

A Special Christmas Eve

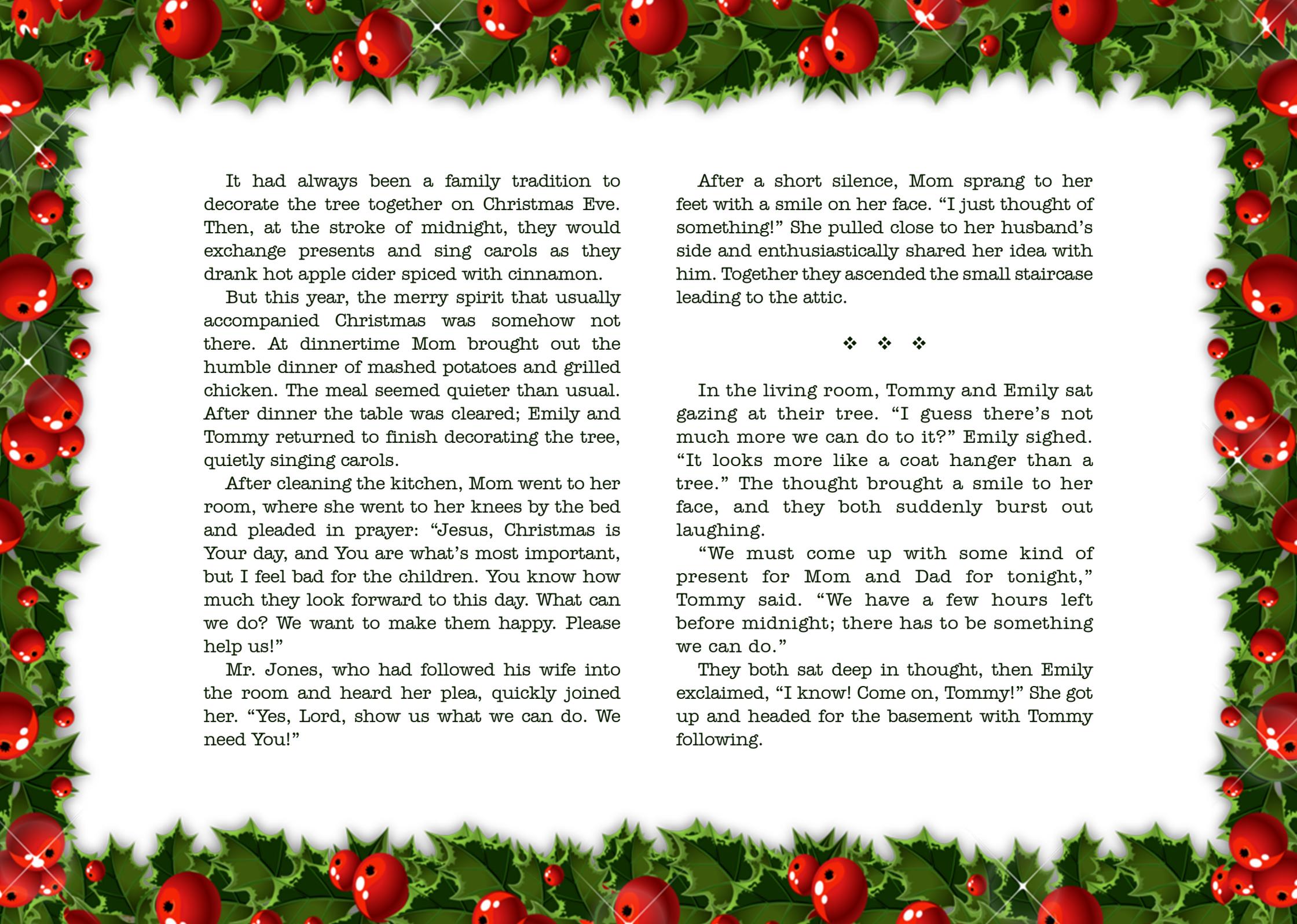
Only two more days till Christmas! But the excitement was a little dampened in the home of seven-year-old Emily and her eight-year-old older brother, Tommy.

Their father, Mr. Jones, had to give up his job in the coal mines due to poor health, and there also hadn't been steady work for Mrs. Jones. The family of four now lived on their father's monthly disability allowance, which wasn't enough to cover the necessities for a family their size. Though their mother was able to earn some extra money doing mending and clothing alterations, they barely managed to put food on the table. It looked like they would have to forgo their usual special Christmas dinner and treats, and they certainly wouldn't be able to afford presents.

