*SILVER BRANCHES*

We weren’t much difference in height, less than a yard. The height gap shortened further when she stretched upward for affection, placing two gentle front paws on my thigh. Who could resist a doggie hug with those beautiful brown, angelic eyes looking at them? Not me. I loved it!

The yummy food, the tree-decorating tasks, and the gifts that eventually appeared under the tree left Susie and I giddy with joy every Christmas. Our family tradition included eating popcorn while stringing garland around silver branches, drinking hot cocoa, and choosing the best spots on the tinsel tree to hang peppermint candy canes, ornaments, and more tinsel.

The work always began in our small kitchen. Coils glowed on the electric burners of our white stove. Jiffy Pop duty was my welcomed assignment every Christmas tree-decorating afternoon. I held the attached handle with a white potholder, a red poinsettia stitched into its middle, crocheted by my grandmother Rosa (known as Ava to me, the Portuguese translation for grandmother.)

While Mom stood by, I gently shook the pan back and forth over the burner and pictured my Ava doing the same thing with me at her house on weekend visits. At Ava’s house, we’d also bake cookies from scratch. I can still picture Ava opening the oven door, pulling a cookie sheet full of sugar cookies topped with holiday sprinkles out—steam fogging her gold-rimmed eyeglasses—setting the warm cookies down on a trivet on the counter, and “product testing” one before it cooled.

Mom heated instant cocoa mix with Borden’s whole milk in a cooking pot on another burner until the aroma of sweet chocolate permeated the air. Then, she’d pour hot chocolate into mugs and pile whipped cream on top as high as I convinced her was required per Santa.

Kernels popped until they pushed the aluminum foil into a round balloon. Mom would slit open my Jiffy Pop creation with a steak knife, and I’d empty the avalanche of corn into individual bowls. Susie sat on the linoleum floor, watching the event unfold, raising her shiny brown muzzle upward, her head bobbing in the air with nostrils moving, for a hint at what tasty morsel might be coming her way.

We moved to the living room where Bing Crosby and Perry Como 78-rpm vinyl records played Christmas music on the old RCA Victor. There, a sparse tinsel tree developed into a densely decorated silvery pine by our family of four, three humans dressed in red plaid flannel pajamas and a dog clad in her green, red, and white knit sweater.

Though we didn’t outfit ourselves in hooded coats and winter gloves, drive miles to a Christmas tree farm, choose a fragrant, fresh Douglas fir, drag it to our car and strap it to the rooftop for the ride home, our family memories were no less special. The view from outside, for anyone peering through the bay window into our annual holiday workshop, would make even Norman Rockwell proud.

My parents had purchased an artificial tinsel Christmas tree from the Sears Catalog the first year they were married because of the alluring easy payment plan. It was their gift to each other and to the family they were starting. Owning an aluminum Christmas tree was economical, especially for a young family of farmers like mine who lived on a budget and didn’t have spare money to buy real trees every year.

Christmas was extra special for Susie and me. On the first weekend after Thanksgiving, we’d follow Dad to my parents’ bedroom closet where he’d pull a three-foot box from behind hanging clothes and bring it to our annual project location in the living room. Susie and I sat on the carpet observing while he pieced together the trunk until it rose to its six-foot height, placed it in a lightweight aluminum stand, and then wrapped it with a white, sequin fleece blanket.

Since Dad was the tallest family member, he had the task of crowning the tree’s peak with our family’s treasured keepsake, a red glass Santa tree topper. Spun of thin glass and adorned with red, silver, and white gems, handling the topper made us all nervous for fear of breaking it. It glistened with Santa’s snowy beard curled for much of its length, draping down the treetop. The priceless decoration atop our tinsel tree captivated me.

Mom would remove individually wrapped branches from the cardboard box and categorize each of them according to their tiny, color-coded dots, spreading groups across the low pile carpeting.

After Susie sniffed approval of every silver branch with aluminum foil needles, I would match the color-coded dot at its tip to the same one on an eighth inch round opening in the aluminum tree trunk and insert. Obedient, Susie sat awaiting further instructions if I commanded them. Branches of different lengths required attention to detail to meet the triangular-shaped goal.

I was obsessed with putting jigsaw puzzles together as a kid. I spent hours on this task, kneeling on the floor at the coffee table with Susie on the couch behind me, analyzing the structure of each piece, and sometimes getting her approval before placing it on the board.

Hanging ornaments and garland on a Christmas tree is a cheery pastime many of us enjoy, but building an artificial tree one piece at a time for an avid puzzle-fan like me was way more fun. I recall my excitement the year I inserted branches higher up the tree trunk because I had grown taller than the previous Christmas. Susie looked up at me with her big brown eyes, wiggled and wagged her tail, and opened her mouth to where I was convinced, she was smiling at me. Though a dog technically wouldn’t understand why I was overjoyed, my connection with Susie was strong. If I was happy, Susie was happy and vice versa. Now, that’s what I call true friendship.

I have vivid memories of helping my mother set up the electric color wheel, with four plastic parts of equal quarters, which sat on the floor next to the tree and shined rotating colors of green, red, orange, and blue hues upon it. I also remember how hot that machine got with prolonged use. That contraption was a fire waiting to happen!

My folks drilled into me we were never to leave the wheel running when we weren’t in the house. Before we left home or went outside to do chores, Mom or Dad would say to me or each other, “Don’t forget to unplug the wheel!” If we were already in the middle of feeding the farm animals or were in the car heading to town and for some reason the *reminder* hadn’t occurred earlier, I’d hear those infamous words spoken to me or the other parent, “Did you unplug the wheel?”

I have vague memory of a time or two when chores were interrupted by this question, and a walk to the house or a return car ride home was made to ensure the wheel had been unplugged. Better to be safe than sorry!

On the rare occasion that we all forgot, and the wheel ran nonstop for an hour or two, I remember watching whoever entered the house first and realized it was still going ’round and ’round, run to unplug it. Maybe that’s why fire has always been my biggest fear.