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Johnny Appleseed's Curse

A short story by
Eric L. Mott

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I CARRY WITH me many memories of the two summers I worked at church camp during my college years. Life as a summer staff member provided me as much excitement as an exam-weary student could handle. The job lacked no variety, as I found myself trimming trees one minute and peeling carrots the next. My second and final summer proved challenging, indeed, as each day brought new circumstances that tried my patience and good humor.

Our camp was an aged, crumbling facility that served a mix of on-site residents, resort guests, conventions, and Christian youth camps. We, the staff, found ourselves on the political hot seat more often than we prepared meals or mowed the grounds. Delicately we balanced the needs of our varied and demanding guests and tried to make them happy in cabins falling apart at their foundations.

During that summer of uncertainty and collapsing cabins, two things remained constant. Every Tuesday, Allan, the camp director, drove a youth camper to the hospital with minor injuries. Second, every time we sang the table grace, “Johnny Appleseed,” we received rain the same day. The words go like this:

Oh, the Lord's been good to me.
And so I thank the Lord
for giving me the things I need:
The sun, the rain and the apple seed;
The Lord's been good to me.

Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen – Ah-men!

Every campground has its superstitions and lore, I suppose. Before coming to camp, I had heard that the singing of Johnny Appleseed caused rain, but I am not superstitious. After sharing conversations with my fellow staff members, who were recruited from college campuses statewide, I found out that the Johnny Appleseed legend was widespread. However, I still did not believe.

Then it started raining—very time we sang the song.

The rain connection was not obvious to us at first, but as the summer progressed, we lost faith in coincidence. Of course, rain sometimes fell when we did not sing Johnny Appleseed, but those instances were easily forgotten. One day we wondered what would happen if we sang the song on a day that was already rainy.

The idea was Gina's—our lifeguard. Gina commanded little respect roaming the docks in an oversized t-shirt and red high-top sneakers. She stood shorter than half of

our young campers, and I did not think our diminutive lifeguard could pull a drowning person, youth or not, out of the lake. Perhaps for this reason, Allan kept watch with her. His glaring, six foot, two hundred pound presence caused any rebellious camper to behave. Anyway, Gina called this reverse psychology on God: If we sang Johnny Appleseed when it was already raining, then maybe God would send the rains away.

To our surprise, Gina's theory worked, and the magic and superstition of Johnny Appleseed then became firmly entrenched in our minds. Everybody on the staff believed, not just the college students. Our camp secretary, Shellie, even though she was married and pregnant with her first child, was not too far removed from college to be a little crazy at times. She had fun with the idea. John, our squinty-eyed, toothless maintenance man, believed anything we told him.

Toward mid-July, we tried to discourage the campers when they requested to sing Johnny Appleseed at meals. We even considered removing the poster with its printed lyrics from the dining hall. Rainy days meant sad campers. Yet I, selfishly, did not mind the rain. I was in charge of the canoes you see. On sunny days, campers went canoeing.

"BE CAREFUL," I would implore them as they sat before me on the beach with their cherub faces beaming up from behind orange life jackets. "Don't stand up in the canoes, don't splash each other, don't go out to the island, and don't go past those big, white buoys. You see them?"

"Yes, yes!" They would eagerly reply as they scampered into their boats. "Put away your gear when you are done," I would call after them. Then, I would go stand on the docks and wring my hands with worry as I watched my young charges scatter and bob on the waves.

For the better part of two summers, I watched these young boaters defy all my instructions. Time and time again I chased after them in my own canoe, like a cowboy on waves. I told them over and over that a canoe goes nowhere when its occupants face each other. For two summers, I labored to put away canoes abandoned mysteriously on the beach. I hated canoes.

For safety reasons, we never allowed canoeing on rainy days. "It looks like rain," I would gloat. "No canoes, today!"

Then came Emily's birthday—it was Tuesday.

A STIFF, NORTH breeze blew in off the lake and dark, towering clouds in the west obscured the sun, causing a premature dusk. I arrived at the mess hall for the evening meal grubby and tired from mowing the grounds. My bones ached and my head hurt from endless hours on the riding lawnmower. I arrived just in time to wash off and help with the last minute meal preparations.

