

Part V

Waiting for school to be over and paying attention was hard, but Miss Atwood said if we didn't "act responsible, pay attention in class, and make passing grades," she would think twice about letting us be in the Christmas Pageant. After school, we filed past Miss Atwood and took the Christmas Pageant handout. My brothers didn't want to talk about the pageant on the way home other than to say they would be helping build a stage and doing other things. The older kids usually did their pageant, but maybe we would all be together this time. I wanted to talk about it and told them I would be the pageant's star, which made Robert and Edward laugh. Henry said he hadn't looked at any of the information but didn't want to be in a stupid play or sing.

"Don't worry about it, Henry. I'll be good enough for both of us."

That made Henry laugh, then say, "You might not even get a part in the play, and they might not let you sing."

I stopped walking. "Henry, that wasn't nice. Everyone likes to hear me sing."

"They just say that to be nice, so Daddy will help them at hog-killing time."

"Liar! Henry, you're lying." Henry wasn't being nice."

"No, I'm being honest, Andy. You aren't the only girl in the whole school who can sing. What about your friend, Lacy?"

"What about her?" I wouldn't look at Henry because I wanted to punch him really bad.

"She can sing. I hear her at church."

"Those are church songs, Henry. God wrote them so everyone can sing them."

"God didn't write them, stupid." Henry stopped walking before saying, "And you know everyone can't sing. You hear Miss Effie every Sunday. Lord knows she can't sing."

"I'm not stupid, Henry, and everybody needs to stop saying I am." I could see our house, so I started running to get home before my brothers did. I wanted to lock myself in my room and read about the pageant, not listen to Henry lie.

I ran ahead, and I was the first one home. Mama was in the kitchen but still told me to hang up my coat and come see her.

I did, and then I went into the kitchen talking. "How'd ya know it was me, Mama?"

Mama turned from the stove, and I saw flour on her face and a bead of sweat on her top lip. "It's mama power." She smiled, then took her arm and rubbed it across her face. "What did you learn today?"

I had a hard time holding in my excitement, "Mama, we're having a Christmas Pageant, and we're doing it with the church, too." I ran to the stove to show her my handout. "See, it's a play and singing, and we have to test to win a place in the play." I showed Mama while she stirred something on the stove. "I want to read all of this, Mama, and figger out what part I want to win," I started twirling, moving out of the room. "I will be the star, won't I, Mama?" I didn't wait to hear the answer. I ran to my room and closed the door.

It was too cold to stay in my room, so I moved to the parlor. The boys had all changed and were out doing their chores, so I wouldn't be bothered. I knew I had to set the table, but I could do that after I read my handout. The play was the Christmas story with Mary, Joseph, Wise Men, shepherds, an innkeeper, and lots of people standing around to sing. I bet Mary was the singer, so I would be Mary. I think Billy Mitchell is a good singer, so he will be Joseph. I'll have to think about the other parts. I need to think about what Lacy will do and help her because they might not have Christmas Pageants in Chicago. I lay by the fire as long as possible but had to get up and set the table.

At supper, no one wanted to talk about the Christmas Pageant. Everyone wanted to discuss taking hogs to market and how much Daddy would get per hog. Mama said she would be glad when James would be home for several days during the holidays, and maybe her sister would come and stay, too. Every time I tried to say something, someone would start talking over me. I finally had enough. I put my fork down on my plate and stood up.

"Are you done?" Daddy looked puzzled. We were having chicken and dumplings and that was my favorite. I had barely eaten because I was waiting for my turn to talk. "No," I said, and before I could say more, Daddy told me to sit back down and eat.

Then Daddy said he was having Hudson Cleaves, Lacy's dad, come help him with a few things. Then Mama said when Daddy went to get Hudson, he should bring Della. Daddy thought that was a fine idea and then said to me. "You bring Lacy home tomorrow, and you girl can play for a while after school."

That sounded like great fun, and it would give me a chance to show Lacy our Montgomery Ward Christmas catalog.

The next day, Lacy seemed as excited as I had been about coming to my house after school. I told her we could lay by the fire, look at my Montgomery Ward Christmas catalog, and pick out things we liked. She said they used to get a Sears Roebuck catalog in Chicago but didn't this year because they moved. She also said we could talk about the Christmas Pageant and our Christmas projects. Lacy said she might need help with the Christmas project since she hadn't had much time to prepare. I wondered if I should share my poem with her or just help her and let my poem be a surprise. I would think about that for a while, but not in school. I had to pay attention, be responsible, and make good grades to be Mary in the Christmas Pageant.

Lacy and I walked behind Robert, Edward, and Henry so we could talk about the Christmas project. I told her about Nancy dancing, Walter reciting something from the Bible, and Billy showing what he had made. I told her people really like to hear reciting things, and she might think about reciting something she learned from Chicago. When she asked me what I was doing, I couldn't lie, but I didn't tell her everything.

"I am reading a poem," I said proudly.

"What poem did you pick?" Lacy asked. "A Christmas poem or just a poem?"

"A Christmas poem, but I want it to be a surprise, so I ain't telling what it is."

We were almost at my house when Lacy said, "I want to audition for the part of Mary in the church school play. It looks like Mary might be singing, so if I sang for the play, would it be too much if I sang for the pageant?"

I could hear Lacy talking as she walked on, but I had stopped walking. Then Lacy turned around and said, "Why'd you stop walking?" She turned and came back to where I was standing. "Is something wrong with you?"

"No, I ain't sick or nothing." I started walking.

"Then why did you stop walking?" Lacy stopped, grabbed my arm, and made me turn around and look at her. "What happened?" is all she said.

"It's just. It's nothing." I lied. We started walking again. "I want to be Mary." I blurted it out.

"Andy, Miss Atwood said we would audition, and they would pick the best one for each part." Lacy continued walking. "So, we will each have to practice really hard and see who wins."

"Okay." I knew she was right, but I felt defeated. "What do I practice?"

“Whatever you like. I’m going to practice being Mary and singing some Christmas carols.”

“That’s what I’ll do too. Okay?” Lacy said it was okay, but I had no idea how to practice being Mary.

Lacy and I looked at the Montgomery Ward Christmas catalog, each picking out everything we wanted. Lacy liked the dolls, mostly the baby dolls, but I liked the trucks and the BB guns. When it came to the dresses, I really didn’t like any of them, but Lacy liked the ones with lots of lace and frilly do-dads. I did like one dress. It was white, and the girl wearing the dress had pretty shiny white shoes and was holding a little red coat. That was my favorite dress, and I marked the page to show Mama.

Mama and Miss Della had fried up some chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans, corn, and a plate piled high with hoecakes. I guess Mama thought she could fry more cornbread than she could bake, which was okay with me. I love hoecakes. We had a chocolate cake for dessert.

I didn’t talk much at supper, but Lacy told everyone about wanting to be Mary in the church school play. Mama asked me if that wasn’t the same part I wanted, and I said it was. Then Lacy’s daddy said his little girl had the voice of an angel, and someone said they had heard her sing in church, and he was right about her voice. I thought I might cry, but I didn’t. No one said anything nice about my singing or how good I would be as Mary. So, right then, I decided how I was going to practice. I will teach myself exactly what I have to say to be Mary because I will read the Bible.