Mildred settled back against the overstuffed chair, her arms dangling over the chair's sides and her body tense and tired from all the hustle and bustle and fuss of Christmas. Upstairs, she heard the two girls quarreling over their toys, and from the basement came the sound of her two oldest children . . . Timothy and Thomas . . . scolding each other.

She sighed wearily. Hot tears stung her eyes. Glancing around the beautiful, carefully-kept and tastefully-arranged living room, she saw the remains of the early morning's gift unwrappings..., paper, ribbons, boxes, bows and name tags. All were strewn in careless abandon and unconcern over the off-white plush carpeting on the floor.

What a mess! she thought, mentally deciding to set the living room in order before doing anything else. At least then {should any one drop in for a cup of coffee and a piece of her famous fruitcake} there would be one room depicting and displaying her fastidiousness as a homemaker, she rationalized, getting to work.

Tina's voice floated down the stairs just then. "You have my dolly, Tanya, and you broke the thing that makes her laugh. Give her to me!" the six-year-old demanded. "And don't ever play with her again. Oh-h, my poor, poor little baby. Mother..." she wailed.
"But it's not your dolly, Tina," eight-year-old Tanya said softly; "she's my dolly. See? Yours is over on the floor. You put her in the corner; remember? And my dolly's not broken; something's just loose in her back. Mother will be able to fix it, I'm sure."

Mildred heard a faint, apologetic, "I'm sorry," come from Tina's lips.

She sighed tiredly. Surely, she thought, there must be more to Christmas than this. Each and every year found her the same at Christmas-time... tired and nervous and totally exhausted. And from what? The perpetual rush, rush, rush of buying and doing and trying to keep up with Herb's affluent family and his many business associates.

It was becoming a three-months-out-of-the-year rat race, she thought. Starting in October, (sometimes the latter part of September even) her frenzied search for just the "right gift" for the members of her husband's "taste-conscious" family left her feeling drained of every ounce of strength. Going from store to store in search of something "unusual," yet expensive and elegant, left her foot-sore and bone-weary by the time she pulled into their driveway at night. For a total of almost three months, her shopping excursions continued and her search was on. It was frustrating, to say the least.

"Mom, Tim's being selfish..."

Tom's loud, insistent voice brought Mildred rudely out of her muddled thoughts. "Please, Tom!" she begged.

"But, Mother, it was my turn to lift the weights; Tim's being selfish."

Giving a quick over-the-shoulder look at the now-clean and tidied living room, Mildred followed Tom to the basement. Games and books were scattered all over the bright plaid carpeting. Pressing her hand to her temple, she leaned against the wall and cried.

"What's wrong, Mother?" Tom asked, quickly placing a supportive arm around her.

Immediately, Tim was at her side. "You sick?" he asked, his voice registering concern.

Mildred continued to cry. Her slender frame shook with sobs.

"Mother! Mother, don't!" the boys begged. "You're sick," Tom insisted.

"I... I guess I am, boys, sick and tired and fed up with all the sham of Christmas!" she wailed. "Oh, to be back home again, where Christmas meant 'a Saviour given.' Back where a God-fearing father, who had little of this world's goods to give us, read Scripture to us and prayed with us and for us. Back where a godly Mother instructed us in the way of righteousness and holy living, making our Christmas gifts with her own dear hands."
Tom guided his mother to a chair. "Sit down," he told her gently, seeming suddenly much older than his thirteen years.

"Tell us more," Tim pleaded.

Wiping tears from her cheeks, Mildred stared at the carpet. Then she raised her eyes toward her young sons. "We have deprived you," she confessed brokenly. "Yes, your father and I have deprived you of the rich heritage to which I fell heir."

"But, Mother," Tom defended quickly, "You haven't deprived us! Not of a single thing. Look at this room; what more could two fellows want or desire? We have everything, Tim and I. Everything! All these things here, plus two 10-speed bicycles, a mo-ped a piece and . . . ."

