



TOM WELLER

APPLE STORIES

After Mommy disappeared, Shirley's father introduced her to the magic of apple peeling. Fall afternoons, sitting on the back steps, knife in hand, hunched over an apple like a jeweler inspecting a gem, her father narrated the process as he worked. "You go slow. You go easy. It's not a race. Think about turning the apple. Let the knife do the work. Think thin. Pay attention. Each apple has a story to tell. Think narrow. That's how you make the peel longer. That's how you make the story special and clear." Finally he would sit up, lean back, separate and raise his hands, a man presenting an offering to the universe. In his left hand would sit the apple transformed, naked white flesh glistening in the hazy fall light, apple sweetness perfuming the air. The peel would dangle from his right hand, a single, continuous ribbon, puddling on the ground near Shirley's feet. "Separating the sweet from the bitter. That's the thing about peeling apples," Shirley's father would say.

Eventually, Shirley's father handed her his knife and an unpeeled apple. "Go for it." He stood behind her, silent, as she tried to curl into the same hunch her father used to peel. Still, she heard his voice the whole time she worked, his voice crowding out the voices of her fourth grade classmates asking questions about Mommy, questions that collected like rain water in the folds of her brain each school day. *You go slow. You go easy. It's not a race. Think about turning the apple. Let the knife do the work. Think thin. Pay attention. Each apple has a story to tell.* The knife felt awkward in her hand, the handle too thick, the blade reluctant against the flesh of the apple. Her peel kept breaking. Sweat bloomed on the back of her neck, ran down her spine. A rain of apple peel chips gathered around her feet. Still, her father remained silent until the last of the peel came off: "You know what to do."

Shirley sat up, leaned back, raised and separated her hands. In her left hand sat the apple, white and dimpled with craters and lumps. In her right hand dangled the last three inches of her apple's peel. Shame and disappointment swelled in Shirley's belly. "Ok," her father said. "There it is. Now tonight, you watch the night sky. Watch it real close."

Shirley looked down and studied the shards of apple peel scattered around her feet. Soon they would turn brown, curl like grasping fingers.

That night, Shirley lay in bed, fighting off sleep and watching the night sky through her bedroom window. And there it was, a full moon, shining like polished chrome and dimpled with craters and lumps, an exact replica of her sorry peeled apple.

Shirley's father explained the magic of apples this way: "The past is in the soil and the water. The future is on the dark and the wind. Apples take all of that in, the past and the future, and hold it inside, and when you know how to treat an apple right, it will share this knowledge with you. Just like old church ladies whisper home remedies and family recipes to each other, a happy apple will share secrets with you."

"Apples are simple souls, undemanding. It doesn't take much to make an apple happy. Just a little know how. You're gonna blush when I tell you this, but that's okay. You need to hear this. It's important."

"To make an apple happy, treat it like you're gonna want a lover to treat you. Hold the apple gently, but caress every inch. Desire the apple. Desire to see its most raw and honest self. Desire to know the apple's secrets. Help the apple reveal itself to you. But don't rush the apple. Go slow. The more patient you are, the more you'll learn, the more details the apple will reveal. Savor the process. The feel of the apple, slick and skittering against your fingertips, the revelation of the apple's shiny white truth, millimeter by silky millimeter, savor it all, every single time. That's all it takes to make an apple happy."

"Can you make the apple tell you important things? Ask it questions like a Magic Eight Ball, only better, not plastic and fake?" Shirley asked.

"You can try. But it's just like with a lover. You can ask an apple whatever you want. And sometimes an apple will answer your question. And sometimes the apple will only answer the question you should have asked, but didn't."

"But then how come my apple showed me the future, showed me the coming of the full moon, but your apples don't ever look like nothing, just round and shiny and perfect?"

"Because I really know how to treat to an apple. Every time I peel an apple with you by my side, I hold in my heart the same question: Apple, will my sweet Shirley love me tomorrow? And when that apple reveals itself, shiny and round and perfect, that apple is telling me that you, Shirley, my one and only sunshine, will be by my side, brightening my life for another day."

Shirley practiced making apples happy. Everywhere she went, she carried an apple in her left hand, and all day long, as she bounced through her neighborhood, as she slumped

in her school desk watching the minute hand tick across the face of the clock, as she lay in bed fighting off sleep, she spun the apple, her tiny fingers light and electric as a cold breeze dancing across the apple's skin. And Shirley would imagine her fingerprints, sensuous swirls skating across the skin of the apple, marking it, changing it. But try as she might, she could never imagine a lover's fingerprints skating across her skin, marking her.

