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A Lovely Couple, Bound with Love

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The conversation at the bar got around to Christmas trees. Somebody had mentioned how much they cost today and what a pain in the neck it is to go out in the bitter cold and shop around for a good one.

"Nah," said Slats Grobnik. "There's nothing to it; not if you know what you're doing."

What makes you an expert?

"I used to work in a tree lot when I was a young guy," said Slats. "My uncle used to sell them in the vacant lot next to his tavern. And that's when I learned the secret."

What secret?

"The secret of having the most beautiful tree you ever saw."

That's easy. The secret is to go out with a pocket full of money and spend what it takes to buy the best tree.

Slats shook his head. "Uh-uh. Money's not the secret."

So, tell us the secret.

"Awright. It was a long time ago, maybe thirty years. I was in the lot and it was the night before Christmas Eve, about a half hour before I was going to close up. I hadn't seen a customer in two hours.

"I had maybe a couple dozen trees left, and most of 'em weren't much to look at. By the time you get that close to Christmas, they've been picked over pretty good.

"So I'm standing by the kerosene heater when this young couple comes in and starts looking at the trees.

"I don't know 'em by name, but I know they live down the street in the basement of one of the dumpiest three-flats in the neighborhood.

"He's a skinny young guy with a big Adam's apple and a small chin. Not much to look at. She's kind of pretty, but they're both wearing clothes that look like they came out of the bottom bin at the Salvation Army store.

"It's cold as a witch's toes, but neither of them have got on gloves or heavy shoes. So it's easy to see that they're having hard times with the paychecks.

"Well, they start lifting the trees up and looking at 'em and walking around 'em, the way people do. They finally find one that was pretty decent. Not a great tree. But it wasn't bad. And they ask me the price.

"It was about \$8 or \$9. They don't say anything. They just put it down.

"They keep looking. They must have looked at every tree in the lot. Like I said, there weren't many that were any good. But every time I gave the price on a decent one, they just shook their heads.

"Finally, they thank me and walk away. But when they get out on the sidewalk she says something and they stand there talking for awhile. Then he shrugs and they come back.

"I figure they're going to take one of the good trees after all.

"But they go over to this one tree that had to be the most pathetic tree we had. It was a Scotch pine that was OK on one side, but the other side was missing about half the branches.

"They ask me how much that one was. I told them that they'd have a hard time making it look good, no matter how much tinsel they put on it. But they could have it for a couple of bucks.

"Then they picked up another one that was damned near as pathetic. Same thing—full on one side, but scraggly on the other.

"They asked how much for that one. I told them that it was a deuce, too.

"So then she whispers something to him and he asks me if I'll take \$3 for the two of them.

"Well, what am I going to do? Nobody's going to buy those trees anyway, so I told them they had a deal. But I tell them, what do you want with two trees? Spend a few dollars more and get yourself a nice tree.

"She just smiled and said they wanted to try something. So they gave me \$3 and he carried one of them and she took the other.

"The next night, I happen to be walking past their building. I look down at the window and I can see a tree. I couldn't see it all, but what there was looked good.

"The lights are on, so I figure, what the heck. I knock on the door. They open it and I tell them I noticed the tree and I was just curious.

"They let me in. And I almost fell over. There in this tiny parlor was the most beautiful tree I ever saw. It was so thick it was almost like a bush. You couldn't see the trunk.

"They told me how they did it. They took the two trees and worked the trunks close together so they touched where the branches were thin.

"Then they tied the trunks together with wire. But when the branches overlapped and came together, it formed a tree so thick you couldn't see the wire. It was like a tiny forest of its own.

“The two of them looked so happy with it that it made me feel good the rest of the week.

“And thinking of those two orphan trees, which would have been tossed out if they hadn’t come along, made me feel good, too.

“So that’s the secret. You take two trees that aren’t perfect, that have flaws, that might even be homely, that maybe nobody else would want.

“But if you put them together just right, you can come up with something really beautiful.

“Like two people, I guess.”

January 29, 1986

These Seven Were Special People

Pick up this or any newspaper, and there will be a page of death notices and obituaries. People die every day. Some die young; more die old. Some suddenly, some after long illness. Rich, poor, unknown, and famous.

We pay little or no attention to most of them. In smaller cities, people might look a little closer at the obits because there’s more likelihood that they’ll know someone.

But in the big cities, most people don’t even give them a glance. Or if they do, they just skim the names. And nobody says that this or that death is a great tragedy, a terrible loss. We don’t say that about the death of strangers. People die. That’s part of life.

Yet, millions of people around the world were plunged into deep sadness Tuesday because of the death of seven individuals who were strangers to almost all of us.

On the streets, you could find ordinary people staring into store windows at TV sets that showed the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger and weeping at the sight.

People phoned me, most of them shaken, subdued, depressed, just wanting to talk to someone about the tragedy.

I asked one elderly woman, who had surely seen much death in her lifetime, why she was so moved at the deaths of people whose names she wasn’t sure of.

She said: “It’s because they were doing it for us. They were representing us up there weren’t they? They were special.”

And I suppose that’s part of it. Yes, they were representing us. The human race is going to explore space because it’s in our