

## Bumpystump's Christmas Story

by Brandon M. Dennis

**E**very Christmas, the town of Cloverhaem had the same tradition. The townsfolk would all go into the nearby woods and decorate the best trees up for Christmas. They would take big blue ribbons and red streamers and dress the trees up all nice and pretty, and then, on Christmas Eve, they would take long white candles and place them lit on all of the longest branches. The townsfolk would make a big bonfire and cook up all sorts of tasty things, and they would sing Christmas carols and make snow forts until the early hours of the morning. Then, when the children began to nod off and the fire burned out, the townsfolk would all go back to their homes and sleep the night away in their warm, cozy beds.

Every tree in the woods looked forward to Christmas more than any other time of the year. It was only then that they received so much attention from the townsfolk. The trees enjoyed being strung with streamers and bows and they would hold wagers to see which of them would be decorated that year. Some trees, because of their beauty, would be decorated every year, while others would be decorated only some years, but most trees were eventually decorated at least once during their lives.

There was one tree, however, which had never been decorated because he was so ugly. His name was Bumpystump, and he was so called because he had big wooden bumps all over his trunk. He was not straight like the other trees and he was not particularly tall either. His limbs shot out in weird angles and his roots poked out of the ground in a crumpled mess. He was squat, his branches were all gnarled and twisted and during the winter he had no leaves. Even when he did have leaves

during the spring, they were small, yellow and very unimpressive. To make matters worse, a Wood Owl had found a hole into his trunk and lived there. Though Bumpystump didn't really mind the Wood Owl, his constant hooting annoyed the townsfolk and they made sure never to even approach the poor ugly tree.

So Christmases came and went, and every year Bumpystump held out hope that this would be the year that he would be decorated, and every year he wound up disappointed.

"O, if only the townsfolk would decorate me this Christmas," said Bumpystump one day in late December. The Wood Owl, whose name was Willard, hopped out of his hole and perched on one of Bumpystump's twisted limbs.

"Bumpy my lad, you're a good old tree, but you are just too ugly. The townsfolk will never decorate such a bumpy tree as you."

"But why not?" said Bumpystump. "All my nooks and crannies are perfect for fitting candles, and my twisted limbs would look lovely with big blue bows."

"That may be," said Willard the Wood Owl, "but with so many pretty trees around, there is just no reason to decorate you."

And so Bumpystump became sad and bent over so far that he nearly touched the ground. Willard felt sorry for his friend and tried to cheer him up.

"Hey Bumpy, I've got an idea," said Willard, and at this Bumpystump straightened up to listen. "I've heard rumor that the very first Christmas tree lives in this general area. Let's see if we can find him, and maybe he can give you some encouragement."

“That’s a great idea!” said Bumpystump. “Do you know where he lives?”

“I don’t, but I do know someone who might. Let’s talk with Benny the Bawling Badger. He knows everything.”

Full of excitement and hope, Bumpystump began to move his roots. He first started swaying back and forth which made Willard very dizzy. Then he strained his roots until—*pop!*—the first root sprang from the earth, and then—*pop! pop! pop!*—three more came out. At last he was completely free, and his friends all turned and looked at him.

“Look at Bumpy!” said the other trees. “He’s going for a walk. Where are you going Bumpy?”

“I’m going to see the very first Christmas tree,” said Bumpystump, and the other trees chuckled.

“Oh that’s just a myth,” they said. “There never was a very first Christmas tree. That’s just a story that we tell little children.”

“Well I think you’re wrong,” said Bumpystump, “and I am going to find him!”

“Good luck!” said the other trees, and they all waved at Bumpystump as he marched off to find the very first Christmas tree.

But first he had to find Benny the Bawling Badger.

“He lives in a cave about half a day’s walk from here,” said Willard. “Follow me, and I will lead you to him!” With that, Willard leapt into the air and flew due east. Bumpystump followed as fast as he could, but it is hard for trees to walk, and so the going was long and tough for him. It was quite a sight to see such an ugly tree march through the forest, and the other birds began to follow him curiously.

“Look at Bumpy go!” said the other birds, and they perched on his limbs as he marched through the woods.

