Albert was the youngest of three siblings in a family of Northwestern pines. Although his father and grandfather tried hard to teach Albert to be a good tree, content with just standing around and watching the seasons change, Albert was bored with his life. The highlight of his day was when birds took a breather on their journey and sat on his branches. He enjoyed watching them flit from branch to branch, listening to their chirp and chat, especially when they chatted about the humans. According to the birds, humans were mysterious creatures, who could swim like a fish, fly like a bird, and run like the wind. Humans ruled the world. They were special.

Albert had never seen a human before, but they fascinated him. He wanted to be special too. He longed for adventure and excitement, and was sick of all the stillness. He wanted to be human. Every day, he watched the birds, craning his neck so as to not miss out on their chirp and chat. Eventually, his whole trunk grew very crooked. The other trees in the neighborhood started to avoid him, whispering that he was ugly. Albert pretended to not care. He began to dream about the humans, these amazing, magical creatures, and wished with all his heart to see one before he died.

One day in the winter, Albert was dozing under a coat of snow, when he suddenly heard voices. He couldn't understand the language, but something told him that they were human. A family came wandering through the woods. Father, mother, and their little daughter. Albert wiggled his branches, so they would notice him. To his excitement, the
little girl came running toward him. She stopped in front of Albert and pointed. “This one!”

Her parents approached. “It's crooked,” the father said. The mother nodded. “It's ugly.” But the little girl said, “It's special.” Before Albert knew, the father took out a saw and started to tickle Albert at his feet. At first Albert laughed, but then the ground swooped away under his feet—and he fainted. When he awoke, he was standing in a living room, near a fireplace, which was decorated with stockings and an Advent calendar. Albert craned his neck to see more of his surroundings, when his eyes fell upon a mirror. In the mirror, the most beautiful tree he'd ever seen smiled back at him. It was decked with a thousand colorful snowballs and festive lights. Albert shook with wonder, wiggling his branches, and the most beautiful jingle sauntered to his ears. Albert realized that the tree in the mirror was him. Ugly Albert. Ugly Albert had become a swan. He finally was special! He was someone!

The little girl skipped into the room. She adjusted one of his snowballs, and then smiled up at him with loving eyes. Albert smiled back at her when her father entered. He frowned at Albert. “It's crooked.” “It's ugly!” the mother called from the kitchen. But the little girl cooed, “It's special.” Albert wiggled his branches once more, and the snowballs tinkled and jingled like tiny birds, chirping with beautiful voices he didn't understand. He had never felt so happy before. The whole afternoon the girl sat in the living room, adjusting his earrings and playing Christmas music for him. She even drew a picture of Albert and hung it up on the wall. In the picture, his crookedness looked beautiful.

And then came Christmas. The little house was full of people, full of noise, full of excitement. Although Albert didn't understand any of it, he felt like the center of it all. He
wondered what his parents and the trees in the neighborhood would think if they saw him now; beautiful, strong, and important, as he hummed along with the Christmas music: “Oh Christmas Tree, Oh Christmas Tree…”

At the end of the night though, he was very exhausted. He'd been sweating a lot from standing near the fireplace and singing so loud and the pot of water he was standing in was empty now, because his body had soaked it up so feverishly. He wasn’t worried though, not even about the few hairs he'd already lost, thinking that surely someone would fill the pot up with water soon. But a few days went by and nothing happened. Somehow, after the big celebration, he didn't see much of the family. Although the little girl played all day in the living room, she played with her new dolls and rocking horse, and didn't look at him anymore. The mother came in once in a while to vacuum off the hairs Albert now kept losing copiously. In the mornings, the father sat in his armchair, reading his paper. Sometimes, he glanced at Albert in a way that made Albert’s branches wiggle with fear, although he didn’t know what that feeling was.

A week or so later, the mother stripped Albert of his beautiful costume. Afterwards, Albert caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. Without his costume, he saw how low his branches were hanging, and how much of his hair he'd lost. And he was so thirsty. So thirsty that all he could do to distract himself was to look at the picture of himself that the little girl had drawn. That beautiful picture of his rise to fame. He lost himself in the picture for days, forgetting about his thirst, about his dizzy spells, about his baldness. But from day to day he felt a little weaker, and the trance of elation he'd felt at his new life, morphed into a heavy blanket, lulling him to sleep. One morning, the father came in with another man. While talking, they glanced at Albert—that glance that
wiggled his branches in an uncomfortable way. Yet, for a moment, Albert hoped that maybe they were talking about getting him some water. Instead, the father and the other man grabbed him out of the pot and carried him outside. Tired, and exhausted, Albert felt the cold soothe his dried-out body, and the wind caress his hair. He realized how much he had missed being outside, and wondered if they might plant him in the garden. The men dropped him to the ground. Through heavy eyelids, Albert saw the father return with an axe. He didn't know what this thing was for but it wiggled his branches in that same uncomfortable way. The father walked up to him and hefted the axe over his head, when the mother yelled, "Dinner!" from inside the house. The father slammed the metal thing into the ground and walked inside.

Albert closed his eyes, letting the cold soothe his weary bones. He didn’t know how long he’d been dozing, but he woke up from something tickling him. It was tiny flakes of snow, falling down from the night sky, like stars. When they hit his branches, they made a soft, little jingle sound. Albert was too tired to open his eyes. In half-sleep he imagined the little girl must have put his pretty costume back on, or maybe even a prettier one, and he surrendered to the tickle and jingle, and hummed, “Oh Christmas Tree,” until he fell asleep for the last time.