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The Apple Box

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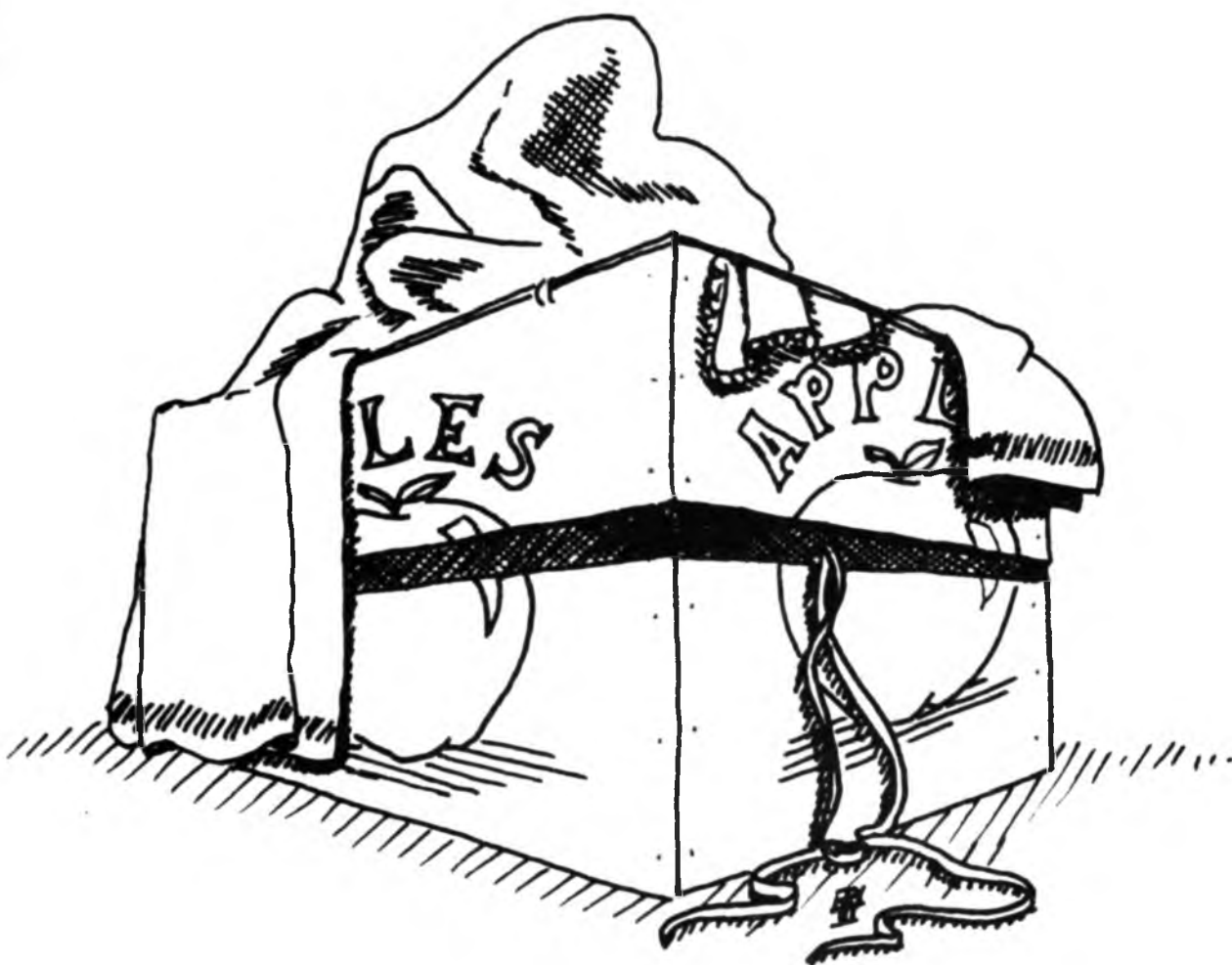
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(poignant fiction with a Western Oklahoma flair)

The Apple Box

— by Margaret Friedrich

Joe stirred drowsily. Only half awake he turned over and reached for Morlee. She wasn't there! Wide awake now, he remembered. But a habit of forty years persisted. The clock radio showed 4:00 a.m. The cold began to seep out of his middle somewhere and slowly spread up his backbone, out his arms, and down to his toes. He lay shivering. The cold came from within and had nothing to do with the frosty November morning. Again the horrible scene seemed to be projected on the huge screen of his memory.

