

Of Twinkling Trees and the D&F Tower

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Temperatures are crisp for a New Year's Eve, but no wind, and it's tolerable in Denver as people gather downtown for fireworks. The show at midnight will be for serious celebrants, but there's one at nine to please children and amateurs so they can get home by ten to watch strangers drop the ball in New York. That's two hours early, by our count, but then again, folks back east are two hours older than us.

Along the mile or so of the Sixteenth Street Mall hundreds of densely lighted trees form a glowing river. They're lit not merely with strings draped from branch to branch, but with lights painstakingly placed to show the contours of every limb. Rising above it at Arapahoe Street is the D&F Tower, once the tallest structure west of the Mississippi, dwarfed now by Denver's skyscrapers. Its brick walls are flooded in reds and greens for the holidays. Of all the buildings along the mall, decorated or not, only that grand old tower catches your eye every day of the week. It will be the epicenter of the fireworks tonight, and it should be.

Let's just walk around and enjoy this place. It's for pedestrians, but buses run on it, too, so watch your rear. We'll pass ubiquitous chain burger joints and coffee shops, alongside bars and restaurants of all cuisines, large and small, local and chain. There are sandwich shops calling themselves delicatessens, figuring if you put a German or Jewish name on a joint, you can call it a deli. Some clothing stores remain, but the big department stores left years earlier for the suburbs. Two large drugstores are still here and open tonight.

Usually there's a rhythmic flow along the mall, and people linger only where you would expect, to enter stores or wait for the shuttle. But tonight, folks aren't moving much and sometimes we get jostled. I suggest you keep your wallet in your front pocket and your hand next to it. Just in case.

We pass homeless people, some with backpacks and bedrolls dangling, others wearing the entirety of their wardrobe, layer upon layer, often carrying a dingy blanket. They wander aimlessly, and sit where they can. Like it or not, this is their place, too. Maybe more so.

Spicy aromas drift from food kiosks representing all nations. If you detect a sweet smoke, it's likely marijuana; legal here, you know, but they're not supposed to smoke it in public. When we pass entrances to alleys, hold your breath, because alleys downtown never smell good, summer or winter.

Bicycle-powered rickshaws, with drivers standing by, still wait to be engaged, quilts laid out invitingly and ready to keep passengers snuggled. Families gather with toddlers in tow and pushing strollers. I hope those parents have the sense to know their babies' ears and noses get cold way before their own. Vendors on corners are peddling colorful light sabers and whirligigs to excite the kids.

A clutch of men and women, probably performers, dressed in tuxedos and sparkling dresses, huddle to grab a smoke between sets, ignoring a nearby quartet, dressed all in white, singing soul music a cappella to a crowd gathered around. In the next block a kid sits alone on the

sidewalk, drumming like Gene Krupa on his array of inverted plastic pails. I've heard better, but I'll give him a buck anyway.

You know, we could walk on the mall like this for hours, but I'm getting hungry. Let's stop here. Do you like sloppy joe's?