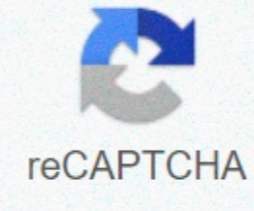




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Sad love story ideas

Keep up with buzzfeed's daily newsletter! Going to content for months, I felt no connection to my newborn son. Then one day, an idea seized on him for changing everything. I'm trying to remember the moment I fell in love with my son Nathaniel, it's hard. Maybe it was when he seemed to listen carefully as I read him my favorite book from childhood, *Velveteen Rabbit*. Maybe while walking, when I stretched out the baby carrier and grabbed my finger. But I'm sure it wasn't the first time I'd held my child in my hand, and the shock I felt of not experiencing the rush I expected when I became a mother was appalling. Even though I had a caesarean section, I still expected to see Nathaniel right away. I imagined it being raised above the curtain and placed on my chest. He opened his eyes, we looked at each other, and the collective wisdom of generations of mothers before me shone into my heart. Instead, my son and I had our first meeting in the hospital's recovery room hours after he was born. My parents and my husband were there. A nice nurse kept asking me where I was on the pain scale from 1 to 10. Someone handed me the baby at some point, but the memory is elusive, just out of my jurisdiction. The last thing I remember clearly was being in surgery. The baby had just been given birth, but she had not yet cried; The nurses were still cleaning his mouth. I was shaking violently, either from fear or from all the drugs that were pumped into my system. I begged the anesthesiologist to do something about my nausea. Before adding another drug to my IV, I heard a nurse asking my doctor about the cause of section C, presumably hospital paperwork. It's late, and I wanted to go home, he said. I think he was joking, but after 36 hours in labor. I wasn't in the mood to laugh. In the dim weeks that followed, I looked through the events that day in my head like a crime scene investigator, trying to figure out exactly when something terribly bad happened. Because something was obviously really bad. When I took Nathaniel, I felt a pulsating, all-consuming anxiety. A word in my head fooled me like a drum beat: escape. I wanted to put Nathaniel in the crile, walk out the door, and I never came back. When we took her for the first examination, I honestly hoped that the doctor would see that I was not up to the challenge of motherhood and would allow us to leave the baby there. What kind of mother was I? What kind of person was I? You're a monster, I told myself. A monster who doesn't love his own child. It didn't make sense. I always thought of myself as a woman born a mother. But here I was, desperately planning my escape from that what I wanted most in my life. When my husband took a picture with the baby, the baby, To force my face to smile, but my eyes were telling the truth. They were flat and empty. My voice sounded like it was coming from a long tunnel. I didn't have an appetite. The food tasted bad. Some friends suggested it might be postpartum depression, but I don't think so. It was like a crut on crutsa, an excuse. Besides, I didn't cry all the time. I didn't cry at all. I just sat there, either numb or panicked, unable to do anything right. I wasn't sick. I was useless. I can't do this. I'm not going to do this. These words ran through my mind every day, hour after hour, hour by hour, minute by minute. Every time the phone rang, I was hoping someone would call to save me. Friends visited, but they always left. Take me with you, I remember begging one of them. I tried to pretend I was joking, but I didn't. After a few weeks, I felt worse, so I called a psychopharmacologist I saw a few years ago. He was honest and told me that with the right medication, I feel like my old self. I didn't believe him. The old me is gone... I was sure of that. I went back to a therapist I saw before my marriage, but over time, she became more of a friend than a counselor. I was ashamed to see you in my current state. I went once, but I never came back. Then I tried an old-fashioned psychoanalyst. Dr. Freud, as my husband called him, was warm and reassuring, but he wanted to talk about my childhood, and I wanted to focus on the present. By this time, Nathaniel was more than 2 months old. I was afraid if I didn't get better, I'd never be friends with him. And my maternity leave is over. I had to take a more aggressive approach. A friend of mine gave me the phone number of the postpartum depression hotline, and I took it with me for weeks before I got up to make a phone call. When I finally did, a nice woman assured me that I didn't have PPD and that it was combatable. The other doctors I saw said that, too, but he was the first one I really believed in. He said he heard women say exactly what I said. I felt that alone in my dark, ugly thoughts, but she personally spoke to other women who had gone through exactly what I was going through. They got better, and I got better. The woman suggested a therapist specializing in PPD from the hotline. When I called her, she said the fact that I felt guilty about my negative feelings about