



The Story:

Times have not been good for the Mobey family. Severe illness has left them with one parent and little income. They live on a relative's benevolence, and count on gaining a small windfall from the seasonal harvesting of a tiny pine forest. --All they have, Ol' Mobey relates, are these 500 Christmas trees. Selling them would leave their world barren. Not selling them would keep their small family impoverished. Preserving the natural peace and beauty of the forest is at odds with material hope. But can't bounty be measured in ways other than pots of gold, or an endless cornucopia of holiday gifts?

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500 CHRISTMAS TREES

by Steven Wallig

Five hundred Christmas trees were all we had. Some of them were stumpy looking, like little folks who had a hard time last year: Summers too hot, winters too cold and not enough rain. Or too much smoke from the highway and the factory on the other side. Though that plant had already been closed. It was pretty cold, early that December. Bitter breezes cleared the air.

Dad said we could dig the trees from the ground and sell them that way. Just say 'good-bye' knowing they'll be planted elsewhere. Growing taller in suburbs and fine estates. Being fed plant food and cared for by gardeners or nice ladies with cotton gloves on. -- Not fighting the weeds on that humpy bit of ground. But, Dad tried to dig one tree out, once. It took a long time to do and it hurt his back. No one bought it. A single tree by the roadside, its roots half-chopped and covered with burlap. The cars just went by. A few days later Dad tried to replant it but it wouldn't take. It sat in its old hole and leaned a bit. Then its needles turned brown and it died. Finally, Dad pulled it loose. That time it came out of the earth like a stick. A stick that my little brother, Younger, could pull out of the ground.

I told Dad that nobody would buy any of those trees. Just like the one that died. But Dad said, put up a banner and some lights; '500 XMAS trees for sale!' And they'll be gone in

no time. And we'll have a field with lots of stumps and nothing else. Nothing but the money we'll make. And Dad said we need the money that the trees will bring. You see, all we had were those five hundred Christmas trees.

Dad used to work at the plant as a senior inventory expediter for years. Then after it closed he helped Uncle Rich in the deli---till Uncle Rich died. Aunt Mae closed the deli and we had to leave the bungalow and move into the little trailer on a piece of wooded property that Aunt Mae owned. There wasn't much to do. Not inside. The nights were quiet. Younger did his homework and then Dad and he watched T.V. hour after hour. I still had my hobby --the only one left. I wrote this journal. Oh yes, I almost forgot: Aunt Mae gave Dad the right to sell the trees, if he wanted.

Afternoons on Sunday are always sad. The time may be free but the new week keeps coming closer.

On the far side of the trailer where the trees were little, there was a small area that was almost level. Dad had told us that a house had been there years ago.

Younger wanted to fly his kite from that spot. He asked me to put it together for him. The kites were the last thing Uncle Rich ever gave us.

The wind was chasing clouds across the sky. Dad had told us that winds like that came from the top of the world.

"I bet the kites will go up for a mile," Younger said.

"What if the string isn't strong enough?" I asked. And if a kite came down on the highway, or dropped and snagged on the taller pines -- besides being dangerous, I felt uneasy about wrecking the kite.

"Wait till next summer," I told him, "-- or the spring."

"What!"

"It could get ruined here. It could even cause an accident," I told him.

"What else is there to do? I'll put it together myself," he said.

Dad bounced the old pick up truck toward the trailer sputtering dirt clouds from the many ruts surrounding the property. We ran after him.

He had been shopping and returned with his usual assortment of canned foods. Beans. Garbanzo beans, kidney beans and beans-beans. And twelve cans of tuna fish. We helped him bring the groceries inside.

"Ugh!" Younger said of the tuna fish, "This kind smells like kitty food." But according to Dad, tuna fish had lots of low-fat, 'protein' in it and was good for you. Besides, this kind was on SALE. So as long as the weather stayed cool we would pack tuna fish sandwiches all week for school lunches. I set the kites down on the table. Dad looked at them and shook his head.

Younger and I went outside, again, to play.

"Mommy never made lunches the way Daddy does. Mommy always put chips and candy in our lunches. Daddy gives us two sandwiches and an apple," Younger complained. "All that sandwich stuff makes me gag."

"So trade it away," I told him.

"Who wants tuna fish?"

I shrugged. "Let's play that we're forest trackers searching for a lost gold mine," I suggested.

"Naw, it's getting too late..."

Younger didn't like to get too far away from Dad on the weekends. As if he would get lost on our little field.

He pulled the top off one of the pumpkins on the steps. We had hollowed out a few extra but only made two of them into jack-o'-lanterns.

"It's probably rotten on the bottom," I told him.

"Just cold." He settled down next to it for a minute but then went inside.

I trotted toward the setting sun thinking of a game I could play by myself.

On the other side of the field near Mulberry Street I looked for someone to play with. Sometimes, the kids from town walked that way to and from the creek.

There was no one around and I went back to the trailer. I saw Younger coming out of the door with a large pitcher of kool aid.

He carefully walked down the steps, one-at-a-time, till he reached the pumpkin. Slowly he lowered the pitcher to pour the kool aid into the hollow pumpkin.

"Younger! What are you doing?! Don't put kool aid in the pumpkin," I said.

"It's not kool aid, dummy."

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's Jello."

"Jello?!"

"Yes," He said, "I'm making a pumpkin pie."

I was astounded. "Dad!" I yelled. "You gotta see this."

We would eat jello all next week, I knew. I hoped it was a good flavor.

**

Monday was school again. Dad walked us, but I was too old to be walked, so I speeded up.

"What's your hurry Ol'?" Dad asked.

"He's too cool," Younger said.

"Button your coat," Dad advised.

"Not that kind of cool...To be seen with us," Younger said.

"Oh," Dad answered.

I didn't say anything. I didn't need to be walked, did I? --I thought Younger could walk by himself also, but Dad wanted something to do.

Mrs. Kornwheeler was in a bad mood. I could tell right away. She didn't ask us about our weekend or tell any stories about her two cats, 'Fisher' and 'Whiskers'. We had a cat once....

--Right away we got to work. Math first. Uh! I knew she was in a really bad mood. It began to put me in a bad mood. Yet the sun was streaming into my face. It was cold outside, almost holiday time. I didn't want to feel too bad. By mid-morning we had to write essays --about our families. In the earlier grades we had to draw pictures. But I like to write.

Kenny Shuler grumbled. I knew he had trouble writing anything he had to make up. I could see his paper from where I sat. 'My Family'. He groaned and held his head in his hands. He would be stuck for a long time.

I tried to think of a funny story. Something about Younger and me. I looked outside and imagined being free and playing.

I began to write:

'When we had a house, a rented bungalow actually, Dad was always in the cellar making things. He loves to tinker. He's not so handy at fixing things --not so they look nice...but likes to kkeep occupied. "I got to keep busy," he said. And he did make things --out of wood, mostly. Useful things and play things. He wasn't a craftsman really, just a putterer. Younger's like that too. Sometimes he'll work for hours gluing or nailing or screwing things together. Things that look pretty much like junk. But Younger would say, "That's the way I wanted it to look." And Dad would look at it, squint one eye and turn it a bit. Younger would wait eagerly for Dad's comments.

Then Dad would start nodding. "Yup --couldn't have done better myself."

I couldn't help it. I usually said, "It's junk! What does it do?!"

Younger would get mad and swing at me.

"Hold it!..." Dad exclaimed, getting tense.

"Well, what does it do, Dad?" I asked.

"How's he supposed to know. I built it, " Younger said.

"If it were something, anybody would know what it is," I said.

"No they wouldn't!"

"Hey!" Dad separated us again. "There are works of art, sculpture worth millions that looks different to everybody. Some people say it's a rusty dinosaur. Others say it's symbolic of something. And to some it's just welded junk-yard-parts."

"See!" Younger demanded.

"But this isn't art!" I said.

"How would you know?" Younger demanded.

Dad would send us to other rooms. "I just can't stand yelling and fighting and arguing!" he shouted at us. "It's STUPID!" he screamed to the walls. Younger probably stood in his corner turning his what-ever-it-was around on its base.

**

Now, things are very different in my family. We are often quiet and sometimes even sad. We miss Mom. Not that I can ever remember a perfect time. When Dad was let go at the plant he was around all day. At first happy and full of plans. He wanted to build houses, he told us. Low-cost houses for average people. He had always wanted to do it. Mom told him it was a bad idea. She had wanted to be an actress but gave that goal up. Dad should give up his idea too.

