

BAMBOO

>> CHRIS EWART

In the morning, before Farm Hands hooks his suspenders under the steely buttons on either side of a big denim pocket, and after he's returned from the well, he washes his face twice in the bucket beside the stove pipe. Lye soap. Burlap whiskers.

'That's a fine bucket,' Farm Hands says as he twists the bucket's slop out the door and up over the hedge. He sends a rainbow of bubbles to wash away the paltry piping of flutes beside the hedge shed, amidst the murmurs of the apple grove and all those bumbling bees.

Each morning he dumps his lye and water up over the hedge. With a smirk behind burlap whiskers, he pours his lye and water up over the hedge. He chagrins and grins each and every morning the flutists flout in the orchard's acoustically sweet spot. In the shine or slight rain, most mornings he splashes the flutists themselves with his lye and water.

Farm Hands hates flutes. Transverse, horizontal, sideways flutes, end-blown tube-pipe flutes. Sharp rim-blown flutes, duct fipple flutes, bass flute in C, alto flute in G, tenor flute d'amore in B flat. Concert, soprano, or treble, Farm Hands simply loves to flatten bees, not blow B flats.

Rainbows, blowholes and all those bumbling bees.

'The instruments, the instruments!' shouts Blushing Gordon, maneuvering his bass flute away from its shower. After several days of Blushing Gordon shouting the very same phrase, the other flutists begin to consider the merits of constructing a protective, preferably waterproof awning atop their acoustically sweet spot of lawn.

A real blossom.

Such labour-intensive discussion leads a particularly steamed C flutist by the name of Jonathan to exclaim, 'Shut up!' He raises his hands to conduct the concerto. 'We already do enough chores around here.' To spot a worm or two, polish a flute, transpose the aria from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* or movements one through four of his *Serenade #3* according to humidity levels and sunlight exposure, provides a full plate for the orchard's flautists. Jonathan shoots his hands upward, twisting them back and forth, sans baton. 'What's next?' he asks the band, all the while his twisty hands grope the sky for lemons to squeeze.

'Filling barrels for a nickel an apple!' shouts Blushing Gordon, turning cherry in an instant, a heartbeat away from crimson. 'Filling barrels for a nickel an -'

'I repeat,' Jonathan interrupts with numerous zots of his imaginary conductor's baton, 'we already do enough chores around here!'

Blushing Gordon swallows his imagination.

He hits a bitter note.

Mr. Newton, the other C flutist, pipes up, 'I sure know we do,' and offers Jonathan a wink of support.

A whole quarter note's worth.

Those hard-to-work flute holes don't suit Farm Hands' hammer-like fingers, and don't suit his morning sleep either. Flutes sound like spigots scraping the blackboard next to his hedge.

'Best to keep the dust down,' Farm Hands says to himself each morning as he dumps his lye and water up over his hedge.

At the ripe age of twelve, Farm Hands' boss, Mr. Winesap, sought to teach him the horticultural benefits of the flute. Playing a *ménage* full of trills and suites to the uniform rows of three dozen apple trees in attendance each day, he learned, helps those green, gold and red apple trees grow.

'Their yield is our applause,' beamed Mr. Winesap.

'My fingers don't enjoy this flute,' said Farm Hands. 'They plug up too many holes at once.'

Mr. Winesap admired Farm Hands' cudged approach. 'Then it's a bass flute for you,' he touted, between a cider-besotted grin. Mr. Winesap's certainty won him innumerable prizes. Over such steamy cups of cider after harvest was in, not necessarily before first frost, he grinned. He welcomed the challenge of directing Farm Hands' fingers to scale a bass flute with ease, and to *pah-pah* the air like a bird's tired wing.

A ruby-throated hum.

While flowers closed for the season, Mr. Winesap remarked that proper aperture sips without spilling. Mr. Winesap enjoys his cider.

His cider, pressed from award-winning apples, keeps his flute quartet limber and agreeable. Farm Hands initially lacked the required years to imbibe cider without significant peril for his own or the trees' well-being. Unlike the grove's hollyhocks, forget-me-nots and apple trees red, gold and green, the growing flautist's aptitude repelled pollination like the crunch of leaves under his size 13½ work boots.

Mr. Winesap suspected, after nine harvests had passed, that Farm Hands' lack of fluting progress drove the other musicians out of earshot. As frost iced the windows of the orchard's cozy sitting room, his playing jarred the bees from their torpor. With his oven-mitts-on-Swiss-cheese approach to his craft, Mr. Winesap thought Farm Hands might sour an apple or two, let alone crack a plate.

'I'm not a good fluter,' Farm Hands declared.

Mr. Winesap pinched the bridge of his very own nose. Good is hardly adequate, he said. 'Perhaps...'

'Could I try another one?' Farm Hands asked.

'I think that's enough cider for today, young man.'

'I meant another flute.'

'Ah.' Next to the old cast iron stove, door ajar for an auburn show of embers, Mr. Winesap noted the shotgun, gingerly. 'Perhaps,' he found his thought once more. 'Perhaps we could try *bamboo*.'

A certain Mr. Winesap knew the maintenance of his flute quartet ensured happy apples. Beyond winning the Tastiest Apple in the Village contest nineteen years running, his harvest brought forth bushels of worm-free specimens fit to triumph in local and national contests of cake, crumble, pie, juice, vinegar, tart, butter, bread, crisp and sauce. Cinnamon was a perversion, he thought.

