Half title · title only · right-hand page

The Orchard Year

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The Orchard Year

Twelve months on my father's apple farm



RUTH CALLOWAY

INDEPENDENTLY PUBLISHED

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The Orchard Year: Twelve Months on My Father's Apple Farm

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This is a work of memoir. Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people in it.

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Dedication · right-hand page

For Dad,

who knew every tree by name.

Contents · page numbers come from the layout

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Preface

My father planted his first apple tree in 1974, the spring before I was born. By the time he died, the farm on Hollow Road had four hundred and twelve trees, a cider press that leaked, and a ledger in which he wrote down the weather every single day for forty-nine years.

I came home for what I thought would be a month, to settle the estate and sell the land. I stayed a year. This book is that year, month by month, told mostly through the trees, because that is how my father would have told it.

I am not a farmer. I learned most of what is in these pages by getting it wrong first. Where the ledger and my memory disagree, I have trusted the ledger.

Chapter opener · right-hand page · sunk title · no running head

CHAPTER ONE

Pruning in the Snow

The ledger for the first week of January says only *cold, clear, pruned the Macs*. My father pruned in the snow because the trees were asleep and he was not. He said a dormant tree tells you everything: you can see every branch that crosses another, every shoot that grows straight up and steals the light, every limb that will break under fruit in September.

I found his loppers on a nail in the barn, the handles wrapped in electrical tape where his hands had worn through the rubber. The blades were sharp. Of course they were.

The first tree I cut was a McIntosh near the gate, older than me. I stood under it for twenty minutes before I made a single cut, and when I did, I took the wrong branch. You can't put a branch back. That was the first lesson of the orchard, and it turned out to be the first lesson of the year.

Our neighbor, Walt Pruitt, came across the road on the third day with a thermos of coffee and watched me work for a while without saying anything. Then he took the loppers out of my hands, showed me where to stand, and gave them back.

> "Open the middle," he said. "Your dad always said you should be able to throw a cat through an apple tree."
>
> "Did he ever throw a cat through an apple tree?"
>
> "Not that I saw."

Block quote · set in from both sides

By the end of the month I had pruned the Macs, the Cortlands and half of the Northern Spies. My shoulders ached in a way they had never ached at a desk. At night I read the ledger by the woodstove and found that the January entries were almost the same every year: the trees, the weather, the date of the first cut. A man who had written down the same few words for half a century, and never once got bored of them.



Scene break · centered ornament

The letter from the realtor came on the thirty-first. A developer in town had made an offer for the whole of Hollow Road, trees and all. It was a fair offer. It was more than fair. I put it on the kitchen table under the salt shaker, and went back out to finish the Spies before the light went.

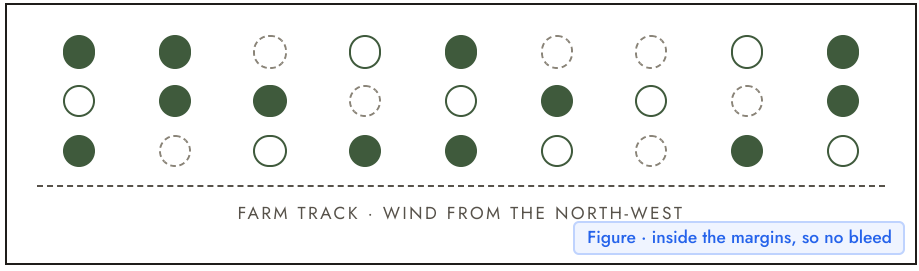
The snow was blue by then, the way it gets just before dark, and the cut ends of the branches showed white against it. I counted them as I walked back to the house. It seemed important to know how many.

CHAPTER TWO

The North Block

Every orchard has a part that its owner doesn't talk about. On Hollow Road it was the north block: three rows of trees at the top of the hill, planted in 1987, that had never once given a good crop. Too much wind, my father said. Wrong rootstock, said Walt. The ledger has a different theory, written small in the margin of a page from 1991: *my fault*.

In February I walked up there with a notebook and drew every tree, the way he must have drawn them when he planted. Nine trees to a row. Some were strong. Some had died and been left standing, grey and bare, because cutting them down would have meant admitting they were gone.



The north block in February. 27 trees in three rows.

● bearing ○ weak ◌ dead

Eleven strong trees, eight weak, eight dead. I sat on the stone wall at the end of the third row and looked at the drawing for a long time. Then I did the thing my father never did. I called a nursery in the valley and ordered eight new trees, on a rootstock that Walt swore would stand up to the wind.

Walt came up the hill in April to help me dig the holes. He did not ask why I was planting trees on land I was about to sell, and I did not tell him. We worked down the rows in silence, the way my father and he used to, and when the last tree was in he leaned on his spade and looked at the line of them, eight thin whips tied to eight stakes, bending in the wind.

"He'd have liked that," he said. "He'd have said you put them in crooked. But he'd have liked it."

That night I wrote in the ledger for the first time. *Wind NW, cold. Planted eight Liberty on Geneva 41, north block. Walt helped.* My handwriting looked wrong under his, too round and too careful. I wrote the next day's entry anyway, and the one after that.

They would not bear fruit for four years. I knew that when I ordered them. I did not yet know what it meant: that some part of me had already decided not to sell.

Back matter · acknowledgments, about the author

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Walt and June Pruitt, who fed me more often than I fed myself that year. To the Hollow Road Grange, for letting me read early chapters aloud and laughing in the right places. And to my sister Anne, who read every draft and never once asked when I was coming home.

About the Author

Ruth Calloway grew up on an apple farm in western New York and spent twenty years as a copy editor in Chicago before she went back. She still keeps the ledger. *The Orchard Year* is her first book.

ALSO BY RUTH CALLOWAY

Hollow Road Cider
A SMALL BOOK OF RECIPES FROM THE PRESS

Forty-Nine Winters
SELECTIONS FROM A FARM LEDGER, 1974–2023