

The **Little** Lord Jesus
from A Prayer for Owen Meany
by John Irving

It was a pity that Owen could not escape the Rev. Dudley Wiggin's Christmas Pageant. The first rehearsal, in the nave of the church, was held on the Second Sunday of Advent and followed a celebration of the Holy Eucharist. We were delayed discussing our roles because the Women's Association Report preceded us; the women wished to say that the Quiet Day they had scheduled for the beginning of Advent had been very successful-that the meditations, and the following period of quiet, for reflection, had been well received. Mrs. Walker, whose own term as a Vestry member was expiring-thus giving her even more energy for her Sunday school tyrannies- complained that attendance at the adult evening Bible study was flagging.

"Well, everyone's so busy at Christmas, you know," said Barb Wiggin, who was impatient to begin the casting of the pageant-not wanting to keep us potential donkeys and turtledoves waiting. I could sense Owen's irritation with Barb Wiggin, in advance.

Quite blind to his animosity, Barb Wiggin began-as, indeed, the holy event itself had begun-with the Announcing Angel. "Well, we all know who our Descending Angel is," she told us.

"NOT ME," Owen said.

"Why, Owen!" Barb Wiggin said.

"PUT SOMEONE ELSE UP IN THE AIR," Owen said. "MAYBE THE SHEPHERDS CAN JUST STARE AT THE 'PILLAR OF LIGHT.' THE BIBLE SAYS OF THE LORD APPEARED TO THE SHEPHERDS-NOT TO THE WHOLE CONGREGATION. AND USE SOMEONE WITH A VOICE EVERYONE DOESN'T LAUGH AT," he said, pausing while everyone laughed.

"But Owen-" Barb Wiggin said.

"No, no, Barbara," Mr. Wiggin said. "If Owen's tired of being the angel, we should respect his wishes-this is a democracy," he added unconvincingly. The former stewardess glared at her ex-pilot husband as if he had been speaking, and thinking, in the absence of sufficient oxygen.

"AND ANOTHER THING," Owen said. "JOSEPH SHOULD NOT SMIRK."

"Indeed not!" the rector said heartily. "I had no idea we'd suffered a smirking Joseph all these years."

"And who do you think would be a good Joseph, Owen?" Barb Wiggin asked, without the conventional friendliness of the stewardess.

Owen pointed to me; to be singled out so silently, with Owen's customary authority, made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck—in later years, I would think I had been chosen by the Chosen One. But that Second Sunday of Advent, in the nave of Christ Church, I felt angry with Owen—once the hairs on the back of my neck relaxed. For what an uninspiring role it is; to be Joseph—that hapless follower, that stand-in, that guy along for the ride.

"We usually pick Mary first," Barb Wiggin said. "Then we let Mary pick her Joseph."

"Oh," the Rev. Dudley Wiggin said. "Well, this year we can let Joseph pick his Mary! We mustn't be afraid to change!" he added cordially, but his wife ignored him.

"We usually begin with the angel," Barb Wiggin said. "We still don't have an angel. Here we are with a Joseph before a Mary, and no angel," she said. (Stewardesses are orderly people, much comforted by following a familiar routine.)

"Well, who would like to hang in the air this year?" the rector asked. "Tell them about the view from up there, Owen."

"SOMETIMES THE CONTRAPTION THAT HOLDS YOU IN THE AIR HAS YOU FACING THE WRONG WAY," he warned the would-be angels. "SOMETIMES THE HARNESS CUTS INTO YOUR SKIN."

"I'm sure we can remedy that, Owen," the rector said.

"WHEN YOU GO UP OUT OF THE 'PILLAR OF LIGHT,' IT'S VERY DARK UP THERE," Owen said.

No would-be angel raised his or her hand.

"AND IT'S QUITE A LONG SPEECH THAT YOU HAVE TO MEMORIZE," Owen added. "YOU KNOW, 'BE NOT AFRAID; FOR BEHOLD, I BRING YOU GOOD NEWS OF A GREAT JOY . . . FOR TO YOU IS BORN . . . IN THE CITY OF DAVID A SAVIOR, WHO IS CHRIST THE LORD' . . ."

"We know, Owen, we know," Barb Wiggin said.

