

The Old Maple and the Fir

The sides of the path were covered with a carpet of white snow. But in the center, its whiteness was crushed and churned into a foaming brown by the tramp of hundreds of hurrying feet. It was the day before Christmas. People rushed up and down the path carrying armloads of bundles. They laughed and called to each other as they pushed their way through the crowds.

Above the path, the long arms of an ancient maple tree reached upward to the sky. It swayed and moaned as strong winds grasped its branches and bent them toward the earth. Down below a haughty laugh sounded, and a lovely fir tree stretched and preened its thick green branches, sending a fine spray of snow shimmering downward to the ground.

"I should think," said the fir in a high smug voice, "that you'd try a little harder to stand still. Goodness knows you're ugly enough with the leaves you've already lost. If you move around anymore, you'll soon be quite bare."

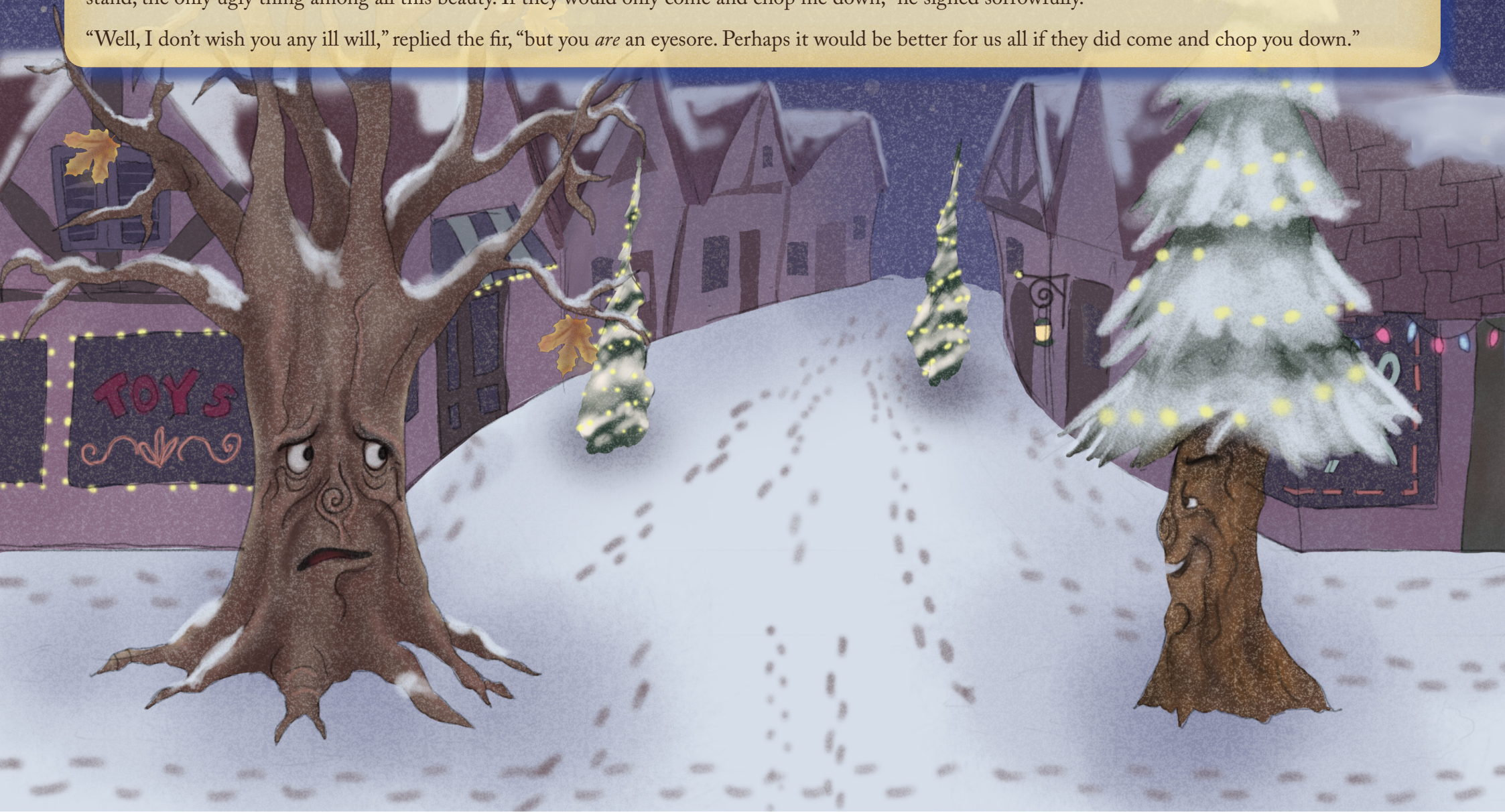


"I know," answered the old maple. "Everything has put on its most beautiful clothes for the celebration of the birth of Christ. From here I can see the decorations shining on each street corner. And yesterday some men came and put the brightest, loveliest lights on every tree along the path—except me, of course." He sighed softly, and a flake of snow melted in the form of a teardrop and ran down his gnarled trunk.

"Oh, indeed! And did you expect they'd put lights upon you so your ugliness would stand out even more?" smirked the fir.

"I guess you're right," replied the old maple in a sad voice. "If there were only somewhere I could hide until after the celebrations were over, but here I stand, the only ugly thing among all this beauty. If they would only come and chop me down," he sighed sorrowfully.

"Well, I don't wish you any ill will," replied the fir, "but you *are* an eyesore. Perhaps it would be better for us all if they did come and chop you down."





Once again he stretched his lovely thick branches. "You might try to hang on to those three small leaves you still have. At least you wouldn't be completely bare."

"Oh, I've tried so hard," cried the old maple. "Each fall I say to myself, 'This year I won't give up a single leaf, no matter what the cause,' but someone always comes along who seems to need them more than I do." He sighed once again.

"I told you not to give so many to that dirty little paper boy," said the fir. "Why, you even lowered your branches a little bit, so that he could reach them. You can't say I didn't warn you."

"Yes, you did," the old maple replied. "But they made him so happy. I heard him say he would pick some for his invalid mother."

