



Cain's Apples
Bryan L. Lee

Published: 2003

Categorie(s):

Tag(s): spooky supernatural horror apples fruit country fiction "short story" "short stories" salesman "short fiction"

Cain's Apples
Bryan L. Lee
Feedbooks Edition
Copyright 2009 Bryan L. Lee

Feedbooks Edition License Notes

Thanks for downloading this free ebook. You are welcome to share it with your friends. This book may be reproduced, copied and distributed for non-commercial purposes, provided the book remains in its complete original form. If you enjoyed this book, please return to Feedbooks.com to discover other works by this author. If you would like to be notified when my next story is available, send an email to bleestories@gmail.com with Feedbooks in the subject. No spam and no automation, just a note from me to you.

Cain's Apples

Buzz! All eyes in the office looked up at the red light on the intercom speaker. "Johnson! Get in here!" a gruff voice boomed out. Six workers breathed a sigh of relief while the seventh felt a tight knot forming in his stomach. Buzz! "I meant now!" the voice boomed out again. "You better go Joe, you know he just gets worse the longer he has to wait," Betty the secretary whispered across her desk. "How can he get any worse?" Joe said over his shoulder as he headed towards the door. Buzz!

Joe knocked loudly. "It's about time!" a voice yelled out from behind the door. "Get in here!" Joe rushed into the room. Before he could do anything, his boss shouted again. "Close that door!" Joe shut the door gingerly and prepared for what had become an almost weekly ritual. "I've got your sales figures in front of me Johnson," the boss pointed to a short stack of papers on his large, executive-style desk. "And I've got to tell you that they are pathetic with a capital 'P'!" Joe reacted to each of the spat out syllables as if they were gunshots.

"Yes sir, Mr. Miller, but," Joe began.

Miller cut him off. "Don't 'but' me. I've had about enough of your loafing around here. I hire salesmen to sell," he raised a finger and pointed it at the quarterly sales chart on the wall for emphasis. "And if you can't handle the job, I'm going to have to find someone who can!" He stuffed his unlit cigar into his mouth and chomped down on it angrily.

Joe stood silently for a moment, trying to gather his thoughts. "But, Mr. Miller, I've got a family to support," Joe said in a plaintive voice. "So do I Johnson," the boss interjected. "So do I. And if I don't see an improvement out of you by next week's report, you're fired, or my name isn't Larry Miller!"

"But," Joe stammered.

"No buts! Now get out!" The boss pointed at the door behind Joe.

Joe knew a good opportunity when he saw one, and he didn't waste any time getting out of Mr. Miller's office. Outside, his fellow workers tried, unsuccessfully, to pretend that they hadn't heard what had transpired. They all sat nervously, desperate for Joe to say something about it first.

Betty was the first to break the silence. "Don't take it so hard Joe," she said softly. "We all know how he can be." "Thanks Betty," Joe said weakly. Six pairs of eyes followed him back to his desk and watched as he plonked down in his chair and started to shuffle through the papers on his desk. They were polite enough not to say anything else.

On the way home that evening, Joe's mind was racing. "What am I going to tell Karen?" he asked himself over and over. "What am I going to say?" As he was imagining how he would break the news to her, he suddenly remembered the shopping list in his pocket. Karen had asked him to pick up a few things on the way home. "Oh great," Joe thought. "I've screwed that one up too."

He was too far along to turn back to the store now. He pulled the list out of his pocket and read it between brief glances at the road. "Hmmm. Eggs, butter, apples, flowers," Joe read silently.

Joe resented that Karen had written "flowers" on the list. It was a reminder that he had been neglectful of her and the kids lately. But, he rationalized the guilty thought away quickly. Between his job and his boss, he didn't see how he could do things any other way. "Besides," he added to his mental explanation, "it's my paycheck that is buying the stuff on this list." With that thought, Joe looked up in time to see a hand-painted sign on the side of the road. "Cain's Apples- Farm Fresh Produce- 2 mi. ahead," Joe read as he sped by. "Well, at least I can get one thing on this list," he decided, and put it back into his shirt pocket.

As he crested the top of a hill, Joe could see the apple stand in the distance. It was a little larger than he expected, which surprised him because he didn't remember ever seeing it there before. He pulled on the shoulder, turned off the engine, and looked at the stand for a moment. It had two signs in front, a large one that said "Cain's Apples," and a smaller one that said "Open" in large red letters.

It looked as if the farmer had just brought in three white sheds on a big truck and dropped them off in the middle of the night. A small generator was off to one side, and it had a cord attached running into the back of the first shed. Each shed had baskets of apples neatly arranged on shelves, with small signs indicating the variety. Joe hadn't seen anything like it around the area since he was a teenager, and the sight of it brought back fond memories.

