

# Miss Appletree And I, Ray Bradbury

Miss Appletree and I

No one remembered how it began with Miss Appletree. It seemed Miss Appletree had been around for years. Every time Nora made a bad biscuit or didn't put on her lipstick when she came to the breakfast table, George would laughingly say, 'Watch out! I'll run off with Miss Appletree!'

Or when George had his night out with the boys and came home slightly eroded and worn away by the sands of time, Nora would say, 'Well, how was Miss Appletree?' 'Fine, fine,' George would say. 'But I love only you, Nora. It's good to be home.'

As you can see, Miss Appletree was around the house for years, invisible as the smell of grass in April, or the scent of chestnut leaves falling in October.

George even described her: 'She's tall.' 'I'm five feet seven in my stocking feet,' said Nora. 'She's willowy,' said George.

'I'm spreading a bit with the years,' said Nora. 'And she's fairy yellow in the hair.'

'My hair is turning mousy,' said Nora. 'It used to shine like the sun.' 'She's a quiet sort,' said George. 'I gossip far too much,' said Nora.

'And she loves me blindly, passionately, with not a doubt in her mind or soul, wildly, insanely,' said George, 'as no woman with brains could ever love a shameful stumbling old drone like me.'

'She sounds like an avalanche,' said Nora.

‘But do you know,’ said George, ‘when the avalanche rolls away and life must go on, I always turn to you, Nora. Miss Appletree is quite impossible. I always come back to my one and only love, the woman who doubts I am a God after all, the woman who knows I put my right foot into my left shoe and is diplomatic enough to give me two right shoes at a time like that, the woman who realizes that I’m a weather vane in every wind yet never tries to tell me that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, so why am I lost? Nora, you know every pore in my face, every hair in my ear, every cavity in my teeth; but I love you.’

‘Fare thee well, Miss Appletree!’ said Nora.  
And so the years went by.

‘Hand me the hammer and some nails,’ said George one day.  
‘Why?’ said his wife.

‘This calendar,’ he said. ‘I’m going to nail it down. The leaves fall off it like a deck of cards somebody dropped. Good Lord, I’m fifty years old today! Hand me that hammer quick!’  
She came and kissed his cheek. ‘You don’t mind terribly, do you?’

‘I didn’t mind yesterday,’ he said. ‘But today I mind. What is there about units of ten that so frightens a man? When a man’s twenty-nine years old and nine months it doesn’t faze him. But on his thirtieth birthday, O Fates and Furies, life is over, love is done and dead, the career is up the flue or down the chute, either way.

And a man goes along the next ten, twenty years, through thirty, past forty, on toward fifty, reasonably keeping his hands off Time, not trying to hold on to the days too hard, letting the wind blow and the river run.

But Good Lord, all of a sudden you’re fifty years old, that nice round total, that grand sum and—bang! Depression and horror. Where have the years gone? What has one done with one’s life?’

'One has raised a daughter and a son, both married young and gone already,' said Nora. 'And proud children they are!'

'True,' said George. 'And yet on a day like this, in the middle of May, it feels sad, like autumn. You know me, I'm a moody old dog. I'm the son of Thomas Wolfe, O Time, O River, oh, the grieving of the winds, lost, lost, forever lost.'

'You need Miss Appletree,' said Nora.  
He blinked. 'I need what?'

'Miss Appletree,' said Nora. 'The lady we made up such a long time ago. Tall, willowy, madly in love with you. Miss Appletree, the magnificent. Aphrodite's daughter. Every man turned fifty, every man who's feeling sorry for himself and feeling sad needs Miss Appletree. Romance.'

'Oh, but I have you, Nora,' he said.

'Oh, but I'm neither as young nor as pretty as I once was,' Nora said, taking his arm. 'Once in his lifetime, every man should have his fling.'  
'Do you really think so?' he said.

'I know it!'

'But that causes divorce. Foolish old men rushing about after their youth.'

'Not if the wife has a head on her shoulders. Not if she understands he's not being mean, he's just very sad and lost and tired and mixed up.'

'I know so many men who've run off with Miss Appletrees, alienated their wives and children, and made a mess of their lives.'

He brooded for a moment and then said, 'Well, I've been thinking a lot of hard thoughts every minute of every hour of every day. One shouldn't think of young women that much. That's not good and it might have some sort of force of nature and I don't think I should be thinking that way, so hard and so intense.'

He was finishing his breakfast when the front doorbell rang. He and Nora looked at each other and then there was a soft tapping at the door.

He looked as if he wanted to get up but couldn't force himself, so Nora rose and walked to the front door. She turned the knob slowly and looked out. A conversation followed.

He closed his eyes and listened and thought he heard two women talking out on the front stoop. One of the voices was soft and the other voice seemed to be gaining strength.

A few minutes later, Nora returned to the table.

'Who was that?' he said.

'A saleslady,' Nora said.

'A what?'

'A saleslady.'

'What was she selling?'

'She told me but she talked so quietly that I could hardly hear.'

'What was her name?'

'I couldn't quite catch it,' said Nora.

'What did she look like?'

'She was tall.'

'How tall?'

'Very tall.'

'And nice to look at?'

'Nice.'

'What color hair?'

'It was like sunlight.'

'So.'

'So,' Nora said. 'Now, I tell you what. Drink that coffee, stand up, go back upstairs, and get back into bed.'

'Say that again,' he said.

'Drink that coffee, stand up...' she said.

He stared at her, slowly picked up his coffee cup, drained it, and began to rise.

'But,' he said, 'I'm not sick. I don't need to go back to bed this early in the morning.'

'You look a little poorly,' said Nora. 'I'm giving you an order. Go upstairs, take off your clothes, and go to bed.'

He turned slowly and walked up the stairs and felt himself taking off his clothes and lying down in the bed. As soon as his head hit the pillow, he had to fight not to fall asleep.

A few moments later he heard a stirring in the somewhat dim early-morning room.

He felt someone lie down in the bed and turn toward him. Eyes shut, he heard his voice groggily ask, 'What? Who's there?'

A voice murmured to him from the next pillow. 'Miss Appletree.'

'How's that again?' he said.

'Miss Appletree' was the whisper.

The End