“Where are you going?” they asked.

“I’m going to go find the very first Christmas tree,” said Bumpystump, and the other birds all began to chirp merrily.

“That’s just a silly story,” they said. “We’ve flown all over this forest and we’ve never seen the very first Christmas tree.”

“Still,” said Bumpystump, “I think I can find him. Now could you get off of me? You are all very heavy.”

The birds chirped and squawked and leapt off of his branches and followed him for a good while longer until they all got bored and went home. By this time the forest had begun to thin, and at last the trees all vanished. Bumpystump was in a grassy plain, and some tall gray mountains loomed in the distance.

“Almost there!” said Willard who was still flying ahead. At last they came upon a hole in the ground, and around it were many round rocks. Bumpystump stopped to catch his breath, and soon he started to hear a faint whining noise coming from the hole. He listened very closely and became sure of it. It was a soft but distinct, “*Bwaaaa-haaa-haaa!*” that came out of the dark hole.

“Hey Benny!” called Willard. “Come outside! I have a guest for you.”

The whining became louder and louder until at last, Benny the Bawling Badger emerged from the hole. He covered his eyes with one hand and rubbed his nose with the other, all the while crying aloud, “*Bwaaa-haaa-haaa!*”

“Stop crying Benny,” said Willard, and Benny sniffed.

“I can’t help it!” said the badger, “for I just received some awful news.”

“Oh no, what’s that?” asked Bumpy, and he bent over to try and comfort the poor badger.

“I just learned that... that... that my new neighbor’s whiskers are longer than mine! *Bwaaa-haaa-haaa!*”

“So what?” asked Bumpystump. “You’re whiskers are still pretty long.”

“I know, I know, but now they are not the longest. What ever will I do?”

“Well, you could... think about something else, I suppose.”

“Easy for you to say,” said Benny with a sob. “You don’t even have whiskers so you don’t know what its like.”

“Benny, do you know where the very first Christmas tree is?” asked Willard rather annoyed,

“Sure I do. I know everything! But why do you want to see him?”

“My friend here has never been decorated for Christmas,” said Willard.

“Oh, is that true?” asked Benny. “That’s so... sad! *BWAAA-HAAA-HAAA!*”

“I was hoping to find the very first Christmas tree so I could ask him for advice,” said Bumpystump.

“Of course, of course,” said Benny, sniveling. “This is what you do:

*Go east, then north, then east again,  
Past the city of ancient men,  
Through the brush and across the fen,  
Then walk a step of two times ten.”*

With that, the weeping badger turned and went back into his hole.

“Did that make any sense to you?” asked Bumpystump.

“Oh sure, perfect sense,” said Willard. “I think.”

Willard leapt into the air and flew due east. Bumpystump lumbered after him as fast as he could, and they marched through the plain for a good long while until they reached a roaring river. It flowed from north to south and barred their way.

“Do we cross it?” asked Bumpystump.

“No, I think this is where we go north,” said Willard, and so the two friends turned north and followed the river. At length the river bent east again and so they followed it east until they reached the foot of some tall, gray mountains. The river grew smaller and poured out of a hole at the mountain base, but an old, forgotten road began right where the grass ended, and so the two friends shuffled along the road as it crisscrossed its way through the gray mountains.

“Look at that!” called Willard, and he flew over to Bumpystump and perched on his limbs. To the left the friends could see tall gray ruins of stone. There were arches and walls, giant aqueducts for moving water and big arenas for watching games. There were short, ugly houses and large impressive houses, but all of them were crumbling.

They passed through the ruins quickly and soon found themselves in a very soggy place. Cattails poked out of the ground and little pools were everywhere. Green slime floated on the surface of the pools and slippery creatures gurgled and croaked from every direction. It wasn't a very pretty place but the two friends had to pass through it and so they did, as quickly as they could and without touching the water.

At last they were through the fen and the ground became dryer. A few trees began to appear, and strangely all their branches pointed the same direction.

“Do we go the way they are pointing?” asked Bumpystump, and Willard landed on one of his branches.

“I don’t know. Maybe. Wait, didn’t Benny say we had to walk a few paces after the fen?”

