

Part VI

Every afternoon, I sat in the kitchen with Mama and read parts of the Bible, but it was hard, and I didn't like reading it. Mama had written down things for me to read so I wouldn't have to read the whole Bible, and then Mama helped me by explaining things I didn't understand.

"I swan, Andrea, you have more questions than ten people." Mama wiped her hands on her apron and sat down next to me. "What questions do you have today?" Mama smiled and pushed my hair back from my eyes.

"Mama, what did Jesus do when he was a baby?"

"Well, I don't know, but I suspect he did what you did." Mama paused. "He cried when he was hungry, slept after he was fed, and kept his Mama and Daddy up at night fussing, and they didn't know why."

That made me giggle, thinking I was like the baby Jesus, but my problem still didn't go away. "Mama, I don't know what to say to practice being Mary because when those writers were around, Mary didn't talk."

"What is Lacy doing to practice?"

"I don't know, and I ain't asking her. Miss Atwood said she knew there was going to be some healthy compa something for the part of Mary and Joseph, and we should each do our best."

"Competition and I think you will do your very best, but that doesn't mean someone else won't be as good or better than you." Mama stood up. "You might not get to be Mary. You know that, don't you?"

"I do, Mama, but I surely hope I do." I got up to set the table. "I don't know what I'll do if I don't get to be Mary."

The next day, after school, I walked by the church to see if I could see Reverend Simpson, and he was there. I talked to him about Mary and told him I would give anything to play Mary, and I crossed my heart and hoped to die if I was lying or didn't get to be Mary. Reverend Simpson was very kind and talked to me about winning, losing, and all kinds of things. I thanked him for helping me and walked home, all the time, thinking about winning. If I didn't win, I wondered if I would really die.

The next week, Miss Atwood, Mr. Simpson, and Miss Edna Lawrence stood in front of the room and explained what we would be doing. The first thing we would do is for each child to present their Christmas pageant project. There would be light refreshments afterward, then the Christmas program would commence. Since Miss Edna was the lady who led the singing at my church, I figured she would lead the singing at the pageant. That was fine with me. Miss Edna knew I liked singing, so that was good for me. Lacy might sing like an angel, but I always sang like a bird, a pretty songbird.

It was two weeks before Christmas, and Miss Atwood, Reverend Simpson, and Miss Edna Lawrence announced they would start testing for the Christmas story. When the testing was done, Miss Atwood would call the names of who would be the Shepherds, the three Wise men, and the most prized parts, Joseph and Mary. To test for the part, Lacy and me both read from the Bible, and we picked the same verses. That was nice since Lacy is my very best friend and we must think alike. Miss Edna Lawrence had asked us both to sing The First Noel. We were alone when we were tested so that no one would feel bad if they weren't good like some of the others. I told Mama I think I sang good, and she said I sang well, but I don't know how she knew because she wasn't even there. We tested on Monday and got the answers on Friday, right before the school day was over.

Miss Atwood stood before all of us, smiling like she won the prize at a pie supper. "Class, I have the results of the auditions. I know you have all been waiting for this, so I'll get started."

Reverend Simpson squirmed in his chair and kept touching his hair. Miss Edna Lawrence held her purse in her lap and fidgeted with a hankie the whole time Miss Atwood was talking. I didn't care about the Wise men or the Shepherds, but I was nice and clapped.

"Now, playing Joseph is our budding actor, Billy Mitchell."

I knew it would be Billy cause he sings good, and he is right cute for a boy my age. Billy and me got along mostly. If he did something mean to me, I did something mean back to him, and then we were friends again. I think we looked like the perfect Joseph and Mary.

"And the role of Mary goes to." I held my breath and tried hard not to grin. "Our newest student, Lacy Cleaves."

Lacy squealed like a stuck pig, which I thought was not appropriate and must be something people do in Chicago. I wanted to die right there in my seat, but everyone was gathering around Lacy and Billy, so I didn't want to die right there and let them know this killed me. No, I would die in my sleep, and only Reverend Simpson would know that I crossed my heart and hoped to die.

Reverend Simpson saw me walking home alone, pulled his car in front of me, and stopped.

"Where's your brothers, Andrea?"

"I told 'em to go on ahead 'cause I had a lot of thinking to do." I put my hand over my eyes to block the sun. "And, I can't think when I'm walkin home with them."

"How about a ride? We won't talk unless you want to. I need to run by the church for a moment, then I will get you home." He was smiling his best smile, so I got in the car with him.'

"I ain't wantin' to cry if that's what you think." I wanted to sound firm, so I didn't look at him.

"I wasn't worried about that."

"And I ain't dying either. I just said that to point out my feelings." He didn't respond, so I said, "You know when I crossed my heart and hoped to die? Well, I ain't."

"That's good to know." He turned the car onto the road that went by the church. "So, you aren't upset that Lacy is going to be Mary, and you aren't?"

"I don't want to go to that hell place." I looked at him through squinted eyes. I knew I couldn't lie. That's when I started to cry. "I wanted to be somebody special for Christmas." I began to wipe my nose on my coat, but when I looked over, Reverend Simpson was handing me his handkerchief. He was always ready to help me. "I wanted people to say, look there at little Andy, all dressed up and looking pretty, and just listen to her sing." I was crying hard, and Reverend Simpson just let me. "I wanted to be somebody special, but I didn't win the test." I leaned over and put my head against Reverend Simpson, and he put his arm around me. We sat there in silence, and the only sound was me blowing my nose on Reverend Simpson's handkerchief.

