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I was just thinking...

WE'RE RUNNING a race against Christmas. We run to the kitchen to bake cookies. We run to the market to buy hams and turkeys. We run to the shops to buy gifts.

We run all day every day with the calendar hot on our heels. At night, when we fall exhausted into bed, we can't sleep. The clock of Christmas ticks like a pounding pulse.

I'm out of breath. I run to my office. I run home again. I write all the checks in my checkbook and run to the bank for more. And I'm not laughing like Liberace.

When a neighbor hints at a special present in store for me, I remember I've left her name off my list. When I add it, I recall three other neighbors who belong there, and nothing occurs to me as a gift possibility except satin-covered thermometers or left-handed nonpareils.

The \$5 saved for a lavish gift for a favorite aunt is sufficient for a bag of dog food. The cost of Christmas mounts higher every year. The insurance premium is due, and the car needs a new fuel pump, refusing to get up in

the morning. One of these mornings I won't, either.

I lay a package down in the kitchen and rescue it later from the garbage can. I buy a gift and leave it in the store. And there are Christmas parties and gift exchanges and the desperate hours of trying to find something for someone who has everything. And the guilty feeling of not being able to put more in the Salvation Army kettles.

ONE OF THESE DAYS, one of these starlit nights, the spirit of Christmas will find me, and I will stop running. We all will. Suddenly, in a whiff of pine bough, the smoky scent of a fat candle, the rich taste of fruitcake, we will be captured.

We will notice, at last, a tree glowing in a window, a child's face lifted to Santa Claus. We will hear a church bell in the night and a carol in the snow.

All at once peace will come to replace the foolish race. We will sit quietly on Christmas Eve and fill our eyes with beauty.

And our hearts with love.

Patsy Johnson

The Christmas I Treasure Most

(Continued from page 9)

Jeffrey and Winifred (the youngest grandchildren) lighted all the candles. Then with all of his family gathered around him, Father read St. Luke's incomparable account of the first Christmas. There was carol singing, with Chester and Winifred singing a duet—"Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" in their high piping voices. Then Mother, the storyteller of the family, gave us an old favorite: "Why the Chimes Rang." She made us see the ragged little boy creeping up that long cathedral aisle and slipping his gift onto the altar. Then she said: "You know, I'd like to make a suggestion. The floor underneath the tree in the den is piled high with gifts we're giving to one another. But we're celebrating Christ's birthday—not our own. This is His time of year. What are we going to give to Jesus?"

The room began to hum with voices comparing notes. But Mother went on: "Let's think about it for a few moments. Then we'll go around the circle and each of us will tell what gift he will lay on the altar for Christ's birthday."

Chester, age seven, crept close to his father for a whispered consultation. Then he said shyly: "What I'd like to give Jesus this year is not to lose my temper any more."

Jeffrey, age four, who had been slow in night training, was delightfully specific: "I'll give Him my diapers."

Winifred said softly that she was going to give Jesus good grades in school. Len's was: "I'd like to be a better husband and father. I'd especially like to give the gift of more patience."

AND SO IT WENT, on around the group. Peter John's was short but significant: "What I need to give to Christ is a more dedicated life."

I was to remember that statement seven and a half months later when the wish expressed that night became an act of dedication at a summer conference of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes in Estes Park, Colo. In June, 1961, he would be graduated from Yale; the autumn would see him in Princeton Seminary. Yet at Christmas time, 1960,

that was the last thing he expected to be doing.

Then it was Father's turn. "I certainly don't want to inject too solemn a note into this," he said, "but somehow I know that this is the last Christmas I'll be sitting in this room with my family gathered around me like this."

We gasped and protested, but he would not be stopped. "No, I so much want to say this. I've had a most wonderful life. Long, long ago I gave my life to Christ. Though I've tried to serve Him, I've failed Him often. But He has blessed me with great riches—especially my family. I want to say this while you're all here; I may not have another chance. Even after I go on into the next life, I'll still be with you. And I'll be waiting for each one of you there."

THERE WAS LOVE in his brown eyes—and tears in ours. No one said anything for a moment. Time seemed to stand still in the quiet room. Firelight and candlelight played on the children's faces as they looked at their grandfather, trying to grasp what he was saying. The fragrance of balsam and cedar was in the air.

Father did leave this world four months later—on May 1. His passing was like a benediction. It happened one afternoon as he sat quietly in a chair in the little village post office talking to some of his friends. His heart just stopped beating. That Christmas Eve he had known with a strange sureness that the time was close.

Every time I think of Father now, I can see that scene in the living room—like a jewel of a moment set in the ordinary moments that make up our days. For that brief time, real values came clearly into focus: Father's gratitude for life, Mother's strong faith, my husband's quiet strength, my son's inner yearning momentarily shining through blurred, youthful ambitions, the eager faces of children groping toward understanding and truth, the reality of the love of God as our thoughts focused on Him whose birth we were commemorating.

It was my most memorable Christmas.