

About Apples

a short story

It seemed to her on the drive to New Jersey that she had done this trip to her father's so many times and so thanklessly, that she'd be spending the entire day sorting his stubborn laundry or vacuuming his house. And he'd stand by and insist there was nothing wrong with his heart or his housekeeping. Yes, today would be like the others, and send her into a death spiral of self-loathing and doubt.

The fifteen-year-old Toyota (left over from her marriage) (spoils of war not entirely worth it) crawled over the George Washington Bridge in a lane of Saturday drivers on errands like herself, their GPSs bright on their dashboards.

He'd said on the phone he didn't need housekeeping, but he was glad of the company. She supposed she needed company herself.

Getting a divorce was not her favorite thing, she reflected, as she recalled the most recent phone call from her attorney (quarter of a billable hour) telling her the paperwork still hadn't come back because her ex hadn't gotten around to signing.

She sighed, and turned up the radio, hoping "Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me" would provide sufficient distraction to forget both the money and the disappointment the last few years had brought, almost like punishment for having Peter, her ex, turn out to be sleeping with his admin, who'd accused him of sexual harassment when he'd broken it off.

The world was full of surprises.

Only she, Celia, a marketing slog for a large and only somewhat morally ambiguous corporation (they made soap with ingredients that killed coral, but sent their hygiene products to conflict-riven refugee areas), how much she, now, knew the sting of infidelity, which had come as a surprise.

But she missed his good cheer. Now she dated new men who sat across from her at the restaurant table and prattled about their ex-wives and their children. Or else she'd be waking up with an unfamiliar body in her bed, or their place, wondering what strange universe she'd landed in. Altogether it was wearing her down.

You needed a partner, but the possibilities seemed clownlike, and unfamiliar, as if aliens had taken over her love life.

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She arrived at the outskirts of Leonia where some of the maples were already turning, a reminder that seasonal affective disorder was on its way. The residential streets

were manicured, calendar-photo-like in their landscaping, the houses that spoke of peace within, affluence, expensive cars.

She found her father in his back yard, perched on a huge ancient wooden stepladder that would make his cardiologist faint.

Celia did not even chastise him, they've been through this before. Since her mother died her father had been on a gleeful mission to defy his own mortality, viz., hence, stepladder, poorly lit cellar stairs, his driving in general, and continuing to chain smoke despite everyone's giving him handouts from the American Lung Association.

He defied death, he believed, picking his apples seven feet off the ground, and dropping them carefully into a plastic bag from Target.

"You're at it again," she said.

"Don't begin nagging me, Celia, this is one of my few pleasures in life."

She threw up her hands in dismay, and wondered how long until he fell off the ladder. "I'm thinking we can go for lunch," she said.

"I can cook something for you."

She demurred, recalling the last time she agreed to that, the bread in the sandwich had green mold on it.

Is this the end of life? she wondered, eating moldy bread and not being able to taste the difference? It had, in truth, looked like a normal sandwich.

She set down her tote bag and held the bottom of the stepladder and he glared at her.

Suddenly there was a massive cracking sound and the huge limb on the opposite side of the tree, heavily laden with red apples, swooped down toward the ground on one

end, leaving an open crotch of raw wood amid the break on the other side of the tree. She could see the soft, pale fibers newly exposed.

“Don’t stand there under that,” her father said in dismay. “Goddamn drought.” He climbed down the ladder and inspected it beside her. “I was afraid of this. Too many apples. You see that?” He gestured at the ponderous clusters of ripe apples now leaning toward the ground like ornaments on a holiday tree. “You have to help me.”

He directed her toward three plastic wastebaskets set on the back porch, marked RECYCLING with circles of arrows showing that nothing is ever lost, if you just tossed your water bottles in the blue bin.

Ten minutes later they were both picking apples and setting them carefully into the recycling bins. Clearly this was going to be a big job.

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The inside of the house is quieter since her mother passed, and she likes it better. Horrible to say, and impossible to admit to anybody, her mother’s constant unhappiness seemed to have come with a will to criticize Celia that never lost its determination. Shoes wrong in childhood. *Sit up straight. Your brother’s doing so well.* Never mind marrying Peter, who had, for all his faults, sided with Celia after most family gatherings here, when Celia would leave the house and get into the car to drive back to Manhattan feeling she’d somehow become a less worthy person.

Even the photo on the piano of her mother’s tight smile makes her heart beat a little faster, as if to protect her from her own inadequacies.

Oh, how do we come to be born with these difficult people? Celia looks at herself in the bathroom mirror. She wipes some eyeliner from under her eyes with her fingertips, and washes her hands.

