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Good Harvest

By Catherine Sarah Young

The caretaker of The Orchard quietly observed the young woman carrying an urn to the center of the field. She watched her stop at the next available space for planting. She's not wearing black, he mused, snipping at the unruly branches of a tree. Indeed, her deep green flowered dress reminded him of a rainforest. He noticed the locket that she wore, shaped like a shell that sparkled in the sun.

The interesting people come here, he thought. The caretaker finished gardening school six months ago and unlike the rest of his classmates who went on to keep lush decorative gardens for the wealthy, he chose to work

here, at The Orchard. It was the first time he had observed someone come here to plant by herself.

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Chloe walked along the pathway, past the newly disturbed soil that faintly indicated the dead lives beneath. Further along she noticed how new life was starting to emerge beneath the plots where urns were buried earlier. She clutched the small urn she was carrying even harder. Though it was light, it felt as heavy as her heart. It was strange to say goodbye like this.

After a few minutes, she stopped and stared at the empty spot where she was to bury Samuel. This seemed adequate, she thought, thinking how she and Sam used to enjoy walking through orchards not unlike this one, though they were regular ones and not cemeteries.

“Do you need some help, miss?” she turned and saw the caretaker of the cemetery. It would take a while before she would think of this place as an orchard. She imagined him as a gardener, making sure something grew out of these urns.

"I'm alright, thank you..."

"Henry."

"Henry. Nice to meet you. I'm Chloe."

Henry stepped back, not wanting to interrupt. "I'll just be around if you need me."

"Thanks." Chloe smiled faintly and knelt at Samuel's burial spot. Placing the urn beside her, she took out a shovel from the kit they gave her and started to dig.

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Ten years after planting

Smiling at the apple tree, Chloe ran her eyes along the many fruits that now grew on the tree that once was Samuel's urn. She looked at the empty basket at her hip. It was going to be full today. She took her time harvesting the apples, only taking the best ones. Picking an apple from a nearby branch, she inhaled the sweet scent, ran her fingers on the waxy red skin, and placed it carefully in the basket. She would pause after a few minutes, running her hands on the bark of the tree. It

was strong, just like Sam had been. She placed her arms around the tree, laid her face on the trunk, and started to cry.

Several minutes later, Chloe backed away from the shade of the apple tree. Her Samuel. Now a strong tree that bore his favorite fruit.

The trees are well-kept here, she observed. All of those in her lane of The Orchard were starting to grow or were already bursting with ripe fruit. Apples, oranges, grapes. It was strange in a good way, all this life appearing after so much death.

Walking towards the end of the lane and inside the small building with a sign that said, "PACKING," Chloe handed her basket to the woman at the counter, who scanned her basket and engraved the apples one by one with The Orchard's logo and her late husband's initials. Chloe picked one up and examined it.

"You almost can't see it," she mused.

The Orchard's employee, whose nametag read, "Ursula", smiled sympathetically. "To us, they're not just ordinary apples. We hope you enjoy them."

Chloe nodded sadly as she brings the basket of engraved fruit back to the car. The kids at the homeless shelter would have a nice Thanksgiving dinner.

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Thirty years after planting

Henry, now middle-aged, sat near the edge of The Orchard. It had been a slow month, as it was not the peak season for most of the trees. His wise gray eyes perused the land. The owners of The Orchard were the ones who chose to plant their loved ones there, and after a few decades the ownership expanded and so did the land. The planted trees grew to resemble a tidy forest, with many decorated with photographs and mementos of the ones who passed away. He could no longer tell where The Orchard ended, and ecologists had confirmed years ago that the sheer number of trees lessened the pollution in the nearest city. Many of the trees were left to grow a bit wilder than he would have liked; some of the owners over the years had stopped visiting and the ripe fruit broke away to rot on the ground below. Those who had decided long ago that visits would be sporadic had signed a contract allowing the public to pick some of the fruit.

At least nothing went to waste, Henry thought, wearily brushing his hair behind his ear. He stood up and began the day's task of pruning.

A couple of hours later, he heard someone approach and brought his shears down. "Good morning."

"Hello, sir. I was wondering about the trees where anyone could pick from." The words came out of the mouth of a young man, who couldn't have been more than seventeen. Henry stared at the kid's ironed slacks and monogrammed jacket with a raised eyebrow. Unusual for his kind to be here, he thought.

"There are yellow tags for those. One over there's an apple tree that's a few decades old. There's some fruit up there."

"Thanks."

"You here for a friend?" Henry asked curiously.

"No, sir. I just heard about this place and wanted to see if I could bring fruit to this retirement home I

volunteer for." Gustavo unbuttoned his jacket. He should have changed after school.

"Well that tree grew from a soldier. Always grows well, but the widow is too old to come nowadays."

"A soldier?" asked Gustavo. "Which war?"

"The one where your kind and mine fought against each other," Henry wryly said, nodding to the kid's necktie that had the name of a private school for the city's elite.

"Sorry to hear." Gustavo shifted uneasily. His family had no idea about his activities outside of school. Really, he should have changed clothes.

"Don't be. Glad you're here. We don't see much of you kids around," said Henry kindly, and to his relief the kid turned around to walk in the direction of the apple tree.

Perhaps the goodness of the person determines how bountiful the harvest is, thought Gustavo, staring at the

branches that were starting to bear fruit. It was the only tree that had anything to pick on this lane.

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At the retirement home, Gustavo brought his harvest of fruit from The Orchard. It had been a good harvest, considering the strange weather they had been having. When his mother passed away last year, he walked around aimlessly in the city and walked into this beautiful home. There were several old people there, and, curious at the arrival of someone who clearly had years to go before retirement, they started talking to him. One even challenged him to a game of chess. He decided to volunteer after school several days a week. It helped with the loss of a parent. His snobbish friends would have found this silly, though they found most of what he did quite odd anyway, he thought with amusement.

On the weekends he helped to cook, and today the apples would help make some pie. The residents were usually complaining about the lack of treats. This is where volunteers stepped in, which the staff allowed sometimes.

Gustavo had never before cooked a meal in his life. His family always had a chef and maids to clean up. But

here he realized that he felt more alive talking to people with real problems and sometimes burning the bread if he wasn't too careful.

Most of the residents were napping, so he got to work alone. Two hours later, an apple pie was left baking in the oven, permeating the air with delicious smells. He still had some apples left over, which he brought over to the common room to place in the fruit basket. An hour later, his old friends starting to come in and it was a lovely afternoon of playing board games, dancing to music, and eating pie. At sundown, Gustavo said goodbye and went home.

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Before lights out, Marion, the resident's chief of staff, came over to make sure everyone was in bed. It was always rowdy when that boy came over, she thought fondly. She plumped the pillows on the couch and picked up a renegade plate on the table. Turning around, she jumped.

"Good God, I didn't hear you. Come to bed, love," said Marion.

The old woman, her silver hair pulled back in a bun, was clutching something in her hand. Smiling sheepishly, she said, "I'll be up in a minute." Then her gaze blurred

and Marion knew she was lost in her own world again. She murmured a good night and left, turning off most of the lights to nudge her last resident awake into going to bed. She was starting to lose her memory and the others generally left her alone. It won't be long now, Marion thought ruefully.

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In the dimly lit room, the old woman placed the apple on the table, using her fingers to trace the logo of The Orchard and the familiar initials that would have been missed by anyone who was hungry enough to bite into the fruit without noticing. She tugged onto the shell locket around her neck. A tear of remembering left her eye.

"Sam," she whispered.