

# Still West of Nowhere

*More Tales from The Cimarron:  
The Continuing Saga of the  
Quinn Family's Montana Homestead*

NANCY QUINN

HELLGATE PRESS



ASHLAND, OREGON

# STILL WEST OF NOWHERE

©2020 Nancy Quinn

Published by Hellgate Press  
(An imprint of L&R Publishing, LLC)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or information and retrieval systems without written permission of the publisher.

Hellgate Press  
PO Box 3531  
Ashland, OR 97520  
*email:* sales@hellgatepress.com

*Cover and Interior Design:* L. Redding  
*Cover Photo:* Nancy Quinn

*ISBN: 978-1-55571-992-0*

Printed and bound in the United States of America  
First edition 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Lovingly Dedicated to:*

*My family,*

*And all my kindred spirits, including those who walk  
on two legs, or four, or soar into the skies  
with beating wings.*



# *A Personal Note to You, the Reader*

I'M GLAD YOU ARE holding this book in your hands, for I consider it a privilege to tell you stories about our unique way of life, and I trust that you will enjoy spending some time with me and my family.

People often ask me why we choose to live on a rural mountainside with all its inherent difficulties. There is no single simple answer, and so it is through these continuing stories that I hope to further illustrate my sincerest thoughts and feelings about our somewhat offbeat lifestyle. As an artist I am more used to painting a story with a brush, but here I must paint my ideas with words. In so doing I hope you will feel as though you are sharing our experiences along with us. If these stories uplift you, arouse your pioneering spirit, or inspire you to pursue your dreams, then I have achieved my primary goals.

I have heard it said that authors and artists are dreamers. Whether it's a painting or a story, in my work I like to weave reality and creative thought together. The written word is a powerful influence, therefore I believe I have a responsibility to my readers, as does any author, to write about what I truly understand from personal experience. For this reason hope and faith are two recurring themes throughout my books, along with perseverance and the need to cultivate a humorous perspective on life. I once read that the highest mountains are not formed without earthquakes. On both a physical and emotional level I have found this to be true. Perhaps one day in the distant future, long after I am gone, someone will find a dusty copy of my book sitting on

Still West of Nowhere

a shelf, and my family's experiences will be brought to life once more to ignite the pioneer spirit in another generation of adventurers.

Lastly, my favorite aspect of being an author is building a connection with my readers. I'm truly grateful for those of you who have taken this journey with us through my books, art, radio programs, and videos. I hope to meet you someday, perhaps at a book signing or other future event. In the meantime, if you have a question, comment, or just want to introduce yourself, feel free to contact me through my website. I would be delighted to hear from you and include you in our expanding circle of friends.

Much obliged,

—Nancy Quinn ([www.quinnwildlifeart.com](http://www.quinnwildlifeart.com))