motherhood was a good sign. It didn't want to feel that way. And she said that she also had PPD and she had got over it and went on to have a second child. On my first visit, she gave me her personal copy of Brooke Shields' book *On Postpartum Depression*. *Down Came the Rain*. After reading the book and the therapist's counseling, I began to feel better, antidepressant. antidepressants. Before I got pregnant, which made a big difference. And something else also helped me: a line from an article I read about Rosanne Cash. When he described his work ethic, he said, Just show up. Just do it. Even if you feel like s-- and you think it's terrible and it never gets better and it never goes anywhere, just show up and do it. And finally, something happens. That's what spoke to me. I felt like a terrible mother, and I didn't know what I was doing. I couldn't figure out which crying meant I was hungry, which means I'm tired. I couldn't get the baby wrap in. I didn't know how often to bathe her, or when to sleep with her, or to put her in her pajamas or to sleep in diapers. I was sure if he was left alone in my care, he'd die. But when my mind started to abstain from not being able to do this, I'm not going to do that, I thought I'd quote Rosanne Cash. Just show up and I'll tell myself. Just do it. That's what I did. And he was right: something happened. I was getting the most out of it. I turned a corner when Nathaniel was 3 months old, and I came back to work. I love my job, so if I go back to her and go back to my pre-baby routine, it made me happy. Finally, I rediscovered my confidence, which felt like it had been put in a car, driven into the middle of the desert and set on fire. It took me a while to come to terms with what happened in the earliest days of my child's life. More than once, I found myself wishing I'd known him when he was born. And, of course, that's silly, because I was there. But I wasn't. To see us together these days, you never know. When he smiles, my heart explodes like fireworks into a thousand tiny stars. There's nothing I like more than cuddled up to him or reading to him. And I think I'll never understand exactly what went wrong, whether c-section traumatized me, or whether I've experienced some kind of hormonal breakdown, or whether people with that type of personality - people who like to do things perfectly at first try, who like to control me - are just doomed to a degree of panic when we become mothers and lose control of everything. I thought I'd fall in love with my baby the first time she was in my arms. But that didn't happen. That couldn't have happened until the thing that broke inside me when he came into the world was fixed. But now I love him, boundlessly and without reservation. And maybe in the end, it's not the moment when we fall in love that matters, it's what we do with that love once it touches us. © Copyright . All rights reserved. The printer points to an external web site that may not meet accessibility guidelines. A mother is the person who, seeing that four pieces of pie for five people, immediately announcing that they never cared about the pie. -Tensva -Tensva I knew I shouldn't be so excited. I was too old for that. At the age of 11, my eldest and mother are grown-up girls, I had to keep my cool. After all, I was in high school. But every time I was alone, I checked every gift under the tree. I read every label and felt every package, guessing the content inside. I looked at each gift so often that I could tell which person was present to which person without looking at the labels. It's been a tough year for my family. When my mother looked at the tree and scattered gifts, she sighed and warned us: There won't be as many for Christmas this year. Try not to be disappointed. Christmas was traditionally my parents' time to ruin us. In recent years, gifts have accumulated and spilled from under the tree, taking over the living room. I heard the phrase that giving is better than inclusion, but I thought that whoever said it must have gone out of their mind. It was all about getting presents. That was the reason I couldn't sleep on Christmas Eve. On Christmas morning, we waited impatiently in the hallway until Dad told us everything was ready. We ran into the living room and let the wrapping paper fly. We tried weakly to wait and watch until the other family members opened their presents, but as time went on, we lost control. Here's another one for you, said Mom as she handed me a package. I looked, confused. After spending so much time testing gifts before Christmas, I recognized this. But it wasn't mine. It was my mother's. They put a new label on it, writing my name in my mother's handwriting. Mom, I don't know... My mother's enthusiastic, joyful look stopped me—a look I didn't really understand. Let's see what it is, darling. Hurry up and open it. It was a hairdryer. Although this may seem like a simple gift, for me it was much more. As an 11-year-old girl, I was shocked. In my world, where inclusion surpassed the light years, my mother's altruism was incomprehensible. It was a huge act. Tears filled my eyes and I thought I was in disbelief about how much my mother should love me to give up Christmas so I could get a few more gifts. I've always remembered this Christmas fondly. He was such an influence on me. As an adult with children in my life, whom I adore, I now understand my mother's actions. I can see that he didn't give up on Christmas as much as I thought, but I did find an even greater joy in his Christmas because it was way actually better than the host. My mother's simple act meant a lot to me. These Christmas miracles restore hope for the holidays.