"IT'S NOT EASY," Owen said.

"Perhaps we should pick our Mary, and come back to the angel?" the Rev. Mr. Wiggin asked.

Barb Wiggin wrung her hands.

But if they thought I was enough of a fool to choose my Mary, they had another think coming; what a no-win situation that was-choosing Mary. For what would everyone say about me and the girl I chose? And what would the girls I didn't choose think of me?

"MARY BETH BAIRD HAS NEVER BEEN MARY," Owen said. "THAT WAY, MARY WOULD BE MARY."

"Joseph chooses Mary!" Barb Wiggin said.

"IT WAS JUST A SUGGESTION," Owen said.

But how could the role be denied Mary Beth Baird now that it had been offered? Mary Beth Baird was a wholesome lump of a girl, shy and clumsy and plain.

"I've been a turtledove three times," she mumbled.

"THAT'S ANOTHER THING," Owen said, "NOBODY KNOWS WHAT THE TURTLEDOVES ARE."

"Now, now-one thing at a time," Dudley Wiggin said.

"First, *Joseph*-choose Mary!" Barb Wiggin said.

"Mary Beth Baird would be fine," I said.

"Well, so Mary is Mary!" Mr. Wiggin said. Mary Beth Baird covered her face in her hands. Barb Wiggin also covered her face.

"Now, what's this about the turtledoves, Owen?" the rector asked.

"Hold the turtledoves!" Barb Wiggin snapped. "I want an angel."

Former kings and shepherds sat in silence; former donkeys did not come forth-and donkeys came in two parts; the hind part of the donkey never got to see the

pageant. Even the former hind parts of donkeys did not volunteer to be the angel. Even former turtledoves were not stirred to grab the part.

"The angel is so important," the rector said. "There's a special apparatus just to raise and lower you, and-for a while-you occupy the 'pillar of light' all by yourself. All eyes are on you!"

The children of Christ Church did not appear enticed to play by the thought of all eyes being on them. In the rear of the nave, rendered even more insignificant than usual by his proximity to the giant painting of "The Call of the Twelve," pudgy Harold Crosby sat diminished by the depiction of Jesus appointing his disciples; all eyes rarely feasted on fat Harold Crosby, who was not grotesque enough to be teased-or even noticed-but who was enough of a slob to be rejected whenever he caused the slightest attention to be drawn to himself. Therefore, Harold Crosby abstained. He sat in the back; he stood at the rear of the line; he spoke only when spoken to; he desked to be left alone, and-for the most part-he was. For several years, he had played a perfect hind part of a donkey; I'm sure it was the only role he wanted. I could see he was nervous about the silence that greeted the Rev. Mr. Wiggin's request for an angel; possibly the towering portraits of the disciples in his immediate vicinity made Harold Crosby feel inadequate, or else he feared that-in the absence of volunteers-the rector would select an angel from among the cowardly children, and (God forbid) what if Mr. Wiggin chose *him*?

Harold Crosby tipped back in his chair and shut his eyes; it was either a method of concealment

borrowed from the ostrich, or else Harold imagined that if he appeared to be asleep, no one would ask him to be more than the hind part of a donkey.

"Someone *has* to be the angel," Barb Wiggin said menacingly. Then Harold Crosby fell over backward in his chair; he made it worse by attempting to catch his balance-by grabbing the frame of the huge painting of "The Call of the Twelve"; then he thought better of crushing himself under Christ's disciples and he allowed himself to fall freely. Like most things that happened to Harold Crosby, his fall was more astonishing for its awkwardness than for anything intrinsically spectacular. Regardless, only the rector was insensitive enough to mistake Harold Crosby's clumsiness for volunteering.

"Good for you, Harold!" the rector said. "There's a brave boy!"

"What?" Harold Crosby said.

"Now we have our angel," Mr. Wiggin said cheerfully. "What's next?"

"I'm afraid of heights," said Harold Crosby.

"All the braver of you!" the rector replied. "There's no time like the present for facing our fears."

"But the crane," Barb Wiggin said to her husband. "The apparatus---"she started to say, but the rector silenced her with an admonishing wave of his hand. Surely you're not going to make the poor boy feel self-conscious about his weight, the rector's glance toward his wife implied; surely the wires and the harness are strong enough. Barb Wiggin glowered back at her husband.

