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The Golden Ring

A Touching Christmas Story
About Giving, Faith, Love and Loss

Written by
John Snyder
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*In memory of my father,
Joseph H. Snyder, whose company and conversation
I miss each day.*

*For my grandmother, Anna Lucile, who gave me
the inspiration to write this book.*

*And for my beautiful wife, Ruth Ellen,
my wonderful daughters, Nikki and Carli, and
the other woman in my life -
Betty Snyder, my mom.*

Prologue

Christmas. It is truly the most inspiring of holidays. It evokes in all of us an abundance of sentiments and emotions. For a brief period in our ordinarily frenzied lives, it provides us a reason to give pause and to reflect upon life, to consider where we have been, and where we are going.

Christmas instills in us a sense of peace, even in times of war. It provides us with hope in times when many are hopeless. It renews our weary spirits and rejuvenates our feelings of spirituality. It brings us closer to our God, our families, our friends ... and yes, for the most fleeting of moments, even our enemies.

It conjures up images of days gone by, of happier times in our lives that we long to recapture. It awakens our perceptions and sharpens our senses. It instills in each of us the feelings of love, giving and goodness only Christmas can bring.

The Christmas season has always been an especially extraordinary time for me. Many of my most precious remembrances are entwined in the tinsel, the glitter and the reverence of this holy season. I am blessed with a wealth of magnificent Christmas memories that will be with me always. It occurred to me that there are millions of wonderful Christmas memories locked up inside people's hearts, just waiting to be shared with anyone who will listen.

A few years ago at Christmastime, while visiting my grandmother, Anna Snyder, we sat at her kitchen table and talked, as we often did, about her childhood years, and what it was like growing up during the early part of the last century. As we sipped our coffee, she told me a very moving tale about one of her childhood Christmases. It was an

amazingly touching story that inspired me to write this book. Grandma was eighty-nine years old at the time. She had kept this story to herself for all these years. What a pity it would have been if she had taken it to her grave without sharing it.

A treasure trove of wonderful Christmas stories are among us, stories that could change our lives and enrich our souls. To uncover them, we merely need to ask. Ask a grandparent or parent, an aunt or uncle to share with you their most precious Christmas memories. I encourage you to do this before the years take your loved ones from you, and these remembrances will be lost, tragically, forever.

Chapter I

A heavy mist chilled the morning air. The Christmas snow, which had fallen just a few days before, was beginning to melt. A curtain of gray fog rose steadily from the thawing blanket of white, lifting into the cold and lifeless sky. The bald oak trees that lined the backyard stood dripping with thaw, their ashen bark blending into the drab countryside. The scene had the mystic quality of a faded dream.

The cold damp air leaked through the back door and crept up my spine, bringing a shiver that woke me from my daydream. Reaching for a leftover Christmas cookie on the plate before me, I watched her as she cautiously shuffled across the kitchen floor. The dismal light of the morning trickled into the room through the window where she stood, casting her image into a silhouette. Her delicate frame was hunched over at the shoulders as she poured hot coffee into a cup. Her hand trembled slightly as she carefully placed the

mug on the table.

“Here, Johnny,” she said in a hoarse voice. “This ought to warm you up.”

Her caring smile was enough to chase the chill away and make the dreary day seem filled with sunshine. She returned to the coffeepot and drew another cup for herself. As she took her place at the table, it became more apparent that the years were catching up to her. She raised the cup to her weathered lips and took her first sip of coffee. It was then that I noticed something on the little finger of her right hand that I had never seen before - a stunning gold ring with an unusual ruby setting.

“That's a pretty ring, Grandma. I don't think I've ever seen you wear it before. Was it a Christmas gift this year?”

She paused and looked down at the ring, twisting it slightly with the fingers of her other hand. She sat in silence for a moment, then looked up and said, “Yes it was a Christmas gift, but not from this year. I received it many Christmases ago, eighty to be exact, when I was about nine years old.”

“And you've had it all this time?”

