

Chapter 3

Bubble Lights * December

I took off my boots in the garage and opened and closed the door to the house as quietly as I could. It squeaked anyway. All the lights were off in the house, except one. I could always count on Mom to leave the light above the stove on for me... just like she used to when I lived at home. It was light enough that didn't keep her or my dad awake, but lit the entry way, kitchen, and part of the dining room.

I was home for Christmas break, and just in from a date. We'd had a nice dinner out and movie in, but that didn't stop me from quietly scavenging to see what Mom made for dinner... and dessert. Judging by the Tupperware, it had been venison strip steak, lightly battered and fried, fried potatoes with onion, and green beans. Dessert had been brownies from a box. Mom was due to make all the Christmas cookies this weekend, so I didn't fault her for the boxed brownies. Papa probably did, though.

I got a glass out of the cupboard and poured a tall glass of milk. I might be in college, but I respected the drinking age, otherwise I probably would have had a nice glass of wine, if I liked wine. But tonight, milk seemed to fit my mood just right. I walked to the dining room and switched on the farthest of the three switches. This lit two can lights around the brick fireplace... and the Christmas tree. Papa had designed the house himself and wanted some of the outlets to work with the switches. A pain in the butt when you're trying to vacuum in the middle of the day, but handy when you're in late around Christmastime and feeling nostalgic.

I walked into the living room and sat on Mom's ottoman next to the tree and waited for the lights to warm up. Of all the Christmas trees I'd ever seen, ours was the end-all, be-all of trees. Every year Mom would say, "Let's just have a small one. It'll be less work for everyone. A *small* tree, please, Dale?" The problem being that her request was made as we were leaving to get the tree. For Papa, choosing a Christmas tree started in July while pruning his several Christmas tree plantations. I'll say this; in their natural habitat, they all look smaller than they are when you're trying to fit them through the door. Even if Papa did try to get a smaller tree, it wound up having to be trimmed 3 or 4 feet to fit under the vaulted living room ceiling.

And Mom always had her routine to get ready for the tree. There was really only one place for a tree to go in our living room: in front of the east windows. Away from the central heating vents and away from the fireplace and TV. That meant the couch needed to be moved from the east windows to the west half-wall. That meant vacuuming. Vacuuming lead to dusting, and pretty soon we may as well have company. Except that in a few hours Papa and I were going to destroy Mom's Feng Shui by bringing in a tree that seemed to grow 4 feet on the drive back to the house.

By now it was dark outside, so Mom had all the outside lights on. Papa backed on to the front slab and released the tree. It's a great tree. It smelled fabulous; that balsam fir smell that Yankee Candle has yet to replicate correctly because they're using the wrong type of fir as a prototype. Papa is proud of his trees that he planted by hand and pruned twice a year; trees that I kept the weeds from choking out by mowing between and got slapped in the face by the branches as the trees got bigger and my mower didn't get smaller.

Papa went around to the basement door and got an old drop cloth that still smells of turpentine from when my parents built this house 15 years before. He spread out the sheet by the door and he and I gently carried the tree onto the cloth. It's right about here that we realized we'd bitten off more than we could chew. We wrapped the cloth around the tree like a girdle to get it in the front door, the biggest door in the house. This is trickier than it sounds because there's pushing and pulling and trying to keep the tree sucked up, but not break branches... then there's the door. Someone has to hold the door (usually Mom). And it's about here that she believes we didn't hear her when she asked for a smaller tree. And while she's voicing this belief, Papa and I are looking at each other wondering what would have happened if we'd picked the one Papa REALLY wanted to bring home. This *was* the smaller tree.

Partially through the door, the tree got stuck and the commotion kicked up a few notches. Mom started in on her I-told-you-so speech and Papa was shouting orders. I was barking back to be heard over Mom and her Christmas music, and finally all the girdling and wedging paid off and the tree was in the entry way. We kept the drop cloth around the tree as we slid it across the floor, through the dining room, and through the living room to the east windows. I took a break to check out and taste-test what Mom made for dinner while Papa went back downstairs for the Christmas tree stand and a patch of plywood to put under the stand. I helped him get the tree in the stand and then left to go shower. This whole endeavor rarely left me without pitch on my hands or in my hair; the solution for that being turpentine, hence the shower.

By the time I got out, Mom was furiously doing the dishes, mad at Papa because he was on his 14th adjustment to level the tree and wasn't listening to her suggestions. She had vacuumed the needles that she could without disturbing a scene which I was certain would escalate to using plumb bobs and bubble levels. I made myself a plate of dinner and sat at the table with a full view of the tree to watch the show:

Papa stood and took a step back to survey the tree, deciding by himself now which direction it needed to go. Then he climbed back under the tree only to get his glasses swatted off. While shuffling around to find his glasses, he moved the wrenches that he was using to tighten and loosen the stand to make the tree ...more than perpendicular, so when he was in position to make the adjustment, he grabbed the wrong wrenches first.

Eventually, I felt sorry for him and handed him the wrenches he needed. While still under the tree, he asked me which way it needed to go and I heard dishes clattering in the kitchen and Mom muttering about him listening to me, but not to her.

Once Papa was satisfied (and what it took to achieve this other than sheer fatigue, I never did figure out), he placed the star on the top so we could get going with the lights and then left to go shower (pitch, turpentine, etc.).

