



FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

CHRISTMAS  
IN MY HEART

A TREASURY OF TIMELESS  
CHRISTMAS STORIES

15



*compiled and edited by*  
JOE L. WHEELER



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC., CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

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*Christmas in My Heart* 15

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Designed by Jennifer Ghionzoli

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Published in association with WordServe Literary Group, Ltd., 10152 Knoll Circle, Highlands Ranch, CO 80130.

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## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Christmas in my heart / [compiled by] Joe L. Wheeler.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4143-0136-5 (15)

ISBN-10: 1-4143-0136-7 (15)

1. Christmas stories, American. I. Wheeler, Joe L., date

PS648.C45C447 1992

813'.01833—dc20

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Printed in the United States of America

12 11 10 09 08 07 06

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## DEDICATION

Way back with *Christmas in My Heart 1* and *2*, it happened. I received a letter from a Canadian housewife, mother, and author. She'd fallen in love with the two books—and had both questions and observations. I responded, and so it began.

Through the years, she has gradually become one of our most cherished friends.

Most of the Canadian Christmas stories we've anthologized through the years have been unearthed by her. Case in point: She submitted "A Christmas Bargain in Kisses," found in this collection.

Unquestionably, however, the most valuable contribution she's made has been as one of the four editors who read and critique each story I write before it is submitted for publication. So seriously does she take that pro bono responsibility that sometimes the text is slashed to pieces before it's tossed back into my lap. But given that her suggested edits are so insightful, invariably the story is greatly improved as a result.

A couple of years ago, I sent her a story I had written hurriedly, as I was rushing about getting ready for a cruise. Once on the high seas, I blissfully relaxed. But there was no escape from her, even there! A blistering e-mail reached me, declaring, in so many words, "How DARE you even think of submitting a story that is unworthy of you? How dare you let all those readers down who've come to expect only the very best from you!" So chastened was I that, upon my return,

I completely abandoned the poor brainchild and  
wrote, in its stead, one of my longest stories,  
“Christmas after the Dark Time,” for Tyndale/Focus  
on the Family and the much shorter “Road Closed  
Ahead” for Review and Herald.

So it is indeed fitting that I dedicate  
*Christmas in My Heart 15* to

LINDA HARRINGTON STEINKE

of

Warburg, Alberta

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- “Give or Take,” (Introduction) by Joseph Leininger Wheeler.  
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- “If You’re Missing Baby Jesus, Call 7162,” by Jean Gietzen.  
Published in *Virtue*, December 1983. Reprinted by permission of the author.
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- “Forty Dollars to Spend,” by Shirley Seifert. Published in *McCall’s*, January 1930. If anyone can provide knowledge of the earliest publication source of this old story, or the whereabouts of the author’s next of kin, please send to Joe Wheeler (P.O. Box 1246, Conifer, Colorado 80433).
- “The Christmas Pageant,” by Michael L. Lindvall. Published in Lindvall’s *The Good News from North Haven* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2002). Republished by permission of Copyright Clearance Center.
- “The House That Glowed,” by Arthur Maxwell. Published in volume 7 of *Uncle Arthur’s Bedtime Stories* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing, 1964). Reprinted by permission of Malcolm Maxwell and Review and Herald Publishing.
- “Please, Sir, I Want to Buy a Miracle,” as retold by Albert P. Stauderman. If anyone can provide knowledge of the earliest publication source of this old story or the whereabouts of the author’s next of kin, please send to Joe Wheeler (P.O. Box 1246, Conifer, Colorado 80433).
- “O Little Flock,” by Temple Bailey. If anyone can provide knowledge of the earliest publication source of this old story or the whereabouts of the author’s next of kin, please send to Joe Wheeler (P.O. Box 1246, Conifer, Colorado 80433).
- “A Christmas Bargain in Kisses,” author unknown. Published in *The Nor-West Farmer*, during 1900–1902. Text owned by Joe Wheeler (P.O. Box 12146, Conifer, Colorado 80433).
- “The Secretary of the Treasury Plays Santa Claus,” by Sara L. Guerin. Published in *St. Nicholas*, January 1894. Text owned by Joe Wheeler (P.O. Box 1246, Conifer, Colorado 80433).



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*Joseph Leininger Wheeler*

INTRODUCTION:  
GIVE OR TAKE

---

*Socrates knew it thousands of years ago: the “sure thing” may not be.*

*We’re slow learners: We still don’t know it.*



It is 105 degrees in the shade, and the summer sun wilts me as I stand outside a house, gratefully lowering my briefcase to the porch floor. Since that briefcase weighs well over forty pounds, I seem to walk with a permanent stoop.

