

Mary Sullivan
from *Ship Sooner*

The branches of the giant pear tree shake their last leaves into the December air. The stems snap off the ends of the twigs and are swept up in the wind, the leaves flying every which way before they skid down the roof slope and brush over the top of the grass. They blow backward and forward, rattling toward the Dodds' house. Then they are gone.

As night comes, the pear tree looms across the sky, like it is ruler of the dark. Its branches are like great arms around our house. Of course, there are no pears now. They always fall in July before they're fully ripe because they're as heavy as stones. Every summer my mother, Teresa, is sure someone is going to get hit on the head by one of them, so she has us hang signs around the yard: *Beware of Falling Pears*.

I sit at the foot of the tree between its stumpy toes and listen to Teresa and Trudy in the kitchen getting ready for my birthday party. Brian and I keep track of people in Herringtown—that's what we do. Otherwise I wouldn't know a thing because no one says anything around me. Teresa says you have to be careful what you do because it all comes back to you. Brian says it's important that we know more about them than they know about us. He has the softest voice of anyone I know. Like after the snow falls and covers everything.

A lighter snaps open, then a flame licks up, followed by the burn, the hiss, and the singe of Trudy's cigarette. Trudy is Teresa's closest friend, but she looks old enough to be Teresa's mother. I wait for her to exhale. Every third or fourth time usually ends in a cough, which racks up from her insides and wheezes out dry and raspy. She spits up into a napkin and Teresa pats her on the back, saying, "When are you ever going to quit?"

"Probably the day I die."

"Don't say that."

"I'm sure heaven has a smoking area."

"You so sure you're going to heaven?"

The freezer door squeaks open then shut, and ice cubes plop, pop, and, crack in their whiskey sours, and Teresa pit-pats back across the floor. She goes barefoot inside, but she'd never step foot outside without her high heels. She says the only reason men look at her is because of her legs. It's true—men are always dragging their eyes up and down her high-heeled legs. When we tell her she could be in the movies, she says, "Sure, if I got the part of an old lady." She has the greenest eyes in the world. There's a photo at Jimmy Joe's, the only restaurant in Herringtown, of Ava Gardner standing with Frank Sinatra about to cut their wedding cake, and people always point to it and say Teresa looks just like her. I think Teresa is prettier. Her eyes are greener and sparklier in the light. Why would our dad ever leave her? She and Trudy clink their glasses together. Gold streamers are strung across the kitchen ceiling and balloons are tied to the backs of our chairs. I put them there.

"Guess who called?" Teresa asks.

"Jack?"

"Why do I make the same mistake over and over again?"

"You're too impulsive, I always tell you that."

"Desperate, you mean."

Trudy laughs.

"I'm already thirty-seven." Teresa sighs. "I feel like I missed so much."

"You always get like this this time of the year."

"I do?"

"Yes, you do. It's the holidays."

"I guess you're right." She chuckles. "You should see his hair. He has twice as much as when we started dating."

"He's probably using some kind of hair-grow shampoo."

"It's like a bouffant now."

Helen walks into the kitchen, snapping her gum between her teeth. Something goes twang! Probably Helen punching one of the balloons with her fist. There is a faint high whistle of helium leaking. By tonight the balloon will be smaller, darker, harder to pop.

"Please don't snap your gum, Helen," Teresa says.

"Hi Helen," Trudy says. "Where's Ship?"

"Good question." Teresa opens the back door. "Ship!"

"Why do you bother going to the door?" Helen asks.

I wait a few minutes, then I step out from behind the pear tree and go inside. I had to start spying. Whenever I'm around everyone whispers or moves away from me. I can't help it if I hear everything.

"There you are, my wild child," Teresa says. She started calling me this because I spent so much time in the woods. "We were waiting for you."

"You're not the only one who's late. Brian is, too," Helen says. Of all the cheerleaders in Herringtown—which is just a small town on the north shore of Massachusetts—Helen is the prettiest. She has green eyes like Teresa, but they're like pieces of glass. Everyone always stares at Teresa and Helen.

"Happy birthday, Ship," Trudy says, stubbing out her cigarette. "Come on over here and let me give you a birthday kiss."

"Thanks," I say. She's so nice and warm when I slide into her arms, I want to stay there. The flab on her upper arms jiggles as she releases me.

"What have you been doing?" Helen asks. "Your hair is all over the place. At least you could comb it for your own birthday party."

Teresa always says, "Don't let her bother you. She's just going through a phase."

"How long is a phase?" I ask. "Fifteen years?"

"I'll be right back," I tell them, dashing for the bathroom. My hair is such a tangled up mess, I can't even get the comb through it. I grab Helen's hair spray in the cabinet under the sink. She'd kill me if she knew. I hold my breath, and start to spray a wide circle around my head when I realize it's Lysol. What's the matter with me?

"Here he comes," Teresa calls. There are only two houses at the dead end of Hawthorn Street, ours and the Dodds', separated by a patch of woods. They must have been built by the same person because they're exactly alike, except ours is pale blue and the Dodds' is mustard yellow. There are also four empty lots, overgrown with brush and grass, where that builder might have planned to build four more houses just like ours, but never did.

"Finally," Helen mumbles.

"Looks like Mr. Dodd is with him." Then after a pause, she asks from outside the bathroom, "Ship, did you invite Mr. Dodd?"

"No."

"Well, he's here."

“Maybe he invited himself.”

“How do you like that?”

At least the Lysol has done the trick, flattening my mop and shining it up some. I’m glad I’m not pretty like Helen and Teresa because it’s plain too much work. As soon as Mr. Dodd walks in I can smell his Old Spice.

Trudy says hello in her polite voice and Teresa says, “Make yourselves comfortable. How’s Mrs. Dodd? Fine, I hope.”

“Oh, she is,” he says. He takes a deep whiff, claps his hands, and announces, “Sure smells good in here. I’m starving.”

“You didn’t have to bring beer—that was awfully nice of you,” Teresa says, making a gesture to take the six-pack. Mr. Dodd keeps it at his side. His Old Spice drowns out the smell of the pizza, the chocolate birthday cake Teresa baked, and even the Lysol. Usually Mr. Dodd smells like the Gooney Factory where he works as a security guard—I think the chocolate has gotten right into his skin—but not tonight. If Herringtown is famous for anything, it’s the Gooney Bar, chocolate and peanut butter over a crispy oatmeal and caramel nougat center.

We hadn’t been in Herringtown a week when Trudy came over with a bag of Gooney Bars. She said we couldn’t live here another day without trying one. According to Teresa, that was the first sweet I ever ate and I devoured the whole thing, including the wrapper, in seconds. After that, every Sunday after church, we marched over to Rexall Drug to buy a Gooney Bar. But the first Gooney Bar I remember tasting was right after I got my ear caps, which I’ve been wearing since I was six when Dr. Gould told Teresa that I had exceptional hearing. With my caps on, I could taste each separate flavor, without the trace of metal I was used to tasting when I ate. All week I’d smell them being made at the factory and wait for Sunday to come.