Emily had hoped to have a certain doll she had seen in a store window. Tommy wished he could have a little puppy, but Dad had told him, "Dogs eat too much, and we just can't afford to take care of one. How would we keep you all fed if we got a dog?"

On Christmas Eve, Tom and Emily spent much of the afternoon playing outside in the newly fallen snow. That evening before dinner, the family gathered together to prepare decorations for their small Christmas tree. They strung together popcorn and draped the strands over the branches, adding some simple decorations saved from previous years.





It had always been a family tradition to decorate the tree together on Christmas Eve. Then, at the stroke of midnight, they would exchange presents and sing carols as they drank hot apple cider spiced with cinnamon.

But this year, the merry spirit that usually accompanied Christmas was somehow not there. At dinnertime Mom brought out the humble dinner of mashed potatoes and grilled chicken. The meal seemed quieter than usual. After dinner the table was cleared; Emily and Tommy returned to finish decorating the tree, quietly singing carols.

After cleaning the kitchen, Mom went to her room, where she went to her knees by the bed and pleaded in prayer: "Jesus, Christmas is Your day, and You are what's most important, but I feel bad for the children. You know how much they look forward to this day. What can we do? We want to make them happy. Please help us!"

Mr. Jones, who had followed his wife into the room and heard her plea, quickly joined her. "Yes, Lord, show us what we can do. We need You!"

After a short silence, Mom sprang to her feet with a smile on her face. "I just thought of something!" She pulled close to her husband's side and enthusiastically shared her idea with him. Together they ascended the small staircase leading to the attic.



In the living room, Tommy and Emily sat gazing at their tree. "I guess there's not much more we can do to it?" Emily sighed. "It looks more like a coat hanger than a tree." The thought brought a smile to her face, and they both suddenly burst out laughing.

"We must come up with some kind of present for Mom and Dad for tonight," Tommy said. "We have a few hours left before midnight; there has to be something we can do."

They both sat deep in thought, then Emily exclaimed, "I know! Come on, Tommy!" She got up and headed for the basement with Tommy following.

Meanwhile in the attic, Mom sat down at her sewing machine and began working like crazy. Dad, in the other corner of the attic, hummed to the tune of “O Little Town of Bethlehem” as he worked on his own surprise.

In the basement, Emily and Tommy rummaged through some old boxes of trinkets and odds and ends. “Look, Tommy! We can make a big, beautiful Christmas card for Mom from this shiny paper and glitter.”

“Oh, this is nice,” exclaimed Tommy, as he pulled out an old postcard picture of Mary and baby Jesus. “We could also use this.”

