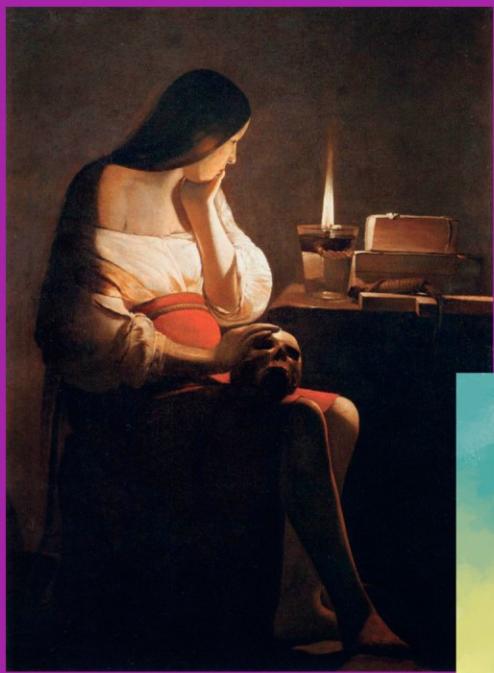


A NIÑOS CHRISTMAS



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1. Elena E. Smith - **What If?**
2. Diana Glycer - **SCENE II. Capulet's orchard.**
3. Thomas Allbaugh - **Confessions of the Real Real Boy**
4. Elena E. Smith – **B J's Wonderful Life**
5. Lois D. Carlson – **Christmas Memories**
6. Joseph Bentz – **Jack and the Bean Closet?**
7. Lynn Maudlin – **Failing The Test**

The theme for **2014** is **telling a new version of a familiar story**, a "What if?" exercise. For example, in the Jack and the Beanstalk story, what if Jack and his mother had eaten the beans and become giants? What if Jack had held onto the beans and never planted them? You can do this with any story you like, including biblical stories. What if the prodigal son's father had stuck to tradition in his treatment of his wayward son? What if Moses had refused to answer God's call to lead the Israelites?

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What if?

By Elena E. Smith

What if...

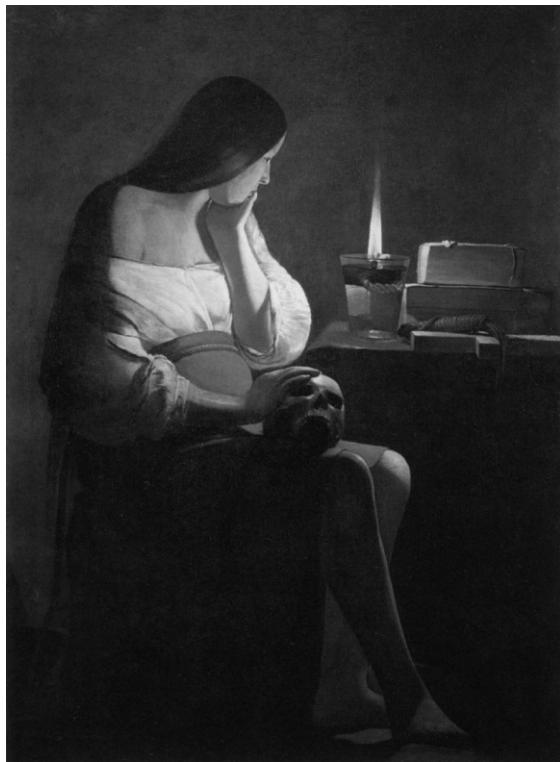
... Paul had seen Jesus on the road to Damascus and said, “Move aside, you’re blocking my way!”

... Joseph said, “Oh, this old thing? I’m sick of wearing it; you can have it.”

... Joseph said, “Dreams, schmemes.”

... Esau said, “I haven’t eaten in days, but I can wait a little longer.”

... Eve said, “You can’t fool me, you slimy excuse for a reptile.”



... Moses said, “How fast can we build some boats?”

... John said, “I had this weird vision, but I don’t see what good it would do to write it down.”

... Jesus had used his power to avoid death on the cross.

SCENE II. Capulet's orchard.

By Diana Glycer

Enter ROMEO

Enter JULIET above at a window

ROMEO

But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?

It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief,
That thou her maid art far more fair than
she:

It is my lady, O, it is my love!

O, that I were a glove upon that hand,
That I might touch her cheek! Or
A shirt, that I might touch that shoulder.
Or....

JULIET

Ay me!

ROMEO

She speaks: O, speak again, bright angel!

