

2-3 seedlings are planted for every harvested Christmas tree. In 2004 sixty million Christmas tree seedlings were planted by Christmas tree farmers.

A Tree for Christmas

It's several days before Christmas: a Sunday.

The sky is clear, clean blue. Sunlight sparks from a million points of light from the surface of the snow.

And the air - corny as it sounds - is like wine. Sharp, exciting, it makes you feel you could run, jump, gallop - or on second thoughts, walk pretty briskly.

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Without willing it, your mind flashes back to similar and earlier days, and suddenly you remember the quality of brightness that brushed your face as you coasted down a hill on your sled, and the pure freshness of open-air skating - a freshness that became part of you so that when you went indoors you brought it with you, on your clothes, your cheeks, your breath. Wonderful days!

...For a moment, a fleeting moment, you wonder if even now you might not borrow a sled, skates - but only for a moment: too many days have come between.

Still, you think, I can go out into that glorious air, I can do something gay... or active... or different...

It's at this point that inspiration strikes, like lightning: probably by association of ideas - outdoors, and the things that belong outdoors, like trees, and the consciousness that it's nearly Christmas. Anyway, I'm thinking: why not fetch a Christmas tree? - find it, and

2B1B0B



In 1963, the National Christmas Tree was not lighted until December 22nd because of a national 30-day period of mourning following the assassination of President Kennedy.

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cut it, and mark it with B, and bring it home for the family and me.

Well, the next thing is to sell the idea - after all, I can't be expected to do all the fetching by myself, no. What's called for is an enthusiastic - but not too frighteningly enthusiastic - bid for the interest of a husband who likes his Sundays unruffled by physical activity of any sort. In a very guarded way I allow the possibility of going off to look around for a Christmas tree fallen by the wayside, so to speak. But to my astonishment he slaps his knee, flings aside his Saturday Evening Post, and says, "Let's go". (It must be the effect of the wine-like air, even the small amount coming through the open window.) Next minute, he's standing up, rubbing his hands, and saying, "Now where're those old corduroy trousers of mine?"

With help, a husband can always find suitable clothes for any occasion, and mine does very well except he insists on wearing the expensive, handcraft gloves that his mother-in-law (my mother, that is) gave him last Christmas, which seems a little undiplomatic to me (people have a way of finding out what you do with the things they give you) but as he says, man-like, "They were given me to be worn, weren't they?"

Not possessing the appropriate togs myself, I appeal to our teenage daughter who's soon mucking up already untidy drawers and hauling out warm slacks and double-wool sweaters for a project which she regards with unconcealed skepticism.

"I don't get it: what're you getting dressed up like this for?" "To cut a tree."

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"To cut a tree?"

"Yes, Dad and I are going off to fetch a Christmas tree." "Good night, Mom, you can buy a Christmas tree." "Yes, but this time we don't want to buy one."

"Migosh, it doesn't cost that much."

"It isn't the money, it's the idea."

"But you and Dad haven't got to go wandering up to your knees in snow to get a Christmas tree. Why, Bill and I could get it for you if Bill could get the loan of his father's car, only he can't. .. If Dad would lend us the car, why I'm sure Bill and I wouldn't mind -"

"That's very thoughtful of you dear, but your father and I just thought we'd ... ah - enjoy ... going out into the country and cutting a tree."

"But Mom -"

No, Mom's just not going to be put off - not even by one of those looks with

which teenagers convey that undoubtedly their parents are going soft in the head. But we're not ready yet. There's the little matter of an axe to cut the tree with and a length of rope to strap it to the car. And neither of them can be found, and of course a man always thinks his wife hides things on him deliberately.

"What in the world have you done with the axe?"

"I haven't done anything with the axe," I answer, trying to assure myself that I couldn't have thrown out the axe with the other trash the last time I tidied up the basement.

"And where's the piece of rope that was hanging on the nail near the door?"

Well, how was I to know the rope would ever be used, it'd been hanging there long enough, goodness knows?

In any case, when a plan is unrolling smoothly it's silly to risk endangering it with an argument, so I suggest we borrow what we need from the nice man next door. Which we do.

By this time the day has worn on a bit, and to be quite frank, it's worn out a bit too. The sky is no longer blue or the snow sun-sparked: a depressing grey quality seems to be creeping over everything. But this isn't going to put us off either.