# Contents

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <i>Emerson Quote</i> .....                           | <i>ix</i>  |
| <i>Prologue</i> .....                                | <i>xi</i>  |
| <b>1</b> <i>Home is Where Our Story Begins</i> ..... | <i>1</i>   |
| <b>2</b> <i>Classic Christmas</i> .....              | <i>9</i>   |
| <b>3</b> <i>The V-8 Debate</i> .....                 | <i>15</i>  |
| <b>4</b> <i>Thirty Below and Nowhere to Go</i> ..... | <i>21</i>  |
| <b>5</b> <i>Wildlife Rodeo</i> .....                 | <i>29</i>  |
| <b>6</b> <i>Cold Case</i> .....                      | <i>33</i>  |
| <b>7</b> <i>The Mild, Mild West</i> .....            | <i>37</i>  |
| <b>8</b> <i>Wheeler of Fortune!</i> .....            | <i>45</i>  |
| <b>9</b> <i>The Chimney Sweep</i> .....              | <i>49</i>  |
| <b>10</b> <i>The Moose Is Loose</i> .....            | <i>55</i>  |
| <b>11</b> <i>The Great Sniffing Expedition</i> ..... | <i>65</i>  |
| <b>12</b> <i>The Face in the Mirror</i> .....        | <i>69</i>  |
| <b>13</b> <i>The Bear Necessities</i> .....          | <i>73</i>  |
| <b>14</b> <i>What the Hail Is This?</i> .....        | <i>79</i>  |
| <b>15</b> <i>The Centenarian</i> .....               | <i>83</i>  |
| <b>16</b> <i>The Code of the West</i> .....          | <i>89</i>  |
| <b>17</b> <i>A Sign of the Times</i> .....           | <i>95</i>  |
| <b>18</b> <i>It's a Jungle Out There</i> .....       | <i>101</i> |
| <b>19</b> <i>A Falling Star</i> .....                | <i>105</i> |
| <b>20</b> <i>A Star on the Horizon</i> .....         | <i>111</i> |
| <b>21</b> <i>Mountain Girl Meets the City</i> .....  | <i>115</i> |
| <b>22</b> <i>A Star Is Reborn</i> .....              | <i>119</i> |
| <b>23</b> <i>A Rising Star</i> .....                 | <i>125</i> |
| <b>24</b> <i>Nancy's Hair Salon</i> .....            | <i>131</i> |
| <b>25</b> <i>Tie One On!</i> .....                   | <i>139</i> |
| <b>26</b> <i>Barnyard Rhapsody</i> .....             | <i>149</i> |
| <b>27</b> <i>Queen of the Hill</i> .....             | <i>155</i> |
| <b>28</b> <i>Gopher Madness</i> .....                | <i>163</i> |
| <b>29</b> <i>The Theory of Relativity</i> .....      | <i>169</i> |
| <b>30</b> <i>Working Girl</i> .....                  | <i>181</i> |
| <b>31</b> <i>Home Away from Home</i> .....           | <i>187</i> |
| <b>32</b> <i>The Gatekeeper</i> .....                | <i>191</i> |

Still West of Nowhere

33 *Dead Man Talking* .....197

34 *Where the Wild Things Are* ..... 215

35 *The Fear Factor* ..... 219

36 *The Little Engine That Could*.....229

37 *Age Before Beauty* .....235

38 *The Wheeler Deale* .....239

39 *Of Mice and Women* ..... 243

40 *Put a Sock in It* ..... 249

41 *A Good Omen* ..... 255

42 *Seeing Double* ..... 259

43 *Horsing Around* .....263

44 *My Ring of Fire* .....269

45 *Putting on My Woman Boots* .....273

46 *Keep the Faith* ..... 277

47 *The Tea Cattle* .....285

48 *A Stitch in Time* .....289

49 *Fantasy Foster Family* .....293

50 *The Winds of Change* .....297

51 *The Best Laid Plans* .....303

52 *Till the Cows Come Home—to the Wrong Home* ..... 311

53 *Brian's Song* .....319

54 *Penny Candy* ..... 323

55 *The Body Electric* ..... 329

56 *Picture Perfect* ..... 333

57 *Doe-Hay-Me* .....337

58 *White Lightning* .....341

59 *Saving My Whiskey* .....345

60 *Lucky Horseshoes* .....353

61 *The Fruits of My Labor* .....357

62 *Anniversary Blues* .....363

63 *Macy's Day Had No Parade* .....367

64 *Finding Whiskey's Sweet Spot* ..... 371

65 *Going Viral* ..... 375

66 *Music of the Night* .....381

67 *Out of the West* .....385

*Epilogue* .....391

*Recipes* .....393



“What lies behind you and what lies in front of you,  
pales in comparison to what lies inside of you.”

—*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

## Still West of Nowhere

# Prologue

**L**IVING ON A MOUNTAIN in Montana is not for the faint of heart. We have resided here for well over a decade, and I still believe this statement rings true. Montana is a place of incredible beauty. Being surrounded by the raw, unapologetic ways of the natural world, one begins to have a better understanding of the circle of life. It is simultaneously stunningly resplendent, serene, harsh, and unforgiving.

Even though the years have turned us into more seasoned and prepared modern day pioneers, there remain numerous challenges we face daily. I continue to look at our experiences with a hefty dose of humor. We expect the unexpected, and there is rarely a dull moment on our high mountain homestead. I continue my expostulation of blending my urban perspectives and social norms into our daily life in this remote area. Although it's not easy, I have adapted to most circumstances without changing the core of who I am. It does demand the price of a certain amount of isolation, but there is a rewarding feeling of contentment as well, being "far from the madding crowd".

