

A vertical photograph of a winter forest. The scene is dominated by tall, dark evergreen trees heavily laden with snow. The ground is a smooth, white expanse of snow. The sky is a pale, hazy blue with soft, wispy clouds, suggesting a misty or overcast day. The lighting is soft and diffused, creating a serene and quiet atmosphere. The trees are arranged in a way that leads the eye into the distance, where more trees are visible through the haze.

THE
Perfect
TREE

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Sam *really* didn't want to be in the forest.

For one thing, it was cold. *Bitterly* cold. Yes, it was a beautiful, calm day, but that cold sank through layers of clothing in a matter of minutes and settled into the skin with a biting grip. He shivered, his muttered complaints turning to puffs of frosty air as soon as they were uttered.

"I know ya didn't want to come," his father Thomas said in a quiet voice. "But don't be complainin' okay? It means a lot to the old fella that you're here."

The *old fella* that his father referred to was Sam's grandfather, Herb. Every year on this date, he'd head out to the old woodshed, retrieve a - *what was it called, a bucksaw?* - and wander up the path that led to the forest behind their property. And it just so happened that Sam and his family had made the journey from Alberta to Newfoundland just in time to participate in what his grandfather called *The Great Hunt*.

Sam had inwardly rolled his eyes at this. It was foolish; hunting for the perfect tree when there were thousands of artificial ones to be found in stores everywhere this time of year. It was like how they hunted for moose, when you could just as easily go down to the grocery store and buy a steak, all packaged and ready to go. It seemed so... *backward* to Sam. But then, that was why his father had wanted him to go so badly. He wanted him to

experience some of the things that he himself had experienced as a child growing up in Newfoundland. Sam could probably count on one hand the number of times he'd been to the province. Fort Mac was home, and Newfoundland was just *that place* Mom and Dad grew up. He loved his grandparents of course, but he could just as easily show that love back at the house, where temperatures were a little warmer than minus ten degrees. He adjusted the tattered toque he'd borrowed from his grandfather, the word *NewTel* emblazoned across the front. He had no idea what a *NewTel* was; he only knew he felt like a moron wearing it, the letters N and L having lost so many stitches they were literally hanging by a thread.

Much like himself, he thought.

“Try to enjoy it, hey?” his father said beside him. Sam looked over. Thomas was keeping stride with him, despite the fact that he was towing a long wooden sled by a rope. He'd told Sam that, ‘back in the day’, he and Sam’s grandfather used to tow a similar sled behind their old ski-doo when they went into the forest to cut trees for firewood. Of course, Thomas never called it the ‘forest’. *Da woods*, was what he'd say. Sam did have to admit that the ski-doo actually sounded like a bit of fun. However, walking through *da woods*, uphill, on a cold day, was not quite so exciting. “He’s seventy-five years old,” Thomas continued. “Ya never know, this could be the last year he’s able to make the walk.”

Ahead of them, Herb scoffed. He shook his head, and called back over his shoulder. “It’s me hip that’s gone, Tommy, not me hearing.” Herb was walking about twenty feet ahead of the other two, *scoutin’ for a tree*, as he’d

said. Sam was actually kind of impressed at the pace his grandfather was keeping. He watched as Herb now stopped - one hand on his hip, the other firmly holding his walking stick - and looked around at the expanse of trees.

“What’s wrong with your hip?” Sam asked.

His grandfather rubbed his side, a little grimace on his face. “Had it replaced years ago.”

“Is it... okay?”

“The artificial will do,” Herb replied. “But it’s certainly not as good as the real shaggin’ thing.”

“See anything?” Thomas asked as he and Sam caught up.

“That I do,” Herb said quietly, his eyes on the forest. “Two outta shape mainlanders, slowin’ me down.”

The younger men both smiled. Herb turned to them, eyes narrowed, a little smirk on the corner of his mouth. “The better question is, do *you* see anything?”

“A lotta trees,” said Sam. “Lots of good ones.” He reached for the bucksaw. “Here... want me to cut one down?”