-Jennifer Yardley BarneyA Christmas spirit strikes againMegad is the season that engages the whole world in a conspiracy of love! -Hamilton Wright MabieC5 He's always dreamed of doing the surprise prank of his life. You know, what you see on TV or late-night laughter with your friends. Well, thanks to a little determination, some luck, and the generous help of the Christmas Spirit, my dream has come true. My family is Canadian, although my sister moved down to Australia a few years ago to study speech pathology. He graduated before Christmas, but because of my own academic schedule, I wouldn't have been able to get down to graduation in time. He was understandably disappointed, and I felt guilty that I couldn't be there for him on this most special occasion. While I was talking to my boss the week before my sister graduated high school, the conversation drifted toward christmas plans. When I mentioned that I was missing my sister's graduation less than forty-eight hours, she said, Well, if you want to go, I don't have a problem with it, so go ahead. I couldn't believe my luck. I almost jumped with joy. Just make sure you get permission from admin, he added. My heart sank. The administration of my school was notorious for refusing leisure requests, and last-minute pleas undoubtedly only involved IRE. I almost didn't bother to ask because I knew it was going to be a waste of time, and I didn't feel like a thorough stager. Plus, I already knew the answer: no. But something decided to try, just in the back. Perhaps it was the hope that the Christmas spirit would somehow be insensied by the administrative office at this time of year. When I got home to find today dean co-worker's response in my mailbox, I steeled myself for disappointment. My teeth were screening, and I opened the e-mail, and I started reading. And I'm reading it again. And I'm going to read it again, just to make sure I understand. Approval? Can I really go? I rubbed my eyes – it must be a mistake. But no, I was passed out. There was no logical explanation. I couldn't believe my luck. The only explanation I could come up with was that the Christmas Spirit was lurking in my fellow dean's heart when he read my request. I called the airline right away. Miraculously, even during the busy Christmas season, I was able to change my grade to arrive the day before my sister's graduation. With the fantastic news, I wanted to tell my sister. But, fingers on the dial, I stopped. Wouldn't it be more fantastic if I could surprise you? I imagined myself showing up knocking on his door. What a shock you'd be in. I laughed cheerfully at myself as I imagined his face when he opened the door and saw me. He loves pranks and practical jokes. Pulling off such a prank would certainly be the ultimate gift, and if I succeeded, he'd probably prefer my unusual arrival than my participation. The idea developed in my head. For such a large-scale surprise, I needed a much more dramatic arrival than a bell ring. For me, Christmas surprises are embodied by gifts. Or at least boxes. Why don't I come in a box? I started plotting. Then, brilliant struck. They're delivering me to my sister's house in a box with couriers! I knew that if I did this, my presence at her graduation and my big arrival would be the best Christmas present I could ever give my sister. No one appreciates a prank as a prankster! Although I was leaving in less than seventy-two hours, I frantically jumped on the computer in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, and started Googling courier companies. One of the first I came across and the only one willing to go for my Christmas surprise was CouriersPlease. The branch manager initially said no, pointing out that Christmas was their busiest season and he couldn't spare a courier for this rather unusual request. But suddenly and inexplicably, he warmed up to the idea and volunteered to dress up and deliver me himself. The Christmas Spirit strikes again! (These Christmas towns are skipped during the holidays.) Upon arrival in Australia, the manager met me in full uniform, but that's not all. He brought one of his couriers, plus a CouriersPlease van! They even made me a reinforced box that had already been tested at the office. I thought the easiest thing to do was walk up to the door and then jump in the box while they were doorkneping. But no, they insisted; My sister might see me through the window, and they certainly didn't want to risk my Christmas surprise. Instead, they parked a few hundred metres up the street, where they put me in the box and took me all the way to my sister, where they called in and announced that they were delivering a package to her. I