

Apple Baskets

Mary Catherine Murray

My grandfather, his father and his father's father were all traditional basket weavers in Fermanagh. By the time I was old enough to wander round in their darkened workshop, Papa only made the occasional wastebasket or apple basket, as the importance they once held for people in their everyday lives was no longer. The beautiful workmanship and subtle variations in shape, texture and pattern were not



much appreciated by a small child. Each man in my family had produced baskets with tell-tale signs of his hands; the way the handle curved, the smoothness or roughness of the weave, the length of rushes chosen.

But life was busy and the few baskets left scattered around the workshop that were made by previous generations gathered dust and developed mould; some had been left lying in the corner of the little Victorian glasshouse at the bottom of the garden. I remember a vixen sleeping on one as I crept fearfully past the raspberry bushes, nervously avoiding reflections of the fox and myself one summer's day.

Papa had always been a fit and active man. His life had been one of narrow confines; that of the farm and the baskets, but I realise now that he had wanted the basket-weaving to be a means of spending time with me, and passing the knowledge onwards. Of course, it would have been a great source of happiness to him to have the skills carry on into my generation, but more importantly he wanted me to remember him and our little banter as he sat with me, hunched over the slowly emerging basket.

But children do not understand the concept of ageing, and I was never very good at sitting still. I found the swing in the garden much more tempting. He had put it up when my father was a little boy. It hung from the heavy bough of a giant oak and could reach amazing heights, in the opinion of a six-year-old.

"Sit down there, Marcus, and we'll do a small basket for you to keep your bits and pieces in," my grandfather said one afternoon.

"What bits and pieces?" I demanded, in truth not terribly interested.

"Little pebbles, bits of string, pennies, small cars, the apple, all the little things filling your pockets," he indicated, pointing to my jacket. "I'll show you as my father showed me, and his father showed him," he continued, pushing a small stool for me towards his chair and reaching for a handful of rushes he had collected for my basket. My gaze as usual, wandered out to the big tree in the garden, with Daddy's swing hanging from it. Rays of bright summer sun were streaming down through the green branches and illuminating the seat.

"I'd rather swing," I remember saying bluntly, and I wandered out of the workshop without looking back.

My parents were rushing that day for something completely inconsequential, and I didn't kiss him goodbye. I never saw him again, as he caught pneumonia that autumn and was carried off faster than anyone could have imagined.

My wife asked me to go to the Sunday organic market for apples yesterday and handed me a plastic bag.

"What? Never ever," I told her. "I will always use an apple basket."