“Yeah, it was ‘...walk a step of two times ten.’”

“Great, what does that mean?”

“Uh, I was hoping you’d know.”

“Does it mean two plus ten? So, twelve?”

“No,” said Benny. “If that were the case he would have said ‘two and ten.’”

“Um, does it mean ten divided by two? Five?”

“No, then he would have said ‘ten by two.’”

“Gah, this is too confusing,” said Willard, and he flew into the air.

“Maybe it is twenty,” said Bumpystump, “because two ten times is twenty.”

“If you say so,” said Willard.

Bumpystump walked in the direction the branches pointed, counting his steps as he walked. First one, then two, and as he walked his mind played tricks on him. Whose steps did the badger mean? Were they human steps or badger steps? What if tree steps were too long, making it more like fifteen steps for him? His mind was preoccupied by such things, and so he didn’t notice the brown stone wall until it came up before him, right at his twentieth step.

A small waterfall trickled down the side of the stone wall and went off south in a little stream. A few prickly bushes grew out of the wall and white flowers grew from the grass below it. The two friends heard what they thought was the sound of crashing waves, far away. Propped against the wall were two pieces of wood tied together in a cross shape, but there was no tree. The trail ended there and Bumpystump looked all around for a tree.

“Where is it?” he said in frustration, and he looked around in all directions. Willard flew up over the rock wall.

“Does the trail continue on?” asked Bumpystump, but when Willard returned he shook his head.

“No, there is nothing beyond the wall but a sheer cliff which ends at the sea.”

“Arg!” said Bumpystump, and he shook his limbs in frustration. “That silly badger lied to us! I guess there really is no such thing as the first Christmas tree.”

“Why do you say that?” said a quiet voice, and Bumpystump flinched, surprised.

“Who said that?”

“I did,” said the voice, and Bumpystump looked at the rocky wall. The voice sounded like it was coming from the two bits of wood.

“You?” said Willard in surprise, and he landed on the wood. He hopped up and down the horizontal plank, peeking at it curiously. “I didn’t know wood could talk.”

“Of course it can. After all, your friend there can talk.”

“But I am a tree,” said Bumpystump and the cross chuckled.

“Well where do you think wood comes from? The clouds?”

Willard laughed and Bumpystump blushed like rosewood.

“Can you tell me where to find the first Christmas tree?” asked Bumpystump.

“Sure, come closer,” said the cross, and Bumpystump came closer.

“Closer...” he said, and Bumpystump came so close that he could see the grain of the wood. It was old wood and it had

become very pale. It was splintered in areas and there were even cracks and holes in it.

“Boo!” said the cross, and he chuckled.

“What... you?” questioned Bumpystump, and he stepped back in surprise. “You are the first Christmas tree?”

“Last time I checked.”

“But how can you be a Christmas tree? I mean, you’re so...so...”

“Ugly?” said the cross, and Bumpystump nodded.

“Yes! Ugly! How can the first Christmas tree be so ugly?”

“I didn’t ask to be the first Christmas tree,” said the cross. “It was just my fate.”

“I guess I was expecting something different,” said Bumpystump, and the cross laughed.

“Aye, I can imagine. Things often do not turn out the way we expect, but we can be sure that they turn out the way they are supposed to. Tell me, why did you come all the way to see me?”

“Well,” said Bumpystump, “you see, I’ve never been decorated for Christmas before, and every year I see all my friends being covered in candles and bows and ribbons, but not me, not ever. I was wondering if you had any advice. What should I do?”

The very first Christmas tree thought for a moment.

“You should go back to your woods, put all your roots back in the ground and be patient.”

“What?” said Bumpystump. “But I’ve been doing that all my life!”

“Listen, every tree has a purpose,” said the cross. “Some trees are decorated for Christmas and others aren’t, but that doesn’t mean that they don’t have a role to play on this earth. In the end, trees have no control over whether they will be

decorated or not and no amount of wishing, hoping or whining will change their destiny. But rest assured, some day you will fulfill your purpose, and I have a hunch that you are meant to be decorated.”

