

Pears · *Jill Birdsall*

GRANTREE WAS STRAPPED in a chair at the center of the yard; gripping its arms, she looked ready to lift off. The chair straddled the stump where the mimosa used to be. She wore heavy black shoes, nun shoes, like the ones that pumped the organ pedals in church. Her feet were light, though, her toes like helium inside the leather—they lifted, both feet at the same time. When she noticed she frowned, pressing her knees with hands. A ring of bees teased around her fluid-filled ankles. The family was in a line moving toward her. They took turns.

Ruth didn't know much about this grandmother. GranTree belonged to Budd's side. Ruth only knew what Ceil told her.

GranTree was GranTree because her last name was Tree. Other people called her Mrs. Tree. Ceil made up GranTree. Ceil was big on names. She believed that what you called a person determined how you would treat them. She made Lauren, Maxine and Ruth call her Ceil instead of Mom. And Budd was Budd instead of Dad. Budd didn't like this—he wanted his daughters to know that he was their father, not just any man—but Ceil insisted.

GranTree used to throw big parties, bigger than she should have. She bought too much food, a "spread" Ceil called it, with cold cuts like turkey and ham and cheese and potato and beet salads, food they didn't have except at other people's houses.

GranTree had a weight problem. She made pizza on the afternoons when Lauren and Maxine visited. At home they only ate pizza for dinner. They jumped rope with their grandfather on the sidewalk. There were songs like "Lemon and lime be on time," and Papa singing, "Keep those big feet off the line." GranTree stayed inside to make the pizza.

Ruth wasn't there. She wasn't born yet.

When Ruth looked at GranTree in the chair, or when she closed her eyes and tried to see who her grandmother might really be, there were all these loose pieces, like parties and pizza—other people's pieces.

The line moved forward a few paces. Aunt Lou stepped beside the chair. Her eyes teary, she took her turn.

GranTree was chewing on an invisible something, like a fistful of raw clams. Her jaw muscles below the ears wrinkled and rippled with effort.

“It’s me—Lou!” Aunt Lou was saying, but GranTree just kept on chewing.

Ruth had to remind herself that GranTree was Aunt Lou’s mother. Aunt Lou was crying.

When Ruth asked Ceil how old GranTree was, Ceil said no one knew. GranTree’s birth certificate wasn’t hers; it was her cousin’s. This way she could work when she was eleven. Another time Ceil said it had to do with an inheritance. The birth certificates were switched and it wasn’t a cousin’s but someone else’s. Ruth understood what Ceil was telling her, that GranTree wasn’t above doing something illegal.

Ruth stepped out of line and took another peek at GranTree. She wondered what it would be like to be up close. They might even touch.

Someone opened an umbrella in GranTree’s house once. It may have been Budd. Something bad happened. When she first heard the story, Ruth thought the umbrella hurt someone—its spokes maybe. Later she understood it brought bad luck, and GranTree had allowed it. They weren’t permitted to open umbrellas in their house.

Ruth stared straight ahead, at the crack between GranTree’s breasts. She looked at the cracks between her own fingers, the ones between her sister’s sandal toes. Aunt Lou finished and Aunt Rita took her turn. Everyone moved up two spots. Ruth was third now. It was Lauren, Maxine, Ruth then Ceil.

GranTree smelled like the bathroom.

Ruth could feel Ceil touching the back of her dress. She straightened her hem, then re-tied her hair ribbon. She rested two fingers on Ruth’s neck—her fingers were cold—and then she began tapping for Ruth’s attention.

“Just say hello to her,” she whispered into Ruth’s hair. “It will be over fast.”

Ceil was wearing a black and white checked suit. She liked black and white. Her hair was cut short, her bangs straight across her forehead. You couldn’t see her eyebrows, which made it seem like Ceil was never surprised or worried; her eyes always appeared still and even.

Ceil’s eyes were looking above Ruth’s head. Budd was at the back of the line. He was staring past them, at his mother, GranTree, and Ceil stepped out of line, trying to get him to look at her, his wife. They stood this way for a long time.

