

Handwritten shorthand symbols on a blue-lined background.

Let It Snow

The Christmas tree is finally up and decorated, with all the favourite ornaments in the best positions at eye level, and the slightly less interesting ones at the back or within the depths of the branches. On top is an angel in red dress, with shiny cardboard wings, singing from a carol sheet. At the tips of the branches are the plastic icicles and imitations of frozen water drops. The tree is an artificial one, with the branches all numbered according to size, so that they go in the correct slots. This is a lot different from the former exciting trip down to Greenwich a week before Christmas to choose a real tree from the cheap market stalls. These were mostly very small compact Norway spruces, with narrow needles, a wide rounded base and a tall almost bare top spike, unlike today's more conical trees, with their darker green or bluish colouring and flattened wider needles, and bred or treated so as not to drop their needles too soon. Part of the post-Christmas fun was to watch a circular layer of dried-up needles accumulate on the floor, and to draw one's finger along the branches to dislodge the remainder of the needles, with never a thought as to whose job it was to clear up afterwards!

At that time Christmas lights were much more expensive and one of the excitements of the season was seeing the increasing number of illuminated trees appear in house windows. Walking home after school in the dark became a game of searching for windows with lit trees. Now that lights are relatively cheap, we can drape many more of them around the windows, and the living room is full of glowing spots of colour, circling the

mirror and over the doorways. The little fibre-optic tree is sitting in its corner on the shelf, scintillating with tiny dots of light, accompanied by the gentle whirring of the motor that spins the coloured disk inside. As soon as the winter afternoon light fades, it is time to flick all the switches on the plugs and fill the room with enough ambient light to make using the wall lamps unnecessary. The shopping is mostly done and our resident robin has reappeared in the garden, made bold by the recent spell of frosty weather, and he provides a living moving Christmas card outside the kitchen window.

The one thing that cannot be organised with the same control and exuberance is Christmas snow. In my part of the world, in southern England, snow is not guaranteed each winter. Frost, ice and cold periods are regular, but settling snow is uncommon enough to retain its novelty value. There are so many Christmas cards, songs and shop displays based on the snow theme, that I have been endeavouring to untangle the reasons for this passion for fluffy white frozen water at Christmas. How strange it would appear if we were fixated instead on the desire and necessity for rain or sleet over Christmas! I made a list of the principal effects of snow over the Christmas period and the common theme was that it overrides our plans and prevents us from going about our daily routines. As Christmas involves suspending those activities and taking a brief holiday from work, the snow seems to give us the final excuse that we need, in order to give ourselves permission to take a break.

Let It Snow

Our familiar surroundings are half erased under a blanket of white, and everything is always much quieter because of the reduced traffic. It is like going on holiday, when you are completely separated from your normal duties and habits. Your mind has a chance to think for itself instead of being on auto-pilot. Thoughts can come up that were crowded out during the more hectic working days. You can rest or indulge in other more interesting pursuits. On holiday you will probably be enticed to travel around, but with the enforced snow holiday you are more likely to be kept indoors. This is exactly what is portrayed as the most important part of Christmas – spending time with family and friends, which means everyone is at home at the same time. This emphasis probably started when the Victorians invented our current way of celebrating Christmas. At that time people relied almost entirely on their own families for support amidst troubles, with no recourse to the many care systems that we have available nowadays. The snow would have been an even greater hindrance to their daily lives, with no snow ploughs, gritter trucks or comfortable heated public transport, and no cosy central heating in draught-free dry homes.

Once it snows we can feel justified in calling a halt to proceedings, even though it may only be a few inches deep. Those who are able to take time off work for the holiday at last have a watertight excuse to lounge about indoors, or at least only go out in the snow to play in it. Part of the enjoyment of a snowy fresh-air walk is returning home to the cosy

fireside, radiator or snuggle blanket, and the ubiquitous bowls of festive chocolates, crisps and peanuts. It is all about victory over adverse conditions, with the smug satisfaction that you are ready and prepared, with Christmas supplies stocked up. If you have to brave the blizzard and snow drifts to get more supplies, that chilly and sometimes soggy battle can be viewed in the same way, as a triumph over the elements to bring home yet more wrapping paper, mince pies and bags of mixed nuts.

However, the snow has to fall at exactly the right time – when you are off work, and have finished your shopping and pre-Christmas visits. It must be pure, deep and white for the duration of the festive season, and then disappear once you need to get back out to work or travel again. Home has to be warm and well insulated, and the pantry stocked full of provisions. This idealised story takes no account of those who have to travel and continue working over Christmas, or those struggling to keep their home warm, and many other difficulties that beset people at Christmas. We love the snow only when it is not going to affect our schedule and comfort too much – even better when there is no timetable for it to interrupt. The snow scenes in shop windows feed our imaginations with their idealised scenario, edited for convenience and comfort, and if it doesn't snow for Christmas, then at least we can enjoy our depictions of it by gazing at the row of Christmas cards from the warmth of an armchair. (1112 words)