

'Bout Apples

by Jake Hull

The white world had a weight like metal, the coldness of metal, the density of metal, and the impersonal neglect of metal. Sawyer had never seen a winter like this, in fact most people hadn't. It was a winter where everything just gave up, gave in; gave nothing. Even the ground gave no argument to the silent stubborn snow. The trees struck up no quarrels with the inches of ice imposing there will on the sagging branches of the pines. But at least those trees stood like humble guardians around a lone house which proudly thrust a single column of dull smoke into the even duller sky.

Sawyer trudged through the snow; his steps were brisk but there was no enthusiasm in them.

He had been here before only two weeks ago and was not excited to have to come back. It was even colder today than it was last time, even more metallic and harsh. He wrapped his long jacket more tightly around him. He was here though, for work, he had quotas to fill. His consolation was two-fold as he walked toward the house: it was the end of the month and this was his last case to close.

Sawyer walked toward the lone house with the sentinel trees. Behind him there were no tracks in the snow.

He climbed the steps gently not wanting to arouse any more attention than he needed to but the three stout wooden steps groaned under his weight -- these steps had barely been used this winter. As he stood in front of the door his hands patted his jacket in three places. He had three very important items, each essential to his job.

Knock. In his left breast pocket, the pocket of important documents, was a pamphlet for Abraham Orchards. Inside the well

designed pamphlet detailed the acreage, farming practices, sales reports, community outreach, and just about everything a potential investor would need to know about the orchard and its 'prize-winning Paradise apples.' The pamphlet even included a few words from founder Mick Abraham:

Here at Abraham Orchards we concern ourselves with not only growing the best damn apple this side o'heaven but also maintaining the health of the land. Because I'll be the first to say that if I was on my dying bed I'd want a little bite o'Paradise before I go. Every man, and woman, deserves that much.

What the pamphlet neglected to mention was that it was all bullshit.

Knock. Further down his jacket in a back pocket was a paring knife. It was small, the blade no longer than a child's thumb. The handle was a dark grainy wood, probably some exotic wood with a fancy name like Peruvian spalted Ash.

The knife didn't fit in your hand like any knife though, it fit like the woodworker sanded it to the lines and curves of your own palm. The blade was sharp and cut smoothly but wasn't so sharp that it was any more dangerous than any other knife. At least that's what Sawyer would say if he were trying to sell this special knife.

What he would neglect to mention was that he had about a hundred more in his car.

Knock. Lastly there was the apple in his right waist pocket. It might have been the most perfect apple. It was mostly red but the flushes of yellow, green, brown, and even darker reds crept up the side like waves or even subtle flames. It was gorgeous with the most apple shape an apple can have, perfect in its irregular roundness. The skin was firm but it wasn't tough. The flesh was

white like the snow on the ground and the moist flavor burst in your mouth when you bit it. It wasn't grainy or too juicy. There was nothing about this apple that could be faulted; it was like taking a bite out of Paradise. At least that's what the pamphlet in Sawyer's breast pocket would say if he told you to read it.

What neither the pamphlet nor Sawyer would mention is that the apple was poison.

Creaks in the floorboard heralded Delores Grisman as she made her way to the door.

"Yes?" She stood there in a dull knitted sweater.

"Good winter day to you ma'am. I was hoping to have a world with your husband..." He paused to give the impression that he was trying to remember the name. He knew the name.

"Walter, yes, Walter Grisman."

It was the end of the month and this was his last case. He knew the name.

"And who is asking for him?" Her voice was sweet, syrup over suspicion.

"Sawyer. Sawyer Hucklefin of Abraham Orchards." A toothy smile spread on his face.

"Sawyer? Hucklefin?" She drew each name out as if to test the credibility of the sounds.

The trick about Sawyer's job was that he had to switch names often. Overusing names or using ones that were too novel or

memorable were bad for business, word could spread. He wasn't as proud of this name as much as others but he thought it was clever nonetheless. Fortunately, the nature of his work stifled gossip.

"I came oh, about two weeks ago to talk to your husband about investment opportunities with the Orchard."

It had been exactly two weeks ago.

"Very well...Walter! There's a..." She looked at Sawyer, "Sawyer Hucklefin to see you."

"Who in the hell is Sawyer Hugglebin?" A coarse growl made its way from a not too distant arm chair recliner.

"Says he saw you some two weeks ago," She hadn't stopped looking at Sawyer, "'bout apples."

"Oh uh, one minute Dee." Walter's tone changed.

"Would you like to come in Mr. Hucklefin?"

"It'll be a short visit. Lots of work still to catch up on today." Sawyer laughed nervously. Truth was: He had no work to catch up on. This was it. He'd close this case and tonight he'd celebrate with another agent - a luscious, long-legged agent with blanched almond eyes.

"It's the end of the month you know."

"I'll put on some tea. Come, I insist."

"I insist." Sawyer's face lost humor.

There was no need to waste anyone's time with courtesies; he had given them two weeks already. Delore's face looked severe and broadcast her discomfort. It was the creaking floorboards under Walter's cumbersome gait that stifled the tension.

"Dee, why don't you go fix some tea."

Walter looked at his wife who busy re-examining the stranger. So Walter grabbed his wife's shoulders and motioned her inside.

