

O' Christmas Tree

With the forecast calling for another wintry blast, I was surprised to see a crowd of overcoats and hoods *ooh-ing* and *ahh-ing* over the gas-grill display, pressing the orange ignite buttons and turning the knobs. They're like a bunch of little girls in their plastic pretend-kitchens, I thought, playing in a world yet to come.

"Christmas trees?" I asked an orange-vested woman whose blond curls hid her nametag.

"Fake or real?"

"Artificial," I said.

"Garden Center. Go all the way back to fencing, turn right."

Seems even "non-real" Christmas trees would garner more respect this time of year, I thought, making my way past the garbage cans, extra-large leaf bags, potting soil, bug repellants and Japanese lanterns. "Hello...Hal," I said, nodding at his tag and pulling a crumpled ad from my pocket. "I'm interested in this five-foot Douglas Fir. Is this the one?" I asked, pointing to the jolly almost-looks-like-the-real-thing-with-fade-in-and-fade-out-white-lights tree.

It wasn't. It was a six-foot fake Scotch Pine and \$70 more. Three hours later and finally home, at the epicenter of an explosion of trinkets and Calpurnia in full attack mode against the army of yellowing paper that seems to threaten her very cathood, I am ready to decorate what is really a three-foot-green-plastic tree set into a two-foot "Grecian" Styrofoam stand. Every year, my former husband and I delighted in peeling away the



newsprint protecting our treasures – Teddy bears popping out of gift boxes, reindeers frozen forever in flight – finding a headline, a dateline on a story: material evidence of a long and successful marriage.

But only in the dictionary does "long marriage" come before "successful." Christmastime eventually became the War of the Orbs. He began weighing the branches with tiny replicas of handlebars and helmets from Harley-Davidson. I dotted the tree with ornaments set in doilies and lace. He especially abhorred the pink Victorian shoe that sprouted tulle. All of them, he gladly gave to me in the distribution of assets.

And now, I find, every one of them is too big or too heavy to hang on the only size tree I can fit into my living room without having to crawl over the sofa to get to the kitchen. Except, perhaps, for this one: a small crystal with red and green splashes and tiny snowflakes suspended in its core. I bought it the year we began counseling. It's not a color I can feel or can scratch off with my fingernail. The color is buried: a jewel in its transparent vault, unreachable unless – and I consider this for a moment – I smash it against something, drop it on the floor, kick it to the wall.

My three-foot fir is waiting to be dressed. Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night. **dt**