

Nancy S. Koven (she/they) is a psychologist and professor emerita who divides her time between New Mexico and Maine. Her fiction has appeared in *Weird Lit Magazine*, *MoonPark Review*, *The Future Fire*, and other places. In her writing, she explores the borderlands of mind and body, often with speculative elements. You can read her work at <https://nancykoven.carrd.co/>.

## **Discovering Applehead**

**by Nancy S. Koven**

I really didn't want to stop, but it's a kid, damn it. A kid in some rusty folding chair by the side of the interstate, pale and underdressed, looking like a pile of dirty snow that the plow left behind. It's only 11am, but Wyoming's descending into darkness, as if the sun's changed its mind already. Through the windshield, I make out a squall gathering steam, working that long, slow inhale before the one treacherous exhale, and I kick myself for getting a late start this morning. I should be in Utah by now.

"You okay?" I have to lean way out my window for him to hear me. The kid looks serene, unbothered, even though he's shivering something fierce.

"Whatcha doing out here?" I repeat.

"I'm waiting to be discovered." The boy says some other things, too, but the wind steals the words from his mouth.

I ask if I can take him somewhere, back home, wherever, anywhere. I tell him it's not safe hanging about the highway like this, that another storm's due any minute. The kid listens patiently but doesn't take his eyes off the road, like he's looking for something.

He thinks for a minute, then says, "Well, I've been waiting here a while and haven't been discovered yet, so maybe it's best I switch spots. Where are you going?"

“South.” Blessedly south, where the driving’s easier and the people aren’t uniformly white. “You can come along if you want.”

The kid looks to be about nine but has the frame of a young seven-year-old and the face of a twenty-something-year-old. His clothes are too big for his body, the pant cuffs rolled up many times over and the sleeves dangling past his fingertips. His voice is high-pitched, several years shy of puberty still, but his manner is more like that of a seasoned adult.

“Can I bring along my folding chair?” He asks this like it’s his most treasured possession. Some of the straps are busted, but he doesn’t strain it much by sitting in it, that’s how lightweight he is. The chair looks like it was found in a dumpster, belongs back in a dumpster.

“Sure, hop in. I’m Marco, by the way,” I say. The boy smiles but doesn’t return the gesture. He’s too short to climb into the cab on his own, so I walk around to boost him up. He settles the chair by his feet and buckles in, a little too expertly, like he’s done this before. I scan the area before getting back in the rig. The sun’s completely given up, but there’s still enough light to see there’s no one around. There aren’t even any footprints in the snow. Just an endless row of pines behind a chain-link utility fence—the kind used to stop deer from leaping out in front of you.

“So, what’s your name, little man?” I ask.

The kid shrugs noncommittedly.

“Don’t you have a name?”

“Of course, I have a name...it’s just that maybe I *shouldn’t* have one.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I might get discovered more easily if I’m nameless. Then, the people can give me whatever name they want.”

The kid looks a bit dirty, disheveled. There's a dead fruit fly or gnat near the outer edge of his eye, and I point it out to him. He shrugs, licks his finger, tries to wipe the bug off, but manages to smear it down and across his cheek instead. In the closed cab, I get a whiff of the kid's saliva and it's bad, real bad. Like he hasn't brushed his teeth in a long time.

I could use a cigarette, but I've supposedly quit, so I slap a nicotine patch on instead. I offer the boy some cough drops—it's the only thing I have—and he takes them, grateful. We talk for a while, me valiantly trying to come up with kid things to say and the kid responding like he's the older of the two of us. I've never been great talking to kids. With my daughter, just as I'd mastered changing diapers, she outgrew them and moved straight to talking like a grown-up. I can still hear my ex-wife complaining about how, as our daughter's vocabulary grew, mine seemed to shrink. How I then stopped talking altogether.

"Is there anyone you'd like me to contact for you?" I ask the boy, who's moved on to fiddling with the radio dial. He's fascinated by how far the knob turns left and right.

"No, not really." The kid shrugs. He's good at shrugging.

"What about your parents?"

"Well, this is how *they* got discovered, but I'm not sure I'm doing it right. I didn't think it would take this long."

I don't know what to say, so I stay quiet.

"You can call me Applehead," he says after a while.

"What kind of name is that?"

"It's a nickname. I had a pet Siamese when I was younger that I was really attached to. Always by each other's side. It was an applehead Siamese, so my parents started calling me Applehead."

