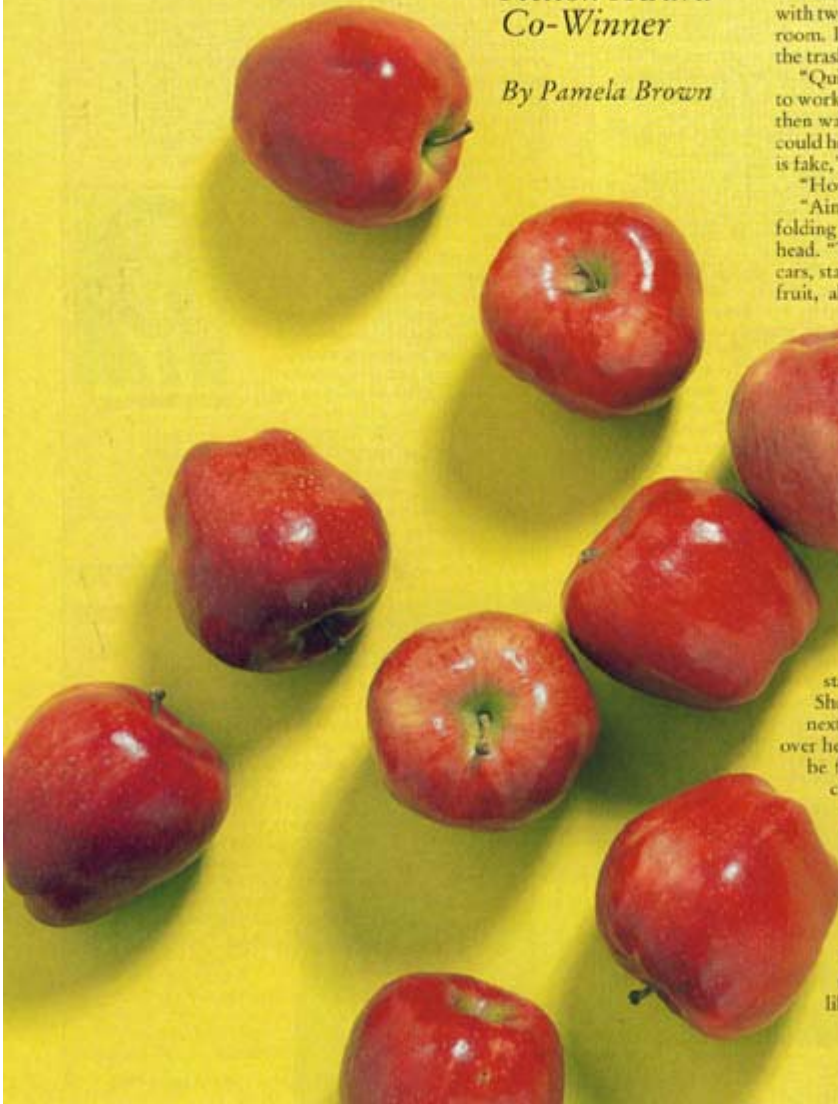


# The Apple Pickers

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By Pamela Brown



She rolled over the hill in a red pickup truck, sandwiched between two burping baby brothers and clutching a bottle of Coca-Cola that had to be warm from her sweaty hand and the autumn sun. I was in the shop, sorting Jonathans and Paula Reds into bushel baskets. They looked the same, but Jonathans stayed firmer in a pie.

"Pickers are here," I called to Mama. She was behind the counter, holding a \$20 bill up at the light bulb.

"I know," she said, "and don't be calling them that."

I shrugged and threw a green apple with two sagging brown spots across the room. It bounced off the wall and into the trash.

"Quit that," Mama said. "I am trying to work." She squinted one eye at the 20 then waved it at me. It was so new, you could hear it rattle in the air. "I think this is fake," she said.

"How can you tell?"

"Ain't enough threads in it," she said, folding the bill in half and shaking her head. "They drive up here in their rich cars, stand in here picking over my best fruit, always wanting Granny Smiths

when any idiot knows they're grown in New Zealand.

"Snobs," she snorted, slamming the cash register drawer shut. It clanged like it was afraid of her.

