene as if it had occurred this morning. I walked to my desk, very deliberately opened my drawer and took out a roll of masking tape. Without saying a word, I proceeded to Mark's desk, tore off two pieces of tape and made a big X with them over his mouth. I then returned to the front of the room. As I glanced at Mark to see how he was doing, he winked at me. That did it!! I started laughing. The class cheered as I walked back to Mark's desk, removed the tape, and shrugged my shoulders. His first words were, "Thank you for correcting me, Sister."

At the end of the year, I was asked to teach junior-high math. The years flew by, and before I knew it Mark was in my classroom again. He was more handsome than ever and just as polite. Since he had to listen carefully to my instruction in the "new math," he did not talk as much in ninth grade as he had in third. One Friday, things just didn't feel right. We had worked hard on a new concept all week, and I sensed that the students were frowning, frustrated with themselves and edgy with one another. I had to stop this crankiness before it got out of hand. So I asked them to list the names of the other students in the room on two sheets of paper, leaving a space between each name. Then I told them to think of the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates and write it down. It took the remainder of the class period to finish their assignment, and as the students left the room, each one handed me the papers. Charlie smiled. Mark said, "Thank you for teaching me, Sister. Have a good weekend."

That Saturday, I wrote down the name of each student on a separate sheet of paper, and I listed what everyone else had said about that individual. On Monday I gave each student his or her list. Before long, the entire class was smiling.

"Really?" I heard whispered.

"I never knew that meant anything to anyone!"

"I didn't know others liked me so much."

No one ever mentioned those papers in class again. I never knew if they discussed them after class or with their parents, but it didn't matter. The exercise had accomplished its purpose. The students were happy with themselves and one another again. That group of students moved on.

Several years later, after I returned from vacation, my parents met me at the airport. As we were driving home, Mother asked me the usual questions about the trip - the weather, my experiences in general. There was a lull in the conversation. Mother gave Dad a side-ways glance and simply says, "Dad?"

My father cleared his throat as he usually did before something important. "The Eklunds called last night," he began.

"Really?" I said. "I haven't heard from them in years. I wonder how Mark is."

Dad responded quietly. "Mark was killed in Vietnam," he said. "The funeral is tomorrow, and his parents would like it if you could attend."

To this day I can still point to the exact spot on I-494 where Dad told me about Mark.

I had never seen a serviceman in a military coffin before. Mark looked so handsome, so mature. All I could think at that moment was, Mark I would give all the masking tape in the world if only you would talk to me. The church was packed with Mark's friends. Chuck's sister sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Why did it have to rain on the day of the funeral? It was difficult enough at the graveside. The pastor said the usual prayers, and the bugler played taps. One by one those who loved Mark took a last walk by the coffin and sprinkled it with holy water. I was the last one to bless the coffin.

As I stood there, one of the soldiers who acted as pallbearer came up to me. "Were you Mark's math teacher?" he asked. I nodded as I continued to stare at the coffin.

"Mark talked about you a lot," he said. After the funeral, most of Mark's former classmates headed to Chuck's farmhouse for lunch.

Mark's mother and father were there, obviously waiting for me. "We want to show you something," his father said, taking a wallet out of his pocket. "They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it."

Opening the billfold, he carefully removed two worn pieces of notebook paper that had obviously been taped, folded and refolded many times. I knew without looking that the papers were the ones on which I had listed all the good things each of Mark's classmates had said about him.

"Thank you so much for doing that," Mark's mother said. "As you can see, Mark treasured it."

Mark's classmates started to gather around us. Charlie smiled rather sheepishly and said, "I still have my list. It's in the top drawer of my desk at home."

Chuck's wife said, "Chuck asked me to put his in our wedding album."

"I have mine too," Marilyn said. "It's in my diary."

Then Vicki, another classmate, reached into her pocketbook, took out her wallet and showed her worn and frazzled list to the group. "I carry this with me at all times," Vicki said without batting an eyelash. "I think we all saved our lists."

That's when I finally sat down and cried. I cried for Mark and for all his friends who would never see him again.

To Walk in the Shoes of Another

Bill Andrews was a big, awkward, homely guy. He dressed oddly with ill-fitting clothes. There were several fellows who thought it smart to make fun of him. One day one fellow noticed a small tear in his shirt and gave it a small rip. Another worker in the factory added his bit, and before long there was quite a ribbon dangling. Bill went on about his work and as he passed too near a moving belt the shirt strip was sucked into the machinery. In a split second the sleeve and Bill were in trouble. Alarms were sounded, switches pulled, and trouble was avoided. The foreman, however, aware of what had happened, summoned the men and related this story:

In my younger days I worked in a small factory. That's where I first met Mike Havoc. He was big and witty, was always making jokes, and playing little pranks. Mike was a leader. Then there was Pete Lumas who was a follower. He always went along with Mike. And then there was a man named . . . Jake. He was a little older than the rest of us -- quiet, harmless, apart. He always ate his lunch by himself. He wore the same patched trousers for three years straight. He never entered into the games we played at noon, wrestling, horse shoes and such. He appeared to be indifferent, always sitting quietly alone under a tree instead.

