

Appleseed

Oscar Braeburn, aka General Appleseed, smacked a tied up police officer in the face with a wiffle ball bat. “Tell me what you know.”

“You’re just a kid.” The police officer had been captured the day before during a surprise raid of Treehouse Headquarters.

Dusk slid into night and a generator kicked on outside. A few bulbs flickered to life bathing the wooden treehouse room in a warm, amber glow. Appleseed assumed a hitting stance and took determined practice swings. “When are they planning the next attack?”

“The military is coming. It’s over.” The officer could barely hold his head up.

Appleseed snickered, grabbed a handful of his hostage’s hair, and pulled so they were eye to eye. “It’s not over ‘til the fat lady sings.” He stepped back and beat the police officer unconscious.

Appleseed closed the door of the interrogation room behind him and entered the main area of Treehouse Headquarters. He tossed the bent yellow wiffle ball bat, smeared with blood, in the corner. A large table covered with a map of the United States and computers took up most of the space.

Surrounding the table were the commanding officers of the teenage renegade group, Ignis Vero. Blond haired Colonel Oakley, overseeing general infantry, cleaned her automatic pistols. Lieutenant Boone, head of communications, sat typing on multiple computers. At the other end of the table was ballistics engineer Major Calamity, busy soldering the circuit board in her transmitter.

General Appleseed looked out a window at the militant group of teenagers surrounding Treehouse Headquarters. They loaded weapons, did drills, and prepared themselves for the conflict. He felt fear and trepidation rising within his young heart but remained stoic. The others needed his resolve and leadership. He turned to face the table. “We’re going to kill every adult in this town tonight.”

Oscar Braeburn was an eighth grader with exceptional intelligence and got invited to participate in the high school’s Model United Nations Club. It was there he met Alice Wesson.

She had a reputation for rule breaking and rumor had it she kept a handgun in the glove compartment of her run down station wagon. She was smart, bold, and a sophomore. They were pitted against each other on his first day in the club.

Oscar went right for it. "Listen, Finland, your timber industry is being ravaged by a mutant Mountain Pine Beetle outbreak. You don't have a choice."

Alice was intrigued by this well-spoken and passionate youngster. "Nice suggestion United States but we're not going to replace our timber with hemp fields."

"Hemp is the future. It grows faster than trees, is more sustainable, and easier to process. You'll take a large financial hit up front which we'll soften with a loan. In a decade you'll be the world's leading hemp producer and a global trendsetter."

Alice refused to give in. "If I say no?"

"We'll blow up your country and plant hemp fields in the ashes of your children."

This got a raucous approval from his fellow Model UN team.

"The U.S. would never advocate hemp."

"Bold action requires bold men." Oscar stood up behind his table to stare down Alice. She stood up and did the same. "Do it. I dare you."

Stars spun around in young Oscar's eyes. He was in love.

When Model UN finished he caught up to Alice in the parking lot. "Nice UN-ing in there."

"Thanks."

"I was thinking," a palpitation of nerves vibrated through him, "would you wanna hang out sometime?"

Alice looked him up and down. "You're an eighth grader."

The spring sun was cooking the blacktop parking lot. Oscar felt sweaty nervousness in his armpits. "Not for long. School year's almost over."

They reached Alice's car. The sun glared into her face and she held her hand above her eyes. There was something about this kid that intrigued her. "Couple of my friends and I are going bowling."

"I love bowling." Oscar hadn't held a bowling ball his entire life.

“Cool. I’ll come pick you up around 8.”

Oscar wanted to raise his arms in triumph but didn’t want Alice to see his soaking wet pit stains. “See ya then.”

Later that night she pulled up to his house and heard yelling from inside. Oscar came to the door, red in the face and upset. “My parents won’t let me go.”

“Why?”

“They don’t want me hanging out with an older girl.”

Alice shook her head in disapproval, a few blond curls falling out of place. “Well, I was looking forward to whooping you at the bowling alley.”

They stood there in awkward silence.

Oscar blurted, “I’m going to sneak out.”

