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—JENNIFER GARNER



GOOD

PEOPLE

Stories From the
Best of Humanity

GABRIEL REILICH & LUCIA KNELL

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Illustrations by Libby VanderPloeg

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CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE
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DEDICATION
INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE

The Kindest of Strangers

CHAPTER TWO

Learn by Heart

CHAPTER THREE

It's the Little Things

CHAPTER FOUR

The Kids Are All Right

CHAPTER FIVE

When I Needed It Most

CHAPTER SIX

Away From Home

ABOUT UPWORTHY
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
ABOUT THE EDITORS

To humanit—big fans

Introduction

Every day on Upworthy, we work to shine a light on the best of humanity. Over the years we've grown an online community of millions—of all ages, from all corners of the world—who share in our core belief that people are fundamentally good. Our posts inspire an outpouring of comments from our readers, each with their own heartfelt narrative. Reading through them is the best part of our jobs, because so many prove our mission. But the nature of social media can make it hard to find them again. They get lost, buried under an avalanche of content. That didn't sit right with us. These comments—each the seed of a beautiful story—deserved more.

So, we began to pose questions to our community with a greater sense of curiosity and intention. Questions like “What's the kindest thing a stranger has ever done for you?” We were met with thousands of replies—stories, wisdom, truths, and triumphs—each a privileged glimpse into people's minds, hearts, and lives.

Energized and inspired, we asked a select number of followers to participate in a new project, an experiment of sorts—one that would grow the seeds of their stories, their comments, into something more permanent. A book. We set out to create a counterbalance to the darker forces and algorithms fighting for our attention. Something to provide readers with space for the quiet, contemplative, and restorative calm we all need.

We pored over these stories dozens of times. Themes began to reveal themselves, which then became the six chapters of this book. And every time we read them—every single time—we were moved. Maybe that's just how goodness works. Its power doesn't diminish with contact. Instead, it grows and grows.

Our hope is that this book will serve as a resource for comfort: 101 stories you can turn to again and again, each page a reassurance that people, more often than not, are good at heart. They are funny, moving, surprising, heartbreaking, inspiring, and, most of all, real. We are forever grateful to all who opened up and contributed these meaningful pieces of their lives, large and small.

The truth is, the book of human decency continues to be written every day. Let's all keep adding stories to it together.

—Gabriel Reilich and Lucia Knell



**GOOD
PEOPLE**



CHAPTER ONE

The Kindest of Strangers

There are a lot of good people out there

Safe Travels

AMY B

It's sort of an East Coast thing—a rite of passage—moving to New York. I grew up in a suburb outside D.C. Relative to New York, D.C. is amateur hour. So, when I got into Cardozo—a young, progressive law school in New York—I didn't hesitate. Goodbye, small potatoes. Hello, Big Apple.

In the grand tradition of moving to New York, I was just 22—naive enough not to think of myself as naive—and wholly unworried about dangers that may lay in store. You know, the kind people warn you about—pickpockets, subway creeps, lurkers in the park.

In fact, my instincts were correct. In 2010, New York bore little resemblance to the gritty cesspool represented in *Taxi Driver* and *The Panic in Needle Park*; that brand of trepidation belonged to people who'd never actually lived here. The danger ahead was of an entirely different variety. The kind that visits you no matter where you live. The kind that arrives politely—a phone call, a knock on the door—and casually blows up your life.

My boyfriend—a soon-to-be relic of my past—dropped me off. I remember it so clearly—standing there in the cold, my suitcase at my side like a comrade, my own R2-D2. The taillights of my boyfriend's car receded, glowed brighter, turned a corner, and disappeared. It was January 4 and 17 degrees Fahrenheit—so it's fair to say the moment is frozen in time.

I lived in “intern housing” for five months—the average amount of time required to secure an apartment that is both affordable and doesn't resemble a Soviet-era interrogation room. Intern housing turned out to be the New Yorker Hotel, which was terribly cool to me at the time. Cardozo had reserved an entire floor for students and interns from all over the world. Before long, I was doing things like walking briskly to the subway, Greek coffee cup in hand, giving tourists directions and skirting dead rats with aplomb. I was, at last, a bona fide New Yorker (or at least someone who could be mistaken for one).

