

Three Atkinson Christmases And a Prelude

Dhyan Atkinson - December 1989

~~~~~

### *The Prelude*

*(This was written before I understood that trees probably don't actually have an aspiration to get cut down and used as Christmas trees, preferring instead their own life under the sun and the stars. Dhyan)*

The road to the Christmas Tree Farm traveled across the big bridge with the toll gate and then ran in a winding path along the river. Huge trees, their branches bare and gnarled against the sky, kept the river company and when the road turned off and went up into the forested hills, it was like traveling into another world, more Appalachian than suburban.

The farm itself was embedded in the hills and the driveway up from the road was graveled and long. It went through groves of trees and at the top of the drive the Christmas Tree man waited to greet every car, just like last year and the year before. He sold trees by invitation only and therefore knew all his customers like old friends. Dad handed our invitation out the window and he said, "Oh, yes, Mr. Atkinson. Good to see you!" And then, leaning over in order to see my mother on the other side of the front seat, he said politely, "Mrs!" and gave his head a nod.

Then to my Dad he said, "Why don't you just park your car right on over there," and he waved us to an empty place. There were about a dozen cars parked around the lot up against the enormous evergreens that surrounded the house. "And here you go," he said to Janet and me, reaching into his kangaroo pouch of an apron as we tumbled out of the car. "Expect you'll need these!" and he handed each of us a disk of red and white striped peppermint candy which we promptly unwrapped and popped into our mouths. "Half a tag means sold," he told us. "Blue tag means not this year. Have fun!" and he left us to begin our search while he went off to greet another carload of guests coming up the drive.

It was November, just around Thanksgiving. The air was cold and dry. The grasses were golden brown. The autumn sky above the Christmas trees burned a brilliant blue. All around us in the sloping fields the Christmas trees waited. In the days before it occurred to me that Christmas Trees might have a preference for a life of their own, I thought each one was calling to me and spread its skirts to the sun hoping it would be one we would pick. Such is the innocent delusion of a child.

Janet and I dashed across the hillsides. This one! No, it's got half a tag. This one! No, there is a big hole-place in the middle. This one! No, blue tag. Blue tag. Blue tag. Here's another with half a tag. We raced and raced around.

Gradually the uniqueness of each tree impressed itself upon my mind. This haughty one was far too tall for our little house. This slender one seemed to be shy and sad. The fat bunchy ones sometimes laughed at me, "I'm sold! You can't choose me!" And I waited, running, looking, feeling, sensing with all my heart for that one I knew would speak to me and me alone. That special one who would tug at my heart. As I looked at each tree, I imagined so many asking to be taken, it overfilled my heart to see them all.

I knew my parent's preferences but their criteria were not quite my own. I ran and silently prayed that "The One Who Would Want Me" would not be too tall. Oh, please don't be too tall! Or that it wouldn't have a bad side too big to hide in the corner. What would I do if my tree were like that?

And then, there it was, the perfect tree. It stood among the others with a whole and perfect tag. (How was it possible that no one before us had seen this perfect tree?) All my heart and passion opened up to this tree and I imagined in my heart that it was mutual love at first sight. I reached out and touched its branches which were supple and strong. I gently stroked its needles which were long and thick and soft. I turned to cry the discovery to my parents, my sister and the open sky. "Here it is! Here is the one!" and then ... anguish! They were nowhere in sight and, worse yet, a few steps in the direction in which I had last seen them disclosed that all three of them were standing around another tree, and I could see at a glance that it was NOT the right one at all. When I reached them they had almost decided. My father's hands were closed around the tag.

"No!" I begged. "Come see my tree. Come see the one I found. Please. It's so lovely. Come and see it. Come! They left my sister to guard the other tree and reluctantly came with me. I dragged at my mother's hand.

"I don't know," my mother said critically, as we stood around it and looked. "I sort of wanted a short-needled tree this year. We had a long-needled one last year."

"I don't know," my father said, "Is it standing up quite straight? It seems as if it might be leaning a bit on this one side."

I nudged my friend. Stand up straight! Stand up straight! She pulled herself up as straight as she could go.

"It is a lovely tree," my mother finally said. "Do you think it's a bit too big, Gaylord?"

"Could be," my father replied.

"COME ON!!!!" my sister's voice came wailing across the field.

"No, I don't think its too big, but is it what we want?" my father said.

"Mommommmmmmm!" my sister yelled.

I danced in agony around the tree almost choking on the forgotten peppermint. "Maybe we should just go take another look at that little one across the field," my father said (never-the-less he took the tag on my tree in his hand and scrutinized the price.) It is less than the other one," he told my mother and then the two of them went back across the field.

Now it was my turn to dance impatiently as I "held" the tree. Other families came drifting by, looking, sizing trees up including my beloved. I guarded my tree jealously. Would I have to cry? What would I have to think of next to convince them that this was the one and only perfect tree? The sweet little tree in my hands stood by me trustingly. Softly I whispered the things I thought she would want to hear. How I would love her. How we would cover her with lights and sparkling ornaments. How beautiful she would look. How I would sneak out to her in the middle of the night, all by myself, when everyone else was asleep and turn on her lights and watch them twinkle in the darkness. How the ornaments would glisten and shine. How I would water her every day and pick her dry needles off the floor so Mom wouldn't know she was shedding and she could stay longer.

"Yes," the tree seemed to say, "Yes, if I have to go with someone, I want to go with you!"

"Moooooooooooooooo!" I yelled across the field.

"Just a MINUTE, Kathy!" my mother's voice floated back to me across the field.

And then, oh bless my longing soul who had found The Friend, my family came trooping across the field to where I waited. The tree stood quietly with a glowing heart and I danced my excitement and joy to the understanding sky. My father tore off the bottom half of the tag and we were committed to my tree. In paroxysms of joy, I raced my sister back to the car.

The Christmas Tree man beamed on us jovially. You would think we had chosen one of his lovely daughters. "Say," he said, "Aren't you the family that like wild persimmons? Got a good batch this year. They're down on the ground already. Sweet as sugar and about three times ugly. Had a real good frost the other night and it just finished them up perfectly. Would you like a few?" and he gave us a brown paper bag and sent us trudging down the hill on the other side into the grove of hardwood and persimmon trees. So, the last thing we did at the Christmas Tree Farm was scramble around beneath the persimmon trees searching among the fallen leaves for that ugliest and sweetest of fruits.

That night I thought about our Christmas Tree after I had been put to bed. It was three more weeks until we would go get her and bring her home. In my mind's eye I could see her standing among her sisters beneath the sparkling stars with her broken tag attached to her bough and the shadows of the starlight around her on the frosty winter ground. I wondered if she felt sadness about leaving her home. In my vision, I put my arms around her and gave her my heart.



## A First Christmas – 2804 West 47<sup>th</sup> Terrace

It was a silent winter night. The little white house at 2804 West 47<sup>th</sup> Terrace sat muffled deep with snow and more snow was falling. Out in the front yard the branches of the young elm tree were weighted down all along their length. There was two feet and more of the fluffy whiteness blanketing the street and every yard, bush, tree, and car on the block. The streetlight at the foot of the driveway had a cap atop its head and the cone of light beneath its face was speckled with falling flakes. A single car came by dragging its underbelly in the undisturbed deepness in its path. It slid a little and the tires spun but then it caught its stride and moved on down the street dragging a whooshing and a faint crunching as it went.