"Maybe you should call the sheriff," I said.

Mama shrugged and put both hands on the counter. "I don't know," she said, her blue eyes staring past me. "I just don't know."

She slipped a fresh apron off a peg next to the register and smoothed it over her blue flowered dress. It used to be for Sundays, but she didn't like church anymore. Said the new preacher had beady eyes.

The pickers came in then, a man and a lady, with their hair spit-combed back. "Afternoon," the man said, nodding first at Mama, then at me. His wife smiled and showed her teeth: there was a space between the top two. Then quick, like she remembered, she shut her

mouth and looked up at Mama. "Orchards look good —," the man began.

"Forty dollars a day," Mama snapped, "each. You want up to three bushels, you pick them, fine. No smoking or drinking in the cabin." Her head was bobbing up and down as she spoke. "How many little ones you got?"

"Three," the woman beamed, holding her blonde ponytail out to the side. "Lacy's our girl, she's 11, then the twins Bert and Alvin, they're going on 19 months."

"Your girl can help my girl sort," Mama said. "After school and weekends. Fifty cents a bushel." She looked at me. "What?" I said.

"Bring them on in, Mary Nell," she said, not smiling. She turned back to the couple as I stepped outside, letting the screen door slam behind me.

"What's your name?" the girl asked. She was sitting on the wooden steps, watching the twins wriggling in the grass.

"Mary Nell," I said. "I'm Laura Ingalls," she announced, turning the bottle up and letting the last brown drops plop onto her tongue.

"You want some apple juice?" I asked her. She was ugly up close, with a space between her teeth like her mother's only worse because her teeth were still too big for her face.

"Prefer another Coke," she said. The twin with the blond hair picked up an apple and lobbed it at her, gurgling. "Alvin!" she barked. He stared at her, burped, then slapped his hands on his tummy.

"Piggy!" he chirped. "Your name's not Laura Ingalls," I said, hitching my thumbs in my waistband. "Your mother says it's Lacy."

She glared. "So don't lie to me," I warned her. The twin who'd been playing with the apple waddled up to me and reached inside his diaper.

The girl held her ponytail out just like her mother did, then slipped the ends of it between her teeth.

"I could be anyone," she said all of a sudden, "Laura Ingalls, Nellie Olson, Ramona Quimby, Heidi or Harriet the Spy." She spit a hair out of her mouth, then glared at me again. "I could be that little twit from the Babysitter's Club."

"You could be Alice in Wonderland," I offered.

"Nah," the girl said. "She sucked."

I thought about that for a minute. It was a stupid story. "Mama says I should bring you all inside," I said.

"Fine," said Lacy, hopping up on one foot and grabbing the boys, one in each hand. Her Coke bottle rolled from between her knees, stopping at the edge of each step like it was afraid.

We all ate dinner in the same room. Mama said it was so I didn't get any fancy ideas about having servants. "They're helping just until your Daddy comes back."

Truth is, Daddy's not coming back. I know this with all my soul. He went to find work in Jacksonville and took up with a lady named Maybelle. The day he left, the Pippins were just ready to be picked. They are small and yellow all over, but their full name is Cox's Orange Pippin. Grandma said we were stupid to plant them here, but we ordered them anyway and now we have a bushel from our six trees.

Grandma stopped talking the day Daddy left. "That old bat's fixing to die," Mama said to me on the front porch. I ran fast as I could to Dr. Harson's office, but my legs were heavy like gnarled logs. She didn't die, but Dr. Harson made her swallow some nasty old black pills, and she belched for three days. Never cried, never spoke. "Bullhead West Virginia hillbilly," Mama yelled at her. Grandma just stared out at the orchard, rocking in her chair and peeling Macintosh for a pie.

"What's that?" Lacy asked, pointing at the row of jars lined up next to the stove.

"Pink jewels," I said. "Right," she said, "Miss Mary Nell Smartass. Think you know it all, don't you?" She looked like a dog: a giant Chihuahua with her braids pulled so tight her ears popped up.

"Applesauce," I said, grabbing a jar with my fingertips. The glass was still hot. "We sell it."

"Why?"

"Our Empires don't always look so good. People think an apple's got to be pretty to taste right. So we take the ugly ones for applesauce."