Finally, after I knock loudly, the inner door opens—a little. The screen door does not. The lady of the house peers out at me with the coldest eyes this side of the North Pole, suspecting that I’m there with the deliberate intention of separating her from the little household money she’s managed to put aside.

Which I am.

She listens impassively while I give my shopworn spiel, and all the while she slowly and almost imperceptibly begins to close the door. Clearly, I have about as much chance of getting inside and showing her the books in my battered briefcase as I’d have selling refrigerators to Eskimos during a blizzard.

In my despair, I play my trump card. “Ma’am, could I ask a big favor of you?”

In surprise she freezes: The door ceases to close, and she spits out a malevolent, “*What?!* ” If I were to expand on that single-word retort it would be this: *I’m in the process of shutting my door on you, so whatever it is that you’re going to ask me is going to result in one single thing: This door is going to close, the lock will be set from inside, you will leave, and my meager supply of money will remain intact.*

Whatever it is that she imagines the favor might be, she’s totally unprepared for the question.

I manage to look woebegone, exhausted, and overcome by the blinding sun (easy, considering the conditions). I smile weakly and say, “It’s so hot today, would

it be too much trouble if I asked you for a glass of water? . . . I'll pay you back when it rains."

Miracle. The door opens again, her lips twitch, and suddenly I'm no longer an enemy, but instead a rather nice-looking young college student standing out there in the blistering heat. She says, "You *poor* kid—must be hot out there! Would you prefer a nice glass of cold lemonade?"

She leaves, and I hear a cupboard door closing, and then a refrigerator door. Soon she returns, glass in hand and a smile on her face. She has to open the screen door to hand me the drink. And I am prepared. I say, "Bless you, ma'am! . . . While I'm drinking it, you might be interested in something I've been lugging around in this monstrosity of a briefcase." I hand her a Bible storybook . . . and take my time drinking.

The attitude of the woman has now shifted 180 degrees. I'm no longer her enemy but rather her *guest*. Which translates internally to, *I'm the hostess, and I've always believed in hospitality. This kid seems nice, and the longer I leave this front door open, the hotter the house is going to get.* "Come on in! Take a seat. I see you need a refill."

And the sale is already two-thirds made.

For five summers, I used this last-resort approach to salvage situations that were otherwise doomed to failure. Again and again, I saw it work. Even if the woman regretfully had to tell me she couldn't afford the books, that her husband had lost his job, and that her kids desperately needed clothes before books, when I left the house, I had become in that short time someone she really liked, enjoyed talking to, and hoped to see again!

And when she waved good-bye, it was as a hostess might bid adieu to a beloved guest.

As for me, I truly appreciated that glass of lemonade—not only because it quenched my thirst but also because it connected me to my potential customer.

Not all gift recipients, however, are quite so grateful. Most of us labor under the delusion that if we only shower people with enough goodies and gifts, they'll love us for life and ever afterward think of us fondly.

Not so. Of giving, Emerson said, "We do not quite forgive the giver. The hand that feeds us is in some danger of being bitten."



So what could this have to do with Christmas?

A lot.

Let's apply it to gift giving at Christmastime. Most people I know spend a great deal of thought to carefully select gifts that they hope will delight their families and friends. Yet after reading thousands of Christmas stories, I have come to realize—especially from the true stories—that the most fondly remembered Christmases usually involved self-sacrifice on the part of the person doing the remembering.

Again and again in real life, I've seen parents pay a heavy price for showering their children with things without offsetting these gifts by encouraging their children to develop a selfless spirit of giving to others. The result is lifelong selfishness, egocentricity, and the tragic mind-set of one who thinks, *The world owes me a living*. And tragically, parents who martyr themselves so that

their children may have anything they ask for almost invariably are trampled upon in later life by their ungrateful grown children.

Almost all of us are born selfish; consequently true generosity is an acquired trait. It is taught by wise parents or other mentors, circumstances, or example, rarely by abstract lectures or sermons.

In retrospect, for most of us, the epiphany that changes the course of our lives occurs when someone—usually a parent—almost forces us to substitute the needs of others for our own yearnings and desires, and our lives are never the same again. For selfless giving (giving in secret without recognition, reward, or payback) is the ultimate type of giving associated with our Lord. Again and again in His earthly ministry, Jesus urged His listeners not only to give sacrificially, but also anonymously. And because the post-apostolic bishop St. Nicholas did just that, we still fondly remember him seventeen centuries after he lived.