JULIET

O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou
Romeo?

Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my
love,

And I'll no longer be a Capulet.



ROMEO

[Aside] Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?

JULIET

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;

Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.

What is Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,

Nor arm, nor face, nor elbow, ankle, nose, nor tooth,

Nor any other part belonging to a man. O, be some other name!

What's in a name? That which we call a rose

By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owns
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for that name (which is no part of thee)
Take all myself.

ROMEO

(bursting through the hedge)
I take thee at thy word!
Call me but Love, and I'll be new baptized;
Henceforth, I never will be Romeo.

JULIET

(shrieks)
What man art thou that thus bescreen'd in night
Is standing underneath my window?

ROMEO

My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself,
Because it is an enemy to thee;
Had I written it, I would tear the word.

JULIET

My ears have not yet drunk a hundred words
Of that tongue's utterance, yet I know the sound:
Art thou not Romeo and a Montague?

ROMEO

Neither, fair saint, if either thee dislike.

JULIET

How camest thou hither, tell me, and wherefore?
The orchard walls are high and hard to climb,
And this place death, considering who thou art.

ROMEO

With love's light wings did I o'er-perch these walls;
For stony limits cannot hold love out,
And what love can do, that love attempts;

JULIET

You gotta be kidding me. Get thee gone!
If they do see thee, they will murder thee.

ROMEO

I have night's cloak to hide me from their sight;
And if thou really really love me, let them find me here.
My life were better ended by their hate,
Than death prorogued, wanting of thy love.

JULIET

Dost thou love me? O gentle Romeo,
If thou dost love me, pronounce it
faithfully:

ROMEO

Lady, by yonder blessed moon I
swear....

JULIET

O, swear not by the moon, the
inconstant moon,
That monthly changes in her circled
orb.
Unless thy love prove likewise variable.

ROMEO

Well, then. What shall I swear by?

JULIET

Do not swear at all;
Or, if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious
self,
And I'll believe thee.

ROMEO

If my heart's dear love....

JULIET

Well, on second thought, best wait.
Do not swear. Although I joy in thee,
Honestly, I have no joy of this contract to-night:
It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden. Totally
Stupid when you come to think of it. 'Tis
Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be
Ere one can say 'It lightens.' Sweet, darling, handsome Romeo.
Good night! And good bye. This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath,
May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet.
Good night, good night! A sweet repose and rest
Come to thy heart as that within my breast!
Perhaps as time shall pass, and years,



So wisdom shall increase. And we
Will rightly join our hearts in love's true pledge.

ROMEO

Oh. Uh, wait. Wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?

JULIET

What satisfaction canst thou have to-night?

ROMEO

You know. Like, you know.

JULIET

Seriously, thou art rash and thou art young.
You're cute, but then again, I barely know thee,
and besides, we would be wise to wait,
for wisdom cometh slow. It's been a blast. Alas,
I must depart.

ROMEO

Wouldst thou withdraw? For what purpose, love?

JULIET

But to be frank, and tell it like it is.
I wish but for the thing I have:
My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite.
So, yea, I love you and all that,
But then again, you can't always get
What you want. But if thou try-eth,
You might get what you need. And I'm good with that.

ROMEO

O blessed, blessed night! I am afeard.
Being in night, all this is but a dream,
Too flattering-sweet to be substantial.

JULIET

No dream, dear Romeo. But listen up:
Good night indeed.
If that thy bent of love be honourable,
Thy purpose marriage, send me word
Oh, maybe in five or six years. By then you may
Have come to your senses, and proved

Thyself steadfast, faithful, and wise.
And then, if thou shouldst prove thyself
A good and worthy man,
You know, like, with a job and steady income,
I'll pledge thee all I have,
And follow thee my lord throughout the
world.

Nurse

[Within] Madam!

JULIET

I come, anon.--But if thou be getting' all
impatient,
Well, it's gonna end up in a world of hurt.
Therefore, I do beseech thee--



Nurse

[Within] Madam!

JULIET

By and by, I come:--
I do beseech, you handsome thang,
To cease thy suit, and leave me to grow up. You know:
Figure out who I am. Get to know you better. Finish school.
Therefore, a thousand times, good night!

ROMEO

No, wait!

JULIET

Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow,
That I shall say good night, till it be morrow.

Exit above

ROMEO

Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast!
I think you are crazy. This totally would have worked out.
But, hmm. Hence will hie me hither to my old flame Rosaline's house.
She's got a balcony, too. There shall I fly,
And some sweet resolution seek, or at least give it another try.

