

SOMEONE IS MISSING

It was two days before Christmas, and Marcie was troubled. She sat on the floor in the glowing fan of warmth from the fire, over a dozen books stacked by her, and flipped through one until she came to a manger scene. In the picture, shepherds had come to visit the Baby Jesus. The Kings were off in the distance, but plainly on the way. Even a cow and a donkey stood nearby in the stable.

It was just as she had thought. Marcie shut the book with a snap, and picked up another. The manger scene in this one was a bit different. The Kings were kneeling in front of the Crib. A boy goatherd stood behind them. A couple of cherubs hovered over the shepherds. But, except for some animals, there was no one else. But, in each story, someone was missing from the manger. There was no little girl. Not one.

Marcie went into the kitchen where her mother was feeding Kevin, her baby brother. "Mom, when the Baby Jesus was born, how come no little girl went to the stable to see him?"

Her mother spooned some mashed potatoes carefully into Kevin's mouth, and smiled up at Marcie. "Are you sure no one did?"

"Have you ever seen a picture of a little girl at the manger?" Marcie demanded.

"Why, I guess not," her mother answered, her hazel eyes thoughtful. "Unless you count angels. Some of them look as though they might be little girls."


Marcie shook her head emphatically. "You can't count angels. They're too--too angelic. I mean plain, ordinary girls like me."

"I never thought of it before," her mother admitted, "but you are right. It is odd."

Marcie's older brother, Tod, came bursting in, bringing a rush of cold air with him. "I'm starving." he announced, seizing an apple from a bowl on the kitchen table and crunching into it.

"I'll start lunch. Marcie, will you finish feeding Kevin? And this afternoon," her mother said, "you and I must finish up the pageant costumes." Marcie beamed, thrilled by the reminder of how soon the pageant was. She had been looking forward to it for days and days--in fact, for a year, because she had been sick with a bad cold last Christmas, so she and her mother had stayed home from church. The pageant was going to be tomorrow, Christmas Eve. This year, Marcie's mother had been chosen to play the Mother of Jesus. Her father was one of the Kings, and Tod was a shepherd boy. Marcie's name would be on the program, too, for helping with the costumes.

She could hardly wait to see how everybody looked. Probably the most beautiful costume of all was the Herald Angel's. It was white and so heavenly. Marcie had helped make it. She wondered if she would ever get to be the Herald Angel. This year the part had gone to Dorothy Cooper. Dorothy was a senior. She had an irritating manner and crooked teeth, but she could play the trumpet, so she was ideal for



