

# **The Apples on the Ground**

**By Nicholas Stillman**

A free sample

© 2015 Nicholas Stillman

Get free short stories monthly at [stillmancifi.com](http://stillmancifi.com)

Blake felt the drowsiness spreading past his toes and knew for certain someone drugged him. He had shaken hands with the man at the yard sale, and some transdermal narcotic probably smeared from one palm to another. Country folk pandemically used the oil to replace boredom with slumber. But why would the polite farmer want to sedate a random city stranger? The old man had smiled graciously upon receiving Blake's ten dollars. In exchange, he'd allow the photographing of all the yard sale items for upload on Stock Y'all. Drugging them both with one handshake, even with a high tolerance, made no sense especially with so many perusing customers around. Unless...

The girl. The dreamy and smiley teenager had jumped into one of Blake's camera shots at the yard sale. The flirting went full throttle afterwards. She launched compliments and one-liners built up from weeks in the calm country. Erin—she introduced herself twice—had even invited him to meet her in two hours at a special brook one kilometer down the road, a little-known scenic hangout. Blake had accepted. He finished taking professional pictures of browned farm tools and started walking to Erin's meeting place. Maybe the old man wanted to protect girls in his community from exploitative outsiders.

It made a grain of sense. Blake could barely stand now, so he'd have to grasp that one speck of reasoning. He lumbered to a rustic log fence and leaned on it to get away from the road. Collapsing on the pavement could hurt. It could kill a bit later with the wrong kind of rural traffic. The wood felt diamond-hard under his palm. Either that, or the rest of him softened from the drug.

Blake pressed his thumb into a wide, eternally long crack to find out. Maybe the trench in the log would swallow him and offer a cool place to sleep. Swimming in dope and sunlight, he felt like liquefying every muscle and pouring himself into anyplace dark.

But Blake knew he'd have to hide somewhere real. Otherwise, a concerned driver might see him collapsed on the roadside. The bushes beyond the fence would suffice, if he could reach them. Sleeping off the drug and waking with a few bug bites seemed better than landing in the ER.

In one moment, Blake pressed his palms on the highest log. The next moment, he found himself on the other side of the fence. Something black and murky happened in between. All those workouts in the city gym finally did something besides turn heads.

He leaned on a fencepost for what felt like days. The wood creaked, as if telling him long stories. He'd have to wash his suit after today's sweaty adventure, or even throw it out. It depended on whether the pasture's mud or grass felt cozier.

Blake wiped both hands on the fencepost to remove the illicit oil. But the sedatives had already crossed his skin to find the neuronal receptors they liked. Luckily, this stuff the country folk call derma, short for transdermal, didn't kill brain cells as many of the new drugs did by design. Derma only stole time and productivity.

The bushes nearby rustled wildly, each leaf a blanket flipping out in the wind. Blake lost himself

in them, either physically or just transfixed. He'd never know for sure. Moments did little flips and somersaults. It took him far too long to notice a huge brown horse standing at his side. He inhaled a big waft of horse hair aroma, and it smelled right. Everything felt right, except standing. Only horses can stand this long.

The big stallion neighed. Blake patted the beast's long nose which looked to him like an eternal hallway. He gazed past it at the distant farmhouse where a roadside billboard advertised android horses. "Ride 'em and Buy 'em," it said. The airbrushed horse on the sign stuck out its caricatured chest. It posed with one front hoof raised to shake hands with a little farm girl.

The bucolic house and fields jumped in and out of reality. Blake felt rocks tumbling in his head, turning into boulders. When he blinked, the lumpy landscape took its time coming back.

Blake patted the horse some more and passed out in the pasture.

Blake wanted to dream about the girl he met at the yard sale. He'd miss their rendezvous at the brook, for certain. It all sounded fabled anyway. Erin had even stroked his neck, adoring the shining clean city man who appeared in this little relic town of hers. And her dress looked thin enough to twirl around a fork and eat in one bite.

She had promised him worlds with her eyes. Erin's big, overly white teeth waited for more scrumptious face to grow around them. Blake knew she'd become even more beautiful with time. In their future years together, that aura of hers would fill out with a powerhouse woman. The air waited for it, for the sculpture to rise a little higher.

But instead, he dreamed about the potbellied lizard man with breathing problems. Blake had seen the young yet horribly aged wreck at the bus station this morning while waiting for his ride to the country. The creature with the C-shaped spine had fallen asleep on the bench across from Blake's. And those protruding lizardly lips, speckled with saliva, buzzed and motored away. They claimed all the space in the lobby. The mouth overall had that messy frown that old grouches get, with expansions setting in. Finished at fifty.

Attracted by the vibrato, a monkey-sized robot on treads pattered to every seated person. They all stayed tight-lipped to avoid the rover outright and to keep its multijointed probes out of their mouths. It tried inserting everything it had into everyone encountered.

They swatted and shooed away the appendages. The rover moved on. No one dared snap its prodding arms in two or bash their briefcases over the rover's camera-laden head. That would result in police presence and fines. But everyone wanted to see those machines destroyed with dynamite or loafers. The robots did help reduce chatter in public areas, though.

So when the rover found the lizardly man, having pinpointed his lawnmower snores, no one woke him. The martyr would preoccupy the annoying robot for all the time he slept. Travelers

craved this sort of sacrifice. They needed a break from dodging these metal pests.

The rovers loved homeless dozers, or hated them, depending on how one thought of it. Each robot could legally pick open belts and pull off pants. They'd find any human puddle on the property and poke for satisfaction. They entered, injected, and recorded.

The snoring man's lips flapped and throbbed in a jagged rhythm the robot could handle. It probed for and found an opening. They preferred gaping mouths over nostrils and open zippers, and this one found its soul mate. The bendy arm snuck half a meter inside the sleeping man. Eight metal elbows disappeared down his esophagus. For ten minutes, the sleeper had to drool around the tendril. The rover had won today. It would go on winning as long as this man lived.