

# Blue Spruce

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he was to go to Maggie and Michael for Christmas, and that was that. There'd be smoked salmon, and a goose, and a chocolate pudding by Heston Blumenthal.

"The TV chef, Mum," Maggie said into the silence. "With the glasses."

"Never heard of him," Sylvia said, though she had. At the other end of the line, Maggie sighed. "We'll make it nice, Mum. As nice as we can, without Dad."

Sylvia said nothing. She could hear Frank's voice – low, resonant; more familiar to her, really, than her own – in her ear. This was still happening, all the time; she hadn't told anyone about it, even Maggie. Come on, love, Frank said. It's hard for her, too.

She drew a breath. "And the tree? Won't anybody come and help me do the tree?" "We'll have a tree here, Mum. A blue spruce. We'll wait to decorate it, if you like." Sylvia closed her eyes; she was suddenly infinitely tired. "All right, love. Yes."

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The plastic tree was in its box at the very back of the attic, under the eaves.

Sylvia stood in front of it, feet placed carefully between an old steamer trunk and a stack of ancient *Reader's Digests*. The air up here was stale, heavy with dust and the forlorn smell of forgotten things; she'd come up only once since Frank's death, to retrieve the good crockery for his wake, and it was still busy with his presence, bending over boxes, calling down to her through the hatch. "Shall we keep this, love?" Sylvia, in the kitchen, shouting back, "How can I know whether to keep it, Frank, if I don't know what it is?"

Woolworths, they'd bought it from. Their first proper tree – they'd made do, the first few years, with paper-chains strung from the ceiling, and cards crowding the mantelpiece. Sylvia was doing the lunch, too: prawn cocktail, and pigs-in-blankets, and bread sauce. She'd made her pudding back in October, to her mother's recipe.

"Sure it's not going to be too much for you, Sylvia?" Frank had asked on the bus into town.

She'd rubbed the swell of her belly – five months in and she felt huge, ungainly, beached – and said, "No, Frank. Really. I want to do it all."

Frank had carried the box home on the bus, then set the tree up in the lounge, beside the telly; together they'd hung it with lights, and baubles, and the angel Sylvia's mother had given her. As a child, she had watched her mother sewing, bringing it to life – thick yellow wool for hair and a dress fashioned from a scrap of fine gold organdie. And now, there she was, the angel, at the top of Sylvia and Frank's own tree. Sylvia had stood back and admired it, glowing

multicoloured in the darkened room, and felt, in some strange, inexpressible way, that this – even more than their wedding day, or the morning she'd discovered she was pregnant – was the moment in which she knew she'd left her childhood behind.

Alone now, in the attic, she reached down for the box. The cardboard was battered, torn: fraying plastic branches poked out at both ends. She remembered that they'd taken it out last year, and found that several of the upper boughs were refusing to snap back into shape.

"Let's get a real one this year, shall we, Sylvia?" Frank had said. "One of those lovely blue spruces."

But she had shaken her head – the plastic tree was tradition; as much a part of their celebrations as sherry on Christmas Eve, and carols on the radio, and a trifle on Boxing Day – and Frank had said no more about it. They'd eased the branches back into position, and there, in its usual place, the old tree had stayed until Twelfth Night.

It had been such a small thing Frank had asked for – turning to her, blue-eyed, seeming suddenly boyish. And she, unknowing, had refused him.

"I'm sorry, Frank," she told him silently, but she heard no reply.

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"No tree, Gran?" Harriet said when she came to pick her up.

Sylvia shrugged. "Didn't seem worth it, really, just for me."

They carried Sylvia's overnight case, and the presents she'd packed carefully into Tesco bags, out to the car.

"Right, Gran." Harriet looked over at her from the wheel. "London-bound."

Maggie and Michael's house smelled of vanilla, and cloves, and mince pies. In each of the bay windows, Maggie had placed a wicker star; the dining room mantelpiece was laden with candles, and sprigs of ivy and ilex tied with velvet ribbon.

The tree was enormous: eight feet high at least, its tip brushing the ceiling, its scent resinous and bracing, like a walk through a forest on a cool night strung with stars.

"Mum." Maggie took Sylvia's hand.

"Michael's getting you a drink. And then we'll put some carols on and decorate it. All right?"

Sylvia looked up at the great spruce, bare and bluish and issuing its wonderful perfume. She closed her eyes, and saw Frank, busying himself about their old plastic tree last year; the lights had been new, and most of the old baubles were still intact, and it hadn't looked too bad, really, not once the decorations were up.

They'd left the uppermost branch bare until Christmas Eve: reaching up with the old angel in her gold dress was Harriet's task, now. There were some things, Sylvia thought, that you didn't replace; some things that connected you, however finely, with the years that had come before, and the years that were still to come. You understood that, Frank, didn't you? she asked silently, and, after a moment, heard his answer. Yes, Sylvia. I did.

She opened her eyes, saw her daughter and granddaughter standing there beside her. Then, from her pocket, she produced the angel she'd retrieved that morning from the attic.

"Here," she said, handing it to Harriet. "Why don't you start?"



*The Versions Of Us* by Laura Barnett (£7.99, Weidenfeld & Nicolson), is out in paperback on 31 December

