

Christmas Tree Magic

Winston loved Christmas. He loved watching his mom bake cookies and his dad string the outdoor lights. He loved singing carols. And, of course, he loved presents. But most of all, Winston loved Christmas trees. Every year his family would sip hot cocoa and nibble candy canes while decorating their awesome, but artificial, tree.

This year, Winston's mom had a different plan. "I think it's time for a new tree," she said.

Winston's eyes grew wide. "A *real* one?"

"Yes, a real one," she laughed. "It will make our house smell like a pine forest."

The next day, Winston and his parents brought home a seven-foot-tall blue spruce that smelled exactly like a pine forest. The family spent all afternoon trimming its thick, bristly branches with sparkly ornaments and starry lights and lots of silvery tinsel. When they finished, Winston looked up at the towering tree, his mouth in a perfect O of amazement. It was the most beautiful Christmas tree Winston had ever seen.

"Your job is to water the tree every day, so it stays fresh," Winston's dad told him. Winston took his job seriously. Each night before bedtime, he carefully filled the tree's container to the brim without spilling a drop.

Two weeks later, the family celebrated the best Christmas Winston could remember in all his eight years. His presents seemed to glow under the tree's magical, blue-tinged branches.

Winston's world remained perfect until that weekend when he noticed pine needles sprinkled on the floor. "What's wrong with the tree, Dad?" he asked. "I watered it just like you said."

Winston's dad shook the tree, sending a shower of needles onto the carpet. "It's not your fault, Winston. You did a terrific job. But the tree's drying out. I'm afraid it's time to take it down."

"Can we plant it now?" Winston asked, excitedly. "Outside my bedroom window would be the very best spot. I could watch the birds fly in and out. Maybe they'd even build a nest in it."

Winston's dad looked at his mom. She looked at Winston.

"Honey, we can't plant this tree," she gently explained. "It doesn't have its roots, and without them, a tree can't live. I'm afraid it's going to die, Winston. That's why all the needles are falling off."

Winston's eyes blurred with tears. "But it's a *real* tree," he insisted. "Why can't we plant it? New roots will grow."

"Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way," said his dad. "I'm sorry, Son, I thought you understood."

But Winston didn't understand. He ran to his room and closed the door. He didn't feel like playing. Even his Christmas toys didn't have that special glow anymore. His tree would die, and he couldn't save it. The magic was gone.

When he looked out the window, he saw his dad dragging the tree up the driveway to be hauled away with all the other trash. Winston couldn't watch. Instead, he trudged to the kitchen for a snack, hoping to forget about the tree.

He opened a bag of popcorn and munched a handful. Then he took another handful and threw it out the kitchen door for the birds. Pretty soon, two sparrows landed. Each carried away a piece of popcorn. In another minute, a bright red cardinal did the same.

Suddenly, Winston had an idea. "Mom! Dad!" he yelled. "Don't let them take the tree!"

He bolted out the door as his father leaned the tree against the trash can. Winston could hear the giant garbage truck chugging towards their house. He had to hurry.

"Let's turn the tree into a giant bird feeder," he pleaded, tugging on his dad's shirt. "We can throw popcorn all over it."

"Now why didn't I think of that?" said his mom, running up behind Winston. "How about propping the tree against the garage so you can see it from your window? And maybe we could *string* the popcorn and add some cranberries."

"It'll look as good as it did inside," Winston said, excitedly jumping up and down.

His dad smiled and ruffled Winston's hair. "OK, let's do it. The tree should last quite a while in the cold. And when it finally loses all its needles, I could have it shredded into mulch."

"Of course!" said his mom.

"Mulch?"

“Yes, Honey, mulch helps plants keep their roots moist, and when it decays, it enriches the soil. Winston, I promise that next year we’ll get a tree with roots and plant it after Christmas . . .”

“ . . . and spread the mulch from this year’s tree around it,” added his dad. “So, in a way, this tree *will* live by keeping the new tree healthy.”

The trash truck rumbled to a stop with a screech of brakes in front of the house. Winston’s dad quickly grabbed the tree just as the trashman reached for it.

“Sorry. Change of mind. We won’t be throwing this tree away.”

He carried the spruce to the garage and stood it in full view of Winston’s bedroom window.

Winston hugged his parents. He could already imagine the birds stopping by to eat popcorn and cranberries from its branches. It really was a magical Christmas tree, after all.