When all was ready, Allan stood up before the hungry crowd of youths. A showman at heart, Allan was not content to rule the roost from the office. He liked to interact with the kids as much as possible.

“Everybody say, ‘Good evening, Allan!’” he bellowed. I plugged my ears and winced in anticipation of the response.

“GOOD EVENING ALLAN!” screamed a chorus of campers.

“Good evening, campers. Everybody say, ‘We had fun today!’”

“WE HAD FUN TODAY!”

“Great! Here with us tonight, to introduce your meal, is our very own Darla. Everybody say, ‘Good evening, Darla!’”

“GOOD EVENING, DARLA!”

I stood at my station in the serving line, ladle in hand. I only half-listened to Darla, one of our cooks, try to make our same old menu sound as interesting as possible. My ears perked up, however, when I heard several young voices request Johnny Appleseed for grace. I frowned, knowing what the weather looked like outside. I made frantic waving motions with my ladle, hoping to gain Darla’s attention, but to no avail. But wait! Gina had spoken up with another bright idea. What if we left out the word ‘rain’ when we sang it? Then, surely, no rain would come. So we sang:

Oh, the Lord's been good to me.
And so I thank the Lord
for giving me the things I need:
The sun, the [] and the apple seed;
The Lord's been good to me.

Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen – Ah-men!

After all the children passed through the serving lines, I served myself and sought a free place at a table. In the name of Christian community, Allan insisted that his staff

eat with the campers after we served them. I always felt I deserved more food than the youth because I was twice as big as them, but they were our guests; so when I sat down I prepared to inhale my supper that I might beat everyone else, who had a head start on me, to the seconds.

“Do you know the plan?” Allan asked from across my table.

“Hmmm?” I mumbled in reply, barely looking up.

“I guess not,” Shellie offered, “he’s been mowing all day.”

I would often spend days at a time buzzing around camp on my lawn mower incommunicado, isolated from the kitchen and office staffs and their schemes.

“Just follow our lead,” Allan said.

I looked at him, shrugged, and returned to my meal. Allan soon dismissed himself, claiming he had business to attend. Shellie followed minutes later, presumably to use the restroom. They both left half-finished plates of food at their places.

Also at my table sat Reverend Bob, the event leader for that week. I saw his eyes follow Shellie out of the dining hall. “Something is up. I can feel it.” Bob said.

We could only afford a skeleton crew at camp, just enough to maintain the grounds and prepare the meals. For that reason, each weekly event brought its own volunteer leaders and staff. Bob brought his same crew of high school counselors for three separate weekly sports camps each summer and we, the summer staff, worked well with them out of familiarity. Bob, a lanky redhead, would always rock back and forth on his heels and drawl whenever he had something important to say. This often made his listeners dizzy.

We had felt cheeky enough that week to pull some pranks and humorous skits at the expense of Bob and his staff during meal times, and he expected more of the same.

“What have you guys got cooked up for us this time?” he asked me while swaying back and forth in his chair.

Shrugging, I confessed, “I don’t know. Today is Emily’s birthday, I think. Maybe they are going to surprise her.”

“Ah, that would make sense,” Bob drawled.

Above the sound of the clatter in the dining hall, I heard the telephone ring back in the kitchen. Emily sat at a table closer than me and dashed back to answer. Emily, my coworker and fellow college student, was our chief cook. She and I were the only two holdovers from the previous summer’s staff, and her reputation as cook had spread

rapidly. As a 4-H farm girl and nutrition major, she handled the kitchen with confidence. Daily, I watched her with fascination as she prowled the kitchen with the graceful movements of a cat and prepared meals for hundreds of demanding children.

Emily's grace deserted her as she returned from the phone. Her face held a look of terror and she waved her arms wildly to gain my attention. My instinct told me Emily's agitation represented an emergency, so I leapt up to meet her.

Emily did not stop to address me, however. "Crawford," she hissed as she swept by. "Go...now!" she added as she looked wildly around for Allan, who, upon returning the dining room, stood looking as if ready to make an announcement. I followed Emily without understanding; the sight of the two of us threading our way through the tables cut Allan short.

"Sheriff!" she spit in Allan's ear. "Tornado! Crawford...shelter!"