"Oh, they all had good causes," mocked the fir. "That young girl, for instance—colored leaves for her party indeed! They were *your* leaves!"

"She took a lot, didn't she?" said the old maple, and he seemed to smile.



Just then a cold wind blew down the path and a tiny brown bird fell to the ground at the foot of the old maple and lay there shivering, too cold to lift its wings. The old maple looked down in pity and then he quickly let go of his last three leaves. The golden leaves fluttered down and settled softly over the shivering little bird, and it lay quietly under the warmth of them.

“Now you’ve done it!” shrieked the fir. “You’ve given away every single leaf! Christmas morning you’ll make our path the ugliest sight in the whole city!”

The old maple said nothing. Instead he stretched out his branches to gather what snowflakes he could that they might not fall on the tiny bird. The young fir turned away in anger.





It was then that he noticed a painter sitting quietly a few feet from the path, intent upon his long brushes and his canvas. His clothes were old and tattered, and his face wore a sad expression. He was thinking of his loved ones and the empty, cheerless Christmas morning they would face, for he had sold not a single painting in the last months.

But the little tree didn't see this. Instead he turned back to the old maple and said in a haughty voice, "At least keep those bare branches as far away from me as possible. I'm being painted and your hideousness will mar the background."

"I'll try," replied the old maple. And he raised his branches as high as possible. It was almost dark when the painter picked up his easel and left. And the little fir was tired and cross from all his preening and posing.



Christmas morning he awoke late, and as he proudly shook away the snow from his lovely branches, he was amazed to see a huge crowd of people surrounding the old maple, oohing and ahing as they stood back and gazed upward. Even those hurrying along the path had to stop for a moment before they went on.

“Whatever could it be?” thought the haughty fir, and he too looked up to see if perhaps the top of the old maple had been broken off during the night.

Just then a paper blew away from the hands of an enraptured newsboy and sailed straight into the young fir. The fir gasped in amazement, for there on the front page was a picture of the painter holding his painting of a great white tree whose leafless branches, laden with snow, stretched upward into the sky. While down below lay a tiny brown bird almost covered by three golden leaves. And beneath the picture were the words, "The Most Beautiful Thing Is That Which Hath Given All."

The young fir quietly bowed its head beneath the great beauty of the humble old maple.

*"The Most Beautiful
Thing Is That Which
Hath Given All."*

