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Apples

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I arose to my sister bouncing on my bed one cold autumn morning.

“C’mon Eric! Wake up! It’s Grandma’s birthday!” she whispered loudly.

I just pulled the cover over my head and hissed, “Quit yer bouncing Tracey, I’m tryin’ to sleep.”

“I’ll be jumpin’ on the bed if I could, but Mom doesn’t like it when I do,” she said in a hushed tone as she bounced a little harder. “C’mon! We hafta get dressed and get going before Mom and Dad wake up!”

“If you keep bouncing like that any longer, they’ll be up any sec now because of the racket you are making!”

Suddenly she stopped bouncing, but only to make a deal. Tracey was good at making deals.

“Okay, I’ll stop bouncing only if you get up ‘cause we got to get to Arnold’s at first light, to make sure we get some good apples.”

I opened one eye to look at the alarm clock and saw it was 5:32 AM. “Ah, c’mon Trace! The sun won’t rise ‘til two and a half hours from now!”

“I know, but we gotta get goin’ ‘fore Mom and Dad get up. If Dad gets up before we go, then he’s gonna make us rake the yard first thing. So get up!” she said, as she yanked the covers off of me and unto the floor beside the bed. Just then, the cold air of the morning swooshed across my body, and I immediately tensed my body onto the fetal position to keep warm. My teeth started chattering instantaneously. “Sheesh Trace! It’s cold!”

“I know! But you gotta get up now!” Tracey said while going through my dresser pulling out clothes for me to wear that morning, throwing a shirt, socks, underwear, a flannel shirt, and my favorite pair of Toughskins’ jeans on the bed. “Dad’s stopped snoring, so that means he’s gonna get up soon. Hurry up and get dressed! I’ll go get breakfast ready when you do that.”

As I rubbed my eyes to rid myself of the Sand Man’s nightly
gifts, I rotated and sat up in bed with my feet dangling from the side. Seeing that I was now sitting up, Tracey stared at me with one of those threatening looks, daring me to lay back down again. Getting the hint, I placed my feet on the cold wood floor. Suddenly a cold shiver went up my spine, and I shook myself awake. Satisfied with her efforts, Tracey smiled, turned around, and quietly opened the door while both listening and looking for our parents. Snake-like, she tip-toed outside the door and quietly closed it behind her.

I stared at myself in the mirror atop my dresser, and realized my mother would probably be wanting my father to take me down to the barbershop this weekend. It was getting long, even for the early 1970s, and it was over my ears, and a disheveled mess after a hard night's sleep. I turned around towards the bed to see that Tracey pulled out my drawers for me to wear. I shook my head realizing that this was not enough for hiking across the woods on a cold autumn morning. So, I went back to the dresser and pulled out my long-johns and a long sleeved turtleneck sweater, and threw them on my bed.

After stripping off my pajamas and the underwear I was wearing, I quickly put on the clean underwear, socks, and long johns – in that order for I did not like it when my socks started riding low on cold days like that day. Then went on the T-shirt, pants, and Cub Scout belt, followed by the turtleneck and flannel shirt. Not wanting the wrath of Mom later on, I then threw my dirty P.J.s and underwear in the direction of the hamper, hoping most of them would fly into it (no such luck). I picked up the sheets and blankets Tracey threw onto the floor, and piled them upon the bed.

Just as I was admiring my quick handiwork, I realized I had forgotten something. After putting on the layers of clothes, I realized I had yet to go to the bathroom for my morning visit, and quietly rushed to the bathroom. Careful not to urinate in my pants, I quickly pulled down my pants, long johns, and underwear and sat down on the pot. The seat was bitterly cold, and realized I needed to put on an additional sweater after I was done for I didn't think I had enough to wear for the morning.

After flushing, I quickly pulled up my undergarments and pants, washed my hands in cold water (the hot water had not risen to the
second floor yet), dried them and quietly retreated to my room for a sweater. I found one that would fit under my coat downstairs, turned off the light in my room, and navigated by shadows towards downstairs trying not to make a noise. However, just as I stepped on the first step, I heard my father stopped snoring, cough to clear his throat, grind his teeth, and after a few nervous seconds I heard him start snoring again. At that moment I started down the stairs.