Hastily in the dark he thrust his arms into the sleeves of the robe Morlee had given him last Christmas. He started for the den but turned and came back for his slippers. Still shivering, he poked at the faintly glowing logs in the fireplace. No amount of heat, he felt, could ever make him warm again. He began pacing. Only the dim light from the hall prevented his stumbling into the furniture. The logs blazed suddenly. He threw another small stick on the fire. When it too was burning, he lowered himself to the sofa.

He sat, fixedly gazing into the flames, not seeing them. It

had been four months since the accident. Yet the scene had so burned itself into his brain that it erupted night after night into his inner vision.

That day of disappointment had begun happily enough. The two drove out to the ranch to inspect the cattle on the grazing section. Morlee had been going with him quite often since all their six children were married and on their own. They swung around past Old Shandy Number One. It was their first oil well, brought in three years ago. Nothing spectacular there. It was pumping away as usual.

"Now, are we going to see my well?" They often joked about his and her wells.

"Sure." He turned the Continental in the opposite direction and covered the short two miles to Morlee's quarter section where their newest well was going down. Just two days before it was reported at 15,000 feet.

"It must be quite a bit deeper now," Joe surmised. Everything was noisily progressing. The drill was turning. The crew was busy, each man doing his specific job.

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They drove up fairly close and parked. As they sat there, fascinated as usual by the diverse activity, he heard a dim roar. He recognized it from his days as a young roustabout — the sound of a gusher about to blow in.

"Run!" he shouted, opening the driver's door. He grabbed Morlee and jerked her small frame across the seat, under the steering wheel, and out of the car. He landed running. With her arm clutched tightly in his hand, he half dragged, half supported her until she struck her stride.

"Let go my arm," she screamed. "I can run better." He heard her step closely following his. As they raced, he heard the explosion. When he had run as far as his panting lungs would let him, he turned to look back, expecting Morlee to be directly behind him.

No! Oh, No! The rig had toppled. It lay on top of the car which was crushed as if it had been through a compacting machine. Flames were shooting high into the air. The smell of gas was strong. Black smoke began to pour over everything as the fire spread to the slush pit. The whole area was an inferno. The heat scorched his face. A primeval urge forced Joe to run again to escape the withering heat. Finally, he could run no more and fell to the ground. He remembered nothing else until he awakened and saw disheveled medics putting him into the ambulance. He heard himself calling, "Morlee? Did you get her out? Where is she?" No one answered.

Again he blacked out. He opened his eyes to see a form in white standing near his bed. He reached up to snatch whatever was thrust into his nose. A cool hand held his own hand immobile. "No, Senator, don't touch the oxygen tubes."

Was that Dena standing beside the nurse? He closed his eyes. Yes, he heard her voice. "You were lucky, Dad. No burns — only shock and exhaustion."

But there was something else — oh, yes — "Where is Mama?"

"You are to rest now, Dad."

"Where's your mother?" he shouted and tried to sit up. "Dena, Dena, where is she? Tell me."

"She is not here, Dad."

"Did the fire get her?"

"Yes, Dad." Her voice quavered as she looked out the window.

He heard himself moaning. Then he felt a sharp prick in his arm.

When he roused again, he heard Jim's voice speaking in low tones with his sister. He couldn't distinguish what they were saying. He opened his eyes to see Jim and Dena standing near the window across the room.

"Jim! How did you get here?"

"I flew in just now."

