



## A Biscuit Tin of Imagination

*Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).*

**H**e heard footsteps in the hall, and then the creaking of his bedroom door as it opened slowly. It was late, and it seemed as though he'd been in bed for hours. But he was unable to sleep. He was tense, and every sound of the wind against the window pane and every rattling shingle jarred his senses. Now he was wide awake and shivered in the darkness, dreading what message this phantom of the night might bring.

The silhouetted frame in the doorway was that of his father who suddenly seemed larger than life to the terrified nine-year-old boy trembling beneath the covers. The shadowy figure now moved toward him across the room and bent over to see if he was still awake. There was a long pause—an almost deafening silence—and then his father spoke.

His deep voice cracked and faltered, but the message was unmistakable—forever frozen in time and space in the deepest recesses of the boy's memory. There was no way to soften the dreaded news.

His mother was dead.

It shouldn't have surprised him. She had cancer, and her condition had been getting progressively worse. But it hurt so terribly bad.

Nothing, it seemed, could ease the pain of that night and the awful aching he felt in the weeks and months and years that followed.

That nine-year-old boy was Clive Staples Lewis.

This episode in his life is one that is remembered by biographers as a life-changing moment. Lewis later wrote: "All settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life. There was to be much fun, many pleasures, many stabs of joy; but no more of the old security."

Yet the joy of his early childhood never really left him—joy that was first identified, not surprisingly, through his imagination. His first encounter with this sense of joy was not a landmark event. Rather, it was what many might easily forget or regard as utterly inconsequential.

One summer day during his carefree childhood before his mother died, his older brother fashioned a miniature toy garden on a biscuit tin. In it, young Lewis saw a tiny, secret and sacred space where he pictured himself shrunk down to fit this magical world of moss and twigs.

It was an imaginary setting that would evolve into the land of Narnia in his classic work, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He later described this singular experience in his memoir, *Surprised by Joy*:

*It made me aware of nature—not...as a storehouse of forms and colors but as something cool, dewy, fresh, exuberant.... As long as I live my imagination of Paradise will retain something of my brother's toy garden.... It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton's 'enormous bliss' of Eden...comes somewhere near it.... It had only taken a moment of time; and in a certain sense everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant in comparison.*

We easily devalue the creativity of young minds as mere child's play when we assume that excellence in academic endeavors or organized sports or dance lessons are more natural avenues to future success.

But we should never underestimate the power of childhood creativity in healing the pain of loss and loneliness—or in unlocking the door to a future avocation. The imagination is a terrible thing to waste.

For C.S. Lewis, the life-changing recognition of joy and the origins of the mythical land of Narnia came by way of a biscuit tin—one of life's momentary unexpected tender mercies. □

—Ruth A. Tucker

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