Joe checked his pocket for his list, got out of the car, and walked up to the stand. He was in luck. The generator was loud and powering a small refrigerator. A sign on top said that they sold eggs and butter. There were also several bunches of flowers in a big water can on a shelf. They were daisies, Karen's favorite.

"Can I help you?"

Joe was startled by a voice behind him. He turned and looked at a man he assumed to be Mr. Cain. Joe thought his bright blue eyes didn't match his tanned and weather-beaten face.

"Oh, hi, do you have any eggs or butter left?" Joe asked somewhat nervously.

"Don't know," the farmer said in a friendly voice, "let's take a look." He stepped past Joe and peered into the refrigerator. "You're in luck," Cain said from the back of the refrigerator. He pulled his head out and looked at Joe. "How many do you want?"

"Just a dozen of the eggs, and I'll take a pound of butter if you've got it," Joe said. "Sure, sure," the farmer answered in his calm and slow voice. "Anything else?" Joe looked over at the water can. "Yeah, um, how much for the flowers?" Cain smiled knowingly. "Two dollars a bunch." "Great," Joe said, imagining the pleased look on Karen's face. "I'll take two bunches." Cain wrapped the purchases in brown paper before placing them on the small table where he had a metal cash box. He looked at Joe. "Something else?" The way he phrased the question made it sound as if he knew that there was.

Joe pulled out his list and read it again. "Oh yeah, I also need some apples," Joe said when he was done. "What for?" Cain shot back. The question threw Joe. "What do you mean?" he managed to ask through his confusion.

Cain saw the problem. "No, I mean what will you use them for, cooking or eating?" Joe seemed relieved. "Oh, cooking. My wife wants to bake an apple pie."

Cain looked pleased. "I've got just the thing, let me show you." He led Joe a few feet over to shed number three and pointed at a tub filled with small green apples. Joe eyed them suspiciously. "What kind are they?" Joe asked. Cain hooked a thumb under a suspender and rocked back slightly on his heels. "Well, these here are hard and sour," he began. Joe started to shake his head. Cain raised his hand. "Now hold on, you're probably thinking about eating apples. These here are for cooking." Joe listened politely. Cain continued with some enthusiasm. "For pie, you want a firm apple, one that's not too sweet. Otherwise, you'll end up with applesauce instead of apple pie once you add the sugar and put it in the oven."

The logic appealed to Joe, and he told Cain he'd take two pounds. Cain packed everything in a cardboard box and handed it to Joe. Then he carefully added the prices on a little notepad and handed the result to Joe. Joe paid, thanked the farmer, and carried the box back to his car.

He was about to drive off when he remembered his original question. He pulled closer to the stand, rolled down the window, and called out to Cain over the noise of the generator. "Hey, Mr. Cain!" Cain turned

around. "The apples, what are they called?" Cain leaned forward and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Larry Millers," he said. Joe paused for a second with a puzzled look on his face. He started to say something, but then thought better of it. The generator was too loud. With a wave and a nod, he drove off for home.

The turn for Joe's house came sooner than he expected. He was distracted, thinking about the events of the day, when he saw the sign announcing "Welcome to Shady Brooke." He turned right, past the manicured flower beds and the ornate fountain, then made a left into his cul-de-sac.

Joe remembered the look on Karen's face when they first moved into the neighborhood. The house and the mortgage were both too big for them then, but two children soon took care of the first problem, and his current job had taken care of the second. Joe shook his head slowly when he thought about what to say to Karen about the events of the day. It wasn't going to be easy.

"I'm home," Joe announced, closing the door behind him with his foot. He set his box of groceries on the table and looked out the window in the back yard. Karen was engaged in a heated discussion over the fence with Fred Kimball, grouchy neighbor extraordinaire. The argument ended abruptly, and Karen walked inside, looking a little worse for wear.

"Oh, hi," she said, slightly startled to see Joe standing there. "When did you get home?"

"I just walked in," Joe answered. "What did he want this time?"

"Fred's complaining about the fence and the property line again," Karen answered in a tired voice. She looked behind him at the table. "You remembered the groceries, thanks."

"Yeah," Joe replied, "I found a fruit stand on the way home. The guy there told me that those apples were good for baking." Karen was examining one closely. It passed her muster, and she transferred the whole batch to the counter. "These are fine," she said. She didn't mention the flowers. "How about an apple pie for dessert?"

Joe smiled wanly. "Yeah, that would be great."

He spent the rest of the evening watching television and chatting with Karen about her day. At dinner, he avoided telling her about his problems at work. "Why tell her now?" he thought, "It will only make her worry." Karen could sense something was wrong, but chose to ignore it. She didn't like to discuss important things in front of the children.

After dinner, she brought her fresh baked pie to the table and carefully cut a slice for each of them. The family agreed that it was delicious.

