

*Wonderful, lifelong friends. The trip of a lifetime.  
A loving gesture. Peace of mind.*

# JAR OF REPENTANCE

*By Kathleen Smith Thomas*

**M**OTHER, MY FRIEND LINDA, AND I WERE HEADED north on the train to Edinburgh, Scotland. I felt as if we were in some movie, and the train, the English countryside, and the characters had all come together for my musing. My mom, Jessie, lived in Washington State, Linda in Utah, and I in Florida. When I had told Linda that Mom and I were going to England, she asked if she could join us. She had long dreamed of visiting the British Isles, and her recently discovered cancer combined to motivate her to make the trip.

Linda and I had known each other since we first met as eighth graders in Sweetwater, Texas, in 1963. We have always been opposites. If opposites attract, maybe the strong friendship we developed in our small west Texas town stemmed from that fact. In our last high school years, Linda had been elected to the homecoming court and yearbook royalty. I had been elected president of Future Teachers and vice-president of the student body. She was prettier and definitely more popular. I enjoyed her energy and extroversion. It allowed me my introversion without making me feel like a total outcast. My senior year, Linda convinced me to try out for cheerleader. She created a cheer for me and said I would be great. Reluctantly I agreed and went through the motions in front of the student body. Linda won, and I did, too, although my heart believed it was more a vote against the other contenders than a vote for me. Linda was selected captain and ran the squad like a benevolent general. She was Miss Energy and a perfectionist, tirelessly planning and enthusiastically working.

Linda was nominated for Homecoming Queen, but Carol won. That was okay, though, because the other big election was for yearbook queen, and we thought Linda would easily win. But Carol won again. After the announcement, I tried to console Linda. Our dates were with us, doing the manly thing, exclaiming, "How could this happen?" and "Carol is such a fake" and "We'll get her." (I was never sure exactly what that meant.) Twenty years later, at our high school reunion, we felt somewhat avenged as Linda, I, and those same dates were in the homecoming parade, perched atop a vintage red Corvette convertible, laughing about the runner-up syndrome. Linda



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and I had traveled several states to be there. Carol, who lived only an hour away, had sent regrets.

Our lives intersected at various times after high school. Linda went to a small college, and I went to the University of Texas at Austin. I thrived at school—university life satisfied all of my intellectual yearning. Linda was in a car wreck and almost died. After a year of recovery, she moved to Austin to work. We both got jobs at the state capitol and encountered everything from lecherous legislators to Vietnam War protesters.

Linda continued to work; I returned to school and eventually graduated. Afterward, my sister and I decided to attend acting school, and we moved to Dallas. There we joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Upon returning to my family, who had moved to Florida, I met someone and, after a year and a half, married. He was not a member, and our wedding took place on the beach. Shortly thereafter, Linda called. She was thinking about joining the Church! She knew I had recently joined and asked what I thought about it. Soon she and her husband were baptized. Over the years, we both had children—I had three, and their ages matched exactly the ages of three of her six children. I settled in North Florida, and she, in Oklahoma.

**S**O, TWENTY-FOUR years later, there we were together again, speeding north from London. The train was wonderful, clean, and comfortable. The scenery was delightful, much as I had imagined it would be. Green fields were interspersed with square plots of land, solid yellow with rape-seed. Cows and sheep dotted the field—not big herds of them as in Texas, but just enough here and there to make it scenic. The small stone homes were set in fields surrounded by wooden fences made from what looked to me like tree branches crossed in Xs. The church in the center of town, with its spire claiming the highest point, completed the pastoral setting. If I concentrated intently, I was able to put myself in one of the small cottages with a pot of tea, some wellies by the door, and my sheep in the field. I could block out Linda's cancer and, for a few moments, be someone else, somewhere else.

Linda and Mother loved the train trip, too. Linda was constantly taking pictures of everything. It became our inside joke that she would take pictures and I would harass her about it. I had left my camera at the flat in London—again! I had taken

maybe three photos in two weeks. We weren't sure where we were going in Scotland, planning to just ride until we decided to explore. Edinburgh arrived about the same time our hunger did, so we got off. We could board again later and travel further north. Mother and Linda looked at me as if I were the social activities director. I said I knew no more about this place than they did but maybe we could head off *that* way, pointing in the direction away from the train. We found a tourist information station where a helpful woman gave us a map. Then, as we headed out to eat some cheese and bread on a nearby lawn, we heard bagpipes from around the corner. Hurrying to look, we found the source of the sound. There he stood, in his kilt, playing real bagpipes. It was too wonderful; standing in Edinburgh, Scotland, with the afternoon breeze, listening to what was surely an authentic Scotsman playing an authentic Scottish folk song. The sun was setting rapidly, and we didn't know where we would stay the night. We felt much like explorers must feel charting new territories—invigorated and inspired.

After eating, we examined our map and started hunting for one of the bed-and-breakfasts we had heard about from the information lady. The late afternoon breeze was now a wind that was not so much blowing as it was whipping—whipping around each part of our bodies, around the building, around pieces of paper in the street and on the sidewalk. Seeing a curved lane off the main road on which we were walking, we gladly turned into it to get away from the noise of the traffic and the wind. The wind did seem to lessen, and, halfway around the curve, we found our place.

The owner was a friendly man who the next morning offered us eggs, bangers, and ham, and toast for breakfast. The place was filled with knick-knacks—expensive, nice ones. Porcelain ballerinas, dogs and cats, and other assorted animals. The owner must have been a trusting sort, because he left them everywhere. His treasures were in our room, in the hallways, and in every corner and nook in his home.