Exit

THE END

C. COLLODI

*The
Adventures
of*
PINOCCHIO

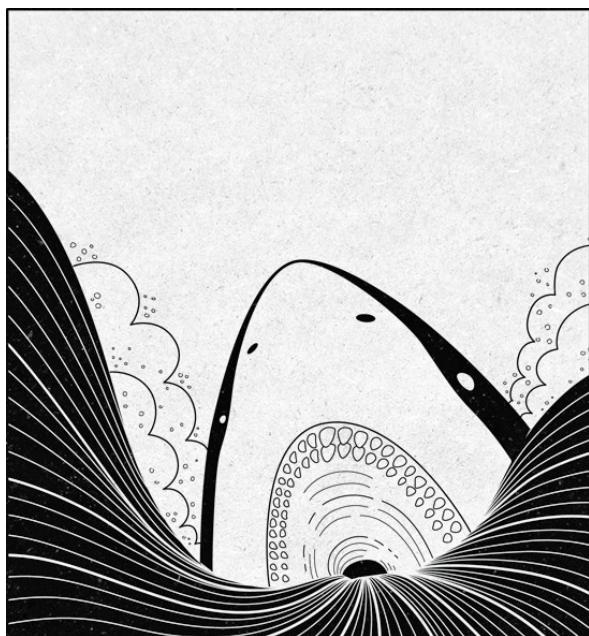


Confessions of the Real Real Boy

As Told to Tom Allbaugh

No, being wooden has had all the advantages.
That's the story no one wants to hear, least of all
G.'s distant relatives, with whom I still
contend, and who have driven me to
this deep wood.

Being wooden has had the advantages,
though I admit
when I saw her wand and sparkly dust, that
whore-to-holism fairie almost had me
convinced
with her "real boy" schtick, the way they
talk
to kids when nearly everything
promises an adventure. But think about
that
carnival; though that part of the "official"
account was true
mostly, at least the way I ditched the
cricket,
went donkey, the story does go thick on
the guilt. The better interpretation is there,
clearly
that I saw differently already.



A real boy: That's what they all
wanted, but being wooden had all the
advantages, even with G. arguing to
author
that whale story and his dream, not
mine,
of the real boy.
You've heard fish stories? After that
one,
it was all I could do to shut up with
the fame rolling in.



But being wooden,
it turned out, had
all the advantages.
Even G., after all
that lying accepted
me finally.
“Sticks,”
he called me, and
not without
affection, either.
And later
facing those
Disney lawyers
(hey, I’m nobody’s
Puppet) as well as

those latter-day
conspiracy theorists with their “evidence” of
the real story, not the fairy tale the world wants to believe,
almost nightly with a camera or a lie detector getting lost in
these woods (that bit about the nose
Was a big wash, too, meant to keep me quiet. And believe me,
if I don’t want to, I don’t get caught in my lies).

It’s a big forest.
They’ll really have to go
rainforest if they want
to stop me. Real boy? You
want
authentic? Check out this
oak. Authentic.
Durable too. Just ask G.’s
relatives
three generations later.



B J's Wonderful Life

By Elena E. Smith

"Tell us a story, Nana." The three little redheads snuggled restlessly in my king size guest bed.

I looked at their clean faces and my heart felt warm. "What kind of story would you like to hear?"

"Tell us one about you and Grandpa George."

"It was long ago."

"How long, Nana?"

"Before you were a twinkle in your mama's eye. Before your mama was a twinkle in my eye. It was 1970, a time when people wanted to feel free. And one way to feel free was to go on road trips."

"Is that why you married Grandpa, so you could drive all over the country?"

I smiled at the memory of George's big rig. "That's right. He took me with him all over America, until your mama was born, then I stayed home with her."

"And you saw every state, Nana?"

"You know I did, Georgina. Including Alaska and Hawaii. We had many adventures, but this one was special." I began every story with these words. The kids settled down into the calico bedding.

"We were driving through Mississippi with a load of car parts when we came to a little town of no more than two hundred people.

"It was past lunchtime and we were ready to stop when we saw a sign that read 'Heavenly Hamburgers – five miles,' so we kept driving. On the billboard was a picture of a plump man with rosy cheeks, smiling and holding a platter with the biggest, juiciest burger I'd ever seen! It was so full of pickles and tomatoes, they fell out the sides! And there was so much sauce on the bun I had to wipe my hands just for looking at it. Your grandpa knew that little out-of-the-way cafes had the best food, and he was always watching for them. Our tummies were growling, but we decided to wait. Every mile, we passed another billboard for Heavenly Hamburgers, and our stomachs ached. We'd already eaten all the Fritos we had, and we were starving!"