"Go on now."

She went.

"Sorry for uh, for that."

"No apology Walter. I suspect I deserve at least that." Sawyer gave a genuine smile but Walter, poor poor Walter let out the queerest noise somewhere between a chuckle, a whimper, and a hiccup.

"It's really been two weeks?"

Sawyer nodded.

"And Hugglebin? That's what you're callin' yourself these days?"

"It's Hucklefin actually, sort of a play on some names from...." He had hoped to see recognition crawl onto Walter's face -- dimmer than coal. "Yes, it's been two weeks. It's the end of the month."

Walter's arms had been crossed but now his right hand was covering his mouth, doing a poor shaky job it. No happiness was left in that man and his face melted into sobs. Sawyer just sighed.

"Listen, I already gave you the two week extension. I'm just...I have to...It's my job."

Sawyer watched Walter falling apart in front of him. This was the 'reaction' and Sawyer had seen it. He had seen it on hundreds of faces which twisted and wrenched, the courage falling like dandruff, like snow. Don't kill the messenger.

"You know," Walter's words were soaking wet, "however much you prepare for it, you never really are ready."

The kettle in the kitchen erupted into a whistle.

"Do you hear that Walter?" Sawyer spoke -- calm as the undisturbed snow behind him. "That's the kettle boiling which means the tea will be ready soon. More than that it means that hopefully your wife can't hear you dissolving into a pile of blubber right now. Is that what you want her to hear?"

Walter was remarkably pathetic.

"You've got to pull yourself together." It was time to close the deal; this case was long overdue. "You have two choices. Come with me or..."

Sawyer pulled the apple from his pocket. Walter's eyes grew at the sight of it. Their eyes always went mad for the way that apple looked. Walter slowly picked it from Sawyer's hand.

"But what'll she do? What'll she do without me? Dee??"

"It's not her time Walter." Sawyer put his free hand on Walter's shoulder. "Look, I checked the lists for the next few months. I didn't see her name."

Walter looked up and then back at the apple appraising the worth of the cold tiny globe.

"I'll tell you what sir," Sawyer jumped into a pitch, "I'll give you a taste of our prize-winning, world famous, Paradise apples."

Walter's face jerked into the goofy confused look that old men pioneered because he didn't see Delores coming up from behind. Sawyer grabbed the knife from his left pocket and started to make a slice.

"No! I don't want to dirty your knife Mr. Hucklefin."

"I'll tell you what Walter, I'm gonna go ahead and give you this knife. Think of it as an extension of Mick Abraham's good will." Sawyer winked. "It's my only one though, so don't go and lose her."

Sawyer reached into the last pocket and slid the pamphlet out, handing it also to Walter.

"Thanks again for your time Mr. and Mrs. Grisman."

With an over-tight handshake to them both Sawyer turned. He walked casually down the steps pausing at the bottom.

"I do hope to see both of you around the orchard next fall. It'll be a great harvest."

With a jerky nod he set off. Case closed. Tonight would be a celebration. He would take the other agent out, they'd eat dinner -- one nicer than either could afford. They'd get back to his place and drink more, enough to forget about what they'd do to each other as well as neglect any thought of work for at least the weekend. Sawyer smiled as he walked away in big enthusiastic steps.

Walter and Delores didn't notice that Sawyer Hucklefin left no tracks in the snow.

Sawyer reached his car and unlocked it. The metal door screeched as it opened, the sound of cold metal waking from hibernation. He looked back at the lone house now in the distance; his breath trailed from his mouth like the smoke from the chimney. He knew he shouldn't have lied to Walter about Delores but he figured things would work themselves out, they usually did.

He stepped into his car which was no warmer than the winter air; the leather seats were stiff. Sawyer turned the key and his car coughed to life. He checked his watch — 4:48. At least two hours to kill before his date. He leaned over to the list that sat in the passenger seat and scanned to the bottom. He crossed off two names: Walter Grisman and Delores Grisman. .

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Walter and Delores walked back to their living room. The warm tea was waiting for them. Walter never really liked tea but Delores was so dutiful about it. She could live off Earl Grey.

“That Mr. Hucklefin was...” Delores started.

“A sure strange fella?” Walter finished. “You believe it. Hucklefin...” Walter almost managed a laugh.

“He really from some orchard?”

Walter was lost in thought.

“Walter?”

“Oh, yeah honey, he sure is from Abraham Orchards. Came a while back about investin'. Seems like a fair place.”

“Two weeks wasn't it?” She asked. She knew the answer. “You know Walter these past two weeks I swear you've been in some kind of rut at least until today. This young man have anything to do with that?”

“No no ma'am,” Walter smiled at his wife. “He's just doing his job.” He walked over to sit beside his wife. He set the pamphlet down on the table followed by the knife and the apple.

“Supper's a ways off. How 'bout we try that apple.” Delores suggested. “After all, if we're gonna be investin' our retirement in this orchard,” She picked up the apple and looked at it. “It better be the best damn apple this side of heaven.”

Delores laughed but Walter's eyes filled with the wettest tears, as wet as tears can be. He took the knife and cut two big slices.

It was the best goddamn apple he had ever tasted.