In the little house all the shades were drawn and the inhabitants were asleep. In the smaller of the two bedrooms, so small in fact that the double-bed, the dresser and the two bedside tables were absolutely all it would hold, two parents slept. Two little girls slept in the other, larger bedroom which was decorated for little girls, being painted a soft pink with white enamel woodwork and having a large oval rug of polar bear whiteness in the center of the floor. They slept side-by-side in twin beds with chenille bedspreads on which ballerinas danced. At the foot of their beds hung a mobile that turned gently in the warm air rising from the floor register. In these bedrooms in which everything was so quiet there was nothing to tell you that in this small white house, Christmas was about to take over.

Now the girls had been told a hundred times not to get up at the crack of dawn and expect to open presents but the little one, especially, was irrepressible and there was no guarantee that an early morning it was not going to be. But they were also so young that when first one and then the other woke up in the darkness it was impossible for either of them to tell if it was just about morning or whether, in fact, it was still the dead of night. Slipping out of their beds they stood shivering and listening in the center of their room and then trotted over to the window to peep out. They pulled the window shade a wee crack away from the glass and found they could see nothing. Jack Frost had been painting their window and the entire surface was coated with a crystallized pattern of ice. It was beautiful. The crystals formed every which way and now there was a fairy picture where the window glass had been. Spears of fern and flowers, mountains, trees, and plumes jumbled together just the way Jack Frost had left them when there was no more space for him to paint. The girls considered his handiwork for a moment and then put their warm fingers to the glass. It was cold! Under their fingertips little round melted places appeared. Getting bolder, Kathy put her whole palm against the glass and Janet put up her mouth and kissed the frost. The ice melted away and in the space they had now cleared the girls tried to see out. It was a difficult and watery task, seeing out of those melted holes, before they froze back up again.

Kathy thought she had seen something. She rubbed her dark spot in the ice and then putting her hand up to shield her eyes she took a quick look at again. "Snow!" She said in surprise to Janet.

"Snow?" Janet asked and licked harder at the glass to get her spot bigger and clear. They put their hands up around their eyes and looked out into a frozen world.

"Snow!" shrieked Janet and, pulling out the window shade in her excitement, sent it shooting suddenly to the top. Both girls froze, listening intently for any movement from the other room.

"Now you've done it," Kathy hissed, "how are we going to get it back down again?"

Janet looked solemn, her blue eyes dark and wide in the streetlight now pouring into the room. She knew of only one solution to disaster. "Mommy! Daddy!" She said in a trembling voice

"Oh, no you're not," Kathy said. "Help me get that window shade down."

Janet's dark blue eyes began to fill with tears in her lip trembled. "Mommy, Daddy," she said again and her first two fingers went up into her mouth. Janet groped for her blankie and not finding it on the floor at her feet looked for in her bed. Then evading her sister's grab, she scampered across the floor, the plastic on the bottom of her feety-pajamas making a shuffling sound as she headed for the door.

"No! Stop!" Said Kathy, but it was too late. Kathy made a grab for her little sister as she passed but Janet invaded her and slipped out the door to the room. She left Kathy fuming in the darkness. It was unfair. Janet was the one who made the window shade go flying up and now she was going to wake up their parents and they would both get in trouble. It just wasn't fair.

Suddenly cold and lonely in the darkness, she scrambled over to her own bed and got back in; the sheets had gotten cold. She pulled her feet up so they wouldn't have to stick down at the bottom of the bed all by themselves. Then, suddenly remembering her belief in witches she pulled the covers right up over her head. The thing about the witches was that they could get you even so much as one hair of your head was sticking out from under the covers. But it is hard to stay completely under. Kathy made a little tunnel right in front of her nose down which cold air came seeping into the pitch dark. "Witches," she thought, and curled up in a tight ball listening for sounds.

There were no sounds. It wasn't fair. Mommy and daddy had taken Janet into their bed again and left her here all by herself. It wasn't fair. She imagined Janet all snuggled up nice and warm between mommy and daddy with her blankie up against her face and her two fingers in her mouth and was instantly intensely jealous.

The bed began to warm up. Tentatively, Kathy pushed her toes down towards the bottom of the bed. Baby was down there. She pulled the old baby doll up to the top of

the bed and cuddled her snugly. Baby was a hideous sight to anyone who didn't love her. Her hair was all scraggly from too many brushings. She had lost at least two of her limbs and the others were all shaky and loose. Kathy had colored her face once with a ballpoint pen and Baby's face had never recovered. She didn't have any clothes on and her soft cloth body was covered with stains Kathy didn't mind any of these things. Baby had been her friend beyond memory and that was all that mattered.

Suddenly she remembered it was Christmas. How had she forgotten? She flung the covers off and lay there listening again. There wasn't a sound in the house except the one made by the heat coming through the register and then, with a click, shutting off. There was light, not much of it, but some. And there was grayness to it. Kathy got up and pulled her housecoat on. It was one Grandma Groegor had made for her, pink with a sprinkling of tiny roses. She tiptoed to the door and stopped. There wasn't a sound but... What was that? Had she heard something or had she not? She leaned further out of the door. Had she heard something in the living room? Was there something or someone there? Kathy leaned way out into the hall. Was that a light she saw? Could it be that Santa Claus was there? She pulled her head back into the room and stood as far into the shadow of the doorway as she could

"Santa Claus?" She asked herself. There was no other sound. Had he heard her? Was he standing in the darkness of the living room trying to hear if any little girls had heard him and were now standing behind the door? She held her breath. Whatever she had heard was silent now. She crept into the hall.

It was a crooked hallway. There was no straight part for more than five or six paces in a row. She leaned way out around the corner so she could see. It was disappointing. No fat and jolly man in red stood in the center of the room. She leaned out farther; had he been there? Had he been there at all? It was hard to see in the darkness. In the living room the Venetian blinds were screwed firmly shut to keep cold out of the house and the curtains were still drawn. The Christmas tree stood all silent, wrapped in the darkness.

Suddenly she felt a tremendous fountain of joy course through her body. He HAD been there. Tucked under the tree were presents and presents and presents. She could see the packages wrapped in their shiny paper. Big lazy ribbons flopped on the top and fell in curls down the sides. And what was that? Did she see something? There was something that sat half obscured by the tree. Was it a sled? Had Santa brought a sled?

Unable to stand the suspense any longer she glanced at the door to her parent's room and tiptoed into the living room. The excitement was almost too much for her to bear. Their stockings, flat last night when I went to bed, were now fat and bulging. She stood in the center of the room trembling with excitement and joy. Yes, that other thing was a sled. Santa brought sled

Suddenly her father was in the doorway behind her. "Yup" he called back over his shoulder "The other one is in here. Guess it's time to get up."

Janet suddenly appeared behind him, her blankie trailing as she ran. "Santa!" She screamed. "Presents!"

"Oooop!" Her father said, catching the end of the blankie, "not so fast. Wait for your mother." The girls danced with excitement in the middle of the room. Janet saw the sled. "Why!" She said before they can really argue about it the mother appeared in the living room pulling on her housecoat as she came.