Herb pulled the saw from Sam’s reach, an affronted look on his face. “Now, now, not so fast there, Mr Sammy!” There was a playful look in his eye. “The hunt is not about finding a tree... it’s about finding *the* tree.” He pronounced it *thee*, stretching out the long vowels as he might a battered bungee cord.

Sam nodded. “Okay. Well... do you see *thee* tree that you want?”

Another smirk from his grandfather. “Perhaps,” he replied. Sam watched as the old man took a roll of orange flagging tape out of his pocket. He carefully stepped off the path and stood before a short tree, lopsided and sparse of limb. He then ripped off a length of orange tape and reached for a prominent branch.

“Umm... not really the *best* looking one around,” Sam offered politely. “We could probably find better if we looked around a bit more?”

“By God,” Herb said with a groan as he reached up and knotted the tape to the tree. “That’s exactly what the young girls used to say about your fadder...”

Thomas, who at the moment was adjusting the crotch of his too-tight snowsuit, looked at Sam with an innocent expression, and shrugged.

“I’m markin’ the *location*, not the tree,” said Herb. “There’s one just in there. If we don’t see a better one, we’ll cut that one on the way back.”

“On the way back?” asked Sam. “How far are we going? We could cut this one and be done.”

“What, and *not* have a boil-up?” Herb pushed Sam’s hat down over his eyes as he rubbed the top of his head. “Hear that, Tommy? He wants to skip the boil-up!”

Lifting the hat, Sam looked from his father to his grandfather. “What’s a *boil-up*?” he asked.

His grandfather stopped in his tracks, so taken aback that he might have fallen down if not for the walking stick. He turned slowly to Sam, his brow lowered. “Did you say, ‘What’s a boil-up’?”

Sam nodded.

Herb gave Thomas a sharp look. Thomas, that same innocent expression on his face, shrugged again.

Herb sighed, shook his head, and then winked at Sam. “Come on, lad.” He inclined his chin up the hill. “Up in that clearing. We’re gonna make a meal fit for a king...”



Half an hour later, the three men sat around a crackling fire. The spot they’d stopped, Sam had to admit, was pretty nice; a clearing at the top of the hill, and it overlooked the whole town. Big fluffy snowflakes had started falling in the last few minutes, and it kind of felt like they were inside a giant snow globe.

Yeah, kind of nice, thought Sam, as he, Thomas and Herb sat along the length of the long wood sled.

He watched as his grandfather retrieved two cans of beans - *with pork and molasses*, the labels read - from his rucksack, opened them with an ancient, rusty can-opener, and dumped them into the pot they’d hung suspended just above the fire. “Now, buddy,” said Herb as he rubbed his callused hands together. “That there is a meal.”

Sam wasn’t so sure. He looked around, still secretly hoping that he would be the one to find that perfect Christmas tree.

Herb followed his eyes, then smiled and pointed to a little tree at the edge of the clearing.

“That’d be a fine one for Rosemary, eh Tommy?”

Thomas nodded. “Definitely.”

“Why’s that?” asked Sam.

“Rosemary likes the skinny ones.” He guffawed then. “Probably why she married Frank. Poor bugger’s like a garden rake; haven’t got an arse to call his own.”

Thomas laughed. Sam shook his head.

“No, what Rosemary *actually* says-” Herb continued, “-is that a great big tree takes up too much space; space that should be used to fit more family and friends.” He smiled. “Got a point there, I s’pose.”

“And poor old Harold Murphy,” said Thomas. “Always cut the ugliest one.”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Herb. “Old Harold, always wanted to be the talk of the town. Didn’t care if the reason was good or bad. He loved havin’ people go round the harbour sayin’ *Blessed God, did ya see Harold Murphy’s tree this year!*”

As he laughed and shook his head, Herb took a loaf of fresh bread from the sack, and pulled out three slices. As he slathered butter on them, he gave Sam a quizzical look. “Are ya just gonna let the beans burn there, Sammy boy. The youngest fella does the cookin’ on this hill.”

Sam jumped to action, giving the beans a stir as Herb took three paper bowls from his sack, and handed them to his grandson.

Sam had never been less hungry in his life. He wanted to tell his grandfather that he'd never actually *eaten* beans, but at the same time, he didn't want to draw attention to this fact. Thomas, Sam noticed, sat to the side, watching his son with a sideways grin. *What are ya gonna do now?* the grin silently asked.