So armed with axe and rope, and looking very sporty I must say, we set out in the car toward the outskirts of the town where we often used to picnic with the children - children! And here they are, one gone off to college to become an engineer and the other in her last year at high school and with a boyfriend besides... We remind ourselves of clearings, quite near the road, and full of little clumps of fir trees. And we decide to make for a particular open meadow we feel will not have collected too much snow. And sure enough, a few miles on, and there it is! The only trouble is that the whole fronting length of it has been fenced in. And that's not all. Someone has been inconsiderate enough to build a house right in the middle of our clearing, and not only that, but come to live in it, so that if for a single moment we'd have entertained the idea of climbing the fence and entering someone's property, we haven't the nerve to climb the fence and enter someone's front garden with the whole family staring at us from one of those large, fashionable picture windows.

Well, there are numerous other clearings - or there used to be. But as we drive on we begin to realize that a great deal of building and fencing must have gone on the last few, perhaps not so few, years, because we pass more and more fences with hundreds of beautiful Christmas trees imprisoned behind them.

Our disappointment isn't sweetened by the visitation of what the weather forecasters call 'occasional snow flurries', through which we peer for some sign of an accessible fir tree. At last I see one all by itself at the top of a gravel pit.

"Stop!" I yell. And we do, with a slither. And although we must be inches away from the ditch, I have to suffer the full impact of a glance which is supposed to make me feel guilty - as though I, and not somebody else was in charge of the car and responsible for the poor driving. But never mind that: what we do is to sit in the car for a while till the snow flurries stop and then get out.

It's quite a little climb to get around the edges of the gravel pit, but we finally reach the top which is sloping, wind-swept and slippery. Our intrepid woodsman steadies himself as well as he can and swings his axe again and again. But the chips don't fly, and the tree doesn't topple. You see, this is a tenacious little fir, used to clinging to thin soil and bending to the wind, and each time the axe strikes it, it just keels over gracefully and swings back again. Trying to grip the trunk with one hand and chop with the other only minimizes the strength of the blows and achieves nothing but an accretion of sticky turpentine to the beautiful new gloves which should never have been worn in the first place.

"Maybe I could steady it while you chop." "All right. Try."

So I stand tiptoe to reach beyond the broader boughs which are scratching my face, but I miss my foothold, grab an arm outstretched to help me, and the next moment we both find ourselves at the bottom of the gravel pit, half buried in deep snow which is not only surprisingly heavy but wet - much wetter than it used to be, I'm sure. It weighs on our legs, and trickles inside our collars and up our sleeves. It even blurs our eyelashes - but not to the point where we can't see an enormous truck rolling along the road toward town with its back piled high with fir trees, all of them no doubt for sale and any single one of them no doubt for sale to us if we wished it.

Daylight is beginning to fade as we get under way once more, and snow flakes are falling again. And I'm beginning to feel that perhaps it wouldn't be inglorious to cry quits and make for home when, there on our left, right next to the highway, what should we see but a whole grove of fir trees - just standing there, unfettered and free!

It doesn't take us long to choose a tree with evenly distributed branches, not too big and not too small, and with a slender upright tip for the star or the angel or whatever remains for the purpose in our box of saved-up Christmas ornaments. And we'd have chopped it down, and brought it home, and set it up in the living room and never have suspected that we'd committed a crime only that I'm curious about the sign nailed to a post nearby. I point to it.

"What do you suppose that says?" And nothing will do us but to turn our pocket flashlight on it and brush off the snow to see what it says and what it says is:

Warning!

Persons felling or mutilating trees in this area will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

We stand in the growing dark, the wet snow falling on us, and taste the bitter taste of failure.

There's nothing for it but to turn back.

We drive in silence. No car meets or passes us: by now everyone is enjoying the brightness and coziness of home - probably sipping a nice hot cup of tea, or decorating the tree they were sensible enough to buy yesterday.

I'm grudgingly admitting to myself that anyway the snow is no longer falling (what's the good of that now?) when the car comes to a sudden stop.

"You see what I see?"

I peer into the light from our headlamps at something bulky lying, dark under the thin covering of snow, in the centre of the road. Is it a man - an animal -?

It's a tree. A fir tree, just lying there, having presumably fallen from the truck we saw earlier (unless an army of leprechauns have dragged it here especially for us, which seems unlikely). Anyway, there it is, a lovely, lovely tree, cut and lying on its side, ready to be hauled up and pushed and strapped into the trunk of the car, which, let me tell you, is done in the time it takes to say 'Merry Christmas'.

Before we know it we are driving up the curving path to our house with a great swish of the wheels and a blaring of the horn to announce our arrival. Effortlessly, like two athletes, we jump out, lift the tree from the car into the light pouring from the front door and stand it up to be admired by our teenager and her boyfriend - and the neighbors too, if they've heard us, and they certainly should have.

"Have much trouble getting it?" our teenager calls out. In triumph we call back. "Nothing to it!"

The snow glistens in the artificial light, and the night air - wintry, exhilarating - is like wine.