Mom got out the step ladder and brought up the boxes of decorations until she found the fragile lights. Our lights were another reason our trees were always superior to everyone else's. I've never seen lights like this in anyone else's house, in any stores, or on TV. And that being the entirety of my world at the time, had we not had them, I never would have believed they existed. Our lights were Bubble Lights. (Cue angelic voices in the "Halleluiah" chorus.) A golf ball sized light at the bottom with a small glass cylinder of

colored liquid attached to the top of the light. When the lights warmed up, the heat was transferred to the liquid until it bubbled. Because the liquid was completely self-contained, it was never lost; just bubbled. As a kid, I didn't know or understand the science (physics?) behind it, so the lights were magical.



Mom would plug in the first strand into the star and carefully attach each bubble light to the branches, making sure the glass cylinder was upright, or the liquid wouldn't bubble. We'd have to adjust the lights as they drooped throughout the Christmas season, but the adjusting was part of the enjoyment. It almost forced you to stop and look at—study, really—the Christmas tree and how everything was situated, balanced, positioned, repositioned, and finally simply appreciated.

Mom wound the strands of lights around the tree in perfect spacing and plugged them in at the bottom. It was a great start, but we were far from done. Papa was out of the shower admiring the lights for a minute before going into the kitchen making himself a plate of

dinner. Mom and I sorted through the Christmas decorations. Probably half of the decorations were store-bought and not personalized. The other half were special. Looking through the ornaments, I realized that my mom is a woman of many talents. Mom went through a macramé phase like many women of her generation, so there were several macramé candy canes, candy cane reindeer, picture frames, keys, and other items that, independently, don't necessarily mean Christmas to anyone else. But I knew that each year, they hung on our tree, making it more Christmas-y with each one hung.

Along with macramé, she made several ornaments with yarn and small-squared, plastic grid. She "sewed" the squares of plastic grid together with eyeballs, so it made a face, complete with a mouth that opened when you squeezed together the "cheeks" of the face. A note accompanied these that said, "Squeeze my cheeks and I'll give you a kiss!" A Hershey's kiss would be waiting inside the mouth. Mom would have to replenish these ones almost daily, but it was a nice treat and made for some great memories.

The yarn and plastic grid were also transformed into picture frames, complete with pictures of me and my brother when we were 5, 6, and 7. The pictures were never updated and we didn't mind.

Mom also cross-stitched. There were a few framed ornaments with our initials cross-stitched inside with a snowflake.

And so, they would get sorted into piles: my favorites, my brother's, and the rest. This was the result of a long-ago argument that started when my brother hid all of the ornaments

with my initials or picture inside the tree and put all the ones pertaining to him front and center, thus grabbing Santa's attention and subconsciously persuading him to give my brother more presents. Mom finally settled it by saying we'd sort them from now on, and each would only put his or her own ornaments on the tree. My brother was in college and wasn't home this eventful weekend, so I put his ornaments in a separate box and took this opportunity to put my favorites in the limelight.

Mom caught me.

"Well, he's not here!"

Mom said my name in that long, drawn-out Mom-tone that made it clear I'd better act like an adult and fairly place his ornaments or there'd be no dessert in my foreseeable future.

"*Fine.*"

Staring at the tree now with my glass of milk from Mom's ottoman, I saw a light that had started to wilt a little to the left. The bubbles were traveling up the side of the glass cylinder instead of straight up, so I stood and righted the light. My eyes traveled from the lights to the reflection of the lights in the surrounding ornaments, all placed on the tree with the individual intent of being noticed, but also part of a bigger picture. I contemplated removing my brother's ornaments for a moment, wondering how long it would take Mom to notice if I could hide the holes in the decorations... I allowed myself a devious smile, took a long pull from my milk, and rolled my eyes at my own thought; of course Mom would

notice... but he was due to be home tomorrow from school, so if I could get away with it just for a day... I smiled again.

I finished my milk and put the glass on the table next to Papa's recliner. I sat down on the carpet facing the tree and laid back, interlacing my fingers behind my head. All of the bubble lights at once looked somehow orchestrated. I found my favorite ornaments and counted them. I found the one with my picture from when I was 6 and even vaguely recalled the picture being taken in front of our new house, the house we were all in now. The lawn wasn't done, but there were mounds of topsoil everywhere around the yard, so the whole place smelled like wet dirt. That's still one of my favorite smells to this day. Probably not Mom's though... it took Papa so long to finish the lawn that us kids had built forts into the dirt mounds and probably tracked in half of the topsoil into the house that Mom had to clean up. One way or another, I bet he lost about half his topsoil over time to kid-caused erosion.

Mom didn't macramé that much anymore, but I remember she used to make these owl... towel holders? Were they towel-holders? I thought I remembered a ring at the bottom. What I really remembered were the eyes. The body of the owl was typical macramé, but around the eyes she brushed out the macramé until it frizzed out. They were pretty cute. What did she do with them? I'd have to remember to ask.

I scooted under the tree and surveyed the gifts. While under there, I inhaled deeply the rich scent of balsam fir and studied Mom's Christmas tree skirt. I recalled the year she made all of them. They're a quilt with Christmas-y squares, batting in the middle, and a lace edge. She tied the layers together to keep it from falling apart over the years. She made one for

each of her sisters and sisters-in-law. It was a lot of work; every time my brother or I would be looking for Mom, she'd be in the basement in her craft corner working on another Christmas tree skirt for yet another relative. My mother, the Woman of Many Talents.

...Including gift-wrapping. I backed out from beneath the tree and decided this time would be better spent wrapping the gifts I'd yet to place under the tree before the intended recipients woke up. I grabbed my glass, rinsed it in the sink, and paused at the light switch. I took in the tree one last time, sighed, and turned off the lights. Magic... began and ended with a light switch. I'll have bubble lights on *my*tree when I get older, I decided.