In an instant of realization, I sucked breath through my teeth and felt a wave of queasiness travel from my throat to the pit of my stomach. Then I understood: the sheriff's office had called to warn us of tornadoes in the area. Emily wanted us to seek shelter in Crawford Auditorium in the center of the campground.

Emily's words instantly galvanized Allan into action. His smile disappeared into a grim frown, and the whites of his eyes shined at twice their normal size. That was the look I recognized as meaning business. The "Allan look," we called it.

As Allan began bellowing instructions to the campers, I exited the dining hall on to the porch and my jaw went slack at what I saw. Shellie stood there holding a lit birthday cake. The pan rested on top of her pregnant belly; her cheesy grin glowed in the light of the candles.

"Shellie," I gasped, "we have to take shelter. We have a tornado warning."

Shellie wrinkled her nose. "No way," she dead-panned. "You're kidding."

I blinked, forcefully yanked the cake from her hands, and placed it on the porch table. "Yes way! Get moving," I said. I turned Shellie by the shoulders and steered her outside. "Happy birthday," I called back to Emily. Her wide eyes showed her surprise; she bent over to blow out the candles.

"Oh, you guys!" she wailed, waving her arms frantically again, but I saw no more.

THE NEXT FEW moments were printed on my mind as one of those portraits of time that stands still in your head, one of those times where each second passes as a heartbeat

thumping in your ears. A purple blanket of clouds enveloped us in the surreal darkness of midday. White capped waves formed by the chill wind came crashing onto the beach from the lake. I looked over my shoulder at the column of children that I led across the campground. Fear silenced the voices that just moments ago were screaming in delight. Silently, they marched behind me wearing faces that ranged from indifference to terror. A couple foolish ones who did not appreciate the situation hopped and skipped along as if we were playing a game.

The row of marching kids behind me looked like a multi-colored snake as it wound its way across the grounds. The image of the serpent chilled my soul, as I shuddered at the thought of what would happen should we all get caught out in the open away from shelter. The sighs of a million rustling leaves above our heads seemed to warn us, "Hurry! Hurry!"

Shellie and I led the fleeing column to the house that contained the residence of the executive director and the camp offices. I was thankful that Allan directed us to his own house instead of Crawford Auditorium as Emily suggested. Crawford was an aged building, whose only shelter were two subterranean restrooms we would have used had we gone there. They were dank and scary. Most people who knew better avoided them except in an emergency. This was an emergency of a different sort, I suppose, but thankfully Allan had the presence of mind to send us to the more comfortable office basement.

Besides, Allan and the staff secretly wished that a tornado someday would swoop down and take Crawford Auditorium. With a leaky roof and a slanted floor, it had much to be desired as a camp facility and we badly needed a new building. Perhaps this was our lucky day!

OUR COLUMN WOUND its way through a colorless world of slow motion. The black forms of trees swaying in the wind seemed to grasp at us as we walked by. Fear and confusion extended what should have been only a minutes' walk from the dining hall to the office to one of perceived interminable length. We finally reached our goal. Through the office we went, through the garage, and down into Allan's basement. Safe at last!

At first I sat with the children on boxes, crates, and unused furniture. Several kids who had lost their fright began playing tag among some hanging laundry. (I have always felt that if Allan's wife had known, she would have been mortified.) I sat and wrung my hands with worry, wishing I could be as carefree as the children. Above the babble of the campers, I heard the camp bell tolling.

One of Allan's most dubious duties as director involved ringing the camp bell during storm emergencies. In our rural location, the camp residents and surrounding area had no other warning system. Allan said he had been emphatically warned at his hiring to keep ringing the bell in an emergency "no matter what."

"Don't I get to take cover?" Allan asked once. "If a tornado carries the bell away, do I need to keep ringing it?" I doubt that the two-ton iron bell moored in its stone piling would have gone anywhere, but what would keep Allan from blowing away?

The ringing stopped. Had Allan blown away? I went upstairs to investigate and Bob followed me. "We're caught in a tornado, and my infant son has an accident," he said, his red moustache twitching. Bob often brought his wife and family to camp. He left the house, shaking his head.

I found Shellie and Emily sitting in Allan's living room watching weather reports on television. "I wonder where John is?" Shellie asked.

"I don't know," I answered. "Do you suppose he's still mowing?" I had last seen John, our maverick maintenance man, riding a lawn mower at the far side of camp. I had visions of him flying around on his mower like in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Allan stomped into his house. "Has anyone seen John?" he asked.