Evenings, Shirley's father would let her take up the knife. First, he would peel, his actions the same, but his words different. Now as he peeled, he would sing to the apple, sing over and over again, his voice as thick and sweet as corn syrup, "Will my sweet Shirley still love me tomorrow, love me tomorrow." The beat changed from day to day. Monday's blues would become Tuesday's rock, would become Wednesday's country stomp, and on and on it would go, reggae and gospel and calypso and scat, but the words, the question, remained constant. And every time the last of the skin would glide free of its flesh, Shirley's father would lean back, raise his hand, and reveal the truth of that apple, white, and shiny, and round and perfect.

Then it was Shirley's turn. Apple in the left hand, heavy with fingerprints after a day in Shirley's caress, knife in the right, still awkward, but now familiar, like a new lover, Shirley would wait for her father's directions. "For now, don't worry about asking the apple a question. For now, just concentrate on what you're doing. Let the apple tell the story it wants to tell. Go slow and easy. Apples appreciate if you put in the time and care to get the peel off in one piece. You know this. It's like lovers. Let the knife do the work. Go for it."

Shirley would start with the tip of the knife. Close to the stem, steel punctured skin, just kissed the flesh, thoughtful and precise as a nurse drawing blood, then a twist of the wrist, the slow rotation of an apple, skin freed, flesh revealed, second by second, more flesh revealed. And Shirley was patient, willing to devote hours to an apple, willing to forgive herself and push on when the peel broke. And at first, the peel always broke, six times on a single apple. Five times. Four. Three. Shirley improved steadily.

And the apples did speak, simple things at first. Reminders of the past: an apple that looked exactly like the rock Shirley had stubbed her toe on just that morning. An apple with exact heft and feel of the snowball Shirley had made last winter and kept stored in the freezer. And a few apples even shared messages from the future. There was the peeled apple that Shirley and her father both agreed looked exactly like an onion. And sure enough, that night, Mrs. Dawson came by to gift Shirley and her father a five-pound bag of Vidalias. Mrs. Dawson explained that she had bought the onions but couldn't use them because Mr. Dawson refused to eat them, claimed it wasn't natural or right for an

onion to be so sweet. The whole time Mrs. Dawson spoke, Shirley stared at the peeled, onion-shaped apple, resting like a totem, in the middle of the kitchen table.

After the Vidalia incident, as Shirley's father came to call it, his voice ringing like a preacher's whenever he mentioned that bag of onions, Shirley began to ask her apples questions. The questions were Shirley's secret, never spoken aloud, shared only with her apples. Before she put knifepoint to skin, she'd concentrate on a single question, she'd hold that question in heart until she could feel it flapping like a bat caught in a net behind her sternum. As she'd start to peel, she'd feel the question pumping from her center, down through the blood vessels of her left arm, down into her fingertips, and soaking into the apple spinning against her knife.

At first Shirley only asked questions about the past, questions about the comings and goings of her school friends. This seemed safer, reminders less dangerous than portents yet still exciting, charged with the electricity of reading a friend's diary or peeking in their windows. But the apples seemed to have their own agendas, ignoring Shirley's questions and giving Shirley information she hadn't asked for. Once Shirley asked *why did little Jenny Dawson stop playing with me last year*, but ended up with a peeled apple that looked like a pair of balled socks. As she looked at the naked apple, she heard her father's voice in her head: *It's just like with a lover*. That night, Shirley found herself folding her laundry. Each pair of socks felt like a poke in the ribs.

Do what Daddy does. This became Shirley's plan. She decided if she always asked the same question, maybe, the apples would relent, finally answer her in a proper way, maybe one could pester the truth out of an apple. And she knew just which question to ask, a question so big and heavy that she thought it might bust right through the walls of her heart, split the organ open like an overripe melon, a lump of tattered meat weeping blood.

Shirley took on the bigness of the question, held it inside her, never voicing it. She felt the walls of her heart stretching like a helium balloon, and she let her heart pump that big question through her veins, through the tips of her fingers, into the flesh of an apple, into the flesh of bushels of apples. Shirley was patient. Shirley's question? *Where oh where has Mommy gone*.

Where oh where has Mommy gone?

Three ribbons of peel and a naked apple curved like a kidney bean.

The ghost of last night's chili rumbled in Shirley's stomach.

Where oh where has Mommy gone?

Two ribbons of peel and a naked apple shaped like a fist

The sting of a two-year-old punch sizzled Shirley's shoulder, a vision of Missy Dawson's face, red as an apple, after Shirley called Mrs. Dawson fat.

Where oh where has Mommy gone?

Two ribbons of peel and a naked apple shaped like a hunching fat bunny.

