

Story for performance #916  
webcast from Sydney at 08:06PM, 23 Dec 07



Source: Reuters, 'Saudi police nab militants', *The Age online*, 23/12/07.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [disease](#), [celebrations](#)  
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There is a Christmas Tree Shop where the chemist used to be. I work there.

Today an old man and his daughter passed through. The man had a slight American accent and the look of a returned ex-pat. He was dapper, carried a blackthorn stick, wore a long tweed coat and a knitted woollen hat.

'We would like one of your finest trees', said his daughter.

'At a good price', he piped up. She smiled lovingly at him whilst throwing her eyes to heaven. With that he turned on his heel and walked to the far end to explore the shop on his own.

'I love the smell. Dad don't you love the smell?'

He was ignoring her, lifting his stick to poke the trunk of a tree on display. The sign said, 'Non-shed Trees For Sale' and he saw hundreds of pine needles lying scattered on the ground.

'We normally have an artificial one, but this year I have persuaded Mum and Dad to get a real one', she told me.

'What do you think of that tree in the corner Dad?'

'No', was his adamant reply.

'Tell me about them', she said. So I told her how they were all Noble fir grown on the side of a mountain in County Wicklow. Grand, full trees. No trimming necessary.

'What do you think Dad?'

'I think you're wasting your time', he replied.

Her smile dropped and she walked over to the trees still packed in their netting. Bing Crosby was telling us to have a Merry Christmas. There was a fog and the lights glowed red, green and blue on the tree outside the courthouse.

He was bent over his stick in pain, looking at the pine needles absolutely everywhere.

For a precious moment, they were both suspended in silence, in the fog.

'Show me one, which is seven foot and full right up to the top. I don't want gaps and I want a bushy one', she said sharply.

'Dad do you want to sit down?' she asked.

'No', he replied.

'Okay we'll take this one', she said exasperated, pointing to a large tree, wrapped and close at hand.

'Dad I'm going to pay for it and don't tell Mum how much it cost.'

He took no notice of her.

'I'm just going to bring the car back around and go to the bank machine. You stay here.'

She left the shop and he relaxed although looked weary. I faced the chair towards him and he sat down.

'Which one did she pick?', he asked clutching his stomach.

'This one.' He looked frail and tired and although genuinely interested, he seemed to have had more energy when despondent.

'I have birds in my chest', he said. 'I can feel them, their beaks pecking through my ribs. Sometimes they sing to me. There are six of them.' He smiled with a wink. 'I was in hospital, treated for cancer and the damn bastard thing is back', he continued. 'I tell ya, I'm going to drink a lot of whiskey before I go. There's nothing they can do. When a doctor tells a sick man to carry on as normal and don't change his lifestyle, that's when he knows he's had it. Dr. Jackson told me not to listen to my wife and to do whatever I want to do. Not listen to my wife? It's not what I wanted to hear. And now we're getting a real tree.'

For a moment he looked terribly frightened and then he started to laugh. We both laughed until tears were streaming down our faces. 'It's getting dark now', he said, sobered by the thought.

She came back red-nosed with her purse in hand. She was muttering to herself, 'I'm going to be all right with the tree. I think I'll be able to manage it in the car.' She handed me twenty euro.

'Did you ask the girl for a discount?'

'No Dad I didn't.'

'I'm sorry I can't give any discounts', I intervened. 'They're not my trees.'

He stood up straight and poked another tree. 'I would have preferred that one myself, anyway I thought our plan was to leave by sunset.'

'Dad I still have to collect the turkey.'

It was the shortest day of the year.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Derville Quigley.*