Jake was a natural target for practical jokes. He might find a live frog in his dinner pail, or a dead rodent in his hat. But he always took it in good humor. Then one Fall when things were slack, Mike took off a few days to go hunting. Pete went along, of course. And they promised all of us that if they got anything they'd bring us each a piece. So we were all quite excited when we heard that they'd returned and that Mike had got a really nice big buck. We heard more than that. Pete could never keep anything to himself, and it leaked out that they had a real hopper to play on Jake. Mike had cut up the critter and had made a nice package for each of us. And, for the laugh, for the joke of it, he had saved the ears, the tail, the hoofs -- it would be so funny when Jake unwrapped them. Mike distributed his packages during the noon hour. We each got a nice piece, opened it, and thanked him. The biggest package of all he saved until last. It was for Jake.

Pete was all but bursting; and Mike looked very smug. Like always, Jake sat by himself; he was on the far side of the big table. Mike pushed the package over to where he could reach it; and we all sat and waited. Jake was never one to say much. You might never know that he was around for all the talking he did. In three years he'd never said a hundred words. So we were all quite astounded with what happened next. He took the package firmly in his grip and rose slowly to his feet. He smiled broadly at Mike -- and it was then we noticed that his eyes were glistening. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down for a moment and then he got control of himself.

"I knew you wouldn't forget me," he said gratefully; "I knew you'd come through! You're big and you're playful, but I knew all along that you had a good heart."

He swallowed again, and then took in the rest of us. "I know I haven't seemed too chummy with you men; but I never meant to be rude. You see, I've got nine kids at home -- and a wife that's been an invalid -- bedfast now for four years. She ain't ever going to get any better. And

sometimes when she's real bad off, I have to sit up all night to take care of her. And most of my wages have had to go for doctors and medicine. The kids do all they can to help out, but at times it's been hard to keep food in their mouths. Maybe you think it's funny that I go off by myself to eat my dinner. Well, I guess I've been a little ashamed, because I don't always have anything between my sandwich. Or like today -- maybe there's only a raw turnip in my pail. But I want you to know that this meat really means a lot to me. Maybe more than to anybody here because tonight my kids," he wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand, "...tonight my kids will have a really..." He tugged at the string.

We'd been watching Jake so intently we hadn't paid much notice to Mike and Pete. But we all noticed them now, because they both dove at once to try to grab the package. But they were too late. Jake had broken the wrapper and was already surveying his present. He examined each hoof, each ear, and then he held up the tail. It wiggled limply. It should have been so funny, but nobody laughed -- nobody at all. But the hardest part was when Jake looked up and said thank you while trying to smile. Silently one by one each man moved forward carrying his package and quietly placed it in front of Jake for they had suddenly realized how little their own gift had really meant to them ... until now....

This was where the foreman left the story and the men. He didn't need to say anymore; but it was gratifying to notice that as each man ate his lunch that day, they shared part with Bill Andrews and one fellow even took off his shirt and gave it to him.

Brandon's Pancakes

Six -year-old Brandon decided one Saturday morning to fix his parents pancakes. He found a big bowl and spoon, pulled a chair to the counter, opened the cupboard and pulled out the heavy flour canister, spilling it on the floor.

He scooped some of the flour into the bowl with his hands, mixed in most of a cup of milk and added some sugar, leaving a floury trail on the floor which by now had a few tracks left by his kitten.

Brandon was covered with flour and getting frustrated. He wanted this to be something very good for Mom and Dad, but it was getting very bad. He didn't know what to do next, whether to put it all into the oven or on the stove (and he didn't know how the stove worked!).

Suddenly he saw his kitten licking from the bowl of mix and reached to push her away, knocking the egg carton to the floor.

Frantically he tried to clean up this monumental mess but slipped on the eggs, getting his pajamas white and sticky. And just then he saw Dad standing at the door. Big crocodile tears welled up in Brandon's eyes. All he'd wanted to do was good, but he'd made a terrible mess. He was sure a scolding was coming, maybe even a spanking. But his father just watched him.

Then, walking through the mess, he picked up his crying son, hugged him and loved him, getting his own pajamas white and sticky in the process.

That's how God deals with us. We try to do something good in life, but it turns into a mess. Our marriage gets all sticky or we insult a friend, or we can't stand our job, or our health goes sour.

Sometimes we just stand there in tears because we can't think of anything else to do. That's when God picks us up and loves us and forgives us, even though some of our mess gets all over Him. But just because we might mess up, we can't stop trying to "make pancakes" for God or for others. Sooner or later we'll get it right, and then they'll be glad we tried...