Ghost Apples by Jacob Wrich

**MY FATHER RETURNED** from war on an unseasonably warm afternoon in early April. That evening we ate pork chops with applesauce at the corner table in our cramped apartment and then walked along the shore of the Mississippi River. My father held my mother’s hand, and when we stopped walking to watch a kettle of turkey vultures circle high above the water, my father put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me to his side. A cold breeze rolled through the valley and under my T-shirt, and the temperature tumbled the way it does in spring in Minnesota when winter still refuses to concede.

We passed a lot of evenings walking along the river or, on colder days, listening to my mom read aloud the book she was writing. She lit candles and Dad and I sat on the couch with our eyes closed, listening to her tell the story of a brother and sister traveling back in time, seeing dinosaurs and cavemen, and later meeting Michelangelo. And when she finished reading her most recent edit, my father would say, “Sophie, you spin quite a yarn. Quite a yarn.” And he’d turn to me and say, “Champ, you got yourself one heck of a talented mom. Now go brush your teeth. It’s bedtime.”

Everything was complete until Dad started having nightmares.

When he had his first one, I thought there was a fight in the alley. Some nights, after bar close, I could hear men yelling, bottles breaking, and cars revving. But Dad’s nightmare was louder, closer. His voice was wrung with panic as he spit curses like spoiled milk. Maybe Dad was attacking some intruder, I thought, pulling the blankets up over my head. But between screams, Mom’s soothing voice swelled with urgency, “Thomas, wake up. It’s okay. Thomas. Tom, wake up!” Then a gasp of someone resuscitated from drowning. Then silence and muffled sobs.

After the first nightmare, I was less frightened. It happened most nights. On bad nights, the neighbors called 911. The police would knock on the door, and Mom would have to assure them that there was no disturbance. That my father had just been having a bad dream. One night the officer asked my mother to step out into the hall, leaving my father in the kitchen. The officer, his voice muffled through the closed door, asked my mother if she felt safe in her home. My dad, leaning against the counter and shaking his head as if trying to get water from his ears, perked up at this question. Mom’s disgusted laughter came into focus as she opened the door and returned to the apartment, closing the officer out in the hallway. She stopped laughing abruptly and wrapped her arms around Dad, resting her head on his chest.

One day, after picking me up from school, Dad plucked a blaze-orange eviction notice from our door. He handed it to my mom, who stopped prepping dinner and said, “Seven days? Are you kidding? How is he going to give us only seven days? There’s got to be a law . . .”

“I’m sorry. It’s my fault. I mean, the police have been here how many times now?” My dad squeezed the bridge of his nose and shook his head.

Mom set the orange slip on the counter. “There’s always my family’s orchard. Might be nice to get out of the city,” she said. “We can’t have a dog here anyways.”

That was the first I had heard about the dog. While I was at school, Mom and Dad had been going to appointments at the VA hospital and meeting with a psychologist about Dad’s nightmares. The psychologist introduced Dad to a nonprofit that assigned service dogs to veterans suffering from PTSD. That, along with the eviction, is how we ended up living on a forty-acre apple orchard in Hillsville. And it’s how we got Maggie, a golden retriever with fur the color of sunrise.

**We moved** to the abandoned orchard in early June when the apple trees, laid out in neat rows, were still feathered with white and pink blossoms. Maggie stuck close to Dad’s side as we walked the aisles between tangled branches. We listened to Mom’s stories of visiting the orchard as a young girl, of eating apples off the trees and looking for salamanders under the rocks near the creek with her cousin Bernice. When my mom had gone up ahead of us and Dad and I were alone, I looked up at his coarse face framed by the trembling apple blossoms, and he said, “Look at this place, Champ. This place is magical.” I kind of laughed, and Dad said matter-of-factly, “I’m not kidding. Feel that? There’s magic here.”

And the orchard felt magical at times. Dad’s nighttime screams became less frequent. Some nights I heard nothing but the buzzing insects and grumbling frogs. Other nights, just a few short bursts of curses before Maggie would nuzzle the light switch on and tug the blankets to wake my father. I would know my father had a bad dream when I heard the kitchen faucet running. The doctor had told him that when he wakes, he should get a glass of water rather than falling back asleep. The simple act of getting out of bed to get a drink acted as a kind of reset.