“Aren’t you gonna miss your cat then? He’s probably waiting for you at home...”

The boy shrugs and says, “I don’t have it anymore.”

“What happened to it?”

“It just disappeared one day.”

“Got discovered, huh,” I say, chuckling at my own joke. But the kid doesn’t laugh, just looks out the window.

I adjust the CB radio to listen to the highway chatter and make sure there’s no APB out on the boy. I don’t dare broadcast I have a kid in tow. Picking up hitchhikers is strictly forbidden, and I can’t afford to get fired. I need the income, if anything, to pay for child support, and my daughter’s already planning her quinceañera. She’s all talk about cap sleeves, tiaras, and dance rehearsals.

Applehead falls asleep to the white noise of the radiator fan, and he looks like he could really use it. I let him sleep.

#

A few hours later, with the worst of the weather left behind, I pull into a truck stop south of Provo. The kid immediately perks up and surprises me by gathering his folding chair and slithering out his side of the truck quicker than lightning. He thanks me for the ride, then says he needs to go, that he can take it from here. He’s not even strong enough to close the door fully behind him.

I don’t like this. I feel uneasy, but he’s not my kid after all, and I figure I can’t stop him. I watch him disappear around the corner of the building, hoping he’s heading to the payphones. Looking around my cab, there’s nothing different, nothing out of place. It’s like he was never even here with me, which is just as well, as it dawns on me that I’ve just transported an unknown

kid across state lines. Feeling guilty for acting and for not acting enough, I do the requisite check-ins with my supervisor and ex-wife.

“Based on GPS, you’re behind schedule,” the boss says.

“Your alimony check’s late again,” my ex-wife says.

I decide to do what I do best when I’m either stressed out or tired—and I’m both—which is overeat, and there’s a diner here with halfway convincing stacked enchiladas. Couple of beers, warm meal, full belly, then lights out in the back of my cab. Tomorrow’s delivery day, and I need to make up for lost time.

Next morning, I’m up before dawn and run through my safety checks without incident. Cargo’s intact, gas tank’s full, and I’m the first one to leave the trucking berths. Just how I like it. It’s as I’m picking up speed on the onramp that I see the kid again, roosting in that same awful folding chair by the side of the highway, studying the traffic like a goddamn bird. The suns barely cracked the horizon, and there’s a thin layer of frost on the ground. I have the sneaking suspicion he was out here all night.

“Applehead, you can’t be doing this.”

“I’m waiting to be discovered. Shouldn’t be too long now.”

I repark my rig, collect the kid, and lead him to the diner for breakfast. He brings his folding chair in with him, plops it on the seat next to him like a stuffed animal. Being a brown man, seen with a white boy, makes me nervous—adding in the folding chair hardly makes it worse.

Heads swivel. Patrons stare but quickly lose interest. Despite the early hour, the place is already full of fellow truckers getting ready to hit the road. I pull my cap down over my eyes, think twice about it, then take my cap off entirely. I don’t want to look suspicious.

“Have you seen that boy before? I think he might be missing. Gonna get some food into him, then see about getting him some help.” I say this to the waitress on my way to the restroom. She hasn’t seen him before, but she doesn’t look all that closely. The boy’s face is dirtier than ever so it might be hard to make out his features clearly.

“Well, no missing kid flyers at the moment,” she says, gesturing to the wall that’s overgrown with out-of-date announcements and faded advertisements. If she weren’t so harried filling coffee cups, she might care more. Then again, maybe not.

After breakfast, I give the boy a fistful of coins and show him how to use the shower rooms at the truck stop. He’s never seen wall-mounted soap dispensers before, so I pointed out everything: the shampoo, conditioner, body wash. I go back to my cab to fish out my fleece blanket, so he has something to dry off with, not wanting to offer him my personal towel. Offering him my own towel would admit a level of familiarity, of caring, that I’m not ready for. I don’t even know this kid’s real name.

The boy emerges much cleaner though not perfect, and I show him the old trick of turning his underpants inside out to get more mileage out of them. His clothes are in a sorry state and halfway falling off, but there’s nothing to be done about that right now. With wet hair, he’s even smaller than I’d first realized.

“Please, is there anyone I can call for you? If you don’t want to go back to your parents, is there another family member who can help?”

He tells me he doesn’t have any brothers or sisters and that, if there are other relatives, his parents never mentioned them.

“What about school? Aren’t you missing a lot of school?”