Nutmeg, not so much.

Grains of Paradise on occasion.

The drifting of Blushing Gordon, the aged bass flutist, and his consistently slight misses of the all-important bass pocket had proven less than solo worthy, relative to his cider intake. Such a small ripple, Mr. Winesap was certain, might turn into a flood. The addition of a bamboo flute would keep the quartet afloat, he concluded, but his protégé's mighty hands might be better suited for picking apples, not serenading them.

Winesap apples were not of the bobbing-for variety, and the Honeygold had lost some sheen recently. So Mr. Winesap invited the rest of the quartet to join Farm Hands in the orchard's cozy sitting room. With apple crumble on the table – minus the cinnamon – Mr. Winesap cleared his spit valve, nutmeg and all:

'It seems our youngest hands may even be too big for the lowest registers of our quartet. We cannot dip below a bass C, and bamboo poses a definite risk. A contrabass or lower would rattle our orchard's roots. The quartet exists to tickle leaves and tweak stem and apple to the ground with gentle and accurate aplomb. Perhaps those bold hands of his are better suited to prop up the hedge shed in between collecting what remaining apples our notes do not nudge to the grass.'

'What?' asked Farm Hands.

'He wants you to pick the apples,' Jonathan, one of the two C flutes, retorted in a fit of impromptu jazz-hands. 'You do know how to pick, right?' He corralled a finger or two under his armpit and called to the apes in the zoo.

Mr. Winesap nodded. 'It might be time to replace Old Roman, to pass the bucket along as it were.'

Old Roman sawed logs in the hedge shed as they spoke.

As sound as a sleeper.

'His hands aren't what they used to be,' added Mr. Newton, wondering why Jonathan's ape impression was so *Curious George*. 'And he does have a nice bucket.'

Farm Hands had eyed that very bucket several times before. Shiny and tin. To and from the well with dots of red earth following behind its rim, or full of snack apples outside of Old Roman's clapboard shed door. Meatier than a flute, Farm Hands thought.

'At least you'll know where to put your fingers,' jeered Jonathan. 'And it has a hole too big to miss!' Jonathan's puppeteer hands traced a circle as big as a tom-tom drum. His fingers like sticks. 'Boom. Bonk. Apple's in the bucket. Bonk. Boom. Apples fill your room.' He wiped his hands clean, 'aplomb, aplomb, aplomb, you big ox.'" He sneered more than an inch and pointed in Farm Hands' general direction several times. 'You get what it means now?'

Farm Hands snapped his new overall suspenders tight. At least one idea jostled for release as he scratched at his chin, sizing up the bucket in relation to Jonathan's head.

A good fit.

Farm Hands' mallets intimidated Jonathan.

'Are you handy with a shotgun?' asked Mr. Winesap.

Farm Hands saw a double-barreled flute next to the old cast iron stove. Farm Hands hates flutes. His fingers plug up too many holes at once.

'It's just that,' Mr. Winesap continued, 'Old Roman's vision seems to leave him from time to time – having only bagged two boars, a raccoon, seven crows, and literally a handful of voles.'

'Root eaters!' Blushing Gordon shouted, 'Root eaters!' He often blushed when he shouted, and he shouted often.

As Mr. Winesap quelled chants of *Down with the Vole* to a din, he wondered if Farm Hands' fingers would even fit the trigger.

'Subdue the bees! Subdue the bees!' Blushing Gordon shouted.

Jonathan raised his hands to conduct the concerto, but the moment had left.

Without Farm Hands stomping his size 13½ work boots into the bassist's role, Mr. Winesap pondered playing alto and bass flutes simultaneously. Perhaps it was his cider talking, but his livelihood depended on innovation. After one season, he declared the yard or so of plastic apple-flavoured tubing—rigged to split his breath between the two flutes – an apparatus nearly impossible to manoeuvre. He was sure a trio of flutes would do just fine by the apples.

The apples seldom notice the difference between four flutes and three, morning after morning, until the trio's pipes begin to gum up, to rust, to seize under the warming sun. Farm Hands' plan to keep the dust down succeeds to a tee. Morning after morning the air returns to birds' tired wings, all those bumbling bees and not so many flutes. Farm Hands winds down the road, down to the well each and every morning to pump his bucket full of water to wash with. Red dots of earth follow behind its rim.

Staccato red.

'Put the bucket down, stupid.' Jonathan squeezes that double-barreled flute full of buckshot by his side.

A real stiff arm.

Twitchy fingers.

'I have to wash my face' says Farm Hands, filling the bucket a little more with each plunge and lift of the lever, knowing he could peg Jonathan square between the eyes with a crabapple at twenty paces. 'Twice.' He fills the thirsty bucket almost to its rim, spilling a drop or two on his lap.

'We could just take the bucket, Jonathan,' implores Mr. Newton. 'Maybe kick it around somewhat—a nice dent or two would do, don't you think?'

'Shut up, wise apple!' Jonathan grows more impatient, his gnarled roots full of gripe water.

Before winding up the road from the well each and every morning Farm Hands swings his fine bucket—full to just below the rim—to his knees.

‘Stop, stop, stop!’ Jonathan yells. His finger stems the trigger and the voles scurry out of sight.

Quick as a fire engine.

Oxblood red.