"Not of things, Tom; your father and I haven't deprived you of things. We have deprived you of something far more valuable and priceless than these material needs and foibles. You have never experienced or known the sweetness, the contentment and the glory of sharing a Christmas with my humble and godly parents . . . your grandparents, on my side of the family."

"I asked you why we never go to see them," Tim reminded gently, "especially since grandfather's hand-carved animals are my very favorite gift."

"They... they're . . . well, it's this way, boys; my parents are Christians. They love the Lord. They're not at all like..., like we are."

Mildred burst into tears. Again, her slender frame shook with sobs. How dare she say all that was on her heart? She couldn't! She must never tell the children how their father had compelled her to break all ties with her past life, including her saintly, old-fashioned parents . . . the grandparents whom her children barely knew . . . and forced her into a world totally distasteful and repulsive to her once-sensitive and once deeply-spiritual nature. It would be a reflection on Herb if she revealed what had happened shortly after she was married to him. And she had thought their marriage was so in the will of God at the time.

Reflecting on the past now, Mildred realized afresh that her greatest mistake was in presuming that Herb was a Christian. He had come into her life like a song and swept her off her feet. Being a business man in a distant state, she saw little of him until after they were married. To her inquiry during the short courtship as to whether or not he knew the Lord, Herb had stoutly declared that he did, and she had trusted and believed him. But, oh, the awful awakening shortly after their wedding.

It all seemed like a horrible and frightening nightmare now. Herb was atheistically inclined. Saddest of all was the stark realization that, under her husband's constant
mockery of true salvation and heart purity, she had succumbed and laid down the cross. Today, her heart was bereft of God and His grace. She was empty and dry and lost.

"Mother!" It was Tom. "Please tell us about Grandfather and Grandmother. Whenever we mention them to Father, he laughs."

For a long time, the mother looked intently at her boys. Then, like one awaking out of sleep, she walked to a closet beneath the basement stairs and drew out several photo albums. Opening the books, she said reverently, "Your wonderful grandparents, Tom and Tim--my godly father and mother. These are all pictures of my growing-up years with Daddy and Mother and my four sisters and five brothers.

"Our Christmases were always times of beauty and of quiet worship of God for sending His only begotten Son, Jesus, into the world to be our Saviour. The observance of this occasion was a sacred and holy one. Our gifts were simple and useful, made, as I previously told you, by our own dear father and mother themselves. They were gifts of love, gifts from the heart. We strung garlands of sugar-coated popcorn, pulled taffy, made mouth-watering black walnut caramel candy and baked all sorts of cookies. We were a truly happy family; we loved the Lord and served and worshipped Him."

"Don't you love Him anymore, Mother?" Tim asked suddenly, grasping her hand in a tight little clasp. "I'd like to know Jesus. Randy Pullifer's been telling me about Him and wanting me to go to church with him. But I was afraid to ask if I could go; Dad always calls Tom and me a sissy when we say anything about God and church."

"I wish I could be like my Grandfather Barnes!" Tom said emphatically. "He doesn't look like a sissy to me." Straightening his broadening shoulders, the boy asked quickly, "Why can't we go there for New Years? After all, Dad's not due back from his business abroad until the middle of January. Please, Mother? Let's go."

Instantly, Tim was all eagerness and enthusiasm. "Please, please!" he begged. "Let's go. You could find God again and..."

With those words, uttered by her son, Mildred got to her feet. Like one awaking out of sleep, she said boldly-quiet, "We'll go. Yes, the Lord willing, we'll go. If we leave today, we'll be able to be there by tomorrow afternoon, God willing."

Suddenly she felt young again. Little matter what Herb would say . . . how he would taunt and harass her when he returned. She was going home for the Christmas season; and she knew that not only would she be home in the physical but in the heart, as well. She would return, not only to her parents, but to her God, also.

Like one in a dream, she said, "Let's pack. I'll help you. We'll leave as quickly as possible. Soon you shall see what Christmas is all about; soon you will discover its true meaning. It is so much more than what your eyes are beholding. Yes, so much more than
this!" and her arms gestured toward the scattered games and toys as she hurried up the steps to begin packing.

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THE END