

The Crèche
by Jan Nieman

Poof! Without warning the manager whisked me from Woolworth's street-level candy counter (perhaps sampling too much of the inventory?) to the downstairs hardware department. The basement, with unvarnished wood floors, smelled musty, and shoppers idly strolling for impulse items weren't going to be lured down there. For a teen with her first work permit, nuts, bolts and hammers held no fascination, and except for the key-making machine, clerking downstairs was a demotion.

The day after Thanksgiving the manager told me to clear out one side of a counter and stock it with new merchandise. When I opened the first carton, I was surprised to spot hundreds of nativity-scene figures nestled in shredded newspaper. I grouped them in their respective bins – cattle in one, donkeys next to them, sheep close to the shepherds, Mary, Joseph, and a very tiny Jesus in a straw manger in the largest space, wise men near the far end, and look, an angel in the very last space.

But, something was missing.

“Isn't there supposed to be a stable?” I asked the manager.

“It looks like we'll just be selling the figures.”

While we were speaking, a gray-haired, whiskered man ambled down the stairs.

“Where do I put this?” he asked, and held up a 10 x 10 piece of cardboard with the words “STABLE” written in large black letters. Under it was printed “\$10, Concord 4-8401” and at the very bottom, his address.

My manager said, “Well, looks like you got your stable. Think it should go right over the Mary bin,” and he taped the cardboard onto a support post.

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A tad confused, I asked, “So when customers ask about a stable, I give them this man’s phone number?”

“That’s right,” the old guy answered for himself, “I live just behind the store. You send them right over, Missy.”

As Christmas grew nearer, shoppers flocked to the basement displays and I no longer was disappointed working in that department. I loved those nativity figures (one step above playing with dolls) and when I received my paycheck two weeks later, I purchased one of each and had enough money left over for a couple of extra lambs. But, I couldn’t afford the stable until Christmas Eve when cash in hand, I hurried to the old man’s home and eagerly exchanged ten dollars for the stable.

It was a crude wooden affair – vertical, dark, shellacked sides propped on a straw strewn base. On top rested a slanted, flat roof, a Christmas light-bulb tucked underneath. Inside, a loft stretched from one side to the other. I shivered with excitement as I set it up under our tree and plugged in the light. A soft glow caressed Mary, Joseph and the babe.

It was perfect – my first adult purchase. I covered it with a pillow case and later that evening proudly presented it to my family. I whisked off the stable’s covering and waited for their astonished responses.

My father, who worked with wood as a pattern maker, ran his finger down one of the stable’s sides and said, ‘Oh, interesting, pretty rough, though.’”

My mother held up a figurine and remarked, “Bernice, these aren’t painted very well.”

My cousin said, “That stable looks like it was made by a kid.”

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Excitement doused, I turned to my contribution. Yes, it had flaws and perhaps the paint job could have been better, but it was mine. I had thought of it. I had purchased it, and I decided it was just right for me. Year after year, much to my family's amusement, I continued to display it as one would a funky Christmas tree ornament that had value only because of its origin.

When I married and unpacked the crèche, my new husband said, "The figures are hollow and kind of cheap looking."

"I know. But it was the first "to me, from me" Christmas present I bought when I was a kid and it means a lot to me."

Plus, we were in no position, as expectant newly-weds struggling to stay in college, to purchase anything better. By the time baby number four arrived, the necessities of life and Christmas toys were on the list, not a fancy crèche.

As the economy grew richer, travelers to Europe returned with ever larger crèches and figures, some all shiny white, some beige with gold etched on the kings' robes, some artistically disfigured into distorted shapes, some ethnically diverse. The new statues grew to towering twelve-inch beauties placed on white cloth draped over tiers, with nary a stable in sight. If one was added, it was a magnificent affair. But still, year after year, as I set up my treasures, the awe of the scene never failed to remind me of the "why" of Christmas.

Our first-born turned twelve and when he unpacked Mary, he commented, "You know, Mom, she probably should have dark hair, not yellow."

I smiled, said, "Maybe," and we continued constructing the scene.

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The following year he became critical of my lowly barn. “Say, Mom, Jesus probably wasn’t born in a stable made of wood. We learned they stayed in a cave.”

I handed him the angel and suggested that he mold a cave for next year’s crèche.

At age fifteen he unwrapped one of the wise men, and passionate about the civil rights movement asked, “Why do you always put the black king behind the other two? And, Mom, chances are the wise men didn’t show up alone. They probably had servants and at least a dozen camels and guards. Besides, they didn’t arrive until months later. They don’t even belong in this scene.”

“Oh, really?” I said, as though I’d never considered that and moved the black king forward in the procession.

He left home and married, but always returned for holidays with his family. One Christmas Eve, after hugs and “Merry Christmas’s,” he looked under the tree and asked, “Where’s the crèche?”

“Well, Son, we didn’t bring it out this year...didn’t think you’d miss it. Besides, it’s tricky for Dad or me at our age to use the step-ladder. “

After opening several gifts my son announced, “Gotta get something; be right back,” and left the house. I wasn’t surprised to see the crèche box in his arms when he returned. My son beamed while watching his children unwrap the nativity figures and positioning them in their proper, historical places. He said, “It wouldn’t have been Christmas without Mom’s crèche.”

Our first-born grandchild, age twelve, held up Mary and scrutinized her. “Dad, if Mary was a Jew, don’t you think she’d have brown hair?”

He winked at me, grinned, and said, “Maybe.”