

APPLES FROM THE HANGING TREE
by
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When she was nine he was twelve - a wild brown boy with mischief in his eyes and a sideways smile. His people lived across the river, where the rent was low and the soil was rocky. She saw him only in the fall, and only for the few weeks his father and uncles came to her family's vineyard to help pick the grapes. He was supposed to help with the work, but he was an adventurous boy and stole off as often as he could to play in the outbuildings and in the woods that surrounded the long rows of vines.

They met in the barn. She was saddling her pony for a morning ride and saw him in with the cows. Her father had told

her not to talk to the laborers, but he shouldn't have been in with the cows, and she stepped forward to tell him so. He was filling a dish with milk for a kitten so small its eyes were hardly open. She forgot all about scolding and helped him care for the kitten.

Soon they were exchanging stories, about their fathers and mothers, things they'd done, things they'd heard. His stories were much more interesting than hers, and he told them well. She didn't necessarily believe them, but she didn't want him to stop.

As the days passed, they met often, always in secret, knowing, even so young, that it would be frowned on. They walked in the woods, played in the hayloft, threw rocks in the stream, and fed the kitten. And always, he talked and she listened.

One of the stories he told was about the apple tree that grew in the square in front of the town hall down in the village - the Hanging Tree he called it. She knew that tree. Her father had whipped her older brothers for sneaking off one night to see a man from across the river hung from that tree for killing another man, but she'd never heard the boy's story about it before.

He told her she should never eat its apples - that they would drive her mad. The tree, he said, had become so twisted

and sick from all the hangings it had witnessed, that now the souls of the hanged became trapped in its apples, and if you ate one, the soul in the apple would live inside you for the rest of your life, and make you do horrible things. The stories terrified her, and some nights she couldn't sleep, but she always came back for more.

At the end of two weeks, when the grapes were harvested, the boy's family left. He said good-bye to the girl and gave her the kitten.

When she was twelve, he was fifteen. Every year since that meeting in the barn, she would wait eagerly for harvest to come, when the boy's father and uncles would return and she could see him again and hear his stories.

They had no contact the rest of the year. His people stayed on their side of the river mostly, and her father didn't let her stray too far from the farm. But each year, while the men worked, they would find each other and pick up where they'd left off the year before.

This year, however, there was a tension - a feeling that something had changed. She'd grown, standing almost as tall as him now, and gentle curves were starting to fill out her little-

girl dresses. He had wisps of soft hair on his chin and lip, and his voice cracked octaves in unexpected places.

He seemed uncomfortable with her now - upset by her closeness and angry if she was too far away. She was shy and giddy by turns - teasing and timid. There was a lot more chasing and pinching than story telling this year, and that was their downfall. Girlish shrieks and laughter lead servants to the cask cellar and they were caught wrestling - at least they said it was wrestling.

They were separated. The boy's father kept him by his side in the vineyard rows, carrying the heaviest bags, and picking until his hands were blistered and raw. The girl's father kept her in her room, with nothing to read but the bible, and the sting of a birch switch so hot that she couldn't sit down.

When she was seventeen he was twenty. In five years they hadn't seen each other. His father kept him hard at work in the fields. Her father found reasons to send her away during harvest.

In those five years, her father, knowing his duty to marry her well, began to allow her to attend parties and gathering with young people of the right sort, and before she was sixteen,

she was betrothed to the son of a prosperous miller. He was loud and hearty and drank too much beer. She didn't like him much, but since he was going to inherit a small fortune, her father did, and that was what counted.

The miller's son was a great one for the company of his friends, and soon the girl was being ignored at winter cotillions, fall barn dances, and garden parties in the summer. It was at one of these last that she saw the boy again. He had gained employment as a groom for a wealthy landholder who threw lavish parties for his unpopular daughter, and they met as he helped her down from the miller's son's coach. They could exchange no more than a furtive smile, but their hearts pounded at the reunion.

Tonight the girl didn't mind that her betrothed left her alone to drink and laugh with his friends, it let her scheme ways of sneaking back to the boy. The boy too was scheming, and as the traffic of coaches slowed, he slipped away to the garden and, from the bushes, watched her dance distractedly with eager young swains.

Then, as the music paused between reels, she heard a whistled tune, a wild melody, and knew it was the boy, calling her from the trees. She slipped to the hedges and away, and in a dark yew arbor they exchanged more than furtive smiles.

The years had added romance to the memories of their harvests together. They spoke of the cruelty of their fathers and the unkindness of the society that forced them apart. They held hands and talked of running away to a place where they could be together in peace, but neither could think of one.

Unfortunately, the girl was seen in the shadows by a rival, jealous of her betrothal to the miller's son, and she quickly went to tell him. Now well in his cups, he was incensed, and called his comrades to join him in confronting the girl and her shadowy suitor.

The young men found the two on a stone bench, sitting very close, and when they saw who it was she sat with, they let out a cry like hunters sighting a fox. Fortunately, the boy was as fleet as a fox, and more used to strenuous activity than his pursuers. He quickly left them stumbling and lost in the dark.

The girl wasn't so lucky. The miller's son took her roughly to his coach, his anger at her infidelity multiplied by his public humiliation. He berated her drunkenly as they rode for home, saying she was a whore and betrayer, of him and her own kind. He was her master. She was his property. He could do anything he wanted to her. And to her horror, he decided to prove it.

Sneaking through the woods that lined the road, the boy heard the girl's screams and came running. He leapt on the back of the coach, silent as a shadow, and laid about the miller's son with his knife. Unfortunately, the coachman was armed, and shot the boy through the leg before he could do more than maim his victim.

The young men didn't wait for a trial. That very night they dragged the boy down to the courthouse square and strung him up from the old apple tree. The miller's son brought the girl, and didn't let her turn her head.

There was no trial for the lynch mob either. Amazingly, though many saw the hanging, no one recognized a single participant.

A week later, the girl's father accepted the Miller's son's proposal of marriage on behalf of his daughter. Though he expected protestations and weeping, she took the news calmly, and said she would retire early.

That night at midnight, when everyone else slept, the girl crept out of the house, saddled her horse, and rode into town.

It was late summer, just before harvest, and the apples were just beginning to tinge with red. She rode across the courthouse square to the hanging tree, stood up in her stirrups, and plucked the apple nearest to where the boy's noose had hung.

Though it was a cool night, the apple was warm - warm like
flesh.

She ate it and rode away.

And they lived happily ever after.

THE END