



# Crabapples

a suburban memoir

John Kitchen

# Crabapples

a suburban memoir



J o h n   K i t c h e n

LANCASTER & HOLMES, LTD.

c P U B L I S H E R S

Copyright © 2025 by John Kitchen

ePublished by Lancaster & Holmes, Ltd., an imprint of Studio 22, Inc. All rights reserved.  
No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form  
or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written  
permission of the publisher.

C O N T E N T S

Moving Day ..... 00

**The New Kid ..... 9**

Winter into Spring ..... 00

Over the River and through the Woods ..... 00

Spring Lake ..... 00

The Fields ..... 00

Whippin’ Crabapples ..... 00

The End of Summer ..... 00

For Whom the Bell Tolls ..... 00

The Big Day ..... 00

**Trick ’r Treat, Smell My Feet ..... 16**

Thanksgiving ..... 00

Snowfall ..... 00

Visions of Sugar Plums ..... 00

*To those who shared in a great childhood,  
lived in a great place at a great time.*



## T H E   N E W   K I D

Monday morning came, and with it, another hurdle. The first day at a new school. Long had I dreaded *this* day.

My dad had just been transferred from his job in Chicago, and we had moved into our new house in Rockford over the weekend. I knew nothing about career moves and corporate ladders. All I knew was that I had been ripped from everything familiar—my school, my friends, my room... pretty heady stuff for a six-year-old.

Our poop brown 1971 Ford LTD wagon lurched out of the subdivision onto Spring Brook Road, a half-mile from the school. I was hoping we'd get ambushed by wild Indians, or cut off by a stampede of dinosaurs, anything to keep us from arriving at our destination, but alas, we had no such luck. Within minutes Mom was pulling into the school parking lot. She eased into an angled slot and shut off the engine.

My older brother Jim and I peered out the windshield at Spring Creek Elementary School. It looked like it had been plucked straight out of a Charlie Brown special. A low-slung orange brick building with its name on the side and a courtyard out front. A flagpole stood front and center, Old Glory snapping

vigorously in the winter wind.

We got out and Mom walked us into the building. School had started over an hour earlier, so the halls were silent. We went to the office, where Mom finished filling out registration forms as Jim and I stared at the floor, two prisoners being processed.

The lady behind the counter took Jim and led him away to his new classroom. I was to be placed in the care of the principal, Mrs. Applegate, for my transfer. Or so I overheard. As if on cue, a door opened and out she came.

“Well, good morning, young man!” Mrs. Applegate exclaimed in a Southern drawl.

She was gigantic. She had auburn hair piled in a bun held in place by a wooden barrett skewered by two lethal-looking chopsticks. She wore a tan polyester power suit, a cream-colored turtleneck, and strappy sandals. She had freckles, but one look at her intense green eyes told me that this woman was not to be trifled with, not that I was going to.

Mom gave me a quick squeeze from somewhere behind me, then left. I heard the clank of the metal door in the lobby as she abandoned me to certain doom.

Mrs. Applegate gave me a reassuring smile that did nothing to reassure me, took my hand, and led me out of the office. We walked past bulletin boards filled with crayon drawings and red and pink streamers left over from Valentine’s Day. We hung a left and walked down an endless hallway with classrooms on either side. The clack of her heels on the tiles echoed down the long corridor. Overhead, penitentiary fluorescents bathed the scene in cold light.

New Kid Walking.

We stopped at the last classroom on the left, Miss Condon’s 1st Grade. Mrs. Applegate rapped on the door authoritatively, then swung it open with a deafening *c-r-e-e-a-k*.

Chalk screeched on blackboard, pencils skidded across paper, and all activity ceased as everyone in the room, and seemingly all of God's creation, stopped to stare at The New Kid.

My scalp prickled and I could feel my pointy little ears turn red.

"Students, this is John Kitchen, your new classmate," Mrs. Applegate announced.

A giggle or two erupted at the mention of my last name. It was to be expected. It was, admittedly, one of the most ridiculous last names ever.

"John's family just moved here from Chicago," she added.

Miss Condon's first grade class was unimpressed. The silence was deafening. The sweep hand on the clock high on the wall clunked out the seconds, one minute at a time. Overhead, one of the lights flickered and fizzed. I felt Mrs. Applegate's hand, heavy as a ham, come to rest on my shoulder. The hand was meant to comfort, and, more importantly, to prevent escape.