Of course, I still called my parents. A lot. I even listened to bedtime stories. Technically.

My dad and I both loved reading. He was always giving me books, talking to me about books—and now, reading aloud lengthy paragraphs from books over the phone. He always wanted to talk about it—the story and the writing and the symbolism—and how it made him think and feel. I loved it. I'll never forget the pride I felt the first time I recommended a book my dad enjoyed in the same way I enjoyed books he recommended to me. Perhaps—even more so than moving to New York, going to law school, and keeping a houseplant alive—successfully recommending a book to my dad made me realize I'd made it. At long last, I was an adult.

I woke up that morning racked with nerves. It was the first day of my clinical internship—January 27, 2012—my final semester of law school. I chose my outfit carefully—black pantsuit, pale blue button-down, sensible heels—then showed up to discover it was a casual office, everyone in jeans and T-shirts. The rest of the day was dull, boredom breaking only once, in the middle of orientation, when my phone went off like a nuclear meltdown alarm. Embarrassed for the second time that day, I turned it off and apologized. When I turned it on again, at 5 p.m., the screen lit up with a dozen missed calls—all from my mom. I knew something was wrong. She

picked up on the first ring.

When I turned my phone on again, the screen lit up with a dozen missed calls—all from my mom.

“Just so you know,” I said. “I’m in an elevator with someone else.”

I’ll put it this way: When I entered the elevator, I was one person; when I exited, I was someone else. Sometimes I look back and imagine the “someone else” in that elevator was me—the version of me that would never receive this call, the version that emerged from the elevator’s sliding doors to walk through the lobby, hail a cab, and meet friends for drinks. Maybe she’s out there somewhere, living my parallel life—the one in which my dad didn’t die suddenly of a heart attack.

My friend Jess was already waiting outside the building. The second I saw her, I collapsed. Poor Jess—she’s really tiny—and yet, somehow, she managed to practically carry me the three blocks to my apartment. My childhood best friend met us there. She and Jess packed my suitcase. I was so out of it, I couldn’t even recall where my clothes were. As though clothes belonged to some other realm in which people had bodies to clothe. I had no body. I was a vapor, the puff of smoke after the rabbit disappears.

My dad was an artist. The house always smelled like paint, or sounded like whatever tools he was using. A hammer could actually be soothing, so strongly did I associate it with him. He was always listening to music. He had a motorcycle that shook the whole house when he started it up in the garage. When my friends put me in that cab to LaGuardia, I was sobbing so hard I couldn’t hear. And I’d discover a short while later that people don’t die all at once. It’s more like an earthquake, with endless rolling aftershocks; even years later, when the aftershocks mostly subside, you’ll find it difficult to adapt, like a sailor on steady ground. My father died the first time when my mother told me so over the phone. He’d die again when I got home to a house bereft of certain sounds.

I got through security, somehow, and sat on the floor against a wall, my phone plugged into the outlet. I called a friend to see if he could pick me up when I arrived—my mother couldn’t drive. After that, I just sat there, pitiful, crying. According to social contract, no one noticed—or rather, everyone pretended not to notice.

And yet, someone did stop. He might as well have been the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, he was so nondescript—a 40-something commuter of average height, dressed in a button-down tucked into work slacks, holding a briefcase. “Are you OK?” he asked. “Do you need anything? Are you by yourself?”

It’s funny in retrospect, because my dad would have been super mad knowing I told this strange man in the airport—“Yes! I am all by myself.” But I took it one step further and told him my whole sad situation—I was flying home, my dad had just died, I’d bought the earliest flight I could, but it wasn’t leaving for hours and I got to the airport super early.

The man took all this in with a look of concern—sincere, authoritative concern, like President Obama in the Situation Room.