"Why do you dye it?"

I handed her a teaspoon and the jar. "The color's natural. It's from the peels. All we add is water. Cinnamon sometimes."

Lacy tapped her spoon against the glass a few times, then dipped it in and tasted. "It's okay."

"It is not just okay," I said, "it's good. You know it. And don't go acting like the brain because you spelled miscellaneous and won the spelling bee. You're just some —"

"Migrant," Lacy cut in. "Wearing your old dress because your mother thought I could use it. I'll bet tomorrow I get a new pair of shoes."

I blushed. My favorite red Mary Janes from last year were sitting on my pillow, with my gray and pink tweed coat. The shoes weren't even scratched: except for church, I mostly wore them in private. They had tiny heels and red bows where the straps buckled.

"Say it," she said.

I shook my head.

"Think I'm poor white trash, don't you? You probably prayed for girls like me in Sunday School."

"No," I tried, but my voice was a whimper.

"I hate you," Lacy said. Then she threw her spoon at me. I let it fall, watching the soft pink dots of applesauce splatter and weave themselves into our braided rug.



"She hates me," I explained to Mama as we walked the Delicious orchard. The night was October's gift — dry and cool with a high crescent moon. Grandma toddled behind us, not speaking, though every few seconds I heard her catch her breath.

"Frost," Mama said. "I think tonight." Though it wasn't cold, she tightened her blue cardigan around her shoulders. "Be nice," she said.

"I was —"  
"That girl has it rough. You think you've got it bad — you don't have any idea. She'll be lucky to

make it through junior high."

"She reads books," I said.

"Ain't enough," Mama said. "I'll see to it she's got food in her belly for the next week or two, but it's not enough to shape her. Did you see those under-pants?" She turned to Grandma. "I liked to die."

Grandma stared at Mama, cool and hard.

"I went to Lundy's and bought her 10 pairs myself," Mama said.

"I never get new underwear," I moaned. It wasn't true, I got five new lavender pairs just last Thursday. I just didn't like Mama taking someone else's side.

"Shut up," Mama said. "You only sorted two bushels tonight and I got five more of Rome about to rot."

Grandma's hand tapped me on the back then, light as air. She

pointed up at a Red Delicious.

"Not until after the frost," Mama hissed.

I jumped up and grabbed it anyway. Grandma snatched it and bit through the skin so hard, I thought my own tongue would bleed.

Lacy and I worked side by side for two weeks. We didn't talk much. I showed her how to turn the best apples top side up in the bags. They were all most people wanted anyway. We could charge \$2 more a bushel if we left leaves on the best ones. Mama paid her every night, and half the time, there was a little package for Lacy from Lundy's. Socks, a pink blouse with pockets, a Dainty Deb training bra. The last one made me furious because Mama had always insisted I wait until I started sprouting.

"The difference is, she *has*," Mama explained. "What do you think, I'm playing favorites over my own daughter?"

I held my face steady and chewed the insides of my cheeks. It was exactly what I thought, but I wasn't in the mood for another lecture. I picked up two Winesaps and rucked them inside my navy turtleneck.

"Oh, boobies," Mama giggled. I went to my room.

They were fixing to leave the next morning: Grandma put Alvin and Bert into the snowsuits Mama had bought them. We'd had a cold snap, so all the Delicious were in. The barn smelled wonderful. Now all we had left were the purple plums, and we could do those ourselves — the trees were wide and low to the ground. Mama went into the shop to get their pay out of the cash box. Not counting Lacy's money, they'd earned \$920.

We all looked up when she blew out the door like a storm cloud.



"There's a problem," she said carefully, looking at us one by one. I was packing some of my books up for Lacy; they were heading for Florida for the winter season.

"We aim to be paid today, Ma'am," the man said. "I've got an offer to work a ranch in the panhandle."

"You will be," Mama said. "What's the problem?" the lady said. Her face had gone pale.

"I'm missing \$50," Mama said. "What are you getting at?" the man asked.

"I'm missing \$50," Mama said. "I didn't miscount. I went to the bank and drew out \$1,000 just yesterday. Now I know I took \$20 for groceries and 10 for the paperboy, but I'm missing 50."

