

'Tree'

A short film by
Sam Sword

© Sam Sword 2013.

First Draft. Feb 2013.
samrsword@gmail.com

EXT. STREET. MORNING.

Bare trees guard hard, cold streets. Christmas lights drip from gables and gutters and bright, shiny decorations peek out timidly through front windows.

We end at number 95. A plain, grey house. A BOY of fifteen knocks on the door. Propped up beside him is a huge Norwegian Fir tree. He stands back and waits. Nothing.

EXT. FRONT DOOR. MORNING.

The boy peers through a window and surveys the living room inside. The furniture is in disarray; boxes occupy most of the floor - packed full of books, picture frames, DVDs and other such souvenirs of life. The shelves remain half empty.

INT. LIVING ROOM. MORNING.

NEIL, 37, is slumped in front of the TV lazily enjoying a cup of tea. The two make eye contact. The boy indicates the door while Neil does his best to retract the greeting. The boy knocks again, harder, determined.

INT/EXT. HALLWAY/FRONT DOOR. MORNING.

The door opens slowly. Neil is eating a slice of toast a foot from the door. Baggy, drab sleeping clothes hang from his slight frame. Spotting him in the gloom of the hall, the boy fixes a festive grin.

Boy

You just moved in?

Neil

What?

Boy

Christmas tree?

Neil

Look's like it / doesn't it.

Boy

I ain't pushing leaflets. Do you want a tree? I'm selling trees. Big ones for only fifty pound.

Neil

How much for a little one?

Boy

Little ones? Twen-thirty pound.

Neil

No.

Boy

But you ain't got one.

Neil

I don't have a wife. That doesn't mean I want one.

Boy

Thirty-five pounds.

Neil

For a wife?

Boy

Yeh, and a free tree.

Neil

... genuinely tempting, but no. Thanks.

Boy

Go on. You've to get one at some point. Everyone has a Christmas tree. Got nothing to dangle your baubles on otherwise. Especially if you don't have a wife. If you know what I mean.

Neil

I do. I'm not sure you should.

I'm not going to buy one mate. Thanks though.

The boy turns and walks back to the road, dejected.

Boy

Happy Christmas!

Neil

Yeh.

The door swings close.

The sarcasm is mutual.

INT. LIVING ROOM. MORNING.

Neil settles back into his sofa and resumes watching his program. He glances at a space beside the empty sofa in front of him. It is the perfect spot for a well sized Christmas tree. He finishes his tea.

Gone cold, he spits it back into the cup. The space opposite grows in his mind. He rearranges himself on the sofa searching out the warm comfy spot he had occupied before. With a grunt he dashes back to the door.

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - MOMENTS LATER.

Neil looks down the street for the boy. There is a faint trail of pine needles across the street, a front door bangs close and the boy emerges from behind the hedge of another house.

Neil

Hey - I'll have one then. A bloody big one.

Boy

Too late. (beat) Just sold it.

Neil

Well I'll take another one!

Boy

There ain't another one.

Neil

There isn't another one?

Boy

Nope!

Neil

You only had one tree?

Boy

Found it. Church yard. Looks better
in there though. See ya!

The boy turns and shoots off up the street. Neil stands alone watching him leave.

INT. LIVING ROOM. MORNING.

He settles back into his favourite spot and bites back into his toast.

It too has grown impatient and he spits the cold, congealed mouthful into the discarded mug of tea.

Neil stares accusingly at the empty space in front of him. Advancing upon the sofa, he shoves it across the carpet to better fill the void.

Pleased with his handy work he takes in the scene through his front windows. A prince on his ramparts. But from the front rooms of every other house in the cul-de-sac Christmas trees smirk back at him.

Neil

FINE! Fine.

Defeated, Neil walks out of the room and upstairs to dress.

CUT TO:

EXT. A STREET MARKET - LATER THAT MORNING.

We join Neil as he walks down the street, wearily weaving his way through the crowd. He stops to look at odd things here and there - a large wok, a set of screwdrivers, a hatchet. At one stall a YOUNG BOY is stretching for a boxed car beyond his reach. Absentmindedly, Neil passes it to him. The boy scurries off and, with a second take, Neil glimpses him disappearing into the crowd. The LADY behind the stall turns to Neil expectantly - a hand outstretched for payment.