"ABOUT THE TURTLEDOVES," Owen said, and Barb Wiggin shut her eyes; she did not lean back in her chair, but she gripped the seat with both hands.

"Ah, yes, Owen, what was it about the turtledoves?" the Rev. Mr. Wiggin asked.

"THEY LOOK LIKE THEY'RE FROM OUTER SPACE," Owen said. "NO ONE KNOWS WHAT THEY'RE SUPPOSED TO BE."

"They're *doves*!" Barb Wiggin said. "Everyone knows what doves are!"

"THEY'RE *GIANT*DOVES," Owen said. "THEY'RE AS BIG AS HALF A DONKEY. WHAT KIND OF BIRD IS THAT? A BIRD FROM MARS? THEY'RE ACTUALLY KIND OF FRIGHTENING."

"Not everyone can be a king or a shepherd or a donkey, Owen," the rector said.

"BUT NOBODY'S SMALL ENOUGH TO BE A DOVE," Owen said. "AND NOBODY KNOWS WHAT ALL THOSE PAPER STREAMERS ARE SUPPOSED TO BE."

"They're *feathers*!" Barb Wiggin shouted.

"THE TURTLEDOVES LOOK LIKE CREATURES," Owen said. "LIKE THEY'VE BEEN ELECTROCUTED."

"Well, I suppose there were other animals in the manger," the rector said. "Are *you*" going to make the costumes?" Barb Wiggin asked him.

"Now now," Mr. Wiggin said.

"COWS GO WELL WITH DONKEYS," Owen suggested.

"Cows?" the rector said. "Well well."

"Who's going to make the cow costumes?" Barb Wiggin asked.

"I will!" Mary Beth Baird said. She had never volunteered for anything before; clearly her election as the Virgin Mary had energized her - had made her believe she was capable of miracles, or at least cow costumes.

"Good for you, Mary!" the rector said.

But Barb Wiggin and Harold Crosby closed their eyes; Harold did not look well - he seemed to be suppressing vomit, and his face took on the lime-green shade of the grass at the feet of Christ's disciples, who loomed over him.

"THERE'S ONE MORE THING," said Owen Meany. We gave him our attention.

"THE CHRIST CHILD," he said, and we children nodded our approval.

"What's wrong with the Christ Child?" Barb Wiggin asked.

"ALL THOSE BABIES," Owen said. "JUST TO GET ONE TO LIE IN THE MANGER WITHOUT CRYING - DO WE HAVE TO HAVE ALL THOSE BABIES?"

"But it's like the song says, Owen," the rector told him. "'Little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.'"

"OKAY, OKAY," Owen said. "BUT ALL THOSE BABIES-YOU CAN HEAR THEM CRYING. EVEN OFFSTAGE, YOU CAN HEAR THEM. AND ALL THOSE GROWN-UPS!" he said. "ALL THOSE BIG MEN PASSING THE BABIES IN AND OUT. THEY'RE SO *BIG*- THEY LOOK RIDICULOUS. THEY MAKE US LOOK RIDICULOUS."

"You know a baby who won't cry, Owen?" Barb Wiggin asked him-and, of course, she knew as soon as she spoke . . . how he had trapped her.

"I KNOW SOMEONE WHO CAN FIT IN THE CRIB," Owen said. "SOMEONE SMALL ENOUGH TO LOOK LIKE A BABY," he said. "SOMEONE OLD ENOUGH NOT TO CRY."

Mary Beth Baird could not contain herself! "Owen can be the Baby Jesus!" she yelled. Owen Meany smiled and shrugged.

"I CAN FIT IN THE CRIB," he said modestly.

Harold Crosby could no longer contain himself, either; he vomited. He vomited often enough for it to pass almost unnoticed, especially now that Owen had our undivided attention.

"And what's more, we can lift him!" Mary Beth Baird said excitedly.

"There was never any lifting of the Christ Child before!" Barb Wiggin said.

"Well, I mean, if we have to, if we feel like it," Mary Beth said.

"WELL, IF EVERYONE WANTS ME TO DO IT, I SUPPOSE I COULD," Owen said.

"Yes!" cried the kings and shepherds.

