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2, 700 words

*Please note: This story begins on page 167 of Goose River Anthology, 2016.*

## CHRISTMAS TREES

By

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New Year's morning, I lay in bed thinking about taking down the Christmas tree. School was starting again tomorrow with a new set of teenagers entering my classroom each period. Today was the last free day I would have for a while.

Since it was always my mother who would so carefully remove each ornament and tenderly wrap it in tissue paper to store for next year, her absence this year was especially painful. I prayed I would be able to perform this task with a fraction of the love and care Mom always put into it. Since it was also the first Christmas without her in our lives, I also prayed not to shed too many tears.

I forced myself to get up and dress. I headed for the coffee pot and carried a cup over to the Christmas tree. The first decoration I noticed was one that had belonged to Mom. It was the

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only one left of her cherished set from the 1940's. In those days, all the glass decorations were quite delicate. They had a silvery background with subdued hues of pink, light blue, or violet. Most were round like the one I held in my hand and had three or four bands around their middles made of some scratchy white substance meant to resemble snow.

As I tried to remember the appearance of the other ornaments in that old set, I was suddenly a child again living in our home in Pennsylvania. It was one of those very lean years after Mom had to give up on trying to operate the TV business our father had left her with, complete with his unpaid debts. In the early 1950's, men were not prepared to have a woman for a boss, and some of her repairmen began to steal from her. Mom had been trying to get a job for months. Having been an executive secretary before she married, those were the jobs she looked for in the newspaper. She answered every ad but was told each time that she was too old.

We had been on public assistance for a while—it is called welfare now—and Mom hated having to accept what she considered to be charity. Our paternal grandfather helped by going to the distribution facility to stand in line for our ration of powdered eggs, peanut butter, and whatever else was available to poor people in any given week, because we no longer had a car. He was a sweet man but a terrible driver, and he was quite ashamed of how his elder son had deserted us. My sister Maggie and I called him "Puppy." He lived in a rooming house in a nearby town, our grandmother having thrown him out of the house years before.

Our grandmother took our father's side, claiming that taking care of a family was too much responsibility for her poor boy. My father was forty-three years old when he left—hardly a boy. But he was inexperienced with women and fell for the wife of the owner of the restaurant next to his original shop, where he ate lunch every day. The woman was worldly and clever. She wanted out of her own childless marriage to an obese man who wore his cook's apron over dirty white undershirts and smoked big smelly cigars. She hatched a plan that the two couples would sell their businesses and move to Florida. They sold the restaurant first and moved. Then our father sold the shop next to the restaurant and kept the newer shop that was closer to our house to return and sell later. Once my father joined his lover in Florida, they planned to run off together. It was a clever plan, because leaving the state made it impossible for my mother to get any kind of child support for Maggie and me.

Our situation had worsened each year, and there was no end in sight, especially this year. Now it was Christmas Eve, and according to our family tradition, this was the day we were to put up and decorate a Christmas tree. But this year there was no money for a tree. Mom, Maggie, and I sullenly talked about this dilemma, wondering how in the world we could get a tree to put up in our empty dining room.

The room was empty, because right before our father left, he convinced Mom to sell the dining room set for traveling money. He assured her we could get another set in Florida. The dining room remained empty from that day when men came to take away our furniture. Almost

immediately after he had the money in hand, our father announced that he and the other couple would go ahead and fly to Florida. He would send for us when he found a place for us to live. I still have the black and white pictures taken at the airport the day the three of them left. The woman must have been taking the photos. There is one with the unsuspecting husband actually dressed in a suit and tie. Then there is one of the four of us, Mom, sitting between Maggie and me, all three of us in our best dresses, Maggie and I with our hair in pony tails. My dad stood in his suit and tie behind Mom with his hands on her shoulders, as if holding her down. She was not looking at the camera and was not smiling.

“Mom is there no way we can find a Christmas tree?” I asked. “Aren’t there trees in the woods?”

“Yes,” Maggie agreed. “Maybe we could just find some branches to decorate and hang up over the mantle.”

Mom looked from one of our worried faces to the other. She was silent for the next few minutes.

“I have an idea,” she said. “Get bundled up—coats, hats, boots, gloves—and follow me!”

“In my mind’s eye, I see our little troupe of three girls—well, Mom was forty-two—but Maggie was nine and I was eleven. We three trudged down the snow-covered hill that was our back yard all the way to the end of the property—a good five hundred feet from the house and nearly to the streetcar line. Our father had planted a row of four pine trees back in the day when

he still cared about us. I think he planted them in the hopes that they would block the view of the streetcar tracks and the neighborhood on the other side.

Before he left, Dad was constantly working on that back yard. He built a wide path that zig-zagged back and forth across the hilly part of the yard. Then where the ground flattened out, he put a tire swing so high up in a giant chestnut tree that it swung back and forth across the entire width of the yard. It must have made a hundred-foot arc. We thought he was quite the acrobat to have climbed so high to tie the heavy rope in that enormous tree. He also built a huge fire pit and some picnic tables. He even wired the yard so that he could plug in his radio while he swung in his hammock in the shade on nice afternoons.

The neighborhood was made up of couples with small children. The adults liked to party on Saturday nights, and our back yard was a favorite spot. They would put the children to bed and gather in our back yard for a cookout. They made so much noise they woke me up sometimes. I remember being maybe four years old, tip-toeing across the hall to spy on them through the small window at the top of the stairs. They were drinking what I now know was beer from one of those old-fashioned kegs that was a big white square box with a spigot. The box was positioned at the edge of one of the picnic tables. It was the year before Dad left, and I remember gathering the neighborhood kids together the day after one of those parties to check if there was anything left in that big white box. There was, and it tasted awful.

