

JONAGOLD

PETER BLENDALL

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Adam

October third was a clear, cool morning. Up early, start early?

'Let's do it.'

Three creaks of the hinges, three slaps of the door, and we were outside. Six feet, crossing the porch and stepping down, took us onto the driveway: a raggedy little bunch, gearing ourselves up to go. Momentarily, ...any minute now, ...we will ...

Instead we stood, as we do some days: yawny and slow, ... on the gravel and clumped-up leaves. First shuffling, then still, we took in the near-frost morning.

Quiet, mist low on the cut-but-not-baled west field: rolling, hanging, quiet... then geese: a flapping, grating thousand, roughing-up the silver-skinned millpond with their lift-off.

I listened, and rolled my neck. David bent down to fix a sock. He straightened himself back up, and that was it. Waiting time was done.

'Gentlemen...' Gail got us moving, as she will. '...shall we...?'

A nod from me, and we did. Turned to face north, and off to work.

I swung my arms, front to back, as we walked, three in a row. Sun behind the poplars; our long shadows running ahead. I clapped lightly, palms just touching; and turned my head: back at the sunlight and dark branch pattern, and ahead to our shadow shapes on the dirt tracks and frosty grass. At the top of the laneway, we each took a bushel-basket from the stack, and moved left-to-right to look along the rows for the planks we'd leaned up to mark the last tree we'd worked the day before. There's mine...

It soon warmed up into another fine day for picking, and by noon we were done. Eight boxes: our best crop so far, and near to as good a one as we could have hoped for. The big boxes sat piggly-scattered in the flat field below the trees—wherever we'd set them to begin with. That was

fine with me, for now, but Gail wanted our work on display and looking just-right. She brought the loader slowly up to right-in-front-of each box, and needled the forks in under. Delicate work, and done with no haste. It was fair entertainment, and I gave it the patience it wanted. Eventually, she got them all wrestled into line: side by each, and spaced about the same distance apart. Only a few piled-up-too-high-anyway apples rolled off in the process.

David watched her careful driving for a minute, looked back at the orchard, and then up at a southbound chevron wheeling in low for a landing on the pond. He seemed to give all three equal consideration. He got a feedbag from the flatbed and went back down the rows gathering up fruit we'd missed or rejected. I took off my hat, thought what a nice morning it was, and ran a hand through my hair.

Gail parked the loader back where it came from, and walked over slowly, like somebody enjoying the luxury of taking her time. She unsnapped her vest and tilted her hat back on her head. It was a good imitation of the 'farmer-takes-a-break' routine, and she glanced over to be sure I appreciated her talent. David came back with a half sack-full and one in his teeth, stooping every so often to pick up one of Gail's spills. When he came up to where we were, we all three stood there in a ragged row admiring the neat row. The apples sat pink and gold and shiny above the angled-out rims of the new plywood boxes. We kept admiring, and the sky poured blue in my eyes till it was all they could hold..., full blue and David at ten was ashamed that he couldn't help tearing up when Smoky came back with a mouse and growled and chewed on its head, ...the maples running up the far side of Burrit's lane were a solid bank of glory: red, gold and green.

It was good farming, and almost done for the year; we felt proud and pleased. I called 'lunch,' and turned to go back. David chose a couple he liked from the feedbag, got his shovel from the flatbed, and loped over to dig them in by the pink rock where Sam was buried. I picked up the feedbag.

Gail and I walked back down to the laneway, silent and just walking, and she wondered a question, in her way, without looking at me. 'You never said how you got into apples.' I heard the words and started thinking while she finished. 'Everybody else is getting out.'

Her city voice filled my ears, ...a breeze, a rustle, a buzz..., and I heard dad imitating the sound of an automatic choke cutting out when he taught me to drive.

'Keep your foot off the throttle till you hear it rev down like that...'

Things happen to me. I don't understand them or cause them. It can take a minute to figure out what's really going on. Why we planted or

why I didn't say? I turned back to ask, but she'd turned back too, and was calling David.

