Adult Short Story Honorable Mention

The Last Gift

By Bob Greenberg

No one would have predicted it—an unlikely bond formed from misfortune, illness and the unspoken longing to bring light to someone else's darkness. He, a 60-year-old disabled Gulf War veteran, she, a vibrant, curious 7-year-old girl with a soft voice and a smile too big for her small face. Their worlds collided in the most unremarkable of places: just within the outpatient entrance of the Boston Children's Hospital cancer center.

Paul sat posted at his usual position near the registration desk, angled so he could greet anyone who walked through the double sliding doors. His battered, black-framed wheelchair had become an extension of him—scuffed on the footrests, smooth on the armrests from wear. He wore a bright yellow-green reflective vest that made the children giggle, a blue baseball cap with a block red "B," and a hospital ID clipped to his shirt pocket. His job, though unofficial in any formal sense, meant the world to him. He was the greeter, the first friendly face the kids saw before their difficult appointments. The staff adored him for it.

Emily was his favorite—not that he ever said so out loud. But something about her stuck with him long after her light steps faded toward the elevators. Maybe it was her unbelievable optimism or the bounce in her walk despite the fatigue she tried to hide. Her blue eyes held both innocence and quiet bravery, the kind that made adults quickly look away. She normally arrived in her prized Winnie-the-Pooh pajamas, but sometimes she mixed it up with a Boston Red Sox sweatshirt and turquoise, yellow and green tie-dyed pants. And always, always, her Sox cap perched on her bald head. Paul remembered her pre-treatment blond ponytail and the way it used to peek through the back of the hat. He missed seeing her hair as much as she missed having it.

Every week, each looked for the other. “Hey there, Emily,” Paul would call out the moment he spotted her.

“Hi, Mr. Paul!” she’d chirp back, always with energy that seemed impossible for a child receiving chemo.

“Come on over here. I’ve got something for you.”

“What is it?” she’d ask, though she always knew.

“You have to come over and find out.”

Emily would release her mother’s or father’s hand and hurry toward his wheelchair. Paul would choose a sticker from the small stash he kept tucked inside his vest pocket—a Red Sox sticker—sometimes the logo with the red socks, sometimes the crossed bat and ball, sometimes a favorite player. And on special days, like the end of her chemo cycle, he offered the prized big #1 BOSTON sticker.

He’d peel off the backing and hand it to her, and she’d stick it proudly on her pajama top or sweatshirt.

“Thanks, Mr. Paul!” she’d call out before racing back toward the elevator.

“See you later, Emily,” he’d reply, waving after her. “And don’t forget them Sox!”
Emily would turn, hand raised high, and beam her goodbye.

Paul never knew her chemo schedule—HIPAA kept him from learning the details—but he didn’t need specifics to know she lifted his spirits more than she could ever understand. She made the long days feel shorter. She made his own illnesses feel less heavy.

Then, one month, she didn't come. Then another.

Paul noticed immediately. The absence of her tiny footsteps echoed through him. He worried more each week: *Had she gotten sicker? Had the cancer spread? Was she in the ICU? Or maybe—maybe—was she better?* His mind spun with possibilities he wished he could ask about. But HIPAA regulations made her condition a mystery he could not solve. Then, finally, one morning, Emily came through the entrance—walking on her own two feet, a little slower than before but smiling widely. Her parents looked tired but lighter somehow.

Paul's face lit up. "Hey, Emily! Great to see you!"

Emily ran to him, nearly tripping over her own excitement. "Hi, Mr. Paul! I feel better! Today is just a follow-up visit."

Paul grinned. "That's great news."

And then Emily blurted out, "Will you be my uncle, Mr. Paul?"

Paul blinked, stunned. "Your uncle?" He looked to her parents for permission, then back at Emily. "If it's all right with your mom and dad, I'd be honored."

"Mom? Dad? Can Mr. Paul be my uncle? Please?"

Her father laughed gently while her mother nodded. "Sure, honey. He can be your uncle."

Emily threw her arms around Paul, hugging him tightly. He hugged her back as best as he could.

“Here,” he said softly, “I’ve got your sticker.” She pressed it onto her clean white T-shirt—no more hospital pajamas.

“Bye, Uncle Paul,” she said when her appointment ended. “See you in three months!” Paul carried that joy with him for weeks.

A week later, at the VA hospital, Paul sat in an exam room waiting to speak with Dr. Erman. He rehearsed questions in his mind—questions he’d been too afraid to ask before. A year and a half of worsening symptoms had left him unable to walk, plagued by tingling sensations, blurry vision and persistent fatigue. He wondered whether it all traced back to his service in Iraq during operation Desert Storm.

Research suggested nearly a third of Gulf War veterans developed Gulf War Syndrome—a chronic disorder with fatigue, joint pain, neurological symptoms and sometimes cancer. Paul remembered the pills—those “nerve pills” they gave them to take daily. He remembered pesticides sprayed on their tents. He remembered the smoke, the headaches, the nights feeling sick without knowing why.

But no one knew the cause for sure. Paul, more than anything, just wanted answers.

Dr. Erman entered the room. “Hello, Paul. How are you today?”

“Not great,” Paul admitted. “My arms and hands feel weaker. And my eyesight’s gone blurry. Maybe I need new glasses.”

“Maybe so,” the doctor said, tapping on his laptop.

“Did you get my lab results?

“Yes,” Dr. Erman said, pausing. “We think you have multiple sclerosis—MS.”

The words sat heavy in the air. Paul swallowed, staring at the wall behind Erman’s head while the doctor explained the symptoms, the treatment options, the fact that there was no cure—only management. Some patients had long periods of remission. Some did not. Paul listened quietly, absorbing every word. When the doctor finished, Paul asked the question weighing on him: “Could Iraq have caused this?”