"Both of yours," she said firmly. "Gaylord can you turn up the heat? It's freezing here. Not, yet!" She said. The girls would have madly started opening everything in sight if they hadn't been stopped. "Here," their mother said, taking stockings and handing each one, "You can open these first," then she walked on into the kitchen and turn on the lights. Oblivious to all else, the girls pulled present after present from the seemingly bottomless stockings. There were bottles of bubblebath, and wind up nice. They each had a small box in which a metal ring shown up at them, it's artificial diamond glittering brightly in the light. All along the length of the stocking ran a giant peppermint stick, the kind they found in their stockings every year. This peppermint stick was so big you couldn't get your holdout surrounded, it lay heavily in the hand like the limbs of the tree, and even sucking the big pieces their father broke offer them with his hammer a child could hardly get her mouth shut around curled up in the toes were a pair of mittens each. They pulled mittens on. There were animals knitted into the design and they nodded the mittens at each other like puppets on their hands.

By this time their parents were back with coffee cups in their hands. They had gathered essentials together – Janet's housecoat, Kathy's slippers – and insisted that the girls put them on Danny turned on the Christmas tree lights in the light inside the plastic Frosty the Snowman and then the real present opening could begin. The rule was one president time and they took turns round and round the circle he went present from Santa for Kathy. Present for Molly from daddy. Present for Janet from daddy present for daddy from Kathy. Present for Kathy from Janet. Present for mommy from Santa. Present for Janet from aunt Merle, etc. etc. etc. It went on until every last present had been pulled out from under the tree in the living room was littered with ribbons tissue and scraps.

While Kathy and Janet played in the living room with their new toys, Mommy and Daddy made breakfast. It was like the Sunday special: a steaming bowl of scrambled eggs dressed up with bits of bacon, celery, onion, carrots, and cheese. There was orange juice in little glasses, big tumblers of milk and, because it was Christmas, there was even a plate of those rolls that popped out of the cardboard tubing when tapped on the edge



of the counter. They sat on a plate in the center of the table, fragrant with the aroma of raisins and cinnamon, and dripping with melted frosting.

By the time everyone was finished eating it was morning for real. The sun was burning away the last of the clouds and the new snow lay glittering with sparkles beneath the sky becoming bluer by the minute. The ice had melted off the all around the neighborhood and in the street there were children playing in the snow Kathy and Janet begged to go out and were soon modified into their snow suits. First the strings of their mittens had to be sorted out and coaxed through the cuff. Then the girls and everything they were wearing had to be somehow stuffed into the body, arms and legs of the snowsuit and the zipper pulled up to their chins. They resembled little red and blue sausages when this was done. Next they had plastic snow boots pulled on over their shoes. Kathy's were getting small. She had to stamp her feet to get her heels to go down and then she pulled the elastic around the button on the side to keep them tight. That year they had some new felt hats with faces on the back and yarn braids. Janet and Kathy were particularly delighted with these because they thought, rightfully enough, that having two faces was going to confuse everyone. They flipped the braids back and forth over their shoulders. When all was said and done, they waddled through the door into the snow. Cars had passed by now packing down the snow in the street. Daddy went with them into the winter wonderland and pulled them both on the new sled.

## A Second Christmas: The Elephant Christmas

Some years later it was Christmas all day it had been Kathy's birthday. There were presents in the morning she had received a drawing set, a book she wanted, something for her violin, a new dress, and lots of other things. There was a birthday dinner at noon, and this year she had asked for Beefheart, which was one of her favorites, and they had it with mashed potatoes and peas. For her birthday cake she had picked her perennial favorite: angel food with colored knuckles embedded in the cake, the sides all as she sat at the head of the table watching the candles burn she knew exactly what she wanted to wish for. She glanced through the picture window in the living room at the cold and gray-clouded day. Would it snow? If she wished for it and blew out the candles, everyone, and a single breath, which she get her dearest wish? She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and blew out the candles all at once. You weren't supposed to tell what it was that you wished for or it wouldn't come true, so she kept looking through the picture window straining her vision to see even a single flake. And then the miracle happened! Beyond the glass of the picture window a few fat flakes began to fall; then they began to come down thick and fast. Her snow! She had no doubt that it had come because of her wish.

But that had been in the afternoon and now it was 5 o'clock and in some subtle way she knew that her birthday was over and Christmas had begun. She couldn't have told anyone where the demarcation line actually lay. In the birthday dishes were done? Was it when a cold winter night settled down around the house and the light quickly faded from the air? Was it when mommy put them both in the bathtub and told him to be sure to scrub their elbows and knees? Neither she nor Janet couldn't say, but both of them knew, without being told, "Christmas was coming the goose was getting fat!"

Christmas was developing a certain ritual, the first part of which began with the Children's program at Our Savior's Lutheran Church. Every year on Eve the children of the congregation were coaxed, coerced, and praised ended putting on a program. Mommy had been rehearsing their parts with them every night before going to bed for weeks now this year Janet's Sunday School class was supposed to sing Silent Night, which was easy Kathy thought, and then say a little one line Bible verse. Still, remembering all the words in one line was arduous for someone Janet's age. "For unto us is a in the City of David A Savior which is Christ the Lord." She and mother went over it again and again and again.

Kathy's class was doing something even more difficult. They had a responsive reading in which some of the children had specific speaking parts. Because she and Janet went

to the public school and not the church school, she had been in danger of hardly having any part at all. The church school kids practice for the Christmas program every day and the Sunday School kids were sometimes, therefore, giving only the simplest parts or no part at all. Kathy and Janet both fiercely wanted to do it all the other kids were doing so when the Sunday School teacher kindly took Kathy aside and told her not to worry, if she didn't know the parts she could just stand there and not say anything at all, no one would notice, she was mortified and not comforted it in the least. Every practice now she almost had them down pat although she had to resort to mumbling a bit over some of the parts. She was comforted to because some other child's family had decided at the last minute to go away for Christmas and she had inherited the abandoned speaking part she and mother practiced hard. She was supposed to say (rightly and clearly now!) And all by herself when it was her turn "and suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly hosts, praising God and saying..." Her line ended in a Funny Pl., Kathy and Janet thought, but that was because, right there, the rest of the children were supposed to come in with "Glory to God in the Highest and on Earth, Peace and Goodwill to all men."

While mother was helping Janet on step at the end. Was it supposed to be "praying or praising God?" Or was it "praising God, singing and saying?" The harder she tried to remember the less sure she became. She sat waiting for the words to straighten themselves out in her head and decided she'd had it right in the first place "praising God and saying..." Yes, that was it.

Or was it

How could she not remember and here it was THE night? She found she had buttoned up her dress the wrong way in her sudden terror and had to undo the buttons and start at the bottom again.

She and Janet were wearing gorgeous dresses tonight. Her mother had made them both. Janet's was blue with a velvet ribbon around the waist Kathy's was satiny and mint green. There was lace at the collar and sleeves they both were wearing white knee socks and patent leather shoes so shiny and new that things in the room were reflected on the toes as if they were mirrors. Under their skirts they were multitude in this, ruffled, and well starched petticoats. They had had their hair up in curlers all afternoon and now mommy took them out and made Janet and then Kathy standstill while she gently brushed the brown or golden curls. She took a piece of hair on the top of their heads and coming back tied a bright newly ironed ribbon over the rubber band. Then they stood neatly in their crisply ironed closed trying very hard not to get mussed up.