Alice’s eyebrow shot up in interest.

“9 o’clock they go to their bedroom and read. 9:30 I’ll meet you down at the end of this block.”

Later that night Oscar scurried up to Alice’s parked car. He tapped on the windshield, grinning like an idiot.

Her friends were sitting in the back seat, he recognized them from Model UN. Tom Petty’s “Refugee” was on the radio and they were hotboxing. Oscar went to sit in the passenger seat but had to move four cans of beer wrapped in a towel.

“Are you guys smoking weed?”

Alice’s friends started cracking up, she quieted them with her hand. “It’s cannabis, son. If you’re rebelling against tus padres then this is the plant for you. You can thank Freddie and Wanda in back.”

Oscar took the glass pipe from Wanda and gazed at it like an ancient artifact. “You said we were going bowling.”

Wanda smiled. “This, “ she pointed to the pipe, “is called a bowl. Put it to your lips, your thumb goes over this hole, light it, inhale, remove your thumb. Voila, you’re bowling.”

Oscar tried but failed.

“Here.” Alice took the lighter. “I’m going to light it and hold my thumb over the hole. Just inhale.”

Alice lit the bowl and Oscar took a big breath. The smoke filled his mind, body, and soul right as Petty ripped into “...everybody gotta fight to be free.”

They drove to a forest clearing on the edge of town. Wanda and Freddie set off fireworks while Oscar and Alice watched from the hood of the car.

The cannabis lifted Oscar to new a plane of reality while him and Alice sipped on warm beers.

“Where’d you uh, get the brewskis?” Oscar cringed at the lame choice of slang.

“My mom.”

“My parents would freak out if I took their alcohol.”

“If she was ever sober enough to remember I’m sure she’d be pissed too.” Alice’s face was severe and angular with shadows.

Oscar couldn’t stop staring at her. “Adults suck.”

“We’ll all be adults someday.” Freddie chimed in.

Oscar objected, “I’ll be different.”

He moved his hand over to Alice’s and embraced it. She looked down then met his eyes, they were vulnerable and sincere.

“My parents, your mom, our teachers. They’re clueless. Our world is in ruin and no one cares.” Oscar released her hand and slid off the hood. He stood proud and moved like a politician on television. “The skeleton hordes of adults are the worst threat to national, nay, global security in the global history of globes.”

Freddie started recording with his phone. Alice laughed while she was drinking and spewed warm beer from her mouth. “You’re high.”

He continued. “My highness allows me to see over the entire landscape of our future and it’s clear as a tear that every problem our whole wide world faces is because of adults.”

“Burn ‘em to the ground.” Wanda lit a sparkler and handed it to Oscar.

“I, General...Appleseed—”

Alice crushed up her beer can and threw it at him.

“I, General Appleseed, declare a national state of emergency. Grown ups are an epidemic. With the help of the most capable military minds, Colonel, uh, Oakley,” he motioned to Alice, “Lieutenant Boone,” Freddie turned the phone around and gave a thumbs up, “and Major Calamity,” Wanda twirled with a sparkler in each hand, “we will cure our country of this plague.”

Wanda lit a large roll of firecrackers. They sounded like dampened machine guns. Oscar held his arms up in stoned drunk victory and went to bow but lost his balance and fell face first into the dewy grass.

Appleseed was caught by his parents when Oakley dropped him off and was grounded. He spent his grounded time organizing an online community of frustrated teens desiring sovereignty. He called it Ignis Vero. When he wasn't writing manifestos he was participating in a new daily ritual of yelling matches with his parents.

They were all part of the same coalition at the next Model UN. Appleseed sat back in his uncomfortable school chair, frustrated. “Australia, your public education initiative is garbage.”

“Why?” Australia replied.

“Public education is an industrialized institution of mind control. Its sole purpose is to mold children into dumb, subservient adults. You'd understand if you weren't an idiot.”

Oakley tapped him on the shoulder. “Chill Ecuador, it's just a game.”

The teacher stepped in. “Ecuador, I want you to apologize to Australia.”

