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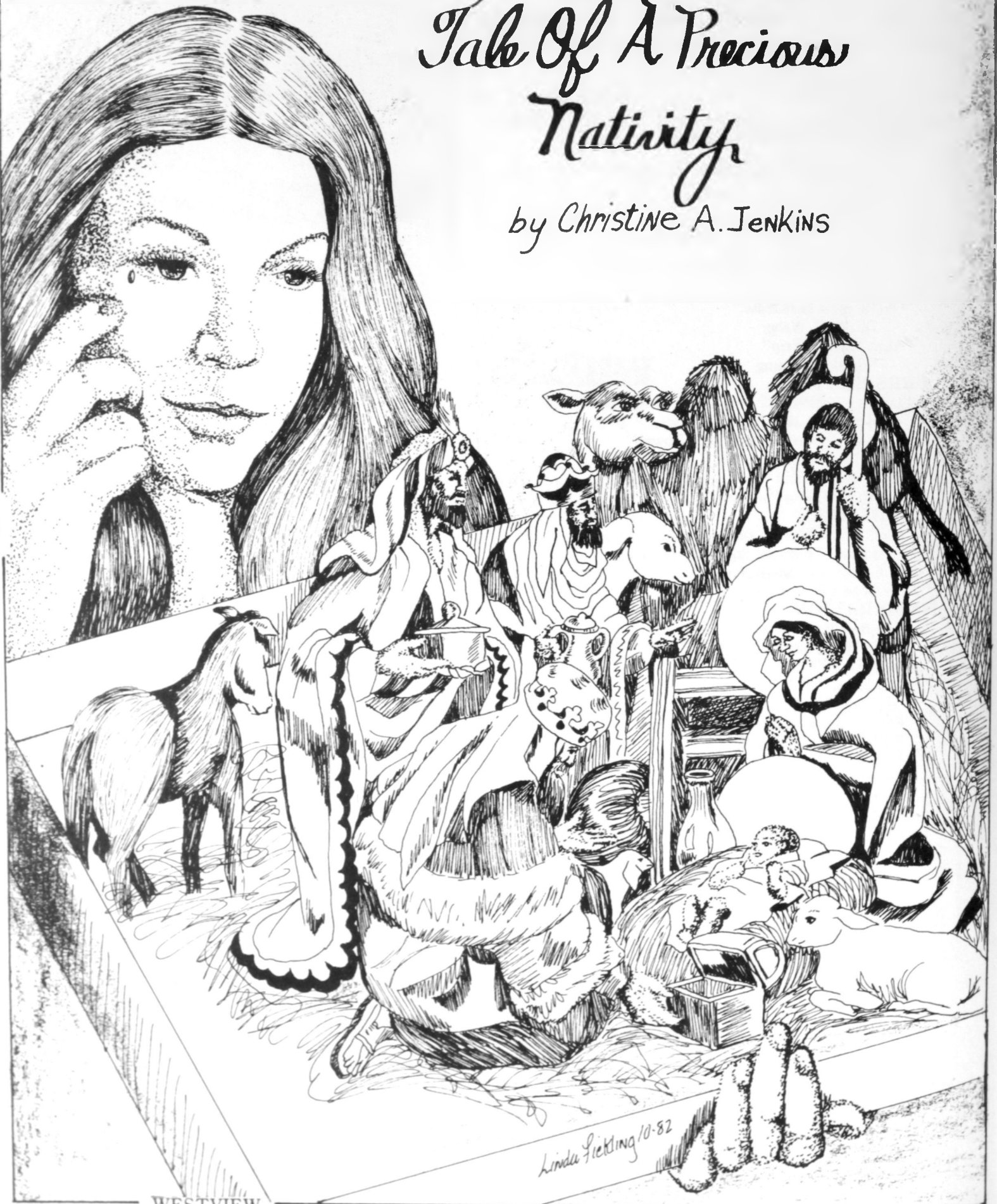
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# Tale Of A Precious Nativity

by Christine A. Jenkins



Bundles in hand, Steven fumbled with the knob and pushed the back porch door open for him and his wife.

He and Jenny had spent the day in a neighboring city Christmas shopping — something they normally left until the few days just before the hectic holiday.

With Christmas still two weeks away, their shopping was nearly complete. This year, Christmas was different.

So many other things were different, too.

"I swear, if she sprays that stuff one more time, I'm going to gag," Jenny whispered to her husband.

"She" was Aunt Sarah, and this was Aunt Sarah's house.