Mom carried a saw and a hatchet and kept chattering cheerfully about how we would have a Christmas tree after all. None of us seemed to notice the bitter cold or realized how far we had walked.

Suddenly we all stopped, speechless, our gaze drawn upward to the tops of four huge pine trees. They had grown incredibly fast in the past few years and were way even Mom's head. In fact, they were all more than twice as tall as her five-foot-five-inch frame.

Maggie and I exchanged worried looks.

"OK," Mom said. "I guess we'll just have to cut off the top of one of these."

"How in the world will we do that?" I asked. "We can't even reach the lowest branch of one of them."

Mom was undeterred, "Here, this one," she said. "You two can give me a boost."

"What?" Maggie said.

"Here," Mom grabbed our arms and reminded us how to make a kind of basket for carrying someone. "I can stand on your arms instead of sitting."

"Mom, I'm not sure this is safe," I said

"OH, I'll be OK," Mom said. "Remember how scared you two were when I painted the gutters on the back of the house? It was three stories up, and I made it without falling off the ladder. After that, this will be a piece of cake!"

Oh, yes, I remembered how each day she climbed that ladder, I was scared she might fall and make us orphans. The memory of that made the familiar churning in my gut begin.

Maggie and I obeyed and boosted Mom up to the lowest branch of the tree. She stood there for a few moments getting her bearings.

“I’ll have to climb a little higher,” she said. “The trunk is still too thick here.”

With that Mom slowly worked her way up through the prickly branches until all we could see was the bottoms of her black boots. We gasped in unison.

“OK, I’m going to start sawing. You two get out of the way. The place where I am cutting is about three inches thick, so it might take me a while.” With that she went to work.

But it was slow going—she was not used to handling the big saw. She took the hatchet out of a deep coat pocket and chopped off a few scraggly branches. As they fell to the ground, they gave off a distinct smell of resin. I picked up a branch and saw the roughness of it, imagining how scratchy it would feel against our skin. I hoped Mom still was wearing her gloves.

All of a sudden Mom yelled, “Timber!”

Maggie and I scrambled away in the opposite direction as the top of the tree crashed to the ground.

“Mom, please come down now. And be careful, “ I said.

She reached the lowest branch and could not decide what to do next.

“I’ll sit down on this branch, and you two try to grab my legs and lower me down,” she finally said.

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We grabbed onto her legs but lost control of the rest of her partway down, and all three of us landed in a drift of soft snow. Nervous laughter ensued as we made sure no one was hurt.

Cutting off the top of that tree turned out to be the easy part. Over the next hour the three of us dragged, pushed, and pulled that treetop up the hill, up the driveway, and to the front yard, our cheeks glowing crimson from the cold by now. We just barely squeezed it through the front door, the treetop objecting the entire time.

Mom had the stand ready. She worked some magic, I think, getting those big screws into the trunk evenly. We stood the treetop up in the dining room and brushed the prickly debris off ourselves as well as we could.

There was suddenly complete silence as we three sat on the floor, exhausted, staring at what was supposed to be our Christmas tree. It did not look like a Christmas tree at all. Its branches were spindly and the needles were too long. The treetop was nearly as wide as it was tall. If we pushed it a bit off-center from the windows, we had a little room to walk past it to get to the kitchen—just barely. What a disaster!

Then suddenly Mom started giggling. It was infectious. Soon the three of us were rolling on the floor over stray pine needles laughing uncontrollably. Thank God for Mom's sense of humor. It always allowed us to practically sail through those really bad times. I can still hear her saying, "Remember, necessity is the mother of invention."

Mom brought out a small carton of ornaments she had been saving since the 1940's. She also had a few strings of old-fashioned lights. The bulbs were bigger than those on the chandelier



in my present dining room, and they only came in red, blue, green, and orange. We put what we had on the tree. Then Mom gingerly unwrapped a small paper bag of silver icicles. She had taken them off last year's tree one at a time and kept them. We added those and pronounced our tree to be beautiful. Now it really was Christmas!

The neighborhood kids came over to play during Christmas vacation and mostly made fun of our tree. But we three girls grew to love it dearly by the time it came down on Epiphany. And as it turns out, it is the only Christmas tree from my childhood that I remember.

I am taking ornaments one by one and putting them on the coffee table to be wrapped, just like Mom used to do. I'm finding some of Mom's ornaments from later years, after she and my father got married again. How is that for a family story? They were married for ten years, divorced for seventeen, then married again to each other for a little over six years. And I remember that new Year's Day is the day my father drowned in a sailing accident and left my mother for a second time. A few years later she came to live with us and took over as caretaker of the Christmas tree. My husband Tom and I had wanted to give Mom a place to live out her last years, which we thought were already upon her. Besides, she was the only grandparent our son Daniel would have the chance to know. But Mom fooled us and lived with us for twenty more years, helping us to build lasting traditions.

Today I decide I'm not going to be sad. The ornaments on the tree are all so special. They remind me of good times gone by. There are ornaments that Tom and Daniel each made when

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they were in kindergarten. Then there is our son's first Christmas ornament, ornaments from trips, and gifts from students and friends. And there is the collection of Hallmark ornaments Mom gave Daniel each year for about twelve years. All of these are a reminder of my special mom and how much she loved Christmas, especially the trees. Without a tree, it just wasn't Christmas.