

[[Intro]]

On a cold winter night, you're driving through unfamiliar neighborhoods, to view Christmas lights and decorations.

One yard contains dozens of figures: snowmen, elves, and reindeer. But on the roof is a massive white-fur covered creature in a black robe and hood.

Sharp horns stick out from its head.

The beast leaps from the roof, fire spraying out its nostrils. It charges towards your car.

You Need my help.

[[AVFD intro music kicks in.]]

This is A Voice From Darkness.

[[AVFD intro music fades out.]]

Hello this is Dr. Malcolm Ryder, parapsychologist. I hope you're all having a lovely holiday season. Now normally I'd tell you I'm here to help you with all your supernatural, paranormal, and otherworldly problems, and this is still true in spirit, but I'm afraid tonight I'm hosting a Christmas party so there will not be a call-in segment. In fact, all we're having tonight is a Christmas ghost story. Or maybe not quite a "ghost" story, but the sort of story of otherworldly interaction that is more common this time of year.

The Ryder family is famous for our Christmas parties. Family and friends travel from all over to Chicago to attend our yearly get-together. My oft-mentioned grandfather Duncan started the tradition, and every year he'd insist on telling a Christmas ghost story to all those present. In fact, he claimed the reason why so many went out of their way to attend the Ryder family Christmas Party was because of his stories. Now I don't know about that, I believe seeing everyone, the extravagant decorations throughout the house, and my grandmother's rum cakes had more to do with the party's popularity, but Grandfather Duncan's Christmas stories were certainly a fixture.

And Amelia and I have kept the tradition alive. I mean that we still throw the party and we still tell stories. Often, we retell some of our grandfather's best Christmas tales. This year, it's my turn to tell a story and Amelia's to make the rum cake. I'll be retelling one of my favorite's of my grandfather's. And before the party tonight, I thought I'd share it with you all as well. So without further ado, let's get to our Christmas story.

[[Christmas Story]]

The Miller family lived on the southern border of Washington state near a great forest. One year, three days into December, Joseph Miller got the idea that he should have his son Daniel cut down the family's Christmas tree. This had never been a family tradition before. But in his mind he imagined this becoming a great new tradition that would extend generations into the future. The morning of this epiphany, Joseph got up early and sharpened his axe. Over breakfast, he told Daniel what they'd be doing that day, who squirmed in his chair when he heard the news.

"That old woman who lives in the woods. She seems protective of the trees. Should we really go chop one down?" Joseph laughed off his son's concern.

"Rhiannon Jones? She was ancient when I was your age. Her family's been in the forest for as long as anyone can remember. But I don't recall them ever causing any harm. She won't mind if we take one tree." Joseph's words did not ease his son's worrying. Daniel did not like to travel into the forest as he got lost easily. "No internal compass, that's your problem," his father once told him. And it was true. But truer still was that Rhiannon Jones stalked the forest and talked to the trees. Daniel didn't like the idea of upsetting her.

"He's a bit young to chop down a tree, don't you think?" Amber Miller said of her son.

"Nonsense," Joseph said. "Abe Lincoln fell'd a whole forest by the time he was Daniel's age."

"I'd like to chop down a Christmas tree," Mary Miller said and swung an imaginary axe. Her father looked down at her.

"You're only five this year. Perhaps when you're Daniel's age," he said.

After breakfast, Joseph and his son journeyed into the dense forest that boarded their property. There were plenty of pine trees that were near their home and Daniel made sure to point each of them out. But his father dismissed all. Partly for being too tall, too mature. But also because he envisioned this pilgrimage to find the perfect tree taking the bulk of the day. Daniel, on the other hand, was hoping to find a sufficient tree as soon as possible and as close to their home as they could. Less chance to get lost and less chance to run into Rhiannon Jones.

After traveling a few hours they came across a grove of young Douglas firs.

"Which shall you chop down?" Joseph asked, and so told Daniel it was now time to begin the next stage of their burgeoning tradition. Daniel searched about the grove. There were many firs the right age and height to take back. There were many more that were taller and grander, but

Daniel ignored those. When his eyes came across one tree in particular, he felt something odd, like he was staring at the only true tree he'd ever really seen. But he was in a grove full of firs, each nearly identical to the others, so Daniel could not account for the feeling.

"This one," Daniel said and pointed at the tree that felt like the only true tree. Joseph nodded, and so Daniel swung his axe.

The two dragged the tree back to their home, brushed the snow off, and brought it indoors. Daniel's mother and sister were unfurling strings of lights. The Miller family then gently wrapped the tree in lights and hung ornaments. A crystal star crowned the top of the tree. As the sky grew dark, they turned on the Christmas lights. Bright colors cast themselves across the small living room. The family basked in the colorful lights until all went to bed.

Daniel woke sometime past midnight but far before the dawn. He swore he heard a whispering voice calling to him from another room. Unable to fall back asleep with the voice demanding his attention, he crept downstairs to the living room in attempt to discover the voice's source.

But there was no one there. The room was devoid of life except for the tree which glowed with colorful lights in the darkness.

