

How Elm Trees Die

by Kathy Fish

This is my dad at the breakfast table. He's leaning towards my brother, Den, like he's telling Den a secret except his voice is plenty loud enough for Mom and me to hear. Den has asked Dad to explain why all the trees in town are dying.

Dad says that when the hot wind blows it gets the trees swaying and whispering to each other. "That's all it is, boy. Trees gossiping, spreading disease." He smiles at Mom. "Isn't that right, baby?" He used to call her Constance, but this summer he has started calling her "baby." I don't know why.

And this is my mom. She's got a paisley kerchief wrapped around a head full of pink curlers and she's wearing lipstick even though it is only breakfast. She drinks black coffee from a green mug that shows a leaping deer and the words "Nothing runs like a Deere" on it.

"Aren't you the poet this morning, Ray!" She laughs. I swear I smell the scent of Tide out her red mouth. "Whispering trees, that's sweet. Really."

I can't eat for the whine of chain saws. We've got a hundred-year old elm tree of our own right outside our house. There's an archway of elm trees that blocks the sky the whole length of our street. The chain saws sound like they are three, maybe four blocks away.

Den has stopped listening. He's scooping forkfuls of scrambled eggs like yellow brains into his mouth. He is twelve, two years older than I am.

Dad's working his teeth over with a pick, watching Mom.

"Gossip kills, doesn't it baby?" Something about his voice makes me feel dizzy. I grip the edge of my chair.

Mom's looking at the paper. Just looking at it. Dad gets up to leave.

"Don't trip over your lunch pail, Poet," she says.

* * *

Around town, cut logs lay scattered like bones. Den and his friends like to walk Indian style across the logs, one foot in front of the other, stretching their arms out at their sides for balance. I sit watching them in the shadow of our school. The new, huge sky wants to swallow me. I try not to look at it. I like the feel of concrete beneath me, of bricks against my back.

A man is singing "Come on baby light my fire" over my transistor radio. I turn up the volume and push my bangs off my forehead. The boys are playing follow-the-leader now. Den calls over his shoulder we'll go home in five minutes. I focus my attention on his sneakers flying over the dead limbs.

I don't tell Den anything anymore. Not since I let it slip that I had trouble with gravity and he'd gone straight to Mom and told her. She felt my forehead and wanted me to explain, but how could I?

It was the day Sister William stood Leonard Tucker up at the front of the class for blowing raspberries during "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." She ordered him to recite the Five Glorious Mysteries and when he couldn't she whacked him on the back of his head with those toady hands of hers. I had felt suddenly lighter and next thing I knew I was watching Leonard Tucker and Sister William from somewhere near the ceiling. I saw myself, too, at my desk, holding my songbook out in front of me like everyone else.

Dad had come into my room after work, smelling like the hot metal shavings under his skin and explained to me all about Gravity like a Poet, which meant I didn't understand a single word. I knew that Gravity did not "hug me close to Mother Earth" all the time as apparently it did everyone else. I nodded to make him smile, but I learned after that to curl my toes in tightly when I walked and to sit heavily in chairs.

On Mullan Avenue, it is cooler and darker. I scan the tallest branches of the trees and see a scattering of brown leaves. I drop down at the foot of the elm tree that stands in front of our house. I see my mom through the windows, moving about her work, her hair still in curlers. The scent of Tide blows out the dryer vent and rises and blends with the hot breeze. I discover that trees really do whisper but I don't know what they are trying to tell me.

Soon, my father appears around the corner swinging his lunch pail. His face is long. I decide not to run to him. I press my bottom hard to the ground beneath our elm tree. The men with the chain saws will come soon. I will wait for them.

