

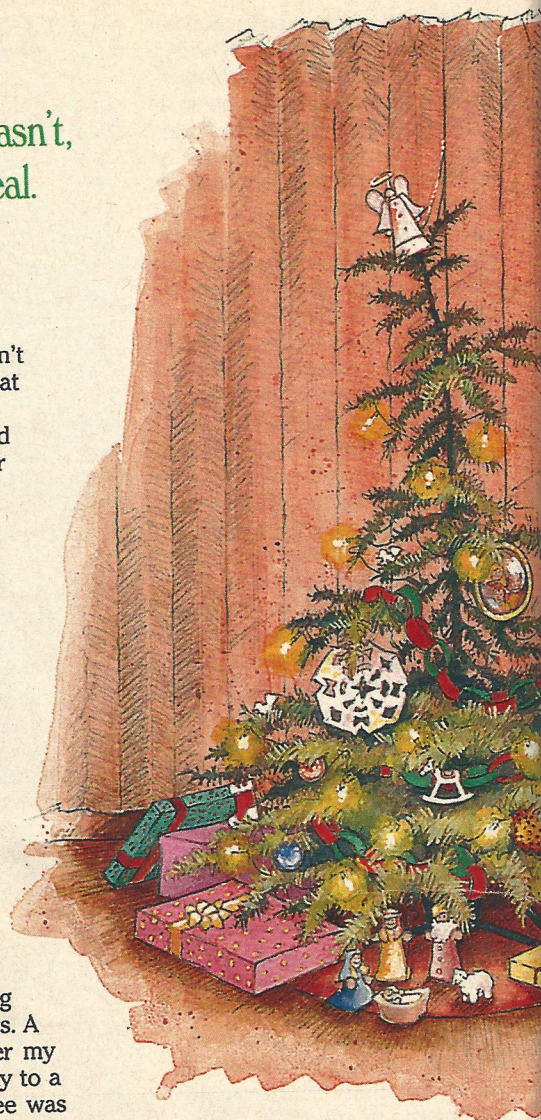
Perfection it wasn't,
but it was real.

At first it looked as if we weren't going to have a tree at all that Christmas.

In years past, getting the tree had been one of the happiest events for our family. My husband, Chris, and I would bundle our three kids on the back of our snowmobiles and roar up through the crisp, glittering snow to Cedar Mountain to check out at least 50 trees before selecting the one that was "just perfect."

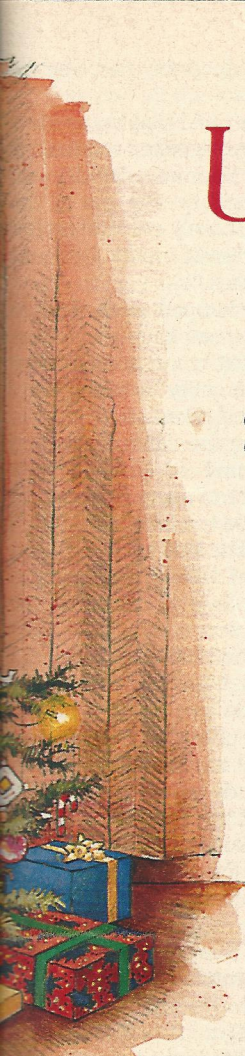
But that was before Chris died and my children and I moved 200 miles to Montrose. Facing that first bleak Christmas as a young widow, I could hardly bear the thought of getting a tree for the holiday. That's when I thought that perhaps an inexpensive artificial tree would do.

I drove 60 miles to Grand Junction, only to find the shopping mall filled with impatient shoppers. A broken ornament crunched under my shopping cart as I weaved my way to a display of artificial trees. One tree was decorated in red plastic poinsettias, another in white doves. A third was made of a glittery silver substance, and yet another was flocked with "snow" from an aerosol can. A plastic baby Jesus for an outdoor Nativity scene was on sale for \$19.95. After the manager announced a special on microwave ovens, a distraught woman began arguing with her husband, saying "We can't afford one," but he grunted that he'd use his credit card and headed toward the housewares. Even plastic money!



Ugly the Beautiful

by Faye Roberts, Montrose, Colorado

A watercolor illustration on the left side of the page depicts a portion of a Christmas tree with warm-toned lights and several wrapped gifts in red and blue paper at its base.

I abandoned my half-filled basket, hurried to the exit and drove the 60 miles back home in angry tears: anger at the couple, anger at the store's plastic Christmas, anger at my husband for dying and leaving me to face Christmas alone, and most of all, anger at God for letting it happen. I resolved there would be no Christmas this year, no presents, no angel cookies and absolutely no artificial tree. When I arrived home, I took the Christmas cards I had been working on and shoved them into a drawer, slamming it shut.

December was turning out to be an appropriate ending to a terrible year. Chris had died unexpectedly in January when a heart valve ruptured while he was loading a snowmobile. We were both 26. From then on there seemed to be nothing but problems. I struggled with the never-ending red tape of insurance, taxes and Social Security. Eight-year-old Amy began having problems at school. Five-year-old Mandy couldn't sleep and started sucking her thumb again. And every time Christopher, age four, did something wrong, it was because he missed his daddy. I cut back to part-time work at the bank and became a night owl, sleeping during the day and pacing the floor at night.

In September we packed up and moved to Montrose. The kids settled into the new school. I planted fruit trees and bought a Rototiller. I really thought we were coping, until December.

I'd always loved Christmas, the music, the smell of Christmas goodies, watching the kids decorate Christmas cookies, but my favorite ritual was bringing back and putting up the Christmas tree. Of course, the "just perfect" tree would always be too big, so Chris would cut off the bottom and use the extra boughs for wreaths and garlands. The cedar's fragrant berries would fill the house with their spicy smell. I would make popcorn and heat cider while Chris strung the lights. The kids would throw the icicles on in globs while I patiently put them on one strand at a time.