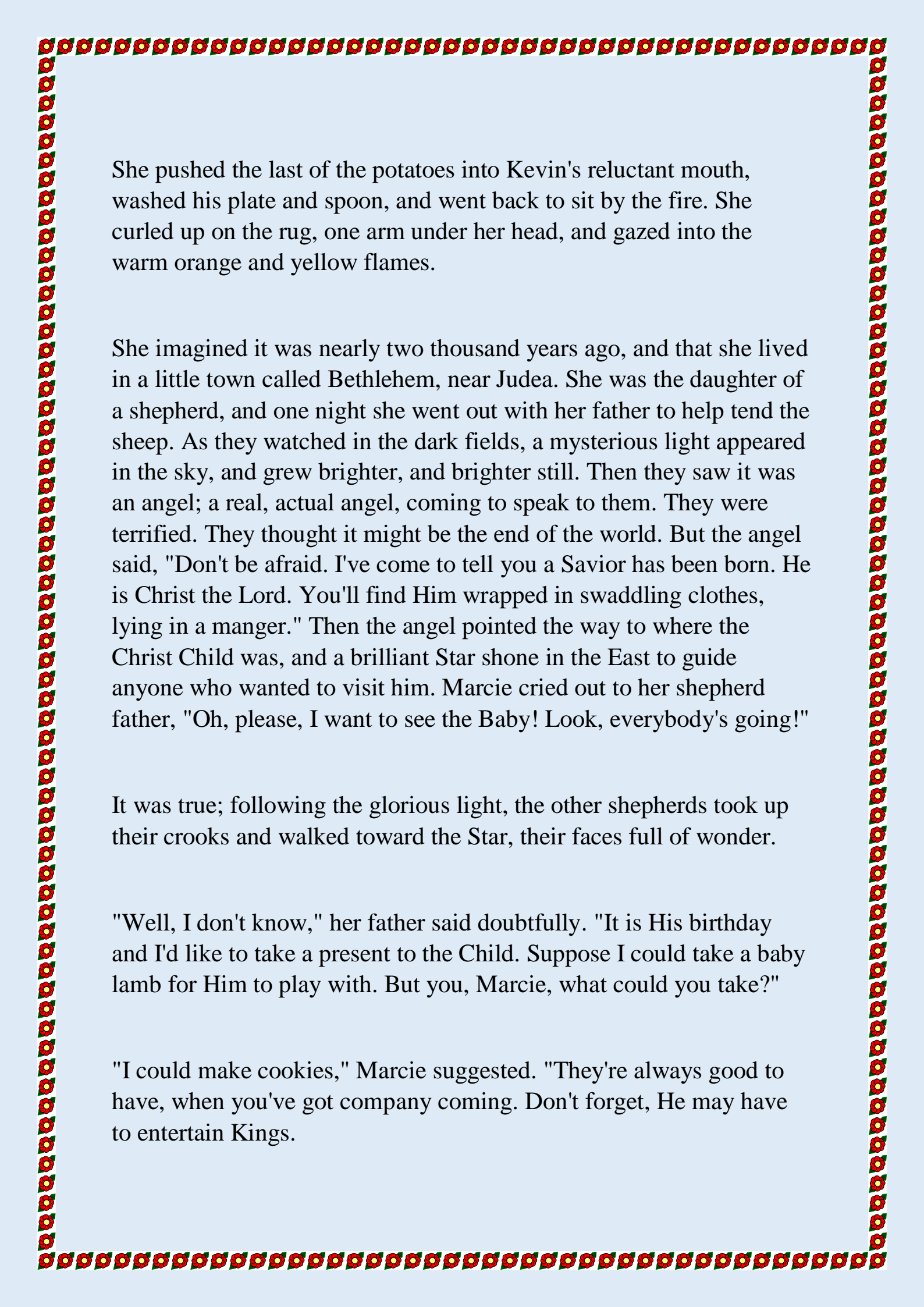
the part. Her trumpet could lead the carol singing. Marcie sighed. About the only thing I'd be ideal for, she thought, is a plain, ordinary little girl. But, of course, there was no role like that. As though reading her mind, her mother said, "Tod, Marcie and I were wondering why no little girls are ever shown at the manger, in Christmas scenes. Why do you suppose that is?"

"Because it's a man's world, what's why," Tod said cheerfully. He tramped away, whistling.

Furious, Marcie wanted to yell after him, "It is not! It's a girl's world."

But underneath, she had her doubts. Sometimes it seemed to her that boys had the best of everything and not just at Christmas, either. Tod could run faster than she could, skate better, climb trees higher. He was allowed to stay out after dark and to play rough games. When he tore his clothes or got them dirty, people said approvingly that he was a "real boy," but when she acted wild, she was scolded for being "unladylike." Kevin couldn't do much, of course, but he certainly got away with a lot. No one minded that he had terrible table manners. Even now, he was dribbling his mashed potatoes. And everybody waited on him. And people thought he was so cute-adorable, they said--for no better reason than that he had red hair, only two teeth, and dimples.

In her heart, Marcie feared that she herself was reflected in the pane of the kitchen window: just a usual kind of little girl, with long brown pigtails and a freckled nose. She was in-between, nobody special.



