

## ***A Real Christmas Tree***

We'd always wanted a real Christmas tree—a tall, lavishly decorated one, like other families had. It would have had singing lights, silver tinsel, blown-glass ornaments, and icicles dressing its snow-tipped branches. And, of course, underneath it would have been overflowing with presents for us children.

But December came, and our living room still remained bare. New Christmas decorations were priced way out of our budget as a family of missionaries. So Mom pulled out the storage boxes, made the old decorations look as good as new, and then she went to work on handcrafted “stockings” made from shiny red paper and cotton trimmings. The little girls joined in to help cut and paste. There were twelve stockings—one for each of us kids—and Mom strung them up on the staircase banister. My two brothers strung lights on the veranda, trying to revive the bulbs for just one more year.

For a Nativity scene, we molded little clay people, then baked and painted them. Someone gave us a set of three cherubs that were the perfect match, except that we kids thought it our duty to rearrange the figures. One of the little angels kept falling down and finally lost its head.

Then one evening when Dad came home, he announced that he had purchased a Christmas tree. Curiously, we gathered in the living room to inspect the Yuletide emblem.

“Isn't it incredible?” Dad was always so enthusiastic. It was a papier-mâché mold of a stick-evergreen about a foot tall.

“That's our tree???”

“It's so skinny!”

“It's kinda strange,” came the replies, with sour faces.

“Dad, that's not a real tree.”

“What do you mean? Of course it's a real tree, honey. My friends in the prison made it. They make all sorts of things! Isn't it great?” Dad tried to get us to join in on his enthusiasm. “And look, I bought a matching reindeer to go with it!” He produced the animal, also made from old newspaper.

That was so like my father. Even though he didn't have much for extra shopping, he always tried to help the less fortunate by purchasing some of their wares so that they could have a bit of

Christmas pocket money, perhaps to buy small gifts or a better meal for their own children. As a minister in the national correctional institute in the Philippines, he had collected many handmade crafts there.

Last year there was an intricately carved battleship that sat peacefully on our library shelf until the kids went to war with it. The year before that, our house was filled with glass bottles that held miniature scenes inside—homes on stilts, tiny matchstick people, palm trees by the beach. My little brother would collect newspapers and old magazines for the craftsmen, and my sisters and I would help sell their beautifully handmade Christmas cards. The profits would then go back to the poor families.

And now this: our “real” Christmas tree.

“I suppose we could fix it up somehow,” suggested my sister. We set it up on the phone table, which was just the perfect size for it. Mom cut out figurines from cardboard—stars, bells, and candy canes. We added glue-glitter to give it a touch of sparkle. I remembered a pair of plastic doves that were covered in white mesh. I’d found them in a wholesale store, and so the birds went up too. We strung colorful miniature lights, and they flickered prettily on Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus, and the two and two-thirds cherubs.

Christmas came all at once to our merry little home, and I’ll never forget it. That year in particular was a struggle for us as a large missionary family, but I know it was one of the most memorable.

No, we never got our store-bought Christmas tree. But we got one that truly represented our family’s love. Our home was never outfitted with fancy décor, but it was filled with the laughter of happy children and the melodies of meaningful Christmas carols. Santa was never the expected guest, but you can bet we caught Mommy kissing Daddy somewhere near that tree. And as for Christmas presents, our parents gave us gifts that no amount of money could ever buy.

We spent so many happy moments together as a family, and our parents taught us that Christmas was for giving of our hearts to others, and that the kind of selfless love we should give is something that colors our lives—not only at Christmas, but all year round, just like a *real* evergreen.

--Nyx Martinez