couldn't see my sister's face as she opened the door for the couriers for a surprise delivery, but I knew from her voice that she was more than a little distracted. It soon transformed into utter disbelief and shock when the box was revealed and she saw her sister sitting inside smiled up at her. He completely lost his mind, and I'll never forget his face as he opened those wings on the box. It's such a gift to be able to attend my sister's graduation and show her my love by giving her the most unique, unusual Christmas present in the history of our family. His memory will be reaped as a souvenir both he and today. It also served as a lesson to me: never, ever underestimate the power of the Christmas spirit. It can move hearts, minds, and, yes, even people in boxes. Read these heartwarming true tales of vintage Christmas kindness.-Heather Thompson Sharing a legacy of loveCompromise, if not spice life, its strength. That's what makes nations great and marriages great. – Phyllis McGinleyChiccoDodiFC/ShutterstockWhen my mother died at the age of eighty-four, my four sisters and I broke our hearts. How can we ever get over the loss of this warm and loving woman, a talented artist who, despite the challenges, enjoyed life and always relied on her husband, daughters and grandchildren? For weeks, my sisters and I had dinner, laughed and cried about old memories. When it came time to sell the home my mother loved, we spent many days in disbelief, clearing out her belongings. I remember reading an Ann Landers column years earlier that discussed how many siblings struggle bitterly over the fortunes of their deceased parents. I thought, How lucky we are that it's never going to happen to us. Somehow, we easily and peacefully shared mom's belongings-furniture, jewelry, and household items-between us and some charities. Although I expected his paintings to be a tug of war, none of this ever happened. It's pretty good, considering there were five girls and four grandchildren. There are no conflicts, no squabbles or disputes. Until we found the old nativity kit in mom's closet. I remember mom telling me how she got the manger. An old friend of mine who was doing carpentry gave it to my mother and father as a Christmas present when they got married. My sister, Eileen, remembers it differently. Mom told him she found the day care in a trash can that belongs to Mrs. Bingham, the old lady who lived across the street. Unlike some ornate versions found in today's stores, this manger was crafted from dark wood and completely unornate, with only a roof, floor and railing around it. Although beautifully crafted, there was a mistake: on one side in front of the double gate it was oblique. Mother filled it with three figures — Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus. Many years later, he added more — the Wise Men, Shepherds, Angels, and Animals. Like children, we loved the annual rites of the Christmas season, especially taking the nativity kit and decorations off the attic and carefully putting them in place. When the sisters all got married and grandchildren came, they added new characters to the stable, including the three little pigs. After Mom's death, when the nativity kit was released, no one was prepared for the next battle. My sister Joanne was the first to claim the manger and insisted it was the only mother's prayer she really wanted. Your wish has been granted. But when my niece Mandy found out, she called me from her apartment in California to voice her objections. She was clearly emotional as she repeated a decade-long promise made to her by my mother: Nanny promised me that I would have the nativity scenes set when it's gone, he cried. The nativity kit is mine. Joanne felt that as a mother's daughter, she first lost weight. Neither he nor Mandy moved. When disagreement showed signs of becoming a full-fledged family feud, we realized something had to be done. Enter the family arbitrator, my sister Eileen, who somehow saw through the fog. But as Mandy's mother and Joanne's sister, would Eileen be able to deal with that dilemma fairly? He temporarily put aside the emotions of the debate and thought logically. The nativity set was just a wooden stable, not an irreplaceable work of art. The beauty was in the eyes of the holders, the perception of two people who coveted a simple item owned by someone they loved. Can't create a copy? Naturally! He ordered the tree from the lumber yard and bought someone to build a second manger. The next day, Eileen went to Centre Millwork and queued behind several contractors who ordered wood from a young man with a crew. He was wearing a note named Brett, written in a green marker. When it was Eileen's turn, she had to shout over the sound of buzzing saws. She pointed to the nativity scenes set in her arms and told her the story, explaining that it was causing a big rift between her sister Joanne and daughter Mandy. Brett took the stable from him, lifted it up with one hand, and laughed: Are they fighting for this? Yes, Eileen explained. I know it seems crazy, but it was my mother's, and they both loved her very much. Is there any way you can measure and cut up the tree so we can