

Harvest

By I.M. Merckel

The afternoon sun shines upon rows of apple trees aligned in columns like soldiers on parade. Their branches bend towards the ground under the weight of ripe fruit in myriads of shapes, sizes, and colors — reds, greens, and yellows. Empty wooden baskets, — dirt streaked, use scarred, sun-bleached — await pickers. The late summer harvest has begun.

In my office, miles distant, my mood is dark, distraught, concerned, for essential details have not arrived, rendering impossible the execution of my latest transaction. The delay impedes the planned outing with my sons: the stout six-year-old with curly blonde hair, a cheerful disposition, and adventurous nature, who moves impulsively without consideration of consequences, and my cautious eight-year-old, short, thin, with dark straight, close-cut hair, who checks with a toe the pool water temperature before deciding whether to enter. The young ones have excitedly arranged our special outing to the Self-Pick Orchard. My head tells me not to leave work unfinished; my heart tells me I must go. A call from my boys interrupts this internal debate.

“I’ll be there in thirty minutes,” I promise, a victory for my heart.

Time passes. I drum my fingers, as if doing so will increase the chances the missing data will appear; a fool’s longing at best. Staring at the phone does nothing. Then, another call. “Are you coming?” I suggest postponement to another day, my mind

gaining the upper hand. My heart then counters as I hear their disappointment. “I’ll leave now.”

Quietly cursing the uncooperative source who had promised timely delivery of the required information, I also chastise myself for agreeing to outings while relying on another’s assurances. I leave instructions for my assistant if the tardy material arrives, an event as unlikely as my winning the lottery. Then off to pick up the lads.

My internal melodrama continues as traffic dawdles. Each stoplight seems reset to “eternity.” I have become the star in an evolving melodrama about lost hope, watching chances for a quick outing disintegrate as we are held captive by the snail-paced line of vehicles ahead. Nothing is going right.

Eventually we arrive at the orchard’s graveled parking lot supervised by a lone male teenager whose responsibilities entail handing out baskets, weighing the picked yield, and collecting the tariffs. He seems more focused on his personal problems — complexion issues, a lack of dating opportunities, and dealing with ignorant parents. Explaining his problems in minute detail seem to have taken control of his mind, thus delaying the receipt of our basket, a prerequisite for the commencement of our mission.

Finally, the attendant runs out of complaints so, basket in hand, we shake off the numbness of the teenager’s discourse and begin our stroll towards the trees.

For the first time I notice the brilliance of the blue sky, the purity of the shiny white cottony clouds, the gentle breeze, the warmth of the day. Soft green grass caresses our ankles like silk as we approach the trees. The perfume of ripening fruit encircles us.

Our harvest begins amidst the melodic background of rustling leaves, chirping birds, and buzzing insects — nature’s unique symphony. The sounds are soon joined by the laughter, giggles, and giddiness of my two young harvesters, their cackling of joy bringing smiles to the faces of those nearby

“This one looks like a butt.” “Here’s two grown together.” “Eewww, a worm hole.” “This one looks like Dad’s ears.”

The boys sample some of their pickings, then move on from tree to tree, dropping partially consumed fruit — a Johnny Appleseed version of Hansel and Gretel’s path marking technique. Should I order them not to eat until the apples are washed? Should I remind them not to waste fruit? Their joy silences me, for what harm occurs to young, happy children by ingesting a little soil or discarding a few samplings? My suspension of adult regulations enhances their adventure, gives them the freedom to frolic. Being relieved from Sheriff’s duty, I join in.

My strategy had been to allot twenty minutes to pick, then return to the clogged roadways permitting a timely return to the important obligations at my office. Twenty minutes becomes forty, then stretches beyond an hour. It is the boys who choose when to depart – tired, bellies full, bored as young children become when an adventure’s newness wears off. Their decision intrudes upon my melancholy. I carry our loaded basket to the scale, its contents evidence of work well done. We have taken far more than our ability to consume. The surplus will find its way to their classes or friends along with the account of our adventure. I compliment my young pickers on their selection, and mean it, for in my mind no supermarket can match the quality of our trove, or the

happiness created by its accumulation. The youngsters smile proudly, boasting of their efforts.

Our return meanders. We sing to the songs on the radio. We laugh as we relive the experience of an outing well done. Not once do I look at my watch.

A stop by the office, a return to “my reality,” discloses the information had arrived, the matter managed — all without me.

More than fruit was garnered during our adventure. The experience served as a reminder of the value of a commitment kept, a promise fulfilled, tasks performed without me, and how “important things” never trounce the happiness of following the soft voice of my heart. More than fruit was harvested that perfect afternoon. A new memory joined past experiences to guide me when the next “crisis” arrives. And who better to teach me than two young boys — one six, one eight.