"We pulled into the parking lot and Paw parked his tractor trailer and we walked inside. It wasn't that big, but all the booths were full, so we sat at the counter. A waitress took our order right away and gave it to the fry cook. He was the man in the pictures, with a round smiling face --- like a brown-haired Santa Claus!"

"Oh!" gasped one of the kids.

"And his blue twinkly eyes stared right at us. 'Helen,' he said to the waitress, 'do we have some first-timers?' She nodded solemnly as he threw two beef patties on the grill, which made a loud hiss. He concentrated on his work.

A wonderful smell filled the air, and soon Helen brought us the fattest hamburgers we'd ever seen! Then, the cook came out of his kitchen and leaned back against the wall as we took our first bites. It *was* heavenly!

"He smiled. 'There's a story goes with that. Every new visitor gets to hear it.' We sank our teeth into our lunches as we listened.

"When I was a teenager, I hit a rough patch – you know how it can be when you're trying to master girls and zits and algebra all at the same time. I fell in love, but she broke it off with me. Seemed like the end of my world! And I decided to do what young people think sounds romantic --- I was gonna drown myself.' Grandpa and I looked at each other. What a weird story!

"But I didn't,' he said quickly. 'Something else happened. I went down to the bridge that night and stared at the muddy water, trying to get my nerve up, when a man approached me. He could have been a vet returning from Nam, but he looked too peaceful and happy. He could have been a hobo, but he was wearing clean clothes."

I looked at the kids, and saw their eyes were still open, so I continued. "He said he had something to show me. Then – it was the strangest thing – it was like I became a ghost and travelled with him into the future where I saw what my life would be like. I saw my wife, Helen,' he beamed at her, 'and our two kids. He told me I would have a happy life, if I just waited a little bit longer.

"Then, next thing I knew, I was back on the bridge and it was night. A bright moon lit everything up 'til it almost sparkled! He was gone, and I felt like I woke from a long sleep. I could have been dreaming, but then I saw his footprints in the sand. And I knew what I had to do. I had to keep trying. Even though some girl dumped me, I would meet someone so much better if I was patient.' His wife, Helen, was smiling. She'd pob'ly heard that tale five hundred times, but it still meant the world to her. He leaned close to us. 'I think it was an angel,' he said, 'an angel from the Lord that came to save me, that day.'"

"An angel?" one of the kids murmured sleepily.

"An angel. That's what he said. It was a nice story. We'd finished our burgers and they were perfect --- just the right amount of food. There was no room left for pie!"

"No room ---?" mumbled a sleepy voice.

I shook my head, as I remembered that afternoon. Just before he returned to the kitchen to start the next order, he told us, "Because of that angel, I did not jump off the Tallahatchie Bridge, and that's why you can enjoy Billy Joe's Heavenly Hamburgers today."

I looked at my three darlings. Their eyes were closed and the bedcovers rose and fell with an even rhythm. I returned to the den to finish wrapping presents for Christmas morning.



CHRISTMAS MEMORIES

By Lois D. Carlson

Joys that can't be measured

Throughout the city twinkling lights and colorful decorations remind us that Christmas is just around the corner. For many, schedules are packed with assorted parties and events, in addition to purchasing and mailing gifts, not to mention all the other preparations for the holiday season. Christmas is a time that elicits many memories and stirs up mixed emotions. For some, it's a joyful holiday of fond remembrances of family gatherings, exchanging gifts, worshiping at the Christmas Eve service. For others, the holiday season harks back to disappointments and old hurts.

As clinical social worker at a community hospital, I see sadness and fear in people's eyes on a daily basis. Being admitted to the hospital around the holidays often exacerbates the anxiety, creating more emotional upheaval.

One event especially made a deep imprint on me. A mother brought her two-year-old daughter to the Emergency Room, who was subsequently admitted for pneumonia. With a history of asthma, this little tyke had been a patient at the hospital on prior occasions. In addition to this young child, the mother had two other small children. I had worked with this woman and her children a few weeks earlier. Recognizing me from her previous admission, the mother's face, clouded by worry, brightened somewhat when I greeted her. Her marriage in trouble and separated from her husband, having three young children to care for was no easy task. And having one with an ongoing illness requiring special treatment only added to her heavy load. Overwhelmed by these seemingly insurmountable problems, the woman was close to tears.