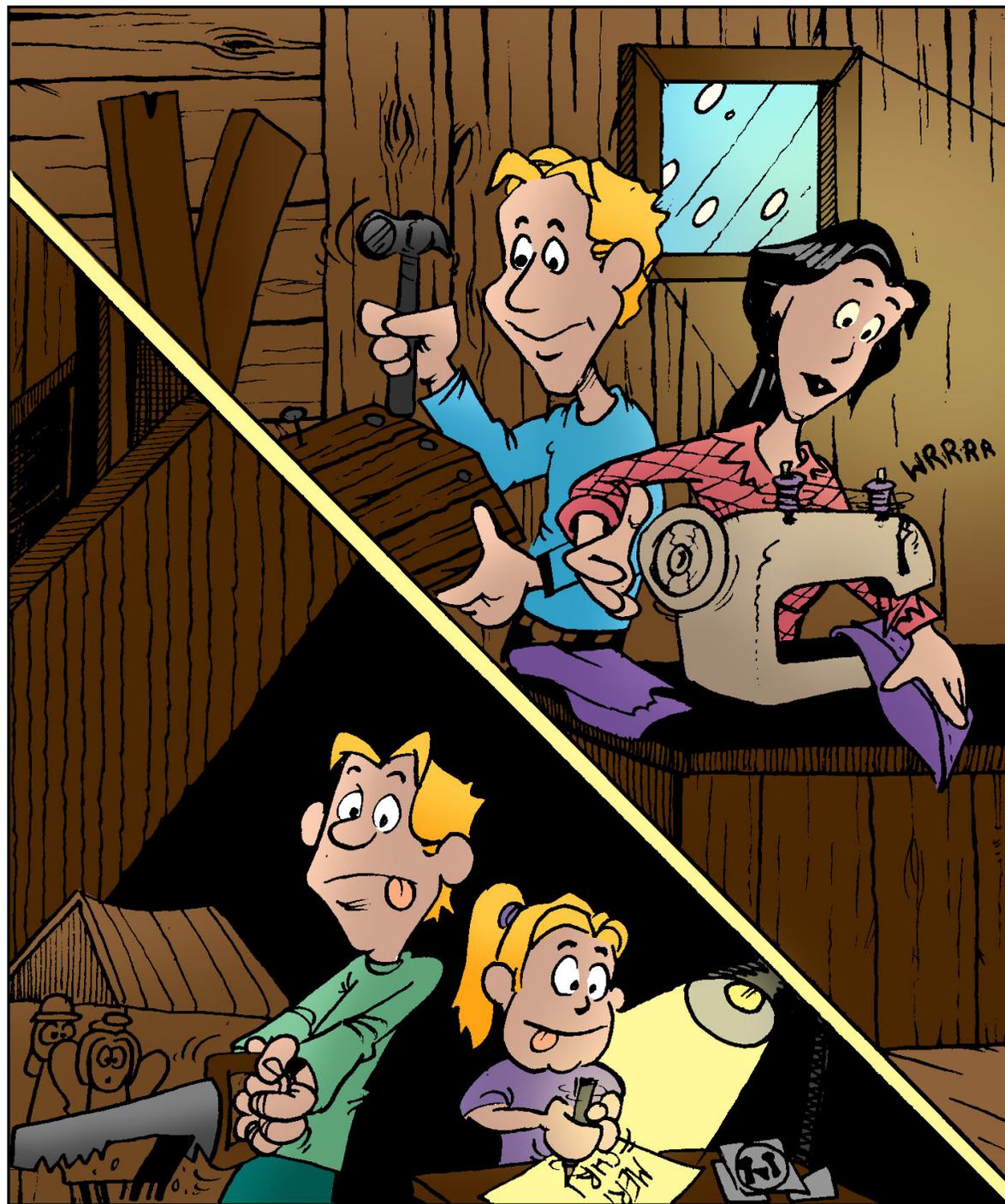
“Oh yes, it’s just perfect! Now what can we make for Dad?” Emily asked, all excited.

“Well, I could fix up this broken manger scene and put it under the tree. That would surprise him. I think I can do it!” Tommy said.

The Jones’ house was soon buzzing with activity: Tommy and Emily in the basement, and Dad and Mom in the attic, each busily working away and oblivious to the others’ intentions.



All along Milford Lane, where the Joneses lived, Christmas lights twinkled from the windows. The smell of baked turkey and Christmas pies came from everywhere. Just a block away from the Jones’ home lived the Miller family. The Millers were seated comfortably around their table, resting after a bountiful Christmas Eve dinner. Their house was beautifully decorated from top to bottom with Christmas ornaments, and there was mistletoe hung in their doorway.





Julie, the Millers' only child, sat with her mom nibbling on delicious home-baked cookies. "Mom, is there something we can do for my friends, Emily and Tommy? They probably don't have much this Christmas."

"I suppose with Mr. Jones not able to work, they must be having a difficult time. Do you have something special in mind, honey?" Mrs. Miller asked.

"I do have one idea," Julie said a little hesitantly, "but I wasn't sure what you'd think about it."

Julie proceeded to share her idea. "I think that's a wonderful idea," said Mrs. Miller. "We'll need to get started right away as it's already getting late."

Meanwhile, Mr. Miller sat in front of the fireplace humming to the tune of "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas." He was interrupted by Julie, who had come bounding in from the kitchen. "Daddy, could you get the wicker baskets out from under the porch for me?" asked Julie.

"But, honey, it's cold and snowing out there," he replied. "There's probably a heap of snow in front of them! Is it important?"

"Oh yes, Daddy—really important!" she replied.

"Okay then, consider this part of my Christmas present to you," he said cheerily, as he put on his overcoat and boots.

"Thanks, Dad!" Julie called after him as he went out the door.



In the attic, Mr. and Mrs. Jones were still working away.