I can remember them disagreeing. One night she told Dad to leave and he did. He would call us up every few days but didn't know what to say. We all listened on the phone and waited for 'good-bye.'

Then Mom got sick and had to go to the hospital. Aunt Mae and Uncle Rich took care of us but they were older and had no children. Dad came back and worked in the deli.

If you asked my little brother Younger to draw a picture of all the places we had to live I'm sure the gloomiest picture would be of Aunt Mae's house. He claimed it was haunted, that there were ghosts upstairs.

I'm sure that it was the sounds of pigeons roosting under the eaves he heard or wind whistling through cracks around the windows. Maybe there were even bats in the attic.

But Aunt Mae's house alone was not what bothered us. We didn't have our mother.

I remember how Mom looked at the hospital. So pale. She didn't know anything, like she was sleeping very deeply. But not really sleeping. It was almost hard to remember how

pretty she had been. When we got home I had to look at pictures of her. Pictures of all of us.

Younger hid. I think he was crying...'

"O.K. class, if you haven't finished the assignment take it with you as part of your homework."

Kenny Shuler sighed in relief. He still had only the two words on his paper: 'My Family'. His sister would help him write something. I folded my essay in half, then quarters and stuffed it into my pocket. I would write something else. Like about when our old cat got stuck in the tree. Mrs. Kornwheeler would like that.

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We had some free time after Art-Class. Mrs. Kornwheeler was late returning from break. The guys crowded around the window. They blocked the sunlight. I was drawing plans for a clubhouse on our lot. Winston Curtis leaned over me.

"Hey, what's that?" he asked.

"Clubhouse," I said.

"Clubhouse? --Hey, look at this! It looks like a shanty-shack for bums," he laughed and carried on. The other guys laughed too. If Curtis wasn't a rich-kid with computers and video games, and all the guys so eager to get invited to his house, no one would like him. I don't think they really like him anyway. He's a jerk.

"Bums go in this window here," he said and held my drawing up.

I wanted to punch him as hard as I could. I took the paper away from him.

"What is it?" Kenny Shuler asked me.

"Nothing," I told him.

"A clubhouse. --Where you going to build it, on the school playground?" Curtis asked, teasing.

"We got woods. My Aunt's..."

"Where all those trees are, off the highway?" Kenny asked.

"Across from the plant. I know where that is. My father's office looks out over there," Curtis said.

Everybody was quiet. Only Winston's father and a few other people --security guards-- still worked at the plant which was basically closed. Curtis noticed this silence.

"What do you do on that lot?" Curtis asked me.

"We're going to sell Christmas trees. We got five hundred of them."

"Yeah?"

Everybody seemed impressed. Mrs. Kornwheeler walked in and the kids went back to their seats.

"You got any really good trees?" Curtis asked.

"Sure." I smoothed the clubhouse plans out.

"I mean good and big?" he asked from his seat on the other side of Kenny Shuler.

"Mr. Curtis, are you finished?" Mrs. Kornwheeler asked. She was the only one I knew who treated Winston Curtis like just another kid. Even I didn't do that.

"How big?" Kenny Shuler whispered to me.

"Mr. Shuler, I'll see you at three o'clock," Mrs. Kornwheeler said. Poor Kenny Shuler. Winston Curtis snickered to himself. He made me mad.

"Mr. Mobey, could you please lower the shade?" she asked me.

"Yes." Everyone was settling in for a last period of social studies. I wished the school day was over already. I had things to do

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I had to wait for my brother. He could be pokey. He could also be late because of a problem during the day. Usually those problems were caused by his not paying attention. Mrs. Grady was probably keeping him after. I was certain of that when every little kid, lugging back packs and carrying drawings, had disappeared. The gathering at the crosswalk thinned to me and the crossing guard.

I was getting cold. When ever I told on Younger, to Dad, he got mad at me. But I was getting mad waiting. So I asked the guard, Mr. 'Fred' if I could go back to the school.

"Why?" he asked me.

"To get my brother."

"Maybe he went home already," Mr. Fred related, putting the 'STOP' - paddle under his arm. He treated the sschool like it was the Pentagon. He was a stickler about rules.

"I'm sure he's still in there," I said.

"He'll come out, eventually," Fred said.

I'm sure that his statement was true. But I was cold. Being cold was not an excuse.

"Maybe he got into trouble and I have to call my Dad."

He thought this over and agreed, "O.K." and crossed me.

I went straight to Mrs. Grady's class-room on the second floor of the old wing and found Younger stapling things on their bulletin board. Even Mrs. Grady was gone.

"Younger! --What did you do this time, lose all your books? --Let Tommy Fasella throw them out the window while you were day-dreaming?!"

"No, dummy."

"You had to stay," I said.

"No, I didn't have to!"

"Then what are you doing here?" I demanded.

"Mrs. Grady asked for volunteers to do the bulletin board. I volunteered," he said.

"You!" I was amazed. "Why would you do that? We could have been home twenty minutes ago."

"Big thrill. What's to do there? The place is too small to even play with toys. At least here there's room."

He stapled a cardboard Christmas tree at an angle to a present. The present was too big for the Christmas tree.

"What about me waiting for you?" I asked.

"Yesterday you weren't there," he said. That was true. We had gotten our signals crossed.

"I thought you had a ride," I said, adding, "That present is bigger than the tree. Haven't you got smaller presents in there?" I looked through the box of cut-outs. I found a Thanksgiving turkey and a pilgrim missing from their own box, and President Lincoln.

"So they got a small tree. You can't keep a tree anyway. The present you can keep!" Younger said. I found some smaller presents and a larger tree in the box. But I could see that Younger could not be swayed.

"Let me help," I said, hoping to get us out of the school faster. We fought for the stapler but I got it. Laughing, he ran to his desk and got his own little stapler. I stapled a 'Happy Holidays' sign and then a Hanukkah toy spinning top to the board. Younger started stapling a much used 'Merry Christmas' banner. We were racing each other.

Mrs. Grady walked in. I felt embarrassed. If anybody else found out that I was hanging out in a fourth grade classroom after school I'd...

"Hello Ol', I haven't seen you in some time," she said.

"Hello Mrs. Grady," I answered. --About three years, I thought.

"And how's everything?" she asked.

"Fine, very good."

Younger stapled, furiously, behind me. I could see a smirk on his face as 'Happy New Year' went up.

*

Walking home, we passed the big house on Third Street. The shades were drawn and there was no sign of Aunt Mae. The paint on the front porch was peeling and the winter grass, uncut since mid-summer, was ragged and yellow.

I used to have good memories of that house. When we were little there were often parties and barbecues. But after we lived there awhile the house was not the same for us.

The first night that Mom was in the hospital was bad. Uncle Rich closed the deli early and came to stay with us at the bungalow.

"We're gonna have some fun tonight, huh, kids?" he asked and tried tickling Younger who wouldn't laugh.

But Uncle Rich could not have fun. He looked very tired. His face was gray and he seemed uncomfortable. He closed the door to Mom's bedroom and told us not to go inside. Then he sat in the easy chair and tapped his knuckles against the end table.

"Is Mom going to be in the hospital a long time?" Younger asked him.

"Nah!" Uncle Rich exclaimed with his usual gusto. "They'll give her a shot right here..." He tried to grab Younger and pinch him on the bottom to make him laugh --but Younger squirmed away.

"Give your Mom a shot right in the keister and 'pow' she'll be out of bed and home making you eat your vegetables. Carrots and beets. You eat carrots and beets, Younger? Ol'?"

"No!" Younger said.

Actually we hadn't had any supper, but I wasn't very hungry.

"Mom's been kind of sick for a while," I told him. "Going to bed real early... sometimes staying in bed all day.

"Aw it's nothing to worry about. Run-down, feeling blue that's all. Give her that shot right in the keister 'OUCH!' and she'll be perky in no time," Uncle Rich said, as if he were going to be his old self, but then became quiet.

Aunt Mae called for him on the telephone.

"Supper? We'll have pizza," Uncle Rich told her on the phone.

Then he fell silent and made 'gab-gab-gab' hand motions while he listened. "Okay Mae, okay Mae..."

When the call ended he pushed himself out of the chair and walked into the kitchen.

There were dirty dishes in the sink. I felt bad about that.