This is the third book in my *Go West, Young Woman!* series. It continues the timeline from the second book, *Stay West, Young Woman!* My goal of blending our city deportment with a wilderness lifestyle remains an unending work in progress. I'm pleased to share our ever-growing collection of true stories about our frontier living, using a touch of style, more wild animal encounters, extreme weather, our "growing" and changing family, animal rescue work, mistakes, triumphs, cultural differences, and just the business of living. This is my invitation to all of you to share our life in the modern and still very Wild West.

## Still West of Nowhere

# *Home Is Where Our Story Begins*

I FIND BEING IN my kitchen extremely comforting. I enjoy the moments of thoughtful meditation while stirring batter, the fragrance of butter when it sizzles in the pan, and the sound of utensils clinking as I search each drawer for just the right implement. Over the years I have had the opportunity to bake, broil, barbecue, and burn meals in many states across this continent. But having settled into a Montana lifestyle for thirteen years, at least I can enjoy the oasis of serene predictability that my kitchen offers me. This day was no exception; my mind was at ease. I was not worrying about my family's future, any health issues, or if we might have to relocate someplace else. I suspected Mother Nature and Old Man Winter were conspiring and would soon come knocking, but the pantry was well stocked for the frigid days ahead, and this added to my sense of security.

Sonja, my youngest daughter, was helping me in the kitchen. Sandy, her older sister, was upstairs deeply engrossed in writing a college theme paper. Nothing would deter her focus save for the scent of vanilla drifting in the air. I waited expectantly for it to waft up the stairs and seep into her room.

Despite now being a young teenager, Sonja happily sang and hummed like a child as she stirred the cookie batter. I listened quietly to the intermittent sound of her soft rendition of Silver Bells. It was Christmas time, not just in the city, but on our mountain as well.

“The dough’s thick enough,” I said. “Now roll them into balls and put them on the sheet.”

“Mom, I’m not a kid anymore; I know how to do this,” she snapped back.

“Sonja, just because you’re now taller than me doesn’t mean you have the right to be disrespectful.”

Sonja’s face sank and her voice softened. “I’m sorry, Mom. I just thought you didn’t trust me.”

“Of course I trust you; that’s why you’re making the cookies. I’m only trying to help. My Gram taught me how to make them when I was smaller than you, and I want the tradition to be passed to your children someday.”

“I’m not going to have any kids. I may not even get married.”

“Now you’re starting to sound like Sandy.”

“Hey, I enjoy making cookies; Sandy just enjoys eating them.”

“True enough, but practice makes perfect. That’s why you have to combine the right quantities of Amish butter, flour, ground pecans, and vanilla.”

“I know, and then we bake them for a few minutes and roll them in powdered sugar while they’re still warm so they’ll look like little snowballs.”

“That’s right, Honey Girl, and we would never think of wasting them by throwing them at each other!” The moment of tension had passed and Sonja was again relaxed and laughing. Her features may have been maturing, but her emotions remained a mix of childhood and budding young womanhood. Two teenagers in the family at the same time – would I survive the drama?

The hours passed quickly, and it was late afternoon when I heard the doorbell. I wasn’t surprised because we often had packages delivered to our door by UPS, particularly at this time of year. Additionally, being

a rural route, we didn't have any mail delivered to our home, but were required to retrieve it from the tiny Mullan Post Office.

Sonja stopped humming and asked, "Do you want me to get the door?"

"No, keep stirring; I'll get it. I don't want you seeing any Christmas surprises."

I hurried down the hall while wiping away the dough from my fingers with a holiday cloth. As a precaution I peered through the large oval glass of our front door. The textured beveling made it impossible to discern who was there, but I could tell it was not the outline of our usual deliveryman, Jim. It was somebody much larger, whose features were so distorted that I could not fathom who it might be. I cracked the door just an inch and peered through the opening. There stood our white gelding, Wilson. Puzzled, I immediately scanned the vicinity, but saw no one else. I opened the door further and looked down the road where our other horse, Whiskey, was slowly walking toward us. His dark reddish color stood out against the brilliant white of the snow, but all around him was stillness.