Lauren and Maxine had their turns. Maxine looked at Lauren and Lauren looked back at Ceil to make sure they were doing the right thing. They didn't really do anything but stand in front of GranTree with their hands folded like at Communion. Ruth watched their shadows on the lawn. Meantime, Aunt Lou and Aunt Rita did all the talking. Their voices were low and buzzing like the bees around GranTree's ankles.

Ruth thought how much like Confession this was, waiting in line. The same pink dress. One of the nuns yelled at Ruth once for listening to someone else's confession. But she was behind the third pew, the one they couldn't go past. She was memorizing the "Father, forgive me" part, going over the stories she'd made up, anxious to be finished, to have told the priest all she'd practiced. She wanted him to know that she was really good, that she'd learned from her made-up sins. She wanted it to be over, but she didn't want it to go too fast.

Ceil said this was like standing in line at a wake.

Ruth sat on GranTree's lap. The aunts put her there. Aunt Rita's yellow sleeve passed in front of Ruth's face. Ruth smelled perfume gone sour, like the kind Lauren and Maxine made with marigolds and water from the hose in summer. She couldn't tell if it was Aunt Rita's or GranTree's.

It wasn't private like in the booth with the priest. There was no screen sliding open to say begin, no sign of the cross to mark the end. They were out in the middle of the yard, the aunts curled around the back of the chair. Ceil's hand reached through them, touching Ruth's ribbon. The aunts were talking fast; their voices were high. Ruth thought they were talking to her, but they were telling GranTree who Ruth was.

"Budd and Ceil's girl, the youngest, you remember," they said.

Ruth knew she remembered.

Ceil's charm bracelet was caught in the weave of the chair. While she worked her way out, Ruth moved out of her reach.

GranTree was smiling and there was a sound bubbling around in the bottom of her throat. She was about to tell Ruth something. Ruth leaned toward her mouth. GranTree's lips were moving but the sound wasn't connecting. She smelled strong. She was trying to tell Ruth—The aunts leaned in, too. They were all trying to hear.

"I remember," GranTree said.

Of course, Ruth was thinking.

GranTree smiled and Ruth saw that it wasn't lipstick but the real color of her lips, that pink. Her eyes opened wide for a moment, then they blinked, just like two hands clapping. She knew the answer. Ruth waited for her to tell them.

"She's the one who brought me the pears."

Ruth's heart was pounding, all the way up to her ears. She was trying to remember when she might have brought GranTree pears. Pears? Ruth pictured their cool green skin, their shape: tiny-headed then wide and round at the bottom like GranTree in the chair.

Ruth could almost see herself with a lap full of pears in the back of Budd's car. The window would be open a crack and Ruth's dress would be blowing up at the edges. The pears would hold it down. Yes, Ruth should have brought her pears. She could have.

GranTree's feet were lifting again, only now Ruth was on her lap so she didn't have to press her knees. They were together, both of them thinking about presents and pears.

Ruth wished she knew exactly when GranTree was born. Ceil said this could be her birthday, give or take a week or two; the aunts liked to think it was, anyway. Other people evidently thought so, too. There were presents on the couch in the house, and a "Happy Birthday" sign hung from the back of GranTree's chair.

Ruth smiled at her, thinking this was the day all right. But then, just as she was about to touch GranTree's thin hair, Ceil lifted her down.

The aunts were talking between themselves. Aunt Rita held onto Aunt Lou. She passed a handkerchief to her. Ruth stood at the foot of GranTree's chair until there was no more line. The sun sank behind the neighbor's hedge, and coals smoked in a double hibachi by the cellar door.

Ruth ran across the yard to find Ceil. She had to tell her.

Budd had left the line and he was standing with Ceil. They were in the corner by the croquet set. Budd was sorting through the metal hoops, hooking them like handcuffs over his wrists. It was as if he were under a spell. He looked over at the chair where his mother sat. Rita and Lou were dabbing a handkerchief at the corners of GranTree's mouth. Ceil stood on her toes. She touched her lips to Budd's lips until he snapped out of it.

Ceil and Budd wouldn't listen to Ruth, but she pushed her way between them. It was important. She told Ceil that GranTree remembered her from when she brought her the pears. Ceil didn't want to hear about it.

“Not now,” she said.

But there was more. Ruth had to ask her, to be sure. So she asked.

“You never brought her pears,” Ceil said, and she scooted Ruth away.

