

The Bookmark

‘I’ll get it!’

My granddaughter reaches the letterbox before the postie’s motorbike has passed the low picket fence and disappeared behind towering pine trees on the corner.

I watch from the kitchen window. Even in late winter I keep it open, enjoying the whisper of a breeze, the sounds from the quiet street, voices and footsteps. Anything that keeps me connected.

‘There’s a letter, a gardening magazine – and a paper bag. With something inside it.’

Melanie’s eyes are like saucers, but she doesn’t open the bag before handing it over.

I know by now that the ‘something inside’ will be curious but harmless.

The bag rustles; a bookmark emerges. Handmade with a pen and ink design, delicately coloured. I recognise the distinctive style.

‘That’s really pretty, Grandma,’ my granddaughter says. ‘Who’s it from?’

‘Not sure, Melanie. It’s a rather pleasant mystery.’

We settle at the table to finish morning tea. Today it’s scones with jam, courtesy of the gnarled old apricot tree. The summer and autumn harvest, from the little orchard in the front yard and the vegetable garden in the back yard, has been converted into bottled fruit, jams and relishes. But the citrus trees are still producing, with plenty to give away.

‘Look at this.’ I open a folder that lies amongst recipe books.

Melanie smiles as she turns the pages, running her fingers over the plastic inserts filled with hand written notes and sketches. Quotes, proverbs and mottos that stir memories, some with meticulous illustrations to match, greeting cards waiting to be inscribed.

‘Who’s giving you these, Grandma?’

‘I may never know, but that doesn’t matter. They have been arriving in the letterbox since summer.’

‘Well, this bookmark needs to be used, not left inside a folder!’

Melanie glances through recipes until she reaches ‘Lemon Delicious Pudding’, and marks the place with the latest gift. ‘There! Let’s make this for dessert tonight.’

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I open the front gate and walk over to the slatted community bench my late husband made many years ago, cleverly incorporated into our front fence. Small side tables on each arm offer an invitation to linger with a cup of coffee, as Jim and I used to do, greeting neighbours and strangers with a smile and a few words. I run my hands over the oiled wood, its original glorious golden-red colour now faded, as I haven’t kept up regular maintenance.

I place garden produce in shallow bowls attached to the tables, above signs that say *Help yourself*: limes that drop to the grass when yellow; leafy winter greens; a bunch of daffodils and jonquils, all pleated yellow and white petals; a handful of bright pink camellias. There is always something to share, and working in the garden keeps me grounded.

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I no longer sit outside by myself. I watch from the kitchen window, as others pass by and pause.

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My daughter's voice on the phone is calm, but concerned. I listen as she talks, distilling her love and support from the general chat and family news.

'Mum, Melanie told me about the anonymous gifts you have been receiving. It all sounds a bit strange. I'm surprised you haven't mentioned it.'

Lyse pauses.

'What if the notes start to get a little – personal? I would hate to think you are being stalked. Especially since Dad is no longer – ' Her voice trembles.

'Don't worry. Every message so far indicates a kind person. I just don't know who it is.'

I flick open the folder as I speak, recalling the surprise when the first gift arrived mid January, a simple note with a quote from John F Kennedy: *We must find time to stop and thank the people who make a difference in our lives*. The hand-written script finishes with a flourish, as if the writer wants to say more. The first note was folded in a paper bag, covered in silvery traces from the letter box snails.

'The messages and notes have been arriving every few weeks, Lyse, and not once have I felt uncomfortable about the content.'

I extract the lemon spattered bookmark from the recipe stack.

'And they are quite beautiful. The writing and artwork are unique. These are not blandly typed up and printed out. Anyone could do that. I look forward to the next one.'

'Oh, Mum ...'

*

The new espaliered fruit salad tree – a gift from my daughter – is showing signs of spring: the blood plum graft has 'woken up' with tiny white and green buds along the bare branches; the nectarine and peach branches already have healthy leaves and buds. I anticipate delicious stone fruits in a few years, to supplement the apples, limes, lemons, oranges and apricots I already enjoy.

I wander through my cottage garden early in the morning, selecting blue-toned flowers, today's gifts for the community bowls outside the fence. I love to share what I have, to give something of beauty and benefit to others.

Just as someone has brightened my life for the past seven months.

I kneel on the padded mat, head down, snipping dew-soaked stems, pulling weeds from the damp soil and tossing them into the gardening bucket.

Footsteps shuffle and a walking stick taps; someone approaches along the footpath, pauses and continues, sound fading.

I ease up from the grass, and walk out to the community bench. Tie raffia around the flower stems, and place my bouquets in the bowls, adding a splash of water from a small watering can.

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Glance along the street in the direction of the footsteps. All I can make out in the distance is a black jacket, grey trousers, glimpses of a white hat with a black band, a cane in one hand.

There's nothing in the letter box.

I'm a little disappointed, still not knowing the identity of the mysterious benefactor.

Then I sit on the bench and reflect.

Perhaps it is time to make new connections.

I wait for the next interaction, whether it be friend or stranger.

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