

The most beautiful tree in the forest

In a forest, there once stood a little fir tree that was more beautiful than his three big brothers standing next to him. The little tree knew this, and he let his big brothers know what he thought of them.

"Look how crooked you are," he said to the first one who leaned slightly to the side.

"You're all brown," he said to the second, whose needles had dried up.

"And you are as barren as a tree in autumn," he said to the third, whose branches were not as densely covered with needles as his own.

The three big brothers endured the little fir tree's mockery for they loved their vain brother unconditionally as only trees do.

Then a raven came, who had heard everything. He sat down on a branch and said to the fir tree: "You are beautiful. But you have no heart. Each of your brothers has more goodness in their smallest needle than you have in all your branches."

The fir tree shook himself to make the raven fly away. But before the raven swung into the air, he said, "If you stay proud, you'll come to a bad end."

"Stupid raven," said the fir tree and stayed as he was.

It got cold, and the first snow fell. Men came into the forest. When the fir tree saw them, he grew excited. He shook the snow from his branches to show himself to the men in all his green glory.

"Don't do that," warned the tree with the brown needles, who was the oldest. "It's better if people don't see you. Soon it will be Christmas!"

"I want them to see me," said the little tree. "Let everyone see how beautiful I am!"

Since the little tree wouldn't listen, the bare tree tried to hide him with its needleless branches. Likewise, the crooked tree leaned to the side a little more to block the men's view of their beautiful brother. But their efforts were in vain. The men had already spotted the little fir tree. They pointed their fingers at him and shouted, "That one is beautiful!"

When the little tree heard this, he proudly straightened himself. But his brothers sighed sadly.

The men nodded and rejoiced. The biggest one of them took out an axe and felled the little fir tree. Dumb with fright, the little tree tumbled into the snow. When the men dragged him out of the forest, the last thing he heard was the wailing of his brothers.

On Christmas Eve, the big man who had felled him put the fir tree in the parlor, close to the stove, where a fire was flickering. The little tree was terribly afraid of the flames and feared that a spark might set him alight. The man who had felled him smiled.

"Look, wife, what a magnificent tree I found in the forest!" he said.

"Wonderful!" said his wife and began to decorate the tree. With golden ball ornaments so heavy that his branches bent down. With silver tinsel covering all his beautiful green needles. And with a white angel that she put over the little tree's magnificent top so that all its beauty was covered.

When she had finished, the woman said with bright eyes, "This is the most beautiful tree of them all!" But the little fir tree had never felt so ugly.

At night, when the fire had gone out and the people had gone to bed, the little fir tree looked longingly at the window. But he could not look out, for it was completely covered with fern frost. The little fir tree sighed. Oh, how he missed the cold of the forest and the warm feeling he had felt while standing among his brothers!

He thought of how they had tried to protect him from the humans. And he was ashamed of how he had spoken to them.

"If I could see them one last time," said the little tree.

So the little tree stood in the parlor. Day in, day out, the hot stove that he feared burned beside him. Day in, day out, he carried his heavy load. And every day, the man and his wife came. They admired the little fir tree and sang songs to him, but they did not notice that his branches were growing more and more barren. They didn't care that the little tree's needles grew browner and browner. On the last day of Christmas, when his most beautiful branch cracked ominously, the little fir tree knew that he would not be able to carry the load for much longer. His heart became heavy.

Only one little joy remained: the night. When the stove was out and everything was quiet around him, the little fir tree looked at frost-covered window and wished to return to the forest.

"If only I could see my brothers one last time," sighed the fir tree.

On this last day of Christmas, something unexpected happened. A tiny light appeared, and the Christmas tree lost an entire branch full of needles in fright. It was a small flame shining through the window! The fern frost quickly disappeared—and the little tree wished he could do the same.

"The fire has come to take me," said the fir tree and he trembled like a leaf.