Dr. Erman shook his head gently. “We don’t think so. Gulf War Syndrome shares some symptoms, but MS appears even in people who’ve never left home. We don’t know the cause.”

Paul chose a treatment plan of weekly IV infusions, pills, physical therapy and home nurse visits. It gave him a bit of hope.

Four months later, Paul was back at his greeter post when he saw Emily’s parents pushing her in a small wheelchair. She looked ghostlike—thin, pale, her eyes hollow. Her bloated stomach pressed against her pajama top.

“Hi, Emily,” he said softly.

She didn’t respond. Her eyes remained half closed. Emily’s mother explained quietly, “The cancer isn’t responding to the chemo anymore. The drugs have made her so sick. She’s being admitted for surgery. They discovered a tumor in her right kidney—a Wilms tumor.”

“I’m so sorry,” Paul whispered.

He leaned toward Emily. “Here’s your sticker, Emily. Go Sox.” He placed it gently on her top.

She managed a faint smile, then closed her eyes again.

The surgery went well. No metastasis. The tumor was removed completely. Emily went home ten days later, though Paul missed her discharge. A nurse told him the operation had been successful.

Three months passed before he saw her again. In that time, his own condition worsened. He could no longer propel his wheelchair. An aide accompanied him now.

Then one morning, there she was—walking, smiling, ponytail restored beneath her Sox cap. She ran to him and handed him a yellow daffodil.

“Oh, thanks, Emily,” he said, stiff smile hiding the pain he felt daily. “My favorite flower.” He handed her a sticker—well, technically his aide did—and she affixed it proudly.

“See you later! Go Sox!” she called. Her joy still worked magic on him.

Two years passed: Emily flourished; Paul stabilized.

His MS entered remission—or at least stopped advancing so quickly. He still needed help several days a week, especially when greeting at the hospital, but he managed.

But one afternoon, Paul saw Emily’s parents walk through the doors alone. Their faces said everything before they spoke.

“Where’s Emily?” Paul asked, dread creeping in.

“She’s had a setback,” her mother said through tears. Another Wilms tumor—this time in her remaining kidney.

Only a small percentage of children developed tumors in both kidneys—but that percentage was enough to include Emily.

Her parents explained their limited options: chemo was unlikely to work, and removing the kidney would require a transplant. “We’re hoping for a miracle,” her mother whispered.

Paul’s eyes stung. He thanked them for trusting him with the news. They gave him their numbers so he could call Emily at home.

That night, Paul lay awake thinking of her. The idea started slowly, then exploded all at once: he could help her. If he was a match, he could give her what she needed most.

The next morning, he waited at the VA hospital until Dr. Erman could see him.

“What’s up, Paul?”

“Doc, am I eligible to be an organ donor?”

The question halted Erman mid-movement.

“MS patients *can* donate in theory,” he said carefully. “But it can trigger flare-ups. Why do you ask?”

“A little girl I know needs a kidney,” Paul said. “And I want to give her one of mine.”

Erman's face tightened. "There are many considerations—compatibility, risks, the surgery itself. But I can refer you to the transplant team."

"Please do," Paul said. "I want to try."

Over the next several days, Paul met with transplant specialists, filled out endless forms, and underwent rigorous testing. He called Emily's parents to tell them what he wanted to do. At first, they refused—protesting that it was too dangerous, too much to ask.
But Paul insisted.

"She's my niece," he told them simply. "How could I not try?"

Eventually, they agreed to pursue testing. Miraculously, Paul and Emily were compatible—not a perfect match, but close enough.

Emily and her parents met with Paul, embracing him and thanking him through tears.

"You're giving our daughter a chance," Emily's mother said.

"A chance is all any of us ever need," Paul replied.

A month later, they underwent their surgeries.

At the children's hospital, surgeons removed Emily's left kidney, along with the tumor. At the VA Hospital, Paul lay on an operating table as his left kidney was removed. Emergency transport rushed the organ across the city to Children's, where transplant surgeons waited.

Everything went smoothly. Emily's doctors ensured the kidney was functioning properly before discharging her. Paul went home a week later, Emily, eleven days after that. They were bonded now in a way no one else could fully understand.

As years passed, Emily became a healthy, lively teenager, entering high school with a ponytail, a circle of friends and a stack of honors classes. She didn't see Paul often but she called him every few weeks. He always called on her birthday and on New Year's Day.

Meanwhile, Paul's MS slowly progressed. He lost some dexterity, then more. Feeding himself became difficult. Dressing himself sometimes impossible. Eventually, he moved into a nursing home and Emily began visiting monthly.

They watched Red Sox games together. She brought the sports section of *The Boston Globe* and read to him, animatedly recounting wins and losses. Paul asked her about school, friends, vacations, her parents—anything to hear her talk.

Each visit ended the same way: Emily hugged him, placed a Sox sticker on his arm or chest, and whispered, "Go Sox."

Paul always tried to respond, though the words came slower now. "Bye, Emily. See you next time." He meant it every time.

But one spring, before baseball season began, Paul passed away peacefully in his sleep.

Emily was heartbroken. She owed him her childhood, her life, her future.

A decade later, after college, graduate school, and marriage, Emily gave birth to a baby boy. She named him Paul. Twice each year—on her birthday and her son's—Emily carried forward the ritual that had defined their friendship.

She whispered, “Thanks, Uncle Paul,” then placed a Red Sox sticker on her son’s shirt.

“Go Sox,” she said, and smiled.

My brother, Paul, would have smiled back.