It was December 15th . . . only ten days away from the annual Christmas celebration at our house. And what a celebration! My folks spared nothing and no amount of money, to have only the best. Our tree had to be the tallest, the most perfectly shaped; our lights all the tiny, soft-white kind and the decorations only the finest and best. Rugs and carpets were cleaned
and shampooed, curtains were washed and drapes were dry-cleaned and rehung.

The cleaned house sparkled and shone with a brilliance a bit akin to the lights on the tree. It was always so breathtakingly beautiful that I felt I was living in some fairy tale world of our own. Attitudes even had a way of changing during this special seasonal event. How I wished they'd remain the same throughout the other months of the year. Why couldn't they? I wondered sadly.

I pulled a corner of the full, sheer curtains away from the enormous window in our living room and looked through the sparkly-clean panes to the meticulously kept and carefully landscaped lawn. Snow was falling. How lazily-unconcerned it dropped from the heavily overcast sky onto the evergreen trees and bushes outside! The lawn was a shimmery, sparkly carpet of whitest white with not a thing to mar its immaculate beauty. I recalled the days when, as a child, I had romped and played in its beauty . . . its cleanliness and revitalizing coldness. Oh, to be a child again! I thought, turning quickly from the window and running up the circular stairway to my room.

I had come home from school feeling light and happy, but a sudden turn of events changed everything for me. Peter was the first to set the chain action in a reverse pattern for me. "I sure hope I don't get any sweaters this year," he announced between bites of chocolate chip cookie. "They may be OK for old people, but not for me. Not for me! I hate the things. Last year, I got three, and I hadn't even worn the ones I got the previous year." Turning to me, he said, "I hope you gave the uncles and aunts a hint about the new trend, Katrina; the trend away from sweaters for a certain Peter Courtney."

I gulped. Deep in my heart, I hoped the crimson in my cheeks wasn't giving me away: I had bought Peter a sweater. The most beautiful, youthful-looking sweater I was sure I'd ever seen. From its place on the male mannequin in Macy's window to its beautifully-wrapped box inside my closet, I had visualized my brother warmly-ensconed in this manly, expensive gift. And now . . . I opened the closet door and, standing on tip-toe, I looked at the beautifully-wrapped packages lying neatly on the top shelf. How lovingly and carefully each was chosen and selected, I thought, as tears bubbled out of my eyes and bounced down my cheeks. And now, what was I to do? Only
ten days away from Christmas, and the best selections had already been bought and were gift-wrapped by early shoppers like myself.

I sat in a pale lavender chair and tried to think, but the more I thought, so much the more befuddled I became. Peter's sweater would have to be returned, I knew, so would Kendra's dress. (Hadn't she hinted of her aversion to the new plum shades?) Even mother's gift would have to be exchanged for something different; she "hated and loathed" pale blue anything for her dining room! (Her very own words.)

I sank deeply into the softness of the boudoir chair, wondering what I could get in exchange for the gifts I had bought. As I thought, the phone interrupted my thoughts.

"Hello. Katrina speaking," I said, speaking into the mouthpiece.

"'Trina, it's me; Evangeline." "Evangeline! Where are you? I mean, well, you sound like you're just around the corner instead of a thousand miles away."

"I am just around the corner, 'Trina. Daddy's company transferred him back. We just got the phone in, and I told Mother you were the first person I was going to call. We're back in our same old house, and are we ever happy! Now we know why God never allowed it to be sold. Oh, He is so wonderful! How about coming over . . ."

"I don't need a second invitation!" I exclaimed, feeling the weight of my problems drop off my shoulders like sand or mud sliding away under an old-fashioned gully-washer.

Evangeline Hummel and I were close friends for all seventeen years of our lives. We played house together as children and double-dated to soda shops as sixteen-year-olds, she with a Christian boy from her church, I with one of the boys from school. The one big difference in our lives was Evangeline's utter and entire consecration and dedication to God--she was a strict church attender and I wasn't; she knew God in a personal way; I didn't. But we got along beautifully.

"You'll be over then?" Evangeline asked, sounding all bubbly and excited and eager to see me. She was so genuine.
"You'd better believe it!" I replied, equally excited and happy.

"I'll be waiting for you, Katrina. I have ever so many things to tell you. I've grown spiritually, and I do want to share these good things with you."

