

by Mae Weller Goodman

Art. by Jim Neebe



"H^AVING A Christmas tree for just the three of us would be silly!"

Mary Blake's voice was sharp and impatient, as it always was.

She looked at her husband. He didn't say anything, just settled deeper into his armchair and rubbed the back of his hand wearily across his eyes.

Her father, too, was silent. He stood at the window, his hands clasped behind him, staring out into the bleak, sleety night.

Father has aged, Mary thought, but then we're all suddenly old since Tommy's gone.

She looked at the picture on the piano—Tommy on his 11th birthday in his Boy Scout uniform, his hat at an impudent angle that matched the laughing gleam of his dark eyes and the curve of his brows.

Now, instead of the picture, Mary saw him lying in bed at the hospital, thin and pale. Tommy never had a 12th birthday.

She had cried millions of tears during the months Tommy was ill, but afterward she didn't cry at all. Something had withered inside her. She felt empty, as though all the juices of her body had dried up and, with them, all feeling of living.

"You two watch television. I'm going to change the pantry shelving,"

Christmas Without Tommy



"I only want a very little one,"
Mary said; "pick it out for me."

Mary said. She created all sorts of odd jobs during the evening, to avoid watching the programs: they were so gay with holiday spirit. And then there were the Christmas carols that Tommy had loved to sing while she played the piano.

She felt a nagging sense of guilt as she pounded the thumbtacks. A woman set the mood of a house; there was no denying that, but she just couldn't help it. Tommy had been gone for seven months, and her sorrow hung over the house like a dark cloud, touching everyone in it. Jim tried so hard to be cheerful, but he stopped smiling after he was home from work for a while, and her father stopped telling his funny stories and singing his favorite ballads in that endearing monotone.

Jim had sounded excited, almost like his old self, when he had said, "I'll have to pick up a tree tomorrow, and we'll trim it in the evening. I'll get some new ornaments, too." All three of them had been silent for a moment, remembering how Tommy had dropped the box of ornaments last year while he was storing them away on a closet shelf.

The mere thought of a Christmas tree trimmed with shining, colored ornaments made Mary feel physically ill. Both men had fallen silent after her outburst about the tree. But she was right: it would be silly. More than that, it would be a make-believe that she wasn't up to.

The nagging feeling was still there the next morning when she was out shopping. There were a few trees on the sidewalk outside the florist shop. Impulsively she picked up a loose green sprig and smelled its fresh fragrance. She started to walk away and then stopped and just stood there, the needles crumpled in her hand.

"Picked out a tree, lady?" The little old man had an elfin face and his black eyes looked at her admiringly. "A pretty lady like you should have shopped earlier when I had big beautiful trees."

"I'll take a little one," Mary said. "I only want a very little one. Pick it out for me. Any one will do." She gave him the address.

Later, standing before a counter of shining ornaments, she felt dizzy and weak. "Please pick some ornaments for me," she asked the girl. "Just enough for a tiny tree."

When the tree arrived, she put it away quickly in the pantry. Mechanically, she fixed the dressing for tomorrow's turkey and rolled the dough for the pies. Tiredness seemed to ooze from her bones. Tonight and tomorrow, she thought, they'll pass. It won't be so bad.

She heard Jim coming in the front door, and after a moment he came into the kitchen. He pressed his cold cheek gently against hers for a long moment. "There's snow in the air," he said. "We may have a white Christmas." Then he went to take his shower, and she set the table.

Her father came in a little later. He called out a greeting and went straight to his room.

After dinner, Mary dawdled over the dishes, her mind on the tree in the pantry and the ordeal of trimming it. I could get rid of it and they'd never know, she thought. But she didn't. She picked up the tree and forced herself to walk into the living room.

At the doorway she stopped and stared, unbelieving! Jim had placed a lovely small tree on the table at the windows, and there was a box of shining ornaments on the davenport. He looked up and saw her standing there, the tree in her arms.

"Mary," he said. "You didn't!"

At that instant, her father walked into the room. Under one arm he carried a small fir tree and under the other a box of ornaments.

For a moment they just looked at one another. Then there was the sound of laughter, and Mary realized she had made the sound. They all laughed together, slowly at first, then with release—wonderful laughter, easing pains, lightening sorrows, bringing the three of them together again.

After the laughter, Mary felt the tears. She ran into the bathroom and bathed her face in cold water. When she opened the door, Jim was waiting for her. She went straight into his arms and he held her tightly.

"I'm okay," she said. "I've been very selfish, and you've been very patient with me."

They walked together into the living room. Her father had set the three little trees in a row, a box of ornaments before each one.

Mary kissed him and went to the piano. "Let's sing a Christmas carol," she said, "and then we'll trim the trees. We'll have to invite all the children in the neighborhood in to see them."

Jim and her father stood behind her and they sang "Silent Night." She looked at the picture of Tommy. It seemed as though the four of them were together again.