

## *My Most Precious Gift*

By Consuelo Conesa Leone

**A**s I thought about all the gifts and cards we would be giving during another Christmas season, suddenly a question came to my mind. Of all the gifts I had received during Christmastime in the past, had any of them significantly affected my life? Then I remembered December 1963.

I was home alone because my parents had gone out. I was a young teacher at the time. Classes had ended, I was on vacation, and Christmas was fast approaching. I looked around for something to read, but I had already read everything in our home library. I decided to go see a neighbor who had a good book collection and had often loaned books to me. This time she offered a book that two young men—foreigners—had left with her.

“I’d like to know your opinion of it,” she said. “The content seems interesting.”

She then added that the young men were missionaries. Missionaries? My interest in the book immediately died. At the time I was not interested in anything having to do with religion, but I took the book anyway.

As I said good-bye, my neighbor added, “Inside the book you’ll find a little note they wrote, suggesting that before reading the book, a person

needs to say a prayer to God.”

Not having any plans that rainy Saturday, I decided to read the “interesting” book. I opened it and found the note written by the missionaries. I put the book on my bed, knelt down, and for the first time in my life, offered up a prayer to God in my own words.

As I started to read, the story captivated me. How was young Nephi able to exercise such unshakable faith? I wondered if I would ever be capable of doing something like that. As I read the book of Mosiah, I drew strength from the words of King Benjamin. At the time I had no idea I was reading a book that would become my favorite for more than 40 years.

During those years the book’s pages have provided me with much support, comfort,

and strength, and I have discovered many important insights that I shared in talks and lessons at the little Tucumán Branch in Argentina, where I was baptized and confirmed. Two years later, while serving a full-time mission, I also wrote little notes on pieces of paper, suggesting to investigators that they pray before reading the copy of the Book of Mormon my companion and I left in their hands.

So many years have passed since then. But how could I have forgotten the most precious Christmas gift I ever received and the neighbor who gave it to me? I can hardly remember her face, and I struggle to remember

her name—Marina. Thank you, neighbor. You have my eternal gratitude. ■

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## Mother's Christmas Mouse

By Betty LeBaron Mostert

When I was a child in the 1950s and 1960s, our Christmas traditions were not elaborate—except for the stockings. Because we children enjoyed our Christmas stockings so much, we continued the tradition when we married and had children of our own. Buying surprises and assembling dozens of Christmas stockings, however, soon became too much for my aging parents, especially my mother, who had a serious case of rheumatoid arthritis that limited her mobility and energy.

Eventually, I volunteered to take over the project. Our annual extended family home evening, in which we acted out the Christmas story and opened our stockings, found me exhausted from the demands of being the mother of several small children and juggling the events of an active life. As I watched everyone dump treasures out of the gingham Christmas stockings I had carefully prepared, I was feeling a little sorry for myself.

As expected, my stocking was empty except for the standard candy cane and Japanese orange that I had placed there earlier. But as I shook



them out, I noticed a little bedraggled mouse made of a walnut and hazelnuts. One ear was much bigger than the other, and the whiskers were crooked. The tail had been cut too short, and the loop to hang it on the tree was off center. I was confused. Had someone's kindergarten project ended up in my stocking?

I looked up and saw my mother watching me from her wheelchair across the room. With a gnarled, bent finger, she beckoned to me.

"I wanted to do something for the Christmas stockings," she said. "They made these little mice in Relief Society, and they were so cute."

Her tears were close to the surface, and her gentle voice shook as she continued.

"I couldn't get my fingers to work, so I made only one. It didn't turn out, but I knew you wouldn't mind."

I looked again at the little mouse in my hand. She was right. I didn't mind. In fact, her little bedraggled mouse became the most precious treasure of all that Christmas.

For more than 20 years, I have tenderly removed the tissue paper from the misshapen mouse crafted

by misshapen fingers and carefully placed it on a branch. My angel mother has been free of her crippled body for several years, but her Christmas mouse reminds me of two profound truths.

The first is that my mother honored me by believing that I could look past the mouse's crooked ears and feel the love and sacrifice that went into its creation. The second is that if I, as an imperfect mortal, am capable of finding beauty in a humble little mouse, how much more is our Father in Heaven capable of seeing past our imperfect efforts and understanding our pure intentions.

I know that when we do our best to give to others and to Him, our gift is not just good enough—it is of incalculable worth. ■

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## A Christmas to Remember

By Jerry O. Thompson

My wife and I had been married less than two years; we were caring for a newborn; and, like typical struggling student families, we were stretching our finances trying to make ends meet.

