

Where are the elves?



Every year when I was little, the elves hid from me. But I knew they'd be there, they always were. And it was my job to find them. I can't remember our Christmas tree without them.

Our tree was artificial; the same one every year. Visibly artificial; true dark green bottle brushes, regularly spaced at regular intervals along the trunk, regularly shortening as they rose, a shiny red 'berry' at the tip of each one. A few days before Christmas, Dad would investigate the depths of our cupboard under the stairs and pull out the cardboard boxes containing the tree, ornaments and other decorations. He'd place the tree in our mahogany plant stand in the front room bay window, pull down the branches, after which they stuck out at 90 degrees, and add the lights, usually tutting in exasperation, as he went on a search for the spare bulbs.

And then Mum, and later Mum and I, would dress the tree. Tinsel first. Then the delicate glass baubles in silver, red and green, painted with fine lines and flowers in white, shiny plastic slot-together 3-D stars, honeycomb paper bells and more. Then handfuls of fine silver strands of lametta, adding an extra sparkle as they wafted in the breeze from the opening and shutting door and the heat from the fire. And finally, attached by an elastic band, the ballerina, in a pale pink net skirt, her leg outstretched in a graceful arabesque, placed lovingly at the top.

I never remember putting the elves on the tree though, not until I was older; but they would always mysteriously appear, later. And that was when I began my search. I never found them easily. Although they're around four inches tall, made by my Dad from pale green crepe paper wrapped around pipe cleaners, with crepe paper hats, painted paper faces, long cotton wool

beards and cardboard feet, they hid, deep inside the tree or obscured from view by strands of lametta.

So, each year I searched. Would they be amidst the branches, holding their conversations from a distance, each on a separate branch, or buried deep inside, huddled around the trunk? Or climbing up the trunk, or maybe, they'd reached the top, and perched precariously, casting, shy, admiring glances as they chatted to their friend the ballerina? I'd search and search, reluctant to ask for help. Search and search. And then I'd spot one. And then another. And the last! And wherever they were, once I found them I was happy. They hadn't deserted us. And Christmas was here.

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