



I'm dreaming of a Charlie Brown Christmas



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Nothing has ever smelled more like Christmas to me than the short-needled, sparse-branched fir tree my parents bought at the grocery store each long-ago December. Its trunk was nailed to a wooden X, its needles were already shedding, but it brought the glorious smell of piney woods into our living room.

It was a Charlie Brown kind of Christmas tree, a bit pitiful until it was decorated and provided with the love only children — trying to be extra good because Santa is watching — can bestow. The tree was wrapped with a string of skinny, steady-burning colored lights. The only problem was that if one bulb burned out, they all went dark and a new bulb had to be screwed into each socket until the defunct bulb was found.

In our early married-with-kids poverty years, husband Ray and I opted to spend our limited cash on toys for our boys instead of Christmas trees. The latter we acquired free by visiting Ray's family farm and cutting down a cedar tree. A cedar smells nice but it is so sticky that you could lose a pint of blood decorating it. That is why the icicles were not artistically draped on its branches but were thrown on the tree in clumps.

One cold, snowy day, I sat in the pickup while Ray sawed away at a cedar. Suddenly, there was a bang and Ray leapt out of his squat and gave a mighty yell.

"What happened?" I cried.

"They shot me in the ..."

Indeed, two hunters had mistaken (so they claimed) Ray's gray sweatshirt-hooded head for a rabbit. Fortunately, they were poor shots and hit Ray somewhat lower than his head. Fortunate, also, was the fact that — in the act of squatting to cut the tree — Ray's jeans were pulled tightly across his ... well, you know. The shotgun pellets were nearly spent and did not penetrate his jeans, but they did leave an interesting pattern of little blue bruises.

As soon as I realized he wasn't badly injured, all I could do was laugh ... and laugh ... and laugh. I laughed so long that it made Ray, who expected a little sympathy, mad. It was quite a while before he appreciated the humor of the incident, but I believe he now enjoys the novelty of being the only man shot in the posterior while cutting a Christmas tree on his own family farm.

As a 2-year-old fond of apples, son Butch tried to eat every red thin-glass sphere within his reach on any tree he encountered. That was the Christmas that the lower portions of our tree and my parents' tree began sporting plastic ornaments. Happily, Butch never swallowed any of the glass, nor was he cut, but Mother and I panicked every time we had to pick shards out of his teeth.

Over the years we have collected hundreds — 817 and counting — of ornaments. One Christmas we learned NOT to put them only on the side facing out from the wall. Trust me, an eight foot Christmas tree falling on its face at 3 a.m. makes a thump loud enough to awaken two adult sound sleepers as well as two kids who could sleep through a train wreck.

Son Greg and his wife Val once owned a cat named Zebby — more accurately, Zebby owned them — who found climbing a Christmas tree absolutely irresistible. Zebby didn't scale the outside of the tree. Nosiree, she shinnied up the trunk, shaking loose ornaments and wrapping herself in tinsel roping before finally reaching her goal of toppling the angel at the peak. When Zebby exhausted her nine lives, she was replaced by TWO cats. I thought at the time that was asking for double trouble, but neither Rameses nor Panda has a penchant for climbing Christmas trees.

Our current Christmas tree, purchased from our friend Bob — now in his NINTH last year of selling trees — is a beauty, a good 12 feet tall in its stand. Ray actually had the audacity to suggest we might consider an artificial tree this year. I'd suspect that he is becoming Scrooge-like except for the fact that he has icicle lights hanging from our roof's highest peaks and our yard contains a bunch of candy canes, Santa in his sleigh, 11 lighted trees and 5 animated deer (they were only animated the first year).

All we need now is the never-to-be-forgotten smell of those first trees I remember ... because this year I'm in the mood for the simple beauty and childish wonder of a Charlie Brown Christmas!

I hope your holidays are filled with the love and laughter of family and friends. Merry Christmas!