Graduation was still a few years away, and we were trying to make the best of the Christmas season. I had several part-time jobs, and my wife, Lisa, was working as a secretary.

We didn't have a lot of extras, but we were happy.

A few months before Christmas, I was still getting to know the families I was recently assigned to home teach. One family in particular stood out because of the adversity they had recently faced. Two of their children had died in an accident from which the father was still recuperating, and the mother suffered from a crippling illness that had left her physically impaired. Despite these challenges, this family had a great spirit about them, and they set an example by the way they followed the commandments.

During my home teaching visit in December, I saw that they did not have a Christmas tree. My heart sank for their children. Knowing of their physical, spiritual, and financial struggles, my wife and I decided to do something for them.

We had saved enough money to buy a Christmas tree, so we decided to go out on Christmas Eve, buy the biggest tree we could afford, gift wrap it, and anonymously leave it at this family's home. Fortunately, no one was home as we dropped off the tree. As we drove home afterward, we anticipated the joy they would feel

upon returning home and finding the tree waiting for them. This small sacrifice added a spirit of peace and joy to our holiday that I had not felt before.

When we arrived at our apartment, we had our own surprise waiting for us on the doorstep: a beautifully decorated Christmas tree! My wife wept as she beheld this anonymous gift of love given to us in our financial need.

We later found out that this gift was given to us by the same family to whom we had given our tree. Even in their dark hour, this family had sought to bless others. Our hearts were filled with the true spirit of Christmas that year. It was a Christmas we will never forget. ■

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## *Did Heavenly Father Really Love Me?*

By Carol C. Watts

Usually I loved the music, activities, and excitement that accompanied the holiday season, but this season was different because our family had moved to a new town. I knew we needed to be there at that time, but I felt uncomfortable and out of place.

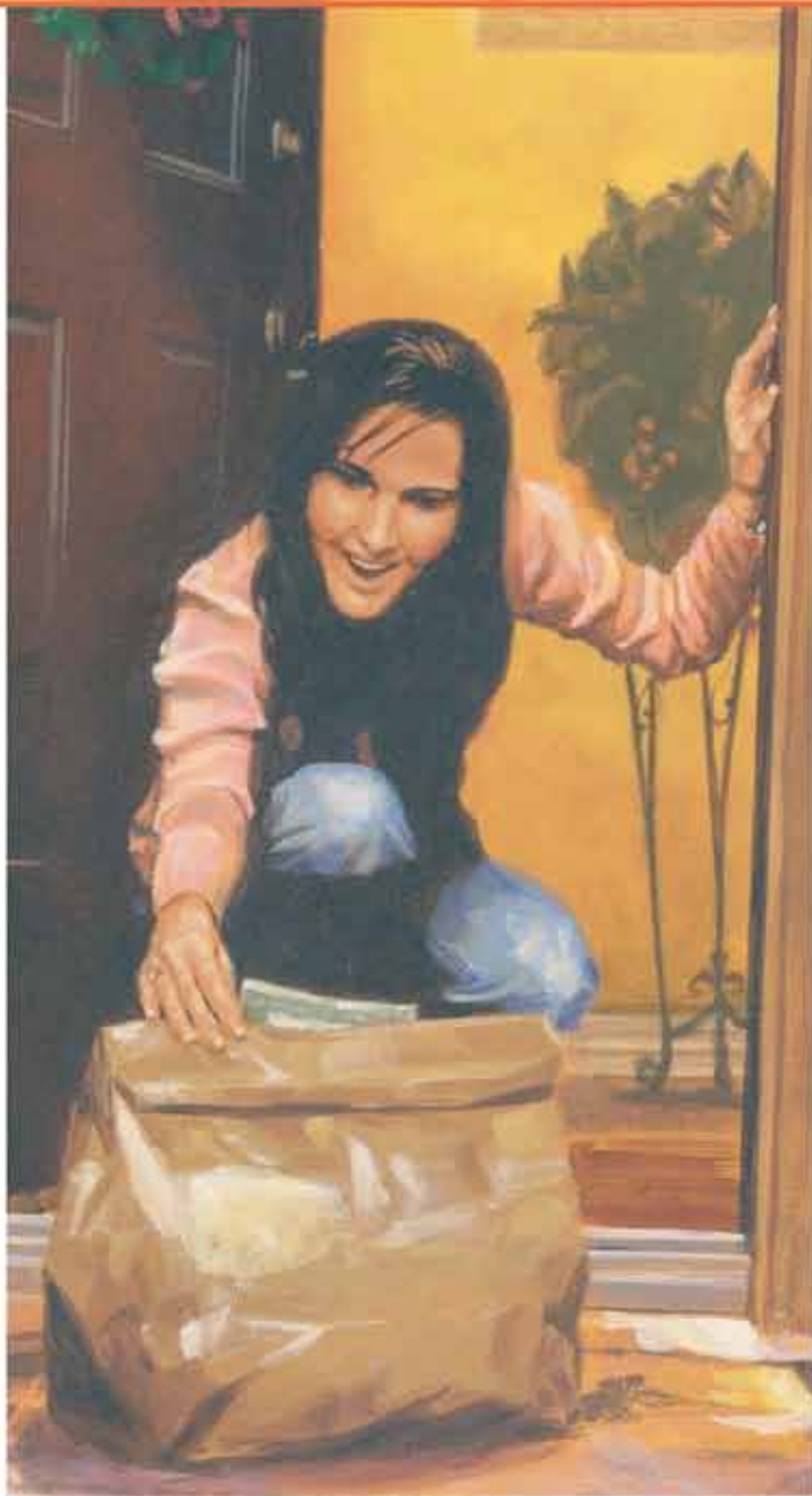
I voiced my discontent to my husband, Rob. We had moved several times since our marriage, and he knew I had trouble with feelings of insecurity. Rob asked me, “Do you realize how much Heavenly Father loves you?”

