

# unforgettable firsts

No offense to Baby's first tooth, step, or word, but the most meaningful childhood milestones aren't always found on a development chart. Six writers share the moments when they glimpsed the person their child would become.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **Brian Cronin**

## *the first time* ***I mortified my daughter***

Ours is a family that celebrates the silly and praises spontaneous dancing and singing. At dinner we're allowed to leave the table for only two reasons: (1) to go to the bathroom or (2) to rock out if we are moved to do so.

My five-year-old daughter, Annabel, habitually abuses this privilege. She can manage only two bites of macaroni before she's shimmying and snaking her way across the wooden floor of the dining room. And while Annabel is "onstage," she demands complete attention, especially from me. If my eyes stray from her performance, she'll holler at me until they return. When she and I used to bike to school, we'd sing together the whole way—*Oh, what a beautiful mornin', oh, what a beautiful day*—while waving at everyone we passed.

This past winter, our family moved to a new home. I had to walk Annabel to the bus stop every morning. Some days the bus would come late. To kill time and keep warm, we'd belt "Make

'Em Laugh" and "Singin' in the Rain" while tap-dancing and kicking holes in the snowbanks. Then, one day, she did something new. As soon as her yellow bus came into view, her mouth tightened, her chin lowered, and she shushed me. And when I didn't stop singing (I actually sang more loudly just to tease her), she stepped on my feet until I quieted down. It was a sad moment. I had anticipated it would come—just not when she was so young. "Who's on the bus that's so important?" I asked. She didn't answer. Is she waking up to the pressures of the social world? I wondered. Or is she just becoming her own person, apart from me?

I'd like to think that person will be consistent with the person I know and love—that resolutely joyous and goofy girl—but ultimately it's outside my control. She's going to sing in her own voice at her own volume. I only hope she believes in the beauty of that voice as much as I do.

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**the first time**  
**my daughter told her dad**  
**to pick up after himself**

One Saturday last spring, as my husband was attempting to read the newspaper, our two-year-old, Sylvie, tugged him out of his chair and pushed him toward our bedroom. She pointed to a pair of used socks he had tossed on the floor and, regretfully but firmly, told him to put them in the hamper. Now. My husband was so stunned that he forgot he was taking orders from a person in a saggy diaper and quickly whisked them away.

Since then, it has been clear that Sylvie's love of tidiness is no phase. This toddler is truly aggrieved by the presence of stray socks, and she visibly relaxes when they are gone. She insists on putting away one toy before taking out a new one. She has even chosen persnickety Bert as her favorite *Sesame Street* character. Obviously, she feels best in an orderly environment, which gives her a sense of calm and control.

Every morning, she swings through our place, conducting a visual sweep like a security guard. You can see her thoughts working. Couch pillows in place: good, good. New bananas in the fruit bowl: I'll allow it. Her Playmobil figures are lined up with the precision of North Korean soldiers. Her Lego buildings have clean, modern lines. Bibs sit in a drawer, barely used.

I see only upsides to this behavior. Our apartment is spotless, for one thing. Our tiny tyrant has been able to accomplish what 10 years of pleading with my messy husband could not: One look of reproach from Sylvie and he hastens to put his junk mail in the recycling bin. And, because of her, I've upgraded my frazzled-mother look a little. When I leave the house, she inspects my outfit for splotches. When she—inevitably—finds one, she runs for a sponge. Then she carefully wipes away the offending stain and gives my shirt a little pat. "Better," she says, and it is.

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**the first time**  
**my son ran a race**

My eight-year-old son, Elijah, is a perpetual need machine. He has a habit of demanding obscure things—ferociously. "I want you to buy me Pokémon HeartGold," he says, "or I'll punch the dog in the face." He also has a habit of doing as close to nothing as possible. He spends much of his leisure time watching YouTube videos of *other* kids playing Club Penguin. I have sometimes worried that all my attempts to create a productive human were failing. Then he started to run.

We first got a sense of the runner he would become last year, during his school's fund-raising Jogathon, in which he kept pace with kids who were taller and stronger, showing a determination that he generally reserves for finding the secret levels in Lego Star Wars. Shortly after that, he said he wanted to run a real race—a 5K in Los Angeles's Chinatown, not far from where we lived at the time. My wife thought he wasn't ready, that a 5K was too long and too hard. But I knew he was ready, because he said so. Believe me: This child doesn't do *anything* he doesn't want to do.

And so last February my wife and I found ourselves waking up before 6 A.M. on a Sunday morning to dress Elijah in a crummy T-shirt handed down from his cousin, cheap athletic shorts, and a pair of old, holey sneakers, then blearily driving to the race.

Twenty-nine minutes after the crack of the starter pistol, Elijah cruised across the finish line, looking impossibly happy. They posted the times. He was fifth in his age group. And for the first time I pictured my son as a successful man.

We bought him a pair of real running shoes, and he trained hard for the next race. It didn't go perfectly: A stop at the porta-potty added five minutes to his time. He was crestfallen. But I told him not to worry; he had come so far. Bursting with pride, I let him watch videos of other kids playing games for the rest of the day.

