

# His Savior

Steven Lewis

AT ELEVEN P.M., AFTER SEVEN TIE VOTES, AND AGAINST FATHER Mulcahey's distinct though unspoken wishes, Marj Czepnicki was finally chosen to chair the Christmas organizing committee at Our Lady of the Lake Catholic Church. Triumphant but dignified, she and Joan Carswell, previously of Fond du Lac, walked directly down to the dank basement of the rectory and over to the wooden storage locker near the old coal-fired furnace.

With Marj waiting, hands on those heirloom slim hips, Joan nervously inserted key after key until she found the right one, yanked the rusted lock off, and pulled the creaking door open. Marj stepped in first, grabbed the dangling string, with its brass cross tied at the bottom, and tugged on the light. "Oh!" Joan grimaced, eyes instantly pooling.

"No," agreed the dry-eyed and tight-lipped chair of the organizing committee. "This just won't do." She picked up a tail-less, one-eyed papier maché donkey: "Look at this! And this—" dropping the donkey and pointing to a decapitated Wise Man, dusty head near fingerless hand, in the far corner.

"I'm sorry, Margie, I didn't—"

"Joan," Marj commanded, waiting for eye contact. The pleasantly chunky woman in her favorite seasonal pink velour ensemble, lifted her eyes without moving her head. "Get a grip, Joan, we're Catholics, not Gypsies. No one, least of all me, would think that you're responsible for this unholy mess!" She shook her head. "I mean, just what was that

man thinking?" she scrunched her thin-as-her-hips lips together.

"Well, maybe, Margie, maybe since they began using the blow-up Nativity scene a couple of years ago, Father forg—"

"Don't be ridiculous—and besides, didn't you just move here in June, so what—?" She had no intention of finishing the sentence.

"I'm sorry, I just—"

"Well, don't *just*. I'll tell you what this is all about, since you're new to this grand old parish: it's about me trying to bring some elegance and tradition back to a beautiful cathedral. It's about Christ being under attack at the elementary school where you teach children to sing nondenominational songs. It's about me trying to elevate the birth of our Savior above some cartoonish plastic blow-up scene off the Disney channel. And it's about that senile old buffoon trying to make me look stupid for challenging him." She nudged a three-legged sheep and it fell over in a small cloud of dust. "And this manger! Look at this manger! It's dreadful. It looks like—, like—, like—, oh, I don't know what the hell it looks like!"

Joan concocted a frown on her face. "I guess you mean *h-e-double hockey sticks*, eh?" she said, and then smiled.

"No, Joan, I meant *hell*. This is hell. Look around."

AS SOON AS THE CURTAIN DROPPED on the annual holiday (né Christmas) concert at LaFollette Elementary on the South Side of Milwaukee, Stanley Poniwascz, his dirty fingernails hiding his thin lips, leaned over to freckle-faced, strawberry blond Janie Goldenberg. "Ya know, it was Jews who nailed Christ."

Her dark-blue eyes widened. "No, you're wrong, Stanley Poniwascz," she whispered. "My daddy said it was the Romans, and he knows. He's the—"

"Yeah, I know all about your dad. My ma says he hates the baby Jesus."

"He does not!"

"Does too."

She closed her eyes just the way her mom does when Dad annoys her. "Does too."

"Well, he's the one on the school board who—"

"Who what?" she sneered.

"Who wrecked this whole stupid concert."

Just then Mrs. Carswell cleared her throat and enunciated very clearly, "Mr. Poniwascz and Miss Goldenberg!" Each stood red-faced, on the top riser, the girl taller than the boy, barely breathing as they waited for the choir teacher to turn her attention to dismissing Row 1. Stanley spoke out of the side of his mouth, "Did too."

"Did not," Janie hissed, just as Mrs. Carswell pointed a thick Polish sausage of a finger right at Gloria Robbins, who nodded and smirked, stepping off the riser and turning right. Girls were to turn right and boys were to turn left. Stanley stepped down, cranked his barbered head around, and mouthed, "Christ Killer" right in Janie's face.

She stuck out her tongue, but Stanley was already moving along in the boys' processional, parents still clapping.

Five minutes later, strapped into the backseat of their brand new silver Prius Hybrid, Janie asked her parents once again whether Jews had crucified Christ.

"Well," said the balding, tenured history professor at the state university, two hands on the steering wheel, "as I've told you in the past, Janie, technically it was the Romans, but the rabbis and other Jews were part of the group that demanded his death."

"Stanley Poniwascz said—"

"Stanley is just an uninformed boy who probably never met a Jewish person before you came into his class."

"Robert Green is Jewish."

"No, I'm afraid he's not. His father is Jewish, but his mother is Episcopalian."

"But Stanley Poniwascz—"

Janie Goldenberg's mother, who everyone always said must have stepped out of a Modigliani painting, turned her long, dark face toward Janie. "Stanley Poniwascz is descended from a long line of yeast-sucking Nazi dogs." And turning then to her husband, she muttered, "We never should have moved down here from Shorewood." An assistant professor in the English department at Marquette, Dr. Stein-

Goldenberg had recently announced to her husband and daughter at dinner, "I'm finished cleaning up after you two."

Dad shrugged and turned the radio on. "It doesn't really matter, Janie."

