

**Marcia Aldrich**

## **Ladders Striking to the Sky**

*T*he world is an apple, my mother once said. The first bite is an adventure: you don't know what you'll find. Will the apple be young and fresh, as clean a thing as you can imagine? Or past its prime, corrupted by time, soft, and secretly bruised? Will it be so mass-produced, have traveled so far, that its taste is corrupted? You hesitate before its wholeness, shortly to be marred forever. You turn the apple in your hands, deciding where to start, where to puncture the lustrous globe. In each apple you encounter, a nature and a history are opened.

As a child the story of how John Chapman came to be known as Johnny Appleseed was one of my favorite stories. I never tired of picturing him tramping alone through the thinly settled areas of Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana, sowing the seeds from his pockets and slender saplings springing up behind him. O legacy!

The old varieties of apples are disappearing. The sad truth is that four-fifths of the varieties known a hundred years ago are lost forever. You can make poetry, in turn epic, comedy, or romance, of the names of the traditional bitter sharp kind with low yield: The Bloody Turk. The White Norman (there used to be a dozen types of Normans). The Greasey Pippin. Sheep's Nose. Kingston Black and Eggleton Styre, commemorating places where they were first found or cultivated. Dabinett, Yarlinton Mill, Foxwhelp. The Tom Putt apple, named after Sir Thomas Putt who found it. (At the year 2000 Apple Day, a Tom Putt, at 255 centimeters, came in second to a Bramley in the longest-peel competition.) Apples are still hand-picked, but efficient mass production has become the norm. It's just a matter of time before machines replace human hands and the sight of ladders striking through apple trees to the sky will be reserved for painting.

My mother never picked apples—we never walked out our back door, a pail swinging between us, and climbed the rough incline of our hill behind our house where some grand apple trees—they were mostly Macintoshes—sprawled in the old manner, here and there a straggler of no particular cultivation, going almost wild. The trees survived according to their own powers, unnourished, unpruned, and unprotected. Yet each year of my youth, in the proper season, they gave birth to the windswept beauty of apple trees hung in fruit.

My parents didn't want to maintain an unprofitable patch of apples, our homely orchard on a hill. The land, after a long period of neglect, was sold off along with the adjoining corn fields and became in time a housing subdivision named Deer Park in the way that all new subdivisions are named for what they destroyed when they came into being. The transfer of the land happened after I left home and yet the wound of it still festers.

your  
The best apples are not store bought. Better not to park  
car in a stadium-sized lot at Giant Eagle, nor push the  
shopping cart down glaring aisles to the produce,  
assembled in ranks like a pyramid, where women stand  
suspended, unsure how to proceed, before bins of apples  
from China, bagged in plastic, as in some terrible  
emptiness.

your spot  
sat indoors  
not be an  
falling from a  
several feet  
collected.  
do. You nibble,  
mouth and  
much progress,  
If you eat a huge store-bought shinier than shiny red  
apple, you will be disappointed when you select  
and bite in. Picked long ago, the apple has  
since, warming, softening, letting go. It will  
apple you will be fond of. You imagine it  
tree, thousands of miles away, rolling to rest  
from the trunk, where it waited an eon to be  
Now, apple in hand, you are unsure what to  
swishing the fleshy yellow pieces in your  
swallowing with effort. But you don't make  
denting one slope before you put the apple

back in your

bag, telling yourself you'll eat it later.

That night, out on a walk, you'll remember the apple.

You'll pull it from your pack, check its condition—brown

where you bit, and throw it over the fence into the pasture.

My mother died in September, apple-picking time. Her ashes were buried in the Aldrich plot at the dilapidated cemetery in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where the last spot waits for my father to join her. His stone is erected, just the final date is missing. The grave digger dutifully dug the hole and we watched as my mother disappeared within it. If it had been up to me, I would have scattered my mother's ashes at the roots of apple trees, sprinkling them freely among the dropped apples, some hard, cold ones, tart or sweet, green or red, and the ones with yellow innards. Human complication is buried in the stories we tell of our origins, and our ends.

I drive out of town in Michigan where I now live, far away from the eastern hills of Pennsylvania where I began and where my mother rests, on country roads, leaving the subdivisions behind, crossing the railroad tracks and passing houses with giant sunflowers in the side yard and tables at roadside laden with baskets of tomatoes and squash next to signs saying *Free Produce*. I go deeper and deeper into the country of farms and pastures and ponds until I reach Clear View Orchard.

I park near bales of straw neatly stacked. A man with a weathered face says to park here and walk up the hill, or drive up to the orchards, or—he points in the direction of two horses hitched to a wagon—I can take the hay ride. The horses look bored with the charade, and I tell the man I want to walk. With a surprised shrug, he hands me two half-bushel bags, and off I go, past the sheep on my right and the pumpkin patch on my left, an orchestrated quaintness. The road up the hill is unpaved and rutted. I walk on the grass alongside, so as not to block the traffic driving up behind me. Looking back downhill, I see a little city of vehicles parked in the open field. Without the familiar lines of the parking lot, the drivers cannot arrange their cars, and they lie at left and right angles like play toys a child has scattered.

The orchard is on a plateau, under an open sky. When I come close, I think of the Afghani proverb—*the night may be dark but the apples have been counted*. I head first to the stand of Macintoshes. Some have fallen of their own accord and litter the ground. Those that have not been collected promptly have browned and broken open, but others are delectable, unbruised and flawless as the apples still on the tree. I should choose from those already down, already

offered, I should gather what falls. After all, *I* have dropped from the tree. And yet if I simply gather the apples from the ground, I will finish too soon. I have come to pick my apples. I want to reach up and pull down, I want to ponder the heaven of apples, the boughs drifting above like a mist and sweeping down, here and there, dripping dark clusters of green leaves in a wash of apples, now yellow, now dappled rose. I've come to feel the breath of apples, the caress of my mother's cheek. I'm torn between the apples already down and the apples still aloft. For today I divide the choice, half picked and half gathered. Soon, though, I will take only the fallen apples.

I return home with two bushels of apples. I pull two laundry baskets onto the back deck and fill them with the overflow.

Come December we should still have apples. One morning when the snow that has been falling all through the night is still falling, looking through the windows into the backyard I will see something red, the red of stewed cherries, something close to burgundy, there on the top back rail of the deck. It will be an apple, skin nibbled away on one side. It will sit well balanced on the rail, more whole than not.

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"My older sister Carol was obsessed with boys. A boy was always in tow. She'd make curfew, but then sit with her date on the built in bench of our front stoop below my parents' bedroom. Chattering, laughing and what have you. My father asked my sister to come inside. When nothing happened, he'd stick his head out the window and shout : 'Go Home.' When that didn't work, he grabbed a bucket, filled it with cold water, and dumped the water on them from above. The boy ran for his car, deciding not even my sister was worth what might come next. My sister shrieked while running inside for cover. Then my mother and father had a humdinger of a fight because my sister had woken up half the neighborhood. But instead of blaming my sister she blamed my father. And my father blamed my mother for not curbing my sister's boy craziness. I watched on the sidelines taking notes. Even at five I knew it was better to come in the back way."