Curious, Sonja came up beside me and peeked outside. "Who is it? Oh, hi Wilson. Where's Jim?"

"It's not Jim, just Wilson," I replied, rather puzzled.

"No packages?"

"Not unless Mr. Wilson brought them." He perked up his ears at the mention of his name, clearly pleased by our company, and took a step closer to the door where he began to nibble at the green wreath we'd hung next to it. As he nipped away I saw his lips brush against our doorbell, a green cast iron frog that was a memento from our first home in Florida.

Sonja laughed in disbelief, "Wilson likes to ring doorbells?"

"Maybe he heard about the cookies."

"Or just smelled them cooking. Did you do that on purpose, Mr. Wilson?" she teased.

The look on his face as he lifted his head and snorted, confirmed our suspicions. *Well, yes, I knew you were baking, and our afternoon meal*

*is late, so I came to the door to wait for you. Whiskey said we could. Just ask him when he gets here. He walks a little slower than I do as you can plainly see.*

*By the way, this wreath isn't as good as last years. I do wish you would taste them first and choose the best one before you bring them home. Last year's had more flavor; this one is not as sweet.*

I mused at the thought of this information exchange between us. Did Wilson have a penchant for tasting all of our previous Christmas wreaths? Personally, I loved the fragrance of our locally grown evergreens, but I'd never bothered to taste one. No doubt the explanation was much simpler than this. Normally the horses stayed in the front meadow, but sometimes hunger or the need for company drove them to our front door, or to my art studio where they would stare at me through the picture window as I worked. More than once I had spied Wilson tasting the bird feeder from the dining room window, or been startled by his presence while I was concentrating on some painting at my drafting table. He would patiently stand a silent vigil until I took notice of him, then snort with pleasure when I acknowledged his presence and asked him what he wanted. Food, naturally, was the most common reply.

"I guess that mystery is solved," I said as I peered down the road, "but perhaps Jim is still on his way."

"I hope so; Christmas is nearly here."

"It's about more than gifts, you know," I gently reminded her.

"Oh, I know what it's really about, but I'm still excited to see your face when you open my gift."

Looking at her maturing face, I found it hard to believe that a scant few years ago I was holding her in my arms at Bethesda Naval Hospital. I cherished every moment with my girls. How many more years would we spend together baking and preparing our favorite holiday dishes? The only constant in our lives was change, and the pace of it was increasing. I intended to enjoy every minute I could with them.

I snapped out of my melancholic daze and said, "Sonja, why don't you feed the boys. I'll keep an eye on the oven until you get back. We still have a couple of sheets of cookies to make."



“Will do!” She turned and darted out the door, never one to saunter. “Wear a coat and hat,” I called after her, but it was too late. She was already halfway down the hill. I watched her trot toward the barn, the boys quickly falling in line after her. They knew her presence meant good feed and sweet treats. The horses kicked up clouds of snow around their feet as they hurried along against the faint pink sky of the setting sun. It was a comforting sight, this picture perfect moment. How many more would I enjoy before the girls were young women seeking their own paths in life, perhaps far from our sanctuary? Sandy would soon finish college and Sonja was learning how to drive. I sighed; *am I getting old?*

I was beginning to feel the cold air seep into my bones. I debated whether to go back inside, when the high pitched beeping of the oven timer decided matters for me. I reluctantly returned to the kitchen and removed the freshly baked cookies with my oven mitts. As I lifted the baking sheet out of the oven, I accidentally brushed my arm against a hot oven coil. I let loose a cry and had to consciously force myself not to drop the cookie sheet. I quickly set it on a trivet before glancing at my arm. A streak of skin had turned fire-engine red and was about to bubble. I dashed to the sink and pushed the tap to the cold setting as I placed my elbow and forearm under the faucet. The cool water soon ran ice cold, and with it came a modicum of relief.

Bill had heard my agony and came down to investigate. “What did you do to yourself this time, Quinn?” I briefly lifted my arm, and his expression became more serious. “That looks really bad; do you want some aloe or egg white?”

“Egg white, please. Will you whip one up for me? And hurry!”

