

Strange Fruit (1960)

I remembered one night when I was ten. My sister had not yet died, or my parents divorced. I awoke very late to hear voices outside, and saw headlights flashing as several cars rounded the curve in our drive. Kathy and Pat and I gathered at Kathy's bedroom window to see what was going on. I can still remember the breeze nudging the drape against our faces.

Outside I could make out the figure of my mother, crying into my father's arms. The bumper of her beautiful red and white '56 Chevy BelAire, our family's pride and joy, dangled from the hook of a wrecker. The grille was smashed in, and various dripping fluids had made a puddle on the slag.

Nearby, we saw a dark shape hanging from an apple tree. Then high beams of the pick-up of Mr. Thomas, our landlord, shone on a dead deer, tied by the heels and strung upside down. My mom had struck a deer, bolting out of the trees along Leavitt Road, as she drove home after her waitressing shift. The men were here to salvage the meat.

As we watched, Mr. Thomas, a small, balding man who resembled Picasso, stepped forward with a butcher's knife, plunged it into the deer's groin and slowly cut downward, opening the animal's belly up.

Then he took his gloved hand, reached inside the animal, and began pulling out stomach, intestine, liver, and finally the lungs and heart.

The parts made a flopping sound as they tumbled onto the grass. The pile of guts they made seemed bigger than a single deer could hold inside it.

Everything inside had to come outside, I thought, as I huddled with my brother and sister. I can still remember her hand on my shoulder. But the cost, judging from my mom's face, was so high. By the time the grown-ups returned to the house, we all crept back to our beds.

It was one of those events that sums up childhood -- life and death dramas involving horrific violence, with kids observing silently, questionlessly from the wings.

When my mom and dad divorced in 1962, after Kathy's death, they would do so without telling us. My mom would pack my surviving brothers and me in a car and drive up to Niagara Falls for a few days of silent sight-seeing. When we returned, all our dad's things were gone from his drawers, and his bed was stripped.

Mom never let on that a deal had been struck. We thought we'd been robbed, and in a way, we were.

My mom had always worked, as a waitress at Stouffer's and other restaurants, including Dick's place. But until now, her income always went to pay for extras. Now, with our dad gone, and not paying child support (her version), she had to provide everything. She responded to this crisis by biting off more than she could chew, waiting tables by day and selling insurance for Mutual of Omaha by night.

My mother is a proud, indeed a queenly person, and the insurance sales gig was totally wrong for her. The field office would provide her, as the last person hired, with the worst possible list of cold contacts -- the old, the mentally infirm, the flat-busted and the lonely of Lorain County, Ohio. And she would show up on their doorsteps late at night, smelling like a french fry doused in cheap perfume, to instruct them about life's myriad dangers -- all except insurance salesmen, anyway.

As a child of 11, I sometimes rode with her, and waited in the car for the five to fifty minutes it took the party to say no. I tried to cheer her up as she sank into the upholstery of our old '55 BelAire. But I probably had the opposite effect.

She never, to the best of my knowledge, in her four of five months of trying, sold a nickel's worth of insurance. But it was an emergency, and this way she felt like she was doing something.

To this day, I get a crawly feeling from the phrase *Mutual of Omaha*. It is the one game you are insured to never win.