

## The Last Evergreen

(Alternate version)

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In a small forest in a small Bavarian town lived many happy trees. There were mostly spruce, beech, and fir, and they all got along quite well. Usually.

Come autumn, the beech trees turned brilliant shades of crimson, orange, and gold. The townspeople would come for hikes and picnics. They would linger to admire the foliage. Some even took family photographs against the glorious panorama of fleeting color.

The evergreens envied their deciduous neighbors. Unlike beech leaves, their needles lasted all year. But their color never changed, so there was no grand show at any point in the year. Just steady, reliable greenery. They felt overlooked and forlorn throughout the fall.

However, at Christmastime, the spruce and fir trees were far and away the season's stars. The townspeople would again flock to the forest, this time to pick out prized evergreen trees to bring back to their cozy homes. It was an honor for any tree to become the centerpiece of a family's holiday.

The beech trees felt envious of their coniferous brothers and sisters—the chosen ones of the forest, symbols of the biggest celebration of the year. After all, in winter, beeches were bare, dormant, and generally ignored.

Bavaria is where the Christmas tree tradition began in the first place, and perhaps that is why the holiday is especially wonderful there. But in their wholehearted reveling in the joy of Christmas, it seems that the townspeople cut down their forest's spruce and fir trees faster than they could grow back. Over time, there were fewer and fewer.

The beeches, at first, weren't concerned. The spruces and firs had their time. Now it was the beeches' chance to become the most beloved trees—not just in autumn but all year round. Perhaps a new tree tradition could begin, they thought, as beech trees' bare branches would make ideal displays for ornaments.

For generations, the town's forest had seemed like an endless source of Christmas trees, but their numbers continued to dwindle with each holiday season. There certainly weren't enough for everyone. While some townsfolk found trees elsewhere, some continued to chop spruces and firs from the small forest, determined to continue their festive custom.

As the evergreens grew rarer, the beech trees started to notice fewer animals in residence. They remembered how the spruce and fir trees gave shelter and food to

the creatures of the forest while the beeches went leafless in winter. As a sad result, many longtime inhabitants of the forest had to find new homes.

The beech trees missed their friend the wolf, and the friendly deer. In fact, it wasn't long before there were no mammals or birds around to enjoy the nuts they produced. There were even fewer insects.

The beeches had grown with shade provided by the evergreens, causing them to develop large, full canopies to capture light, but less energy into their smaller trunks. But now, in unimpeded sunshine, they struggled to adapt, as such conditions require a larger, stronger trunk and less expansive canopy. To the beech trees, the world felt upside down.

Worst of all, fewer townspeople came for walks. The once full and diverse woods now looked sparse, boring, and even a bit sad. The beech trees realized that instead of becoming the center of attention, they were being forgotten.

As another Christmas approached, a man from town came to the forest to discover, after much wandering this way and that along various paths, he could not find a single fir. Finally, he saw that only one spruce tree remained.

As he approached the last evergreen, the beech trees looked on in horror. This had all gone too far! They missed the days when their evergreen friends kept the forest

full of life in winter and provided a green backdrop for their spectacular colors in autumn.

One by one, the beech trees around the lone spruce began dropping branches, sacrificing part of themselves to save the evergreen. Confused and afraid, the man ran from the woods. He warned his neighbors, family, and friends to stay away, and word spread that the beech trees were losing limbs. The woodland was considered depleted, and dangerous.

The small town forest was quieter than it had ever been. For years, people stayed away, admiring the beeches' fall color only in passing and lamenting the loss of the evergreens.

But in the stillness, nature found opportunities. The beeches protected that spruce, and soon the spruce grew cones, which held seeds, which grew into saplings. A small grove of spruce became established, eventually welcoming a capercaillie—quite a stately and impressive bird—who'd seen the spruce needles that they eat all winter.

It just so happens that a seed from a fir cone was stuck to that fancy feathered fellow. And when the capercaillie flapped his wings, the seed fell to the forest floor. It rested there until sprouting in the spring rains.

A few more silent years passed, and slowly, the sprouted fir began to grow cones. From them, seeds would help more firs take root. Meanwhile, young spruce filled the forest. All kinds of creatures once again called the woods home. The townsfolk returned to spend time in the forest.

Like the beech trees, the people had a new appreciation for the evergreens. No longer did they venture to the forest to chop down Christmas trees for their homes, instead buying them from tree farms. And each year they chose just one tree from the forest, to be decorated and displayed in the town square.

The last evergreen had become the first, leading the forest's recovery with help from the beeches. The trees no longer saw each other as separate but as parts of one living community.

And the beech trees, seeing the glow of the chosen evergreen that stood at the heart of the town and the holiday season, were not envious. They were proud.