'Come on; lunch.'

I unturned, waved to mom on the porch, and kept walking.

Gail left her gumboots in the mudroom, and went on through the breezeway to check our messages. I went inside, poked my head in the kitchen and held out the feedbag.

'We're here, with apples.' Mom was taking hotdogs out of the water. Her hair was bright blue and puffed out, and she looked at me looking surprised.

'Don't say anything.'

I shrugged. 'OK, I won't, but I'd like to.'

No need to, either: Steph had obviously used her as a guinea pig for Hair Today's latest trainee. Mom was setting the table, ready to press ahead in spite of any delay. 'Where is everybody? David's hotdogs are ready. I'm starved.'

She started serving out soup into the blue bowls, and Gail came back in from our apartment. 'John called back. He can press tomorrow if we get there first thing. Sharp, Alma. None of that wimpy light blue rinse blue, eh?'

She looked over at the bag on the floor. 'Sauce, pie, or jelly?'

Mom put out the dish of applesauce, answered 'Make a request...', and I sat down. David came in and got his relish from the fridge and sat down in his place with the two hotdogs lined up just so on the white plate. He squeezed relish on one side of the pair, and spooned applesauce from the dish on the other. His place looked out: west, over the porch and on to what the season showed. He checked his work for neat before he cut it up. I salted my soup and made conversation.

'What do you think of Mom's hair, David?'

He'd been watching the sky and chewing and maybe hoping to see the geese make another pass at the pond; he turned to look.

'Mom likes blue.'

He smiled a little, pleased with himself, as he worked out the rest of his line. 'I do too.'

Gail caught the smile and looked over at me. 'How about you?'

David's little smile widened slowly to big, and I looked around from smile to smile and the smell of soup and apples filled the kitchen, ...and mom when she still had her force and straight blue-black hair and mine then carrot, ...and David at seven couldn't sit still. He ran through the house, bounced off chairs, and banged the piano. Mom set her mouth. She

looked at dad to see if he'd speak first. David ran back in, waved his arms, and sang.

'...I'm a goose, goose I am ...'

Dad frowned, stared down, and went back to eating. Mom stood.

'David.'

She took his raised arm as he ran by. Her hand took his small one gently, but firmly. She let go when he stopped, and he stood with arms raised, fingers fluttering, looking up at her. She didn't yet understand that no amount of force would change things. Gently, but firmly, she explained the matter. 'We said no running in the house. You agreed. Do you remember?' He lowered his arms.

'I'm not running; I'm flying...'

That did it. Dad stood up too, solid and tall and growling, and glared down at him. 'No running, no waving, and no silly singing. It's all forbidden. We don't want to hear it. Ever.'

More frightened tears; another silent lunch. The old kitchen then with both pump and taps on the brown counter. Lino. Pump to the side of the sink, taps behind, and now the white new room, where mom was talking about her visit to the hairdresser. '...young to be trusted alone with the scissors, but Stephanie...'

It was almost eleven when Gail went to sleep. I got up and opened the window; night flowed in. I stood, smelled sharp-edged frost, and looked at me in the upper panes. A face, a fall air breath; drawn-in full. I saw piled-high pink and gold apples, blue sky and blue hair, and remembered Gail's question. I don't know how things happen when they're happening. With other people, it's all fast. For me, they unfold in parts, one at a time. I watch and try to deal with them that way—step by step. Do other folks shape the way things turn out? React, right when they happen? Deep sky, wheeling stars, and growing apples...Where did it start? How to say? Pick a point in the past...or an event. Say, graduation day: see dad hurting in those months, mom efficient and worried, David now quiet and nervous, ...that's how it happens, for me. The sound of 'You never said how you got into apples?' and wind in my ears and blue in my eyes. One scene jostles the next into place, with it all eventually leading to an answer someplace, but by then everybody's long since left me behind, telling the story to myself.

