

THE CHRISTMAS TREE
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Feeling it might just about be what we needed, I was drawn to the tin Christmas tree in the little shop in Juarez, Mexico, the day before Christmas Eve, 1969.. It stood in the middle of a table full of Christmas ornaments already marked down. It was shiny tin, about 2 ½ feet tall, with maybe a couple of dozen branches and a perfect conical shape. There was a candle holder at the tip top and at the tip of each branch. As I moved in to take a closer look at this little wonder, the shop keeper, in her best Tex-Mex, tells me to be very, very careful, to hold it by its base. I should have listened.

The day before, I had driven from final exams at Texas Tech to my parents home in El Paso. Although glad to be headed home, holidays at our house could be a bit "iffy," because my mother was severely bi-polar. Most Christmases were really special, but my heart sank as I drove into the driveway; there were no yard lights and no brightly lit Santa face hanging on the wall, not even so much as a wreath on the door.

I rolled in late but everyone was up to greet me. Dad, not a hugger, gave me a two-handed hand shake, Mom gave me a good hug and a kiss, and so did Mattie, my younger sister, home from school in Phoenix. Mom wasn't looking so good and quickly and quietly retreated back to her room. Dad told us about Mom's latest battle with depression and stated it might be best to just kind of skip Christmas this year, and then he retired for the night. Mattie and I stayed up to visit for a while. She had been home a couple of days, and she thought Mom was feeling even a bit worse from the guilt of not doing anything for Christmas. But the decision had been made: no decorations, gifts, or Christmas church; we just were to enjoy one another's company.

The next morning Mom was up to fix breakfast. While obviously still depressed, she seemed a little more interested in the idea of Christmas. She kept apologizing for the holiday and that she had not so much as put up a tree.

Mattie and I put our heads together and decided to do at least a little something. We would keep it simple, just a few small gifts, anyone of which would be appropriate for any one of us. We headed off to Juarez, where we would have gone shopping regardless.

Back then, Juarez was a friendly city full of small wonders and delights. Just after crossing the Paso del Norte bridge there was an ornamental iron works shop. You knew when it was open by the Volkswagen beetle parked out front. The entire shell had been removed from the body and replaced with rose vine iron work in the exact shape of the original beetle body. I loved that car. Further in town was a market with a public plaza. As an architecture student I was always impressed at how such a large open space could seem so intimate. The market area was made up of small shops connected to each other, each with its own barrel-vaulted roof. Going there was always a joy.

Mattie and I started hitting the stalls and had picked up two or three things and then headed into the tin shop. There were all kinds of incredible works in tin: mirror frames, sconces, table tops, even light switch plates. And the little tin Christmas tree.

Following the shopkeeper's advice, I picked up the tin tree by its base and held it ever-so-carefully. The trunk was twisted wire covered in tin. Each branch grew from the trunk and had a spine made of that heavy wire. To that was soldered a strip of tin an inch or so wide. Then the maker took his snips and cut into both sides of each strip, creating hundreds of little very sharp "pine needles." I can only imagine what goes through the

craftsman's mind before he created such a thing. At the very least, I was sure he checked to make sure his tetanus shots were current and he had a lot of iodine and Band-Aids.

The shopkeeper secured it in heavy brown wrapping paper, then gave us a few dozen candles, each about ½ inches around and 3” tall. She wishes us Feliz Navidad and added, again, in English, “Be very careful.”

We head back north across the Paso del Norte, our meager Christmas in hand.

That evening, Mattie and I set up our little Christmas on the coffee table: four presents under a 2 ½ foot-tall tin Christmas tree. To avoid scratching the table, we made a skirt from the wrapping paper. Dad, hoping this is a good idea, nodded his approval, but Mom did seem to brighten up.

Next day, Christmas Eve, went along pretty well. Mom and Mattie fixed a nice brunch and we had some good conversations about school and life and such. Still, Mom spent a good part of the day in her room. But I noticed when anyone walked past that tin Christmas tree, they seemed to hesitate and on their face would be a slight grin.

That night, since there would be no going to church, we decided to have our Christmas. We turned out all the lights and gathered around our shiny little tree. Mattie and I started lighting the candles. Even before they were all lit, it was starting to get pretty warm in there. But when all the candles were lit, it was a sight to behold, almost beyond description. It was bright, very bright; it was as bold and magnificent symbol for Christmas as you could imagine. It was also very warm and not unlike a small forest fire. The dull roar we began to hear was the air being sucked out of the room. The top candle, within moments, had been fully consumed. Then we looked up. The paint was boiling off the ceiling.

As my sister and I began desperately trying to put out the tree, Dad sprinted off, only half serious, to find the lock box of important documents, just to have it handy in case the house burned to the ground. Mom watched all this in amazement with both a smile on her face and tears in her eyes. Mattie and I managed to blow out all the candles, suffering just a couple of burnt eyebrows. After all the excitement, we all just sat in silence for awhile, then my folks got up and went to bed. The paper skirt proved to be very handy, holding a pool of wax, and we decided to open the other presents after the wax they were covered in had cooled. Mattie and I watched a movie on late night TV.

Christmas morning, Mattie and I were the first ones up, just like when we were kids. We had agreed to give each other a surprise gift, but one we could not spend any money on, and it could not be too serious. I gave her my very old single shot 22 rifle, something ridiculous to a gal who had a concealed weapon permit. But she won in the absolutely pointless category; she gave me one of her French textbooks from high school.

Mom got up shortly afterwards in a good mood. She, and all of us for that matter, would look at the tin Christmas tree standing in a pool of wax, and just laugh. Then later that day we opened the four little gifts that had been entombed in wax.

We were all thankful to that tree. It had given us a real thrill. Gave Dad the chance to make jokes on just what to write for the insurance claim on the damaged ceiling. But mostly, for at least a while, it gave us back our mother.