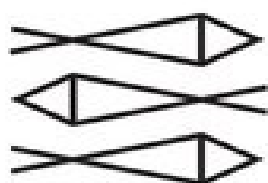
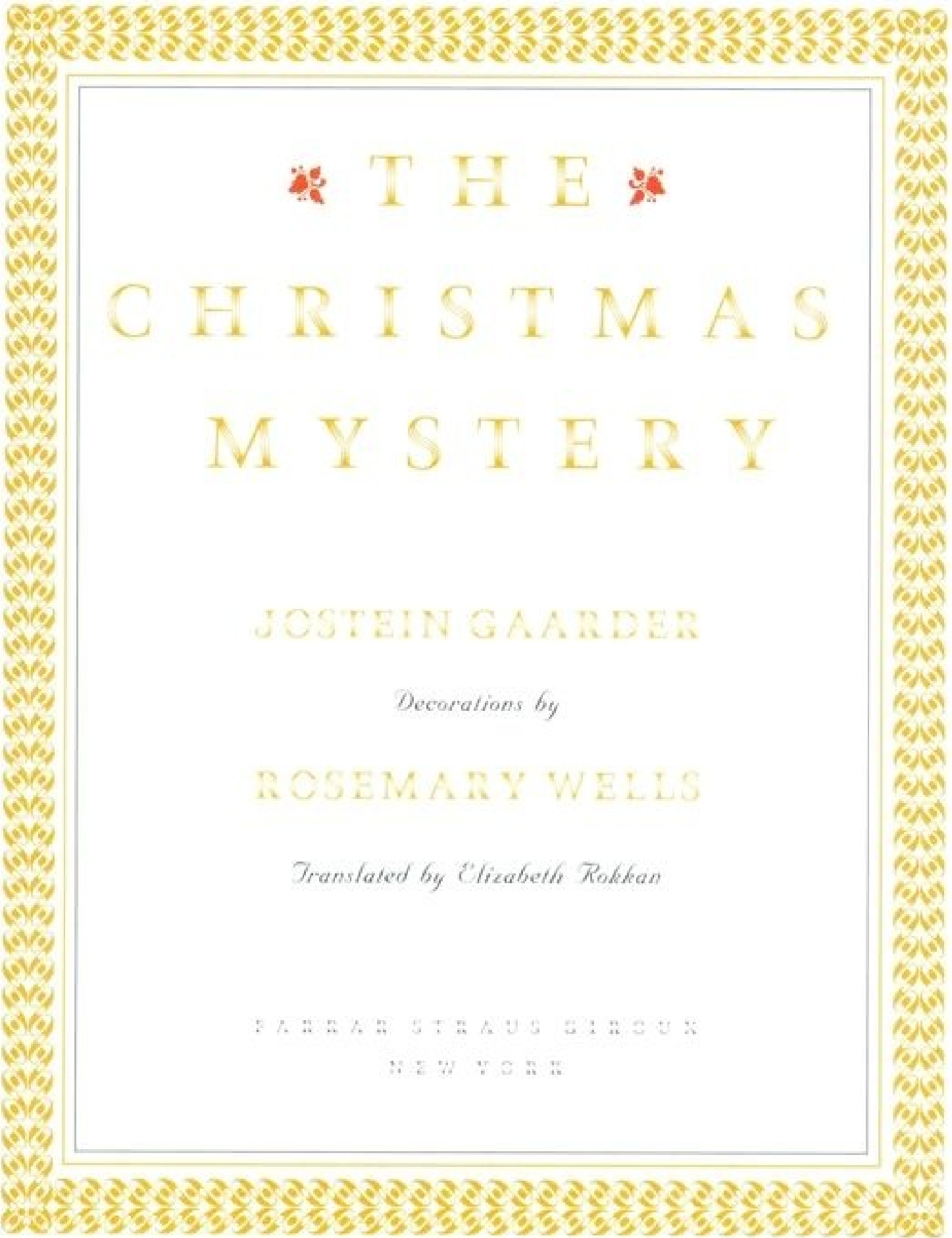


THE CHRISTMAS MISTERY

JOSTEIN GAARDER





THE
CHRISTMAS
MYSTERY

JOSTEIN GAARDER

Decorations by

ROSEMARY WELLS

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FARRAR STRAUS GIRoux
NEW YORK

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1

❁ **DECEMBER 1** ❁

*... perhaps the clock hands had become
so tired of going in the same direction year after
year that they had suddenly begun to
go the opposite way instead ...*

DUSK was falling. The lights were on in the Christmas streets, and thick snowflakes danced between the lamps. The streets were crowded with people.

Among all these busy people were Papa and Joachim. They had gone into town to buy an Advent calendar, and it was their last chance, because tomorrow would be December 1. . They were sold out at the newsstand and in the big bookstore in the market square.

Joachim tugged Papa's hand hard and pointed to a tiny shop window. An Advent calendar in bright colors was leaning against a pile of books. "There!" he said.

Papa turned back. "Saved!"

They went into the tiny bookshop. Joachim thought it looked a little old and worn out. There were shelves from floor to ceiling along all the walls, and on all the shelves the books were tightly packed. Almost no two were alike.

A large pile of Advent calendars lay on the counter. There were two kinds. One had a picture of Santa Claus with a sled and reindeer; the other had a picture of a barn with a tiny Christmas elf, *nisse*, eating porridge out of a big bowl.

Papa held up the two calendars. "There are chocolates behind the doors in this one," he said, "but, of course, your dentist wouldn't like that very much. The other has small plastic figures."

Joachim examined the two calendars. He didn't know which one he wanted.

"It was different when I was a boy," said Papa.

"What do you mean?"

"Then there was only a tiny picture behind each door, one for each day. We were so excited every morning! We used to try to guess what the picture would be. Then we opened the door ... well, we *opened* it, you see. It was like opening the door to a different world."

Joachim had noticed something. He pointed to a wall of books. "There's an Advent calendar over there, too."