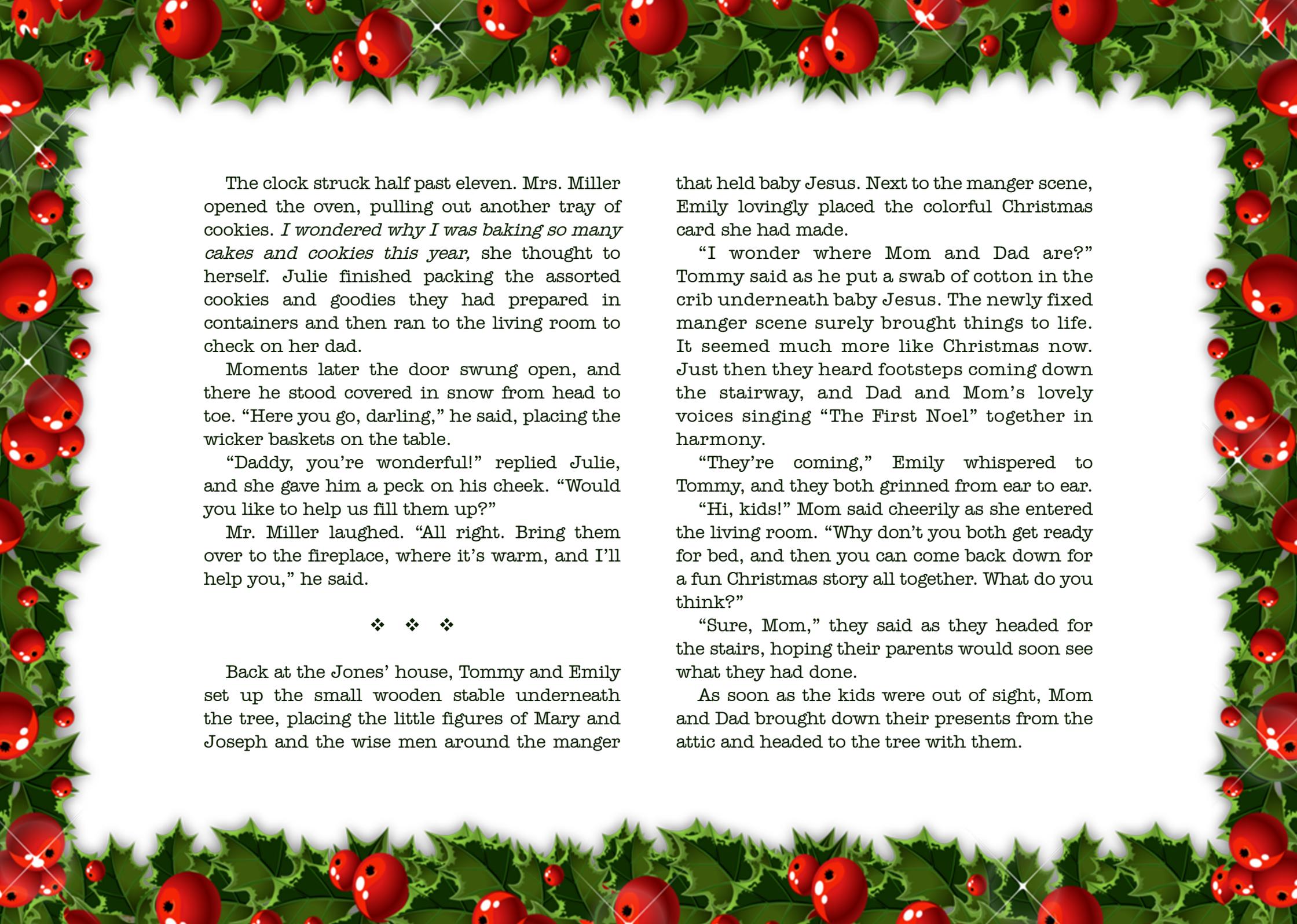
This is going to be a beautiful Christmas after all, thought Mrs. Jones as she worked on the finishing touches to complete the doll she had made for Emily.

Mr. Jones looked up lovingly at his wife. "What do you think? Do you think he'll like it?" he asked as he showed off his finished product.

"My dear, it's lovely, just lovely! I'm sure he'll love it!" she said.

Smiling at her approval, he took a look at the doll Mrs. Jones held lovingly in her hand. "Looks as good as if it were right out of the store," he complimented his wife. "I don't know how you did it, but it's beautiful."





The clock struck half past eleven. Mrs. Miller opened the oven, pulling out another tray of cookies. *I wondered why I was baking so many cakes and cookies this year*, she thought to herself. Julie finished packing the assorted cookies and goodies they had prepared in containers and then ran to the living room to check on her dad.

Moments later the door swung open, and there he stood covered in snow from head to toe. "Here you go, darling," he said, placing the wicker baskets on the table.

"Daddy, you're wonderful!" replied Julie, and she gave him a peck on his cheek. "Would you like to help us fill them up?"

