

At The Lake

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Darkness deepened. Cold winter breezes left before darkness fell. Light speckles of the starscape unfurled in slow motion. A crescent moon grew closer to the forested hills of the horizon. Two companions casually swam in the chilly water; neither had anything to say.

Unlike summer and other fair weather, the expanse of the lake was devoid of watercraft. Thankful for each other's company, they also enjoyed the silence, without jet skis, speed boats, or trolling fishermen. The turtle, named Myrtle, and her small fish friend, Henry, meandered along close to the surface.

The two mariners drifted near a southern shore. Stately wooden lake cabins, side by side, exhibited large display windows. They suddenly heard happy children and the sounds of firm voiced supervising adults. The mariners' curiosity caused them to swim and see the commotion. At the dock they stopped, raised their tiny heads, and listened.

A lively family gathered below a lake home. They arranged a variety of snack foods, hot drinks, blankets, and a small tree. A man lit a small movable fire pit. When the blaze started, the mariners backed up for fear of being sighted. Though, in time, the two moved closer as the humans busied themselves. Myrtle and Henry glanced at each other with stumped expressions.

The man and a woman gave instructions to the smaller humans. They opened several small boxes with a variety of glittering objects. Within one box lay two dozen white candles, several inches in height. Another box contained metallic candlestick holding pans with short cylinders to set the candles in. On the undersides were clasps to clamp the pans level onto narrow branches.

The man took hold of a six foot tall spruce tree he'd sawn from their hillside property. He grasped a hatchet. By the light of the fire pit he chopped off the bottommost limbs and twigs. At roughly eighteen inches he stopped, exposing a bare lower trunk. The man tossed the loose brush into the fire. Then he pried off a flat circular metal cap from the dock's plank surface. He positioned the trunk down into the hole until the branches stopped it, and then he stood up to hold the top of the tree. Next, he pulled the tree out and set it near the holding hole. One of the children knelt down near the trunk.

"Yep! Its wet."

"How much?"

The child showed the distance using his fingers.

"Good enough. Let's snug her in." The father and eldest child used brackets to secure the trunk through the dock and into the lake.

The mother watched until she decided it was vertical. She raised a hand. "That's good, nice and straight."

The tree had a new home and plenty of water to drink.

Immediately, one by one, the mother carefully handed the children items out of the boxes. In the flickering light work had begun. The two watery spectators glanced at each other and shook their heads in wonder. Each thought the same, "*What are these humans doing?*"

On the branches, children attached glittering orbs, sparkling figurines, and plastic candy canes. They argued over who could choose which ornaments, whose was theirs, and where to place them. The parents let them squabble while they secured the candlestick holders around the tree on the ends of sturdy branches. When done, they smiled.

The man reached out a hand. "I need candles!"

His wife handed him one candle after another. She then decided to add some herself.

The adults walked around the tree checking the ornaments. After nodding, the father announced, "And now to light our tree!" The children clapped and jumped. Even the unseen viewers swished their tails in anticipation.

A metal canister filled with long-reach fireplace matches was opened. Each child picked one and poked it into the fire pit until the head blazed. The parents gave simple instructions, explaining "Do it just like last year." One child added, "Like every year." A magical silence overtook the lighting activity. The father lit a taller, twisted candle secured at the top of the tree. When all of the candles glowed, each face reflected the wavering yellowish points engulfing a black wick. Bright-eyed, the family carefully stepped back and walked around the tree. They took photos of the wonderful, private, scene. One of the girls, with a face of glee pronounced, "Our family Christmas tradition!" The youngest child squealed, "For the special Jewish baby!"

Myrtle and Henry looked up the nearby hillside to the home. In one of the broad triangular windows they noticed a similar, but taller tree. This tree seemed to revolve and displayed lights of various colors. A fancy dressed doll of a woman with wings and flowing white hair repeatedly waved one hand to no one.

"Who wants hot chocolate?" The kids crowded around their mom. Each received a cup. She handed a mug to her husband. In silence, the eyes of the two creatures glimmered.

After the drinks, the family sang a song. Smiling, each reached out for another's hands until the little group ringed around the tree. The turtle and fish looked at each other pondering what this new activity meant.

When the song ended, silence followed. Before long, laughter and giggles filled the air. Eyes gleamed in the winterscape.

In time, the family walked up the wooden stairs and went indoors. Candles melted; the yielding wicks eventually stood above tiny, hot clear, puddles. Intrigued, the two creatures stared, and in their own way, grinned. They chose a new direction, dipped underwater and swam.

Darkness regained the dock.