Sam gave Thomas a glare, tinged with a tiny smile of own. He almost laughed as the first word that came to mind was one he'd never used. *Shagger*, he thought.

"Now Peter O'Keefe, he had to have the biggest one; the fullest one."
"Course, Pete needed it. The size of his big ol' shack down by the water. My God, you could rear three families in that place."

Slowly, Sam spooned the beans into each bowl. He gave heaping spoonfuls to the other two, hoping his grandfather didn't notice his meager helping. This hope was dashed immediately.

"Sammy boy, what're ya gonna do with that bit of grub, feed the rabbits?" Herb shook a slice of bread at him. "Here luh, take the bread, and then spoon the beans on and eat it like that. Couldn't ask for better." He took a big bite of his own food, and through a mouthful of beans said, "It mighten look like much, but by God, it's some tasty."

As Herb looked at him expectantly, Sam took a deep breath, steeled himself and took a bite. For long moments, the other two just stared at him - Thomas with a foolish smile on his face. The texture was just plain weird, he thought, but he conceded that the taste was actually not that bad. He took another bite. Herb nodded, rubbed the boy's head, and began to hum

contentedly as he used his bread to wipe up the remains of his meal. Sam smiled, recognizing the tune.

We Three Kings.

As he scraped the last of his bowl, Sam turned to his grandfather. “So Pop, what would *you* consider to be the perfect tree?”

Herb thought for a moment before he took the empty bowls from Sam and Thomas, and tossed them into the fire. “Well, now. Fine question, that is.” He stood up gingerly, and looked at the trees surrounding them. “Most wants a pretty tree I s’pose. Full and even. One that fits the room well.” He stopped then, and his eyes grew serious. “Miss Catherine Maloney put it best, I think.”

“Miss Maloney?” Thomas leaned forward eagerly. “My old teacher?”

“The very same.”

“Huh.” Thomas looked thoughtful. “Y’know, I think I was always her favorite. She still living in the harbour?”

“Course she is.”

“God, she must be *old* now...”

Herb’s eyes narrowed. “*Ancient*, in fact... she’s a year *younger* than me.”

Thomas turned to Sam and clenched his neck muscles in that classic ‘*oops*’ expression. Now it was Sam’s turn to laugh.

“Anyways,” said Herb. “Miss Maloney, God love her, used to always have a tree that was lovely to look at, but was in *hard shape* on one side, on the back.”

“Why?” Sam was intrigued.

Herb picked up his walking stick. “She said trees were like her students. All different, unique. She said there were so many that looked fine on the outside, but hid the areas where they were broken. Said it was about perspective, how you looked at a tree... or a person. Said, even when we’re damaged, we can still put our best face forward, face the world, and add our joy to it. And people will love us, despite our flaws. Sometimes, because of them.” Herb’s voice went quiet. “I’ll never forget that.”

Sam let that sink in. For several long moments, the forest was quiet, and heavy with their thoughts.

“It’s a shame, really,” Herb continued. “Her husband Pat died a few years back, and she took sick only months after. Anyway, she pulled through, but she’s not the same. Not by half. And they never did have kids of their own.” Herb smiled. “Maybe that’s why she loved her students so much. They were all her youngsters.” He turned to Thomas. “Your mudder and a few neighbors helps where they can. Genevieve got her a little artificial tree, and they helps her decorate each year.” He looked out over the town. “Lookin’ after each other. I s’pose that’s what it’s all about in the end.

“Now,” said Herb suddenly, rubbing his hands together. “A little treat for us all before we goes. Sam, get that bottle out of my sack there.”

“Fadder!” Thomas said sharply “He’s *fifteen*. Don’t even think about it.”

“Shag off, Tommy. He ate his beans. The young fella deserves a treat.”

Sam slowly extracted the bottle from the sack and held it before his face. A red and yellow label with the word *Purity* graced the front of the bottle. Below were the words *Strawberry Flavored Syrup*.

Thomas chuckled.