"Boy, I'm bushed tonight. Me, a cook and deli-man... How about we have a little secret. We order some pizza-pie and don't tell your Aunt Mae?"

We nodded.

But Aunt Mae kept calling back every few minutes. Finally Uncle Rich got angry.

"Look Mae, we're fine over here. In the morning I'll clean the bedroom. Why don't you spend your time finding that kid brother of yours and stop phoning here every ten minutes! He slammed the phone down and sat quietly in the chair.

Younger and I knew things were bad but not how bad. We didn't realize how sick Uncle Rich was then, either.

In the morning we went to school and by evening had to begin packing to stay with Aunt Mae and Uncle Rich.

Dad, they said, was driving a truck across the country and they hadn't got hold of him yet.

There were plenty of rooms in Aunt Mae's house and Younger and I each got our own. But they were filled with old furniture. The drawers were hard to open and the bed squeaked.

Uncle Rich tried to make us comfortable. "Take those old pictures off the wall. Put up your baseball pennants. This is your room now, Ol'," Uncle Rich told me before going to work.

But when I asked Aunt Mae where to put some of her pictures she just looked at me funny.

"Put them? Aren't they okay where they are?" She asked.

So all of our stuff sat in boxes. Younger couldn't sleep at night. He kept going downstairs and asking for things. Finally, when it was dark in the house and Uncle Rich's snores echoed along the creaky hallway - I could hear my little brother crying.

I told him to come into my room so we could play. Soon he fell asleep at the foot of my bed, wearing his robe.

I got into trouble at school that first week of staying with Aunt Mae. It was during recess and I climbed into a first floor classroom window on a dare by Billy Aredo.

"Betcha no one will do it!"

"I'll do it," I bragged.

Only I got caught by Mr. Owens, the day custodian.

The worst part was being sent to the principal's office. I had been to Mr. Murphy's office

before, to get supplies or hand in the attendance list, but never for a crime.

Mr. Owens told him what I had done.

"This youngster got bored with recess and climbed into 2B."

"Windows open?" Mr. Murphy asked.

"Yeah," Mr. Owens said.

"Okay... sit down," Mr. Murphy said to me. That was the worst. He wouldn't question me or punish me right away. He would make me wait!

My own mind turned against me. 'What-I-do-wrong; -climb-up-a-window-sill?' -began to turn into an argument that I could only guess at: 'But Mr. Murphy, I wasn't going to steal or destroy anything!'

When the bell rang I began to get scared. I was late for class and would also get into trouble with my teacher!

All the while Mr. Murphy never looked up at me. He continued working at his desk as if I didn't exist. Minutes went by.

"Mr. Murphy, my teacher..." I began.

"She knows you're here, I'm sure," he said.

More time went by. My hands became sweaty. I had trouble swallowing. Finally Mr. Murphy spoke again. "I've written a little note to your Aunt, son."

Rather than feel better because he knew who I was, I felt as if I was in the Doctor's office - in the room where they give the injections and the air smelled of alcohol.

"I wasn't doing anything bad..." I said.

Mr. Murphy looked at me.

"No? But son, you're a good student, a smart fellow. Should you be climbing into unoccupied classroom windows? What kind of example might that set for your less fortunate colleagues? Some of them might want to play tag on the highway. Do you understand? Rules are rules."

I thought of Kenny Shuler playing tag on the highway and almost laughed. I took the note from him.

"Don't do it again, son. Okay?"

"Okay," I said.

"Back to class."

The punishment was only beginning. Aunt Mae read the note several times. "This will

never do, young man," she said. At first I thought she was angry with the note!

"He had to send that home, I said. "He made me sit in his office too. So Kenny Shuler wouldn't chase trucks on the bypass..."

"You have a smirk on you face. Get it OFF!"

I'm sure I had no smile after she yelled at me.

"One more poison for my brother to swallow. Well, I won't stand for it! Until your father gets home I'm responsible for you."

'Where is he?' I wondered. We had talked to him on the phone the night before and he seemed so reassuring: "I have another 400 miles, kids. I talked to Mom's doctor just before. Don't worry... I'm on my way..."

"I have certain standards that must be met. Doings like this requires extra-ordinary punishments," Aunt Mae continued.

'What-I-do-wrong;-climb-up-a-window-sill?' ran through my mind again.

"I think first, you should write a long essay on unlawful entry. After all, you like to write..."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Breaking into someplace you don't belong in. ILLEGAL TRESPASS. That's why I have those signs up on the trailer by the pines! It's the first part of a bad crime... I think five pages with every line filled should be a starting place. No television, no outside play..."

"Aunt Mae!" I protested.

"You have got to learn..." she warned.

"I've already learned. I will never..."

"Get upstairs and get started," she told me.

I thought of complaining to Uncle Rich but decided that writing the essay would be the better thing to do.

I trudged upstairs. Aunt Mae held me with an unrelenting gaze, as if she would not move from her chair next to the cove window until all of my many weeks of punishments were done.

I sat down at the old desk and opened my notebook. I couldn't think of a thing to write. Visions of Kenny Shuler running amok over all the highways in our area filled my thoughts. I heard him screaming: 'Ol' Mobey made me do this!' over the sound of a mean truck bearing down with its mighty horn.

I held my head in my hands as Kenny did when given assignments he couldn't

understand..

Aunt Mae entered the room.

"I'm working on it," I told her.

She closed my notebook. "O!...O!", there's a strain on all of us... All of us..."

I nodded, uncertain of what she meant. "Do I have to do all these punishments?"

"No, No, I'm sure it was just a school-boy prank. My goodness, once your father disappeared for half-a-day in the woods. Came home with mud up to his arms! My gosh... She laughed. "Your Uncle Rich is right, sometimes I'm too...too nervous." She rustled my hair.

"You want me to make you and your brother a glass of chocolate milk?" She asked me.

"I'll make one later," I said.

"Don't make a mess," she warned.

I nodded.

Younger and I were glad when Dad got back. We were happy to move into the little place by the pine trees. But we weren't a whole family. We all missed mom.

**

When we got home to the trailer it was already late. I wanted to play outside but had something else to get out of the way. The essay. Dad was out. Maybe he had walked to the hospital. If I re-did the essay while he was home --looking over my shoulder-- he might ask too many questions. I took the folded essay I had done in school and ripped it into hundreds of pieces which I stuffed under the coffee grounds in the kitchen trash bucket.

Then I rushed through another essay that wouldn't make anybody feel sorry for us. I wanted to write a story that would seem funny if Mrs. Kornwheeler read it to the class. But it was beginning to get dark already so I made it short, a little over a page.

"Where you going?" Younger asked.

"Outside, man. Come-on. Let's play something," I said. Younger was not interested. He would watch TV. till Dad returned and then waste time till forced to do his homework.

*

Outside. I could see my breath. The horizon looked so clear with pink bands under the darkening blue clouds. I was alone in my forest. It was a kingdom that stretched for hundreds of miles, I pretended, and I owned it all.

The scent of the little trees stung my nose as I walked by. I loved the taller trees. They

were strong enough to lean on. But the evergreen sap would get on my coat. It was sticky and never stopped smelling.

I searched for the best place to build my secret club house and dragged several planks of plywood from behind the trailer to the spot.

I leaned the walls against several trees and set a small roof over it without using any nails. I crawled through a space between two walls and went to the back. I sat on a bed of soft pine needles. It was very dark and cool but there was no wind. It was perfect. If I brought a flashlight and a notebook I could make secret plans and write coded messages and...

And I heard something. --Someone calling my name.

"Ol', Ol' Mobey!"

It wasn't Younger. It definitely wasn't Dad. I had an urge to hide till who ever it was went away. Then I heard footsteps.

"Hey look at that one, Ma. Look at that!"

Who ever it was had a huge flashlight. A powerful lantern. "Let's get that one!"

I crawled out of my hiding place and investigated. It was Winston Curtis and his mother. He heard me and was startled. He put the light on me.

"Curtis! Not in my eyes," I said.

"I thought it was a wolf or something. --This is the kid I tol' ya about, Ma. He claims to own the place."

"Oh?"

"My Aunt owns it. We're in charge of the trees," I said.

"Well, Mobey, that's what we want; a few really great trees. Especially one very big one for our main hall," she told me. "Don't you have any lights up?" she asked.

"Not yet." I didn't feel too good about what was happening.

Dad arrived, carrying a shovel. He had probably been busy filling in a ditch that ran along the side of the property.

