

The Orchardarians

by Peter O'Cain

2025 Fiction Contest — 1st Place

Jeremy Rooke plopped a pitcher of beer as dark as the August night onto a scarred wooden table and slid into his seat. At six-foot-nine and 350 pounds, he could hardly fit into the booth.

"Where did I leave off?" he said.

Sitting opposite at a foot shorter and 200 pounds lighter was Tim Wallace, the 45-year-old editor of *The Wenatchi Globe* newspaper.

"I believe you were going to tell me how this entire town is secretly run by, uh, the people who put on the Apple Harvest Festival every year," he said.

"Right," Jeremy took a drink. "How have you guys not figured this out yet?"

"I'm going to guess because there's nothing *to* report?"

Jeremy, 35, ran an independent news site called *The Bad Apple*.

"No, there's definitely something to report. You legacy media types just have your heads too far up your own asses to see the real stories," he said, letting out a belch. "No offense."

"None taken. We don't have *the* Jeremy Rooke to dig up the real stories."

"That's why we're here," Jeremy smiled. "I dug one up for you."

"All right, let's hear it," Tim chuckled.

"I'm going to lay all this out in my piece, but I'd like to run it in *The Globe*, too," Jeremy said, looking over his shoulder, scanning the half-empty bar. He lowered his voice below the classic rock playing from the jukebox, "There isn't a dime the Orchardarians don't touch or a string they don't pull in this town."

"Oh yeah? So where's the money going?" Tim asked. "Because they're not rich."

“A bunch of local deep state stuff. Plus a blood ritual. I think. I'll get to that.”

“Oh, sure, of course. Continue.”

Over the next hour, Jeremy detailed the ways in which the Orchardarians were weaved into the town's fabric. With every sip of beer came a new allegation, a new person connected to what was, according to him, a cult hiding in plain sight.

“And like I mentioned earlier, I've even heard rumors that they sacrifice a migrant worker each year,” Jeremy said.

“A migrant worker?” Tim laughed. He couldn't help himself.

“Yeah, something about the symbolism—”

“Sorry, I need to send a text real quick,” Tim interrupted. “Keep talking.”

“And the ones they snatch are usually undocumented so they're harder to trace. But again, I'm still trying to confirm all that.”

“Okay,” he said, still chuckling. “So. I can see how killing a few migrants over — how many years did you say they've been doing this?”

“A hundred.”

“Okay, I can see how maybe if they killed a few migrants over a century it would go unnoticed, but *one hundred* migrants? No way. That's insane. People would've noticed. *The Globe* would've noticed ”

“Not if they're in on it.”

Tim glared at Jeremy.

“Kidding. I don't actually think the current *Globe* staff is in on it,” Jeremy said. “But I do think Forest Senior was.”

He was referring to James Forest Sr., a local icon who founded *The Globe* in 1910. His grandson, James Forest III ran the paper now.

Tim stuck a finger at Jeremy. “You know, I'll listen to your fairy tales, but I won't listen to you question my paper's integrity.”

“I said I was kidding. Besides, if I thought you guys were still in on it we wouldn't be talking.”

“Mhmm.”

“You know, you’re getting awfully defensive — anything you want to tell me?” Jeremy said as he sat upright, blocking out light cast by a nearby lamp. “Anything you want to confess?”

Tim rolled his eyes and faced the wall at the end of the booth. “There's nothing to confess. You’re just crazy.”

“People called Ahab crazy, too.”

“Yeah, then Moby Dick smashed his fucking boat.”

“But he was right.”

“That's the problem: you're not right. Your whole perspective is so skewed you can't tell reality from your imagination,” Tim said, raising his voice and drawing looks from around the room. “You come up with these wild theories before ever considering, I don't know, that coincidences happen. That conspiracies are almost always explained away by boring bullshit, like low staffing, instead of, I don't know, a fucking murder cult.”

Jeremy took the last drink of beer and pushed the empty glass to the center of the table.

“The festival starts next Saturday. My story is going live the day before. You could've been on the right side of history.”

“I think we’ll be okay.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Tim finished what was left of his beer.

“Well, I guess we’re done here. You wanna take off?” he asked. “I think I'm parked next to you.”

“Sure,” Jeremy said, reaching across the table and squeezing Tim by the shoulder. “A little guy like yourself shouldn't be out alone this late.”

Their cars were three blocks away behind a convention center. Neither spoke much along the way.

“It’s not too late,” Jeremy said as they came to the parking lot. “Think about publishing my piece.”

“I will.”

Jeremy clicked the key fob to his pickup, its headlights illuminated a police car. “Hide your blow,” he joked.

The cruiser’s emergency lights flashed on and a cop stepped out and walked toward Tim and Jeremy. Backlit by red and blue strobes, they could only make out a shifting silhouette.

“Don’t you have anything better to do,” Jeremy shouted.

The cop raised a handgun and fired four rounds into Jeremy's torso. He slumped forward onto his face like a felled tree. The cop holstered his gun. "I got your text."

"I see that," Tim replied. Blood pooled around Jeremy's body. He'd be an island soon. "What's your story for this?"

"My dashcam is in the shop," the cop said. He drew a pistol wrapped in plastic from his cargo pocket. "And I didn't have time to turn on my body cam after he pulled this on me."

"That works."

"So how'd he find out about everything?"

Tim shrugged, "Good journalist."

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