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## Old Man

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## OLD MAN

*Allen Parrott*

**I**T WAS A POOR excuse of a tree and he wanted it out of his yard. The wind had blown it crooked, and some one, who owned the house before he did, had cut off the branches to the west, making it lopsided. It spoiled the looks of the whole place, it was no earthly good, and all winter he had been planning to get rid of it.

He told his wife he was going to have it chopped down and hauled away, and she said it made the only decent shade and what was she going to do next summer, because if a cool breeze was blowing anywhere on the face of the earth it would be under that tree, and she liked to pull a chair under it and sit there, and why didn't he let it be; it was better than nothing. "But don't listen to me. If you've got it on your mind I'll have no peace in this world until it's gone."

He reminded her the leaves fell from it all year round, and there were bean pods in the fall to be raked up, and their grandchildren were always climbing it, just narrowly escaping death. He let his voice dwindle off, for he knew she was right; he had it on his mind, and he connected winter and being cold, with the tree and its twisted branches, and the black bean pods and brown leaves shaking in it, and the circle of snow frozen at the foot of it.

He was in the grain elevator one afternoon, loafing, talking to the other retired farmers who sat around the stove. Jim Miller came in to get a bushel of oats.

"Say, Jim," he said, "I got a tree over at my place I'd like to have cut down."

"All right, Fred," Jim said. He made a little extra money in the winter time, doing odd jobs in town. "When you want it done?"

"No hurry at all. I'll give you fifteen dollars to take it out of my sight."

"How big is it?"

"It never scratched heaven. A sorry tree."

"I'll cut it down," Jim said. He stood with one hand on the door knob, waiting to leave.

"It's the worst-looking tree you ever saw. I want it out of my front yard."

"I'll do it," Jim said, and he left.

The next morning before Fred had finished breakfast, Jim and his son were sawing the tree. They had slipped up on him—he didn't hear their truck—and he had a notion to run out bareheaded and stop them. They had taken him at his word too suddenly.

"Well, there goes our tree," he told his wife. He felt as though he was in a dentist's chair, waiting for a bad tooth to be pulled.

"Serves you right," his wife said.

"Now that's a silly thing to say. I'm going to feel a lot better."

"You'll feel a lot better next summer with the sun scorching your head," she told him.

He bundled up and went out to help them.

"Well, you picked the coldest day of the year," he growled at Jim. "Let me give you a rest."

Jim straightened up, and stepped back to let him work one end of the saw. He had barely started when his wife stuck her head out the front door.

"What are you trying to do, old man, kill yourself?"

He stopped sawing for a moment and with quiet dignity told her he was a long ways from the grave, and he'd appreciate it very much if she'd tend to the kitchen and leave him be.

"If you're laid up, don't expect any sympathy from me," she told him. She waited to see if he was going to say anything else, then closed the door.

Jim offered to take another turn at it, but he said he was good for a long while yet. He sawed until his wind gave out and when he straightened up, he had to put his hand on his back.

"I'll get my axe, Jim," he said, and he started to walk to the tool shed. Before he got to the corner of the house he heard a cracking sound—he supposed a branch had fallen off—but when he turned around he saw the tree was down. He had expected to feel the ground shake under him, and hear a crash, and he would have liked to be the one who pushed it over. "Well, that's that," he said.

He looked at the base of the tree and noticed there was a stump. In

all the time he had considered cutting the tree down, he had forgotten there would be a stump. "Can't we get rid of that too?" he asked Jim.

"Better let it rot for awhile. Your wife can set a flower pot on it."

"Now that's going to look simple. A stump with a flower pot on it." He'd have to spend the rest of his life waiting for the stump to rot.

His wife came out of the house to look. She had thrown his sheep-lined coat over her shoulders, and she walked around the tree with her arms folded, shaking her head and clicking her tongue.

"What are you going to do with the stump?" she asked. Somehow she always guessed what was puzzling him most, and then asked him.

He didn't answer her.

"I was going to say we could put a board over it and make a bench out of it and I could sit on it on hot afternoons, but I forgot the tree was gone."

"You talk like the world is going to end," he said.

"Well, that's the way I feel," she answered. She walked over to Jim and told him if she ever had some peas to shell, or a free minute, she came out on hot afternoons and sat under the tree, and on Sundays her sons' wives brought out blankets and spread them on the grass, and sat in the shade and watched the cars drive past.

After Jim left, they stood by the fence for a moment, looking at the hole in the air the tree had filled. There was nothing between their heads and the grey sky, and in front of them the yard was filled with chips of bark and broken branches.

Everything about it was a disappointment to Fred. What he had expected was, when the tree was gone, winter would go too, and the grass would be green, and the sun would be warm on his back. Instead there was a gap in the yard, and his wife was saying they'd have to remember to pull down the curtains at night, and he was cold.

"But you can plant another, Fred," she went on; "they've got trees now that grow fast."

He was going to go in the house with her, but it came to him that that was a good idea. "I'll be back," he said, and he walked across the highway into town and bought a cherry tree no bigger round than his thumb. With a pickaxe he broke the sod, and planted the tree the best he could near the stump, propping it up with frozen clods.

The rest of the winter he stayed indoors, sitting in a chair pulled up to the window, watching the tree, waiting for spring to come, waiting for it to bloom.