Bill quickly located the hand mixer and fumbled under the counter for a bowl. I watched in pain as he separated an egg white in it and began whipping it into a lather. I listened to the whirring sound and focused on the egg white as it transformed into an opaque fluffy mass.

“How does this look?”

“Fine, let me dry my arm.” I gently pressed the area with a paper towel and spooned the mixture onto my arm, leaving it to do its magic. I winced as I spoke. “This always worked before...I hope it does now.”

“Is this the trick you learned from your grandmother years ago?”

“Yes...it really helps me not to blister and scar...I still don't know how it works...maybe the protein in the egg?”

“How are you feeling? Is it having any effect?”

“I think so...the pain is easing off.” It still hurt and felt like someone was holding a match to my delicate skin, but it wasn't getting any worse. I continued leaning over the sink, supporting my left arm with my right hand.

“Are you feeling sick?”

I looked up at Bill and frowned. “No, it's just a burn; I'll be okay now.”

I barely heard the front door open and close, and took little notice of it until Sonja entered the kitchen.

“Oh, no, what happened?”

“Your Mom burned herself.”

“Again?”

“Yep.”

“Hey, what do you mean ‘again’? It's been years since this last happened.”

Sonja and Bill exchanged knowing glances. I looked at them both and rolled my eyes at their sense of humor. “I'll be fine; it's no big deal, but I'd appreciate it if you would bake the rest of the cookies, Sonja. Your dad can help.”

Bill managed a pathetic smile. “Whatever you say, Dear.”

As the cookies baked, I kept basting my arm with more egg white, replacing the batter every twenty minutes, while checking the progress of my healing. I was rewarded for my persistence, and within two hours most of the redness had disappeared, and no blisters formed. The skin was still delicate and sore, but it could have been much worse. You have to give credit to some of the old wives' tales; there are times when such remedies work.

By now I had stopped using the egg white, and was applying both Aloe Vera cream and ice to my injury. Sonja watched me intently for a while before cautiously saying, “Mom, you know I want to be a nurse.”

“That’s a very noble choice,” I replied without any conviction.

“No, really. I’ve already begun studying first aid, but I didn’t know anything about using an egg on a burn. Do you think home remedies are better than modern medicine?”

This time I looked at my daughter instead of my wound. “I’m sorry, Honey, I didn’t mean to sound dismissive. I’m still in a bit of pain. I think nursing is a good idea, but it takes a lot of dedication and hard work.”

“But what about home remedies?”

“Huh?”

Sonja appeared exasperated. “Home remedies, are they better than modern medicine?”

“Well...I have to say yes and no.”

“That’s not much of an answer.”

“They each have their place. I would say I want most of what today’s medicine has to offer, but sometimes the medications can cause more harm than good. You’ve seen some of the reactions I’ve experienced. On the other hand, you know I’ve spent a fair amount of time in hospitals, and the doctors have helped me a lot. Sometimes I react better to natural remedies, but even herbs can have side effects, so I’m careful what I choose, and I do a lot of research before I decide to try anything. At least nowadays we have a better idea of what works and what doesn’t. Did you know that a long time ago the early pioneers would rub cow manure into a burn or place butter on it?”

“Oh, butter please,” Sonja quickly injected.

“Do you know how they cured a cold? They ate an onion sandwich and washed their hair. Sometimes they carried an onion in their pocket to ward off small pox. They also caught leaves in their hands, and they treated the chills by running a broom down the patient’s back in the sign of the cross.”

Sonja just snorted, “No one believes that now, Mom.”

“But they believed it back then. They also believed you should put a spider web on a cut to stop it from bleeding. I’m sure when people far in the future look back on us, they will think we had some pretty silly

treatments as well. So I like to blend the old and new – whatever works best and is handy.”

“How’s your arm?”

“Take a look.”

“Wow, it really worked.”

“Yes. I don’t know exactly why. I’m sure if some scientist researched it, he’d find the answer. Just the same, sometimes the old remedies are still good choices. Either way, I’m glad your Dad isn’t a rancher.”

“Why’s that, Mom?”

“Because he might have run into the field to get me a fresh cow pie.”