"Ready yet?" Daddy asked. Yes, they were ready. He went to start the car while mommy got their coats from the closet. Kathy had received a new one from grandma Gregor that morning on her birthday. It was made of a soft blue woolen material and her doll Sweet Sue had won the match. The air was bitter cold outside. They picked their way carefully down the icy sidewalk to the car because the patent leather shoes were slippery soles.

Just before they got to the car, mother said, "I believe I will go back to the house for a minute and go to the bathroom."

"What?" Kathy and Janet thought, "Now? When they were just on their way out the door?" They said impatiently vinyl slipcover of the back seat and waited for their mother to come back to the car. They could hear Casey, their young Toy Fox Terrier, barking excitedly inside the house. At last the light in the living room went dark and mother came through the front door, pulling on her gloves. The outside light by the front door gleamed yellowly on the numbers on the front of the house "2804," they said. "That's where the Atkinson's live." Kathy and Janet hoped Santa Claus knew the number.

Janet pulled one hand out of her rabbit fur off and leaning over to Kathy whispered something into her ear from behind a genteel, white gloved hand. "What?" Kathy whispered back.

Janet whispered again. "Do you think Santa Claus will come while we are at church like he did last year? Do you think he will come or do you think he will wait until morning?" This was a question of burning interest to them both but there was absolutely no way of knowing what the answer was going to be. Just in case, they had insisted that a plate of Christmas cookies be left on top of the bookcase before they went to church and beside it a glass of milk. If Santa came while they were gone, the milk and cookies would be there. And two, because the bookcase was temporarily sitting right next to the front door because of the Christmas tree, they would be able to check the plate the minute they got back into the house.

Daddy back to the car down the driveway and soon they were driving past houses all decorated with Christmas lights and new fallen snow. The car tires rumbled familiarly over the icy bricks on rainbow Avenue. When they got to church it was already filling with families. Daddy took their coats and hats and muffs and the family split at the door. Their parents going on into the sanctuary and the girls each going to her own Sunday School room. Kathy had been lucky this year. Her class was meeting in the room up behind the choir loft high above the church. What was so special about it was

climbing all those stairs up the bell tower and, as she walked to her room, getting to peep into the organ loft with all those multi-sized organ pipes along the wall.

She and the other kids in her class were sure that they had the best Classroom of all but they were not so sure that they were lucky having Mr. Jurgens as a teacher. At least once per Sunday he yelled at them for laughing and not paying attention in class. One Sunday he had gotten especially worked up and had treated them all to a graphic description of the crucifixion ending with, "and He went through all this for you, personally! And you sit there and laugh in his face." She and her class and sat there, uncomfortable and cornered, until the outburst had passed they were laughing at Jesus. They were laughing because Sharon Osterman had a tube of toothpaste in her purse and they were passing around and eating it. The funny thing to do.

She climbed the stairs two at a time up the bell tower to the upper floor pastor Roland was up there and he stopped to talk with her. "He is a nice one, Pastor Roland," Kathy thought. She liked how he teased her, teased all the kids really, in such a friendly way. He knew she played the violin and had once asked her to play Danny Boy for him which she had done, standing shyly in the hallway with him where no one else could hear.

Her classroom looks strange in the nighttime. The windows which normally looked out over the roof and down across the playground in the back of the church looked out at night over nothing at all. They were like eyes which had lost all their luster and ability to see.

Kathy's friend Annie came into the room. She was also a public school kid but there was something strange about her. You never saw her parents. You never saw her with a family and church but every Sunday morning she turned up first Sunday School with her little sister Jeannie. Annie didn't come in Sunday close like the rest of the little girls. She hardly said a word and after Sunday School with over you would see her walking away down rainbow with Jeannie who was a grade younger than Janet but about twice as wild. Kathy wondered if she would bother to go to church each Sunday if her parents didn't bring her. She thought she probably wouldn't, especially if she would have to bring Janet and Janet was as wild as Jeannie. It made her wonder about the mystery of Annie. But now she came into the room and saw that Diane Oberg was there. So was Tom Rice, looking stiff and uncomfortable in his Sunday blue coat and tie. Penny Thomas was there and the Osterman twins. The twins look so much alike that Kathy and that made her extremely uncomfortable around them especially since the twins were very touchy about being called each other's name. She was just getting into a discussion about something with Patty more when Mr. Jurgens came in dressed in a

dark blue suit and carrying his hat. (No one else's father wore a hat or taught Sunday school. Michael Jurgens, in the class between Kathy's and Janet's, was mortified and as a result was the worst kid the Sunday School had.)

Mr. Jurgens told them to line up, they were going to run through their parts one more time. Kathy's tummy began to flutter, but when her turn came in she said her part about the Angels no one stopped and said, "That isn't right! Praying first and then singing? Geez your dumb," although she that somebody would. She faked nervously along with the rest of the parts.

Then Mr. Jurgens put them all in single file and marched them out of the room, down the steps and into the church lobby. There were so many people in the sanctuary that the overflow room was open and people had begun to fill the folding chairs. The Sunday School children were lined up by classes in the lobby waiting to file and behind the minister. Kathy look for Jana and found her standing in line with Nancy Rice. The two of them had their faces stuck into the rectangles of the stained glass windows looking into the overflow room beyond. The church was beautiful all along the walls a garland of evergreen boughs had been looped. At each quote up" place there was a huge red velvet bow. The Isle ends of the pews were decorated with evergreens and there was evergreen across the front of the church as well. There were candles everywhere and Christmas tree at least 20 feet tall stood at the front of the church a twinkle with its tiny white lights. All over it dangled white religious symbol ornaments the women of the church had handmade. The tremendous stained glass window, which made up the entire wall of the church behind the altar, was the only thing that didn't look better than it normally did during the day. Without the daylight behind it you could just make out the pictures but the colors were all sleepy and dark.

The organ began to play in the Sunday School classes began to go down the aisle, class by class, starting with the youngest. Kathy trembled with excitement, her face seemingly frozen in a grin. She tucked her chin and tried to sober up her face as she walked. Her hands were folded across her tummy and the patent leather shoes made a soft tap tapping and she came down the aisle then she was in the pew with the rest of her class and safe.

The minister stood up, his surplice white over the white gown,; the embroidered sash was purple against this knowingness of the gown. All over the church you could hear the rustling of taffeta, silk wool, and lace as a congregation rose the minister opened his hymnbook. The congregation open there's the minister said his words out of the book and the congregation sung the response. He walked up to the lectern and said the verses for the service and the congregation sat down. He talked to them a few minutes

about the Children's Service, how many years the tradition had gone on, and then the children's program began.

The tiniest of children, the toddler in kindergarten class, stood up and came to the front. They stumbled in their fancy close and, looking darling, held each other's hands as they lined up on the steps. The tallest one stood proudly in the back. The littlest ones stood dazedly in the front. One of them began looking for his mommy, found her and waved. Another one began to cry and had to be removed from the line. None of them looked as if he or she had the faintest idea why they were up there. They looked at the congregation in amazement. The teacher had a pitch pipe and tried to gather their attention with a single plaintive note. Each and every person in the pews strained to see over the people in front of him or her to catch a glimpse of the little ones standing in a row at the front of the church. Then the babies began to sing.

