

CHRISTMAS IS THE TIME childhood memories resurface in a ramble:

The first Christmas after my father re-married and we became a family of ten, we blindly carried on our usual process of everyone buying a gift for everyone else. Do the math: that comes to 90 gifts, plus the ones from Santa. When our tree was *literally* half-buried in packages, everyone was flat broke, and the wrapping paper alone filled two garbage cans, even we kids agreed enough was enough. From then on we drew names from a hat.

The hat thing was never as exciting as that first insane Christmas.

On an earlier Christmas, just before my mother died, I recall one of my older brothers (we'll call him Randy) got a dart gun for Christmas. It was one of those plastic spring-loaded jobs with the plastic-stemmed darts topped with little rubber suction cups. Randy got bored licking and sticking darts to the plate glass window (the only thing the silly darts would actually stick to) and before too long we heard odd sounds coming from the living room — sharp pops followed by the soft tinkle of glass. Clever Randy had discovered if he removed the suction cups, the remaining projectiles were perfect for shooting the ornaments off of the Christmas tree. So much for family heirlooms. Mom scolded him, but we could tell she was trying really hard not to laugh. Ornaments break without much provocation anyway, but in our house the process was usually coupled with high drama like this, and Randy did-in close to a dozen with his dart gun antics.

We lost a bunch the year our cat, Sabrina, decided to climb the Christmas tree.

We started making paper ones and stringing popcorn to fill in for the losses. It wasn't all us kids fault either. Dad had a habit of bumping into the tree. We'd all laugh and he'd curse. When our step-mom entered the picture, she had always set up one of those tidy trees with all the same colored balls on it. Her red balls wouldn't be caught dead sharing a tree with our eclectic, mismatched pile of cheap baubles, cut paper, and stale popcorn, so from then on, there were *two* trees: one in the living room and one in the family room. I always preferred the homely one, truth be told; the living room looked like a generic shop window, the family room like a home.

Our nativity scene had the same issues. Some of the wooden animals had gone missing and been replaced with Crayola-colored plastic ones from my youngest brother's barnyard play set. One of the wooden magi was missing an arm and was left with a splintery scar - you won't find any account of that in scripture. And we stuck a cheesy angel made of white nylon fabric and wire on top of the roof. The angel had dots of gold glitter and a wrapped cotton ball for a head with a drawn on expression that resembled a happy-face sticker. This crèche was also banned from the living room — our step-mom had her own fancy, hand carved one from Sweden, or somewhere. Soon we were all banned from the living room too, but that's another story.

My favorite memory was from one of the Christmases after Mom died and before Dad remarried; it's really an after-Christmas memory. We were without adult supervision while

Dad was at work, which left time for a lot of right-brain thinking. My sibs and I collected all the discarded Christmas trees out of everyone's trash heaps, dragged them into our own back yard, and with them, built a forest of Christmas trees. Some were flocked, some had strands of that old, heavy lead glitter still dangling from them. It looked amazing.

Magical.

We played and ran around in our forest all afternoon.

When Dad came home we proudly showed it to him. His reaction? He pitched a fit, of course — you see, there was only one day that the trash guys were to collect old Christmas trees and this had been it. I guess we didn't think about that practicality, but it still seems sad to me that Dad couldn't experience the magic in that moment. Mom would have. Now that I'm older, I get it, and get him better too, but there's a part of me that wishes he could have run around and played in that forest with us — just for an hour or two.

Here's hoping this holiday season brings you all fond memories and forests of magic.



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