Yet the window of opportunity to dramatically change the lives of our children for the better in this respect is open such a *short* time. In the almost frantic pace of babyhood, childhood, and adolescence, parents frequently discover too late that their children have left them and are now mentored by others. The God-entrusted opportunity and obligation is now gone forever, the tree already being bent.

I wish I could say that I have so learned this lesson that I practice it with our grandchildren. Instead I sense that our daughter and son-in-law have to do damage control from the gifts we shower upon their two sons. Two years ago, both sets of grandparents were together

under one roof, and we seemed determined to outshower the other!

There too, we must learn to practice what we preach. Perhaps as grandparents *we* need to assist in this life-changing process and help, rather than hinder, in terms of lighting the spark that may flame into lifelong selfless generosity in these beloved grandchildren.

There is, after all, nothing wrong in our giving, though both our motives and attitude count a great deal. But there *is* something gravely wrong when children are permitted to grow up ungrateful and devoid of a belief structure that makes selfless giving one of their greatest joys. By selfless giving, I mean giving without recognition or expectation of gifts of equal value being given in return—the hardest type of giving there is. For we are all born to selfishness and a terminal case of you-can't-thank-me-enough-ishness. And the only power in the universe strong enough to shatter that core of selfishness is God.

### SO THIS CHRISTMAS . . .

Let us determine that it will be different in that respect, that we will tackle that most daunting challenge of all and in the midst of affluence, nurture the spirit of true generosity in our families. Interestingly enough, in less-privileged countries I've lived in or visited, I have noticed a disproportionate love of giving and contentedness with life in general, compared to the greed and dissatisfaction so prevalent in our own country and in other affluent nations.

So let us deliberately plan activities and projects for our children that will enable them, perhaps for the first



time, to move beyond themselves and catch a glimpse of lifelong service for others. As vehicles of discussion in such a life-changing attitudinal shift, I invite you to read stories in this collection that have to do with such giving: “Eric’s Gift,” “If You’re Missing Baby Jesus, Call 7162,” “Carla’s Gift,” “Miracle at Midnight,” “O Little Flock,” “Forty Dollars to Spend,” “The House That Glowed,” “The Wheelchair,” “Please, Sir, I Want to Buy a Miracle,” “The Secretary of the Treasury Plays Santa Claus,” and “The Forgotten Santa.”

And we’d be honored if you’d let us know the results.

#### C O D A

I look forward to hearing from you! Please do keep the stories, responses, and suggestions coming—and not just for Christmas stories. I am putting together collections centered on other genres as well. You may reach me by writing to:

Joe L. Wheeler, PhD  
P.O. Box 1246  
Conifer, CO 80433

May the Lord bless and guide the ministry of these stories in your home.





## IF YOU'RE MISSING BABY JESUS, CALL 7162

---

*World War II was raging, and Christmas had come again. Somewhere in the family's moves, their nativity set had been lost. So they bought another.*

*Only trouble was: There were two figurines of the baby Jesus. So what to do?*



*So many people have urged us to include this that it is easily the write-in story of the year!*



In the depths of a bitterly cold December, my mother decided it simply wouldn't do to go through the holidays without a nativity set.

It was 1943 in a small town in North Dakota. My father worked for an oil company during my growing-up years, and we moved around to several different parts of the state with his job. At some point between one move and another, we lost our family's little manger scene.

Happily, Mother found another at our local five-and-dime for only \$3.99. When my brother and I helped her unpack the set, however, we found two figurines of the baby Jesus.

Mother frowned. "Someone must have packed this wrong," she said, counting out the pieces. "We have one Joseph, one Mary, three wise men, three shepherds, two lambs, a donkey, a cow, an angel—and two babies. Oh dear! I suppose some set down at the store is missing a baby Jesus."

"Hey, that's great, Mom," my brother said with a laugh. "Now we have twins!"

Mother wouldn't have a bit of it. "You two run right back down to the store and tell the manager that we have an extra Jesus."

"Ah, Mom."

"Go on with you now. Tell him to put a sign on the remaining boxes saying that if a set is missing a baby Jesus, call 7162."

She smiled. "I'll give you each a penny for some candy. And don't forget your mufflers. It's freezing cold out there."

The manager copied down my mother's message, and

sure enough, the next time we were in the store we saw his cardboard sign:

“If you’re missing baby Jesus, call 7162.”

