

the Christmas tree

Chapter One by Kay Hively

Mary Jo shook all the water out of the old tomato can. She would need every drop to save the Christmas tree.

As she watched the water disappear into the ground, Mary Jo buttoned her sweater. A stiff north wind shook the dark green branches of the little tree. Winter was on its way.

In only a moment, the water that had stood around the tree was gone. The small puddle of mud was now blowing dust.

As Mary Jo walked back to the house with her empty tomato can, a truck filled with furniture drove into the yard. The Carters were moving away – going to California.

Mary Jo could see Emma, her best friend, in the back of the truck. When the vehicle stopped, Emma jumped down and ran to Mary Jo. The two girls hugged.

Mary Jo squeezed extra tight and tried not to cry.

All of Mary Jo's family came outside to say good-bye. Mr. Carter said he hated to leave Mississippi, but the farm he was sharecropping was blowing away and he couldn't make a living any more. Emma's mother told how the well had run dry and they didn't even have water to drink. That was when the family decided it was time to leave, she sobbed.

After the good-byes were said, the Carter family drove away. Mary Jo used the tail of her shirt to wipe away the tears that tumbled down her face.

If the rains had come to the Carter farm, Emma might not be going away.

Mary Jo could not understand why it rained on their farm but not on the Carter farm. Just one good rain had made the difference. Her family would have a crop, but the Carters had no cotton to pick.

Mary Jo looked out at the fields behind the house. They were white, with little speckles of brown, showing where some cotton bolls had not yet opened. Her daddy had said they were lucky to have a crop. Even a small crop would keep them going for another year.

Tomorrow would be Monday. Everyone would get up early and start picking cotton.

Mary Jo was only 10 years old, but she would work. She even had her own cotton sack, just like her brothers, Mac and Morey.

Mac and Morey didn't like to pick cotton, but they liked being out of school for two weeks and making money. Mary Jo liked watching the fields turn white. But, best of all, she knew it would be close to Christmas when all the cotton was picked.

Thinking about Christmas, Mary Jo looked across the back yard at her little tree. Mr. Brady, the government man, said if she took care of it, she would have a tree to decorate this year. But with the drought, Mary Jo worried that her Christmas tree would dry up, like the cotton on the Carter farm.



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Classroom Extensions

Things to Think About and Do –

- Why was the Carter family moving to California? How many states will they drive through to get to California? On a map, locate the capitals of all the states the Carters will drive through.
- Have you ever seen a cotton field? What happens to cotton when it is taken out of the fields? Look at the tags on your clothes and see if any of them are made with cotton.

Next Week: Chapter Two – Winter Comes