Neil

No. He's not...

Lady

£7.80!

Neil pays the lady and moves off before collecting his change.

The market is territorial, like walking through dog kennels, each stall holder erupting with life as Neil passes by.

Stall by stall he grows visibly weaker until he gives in to the trudge of the crowd. Deadwood, resolved to the swell of the tide.

EXT. CHRISTMAS TREE STALL. NOON.

He finally washes up at the other end relieved to find a stall selling Christmas trees. The stock appears somewhat depleted and is guarded by the most eager looking STALL HOLDER of all. A spent customer struggles to carry off his new purchase as the stall holder struggles to get rid of him.

Neil surveys the trees on offer. They look dishevelled and have clearly suffered from their journey to the stall. He feels along their broken, twisted limbs. The feet of their trunks bear the vicious scars of their seasonal uprooting. Their needles lie strewn on the floor and are crushed underfoot by the Stall Holder as he bears down on Neil.

The man wears a large bumbag out of which poke various notes. His large garden gloves make him appear like a boxer. A similarity confirmed by the teeth which protrude from his gums like misaligned gravestones.

Stall Holder

Now then! Lookin for a tree? Nice ones these are, fresh from the woods.

Neil

...

Stall Holder

Sold out of the Norway Spruce we have.
Got a few of the Scots Pines left and
one or two Nordman Firs.

Neil

Right. Right. Very nice.

(beat)

Stall Holder

What size you after?

Neil

(beat)

Is there any... have you got anything er...
English?

Stall Holder

...

Neil

No! No, stupid. I don't know why I. Um.

Stall Holder

Everything's on offer. Thirty quid for
all trees.

Neil

Thirty quid.

Stall Holder

Thirty Quid. And if you buy two you can have the third tree free.

Neil

Three Christmas trees.

Stall Holder

A lot of folk these days need more than one tree. More than one family you see! I've got one and a half myself (a wink). How many you in the market for?

Neil

I'm really just. Ignore me.

The Stall Holder is attracted by some other customers - a young couple intimately engaged with one another.

Stall Holder

(to the couple)

Lovely spruce that. Forty quid for the large ones. If you take it I'll chuck in a Happy Christmas as well. How about that?

Neil studies them for a moment, then takes the opportunity to escape, trying to slip around the back of the stall. But he trips up and knocks a tree as he steadies himself. It clatters to the floor and the Stall Holder spins around.

Stall Holder

Top choice. Good Lad. That's from my own garden that one.

(To the other couple)

Forty quid Madam, and I'll have my son deliver it for you.

(Back to Neil)

Thirty quid then mate.

Neil

No sorry. I just tripped over it. I don't want it thank you. I don't want one. I don't actually need one.

Stall Holder

Look, it's a little late in the week; all the good-uns have gone I know. I'm getting some fresh stock in tomorrow. If you give me the thirty quid now, I'll have my boy deliver you one first thing tomorrow morning.

The couple proffer payment for their tree. As the Stall Holder hurries their notes into his belt and splutters his gratitude Neil's surroundings begin to blur.

The wild murmur of the market and the busy bustle of bobbing heads on shoulders shimmer all around him.

Neil exhales hard.

All the heads blow out like extinguished candles and the scene falls still for a moment.

Neil alone at its centre.

A GROUP OF KIDS walk into shot behind him and puncture the silence.

Group of Kids

Man, I hate the northern line. It's always fuckin' delayed. Of all the train lines in London, they have to make the shit one, the black line.

Oh my days, people waste so much money on them trees man. I'd just go to the park and nick one.

As the kids pass off screen the scene returns to life. Neil stares after the kids. Divine inspiration. He has a plan.

EXT. A WOOD. THAT AFTERNOON.

The sound of Neil's footfall is lost within the hollow wail of the wood. He is carrying a newly purchased hatchet and mud spatters up his jeans.

The trees look magnificent; stretching downwards like roots from the sky held aloft over Neil's head. The white winter sun dances across his face as he stares upwards through the canopy. Unguided, his feet slip in the ruts off the path and he falls to his knees, mud splashing up his arms. The hatchet bites into the soft grass, burying its heavy head into the earth.