All week long we waited for the call to come. *Surely*, we thought, *someone was missing that important figurine*.

What was a nativity set without the main attraction? Each time the phone rang, my mother would say, “I’ll bet that’s about Jesus.”

But it never was.

With increasing exasperation, my father tried to explain that the figurine could be missing from a set anywhere—Minot, Fargo, or even Walla Walla, Washington, for that matter. After all, packing errors occurred all the time. He suggested we just put the extra Jesus back in the box and forget about it.

“Back in the box!!” I wailed. “What a terrible thing to do to the baby Jesus. And at Christmas, too.”

“Someone will surely call,” my mother reasoned. “We’ll just keep the babies together in the manger until we find the owner.”

That made my brother and me happy. It was special to look into that little manger and see two Christ children, side by side, gazing up into the adoring eyes of Mary. And was that a surprised look on Joseph’s face?

But the days went by, and no one called. When we still hadn’t heard from anyone by five o’clock on Christmas Eve, my mother insisted that Daddy “just run down to the store” to see if there were any sets left.

“You can see them right through the window, over the counter,” she said. “If they’re all gone, I’ll know someone is bound to call tonight.”

"Run down to the store?" my father thundered.  
"Ethel, it's fifteen below zero out there!"

"Oh, Daddy," I said, "we'll go with you. Won't we, Tommy?" Tommy nodded vigorously. "We'll bundle up good. And . . . we can look at all the decorations on the way."

My father blew out a long sigh and headed for the front closet. "I can't believe I'm doing this," he muttered. "Every time the phone rings everybody yells at me to see if it's about Jesus. And now I'm going off on the coldest night of the year to peek in some store window to see if He's there or not there."

Daddy muttered all the way down the block in the cold, still air, while my brother and I raced each other to the store. The streets were empty and silent. But behind each lighted window, we knew that families were gathering around Christmas trees and manger scenes and fireplaces and tables laden with tasty holiday treats.

I was the first to reach the store window, where colored lights flickered along the edge of the frosty pane. Pushing my nose up against the glass, I peered into the darkened store.

"They're all gone, Daddy!" I yelled. "Every set must be sold."

"Hooray!" my brother cheered, catching up with me. "The mystery will be solved tonight!"

My father, who had seen no logical reason to run, remained some yards behind us. When he heard our tidings, he turned on his heel and started for home.

Inside the house once more, we were surprised to see only one baby Jesus in the manger. Where was the

twin? For that matter, where was Mother? Had she vanished, too?

Daddy was unperturbed. "Someone must have called," he reasoned, pulling off his boots. "She must have gone out to deliver the figurine. You kids get busy stringing those popcorn strands for the tree, and I'll wrap your mother's present."

We had almost completed one strand when the phone rang. "You get it, Jean," my father called. "Tell 'em we already found a home for Jesus!"

My brother gave me a quick, eager look. Our mystery would be solved at last.

But the telephone call didn't solve any mystery at all. It created a much bigger one.

It was my mother on the phone, with instructions for us to come to 205 Chestnut Street immediately, and to bring three blankets, a box of cookies, and some milk.

My father was incredulous. "I can't believe this," he groaned, retrieving his boots for the second time that evening. "*Now* what has she gotten us into?" He paused. "205 Chestnut. Why, that's eight blocks away. Wrap that milk up good in the blankets or it'll turn to ice by the time we get there. Why can't we just get on with Christmas? It's probably twenty below out there now. And the wind's pickin' up. Of all the crazy things to do on a night like this."

Tommy and I didn't mind at all. It was Christmas Eve, and we were in the middle of an adventure. We sang carols at the top of our lungs all the way to Chestnut Street. My father, carrying his bundle of blankets, milk, and cookies, looked for all of the world like St. Nicholas with his arms full of goodies.

My brother called back to him. "Hey, Dad, let's pretend we're looking for a place to stay—just like Joseph 'n' Mary."

"Let's pretend we're in Bethlehem where it's probably sixty-five degrees in the shade right now," my father answered.

The house at 205 Chestnut turned out to be the darkest one on the block. One tiny light burned in the living room, and the moment we set foot on the front porch steps my mother opened the door and shouted, "They're here, they're here! Oh, thank goodness you got here, Ray! You kids take those blankets into the living room and wrap up the little ones on the couch. I'll take the milk and cookies."