"Hello," he said.

"Are you Mobey's father?" Winston's mother asked.

"Uh...-Yeah..."

Mobey was our last name. Ol' was originally short for Oliver --uh-- but became just Ol' as in Older after Younger was named. I didn't say anything about that.

"Dad, they want a bunch of trees. One monster tree for..." I began.

"Our main hall," Curtis finished.

Dad looked at me. It was a look that was more curious than anything else.

"Hey, look at that one. I want that one, Ma. Look at it!" Curtis shouted. He had found the biggest, oldest, most beautiful tree we had. My heart sank.

"Fantastic," Mrs. Curtis said. "Fantastic."

"That won't fit in your house," Dad said.

"Yes it will. We have a large home," Mrs. Curtis answered.

"In one room?" Dad asked. He didn't know who she was.

"Yes."

"Oh."

"How much is it?" she asked.

Dad was taken back. "Uh...Well...Kinda early... Uh...---For...oh, about ...seventy..."

"Two hundred dollars," I shouted out. Still it didn't seem enough. How long had this tree been growing? Twenty years or more?

Mrs. Curtis laughed. "Smart business man," she said.

"We'll pay it," Winston whined.

"Smarter than this business-man," she said of her son. "Mr. uh... You said it was early...If we take the tree now, it won't lose its needles before Christmas, will it? --It should last till the new year, correct?"

"Uh..."

I could see that Dad was uncertain. He didn't know what to say.

"I want it. It's really great!" Winston shouted. "Biggest one here."

"It will hold its needles, won't it?" Mrs. Curtis asked again. Her tone was sharp, like Mrs. Kornwheeler's if she thought someone was trying to pull a fast one.

"I really couldn't say," Dad admitted. "I'm not certain."

"Not much of a forester are you," Mrs. Curtis said.

I wished Dad had shoveled dirt on her.

"Hardly anybody buys trees this early," I said.

"This is a bit unexpected..." Dad began, "I apologize for not being Smokey-the-Bear, but I have a solution for you. We could tag the tree..."

I giggled.

"Don't bother..." Mrs. Curtis paused in the dark stillness as Winston circled the majestic evergreen, shining his foolish searchlight all over it. A stray beam caught her and Dad in the face. She was actually angry. Dad had no expression.

"We'll have to get one somewhere else..." she said.

"But, I want this one!" Curtis demanded.

"Come on. Bring the light. I don't want to trip in this place!"

"Aww. --Let's get that tree!"

"Come NOW, Winston, now!"

Dad and I watched as Winston lit the path for his mother. Her shoes stepped softly through the hard ground. Her coat swished about her and her perfume scented the air she passed through.

Dad leaned on his shovel. "Who was that warm and wonderful human being?" He asked.

"Winston Curtis the third's mom," I said. A shiver ran through me.

"--What? The General Manager's family?" Dad asked, anger showing on his face.

"Yup."

Dad swore under his breath. "That at least, makes sense. No, I'm not a 'forester', but I was an expediter till Winston Curtis senior closed the plant. Well, it wasn't exactly his fault, he only kept it a secret for six months. Go to work one day and 'SURPRISE, thanks for the fourteen years; here's a week's vacation pay - have a nice time!..."

"Yeah, and why should they get our best tree?" I asked.

"Why? Because we could use the money. What a sap I was. I should have told her what ever she wanted to hear... I shoulda'..." Dad walked toward the trailer whacking the shovel at dirt.

It was completely dark. All the trees began to look spooky. Breezes blew through them making their boughs creak. The big tree seemed to be smiling above all the others. I followed Dad to our little home.

Dad and I cooked hot dogs and beans for supper. Younger made faces at us.

"Hot dogs and beans, ugh!"

Of course Younger rarely showed interest in eating anything besides cake and ice cream or cheese on crackers.

"Dad, do we have to kill those trees?" I asked.

"Well, I was thinking about it... --You know, let people cut down their own. But, if I rented a chain saw I could cut down bunches and charge more for them," he said, while stirring the beans.

"I mean, do we have to sell them?"

"Bills are due. Medical insurance...for your Mom..." His voice trailed off and he cleared his throat. Younger became very quiet.

"It just doesn't seem right. Chopping them all down," I said. "Mom won't ever get to see them."

"I know that; either way, I know that," Dad said.

"Can't we think of something else to do?" I asked.

Dad was quiet. Younger watched us. Finally Dad said, "Be a pretty bare holiday. A bleak new year with no money..." None of us spoke till dinner was ready.

I was almost asleep by the time Dad whispered, "Good night." The kitchen light went out and I drifted down a river into a wilderness of adventure. Somewhere in the distance a woodsman marked his tree with an ax. I could hear it clearly.

"Ol', Older-wake up!" It was Younger.

For a minute I wondered where the night went so fast.

"Dad left!" my little brother said.

"Go to sleep," I told him.

"No. He's not here."

There was no use in arguing with him. He was going to keep me awake anyway. I slid my feet over the bunk and dropped to the floor, quietly, almost like an Indian, I thought.

The outside door was not fully closed. Its opening must have been the sound I mistook for an ax chopping in the distance. I squinted through the curtain. I could see Dad strolling in front of the porch.

"Look. There he is. Fifteen feet away."

Younger looked. "What's he doing out there?"

"He doesn't have to go to bed at ten o'clock if he doesn't want to," I told my brother.

"Well I'm not sleepy, either," Younger said.

By then I also wasn't sleepy.

"Do you have any of your birthday money left?" he asked me.

"Maybe two dollars."

"I can't find mine," he told me.

"It's in the wallet you made from the kit Mom bought you." We had to sew them three times to get the sides matched right.

"No, it's not! - Look." He took his folder of secret stuff and emptied it under the night light near the beds. He spread the wallet wide open for me to see.

I held the wallet under the tiny light. The I.D. form caught my eye.

"What's this: 'Younger Mobey, Special Agent F.B.I.' You wish! Besides, you spelled 'special' wrong. It's not s-p-e-s-h-u-l."

"So what. It's only for play."

I looked through his other secret stuff papers. I found a real old picture of Uncle Rich in an Army uniform.

"Did you know that Uncle Rich was an Army commando?" he asked me.

"He drove a truck."

"Uh-uh"

"He told me so. He even told me a funny story of the truck getting stuck in the mud.

"Uh-uh."

"Uh-huh."

"Well, he was a commando, too."

On the bottom of the little pile of stuff were two playbills with Mom's name in them.

"That's when she was starring at the play house," Younger said.

Her name was fifth from the top on one and near the bottom on the other. She used to get very busy with those plays. Very busy.

"What else do you have in here?" I asked.

"No money," he said.

Quietly, almost sulking, he put his stuff back into the folder.

"How much money you missing speshul agent Mobey?"

"Shut up."

"How much?"

"Three dollars."

We were quiet for a minute, then it hit me. "It was two-ninety-eight for that miniature flashlight with the little wrench on a key chain you wanted last week..."

"Oh yeah..."

We both laughed.

I made TV music sounds. "And so ends another mystery investigation of the famous F.-B.-I-!"

We laughed again.

"Dum-de-dum-de-dum!"

He tried to get me in a wrestle hold, but I was too strong for him. We both rolled over and knocked a folding chair down.

"Is this how you guys sleep?!"

It was Dad.

"Uh-oh."

"We got scared when you were gone," Younger said.

"I can see how frightened you were. Thought your older brother was a bear cub, so you'd wrestle him."

We laughed. "I wasn't scared but he was. He got me up," I said.

"Uh-uh..."

"Okay- back to bed," Dad told us.

We scrambled into our beds. "Where did you go, Dad?" Younger asked.

"Just outside. It gets lonely in the dark."

"Put the TV on Dad," I suggested. "It won't bother me."

"It will me," Younger said.

Dad locked the door. "I'm in for the night. Just go to sleep, now."

"Okay" I snuggled up to the pillow which had grown cool already.

"Dad?" Younger asked.

"What, son?"

"Wasn't Uncle Rich a commando in the Army?"

"Maybe a secret one...I think he was mainly in charge of the trucks."

"Dad, you gonna stay in here all night, with us?" Younger asked.

"Yup. See you in the morning."

Mrs. Kornwheeler graded our essays during the Lunch and Phys. Ed. periods. We got them back just before school let out. I got a C minus. She had written in red ink along the top of the paper, 'You can do much better than this!!' I felt angry inside. Later, Dad added to it.

