

## 5. Sensory Experiences

Nostalgic images of my grandparents' Christmas tree and the nativity scene nestled at its feet evoke rich sensory experiences for me. The family ritual always begins on Christmas Eve to sound of silly cheerful songs -- "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town," "Frosty the Snowman," and "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." Clove-studded oranges and bayberry candles add their spice to the toasty warm smoky smell of burning logs and the fresh evergreen scent of pine.

Munching on sorghum popcorn balls and spice cookies, we hang the tree's scraggly branches with our favorite mismatched ornaments -- no two alike, each reminiscent of bygone Christmases. The red and blue tin soldier and the chubby chipped ceramic elf are the ones I hang in memory of childhood; the engraved crystal snowflake and sparkling golden star, my adult contributions.

Our homemade garlands of popcorn and cranberries and candy in bright cellophane become colorful necklaces like Christmas tree costume jewelry. Singing "It's Beginning to Look a Lot like Christmas," we carefully strew the silvery icicles strand by strand. The battered Christmas angel with her bright pink cheeks and cottony hair crowns the tree.

Worn stencils help us fill the frosty windowpanes with fluffy Christmas symbols. Christmas cards march across the mantle hung with ancient felt stockings. Mr. and Mrs. Santa (made from *Reader's Digests*) sit on the television, surrounded by ceramic knickknacks and candles and crocheted coasters. Colorful tins filled with divinity, fudge, and wavy candy ribbons sit in easy reach.

My grandmother brings out the nativity scene with its rough wooden stable and delicate ceramic figures. By the light of candles and the fireplace, we begin to sing a different kind of song -- "The Little Drummer Boy," "O Come All Ye Faithful," "What Child Is This," and "Silent Night." The barnyard animals seem wise and loving, the shepherds reverent, the magi in awe. Mary and Joseph, too, in a kind of gentle wonder, gaze at a simple cradle -- always left empty in my grandparents' home.

When I was six years old, I noticed that, unlike other nativity scenes I had seen, no figure of the Christ child ever slept under our tree. I asked why, and was told that our cradle was full, not empty. My grandpa told me to squinch my eyes up and to concentrate very hard and maybe I would see what beloved child lay safe and warm in our home.

Although I now doubt Santa's secret benevolence and the Christ child's divinity, the symbolism of each still remains powerful and I always revere that empty cradle -- and when I look at it, from year to year, I am always blessed, safe and warm, in the heart of our home.