"Have you seen your mother?"

"No, I haven't, Dad."

"She's gone, isn't she?"

"Yes, Dad, she's gone."

Time after time after time the scene had gone through Joe's mind, especially at night when he couldn't sleep. Although the accident had happened four months earlier, the searing memory of it was as sharp as when he first understood what had happened. He had so often castigated himself for not saving Morlee, but everyone told him that he had done everything possible.

His mind now went back more than forty years to the

day of their marriage. That too had been a freezing November day in New York State. Shortly before daylight he had heard wheels on the gravel driveway and then had heard them go away. He heard nothing else — no knock on the door, no voices. He drifted off into a short nap and then woke, feeling that something was amiss. He went to the window of his second-floor room. Oh, Lord! What was she doing? Little Morlee O'Neill! There she sat on an apple box with her coat clutched tightly around her, a large, black, crocheted wool fascinator tied over her head. She was crying, making no sound in the frosty air.

He knew in an instant why she was there. His first impulse was to run — go out the window on the opposite side of the house and get away, maybe ride a freight train out West. They had played around once too often in the past few months. He looked again, and this time his heart went out to the frightened, desolate, helpless sixteen-year-old girl.

By this time Pa was dressed in his sheepskin coat and had gone out to investigate. "Morlee, what's the trouble? How did you get here? You're freezing. Child! Come in, come in. Let's get you warm."

Then Joe heard the sound of shaking down the iron cookstove as Pa hurried to get the fire going before he called Ma. But his mother had already heard the commotion. He could hear her voice, gentle and comforting. He dressed quickly, his body shaking from more than the cold air.

"Joe, Joe, come down here this instant," his father called from the foot of the stairs. A few minutes later Pa's voice, "Joe! Now!"

"Coming, Pa." Joe came slowly down the steps in his farm-chore clothes. He ambled into the huge, old kitchen and stood gazing from one face to another. Morlee didn't look up. Ma stood with one arm around the shivering girl and her other arm akimbo with hand on hip. She said nothing. Pa was busily stuffing the cookstove with small, split firewood. When he had finished, he turned toward his son. Joe would never forget Pa's deliberate motions. His words were slow and careful.

"Can you tell me why this child says she came to see you? Her folks have packed all her clothes in an apple box, brought her here, and told her they don't want to see her again until you two are married."

Nineteen-year-old Joe looked at his summer playmate. She raised her eyes, and each looked steadily into the other's face. He saw the pain and misery there and, yes, the fear. He turned to his father. "Whatever she told you is probably true, Pa."

Nobody said a word. Each one was staring at the floor. Joe knew his father's hot temper. Finally, with no trace of anger, only regret in his voice, Pa said, "What's done can't be undone. But you can sure do your best to make it right the rest of your life."

Still staring at the floor, Joe heard himself reply, "Yes, Pa, I'll do it."

"Now get out there and get the milking done while the girls get breakfast." Joe willingly escaped to the cowbarn. In a few minutes his two brothers, Chuck and Sam, joined him.

"What's your gal ding here with all her clothes packed in an apple box?" taunted Sam.

"You shut up."

"Aha! Do I know a secret!" chanted Chuck.

As the boys finished the milking, Chuck and Sam were laughing and telling off-color jokes while Joe glowered darkly at them. Back in the big, warm kitchen the three washed up. By that time the family had gathered around the long plank table with benches at either side. Ma sat in her chair nursing Little Baby Joyce. Two-year-old Michael sat in his high chair at the left of his mother. Morlee was seated on the bench at Ma's right. Maggie carried the huge stack of buckwheat cakes to the table while Eileen carried an equally large stack of flannel cakes, those rich, light pancakes which warmed the insides of their bodies as their flannel underwear warmed the outside of each sturdy figure. Janie and Libby, flushed from their cooking, followed with the huge platter of sausages and the warm maple syrup.

