



# *The Golden Apple*

A Short Story

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# The Golden Apple

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**TWENTY-TWO YEARS AGO ON** a gusty December morning, when the air smelled so sweetly of vanilla that everyone in the town of Vacherie found themselves craving shortbread for breakfast, Laura Duparc's husband lingered in a hospital bed, disappearing one heartbeat at a time. That's when she'd begun to bake. Her fear and grief produced a sickening sweetness that slipped under windowsills and beneath doors, rose from the sidewalks and swirled in the treetops. It brought tears to the eyes of women who had buried their great loves, dreams, and children. Men climbed into their barn lofts, or set to walking the banks of the Mississippi River, with no idea where they would go. They said they tasted alum and their tongues curled in their mouths. They feared their own mortality and lay awake at night calling up every memory of wasted youth so they would not lose their minds.

For days, Laura baked until the hour the nurse they'd hired took Laura by the hand and led her from her kitchen. Laura hadn't been by her husband's deathbed to say goodbye and people would talk about that. But her reasons were her own. Afterward, a maple pound cake burned to ash in the oven and the fire department had to be called. Smoke rolled into the streets and clouded the skies while Laura hid in the tall sugar cane, but the stars shone brighter than ever before. She felt she could reach up and burn her fingertips on their trailing brilliance. It was then that Laura knew her love was truly gone.

At the wake, neighbors came to Cane House empty-handed and left with tins of sweet orange Bundt cake or pistachio macaroons until Laura's pantry was bare. From that day on, she wouldn't allow a single grain of sugar to enter her house. Sweetness had not given Laura Duparc her heart's desire. Years later, no one, not even Laura, could have guessed she would be lying in the little room at the top of the stairs, listening to her own breathing tick the minutes of her last hours away, unable to think of

anything else. Visions of English toffee and peanut brittle filled her waking hours and she dreamed only of melt-away fudge, petit fours, and coconut crème truffles.

The house was nestled in the St. James Parish along the Great River Road, named Cane for the sugar cane fields that produced the Duparc family fortune a century before. Laura lived happily in the old home, a young bride dreaming of filling the many high-ceilinged rooms with babies. To her great disappointment, seasons passed and Laura's youth with them. Still there were no children. Then came a winter when the first freeze fell too early in October and Laura began to lose faith. With the cold, a carnival arrived. George made an adventure of it, escorting Laura in her new, woolen, purple coat, hoping to lift her spirits. They marveled at the strange acts and rode the fanciful carousel and walked beneath the glowing lights like young lovers. It was there Laura spied a stand selling golden candied apples. The old woman working at the stand had eyes as bright as a bird. She waved away Laura's money and made a gift of an apple. The taste of cinnamon brought tears to Laura's eyes and she begged for the recipe. The old woman would only say she was sure she had nothing Laura really wanted. Laura cried, and surprised herself when she admitted her true heartbreak.

"I want to make a home for a child I'll never have."

Moved by Laura's sadness, the woman said more than she had before. She told Laura to wait for the first week of December, when magic hangs in the air. Then Laura was to make something sweet and give it away. That would bring her what she wanted.

"A heart's desire is a precious thing," the old woman warned. "You will owe a debt to be paid in small losses your whole life long. And if you are not vigilant, you will never know when you get what you want."

Laura went home to gladly pay and wait.

December was always a month for wind storms and no one in Vacherie noticed anything out of the ordinary about the roaring beneath the eaves or the low-hanging fog rolling in off the river, leaving even well-built houses damp. People were accustomed to tucking in for the season, tending to the fire,

and generally hibernating through to the New Year. December inspired naps and noodle soup and nostalgia, all favorites amongst the families of Vacherie. They looked forward to the hushed days before Christmas, but it was a contradictory time, too. People felt it hard to hear what others were saying over the whistle in the chimney and often, the worst of misunderstandings and arguments would break out between the closest of friends. December required guarded hearts, prepared for joy just as well as regret, and the good sense to know the difference.

