

# *The Magic Tree*

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All day long clouds had gathered, moving from the north as if they intended to banish the weakened sun forever from the sky. By mid-afternoon, the sky was steel gray, with stains of deeper gray shading off into black. By early evening the north wind began to whistle through the town, and as day insensibly merged into night, snow began to fall. At first it was blown with great force against windows and doors, as though the wind were determined to force the snow into the small houses. Then the winds died away, their fury spent. But all night long the snow drifted to the earth, covering the streets of the town, blanketing trees and muffling every sound, rounding all the sharp edges of existence. All night long the clouds unburdened themselves, and by morning they had dissolved. The sun rose in a cloudless sky, casting its rays on the new-fallen snow, causing the entire town to sparkle as if it had been dusted with diamonds.

The moment he awoke, Jim knew about the snow. He could not see it from his bed, but the light coming through the window was different -- more alive, more exciting. He could not see the snow, but he could hear it. All the normal sounds of a small town coming awake on a Saturday morning sounded strangely distant and muffled. He lay still, listening to the strange stillness, enjoying the warm feel of his bed, thinking of all the things a boy could do on a Saturday morning with a world of fresh snow. He could build a snowman. He'd need help, though, getting the head up on top. The snowman he planned to build would be so big, he would not be able to reach the head. Since it was Saturday, perhaps his father would help him with the snowman.

Saturday! This wasn't just any Saturday. This wasn't just any Saturday with a fresh snowfall. This was the Saturday when he and his father would go out to find the Christmas tree which would stand in the corner of their living room throughout the holiday season. Every year he and his mother and his father found a Saturday in December when they could go out together to select the tree. Most years they would walk down to the vacant lot where the trees were displayed. Mother and Father would examine the trees very carefully. Every year, Jim hoped that they would buy a tree like the neighbors always had -- a pine tree with long needles and space between the branches so that the lights and the ornaments could hang in the tree. But Mother and Father always talked about how the tree should be very full, and should have a very straight trunk, and be tall -- but not too tall -- so it could stand in the living room with the electric star fastened to its very top. Every year they would find a very full cedar tree -- one so full of branches that the ornaments would be sort of stuck on the outside, instead of hanging in among the branches. Daddy would ask the man the price of the tree. Then he and Mother would whisper quietly together. Sometimes Daddy would speak again to the man. Sometimes they went to another vacant lot where trees were being sold. But sooner or

later they would choose a tree. Carefully, Daddy would insert his hand in among the sticky branches, grab the trunk, pick up the tree, and carry it home. The smell of the cedar would be strong on his clothes all day.

This was the Saturday when they would select the tree, only this year it would be different. This year they had a car, and Daddy had promised that the two of them would go out together to cut down their own tree. Would the snow make any difference in their plans? Could cars drive in this snow? Jimmy slid out of bed, feeling the shock of cold linoleum beneath his bare feet. He hurried to the kitchen, where his mother was cooking a pot of steaming oatmeal. "Will we get the tree today?" he asked as he slid into his chair. "We'll see," said his mother. "Now sit up and eat your breakfast."

He was barely finished his oatmeal when the outside door opened and his father entered the room, stamping the snow from his shoes. "Get yourself bundled up. It's going to be cold out there, looking for a tree in this weather. I've got the chains on the tires, and I want to get going before it gets too late."

In a flash, Jim was so bundled -- in snowsuit, boots, cap, mittens and scarf -- that he thought he'd never be able to move. His mother checked him over one more time, gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, and urged the two of them to find a good tree, a nice thick one with a straight trunk. "I'll have cookies and cocoa ready for you when you get back," she promised.

The car didn't want to start. It groaned and protested, sputtered and knocked, but at last, with a final shudder, the engine caught and was running smoothly. Jim watched as his father turned the wheel and moved the car from its place beside the curb. As they pulled away, Jim looked back to see the bare space, like a huge footprint in the snow, where the car had been parked all night long. He liked sitting in the front seat with his father, watching him as he moved the gearshift from one position to another. He liked the sound of the engine as it moved smoothly from one speed to another. He was fascinated by the crunching, squeaking sound the tires and chains made in the deep, fresh snow.