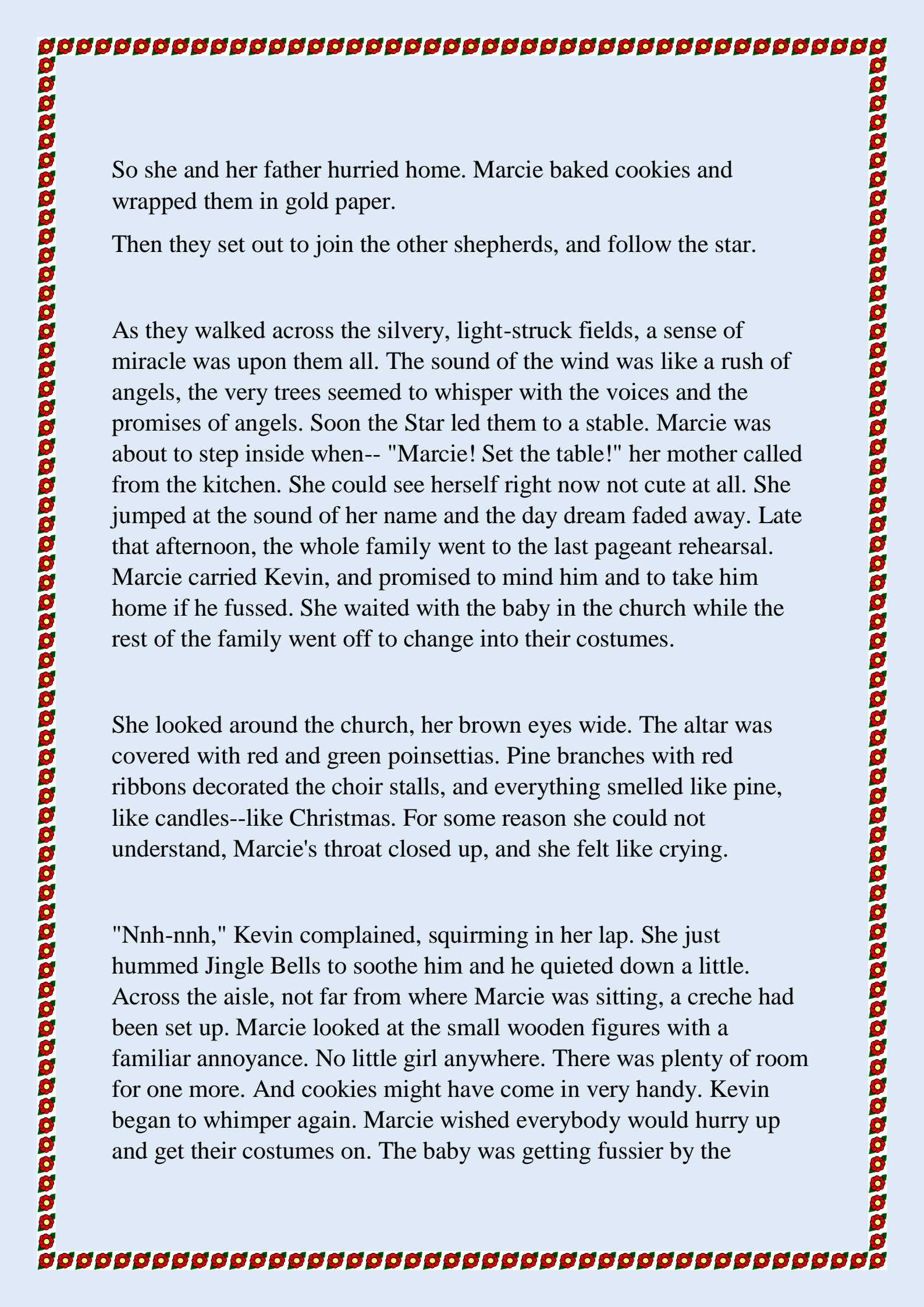
She pushed the last of the potatoes into Kevin's reluctant mouth, washed his plate and spoon, and went back to sit by the fire. She curled up on the rug, one arm under her head, and gazed into the warm orange and yellow flames.