He turned his attention to the teacher. “*You* work for a government funded day care center specializing in neutering original thought.”

“You'll be asked to leave the UN if you don't apologize.”

Appleseed stood up. “The UN is a front for a global crime syndicate run by centralized banks. I don't wanna be part of it.”

Oakley sat back, wide eyed and excited.

“If you refuse to apologize—”

“I refuse to apologize.” Appleseed collected the little flags in front of each student representing their country.

The teacher took stern tone of voice. "Oscar, I think you should leave."

"My name's Appleseed." He looked at Oakley, Boone, Calamity, and smiled. "You think I should leave? Thinking is all you adults ever do. Think and talk. Think and talk. You never *do* anything."

"Oscar." The teacher was frustrated and losing his cool. "You'll be an adult some day and you'll understand."

"I'll never be like you." Appleseed held all the flags.

Oakley and Calamity grinned, Boone had his phone out recording, and the rest of the students sat in stunned disbelief.

The teacher moved towards Appleseed. "You're going to face disciplinary action if you don't leave the classroom right now."

"Do something." Appleseed threw a flag at the teacher. "Anything." He threw another. "Action determines outcome." Rapid fire flags came at the teacher. "Do something!"

The teacher, blushing with embarrassment, shoved Appleseed who retaliated by charging and tackling the teacher to the ground. Students erupted in cheers. Oakley rushed forward to pull him away. "You'll get expelled, idiot!"

She grabbed him by the shoulders and straightened him out so they were facing each other.

Appleseed jerked away. "Who cares?"

"I care."

Appleseed looked up and saw her blond hair framing genuine affection. He calmed down and the cacophony of sound faded away until it was just the two of them.

"This world is a prison." The slightest hint of tears gave away his roaring, internal teenage emotions.

She held his hands. "You're being dramatic."

Appleseed looked away and composed himself. He cracked a crooked grin. "Ecuador is withdrawing from the UN. Who's with me?"

Appleseed was suspended and placed under house arrest but was allowed to complete the remaining weeks of middle school from home. Instead of doing schoolwork, he spent that time developing Ignis Vero in the online forums he created to discuss societal problems. He appointed leaders in different towns and cities where dissent was strongest. These were splinter cells of Ignis Vero, nodes of digital unrest growing in every city and town in America.

The video Boone took of him attacking the teacher went viral so Appleseed had a flood of support. This made funding easy. He collected a dollar or two from hundreds of thousands of teens and invested it in emerging cryptocurrencies.

His house arrest was lifted by the middle of the summer and he demanded emancipation. Refusal from his parents sent him to the state where he was laughably rejected by the court. Exhausting all peaceful paths meant it was time to take Ignis Vero to the next level. He had enough financial support to set Operation Orchard into motion.

With connections he'd made over the dark web he procured crates of post Soviet Bloc military equipment. It wasn't long until he had a fully functional Treehouse Headquarters hidden in the forest where the growing teenage militia could run drills.

As a way of announcing Ignis Vero to the world Appleseed organized a town hall style meeting with city officials where, dressed in khakis, polos, and sun dresses, the teens would give adult leadership one last chance.

His parents told him he'd be grounded indefinitely if he went. In response he spray painted 'Ignis Vero' all over the family car and went to the meeting.

Appleseed stood at the podium and tapped the mic. "My generation is being enslaved by debt, adults are addicted to unsustainable resource consumption, and mainstream media is ruthlessly brainwashing my peers to think it's all gonna be okay." His contingent of supporters clapped. "The hope we're told to have in our future is the equivalent of the good night's stay a dog is promised at the Humane Society's Euthanasia Row."

The head of city council, who looked like a evil skeleton in a cheap suit, cleared his dusty throat. "It's encouraging to see young people interested in their civic duty."

Appleseed snapped his fingers and Boone brought a thick manilla folder up to the city council head and returned to his seat, recording video the whole time.

“In there you’ll find a multi step economic proposition that will reestablish this country’s manufacturing dominance while also erasing the national debt in 15 - 20 years.”

