

“What do we do with this one?” James asked.

The one he referred to was a small tree, a bit weak on it’s right side when it came to needle coverage. It was small and lopsided.

“Well, normally we would chop it down and mulch it, but what’s the use?” Carl replied. It was bitterly cold and he hunched forward with his hands in his pockets. All around them was what remained of the Christmas tree farm. Nothing but the empty lot. Just stumps all across the field.

“It doesn’t even look much bigger than the ones we have growing for next year,” James said timidly. He was young. This was his first job. Carl thought he was a good kid. He liked him because he didn’t mind crawling around in the dirt to cut down the trees.

“We still have spaces in that field. Instead of mulching a sapling, why don’t we move it over there and see if it grows any better?” Carl said.

“What for next year?”

Carl shrugged in the affirmative. “Go get a shovel and we’ll dig it up.”

James was off with a start and Carl lumbered on behind him, lighting a cigarette as he went. The sapling swayed in the breeze, lone and cold. All around, the stumps.

The saw’s teeth ripped through the bark into the fresh wood underneath. James was more rugged than he had been a year ago. He was stronger than before, owing in no small part to the labor he had performed on the farm since last year’s Christmas season. During the summer he had helped harvest corn. Heavy work. Good conditioning. The tree at hand came down in no time.

A few moments later he had netted the tree and strapped it to the roof of a kindly family’s car. It was crowded and he was on his way back to the staging area where they would wrap the freshly cut trees. He was fixing on grabbing a hot cocoa from the shack by the entrance but

was interrupted by Carl, whose words were muddled by the gobs of gum he had lodged in his mouth. James went to ask him to repeat himself but Carl just shook his head and pointed to another family. James got the message, and headed to them.

“Hi there! Merry Christmas!” he said with his usual enthusiasm.

“Hi,” Patrick said. He was in an old red plaid flannel jacket, that Maggie always thought made him look like a mountain man. His hair was graying but cropped tight to the sides of his head. A pair of thick rimmed plastic glasses sat on his face. “I believe a decision has been made.”

“Excellent! Where’s your tree?” James replied.

“Toward the back of the lot, with my family” he replied.

The duo walked past other families and trees yet to be harvested. They eventually made their way to his wife Maggie and their children. Their son was Markus who was 8, and their daughter was Emma, 6.

“There she is,” Patrick said as they approached the tree.

“Here I am,” Maggie replied. She was sipping a hot cocoa and

holding Emma's hand. "The tree, but yes- you're also here," Patrick said and then turning to James joked, "Please don't chop down my wife."

James laughed and began to get down onto the ground, saw in hand.

"Excuse me buddy," he said to the small boy that stood staring upwards.

"Markus, come on over here so he can get our tree," Maggie called out.

For a moment the boy didn't move, as if transfixed. It took her calling a second time to break the spell. He joined her and his sister looking onto the scene with a look that no person there noticed. Not fear, but trepidation. Like he already knew what was coming.

As James roughly brought the saw back and forth he thought back to the year before. He thought about the small sapling. Hard to believe it had grown this much.

The upper branches came down into the dirt before James and Patrick began carrying it to the staging area.

As they went, they passed other trees, yet to be chosen.

And stumps.

There was no water in the base on Christmas Eve. Maggie and Patrick had gotten the kids up early on this morning and then spent the day bringing them to both sets of grandparents' houses. The hope was that there would be enough excitement during the day to completely tire them out early. The pair would have some work to do, on this night-after all.

It was 7:30 when Maggie tucked in Markus. He was wearing his monster pajamas. They were his clear favorite. She leaned in and kissed his forehead. She ran her hand through his hair.

“Are you excited for Christmas?” She asked him. He nodded in reply, but hesitantly. He seemed anxious. “Are you okay, Marky Mark?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s wrong,” she pressed.

“What if I wake up while Santa’s here?” He deflected.

Maggie smiled warmly.

“I’m sure Santa will forgive you. I bet lots of kids wake up while he’s dropping off the presents,” she said, “The important thing is just to stay in bed. Okay?”

Markus nodded and Maggie headed down the staircase to the first floor of the house. He closed his eyes, and thought about how he wanted to explain his true fear to her. Or how he possibly could have even begun. _____

“Kids are down,” She said quietly as she came out from the stairwell. Patrick was staring at the tree, unmoving. “Well, we should probably get started.”

Patrick still didn’t move. He couldn’t.

Maggie seemed to grow concerned as she stepped towards the glowing tree in the darkened living room. “Patrick?”

He couldn't tell how long he had actually been asleep. He sat up a little in bed and looked out the door of his room. From somewhere downstairs, he could hear a shuffling sound. He sat for a moment, trying to make out what it was he was hearing. Something in his mind decided that it wasn't Santa.

His legs swung off the side of the bed and as he slipped off his mattress his toes pressed into the hardwood floor. He left his room and then walked out into the hall. His breathing was intensifying as he approached the stairs. He could see shadows dancing across the wall on the first floor. He began to walk down the steps, but wouldn't be able to see what lay before him until he reached the bottom of the enclosed staircase. As he crept down the steps the sounds continued. There was something wet and thick, a slimy messy noise. He hadn't heard it before.

As he reached the bottom of the staircase, he quietly looked around the corner of the wall and into the living room. Gifts were strewn about, and all through them, roots. He saw his father first and the blood that had pulled around his ankles, spilling out from where his feet used to be. Roots had pierced through his body all over. He followed them and

traced them through to his mother. One of her feet was gone and the other was being slowly cut through with a large carving knife- held by the tree.

The roots came from it, freshly sprouted from it's stump. As it felt the boys presence it rose up and appeared like some kind of octopus- the roots like tentacles coiling through the room. It stabbed the knife into the floor as some of its branches wrapped around Maggie's torso. The roots gripped her foot and then with a forceful yank, tore it from her leg. Markus screamed and the tree darted across the room. The Christmas lights on it pulled from the wall and everything went pitch black.

Markus couldn't see anything as he scrambled up the stairs and dove under his bed. He spun around peering through the door with fear in his eyes. The ghostly moonlight filtered through the window at the end of the hall and cast just enough light for him to see the slithering shapes of the roots as they wormed there way past his door. He thought of his sister, and a moment later he heard her scream. A moment after that, as the roots found their way to him, he did too.

On Christmas morning, Maggie and Patrick had become rigid enough. Deep in the woods, in the wild, in nature they lay upon the ground, frozen. The hooks that had once hung on branches had been pierced through their flesh while they were still warm enough to do so. Their stumps would now be hard enough to be pushed into the ground. Once they were, Emma and Markus- through tears- did the next part. They walked round and round their parents, stringing up the lights, and the garland. The tree watched on. They all did.

When they were done, the tree began to coil its roots back into the frozen dirt and thought about the two little saplings that cried beneath their parents.

As it finally began to settle, It thought it might let the two of them grow a little while longer- before next year's harvest.