When I walked into the lit kitchen downstairs, Tracey asked, “What took you so long?”

“I had to put on my long johns and went to the bathroom.”

“Oh,” said Tracey blankly staring at the wall behind me, as if she was calculating something out. I did not have to ask her at all, for I already knew what it was. I knew she had also forgotten to put on her long johns because she would have pulled them out of the drawer if she thought she would have to wear them. Now, she was figuring out how she could go upstairs without waking up my parents to retrieve them.

I looked down at the table and saw my sister get out my box of Wheaties, a bowl, some sugar, and a carton of milk and put them on the table. Recognizing she had forgotten a spoon, I shuffled to the silverware drawer and pulled one out and went to my seat at the table. “Thanks, Trace,” I said as I sat down. “Yer welcome,” she replied as she shoveled the last spoonful of her Kix into her mouth, placed the spoon in the bowl, walked over to the sink and placed the bowl into it. She looked back at me and said, “I will be right back down, and we should get goin’ afterwards.”

“Okay.” I smiled as I took my first mouthful of Wheaties, knowing I was correct earlier. As she ventured upstairs, I stared at the front of the Wheaties box and frowned at the picture of Jerry West on the front of it. “Jerry West sucks,” I said to myself as I spooned the next mouthful of cereal into my mouth, knowing John Haviliceck was a much better player. All West could do was shoot the ball, while Hondo was a better all-around player. Hondo could not only shoot, but he could also play defense, rebound, and, most of all, he was not a ball hog like West was. Well, that was just one opinion from a young kid who lived just outside of Boston.
As I ruminated downstairs, I heard Tracey close her door upstairs, and winced because of the amount of noise she had made. I upended the bowl to swallow the sweet milk left over, and placed it and the spoon at the side of the sink. Since I was too short to see into the sink, I did not want to make any additional noise by mistakenly placing my bowl on top of Tracey’s in the sink.

I turned to the table, closed the cereal boxes, and put them in the pantry. As I retrieved the milk, Tracey whispered as she came into the kitchen, “I think Dad’s up.” While I put the milk into the fridge, Tracey put away the sugar. Just then, we heard a toilet flush. Dad was up.

We turned off the kitchen lights and scurried out the back door. Sitting on the back stoop in the mud room, we put on our shoes, and our coats. “Did ya forget the money?” I asked Tracey.

“Nope. That’s what I got when I went back upstairs,” lied Tracey, for I knew she would never admit that she forgot her long-johns, or ever being wrong. A trait she still carries to this day.

Reaching into my coat pockets, I found both my stocking cap and mittens, and put them on quickly as we entered the cold darkness of morning. I looked back at Tracey, whose breath looked like steam, and her nose was already turning red. As we started our journey to Arnold’s, our feet crunched the frozen grass and leaves in the backyard. I looked down and saw she had put on her boots, and realized I should have done the same because I was wearing my Buster Browns Mom bought me at the beginning of the school year. Mom would kill me if she saw me wearing them now to hike across the woods, but my boots from last year did not fit any longer.

The woods started just outside of our backyard. There used to be a creek marking the boundary from Mr. McDonald’s property and ours. However, Mr. McDonald put a series of large steel culverts to direct the flow of the stream, and placed both rock and dirt on top of it. Granted, my parents enjoyed that tremendously for it increased the size of the backyard and reduced the amount of mosquitos during the summer. On the other hand, both Tracey and I hated it because we loved playing in the stream during the summer. Sometimes parents do not listen to their children.

The path we took to Arnold’s was not actually a path at all. It was
a forgotten country road that ran through the woods and onto a more used dirt road that went to Arnold's. Tracey and I called it a path, for cars no longer drove on it. It was simply two ruts in the ground which the tires or wagon wheels created over years of use. In between the ruts was high growing grass, and at one side there were berry bushes, wild brush and birch trees in their fall bloom. On the other side, there were pine trees and a blanket of needles covering the forest floor.