To myself, now into apples. That now twenty year ago day. Locusts in flower. More chores for me. How David didn't really get it. Graduation. Shining my shoes...one leads to the next. This late there's nothing to stop the procession. Burrit's maples are the darkest shape in the night window. I smell the moving cold air and the maples stand there: lined-up,

even-spaced, ...old. Me. Them. Watching each other. This frost will kill the clover...

I went back to bed, the wind kept filling my ears, and I graduated from PECI June 29, 1989, and hoped it would be the last time I saw the place. We never clicked. Totally boring, but if I kept my head down nobody bothered me, which is how it played out. Auto shop was ok, but it was stuff I mostly knew already, so it amounted to more of the same. They did try to teach us some diagnostics on the computer, but it always crashed. It was old Mr A's last year teaching, and he felt the same way I did about the place. He said back when he'd learned the trade they took a car apart and put it back together, and what a good way that was, ...and ducked outside for a smoke.

Cory Miller remembered a not-that-badly-beat-up '76 Regal in his dad's wrecking yard, and we jumped it late Sunday night and drove it into town. No plates, no insurance. We climbed the west fence, got in and worked our way out to the road with just a flashlight. Somebody had bought the windshield, and the back window was shot out at some point. That had left a six inch or so hole with spider lines and shards hanging loose, so it was a noisy, breezy ride. The foam in the upholstery had gone moldy, and a little crop sprouted up in the back seat. The burdock was doing nicely. We were damp-pantsed and dirty by the time we got the Regal parked outside the bay door of the auto shop, and when we forced the rusty doors shut they made an awful grating sound in the empty lot. Then we looked at each other and cracked up—we were so carried away with the fun of stealing a car that we hadn't thought about getting back home.

Cory kicked the door, but he was wearing sneakers, and just pretending to lose his temper with himself. 'Fine pair of auto rustlers, eh?'

Town was silent and deserted as we walked back to Main St. The maples were leafed out, the lights in most of the houses were off, and we could hardly see where we were headed on the back streets. We walked side by side down Bridge St, and when we turned onto Union a car came by and Cory waved, but it didn't stop, and took the left fork on out to Glenora.

Heading up the hill I looked back, and saw another set of lights coming down Union. 'Car', and we turned around to try again. It took the right fork towards us, we stuck our thumbs out, and as it turned uphill an OPP cruiser took shape. Cory looked at me- 'shit'—and then at the big white Crown Vic as it slowed up. 'Don't say anything. They can't prove it was us.'

It was too late for me to answer—it pulled over ahead of us, and gave a quick, friendly pop of its cherry. Cory opened the front passenger door, and we both looked in, and saw Constable Taylor, with all her cop gear piled on the front seat. Even tied back in a ponytail, her red hair looked too

big for the rest of her, and made it feel less like a cop talking. 'What are you fellows doing out so late?'

We were both standing next to the open door, but Cory was sort of in front of me. 'Helping Adam's aunt. Change a fan belt.'

I thought that answer had a lot of potential problems, but now we were stuck with it. She didn't check for flaws. 'Hop in the back. I can ride you as far as the turnoff.'

She knew Cory's dad from the time a guy from Napanee tried to sell him a nearly new Jimmy for two grand, 'cash'. Mr M had Cory call it in to her while he pretended to do a thorough look-see on it.

'You two smell like more you've been swamp-wading than fixing fan belts.'

Cory was quick on the draw. 'That's just Adam. He's sort of ...not completely housebroken.' I elbowed him, and she laughed. 'How's your dad?'

Now that it looked like we weren't about to get busted, Cory relaxed. 'ok.' A pause. 'They went to a wedding in Sterling today.' I remembered her first name. Maureen. Dad said they moved the constables around so they didn't make too close friends with the locals.

The radio crackled, and she picked up the speaker. 'Thirty One ... 3-1'

I couldn't make out what they were saying, but she must have. 'Oh, I know it; know it all too well ...ok. One quick little errand first and I'm on it ...yeah, over.' She put the speaker back on the hook and chuckled. '...got to put the dog in or she's after the neighbours' chickens. Again.' I liked the sound of her laughing and thought that I hadn't heard much of it around our house lately.

