

Gifts

The ones we give are best, they say, and I agree, of course, but lately I keep thinking of the gifts that I've received.

A tiny creature carved on a stick by my brother. Dinner out with my niece and our husbands, just us four. A horse chestnut my friend Katie once placed in my palm like a jewel. (I kept it in my purse for years, until it fell apart from age.)

A mix tape from Anne for driving coast to coast. Carol's blue platter. A silver starfish from Marge. Becky's lavender field on canvas. An applesauce cake that Nancy made because she knew my story. A sand dune painted by my father just for me. All the dime-store goodies my mother used to wrap up "for the tree" when I was young, so I would know abundance.

And this. When my husband and I first got together, his sister paid him back a long-forgotten loan, just a few hundred dollars but at the time it was a lot to us. He could have bought himself a gift. Or paid a bill. Instead, my true love brought me home a Cuisinart, my dream machine.

Such gifts are love made manifest. But what do we call the other kind, the gifts with no name, no giver, no tangibility?

Last spring, I had a brush with death. The diagnosis proved benign, totally, forever benign, but for two long weeks I lived with the likelihood that I would be gone by fall. At first, I felt panic, then not fear but gratitude for the daily stuff of life. A gift like that doesn't need a name. Yonder breaks a new and glorious morn, and that alone is reason to rejoice.

In the television show *The Crown*, about the British royals, one scene takes place on Christmas Eve in Scotland. The tenants from surrounding farms have walked up to the castle to serenade the king. We the audience know, and he alone knows, that he is dying. These sweet carols, this annual tradition, will be his last. I know the look upon his face, that mixture of sadness and joy.

In the scene, a farmer's child sings a cappella, filling the hall with the goodness and light of the season: *"What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb."*

I know it's only TV, but that scene spoke to me. Giving and receiving are the most personal things we do. Maybe sugarplums mean something to you the way applesauce cake does to me. Maybe for you it's frankincense or French hens.

But it's not the gift, it's never the gift, it's always love we exchange. The gifts of my lifetime, your lifetime, are blessings. May you know them in abundance, given and received. May you treasure them as I do, every one.