

II

WHEN WE ARRIVED HOME with our Christmas trees that December, Irene made good on her promise to quarantine my puny pine.

“Do not bring that thing into this house,” she said as our dad manhandled the big tree off the car roof and carried it to our front door.

“Mind your own business,” I replied.

“The garage is the only place for it,” she added. “At least we won’t have to look at it there.”

I had planned to take it to the garage anyway—so I could fix it up—but I couldn’t say that now.

“I’m going to put it on the front lawn with lights and tinsel so the whole neighborhood can see it.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Will too.”

“Will not.”

“Children,” said my mom. She had come outside to watch our dad struggle with the tree. “Please, no bickering. It’s almost Christmas.”

“Will too,” I whispered when Irene followed my mom inside.

As a rule, I never gave Irene the last word...not even at Christmas.

The garage was out of the question now. Putting it there would have looked like surrender, so I stood my tree on the porch instead. Then I stepped back to examine it.

Standing by itself without its piney brothers towering above it like giant sequoias, the puny tree didn't look so puny. In fact, it was the right size for a tree that would have to travel. Naturally, its defects remained. Scrawny was there to stay—stuck like a nasty nickname at school. Its trunk was crooked, and its top hadn't made it down from Canada or wherever it had been chopped off. The orange sap and skinned bark hadn't disappeared either. Still, it was perfect. The possibility for a tree miracle was definitely there.

I stood on the porch admiring it until I heard the call to come into the house. Inside, everyone was staring at Irene's perfect tree. My dad had set it up in our living room. The top almost touched the ceiling.

"What a lovely tree, Harold," bubbled my mom.

"Irene picked it out," he confessed. "She has an eye for trees."

Irene beamed like she had gotten a medal. Then she gave me her secret smirk. There was no way that I was going to let that pass.

"It looks cloned to me," I said.

The family stopped staring.

"What do you mean, Charlie?" my dad asked. Something in his voice wanted to know how I knew about cloning.

“It doesn’t look real. It looks like it came out of a tree mold.”

“Oh,” he replied. “Yes...well...it does have a very traditional shape.”

“You’re just jealous,” snapped Irene. “Because yours is so ugly.”

My mom gave my dad a puzzled look.

“Charlie got a tree, too,” he explained. “A small one.”

“A sick, midget tree,” corrected Irene. “It got puked from the forest.”

“That’s enough,” my mom said.

“Irene’s tree took steroids,” I shot back. “It looks like the Arnold Schwarzenegger of Christmas trees.”

“Dad!”

Our dad raised both hands and said, “Okay, you two, get ready for supper. And no more discussion. Each of you got the tree you wanted, so both of you should be happy.”

As Irene retreated to the kitchen, she said, “At least my tree is in the house.”

I had a comeback ready, but I stopped. What I wanted to say couldn’t be said without tipping my hand.

Sure, her tree was in the house, and mine wasn’t. Sure, her tree stood tall while mine looked small. And yes, her tree was full, and mine was scrawny. But like so many other Christmas trees, hers was standing in an ordinary living room while mine was going to stand somewhere special. But I couldn’t say where.

For the first time, I let Irene have the last word.