When George Duparc fell ill with an unpredictable heart in the first week of December, people breathed a sigh of relief that their own loved ones had a healthy bloom in their cheeks. Perhaps regret wouldn't visit their homes this season. Only Laura didn't blame the capricious last days of the year. Secretly, she feared what the old woman had told her may have been a curse. Without warning, the only thing she wanted had changed, a terrible trick. She wanted to save her true love, but try as she might, no doctor, no medicine, nor promise to God made any difference. She watched death creep up the steps and into the room, a shadow of a doubt, realizing that without George, her dream would die, too. In the sallow light of dawn on Christmas Eve, she'd abandoned George. Her hands hung by her sides, useless, and to help her forget what she could not change, Laura began to bake. She did not stop until there was no sugar left in Cain house. She made cakes and candies, breads and puddings. To her surprise, the aroma of her longing brought strangers to her door. Each visitor left with something sweet to satisfy a need they'd never known. Before she knew it, she'd sacrificed her heart's desire for the man she loved. She'd wasted her one chance for a miracle.

The sugar was gone and everything was wrong. The empty cupboard smelled of caramel corn even as many new years passed. The hallways stank of candied almonds while Laura wept in her widow's black. Springs and summers came and went as she watched her girlhood friends raise their families and Laura herself grew old and tired and sorry she'd ever listened to the woman at the carnival.

Now the wonder of Laura Duparc's broken heart was only an urban legend. If someone thought they caught a whiff of lavender frosting on a winter wind, they might wink at their companion or smile

secretly to themselves. School girls said that if you smelled ginger just as you fell asleep, you would dream of your true love. Laura wanted to warn them to guard their innocence, to be wise and careful with their chances, lest they all be lost.

But dreams may only fade, not die. They may crystallize. Laura realized that this was true when she began to misplace things, when she missed her appointments and her words became confused, and her shoulders and neck began to ache with the pressure in her head. By the time the doctor's diagnosed her illness, the tumor was a terrible fist behind her eyes. She imagined its fingers curled around her memories. And then, like a miracle, the voice of a young woman spoke to Laura, who lingered just behind sleep's veil. And inside Laura, the death-grip relented, unfurled, flowered to reveal a truth as perfect and golden as an apple.

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Megan Bell liked to learn a little about her patients before meeting them. Often, they were in no condition to share the details of their lives. The most important part of her job was to assure them they weren't alone and that they'd been known. It was this secret gift—the gift of comfort—that Megan learned when she was very young. It was a wisdom that made her different and strange to the other children in the foster system, paranoid sorts, afraid of her patient manner, children who grew bitter or sad or cruel as they aged out and stumbled into the world full of a desperate need they could not name, a taste for tears. Megan, on the other hand, moved from house to house with a quiet ease. It was this knack for pleasing others that gave her what she wanted, to be an invisible girl. And now in her work, she looked into the eyes of each of her patients, seeing the same fear she'd seen in the fosters, knowing just what they needed in the days before they died. To Megan's way of thinking, death was no different from life when it came to the heart. She slipped in and out of the last days of these lives as easily as she had moved from house to house in the system. It didn't occur to her to grieve for what she'd never known, or to resent the comforts she purveyed with grace to others. She had never learned to dream.

And so Megan came to Laura Duparc's door a solitary figure, a tall reed of a girl, accustomed to the brackish reek of disillusioned lives. Finding herself in a house that smelled distinctly of burnt maple syrup was entirely unexpected and it made her uncertain, dizzy, as if she'd just stepped off a spinning carousel. The Victorian porch wrapped around the front like a swirl of frosting and the eaves dripped with scrolling, wooden gingerbread. Megan could barely bring herself to trust the structure to hold her weight. She imagined if she leaned close to stick out her tongue and lick the railings, they would taste just like vanilla taffy.

"I see you. I know you are here," Megan said, when she met Laura Duparc. She did not touch the old woman. She only waited for the deep sigh that always came with those words. Laura Duparc was no different, even in her sleep.

Laura Duparc would not speak to Megan. She'd lost speech a few weeks ago, after the diagnosis of a brain tumor. Her decline had progressed faster than anyone would have anticipated and Megan understood she wouldn't linger. It would be a quiet death in a quiet house. The reclusive heir to a sugar cane fortune had arranged to die at home and Megan's duties mostly consisted of dosing her patient with morphine while keeping her comfortable and clean. It was all fairly routine. The exception was that this client came with a final request. The lonely house was to be prepared for Christmas per the instructions left in a letter to hospice care.