Away in a manger no crib for a bed,  
The little Lord Jesus laid down his  
sweet head.  
The stars in the sky looked down  
where he lay.  
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.

It was a higgledy-piggledy performance at best. This child sang loudly but quite out of tune. That one came in by fits and starts whenever she happened to remember the words. Several children didn't sing at all but stood with their mouths open or thumb stuck comfotingly in. The other looked at their teeth they sang along by reading her lips until finally the song was done, forgetting, perhaps, that they had sung this song every class time since last July to get it right by now. But they had the most forgiving and appreciative of audiences and açai whispered across the congregation as little ones were shepherded to their parents waiting conveniently in the first few rows.

The classes followed each other one after another, this one doing a reading, that when doing a song. The dim hung over their heads like so many captured and suspended moons. The candles flickered and cast their light. In the lofty church the sound of sweet voices rose to the rafters: "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear... That glorious song of old... Of angels bending near the earth... To touch their hearts of gold." Janet's class file to the front Janet was standing in the middle next to Nancy Rice and the two of them had their hands folded importantly across their metals and their hair all tightly curled. "Silent Night," they sang, "Holy night. All is calm. All is bright" and then they said their verse straight off without a hitch.

And Kathy's class's turn came up. They stood together on the steps and said their piece. Kathy's turn to speak came rushing up to meet her, hung over her, then was gone. She found her parents faces in the crowd. Her mother's eyes were shining and she knew she had done it and had gotten it right. An intense feeling of relief and pride washed over her, she raised her chin and mouthed the responses with the rest of the class allowing herself to forget, forever, from that moment on, whether 'singing' or 'praising' or 'something else' came before the 'saying' part. Then it was and they all returned to their pew.

A few more classes rose to speak. The congregation sang a Christmas Carol; the minister said a prayer, and then the organ burst out in joyous acclaim. Great and brilliant burst of music poured warmly over the heads of the congregation. The minister strode down the aisle, his robe swishing as he walked, his Bible tucked against him in his hand, and the children followed, row after row after row. When they got to the door of the lobby there were adults waiting for them. They stood by big barrels and handed each child, as he or she came through, a brown paper bag full of nuts, candies, and one large navel orange. Kathy stood with her friends and watched out of the corner of her eye as Annie searched the lobby for the wild Jeannie, collected her and herded her through the door. Kathy was surprised to see an old lady with them, a grandmotherly person who hugged the wild Jeannie and held Annie's hand as they walked down the sidewalk. So maybe Annie had some family after all. It made Kathy feel suddenly glad.

More adults came pouring in their turn down the aisle while the organ continued to splendidly play. There were her mother and father. Her father went to get the coats from the crush of coats in the rack. Her mother went to find Janet. Kathy stood where she was, the paper bag heavy in her hands, and watched as the people milled around the lobby. Mostly she was not much taller than people's second button and it seemed, coats, and chests. Tiny, ancient Miss Engelbrecht, who was in any taller than Kathy herself and taught the youngest class stopped by to say hello and wish her Merry Christmas. Kathy remembered when even Miss Engelbrecht had looked so tall. The lobby was emptying and with one long and fervent "amen" of Accord the organ abruptly stopped playing. People poured into the night. Kathy's parents arrived with Janet already be-coated and in toto and soon they to. The car wasn't warm this time either when they got in, you could see your breath in the darkness and Kathy and Janet had bare legs, but forgetting all else they were aglow with renewed excitement

Had he come yet? Did Santa come while they were at church?

Kathy had secret hope she wasn't talking about. She hoped more than anything else that, like the birthday candles snow wish, this wish to would come true. A few months



ago, when she was at G. E. M. (A big everything store) with her parents, she and Janet had been allowed to walk through the toy department and then she had seen something the likes of which she had never seen before. It was a huge stuffed elephant. It was almost as tall as she was. It was standing on the ground, all its 4 feet sturdily under it, and on his back was a tasseled blanket of red velvet, edged in shiny gold. The rope hung in points from the elephant's sides and in a triangle down the elephant's face and Kathy wanted that elephant more than anything else in the world. She had dragged her mother over to see it, and then her father. Even Janet had been dragged over from a display of Raggedy Anns to look and admire. The next day she had written a letter to Santa Claus. She had talked of nothing else for days. When her mother had gently told her that perhaps it would be too big for Santa to bring and that she shouldn't get her hopes up, Kathy had been crushed. She wrote another letter to Santa and told him she didn't care if he didn't bring her anything else at all. All she wanted that Christmas was the elephant and he needn't bother trying to bring her anything else. But her mother's continued lack of enthusiasm worried her. What if what she had said was true and Santa couldn't bring her the elephant? What then? She tried to brace herself for disappointment as they drove through the dark and snowy streets. If he couldn't bring it, then she guessed he just couldn't.

The girls were bouncing in the backseat as the car came up the driveway. The race around the car and up the steps jiggling with impatience as her parents came more slowly with the keys. Had he, or hadn't he? Was it now or will they have to wait until morning? At last the door came open and they raced into the darkened house. There was a plate of cookies and all but one! There was a glass of milk and it was almost empty. Janet picked up the cookie that was left and looked at it all stricken. It was missing a bite! Santa had eaten all the others and left this one half eaten! Then they were whirling into living room and excitement. Daddy reached over and lit the Christmas tree and for a moment it stood there in its glory was no other lights on in the room at all. There were presents everywhere in the stockings again were full. Kathy took one quick look around the tree and saw that the elephant was not there. She felt one quick stab of disappointment and then it was gone. There was so many presents under the tree and in the excitement she was suddenly prepared to forget the elephant and see what up the rest of them contained.

They got their coats and muffs off. Mother insisted they change out of their good close but soon the ritual of present opening began: one at a time, round and round the circle. There were presents and more presents. Janet got a box of clothes for her chatty Kathy doll the grandma Gregor had meticulously made. So did Kathy. They each got a shoebox filled with a little spicy anise flavored cookies they pretended were dog biscuits although they had to be careful not to call them dog biscuits when grandma

was around. She took offense as they called her good cookies biscuits for the dog. Janet had a classics book of Heidi with beautiful colored pictures. Kathy got Little Women and then opened up a chemistry set.

There was one rather large box for Janet still tucked way over in the corner. Kathy was curious about what it was. "That one!" She said to Janet when it was Janet's next turn the Janet wanted the flat red package with the shiny silver bow. When it was Janet's turn the next time Kathy urged her once again to open the one of the corner but this time daddy handed Janet a package with mysterious knobs and lumps and once more the big box in the corner was passed by. But the next time it was Janet's turn she chose the one in the corner and Kathy watched with interest as Janet tore off the paper in the bow. The box was of plain cardboard that opened at the top Janet undid the folding and lifted out... Could it be?... Something gray... What?... With tears in the quizzically funny face... It was! It was a stuffed elephant. Suddenly all of Kathy's longing for the elephant in the store rest over her again. "No!" She said, "that's mine. Santa got it wrong. It was supposed to be for me!" And she burst into tears.

Then unhappiness reigns supreme for many minutes. Kathy was crying and trying to take the elephant away from Janet. Janet was crying and trying to keep the elephant in her arms. Mother was trying to separate the two of them and father was angry because everything was upset and not the way it was supposed to be anymore "but the it was supposed to be for me!" Kathy kept trying to explain and her heart was almost broken. Even a LITTLE elephant was better than no elephant at all. Her father was only angry and refused to understand. "The package was addressed to Janet" he told her sharply again and again "you saw the tag," but casually just continued to weep.