He told me to wait where I was: Not a problem, because I was as attached to that wall as my phone charger. When he returned—it could have been five minutes, or 50—he told me he got me

on an earlier flight. It wasn't a lot earlier, but the smallest amount of time mattered so much to me. I was taken aback by this unexpected act of generosity, even in my current state. I don't remember his name—I'm not sure he even told me his name. I didn't know what he did for a living. And yet, he carried my bag to the gate, sat across the aisle from me, and held my hand. He asked me questions. He asked about my dad. He talked to me that entire flight, and when we landed, he walked me all the way to the door to where my best friend from high school picked me up. I think he waved goodbye. I'm not sure I thanked him—I hope so.



Like my father's death, this anonymous act of compassion changed me forever. I'm less afraid to approach the crying girl on the street to ask, "Are you OK?" I haven't saved any lives, or counseled anyone through grief. But I have made friends for the night. I don't walk by, pretending not to see.

If I were to cross paths with that man today, I wonder would I recognize him? When I think of his face, it's a total blank. It was his kindness that left the indelible impression.

I was so young—24—when I lost my dad. None of my friends could relate. For years I felt really alone—stranded on my planet for one. I still feel that way sometimes. But I think about the man who helped me that day—every time I'm at a gate, every time a plane takes off, every time I'm looking for my ride. I don't feel alone when I fly. His kindness keeps me company. ■

SPOTLIGHT

My sister and I were visiting Chicago and trying to get our crappy, out-dated luggage up some steps. Some random guy came over, grabbed them, and pulled them up the rest of the way. I'll never forget his reply when we said thank you: "Live to give." That's been my mantra ever since. —**Sarah Beth R. T.**

The Art of Parenting

ERICA T

One thing about motherhood people don't talk about enough is the way we have to Pretend That Everything Is Fine, No Matter What. It's a survival skill that begins the minute a tiny stranger is placed in your arms and you realize:

1. No one taught you how to be a mom.
2. You and your baby may be totally screwed.
3. It's too late to cram him back in there.

So, you pretend! Everything's fine and totally under control, guys! *I got this.* You smile even when you're scared shitless, and, eventually, your baby starts smiling back. That's motherhood.

So, you pretend! Everything's fine and totally under control, guys! *I got this.*

When Kieran was two years old, he was a blond-haired, blue-eyed bundle of energy—still babyish with chubby arms and legs but running around like a big kid. My divorce was almost final, thank goodness, but it was messy and awful, and I was exhausted. I had sole custody, which I wanted. But being a single parent is a lot.

We went to the Phoenix Art Museum one morning, just to get out of the house. I love art—I'm an artist, after all—and walking through the exhibits, especially in the morning right after they open, soothes me. Kieran was happily exploring the area between the walls and the wide wooden handrails, running his hands through the empty spaces, when suddenly his arm got stuck.

Now, I don't know how long we stood there while I pretended not to freak out. His arm was wedged so tightly that no amount of maneuvering was working, and I definitely didn't want him to realize he was stuck. I couldn't leave to get help, and because we were there so early in the day, no one else was around to assist.

In that moment I realized how very alone we were in the world, both literally and figuratively. Everything was falling apart. I couldn't support us. I couldn't handle any of this. He would be trapped there forever. Maybe we could just live here in the museum. Maybe we could become an exhibit.

As I silently panicked, my mom-face defaulted into a happy, brave, *everything is fine* smile. Kieran wiggled a bit, but remained calmly curious about his predicament. I noticed his eyes dart to something behind me—I turned around. There was the most beautiful man I've ever seen: ethereal and otherworldly, calm and collected.

He was wearing a solid white dashiki that made him glow, and he spoke with a heavy accent.

A group of equally beautiful, similarly dressed people walked with him, and collectively they had this cool, chilled-out vibe that seemed to fill the air. In my mind I was thinking crazy thoughts like, *This is an angel but angels aren't real, so what the hell is happening?!* But on the outside, I just stood there, gaping. The man leaned over, whispered something into my son's ear, and popped his arm out like magic. And then it was over. A stranger had transformed us from museum captives to regular attendees in a matter of seconds. We were free.