build the copy? Brett said, Leave it here. I'll see what I can do. Eileen's gone, hoping to come up with a little miracle. That's what it takes to satisfy the two women in his life who squat. A few days later, he received a phone message that his order was ready. Brett not only cut and measured the wood, but also built a second manger. I know you wanted them to look the same, so I added a few dings and errors that were original. I hope you don't mind. I'm sure the new stable had the same slanted front gate. Okay? Eileen said in tears. You have no idea what this means to my sister and my daughter. For the whole family. I don't care what it takes. Your work saved the day. It will be \$3.75 for the materials, Brett said. When Eileen insisted on paying him more, he said, I didn't do it during company time. I built it at home so I wouldn't charge for the birth. He pointed to the new manger. I hope this helps your family have a happier Christmas. Eileen left Brett with a big tip and a big hug. When he got home and called me. And Mandy about her creative solution, they were very happy and extremely relieved that the problem was solved. A phone call later, Joanne and Mandy agreed that Joanne would take possession of the new stable, as well as some old statuettes, including Mary, Joseph and the infant. Mandy would get to keep the original, as Nanny promised.-Kathy Melia LevineReads the story of the veteran who found long lost love after 75 years. CatchI don't remember days; We remember moments. – Cesare Pavese, The Burning Brandnmoomsaby/Shutterstock After Christmas dinner, my family rested around the kitchen table. We all enjoyed the traditional turkey, sweet potatoes glazed with slightly brown sugar, and one last pumpkin pie stuffed with ice cream. The smell of good cooking was still lingering; the oven remained warm. My sister, our chef, basked in compliments - Fabulous meal, I really couldn't eat another bite, Everything was amazing. Dad rose from his chair and stood contentedly nearby. My nephew, who never sat for too long, started dripping his new basketball around the table and across the kitchen. When he approached dad, he stopped—almost insecure. The shaking, wrinkled hands, dad stretched the ball out. He didn't talk, and the boy, embarrassed, looked up at us and looked up at us again. I needed a little convincing, but the ball gently passed. I watched my father closely to see what he was going to do. A playful smile appeared on his face. The glamour in her eyes shone brighter than any Christmas light. Holding the ball and reaching forward, Dad bounced back to the ground and then caught it. This operation has been repeated. Nodded approvingly, then turned toward our assembled group. Gently throw the ball, Dad started a game of catch. The ball continues to pass through the enthusiastic couple's outstretted hand. The Ide here! shouts rang through the warm kitchen. Dad's active involvement in this game was remarkable to me as he had advanced Alzheimer's disease. This dementia has robbed him of many memories and recognition of people, places and points. That being said, Dad clearly recognized the ball and what could be done with it. When I was younger, playing with dad was rare. It's to his credit that Dad worked hard and took care of us. He was very aloof and never showed or shared much emotion; The game of choice was chess, which he eventually taught me to play. As an adult, I became a caregiver, and I watched helplessly as dad refused. Connecting moments between father and son was few and far between took the basketball. I don't know how long we played catch. Looking at the clock wasn't important. Dad led us joyously until he got tired. But I do know that our game ended too soon and it was time to face the reality of dirty pots, high on worksheets. The moment, however, will certainly last forever. This Christmas, Dad gave me a special memory—something I'll always treasure. These stories of meeting Santa will fill your Christmas spirit.-Rick LauberA Christmas present, delayed Possession of his sister is like a best friend can not get rid of. You know, whatever you do, they're still going to be there. Amy Lillona Titova/ShutterstockI was ten years old the summer my father helped me buy my first ten-speed bike from Father Allen. I bet \$60 on mowing lawns and shoving snow, and the other half from my dad. I'd pay you back in installs for the next six months. Although it was the kind of bike you'd expect a priest to make (boring silver, slightly worn, no baseball cards on the spokes), it was my ticket to the adult world. I spent the summer and the fall riding like I was shamed by Greg LeMond. My sister Liz, who was a prisoner in her five-speed and banana chair, had no chance of keeping up. We were always stuck in the hand-me-downs with our older siblings, some of whom had notoriously poor taste in bicycles. Now, however, I could ride it from every corner of the city, sometimes even until the beach. In those heady days before someone gets their driver's license, a good bike is a magic rug. Shortly before the Christmas deadline to pay my father back, several blizzards hit us. That