Joe slept fitfully that night, and left for work 15 minutes earlier than usual. He wanted to make sure he would be on time today. He arrived a few minutes early, and had already made his first call of the day when Betty came in looking agitated. "What's the matter?" Joe asked with some concern. Betty was one of his few allies in the office. "Joe, haven't you heard? Mr. Miller's had a stroke."

Joe looked at her with wide eyes. "Really? When?"

"Last night around 7:30. He's in the hospital now." She started to choke up. "They don't think he's going to make it."

Joe's grave look hid the sense of relief he felt inside. "A stroke? Miller? Ha ha, this is almost too good to be true," he thought, before catching himself. Aloud he said in his most sympathetic voice, "I am so sorry to hear that." Betty acted as if she didn't hear him and sat absent-mindedly at her desk. Joe returned to his and waited for some word.

It came a little after two. Larry Miller died at 11:15 am from complications following a severe stroke. Betty took the phone call.

The office closed early because of the news, and Joe was on the road by three. On the way home he contemplated the new turn of events. "I still can't believe this," he thought with excitement. "I'm off the hook." With Larry Miller dead, Joe figured his job was safe, at least for a while. He was thinking about how glad he was that he didn't tell Karen when he saw the sign out of the corner of his eye. "Cain's Apples- Farm Fresh Produce 2 mi. ahead."

With a chill, Joe suddenly remembered what the old man at the stand had sold him. Larry Miller apples. "He knew," Joe said half-aloud. "He knew." Stepping hard on the gas peddle, Joe raced to the fruit stand and brought his car to a halt in a cloud of dust and gravel.

The sign in front said "Open," but Cain wasn't there. Joe called out. "Hello! Anybody there?" No answer. He looked behind the sheds and was about to leave when he heard a familiar voice behind him. "Can I help you?" Joe wheeled about and saw the same bright blue eyes and the same weathered face.

"You startled me," Joe said.

"Sorry about that," Cain replied with a warm smile. "What can I get you today?"

Joe pondered his reply for a few moments. His thought about the apples began to seem silly to him. The generator was still banging away in the background. "I'd like some apples," he finally said, sheepishly.

"Well, we've got apples," Cain said with good humor. "What do you need them for?"

"You like tart apples, or sweet ones?" Cain asked as he rummaged through a large tub. Joe watched carefully as the old man grabbed several apples and held them up for Joe to see. "Well mister, tart or sweet?"

Joe weighed the choices. "Tart," he said all of a sudden, without quite knowing exactly why.

"You'll like these then," Cain said and started filling a bag with scruffy green apples. "They're sometimes a little bitter, but for the most part they're very good."

Mr. Cain finished filling the bag and handed it to Joe. "That'll be \$1.50," he said, and opened up his little metal cash box. Joe paid him. "One more thing," Joe said hesitatingly. "What are they called?"

Cain's blue eyes lit up, and he smiled slightly. "Pahchay," he said. "Pahchay?" Joe asked again. "Never heard of it."

"It's an old variety," Cain explained, "first developed 73 years ago in Delaware." Joe wanted to ask more, but had already started to feel slightly embarrassed about his suspicions. This was an apple stand, that's all. It was time to go home.

"Thanks," Joe said and turned to leave. The generator was blaring in his ear. Mr. Cain yelled out behind him after he got into the car. "Pahchay's the Latin name you know. The locals call them Fred Kimballs." Stunned, Joe turned to look at Cain. The stand was empty.

Joe sped off from the stand, the bag of apples beside him on the seat. He rolled down his window and tossed the bag out. The car behind him swerved to avoid it, but ran over it anyway. When the driver honked loudly, Joe gave him the finger.

On the way home, Joe's mind was revving faster than his car's engine. "I can't believe this," he said to himself. "There has got to be a rational explanation." He was still thinking that when he turned out the lights for bed that evening. He had gotten home at 4:30. The ambulance arrived for Fred Kimball a little before six.

That week, Joe looked for the apple stand every day on his way home from work. He was having trouble sleeping and, according to Karen, was also short-tempered and irritable. "Joe, I don't know what's wrong with you these past few days," she said on Friday after dinner. Joe hated Fridays. The kids were usually out of the house, and Karen used the time to address family concerns. "Nothing's wrong," Joe said curtly. "Don't give me that," Karen said. "You've been like a stranger this whole week, yelling at me, snapping at the kids."

"Look, I said nothing's wrong, alright?" Joe said.

Karen threw her napkin on the table and stood up. "I don't know why I even try," she said bitterly and walked out to the kitchen. "I don't either," Joe called after her. "Why don't you save it for your handyman?"

Karen came back into the room. Her eyes were angry. "Is that what this is about?" she said in her argument voice. "I've told you before, Mark and I are just friends. He fixes the things around the house that you never seem to have time for anymore, and he does nice work. That's all."