He ran over to get it and held it up to show Papa. It had a picture of Joseph and Mary bending over the Baby Jesus in the manger. The Three Wise Men from the East were kneeling in the background. Outside the stable were the shepherds with their sheep, and angels floated down from the sky. One of them was blowing a trumpet.

The calendar's colors were faded, as if it had been lying in the sun all summer. But the picture was so beautiful that Joachim almost felt a little sorry for it.

"I want this one," he said.

Papa smiled. "You know, I don't think this one's for sale. I think it must be very old. Maybe as old as I am."

Joachim wouldn't give up. "None of the doors are open."

"But it's only here for decoration."

Joachim hadn't taken his eyes off the calendar. "I want it," he repeated. "I want the one that's like none of the others."

The bookseller, an older man with white hair, came over. He looked surprised when he saw the Advent calendar.

"Beautiful!" he exclaimed. "And genuine—yes, original. It almost looks homemade."

"He wants to buy it," said Papa, gesturing toward Joachim. "I'm trying to explain that it's not for sale."

The white-haired man raised his eyebrows. "Did you find it here? I haven't seen one like that for many, many years."

"It was in front of all the books," said Joachim, pointing.

The bookseller nodded. "Oh, old John must be up to his tricks again."

Papa stared. "John?"

"Yes, he's a strange character. He sells roses in the market. Sometimes he comes in and asks for a glass of water. In summer when it's hot he'll pour the last drops over his head before he goes out again. He's poured a few drops over me a couple of times, too. To thank me for the water, he sometimes leaves one or two roses on the counter; or he'll put an old book on the bookshelf. Once he put a photograph of a young woman in the window. It was from a country far away. Maybe that's where he comes from himself. 'Elisabet,' it said on the photo."

"And now he's left an Advent calendar?" Papa asked.

"Yes, apparently."

"There's something written on it," said Joachim. He read aloud: "MAGIC ADVENT CALENDAR. Price: 75 ore."

The bookseller nodded. "In that case, it must be very old."

"May I buy it for 75 ore?" asked Joachim.

The man laughed. "I think you should have it for nothing. You'll see, old John had you in mind."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," said Joachim. He was already on his way out of the bookshop.

Papa shook the bookseller's hand and followed Joachim out to the sidewalk.

Joachim hugged the calendar tight. "I'll open the first door tomorrow," he said.

JOACHIM woke up many times that night. He thought about the white-haired bookseller and about old John with his roses at the market. He went to the bathroom and drank water from the tap. He remembered that John had poured water over his head.

Most of all, he thought about the magic Advent calendar which was as old as Papa. And yet nobody

had opened any of the doors. Before he went to bed, he found all the doors, from 1 to 24. The twentieth was, of course, Christmas Eve, and that door was four times bigger than the others. It covered almost the entire manger in the stable.

Where had the Advent calendar been for over forty years? And what would happen when he opened the first door, in a little while? He and Papa had hung the calendar on a hook above his bed.

When he woke up again, it was seven o'clock. He reached up and tried to open the first door, but his fingers were so impatient that it was difficult to hold it properly. At last he managed to loosen a tiny corner, and the door opened slowly.

Joachim gazed at a picture of a toy store. Among all the toys and the people were a little lamb and a small girl, but he couldn't look more closely at the picture because, just as he opened the door, something fell out on his bed. He picked it up.

It was a thin sheet of paper, folded over and over. He smoothed it out and saw that there was writing on both sides. He began to read.



THE LITTLE LAMB

“Elisabet!” her mother called after her. “Come back, Elisabet!”

Elisabet Hansen had been standing staring at the big pile of teddy bears and stuffed animals while her mother was buying Christmas presents for the cousins who lived in Toten. All of a sudden, a little lamb popped out of the pile, jumped to the floor, and looked around. It had a bell around its neck, and the bell started to jingle in competition with all the cash registers.

How could a toy suddenly come to life? Elisabet was so surprised that she started to chase the lamb. It was running across the floor of the department store in the direction of the escalator.

“Little lamb, little lamb!” she called after it.

The lamb was now on the escalator, which led to the floor below. The escalator moved quickly, and the lamb leaped even faster, so that Elisabet had to run faster than the escalator and the lamb together to catch up with it.

“Come back, Elisabet!” repeated her mother, severely.

But Elisabet had already jumped on the escalator. She could see the lamb running across the ground floor, where they sold underwear and ties.

As soon as she had solid ground beneath her feet again, she went the same way as the lamb. It had bounded out to the street, where the snowflakes were dancing amid all the strings of Christmas lights hanging from the streetlights. Elisabet knocked over a display of winter gloves and followed it.

The street was so noisy that she could only just hear the bell jingling over on Church Road. But Elisabet did not give up. She was determined to pat the lamb's soft fleece.

“Little lamb, little lamb!”

The lamb dashed across the road against the light. Perhaps it thought a red man on the traffic light meant “Go!” and a green man meant “Stop!” Elisabet thought she had heard that sheep were color-blind. At any rate, the lamb didn’t stop at the red man on the light, so Elisabet couldn’t stop either. She was going to catch up with the lamb even if she had to follow it to the ends of the earth.

The cars honked their horns, and a motorcycle had to swerve onto the sidewalk to avoid colliding with Elisabet or with the little lamb. The people doing their Christmas shopping stared. They didn’t often see a little girl running across Church Road against the light to catch a lamb. In any case, it was unusual to be running after a lamb in the middle of winter.

As they ran, Elisabet heard the church clock strike three. She noticed it especially, because she knew she had come to town on the five o’clock bus. Perhaps the clock hands had become so tired of going in the same direction year after year that they had suddenly begun to go the opposite way instead. Elisabet thought that clocks, too, might get bored with doing the same thing all the time.

But there was something else. When Elisabet had gone into the department store, it had been almost completely dark outside. Now it was light again, and that was odd, because there had been no night in between.

As soon as the lamb had the chance, it turned onto a road leading out of town and trotted on toward some woods. It leaped onto a path between tall pine trees. Now it had to slow down a little, because the path was covered with the snow that had been falling during the past few days.

