Out of the Mouths of Babes

by Donna Dunn

My special day had finally arrived. September 25th was here at last. Time is cruel, especially for those who can't tell
time. It seemed to pass slowly, almost torturously, for a young girl like me, unable to chart the hours as they crept by. In
fact, I could barely will myself to sleep last night in anticipation of the glorious event to come—my fourth birthday party.

There were many preparations to be made in time for my party. About a week ago, Mom called all of our friends and
relatives to invite them to the upcoming party. As she excitedly talked to Aunt Valerie on the telephone in the kitchen, I
stood by her side, impatiently tugging on her skirt, whispering, "Don't forget to invite Bernie!" She gazed down at me,
seeing the twinkle in my brown eyes, and gave me a reassuring smile. I knew she wouldn't forget.

Bernie Wilson worked with my mom at the golf course across town. She was a kind, gentle woman in her mid-50's
with platinum blonde hair that would gleam in the sunlight like spun gold. Her soft green eyes sparkled warmly when she
spoke in her soft, southern drawl. She was the epitome of a grandmother, perhaps even a fairy godmother. Bernie had
grandchildren of her own; in fact, I was often told that I closely resembled one of her own granddaughters. Bernie treated
me like a royal princess, buying me an ice cream cone on a sweltering Saturday afternoon, reading me my favorite
stories, or even just watching my favorite Mickey Mouse cartoons on television with me. Last April, just before Easter,
Bernie had sewn together a cuddly, stuffed dog made of blue and red patchwork fabric for my Easter basket. I treasured
that dog with the floppy ears, giving him a special place on my bed for him to stand guard. Bernie and I had a unique
relationship, which is why I could not let this one special day pass without her presence.

The guests were scheduled to arrive in about forty minutes. Mom had fussled over my new birthday outfit that she and
Dad had purchased especially for the occasion. I loathed wearing frilly dresses, so Mom was satisfied to tie a blue ribbon
in my hair to match my blouse. Mom and Dad were now in the kitchen decorating my cake. Mom had baked my favorite
chocolate cake for the party and Dad was helping her frost and decorate it. I climbed onto a chair to look at their creation.
It was pretty. They had used jelly beans to make a picture of Mickey Mouse. Black, yellow, blue, and red—it was perfect.

Mom answered the door when the doorbell rang, and a stream of friendly faces walked in and surrounded me. Uncle
Roland, Aunt Valerie, and Sheryl were first. Then Uncle John, Aunt Rena, Marion and Erin came in. Roger and Kevin,
our two friends from across the street, even came to wish me a happy birthday. In all the excitement, I didn't notice that
Bernie had arrived. I ran to her and gave her a big hug.

Mom and Dad gathered all the guests into the living room so I could open my cards and presents. The cards were to
be opened first. I sat on the floor in the middle of the room and began to tear into my cards. I opened my first envelope.
Inside, I found a birthday card and also money. I set the cards to my left and the green "paper" to the right. Each enve-
oplo that I opened contained money and a birthday card. I opened the last envelope, anticipating and half-expecting both
a card and money. The card was all that the envelope contained. I stared at the open card in disbelief. There was no
money. I looked up quizzically and suspiciously eyed all those around me and said, "Ok, who's the wise guy?" Everyone
burst out laughing. I'm sure that Mom and Dad may have also felt a twinge of embarrassment at the bold and daring
question posed by their precocious four-year old daughter. The cardgiver was my beloved Bernie. Beneath the guise of
my inquisitive smile, I was deeply puzzled. How could I possibly explain Bernie's love for me if there was no money in my
card? Hadn't anyone who'd ever loved me placed money inside my birthday card? Maybe Bernie didn't love me after all.

As a child, I had been deeply disappointed with the card that contained no money. With the underdeveloped reason-
ing ability of a four-year-old, coupled with wide-eyed innocence, I had equated love with money. Looking back, I realize
now that the sentiments versed in a lovingly chosen birthday card are far more precious than any amount of money that
may be tucked inside the envelope in a moment of haste. Once money is spent, the loving manner in which it may have
been given is silenced by the ringing of a cash register, forever forgotten. It's been said many times that to give is better
than to receive. Bernie's heart swelled with adoration and love for me when she gave me that birthday card. She gave of
herself unselfishly and expected nothing in return. Although I may not have appreciated the card's value as a youngster, I
now know that a birthday card given out of love is exceedingly more priceless than any amount of money the card may
hold.

I learned a valuable lesson that day. Money cannot buy love. The loving relationship that Bernie and I shared
together could never hold a price tag. I do hope that Bernie has forgiven me for my vocal outburst as a disappointed four-
year old. And in my own heart, I know she has.