

## 12 NIGHTS OF KINDNESS

### Have you heard of the 12 Nights of Christmas?

Also known as Secret Santa, I came across this idea years before I experienced my own loss. Modeled after the *12 days of Christmas*, beginning on December 13 and ending on Christmas Eve, every evening a family anonymously drops a poem with a corresponding treat on the porch of a neighbor in need. On Christmas Eve, the sneaking family reveals their identity. The whole idea is to teach kids that giving is just as fun as receiving.

### Inspired by the idea of helping my kids learn the joys of giving at their young age, that December we adopted the tradition as our own.

Our oldest daughter was at college and our teenage son was a busy highschooler, 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 Aly much preferred to be an elf, given that she was female and Santa was, well, male. But, if her 8-year-old brother Shaun was Santa—an elf's superior—that wouldn't do either. To keep the 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, everything we needed was there.

Taking home supplies, we got to work printing the poems and preparing the treats while the kids giggled at the notion of twelve nights of mischief over the holidays.

It was already December, and the first night was fast approaching. Fairly new to the neighborhood, we discussed who should be the recipient. I had heard that Tom, a neighbor a few blocks over, had recently lost his wife to cancer and was now a widower.

I couldn't imagine what the holidays must be like for Tom and their two kids. To my mind, it was clear that their home could use small doses of nightly cheer. We all agreed, and the matter was settled.

On the evening of December 13, my two little elves giggled nervously as we bundled up and headed out into the night. Sneaking through the quiet snow-filled lanes of our neighborhood was as magical for the kids as it was for me; I treasured our memories in the making.

We successfully delivered the first poem and, per the instructions, a partridge ornament. Upon returning home, we thawed our hands around a mug of hot cocoa, and warmed our hearts around the notion that our nightly surprises might bring cheer to Tom's family.

### 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. We had never actually met Tom, and 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; we had to finish.

That afternoon, as per the instructions, we arranged 12 homemade cookies on a small 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. But, was Tom and his kids even home? We didn't know but would soon find out.

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

When Tom opened the door, we nervously started singing:

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

To my horror, I ended up singing alone—my two elves stood glued to the porch with mouths frozen shut. Because I'm tone deaf, I quickly decided that one verse was more than enough for this poor family. As soon as I quit singing, I 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?**

I decided the best way to handle this was to introduce ourselves and explain we were the little elves responsible for the nightly treats, and then hastily leave the poor family alone. After all, it was Christmas Eve and we were strangers intruding on their fragile emotions.

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

It turns out that Tom and his kids 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 different neighbor each year. That is, until our own tragedy struck.

In 2009, Aly, now 15, died in a car crash while coming 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 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 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 both giver and receiver a nightly dose of good cheer, and once again enriched our holiday in magical ways.

In the years since, I've never forgotten Tom. Having faced loss since then ourselves, I now fully understand how the holidays can feel quite bleak, and how a little kindness can go a long way.

Overall, the nightly trips to an unsuspecting porch are more than just fun. People of all ages can be agents of kindness, and giving others the priceless gift of cheer anytime of year is a gift of joy we give ourselves. Happy holidays!

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For full instructions on how to adopt the 12 Nights of Kindness, visit [www.lyndafell.com](http://www.lyndafell.com).