“Yes, but I haven't worn it in years because it didn't fit for a long time. But I guess these tired old fingers of mine are shrinking a bit. I tried it on Christmas morning and it fit on my pinkie just fine,” she said, holding the ring out to admire it. “This is a very special ring, John.”

“Who gave it to you?”

“My father, bless his soul. Every Christmas, I take this ring out of my jewelry box and hold it for a while. It helps me remember that special Christmas Day so many years

ago when my father gave it to me.”

“What’s so special about the ring?” I asked her.

“The lessons it taught to those who touched it and to those who were touched by it.”

“What do you mean?”

“This ring has a mysterious past. The events that led up to my father giving it to me, and the place where he got it are mysterious as well.”

“Mysterious? Where did he get it?”

“Wait,” she said, as she put her hands on mine. “I’ll tell you the incredible story behind this remarkable ring.”

Grandma clutched my hands and looked into my eyes. Her wrinkled face and silver hair reflected the many years that had passed since she received the gift of the golden ring. She began to tell me the story, and I had a strong sense of being pulled back in time. As I looked deeper into her eyes, the wrinkles seemed to fade and the face of a little girl with curly brown hair and brilliant blue eyes began to emerge.

Chapter II

It was a cold December evening in 1918, only four days before Christmas. The winter sun had set about an hour before over the small borough of Meyersdale, a picturesque township nestled in the dense snow-covered mountains of western

Pennsylvania's coal country. The spirit of Christmas was in the air, particularly at 525 North Street, where the Beal family resided.

The six Beal children had done all they could to hurry the winter days along to reach the threshold of Christmas. Once there, they strived to keep themselves in the moment, pressing their parents' patience nightly with ingenious schemes to stay up a little longer, to revel a bit more in the present.

"I forgot to feed Nelly," one would call out from an upstairs bedroom, referring to the family's beagle. In truth, the plumpish pooch could have skipped a week of vittles and would have been no worse off.

Anna, the middle child, was nine years old. Her long brown curly hair hung in obstinate ringlets around her face. Her blue eyes sparkled with the anticipation of Christmas, a very special holiday in her heart. She loved the sweet smells created by her mother's holiday baking, the tangy scent of a fresh-cut Christmas tree and the soothing sounds of Christmas carols sung in church and on street corners. Anna delighted in looking at Christmas decorations. By the holiday's end, her nose print was on most of the shop windows in Meyersdale, as she pressed her schnozzle against the glass for a closer look at the decorations inside.

When she thought about what Santa would bring, her stomach got that feeling she felt when her father pushed her high on the swing in the backyard under the large maple tree. Most of all, she treasured the warm and peaceful feeling which swept over her and all those around her at this time of year. She enjoyed the way people treated each other so nicely as Christmas approached, and missed this fellowship that sadly seemed to fade after the Yuletide.

Anna was quiet by nature; one could never discern what complex thoughts were behind her pensive frown. She followed a ritual on these cold evenings. She would walk to the living room window made opaque by the ice etchings artfully carved by Jack Frost. Warming the frozen crystals with the palm of her hand, she would stare out into the approaching darkness.

Fresh snow covered the streets of the town. The recent snowfall clung to the tree limbs causing them to bow under the weight. The white powder glistened under the gentle glow of the streetlights, appearing as diamond dust glittering in the night. The air was frigid, but unusually still, a perfect background for the church bells that could be heard ringing in the season.

In the distance, the whistle of a train echoed faintly through the hollow. It sounded again with more measure. Its high-pitched bellow, growing ever closer, announced the arrival of an incoming train. The rumble of the approaching engine became louder as it shook the tracks leading into town.

The heat from the coal-fired potbelly stove warmed Anna's back as she faced the frosty window. The sound of laughter ricocheted through the large house on North Street, interrupted by the periodic squealing of Anna's older sisters as they ran around the house, chased by the younger brother they affectionately called "Boopie". Elwood was his real name. His older brother, Earl, took the name Boopie from a character he saw in a movie. He tagged his little brother with it, and, unfortunately for Elwood, the nickname caught on around town and stuck with him the rest of his life.