“Of course,” I replied.

“But,” Rob persisted, “do you feel *in your heart* that He loves you?”

Tears came as I realized that I did not. For as long as I could remember, I had felt that I was less than everyone else. Rob challenged me to pray and ask Heavenly Father to let me feel His love for me. That night I did so.

A couple days later I went grocery shopping. In addition to purchasing the usual items, I had planned to buy some ground beef and a roast. I realized, however, that we did not have enough money to afford the meat. It would be another week before we had any money. We also



needed fuel for the car so we could travel to an out-of-town family party.

We weren't destitute, but I prayed about our situation, telling Heavenly Father that it would be nice if we could somehow buy the needed items.

The next evening as I was prepar-

**A**s I was preparing dinner, the doorbell rang. When I opened the door, the only thing I found on the doorstep was a large paper grocery sack. I reached down to pick it up and saw a \$20 bill stapled to the top of the folded-down sack, with "Merry Christmas!" written in crayon across the front. Inside the sack were several packages of frozen ground beef, as well as a couple packages of steaks. I was dumbfounded. I had told no one that we were out of money until our next check, not even my husband. How could someone be so sensitive to the Spirit that he or she gave us not only the meat we needed but also almost the exact amount of money it took to fill up our car? During fast and testimony meeting, I expressed gratitude for the gifts, hoping that the person responsible was there.

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This experience was a turning point for me. Heavenly Father had answered my prayer. He did love me, He knew my needs, and He let me know by showing me. Since then I have sought to improve my ability to hear the whisperings of the Spirit. I often pray now that I might be an instrument in answering someone else's prayer. ■

## The New Recruit

By Henny Rasmussen

I picked up my husband's memoirs and read, once again, his account of finding the Church more than half a century ago:

"As a 20-year-old in 1951, I was at the school of sergeants at the Kronborg Castle [in Denmark]. On Christmas night I was on guard duty on the embankment that surrounds the castle. At one point I stopped, looked up to the stars, and felt that there was more between the sky and the earth than I had thus far thought. In other words, I began to believe that there was a God, which I had never really believed before. My parents were absolutely not religious, and they and I came to church only for baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals.

"When months later I became a sergeant, I got my own troop:

44 new recruits—or more exactly, 43 plus 1. This one was very different, and when I asked him what it was that made him different from the others, he said he would tell me in the evening inside my quarters.

"There he told me about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for five evenings in a row. On the sixth day, Sunday, I went to church. And with that my new life began.

"The Church involved me completely. Little by little I became acquainted with the members of the Church. I found out that my recruit was not so much different than the overall membership.

"I became convinced that the Church was true, that it was the Lord's Church—and I was baptized. A truly magnificent day."

I am grateful that my husband, Orla, who died in 1998, included these words in his personal history. That long-ago Christmas night, when my husband first sensed that God truly did exist, and his conversations with the new recruit are responsible for our meeting each other, being sealed in the temple, and having five children—who have now brought grandchildren and great-grandchildren into our family. We have had a rich life in the Church and many blessings. I am grateful for that Christmas night and for the new recruit in Denmark those many years ago. ■