

# OF *Withered* APPLES

PHILIP K. DICK

SOMETHING was tapping on the window. Blowing up against the pane, again and again. Carried by the wind. Tapping faintly, insistently.

Lori, sitting on the couch, pretended not to hear. She gripped her book tightly and turned a page. The tapping came again, louder and more imperative. It could not be ignored.

"Darn!" Lori said, throwing her book down on the coffee table and hurrying to the window. She grasped the heavy brass handles and lifted.

For a moment the window resisted. Then, with a protesting groan, it reluctantly rose. Cold autumn air rushed into the room. The bit of leaf ceased tapping and swirled against the woman's throat, dancing to the floor.

Lori picked the leaf up. It was old and brown. Her heart skipped a beat as she slipped the leaf into the pocket of her jeans. Against her loins the leaf cut and tingled, a little hard point piercing her smooth skin and sending exciting shudders up and down

her spine. She stood at the open window a moment, sniffing the air. The air was full of the presence of trees and rocks, of great boulders and remote places. It was time—time to go again. She touched the leaf. She was *wanted*.

Quickly Lori left the big living-room, hurrying through the hall into the dining-room. The dining-room was empty. A few chords of laughter drifted from the kitchen. Lori pushed the kitchen door open. "Steve?"

Her husband and his father were sitting around the kitchen table, smoking their cigars and drinking steaming black coffee. "What is it?" Steve demanded, frowning at his young wife. "Ed and I are in the middle of business."

"I—I want to ask you something."

The two men gazed at her, brown-haired Steven, his dark eyes full of the stubborn dignity of New England men, and his father, silent and withdrawn in *her* presence. Ed Patterson scarcely noticed her. He rustled

through a sheaf of feed bills, his broad back turned toward her.

"What is it?" Steve demanded impatiently. "What do you want? Can't it wait?"

"I have to go," Lori blurted "Go where?"

"Outside." Anxiety flooded over her. "This is the last time. I promise. I won't go again, after this. Okay?" She tried to smile, but her heart was pounding too hard. "Please let me, Steve."

"Where does she go?" Ed rumbled.

Steve grunted in annoyance. "Up in the hills. Some old abandoned place up there."

Ed's gray eyes flickered. "Abandoned farm?"

"Yes. You know it?"

"The old Rickley farm. Rickley moved away years ago. Couldn't get anything to grow, not up there. Ground's all rocks. Bad soil. A lot of clay and stones. The place is all overgrown, tumbled down."

"What kind of farm was it?"

"Orchard. Fruit orchard. Never yielded a damn thing. Thin old trees. Waste of effort."

Steve looked at his pocket watch. "You'll be back in time to fix dinner?"

"Yes!" Lori moved toward the door. "Then I can go?"

Steve's face twisted as he made up his mind. Lori waited

impatiently, scarcely breathing. She had never got used to Vermont men and their slow, deliberate way. Boston people were quite different. And her group had been more the college youths, dances and talk, and late laughter.

"Why do you go up there?" Steve grumbled.

"Don't ask me, Steve. Just let me go. This is the last time." She writhed in agony. She clenched her fists. "Please!"

Steve looked out the window. The cold autumn wind swirled through the trees. "All right. But it's going to snow. I don't see why you want to—"

Lori ran to get her coat from the closet. "I'll be back to fix dinner!" she shouted joyfully. She hurried to the front porch, buttoning her coat, her heart racing. Her cheeks were flushed a deep, excited red as she closed the door behind her, her blood pounding in her veins.

Cold wind whipped against her, rumpling her hair, plucking at her body. She took a deep breath of the wind and started down the steps.

She walked rapidly onto the field, toward the bleak line of hills beyond. Except for the wind there was no sound. She patted her pocket. The dry leaf broke and dug hungrily into her.

"I'm coming . . ." she whis-

pered, a little awed and frightened. "I'm on my way. . . ."

HIGHER and higher the woman climbed. She passed through a deep cleft between two rocky ridges. Huge roots from old stumps spurted out on all sides. She followed a dried-up creek bed, winding and turning.

After a time low mists began to blow about her. At the top of the ridge she halted, breathing deeply, looking back the way she had come.

A few drops of rain stirred the leaves around her. Again the wind moved through the great dead trees along the ridge. Lori turned and started on, her head down, hands in her coat pockets.

She was on a rocky field, overgrown with weeds and dead grass. After a time she came to a ruined fence, broken and rotting. She stepped over it. She passed a tumbled-down well, half filled with stones and earth.

Her heart beat quickly, fluttering with nervous excitement. She was almost there. She passed the remains of a building, sagging timbers and broken glass, a few ruined pieces of furniture strewn nearby. An old automobile tire caked and cracked. Some damp rags heaped over rusty, bent bed-springs.

And there it was—directly ahead.

Along the edge of the field was a grove of ancient trees. Lifeless trees, withered and dead, their thin, blackened stalks rising up leaflessly. Broken sticks stuck in the hard ground. Row after row of dead trees, some bent and leaning, torn loose from the rocky soil by the unending wind.

