



Gift
from

a Stranger



You may have seen her at the Recreation Center, at the library, or at a local coffee shop. She's about five foot ten, has dark blonde hair, and is usually pushing a stroller carrying the one-year-old boy whom she nannies. Only accidental onlookers may have seen her secretly dropping off small packages at the doorsteps of people in the neighborhood. Why does she do this? Because when Jo Jordan was very young, the gifts of a kind stranger at Christmas eased the pain at a time of great loss.

A DIFFERENT CHRISTMAS

It was the quietest Christmas Eve six-year-old Jo Jordan had known. As she, the youngest of two sisters and a brother, and their mother sat at the kitchen table watching the snow fall beyond the kitchen window, she wondered what kind of Christmas they'd have this year. Just a month earlier, her father had died after a long and torturous illness.

Jo's mother tried to manage the farm as she divvied up chores between herself and the children. But filling Dad's shoes was impossible. Taking care of the pigs, chickens, cows, horses, and an endless supply of cats, in addition to digging up potatoes, picking strawberries and green beans, and keeping the books, was a strain on this fatherless family. Though there were presents under the tree, the absence of Jo's father made for an incomplete Christmas.

During Christmases past, the family sat around the decorated

tree on Christmas Eve, drinking hot apple cider as Jo and her siblings pestered their dad about what was inside the packages. This year, there was no laughter, no Dad. Even at age six, sitting at the kitchen table daydreaming about how she used to bring her father hot tea in an old green metal thermos, Jo had a tremendous respect for her mother's strength. However, despite Jo's mom's desire to make another wonderful Christmas for her children, Jo still longed for her father's presence.

A muted jingle interrupted Jo's daydreaming. Everyone but Jo thought it must be the harsh Canadian wind whistling through the eaves. But Jo, a curious child, bolted from the table and flung open the back door to find a gigantic plain brown box at the doorstep. "Mum, Mum," Jo cried. "There's a big box out here." Jo's mom thought Jo was playing a joke and didn't come to the door.

Jo convinced her sister to help her lift the box over the threshold and drag it into the house as a flurry of snow and icy air followed them inside. Their mother watched them with suspicious eyes as the children ripped open the lid of the box to find a bounty of brightly wrapped gifts with each child's name on them—*To Jo from Santa*. The children tore the presents out of the box one by one, jumped up and down, and giggled under the shower of torn wrapping paper. Beams of light bounced off the red, green, and silver paper, making the children's eyes sparkle. *Who did this?* they all wondered. *Who has been so kind?* Although they would never ►

BY
ALICEA
JONES

PHOTOS BY
TODD WHITE



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from page 31

learn the identity of the mysterious Santa, this gesture of kindness brought joy to an otherwise sad Christmas.

A GENEROUS PHILOSOPHY

Even though Jo had spent many winter afternoons watching her mother bake lemon loaf and other goodies for family, neighbors, and those in need, this Christmas their family was on the receiving end of kindness. This mysterious box of gifts changed Jo's life forever. The seed of generosity was planted in six-year-old Jo. She didn't know it then, but lemon loaf would be her gift of choice. Surely, if something so yummy made her smile, it would also bring joy to others.

So when Jo was a young adult living on her own, she began making lemon loaves just as her mother had done. At first, Jo made the loaves as a special treat for her two boys. They loved it, and their smiles reminded her of the joy she felt when she opened the surprise Christmas box. Then she began giving lemon loaves to friends who needed cheering up, sick neighbors, and people moving to Georgetown, such as Dr. Matt Lester, a new doctor at Georgetown Pulmonology. *There's nothing better than to leave some lemon loaf on his desk with a note welcoming him on his first day of work,* she thought.

"A friend asked me, 'Do you give lemon loaf to everybody? Surely you know how to bake other things.'" Jo just chuckled, thinking about how many people she has encouraged with her

baked specialty. In Georgetown alone, she's given out more lemon loaves than she can remember, sometimes anonymously, ringing a neighbor's doorbell and running away before anyone could answer. Jo believes that the greatest blessing one can receive is the joy that comes from giving love, hope, and encouragement to others—even after experiencing deep personal loss, such as losing her father at a young age. "It's made me who I am," she says.

Her heart goes out to people in friendship, laughter, and yes, lemon loaf. For Jo, giving bread to the sick, as a birthday gift, or "just because" is her way of giving back. So this Christmas, if you see a tall, slender young woman heading in your direction and carrying an armful of small bundles, it could be Jo Jordan, forwarding the kindness of a stranger. ■

Mum's Lemon Loaf

1/2 cup of butter
1 cup white sugar
2 eggs
1/2 cup milk
1 1/2 cups flour

1 tsp baking powder

1 lemon rind (reserve the lemon for the topping)

1/4 cup sugar and juice of 1 lemon, mixed well, for the topping

Cream together butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Add eggs, milk, and lemon rind to butter mixture and mix well. Stir in flour and baking powder until blended, then pour batter into parchment lined loaf pan. Bake at 350°F for 45 minutes or until toothpick inserted in centre comes out clean. Once the loaf is done baking, leave it in the pan to cool, and set a timer for 5 minutes. When the timer rings, use a pastry brush to apply 1/3 of the mixture on top of loaf. Set timer again for 5 minutes, and repeat process until all topping is used.

Gift cooled loaf out of pan... and enjoy!