"What was the assignment?" he asked.

"Write about your family..." I said softly.

"What?"

I told him again.

Dad read the essay. "It's too short, and not really about your family. This last paragraph is hardly finished."

I snatched the paper away from him and sat down at the table. "I'll do better, next time," I said.

"Hey!" Dad got mad. "Don't take stuff from me like that," he said.

"It's mine," I said. For some reason I began to cry. "Don't you say anything!" I warned Younger.

"I'm not saying a word," he told me.

"What's the matter?" Dad asked.

I couldn't stop. I cried harder.

"What's wrong?... You'll do better next time," Dad said.

"I don't have to tell people how bad off we are, do I?" I said. "How we don't live where we did...And Mom is..."

Younger grew pale. Dad hugged me.

"And we got to chop down an old forest for rich snobs like the Curtises...It's not fair!" I continued.

"No, it isn't. --I understand," Dad said.

He tried to look me in the eye, but I purposely turned away.

"I hurt on the inside, too," he told me. But I didn't believe him. Nobody could hurt like I did.

**

My Aunt Mae must have saved twenty boxes of Christmas lights over the years. Some of the lights were from the big house on Third Street, some from the deli, and others from relatives no longer around. Dad borrowed the lights from her and rented a jungle of extension cords. He planned to light all the trees facing the highway and put floodlights on a sign reading: '500 XMAS TREES'. It was my job to help paint the sign on a 2'x8' sheet of quarter inch plywood. Each letter was to be five and a half inches wide by eighteen inches tall. It was a lot harder than it sounded.

First, we painted the sign-wood white and let it dry for an hour. Then, Dad and I marked off all the letters in pencil, to be trimmed in black enamel and filled in with red and green paint. Younger was allowed to do the fill in.

We had to do this outside in the cold as Dad fretted about the possibility of snow. Our noses ran and we got paint on our shoes. There was a lot of complaining and some quarreling from all involved.

Younger wanted to paint evergreen trees along the sign's border and Dad wanted him not to step on the wet letters.

Dad had to rent a post-hole driller to get the sign post columns into the ground. He used a plumb-line and level to get them even but still the two posts refused to line up exactly. He cursed under his breath and threw dirt into the woods. We ended up having to add a half inch of plywood to one post in order for the sign to meet each post squarely.

It was practically dark as we prepared to put the sign onto the posts when a strong wind stormed through bringing an icy rain and hail with it.

Laughing, we carried the sign into the trailer and then helped Dad bring all the lights and extension cords inside also.

"Fish sticks and spaghetti for dinner?" he asked us.

Younger's shoes were splotted with red, green and black paint. We were exhausted. There were boxes and bales of wires in our tiny kitchen --enough for a crazy invention of some kind--and an eight foot sign that stretched from our bunks to Dad's bed. "Fish sticks?" Younger questioned.

I began to laugh. Then Younger laughed and Dad joined in too. He laughed till tears ran out of his eyes. We mimicked each other's painting and hammering and cursing till our sides hurt and our faces ached. It was the most fun I had all year, and all we could show for our efforts were two uneven posts standing 88 inches apart in the pitch black darkness before our little forest.

**

It rained for days. Dad returned the post-hole digger to the rental shop in Uncle Rich's old pick-up truck which then died behind the trailer. He tried to start the truck at 8:05 on Monday morning and could only manage to roll it nose downward into a little ditch. RRR-RRR-rrr Nothing.

He walked us to school beneath a faded beach umbrella. The three of us tried to keep in step so as not to bump one another into the downpour.

"Not walking ahead today, huh, Ol'?" Younger taunted.

"It's the power of the umbrella," Dad said.

He watched us run into the school building minutes before the late bell and then trudged home beneath his portable roof.

In the afternoon the rain was still there and so was Dad, having made a return trip. He had spent the day stenciling tiny Christmas trees along the border of the sign. He had also repaired all the smudged, smeared letters, but the trailer smelled sharply of paint. I could hear his excuse in my mind, 'I got to do something to stay busy.'

The next day it also rained and by that afternoon we found little pine cones and ducks painted in between the tiny trees. The trailer had been aired out, making it damp and chilly.

By Thursday Dad was grumpy. It seemed like it would rain till Christmas. We were nearly out of paint too! When we got home from school even the '00's in '500' had little trees painted in them.

On Friday the wind kicked up again, slashing our legs with water and pelting us from many directions as we forced our umbrella toward school. Alone, near home on the return trip, the wind bamboozled Dad, catching the umbrella and blasting it onto the highway where a tractor trailer mangled it to shreds. --We found that out on Friday afternoon as Dad waited for us with plastic ponchos of his own construction. When would the awful weather end, we wondered?

It rained on and off all day Saturday. We did homework and watched TV. Dad tried pacing alongside his beautiful sign but could barely get going.

"I got so much to do," Dad agonized. "Got to fix the truck. Get the sign and lights up. Rent a power saw and make some money for the holidays." The holidays were only a week away and we began to share Dad's worries.

Things got worse. On Saturday night there was a highway accident and a power utility pole was knocked down. We had no electricity. Our little refrigerator defrosted itself onto the kitchen floor. --There wasn't very much food in it, anyway. We had no TV., no radio and all our clocks said 11:45.

"Even a broken clock is correct twice-a-day," Dad said. But he wasn't very happy. He stared out of the window at the muddy fields and the stalled pick-up truck. "Might be too late to even start selling the trees..." he mumbled.

"Let's save them," I said.

He didn't seem to hear me. "Got to get to the hospital tomorrow. Maybe you can get to see Mom on Christmas Day..." A flash went through me. My knees became weak. I felt bad. I didn't want to go.

"Could we save the trees?" I asked.

"Huh?" Dad asked.

"Can we save the trees, Dad?" I asked again.

His eyes were moist. "Who's gonna save us, huh, boys?" He asked.

Younger didn't say a thing. I could hear the wind rippling the puddles outside. I shivered.

Dad turned toward the window. He wiped his face with one hand. "Might have to stay with Aunt Mae for a bit," he said.

"No," Younger said, "I don't want to stay there."

"Why? Aunt Mae loves you," Dad said.

"We know that Dad. Just is..." I began.

"Aunt Mae is always picking stuff off the floor she blames us for, and shutting off all the lights. If you go to get a napkin from the pantry by the time you get back to the kitchen it will be dark! And besides I can't fall asleep there..." Younger told him.

Dad continued looking out of the window onto his hopes for us battered by rain, and tattered with bad luck. I knew. For the first time I could remember, I felt the pain inside another person.

*

The rain stopped about the same time the electricity came back on --late Sunday. Dad slogged to the pickup truck, peered under its hood and then turned to us watching from the window.

"The engine's still there," he shouted and laughed. Dad waved to us and walked toward the highway.

He was gone awhile. When he returned he was quiet. Not mad, just quiet.

I helped him with dinner: hamburger patties, macaroni and cheese.

"You'll never guess what an informative visit I had this afternoon," Dad said.

"What does that mean? Younger asked.

"It means I learned a lot. A real lot," Dad said.

"About what?" I asked.

"For instance, Mae...Aunt Mae wants to sell everything and move. 'Can't take any more winters up here,' she says. 'Always wanted to go South, but Rich wouldn't have it'... Selling everything."

"When?" I asked.

"As soon as it gets bought. Could be tomorrow, could be next year. But she's moving anyway --bought or not. Real soon..."

I thought about it, but wasn't sure how it would affect us.

"That's not all...Notice how quiet it's been?"

We hadn't noticed.

"No big trucks roaring down the highway..." Dad said.

"Yeah, that's right," Younger remarked.

"Know why?" Dad asked, a strange grin on his face. Not a happy grin either.

"The road --the highway out front is closed. All traffic is being detoured. Out-of-town traffic to the bypass, local traffic down Third or Mulberry streets," he told us.

"How come?" I asked.

"When they put in the new utility pole today they busted a buried water main. Now the whole highway is being dug up."

"When is it going to be fixed?" I asked.

"Tuesday, maybe later...Perhaps late Wednesday..." he said.

"So?" I asked, thinking we could still get the pickup truck to the bypass --if Dad could get it going again.

"So", he repeated slowly, "So --how are we going to sell any trees, boys? Busted truck, no saw, wet ground and no traffic. Who are we going to sell them to?" He laughed once after he made his point.

