

# Cognac, yule tree and Jack Jones

I HAVE been a reasonably happy single person for so long, I sometimes forget that we unmarrieds are supposed to be pitiful at Christmas.

A man I met the other day reminded me of this when he expressed surprise upon learning that I always buy a Christmas tree for myself and decorate it alone.

"That doesn't depress you?" he said.

Quite the contrary, I told him. I've created my own Christmas tree tradition over the years and honestly look forward to performing each stage of it — in solitude.

To begin with, I never buy my tree on a weekend or in the daylight. One of the advantages of not having little nippers or a spouse who expects dinner on time is, you get to do things on week nights. Even if it's just laundry. Families pretty much have to buy their trees on weekends, no matter how crowded the tree lots or picked-over the stock. We single entities get five week nights to work with.

Where I get my tree is even more important than when. While I realize that there are a host of worthy charities currently in the tree-selling game, I happen to like buying my Christmas trees from recovering alcoholics and junkies. Consequently, for the past 10 years I have gone to the Delancey Street lot at Market and Duboce.

That lot and the people who run it are central to my Christmas ritual. Each December they serve to remind me — in an urban sort of way — that Christmas is mostly about birth and miracles.

Knowing that each of them has spent too much time on the dark side of the moon, I like to hang around and listen to them joke and rag on each other all the while they are impossibly polite to us customers. I watch them wrestle a 9-foot Douglas fir into a hatchback or

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struggle to remove a wooden stand from the base of a Scotch pine and I think about the individual struggles that brought them to this wind-swept corner of San Francisco, hoping to make a new start.

That is when I remember the stuff about birth and miracles. And, usually, that is when I get teary-eyed for the first of 127 times in the holiday season.

The next stage involves me dragging my tree out of my own hatchback and up the stairs to my apartment. No matter what kind of shape I'm really in, hauling a tree around all by myself makes me feel like an Amazon. I also enjoy getting sap on my hands and leaving it there for hours. I don't know why but I think it goes back to not

playing in the mud enough as a kid.

Once I get the tree in its water stand and the lights strung — two tasks that would suck eggs whether I did them alone, with Kevin Costner or an entire troop of Chippendale dancers — I begin to hang the ornaments. As everyone in the civilized world knows, this is the best part. And when you do it alone, you get to hang all of your favorites exactly where you want them.

No arguing or having to make nice in the name of peace. Just put that lime green Kermit the Frog wherever you think he looks best.

I do have my favorites, too, collected over the years from friends, lovers and a few after-Christmas sales. I take them out of their tissue

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paper wrappings, think of the people and occasions that brought them to me and find the perfect spot for each on the tree.

That's usually the second time I tear-up during the holidays.

WHEN THE trimming is done, I turn out all but the tree lights, pour a couple of fingers of cognac and put on an old LP that has signified the beginning of the holiday season for me since I was in college: "The Jack Jones Christmas Album."

Yeah, that's what I said, Jack Jones. You were expecting maybe 2 Live Crew? So you'd prefer Joan Baez or Placido Domingo? Eggnog instead of cognac? Next I suppose you'll tell me I ought to go wash the sap off my hands and get that Play-Do miniature Giants baseball player off the top bough.

See what I mean? For some of us, 'tis the season to be jolly — alone.