"Boy who felled me..." A voice whispered. "You have made a grave mistake."

"Who said that?" Daniel cried.

The Christmas lights cast shadows of the tree across all the room's walls. And the shadows multiplied into a forest. The shadow forest swayed slowly as if blown by an unfelt wind.

"The Tree you have doomed to death. A mistake you shall soon regret. I grew from a seed from the ancient forest, the first forest, the true forest."

"I'm sorry," Daniel said. "I had no idea. I thought you were just a tree. Just a Christmas tree."

"You're a liar like all your kind," The Christmas Tree said. "As soon as you laid eyes upon me, you knew what I was. Yet you struck me with your axe anyway. I should have lived a thousand years. Perhaps ten thousand. And my spirit, in the true forest, would have grown tall and proud. But you've doomed me. When I venture there, I shall be slight and sickly. All because of you and your axe."

Daniel apologized to The Christmas Tree, again and again. He insisted he had no idea he'd done all what the tree accused him of. He admitted he felt a sensation when he first saw the tree, but he had no idea what that feeling meant. He begged the tree, pleaded with him if there was anything he could do to right the situation.

“I will soon die, it is too late. You’ve condemned me, boy. However... when I make my way to the true forest, if you do something for me, I might still be tall and proud. As all great trees should be.”

Daniel was hesitant. He wasn’t sure what the tree might ask him to do. But he answered:

“Anything. I’ll do anything if that will undo the harm I’ve done you.”

“You must give me two gifts. One tonight, and one on the morrow in the light of day. The first gift is easy to give: take an ornament from my tree, one you and your family have garishly decorated me with, take one ornament and whisper to it a dream or a memory. It matters not which. And I am not sinister like those who do deals east of the Levithan. I will tell you now, do this for me and the dream or memory you share will then belong to me. That is the first gift I need from you. Will you comply?”

“May I know the second gift first?” Daniel asked.

“The second gift I’d need from you is for you to travel to my stump and roots. Go there with the axe you used to fell me. When you arrive, you need to cut upon your palm with the blade of the axe and press the blood onto the stump. You’ll thereby give me some of your spirit.”

“My spirit?” Daniel said. “I can’t give you that.”

“I would not take all of it, boy,” The Christmas Tree said. “And besides, your spirit is infinite. If I take a part of your infinity, then I too will have infinite spirit. But you will be left with infinite spirit still,” The Christmas Tree assured Daniel, who had only studied up to his multiplication tables in math class this reasoning was sound. But Daniel wasn’t sure if that was true about infinity or not. “Do you accept my offer?” The Christmas Tree asked.

“If I give you these two gifts, I’ll undo whatever harm I did you today. And you won’t haunt me from your ancient forest?”

“Give me these two gifts and I would not dare harm you as I sway tall and proud in the true forest.”

Daniel plucked a shining red orb-shaped ornament from the tree. He thought for a moment. He didn’t want to whisper a great memory or dream, the tree didn’t say it had to be a great one after all. Just any dream or memory. He thought of a reoccurring dream he had where he was in the very forest he and his father trekked into earlier that day. In his dream, Daniel would become lost and constantly find himself back in the same clearing surrounded by thick trees no matter what direction he ran. The Christmas Tree didn’t say he couldn’t whisper a nightmare, and so Daniel whispered this nightmare of being lost in the forest to the red ornament. He then hung it back on the tree. He felt something leave him then. He didn’t know what, but he felt slightly less afraid of something he could no longer name.

“From you, feller of me, I accept this first gift. On the morrow, you should go to my stump as soon as the morning star rises.”

Daniel nodded and assured The Christmas Tree again he would do this. He then went back to bed, slept, but had no dreams.

The next morning, Daniel rushed out the door before breakfast. He left a note telling his parents he had to go help a friend, which he felt was only half a lie. He was worried his parents would ask too many questions if they saw him take the axe into the woods again.

Before stepping into the forest, an odd sensation passed over Daniel. Normally he was always so afraid to enter the woods. Especially alone. He couldn't remember why. “The Old Woman,” he said to himself. “I'm sure that's all it was. But I'll just keep an eye out for her and run if I see her.”

Not being able to recall any other fears he had associated with the forest, Daniel confidently stepped forward.

It had not snowed the night before, and the tracks Daniel and his father left were still easy to follow. A few hours later, he came across the grove of Douglas firs. In their midst was the stump of the tree he'd chopped down.

Daniel hesitated. He started to question everything that had happened the night before. He didn't remember having any dreams, but what if talking to The Christmas Tree had merely been a dream? Wasn't that more likely than actually talking to it, after all? But what if he went home today, and did not give the second gift he'd promised the tree? What would it do then? Would it harm him or his family? No, Daniel couldn't allow any chance of that. Even if it was silly to cut his hand because a Christmas Tree told him to, he'd do it and tell his parents he cut himself playing with a friend.

Daniel held the axe by its head to have better control. He let the blade hover over the fleshy palm of his left hand. His breathing shallowed.

I should have brought a first aid kit, he thought. Is it too late to go get one?

