

## Focus – The Best We’ve Ever Had

*by Major Deborah Flagg –*

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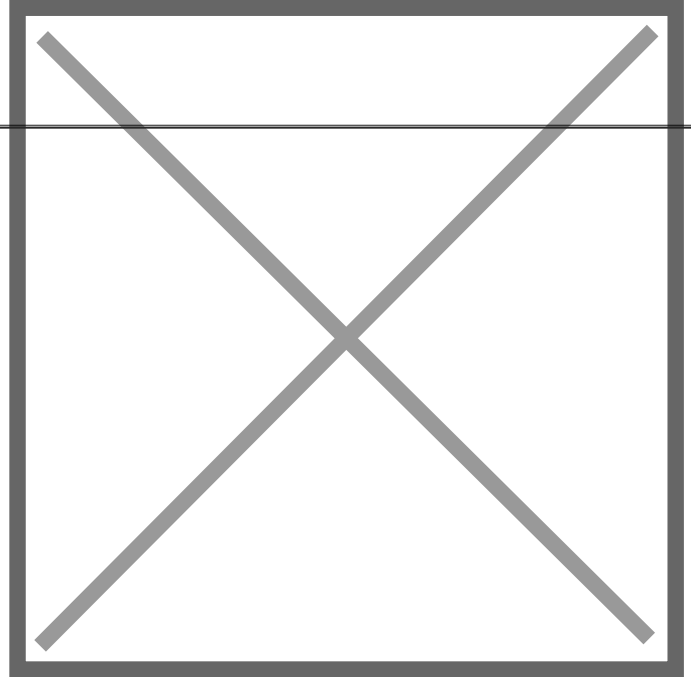
It was, quite simply, a perfect tree, or as nearly perfect as growing things can be. It possessed in its pungent frame all that was desirable—full, hydrated branches, a conical shape, and silky, verdant needles that held tenaciously to the supple twigs. There were no holes or awkward spaces to disturb the balance; it was pure arboreal symmetry. Tucked humbly into a chilly corner of the Christmas tree lot, its very presence among the slowly dying evergreens was a benediction.

One frosty evening in an early December, this nearly-perfect pine was being examined—shaken, rotated, scrutinized and tugged at—by a cheery Yuletide family. They were smitten by its splendor. They loved it. They adored it. It was their Christmas dream come true, all the deep, dark and holy forests of the world captured in its scented arms. “We must have it!,” they chimed. “It will be ours,” they echoed. And they laid down gold and silver in exchange for its sweet tree beauty.

After bearing it gently home, the family anchored it in a corner of their living room, in the perfect place, protected from drafts and heedless traffic. Then they all gathered around to pay homage to its bare excellence and to congratulate themselves on such a rare and wondrous find. “It is the best we’ve ever had,” they exulted. “It is absolutely perfect.”

In the grip of holiday spirit, the family, young and old alike, set about to adorn the comely tree with every trinket and bauble they possessed—colorful globes, shimmering snowflakes, iridescent icicles, roly-poly Santas, blood-red berries, chirping birds, glowing angels, velvet ribbon and twinkling lights. They worked and worked, the little family, hanging, tying, polishing and arranging, until the nearly-perfect tree was groaning under the weight of Christmas glitter.

“We’re finished,” they sighed, “Look what we have created.” “Almost finished,” said one of the young ones. “We still have this,” she said, holding up a tarnished, ancient manger cradling a tiny faded baby. “It’s so tacky,” one groaned. “It doesn’t go with our other lovely things,” another complained. And they tucked it way inside the foliage so no one would see.



The next day the family awakened to a most disturbing sight: one of the branches had fallen from the exquisite tree, just fallen, its needles scattered on the ivory carpet. A globe, an icicle and a laughing Santa also lay amid the debris. "Never mind," they said, "We'll just turn the tattered spot toward the wall and nobody will ever know the difference." "It's still almost perfect," they reassured themselves.

The next day, the family found the same distressing scene, only this time, it was more branches, more carnage. And the next day, and the next. One by one, the bejeweled branches fell to the floor until there was just the trunk and a few twigs clinging for dear life. The nearly-perfect tree did not look perfect anymore. Bereft of branches and tinsel, it looked strange and scrawny, like a logging camp survivor. The family gathered around their pathetic Christmas trophy with tears in their eyes and deep questions in their hearts. "What has happened to our lovely, wondrous miracle of a tree?" they cried.

As if to comfort each other and their now desolate shrub, they drew closer and closer to its meager foliage. Closer and closer they gathered, until their eyes saw what they had forgotten but now remembered. Nestled among the thin and trembling twigs was a tarnished, ancient manger, cradling a tiny, faded baby. It was still there, slightly swinging, stirred by the family's breath, set in motion by their collective amazement. It wasn't as tacky as before; it seemed softly lit from the inside. And there was music coming from somewhere, from within the tree perhaps, or from the manger itself, which now seemed beautiful. The music was faint, but strangely familiar, a melody inescapable and true. And as the moments passed, the moments of the tiny baby in the ancient manger and the deep, true music, an unimaginable thing happened. The tree itself began to glow. It shone with a light beyond understanding; it grew warm and radiant, sending out heat to every corner of the chilly house and to the astonished family who stood so near.

"What shall we do with this tree now?" one of them asked. "We should keep it, keep it always," the others answered, "We should never let it go." "Let's hug it," said one of the young ones. And that's just what they did. They hugged each other, they wept, they sang glorious songs. And of the mysterious tree, now a slender trunk with a solitary ornament—the tiny baby in the ancient manger—they said, "It is absolutely perfect; it's the best we've ever had."