"Let Owen do it!" said the donkeys and the cows-the former turtledoves.

It was quite a popular decision, but Barb Wiggin looked at Owen as if she were revising her opinion of how "cute" he was, and the rector observed Owen with a detachment that was wholly out of character for an ex-pilot. The Rev. Mr. Wiggin, such a veteran of Christmas pageants, looked at Owen Meany with profound respect-as if he'd seen the Christ Child come and go, but never before had he encountered a little Lord Jesus who was so perfect for the part.

It was only our second rehearsal of the Christmas Pageant when Owen decided that the crib, in which he could fit-but tightly-was unnecessary and even incorrect. Dudley Wiggin based his entire view of the behavior of the Christ Child on the Christmas carol "Away in a Manger," of which there are only two verses.

It was this carol that convinced the Rev. Mr. Wiggin that the Baby Jesus mustn't cry.

*The cat-tle are low-ing, the ba-by a-wakes,
But lit-tle Lord Je-sus, no cry-ing he makes.*

If Mr. Wiggin put such stock in the second verse of "Away in a Manger," Owen argued that we should also be instructed by the very first verse.

*A-way in a man-ger, no crib for his bed,
The lit-tle Lord Je-sus laid down his sweet head.*

"IF IT SAYS THERE WAS NO CRIB, WHY DO WE HAVE A CRIB?" Owen asked.

Clearly, he found the crib restraining.

"THE STARS IN THE SKY LOOKED DOWN WHERE HE LAY, THE LITTLE LORD JE-SUS, A-SLEEP ON THE HAY," Owen sang.

Thus did Owen get his way, again; "on the hay" was where he would lie, and he proceeded to arrange all the hay within the creche in such a fashion that his comfort would be assured, and he would be sufficiently elevated and tilted toward the audience-so that no one could possibly miss seeing him.

"THERE'S ANOTHER THING," Owen advised us. "YOU NOTICE HOW THE SONG SAYS, 'THE CATTLE ARE LOWING'? WELL, IT'S A GOOD THING WE'VE GOT COWS. THE TURTLEDOVES COULDN'T DO MUCH 'LOWING.' "

If cows were what we had, they were the sort of cows that required as much imagination to identify as the former turtledoves had required. Mary Bern Baird's cow costumes may have been inspired by Mary Beth's elevated status to the role of the Virgin Mary, but the Holy Mother had not offered divine assistance, or even divine workmanship, toward the making of the costumes themselves. Mary Beth appeared to have been confused mightily by all the images of Christmas: her cows had not only horns but antlers-veritable racks, more suitable to reindeer, which Mary Beth may have been thinking of. Worse, the antlers were soft; that is, they were constructed of a floppy material, and therefore these astonishing "horns" were always collapsing upon the faces of the cows themselves-obliterating entirely their already impaired vision, and causing more than usual confusion in the creche: cows stepping on each other, cows colliding with donkeys, cows knocking down kings and shepherds.

"The cows, if that's what they are," Barb Wiggin observed, "should maintain their positions and not move around-not at all. We wouldn't want them to trample the Baby Jesus, would we?"

A deeply crazed glint in Barb Wiggin's eye made it appear that she thought trampling the Baby Jesus would register in the neighborhood of a divine occurrence, but Owen, who was always anxious about being stepped on-and excessively so, now that he was prone and helpless on the hay - echoed Barb Wiggin's concern for the cows.

"YOU COWS, JUST REMEMBER. YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE 'LOWING,' NOT MILLING AROUND."

"I don't want the cows 'lowing' or milling around," Barb Wiggin said. "I want to be able to hear the singing, and the reading from the Bible. I want no 'lowing.' "

"LAST YEAR, YOU HAD THE TURTLEDOVES COOING," Owen reminded her.

"Clearly, this isn't last year," Barb Wiggin said.

"Now now," the rector'said.

"THE SONG SAYS 'THE CATTLE ARE LOWING,' " Owen said.

"I suppose you want the donkeys *hee-hawing*" Barb Wiggin shouted.

"THE SONG SAYS NOTHING ABOUT DONKEYS," Owen said.

"Perhaps we're being too literal about this song," Mr. Wiggin interjected, but I knew there was no such thing as "too literal" for Owen Meany, who grasped orthodoxy from wherever it could be found.