Mr. Miller laughed. "All right. Bring them over to the fireplace, where it's warm, and I'll help you," he said.



Back at the Jones' house, Tommy and Emily set up the small wooden stable underneath the tree, placing the little figures of Mary and Joseph and the wise men around the manger

that held baby Jesus. Next to the manger scene, Emily lovingly placed the colorful Christmas card she had made.

"I wonder where Mom and Dad are?" Tommy said as he put a swab of cotton in the crib underneath baby Jesus. The newly fixed manger scene surely brought things to life. It seemed much more like Christmas now. Just then they heard footsteps coming down the stairway, and Dad and Mom's lovely voices singing "The First Noel" together in harmony.

"They're coming," Emily whispered to Tommy, and they both grinned from ear to ear.

"Hi, kids!" Mom said cheerily as she entered the living room. "Why don't you both get ready for bed, and then you can come back down for a fun Christmas story all together. What do you think?"

"Sure, Mom," they said as they headed for the stairs, hoping their parents would soon see what they had done.

As soon as the kids were out of sight, Mom and Dad brought down their presents from the attic and headed to the tree with them.

“Oh, look, sweetie!” Mom said as she saw the sparkling Christmas card and the beautiful manger scene. Mom was touched by her children’s thoughtfulness, and Dad was proud of the beautiful work Tommy had done to make the manger come alive again for another Christmas.

“We have such wonderful kids, don’t we?” Mom said. Then, just as the clock struck midnight, the doorbell rang.

“I wonder who would be coming around at this time of night?” Dad asked as he opened the door.

“Surprise!” Julie and Mrs. Miller chorused in unison. “...and Merry Christmas,” Mr. Miller added, as he extended his hand towards Mr. Jones.

At the same time, Tommy and Emily came running down the stairs, dressed in their pajamas. How surprised they were to see all the goodies the Millers had brought—pretty baskets laced in red ribbon, filled with an assortment of cookies and other delicious goodies.

“W-won’t you please come in?” Mrs. Jones said while opening the door and ushering the Miller family inside, out of the cold.

“Well, we can’t stay long, but we do have something else—for the children.” Emily and Tommy instantly looked up, curious, as they followed their guests into the living room.

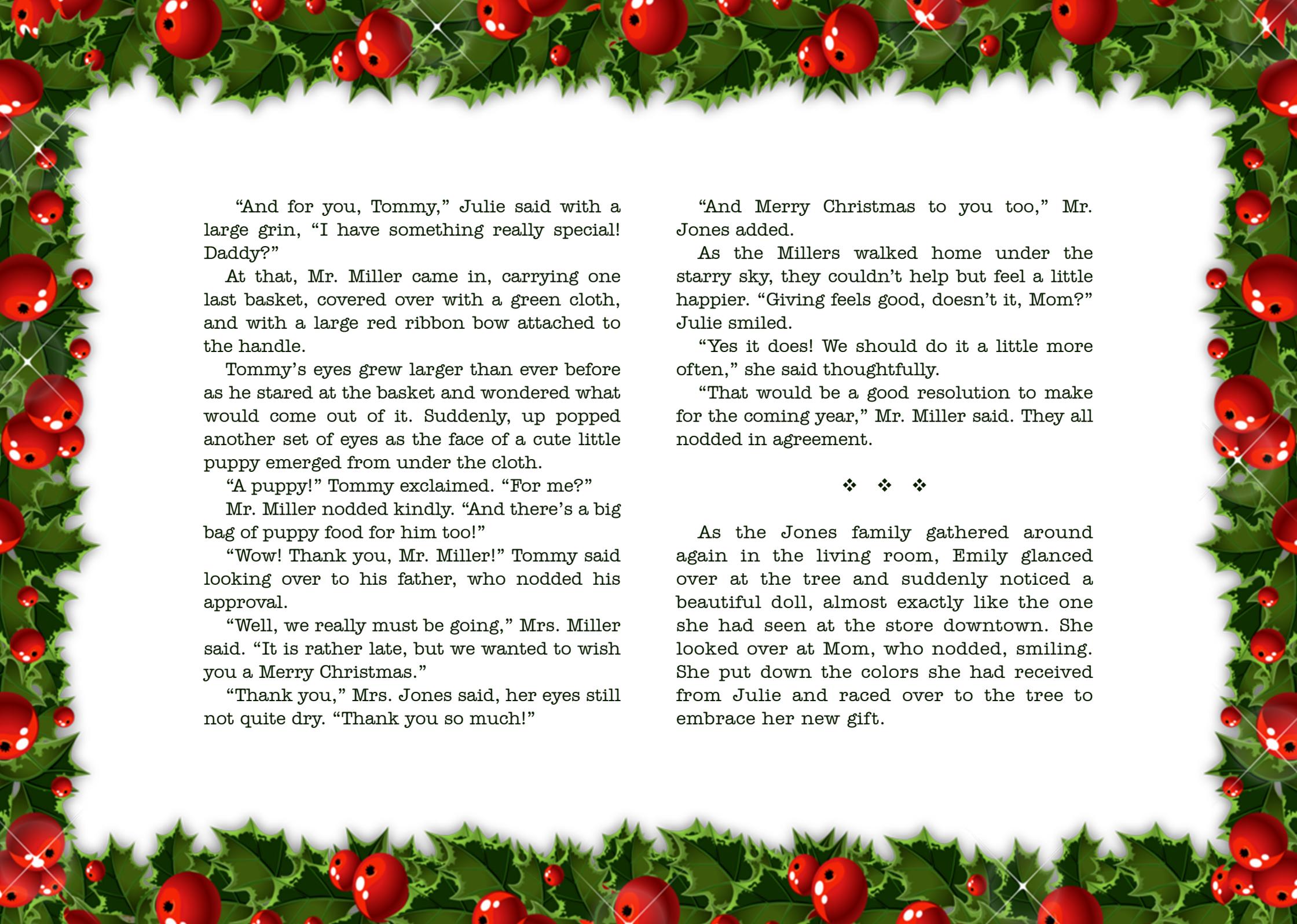
“Here, Emily, this is for you,” Julie said, handing a small wrapped package to her friend. “Go ahead, unwrap it!”

