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## Christmas Nativities

The year is 1964 and Christmas is a few weeks away. I was practising my fleeting role in the primary school Nativity play, as one of the host of angels appearing to the shepherds in the fields. The head angel had delivered the message of the birth of the Saviour in Bethlehem. We were waiting for our musical cue to leave the stage and return to the place whence we came and this was Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, which begins with several very dramatic chunks of sound with short pauses between, in the manner of an important announcement. With each chunk, the backmost row of angels turned and rushed off the stage, and this was repeated until all four rows had gone. No doubt the loud organ music drowned out the sound of our clattering and thumping feet. A week before the big day, we angels had a good time making our haloes. This was a crescent shaped piece of card that fitted over the top of the head, and we covered it by winding strips of gold paper round it, from one end to the other. Children often fuss over who is chosen to be Joseph and Mary, but I was very happy to wear the beautiful white robe and have a golden glow around my head.

The rehearsals were very interesting and entertaining. There was a scene of a meal where all the characters had to suddenly jump up and leave in a hurry. Whether it was the villagers joining the shepherds or the kings hurrying to start their journey, I have no recollection. All I remember is that some of the children taking part in that scene found it impossible not to grab some of the food from the table before they left, despite the admonishments from the teachers. This was definitely not part of the story

but probably unwittingly true to life! Maybe they should have used cardboard bread to prevent this unseemly interruption to the smooth flow of the story. Some of the characters had to carry candle lamps and they used gold paper to represent the flame. I was convinced that there was a better solution to this, but no matter how hard I tried, I could not think of an alternative, especially as all the props had to be cheap and hand made.

The high point of my Christmas creative efforts was the making of a model Nativity scene, generally consisting of a barn, stable or shelter, all the figures and animals, with a backdrop of blue sky and stars, one giant star attached to or just hovering over the roof, and the compulsory snow, completely disregarding the likely climate of the area at that time. Small cheap plastic Nativity figures were easy to obtain and tiny toy animals were already to hand in the toy box. All my ingenuity went into creating the landscape and buildings, using cereal cartons with white paper stuck to them so that the details could be drawn and coloured in. White detergent powder made good snow as it consisted of tiny granules that could be piled up or glued to the roof. Its pungent aroma had to be ignored, and could be forgiven when one stood back to view the perfection of the glistening snow. Background hills were the usual folds of cotton wool. The ultimate enhancement was a small solitary torch bulb inside the stable with the battery hidden behind. Yellow interior walls made the whole thing glow from within and placing it near the Christmas tree meant that the silver stars took on the colours of the tree lights.

## Christmas Nativities

Silver glitter was essential for finishing off the snow scene as well as making other decorations. The stash was always kept topped up, and I became a connoisseur of glitter quality. Cheap ones were dark coloured and came in bendy plastic tubes. The worst cheap ones were a mixture of colours, and despised as the unattractive sweepings from the factory! The good ones were lighter and came in glass tubes and those I sought out everywhere I went. I did with them what I now do with my printer inks - make sure I have several in each colour to cover every eventuality and not run out at a critical moment. The favourites were silver, gold and white, the latter being tiny pearlescent flakes that brought a shimmer without obscuring the colour of whatever was beneath. I could not resist improving the Christmas cards with them, before my parents sent them out. Every snow scene, candle, lamp, fireside, starry sky or glistening holly berry had to be picked out in glitter and I vicariously joined the recipient in gasping with delight at receiving such a gloriously dazzling card, far better than could be bought in any shop. I am sure they also found a small residue of excess glitter falling from the envelope as well.

I recently visited Trafalgar Square in London where once again there is on display the beautiful Nativity scene created in 2006, in a large perspex case near the base of Nelson's Column. All the carved wooden figures are fairly plain but lifelike, spread out widely, each spotlighted, and all their gazes directed at the baby in the centre, wrapped in cloths and lying on the ground. It is amazing how mesmerising this simple arrangement is, where time has been halted and the components of the scene separated, so that the viewer sees and considers each character in turn, trying to guess how their real-life counterparts of two thousand years ago reacted to the event and what effect it had on their lives from that moment on. The distance between the figures seems to represent their personal space, empty of intrusions that might interrupt their thoughts on this astounding moment in history. Passing children were instantly drawn to the lamb and donkey in two of the corners. I took photographs from different angles but they cannot quite capture the arresting effect that the scene has when you are actually standing there. I much prefer this Nativity scene to all those I made in years past. (1025 words)