“I like school, and I hope I can go back, but it’s important I get discovered first. After that, my school might have to change anyway.” This last part he says somewhat cryptically.

I stare at this kid, wanting to see something of myself in him, waiting for that déjà vu moment to hit when I suddenly recall similarities from my own childhood, but I don’t, I can’t.

“Can I ride with you again today?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say, knowing this is not what I should be doing. Still, I can’t help but hear my ex-wife, that small, nagging voice inside my head, telling me I need to care more, that I need to show our daughter she comes first, to make her always come first.

“But I’m only going a few more hours south today. Gotta rendezvous with a shipping depot in Arizona by noon. I can take you as far as there.” At least the depot’s in a built-up area with a real police station. I bet there’s even some kind of children’s services outfit, people who know what they’re doing.

I’m hoping the boy’s forgotten his folding chair in the changing room, but, no, he’s got it with him, and we pack it into the truck.

\*\*\*

I don’t see what the kid’s looking at, what he’s so excited about. This is the part of the interstate that runs through remote stretches of desert. There’s nothing out here save cholla and sagebrush and piss-colored earth. Last year’s Russian thistle roll across the blacktop like errant bowling balls. This is the southwest of Saturday morning cartoons, the kind that has roadrunners and wily coyotes and not much else.

Yet, something’s gotten the boy’s attention. I squint into the distance. Nothing. Not really. In my periphery, I catch the briefest flash of silver, but it could just be sunlight bouncing off my side mirror or even a piece of tinfoil glinting from the wash.

The boys beside himself, hoarse with emotion, begging me to pull over, tugging at my sleeve, pointing. I ease the rig onto the shoulder, dodging slivers of sidewall lying there like long, discarded ribbons. An image of my daughter flashes before my eyes, not my daughter as she is now, but my daughter as she was before; carefree and laughing, long braid done up in a ribbon. Always with a ribbon.

The misgivings pile up as we roll to a stop. I get out and help the boy out, too. He's wriggling with unrestrained enthusiasm. It's not quite hot yet. The usual wind isn't blowing. There's minimal dust in the air, which is odd for this part of the desert, as if it rained overnight and packed down the earth. Even the Chamisa are weighed down with dew. The cicadas haven't emerged from wherever they go at night, so it's quiet.

I follow the kid through the brush, peppering him with questions that he either doesn't hear or doesn't want to answer. There're no footprints or tire tracks in the dirt and nothing to suggest a trail, but the boy weaves and dodges like he knows where he's going. Plenty of packrat nests, which means plenty of rattlesnakes, and there is, in fact, a lot of reptile scat strewn about. He races ahead, gaining speed, oblivious that I can't keep up.

"Don't you see it?" he yells back, his face contorted into an extreme smile.

Up ahead, the ground drops off, and the boy disappears over the lip of an arroyo like it's no obstacle, legs temporarily blurring against open sky. I can't ignore the stitch in my side anymore, and I crash to a halt, head down, hands on knees. I'm a little light-headed, and the artery throbbing in my forehead tells me how miserably out of shape I am—as if I don't already know.



“Hello!” the boy shouts, his voice turned away and farther than I’d bargained for. “Hi! Here I am!” he yells, and I hear, for the first time in my life, pure, unadulterated euphoria. I can’t see who he’s talking to; he’s wormed his way too far down into a crack in the earth.

*C’m on, Marco, pull yourself together. Go see to the boy,* my ex-wife urges in my ear. Despite never losing the baby weight, she’s more fit than I am.

One foot in front of the other, I weasel through a mass of dead cacti to get to the slope where I saw him descend. A green light clicks on somewhere far below, illuminating part of the fissure. It’s a pale, sickly light, hard to look at and out of place. It wasn’t there a second ago, but I can’t shake the feeling that it’s always been there. Will always be there. The sound of air escaping and a hatch closing trickle up to me, but all I see is that green glow.

Suddenly the light goes out, and I’m flat on my back, looking up dumbly at cloud formations. My stomach churns, protests, and my ribs are bruised. I don’t know how long I’ve been unconscious, not even sure I was unconscious. There’s nothing strange in the sky or on the ground. The fissure’s dark but empty. The cicadas have started singing. There’s no sign of the boy anywhere.

*How could you lose a kid?* I hear in my mind, but this time it’s my own voice speaking to me.