Boopie had always been the mischievous one of the family. He was also the only blonde, and his pale locks were often seen bouncing through the house like a streak of

yellow lightning. And, just as most lightning is followed by thunder, Boopie's streak through the house was usually followed by the discovery of some playful prank.

Mabel and Jule, Anna's older sisters, were very much alike. Mabel, who went by the name "Sis", was a good three years older than Jule, but the girls' features were nearly identical. Each had a tiny freckle on the left cheek that Anna used to try to mimic, with little success, using a pencil lead. Both sisters were also very boisterous, a vast difference from Anna's disposition. Despite the obvious differences between Anna and her sisters, the three of them remained close.

"No running in the house!" shouted Anna's mother, Elda, as she looked up briefly from peeling a potato. She tried to project her voice with authority, but she was unable to hide her smile; she shared her children's excitement about the approaching holiday.

Anna, as usual, was oblivious to the commotion within the house as she continued to gaze pensively out the window. Boopie, Anna's junior by a year, sneaked up behind his big sister and startled her by tickling her under her arms.

"Oh!" Anna shouted with surprise. By the time she could turn around to retaliate, the culprit was already running up the stairs in search of someone else to pester.

This would be anybody but Earl, the oldest brother, partly because he was rarely at home anymore, and partly because he had discovered the art of indifference. Much to Boopie's dismay, Earl's attitude tended to squelch his pranks.

"Thanks, Boop." Earl would holler when he found frogs in one of his drawers. He would then quietly release the creatures back into the night. Or, "What a kidder," Earl would intone when he returned from work and his little brother would jump out from behind the couch in an attempt to startle him.

This time the object of Boopie's newest attack was obviously Jule, as her alto "Booooooppiieee!" resounded throughout the top floor.

Once more, Anna directed her attention outside. Her warm breath steamed the window and it quickly began to freeze. As she wiped away the icy crystals, she watched the blurred figure of a man walking down North Street from the train station where he had just arrived. It was her father, Joseph.

His large frame cast a massive shadow in the moonlit darkness as he trudged through the new fallen snow. His image, at first, appeared almost gargoyle-like as it lumbered to and fro, moving from light to shadow. The pace of Anna's heart quickened as her father drew nearer. She watched him emerge from the shadows and recalled many holiday memories: the Christmas he made the wooden manger scene, the year he took all the children sledding, and last Christmas, when he gave the Christmas prayer at church, telling the Christmas story to the entire congregation.

To Anna, Joseph was a hero. He could fix anything. When Tobi, her mischievous cat, disappeared one rainy night, her father braved the squall and returned hours later, drenched, but with Tobi safely tucked under his arm, warm and dry, carefully wrapped in his coat.

When her father neared the house, Anna saw the steam coming from his nose and mouth as he breathed. Joseph had just put in his customary twelve-hour day on the B&O Railroad, where he worked as an engineer. Anna could tell by his plodding gait that this had been an especially tiring day. Seeing the warm glow of light in the windows of his house gave Joseph cause to hasten his tired pace.

With each step, Anna's excitement grew. She could hear her father's footsteps as

they crunched into the crisp white powder. Anna couldn't contain herself any longer. "Daddy!" she screamed. "He's home!"

The announcement caused a stampede toward the front door. Anna, Sis, Jule, Boopie, and even young Dick jostled for position in the vestibule. Joseph's steel-toed work boots sounded like large kettledrums as they hit each wooden step on the front porch. He stopped to stomp the snow off his feet, causing the glass in the front door to vibrate and letting Elda know he was home.

Joseph peered through the etched glass window on the front door and caught his first glimpse of the welcoming party. Despite his current state of exhaustion, he managed a warm smile as he anticipated the playful mauling by his children. He swung the door open and the children shouted in unison, "Merry Christmas, Daddy!"

"Hey, kids!" Joseph shouted with a broad smile. "Have I got a surprise for you?"

This prompted a confused chatter as the children tried to unravel the mystery. "What is it? What is it?" Jule shouted repeatedly, louder and louder. When Boopie attempted to out-yell his sister, his voice suddenly cracked with a duck-like sound, causing him to become the target of everyone's laughter.