Other days it felt less magical and more like work. The orchard had been in the family for three generations, but no one had lived there since my great-aunt and -uncle left twenty-five years earlier. By July my hands were rough from dragging dead branches. We made a brush pile in the woods. “A fine place for animals to make their homes,” Dad said.

On rainy days, my father worked on the floor. Looking through a small hole he had cut, we could see layer upon layer of floors laid one on top of another. Like with the rings of a tree, we traced the history of the floor backward through time. From the faux-wood laminate, to tile, to linoleum, and down to the original hardwood oak. My dad wanted to restore the original floors, and that meant peeling back the old floors one layer at a time. I had to haul the old flooring, load after load, by wheelbarrow to a spot behind the shed.

Despite all the hard work, the orchard still occasionally unveiled its magic. On clear mornings, I’d sneak out just before sunrise and lie on my back between rows of apple trees and watch as the sun peaked above the rooftop, its orange rays reaching like arms of victory toward the ever-lightening sky. I’d wait there, the morning dew wetting my clothes, until the sun was total over the house, and I’d stare down the long row of trees, their branches shrinking into the distance like a child’s drawing of an echo. Then I’d return to the house, greeted by the smell of coffee and pancakes.

One day, with steady rain drumming the windows, my father chipping up a layer of red-and-white checkered tiles, and my mother typing away in the study, I started digging through a closet in the upstairs spare bedroom. I brushed past a sky-colored dress with white lace, a tuxedo wrapped in plastic, and a young girl’s red velvet Christmas dress and black suede shoes. I dug through a box of old newspapers, books on baseball, a *Farmers’ Almanac,* dust-coated church cookbooks, a boxed collection of books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, a King James Bible. And in the back of the closet, underneath some old brown work boots and a pair of unfinished mittens, I found a brown leatherbound book branded with the word *Journal.*

And that’s how I fell in love with my mom’s cousin Bernice.

There was nothing special about anything that Bernice had written in the journal. Half the pages were empty, and of the pages she had written on, half of them just had simple little drawings of flowers and insects and suns with stick-rays shooting out. Other pages had little poems that I would read over and over. And other pages had more traditional journal entries. Just little moments in Bernice’s life. The thoughts and feelings of a thirteen-year-old girl growing up on the very orchard where I found myself, just a year younger than her when she wrote it. Bernice wrote about a crush she had on a boy at church named Silas, crocheting mittens for her mom for Christmas, all the deer roaming the orchard in the autumn evenings, wanting to be a musical theater actress on Broadway, that she felt dumb at school because she had to wear the dresses that her mom made.

Reading her journal was the first time I recall identifying with another’s feelings. What some might call empathy, but it was more than that. It was a feeling that we are all connected through some common innate experience. In a world where we try to identify what makes us different, her journal was a reminder that we are of the same species. And though it was her journal entries that pulled me in, it was her poetry that kept me returning. She had little phrases that I found enchanting, that would singsong through my head as I hauled old flooring or dragged branches to the brush pile. One called “If You Love Me” was my favorite.

*If you love me, hold me
By the middle. I’ll break
If you hold too close
To the edges.
If you love me, don’t
Let go or I will tumble
Like water down a fall.*

And because I loved my mom’s cousin Bernice, who I now felt I knew more intimately than even my mother did, though I had never met her, I dreamed of holding her between the rows of apple trees. I dreamed of her singing show tunes as the sun came up. I dreamed we danced together, her movements ever graceful against my awkward body.

The summer went by fast but slow. Mom finished the copyedits on her book and sent the manuscript to the publisher. Dad got stung by several ground bees, which we eventually drowned by covering the hole with a window screen and pouring water down it. A family of three foxes showed up at dusk most nights and came within twenty feet of the front porch before running off when Maggie, curled at my dad’s feet, would finally get up and growl. I caught a painted turtle, named it Fred, and kept it in a tub in the yard until a raccoon ate all four of its legs. Then one morning I saw that Fred had laid three eggs, so I changed her name to Frida.

