

When my mother, Angela, was six years old, she felt sorry for the Baby Jesus in the Christmas crib at St. Joseph's Church near School House Lane where she lived. She thought the Baby Jesus was cold and wondered why no one had put a blanket over his plump little body. He looked happy enough, smiling up at his mother, the Virgin Mary, and St. Joseph and the three shepherds carrying little lambs all cozy in their fur. Even if he was cold he'd never complain because the Baby Jesus would never want to make his mammy the slightest bit unhappy.

Little Angela wouldn't let it go at that. She was often cold herself, hungry too, but never complained for fear of being told by her mother and brothers and sister to stop the whinging. No, she'd have to do something about the poor little Baby Jesus and she wouldn't tell a soul in the world.

A few days before Christmas she hid in a confession booth. The middle part where the priest sits, and peeked out from time to time to see if the church was empty. Old people like Mrs. Reidy and Mr. King knelt in the pews praying. Snuffling and thumping their chests. And Angela wondered why they didn't go home and have a nice cup of tea with lots and lots of sugar.

When she let out a little sneeze herself, the old people looked frightened, wondering where that sneeze came from. They whispered to one another there must be a ghost in the church and shuffled away as fast as they could.

Little Angela waited a while till she was sure the church was empty. All she could hear now was the talk of people passing outside and the clop clop of horses on the street.

She thought about what she was going to do, but she knew from lessons in school that stealing is a bad thing and you could be punished. You could be sent to bed without even a cup of tea. Even if you took a penny from your mother's purse you could be punished, so what would be the punishment for stealing the Baby Jesus? Her own mother would surely slap her bottom but she didn't want to think about that. She had to take care of that poor little Baby Jesus before he turned blue with the cold altogether.

She was surprised at how cold and stiff he was, not soft like the babies in her lane. When she lifted him from the crib he kept on smiling at her the way he smiled at everyone else: the Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, and the three nice shepherds with their lambs and the Three Wise Kings with all their presents. She felt sorry for them that they wouldn't be able to look at the Baby Jesus anymore, but they didn't seem to mind. Besides, making him warm was the important thing and they'd never begrudge him that.

She had to be careful. She wouldn't want anyone to see her carrying the Baby to her house. She trotted quickly down the aisle and outside where it was now dark. The gaslights flickered along the streets and she could hide and wait in the deep shadows between. It was

cold and people passing by were not in the mood to be looking at a little girl carrying something white in the dark. People wanted to be home sipping a nice hot cup of tea and warming their legs by the fire.

Then she stopped. How was she going to take the Baby Jesus into her house with everyone gawking and wanting to know who was that and what she was doing? She wouldn't go in the front door. There was a lane behind her house where she could carry the Baby over the wall and into her backyard. No, the wall was too high. She could climb over herself, but not with the Baby. She talked to him. "Will you help me, little baby? Will you help me?"