

“A Most Wondrous Gift”
A Short Story for Christmas 1956
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The candles in the dark cathedral played impish images on the holy walls while a lone woman knelt before a statue of the *Pieta*. The organist cascaded crescendos through the canyon of the cathedral as she knelt, shivering with quiet sobs, before this heartrending image. It was very strange to see a woman kneeling in sadness at such a joyful time, but it attracted no attention from the small group of people kneeling in raptured meditation before the Crib.

She rose to her feet, walked to the center aisle, genuflected, and blessed herself as she stepped into the crisp December air. The stars were softly burning as the moon's reflection moved up the white-blanketed street before her, alone, without her Johnny.

The greying woman stopped and listened as the melodious strains of distant carolers drifted to her on the clear night air. The yellow light of a nearby lamp post festooned with greenery cast a bold finger of light across her tear-streaked face. It revealed a gracious, elderly woman whose eyes showed mysterious depths. They were eyes that had known happiness and laughed, and sorrow and cried.

Wrapped in a melancholic reverie, she moved on slowly. Some people across the street were taking a boisterous leave of their hosts. “Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!” broke from their lips many times and many times broke the heart of this woman.

She reached her home and stepped onto the porch. Turning around she gazed into the night. The street was quiet now. No lights showed but those that twinkled from the Christmas trees in the windows along the streets.

She gazed on the winter night's beauty and a breeze whispered by her ears: “This is the night—a time of beautiful, soothing darkness. It is always followed by day. This is winter—a time of apparent death. It is not truly death, but rather a deep sleep that envelops nature in its shadowy bosom. It is always followed by spring.”

To this widow of four days came a creeping, slow rushing, then fast surging wave of untold divine joy. Suddenly the stars in the sky showed brighter and glimmered in a crystal and velvet existence. A particular diamond of light caught her eye as it blazed forth in its unique and magnificent glory. It cast its silver gleam over the winter wonderland and showed a tree, a victim of winter, lifting its arms heavenward. It was devoid of leaves and in the midst of its nakedness and destitution it raised its limbs in praise of its Creator. It portrayed the faith that is was not forsaken as it waited for the spring which always comes. With that green season comes new life and the restoration of all desires and ambitions.

Warmth was restored to her life. She saw there could be no spring without first a winter. Her mind reverted to the beautifully tragic *Pieta* and she knew without Christ's death there could be no eternal life. The springtime of her faith blossomed forth amidst the barrenness of its winter.

She turned with a gayer step. The grace and dignity of her years reappeared as she turned the key in the lock of her front door. She walked in—neither closing the door, nor removing her coat—and stepped across the room to the Christmas tree which had so recently been decorated by Johnny's loved hands. She connected the plug and the lights of the tree in unison blinked on and filled the room with their color. They were the sole illumination save for the lustrous blue that glowed from her small Crib.

She looked fondly at the winsome stable scene and in startled surprise dropped to her knees and examined the Figure of the Child more closely. The corners of the Mouth were turned up in a knowing smile. Thrilled and frightened she thought over the past, “Was that Statue smiling when

I placed it there last week and in Christmases long ago?"

Then she realized as she gazed on the Holy Child, as she picked Him up in her arms, as a sudden, effervescent joy rushed through her, that He was smiling for her.

Time reverently paid homage to the Creator of Eternity as the minutes passed. She then tenderly placed the Infant back in His Crib.

"Thank you, Little One, it is your Birthday and Johnny is with you. You have given me a renewed and joyful faith—a most wondrous gift!" © 1956 and 2004 Jack Fritscher