Dad’s nightmares got worse over the Fourth of July week. The days were humid and the curtains danced in the breeze of the hot nights. Fireworks exploded periodically and sometimes in rapid succession in the distance. I got out of bed every couple of hours to put more aloe on my sunburned chest and neck. Maggie got bloodied a couple of times that week when she tried to wake Dad from his nightmares and he started swinging his fists and hit the dog in the snout. Mom applied bacitracin to Maggie’s cuts, but she would lick it off before the cuts had time to heal. Dad gave Maggie bacon off his own breakfast plate and patted her head, and once I heard him apologize as he gave Maggie a dried pig’s ear.

And then August came and most of the floors were ripped bare down to the original oak, which was covered in deep grooves and scars that Dad sanded out. We burned most of the old flooring in the pit behind the shed, the linoleum and tile billowing coal-black smoke that sucked the air out of my chest anytime I had to get close enough to toss more on the fire. The smell lingered in the air for weeks until the nights turned cooler. And by the end of August, Dad had the floor cleaned up good as new and was brushing on a second coat of stain when Mom took me to the middle school to enroll me for the upcoming school year.

I imagined Bernice walking the bleak halls of this tiny school in her handmade dresses, making eyes at the boy named Silas, who was oblivious to Bernice’s depths and her beautiful words. And though I recognized that I had no knowledge of Silas other than the snippets from Bernice’s journal—that he read books and helped his dad milk the cows before coming to school and that he loved baseball—I still felt that Silas didn’t deserve her.

Being at the same school that Bernice once attended only intensified my love for her. I knew the orchard well, but seeing the halls and desks and classrooms brought me into a new part of her world. I fantasized about meeting her. Talking to her about poetry and musical theater. Dropping little hints from her journal into our conversation so that she identified with me. But I would never let her know that I had her journal for fear that she would want it back.

With these thoughts pacing through my brain on the ride home, I said, “Mom, where is your cousin Bernice now?”

My mom turned toward me and scrunched up her forehead inquisitively. She was on to me. Why would I ask about Bernice? It was strange, I admit, for a boy to have a crush on his mom’s cousin, especially one he’d never met.

“Honey, my cousin Bernice died,” Mom said.

A swell of tears boiled in my cheeks. I looked away, clenched my jaw.

“When?” I asked.

“Oh, I suppose she was about your age. Maybe a year or two older.”

“How did she die?”

“She was waiting for the school bus one morning. It was dark. A man driving a pickup truck didn’t see her, and . . .”

I wailed as hot tears exploded from my eyes. I tried breathing slowly as my mom rubbed my back with one hand, her other guiding the steering wheel.

When I got home, I walked right past Dad staining the floor and past Maggie sitting next to him. I climbed the stairs to my bedroom and read the final entry in Bernice’s journal. She was excited for Christmas break, excited to give her mom the mittens she had been crocheting. She was going to miss seeing Silas at school. She had asked her mom for a record of *The Music Man* for Christmas. At the bottom of the page, she had drawn a picture of a trumpet surrounded by stars and snowflakes. I barely left my bedroom that week.

**Autumn wore on,** and frost began to cover our windows in the mornings. After school Dad had me pick the rotting apples off the ground and pile them near the firepit behind the shed. Most days I could fill the wheelbarrow. The deer kept the pile from getting too big. Some days there would be up to eight deer shouldering each other out of the way to get at the pile of rotting apples. One day, taking off my work gloves after dumping apples behind the shed, I came in to find Mom and Dad sitting at the kitchen table. Maggie was curled up near Dad’s feet, her scarred nose resting on her paws.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“We’re celebrating,” Dad said. “Your mom’s publisher wants her to go to Chicago for her book release. She’ll be signing autographs and doing readings.”

“They just want me to promote the book a little,” Mom said.

“She’s being modest. They love her book. Think it’s going to be a big hit with middle-schoolers. Like you, Champ. You loved your mom’s book, didn’t you?”

