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A CHRISTMAS TASTE OF APPLES

Tom and Grandma Jones, 1930

It'll soon be Christmas. I can always tell by the taste of apples in the air. It's been that way with me for a long time now and all because I once had a grandmother who rode streetcars and buses and peeled apples like no one else did.

My Grandma Jones was small and thin; she had pernicious anemia and a bad heart and an ulcer on her shin that never healed. But what she wanted to do she did, and she had a fine old time doing it. She never learned to drive a car. If she wanted to visit someone, take in a show or do a little shopping, she nearly always took the bus or the streetcar or both. She was a genius at transferring from one to another and back again.

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One of the things I remember most about Grandma Jones and her apples was when I was a kid and Christmas was coming. She lived with us in those days in a little house in South Gate. Her room was small, with barely enough space for her bed and dresser and pedal-powered sewing machine. But she didn't mind; bad things, disappointments and inconveniences were part of living, and Grandma Jones accepted them.

As poor an area as it was in the nineteen thirties, South Gate had its advantages; at least Grandma Jones thought so. She loved to shop, and in less than an hour she could be in Long Beach by bus or Huntington Park by streetcar. To her these were one-apple trips. When something special came along like Christmas or Easter or my birthday, she'd make a day of it and take a two-apple trip on the old "J" car to Los Angeles. Sometimes if I'd been good and had done what she'd told me to do, she'd take me along.

I always looked forward to a two-apple trip, and just before Christmas was the best one of all. We got on the car at the end of the line in South Gate. She sat by the window, I had to sit on the aisle, and she always spread a handkerchief on her lap -- one of those dime store kind with the flowers on the corners. Then she took an apple out of the sack she had and gave it to me to polish on my shirt front while she rummaged around in her old black purse for the knife. That knife had a lot of character. It was small, with a mother-of-pearl handle yellowed with age, and it had two blades that were black with apple acid. She held the apple in one hand while she looked over the tops of her rimless glasses and started peeling with the other.

It was a wonderful thing to watch. Slowly, with the care and patience of a surgeon, she slid the blade around the shiny red skin. A half-inch peel twisted and bobbed about with the sway of the street car till it fell in her lap, all in one piece. Then came the slicing. One for me and one for her -- sweet white wedges dripping with juice -- till all that was left was a sliver of core hardly worth throwing away. Last and best came the peel. That was all mine. It had a flavor all its own -- a tart, metallic taste from the blade of that old penknife that had more Christmas in it than all the decorated windows and packages and sidewalks full of people slipping by outside. I made it last as long as I could.

We rolled along pretty well till we got to Florence Avenue and made the jog to Pacific Boulevard. But all the way through Huntington Park and that awful packing house smell of the Vernon District, the streetcar rocked and clanged and jerked to a stop every few blocks. By then Grandma Jones was working on her second apple.

Coming home at the end of a two-apple trip when I was small, I always fell asleep on Grandma's lap. I remember the sound of the wheels rattling on the rails, the department store windows full of toys I'd never seen before, and the sticky candy cane some skinny Santa Claus had given me. But most of all I remember falling

asleep on Grandma Jones' lap with her hand, smelling faintly of apples, smoothing my hair.

And now, Christmas is almost here again. The streetcars are gone and there aren't as many buses as there used to be. But even though my Grandma Jones has been gone twenty-five years and I don't think of her as much as I used to, I still remember her along about this time of year. I have a few of her things put away in a box on a shelf in the closet -- a pair of glasses, an old wrist watch, a few flowered handkerchiefs, and a penknife with a mother-of-pearl handle. They're not worth much, not really; but every year when Thanksgiving day has gone and I'm feeling a little depressed with the last minute shopping and all, I take down that old box, spread the things out on my desk and I'm back on that streetcar again. Outside, the sidewalks are filled with people and packages and the decorations are up. Next to me, Grandma Jones is rocking back and forth on the seat, looking over her glasses, peeling away. There's a taste of apples in the room and right then and there it's Christmas.

Tom Harvill
(Southland Magazine, 1969)