Herb extended a hand. “Here, give me them plastic cups in there.” Taking one of the cups, he half filled it with fresh snow, and then poured a generous amount of the syrup on top. Finally, he gave it a good stir with a spoon and handed it to his grandson. “I suppose yer fadder’s made you these plenty a times?”

Sam shook his head. “Never.”

Herb, about to drop a handful of snow into the second cup, paused, and then flicked the snow at Thomas instead. “That’s shockin’ for you, Tommy.”

Thomas bawled out as the snow hit the side of his neck.

“Lord *geez*, Fadder! That’s *cold!*”

“I should hope so!” Herb replied as he filled another cup. “If I lives to see the day we gets *warm* snow atop Clancy’s Hill, I might start to worry.”

Sam chuckled, scooped another spoonful of the Purity slushie into his mouth, and looked out over the harbour as huge, cloudlike snowflakes floated down around them.



The trio made their way back down the hill, their bellies full and their hearts warm. His grandfather was humming again, Sam noted. He didn't recognize the song so quickly this time, but after a minute or so, it came to him. It was one of the songs on that *Boney M* Christmas album that his parents played repeatedly every December.

When A Child Is Born.

A few minutes later, Sam pointed. "There's the orange tape,"

The three men slowed by the marked tree. Sam now pulled the long sled behind them as they made their way home.

"Alright, young fella," his grandfather said. "Let's go check it out; see what kinda eye you got."

As he and his grandfather circled the tree, Sam looked it up and down. *Not bad*, he thought as he gave it a close inspection, *but...* He reached out and ran a hand along a discolored branch. His grandfather appeared at his side and tutted. "Agh, that's what we calls a *blasty bough*, Sammy boy. I didn't see that from the path. That's too bad."

Sam was still scrutinizing the tree when he heard his grandfather call out. "Aha! Now lad. Have a look at this one!"

He and Thomas went over, and indeed, the old fellow had found a dandy. *Beautiful*, in fact, thought Sam. Perfect symmetry. Perfect height. Every bough healthy and covered in a soft layer of snow. Shaking the snow off for a closer look, Herb tilted his head, tilted it again, and then nodded.

"Cut 'er down, buddy."

And so, Sam cut his first Christmas tree. The smell of the fresh cut wood was intoxicating. Thomas held it near the top as the saw made its way through and it separated from the stump.

“You happy?” Herb asked Sam, his face beaming.

“Yeah, Pop,” he replied, his smile equally wide. “I’m happy.”

They carried the tree out to the sled. Herb and Thomas then engaged in a debate over whether it was necessary to tie the tree down. Herb always insisted that you should tie everything down. Thomas always insisted that Herb was foolish. As the two playfully bantered back and forth, the sound of sawing suddenly filled the forest.

“What in the name of...?” Herb whispered.

Behind them, Sam was in the process of cutting another tree.

The tree with the blasty boughs.

As he felled the tree, he looked up and gave the men a childlike smile.

“What are you *at*?” asked Thomas. “We got our tree.”

“Yeah, we do...” Sam replied. He rubbed the back of his neck. “But Miss Maloney doesn’t have hers yet.”

Silence filled the forest. It was broken moments later by a bell, ringing out loudly in the town far below.

“Well, Sam... That’s... I mean, that’s...” Herb’s eyes filled with pride. “That’s pretty special.”

Sam lifted the tree up, and Thomas rushed in to help him carry it out.

“You know-” Thomas said as they loaded it onto the sled. “-she probably got that artificial one up already.”

“Maybe,” said Sam. “But I figure if I show up with her *favorite student*, she might not mind at all.” He smirked. “And it’s like a wise man once said - *the artificial will do, but it’s certainly not as good as the real shaggin’ thing.*”

Sam’s grandfather put an arm around his shoulder, and pulled the boy into a sideways hug. “Sammy boy... that’s just perfect,” he said.

And it *was* perfect, thought Sam.

A perfect day.

Maybe even the perfect tree.

Because perhaps the perfect tree is simply the one that brings you the most joy. Perhaps, if you’re willing to look for joy, open your heart to it, and spread it as widely as possible, you’ll find that there’s as much joy to be had in this world as there are trees in the forest.