Megan climbed the narrow, uneven steps to the attic trying to ignore the grumbling of an empty stomach and the strong aroma of chocolate ganache. She had checked the kitchen and the cold oven more than once to be sure Laura Duparc hadn't somehow performed the impossible and crawled from her bed to her mixing bowls. The sweetness, it seemed, was inside the house, part of it, absorbed by the wooden walls and floors.

There were stories about this house that Megan had dismissed as foolish, having learned some of them from her supervisor, a man who had never been to Vacherie, himself. It was said that kids from town were always sneaking into the yard, onto the porch or near an open window, daring one another

to inhale. Supposedly, if she took the time to check, she would find gouges in the clapboard siding where besotted teenagers carved out pieces of wood as tokens of undying love. Laura Duparc had never chased a single soul away or worried about wood rot or children trampling her grass, so there were muddy paths and worn spots beneath her windows. She'd welcomed the forlorn, the optimists, the risk-takers willing to become thieves for the sake of love.

Megan imagined what kind of person might do such a thing as she drew out the dusty box holding strands of lights to decorate Cane House. She had no idea how she would manage the task of stringing them from the steep roof and the window casings. The second request was less disconcerting. The woman had written out a recipe on a note card in spidery, uneven handwriting. She wanted Megan to bake her true love's favorite shortbread. The letter explained this was her gift to the kind heart who would care for her, the secret to a heart's desire.

It would have been easy enough to ignore the letter, to go about the usual, let the time pass without obliging the old woman. The morphine kept her semi-conscious and it was likely she had no knowledge of Megan at all. Megan knew the look of a woman who wouldn't make it through to the end of the week. Maybe that was why she'd agreed to the requests from the letter without putting up a fight or making some excuse. That was how she found herself standing in the cold light of the high-ceiled room on the north side of Cane House, tying an apron around her waist. Not since she was a girl in the foster home on Duncan Drive had she faced off with a gas stove. It was surprising how well she remembered the sulfur smell of natural gas and a lit match. Long ago she'd learned to make simple, flavorless meals. They'd tasted of hopelessness and there'd been no joy in the business. Thinking of those tables, set by strangers for other people's children, made her suddenly lonely.

A sound came from the back of the house and Megan startled. She was driven by curiosity to see who might be sneaking nearby for a stolen wish on Laura Duparc's broken heart. Megan turned out the oven flame and gladly abandoned the kitchen, hoping a stray dog had come to scratch at the door and keep her company. Instead, she found a man. He wore a thin, brown jacket with the collar turned

up against the wind. He didn't notice her at first, watching from the doorway. He was working a splinter of wood free from his fingertip. When the invisible sliver broke free, she saw the tiny red bloom of blood before he brought his finger to his mouth. In the other hand, he cupped the splinter gently in his palm, like a small bird, until he closed his fingers and tucked it inside his pants pocket. He looked up at her then with such expectation that Megan felt something happening inside her. She saw his quiet blue eyes, set wide apart in a careworn face, and wished she knew his name.

"I see you," Megan said out of habit. He smiled to be caught at his crime. He didn't seem at all ashamed.

"Then my luck's changed already."

"How can you believe that?"

"Have a look and tell me what you think?" He tapped his wounded fingertip against the sideboard and Megan stepped a little farther outside the door for a look at the back side of the house. It was true. There were a thousand pieces cut from the siding. From the front, the house was pristine but here she could see damage that spanned the entire back wall, disappearing a bit at a time, cut out to look like so much bridal lace.

For once, Megan had nothing comforting to say. She wondered where all of those pieces had traveled, what hands had worried the wood smooth, whose treasure boxes held these secret prayers. She felt as she looked at these wounds, a space was created inside her, and the thought made her afraid there would never be anything to fill it. Seeing her cry, the blue-eyed man offered to do anything to make her smile. He offered to come again the next day and patch all the holes.

"No." She almost asked him for a kiss, but instead he took the box of lights from her arms.



“Then I’ll string these on the highest places.”