"Hey, Boopie, ever think about trying out for the church choir?" taunted Sis.

With that, Joseph pulled a wrinkled paper sack from his right coat pocket and teased, "Okay, it's something to eat, it's sweet, it's red and green and..."

... "And your mother will be upset if you eat it before supper!" Elda said with a grin, as she rounded the corner from the kitchen. Boopie quickly grabbed the bag and streaked into the living room, pursued closely by the other children.

Joseph took off his coat, which was heavy with moisture, and hung it on the oak

coat tree in the hall. The heat from the stove was a comfort to his frostbitten face. The welcome smell of supper cooking defrosted his nostrils as he walked into the kitchen where Elda was hurrying the evening meal. He walked toward her, wrapping his arms around her from behind while she whisked the gravy on the stove.

“Joseph,” she scolded playfully. “How long have we been married now?”

“Not long enough?” he queried, trying to make his wife smile.

“Seventeen years,” she answered for him, not looking at his face to avoid losing her resolve. “And for how many of those years have we had children?”

“Let’s see,” Joseph said, making a murmuring count of Earl’s age. “Too many?” he joked, making his wife swing around in mock surprise. “I mean, sixteen.”

She stepped toward him, wiping her hands on her apron. “And of those sixteen, how many times have I let you give the children c-a-n-d-y before supper?” her eyebrow was raised.

“Speaking of supper, honey, it sure smells delicious,” he said shaking his head. “You must have been cooking all day!”

“Oh, you,” she said, ruffling his hair. “Always changing the subject.”

Sneakily, Joseph reached around behind her and swiped some chocolate icing from the freshly baked cake that was sitting on the counter.

“Hey, you’re not exempt from the no-sweets-before- supper rule!” Elda said sternly, but she laughed as Joseph sucked the icing from his finger.

“Good cake though,” he said grinning, as Elda made the announcement to the rest of the family that supper was ready.

“Hey, where’s Earl?” asked Joseph.

Earl worked at a nearby furniture factory running a lathe and keeping the floor clear of wood shavings and sawdust. He was usually home by now.

“He should be here any minute,” answered Elda, knowing that it was a rare occasion for Earl to miss a home-cooked meal. Just as she finished making that prediction, the back door burst open.

“Your ears burning, son?” asked Joseph, smiling.

“No sir, but my stomach is growlin’ like a train!” answered Earl shucking off his coat and gloves. Earl was a jovial sort. His round crimson face appeared even more so this night after his long walk in the cold night air. He loudly greeted everyone at the table as he bounced his fist lightly on his siblings’ heads. Before sitting down, he gave a slight tug to the right ear of his younger brother, Dick, who seemed to be staring off into space.

“What’s up, daydreamer? You thinking about Santa or Evelyn Ritchie’s pigtails?” Earl teased.

Dick, at age five, was the youngest of the Beal clan. The most silent of the bunch, he related most to Anna, except he was even more shy. He idolized his oldest brother’s gregarious nature, and even at this early age, tried, unsuccessfully, to mimic Earl’s traits. His attempts at off-the-cuff humor landed flat more often than not, but he still got sympathetic smiles for trying. When this happened, he would retreat back into himself for a while, only to try again later. Eventually, he got it right, and he would grow up to be most like his older brother.

Earl zealously plunged his fork into the mountain of mashed potatoes on his plate and piloted it toward his mouth. One stern look from his father reminded him that he was doing something out of turn. Joseph cleared his throat prompting Earl to stop and knock

the potatoes off his fork. Sheepishly, he returned the utensil to its original position beside his plate.

As the Beals solemnly bowed their heads, Joseph offered the blessing and his annual reminder that the true reason for their happiness at the holidays was not Santa or presents, but rather family and, most importantly, the birth of Jesus.

The prayer, as intended, cast a serious note on the table. It wasn't that Joseph wanted to bring everyone's spirits down; he just felt that somewhere amid the sparkling lights and exuberant giggles, the true meaning of Christmas was being lost.

