EDWARD CLONEY

APPLE TIME

THOUGH I LIVED WITH MY PARENTS IN OUR OWN HOME, I spent considerable time in Gramp's barn and Gram's house, for I had chores to perform there, duties to be met.

Each morning on my way to school it was my responsibility to join my grandfather, who would have been in the barn since dawn. His greeting was wordless—just a quick tilt of his head or maybe a friendly grunt.

"Hi Gramp" was my respectful reply, as I commenced shovelling up the fresh manure and pitching it through the small, hatched door built for that purpose. It might seem like an inelegant task, and I was not as devoted to it as my grandfather, but I grew to regard my work with the barn's occupants as one of fondness, even pride. And if I carried the smell of manure to school with me and had to endure the jibes of "shitheels," it was no great concern of mine. I regarded manure removal on a par with reading, writing, and arithmetic, as they were all in a day's work.

On seeing my completion of the manure pitching, Gramp would utter the first words since my arrival: "You're on, lad." That was my signal to move on to Lucy's teats and finish off the milking. With a full milk pail on one arm and a basket of freshly gathered eggs on the other, I'd go into Gram's warm kitchen, where hot chocolate invariably awaited me.

Never to my knowledge had she ever set foot in the barn, though one evening I happened to find her standing at the open door, peering into the gloom inside and inquiring on the state of his health.

"Are you all right, Charles?" she asked.

No reply, but no trespass either.

Seeing my arrival, she commanded: "Young Charles—go see if your grandfather's all right. He's been in there since noon for heaven's sake."

It was now past suppertime, which I supposed was the cause of her concern, but I found him, like any other time, quietly sitting on a bale of hay and looking at his livestock. Even to a kid it was obvious that he thought

animals, particularly horses, were superior to people and that he preferred their company.

"Supper's on, Gramp," I said.

"That so," he replied, making no effort to leave.

I went in the house and reported my finding.

"He'll be along then," Gram said.

One September evening we had just sat down to supper when the telephone rang. The nameless caller reported that kids were tormenting the cattle up in the pasture. Gramp rushed out to investigate, Gram watching from the window. It was a small gang of boys pelting the cows with apples from a nearby tree. He let out a roar, raced towards them, fell, and dropped dead. The boys scattered.

I was devastated by his sudden death because, despite his brittle nature, much of the time I loved my grandfather very much. In the seasons of my grandfather's barn, I had come to know and understand the animals there and him as well. My last living memory of him was one evening shortly before the phone call had come. Gram had sent me up to the pasture to check on him, and I had found him sitting on a stump under the apple tree, watching his cows busy at a blue salt lick. Seeing him there like that, I knew he wasn't just looking at his cattle and a salt lick—he was looking at the past life he'd had with them. I knew he'd probably been there for some time and would likely remain until dark, so I returned to tell Gram he was okay.

With Gramp it was all about his "critters," as he called them, and the reverence he had for his animals was confirmed to me at his funeral service, as the minister referred to it several times. It was confirmed again the following week, when the local newspaper, along with his obituary, printed a photograph taken in the 1930s that recorded my grandfather's greatest triumph. It showed a crowd of people standing around a makeshift corral that had been erected at the train station freight yard. Inside the corral were a great many horses, and the caption read: LOCAL RESIDENT RETURNS WITH WESTERN HORSES.

Gram provided the details of Gramp's western horses adventure—for adventure was surely what it must have been. He had travelled by train to Alberta, where he had bought a hundred horses to be freighted back to Nova Scotia and sold. They were referred to as "western horses," and they were much sought after by farmers throughout the county. He had also ridden

back with them, tending to them along the way. After his return, he'd wanted it to be recorded for history that a hundred horses had once stood at the train station corral (their temporary home before being auctioned off), so he'd added two of his regular ones to the ninety-eight that had survived the journey.

That night, after falling asleep, I rode out west with my grandfather, and I rode back with him aboard a wailing night train blasting east out of the prairies with a hundred horses in tow. It was my chore to stay with them at night, to calm them, and to keep them from being frightened by whispering to them in the dark.