Soon they were leaving the small town behind and driving out into the countryside. Here the snow seemed even deeper. Field after rolling field enfolded in the white embrace of snow moved past the automobile window. Here and there, chimneys of large farmhouses wrote each other faint smoke-signal messages against the sky. In some barnyards, a few chickens pecked in a discouraged sort of way at the strange, white substance covering the ground. And over all, the same stillness which made even the engine sounds and the crunching noise of the car's tires seem distant and strangely unfamiliar.

After a while, the car stopped at a stop sign and then proceeded up a steep hill. Thanks to sand on the road and chains on the tires, they reached the top with little trouble. A few minutes more and Jim's father stopped the car at a point where the road turned sharply to the left. He turned off the engine and said, "From here we walk. I don't think we could make that lane even with snow chains." For a long time they trudged through the snow along a narrow lane, scarcely wide enough for one car. Jim's nose was beginning to feel

cold. He wanted to wipe it, but he didn't want to take off his mittens to search for his handkerchief. He snuffled a bit. His father smiled. "Just a bit farther," he said.

Soon Jim saw a small, old, ramshackle house nestled into the side of the hill a short distance away. Smoke was coming from a metal stovepipe which poked through the roof at one end. Jimmy's father knocked at the door and there was a shuffling sound from inside. The door opened and an elderly man stood peering out.

"Charlie, this is my boy, Jim. I brought him along to help me select our Christmas tree."

The old man grunted as if in acceptance, looked at the boy for a moment, and then said, "The trees are out that way," pointing off to the left. "Did ya bring along an ax? You'll need an ax. Naw, you didn't bring an ax. City folk never have axes. Well, you'll find one out there in the barn. Help yourself; pick any tree you want; ain't nothin' there but scrub anyhow."

The old man went back into the house and closed the door. Jim and his father went on to the rickety building the man had called a barn. Inside they found the ax. Jim's father put the ax over his shoulder and headed out, with long strides, in the direction of the trees. After walking for a while through fields made rough by the stubble of last summer's corn hidden beneath the snow, they came to a place where the land dropped off steeply toward the creek. Here were the remains of an old field which had been allowed to return to grazing land. Here and there across the expanse of sloping land no longer disturbed by the plow each spring, clumps of cedar trees had taken root, and now stood like scattered sentinels upon the white landscape.

"Here we are, Jim. Now we must pick the right tree for our Christmas. Remember, it must be full, and well-proportioned, and the trunk must be straight, and it must be tall, but not too tall for our living room. Which one do you like?"

Jim was silent for a moment. In truth, he was disappointed. He had hoped that this year they would have a tree like the neighbors -- one with long needles and lots of spaces between the branches. But he saw only cedar trees. At last he chose one tree and pointed to it.

"Oh my, Jim, that tree is much too tall. Even if we could get it home and into a bucket of water and wire it into place, there would be no room on top for the Christmas star. What good is a tree without our star on top?"

At last they selected a different tree. It seemed like a little tree to Jim. He watched as his father took the ax and struck a blow at the base of the tree. The little tree shivered, scattering snow from its close-packed branches. Another blow and then another and soon the tree trembled and fell over into the snow.

The boy watched his father thrust his hand into the dense, prickly foliage, grab the trunk, pick up the tree and, with his other hand, shoulder the ax. Then they began the long walk

back across the fields. Jim's father returned the ax to the tumble-down barn and then went to the little house. He knocked on the door. Again the shuffling noise from inside and the old man opened the door. "We got the tree, Charlie, and I put the ax back where I found it. How much do I owe you?"

"Don't owe me nothin'. Ain't nothin' but scrub anyhow. Most folks don't want them old cedar trees, not even for Christmas trees."