allowed me to shovel enough driveways to pay off my debt. I am now officially the bike owner; it was a feeling like any other. It's important to note that while my mother and father were fantastic parents, they couldn't be trusted with the awesome responsibility of buying proper Christmas presents. They were too fast to give out gloves, sneakers and shirts as gifts. And while we could say a prayer for baby Jesus in the manger on his way to church, he seemed too busy at this time of year to leave gifts under the tree. We outsourced our requests for really good gifts to Santa. For her family of seven kids, my mother developed a system in which she decorated the outside of seven large boxes of different types of wallpaper. We all had our own boxes that contained six or so gifts, and we'd close our eyes and reach to grab one when it was our turn. It reduced the packaging for hours and satisfied my father's sense of naval order. The downside was that we opened one gift at a time so that everyone could appreciate each other's gifts. Neither Liz nor I praised this system because we were last. After the obligatory oohs and aahs, we are all lifted from the present of the family review, a process that averages about five minutes or so. That meant Liz and I had to wait about minutes between all present, so patience was in short supply- when one of us pulled out a belt or pack of underwear, we saw the whole Dad, a master showman, liked to keep some of Santa's better gifts in the end. That fateful Christmas morning, he gave me a used portable turntable. I was ecstatic, I ended up tied up in the family stereo that we all fought through. Unfortunately, my hideout was short-lived after my father called my sister into the kitchen. There's also a gift for you,' she said as she opened the door that led to the garage. There, on the stairs, stood a brand new 10-speed Schwinn. I couldn't hear the screams of joy – all I could hear was the nebuliser motor of the lawnmower, the endless scraping of the metal snow shower on the concrete. I endured too many hours of indentured servitude on my used bike; That Santa was able to give Liz this shiny machine less than a week later was a sign that she had lost touch. Maybe Mrs. Claus is going to put something in her food? I fell to the ground. Her 10-speed cart turned into a pumpkin when my sister hopped on to the shiny leather seat. Let's go for a walk, Rob. He sang, my father kept the bike straight while he put his foot on the pedals. It's too snowy to ride, I mumbled, away from the turntable. The symbolism seemed lost on my father. The rest of the day, then the rest of the week. My father wasn't someone to whom we complained about gifts (not if I ever wanted to see another one, anyway). Santa always seemed to lose interest after Christmas, rarely accepting returns or trade-ins. That he left Baby Jesus, but he didn't answer my prayers, I could tell because Liz's bike was still crumbling into a pile of rust flakes. After a few weeks watching me sulk, my father finally pulled me aside. Are you all right? It's not fair, he lamented. I've worked so hard for my bike, and it's not even new. Then Liz gets a brand-new bike as soon as I pay the last installment. You shouldn't have done anything for him. My father smiled. He didn't have to do anything for her because it wasn't really her,' she said, then left the room. What does that mean? I didn't want to take a bike, it was a girly bar that sloped down to the ground and a floral white basket on the wheel. I could turn it into a new set of action figures, I thought, but she's been wearing it every day since Christmas, wouldn't let me take it back now. I finally got over it, chalking up elf error (a bad and nice list can be cumbersome). By spring, Liz and I were riding together in town now that she could keep up. Sure, I would have lost him on the steep slopes, but I always let him catch up when we went downhill. In the beginning, the youngest children of the big family tie a bond out of necessity—older siblings can tax them, and there are only enough locked doors to hide behind. Sometimes you need someone in the foxhole with you. As we do Liz and I became real friends. We cycled down to swim in the local pool, then invested seven miles to study together for free city tennis lessons. We were planning secret parties when my parents went on a trip and we were playing Who Can Leave Less Gas in the Tank when we finally got our driver's license. I leaned on him to give names to faces when we were at parties, and he treated my best friends like his personal dating service. We ended up in the same college, and we still graduate from high school the same year. Still, I wasn't smart enough to figure out what my father meant until years later. This brand new bike wasn't a gift for Liz-it was a gift for me. He gave me the gift of my sister's company, the ability to stay together instead of moving away from my ability to travel. He gave me my best friend. It's a gift I've admired every day since then. Read another person's unforgettable Christmas gift.