

The Christmas Tree

2003

For the first time in my life I almost didn't put up a Christmas Tree that year. The reason? I failed to tag a tree at the Moon Mountain tree farm early in December. Instead, I waited until a week before Christmas, only to find the farm sold out and closed. So what to do? I checked out other local tree farms and they, too, had closed for the season. I still had a lot of shopping to do. And so I thought, "What's the point? The kids are gone; we expect no company; I'm not getting any younger. So why bother?"

And then a panic came over me. I realized I was addicted to Christmas Trees. As long as I could remember, we had a tree, top to the ceiling, widely spread branches aglow with lights and familiar ornaments. Suddenly the thought of our living room being vacant on Christmas day gave me a chill. My adrenaline got going. Having a tree became a must and so within three hours we returned from the wilds beyond Petaluma with the most beautiful tree we ever had - and put it up by supertime.

Later I began to wonder why I reacted so emotionally over what anyone's rational mind would consider an optional thing of no great consequence. And all I could think of was that scene in the old musical *Brigadoon*. Gene Kelly and his skeptical friend Van Johnson are hunting in the Scottish highlands and become lost. As they consult their map, a village appears out the mist and they enter it to find everyone in a festive mood, the men in kilts, the lassies lovely. It's Brigadoon, a mystical village that appears only once every century to spare it the violence of our everyday world.

Gene Kelly is enchanted but Van Johnson doesn't trust it "It's a fairy tale," he says, "Let's go!" Kelly hesitates: "I believe in this place. I can't give it up, now that I've found it." Nevertheless he succumbs to the skeptic's influence and the next thing you know, he's caught up once more in the whirl of Manhattan where the bars are full of lonely people pretending to be carefree; where the noise and gossip of the modern metropolis prevent their hearing poetic rumors of a better world.

My malaise over not having a Christmas Tree was so similar to that of Gene Kelly over leaving Brigadoon. I thought, "If I casually let go of this tree thing (or for that matter any of the great symbols and sacraments of my tradition) will I be letting go of something of immense importance to my humanity, my sanity?" My irrational but valid conclusion was, "Yes." And so, even as Gene Kelly returned to dwell in Brigadoon, I once more raised within our living room that tree that throughout my life has been my link to - what? To Paradise? Because what is the Christmas Tree but the reappearance in our homes every year of that Tree of Life that stood in the center of the Garden of Eden.

Or was that Christmas Tree something akin to the tree Betty Smith writes of in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*; a tree that made even tenement dwellers hopeful; a tree which grew up in a boarded lot amid garbage bins and right out of cement itself; a tree which the landlord sent two men to chop down - but out of whose stump a new tree grew along the ground until it reached a place where there were no clothes lines above it - and then once more began to reach for the sky - because nothing could destroy it!

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