I'm not a hugger, especially with strangers, but I asked the man who helped Kieran if I could hug him because I was so thankful for his help, and he, in his infinite kindness, obliged. That serene intervention was exactly what I needed at exactly the right time, and it drove home the following realizations:

1. Even when it feels like I'm completely alone, I'm not.
2. Just because I can't see a way out doesn't mean there isn't one.
3. Art museums have to make *everything* artsy, even their damn handrails. ■

Do It for Peggy

MIKE A

Peggy was a train attendant, but I like to refer to her as St. Peggy, patron saint of smiles. I met her while visiting Toronto with my boyfriend. We took the train into the city, and Peggy was the attendant checking our tickets. After she clipped them, she stood and talked with us for a while. Every few sentences, she would smile or laugh, and immediately, we would smile and laugh, too. I'm telling you, it was weirdly contagious.

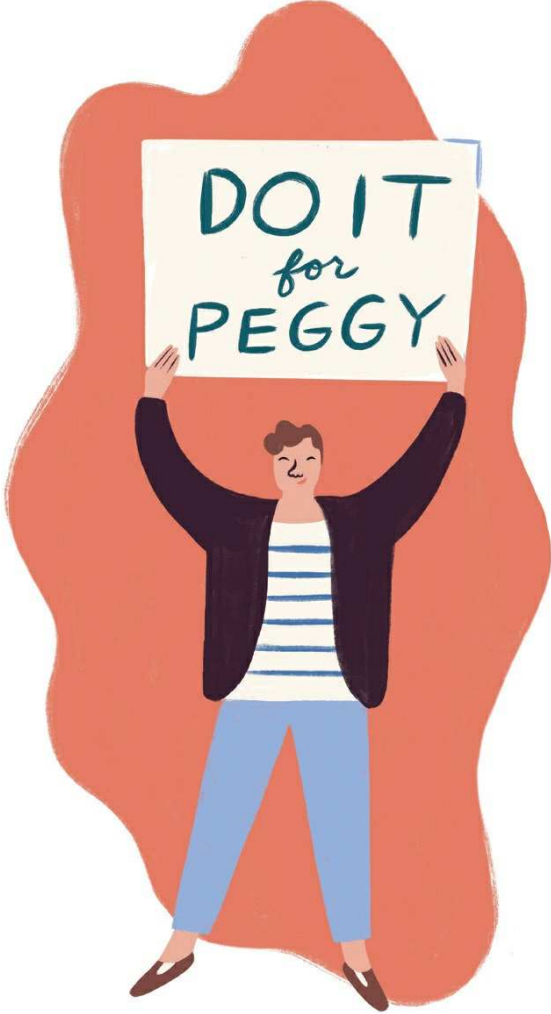
We talked to her for less than 10 minutes, but I swear, she changed my life. I've never met someone whose presence struck me so strongly. She was joy personified. When the train reached our stop and we walked down the platform, we both glanced back. There she was, waving at us from the window, wishing us safe travels.

Since that day, my boyfriend and I have coined the phrase "Do it for Peggy," which we exclaim when we need to do something challenging.

Moving a mattress down the hallway? Do it for Peggy! Have to get a root canal? Do it for Peggy!

Headed to a family reunion, a funeral, or the Department of Motor Vehicles? You know what to do. Do it for Peggy.

See? You can't help but smile. ■



All the Good in the World

KAREN R

There's a motto often repeated inside the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous: We suffer to get well. It means, of course, that pain drives us to the point of being desperate enough to change. To do the scary thing. To stop drinking. To ask for help.

Alcoholics don't like pain, and we sure as hell don't like to suffer. That's how I ended up drinking in the first place.

I grew up in Seattle, where my best friend and I used to walk around our neighborhood smoking cigarettes and trying to look cool. At age 12, we caught the eye of a creep, who regularly offered us cups of peach schnapps in exchange for letting him smack us on the ass. At the time, this seemed like a fair trade.

Alcohol provided an escape I desperately craved after an unsettled and challenging childhood. From then on, I didn't do anything sober if I could help it, and it stayed that way for more than two decades.

I was working as a limo driver the night my life took an abrupt turn. My assignment was simple: Pick up a bride and groom at the church where their wedding took place and drive them a short distance to their hotel. Easy enough, right?