Yet Owen relented on the issue of whether or not the cattle should "low"; he saw there was more to be gained in rearranging the order of music, which he had always found improper. It made no sense, he claimed, to begin with "We Three Kings of Orient Are" while we watched the Announcing Angel descend in the 'pillar of light"; those were shepherds to whom appeared, not kings. Better to begin with "O Little Town of Bethlehem" while made the angle made good his descent; the angel's announcement would be perfectly balanced if delivered between verses two and three. Then, as the "pillar of light" leaves the angel-or, rather, as the quickly ascending angel departs the "pillar of light"-we see the kings. Suddenly, they have joined the astonished shepherds. Now hit "We Three Kings," and hit it hard!

Harold Crosby, who had not yet attempted a first flight in the apparatus that enhanced his credibility as an angel, wanted to know where "Ory and R" were.

No one understood his question.

" 'We Three Kings of Ory and R,' " Harold said. "Where are 'Ory' and 'R'?"

" 'WE THREE KINGS OF ORIENT ARE,' " Owen corrected him. "DON'T YOU READ?"

All Harold Crosby knew was that he did not fly; he would ask any question, create any distraction, procrastinate by any means he could imagine, if he could delay being launched by Barb Wiggin.

I-Joseph-had nothing to do, nothing to say, nothing to learn. Mary Beth Baird suggested that, as a helpful husband, I take turns with her in handling Owen Meany-if not exactly lifting him out of the hay, because Barb Wiggin was violently opposed to this, then at least, Mary Beth implied, we could fondle Owen, or tickle him, or pat him on the head.

"NO TICKLING," Owen said.

"No nothing*." Barb Wiggin insisted. "No touching Baby Jesus."

"But we're his parents!" proclaimed Mary Beth, who was being generous to include poor Joseph under this appellation.

"Mary Beth," Barb Wiggin said, "if you touch the Baby Jesus, I'm putting you in a cow costume."

And so it came to pass that the Virgin Mary sulked through our rehearsal-a mother denied the tactile pleasures of her own infant! And Owen, who had built a huge nest for himself-in a mountain of hay-appeared to radiate the truly untouchable quality of a deity to be reckoned with, of a prophet who had no doubt.

Some technical difficulties with the harness spared Harold Crosby his first sensation of angelic elevation; we noticed that Harold's anxiety concerning heights had caused him to forget the lines of his all-important announcement-or else Harold had not properly studied his part, for he couldn't get past "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news ..." without flubbing.

The kings and shepherds could not possibly move slowly enough, following the "pillar of light" in front of the altar toward the arrangement of animals and Mary and Joseph surrounding the commanding presence of the Christ Child enthroned on his mountain of hay; no matter how slowly they moved, they arrived at the touching scene in the stable before the end of the fifth verse of "We Three Kings of Orient Are." There they had to wait for the end of the carol, and appear to be unsurprised by the choir charging immediately into "Away in a Manger."

The solution, the Rev. Dudley Wiggin proposed, was to omit the fifth verse of "We Three Kings," but Owen denounced this as unorthodox. To conclude with the fourth verse was a far cry from ending with the hallelujahs of the fifth; Owen begged us to pay special attention to the words of the fourth verse-surely we did not wish to arrive in the presence of the Christ Child on such a note.

He sang for us, with emphasis-" 'SOR-RROWING, SIGHING, BLEED-ING, DY-ING, SEALED IN A STONE-COLD TOMB.' "

"But then there's the refrain!" Barb Wiggin cried. " 'O star of won-der, star of night,' " she sang, but Owen was unmoved.

The rector assured Owen that the church had a long tradition of not singing every verse of each hymn or carol, but somehow Owen made us feel that the tradition of

the church-however long-was on less sure footing than the written word. Five verses in print meant we were to sing all five.

" 'SORROWING, SIGHING, BLEEDING, DYING,' " he repeated. "SOUNDS VERY CHRISTMASY."

Mary Beth Baird let everyone know that the matter could be resolved if she were allowed to shower some affection upon the Christ Child, but it seemed that the only agreements that existed between Barb Wiggin and Owen were that Mary Beth should not be permitted to maul the Baby Jesus, and that the cows not move.

