

# Mamma Jade

Mamma Jade wasn't really my mother; in fact she was old enough to not really be my grandmother either. That's just what everybody called her, from us children to the pickers, the sorters, and even Mister Mike who ran the Orchard. Now, years after those balmy summer days I can still picture her sitting in front of the White House, children all around her hanging on her every word. Oh how I miss the sound of her voice, so rich and dark and full of mischief.

Sitting on those steps, under the porch that captured shade from dawn to dusk, she would work sorting good fruit from bad. I marvelled at the speed with which she caressed the crop for blemishes. Constantly we tried to trick her by placing an apple that had caught the frost deep within her basket only for her fingers to toss it aside as we all cheered and clapped. Not that any of the fruit was wasted, Mister Mike would take the bad ones down to the brew and the next time we saw it would be in a tall glass, amber gold and laced with summer. All the time Mamma Jade worked - she talked. She told stories of the big city, of men in tall hats, women in gowns the colour of the wild strawberries in the far field. She spoke of love and magic, and the diamond mines in the south. The sound of her voice would carry out into the fields where the pickers listened from the tops of the ladders. I can remember those stories as clearly as I see the stars on the night before the rains return.

There is one story that I will carry next to my heart for as long as I live. It came at one of the most precious times in my life. It was late in the season and all the other children had been sent out into the fields to gather the remaining harvest that littered the ground, whilst I was left behind to help with sorting. It was the first and only time in my life I was alone with Mamma Jade. She told me a secret. In a whisper that barely reached my ears she bestowed upon me the knowledge of the golden apples.

Everyone that works in the orchard lives in the surrounding villages, and every summer we pack up a few belongings and stay in the little huts within the grounds until the work is done. At night the women light a fire by the track and sit around talking and listening to Mamma Jade as the men sit upon the corrugated roofs drinking cider from the brew.

On this Summer of which I speak there was a family that none of us had seen before. Occasionally in your life there are moments that etch themselves into your

memory, so vivid that you only have to close your eyes to recall them; the moment I first saw Rudy was such a moment.

He was standing with his back to me, gazing up at the sun. My eyes were mesmerised by his curls, dark as midnight and swaying like corn in the breeze. I held my breath for what seemed minutes, reluctant to break the spell. He turned around, caught me staring and smiled. I almost died. I needed no mirror to tell me that I was blushing, my cheeks felt like fire. Before I had a chance to gather my wits and smile back, he had returned to his work. I cursed my shyness.

The days that followed were truly heaven and hell. I would make feeble excuses to run errands into the fields in the hope of catching a glimpse of Rudy.

On the day that Mamma Jade and I were alone, Rudy was helping to load up the trucks. I watched him, hypnotized as he picked up the baskets and held them up to the men on the tracks. I couldn't take my eyes off him.

"Girl!" called Mamma Jade suddenly, jolting me from my trance. "If you stares at that boy any longer, I swear God will strike you blind. You hear?"

"I don't know what you mean?" I replied pathetically. That's when Mamma Jade let go one of her laughs, and when she starts laughing - everyone starts laughing. She threw back her head and roared to the heavens, her entire body shaking. When we were very young and Mamma Jade started laughing, our mothers would all cry out together - "Cover your ears's children! Else you catch the giggling virus." We would all cup our hands over our ears with the last of us to laugh being the winner. It was a very short game.

"From where I'm sitting," she continued finally. "It looks like you gonna drink that poor boy dry with your eyes - God help him if you ever get your hands on him."

"Oh do you think I will Mamma Jade, do you?" I begged. "I've tried everything, but I always lose my tongue just when it matters most."

"I never took you to be a shy girl Victoria," she stated.

"Oh I'm not Mamma Jade. It's just that when he looks at me I can hear my heart pumping real fast and my legs get weak at the knees. What am I going to do?"

For a moment she just sat there in silence, glancing between me and Rudy. Then she smiled.

"How old are you Victoria?" She asked in a whisper.

"12, nearly 13," I added as if the extra year made all the difference.

"Is that old enough to keep a secret?"

"Of course it is!"

Mamma Jade looked back. "I'm not so sure."

“Oh it is,” I pleaded. “I promise it is.”