Elisabet went after it. It was difficult for her to run, too. But the lamb had four legs that were dragging in the snow, while she had only two. Perhaps that would help her to catch up.

Her mother’s cries had been drowned long ago by the noise in the street. Soon she couldn’t even hear street sounds. But something was still singing in her ears: “Should we buy this one or that one? What do you think, Elisabet?”

Perhaps the lamb had come to life and run away from the big store because it could not bear to listen to all the cash registers and all the talk about buying and selling. And perhaps that was why Elisabet was following it. She had never been very fond of shopping.

JOACHIM looked up from the thin sheet of paper that had fallen out of the magic Advent calendar. He was amazed by what he had read.

He had always liked secrets. Now he remembered the little box with the key in it, the one Grandfather had bought him in Poland. Mama and Papa had made him a solemn promise that they would never look for the key and open the box when Joachim was asleep or at school. It would be as bad as opening someone else’s letters, they had said.

Until today, Joachim hadn’t had any real secrets to hide in the box. But now he put the paper from the Advent calendar there, locked it up, and hid the key under his pillow. When Mama and Papa woke up and came to look at the Advent calendar, too, they would see only the picture of the lamb in the department store.

“Do you remember?” asked Mama, looking up at Papa. “It was just like that when we were small.”

Papa nodded. “Then we used our imagination and made up a story about each little picture. It was much better than plastic figures that end up being swallowed by an angry vacuum cleaner.”

Joachim was laughing inside. only he knew that there had been a mysterious piece of paper inside the calendar.

He pointed to the picture of the lamb. “The lamb has decided to run away from the shop,” he said “because it can’t bear listening to all the cash registers and all the talk of buying and selling. But there’s a little girl called Elisabet in the shop, and she runs after the lamb because she wants to pat its soft fleece.”

“See what I mean?” Papa said. “What does the boy want with plastic figures?”

For the rest of the day, Joachim wondered whether Elisabet would catch up with the lamb so that she could pat its fleece. Would he find out tomorrow?

For then surely there would be another thin piece of paper.



2

❁ **DECEMBER 2** ❁

*... I know a short cut, and that's the path
we're taking now ...*

JOACHIM woke up before Mama and Papa the next morning, too, but he nearly always did. He sat up and looked at the big Advent calendar.

Only now did he notice a little lamb lying at the feet of one of the shepherds. Wasn't that strange? He had looked at the large picture with all the angels and the Wise Men, the shepherds and the sheep many, many times. But he hadn't seen the little lamb until now.

Perhaps it was because he had read about the lamb on the piece of paper that had fallen out of the calendar.

But that lamb had jumped out of a modern store—and the lamb on the Advent calendar had lived in Bethlehem long, long ago. There were no cars and no traffic lights then and no big stores with escalators and cash registers. Besides, Elisabet had heard the church clock striking three, and surely there were no church clocks two thousand years ago? Joachim knew that it was as long ago as that since the Baby Jesus was born.

Now he found the door with the number 2 on it, and opened it carefully. A folded piece of paper fell out of the calendar as the door opened. He peeped in at a picture of some woods. Among the trees was an angel with his arm around a little girl.

Joachim unfolded the paper and saw that there was writing on it in tiny letters on both sides. He began to read.



EPHIRIEL

Elisabet Hansen didn't know how far or how long she had been running after the little lamb. But when she set off through the town it had been snowing heavily. Now it had not only stopped snowing; there was no snow on the path at all. Among the trees she could see blue anemones, coltsfoot, and windflowers, and that was unusual, since it was right before Christmas.

She picked an anemone and looked at the blue petals carefully. Picking flowers at this time of year was every bit as mysterious as it would have been to throw snowballs in midsummer.

It occurred to Elisabet that perhaps she had run so far that she had reached a country where it was summer all year round. If not, she must have run so long that spring and the warm weather had already arrived. In that case, she might still be in Norway, but then, what would have happened to Christmas?

While she stood wondering, she heard the tinkle of a bell far away. Elisabet started running again and soon saw the lamb. It had found a small grassy hillside and was grazing greedily.

That was not particularly surprising, for the little creature had probably been very hungry. It had not had any grass to eat as long as it was winter. It had certainly not had so much as a morsel of food as long as it had been a toy either, and that may have been for a very long time.

Elisabet crept toward the lamb, but just as she was about to pounce on it in order to pat its fleece, it leaped away again.

"Little lamb, little lamb!"

Elisabet tried to keep up with it, but she tripped over a pine-tree root and fell flat on the ground.

The worst thing wasn't that she had hurt herself, but that she realized she probably wouldn't ever catch up with the lamb. She had decided to follow it to the ends of the earth, but the earth was round, after all, so they might go on running around the world forever, or at least until she grew up, and by then she might have lost interest in lambs and the like.

When she looked up, she saw a shining figure between the trees. Elisabet stared, wide-eyed, because it was neither an animal nor a human being. A pair of wings were sticking out of a robe as white as the lamb.

Elisabet was only just getting to know the world. She knew what the most common animals were called, but she hadn't learned the difference between a tomtit and a yellow

hammer, for example. Or between a camel and a dromedary, come to think of it. Still, there was no mistaking what she was looking at snow. Elisabet understood at once that the shining figure must be an angel. She had seen angels in books, but it was the first time she had seen such a creature in real life.

“Fear not!” said the angel in a gentle voice.

Elisabet raised herself halfway up. “Don’t think I’m afraid of you,” she said, sulking a little because she had fallen and hurt herself.

The angel came closer. It looked as if he was hovering just above the ground. He reminded Elisabet of her Cousin Anna, who could dance on the tips of her toes. The angel knelt down and stroked Elisabet gently on the nape of her neck with the tip of one of his wings.

“I said, ‘Fear not,’ to be on the safe side,” he said. “We don’t appear to humans very often, so it’s best to be careful when we do. Usually people are very frightened when they’re visited by an angel.”

