



The Orchard

Peter Heller

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Rating: ♥ ♥ ♥

My Book Notes:

Childhood memories are subject to constant revision, and so I have mostly vague and gauzy recollections of our move, punctuated by images and events that are far more crisp, even cinematic.

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Such is the wonder of youth, that the world is essentially malleable, that small events can be made big and large events made to disappear.

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Nature was one leg of the stool, and self-sufficiency and beauty the others.

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She thought she would revive the orchard. There were plenty of apples. They had been ripening and falling on their own for decades. The wildness had somehow concentrated their sweetness... Each ripe apple from these gnarled elders was a gift of deliciousness.

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Hayley was very good with a chainsaw and had cut enough dead apple trees to keep us in fragrant firewood for the next two winters.

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Rosie was a weaver who actually made a decent living at her craft. Once when we were fishing with chicken gizzards and bobbers (lame), she told me that the only difference between art and craft, or art and conversation, or art and humming – or even fishing – is the maker's connection to God. I had no idea what she was talking about, but that line has stuck with me all my life.

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When you have been sitting next to one woman your whole life, you get used to the topography. It is like living all your days at the skirt of a certain mountain.

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Hayley got up and brought out two cans of Catamount and one of A&W root beer. I heard three sharp sighs as the three tabs were pulled back, and then we all drank in silence in the sun.

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Nobody spoke. I leaned into the new woman because the sun on the soft mohair was irresistible. Softness and heat and a smell like maybe the Andes and maybe wild roses, though I wouldn't have known what either of those smelled like.

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Sitting on the bench in the sun with these two women, I had a taste for the first time of what it might feel like to believe anything was possible.

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It's funny how simply, how quickly the lens can change through which we view our day, our lives. Fleets of dark clouds with bruised bellies flew across the sun, and yet that morning seemed brighter and somehow more vivid than the ones before.

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One of the things I love about my mother in retrospect is that she had that childlike capacity as well. She could be accepting of the gifts that came her way without the second-guessing that so many of us endure.

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We were a team, indivisible, the nurturing going in all directions. A team of three – Hayley, Frith, and Rosie.

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I find that I can recognise other homeschooled souls in a crowd, almost as if there was a secret handshake or a tell; we have a certain temper of spirit that has been cooked out of everyone else.

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Hayley had read me the poem Three Magi by Eliot. She was always reading me poems that were way over my head. In dispensing so much incomprehensible music, she taught me that I could fiercely love something I didn't understand in the least. Good practice for when you got to the really big things, like God.

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Marie said, 'I prefer the stool to the easy chair, on account of... sometimes I just can't climb out of a chair. The other day I thought I would have to call the fire department.

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I have found, in the wisdom of years, that the best relationships usually begin rocky.

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‘You know, Pup,’ Hayley said. ‘The people we are most excited about often hurt us, and they don’t mean to. At all.’

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That was something I noticed: People who always seemed to do the right thing, by their own lights, had a certain verve.

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I assume there are infinite and fluid territories along the spectrum of closeness, friendship, and love. Why try to set a hard border where there isn’t any.

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Does joy require some sense of safety?

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Safety, the sense of it, came in fleeting, warm swaths, like sunlight sweeping over the hills.

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Safe. To be held. To be protected. To feel Hayley’s chin on the top of my head, rubbing as she read the book. To feel her strong arms encircling. To feel the breath in her chest pressing my thin back.

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Bill had lost his family in that horrible Balkan war, and Hayley told me later that he had a little girl. And then he turned away and was gone through those awful hanging plastic strips that look like stricken seaweed.

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I don’t know what happiness is. Something we seek and try to hold on to, and in the holding lose like water through fingers. In my own life, the happiness that sneaks up is the only true one. Lands on your shoulder like a surprised bird and takes off again.

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She stood there laughing in the dusk, and it was a laughter that carried a freight of sadness. Or knowledge, which I am coming to believe is the same thing.

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I can see that my mother loved Li Xue because she wrote of beauty and heartbreak and friendship in equal measure and touched them all with grace.

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I asked Hayley what she was writing. She looked up all blurry as if out of a dream and said, 'Oh, I'm writing silence, Pup. I am trying to capture the thunder of it.'

'Thunder?'

'Silence can sometimes be louder than thunder, don't you think?'