"Does too," she mumbled, squirming against the encroaching seatbelt and thinking now about that poor Christ in the stained-glass window at Our Lady of the Lake, nailed up there on the cross, blood dripping from his feet and hands. From her desk in Room 224 at LaFollette Elementary, she could see him staring across at her. Mrs. Carswell even pointed out the window one day and said it was the most beautiful vision she had ever seen.

"It doesn't matter, Janie," said Mom, looking out the passenger window.

Janie looked at the palm of her hand, trying to imagine what it would feel like to have a spike driven through it. "Does too."

"DOES TOO," Janie mumbled again an hour later, when her mom came into her room to kiss her good night.

"Yes, I love you, too, darling," her mom whispered. "Don't forget: tomorrow you need to clean your room and take care of that closet. I'm not your maid."

And what seemed hours later in the bright, rugless, moonlit room, but was probably only forty-five minutes, Janie finally heard her parents' bedroom door click closed. That was the sign that all was well, the click that meant that she could now safely fall asleep. She closed her eyes, but sleep would not come. Snuggling under her fluffy pink comforter and hugging her new Addy American Girl doll tightly in her arms, Janie was still wondering what it would feel like to have a spike driven through her hand.

Which was when she thought about Father Mulcahey. She knew the priest because he had stopped by one evening after her dad was elected to the school board. Also, Mrs. Carswell had invited him to visit her class a few weeks before to talk about the meaning of Christmas—and Janie, who wouldn't know a brogue if it took up residence in her throat, loved the soft sound around his voice, the way

it flowed so smoothly through those crooked yellow teeth. He didn't sound like everyone else down there on the South Side, practically honking through their noses, as she once heard her mom say.

And so Janie decided then and there that she would stop in at the church right after vacation and tell Father Mulcahey, who seemed like a very kind man, that she was really, really sorry if the Jews had murdered Christ. And that even if they didn't do it, she was sorry anyway.

That made her feel much better, but five seconds later, which was probably five minutes, it seemed impossible to wait another second to tell him. This was too important, especially with only three days to go before Christmas.

So Janie Goldenberg slid out from beneath the warm pink comforter, put some clothes on over her pajamas, and, carrying her boots, tiptoed down the hall and down the carpeted steps, lifted her light-blue winter jacket off the hook, took her gloves and hat out of the sleeve, stepped into her boots, bundled herself up, unlocked the front door, and went out into the crisp, starry night.

Our Lady of the Lake was on the corner, just two blocks away—and four blocks from Lake Michigan. The church was all lit up as if it were daytime, and the spotlights peeking out of the frozen lawn made the crèche look all shimmery and bright. Everyone at school had been talking about how beautiful the living crèche was, but tonight the outdoor one was even more than beautiful to Janie, it was magical. Inside the white fence, on straw beds around the real wooden manger, were a real sheep, a real donkey, and a real pony.

Mrs. Carswell, who must have forgotten that Robert Green and Janie were Jewish, told everyone on the last day before vacation to bring their cameras to Mass on Christmas Eve because Mr. and Mrs. Cznepnicki would be dressing up as Mary and Joseph, and Mrs. Carswell's husband and two other men would come as the Wise Men, and, if it wasn't too cold, she beamed, Mrs. Miller's baby boy, Dylan, would lie in the manger, at least until he started crying.

In the meantime, she said, Mrs. Cznepnicki's beautiful antique alabaster-cheeked baby Jesus would be in the cradle. She held up a

photograph of the doll, blue eyes wide open, staring at the heavens, peaceful, innocent, and serene.

Janie took one look at that gorgeous baby doll lying in the manger and, forgetting all about her speech to Father Mulcahey, opened the gate, and, stepping lightly around the sleeping donkey and sheep and pony, went over to the infant. She scooped up the baby Jesus in her arms just the way she had seen her Aunt Ruth pick up baby Sarah. Then she turned and tiptoed back out the gate and, walking as quickly as her skinny legs would move her, made it back to her house at 3379 South Linebarger Terrace, where she opened the front door without a sound, turned the lock, put the infant on a chair, took off her things, stuffed the mittens and hat into the arm of the coat, hung the coat on the hook, tiptoed up the steps, put the doll on her bed, took off her clothes, snuggled in under the covers, lifted her pajama shirt just the way Aunt Ruth did, and nursed the baby Jesus, humming, "Slee-eep in heavenly pea-eas, slee-eep in heavenly peas."

WHEN JANIE OPENED HER EYES to an orange sky the next morning, she smiled down at the infant still in her arms. She held her breath and listened for creaking floorboards, for a toilet flushing, for the hum of the shower. She sniffed deeply for that nose-scrunching smell of coffee dripping in the kitchen. And when she was a hundred and ten percent satisfied, as her dad often said, that her parents were still asleep, Janie Goldenberg kicked off the covers and stood up, her bare feet on the cold wood floor a sudden reminder of how badly she needed to pee.

But first she tiptoed over to her messy closet, made a nest out of some old sweaters that had fallen into the dusty corner, and laid the baby Jesus down. She covered him in last year's pink parka, put a Brewers baseball cap on his head, placed Addy next to him so he wouldn't ever be lonely, and pushed the thickly painted closet door shut. He would be safe there forever.

And as she sat down on the freezing-cold toilet seat, Janie Goldenberg smiled a smile she imagined to be as angelic as the smile of Mrs. Miller's baby, Dylan, who might be lucky enough to grow up and talk just like Father Mulcahey. ◇