Suddenly Elisabet began to cry, not because she was afraid of angel, and not because she had hurt herself, either. She didn’t understand why she was crying until she heard herself sob, “I wanted ... to pet the lamp.”

The angel nodded gracefully. “I’m sure God wouldn’t have created lambs with such soft fleece unless He hoped someone would want to pet them.”

“The lamb runs much faster than I do. said Elisabet, sobbing,”and it has twice as many legs ... Isn’t that unfair? I can’t see why a little lamb should be in such a hurry.”

The angel helped her to her feet and said confidentially, “It’s going to Bethlehem.”

Elisabet had stopped crying. “To Bethlehem?”

“Yes. To Bethlehem, to Bethlehem! That’s where Jesus was born.”

Elisabet was very surprised at what the angel said. In an attempt to hide her astonishment, she began to brush dirt and grass off her pants. There were some nasty stains on her red jacket, too.

“Then I want to go to Bethlehem,” she said.

The angel had begun dancing on the tips of his toes again on the path. “That suits me,” he said, hovering just above the ground, “because I’m going there, too. So we might just as well keep each other company, all three of us.”

Elisabet had been taught that she should never go anywhere with people she didn’t know. That certainly applied to angels and trolls as well. She looked up at the angel and asked, “What’s your name?”

She had thought that the angel I was a man, but she wasn’t quite sure. Now he curtsied like a ballet dancer and said, “My name is Ephiriel.”

“That sounds like a butterfly. Did you really say Ephiriel?”

The angel nodded. “Just Ephiriel, yes. Angels have no mother or father, so we have no family same.”

Elisabet sniffed for the last time. Then she said, “I don’t think we have time to talk anymore if we’re going all the way to Bethlehem. Isn’t it far away?”

“Yes indeed, it’s very far—and a very long time ago. But I know a short cut, and that’s the path we’re taking now.”

And, with that, they began to run. First the lamb, then Elisabet,. The angel Ephiriel danced behind them.

As they ran, Elisabet wished she had asked the angel why it had suddenly become summer. But when she caught a glimpse of the lamb on the path in front of her, she didn’t

dare stop.

“Little lamb, little lamb!”

JOACHIM quickly hid the piece of paper in the secret box.

It was John the flower seller who had left the old calendar with the bookseller. Did he know about the scraps of paper, too? Or was Joachim the only person in the world who knew the secret? After all, he was the only person who had opened the calendar.

Another thought struck him. Elisabet! Wasn't Elisabet the name of the woman whose picture John had put in the shop window?

Yes, it was, he was certain. Could it be the same Elisabet he was reading about in the magic Advent calendar? She was only a child, it's true, but the calendar was so old that she must have had plenty of time to grow up during all the years that had passed since then.

Mama and Papa came in that day, too, to see the picture in the calendar.

“An angel,” whispered Mama solemnly.

“He's comforting Elisabet, explained Joachim.” She was running so fast after the lamb that she fell and hurt herself.”

Mama winked at Papa, and Papa smiled shyly. It was probably because they thought Joachim was good at inventing stories. They didn't know that he wasn't inventing anything at all.

That day he had to get to school early, so there was no more time to talk about the Advent calendar. But Joachim thought about nothing else on his way there.

When he came home from school, he had to let himself in. He got home a little earlier than Mama nearly every day.

Joachim rushed to his room and looked up at the magic Advent calendar. It was still there. He had had to ask himself a couple of times during the day whether it had been only a dream, because Joachim was always dreaming about the strangest things.

He longed to know what the picture behind door number 3 was. Should he open the third door? All he had to do was push it back again afterwards and pretend he hadn't done it.

But that would be cheating. You weren't allowed to cheat at cards either, but it would be even worse to cheat about Christmas. It was like peeping into presents that were not to be opened until Christmas Eve. It was almost like stealing from yourself.

Mama soon came home from work and started to peel potatoes and carrots. Then Papa arrived. He was complaining that he had lost his driver's license.

“I can't understand it,” he said. “Not in the car, not at the office, and not in my coat pocket, either.”

“What a muddlehead you are!” said Joachim. Because Papa always said that to him when he couldn't find his pencil case or he hadn't put his toys away.

That evening must have been the first time in Joachim's whole life that he asked to go to bed early.

“You don't feel ill, do you, darling?” asked Mama.

“No, of course not. but the sooner I go to sleep, the sooner I will wake up to open the magic Advent calendar.”



3

DECEMBER 3

*... like running before
the wind—or like rushing down
an escalator ...*

JOACHIM woke up early on December 3. The Donald Duck clock hanging above his desk said quarter to seven. Mama and Papa would not be up for another half hour.

He remembered that he'd dreamed about something strange, but he was not quite sure what. It had something to do with the angel Ephiriel and the lamb.

He sat up in bed and looked closely at the magic Advent calendar. At the top of the picture, several angels were floating down through the clouds in the sky. One of them was blowing a trumpet. That was to wake up all the sheep and the shepherds, of course.

Joachim imagined that the angel on the right of the picture must be the angel Ephiriel. He looked just like Joachim thought Ephiriel might look.

Suddenly he noticed that that angel was smiling at him, lifting an arm as if trying to wave to Joachim. The angel in the picture looked clearer than yesterday.

Joachim got up on the bed and opened the door with the number 3 on it. He saw a tiny picture of a vintage car. He had seen that kind of old car at the Technical Museum with Grandpa.

Joachim didn't understand what a vintage car could have to do with Christmas, but he picked up the thin sheet of paper that had fallen out of the calendar. He snuggled down under the covers and began to read.



THE SECOND SHEEP

Elisabet and the angel Ephiriel went on running after the little lamb. Soon they left the woods behind and were going down a narrow country lane. In the distance, thick smoke rose from some tall factory chimneys.

“There’s a town,” said Elisabet.

“That’s Halden,” explained the angel. “We’re fairly close to Sweden.”

