

FLUFFLE-PICKING TIME

By Chris Grabenstein

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WITH ONE WHIFF of the early morning breeze, Charlotte Applebee knew it was fluffle-picking time in Plush Grove.

The outdoors smelled like cotton candy mixed with the fresh scent of pillowcases dried on a clothesline. That meant the fluffles had already ripened on the branches of the trees in the five-hundred-acre orchard that had been in the Applebee family for six generations.

"The carnival men will be here soon," Charlotte said to Mr. Wiggles, her stuffed bunny rabbit, as she climbed out of bed and pulled on her flannel shirt and fluffle-picking overalls. "But don't worry. I won't let them take you."

The bunny rabbit, frayed and gray, was flopped between a pair of pillows looking limp and sad-the way it had looked for six years because it only had one eye and no wire to perk up its ears.

Charlotte went to her bedroom window to savor the sweet scent. "The fluffles smell plump and cuddly this year. I bet it'll be a good harvest. The best in years."

Although she was only eleven, Charlotte knew all the signs of fluffle-picking time. School would be closed for a week so the children could work in the orchards, helping their families pluck the ripe fruit out of the fluffle trees.

"The trees are heavy," Charlotte's father said proudly when she came down to the kitchen to eat a big breakfast of eggs, bacon, sausage, biscuits, gravy, waffles, fried chicken, and cornbread. It was what her dad called "a proper fluffle-picker's breakfast." They had to eat a hearty morning meal because fluffle picking was hard work and they only had a week to pluck every stuffed animal out of their trees or else they would "turn." They'd lose their cuteness. Their fleecy fur would become matted and tangled. Their button eyes might even pop out.

"School called," said Charlotte's mother. "It'll be closed for the week. All the fluffle farmers need every available hand they can find out in the orchards."

"Doc Hargrove's sending over his boy, Bobby," said her father. "He's your age, right, Charlotte?"

"Yes, sir," said Charlotte, stuffing her mouth with scrambled eggs and biscuit so she wouldn't have to say any more. Bobby Hargrove, who always sat behind her at school, was like a

spoiled fluffle. Filled with bad stuffing. Rotten to the core. Bobby also thought that, since he was the doctor's son, he was better than all the "fluffle-picking hicks" in Plush Grove.

But Charlotte knew that nobody would even be able to pay to see Dr. Hargrove if the carnival men didn't buy up all the crates of stuffed animals that grew in the county's fluffle orchards each year.

"Trees are bursting with good variety this year," said Charlotte's father, putting down his coffee mug. "We've got heart-hugging white bears, monkeys wearing striped leggings, some blue whales, and a whole bunch of fuzzy brown bears."

"Blue whales are rare," said Charlotte's mother.

"Aya," said her father. "They're nice and plump, too. I figure it's that blanket of polyester I mulched around the roots back in June."

"But what makes them turn blue?" asked Charlotte.

"Sadness, I suppose," said her father. "We try to keep it away from the orchard but, every now and then, some seeps in."

"It's the price we pay for rainstorms," said her mother.

Breakfast finished, Charlotte headed out to the barn to grab her picking ladder and a stack of wood-slatted bushel baskets.

"You and Bobby can work the eastern orchards," said her father. "Your mother and I will head north and west."

"And try not to fall in love with any of the fruit," warned her mother.

"I won't, Mother."

"You sure did when you were little."

"She was only five," said her father, remembering when Charlotte had brought home Mr. Wiggles.

"Well, she's not five anymore," said her mother.

"Remember to toss any rotten fruit you find to the ground," said her dad, as if Charlotte didn't already know the basics of fluffle picking. "It makes good fertilizer."

"Yes, Dad."

Charlotte headed off to the eastern orchards, where the fluffle trees were lined up in tidy rows as far as the eye could see.

"Hey, wait for me!" shouted an annoying voice behind her.

It was Bobby Hargrove.

"Do I need a ladder?" he asked. "Last year, when I worked the Jenkins orchard, I had a ladder."