## *Classic Christmas*

**T**HIS WAS THE YEAR. The girls were old enough for me to finally unpack two of my most beloved Christmas ornaments without fear that they might be accidently broken or damaged by little helping hands. Each one was an old-fashioned tabletop ceramic Christmas tree containing a small lightbulb in its base. When turned on, a smattering of soft colored glows emitted through each of the tiny plastic “bulbs” or “birds” that adorned them, simulating Christmas tree lights. They were very popular at one time, but now are considered vintage décor. I made the first one myself the year Bill and I were married. I cast it from a mold and painstakingly painted it several shades of green before firing it in a ceramic oven. The second tree was inherited from my paternal grandparents after they died. It was of similar size and shape as the first, but was glazed in a frosted white finish. I never knew my paternal grandparents very well because we moved away from Michigan a few years after my father’s untimely death. We maintained a sparse relationship over the intervening decades, but were never very close. I acquired their ceramic ornament so my children would have some connection to them, no matter how tenuous. My plan had always been to give each of my daughters one of the trees in order to maintain that thread to the past every holiday season. Today they would see each tree for the first time.

Now I was unconsciously holding my breath as Bill cautiously descended the steep loft staircase with the first large box containing one of these precious ornaments. He could not see over or around the box and had to feel his way down each step. Once he reached the floor, my apprehension was replaced by a surge of excitement, and I began to breathe again. We carefully unpacked the box and I caught a glimpse of an opaque pearlescent white spire I had not seen in a decade. They had been packed away by the moving company we hired when we left Washington, D.C., and had remained untouched all these years.

The tree shimmered as Bill lifted it out of the box, its tiny blue, yellow, green, and red plastic birds with outstretched wings perched on the edges of the branches.

“I can’t wait to get them set up,” I said as I peered into the large box looking for the tree base and cord.

“You can start on this one while I get the other box open, then you can put them together,” Bill replied. He soon returned with the second box and placed it gently on the floor. As he opened the top I heard a light tinkling sound. We both froze and looked at each other.

“That doesn’t sound good,” I cautioned.

Bill opened the box and looked inside. “Nancy, I don’t see any packing material in here.” He leaned closer to the box and began to rummage. I could hear more tinkling and I cringed at the thought of what this meant. “Damn!” He lifted out a large chunk of green ceramic, followed by another and another. “There isn’t any packing material in here, none at all. This tree is in pieces; I can see shards at the bottom of the box.” He moved a few of them around, and I heard them scuff and clank as his hands touched what was left of my poor beautiful tree.

I looked into the box and I saw all my hard work and memories shattered at the bottom. “I can’t believe this! Not even a scrap of paper to wrap this in? They just threw it into the box? They knew it would never arrive intact; they just didn’t care! We paid for this?” I was angry and on the verge of tears.

“Maybe I can fix it,” Bill replied as he began fitting the large pieces together.

“I doubt it. Just look at this mess! How are you going to fit these small pieces together?” I picked one up in my hand and turned it over thoughtfully.

“I’ll see what I can do; I know how much it means to you.” He stared into my eyes and gave me a sympathetic smile. Bill picked up the box, and I mentally cringed when I heard the ceramic pieces clink against each other. “I’ll take it to my shop and see if I can glue it back together.”



The next two days we all kept busy cleaning, decorating, wrapping gifts, and cooking. Despite the rush, pesky hands still managed to find time to raid the cookie jar, and I soon found myself having to bake more confections. Otherwise, our supply would be depleted before Christmas Day. This time I decided to make a different kind of Christmas treat, my painted cookies, which I made by combining extra vanilla with a basic sugar cookie recipe. My daughters would use an assortment of cookie cutters to form the dough into stars, wreaths, bells, and horses which we then painted with my artist brushes and a food coloring mixture. When they came out of the oven the results were always (well, usually) soft cream-colored cookies with glossy hard icing. They looked like small works of art which I considered too pretty to eat. My family harbored no such inclination, and it wasn’t long before I found myself hoarding some for our ranching neighbor, Chase.

Each Christmas we would prepare a basket of assorted goods and small gifts for him to show our appreciation for all the help he freely gave us during the year, not the least of which would be pulling Bill’s tractor out of a snow drift at least once during the winter. Chase enjoyed chocolate cake, so this season I decided it would be the centerpiece of his basket. I would surround the cake with my snowballs and painted cookies. To this we added a utility knife and a camouflaged watch cap with built-in LED lights so he could calve during the bitter cold winter nights with both hands free.