My heart was in my throat. I tightened my grip on my Fat Albert lunch box.

After what felt like an eternity, Miss Condon glided over, slim and pretty in her mod 70s dress. She took my coat and lunch box and handed them off to some tall kid named Mark, who disappeared out into the hallway. Then she took my hand and led me to an open desk in the middle of the classroom. I slid onto the cold metal seat.

I could feel twenty pairs of eyes drilling into me.

I looked around. All escape routes were blocked. I thought about crashing through the bank of windows on the far side of the classroom and running home. Only I didn't know where our new house was.

Not even G.I. Joe with the Kung Fu Grip could get me out of this jam.

A six-year-old trapped in totally unfamiliar surroundings has only one coping mechanism: complete shut-down. Moments after my dramatic entrance into Miss Condon's class, my brain ceased all operations and a weird kind of autopilot took over. I lost track of time and space; my hand pushed pencil across paper and my feet took me where I needed to go.

When lunchtime came, I followed the others to the cafeteria like some forlorn electron orbiting just outside the class nucleus. I got in the milk line and dug the new punch card out of my Super Denims.

"White or chocolate?" the Milk Lady asked.

Hmmm. I'd never been given the choice before. We never had chocolate milk at home, unless you counted the time I tried making it myself using milk and a spoonful of Hershey's Cocoa. It wasn't great.

"Chocolate, please." I answered.

Mom wouldn't have approved, but I didn't care. I was still mad at her for leaving me for dead in this weird place.

The Milk Lady handed me a half-pint carton with a picture of a brown cow, and I shuffled toward the rows of lunch tables, finding a place off by myself within view of the herd.

I opened my Fat Albert lunch box and dumped out the contents. A half peanut butter sandwich on Wonder Bread, a bag of Taco-flavored Doritos, and a Hostess Crumb Cake. Something from each of the three major lunch food groups—Sandwich Group, Chip Group, and Dessert Group. I dug in, but everything tasted like sawdust.

I cracked open the carton of chocolate milk, took a sip, and let it slide down my throat, just like a cowboy relishes that first sip of whiskey at a saloon after a dusty day on the trail. It was cold, chocolaty, and smooth going down. Ah, sweet Escape. In that creamy instant I forgot that I was The New Kid, trapped in

a new school with no friends. I forgot that I'd been shanghaied and now lived in a new house in a new neighborhood in a new city where I knew nobody. It didn't even matter that I'd probably never see my old friends Phil and Rocco again, for in that one fleeting moment, life was good.

The shrill blast from a whistle jolted me back to the miserable present. I turned and looked right up the nose of Mrs. Bussian, the recess teacher. At first glance, she reminded me of H.R. Pufnstuf. She was very tall, and had a really big head supported by really narrow shoulders. Her wide mouth was punctuated by bright red lipstick. She blew the whistle again, nearly parting my hair, then she had everyone stand and proceed to the gym for recess.

The tiny gym was vibrating with the sound of bouncing balls and the rhythmic thwacking of jump ropes. Heat generated by 150 hyper kids burning off Ding Dongs and Dolly Madison Zingers made the place feel like a sauna.

I scanned the bustling crowd for signs of my brother, but he was nowhere to be seen. I wandered the fringe as the rest of the inmates let off steam before a long afternoon of confinement.

\* \* \*

The final bell clanged sharply at 3:00 p.m. I'd survived. Miss Condon formally dismissed the class, and books were quickly shoved inside desks and everyone tore out of the classroom.

I slowly returned my workbook and borrowed red jumbo pencil to my desk, closed the lid, and slipped out of my seat, the last to leave.

"See you tomorrow," Miss Condon said, smiling kindly.

I smiled back weakly. It was true. I would have to come back tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that, and the day after that, until the first sunny days of June arrived and I was released on parole.

After the crowd at the coat rack cleared, I snatched my brown acrylic pile coat from its hook. I shrugged it on, tugged up the zipper, and grabbed my lunchbox. I looked down the hallway and spotted Jim, standing like a statue against the surge of the recently-freed. He looked shell-shocked. I trudged down the hall, met him without a word, and together we walked through the lobby and out into the overcast February afternoon.

We spotted the station wagon, Mom waiting patiently inside its warm confines. It seemed like years since she'd dropped us off. First days of school were always like that.

She asked us how our days went, and Jim spat out what he could remember of his traumatic day. I didn't feel like talking about it. I just stared out the window at the unfamiliar scenery, dull and muted in the late afternoon light.