Tracey and I had discovered many species of berries in the woods, and during the summers we always brought home buckets full of different varieties. In other words, the woods held a bounty of blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, boysenberries, huckleberries, loganberries, and even wild strawberries. For example, during the last summer we brought home two large buckets of berries from the woods one day. My mother did not know what to do with all of them. Luckily, my Great Grandma was visiting in the kitchen, and she told to my mother she knew exactly what to do, and took both buckets back with her to their apartment in downtown Westborough. We, my parents and my three siblings, came by for dinner the following night, and sat down with Great Grandpa. After a great meal of ham, potatoes, red gravy, and string beans, Great Grandma presented to us three pies she had made from scratch from the berries, plus one rhubarb pie, as well as jam made from the berries. Of course, my sister, younger brothers and I were ecstatic, for Great Grandma was an outstanding cook, and really knew her way around a pressure cooker.

It was still dark, and Tracey and I stumbled into the woods. Luckily Tracey brought one of Dad's flashlights as we navigated down the old road up the wooded hill. Atop the hill was what we called the "Black Barn." It was not really a barn, but a wood shed with dirt as the floor, one doorway and two window frames, but no door or windows. Instead of paint, it was covered with black tar paper on both the outside and inside of the shed. Because of the color, we called it the Black Barn.

It was our own unofficial clubhouse. The "barn" was simply a place where we gathered with friends of the neighborhood during the times we were outside playing in the woods. When it was winter, we
would gather there to sled down the old road of the hill. At times we
would start a small fire in front of it to keep ourselves warm. Other
times we would need some type of shelter when a big nor’eastern came
in from the New England coast during our time sledding in the fresh
snow.

Just beyond the Black Barn, the old road opened up to the farm
access road leading to Arnold’s Orchard. It was a six mile walk, but
for our little legs it seemed a lot longer than that. However, we had
all of the energy we needed that morning, for it was Great Grandma’s
birthday and we were going to buy her a bag of apples.

The past few days, my sister and I gathered all the change we
could find from our new piggy banks, in the folds of the couches
and chairs, and the drawer where our parents threw their keys and
everything from their pockets. We also scoured the entire house for
any change we could muster. We gathered what we thought was a
large sum of money in the eyes of two young kids.

Once we reached the black barn, I stopped, bowed my head, and
closed my eyes. Tracey stopped too, and asked me what I was doing.
I said that I was praying for Great Grandpa, who died earlier in the
week, and for Katherine, whose grave we found that past summer in
an old forgotten stone-fenced farm field adjacent to the black barn.
When we found it, we went to the nearby farm and mentioned what
we discovered. The farmer’s wife mentioned it had belonged to a
little girl who died of smallpox in the early 1800s, and her family was
destitute and buried her on the plot instead of in the town’s cemetery.

Tracey prayed with me.

After we had passed the barn, we came to the access road, and
saw that the sun was starting to come up. From there we walked
towards Arnold’s Orchard. After forty-five minutes we arrived at
Arnold’s. The sun was up and Mr. Arnold in his flannel field jacket
was just opening up the building where he sells his apple-based
products. Tracey and I walked through the door, and all we could
smell was the apples and the cedar of the building. We stood just
inside the doorway, as Mr. Arnold was busy arranging everything for
the day’s business. As he turned with a bushel basket full of apples in
his arms, he was a little startled by our presence.
“Hi kids! Both of you are up really early this morning, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir.” Tracey replied for both of us.

He put the basket atop one of the tables, smiled and asked us, “What can I help you with?”

I piped up. “We want to buy some apples for our great grandma for her birthday.”

Just then Mrs. Arnold entered the building. “Good morning children.”

“Good morning ma’am,” Tracey and I said in unison.

“What are you two doing here so early?”

“They are here to buy some apples for their grandmother for her birthday,” Mr. Arnold explained.

“Oh that’s very nice of you. What kind of apples does your grandmother like? And how many do you want?”

Tracey and I looked at each other, for we did not know there were different kinds of apples, nor did we know how much to get. I took the initiative. “We would like some red ones please.”

