

PIA Z. EHRHARDT

PEAR TREE

SHEILA'S MOTHER HAD LEFT HER FATHER for another man and boarded a ship to Italy. She'd been gone for two weeks. Sheila's father owned an accounting business and he'd called the office to say there'd been a family emergency.

He wore the same pair of jeans and his Tulane sweatshirt, thick cotton socks, and sat in his chair in the living room and read Graham Greene novels. He wanted quiet, no TV or radio, so the house sounded punished. A canteen filled with bourbon hung from the arm of his chair. He didn't eat for the first few days, and then Sheila made him eggs and bacon for dinner, or pancakes, or Rice-A-Roni with LeSeur peas. The pantry was getting low, so she ordered pizzas or po-boys from the restaurant around the corner, took money out of the drawer where her mother kept fives and tens for a rainy day. Her father's car stayed in the garage.

Sheila and her best friend, Bobbie, sat in the branches of a gnarled pear tree. It was a cool, clear Saturday in October and people were outside walking their dogs or working in their yards. Mr. Monahan, the next-door neighbor, raked newly fallen leaves into mounds. He was in his thirties and taught French at their middle school.

"He's industrious," Bobbie said. They were playing a game where you had to use intelligent words in every sentence.

"Dashing, too," Sheila said. First one to get stumped had to stand on her head for two minutes. They were in the sixth grade and on the gymnastics team.

“What a glorious Saturday,” Bobbie said, leaning back on her branch like it was a balance beam. She was sure Sheila’s mother was coming back. When Bobbie was over, Sheila’s chest didn’t feel as hollow, her skin didn’t hurt. Their friendship kept them busy. There were patches of time when she forgot about her mother, because when her mother had been there she didn’t think about her all day, so why should she now? She tricked her mind like that. Up in the tree, she and Bobbie were on another planet; they could watch the block and know things first. From the tree, they might see Sheila’s mom come home in a United Cab, her mind changed, the handsome man left at the dock with wilted daisies in his hand.

Mrs. Monahan ran down the front steps to help her husband. She wore a mustard and gray plaid flannel shirt that hit at her knees, and bright red gloves. She shook a brown Hefty bag open until it ballooned with air and held it for her husband. He gathered the leaves with the rake and stuffed them in the bag.

“They look deliriously happy,” Sheila said.

Mr. Monahan threw Mrs. Monahan into a giant pile of leaves, dove in after her, and the middle part of their bodies disappeared.

“Fornication,” Bobbie said.

They passed a bag of malted milk balls back and forth. Sheila pulled out two, said, “I will not masticate.” She popped them in her mouth and waited for the chocolate to melt so the malted milk would fizz and liquefy.

Deep sobbing sounds came from the den of Sheila’s house. Her father was crying again and the window was open. Smoke drifted through the screen.

Bobbie looked over at the window, concerned. “That’s not sadness, that’s sorrow,” she said.

“I know,” Sheila said, and Bobbie didn’t point out that she’d lost the game.

“I didn’t know your dad smoked,” she said.

“He just started.”

“I’ve never heard a man cry that hard,” Bobbie said.

Sheila hadn't either. He'd read her mother's letter in the kitchen and ripped it apart. Sheila was doing her homework in the dining room and heard heaving, thought he was throwing up but when she went to check there was no vomit. Had Grandmother died? She'd put her arm around him and asked what was wrong, and he'd laid his head on her chest and cried in her arms. "She left us," he kept saying, over and over.

"Who?" Sheila said.

"Your mother."

What did he mean by us? His tears frightened her; her father was acting like a baby and there was no parent around to help.

Sheila did to him what her mother would have done to her. She cooed: "Mom will be back, don't cry," but she wondered what he'd done to make her leave. She didn't yet know about the man.

Sheila kept the house quiet for her father. She knew the floorboards in the hall that creaked, and navigated around them. She brought him fresh coffee and cookies when she got home from school, and drew the blinds when night came so the neighbors wouldn't see him in the same clothes in the same chair, smoking cigarettes and drinking from his canteen.

Mr. and Mrs. Monahan were unburying themselves from the leaf pile. He picked leaves from her hair and they kissed for a long time in a patch of sun like they'd forgotten the world.

She wondered if her mother right then was kissing the man on the top deck, her long brown hair whipped by wind, her family out of her mind because his kisses were softer than her father's.

Sheila didn't cry around him. After dinner when the distractions were gone and the tears came, she went to the garage, sat in the car and pounded the steering wheel with her hands like it was her father's chest. Her mother was gone and Sheila wished there'd been a chance to talk to her without Dad, about Dad if that's what she wanted, and clear up what was wrong. She called him names—*stupid, boring, selfish*. Intelligent words wouldn't come to her.

She went back in the house, ashamed and unsure, and looked in on her father in the den, reminded him like a mother to go up to bed.