Crab Apple Kutcha

Mandy Ruthnum

I ran around the backyard of our new Canadian house, noting the bright-orange siding, the long grass, the huge tree with low branches begging to be climbed.
My mother followed, always two steps behind no matter how fast I ran. Her long black braids were held back from her face with plastic combs. A tiny boy with white-blond hair spied on us through the slats of the back fence.

In the corner of the yard, we found a tree weighed down with small green apples. My mother's slender brown arm reached up and picked two, handing one to me. I took a small bite excitedly but found it more sour than a lemon. I spat it onto the grass. She bit into hers and smiled. "Sour apples!" she remarked, "well, we can make kutcha."

We already had plenty to do, but in those days, my mother had a lot of energy. When we moved to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan from Scotland, only two suitcases of clothes came with us, and two steamer trunks of books were shipped later. We left most of our things behind, including my toys and my imaginary friend Peter. My parents were experts at big moves. This was their second brave leapfrog across the planet: Mauritius to Scotland to Canada.

"Toque" and "Parka" made their debut in our vocabularies. We tried really hard to like hockey, and failed. The children of the street came out to assess me, and shy smiles were followed with plans for future playdates.

The great crab apple harvest began the next day. My plastic bowl was the right size for my little brown hands. My mother picked apples from the ladder, and my job was to pick up the fruit that hit the grass below. Fuzzy green caterpillars distracted me from my task. Various containers of apples littered the kitchen. After work, my father drove home in the Buick (pronounced Bwick) and we went to Woolco to pick up some mason jars.

The next morning, we washed and grated the crab apples at the kitchen table. It was tricky to hold the tiny apple against the metal grater and turn it at the right moment to protect my fingers. The apple flesh turned brown quickly and our fingers pruned. My mother took off her rings, plunged her clean hands into the bowl, and squeezed the juice out of the grated apple.

She heated some oil in a pan, added the apple sludge and deftly sprinkled it with turmeric, ginger, garlic, and mustard. She threw in a glug of apple cider vinegar and a few whole red chillies. My mother never measured anything. She just knew what to do.

We lined up the yellowy-brown jars of kutcha on the counter to surprise my father when he came home. He made his impressed face, which involved pulling the corners of his mouth downward trying not to smile while nodding slowly.

That night, we ate it with rice and lentil soup in front of the six o'clock Canadian news.



Mandy Ruthnum is a Mauritian-Canadian writer living on Vancouver Island. Her work has been published in Room, The Ogham Stone, The Fabulist and The Globe and Mail.