Aunt Sarah and Uncle Jake had welcomed the young couple into their home after Steven and Jenny's move to rural Oklahoma a few months before.

"C'mon Jenny. You know she's only trying to make things a little nicer for us," Steven said. "I wish you'd just think about that a little." He piled the packages on the kitchen table and turned to watch the matronly woman empty a half of a can of evergreen scent into the air around a metallic Christmas tree.

His wife was unhappy and he knew it. It's not that she had told him so recently, nor that she had even hinted it. He just knew Jennifer Calletti Burns.

He'd never seen her so quiet, especially around the holidays. She'd always been eager to host parties and whip up fresh egg nog when the season rolled around.

"Hi children, how was your trip? I was beginning to worry about you. It was getting kind of late," Aunt Sarah said, walking toward the bathroom to put away the can of room freshener.

"I think we found most everything we needed," replied Jenny, who resented the aunt's concern. They were not children.

Had this been Michigan, Aunt Sarah would have had a right to worry, Jenny thought. After all, this time of year, the winds were undoubtedly whirling snow across the northern highways, making driving hazardous.

Oklahoma offered little risky driving in December — something Jenny thought she'd have liked about her new home. But with Christmas a mere two weeks away, the ground was still bare — "chili powder" she'd often thought as she drove along the dusty, red, dirt backroads.

This is just not adding up to Christmas, Jenny concluded as she unpacked a few groceries.

She didn't care that Aunt Sarah didn't like to fuss over the holidays. Jenny intended to do some Christmas baking. If she couldn't be home for the holidays, she was going to make the best of them on this farm.

Steven had whisked her away from her native Michigan that fall when he took a job with the oil company. Michigan — its faltering economy — offered little to a young couple building a future, he'd convinced her.

She glanced at her freckled, high-school sweetheart stretching to put sugar in the cupboard. She loved him.

He knew she had left her family and sacrificed her job on the local newspaper to follow him to his perceived land of opportunity; she'd told him countless times the first month, never intending to hurt him. But she was homesick and her heart was hurting.

And now, with the greatest of family holidays approaching, the ailment was crippling her normally cheerful disposition.

For the three years they'd been married, Christmas had been spent with Jenny's family. Traditionally, she and Steven hosted the Christmas Eve dinner and annual gift exchange among siblings.

It would never again be the same, and the thought proved tearful. Jenny tucked away the last grocery sack and headed for the bathroom.

"It's going to take every ounce of dreaming to make this a Christmas, let alone a white one," she sniffed to herself. She drew her composure and walked out to the living room.

There she found Steven, his henna-haired aunt, and Uncle Jake sitting before the silver Christmas tree.

How she hated that tree.

If only they'd been in Michigan, she and Steven would have harvested a Scotch Pine from a field as she kept watch for the sheriff. If only. . .

"Doesn't it look lovely," remarked Aunt Sarah who had eased off the sofa to adjust the tinsel star atop the tree.

"Mom and Dad said they'd bring a box of our ornaments over if they can find them in the garage," Steven told his wife. The Burnses' possessions were stored in Steven's parents' garage until the couple could find a home.

"That would be nice. Maybe it would make things a little homier for you two," commented Uncle Jake. He had sensed Jenny's need to be home, or as close to it as possible.

She really liked the balding man. Although he was thin, he reminded her of some old uncle on a now forgotten television series. He was funny and sentimental and so good natured.

He and Sarah made an odd couple, Jenny had told Steven. Jake was sort of zesty and enjoyed people, while Sarah was rather a homebody who enjoyed her garden and sewing.

The spectacled aunt probably viewed Jake's nephew and his wife as intruders, Jenny believed.

It had been Jake to whom Jenny had appealed a few days earlier when she learned Aunt Sarah planned not to erect the artificial tree.

"Jenny, it's been so long since we've celebrated Christmas around here, I'm afraid your Aunt Sarah has forgotten its magic. I'll talk to her tonight and see what we can do," he assured.

The next morning when she arose, Jenny found in the living room the box containing the silver tree. That afternoon, she and Jake assembled it.

Later in the evening, Aunt Sarah rummaged through the attic to find the two dozen red baubles with which to trim it. They all joined in decorating the tree, and Sarah even appeared to enjoy it.

At Jenny's suggestion, the woman popped some corn which they strung into garlands for the tree. Sarah never mentioned her arthritis.

"You know, she's really not that bad," Jenny told her husband of his aunt later that evening. "I mean, it must be just as difficult for her to share this house with us as it is for us to give up our privacy."

Despite the pleasant evening, Jenny confided to Steven something was still missing.