"He's probably in Oz by now," I said.

That broke the tension, and we all began to laugh. Shellie poked Emily in the ribs and cackled, "Auntie Em! Auntie Em!"

The clearing sky indicated that eminent danger was passing—the reason Allan had stopped ringing the bell—but we wanted to keep the kids safe until the warning officially subsided. Allan, Shellie, and Emily, and I sat around Allan's living room sharing our stories about what had happened during the evacuation.

Bob plodded back into the house with his head hung. He carried a diaper bag slung over his back. "We're caught in a tornado," he mumbled as he walked by. "My son has an accident, and I have to risk my life to get the diapers." Bob turned the corner and plodded morosely down the stairs. We laughed at his discomfort.

Sounds of singing drifted up from the basement. We heard Jill's voice above the others. She was one of Bob's bright, teenage counselors who had wisely decided to keep the children occupied with song. The singing reminded Allan of something, and the wild look entered his eyes again. He slapped his forehead. "Did anyone blow out the birthday candles?" The wild look entered his eyes again. "Oh no! We escaped the tornado but the birthday cake will have burned down the dining hall!"

“Oh you guys!” Emily wailed. “They were the trick kind that won’t blow out.” Shellie held her hand over her mouth to suppress snickers of glee. I gave Emily an incredulous look. Emily continued, “At a time like this? You give me a cake with those? I had to douse them with a pitcher of lemonade!”

Allan chortled in his deep resonating voice. Shellie giggled.

It has come to this, I thought. What had been a moment of terror just a few moments ago was now something to laugh about, an amusing diversion. “Boy, I bet that cake is soggy now,” I said. Emily glared at me. “Happy birthday, Em,” I added meekly.

THE SCENE THAT greeted our return to the dining hall tempered our good humor. A hundred or so cold, half finished meals gave mute testimony to our hasty exit. We groaned at the long cleanup facing us. Most lost interest in their food, but we sang an inspired Happy Birthday to Emily and offered soggy cake to any who desired it and began to clean up. A holiday atmosphere reigned in the kitchen as the full staff, finally reunited, shared stories about our individual adventures throughout the episode.

“You should have seen Shellie’s face when I took the cake from her,” I reminisced while scrubbing pots.

“That’s ‘cause I didn’t believe you,” Shellie said with a dish towel in hand.

“No kidding.”

Emily’s voice floated from a back storage room, “I can’t believe you gave me trick candles!”

“Leave out the word rain,” mocked Shellie. “Right, Gina?”

“Yeah, it’s because of that stupid song!”

“On a Tuesday, too,” added Darla. “A double whammy!”

“I’m taking the sign down,” called Allan from the dining hall. He reached up above the kitchen serving windows and tore down the poster board that bore Johnny Appleseed’s words. He looked at the back side and burst out laughing. “Look guys!” On the opposite side of the poster were the same words with a huge black ‘X’ through them—the creator of the poster had goofed and started over.

“How appropriate,” I said. “Display that side and write tornadoes where it says rain.”

Allan laughed again.

SEVERAL WEEKS LATER, Reverend Bob and company returned for their last camp of the season. It was suppertime and Allan was in the spotlight again.

“Everybody say ‘Good evening, Allan!’”

“GOOD EVENING ALLAN!”

“Good evening, campers. Everybody say, ‘we had fun today!’”

“WE HAD FUN TODAY!”

“Let’s sing grace before we eat. Does anyone have any requests?”

Bob called out from the crowd. “We want to sing Johnny Appleseed.” The campers giggled. Obviously, Bob and his counselors had told them the story of what happened a few weeks earlier.

Allan shook his head emphatically and pointed to the poster with the crossed out words. “No, no, silly campers. See? We don’t sing that song anymore.”

Bob stood at his seat with a twinkle in his eye and rocked back and forth. “Well, we’re gonna sing it, anyway!”

Allan and the staff, including me, plugged our ears and winced. We watched in silence as Bob and his campers mouthed the words.

Oh, the Lord's been good to me.
And so I thank the Lord
for giving me the things I need:
The sun, the rain and the apple seed;
The Lord's been good to me.

Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen – Ah-men!