Lori crossed the field to the trees, her lungs laboring painfully. The wind surged against her without respite, whipping the foul-smelling mists into her nostrils and face. Her smooth skin was damp and shiny with the mist. She coughed and hurried on, stepping over the rocks and clods of earth, trembling with fear and anticipation.

She circled around the grove of trees, almost to the edge of the ridge. Carefully, she stepped among the sliding heaps of rocks. Then—

She stopped, rigid. Her chest rose and fell with the effort of breathing. "I came," she gasped.

For a long time she gazed at the withered old apple tree. She could not take her eyes from it. The sight of the ancient tree fascinated and repelled her. It was the only one alive, the only tree of all the grove still living. All the others were dead, dried-up. They had lost the struggle. But this tree still clung to life.

The tree was hard and barren. Only a few dark leaves hung from it—and some withered apples, dried and seasoned by the wind and mists. They had stayed there, on the branches, forgotten and abandoned. The ground around the tree was cracked and bleak. Stones and decayed heaps of old leaves in ragged clumps.

"I came," Lori said again. She took the leaf from her pocket and held it cautiously out. "This tapped at the window. I knew when I heard it." She smiled mischievously, her red lips curling. "It tapped and tapped, trying to get in. I ignored it. It was so—so impetuous. It annoyed me."

The tree swayed ominously. Its gnarled branches rubbed together. Something in the sound made Lori pull away. Terror rushed through her. She hurried back along the ridge, scrambling frantically out of reach.

"Don't," she whispered. "Please."

The wind ceased. The tree became silent. For a long time Lori watched it apprehensively.

Night was coming. The sky was darkening rapidly. A burst of frigid wind struck her, half turning her around. She shuddered, bracing herself against it, pulling her long coat around her. Far below, the floor of the val-

ley was disappearing into shadow, into the vast cloud of night.

In the darkening mists the tree was stern and menacing, more ominous than usual. A few leaves blew from it, drifting and swirling with the wind. A leaf blew past her and she tried to catch it. The leaf escaped, dancing back toward the tree. Lori followed a little way and then stopped, gasping and laughing.

"No," she said firmly, her hands on her hips. "I won't."

There was silence. Suddenly the heaps of decayed leaves blew up in a furious circle around the tree. They quieted down, settling back.

"No," Lori said. "I'm not afraid of you. You can't hurt me." But her heart was hammering with fear. She moved back farther away.

The tree remained silent. Its wiry branches were motionless.

Lori regained her courage. "This is the last time I can come," she said. "Steve says I can't come any more. He doesn't like it."

She waited, but the tree did not respond.

"They're sitting in the kitchen. The two of them. Smoking cigars and drinking coffee. Adding up feed bills." She wrinkled her nose. "That's all they ever do. Add and subtract feed bills. Figure and figure. Profit and loss.



Government taxes. Depreciation on the equipment."

The tree did not stir.

Lori shivered. A little more rain fell, big icy drops that slid down her cheeks, down the back of her neck and inside her heavy coat.

She moved closer to the tree. "I won't be back. I won't see you again. This is the last time. I wanted to tell you. . . ."

The tree moved. Its branches whipped into sudden life. Lori felt something hard and thin cut across her shoulder. Something caught her around the waist, tugging her forward.

She struggled desperately, trying to pull herself free. Suddenly the tree released her. She stumbled back, laughing and trembling with fear. "No!" she gasped. "You can't have me!" She hurried to the edge of the ridge. "You'll never get me again. Understand? And I'm not afraid of you!"

She stood, waiting and watching, trembling with cold and fear. Suddenly she turned and fled, down the side of the ridge, sliding and falling on the loose stones. Blind terror gripped her. She ran on and on, down the steep slope, grabbing at roots and weeds—

Something rolled beside her shoe. Something small and hard. She bent down and picked it up.

It was a little dried apple.

Lori gazed back up the slope at the tree. The tree was almost lost in the swirling mists. It stood, jutting up against the black sky, a hard unmoving pillar.

Lori put the apple in her coat pocket and continued down the side of the hill. When she reached the floor of the valley she took the apple out of her pocket.

It was late. A deep hunger began to gnaw inside her. She thought suddenly of dinner, the warm kitchen, the white tablecloth. Steaming stew and biscuits.

As she walked she nibbled on the little apple.

LORI sat up in bed, the covers falling away from her. The house was dark and silent. A few night noises sounded faintly, far off. It was past midnight. Beside her Steven slept quietly, turned over on his side.

What had wakened her? Lori pushed her dark hair back out of her eyes, shaking her head. What—

A spasm of pain burst loose inside her. She gasped and put her hand to her stomach. For a time she wrestled silently, jaws locked, swaying back and forth.

The pain went away. Lori sank back. She cried out, a faint, thin cry. "Steve—"

Steven stirred. He turned over a little, grunting in his sleep.

The pain came again. Harder. She fell forward on her face, writhing in agony. The pain ripped at her, tearing at her belly. She screamed, a shrill wail of fear and pain.

Steve sat up. "For God's sake—" He rubbed his eyes and snapped on the lamp. "What the hell—"

Lori lay on her side, gasping and moaning, her eyes staring, knotted fists pressed into her stomach. The pain twisted and seared, devouring her, eating into her.

