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The Fir Tree

THE FIR TREE by Hans Christian Andersen

A long time ago, in a forest, there stood a pretty little fir tree. The forest was very beautiful - the air was fresh and smelled of pine and berries, the birds sang joyfully and it was a peaceful place to live. But the little fir tree wasn't happy. It wanted to be tall, like the trees that grew around it.



It looked up at the trunks of the other evergreens in the forest, knowing that from their tops you could see the whole wide world, and it watched the birds making nests in the broad branches that spread on either side. People passing through the forest would often say 'What a pretty little tree!' and for sure it had a lovely shape but the fir tree only heard the word 'little' and not the 'pretty' that went before it. All it wanted was to be tall.

Sometimes a hare would come bounding through the forest and leap right over the little fir tree on strong, springy legs and that would make it feel even sadder. Two winters had come and gone and the little fir tree grew. Now the hare wasn't able to jump over and bounced around it instead but this didn't make the little fir tree any happier.

'I wish I could be older and taller like the other trees,' sighed the little fir tree. 'That's the only thing I care about in the world.' There was no pleasure in the warm sunshine or the gentle breeze or in the sounds of the swallows and the blackbirds that filled the air.

Woodcutters would visit the forest and cut down the tallest trees with axes and saws. The little fir tree shuddered as it heard their thick trunks fall to the floor with a loud crash.

When the branches were hacked off, it thought the trees looked skinny and bare, but it couldn't help thinking how exciting it would be to join them on the horse-drawn wagons that took them away from the forest.

'Where are they going?' it thought. So the wise Stork was asked.

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'Ah yes,' nodded the Stork. 'When I fly over the sea from my travels in Africa I often see great ships sailing down below. They have fine masts made from those trees and very grand they look too. That's where they're headed - to sea!'

'I wish I was tall enough to go to sea,' said the little fir tree miserably. 'But what is the sea? What's it like?'

'That would take far too much time to explain,' replied the Stork and away he soared.

'Never mind,' beamed the sun. 'Be happy that you are young and free.' And the wind agreed, and so did the dew that sprinkled its branches. But the little fir tree took no notice.

It was Christmas time. The woodcutters came back to the forest in their horse-drawn wagons, but this time they cut down trees that were smaller and younger than the fir tree. 'Why have they been chosen?' it said bitterly. 'What makes them special?'

Then it noticed that the woodcutters didn't hack off the branches but left them on. 'They are no prettier than me,' moaned the little fir. 'Where are they going?' The Stork had flown back to Africa to spend the winter so couldn't answer the question. But the sparrows could.

'We know! We know!' they chirped as they huddled together to keep out of the cold. 'We have flown around the town and seen those trees standing in the warm rooms of smart houses. They are dressed up to look very splendid with sparkling stars and glowing candles and glass balls of every color you can think of. Wooden toys dangle from the branches and bags of sweets and golden apples. Children stand around them holding hands and singing carols. Oh that would be a lovely life!'

'I wonder if anything so wonderful will ever happen to me,' replied the fir tree. 'What I would give to stand in the warm room of a smart house and be decorated in all that finery. That's much better than crossing the sea. Oh, how I ache with wanting that.'

'Nothing beats the fresh air,' smiled the sunlight.

'You would never again be warmed by the golden sun,' whispered the air.

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But the tree ignored them.

Another year had passed. Another Christmas time had arrived. The fir tree listened to the sound of the horse-drawn wagons as the woodcutters came back to the forest.

It couldn't hide its excitement when it was chosen to be cut down. 'My time has come. I knew it would,' cried the tree happily. 'I will stand forever in the grandest of houses and my branches will be decorated with beautiful things.'

As the woodcutter's axe cut through its stem, the tree groaned, and as it fell to the forest floor, it felt sad that it would be leaving its home and the creatures that it had known all its life. But it knew that a better life was waiting in the town.

The ride to town was a bumpy one and the tree felt most uncomfortable. But that soon changed as the horses trotted to a halt outside a big, white house on a street that swept around in a half moon shape.

'This is the prettiest tree,' it heard a well-spoken lady announce. 'Bring this one in, please.'

The fir tree no longer stood in the peaceful forest with its smells of pine and berries. Now it was placed in a large tub filled with sand in the center of an enormous high-ceilinged room. There were silk sofas, ornate vases, pictures on the walls of faraway places, and thick patterned rugs. 'This is all worth a lot of money,' thought the tree, bursting with pride. 'This is where I should be!'

Some children arrived with a box full of Christmas decorations. They covered the tree with baubles and sparkling tinsel, hung tissue paper bags of striped sweets over its branches, and fixed candles of red, white and blue onto the ends. 'Tonight we can light the candles and sing carols,' the children laughed. 'It will be bright and beautiful.'