“And are you sure you want this - Rudy?” I nodded vigorously. “There’s no turning back once we begin.” With that she motioned me to shuffle up close and she began to tell me her secret, all the time working as she spoke. “Can you see that big tree, way down the field, towering above the others?” I followed the line of her pointed finger before nodding. “That’s called the King Tree and right at the very top of that tree, way up where no picker can reach, grow the biggest apples you have ever set your eyes on. Those is magic apples.” She paused, widening her eyes until the wonder showed upon my face. “They are the golden apples and no one else in the whole wide world, save you me, know they’re there. The reason those is magic is this. They got a love charm so whoever you give them to falls in love with you and there is nothing either of you can do to break its spell.”

“How do I reach them? Tell me! Tell me!” I blurted impatiently.

“Sssshhh,” she warned, a finger to her lips. “All in good time, first you got a promise me you’ll never tell another soul. These things is dangerous, okay?” I agreed. “The other problem is that these apples grow so high that even the pickers ladders can’t reach them. They are way up, almost to the sky.” She must have noticed the excitement drain from my face as she was quick to continue. “Don’t worry about that girl, you forget these is magic apples. You let them come to you. Tonight, when everyone is asleep you must go down to the King Tree and sit at its base, repeating the name of the boy you want to charm over and over until the sun comes back to us again. Then, as soon as you see it you run as fast as you can back to your bed and there beneath your pillow will be a golden apple.”

I stayed silent for a minute, mesmerised by her words. “What I do then?”

She laughed. “Then you give the Apple to Rudy.”

“What if he doesn’t take it?”

“You make sure he takes it and that he doesn’t pass it on to someone else. Because if he does, you in trouble!”

That night I did as she said. Chanting his name I watch the moon go full curve through the inky darkness, oblivious to the chill breeze that greeted the night. I sat with my heart in my mouth as the silver disc disappeared and I longed for the first intoxicating fingers of the sun to touch me.

Daylight.

I leapt to my feet and ran and ran until I thought my lungs would burst. Despite the arrival of dawn the hut was still shrouded in darkness and I had to be careful as I tiptoed through the sea of bodies that lay dreaming at my feet. Reaching my bed I slipped my

hand into the coolness beneath the pillow and pulled out an apple three times larger than my fist. Excitement ran through my veins like a mountain spring. Clutching the apple to my chest I lay down and slept.

I awoke to the touch of my mother's hand. "Come on sleepy-head," her familiar voice was warm and kind.

"What time is it?" I said drowsily.

"Almost mid-morning, I let you sleep in as it is our last day." I threw myself out of bed and flung on some clothes before rushing out into the dazzling sunlight, the golden apple safely tucked away in the folds of my skirt. Tears blurred my vision as I looked along the lines of people as they filed out into the road. There was no sign of Rudy or his family.

I stumbled down into the fields, desolate and full of an emptiness so deep that I pulled out the golden apple and threw it down into the sun-dried grass. How long I sat there I do not know but I cried until I was as dry as the track.

"Is everything all right?" the voice started me and I screamed. "Sorry I didn't mean to frighten you."

Relief soaked through my body as I looked up to see Rudy, the familiar smile gracing his face.

"Have you been crying?" he asked.

"No! Well yes, I never did like the end of the season," I lied.

"Here, this should cheer you up," he said brightly. In his hand he held a huge apple. I gasped for at first I thought it was my golden apple but as I looked closer I noticed that scarlet flames licked its sides where mine had been as green as the meadow. Aware suddenly of my hunger I took the fruit and bit deeply. I looked up to see him smiling.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"Nothing, things couldn't be better." Noticing the quizzical look in my eye he continued. "It's supposed to be a secret, but I don't suppose it will do any harm now that you've tasted it. That's not a normal apple, it's a golden apple."

"What!" I exclaimed. "But how did you-?"

"Mamma Jade told me to sit out on the porch all night, repeating your name until dawn. They're magic apples Victoria! A love charm and now you and me are bound forever...."

His words ring inside my head as if they were spoken yesterday. Oh I know I shouldn't keep delving into my memories night after night but I get so lonely when Rudy is away working in the city. What else have I got to keep me company on these cold nights, all the children have gone and the house feels so big and empty around me? I much prefer

my memories, to feel again the sensation of holding the golden apple in my hand, stunned by Rudy's words.

I remember only too well how I'd laughed and taken another bite, caring not that the juice ran down my chin. Nothing else from that day forward could ever taste so sweet.



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