



(Fermented Version)

Technically, Mr.Cider was the *far* orchard's resident scarecrow. In practice though, he did the scaring for all three of the farm's sizeable orchards, the so-called 'East', 'West' and 'Far' orchards.

So-called by Mr.Cider because he wasn't sure whether the 'East' orchard was really East or the 'West' West. Consequently the third orchard was neither North nor South, but 'Far'. Some time ago vandals had torn down the signs that said 'East' and 'West'. The farm-owner's two young girls had put the signs back up the wrong way round; Mr.Cider couldn't be sure whether the owner had switched them back or not, and had long since forgotten where was where.

He'd always done the larger share of the scaring, even before his former colleagues had lapsed into uselessness and been retired to the family garden (at least he thought they'd been retired to the family garden, he couldn't be sure). The farm-owner had re-positioned Mr.Cider to pick up the slack, giving him a greater scaring vantage.

They used to enjoy a drink together on a friday evening. They being: Mr.Cider, the East scarecrow (Mr.Cider had forgotten his name), and the West scarecrow (Mr.Cider had forgotten his name). They fermented apples and made cider. There were always more than enough good apples left after

the wholesalers had been. Apples that were missed, and that would be bad by the time the wholesalers returned. More than enough for a bottle or two of cider. Of course, the three of them could have just stolen more - but they all took pride in their scaring, even when age and routine had begun to wear them out, and they'd grown forlorn, as scarecrows tend to do.

Besides, stealing hadn't been necessary. Good scaring (as their scaring was, for the most part) meant good business, and good business meant surplus apples. Mr.Cider had developed quite a taste for the sweet cider, and looked forward to the next drinking bout as soon as his head had cleared from the last.

At first, when East and West retired, Mr.Cider didn't mind all that much. He preferred his new vantage, and having the run of all three orchards. It also meant drinking that weekly bottle or two of cider to himself. With just himself to water, he'd begun to spread the cider out, so he could have a bit every night. Quickly enough though, the smaller rations began to frustrate Mr.Cider. He often found himself wanting to indulge the way the three of them used to of a friday evening. So, in time, he began to pick extra apples from the orchard to ferment. Each week he augmented the left-over haul of apples with a basket-full of stolen ones. Now he usually managed to produce five or six bottles of cider a

week whereas before he had managed one or two. The theft was easily rationalised. He worked three times as hard now, he thought to himself; he deserved thrice the refreshment.

Still, with thrice as much cider, he grew lonely. He felt the nights begin to wear on him. When he was drinking he could lift his mood. A little bit of cider wasn't enough. When he was drinking, really drinking, he didn't grow so fearful of the dark (or of the rats which he thought he'd spot from time to time). He didn't miss company so much, finding he could lose himself in his own company. He soon wanted one of the old friday evening bouts every evening. So he took to stealing more and more apples from the orchard, until eventually he was drinking seven times as much cider. And of course, he wasn't working seven times as hard. His scaring suffered. He was doing more stealing than he was scaring, and doing more drinking than he was stealing.

He woke up one day face-down on the ground. He turned his head and could see from the painful sun that it was late in the day. He had overslept. The birds took their breakfasts early. A good scarecrow had to be up to catch them. He hoisted himself off the ground and saw from the half-pecked apples littering the floor of the 'West' orchard that his mistake had cost. He still felt drunk. He started up off his feet to scare a lingering crow, but felt queasy. He sat back down again, vowing to make up for his lapse tomorrow.

He knew that the bird-damaged apples, on top of the extra ones he'd have to steal, would be conspicuous.

There were more incidents. Mr.Cider would steal too many apples, or steal too many from one part of the orchard. He might be unconscious for a day, lying oblivious in the sunshine as the birds and rodents picked away at his apples. He was stealing more, yet there was less and less good apples to steal. He was forced to use more and more bad apples to make his cider, parsing through whatever the wholesalers left behind. The cider he made was stronger, but tasted sour. The headaches were worst with it, too.

One week the wholesalers didn't come. At first Mr.Cider was relieved. It meant he could take a little extra that week. They came back the following week, and Mr.Cider was even more relieved. They must have been busy elsewhere the week before, or perhaps on holiday he thought. The week after that they failed to turn up again. Again, Mr.Cider felt partly relieved and partly anxious. He had apples in abundance, for this week at any rate. But the orchard was falling into disrepair. Mr.Cider's sub-par scaring was adversely effecting the yield. And the farm-owner hadn't been tending the orchard as frequently - in fact, he hadn't tended to it for what Mr.Cider reckoned must have been at least a month.

After three weeks, Mr.Cider heard the familiar sound of trucks. A little earlier in the day than usual. And more than a couple, it sounded like. Still, the wholesalers, he thought. He felt relieved. As the first truck pulled into the 'West' orchard, he realised that it wasn't the wholesalers who'd arrived. These trucks were laden not with empty crates but with tree-saws and chainsaws and wood-chippers.

The orchard had fallen into such a state that it was no longer profitable to the farm-owner, Mr.Cider surmised. He was having the land cleared. These were tree surgeons. It only took the surgeons a day to fell every apple tree in the orchard. Then as night approached, they drove off, leaving Mr.Cider to his thoughts. Mr.Cider did the only thing that he could, and gathered up all the apples that had fallen onto the ground, all the apples that hadn't been cleared up by the surgeons. He made more cider. He did not know where the cider would come from after this last batch, but he made as much as he could. He fermented every single apple that was left, managing to make ten bottles.

Not without some difficulty, Mr.Cider made those ten bottles last him two weeks. By the time the last drop had been drunk, when Mr.Cider knew there was no more to drink, he'd started to convince himself that he was pleased. That he fancied a change. A clear head for once. But a day after he'd finished all the cider, he knew that he would die if he

couldn't get any more cider. He began to hallucinate, though he did not quite know what was hallucination and what was not.

On the second sober day he began to feel his coarse, sacking-cloth skin ripple and move. He lifted up his forearm and saw a reddish, fleshy lump protrude through a hole in the lattice of sacking cloth. It looked like an apple. It pushed itself further, further up and out until he could see its tiny form clearly. It was a lump ridden apple, distinctly an apple but about the size of a grape and covered in lumps. He prodded it with his finger. It was fleshy like a rotten apple, but seemed to resist under his touch. Before he could pull it out (he wanted to pluck it out) he noticed another, pushing its way out of his middle finger. He recoiled. He tugged down his shirt; he felt more pushing through his chest. The lumpy apples were pushing through his skin, every hole in the lattice of his skin framing a new one. He felt his face and brain swell. He watched what was happening to the parts of his body that he could see, but knew the same thing was happening to the parts he couldn't. Eventually there was no more visible skin, just a mass of lumpy, pushing, living apples. Parts of his body, infested with colonies of lumpy apples, dropped off him. He saw his ear fall down near his feet. Soon he couldn't see or think at all. He forgot what Mr.Cider was. And Mr.Cider thought, there is no more Mr.Cider, there is only lumpy, living, rotten apples.

