

# Father Knows Mistletoe Best

By Toni Gill

As I drew an old pair of Daddy's long underwear onto my legs, I silently wished that this afternoon was over. My sister, Joanne, who was eighteen, was rummaging through the large, built-in drawers in our room looking for some gloves.

"I don't see why we have to do this every year!" she complained.

"It means so much to Daddy and Bobbie," I explained for the twelfth time that day, "and it's only for one afternoon."

"You just wait," she warned. "Something always goes wrong, and today will be no exception!"

I knew she was right. Every Christmas Eve it was the same thing. Come rain, snow, or ice, the Gills would get their mistletoe on Christmas Eve afternoon. There was never any legitimate reason for staying home and being warm and cozy. We had to go five miles down the river in an out-board motor boat and shoot mistletoe out of the tops of the trees lining the shores of the many creeks. Mama calls it a family tradition. She never goes with us.

It was two o'clock when Joanne and I trudged down our front walk and across the road to the boat house. Daddy, Bobbie and Pepper were already there. Bobbie is my nine-year-old sister, and Pepper is our eight-year-old Dalmatian. Joanne, Bobbie, and Pepper crowded into the front seat. Bobbie, who is usually excited when we start one of these things, was sulking because Mama had made her wear a hat. I handed Daddy his gun, the long-handled clippers, and the paddle, and got in beside him on the back seat. We got out of the boat house without scraping the sides of the boat any more than usual, and Daddy pushed the automatic starter. Nothing happened. Joanne turned around and gave me that "well, here we go again" look. I nodded and looked heavenward.

"Push the starter," I heard Daddy say. I looked back at him. He had his hand stuck in the motor. I have no idea what he was doing, but I was afraid I would electrocute him if I pushed that little button. Rather than have him lose his temper though, I pushed the button. Surprisingly enough, the motor started, and we went skimming over the water. That icy wind cut right through the pounds of clothes we had on. When the spray from an extra large wave hit me squarely in the face, I gave up trying to be comfortable.

It took us fifteen minutes to get to the place where the river narrows and divides into the various creeks. Daddy slowed the motor

and turned into the first one we came to. The idea was for all of us to scan the shore of that muddy, briar-infested wilderness and find some mistletoe. But not just any mistle-toe. It had to be thick and green and full of white berries. It really wasn't hard to find though. I don't think anyone ever explored these places except us. We soon spotted some and turned towards the shore.

Since the tide was unusually low, we couldn't pull the boat close enough in to shore to get out on dry land. Daddy had on boots that came up to his knees, so he got out to wade in. I heard a squish, and a strange expression came on Daddy's face. The smelly mud was deeper than he had figured and was seeping down into his boots. Daddy resolutely shouldered his gun and started for shore. He reminded me of the soldiers I had seen in war movies trudging through tropical jungles. Of course he didn't look exactly like a Hollywood soldier-hero. He didn't have lots of unruly black hair falling over flashing blue eyes. His gray hair was covered by a red hunting cap, and his brown eyes looked through horn-rimmed glasses. But he was just as determined as the toughest of the glamour boys.

When he had gone only a few feet from shore, the underbrush hid him from sight. We knew which tree he was headed for though, and we watched the large piece of mistle-toe clinging to its top branch as we heard the shot from Daddy's gun. It didn't budge. Bobbie stuck her fingers in her ears because she said the loud noise scared her. When she removed her fingers, she found that one of her ears had stopped up. She started whining and demanded that I do something about it. Now how could I possibly un-stop her ear while sitting in a boat up a creek in the dead of winter? Besides, I was trying, without much success, to keep the boat from drifting away from the shore with the canoe paddle. I told her to yawn, but she said she wasn't sleepy. She was still complaining when, eleven shots later, the mistle-toe came tumbling down and Daddy made his way back to the boat.

Within an hour the boat was so full of mistle-toe we couldn't move for fear of knocking the berries off of a piece of it. Daddy still didn't think we had enough. We had to supply all the neighbors too. Joanne called Daddy's attention

to a piece hanging out over the creek which looked as if we could reach up and break it off by standing in the boat. When we got under it we realized that it was much higher than we had realized. Daddy had to stand on the top of the bow of the boat and stretch up with the long-handled clippers to reach it. Even then he could only reach it when a wave raised the boat a few inches. Bobbie picked this moment to burst out with "Joy to the World" in her piercing, monotone voice. This almost scared Daddy off his perch, and he bellowed something about keeping the boat still. Sure thing. All we had to do was make those waves stop lapping against the sides. Pepper must have gotten over-excited. Anyway, she lost her lunch all over the boat. By this time Joanne was doubled up with fits of laughter. I got the old rag that Daddy used to wipe out the inside of the boat, cleaned up Pepper's mess, and threw it, rag and all, over-board. By now Daddy looked as if he were trying to hang himself with the vines that were dangling from the tree, tears were streaming down Joanne's face, and "Joy to the World" was sounding less and less angelic. I just stared at Pepper, hoping that she didn't have any lunch left in her unsettled stomach. The piece of mistle-toe and Daddy fell unto the boat at the same time. Fortunately the mistle-toe fell on top of Daddy so not much of the berries fell off. Finally we were ready to start for home!

A short while later we rounded that last bend. The boat house never looked so good. While we were still a long way from shore, the motor stopped. Instinctively our gazes fell on the gas gauge. Empty. That canoe paddle got smaller and smaller and the boat, larger and larger as Daddy, Joanne, and I took turns paddling in against the current.

Mama was standing on the pier waving and shouting, "Merry Christmas," as we pulled into the boat house. I took one look at the expression of pride on Daddy's face when she exclaimed how beautiful the mistle-toe was this year. Next Christmas Eve we would go again. This was "Daddy's Christmas adventure" with his girls.

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