Suddenly they heard a clatter right behind them. Elisabet turned and saw an old car heading toward them. In the car sat a man wearing a hat and a coat. He had a black beard and looked a little like the picture of her great-grandfather on the mantelpiece at home. As the car passed them, the man honked the horn and saluted with his hat.

“Look at that car!” exclaimed Elisabet. “It must be really old.”

“On the contrary, I think it was probably brand-new,” said Ephiriel.

Elisabet sighed. “I’ve always thought angels were much cleverer than humans. But you don’t seem to know much about cars.”

Still, she didn’t want to quarrel with the angel, so she went on, “But I suppose you don’t drive cars in heaven. I imagine God has forbidden any kind of pollution.”

Ephiriel pointed to a large pile of logs. “Sit down here,” he said. “You deserve a short rest, and there’s something important I have to tell you about our journey to Bethlehem.”

Elisabet sat down and looked up at the angel. “Don’t you get tired, too?” she asked.

The angel shook his head. “No, angels don’t get tired, because we’re not made of flesh and blood. When you get tired, it’s your flesh and blood that feel it most.”

Elisabet felt a little embarrassed that she had thought angels could get tired. If they had been able to, they surely wouldn’t have the strength to fly up and down between heaven and earth. That must be very far, maybe even farther than Bethlehem.

“Exactly where are we going, my dear?” asked the angel.

“To Bethlehem,” replied Elisabet.

“Very well, and what are we going to do there?”

“We’re going to pet the lamb.”

The angel nodded. “And we’ll welcome the Baby Jesus into the world. He was called God’s lamb. That was because He was just as kind and as innocent as a little lamb’s fleece is soft.”

Elisabet shrugged. This was something she’d never thought about.

“But it’s not enough just to travel to Bethlehem,” the angel continued. “We have to travel two thousand years back in time, too. That’s because when you started to run after the lamb, just about that length of time had passed since Jesus was born. We’ll try to get there at the moment when the great wonder happens.”

“Isn’t it absolutely impossible to travel back in time?” Elisabet asked.

Ephiriel shook his head. “Not absolutely, no. Nothing is impossible for God, and I’m here as God’s messenger, so practically nothing is impossible for me, either. We have a small part of the long way behind us already. Down there you see Halden, and we’re at the beginning of the twentieth century after Jesus’ birth. Can you understand that?”

Elisabet’s eyes widened, and she nodded. “I think so—and that means the vintage car wasn’t so old, after all.”

“No. It may have been brand-new. I’m sure you noticed how proud the driver was when he honked his horn. Not very many people own cars at this time.”

Elisabet simply sat and stared, and the angel Ephiriel continued. “It would have taken a very long time to run to Bethlehem in a straight line. But we’re also running diagonally down through history, so in a way we’re going downhill all the time. It’s like running before the wind or like rushing down an escalator.”

Elisabet nodded. She was not at all sure she understood everything the angel said, but she understood enough to realize how clever it all was.

“How do you know we’re at the beginning of the twentieth century?”

The angel raised his arm and pointed at a gold watch on his wrist. It was decorated with a row of shining pearls. On its face it said 1916.

“It’s an angel watch,” he explained. “It isn’t quite as accurate as other watches, but in heaven we’re not too particular about all those hours and minutes.”

“Why not?”

“We have the whole of eternity to see to,” replied the angel. “Besides, we never have to catch a bus to get to work on time.”

Now Elisabet understood why the church clock had only struck three even though it had been six or seven o’clock when she ran from the shop and why the snow had disappeared and it had suddenly become summer. She had run backward in time.

“You began running along the diagonal path as soon as you started chasing the lamb,” continued the angel Ephiriel. “That’s when the long journey through time and space began.”

Another car approached them from the opposite direction. It left such a cloud of dust and sand behind it that it made Elisabet cough.

When the dust cloud had settled, she pointed up at the road. “There’s our lamb again. But now there’s a grown sheep as well.”

The angel nodded. “Verily I say unto you, that sheep is going to Bethlehem, too.”

With that, they began to run. When Elisabet and Ephiriel had caught up with the lamb and the sheep, both of them bounded on as well.

“Little lamb, little lamb!” coaxed Elisabet.

But the lamb and the sheep would not be coaxed into standing still. They were going to Bethlehem! To Bethlehem!

They passed the outskirts of Halden. They paused for a moment and looked down at all the people walking in the streets and the market. The ladies were wearing long, colorful cotton dresses and large hats. Several vintage cars were sputtering along the streets, but there were horses and carriages as well.

They left it behind them and soon came to a border station. A large sign announced: “Border. SWEDEN.”

Elisabet stopped abruptly. “Do you think we’ll be allowed to go into Sweden?”

The angel fluttered around her like an overgrown butterfly. “They won’t dare stop a pilgrimage,” he replied. “Besides, it’s only a few weeks since Norway had the same king as Sweden.”

“May I look at your angel watch again?”

~~Ephiriel stretched out his arm. The watch said 1905.~~

Then they sped past two border guards, the lamb and the sheep first, and Elisabet Hansen and the angel Ephiriel just behind them.

“Halt!” shouted the border guards. “In the name of the law.”

But they were already far into Sweden. And they had come a few years closer to the birth of Jesus.

JOACHIM sat up in bed. So that was why there was a picture of a vintage car in the Advent calendar. That was why it had suddenly become summer.

Joachim quickly locked the piece of paper with the story of Elisabet and the angel Ephiriel in the secret box. Afterwards, he sat for a long time, thinking over what he had read.

Elisabet hadn't just set off after the lamb and followed it into the woods. She had begun to run back in time as well. She had already come to the year 1905, but she was going all the way to Bethlehem when Jesus was born. Joachim knew that it happened almost two thousand years ago.

He was old enough to know that you can't really run back in time. But it was possible to do it with your thoughts.

At school he had heard that a thousand years to mankind can be as one single day to God. And the angel Ephiriel had told Elisabet that nothing is impossible for God. Could Elisabet and the angel really have run back in time?

He heard Mama on the landing. She came into his room and asked, “Have you opened the Advent calendar?”