I nodded. “How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t know if I’m going to—”

“Oh, stop that right now, Sophie! We’ll be fine. It’s just a week. How about it, Champ? Just the boys for a week? Oh yes, and you too, Maggie,” Dad said, rubbing Maggie’s ears.

“But Tom . . .” Mom said.

“Hey, Champ, why don’t head up to your room for a few minutes?”

I walked around the corner and waited on the lower steps, where I could hear the concern in Mom’s voice as she asked about the nightmares, and what if he had a bad day. When Mom said this, I thought back over the past summer and recalled that there were several days that Dad seemed to be missing. He had stomachaches or just didn’t feel well and spent the day in his bedroom. But at twelve, I just thought of these as free days where I didn’t have to haul branches or old flooring, days where I could explore the orchard and catch frogs by the creek.

Though Mom was hesitant to leave, I could hear in her voice that she really wanted to go. And Dad persisted, convincing her that he could take care of me. Mom finally acquiesced, and I tiptoed up the stairs and took out Bernice’s journal and read her poetry while tracing her sketches with my fingertips.

The day before Mom left, several deer climbed onto the front porch, and Mom and Dad had to shoo them away with a broom. But even once they were off the porch, the deer just stood awkwardly in the yard. It turns out that the apples I had been piling behind the shed had begun to ferment and we now had apple-drunk deer patrolling the orchard. Mom half-heartedly tried to use this as a pretext not go to Chicago, but Dad quickly pointed out the absurdity of this excuse.

**The day after** Mom left, an ice storm blanketed Hillsville. Businesses were shut down, schools were closed, and a countywide emergency was declared as an overnight pummeling of freezing rain laid down two inches of ice. Power lines were down. Tree branches snapped under the sheer weight of the icy coating. But Dad just brewed a pot of coffee on the woodstove and lit a few candles and, wrapped in blankets, we sat on the newly stained floor, where he taught me how to play cribbage. It was nice spending prolonged time with Dad with no chores or tasks to interrupt. I asked him what I had been wondering since the first night I heard him screaming in his sleep.

“Dad, do you remember the bad dreams you have?”

Dad paused a long while, sipped his coffee, and walked over to the window. After a few moments I followed him, and we both looked out at the ice-glazed world. Every tree, every branch, each blade of grass coated with shine. I had given up on Dad answering the question, when he said, “I only have one bad dream. It’s the same one over and over. We’re just outside of Kuwait. It’s early evening but looks like midnight. The oil fields are ablaze. Smoke shutters out the sun. The wind’s thumping. Cyclones of fire whirl through the black desert. Our captain told us that a nearby home was harboring Iraqi soldiers who were believed to have detonated an IED that—”

“What’s an IED?” I asked.

Dad seemed to snap out of his trance for a moment. “Oh, um, never mind, Champ. I shouldn’t be telling you this. Your mom wouldn’t want—”

“Please, Dad.”

He breathed deeply. “An IED is an improvised explosive device. And we believed at the time that this home was full of Iraqi soldiers who had killed eight of our men. Our mission was to capture the enemy soldiers.”

“This is your nightmare?”

“We bust down the door, and smoke from the oil fields fills the brick hut. We had our gas masks on, our weapons drawn, all six of us. The hut’s empty so we start searching. I flip the mattress in the main room. And underneath, there’s a woman and a boy about your age hiding there. The woman’s wrapped up in a sheet. The boy’s naked and shivering. I’m waving my hand through the thick, black smoke. I decipher that the boy and his mom are not a threat. I’m yelling, ‘Civilians! Civilians!’ ”

Dad watched two deer stumble through the icy orchard, took a deep breath, and cleared his throat.

“I hold out my hand to the woman, and the boy reaches beneath his back and pulls out a gun. Then two quick flashes. My ears ring. My buddy Patrick shoots the boy. The boy’s mom starts screaming. She’s laying her face over the hole in the boy’s chest.”

Dad didn’t seem to realize he was crying until Maggie nudged his hand. He blinked hard, shook his head, and wiped his tears. He was silent for a long time, just staring out at the icy orchard. “I just kept thinking of you and your mom,” he said and walked to his bedroom. Maggie didn’t get there before he closed the door, so she lay down outside the room.