Going home they were stretched out in the very back of the car, supposed to be asleep—Lauren, Maxine and Ruth. Their heads rested on the wheel humps. Their necks were stiff. It was dark and they traveled over bridges that seemed higher and longer at night. The largest had green lights reaching to a point.

Ruth remembered a roller coaster and worried they would have to drive to the top of the lights. Lauren and Maxine were playing car-checkers in the dark and they told Ruth to be quiet and put her head down. Ruth heard the soft clacking of their kings, and she kept worrying. Then Budd took them over the bridge and it was flat, not nearly as high as it looked.

They were on a highway and it was stop-and-go. There was an accident ahead. They sat up. Ceil called back to the girls, saying they should keep their heads down, eyes closed.

“Nobody look,” she said.

“It’s a bad one,” Budd was telling her.

He looked out his window, then his foot hit the gas. The checkers spilled off the board. Lauren and Maxine tried to catch them but they fell behind the wheel humps. It sounded like there were hundreds of checkers and they would never stop falling.

All the time that the checkers were falling, Ruth was looking at the accident. She was sorry after. She’d looked first out the side window, then when they were past it she’d turned and looked out the back.

“They were teenagers,” Budd said.

Ruth didn’t know what her father sounded like when he was a boy, but this is what he might have sounded like, she thought.

There was silence in the car.

Lauren and Maxine were staring at the wheel humps, trying to figure out how to get to their checkers. Ruth was still seeing glass and blood and red and white lights. Now she really had something to confess. She felt sick, not because of what she had seen, but because she looked when Ceil said not to.

Ruth was thinking about GranTree. She was thinking about pears—green and bruised and womanish. She wanted to know why Ceil didn’t

like GranTree. And if Budd really was at the center, for this is what Ruth suspected, then why did he seem so oblivious?

It was the pears and Ceil wanting her to know there were none.

Suddenly Ruth felt an urge to be in Budd's place, steering. She wanted more than anything to turn the car around, to do what he wouldn't do, to go back. To bring them. She wanted to go back and give them to GranTree. She'd give her two, she was thinking. A pair of pears.

And this was what Ruth said to the back of Ceil's head, after the bridge and after the accident, while they rode the final miles away from GranTree, toward their home.

She said, "About those pears. I must have only given her one. That's why we don't remember."

Ceil was irritated now. She was tired.

"Ruth, you never gave her anything," she said.

Lauren and Maxine had reached behind the wheels and retrieved their checkers. They were holding the checkers in their hands, at a loss as to whether they should finish their old game, or start a new one. Ruth moved away from them, to hear her parents better.

Budd's voice was flat and far. It could have come from behind a screen.

"All she ever got was bad luck," he said.

He meant the two strokes.

Ceil reached her hand to the back of his neck when he said this, where his hair met his collar, and she touched two fingers against his skin. She left them there.

It began to rain and Budd flicked the windshield wipers on. Ceil was staring straight ahead. Her fingers moved left, right. Ruth noticed she was keeping time with the wipers, on the back of his neck she did this.

Then Ceil said, as much for Budd as for all of them, "She didn't know what she was talking about."

Lauren and Maxine looked up for a moment, as if registering what Ceil had said.

"It's raining," Maxine said.

Then they went back to their game.

Budd turned the radio on and there was static. He didn't bother to tune in a station. He was wiping under his nose with his sleeve. The car felt like one huge umbrella, open to bad luck and rain. Everyone was quiet for three exits. Ceil took her hand back, resting it in her lap. Then there was a

toll. Budd reached into the ashtray for change. He rolled down his window. After he paid, his face turned red.

“You just don’t understand,” he said. “You have no idea what it’s like to have only one left. When she dies, there’ll be no one.”

Ceil shifted in her seat.

“You have us,” she said.

She opened her window and looked out. Through the static, Ceil hummed her own made-up song. She was bitter.

Lauren and Maxine folded the checkerboard, stacking the pieces in their tray. They propped their chins on the center seat and stared straight ahead.

Ruth curled herself into a tight ball. Her knees tucked under her chin, she hid behind the wheel hump. She closed her eyes and it was as if she were in two places at the same time: on the lawn and in the car. Sitting with GranTree she believed in pears. Riding home with Ceil there were none.