She imagined it was nearly two thousand years ago, and that she lived in a little town called Bethlehem, near Judea. She was the daughter of a shepherd, and one night she went out with her father to help tend the sheep. As they watched in the dark fields, a mysterious light appeared in the sky, and grew brighter, and brighter still. Then they saw it was an angel; a real, actual angel, coming to speak to them. They were terrified. They thought it might be the end of the world. But the angel said, "Don't be afraid. I've come to tell you a Savior has been born. He is Christ the Lord. You'll find Him wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." Then the angel pointed the way to where the Christ Child was, and a brilliant Star shone in the East to guide anyone who wanted to visit him. Marcie cried out to her shepherd father, "Oh, please, I want to see the Baby! Look, everybody's going!"

It was true; following the glorious light, the other shepherds took up their crooks and walked toward the Star, their faces full of wonder.

"Well, I don't know," her father said doubtfully. "It is His birthday and I'd like to take a present to the Child. Suppose I could take a baby lamb for Him to play with. But you, Marcie, what could you take?"

"I could make cookies," Marcie suggested. "They're always good to have, when you've got company coming. Don't forget, He may have to entertain Kings."



So she and her father hurried home. Marcie baked cookies and wrapped them in gold paper.

Then they set out to join the other shepherds, and follow the star.

As they walked across the silvery, light-struck fields, a sense of miracle was upon them all. The sound of the wind was like a rush of angels, the very trees seemed to whisper with the voices and the promises of angels. Soon the Star led them to a stable. Marcie was about to step inside when-- "Marcie! Set the table!" her mother called from the kitchen. She could see herself right now not cute at all. She jumped at the sound of her name and the day dream faded away. Late that afternoon, the whole family went to the last pageant rehearsal. Marcie carried Kevin, and promised to mind him and to take him home if he fussed. She waited with the baby in the church while the rest of the family went off to change into their costumes.

She looked around the church, her brown eyes wide. The altar was covered with red and green poinsettias. Pine branches with red ribbons decorated the choir stalls, and everything smelled like pine, like candles--like Christmas. For some reason she could not understand, Marcie's throat closed up, and she felt like crying.

"Nnh-nnh," Kevin complained, squirming in her lap. She just hummed Jingle Bells to soothe him and he quieted down a little. Across the aisle, not far from where Marcie was sitting, a creche had been set up. Marcie looked at the small wooden figures with a familiar annoyance. No little girl anywhere. There was plenty of room for one more. And cookies might have come in very handy. Kevin began to whimper again. Marcie wished everybody would hurry up and get their costumes on. The baby was getting fussier by the

moment. "Hey, cheer up," she urged him. But he whimpered all the more and finally he began to cry.

She realized she would have to take him home. Once he got in a bad mood, he didn't come out of it too easily. She told herself: Oh, well, there's always tomorrow. Anyway, it might be better to see the pageant all at once, when it was perfect. The baby was staying with a neighbor tomorrow. She skipped home, jogging Kevin and singing energetically, Dashing through the snow...in a one-horse open sleigh... Overhead, the first stars of evening blazed down. Next morning, Marcie woke up early, bursting with anticipation. It was Christmas Eve. She ran to the window. The day was brilliantly clear, and all the town seemed decorated for Christmas: the giant fir tree out front glittered with its burden of snow; glowing icicles hung from every roof and sill of every house; whitened streets reflected the sun with a magical brightness.

The hours of the day seemed to fly by. There were last-minute presents to wrap, popcorn balls to make, celery and onions to be chopped for stuffing the turkey.

In the afternoon, Marcie and her mother wrapped one of Marcie's favorite dolls in swaddling clothes. The doll was to be the Baby Jesus in the pageant. Marcie felt very proud that her beloved doll was to be used. She washed the doll's face carefully after it was dressed, to be sure it looked its best.