With the new day upon us, we were ready to sightsee. While walking down a mile-long road to see the oldest castle in Scotland, we came upon a parade of men in kilts celebrating some church event. Farther on, we found three men sitting on a bench. Telling Mother and Linda that I wanted to talk with some “real Scotsmen,” I approached the three. Apologizing for being so bold, I asked if they were indeed authentic Scotsmen. They said, “No, Lassie, we’re on tire from Ireland.” “Tire, tire,” I thought. “What is that?” After a brief moment of befuddlement, I realized they were saying “tour.” They were on tour from Ireland. They laughed easily. Mother and Linda joined in, and we had a lively visit.

Set on the top of a plateau overlooking Edinburgh, the castle was delightful. Extremely old, drafty, cold, and so . . . well, so castley. After a guided tour, we entered the gift shop. There were all the wonderful “Scottish” things: shortbread, marmalade, scarves, kilts. The orange marmalade, my favorite,



Linda, Kathleen, and Jessie in a park near Hertfordshire, England, May, 1992

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had been made in Edinburgh, and the white opaque jars it was in had been made just north of there. The jars were simple and quite beautiful in their simplicity. Easy to hold, square, and with a smoothness that reminded me of marble. Plain lines and simple lettering described the contents. A plainness that was appealing and inviting. A jar you would want to keep after having eaten what was inside. The gift shop also contained Scottish plaid scarves that depicted the colors of the different clans. We found ours but decided not to buy. Kilts and mittens. Toys and candy. My mother bought a mug with Scottish dogs on it. Linda and I finally decided on the shortbread and the marmalade. Linda bought the marmalade for her mother, thinking her mother would like the jar. I bought mine for me. The castle was closing, so we departed and strolled back down the road.

Looking for places we might eat, we ventured into several side streets. Noticing a pub, we put our heads in to check it out and found only men were inside. Reluctant to enter, we turned around to go back to the road when we noticed a staircase across from us that led to what looked like a place to eat. Going down the stairs, we opened the door. It was small—four tables at the front, some screens, and then two more tables. We entered and looked at the menu. Soup and bread. The place looked and smelled worthwhile, and we were hungry and cold, so we stayed.

The delightful man who brought us the menu had recently arrived from Russia. We had delicious tomato soup and French bread. All sorts of Russian memorabilia were displayed on the wall, and we had a lovely visit with the owner as he told us his life story. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined I would one day be in Scotland, talking with a restaurant owner

from Russia, while eating possibly the best tomato soup I have ever had.

While returning to our bed and breakfast, we stopped one more time to exchange some money. In the process of returning the money to her purse and paying what she owed me, Linda dropped her bag. We heard something break, and at the same second, I knew it was the marmalade jar. Immediately a voice in my head said, "Give her yours." Almost as quickly another voice said, "No." While my mother and I sympathized and helped Linda clean up the mess, the battle continued inside my head.

"Your aunt and your mother would give it to her."

*Well, I'm not as perfect as they are.*

"It is just a jar, and Linda has cancer."

*But I want it.*

"Give it to her."

*No.*

"It is the compassionate, Christlike thing to do."

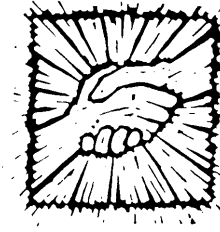
*No, and stop it.*

WE RETURNED TO London and eventually to the States. We kept in close touch over the next two years, exchanging pictures of "The Trip," writing letters, and visiting. Linda, her husband, and all six children moved from Oklahoma to Utah. I moved from the panhandle of Florida east to Tallahassee. Linda sent me a beautiful album about the trip. All those pictures she had taken that I had harassed her about brought back wonderful, warm memories.

Two years to the month after our trip, we talked on the phone, reminiscing about our adventures in England, calling it the most wonderful trip in our lives. We talked about her cancer and how she was maintaining a positive attitude in fighting it. At the end of the conversation, she said she wished, in her life, to have been more like me. It made me feel uncomfortable to hear her say this. I did not see myself as the person she was envisioning.

After we hung up, I went to the kitchen and opened the door to the small, not-often-used cupboard by the refrigerator. There, stuffed in the back (for I did not enjoy looking at it), was the marmalade jar. I took it down, washed it, polished it, and wrapped it in a clean white cloth. I carefully set it in a box and then sat at my desk and wrote Linda's mother a letter explaining that Linda had bought some marmalade for her while we had been in Scotland. That jar had broken, but this jar was the same as the one she would have received. I told her what a kind and loving daughter she had. I enclosed the letter in the package, walked to the car, and drove to the post office. Once the package had been mailed, I felt the way I feel after a splinter has been removed from my finger. I wonder how something so small can create such discomfort, and I marvel that its removal can cause so much relief.

A few weeks later, I received a lovely letter from Linda's mom. She thanked me profusely for the thoughtfulness, saying she loved to have anything of Linda's. I felt profoundly ashamed. Linda died later that year. ☹



## THE FOX

*Why do we feel (we all feel)  
this sweet sensation of joy?*

—Elizabeth Bishop's "The Moose"

"State officials estimate nearly 700,000 head of cattle reside in Manatee County, as well as 7,000 horses, 250,000 dogs, 750,000 cats"

and one fox  
who visits  
our sea oats back yard by the Gulf;  
a mystery  
how he came to this barrier  
island, hardly a habitat  
for foxes.  
He does not appear rabid  
(his demeanor—unruffled serenity)  
stretching and sunning  
on the wide stump  
where a neighbor cut down a tree  
that obstructed the view.  
Cautiously wise, the fox is surprised  
by our appearance as we are by his—  
long grey brush of a tail, the reddish ruff  
and pricked up ears . . . those eyes . . .  
wild life  
amidst the developers.  
Why? *Why do we feel  
(we all feel) this sweet  
sensation of joy?*  
amidst the terrible noise  
of pile drivers,  
each cement piling  
a long spear  
into the earth.

—ANNE FASULO