

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Melissa nibbled at the center of her buttered toast, her face sober, brown eyes thoughtful. "Mom, where's Christmas?"

"Not where, honey, when. The 25th of December. That's ten days from now. Eat your crusts, Melissa, and finish your milk. You don't want to miss the bus."

Greg drained his glass and grinned at his sister. "I remember last Christmas; we had a party at school and Santa Claus came with a present for everyone. Maybe he'll come to school this year, too, and bring something for both of us."

"But where's Christmas now, Greg?"

"It's not where. Didn't you hear Mom? It's when. Next week, Sunday after this."

"Melissa, Greg, come put on your boots."

The children hurried into their coats and Mother watched from the window as they ran to join the other neighborhood youngsters at the corner bus stop.

At school Melissa practiced singing carols with the other first graders in her room. The smallest little girl in her class, Melissa would lead the chorus of angels when they marched in the school pageant.

After recess Mrs. Stone read aloud another chapter from Dickens' **Christmas Carol**. Melissa thought about where Christmas was now. During the afternoon art period, the class made chains from construction paper to decorate the Christmas tree standing tall and fragrant in the corner of the gym.

That night while Dad was tucking her into bed, Melissa asked her question again. "Where's Christmas, Daddy?"

"It's coming. It'll be here before you know it."

"Yes, but Daddy, where is it now?"

"I don't know, Melissa. Just around the corner, I guess. Sleep tight. When you wake up tomorrow it'll be one day closer."

"It's a mystery," thought Melissa, "and tomorrow I'll see if I can find it around corners."

No matter where she hunted around corners, in cupboards and closets, however, Christmas wasn't to be seen. There wasn't a clue as to where it might be tucked away.

Although the weekend was busy, at every opportunity Melissa continued her search. On Saturday Dad took the children to pick out a tree; there was no Christmas at the lot where they bought it.

On Sunday afternoon the Christmas lights were draped around the evergreens at the front door. The colored lights twinkled cheerfully in the cold darkness, but no Christmas.

After supper Mother brought out the tree decorations and Anunt Ann and Uncle Bill came over for coffee and dessert. Then everyone trimmed the tree before Melissa and Greg were off to bed.

It looked like Christmas and smelled like Christmas and everyone talked of Christmas, but something was missing for Melissa. It wasn't here yet. Where could it be?

All during the following week Melissa watched and waited. Santa came to the school party, but he didn't bring Christmas. Melissa in her angel costume, with the big golden wings tied securely around her chest and shoulders, played her part perfectly in the pageant.

Still no Christmas.

At breakfast on the day before Christmas Dad asked who wanted to go to the Mall and do some shopping. Mother couldn't; there was too much to do for tomorrow. Greg and Melissa ran for their coats and boots. Maybe Christmas was at the Mall.

Once inside the Mall, Dad took them to a small shop where they couldn't get lost. "Look around, first. Get something for Melissa, Greg, and you, Melissa, choose something for Greg. Each of you get something for Mother, too. Here's some money. When you've decided, take it to the sales desk, right over there, and pay for it. I'll wait for you right here."

As Greg wandered among the displays, Melissa looked for a present for her mother. There were plates, mugs, table linens, boxes of incense, jewelry, woolen scarves in bright colors, all sorts of things to choose from.

What would please Mom? Hanging from a hook swung a silvery mobile with silver balls, turning slowly, balancing, delicate. It was beautiful and Mom would like it. For Greg she found a game. Then she picked out a key ring for her father; it had his initial, molded in clear plastic, dangling from the chain.

She took her gifts to the desk, paid for them and waited while they were wrapped. When she joined her father, Greg had finished before her and he, too, was waiting with his packages.

Still, she hadn't found Christmas.

The children rested in the afternoon for they'd be up later than usual to attend the candlelight service at the church.

Walking hand-in-hand between her parents, and with Greg leading the way, the family entered the high-ceilinged sanctuary. This was Melissa's first visit to church at night. It was dim inside for the only light came from the tall candles burning at every window.

On the altar were candelabra holding long tapers; these were lighted as the service began and they glowed like stars. The altar and the windows were draped in swags of greenery. The scent of pine and burning candlewax mingled with the smell of wool and warm humanity as the people gathered in worship.

The organ's mellow tones swelled, filling the air with melodies of Christmas hymns. Melissa knew the tunes but they sounded richer coming from the organ.

As the music died to a whisper, a voice from the altar led in prayer. When you're small, you know, you can't see anything in church but the backs of the people sitting in front of you, but Melissa recognized the voice as that of the minister of the church.

Then the minister told the age-old story of Mary and Joseph traveling to Jerusalem and finding no room at the inn, of the baby born in the manger with the cows lowing and the sheep nearby.

He told of the kings bearing gifts, following the great star in the east, coming to worship the new-born King of Israel. And then there was caroling. Melissa joined in the singing.

As the music soared and the church bells rang out, Melissa's search ended.

Christmas! This is Christmas. It's Christmas right here, right now. This is where it's been all the time. This is where Christmas really is.

Found, at last.