My drinking was way out of hand by that point. By the time I showed up to work, I'd already begun to black out, so I don't remember any of this, but, before I went to the church, I sideswiped a gas pump after filling up the limo's tank, causing a bunch of property damage and catching a hit-and-run charge.

I arrived at the church with scratches all down the side of my limousine, loaded up the happy couple, and...refused to take them to their hotel. We went on a joyride instead! I thought it would be fun, but apparently they did not see it that way and I was charged with kidnapping and driving under the influence. The company I worked for offered to drop the charges if I went to rehab, and I agreed to go without hesitation. That option certainly sounded more appealing than serving jail time.

Rehab is where I found the love of my life.

Pat had the brightest blue eyes I'd ever seen, the color of the Caribbean Sea. Just looking at him felt like a three-week vacation. I remember sitting in an AA meeting, holding my shiny coin representing 30 days of continuous sobriety, and wondering, Who is that good-looking man? Was he really that happy? How anyone could find happiness without alcohol, I had no idea. I, for one, was miserable. But when Pat smiled, his whole face lit up and those blue eyes beamed even brighter. I needed to get to know him, which meant both of us would need to stay sober.

Pat had the brightest blue eyes I'd ever seen, the color of the Caribbean Sea. Just looking at him felt like a three-week vacation.

I kept showing up, day after day, and so did he.

The people in recovery who watched our relationship bloom said we didn't have a chance in hell to stay sober if we got together; we were both severe alcoholics who could barely take care of ourselves, let alone another person. But we did. We hung on for dear life, to our sobriety and to each other. Nine months later, I left rehab, moved into a small house, and started building a real life. Pat moved in, too, and he never left.

For 25 sober years, Pat and I were married, living a free-spirited, nomadic lifestyle. Both of us were loners, happy to depend on each other for support and companionship, content to hang out at home and dedicate our time to our work and each other. When one of us felt like we wanted a drink, the other one was there to say, "That's a terrible idea." We never wavered. He was my best friend, and those bright blue eyes continued to slay me. I never got tired of looking at them.

When Pat died suddenly of an aortic aneurysm at the age of 63, I found myself completely and totally alone—in a very rural area, surrounded by cow pastures and farms. Overnight, I didn't have anyone. The grief was unspeakable.

Of the many hurdles I've had to overcome since becoming a widow, the hardest arrived upon realizing I had no one to drive me to the hospital for a medical procedure. The doctor required me to be accompanied by someone. But who? I weighed my options for days, trying to figure out how to make it work.

I was chatting with another woman online who lived in Sweden. She asked if I'd considered posting about my predicament in the local Neighbors Helping Neighbors Facebook group.

"Really? Ask a total stranger?" I asked, appalled at the idea.

Three days before my appointment, however, the pressure was on. I mustered up all my courage and posted a call for help. I've never felt more vulnerable in my entire life. Not only was my appointment in Kansas City, more than an hour away, but I needed someone to drive me there, stay with me, and drive me home. I was asking for someone to give up an entire day. For me! And I'm a small-boned, 61-year-old widow with chronic pain. What if someone tried to take advantage of me?

I walked away from my computer feeling physically sick over the whole situation. I missed Pat.

Hours later, I returned to my computer to discover so many people offering to help that tears started streaming down my face. The outpouring of kindness was just unbelievable; it felt like a warm blanket. One woman in particular took the time to send a private message explaining who she was and how she had the day off and would be happy to contribute. She seemed trustworthy and reliable, so I agreed to let her take me.

During the ride, I found out she lived with three developmentally challenged adults and worked as their caretaker. This was her only, much needed day off, and she chose to use it to help me.

I choked back tears as we chatted like old friends; she was so kind and sweet, and my heart was so broken over losing Pat. I'd been alone for so many months—just being around another human demonstrating such empathy did more for me than any pain medicine ever could. After she brought me home, she continued to check in and reminded me that she was around if I ever needed her.

The experience reminded me that there are still good people in the world if you're willing to open yourself up to them. And, maybe, in the midst of all my suffering, I'm also starting to heal.