I sighed as I hung the phone up. Evangeline hadn't changed, I knew; and much as I had hoped to hear news about good-looking boys and such like things, I was happy to know that she was still the same wonderful person she had been when they moved away from our community. I would have been terribly disappointed if she had returned, different and irreligious.

There was something strengthening about Evangeline . . . in just being around her. I didn't know another person like her, and while my parents had hoped that I would become interested in, and involved with, girls whose parents were more in our class -- the high society kind -- Evangeline continued being my very special and close friend. Perhaps it was because, secretly, I could scarcely tolerate the vanity and pomp and hypocrisy of the other girls. They were shallow and false; a friend only so long as every wish and whim of theirs was catered to, doing only what they demanded and wanted. Evangeline, on the other hand, remained constantly the same -- a true and loyal friend under any and all circumstances. There wasn't the slightest hint of hypocrisy about her. She was genuine through and through, and openly transparent. Who wouldn't enjoy being with someone like this? I wondered, hurrying into my coat and racing for the door.

"Hey, where are you going?" Peter asked, intercepting what I hoped would be a quietly-secret exit. "Over to Evangeline's house."

Peter spun around on his heel so fast that he turned his ankle and let out a fierce howl of agony. Hopping around on one foot, his face contorted in pain, he managed a weak exclamation of surprise, "Evangeline's house! Don't be funny, Katrina."

"But I'm not, Peter."

Hobbling to the nearest chair and falling into it, Peter rubbed his aching ankle, saying, "You're ridiculous; positively and absolutely ridiculous! Evangeline's not within a thousand miles of here."
Laughing softly, I countered with, "Want to see for yourself? Come along."

Peter merely shook his head and, continuing to rub his ankle, he said, "What's wrong with Judeen Upton and Yvonne Tigby? They have class, Katrina, real class. I sometimes wish you'd forget about Evangeline and broaden your . . . well . . . your list of friends and friendships. You're in a rut, Sis."

Flinging a long scarf across my shoulder and bringing it up closely around my neck, I smiled and replied, "Perhaps." Then I stepped out into the beauty of the winter evening, feeling suddenly as light and as breezy as a feather tossed in the wind.

The snow fell on my cheeks . . . my nose . . . with a tingling-cold, making me feel very much alive and alert. It dressed the rustic fenceposts (surrounding our lawn) in whitest-white caps with earmuffs and mounded softest marshmallow drifts at their feet. I stopped long enough to listen to the gently-soothing sound which the myriad flakes made as they spiraled into the open, waiting-arm branches of the pines and evergreens. Then I headed down the curving driveway, facing into the wind, toward Evangeline's house, feeling great, and like my problems were already solved and my questions answered.

In spite of the cold, my heart felt warm. I held my head high and smiled into the storm. This amazed me. But I knew the reason . . . and the answer to it.

My feet seemed to take wings, and I discovered I was running. (A senseless thing to do on slippery, ice-concealed roads and pavements.) Without warning, my feet skidded out from beneath me and away I went, sliding down the driveway. I reached the bottom in record time, to say the least, and aside from the bruises I received and the utter humiliation of the ordeal, I was not injured or hurt.

Picking myself up and brushing the snow off as best I could, I hurried forward, instinctively developing a far greater respect and cautious attitude toward the beautiful white flakes that covered everything in a thick cloak of shimmering beauty. My heart wanted to
sing for joy, so relieved was I to know that Evangeline Hummel was back in our area.

With the joy that I felt, there came also a profound awareness of the beauty of the world in which I lived. Evangeline, on more than one occasion, had reminded me that everything which God made and created was "good; very good." (Her words.)

She said sin was the distorting, ugly, and devastating thing in the lives of men and women; that the world itself was a thing of beauty; a gift of God's careful and loving planning for humanity. And I believed her.

Before I reached Evangeline's house even, I saw her on the front porch, waiting for me. The scarf around her neck waved me a welcome greeting, and her eyes were like shining jewels. Her glad cry of, "Katrina! Katrina!" warmed me through and through. In no time at all, we were in each other's arms, weeping for joy.

Hurrying inside, Mrs. Hummel greeted me with the same genuine warmth and affection that Evangeline displayed. How different this family was from mine! I thought with sudden longing, recalling the very few times that my mother had ever put her arms around me or told me that she loved me.