Finally daddy took her by the hand and led her into the kitchen Kathy was absolutely convinced that she was going to be spanked. How could such an awful thing be happening? She had never in her life imagined that anything so terrible could happen on Christmas as Santa getting Janet one of her presents and then she getting spanked about it, never! The daddy didn't spank her, instead he showed her, tucked away in the corner of the kitchen counter, illuminated by the nightlight from the stove, a big unwrapped box. It was a very big box indeed. It didn't have any Christmas paper on it but on top there was a note. Kathy was still sobbing and clung to her dad. Her father detach the paper and put it into her hand. Through her tears Kathy just managed to read, "dear Kathy, this was too big to wrap. I hope you don't mind. Merry Christmas! Love, Santa." And somehow her father was getting the box open then he reached in and lifted out a big stuffed elephant.

It wasn't the elephant from the store but it was just as big. In fact it was at least half as tall as Kathy herself. It didn't stand on his 4 feet but instead sat on its bottom, it's 4 feet sticking straight out. The elephant's trunk was raised in the salute and her big floppy ears, are lined with crimson plush, stood out on either side. Kathy took the elephant into her arms and hugged it very tight. She looked up at her father who was still angry about the crying. "I don't know if you should be allowed to have it," he told her, "after all that fussing." He mean it? Her heart about near froze again. But then she could see he didn't minute and he wasn't really going to take her elephant away. She hugged the elephant to her and they took the elephant back into the living room. Set next to the other one it was easy for all to see that it was by far the larger of the two and that was a satisfaction that finally eased the last of the pain that still throbbed in Kathy's heart.

Pretty soon the crisis was over and they were all laughing again. When all the present opening was over and they were having a snack of birthday cake and punch they set the two elephants together again and decided they were mother and son daddy suggested the elephants be called Ellie and sent Funt. The name seem right and proper. Funt snuggled up against his mother and was content. Kathy was tired and snuggled up against her mother and was also content. They all went to bed and slept through the night soundly because there was no present opening to happen the next morning to trouble all their dreams.

As she fell asleep, (Ellie right next to her bed were Kathy could reach over and pat her whenever she wanted to and sent tucked into Janet's bed with her right next Raggedy Ann) Kathy found yourself wondering once again. "How does Santa know when we go to church? And all the Christmas presents are here when we get back!" It was a wonder that never cease to amaze her some of the kids at school said there was no Santa Claus and that their parents were really Santa Claus but surely that must not be so their parents had been with him at church the whole time and there was the proof of the half eaten cookie when all of them had gotten back she fell asleep turning the puzzle over and over in her mind.

### A Third Christmas - Cousins

That year they had spent Thanksgiving and Humphrey at grandma Gregor's house with Uncle Helmut, Aunt Merle, and their cousin Lisa. Grandma had cooked all morning and at noon Aunt Merle and mother had taken all the heavy fine china, and Crystal out of the display cabinets and all the silver out of its velvet lined box and had set it all on a thick, white, linen tablecloth on the long dining room table. Kathy had watched all this happened looking through the wooden rails of the banister as she sat on the stairs. Uncle Helmut saw her up there and came to sit beside her. They sat together and joked as Janet and Lisa played with paper dolls in an upstairs bedroom and the dinner was carried out to the table before their hungry eyes. There was turkey and mashed potatoes with gravy. Grandma had cooked up corn, rolls, peas and sweet potatoes swimming in a juice of brown sugar and marshmallows. Bright red cranberry sauce wiggled in its dish every time somebody walked past the table. The aromas were almost unbearable and it seemed like forever before they finally all sat down to eat. Kathy begged for a whole turkey leg all to herself this year and then was all stricken at the size of the thing when it was really placed on her plate.

Because they had spent Thanksgiving with grandma Gregor and because the Atkinson cousins were coming from Los Angeles they were now going to Grandpa and Grandma Atkinson's for Christmas. This upset their own usual Christmas a bit but the Saturday before they had had a birthday party for Kathy and then Janet and Kathy were allowed to open one of their Christmas presents before they left for Nebraska and would open the rest of them when they got back. The sunset early in the evenings at midwinter and so it was already dark when daddy got home from work and they took off for Nebraska. Janet and Kathy watched out the window as the familiar city streets slid by. They look for all their favorite landmarks: the cow atop the American Herford cattle Association building in downtown Kansas City (glowing red it night was a lights turned on and cited in print. The next thing they watched for was the grain elevator in St. Joseph's painted like a giant Quaker Oats box set by the road just before you cross the silver painted bridge over the Missouri River. After St. Joseph's it was just too boring to sit in the dark backseat and see nothing but the endless side of the road through the windows. What they wanted was for daddy to turn on the light in the ceiling so that they could see to play their puzzles the daddy said it was too hard to see the road that way and kept the light turned off. They get tired and had to decide who got to sleepwear. Daddy had built a platform that stretched over the hump on the back seat floor and one of them could sleep down there on an army slipping back. The other one slept on the seat as both of them were too big now to sleep on the wonderful ledge between the back seat and the back window The rule was that one of them got the platform going up to Grandpa and Grandma's house and the other got to sleep there

while going home. She getting it decided he was going to go first, the girl stretched out and tried to go to sleep. It was hard. The car jiggled steadily and the sound of the wheels on cement turned endlessly beneath her ears. The steady vibration of the car made Kathy's nose at the edge since she was the one on the platform and she tried a dozen different positions to get the itching to stop.

When she woke up they were still not there. She sat up and looked out the window but could see nothing but farmlands for as far as the eye could see. Here in their lights twinkled in the sum farmyard surrounded by darkness. Sometime recently it had snowed and now there were ghostly patches tucked into the hollows along the road. Mother also seem to be asleep, her head sunk into a pillow against the window glass. Daddy listen to the radio which softly played as he drove and drove. With some sixth sense he intuited Kathy sitting up silently in the back seat and glanced back over his shoulder at her. "See the Milky Way?" He asked. She craned her head into the bottom corner of her window and look straight up. Yes there was stretching in a blaze of brilliant points across the sky. She sat looking up at it for a while and then ask how much longer before they got there.

"Another hour or so," her father said. Janet stirred restlessly in her sleep. Kathy lay back down again on the platform and soon was fast asleep.

When they got to Poni city, the small town in Nebraska where their grandparents lived, there was one light burning in the kitchen of the small house on the edge of town. The family let themselves in through the kitchen door and pretty soon there were Grandpa and Grandma come out into the the kitchen and their bathrobes to greet them. Grandma's hair lay in a long braid down her back. "Does anyone want something to eat?" Asked grandma and soon they were all sitting around the big table in the kitchen eating thick slices of homemade bread spread with chopped beef and potato. "Just leftovers," grandma said. But it tasted the delicious.

Janet and Kathy were disappointed that the Atkinson cousins were not there yet and had to be satisfied with the news that they would arrive in the morning. Then they were all trundled off to bed. It was cold Grandpa and Grandma's house. Janet and Kathy were put into the big bed in the back bedroom downstairs. The sheets were like ice and they had half a dozen blankets and homemade quilts piled up on top of them. Mother and dad, in the next room, had an electric blanket but everyone was afraid to give one to the girls because they both twined covers up in their fists at night. Grandma was afraid they might electrocute themselves to the girls lay between the rough outside, past the house as they drove out of town, making a whooshing sound as they passed.