“But I want to be decorated this Christmas, not sometime later,” said Bumpystump.

“Maybe you will,” said the cross, “but you can’t be decorated for Christmas if you are here talking with me, now can you?”

Willard hooted and leapt into the air, flapping his wings frantically.

“Oh no!” he said. “It’s nearly Christmas Eve! I forgot all about the time.”

“I’ve got to go!” said Bumpystump, and he and Willard turned and shuffled off as fast as they could.

“Good luck,” called the cross after them, “and remember to just be patient. If you are meant to be decorated, you will be!”

Willard and Bumpystump hustled back as fast as they could. They walked a step of two times ten, through the brush and across the fen, past the city of ancient men, west, then south, then west again. They waved at Benny as they passed his hole and heard a faint *Bwaaa-haaa-haaa!* coming from it. Soon the grassy plain became dotted with trees, and before they knew it they had returned to the forest.

As the woods grew thicker, Bumpystump got the feeling that something was wrong. No birds were chirping and no animals were scurrying. The wind was not rustling and the trees were not sighing. Soon Bumpystump saw trees scarred black in places and missing leaves and needles. As he got closer to his home, the trees became increasingly stripped of all greenery, and then there were no trees at all, just smoking stumps. He saw the town in the distance and raced for it

frantically. It stood alone amongst a forest of smoking logs, and the townsfolk were racing about, pouring water on their homes and stomping out any lingering coals. Bumpystump found his spot and popped his roots back into the soil before he was noticed.

“They’re all gone!” said Willard in astonishment, and they *were* all gone. No trees were left standing, only their smoking remains.

“Oh, what has happened while I’ve been gone?” cried Bumpystump. He was so upset that he bent over and wailed out loud. But just as he did a little girl appeared nearby. According to the rules of talking trees, humans aren’t allowed to see them talk or move, and so Bumpystump swallowed his sorrow and quickly stood erect, making sure not to say a sound. When the girl noticed Bumpystump she yelped and turned towards the town.

“There is still one left!” she called happily, and she raced back to get her family and friends. Soon a host of men and women came with the girl leading them and stood before Bumpystump aghast.

“It’s a miracle,” said one man.

“He’s completely unharmed!” said another. The townsfolk laughed and hugged each other.

“We still get a Christmas after all!” they said, and they hustled back towards the town. They came back with bows and ribbons and long, white candles, and they decorated Bumpystump up so much that you could hardly tell that there was a tree underneath all those ribbons. The sun set and they built a fire, though smaller than usual. It was Christmas Eve and the stars came out, and Willard hopped out of his hole and started to hoot. But the townsfolk didn’t mind and

actually found it comforting, and they all sang Christmas songs and cooked Christmas treats over the flames.

At length the fire dwindled and the children all got drowsy, so the parents brought them home and tucked them into bed. But one girl who was not quite sleepy stayed behind and sat staring at the fire until it completely burned out. With the moon shining brightly and the stars glimmering brilliantly, she gazed over the land and was saddened by the stumps and smoking logs. But then she faced Bumpystump and walked over and hugged him.

“You saved Christmas,” she said, and she smiled big and bright. Then she ran home to sleep in her warm bed with her brothers and sisters.

“I don’t know exactly how to feel,” said Bumpystump after the lights from the town had all gone dim. “On one hand this should be the happiest day of my life, but on the other hand it is so sad to see all the other trees gone.”

Willard popped out of his hole and hopped onto a branch.

“If not for you, these people wouldn’t have had a Christmas,” said Willard. “You may be the ugliest tree ever, but today, to these people, you were the prettiest thing around. It seems to me that the fire was nothing you could control. The trees will grow back and the earth will mend, but today will always be the day that you saved Christmas.”

With that, Willard went back into his hole and fell asleep. He was right. In time, the children in the town became adults and had their own children and the trees all grew back—trees that were tall, shapely and beautiful. But every year, after the prettiest trees had all been decorated, the townspeople would search for Bumpystump and cover him with more bows, ribbons and candles than any of the others, and spend their Christmas Eve right at his roots. He became the most loved

of all the trees in the woods, and was forever known as the tree that saved Christmas.