"It is so good to see you again!" Mrs. Hummel declared with genuine sincerity, holding me suddenly at arm's length and remarking how utterly grown up I had become in her absence.

We talked and laughed and tried to get caught up on the many things that had transpired and taken place while the Hummels were gone, then Evangeline turned and, looking me full in the face, she said, "We're having a special service at church tonight, please come with us. You've never attended a single service with us, Katrina. How about giving us a 'welcome home' present and going with us? Please?"

Immediately my brain shifted into gear. Why not? Mother had left for one of her endless, boring bridge parties, and Daddy wouldn't be home from the office till who-knew-when. Kendra had gone shopping and Peter, well, he was old enough to take care of himself. He would be on the phone for an hour or more, talking to Michelle Ornsby.
"I'd love to go," I answered quickly, feeling an excitement I couldn't account for.

"Have you had supper?" Mrs. Hummel wanted to know. "Because if you haven't, Evangeline and I'd be delighted to have you as our guest. My husband won't be home till later. A matter of business at work. He'll join us at church, the Lord willing."

It was just like always; I felt like one of the family and the meal was delicious -- simple but delicious. Evangeline and I did the dishes and talked and laughed like old times. It was over the dishes and the bubbly soap suds, that she told me about her call to be a foreign missionary.

"Bu . . . but aren't you afraid?" I ventured, picturing her laboring in some remote, isolated area of the jungle with lions and tigers stalking hungrily around her grass hut.

She laughed aloud. "No, Katrina, I'm not afraid; God has promised me an angel of His protection. Furthermore, I may never go to the wilds of Africa nor to some cannibal village. Then again, I may. I only know that He called and I answered. So, wherever He chooses, I'll go. I feel so very close to Him. I wish you could know and understand my feelings," she added softly and wistfully.

I turned my eyes from her face, fearful that she see how I, too, wished for the same. Then we left for church.

I was both shocked and amazed when I got inside the church. It was neither large nor small, and the interior belied the simple frame of the outside of the building. It was beautifully but simply decorated, and the minute I stepped inside, I became acutely aware of the fact that God was there.

I followed Mrs. Hummel and Evangeline down the aisle to the second pew from the front, noticing as I walked, the many bowed heads and the quiet reverence that pervaded the atmosphere. It was as if God Himself were walking those aisles. My heart hammering inside my chest and a horrible fearfulness took possession of me. It was as though God had turned a bright light on somewhere and was looking deep into my soul. I was afraid to move.
The singing began, and what singing! I never heard anything like it. No contemporary music, which focuses mainly on individual experience and which was so much a part of my generation; nor any choir anthems with their two-octave range and multitude of orchestrated accidentals either. No, no. The songs were songs of true worship, speaking the truth about God and honoring Him, edifying and drawing me, pulling at my heart.

Something in the words, and the way the people sang the hymns, sent strange little pricks to my soul. For the first time in my life, I realized that I was in the presence of God, and I was not fit for the nearness of this Honored Guest. My heart and spirit felt unclean and unholy. Then, I knew why: I was a sinner. That must be it!

The minister preached but I couldn't retain a thing he was saying, so intense and acute was the pain in my soul.

My heart continued its relentless hammering and when a song of invitation was sung, I touched Evangeline's arm lightly, asking her to walk the few steps to the mourner's bench with me.

Needless to say, I did the most noble thing I've ever done by stepping out and bowing at that altar. Not merely the most noble but also the most rewarding thing ever: I met the Lord Jesus Christ and fell in love with Him. I'll never be the same, not ever again. I became truly born again. The loud hammering in my heart ceased, my fear departed, and in its place flowed rivers of unending peace and joy and glorious pardon and forgiveness.

I don't know what the future holds, nor what I may have to endure of hardness and cruelty from my family, but I know this one thing, that this will be my greatest and most wonderful Christmas and New Year ever. And not because of the gifts either: rather, because of The Gift, God's Son! At last . . . at long last . . . I learned the real meaning of Christmas and I became the joyful recipient of His peace.

My gifts in the closet seem like trash and junk, in comparison to God's Gift. And to think that I almost missed learning the why and the wherefore of Christmas! But God, and the Hummels . . . Bless them!

I turned toward Evangeline and Mrs. Hummel. They looked like angels, which indeed they were: God's earthly angels bearing tidings of great joy and
peace to my once sin-burdened soul, now released, unchained and set free. And suddenly, I was shouting.