

## MISTLETOE

By Douglas Evans

*Appears here with the kind permission of the author.*

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 stores for Christmas decorations,” I told myself. “Why couldn’t I sell mistletoe, too?”

Christmas was three weeks away, and selling mistletoe would be a perfect way to earn money to buy a gift for my brother, Derek.

After taking a few steps back, I ran and leaped. I stretched my arm up as high as I could, but the lowest mistletoe cluster was miles beyond my reach. So that was that.

I had started home when something caught my eye. At the edge of the apple orchard, one tree stood bare. A pile of mistletoe lay by the trunk, as if put there just for me.

I picked out the best sprigs and filled my lunchbox. Delighted, I sprinted across the flattened cornfield to the mobile home where I lived.

I entered the side door, listening. Yes, I could hear my brother playing his guitar. I walked down the narrow hall to our bedroom and pounded on the door.

“Derek? Let me in.”

The guitar stopped. “Hold on. Hold on,” came a reply. The door flung open, and my brother, wearing his leather jacket, breezed past me.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“None of your business.”

It wasn’t easy sharing the cramped bedroom with my older brother. We often got on each other’s nerves and we rarely talked. The whole trailer was far too small for our family.

With Derek gone, I emptied the mistletoe onto my bed. I split it into small sprigs and picked off the dead berries and leaves. In my mom’s sewing box, I found some red ribbon. A bow went on each sprig, and each sprig went into a plastic bag.

As I worked, I spotted Derek's guitar on his bed, wrapped in an old towel. That guitar was the one thing in the world Derek cared about. That's when I knew what to buy him with the mistletoe money—a case for his guitar.

The next day I brought my mistletoe packages to school, and during lunchtime I sold every one. My pockets jingled with change, but it was hardly enough to buy a guitar case.

After school I cut through the apple orchard again. Another surprise awaited me. Two more trees were bare, and a pile of mistletoe lay at the base of each one. I loaded my lunchbox and raced home.

Derek, his hands jammed into his pockets, was striding across the cornfield as I approached the trailer.

“Derek! Derek!” I called to him.

My brother didn't seem to hear me. He lowered his head and kept on walking.

That night I made twice as many mistletoe packages. After school the next day, I walked to the mall. I found a plastic milk crate to use as a sales stand and thumbtacked a sign to it: Christmas Mistletoe 50¢. Within an hour, the mistletoe was sold out.

I hurried over to the music store. In the display window, on cotton snow, lay a row of wooden recorders. I had learned to play a plastic recorder at school. Each year a wooden one was at the top of my Christmas list, but each year my father said we couldn't afford it.

Inside the store I found the perfect guitar case, a leather-covered one with gold buttons. But the price was too high. With luck, more mistletoe would be on the ground that evening.

The sun had just set when I reached the orchard. The air was icy.

Something rustled. Turning, I slipped and fell on scratchy twigs. Another heap of mistletoe!

While I filled my pockets, a voice behind me said, “Chilly night to be out.”

I spun around. A man in a long coat stood there. “I'm collecting mistletoe,” I said.

“Is that right?” said the man. “Fact is, I'm paying a guy to cut that mistletoe out of my trees.”

I must have worn a puzzled look, because the man went on to explain, “These apple trees are loaded with mistletoe. Fact is, the very plant that people kiss under can do

these old trees harm. It attaches itself to their branches and sucks out their food and water. It could end up killing the entire grove. You're welcome to take all the mistletoe you want."

The man walked to the far side of the orchard. He stopped under a tree and looked up. From the high branches tumbled a clump of mistletoe. Then another and another. Soon two legs dangled from the lowest branch, and a figure dropped to the ground next to the man. Derek! I hid in the shadows.

"A few more nights ought to do it," said the man.

"Yeah," Derek replied.

"So what are you going to do with all the money I'm paying you?" asked the man.

Derek shuffled his feet. "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 years. He can play pretty well. And you know how it is. He's my brother."