

The Tree

Last Christmas, we didn't get a tree. All year I'd had my eye on a cone-shaped cedar growing along the west woodsline of our South Georgia homeplace. But every day it rained; our grown children were spending the holidays with their in-laws; I wasn't in the Christmas mood. I didn't even untape the cardboard box of Christmas decorations--dead red bows and snarled strands of lights, and that 1985 pink glass angel with the nicked skirt to remind me of that peak Christmas when our children equated Christmas with home. Before Jesus and Santa went on-line. I shopped from my front porch swing--all those high-priced items in free catalogues--then logged onto January.com in my mind.

But lo and behold on Christmas day, my middle daughter Angie showed up with her five-year old Laney in a red-plaid dress and a bow in her hair. Our old farmhouse was cold and gloomy--we didn't have a tree. I'd just come back from my elderly father's house where I'd cooked dinner for him: turkey and dressing, baked ham, candied sweet potatoes, green beans, squash and pumpkin pie. But my own house smelled of the damp and cold soot from the fireplace in the living room. In the old Tom's commissary jar, on top of the refrigerator, were two cookies with chocolate chips that looked like gravel.

In our tree-less, lightless living room, on that soggy gray day, we opened our gifts from Laney--a red cap for me, because she knows I like caps--and she and her mother opened their gifts from us: Lillian Vernon monogrammed forget-me-tomorrow objects: water glasses for mom, whose taste runs to Reggae music, and a baby doll for Laney who was lately into Barbies. It could have been Thanksgiving or Fourth of July. Their faces said Poor Nannie and Poppee, they have no tree. I felt as aloof as the man in the moon.

A couple of weeks later, when Laney came to visit, I took her riding on our golf cart through our backyard fields of frost-cured weeds to the start of hardwoods near the back pond. I showed her the tree--spring green against the backdrop of wintering woods, stark and accusing on its platform of white sand dredged by a gopher tortoise. No comment from Laney, who is usually talky, but she walked up to the tree and stood with her back to it and measured her height against the tree's the way she often does me.

All that remaining winter, we checked on the tree when she came to visit. Sometimes we just looked and other times we stopped and discussed it. Soon it became "Nannie's Christmas tree," like the moon she called mine first time she saw it rising through the pines in front of our house. Then spring, and the cedar became just another green tree in the green woods. Then summer, and it was too hot for Christmas ever again. But still to placate or remind me, Laney would step up on the mound of talcumy sand and measure herself against the tree. She was growing and the tree was grown. I hoped. Though twice the height of Laney, who stood about three feet tall, the tree looked

house-plant size under the ceiling of hazy blue sky. Would it fit in my living room with its sixteen-foot ceiling?

Fall came cool and winey and the hardwoods turned yellow, gold, orange and red. Like the red-hued rows of Crayons in a fresh box. And once again, the cedar stood bold and evergreen on its plinth of snowy sand. It was as if God had planted the perfectly trimmed cedar in a place easy to get to, because knowing me as He does, He knew I'd balk at scouting for a tree in the deep woods. I'd find some excuse for skipping His son's birthday and plunge headlong into another year, another decade, another century. For a fact, after fifty, we have a tendency to rush through days like water over rapids. Only for children does time gather and pool.

Laney was back in school now, visiting on weekends and bringing with her cutouts of crayoned pumpkins and turkeys created from pinecones with bird feathers for tails. Then construction-paper Christmas trees with M&M candy ornaments she picked and fed to me while I drove the golf cart through the fields, to the woods, to pay our respects to the tree. Soon we would saw it down, and the raw stump would jut from the gopher tortoise's mound. There would be a straight line of bony gray trees when we cut out the unbelievably green and conical cedar.

One whole week before Christmas and Laney and I set out with the handsaw and a coil of hemp rope to lash the tree to the roof of the golf cart. "Silent Night" and "Jingle Bells" and we are dashing through toasted weeds instead of snow, and the sun is shining like midsummer. A warm day, and I am not in the mood--I have been Christmas shopping with all the greedy credit-card holders, pushing and shoving for gift toys and clothes while children in Third World

countries go without medicine and food. On the TV news, I saw a legless man scooting on his bottom through the drowned grass following a tidal wave in New Guinea. But Laney is here beside me, in Southeast Georgia, standing before the tree.

Our arms are mackled red and raw from cedar-needle pricks, and the tree is too tall for the living room ceiling. The stained-glass angel on top has to bow her head. My old ornaments look shrunk and ruined hanging from the sturdy branches; with all the thousands of tiny twinkling lights I've accumulated over some thirty-odd years of Christmases, I am short a couple of thousand. One strand blinks and one strand glows and every other bulb is a dud.

Laney hangs the 1985 pink glass angel with the nicked skirt, and the little bell inside goes LING, LING. Laney's face is as lit as the stained-glass angel's--thank God that one light works.

And we have a tree. Boy, do we have a tree! And it's a tree we know like none other. It's a tree that knows us on sight.