After a blessing hurriedly recited by the children in unison, everyone began eating wordlessly. A strange uneasiness inhibited conversation but not appetites. Only Pa spoke. "Janie, me Love, where's me tay?"

"Oh, Pa, I forgot."

"I'll bring it," Libby exclaimed as she hurried to the stove where the teakettle was singing softly. She reached for the small copper-lustre teapot in the warming oven. A teaspoon of Pa's favorite green tea went in first. Then she filled the pot with the boiling water from the kettle. She carried it to him where he sat at the head of the table in his big captain's chair.

"Thank you, Darlin'. You do take good care of your old pa."

Joe furtively watched Morlee. She didn't eat although she had taken a flannel cake and cut it into small bits which she was pushing around on her plate. He himself was not hungry. He couldn't swallow the buckwheats and sausage in front of him.

Chuck and Sam had gone upstairs to dress for the academy which they attended in the village. Janie and Libby had gone upstairs to make beds and tidy up the second floor. Maggie and Eileen were playing with Baby Joyce.

"Put Baby in her cradle and go dress for school," Pa ordered them.

Little Michael was quietly playing with his blocks behind the stove. Ma was eating her delayed breakfast now that Joyce was quiet and happy. Joe rose.

"Sit down," commanded Pa. "I guess this ends your academy days — in the middle of your last year."

"Yes, sir," Joe stared out the window.

Pa continued, "I'll hitch up the team and we three will go to the County Seat to get your license and see the Reverend Moore about the ceremony. We'll have to pick up Pat O'Neill. He has to give his consent to the marriage since Morlee is under age. So are you, young man."

Joe was aware that his bride-to-be flinched when her father's name was mentioned. He wondered if Old Pat had ever beat her. At that moment a flicker of responsibility and protectiveness was born in him. When they were ready to go, Ma appeared.

"I just went and put on my best bib and tucker," she explained. "I'm not going to miss my oldest son's wedding. The girls can take care of the babies until I get back."

All his life Joe would remember the dour face of the minister and his gaunt, tall form as he stood in the sparsely furnished parlor of the manse. As the black-clad figure intoned the words of the ceremony, Joe heard himself repeating, "I, Joseph Alexander Shandy, take thee, Morlee. . ."

Yes, those first years were hard. They had moved way

out west to Oklahoma. Joe had worked as a cowboy until he saved enough money to make the first payment on a section of cheap grazing land. He had stocked the whole 640 acres with five cows and a bull. Morlee stayed on the ranch, caring for the children and keeping an eye on the cattle while he went to Eastern Oklahoma to work as a roustabout in the oilfields where the pay was good. He came home as often as he could, riding the caboose of a freight train. Soon he had earned enough to stock the ranch with a small herd of mixed breeds of beef cattle.

Morlee had been a good wife. He had tried to be kind to her. Gradually they developed a deep caring for one another. The six children had come along to keep them busy. The cattle business had proved to be profitable in the new state. He had bought two other farms. Their first oil well had come in three years before Morlee's death. And he had managed to read law in old Judge Johnson's office.

Yes, it had been a good life even though it was not exactly what he had planned. Always interested in community affairs, he found himself branching out into wider fields. Then two years ago his friends had helped him conduct a successful campaign, and he was elected to the state senate. Not exactly what he had planned, but good nevertheless.

As his thoughts traced events so long past, he slowly became drowsy. He lay back on the pillows and pulled the afghan from the back of the sofa over himself. The next thing he knew, the click of a key in the front door awakened him. Heavens! It was daylight. It must be 8:30. Sarah was always prompt. "Mornin', Senator." Sarah's cheerful black face peered in the doorway. Her unfailing pleasantness always gave him a lift. She had been coming in for fifteen years, yet he had paid little attention to household mechanics while Morlee was there.

"Good Morning, Sarah. I must have fallen asleep here."

"You want I should fix you some breakfas' while you git ready for work?"

"Yes, Sarah. Two soft-boiled eggs with toast and coffee will do I'll be ready in half an hour."

