

**University of Maine**

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**From the Selected Works of Kimberly J. Sawtelle**

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December 21, 1988

## So much for department store trees

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# So much for department store trees

by Kimberly Sawtelle

Ever since I was a little girl I dreamed of the day I would be able to have a "grown up" Christmas tree, like those pictured in *Good Housekeeping* magazine. You know the ones—a classic evergreen silhouette, impeccably balanced and meticulously manicured: festooned with glorious decorations, matching ornament for ornament, each strip of tinsel lined in perfect order with every other piece of tinsel on all the branches.

I sigh when I walk into department stores like Porteous, and wander aimlessly among the designer trees with their expensive decorations. Just once in my life, I want to have a tree as wonderful as those with their confection-like beauty.

The time has come, at last.

This year, after decades of threatening, the family has an artificial tree. Every year, for as long as I can remember, Mother has stated, "This year we're going to have an artificial tree!" And every year, for as long as I can remember, I argued, "No, what's wrong with a real tree?" Finally, after holiday upon holiday of spilled water; leaking tree stands; dry needles littering the floor; knotted tinsel and allergy attacks I decided my gift to the family this year would be that long-lamented fake tree.

Fortunate to get one on sale, I brought the thing home and set it up to make sure it had come complete. Looking at it, smack in the middle of the kitchen floor, I suddenly had a dawning; it was "The Perfect Tree," classic silhouette, impeccably balanced! All I needed were designer ornaments and look out *Better Homes and Gardens*.

Careful research into this season's Christmas tree decorating phenomenon lead me to create the consummate Victorian tree. Currently vogue, it proved to be the least expensive avenue to pursue, since most the ornaments are intricately cut and folded paper with a little lace and gold foil thrown in for good measure. Although I don't want to boast, I can cut paper as well as the next guy.

For over a month I designed a dozen individual paper fans, no two alike. I purchased yards upon yards of ribbon and white and ivory lace to create little nosegays decorated with burgundy and dusty rose silk flowers. I folded tissue paper flowers, hunted up antique-looking gift tags to hang on gold thread, and learned how to tie florist bows out of wire, lace and ribbon.

Once all the pieces were in place I began to put the tree together, starting with the mandatory, designer tree tiny-white-lights. Fussily weaving the strings of lights amid the plastic fir tips it suddenly didn't feel quite right. Placing each bulb in flawless symmetry I remembered the strings of clunky old lights we had on the tree when I was a child.

We were forever one string short but never had the money to get the extra lights, even when the oldest strand shorted out and left us with even fewer. The 7-watt bulbs needed to be checked every 15-minutes to make certain a hurricane hadn't secretly snuck through the house, forcing a hot light to touch a drying

limb, the curtain or some tinsel.

As each individually designed and handcrafted nosegay touched its carefully designated branch I thought of the tree decorations my brothers and I made as children. Mother was always coming up with new holiday decorations for us to make while she worked around the house. At least one weekend every December she would bring out something new for us to craft, always providing a completed sample to guide our efforts. There were Dixie cup angels, sequined styrofoam balls, quilling and assorted construction paper and cedar cone projects; the results of which have hung on the tree every year since they joined the homemade ornament ranks, or fell apart.

Glycerized baby's breath, specially arranged among the limbs, is a far cry from the pounds upon pounds of tinsel that has burdened the family's annual tree.

There are still pieces of old lead tinsel in the box upstairs from a time before these nasty hair-like plastic things available now. The heft of the old glitter and shine was thrown out a long time ago when it was discovered to be too dangerous; unfortunately now it's also considered antique.

One of the greatest things about Christmas trees at home was always the tinsel blowing contests my brothers and I held from different chairs in the livingroom. It was an understated competition with, heretofore, unrecorded rules. Each participant must:

1. Remain in a seated position. No leaning forward (unless you're sitting on the couch) or rocking allowed;
2. Aim at the "good" tinsel at the top of the tree (that's the stuff that never falls off gets stepped on and crunched);
3. The one who blows hardest, making the designated tinsel move most, with the least time elapsed from time blowing commenced, is the smug, yet unrecognized winner. My youngest brother usually claimed this victory, from the couch no less,

earning him the undisputed title, Blow Hard.

Finishing up my holiday chore with magazine accurate ornaments in place, gilt-edged tassels precisely positioned and 200 miniature lights glowing brightly I asked Mother what she thought of my fairy-tale creation. "It's pretty, but it looks cold," she stated flatly.

She was right. My perfect department store tree is just that. A characterless, impersonal decoration that should be chiding last minute shoppers on the rush, "If you had started earlier, you could have had a tree that looks just like me."

That's the bottom line. It could be sitting in anyone's home. It has no identifying marks leading any of us to claim it, aside from the fact it's primly showing off in the center of our livingroom; no kitchen cup nuns, no cardboard Pied Pipers, no battered pink foil star, no faded construction paper chains.

It's a nice enough tree and just what I always wanted, but some how it's going to seem like we'll all be spending Christmas with a beautiful stranger.