After half an hour of searching and calling for him, I make my way back to the truck, where the engine’s still running. My jaw aches, and I realize I’ve been clenching my teeth. In the mirror, my face is caked with dirt except where tears have left clear paths along my cheeks. My face looks like a desert with fissures running through it, and I feel ancient and empty. I rub my eyes and see green phosphenes dance obscenely behind my eyelids. From the portrait day photo taped to my dashboard, my daughter stares back at me with palpable disappointment.

Rummaging around the cab for my emergency cigarettes, I finally notice the folding chairs gone. Applehead's left no trace.

\*\*\*

I'm nearly two hours late getting to the depot in Flagstaff, and, because of that, there's no loading bay available. The guy at the guard shack mumbles me over to a crowded check-in area where the only bathroom is a sagging porta-potty baking in the sun. As I'm waiting, I hear the staging manager bellow into the phone, and the fury in his eyes tells me he's on the line with my boss. The unloading crew's unhappy, as is the leather-faced woman who checks my bill of lading.

"Melanoma," she says, catching me looking at the gauze on her neck.

"Excuse me?"

"Skin cancer. I had this spot here for several years, and my regular doctor never said a thing about it. Then it started itching, so I decided to get it looked at properly. Biopsy came back with melanoma. Don't know why I waited so damn long. I just hope they discovered it in time."

"Oh," I say. Then, startling both the lady and myself, I start to laugh. A dry-as-a-prune, bitter laugh that's closer to barking than I don't mean. With her talk of waiting and discovering, I can't help it—my mind flashes to Applehead. *Good things come to those who wait*, my mother used to say, and I, in turn, say to my daughter. But, when do the bad things come? Don't they come to those who wait, too? "I'm sorry," I manage to sputter, but the woman has already turned her back.

While the team unloads the pallets, I check my messages.

"We're docking your pay to make up for the late fee, Marco," begins the one from my dispatcher.

“Our daughter thinks she’s in love...Can you please talk some sense into her?” texts my ex-wife.

The shock back to reality actually feels pretty good, like the satisfaction you get from sore muscles after a workout. In this case, the pain of everyday life is a welcome distraction from the craziness of earlier. I can go back to playing the lousy husband, the mediocre father, and the unreliable employee, where I know the rules of the game—they’ve been drilled into me. I gather up my documents, slap on a fresh nicotine patch, and set the truck in gear. Time to cut loose.

“Hello, Marco!” A voice comes from the other side of the security gate along the little strip of grass by the service road. The sound is raspy, underpowered, as if produced by someone who can’t push enough air past their vocal cords. I don’t recognize the voice.

Through the barbed wire fence, I catch a glimpse of a tall, thin figure hunched in a sitting position. From here I can see it’s an older man, make that an elderly man, whose willowy frame looks like it could be carried off by the wind any second. I buzz the gate open and pull my rig forward, scrunching my eyes up to see him better. The man waves at me and struggles to stand; the chair is so low to the ground that his knees are higher than his belly, and it takes four attempts before he can launch himself upright. He’s wobbly on his legs.

“He’s been out here all afternoon, just sitting in that chair,” the guy at the guard shack calls out to me. “I didn’t know he was waiting for you, or I would’ve flagged you sooner. Need me to call someone?” His tone makes it clear he doesn’t really want to, but that he doesn’t want any trouble either.

I roll down the window and stare at the skeletal outline before me. “No, it’s alright. I know him,” after I realize that I do, that it’s Applehead, with the same dirty clothes and same tatty folding chair, just Applehead at the other end of his lifespan.

“Didn’t get discovered?” I ask the figure.

“No, I did actually, but it didn’t work out after all,” Applehead says with a shrug. “Think I can get a ride with you back the way we came?” he asks. There’s a strange cadence to his voice—halting, like he has to concentrate in order to enunciate properly, like he’s forgotten how to speak or is out of practice.

“Yup, I’m heading in that direction,” I say. “I’ll take you home.”

I ease him up into the cab and help him settle in. He’s dirty all over again, and he’s outgrown his clothes. His shirt and pants are ridiculously small now, with his arms and legs sticking out well beyond the cuffs, making him look like a scarecrow. His manner’s as easy-going as ever, but I treat him gingerly, like one of my Abuelita’s fancy teacups.

“Do you want that to come along?” I ask, pointing to his folding chair by the curb. I peer into his eyes as I wait for an answer, and a little boy gazes back, across the span of decades. I wonder what he sees when he looks at me.

“No, we can leave that here” he says after a while. “Maybe someone else can use it.”