Chapter III

After dinner, the girls helped their mother clear the table and wash the dishes. Earl tended the fire while Boopie interrogated his father in the living room about the events of his lengthy day on the railroad.

“Hey, Dad, what happens when it snows a lot on the train tracks; can the train still go?”

“Well, it depends. If the snow isn't too deep or heavy with water, then it usually can.”

“What happens if there's a lot of snow, piled real high?” the interrogation continued.

“In that case, if the snow is too heavy to run the train through, they call out the snow fighters.”

“Snow fighters?” Boopie cocked his head.

“Yes, it’s a crew that drives a special train engine which has a big plow on the front. It plows through snow drifts to clear the tracks.”

“Oh,” said Boopie wiping his nose with an upward swipe of his palm, “I think I want to be a snow fighter someday so I can drive a train through a big pile of snow - as big as a mountain - and make it explode into a big white cloud!” With this, he raised his arms in a circle and made a noise like a loud explosion, accidentally knocking the candy dish off the table with the emphatic motion of his arms.

His father laughed. “Well, Boop, I don’t think life on the railroad is always that exciting; usually it’s little more than back-breaking work. Why don’t you study hard and be a doctor? That way you can spend lots of time with your family and make a lot more money.”

Overhearing the conversation, Earl said, “Sure, and deal with a bunch of sick people coughing on you and blood everywhere. No thanks. Give me the railroad.”

“Don’t knock the medical profession too much. If it wasn’t for Dr. Towles, Boopie wouldn’t even be here,” Joseph said.

“Huh? What do you mean, Dad?” asked Boopie, squinting at his father.

“Well, you were wriggling around from the moment you entered this world and even before! You wriggled so much you darn near hung yourself on your cord. Took the doc almost an hour to get you untangled. Without him, you may have choked!” Joseph told him.

“Cord?” Boopie asked. “What cord?”

“Never mind,” Joseph said, attempting to close the door on the conversation that

he just opened.

Boopie looked quizzically at him and then at Earl. “You remember that?”

“How could I?” said Earl, “I was just Dick’s age when all that happened. But I wouldn’t put it past you.”

Boopie turned his glance to his father, who was nodding slowly. “It’s true,” said Joseph. “Go ask your mother if you don’t believe me,” figuring he’d let Elda explain about the cord in the event the subject resurfaced.

“No, I believe you. I just didn’t think about doctors like that. Maybe I’ll be a doctor when I grow up and I’ll be the town hero!” he shouted. Curling his arms up over his shoulders, he pumped his muscles, then shot from the room, seeking out his sisters to tell them his near-death story.

The fire popped like corn as Earl added another log. Behind him, young Dick mimicked every move, prodding the air with an imaginary poker, blowing on the embers until his cheeks glowed a bright pink. He even grunted as he pretended to load more wood onto the imaginary blaze.

Earl waited until he heard Boopie in the kitchen shouting his story. “Did you make all that up?”

“No,” laughed Joseph. “What a reputation I must have in this family!”

“Tell me a story about me then. What was I like when I was little?”

“Look behind you,” said Joseph motioning toward Earl’s youngest brother. “That was you following me. You did everything I did, watching the way I washed my face, even wanting to go to the outhouse when I did.” Earl blushed as he laughed, then forced a cough in an attempt to disguise his embarrassment.

“Why do you think I kept having kids? I needed another boy to get you off my back!” Joseph kidded.

With that, father and son shared a laugh. Then young Dick climbed up on Earl’s back, wrapping his arms around his big brother’s neck.

“Looks like it worked,” joked Earl. Then in a more serious tone, he asked, “So, how was the railroad today?”

Before long, Joseph was spinning railroad yarns, his sons gathered around him, listening. After hearing a few railroad stories, Earl began to recount his day at the furniture factory. The audience was far less intrigued, except for young Dick, who listened intently from under the bridge of Earl’s right leg, which was propped up on the table in front of the sofa.

“How many chairs did you make today?” asked Dick.

“I didn’t make any. But I turned legs for a whole bunch of tables.”

