

MISTLETOE

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I stood under the mistletoe. The green, leafy clusters speckled with waxy-white berries hung from the branches of every apple tree. "That's the same stuff they sell in the stores for Christmas decorations!" I said to myself. "Why can't I sell mistletoe too?"

Christmas was three weeks away. Selling mistletoe would be a perfect way to earn money to buy a gift for my brother, Derek. I took a few steps back, ran, leaped, and reached as high as I could. But the lowest mistletoe cluster was too high. I missed it by a mile. So that was that. I had started for home when something strange caught my eye. At the edge of the apple orchard, one tree stood bare. Of course I knew the leaves and apples fell off months ago. But the mistletoe, every sprig of it, had fallen off the branches also. It lay in a neat pile at the foot of the tree, as if put there just for me. Delighted, I carefully picked out the best sprigs and put them in my lunch box. When it was jam packed, I sprinted across the flattened cornfield to the mobile home where I lived.

I entered the side door. A guitar was playing. I walked down the narrow hall to my bedroom door and pounded on the door. "Derek, are you in there?" The guitar stopped. "One sec," came a grumpy reply. A moment later the door was flung open. My brother stood there wearing his brown leather jacket. "Where are you going?" I asked. "None of your business," he muttered, sailing past me. With Derek out of the room, I emptied the contents of my lunch box onto my bed. I split the sprigs of mistletoe into smaller ones and carefully picked off every dead leaf and berry. In my mom's sewing box, I found a roll of red ribbon. I used it to tie bows around the sprigs, then put each one into a little plastic bag.

As I looked for something to put the mistletoe in, I saw Derek's guitar on his bed, wrapped in an old towel. The guitar was the only beautiful thing Derek owned, and I knew what to buy with the mistletoe money: a case for that guitar. Even if Derek was grumpy sometimes, he was still my brother, and I loved him. The next day I took my mistletoe packages--ten in all--to school. During lunch time, I sold every one. My pockets jingled with change as I walked home that day. But it was hardly enough money to buy a guitar case. After school, I cut through the apple orchard again. A surprise awaited me--two more trees were bare, and under each one lay a pile of mistletoe! I loaded my lunch box, filled my pockets then raced for home.

That night I made twice as many mistletoe packages. After school the next day, I walked to the shopping center office and got permission to sell my mistletoe there. Then I found a wooden box to use as a sales stand. I thumb-tacked a sign on it that read: "Christmas Mistletoe 25 cents!"

Within the hour, the mistletoe was sold out. I hurried over to the music store. In the front display window, on cotton snow, lay a row of wooden recorders. I had learned to play a plastic one at school, and more than anything, I wanted one of those wooden ones which sounded so much better. Each year that

was at the top of my Christmas list. But each year there wasn't enough money. I was calculating how much more money I'd need to buy a recorder when I saw the towers of guitar cases in the back of the store. As much as I wanted a recorder, I wanted to buy Derek a guitar case more. Even if he had been a grouch lately, he was a pretty neat brother. Going inside the store, I found the perfect case for Derek, a brown one with gold buttons. It cost a bundle, though. Much more than I had. I hoped that there would be more mistletoe in the orchard when I got there.

I reached the orchard after the sun had just set, and the air was icy. The shadowy crooked branches of the apple trees appeared as grabbing fingers against the purple sky. Something rustled in a distant tree. Rotten apples squished under my feet as I tried to creep closer to see what it was. Then I tripped. My knees sunk into a pile of something scratchy. Mistletoe! Another big heap of it. It was a miracle! I was filling my lunch box, when a voice right behind me softly said, "Chilly night to be out, young man."

I spun around. "I'm collecting m-m-mistletoe," I stuttered, half from cold, half from fright.

"Sorry I scared you," the man said with a friendly smile. "The fact is, I'm paying a guy to cut all that mistletoe out of my trees."

"What!" I exclaimed, puzzled.

"My apple trees are loaded with mistletoe. That very plant people kiss under can do these old trees harm. It attaches itself to their branches and sucks out a lot of food and water. Eventually it could kill these trees. Anyway, you're welcome to take all you want." The man wished me a merry Christmas, then walked on across the orchard. He stopped under a tree about thirty yards away and looked up. Out of that tree tumbled a big clump of mistletoe--then another and another. An instant later two legs dangled down from the lowest branch.

All of a sudden someone jumped down next to the man. It was Derek! He didn't see me in the shadows. "A few more nights ought to do it," the man said.

"Yeah," Derek replied, brushing off his jeans.

"So what are you doing with all the money I'm paying you?" asked the man. "Are you going out and having a good time?"

"Nah," said Derek, shuffling his feet. "I'm saving up to buy my kid brother something for Christmas."

"Is that right?" said the man.

"Yeah, he's been wanting a wooden recorder for ages. He can play pretty well. And you know how it is--he's my brother."