

Christmas Tree

By: Brandon Fries

The heavy fog that suffocated our town finally lifted, the sun illuminated the street. The loud chirps from the birds woke me from my slumber—much too early—and greeted me with a pounding headache.

Parched mouth.

Today we had to follow tradition; a tradition that began the year I was born and that I've continued even after leaving home and living on the other side of the country. But this year, I'm back home.

The same house my parents bought the year I was born; that was a busy year.

Evi was already up and even more chipper than normal and cleaning up the beer cans from the previous night.

"Morning sunshine," She said.

"You were passed out when I got home last night."

It's a rough one. Still searching for balance.

"Coffee is ready, just how you like it."

Black and hot.

"No silly, with the egg nog!" she said. "Just how your father used to make it for you; I even added a little bourbon to take away the sting off the hangover."

I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

She took every effort to make the morning identical to my childhood, and the nostalgia was nauseating.

Eggs were scrambled, with green food coloring added.

Ham was fried.

Holiday coffee was made.

It was cute as a kid, but being stuck in a Dr. Seuss book in your thirties is a bit embarrassing.

I choked it down to make her happy and avoid a fight. The past couple of weeks had been uneventful, so I knew

a fight was coming soon—I didn't want to ruin this day.

I threw on my jeans and a flannel and we loaded into the truck—but she drove this time—my head was still pounding.

We left the sleepy city streets and carved our way through the curvy country roads. We drove past the tabletop mountain.

I hiked that once. I was in my mid-teens. Dad and I were on our way back and the weather was getting chilly, but we hiked up it, anyway. We parked on the backside and ignored the signs warding off trespassers. I made it to the top just fine, but coming down I slipped and scraped up my hands down to the bone and I was in the hospital for a bit.

Dad never came to visit me—guess I embarrassed him.

The winding of the road continued, and the eggs slopped around in my stomach.

I rolled down the window and the cold air shocked me, cooling the sweat beads that were forming on my brow.

"Do you need me to slow down?"

No, just get there. I want this over.

We entered the small town and a Mexican restaurant had replaced the ice cream shop. We always stopped there on our yearly pilgrimage. There's a little spot on the side of the building where I frequently deposited my breakfast.

Car sickness.

Week stomach.

Anxiety.

I had them all. Remember the kid in your elementary school that everyone made fun of? He threw up on the field trip. Every time. And you would conspire with the other kids to have him sit in the back so that the bumps were bumpier, and the swaying was more aggressive?

I was that kid.

We need to pull over. I want to pay homage to my spot.

Memories.

"Ready?"

I guess.

"We're almost there."

You act like I haven't done this every year of my life. I know where we are going.

She looked away in a huff.

The truck rumbled to a start and off we went into the pines, waiting for the pavement to end and the dirt to start. The snow came early, but we navigated through the snow to our spot.

"Are you OK? You're still not looking great."

I'll be fine. Just stop asking all these damn questions.

The snow crunched under our tires.

We pulled off near the end of a meadow.

One year we got stuck here.

"I know, you've told me."

But that memory made this place special.

"And you camped in the truck until help came the next day."

We almost froze to death, but dad knew how to survive. We made a survival shelter. It was the first time I felt that he was proud of me.

"I've heard the fucking story."

Why the hell are you acting like this?

"Just moping around all day. Get over yourself."

I dropped out of the truck.

Fuck you.

I grabbed the ax and headed to a patch of trees, looking for the perfect one.

The thud of the ax blade sinking into the tree.

Tears of sap sliding down the trunk.

Breathlessly swinging the metal.

Swing after swing.

A creak.

The rip.

It falls.

Exhausted.

Crying.

"Get up, pansy-ass. Load the tree up."

I took a moment to catch my breath and grabbed the squatty tree and wrested it into the bed of the truck. She started it up and revved the engine.

"Get in," she said with a clenched jaw, looking straight ahead.

I did as I was told—I always do as I'm told. That's what dad taught me.

She hit the gas too hard, and the tires struggle to find grip, but eventually, the truck lurched forward—finding freedom. We bounced down the dirt road.

Gas looks like it's getting low. Might need to stop up there.

"No shit."

What crawled up her ass?

"You exhaust me. I'm walking on eggshells around you."

The station is around this corner.

"I'm—" she sighed. "Over it."

She pulled in, and I got out to fulfill my husbandly duty—pay for a fill-up. I entered the store and pulled out the money clip.

Silver with a buffalo coin glued onto it.

My dad's money clip, but it's empty. I had over a hundred in cash in it when we left the house.

I turned around to ask her why she took the money.

The truck was gone.