

# *Better Than Sacrifice*

By Doreen Tamminga

“You watch out for that tree!” Dad said as he shrugged into his heavy winter coat.

I knew which tree he meant. We had been watching out for that tree all spring and summer and fall. It was just a small seedling when Dad planted it in the front lawn last spring, just a little higher than my knees.

“It’s your mom’s favourite tree,” Dad had said as he carefully tamped the dirt down around the slender trunk. “Stays green in the winter and she’s hoping the cardinals will nest in the spring.”

The tree had been faithfully watered every week until the snow fell, and fertilized for tree growth in the spring and root growth in the fall. Now, come winter, Dad was still thinking about Mom’s tree.

It had snowed this winter. Not just a few ground-covering flurries, but deep heavy snowfalls that carpeted the lawn, one on top of the other. Everything was knee-deep in snow, even the tree. It had grown nearly a foot since Dad had planted it, and now that foot of new growth sprang fresh and green above the snow.

“We’ll watch out,” I said now to Dad as he pulled on his boots. I was collecting hockey sticks from the garage for myself, my brother, and a few cousins. Their family had come to spend the afternoon at our house. To my

cousins’ delight, yesterday’s freezing rain had crusted the snow with a thin layer of ice. It would be perfect for ice-hockey, even on boots!

“I’m dropping off a warm meal for Mrs. Meyers,” Dad said as he pulled the truck keys from his pocket. “Stay in the side yard.”

“We will,” I called back and let the garage door shut with a bang. Bright sunlight dazzled my eyes as it shone off the snow. Mom’s tree was sparkling in its coat of ice, but I hardly noticed as I dashed around the back of the house to join the others.

It was a rip-roaring game with the slippery ice adding a whole new dimension to our skills. A guy could take off with the puck and go for a break-away... and it truly became a break-away, as he hadn’t any brakes. More than one of us followed the puck through the goalposts and into the hedge. But it added to the hilarity of the game, and we played until we had beaten the other team twice.

“Let’s run races!”

I’m not sure who first suggested it, but we all thought it was a great idea. We could probably tell you who was the fastest on dry ground, but running on ice would be a new challenge for all of us. Who knew who might win? We were eager to find out. There wasn’t much of a course in the side yard for a hundred meter dash, so the boys decided to run the course from the side yard into the front yard and back again.

“We can do a figure eight!” I added. “The bird-feeder will be one pole to round, and...”

My eyes scanned the front yard, then rested on the slender tree branching above the snow.

“The little tree can be the other,” I announced.

It was on the third race that a runner lost his footing and slid into the tree. Like an icicle, the slim trunk snapped and tumbled across the ice.

My brother and I looked at each other, then ran over to the tree. Carefully he picked up the bushy green tree top and shoved it down into the snow next to its trunk. Silently I watched, then swallowed nervously. Something didn't look right. Something didn't feel right.

The fun of the footraces had ended as abruptly as the tree. The others went inside to play ping-pong, but I grabbed a snow shovel and started clearing the rest of the driveway for Dad.

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A truck door slammed on the driveway below. I didn't want to look out the hall window. I wanted to run, to hide, but irresistibly my feet drew me to the window.

Dad dropped the truck keys in his pocket and paused to look at the sidewalk, the driveway, the shovel leaning against the porch wall. He looked at the house, the lawn, the tree. My heart skipped a beat.

He knew. Maybe it was the newly arranged branches that gave it away. Or maybe it was the footprints all over the front lawn. In any case, Dad looked oddly at the tree for a moment before leaving the sidewalk for the front lawn. Nearing the tree, he bent and peered at it. Reached out. Touched it... and it fell over.

I dropped down to the floor and groaned.

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“Jesse!” It was a command.

I could have heard Dad's voice ringing up the staircase from the attic. I was sure everyone else in the house heard it too. The hum of adult voices in the kitchen ceased. The patter of little feet fell still. Even the warm smells of coffee and soup seemed to evaporate in the icy silence.

“Come here, please.”

I came.





I wandered into the library when it was all over. I couldn't face the others yet. Great-grandpa was sitting in the rocker pulled close to the fireplace. A wool blanket lay over his knees.

"Come here," he beckoned with his hand. I came.

"Sit down." He gestured to the fireplace hearth and I sat, the warmth of the fire seeping through my sweatshirt and across my back. He knew I was in big trouble—his strength may be going, but his hearing was not.

"Many, many years ago," he began slowly, "there was a king." Great-grandpa's voice was thin, and his hands trembled on the armrests, but the story-telling gleam was in his eyes.

"He was a brave leader who defended his country valiantly against the enemy. One day he and his army were sent on a mission: to destroy a cowardly people, a treacherous people. Their wickedness had reached its height, and an old prophet gave the king his mission from the Lord. This nation and their livestock must be wiped out.

"Samuel was the prophet and Saul the king. When Saul came to greet him after the battle, he did so boldly. 'We have fulfilled our task,' were his words, but the old prophet was not fooled."

Great-grandpa sat straighter in his chair as he continued, and fire was in his eyes as he finished the story.

"Then what is this bleating and lowing that I hear?' Samuel asked.

"Oh, that,' Saul dismissed his disobedience lightly. 'We have kept the best of the livestock as a sacrifice for the Lord.'

"Tears must have risen in the old prophet's eyes as he saw the folly of the proud, unbending king. Saul had been a giant in his nation's eyes: the finest, the best. But now his own greed would cut off his reign.

"The prophet's voice may have wavered, but the verdict did not, as he pronounced the end of Saul's reign and the Lord's judgment: 'To obey is better than sacrifice'."

The ticking of a clock was only sound in the library as Great-grandpa's words sank in. I could hear again my own protests of innocence to Dad. I could see myself playing the part of a helpful son, shoveling valiantly, sacrificing a few games of ping-pong to fool Dad. But the old prophet's words rang in my ears: "To obey is better than sacrifice."