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**the first time**  
**my son laughed**

**As a baby, my son was at risk for serious health problems. Max had brain damage due to a stroke at birth; doctors told us he might never walk or talk. He landed in the neonatal intensive care unit for two weeks, unconscious for most of that time. Once he came home, I watched his every movement and tortured myself by reading a weekly e-newsletter on baby development.**

**Even at that tender age, Max had muscle tightness, the first sign of the cerebral palsy he would eventually be diagnosed with. One afternoon I took him to a baby-massage class. I had told the instructor about Max's condition, but she wasn't prepared. "Oh, it's so hard getting his legs to move," she said, frowning. I was crushed: I had a child who couldn't even get a massage? What kind of life would he have?**

**As other mothers in my neighborhood went to new-mom coffees and compared notes on the local online message board about spit-up and swaddling techniques, I spent my days shuttling Max to doctor's appointments and researching therapies. I felt no joy, only anxiety about what the future held for him—not to mention a bad case of "Why me?"**

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*the first time*  
**my daughter took  
care of my son**

When I learned that my wife was pregnant with our second child, I was elated. Then I thought about our daughter, Josie, who was two at the time, and a mild terror set in. My exact words to my wife were “What if she eats him?”

“Nah,” Erin said. “She’s a picky eater.”

But my fears were not unfounded. Josie was what the professionals might call a “sensitive” child. Not a brat, exactly, but a girl who vigorously sought our undivided attention. And truth be told, Erin and I were haunted by the specters of our own somewhat bullying older brothers. We didn’t want our new child to be pushed around.

For the first few months after we brought Judah home, there was no problem. Josie gloried in her role as the big sister. But as the little guy became more demanding, Josie grew frustrated. She would hug him with equal parts affection and hostility. As much as she enjoyed having a disciple follow her around and laugh at her jokes, she clearly hated sharing her toys and our attention. Then, a few weeks ago, something changed.

We were in the basement playroom, watching the kids cavort in a cardboard box (a.k.a. a rocket ship), when Erin realized it was time to start dinner. “Let’s head upstairs,” she said.

“But we’re almost to the moon,” said Josie, now four. “We almost to moon,” echoed Judah, two.

“You and Papa go,” Josie said calmly. “I can look after Judah and make sure he doesn’t get into mischief.” Erin and I exchanged glances. We were used to Josie aping our vocabulary. We were not used to her volunteering to watch her brother.

Josie pushed us out the door and shut it behind us. Naturally, Erin and I stood there and eavesdropped.

“Don’t worry, bud,” Josie said soothingly. “Mama and Papa are right upstairs. We’ll see them when dinner is ready.”

I realize this event doesn’t sound like a big deal in the grand scheme of things. But it was the moment when Erin and I could see that Josie was the sort of big sis who would look out for her kid brother, who would choose the path of compassion over resentment. To us, it seemed a small miracle.

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**When he was three months old, I blew a raspberry at him as we were lounging in bed. “Heh, heh, heh,” Max responded. A laugh? I wasn’t sure—his face hadn’t looked particularly merry. I did it again. “Heh, heh, heh,” chuckled Max, unmistakably. And I laughed back; it was my first real laugh in what felt like forever. I was thrilled to see my son enjoying himself. Blissful that he had done something on track. And most of all ebullient that he could, at the very least, laugh. No matter what kind of challenges he might have, no matter whether he could walk or talk, my child would be happy.**

**I couldn’t have known it then, but that laugh was a sign of the child Max would become: a sweet, good-natured, smiley kid—except when I tell him he can’t have chocolate ice cream for breakfast. That laugh also foretold the ways he would surprise me, not to mention our doctors. Max crawled at two years old, walked at three, and at four said his first word (“No!”). Now eight, Max has his challenges: He is cognitively delayed and has trouble speaking and using his hands. Yet when I look at him, I don’t see a kid with cerebral palsy. I see a child who takes pleasure in life—maybe even more than most.**

*Ellen Seidman, who lives with her husband and two children, writes the blog Love That Max (lovethatmax.com).*

*the first time*  
**my daughter played  
a practical joke on me**

In retrospect, I should have seen it coming. After all, I was the runner-up for Most Mischievous in my senior-class poll. To feel right in the world as an adolescent, I needed to rebel—and I did so by tying a soccer player’s boxers to his car antenna, safety-pinning people’s sleeves together during assembly, and making up elaborate scavenger hunts that required stealth and trickery. So I ought to have expected to get punked by my five-year-old daughter. But I didn’t. An embarrassing rookie mistake.

In the kitchen one day, while my back was turned, Phoebe put a glob of mayonnaise in my glass of milk. When I drank it, the mayo hit my tongue like something horribly curdled. I rushed to the sink, spitting and gagging. When I gathered myself, I turned to Phoebe. “I put mayo in your milk!” she exclaimed, wide-eyed, obviously afraid she was about to get in trouble.

I just looked at her. “Wait—you did this because you thought it would be funny?”

She nodded.

“That’s my girl!” I said, laughing. Phoebe seemed delighted.

How could I be angry? A prankster who procreates is going to get what’s coming to her. In my case, I’ve gotten my comeuppance repeatedly: Phoebe, now 16, has three younger siblings who are known to dollop lotion on light switches and tape up faucets that later spray you in the face.

So often our culture expects us to show our love for one another through exchanging greeting cards and stuffed bears holding Mylar balloons. But as Phoebe and my other children remind me constantly, a prank—and the hysterical laughter that it inspires—can bond a family just as much. A beautifully wrapped box of fake dog poop sometimes says “I love you” in the most memorable way. And as it shows up again and again—on the bath mat, the Persian rug, the front stoop (um, thanks, Phoebe!)—it proves that funny is a gift that just keeps on giving.

*Julianna Baggott is the author of The Provence Cure for the Brokenhearted and My Husband’s Sweethearts, written under her pen name, Bridget Asher, as well as the forthcoming trilogy Pure. She lives with her husband and four children in Tallahassee, Florida.*

