

VELMA'S STORY

Christmas
IS FOR *Miracles*



A SHORT STORY
G.L. GOODING

CHRISTMAS IS FOR MIRACLES

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““**W**hy don’t Papa come to church with us? Doesn’t he like God?” the little girl asked as she and her mother exited the church.

The woman ignored the question. Instead she secured a blanket around the infant in her arms more tightly and hurried the girl down the steps toward their buggy.

“Mama, why don’t...”

“I heard you girl,” her mother interrupted sharply. Quickening her pace past the judgmental eyes and cutting whispers of other departing congregants, she deflected the question. “You wouldn’t understand, and we need to be gettin’ home out of this weather.”

They had arrived at twilight on a bitter cold Christmas Eve, 1920. The church, serving a large rural Methodist population, was surrounded by fallow farm fields that stretched to the horizon. The next closest church of that denomination was all the way to Des Moines some twenty-miles further southeast.

Velma had been coming to church nearly every Sunday for the past year but didn’t enjoy the experience much. She had no choice. No matter how friendly she tried to be with the other children, they ignored her. She also noticed that her mother was treated the same

way. She wished they would just stay home and learned about God from the family bible.

That night, however, she was pleasantly surprised. The service turned out to be very festive and joyous. She was mesmerized by the brightly lit sanctuary, fragrant decorations, and the Christmas carols she heard for the first time. Even the droning voice of the preacher was soothing, so soothing in fact that she dozed off in the cozy warmth of the great room.

Coming out of the church into darkness two hours later, they had found the sky filled with snowflakes the size of silver-dollars. Hurrying to the buckboard, Velma struggled onto the seat and turned to take Edward from her mother, a job usually reserved for her older sister.

This time, however, seven-year old Wilma had stayed home claiming she didn't feel well. Velma knew better but said nothing. Brother Eugene had also been left behind for fear the two-year old might throw one of his famous fits and disturb the service. Velma was certain the other two would have been there and behaved if Papa had come. But he didn't, he never did.

Once aboard, Mama clicked her tongue and Nelly the mare jerked off into the darkness. Being a small child, the distance from church to their farm seemed endless to Velma, especially in the winter cold. Her mother dropped the reins and worked to toss a heavy blanket over their laps burying the baby in the process. He slept on, however, undisturbed.

They were soon in total darkness as the glow from the church faded behind a slight rise. Her mother seemed contented to remain mute, but soon Velma could stand the silence no longer. "Mama, them people at church ain't very friendly to'rd us, are they?" There was no reply. "Why's that, Mama?"

“Never you mind about that, missy,” came the rather sharp reply. “We don’t go to church for the people. We go to talk with God.”

“Can you really hear God, Mama?” Velma asked in all seriousness. “‘Cause I listen really hard all the time, well most of the time, and I ain’t heard him yet.”

Velma couldn’t see the brief smile that crossed her mother’s face that was hidden by the falling snow. “it’s a different kind of listenin’. You’ll understand when you’re older.”

“If you say so, Mama,” Velma said disappointedly. Then suddenly she brightened. “Oh, I get it. All that prayin’ and singin’ is us talking to God, right?”

“Yes, Velma.”

Pondering this for a minute, the little girl added off-handedly, “He must have real good hearing or a lot a ears.”

“What do you mean, child?”

Velma searched for words to explain then shrugged. “I guess I don’t know exactly. It’s just that with everyone praying at once, he’d need a lot of ears. And if he can hear us even when we’re not talkin’ out loud, well...” Velma trailed off, at a loss for how to complete her thought.

After contemplating her daughter’s vision, her mother said supportively, “that’s an interesting way of thinkin’ girl. You might just be right.” With that her mother put a hand under the blanket, rooted around, and emerged with something. “Here’s a little reward for your wisdom,” she said handing her a candy cane.

“Oh, Mama. Thank you,” the little girl said with glee. “What a nice present.”

Her mother shook her head. “It weren’t nothing, girl. They was handin’ them out to us on the way out the door.”

“Well thanks anyway.” Then between licks, Velma asked, “Do you have some for the others?”

Her mother nodded. “For everyone but Edward and your Pa.”

This had Velma chuckling. Soon, however, the rhythm of Nelly’s hooves against the frozen ground was the only sound. By then, the steadily falling snow was beginning to obscure the fence posts and bare trees lining the county road.

Starting up the last gentle grade, Velma broke the silence again. “The people weren’t friendly but the church was sure pretty and the singin’ was good.”

Startled out of her reverie, her mother only managed a, “yes, indeed.”

“I especially like the tree with all those candles and or’ma’nents.” When her mother didn’t reply, Velma continued, “Why don’t we have a tree or any decorations at home?”

Her mother replied in an annoyed tone, “you sure got a lot of questions.”

“Well, Wilma says they have a tree at school and most of the other kids talked about the one they had at home. So, I was just wondering.”

After a long pause and sigh, her mother replied, “Well, me and your Pa don’t feel much in the Christmas spirit these days.”