She dropped us at the Black River cut-off, and turned down the hill. We both seemed inclined to do the same thing that night. We stood still and watched her taillights fade, turned and looked at each other and up at the moon for a second, and started walking. Puffy clouds raced along above us, and then everything went dark. The locusts along the road wouldn't leaf in for a month yet, and when the moon came out from behind the clouds again it lit everything up,—the clouds made a purple and grey quilted pattern gliding along behind the silhouette of the twisty branches. Our walking made a tiny sound in the huge night when we scuffed the gravel along the side of the road. Cory turned off in his driveway; and spoke as he headed toward the house.

'Tomorrow, buddy.'

'It's already tomorrow...'

'Well, later, then?'

'Take care.'

I kept going, and turned into our drive. The wind was in my face, with tomorrow's rain on it. The pole which should have braced the door to the

driveshed had blown down, and when the moon came out, there was Sam standing in the doorway—it was bright enough to see his black nostrils moving as he smelled tomorrow's rain, too. Or today's.... I nudged him back all into the shed, closed the door and wedged the brace back in place. I was tired. 'Call it a night', I remembered, and went inside and to bed as quietly as I could.

The next week we all had fun with the taking-the-car-apart phase of the operation, and scattering parts all over the shop. The week after that Mr A was sick and the week after that was graduation. The end of the story of high school, and the parted-out Regal lay there spread out in a god-awful mess on the last day. Cory took the radio and his dad wanted the pads and rotors back. He looked at the junk on the floor and benches and a section of the dash on the drill press, where a hole-saw had got bound-up on it and the whole thing just been left there, bent onto the stem of the press. He shook his head.

'Help yourself, amigo. Never know when something might come in handy.' I took the antenna for the half-ton, and the starter motor because you always need one eventually, and—since it was unbolted and just sitting there—the power steering pump. There was nobody around to ask permission from, and it felt maybe-not-quite-right at first, but I couldn't really find any harm in it.

Mr Miller gave us a ride home, and he didn't seem to see any, either. 'That's all you boys could pick off that carcass? Lazy pair of buzzards you make.'

Graduation morning Mom was at it early, getting everybody spruced up and moving in the right direction. 'I'm so proud of you, Adam. Comb your hair down. Doesn't he look smart, Don?'

Dad took a T-3, and Mom got David dressed up in a tie and one of Dad's old jackets. She called her sister to tell her to make sure Amanda remembered to take a picture of me getting my diploma. I didn't have a tie, and asked Mom to get me one of Dad's. She fushled around for that, and Dad popped another T.

David was all dressed up for town, but mom lost track of him and he lost track of the program. He went to the barn to feed Sam again and brush him up. Dad said he was still achy after two killers, but he showed me how to tie the tie. David came in with muddy shoes and straw in his jacket and smelling like horse. It was time to hit it. Dad was really hurting. He tried to stand up and get his walker, but it was no go.

'Sorry, son, it's seized up solid and the foot's burning like hell.'

Mom hadn't started getting ready till everybody else was on track. She came out in her powder-blue suit and dark blue hat and saw what was

happening. ‘Stay with David, dear. Adam and I will be fine. Gilligan is on now; he’ll be ok with that. Here’s the clicker. Where are the keys?’ How could she remember when the ‘Gilligan’s Island’ was on? Dad nodded, and set the recliner back.

We went out, got sitting in the Datsun, and I turned the key. Nothing; not even a click of the starter. Yet again. There was no need for words: we both knew the drill.

I started the truck and went around to the passenger door to help Mom up. I went to school for the last time and left with a diploma in a leather folder. I assume that’s what’s in there, anyway. I gave it to Mom before I sat back down in the auditorium and haven’t seen it since.

