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GIRL NEXT DOOR

On Mother's Day and apple trees

Sometime back during the Eisenhower administration, my mother and uncle decided that it would be really wonderful to get their mother two apple trees for Mother's Day.

Like many children, their gift-giving habits tended toward items they wanted themselves, with the result that—since they had indulgent grandparents who sometimes funded such purchases—we still have a number of random items, including some spectacularly ugly, leaf-emblazoned footed tumblers. I'm sure that the apple trees were, in their estimation, the best idea they'd had yet.

And so it was that my grandmother spent Mother's Day, several decades ago, up to her knees in dirt, digging holes to plant those apple trees.

I grew up hearing that story, and it may be one of the reasons I've never been too keen on Mother's Day, since, it seemed clear, any present given by a child to her mother on such an occasion was bound to backfire. There are plenty of other reasons I dislike the holiday, of course: consumerism and Hallmark holidays and the idea that one should only appreciate certain people on certain days by buying cards that someone has convinced you you have to buy because otherwise you'll be branded a bad daughter and get coal in your stocking (or

apple trees were not really a fiasco. They still grace my grandmother's yard, and they still produce apples. I used to sit in one of them to hide or to read when I was a kid. Every time I see them I'm reminded of the story of their planting, and I'm reminded also of how cool my grandmother is: She got trees for Mother's Day, and so she went out and planted them. I've been blessed, I think, to come from a family of such consideration, a group of people who take what you give them—no matter what it is and no matter how much they don't want to—and make it grow.

I've never found a Hallmark card that expressed quite that sentiment—or, to be more precise, I've never found a card that expressed quite that to the kind of family I have.

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I come from two generations of mothers made single by divorce or death, and as a child, my two best friends (both of whom I still know and love) were also the daughters of single mothers. We got a lot of sympathy, which we didn't want, and

our mothers got a lot of slack, which they didn't need. But we all made it, just fine—perhaps because we realized that, like the apple trees, the families we had been given were not a burden but a gift, not an oddity to be mourned but a set of bonds to be celebrated.

whatever). But oddly enough, despite my concerns about how the world is too much with us, getting and spending filling all our time and all that, I'm not inclined to rehash that particular tirade right now.

I'm thinking instead about gifts and what they mean and what the best sorts of gifts are. Almost assuredly everyone has had a gift-giving fiasco of some sort, though perhaps not quite on the magnitude of the apple trees. Perhaps it was at a grade-school birthday party, and somehow your gift just didn't match the rest of the pile—you brought a board game when everyone else brought figurines or doll clothes, and suddenly you realized you really weren't one of the cool kids. Or perhaps you've given a gift intended to change somebody's mind—a book or a tape or something they're supposed to *get*, and the person in question just doesn't.

Yet when I think about it again, the ap-

Our mothers gave us love and food and conversation and books and night skies and music and warm blankets and freedom and responsibility, and they gave all these things unconditionally, no matter what kind of messes of mudpies and paste and lopsided Valentines and apple trees we gave them in return.

So this Sunday I won't be sending any flowers or delivering any cards or fixing anybody breakfast in bed (which, I should add, my mom hates, or I might consider it). But I'll be thinking, as I often do, of how many fantastic mothers I've known and how few of them fit the mold and how many gifts they've given and how there ought to be some better way to thank them. Until I figure it out, though, I'll simply reiterate "Thank you!" and hope that this little column plants a seedling that grows to bear some kind of fruit. •