

OH CHRISTMAS TREE, OH CHRISTMAS TREE, WHERE ARE YOUR BRANCHES?

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[Assignment: Based on your direct observations, write a description of a place or a person which conveys a recognizable feeling through the use of specific details rather than by statement of attitude.]

In early December every year, Dad makes his pilgrimage into the dark cold garage attic to retrieve the Christmas tree. He climbs the rickety ladder with flashlight in hand to emerge into the long skinny attic with a sloping ceiling. He stands stooped at the top of the stairs, wondering in dismay how he is going to find anything in this place that looks as if it has been ravished by a series of tornados. The task seems overwhelming, to find one battered, bent and warped box among dozens. The only thing to distinguish it from the rest are the words "CHRISTMAS TREE" written in bold black marker on the side. When Dad finally spots it with the flashlight, he tromps through the piles of discarded treasures we will of course need again someday--stacks of camping equipment, boxes, cobwebs and layers of dust--clearing a path for the Christmas tree. Dad carefully edges his way down the steep steps, slowly dragging the tree box behind him. He finally makes his way to the living room where the rest of us have been patiently waiting, trying to suppress our excitement.

Putting up the Christmas tree in our house has become a kind of ritual. My brother and I scurry to the box, pulling it open, half expecting to find the splendid tree we had the year before, only to find the furthest thing from it. Our tree is in about twenty pieces looking more like a jigsaw puzzle at this point than anything else. There are wires, poles and prickly green things sticking out all over the place. Before us now is a task even greater than the one in the attic. Matt begins begging for a real tree, one that has branches that stick up instead of down, smells like pine, and has the shape of a tree, one that would touch the ceiling, unlike our measly six foot tree. All this is to no avail since we have a perfectly good tree right here--we just don't know it.

Things start to look hopeful and it actually begins to resemble a tree when Dad finally gets it put together. However, it can still be confused with a gigantic bottle brush.

Next come the lights. Every year Dad makes the mistake of thinking that putting on the lights is going to be an easy job. Unfortunately, no matter how carefully he wound up the lights the year before and strategically placed the cords, inevitably they have ended up in a heaping pile with more tangles, turns, quirks and loops than the New Jersey Turnpike. With the lights finally up, hours later, we finally decorate the tree.

The garland will go on first. We have one piece of green, one short piece of red, and some thin shabby silver garland with a strip of gold foil wrapped around it for added effect. This is so old now that it looks more like a massive ball of tin foil than a decoration.

Now that the tree is up and the lights and garland are on, we can break out the boxes (and boxes) of ornaments. This part is done rather ceremoniously. Mom sits down in the rocking chair and unwraps the ornaments, handing them out one at a time. Once the ornaments are on, the final touch is placing the angel on top of the tree. Why this paper angel, colored in an array of blues, reds, yellows and greens, ever attained such a respectable position is beyond me. Nevertheless, it is always an honor to be the one to put her in her place of glory on top of the tree. Ever since I can remember, this angel has reigned proudly at the top of the tree, keeping close watch on all the wonderful treasures the branches have borne.

When we finally take a step back and look at the tree, what we see is breathtaking. We have an absolutely wonderful Christmas tree. Ornaments cascade down the tree from the top of the angel to the bottom of the red tree skirt. Every single branch has an ornament on it, some have two or three. In only a few places can we see the vibrant green of the soft needles peeking through. This tree has undergone some impressive changes in the course of an evening. It seems to come alive and is smiling radiantly beneath its extravagant attire. Now the tree seems to stand taller and take on a perfect tree shape to bear the precious ornaments proudly. The colorful lights sparkle and glitter like the stars up above as the ornaments reflect their glistening glow.

If our tree could talk, oh the stories it could tell and the memories it could awaken. Every ornament got there for a reason. It is special to someone in some way. The paper cut-out of an anorexic Santa in a red suit with black buttons is Danny's own. Andrew made the Santa head with the cotton beard that seems to grow thinner every year. There are dozens of small cross-stitch ornaments. Grandma makes them every year and gives them to each grandchild. The speckle-glazed ceramic boat, car and train were made by Mom and belonged to the boys. Mom made me a little girl wearing a green dress and black shoes. Dad's favorite ornaments are the blue and green antique-looking twin angels. Matt has a small white stocking that hangs from a green ribbon and has a choir boy on the front. When he was a toddler pennies used to appear in it if he were good. The gingerbread men made from real cookies have survived over eighteen years. There are countless shiny brass ornaments in many sizes and figures. They were almost all given to us kids by Martha Rink as we passed through her Sunday school class. Our tree also contains many wondrous works of art. One of my best pieces is a crudely cut out gingerbread man. It is half colored, mostly scribbled on in brown. I had done all of that, but what I was most proud of was the "BECKY" I had scrawled all by myself on the back. Danny got the prize for the most unique self-made ornament. It was (so I am told) a Santa Claus made from red and blue electrical wire and wound into a blob that he recognized as Santa. Mom also has a few ornaments on the tree from her childhood. She has a plastic, mostly-off-white reindeer with only a speck of paint left on it that has successfully survived the years, as well as a red Santa with an opened bag on his back where Santa used to leave her suckers. My favorite ornament is the manger scene that fits over a single light bulb. The light shines in, illuminating baby Jesus' face just as I imagine the shepherds' star did over 2000 years before.

Indeed our tree has become a magnificent sight. It glistens and shimmers at us from every angle. Through its fake wiry limbs, the tin-foil-ball garland that Mom and Dad have had since they were married, and the mismatched ornaments, our tree radiates an aura that evokes a true feeling of Christmas from deep within. Our tree is the most splendid Christmas Tree I have ever seen.