



Malus for All

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A lonesome apple tree imprints its image on my memory. It grew with barbed wire running right through its trunk, straddling the fence line between a virtually abandoned Iowa farmyard and adjacent pasture. The tree's branches splayed toward the decrepit porch of the tiny, worn-out farmhouse we had rented for seventy-five dollars a month. Both tree and house seemed not to have been cared for in a long while.

The old apple's lichen-covered branches sagged as though weighed down by too many children. Lower boughs settled nearly to the ground on our side of the fence, yet across the wire, foliage appeared younger and livelier after years of regular clipping to the height of a cow's outstretched muzzle. Here was a tree, unbalanced and lacking horticultural

convention, with an uncertain history only hinted at by its phenotype and location. Was it intentionally planted by an earlier farmer of converted prairie? Perhaps it birthed from a carelessly tossed apple core or sprouted from a seed passed through a lovingly tended horse.

Our tiny one-room-up-and-one-down house had similarly mysterious, idiosyncratic features, from a dirt floor cellar that filled with water on rainy mornings, to the occasional smell of pickles arising spontaneously in the kitchen. In early April, just before our first son's birth, we discovered a rogue hive of honey bees lodged in the south-facing wall next to the family bed, waking to early spring warmth. Too late to evict them before little Jacob came buzzing into the world with

his own sweet energy. Our friends thought we were crazy to raise an infant so close to such dangerous neighbors, but the soft vibrations of wilding bees entering and exiting their lap-sided nursery seemed to soothe him during his first months.

By fall it was clear our apian neighborhood gang had thoroughly fertilized the old apple tree's May blossoms. Due to optimal environmental conditions or possibly through a stroke of genetic genius, the surprisingly fecund tree delivered a bumper crop of nearly perfect, unblemished fruit. Our teething six-month-old discovered the joys of fresh applesauce, and I, a twenty-something botanist-to-be, discovered "wild" apples. My first bite of the old tree's fruit launched me on a journey through botanical