Everyone's eyes were bright with excitement, but Marcie's more than all. She raced upstairs and changed into her red velvet dress, and tied red ribbons on her pigtails. Then she went to Kevin's crib to dress him

in his snowsuit, but suddenly noticed he looked strange. He had some bumpy spots on his face, and he was unusually hot to the touch.

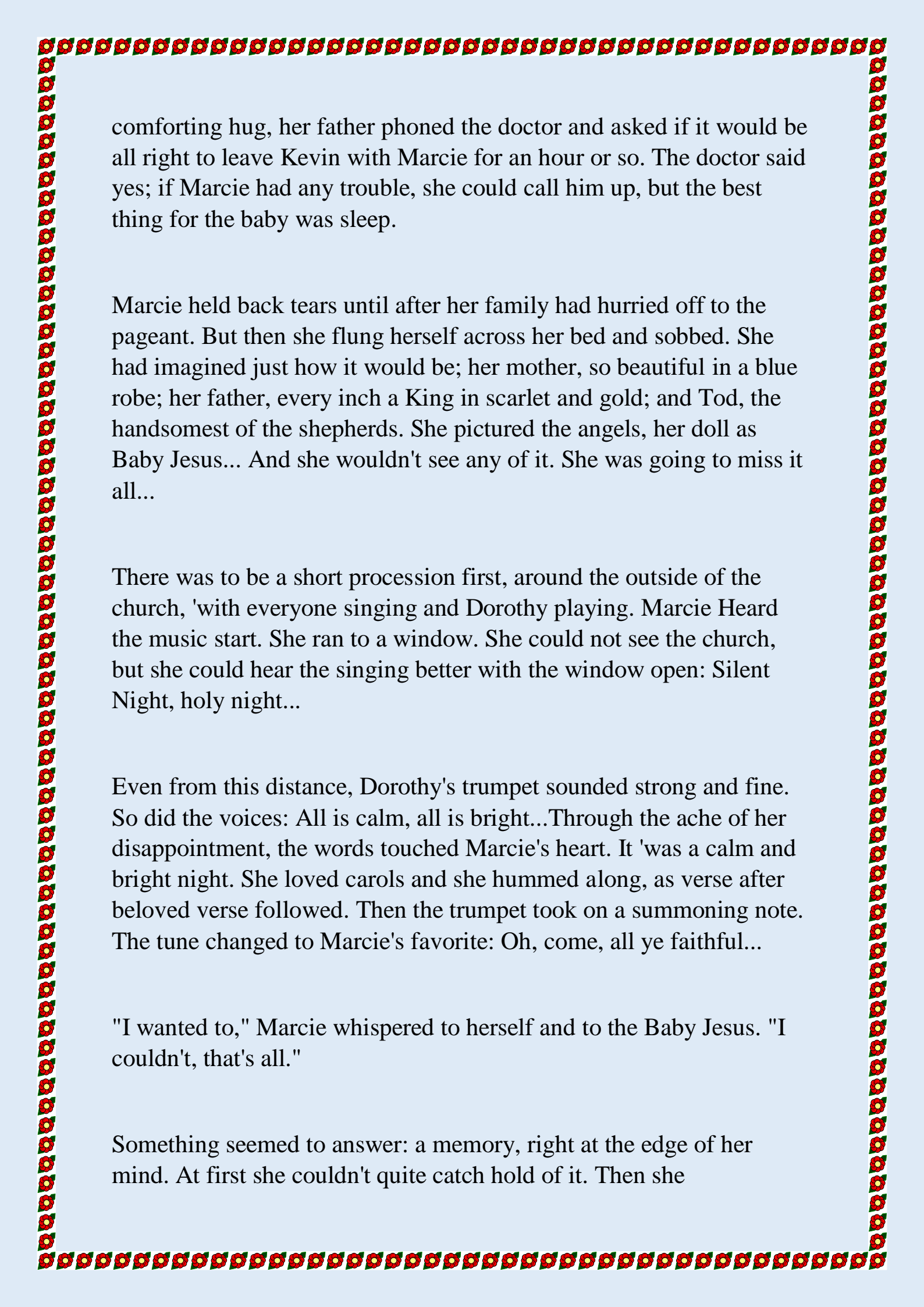
Alarmed, Marcie called her parents. Her mother took one look at the baby, and groaned, "Chicken pox!"