He nodded, and Mama looked at the picture in the calendar. “A vintage car!” she exclaimed.

She sounded surprised, almost disappointed. Perhaps she thought there should be pictures of angels and Christmasy things every day.

“It's because Elisabet and the angel Ephiriel have run to Sweden at the time when vintage cars like that were brand-new,” said Joachim. “They're going to run all the way to Bethlehem.”

“You're a real little storyteller,” said Mama, patting him on the head. Then she went into the bathroom.

Joachim felt a tickle in his stomach when he thought about all the clever things he knew about which Mama and Papa believed he was just making up. He decided something even cleverer. On Christmas Eve he'd put together all the pieces of paper that had come from the magic calendar and place the package under the Christmas tree. Then he would write: “To the best Mama and Papa in the world” on the outside.

This idea made him look forward to Christmas even more. But it wasn't always good to look forward to something. It could be boring, too, if it took a long time to come. When he looked forward to something terribly exciting, it could almost give him a headache.

That afternoon, Papa complained that he still hadn't found his driver's license. In that case, I wasn't really supposed to drive, said Mama. But when Papa heard that, he snorted like a steam engine.



4

❁ **DECEMBER 4** ❁

... he barely had time to look astonished ...

WHEN Joachim woke up on Friday, he made sure it was completely quiet in the house. Then he opened the fourth door. It was a picture of a man in a light blue robe which looked a little like a nightgown. In his hand he held a tall staff. But Joachim had no time to look at the picture carefully because a scrap of paper fell on his bed today, too.



JOSHUA

Elisabet Hansen and the angel Ephiriel hurried after the sheep and the lamb. They passed a red log cabin in a small clearing in the woods.

From a hilltop, Ephiriel pointed down at a large lake. “That’s Vänern, the biggest lake in Scandinavia,” he said. “The watch shows that 1891 years have passed since Jesus was born,

but we've only just arrived in Sweden."

~~A rapidly moving river flowed out of the lake. A bridge arched over the river, and they walked across it to the other side.~~

"This is the Göta River," said Ephiriel. "We'll follow an old cart track along the riverbank."

"Little lamb, little lamb!" coaxed Elisabet, but the sheep and the lamb were already running again.

They passed a village. On the outskirts was a church that was painted red, and the people from the village were heading along the road toward it. Most of them were on foot, but some of them sat in big, horse-drawn carts. The men were dressed in black suits and black hats, and many of the women were in black as well. Some of them carried hymn books.

"It must be Sunday," said Elisabet.

They paused for a moment or two and looked down at all the people. Suddenly a little boy noticed them, but he barely had time to look astonished, because at that same moment the angel Ephiriel began running again. Elisabet had to hurry to keep up. Once she turned and looked back, but all the people in front of the church had vanished. The horses and carts had vanished, too.

When they left the village behind, Elisabet turned to the angel and said, "The only one who saw us was a little boy."

"Excellent. We try not to attract too much attention. Sometimes we can't help it if someone catches sight of us, but a glimpse is quite enough."

They ran on through woods and fields. Now and again, they saw people making hay or reaping wheat with scythes. Sometimes they had to take a roundabout way so as not to scare anyone.

Before long, the sheep and the lamb found a field that was so green and tempting that it dazzled the eyes.

"Now's our chance," whispered Elisabet, "if we go up to them carefully."

But just then a man came walking toward them. He was wearing a blue tunic, and holding a tall staff that was curved at the top. He greeted them. "Peace be with you who walk on the narrow way along the Göta River. My name is Joshua the shepherd."

"Then you are one of us," said Ephiriel.

Elisabet didn't understand what the angel meant by that. But then the shepherd said, "I am coming with you to the Holy Land, for I must be in the fields when the angels announce the glad tidings of the birth of Jesus."

A clever idea occurred to Elisabet. "If you are a proper shepherd, perhaps you can bring the lamb to me?"

The shepherd bowed low. "That's not difficult for a good shepherd."

He took a few steps firmly toward the sheep and the lamb. The next moment, the lamb was lying at Elisabet's feet. She knelt and petted its soft fleece. "I think you are the fastest stuffed animal in the world," she said, "but I caught you at last!"

The shepherd thumped his crook on the ground and said, "To Bethlehem! To Bethlehem!"

The lamb and the sheep bounded away, the shepherd, the angel, and Elisabet after them.

They came to another small town. From a hill outside the town, they looked down on a cluster of red timber houses. Ephiriel explained that the town was called Kungälv.

"That means Kings' Rock. The town was given that name because the Scandinavian kings used to meet here to take counsel together. One of them was Sigurd Jorsalfar. Jorsalfar means the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Sigurd was given that name because he had gone on a

pilgrimage to the Holy Land where Jesus was born.”

—~~Soon they passed above a city at the mouth of the Göta River. Women in long dresses and men wearing hats and carrying walking sticks were parading up and down the streets. Others rode in fine coaches drawn by two horses.~~

“That’s Göteborg,” said Ephiriel. “The time is 1814, and Denmark has had to hand Norway over to Sweden. Now Norway will get her own Constitution.”

Joshua the shepherd turned and waved to them. “To Bethlehem!” he called. “To Bethlehem!”

They sped on through Sweden.

had just hidden the paper from the Advent calendar in his secret box when Mama came into his room

“And what was the picture today?” she asked.

Joachim knew he did not need to answer. Mama always wanted to look for herself.

She clasped her hands. “It must be one of the shepherds in the fields.”

“Why do you say ‘in the fields’?” asked Joachim.

Mama told him that there were pictures of shepherds in nice old Advent calendars because an angel had come to the shepherds in the fields to tell them that the Baby Jesus was born.

“They’ve come as far as Göteborg,” explained Joachim.

“Göteborg?” Mama looked at him oddly. “Who are ‘they’?”

“Elisabet Hansen, the angel Ephiriel, and Joshua the shepherd. They’re going to Bethlehem! To Bethlehem!”

Mama looked at him in astonishment. “Don’t let this old calendar get to you. They’re on pictures.”