"Ethel, would you mind telling me what's going on here?" my father huffed. "We've just hiked through sub-zero weather with the wind in our faces all the way—"

"Never mind all that now," my mother interrupted. "There's no heat in this house, and this young mother doesn't know what to do. Her husband walked out on her. Those poor little children will have a very bleak Christmas, so don't you complain. I told her you could fix that oil furnace in a jiffy."

Well, that stopped my father right in his tracks.

My mother strode off to the kitchen to warm the milk, while my brother and I wrapped up the five little children who huddled together on the couch. The distraught young mother, wringing her hands, explained to my father that her husband had run off, taking bedding, clothing, and almost every piece of furniture. But she'd been doing all right, she explained, until the furnace broke down.



“I’ve been doing washin’ and ironin’ for folks, and cleanin’ the five-n-dime,” she said. “I—I saw your number every day there, on those boxes on the counter. Then—when the furnace went out—that number kept goin’ through my mind. 7162. 7162.

“Said on the box that if a person was missin’ Jesus, they should call you. That’s how I knew you was good Christian people, willin’ to help folks. I figured that maybe you’d help me, too. So I stopped at the grocery store tonight and called your missus. I’m not missin’ Jesus, Mister, because I surely love the Lord. But I am missin’ heat.

“Me and the kids ain’t got no beddin’ and no warm clothes. I got a few Christmas toys for ’em, but I got no money to fix that furnace.”

“It’s okay,” my father said gently. “You called the right number. Now, let’s see here. You’ve got a little oil burner there in the dining room. Shouldn’t be too hard to fix. Probably just a clogged flue. I’ll look it over; see what it needs.”

My mother came into the living room carrying a plate of cookies and a tray of cups with warm milk. As she set the cups down on the coffee table, I noticed the figure of the baby Jesus—our twin—lying in the center of the table. There was no Mary or Joseph, no wise men or shepherds. Just Jesus.

The children stared wide-eyed with wonder at the plate of cookies my mother set before them. One of the littlest ones woke up and crawled out from under the blanket. Seeing all the strangers in his house, his face puckered up, and he began to cry. My mother swooped him in her arms and began to sing to him.

*This, this, is Christ the King  
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing . . .*

Mother crooned, while the child wailed.

*Haste, haste, to bring Him laud,  
the Babe, the son of Mary.*

She went on singing, oblivious to the child's cries. She danced the baby around the room until finally, in spite of himself, he settled down again.

"You hear that, Chester?" the young woman said to another child. "That nice lady is singin' 'bout the Lord Jesus. He ain't ever gonna walk out on us. Why, He sent these people to us just to fix our furnace. And blankets—now we got blankets, too! Oh, we'll be warm tonight. Jesus saves, that's what He does."

My father, finishing his work on the oil burner, wiped his hands on his muffler. "I've got it goin', ma'am, but you need more oil. I'll make a few calls tonight when I get home and we'll get you some.

"Yessir," he said with a sudden smile. "You called the right number."

When Daddy figured the furnace was going strong once more, our family bundled up and made our way home under a clear, starry heaven. My father didn't say a thing about the cold weather. I could tell he was turning things around in his mind all the way home. As soon as we set foot inside the front door, he strode over to the telephone and dialed a number.

"Ed? This is Ray. How are ya? Yes, Merry Christmas to you, too. Say, Ed, we have kind of an unusual situa-

tion here tonight. I know you've got that pickup truck, and I was wonderin' if we could round up some of the boys and find a Christmas tree, you know, and a couple things for . . ."

The rest of the conversation was lost in a blur as my brother and I ran to our rooms and began pulling clothes out of our closets and toys off our shelves.

My mother checked through our belongings for sizes and selected some of the games she said "might do." Then she added some of her own sweaters and slacks to our stack.

It was a Christmas Eve like no other.

Instead of going to bed in a snug, warm house, dreaming of a pile of presents to open on Christmas morning, we were up way past our bedtime, wrapping gifts for a little family we'd only just met. The men my father had called found oil for the furnace, bedding, two chairs, and three lamps. They made two trips to 205 Chestnut before the night was done.

On the second trip, he let us go, too. Even though it must have been thirty below by then, my father let us ride in the back of the truck, with our gifts stacked all around us.

My brother's eyes danced in the starlight. Without saying anything, we both knew Christmas could never be the same after this. The extra Jesus in our home hadn't been ours to keep after all. He was for someone else . . . for a desperate family in a dark little house on Chestnut Street.

Someone who needed Jesus as much as we did.

And we got to take Him there.

*Jean Gietzen*

Jean Gietzen continues to write from her home in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.