

My Best Christmas Ever - The Evening Standard, December 2010

Christmas in Tinsel Town

As the mother of five small children who fervently believe in Santa Claus, I can point to many Christmases which began happily and ended even better. But there is one in particular that has remained with me since my own childhood because it set the stage for all future Christmases.

I was about nine at the time, and in those days my family lived in Los Angeles. Since arriving from England two years earlier, I had grown used to the perpetual sunshine at Christmas, and the occasional sight of Santa driving across town in a Ford Mustang. In fact I loved it when the plastic reindeer were strung across Beverly Boulevard. I even looked longingly at the fir trees dyed pink that you could buy from the temporary Christmas lots along Westwood.

These gaudy displays were the forbidden fruit to me. I yearned for all that tinsel and sparkle. I desperately wanted our house to have neon candy-canes out front and Rudolph on the roof. I began to doubt whether I ever could be truly happy without the automated Frosty that waved from our neighbour's front lawn.

It was, therefore, with a heavy heart that I accompanied my mother to chose a Christmas tree that year. I knew the drill – not too wide, and not too tall and definitely green. I only realized that something was up when we turned into 'Sal's Xmas Emporium.' She turned me loose with the words, "choose any one you like".

Oh! What an hour it was. With admirable composure my mother said not a word as I wavered between the powdery blue and baby pink confections that had once been innocent evergreens on some mountain-top. It was a close-run thing, but in the end they were cast aside in favour of a six-foot 'snow-dusted' perfect pyramid that came with its own Santa's elves' tree stand.

My mother had not finished, however. Knowing her only daughter too well, next she took me to Woolworths where I was unleashed at the Christmas aisles. Nothing was barred: more fake snow – this time with glitter. More tinsel! More day-glo baubles! Lights! Lots and lots of lights!

Thirty-three years later I can still remember the joyous afternoon we spent, she and I, decorating that tree until its branches were completely hidden beneath a

mound of sticky, glittering junk. It was her gift to me and I have carried it in my heart ever since.