"Can't we have a holiday without selling the trees?" Younger asked. My little brother looked very serious. I thought he might begin crying.

"Plenty of lights. No toys," Dad said.

"We'll make toys... We'll have a good time. A great time," I said.

"Medical insurance premium is almost due. Your Mom's not well..."

I shook my head. "I don't want to hear about it," I said.

"What? Hear about our bills or about your mother?" Dad asked. --She hadn't seen me when I was there, II thought. I missed her so much but I couldn't even tell that the person sleeping in that bed was really her. Thinking about it made me feel sick and I wanted to run away...

"Let's just have as good a holiday as we can. O.K. Dad?" I looked to Younger for support. He didn't know what to say.

"O.K." Dad said. "O.K., O.K." He shrugged his shoulders and stirred the macaroni.

*

In the afternoon the class began to get ready for our Christmas party. All the kids were happy. So far we had gotten no homework assignments, and it looked like we might not get any. Winston Curtis spread the word that Mrs. Kornwheeler had forgotten and everybody should cross their fingers. There was a lot of giggling going on and for once it was allowed.

Groups were being assigned for decorations, entertainment and snacks. The circle of boys around Winston sat low in their seats and volunteered for nothing. Kenny Shuler put his head on his desk and made faces. I looked away.

"Mr. Mobey, would you like to take charge of the entertainment committee?" Mrs. Kornwheeler asked.

"Uh...No..." I said. The kids near me giggled.

"How about making some decorations?" Our teacher asked me.

"I've been busy doing too much decorating, Mrs. Kornwheeler," I said as an excuse.

She frowned.

"--To sell our trees... Making signs..." I added.

"Mindy?" Mrs. Kornwheeler asked.

"Way-to-go! --Everybody stay back here. Don't volunteer, we can just fool around," Curtis urged in a whisper.

"How many trees did you sell?" Kenny Shuler asked.

"Probably none!" Curtis said.

I was getting mad. I raised my hand. "I volunteer for the snack committee," I said. Winston led a low rumble of 'boos'.

"Okay. Good, Ol' - You can start by picking up some of the paper plates and napkins in the teacher's room."

"Got any trees left?" Kenny asked as I got out of my seat. "Huh?" he urged.

"About five hundred," I said. I wanted to say more but didn't.

Mrs. Kornwheeler followed me into the hallway.

"Do you remember who borrowed my cassette player?" She asked.

"No..."

"I think it was Mr. Murphy. Tell me if the teacher's room is locked."

I walked down the hall and tried the door.

"No. It's open."

"Good," Mrs. Kornwheeler said and turned toward Mr. Murphy's office.

I felt funny being in the teacher's room. First of all it smelled of cigarette smoke, which reminded me of Uncle Rich but also that things are not always what they seem to be.

The paper plates were stacked up neatly. Enough for a really big party. I could remember a big party once along time ago...

I piled plastic forks on the top of thirty plates, took a bunch of napkins and turned to leave.

A xeroxed note from Mr. Murphy lay on the table: 'Normal homework policy may be held in abeyance this holiday. In other works, it's optional. Happy Holidays! Jack Murphy, Principal.'

I read it several times in order to figure out what 'abeyance' meant. 'There,' I thought, 'so much for Winston Curtis' theory of Mrs. Kornwheeler forgetting about it, and all that magic wishing and hoping and distracting her!'

I went back to class. Mrs. Kornwheeler hadn't returned yet and the noise level was high. Winston's back was turned as he held the attention of all the boys around him. I was going to share the home work news. I even felt good about knowing it!

I quickly set the plates and napkins on Mrs. Kornwheeler's desk. The boys were laughing.

"Duh, I don't know any thing about 'dese-duh-uh-trees..." Winston mocked. The guys laughed. - Till Billy Aredo saw me. His expression froze. He tapped Winston Curtis, who turned around. Curtis expected to see Mrs. Kornwheeler. When he saw me his face went slack. All the boys became quiet.

My smile faded. Slowly it sank in. Winston had been making fun of my Dad.

I saw the corners of the classroom shrink in my vision and everything happened in slow motion. I cut through the aisle behind Janet Cullin's desk and went straight for Winston.

My hands were clenched and all I could see was Winston's face. I leapt toward him..

Something like the bough of a tree caught me in the middle. I seemed to hang in the air

for a second.

I looked down to see Kenny Shuler holding on to me. I had pulled him half out of his chair.

"Kornwheeler's behind'-you..." he croaked. "-Don't!"

"WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?!" Mrs. Kornwheeler shouted.

Kenny let go. I half turned to see her. She held the tape cassette in her hand as if it were a laser gun.

There was a moment's pause. I was trembling and trying very hard not to cry.

She watched us all as she added up the clues.

"Mr. Shuler! Mr. Shuler, is this a football field?!"

"No, Mrs. Kornwheeler..."

"Stand up, Mr. Shuler!"

Kenny stood. Poor old Kenny Shuler,--left back once in Mrs. Grady's class, - was going to be the fall guy again. And I knew that Kenny had been saving me! I caught my breath.

"It's my doing Mrs. Kornwheeler," I said. So much was already going wrong this holiday...

"You?" She was confused. Then she watched Winston Curtis' face.

I glanced at him. He was ghostly pale. Too frightened to swallow. All the fight went out of me. I just felt miserable.

But Mrs. Kornwheeler relaxed. She even smiled as if nothing had happened.

"Alright people...Alright." She said very sweetly. "Mr. Mobey, you may sit down. Mr. Shuler, you may also sit down."

I went to my seat without looking at anyone. I lay my head on my desk toward the window. All I could think of was my Dad working on his sign. I felt so bad for him. I squeezed the tears out onto the crook of my arm and concentrated upon my breathing so I wouldn't sob.

Mrs. Kornwheeler took every one's attention away from me with some music and a lecture on the technology of sound. I was terribly grateful.

After her lecture, Mrs. Kornwheeler turned the cassette player off.

"Everybody ready for tomorrow?" she asked.

"YEAH!"

"OOPS - we forgot one committee. The most important one of all. And I know who is the person for it. Mr. Curtis! Do you think you can hide away for ever?"

The kids snickered.

"What's the committee he's going to be on Mrs. Kornwheeler?" Mindy Rosenblatt asked.

"Why, the clean-up committee," she said.

The kids roared with laughter. Even I smiled to myself.

"It's a few minutes early but Mr. Murphy won't mind. Why don't you kids leave now. Just do so QUIETLY, please."

Everyone began to file out. Someone came toward me. "Ol'?" Mrs. Kornwheeler asked. Everyone else's footsteps retreated. I felt a cool hand touch my forehead. It felt good but I was uncertain of it. I closed my eyes.

"Feel like talking?" she asked me. I could hear her sit in the chair across from me.

I turned my head toward her but still kept it half-hidden in my arms.

"You'll have to forgive me; I'm not always at my best. Twenty-nine kids... The day you had to do the essay. I saw you writing. It looked like several pages. I'm sure you didn't turn in the essay you wrote. I'm sorry, I just wasn't thinking. We're only human, we teachers. Though, I'm sure you kids think otherwise."

She didn't say anything for several moments.

"How are things Ol'?"

"Okay." I sat up.

"How's your Mother?"

I shrugged.

"Oh, it's hard, I know. Have you seen her? Do you visit the hospital?"

"Not a lot. There's only certain times that kids can go. We're supposed to go Christmas Day, but..."

She nodded.

"She's not like herself..." I said.

"What do the doctors say?"

I exhaled. "They're not sure yet. First they said it was Reye disorder."

"Reye Syndrome."

"Yeah. Then maybe a blood poisoning, or a tumor. Maybe Lupus. I don't know what that

is, but Dad says if it's lupus we shouldn't see her when it gets worse. At least not my little brother... She can't move and they think she's in pain so they make her sleep. Sometimes she sleeps with her eyes half-open."

Mrs. Kornwheeler closed her eyes. "Dear Lord."

I felt like telling her, 'It's okay because it's not my mom. My real mother went away and I keep thinking she will come back. In fact, I'm actually mad at her for leaving me and Younger. This other person was not well for awhile. That's why Dad left. That's why things were not right for a long time. Since I was small and she would sing to me. Sing softly, and hold me till I fell asleep. Someday I would have to tell Younger about this Mother. Because he might not remember... I got a very bad headache when I went to see her at the hospital. I couldn't recognize her and got a bad headache. Dad said it was the hospital smell. It always made him sick too. But it was something else...'