'I can't wait for the evening to come,' thought the tree.

'Wait! Wait! We've forgotten the star!' cried a little girl.

A servant was called and very, very carefully she stood on a chair to reach the top of the not-so-little fir tree and fastened a shining silver star. To the tree, it felt like a crown.

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That night the candles were lit. The fir tree trembled, partly with fear because it had never seen a flame before and partly with joy because it felt so happy. 'Will I grow as tall as the ceiling here?' it thought. 'Will these dazzling ornaments hang all year round?'

The trembling caused one of the candles to fall on its needle leaves and burnt some of them. 'Help!' the children shouted, but the fire was soon extinguished and after that the fir tree stood perfectly still to stop it happening again.

Then carols were sung and the children danced around the tree laughing. The tree couldn't believe how much happiness there was in this one room and that it was part of all this fun.

But it wasn't to last. The next day the tree was stripped bare. The children had eaten the sweets and ripped off the wooden toys and garlands of tinsel. 'I expect tomorrow I'll be decorated again with new candles and fresh apples and more delicious mouthfuls,' thought the tree. 'Tomorrow I won't tremble as my splendor starts again!'

In the morning, however, no children came. But the servants did. Roughly they dragged the tree out of the room and up many steps to a cold, dark attic room. There was no daylight and the wooden floor was coated in dust and spiders' webs. It was very different from the warm sitting room with the silk sofas and thick rugs.

'What will I do here?' thought the fir tree. 'I can't see. I can't hear. I am hidden from view,' and for the first time since leaving its forest home the fir tree felt sad and alone.

There was plenty of time to remember the smell of the fresh air, the feel of the sunshine and the cool breeze. 'But it's winter, of course,' decided the tree. 'The ground would be too hard and covered in snow so that I cannot be planted again. They are keeping me here until spring time comes. How kind and thoughtful!'

Then it thought of the hare that used to leap right over it. 'I feel quite lonely. I didn't like it before but how I'd love to see the hare jump again.'

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Suddenly there was a scratching sound and then some timid squeaking from a corner of the attic room. Two little mice crept quietly towards the tree, sniffed its branches and climbed between them. They said: 'It's so cold in here, isn't it, old fir tree?'

'I am not old,' replied the tree grumpily. 'I know many trees both taller and older than I am.'

'Where do you come from?' asked the mice who were extremely curious creatures and wanted to know about the world. 'What do you know?'

'I come from a forest where sun shines and birds sing,' said the tree. And it told them of its home.

'You must have been very happy there,' the mice said.

The fir tree reflected upon the story it had just told them. 'They were happy days after all though I didn't realize it at the time.' But then he told them about Christmas and the way he had been decorated and enjoyed by the excited children. Soon other mice and a couple of rats came to hear the stories of the fir tree and it enjoyed talking to them, having some company in the cold dark attic.

One day, the door opened and the servants came in. The mice heard their footsteps tramping up the creaky stairs and disappeared into holes in the wall. Very roughly, the fir tree was hauled out of the attic room and into the daylight.

'I knew this would happen!' thought the tree.

It was taken out into a garden and the tree felt so happy to see the sun and breathe fresh air again. 'My life is beginning again,' it said. 'How happy I am to be here with the white blossom and pink roses and to hear the swallows twittering overhead.'

The tree looked down at itself and was shocked. Its branches were withered and yellow. It looked old. It looked almost dead. And the servants didn't dig a hole to plant it. They dragged it to a forgotten corner of the garden where weeds and nettles grew and there they threw it.

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Two of the children who the fir tree remembered dancing around it at Christmas were playing ball in the garden. They saw the tree and for a moment they were very excited.

'Look! Look what's sticking to the ugly old fir tree!' said one. 'Our silver Christmas star!' He clambered through the nettles and stood on the poor tree's branches which crackled underfoot. He plucked the star violently from the top of the stem and gave the tree a kick as he left.

Now the tree was sadder than it had ever felt. It wished it had been allowed to stay in the cold, dark attic where at least there were mice to talk to but, more than that, it thought of the home it had grown up in. 'If only I had enjoyed myself while I could,' it said. 'But that's all past. Now it's far too late.'

A servant came back with an axe. It chopped the tree into small pieces until a pile lay on the ground. Then each piece was thrown on the fire and it burned brightly. The children of the house loved listening to the 'pop' that the wood made as it burnt. They didn't realize that each 'pop' was a sigh from the little fir tree as it thought of summer in the forest and of the wonderful day it had spent one Christmas.

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