When the creche was properly formed, which was finally timed upon the conclusion of the fourth verse of "We Three Kings," the choir then sang "Away in a Manger" while we shamelessly worshiped and adored Owen Meany.

Perhaps the "swaddling clothes" should have been reconsidered. Owen had objected to being wrapped in them up to his chin; he wanted to have his arms free-possibly, in order to ward off a stumbling cow or donkey. And so they had swaddled the length of his body, up to his armpits, and then crisscrossed his chest with more "swaddling," and even covered his shoulders and neck-Barb Wiggin made a special point of concealing Owen's neck, because she said his Adam's apple looked "rather grown-up." It did; it stuck out, especially when he was lying down; but then, Owen's eyes looked "rather grown-up," too, in that they bulged, or appeared a trifle haunted in their sockets. His facial features were tiny but sharp, not in the least baby like-certainly not in the "pillar of light," which was harsh. There were dark circles under his eyes, his nose was too pointed for a baby's nose, his cheekbones too prominent. Why we didn't just wrap him up in a blanket, I don't know. The "swaddling clothes" resembled nothing so much as layers upon layers of gauze bandages, so that Owen resembled some terrifying burn victim who'd been shriveled to abnormal size in a fire that had left only his face and arms uncharted-and the "pillar of light," and the worshipful postures of all of us, surrounding him, made it appear that Owen was about to undergo some ritual unwrapping in an operating room, and we were his surgeons and nurses.

Upon the conclusion of "Away in a Manger," Mr. Wiggin read again from Luke: " 'When went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.' "

While the rector read, the kings bowed to the Baby Jesus and presented him with the usual gifts-ornate boxes and tins, and shiny trinkets, difficult to distinguish from the distance of the congregation but somehow regal in appearance. A few of the shepherds offered more humble, rustic presents; one of the shepherds gave the Christ Child a bird's nest.

"WHAT WOULD I DO WITH A BIRD'S NEST?" Owen complained.

"It's for good luck," the rector said.

"DOES IT SAY SO IN THE BIBLE?" Owen asked.

Someone said that from the audience the bird's nest looked like old, dead grass; someone said it looked like "dung."

"Now now," Dudley Wiggin said.

"It doesn't matter what it looks like!" Barb Wiggin said, with considerable pitch in her voice. "The gifts are symbolic."

Mary Beth Baird foresaw a larger problem. Since the reading from Luke concluded by observing that "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart"-and surely the "things" that Mary so kept and pondered were far more matterful than these trivial gifts-shouldn't she do something to demonstrate to the audience what a strain on her poor heart it was to do such monumental keeping and pondering?

"What?" Barb Wiggin said.

"WHAT SHE MEANS IS, SHOULDN'T SHE ACT OUT HOW A PERSON PONDERES SOMETHING," Owen said.

Mary Beth Baird was so pleased that Owen had clarified her concerns that she appeared on the verge of hugging or kissing him, but Barb Wiggin moved quickly between them, leaving the controls of the 'pillar of light' unattended; eerily, the light scanned our little assembly with a will of its own-appearing to settle on the Holy Mother.

There was a respectful silence while we pondered what possible thing Mary Beth Baird could do to demonstrate how hard her heart was working; it was clear to most of us that Mary Beth would be satisfied only if she could express her adoration of the Christ Child physically.

"I could kiss him," Mary Beth said softly. "I could just bow down and kiss him-on the forehead, I mean."

"Well, yes, you could try that, Mary Beth," the rector said cautiously.

"Let's see how it looks," Barb Wiggin said doubtfully.

"NO," Owen said. "NO KISSING."

"Why not, Owen?" Barb Wiggin asked playfully. She thought an opportunity to tease him was presenting itself, and she was quick to pounce on it.

"THIS IS A VERY HOLY MOMENT," Owen said slowly.

"Indeed, it is," the rector said.

"VERY HOLY," Owen said. "SACRED," he added.

"Just on the forehead," Mary Beth said.

"Let's see how it looks. Let's just try it, Owen," Barb Wiggin said.