Jim's father thanked the old man and wished him a merry Christmas. Then he picked up the tree, took hold of Jim's hand and they began to trudge back up the lane to the car. Jim's nose was cold, the wind was beginning to burn his cheeks, even his fingers were beginning to feel cold, despite the warm mittens he was wearing. They reached the car, put the tree into the trunk, tied down the lid of the trunk so the tree would not fall out, since the top of it stuck out, and headed back to town. Jim fell asleep almost immediately, though he did wake up now and then, when the car struck a bare spot in the road and the tire chains made a loud, complaining noise.

Before very long, they were home. Jim's father pulled the tree out of the car's trunk and carried it up the three flights of stairs to their kitchen door. Jim soon found himself divested of mittens, cap, scarf, gloves, boots and sitting at the table eating tomato soup and hot chocolate and homemade Christmas cookies which his mother had baked while they were gone.

After lunch, Jim wanted to decorate the tree immediately.

"Oh no," said his father. "First I must cut the end of it straight, and then find the bucket to stand it in and some wire to fasten it to the wall so it will not fall when it is all decorated. You go take a nap, now. I'll get the tree up while you nap, and we'll decorate it tomorrow, after church."

Jim fell asleep quickly, dreaming about tiny little trees with great big stars on top of them, and colored ornaments clinging to their sides as if they had been pasted on -- rather like the construction-paper trees he had made in school. The sound of a handsaw entered his dream, and he saw his father cutting the small tree they had brought home -- cutting it from the bottom a section at a time until there was nothing left of the tree but a tiny green tip.

"There," said his father in the dream, "now it will just fit in our living room."

When Jim woke from his nap, he lay still for a moment. He could smell the Christmas cookies his mother had baked that morning, still clinging to the corners of the room. There was another smell, too -- a green, woodsy, living smell. He slipped out of his bed and ran down the hall to the living room. While he slept, the furniture had been rearranged and over in the corner stood the tree he and his father had selected and cut just that morning. Its trunk was firmly planted in a large bucket, which was wrapped around with a white sheet, and the wires securing it to the walls were barely visible. The tree

looked very much as it had looked when he first saw it standing sentry in the snow-covered field. Only now it seemed so much larger.

Immediately, Jim wanted to decorate the tree.

"No," said his mother. "It's too late today. We'll decorate it tomorrow, after church."

"Oh, please," begged Jim. "It looks so bare standing in the corner. Can't we put the lights on, please?"

"I'll tell you what," said his father, "we'll get out the star that goes on the very top. We'll put the star on, but nothing else until tomorrow afternoon."

After dinner, Jim's father rummaged under the bed where the Christmas decorations were stored. (When you live in a small apartment, spaces like those under the bed become your attic and your cellar and your storeroom.) Next to the boxes containing jars of peaches and tomatoes Mother had canned last summer was the box containing the special star. Next he brought in the stepladder from the back porch, climbed it and very carefully positioned the star on the very top of the tree. He attached the star to an extension cord and plugged it into the wall outlet, and the star began to glow softly at the top of the tree.

Jim lay on his stomach on the floor at the base of the tree. He breathed in the warm fragrance of cedar which now filled the room. He looked up at the tree and wondered how he could ever have thought it too small. Now he could see that it was enormous! It was so tall and straight that it seemed that it had caught the North Star in its topmost branches. He wondered how he ever could have wanted a different kind of tree, when this tree was obviously *the* tree, the *original*, the world's *best* Christmas tree, even in winter smelling so green and alive. Lying there on his stomach, Jim knew that there was much magic yet to come this magic season -- tomorrow he and his parents would decorate the tree. There would be toys and gifts. There would be special music and special food and visits with friends and relatives. But the magic of the season had begun today with this wonderful tree, and had really begun with the snow and the cold, and the automobile ride and his father's big hand holding his small hand, and home-baked cookies, and finding the tree, the one right tree in all the world.

Christmas had begun today, with the pole star shining and winking from the top of the tree, his own, magic Christmas tree. And all Christmases to come -- even those when he was older and sometimes alone for the holiday -- would be enriched by the memory of this Christmas and the magic of this day and this tree.