The older couple was not religious.

Oh, they believed in God, but it was not something they displayed, even on a holiday like Christmas.

For as long as Jenny could remember, the Calletti family made the spiritual part of Christmas come alive; it was a part of the holiday's magic. But she and Steven would attend Christmas Mass alone this year.

An ingredient of the holiday's magic, Jenny believed, was a nativity scene. It was that for which she and Steven had hunted on their shopping trip today.

A nativity set had always blessed the Calletti home.

Mother had been fortunate. Before she even married,

she found her beautiful glass figurines and the wooden stable. Its figures glowed with the life of Christmas.

Setting up the manger was a family ritual. Each child would unwrap a statue — the camel with the now splintered leg, the tiny crib which held the Christ Child, the beggars, shepherds, and kings. Each was arranged carefully atop the sheet-covered dining-room buffet, and tiny lights illuminated the set.

Jenny and Steven had searched everywhere for the right manger set. They found only plastic cast molds carelessly painted, or beautifully carved figures too expensive for their young budget.

Desperate to bring a bit of the same enchantment to her new home, Jenny had grabbed a set of plastic figures when Steven took them from her arms.

"Honey, you know you wouldn't be happy with it. You'll find the right one before Christmas, I promise," he said, returning the manger to the shelf.

Before they retired that evening, Steven suggested Jenny call her family. "Maybe that will perk you up," he said, tapping her bottom.

She was only too happy to oblige.

But the conversation jarred loose all those memories again — memories she wouldn't be there to share this year. Jenny grabbed a Kleenex from the desk and trudged to the bedroom.

The following week she became preoccupied with making the farmhouse a home for Christmas. She was determined to lift her spirits. She baked, molded ornaments from homemade clay, and drove into town again in search of a nativity. "With Christmas only a week away, maybe some of the expensive sets will be on sale," she'd reasoned.

Again she returned empty-handed.

She'd all but given up when she decided to assemble one from thread spools. She'd seen the instructions in one of Sarah's craft magazines.

Admittedly, she was no artist. The magic marker faces were smeared. Joseph looked cynical, and Mary looked as if she'd just finished a pitcher of strawberry Kool Aid.

Frustrated, Jenny dumped them in the garbage and retreated to the bedroom to wait for her husband's return from work with their mail. Perhaps among the bills were some Christmas cards — they always seemed to take the damper off these recurring moods.

She heard a tap on the door.

"Come in," she said, casting aside the pillow she was

hugging.

"Your Aunt Sarah says this is for you," reported Uncle Jake who was carrying a package. Sarah shuffled in behind him, almost timidly.

"What's this?" she asked, reaching for the gift-wrapped box. She couldn't imagine from whom it could be. Everyone with whom they normally exchanged gifts had sent them plenty early, afraid the holiday mail rush would make for an even sadder Christmas for the lonely Burnses.

An envelope taped to the side of the box instructed: "OPEN IMMEDIATELY."

"Jenny, just thought you needed a little magic in your Christmas. Hope this provides it. Open it right now."

She recognized Aunt Sarah's script.

Jenny's hands ripped through the Santa faces and she uncovered the box.

Tears brimmed, but did not fall. Inside the box lay a manger set, more precious than any she'd ever seen.

Each little stuffed figure Sarah had fashioned carefully of fabric from her sewing remnants.

Scraps of orange satin cloaked a king. Another wore a crimson satin befitting any royalty, while the third wore a blue velvet cape tailored from what Jenny recognized as the leftovers of the sofa's new slipcovers.

The Magi were adorned with old earrings and beads, and likewise carried frankincense, gold and myrrh no doubt mined in Sarah's jewelry box.

Mary, Joseph, the two shepherds and an angel were in homemade garb as well. Their faces were embroidered, and the men sported beards of yarn.

A lamb which stood taller than the shepherds was cut from the wooly inside of a sinter coat. The corduroy camel looked a bit deformed with his misshapen humps, and the brown felt donkey had difficulty standing. Yet they were loveable creatures, formed by loving, stiff hands.

Finally, Jenny unwrapped the tissue which held the tiny babe, clothed in burlap, who lay in a manger of gold shag carpeting, undoubtedly from Uncle Jake's work bench.

Tucked inside the cloth and cardboard stable was another note.

"Steven said this was the only thing that could make your Christmas real for you. Hope it does. Love, Sarah and Jake."

No thank you, no kiss, no embrace could express Jenny's love for the nativity or her aunt and uncle.

And the magic of Christmas shone through the farmhouse.