Joseph’s attention slowly drifted away from Earl’s account of his workday. It had been a long week, and he couldn’t help thinking how he would spend his time over the next few days. He had the weekend off, a rare occasion indeed. It was unusual for him to be off two days in a row, much less over a weekend. He was happy that he could spend the next two days, so close to the holidays, with his family.

“The Johnsons said I could borrow their truck tomorrow if we wanted to go pick out a Christmas tree,” Earl said.

The Johnsons lived two doors down and were one of the few families on North Street who owned a motorized vehicle. They were the ones who had everything first, but they were very generous, lending their possessions to their neighbors whenever possible.

On several occasions Joseph had borrowed tools from Tom Johnson that had cut his workload in half. With Joseph's limited amount of free time, having the Johnsons as neighbors was a blessing.

"Again?" harrumphed Joseph, his mood shifting away from the happy complacency of earlier. "I thought they lent you that truck just last weekend?"

"They did." Earl said flatly. "But how else would we manage to get that tree home?"

"I don't know why you have to go to so much trouble to hack down a tree and lug it back here, getting all those needles all over the place."

"Well, I was hunting the other day on the Saunders farm and Mr. Saunders said I could pick out any tree I wanted," offered Earl. "So it would be silly not to get one, Dad. Besides, I like a tree, and so do Mom and the kids. You should come with us this time; I bet you'd be able to pick the best tree yet."

"You know how I feel about all of this silly Christmas stuff," Joseph answered. "I'll help you set up the manger, but that's it. I won't decorate any tree!"

Earl certainly did know how his father felt about Christmas. He just didn't understand how his father could love the holiday as much as he did and yet refuse to participate in any part of it other than the religious aspect. Joseph wasn't an obstinate man, but he always held true to his beliefs. And Joseph did not believe that Christmas should be anything other than a celebration of the birth of Christ, plain and simple. His strict religious upbringing had stuck with him. As a child, he knew nothing of Santa Claus, holiday gifts, or Christmas trees. Oddly, it was his steadfastness in his beliefs that earned the respect of his children, but they were still children and disappointed that their

father didn't share in every dimension of their joy.

Joseph's Christmas was truly one-dimensional. He had never given gifts at Christmas, even to his children. He did, however, tolerate their belief in this fellow Kris Kringle. He never really told them there was no Santa Claus, he just never acknowledged that there was. He tried to understand his children's fascination with the jolly old elf and did what he could, within his own bounds, to help Elda ready the house for the holiday.

Oh, Santa did visit the Beal household. Every Christmas Eve, after the children had gone to bed, Elda would lug in a huge fir tree and decorate it gloriously to commemorate the occasion. And she always made certain that an abundance of presents were under the tree to be opened on Christmas morning.

In the kitchen, the girls were finishing up their chores. Their mother disappeared for a few minutes and then emerged from the cellar with a box of chestnuts for roasting. After toasting the nuts slowly on the stove, Anna, Sis, and Jule followed their mother into the living room and proudly presented the bounty to their father and brothers. The family sat around the small sofa table talking and joking with each other. Anna took her usual position on her father's left. This is how the Beal family spent many winter evenings, this one no exception.

The talk soon turned to Christmas, as the children tried to imagine what Santa would be delivering in his sleigh.

"Will you read us the Christmas story, Daddy?" asked Anna.

Joseph, although tremendously tired, reached for the Bible that he kept on the table next to his chair. Thumbing through the pages of the New Testament, he began reading the accounts of the birth of Jesus from the books of Matthew and Luke. Joseph's sometimes-stern voice always softened when he read from the Bible. This was fortuitous for two reasons: first, it helped bring the words closer to his children and second, the tone of his voice almost always lulled them into a sleepy trance.

After the story was finished and the chestnuts were gone, Elda playfully chased the children upstairs to bed. Joseph accompanied them, tucking in each one of them and making sure they all said their prayers. He headed back down the stairs and heard a voice trailing behind him.

"G'nite, Daddy, I love you." It was Anna, the most affectionate child Joseph had ever known. She also had a sense of kindness that was well beyond her years. While all of his children excelled at something, Joseph took great pride in the fact that his daughter was one of the most selfless people he knew, adults included.