In the morning they dozed in the bed although they could hear that the adults were already up. The smells of fresh coffee and warm homemade cinnamon rolls wafted into the bedroom but Janet and Kathy were reluctant to leave the warmth of their bed. They lingered so long that the Atkinson cousins arrived while they were still in bed. When Ellen and Joyce came tearing into their bedroom they tumbled quickly out.

“Lazybones!” Taunted Joyce. Kathy and Janet shrugged out of their 90s feeling foolishly naked in front of the cousins and quickly pulled on their close the house was full of cousins and uncles and grandparents and aunts. All the Atkinson cousins except one were redheaded our carrot top. They were, from oldest to youngest, Christine, ON, Joyce, Ellen, and David. Owen was Kathy’s age but since he was a boy she hung out with Christine. Janet fit neatly and age right between Joyce and Ellen and the three of them stuck together so closely and giggled so pervasively that they were colloquially known as The Three Sillies family wide.

Dinner, a huge production, was in progress in the kitchen. Mother and Aunt Elsie were in there helping Grandma. Grandpa, uncle Dan and daddy were in the living room their chins tucked importantly and their arms folded across her chest as they talk serious talk. Daddy look just like a smaller carbon copy of his brother and they stood together in exactly the same posture discussing the weather with their dad. Owen and David were at the table no matter how cold it was, to poke through forgotten closets and boxes and chests of drawers looking for treasures left behind by their uncles and aunts. They pulled the stereopticon from its place in the chiffarobe and past the picture cards around.

And Vivian and Uncle Ken arrived. Aunt Vivian was carrying their Pomeranian dog, Kibby snappish and nervous. He was rapidly turning into a bad tempered, if gorgeous, ball of white fluff – too many kids for his liking – and, as much like a toy as he looked, he was determined not to let anyone think this was so. He sat jealously on Aunt Vivian’s lap as the girls ringed around and wouldn’t let anyone touch him at all. “Too many kids in the house,” said uncle Dan. “Let’s go for a walk.” So all the cousins were bundled into their hats and coats and with Grampa, Uncle Gaylord, (Kathy and Janet’s dad) and uncle Dan they all set out down the railroad tracks.

The day was crisp and blue. The tracks were lined with dried grass and the rails were shiny bright from recent years. The children walked on the rails are raced up and down the ties trying to step now on every wouldn’t hi and then on every other one. The former made for very short steps indeed and for the latter you had to nearly jump. A few bright red leaves still clung to the sumac here and there and yellow ones on the Elms. Uncle Dan and daddy were looking for wild bittersweet growing up the trees along the tracks. At last I found some of the bright orange berries and carefully broke

off an arm full of stems. Christine and Kathy were trying to make a wreath from the dried vines of wild grape and The Three Sillies were busy throwing clickers over the edge of the bridge into the cold, slow, water flowing beneath.

A part of the reason for going at all was to find the Christmas tree. Uncle Dan and Daddy especially got into this although the evergreens that grew in Nebraska were not at all like the sturdy, long needled Pines brought into the city and sold in the Christmas tree lots. Instead, there were dozens of small scraggly spruces that hardly looked like Christmas trees at all but over which uncle Dan and Daddy exclaimed in bursts of sentiment. They found a small one to their liking and grandpa cut it down.

When then noses were all rosy, their ears nipped beneath their caps and Uncle Dan's and Daddy's bald heads were crimson with the cold they turned back along the rails and went back to the house. They took a shortcut through the cemetery and all the kids went scrambling among the stones looking for Atkinson plot. They found it last, the low cement boundary wall almost hidden in the winter grass and the cement tree with its rough bark and lopped off limbs almost looking like a real tree among the others except that it also had a cement sash hung across his middle carved with the family name. While the uncles and boys went on back to the house the girls took a walk to the back of the cemetery to find Uncle David's grave. He had been Grandpa and Grandma's fifth child and had only lived a few days after his birth. The girls all thought this was very sad, especially at Christmas, and left a bouquet of grasses and weeds by his headstone and decorated the little grave with a circle of pinecones.

When they got back to the house the binder cousins had arrived and there was the shyness of getting used to another batch of cousins to be gone through all over again. They were all stunned to find they Kibby was sitting contentedly in Barbara's arms but since And Vivian and Uncle Ken lived in Omaha he was much more used to seeing the Binder cousins than any of the rest of them. Christine, jealous that Barbara was getting to hold the tiny ornamental dog reached out to pat him and Kibby promptly snapped at her. In the confusion that resulted and Vivian took back her dog which left the cousins with nothing between them and staring at one another. The boys seem to fare better than the girls for Owen and Phil were busy playing checkers and David and Tim stood by and watched but soon the older girls were also racing around the house and when they were shouted down for noise and as they all clattered up the stairs into the attic.

The girls tended to divide into three groups. There were the oldest three: Marjorie, Christine, and Kathy. And then there were the Three Sillies with the addition of Barbara. Barbara was smaller than Janet and it wasn't until years later that Kathy and Janet learn was surprised that she was actually older than either Kathy or 01.

Downstairs there was one more group of quote Little Girls:" Joy, Mary, and baby Sharon who were all Binders and were too young to be allowed to run up and down the stairs. Now the oldest two groups of girls merged and all of them played hide and seek in the attic. There were two bedrooms one storage room and a central room where there were many many places to hide. The longest game was when Barbara managed to tuck herself up into the shelves in the main room where the quilts were stored, right behind the person who was open quote it" and so is not found for a long, long time. This extended game tired them all out so they lay contentedly on the floor of the middle bedroom with the rug pulled back from the great in the floor and peered down into the living room to spy on the adults.

Blow them the feast was beginning to take shape. The dining room table was pulled out into the center of the flowered linoleum floor. The bed of Old Mike, their grandparents ancient black lab, was pushed back behind the heater and about two dozen chairs were retrieved from every corner of the house. And Elsie and mother flipped the latches beneath the table and pulled on either end. Three A great yawning gap appeared in the middle and was fitted with three leaves. This made the table long enough to fill the entire room. Next it was spread with underpads and covered with three clean white overlapping linen table cloths, the kind with shiny polished cotton threads woven into their whiteness. Next came the china. There were so many ants, uncles, and cousins, that there was not enough matched china and crystal in the house to make up a complete set. The plates and glasses ran in various assortments down the table, some plain white, some with flowers, and others with faded golden rims.

Delicious smells came up through the grate in the floor. Grandma and the Ants had fixed an enormous slab of roast beef cooked so tender that it would fall apart at the touch of a fork. It came smoking from its pan with an abundance of well roasted potatoes, onions, and carrots and the drippings turned in the gravy. There was a bowl of yellow sweet corn kernels from last year's garden, a thick pat of butter melting over the mound of corn they were creamed peas. There was a grated carrot salad with some cucumbers. There were two oval plates of cranberry sauce and two plates of homemade white bread. There was a plate of carrot sticks, celery sticks, green pepper slices green olives and black olives. There were homemade dill pickles, sweet pickles, mustard pickles and, Kathy's favorite, bread-and-butter pickles there were at least three kinds of homemade jelly and real butter. For dessert there were three kinds of pie, and orange juice cake and a white cake, ice cream and slabs of sharp cheddar cheese for the top of the apple pie. All in all there was more bounty than any 24 people could hope to eat and there's hardly a thing on the table that had been grown in the garden, or raised from a calf, or made with Grandma's own two hands in the kitchen. It was a stupendous feast which, of course, the children all took for granted with the possible exception of the



Binder kids who had a garden and had to help with canning and freezing at their own house.

