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Our Christmas Angel

"Angels we have heard on high
Sweetly singing o'er the plains:
And the mountains in reply,
Echoing their joyous strains...!"

I rehearsed my favorite Christmas song along with the choir, but this time I barely listened to the words as the voices of the other "Christmas angels" sailed around me.

It was December 22, 1961, and my brother Danny and I were worried. Things just weren't going along as usual this year. Mother wasn't feeling well, and Daddy came home looking defeated. His already rounded shoulders seemed bowed more than ever, as if under a great weight.

When Dad came home from work, Dan and I looked at each other in anticipation. Maybe tonight would be the night Daddy would take us to get a Christmas tree! Each night we asked him, and his answer was the same: "No. Not tonight."

We knew there was no point in arguing or coaxing. His answer seemed final, with none of the humor he usually displayed at our impatient antics. But surely he couldn't keep putting it off! Christmas was only four days away! We'd always had a Christmas tree up by this time. Up and down the street, lights twinkled in the dusk, and picture windows displayed ornamented, sparkling trees to every passer-by. Christmas music floated from the county jail across from our house. With our noses pressed against the window, we breathed little, foggy circles onto the glass, and drew snowflakes and stars with our fingers in the mist. Soon we would have a tree, too! Probably tonight!

We whirled and rushed toward our dad as we heard his slow step at the back door. "No, not tonight," he repeated heavily as he turned away. His face was lined with unspoken cares.

Years later I found out from my mother that we were going through an especially hard time financially. We'd never had a lot,

but that year Dad was trying to start a new business and care for a struggling new church as well. As usual with Dad's little flock, money was scarce. He had helped two little churches get off the ground already, and was now pastoring a third "struggling baby." The love offerings he received now and then didn't stretch far enough for Monday through Sunday fare, so Dad had to work during the week and do his counseling at night.

Now that I look back on it, my dad could have benefitted from a friendly ear himself, but I never heard him complain. If a family in need showed up at the door, they were always invited in, given a meal, and Dad listened to their tale of woe, offering help and sharing his generous sense of humor. His humor seemed threadbare now, though, and his doctor had just informed him to either give up preaching or the business, because both were too much for him. However, Dad had felt called to preach, and as for the business, how else would he feed and clothe his children?

At ages eight and eleven, Danny and I were supremely unaware of this combination of difficulties and only knew that now it was three days until Christmas and still we had no tree, and no sign of presents. We must have known that it was a difficult time for Dad, though, because we didn't put up a fuss: we only turned away sadly and put our noses to the window again. Perhaps we weren't going to get a tree after all. Maybe this Christmas would go right by without any sign that it had been there at all.

Across the street at the jail there was a sudden flurry of activity. In the deepening dusk one of Danny's policemen friends was carrying a tree out of the county jail. He propped it against the wall and went back inside.

"Danny! Look!" I whispered excitedly.

It was a beautiful tree, full and green and tall, and probably nicer than any we'd ever had. It had only one problem: the top was missing, but in our excitement over seeing it there, that "problem" faded into insignificance. What was it doing there? Did they want it? Our eyes danced with unanswered questions. We were too shy to ask about it, but as the next day wore on, we wondered and wondered.

The house was quiet. Daddy was at work, Mother was in bed, our older brother, Joe, was in the Marines, and my teenage sister,

Sharon, was out visiting friends, absorbed in her teenage world. Only Danny and I watched the tree leaning against the wall and the policeman going in and out of the station as the hours ticked by until Christmas.

Finally we could stand it no longer.

“Let’s ask them,” I said. “Maybe they don’t want it.” I watched Danny speeding across the street, and into the station. Although I was three years older, Danny was the confident one, especially when it came to those towering policemen in their fresh pressed uniforms.

A few moments later, he came out, his face all aglow. “Yes!” he nodded to me. “Yes, yes!”

I was over in a sparkle. A sturdy policeman came out and helped us carry it across the street. “We cut the top off for a tree for the inmates,” he explained. “We were just going to throw this bottom half away.” I was filled with excitement as I watched him stride away.

When Daddy came home, he didn’t say a word. He just made a stand out of scrap wood and set the tree up in the dining room for us. I saw him looking at it quizzically, shaking his head a little at the sawed off top.

In fact, no one seemed to share our excitement, but we still thought it was a most beautiful tree. It was full and glossy, and even with the top gone, it almost reached the ceiling. Even more important, it was our tree, and God had given it to us. We knew God had given it to us, because who else could have made such a miracle?

Danny and I ran back and forth with decorations, filling up the tree. But when we finished, even I had to admit, as my eyes traveled up to the sawed off top, that it looked incomplete and ugly. I looked at Danny’s downcast face and knew he was feeling the same way. None of our decorations would cover up the fact that our tree just didn’t have a top!

Disappointment started to seep in like a fog over my heart, but as I gazed at the tree, an idea formed inside me, as clear and pure as the joy I felt about Christmas every year. I ran to my room and got one of my favorite dolls. She was about six inches high, with long golden hair and a white dress which reached to her ankles. Just

as I had thought, she was just the right size to fit her legs into a discarded toilet paper roll, and the toilet paper roll fit perfectly on the sawed-off top of the tree. Her long white dress fell over the roll and disguised it. Danny watched in awe as I made silver angel's wings for her out of cardboard and aluminum foil and tied them on with thread, and a little halo from a bit of tinsel. We were breathless with anticipation as I climbed onto a kitchen chair and set our Christmas angel in her place of honor. Her golden hair shone, and her wings sparkled. Her flowing white dress covered the ugly top in a gracious gesture. She seemed to gently proclaim a blessing on our tree, and on our lives.

“Come see our tree, Daddy! Come see our tree!”

Dad came in and stood staring at our tree, and at the little angel standing so proudly atop it. She seemed unconcerned, hopeful, and triumphant. His face cracked into a smile, the first one in weeks, and he straightened. Watching his face change made me happy. I could tell that he felt happier too.

Christmas seemed to fly by then, with fast wing beats and happier feet. I put my heart into our choir's Christmas Eve performance, and enjoyed, as usual, the door to door caroling we did for those who couldn't attend church that night.

I can't remember whether we got presents that year, or if we did, what they were, but Danny and I still remember our tree, and our best Christmas gift ever.

It was a gift of hope, sent specially to us from God via our Christmas angel, who stood valiantly on top of our sawed off tree and proclaimed a victory over sawed off dreams. If I listened very closely I thought I could hear her singing: “Glory to God in the highest! On earth peace, goodwill towards men!”