

"BRANCHES"

By

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FADE IN:

EXT. SNOWY HILLSIDE - DAY

White, glistening snow cascades over acres of land. All is quiet, all is bright. Snow falls decorating rows of mature Christmas trees.

Wind gusts occasionally, shifting the coatings from one tree to another. It's early, by the sun's position, and the fresh snow remains pure and unblemished.

In a moment, there's movement at the horizon. Coming over the hillside, a wave of people. Maybe thirty of them. Dressed in hats and gloves, carrying saws.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

We all grew up together. Even as we got older, nothing seemed to separate us.

The band of people clear the horizon.

Snow flies as they gallop gleefully through the drifting snow. They're a raucous, joyful bunch.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Every year, a few weeks before Christmas, we'd get ready for the holidays together.

The group disperses a little, spreading over the acreage.

Packs of smaller numbers trudge forward, wading deep into the valley.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

There's certain things you hope will never change.

(beat)

And some things you know can never stay as you'd wish.

Others peel off the main group into the rows of trees, leaving only four men, as if wearing blinders, blazing a trail through untouched snow.

One of the men, a charismatic blonde, raises his saw and veers into the corner of the valley toward the end of the rows of trees.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Chris was everybody's choice to be the first to make it big. He had it all, looks, strength, charm, that spark that told you he was special.

A second man, a wily redhead, scoops up a handful of snow, dumps it over the head of the remaining two men and scampers into the trees.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I think everybody knows a Wade. The one in every crowd that's a little off center. Looks a little different, always crackin' jokes. Never as loose as they try to appear.

Wade brandishes his saw like an executioner, then proceeds to gesture to the tree like he's calling it out to a fight.

When the tree isn't provoked, Wade tears off his hat and really taunts the tree, flailing his arms, trying to let the tree take the first shot.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Just like every group has a Chris or a Wade, not many groups have a James.

The more distinguished of the remaining two guys pats his friend on the back and nods off to one side of trees. He draws a circle in the snow with his saw around a tree.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

He just had... presence. Wisdom beyond his years, like he ran life end first and was just getting to the fun days of youth.

The last guy walking forward is near the end of the valley. The tree rows give way to dense snow over a steep hillside.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Me? I don't fit a stereotype. I guess I waited for the path to choose me rather than take one I had serious doubts about.

(MORE)

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I mean, a lot of what we turn out
to be comes from where we land.

Snow swirls around the four, now separated guys, each lying on the snow, sawing down their respective trees. The sun dips behind the hillside and the valley darkens.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

And what we don't anticipate.

The charismatic blonde gets to his knees as his tree falls on it's side.

He makes a show of it, pumping his arms in the air. He drags it to the center of tree rows and unclips his cell phone.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Chris was the first to go. We all
knew he was bound for glory, but
that's the way fame goes.
Sometimes you flame out early.

The wily redhead saws until his arms drop. His tree still standing. He lays on the snow, exhausted.

Taking a breather, he can't resist, he fans out his arms and legs and molds a snow angel.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Wade fought maturity to the death.
He got into stand up comedy.
That's when he learned you can't
give a whole show of punch lines.
All the pay off comes from the long
silence of the set up.

Snow angel complete, Wade carefully rises, circles to the other side of the tree and resumes sawing until his tree falls.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The hard surprise came after Wade.

The distinguished looking man drags his freshly cut tree into the snow path. He's breathing hard. Hand to his chest.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

James had a lot in front him. His
body just didn't see it that way.
It's a cliché, but there's
something painfully sad about a man
cut down in his prime.

The last guy. The one to venture deepest into the valley. Average build. Nondescript. Emerges from the back row with his tree.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Me? I didn't want to lose touch with any of them. Like colors, moods and flavors. It's good to have a variety, but I knew eventually we'd get pulled apart.

The four guys begin the laboring job of pulling their trees to the path where a wagon approaches to bring them and their trees back to the entrance.

They move at different speeds. Use different methods. Each arrives at the path from a different angle.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

We did what we could. Chris was gracious. James was polite. Wade, well, he was Wade. But I can still remember, the last day I saw them all.

The wagon arrives. The guys load their trees onto the front of the wagon. Dusk slowly surrenders to darkness.

The guys jump on the back of the wagon with some other bundled people.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I didn't know at the start of that day that I'd never see them again. Guess we never know.

The wagon nears the horizon. Snow intensifies.

Darkness falls. An obliterating white gives way to dark silhouettes of trees under moonlight.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I lived to see two more winters after that. Picked up a few acquaintances over that time, but hardly the friendships that formed over those early years.

Staying in the field, a lone, weathered Douglas Fir takes on snow, bending under the elements, looking old and fragile.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I went to a family that gave me a lot of love. Took my picture with their new baby. Even wrapped me completely before I was taken away. We don't get to choose our destiny but, all in all, I had a good life, and I wish for you the same. Call your friends and spend time with them. You never know when you'll get called apart.

Pulling away from the Douglas Fir now. Darkness overtakes the lot. It stands in front, set apart from the others by the stumps around it of trees that have gone before it. It looks it's part, strong and assured. Aging and full of wisdom.

FADE OUT.