They all sat down to eat. The Atkinson cousins, both the Kansas City and the Los Angeles branches, sat uneasily as Uncle Hook of the Binders said the grace. Both of the other two families asked the same rote and cursory blessing before every meal but the Binders were fundamentalist Christians and spoke personally and at length to the Lord before every meal. Uncle Hook kept their heads bowed for a long time as the food cooled but as this always happened the same, there was not much that could be done except to wait through it. It seemed that there was some unspoken agreement among the adults about this issue and so the children let it lay.

At last they could dig in there was so much food that even taking only a spoonful of everything as it passed around the table meant that your plate was heaped by the time the last bowl passed by. By carefully choosing where she sat and by being as discreet as possible Kathy managed to keep the unspeakable things, like asparagus, off her plate. It helped to sit away from that Ants who were likely to forget you are old enough to serve yourself now Grandma would never do such a thing and neither would a cousin so it was best to have one of the other on either side. And so the dinner went on in a seemingly interminable whirl of plates and platters, glasses and bowls.

When the whole thing was over there was a monstrous washing up that had to be done and the children were recruited right and left. There were so many things to wash that by the time they were through at least six dishtowels hung behind the door ringing wet. Daddy often volunteered to wash, one cousin managed to rinse pan full of scalding water they came next (it was a lovely old pan – originally all of white enamel, but grandpa had welded it in several places as they rested through and now the white was spotted with brass that shone like molten gold and paren and then three or four cousins with dishtowels took care of all the rest when every last dish, glass, pot, pan and spoon was washed and put away they were free to go play again. They scampered outside into the cold Nebraska air and played tag, or Mother May I? Or Stop – and – Go until the sun went down and the Binders had to go home to take care of the livestock.

This was not a happy moment for there was not enough sleeping space at grandma's which meant that some or all of the Atkinson cousins would usually now be selected to go sleep at the Binders house. Kathy and Janet both felt very shy about this. The Binders lived on a farm in a big old brick house that for as many years as they had known the Binders was still under construction. In strange places the plaster was likely to be missing from the walls and the brickwork would be showing through. There was little or no heating in the upstairs of the house where the kids slept and even though there

were plenty of blankets it was quite strange to see your breath in the bedroom of a morning or feel yourself shivering violently as your bare feet hit the icy wooden floor. The worst though was that the Binders never missed an opportunity, when the kids were away from their parents, to proselytize their kin. As a matter of fact it would have been very hard to miss the point that this was a Christian house for there was in a room in which Jesus did not look down from the wall or one or two Bible verses on plaques are inside frames were strategically placed. Even the pillowcases were embroidered with crosses set among flowers or sprouted praying hands. But as if this was not enough, the Binders insisted that anyone staying in their house (whether voluntarily or not) had to take part in the family Bible study and prayer that seem to take place every night (although Kathy, for one, suspected some part of this ritual was not routine and was put on especially for visitors). They all got handed a Bible (woe to the cousin who couldn't find First and Second Kings!) Everyone had to take a turn to read and in the end there was another interminably long prayer voicing sentiments Kathy was not sure at all her parents shared

The strangest thing of all to the Atkinson cousins, both Kansas City and Los Angeles branches, was that the Binders didn't get or give presents at Christmas. They believe that Christmas was Jesus's birthday and that presents to others simply wasn't right. They did not believe in Santa Claus and there was never a tree in their house. Kathy had never heard of such a thing and was fervently glad her family didn't believe as they did.

As it turned out, this was not one of those times where she had to go to the Binders. Perhaps because it was Christmas and the Binders and Atkinson's celebrated and in such different ways, perhaps because the Los Angeles cousins were going to leave again the next morning to go on to their other relations in Iowa, her family and theirs were just going to squeeze in somehow at Grandma's. Kathy was glad the Binders left in their station wagon and after they were gone daddy brought in the tiny spruce tree to which grandpa had fixed two crossed pieces of wood. Grandma dug a box of battered and fragile ornaments from the closet under the stairs. The cousins strong popcorn and cranberries and hung them on the tree. Then each ornament was carefully taken from his wrappings and ever so carefully hung. The mirrored ones were rusty. There were wax angels without their wings but Grandma touch them all lovingly, especially the ones that looked as if they had been made by small children a very long time ago. When it was all decorated they turned out the lights and looked at the little scraggly tree glowing on darkness and despite her misgivings Kathy had to admit that it had somehow taken on a glory of its own standing there all decorated by the window. By the light of the string of colored and forgiving Christmas lights, the little ornaments gleamed in the popcorn hung festively all the same.

After that, most of the adults sat in the living room talking about adult fish things but grandma, daddy and uncle Dan gathered in the kitchen under the bright fluorescent light while grandpa got out the mechanical toys one by one, carefully wound them up or fitted them with batteries and let them play. Kathy's favorite was an elephant whose trunk dropped into a tiny cup of dish soap and then blew bubbles into the air although the bear in the loose fitting wirey-furred cloth skin who took three steps, and turned his head before walking three steps more, his mechanical parts growling inside of him, was almost as good. David's favorite was the mechanical monkey who played the drum with his foot and clashed a set of symbols in his hands. His head swiveled proudly from side to side and young David laughed and laughed. They all had a cold quick supper (in which a reprieve of orange juice cake and ice cream was heavily favored among the kids) and then it was time for bed.

Kathy's parents being in the room off the living room in which there was a couch that pulled out on which Kathy and Christine were chosen to sleep. Mommy and daddy were across the room in the bed with the cold iron bedstead. Uncle Dan and aunt Elsie were in the next room with toddler David in a dresser drawer and Owen on a thick mat on the floor. Joyce, Ellen, and Janet were all together in a bed upstairs in the attic with grandpa and grandma in the other upstairs bed. Aunt Vivian and uncle Ken were in the daybed in the living room with old Mike behind the stove and Kibby at their feet. The house settled down in the cold darkness and seem to go to sleep.

Kathy lay awake in bed for a long time after Christine and her parents had dropped off. It was strange in the darkness and the gathering cold, she was afraid to cuddle up to Christina she would have to Janet so she lay quite still on her side of the bed. The gas heater in the room hissed a bit and turned itself on and off. The tiny row of flames at the bottom burned blue. Outside she knew the stars were blazing in the dark sky above the Nebraska farmland. Daddy had taken her outside before bedtime to see them and as they stood and watched, a meteor had cut the darkness and left a trail of light from the eastern sky down to the west she thought about how cold it must be in the cemetery across the street and about the little baby, Uncle David, who had been laying out there all this time and had never known a cousins Christmas such is the one they had just had. A car passed by in the front of the house, the peculiar crescendo of his wheels whining to a peak and then swishing by. She heard another one. 1/3 one roused her one more time and then she forgot the person in the bed with Christine and huddled up close in their combined warmth and fell, deliciously to sleep.