

DELICIOUS

The only thing I ever wanted was to ride on the float in the Apple Harvest parade. I wanted to stand up there in front of that big Red Delicious, with the sash across my chest, smiling with all of my teeth and doing one of those little waves while the Brethren in Christ Ladies' Auxiliary walked alongside handing out Dixie cups of steaming cider.

But wouldn't you know that the year I turned thirteen – my first year of eligibility – a blight came across from Michigan and wiped out nearly the entire crop of Delicious, Red and Gold, not to mention what it did to the Braeburns, Winesaps, and Idareds. And the Aurora Golden Gala – all blistered and pustulated. I am sorry, but words cannot even describe.

The next year those smarty pants at the county extension office came up with some kind of spray – it seems it killed all of the ducks, but the apples were smooth and shiny and the Harvest parade was on again. And wouldn't you know that Belinda MacIntyre, whose father happens to be one of those agricultural geniuses, just snuck right in and stole the whole show right from under my nose.

Now, the year after that things were getting desperate. I was fifteen, and it's not much longer that a girl can climb up in front of a fiberglass apple wearing last year's homecoming dress and handing out fascinating brochures like 'Apples are Really Top Banana,' without looking like a fool. This was my last chance, and it was clear to me that I was going to have to take action.

First, I thought I would present my qualifications one-on-one to the members of the selection committee. Oh, I had it all planned out: apple pie, apple dumpling, apple kugel, apple brown betty, the works. Would you believe that Dr. Ueber, my own dentist, is the head of the committee? I guarantee you that it is one hundred percent impossible to bake your way into the esteem of a man who has lectured you on your flossing habits since you were four years old.

I was stumped. I went out back of the house past the refrigeration shed. The crews out picking the early Gravensteins waved as I went past, but I suspected them of laughing behind their gloved hands. I plucked an apple out of a crate and walked on.

I plopped down on the grass beside the irrigation pond and bit into the apple. I had to get on that float somehow. Next year it would be all boys and keg parties in the woods, and I wouldn't care anymore – just ask my sister, Apple Harvest Queen two years running, and proud teenage mother of a six-month old. Ugh. I took a last savage bite of the apple and hurled the core with all my might into the pond.

Splashing right up out of where it landed, came a huge black and white duck with patches of red warts on each cheek. I had been sitting on that bank for a good ten minutes and hadn't seen a sign of any duck. I didn't know they could spend so long underwater. I also thought all the ducks had died.

"It wasn't for your want of trying," the duck said.

I sort of fell right over on the bank, I was so surprised.

The duck glided across the pond and hopped onto the bank beside me. Up close, those red patches on its cheeks were raw and blistered.

“I’ve heard you have a little problem,” the duck said as he shook out the water and reached back to preen his feathers. “Maybe I can help.”

I did feel a little foolish confiding my troubles in a duck – especially a mutant pesticide duck – but I was going to feel a lot more foolish if I didn’t get up on that float. I told him all.

The duck thought on it for a moment, the red warts on his cheek boiling and bubbling like a tub full of Calgon. Then he sat down on the grass and got a funny, faraway look in his eyes. He stood up, and there underneath him was a clutch of speckled eggs nestled in the clover.

“Boy ducks don’t lay eggs,” I started to say, but he dove headfirst back into the water, just the tip of his tail feathers showing.

The next day was Sunday, and I baked up a cake – apple, of course – with my nice fresh eggs, and took it to church. “I’m just so excited for all of us,” I said as I served up an extra big slice to Missy Wojicki, whose sweet, apple-blossom complexion made her the prettiest girl in the county.

Come Monday morning, it turned out that every girl who ate that cake had the worst break-out of her entire life – I mean, craters. A bucket of Clearasil and a gallon of double-matte foundation and they still looked like a pizza had thrown-up on their faces.

As I stood before the Harvest committee and modestly bowed my head to receive the sash from Dr. Ueber, he caught sight of Missy Wojicki crying in the front row. She had taken her hands off her face to wipe away the snot and I felt the shudder of disgust run all the way up Dr. Ueber’s arms at the sight of her uncovered face.

I had my day at last, and let me tell you it felt go-o-od. I caused a sensation when I climbed up in front of that Red Delicious in my brand-new bridesmaid’s dress – my sister’s baby daddy was finally going to make an honest woman of her – and started handing out brochures on the dangers of pesticides. And, just to prove my point, on top of the apple there was a little nest, upon which sat the world’s last remaining duck.

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