

After the Fall

by John Wentworth Chapin

Pop-pop and Lily were in the garden again. His hands were knobby and mottled, ugly things, but she took them without hesitation when he offered them to lift her out of the dirt or onto his knee, setting her there like a giggling princess. Pop-pop couldn't talk since the stroke, but his gestures were broad with warmth and love.

Dee, Lily's mother, watched from the porch, hiding her rare cigarette from her father and her daughter. She was as ambivalent about Kent III's as she was about her formerly monstrous father charming his granddaughter. For a long bit of her childhood, he'd come drunkenly into her bed and made a mess of her life; it started after she quit ballet and ended around her first period. She had to count the years on her fingers, but she remembered the markers.

She forgave him, she supposed. It had been easy to do so at the hospital when he was gray and papery. Now, it took a cigarette to steady her when she watched him touch Lily, another drag to quench the fire when Lily shrieked with delight. Dee trusted him, but she couldn't look away. Yearning, horrified, resigned.

Perhaps he was hollow, without memory behind his now watery eyes. Perhaps this was a peace offering. Perhaps it didn't matter. They were a family, now, these three: child, widow, widower.

Lily aped a pirouette and collapsed giggling onto Pop-pop's lap. Dee inhaled.