"Would you like to come to church with us on Christmas Eve?" Mrs. Kornwheeler asked.

I liked the idea. People singing. Warmth in the crisp night but maybe we'd have something to do - me, Younger and Dad. A funny scene came to mind of Younger holding a candy cane. He was just walking and wearing a suit that Mom had made.

"Or I suppose you have some other plans... Are you going to Mae's for Christmas dinner? - Your Aunt Mae?"

"I don't think so," I said. "Aunt Mae doesn't like to cook anymore." She doesn't like to do anything anymore, I thought.

"She took Rich's illness very bad. They were inseparable. Your Aunt Mae and I were 'buddies' years ago. Girl friends. Didn't you know that?"

Aunt Mae and Mrs. Kornwheeler? I didn't think Mrs. Kornwheeler was that old!

"We used to pick blueberries right where your trees are now. The town was smaller then and surrounded by woods."

Who planted our trees?" I asked her.

She thought a moment. "It might have been Rich's father but I'm not sure.... I'll tell you what I do know: I knew your father when he was your age. And he was very much like you. A drawer, a doodler, a nice boy. Very much like you. Listen, if you have no plans on Christmas Day, come to my house. Only Ed and I will be there. Cindy's going to her fiancé's family for dinner. Tell your Dad it will be very casual. Two o'clock. Ed and I always prepare too much food. We could use three or four more mouths to eat it. I think I'll call Mae myself. Okay Ol'?"

"Okay."

"And if you want, re-do the essay. The one I marked you down on. Write about anything you want. Write about the best Christmas you can remember. Alright?"

"Okay."

She put her arm around my shoulders and gave me a little squeeze. It made me smile.

"There," she said. "That's the way to look!" she told me as she walked me toward the door.

Outside, Kenny Shuler was hanging around near the crossing walk.

"You get detention?" he asked.

"Naw."

Kenny smiled, "Boy, that's good. I always get detention!"

I felt good about Kenny Shuler, like we could even be pals.

"Thanks Kenny," I told him.

"Thanks? Winston Curtis should be thanking me. One more foot and it would have been over for him. Blood poppin' out all over his nose and gushin' from his eyeball..."

I cringed.

"- You woulda cremated him."

I shrugged.

"No detention. Nice going, dude!" He put his hand up for a 'high-five' and I slapped him and he slapped me back.

"So how's the holiday shaping up?" He asked. "Gonna get any neat stuff?"

"No."

"Me neither," he said. "Probably get the garbage bag full of old and broken toys my Ma took away when she cleaned my room. Get my old stuff back for Christmas! Imagine that!"

The second bell sounded for the lower grades. Younger would eventually show up.

"Well gotta go." Kenny said, laughing. "My Ma probably thinks I got detention AGAIN!"

"See ya Kenny."

"Yeah, Mobe'."

I decided that I would tell Dad about Mrs. Kornwheeler's offer for Christmas dinner, but not about the rest of it.

**

Christmas vacation! I walked Younger home from school. He was pokier than usual.

"C'mon Younger."

"What's your hurry? Big rush to do nothing."

"My back-pack is full of junk. We had to clean our desk out - so it's heavy. Will you walk a little faster? I prodded.

"Mrs. Grady didn't assign any home work for the holiday - that's two nights in a row," he said.

"All we did today was have a party. C'mon speed up!" I said. "I'm not gonna wait all day for you."

"So don't," he said, but walked faster to keep up with me.

"I don't mind having a party. At least we can have a good time in school," Younger said.

We crossed the field from Mulberry Street and trotted through the pines to the front of the lot. Dad stood near the highway.

"Hi boys. Waiting for progress?" He was watching the work on the highway. "They replaced the water main only to damage the storm sewer. Have to dig that up now," Dad laughed. "You get homework for the vacation?" he asked.

"Not really," I said.

"No," Younger said.

"I found a battery charger in Aunt Mae's garage, and put a new regulator in the pickup. Might be able to start it by tomorrow. Won't that be a thrill? We can ride up the side streets and see all the decorated houses."

I didn't know if he was kidding or not and said nothing.

**

It was four o'clock on Christmas Eve when the highway was reopened. Dad heard a truck go by and opened a window in our trailer to lean out. We crowded under him. A herd of cars and vans went past.

"WHOOPEEE!!" Dad yelled.

Younger laughed.

"Are we saved or what?!" Dad shouted. He put his fatigue jacket on and went outside. We followed.

Dad skipped around the trailer. Carefully he disconnected the battery charger. "Stay back fellas, --this is a job for Super Dad... Now let's see if the magic took." He got behind the wheel and inserted the ignition key. RRR-rrr... He made a face, sucked in a deep breath and tried again. RRR-rrr...UMP. It started!

"Yahoo!" Dad shouted.

Younger jumped up and down.

"All I got to do now is try and reverse the truck out of this little ditch. Hope the ground is hard enough."

Reversing was not so easy. He sent Younger and me to get plywood scraps to put under the tires.

I ran into the pine woods. Deep into the center of them. I found my wet club house. I pulled a wall apart. Two squirrels bolted, startling me. I could smell the pine. The trees were all around me in the late afternoon cool. It was a good feeling.

I dragged the plywood along the path and behind the trailer to Dad who took the planks to place behind the wheels. He added a small piece that Younger had found for good measure.

"Dad, where are you going?" I asked.

"Now? --Just to free the truck," he claimed.

"O.K. Stand back men. Wish me success!"

As Younger and I watched, Dad backed the truck out of the ditch and shouting in triumph turned it to bounce along the bumpy ground toward the gravel shoulder near the highway.

I ran after him. He climbed out of the cab --the engine still running, and looked up at the darkening sky. I knew what he was thinking. He was frozen in calculations. 'Was the tool rental center still open? Could he rent a power saw, string lights and get the sign up? How many trees could he sell before...'

"Don't do it, Dad, please."

"Huh?" he asked.

"Let's just be together. Most everybody has their tree up by now..." I said.

"Except us," Younger said.

"Except us." Dad repeated, still thinking. He looked up at the evening sky and then at the pine forest before us. He kicked at the post columns he put in last week and seemed to make a decision.

He reached into the pickup cab and shut the engine off. "What do you mean we don't have a tree?" he asked. He spread his arms to the horizon. "We have 500 trees!" he shouted. "Let's get ready for the biggest Christmas party any little family ever had."

Dad worked like a dervish. We helped him carry his prize sign out to the posts.

"This side, boys."

He nailed it facing in instead of toward the highway. Then, he ran extension cords in six directions. He placed a flood light under the sign and one on our biggest, most beautiful tree. By that time we were tired. We helped get the boxes of lights out of the trailer and as Dad began unpacking strings of Christmas lights by the glow of flood lamps Younger and I stayed inside.

I made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and poured milk. Younger and I ate ours.

"Dad?" Are you hungry?" I called out to him.

"Dad, where are you?" I asked.

"Here," came a voice from the dark.

"You all right?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Will you be long?" I asked.

"Nah... Soon..."

I wondered if I should try to write that essay about other Christmases for Mrs. Kornwheeler. I didn't know exactly what to say about any of them. Uncle Rich used to get us neat stuff. He even dressed up as Santa Claus once.

But, for a few years Mom had been busy with local plays. Decorations went up the last minute. Dad and Mom said little. Then the holiday was over and Mom went back to the play. The tree turned brown. Dad took the decorations off and left them in a pile. Younger would fool with some of them. The wooden soldier got broken...

Younger slid three cardboard boxes out from under his bunk. He opened them one-by-one and went through the things inside. Summer tee shirts in one box, old sweaters in another - last year Aunt Mae got us sweaters. Mine was too small and Younger's too big!

In the third box he seemed to find what he was looking for. Under a toy reindeer was a shiny pillow shaped like a Christmas stocking. He took it out and looked at it for a minute, then placed it carefully on the kitchen counter near the wall.

"Aren't you gonna put yours up?" he asked.

"Where is it?"

"In the box," he said.

I looked through the box. I found mine under a scarf. It said 'Older' on it in crooked stitching. It had been the first time I was called that for real.

The pillow had started out as a stocking made of left-over drapery material. But it was too satiny and just hung like a limp snake. So Mom stuffed them like pillows. They had a sleeve in the back that could be used for holding something like a skinny box of crayons.

