

Little town

by David Owen



a town the size of a high school has numerous unique features, among them amateur theatricals in which you know almost everyone in the cast. I don't go to many local plays, but I do attend the annual Christmas pageant, which for a number of years has been directed by my wife. She is a stickler for some details but not for others. Every year, a few children in the cast object to filling the usual roles, and my wife permits them to appear instead as whatever they were for Halloween. Over the years, the entourage in the stable in Bethlehem has included not only shepherds, angels, wise men, and sheep, but also a dinosaur, a monkey, a princess, a tree, a bee, and a pirate.

The baby Jesus is sometimes portrayed by a live baby and sometimes not, depending on the vintage of that year's crop of infants. One year, Jesus was an anatomically correct male doll, which a forward-thinking aunt had given my two-year-old son (who named it Claudia) the Christmas before. Another year, Jesus was a real three-month-old girl named Eleanor. Among the animals that year was a fierce-looking tiger, who walked down the aisle of the church with a plastic chicken drumstick in his jaws. He presented the drumstick to Eleanor by leaning over the edge of the manger and opening his mouth. Later, Eleanor cried and had to be

replaced by her understudy, a rolled-up blanket.

The pageant makes a large and favorable impression on the participants. When my daughter was very young, she would come home intoxicated by both the applause of the audience and the grandeur of the script. She would pace back and forth in the playroom afterwards, playing several parts herself and narrating her own versions of the story. In one of them, which I overheard from the kitchen, Jesus had "long pants, a royal coat, shoes made of wood, and long, straight socks."

Long after the pageant ended one year, my kids and I put on our long pants and royal coats and walked back up to the village green. It had begun to snow earlier that day, and the storm was shifting into second or third gear. We saw no one else walking, and no cars. The church was dark, but through the windows of the houses of my neighbors we caught glimpses of the other pageant—the one that goes on all the time. My glasses were getting snowy, so I took them off. Viewed myopically, the windows looked shimmery and old-fashioned, and the streetlights had points like stars. Then we found a snow bank under a hemlock tree next to the road, and we stretched out on the ground. We lay there for a long time, as the lights went out in some windows and came on in others, and we watched the snow come down. □