“What does that mean for our town?”

“The process starts on a small scale. We can lead as an example for others to follow.”

They watched while the city council.

“Industrialized hemp infrastructure? Clean energy powered public food production towers? Employing homeless population and placing them in currently vacant homes and apartments? Son, this isn’t realistic.”

“Why?”

The old man chuckled. “You’re too young to understand.”

Appleseed could see this was going nowhere. “I’ll ask you one last time. Will you help us save the country?”

“What do you propose we do?” The head of city council sat upon his perch beaming with condescension.

“Step down immediately and allow my cohorts to replace you.” A roar of agreement came from his peers.

The old man tried to speak but jeers from the teenagers only intensified. When they finally calmed down he spoke, flustered and annoyed. “We’re in charge. Not you. Your lack of respect is indicative of your age and inexperience. This is finished.”

“This isn’t finished, councilman. This is only the beginning.”

That evening the teenagers launched a midnight vandalism offensive kicked off by a shocking announcement. As a sacrifice in the name of Ignis Vero, Appleseed poisoned his parents’ dinner. He led the mob of teens back to his house and had Boone broadcast a video to all his followers nation wide.

Oakley hid her face in horror when she saw the dead adults. Spray painting and breaking windows was one thing. Murder was different. She pulled Appleseed aside.

“This is crazy, Oscar.”

He annunciated each syllable, “Colonel Oakley, my name is General Appleseed.”

“You just killed your parents.”

He pulled her close. “Adults aren’t going to save us, no one will. Nothing will change unless we do something.” A titanic feeling grew in his heart but he didn’t know how to express it. “I need you with me. There’s no going back after this.”

Oakley’s stomach was in knots. She wanted Appleseed to be wrong about everything but deep down she believed him. Excitement replaced her nerves. “I’m with you.”

She kissed him and electric courage shot through his being.

“Boone, toss me the phone.” Appleseed began broadcasting. He gestured to his deceased parents face down in their pot roast. “This is the past.” He panned to the yard full of anxious teenagers. “We are the future.”

They ran through the quiet town slashing tires, setting mailboxes on fire, and spray painting Ignis Vero everywhere. Boone recorded it all and the video of Appleseed’s call to arms exploded over the internet.

The next afternoon, at Treehouse Headquarters, Boone intercepted a communication of an impending police raid.

Prepared with out of date military gear and itchy trigger fingers, the teenagers were waiting. The cops stated if Appleseed and those in leadership turned themselves in then the rest of the kids would only receive probation and community service. In response, Major Calamity fired a clunky USSR rocket launcher into a large group of police officers and the battle began.

The teenagers surprised the police with guerrilla tactics, grenades, and bloodthirsty resolve. They darted through the forest, picked off victims from hidden sniper posts, and laid waste to an unsuspecting and under prepared enemy.

The police were hesitant to unleash heavier fire power and retreated to wait for military backup to arrive.

A grim feeling crept into the treehouse. Appleseed glanced at the bent wiffle ball bat in the corner smeared with blood. “Boone, have you released our mobilization message to the other groups?”

Boone replied without looking up from his screens, “Negative. All our communications are blocked.”

Appleseed built his uprising one city at a time via the internet. There were small Ignis Vero factions all across the country. They were waiting on his word to launch their own attacks.

Major Calamity lit a match on the wooden floor of the treehouse. “It’s gonna be a bloodbath.” She puffed a cigarette to life.

“She’s right General,” Lieutenant Boone stroked his hairless chin, “the military is coming. We’ll be outmanned, outgunned.”

“No retreat, no surrender.” General Appleseed listened to the murmur of teenagers down below preparing for the coming conflict.

Colonel Oakley spoke, “There could be another way about this. We’re facing a trained and professional military. Surely we’ve made our point. Must we go to war?”

Calamity finished soldering her transmitter and closed it with a satisfying click.

Appleseed looked at Calamity. “Your surprise fireworks ready?”

Calamity took a big drag on her cigarette and exhaled. “The adults rejected us with disrespect and mockery. Tonight our flames will consume their laughter.”