That evening Dad was up and making hamburgers for dinner. He told me a joke. “A man walks into a library and says, I’d like a hamburger, please. The librarian says, Sir, this is a library. So the man says, Sorry. Then he whispers, I’d like a hamburger, please.” We laughed for a while and that seemed to set aside what had happened that morning, though his story stayed in my mind the rest of the day. The blackness of the oil smoke and the cyclones of fire stuck with me. But Dad seemed better. We even went for a walk through the frozen orchard and ran our hands across the iced trees and apples. As we were headed back into the house, Dad stopped and said, “Hey, Champ, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have told you that story.”

The rest of the week with Mom gone went well. Dad got a little bored and starting fiddling with some of the trim around the windows. I read the advance copy of Mom’s book, *The Rewinders,* fantasizing that the brother and sister traveling back in time were me and Bernice. That we were the ones watching dinosaurs hatch from their eggs and helping Leonardo da Vinci build a flying machine. I pictured Bernice writing poetry about our adventures.

The night before Mom was set to return, Dad had a bad dream. He was screaming in bed, much of it unintelligible, but sometimes the words “Don’t shoot!” would emerge from the jumble, and I would remember the boy. I went into Dad’s bedroom and turned on the light. Maggie was barking and pulling at Dad’s blankets as he thrashed around. I ran over and started shaking him, trying to grab his face and open his eyes with my fingers, but he wouldn’t stay still. Finally, he reached out and palmed my face like a basketball and pushed me backward. I stumbled over Maggie and hit the back of my head on the wall. I saw a flash of light and closed my eyes.

Then Dad was in front of me, holding my face and yelling, “Champ? Champ? You okay, buddy. Hey, hey, Champ!” And he lifted me onto his shoulder and carried me to the kitchen, where he set me on a chair. The light hurt my eyes. Dad handed me a glass of water and sat across from me, our knees touching, and he said, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Are you okay?” I nodded slowly since my head felt too heavy to lift. For a moment I thought I was going to throw up.

The next day, the sun shone bright on the frozen orchard. Dad was up early, making bacon and pancakes with real maple syrup. We had coffee, mine mostly milk, and orange juice and the two of us ate until we felt planted in our chairs. Dad said, “Hey, Champ. I know it’s scary, but if I’m having a bad dream like that, don’t wake me up. Let Maggie take care of me. That’s why she’s here. I couldn’t live with ever hurting you.” I promised him I wouldn’t do it again, but I wondered if I could follow through on the promise.

After breakfast Dad and I walked through the orchard. The sun bounced its rays across the ice-glazed land. The deer had chipped away at the ice covering the rotting apples piled behind the shed and had eaten most of them. A scattered few deer stumbled and slipped down a slope toward the tree line. A big buck kept ramming into a frozen tree, where he would fall drunkenly on his stomach after each slam, his feet sliding out in all directions.

Dad and I penguin-walked through the orchard and laughed at the deer until we stopped at one of the apple trees and Dad said, “Hey Champ, look at this.” On the ice-glazed apple tree, we saw a ghost apple. The ice had covered the dead apple that was rotting on the tree and the sun, magnified through the ice, turned the apple into liquid, which poured out the bottom, leaving just a hollow ice formation in the shape of the apple. After we saw that first one, we looked around and noticed they were everywhere, hundreds of these apple-ice formations dangling around us like some sort of ornate replicas of the world we had been living in for the past six months.

In the distance deer staggered into the woods. Dad broke off one of the ghost apples and handed it to me, saying, “I told you this place was magic.”

I held the ghost apple, the ice capturing the rays of the sun so that if you were to see me from a distance, I might have been holding fire. And a line from Bernice’s poem came to mind. *If you love me, hold me by the middle.* Until that moment, I had dreamed of holding Bernice. But then, looking down at the ghost apple melting in the warmth of my bare hand, I realized I could never hug Bernice. I couldn’t travel back in time like the kids in Mom’s book. I was here in the orchard with my father. Dropping the ghost apple to the ground, I stepped forward and hugged my dad with all my might