Soon we were pulling into the garage. I got out, kicked off my Keds at the door, and headed into the kitchen. A pot of chili bubbled on the stove. The familiar, fragrant collision of tomatoes, onions, and spices made the new house smell a little more like Home.

I snuck a couple of Salerno butter cookies and headed upstairs to my new room. I walked over to the window overlooking the back yard and pressed my forehead against the cold glass. I munched the cookies, showering crumbs on the red shag carpet, and stared out the window. The snow was turning blue in the yard below as the sun went down in the west.

Dad came home from work at 5:30, and we all sat down at the kitchen table. Everyone spooned up chili and exchanged war stories. Well, everyone but me. I busied myself fishing onions out of my chili and crushing stacks of saltines into my bowl.

After the dishes were done, we sat in the family room as Dad piled wood in the fireplace and set it ablaze. He clicked on the color RCA TV and tuned in *The Rookies*, starring Kate Jackson and George Stanford Brown.

I had more important things to do. I plopped down on the floor next to the bookshelf and continued my research on dinosaurs, selecting a venerated text by Little Golden Books. My plan was to become the world's youngest archaeologist, discover a pristine Tyrannosaurus skeleton in our back yard, and get rich. Then I could buy all the Bottle Caps and Wacky Packages I wanted.

The furnace whirred to life and warm air flowed from the register next to me. I looked up from an illustration of a Tyrannosaurus Rex being gored by a Triceratops and sighed.

Things would get back to normal.

Eventually.

# TRICK 'R TREAT, SMELL MY FEET

I stared out the long bank of windows along the wall of Mrs. Schafer's 3rd grade classroom. A somber procession of grey clouds made its way across the October sky. The leaves had all fallen, the morning lawns were white with frost, there were jack-o-lanterns on the bulletin board, and today was Halloween.

Halloween was a big deal to a nine-year-old. A kid could get his sticky hands on a year's worth of candy in a single night. My allowance of 25¢ a week simply wasn't enough to support my burgeoning candy habit. At best it could get me a couple of packs of green apple Now 'n Laters. And the week before I had blown my entire paycheck on a vending machine at the grocery store, the one offering miniature NFL helmets. It was a gamble, with my odds of landing a Buffalo Bills helmet standing at a dismal 1-in-28. Undeterred, I surrendered my quarter, and cranked the handle. A Miami Dolphins helmet tumbled down the chute. Rats. Then and there I decided the Dolphins would be my new favorite team. It was just easier that way.

The shrill clanging of the bell shattered my reverie. I tossed my Husky pencil and language workbook into the desk and let the lid slam shut. I grabbed my coat and Fat Albert lunchbox and

met up with my brother at the back doors. We headed out onto the playground, across the baseball field, then slipped through a gap in the wire fence. We took a worn dirt path that bisected a couple of acres of undeveloped land. Old gnarled trees stood here and there, their skeleton branches rattling in the wind as we walked past. We crossed the road into our subdivision, went a couple more blocks, through the park, then took a final shortcut through the neighbors' yard and we were home.

I burst through the back door and headed to the kitchen for check-in. Mom was at the avocado Kitchen-Aid stove, frying up hamburger and onions, which meant we could be having just about anything for supper that night.

"How was your day?" she called out from over her shoulder.

"Fine," I mumbled, ever the articulate—and effervescent—conversationalist.

I went upstairs to my room and played with my G.I. Joes until the light grew dusky outside. At 5:30, Dad's Mid-Life Crisis—a Fiat 124 Spider convertible—purred into the garage and Mom called us down for dinner. Goulash. I picked out the onions, and swept them to the edge of the plate with my fork. Mom didn't bother making dessert because she—and we—knew dessert was *out there*, beyond our front door, in big bowls waiting on tables in entry halls throughout Spring Lake Estates.

After I finished eating, I dropped my plate into the sink, then headed upstairs to put on my costume. It was one of those pre-packaged Marx sets—a swishy one-piece vinyl costume paired with a mask, carefully chosen from the stacks at Ben Franklin the week before. After much deliberation, I had decided on the lion costume. I took it out of the box, slipped it on, and fastened the stiff vinyl ties at the back. I put on the mask, then ran to the bathroom to check it out in the mirror. Ah yes, *very* convincing. Except for my red Keds peeking out, and the fact that I was

walking on two legs, I could easily pass for a lion. *Rahr.*

I went downstairs to the laundry room and grabbed an Eagle Foods grocery bag. It held more than those sissy plastic jack-o-lantern buckets, and was better for receiving candy donations than a pillowcase. Maximum capacity was crucial, because tonight was all about making a haul. My brother and I had only two hours to separate Spring Lake homeowners from as much of their candy as possible.