Joachim realized that he couldn’t keep telling Mama and Papa all he knew about Elisabet. If he did he wouldn’t be able to keep the secret of the scraps of paper in the calendar either.

He realized something else, too. He would have to try to talk to John. John was the only person who knew where the magic Advent calendar had come from. Perhaps he also knew more about Elisabet Hansen. But how could Joachim find John? He wasn’t allowed to go to town and to the market square by himself.

He had just come home from school that afternoon when someone rang the doorbell. It couldn’t be Mama, because she knew Joachim never locked the door from the inside. So who could it be?

He went out into the hall and opened the door. On the steps stood the bookseller who had given him the Advent calendar!

“Ah, there you are,” he said. “Just as I thought.”

“Why?” asked Joachim, suddenly a little scared that the bookseller might have come to ask for the magic Advent calendar back.

Besides, how did he know where they lived?

The man put his hand into his coat pocket and took out a driver’s license.

“Your father left this on the counter,” he explained. “I thought it must be yours, but since you didn’t come back to the store I decided to drop it off myself. I live close by, you see, at 12 Clover Road.”

That wasn’t far. One of Joachim’s classmates lived at number 7.

“And how’s it going with the magic Advent calendar?” asked the bookseller.

“Super,” said Joachim. “There are some mysterious pieces of paper in it, too.”

“Are there?”

The bookseller gave him a big smile. He handed Joachim Papa's driver's license. “Well, I must be going on,” he said. “It's a busy time for us booksellers.”

It wasn't long before Mama and Papa came home from work. Shortly afterwards, they had dinner.

Joachim had decided not to say anything about the driver's license until Papa mentioned it himself.

Instead, he started to talk about something completely different. “What's a pilgrimage?”

His parents must have thought it strange that Joachim asked about that, because “pilgrimage” was a difficult word. Papa helped himself to more fish pie and said, “A pilgrim is someone who travels to a holy place.”

“Like Sigurd Jorsalfar?” asked Joachim. “He traveled all the way to Jerusalem, didn't he? That's why he was called the Traveler to Jerusalem.”

Mama and Papa looked at each other. “Have you been learning about Sigurd Jorsalfar at school?” asked Mama.

Joachim shook his head. He realized it was time to talk about the driver's license. He looked up at Papa. “Have you found your driver's license yet?”

“Not a trace,” said Papa.

“I have,” said Joachim.

He got up from his chair and went into his room to get the driver's license. He handed it to Papa, smiling mischievously.

Papa nearly choked on his dinner. “Where did you find it, Joachim? Surely you didn't—”

Joachim had to interrupt Papa before he said something he would come to regret. “You left it in the bookshop when we bought the Advent calendar.”

Papa looked as if he had had a visitation from an angel in broad daylight. He had in a way, too, except that the angel had sent a white-haired bookseller instead of coming himself.

“He came this afternoon,” explained Joachim. “He said he lives nearby.”

Then Mama and Papa understood.

“Well, he's quite a bookseller,” said Papa. He turned to Mama. “That is quite unusual.”

“And you're quite an unusual muddlehead,” said Joachim.



5

❖ DECEMBER 5 ❖

... “a thousand ages
in thy sight are like an evening gone” ...

JOACHIM was glad there were no chocolates or plastic figures in the old Advent calendar. But Papa had not been right when he said there were only pictures behind the doors.

A strange story was hidden inside the magic Advent calendar. It took 24 days to read the whole of the tale, since the story was divided into 24 small chapters, one for each day. Each day, another pilgrim joined the pilgrimage.

December 5 was a Saturday. Mama and Papa usually slept late on the weekends. Joachim woke up at seven, as he always did. He sat up in bed and examined the big picture on the calendar.

Only now did he see that one of the shepherds was holding a crook in his hand—just like Joshua. Why hadn't he noticed that before?

Every time he looked at the magic calendar, he discovered something new. But surely there couldn't be anything more to see than what had been there all the time? Wouldn't that be like a magic trick?

Amazed, Joachim took a deep breath.

Perhaps that was what made the old Advent calendar magical? The picture outside had never been completely finished, and gradually what was missing was painted in as the doors were opened and the pieces of paper were read.

Was it really possible to make a picture like that?

Joachim knew that bread was not quite ready until it had risen all by itself—first in the baking pan and then in the oven. He knew that it had something to do with yeast, because Joachim had often helped Mama or Papa bake bread. When he was smaller, he used to think that babies inside the mothers' stomachs must be like yeast.

Wasn't the whole world a magic picture which added to itself? For the world changed all the time.

It was never completely finished.

If God had made a whole world that could create itself in every tiny nook and cranny, then He could probably manage to make a picture that developed itself in front of the eyes of those looking at it.

Joachim opened the door with the number 5 on it. Today's picture was of a rowboat. In it sat a shepherd, an angel, a little girl, and three sheep. Joachim knew who they were, but what interested him most was the thin sheet of paper.



THE THIRD CHEEP

Elisabet, the lamb, the angel, the sheep, and the shepherd sped through Sweden along dirt roads and grassy cart tracks, between yellow fields and through dense forests, until they looked out over a little town down by the sea. The wind blew so strongly that the waves were breaking over the line of the pier. Far out to sea, there was a sailing ship with three tall masts. At the edge of the town was a large castle.

"We are in Halland," said the angel Ephiriel. "The town is called Halmstad, and the waves are rolling in from Kattegat. The watch says that 1789 years have passed since Jesus was born."

"Are we still in Sweden?" asked Elisabet.

Ephiriel nodded. "But not so very long ago this was part of Denmark."

Joshua the shepherd said they should hurry, and they crossed a landscape that became flatter and flatter the farther south they went. Between grazing land and enclosed pastures lay small villages, each with a little church and a few houses.

They were rushing through dense woodland when Joshua the shepherd stopped and knelt under a birch tree. He had found a sheep caught in a trap.

"The trap was probably set for a hare or a fox," he said.