Mr. and Mrs. Arnold smiled and laughed softly, amused at our innocence. “Okay. As you can see, we have a lot of those. So how many do you want?”

Tracey then took control of the conversation. “We would like a bag of them please.”

Mr. Arnold then grabbed one of the bags from the nearby table, and was handing it to Tracey as she gave him the $2.32 in change that we had gathered the past two days.

Mr. Arnold’s eyebrows went up. “I’m sorry miss, but this bag costs a little more than what you have there.”

Tracey’s and my eyes went to the floor. I looked up toward Mr. Arnold. “We’re sorry to trouble you Mr. Arnold,” I said, turned and followed Tracey to the doorway.

I heard Mrs. Arnold scold her husband. “James, you could make an arrangement with them. After all, they obviously got up real early to walk all this way here to get some apples for their grandmother.”

Apparently, that hit the mark with Mr. Arnold. “Kids. Wait up.” Tracey and I stopped at the doorway, and turned towards him. “I’ll
make a deal with you. If I give you an empty bag, you can go out to the orchard and pick enough apples to fill the bag, and I will take what you have in money. Okay?"

Tracey and I beamed, and she ran up to Mr. Arnold to get an empty bag from him and said, "Thank you Mr. Arnold!" and the both of us ran out the door towards the orchard.

We ran to the first tree, and I looked at all of the apples on the ground and started to pick them up. Tracey told me to stop and she explained to me that the apples on the ground may have worms and bugs in them. The good ones were in the tree, and I should climb up and pick them from the branches.

I balked at her suggestion, for I had never climbed a tree before. Also, looking upwards at the tree, the apples that had not been picked yet were on the upper branches. "Tracey, you should climb up instead of me. You know I haven't done that before."

"It's nothing to it. You just climb up the branches like a ladder one by one."

"Still. You should climb up, not me." I was afraid, and I did not mind Tracey calling me a sissy for not wanting to climb. Then I realized she was afraid also, and wanted me to climb instead of her. "Besides, you know how to do it, and it'll be quicker if you did it."

She responded with a "Hmmph!" and started climbing up the tree to the branches where the apples were. One by one she tossed the apples down to me, and quickly we filled the bag up. After Tracey climbed down to safety, we marched proudly with each of us holding the bag's handles towards Mr. Arnold in the store. We placed the bag outside the door, where I stood guard as Tracey went inside to pay for the apples. Both of the Arnolds came outside with Tracey to inspect the bag of apples. Astonished, Mr. Arnold asked us, "Where did you get those apples?"

"From the first tree over there," answered Tracey.

Then Mrs. Arnold started laughing with her hand over her mouth at the situation. It was obvious that Mr. Arnold had meant for us to pick the apples from the ground, and not from the tree. He was not expecting two small kids to climb up the tree to pick the apples. Then Mrs. Arnold interceded. "James, you did say pick a bag of
apples from the orchard. You did not say where in the orchard." She
turned laughing as she went inside, as Mr. Arnold grunted from his
colly.

Sensing the situation, Tracey quickly handed the $2.32 in change
to him, said thank you, grabbed her respective bag handle, and we
left. As I said before, Tracey was good at making deals.

The walk home was a little quicker than when we went the
other way. It was because we were not fumbling about in the dark
as we were earlier. The trees were wearing their fall colors very well
that morning. As we walked home we would kick at the leaves on
the ground as the morning sun shone through the trees in beams
of spectacular light. When I kicked one leaf Tracey noticed I was
wearing my Buster Browns and remarked that if I scuffed my shoes,
Mom would kill me, so I should stop my kicking. I realized she was
correct, but kicked one more pile of leaves just for fun.