“Oh.” Velma replied in confusion. “But didn’t that man at the front of the church...”

“The Pastor. He’s called a Pastor or Reverend.”

“Rev’reant?”

“Reverend.”

Stumbling over the word again, Velma gave up. “Pasture is easier to say.” Suddenly, Velma heard her mother chuckling. “What’s so funny?”

"Never mind. You were saying something about what the *Pasture* had said."

"Well, before I dozed off. Sorry Mama. But before that, I heard him say this was a celebration of a birth."

"That's right. Jesus's birth."

"Even those grumpy old people at the church seemed happy about that. So, why can't we be happy too instead of being upset about... whatever is upsetting you and Papa."

Her mother said nothing for a good while, just stared into a growing curtain of snow. Then softly she replied, "You're right, but it seems these days..." She let the sentence drop.

"Was that what you and Papa were arguing about this morning?"

Her mother looked at Velma in surprise. "Say, were you snoopin' around again?"

"Well, I was just comin' down stairs and kind a heard you sayin' somethin' about God and Christmas. That's when I walked in and you headed off to change Edward."

"Velma, what have I told you about bein' nosey?"

The little girl's eyes dropped. "Sorry, Mama."

"Bein' sorry don't get it done. You best break that habit if you know what's good for you."

"I'll try harder, Mama." Velma replied sheepishly then couldn't resist asking, "was that what you and Papa was fightin' about, God or Christmas?"

"A bit of both I guess, but you wouldn't understand."

"I'd like to."

Her mother considered for a moment then tried to end the discussion quickly. "Your Pa grow'd up different than me. You've never met his folk, but they had different ways, went to a different kind a church."

“Did they have a different God?”

Her mother struggled for the right words. “No, it’s the same God, but over the years those from you daddy’s church and ours grew to dislike and distrust each other.”

“Why?”

“That’s a question I doubt either your Pa’s or my folks could likely answer. Regardless, they hate each other so much they won’t even come to see their own grandkids.”

“I bet God’s not happy about that.”

Her mother snorted a laugh. “I think you’re right. Anyway, years before you come along, Pa quit seein’ his folk and goin’ to their church, said he was fed up with them. I keep goin’ to mine even though all my kin ignore me. We already talked about my reasons.”

“But Papa does believe in *our* God?”

“He’s not our God, he’s everyone’s, but folks from Pa’s family see God in a different way than us Methodies do. It’s like we’re lookin’ at the same penny but from opposite sides.”

Velma pondered this for a good while, then sighed. “You’re right, Mama. I don’t understand. But if you both believe in the same God, and we’re supposed to be happy about baby Jesus right now, why couldn’t we at least have had a Christmas tree?”

Her mother started to answer but hesitated. Then taking a deep breath she said, “I asked your Pa nearly the same thing this morning. Kinda made the same point you just did plus tried to remind him of his own growin’ up.”

“When you left to take care of Edward, Papa was even more quieter than usual when we were alone. He didn’t say nothin’.”

Her mother’s voice turned accusatory. “So what did you say to him that got him up and out of the house before I came back?”

"I just asked since this would be my first real Christmas, one I would remember, would there be presents even though there wasn't a tree to put them under." Velma said apologetically.

"You didn't?" Her mother exclaimed. "Pray, what did he say to that?"

"He acted like he hadn't heard me. You both have a hard time hearing me sometimes."

While straining to see the approaching entrance to the farm, her mother asked doubtfully, "And that's all you said?"

"Well, no." Velma said meekly. "I asked him if his family celebrated Christmas. I took his snort as a yes. So then I asked if he could remember his first Christmas with them and what was it like? Did he have a tree? Did he get presents?"

"Good Lord, child. No wonder he left."

"Not right away though. He just sat staring at me for the longest time. You'd have been proud of me then, Mama. I just walked over and gave him a hug without sayin' nothin', and he let me hold on for just a bit before pushing me away. Then he got up and left."

"Was he angry?"

Velma thought back. "I don't think so. At least not then."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, he did get a little grumpy when I went out to feed the chickens. He was throwin' hay to the cows in the pen nearby. It was then that I asked if he would come with us to church. 'Member I didn't know then about what all you told me tonight."

Her mother controlled her temper and asked calmly, "then what did he do?"

"Well he didn't get mad. He just shook his head, tousled my hair and said to get back inside where it was warm. He seemed alright at lunch, didn't he?"

“Well, at least we didn’t argue. In fact, we hardly talked. He seemed in a big hurry to get back to the barn, and he didn’t protest when Wilma asked to stay home. Kind a strange.”

Grabbing the reins, her mother turned Nelly up the long lane leading to their farmhouse as she added. “I hope Eugene and your sister behaved for your Papa. It would be sad to ruin our good feelings from tonight’s service.”

“And you’ve got a pocket full of presents for the kids,” Alice said cheerfully. “So they’ll surely be happy.”

“Only after we eat dinner. The turkey should be about done, if the fire got stoked regular that is.”