For over an hour, I listened as she unburdened her heart, hoping to find some solutions to her hopeless situation.

"My children will always take priority," she said, a firm, resolve in her voice. With labored breathing, the two-year-old nestled close to her and slept as mother tenderly caressed her cheek. We waded through the impossible issues and reviewed her options, which gave her a little more hope and lifted her spirits.

It was only ten days until Christmas, and I wondered about the children. Her limited extended family was not involved in their lives -- she was on her own.

Hesitantly, I asked, "What plans do you have for Christmas?"

Dropping her head, she murmured, "The check we get this week must go for the rent," and sighed deeply. "If there's any money left over, I may be able to buy the children something small. We'll have to see."

My pager buzzed and I had to leave. I squeezed her hand and assured her we'd talk again. As I left the room, my heart ached for this mother and her brood, with all the turmoil and uncertainties before her. I asked the Holy Spirit

to guide me in how I could help her. Then I remembered the phone call earlier in the week from a local company wanting to adopt a family at Christmas. I hurried down the stairs and back to my office to make the call.

"Yes," the woman said, "we're still interested."

I gave her limited information about the situation and ages of the children, hoping this firm would come up with a nice package for the family and thanked her for taking on this project.

By weeks' end, the two-year-old had made sufficient progress to be discharged and would be going home the next day. I hadn't had any further contact from the stranger offering to adopt the family and began to panic, wondering if the whole thing would fall apart. I phoned the woman in charge.

"I was just about to call you," she said in a cheery tone. "I'd like to bring the gift over this afternoon if that's okay? But I need directions on how to get to the hospital."

A few hours later, she handed me a card for the mother. A bit puzzled, I thanked her for the agency's gift, not knowing what contents were inside.

I entered the patient's room, and the two-year-old was sitting up on the bed, playing with a toy and smiling, showing definite signs of improvement. Mother and the other children were at the bedside, a tight-knit family, holding on to one another for support. After exchanging a few words of greeting, I handed the card to Mom and said, "This is from a group who wanted to adopt a family for Christmas."

Her eyes lit up in surprise. Awkwardly, she extended her hand and took the envelope, unsure what to do with it. Timidly, she peered at me and said, "Shall I open it now?" I assured her that would be fine. Her hand shook as she tore the parcel open. She gasped, and tears spilled down her face as she pulled out two gift certificates: one for six hundred dollars from Wal Mart; the other for two hundred dollars from Stater Brothers grocery store.

Smiling, I swallowed the lump in my throat, gave her a big hug and said, "Merry Christmas."



Jack and the Bean Closet?

By Joseph Bentz

"Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." John 12:24

As a kid I used to love the story of Jack and the Beanstalk. I identified strongly with Jack, who disobeyed his mother and got in trouble for it. I had been there many times. She and Jack are so poor that she sends him off to sell their only cow. The sale has huge significance for Jack and his mother, who need the money to survive. Jack shoulders a big responsibility as he leads that cow away to sell it, but the transaction should have been fairly simple: Sell the cow and bring the money home.

On the way to the market, however, Jack comes across an old man who offers him something more promising than mere money for the precious animal. The man offers him Magic Beans. If planted, they would grow high into the sky, and who knows where such a beanstalk might lead? If Jack had been a sensible and obedient son, he should have simply said no to this offer. His mother has given him a clear mandate, and he should simply sell that cow and get the money. The old man is probably a scam artist. He's offering beans! But Jack takes the beans, and when I experienced this story as a child, I always cheered him on, despite the risk. Who wants mere money when you could have magic beans?

Then comes the horrible part of the story, as I saw it. Jack has to go home and explain his disobedience to Mother. I would have hated that trip back home, trying to come up with an explanation that would mollify her, imagining her anger and the possible punishments.

Jack's encounter with Mother does not go well. Their



financial situation is desperate, and Jack has traded their only valuable possession for a bunch of worthless beans. In anger she flings the beans into the dirt and sends Jack to bed without any supper.

Jack's mother expects that to be the end of the story. After all, when you throw something away, you expect that to finish it.

In this case, however, Jack's mother has thrown away beans—or seeds, essentially—and seeds are different from other things you throw away. Seeds are counterintuitive. Most of us are so familiar with them that we forget how unusual they really are. Usually when you toss something in the dirt, or bury it in the ground, that means you are either killing it or hiding it or disposing of it. With seeds, it's different. Seeds absolutely depend on that burial, that particular kind of destruction, in order to produce anything. Unless you do what looks like killing them, you'll never get anywhere. You'll be stuck with hard little blobs that don't seem worth much at all.