Ahead spreads a field of Christmas trees. They beckon and ripple in the breeze.

The sight of them revives Neil and the swirling wind whips him to his feet.

He moves through their ranks, inspecting them as he goes.

Neil

(To himself)

Some folk these days need more than one
tree!

Selecting a modest tree, Neil draws out his hatchet and swings at the trunk. A dull thud reverberates up his arms. A bird bursts from the tree. He staggers backwards in surprise.

In the deeper recess of the tree is a nest. He looks at the trunk. He has made only a weak scratch. Carefully, he lets the branches relax back into place around the nest. He leaves the tree and moves on.

At the edge of the copse Neil emerges, walking out into an open, empty field. His gaze is fixed on a lone tree stood far out in the field beyond.

EXT. FIELD. AFTERNOON.

It is a thick, stout tree. His arms at various angles, Neil measures it to assess its suitability. Without doubt it would take pride of place in his front room.

He searches out its trunk and brings the hatchet down upon it. Rattling in his hand it makes barely a mark on the lithe, green spine of the tree. Taking better aim he delivers two more blows. Hard, rhythmic. He adjusts his position and chops again. THWACK. THWACK. The sun moves behind a cloud and the trees dip under the quickening wind. THUD. THUD. Neil's face tightens, his lips purse and his eyes water. With two more blows he begins to weep. The hatchet tears away at the trunk and the tree begins to splinter. Neil thrashes at the spine, his attack growing wilder as it nears the end. The tree turns slowly and Neil swings to make the final blow. But the tree withers and falls towards him as if pleading for its life. He hops back and stumbles to the ground.

On his back, his hair aflutter across his face, the tree staggering above him, Neil collects himself.

With a heavy sigh he picks himself up and delivers the final blow - the strong trunk now a severed stump.

INT. A TRAIN CARRIAGE. LATE AFTERNOON.

Neil is sat at a table accompanied by his hatchet beside him and the tree before him. A GIRL - early thirties - squeezes into the remaining seat and stacks her bags of presents on the table between them. They exchange a weary smile over the colourful ramparts.

Girl

What a time of year!

Neil

Huh. We could have Christmas right here,
what with my... and all your...

Girl

You might not like what I've got you.

Neil

No. No one ever does!

They chuckle, then retreat. Her to her bag, him to the window.

Girl

You seem to have gone to great lengths.

She notices a gold band on his finger disappear beneath his right hand.

Neil

Well, it's funny...

They are both engulfed by a tunnel. He waits in the darkness as the train screeches and rattles about them.

They re-emerge into the light. Neil ready to finish what he was saying. But she's begun checking her phone.

INT. NEIL'S FRONT ROOM. THE END OF THE DAY.

Neil is back in his place on the sofa. The tree stands resplendent in the opposing corner; unadorned but grand and proud.

Neil is enjoying a ready meal and does not hear the keys in the door or the soft steps in the hall. He is engrossed instead in one man's vain attempt to conquer a slippery obstacle course on TV.

As the man flounders and falls with a splash, LOU comes into the room. She has two large folders squeezed under one arm and a book clutched in the other. They meet one another with startled surprise. A thousand arguments zip between them.

Lou

I thought you were away.

Neil

Ed cancelled.

Lou

Oh. Hi.

Neil

Something to do with his sister. Hi.

Lou

I just came to...

I like the tree.

Neil

Hmm? Did you find what you wanted?

Lou

They're going to pick up the rest on Tuesday. These are yours.

Neil

Tuesday. Right. That's soon.

Lou

It looks good there...

Neil

Yeh. You were right... it is better than in the hall.

Lou

The needles'll drop.

Neil

It'll be worth it... s'only once a year.

Lou

I'd better go.

Neil

I'll help you.

Lou

It's ok. I can manage.

I'll see you...

Bye.

Neil

Right.

Lou leaves and Neil is left standing alone in their front room. Through the window he watches her walk across the street to her car. Opening the passenger door, she fumbles with her things and they fall onto the seat. She hastily circles the back of the car, clambers in behind the wheel and closes the door.

We stalk slowly backwards, retreating out of the room. Neil alone at the window. The tree in its place. A ridiculous, embarrassing folly.

B.O.

End credits.