"Oh, lord," the woman groaned. "Lacy, give it back."

My neck snapped as I turned to look at her. A thief! A common thief in our home.

"I didn't take it," Lacy gulped.

"Honey —," her father said.

"I swear I didn't," she said, folding her hands in her lap and closing her mouth. The tweed coat was too big for her. I wanted to rip it off and take back all the other things she'd stolen from me.

"Mary Nell?" Mama said.

I shook; the blood in my veins flowed so fast I thought I would faint.

"What?" I whispered.

"Do you know anything about this?"

"Fifty dollars is a lot of money," the man said. His wife was starting to cry — the tears made little ribbons down her windburned cheeks.

"No," I choked.

"Well," Mama sighed, "can't get it out of either of them. No sense." She shook her head. "None." She handed the man his pay.

"I'm sorry it had to end this way," the woman said, her eyes not blinking as she watched her husband count out the cash. It was all there.

"Me too," Mama said, pulling herself up the steps and into the shop.

After they drove away, the twins in the cab and Lacy in back of the truck huddled up in a plaid football blanket, I went inside.

Mama looked up from the counter. "I'm pure ashamed," she said.

"But I didn't —"

"Yes you did," Mama said. "You did

it to spite that girl. You're hateful," she continued. "Just like —"

"Just like her father," came a voice from the living room. Mama blanched. I was so afraid I couldn't turn around.

"That's what you wanted to say, wasn't it?" Grandma asked, holding a dishpan full of peeled and cored Wine-saps. "You always hated my boy. That's what drove him off."

"No —," Mama said.

"I know," said Grandma. "I know what you are."

"You can talk," I said.

"Go upstairs," Mama ordered me. "Stay put," said Grandma. I wavered with my hand on the door between the shop and the kitchen.

"Well?" said Mama. "Speak your piece."

"I ought not to," Grandma said.

"There you go, manipulating people," said Mama.

Grandma set the dishpan down on the counter. A bit of water splashed onto the wooden floor.

"I took the money," she said.

"What!" Mama and I both said: my voice was a squeak and Mama's was almost a boom.

"I took it, and I done gave it to that little lady," Grandma said. "Raising up those boys, she had it hard. I put it in her pocketbook after breakfast."

I took my hands off the door-knob and stood next to Grandma.

"I don't believe you," Mama said, but her voice was weak. She kept buttoning and undoing the top two buttons of her sweater.

"I don't care," said Grandma. "I just don't care." She took the dishpan into the kitchen, squeezed into her little rocking chair, and picked up her paring knife.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound," she sang in her craggy voice, still rough from six weeks of not speaking. "That saved a wretch like me." I handed her an apple from the dishpan, and she quartered it in two strokes. I put one in my mouth — it was tart and warm from the water. "I once was lost, and now I'm found, was blind, but now I see." We continued like that all morning, peeling and coring and slicing the apples. In the afternoon, we baked pies. ■



## Pamela Brown

Pamela Brown is a repeat winner of the *Ohio State Alumni Magazine Award for Fiction*, having won previously in 1989 for "Sweet Corn." She graduated from Ohio State in March of 1991 with a B.A. in English and has begun work toward a master's degree.

Her works have continued to win awards at Ohio State. She has received honors for fiction, plays and poetry, and in the process of producing those pieces, she continued the never-ending journey of learning and discovery that is writing.

One of the first things she learned was not to take it so seriously anymore. "Life experiences will show up even when you're not aware that they're showing up," she said. She also has shifted her focus from words to visuals.

Her winning story, "The Apple Pickers," just "came out of nowhere," she said, and played around in her head for about six weeks. Finally, it came time to write and it all came out at once.

It uses her childhood experiences of growing up in the country as well as powerful images she retains from joyous visits to a neighbor's apple barn.

The story let Brown tie together elements from childhood and family as well as look at life from a slightly different perspective — the story let her be a child again and it also let her experience not having much money.

She hopes the story will serve the same purposes for the reader. "I just want it to be a pleasurable reading experience," she said.

Brown continues to write and has a series of goals she hopes to achieve before turning 30. Her eclectic interests at present include writing for children, teaching flute and working two jobs.