In past years I had made the cakes for his entire family, but he once sheepishly admitted to me that the cakes rarely got to their house in one

piece, if at all. I laughed when I thought about this, until I remembered how close his mother Gail and I used to be. I treasured our friendship during those early years on the mountain, but this had abruptly ended several years ago for reasons I never understood. She simply stopped returning my phone calls or dropping by to chat. It had been and remained a painful experience, and I truly missed our camaraderie. Now I was suddenly feeling melancholy. I guess this happens to everyone at some point in the holiday season. Be it Thanksgiving, Christmas, or New Year's Eve, we can't help but remember absent friends and family. I still had my family, but the girls were becoming more independent. Before long Sandy would leave, then in a few more years it would be Sonja. "Stop it Quinn," I mumbled to myself. "You're making yourself miserable over nothing."

I heard the back door open and felt a sudden blast of cold air. Bill came in carrying a large cardboard box. He stomped the snow from his muck boots and set the box on the dinner table. "Merry Christmas, Nancy," he beamed. Then his countenance grew more serious once he saw my face. "What's the matter, Honey? What did Sandy do this time?"

"Nothing. She did nothing wrong. Everything's fine; everyone's fine. It's just me—as usual."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing. I'm just feeling sorry for myself over nothing. Here I have everything to be thankful for and I'm upset over nothing."

"Well it must be something. Do you want to talk about it?" He came closer and held my arms, staring intently into my face.

"No, you'll think it's silly." He gave me one of those "looks", the raised eyebrow, coupled with a scolding frown. He knew I could never resist that expression. It was his silent way of telling me that anything I said would be taken seriously and not dismissed or ridiculed. "I was just thinking about Gail."

"Ah, I see." He gave me a big hug and continued. "Well, I can't do anything about that, but I do have something here that might make you feel better." He guided me to the table and told me to close my eyes. I



could hear the rustling of paper and the sound of something like a dinner plate being placed on the table. “You can open your eyes now.”

There sat my green ceramic Christmas tree, all in one piece again. Suddenly I was ecstatic. “You fixed it! That’s amazing!” I smiled and grabbed him around the waist and squeezed as hard my little frame could.

“Well, it’s not exactly fixed, but I did manage to get about 95% of it back together. The rest I puttied in. You’ll still have to paint it to hide the seams, but I think it’ll be alright after that.”

I studied the cracks which appeared as fault lines spreading over several major surfaces. They were white from the glue that had seeped into the small caverns formed when putting the pieces together. It reminded me somewhat of a stained glass window or a jigsaw puzzle, and I marveled at how he was able to find the smaller pieces and reassemble them into their original three-dimensional shape. I knew I wouldn’t be able to paint and re-fire the tree, and the paints I used for canvas were unsuitable to this task. I pondered how I could hide the cracks without making the repair obvious. Then it came to me. “Nail polish,” I said firmly. “Green glitter is in style now. I’m sure I can find some in the stores. I’ll paint over the cracks and the glue. I know it’ll stick. It’s glossy when it dries, and I won’t have to re-fire it. It’s the perfect solution!”

“See, I knew you’d think of something creative, Quinn. I’ll put sparkly green nail polish on the shopping list. Who would have thought? Just one thing though,” he added as he wrote it down.

“What’s that?”

“Well, you’d better come with me when I get it. You have a better eye for color than I do.” Then he added in a fake Arnold Schwarzenegger accent, “And I don’t want anyone at Walmart thinking I’m a girly-man.”



Within a few days I was sitting at the round table in our loft and “polishing” my labor of love. The green ceramic tree began to look

more like my original creation with every stroke of glittery green lacquer. Personally, it was not the right choice for my fingernails, but it was the perfect choice for bringing our little Christmas tree back to its former glory. Carefully, I dabbed and ran the brush along each crevice, filling in the white areas, which then seemed to magically disappear. It was working, and even if upon close inspection you might see a minuscule seam, that only added to the history of the piece. After all these years, my tabletop Christmas tree was adding another chapter to its story...and ours.