

# Evergreen Promises

Arthur Klepchukov

“I’ll never buy a real Christmas tree again,” I say as I flip on the car’s emergency lights.

“Huh?” My stepdaughter looks up from the back seat. Pulls off her giant headphones, but someone’s still rapping. Probably about daddy issues.

“Didn’t you see what happened?”

“What?” Her eyebrows squirm like I’m still talking.

“Turn around.”

She does.

I want to say it’s proof that Santa doesn’t give a shit. But I remember that every drop of my adult venom will seep into her thirteen-year-old brain as ammo for the next argument.

The Christmas tree I overpaid for twenty minutes ago lies on the shoulder of the highway.

“Oh shit,” she says with a delighted squeak.

“Lisa, language.”

“Oops.” She glances at me like she knows I cursed in my head. “What are we gonna do?”

“Stay put. I’m gonna see if there’s something to salvage.”

It’s a lie. I watched a semi knock that gorgeous pine onto the shoulder.

I open my door. The car beeps to remind me I left the lights on or the keys in. Or as Lisa likes to say under her breath: *Fail. Fail. Fail.*

I climb out. The car rocks from idiots whooshing by.

My hands are freezing in the wind. I stomp toward the tree. I don’t know what I’m doing.

I didn’t know what I was doing after I bought the tree either. I’d never hauled one home. Should’ve paid extra for help to tie it to the car. I let my wife get in my head; her comment about atypical masculinity—or was it nontraditional? So, with my traditional caveman temper, I bolted off to get a Christmas

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tree. I invited Lisa to “help,” though more to appease my wife. Bonding experience, my ass. The kid didn’t want to be here, and with my cheery attitude who could blame her?

I inhale to slow down a world that never will. Only tire rubber and afternoon cold crawl in.

I find the tree’s top splintered. I bend down as if I could figure out what wire to fix or gasket to replace to get this baby running. But I could only pretend to be that kind of guy.

Angsty lyrics from Lisa’s headphones mix with car tires gnawing at the road.

Her hand rests on my shoulder.

Startled, I pull her away from the traffic. Cheeks rosy, headphones hugging her neck.

“Maybe we could save a branch?” she says.

“Might still smell nice.”

She smirks. “A highway-scented tree for the holidays.”

“You’ve got a real problem with this time of year, don’t you?”

She leans to turn away.

I sigh. “Hey.” I point to the tree. “Help me pick a branch.”

She rolls her eyes.

“I’m serious. You wanted one, I’ll get one.”

She points.

I lift a frail one lying on top. “This one?”

“No, the big one.” She points to one of the few still attached to the trunk. Of course.

I pull, but it won’t budge. I step over to the other side of the tree and try again. I’m yanking and yanking when Lisa and I make eye contact. She’s reaching for her headphones, turning around, retreating to the car. Needles prick my hands. Sap oozes onto my fingers.

No, I’ll finish at least one thing today.

I stomp on the trunk and pull the branch—a game of tug-of-war I can’t lose. Twisting helps. Peeling, peeling, detached.

The frost is all too thirsty for my beads of sweat.

I lug the branch back to the car. Lisa’s already inside, head bobbing to another song I wouldn’t understand. I open the trunk, shove in the branch, and wipe my hands on a rag.

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I join her in the back seat and slam the door shut. Lisa stares at me like I expect her to drive us home. Old enough to run her mouth but not reach the pedals.

“Here.” I hand her a piece of her branch.

She stares at it long enough to make me seem ridiculous. But then, she pauses her music. Takes off her headphones.

“Sorry I didn’t have time to wrap it,” I say.

Lisa smiles.

“So, am I the problem with this holiday?”

That slice of innocence fades so fast I want to kick myself for asking.

“It’s not you. It’s just a dumb tradition,” she says.

“Well, there’s a decent word—*tradition*.”

“Nothing decent about it.”

“Why not?”

“What’s it really about besides spending money we don’t have on things we won’t want?”

“Couldn’t a tradition be a positive pattern?”

Silence. Sulking.

“It doesn’t have to be anything more than how you’ve felt years before. A crackling fireplace. Hot cocoa. That pine scent.” I point to the branch.

“You wanna know how I felt before? How about I’m six, and I ask Santa for one thing. Just one damn thing.”

*Language*, I want to say but stop myself. She’s talking to me.

“I ask him to keep my parents from splitting up. But my dad leaves anyway. Never even brings home the Christmas tree he promised. So that,” she points back to what’s left of our tree, “is all the reminding I need, thanks!”

“I’m sorry things didn’t work out—”

“It’s not your fault!” She looks away and sniffles.

“Well, I’m still sorry. Listen, I hurt too. I didn’t have the family I needed, and I don’t want anyone to feel that endless lacking.”

She turns to me. “But I’m not *yours*.”

“And I’m not yours. Maybe that’s the point? We weren’t put together by biology. Your lovely mom brought us together. I choose to stay. To try and bring you a real Christmas tree. To be here with you.”

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She exhales, lip trembling.

“You know, pain can be a tradition too. All you’ve been holding in for how many Decembers?”

Her gloved fingers count to seven.

“Is holding on to this pattern what you want?”

She doesn’t nod, nor does she refute it.

“Can we go home?” she asks, her voice softer than her adolescent angst and first makeup armor.

I nod and move back to the front seat. I start the car, wave farewell to the remains of our tree, and drive.

Lisa doesn’t put her headphones back on. I don’t hear more music. Winter howls when we’re at a red light, waiting.

“Turn left,” Lisa says.

There’s an open store. In the back seat, she brushes the needles of her branch.

Once inside, she picks out a fake tree—short and silver instead of green and full of promises it cannot keep.