They will make lunch now, and it will be dried out baloney with curled edges, and cheap mayo she can't abide. But no, on the kitchen table he's put a pile of apples and a cutting board and he's paring the skins off and whistling.

"What are you making?"

"Old recipe your grandmother used to make," he says.

"The crisp?" She goes to the fridge and actually finds a new package of supermarket generic butter, and sets it on the kitchen table. The refrigerator contains very moldy food indeed. "I thought I'd vacuum," she says.

"Not today, Celia. It's not that dirty this time."

What is he smoking? she wonders. He thrusts a bowl at her.

"I've got sugar in that cabinet over there," he nods his head toward it. When she opens it there's some mouse turds but the package isn't chewed, so she brings it back to him.

"You need an exterminator for the mice."

"I've taken care of it. I've got Havahart traps in the cellar. Then I drive them to the park behind the high school and I let them out. You have to do it in the dark."

"Because it's illegal?"

"It's not illegal, it's just the neighbors don't like it. Some predator eats them anyway. They have no defenses in the wild."

“Your hands are clean,” Celia says, thinking they’ve gotten their unappetizing discussion for the visit over early. Last time it was the upstairs bathroom shower drain being clogged, and he’d showed her the gizmo he’d bought to fix it.

Okay, he was living alone, the body functions seemed to have become more acceptable after an older person lived alone. A higher threshold for belching, for instance, and not caring about it. A widower, which he was, she was being uncharitable, no question.

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“I didn’t know this was Ma’s recipe,” she said.

“She never made it. I often asked her to make it. My mother used to make it. Your mother never made it.”

Celia mashed the butter sticks with a fork until they were as soft as he told her was correct. She poured the sugar in and cut it with the two knives. She was almost doing it right, he said, but not exactly. The knives were the wrong kind.

“Did she show you how to do that?” he asked.

“I have been known to bake on my own,” Celia said, thinking she should have had children. Maybe she could still have children. A baby. She probably wouldn’t be a harsh parent, she thought. Not critical at all, really. Probably spoil the child rotten.

That is my mother’s voice, she thought suddenly. *Spoil the child rotten*. I don’t think like that. I will never have that thought about my child.

Her father was lighting the gas oven, and she waited uneasily for the explosion. He said the pilot light had stopped working, because he’d managed to turn it off, six months ago, to save gas.

“It’s a scam of the gas company,” he said. “I read it in *The Times*. They don’t mind if you turn it off.”

“They said that in *The New York Times*?”

“I can’t remember when. Why are you doubting me?”

“I’m not doubting you. I’m just wondering.”

“That’s the same as doubting me. I told you people don’t mind.”

“I’m not going to argue.”

“Good,” he said.

The peeled apple slices were turning rust colored in their stack in the middle of the table. She bumped elbows companionably with her father while they finished the dish (baking pan with remnants of previous food still in corners). (How could he live like this?)

He brushed his hands together in satisfaction.

“I’ve got to build a brace for that tree,” he said.

“What if you use the stepladder?”

They sat on the back steps, watching the broken tree in the sunshine.

“I brought you some food,” she said.

“What are you, Meals on Wheels? I don’t need food. I go grocery shopping.”

She made a face. You’re welcome, God dammit, she thought. He’d never be grateful, it was too much to expect. The patriarch never says, *Thank you*. The patriarch will explain to you you’ve spent too fucking much on it, and you’re stupid. She sighed.

Her father lit a cigarette, and put the match in a tin can, a system he’d maintained since her childhood.

“You shouldn’t smoke with high blood pressure.”

“We were having such a good time, and now you bring this up.”

“I do,” she said. “Because you know I’m right.”

The timer buzzed for the apple crisp, which was only slightly burnt, but hadn’t she warned herself mentally that 400 was too high? and hadn’t she decided not to say anything?

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“Celia,” he said after they ate, “I have family pictures for you. I’m cleaning up my file cabinets because I’m old.”

“I live in an apartment, Dad. It’s better if you keep them.”

“Salvation Army,” he said. “That’s where they’ll go. Someone will wonder who we are, and then throw them in a dumpster. This is what is going to happen.”

“I told you to go to the doctor. What is it?”

“Maybe a bit of angina. I ran out of the pills.”

“God, Dad, I’ll just go to the pharmacy and get more. It’s no trouble.”

“Mortality,” he said. “I don’t like it.”

She was overeating, third serving of apple crisp, but somehow it calmed her down to think she was ruining her diet.

“What about the photos?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Your mother is in most of them. I suppose that’s making you stubborn.”

“I’m not stubborn.”

He shrugged. “Dumpster. Too bad.”

“All right, I’ll take them. But I’ll stick them in a closet.”