Poor Mr. Hippity, died from an overdose of happiness, Shirley's father had said; eaten by neighborhood dogs, Missy Dawson had hissed.

Where oh where has Mommy gone?

A single ribbon of peel, wide as a dime, but perfect, whole, and an apple become a white glistening rectangle. An inscrutable rectangle.

A chalkboard eraser from school? An ice cream sandwich? A red brick like the ones that made up the firehouse? A block of government cheese? As she tried to read the apple, a buzzing swarm of hornets filled Shirley's head.

"What do you see, Daddy?"

"A fat letter? A rich lady's wallet?"

They left the naked rectangle apple in the center of the kitchen table, left it where they could see it, could ponder it and try to tease out its message.

Where oh where has Mommy gone?

A single ribbon of peel, narrow as a shoelace, and long. Shirley imagined wrapping it around her face, an apple peel mummy. A glistening apple rectangle. The same, but different. Its longest surfaces marked with rows of parallel squares, tiny perfect squares. Tiny, perfect, inscrutable squares.

A kind of fancy cleaning sponge? The sole of a clubbed-toe shoe? Part of a waffle iron? The hornets in Shirley's head hummed like electricity.

"What do you see, Daddy?"

"I see a building. A building with tiny windows. Windows just big enough to remind everyone inside what they are missing on the outside.

They set the second rectangle apple on the kitchen table. Like twin sisters, the apples were the same size, but different.

"These apples are trying to say something special to you, Shirley."

Where oh where has Mommy gone?

A single ribbon of peel thin as kite string. Shirley imagined it being pulled up, up, up, into the sky, could almost feel it rising through her fingers. A glistening apple rectangle, rows of tiny parallel squares along the longest surfaces, but different. Lines, horizontal and vertical, scarring every surface, a brickwork pattern. Among the bottom rows of squares, a rectangle. A door. The naked apple become industrial.

A building? What building? A warehouse? A factory? The hornets in Shirley's head swirled like water racing for the drain.

Shirley carried the naked building apple cradled in both hands. She placed it on the kitchen table, with the other rectangle apples, with its siblings.

Shirley's father said, "That apple is the state mental hospital."

All the hornets whooshed from Shirley's head, a panic of wings and gold escaping, leaving only darkness, darkness as thick and sticky as tar.

"Why is Mommy in the state mental hospital, Daddy?"

"What makes you think Mommy is in there?"

"The apple. Every apple has a story to tell"

"What makes you think this apple's story is about Mommy."

"I wanted to know what happened to Mommy. I let that question grow in my heart, let that question flow into the apple. I treated each apple the way I'll want a lover to treat me. I made my apples real happy."

"Sometimes mommies just get tired. Sometimes mommies need help." Shirley's daddy swayed as he talked, his weight shifting from his right foot to his left and back again, like some heavy thing inside of him had come loose, was swinging wildly, back and forth, equilibrium erased.

"What's gonna happen to Mommy?"

Shirley knew what is coming next. She reached for the knife before her father even put the apple in her hand.

Shirley did the peeling, but they both did the singing. Later Shirley's father will say that Shirley started the singing, and he just followed along. Shirley will say her father started and she just jumped in. The truth is the song was born in each of their mouths at the exact same moment.

"What's gonna happen to Mommy? Oh, what's gonna happen to Mommy." Rhythm like a jug band, harmony like songbirds, they sang as Shirley peeled.

Shirley peeled slow. Shirley peeled easy. She felt the apple whispering against her fingertips. She felt herself touching the apple the way she was going to want a lover to touch her. She felt herself desiring the apple's secrets, a feeling like hunger and fear gone feral. Shirley rode that feeling the way dust rides a tornado.

Peel thin and fine as spiders' thread spun off Shirley's apple. "What's gonna happen to Mommy? Oh, what's gonna happen to Mommy." Shirley imagined apple peel webs. Shirley imagined tiptoeing fearlessly across apple-peel filaments. "What's gonna happen to Mommy? Oh, what's gonna happen to Mommy." Shirley imagined spinning traps out of apples, spinning bridges out of apples. Shirley imagined spinning home out of apples.

"What's gonna happen to Mommy? Oh, what's gonna happen to Mommy." They sang until their voices sounded like sandpaper on hardwood. They sang until they tasted blood in the back of their throats. They sang until the last of Shirley's peel slipped off the butt of her apple. And then they sang no more. And Shirley sat up, leaned back, separated and raised her hands, a girl presenting an offering to the universe, a girl hopeful, a girl sticky with apple sweetness, a girl scared, a girl reaching for Mommy, a girl with a left hand holding only light and air where a naked apple should be.