"I'm afraid so," Marcie's father agreed after a moment. Marcie remembered 'when she and Tod had chicken pox. Yes, they had looked just the way Kevin did now.

After taking Kevin's temperature, her mother phoned Mrs. Carter, the neighbor who had planned to take care of Kevin. She explained about the chicken pox, and asked if Mrs. Carter's three small children had had it. The answer was no; Mrs. Carter was awfully sorry, but of course she couldn't under the circumstances, take Kevin.

Her mother called two more neighbors to baby-sit, but without success.

"We've got to get somebody," Tod said. "We're late already. And what are they going to do if we don't show up? What good is a Christmas pageant without the Baby Jesus? And His Mother? And one King and one shepherd?" Marcie swallowed hard. It was true that the whole pageant would be ruined without her mother and father and brother. But, she thought, there was one person who would not be missed--who, in fact, was always missing--a plain, ordinary little girl with no place at the manger. Still, it was hard to say the words. Marcie's voice sounded husky as she volunteered, "I'll stay with Kevin." Her mother protested, "No. I know how much you've been looking forward to the pageant. There must be something else we can do. But they all knew that time had run out. After giving Marcie a



comforting hug, her father phoned the doctor and asked if it would be all right to leave Kevin with Marcie for an hour or so. The doctor said yes; if Marcie had any trouble, she could call him up, but the best thing for the baby was sleep.

