

# Orchard

by Jürgen Fauth

In April, my uncle's cherry orchard is an amazing sight. I used to score girls by taking them on a ride past Frauenstein, up on a hill where you could see the trees, the whole lot of them sparkling white and pink in the breeze. Then we'd go for a walk through the orchard to my special tree, where I had a ladder set up so you could get to one of the branches in the crown. We'd smoke a joint and then climb up higher to where you could stick your head out on top. It felt like coming up from a dive in an ocean of cherry blossoms, like taking a swim in cherry blossom seas. Girls loved it, and to be honest, I loved it too. The girls were just an added bonus.

At night, I'd often drink whiskey with my uncle and we'd take walks through the moonlit orchard, talking about the old days when I was a boy and my parents were still alive. He's a good man, my uncle, and a great cherry farmer.

Recently, though, things have been different. First of all, I'm older and I've been growing a bit of a paunch. My good looks and boyish charms are getting away from me. I can tell. Convincing girls - women, really - to take a ride with me is more of a challenge than it used to be.

And the orchard's facing worse problems: my uncle says that every year, summer has been coming earlier and the cherries are rotting on the trees. He's lost money for three years running. One year, half his harvest had worms, and many trees are dying from a bark disease related to the weather. Uncle tried to explain it to me, how the health of the trees hangs in a precarious balance, the way the weather, the worms, the water in the soil, and the fertilizer have to come together. "Like a hammock strung up on ten different poles," he said. "If one is missing or hanging too high or too low, you're going to roll out of the hammock and bump your head."

A cherry orchard with dead trees is a sorry sight. Cherries with worms in them are an awful thing. It can scar you for life, biting into a worm, spitting it out and then checking the remaining half of the cherry to find a wiggling mealy-white maggot. This happened to a redhead I picked up in a Frankfurt biergarten last summer, and I doubt she'll ever eat another cherry again in her life. She gagged for several minutes, didn't want to come for dinner afterwards, and hasn't called me since. Uncle definitely had to do something about his orchard, or pack it in for good.

He really didn't have much of a choice, then, when the man from Monsanto came with his suitcase full of studies and sample seeds, and made his proposition. Genetically modified cherry fertilizer had been used to great success in Japan, home of the most amazing cherry blossoms in the world, and even Washington, D.C. was considering Monsanto products for its famous trees at the Jefferson Memorial. The first year was free, the case studies were more than promising, the research nothing short of amazing. Uncle signed, and soon began to spread the fertilizer that subtly altered the DNA of his trees and made them resistant to worms, bark rot, and the onslaught of the seasons.

I could never get a satisfying answer out of him about the side effects, whether or not the man from Monsanto had told him about that. I first noticed it in early April, when I took a girl named Sue I picked up at an orphanage in Wuppertal to the orchard. We were sitting on the top branch of my special tree, high as kites, sticking our heads through the canopy of blossoms, when Sue asked me why all the tiny leaves had tiny corporate logos on them. We'd smoked some powerful Amsterdam weed, and so I giggled for a bit before I realized she was serious and investigated a blossom myself. She was right: every little petal showed a company logo: the Nike swoosh, the Yahoo "y" with exclamation point, a tiny Coca-Cola mark, the McDonald's golden arches, and so forth. Sue and I laughed and

laughed, but later that night, with a glass of Scotch in my hand, I asked Uncle about it, and he just shrugged.

"Remember how I told you about the hammock? Now my orchard is propped up like a Formica counter - the weather and the worms, none of it really matters any more."

And he was right. In the summer, none of the trees got sick, and not a single cherry had worms. Instead, they showed the logos on their ripe red skins. People didn't seem to mind, and bought cherries like they did in the old days. I never took another girl there again, but Uncle thought it was a small price to pay for a healthy orchard and a booming business.