There was a chorus of giggling as the rest of the gaggle - Dick, Boopie, Sis, and Jule - each said their individual good nights, an obvious, but unsuccessful stall tactic, meant to delay the sandman.

"Good night, my crafty children. Now get some sleep," Joseph teased. As he walked down the last few steps of the intricate wooden staircase that adorned the foyer, he couldn't help grinning when he thought about his children's holiday enthusiasm.

When Joseph returned to the living room, he saw his wife curled up on the sofa, smiling as she deftly worked the knitting needle through the ball of yarn on her lap. Joseph picked up his Bible and began reading where he'd left off.

“Got a twitchy face tonight?” Joseph inquired, referring to Elda’s repeated smiles.

“Oh, I was just thinking.”

“Hm, I know what that means.”

“Whatever do you mean?” asked Elda, coyly.

Joseph responded with a knowing smile.

“Well,” Elda continued, knowing she was found out, “I heard Earl ask you about helping us cut the Christmas tree tomorrow.”

“And let me guess. You want me to go along?”

“Come on, it will be fun.”

“I can’t, Elda you know how I feel. It would be against everything I’ve stood for.”

“I know. I just thought maybe you’d make an exception this year, just to pick the tree. You don’t have to decorate it or…”

Joseph cut her off in midsentence. “I don’t really think its such a good idea. This year it’ll be the tree, next year it’ll be presents, and then the whole holiday will mean something different for me, and I’m not prepared to compromise it like that.”

“Just tell me you’ll think about it.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Elda leaned over and kissed him good night. “Thanks,” she said, smiling down at him. “Are you coming up to bed?”

“No. I think I’ll stay up and read for a while longer. I’ll be up soon.”

The time passed quickly and Joseph’s eyes became heavy with sleep. His head began to nod forward and then back. When he caught himself drifting off, he would jerk sharply in an effort to stay awake. After trying to fight off sleep for several minutes,

Joseph noticed a brilliant white light glowing from the direction of the kitchen. He heard the faint sound of a sweet but unfamiliar melody. The bright luminescence moved slowly toward him, the music sounding ever louder. He rubbed his eyes in an effort to clear his vision and tried to focus on the hazy figure of a man with a long brown beard that fell in an assemblage of curls at his chest. The figure stood before Joseph in silence.

“My God!” Joseph gasped aloud. He could not believe what he was witnessing. The image before him was that of Jesus Christ. Joseph’s jaw dropped in bewilderment. Then the spirit held out something in its hand and spoke for the first time. Joseph could barely make out the apparition’s cryptic message.

“Joseph, take this gift from me to you as a token of my love. It was a gift of gold given to me by one of the wise men at the manger the night I was born in Bethlehem. It does me no good, yet it will bring others great joy.”

Joseph nervously extended his right hand to meet the outstretched hand of the figure. The Spirit was offering him a beautiful golden ring. Joseph’s hand was trembling. Then an angel appeared and said, “Fear not, for behold, we bring you good tidings of great joy.”

As Joseph reached out for the ring, a loud thud caused him to sit up abruptly. Just as suddenly as they had appeared, the heavenly images vanished and the music stopped. Joseph had dozed off momentarily. His Bible had slipped from his grasp and fallen to the floor, awakening him.

The hallucination left Joseph shaken. It had seemed so real. In fact, in the initial moments after the event, he questioned whether it was a dream or reality.

“Naaaa,” he grumbled, trying to reassure himself. “I must be more tired than I

thought.” He retrieved the Bible from the floor and placed it on the table. He convinced himself that it was a dream, probably induced by the hard day’s work and the comforting warmth of the fire radiating from the potbelly stove.

Joseph collected himself and walked upstairs to his bedroom for what would be a restless night of tossing and turning. He could not stop thinking about the dream. Each time he fell asleep, he would hear the beautiful music and the vision would return. He always woke up at the same point in the dream, reaching for the golden ring in Jesus’ outstretched hand. Finally, Joseph fell into a welcome state of uninterrupted slumber.