He loosened a cord from the sheep's leg and added, "But now the sheep shall come with us to Bethlehem."

"Because it's one of us," said Ephiriel.

And the sheep seemed to answer. "Bah!" it bleated. "Baah."

Off they went: the lamb and the two sheep first, the shepherd behind them, Elisabet and Ephiriel last.

They entered a town and stopped in front of an old church with two tall towers over the entrance.

The angel told them that they were in Scania, that the town was called Lund, and that the big church was an ancient cathedral. He looked at his angel watch and said, "The watch says 1745. That proud cathedral has stood here for many, many centuries. Churches and cathedrals have been built all over the world, and it all started with the Christ Child who was born in Bethlehem. It's as if a tiny kernel of wheat is put into the ground and grows into a

whole field full. The glory of heaven is very easily scattered about.”

~~Elisabet wondered about what the angel had said. “Can we go in?” she asked.~~

The angel nodded, and they entered the great church. The sheep first, the shepherd next, and then Elisabet Hansen.

Inside, Elisabet heard the most beautiful sound. From the great organ there swelled such rich and powerful melodies that tears came to her eyes.

When the angel saw her, he said, “Yes, weep, my child. That wonderful music was composed by Johann Sebastian Bach. He is alive in Germany at this time, but his music will be heard throughout the world one day. That’s not at all surprising, because his music is a tiny shred of the glory of heaven.”

The only things that disturbed the music were two bleating sheep and a lamb scurrying about, so that its little bell tinkled.

A man in black robes came toward them from the chancel. It was the priest. “Get out, all of you!” he said sternly. “Lund Cathedral is not a common sheepfold.”

Then the angel Ephiriel stepped in front of the priest. He spread out his wings and said, “The pastor should not be dismayed! He should remember that Jesus was born in a stable and that He was called the Good Shepherd.”

The priest stopped abruptly, for even though he was a priest in an ancient cathedral, he was not really used to angels and the like.

He fell to his knees and folded his hands. “Glory to God in the highest!” he exclaimed.

They left him like that. The angel made a sign to the others that they should go. “Moments like that should never last too long,” he said. “Perhaps he’ll write a report to the bishop. Then the whole thing will be hushed up, or rumors will start to circulate about the miracle at Lund. In any case, the bishop should remind the pastor that the world ‘pastor’ means shepherd, neither more nor less.”

Joshua struck his crook against the church wall. “To Bethlehem! To Bethlehem!”

They sped through a large park teeming with birds. A couple of soldiers came riding in their direction. When they saw the lively procession, they called out, “Halt!”

The men galloped toward them. But just as they bent down from their horses to seize Joshua the shepherd, they vanished like dew in sunshine.

Elisabet gaped, for the pilgrims were standing on the same spot as they had been before the soldiers rode up.

“They’ve disappeared!” she exclaimed.

The angel’s laugh was like rippling water. “Yes, in a way. But we were the ones who disappeared. Perhaps they were so terrified when they saw what happened that they fell off their horses.”

Elisabet was astonished, so Ephiriel had to explain to her again how they were traveling. “We’re traveling in two directions at once. One journey goes south on the map to the town of Bethlehem in Judea. The other passes through history to David’s city at the time when Jesus was born. It’s a very unusual way of traveling; many people would say it was quite impossible, but nothing is impossible for God. For ‘a thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone.’ But the road to Bethlehem is exactly the same.”

The angel’s words astonished Elisabet and she hid them in her heart.

“It makes it simpler to avoid danger,” remarked Joshua. “If we can’t give the slip to severe priests or angry soldiers by taking a step to one side, we have to take a step back in time, instead. As little as fifteen minutes or half an hour can be sufficient.”

With those words, they were on their way once more. They passed large fields and small

villages. Soon they could glimpse the sea in the distance. In a short while, they were ~~standing on a deserted beach.~~

“This is Øresund, the Sound,” said Ephiriel. “My watch shows that 1703 years have passed since Jesus was born. We must get across to Denmark before the eighteenth century is over.”

“Here’s a rowboat,” announced Joshua.

They climbed on board, the sheep first, Elisabet and Ephiriel behind them. Joshua pushed the boat out and jumped in at the last minute.

The angel Ephiriel rowed so hard that the spray foamed about the prow. The waves rocked the boat and the lamb’s bell rang piercingly all the way across.

Joshua sat in the stern. Suddenly he said, “I can see Denmark.”

“I CAN see Denmark.”

Joachim could almost see a little of Denmark, too, but it was only inside his head.

It was strange that Elisabet was able to travel back in time. And it was strange to think that two thousand years had passed since Jesus was born but the stories about Jesus had traveled through all those two thousand years, so that Joachim had heard about Him, too. Elisabet was traveling through time in the other direction.

When Mama and Papa got up, they came to see the picture in the Advent calendar. Joachim pointed to the boat with Elisabet, Ephiriel, Joshua, and the three sheep. But he said nothing about what had happened in the big park. He didn’t tell them that the pilgrims had visited the cathedral in Lunenburg, either. They would only have asked how he knew what a cathedral was, and Joachim had decided not to talk about the pieces of paper in the calendar.

After breakfast, they went into town to buy Christmas presents at the big department store. In the toy department on the first floor, Joachim started to think about Elisabet from the magic Advent calendar.

Could it have been from this store that she began running after the little lamb? There was an escalator here. But wasn’t it a very long time since Elisabet had chased the lamb?

“This shop must be forty years old,” he said to his mother.

She looked at him oddly. “I should think it’s even older than that” was all she said.

So he knew. Elisabet and the little lamb had run from this shop. He understood completely, because Joachim didn’t like shopping in large stores, either. He got really angry at the nagging sound of the cash registers.

That Saturday was extra-long because he was thinking about what would happen when Elisabet and the angel Ephiriel got to Denmark. It was even worse at bedtime. He had to lie right under the magic calendar, which was still full to bursting with secrets.

To sleep so close to all those secrets was almost like living in a chocolate shop without being allowed to taste one single tiny chocolate.

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