But as quickly as it had come, the small flame disappeared again. And where the flame had just been, a small face was now looking through the ice-free window. It was a very dirty face with big, dark eyes. The little fir tree was terrified until he realized that it was only a little girl. Her head was bare, and snowflakes had made her brown hair all white. The poor girl was wearing nothing but a torn dress. The cloth of the dress had become so thin that the little tree could see the threads from which it was woven. The poor girl looked longingly into the parlor—and when she saw the little fir tree, her dark eyes grew even bigger. The little tree saw his reflec-

tion in the girl's eyes and hardly recognized himself. He had changed so much! He stood completely crooked in his stand, his needles had become brown due to the heat of the parlor, and his most beautiful branch hung low, dangling by a thread of bark. But the poor girl looked at him so lovingly, as if she saw something special in him. She remained silent for quite a while, looking at the beautiful fir tree through the window, lost in thought.

Then the poor girl said: "You and I are both in a place where we do not belong. As I long for the warmth inside, you must long for the cold outside. It made me very happy to see you, now let me give you a little happiness."

The little girl lighted another match and drove away even the smallest ice crystal. "I'll be back tomorrow," she promised. Then the poor girl disappeared into the darkness –and the little fir tree could look through the window all night long. Outside, the snow fell to earth in thick flakes and the moonlight enchanted the world with its silver glow. And far outside, behind the last houses, he could see the tree-tops of his big brothers. Thus the little fir tree fell asleep. When he awoke in the morning, the fern frost covered the window again making it impossible to look out. But the little tree was not sad anymore. He could hardly wait for nightfall. At night, the poor girl would come. And indeed, just before midnight, the poor girl came back—as she had promised. With her matches she melted all the window frost and then she looked in just as longingly as the fir tree looked out.

It went like this every night until the seventh. On the seventh night – which was New Year's Eve – the poor girl did not have any more matches to light. So she rubbed the ice from the window with her bare hands and gazed into the room, her fingers and lips blue with cold.

The little tree was weighed down with a heavy heart, for he had grown fond of the poor girl. He wanted to do something nice for her, too. So the little fir tree broke off his most beautiful branch and threw it into the oven. There were still embers in the ashes. The little tree gathered all his strength, lifted the heavy orna-

ments, stretched and stretched—and when the branch caught fire and the parlor was brightly lit, the girl saw him in all his Christmas splendor. The poor girl smiled. Her smile was the most beautiful thing the little tree had ever seen. Thus, the girl sank unconscious to the ground.

A raven flew to the window. It was the same raven the little tree had met in the woods. When he landed on the windowsill, he turned into an old man wearing a large black coat and a hat with a wide brim, which he had pulled low over his face. The man's head was a bony bird's skull. Instead of eyes, he had dark cavities in which one could see eternity. The man bent down to the girl who was lying in the snow and had turned very pale. He pecked her with his long beak to see if she was still alive. It was right then that the fir tree knew death had come to take the girl.

"Don't," cried the little tree as loud as it could through the closed window.

The old man looked up. "There's not much life left in her," he said.

"Nor in me," said the little tree. "So let the girl have her own and take mine instead. It seems a fair exchange to me."

The old man looked at the fir tree thoughtfully, his head tilted to the side, as the ravens do.

"It seems to me that you've found your heart after all," said the old man.

Then a sudden wind pushed the window open, snowflakes blew in, and it became freezing cold in the parlor. Through the window, the old man entered. He went to the fir tree, wrapped him gently in his black coat and carried him outside. In the snow, the old man turned back into a raven and hid the little tree, which had grown small like a sapling under his wing. The poor girl, however, lay as good as dead in the snow.

"Can't we do anything for her?" asked the little tree.

The raven shook his head and swung into the air. At that moment, a loud crashing and clanging sound was heard in the parlor. Hurried feet ran across the wooden floor.

"The tree has fallen," cried the man.

"The wind has opened the window," said the woman as she set about closing it.

They were already high up in the air when the little fir tree saw the man and his wife hurrying out of the house. They wrapped the little girl in warm blankets and carried her into the parlor. Shortly afterward a red glow lit up the night and revealed that the stove inside had been lit. But this time the thought of the burning flames did not frighten the little tree—it warmed his heart. While the raven carried him higher and higher above the clouds, the little tree closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he found himself in a forest that was very much like his own, yet different. The little fir tree felt that he had arrived home. Next to him there were three empty places, one for the brown tree, one for the crooked tree and one for the barren tree. The little tree knew that soon he would be back among his big brothers. Happily, he put down roots and waited for the day when he could tell them the story of the poor girl.