"Yeah, I know," Joe said sarcastically, "that's all." They stared at each other in silence. Finally, Karen spoke up. Her voice was calm and cold. "I've had it Joe. I've really had it." He looked up at her from his seat at the table. He knew she meant it. "Either you get some help, or I'm leaving." Joe yelled at her. "Where are you going Karen, to him? Just go ahead!" With that he pushed his chair back and stood up. Karen stepped to one side. He grabbed his car keys off of the hook and headed for the door. "I'm going out," he said and slammed the door behind him.

* * *

The bartender looked at Joe from the other end of the bar and tapped his wristwatch. Joe looked at the clock over the bar. It was closing time, and Joe had been sitting there since nine. He fished through his wallet and threw a twenty dollar bill on the bar. He staggered slightly as he found his way to the door and out into the parking light. The night was cool and clear, and it felt good after the stale air of the bar.

The plan had come to Joe during his third beer. It was perfect. It would be hard for Karen to run off with Mark Fisher if there was no Mark Fisher. What if he were plucked a little early from the tree of life? Joe smiled inwardly at his private joke. It was time to buy some apples.

It took him two tries, but Joe finally got the car door open. The combination of the booze and his new plan made him feel strangely energized. He eased the car out of the parking lot and set out towards Route 24. After a while, he saw the glow of lights up ahead on the side of the road. He was in luck, Cain's was open.

Joe parked clumsily and left his lights on. He got out of his car and shuffled over to the stand. The bright lights stung his eyes, and he could

hear the ping ping sound of insects bouncing off of the aluminum shades. "Cain!" Joe called out loudly. "Cain!" Joe was swaying slightly.

Cain appeared out of the shadows in the back of the stand. "I'm here mister, no need to shout." His eyes reflected the light strangely. "What can I do for you?"

"You know," Joe said with menace. "You know. I want the apples." Cain looked at him with a question on his face. "What apples?"

"Don't play stupid with me," Joe growled and grabbed the old man by the straps of his overalls. "I want some Mark Fishers!"

Cain looked confused. "Mark Fishers? I don't have any Mark Fishers"

"The hell you don't," Joe yelled, and pushed the old man hard against the side of the shed. "Listen," Joe said through clenched teeth. "You sold me some apples you called Larry Millers. I ate them, and Larry Miller dies." Cain was staring wide-eyed at Joe. "Then I bought some Fred Kimballs. I threw them into traffic, and poof, Fred's pushing up daisies."

Joe paused to see if his words were having an effect. Cain looked frightened, but he was listening. "And now I've got another problem, and you're going to help me solve it." Joe tightened his hands on the old man's suspenders and slammed him against the wall again. "Now, where are the Mark Fishers?"

Cain shook his head and was gasping for air. "You don't understand," he said between breaths, "you've got it all wrong."

"How's that?" Joe asked suspiciously.

"I said you've got it all wrong." Cain had his wind back by now. "I don't get to choose which apples to sell, I just pick the ones that are ripe. Larry Miller and Fred Kimball were ripe. Their time was up."

Joe stood there with his mouth open trying to digest what he had just heard. "Let me get this straight," he said, letting go of Cain's suspenders. "You don't choose the apples? Those two died of natural causes?" Cain was nodding. "Yep, in their cases anyway. The apples are just our way of timing things. We never sell them before they're ripe."

Joe stared at the tubs of apples around him. "And all of these are," he swallowed hard, "people?"

"Oh my, good gracious no," Cain laughed heartily. "We only get one or two ripe batches a day. The rest of these are for display purposes only." He winked slyly.

"Well, what are you doing open now if you only get one or two batches a day?" Joe asked with genuine interest. "To tell you the truth, I was getting ready to close down when I saw you pull up," Cain

answered. "I just sold my last batch to a real nice fellow a couple of minutes before you got here. They were a young variety. Real pretty, fragrant too."

Joe's vision was blurry and he felt wobbly on his feet. He reached out for the wall to support himself. "Funny thing about them, though," Cain continued. "Every single one of them was rotten at the core." Cain's blue eyes were fixed on the sagging figure in front of him. "We call them Joe Johnsons," Cain said with a smile, and disappeared into the darkness.

From the same author on Feedbooks

After Dark (2009)

What would happen if the neighborhood vigilante just happened to be a werewolf? Find out *After Dark*.

Jimmy (2009)

Jimmy likes to try new things, but they don't always turn out the way he planned. Brief (800 words) & fun.

The Anthill (2010)

They were just regular black ants, the kind boys feed grasshoppers to, or zap with their magnifying glasses. But Harold knew Alice didn't like ants.

The Weekender (2010)

A vacationing businessman catches more than he bargained for in this suspenseful short story.

The Volunteer (2011)

A new project at work leads to unusual consequences in this surprising short story.



www.feedbooks.com
Food for the mind