“There are some of me.”

“I’ll keep those.”

“I need to explain them to you,” he said, rising and pushing back his chair.

“Not today, Dad. Maybe next time I come.” Her voice sounded shrill even to herself.

He sat back down. A silence. Then he said, “Do you need money?”

“I have a job.” The sunlight filled his kitchen, bleaching out the failures of housekeeping. The stack of washed Styrofoam containers earmarked for recycling. The dish sponge that should be sent to the Centers for Disease Control.

“You’re not answering me, Ceel. Do you need a loan? A life scholarship.”

I am waiting to get the exhaust on the car fixed, she thought, but I’m not going to tell him it’s two grand.

“No thanks,” she said.

He was boiling water for coffee, which he made out of instant. “You don’t want your mother’s pictures,” he said, still turned away from her.

“It doesn’t really have a good vibe,” she said.

The water boiled, the teaspoon clinked in the mugs when he stirred.

“I was the one who loved you,” he said.

The instant coffee granules whirled around on the surface of the water in the mug, a whirlpool of bits that should have been real coffee, instead of this thing she would not ordinarily drink, and drank only to please him.

“I know it,” she said, sipping, scalding her tongue.

“I’m putting the crisp in the refrigerator,” he said.

It reminded her of Peter announcing what he was going to do. I’m going to brush my teeth now. I’m going to move this lamp so I can read.

Was that being married, where you had to announce everything except, I’m going to meet my admin now, and we’re going to a conference room where we’ll lock the door. Was that what it was like to live with somebody?

You couldn’t really tell what was normal in a marriage, there were so many ways to do it.

“My shrink says I have low self-esteem,” she said suddenly.

“I don’t believe in it.”

“Low self-esteem?”

“No. Shrinks. Too much whining. Look at you, why would you have low self-esteem? You have a job, and you look good. Men stare at you. I saw that when we went to the restaurant last time. Men look at you with interest.”

“Marriage is different,” she said.

“Tell me about it. You think your mother was easy to be married to? She was not a happy woman. A woman who is not happy makes a terrible wife.”

“And mother.”

“Of course. On the other hand, she was very intelligent. We thank God for small favors. I like that. Talking about Tchaikovsky so your head would spin around for the joy of it. She was smart. On the plus side, you’ve inherited her brains, Celia, that’s a benefit.”

“I’m ecstatic to know this.”

“All right, be sarcastic. I thought it was a good thing. You were bright as a button.”

“I never satisfied her.”

He drained his coffee, and set down the mug. “Correct. You never did.”

“I don’t suppose it was my job. My therapist says that. He said it wasn’t my job.”

“Why does he make it into a labor negotiation? Your job. Not your job. It just is.”

‘I hate my divorce.’”

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Her father, dismayed by the brink of the abyss to which she has brought the conversation, gets up, gathers her mug, and pours more hot water and instant coffee in it.

“This will cheer you up,” he says.

“I don’t think so, Daddy.” It’s only caffeine, the depressive’s go-to drug, she wants to tell him. Totally suitable for a visit to Leonia, where people don’t weep about divorces, if they’re unfortunate enough to screw up and get one.

Maybe, to judge by the perfect lawns, they never get divorces. Too chaotic. Too inefficient, to divide the marital property. At least she can keep the car, which is in need of an exhaust system. That could be symbolic of some deeper failure between herself and Peter. Flunking inspection because of a failed carbon emissions test. My life.

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Fifteen minutes later her father is dragging the wooden stepladder across the grass toward the apple tree and she’s afraid of him lifting the bough so it can rest on top of the ladder. It seems the tree has broken from being too fruitful, she thinks. Under the shady tree, her father smiles at her doubtfully.

“Come on now,” he says. “I love you. One out of two ain’t bad.” He gives her a hug, and thumps her back gently. She rests her head against his chest, home of his ageing heart, and she thinks of all the complexities of love, its peaks and valleys and surprises. He keeps her there until she has had enough and is ready to break away and move on.

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Later she is driving back to Manhattan with three plastic bags of apples in the back seat, rustling around in the wind from the open window. These gifts from her father, who had put them in her hands with the assurance he’d selected them carefully, both new-picked apples and drops, and couldn’t she use them both, he’d asked her, both the bruised and the ones perfect from the tree. “Some are good for cooking,” he’d said, “others you eat, of course, if you have any sense.”

The George Washington Bridge looms distantly, and the crowded on-ramp is fit to raise her blood pressure. The sun is beautiful on the River and for a split second she sees it. It is a piece of glory, she thinks.

Back in her apartment in Manhattan she goes online and sees somebody who actually looks quite promising.