

All I Want For Christmas - A Memory

I looked forward to Christmas as much as any kid, but Santa could be inconsistent, even disappointing compared with my inflated expectations. The theology was mildly appealing, though a bit abstract to a child. Oh, but the decorations were sublime! The bigger, shinier, more electrified, the better I liked them.

We maintained a collection, fragile glass ornaments for the tree, strings of colored lights for inside and out, slightly shabby strands of metallic tinsel in silver & gold, all stored in our musty third floor attic from January to November.

This stuff was pretty typical for a middle class Tulsa family like ours. More notable was the group of big, flat Nativity figures, propped together on one wall of the attic. They were jigsaw-cut from plywood and must have been life sized, because they always seemed enormous to me. Mary, Joseph, the magi and livestock, all rendered in technicolor images, printed on very heavy paper, affixed to the wood with a strong mucilage. The baby Jesus was missing altogether. I have no idea where these came from, but they had always been there.

If we could set up this striking crèche, as my mother called it, we would be the talk of the neighborhood. Think of the glory!

I whined and begged, but Mama dismissed all my pleas. It was a man's job she said. My father, now in his fifties, was physically soft and much too busy earning a living as a public accountant for such an unnecessary project.

Eventually, I could stand it no longer. I decided to take matters into my own nine or ten-year old hands. I was, after all, born under the star sign of fiery Aries.

I conceived my plan, then waited until my mother was well occupied, so I thought.

Luckily for me, I was the only child present in our big cluttered house much of the time. I was the youngest of four daughters, younger by many years. My three older sisters were busy carving out adult lives by this time, so I was free to dream up these shenanigans, unobserved, if I could elude my mother.

The thick plywood cutouts were heavier than I had anticipated, so I had to prioritize. The camel was my favorite. I began with him.

I tried to lift him off the floor just enough to avoid creating any bumping or scraping sounds, which might alert Mama on my way down the steep, narrow attic steps. I rested when I got to the bottom, before traversing the carpeted upstairs hallway, again at the landing, before starting down the stairs to the first floor, and at several points along the way down.

Having reached the downstairs successfully, it was a short distance to the back door. I dragged the camel out the door, off the back porch, then through yellowing grass the length of our side yard, down the concrete front steps of the terrace, to street level.

All my strength was drained for the moment, but I was flushed and jubilant!

These were strictly outdoor display pieces. They were all cut with pointed spikes at the bottom, that went into the ground to hold them upright. Mary, Joseph and the wisemen had one spike apiece. My camel and the other animals each had two because they occupied more horizontal ground. The spikes were designed to be forced into the earth with the aid of a mallet or hammer. They needed the strength of an adult to get them all the way in, flush with the ground and make them stand vertically.

It took my remaining energy to get the camel's two spikes even partially into the hard Oklahoma soil.

I pushed on his rump and on his neck with my little hands, working the points into the ground until he stood erect, almost, only leaning a little bit. He looked strangely at ease, in his repose, oblivious to my efforts, with legs tucked underneath his body like a cat.

I was very tired now and my arms ached.

At this point, I got caught. Even Mama, accustomed to interrupting all manner of my mischief was shocked to see what I had achieved. She shrieked at me like a banshee, horrified. I had to admit, if only to myself, that the project was too much for me.

I still had big dreams. My camel and I had a date for next year.

"Just wait" I smiled to myself.

