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Autor: Hammel, Hanspeter
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Christmas lights decorate houses and bring a sparkle to children's eyes.

The day the Christ Child died for me...

It was Christmas 1958 when the Christ Child died for me.

BY -MINU

IN THE EARLY HOURS of the morning we were already experiencing shivers of anticipation ahead of the great Christmas Eve happening: a thrilling fluttering in the stomach such as can only be felt by Swiss children who believe unconditionally in the wonder of the Christ Child.

Such children write letters to the Christ Child on Christmas paper and whisper a few ardent wishes to him before they go to sleep.

My parents were dyed-in-the-wool fans of Christmas. They turned December into a magical month with a thousand secrets. The bedroom doors were locked, but occasionally they were left ajar so that we could catch a tantalising glimpse of the gift-wrapped

packages stacked on top of the wardrobe. This only increased our pre-Christmas excitement.

Needless to say, every member of the family had his or her own Advent calendar. And it would not have been right without the tinsel. The kitschy snow scene with dwarves, reindeer and a Christmas tree in a snow-filled forest had to sparkle and twinkle. And whenever we came home from school, a brightly lit star was shining at us through the living room window. These stars used to shine on all Swiss windows, long before lights were hung on the tree or bush in the front garden, and cities metamorphosed into Christmas Broadway shows with garlands of lights and neon Santa Clauses.

No. 24 was always the largest and most secretive window on the Advent calendar. "You mustn't open it before the 24th," admonished our elders. "If curiosity gets the better of you and you take a peek before then, you'll be disappointed. The magic will disappear..."

So we waited until the wonderful morning of December 24th, when the last window could be opened, and the holy family now lying in the snow under the Christmas tree took our anticipation of Christmas to new heights.

But that morning was different. The week before, my classmate Rosie had got on my nerves by saying "We're not children any more! Nothing will happen if you open that window."

To which I replied stubbornly, "At eight years old we're all still children."

"Maybe you boys are. You're just stupid. But we girls know better. I opened my last window yesterday. And nothing happened".

This aroused my curiosity: "So what did you see?"

"The usual: the manger and the ass. And the Mother of God and..."

I allowed myself to be persuaded by Rosie, and carefully opened the last cardboard window. Only a little, so that I could close it again immediately. But that was enough: I

saw the baby Jesus lying in his manger. I saw the halo, and suddenly I was overcome by a profound sadness.

Hastily I pressed the window shut again, wanting to undo my action – but it was all in vain. My heart remained heavy, and suddenly the happy days leading up to the big moment were no longer so bright and full of promise. Added to this, Rosie took me aside and said, "It's the same with the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus as with the Christ Child: all fairy tales for kids. It's high time you realised it – after all, you're not a baby any more."

That was when the Christ Child died in me, and with him all his wonderful secrets and miracles.

I slunk around all day and my mother, noticing my mood, grew worried. "I hope you're not coming down with something."

Little did she know that I had penetrated the land of secrets and dispelled the magic.

When I opened the largest calendar window that morning in front of my parents, I feigned surprise and pleasure. "Oh, look: the holy family. How wonderful." But inside I was crying. I had just had my first important experience of life.

At home, preparations for Christmas Eve reached fever pitch. For the sixth time in a row my father had to promise to come straight home from work at half past eight. He was a tram driver, and later used to tell tales of these Christmas Eve stints. "It's a strange feeling. You sit in your tin can – at noon the city is crammed with people rushing to and fro, carrying packages or asking you where you can buy something for the top of the Christmas tree. Then all of a sudden, the chaos subsides. The streets become quieter and the first candles begin to flicker on Christmas trees in living-room windows. And you drive through an enchanted town. Sometimes a few old people board your tram – people who don't want to be alone on Christmas Eve."

So while Dad worked, Mum prepared the Christmas room. Firstly, the keyhole was filled with wax: "Woe to anyone who takes a peek," she would call out. "If that happens, the Christ Child will fly away." Followed by, "Have you finished the coat hanger for Auntie Nelly?"

The only thing that bothered me about the run-up to Christmas was the constant stress of making things, particularly for children who were all thumbs. My aunts and

uncles were presented with dreadful painted wooden plates, decorated toilet-roll holders and key-rings. Even Mum's proud "made it himself" was no excuse for the horrific results. But my beloved relatives stoically accepted the covered coat hangers, gave each other understanding, amused looks, and embraced us: "It's exactly what I wanted."

We children suffered a similar fate in the form of the Christmas poem and the recorder concert, without which we would have had no chance of presents. So, gathered in front of the Christmas tree, we raced through the notes and lines we had learnt by heart, anxiously glancing at the pile of presents to detect the skis we had hoped for. "Don't rush - slower. With feeling," admonished Mum. And Uncle Alphonse would bring out the hip-flask because the pre-dinner recital was taking too long.

Mum insisted on tradition through and through. First we all had to sing together. The first few lines of "Silent Night" were tentative, but by the time we reached "heavenly pe-ea-ce" we were in full voice. But then we came to a halt. We stumbled through the text, humming "lallalla" and looking around us in embarrassment. Only our Granny from Kemsberweg had her eyes firmly on the gift basket under the tree and was secretly counting the items so she could pronounce judgement at the evening meal: "Last year there was one more bottle of Malaga ..."

After the singing, the children were reluctantly enlisted to recite poems and play the recorder. Finally Mum picked up the bible and read the Christmas story. Meanwhile Aunt Irmgard fingered a candle and claimed in her sonorous bass that it would soon burn the tree down. And although Mum's voice became louder and the Christmas Story was related faster, it was drowned out by claims of "It's shocking what they are charging for Christmas trees nowadays".

Then came the "Amen" and the evening meal.

This, too, was traditional. The smell of "Schüfeli" (ham) and runner beans had been filling the house for the entire day. This dish was as much part of Christmas Eve as baking cookies for Advent.

After the "Schüfeli", caramel cream was served with Christmas cookies and mandarins. I was never a big fan of "Schüfeli". And long after I had grown up, I tried to persuade Mum to switch to fondue chinoise,

which had long taken over from the traditional ham. But Mum resolutely refused: "No way. Your father would be devastated if he had no "Schüfeli" on Christmas Eve. It's part and parcel of the festivities." (Yet one Christmas after my mother's death, my father exclaimed, "Couldn't we just once have something different? I only used to eat 'Schüfeli' for your mother's sake!")

So, that Christmas Eve of 1958 I stood in the kitchen and waited for the bell to ring out from the Christmas room. I knew what was in store for me. As I rushed in, Mum would close the window, smile and say, "The Christ Child has been".

The adults would look eagerly at my face, wanting to relive their own childhood. And I would have to fake a childish, unadulterated joy.

From far off I heard the bell ringing.

I entered the warm room – and the lights of the Christmas tree blinded me... 

Hanspeter Hammel alias -minu is a columnist and author and lives in Basle.

Translated from German



Glass Christmas tree baubles – blown by children.