

I DO NOT BELIEVE IT

by

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1000 words

Ruthie sat tweedily four-square at the organ, muttering into her scarlet neck wattles and presenting a portcullis of ancient dentistry as she pumped furiously with both feet to fire up the ancient pipes.

Chin, lower lip and jaw out-thrust and half-moon glasses on the end of her nose, a bundle of cherries on the crown of her felt hat wobbled in a syncopated and most aggressive fashion as she raised her left hand and brought it crashing down onto the lower keys.

A rusty breath escaped the pipes, gathered momentum until it grew to a mighty ooooOOOhhhW and 'Once In Royal David's City' swelled in sweet treble from the choir boys processing with candles down the aisle. It was the annual Nativity Play, and everyone was there.

It was also my big night, my magnum opus, my star turn. Tonight I was the Angel Gabriel complete with white crepe paper wings on a large wire frame and a long white satin dress. The wings had to be attached by crossing ribbons on my breasts and tying them at the back. Except at age nine, I did not have breasts across which to tie the ribbon securely, so the wings, aerodynamically, were slightly less than perfect. But I was a staunch little girl and decided that a noble interpretation of Gabriel would probably do the trick. I would glide to centre altar, brilliant in Mr Cook's spotlight, say my piece as Mum had painstakingly taught me, clearly elocuted:

'Hail Mary, thou art highly favoured ...' right to the end.

'And don't you DARE chew anything Jacqueline.' Mum's famous last words.

But what if my mouth dried up and I couldn't speak because my tongue got stuck? It would really have been much better if I could have been the Golden Angel who just stood (centre altar, but one step up) and glowed, and didn't speak.

All the actors from Port Albert primary school were waiting nervously in the vestries and on the lawn. Oom Willem had brought his well behaved donkey Stoffel, who always played the same part and sent in his account for appearance money very promptly after the play. Rumour was that there was a bank account in the name of D Stoffel where all his modelling fees were deposited. Anna-Marie Louw's pet lamb Lulu was also there. She looked very clean and fat, probably because she was about to have twins, but not that night, not in church. The sheep, not Anna-Marie.

Anxious mothers put finishing touches to stripey towels around close shaven heads (in case of nits), adjusted dressing gowns and gave final orders .

'If I catch you doing that in the church Arnold, you know what comes next my boy, so don't even *think* of it – OK?' and, even worse 'Clay, if I see you sticking your finger up your nose just *one* more time...!'

In an atmosphere ripe with hairspray and cosmetics, the girls donned their silken robes and veils, batting heavily mascara'd eyelashes at each other, and worked themselves up into a frenzy of first night nerves. Even though they didn't have to do anything except be women in the crowd.

Mary sat quietly in a corner contemplating her sanctimonious blue self and feeling quite pleased that she just had to sit on a stool and look beautiful and calm and not have to speak, just smile at the baby and Joseph, when she remembered, and hoped that she wouldn't fall off Stoffel while riding down the aisle. What if her robe got caught on the saddle and showed her knickers when Joseph helped her down? What if Stoffel eeyored in church or did something even worse? She would feel *so* embarrassed. Stoffel and Lulu were taken for one last walk around the field, just in case...(can't have *that* happening in church) and Reverend Kevin gathered his multicoloured flock and led them in. Shepherds minded their flocks from various distribution points around the chancel. A gentle baa-ing issued from the wings.

Electric candles lit the interior, Ruthie fired up the organ, her cherries shaking like maraccas and the Holy Family established themselves around the crib.

Henning had his ox mask on upside down, but that was soon fixed so he could see what he was doing. He was a bit put-out because Barry Thomas's pet Dexter calf had to share his space. Everyone murmured 'Ohhh sweet' when little iStation was led on by his proud owner. Given the circumstances of his conception, an appropriate name. His mother strolled down to the local train station late one night, as a Dexter bull was being offloaded. The rest was history.

Gabriel, (me) was getting well and truly steamed up. I knew my words off by heart, and my wings were staying put; but it was sooooo hot and, even though I'd drunk two bottles of lemonade, my mouth was still dry. It was beginning to thunder. I was scared of thunder. My parents and a posse of proud friends and relations occupied the front row. Waiting.

Time to put my emergency plan into action. Reaching under my robe, I sneaked a small forbidden packet of bubble gum from the pocket in my school knickers, popped three bits and began ever so slowly, to chew and release the glorious fruity syrupy flavour.

The moment had arrived, so had the gathering storm. I glided gracefully into position, mid-altar, Mr Cook turned his spotlight on me, everyone drew in their collective breath and murmured 'Aaaaah'. Raising my right arm, mindful of the right wing's precarious position, I threw my voice to the back of the church; cried '**Hail** Mary, thou art highly f. . .' at which moment three things happened; a massive

bubble erupted on the aspirate F and popped all over my face, an apocalyptic thunderclap rocked the church and...all the lights went out.

Was I ever forgiven? well, time passes and memories grow dim!