

O Christmas tree, how old and tired are thy branches

Gayle Nichol - December 2024

My Christmas tree sits stark and bare in the middle of my room as I write this.

In years past, I would set it up and within hours I'd stuff it with decorations in a frenzy of Yuletide abandon like some kind of crazed Who.

I'm older now. Refined. And much too achy to attempt too much merriment all in one day.

So it sits naked, just plastic branches heaped with multicoloured lights, the way nature and NOMA intended.

I walked the dog this morning thinking about the trees I've had in my life.

Rifling through old photos recently, I laughed at a picture of my dad with my two brothers all sitting on the floor. Fred, the youngest, practically vibrating with excitement about the tree that is being assembled. Kevin, in his early teens, and likely an unwilling participant. And my dad, puzzled, trying to figure out the colours on the tips of the wire branches to determine where they are meant to slide into the trunk.

We joined the ranks of artificial trees early in the game. As much as my dad loved Christmas, he hated pine needles stabbing through his socks.

Years later, tired of the branch colour-coded guessing game, dad bought a beautiful lush tree that came in just two parts. Set into its base, the branches would just fall out like it had been freshly plucked from the forest at Eaton's.

While at school in Toronto I shared an apartment with a group of friends from across the country. While we all headed home for the holidays, we still enjoyed weeks of the festive season together, and our tree on tiny Draper Street was a ceramic number crafted by my cousin. It had cute little Christmas mice nestled at the base and peaking mid-way through, and one holding tightly, wearing a Santa hat, perching the star at the peak.

After I got married real trees were on the agenda for a few years. But like my dad, I didn't enjoy the stabbing needles. The real trees, the falling needles, and the husband in the end, were all out. It must have been in those first few years on my own again, that dad offered me their old tree-in-two-parts, as he had his eyes set on some new monster eight-footer.

Free and functional were just the order in those days, and so I took the tree home and made it my own.

It's the same tree that I pulled out of the cupboard last night.

Ironically, in my old country home, it is the box where some not-so-cute country mice had made a home in the months since it was last shut away on New Year's Day, squirreling away dog kibbles and making themselves otherwise at home.

I set the tree into its base and made my way to the back door with the mousy box, stopping for a moment to check the label.

Eaton's had delivered the tree to my dad in 1986.

My Christmas tree is almost 40 years old.

It's no longer lush. But still far from a Charlie Brown tree.

And for all these years, it has accomplished one thing. To bring light and cozy joy to the rooms it's filled. That's pretty good for a chunk of plastic.

But if there's a mouse hiding in those branches when it comes time to decorate, there's a chance it may have a National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation ending.