

The Bear Who Lived in the Christmas Tree

by Bálint Harcos

One day, when it was nearly Christmas, Liza and Dad went out to buy a Christmas tree. The streets were full of colourful lights and people hurrying along with big packages.

Liza turned to Dad.

“Dad, do you know what I’d like for Christmas more than anything? A pet!”

“A real one?” asked Dad.

“*Dad!*” retorted Liza, pulling a face.

“We can’t keep a pet in our flat,” said Dad, shaking his head.

“A dog, for example. Why couldn’t we have a dog?” asked Liza.

“Because we don’t have enough space.”

“But we’d have enough space for a cat?”

“We would, but a cat would shed hair everywhere.”

“What about a hamster? They don’t shed their hair.”

“No, they don’t. But they do gnaw everything.”

“And a parrot? They’ve got beaks!”

“That’s true. But they’re too noisy.”

“A tortoise? They’re very quiet.”

“Too quiet. We’d be stepping on it all the time.”

Just then, Liza and Dad arrived at the Christmas-tree seller’s stand. There were all kinds of trees there: blue spruces, Norway spruces, Swiss pines and Scots pines.

There were little trees and big trees, short trees and tall trees, fat trees and thin trees, broad trees and narrow trees, trees with lots of branches, and trees with not so many.

There was one tree that Liza liked the look of.

It was tall and thick. She pointed it out to her Dad.

“Let’s get that one over there!”

Dad looked at it.

“That’s too big. Can’t we get a slimmer one instead?”

“No! Let’s get this one! Please!” begged Liza.

“All right then,” said her father, nodding.

He paid for the tree and the Christmas-tree seller bundled it up in a net.

Dad wrapped his arms round the tree and went to heave it onto his shoulder. But he could barely lift it off the ground. It weighed a ton. Despite this, he did somehow manage to get it onto his shoulder, and then he and Liza set off for home.

Dad puffed and panted under the weight of the tree.

“This is seriously heavy!” he said.

Then he added, “What can be making it weigh so much, I wonder?”

Then, a little further on, just as Dad was hitching the tree further onto on his shoulder, something went “Aargh!”

And when Dad stepped down off the pavement, something went, “Ooh!”

And when they were climbing the stairs, something went, “Ow!”

Liza chuckled.

“Dad, what a lot of noise you’re making!”

When they got to their flat, Dad put the Christmas tree out on the balcony. There were only a couple of days left before Christmas now. Liza peeked out of the window every day to check that their tree was still there.

But somehow the tree was never standing quite where it had been the day before.

“The wind must have knocked it,” mused Liza. “Or maybe the birds were pecking at it. Or did the neighbour’s cat nudge it further over?”

She even asked Dad.

“You haven’t moved the Christmas tree at all, have you Dad?”

“No, I haven’t,” said Dad, stroking her hair. “It’s right there exactly where I put it,” he said, pointing out to the balcony.

Liza was puzzled, but she didn’t say anything more about it.

Then it was Christmas Eve! All day, Mum and Dad ran about excitedly, getting ready. Liza always loved this time. Dad brought the Christmas tree in from the balcony and took the netting off it.

He and Liza started to decorate the tree. First, they wound lots of thin strands of tinsel called ‘angelhair’ round the tree.

“Ooh, ooh, ooh! Don’t! That tickles!” said something.

Dad stuck his head out from behind the tree and smiled.

“Are you that ticklish, Dizzy Lizzy?”

“Me?” Liza smiled back. “You were the one giggling!”

“No, I wasn’t,” said Dad, and shrugged his shoulders.

Then they hung the decorations on the branches: the angels, the baubles, the rocking horses, the bells and the little sleighs.

Some of the decorations had pointy tips.

Now something winced and said, “Hey! Ooh! Yikes! Ouch! Stop that!”

Liza leaned round and looked behind the tree.

“What did you say, Dad?”

Dad looked surprised.

“I was just going to ask you the same thing. Didn’t you say something just now?”

“No...” said Liza, perplexed.