As we arrived at the house, we looked in the back windows to
make sure our parents – or more importantly, Grandma – would not
see us as we crossed the backyard. Thus, we took a more circuitous
route to the back door of the mud room. Quietly, we took off our
shoes and coats and entered the kitchen. We observed that nobody
was there but we heard voices emanating from the family room. So
Tracey snuck upstairs by way of the dining room with the apples as
I walked to the fridge for the carton of milk. I got a clean glass from
the sink and filled it up with milk to have with some Mr. Chip’s
chocolate chip cookies. I looked up at the clock to see it was almost
ten o’clock in the morning, and settled down to start dunking cookies
in the milk. My mother, hearing the noise in the kitchen, came out to
see who was there. Seeing myself occupied with my cookies, she asked
me, “Where did you two go this morning?”

“We went to the Black Barn.” It was not entirely the truth, but it
was not a lie either.

“You were gone early.”

“We watched the sunrise this morning.” Again, it was not entirely
the truth, but it was not a lie either.

“Okay.” She then brushed her hands through my hair, examining
me. I kept munching on my cookies, as she did this. “You need a
haircut. Your dad should take you to the barber shop this morning.”

“Okay,” I said as she left the kitchen. As she went upstairs my
great grandmother came from the family room. “Hi Grandma!”

She smiled at me, and said, “Good morning Eric. How are you
this morning?”

“Warming up from outside. How about you?”

“I’m fine thank you very much. I’m going upstairs to my room
now.”

“Okay.” I smiled knowing Tracey would be done placing the bag
of apples in her room.

I put both the milk and cookies away, and the glass on the side of
the sink. I then proceeded to the family room to watch the Saturday
morning cartoons, and lucked out to watch the beginning of a Jonny
Quest show. Tracey then came in and sat down beside me. “Did you
get it done?” I asked her.

“Yeah, I did.”

“Good.”

Many years later, thirty-six to be exact, I mentioned what Tracey
and I did that morning to my mother. Upon hearing it she laughed,
and said when we came into the house she knew Tracey and I were
up to something, for I never got up that early when I was that age.
She went on to explain that she and our great grandmother were in
the family room, and they were discussing Great Grandma’s plans for
the future. Great Grandpa just died earlier in the week, and Great
Grandma felt that she was an extra wheel in a household full of
children. My mother was trying to assure her that she was very much
needed in the house, and the children loved her very much. After
Great Grandma left for upstairs that morning, she entered her room
to find a large bag full of apples with a homemade card reading:

“Happy Birthday Great Grandma! Here are some apples for your
great apple pie! Love, Tracey and Eric.”

My mother said Grandma had cried in joy and love for a little
while. Plus Mom said it was the perfect gift for that moment in time,
because it demonstrated that indeed she was much needed and loved
by us children.

Nevertheless, my father and great grandmother left for Iowa
with my great grandfather's remains, and he was buried in the town of Spencer. After the funeral, my great grandmother stayed with her sister's family in Sioux City. The next summer all of us went to Iowa for a family reunion on my mother's side. We initially gathered in Sioux City at my Uncle Chuck's home, and visited my grandmother for lunch.

Two years later my family moved to Syracuse, NY and my great grandmother stayed with us for a while, until one afternoon all of us returned from visiting the N.Y. State Fair and found her in Tracey's room. Dad then went to Spencer again with my great grandmother.

Long ago in Spencer, my great grandparents purchased four plots at the cemetery when they buried their youngest son, Caleb, who died at the age of six years of age from influenza in the 1920s. My great uncle and great grandparents are now buried there, while my grandfather, Lester, opted to be buried with his wife, my grandmother, in Burien, WA. So, three summers ago before I had my heart surgery, I mentioned to my father that if he or my mother were not going to use the plot, and if something went wrong, then I would not mind waking up in the afterlife with my great grandparents at my side.

Later, I was told it was an honor to be invited to dinner by either my great grandmother or Mrs. Meutzel (Great Grandma's sister-in-law) who lived down the road in the town of Spencer in the day. Both of the women could really cook, and both of them kept winning the cooking competitions at Spencer's Town Fair. For instance, Great Grandma won the pie contest eight years straight before moving to Sioux City. So, when I discovered her recipe book in the attic this past summer, I was surprised to find this family treasure. When I opened the page to where her apple pie recipe was, there was a note to the side of it; "Tracey's and Eric's favorite."