

Apple-core Baltimore, Ray Bradbury

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On the way to the cemetery Menville decided they needed to pick up something to eat, so they stopped the car at a roadside stand near an orange grove where there were displays of bananas, apples, blueberries, and, of course, oranges.

Menville picked out two wonderful, big, glossy apples and handed one to Smith.

Smith said, 'How come?'

Menville, looking enigmatic, just said, 'Eat, eat.' They stowed their jackets in the car and walked the rest of the way to the graveyard. Once inside the gates, they walked a great distance until at last they came to a special marker.

Smith looked down and said, 'Russ Simpson. Wasn't he an old friend of yours from high school?'

'Yeah,' said Menville. 'That was the one. Part of the gang. My very best friend, actually. Russ Simpson.'

They stood for a while, biting into their apples, chewing quietly.

'He must have been very special,' Smith said. 'You've come all this way. But you didn't bring any flowers.'

'No, only these apples. You'll see.'

Smith stared at the marker. 'What was there about him that was so special?'

Menville took another bite of his apple and said, 'He was constant. He was there every noon, he was there on the streetcar going to school and then back home every day. He was there at recess, he sat across from me in homeroom, and we took a class in the short story together. It was that kind of thing. Oh, sure, on occasion he did crazy stuff.'

'Like what?' said Smith.

'Well, we had this little gang of five or six guys who met at lunchtime. We were all different, but on the other hand, we were all sort of the same. Russ used to sort of pick at me, you know how friends do.'

'Pick? Like what?'

'He liked to play a game. He'd look at all of us and say, "Someone say 'Granger.'" He'd look at me and say, "Say 'Granger.'" I'd say "Granger" and Russ would shake his head and say, "No, no. One of you others say 'Granger.'" So one of the other guys would say "Granger" and they would all laugh, a big reaction, because he said "Granger" just the right way. Then Russ would turn to me and say, "Now it's your turn, you say it." I would say "Granger" and no one would laugh and I'd stand there, feeling left out.

'There was a trick to the whole thing but I was so stupid, so naive, that I could never figure out that it was a joke, the sort of thing they played on me.

'Then one time I was over at Russ's house and a friend of his named Pipkin leaned over the balcony in the living room and dropped a cat on me. Can you believe that?! The cat landed right on my head and clawed my face.

It could have put out my eyes, I thought later. Russ thought it was a great joke. Russ was laughing and Pip was laughing, and I threw the cat across the room. Russ was indignant. "Watch what you're doing with the cat!" he said. "Watch what the cat was doing with me!" I cried. That was a big joke; he told everyone. They all laughed, except me.'

'That's some memory,' said Smith.

'He was there every day, was in school with me, my best friend. Every once in a while, at lunchtime, he'd eat an apple and when he finished

he'd say, "Apple core." And one of the other guys would say, "Baltimore."

Russ would then say, "Who's your friend?" They'd point at me and he'd throw the apple core—hard—at me. This was a routine; it happened at least once a week for a couple of years. Apple-core Baltimore.'

'And this was your best friend?'

'Sure, my best friend.'

They stood there by the grave, still working at their apples. The sun was getting hotter and there was no breeze.

'What else?' said Smith.

'Oh, not much. Well, sometimes at lunchtime I'd ask the typing teacher to let me use one of the typewriters so I could write, as I didn't have a typewriter of my own.

'Finally, I had a chance to buy one real cheap, so I went without lunch for a month or so, saving my lunch money. Finally, I had enough to buy my very own typewriter so I could write whenever I wanted.

'One day Russ looked at me and said, "My God, do you realize what you are?" I said, "What?" He said, "You're a stale fruitcake, giving up your money to buy that damned typewriter. A stale fruitcake."

'I often thought later that someday when I finished my great American novel, that's what I'd call it: Stale Fruitcake.'

Smith said, 'Better than Gatsby, huh?'

'Gatsby, sure. Anyway, I had the typewriter.'

They were quiet then, the only sound the last bites into their diminishing apples.

A distant expression came over Smith's face and he blinked and suddenly whispered, 'Apple-core.'

To which, quickly, Menville said, 'Baltimore.'
Smith then said, 'Who's your friend?'

Menville, looking down at the marker near his feet, eyes wide, said, 'Granger.'

'Granger?' said Smith, and stared at his friend.

'Yeah,' said Menville. 'Granger.'

At this Smith raised his hand and threw his apple core down on top of the gravestone.

No sooner was this done than Menville hurled his apple core down, then reached and took it up again and threw it a second time so that the gravestone was so littered with shreds of the apple core that you couldn't make out the name on the marker.

They stared at the mess.

Then Menville turned and began to walk away, threading through the gravestones, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Smith called after him. 'Where are you going?'

Menville, not looking back, said in a hoarse voice, 'To get some more apples, damn it to hell, more apples.'

The End