

TITLE: The Tree

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STANDING: Undergraduate

Carrie loved her father. That never changed. During the move, he had been a symbol of security for her and Noah. As their surroundings changed, their father's rimless glasses and hairy arms remained constant. Garden View was a hospitable town and they were quickly assimilated into the community, but there was always a vague distance in between Carrie's father and the rest of the town. It may have had something to do with their father's midwestern origins or his lack of a wife. Either way, the distance didn't stop his handsome features and single status from attracting the eyes of various PTA mothers. They would eye him with quiet lust and chatter about how they never understood why he never found another wife.

Their new house contained a small vegetable garden in the front yard, which Carrie's father would spend sunny weekend days tending to. Carrie and Noah would hang around him while he worked, toeing the dirt and occasionally plucking weeds. Sometimes he would pluck a grub from the soil and dangle it above his mouth as though he were about to eat it. The children would squeal with a combination of disgust and amusement, knowing he would never really eat the thing. Their father seemed to take pride in the things he planted and delighted in watching them grow.

At that time, there was a balance present in the children's lives. One they would only notice once it had slipped away from them. Tranquility lay in backyard play and empty neighborhood streets. They were comfortable in the ignorance of youth, unaware of the paradise in which they existed.

Not long after they had settled into Garden View, Carrie's father planted a semi-developed tree sapling in the far-right corner of their back yard. After school, he walked his

children to the back yard and showed them the adolescent tree. Carrie saw the thing sitting in a small mound of dirt, small and bare, and asked what it was.

“It’s an apple tree,” her father said.

“There’s no apples,” said Noah.

“It’s not all the way grown up. It’s going to be a couple of years before it starts growing fruit. It’s very delicate at this stage of its life, so I don’t want you guys going near it, okay?”

The children, having no interest in something that would take so long to do anything interesting, agreed to stay away from the tree. Over the years, as it grew, the apple tree became more and more of a background fixture in their lives. The only time Carrie really noticed the tree were a few times when she would look out her window and see her father sitting on the deck, eyeing the tree with a strange, cold expression.

It wasn’t until the summer before Carrie’s first year of middle school that the tree began to show the first signs of fruit. Small green buds were emerging from the tree’s branches and Carrie’s father told her and Noah that those would be turning into apples before too long.

Shortly after school let out, Carrie began digging holes in the back yard. She said that she wanted to become an archaeologist when she grew up and that she needed practice, but really, there was just something about the act of digging the holes that she enjoyed. Her father was not thrilled about her defacing the back yard, but he allowed it as long as she followed three rules. The first was that her brother had to be within her sight at all times since she had to watch him while their father was at work. The second was that she had to refill any holes she dug whenever she was done. The third – and this one was stressed with a seriousness Carrie rarely saw in her father – was that she couldn’t dig anywhere near the apple tree.

“The roots are delicate,” he explained, “and if you hurt a big root with that shovel, the whole tree could die. And we wouldn’t get any apples.” Carrie agreed to follow these rules and her father planted a kiss on her forehead.

When her father left for work, she would pick up the shovel and dig under the oppressive summer heat. Noah would watch her from the deck, bored. By July, the yard was riddled with holes. The digging had left the ground uneven and mostly bare, with small patches of grass dotting the desolation. The only part of the yard with solid patches of grass was a ten – foot area around the corner of the yard that contained the apple tree, which Carrie’s father had marked with small wooden stakes. Carrie had run out of new ground to dig, so she began to dig up old holes. Soon she became bored and the area around the tree became appealing. She began to feel compelled to deface the untouched earth. She even got the idea that maybe there was some type of treasure in that ground that her father didn’t want her to find. Maybe it was a present. More than anything, the thrill of rebellion that the idea presented attracted her to the act. Carrie figured that her father was being overprotective of the tree and that she wouldn’t be clumsy enough to seriously harm the tree. If she covered her tracks properly, her father would never know.

In early August, after Carrie watched her father’s sedan disappear around the end of their street and ran to the back door. Noah followed her as she exited into the back yard and she stopped him.

“Stay inside,” she commanded. If Noah watched her, he would surely blab to her father about what she was doing.

“But dad said you’re supposed to watch me,” he pouted.

She sighed. “I can see you from out here. Go back inside.”

“No you can’t.”

She groaned. “There’s bugs.”

Worry crept onto Noah’s face. “What?”

“Yep. Bugs. Ones that bite. I don’t want you to get bit.”

Noah retreated slowly into the living room, muttering something about bugs and TV.

Carrie retrieved her shovel and walked onto the forbidden ground. She went to the space in between the tree and the fence and lowered the shovel to the grass and pushed down.

The blade broke through the grass and sank into the soil below. Using the shovel, she cut a square into the grass, then picked up the patch and placed it nearby. She began digging quickly out of a vague fear of her brother seeing her or her father coming back early. A few feet down, the dirt became riddled with small, pinkish – white roots. She broke through them with ease, sure that she was doing no harm to the tree. The hole got deeper, deeper than any hole she dug in the rest of the yard. When she climbed into the hole to dig deeper, it came up to her chest. Carrie felt comfortable in her defiance, certain that there had been no reason in keeping her away from the tree, until she plunged the shovel into the hole and she felt it break through something solid.

Her confidence came crashing down. She was sure she had struck some vital component of the tree. Did trees have hearts? She wasn’t sure. Slowly, she removed her shovel and crouched down. She began using her hands to wipe the dirt away from where the shovel had struck. The dirt revealed something long and dark, with a bunch of the pink-white roots coiled around it hungrily. She removed more dirt along the length the thing, revealing something red poking up from the object. Scared and curious, she tugged at the red part and a thin snap was audible as the thing rose from the dirt, pulling some of the roots with it. In her hand, Carrie held a red, high-heeled shoe. Attached to it was a leg, severed just below the knee, its flesh black and withered.

Carrie cried out, dropping the limb and scrambling out of the hole. For a time, Carrie stared into the hole, wide – eyed and unbelieving. A wind blew and the leaves hissed. The sound made her feel nauseous. She picked up the shovel and began to pile dirt back into the hole. When the hole was full, she placed the patch of grass back onto the dirt and patted it down with her foot.

She left the shovel on the deck and washed her hands in the kitchen sink. She sat next to her brother on the couch and watched television with him.

“You stink,” he teased. When she didn’t react, he returned his attention to the television.

Carrie never told anyone about what she saw. She wasn’t sure who it was that had been down there or exactly what had put them down there, but she had an idea, and it was too awful to speak. Silence became unsettling. Wind made her sick. Her father’s kindness became hollow.

Carrie became quiet. She sat alone at school and made no attempt to interact with her old friends or make new ones. Her teachers struggled to maintain her attention and they complained to her father about it.

In October, the apple tree bore fruit. One afternoon, as the sun was setting, Carrie’s father walked her and Noah to the tree and plucked three apples from a limb. He handed two of them to his children and kept one for himself. He commented on the cooling weather and took a bite from his apple. Noah examined his, then began tearing into it. Carrie just looked at hers. Her father frowned.

“Something wrong?”

Carrie looked down and saw Noah, his mouth packed with fruit. She shook her head. Her father smiled and took another bite.

“Come on, take a bite. It’s good.”

Carrie smiled back. The wind blew and she sank her teeth into the skin of the apple.

Rationale:

This story is Milton informed in the sense that it revolves around innocence and how it can be spoiled by knowledge. I would also say I use Milton's idea of innocence being defined by ignorance. The balance of Carrie's early life is spoiled by her knowledge of what is beneath the tree. I also use obvious motifs from *Paradise Lost*, such as the tree being a source of the knowledge.