

ROTTEN

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I was born in a verdant grove, under a cloudless golden sky and a canopy of leaves. Opening my eyes for the first time, the first thing I saw was a sapling nestled in the soil between two withered old stumps. As I grew, the sapling grew alongside me. It was not long before the sapling became a tree, towering above me with its leaves blending into the canopy above. As its tallest branches brushed the heavens, the lowest began to hang low to the ground. Upon these branches, fruits of all shapes and sizes and colors began to grow, ripe and heavy with juice. I marveled at these fruits, captivated by the plentiful choices before me as I finally noticed the growling of my own stomach. I took stock of the fruits before me, wondering where to start or if I'd even have the room for all these fruits in my stomach. At that moment, for the first time in my life, I looked away from my sapling to the other trees in the garden surrounding me.

Not far from my own tree, there stood another—not quite so tall nor verdant as my own, but impressive nonetheless. At its base stood a young girl, roughly my age, deep in thought as she examined the two solitary fruits her tree had produced. I felt a twinge of pity for this girl—she had not been blessed by the same bounty I had, and the measly fruits offered by her tree surely could not sustain her. I contemplated calling out to her, offering to share in my wealth, but there was no need—as I watched her, she began to approach a branch of her tree. I thought she'd decided on the pitifully small maroon fruit with dull gray leaves, but when she reached the branch she did not grab the fruit. She grabbed the branch itself and hoisted herself atop it. Then, she reached for another branch above her and repeated the step, slowly scaling her tree until I could scarcely see her through the foliage. A moment of blurred movements and flashes of her figure through the gaps in the leaves later, and she suddenly jumped down to the ground once more. In her hands rested a shining gold fruit, nearly glowing in its brilliance. With a satisfied grin she sank her teeth into the flesh of the fruit, golden juices running down her chin, and I returned my gaze to my own tree once more. While



beautiful, none of the fruits before me bore that same luster. But the girl did not find this fruit among the lowest branches of her tree, so it was unreasonable to expect so from mine. I gazed upwards.

Above those branches, through the gaps in the canopy above, I saw them—fruits beyond my wildest imagination. Impossibly large, their branches bending precariously under their weight. Some of the fruits were a shimmering gold, like the girl's, but there were countless others just as stunning: some were a polished chrome, nearly invisible as they reflected the leaves around them, others seemed to be encrusted with rubies and sapphires, pearls and diamonds, and a few even seemed to shift with ever-changing patterns and colors. I must have stood there for hours, entranced by the bounty above me. I scarcely knew where to start, so once again I turned my gaze out towards the other trees.

Nearby there was a boy, just a bit older than me, holding the core of a fruit in his hands. As he chewed the last bites the core in his hand began to crumble into ash, leaving a handful of seeds resting in his palm. The boy barely paid any attention to the seeds before placing them in his pocket, then he turned back to his tree to reach for another fruit. As he did so, his tree seemed to shudder from root to branch—then, one by one, the fruits began to fall from its branches. As they bounced on the ground and settled into the grass his fruits began to rot away, their shining skins and rinds rapidly decaying into puddles of black and brown liquid before soaking into the soil, leaving no trace of their existence. The shock I felt was mirrored on the boy's face, who began to look back and forth between the ground and the now-barren branches of his tree as he searched for a sign of any fruits possibly remaining. His efforts were fruitless, he reached back into his pocket and pulled out one of the seeds, turning it over in his hand as he examined it carefully. Then, he looked out at the garden around him, at all the other children and their trees as far as the eye could see, and his fist clenched around the seed. He stepped away from his tree and set out, passing my tree and others, shrinking in my eyeline before disappearing in the shrubbery.

I was floored—the boy's tree had granted him one fruit before shedding its bounty, leaving him with only the seeds of that fruit to sustain himself in the future. I began to panic—

would my tree do the same to me? My eyes shifted back to the girl I had seen earlier, only to find her gone and her tree as fruitless as the boy's. I turned back to my own tree, eyeing the fruit with unease—how could I choose only one?

I sat down at the base of my tree, looking upward to stare at the fruit. I thought for a long while about which one I would ultimately pick, and fruit I would spend my life cultivating. The sun sidled lazily across the sky, setting it ablaze through the gaps in the leaves as it set beneath the hills beyond the grove. As the inferno above dwindled into inky darkness I closed my eyes and drifted into restless sleep, haunted by dreams of rotting fruit.

I awoke with the sunrise and continued my contemplation. Though I hungered, the image of rot burned in my mind and I could not bring myself to make a hasty decision. All around me the other children played in the garden, some picking fruit from their own trees and venturing forth out of the gardens when the rest of their fruits rotted away. I wondered how they could choose so easily, commit to a life of farming just one fruit. I imagined the regret they'd feel, years in the future when that fruit would begin to taste like ash in their mouths, that they hadn't chosen another. I would not be like them, I decided. I would think carefully, and only the best and most dazzling fruit to eat the rest of my life.

And so the days continued—I woke with the sunrise, I stared at my fruit as the children around me played and ate and left, I slept with nightfall, and I repeated the cycle all over again.

One morning I woke not with the sun but with a sound, a soft thud on the ground next to me. My eyes opened and I saw a fruit, shimmering silver and bejeweled with emeralds and aquamarine, perfect for just a moment before shriveling into a gray mass and bursting into a rotten puddle, soaking into the ground. I sat in shock for a moment, staring where the fruit had been, before my gaze shot up to the branches above. Most of the fruits remained intact, perfect as ever, but some now held bruises, patches of dark brown, sagging flesh marring a few otherwise perfect fruits.

As I examined the fruits, another fell just a few inches from my feet—a brilliant gold fruit, emitting a foul odor as it decayed before me and vanished. I began to



panic—this was not a possibility I had ever considered that the fruits might not always be ripe. I didn't know how much time I had left, how long before all my fruits had fallen and rotted away into nothingness. And yet, I couldn't choose. That fear still scorched my chest, my fear of choosing the wrong fruit burning as brightly as the fear of not receiving one at all. I looked to my left, to my right, but all that remained in the garden were barren trees. No other children remained, just me. Another fruit fell from my tree, and I turned back to the branches. I began to reach for one fruit on a low branch before recoiling, instead gripping the branch it grew from and hoisting myself up. I climbed madly, with no direction, hoping the perfect fruit would materialize before me.

As I searched, each fruit I found too imperfect in some way to commit to, I began to panic more and more. I reached for a branch without looking, and suddenly I was falling. I hit the ground with a dull thud, facing the canopy above. Another fruit fell, landing squarely on my heaving chest before rolling off and rotting into the dirt. I barely registered the impact, as the tears formed in my eyes. I didn't know what to choose. There were too many fruits, too many potential wrong choices, and not enough time. I wish there was more time. I wish I was like the other children, able to simply choose and move on. I wish I didn't have to choose, or that I could try all the fruits and choose after. But now, as I lay beneath a tree of rotting fruit, all I can do is cry.