

## Appleing

by Andrea Abbott

Appleing, that's what my dad called it, a fruity version of hunting. We'd drive, though we could have walked, less than a mile, but the backpacks would be heavy afterwards and my dad took pity on me. He could walk miles and miles with huge loads on his back, this ability courtesy the U.S. Army and WWII.

That history also gave us our backpacks. Sometimes it seemed like most of what we owned were Army leftovers. Our backpacks were worn canvas, his khaki and on a frame, mine a faded red-brown, a bag with grommets with a string through them at the top to snug it up. Sacred vessels these, indispensable for our quest.

We'd drive past where the paved street turned into a dirt road, past the last house in the village, a house that had barns and outbuildings and a stable where the owners boarded a few horses. After that, it was all overgrown fields and stunted trees, a barn falling in on itself and willows stitching the path of a small creek. There had been farms out there at one time but even the foundations of the buildings were caved in and covered with grass and thorns. The houses had disappeared long since, maybe when the West opened up, or some other event lured hardscrabble farmers away. Those vanished houses were the reason there were abandoned apple trees.

We parked at the edge of the dirt road. Right off the road was a small graveyard, perhaps twenty graves at most, guarded by a steel "rope" looped through iron posts. Despite their age, most of them from the middle to the end of the 1800's, the stones were still amazingly straight and unbroken. They stood as upright as I imagined their inhabitants had stood in life. No slouching was allowed in their world. All of the graves were for the Smiths, and my father said that Clint Smith, who lived in the village, was related to them. Clint was well in his 90's and we still saw him mowing his lawn, fixing his roof, shoveling his path in winter. Straight, firm, upright. They used to say that if a man didn't die in his forties, he'd live forever. Clint seemed to be working on that.

After I'd had a chance to read the names on the gravestones, we rolled under the loose barbed wire fence that kept the apple trees from straying, slipped our backpacks on and set off to cross the quarter mile or so of pasture that stood between us and the trees.

It seemed as if every year the weather was the same. There must have been sunny days and it must have rained sometimes, but in my memory it is always a hazy, cloudy, dry day with a low cover of clouds and slight drift of smoke from burning leaves. Our boots released the smell of dead grass and leaves underfoot, a dusty brown scent, so different from the green smell of spring. Somehow the grey sky and the hint of smoke combined to make me sleepy. I fought to keep my eyes open, as if I had fallen under an enchantment. I was entering nature's great drowsiness, the inward folding of autumn.

My father never seemed affected. He marched briskly across the pasture with me stumbling in his wake. We crossed the land between the graveyard and the twisted old apple trees that stood half in, half out of the woods. The trees at the edge of the woods were young and thin. They were marching, as trees march, generating a forward movement with each sapling, gradually conquering the old pasture.

The pasture itself was harder to cross than it looked. From the road the grass looked like a level plain but close up revealed itself to be tussocks and hummocks, with little channels between them that were sometimes filled with water. Progress toward the apple trees involved stepping from one clump of grass to another as they rocked under my feet.

It was a good thing I had on my special boots, the boots that I always wore on any adventure. My father bought them for me at the general store where they hung beside sneakers and slippers and above bolts of oilcloth and drawers of nails and screws. For some reason, they were called packs. They were rubber and came half way up my calf. The feet were wide so I could slip a pair of wool socks in them, soles deeply treaded for a firm grip on ice or snow. With them, I plowed through deep puddles, thick mud, and the worst snowdrifts. Every farmhouse had nests of them at the backdoor, ready for milking or cleaning gutters. Usually, boys wore them. I was a girl and a village kid so the fact that I wore them was considered odd but I loved them. My father called

them my seven league boots and when I wore them, I felt as if I could stride miles in one step. I felt powerful. I suspect I tried to swagger.

I don't remember how many years we went to gather apples, perhaps from the time I was eight or so until I went to college. Like most things seem to children, it was something I always did, something with no beginning and no end. Over those eight or nine years that I hopped from one hummock to another, the rituals were the same. Every year we would reach the first few trees and begin to pick whatever apples we could reach. It was a mixed orchard and my father would name the apples as we picked them. Russet, Pippin, Rome Beauty, Baldwin, Winesap, and my favorite, Northern Spy. I imagined a skulking figure with a black cape and mask whenever I heard the name.

You wouldn't see these apples in the grocery stores. Grocery stores stocked the familiar MacIntosh, Cortland, and Red and Yellow Delicious. These apples didn't look as appealing to consumers who were becoming accustomed to standardized food in the late 1950's and '60's. Perhaps that's why my father felt compelled to pick them, to keep them from being completely forgotten.

When we'd picked all that we could reach readily from the ground or from some easy climbing, my father would tell me to stand back. Then he'd climb up whatever tree we'd been picking from, grasp its trunk firmly and shake it. Apples would fall in all directions and I'd run to pick them up. Windfalls, he called them, only he was the wind.

These weren't like the apples in the store in another way. These trees hadn't been cared for in decades. They were never sprayed or pruned. The apples we picked were small hard balls, pocked with worms and insects. When we got them home, my mother would pronounce them only fit for applesauce and would mutter over the work it took to find a bit of apple that could be cooked. When the applesauce was made, however, my father and I would pronounce it the best in the world. Mom would admit that these apples had character, lots of character.

We'd pick and shake and gather until our packs were full. The little knobs of apples pressed into my back through the canvas, and the straps cut into my shoulders but I would never, never have complained. My father trusted me to be strong, and so I would be strong. Then we would pick our way over the rough field, me balancing against the weight of the pack.

There was always something interesting to see. My father would point out animal tracks and ask me to guess what made them, or find a feather and ask me to name the bird that had dropped it, or he'd show me a leaf or flower to identify. The world was a never-ending story for my father. He was appalled at people who never looked at what was around them and, as he said, wouldn't have noticed if a cow flew up in front of them. I knew that not being attentive to nature was a great sin and I strove to watch and listen carefully.

One time stands out for me. My father was ahead of me by a few feet as we were leaving the orchard. Suddenly, at the last tree before the pasture, he stopped. He gestured for me to come closer and be very quiet. I balanced carefully from one hummock to another, hoping desperately I wouldn't fall and make a noise. As I got to the tree, he pointed to a cleft in the trunk. There I saw a small white face with two black eyes like blackberries, a twitchy nose with white whiskers.

"It's a weasel," Dad whispered, "A weasel in its winter coat."

I stared at the weasel, and it stared back at me. Though I didn't move a muscle, suddenly, he seemed to tire of us and whisked into a hole in the tree. One second he was there, the next he was gone. I relaxed my tense body and breathed. My father's eyes shone with excitement.

"That's one of the few times I have ever seen one," he said. "We're lucky. They're good at hiding."

I knew he was trying to give me some of his awe at encountering the weasel but, in truth, I couldn't really grasp that what I'd seen was so remarkable. I thought that I would see weasels and all kinds of things again and again. I was too young to understand that the world doesn't deliver little miracles every day.

We went under the fence, past the graveyard with the sleeping Smiths, and returned to the car. I tried to act as enthusiastic as my father seemed to expect me to be.

I never saw another weasel. I learned two things that day, though it took me a long time to understand the lesson. You never know when you'll see something for the first time. You never know when you'll see something for the last time.

**Andrea Abbott** lives in Central New York with her husband, one of their sons, and a grandson. She worked in a variety of occupations in the human services field, including serving as a librarian in a men's maximum-security correctional facility. Following retirement, she became the minister of a small Unitarian-Universalist church. Now retired, she has returned to her earliest desire, which is to write.