Last Christmas Eve after midnight mass, Chris and I had turned off all the lights in the house and we'd sat staring at the tree, counting our many blessings: the children,

our families, our home in the country, and our love of the Lord and His love for us. Now I was in a strange house, in a strange town, and in the strange situation of actually having considered buying an artificial tree. I missed the mountain, home and Chris more than I ever thought possible.

The yellow school bus stopped out front, and the kids piled into the house, dropping lunch boxes, books and gloves. As we sat in the kitchen drinking cocoa, I announced, "There will be no Christmas tree this year. The season has become too plastic and phony. It is a time for greedy merchants to bleed people, trying to get them to spend money they don't have. We won't participate in it."

All three voices cried out in unison, "But, Mom, that's not fair!" And three gloomy faces followed me around the house the rest of the week.

On Sunday the kids stayed after church to practice for the Christmas program, and came home full of Christmas spirit. I softened at Christopher's big, sad brown eyes and consented to buy a small tree, as long as it was not fake. Few were left to choose from at the lot by the grocery store. It could be either a tall, spindly pine, or a short, scraggly spruce. We chose the latter. A salesman tied it to the top of the Subaru and we took it home.

The tree wouldn't fit in the stand; the trunk was too fat. I whittled it down with a butcher knife, leaving globs of sticky sap on the carpet. The needles scratched my arms as I tried to set the tree back in the stand. It kept tilting to one side. I got some baling wire from the barn and wired it to the curtain rod. I turned the bare side to the wall, but no matter how I turned it, the tree had a big hole gaping in the middle. The branches drooped pitifully. It was absolutely the worst-looking Christmas tree I had ever seen. Disgusted, I went to the bedroom and

left the kids to decorate the tree by themselves.

Later, I heard a timid tapping as Mandy's bright blue eyes peeked around the bedroom door. "Mommy, would you come put the angel on the top of the tree?" she asked, barely controlling her enthusiasm. "Not now, honey. I'm busy folding these clothes."

Her shoulders slumped as she turned to go, then she turned back and asked, "Could you at least come and see, just for a minute?" I felt guilty for taking away her spark of joy and relented.

Amy had strung the lights, forgetting to check for burned-out bulbs. Mandy and Chris had put too many balls on the bottom, leaving the top bare where they could not reach. The kids were so proud of the job they had done. When I put the angel on the top, they all declared how beautiful the tree was.

The neighborhood kids, however, did not see the same beauty and playfully christened the little tree "Ugly." I had to agree with the neighbor kids. The name stuck. Amy would ask Mandy to plug in Ugly's lights. Mandy would ask Chris if he had watered Ugly. Ugly quickly became part of the family.

On Christmas Eve we went to the children's pageant at church. Everyone else seemed to be enjoying the play, but I kept worrying that the boy behind Mandy would scorch her pigtail with his candle as they stood in front of the altar, singing "Silent Night." Gone was that mysterious Christmas wonder and glow that Chris and I had felt at midnight mass the year before. All I felt now was a cold emptiness as I observed husbands and wives holding hands and proudly watching their children.

After punch and cookies, I took the children home and put them to bed, promising to leave the porch light on for Santa. I watched Johnny Carson until I was sure they were asleep, then decided

to put off playing Santa until early morning. I flipped off the television.

The soft lights of the Christmas tree flickered in the darkness. As I bent down to unplug them, I noticed a strange present wrapped in paper I had not seen before. On the card was scrawled "To Mommy, Love Mandy" in first-grade handwriting. I smiled and, without thinking, opened the box carefully. There under a layer of pink tissues lay a lamb made of flour-and-salt dough. Next I unwrapped a wise man, his whiskers made from pressing dough through a garlic press. One eye was a little larger than the other; his turban, lopsided. I set him next to the lamb and unwrapped Mary. The hair sticking out from under her blue scarf was the same bright yellow as Mandy's. She had a big red smile on her face. Next came Joseph, and finally baby Jesus sleeping in a manger.

I sat back and admired the family under the flickering lights. The ugly tree held its branches like protective arms over the little family. On the tree was none of the plastic I had been fighting all season, but it was decorated with love and memories: a God's eye made of Popsicle sticks and yarn, a chain of red and green paper strips, a navel orange stuck with cloves, the wooden ornaments my mother had painted for me when I was a small girl, the big white snowflake Chris had made in preschool, and three clip-on glass birds, the only store-bought ornaments Chris and I could afford the first year we were married. Filling the big hole in the middle of the tree was the ornament with a picture of the kids on it.

At that moment it was the most beautiful tree in the world. It stood straight, even though it needed reinforcement.

Just like me! I thought. I too was weather-beaten but was still standing. I had family and friends for my baling wire, my reinforcement. Even though I too felt empty in the middle, I had three terrific

kids to help fill the space Chris had left. I had the Lord as my base, and His angels watching over me. I was surrounded with the loving and caring ornaments of memories. Some of my lights had burned out, but others still flickered with the hope of tomorrow.

Seven years have come and gone since I sat beneath that tree on Christmas Eve. I am remarried now and have a four-year-old son, Todd. With my husband, Tom, I have rekindled the tradition of cutting our own tree. When we get it home, it is still too big. But every year, the kids and I remember with pride our Ugly tree. We've had to move our Nativity family to a shelf (Todd tried to eat baby Jesus last year), but in my heart it will always belong under the bare branches of the scraggly spruce tree. ◀

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(Signed) J. Wendell Forbes, Deputy Publisher