A week later Monday dad was scheduled to go into the clinic. David lost Sam’s brush. Mon sent him out to look again and me to help, but we couldn’t find it, and he moped. Mom got him to help with the weeding and told me to get a brush and a bag of feed while Dad was at his appointment. Dad got up from the chair and outside with his walker, but when he tried to bend his hip to get in the truck he just stopped, suddenly, and grimaced. I helped him back down and he walked himself back inside. We called the office to cancel, and Mom explained how bad it was. ‘He really can’t move around at all, Shirley. Hardly at all any more. How much longer is the wait?’

I got Dad a T-3, and Mom came back into the den.

‘You may as well go in anyway, Adam. They’ll call the prescription in for you to pick up. Shirley says they have you for the replacement in nine weeks, dear. For the foot operation maybe longer.’ She turned to me. ‘... and we need shampoo and cat food, too.’

Traffic was moving slow in town, so there was lots of time to check out the scene as we all inched along together. Aunt Dorrie holding the door for an old guy in a motorized chair going into the bank, the Sunoco all snowfenced-up while they dug out for the new tanks, and a block ahead a familiar shape sitting on the planter in front of Tim Hortons, having a smoke. Six-three, one-forty, all pointy elbows and knees, and blond dreads held in at the ends by a floppy knit green-and-orange toque in July—that could only be JC. He waved me down with a peace sign as I pulled up at the light, and shouted at the open window. ‘My man Adam. Que pas?’ He said my name in a way that made it almost rhyme.

I waved back. ‘Mr Matchstick.’

There was no rush to get home; I pulled in to the lot and cut the engine.

He’d just started a job laying patio stones for McGuire’s Gardens; he was there waiting for Terry to pick him up. ‘OK bucks; you working yet?’ I

said always, but not for pay; with dad out of action I was busy keeping the house running. JC said things must be tight. ‘Your mom working?’

‘Cutting hair for my aunt; and in the garden. Applied to Sears, but they’ve only got nights.’

He was looking past me, out at the street. ‘Bummer. Call Terry maybe? Your cousin’s hot, man; what’s her name? There’s way more work than we can handle, and he took a serious divot out of his thumb last week. Can’t run the saw right with the splint. Can’t run it for shit even with his hand regular, actually.’

It took a minute to sort that all out, and at the end of the process, I turned around to see which cousin he meant. Steph it was, waiting for the light in a little Neon, twinkling her fingers at us. Repainted, for sure, Coke can red, and just about as built to last. I turned back to JC. ‘Stephanie’, and it came to me how upset it got David when she and Amanda were around and they giggled and talked a way that made mom frown and David run around the room and into the walls. JC kept looking. ‘I’m in lo-ove. How’d she manage to get the new wheels?’

My not-really-an-answer popped out and my own voice sounded funny to me. ‘How’d she even manage to get a license? She can hardly ride a bike.’

JC kept looking past me when he spoke, and Steph must still have been waving, since he did too and spoke without looking.

‘... Adam, my brother, reconsider yourself. License is nothing, ... just a tiny timbit. That little red wheelie, and curly blond hair—they’re the maple glazed and a double-double ...’

I was going to say something about the blond hair part, but it got tangled up on itself instead of coming out in words, and while I watched that happen he was working out the rest of his thought. He started to speak and I halfway saw it coming and got a bad feeling, but I’d started it, and had to let him finish. ‘... and I do plan to roll up that rim to win.’

There was too much to do at home to do anything about calling Terry that week, but we did eventually get caught up. Mom said the chickens were too much trouble, and nobody came by just for eggs any more. ‘I hate those stinky birds anyway. More than Dorrie and almost as much as Fred. He’ll maybe take them to kill, I guess.’ She got David well focused on the tv, and we got to work. I killed 3 for us, and her brother came and caged up the rest and slid them onto the piece of aspenite which he called the bed-liner of his Cheyenne. The gate fell open as he backed out, but he kept going and the chickens made their racket. Good riddance. Mom got ours plucked and in the freezer, and David came in holding a wrecked cage in one hand and a nearly dead bird, by the feet, in the other. Both were a sorry sight, each in its own way. ‘I found her by the road.’