

## **APPLES FOR CHRISTMAS**

I was a teenager on the family farm in northeastern South Dakota where I lived with my five brothers, two sisters, and my parents. Dad had a gasoline service station and bulk fuel delivery business in the county seat nine miles to the west. It was two weeks before Christmas and time to deliver Christmas boxes of apples to farmers in appreciation of their business during the year.

Mom and I drove into town on Saturday to pick up the new family car a, a gray and white Ford station wagon. We admired the new car sitting in front of Dad's service station. Behind the service station were large storage tanks containing diesel fuel, kerosene, and heating oil that Dad delivered to customers in town and on the surrounding farms. Mom, the new car, and I were to deliver boxes of apples and bags of fruit to the farmers. The big boxes with the largest, fancy grade of apples went to the best customers while smaller boxes with smaller apples went to lesser customers. For the smallest customers, there were bags containing oranges, apples, and walnuts. We looked at the list of customers and the type of gift they were to receive. I loaded the boxes and bags into the station wagon and we headed along the rough gravel roads to locate the farms on the list.

There were several inches of snow on the ground and the weather was gray and cold, but the roads were drivable. Even though pheasant season was over, I kept a sharp eye out for pheasants lurking in the ditches and windbreak groves of trees along the roads. We listened to Christmas songs on the radio and made comments about the stark beauty of the quiet, dormant countryside. There were groves of Russian willows, considered nuisance trees by some but having value as windbreaks and snow barriers for farmers and wildlife.

We would pull up to a farmhouse, knock on the door, greet the farmer or his wife, and give them their gift. There was someone to answer the door at almost every place we stopped. If there seemed to be nobody home, we would leave the box of apples with a note attached inside the door (hardly anyone locked their front doors). If the door was locked we couldn't leave the apples in a warm, protected place, we would simply leave a message (we didn't want the apples to freeze on the front steps). People seemed genuinely surprised and warmly thanked us for the gift.

It had been a very satisfying afternoon. On the last delivery of the day we drove up a long, winding, rutted driveway to a forlorn, drab looking farmhouse of the King family. One of my high school classmates, a shy, homely girl named Carol lived here. A growling mongrel dog guarded the front steps of the farmhouse. There was a dark, foreboding sense about the place. Mom, who had an uncanny touch for dealing with animals, fearlessly walked past the mongrel and knocked on the door of the house. There was no answer. She knocked several more times, still no answer. She was about halfway back to the car when a thin, tired looking woman yelled at her from the door, "What do you want!" Mom turned and slowly walked back to speak to the woman and then went inside. I stayed inside the station wagon while the mongrel circled the car growling under his breath.

It was getting cold inside the car and dusk was fast approaching. I shivered in my parka with my imagination going wild about what was going on in that house. I was getting irritated too. Finally, I decided to get out of the car despite the dog and find out what was going on. As I got to the door of the house, Mom emerged and told me to get a big box of the big apples. I protested pointing out to her that the King's were supposed to get a small box of small apples. She told me that there was a mistake on the list. I retrieved a large box of large apples from the station wagon and delivered them to a very tired looking Mrs. King. She offered a weak, distracted "Thank you" and slammed the door shut.

It now was dark and the dog had disappeared, probably to the barn to get warm. As Mom negotiated the long, winding driveway, snow flurries swirled in the headlights. When we were back on the gravel county road, Mom said to me, "Carol's little sister has leukemia. They just found out today." The size of the box of apples didn't seem to matter anymore.