“What are you doing in my woods?” A voice called out. Rhiannon Jones, the ancient woman of the forest, stood only several feet away from Daniel, leaning heavily on her walking stick. He hadn't heard her approach.

Daniel didn't answer. He had no idea where to begin. He tried to think of the most plausible lie that would get the old woman to leave but his mind failed to come up with anything quickly.

“What happened to the tree that was there?” she asked. She tapped her walking stick once on the ground.

“My dad and I chopped it down the other day to use as a Christmas tree,” Daniel said. He just blurted it out without thought, without even thinking about lying.

“And why are you back today?” The old woman asked and once again tapped her walking stick on the earth.

“The tree we chopped down spoke to me last night,” Daniel started. He then told her the full story of the previous night and everything that led him to her that morning. He said it all to her as truthfully as he could recall without thinking of lying to her.

“Foolish boy,” the old woman said. “Foolish tree too though. All right, take me to it. I’ll set this mess right.”

Daniel didn’t know what to say, and so he walked with Rhiannon Jones back to his house. He was worried that due to her age the few hour trek would be difficult for her, but somehow they ended up at the edge of the forest in a few short steps. Seeing the bewildered look on Daniel’s face, the old woman said:

“Just a shortcut I know. Nothing fancy.”

When Daniel led her into his home, his father, mother, and sister were all at the breakfast table. They began to ask him questions, but Rhiannon Jones said:

“It’s early, yes, but a lovely time for a nap for everyone but the boy.” She then tapped her walking stick on the ground. Silently, all of Daniel’s family made their way to their bedrooms and shut their doors.

“No need for an audience,” the old woman said.

Daniel then took her into the living room.

“Waken,” she said.

The room grew dark. Like the night before the Christmas lights produced shadows of trees across all the walls.

“You have betrayed me, child.” The Christmas Tree said.

“Give the boy back his dream,” the old woman said.

“He agreed to give me two gifts. Two gifts that will allow me to stand tall and proud in the true forest. I will have what I’ve been promised.”

“Foolish tree,” Rhiannon Jones said. “All of your kind that are decorated as you are for winter rituals find their way to the deeper forest. The deal you tricked the boy into was unnecessary. Undo it or I’ll make sure you are nothing but ashes blowing in the wind of the forest outside this door.”

The red ornament Daniel had whispered his nightmare into the night before fell from the tree and shattered. For a moment, he felt hopelessly lost. With tall trees around him, in a place he could never escape. He fell to the floor. But a moment later, the feeling passed.

Rhiannon Jones looked down at the boy to see if he was all right.

“It was a dream where I was lost in the woods,” he said.

“You gave the tree a nightmare instead of something pleasant. You two deserve each other.” She turned to The Christmas Tree again. “Over the next few weeks, you will dry out and you will die. Do not be afraid. Do not fear. I promise you that you will awaken in the deeper forest. You will be grand and tall and covered in lights and ornaments that distinguish you. The crown you wear now, the crystal star, will shine brightly where all other stars are black.”

Daniel wasn’t sure how, but it seemed as though The Christmas Tree stood taller, proud like a peacock with its tail feathers on display. The old woman turned to Daniel next:

“Don’t chop anymore of my trees. If the great river ever wakens, we’ll need every last one if we wish to survive.”

Daniel had a thousand questions already. And now he had a thousand more. But Rhiannon Jones did not stand still to hear a single one. She made her way to the door.

“Hope you and yours have a lovely Christmas,” she said.

“You too,” was all Daniel managed to get out before the old woman disappeared from the house.

She was gone. His family asleep. Daniel went back to The Christmas Tree.

“Even though you’re still going to where you want to, and as tall and proud as you want, I’m awfully sorry about chopping you down.”

The Christmas Tree didn’t answer Daniel. Not with words anyway. But the colorful lights hit the crystal star atop the tree and reflected a rainbow of stars across the ceiling.

Over the rest of December, Daniel convinced his sister to help him make more ornaments: from paper, from toys, from baubles scattered about the house. On Christmas Eve, when Daniel was alone near the tree, it whispered to him: "Before I depart this world, I will give you a gift."

"What is it?" Daniel asked.

"You will know it when you experience it," The Christmas Tree answered.

That night, Daniel began to have his nightmare of being lost in the forest. But this time, he saw a shining crystal star high above one of the trees. He felt no fear then and he walked toward the star's light. He found when he did this, he was not lost in the woods at all. A path revealed itself and led him to the Christmas Tree, far taller and prouder in Daniel's dream, but still decorated in all the lights and ornaments his family had placed on it.

For the rest of his life, Daniel frequently dreamed of the forest, but these dreams were never nightmares.

[[Outro]]

I hope you've enjoyed that Christmas story, and I hope you all have a good holiday season. On our next episode, the phone lines will be open once again. But that's all for tonight. I'm afraid I have to get back home to host a party. Once again, I'm Dr. Malcolm Ryder, parapsychologist, and if you're experiencing anything supernatural, paranormal, or otherworldly, be sure to call in, next time on A Voice From Darkness.

[[AVFD outro music]]