

Rotten

by Justice McCray

“Do not steal apples from the tree,” Esme said. She mimicked the words of the sign a few skips behind her. “They are rotten.” She dragged an empty sack down the uneven dirt path, periodically detaching it from the thieving roots that sprouted from the ground and tugged by the pouch without warning. The burlap appeared strong but ripped an inch at the stress of the fourth tug-of-war.

The dirt path was swept up by the base of a green apple tree roughly two adults tall. The surrounding woods scratched the sky, but they did not bare the kind of fruit Esme longed for. The hamlet of green and brown was protected by shade and distance, as it hid a mile away from the destruction of human hands. The walkway ending tree began a small patch of ruby spotted fruit trees, but those were not the trees that caught Esme’s attention. Her intentions stood in front of her, hiding its green goodies underneath its leaves.

Esme examined the green apples carefully and chuckled. “Stupid sign,” she said. She knew she could easily fill her bag up with the fruit of this tree alone. She stood on her toes to grab an apple that shined with the single drop of sunlight that lit up the clearing. The apple was too far out of reach, but Esme reached higher anyway. With no avail, she decided to climb the tree that tripled her in size. Her shoes gripped bark four feet from the ground, one arm wrapped around a branch as she twisted her green gold off of the tree. When Esme tugged the apple off of its stem, the snap she heard was far louder than expected. A scream awoke the sleeping wood.

The branch Esme supported herself with had broken, and Esme fell. She braced herself for the taste of dirt, apple clenched tight above her head, and she closed her eyes. She jolted them back open at the sound of a second exclamation and saw her feet dangle below her. She felt a splintering pain in her wrist and saw it somehow cuffed to a higher branch.

“Ow!” a voice said, “You hurt me!”

Esme looked around her world ferociously, trying to identify the owner of the voice that echoed in front of her. “Who’s there?” she said.

“Why do you come here to hurt me?” said the voice.

“Show yourself, demon!” Esme wiggled and fidgeted in an effort to break free of the branch’s grip. With no warning, the branch pulled her up and stirred her body like a pubescent pitcher of lemonade.

“I am the tree of which you came to purge. You step on me, you steal from me, you break my branches, and you have the nerve to call me a demon?” The tree stopped shaking the girl. “If anyone here is a demon, it is you, child.”

“How are you talking? Where is your face?”

“I don’t show my face to anyone who can’t recognize beauty.”

“Well if you let me go, I won’t ever bother you again.”

The tree stood silent for a moment, as most trees do.

“Well?” Esme said. “What are you waiting for?”

“Tell me girl, was there no sign along my trail forbidding my fruit and the fruit of my sisters?”

“No one owns these woods. The apples belong to everyone.”

“Answer my question, girl.”

“The sign said not to steal the apples from the tree because they’re rotten, but the apples on your branches are clearly fresh.”

“Who said it was the apples that were rotten?”

“My bad.”

“Yes, you’re bad. Let go of my apple and I will let you go.”

“No. This is my apple. I picked it fair and square.”

“Is that so? Well if the devil child wants to play fair, then the devil child shouldn’t mind me breaking off one of her branches? It’s only fair.”

Esme’s eyes bulged and she looked to the sky for an angel to save her, but only saw the apple she refused to let go. “Wait!” she said, hoping the tree would listen. “If you want to be truly fair, you have to break my arm when I’m not expecting it. After all, you didn’t expect me to break your branch today, did you?”

“Child, I did not grow this branch just to hold you up.” The tree loosened its grip on Esme. “I will wait a little while, but then I will break your branch.”

“No you won’t!” Esme said. She swung her body forward and planted her feet flat on the tree’s side. Without hesitation she kicked herself up and off, snapping the branch that held her hostage. She fell on her arm, and the dirt from the path fogged the air briefly. All that was visible was the green shimmer in her hand.

“Devil child! Give me back my fruit, it’s not suitable for someone of your nature.”

“Why? Is it as bitter as you?” Esme chuckled at her own joke and took a bite of the apple.

“Child, I wish you hadn’t fallen so far. Now you must learn as I.”

The apple Esme so proudly held browned into a mush in her palm. She shook her hand and watched it sing a patter song, but the rotten goo consumed her arm, wrapped around her body, and swallowed her head. The brown coating that covered the girl hardened, and chipped away into bark. Her arms became the branches of an elongated stump, and without warning, broke off to become sticks in the dirt. They rolled over the empty sack, ripping it entirely.

“Child?”

The stump bore no leaves or fruit. It was rotten.