Soon after Gramp died, Gram went into a fast decline. My mother said that my father was partly responsible because he sold off all the livestock before winter set in, having no time or interest in carrying on with them himself. He also declared that come spring the barn, in dire need of repair, would have to go as well. My mother said that these sudden changes had been too much for Gram to handle and that she needed some time to heal. She lost all interest and grew morose, and the big effect of that on me came with the complete shutdown of her kitchen. Even though there were no more barn chores, I still dropped in on my way to school, expecting to receive some cocoa or to have my lunchcan supplemented with goodies, but I was disappointed on both counts. Instead, she spent all her time on the creaky porch, swinging and staring into space. Concerned, I joined her there from time to time, but all she did was remain silent and want to hold my hand. I felt awkward with that and didn't know quite how to respond. When I spoke of it to my mother, she said it wouldn't kill me.

Then Gram came out of it, somewhat, as she gave up the old swing and began picking apples in the pasture, which was understandable to a degree, as that was where it had happened. She also took to cooking again, although she would only make applesauce and nothing else. The fridge was soon full of it—she became an applesauce hoarder—and there were none of her normal creations from fall apples, like apple pies, apple fritters, or Brown Betties. What was it with all the applesauce, everyone wondered, including me, until it occurred to me what was going on: she wanted to turn to soft mush all the hard apples that had killed him.

When the cooler weather arrived it became my new chore—my only chore—to take over Gramp's job of keeping the kitchen woodbox full. At

first I didn't much mind my reward for filling the box each day on my way home from school, which was a big bowl of applesauce sitting out for me on the table, but after a week I'd had enough. I wasn't sure what to do about it, but an opportunity presented itself the next day. Coming in from the woodshed, I noticed that her laundry basket was on the back step, and it was nearly full of the day's harvest of apples. I soon resolved what to do: I began an apple-throwing contest. Could I hit the distant clothesline pole with an apple? After each armload of wood, I fired off a big bunch. I was soon hitting the pole with most throws, so I had to change the objective of the contest to how *many* hits I could make. The real objective, of course, was the complete elimination of apples. And it worked. By the time the woodbox was full, the basket was empty. Finished with my chore, I ate what I hoped would be my last bowl of applesauce and lit for home.

"A tramp probably stole them," Gram said the next day, after I'd filled the woodbox. This was her explanation for being all out of applesauce.

"Goddamned tramps," I said.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Just how old and stupid do you think I am?" she asked.

I figured flattery might be my best defence. "A hundred?" I answered, meaning it as a compliment.

She didn't reply at first, and then she did the strangest thing. "I've a treat for you," she said. She went to the pantry and returned with a freshly baked jelly roll the size of a small log. Then she went to the fridge and came back with a brick of ice cream. "Neapolitan," she said. "Three flavours." She sliced me a piece of jelly roll and cut the slab of ice cream lengthwise so I'd get all three flavours: chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry. I was agog.

She returned the jelly roll to the pantry and the ice cream to the fridge. It appeared that she wasn't having any herself, and I thought maybe she was poisoning me for what I'd done to her apples. I inched a smidgen of vanilla onto my tongue, checked my vision and balance (both okay), and dove into the strawberry section, which was my favourite.

"Tastes better," she commented, returning to her rocking chair by the window, "if you let it melt a bit."

I didn't need any instructions on how to eat ice cream and was soon well advanced into my final portion of chocolate and jelly roll. Finished, I considered licking the empty bowl, but I saw her eyeing me, so I declined and sat

the bowl and spoon in the sink. As I helped her wash up, I got to thinking about the whole affair—about the apples thrown by the boys, about those I'd thrown at the clothesline pole, about all the applesauce, about the jelly roll and the ice cream, about the nonexistent tramp. I wondered if there were really such characters hanging around, tramping around unseen among us, helping themselves to other people's apples and God knows what else. Though it was foolish of me, because it hadn't happened, I saw our tramp, in my mind's eye, gleefully stuffing his pockets with Gram's apples in the fall moonlight.

At the door, as I was leaving, I asked, "Where do you think that tramp was going?"

"Straight to hell," she said, eyeing me close again, "for taking something that didn't belong to him." But she smiled, too, for the first time since she'd watched Gramp fall.

So there it was: she'd sat there in her chair by the window and watched me do it. And she didn't stop me because she remembered being ten herself, instead of a hundred, and had felt bad about it all—my poor reward for helping her, her applesauce obsession, and seeing my revolt against it. The resumption of proper treats showed that she was back—that we'd brought her back, me and the tramp. Tramps, full woodboxes, and Neapolitan ice cream for another hundred years, way I saw it.