Jack's mother doesn't get that. She doesn't share Jack's faith in transformation. She looks at the beans in his hand and sees only beans. Jack sees what they what they might become through the magic of transformational destruction and resurrection.

By throwing the seeds into the dirt, the very place they need to be, Jack's mother has inadvertently set in motion a process that will make her rich. When she and her son wake up the next morning, a giant beanstalk has grown high into the sky. Jack climbs it, faces down the threats of the mean giant who lives in the kingdom at the top, and gets hold of enough riches to keep himself and his mother financially secure for the rest of their lives.

But...does the seed really have to die?

Imagine if the story had gone differently. In this version, after his mother flings the beans into the dirt, Jack secretly runs out and retrieves them. He

holds the precious beans in his hands for hours. He goes to sleep with them under his pillow. The next morning, he hides them in a box in the closet where his mother won't find them. Each day he takes them out and admires them, running them through his fingers and holding them up to the light, and then he puts them back in the box. The End.

Not much of a story, is it? This version would pretty much confirm Jack's mother's attitude about the stupidity of trading the cow for these beans. What good are "magic beans" if all they're going to do is sit in a box and look pretty? Besides which, beans aren't even all that pretty. He could always cook the beans and eat them, but there aren't very many, so that paltry meal would be over pretty quickly and wouldn't be very satisfying. No, the only



way for Jack's beans to pay off is if they are planted and grow that big beanstalk.

Which brings me to the verse of Scripture that begins this chapter. When Jesus says that the only way to turn a single little kernel of wheat into *lots* of seeds is to let it fall to the ground and *die*, he is illustrating a spiritual principle that he teaches in several ways throughout the gospels. Right after giving the illustration of the seed falling to ground and dying, he says, "Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25).

Nature itself, Jesus shows us, embodies this spiritual truth that some things have to die to what they *are* in order to become what they were *intended* to be. The seed, when it is buried in the dirt, doesn't simply grow bigger as a *seed*. You don't have gigantic *seeds* pop up in your garden; you have *plants* spring up that *started* as seeds. In order for that process to occur, the seed must "die" to its original form. It will break apart as a seed. That part of the process is normally hidden from view, down in the ground, but if you witnessed it without understanding the way all this worked, you might think it looked pretty bad for the seed, all torn up like that. At first, the seed would look much worse than when you first buried it. The whole thing would look like a terrible failure. Only time, and nature's processes, will confirm that this complete shattering of the seed is not a failure, but a triumph. It will grow a plant that may produce life-giving fruit, not to mention more seeds that may produce even more plants. The seeming "destruction" of the seed is not wasted. It is ultimately not even a destruction. It is a redemptive transformation.

(An excerpt from my forthcoming book, *Nothing is Wasted*.)



Failing The Test

By Lynn Maudlin

It came to him every night, this torment. In the waking nightmare which served for sleep he remembered his words, his folly:

"You are wise and fearless and fair, Lady Galadriel. I will give you the One Ring, if you ask for it. It is too great a matter for me."

He could not see her face as it was, he could no longer remember the golden light which infused the very air around her; instead he saw the cruel and brittle visage: her skin white, like paper, and no sense of pulsing life behind it; her eyes sharp and hard and glittering, black as the bottom of the well in Moria—and he would fall into that pit, if he looked on her face for any time. He had learned not to look.

Once, when he had, he seemed to see out of her own eyes or those of one of her creatures, and he walked in that form, powerless to act or cry out, into Lothlorien, or rather that valley which had been Lothlorien. He did not understand how she could so thoroughly debase and destroy her own kind – there was no sense of kinship and nothing stayed her hand or slaked her thirst but the exercising of her power, ruthless and absolute. Since then he had endeavored to not meet her eyes ever again, lest he should find himself walking into the Shire....

"I do not deny that my heart has greatly desired to ask what you offer"—

He squeezed his eyes tight-shut, the memory of the memory was like acid blistering his brain. He bit his tongue to keep from crying out and remembered not to draw blood – it wasn't good to draw blood, it attracted the attention of things in the dark.

"You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain. Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!"

No, he thought, no one loves you but all despair. Beautiful and terrible you were, but for so short a time, and then the darkness won: you do not wear the Ring for the Ring wears you – and wears you down, even an Elven queen wears down.

But not me, he thought. I am undiminished. I wait, here in the darkness I wait. She will come, some night she will come—and then... then, ...well.

