

12 Nights of Kindness

BY LYNDA CHELDELIN FELL

Have you heard of the 12 Nights of Christmas?

Also known as Secret Santa, I came across this concept years ago while reading *In Search of the Real Spirit of Christmas*, by Dan Schaeffer. In the back was a chapter describing his family tradition modeled after the twelve days of Christmas. Beginning on December 13 and ending on Christmas Eve, every evening the family left a poem and a treat on a neighbor's porch. The whole idea was to teach kids that giving was just as fun as receiving.

Twelve nights sneaking around the neighborhood pretending to be Santa? How fun! I especially loved the idea of helping my kids learn the joys of giving at their young ages.

And so, that December gave birth to a new family tradition.

Our oldest daughter was at college and our teenage son was busy with high school activities, so that left our two youngest kids. As I explained what we were embarking on and why, they were thrilled with the idea of playing a secret Santa.

Our 10-year-old daughter much preferred to be an elf, given that she was female and Santa was, well, male. But, if her 8-year-old brother was Santa—an elf's superior—well, that wouldn't do either. To keep the village peace, they both became elves instead of Santas.

As a family of six with one in college, we were on a budget. Armed with a shopping list, my first stop was our local dollar store. Thankfully, this turned out to be our only stop—everything we needed was there. Taking home supplies, we got to work printing the poems and preparing the bags while the kids giggled at the notion of sneaking through the neighborhood in the dark.

It was already December, and the first night was fast approaching. Fairly new to the neighborhood, we discussed who should be the first recipient of our newfound tradition. I'd recently heard that a neighbor a few blocks over was a new widower. His name was Tom, and he had lost his wife to cancer that summer. I couldn't imagine what the holidays must feel like for him and their two kids. It was clear that their home could use small doses of nightly cheer, and the matter was settled.

On the evening of December 13, my two elves giggled nervously as we bundled up and headed out that first night. New snowfall had recently blanketed the region, turning our nightly treks through the quiet streets into an enchanting winter wonderland. I treasured memories in the making.

Upon returning home each evening, we warmed our chilled hands around mugs of hot cocoa and giggled over who was clumsier in the dark. We also shared hope how our nightly surprises might bring cheer to Tom and his kids.

The next eleven nights flew by and soon it was Christmas Eve—the day when we had to reveal our identity.

I woke up that morning feeling nervous. I had never met Tom nor had I ever experienced a significant loss, so I knew nothing about grief. I was worried that perhaps our nightly gifts had been a bit too much for the family's fragile emotions. But there was no backing down now—we had to finish.

That afternoon we arranged a dozen homemade treats on a festive paper plate, covered it with red cellophane, taped the final poem to the top, and off to Tom's we went, this time in broad daylight. Was Tom and his kids even home? We didn't know but would soon find out.

My worry grew as we rounded the corner of Tom's street. With my two elves in tow, we nervously made our way up his short driveway.

With treats in hand, we gathered on Tom's front porch, and I rang the doorbell.

When Tom opened the door, I immediately belted out:

*We wish you a merry Christmas
We wish you a merry Christmas
We wish you a merry Christmas,
and a happy new year!*

Rather embarrassingly, I realized I was singing alone, for my two elves stood glued to the porch with mouths frozen shut. Because my children insist I'm tone deaf, I made the swift decision that one verse was more than enough for this poor grieving family.

As soon as I stopped singing, I further realized that Tom and his two kids had tears in their eyes.

Oh, dear. Was my voice that bad? Or, was our entire mission just a big flop?

In that awkward moment, I felt it best to explain who we were, offer our apology, and then leave the poor family alone. After all, it was Christmas Eve, and we were nothing more than strangers intruding on their fragile emotions.

But, I soon discovered I had nothing to fear at all—Tom and his children were crying because of how much they loved the gifts, and now it was coming to an end!

It turned out that Tom and his children not only enjoyed the element of surprise, but the nightly anticipation was a wonderful respite from the constant sadness. Mission accomplished.

That first year proved a wonderful experience and we continued the tradition, choosing a new family each year.

Until our own tragedy struck.

In late summer of 2009, the unthinkable happened when our youngest daughter Aly, now 15, died instantly in a car accident while returning home from a swim meet. Caught in my own fog of grief, I had no joy to share and no energy to carry on the family fun with our youngest son Shaun, who was now 13.

With broken hearts, our beloved tradition came to an unexpected end. Or, so I thought.

In the years since losing Aly, in fits and starts our family learned to laugh and feel joy again but I've never forgotten how bleak those first holidays felt. I've also learned that helping others helped my own heart to heal.

When our only grandson turned 9—the perfect age to become an elf—I reinstated the old family tradition. Just as it had in years past, it offered us both a nightly dose of good cheer, and once again enriched our holiday in magical ways.

In 2017, with our grandson now living in Lake Tahoe and no new grandchildren to take his place, it was time to select one last family before retiring the beloved family tradition. It wasn't hard to choose, for a neighbor who was raising her teenage grandson just a few doors down had terminal cancer. She unabashedly loved the holidays, and had decked their home mighty merrily each year. Except this year, for she was now bedridden.

So, for 12 nights beginning December 13, we brought Christmas to her.

On December 24 of that year, as we sang We Wish You a Merry Christmas, there wasn't a dry eye in the house. She died just a few weeks later.

Having experienced our daughter's death years before, I understand how the holidays can feel bleak, and how a little kindness can go a long way.

The memories we made over the years proved more than just a little fun. Being agents of kindness taught two generations of elves that giving is also good for the giver, and that nobody needs cheer more than someone with a heavy heart. Further, the nightly gifts of compassion gave us the best gift of all—memories we'll treasure for life.

***Lift a sorrowful heart this holiday season
by leaving a surprise on a doorstep each evening.***

***Pick a person who could use a wee lift
and each evening leave them a small gift.***

***It's fun, it's fast, and won't break the bank
and the cheer you bring is the best kind of prank.***

P.S. Full instructions can be found at www.InternationalGriefInstitute.com. Happy holidays!

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