“C’mon, let’s go!” Jim hollered. He was standing at the front door, dressed as a football player, not much of a stretch.

Mom and Dad had taken up their positions on the couch, ready for another big night in front of the TV.

We burst out the front door, ready to pillage the neighborhood. Our breath steamed in the chill night air. First up, the Larsons, our next-door neighbors. We rang the doorbell, hoping they would forgive the thousands of times our baseballs, basketballs and footballs had found their way into their yard. Mrs. Larson opened the door and I instinctively braced for a chewing-out. It was pretty much the extent of our relationship—my ball would roll into her yard, and she would yell at me. But tonight was different. It must have been an act of Halloween amnesty, because Mrs. Larson actually *smiled at me* and dropped a Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup into my bag. Whoa.

We zig-zagged down Fawnridge Lane, then hung a right onto Conover, scoring at every house. Back then, it was unusual to find a house on Halloween without its front porch light on. Only religious kooks and weirdos avoided trick-or-treaters, and those who did were inviting a good egg-ing for Failure-to-Comply.

Halfway up Conover Drive we found ourselves on the Thompsons’ porch. Personally, I would have preferred to keep walking, but Jim insisted. The Thompson kids were stoners, and

no one had ever *seen* the parents. If you were going to get an apple with a razor blade inside, or that Hershey bar with pins in it, you were probably going to get it at the Thompsons.

Jim felt it was worth the risk. He pressed the glowing orange doorbell. We heard chimes echo inside, followed by a clank, then shuffling footsteps coming closer and closer. It was too late to run now, and even if I tried, I'd probably trip over my stupid costume and land face-first in the wet grass. I was dead either way.

The front door opened and there before us, standing in eerie yellow light, was the elusive Mr. Thompson. He looked tired. But that was to be expected when your kids were burn-outs.

"Trick 'r treat," Jim squeaked.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

Mr. Thompson slowly turned away reached into a bowl out of sight. He opened the screen door and dropped shiny green apples into our bags. Gulp. There was no way in H-E-double hockey sticks I was going to eat that. Maybe Mom could use it to make a pie.

"Thank you," I sputtered through my lion mask, then I tore off to the next house and relative safety.

We wound our way through our little corner of the subdivision, its streets alive with roving bands of trick-or-treaters, its houses aglow with warm golden light. We hit house after house, smelling strange supper smells, and scoring Junior Mints, Sugar Babies, Bottle Caps, Snickers, Milk Duds, Mallo-Cremes and the occasional popcorn ball wrapped in orange cellophane.

Halloween was the one night of the year when you got to see your neighbors at their benevolent best. It was like a huge Open House. Neighbors who any other day of the year would be screaming at you to get off their lawns were now giving you

candy. Oh, the sweet irony.

But it was getting late, and I was getting tired. By this time, I was struggling to breathe through the tiny pin hole in my mask, and the rubber bands that held the mask in place were sawing the ears right off the sides of my head. My Keds were soaked through from walking through dewy yards, and my bag of loot now weighed more than I did. It was time to head home.

Satisfied with our haul, we double-backed on Weymouth Drive, then cut through the neighbors' yard—again—into our own back yard, where we were greeted by the smell of woodsmoke.

We came in through the back porch, where I kicked off my Keds and tore off my mask, gulping in my first full helping of oxygen since leaving the house two hours ago. Dad had made a fire—he loved a good fire—and he and Mom were sunk into the couch, watching *Monday Night Football*.

I staggered upstairs to my room and dropped the loaded grocery bag onto my bed. Inside was sugary treasure of every shape and size. It smelled like Halloween. I tore open a box of Milk Duds—my third of the night—and shook the whole thing into my mouth. The waxy chocolate gave way to stale caramel that threatened to rip out my nine-year molars.

There would be serious trading tomorrow. One thing was for sure—those Mounds bars had to go. Wished I knew someone who liked coconut.

But that would have to wait. Right now I was pooped. I changed into my Captain America pajamas, brushed the sugary gunk off my teeth, and crawled into bed. Somehow, miraculously, and in spite of that night's record-breaking sugar intake, I instantly fell asleep.