"You're a bushel boy this year," said Charlotte. "I'll pluck the fruit and toss it down to you."

"I'd rather be a picker than a packer."

Charlotte ignored him, set up her ladder, and started plucking stuffed animals off the branches. Her dad had been right: It was a very good harvest this year. She tossed down plush white teddy bears cradling red Valentine's Day hearts, purple gorillas, pink bunny rabbits, and a rare blue whale.

"Hey," cried Bobby. "Slow down!"

That made Charlotte smile. She started singing a fluffle-picking song (to the tune of "Frere Jacques") so she could pluck fruit even faster:

*Picking fluffles, picking fluffles
One by one, one by one
Picking all the fluffles,
Picking all the fluffles,
Till we're done, till we're done*

She was having so much fun, bombarding bratty Bobby down below, she didn't pay much attention to the dusty pink bunny with the bent ears, yellow knit sweater, and yellow paws.

"This one is rotten," said Bobby when he caught the bunny.

"What?" said Charlotte.

"This thing has three eyeballs!"

Charlotte scampered down the ladder.

"Let me see...."

Bobby handed it to her. "There's a shiny eyeball on its cheek. And look at that smile. It's sewed in upside down. What kid in their right mind would want this stupid bunny?"

"If it's a prize at a carnival booth..."

"They'd have to give it to the loser," sneered Bobby. "This bunny should've been harvested a week ago, before it grew an extra eye. Now it looks like a potato that's been in the potato bin too long."

Bobby tossed the floppy bunny to the ground.

"One bad bunny can spoil the whole lot!"

Charlotte nodded grimly. "Haul your bushel over to the holding crate," she said.

Bobby did as he was told. But not before he gave the limp bunny a good swift kick.

"We should chop off its head," he said as he walked away with his load. "It'll decompose faster if all the stuffing spills out."

"Go dump that bushel," said Charlotte. "I'll deal with the bad fluffle."

"Fine. Have all the fun. See if I care."

Charlotte knelt next to the bunny as Bobby disappeared around the trees. Her mother was right. She was too old to be bringing home stuffed animals, especially damaged goods. She buried the sad-looking, three-eyed bunny under a pile of yellow leaves that matched its ugly sweater and plush toes.

Bobby and Charlotte worked the orchard until sundown, with only a short break for lunch.

“Did you rip off its head?” Bobby asked at least a dozen times.

And every time he did, Charlotte would ignore the question and sing her annoying "Picking Fluffles" song again.

That night, after Bobby had gone home with a day's wages, Charlotte ate a late dinner with her parents. Nobody said much around the table. They were too hungry to chat.

“Well,” said Charlotte's father when he finally pushed back from the table. “We best turn in early. Tomorrow's going to be just as much work as today.”

“Not that we're complaining,” said Charlotte's mother. “Didn't spy one rotten piece of fruit all day.”

“Good harvest,” said her father. “Best in at least six years.”

Everybody said good night and headed off to bed.

Charlotte went up to her room, where Mr. Wiggles had been waiting patiently between his pillows all day long.

“Can you a keep a secret?” asked Charlotte. The stuffed bunny, of course, said nothing. His one button eye remained blank. “You want to know the best thing about fluffle-picking overalls?”

Once again, Mr. Wiggles didn't answer.

“They're big and baggy. Perfect for hiding stuff you were supposed to leave to rot under a tree.”

She took out the three-eyed bunny with the bright yellow sweater. She had to peel away a wet yellow leaf before squeezing the freshly picked bunny into the pillow nook beside Mr. Wiggles.

Charlotte looked at her two castaway bunnies, their heads side by side. All of a sudden, Mr. Wiggles seemed to have two eyes again because his cheek was smooshed right up against the cheek where the extra button had popped up on the new bunny.

And the new bunny's sadly sewn frown? Somehow, it had turned itself upside down.

Charlotte smiled. Her father had been right.

It was a good harvest.

The best in at least six years.