-Robert F. WalshPepper's last giftDogs life is too short. It's their only mistake, really. - Agnes Sligh TurnbullJohn Raptosh / ShutterstockAny life thrown at us every year, coming to Christmas our family was a constant tradition: our dog Pepper opened our presents for us. When our beloved Black Lab mix was a gangly adolescent puppy, we just gave him unbreakable gifts to unpack, things like pajamas and steering wheel covers. He proved to be so careful that he soon gave her every gift that was not edible. Each time, Pepper found the seam of wrapping paper with her nose and kept the present down gently with her sepaws. His front teeth put up the paper's lips with the utmost care. Then he took off every inch of wrapping paper before stepped back to lie in the middle of our gathering. He never bit or scratched the presents. Friends and relatives who joined family celebrations never believed Pepper could be so subtle until he witnessed his talents. Watching our sweet dog unpack gifts always warmed the holiday, which was often a little bittersweet for college, studying abroad, or work commitments often held by my two sisters and me away. One year, everyone came home for Christmas. I came back from Ireland, Kaci flew in from Arizona, and Kara flew in from college. Because of Mom's joy, she was busy baking cookies for all of us. Our Christmas season was supposed to be perfect. You couldn't feel perfect because Pepper's health was deteriorating. His life was longer than we expected—he was fourteen—and yet his mind was sharp. His enthusiasm for life made him feel better. But his body couldn't keep up with his soul. He's already shown the usual signs of deafness and stiffness. In Year 2, his hips and hind legs started to freak out for him. We knew we were going to have to make a tough decision soon. It was probably Pepper's last Christmas, so we decided to make sure it. On Christmas Day, we gathered around the tree to open the early present. We all took a turn, and then we called Pepper to open another one. But his tangled legs couldn't navigate the boxes and shredded wrapping paper on the floor. He tripped over obstacles and soon disappeared into the next room. He went back to the floor, as far out of the way as he could. Our hearts are broken. Can Pepper attend his last Christmas? Pepper stayed on the periphery of all vacation activities. We gave gifts during the day but didn't feel very giving. We shared stories about cinnamon rolls that are bleave. We played next to the tree, the glitter of which faded. That night, Kaci said what we all thought: If only Pepper could have helped us open the presents this year. We all put our mugs down on our spicy tea. Maybe he still knew, Kara said. But there are none left, mom reminded me. Kara jumped up and left the room. We heard him open drawers and cabinets in the kitchen. He returned with a box of dog noes, scissors and a roll of duct tape. Give me that green paper, said Kara, pointing to a large sheet at my feet. He cuts a small part of the paper and wrapped a single dog treat in it. He held it up like he'd found gold. Now I have a gift for him! I knelt on the ground near Kara and packed another dog. Kaci and mom joined in. Soon there were four elegantly packed dog poeks in a row on the floor. We cleaned the floor of the scrapped wrapping paper. We hid our feet under us as we sat out of the way on the furniture. Go get Pepper, we encouraged mom. We all jumped like enthusiastic kids. Mom went to the other room. You want to open a gift, girl? - he cheated on her. In an instant, Pepper stuck his head in the room. His ears were completely sharpened with anticipation and curiosity. He slipped his stork legs to make a series of gifts. He smelled all four of them and looked back and forth between them. There's never been such a wide selection of gifts. Soon, Pepper picked out his first Christmas present. She was nimble in turning the present with her fore paw as she was a nimble young dog once more. She yanked every last bit of paper off the dog treat before she chewed it with her usual grace. Our family swelled with glee. Pepper licked the last crumb off the floor. He looked at the remaining three gifts, and then turned to mom, as if to ask, Can I open another one? Come on, girl. Mom encouraged me. For the next few minutes, Pepper opened all his Christmas presents. While we were, it reminded us of his sheer joy that we were together. Our family felt whole—not because we were in the same room, city, or country, but because the we've been connected. In the new year, Pepper let us know that it was time to call the vet. His death, while tearful, was peaceful. A In his own way, his death is a celebration of life because he gave my family so much love and laughter. Long after I forgot my presents, I'm still cherishing Pepper's last Christmas present. He taught me that no matter where we all spend the holidays and no matter what the year brings, the smallest act of heartfelt gives our family together in our love. For me, this knowledge is the longest-term gift of them all. I feel like a kid again when you read these adorable letters from Santa that will warm your heart.-Zach HivelyChicken Soup of SoulAll Stories reprinted with permission of Chicken Soup for the Soul Publishing, LLC © 2013 2013

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