"Mommy made them for us," my brother said.

"Of course."

"Aren't you going to put yours up?" he asked.

There was even one for Dad in the box. Three of them, in three sizes! I placed 'Older' and 'Daddy' next to 'Younger.' They slid around on the counter and I felt foolish straightening them.

Younger straightened them.

"She didn't make one for herself..." Younger said, then added, "I miss Mommy... Don't you?"

"Of course," I repeated.

Younger looked at the three pillow stockings for awhile, as if he had decorated the inside of an entire house.

"I can remember when Mom made them... Things were better a long time ago - she used to sing to us," I told him.

He nodded, "I remember, too."

'How could he?' But he thought he did!

I took an unopened package of cinnamon chewing gum out of my school back pack - it was left over from our school party - and pushed it into the sleeve of Younger's stocking pillow.

"Thanks," he said.

I went through the rest of the box. There was nothing else there that I had forgotten about.

Younger was still watching the pillows. I tossed the stuffed reindeer onto his bed and closed the box.

"I wish Mommy could see the sign we made, and all of our trees," Younger said. "Do you think she would have liked them?"

"For sure," I said.

I know that Mom would have liked the trees. I remember her standing near the shore of Bass Lake. Her hair was long then and it danced in the air as the leaves shook above us. She closed her eyes and laughed softly.

It is the first memory I have of all the family together.

Aunt Mae was upset that sand was blowing onto our picnic basket.

She bent over to fuss with the edges of the blanket.

"We need rocks to hold the blanket down," she said.

"Don't worry about it Mae, come look at this. All the tall grass billowing around the lake," Mom told her.

Younger wanted to be picked up, to sit on her hip. He was just a baby and didn't talk. I stood next to Mom as I watched Dad and Uncle Rich walking along the other side of the lake searching for something. --Maybe dry wood for a camp fire.

Part of me wanted to be with them stepping over logs and looking for things. Dad and Uncle Rich always had a good time with each other. Uncle Rich loved to play little jokes on everyone. Funny little jokes like wearing eye glasses with no lenses and wiping his eye through the frame. Corny stuff, and I miss him too.

Younger lifted his arms and whimpered to be picked up.

"Oh you spoiled baby," she teased but swooped him into her arms. I stepped closer to her. She began to hum and sway with the breezes' song as it brushed over us.

"I don't think the soda is cold enough --there goes that blanket again!" Aunt Mae complained.

"Go help Aunt Mae," Mom whispered to me.

I didn't want to, not really, but I did. I pulled the blanket back and sat on the end that kept curling up.

Aunt Mae smiled at me. "What a day for a picnic... I tell you. Let Rich and your father plan anything. Last time it rained!"

The breezes died down and Mom brought Younger to the blanket.

He was practically asleep in her arms already. He doesn't fall asleep so fast anymore!

"Sleeping?" Aunt Mae asked.

"Poor little baby's tired," Mom said, laying him down in the shady corner of the blanket.

Aunt Mae began setting the paper plates in a semi-circle upon the blanket's center. She had all the sandwiches labeled with marks on their wrappers.

Uncle Rich and Dad were almost back.

"Got the food ready Mae?" Uncle Rich called out.

"If you're not more gracious you won't eat," Aunt Mae answered. But I knew she was kidding.

Just as Aunt Mae prepared to set the sandwiches upon the plates a lone gust of wind blew the plates off the blanket. They rolled and tumbled across the park like pinwheels gone

crazy. Two of them lifted skyward.

"Look," Uncle Rich said pointing at the plates, "Flying saucers."

We knew it was corny but we all laughed, except for Younger who slept. Even Aunt Mae, shaking her head in amazement, laughed.

I know that Mom would have liked the trees.

*

Younger and I watched television --mostly the same shows we saw every year, lots of special cartoons. I ate half of Dad's sandwich. We began to get sleepy... I thought about brushing my teeth.

Younger fell asleep in his bottom bunk. I turned the TV off. I was going to call out to Dad but... maybe, I thought, could catch a quick nap.

I drifted off and dreamed of an airplane flying south. Was it Aunt Mae's plane? It had a very noisy engine.

There was stomping and a great commotion over my head --on the trailer's roof! 'Whump-whump-whump', followed by the sounds of horses whinnying or moose calls. I bolted up right --the sounds were real!

"Dad!" I shouted.

"Out here, boys!" I heard.

Younger was awake. "What's that?" he asked.

I put my robe on. There was more stomping on the roof. I opened the trailer's door and looked up. Younger, clutching his toy reindeer, rushed out behind me.

It was Dad. He stood on the roof of our trailer. He leaned down to us in a crouch.

"You boys just missed Santa Claus," he told us, laughing.

"Aww..."

"Look." He told us and spread his arms. We looked. Practically the entire pine forest was decorated with glowing lights. In the center stood our big tree and to our left was the grand, eight foot sign.

"Merry Christmas, boys!" Dad told us. "Let's see what Santa left." He shimmied to the edge and let himself down to the porch platform. "Have shoes on? --Let's go!"

We ran after him into the pines.

"Stay on the path, don't trip," he told us. But we ran fast, anyhow, along rows of wonderful, decorated trees. Living trees. Happy trees, I thought, --and our trees. Towering above the floodlight was the king of the trees, tinsel billowing off its green

needles.

Underneath the great tree was a small cardboard box with some presents in it.

"I think Santa had to travel light this year, fellahs," Dad said.

Younger unwrapped a wooden flute from its tissue paper. I got a dictionary and a new note book. Younger also got a pair of bear-earmuffs.

There was one gift that was still unopened. It was the largest one, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string.

"This is from Aunt Mae to all of us," Dad said." She didn't want to bring it with her tomorrow. She wanted us to have it when just we three were together..."

"What is it?" I asked.

Dad undid the string. He pushed the paper away from it. I could see something smooth like glass.

"Oh...look at this..." Dad said. He held it for us to see.

There, by the twinkling glimmer of all of our tree lights was a family portrait - probably made from a snapshot Uncle Rich had taken of us. - Me, Younger, Dad and our Mom. We were all smiling with a happiness that would never go away. Mom was so pretty, and so full of joy that it had spread to us all. We had forever a picture of when we were whole, of a Dad who once left but would never leave again, and a Mom we would always love and remember the way she was.

"There's a note here, Dad said, but I'm having a little trouble seeing it..."

I read the note: "To my brother and nephews, I know you will have a place for this portrait as I will always have a place for you in my heart. You must visit me in my new home this spring. Your loving sister and Aunt Mae - Merry Christmas." "

"Merry Christmas," Dad said again.

"But we didn't get you anything, Dad," Younger said.

"You've given me everything," he said. Dad bent to one knee. "Christmas comes on the darkest day of winter. But the little green seed-bud is still there, getting ready to be born. And do you know what grows from that bud? Hope." He hugged us.

"Let's pray for staying together... And for Mom to get well, if she can... Okay?"

The dictionary was pressed against my face. I sniffled a little bit. Then slowly we retreated toward the warmth. Younger played a made-up tune on the flute with Dad and I marching behind adding a rhythm section. Slowly through the thousands of lights we wandered out of our magic dream world into the little place that was our home. It was the best Christmas of my life.

**

Late in January Aunt Mae left for Florida. The realtor told her that it would be hard to sell the deli so she worked out a partnership with Dad. That was the good news. Dad and Younger and I worked hard at fixing up the deli. There were rooms upstairs which we moved into. It was much more comfortable than the trailer, and we had a lot better food to eat. Dad was happy too.

The bad news was about Mom. The Doctors told us she wouldn't get better. We visited every Sunday and hoped she wasn't hurting.

Another thing happened to make us sad. It was in late March. The deli was doing all right, but Dad closed it for an hour to pick us up from school. He walked us across Mulberry Street and stopped by the highway. Bulldozers had cleared the lot. On one side was a wall of green made up of all our lovely trees bulldozed into a flat pile.

"The waste, Dad said, the terrible waste."

"It was sold, huh?" I asked.

"Yeah, A new company... I guess the town needs it..."

We walked a little closer. Younger found a small tree. It pulled away from the shoveled earth. "Can we plant it, Dad?" he asked.

"You betcha," Dad said.

We all walked back to the deli in silence. Our magic kingdom was gone forever. But inside us was the memory that would live as long as we would, about the greatest holiday we ever had --with our 500 Christmas trees.

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