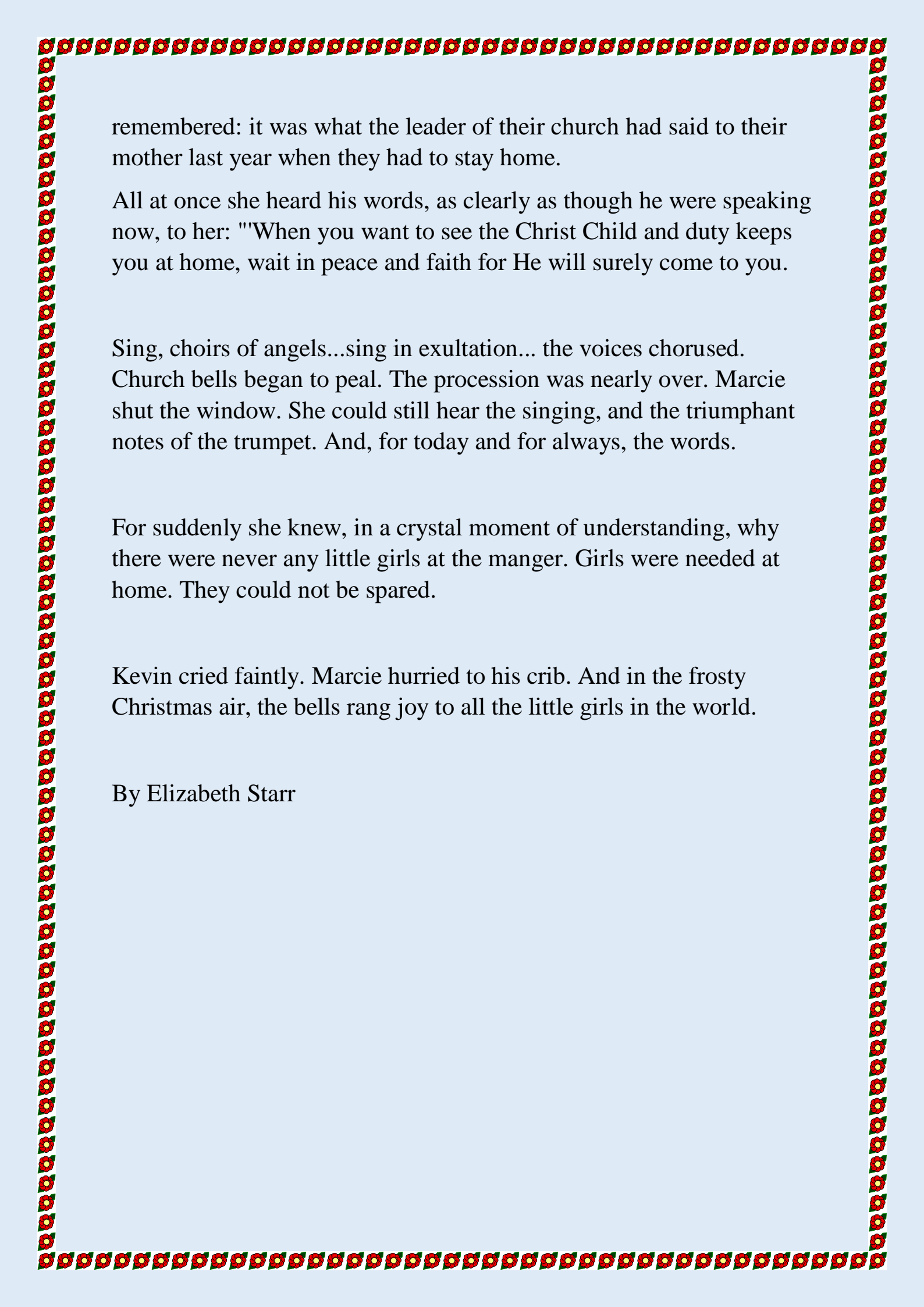
Marcie held back tears until after her family had hurried off to the pageant. But then she flung herself across her bed and sobbed. She had imagined just how it would be; her mother, so beautiful in a blue robe; her father, every inch a King in scarlet and gold; and Tod, the handsomest of the shepherds. She pictured the angels, her doll as Baby Jesus... And she wouldn't see any of it. She was going to miss it all...

There was to be a short procession first, around the outside of the church, 'with everyone singing and Dorothy playing. Marcie Heard the music start. She ran to a window. She could not see the church, but she could hear the singing better with the window open: Silent Night, holy night...

Even from this distance, Dorothy's trumpet sounded strong and fine. So did the voices: All is calm, all is bright...Through the ache of her disappointment, the words touched Marcie's heart. It 'was a calm and bright night. She loved carols and she hummed along, as verse after beloved verse followed. Then the trumpet took on a summoning note. The tune changed to Marcie's favorite: Oh, come, all ye faithful...

"I wanted to," Marcie whispered to herself and to the Baby Jesus. "I couldn't, that's all."

Something seemed to answer: a memory, right at the edge of her mind. At first she couldn't quite catch hold of it. Then she



remembered: it was what the leader of their church had said to their mother last year when they had to stay home.

All at once she heard his words, as clearly as though he were speaking now, to her: "When you want to see the Christ Child and duty keeps you at home, wait in peace and faith for He will surely come to you.

Sing, choirs of angels...sing in exultation... the voices chorused. Church bells began to peal. The procession was nearly over. Marcie shut the window. She could still hear the singing, and the triumphant notes of the trumpet. And, for today and for always, the words.

For suddenly she knew, in a crystal moment of understanding, why there were never any little girls at the manger. Girls were needed at home. They could not be spared.

Kevin cried faintly. Marcie hurried to his crib. And in the frosty Christmas air, the bells rang joy to all the little girls in the world.

By Elizabeth Starr