After a few minutes, Reverend Simpson said he thought he had an excellent idea and he would be right back. He wanted me to sit right there and wait for him. I did, and he did have an excellent idea.

Sunday morning, we all got ready for church, and I asked if I could wear my shiny black shoes that I had for Easter. Mama said I could but not to ruin them because that would be what I would wear for the Christmas Pageant and the Christmas Eve service. Everyone was dressed and in the buggy on time, which Daddy said was a miracle.

Reverend Simpson stood in his usual place on the church steps, where you almost had to knock him off to get inside. He shook hands with everyone and made small talk about the weather, livestock, or food. He usually got invited over for supper when he bragged about food, so he did that a lot. He shook my hand and said it was nice to see me. I said thank you and walked inside.

Lacy, her mama, her Daddy, and Grandpa Arlo sat in the pew behind us. I was very nice to Lacy because Mama told me I had to be. I understood she won fair, but I was still concerned I might die, and that was a constant on my mind. Reverend Simpson preached hard about what was coming. He said we would soon be talking about a baby Jesus, and it was right that we did, but we needed to be right with Jesus, the man who would be coming back for those who had accepted and committed their lives to Him. He said if you love the Lord Jesus and are ready to make the biggest commitment of your life, step out of the pew and into the light of Jesus. So, that's what I did.

Reverend Simpson was excited to see me even though me and him had sort of planned this. He took my hand and asked me some questions, asked everyone a few questions, and then Miss Edna Lawrence asked everyone to stand and turn to page 148 in their Cokesbury Worship Hymnal and join her in singing I Surrender All. My Daddy and Mama came up and stood by me, and then my brothers, Ma'am, Pap, Granny, and Pa, all came. It was like a Thanksgiving singing, with us all standing around smiling and singing. Reverend Simpson said it was a glorious day when someone committed to the Lord, and it was especially nice when a young person knew the Lord and stood in His light.

“The Holy Ghost is with us this morning. He’s working on us this week. This child is no longer lost and alone because she has accepted the Lord God as her savior and the Methodist Church as her home. Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!”

Reverend Simpson was red in the face, and Mama, Ma’am, and Granny were all crying. I was feeling pretty good, and I think I even got a glimpse of that Ghost fellow. I know I felt different when I answered those questions and said I loved Jesus standing there in front of everybody. It was a glorious day. When the music stopped, without asking anybody, I started singing O Come All Ye Faithful all by myself without the piano. Reverend Simpson looked at me with the biggest grin I’d ever seen and said, “Yes, come. Come all ye faithful. The altar is open; come.”

Epilogue

The afternoon of the Christmas Pageant was sunny, and almost everyone I’d known in my entire life was there. I dressed in my prettiest Sunday dress. Mama fixed my hair real pretty, and I wore my shiny black shoes. I read my Christmas poem and I nun-ce-ated like Miss Atwood said we should when reading our original work. I saw my Daddy grinning when I was finished, and I knew he was proud of me for gettin’ everything about Christmas in one poem. My Daddy rhymes real good, too, so I think he was even more proud that I was taking after him in rhyming. Lots of people came up and talked to me about my poem, but it was mostly talk about me going forward on Sunday.

When it was time for the Christmas Story, I took my place in the choir and tried to be as ladylike as I knew how to be. Walter stood next to me, and I think he winked at me, but I hope his eye was twitching like they sometimes do. But I gave him the stink eye in case he had other things on his mind.

Billy and Lacy came out walking to Bethlehem, and the lights went out in the room. My brother James turned on the light of a star, and Billy and Lacy walked to it. The room got dark again, and then the star came back on. Mary and Joseph had a baby in a feed trough, and they asked why the shepherds came to see them and everyone sang, Away in the Manger. Then it got dark, and when the star came back on, the three Wise men stood by Mary and Joseph, and they

asked them the same question. Then we all sang We Three Kings and The First Noel. Then Billy said this was the son of God who came to be the savior of the world. Then Lacy said it was a beautiful night; everything was quiet, and not even the baby was crying. The lights went out, and the piano started playing, but my friend Lacy didn't do anything. Miss Edna Lawrence played it again, but my friend Lacy stood still. When Miss Edna started playing again, I knew what to do for my best friend.

“Silent night, holy night,” I sang out and moved down to stand by my best friend Lacy Cleaves. “All is calm. All is bright. Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child.” I took Lacy's hand, and we stood side by side and sang. “Holy Infant, so tender and mild. Sleep in heavenly peace. Sleep in heavenly peace.”

The Christmas Star wasn't supposed to come on, but it did. My brother James was supposed to turn on the big lights, but he said something was wrong and they wouldn't come on. I looked up, and the Christmas Star was shining above my head. My best friend Lacy looked at me and said thank you, and then I heard everyone clapping and saying, look, we have our own Christmas Star, and right then, I knew I wasn't gonna die because I knew God had made two stars for Christmas; one was for the baby Jesus and one was for me.

I hope the real Star of Christmas fills your heart with joy, peace, hope, and love because that is the essence of Christmas, and His presence in your life is the greatest present you will ever receive.

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