'There can be a silence when someone says goodbye,' she said. 'But even then, you can hear your heart pounding. In your ears.'

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I was only seven, but I was not immune to symbolism or artistic suggestion.

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I loved that so much, listening to the words formed twelve hundred years ago roll from my mother's lips and flutter moth like in the lantern light, and sink like snow to the floor.

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Hayley explained to me that every poem has a certain music, and that the sound of it is as important to the meaning as anything else. Does it sound hard and bright like a tinkling chime, does it rill along like a stream, or is it soft and sad like slow rain?

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That made an impression on me too – something I would turn over in my mind many times: that the artist doesn't have to know anything about her work and usually doesn't.

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Hayley never, ever didn't know. She didn't seem at a loss, not once. She cried, she was brokenhearted, she was uncertain with sudden gifts – like Rosie, like a package of venison, the offerings of friendship. She struggled some nights with her work, I could see it from above, chin over the bed – but she always knew where she was and what to do; or she seemed that way, to me. And together we were never lonely.

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Solid woods on either side and the road got narrower and rougher, until we were jouncing over exposed rocks and the branches of the younger trees scraped the sides of the car like reaching fingers. It was like driving through an aquarium then, a narrow passage through shifting green deeps where the light sprayed down and fractures at watery angles.

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I shoved open the door and Bear (dog) and I ran to the edge (of the quarry). Swimming! And green water! I'd never seen water so green. It had the hardness of a jewel, the transparency of glass.

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I hit the green water and was transmigrated into something submarine, something at one with density, and cold, something with slow fins like a sea turtle whose world was bubbles, and then I was swimming instinctively for the light, and I breached like an albino sperm whale.

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I have since used the tactic many times: When besieged by chaos, pretend it is not there and swim calmly to the beach. Another lesson: Swimming calms the heart.

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That was another thing I learned that morning. Being brave makes one hungry.

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Real evil exists in the world. One of our greatest challenges as humans is to figure out how to resist it, even obliterate it.

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Everybody does bad things once in a while. Sometimes the bad thing is really bad, like with those brothers. Sometimes it is just not doing a good thing, or the right thing.

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Truth may be beauty, but it is also heartbreak.

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The power in a simple truth: To Hayley, that truth was simply seeing. Seeing with honesty and clarity; making oneself still enough, vulnerable enough, to encounter another fully.

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Do we feel the canopy thinning above us? As we grow, as our elders decline and fall? I was not ready for that, for any thinning at all. The raw sky with all its violence is too harsh without the protective shade of a parent.

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We were complete in our company, as we had always been. Comfortable in silence on the bench on the porch, or in the truck with the air pouring in the open windows.

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I closed my eyes. Whatever fears stirred in me were too immense to acknowledge and so I just let myself drift within her encircling arm. We were one being, just one. I felt the wind on my face, the sun, felt the enveloping goodness of my mother, and the uncertainty, barely there, in the way she held me and leaned against me. Why couldn't we be like this, the two of us, the way we were meant to be, until the end of time?

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I willed myself not to fear that she would never come back the same. The surgery would fix whatever was going on, take away the spots on her lungs. But we know things as children we ought not to know, things no one would ever presume to teach us. And so beneath the wilfulness and sweetness of those days was a blind fear, and beneath the fear was a darkness without depth, without firelight, or starlight or lamplight. And so I held Hayley's hand more tightly and we walked back up the hill.

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We tend, when someone close to us is dying, to focus on our own desires. Not only as children do we do this, but as adults too. It is terribly selfish. The desire that this person not go away, not ever. That she stay close, that she hold us, that she be there to listen when we have something to report, or when we are heartbroken. That she smooth our hair, or rumple it, or pull at the knots. That she laugh at our insights. That she is there, always. How rarely do we dare imagine what she might want: another morning with fog thick in the valley like cotton. Another pestering question from her young daughter. Another cup of tea. A poem.

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When I got my driver's license, and with an unspoken understanding from Rosie, I began to spend more time at the cabin, maybe half my nights. The school didn't know about it – I am not sure they would have approved; I was only sixteen – but I loved it, I needed it. I

slept up in the loft in our old bed, and I curled on my left side as I always used to do, and I imagined Hayley's arm thrown around me and I felt comforted.

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