"NO," Owen said. "IF MARY IS SUPPOSED TO BE PONDERING-'IN HER HEART'-THAT I AM CHRIST THE LORD, THE ACTUAL SON OF GOD ... A SAVIOR, REMEMBER THAT ... DO YOU THINK SHE'D JUST KISS ME LIKE SOME ORDINARY MOTHER KISSING HER ORDINARY BABY? THIS IS NOT THE ONLY TIME THAT MARY KEEPS THINGS IN HER HEART. DON'T YOU REMEMBER WHEN THEY GO TO JERUSALEM FOR PASSOVER AND JESUS GOES TO THE TEMPLE AND TALKS TO THE TEACHERS, AND JOSEPH AND MARY ARE WORRIED ABOUT HIM BECAUSE THEY CAN'T FIND HIM- THEY'RE LOOKING ALL OVER FOR HIM-AND HE TELLS THEM, WHAT ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT, WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR ME FOR, 'DID YOU NOT KNOW THAT I MUST BE IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE?' HE MEANS THE TEMPLE. REMEMBER THAT? WELL, MARY KEEPS THAT IN HER HEART, TOO."

"But shouldn't I do something, Owen?" Mary Beth asked. "What should I do?"

"YOU KEEP THINGS IN YOUR HEART!" Owen told her.

"She should do nothing?" the Rev. Mr. Wiggin asked Owen. The rector, like one of the teachers in the temple, appeared "amazed." That is how the teachers in the temple are described-in their response to the Boy Jesus: "All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers."

"Do you mean she should do nothing, Owen?" the rector repeated. "Or that she should do something less, or more, than kissing?"

"MORE," Owen said.

Mary Beth Baird trembled; she would do anything that he required.

"TRY BOWING," Owen suggested.

"Bowling?" Barb Wiggin said, with distaste.

Mary Beth Baird dropped to her knees and lowered her head; she was an awkward girl, and this sudden movement caused her to lose her balance. She assumed a three-point position, finally on her knees, with her forehead resting on the mountain of hay, the top of her head pressing against Owen's hip.

Owen raised his hand over her, to bless her; in a most detached manner, he lightly touched her hair-then his hand hovered above her head, as if he meant to shield her eyes from the intensity of the "pillar of light." Perhaps, if only for this gesture, Owen had wanted his arms free.

The shepherds and kings were riveted to this demonstration of what Mary pondered in her heart; the cows did not move. Even the hind parts of the donkeys, who could not see the Holy Mother bowing to the Baby Jesus-or anything at all- appeared to sense that the moment was reverential; they ceased their swaying, and the donkeys' tails hung straight and still. Barb Wiggin had stopped breathing, with her mouth open, and the rector wore the numbed expression of one struck silly with awe. And I, Joseph-I did nothing, I was just the witness. God knows how long Mary Beth Baird would have buried her head in the hay, for no doubt she was ecstatic to have the top of her head in contact with the Christ Child's hip. We might have maintained our positions in this tableau for eternity-we might have made creche history, a pageant frozen in rehearsal, each of us injected with the very magic we sought to represent: Nativity forever.

But the choirmaster, whose eyesight was failing, assumed he had missed the cue for the final carol, which the choir sang with special gusto.

*Hark! the her-ald an-gels sing, "Glory to the new-born King;
Peace on earth, and mer-cy mild, God and sin-ners rec-on-ciled!"
Joy-ful, all ye na-tions, rise, Join the tri-umph of the skies;
With the an-gel-ic host pro-claim, "Christ is born in Beth-le-hem!"
Hark! the her-ald an-gels sing, "Glo-ry to the new-born King!"*

Mary Beth Baird's head shot up at the first 'Hark!' Her hair was wild and flecked with hay; she jumped to her feet as if the little Prince of Peace had ordered her out of his nest. The donkeys swayed again, the cows-their horns falling about their heads-moved a little, and the kings and shepherds regained their usual lack of composure. The rector, whose appearance suggested that of a former immortal rudely returned to the rules of the earth, found that he could speak again. "That was perfect, I thought," he said. "That was marvelous, really."

"Shouldn't we run through it one more time?" Barb Wiggin asked, while the choir continued to herald the birth of "the ever-lasting Lord."

"NO," said the Prince of Peace. "I THINK WE'VE GOT IT RIGHT."