"Lori!" Steven grated. "What is it?"

She screamed. Again and again. Until the house rocked with echoes. She slid from the bed, onto the floor, her body writhing and jerking, her face unrecognizable.

Ed came hurrying into the room, pulling his bathrobe around him. "What's going on?"

The two men stared helplessly down at the woman on the floor.

"Good God," Ed said. He closed his eyes.

THE day was cold and dark. Snow fell silently over the streets and houses, over the red brick county hospital building. Doctor Blair walked slowly up

the gravel path to his Ford car. He slid inside and turned the ignition key. The motor leaped alive, and he let the brake out.

"I'll call you later," Doctor Blair said. "There are certain particulars."

"I know," Steve muttered. He was still dazed. His face was gray and puffy from lack of sleep.

"I left some sedatives for you. Try to get a little rest."

"You think," Steve asked suddenly, "if we had called you earlier—"

"No." Blair glanced up at him sympathetically. "I don't. In a thing like that, there's not much chance. Not after it's burst."

"Then it *was* appendicitis?"

Blair nodded. "Yes."

"If we hadn't been so damn far out," Steve said bitterly. "Stuck out in the country. No hospital. Nothing. Miles from town. And we didn't realize at first—"

"Well, it's over now." The upright Ford moved forward a little. All at once a thought came to the Doctor. "One more thing."

"What is it?" Steve said dully.

Blair hesitated. "Post mortems—very unfortunate. I don't think there's any reason for one in this case. I'm certain in my own mind. . . . But I wanted to ask—"

"What is it?"

"Is there anything the girl might have swallowed? Did she

put things in her mouth? Needles—while she was sewing? Pins, coins, anything like that? Seeds? Did she ever eat watermelon? Sometimes the appendix—”

“No.”

Steve shook his head wearily. “I don’t know.”

“It was just a thought.” Doctor Blair drove slowly off down the narrow tree-lined street, leaving two dark streaks, two soiled lines that marred the pale, glistening snow.

**S**PRING came, warm and sunny. The ground turned black and rich. Overhead the sun shone, a hot white orb, full of strength.

“Stop here,” Steve murmured.

Ed Patterson brought the car to a halt at the side of the street. He turned off the motor. The two men sat in silence, neither of them speaking.

At the end of the street children were playing. A high school boy was mowing a lawn, pushing the machine over the wet grass. The street was dark in the shade of the great trees growing along each side.

“Nice,” Ed said.

Steve nodded without answering. Moodily, he watched a young girl walking by, a shopping bag under her arm. The girl climbed the stairs of a porch and

disappeared into an old-fashioned yellow house.

Steve pushed the car door open. “Come on. Let’s get it over with.”

Ed lifted the wreath of flowers from the back seat and put them in his son’s lap. “You’ll have to carry it. It’s your job.”

“All right.” Steve grabbed the flowers and stepped out onto the pavement.

The two men walked up the street together, silent and thoughtful.

“It’s been seven or eight months, now,” Steve said abruptly.

“At least.” Ed lit the cigar as they walked along, puffing clouds of gray smoke around them. “Maybe a little more.”

“I never should have brought her up here. She lived in town all her life. She didn’t know anything about the country.”

“It would have happened anyhow.”

“If we had been closer to a hospital—”

“The doctor said it wouldn’t have made any difference. Even if we’d called him right away instead of waiting until morning.” They came to the corner and turned. “And as you know—”

“Forget it,” Steve said, suddenly tense.

The sounds of the children

had fallen behind them. The houses had thinned out. Their footsteps rang out against the pavement as they walked along.

"We're almost there," Steve said.

They came to a rise. Beyond the rise was a heavy brass fence, running the length of a small field. A green field, neat and even. With carefully placed plaques of white marble crisscrossing it.

"Here we are," Steve said tightly.

"They keep it nice."

"Can we get in from this side?"

"We can try." Ed started along the brass fence, looking for a gate.

Suddenly Steve halted, grunting. He stared across the field, his face white. "Look."

"What is it?" Ed took off his glasses to see. "What you looking at?"

"I was right." Steve's voice was low and indistinct. "I thought there was something. Last time we were here. . . . I saw. . . . You see it?"

"I'm not sure. I see the tree, if that's what you mean."

In the center of the neat green field the little apple tree rose proudly. Its bright leaves sparkled in the warm sunlight. The young tree was strong and very healthy. It swayed confidently with the wind, its supple trunk moist with sweet spring sap.

"They're red," Steve said softly. "They're already red. How the hell can they be red? It's only April. How the hell can they be red so soon?"

"I don't know," Ed said. "I don't know anything about apples." A strange chill moved through him. But graveyards always made him uncomfortable. "Maybe we ought to go."

"Her cheeks were that color," Steve said, his voice low. "When she had been running. Remember?"

The two men gazed uneasily at the little apple tree, its shiny red fruit glistening in the spring sunlight, branches moving gently with the wind.

"I remember, all right," Ed said grimly. "Come on." He took his son's arm insistently, the wreath of flowers forgotten. "Come on, Steve. Let's get out of here."

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