For the rest of the afternoon, Megan moved around the unfamiliar kitchen, searching for ingredients and checking labels to be sure things weren’t out of date. She was surprised to find fresh milk, butter, and eggs in the ancient refrigerator. Outside, the blue-eyed man crawled all over Cane House and she was glad at the sound of him overhead. When at last she added a teaspoon of vanilla flavoring to the batter, she was unprepared for the strength of the aroma. She reached above the sink to push the window open and imagined the sweetness flying over the eaves and gables to reach the lonely man above her head, floating along the hills and down to the riverbank, reminding every heart in Vacherie of Laura Duparc.

As the bread baked, the marvelous fragrance flew up the stairwell to the room where Megan gently washed the old woman’s pale, thin body with the softest cotton cloth, the kind Megan ordered special. She whispered to Laura, stories filled with regret that drifted back into focus from her foggy memory: a kitten she had to leave on a roadside, a silver flute she’d seen in a shop window, but never had the courage to learn to play, a book she loved that had been stolen from beneath her bed while she slept, the kiss she wished she had given to the lonely blue-eyed man. By the time Laura Duparc’s bath was finished, Megan felt as though she’d confided all her untold secrets. She felt her skin had cooled and her eyes had cleared, even as the old woman slept in fits, grimacing and sighing so Megan smoothed her hair like a little girl’s. Letting go of life was not so peaceful as people wanted to believe. Megan knew it was best not to fear the struggle, best to accept what can’t be changed.

While the bread cooled, she made a sandwich for her supper and warmed a pot of cider on the stove. When the bell at the door rang, she supposed it to be the blue-eyed man, finished with his work. Instead, a young girl stood there. She’d brought the mail for Megan and smiled shyly. It was only after the little girl did not turn to go that Megan understood what brought her to Cane House. She offered the girl a piece of warm shortbread. No sooner had the girl gone, than a pair of old women called, arm

in arm. They were long-time friends of the woman upstairs, asking after her health. Megan assured them the patient was comfortable. She sent them away with their own cups of cider.

Day was fading and Megan stood on the lawn to see the strings of white lights trimming the house. They gave the impression that there was a celebration in progress. Perhaps that was true because for the next hour neighbors came and went, all asking after Laura Duparc, all sharing memories of other Christmases. Many recalled the year George Duparc's heart stopped. A few returned with their good luck charms, slivers of wood as smooth as satin, and Megan collected them in a silver bowl.

By evening, most of the shortbread had been eaten up. The stairwell glowed from the Christmas lights in the window as Megan went to check on the soul upstairs and share the news of all her visitors. The next dose of morphine carried the old woman farther away and Megan stroked her soft brow and watched the lines of worry smooth, suddenly the skin of a child, youth revisited like magic. Megan began to think that if she'd been able to choose a mother, she'd have chosen Laura Duparc. She'd never seen Laura Duparc's eyes, but she knew they must be green, the same as her own. She knew if she'd lain in this bed, gazing up at the reflection of a mother like Laura Duparc, she'd have seen herself there, a girl who knew she was loved.

The house had grown cold. Downstairs, Megan lit a fire in the front room and found herself making wishes as the sparks flew up the chimney, something she hadn't done since before she discovered her own gift of invisibility, something this house was doing to her. It was Christmas Eve and the last request in the letter was a simple one: dream of your heart's desire. Megan wondered if she even knew what that might be. She wondered what Laura might be dreaming—of her life here, her wonderful shortbread, her true love? She wished the woman could wake and tell her the secret, tell her how to make a home as full of love as Cane House. Megan was sure she'd been given something precious, more than a favorite recipe, something she could not yet name, but if it had a shape it would be as true and round and full of possibility as the ring of the bell at the door.

In the sallow light of dawn, Laura Duparc smiled in her sleep while the homeless child in the rooms below, dreamed; it was a waking dream, one that changed her and brought her home. In the growing warmth, in a house that smelled of cinnamon, cardamom, and spice, it was easy for Megan Bell to imagine this was her very own hearth, and that the blue-eyed man loved her and the rooms upstairs were waiting for her children. She dreamed of twinkle lights and neighbors who knew her name. Of salt and sweetness, of being seen and of giving away your best gifts until you were nothing but a memory, a blessing, a golden apple.