After that they used wire to fix sparklers and little wrapped chocolates and candles onto the branches.

And then something said,

“Ooh! Eek! Aiee! No! That’s sharp!”

Dad came out from behind the tree.

“Let me see,” he said, taking Liza’s hand. “Where did you prick yourself?”

“I didn’t!” said Liza, staring at him.

“Yes, you did! You just said, *that’s sharp!*”

“I did not,” said Liza, shaking her head. “*You* were complaining. You said *Ooh!*”

Liza and Dad didn’t get it. They carried on decorating the Christmas tree.

They strung all kinds of things from the branches: a few little bells, tiny houses, bows, meringues, gingerbread biscuits and last of all, they put a star on the very top of the tree.

Outside, it was getting dark. Liza ran to her room to get changed. She put on her blue velvet dress and her smart shoes. Then she waited for the bell to ring in Christmas.

“I really hope I get a real pet!” she sighed to herself.

And then Liza heard the silvery tinkling of the bell! She leapt up and dashed into the living room. There, she gasped with wonder. Mum and Dad were singing and there stood the Christmas tree with all its candles alight! There were tealights flickering on the table and sparklers shimmering on the tree. Under the tree there were lots of presents wrapped in pretty paper. There was a tiny one and a big one, a stripy one, a rectangular one, a round one, a spotty one, a red one and a purple one.

When the sparklers had burned out, and they had finished singing the carol, all three of them hugged each other and wished each other a ‘*Merry Christmas!*’ Dad blew out the candles, and Mum turned on the lights.

Suddenly the room was very bright. Liza heard a little rustle from over by the tree.

A thought flashed through her mind. “Maybe I am getting a pet, after all?” And she ran over to the presents.

She went straight for the biggest one, stripping off the paper. Inside was a dolls’ house.

“A dolls’ house! Wow!” said Liza, turning it this way and that. She was very pleased.

But then, for some reason, she thought, “Maybe the pet will be in the next one!”

She opened the present wrapped in sparkly paper. Inside was a ballet costume with a tutu!

“It’s not here either,” thought Liza. “But this is lovely too!”

In the rectangular present with the ribbon round it there was a notebook with a lock, in the stripy one there was a set of pencil crayons, and in the spotty one there was a telescope.

“Okay, it’ll be in this one then. The package with the little hearts on the wrapping paper,” thought Liza picking up her last present. She pulled off the paper and what was inside?

A storybook.

Liza looked happily at her lovely presents. But just then, deep inside the Christmas tree, something shifted and swayed, and out from among the branches stepped a bear!

“A very good evening to one and all!” it said.

Mum and Dad just stood there open-mouthed.

Liza leapt to her feet and gave the bear a big hug.

“I knew it! I knew it! I got one after all! A real pet!”

“But, Dizzy Lizzy,” stammered Dad. “We can’t keep a bear in the flat!”

“But Dad! You said,

we couldn’t have a dog, because the flat was too small,

we couldn’t have a cat, because they shed hair,

we couldn’t have a hamster, because they gnaw everything,

we couldn’t have a parrot, because it would be too noisy,

and that we couldn’t have a tortoise because we’d always be stepping on it,

but you never said we couldn’t have a bear!”

“But how on earth did it get here?” asked Mum, horrified. “We didn’t bring it into the flat, that’s for sure!”

“Oh, but you did,” said the bear, nodding his head. “This tree is my home. Would you like to see it?”

“Yes, please!” cried Liza.

And, to Mum and Dad’s astonishment, the bear took Liza by the hand, and together they plunged in between the branches and out of sight.

The bear showed Liza round his home.

“It’s a little on the small side, but it’s still bigger than that dolls’ house,” he smiled.

When he said that, Liza reached out through the branches and pulled in the dolls’ house, then the other presents too: the ballet dress, the notebook, the coloured pencils, the telescope and the storybook. She and the bear played with her presents and drew pictures until Mum rang the bell that meant that dinner was ready.

And the bear stayed there with them from that day forward till the end of time.