"Doe you want some juice, Senator?"

"Oh, yes."

As he showered, shaved, and dressed, he was thinking of the trip he must make to the capital in order to be there for the afternoon session. He came into the breakfast room clad in a conservative business suit but shod in cowboy boots.

"Thank you, Sarah. What would I do without you?"

"I 'spect you'd jis git somebody else to do for ya." And she left for other parts of the house to begin her cleaning chores.

Joe stayed in the capital all week, absorbed in the business on the senate floor. He was busy reading numerous newspapers and the mountain of letters his secretary handed him each morning. He was also doing some research on the state's water problems.

From habit he headed home on Friday evening. He didn't know why. No one was expecting him. As he unlocked the front door, he heard the telephone ringing — twice, three times, four, five. He answered on the fifth ring just in time to hear the click on the other end. A bit puzzled, he shrugged and went to his desk to check the mail. A few bills, some junk mail, and at the bottom of the stack lay a letter from Little Sister Joyce. Bless my sisters! he thought. They had all written him regularly since the accident. Brothers Chuck, Sam, and Mike phoned him occasionally. He sat down at the desk to read Joyce's letter. It was a rambling message full of family news — a brief

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trip, the kids' schools, plans for Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving! What am I going to do that day? Maybe I'll spend the day on horseback, riding fences and counting cattle.

Then the telephone rang again. He answered promptly. "Shandy speaking."

"Oh, Dad, I'm glad you're home." It was Linda's voice pouring out her words so fast they tripped over one another. "Dad, will you come to our house for Thanksgiving? Bob says to tell you we'll really be disappointed if you don't come. I just talked with Dena. She and Harvey and the kids can come from Dallas. Jim and Sandra and the boys will try to make it, and maybe some of the others will you, Dad? Besides, Bob and I have some special news for you. And we're not going to tell you until you are here!"

"Your enthusiasm impresses me, Baby Daughter. Of course I'll come. What can I bring you?"

"Nothing this time. Just come. After you hear our news, you'll think of something."

As Joe turned away from the telephone, he was smiling.

In two weeks he would see some of the family. The grandchildren would have changed. He could guess Linda's news — maybe. Now in a happier mood, he wanted to see some of his old-time friends. He went to the Stockman's Cafe for dinner. He could usually count on seeing someone he knew there.

But this evening everything seemed unusually quiet. Only Old Jake from the all-night filling station came in for pie and coffee. "Hello, Senator. Who're you bettin' on to win the game?"

Ah, yes, almost everyone was out of town to see the big football game of the season. How Morlee and he had enjoyed attending all the games when their children were playing! The excitement, the pride in their youngsters, the celebrations afterward — these and all the other family and hometown events had made life brilliant and satisfying though they were not fully appreciative of it at the time. Now he was left with only a hollow feeling. Not conscious that Old Jake's quizzical face was still turned toward his own nor aware that he spoke aloud, Joe exclaimed in a low voice, "Things will never be the same again?"

And they never were.

— an article about an unlikely seeming Western Oklahoma philanthropist —

The Town Miser

— by Sheila Cohlma



Medford Johnson: left at two years of age and right as a young man.

Occasionally one reads of a wealthy philanthropist donating huge sums of money to benefit mankind. Medford Johnson was an eccentric miser in a small Oklahoma panhandle town but he was no less charitable. He left his entire estate to benefit my hometown.

Medford was "quite an old gentleman"

as my dad would say. But most people in Tyrone said he was crazy, and to a certain extent they may have been right.

Medford worked for my dad in the 1970's as a farmhand. He had worked for several farmers in his later years and was known to be a good hand although sometimes infuriatingly slow and methodical.

He always wore a khaki shirt, worn overalls, and a denim cap over his thick, white hair. His warm brown eyes glowed with a dry, quiet humor.

My family still laughs about his odd habits and ways. We especially remember his mealtimes with us. Once Mom had fixed a large roast with all the trimmings.