

TREE

After 'The Trees They Do Grow High', a traditional English ballad

I was ten when my husband was born.

He came slipping and sliding into the world, while I stood outside on the landing holding Rita's hand. Her sharp acrylic nails dug red welts into my palm, and I watched the gum shift and twirl between her parted lips like washing in a drum. And all the while my husband was screaming his arrival, and the sounds of women cooing and fussing seeped around the edges of the closed door.

Then the door opened, and a woman said, You can come in now.

My husband was lying in his mother's arms, wet-slicked and yellowish, his eyes closed against the brightness of the light. Someone lifted the bundle of him and handed it to me, and I placed his feather-weight in the crook of my arm.

And then he opened his eyes and looked at me, and I saw that his eyes were blue; and I laid my other hand against the tiny bird-bones of his skull.

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My father said to me, this is what we do in the old country. A father chooses a husband for his daughter; chooses a fine man, one who will provide for her, one it will dignify her to serve. Your grandfather chose me for your mother, he said; and I saw him, then, my

tall, rod-backed grandfather with his walrus moustache, walking like a sergeant up and down a line of young men, stopping in front of my father and saying, You.

I said, but you were already a grown man then; my mother just a few years younger. The man you have chosen for me is just a child. How can he provide for me? How can I serve him?

We will wait, my father said, until he is grown. Every day, he grows a little taller. In ten years, he'll be tall as a tree.

In ten years, I said, I'll be an old woman.

In ten years, my father said, you'll be a wife.

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For many years, I tried to forget the fact of my marriage. I grew old in my father's house; Rita left, taking her gum and her long nails with her; other women came and went, thin women with scrawny bird-wrists, hung with jewellery, drawn like magpies to the glint of money. They ignored me, mostly; or sometimes they tried to draw me to them, exact confidences that I wouldn't give. My father never married any of them; my mother was his wife, he said, and always would be, though we had nothing left of her but photographs and a wardrobe full of silks and furs that he couldn't bear to throw away.

My husband's father came to the house often; sat shut away in my father's study while his men glowered outside the door or smoked and played cards downstairs. He was a tall man, thin-faced, sallow-skinned; my father called him his friend, his oldest friend, his cousin, but he had the eyes of a hungry wolf. He called me daughter, showed me photographs of my

husband: a skinny boy of ten with a graze on his cheek; a twelve-year-old half-scowling at the camera.

Sometimes my husband and his mother came, too, and I would serve them biscuits and cherry brandy, and we would sit and stare at each other while the men talked on upstairs, as if each of us were trying to solve the riddle of the other's face.

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My father said, your husband is going away to school. You must give him something, to remind him that he is yours. To tell the other girls to keep away.

What should I give him? I said; but my father said only, That I will leave to you.

The next time my husband and his mother came to the house, I ran upstairs and took a blue ribbon from my jewellery-box. His mother nodded when I came back into the room. I will leave you two alone awhile, she said, and she slipped away.

My husband and I stared at each other. He was fourteen now, tall like his father, his blue eyes clear and far-seeing. Let's go outside, he said.

We walked through the garden without speaking, until he stopped in front of a row of young saplings, planted just a few weeks before, their young branches reaching and twisting like raised hands, desperate to touch the sky.

My mother says I am like a tree, my husband said. Growing so quickly you barely notice, until one day I am tall enough to be called a man.

I said, My father says that about you, too.

My husband smiled. I took the blue ribbon from my pocket and handed it to him. He nodded, just once, and placed the ribbon in his own pocket. Then we turned back and walked toward the house, and he slipped his hand into mine.

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We were married on a spring day, me twenty-six, he sixteen; clouds scudding through a sharp blue sky and the church bells tolling out the news. I wore the dress my aunts had sewn for weeks, sitting up late into the night. My husband was tall as a grown sapling; handsome, too, and when he kissed me at the altar I knew that these ten years didn't matter, that he had finally caught up, as my father had said he would do.

A year later, our son was born. The cooing and fussing now was my own; our son the bundle placed in the crook of my arm, his the tiny bird-skull and the slick of baby-hair.

My father said, you see, daughter, I made a good choice for you. And I said, yes, father, I believe you did.

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On another spring day, we returned to the church. The bells tolled a different story; I wore the black dress my aunts had sewn for days, while I was wrung-out from crying, and our son was tetchy and tooth-sore, reaching out his arms for his father and meeting only empty air.

We will build a mausoleum for him, my husband's father said, to show that he was a great man.

No, I said. We will plant a tree, so that our son can watch it growing, as I did his father, too.

The tree has grown tall now, taller than a man. We visit it often, my son and I, and every day it seems to reach a little higher, while its roots inch deeper into the wet earth.

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