“Ooh, what is it?” Emily asked as she eagerly undid the wrapping paper.

“They’re colored markers,” Julie answered as Emily pulled them out of their wrapping. “I know you like to color.”

“Oh, thank you!” Emily said as she hugged her friend.





“And for you, Tommy,” Julie said with a large grin, “I have something really special! Daddy?”

At that, Mr. Miller came in, carrying one last basket, covered over with a green cloth, and with a large red ribbon bow attached to the handle.

Tommy’s eyes grew larger than ever before as he stared at the basket and wondered what would come out of it. Suddenly, up popped another set of eyes as the face of a cute little puppy emerged from under the cloth.

“A puppy!” Tommy exclaimed. “For me?”

Mr. Miller nodded kindly. “And there’s a big bag of puppy food for him too!”

“Wow! Thank you, Mr. Miller!” Tommy said looking over to his father, who nodded his approval.

“Well, we really must be going,” Mrs. Miller said. “It is rather late, but we wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas.”

“Thank you,” Mrs. Jones said, her eyes still not quite dry. “Thank you so much!”

“And Merry Christmas to you too,” Mr. Jones added.

As the Millers walked home under the starry sky, they couldn’t help but feel a little happier. “Giving feels good, doesn’t it, Mom?” Julie smiled.

“Yes it does! We should do it a little more often,” she said thoughtfully.

“That would be a good resolution to make for the coming year,” Mr. Miller said. They all nodded in agreement.



As the Jones family gathered around again in the living room, Emily glanced over at the tree and suddenly noticed a beautiful doll, almost exactly like the one she had seen at the store downtown. She looked over at Mom, who nodded, smiling. She put down the colors she had received from Julie and raced over to the tree to embrace her new gift.

This was a much greater present than the doll at the store, because she knew that Mom had made it just for her. “Oh, thank you, Mommy, it’s beautiful. Thank you!”

Then Tommy spotted his gift. “A wagon! Now I can take my puppy for a ride. Oh, this is going to be so much fun! Thanks, Dad! It’s just perfect!”

Tommy’s enthusiasm and the joy that sparkled in his eyes were reward enough for Mr. Jones, who could hardly keep the tears from forming in his eyes and his fatherly pride from showing on his face.

Mrs. Jones brought out the cider she had reserved for Christmas to enjoy alongside the cookies and snacks the Millers had brought. As they sat around their little Christmas tree, they thanked the Lord for His loving care.

While Emily held her doll and Tommy stroked his puppy, Mrs. Jones took out the old family Bible and began to read the story of the first Christmas. Mr. Jones looked on with great joy. It was indeed a merry Christmas, and the peace that fell upon them that special Christmas Eve would last for a long time to come.