Whirring helicopter blades came from a distance and everyone in the treehouse held their breath. Small pockets of commotion outside grew into shouting. Oakley stuck her head out the window. “Battle stations! Move!”

She slid down a fire pole that led to the ground.

Calamity had a crazed look on her face. “I’m ready General.”

“Get on top of the treehouse and when they break into the clearing—”

“Fireworks.”

They smiled at each other.

Calamity climbed to the roof and Appleseed grabbed Boone, pulled him close. “My signal must reach the other cities.”

“I’d have to send it from where I physically hacked into the cell tower.”

“Do it.”

“That’s suicide. It’s gotta be crawling with military.”

Appleseed zeroed in on Boone. “If the message doesn’t get out then all this is for nothing.”

Boone started to tear up. “I...I...don’t think—”

“Don’t think! Do. This is the start of our new world. Ignis Vero was only supposed to be the spark.”

A growing barrage of gunfire made it hard to hear.

Boone’s face froze in massive realization. “You never meant for us to win; we’re supposed to be your martyrs.”

Appleseed’s expression didn’t change. “Give me your word you’ll get this message out.” He cocked and pointed a pistol at Boone’s head. “Or I’ll kill you right now.”

“This is insane.”

“You hacked into military grade technology and built a state of the art communications network from scratch. This isn’t insane, this is legendary!”

Boone swallowed hard. “What about you?”

Wildness grew in Appleseed’s eyes.

A string of explosions shook the earth. Major Calamity planted a ring of high grade demolition material around Treehouse Headquarters and it detonated like doomsday fireworks. Flames grew and consumed the fractured forest battlefield. Appleseed was running towards Oakley when the blasts went off and the shockwave knocked him to the ground.

He looked around at the chaos and carnage. Standing in the middle of it all was Oakley. Burst after burst from her automatic pistols lit her beautiful face in explosive flashes. She ducked behind a boulder and reloaded. Appleseed dove and joined her cover.

“This is fucked!” She peered around the boulder and fired.

“Depends on how you look at it.” He spun out from behind the rock and couldn’t even think to pull the trigger before two bullets collided with his stomach.

Oakley saw his body drop. “No!” She scrambled onto the battlefield and dragged him back to the boulder while bullets zipped through the air.

Appleseed was losing blood fast. Oakley held his head and wiped tears from her face.

“Oakley, I couldn’t stand around any longer.” He coughed up blood.

“Alice! My name’s Alice! You’re Oscar!”

Appleseed shook his head. "Something had to be done."

"This is what you wanted? For everything to burn?"

Flames crackled around them and the screams of soldiers, adult and teenage, were punctuated by bursts of gun fire. Appleseed looked up at Oakley and felt a wave of something he'd never experienced before, gratitude.

"Thank you for standing by me." He reached a quivering hand up and touched one of her long blond curls. His watering eyes lost their life. Oakley knew it was over.

She stood up and reloaded her automatic pistols with shaky hands. Soldiers moved through the smoke and fire like tactical phantoms. Oakley looked around for members of her infantry and saw nothing but dead bodies.

Appleseed was right. No one cared what kind of world they were leaving for the next generation. They just hoped they'd be gone before everything fell apart. No protesting or voting or town hall meeting would change that. Bloodshed is the only language.

Oakley ran into the open, firing and screaming. Soldier after soldier fell to her gun blasts but there were too many of them. The first bullet blew one of her knees apart and she tumbled forward with momentum. She pulled herself up and was able to squeeze off a couple more bursts before another bullet smashed through her chest laying her out.

The blood filling her lungs made it feel like someone was hugging her too hard. Smoke moved through her nostrils with each panicked, gurgling breath. Crunching boots walked by her head. She heard, "All insurgents are neutralized."

"So this is the end?"

"Reports of armed, teenage riots are coming in from across the country. This is just the beginning."

Oakley thought, *what have we done?*

As she faded from life she looked up through the burning trees and saw a glowing thumbnail moon in the sky.