Sensing the warm stall that awaited her, Nelly picked up her pace reaching the top of the lane quickly. Still the heavy snow obscured the farmhouse until it was only yards away. As Nelly began the familiar turn that lead around the house to the barn, Velma and her mother were surprised to see an unusually bright light coming from the large living room window.

“Oh, God. The house is on fire,” was her mother’s first reaction. “No. Wait. I can’t believe it.”

Drawing closer to the house, it suddenly became clear what they were seeing.

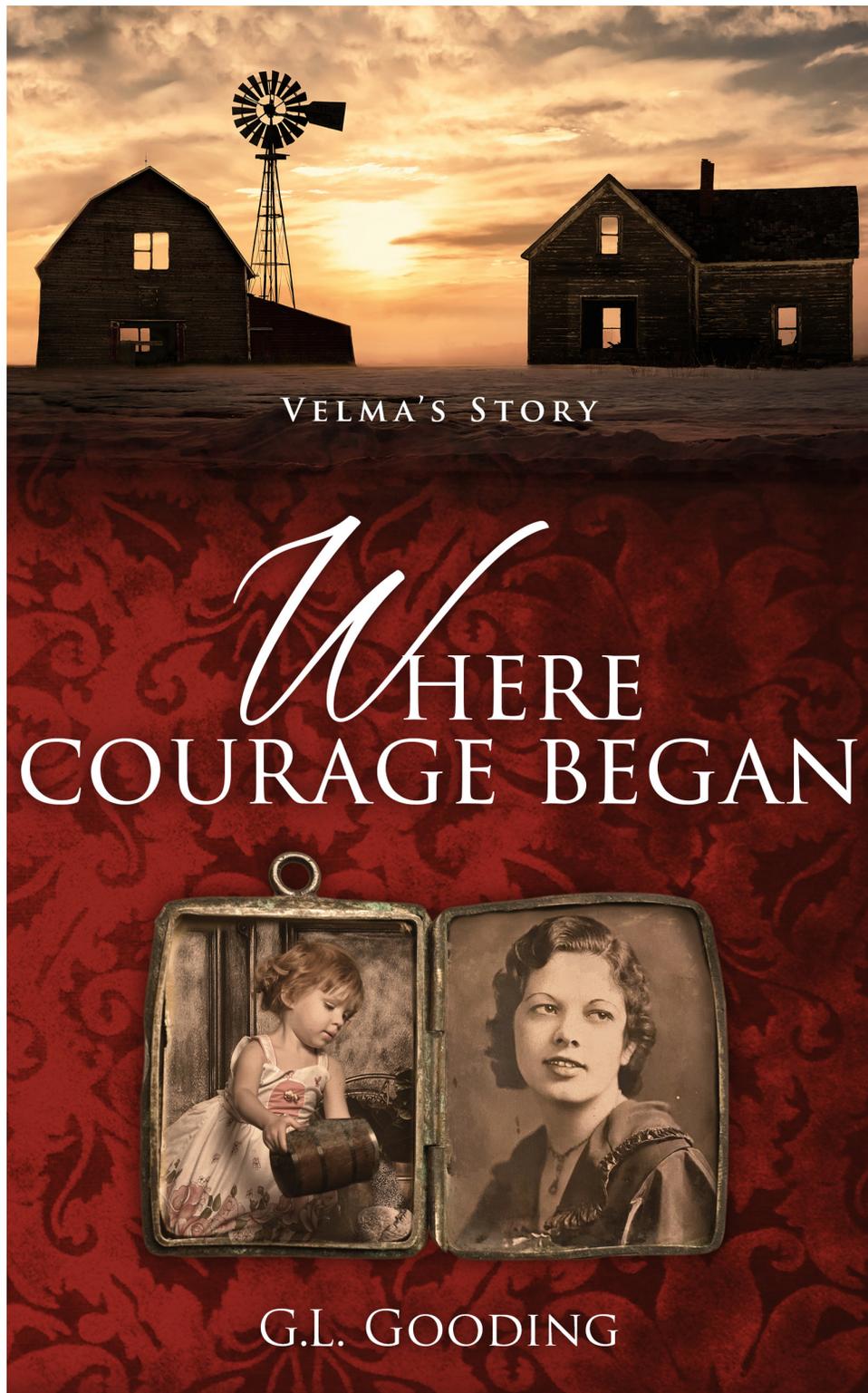
“Mama, oh, Mama, it’s a tree. Papa got us a Christmas tree.”

Centered in the window stood a tall white pine covered in dozens of candles. Garlands of popcorn and colorful paper rings reflected in the light added to the splendor. Pressed against the window glass, Wilma and Eugene waved at them excitedly. Meanwhile, standing behind them stood Papa keeping a watchful eye on his blazing creation.

As Nelly covered the final distance to the barn, Velma and her mother sat looking at each other in stunned, but joyful silence. As

the horse came to a stop, her mother finally spoke, her voice hoarse with emotion. "That's more than a tree, Velma. It's a miracle."

"That's right, Mama. A Christmas miracle."



Read more about Velma's Story in the novel by G.L. Gooding:

Where Courage Began

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